

“Imagining Cinnamon”
by James Michael Maloney

Finally, all of her dental work was finished. It had not been easy for her. She was only eight years old. No little girl should ever have had to deal with it, but, as Daddy had said, she had the imagination to get through it. “Imagination rules the world,” he had told her (without also telling her that it was Napoleon who had said that first, a long time ago, in French).

At first, when she was afraid of sitting still in the chair, terrified that she would be held down, Daddy had let her smell some cinnamon that he had brought to the dentist’s office. It calmed her. She had been held down once, when she was five, by her cousin Robert, who was older and bigger, and she had begged him to let her go, but he just laughed. She struggled and become so afraid and upset that she wet her pants. But Daddy heard the noises and came upstairs from the living room and lifted Robert up and off of her by the neck with one big hand, and she just lay there, trembling and sobbing, feeling the urine in her pants slowly spread out and grow cooler. Daddy picked her up gently and took her downstairs to the kitchen and held an open bottle of ground cinnamon under her nose. It calmed her. “It’s OK,” he said, stroking her hair.

When, three years later, the dental procedures became necessary, Daddy initially brought the cinnamon, but he also told her that she could learn to imagine the smell all by herself. And she believed him, and he was right. After only a little trying, she was able to smell cinnamon whenever she was afraid as she lay back in the dentist’s chair through those many visits. And all the horrible things she envisioned the dentist was doing in her mouth, and the needles, and the scary numbness, became less upsetting. She had her imaginary cinnamon, and it worked.

Now it was the Saturday after Halloween, and the dental work was all finished, and she had just started third grade, and Daddy was taking her to Radio City Music Hall to see David Bowie. She loved David Bowie. She loved his music, and she loved the way he looked. The *ways* he looked. Daddy had asked her what fun thing she wanted to do as a reward for being brave and imaginative and getting through the dental work, and she had not hesitated for a moment. “I want to go see David Bowie at Radio City Music Hall!” she burst out.

“Well, you’ll have to stay up pretty late. And we’ll have to ride the subway, and I don’t want us to get separated, so you’ll have to stay close to me,” he cautioned.

“I’ll get lots of sleep the night before. We could go on a Saturday. And I promise to stay close to you the whole time.”

And so he had said yes, and now the night had arrived, and they were changing trains, but the platform was crowded, and she was so eager that she dashed ahead and got on the next train. But Daddy was too big to move between the people as fast as she had, and she was on the train and the doors were closing before she realized that he was still on the platform, trying to get to the train, a look of fear on his face. But the doors didn’t open again, and the train left the station.

She was scared at first, but she knew what to do. They had talked about this. She would go on by herself to Radio City Music Hall and meet him there. He had the tickets, but she knew the seat number and understood that she should find someone in charge. It would be all right.

When she came up out of the subway, though, she was a little bit lost. She looked around and saw a big man standing next to a van. The man looked a little like her Uncle William. The man looked her straight in the eyes, confidently, and smiled. She approached him. “Excuse me,” she asked politely, “Can you tell me which way to go to get to Radio City Music Hall?”

“I can do better than that,” he said, smiling again. “I can give you a ride there.”

She hesitated. She had been taught not to go anywhere with strangers.

He sensed her hesitation. “Oh, I understand. It’s OK.” He lowered his voice to a whisper and reached into his pocket. “I’m an undercover police officer.” He quickly pulled out a badge and showed it to her, then tucked it back into his pocket. It looked kind of real.

“Um, I guess it’s OK, then,” she replied, still hesitant.

The man opened the side door of the van and showed her the inside. There was a nice long padded seat running from front to back, and carpet on the floor, and cool-looking posters on the side walls. “You’ll be safer riding in the back,” he said. “Hop in.”

