

*David Sandler*

## **The Jerseymaid Ritual**

“Can you hear them? Can you hear the elves?” Molly asks as she pours more milk into my bowl. I tilt my head and bring my ear down to the bowl. I look up at Molly and she senses that I want her next to me. Setting the bottled milk on the kitchen table, she sits down in the empty chair beside me, pulling her chair close to mine. She tucks her hair behind her ear and lowers it to the bowl so that her nose is about two inches from mine as she listens. Raising her index finger to her lips she lets me know that silence is required if the elves are to respond.

We stare at each other, heads turned sideways hovering over the bowl listening for elves. More accurately we are staring into one another, our concentration so intense that for that instant we are not two people but one being of singular purpose, and I think I know what it must feel like to be an identical twin.

I see my reflection in her blue eyes, a blue that reminds me of the hottest part of a flame. Her strawberry blonde hair reaches the top of her shoulders. She has a round face with piercing dimples, and her wide smile enlarges her freckles and makes her appear as if she’s blushing.

In a whispered voice she begins to tell me about the elves. “They live in the cereal. Their magical powers are activated by the milk, and that makes it possible for them to talk to one another without having to rise to the surface of the bowl. They never get old and they never die. They stay young forever. They dance and sing and play kid’s games, games like Chutes and Ladders and Twister. Grown-ups don’t believe though...”

“Why not?” I interrupt her.

“Because grown-ups can’t hear them,” she says.

“Why not?” I ask again.

“I don’t know,” she says shrugging her shoulders. The corners of her mouth turn slightly upward, and I can tell that she is amused by my questions.

We become silent again until the silence becomes overwhelming, and then it happens. I hear them. I hear the elves. They are talking to one another in a language I cannot understand, but I can hear their laughter. Molly, obviously aware of my discovery, whispers, “Snap, Crackle,” and then sucks in her lips to make a loud slurping sound and lets out a shrill “Pop!” that sends us both into bursting laughter. She makes me laugh so hard that tears stream down my face, and I have to press my thighs together to keep from peeing in my pants. She ruffles my hair with her hands and I am grinning stupidly from ear to ear. I never tell her how much I like it when she ruffles my hair like that, how the sensation of it makes me feel warm and special inside. I never tell my sister Molly how much I love her.

“Can you hear them? Can you hear the elves?...”

The stewardess tells us to prepare for landing. I push up my food tray and put away the playing cards, upset that I have to ruin my game of Solitaire. I buckle myself in and glance out the window of the plane. From my window seat I can see the LAX landing strip through the smog.

I look around to locate where the emergency gear is, as if in a real emergency I could survive a plane crash with an inflatable jacket and some choice oxygen. I hate landings. So many things can go wrong with a landing. I hate being in the air. But even more, I dread the thought of having to land. It is Molly’s birthday and I am coming home.

As the plane prepares to land there is a part of me that hopes the plane will crash on the runway. Perhaps the drama of it all will force my parents to take notice of me. Leaning back against the seat I pop a cassette into my Sony walkman and squeeze the headphones tightly against my ears. Closing my eyes, I press play and turn up the volume. “Oobladi. Ooblada...”

Waiting for Sammy to arrive, Molly plays hopscotch with her best friend, Sharon. Sharon is also in the third grade, and they do everything together. The squares are drawn onto the sidewalk with colored chalk, and small rocks are used as markers.

Sammy picks Molly up at the corner bus stop which is directly in front of our house. Sammy is the school bus driver and he drives the Carpenter Elementary School Bus. His name is not really Sammy, but he is one of the few black people I have met and I confuse him with Sammy Davis Jr. Molly turns bright red the first time I call him Sammy and ask him to sing "Candy Man."

I wait outside with Molly, Sharon, and some of the other kids from the neighborhood for the school bus. Even though I am too young to ride the bus, mom says I can wait outside with Molly as long as I promise not to step off the curb and Molly promises to watch over me.

