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The Girl Who Wished

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Once upon a time, way back in the 1950s, when there was no cyber or cable anything and the cars were all big and boxy, there was a little girl who lived with her mother and father, just the three of them, in a fine brick house on the Far South Side of Chicago. (Only Negro people, as they called themselves back then, lived in the neighborhood, nearly all of them also living in fine brick houses.) The Girl's favorite part of the day was evening when her Daddy returned from work. No matter the season, she'd wait on the front steps, anxious for the sight of his tall, dark figure walking down the street. If he was whistling, The Girl knew he was happy and she'd run to him so he could grab her with his large hands and lift her up.

"Hey there Caramel," he'd say. (He called her "Caramel" because he said that's what her color reminded him of, which made The Girl happy because it was her Mommy's color too.)

Her Daddy's face was scratchy and smelled like burning leaves. After a hug and kiss, he would carry her inside. However, if he wasn't whistling as he approached, then The Girl knew he was sad. On such evenings she waited on the steps and he passed her without saying a word and she knew she must not make noise that evening because Daddy might get mad and yell at her.

Her mother and father yelled at each other a lot, especially at night after The Girl went to bed. She'd hide under the covers but could still hear them. It made her cry to hear the angry voices, so one night she prayed to God.

"I wish Mommy and Daddy wouldn't fight anymore," she said.

"Alright, you'll have your wish," she heard God say.

The next Sunday when she and her mother returned home from church, her father was gone, along with all his

clothes. She never saw him again.

The Girl's playmates (who were all Negroes too) soon took to teasing her. They'd heard their parents talking of how The Girl's father had run off with someone named Wanda Williams.

"Where your daddy girl?" the kids teased.

"In his skin!" The Girl answered defiantly.

And when she walked away, they sang behind her:

*"Someone's in the kitchen with Wan-da.
Someone's in the kitchen I know-oh-oh-oh.
Mister Foster in the kitchen with Wan-daaa,
And she's playing on his banjo!"*

A few months later, The Girl and her Mommy left the fine brick house and moved into a small apartment set above a neighborhood storefront because they didn't have any money. The Girl was mad at God. Her wish had been for Mommy and Daddy to stop fighting, not for Daddy to leave. The Girl swore she'd never talk to God again.

The years passed and passed all the way to the 1970s when folks wore long hair and bell-bottoms. By then, The Girl had grown tall and cover-girl shapely and attended community college, which is where she finally made her first real best friend. The friend's name was Sheila. She had dark skin and a wide smile that made you feel she had some sneaky fun in mind. Sheila and The Girl were very different. Whereas The Girl wanted everything five minutes ago, Sheila was patient as a tree; The Girl was an authority on fancy clothes, Sheila had no fashion sense whatsoever; The Girl cared nothing for current events while Sheila read newspapers galore.

Despite all this, The Girl and Sheila loved each other's

company. They had fun doing everything and nothing. They gave each other advice. They finished each other's sentences. In conversation, each knew when to ask a question and when to just listen.

Then, after junior year, Sheila moved to New York City—alone. In letters home Sheila wrote that Manhattan was simply, “too wonderful.” It made The Girl sad (not to mention a little angry) that her friend was having such a good time without her.

One night, The Girl sat in her bedroom at home drinking a beer she'd snuck in past her mother. While gazing at the photograph of Sheila smiling in Central Park, she became so unhappy she broke her promise and prayed to God again. “I wish Sheila was home.”

“Alright, if that's what you want,” she was sure she heard God say.

A month later, Sheila returned home. Sheila was sick. Doctors gave her lots of treatments, but none did any good.

After Sheila died The Girl was really mad at God. She vowed she'd never, ever, talk to him again. He might be the Almighty, but she also knew he couldn't be trusted.

Not long after that, The Girl left college and got a boring secretary job. She dated lots of men to ease the tedium but they were boring too, even the ones she slept with.

One night, when she was awfully drunk and angry after reading Sheila's old letters, The Girl decided to pray to The Devil.

“I want a handsome man to marry who has lots of money. And let my baby be a boy because life's easier on them than it is on girls.”

“I think that can be arranged,” she heard The Devil say.

She laughed and didn't give it another thought. But a year later at a picnic she met a Handsome Man. He was

so un-brown that when her mother first met him, she thought he was a White man. His family was rich and he was engaged to a woman as un-brown as he. But after the picnic he said he wanted to marry The Girl instead. The Girl didn't love the Handsome Man like the women do in romantic movies, but as her mother told her: "Child, life is not the movies."

The Girl said yes to the Handsome Man's proposal, which didn't please his mother. "She's not Catholic," his mother protested. "She's too dark and she's stupid." But The Girl converted and married the Handsome Man anyway. They moved into a big house way up on the North Side in Lincoln Park where hardly any Black people (as they now called themselves) resided.

At first The Girl was happy being married, then after a while she wasn't; so she gave in to the wishes of her husband and agreed to have a baby. Soon she was pregnant, but after six months, for some reason, her body pushed the baby out, the poor child breathless. She later learned from Her Husband The Handsome Man (who insisted on learning every detail of every little thing) that the baby had been female.

