


Hold Me Forever, Daddy



For readers of
The Cud



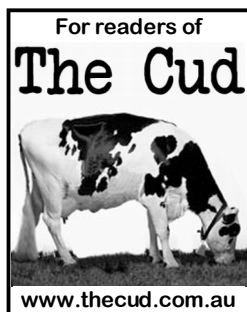
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David M. Fitzpatrick
Illustrations by Justus Magee

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Introduction

It's January 2013, and time for The Cud's annual "All Things Lit" issue at www.thecud.com.au. I've been writing a column called "Cud Flashes in the Pan" for a while, writing flash-fiction speculative stories—75 to 1,000-ish words, in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the like, with various themes each month.

Last year for All Things Lit, I provided the usual fare, but I also included an e-book of my story "Cone Zero, Sphere Zero," which originally appeared in the anthology *Nemonymous 8: Cone Zero* and was later reprinted in my anthology *Atheist Tales*. Response was good, so this year I'm doing the same sort of thing.

"Hold Me Forever, Daddy" was my first short-story sale, and it was a good one. At ten cents a word, it paid out nearly \$900. Of course, if you tallied up the money I've made on the other four dozen stories since then, I'd be lucky to have equaled that number with the rest, but of course we don't do this to get rich.

Like any good tale, there's a story behind it. This short story was the result of a nightmare I had. I dreamed my youngest stepdaughter had died and we'd buried her in a cemetery which, in the dream, was next to where we lived. In the dream, I heard her crying to me from her grave, scared because she didn't understand she was dead, and she wanted her daddy. Needless to say, when I woke up from the nightmare, I

rushed out to find her, watching Saturday-morning cartoons, and hugged the life out of her.

Then I got dressed and headed to my office, where I sat down and wrote this story. It was one of the few times I had no pauses during writing; writers, I’m sure, all know the feeling you get when a story sort of writes itself. This one did. I wrote for several hours until it was done, and aside from minor edits and polishes, it’s pretty much as it was for the first draft.

I had the pleasure of then landing a gig with the magazine that bought the story, and was able to lay out my first sale. And an added bonus: My friend Justus Magee did the artwork for the story, which is reproduced here.

The story has a special place in my heart because of the terrible imagery it evokes for me—the dreadful memories of a nightmare that haunts me to this day. I don’t know if it will affect you in any way close to that, but that’s the goal.

But for now, enjoy—as much as you can enjoy a story featuring an innocent little girl dead and scared and calling to her daddy from the grave.

And remember: Keep coming back to The Cud.

*David M. Fitzpatrick
Brewer, Maine
January 2013*

Hold Me Forever, Daddy

David M. Fitzpatrick

If anyone could have gone back ten years and asked Jack Meader three specific questions, he would have answered that no, he didn't believe in anything supernatural; yes, he'd be able to get over even the powerful trauma of losing a child, even in a brutal fashion; and no, he could care less about attending the birth of his own child. He began unlearning those ideas when his daughter came along.

Jack fell unconditionally, irrevocably in love with Kimberly Dawn the first moment he laid eyes on her. Nine months of planning had failed to bore through his male ego. He thought he was ready, but when he held the baby's head gently in his hands, supporting the neck as she endured the hellish exodus from the womb, Jack underwent an instant metamorphosis of sorts.

Judy had timidly declared her pregnancy to him on Valentine's Day with a happy pink and white card, her handwritten note inside dropping the bomb. Jack had been dumbfounded. They were well-enough off, of course, with his job of twelve

years tending the expansive Charity Hill Cemetery paying a respectable salary and Judy doing her private computer consultation business from home. They lived in a low-mortgage house on land bordering the cemetery and had long ago filled it with little feet: Patrick, nine years old, and Eddie, going on six.

It had been so long between babies that Jack hardly remembered what it was like. Judy, worried sick watching his blank stare at the card, had burst into sobs before he could compose himself and go to her. He was pleased she was pregnant, he had told her. They could deal with it, he had said. Within minutes, he had calmed her and she was bouncing and happy again.

In truth, while Jack wasn't upset about the situation, he really wasn't excited about it, either. The baby was coming, and he would work with that; but in contrast to Judy's solid nine months of preparation—shopping for clothes and accessories, knitting things, redecorating her study to be part nursery—Jack was pretty laid back about it. It was, after all, just another baby. He'd love the child and rear her well, but like he used to tell everyone through his first two kids, they just didn't even become interesting people until at least age six.

“All they do is piss and shit and cry and eat and puke all day,” he told Al Danbury, his assistant groundsman at Charity Hill. “They're ugly to begin with, squashed little faces and bad hairdos, can't even dress themselves or carry on a decent conversation. Six years old, Al—not til then.”

The ultrasounds told them she was, indeed, going to be a girl, although Jack never accompanied Judy to the OB. He could never see anything in those ultrasound pictures anyway, he had argued with her over all three pregnancies. Her sister Beth coached her in the birthing classes, all the silly breathing things. Just another routine procreation as far as he was concerned.

* * *

Judy was seven months into her pregnancy – her five-foot-two frame looked like a beachball with legs – when Jack was wisecracking over the whole thing with Al while preparing to mow the entire southwest corner of the cemetery. Al, accustomed to Jack’s disinterest, mentioned something that altered Jack on the spot.

“I delivered my two children,” Al said.

