



"BORN BAD"
JEFFERY DEEVER

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Sleep, my child and peace attend thee, all through the night...

The words of the lullaby looped relentlessly through her mind, as persistent as the clattering Oregon rain on the roof and window.

The song that she'd sung to Beth Anne when the girl was three or four seated itself in her head and wouldn't stop echoing. Twenty-five years ago, the two of them: mother and daughter, sitting in the kitchen of the family's home outside Detroit. Liz Polemus, hunching over the Formica table, the frugal young mother and wife, working hard to stretch the dollars.

Singing to her daughter, who sat across from her, fascinated with the woman's deft hands.

I who love you shall be near you, all through the night.

*Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,
Hill and vale in slumber sleeping.*

Liz felt a cramp in her right arm—the one that had never healed properly—and realized she was still gripping the receiver fiercely at the news she'd just received. That her daughter was on her way to the house.

The daughter she hadn't spoken with in more than three years.

I my loving vigil keeping, all through the night.

Liz finally replaced the telephone and felt blood surge into her arm, itching, stinging. She sat down on the embroidered couch that had been in the family for years and massaged her throbbing forearm. She felt light-headed,

confused, as if she wasn't sure the phone call had been real or a wispy scene from a dream.

Only the woman wasn't lost in the peace of sleep. No, Beth Anne was on her way. A half-hour and she'd be at Liz's door.

Outside, the rain continued to fall steadily, tumbling into the pines that filled Liz's yard. She'd lived in this house for nearly a year, a small place miles from the nearest suburb. Most people would've thought it too small, too remote. But to Liz it was an oasis. The slim widow, midfifties, had a busy life and little time for housekeeping. She could clean the place quickly and get back to work. And while hardly a recluse, she preferred the buffer zone of forest that separated her from her neighbors. The minuscule size also discouraged suggestions by any male friends that, hey, got an idea, how 'bout I move in? The woman would merely look around the one-bedroom home and explain that two people would go crazy in such cramped quarters; after her husband's death she'd resolved she'd never remarry or live with another man.

Her thoughts now drifted to Jim. Their daughter had left home and cut off all contact with the family before he died. It had always stung her that the girl hadn't even called after his death, let alone attended his funeral. Anger at this instance of the girl's callousness shivered within Liz but she pushed it aside, reminding herself that whatever the young woman's purpose tonight there wouldn't be enough time to exhume even a fraction of the painful memories that lay between mother

and daughter like wreckage from a plane crash.

A glance at the clock. Nearly ten minutes had sped by since the call, Liz realized with a start.

Anxious, she walked into her sewing room. This, the largest room in the house, was decorated with needlepoints of her own and her mother's and a dozen racks of spools—some dating back to the fifties and sixties. Every shade of God's palette was represented in those threads. Boxes full of *Vogue* and Butterick patterns too. The centerpiece of the room was an old electric Singer. It had none of the fancy stitch cams of the new machines, no lights or complex gauges or knobs. The machine was a forty-year-old, black-enameled workhorse, identical to the one that her mother had used.

Liz had sewed since she was twelve and in difficult times the craft sustained her. She loved every part of the process: buying the fabric—hearing the *thud thud thud* as the clerk would turn the flat bolts of cloth over and over, unwinding the yardage (Liz could tell the women with near-perfect precision when a particular amount had been unfolded). Pinning the crisp, translucent paper onto the cloth. Cutting with the heavy pinking shears, which left a dragon-tooth edge on the fabric. Readyng the machine, winding the bobbin, threading the needle...

There was something so completely soothing about sewing: taking these substances—cotton from the land, wool from animals—and blending them into something altogether new. The worst aspect of the injury several years ago was the damage to her right arm, which kept her off the Singer for three unbearable months.

Sewing was therapeutic for Liz, yes, but more than that, it was a part of her profession and had helped her become a well-to-do woman; nearby were racks of designer gowns, awaiting her skillful touch.

Her eyes rose to the clock. Fifteen minutes. Another breathless slug of panic.

Picturing so clearly that day twenty-five years ago—Beth Anne in her flannel 'jammies, sitting at the rickety kitchen table and watching her mother's quick fingers with fascination as Liz sang to her.

Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee...

This memory gave birth to dozens of others and the agitation rose in Liz's heart like the water level of the rain-swollen stream behind her house. Well, she told herself now firmly, don't just sit here... do something. Keep busy. She found a navy-blue jacket in her closet, walked to her sewing table, then dug through a basket until she found a matching remnant of wool. She'd use this to make a pocket for the garment. Liz went to work, smoothing the cloth, marking it with tailor's chalk, finding the scissors, cutting carefully. She focused on her task but the distraction wasn't enough to take her mind off the impending visit—and memories from years ago.

The shoplifting incident, for instance. When the girl was twelve.

Liz recalled the phone ringing, answering it. The head of security at a nearby department store was reporting—to Liz's and Jim's shock—that Beth Anne had been caught with nearly a thousand dollars' worth of jewelry hidden in a paper bag.

The parents had pleaded with the manager not to press charges. They'd said there must've been some mistake.

"Well," the security chief said skeptically, "we found her with five watches. A necklace too. Wrapped up in this grocery bag. I mean, that don't sound like any mistake to me."

Finally, after much reassurance that this was a fluke and promises she'd never come into the store again, the manager agreed to keep the police out of the matter.

Outside the store, once the family was alone, Liz turned to Beth Anne furiously. "Why on earth did you do that?"

"Why not?" was the girl's singsong response, a snide smile on her face.

"It was stupid."

"Like, I care."

“Beth Anne... why’re you acting this way?”

“What way?” the girl’d asked in mock confusion.

Her mother had tried to engage her in a dialogue-the way the talk shows and psychologists said you should do with your kids-but Beth Anne remained bored and distracted. Liz had delivered a vague, and obviously futile, warning and had given up.

Thinking now: You put a certain amount of effort into stitching a jacket or dress and you get the garment you expect. There’s no mystery. But you put a thousand times *more* effort into raising your child and the result is the opposite of what you hope and dream for. This seemed so unfair.

Liz’s keen gray eyes examined the wool jacket, making sure the pocket lay flat and was pinned correctly into position. She paused, looking up, out the window toward the black spikes of the pine, but what she was seeing were more hard memories of Beth Anne. What a mouth on that girl! Beth Anne would look her mother or father in the eye and say, “There is no Goddamn way you’re going to make me go with you.” Or, “Do you have *any* clue at all?”

Maybe they should’ve been stricter in their upbringing. In Liz’s family you got whipped for cursing or talking back to adults or for not doing what your parents asked you to do. She and Jim had never spanked Beth Anne; maybe they *should’ve* swatted her once or twice.

One time, somebody had called in sick at the family business-a warehouse Jim had inherited-and he needed Beth Anne to help out. She’d snapped at him, “I’d rather be dead than go back inside that trash-hole with you.”

Her father had backed down sheepishly but Liz stormed up to her daughter. “Don’t talk to your father that way.”

“Oh?” the girl asked in a sarcastic voice. “How *should* I talk to him? Like some obedient little daughter who does everything he wants? Maybe that’s what he wanted but

it’s not who he got.” She’d grabbed her purse, heading for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To see some friends.”

“You are not. Get back here this minute!”

Her reply was a slamming door. Jim started after her but in an instant she was gone, crunching through two-month-old gray Michigan snow.

And those “friends”?

Trish and Eric and Sean... Kids from families with totally different values from Liz’s and Jim’s. They tried to forbid her from seeing them. But that, of course, had no effect.

“Don’t tell me who I can hang out with,” Beth Anne had said furiously. The girl was eighteen then and as tall as her mother. As she walked forward with a glower, Liz retreated uneasily. The girl continued, “And what do you know about them anyway?”

“They don’t like your father and me-that’s all I need to know. What’s wrong with Todd and Joan’s kids? Or Brad’s? Your father and I’ve known them for years.”

“What’s *wrong* with them?” the girl muttered sarcastically. “Try, they’re losers.” This time grabbing both her purse and the cigarettes she’d started smoking, she made another dramatic exit.

With her right foot Liz pressed the pedal of the Singer and the motor gave its distinctive grind, then broke into *clatta clatta clatta* as the needle sped up and down, vanishing into the cloth, leaving a neat row of stitches around the pocket.

