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A Friend

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MARGO'S DAUGHTER came home from school that Friday with a new friend. From the window in the kitchen, where she was trying and failing to make decent croissants for the third time this week, Margo watched the bus deposit her eight-year-old daughter, Anya, and some unknown boy, which was odd because the town was so small and Margo had often been at Anya's school to volunteer and had no memory of him. He wasn't wearing a shirt, only a denim vest and parachute pants. He had no backpack, no books. Margo watched the boy and Anya talk for a few minutes, Anya gesticulating wildly at their house while the boy peered at it with what seemed like suspicion. Finally, the boy nodded, Anya took him by the hand, and they walked to the front door.

"Hello, there," Margo said, greeting them in the hallway. "Who's this?"

"This is Harbell," Anya said.

"What, now?" Margo asked.

"HAR. BELL," Anya said, stressing each syllable. "He's new at school."

"Hello, Harbell," Margo said, but the boy seemed pained by her attention. He did not reply.

"Can we have a snack?" Anya asked.

"Well, hold on," Margo replied. "I need to make sure it's okay with Harbell's mom and dad that he's at our house."

"It's okay," Anya said. "His mom was at drop-off, and we talked to her, and she said it was okay. She said that she'd pick him up at five. I gave her our address."

“Why didn’t she just drive you here to the house?” Margo asked, because there was something strange about this woman who would let her child go off to hang out with some random family without even checking it out.

“She had to get back to work,” Anya answered quickly. “She’s a karate master.”

“Say what?” Margo replied, confused, trying to keep up. The entire time, Harbell was simply staring at the umbrella stand like he was trying to set it on fire with his mind. He had the darkest circles under his eyes.

“She’s opened her own dojo!” Anya said, starting to hop around. “She said I can have free lessons.”

“Oh, well, okay,” Margo said.

“Can we have chips?” Anya asked.

“What about croissants?” Margo responded, trying to unload this new batch.

“Oh, Harbell hates croissants. He might even be allergic, I think.”

“Is that true, Harbell?” Margo asked the boy, who was still staring at the umbrella stand. It was hard for Margo not to stare at it, too. Maybe he’d never seen one before? “No croissants?”

“I guess not,” Harbell said, looking embarrassed. His voice was really deep, unnatural coming from this scrawny kid.

“Chips!” Anya said. She was always a little hyper, hard to settle down, but this boy, a new friend, had sent her into some new state of excitement. Anya did a few karate kicks, then a kind of impressive roundhouse, nearly hitting Harbell, who didn’t even flinch. Trying to catch her breath, Anya bowed to Margo and grabbed Harbell’s hand to lead him upstairs to her room.

A few minutes later, when Margo walked into Anya’s room with a bowl of corn chips, the two kids were stacking building blocks, and Margo almost gasped to see that the blocks rose nearly to the ceiling.

“How did you do that?” Margo asked, watching the blocks sway just slightly but never fall.

“Harbell’s really good at stacking. He went to this summer camp last year where they learned how to stack things.”

“Stacking camp,” Harbell rumbled, looking a little proud of himself.

“Stacking camp!” Anya said. “Can I go this summer?”

“I guess so,” Margo replied. She felt like she’d dropped acid. “I’ll ask Harbell’s mom for information about it when she picks him up.”

“You rock, Mom!” Anya said.

“Don’t get too crazy now, Anya,” Margo told her. Harbell was holding a block in his hand, like he was weighing it, staring up at the stack. The blocks towered over him. How in the world was he going to get that block up there? How had he already done it with the others? She watched him with genuine curiosity.

“Mom!” Anya said, smiling, so happy. “You’re making Harbell nervous. We need our privacy. Remember? My privacy?”

“Okay, okay,” Margo replied. She walked out of the room, keeping the door open. When she was downstairs, Margo heard Anya cheer. “You did it!” her daughter shouted. And then, a few seconds later, the whole stack fell, the blocks clattering against each other. She heard what must have been Harbell’s laugh, a kind of stutter.

