

# Childish Things

by Renee Carter Hall

*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

—1 Corinthians 13:11 (KJV)

*When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.*

—C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children"

David sat in the hospital cafeteria, sipping coffee that had gone cold half an hour before. It didn't matter; he wasn't thirsty, wasn't hungry. He felt rather like the corridors around him: white and blank and cold.

He twisted his wedding band around and around on his finger. It was a little loose; he supposed that meant he'd lost weight, and any other time he would have been glad. Instead, all he could think about was how this same gold ring had encircled his newborn daughter's entire arm. How her tiny red body, delicate and fragile as a butterfly's wing, bristled with needles and tubes hooked to monitors and machines he couldn't even name, let alone understand.

Some things, he thought idly, are good when they come early. Repairmen, for instance. Spring after a hard winter. A raise, a promotion. But not a child, not a baby who still needed two and a half months before she would have been ready for the world that now pressed so heavily upon her.

He wanted to be upstairs with Amy, in the NICU—neonatal intensive care unit, a name far bigger than its occupants—but she had made it clear that he needed to eat something, especially since they were going to be here all night. So he'd come down here with the idea of obeying, because she was right, of course, in the way she always was, the way that saw to the heart of things, to the heart of him—but he'd looked at plastic-wrapped turkey sandwiches and wilting Caesar salads and cups of layered Jell-O, and nothing had looked good. Nothing had even looked real. He wanted...

He wanted to be home, all three of them home where they belonged. He wanted to watch Amy nurse Caitlyn, wanted to rock his daughter in the chair he'd refinished just a few weeks before, wanted to put her to bed first in the frilly bassinet, then later, when she was bigger, in the white

crib with the plush mobile of moons and stars hanging over it. He wanted to watch her sleep, without the discordant electronic lullaby of the monitors and pumps and respirator all keeping mechanical time.

He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. The doctor was coming by in an hour and a half, and then the longest night of their lives—all their lives—would start. They had agreed that turning off the respirator was the best thing to do, the only thing to do.

She would breathe on her own, through the night, through every night afterward.

Or...

Or, she wouldn't. It was that simple.

Hell would not be red with fire, David decided on his way back to the NICU. It would be white, and sterile, and cold. It wasn't about being tortured yourself; it was having to watch the pain of someone you loved more than your own soul. And being utterly helpless to do anything about it.

\* \* \*

And then the elevator stopped.

He was, of course, alone. He swore and jammed the red emergency button. Silence.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. God, he was so tired. Tired of this place, tired of the hollow look in Amy's eyes, tired of other people's sympathy. Tired of being what he had to be: strong for Amy, supporting her, getting them through this...

Something touched his arm.

He jerked away, looking around, the metal walls casting hazy reflections around him. Nothing.

He shook his head. He'd dozed off, that was all. Understandable, given how little sleep he'd had.

Then something warm pressed against his arm, and he *knew* something was there—he could feel a tingling presence at the edge of his perception—

"Keep it together, Dave," he said out loud. "You can crack up when this is all over. Not before. All

you have to do—"

A shape coalesced before him, first a color, a bright reddish purple, then a form—it was an animal, how had an animal gotten in a closed elevator? —and then it was solid and real and warm breath on his face as he sank down to the floor.

David reached out his hand and touched fur.

"Jinks," he whispered.

And the voice came back to him from thirty years before, but still the same, everything the same, the voice gentle and rich and kind.

"Hello, David. It's been a long time."

\* \* \*

David got to his feet on the first try, which surprised him. "You're... smaller than I remember."

Jinks smiled. "You've grown a bit since you saw me last."

David tried to take it in. Standing before him was a quadrupedal big cat, with a coat of thick purple fur highlighted with white at the belly and paws. He was just as David remembered: the same short, curling white horns at his brow, the same saber teeth, the same green stripes ringing his impossibly long tail. And the same luminous green eyes, which right now held a highly amused expression.

