

Children's Day

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Golden Gate International Exposition
Treasure Island, San Francisco Bay, 1939

Shorty was complaining about the grift around Midget Village when Miranda saw the clown. Sad eyes. No smile. The Gayway wasn't always gay, even for a clown and the little blonde girl with him, waiting in line for cotton candy.

Too many kids, too many clowns. Monday, April 3, Children's Day, and Miranda wondered why the fuck she'd come back to the fair on her one day off. Maybe because she had nowhere else to go.

"You take it up with the bulls?" she asked Shorty.

The little man shook his head, the red light of the cigarette dancing at the end of his mouth.

"You know how it is. Don't take us serious. Come in for a belly laugh and drift over to Sally Rand's or Artists and Models for a tweak of some tit. Christ Almighty, I can't blame 'em for that, but we need protection, not a goddamn babysitter."

Miranda nodded, looking over his head. The clown was crouched at the side of the refreshment booth, talking to the kid, pink sweat dripping on his dirty white collar. Puffs of spun candy hid her face. A stout woman in a green plaid coat smiled at them through her peanuts.

Miranda dropped her Chesterfield and rubbed it out in the dirt next to a wadded-up napkin from Threlkeld's Scones. "I'll do what I can. I don't have much pull with the cops—"

"You got pull where it counts, sister. You got in the papers, you got your

shamus license, you caught your boss's killer. That's enough for Leland Cutler, and it's enough for Shorty Glick."

She bent down to shake the midget's hand. "I'll do what I can. Be seeing you, Shorty."

He nodded, put the ten-gallon hat back on, hoisted up the chaps and kid's gun belt with dignity, and waddled into the compound. Singer's Midgets, carted around from sawdust heap to sawdust heap, stared at, laughed at, gee whiz, they're tiny, Bob, just like kids. Fuck you, too, lady. How's that for kid talk?

She walked down the fairway, leaned against the wall of Ripley's Odditorium and lit another Chesterfield, staring down at the line waiting for Sally Rand's Nude Ranch. Sally's girls needed protection as much as the midgets, and the only kind they'd get from the cops came with a price. Miranda just charged money.

Women were clutching their hats against the cold Bay wind, and some Spanish flamenco dancers from the Alta California exhibit huddled, laughing, in front of the fortune teller. Miranda pressed herself against the stucco wall, closing her eyes. No fortunes left, not for Spain.

Not for Miranda. Fortunes meant future, and she didn't think about the future anymore, not since '37. Johnny wasn't in it.

Poor, tired Spain, poor tired world, tired, so tired of war, and yet more coming, more fucking wars, more corpses, white flesh bloated and ruptured, rotting in farm house wells, mangled bodies on the streets of Madrid. No future, no fortune. No Johnny. Just the carnival.

Listen to the calliope and it'll all go away.

Step right up, folks, one thin dime, neon and fishnets, girls in G-strings, babies in incubators. Welcome to the Gayway, Leland Cutler's Pageant of the Pacific, pride of 1939, and who gives a fuck if New York has a world's fair, too.

She blinked, watching the cigarette ash burn closer, Laughing Sal's mechanical cackle drifting on the wind. No treasure on Treasure Island.

Just another world's fair. Another goddamn calliope.

She walked back again toward Midget Village. The line at the refreshment stand was shorter. The clown and the kid, still in sight, headed toward Heather Row. But the clown was pulling the kid's arm, the girl crying, upset. Fat lady in green nowhere to be seen.

Miranda gulped the cigarette, nicotine hitting her lungs. Burnett hadn't taught her much. Wiggle when you walk, Miranda, you know how to be an escort. Fuck being a detective. Wrong again, Burnett, you bastard, rest in fucking peace.

They all needed help, midgets and Sally's girls and sideshow freaks and monkeys in race cars. She dodged two sailors and a marine, and hurried toward the clown.

You pays your money and you takes your choice.

Couple of fraternity boys pushed an elderly couple by in the fifty-cent chairs, almost running down Miranda. The clown pulled the kid toward La Plaza Avenue, rounding the corner by the Owl Drug Store and Ghirardelli Chocolate.

A sharpie in a cheap suit pried himself away from a souvenir booth, eyes on Miranda's snug navy jacket, as if looking would make it go away. She tried to side-step him, but he jumped in front, blocking her.

