

She'd been forbidden to eat dinner, but Maggie was patient. It was midnight when her father dozed off, and it was then she made her move, quietly making her way past the mess strewn everywhere. Only five years old, she had already learned a young rebel's oldest truth: that what her father didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

After a few tense moments Maggie made her way past the piles of trash and left their room. It was cold, even in her pajamas, but Maggie couldn't risk going back to get a blanket. She made do with rubbing her arms and missing her mother.

She and daddy were spending the winter in the local homeless shelter. They had been there for the longest time, since... well, as far as Maggie was concerned, since forever. They wouldn't be able to rely on charity much longer: two weeks more and they would have to leave. The priests and social workers had done their best, but Maggie's father was both too lazy and too vicious a person to find a job, much less hang on to one. A few of the volunteers had tried to wrest Maggie from his custody, but he enjoyed the welfare too much to allow that to happen.

Not that she knew any of this. All she knew was that she wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The communal kitchen stocked Smuckers Red Raspberry Preserves, her favorite kind. Maggie was very proud of her sandwiches, as one of the few memories she had of her mother before she'd left was learning how to make them on her knee.

Maggie was almost to the kitchen when she heard floorboards creak. She whirled, terrified that her father had caught her. She couldn't see anyone, even though the moon was flooding the hallway with milky light, but then Maggie noticed that the sounds were coming from old Mrs. McTavish's room.

No sandwich for Maggie. She almost wished her father was coming instead. Mrs. McTavish, the only other occupant at the shelter, smelled like cat piss, and the little five year old couldn't help gagging when the old lady was near. However, it wasn't Mrs. McTavish that came through the door. Through the door. Not opening the door or breaking it down. Through it, as though the battered section of wood wasn't there at all.

First came the head, the flesh drawn sharply across a skull that by turns mirrored the features of man, wolf, and goat. Heavy ram's horns curled down and out, forming wicked points that hung next to burning yellow eyes. The rest of the body followed without a sound, lean and emaciated. Despite the curious hump at its shoulders, the creature's body reminded Maggie of a cat's, or rather a man who decided he'd rather be a cat. A big, black, ugly cat.

Girl and creature stared at each other, the beast's tail switching back and forth. It never occurred to Maggie to be afraid: perhaps life had left her too jaded to concern herself with a monster that wasn't her father. She couldn't decide whether it was a person or an animal, so she decided to find out the best way she knew how. With a tentative whisper she asked "Do you have a sandwich?"

It blinked and shook its head.

Maggie looked at the thing's flanks and noticed that its ribs were showing, to say nothing of the rest of its bones. Her face fell into a worried pout: her dog had looked like that just before it had died. And her mother had always told her sharing was caring. "You look hungry. Would you like a sandwich?"

The creature stared for a few moments and then nodded slowly.

"Okay." Maggie held out her hand. "Come on. I'll make us a sandwich."

Maggie talked to the creature and it listened politely, tucking into the sandwich with the curious detachment of something that couldn't remember whether it had eaten before. After considering the matter for some time, it concluded that it liked the experience and would have to do it again sometime.

The little girl told it her story, how she was born in the hospital a few miles away, how her mommy had left when she was three because her daddy was too mean, and how they'd been moving around ever since. Daddy was always mean. Sometimes, like yesterday, he wouldn't let her eat, but he got really nasty when he drank the bottles. Then she had to hide.

"I like it here. There's lots of places I can play, and nice people too, though Mrs. McTavish is mean like Daddy, but I guess you know that, since you were in her room. Do you live with her?"

The creature started to shake its head, then wagged a claw in a "kind-off" gesture. The hump on its back shifted slightly.

"Hmm. Do you visit her?"

It nodded.

"She must like having visitors: even mean people get lonely, don't they?"

A rather unpleasant expression might have ghosted across the beast's face at this, but Maggie didn't notice, as she was busy yawning.

"I'm sleepy. Bedtime. Will you come back?"

The creature pondered for a moment, then nodded.

"Good. I like you." Maggie smiled. "You need a name."

The creature waited patiently. It had a title of sorts, but didn't recall ever having a name. It wondered what having one was like.

"You're Bobby now, okay?" Maggie paused. "Do you like Bobby?"

Bobby shrugged and nodded again.