"I'm hallucinating," David said. "Right?"

Jinks stretched. "Never fails. When kids see something they can't explain, it's magic. When adults see something they can't explain, they're cracking up. It's a pretty limiting way of looking at the world, if you ask me." He stretched his back legs, spreading his toes, then turned back to David, putting his front paws on David's shoulders and bringing his face close enough that David could smell Jinks' breath, which smelled oddly like grape Kool-Aid.

"You *do* remember, don't you?" Jinks asked.

"Um..." David tried to pull away. "A little personal space would be nice."

Jinks chuckled. "Personal space, huh? Oh, you have one—*if* you remember it."

And then, David did. "The kingdom of Davidia..."

"That's my boy," Jinks said, grinning, leaping back, chasing his tail for joy. "I knew you wouldn't forget! Other Ellusa's children forget, but not you."

"Ell... usa?"

"Imaginary friends. The technical term, anyway." Jinks padded over to the elevator panel and stood on his hind legs to press a purple button David knew hadn't been there before. The elevator hummed back to life, and he felt the car ascending.

"What happens to an Ellusa if their child forgets?" David asked.

Jinks looked puzzled. "Nothing. *You* forget *us*. We don't forget you."

The doors opened, and David breathed a sigh of relief—then froze.

This wasn't the hospital.

Before them stretched a green meadow with golden mountains beyond. A great tree stood in the center of the meadow, its branches thick and twisting, every leaf a different color. Sixty-four leaves, he knew; sixty-four colors. He'd used every single color in his box of crayons.

Jinks ambled through the doors, then looked back over his shoulder. "You coming?"

"I..." He looked at his watch, which didn't seem to be running. "I have to be—"

"Don't worry. There's no time here."

Looking around, David could believe that. Everything looked exactly as he'd imagined it so long ago: the soft grass, the bubbling stream—fizzing, actually, since it was orange soda instead of water—and of course, the tree.

"The magic tree," David said, touching its smooth bark.

Jinks chuckled. "Why don't you see if it still works?"

David smiled and reached up to pluck a leaf from one of the branches. As the stem gave way, he found himself holding a peanut butter sandwich, with jelly the color of Jinks' coat—and, he noted

with satisfaction, the crusts cut off.

Jinks shook his head. "I can't believe you still make Amy cut the crusts off."

David smiled sheepishly and took a bite. It tasted good; it tasted *real*. Then he frowned and looked back at Jinks. "You know about Amy?"

Jinks nudged him, purring. "I told you, we don't forget you. Ellusa don't disappear when their kids grow up. We're still there. It's just like pulling teeth to get you to *see* us, that's all."

"So you've been..."

"With you all this time," Jinks said quietly. "Yes."

David stared out across the meadow a moment, the sandwich forgotten. "Those dreams..."

"Were they?" Jinks asked.

He remembered being in that state between sleeping and waking, those nights when worry kept him from sleep—worrying over exams or dates or job interviews, or that he would do something stupid at the wedding and somehow lose the soulmate he still couldn't believe he had—and then there would be a feeling of peace, a kind of spiritual warmth stealing silently over him, easing him into sleep, into dreams of green meadows and a voice telling him everything would be all right.

And then, he remembered something else.

"Yes," Jinks said. "I was there, too."

His father's funeral. His mother stately in her grief, his sister dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled tissue, and David wondering if any of them were really feeling *anything*, wondering what they would do if he broke down the way he desperately wanted to, needed to, except that sons weren't supposed to, boys didn't cry and men weren't even supposed to have hearts as far as he could tell—

—and there had been a brushing of a breeze against his pants legs, and that sudden peace that came over him like sunlight after rain. And later he'd noticed that he must have gotten into some purple lint somewhere—

—not lint, it was hair—

"That was you," David said, his voice barely a whisper.

Jinks' green eyes held great sorrow, great love. "You needed me. So I was there."