"Lady, why the hurry? A looker like you—"

"Get out of my way—"

He stroked his thin mustache with one hand, and put his other one on her left shoulder, straight arm, sliding up and down, out and in.

"Sally's that way, girlie— you could make a bund—"

Miranda shoved his hand off her breast with her right, backhanding him hard in the face with her left. He tumbled, off balance, and hit the dirt.

By the time she heard the angry "Fucking bitch!" the clown and the girl had disappeared.

Ghirardelli Building, sign of the giant parrot. It perched above the door, hawking chocolate malts and candy. Café sat one hundred, about twenty people were waiting for seats. No clowns. A lot of children.

A blonde in a hat and brown jumper was leaning over the candy belt, watching the chocolate bonbons. Miranda pushed her way through.

Not her.

Eight people, understaffed, handing out samples to quiet the kids.

Five- year- olds all looked alike.

Miranda's stomach tightened, started to hurt. She headed for the Owl, checked the lunch counter, toy department, searched the aisles.

Too late.

The White Star Tuna Restaurant was quiet, almost empty. Found a table by one of the windows, stared out at the enormous sparkling walls of Vacationland until the tuna-tomato salad and coffee arrived.

It was too early for tuna, too early for the Chicken of the Sea star on top of the bright round building, too early for the "Romance of Tuna" story that hung on the walls and filled a page in the takeaway souvenir menu.

Early didn't mean much to Miranda. Late night at Sally's, boyfriend trouble for one of the girls. Now she'd lost the clown. Tuna romance was just the fucking ticket.

Back and forth, back and forth across the knots of people. She looked down at her cup. Kaleidoscope of black. Maybe she was wrong.

Around and around, spinning, shiny, colors too dark. Five years old, first encounter with fingers in wrong places. Hard fingers, hard laps, persistent. Little girl, bouncing on an old professor's lap, friend of her father. Bouncing hard.

Around again to ten. Old Hatchett asleep, father away, drunk or at an

academic conference or both. Escape the dungeon, get out, get out to the streets. Muddy San Francisco, horse shit on Market Street, ten years after the quake. Man in a dirty suit, sudden smile, all in the eyes.

Eyes that scared her, hands that scared her, come on, little girl, I'll give you a present. Don't you want to play?

Fourteen and she learned how to fight, how to bite a finger, how to squirm out of a grasp, learned where to look and what to look for, curious, but not enough to return to the professor's lap, or the Santa Claus with his own bag of toys. Around and around she goes, and where she stops . . .

The kaleidoscope dissolved, carousel no longer turning. No farther, not today.

Miranda drained her coffee, shoved the tuna away untouched, and left half a dollar on the yellow Formica table top. Walked back to the Plaza and lit a Chesterfield, still scanning the crowds. Maybe she'd been wrong.

A uniformed cop was walking up from the Court of Pacifica, heading toward the Gayway, nodded when he saw Miranda.

"You busy, Corbie?"

She inhaled the cigarette, blew a stream of smoke behind her. "It's my day off. Why?"

His brown eyes were somber. "Lady says her daughter's been kidnapped. We're looking for a clown."

Silk dress from Magnin's under a shoulder-length fur, head of a dead animal dangling from the back. Gloved hands. Whiff of My Sin when she sobbed.

She was a little older than Miranda, about thirty-five. Brown hair, more than a touch of henna.

Grogan looked at her, his mouth curled around a cigar, then back over at Miranda.

"You here to add the woman's touch, Corbie, or because you got something?"

She blew a smoke ring, watched it float behind his left ear. "How about the human touch, Grogan—or is that beyond you?"

He shrugged, eyes on the victim. One of the uniforms coughed.

"Says she turned her back to buy her kid some cotton candy at the Gayway, and next thing she knew the kid was gone. The kid's name is Susie. I thought Donlevy gave you the low-down."

"What he knew of it." She pulled Grogan's chair from his desk and sat next to the woman.

"Any enemies, Mrs. Hampton? Demands for money, threats?"

The face that jerked toward Miranda was sharp, still pretty. "N-no.

Not that I know—and please, don't tell my husband. He'll—Geoff is so impetuous, I'm afraid he'll—don't tell him!" She gasped, the sable quivering.

Miranda ground the Chesterfield into the arm of Grogan's chair.

Waited for Mrs. Hampton to breathe again.

“Did Susie ever run away—or get lost?”

“No. Please, please, just find her. I don’t even care if you find that—the monster who took her, just find my little girl.”

