

## Missy · Rikki

### *Die, Little Mae!*

MISSY IS SITTING in the front of the school bus and she says this just as Little Mae steps off. Startled, Little Mae turns her head and stares back into Missy's pale blue eyes. It is as if there were holes in Missy's head; Little Mae sees the sky shining right through!

*Bye! Missy says brightly. Bye! Little Mae!*

\* \* \*

Missy is in her bath. She is an ugly little girl, her face much too long, her body uncannily long, as if made of rubber she had been pulled from her mother's womb and stretched. Rubber is in fact Missy's symbol: in the bouncing of the ball look for the cosmic dance!

\* \* \*

The head crowns and the doctor has not yet arrived. Panic-stricken, grandmother pushes with both palms against the baby's skull, keeping it tied up in limbo for over thirty minutes. When at last the doctor comes and lets the baby out, it comes out *long*.

*The limbs on her! Curses grandmother. Poor little spider-child!*

\* \* \*

Today Missy is nine. And the universe is pink. The hot bubble bath foaming and popping at her knees, her skin in the hot water (perhaps the only thing Missy really loves is hot water—very hot water), the birthday dress—ironed and fluffed out and waiting on the bed, the bed, its sheets and covers, and the thick wall to wall carpeting.

Dozens of stuffed animals clutter the bed. Missy sleeps with them all; they protect her from darkness and make her invulnerable. All night long their small, hard eyes watch over her helpless, sleeping body. They can see everything and they are Eaters—Eaters of ghosts, Ghouls and Witches. They watch over Missy and Missy watches over them—when morning comes she counts them to be sure that no-one has been left behind during the terrible passage through night.

\* \* \*

After the bath, mother rouges Missy's cheeks. Missy admits that she looks "prettier" this way, but she is not pleased. She knows that it is her pale, pale skin—pale as an egg (as granny used to say) that is so impressive across her impassive, long face. Now that she is out of her bath, dried and dressed, her paleness has returned as has a certain persistent chill in her hands and feet; her ears are always unaccountably cold as well.

*Egg! Granny had said, Egg! Why so cold? Shall we put some pepper on to hot her up? Eh? Pepper pot?* and she had nibbled Missy's ear. But that was long ago, so long ago! Granny had been the only one to dare take such liberties with Missy.

\* \* \*

*It is my birthday and I am nine,* Missy says solemnly to the animals all lined up according to species and size along the floor.

*We are the same age, well nearly, darling Wool!* she says to an aged cotton lamb who has lost its eyes and most of its fluff. *And you must all work very hard for me today, all of you!* She continues, her hands clasped tightly across her heart. *Little Mae will be here,* she adds in a whisper, *and you know how much we all hate Little Mae! Here! Goosey! You'll be Little Mae—but just for today, poor darling, and I'll make it up to you later, I promise!*

Goosey is placed in the center of the floor—a small brown rabbitish thing, covered with the tiny bumps that gave him his name; the others are placed all around him.

*NOW! Watch Goosey and think hard about Little Mae! Think the most terrible things you can, terrible, HORRIBLE THINGS!*

\* \* \*

The doorbell begins to ring; it will ring intermittingly for the next fifteen minutes—Missy's guests are punctual. There are nine of them. Ill at ease in Missy's expensive house they perch at the edge of the silver brocade furniture and whisper nervously together until Missy arrives, taking everything in hand and leading them all out to the back lawn.

Pink orchids in large, ornate chinese vases stand in each corner of the stone terrace and the picnic table—hidden beneath a glossy, embroidered cloth, is decorated with an ornate arrangement of flesh-colored roses and peaches. The linen is white and the gold-banded porcelain dishes dazzle like nine solar discs. Each guest's name is tied to her napkin along with an orchid:

PRISSY  
MELBA  
LOLLY  
LORETTA  
LITTLE MAE  
HATTIE  
ERNESTINA

FANNY and—at the head of the table—MISSY. The presents (invitations had specified: *gifts will be pink*) have been stacked by Missy's dish; she has them removed and placed in the house; Missy feels that opening gifts in public is in very bad taste.