David leaned back against the tree, looking up through the rainbow of leaves. Then he thought of something and laughed. "You know, I never imagined anything for you to hunt back then. What did you eat, anyway?"

"Your leftovers," Jinks replied, licking peanut butter from his fangs. "Not bad, but I'd rather have crunchy."

Jinks washed his paws and lay down, and David rested against the cat's flank, wondering if the Ellusa hadn't gotten bigger since they'd come back to Davidia. "You used to be big enough that I could ride on your back," David said.

"You used to be *small* enough for that," Jinks corrected him. Then the Ellusa laughed. "Remember when you slayed the dragon?"

"Water guns," David remembered. "I shot him with water guns until I put out his fire, and then he flew away..."

"And left all his treasure behind, and you paraded around in that crown, and all those jewels so heavy you could hardly stand up."

"And I put gold rings on your horns and your tail, until you got mad at me and made me take them off." David touched his wedding band, and the image of it around Caitlyn's arm came back like a shadow falling over him.

Jinks rested a heavy paw on David's knee. "You learned to be brave here."

David thought of the sick helpless feeling that he'd lived with for so long that he almost didn't even notice it anymore. "Did I?" he asked.

A breeze stirred the leaves, and a burnt sienna one broke off, swirled into his lap, and became a chocolate chip cookie, warm from the oven. David ignored it. "Did you bring me here to forget?"

Jinks shook his head. "No. I brought you here to remember."

David looked up again. Tears blurred the leaves into a kaleidoscope. "I'd rather forget. I'd rather be five again," when you didn't have to worry about anything, think about anything, when you didn't have to be strong for anyone, not even yourself...

Thoughts, feelings, memories—everything crashed over him, and he wept, and Jinks was warm

comfort, thick fur to bury his face in, the Ellusa's voice deep and sweet.

"You learned to cry here, too," Jinks said. "I should have told you then that it was all right to do it out there."

At last, when he was spent, Jinks licked the tears from his face and purred, a heavy rumble that sounded in David's chest as much as his ears. David smiled. "I remember when you broke the lamp."

Jinks' eyes narrowed in mock rage. "Hey, kiddo, I had nothing to do with that—and your mother knew better, too, you little liar—"

"*I'm* a liar? Who told me I could sprout wings here if I jumped off that cliff?"

Jinks grinned. "I couldn't help myself; it was so funny the way you flailed around before you hit."

David shoved him playfully, and Jinks took a swipe at him with one paw, ruffling his hair. "That could have been your head, you know," Jinks taunted, leaping away.

"Get back here, you big furball!" David chased after him, grabbing a handful of leaves and pelting the cat with chocolate-frosted cupcakes.

"Not the sprinkles!" Jinks pretended to stagger, then flopped onto his side. "Not... the..." His eyes closed. "Sprinkles..."

David was out of breath from laughing by the time he reached Jinks. The cat knocked David off his feet with one idle swipe, then got to work licking the frosting from his fur.

David looked up. The sky was turning pink, deepening to orange at the horizon. "Sunset," he said.

Jinks glanced at the sky, gave his ruff a final pass, then got to his feet. "Come on, then. Time to go back."

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David looked at his watch. Four thirty-three A.M. Amy had finally fallen asleep in the chair, the night nurse had moved on, and now he was alone in his vigil.

He watched Caitlyn's chest rise and fall, rise and fall. Every breath a little closer, a little stronger, every breath her own way of saying *I'm here. I'm here and I'm staying*. Every breath a gift and a prayer.

He felt Jinks beside him before he saw him, and spoke quietly so he wouldn't wake Amy. "Do you know what's going to happen?"

"The Ellusa aren't given that sight," Jinks replied. "We love who we're given to love, for as long as we can." He paused. "Just as you do."

He was gone then, and David turned back to the incubator. Caitlyn breathed before him, Amy breathed deeply in her sleep behind him. Moment by moment, breath by breath, the night gave way, and the sky outside the windows gentled into dawn.

