

Abandoned Daycare
By: Personalias

It was supposed to be an easy job: Spend the night cleaning up an old daycare that had been out of business longer than it had been open. Then Jake's aunt could re-open it, take care of some brats, make some money, yada yada yada.

It started out simple enough for the four college students. Carpet cleaner and stain remover were needed for neglected spots where pipes had dripped or wild animals and homeless people had done their business, but it's not like the hallways were smeared in shit. If anything the place reeked of baby powder, and there were worse things for a place to reek of.

All this place needed was some vacuuming, some mopping, a whole lotta trashbags, and a bunch of cardboard boxes. The quartet of amigos had all helped each other move out of dorms before. This was just that but on a bigger scale. One night tops. Maybe a weekend. Easy money.

Until they found the storage room...

It was Lester who spoke first. "It's like if a preschool teacher was a hoarder!"

Lester: Master of words, wits, and wisdom. Speaker of the obvious. Probably very high. His baggy clothes and gangly frame made him look like a scarecrow brought to life.

The stoner wasn't wrong. The room was littered with baby toys, furniture, clothes, and other what could be best described as 'knick-knacks'. Everything was scattered about but nothing seemed hidden.

"Some of this stuff looks in good condition," Emily noted. "Wonder why they didn't pawn or sell it?"

Emily: Practical. Responsible. A good girl. Her Family was wealthier than all three of her friends' combined, but she did her best not to flaunt it. Still dressed stylishly and feminine. She hadn't been seen in pants since she'd been old enough to pick out her own clothes.

Madison ran her hands over the crib bars. "This crib is giant," she noted. "Manufacturing error?"

Madison: The only one of them on a full academic scholarship. Blind without her glasses. Naive to the ways of the world.

Over by a changing table, Jake reached beneath and took out an almost comically large diaper.

“These got cartoons on them and everything. Maybe this was a daycare for old people or something.”

“Why do the diapers have cartoons on them then?”

“I don’t know! Old people like cartoons! Alzheimers and shit!”

Jake: Blonde haired blue eyed All-American dreamboat. Point guard on the college basketball team. The unofficial leader of the group.

The others winced and sucked in their breath. Jake didn’t normally talk like that. His grades had been slipping this semester and he was going full meathead dudebro as a result. They’d have to have a talk to him about that.

Something else caught Jake’s eye. He put down the diaper and took a few steps towards a small silver whistle laying on a shelf with an anchor engraved in it. His lips started to pucker at the thought of blowing on it.

Madison found a vial straight out of an old sci-fi movie, the green liquid inside it still bubbling. A voice in the back of her mind whispered that maybe she should drink it and see if it tasted any good.

Emily fiddled with a dusty old carpet bag, opening it up and taking out brick-a-brack, noticeably a paddle that seemed too big to fit.

“Uh guys,” Lester said. “I’m not sure it’s awesome to be messing around in here. Maybe we should get back to cleaning.” He was looking around and realizing there was some disturbing stuff in here: A pink straight jacket, a dollhouse that looked eerily like the outside of the daycare, a VHS tape called ‘This Show Is For Babies’, and golden diaper pail were just some of the things that were giving him the heebie jeebies.

“Dude, chill out.” Jake put down the boat whistle and picked up a pastel puzzle box. He turned it over in his hands, trying to solve it, playing with it and his focus increasing and his frustration ratcheting up with every turn and click.

The stoner rolled his eyes. “Yeah,” he whispered. “Can’t even solve a damn kids’ toy.” Lester paced near the entrance. “Dude belongs here.” He stopped when he noticed a teddy bear. It was a clean but raggedy looking thing, with two mismatched eyes; one sparkling red and the other shimmering blue. Lester could have gotten lost in those beady eyes.

Something didn’t sit right about that with him. “Where have I read...?” He let the thought dangle unspoken

“Guys!” Emily called, barely containing a giggle. “Listen to this!” As if snapped out of a trance,

the others put down their discoveries and gathered round her. "I found this rule book inside the bag."

The others all drew close. "I wouldn't call that a book." Madison said. "It's too thin. More like a pamphlet."

Jake read the title aloud. "Nanny Windel's Rules for Good Baby Boys and Girls."

Lester arched an eyebrow and stepped back. "Rules? Numbered rules?"

"Yeah," Emily said. "How'd you know?"

Madison peaked over Emily's shoulder and read the first rule aloud. "Rule Number One: Good babies wear and use their diapers at all times except when being changed or given a bath."

Emily snorted. "Weird right?"

Jake posted up behind Emily's other shoulder. "Rule Number Two: Good babies don't touch their diapers." He shook his head. "Who wrote this garbage?"

