

Will Anyone Ever Know Me?

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What did she know? What had been done to her?

The woman woke in the night and asked her husband, "Is she here?"

The man turned on the bedside light.

"She isn't here," he said.

And they felt it. Relief. An enormous relief that she wasn't in the room, that presence, that unfortunate who is not their child.

"We were selfish," she said.

"No, we did what was right."

"She's from another world. We don't even know her age."

"She's a child—whatever her age."

"We've lost everything and now this. It doesn't change that we've lost everything. I don't know if I have the strength . . . We pretended. And we stole her."

"No. Rescued."

"Stole."

"Lured her. At the worst."

"She's from so far away."

"She's who she is."

"Our daughter—our real daughter—"

"—would have wanted us to save her. It was a miracle that she wound up in our room. She's ours now."

"Ours?"

The man turned off the bedside lamp. After a while he said, "She could have Elizabeth's room. It would be heaven for a girl like her. For any little girl."

"You don't understand how I feel—no. I won't go that far."

"She's here." His whisper was a hiss.

"She's so quiet. Can she hear us?"

"I don't know . . ."

In the half-darkness the woman saw the child crawling toward the edge of the bed.

"Picture for you, ma'am," the girl said.

"What, honey? Oh, honey, what?"

"For the door, ma'am. For the room. So you know I'm in the room."

The woman turned on the light. She looked at the picture—a stick figure of a girl with long hair.

"See. So you know?"

"Did they make you put up a sign?" the woman asked.

"Yes. Yes, ma'am."

"The sign meant you were in the room and you were alone?"

"Yes."

"You don't need a sign here . . . This is a pretty picture. This is a very pretty picture. You know, you don't have to call me ma'am."

"I am sorry."

"What would you like to call me?"

The child didn't answer.

"Can you tell me?" the woman asked.

It was awful, everything was awful. Elizabeth their beloved daughter had been lost to them. Then this other child appeared a month later when the woman was simply running the bathwater in the hotel and heard her husband call to her in that voice he had never used before. And there was the girl standing in the living room of their suite and it became obvious. The child had some English, enough to tell them what they needed to know, and the husband knew some of her language and so they learned more. There was no one from her family. No one left. What could the man and the woman do?

And now here she was with them—how had they done it? By what miracle could a living child be taken from one world to another, could pass through that membrane? Why had they been allowed to get away with it?

And the woman was thinking: What have we done? Will we be caught? Will it have been worth it?

It was breathtakingly easy to steal the child—and now there was no way to explain her . . .

The child would not sleep alone in the guest room. In the middle of the night she came into their room, night after night, to sleep on the floor near their bed. When they

woke she was already looking at them. She looked as if she wasn't sure what was expected of her but that she would wait for an answer.

What did the girl know? What had been done to her?

"We did the best we could, didn't we?" the man whispered.

They were safe. They could hear the child moving about in the room above their heads.

"What if they come after her?" the woman asked.

"No one will ever come after her. There are more and more and more and more where she came from. All those girls. They keep so many of them and use them up. She doesn't have a family. She's safe here. She's already dead to the people who forced her to go to the hotel."

"I dream about them coming for her. They take her away. And then she's back."

"You mean—our daughter's back." In his wife's dream their daughter came back after they returned the foreign child. He knew because he had the same dream.

"It's not fair," the woman said.

The girl hardly ate and would not smile. She often looked as if she were waiting.

"She doesn't trust us."

"How could she?"

"You're right. How could she."

The woman still had Elizabeth's passport—that was what allowed everything to happen. She had kept her daughter's passport with her, and so when the child was in their hotel suite they hardly needed to think. They knew the country was corrupt. Children could be bought. It was breathtakingly easy because their own child was not alive.

"Have you thought about giving her the room?"

"She's so foreign. So strange—to give her the room—it would be like saying Elizabeth is gone."

"Elizabeth will never be gone. We'll never let her go. She's with us."

Would Elizabeth want the girl to have the room? the woman wondered.

"She would have," the man said.

"Do you think so?"

"She was a loving girl—she would have loved to have a sister. She was a gentle girl. She shared things."

"After she turned nine. Not before. After her birthday she started to be good about sharing with her friends. She shared some things anyway."

"She didn't share her stuffed animals. I'll admit that."

"The girl," the woman said, "she probably would like a stuffed animal to hug at night. Maybe that's why she can't sleep. Maybe the panda family."

