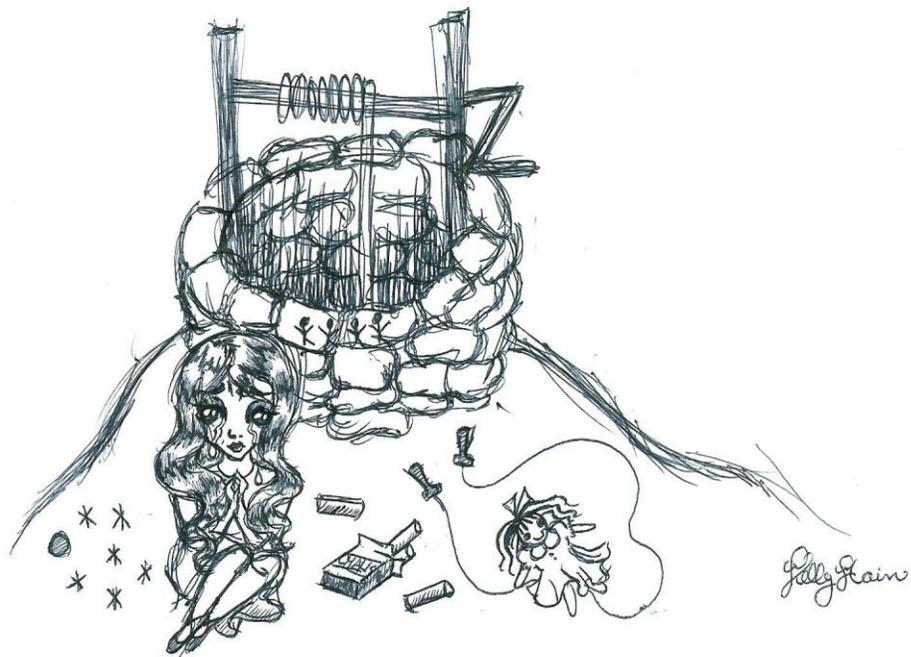


Child's Play



Andrew Breslin

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The little girl beside the old abandoned well shivered in the light October breeze, sopping wet from her own tears. She sucked in fitful gulps of breath only to let it out in long and anguished wails. The salty water welled up briefly in her capacious dimples before pouring down her face in tiny saline rivers. On this perfect Sunday afternoon, she wept like it was the very last day of the world, and a school day at that.

Evidence of better times in the not-so-distant past surrounded her. Coloring books lay scattered, well-used crayons atop them. From the big box, for those special occasions when nothing will do but puce or burnt sienna. Sky blue and forest green were worn down to the nubs from frenzied creativity. Also at the ready was an impressive chromatic array of chalk, and on the smooth brick of the well, a pair of stick figures basked in the rays of a chalky yellow sun. A small menagerie of non-indigenous stuffed animals populated the region, a lion, a giraffe, a zebra, all wearing the friendliest of smiles, living in blissful cohabitation, the lion a recent convert to vegetarianism. But none of these could ease the child's broken heart, and every tear that flowed was wetter than the last.

"Now, now dear. Don't cry," the man who approached instructed uselessly. "There, there. Don't cry. Now now. There there."

A thin man, and tall. Six foot if he were an inch, and he was at least a few of those. On his head perched a dilapidated mesh of straw, a sorry haberdasherial wreckage, more hole than hat. It neither protected him from the assaults of sun and rain, nor concealed his incipient baldness from the prying eyes of a cosmetically judgmental world. It looked like it might well have been swiped from a local scarecrow. He looked a lot like one himself, in fact, though his manner was devoid of menace and only the most cowardly birds would pass up a chance at free corn for fear of this affable bumpkin.

"Now what's the matter, sweetheart?" he asked softly.

She pushed aside some strands of golden hair, stuck to the front of her face by a thousand remorseful and unusually adhesive tears. Her breath escaped in tortured sputters. She inhaled deeply, tried to speak, but was too overcome with grief. She repeated the attempt, but sobs again drowned her words. Finally mustering her courage, she took in one deep breath and gasped out, "My dolly fell down the well!"

The kindly scarecrow stepped up to her and patted her curly head, trying to soften the blow of this tragedy. "Now don't you go crying, sweetie. You have lots of other toys," he reasoned, pointing around at the animals and art supplies.

"But this was Little Miss Molly! She was my favorite!" she protested, the flow of tears unabated.

"I'm sure your Mommy and Daddy will buy you a new doll."

“B-b-b-but Daddy lost his job when the fak-tree closed down, and he says he can’t buy me any new toys now!” she blubbered.

The man shook his head in sympathy. “Well, that’s just a crying shame, honey. I’ll tell you what, my niece left some dollies at my house, and I know she’ll never miss them. I’ll go get one and you can have it. Won’t take but a minute or two and then—”

Amidst ever-moister sobs, she sputtered out, “But my Granny gave her to me right before she went to stay with God!”

She lowered her head onto her hands, all hope of happiness crushed, pulverized, scattered to the four winds. Her whimpering was muffled now, and the tiny body quaked in misery. A little blonde ball of despair.

The tall man was moved. He found a tear escaping his own eye in the face of this emotional trump card. A child’s misery is contagious, and he knew it fell upon him to curtail a potential epidemic.

“OK sweetie, calm down.” he said, patting her head again. “We’ll get Little Miss Molly. My truck’s parked just up yonder and I’ve got some rope. I’m a pretty good climber too. Lucky thing for you and Molly.” He smiled and winked.

The flow of tears began to slow, the fountain drying to a slight trickle. “Oh thank you mister,” she said, her dimples glowing, the moisture on her cheeks brilliantly refracting and reflecting the afternoon sun.

He returned with the rope, over 50 feet of thick twine, knotted every yard for easy climbing. He looked down into the deep well, but could see little. The sun was low in the sky, throwing all but the highest regions in shadow. He tested the structural integrity of the old iron windlass that once served to lower a bucket down into the depths, finding it solid and unyielding, more than sturdy enough to bear his weight.

He removed his cherished hat and laid it on the ground beside the well, revealing a head the hair had begun to abandon in droves. He secured the rope with a careful double knot, giving it a good yank for reassurance. He dropped the other end down the well and prepared to descend.

“Don’t worry dear, we’ll have your dolly back in no time.”

“Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!” the little girl gushed, smiling broadly now. The man’s balding head disappeared as he made his way down the rope.

She reached for her Snow White coloring book, now opened to a picture of Grumpy, his attitude perhaps understandable, for he was colored far outside the lines, and mostly in puce for some reason. She cast the book aside and picked up the serrated knife that lay beneath. She hummed a happy tune as she sawed away at the rope. The knife was sharp, her hand practiced, and in a few moments, the line snapped. A brief, impassioned scream preceded a reverberating splashy crunch.

She returned the knife to beneath the coloring book, then executed a spinning dance, whirling like a tiny blissful dervish while singing a song she had composed herself, and of which she was quite proud:

It's a sunny sunny day!

Nothing to do but play!!!

Nana nana nah nah nay!

It's a sunny sunny day!

She stopped spinning to pick up a piece of green chalk and with a few deft strokes added a third stick figure to accompany the other two on the side of the well.

She sang and danced a little more, then sat back down on the ground and started crying again, as if she'd never stop.

The End

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Andrew Breslin's first novel, *Mother's milk* is available at:

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Thanks for reading!