Clatta, clatta, clatta...

In middle school the girl would never get home until seven or eight and in high school she’d arrive much later. Sometimes she’d stay away all night. Weekends too she just disappeared and had nothing to do with the family.

Clatta clatta clatta. The rhythmic grind of the Singer soothed Liz somewhat but couldn’t keep her from panicking again when she

looked at the clock. Her daughter could be here at any minute.

Her girl, her little baby...

Sleep, my child...

And the question that had plagued Liz for years returned now: What had gone wrong? For hours and hours she'd replay the girl's early years, trying to see what Liz had done to make Beth Anne reject her so completely. She'd been an attentive, involved mother, been consistent and fair, made meals for the family every day, washed and ironed the girl's clothes, bought her whatever she needed. All she could think of was that she'd been too strong-minded, too unyielding in her approach to raising the girl, too stern sometimes.

But this hardly seemed like much of a crime. Besides, Beth Anne had been equally mad at her father—the softie of the parents. Easygoing, doting to the point of spoiling the girl, Jim was the perfect father. He'd help Beth Anne and her friends with their homework, drive them to school himself when Liz was working, read her bedtime stories and tuck her in at night. He made up “special games” for him and Beth Anne to play. It was just the sort of parental bond that most children would love.

But the girl would fly into rages at him too and go out of her way to avoid spending time with him.

No, Liz could think of no dark incidents in the past, no traumas, no tragedies that could have turned Beth Anne into a renegade. She returned to the conclusion that she'd come to years ago: that—as unfair and cruel as it seemed—her daughter had simply been born fundamentally different from Liz; something had happened in the wiring to make the girl the rebel she was.

And looking at the cloth, smoothing it under her long, smooth fingers, Liz considered something else: rebellious, yes, but was she a *threat* too?

Liz now admitted that part of the ill ease she felt tonight wasn't only from the

impending confrontation with her wayward child; it was that the young woman scared her.

She looked up from her jacket and stared at the rain spattering her window. Her right arm tingling painfully, she recalled that terrible day several years ago—the day that drove her permanently from Detroit and still gave her breathless nightmares. Liz had walked into a jewelry store and stopped in shock, gasping as she saw a pistol swinging toward her. She could still see the yellow flash as the man pulled the trigger, hear the stunning explosion, feel the numbing shock as the bullet slammed into her arm, sending her sprawling on the tile floor, crying out in pain and confusion.

Her daughter, of course, had nothing to do with that tragedy. Yet Liz had realized that Beth Anne was just as willing and capable of pulling the trigger as that man had done during the robbery; she had proof her daughter was a dangerous woman. A few years ago, after Beth Anne had left home, Liz had gone to visit Jim's grave. The day was foggy as cotton and she was nearly to the tombstone when she realized that somebody was standing over it. To her shock she realized it was Beth Anne. Liz eased back into the mist, heart pounding fiercely. She debated for a long moment but finally decided that she didn't have the courage to confront the girl and decided to leave a note on her car's windshield.

But as she stepped to the Chevy, fishing in her handbag for a pen and some paper, she glanced inside and her heart shivered at the sight: a jacket, a clutter of papers and half-hidden beneath them a pistol and some plastic bags, which contained white powder—drugs, Liz assumed.

Oh, yes, she now thought, her daughter, little Beth Anne Polemus, was very capable of killing.

Liz's foot rose from the pedal and the Singer fell silent. She lifted the clamp and cut the dangling threads. She pulled it on and slipped a few things into the pocket, examined

herself in the mirror and decided that she was satisfied with the work.

Then she stared at her dim reflection. Leave! a voice in her head said. She's a threat! Get out now before Beth Anne arrives.

But after a moment of debate Liz sighed. One of the reasons she'd moved here in the first place was that she'd learned her daughter had relocated to the Northwest. Liz had been meaning to try to track the girl down but had found herself oddly reluctant to do so. No, she'd stay, she'd meet with Beth Anne. But she wasn't going to be stupid, not after the robbery. Liz now hung the jacket on a hanger and walked to the closet. She pulled down a box from the top shelf and looked inside. There sat a small pistol. "A ladies' gun," Jim had called it when he gave it to her years ago. She took it out and stared at the weapon.

