

The Bassinette

“Do you think she’ll like it?”

Samuel looked up to Meredith and nodded. “I’m sure she’ll love it.”

A relieved smile flickered across his girlfriend’s face as she sat down. “I wasn’t sure. You know, if she would even want anything from me.”

“She’s five, Meredith.” He stood up and sat beside her on the couch, taking her small hand into his. “She’s not a teen. I doubt she’s going to take sides, or that it will even be an issue. Emily knows that her mom and I don’t love each other anymore and that the divorce was the best thing for everyone. We only live a few streets away from each other.”

“Your ex, she’s not worried that I’m going to try and get Emily to call me mom, right?”

“No, she’s not. It’s a conversation we had when we were finalizing the divorce.” He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Relax, sweetheart. Try to relax.”

Meredith nodded and rested her head against his shoulder as he settled back into the comfort of the couch. He let his eyes wander back to the bassinette and smiled.

“Where did you find it?”

Meredith laughed shyly. “Well, I was coming up Route 101A through Amherst where all the antique stores are and stuff. I saw this out in front of one of the newer places. I remembered you saying how much Emily loved her American Girl dolls, so I thought a bassinette would be perfect.”

“It really is fantastic.”

Her Apple Watch beeped, and she glanced at it. She groaned in dismay and straightened up. “That’s work. They need me now.”

“Now?” Samuel was unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

She smiled and gave him a quick kiss.

“Now. It’s a problem with being the only one who can troubleshoot the system. Listen, if I get done before midnight, do you want me to swing back?”

“Of course.” He grinned, getting to his feet and helping her up. “I want you to stop by even if you get out after.”

She stood up on her tiptoes, and he bent down slightly to receive her kiss. “That might not work out well for me. I still have to go back to work in the morning.” She glanced at the bassinette. “Do you think you could finish cleaning it for me?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” She kissed him again, and he walked with her to the front door. He helped her get her coat on and gave her one last, long kiss before releasing her. “See you soon. I’ll let you know when I get there.”

“Sounds good to me.”

He stood in the doorway as she walked to her car and climbed into it. The bright red Tesla started up silently, and in a moment, she was backing out of the driveway onto Merrill Street. She waved, and he did the same, watching her as she drove off into the night.

When her taillights finally turned onto Broad Street, Samuel stepped back and closed and locked the door. He went into his kitchen, set the kettle to boil, and then took down a bag of chocolate and mint cookies. Samuel ate three of them in the short space of time it took for the kettle to whistle, and then another two more while his tea steeped.

After adding a splash of cream and spoonful of honey, Samuel carried his 'weak tea', as his mother called it, back into his television room. He sat down in his easy chair, the one piece of furniture his ex-wife had deigned to allow him to take with him, and sipped his tea as he eyed the bassinette Meredith had purchased.

The item stood on an old towel by the fireplace, where the wood in the hearth burned slow and lazy, the embers glowing. There was a gray basin half-filled with soapy water, and several small rags beside it.

The bassinette was a curious-looking piece of furniture, and he wasn't certain if it had originally been crafted for a doll or a baby. The wood was painted a soft blue, with a significant amount of wear on the edges. Most of the paint had worn off the rockers, and beneath a thin layer of dust and yellow stains, he could glimpse some curious motif that worked its way around all four sides of the bassinette.

The wood was thin, Samuel saw, and he found it strange that there was a wooden hood over the head of the bassinette as well. He recalled how some similar pieces had wicker hoods, and sometimes canvas or cloth pieces stretched over a thin framework of wood or wire, but he couldn't remember seeing one made entirely of wood.

How did they shape it? he wondered, admiring the gentle curve of the arch. He smiled at the item and shook his head. Whoever had built the piece, whether for a child or a doll, they had done it well and with care. Samuel found himself wanting to clean the piece if only to see what motif was hidden beneath the dirt and staining.

He finished his tea, stood up, and asked Alexa to put on Mozart. As the strains of one of the musician's waltzes filled the room, Samuel went and sat down beside the bassinette and picked up a cloth and dipped it into the basin of cool water. Humming along with the music, Samuel pulled the bassinette closer and started with the hood. He cleaned in slow, small circles, the water running down and cutting paths through the stains.

By the time the first waltz ended, Samuel had cleaned the entire hood, and he paused to enjoy the brightness of the blue. It glowed in the fading light of the fire, and he felt the urge to clean the rest of it. He switched out the dirty rag for a clean one and worked on the right side. Soon, he reached the first part of the motif, and he was pleased to see what looked like a face break free of the grime.

What he was able to see of the motif reminded him of the work of illustrator Arthur Rackham. There was a sense of beauty, with a hint of malice to the features. Curiosity rose within Samuel, and he worked harder at cleaning the bassinette.

