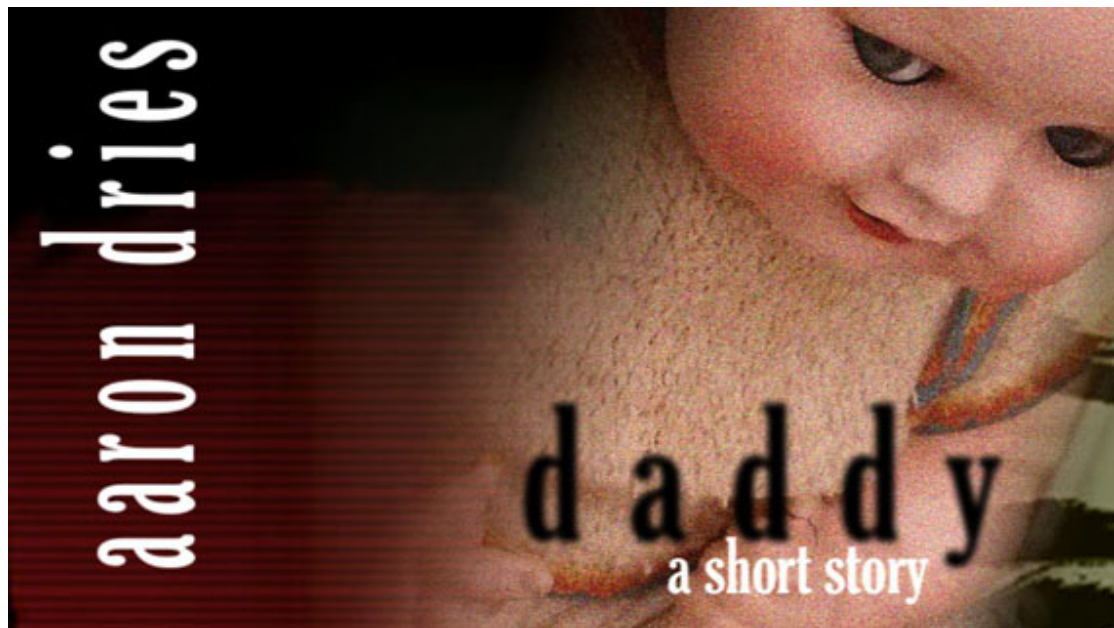




Lewis was only two weeks into his four-month contract with the London architecture firm when he found the baby in the dumpster, lying on a cot of lettuce leaves and used condoms. He butted out the cigarette he'd been smoking, downed his coffee and ran into the alley, following the cries.

He saw her through his thick lens Coke-bottle glasses; she was naked, shivering. She sucked on his pinky finger when he cradled her in his hands. Her

hunger broke something in him; something he didn't even know was there.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, the plumes of breath freezing before his face, leaving him to wonder how the baby had survived for so long. London chill ran deep and merciless—grown men died in such cold.

He carried her back into the building, his shoes clattering up the designer glass staircase. The little baby flooded his palms with her urine, hot and stinking. His shadow passed over the immaculate carpet. Co-workers, some of whom still didn't know his name, watched him as he marched toward his office. He stopped near the windows that overlooked a grey cityscape, swarming with tiny people going about their business. Dead leaves rode the wind.

The child's uncomprehending eyes—twin blue suns—stared up at him. Into him. Bright.

Lewis had no siblings. His parents were dead and he'd never married. The concept of someone leaving a child to die in the cold was impossible for him to grasp. He shook his head, tears beading off his silk tie. His secretary stepped up beside him, her narrow face half in shadow.

“Mr. State...” It was all she could think of to say and somehow, the trailed-off sentence seemed to express it all.

*

After the screaming reporters and flashing light bulbs, the silence of his rented apartment was deafening. He felt emptied out—a picked-at carcass held together by will alone. Though the baby was gone from his arms, its weight haunted

him.

He fixed himself a *Weight Watchers* meal that tasted like flavored plastic and didn't bother to ask himself why he expected anything different. But the taste didn't matter. Two bites in and he realized that eating was just another failed distraction. Loud television and the bland, flat beer in his hand hadn't worked their charm either.

Lewis looked around the room. The walls were vacant and so blindingly white it hurt his eyes. There was an artificial plant accumulating dust in the corner, its leaves shivering as warm air gasped from the ducted air-conditioning.

