

Bookstore Baker

There is a book store down Old Sparrow Lane where children disappear. It doesn't happen on Halloween or during any special phases of the moon. The dates are irregular and hold no supernatural significance.

There is nothing particularly suspicious looking about the shop. It is small, meticulously neat with the walls lined with pine like the insides of a steamy sauna. It is run by a Russian woman who insists you call her Baba. She's in her seventies and has a tendency to dress like she is colour blind. Bright yellow sweaters, dark purple scarves and jaunty red crocheted beanies give her the appearance of an oversized cup cake. She likes to bake thick, meaty pies and exotic tasting sweets and will have them set out for the children to help themselves. Her face is lined but not in a cruel way and she likes to smile even though her teeth have a rather grey tinge.

The shop is full to bursting with books and home made nick knacks. Classics next to the candle sticks, fiction next to the painted firefly statues and children's books that are surrounded by dragons of all shapes and sizes. The walls in the children's area are painted with a mural of flying dragons, castles and knights. Unlike everything else that is hideously bright in the shop, the mural is painted in dark sepia tones.

"That is the creepiest looking thing I have ever seen! Are you sure you want to sit and read here honey?" Is quite a common question posed by concerned mothers to their children.

"It's how dragons are supposed to look, Mum. Duh." The children love it and generally get their own way as determined children are determined to do. The dragons watch them as they read. The children delight in the way the eyes blink and move, following them as they play their games. Watchful.

“You would want to be careful,” the shop owner whispers to them, “The dragons know if you’ve been bad. They know what’s in your little hearts. If you are a mean child the dragons will judge you and gobble up your soul!” The children jump as she hisses at them. They are frightened but only secretly. Their world of video games, science and logic tell them that there is no such things as dragons and paintings that come alive. But still, the warning is given to every child who enters her store. The sillier ones do not listen. They don’t stay silly for long. They do not stay anything for long.

Observe this child. We shall call her Annie. Annie is an impetuous eleven year old who visited the bookstore at 5.30 pm on October 24th 2004. She has golden pigtails and a tendency to push around her parents, her nanny and any other children she can find. It’s almost closing time and the shop is empty but they are still let in.

“Welcome little one!” the shop keeper greets cheerily. Her dark eyes take in the frazzled appearance of the little girl’s nanny.

“Why do you talk so funny?” demands Annie.

“Because I’m from a far away place called Russia.”

“Why didn’t you stay in your own country?” Annie asks. She recently heard her father complaining at a dinner party about the influx of foreigners and had taken it upon herself to share his misguided opinions.

“I needed to come here to share my stories with you that is why.”

Annie gives her a long stare down the tip of her freckled nose. She sniffs in a bored way.

“Margaret I’ll be with the kid’s books. Stay here until I need you.” Annie strides away, her pigtails swinging. Margaret sighs long and deep.

“Would you like some tea?” Baba offers and Margaret gives her a grateful nod. She is soon sitting at a little table next to the counter with a mug of black tea. A slice of hot pie is placed in front of her. It has a rosy red filling and she can taste meats and rich fruit.

“I’m really sorry about her,” Margaret says. She’s glad the shop keeper hasn’t taken any offence.

“I see enough of children to be able to pick bad apples,” assures Baba. “Not to worry. She will get her comeuppance.”

“I doubt it. Her father is filthy rich and gives the brat whatever she wants. Her mother is drunk by 10 am and is no use for nothing,” Margaret spits. She doesn’t know why she is talking badly about the family she’s employed by but after two years of service it feels *good*. She scoops more pie into her mouth.

She tastes the heady juices on her tongue. Its flavour is jumping and changing and she can no longer identify anything in it.

“This’s the most amazing pie! What did you make it from?” she asks.

“This and that,” Baba smiles, waving her wrinkled hand, “But my secret ingredient is naughty children.” Margaret laughs and laughs. Red juice leaks out of the corner of her mouth and down her chin. Baba is cackling with her.

“You wouldn’t want to make one out of Annie. It would taste as rotten as she is!” Margaret manages to say in between more mouthfuls. Her mouth is red all the way around. She looks at her plate in despair. It is empty. Baba gives her another slice and Margaret falls on it, shovelling the pie in with her fingers because the spoon won’t hold enough.

“You are wrong. The nastier the child, the sweeter the pie!” Baba exclaims. “That pie you are eating now is called “Ruby Raspberry Pie” it was made of a particularly nasty little girl named Ruby who knocked some candle sticks over and blamed it on the other children. Her older sister was at her wits end so I had no choice.”

“We could make some ‘Apricot Annie Cobbler,’” Margaret jokes as she eats. Baba is looking thoughtful, like she is considering the idea, which makes Margaret laugh all the more. There is pie all over her face now with bits of crust in her hair.

“Eww! Look at how disgusting you are Margaret! Even I can eat without being a pig,” Annie says in her grating, high pitched voice. Margaret looks at the putrid little girl. She looks at Baba.

“Hungry,” says Margaret pitifully.

“I know. So are they,” Baba points at the mural. The dragons are rippling and coming to life.

“What’s wrong with your painting?” Annie says. “Paintings aren’t supposed to move.”

“Why don’t you have a closer look and see if you can figure out how it does it?” suggests Baba, “After all you are such a *clever* girl.”

“You’re right. I am clever.” She marches over to the mural and starts prodding the largest dragon with her sharp little nails. “Stupid dragon you aren’t even real.”

The dragon chuckles low and deep and Annie stops poking. A large head rips free of the painting and roars. Annie tries to run but the dragon is quicker. Its powerful yellow teeth close over her head and tears it clean from her body. Blood sprays out of her severed neck and the golden pig tails disappear as the dragon rolls her skull around its mouth.

Margaret is a bundle of giggles as she points at the twitching body. It stops twitching. Baba locks the door to her store and puts on leather apron over her violent green sweater. She walks over to the dragon and rubs under its chin lovingly. It groans and shuts its eyes like a spoilt dog.

“Well Margaret, Apricot Annie Cobbler she shall be.”