He lost track of time as he cleaned, and several times he had to get fresh water for the basin. It wasn't until the clock on the mantel struck eleven that he realized how long he had been working.

But it was done.

The bassinette stood clean and bright in the lamplight and the faint glow of the fireplace. As he sat back and examined it, Samuel saw the motif in full detail.

Goblins cavorted around the side of the bassinette.

They were not cute illustrations but rather harsh and violent. There was far more than a hint of malice in their drawn features and their small eyes. These creatures were the stuff of nightmares. They peered out between the branches of rosebushes and Hawthorn trees. They seemed to slide from one shadow to the next, and the way their eyes were drawn made Samuel feel as though they were watching him, waiting for him to acknowledge their presence.

Samuel turned the bassinette around and saw the motif was carried across all four sides, and there was not a single identical face among the goblins. They were all terrifyingly individual. He felt a chill as he touched the wood, and he retracted his hand. Samuel peered into the bassinette's interior. Against the headrest, he saw a dark stain. It was small, perhaps no larger than a dollar bill in length and width, but it was there, and it disturbed him. As he stared at it, the stain throbbed.

He blinked and shook his head, his pulse quickening as he focused on the stain again.

Nothing happened.

He swallowed dryly, then reached into the bassinette and touched the dark mark. It was cold to the touch, but then again, all the wood was cold. The heating system hadn't kicked in, and the embers weren't doing much more than glow prettily in the hearth. He drew his hand back and rubbed his fingers against his leg, trying to warm them again.

Who would give this to a child? he wondered as he stood up and went to the couch. Samuel felt better putting distance between himself and the bassinette. I mean, come on, this thing is terrifying to look at.

I'm going to have to tell Meredith we need to paint it before we give it to Emily. Poor kid will have nightmares if she looks at that. I don't think she'd put her dolls in it either.

He shook his head and sat down, picking up his cellphone and glancing at it. There were two messages from Meredith. The first told him she was safe at work, and that had been an hour and a half earlier. The second text had come only half an hour after that, and she had asked him, with a smiley face emoticon, whether he had fallen asleep on her or not.

Samuel grinned, thumbed the text and started to write back when the phone died.

He paused and blinked, confused. His phone had never died before. It had been over eighty percent charged, too.

This is a new phone; it can't be dying. He tried powering it back up, but the phone remained dark. Frowning, he took the charger off the coffee table, and he plugged the cable into its port.

Nothing happened.

Samuel scratched the back of his head, confused, and set the phone down on the coffee table. Maybe it'll kick in after a few minutes.

He stood up and walked to the kitchen, where the landline was. Samuel plucked the yellow handset out of the cradle, held it up to his ear, and was about to dial when he realized there wasn't a dial tone on the other end. He jiggled the receiver, and when nothing happened, he hung up the phone.

Confused, Samuel turned around and sat at the kitchen table.

Something was off about the room.

He looked around and realized the lights were dimmer than they should have been. It was as though someone had come along and replaced his bulbs with weaker counterparts.

When was the last time there was a gray-out in Anger, New Hampshire?

Has there ever been one?

For a few years after college, Samuel had lived in San Diego, and he had experienced gray-outs and rolling blackouts during that time. While he had suffered through power outages in Anger before, he had never known the place to gradually lose power.

There was something strange and disconcerting about the lack of phone service and the slowly weakening lights.

Suddenly, Samuel found he didn't want to be in his kitchen. He didn't want to go back into his television room either, but he had to put out the embers. Frustrated with his own unease, Samuel walked back to the fireplace, picked up the basin of dirty water, and emptied it a little at a time over the embers. They hissed and sputtered, but they went out, the gray smoke curling up into the chimney and vanishing.

Samuel waited several minutes, just to be certain the embers were out. When he was satisfied that they were, he put the basin down and gave the bassinette a wide berth.

The eyes of the goblins were following him.

Samuel went up to his room and prepared for bed. When he finished and eased himself between the covers, pulling the heavy blanket up around his neck, he shivered. The shivering worsened as he lay there, and then, as he tried to control his body, he realized he could see his own breath, and that he couldn't hear the heating system.

Did it die?

He groaned and got out of bed, angrily pulling on socks and tugging on his slippers. Samuel hesitated, then put on his bathrobe for good measure. When he stepped into the hallway, he felt as though something was off about it. With an unsettled sensation burrowing into his stomach, he walked to the wall plate and flipped the light switch up.

Nothing happened.

He tried it several more times until he came to the unfortunate conclusion that all his lights were out on the second floor.

Did I lose power? He glanced out the window at the end of the hallway and saw the Kodiaks, who lived in the house next door, had their power. He knew they had a generator, so he listened for it.

The telltale rumble of the gasoline-powered generator was absent.