“Yeah, I was there for Patrick and Eddie,” Jack replied, tightening the clamps holding the catcher bag to the gargantuan mower. “Held Judy’s hand, told her everything was gonna be all right, and listened to her swearin’ at me like a sailor while she popped ‘em out.”

“No, I mean I actually *delivered* them both. Annie Lynne and Billy, both of them. Out they came and I caught ‘em.”

Jack was stunned. “No doctor?”

“Well, ‘course. But I was there, playing catcher behind the plate. Caught their heads and helped ‘em out.”

Jack leaned against the big mower, pulling off his worn-out old Boise Cascade baseball cap and scratching his head as he watched Al working on the other side of the mower bag. “Don’t mean to be disrespectful, Al,” he said, “but why in God’s green garden would you wanna do that?”

“Well, I’ll tell ya,” Al said, “I figured I got between her legs and filled her full of those kids in the top of the first, there’s no right reason at all I shouldn’t be standing back between them in the bottom of the ninth. With her crying and screaming on that table, in pain and an absolute mess down there, seemed the least I could do.”

Jack stood silently, pondering his friend’s words. Al said, “I’ll tell you, Jack, there’s nothing like it. You try it with this little girl of yours. You see that little head poking out and squashed up like a Nerf football, and you take charge of her tiny little life. You’re her only God then, the only salvation from the hell she’s escaping, bringing her into this world. You stand down there, you do what I say, and you’ll never look at

any of your kids the same way again.”

It was a rainy September morning when Judy went into labor with a vengeance. From nothing at all to die-hard contractions that lasted minutes at a pop, her water broke and she was screaming. Jack rushed her to Eastern Maine Medical Center, just a handful of miles down the road in Bangor, and made it just in time. Her feet were barely in the stirrups and the doctor was checking up inside her and announcing she was at ten centimeters; the baby was coming any second. He was familiar with Jack and Judy’s birth plan and had Jack move to his position.

The doc talked all the way through, but it was so much background noise to Jack. He saw the thin covering of light, downy hair as the baby’s wet head appeared, Beth somewhere up at the other end of the mother telling the woman to PUSH, and the sense of awe that filled him was one he thought could never be surpassed—except that it was surpassed the next moment, and then the next, and so on, throughout the birthing.

It happened fast, but Jack could remember it all in slow-motion: the head popping out, shoulders following, and a good, final PUSH from Judy left the baby completely in Jack’s hands, so to speak. He heard the first helpless gurgling cry escape her newborn lips and his entire world exploded around him. Months of jokes with Al about catcher’s mitts and fast-balls hadn’t begun to prepare him for the moment; there were simply no words for the torrent of feelings. All he knew was that he didn’t want to let the nurse take the baby from him to clean her up, and that he could never feel better about anything else in his life ever again.

He was wrong. Every day he felt the same feelings. Every day he felt like he was bringing her into the world. He couldn’t say that he loved Kimberly Dawn more than Patrick or Eddie, but he felt a powerful relationship with her that he had not

known with his sons. He fed her, bathed her, and changed her every day – something he'd never taken a particular interest in with the first two. He was there to coax her into crawling and there for her first steps – indeed, she wouldn't walk for anyone else for the longest time. "It's the strangest thing," Judy would tell Beth or her mother, "but Kimmy will not walk for anyone but Jack. She'll crawl, you know how she does, sort of hiking her butt along the floor, and cry when I try to get her to stand. But you get Jack on the other side of the room and that girl will get to her feet and stagger around like a drunk flamingo, doing anything to get to him. She tries to please him, you know. All smiles, shining eyes – a Daddy's girl, no doubt about it."

Kimmy would cry for Daddy when her brothers were bothering her or when she was angry about bedtime or when she was hurt. She knew by the time she could sit up what time Daddy was home from work at night, and if he were late she'd become troubled and whiny. She'd screech with happiness when he'd come home for lunch on rainy days and cry for a half-hour when he'd leave.

At two she burned her hand when she fell against the stove when Judy had a turkey in the oven. Jack was in Bangor, picking up building supplies at Hammond Lumber, as Judy rushed Kimmy to the hospital. She screamed and wailed and cried for her Daddy all the way there, all the while the ER nurses cleaned up the burn and the doctor examined her.

Judy paged Jack on his alphanumeric pager and he flew like the wind to EMC, leaving his purchases, his credit card, and even his wallet right there at the checkout. The moment he burst into the examination room, Kimmy's crying ceased and she wrapped her little arms about her Daddy's neck and sobbed quietly, saying "Daddy" over and over. While the nurse removed the dead skin and bandaged her with plenty of stinging ointment, she never winced while her Daddy held her. All the while, he spoke softly to her, telling her he would hold

her forever and ever. She knew her daddy would never lie; what he said was as true as the sky was blue.

At three and a half, she had her first nightmare. She woke, screaming, and Jack came off his pillow and flew like a streaking cruise missile, exploding into her bedroom and scooping her up like Superman rescuing a frightened kitten. She muddled onto him and he rocked her for five solid minutes, feeling her racking sobs subside as her tiny body trembled against him. When she was finally able to speak in a shaky voice, looking up with wet blue eyes that gleamed in the moonlight, she talked in kid sentences, but he got the gist of it: she was running away from a monster with two mouths and lots of teeth. It slavered and growled and drooled slime, and was just about to snap her up in its dual maws when she woke.

“Daddy,” she said amidst sniffles and residual tears, “I couldn’t find you when the monster was chasing me.”