It was then that he felt the first pang of homesickness. Lewis didn't have many friends in London—and even less in Minnesota—but at least there he had his magazines. His little side projects.

His glasses made a heavy *thunk* as he placed them on the dining room table. He rubbed his eyes and in the darkness saw the unnamed child, red faced and screeching. He could imagine the nurses taking her away.

*

The hospital reeked of antiseptic and piss—scents that grabbed him by the balls and dragged him back into his mother's nursing home. She didn't know who he was in the end, and the last time he saw her, she'd been sitting on a throne of her own shit.

Lewis searched for a distraction and found his feet. One step then another. Repeat. *This was how he got by.* His thighs brushed together as he strode down the hallway; the swish of his trousers sounded like saws felling trees. He stopped at the

nurses' station leading into the Pediatrics unit. The window was decorated with *Thank You* cards covered in spider legged self-portraits, rainbows. A deflating balloon bobbed at the end of its string. Lewis leaned forward, cleared his throat and introduced himself.

The nurses clapped. They shook his hand. "I know this is going to sound naff, but would you sign this for me?" The staff member offered him her arm, which had been wrapped in plaster. His scribble was one of many.

"This has just made my day, shit, my whole week!" said the nurse who was now escorting him down a long, white corridor. "Oh, we named her Bernadette after the street you found her on."

Bernadette.

Lewis rolled the word around in his mouth, just as a child would a piece of candy. The nurse gave him a smile and walked away, leaving him among the rows of cots. Some were empty. He looked down at the baby, her head cupped in his palm. He didn't think the name quite fit.

No. It seemed ... *grand*.

She was a tiny thing, but rough around the edges. He could see it in her eyes. He'd seen grown men without that grit—he lacked it himself. She had old eyes; the look of someone who had seen a lot, survived, and come out the other side stronger. Lewis could see it so plainly because it was something he so plainly desired.

He thought the name was inappropriate, but who was he to judge?

I'm the fella who saved her life, he thought. I've got every right to my opinion.

They should have asked me to name her. But as was his typical manner, Lewis remained quiet.

Although he'd never been in the unit before, he felt like he belonged there. The baby tingled in his arms. She was such an easy thing to love. Her mouth pressed against his thumb; it felt like nothing. *Like everything.*

She fit inside his life perfectly.

The nurse returned two hours later and took her from him. He fought the urge to snatch her back, and it was the same every time he visited. But the pain of leaving the child behind was worth it, because when she was in his hands he felt more alive than he had in years. And then strangers who couldn't possibly care for her the way he did would take her away, leaving him to walk through the shit-stinking hospital alone.

*

On his sixth visit, the male nurse at the station told him Bernadette was gone.

"What do you mean, *gone*?" Lewis asked. He was astonished at how calm he was when all he really wanted to do was dive over the counter and grab the nurse by the shoulders and shake some sense into him.

"Look, Mr. State—"

You condescending little bastard, he thought. Lewis didn't want to hear what the heavily accented man had to say. He didn't want to see his lazy grimace, that haphazard smile thrown across his face like an empty body bag over a gurney. He didn't want to see his teeth or smell the traces of cigarette smoke embedded in his skin. Lewis prepared to turn around, but the nurse's soft voice stopped him short.

"Lewis. She's been ... collected. You know? A relative came and picked her

up.” The nurse sighed, feigning compassion—it infuriated him. “It wasn't her mother. Nobody has any idea where she is. It was an aunt that came and picked her up, I think. I'm sorry for you. I know how you felt about little Bern’.”

Little Bern’? Lewis stepped back. The station was a large square cut into the hallway wall; it looked about three feet in height and three by three in width. Plexiglas windows within reaching distance were covered in greasy fingerprints. Lewis traced the walls with his eyes, configuring measurements in his head. He could see the floor plans scratched onto butcher's paper and some British architect stabbing a finger at it and saying: “*See here? That's where the window will go. That's what will drive him crazy—*”

“Don't take it to heart. We should be happy for the little tot,” the nurse continued. “You're a hero here, mate. Remember that.”

The floor plans and sketches vanished. There was just the hole in the wall and the slight young man on the other side reaching for the Plexiglas window. Lewis stepped forward, his throat heavy. “I'm not your mate.”