“Yay!” Maggie yawned again and reached out to her new friend. “Carry me to bed? Only you have to be quiet. Daddy’s asleep.” Bobby bent down and gently lifted the little girl in its arms, letting her point the way. No noise was made, and had Maggie looked she would have seen the creature deftly step into the air, its clawed feet a good six inches above the floor. When they reached the room it drew back the blankets and tucked her in, though it looked a little uncomfortable doing so.

“Thank you, Bobby,” she whispered. “Night-night!” Bobby might have smiled but Maggie wasn’t sure. It turned and leapt through the window, and as she watched the hump on the creature’s back unfolded into great, ribbed wings, shadows and ash fingering the air as it flew away.

“Bobby’s an angel?” Maggie turned and was asleep moments later, but her delighted smile lasted for some time after that.

The next day Maggie made a peanut butter sandwich first thing, then looked everywhere for Bobby. Mrs. McTavish wasn’t in, though people kept coming and going in her room. They shooed Maggie away when came looking for her new friend and seemed very sad, though they wouldn’t explain why. She went to bed disappointed and even tried to stay up late to see if Bobby only came out at night, but when she woke next morning she still hadn’t seen the creature. Pouting, she ate breakfast and then went outside to play on the rickety swing set the volunteers had erected outside, determined to have fun with or without Bobby. The creature was waiting for her, perched like a bird atop the frame.

“Bobby!”

It fluttered down like an oversized bird at her delighted yell, landing with a gust of wind and returning her hug with a tender nervousness.

“Bobby, where were you yesterday? I had to eat your sandwich.”

The creature hung its horned head, looking mournful, and Maggie laughed. “Okay, I’ll make you another one. Then do you want to play?” Bobby nodded, eager to try eating again. They made their way to the kitchen. No one seemed to notice the horned figure trailing behind the little girl. They only smiled, glad to see that she was having fun, even if it was with an ‘imaginary friend.’

After Bobby ate its sandwich they went back outside. Maggie jumped into the swing and the frame sagged. “Push me, Bobby!”

The beast looked with some skepticism at the swing, and then gently plucked the child from the contraption before it broke.

“Bobby, I want to swing!”

Bobby unfurled its batlike wings and gently flicked them at the air a few times, then cocked its head and looked expectantly at Maggie.

“You want to fly away, Bobby?” the little girl started to tear up. “Bu-but you just came!”

It mimed picking something up and then flapped its wings again.

It dawned on Maggie what Bobby was suggesting, and her eyes lit like the fourth of July. “Yes, Yes! Let’s go flying, Bobby!”

Bobby took her into its arms. There was a dull crack of sound and a rush of wind past Maggie’s face. She watched in awe as the homeless shelter and the rest of the town that was her whole world fell away. Laughing as Bobby soared in ever-widening circles, she waved her hands and was delighted by how easy it was to hide away everything she’d known when she placed one of them just so. The air was cool, but when it became too much she snuggled herself close to Bobby, marveling at how deliciously warm he was, like fresh laundry.

“This is great Bobby! You’re the best angel ever!”

Maggie couldn’t see its face as she said that. If she had, she wouldn’t have understood the strange and profound joy that shone in Bobby’s eyes, as though it had never known such a feeling before. The wry amusement that also glittered there would have been likewise lost on the little girl.

After a short but blissful hour, Maggie watched the little town slowly grow between her toes until they landed at the shelter’s door. Maggie turned and gave Bobby a huge hug as soon as she was on her feet again. “Thank you, Bobby.”

Bobby hugged her back, then gently took her shoulders and knelt. It locked its eyes with her and Maggie understood, as though Bobby had just spoken, that it wasn’t going to be back for a while, and it didn’t know how long a while would be.

“But Bobby…”

It shushed her with a claw gently pressed to her lips, then took one of her hands in its own. Maggie felt the creature put something in her hand, and she looked down to see what looked like a coin made of black glass in her hand. Bobby met her eyes again, and Maggie knew that she was to break it if she needed him, but only if she really needed him, not to play.

“Okay, Bobby.” Silent tears crept down her cheeks, and Bobby touched them with a reverence that Maggie had only seen at church. The priest had held a cup and spoken over it with the same solemn, quiet seriousness.

Bobby drew its hand away, staring at the wet spots on its claws as though not quite believing they were there. Then it drew Maggie to its breast one more time, and Maggie felt the touch of what might have been a kiss on her brow as she hugged it back.

“I love you, Bobby.”