“It was just a bad dream, Punkin,” he told her with a bright smile.

“But I needed you,” she pleaded.

His heart almost fell but apparently found one rib to hang on to. “Well, you just didn’t dream Daddy into your dream this time,” he said. “All you have to do is dream me right in there. Cuz as long as I’m in your dreams, or here in the real world, Punkin – Daddy will always be there for you.”

She sniffled a bit of runny nose that was going on. “Do you promise forever?”

“Of course,” he said, cupping her tiny, fragile head between his hands and ruffling her hair and ears. “Daddy will always be there for you.”

From age three on, she absolutely couldn’t go to sleep without Daddy reading her a bedtime story – or telling her one he spun from whole cloth on the spot, or just sitting with her at bedtime and telling her he loved her. Such was the nature of

the love between a father and a daughter, Pastor Bentley from the church had told them, when God's hands brought them together. Jack didn't know anything about that. He just knew he loved her to pieces, and no job, responsibility, or person on Earth would keep him from his daughter.

Kimberly grew more beautiful as the years passed. Her bright blond hair danced in pretty pigtails through kindergarten. First grade saw the hair beginning to darken a bit; her eyes, in contrast, sparkled brighter. The pigtails were lost to a naturally fluffy, dirty-blond cascade by the end of the school year. She was just three and a half feet tall and, as Al always told her, "prettier than a pink bow on an Easter dress."

It was earlier that school year, just before her seventh birthday, that she had taken notice of a popular murder all over the media. Although she didn't resemble Jon-Benet Ramsey, many people commented that Kimmy's beauty and innocence reminded them of the young Colorado girl who had been murdered in 1996. Kimmy had caught a news report about it and had immediately become glued to the television. Her attentiveness to the horrible murder investigation concerned Jack and Judy a bit; they would catch her watching the TV and hurriedly change the channel, but she'd been too engrossed in the story at that point.

Questions inevitably arose. Jack was munching popcorn with her one October night in front of the television when a news break mentioned a development in the Ramsey case. Kimberly calmly said amidst a mouthful of popcorn, "They think her parents killed her."

"Well, thinking doesn't make it so, Punkin," he told her.

"You know what Jon-Benet's problem was?" the little girl asked knowingly.

"Well, her problem was that she was killed," Jack said gently, not even quite sure how to proceed in the conversation.

"Nope," Kimberly said, stuffing in more popcorn. "Her

Daddy didn't love her enough. He never promised to always be there when she needed him. If he did," she said in lower tones, through a mouthful, "he would have stopped the person who killed her."

Jack was stunned to silence as the little girl leaned her little head against his chest and under his arm, snuggling up close to her thunderbolt-wielding Zeus, content in the truth of her observation and knowing fully well that the crook under her Daddy's arm was the safest place in the entire universe.

Kimberly Dawn was murdered eight months later.

The Maine State Police Crime Lab went over the case for months to reconstruct the ordeal through which the little girl had suffered. Most of the details came from the surviving member of the assault—Eddie, Kimberly's brother, thirteen at the time. He'd left school and hung out with his buddies for an hour before meeting up with Kimberly, who was escaping the first grade into the early June sunshine. They often walked home together instead of taking the bus, often shortcutting across a back field and off-road dirtbike trails. From there, it was less than ten minutes to the back side of the cemetery of which Jack Meader served as caretaker.

It was when they emerged from the woods trail on the far side of the vast graveyard, Eddie told the investigators, that they ran into the dirty, scraggly-faced white guy and the Hispanic with his left eye swollen shut. It wasn't uncommon for Jack to come home with stories of transients smoking dope in the back of the cemetery, and not unusual for summer help to be popping in about that time of year anyway, so Eddie hadn't thought much of the two.

"Where you kids goin'?" the white guy asked.

"Home," Eddie had said, grabbing for his sister's hand and banking around the two. "My dad runs the cemetery."

The Hispanic guy moved in front of them and Eddie stopped short, pulling his sister to him. "Move it, jerkoff,"

Eddie said coolly in a way only invincible thirteen-year-old boys can.

Eddie got a lot of crap later by less-understanding sorts who thought they may have walked away unscathed had he not said that; the State Police seemed convinced what then happened would have anyway. The Hispanic backhanded Eddie with such force that Eddie landed several feet away, the force of his head on the flat grave marker enough to shatter his skull on impact. Temporary paralysis, the result of the incredible trauma, hit him immediately. All he could do, conscious as a coffee-drinker on caffeine overdrive, was lie there and watch through blood-soaked eyes.

The white guy had his hands on Kimberly before Eddie had finished landing. She screamed then, loud and shrill as little girls do, but the nearby sound of a riding mower over the hill drowned out any hope of anyone hearing her. The white guy picked her up as she wailed, flipped her high over his head, and mercilessly bodyslammed her to the grass. Her scream, only briefly interrupted by the impact as the first rack of ribs broke, rekindled after a moment, although weakly.

He picked her up again, slammed her back to the ground. Again she wailed, ever so weakly then. The third attempt saw him getting smarter as he hurled her headfirst into one of those flat grave markers.

Eddie, unable to move, tried to gurgle at that point, but the Hispanic kicked him so hard his stomach ruptured and one kidney was rendered forever useless. Only eight solid hours of emergency surgery would patch the stomach, remove the destroyed kidney, and repair the vicious damage to the boy's skull.

