Sir Man-With-Beard

By M. Page Jones

The children at Boyd Village Children's Home in Ohio always knew when it was a Saturday. When the rest of humanity was allowed to sleep in and enjoy their weekend, workers were busy bathing, scrubbing, brushing hair, and stuffing the orphans and foster kids into various donated hand-me-downs. It was the day that all the children were herded into a single line in the main visiting room to see if anyone thought they might want to adopt or foster a child.

 Abby, a pale girl of four, with a scattering of freckles across her nose always wore a permanent scowl. However, on Saturdays she would include a furled brow and tightly pursed lips. She hated these weekly "Meet and Greet" events and made no attempt to hide it. They were held in the main room which was badly lit by several fluorescent lights, held hard green plastic furniture and even harder plastic chairs. As if there wasn't enough plastic in the room already, large plastic plants were stuffed into dusty plastic containers and placed around the room as if they could add some cheer to the space.

The 42 or so children were lined up in a single row starting with the babies in their basinets closest to the door and down the room ending with the teens. The prized possessions were the infants so that was why they were put nearest the door like any good shop owner would do to pull shoppers inside. As the double doors opened up, you could almost see the couples rush towards the tiny ones, practically salivating over them. It wasn't hard for Abby to hate the pink, wrinkly, noisy things. What was the big deal? All she knew was that they got more attention and cried every time the wind blew a different direction. Abby tried once crying over not getting the flavor ice cream cup she wanted like this little boy beside her at the dinner table but she soon felt stupid. Actually, she had learned pretty early on that crying did not necessarily get you food or a soft touch or a parent rushing to make sure you were alright.

She couldn't really blame the adults, as they slowly—very slowly would make their way from the babies. The potential parents saw a blank canvas that they could imprint their love on. They were a kind of paint-by-numbers where they could choose bright and beautiful colors unlike the rest of the older children that would require a gallon of paint thinner to rid them of their bad memories, nightmares, and all too true proven fear of not being loved. Then there was the draw of being able to name their newly acquired child. Kids Abby's age and up knew their names but the babies could get names like "Rose" after their adopted grandmother or "Edward" after another's father.

Since she had arrived at the children's home, she had had no luck on getting any of the potential foster or adoptive parents to want to get to know her. Over the last few months, Abby had watched from the line in the main room as the Misfit Children playing with their Misfit Toys practically knocked themselves silly showing how cute or funny or smart they were to potential parents. The smart ones would use stacking blocks or puzzles showing how gifted they were. Other kids who knew their IQ was not their selling point would go the route of humor or affection. Abby viewed it all as very sad and every week told herself how glad she was that no one wanted to talk to her, although every Saturday night she'd allow a couple of tears to fall before telling herself to stop being such a baby.

The night before, the staff sat around the dinner table and decided that tomorrow would be the day that they got Abby into the playroom with some people. She was such an odd-looking child with old soul eyes that never missed a thing around her. They came to the conclusion that they couldn't change her expression over night so maybe they could do something to distract from it. Eventually, they were all standing around her tilting their heads and squinting their eyes trying to see what magic they could perform by morning. Abby ignored them all and continued eating her dinner. She knew they were talking about her but she didn't want to give them the satisfaction of paying it any mind.

Suddenly, an older woman who always dressed in polyester suits and smelled of mothballs and lavender lotion slapped her hands together.

"I've got it. Who's the cutest little girl in the history of little girls?" She clapped her hands together in pure delight. "Shirley Temple"!

Soon Abby found herself being surrounded by a couple of the women who wet her stick-straight, white-blonde hair then rolled pink plastic curlers with pink sponges all around her head, snapping them into place. When they were done, they stood around her very pleased with what they had done. Mothballs was certain that come morning the curls, along with a little, dainty dress, would distract from the hardened eyes of a child who had to grow up way before her time. After Mothballs tucked her into bed, wished her a good night, and turned off the lights, Abby laid there in the dark for a few seconds on those hard, pinching contraptions. As she struggled to find a way to get comfortable, she wondered what she had done to deserve this punishment and scolded herself to figure it out and to promise to NEVER ever do it again.

The next morning, Mothballs woke her up to find that her four cowlicks and tendency to sweat when sleeping resulted in a kind of half-curled/half-gnarled mess. She muttered something about not being a miracle worker and rushed to re-wet the hair, then with a large-toothed comb push it back down onto the child's scalp making it worse than what it had been to begin with.

A new shipment of clothes had been delivered to the home by a local church on the nicer side of town. The staff was excited to see what new outfits they could decorate the candidates in. Mothballs took Abby to the basement where dozens and dozens of bins were lined up down the center of the length of the cold cement space. On either side were chain link fences that locked up filing cabinets full of facts and stories about all the children currently there and all who had come before them. When Abby found out what was in them from one of the older kids, she was pretty sure she knew what was in hers.