"Nanny Windel, didn't you hear?" Emily laughed. "Rule Number Three: Babies can't feed themselves."

The corners of Lester's mouth were plunging down towards the carpet. "Guys. I think you should stop reading that. Now."

Yet again, the others ignored him and kept going. "Rule Number Four," Madison took over, "Good babies don't use grown up words."

"Rule Number Five: Good babies crawl," Jake said. "Most of these are just facts, not rules. What's so good?"

Lester was sweating bullets. "Guys. Stop."

"Oh. Finally!" Emily said. "Here we go. Something close to a rule. Rule Number Six: Bad babies get spanked until they're good babies."

Everyone threw back their heads and laughed. Everyone but Lester.

"What's this at the end?" Jake pointed down to the bottom.

Madison squinted, and held the pamphlet closer to one of the lanterns. "It looks like it's in Latin."

"Don't read the Latin!" Lester begged, "Haven't you guys seen any horror movies, or read any-?"

“This isn’t a horror movie,” Emily said. “This is a daycare.”

The color drained out of Lester’s face. “It can be both.”

“Stop being a fucking baby,” Jake warned.

If Emily was concerned, she didn’t show it. “Capre nos, capre.”

Elsewhere in the building, from beneath the floorboards a battered umbrella poked out and unfolded, its canopy blooming like a toxic flower. The eerie blue ghostly figure holding it rose daintily upwards, passing through solid matter unconstrained by the laws of physics. There was no need for her to smooth out her skirt or brush the dirt off her jacket. She did so out of habit more than anything.

Immense (but not overly emotional) satisfaction filled her translucent face. “Bad babies need to be put back in their place,” she said to herself.

KA-THOOOOOM!

Far removed from the college students, a different gathering was taking place. Men and women wearing lab coats and business casual attire watched monitors eagerly, each one anticipating what artifact might catch the victim’s fascination.

“We have a winner!” Gary announced to the grousing crowd of coworkers. “It’s Nanny Windel, ladies and gentlemen!” People groaned like they’d just lost a bet. Gary could barely contain his laughter. “Nanny Windel pulls a ‘W!’”

Bald headed with thick rimmed glasses and looking like a bank teller, Gary walked through the assembled crowd to the whiteboard keeping track of everyone’s bet. “Alright, that means congratulations go to maintenance!” There was some low applause before he quickly added “Who share the pot with Ronald the intern.”

A single pipsqueak leapt into the air. “YES!”

Another co-worker came up and complained. “Wait, that’s not fair I had ‘Phantom Babysitter’, too.”

Gary examined the board which had such entries as ‘Were-baby’, ‘MerMommy’, ‘Creepy Twins’, ‘DiaperBot’, and ‘Darleen Lattle’.

“Yes you did, Gary said. “You had ‘Phantom Babysitter’. But this is ‘Ghost Nanny’. See? They’re very different monsters. It’s like the difference between zombies and zombie redneck torture

family.” He then walked away, seeing no further point in discussing it. “There’s always next year.”

Gary went and stood by Steve, his co-producer in tonight’s events. In his early forties, but with a full head of light brown hair, Steve had the demeanor of a kid who had just missed out on tickets to Disney. “Oh man, I’m sorry.”

Steve shook his fist. “He had the whistle in his hand.”

“I know,” Gary consoled him. “A couple more minutes, who knows what might’ve happened.” “I am never gonna see a MerMommy,” Steve pouted. “Ever.”

Gary turned and looked Steve in the eye. “Dude, be thankful. Those things are a trainwreck. They never know when the baby is wet.”

Steve sighed and looked at the Ghost Nanny floating through the hallway. “So, Nanny Windel.”

“Well she may be an undead anal retentive Mary Poppins rip-off...” Gary started.

Steve finished the thought. “But she’s *our* undead, anal retentive Mary Poppins rip-off.”

“With a hundred percent clearance rate.”

“True.”

That gave the men comfort.

Steve relaxed and asked, “So should we call Japan? Tell them to take the rest of the night off?”

“Yeah,” Gary chuckled. “What are they gonna do, relax? They practically invented desperation play. They literally don’t know how to relax.”

KA-THOOOOOM!

The sudden storm outside caused all four teenagers to jump practically out of their socks. The lights flickered off for a moment, just long enough for all four to jump uncomfortably close to one another.

Jake opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by a haunting yet familiar melody.

*“This-is-the-way-we-go-to-school,
Go-to-school,*

*Go-to-school,
This-is-the-way-we-go-to-school,
So-early-in-the-morning."*

The voice that sang it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. Its haunting melody was a peculiar siren's call that weaved in and out of the hallways outside the storage room.

