

David Ewald

Attractive Nuisance

I was in town on business. This was before the advent of the Internet so there wasn't much to do except watch the latest stock reports and the occasional bad movie on the local soft-core porn channel. My apartment was adequate. I'd rented out the luxury suite for that week and it came equipped with all the amenities: microwave, dishwasher, high-pressure shower-head, rooms big enough for a family of five. The man who checked me in was from Pakistan, I think.

"Only for the week," he said. "That's special rate, sir. You'll like."

He was old and lived in an apartment at the back of the lobby, behind the check-in counter. His wife or daughter came in carrying a small child. Tagging behind was a girl of about seven or eight. The woman and her baby paid me no mind and went directly to the counter where she spoke to the man in their own language. I realized the little girl was looking at me.

"Hello," I said.

She put her index finger in her mouth, tugged at the corner of her cheek, her finger working like a hook, and then walked around to join her mother. The Christmas lights gave off a haloish glow. Outside, cars crawled by. A small but well-adorned pine tree squatted in one corner, ablaze in all its synthetic glory.

"I'll be back here at five pm Friday to check out."

"Check out time is eleven am, sir."

"In the morning then. Eleven."

"Very good, sir."

The motel complex had three floors and all of the rooms but mine faced inward onto the below-level open air parking garage. Some of the doors and windows had been decorated festively, signs reading Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, and here and there a string of lights blinked or a wreath gave off its scent of the otherworld.

Beyond the heavy door with my room number on it was a long dark staircase ascending to another door, this one wooden and not needing a key, and beyond that the apartment. I entered carrying my suitcase and satchel. My tie had gone askew and after setting down my possessions on the queen-sized bed I went into the bathroom to straighten it out.

The living room was especially cold and the heating unit looked to be on the fritz. I didn't dare switch it on at this point. The track for the sliding glass door had rusted considerably enough to prevent the door from being moved more than a few inches. Though the glass was grimy with a film of dust I could still see the descending clouds, the cold color, and the rooms far across the way in another wing. Few lights were on, fewer decorations back here. I moved to the dining nook and stood at the window, this one clean compared to the sliding glass door. As if it were new and had recently been replaced.

Down below was a fenced-in courtyard in the center of which was a sizable circular lawn. The grass looked well-maintained, as did the single rose bush at the lawn's heart. At this time of year the flowers were all but dead, but I could imagine at other times during the happy warm seasons the flowers looking robust in the sun, and the bees buzzing, and the scent overpowering.

A single rose bush in the center of the circular fenced-in lawn. I found that odd.

As it was late I fixed myself a quick dinner from the few items I'd

picked up at the store before check-in. I ate in front of the TV in the massive studio-like living room. After the stock reports and the end of my meal I flipped to the soft-core porn. After that I went to bed.

I woke up in the middle of the night with the usual need. My bladder was nothing if not porous. On my way out of the bathroom I thought I saw—of all things—fingers curving around the corner of the wall that faced the open living room. The fingers, I thought, were small. They, I thought, were white.

It might have been my mind, in which case I could go back to bed. But just as easily it might well have been a person, a sneak, the Pakistani girl perhaps (the fingers might *not* have been white), in which case I could definitely *not* go to sleep. I could not be sure so I erred on the side of curiosity and turned the corner. I saw no one.

I'm not sure what compelled me to go to the window above the dining table in the nook. Something compelled me even then.

All the lights in all the rooms on all three floors were out. Through the clouds the moonlight illuminated the courtyard. Standing just outside the black-painted iron gate encircling the lawn was a little girl in a fetching dress. She looked familiar.

But she was not the Pakistani girl.

She was blond, her long hair braided into a whip that fell down her back. Her dress was cream-colored and spotted with polka dots. She was barefoot and pale.

She no longer reminded me of someone. She was that someone.

I had not seen this girl in three decades.

"Cindy," I muttered, for I was into muttering to myself at that time.

I watched as the girl, Cindy, passed through the gate without opening it. One moment she was standing outside and the next....she

was beside the rose bush. I watched her reach a hand out to touch an empty stem. She seemed to mime plucking a flower then placing it to her nose. I watched, my mouth undoubtedly ajar.

Her fingers still pinching the imaginary flower, Cindy gradually looked up at me. Toothlessly, she smiled. I ran.

I ran from the window and out of the apartment, down the dark staircase and through the secure front doorway. I ran to the opposite side of the landing, found the staircase leading to the rear-facing wings of the apartment complex and tackled these new steps two or three at a time. I didn't care how scared I was. The truth was I was not that scared. Certainly not as scared as I was that day three decades earlier, when I'd believed I'd seen her for the last time.