*

Lewis couldn't sleep on the plane back to America.

The couple next to him looked to be in their mid-twenties, their hands intertwined. When they were asleep they snored and when they were awake, they laughed. Between their jabbing elbows and the plane's turbulence—which even had the stewardess unnerved—Lewis felt like screaming.

He imagined doing it himself—simply opening his mouth and roaring,

drawing as much attention to himself as possible. Everyone would look at him. The children would be scared, but at least they would know how much he was suffering. Someone might even recognize him from the news and turn to their traveling partner and whisper behind their hands.

"Look, there's that man."

"The hero."

"I wonder what happened to him?"

But Lewis didn't thump around in his seat, or scream, or do anything else to get their attention. He just sat there in silence, blinking every few moments, and stared at the emergency instruction booklet in his hands. When the stewardess rolled the service cart to a stop next to him and asked if he would like to order something off the menu, he politely declined.

*

Lewis couldn't count how many times he must have passed the store and not seen the baby doll. The thrift store had been on that street for years and it was rare for him to even notice it, unless of course it was Christmas or Easter and the large window was decorated with lights. And even on those days, he wouldn't have seen the doll were it not for the brown paper bag blowing in the wind. It had skirted across the road, rising and falling, brushing against the tarmac like a tenacious angel daring to touch the earth once more. The paper bag skirted past him and planted itself against the window with a soft crunch.

DARLING DIDDI. SHE TALKS, LAUGHS AND GOES

POTTY!

The bag blew away.

Diddi stared up at him from the confines of her box. She had flushed cheeks and her eyes were the color of faded blue jeans. She wore pink overalls covered in flowers and knitted vine.

There was no time to hesitate over his purchase. The doll had been bought before he realized he was even in the store.

*

His apartment was an open loft fit-out with good ventilation and lots of natural lighting—an architect's dream. The breeze blowing in through the open window ruffled his thinning hair; the light cast his shadow long across the living room floor.

Darling Diddi sat in his hands. It was an old battered thing, scuffed and beaten, but the resemblance to Bernadette was uncanny. Her upturned nose. Her chin.

The eyes.

His phone rang and the machine picked it up. He didn't bother answering it anymore; he never accepted personal calls. His landline was simply a breeding ground for telemarketers. If it was work related they reached him by email. The only other voices he heard in his home were those filtering in from the television or on occasion, from the woman who called out, *you've got mail*, from somewhere inside his Mac.

Lewis doubted that the doll was the same one the box proclaimed it to be. The

child in his hand looked nothing like the one printed on the cardboard inlay.

Didi or Bernadette, his little girl looked like a Lily.

“And never an Elizabeth,” Lewis said, smiling.

It had been his mother's name, and his mother's expression.

Want an Elizabeth, go pick on a Windsor. Instead you got me: Lily.

Lewis laughed.

The battery socket looked as though it had been warped by heat, so he succumbed to the notion that he would never hear his daughter speak, but that was okay. He knew that parents feared for the health of their newborns. After all, there were challenged children being born every single day. He saw it on the news and read about it on the Internet all the time. Lily being mute was a blessing.

Life hands you barley and bones, well, go on and make some damn soup.

That had been another one of his mother's expressions.

So what if Lily couldn't speak. It didn't stop Lewis from holding his head high. “But you can hear, can't you?” he said. “Yeah, I know you can. You're smart. I know that, too. I can see the smarts in your eyes.”

Lewis pulled his baby close to his chest, took off his shirt and pushed his flaccid nipple into its mouth. He rocked her in his arms. “There you go, oh come now, it's okay. *Sh-bbb.*”

He wanted to sing her a lullaby but he didn't know any.

*

He had been wrong about Lily being mute. She could make noise—just

nothing intelligible. There was none of the cute goo-goo-ga-ga's he'd read about in books and saw on soap operas.

There was just the crying.

Lewis would get up in the middle of the night, shaking off dreams in which he was falling or sometimes wandering the halls of his mother's nursing home, following the scent of shit and soap to her room.

He'd constructed a cot from the modeling materials he kept around the apartment for projects that required dioramas and functioning models. Lily's mattress was made from the tie-dyed silk material he purchased at the Camden Markets on one of his few trips outside London Central. The old woman who sold it to him had claimed to be blind.