She would dream about how the rest of the people here would find out that she was, indeed, a princess. She would lie in the bottom bunk of her bunk bed and stare at the light coming in from under the door to the room. She would stare so intently at it, willing for the light to grow stronger, so strong that it would light up all sides of the door. The door would swing open and a knight with shiny silver armor and a large red feather coming from the top of his helmet would stomp into the room and demand to know who had taken Princess Abby. He would hold out a large scroll, just like the one in her file folder, and show everyone a drawing of her in a crown and a long bright blue gown full of sparkly crystals. He would explain that she had been stolen at birth from a castle by the sea, and that her parents, the king and queen, had been heartbroken ever since and had never stopped looking for her. He would then put her on top of a white horse that had pink and white ribbons in its hair and begin to ride off. Mothballs would appear looking like the witch from Snow White and demand he stop. The noble knight would point his shiny sword at her and she would cower before him and the mighty hooves of the magical stead. Every night, Abby would fall asleep wishing for this. No one could blame her because the truth was more painful than any child should have to remember.

When she was almost three, her mother had picked up her purse, her car keys and walked out the door. A few seconds later, the door swung back open, and she casually strolled into the living room, looked at her baby playing with the little black puppy the toddler had gotten for her Christmas present, and in about as much time as it would take to decide on what shoes to wear, she bent down, scooped up the dog, walked out, and never returned.

She left young Abby with her alcoholic father who nightly tucked himself in with a bottle of Jack forgetting about the little girl. The man who owned the bar a couple blocks away felt pity for them both and offered room and board above his bar in exchange for her father cleaning up and doing general maintenance. A few weeks later, his generosity soon had become twisted into a heart-breaking scene that the kind man couldn't stomach. Night after night, the little girl's father would begin to drink while she played with her dolls on the floor next to him. Whenever she got hungry, she would reach for a handful of pretzels that were always on the bar. The bar owner had taken a couple of weeks off work to visit his relatives in West Virginia. When he returned, he walked into his bar and couldn't believe what he was seeing. Apparently, his employee had run out of drinking money, had talked one of his drinking buddies put a coin in the jukebox, and had put the little girl on the bar to dance to the music. He was slamming his hands down on the bar keeping the beat and laughing. A couple of the regulars couldn't watch and moved away to a nearby table. The one man who had picked the tune was staring oddly at the small girl in a way that made the bar owner sick. He pulled the child off the bar and took her up to her room. The very next morning, he called the State and they arrived to find a malnourished, underweight little girl with her hair falling out who was playing with a stack of used ashtrays on the floor as her father drank a beer beside her. Abby remembered bits and pieces of this time in her life but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't picture her mother's or father's faces. It really didn't matter that she couldn't envision them. She had long ago replaced them with the kind and gentle faces of the king and queen from her nightly fairy tale. A tale that she tried so hard to make herself believe in.

 But today, today was Saturday at the children's home and soon the place would be full. Mothballs hunted in the girl's bins marked "Girls-2-4 year olds." She rummaged around trying to find something like what she remembered the overly talented Shirley Temple wearing in one of her several films.

"Ah-ha!" Mothballs yelled, pulling out a pink dress with yellow roses and smocking at the top. She held it up to the bored but patient girl. She tsk-ed and said something about having unfortunate shoulders like a linebacker and began to dig some more. Abby looked down at her flannel pajamas and wondered why she had to change. Of course, nothing matched in the hand-me-down world and it didn't much matter to her. The top had blue and pink lines, and the bottoms had yellow and red clowns on them. The only thing they had in common was the worn material and the little flannel balls that came from too much wear. Abby liked to pick at them at night to help her sleep. Suddenly, she was whipped around and a dress was held up to her and it was declared "perfect".

 An hour later, Abby was escorted into the main visiting room wearing a pink-gingham prison. She twitched and pulled at the fabric. It went down to the floor and although it made her feel slightly like the princess she believed herself to be, she felt like the tight shoulders and more tightly tied bow in the back were going to make her faint. The only consolation was that one of the really annoyingly shaped white plastic heart buttons going down the front of it was falling off. She tugged at it and was rewarded with a small slap to her hand from Mothballs.

The children were led into the main room and told where to stand. As Mothballs and a few staff began to walk down the line in a kind of inspection, Abby reminded herself to just be strong and get through this nightmare that occurred every seven days. She had been here for almost 4 months and already had a list of the "Top Things I Hate About This".

