

The Community

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Pauline's screams woke John. He got up and went to her room. Must just be a nightmare. But when John entered she was standing in front of the window. The moonlight filtered in reflecting off of her blonde hair creating a glow around her.

"Polly, what're you doing?"

Pauline ran from the window and wrapped herself around John's legs. He could feel her shaking. Kneeling down he looked her in the eyes, "What's wrong?"

"There was a man outside the window."

John looked out the window. There was nothing but trees and gravel.

"I don't see anyone."

"He was out there."

"Come on let's get you back into bed."

She hopped up into the bed and curled up grabbing the cuffs of her pink pajamas. John pulled the covers over her.

"Why don't you tell me what you saw?"

"You won't believe me. Mom and dad didn't."

"You've seen him before?"

She nodded her head, "He was nice, like the clowns at the circus. He danced, made funny faces and music," Pauline raised her curled fists to her eyes, "Then he turned mean. I didn't like the new way he danced or the new music. He made scary faces."

Something tugged at the back of John's mind. Like a dream trying to be remembered. He let it go. He kissed Pauline on the forehead.

"It's ok I'm here."

He started to leave but Pauline grabbed the sleeve of his shirt, "Don't leave."

The bed wasn't exactly big enough for the both of them. John's feet hung over the edge. The blanket barely covered the two of them. John let Pauline have most of it. She curled up beside him. He watched her go to sleep then allowed himself to drift off.

The sunlight greeted John. He quickly pulled the covers over his face. Feeling that his feet were exposed he remembered where he was. Turning over he saw Pauline had already gotten up. John went downstairs finding his mom in the kitchen. John sat down at the table.

"How late were you guys out last night?"

"We got back around three," his mom said.

Typical. Even though they were hitting their late forties his parents insisted on living like they were twenty. It said something about their immaturity in some areas of their life. If John hadn't been home for the summer Pauline would have been on her own the night before.

"Where's Polly?" John asked.

"She's in the living room watching TV."

"You didn't tell me she was having nightmares."

"They're just nightmares, no big deal."

"She was awake."

“Seeing things then. Children have over reactive imaginations.”

His mom jammed the coffee pot back into the coffee maker a little too hard.

“The man she describes, he just sounds, just sounds too weird. She’s just having nightmares,” she said.

“There are some pretty weird people out there.”

His mom sat down and looked John straight on.

“Do you think we didn’t check the cameras? There wasn’t anything.”

John didn’t push the point any further. If his parent’s precious security system for Hamelin didn’t reveal anything then that was the end of it. They finished their breakfast in silence. His mom left as he loaded the dishwasher. John was amazed he had made it past one with how neglectful his parents could be. His childhood memories were filled more with some nanny than them. John’s parents didn’t get excited about his summer returns because they wanted to see him; they got excited because it meant they didn’t have to pay a babysitter.

John went to check on Polly.

“Polly, are you fine while I take a shower?”

She responded with a nod of her head while keeping her eyes glued on the TV.

John thought he heard music outside as he was getting dressed. It sounded like someone was playing the flute. The tune was familiar but John couldn’t remember where he had heard it before. He didn’t think anyone in Hamelin played the flute. Maybe one of the neighbors was making their kid learn it. Could just be the TV. John pushed it from his mind, it was nothing.

John still heard the music as he came down to check on Polly. She wasn't sitting in the living room anymore and the TV was off. Where was she? The music stopped. Someone knocked at the front door. It was one of the neighbors, she lived next door. John recognized her face but couldn't place a name.

"Have you seen Julie!? She was out back playing but she's gone."

"How old is she?"

"Five. Please you've got to help me find her!"

John placed his hand on her shoulder and mimed taking in deep breathes. She followed the cue.

"What were you doing when Julie disappeared?"

"I was... I was..."

John looked at her. He noticed the messed up hair and signs of smeared lipstick. Her blouse was only half tucked into her skirt. John glanced behind her and noticed a maintenance vehicle in front of her house. Christ. Why did the parents of Hamelin have to be so shitty? Then John remembered Polly. He hadn't figured out where she was. Without thinking he closed the door on the woman and rushed upstairs.

Polly was in her room. She was in the corner crying with her ears covered. He crouched down next to her. John embraced her and kissed the top of her head. He didn't know what he would do if Polly ever went missing. She was the only reason he ever came back home. She had to have at least one person her life who really cared for her.

"The mean man was playing his music. I'm scared," she said.

"You're safe with me."

“You slammed the door in her face.” John’s mother said.

