

This was written as an entry to Cast Iron Theatre's "Dukeanory: Ugly Tales for Beautiful Souls":

"We're looking for your stories! Cast Iron Theatre will present an evening of spooky short stories as part of the BRIGHTON HORRORFEST in October!

"Loosely inspired by the portmanteau Amicus stories of the seventies, CAST IRON THEATRE will present an evening of six spooky stories, all with one theme.

"The stories will be read by CAST IRON actors in a Jackanory style, and will have a linking theme - UGLY STORIES FOR BEAUTIFUL SOULS: make of that what you will!

"No, seriously - make of that what you will: please submit your horror / spooky story of around 1,500 words, and allow the title to strongly influence your narrative (although be as loose with your interpretation as you wish). Bear in mind that your story should probably be first person narrative (although the events don't have to have happened directly to the person telling the story), and that the Amicus films we're taking inspiration from were a) largely made in the 70s and b) often influenced by folklore dating between 1870s and 1930s."

Safe

By Susanne Crosby

"Tell me again" she said.

No sooner had I walked in the door and shut it behind me: there she was; having just run to me and thrown her arms around me. She was speaking softly into my chest. The smell from her freshly washed long straight hair floated up to me: strawberries. I put my big arms around her very softly.

"I rescued you."

She looked up at me, not letting me go with her arms. Her skin was almost translucent, her oval face and big wide eyes were the definition of beauty. "No... tell me properly." She reached up and held her hand to my face, her touch was so light and my skin must have been so rough. Her fingertips touched the crinkles around my eyes while her palm touched my beard in such a gentle way I could barely feel the move of the hairs on my face.

I unfolded her arms from my back and walked her across the room. She sat on her bed, simply, no fuss, no adult pretence, just simply sat. I sat in the rocking chair and looked at her, smiling.

“You never tire of this story?” I asked.

She smiled back at me. Beamed actually. “Never.” She said proudly.

I breathed in to start and she got up, still in her loose white cotton nightgown, and got into her bed. Lifting the covers delicately with slender hands and sitting with the covers over her, her arms around her bent knees, looking at me, waiting patiently. I looked around the windowless room for a second. Then I began.

“It was the day the war started. We didn’t know that at the time of course. The world had been going crazy with countries threatening each other...” I looked up. This wasn’t the part she was most interested in and I knew it. I smiled knowingly and started again. “... OK. It was the day the war started. The bombs started dropping and the noises were deafening. There was no warning and it was just suddenly chaos. I was on my way home, I knew if I could just get home I would be alright, as my basement is big and secure. I was covered in dirt – a bit like I am now – from the debris and clouds of smoke and fumes in the air. I was coughing and my ears were ringing from the crazy noises around me. As I was stumbling through, stumbling past a pile of rubble where once there was a building – there you were. Four or perhaps five years old. Covered in dirt. Standing there, looking at me.

“You were the only silent thing in that horrible noisy grey day. You had been crying; I could see from the tear streaks through the dirt on your face. But you held me with your eyes, I couldn’t move. I had never seen anything so beautiful. Then a bomb dropped in the distance and I was shaken out of my trance. Up til that moment I had only thought of myself, protecting myself. After that moment, I knew I had to rescue you; to save you. Everyone around you was dead.”

I paused at this point, looking up at her. It was the horrible bit where I know she was looking for her family – even though she can’t remember them now.

“So I climbed over the stones – nearly falling over a big red chunk of wall, then I reached you. I scooped you up and you rested your head on my shoulder. I climbed back over the rubble with you in my arms and went as fast as I could – ignoring the noises, ignoring people screaming, and the distant noises of bombs and engines. You remember the people screaming?” She nodded. I know it was the only thing she did remember. “Well we got back here. I told you I would keep you safe. I rescued you, and I would always keep you safe.

“And here we are still. All these years later, with you becoming a young woman. I’m so sorry you don’t have a mum to look to in these times, to help you through. I will do what I can, what I always have, to try and be everything to you.”

I paused and in one movement she was in my arms on my lap. I rocked her back and forth. I stroked her soft fine hair as I continued. “And here we do our best, don’t we? I found you an old record player, you have some records there, all safe energy from my generator. I bring you food which I make sure isn’t contaminated. Fresh water. I bring you books” I pointed up to her bookshelf “from the old Library which is abandoned now. I used to read to you when you were little. We have been everything to each other

these past few years haven't we?" I felt her nod as we rocked. "We have your daylight lamps. We have our extra vitamins to make sure we survive. We may not have sunshine, but we make do. I will always keep you safe. Always. Come on, time for bed now."

She went back to her bed and climbed under the covers; I patted them around her as she turned to her side to face me while I crouched down. This was a routine we had. I stroked her long hair away from her face. "I'm sorry that after all these years that the war is still going on out there. I'm sorry my love. I'm so sorry that everything is in short supply and there is no law and looting – I want to keep you safe, that's why you're here, kept away from all that ugliness. The people out there are ugly – I just don't want to think about what they would do if they found you. You are such a beautiful girl. It's my duty to look after you. And every day I pray that it will be different, that the sun will come out again from behind the ash filled sky, that law and order will be restored, that the air will be safe to breathe – you know I filter it for us down here. I long to see the sun again. I long to walk out of here, hand in hand with my beautiful girl, and show you the sun again, and that the sky will be blue."

She nodded and smiled sleepily. I leaned over and kissed her forehead – pausing for a moment to breathe her in before standing up. "Goodnight my love" I said as I went out of the room, turning the key in the lock after I closed the door behind me.

These visits were so precious to me. No matter how many times I told that story to her she never tired of it. So long ago now, and those words had become so real to me, it was as if I could see it happening in my mind – I almost believed it myself. There were aspects that were absolutely true of course – funny how she remembered the screaming: one adult female screaming and screaming – at me at the time, how could she realistically call herself a mother with all that screaming going on? Honestly, in front of the girl and everything. But I soon saved my girl from that. And of course I saved my girl from seeing the result of what happened once the screaming stopped. It was my duty.

I walked up the stairs to the rest of my house, isolated, off the grid, self-sufficient. It really was the perfect place to survive any conflict, if there was one. I felt inwardly so satisfied with myself in that second. So righteous, in a way. I had seen her in the park so often and those eyes – nobody was paying attention to those eyes. She needed to be protected. I had done the right thing: rescued this beautiful girl, this beautiful soul, from an ugly world.

And as I thought to myself as I walked out into the brilliant sunshine, maybe, just maybe, this girl was the one I'd been searching for. Maybe this one was a keeper. Finally, I'd found the right girl.