First and foremost, she hated being touched. It actually made her skin hurt. On the line, strangers often patted her on the head and insisted on her shaking hands "like a big girl". The staff had grown to accept this quirk, and was careful to touch her as little as possible. Behind closed doors wondered if this reaction was due to physical abuse at home or maybe a medical condition where she bruised easily? They didn't understand that as a baby when you are usually held and your senses become developed, her mother had sat in a rocking chair holding her child and rocked for hours while staring out the window. She didn't seem to hear her baby crying or know it was time to change her. She just rocked, and rocked, and rocked. Abby didn't know why she had a great distaste of anything that rocked but she knew the motion made her pull her knees up to her chest, and grow so still that she was pretty sure she had mastered the ability to become invisible at will.

 Second, she also hated being looked at like some kind of cattle. It seemed as though a few of the adults while smiling too much and using this weird high-pitched voice would check out the child's ears, eyes, and teeth. Abby swore she caught some couples running their hands down a child's arm she assumed to see if they came from hardy stock. Abby knew for this reason she would never be chosen. The malnutrition before arriving at Boyd had not only made her scrawny but also led to discoloration of her baby teeth that now mixed with a few new ones resulting in different colored teeth that didn't quite line up. Whenever she smiled, she would cover her mouth with her hand to hide her teeth, ashamed of how she looked.

Lastly, she hated the labels that Mothballs would come up with to help "sell" a couple on a child. All of the inhabitants of the home were use to being talked about when on the line. More accurately, they were talked over, talked around, whispered about accompanied with tragic facial expressions and some kind of strange sign language the workers brought out to describe the child's past without using words. Mothballs used phrases to describe Abby like "shy at first" and "very grown up for her age" which were nice replacements for the actual "distant" and "war-worn".

After these events, Mothballs would pull a child aside and encourage them next time to be "more friendly" and "smile more". She always came directly to Abby and would quietly chide her on what she did wrong and what to do better. Abby felt no malice towards her; she just perceived the woman just had a complete misunderstanding of how life worked. The child even felt bad for her a few times afterwards when she thought she saw the old lady tear up and shake her head at the end of a "Meet and Greet" as though she had let the children down.

Abby stood waiting for her turn to be examined. She carefully checked to make sure that the black patent leather shoes with blue stitching on them (she was sure they were about a size too small because her toes were starting to go numb!) were touching the edge of the gray-brown-blue swirled linoleum square she had been assigned to. She passed her inspection only after Mothballs wet her own hand with spit and slicked a runaway cowlick on Abby's head. The girl growled at her first for touching her and then for using old lady saliva on her head.

Dramatically, the front doors to the home were flung open causing a whoosh of air to sweep into the room. Knowing that the line would take ages to make its way to her, Abby decided to pull off that silly plastic heart button hanging on a thread mainly because it gave her something to do but more importantly it would probably make Mothballs crazy!

Abby rarely looked up at the people coming her way. Silently, she wondered if there was a chance that she would be asked to go into the playroom where on weekdays she was use to watching other kids play, run, and scream but where on Saturdays the child-sized tables and chairs were moved into small groups around the room.

Abby had just found success tearing off the white thread with the button hanging from it when she sensed someone standing in front of her. She peered slowly at the work boots and the brown corduroys in front of her. She winced and waited for the inevitable touch that was sure to follow. A weird pat to the head or hand on the shoulder made her skin ache.

 "Hello, how are you?" a very deep voice said. When the man spoke, he didn't use that "grownup-talking-down-to-child" voice. His voice rumbled against her ears. Startled, she began to raise her head and saw a giant of a man. As her gaze travelled upwards, she found herself looking at a long, full beard and then into blue, twinkling eyes. She waited for the big, over-the-top smile that she was sure was coming but he just stood there with a soft look on his rugged face. With a swoosh of air full of the smell of insecticide, Abby's "Biggest Cheerleader" was standing behind her with her lavender-scented hands clutching the little girl's shoulders.

"Shake hands, Abby. He won't bite!" she laughed at her own joke.

Abby started to hold out her hand but remembered in time that she still held the button in her handshaking hand. While she was trying to decide whether to upset Mothballs more for not shaking hands or for ripping off the button, Man with Beard introduced himself to Mothballs.

"My name is James and this here is my wife, Jenny," he said to the old woman.

Mothballs twittered a little and said the usual, "pleased to meet you". From behind the tall man, a young woman stepped forward. She shyly extended her hand to Mothballs. When she did, her long brown hair that fell way past her waist brushed again Abby's face. It smelled like sunshine and flowers and the scent succeeded in calming Abby down. As her husband stepped aside so that his wife could greet Abby, Abby saw the face she had seen in her fairy tale! The queen! Her brown eyes were warm, and her smile just barely turned up the corners of her mouth in a way that made you feel that you and her were in on a secret that only the two of you knew about.