Sleep, my child... All through the night.

Then she shuddered in disgust. No, she couldn't possibly use a weapon against her daughter. Of course not.

The idea of putting the girl to sleep forever was inconceivable.

And yet... what if it were a choice between her life and her daughter's? What if the hatred within the girl had pushed her over the edge?

Could she kill Beth Anne to save her own life?

No mother should ever have to make a choice like this one.

She hesitated for a long moment, then started to put the gun back. But a flash of light stopped her. Headlights filled the front yard and cast bright yellow cat's eyes on the sewing room wall beside Liz.

The woman glanced once more at the gun and, rather than put it away in the closet, set it on a dresser near the door and covered it with a doily. She walked into the living room and stared out the window at the car in her driveway, which sat motionless, lights still on, wipers whipping back and forth fast, her daughter hesitating to climb out; Liz

suspected it wasn't the bad weather that kept the girl inside.

A long, long moment later the headlights went dark.

Well, think positive, Liz told herself. Maybe her daughter had changed. Maybe the point of the visit was reaching out to make amends for all the betrayal over the years. They could finally begin to work on having a normal relationship.

Still, she glanced back at the sewing room, where the gun sat on the dresser, and told herself: Take it. Keep it in your pocket.

Then: No, put it back in the closet.

Liz did neither. Leaving the gun on the dresser, she strode to the front door of her house and opened it, feeling cold mist coat her face.

She stood back from the approaching silhouetted form of the slim young woman as Beth Anne walked through the doorway and stopped. A pause, then she swung the door shut behind her.

Liz remained in the middle of the living room, pressing her hands together nervously.

Pulling back the hood of her windbreaker, Beth Anne wiped rain off her face. The young woman's face was weathered, ruddy. She wore no makeup. She'd be twenty-eight, Liz knew, but she looked older. Her hair was now short, revealing tiny earrings. For some reason, Liz wondered if someone had given them to the girl or if she'd bought them for herself.

"Well, hello, honey."

"Mother."

A hesitation then a brief, humorless laugh from Liz. "You used to call me 'Mom.'"

"Did I?"

"Yes. Don't you remember?"

A shake of the head. But Liz thought that in fact she did remember but was reluctant to acknowledge the memory. She looked her daughter over carefully.

Beth Anne glanced around the small living room. Her eye settled on a picture of herself and her father together—they were on

the boat dock near the family home in Michigan.

Liz asked, "When you called you said somebody told you I was here. Who?"

"It doesn't matter. Just somebody. You've been living here since..." Her voice faded.

"A couple of years. Do you want a drink?"

"No."

Liz remembered that she'd found the girl sneaking some beer when she was sixteen and wondered if she'd continued to drink and now had a problem with alcohol.

"Tea, then? Coffee?"

"No."

"You knew I moved to the Northwest?" Beth Anne asked.

"You always talked about the area, getting away from... well, getting out of Michigan and coming here. Then after you moved out you got some mail at the house. From somebody in Seattle."

Beth Anne nodded. Was there a slight grimace too? As if she was angry with herself for carelessly leaving a clue to her whereabouts. "And you moved to Portland to be near me?"

Liz smiled. "I guess I did. I started to look you up but I lost the nerve." Liz felt tears welling in her eyes as her daughter continued her examination of the room. The house was small, yes, but the furniture, electronics and appointments were the best—the rewards of Liz's hard work in recent years. Two feelings vied within the woman: She half-hoped the girl would be tempted to reconnect with her mother when she saw how much money Liz had but, simultaneously, she was ashamed of the opulence; her daughter's clothes and cheap costume jewelry suggested she was struggling.

The silence was like fire. It burned Liz's skin and heart.

Beth Anne unclenched her left hand and her mother noticed a minuscule engagement ring and a simple gold band. The tears now rolled from her eyes. "You-?"

The young woman followed her mother's gaze to the ring. She nodded.

Liz wondered what sort of man her son-in-law was. Would he be someone soft like Jim, someone who could temper the girl's wayward personality? Or would he be hard? Like Beth Anne herself?

"You have children?" Liz asked.

"That's not for you to know."

"Are you working?"