Lewis plucked Lily from her bed and patted her on the back. Her cries were endless, amplified over and over in echoes of echoes.

The moonlight creeping in through the Venetian blinds painted them in gray stripes. His bare feet stuck to the tiles, and when he shuffled around, he heard clammy scratches. Lewis couldn't remember the last time he'd mopped the floors, or in fact, done any of the housework that required more than just a superficial wipe. Yeah, he knew some chores were slipping through the cracks, but assumed such things were common in the lives of single parents.

Lily cried and Lewis checked her puckered mouth. Her bright blue eyes glowed in the dark. "Oh baby, you must be teething."

In the dream he couldn't move. His mother was writhing in bed, fighting her sheets as though they were alive and trying to strangle her. Her face was split open in a grimace of agony and she'd wiped a layer of shit across her lips in a sickening brown clown smile.

The wind will change and you'll be stuck with that expression, Lewis, his mother would say. Back in the days when she could form words. Back when she knew who she was talking too.

He wanted to get up and tend to her, but the last time he'd done that she'd rolled over and latched her gummy mouth on his wrist, her good arm snapping around to pinch his side. The nurses told Lewis that he could no longer approach her. That his mother had been a danger to herself for quite some time, but had now graduated into being a danger to others.

Lewis wondered how long it would take for her to die.

It seemed cruel for her to live in such a way—her soul imprisoned in a decrepit husk, without even thoughts to keep her company.

He knew that there were many long days and nights of crying to come yet. This was only the beginning.

*

“Jesus, muchacho! You look like you've spent two weeks in Vegas and haven't stopped to piss,” said Xavier, a draftsman at Lewis' firm. Xavier looked at his co-worker with two parts awe and one part concern. The concept of someone having a life outside of work excited him—and *Lewis, of all people!* He was more shocked than

anything.

Lewis wanted to tell him about Lily, or maybe show him the small photograph of her that he kept tucked away in his wallet, but a little voice inside him told him to keep it to himself. That same voice also screamed at him to clean his act up, shave and get some sleep.

You're dying on your feet, warned the voice.

Lewis took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Sorry to disappoint you, Xavier, but nope. No Vegas trip, I’m sad to say. Just a stretch of shitty nights.”

“Insomnia? Ah man, anything but that.”

“Yeah. It’s a bastard of a thing; it hits you like a freight train.”

“Well Jesus, man, put down the coffee!”

His mug had the words **GERM TOWN—RECONSIDER VISITING** printed on it, only the lettering was threaded with stains from where his shaking hands had spilt its contents over and over again. It was yet another unwashed thing in his life. He could see his reflection in the inky liquid, warped and gaunt. He looked unrecognizable as the man he’d been prior to visiting London.

“*Thanks* Xavier,” Lewis said, slamming the mug down on the kitchenette counter. Some of the coffee jumped out of the mug, slapping against his shoes.

“Someone’s too tired to give you a smile, how about you consider giving him one instead?” he spat, unable to hide the sarcasm.

Xavier raised his hands, trying not to laugh. “Hey, was that another one of your mother’s sayings, muchacho?” he asked as Lewis rounded the corner and vanished into his office.

*

“Shut up! Shut up!”

But Lily wouldn't shut up.

Her screams were high-pitched wails that seemed to last forever. He had no idea how lungs so small could hold and then expel so much oxygen at once. The sounds she made pierced the air and dug into his ears like something alive and livid, scratching at the inside of his skull until it hurt.

Since the baby, Lewis was quick to anger at the best of times. Between the stress of multiple work-related projects and the lack of sleep, he felt like he was falling apart at the seams. Lily's cries tore him up in the most intimate of ways—as though each wail were a betrayal.

As if she knew his vulnerabilities.

Her cries for food would assimilate with his dreams so when his mother with her shit-stained smile, turned to yell at him, he heard the infantile scream. Her green eyes would turn blue just before he woke up, clutching his chest and lathered in sweat.

He tried calculating the square-footage of his room, creating sketch-ups of the designs and material requirements—anything to distract him from the noise. He buried his head under his pillow and took sleeping pills that were strong enough to make him groggy but too weak to knock him out.

Lily screamed again. And again.