Cindy Cindy Cindy Cindy Cin—

I turned the corner and came out onto the open communal area. Fast approaching the fence, I strained so that I could see. Through the black-painted bars I saw the rose bush quite clearly, but Cindy was no longer there. Perhaps she had gone behind the bush; I would have to be inside to be certain.

I attempted to open the gate with one hard tug. When that didn't work I looked up for the latch and found instead a padlock barring entry. I gripped the padlock and yanked. Tighter than an elder's ass on a mission.

She had to be behind the bush; no other explanation was forthcoming and there wasn't much time left. I had already lost her once; I was losing her again now. I jumped and grasped the top of the fence. Using my formidable upper body strength, I pulled myself up so that I could swing my arms and then my entire body over the top of the fence. I landed on the other side gracelessly, with enough lack of skill that my ankle twisted a little and I had to limp around the side of the rose bush.

Cindy was not there.

"Where are you," I muttered. "Are you...."

"Sir. Sir!"

I turned from the rose bush to face the old motel owner. His hands were extended through the bars. Behind him a small group of concerned citizens, fellow motel people, had gathered.

"Yes?" I said meekly.

"Sir. You are causing quite the commotion. These people are trying to rest."

"Oh." I had since found my shoes to be of great interest.

"Sir. You were shouting."

Had I been shouting? If I had I hadn't heard myself. But then so often I had not heard myself—at other times, in other situations.

"What was I...um...What was I...saying?"

"Guy kept saying a name," offered up one squinty-eyed motel person.

"Some girl's name," ponied on another.

"Sir. Please come out now."

I did as I was asked. When I had successfully grunted my way over the fence to the outside-side I stood before the gathered throng and apologized to those who remained. They looked but briefly in my direction before leaving. The old motel owner was also on his way out.

I stayed him with a "Wait" and a hand on his arm. He hovered dispassionately, a voice on the brink.

"Why is the gate locked?"

"The gate is locked, sir, so the roses are not disturbed."

"Have they been disturbed before?"

The old owner, possibly from Pakistan, pulled away and continued walking back to those he loved.

* * *

"Now," Cindy said. "This is where we wait. When they come over that ridge, we open fire."

Shielding my eyes, I looked. Nothing of note could be seen above us. I looked to the other side of the canal, at the wall sloping to the sky, and saw the same.

"What about the other side? You don't think they're going to come from there?"

"They won't come from there."

"Why not?"

"That's not what *the scouts* say."

Her shadow crossed over me, and I took advantage of the blocked sun by lowering my hand. Cindy wore jeans, a button-up checkered shirt and boots. Her long blond hair was in the braid she liked.

"This is stupid," I said. "They have the high ground."

"But I'm Annie Oakley and you're the Lone Ranger. They can't beat us." She squinted at me. "What's wrong?"

"Playing this is stupid. Those shows are over."

"So?"

"So...what about *Dragnet*?"

"*Dragnet* doesn't have any girls I can play."

"What about...." I tried to think of a woman character in *Dragnet*, but none came to mind, and what's more I was now distracted by a

strange sound. It couldn't have been an earthquake because we would have felt the ground shake. Instead there was only a faint hiss farther along the canal bed. The hiss intensified sharply into a whoosh that sounded as if a busy freeway were rushing toward us. Now the concrete started to vibrate. I then knew that sound.

"Water," I said.

Cindy looked at me. Her eyes widened. She knew I wasn't lying this time.

"Maybe it's only a little," she said.

"I don't think so. Run!"

Just as I cried out we saw the water rise up in the distance along the canal bed. It was coming fast. Both of us turned to run up the side of the ridge. The slope was concrete and there was no ladder, no hand- or footholds. I was small and light and kept hunched over as I ran up. I was going to make it. I could see the top just ahead. Behind me I heard the flood flash by—and I heard a scream. I grabbed hold of the top of the concrete ridge and let my lower body slide down, hoping that Cindy would be there to grab my ankles or feet. She wasn't there. I heard her scream again, and when I turned I closed my eyes at what I saw. She had fallen. Older than me by a year, she was also taller and more awkward. It was that awkwardness, that gangliness and lack of centering her gravity that had caused her to slip as she crawled up after me. And now she was being carried away, this ten year old girl, and I could not open my eyes for fear I would see her as I last saw her, arms and head just above the deluge, her eyes and mouth open forever.