"We need to leave," Lester said. "Yesterday."

"In this storm?" Jake said. He pointed out a suddenly rain streaked window. Lightning flashed in the distance. It really was a dark and stormy night.

Lester pointed upwards to the ceiling. "Did you not just hear the creepy song?"

"That was just a power surge," Madison explained.

"Yeah," Emily agreed, "Just some old P.A. glitch."

The stoner started all-but sprinting out of the storage room and towards the nearest exit. "Shit!" he said when he slammed up against the door. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" He slammed his fists in anger and frustration. "Fuuuuuuuck!" A nearby metal garbage can bounced off a window like it was nothing more than balled up paper.

"Dude!" Jaked shouted. "Chill out! It's just rain!"

"We're trapped!" Lester said.

Emily shrugged. "Electric doors. Glitched with the lightning strike."

Madison dug her phone out of her pocket. "We've still got our cell..." she paused and frowned. "No signal."

"Huh," Jake said. "Me neither." He didn't seem worried though. No one did. "Oh well. Not like we were going anywhere tonight." He grabbed an empty trash bag and waved for the girls to follow him. "Come on. Let's make some money."

Lester slumped down to the floor and rested his face in his hands lest he scream. "What did I do to deserve this?" he asked himself.

Emily lagged behind. "What's with you?"

"This place is haunted or something," Lester said. His knees were pulled up to his chest so he was in a fetal position. "There's gonna be a ghost, or some kind of psycho Chuck-E-Cheese thing, or a portal, or moving toys." He smacked himself in the forehead. "Why didn't I see it?"

“Daycares aren’t haunted,” Madison stated smugly, pushing her glasses up her nose.

“Pretty sure this one is.” Lester was on the verge of tears. “I know how this story ends. We’re not gonna like it.”

Jake walked away. “Whatever, dude. Somebody gave you a bad batch of gummies. I’m cleaning up and getting paid.”

“Me too,” Madison echoed.

Emily spared Lester a last pitying look. “Me too.”

“And the game begins,” Gary said. He pointed to the layout of the ritual site. “We’ve got three runners and a bump on a log and the three are splittin’ up.”

Steve furrowed his brow. “Nice, but why is the stoner freaking out? Shouldn’t he be experiencing mild euphoria and decreased cognition due to the gas we’ve been pumping in?”

“According to these readings, he is.” Gary said. “He’s just got really baggy pants.”

Madison had to pee and she hadn’t found any sign of a bathroom. It had gotten to the point where the ache in her bladder was distracting her and it was getting harder and harder to think about anything else.

It had gotten to the point where she’d dropped her garbage bag and walked through the cluttered hallways without the extra weight. Every classroom she poked her head into seemed devoid of plumbing of any kind. This section was so cluttered that it made the storeroom they’d found earlier seem spacious and organized.

Each step was slow and high, lest she step or slip. How did it get like this? It was like a bunch of rowdy tots had been allowed to trash the place and then vanish.

“C’mon,” Madison hissed to herself. She poked her head into another classroom and saw nothing but cribs and changing tables...again. “There’s gotta be a pre-k or something. Gotta do potty training sometime!”

Oh-dear-what-can-the-matter-be?

Dear-dear what can the matter be?

Oh-dear-what-can-the-matter-be?

Johnny’s-so-long-at-the-fair.

Madison's head whipped around searching for the source of the song. Her body, sadly, didn't follow. The sudden twisting threw her off balance and caused her to trip over an errant roller skate and then her own feet.

She tumbled to the floor, relatively unharmed, but the momentum tore her glasses right off the front of her face. "My glasses!" Madison yelled. She couldn't see a thing without her glasses! Everything was just a blur to her. Quietly, she crawled around on all fours, groping for her glasses.

"Hello child," a friendly, feminine voice called out to her. "Are you looking for these?" Before Madison could reply, something cold gripped her right hand by the wrist and placed the familiar frame of her glasses back in her hand.

"Thank you," Madison mumbled. Then she realized something about the voice seemed distinctly 'adult'. She put on the glasses and looked up. "I sincerely appreciate the assistance."

"What was that?" her new savior asked. "Are you using grown up words?"

Even with her impaired vision, Madison could make certain things out about the woman standing over her. For example, she wasn't technically standing as she had no feet. And Madison could read the hallway bulletin board directly through the woman's translucent body. "No way..." she gasped.

KA-THOOM!

The lights flickered and flared up with another nearby lightning strike. In that bare instant, Madison saw more than she'd ever wanted to. Rotting flesh, exposed bones, no lips to speak of and a raggedy patched uniform to match. The Nanny- and she was a nanny- looked less like a certain Julie Andrews role, and more like Geoffrey Rush from the pirate movies.