Miranda leaned forward. “Exactly what happened?”

“I—I told them already. Sergeant, why do I have to—”

“—you don’t have to do nothing, Mrs. Hampton. This here’s Miranda Corbie. She’s what they call a private eye in them fairy tales people read.”

The woman held the handkerchief up to her face.

“Are you going to help get my Susie back?”

“I need the truth, Mrs. Hampton— in your own words.”

The woman took a deep, rattling breath, closed her eyes for a moment. “Cotton candy. Susie likes it. She just turned five last week, I—I was looking for a smaller bill—the man at the counter didn’t have change for a twenty—”

Miranda looked up, exchanged glances with Grogan.

“—and by the time I sorted it all out, I turned around and she was— was gone.”

“Where does the clown come in?”

She closed her eyes again, shaking her head, hand to her heart.

“He’d been following us. I’d noticed him, he’d made Susie laugh earlier, and we threw him a dollar. I thought he was just, you know, performing as those people do, but I can see now that he was following us.”

Miranda pulled out the pack of Chesterfields, offered one to Mrs. Hampton. She shook her head. Miranda’s lighter sputtered, and one of the uniforms stepped forward with a lit match, while another one sniggered. Miranda grabbed his hand for a moment, looked up, and said, “Thanks.”

She inhaled, leaning back in Grogan’s chair. Said it casually. “So you didn’t actually see him take Susie.”

Lois Hampton fixed her large brown eyes on Miranda’s, all reproach and a mother’s dignity, surrounded by the faint odor of Choward’s Violets and Sen-Sen.

“Miss Corbie— I didn’t need to see him. I know. My daughter’s in danger.” She bent forward, placing a gloved hand on Miranda’s sleeve.

“Please— please help me.”

Rick wasn’t at the Press Building. Miranda hung up the payphone, watching husbands pull wives into the Ford Building. Hit the receiver, asked the operator to try the *San Francisco News*. Shook out another Chesterfield from the crumpled pack.

“Rick—Miranda. I’ve got something.”

He paused for a moment then, laughed, Irish lilt always so goddamn irritating.

“It’s not like you ever call and ask me over for a drink. What is it? Need some help with that shiny new PI license of yours?”

She struck a match on Ford’s wall.

“You were over two weeks ago.”

“Don’t worry, honey, you don’t have to ration me. What is it?”

“Little girl kidnapped by a clown.”

He whistled, and she held the phone away.

“Don’t fucking whistle. Woman’s name is Lois Hampton. Lives in the city. Five-year-old daughter, blonde. Susie. Husband is Geoff, they’ve got money. I need you to look her up.”

Silence, while Rick scribbled. “What about the clown?”

“He’s not a clown by now. I tried to tell Grogan to search the restrooms, but he’s still out looking for circus acts. Just check Lois Hampton.”

He hesitated. “Miranda—”

“Yes?”

“—should I look for— you know—”

“Molesters? Rapists? Another Albert Fish in a clown costume?”

Her voice was heavy, and her hand shook when she brought the cigarette up to her mouth. “Check everything. I’ll call you back in half an hour.”

“OK.”

She hung up the phone, taking a last shuddering inhale of the Chesterfield. Squinted up at the giant National Cash Register, the two-foot numbers marking attendance. Twenty-three thousand and counting. A lot of them five-year-olds.

Children’s Day. Four hundred fucking acres of it.

She lost them at La Plaza. Nearest restroom was across the road at Vacationland. He’d sneak into the ladies room, use the girl as an excuse.

Clean-shaven, late thirties, dressed oddly. Maybe baggy pants and a souvenir shirt. Unless he’d planned it, and was hiding more than a trick hanky in his clown suit.

A guide stood outside, buttons still shiny on the uniform. College kid.

She asked: “You see any clowns this morning?”

He rolled his eyes. “Lady, I could tell you—”

“Don’t. This one kidnapped a little girl.”

Jaw dropped. “Geez, lady. I’ve seen maybe three or four. All the kids, you know. Children’s Day.”

“Any come in here?”

“Maybe. I’ve been moving around.”

She headed inside the curve of the building. Women’s and men’s restrooms, side by side, across from the cafeteria and barbershop.

Attendant a slow, stooped woman with a Russian accent. Da, there was a clown. Da, he come in with a child. She stroked the dollar bill like it was a pet.

The other one, younger, dark-haired, lounge help. Another dollar.