Bobby nodded, its wings made that cracking boom that she already knew so well, and it was gone.

“Beer.”

Maggie pushed herself off the couch and walked to the kitchen, careful not to step between her father and the television even though the commercials were on. She nudged the few groceries they had and cringed: the bottles were gone.

“There aren’t any, Daddy.”

He snarled, flecks of spittle flying from his unshaven face. “Of course there’s beer, you little brat. Get me one.”

She shook her head, shaking. “I don’t see any bottles.”

“What are you, blind?” He rose on unsteady feet and made his way over. He leaned down and looked himself, casually shoving her out of the way as he did. “Hmph.” He scowled and reached up into the pantry, pushing aside a few boxes and cursing when he found nothing. Then he went to the bathroom and returned, smiling.

“Good old Jack.” He took a swig and got back in his chair. “You’re lucky I had this, Maggie.” She knew better than to disagree, but also knew that she was most definitely not lucky. She left as soon as the commercials ended and stayed in her room for a few hours, hoping that he’d be asleep when she came back and she could have some food.

He wasn’t.

Red-faced, her father bellowed obscenities at her, blaming her for her mother’s departure, his alcoholism, and even their poverty. He threw bottles at her, though thankfully he’d drunk too much to hit her. They shattered on the wall behind her, the glass lying in countless shards around her feet. Maggie stood through it all unflinching, her face wooden and her eyes blank, far away, two years away, back at the homeless shelter. She was flying, flying with Bobby... she smiled. She couldn’t help herself.

He hit her and she fell, crying out as glass cut into her hands, her sides, her knees. She could feel her face swelling where his fist had connected and she cringed back, cutting herself more but not caring at all, desperate to get away from him.

“You think I’m funny? You little shit, you damn little whore,” his fingers scrapped at the floor and drew the remnants of a bottle up with a hideous glitter in his eyes. “You won’t smile again. I swear that, bitch.”

Maggie screamed and ran to her room, locking the door and sobbing as her father battered at the thin wood, making the hinges squeal in protest. She plunged her hands into her sock drawer and frantically scabbled at the contents. It was there, it had to be...

The door shattered under her father's laughter as Maggie's fingers closed around something small and flat. He swung and a flare of pain suddenly burst in the corner of her left eye. Her hand tightened with pain and the glass coin broke.

Time stopped.

Maggie turned and stared at her father, stuck with his hand still slashing towards her, the broken bottle sprinkled with drops of red. Despite her fears she stood, wiping the blood from her eyes. Maggie was awed that he did nothing as she touched him, then hit his unresisting body. All expression drained from her face as she struck him again. And again. She rained blows down on his gut, slowly at first, then faster and faster, like a machine slowly warming up, not stopping until she felt a touch on her shoulder.

"Bobby."

She didn't need to look. She knew it was her friend. At its touch, a wall broke and sobs wracked her body. Gentle hands turned her and held her close, wiping the tears away until she was able to look up. Bobby watched her silently for a few moments, expressionless, then looked to the countless cuts on her body, the bruises, the blood on her lips, in her eyes. It raised a claw and passed it over the wounds. The shards of glass fell one by one from her flesh, and in their wake the gashes knit themselves into scars. Even swellings on her face faded away like sand brushed from skin. Bobby nodded in satisfaction and then turned to her father, eyes blazing with hellfire.

"What are you going to do, Bobby?"

The creature glanced at Maggie and then took her by the hand, leading her from the room, walking her through her father like a ghost. Bobby took her to the kitchen and made a curious gesture with one hand. Smucker's Red Raspberry Preserves appeared on the counter. Laughing, Maggie took the peanut butter and bread from the pantry. Bobby watched for a few moments, then gestured again. Maggie was to stay in the kitchen. Bobby went back upstairs. Maggie made sandwiches and ignored the screams.

Bobby came back and went to the sink, washing something from its talons. Maggie asked no questions. She simply offered it a towel and a sandwich. Bobby wiped its hands clean and ate, considering Maggie as she watched. When Bobby was finished it reached out, took her in its arms and carried her from the house. Maggie wrapped her arms around its neck and smiled into his soft, warm skin. "My angel, back for me..." She fell asleep and Bobby smiled, a little sadly, a little bitterly, but with a joy beyond anything it had ever known before. It flew away, a little girl in its arms. It wasn't an angel, and knew it.

That didn't matter.