Ghosts were real! This old daycare was haunted! Madison was alone! On the bright side, she no longer needed to go to the bathroom...

"Naughty baby!" the ghost nanny scolded. "Good babies wear and use their diapers at all times except when being changed or given a bath!" A spectral hand gestured to the spreading puddle on the floor beneath Madison. "You're not wearing your diapers!"

Drenched in her own pee there, the usually witty and articulate young woman was at a loss for words. "I...I...I..."

"And don't think I didn't hear you talking like a grown up! "Good babies don't use grown up words!"

Madison's eyes widened in realization. The rules! She was quoting those stupid rules! This

would be terrifying if it weren't also so ridiculously humiliating. "Nanny Windel?"

"That's right, baby girl! But it's far too late for introductions!" Madison found herself picked up in the air, a cold dead arm wrapped around her waist and holding her parallel to the floor. "TIME! FOR! DISCIPLINE!"

Madison didn't have to be too brainy to guess what happened next...

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

Steve and Gary watched the brainy little girl get the daylight's spanked out of her. Watched her squirm and kick and beg as a translucent paddle started spanking the maturity right out of her; listened to her scream as each swat to her drenched back side took away more and more of her adult mind.

Within minutes the girl's ability to walk was lost, and her vocabulary down to less than a hundred words. The men watching knew Nanny Windel had finished her job when Nanny took her to one of the nurseries and started changing her.

With cold reverence, as if they'd just witnessed a ritual sacrifice, the men bowed their heads, and Steve pulled a lever.

One down...

Jake's stomach growled. The daycare kitchen's floor was now spotless and shined enough so that he could see his reflection. He looked down at himself. Damn his metabolism. Should've carbed up.

"What kind of kids did this place used to take care of?" he puzzled, looking at the massive highchairs big enough to sit him. His mind refused to settle on the most obvious answer. It was too silly! Must just be his blood sugar getting too low.

"Do-you-know-the-muffin-man?"

The-muffin-man?

The-muffin-man!

Do-you-know-the-muffin-man-who-lives-on-Drury Lane?

Stupid sound system glitch. Where was it coming from?

He walked up to a pantry and flung it open. "What do big babies eat, anyways?" Applesauce as it turned out. "Better than nothin'," he grunted. He opened a drawer and found more than enough spoons. All plastic. "Whatever."

He ripped open the flimsy tinfoil top and dug in. It wasn't bad. It wasn't a burger, but it wasn't bad. He started pacing, stirring the grainy mush around.

KA-THOOM!

"Babies can't feed themselves!"

The voice saying it made the inside of his fillings hurt. Jake turned to face it and was so stunned by what he saw that he forgot to swallow and bits of yellow paste dribbled out of his lips.

"Good babies crawl!" The thing glided across the floor. It had no reflection. "I'll make you good!"

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

"Another one bites the dust."

Steve and Gary watched the cocky jock get spanked absolutely senseless. A few minutes later he was sitting in a highchair and pushing a load into his crinkly diaper. Nanny pinched his cheeks and started going through walls towards her next victim.

"Two down," Steve said.

"Uh-oh..." Gary noticed. "Windel's going for the virgin." The virgin was on all fours, crying like they'd already been regressed. "Virgin's gotta be last and this one's making it a little too easy."

Steve leaned over and picked up a phone. "Containment, I'm gonna need an ectoplasmic containment field and plenty of thorazine to..."

"No wait," Gary interrupted. "Looks like she changed her mind for now." Sure enough, the Ghost Nanny paused and about faced; the sounds of screaming more enticing to her than the faint babbles of somebody faking it.

Steve leaned back and wiped his brow. "Perfect in practically every way."

"Let's just hope things stay like that."

KA-THOOM!

"One-elephant-went-out-to-play"

*Upon-a-spider's-web-one-day
She-had-such-enormous-fun
That-she-called-for-another-elephant-to-come”*

Emily hid in the ballpit, her hand clapped over her mouth to keep herself from screaming. She'd forgotten the pushbroom and went looking. That's how she stumbled upon a cooing and crying Madison, topless and wearing nothing but a diaper.

Emily thought it'd been a joke. It wasn't, though. Neither was Jake. No way would Jake willingly shit himself for a bizarre practical joke. Running out of the daycare's kitchen was when she'd seen the ghost. It was also when the ghost saw her.

“Good babies crawl,” the thing's voice was both beautiful and terrifying. “Good babies wear and use their diapers.”