It was a relief to know that the boy had the capacity for laughter. Anya was a unique kid. She could overwhelm other children with the intensity of her obsessions. A lot of parents seemed to regard her as an overstimulated force of nature, and were never quite sure how to deal with her. She was rarely invited to playdates. But Harbell didn’t seem to mind. Now Margo really wanted to meet his mother, this karate master, who allowed her kid to wear only a denim vest to school, which, technically, was against the dress code.

FIVE O’CLOCK came and went. Anya and Harbell were in the living room, watching cartoons while they drew detailed maps on construction paper. There was no sign of Harbell’s mom, and Margo kept looking out the window, waiting for the woman’s car to pull into the driveway. She worried that Anya had given her the wrong address, imagined the woman driving up and down the streets of this new town, no idea where her boy was.

“Anya,” Margo told her daughter, “I’m a little worried that Harbell’s mom can’t find the house.”

"She said that she knew where we lived," Anya said.

"Harbell, do you know your mom's phone number?" Margo asked him. The boy didn't even look up from his map, which was quite intricate, a mountain range separating a futuristic city from what looked like a post-apocalyptic hellscape. It unnerved Margo, actually.

"Harbell?" Margo reminded him. "Do you know your phone number?" The boy shook his head.

"Oh, gosh, well, let me think. Do you know your address? I can drive you home." When the boy shook his head again, Margo felt the slightest irritation with him. "You don't know where you live, sweetie?"

"Mom!" Anya shouted. "He just moved here. He just got here this morning."

"*This morning?*" Margo asked, confused. "Okay, never mind. Harbell? What's your last name?"

Anya spoke for the boy. "Harbell," she said.

"No, what's his *last* name, sweetie."

"*Harbell,*" Anya said.

"His last name is Harbell?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then what's his first name?"

"Harbell, too."

"His name is Harbell Harbell?" Margo asked, and Anya smiled and nodded. "Is that true, Harbell?"

Harbell nodded, unconcerned.

"Your name is Harbell Harbell?" she asked him, and Anya said, "Mom! We're working."

"Well, I'm just trying to figure out what to do here. His mom is twenty minutes late."

"Can he spend the night?" Anya asked.

"What? No, honey. No, I need to get in touch with his mom."

"We can just take him to the dojo," Anya said.

Margo hesitated at the thought of putting Harbell in her station wagon, as if the act would create a new category of child abduction, but she wasn't sure what else to do. The key, she decided, was to keep pretending that nothing was wrong.

"Okay, then, we better get going," Margo said, getting her keys, her purse. She called her husband at work and tried to quickly explain

what was going on. He wouldn't stop saying the word Harbell, stretching out the syllables, playing with the emphasis, saying it like he was the announcer at the Grand Ole Opry, before she finally got irritated with him and hung up.

"Okay, boys and girls, let's roll out," Margo said, trying to keep it light, trying to be cool, trying not to worry about whether someone might think that she'd kidnapped this denim-vested, deep-voiced boy.

They loaded into the station wagon, and Anya directed them to the town square, where she said they would find the new dojo. Margo had not heard a single word about a dojo opening up in town, but there wasn't anything else to try. The square was fairly empty. She found a parking space. Anya and Harbell hopped out of the car before she could unbuckle her seatbelt, and she watched them run to a storefront where she remembered there being a travel agency. She didn't come to the square much, honestly.

And there it was: HARBELL DOJO—KARATE AND SELF-DEFENSE. But it was closed, the lights off. She walked up to the building and leaned against the storefront window, staring at the red mats that lined the floor, a big red dragon painted on the only wall that wasn't covered in mirrors.

"It doesn't look like your mom is here, sweetie," Margo said to the boy, who shrugged.

"It's not open yet," Anya told her. "The grand opening is next week. She said I could have free lessons!"

"You said that already, sweetie," Margo said. Then she took a deep breath. "Well, jeez, we came out here for nothing. And now your mom is probably at our house, worrying about where you are. We better get back."

The kids ran back to the station wagon, and Margo was so flustered that she didn't even check to see if they'd buckled up. Margo drove the entire way home ten miles above the speed limit. She wanted to punch this woman in the face, how much this Harbell woman had messed up her day, but then she remembered that Harbell's mom was a trained fighter. She could probably throw Margo through a window.