Kimberly was done screaming then, only crying and whimpering well under the roar of the nearby mower. She was unable to move, mostly from nearly every rib being shattered, her collarbone in a dozen pieces, and her hips smashed, but also from the runaway hemorrhaging going on all over her insides.

While she lay there dying, they proceeded to rape her seven-year-old body. Eddie, unable to move, could only watch it all happen six feet away – watch them each have their ways with her twice, right there on the grave. She tried meekly to fight, but they were but the movements of a mechanical doll with a drained battery. By the time they were done, she was no longer moving.

If she'd lived, she'd never have been able to bear children. There was far too much damage to her insides; her tiny uterus was torn apart, her Fallopian tubes shredded, her ovaries crushed like raw eggs.

Eddie was trapped in the dimmest tunnel vision when it was all over, barely able to see them checking her for a pulse. They had apparently assumed Eddie was already dead and, as if suddenly realizing the depth of their situation, hurriedly tucked in their bloodied sex organs. High-fiving each other in celebrating their mastery of “the little bitch,” they got the hell out of Dodge.

Two minutes later, the big mower topped the rise and Jack Meader saw the bloodied, beaten forms of his children lying on graves.

The explosion that came next was that of atomic proportions. The state was in an uproar. National news picked up the story. A massive manhunt was launched and every law enforcement officer in New England was on the alert. Eddie was able to speak the next day and gave descriptions – he even remembered that the men had referred to each other by name – “Smitch” was the white guy and “Dace” the Hispanic. He also remembered one of them saying something about raking blueberries.

The manhunt took on some direction then. Maine is the largest producer of blueberries in the world, and migrant workers from as far away as Mexico knew it. During blueberry season, countless transients flocked to Washington County,

and apparently Smitch and Dace were two of them. Hordes of State and County police swarmed like angry bees to the blueberry fields of Maine—primarily the Down East area towards the eastern border near Canada. Before the end of the day, tentative identities had been established: Jesse Mitchell, native to Worcester, Massachusetts; and Jorge Desiervo, a Puerto Rican immigrant from New York City. The two had been raking on Jim Barker’s land until three days before Kimberly and Eddie had been attacked. Barker had fired them for sexually threatening several female workers.

The people of Maine wanted blood, but the dragnet hadn’t come up with anything in the first twenty-four hours. Luckily, the duo’s pictures had been steadily shown on television and in the newspapers, and stopping their stolen Toyota Corolla for a quick bathroom break at an Interstate 95 rest area in Kennebunkport was their undoing.

An off-duty Portland homicide detective who wandered into the restroom recognized the two as they stood on either side of him at the urinals. The cop calmly finished his leak, zipped up, stepped back from the urinal, drew his nine millimeter, and hollered them to the floor—exposed penises, still covered in dried blood, notwithstanding.

Justice went quickly. A truckload of expert witnesses appeared at the trial at the Penobscot County Courthouse to confirm the DNA and forensic evidence. Eddie Meader, of course, was the most damning testimony of them all, the eyewitness to the events.

Jack was barely able to attend the court proceedings. His composure was well in check until Eddie jumped up on the witness stand, face a spiderweb of lifetime scars, and began hollering at the defendants, “Why did you do it? Why did you do that to my sister?”

The judge let him go for a minute, let him yell and cry and swear while the defense attorneys screamed out their objections. Francis Morton had been a judge for thirty-two years, a



lawyer twenty before that, and he had seen cases innumerable and had defended the American legal system and ‘innocent until proven guilty’ as any good judge should. But the case had already been decided; he knew it as well as anyone. The perps would be found guilty and spend the rest of their lives looking at concrete. With any luck, a few other residents of “Tommy Town,” the state prison, would give them a taste of their own medicine—beat them and rape them senseless. If the Fates were in particularly good form that day, maybe worse.

So Morton let the boy say his piece, all the while watching the members of the jury, their faces flushing deeper as the mo-

ments passed, Eddie crying and demanding answers from the smug defendants who, to this point, had steadfastly maintained their innocence. Finally, he rapped the gavel, called for order, let everyone know this was a courtroom and not a circus, et cetera, those things Morton knew television courtroom dramas told everyone judges were supposed to do.

Things would have moved on quietly then, as Eddie re-seated and wiped his tears away, when Jesse Mitchell suddenly answered the boy's wailed question, his voice shattering the frozen silence like a Coast Guard icebreaker tearing up the Penobscot River: "Cuz she wuz young an' sweet an' the tightest virgin I ever had, ya little bastid."

In the wink of an eye, Jack Meader lost his mind.

He screamed, leaping from his seat and vaulting over the partition. Bailiffs scrambled in but not before Jack wrapped his fingers around Jesse's throat and drew blood. The whole thing lasted maybe a half-minute before Jack was pulled off the perp and dragged, kicking and screaming, from the courtroom.

Judge Morton hadn't moved a muscle during the entire event, a point not even mentioned by the media but certainly noticed by all. When Jack was gone, the judge asked Mitchell if he wanted to change his plea to guilty. Mitchell refused with a smile, saying he hadn't killed anyone and just wanted to piss everyone off. The judge informed him he had succeeded. The trial ended that day and the jury deliberated for five whole minutes before convicting both on every single charge with which they had been hit.