What the fuck was this? Emily literally had no words for what was going on. Why would a ghost be saying this kind of shit? Why would a fucking daycare be haunted? Did daycares even have nannies? Shouldn't she be running from some sort of undead babysitter or something?

The absurdity and terror of her situation compounded when an icy cold arm snaked into the ballpit and ripped Emily up into the air. “Naughty baby! Hiding from Nanny!”

Emily didn't have to pee. If she did, she'd be pissing herself right now. The thing dangling her by the armpits was both strangely beautiful or rotting depending on where she focused her eyes. “I'm sorry!” she said. “I'm sorry! Whatever I did, I'm sorry!”

“Good babies don't use grown up words!”

The walls rushed by and the ballpit rushed up to greet her as Emily was dropped down to the edge of the ballpit, a terrible weight pinning her, forcing her to bend over. Something like a breeze blew her skirt up exposing her panties.

“Please!” Emily begged. “Don't!”

“Bad babies get spanked until they're good babies.”

THWACK!

Something hard and flat collided with Emily's backside. She didn't know math. Just lost it. She knew numbers. But she couldn't do anything with them.

THWACK!

“Eeeep!” Emily kicked futilely with another swing of a spectral paddle stung her ass. What

were numbers?

THWACK!

“Noooooo!” she cried out, suddenly illiterate. Tears started to run down her cheeks. One part of her brain was crying out as bits of information were excised and removed from her consciousness like tumors. The other part reeled in pain and just wanted it to stop so she could get back to playing.

She’d been a bad girl. Not even that, a bad baby. Before the fourth swat came down on her, both parts of her being decided that they wanted nothing more than being a good baby. Anything to make the hurting stop.

There was a pause.

“Hm?” The sound came from the ghostly woman just behind her. “What are you-?”

THWACK!

Emily’s ears heard the sound of the paddle hitting something, but her bottom didn’t feel it. The weight was off her too. She could move! In utter bewilderment Emily stood up and turned around only to see Lester holding a wooden paddle and staring down a now diapered and confused ghost.

It was an objectively amusing sight, seeing the ghost with nothing but a diaper on below the waist. She no longer floated menacingly in the air, but stood awkwardly on the ground with bare feet that wriggled like worms after a rainstorm.

“Bad baby!” Lester said in the exact same tone as the ghost had. “Wandering around without your diaper on! Daddy Lester had to put it on for you!”

The ghost scowled. “I’m not a baby, you twat!”

“Then why are you wearing a diaper?” The stoner retorted.

“Because you snuck up and slid one on me.”

Lester slapped the paddle into his open palm menacingly. “Of course I did, little one. Babies can’t put on their own diapers.”

“But-...”

Lester circled around the frankly confused and bamboozled specter “If you’re not a baby, then why are you getting spanked? Only babies get spanked.”

Nanny Windel's fingers started nervously fidgeting, her arms drawing closer to her waist.
“I...I...I...”

“Ah-ah-ah,” Lester wagged his finger. “Good babies don’t touch their diapers.” The ghost's hands splayed outward. Combined with her overly wide stance thanks to the giant diaper, she looked more like a starfish than a ghost.

THWACK!

The ghost poofed into a baby powder scented cloud, and the wooden paddle clattered to the ground out of Lester's hands.

“Lester!” Emily ran forward and wrapped her arms around her gangly friend turned rescuer. He hugged her back, making her feel safe.

“You okay?” he asked. He pried her off of him and looked directly at her skirt. “Still potty trained?”

Emily nodded. “Yeah. I think so...?” She did a mental run through of the process; panties down, sit, pee, wipe, flush, panties up, wash hands. “Yeah. Definitely.”

“Good,” Lester said. Something inside Emily doubted he meant that, but only for a second. She'd just been saved. “Means I got here on time.”

Emily pushed back her hair out of her face. “How did you know what to do?”

“Circular logic is a trope, but it goes both ways but the advantage goes to the person who invokes it first.”

It might have been because the college co-ed no longer knew her three R's, but none of what Lester had just said made any sense. “Huh?”

“Just jump into the ballpit with me.” Without waiting, Lester high stepped over the edge and started wading towards the middle of the plastic orb filled pool. “Come on. I got a hunch.”

Confused and having trouble stringing together coherent thoughts, she did as she was bid. “What about Jake and Maddison?”

Lester started scooping out armfuls of balls and tossing them over the edge. “Jakey and Maddie?” he echoed her question. “They're gone. Stuck like that. If they'd been physically regressed there was an off chance that they might just have to grow up all over again. But they got mentalled by that Ghost Nanny. Probably not coming back from that. Most likely scenario is they spend the rest of their lives in a nursing home or something. Maybe the nurses will know about ABDL and get them some cute clothes and diapers but that's a big maybe.”