This is ridiculous. What the hell happened to my place? Everything's paid. The cable bill, phone bill, power. I know there's oil in the tank, I had it filled last week.

Growing angrier, Samuel hurried down the steps, reached the first floor, and went directly to the basement. He snatched up his flashlight from its hook just inside the doorway and turned it on. The light illuminated the stairs for a moment and then died.

Samuel stared at the flashlight in disbelief for a moment before he swore at it in disgust. Hanging it back up, he turned around and went to the stove. Ambient light from the Kodiaks' exterior light filtered in through the windows over the sink, and he was able to take down one of his emergency candles and the box of matches he kept with them. Within a minute, Samuel had the candle lit, and he carried it, and the matches, with him into the basement.

The flickering light of the candle added a surreal visual tone to his trip through the darkness of the basement. He went directly to the furnace and tried to see what was wrong, if it was the pilot light or something else.

Bending down, Samuel saw the pilot light was still lit, but the electric switch wasn't engaging. His thermostat, which was one of the newer, app-controlled devices, was evidently failing to tell its counterpart that he was freezing.

I can't even call anyone because my damned phones aren't working, he thought, getting to his feet. He stomped his way up the stairs and back into his kitchen, slamming the basement door behind him. Samuel glanced out his window at the Kodiaks' house. Nearly all the windows on the first floor of their house were lit. He knew that Bob and Marie Kodiak were night owls, and they would invariably be up, more than likely drinking coffee despite the lateness of the hour. An urge to go outside and ask to use their phone welled up within him, but shame and embarrassment swept it aside. He had known them for less than two months, and he didn't want to make his first social call because he was having issues with his home.

No, it's not that cold in here. Not at all. I'll start a fire in the hearth, bring my blankets down, and close the door. It'll keep it warm enough in there until daylight, then I can ask to use someone's phone.

He shivered and considered, briefly, about getting in his car and driving to his ex's house, although he felt some doubt as to whether she might be awake, and if she would even let him in.

Like the visit to the Kodiaks', this idea, too, was shoved aside.

Samuel didn't need his ex thinking he wasn't capable of providing the basic necessities living on his own. The divorce had been less than amicable, and he knew she was seeking a way to limit his time with his daughter.

Blankets and fireplace it is, he thought.

Carrying the candle, Samuel went into the television room and built a fire, waiting until it was burning well before he left to gather his bedding.

He returned a few minutes later and made up a bed on the couch. Feeling somewhat better about the situation, Samuel closed the door to the television room to keep the heat in, then paused by the fireplace.

The goblins on the bassinette were watching him.

No, that's not going to work, he thought, and he picked up the bassinette. The wood was painfully cold in his hands, and he hastened it to a darkened corner, placing it as far as he could. When he sat down on the couch, he peered at it and was pleased that while the bassinette's hood was still visible, the goblins were not.

He felt an odd sense of relief over that and laid down. Pulling the blankets up over him, he watched the logs burn, and he listened to them as they popped and cracked. The faint scent of burning wood was both pleasant and soothing, easing his mind about the situation he found himself in. Warmth

returned to him as he lay there, and he closed his eyes, finally relaxing. The situation wasn't as bad as he had feared.

If it does get worse, I'll bite the bullet and find a place to stay for the rest of the night, he thought, yawning. But really, it shouldn't come to that. Not at all.

Exhaustion pulled at his mind, dragging him down towards slumber. Faintly, Samuel heard a scratching sound. The damned tree limbs, he thought. I need to trim the branches back on the old elm tree by Emily's window.

His eyes snapped open as he came fully awake.

There aren't trees around this house. Not close enough to hear.

The fire was smaller, the number of embers far larger than the amount of wood left in the hearth. Samuel could still hear the creaking, and he wondered what was happening.

It almost sounds like it's coming from inside the room, he thought, and then he stiffened as he saw the bassinette.

The hood, barely visible in the darkness, moved back and forth as though the entire piece was rocking.

Goblins.

The word shook him, and he sat up violently, throwing the covers off himself and snatching up the candle and matches. His hands trembled as he lit the candle and held it aloft. He half expected to see the goblins gathered around the bassinette, frozen and caught in the act of climbing out of the furniture's side.

There were no goblins, and Samuel let out a tremulous sigh of relief. But the bassinette was still rocking to either side.

That needs to be out of here, he thought, getting to his feet. In fact, I'm going to put it in the garage until morning.

Samuel took a step toward it and froze.

There was something dark in the bassinette. A shape that shouldn't have been there, not even with the shadows created by the flames of the fireplace.

Is that an animal? Did something get into the house and then into the damned bassinette? Are you kidding me! How much worse can this night get! "Hey!" He clapped his hands and walked to the door, throwing it open.

"Get out of here!"

