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# My Child and I

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## MY CHILD AND I

The loud crack of angry thunder jolted my bones as I stopped before the amusement park. In all the times I have passed it on my mornings jogs, never have I sensed the place to be so alive and inviting.

I found myself listening to the chiming bells of the merry-go-round and the joyous laughing of children. There was something within, beckoning me to approach. I drew closer, fighting with my trembling hands, and walked through the tall, silvery gates into the midst of the crowd.

Young and old shared the cheer of the rides and games, laughing and carrying on as they did. Once more, lightning bolted from the grey sky in white streaks that were punctuated by the violent crackling of thunder. Yet, despite the saddening weather, the gaiety of the atmosphere within the park was as heavy as a truck.

My body trembled at this contrast, and at embarrassment. I looked down and noticed that I was dressed only in grey sweat pants and a dirty, grey shirt. I felt naked among the colorful people that romped about me. I was envious of them, of their contentment with their lives. I have always lacked that quality. I have left that emotion in a forgotten corner of my mind.

I was startled out of my day-dreaming by the call of a parrot. He was perched behind me on a steel railing that led to the funhouse. His blue and red feathers sounded like vinyl whipping in the wind as he flapped his gallant wings.

I felt a familiar presence. It was as thick as honey, becoming stronger as I drew closer to the funhouse.

I stepped onto a metal ramp and I grasped the railing as I walked upward.

A darkened hallway stretched before me. I could see, at the end, a room. It was lighted as brightly as sunshine gleaming off of newly fallen snow. The resonance of the park faded away as I moved through the hall and into the room. Mirrors covered the walls like a giant reflective carapace.

From behind me, a squeaky, child-like voice called out.

"Welcome back, Peter Caboodle," it said.

My hands clenched into fists, my chest tightened like a rubber band, and I whirled sharply about.

A strange creature, a short gnome-like man, stood staring at me. He had bare feet, a shiny bald head, and he held an old mahogany pipe between his thin lips.

I turned away from him and caught his reflection in one of the mirrors. He was different. He looked like a child on Christmas morning, sitting cross-legged in the middle of mountains of presents. Another mirror pictured the little man with heavy eyes and a body drooping with despair.

"Puzzled, are you?" he asked.

I lowered my tight fists to my sides and slightly relaxed. I was frozen with amazement. I felt that I knew this creature.

"Who...what are you?" I asked.

The little man lurched forward, completed a somersault and raised to his pudgy feet.

"Why," he began, "I am something special."

I tried to regain my confidence and spoke sharply to the little man. "Look, this is all very good, especially the mirror trick. But this isn't funny any more."

The little creature giggled like a schoolgirl and said, "There are no tricks here, no illusions."

He stared into my eyes as if to burn them out with his gaze. I felt that my heart would burst from my chest like a bucking horse. I took a deep breath and walked about the room. I looked at every mirror, every conceivable area that a door might be concealed. All the while, the little man snickered at my task.

I became more frantic. A darkening sense of doom crept into my brain. My stomach sank, dragging the rest of my body with it. I collapsed to my knees, my throat tightening, my eyes beginning to haze.

The little man smiled and said, "There is no need for fear, Peter Caboodle." His words were hypnotic, like a mother's sweet lullaby. I drew back my tears of despair.

"Why did you leave me?" he continued. "I am invaluable."

A small grin formed on his thin lips as he waddled toward me.

"Look in the mirrors, Peter," he said.

I looked across the room and saw myself, drawn and confused.

"Only one emotion do you feel. Only one self do others see; all because you ignored me."

I looked back at the little man and saw his lips tighten around his pipe, the tobacco glow red, and two thick, grey rings of smoke fly from his mouth. They floated upward, merged, and disappeared.

He looked away from me, at some distant point in one of the mirrors.

"What do you hear, Peter Caboodle?" he asked. "What do you smell?"

I could hear faint carousel bells chiming a somber tune. I smelled the sweet aroma of buttered popcorn and of hot candy apples.

The little man smiled, waddled to a mirror across the room, and, with a grunt, thrust it open. The sounds and smells of the amusement park flowed inside in a river of sweet enigma. He turned toward me.

"I am back from the corners of your mind," he said. "We are finally together."

He waddled like a penguin toward me and faded into a fine, white vapor. I watched it spread out, turn grey and slowly disappear. I gasped at a sudden feeling of warmth that shot through my viens. I looked at the little man's pipe. It lay on the floor where the little man had disappeared. It was still burning, glowing with the same reddish hue.

I felt energy charge through my body like an electric shock. I was as light as a feather, as cheery as an elf. I felt like a child, once again.

I tried to piece together what had happened. Not a normal thing. I remembered the little man fading into vapor, the warmth shooting through my viens. I knew what had happened.

Todd Semelbauer