ABDL? Mentalled? Physically Regressed? None of this made any sense to Emily. It was like Lester was speaking an entirely different language. Not knowing what else to do, she copied her friend and helped him excavate the pit. ‘How do you know all about this stuff?’

The stoner didn’t stop digging. “There are websites,” Lester said. “Stories. Pictures. Most people think they’re just internet fetish porn. But it’s way more than that. Investigative journalism? Prophecy? Some reflection of the collective unconscious? Whatever it is I’ve always had a hunch that it was true. This just proves it.”

“This is why you came with us?” Emily. “To prove your conspiracy theories?”

The pair neared the bottom. “I mean...” Lester paused. “Kinda? I didn’t really think this would happen. Just figured I could make some cash and get some ideas about posts on a message board or something. Then the storage room happened and I started connecting the dots.” The ballpit was finally empty enough that they could see a trap door. Lester opened it up and dropped down into what Emily could only describe as a glass walled elevator. “I did try to warn you.”

That’s right, he kind of did. Emily followed and dropped down while Lester messed with some wiring. It was better than staying behind having to take care of Jake and Maddison. “How’d you know this would be here?” she asked.

Lester smiled. “Come on. Never heard the one about a kid getting lost in a ballpit? Of course there was a trapdoor. AR Traps are too cheeky for their own good most of the time.”

Emily let out a polite laugh; the kind people did when they didn’t get the joke. It only made her feel more childish. “How’d you find out about all this stuff?”

Lester sparked a couple of wires together and blushed. “I was looking for internet fetish porn.”

And down they went.

Mission control was at red alert. People were panicking. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Technicians were scrambling, security was gearing up, and Steve was really regretting that he’d hit the tequila as quickly as he did.

“Yeah, I know they’re in the elevator!” he shouted into his phone. “No! Don’t regress them both! Order matters! You know that! Well yeah, if you regress one go for the other. They both already know too much. Both of them need to spend the rest of their lives with their heads empty and their diapers full!” He paused, frowning through the tequila haze. “Kill them? What are we, monsters?”

Gary was pouring over all the available data while one of the gals from tech searched the

internet. "I found him, sir!" She pointed to a profile picture on a fetish site.

He readjusted his glasses and pronounced the screen name phonetically.

"Ay-Bee-Dee-El-Baby-Daddy-four-twenty-sixty-nine-eight-zero-zero-eight-equal sign-equal sign-Dee?" He cringed at having to read it. "That's a terrible screen name!" More to the point, Gary added, "And he never should have been selected for this! He knows too much! It hardly ever works if they know the tropes!"

The technician clicked deeper into the stoner's profile. "Sir, look at this."

Gary felt a thin line of hope. He waved Steve over. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing? Notice a pattern?"

Indeed Steve did. Steve got back on the phone. "Inform the director. Follow the protocol, but if this doesn't work, we've got one last hail mary."

It was dark outside the box at first. That was a mercy as far as the college students were concerned. The mercy didn't last long. They were moving. Emily could feel that much through the floor, the humming micro vibrations. It came in little starts and stops, and jolts. Unlike most elevators, the pair could see through three of the walls. Based on the slight rocking sensation, Emily guessed they weren't just going down but also forward and back and sideways and around.

They were on a track-a complex conveyor belt-and every time they stopped, they got a peek inside another box.

"WAAAAAAH!" A giant, obese, fleshy, blob of a human wearing a sagging white diaper pressed itself up against the glass. It was in its own box, its own moving cell, but it didn't make Emily feel any safer. "WAAAAAAH!"

"That's a really big baby," Lester commented with an air of cold detached authority. "Lot less cute when they're scaled up to seven feet."

That was an understatement. Emily took a step back. "What does it do?"

"If I had to guess," Lester said, "It bites you and you turn into one. Werebaby? Babbire? Same difference."

Something wispy and smoke-like pressed itself up against an adjacent wall. Emily knew it would smell like lavender and piss just from looking at it. "Wssssshhh!" it hissed through the walls. Why weren't these damn things soundproofed? Emily pressed herself into Lester, his body the only thing that felt safe in the moment.

"I think it's saying wish," Lester remarked. "Some kind of diaper genie? Thought that one would

be prettier. Guess they went with Wishmaster or something.” She was at a slaughterhouse dressed as a cow. He was at an aquarium admiring the sharks.

In another cell, two little girls with skin like porcelain held hands, staring at the pair. “Don’t play dress up with them.”