The door slammed shut, and he jumped back, his heart racing madly and thundering against his breastbone.

He reached out for the doorknob, grasped it, then jerked his hand back, swearing. The metal had been cold enough to cause him to tear off some of the skin from his fingers and palm. Samuel glanced at the bassinette and saw it was no longer moving, although the shape was still in it.

He took a cautious step toward it and thought, I can open a window and chase it out that way. I'll worry about the door in a minute or two. One thing at a time, and whatever's in the bassinette is priority here.

Samuel glanced at the fireplace and the brass poker there. He took several small steps toward it, his eyes never leaving the bassinette. When he reached the poker, he picked it up awkwardly with his uninjured hand. Gripping it firmly, he stepped toward the bassinette again.

“Get out!”

He swung at the bassinette and slammed the end of the poker against the foot of it. There was a dull clank of metal against wood, and the creature sat up. It crawled toward the end of the bassinette, and the firelight illuminated its face.

Samuel found himself looking at the gaunt face of a child, perhaps no more than two. He couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. Its hair was light blonde, and it wore a gray shift. It gripped the end of the bassinette. As Samuel watched, the child pulled itself through the wooden foot and tumbled out onto the floor.

It squinted at him and hissed, revealing yellow and stained jagged teeth. The child's tongue was a bluish color, and its entire body quivered as it rose unsteadily to its feet.

Before he could stop himself, Samuel screamed and brought the poker smashing down onto the head of the child.

But the brass passed through it and bounced off the floor, the impact sending reverberations up through Samuel's arms. The child shrieked at him and lurched forward on unsteady legs.

Confused and desperate, he kicked out at the child, but as his foot passed through it, pain shot through his leg and sent him tumbling to the floor. Samuel's chin slammed into the wood and drove his teeth into one another. He shrieked as a tooth snapped, bits of enamel flying onto his tongue. Gasping for breath with his heart fluttering, he rolled away from the child and tried to stand.

The child was upon him in an instant.

Small hands tore at his face. Icy fingers gripped his nostrils and pulled viciously at them. Samuel tried to smack the child to drive it off him, but nothing worked. His hands only encountered the bone-chilling cold that his foot had.

Samuel managed to get to his feet, and the child fell away. With his face numb and pain flaring up from his broken tooth, he twisted around and snatched up an antique clothes iron from the mantle. The heavy piece of metal was comforting in his hand, and as the child launched itself at him, Samuel threw the iron.

It passed through the child, causing it to vanish even as the iron crashed onto the floor.

Panting, Samuel looked around, desperately trying to see where the child was.

But he couldn't see it.

The only movement came from the flames as they devoured the logs. The only sound was coming from the fire.

Samuel turned toward the closed door and walked stiffly to it. He reached out for the doorknob and, glancing to the side, saw that the bassinette was rocking.

I don't know what's going on, but I need to leave here. My tooth. I have to go to the hospital or someplace. My tooth.

Samuel reached out, tried again to take hold of the doorknob, and howled with agony as the cold metal bit into his flesh again. Ripping his hand back, he cradled it to his chest and stumbled back. He went to the fireplace and sank down to his knees, extending his injured hand toward the warmth of the fire.

As he did so, he caught movement in the corner of his eye.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears as he turned toward the bassinette. It was no longer rocking.

As he stared at it, the child sat up, eyes fixed upon him. The small hands grasped the edge of the bassinette, and the child slowly pulled itself through the wooden furniture until it once more stood on the floor. Its feet were hidden by the ragged hem of its shift, and it tilted its head to look at him, as though the child wasn't quite sure that Samuel was there.

It took a step toward him, and Samuel whimpered, shrinking back. "Please," he whispered, wincing as his tongue brushed against the broken

tooth. "I just want to leave. That's it."

The child looked at the door, and Samuel nodded vigorously. "Yes. That's all I want!"

The child stepped toward him again, and Samuel forced himself to remain still. A teasing, playful smile spread across the child's face, revealing once more the vile teeth hidden behind its lips.

Samuel smiled back and nodded. "Yeah. I just want to go away, okay?" The child laughed, an oddly pleasant sound that reminded him of Emily.

Samuel's shoulders relaxed, and, despite his broken tooth, his smile widened. He got to his feet, still holding his hand to his chest. Cautiously, he stepped toward the child, who continued smiling.

With his head pounding, Samuel took another step closer to the door, passing the child. When nothing happened, he reached for the door and screamed as pain exploded in the back of his knee, knocking him to the floor.

The child, laughing, scrambled up Samuel's side, grabbed hold of his eyelid, and peeled it up, smiling down at him. "No," Samuel whimpered.

The child cooed and thrust its hand deep into Samuel's eye.

Pain and the sound of his own shrieks ushered him into darkness.