Yes, miss, told him it ain’t proper. No mother, I says, and he says she’s sick in bed, and he’s off work, needs to wash up. Washed up right there in the sink. Felt sorry for him, miss. I ain’t done nothin’ wrong.

Another dollar, help the guilt along.

Little girl was crying, miss. Hungry. Talked about doughnuts.

What's this all about? I ain't done nothing wrong, miss, I can't lose my job, gotta feed my own kids. No, don't remember what he looked like without the face on. I ain't done nothing wrong. He was just an average Joe, miss. Just an average Joe.

Miranda ran out of the powder room, the door banging behind her.

Doughnuts meant the Gayway, Maxwell House building, hot coffee and crullers, the Doughnut Tower's fat red neon stripes slicing through the fog.

Couple of hundred in the restaurant, maybe forty kids. No little blonde girl. No clown, ex or otherwise. No luck. Spilled out like coffee, good to the last drop.

Miranda checked the Penny Arcade next door, then up and down the strip, past the Glass Blowers and Loop- A-Swing, the diving bell and flea circus. Her ankle twisted on a souvenir kewpie doll dirtied from sawdust and cigarette butts. She stopped, breathing hard, picked it up. Maybe from a kid in Children's Village, the Gayway's official nanny service, complete with on-duty nurse and riding ponies. Perfect for when the parents ogled nipples at Sally Rand's.

She stared at the painted face. Midget Village, Chinese Village, Children's Village. Too many goddamn villages. The clown would be in the big villages by now, San Francisco or Oakland. He'd gotten by her, gotten by them all.

Miranda walked to a phone by the Fun House and dialed Rick. Set the kewpie doll on the phone ledge.

"Sanders? You got anything?"

"Yeah. Half a goddamn hour, Miranda—"

"Fucking tell me."

He grunted. "Lois Hampton. You said the kid is five, right?"

"Turned five last week. Why?"

"She married Geoff Hampton, finance attorney, four years ago. Methodist ser vice. No parents for the bride. She worked at Emporium— probably counter girl, from what the society column left out."

"So she married up. And the kid's not his."

"Or is, but nobody waited for the license."

Miranda tapped her second-to-the-last cigarette out of the Chesterfield package. "What else?"

"What the hell do you want for thirty minutes? No child killers. So far."

She took out the Fair lighter, lit, and inhaled, blowing smoke and watching it drift by the Headless Girl stand.

"See if you can find a birth certificate for Susie. And call Whitney— the concession director. Lean on him for a list of clowns working Treasure Island today."

Rick hesitated. "Listen, I want her found as much as you do. But I can't spend all day—"

"Yeah, I know. Give it another hour, Rick. OK?"

He grumbled. "Yeah, Miranda. Don't I always?"

She hung up the phone, staring at the two giant Ferris wheels turning side by side. Shielded her eyes to make sure. A little blonde girl and a dark-haired man were sitting in a top car, laughing.

Shoved her way to the front of the line, eyes on Susie, insults behind her.

The operator leered, all teeth. “Your money’s worth, missy. One dime. I’ll make sure you get a good, long ride.”

Miranda showed him her ID. “Stop the goddamn wheel.”

Face red, he pulled one of the long handles. She leaned on his shoulder, the line behind her starting to whisper.

“Step aside when you get to the car with a little blonde girl. I’ll tell you when.”

He nodded, easing the cars to a stop, one at a time, one at a time.

Three more to go before Susie.

A fat lady in the car before them had difficulty getting out. Susie’s hat was off. The clown’s hand stroked her hair, greasepaint still filling the cracks in his face.

Their car swung into line. Miranda poked the operator in the back with the kewpie doll, and he opened the gate, got out of the way. The clown gave Susie a small push and she walked forward. Miranda stepped in front of her, held out the doll.

“This is for you, Susie.”

The little girl stared at her, confused. Miranda grabbed Susie’s hand, eyes raised to the clown. He looked from one to the other, panic twisting his face. Then he jumped off the platform, running into the Gayway crowds while a woman behind them screamed.

It took three minutes to find a cop. She gave him Susie, ran past Greenwich Village toward the opposite end of the zone. Where the hell could a clown go to be inconspicuous? Except he wasn’t a clown anymore.

She stopped in the middle of the grounds, breathing hard. Susie was safe. Not harmed. But the clown . . .

She looked up at the complex called Children’s Village. And took out her last cigarette.