The Cenobite wearing a rubber apron was the first one to stump Lester, yet it had nothing to do with identification. “Demon Mommy. Makes the Ghost Nanny look gentle.” The puzzle box resting in its hands was identical to the one in the storage area. “Why are there so many?” he wondered. “Almost any one of these could take most people.”

Emily knew. “They need us to be bad babies,” she whispered. “They need an excuse to punish us. So they can say we deserved it...that we had it coming.” Hearing that truth come out of her own mouth made Emily launch into the biggest tantrum in her young life.

Diaper Bot.

Living Doll

Granny Witch.

Maternal Alien.

None of the ludicrous horrors beneath the ground caused her scream to abate until she’d gotten it well out of her system.

DING!

The guard at the elevator doors didn’t get a word out. Lester shoved a pacifier directly into his mouth and the man went limp. “Stocked up before I came to the rescue,” Lester explained.

The college kids stepped out of the elevator and into, surprisingly enough, an empty and sterile passageway. One each side was a row of elevators like the one they’d existed, and a single security booth betwixt them.

“This...is not what I expected,” Emily said.

“Me neither,” Lester admitted. “I was thinking more pastel. Maybe ironic smiley faces or something.”

TZZZZZZZICK!

Static crackling filled the hallway. “You shouldn’t be here,” A voice boomed over unseen

speakers. Neither Lester nor Emily had heard it before. They could only look up towards the ceiling and off into the middle distance, the way lost children do when searching for a parent.

“This should have gone differently. Ended more quickly.” It was a woman. Definitely a woman. Late forties, early fifties. Old enough to be their mom. “I can only imagine your pain and confusion. But know this: What’s happening to you is part of something bigger, something older than anything known.” She sounded sincere, too. Whomever this was, believed every word that was being broadcast out.

The lecture was accompanied by the sound of clicking heels en masse. Lester and Emily were alone, but soon they wouldn’t be.

“You’ve seen impossible things,” the woman on the P.A. system went on. “An army of non-consensual, dominating, caregivers. Monster that would give Freud wet dreams and nightmares all at once. But they are nothing compared to what came before what lies below.”

Lester grabbed Emily’s hand and dragged her into the security booth.

“What’s she talking about?” Emily asked.

“No clue this time.”

The sound of footsteps grew thunderous while the woman’s voice droned on. “It’s our task to placate the ancient ones, as it’s yours to be offered up to them. Forgive us, and let us get it over with.”

“Come here sweetie!”

“Come to Momma!”

“Who’s my little sugar lump! You are! Yes you are!”

“Time for your nap!”

Cooing motherese rang out like bullets from machine guns as a full squad of Professional Mommy Domes circled the corner and entered the corridor, all armed with diaper bags, restraints, and syringes. They were going for a rush job.

“Shit,” Lester cursed. “What do we do?”

It was Emily who saw the button: The big, shiny, red, button.

DING!

Chaos erupted in the Mission Control compound. Men and women were dropping left and right. The monitors broadcast the chaos. Orderlies were restraining victims into straight jackets over diapers so thick that they'd only need to be changed once a day. Mad scientists cackled with glee as they zapped people with age regression rays, leaving them as squalling infants in a puddle of their own clothes. Gargantuan storks snatched people up in bundles, taking them far away to lands best not spoken of. A number of helpless interns were forced on their hands and knees, crying with their pants down and glass thermometers jammed up their rectums; the temperature of each one reading 'baby'. A security guard stood with his nose in the corner and his hands on top of his head, his new schoolboy uniform bulging and sagging with a loaded diaper. A walking changing table with mechanical arms and what appeared to be a salon hair dryer was busily dragging people onto it and dressing them in more 'suitable' attire while it wiped their bottoms and brains simultaneously.

Lots of screaming. Lots of crying. Lots of begging. Lots and lots of diapers.

Steve lay on the floor, out breath from whatever knocked down the door into the control room. Slithering over to him looked like the creature from the black lagoon cosplaying as Ariel. In the monster's head was a dripping wet seaweed nappy. "OH COME ON!"

Far away- but not far enough- from the chaos they'd created, Emily and Lester ventured out onto an open bridge dangling over a pit. The moon above them with infinite darkness below, if not for the carvings in the walls and the bedlam they'd just escaped, they might have allowed themselves to believe they'd escaped their tormentors' demesne.

"Where the fuck are we?" Emily asked, proud that she could still curse now that she thought about it.

"We are very much in uncharted territory right now, baby girl." Lester said.

Emily's nose wrinkled. She didn't like being called that, least of all by Lester. "What's the point of all this?" she wondered, trying to change the subject.

"It's like you said," Lester replied. "It's punishment."

Being turned into a drooling idiot for goofing off in a storage room seemed disproportionately cruel. "For what, though?"