“Sorry. I was worried about Polly.”

“Pauline was in her room.”

“I didn’t know that. I came downstairs and she was gone. I panicked.”

“You never think. Pauline is fine but Julie is still missing. You should have helped Diane.”

“Polly is not fine! Have you seen her?”

His mother didn’t say anything she only continued to cut vegetables.

“No of course not. You can’t be bothered to care for your own children.”

His mother glared at him, “Don’t you talk back to me like that! Your father and I raised and fed you. You ungrateful prick.”

“Tell me there couldn’t be a possible connection between the man Polly has been seeing and Julie’s disappearance.”

Their stares locked. She looked away John felt some sense of triumph. She knew he was right but her pride wouldn’t let her admit it.

He left her in silence.

John decided to figure things out on his own. He had to find out who the strange man was and how he was getting into the community. John had to protect Polly. While there was still light John went and looked around the small forest behind their house. Hamelin was an enclosed community so the forest wasn’t allowed to continue on

forever. But Hamelin was on the edge of the city so for posterity's sake it was allowed to be quite sizable. John used to play a lot in the forest when he was younger.

John's house was directly in front of the forest. The tree line started several yards from the back of the house. Polly's window faced it. John walked over to where the forest started and stood looking at Polly's window. He felt an odd presence behind him and for a moment he thought he could hear the sound of a flute. The wisps of a memory floated into his mind. But as hard as he tried John couldn't grab hold of the memory. Slowly it sank away again.

He was going to camp out here. If there was someone hiding out in the forest John was going to catch them. John found a tree he could lean comfortably against. He tried to find one that allowed him to watch the area in front of Polly's window but that keep him concealed from anyone standing there. It wasn't a perfect plan but it was better than nothing. It was less obvious than setting up an actual tent or rolling out a sleeping bag.

Night came slowly. John watched the sun set and the stars come out. He looked trying to see if he could remember any of the constellations. Turns out he didn't so he just started making up his own. He looked at his watch, it was past nine. Polly should be fast asleep by now. John just sat there waiting in the summer night. Once in a while a breeze would grace him. John tried his best to stay awake but his mind refused.

John was awoken by the sound of music. He looked up at Polly's window, nothing. He turned his attention to the edge of the forest. There was a shadow. John jumped up and ran towards it. It was one of the neighborhood kids. The music continued to play.

John stopped. He continued to try and run towards the kid but John was no longer able to move. A man stood beside John. The man had the stench of something rotting. He was tall and gangly with a wrinkled black suite. He spoke with a crisp voice.

“Do you know what it feels like to dance to the tune of death? No, you were the cripple. Why are you here? The others learned not to touch the damned. Do you think you can save them? A mistake?”

John had no idea what the man was talking about.

“I know you don’t understand. But you will. Not yet though. When their punishment is complete I will help you understand.”

The taste of dirt filled John’s mouth. He was on the ground. But it wasn’t home. It was someplace else. And it wasn’t him. He was a child and to his side lay crutches. Looking around he saw he was surrounded by the wood and stone buildings of a dimly lit village. Somewhere he heard the most beautiful music. He had the strongest urge to follow the music. Why were they leaving him? Didn’t they know he needed help? He couldn’t hold back the tears. John tried to crawl. He wouldn’t see his friends again. They had left him. They had followed the man and his wonderful music but he had been left behind to suffer.

John woke up in his sweat covered bed. He couldn’t figure out what happened. The last thing he remembered was the man. Then what? He couldn’t remember. But he did remember something else. He finally remembered why the man that Polly had described seemed so familiar. He had seen that same man when he was a kid. Rushing

downstairs he found his parents at the table with what he assumed were the parents of the child from the previous night.

“We need to talk.”

“Not now,” his mother said.

“No it can’t wait.”

“Fine”

His parents told the couple they would be back.

“What? Another kid went missing night.”

John resisted the urge to tell them what happened the night before.

“Look I remembered something. When Polly first told me about the man she saw, it sounded familiar but I wasn’t able to place him. But now I remember. I remember seeing the exact same man when I was younger. I think this man is taking the children.”

“Ridiculous,” his mother said, “No children went missing back then.”

His mom was right. Why didn’t any children go missing then? But then it hit him. John was the oldest. There were no other children in Hamelin at the time. Maybe whoever the man was was just checking out Hamelin. He said something about punishment. If he wanted to steal children it wouldn’t make much of an impact to still the only one. Come back when there was more.

“It has to be the same man,” John said to his mother.

