

Imaginary Friends

By Deborah Woehr

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The thought of riding that Ferris wheel scared me to death. But, at the same time, I was anticipating the thrill of sitting on the metal seat of that huge contraption with its blazing lights and seeing the carnival below me from a dizzying height. That was what I was afraid of—heights.

“Come on, Glory,” said Frank Morgan. My stepfather-to-be was extending his hand out to me as I stood trembling before the gate. He was telling me not to be afraid. Ferris wheels were neat, he was saying. But I stood rooted to my spot. I ignored the groans of impatience coming from the people standing in line.

“It’s okay,” Frank laughed, amused by my fear. “Honest.”

“Don’t be afraid, little girl,” the operator said. He was a tall, skinny man with a large overbite. I tried not to stare at the man’s eyes, the left looking straight, the right pointed haphazardly at his nose. It was kind of creepy, that eye. I had no idea that eyes could do that, I was thinking. I’ll have to tell Billy all about that when we get home. He’ll get a kick out of it. The operator’s kind voice soothed most of my fear, but not all of it. “Your daddy’s right. Nothing bad is going to happen. Go on.”

So I went. Frank draped his arm around my shoulders and held me tight, laughing when the Ferris wheel jerked to a start and I let out a yell. Then my stomach lurched as we shot up into the air as the giant wheel began its cycle. The wind blew my hair into my face, but I dared not let go of the bar penning us in.

“What’s the matter, Glory?” Frank teased. “Afraid you’re going to fall out?”

“Yes,” I whimpered. Then he played a mean trick on me by rocking the seat back and forth. “Stop it, Frank!” I wailed and then I began to cry.

“I’m sorry,” Frank said, a hard chuckle mingling with the words. “I was only teasing you.”

“Well, it wasn’t funny!” I said between sobs.

“No, I guess not,” he winced and looked away. Then he said, “Look, there’s Mama.”

I peeked over the bar and saw my mother standing next to the line, searching for us. When she spotted us, she smiled as she waved. I waved back, but I didn’t smile. I was too mad at Frank. He was always pulling mean tricks on me, trying to scare me.

“See, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” Frank said. “How do you like the view?”

I said nothing, but he was right. From up there, the lights were very pretty. I heard the screams of the thrill seekers as they rode on the Lobster and the Tarantula on either side of us. I knew I would never go on those rides. They were just too scary. Instead, I ignored Frank as I looked down at all the people on the ground. Some were carrying huge stuffed animals as they made their way across the park. I was wondering whether they had bought them or if they were prizes won at some coin toss. Then Frank nudged my arm.

“Are you excited about your mom and I getting married next Friday?” he asked.

“I guess.”

“Don’t sound too excited there,” he smiled halfheartedly. “Wouldn’t want you to break a sweat.”

“I just miss my dad.”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ll bet he’s looking down from heaven right now, seeing what a brave little girl you are. I’ll bet he’s real proud of you.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. My father had been killed in a construction accident two years ago. Frank had been Daddy’s best friend. I had liked him at first, until he started coming around so often. I didn’t know he and Mama had been dating until she told me about their engagement. She told me last week that they were going to get married at the City Hall. I tried to be excited for her, but I didn’t like the thought of Frank living with us. I had just gotten used to the idea of Daddy not being around.

“You know what,” Frank said, taking my hand. “I’m going to take good care of you and your mother. I know I kid around a lot, but I do love you. Do you love me?”

“Yes,” I lied. I hated the sweaty warmth of his hand, wishing that he would let go. But he squeezed my hand and held it until the Ferris wheel slowed to a stop. When the operator unlatched the bar, I wrenched my hand from Frank’s grasp and jumped out of the seat. Then I ran over to where my mother was standing and hugged her tightly. I felt her hand brushing the hair out of my eyes as Frank walked up to us. I could tell that he was mad, but he forced a smile as soon as he joined us.

“Would you like me to win you something, Glory?” he asked.

“I guess.”

I looked up at Mama and saw the worried look on her face. She knew how I felt about Frank even though I hadn’t told her myself. They had had many discussions about his relationship with me, Mama always telling him that I had to get used to him.

The lights, sounds, and people distracted me from Mama’s worried gaze as I looked around. There were a lot of people walking around, one older kid bumping into us before he hurried to catch up with his friends. They were all laughing and joking. I wish I could be that carefree, but I’m not.

Frank managed to win a couple of games: one where he had to shoot at plastic ducks and knock them down and a coin toss. He handed me a pink monkey and a gray elephant. I took them gratefully and walked between him and my mother. Mama tried to ease the tension between us, but it didn’t work. Finally, we went home even though the fireworks show hadn’t started yet.

“What happened on the Ferris wheel?” Mama asked as she tucked me into bed.

“Frank tried to knock me out of the seat,” I whispered. Frank was sitting in the living room, pretending to watch TV, but I knew he was listening in on our conversation. He always did that and I hated him for that. I hated him for a lot of reasons.

“He was just teasing,” Mama said. “Frank would never do anything to hurt you, not on purpose.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but he scared me.”