Lewis towered over her, reached down and shook her by the shoulders so hard that the makeshift cradle collapsed, scattering cardboard and wire. Her baby rattle

hissed as it rolled across the floor.

Lily's mouth didn't move and the sound did not stop and her eyes did not blink. Lewis pushed his child against his chest with one hand, the other hanging limp by his side.

*

A bitter wind sent the trees outside his apartment into shudders, their branches scratching against the windows. Clouds passed overhead with the speed of a running stream. Lewis watched the television blink on and off. His eyes glazed over and grew dim. The Presidential State of the Union address was on but he had no interest in anything that was being said. Nothing the man at the podium with the black suit and handsome tie seemed to apply to his world. Not anymore.

The baby was a vampire feeding off his energy, off his love—just as his mother had done.

Yeah, she may have given him life, but it had come at the cost of his own. She had turned soft, both in mind and flesh, and come to collect the freedom she had given him at birth. That was why he put her in the nursing home; there had been no other choice.

Death had been too slow.

Lewis had lost a lot of weight. When he looked at himself in the light of the bathroom mirror, he saw shadows being cast by his ribcage. His sagging man-breasts clung to his chest like the teats of female hogs. He itched in places where he shouldn't. People had commented on his smell at work, on his dandruff.

He was beyond humiliation. Day by day his daughter pushed him into new places. Darker places.

Lily was screaming.

The television picture shrank down into a dot, lingering on the screen for just a moment.

Lewis stood up and the bones in his back cracked. He walked over to where he'd left Lily on the floor, lying on a bed of old *Time* magazine covers. She'd shat herself again. Her sloppy mess covered the faces of former politicians and public figures alike. But Lily didn't care, and neither did he anymore. This was the extent to which she had sucked the life from him.

Lewis picked her up. She wretched and shook.

Her blue eyes looked into his. They'd never seemed so bright. The more she fed, the louder she screamed he fainter he felt. "You're killing me, Lily," he said. "You're destroying me."

Even his voice was softer. All of its grind and edge was gone.

As though mocking him, Lily's cheeks were still the same flushed rose they had been when he saw her in the window of the thrift store. She continued to wail—or was it laughter?

"Stop, Lily. Stop now. This is your last chance."

But she did not stop.

"Cut it out, God-damnit, Lily! Stop! Stop! *Bernadette* stop it!"

No response. Just the continuing noise.

He punched her in the face and felt it collapse inwards under his knuckles. One of her eyeballs fell from its socket, sailed through the air, and shattered on the

floor, breaking into shards that lit up in the flickering television light.

The President continued to drone on. People were clapping. Static rained down over the audience.

Lewis felt Lily's pain; it gripped his chest. It hurt to hurt her, just as it had hurt to put his mother in the home. He remembered how she had turned to look at him, confused and afraid, as the nurses led her through those pneumatic glass doors and into a world of white. It had also stormed that day.

Lewis opened the front door of his apartment. The wind cut through him. Leaves swirled in circles at his feet as he stumbled down the stairs, one hand on the balustrade and the other clinging to the baby. He stole furtive glances at his surroundings, frightened that someone just might hear Lily's screams and come running. Just as he had in London.

And were his neighbors to enquire, what would they find, he wondered?

Lewis knew that only someone without children would judge him. He was neither a bad man, nor a guilty one.

He passed through the trees, seeing faces in their trunks crying for mercy, and passed into the alleyway beside his building. The only light came from the street-lamp at the end of the road—it was partially obscured by the branches of an old sycamore, casting frenetic shadows over him and his crime.

The father cried with his daughter as he lowered her into the mouth of the garbage can.

Lewis sat on the kitchen floor. He estimated that the sun wouldn't come up for another two hours. The storm had blown itself out and sucked away all the noise. Left behind was a stillborn silence that set his teeth on edge.

He held his hands up to his face, studying the structure of his bones and veins. There was an architecture to the human body that he'd never appreciated because he'd never sought it out. Though he may get old and weathered, the structure of his being held strong. Not even death could destroy that. There were skeletons defying time in their coffins in shallow graves all over the planet.

This was one of many distractions he could employ and exploit in his newfound quiet. Lewis decided to have a shower. He could do that now without worrying about how long he pampered himself, afraid that Lily would cry for him again. There would be no more guilt. Lewis walked down the hallway and pushed open the bathroom door, reached into the darkness for the light switch. He found it and flicked it on.