The woman could see them, the pandas, the mama and the papa and the baby, the two stuffed monkeys, the menagerie of tigers. The Barbies hadn't been of interest to Elizabeth, but just the same she wound up with a line-up of them on a shelf at the headboard of her bed. Most of the dolls came from other girls who gave them to Elizabeth at birthday parties. But the stuffed penguin—Elizabeth wouldn't sleep without it. The stuffed penguin had been buried with Elizabeth.

"It's all right," the man said. "I shouldn't have asked. Come on. I'm sorry. It's all right. It's all right. The guest room is nice—it's a nice room for a little girl."

What did the girl know? What had been done to her? Who would have allowed this living breathing child to stand in the middle of a strange hotel room in an adult's ruined pinkish brown evening gown torn to show her legs and with her chest nearly bare—the vulnerable breast bone standing out from her chest. The child wore a woman's high heels, heels so high and large that her foot slid into the toe, and the sole at the heel was bare. The child's eyes were rimmed with eyeliner. Trick or Treat was the woman's first thought when she walked into the living room of their suite. And then the child began to undress and the man and the woman said No No No and the child looked around wildly.

Wasn't that look there still? But even the child's fear was somehow almost calculating. How would they ever lure her into their world?

Their own lovely daughter—the country had stolen her, the awful country that the woman had taken Elizabeth to because the girl missed her father. After the funeral in the States the woman flew back to help her husband pack up and take care of all the details of his failed transfer. They were leaving in less than two hours when the girl appeared. There was no time to waste, no time at all, and with some of the woman's clothing cut and pinned and with the child's hair

washed and cut—oh the woman was working so quickly—the child would leave her own country. And because the child looked the age of their child in the passport it was fated perhaps. It was also fated (wasn't it?) because the woman would never have returned to the country except that she couldn't let her husband go back alone—and only two of them could have carried it off in this country to which they would never convert now—with its wobbling flat bed trucks and tankers and jitneys and scooters and insane taxis and buses that spewed black air and its skinny boys dodging between carts and horses and more carts from which the boys sold boiled eggs inside of which a tiny bird already with pinpricks of feathers was boiled alive as a delicacy—a delicacy! to be bitten into when the egg was cracked.

What else should they have done? If they allowed the little girl to leave the room whoever brought her by mistake would take her away to be used again. The authorities were in league with those who brought children to foreigners' rooms. The man and the woman were efficient people and their hearts were broken and they were numb and they had nothing to lose. How else could they have pulled it off?

But then there were the electric sensations that still fuzzed in the woman's fingertips. They had stolen the child who had been sold and otherwise would be sold and sold until she was dead of disease and even the man and the woman were afraid to take her to the doctor now—where to go?—what was to be done? Except that the man had a friend who worked in a clinic and they could possibly approach him, and the woman was thinking that there is a place inside any mother who knows how to help a child yes, a child is a child is a child yes.

The woman turned on the light.

The child was standing in the bedroom again. Her nightgown was on backwards. The neckline dipped low on her chest where her breast bone jutted. The woman got out of bed. Getting up like this night after night—oh suddenly it reminded her of when Elizabeth was a baby waking up all through the night, night after night.

"Come on," the woman said to the girl. "You'll need to turn this around. That's the back. You have to keep warm or you'll get a cold. It's cold here. But that's okay because we make the house warm. Everything is okay here."

The child looked at her with that look—of waiting and calculation.

The woman was so tired.

"Would you like to see?" she began. "There's a room that maybe you would be happy to sleep in—for tonight maybe. It was a special room and there are stuffed animals in it."

She led the child out of the bedroom without waking her husband.

Do I have cancer? the woman wondered as she walked upstairs with the child. How could I not have some terrible disease by now? She told herself: I don't care. I don't care. What do I matter? A child was saved from disease and death—and enslavement. Who knew what had been done to her?

The woman fumbled for the light switch.

Elizabeth's room in the bright light was full of the lovely accoutrements of a lucky child. The bed with its pink canopy floated at the heart of the room. Stuffed animals were heaped in a jumble on the comforter. The woman felt breathless with pain.

The child ran toward the canopy bed.

When she turned back her face was alive. But she did not point at the pandas or the monkeys or the tigers. She pointed at the shelf of dolls at the head of the bed, as if at last out of her terrible loneliness she recognized what she missed.

"They are beautiful, ma'am," said the child. "They are beautiful girls."