Citizens screamed for Maine to adopt the death penalty. Public outcry rippled throughout New England as the rest of the country watched the atrocity come to a close, but the long and short of it was that despite the horror of the ordeal, when it was over it was over. The monsters headed to Thomaston State Prison, the national news trucks packed up and left, and the Meaders went home to continue their lives raising Patrick and a traumatized Eddie, and to do so without a bubbly little

girl who was prettier than a pink bow on an Easter dress.

All through it, Jack and Judy suffered a grief that only they could understand. Counseling began with no plan for it to end in the far future. Eddie barely went a night when he didn't awaken screaming and crying like a three and half year old child who had just dreamed the first nightmare about slaver-ing, two-mouthed monsters.

Judy was better able to deal with the loss and move on with some relative normalcy. Jack, on the other hand, faired not nearly so well. From the moment he had ridden the mower over the rise, navigating the bulky beast between the D'AMATO and SPEKHARDT family plots, and had seen the bloody horror before him, his life had irrevocably changed. While he was thankful Eddie had survived, the loss of Kimberly Dawn wasn't something he could begin to handle.

Everyone consoled him with such senseless truths like *It would have at least been easier if she had died in some normal fashion*, but Jack just couldn't understand that logic. Eaten away by billions of ravenous cancer cells, rendered immune to the tiniest illness by AIDS, body crushed by a speeding tractor trailer, burned to the bones in a house fire, decapitated by a runaway airplane propeller — they would all have been impossible from which to recover. Regardless of how she'd died, Jack no longer had his Kimberly Dawn, the one living creature in the world who had loved him unconditionally: who had worshipped the air he breathed, the ground he walked on, the life force that made him Jack Meader.

“I promised her all her life I'd always be there for her,” he would sob to the psychiatrists during therapy. “I promised her I'd always protect her, always hold her. I was right there over that rise, mowing my damn lawns, *right there* and I wasn't there to save her.”

They told him it wasn't his fault. In fact, they told him, if he hadn't been in that section of the cemetery at all, Eddie would also have died. Without Eddie, the perps might never have

been found. But Jack couldn't see it. It wasn't Eddie he had sworn to for seven years that he would always be there, to hold and keep safe.

Jack lived immersed in his swamp of grief for a full year after the incident. All the while, he was caretaker of Charity Hill Cemetery, mowing lawns and pruning trees and righting gravestones toppled by pubescent vandals with nothing better to do on school nights. He refused to return to that section of the cemetery where his son had been bludgeoned nearly to death and his daughter beaten and raped until her little body gave up. Al always took care of that part.

The one thing Jack did every single day in that cemetery, without missing it once, was to visit Kimberly Dawn's grave. The visits usually lasted anywhere from a half-hour to an hour, rain or shine, humid Maine summers or blisteringly cold Maine winters. Even through the Great Ice Storm of 1998, the longest-running ice storm in any Mainer's memory, he was there, trudging across the vicious arctic wilderness that was somehow Charity Hill Cemetery. There had been so much ice that every stone was encased in layers upon layers of frozen snow and clear, glassy ice. Nothing looked familiar, but Jack knew exactly where his daughter's grave was—and was there every day during that frozen apocalypse, chiseling the frosty armor from her headstone and digging rock-hard snow and ice from her lot. He'd resolved to never abandon her again, no matter what.

It happened on the first year anniversary of Kimberly's murder. It was nearly midnight as Judy killed the television and the light and cuddled up to her husband in their bed. All was silent but the ticking of the alarm clock, and then Jack broke the silence.

"It's been a year today," he said softly.

Judy hugged him close to her. "I know, honey."

Another long pause, and then, "I just wasn't there for her. What could she be thinking, wherever she is now?"

"Oh, Jack," Judy said, her voice wavering as she gripped her arms and legs about him in the darkness. "Honey, she's thinking how wonderful a daddy you were, how you would have done anything to have changed that day. And she's not thinking about blaming you. Not one little bit."

"I think she's disappointed," he said to his wife, and maybe to the night as well.

"She could never be," Judy soothed.

"She was seven," he said, his voice remarkably calm. "A seven-year-old can't understand. A seven-year-old can only see that her daddy promised and promised all of his miserable life and it was nothing but lies. Seven-year-olds can't see mistakes and random things."

"She can see your powerful love," Judy tried, but she knew she was losing.

He said quietly, "I'd give anything to make it up to her."

Judy said no more. It would have done no good, and she knew it. She drifted off to sleep.

She came awake with a start a short while later to Jack shaking her. She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Jack was on the edge of the bed, leaning over her, hand on her shoulder. "Jack, what is it?"

"Do you hear?" he said excitedly. "Listen!"

She listened, strained to hear whatever it was he was hearing. The distant sounds of trucks on Route 2 nearby were all she could find. "I don't know what—"

"Sssh!" he said harshly. "Listen close. You'll hear her. Kimberly."

Judy lost her breath for a second, and then sighed. "Honey, it was a dream. Lie back down—"

"No!" He sounded angry that she should even think to question him in that way. "It's Kimberly, up on the hill. She's

calling to me. 'Daddy, daddy,' she keeps calling to me."

"That just isn't true," Judy said. "She's been gone for a year, Jack."

"Up on that hill, she's buried."

"Christ, Jack!" Judy exploded then. "How long are you going to do this? How long? Kimberly is dead! Dead!"

He looked at her through the dimness, shocked. "Of course she is. I know that. I do. But she's up there now, calling to me. You be real quiet, and you'll hear."