The room burned bright. He saw the bathtub. The drawn-back shower curtain. The woman with the slit wrists staring back at him, lying chin-deep in a pool of blood.

Her face was framed by lifeless hair and she had bright blue eyes, just like Lily's. Only fiercer. The woman pulled herself upright and her skin tore away where her back had been resting against the lip of the tub, revealing insect-infested flesh. As she began to speak, a rosary slipped out from between her lips and snaked into the scarlet water.

"Lewis," the woman said. When she spoke, the sound of moving phlegm rattled in her lungs. She bore a distinct South-London accent. *"You wanted it, you got*

it.”

He tried to turn and run from the room but he stood rooted to the spot. He could feel himself shaking in his clothes. Huge wells of emotion threatened to burst free, but didn't.

Gashes criss-crossed up and down the woman's arms. Blood dripped from the wounds like honey and the tip of a razor protruded from one cut near the crux of her elbow. A flicker of sadness crossed her face and she grew still, as though she were taking a moment to reflect on where she was and what had brought her to this place. The expression died, and whatever life had been in her faded with it.

Lewis watched her jaw slacken then unhinge with a sickening *thunk*. The sound of it made his heart jump. He screamed. His legs collapsed underneath his weight and he fell to the floor.

The woman raised her head to expose her bulging throat. Her jawbone slanted off to the side like the broken wing of a bird and her mouth opened wide.

Something's trying to get out. But by the time he understood what was happening, it was too late, and he'd seen what was pushing up her throat to peer out at him. He saw an old grinning face covered in shit.

His mother wormed and twisted under the woman's skin, trapped and shaking. Ancient fingers curled out from inside the woman's mouth, prying the lips so far apart that it looked as though she had a smile that stretched off to either side of her head. His mother's eyes rolled back in their sockets to reveal the whites. She gasped for air and mewled like a newborn.

The cry ripped through Lewis. He crawled out of the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind him. He lay breathless in the hallway.

*

Lewis didn't know what to do or where to go, so he shuffled back into bed and drew the sheet up close to his chin. The sun was yet to come up and despite the dark, he knew he wasn't alone. He didn't need to see it to know it was there. It was close, he could feel it. After a few sluggish minutes, he could hear it too.

The tap of plastic feet. The jingle of its baby rattle like the sound of pebbles in a jar. Lewis' heart seized up and skipped a beat.

Moonlight fought through the clouds and the room dissolved from black to blue. He could see the paintings on the walls, the remaining *Time* magazines on the dresser. But not It.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He swallowed hard, the noise of his clicking throat startling him. Lewis prayed for the clouds to return. Were his prayers to be answered, his bedroom would be swallowed up by the darkness so at least he wouldn't have to see it. Hearing it was one thing, but locking eyes with it was another. Lewis had shown compassion and mercy throughout his entire life, it seemed unfair that it would be denied to him now.

Chi-chi-chi-chi-chhhh, went the rattle.

There was a tug on his sheet; it tightened over his toes. He craned his neck forward, his chin doubling. Beyond the mound of his chest he could see the foot of the bed. Everything else seemed to disappear. Lewis had read once that the human focal point was the size of a thumbprint, and lying there, watching and waiting for its arrival, he knew that to be true.

The small hand reached up onto the mattress. Plastic fingers fumbled and latched at the sheet, folds unraveling as its weight bore down. It started to pull itself up on to the bed. Lewis wanted to close his eyes but couldn't. And then he saw it.

The crown of its bald head. Its heavy eyelashes. One cobalt peeper stared out at him from its bent-in face. The rosy cheeks, soiled and scratched. Its mouth was caught in an eternal pucker. *Feed me, feed me*, those lips said to him. *I'm hungry*.

But those words were only in his head. His visitor may have stared and stalked, but it did not speak. He was too terrified to realize how grateful he was.

A moment passed by and that last saving grace was gone. The baby's first word was drawn out, as though the non-existent batteries in its belly were running dry like a record played at half its speed. Those puckered lips did not move. The word carried no echo. It was just for him.

"Da-aaadyy."

* *'Daddy' was originally published in SNM Horror Magazine, March 2010*