

Shall I Tell You a Story?

By Sabrina Fukuda

“Shall I tell you a story?”

His voice, just above a whisper, permeates the air around them. They shuffle, suddenly uncomfortable, glancing once at each other, then turning back to him.

Four pairs of eyes blink across to him in the flickering candlelight.

“I... I don’t know if this is the right time.” One of them replies. Her voice is soft, tremulous. It has a kind of aggravating fragility. One that inevitably reflects the frail whisper of the woman it belongs to.

Much like everyone else in her life, the others ignore her.

A phone slams down on the table, causing everyone to flinch.

“There’s no signal. Looks like it’s just us.” The bearded man to the woman’s left spits out. He peers at the silhouette of the man in front of them. Flashing his teeth at the shadow behind the flames, his smile contorts into a sneer.

“So, why not? We seem to be stuck here anyway.” The bearded man goads him to continue.
“Let’s hear what you’ve got.”

They push Johnny's face into the mud again.

They jeer as he gasps, cackle as he struggles under their grasp, grin in satisfaction when a sob escapes him.

"Who you gonna cry to? Can't go to *mummy*." It's Billy, the worst one, the one with the broken tooth and the permanent scowl. "Cause she wouldn't even care!"

He laughs and repeats the words. The others join gleefully.

"Mummy doesn't care. Mummy doesn't care. Mummy doesn't care."

The words become a chant. Their voices become one. They shout in time with the harsh thumping in Johnny's aching chest. The chant presses around him. Pulses within him.

Mummy doesn't care. Mummy doesn't ca-

It stops. They stop. Silence.

"I'm bored now," Billy states flippantly. "Come on, let's leave this loser."

As he mounts his rusted bicycle, his lackeys give Johnny a final kick and hi-five each other.

Sniggering, they follow after Billy.

When he no longer hears the dry rasp of tyres hit the pavement and knows they are finally gone, Johnny peels himself off the wet earth. His fingers shake as he rubs his eyes, furious at his tears, at the burning in his eyes and the lump in his throat, which always resurfaces no matter how many times this has happened to him. Johnny feels the mud congealing on his face and wipes his dirty hands on his stained shirt. He bites his lip to stop the new threat of tears collecting in the corners of his eyes. He tastes grass, dirt and the salty zing of tears.

And the worst part of it all? They were right.

Mummy doesn't care.

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That was the night Johnny met The Stranger.

Johnny is limping home, that final kick still throbbing in his left leg. He is dirty, aching and longs only for a warm bath and the blissful ignorance of sleep. Johnny is so lost in his thoughts and self-pity that he doesn't even realise that there is someone else in the street until he speaks.

"Hello." The voice cuts into the evening stillness.

Johnny spins around, lifting his arms around himself protectively, an action well ingrained from several years in the schoolyard.

The Stranger is tall. He is standing behind the streetlight, a few steps away from the light so that he merges into night and shadow. In the darkness, Johnny thinks he sees the man wearing a long overcoat and a top hat.

"Are you happy, Johnny?" His face is undiscernible, but his tone offers a mild air of curiosity. Johnny stumbles back, shaking his head in shock. "How do you know my name?" Silence answers back at him.

"Who are you?" Johnny whispers, lip trembling as he grips his backpack's shoulder straps tightly.

There is a pause. The Stranger tilts his head in consideration.

"It does not matter who I am." He finally responds. He steps forward, but despite now falling under the weak yellow stream of light, his figure remains swathed in darkness. "What matters is what I can do for you."

"I-I don't understand." Johnny whimpers.

The man nods, somehow satisfied, and turns to leave. Before he does, he tips his hat and a sliver of light catches his face. Lips curling into a knowing smile.

"You will."

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"It's not fair," Tina says. She looks at Johnny's bruised leg and grazed cheek. "They can't keep doing this to you."

Johnny bows his head. Shakes his shaggy hair as if falls over his eyes. “Yeah?” His cut lip twists into a spiteful grimace. “Well, what could *you* possibly do about it?”