* * *

It wasn't a dream, but it was what I woke up from to find her beside me—in spirit if not in the flesh.

“Cindy,” I said.

She stood over me, but in this darkness and without my glasses I could only make out her outline, a fuzzy form. It was her, though.

“Cindy,” I repeated.

I watched, rigid, as Cindy, still wearing the polka dot dress, turned and headed toward the bathroom. I fumbled for my glasses, turned on the bedside lamp, and then slid out of bed.

I found her sitting in the tub. She was still not clear to me, so I turned on the light and that's when I saw I was mistaken. It wasn't Cindy. It was a girl who looked quite similar to her, about the same height, the same hair color and length, the same braid and a similar polka dot dress. But, I saw now, the dress could well have been from the eighties and not the fifties. The girl was not my Cindy, my friend. Most telling of all was her face—the eyes were brown instead of blue, the nose free of freckles; even the facial structure, the cheek bones, jaw, brows and dimples were off.

“What the....”

The girl, who I also realized was a bit younger than ten—perhaps seven or eight—opened her mouth while staring at the showerhead, as if waiting for the water to fall. She was screaming in silence. She was drowning. Her fists flew out, her hands like claws, and she grasped at the tile wall even as she sunk backwards. I stepped toward the tub once she'd disappeared into it and out of view. Looking in I saw only emptiness.

“Who are you,” I said. “What are you telling me?”

I sensed her behind me, and when I turned the dress was just disappearing around the doorway.

I ran out and into the dim light bleeding from my bedside lamp. I

could not see the girl, this Cindy impostor, anywhere in the room. I ran around the bed and looked on that side. I checked under the bed and again in the bathroom. No one.

In the dining nook I stared out at the single rose bush in the circular gated area. Again, no sign. I was headed back to the bedroom when I yelped and jumped back. The girl was standing in front of the door leading out of the apartment. Her hands were folded before her. She looked solemn. Suddenly she backed up through the door, which I threw open and, finding no one, descended the stairs rapidly.

She was on the street, walking away from the motel. As I hadn't taken my watch I had no idea of the time but it must have been early, the dead hours when no cars passed by, not even the medics. I kept my distance, fearing that if I drew too close she would run or, worse, simply vanish, never to reappear. As I walked I wondered how I could've gotten it wrong; how could I have mistaken this girl for Cindy? For as I followed she seemed to look less and less like her. She seemed to get shorter, as did her hair. With each step her skin turned even more white until it appeared nearly translucent.

She didn't have far to walk. From the main drag where the motel lay it was only three blocks down and three blocks to the right. We were now in a residential area, and I was following the girl past darkened houses and faint glow of the occasional corner street lamp. I heard a branch snap, a door slam in the distance, but I was not afraid. She was with me.

And then we were at a house, darkened like all the others. This house the girl approached. She walked up the driveway and toward the front door. After taking a quick look around, I followed her. She led me not to the front door as I'd expected but instead around the side of the house. Undergrowth was thick here, and I kept feeling as if something were crawling up my pajama-pant leg.

The girl had stopped ahead on the side of the house. She was looking through a window high enough up for her to have to stand on her tiptoes. Cautiously, I moved toward her. She did not back away from me but instead continued to look.

The window peered into an office. At the large desk opposite us a man hunched in front of a desktop computer. What he was doing I couldn't tell. The only light in the room came from the screen. I could not yet see this man's face. His back remained to us.

I turned to find the girl staring at me. For a second I startled and stepped back, for now the girl had next to nothing in common with Cindy. She was incredibly young, at most three or four, chubby, had short red hair and skin so translucent I could see veins. Her skin looked unnatural, but then I had to remember the way she'd died.

And then I *knew* how she had died. I suspected I knew *where* she had died as well, and I had a good idea of who had killed her.

"Oh God," I said, staring through the window. The man began to turn and get up. I gasped and dropped to the ground. From there I crawled.

Back on the street I stood waiting for the girl to appear. After half an hour of freezing while not seeing her, I headed back to the motel with an idea of what I had to do.

* * *

The old owner stepped back from the heating unit.

"It is all okay, sir. It is working fine."

"Then there's something else I need you to help me with."

Taking him forcefully by the arm, I directed him to the window overlooking the single rose bush in the center of that circular gated lawn.

"What happened there?"

"Nothing, sir."

I grabbed him by the arm again and forced him to look. "Don't give me that. You don't want to remember what happened there, or is it you had a hand in it and you're covering up?"