“I know. Let’s try and forget about it, okay? Good night.”

“Good night.”

“What did you call me?” Frank asked menacingly.

“I don’t know,” I said, confused.

“You called me Daddy Frank!” he yelled. “How many times have I asked you not to call me that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is that your answer for everything—I don’t know?” He placed his hands squarely on his knees and leaned over until his face was mere inches from mine. The sour smell of beer and cigarettes made me want to gag.

I shrugged as I stood in front of him, glued to my spot on the carpet. Frank had gotten mad at me several times, but this time I was afraid of him. He reclined back in his chair and reached for his beer, his jaw clenched and his eyes sparkling with malice.

“Well?” he prodded. But I didn’t know what to say. I just wanted to hide in my bedroom until Mama came home. Instead, I stared at him and watched, terrified, as his face grew red and his eyes began to bug out of head. Then he slapped me twice, once on each cheek. The second slap knocked me to the floor and I began to bawl.

Through my tears, I heard him say, “The first was for calling me Daddy Frank. The second was for being stupid.”

Then I heard the sound of Mama’s car pulling into the driveway and instantly stopped crying. The car’s beeping horn caused Frank to rise from his chair. He gave me a contemptuous look and made a kicking gesture as I scuttled away.

“I hate you,” I whispered as the front door closed. “I wish you were dead!”

I brushed a hand across my face, the left side still stinging from the slap. Then I walked into the bathroom and washed my face, listening to the sounds of my mother and stepfather talking to each other. Frank sounded cheerful over the rustling sound of grocery bags as he asked my mother how the parent-teacher conference went. It went fine she said. She told Frank that I was Mrs. Spencer’s best student and how proud of me she was. I smiled in the mirror.

“You wouldn’t know it by the way she acts,” Frank snorted.

“What happened?” Mama asked, the cheerfulness in her voice dropping like a stone.

“She called me Daddy Frank again, Sarah. She knows I hate that. I swear, she does it to piss me off.”

“Well, don’t let it,” Mama snapped. “Help me with the groceries, will you? I have to get dinner going.”

“Right,” Frank said grumpily. “By the way, I came home from work this afternoon and thought some boy was in her room. Some kid named Billy. But when I walked by her door, she was by herself. What’s up with that?”

“Billy’s an imaginary friend, okay? She’s been through a lot since Bill died.”

“Great. That’s just great, Sarah! Not only are you guys shutting me out with all that mother/daughter crap, but now I have to compete with Bill’s ghost?”

“She’s eight years old, Frank. It’s perfectly normal for a kid her age to have an imaginary friend.”

“There’s nothing normal about that girl, Sarah, and you know it!”

“Just drop it, Frank,” Mama said tiredly.

I realized that I had been holding my breath and let it out in a big whoosh. Then I looked in the mirror and saw, with some disappointment, that my face had lost most of

the red mark. Mama would never believe me if I told her about the slap. Stepping down from the stool, I opened the door and quietly stole into my bedroom. Frank was still complaining loudly, but I ignored him as I buried my nose in a book. I had a book report due next week. I was halfway through the first page when I heard the front door slam, falling off my bed when I jumped.

Picking myself off the floor, I flung open the door and found Mama standing there, her hand poised to knock. She gave me a weak smile before she said, “Hi. Congratulations on your report card. Four A’s and a B.”

Nodding, I said, “Sorry about Frank.”

“Can you work at calling him Daddy?” she pleaded. “He wants so much to be a part of our family.”

“He is by marriage,” I stated coolly.

“I know, but could you try?”

“I’ll try,” I lied. I never would because Billy told me not to.

If you start calling him Daddy, then he’ll never leave, Billy had said. And you want him to leave, Glory. I think that would be the best thing for you and your mother.

Is he going to hurt us, Billy?

Just do what I say and you’ll be all right. Promise?

I promise.

“Glory, are you all right?” Mama asked, a concerned look crossing her pretty face. “You look a little flushed.”

“I’m fine. I was just thinking about my homework, that’s all.”

“Why don’t we take a break and go out for pizza, since Frank’s not going to be home for a while?”

“Sounds great!” I said. “Let me get my sweater.”

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“What are you guys going to do?” I asked my friends as we headed out the door of our classroom. Before the bell rang, our teacher had grouped us into pairs for an upcoming science fair. Karen and Marcy got paired together, while I got stuck with the class nerd.

“I was thinking about building a solar system,” Marcy replied.

“Don’t you think that’s overdone?” Karen asked, rolling her eyes.

“It was just an idea,” Marcy shrugged. “Besides, we have weeks to work on our project.”

“I’m sorry you got stuck with Steve,” Karen said with genuine compassion. “I hope you don’t get teased too much over it.”

“Thanks, Karen,” I said. “But I think the class expected it. They think I’m a nerd, too.”

“You’re not a nerd, Glory,” Marcy said. “You’re just a little different.”

“Yeah, right,” I said bitterly. “Anyway, he goggled at me when Mrs. Spencer read off our names.”

