

Save the Children!

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He awoke with a start, the soft, measured voice still present in his thoughts. *Think of the children*, it repeated. *Please save them*.

Half asleep he rose up on his elbows, turned to Margaret's still form beside him, and groggily said, "Let's go now; let's save them," and after a brief pause, "Think of the children. They're in danger."

"Whaaa?" She blinked her eyes, then stared at him. "Oh, Michael. Not *again*."

"Please save them." He looked at her through half-closed eyes.

She sat up in bed and gingerly poked his shoulder. "You're still asleep, Michael. You just have to stop this. Every morning now."

He closed his eyes completely, fluttered the lids, then opened them. "Nothing... nothing. I guess I—"

Michael lay back onto the pillow and stared at the ceiling, realizing it had been his own voice speaking in the dream.

He shaved slowly that morning, mulling over his advertising campaign for Smith and Reynolds Toy. He had been trying to develop a tie-in between the new Commander Dick Action Doll and the rest of the S & R line of war toys. He'd been brooding over the problem all week; the presentations were close, but he felt there was something missing. The sales copy just wasn't coming together.

Think of the children. A few seconds passed before he realized he was hearing that gentle, lulling voice, his own voice, again. *They're screaming for our help*.

Suddenly Michael felt half-asleep again, and it was hard to think.

Please save the children. You can leave now. They're jamming the city. They're crowded into the subway station; they're stacked into the auditorium like wood.

Margaret was staring at him from the bathroom doorway. "What are you doing?"

Michael just looked at her.

"Is something the matter, Michael?" Her lips were pursed.

He looked at her awhile, barely recognizing her, then realized she must have been talking to him. "Guess I'd better hurry... I don't want to be late..."

Hurry. The children need your help.

"Maybe you should call in sick today. You don't look well, Michael."

"No... I have to get into town. I need to hurry."

Margaret shook her head doubtfully, then left.

The sky was beginning to cloud over as he drove to work. By the time he arrived at the office a fine mist had begun to fall. Very few people seemed to be about, which was odd. Two children, one holding a rose, the other a baseball glove, stared at him as he entered the building.

"You're late, Michael," his boss told him flatly as he walked into the presentation room.

Jackson, one of the other partners in the firm, and a coworker on the S & R account gestured a vague greeting as Michael took his chair before a large table covered with toys, models, and simulated desert and mountainous terrain.

"Got something for you to see, Michael," Jackson stood and walked to a side door. He opened it, motioned with his forefinger to someone in the other room.

A small boy, perhaps five or six, came through the door. He wore ankle-length blue trousers with suspenders, a yellow-and-red-striped polo shirt. The child looked as if he had walked out of a Norman Rockwell painting: red-haired, blue-eyed, skinny.

The boy stared at Michael. Michael looked away.

Commander Dick jumped out of the green jeep awkwardly, with one gigantic, stiff-legged hop. He dived into a shallow foxhole just as the jeep exploded into a shower of plastic fragments.

Another jeep rammed a large tank, both exploding into a profusion of plastic parts. Commander Dick staggered up, hopped around with one leg missing. A narrow yellow tube snaked out of the bottom of his back, around irregularities in the papier-mache terrain, and up into the control box the small boy was gripping with strained, white-knuckled hands. He stared at the game board vacantly, a half-smile playing with his lips.

"So... what do you think?" Michael suddenly realized that Jackson was standing over him.

Go down into the city. You can save them now.

Michael could just stare at Jackson, his head and neck rigid with tension.

"Michael? Something wrong?"

Hurry. The children need your help.

"Oh... oh, sorry. It's fine... fine. Good idea."

Don't be late. Go down and find them where they've been hid.

"Thought you'd like it," Jackson chuckled, then ushered the small boy out the door.

Michael left work early, claiming illness. There seemed to be no one on the streets as he made his way home.

Why should I react that way? he thought. Why am I so paranoid? It can't be the war toys; kids just imitate what they see. Never bothered me before. He almost

chuckled, not sure why, but the toy demonstration accompanied by these obsessive pleadings... it just seemed too much, bathetic, almost ludicrous to him.

They're crowded into the subway station; they're stacked into the auditorium like wood.

Children were beginning to line the streets in twos and threes.

Please save them.

Children were walking out in front of his car. He had to swerve desperately to avoid them.

The children are screaming. They've no mothers or fathers.

Children were pushing and shoving, trampling each other in their attempts to reach his car, to be struck by his car.

Don't let them down. They're packed into every corner in the town.

Michael suddenly realized he was screaming.

He awoke with a start. Again. He thought he was hearing the soft, measured voice again, but it was his wife speaking from her side of the bed.

"You have to stop this, Michael. I haven't been able to sleep with all your craziness."

"The children..."

"Is it because of the baby, Michael? I was disappointed too; I wanted kids. Do you feel guilty, Michael? Is that what all this is about? Or is it me that you hate?"

"They won't leave me alone..." He was gripping her arm.

"Michael... *nothing* could be done... *Michael*. This *has* to stop!"

He was awake again. He didn't know how long. His wife's form seemed soft and peaceful, her face white in the moonlight.

Half-asleep. Thinking seemed difficult.

He thought he had heard screaming, but knew it couldn't be.

He wanted to go into the town, but wasn't sure why.

Michael walked into the bathroom, shaved, and dressed in his sharkskin suit. Then he pulled it off. He wore his golf togs into the kitchen, got a glass of milk. Then he ripped them off.

He shaved again, and then he shaved once more.

"Their teeth are rotting. They're growing larger, becoming older every day," he muttered to himself. "I have to reach them in time."

Michael suddenly realized he was lying on the bathroom floor, clothes strewn about. "If I hurry I'll make it."

Michael pulled himself off the floor, slipped into his work clothes hanging in a small closet off the shower, then put on his tennis shoes. Then he lay down again.

"I'll get dressed right away. I'll do the best I can."

Michael got up off the floor and took off his clothes. "If I hurry now..."

Michael shaved for the ninth time that evening. His face was scratched and bleeding.

He could hear them screaming, the screams getting louder all the time. He staggered over to the bathroom window, wondering if he could see them from there, imagining them jamming the suburbs, crowding the ditchlines, packed into the bushes and trees.

"I'm going to hurry; I'm going to save you all," he whispered into the darkness as he tied his broad red tie around his bare, collarless neck.

He would hurry. He would waste no time. He would dress in his finest clothes and soon he would save them. Soon he would be running down the city streets, seeking them out.

He descended the staircase to the ground floor, half-awake, half-dreaming of napalmed children, battered babies, little boys with amputated legs, little girls raped and beaten.

He staggered past the open window, his loose bathrobe and tie fluttering in the breeze. He turned and leaned into the cellar door, opened that, and descended.

Michael took each step gingerly, wondered what his own child might have been like, if he could have saved him. He remembered the fear he felt when she told him of the pregnancy, the fear he wasn't capable of taking care of a child.

He stood at the bottom of the staircase, watching the darkness ebb and flow around him. But wasn't there only so much one man could do?

There were soft sighings in the darkness.

... save us... please, save us...

He couldn't protect himself as a child. His father could still strike out at him, torture him, and there was nothing he could do...

Think of us...

Like the rustlings of dead leaves they touched him, softly at first, over his entire body. Then harder as the children congealed into one hand, stroke, arm, one gross misshapen baby's form. Harder still as he began to cry, and they, comforting him, stroked too hard, until he cried out from the pain.

Again, he could hear their cries, the soft measured crying voice his own.