Mothballs suddenly stepped in between them and broke the moment.

"Abby's a bit shy, I'm afraid, a quiet child, really," Mothballs sputtered. "Go on, Abby. Shake hands with the nice man and lady. Don't be rude."

Man with Beard began to kneel down in front of Abby. She suddenly felt disappointed that he was going to be one of "those" after all. "Those" were the overly-sincere-every-child-is-special, I-am-here–to-rescue-you-types who insisted on holding your hand while looking deeply into your eyes. A few even managed a tear or two for the little orphans.

Instead, he was waving off Mothballs as if to let her know that he had this, and she could release her death grip she still had on Abby's shoulders.

"How are you doing, sweetie?" Man with Beard asked.

Abby stared down at the floor and softly whispered, "Okay."

"It's nice to meet you, Abby," he said and his wife murmured a greeting in a small, quiet voice that seemed so odd beside the deep rumble of her spouse. Abby made a point of never remembering names out of a kind of self-preservation so that when she was rejected, she didn't have to put names to the disappointments. So, Man with Beard and Lady with Hair Curtain continued to talk about how they had a farm and chickens and sheep and ---wait, what did he just say—horses?

Abby suddenly looked up at him and stared him straight in the eyes like she had never done before while on the line. Could this man be—was he here to—could he be the knight sent to save her? She began to study him with narrowed eyes. Suddenly, his face broke into a grin. His eyes began to twinkle and he let out a low chuckle at this little girl's serious face. It caught her off-guard and she felt herself smiling back. This had never happened before! Usually when she used her grown-up face, people just quickly moved on. His grin soon turned into a smile. As his smile got bigger, so did hers . . .teeth and all. She had even forgotten to do her signature move of covering her mouth to hide all the un-princess-like teeth.

"I like you, Abby. Do you think you'd like to talk to us for a bit?" he asked.

Mothballs let out a small gasp and sputtered out an "of course", and began to pull Abby towards the playroom.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said firmly but gently, "but I'm asking Abby. I think she can tell me herself if she'd like to go with us."

Abby felt at that moment something she'd never felt before. She was well, what was this feeling? She felt….she felt….real! She felt…visible! Someone saw her, really saw her and wanted to know more! She wasn't just another sad little girl in a lineup of other sad little children. Abby nodded yes and caught herself doing another toothy grin matching the one now on his face but this time remembered to cover her mouth, after all, she didn't want to scare him off.

 He stood up and with his wife walked into the room full of toys, chairs, tables and children's drawings posted on all the walls. Mothballs encouraged them all to play a board game together or build something with the worn-down blocks and plastic toys scattered around the room.

"I think we're good with just talking, right, Abby?" he asked.

She shook her head that it was fine with her.

"How old are you, Abby?" he enquired.

"Four and a half," she softly replied.

"You got any kids?" he asked.

Abby felt another smile coming on and covered her mouth.

"No" she giggled.

"That's good, we only have room for one little girl so that works out pretty good," he explained.

Mothballs couldn't help it and jumped in to tell the little girl's "stats" such as how long she'd been at the home, her current status with the State, that she was indeed available as a foster or adoptee, her health issues and IQ testing. The man just smiled at Abby while he listened seeming to know that the "stats" didn't really tell him anything about what was important about her. He seemed to just get from the serious look in her eyes and the pain behind them that the little girl's soul was bruised. Woman with Hair Curtain said very little but her hand rested on his arm with delicate fingers that Abby thought would never torture her with plastic rollers and would always be gentle when touching her. Abby also loved how quiet the woman was, and knew that she would never force her to talk but would rather understand how amazing it was to sit in silence with someone and feel…. safe.

Suddenly, the director of the place, Man with Big Glasses, walked into the room and announced that the Meet & Greet was over. The workers began to hustle everyone back into the main room for goodbyes. This had been the part of the event that Abby hated the most. Seeing that no one had talked to the thin little girl, strangers would pat her on the head or the back and try to convince her that a little girl as pretty as she was would find a home soon. By the time the last potential parent left it didn't just physically hurt her skin but made her tummy ache so bad she could never eat lunch on Saturdays. Once a woman wearing some kind of dead animal around her shoulders had bent down to comfort her by kissing Abby on the cheek. Abby had jumped back so hard that the woman almost fell over. Mothballs had seen it go down and rushed over to assure her that it wasn't a reaction to her it was probably the fur that freaked the girl out. With her face flushed with embarrassment, the woman weirdly laughed and quickly walked away.