He was slapping on greasepaint when she walked in the room. Jumped up, shrank against the wall, eyes large without the makeup, focused on the .22 in her hand. Still sad.

“Please, please, lady. I was just trying to see her. She don’t even know I’m her father.”

She stared at him, smoke from the Chesterfield curling toward the cracked mirror.

“Some fucking father. You expect me to believe you? You kidnapped a little girl, goddamn it—”

“There’s proof. Loie’s got it. She showed it to me. Before— before she got married.”

He wiped his forehead, his hand shaking. Sank slowly into the chair, the bare yellow lightbulb throwing shadows across his face.

“Made me promise never to see her. Susie’s chance. Loie’s chance. My little girl could have the good things . . . I ain’t never gonna be able to buy her what he can. And I kept my promise. I ain’t seen her since she was a baby.”

Miranda gestured with the .22. “Keep your hands on the counter.

I saw *Stella Dallas*, and it plays better with a woman. You broke your goddamn promise. Why? Got religion, all of a sudden? Or did you figure you’d be Daddy for a day?”

Face, mouth, voice, pleading, looking at her, not the gun. “Loie brought her here, to the Village. I make balloons for the kids . . . Loie was leaving for Sally’s, didn’t recognize me with the face and all. I stopped her, asked about Susie, but she was worried ’bout people seein’ us together. So’s I took Susie when she left, tried to— to spend a little time with her. Knew they’d probably look for me as soon as Loie figured it out, washed my face, took my street clothes with me.”

Miranda blew a stream of smoke toward the cheap pine wardrobe in the corner, the pistol steady and pointed at the clown.

“What were you going do with her? Tell me that— what were you going to do with her?”

“I weren’t gonna keep her, lady. I just wanted to see my little girl. Give her some fun, something to remember her old man by. She said she likes cotton candy. Please don’t lose me my job. I like kids. I’m good with kids. Ask Anderson— didn’t he tell you? Didn’t he tell you I’m good with—”

“Fuck the job. Worry about San Quentin.”

Face whiter than makeup, shadows under the eyes, dark pools. Hands trembling on the counter. The Tower of the Sun carillon played the hour, “Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream.”

His voice croaked, reedy, strong, sure.

“All right. Go ahead. I’m not sorry for tryin’ to see Susie. I’m glad I did it. I’d do it again. And at least she’ll know her old man was willin’ to pay the price for seein’ her.”

Miranda took a long drag on the Chesterfield, studying his face.

He met her eyes, breathing hard, defiant. *Disturb not her dream . . .*

She said: “Put some makeup on.”

She thought about Susie, and about what Susie would want. But fuck, Susie was five years old, and it didn’t matter what she’d want. Children’s Day was make-believe, and only once a year.

At least she had a father who loved her. That put her ahead. Put her ahead of Miranda.

She called Lois Hampton, calmed her down. Met with her privately, lunching at the Women’s Club, Susie still holding the kewpie doll. Suggested new terms for Susie’s daddy, especially with Geoff away so much. No, no publicity, Mrs. Hampton. No publicity. Called Rick. Got a liverwurst sandwich

at Maxwell House, walked to the Owl for more cigarettes. Finally strolled over to Midget Village, watching Shorty twirl a six gun for some kids and their parents, the late afternoon sun stretching across the bay, the midgets making long shadows in the sawdust of the corral.

A cop ambled by, stood next to her.

“Hear you found the missing girl, Corbie.”

“Yeah.”

“Lost the kidnapper, though?”

Miranda shrugged, opened a new package of Chesterfields. “I don’t know, Gillespie. Sometimes a clown is just a clown.”

He stared at her. “What the hell does that mean?”

She blew a smoke ring, watching it rise high on the bay wind, drifting above the Gayway.

“It means Happy Children’s Day.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and moved on.

KELLI STANLEY is an award-winning author of two crime fiction series. *City of Dragons* (from Thomas Dunne/Minotaur Books in February 2010) continues the story of Miranda Corbie—private investigator in 1940 San Francisco—ex-escort, and the protagonist of *Children’s Day*. Kelli’s debut novel, *Nox Dormianda*, set two thousand years earlier in Roman Britain, won a Macavity Award nomination, and the Bruce Alexander Award for best historical mystery of the year. Kelli lives in foggy San Francisco and earned a master’s degree in Classics. Discover more about Kelli and the worlds she writes about at www.kellistanley.com.

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