While Molly is playing hopscotch, I pace back and forth with great caution along the sidewalk, pretending that the cracks are hair-triggers and that stepping on one would set off the explosives that are buried beneath the street. I keep my head down, looking towards the ground, trying to keep a steady, sometimes rhythmic cadence between the cracks.

The bus is very loud and nobody has to see the bus to know that it is coming. The dusty orange bus pulls up in front of our house. The doors pull in and everyone begins climbing the steps and heading towards the back. I wave wildly, excited to see Sammy. "Hi Sammy," I holler, and Molly rolls her eyes looking to Sammy as if to ask for forgiveness for her stupid brother. Sammy smiles at Molly and lays his hand on her shoulder. He waves back to me and says, "Have a good day, Ace," and then the doors close.

Molly lowers the window to wave goodbye to me, and tells me to have a good day at Kindergarten. The bus takes off and at that moment I wish I were on it. As the bus heads down the street, Molly's waving hand is still visible in the window. I follow the bus down the street until it turns the corner leaving a ghost of exhaust fumes. As I walk back inside the house I imagine Molly waving to me from the bus window all the way to school.

The plane lowers itself to the runway for a safe landing. Passengers get out of their seats, pick out their baggage from the baggage overhang, and wait in line to exit the plane. I turn up the volume of my walkman. When everyone has left the plane, I am still sitting at my window seat; the last occupant on board.

Sometimes I think I think too much, and other times I know I do. It is at these times, when thoughts become overwhelming, that I tune out, become numb, refuse to contemplate my present existence. One way of doing this is to think about Molly. I wonder if I could stop thinking of her even if I tried. I am afraid that if I stop thinking of her, I will forget what she was like, and then all I will have are aging memories based on a single photograph. It's ironic how the truly special moments can't be appreciated until some time has passed, and once time has passed you can never fully capture the same moment twice.

When I'm not thinking of Molly, I often imagine how my life would have turned out under different circumstances. What if I were an only child, or the oldest child? What if I had the same mother but a different father, or a different mother but the same father, or different parents altogether? What if I had been raised by a band of gypsies, or brought up in a traveling carny surrounded by side show freaks? What if I were a giant or a hobbit, or a feral child living in the jungle?

I don't want to leave my seat. I am breathing rapidly; my heart is beating at a crazed rate. My temples are pulsating and I feel a migraine coming on.

Finally I force myself up from my seat and I retrieve my duffle bag from the overhang. Walking down the aisle of the plane, I feel like I'm walking in slow motion on a tread mill floor. I walk through the terminal and I see my father waiting for me. He looks at his wrist watch and extends his arm to show me the time, expressing disapproval at my lateness.

Molly. Sammy doesn't bring Molly home today. I want to believe that she just missed her bus, but already my head is dizzy with another truth, and I cry. My parents turn towards me and look away as I look up, their faces tear-streaked, their eyes full of panic.

“We don’t know anything definite yet,” they tell me and they send me into another room, any other room, because they know that as long as I am in the same room with them, they are in the same room with something definite.

I choose to go to Molly’s room because that is the only way I can think of to feel connected with her. I shut the door behind me and stand against it. I slide down to the bedroom floor and strain to hear the conversation in the kitchen where the detective stands with my parents. At the same time, I want to put my hands over my ears. If I can’t hear what is being said, then it won’t be true.

Molly has been abducted from school. The detective assigned to Molly’s case explains that Molly was seen in front of the playground being shoved into the back seat of a white cadillac, which then sped down the main road. The detective assures my parents that he will do everything in his power to find Molly.

I crack open the door to see my dad standing in the corner of the kitchen with his back turned to us. His back is shaking up and down. My mom is pacing the floor, her hands shaking uncontrollably. She walks by the kitchen table and knocks over a bottle of milk. The bottle falls to the floor and shatters. My dad and the detective turn around, startled by the crash, but my mom doesn’t seem aware of what has happened. On the floor shards of glass are floating in a pool of white.