“I...” Tina’s watery blue eyes widen and her pale, thin hands flutter aimlessly on her lap. Her lips open and shut as she struggles to find a reply.

Johnny looks up and smiles ruefully at his only friend. “I’m sorry. It’s... it’s just been a hard few days.”

Tina nods and places one dainty hand over his. “It’s not just Billy and the others. It’s your mum, isn’t it?”

Johnny’s eyes fall on her pallid hands. Icy blue veins. Long, bony fingers.

“It looks like it’s gonna be one of those weeks.” He mutters.

“She hasn’t left her room?”

“Hasn’t left her room. Hasn’t said a word.”

“You can come over to mine tonight. Mum is always happy to make dinner for you too.”

“Thanks, um... Tina?”

“Yes?”

Johnny hesitates, his words caught in this throat. “It’s not just that.”

Tina raises her eyebrows expectantly.

“Last night... there was a man.”

“What? Where?”

“In the street. It was dark, so I couldn’t really see him properly.” Johnny’s words now rush out of his mouth. “But I think he was wearing a fancy coat and a hat. He knew my name.”

Tina is silent.

“He asked me if I was happy.”

Tina looks away. “Johnny, are you sure this isn’t one of your...”

“My what?” Johnny snaps.

“You’ve had many imaginary friends. As you said, this is a really stressful time...”

“So, you don’t believe me?” The words feel heavy in his mouth.

“No... Johnny.” Tina’s grip on his hand tightens. “Of course, I believe you.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

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It takes two days until he finds her body.

Johnny, used to long periods of his mother’s absence, does not find it unusual to come home to a quiet house. It is only when his hand slips, and a plate crashes onto the floorboards that he gets worried. Usually, a sound as loud at that would be inevitably followed by his mother’s shouts demanding silence. This time, as Johnny sweeps up the broken pieces, all he hears is the soft tinkling of scattered porcelain against the swish of his scraggly broom.

She looks peaceful in death.

Johnny falls beside the bedside, sobs breaking out of him as his legs give way underneath him. He presses his head against the mattress and rocks back and forth. His world falls to pieces around him.

He feels his presence in the room before he sees him.

The Stranger stands on the other side of the bed. More shadow than man, he looks down, almost reverently, at Johnny and his mother.

“Why did you do this?” Johnny shouts, fear morphing his grief into anger.

Silence.

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No one believes the raving boy who claims that The Stranger killed his mother.

Not when he describes him. An overcoat. A top hat. A shadow.

Johnny tells, he begs, he pleads to anyone who would listen. He tells them that if they can't believe him, then they can trust Tina.

For the first time in her life, the pale and whisper-thin girl has all eyes on her. But rather than shining under the spotlight, she wilts.

Tina doesn't say a word.

They take Johnny away.

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"Okay, just hold on a second." The bearded man lifts his hand up to interrupt. "Is this going anywhere?"

A gust of wind hits the cabin's walls and the room shivers. The candles flicker.

"Sure, it will." The other woman in the room speaks up for the first time. Her voice, rough, worn out in the tell-tale way of a habitual smoker. "If you shut up long enough for him to finish."

"What?!" The bearded man shouts indignantly. He turns to her, opens his mouth, ready to fire an insult.

“Now, now. Can all of you just calm down?” The fourth member of the group finally speaks. The calm, icy demeanour of his voice causes everyone in the room to tense. It is instantly understood that the speaker, a man with eyes hidden behind a pair of black-framed glasses, is not one to be argued with. The bearded man bites back his words and hunches back into his seat.

“Good.” The man with the glasses says, satisfied. He turns back to the narrator, his glasses reflecting the flickering candlelight. “Now, could you please continue?”

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They think Johnny is crazy.

They tell him that the trauma of losing his mother was too great and that he fabricated a story to make sense of it. Johnny created a villain, so he could assign blame to something. That it was easier to hate someone than to face up to the injustice of reality. They told this to him so many times that he started to believe it was real.

The Stranger didn’t exist. The world was just cruel.