"Sir. What are you accusing me of?"

I made sure to breathe before speaking. "That used to be a pool down there, but a little girl was killed, she was drowned in that pool, so to erase the tragedy the place was covered up. The rose bush is the only thing to remember her."

I could tell I had reached the owner in some way. Still, he shook his head. "Why do you believe this?" he said.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"What will it benefit you?"

"I care!"

I grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him toward me. Our faces were now very close.

"Tell me what happened, or I won't be able to save your granddaughter or daughter or whoever the little girl is I see living with you."

The owner's eyes widened and his mouth worked soundlessly like that of a fish out of water. I pressed on.

"It's going to happen again. She showed me who did it then. Same guy who's going to kill another little girl now!"

With surprising strength and swiftness the owner wrenched free from my grasp. I was too bothered now to accost him further. If what I had said had not been true before, it was true now.

The owner did not storm away, nor did he say he was going to call the police. Instead he stood with his head bowed to the carpet. He seemed to be debating within himself. At last he said, "It's not all wrong, this story."

"It's all *right*."

The owner held up a hand. "It was a pool," he said. "A girl did drown. She was here with her family. She went out to the pool in the morning, the gate was not shut fully and...."

"And you think she fell in," I said. "On her own."

"She did fall in alone, sir. She was four years old. No one else was there."

"No witnesses?"

"The pool had to be destroyed. An attractive nuisance."

"A what?"

"Attractive nuisance," the owner repeated. "You are wasting your time—and my time. Making an accident a crime."

"Didn't you feel *anything* when you found out this little girl had died in your motel's pool?"

"Sir," he said. "I did not work here then." With that he turned and left the apartment.

* * *

That night, Monday, the girl visited me again, and this time she spoke as she cried over what had happened. My story was true. The man in the house, the previous owner of the motel, had drowned her in the swimming pool early that morning when she'd gone out while her parents slept. She'd fought, but there was no way she could change the ending. This new story, though, she could control. The man had taken a

trinket of hers from the murder scene, a trinket that had been forgotten in all that grief, and if I could find this trinket in the man's house, where he still kept it hidden, I would have the evidence we needed.

The next morning I watched as the man left his house. He was dressed in a track suit, sneakers, sunglasses. He did some stretches, then jumping jacks and breathing routines—all in his front driveway. Behind him the garage door opened and a sedan pulled out. The man stood aside to let the car pass, but it stopped to let him lean in and, I assumed, kiss goodbye whomever was driving. As the car hit the street I saw enough to know it was a woman, though I could not get a clear view of her face.

The car gone, the man continued his warm-ups for another minute and then took off. From behind the tree I pondered what I had seen. The man was younger than me, perhaps by as many as ten years, which would have put him at twenty-nine. But if he was that young then he must've murdered the girl even younger, probably in his early twenties. Could he have owned a motel at that age? Regardless, he had at least worked at the motel, and a sick, despicable youth had grown into a husband and homeowner, cover for his darkest impulses.

His run could be brief, in which case I would have to move fast. I hurried across the street and over to the side of the house. I passed the office window. The girl had told me the previous night that there would be a key under a potted plant on the back patio, and sure enough there was. With this key I opened the side door that led into the garage, found that door to be unlocked just as she'd said, and slipped into the house. From there it was only a matter of making sure the evidence was present. I was overjoyed to find it was.

I didn't go to work after that. I went back to my apartment instead. When I woke the TV was on, I was curled up on the couch in a position reminiscent of those mummified victims of Mount Vesuvius, and my

coworker was standing over me.

I sat up quickly, the blood to my head all at once, and blinked my eyes like beating wings.

"Christ," he said. "Look at you. What's going on? The man upstairs is pissed. He knows you missed the meeting today."

"I expected this," I said, and I pinched the bridge of my nose in an attempt to stop my headache.

"Couldn't you wait until, you know, after Christmas to bottom out?"

"There is no Christmas!" I leapt up as I said this. Incensed, my eyes surely blood-shot, I must've terrified my coworker, for he backed away.

I continued to advance on him, a little man, a mean man who had never been chosen for anything short of the job he held on to as if it were his manhood. "There's no New Year," I said. "No bowl game, no chili with cheese and onions, no parade and certainly *no resolution!*"

This last must've been a roar. My coworker turned and ran. He flung open the door and pounded down the steps as many as he could at a time.