She exhaled abruptly, turning from him and flopping back into bed, hauling the covers up over her shoulders. "I've had it with all of this! You think this doesn't hurt me, too? You think I don't feel terrible about what happened? That sometimes I just feel like dying because I can't change things? I do! But I can't change things, and I accept that!"

He was still sitting on the edge of the bed, intently listening for noises out the open window, not listening to her. She let it go, laid back down. A year of counseling hadn't changed things; an argument at midnight wouldn't, either.

The she heard it. Far off, but not too far, a tiny voice: *Daaaaddyyyy...*

Judy felt the hair stand up on her neck, her back, fluffing on her arms.

"You hear that?" he whispered excitedly.

Daaaaddyyyy...

"My little girl," Jack said simply. "She wants me."

"Dammit," she cursed. "Oh, dammit, Jack, it's a kid but it's not our daughter! Some scared kid, too young to be out past her bedtime, in the cemetery and lost, and she wants her daddy. That's it!"

Perhaps he considered it for a moment, because then he said, "Well, as caretaker, I'd better get out there and help her home. Cemetery's no place to be lost at night."

She could find no way to argue that. He got up and began pulling on his pants.

* * *

Jack made his way across the graveyard under a crescent moon. He needed no flashlight; he knew the cemetery like the back of his hand, and there was a fair amount of moonlight. He threaded his way amongst the tombstones that stood across the hilly landscape like companies of troops. He knew exactly where he was heading, and could get there blind if he had to.

He topped the rise on the little hill beyond which was their new family plot, where Kimberly was the first tenant. He focused his eyes on the dark shape he knew to be her headstone not a hundred feet away, pausing a moment in wonder.

The headstone moved. He was sure of it.

He stood, awed and frightened, watching the shadows as they morphed from one blackness to another. He blinked, tried to focus better.

Daaaddy...

He sucked in his breath. The shadows were moving disjointedly, swaying next to the gravestone, almost as if something were growing there, bursting forth from the ground like a plant fighting its way up in search of sunlight.

Jack staggered forward, clumsily, down the slight grade toward whatever was happening. Somebody was dancing on his daughter's grave, maybe – well, not for long.

He closed the distance by half before whoever it was spoke again: *Daddy... Daddy...*

He froze, started, froze again.

Daddy... why weren't you there for me?

He shuddered, blinked. The shadows were swaying above the grass, wrenching to and fro like someone buried in beach sand up to his waist and trying to get out. Jack stumbled forward again. “Kimberly?” he croaked.

The shadows suddenly stiffened, as if someone were standing straight up, and as suddenly as they were moving they were gone completely.

Jack broke into a lumbering run, tearing across the grass and reaching the site, collapsing to his knees and sliding on the damp grass. He skidded painfully across rough, grassless terrain before he reached the stone. His eyes adjusted to the light, and he leaned over and felt the ground. Dirt, as if turned over with a spade. Clumps of sod pushed aside. He began to cry.

“Come back, baby,” he wailed, echoing across the moonlit graveyard like the desperate chant of a shunned lover. “Come back to Daddy. Come here...”

Judy Meader shivered as she heard the phantom voice of her husband carrying mournfully across the cemetery, *Come back, Kimmy... Daddy's here... I'm sorry, baby... come back to me... come back...*

Neither of them spoke about it the next day. Jack was unusually solemn and reserved. Judy thought maybe the experience had been exactly what Jack had needed—reality kicking him squarely between the eyes.

That night, she stirred a bit when the bed moved. Jack was up again, donning his pants. She registered it briefly, then drifted back to sleep.

The next morning, she went out to the cemetery to bring him and Al cold drinks. Al accepted his graciously and directed her towards Kimberly's grave to find her husband. He was using a weed whacker to trim around the stones in that area when she found him. He, too, was happy to have a cold drink and took a break long enough to guzzle some down, sitting on a handy stone while he did so.

“I saw her again last night,” he said suddenly.

“What?” she said, but somehow knew where he was going with that.

“I saw Kimberly the other night, trying to get out of her

grave. I heard her again last night and went back out."

She just stared at him. "Do you realize how you sound?"

"Yep," he said, wiping sweat off his brow. "Crazy as all hell. But it's true. Both nights, I didn't make it there to help her. I aim to make it tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm heading out here by dark," he said. "I'll sit there until she appears. Then I'm going to hold my girl again."

"No," she said. "Jesus, no. This is ridiculous."

"Not at all," he said, too calmly. "I've done very wrong by my little girl, and I'm getting a chance to make it right. I won't let her down again."

When night fell, he was out the door. Judy let him go. She helped Eddie with his algebra homework, did the dishes, watched a few sitcoms, ushered the boys to bed. Made a spaghetti sauce and put it on to simmer overnight. Dressed for bed. Watched the eleven o'clock news.

She lay in bed at midnight, unable to sleep, unable to stop listening intently to the sounds of the breezes coming in the open window. She refused to admit to herself what she might hear—refused to believe or accept any of it. At any rate, she couldn't hear anything. But maybe that was because something calling him didn't have to this time... because Jack was out there, in the graveyard, with...

Instinct drove her from her bed. She had to know. In her nightgown, she fled across the graveyard. The sky was overcast, starlight peeking through here and there, with only a hint of moonlight through breaks in the clouds. The graveyard scared the shit out of her; she couldn't help but feel the ghosts and ghouls flitting back and forth behind her, hiding behind headstones and trees as she passed, phantoms following her every footstep with hovering steps of their own. Crypts flashed past in the darkness, and her heart beat faster.