"Are you asking if I've changed, Mother?"

Liz didn't want to hear the answer to this question and continued quickly, pitching her case. "I was thinking," she said, desperation creeping into her voice, "that maybe I could go up to Seattle. We could see each other... We could even work together. We could be partners. Fifty-fifty. We'd have so much fun. I always thought we'd be great together. I always dreamed—"

"You and me working together, Mother?" She glanced into the sewing room, nodded toward the machine, the racks of dresses. "That's not my life. It never was. It never could be. After all these years, you really don't understand that, do you?" The words and their cold tone answered Liz's question firmly: No, the girl hadn't changed one bit.

Her voice went harsh. "Then why're you here? What's your point in coming?"

"I think you know, don't you?"

"No, Beth Anne, I *don't* know. Some kind of psycho revenge?"

"You could say that, I guess." She looked around the room again. "Let's go."

Liz's breath was coming fast. "Why? Everything we ever did was for you."

"I'd say you did it *to* me." A gun appeared in her daughter's hand and the black muzzle lolled in Liz's direction. "Outside," she whispered.

"My God! No!" She inhaled a gasp, as the memory of the shooting in the jewelry store came back to her hard. Her arm tingled and tears streaked down her cheeks.

She pictured the gun on the dresser.

Sleep, my child...

"I'm not going anywhere!" Liz said, wiping her eyes.

"Yes, you are. Outside."

"What are you going to do?" she asked desperately.

"What I should've done a long time ago."

Liz leaned against a chair for support. Her daughter noticed the woman's left hand, which had eased to within inches of the telephone.

"No!" the girl barked. "Get away from it."

Liz gave a hopeless glance at the receiver and then did as she was told.

"Come with me."

"Now? In the rain."

The girl nodded.

"Let me get a coat."

"There's one by the door."

"It's not warm enough."

The girl hesitated, as if she was going to say that the warmth of her mother's coat was irrelevant, considering what was about to happen. But then she nodded. "But don't try to use the phone. I'll be watching."

Stepping into the doorway of the sewing room, Liz picked up the blue jacket she'd just been working on. She slowly put it on, her eyes riveted to the doily and the hump of the pistol beneath it. She glanced back into the living room. Her daughter was staring at a framed snapshot of herself at eleven or twelve standing next to her father and mother.

Quickly she reached down and picked up the gun. She could turn fast, point it at her daughter. Scream to her to throw away her own gun.

Mother, I can feel you near me, all through the night...

Father, I know you can hear me, all through the night...

But what if Beth Anne *didn't* give up the gun?

What if she raised it, intending to shoot?

What would Liz do then?

To save her own life could she kill her daughter?

Sleep, my child...

Beth Anne was still turned away, examining the picture. Liz would be able to do it—turn, one fast shot. She felt the pistol, its weight tugging at her throbbing arm.

But then she sighed.

The answer was no. A deafening no. She'd never hurt her daughter. Whatever was going to happen next, outside in the rain, she could never hurt the girl.

Replacing the gun, Liz joined Beth Anne.

"Let's go," her daughter said and, shoving her own pistol into the waistband of her jeans, she led the woman outside, gripping her mother roughly by the arm. This was, Liz realized, the first physical contact in at least four years.

They stopped on the porch and Liz spun around to face her daughter. "If you do this, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"No," the girl said. "I'd regret *not* doing it."

Liz felt a spatter of rain join the tears on her cheeks. She glanced at her daughter. The young woman's face was wet and red too, but this was, her mother knew, solely from the rain; her eyes were completely tearless. In a whisper she asked, "What've I ever done to make you hate me?"

This question went unanswered as the first of the squad cars pulled into the yard, red and blue and white lights igniting the fat raindrops around them like sparks at a Fourth of July celebration. A man in his thirties, wearing a dark wind-breaker and a badge around his neck, climbed out of the first car and walked toward the house, two uniformed state troopers behind him. He nodded to Beth Anne. "I'm Dan Heath, Oregon State Police."

The young woman shook his hand. "Detective Beth Anne Polemus, Seattle PD."

"Welcome to Portland," he said.

She gave an ironic shrug, took the handcuffs he held and cuffed her mother's hands securely.