“John leave this to us. You’re becoming delusional. Fine you were maybe right about Pauline’s imaginary friend being someone real. But you really can’t expect it to be someone who also just happened to be here over a decade ago.”

John gave up and walked away. He didn't know what was going on. But it didn't matter what was happening. Only one thing mattered: protecting Polly.

John's parent's left him alone for the rest of the day. He spent it in Pauline's room. He wasn't going to leave her alone. She sat in the corner never speaking. John dozed off for a little while but woke up when his parents told him they were going out.

John made sure he stayed awake, keeping his eyes on Pauline. As he was checking his watch he heard the music. Polly's head shot up.

"Polly?"

No answer. She stood up and began to walk. He tried to stop her but got really weak when he approached her. He fell to the floor unable to move again until she was farther away.

"Polly, don't leave."

After Polly had left the house John was able to move. He followed her outside. All of the children were gathering in the street. John tried to remember which house the party was at. He needed to get their attention. He didn't know how any of these people became parents. They seemed to do the absolute minimum to raise their children. Then complain when their children stay brats for the rest of their lives. He wasn't going to let that happen to Polly.

John ran back inside and downstairs to the main security control room. The room had monitors for all of the cameras in Hamelin. It also had the trigger for the emergency storm system. Hamelin had its own tornado siren. John turned it on. Hopefully it would

grab the attention of those useless parents. He headed back outside first grabbing a knife from the kitchen.

When he got outside all of the children were heading towards the gate and the man was standing yards from him staring back at him with a crooked smile.

“Do you think you can break the cycle?”

John felt paralyzed again. But he found if he concentrated hard enough he could make small movements. Slowly he positioned the knife over his leg then plunged in. He screamed. The pain shot through his body overriding the paralysis.

“Clever.”

“Go fuck yourself!”

“You don’t want this.”

“I won’t let you take them. They’re innocent children.”

Before John could blink the man appeared in front of him.

“Innocent! These children have been thieves, murderers, rapists, liars, cheaters, and executioners.”

“What?”

“So little understanding of death. Men live their lives over and over. That’s what this is about, true eternal damnation.”

Neither noticed the parents had gathered behind them. The parents stopped several feet from John and the man. John couldn’t really make out what they were saying but they seemed to be whispering quickly between each other, try to grasp what was happening. Several of the parents tried to rush for their kids but the man waved his arm and they flew back into the concrete. The man looked back at John.

“I told you you didn’t want this. If someone interrupts the punishment I kill them all. I’ve done it once before. I had them walk into the sea. What do you think I should do this time?”

“Why?”

“I told you true eternal damnation. Long ago the souls of these parents, in another lifetime, made a deal with me. I came to their village to rid them of a plague. We agreed on a payment but when I had finished they refused to pay me. As punishment I took their children and have continued to do so life after life.”

The man snapped his fingers the siren’s pitch went up.

“Don’t worry I will let you dance to the same tune as your friends. This time you won’t be left behind.”

As the pitch got higher all of the windows in the neighborhood started to crack and shattered. The man walked towards the children. John tackled the man. Taking the knife John shoved it deep into the man’s back. The man threw John off of him and stood back up. Again the man snapped his fingers. The ground around them began to fracture. John could hear the sound of leaking gas.

“What are you doing?”

“Everyone has to dance now. Your graves are waiting and I will play the tune that leads you there.”

The farthest house from them erupted casting the neighborhood in a soft glow of firelight. And one by one each of the other houses erupted, covering the Hamelin Community with hellish fire. John looked up at the man and for a second he no longer saw a man of flesh but a man of bones illuminated by the flames.

“What are you?”

“I’ve had many titles and names.”

John heard the music again. As it played he noticed all the parents had started moving like the children. And as the music continued they began to walk into the fire.

“No! Stop!”

“This is your punishment for interfering. You get to watch them die.”

As the children walked towards the flames John tried to tackle the man again but the man kicked John. John fell to the ground.

“Don’t take her from me.”

“You don’t even know why you care for her so much.”

“She’s my sister.”

“You were both survivors. You were the cripple and she was the deaf. In that life you got married had children of your own and tried your best to forget me. You’ve always been together.”

John’s mind flooded with flashes of memories from previous lifetimes.

“Why am I remembering these things?”

“You’re close to death.”

The man snapped his fingers for the last time. John found himself moving against his will. He couldn’t resist anymore. As he walked into the flames he felt the searing heat as the flames burnt his flesh. The man let him scream. John fell into the ashes beneath him feeling his soul slip away from this world. The man looked down at him.

“Until the next life.”