Missy sits stiffly, regally; the rouge and her unusual size give her the aura of a grown-up. The others cannot help but admire her and feel proud that they belong to this magic, inner circle. Little Mae also sits very still; she is waiting for the hatchet to fall, but it doesn't, not yet. It stays in mid-air, just above Little Mae's braided head. Missy is even smiling at her. But such a *cold* smile!

\* \* \*

*She hates me, mother!* sobs Little Mae. But mother insists:  
*Now, Little Mae! She can't hate you! She wouldn't have invited you! It just makes no sense!*

\* \* \*

Little Mae is thinking: *It makes no sense!* And she clasps the gorgeous linen napkin that fills her lap—almost as big as a bath towel—and claws at it mindlessly with her little polished nails.

The cake arrives. It is a great frosted pyramid decorated with almonds and marzipan babies; Missy dismisses the maid and cuts the big pink and white slices herself being careful to give each guest one baby. Little Mae sees that her baby has no head and bites her lip. The maid returns to the table with a large dish of raspberry ice cream.

Missy lifts her fork and the girls eat; they arch their pinkies and *ooh!* and *ahh!* like great ladies; the cake is *Heavenly, heavenly! It is like a cloud, light as a feather! Really, Missy, it is LOVELY!*

Missy tells them that it was baked especially for her birthday and that it came early that morning in a great, sparkling white truck—

*Like an ambulance,* she adds, turning her eyes upon Little Mae, *Only very much bigger.*

Little Mae cannot bear Missy's eyes and tearfully stares into her dish. She

is a sickly child—obviously not tough enough to belong to the select group of Missy's friends. But then why has she been invited? The others all look at Little Mae curiously . . .

\* \* \*

Missy is talking about Mexico. Her uncle lives there.

*What's he live in MEXICO for,* asks the astonished Fanny, certain that the only civilized place to live is Georgia.

*There's OIL in Mexico, silly!* Says Missy. *And temples and great pyramids. The Aztecs built them.*

*ASS-PECKERS!* Loretta gasps and the girls all laugh—even Missy laughs and so they all laugh freely, gleefully until the tears stream from their eyes. It is the party's first good laugh and everyone is grateful to Loretta. Little Mae manages to jam some pink slush into her mouth and to swallow.

*AZTECS!* Missy shouts very suddenly and somewhat sternly. And all the girls fall silent. *Aztecs,* says Missy, softly. *They used to cut off people's heads.*

*THEIR HEADS!* The girls, wonderfully scandalized, all gasp together.

*They cut them off and strung them on sticks—like pearls,* Missy continues, and catching Little Mae with her eyes: *But first they cut out their hearts!*

And suddenly Little Mae is sick, seized and shaken in the terrible fist of a fit; foam fills her mouth and her body arches backwards, she falls with a loud thud to the floor and lies there, rigid, as if tied and knotted tightly inside an invisible sack. And as the girls all scream and scatter, the maid comes and gently lifts Little Mae in her strong, black arms and cradling her to her bosom carries her from that terrible place.

\* \* \*

It is evening. The party is over and Missy has gone to her room to sleep. Goosey is still in the middle of the floor surrounded by the others.

*Poor, poor Goosey!* Missy cries, picking him up in arms. *But you were marvels, simply marvels, all of you!* she cries. *Little Mae was so sick! So sick! And I am so proud of you! But now,* she wonders as she places the animals all back on her bed in readiness for sleep, *what shall we do with Goosey? He's poisoned! Poisoned to the core! Poor Goosey! He'll have to be killed, he'll have to die, and he'll have to die tonight! He can't stay with us any longer—you do all see that, don't you?*

And as everyone agrees, Goosey is taken to the bathroom and quartered with a pair of very sharp scissors, his stuffing spilled into Missy's private toilet that smells invariably of disinfectant.

*Nothing remains of Goosey!* Missy cries gaily to the others. *All the bad has been*

*flushed away!* And then, with child-like glee so unlike herself, Missy takes a running leap and jumps into bed.