The detective requests a photograph of Molly to circulate around the neighborhood. Dad pulls his wallet out of his pants pocket and removes a photograph from its plastic sleeve. The photograph is of Molly and me standing in front of our garage, arms around each other. Molly has on a pair of canary yellow overalls and a white tee shirt; I am wearing brown corduroys and a blue O.P. surf shirt. Molly flashes an exaggerated smile for the camera, while I squint into the sun. Dad takes a pair of scissors out of a kitchen drawer, and before I know it, he takes the scissors to the photograph and I am cut out. The detective holds the image of Molly, still in my embrace, in his hands.

I remember how I felt the day of Molly’s disappearance, but other memories become cloudy, fragmented. I am like a t.v. with bad reception.

We are sitting at the dining room table for the Passover seder. Molly sits next to mom, and I sit across from Molly, next to Dad. Dad is telling the story of Passover, about the plagues that G-d cast upon the Egyptians. Dad says that the Jewish people took the blood from the sacrificial lamb and applied the blood to their doorposts. He explains that this was so that the Angel of Death would know which houses to pass over in order to kill only the Egyptian first born sons.

I see Molly stirring around uncomfortably in her chair. She shakes her legs nervously beneath the table. It feels as if the whole room is shaking.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “If G-d knows everything then why doesn’t he know which houses to pass over without us having to kill a lamb?”

“Ours is not to question G-d, Molly. G-d has his reasons for everything,” dad says not looking up from his haggadah.

He reads: “Behold the hand of the Eternal will be against the cattle that is in the field, against the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the oxen and the sheep, a very grievous plague...”

Molly interrupts, “But I don’t understand,” she pleads and her voice is shaking as her lips begin to quiver. “Why do the children and the animals have to suffer for something they didn’t do?”

My dad’s voice is harsh as he snaps at my mom, “Will you talk to your daughter?”

My mom moves her seat closer to Molly and gets right up in her face and says, “Dear, if you keep talking like this, G-d will cast a plague on you!”

Molly’s lips are quivering something awful now, and tears stream down her face. She looks in my direction as if asking for help. Finally she whines, “But I don’t...,” and my mom slaps the question out of her. Mom slaps her so hard that she leaves a red imprint of her hand on Molly’s face. Molly turns towards me with a glazed look of confusion and fear on her face. Since the day Molly was abducted I sometimes see the same expression on my own face when I pass a mirror.

The photograph of Molly appears on the back of a Carnation milk carton. Soon after that my mom stops buying milk from glass bottles, and only buys the milk that comes in cartons at the grocery store. The photo of Molly is grainy, black and white. Above the picture the caption reads: "Have you seen this child?" and below the picture a toll free number is given to call. Mom bought ten cartons of milk the first morning that the photograph appeared on the carton.

I remove the scissors from the kitchen drawer and cut the photograph of Molly from the carton. I find myself cutting the photographs of all the missing children from the backs of the cartons.

I am the detective from the Carnation Detective Agency. My H.Q. is at home in my bedroom and I work undercover. I hide the photographs of the missing children in an old shoe box, which I tuck underneath my bed with my coloring books. I search everywhere for the missing children. I search in grocery stores, restaurants, and the shopping malls. I can't find the children anywhere, and in the back of my mind, I often wonder if they are all together like the Lost Boys of Never Never Land, and a part of me is envious.

I start riding the Carpenter Elementary School bus. Sammy doesn't drive the bus anymore. The driver is some old lady who dyes her hair a different color every other week. I walk towards the back of the bus and sit alone by the window. The boys, who are sitting around me, are looking through their baseball cards, talking trades and swaps. I take out the shoe box with the photographs of the missing children from my pack and I begin looking through them, strategically planning out the best way to conduct my search. One of the boys comes up to me and asks me if I want to trade cards. I tell him that I can't, and he gives me a puzzled look and returns to his seat. I don't bother trying to explain to him; he would never understand. No one could.

I am standing on the step ladder in the kitchen, twisting crepe paper and taping it to the ceiling. All day, in preparation for this birthday party, I have been blowing up balloons, putting bows on

all the stuffed animals that can't be wrapped, and rewrapping presents that have accumulated over the years.