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He didn't see Jinks again until more than two months later. They had brought Caitlyn home, finally, and she slept now in the pink nursery just as he'd imagined all those weeks ago. Still, he found himself up several times a night, even when she wasn't crying, just to check on her, to watch her chest rise and fall. To make sure she was still all right.

Jinks appeared on the seventh night. "David," he said quietly, "it's time."

David frowned. "Time for what?"

Jinks swallowed. "You asked what happens to Ellusa when their kids grow up. Well, the whole truth is, we don't stay forever. We can't.

"You have a child of your own now, David. So you have to release me."

David stared at him. "What if I don't?"

Jinks smiled sadly. "I'll still be with you for a while, for as long as I can. But then I'll start to fade, and I'll keep fading until I'm gone. For good."

"And if I release you... what happens? Where do you go?"

"To another child, to be their Ellusa, as I was time and again long before you were born." Jinks

paused. "You were a good kid, David," he said, his voice rough. "I'll miss you. But it's time."

David tried to blink back tears, then let them fall. "What do I have to do?"

"Tell me goodbye."

David nodded. He took a slow breath, then hesitated. "Will I ever see you again?"

Jinks put his paws up on the bassinet and nuzzled the baby gently. "She's beautiful, David. She's got your eyes." He turned back. "Maybe," he said at last, with a slight smile. "If you can recognize me."

David knelt and hugged Jinks around the neck. Jinks was purring again, and David wondered which one of them it was meant to soothe.

"Goodbye, Jinks," he said, and even as he spoke, even with his eyes closed, he felt the fur fading, dissolving like cotton candy under his fingers, until he held nothing, and even the silent presence was gone.

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Caitlyn tipped her toy teapot over David's cup and passed him a plate of plastic cookies. He'd decided it was best to sit on the floor; he wasn't sure his knees could handle the tiny chair.

Caitlyn served her stuffed dog next, then the doll her aunt had given her. Then she turned to the empty room. "And how do you take your tea, Hopscotch?"

Caitlyn listened a moment, then came to whisper in David's ear. "He says he wants a peanut butter sandwich."

"Oh," David said. "Well, he *is* a guest... How about I go make one for him?"

"Okay."

"Would you like one, too? With jelly?"

Caitlyn conferred with Hopscotch. "Strawberry, please. And—"

"No crusts," David finished. "Okay."

David smiled as he made the sandwiches. Caitlyn had an incredibly vivid imagination, and he loved watching it at work. He'd have to ask her what this Hopscotch looked like. A rabbit, maybe?

He carried the plate out of the kitchen, grabbing the milk on the way. Imaginary tea wasn't going to do much to wash down peanut butter. He headed down the hall to her room—and stopped at her doorway.

There was something—someone?—in there with her.

Heart pounding, he took a step closer, edging forward until he could peek around the door. There, amid Caitlyn's toys and dolls and stuffed animals, stood a horse. A very small horse, to be sure, but with legs so long it was hard to think of it as a pony. Then again, no horse or pony had ever had a mint green coat and iridescent blue butterfly wings.

"Hopscotch," he said softly, wondering...

The horse looked up and caught his eye. Its eyes, David saw, were a very luminous, very familiar shade of green.

And then the horse flickered and faded and was gone, though Caitlyn could still see him, judging by the way she reached out to stroke where Hopscotch's nose would have been. David waited a moment to compose himself, then brought the sandwiches in.

"Thank you, Daddy," Caitlyn said.

"You're welcome, sweetie." David picked up a sandwich and held it out to the air. "Hopscotch, would you like a sandwich?"

"Daddy," Caitlyn scolded him in a loud whisper, "that's his *tail*."

"Oh." David smiled. "Sorry."

And from somewhere very far away, from a place where there was no time, David thought he heard a low chuckle. But it might have only been his imagination.

*written permission.*

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