Any minute one of those crypts would fly open to reveal some vampiric night creature, fangs bared and cloak flapping; any second zombies would be clawing their way out of their coffins and through the wet ground to get at her.

They weren't there, of course, but that didn't calm her a bit. She stumbled along, tripping over a tree root here or a rock there. She didn't know the lay of the yard like Jack did, and she hoped she didn't run smack into one of the thousands of gravestones camouflaged by the night. Finally, she saw the familiar weeping willow on the hill that overlooked that area where Kimberly's grave was.

She stopped under the willow's sad branches. The effect

was eerie, and of course she felt as if the tree were certainly going to take on an unlife of its own, wrapping those hanging, vinelike branches around her and constricting, choking the life out of her, leaving her to be the second member of the Meader family to be buried there.

The horrific thought was suddenly kicked out of her mind as the clouds parted and bright moonlight streamed earthward like enlightenment from paradise, and she beheld the sight ahead.

It was Jack, upon their daughter’s grave. He was on his knees, and for a moment Judy thought he was pulling up weeds. Even as she began moving closer, she could see that wasn’t so. And now it seemed there was someone else there with him. A very short person, it seemed, almost as if only the top half of a person.

Then she heard the voice: “Daddy... help me, Daddy... help me out..”

“Daddy’s here,” he said softly, calm tones soothing the frightened child with him. “Everything’s gonna be all right, Punkin.”

Judy staggered, tripped, fell, clambered back to her feet. She hurried, not wanting to, absolutely terrified to, feeling like the mortally depressed mother in “The Monkey’s Paw” who had realized that wishing their dead son back alive was wrong, that the knocking at the door was indeed him—but he was a decomposing corpse having climbed out of its grave.

She stopped a dozen feet away, her eyes focusing, and she could see the long hair of her daughter. The girl was grasping desperately onto her Daddy’s arms, her body buried hip-deep in the ground, and she was whimpering helplessly like a frightened animal. Jack had hold of her under the armpits, and he was tugging, gently but strongly, trying to extricate her like some cave-in rescue victim. It seemed she should have been popping up out of the ground with no trouble at this point, but

Jack just didn't seem to be able to extract her.

Judy couldn't make out the girl's features, but there was no other explanation to the ordeal. Nothing logical. She stood, frozen in place, unable to breathe.

"Daddy... it hurts, Daddy! It hurts! It huuurrrts..."

"Daddy's gonna make it all right!" His voice was feverish now, almost panicked. "Don't go, Punkin. Just a minute more!"

She was sinking back into the ground, her whimpers becoming crying. He was holding on, but nothing was stopping her. He cried out in anguish as, very suddenly, the tiny form of the dead girl was sucked into the earth like a strand of spaghetti into a mouth.

The quick beginning of a scream was cut abruptly off as she vanished.

Jack collapsed face first into the dirt and he hollered, long and loud, baying into the unfair, terrifying night.

Judy dropped to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably, and cried with him from a distance.

He headed back to the house, oblivious to his wife. She followed, drooling and sobbing quietly to herself, a few paces behind. It wasn't until they were in the living room of the house and she had snapped on the light did she realize what he looked like. His flannel shirt and pants were dirty as well as grass-stained, but the arms of his shirt were covered in something she couldn't quite identify.

He walked mindlessly to the washroom, stripped, headed to bed, all without a word. She chased into the laundry room and dug his shirt out of the hamper, examining what she had seen.

She couldn't hold the shirt in her hands, and begged God in her mind to forgive her for it; but the bits of decaying flesh, sticky hair, and squirming maggots were something she couldn't handle. She just couldn't.

* * *

Judy couldn't even look at him the next morning. He skipped breakfast and headed off to work.

Al came by around lunchtime, not an uncommon visitation time for him; but the man had a distraught look on his face that she knew spelled trouble—a look she had seen a lot in the past year, one that meant Jack was having an especially bad day. She didn't doubt it at all today, but somehow the look on Al's face told her more was up.

"Jack's at her grave," he reported solemnly. "And he ain't trimming the grass today."

She felt her blood cool in her veins and she leaned against the counter heavily. "What is it?"

"He's doing it," Al said. "He's digging her up."

Judy got there just as Jack had hit the casket, and before she could scream at him to get out, that this was crazy, that he was disrespecting her memory, she saw down in the hole: the wooden lid of the coffin, a huge, gaping hole in it, the wood shredded and ripped as if clawed to bits by its occupant. She was reminded of the stories of people assumed dead and buried alive, who awakened later only to be unable to dig their way out. But her daughter's body had been autopsied and kept in cold storage for two weeks during the investigation, so there was no doubt as to the lifelessness of her daughter. It didn't even matter what she thought she had seen that night—if he'd actually been pulling her body out of the ground, it certainly hadn't been anything more than a soulless husk of rotting flesh that once was Kimberly.

Jack looked up from the deep hole at that point, and she half-expected to see a crazed, madman-like look on his face like some eccentric Igor finding body parts for the good doctor. Instead, he looked very calm, very serene—the most together she thought he'd been in the past year. He was dirty, sweaty, and disheveled, but otherwise fine. He nodded to her. "Morning, honey."

"Jack," she said, and could think of nothing else to say. She looked to the torn-up hole, where dirt had sifted into the casket, and she saw the form of her daughter partially buried.