A year later The Girl was pregnant again. This time everything was fine until nearly the eighth month when, again, her body pushed the baby out before it was ready. After living for an hour, this child died too.

With tearful eyes Her Husband The Handsome Man said they must name this baby (which The Girl thought of as Dead Baby Number 2). The Girl said naming was morbid but Her Husband the Handsome Man insisted. The child must be named for the sake of its immortal soul, he said, which is how Joan Frances Woodbury came to be buried in the Woodbury family plot.

Convinced the Devil had killed her first two children

because neither was the boy she'd wished for, The Girl was all guilt and loathing when she got home from the hospital. Unfortunately, Her Husband the Handsome Man had been so sad during her stay that he forgot about the nursery, which she found still intact.

The Girl became furious. She opened the nursery's second story window and flung away the cotton diapers and stuffed animals and baby jammies; the items landing in the front yard.

People walking down the quiet street stopped to look. (It was late on a Saturday morning, very cold but with no snow.) Out the window sailed plastic bottles of baby oil, baby powder, baby formula, then a folded blue pram in mint condition, then a white bassinet, and then glass baby bottles that shattered on the walkway. The flying shards forced the half-dozen gawkers to step back from the low, front gate. They all thought the Black woman up there must be crazy. (The onlookers were all White people.) Then just like that the Black woman disappeared from the window and they heard yelling coming from inside the house. As it turned out, Her Husband the Handsome Man had been in his first floor den with his rosary, praying for poor Joan Frances. It wasn't till he heard bottles breaking that he rushed to the living room picture window. He then took the stairs two at a time to the second floor, arriving at the top as The Girl was pushing the rolling crib into the hallway.

"Things aren't bad enough," she yelled, "I have to come home to this?"

Gripping the crib's headboard she shoved it into him and knocked him to the floor, then she pushed the bed over the top stair and sent the thing crashing all the way to the landing, after which she turned to Her Husband The Handsome Man, who was rising from the floor, and

growled: “There-is-no-baby-in-this-house, understand?”

She stomped down the stairs, stepping around the toppled crib at the bottom. Grabbing her black wool coat from the foyer closet, she opened the front door onto the trashed yard. The onlookers by then had been joined by two White men police officers, their car parked in the middle of the street with blue lights flashing.

Her eyes large with rage, her hair sticking wildly from her head (for she had not been to the hairdresser’s for some time), the cops asked her what was wrong.

“Wrong?” she sneered while pulling on the coat. “Why, everything’s just fine!”

She made a move to go and one of the officers raised a hand to stop her.

The Girl pointed her finger at him.

“This is my yard. This is my stuff. If I want to throw stuff out my window it’s my business.”

The officer’s face went red. He was about to speak when his partner motioned to the still open doorway where Her Husband the Handsome Man was now standing.

“It’s okay,” he said to the cops. “Let her go. She lives here.”

The cops stepped aside and The Girl stormed past, yelling at a few of the onlookers to get the hell out of her way. They all watched as she headed down the block, hands jammed in her coat pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold.

The Girl didn’t return home till after dark. The porch light was on and the yard cleared, save for the bits of glass: teensy glimmers under the whitish glare.

A few years later The Girl got pregnant yet again—prophylactic malfunction—and this time there was no baby shower or talk of names or heart-to-hearts with her mom about mothering.

The baby was born a healthy boy. Her Husband the Handsome Man asked what was her choice for a name. Gazing with disinterest at the hospital TV she said, "Call him whatever you want." So, he named the undead baby Charles Breton Woodbury—Brett for short. He was so pretty, even The Girl's snarky Mother-In-Law couldn't look at the kid without smiling. But The Girl was not fooled. She knew God and The Devil were just waiting for her to weaken and fall madly in love with her son so she'd start wishing good things for him, which God and The Devil would then use as a means to destroy the boy, just like they'd destroyed her parents' marriage, and Sheila, and her daughters. The Girl gave Brett a respectable amount of attention, but not so much that she'd succumb to any desires to adore him. She kept her emotions in check, she watched her step, and she never wished for anything again.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERIC CHARLES MAY is an associate professor in the Creative Writing department at Columbia College Chicago. A Chicago native and former reporter for the Washington Post, his fiction has appeared in the magazines *Fish Stories*, *F*, and *Criminal Class*. In addition to his *Post* reporting, his nonfiction has appeared in *Sport Literate*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the personal essay anthology *Briefly Knocked Unconscious by a Low-Flying Duck*. His first novel, *Bedrock Faith*, was published in 2014 by Akashic Books.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

GEOFFREY GRISSO currently resides in the wet and gloomy city of Portland, Oregon; where the cats rule, beards prevail and beer is always near. He works mostly with pen and ink, though the occasional computer intervention may arise. He is very experimental and constantly seeking growth, so that his techniques transform from time to time.