So, the years went by.

Johnny moved from foster home to foster home. He had friends, he lost most of them. He fell in love, he fell out of love. It took a while, but Johnny started to move on. He started to forget. It wasn’t the best life, but it wasn’t particularly bad either. For once in his life, Johnny was content.

That was when The Stranger came back.

It's a mundane afternoon; Johnny is sprawled on his lounge room sofa. His eyes are closed, and he feels a warm trickle of sunlight cast over his eyelids. There's a slight ache to his bones, a reminder of a strenuous but rewarding day at work. He stretches out, resting his cheek against the cool leather covering. Johnny's breath deepens, lulling him to sleep.

"Are you happy, Johnny?"

He freezes. *No. No... it can't be...*

"You're not real. You're not real." Johnny's voice cracks, but he forces himself to repeat those words. Eyes screwed shut, and covering his ears, he repeats the words like a prayer.

"I'm as real as you are, Johnny."

Johnny shakes his head fervently, breath catching in his tight throat. "No. You can't be. Why are you back?"

"I was never gone."

"Who are you?" The words escape Johnny's clenched jaw before he can stop them.

The Stranger merely shakes his head, almost fondly. Then, with a tip of his hat, he merges back into the shadows behind him.

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His appearances become increasingly frequent.

Sometimes he just stands there. A flicker behind his reflection. Sometimes, he is there for longer. Sometimes, he doesn't leave for days. Sometimes, he speaks.

This is one of those times.

"You just have to ask."

Johnny shakes his head nursing his throbbing head in his hands. “What are you even talking about?” Rubbing his temples, he takes a haggard breath. “Why are you still here? What is it that you want?”

“Remember Johnny,” the tall man’s voice is chiding, as though Johnny was still the small child he was all those years ago when they first met. “This is not about me. It is about what I can do for you.”

Johnny springs up from his chair, shouting. “Just go away! That’s what you can do!” He takes a deep breath. “Just leave me-”

“John?” A voice calls out behind him, interrupting him. “Who are you talking to?”

Johnny snaps his jaw shut and turns to the doorway. “It’s...” He looks back to where The Stranger was standing and is not surprised to see the place vacant of his presence.

“Are you okay?” It is his foster sister, Lin. She walks up tentatively, her thin eyebrows drawn high on her wide forehead. “We’ve all been worried about you these last few weeks. We tried to call, but you haven’t been picking up.”

“I...” Johnny bites his lip, looking down at his bare feet. “I’m okay.”

Lin shifts from one foot to the other, she reaches into her pocket and fiddles with her lighter.

“John... you know you can talk to us. You know... if you think you see anything...”

“Lin, I’m fine!”

Lin’s brown eyes snap up to look deeply into Johnny’s. Her gaze, stern and searching, has that ability to reach out and probe into his mind.

Johnny is the first to look away. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, we’ve all had our days. Hell, me most of all.” She laughs self-deprecatingly. “I just wanted to check in and let you know that mum’s stopping by tomorrow.”

“She worried too?” Johnny huffs out a laugh.

“Yeah... and... I think she needs to tell you something.”

“You can’t do this to me!” Johnny slams his fist against the upstairs banister. Fiona, his foster mother, flinches. She takes a calming breath and looks back at Johnny. “I’m sorry. I know how much the business means to you. But we just can’t afford to keep supporting it.”

“Look, I know you’ve done so much for me. More than I deserve.” Johnny bites the inside of his cheek until he draws blood. “But this was *mine*. This was *everything*.”

“Johnny...” Fiona reaches out a shaking, wizened hand. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...” Johnny ducks away from her hand and looks away. “Get out.”

“Johnny, my boy, you have to understand...”

“I said get out. And I’m not your boy.” He spins around and points to her. “You are not my mother.”

Johnny storms away, tasting the tangy metallic taste of blood coating his mouth.

Fiona follows after him. “Johnny...”

“Leave me alone!” Johnny shouts, his entire body tense, eyes screwed shut.

A deafening crash follows after.