"For having power you'll never be ready for," came the reply. From the other end of the chamber, a woman in a gray pantsuit walked out to meet them. From her voice, Lester and Emily knew she was the one who had lectured them earlier.

"It's different in every culture," the director explained. "And it's changed over the years. For some it's a parent being re-raised by their child. Other times it's an unfaithful lover being taught

a lesson in impulse control. Everyone is meant to grow old. Not everyone can be allowed to grow up.”

“And us?” Emily asked.

The director gestured to the carvings. The outlines were simple, but if Emily were to label them, she’d have thought of them as a wizard, a knight, a jester, and a maiden respectively.

The director gave them their proper titles. “The Scholar; smart but arrogant. The Athlete; strong but brash. The Fool; beloved but naive.” Close enough. “All are forced back into the cradle forever by whatever surrogate they’ve summoned. Leaving the last to regress or mature as fate decides: The Virgin.”

“Me?” Emily almost laughed. “A virgin?”

The older woman didn’t even smile. “Not you, dear. Him. You’re the Fool.”

“Hey!” Lester barked. “You don’t gotta tell everybody.”

Emily ignored him. “What if you don’t pull it off?”

“They rise.” Almost reverently, the director indicated the black morass below.

A burning desire to know filled Emily’s almost childlike brain. “Who does? Who’s beneath us?”

“The ancient ones. The True Adults. As long as they accept our sacrifice they remain below, content to let us grow up. But the other rituals have all failed.” The director leveled an accusing finger at Emily. “The sun is coming up in eight minutes. If you’re an adult when it does, none of us will be.”

“Fuck you,” Lester snarled. “If we have to be stuck shitting our pants for the rest of our lives, then you do, too.”

“Not you,” the older woman said. “Just her.”

Lester’s eyebrows shot up. “Yeah?”

“Lester!”

“Sorry, Emily,” Lester said. He pulled her closer to him, her back to his chest and his arm wrapped around her throat. “I’ll take real good care of you.”

The former rich girl struggled in the poser Daddy’s grip, but it was no use. “If this is where we’ve gotten as a society, maybe it’s time for a change!” she yelled.

'Change' was a poor choice of words. The director was already unfolding a diaper for Emily. "We're talking about the permanent regression of every human soul on the planet. Including you. They let us grow up once. They won't let it happen again."

Lester was using his free hand to work Emily's skirt and panties back down to her ankles. "You're gonna be so cute, all pamped up," he whispered. "I'm finally gonna get be a real Daddy!."

Overcome with revulsion, Emily did what most any young woman would do. Her head rocked back into the creeper's nose and her fist swung down into his balls. Little did she realize just how close to the edge Lester was.

The director dropped the diaper she'd been fluffing and reached out for Lester. "NO!" It was too late. If there was a bottom to that pit, it was too deep for the sound to reach Emily's ears. "You fool! Do you have any idea what you've done? You've ruined everything."

The entire world shuddered. Both women fell to the floor. Emily, in particular, landed on her backside. A low, rumbling moan roared out from beneath them and Emily swore she heard something that vaguely sounded like "Naughty, naughty!".

Strangely enough, Emily didn't care. If she was going to end up like Jakey and Maddie, she might as well take everyone else down with her. At least Lester wouldn't get what he wanted. Did that make her immature? Whatever. Why did her underwear feel like it was getting thicker?

"NAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUGHTY!"

The new daycare workers groaned about how they couldn't get through the morning without their morning coffee. Thousands of years of dreamless slumber was one heck of a long weekend, but these kiddos wouldn't take care of themselves.

Little Emily crinkled around the daycare that morning, babbling to herself. Ever hungry, Jakey was putting everything in his mouth, thumbs and toes included. Madison was hoisted off the changing table, being declared clean just before the wetness indicator on her diaper turned partially blue.

Not that Emily was one to talk. Literally speaking, no one was. Talking was just not what humans did. As a people the darlings were just too young for it. Emily stopped in her tracks. Something was wrong, but the girl just wasn't quite sure.

Just.

Not.

There!

Whatever it was, the thought left Emily's brain as quickly as something else had entered her diaper, causing it to balloon out behind her. A True Adult clicked its tongue and pulled back the waistband of her diaper, making her giggle and gurgle at the attention.

Emily was lifted up as high as high could be, carried over to the nearest changing table. The sound of tapes being ripped off her diaper's front landing zone sounding like a kind of cannon. She gazed out at all of her little friends and cooed while her ankles were crossed and her legs lifted into the air.

There were her friends Jakey and Maddie, and several billion other humans that needed taking care of.

But no Lester