At the house, there was no sign of Harbell's mom, but Robert was home from work. Margo went inside, leaving the kids outside to play on the tire swing, and she asked Robert if Harbell's mom had come by or called.

"No," he said. "What's going on, now?"

"It's this Harbell kid I told you about. Anya brought him home from school today. And now we have no idea where he lives or where his fucking mom is."

"You look weird," he said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm worried!" Margo said. "Where is she? What do we do with him?"

"He can have dinner with us," Robert replied, smiling. "I picked up pizzas from Bizzy's. It's fine."

"What if she doesn't show up?" Margo asked. She was getting worked up.

"We'll call the police," he said. "They'll probably know what to do."

"I think we should call them now," Margo said.

"Let's not worry this kid," Robert said. "He's probably pretty weirded out about all this."

"He's a strange kid," Margo admitted. "But Anya seems to love him."

"Well, good! Good. Call them in, okay?" Robert said, setting the table.

Margo went outside and called Anya and Harbell inside. "Who's hungry?" she asked, and Anya cheered. Harbell didn't say a word.

When they came inside, Margo gestured to Robert and said, "Harbell, this is Anya's father."

Harbell nodded, unable to make eye contact with Robert, and Robert smiled. He stared down at the boy, but a look of confusion slowly came over his face. He turned to Margo. "What, now?" he asked her.

"This is Harbell," she said, touching the boy's shoulder. She should have warned Robert about the denim vest.

"Harbell!" Anya shouted. "My new best friend."

"Well, okay. Nice to meet you, Harbell," Robert finally said, looking worried, still smiling that weird smile. "Margo? Come help me with the pizza?" he asked her.

"Sit by me," Anya instructed Harbell, patting

the chair next to where she sat, while Margo followed Robert into the kitchen.

He immediately turned to her, looking kind of angry. "What's going on?"

"I know," she said. "He's weird. It's all very weird."

"Margo!" he said, then realized he was shouting. "You scared the shit out of me. What's going on?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked him.

"There's nobody in there," he said, gesturing toward the dining room. Margo felt this sharp pain in her stomach. She felt itchy. She went back into the dining room. Harbell was drinking a glass of milk. Anya was singing a song.

"Yes he is," Margo said, returning to Robert. "He's right there."

"There is no one there, Margo," Robert said. "I promise you. There is no kid in there."

"Anya sees him," Margo said, confused.

"I am telling you, one hundred fucking percent, there is no kid named Harbell in there."

"I've been with him all afternoon," Margo replied.

"It's an imaginary friend," Robert told her. "Anya made this kid up."

"No," Margo said. "We went to his mom's dojo. He's real."

"What dojo? What are you talking about?" Robert was getting really angry now. He seemed fed up, and Margo couldn't understand what was going on. Was he mad at her?

"His mom, Mrs. Harbell, she—" Margo said.

"His name is Harbell Harbell?" Robert said, interrupting her.

"Yes," Margo replied.

"That's a made-up name, Margo," he said. "That's the kind of name that an eight-year-old would make up."

"I can *see* him," Margo said, her voice so soft. "I made him a snack." She thought about the fact that he'd arrived without a backpack. She wanted to look again to see if Harbell was still there, but she was terrified at what she'd find.

"Are you okay, honey?" Robert asked. He wasn't angry anymore, it seemed. He looked genuinely concerned for her.

"He's right there," Margo said, glancing—but

not looking—back at the dining room. She didn't know what else to say.

"He's imaginary," Robert said, his voice so certain, the verdict final.

"I don't think he is, though," she replied.

"Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "We'll do this dinner, let Anya have this friend, and then in the morning we'll figure it out. Okay?"

"I don't know. I guess so," Margo said, but she wasn't thinking about any of that. She was terrified of what would happen when they walked back into the dining room. She didn't know what would be worse, if she saw Harbell sitting there or if she didn't.

"Okay. Okay. It's okay," he said, breathing slowly. He was gentle with her, having determined that she was crazy, she supposed. "It's okay." He handed her two plates stacked with pizza, and she took them. They walked into the dining room. And there was Harbell, sitting right next to Anya. And now he was smiling at her. For the first time since he'd arrived, he looked happy.