The girl was dead, all right, body decaying with the worms and looking none too pleasant. But the hole in the wood, *that* had clearly been done from the inside: quite thick, she could see the tapering at the edges that indicated something from within had dug and clawed and ripped its way out of the pine-box tomb.

"See, honey?" Jack said. "This'll make it easier for her to get out. I think she spends her time trying to get out, but Mother Earth, she just don't wanna give her up. She's *supposed* to be feeding these worms, after all. But she wants me. She needs me."

"Jack, look at her," Judy said, forcing composure. "She is dead."

"Well, of course she's dead," Jack said, and for the first time in forever, he smiled, wide and happy. "She died a year back. Bodyslammed and beaten and raped til she couldn't live no more. And scared beyond her death 'cuz her Daddy wasn't there to protect her. He was too busy cutting grass a hundred feet away. And he hasn't been there for the past year, when she really needed him most, when she needed to finish her dying. She can't do that without me. Tonight, I'm making it right, Judy. Everything will be right tonight."

It took her a few seconds, but it sunk in; at least she thought it did. "You're not doing it, Jack," she said, voice cracking, tears welling in her eyes. "You are not taking her from here. You are not taking this dead girl home with us. She needs to rest in peace, Jack, rest forever, because her time here is over. She is dead and God wants it that way for whatever reason and you are not going to bring her rotting body home! You are going to bury this grave back up and forget about this!"

Jack stared up out of the hole at her, face incredulous, brow furrowed, as if thinking her insane. "Why, of course I'm not

going to bring her rotting body home. I’m thinking you’re going loony on me, honey.” His face darkened. “But I am not burying this grave and forgetting about this. Now run yourself home, and don’t *you* forget *that*.”

She ran home. She didn’t forget it.

That night, he whistled his way through supper, through getting dressed into clean clothing, and as he headed out the door for the cemetery. She let him go. She knew she couldn’t change his mind, but she also knew she couldn’t bear to see the zombified form of her daughter climbing out of its grave again.

“Not my daughter,” she whispered to herself in her lighted room that night at midnight, window sealed tightly. “She’s dead and gone, gone to God... *just not my daughter...*”

She dreamed only one piece of a dream, at least that she could remember. The image of Jack desperately trying to haul his crumbling daughter out of the ground, and all the while the little girl was crying out, voice raspy and strained through her decomposed larynx: *Hold me forever, Daddy, just like you promised... hold me, Daddy... forever...*

Judy woke to bright sunlight and the alarm happily buzzing away at six-thirty in the morning. Jack was not in bed with her, and she knew he hadn’t been all night. She woke the boys and told them to get ready for school on their own – that she had to go find their father, who had undoubtedly worked early that morning.

She ambled quietly through the dew-coated grasses, somehow afraid of the graveyard in the daylight. She was afraid of what she was going to find. She couldn’t deny what she had seen with her own eyes, but somehow couldn’t quite believe anything supernatural had transpired. Even still, her heart was heavy and cold, beating like a piston in molasses.

She topped the hill under that weeping willow tree and

saw the grave, mound of dirt next to it, shovel tossed aside... and her husband, sitting propped up against the gravestone, sleeping. She sucked in her breath, for even from this distance, she could see what he held.

So he had done it: taken her body out of the grave and held it all night. It was a turning point, she figured, if a gruesome one. He would either recover from his tremendous grief or be plunged into further wells of sorrow. The latter would mean Jack would have to be in-patient somewhere, the only way for him to deal with this. The former would mean life would finally begin again for the Meader family, and they would certainly have to move away. Jack needed to be elsewhere, doing a job that wouldn't remind him of the horror all the time.

She headed down the hill towards him, tucking her shirt into her jeans as she went. The thought of having to be there waking him while he held the rotted corpse that was once their daughter sickened her, but she'd deal with that just to...

She got close enough to see then, and screamed, and wailed, and collapsed, a shaking, quivering mass of woman who just couldn't do it anymore.

He was propped up against her gravestone, cradling the decaying, skeletal corpse. Kimberly's arms were about her Daddy's neck, her knees drawn to her chest. Her lovely white dress, bought to bury her in, was dirty and rotting as well. Her golden-brown hair, once silken and beautiful, was brown and black and falling out of her decomposing skull in clumps. Worms of all sorts were there, maggots crawling.

Jack held her tightly, his own finger bones already visible through the rotted, torn flesh. Blood was everywhere not from any accident but from the thousands of worms that had been feasting on his body all night. Even through the lack of flesh on their faces, all she could see was contentment.

Judy backed away, shaking her head, tears welling in her eyes and spilling onto her cheeks. She tried to mouth the word *No* over and over, but the word just couldn't make it past her

lips. It was emotionally devastating, but somehow, in the whole crazy mess of it all, things were right again. Daddy had fulfilled his promise to his most beloved daughter, and was finally there for her. Kimberly had what she had been promised: Her Daddy was holding her forever.

Finally, Kimberly was resting in peace. Finally, so was Jack.



About the Author

David M. Fitzpatrick's 50 short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. He has co-edited two anthologies and edited five more. By day, he is a Special Sections writer for the Bangor Daily News in Bangor, Maine, and freelances as well. He lives in Brewer, across the river from Bangor. He keeps hoping Stephen King's errant Muse will accidentally land on his house on the way to King's. No luck yet.

