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The Dark Men

Amanda Rogers

He was a dark man with big eyes who had no lips. He had lips, but they were thin and white and faded into his face. He never smiled. Sometimes he made a face like he was going to smile, but it wasn't real. He never really smiled. He wore bright colors though. Pinks and greens and blues. Bright blues, aqua marines. He had a large purple hat. He wore it on Sundays after church. He made his smiley face at church quite often, people called him friendly.

He wasn't friendly though, not really. You see, every Sunday he would go out in his big purple hat. He would go to a restaurant in the city, always a different one, always secretly. He was dark, and fit in well. His bright colors and purple hat made people leave him alone. People who dress in bright colors and goofy hats are never up to no good.

He would go to a restaurant and hide in the bathroom. Usually it was the men's restroom, since he had trouble getting into the women's. But sometimes he pulled it off. He liked the women's restroom better. It smelled nice, like powder and lemon. Almost all the bathrooms he went in smelled the same.

He would go into the bathroom and hide in a stall, sitting with his legs up so you couldn't see him from the bottom. He would listen as people came in and out, chattering with one another, relieving themselves, washing and drying their hands. He would listen for hours sometimes, waiting for the specific sound. He knew this sound because he had heard it over and over; he knew what to listen for: the sound of a single pair of little feet.

He could tell by the sound of their walk how old they were, what sex they were, how hyper, how nice. He liked the nice ones.

This dark man had seen a story once on the news when he was little. The story was about a man who was tall like him and dark too. The man on the news had no lips and didn't smile. He was a bad man; he wore all black and had a scar above his eye. (The little kid didn't know which eye because he'd read about how cameras make everything backwards and he sometimes gets confused.)

He was a bad man, this dark man on the TV. The news said that he killed kids. Little ones. The news said that he touched little kids in the bathroom of the school where he was a janitor. It said he kidnapped them sometimes, it said that he did bad things.

The little boy knew that what the news said was true. The dark man on TV had a lawyer who was trying to say it wasn't. The little boy knew that the lawyer was wrong though, he knew his daddy did do those things.

His daddy would bring them home in his truck, the little kids. He would take them down into the basement and make them put on this big goofy purple hat. He liked it, he'd say. He thought it was funny and strange, how they looked so young and silly in that big purple hat.

He would tie them up. He would say, "Close your eyes dear child, I have something to give you."

The little boy wanted to leave his daddy, but he loved him very very much and was afraid to disappoint him. He was very afraid. So he helped his daddy. He handed him tools and sharp things and helped him to clean up after, when the kids had stopped breathing and his daddy wasn't laughing anymore.

And then someone found out about his daddy, and he was taken away to jail and the only time the little boy saw him was on the news. The little boy loved his daddy very much, and missed him terribly.

Eventually the little boy grew up. He bought a truck and a purple hat and went out to restaurants on Sundays after church.

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He would wait in the stalls with his legs curled up for the sound of a single pair of little footsteps. When he heard them, he would slowly uncurl himself and open the door and step out.

“Hello little child.” They would smile at him and some would say ‘hi mister’, because when they are young like that they can’t help being friendly.

“Hello little child. I know that you are eating your supper, and you must finish it if you want to grow big and strong, but I was wondering if you would come with me for just a moment, I have something to give you. I will let you try on my purple hat.” Nine times out of ten, the kid would look up at the beauty of that purple hat and come right away. Sometimes he had to convince them, but it wasn’t hard. People said he was friendly after all. Anyway, all kids know that people who dress in bright colors are never up to no good.

He sneaks them out quietly to his truck. When he opens the door, circus music comes out. There is a smell like cotton candy or caramel corn, something pleasant and sticky and delicious.

“Close your eyes, dear child,” he would say, “I have something to give you.”

The kid would close his or her eyes, and the man would think. He would think of all the happy things he had ever seen in his life. He would think about clowns and bunnies and happy little pigtails. He would concentrate on candies and sunrises and birdsongs until his whole heart felt ready to explode.

He would quickly take off the hat that was filled with all these happy thoughts, and put it on the child’s head. He would lean in and hug the child with all he has, pushing out the goodness until he felt nothing but a dark empty. The child would stand there, dumbfounded, with a silly grin on his or her face. They wouldn’t know what hit them, but would be filled with such a sense of euphoria—a blinding happy that took over every sense in their body.

“I love you child.” He would say, “I want you to go inside and finish your meal, I want you to grow up big and strong. And when you get sad, I want you to remember this happiness and know that there is good out there, even when you can’t see it. Go child; go back to your family.” He would take the hat back, the hat which had been drained of all the happy thoughts he could collect that week. He would get into his truck, turn off the music, curl up and sleep.

Every week the dark man would do this.

On the first of every year he would lay in his truck and think about the fifty two children. He would remember their faces, how they smiled and laughed and how they will have a piece of that goodness always. He thinks of all the badness too. He thinks of that bad man on the TV and about how they aren’t that different, about how their faces match. He curls up and remembers the other faces, the ones he can’t take back. He thinks how all the good thoughts in the world could never take it back.

He cries. He whispers to each child he sees, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, so sorry.”