THAT NIGHT, after she'd found an old T-shirt for Harbell to sleep in, once Anya and the boy were fast asleep, she got into bed with Robert.

"Why is this happening?" Margo finally asked.

"I don't know, honey," he replied. Then he thought for a second. "Do you think it's got something to do with Anya? You and Anya, I mean."

"What?" she asked.

"Are you worried about losing Anya?"

"No," she said. "What are you even talking about?"

"Maybe you think that she doesn't need you," Robert said.

"She's eight, Robert. She's not like, going to college in a month. She's not *leaving* us. Jesus. She's a kid. She can barely even dress herself."

"It was just a thought," he said, getting a little huffy after so much time trying to be patient with her.

"Well, think of something else, then," she replied.

There was a long enough pause that Margo

thought the conversation was over. And then Robert said, "Do you think the croissants have anything to do with it?"

"Oh for fuck—no, Robert, I don't think the croissants have anything to do with it."

"You've been pretty obsessed with making those croissants. I mean, you've made like forty batches."

"Not that many, Robert. Not that many."

"Still, you've been talking about it a lot."

"You think that my failure to accurately reproduce croissants I ate six months ago in a stupid little café in Venice has led to me having a schizophrenic mental breakdown and inventing some ghost child?"

"I mean..."

"Goodnight," Margo said, her voice sharp, aggrieved.

"I'm just saying."

"I saw him."

"He's not real," he told her.

"*Anya sees him!* I see him. That's two against one," Margo said, and then she turned away from Robert and lay down, facing the dull, red digits of her alarm clock.

"Let's just see what happens in the morning," Robert said, knowing not to touch her. "Maybe he'll just disappear."

"He'll be there," Margo said, but she didn't say it out loud.

IN THE MORNING—4 A.M.—actually, Margo got up before everyone else. She refused to go into Anya's room, though. She was afraid of what she'd find, or wouldn't find. Instead she went down to the kitchen and made some coffee. She drank it slowly. She felt the caffeine working on her system. And then, nothing else to do, she went into the pantry and once again got out the ingredients for the fucking croissants.

Robert came into the kitchen while the dough was proofing. What was worse, she wondered: to see something that wasn't there or to not see something that was plainly there?

"Is he in there?" Margo asked him, unable to resist her own curiosity.

"No," he said, still looking at her with mystification. "No, he's not in there."

"You checked?" she asked.

"Honey," he said.

She poured him some coffee, got the creamer from the fridge. She was trying so hard not to lose it. "I'll call the therapist," she finally said. "I don't know what's going on."

"It's okay. We'll be okay."

"What do we say to Anya?" she asked him.

"We'll just play along, I guess," he said. "It's normal for kids to have imaginary friends. I think it's actually a sign of intelligence and creativity."

"But not for adults," she said.

"No, I guess at some point it becomes a cause for concern," he replied.

"I just don't know that I can do it," she told him.

"Do what?" he asked, moving to hold her hand.

"I don't know if I can pretend that I see him while also pretending that I don't see him," she said, almost crying.

"Margo—" he began, but then Anya and Harbell came into the kitchen, yawning, their hair all crazy. Harbell had changed back into his denim vest.

"Holy shit!" Robert shouted.

"Dad!" Anya said, giggling.

"Is that Harbell?" Robert asked, pointing right at the boy, and Margo didn't know if she'd ever been this happy in her entire life, if she'd ever been this relieved. Not on her wedding day. Not when Anya was born. Right now, Harbell in the room, all three of them staring right at him, this was the happiest she'd ever been.

"Dad," Anya said, smiling. "You met him last night."

Robert was breathing deeply, slowly. He eyeballed Margo without moving his head.

"My dad is weird sometimes," Anya said to Harbell, who was now staring at the microwave clock, the circles under his eyes even darker, like he'd been awake all night.

"He's real," Robert said. Margo kind of wished that Harbell would vanish just so Robert would freak out even more.

"Harbell Harbell," Margo said at him, smiling.

"You guys are both being weird," Anya said.

"Me and Harbell want cereal, please."

"Coming right up," Margo said. Robert was still staring at the boy. He looked like he was about to cry.

The kids went into the living room to watch cartoons. "Holy shit, Margo," Robert said. "He was *not* there last night."