As they all walked towards the main doors, Man with Beard knelt down once again and this time held out his hand as if he knew that he had now earned that right.

"Abby, we'll be seeing you soon. Okay? Thanks for talking to us." Abby shook his hand and it didn't feel painful at all. The palm of his hand was rough from hard work but his grasp was soft.

It was going to take two or three weeks to set everything up but Abby received the wonderful news that she would soon be the foster child of Man with Beard and Woman with Hair Curtain. Mothballs was beside herself literally dancing and twirling around the lunch room as she told Abby all about it.

Abby was scared to believe it but at night when the door opened and the knight rode into her bedroom, he looked a lot like the giant man with the gentle hands.

Unfortunately, her fears came true. Almost two and a half weeks after having met her, Man with Beard was back to the home and talking quietly to Mothballs. Abby heard the word "cancer" for the first time and saw the old woman's reaction to the word. It seemed that the valiant knight was not going to be able to save his beautiful lady with the flower-scented hair from an ugly monster with an ugly name.

The old woman looked over at Abby and couldn't contain herself. She rushed out of the room holding a handkerchief to her face crying as she fled. She just couldn't stand the injustice of it all.

Man with Beard sat down on one of the hard plastic chairs and gently pulled Abby towards him. She felt herself oddly leaning into him like she had never done before. She let herself get so close that his beard itched her cheek as he put his head next to hers.

She heard his voice catch as if there was something stuck in his throat. He sighed deeply and the breath blew the blonde bangs from her face.

"Little One, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know they told you that you were gonna be our little girl, and we had all intentions of—we had your room all ready." He cleared his throat loudly like the words were actually cutting his throat as he spoke them. "My wife had this pain and she went to find out about it and turns out she doesn't have long before…" his voice trailed off. "I don't know what to do…I keep my word. When I promise things, I do it. It breaks my heart…you gotta come back here and someone else gets to be your daddy, it's not fair….for either of us…" He suddenly stopped speaking and Abby felt a warm drop of water hit the tip of her nose.

It might have been surprising to anyone that Abby didn't feel disappointed. After all, she hadn't let herself believe that far. In the four and a half years that she had lived, she already knew life was hard, and had a feeling he was about to learn that, too. She didn't beg or cry. Instead, she simply reached up and began to pat his back. She had seen workers at the home do this to kids who were upset and it seemed to make them feel better.

With this simple gesture from a child who had had so little kindness shown her in her life, the large man's tears turned into sobs that shook his whole body. She knew that most of these tears were for the some of the tears were for the woman with the soft eyes and warm hands but Abby knew without him saying so that a few were for her as well.

They stayed like that for a long while, the child comforting the man. After awhile, Abby looked up and saw the room full of the staff as well as some of the children. Sniffles and nose blowing soon filled the room as they all watched with tears running down their faces.

Man with Beard seemed to sense the audience and quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out an old, worn blue bandana to wipe his eyes. He looked up at her and was moved by the almost motherly expression on her face. The tears slowly, quietly continued to fall as he stared back into the eyes of the little girl who would never be his.

Abby gave him a smile and whispered, "It's okay". She looked over at the sobbing crowd and smile at them as well. Didn't they understand what had happened? He had given her something that no other person had given her. It was a gift beyond anything she had ever known…hope.

Hope that she was worth crying over someone losing her. Hope that she was not damaged or had come into this world not being able to be loved. Hope that the next time someone had to choose between her and a dog, she would win! Hope that the nightly dream of being rescued as a lost princess could turn into being found as a little girl who could love and be loved.

Man with Beard finally managed to pull himself together, gave Abby one last hug and kissed the top of her head. Abby hugged him back and it didn't hurt one bit.

Over the next few months while once again back on the line, Abby was on a roll. She fed on this sense of hope. More and more people walked with her to the playroom to chat, and within nine months, she was officially adopted.

Years later while in her late 20's, she wandered back to Boyd Village. She walked through the same double doors, sat on the ugly green couches, stepped on the scuffed linoleum and even stepped to the line careful to stand only in one square of the flooring. She even walked down the stair to the basement where she had remembered that dreaded pink dress and too tight shoes. She passed the same metal fences but now she could smile at the cabinets because she had just found her biological family and was there to visit 14 aunts and uncles since it turned out that her father was the youngest of 15!

She wished she could remember the couples' names so that maybe one day she could stand in front of him now all grown to make sure he understood that all she had were warm thoughts and love for him and his wife. He had been the knight who came ever so briefly into her life and opened a world where people could be warm, touches could be soft, and a little girl knew she could be loved.