

Only At Night

by Vonda N. McIntyre

This story copyright 1979 by Vonda N. McIntyre. This copy was created for Jean Hardy's personal use. All other rights are reserved. Thank you for honoring the copyright.

Published by Seattle Book Company, www.seattlebook.com.

* * *

At night, when I'm here, all the babies lie quiet with their eyes closed. The ones that have eyes.

At night, covered with sheets against the whisper of air in the wards, the children begin to look almost human. I walk between the cribs of deserted newborns and the railed beds of the older ones, sometimes trying not to burst into tears. I touch them, gently, trying to soothe them. Most of them aren't capable of being soothed. They're all waiting to die. Sometimes one awakens and lies there helpless and immobile, staring up. They never cry. I hold them and wonder if they think the dull pinpoints of light on the ceiling are stars.

Tonight most of the children are awake. It might be the heat, which is too much for the air conditioning. I do what I can, touch them, change diapers (I am reprimanded if I use too many), offer water. I wish I weren't here. It's too quiet and the air is too heavy and no one's here to talk to. On other wards someone will awaken and need the reassurance of companionship to go back to sleep. Or I'll whisper a story to a child and he'll correct me if I change a line until we both begin to giggle, try to stop, and just laugh harder. But these children don't need bedtime stories. A record of gibberish would do as well. They don't need me. Maybe if they had always had love they would be able to want it and accept it now, but all they need is food and cleaning and a place Out of the rain. To them I'm an automaton, wound up and set to take care of them.

I wish I weren't here at night, but the others have been here longer and choose to come during the day. While drab sunlight seeps in they put the children on the floor to drag themselves around with stumps of limbs, like mindless invertebrates making their first foray onto the land.

I pick a child up, gently, because her skull has never grown together. There is a soft depression at the top of her head, like skin on cooled soup. I sing, more for myself than her. She is deaf.

She is watching me. My voice trails off and she blinks as if disappointed that I've stopped. Do all babies have blue eyes? I know I'm putting my own thoughts and sadnesses and fears into her gaze. She does not think; she can't. None of them can. But there's something behind her eyes that's more than complacent blankness. I put her back in her crib and move on.

I wonder if all their parents have forgotten them. They must have. They hardly ever come... If I believed that I'd be a fool. Their parents remember them too well, every instant of every day, and that's why they don't come. They've spawned monsters that they're afraid to try to love. They're perfect people who hide their mistakes. If they see their deformed child before it is taken away (I've seen the parents; they can't resist one guilty peek between meshed fingers, as if they were at a freak show), they cry "Oh, God, why me?" and then they leave.

The children are restless. The ones that can move rustle their sheets. Those with limbs wave them. Twisted fingers clutch handfuls of air and discard it again. I know I shouldn't be afraid, but it's very strange.

One of the larger children (I can only think of him as a large child) is strong and dully mean. Sometimes he has to be restrained with soft straps and buckles so he won't hurt himself or us. I hear him begin to beat his head against the backboard, over and over. I run down the ward. He's supposed to have an injection every night to make him sleep; they don't want me to have to handle him alone. I gave him a name because his parents didn't. He's perfectly formed and beautiful, but he has no mind and no control

over bladder or bowels. I call to him, **Peter!** but he doesn't stop. He doesn't know me; he has never seen me. I take his arm and tell him gently to sit still and I try to pull him away from the backboard. His head hits again and I see his eyes when his hair flops away. They are blue... the same clear blue...

My voice rises and I try to soften it. He'll feel my panic like an animal and know I'm afraid. I drop the railing and take his shoulders. He's taller than I, and heavier by half. His expression when he sleeps is peaceful, but now he pulls his lips back from his teeth-- the light sparks from them and blinds me. I feel tears running down my cheeks like molten ore.

He hits me. The force throws me back against another bed; I hit my head and slide to the floor. I can't get up; though I try I have as little control over my body as the children. I feel blood from my cut lip flowing out to mix with tears, and a sticky dampness spreads from the dull pain where a bed rail cut my scalp. I try to rise again and almost faint. I lie still.

I hear a clang and the sliding of sheets. I strain my eyes and see Peter crawling out of his bed. He has never been taught to walk. He seems to be coming toward me and I'm afraid again, but he ignores me and flounders to the aisle between the rows of beds. He moves farther into my field of vision. I can see the other children coming and I hear the sides of cribs clanking down. I must be dreaming. The noises rise. I clench my teeth for the pain, but unlike a pinch it doesn't wake me up. I know that if I could move, or scream, or make any noise at all, this would stop. If I didn't think that I would doubt my sanity.

The children gather around Peter.

My hearing is distorted and I feel very far away. I can hear them talking but I can't make out any words. They look like a war council of ancient veterans, come to display their war wounds: missing hands and feet and ears and noses, twisted bodies, seal flippers and crab-skins, deep scars that twinge before storms. They look so absurd that I'd laugh if I could. It would be the first time I ever laughed here.

They look very angry and their voices are shrill. One of them shakes a fist of seven fingers grown together.

I wish it were day. Then I could hope for a nurse on a coffee break or a doctor on rounds or even one of the infrequent parents on pilgrimage to purge their guilt with fifteen minutes, and pity, and finally flight.

I think the children are there for a long time, but I can't really tell. I'm dizzy. My hip and shoulder hurt where they're pressed against the floor. My physical incapacity gives my imagination too much freedom: the children are plotting against me. When the doctors and the other nurses come in the morning they will find me hanging, crucified, against the wall. I will wear a crown of needles and catheters. I will be nude and bleeding, but in three days I will not rise. If they can make plans of revolt or revenge, surely they can see that I am not the one to hate. I try to ridicule myself for taking dreams and fancies seriously, but I'm not sure now that it's all a dream. It seems very real. I'm frightened, and I'm trembling.

They seem to be done talking. The council roils and breaks and moves toward me. As if I could stop them with my eyes I watch them crawl and drool on the floor. I brace myself... but they fragment their united front and crawl away. A few of them look at me. Peter touches my hand before he clambers up into bed. I lie here, and slowly everything becomes quiet again.

In the morning I'm asleep and the nurses easily wake me. I can move. I have a cut on my head and blood and a bruise on my chin. There's a lot of blood on the floor, but I only have a dull headache and orders to get some stitches. I remember what happened last night. I decide not to say anything, because they'll think I'm crazy. Peter is lying on his back in his bed-cage, gabbling dully like a grotesque newborn. Everything else is in order. The other nurses ask me if I'm all right. I tell them I had a nightmare while I was unconscious and they cluck in sympathy. One of them offers to take my shift, the inconvenient, lonely one, at least until I'm better. I'm going to pretend I don't notice it when she begins to regret her generosity.

They smile and the head nurse tells me to take some time off and rest until my scalp has healed. I thank her. After I go home I'll have to decide whether to come back or not... If I do I'll come at night. The parents only visit in the daytime.

Return to .