At first, there is a stillness. Bone deep. A deathly silence marking the end of an epoch. It lasts only for a second. Or two. But it’s enough to know.

Johnny believed his world was shattered the day he found his mother’s body.

But it is only now that Johnny realises how it feels to have your world completely, irreparably broken.

Fiona’s crumpled body lays at the bottom of the stairway.

Lin sees the body. The silence breaks. Time moves forward.

“You’re a monster!”

Johnny barely hears her screaming accusations through thunderous pulsing in his head.

“You did this! We should have never let you into our home!”

As Johnny looks past Lin’s huddled form and sees a familiar overcoat and top hat grazing the fringes of the darkened doorway behind her, he can’t help thinking that maybe she is right.

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This time, he does not mention The Stranger.

The trial goes quickly. Lin makes sure of that. Her pretty face morphed into a vindictive snarl, she tells everyone he did it. He killed her mother.

So, this time, when Johnny tastes the mud pressed against his face and feels the stabbing pain of feet kicking him, he is not in the schoolyard. But rather, he lays on the over trodden, dreary slab of earth that is the prison courtyard.

As his inevitable tears mix with the blood and dirt coating his face, Johnny asks himself what he did to deserve this.

They kick him in the leg once more.

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“Please, just look at me.” Johnny pleads the guard standing on the other side of his cell. “I need to go to the infirmary.”

Correctional Officer O’Connor peers through the rusted metal bars. His eyes, beady and black like a crow’s, reflect nothing. It is an expansive emptiness that swaps those pools of blackness. The eyes flicker, disinterestedly, over Johnny’s black eye, his split lip and the blood seeping through the jumpsuit over his left rib. His lips draw into a thin line, further accentuating his aquiline nose.

“Just sleep it off, Johnny.” His voice is as cool and detached as the darkness that recedes in his empty eyes.

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“Are you happy, Johnny?”

It is no longer a question. Somehow, after all these years, it had become a kind of greeting. Johnny feels a slight sting in his lips as they pull into a small smile. He lays back, eyes closed as a blinding, pulsing pain throbs throughout his body.

He opens his mouth and replies with his usual response: “Who are you?”

The Tall Man – Johnny wonders when exactly he stopped referring to him as The Stranger – sits beside him.

They settle into a comfortable silence.

The blood trickles from Johnny’s open wounds.

As the pain starts to subside, it is replaced by a floating, boundless nothing.

Johnny thinks.

He thinks about Billy. About his mother. Tina. Fiona. Lin. O’Connor.

“I understand.” Johnny’s voice is a whisper.

As the shadows grow and shift, merging with the darkness within him, Johnny, at last, tells The Tall Man what to do.

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“And?” The bearded man bristles impatiently. “What is it? How does the story end?”

Silence.

A flash of lightning. A roll of thunder.

“Are you kidding me? You put us through all of that and now you stop?”

“I think you should calm down, Billy.” The narrator, the man behind the candlelight, responds at last. He stands up as another flash of lightning illuminates the room. He is tall. He is wearing an overcoat. A top hat balances on his head.

“Every day. Every day, Johnny wanted to know what he did to deserve the life he got. In the end, he finally understood.”

A roll of thunder shudders throughout the room.

“See, it was never him. It was you.”

He points at them, one at a time.

The bearded man. “Billy, the childhood bully.”

The frail woman. “Tina, the friend who betrayed him.”

The woman with the smoker’s husky voice. “Lin, the foster sister who sent him to jail.”

The man with the glasses. “O’Connor, the guard who let him die.”

The wind picks up and a resurgence of rain hits the cabin’s windows. A thunderous crash reverberates throughout the room as the windows collectively shatter around them.

“What...” Lin is the first to speak. Her raspy voice barely carrying over the monstrous roar of the storm. “What did he ask you to do?”

The Tall Man smiles. Lightning flashes. The darkness around him expands, engulfing The Tall Man until it is no longer possible to distinguish him from shadow.

The candles flicker once.

Then, they burn out.