* * *

It was time to end this, time to check out. That Tuesday night, with the girl by my side, I again walked over to the man's house. Although it was late, he and his wife were just sitting down to dinner. Through the large front window I looked in from my crouched position. Husband and wife had their heads bowed over their food, a reminder of what could never make up for the loss I'd experienced when I was nine. I looked to my side. The girl was no longer with me, but I knew what I had to do. Getting up I went to the front door. As I was about to ring, headlights flashed across, red and blue lights followed, I heard tires screech, a horn

blare short and sharp, and a voice said, "Hold it."

I turned to see two police officers heading up the driveway from their vehicle, its doors still open, lights still flashing. The officers did not have their guns drawn, but I put my hands out anyway to show I meant them no harm.

"I'm so glad you're here," I said. "I was going to have you show up later, but now's an even better time, I think."

"Have you been to this house before?" one of the officers said. He was reaching not for his gun but for the handcuffs nearby.

"Of course," I said, and that's when the front door opened. The man stood in the doorway, wearing glasses not unlike mine, with a soft face not unlike mine—only younger, a memory. He shifted his weight to his other foot. Through the slim opening to his side I could not see his wife. I noted that opening.

"He the one you saw creeping around last night?"

"And this morning," the man answered. "We think he might've broken in."

"Did you force your way into this house, sir?"

"For a reason," I said. "To find the proof that this man murdered a little girl, a four-year-old girl, in the swimming pool of the motel not far from here. He did it—he worked at the motel at that time!"

Not only did the man laugh, but the officers chuckled as well. One of them asked the man what he thought of my accusation, to which the man answered that he had never been to the motel in question, though he'd seen it from the road many times. He had never worked at any motel; he was a writer who made his living at home.

"Bet you'll write about this," one of the officers said, to which a fresh round of laughter brayed.

I knew where this was going. I didn't care, though. I would show them.

Before the laughter and the shaking of heads could subside I bolted for the doorway. The man's eyes widened and the officers cursed and shouted at me. I could feel them close behind as I slammed into the man and knocked him to the tile. Now I heard the officers shout to halt, stop or they would fire, but I knew they wouldn't fire, not in this hallway with its pictures of the childless couple together, nor would they fire into any of the rooms I might have gone into. I ended up in the office, the computer on, the monitor dark, and I got down on my knees and with the aid of the hunting knife I'd bought that day I forced open the lowest desk drawer.

I brought out the evidence just as the man, followed by the officers, rushed in.

"There!" I cried. "There!" In my hand, clear for all to see, was a bright plastic trinket, the kind four year old girls of that time would wear around their wrists. It was the very same trinket the girl had worn when she was murdered, when the man in this office, this "writer," forced her head under the water. I explained all this to the officers, pointing at the shocked man several times, and still they trained their guns on me.

"Drop the knife! Drop it!"

"Drop it now or we will fire!"

They wouldn't. And ruin this man's possessions? The legal ramifications alone would do them in.

"Admit it," I said to the man. "Admit it now!"

"I've never seen that before in my life!"

To the officers I said, "This killer's going to kill again—the little Pakistani girl at the same motel! If you're not going to bring him to justice and

save—" Without finishing my sentence I leapt at the man, the knife out. The officers did not fire. They continued to shout, but now I had the man by the arm and was pulling him toward me, the knife at his throat.

The man's eyes were wild with fear, the same fear the girl he'd drowned had felt. I smiled. "You're going to—"

I heard the gun's report before I felt the hit to my head—and even then the feeling was so brief it was as if I had never existed.

* * *

So there was blood—my blood—and more on the computer, the hanging cabinets, the desk and drawers. I know because I saw it, I saw it over and over for a time, and then I no longer saw it, and now I am here with the one I had tried to save and the one I never tried to save.

It's difficult to describe this place. Perhaps it's *no place*, neither heaven nor hell, free of Satan's power but not privy to it either. I can only say I am here, and every so often I am compelled to step out and drift, to look at the world as it continues to change, even as I do not.

The man never did kill the little Pakistani girl, nor did he kill anyone else. But that doesn't mean he won't ever, and when he does I'll be watching, ready to tell someone new.

David Ewald is the author of a novel in stories, He Who Shall Remain Shameless (forthcoming from Macromere Press), as well as a full-length play, Mormania (Paragon Theatre's The Trench). His short fiction and dramatic work have appeared or are forthcoming in BULL: Men's Fiction, The Chimaera, The Harrow, The Bend, Eclectica, Morbid Outlook, Denver Syntax, and Spectrum. He teaches writing, literature and theater at Arapahoe Community College and lives in Denver, Colorado with his wife.