She hesitated again and turned around to face him, but at that moment his big hand came up under her chin, grabbing her by the throat and lifting her upward and into the van, and he came in with her, closing the door with his other hand. She tried to scream but nothing came out, and then something about the pressure on her throat made her feel lightheaded and dreamy, and when she woke up there was duct tape over her mouth, and more duct tape holding her hands together behind her back, and even more duct tape around her ankles. She was lying on the carpeted floor of the van, and it was moving, and the big man was driving it.

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Sweeney was hanging out alone on the quiet suburban corner. It was another boring, uneventful Saturday night. He wished he’d had the money to go into the City to the Bowie concert with Ernie and Freddie, but he hadn’t worked in weeks and his old lady wasn’t about to front him the cash. He was standing by the run-down house where the big dude they called Crusher lived, just killing time, wondering if the neighborhood rumors were true and that Crusher was some kind of sicko with a thing for little kids. Fucking pervert, Sweeney thought.

As if on cue, Sweeney saw Crusher’s van coming up the street, so he quickly hid in the shadows behind a tree and watched as the van pulled up and parked. He saw Crusher get out, look up and down the empty street, and quickly open the side door. Then Crusher went into the van and came out carrying something. To Sweeney’s amazed horror, he saw that Crusher had a little girl, tied up and with duct tape around her mouth, eyes open wide, scared, squirming.

This was it. Maybe it was the moment that Sweeney'd been waiting for the whole twenty years of his life. He swallowed, gathered his courage, and stepped out from behind the tree.

"I don't think so, asshole."

Crusher turned, set his package down on the sidewalk, and rushed Sweeney. But he had to cover a good twenty-five or thirty feet, and Sweeney knew he could take him. In the time it would require for Crusher to reach him, Sweeney would have his nunchucks in his hands in the ready position, and he would be able to hit Crusher in the head, the knees, the hands, the face, over and over, all the while stepping deftly aside so the big man couldn't touch him. Sweeney was damned good with his nunchucks and correspondingly quick on his feet.

"Oh, fuck," was the last thing Sweeney said as he reached in under his jacket to the small of his back. He had forgotten that his nunchucks weren't there, that the incessant lecturing from his old lady about how they had been made illegal a couple of months before, and how he didn't need another rap after that ACD for the pot, had finally convinced him to leave them home.

Now Crusher's big hand was up under Sweeney's chin, lifting him off his feet and pressing hard on his carotid arteries, causing Sweeney's vagus nerve to send a signal to his heart that slowed it down to around thirty beats a minute. As Sweeney lost consciousness, Crusher felt the body slacken, but he did not release his grip. He opened the front door of the house, glancing back to make sure that his other, intended victim was in place and that the street was still quiet. Holding Sweeney tightly by the throat, Crusher took him inside and put him on the floor. He finished him off by crushing his larynx and holding pressure until there was no more breathing.

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During the sixteen hours that she was tied down to the table before she died, she cried and begged, and experienced more fear and pain, than ever before in her short life. But the scent of imaginary cinnamon was strong in her nostrils right up until the end.

Author's note: My most haunting childhood memory, from when I was a young boy living for a time in semi-rural Bennington, Vermont, is of walking out of the house and seeing a group of boys gathered in a circle. It seemed like something fun was going on. I walked over, eager to join in, but to my horror I saw that they were torturing a mouse, holding it by the tail and swinging it over an open flame, laughing about it. I rushed in to stop them, but was blocked and then pushed to the ground by a couple of the boys. I got up and tried again with the same result. And again. Finally, as I lay there, my hands and knees scraped from rough contact with the gravel, my powerlessness and unspent rage ripping me apart from the inside, all I could do was listen to the mouse's screams before it died. The night I wrote this, I witnessed a female friend endure a form of psychological torture that I was equally powerless to stop. And of course it made me remember that mouse from half a century earlier, and I lay awake until my imagination purged my horror with this story.

My once-upon-a-time stepfather, the late Hubert Selby, Jr., was known for writing some pretty dark fiction. But no, Cubby, nothing you ever wrote is as hellish and hopeless as this.