"No," she corrected. "He's been here for a while."

"We need to find his mom," he said.

Margo snorted.

"I'll call the police," Robert said.

"What if they don't see him?" she asked.

Robert thought about it for a second.

"Where is our cereal?" Anya shouted.

"Coming!" Robert called back.

"I think it might be Anya," Margo said, and it suddenly made sense to her. "I think Anya invented Harbell, and now he's real. It just takes a little while for the effect to work on other people." She laughed.

"Let me go get Jerry," Robert finally said, referring to their next-door neighbor, a priest.

"What?"

"He, like, he understands stuff like this," Robert said, then shrugged. "I'm going to get him." And he ran off before Margo could stop him.

After Margo brought the cereal to the kids, Robert burst back into the house. When he saw Harbell, he sighed with relief. Behind him, smiling, a little confused, wearing a floral bathrobe, was their neighbor Jerry.

"So, okay," Robert said. "Do you see Harbell?"

"In there with Anya?" Jerry asked. "Oh, hey, Margo,"

"Hi, Jerry. Sorry about this."

"No, it's okay. It's fine. So, okay, in the room with Anya?"

"Yes!" Robert said, overexcited. "Right next to her. Harbell."

"I don't see anything," Jerry admitted. He looked so disappointed, like he'd let them down.

"We're going outside to play," Anya told all of them, taking Harbell by the hand.

"What's going on exactly?" Jerry asked them.

"Is there anything in the Episcopal Church that talks about ghosts?" Robert asked him.

Jerry sat at the kitchen counter while Margo

and Robert explained it to him.

"It's, like, mass hysteria," Robert suggested.

"Not that mass," Margo said. "It's just three of us."

"Well, I guess. I don't think the exact number matters, as long as it's more than one," Jerry said.

"Maybe all miracles are just mass hysteria," Robert said.

"Now, okay, no, let's not get carried away," Jerry said, pulling the bathrobe tighter around his chest. "I think it's okay. It seems temporary."

"But temporary in the wrong direction!" Margo said.

"Well, no," Jerry said, clearly confused.

"Do you know anything about a new dojo in town?" Margo asked him.

"Is there an old dojo?" Jerry said, struggling to keep up, but benevolent about it somehow.

"Jerry, really. Have you heard anything?" Margo continued.

"No," he finally said. "No, I haven't. I think, well, so, I tell you what. Let me get back to the house. I need to get dressed anyway. Sonya's probably wondering what's going on. I've got to head to work. I'll check in with you guys on my way out and think about all this. Just give me a bit."

"But what do we *do*?" Margo asked him.

"Stay calm," Jerry offered. "You're together in this, so that's a plus. You'll be fine. Back in a bit." He stood up from the counter and waved goodbye.

After Jerry disappeared down the hallway, letting himself out, Margo asked Robert if they should call the police now. And just as Robert was about to reply, they heard the door open

again, and then Jerry reappeared in the kitchen.

"There's a boy with a denim vest on the tire swing with Anya," he said, stunned.

"Yes!" Margo and Robert said at the same time. "That's Harbell!"

"Oh, wow," Jerry said.

None of them spoke for a few minutes. They heard the door open, and Anya and Harbell walked into the kitchen.

"We're bored," Anya announced. "Harbell wants to do something fun."

The adults looked at each other for a second, and then Margo decided that she would handle this. She was responsible for this little boy. Until his utterly irresponsible karate mother came to pick him up, Margo would take care of him.

"Harbell?" she asked him, looking directly at him, smiling as kindly as she could. "Now tell me the truth. Do you like croissants?"

The boy nodded, curious, finally making eye contact with her. He was strangely beautiful, his features so delicate, now that she really looked at him, now that she could get over the suddenness of his arrival in their lives.

"I love them," Harbell offered.

"He loves croissants!" Anya announced.

"Would you like to make croissants?" she asked him, and he smiled.

Harbell said, "Yes, please."

"Yay!" Anya announced.

"Can we help?" Robert asked her, and Jerry stood there. Even Anya and Harbell were quiet, waiting for Margo to answer.

She would take care of everything, she would assert *order*. All she had to do was open her mouth and say the word. ■