The photograph of Molly, in her canary yellow overalls, is situated in the center of the table like a shrine, and is surrounded by gardenias that my mother has brought in from the garden. My parents have distorted the photograph, and I can't help thinking that there is something about these parties that, like the photograph, are not honest.

I don't know why I keep coming back year after year to celebrate Molly's birthday. At first I thought my parents celebrated her birthday out of some sense of hope that Molly would return. And if she had returned on her birthday, then she would see that they hadn't forgotten her.

Eventually, I begin to realize what this birthday really is: an annual funeral. And like any funeral, it is not for the dead but for the living, not for Molly but for my parents. My mother and father need to convince themselves that they are good parents, that they were good parents to Molly when she was at home and this is how they prove this to themselves.

Father brings in the familiar chocolate cake, with the red script that reads: "Happy Birthday Molly." Nine candles are lit around the border for the nine years of age she would have been before she was taken away from us. We sing 'Happy Birthday' and let the candles burn themselves out. We turn our chairs around, like we always do, to face the door and sit in silence waiting for Molly to walk into the room.

"I wonder if Sharon will come by?" my mom asks no one in particular.

"Mother," I say. "Sharon hasn't been around for the past fifteen years." But she is oblivious to what I am trying to tell her, and she looks back at the door.

The silence is too much. I can't take the smothering silence a moment longer. I'm tired. I'm tired of sitting her waiting vigil.

I turn around and see, lying on the chair next to mine, the old shoe box with the photographs of the missing children, and I wonder who took the box out from under my bed. I open up the shoe box and inside I am surprised to find brand new black tap shoes. I look curiously at the tap shoes and put them on my feet. The fit is



perfect and I now know what I must do. I get up and stand in front of my parents. The music starts and I begin to tap.

**BOOM BOOM CHAKA LAKA LAKA BOOM**

I tap and tap, brushing foot back and forth, shuffling my feet, stepping right, left, right, left. My feet are tapping out rhythm to the music. I am tapping fifty taps in five seconds. Hop, shuffle, hop, shuffle, heel, slap, shuffle, tap, tap, tap.

**BOOM BOOM CHAKA LAKA BOOM BOOM**

My parents still don't notice me. They stare right through me. I jump up on the kitchen table in front of them. I begin doing forward flips, backward flips, cartwheels, somersaults, and I come out tapping. I reach into my pants pocket and find it full of sand. I sprinkle the sand onto the table and begin tapping out a soft shoe. Slide, slide, shuffle, shuffle, slide. My dad reaches across the table and plucks the photograph from the center of the table which is now beside my moving feet; it seems as though he is going to reach right through me. I am swinging my arms frantically, and I have broken into a sweat. I throw myself down on my knees and slide the distance of the table, through the sand and the gardenias and the birthday cake, with my arms extended out. And that's when the music stops, and the dance is over.

I look to my parents and they are silent. They don't seem to see me. All of a sudden, I hear faint clapping from behind me. I turn around towards the direction of the door, and I am staring into total darkness.

"They can't hear you," Molly says emerging from the darkness dressed in her canary yellow overalls and white tee shirt. I see my reflection in her blue eyes, and her strawberry-blond hair covers her ears. She is just as I remember her.

"They never get old and they never die," I say. "They stay young forever. Grown-ups don't believe though..."

"Why not?" she interrupts me.

"Because grown-ups can't hear?" I answer.

"Why not?" she asks again.

"Because they don't take the time to listen," I tell her, and then

we both burst out laughing. We laugh so hard that tears stream down our faces, and our laughter echoes throughout the house.

She ruffles my hair with her hand and I am grinning stupidly from ear to ear.

“I like it when you ruffle my hair like that,” I tell her.

“I know,” Molly says.

I embrace my sister, and we are frozen in the moment.

“I love you Molly,” I whisper in her ear, and she pulls me closer to her.