“Yuk!” Karen shouted before stopping on the sidewalk and staring at the street, her normally cheerful expression turning into a stony mask. “Um, Glory?”

“What?” I asked.

“Your step-dad’s here and looks pissed.”

Looking toward the street, I saw Frank sitting in his red Thunderbird, glaring at me. He raised his hand and motioned for me. I glared back at him as I approached the car, wondering why he wasn’t a work.

“Get in,” Frank ordered.

“But I’m supposed to go over to Marcy’s,” I said. “Mama said it was okay.”

“I don’t give a damn what Mama said,” Frank said, spittle flying off his lips. “Get your ass in the car. Now!”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Glory,” Marcy called awkwardly.

“Yeah, we’d better get going,” Karen said as she clutched Marcy’s arm. I watched as my friends walked hurriedly down the street, hating Frank for embarrassing me.

When we reached the corner, I opened the door and stepped inside the car. Closing the door, I stared out the window and ignored Frank as he pulled from the curb. The houses whizzed past as the car sped down the street. I caught a glimpse of Marcy and Karen as they approached Westwood Street. In a blink of an eye, they were replaced by another row of houses.

“Driving fast enough?” I asked when he swerved to avoid a sixth-grader I had seen in the halls. The boy’s face looked pale and shocked as we passed by.

“You shut your mouth,” Frank said through clenched teeth.

“Couldn’t keep quiet, could you?” Frank roared as he threw the keys on the table, knocking over a vase with a resounding crash. The combination of the shattering glass and Frank’s yell caused me to jump.

“What did I do?” I asked, cringing as he raced toward me and grabbed my shirt. It tore as he lifted me off the floor and up to his eye level.

“Don’t play innocent with me, little girl!” he yelled, shaking me with every word. “Your mother called and accused me of beating you! She threatened to throw me out!”

“You did slap me, but I didn’t say anything,” I said, my voice faltering. Frank was squeezing the collar of my shirt so tight that I was having trouble breathing.

“Then how did she know? Care to explain?”

“She must have seen the red mark on my face last night. I don’t know.”

“There’s that sentence again,” he said threateningly. Then he let go of my collar and I fell to the floor with a hard thump, my back scraping painfully against the corner of the table.

“I really don’t know how she found out, Frank,” I said, wincing as I rose from the floor.

“Why won’t you call me Daddy?” he whined as he threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. “Haven’t I promised to take care of you and haven’t I lived up to that promise?”

“Yes.”

“Haven’t I tried to be a good father to you?”

“No. You tease and bully me around and I hate your guts.” There. It was out. I was glad I finally said it.

“I like to kid around,” Frank shrugged off the sting with a weak smile. “I’ve always been that way.”

“I guess that’s why you don’t have any friends. Daddy had lots of friends.”

“Yes, he did,” Frank sneered. “But I see you didn’t take after him because all yours are imaginary. What’s the matter, can’t handle real people?”

“I have friends,” I shouted. “Marcy and Karen! In case you forgot, I was supposed to go over to Marcy’s this afternoon.”

“Right. I’m supposed to believe that.”

“I don’t care if you believe me or not, Frank.”

“Daddy.”

“Frank.”

“You call me Daddy, or I swear—“

“Screw you!” I screamed. “I’m never calling you that, not now or ever!”

There was no warning as Frank’s fist slammed into my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. Everything went black after that. Some time later, I woke up in my bed. Frank was standing over me as my eyes fluttered open, his eyes filled with hatred.

“If you ever tell your mother what happened here this afternoon, I’ll kill you both,” he whispered fiercely. “You understand me, bitch? You aren’t ever going to get away from me.”

Then he stomped out of my room, slamming the door behind him. My stomach felt swollen and bruised as I lay there petrified. What am I going to do? That man was serious. If I even hint to Mama about what happened today, we’re both dead. What am I going to do?

Glory. Glory?

I heard the voice through the fog of sleep. I winced as I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Who’s there, I asked groggily.

It’s me. Billy.

Billy? You’ve got to help me, Billy. Frank really clobbered me today. I think he’s going to . . .

I know. I know what he plans to do. But don’t worry. Everything is going to be all right. You’ve got to trust us.

Us?

We’re here too, came a familiar voice.

Marcy?

Yeah. Karen’s here, too. Billy asked us to help you.

Aren’t you supposed to be at home? I asked, spotting my best friends standing at the foot of my bed.

Marcy didn’t answer, but gazed at me with indescribable love and peace. Peace like I’d never felt in my life. It made my eyes water and my soul ache. I reached for them, wanting to be swallowed in that love until I winked out of existence. But they

backed away, regret mixing in with that love. Why won't they let me near them? I wondered.

Billy was standing beside me, looking at me with fierce determination. The room was suddenly charged with electricity as he moved to stand beside my friends. Something big was about to happen and it wasn't a thunderstorm. My whole body trembled with fear and excitement as I sat on my bed, reminding me of the night on the Ferris wheel. It was that same type of feeling.

When I pushed the blanket off my lap, Billy shook his head and said, *No. You can't come with us.*

"Why?"

You just can't, that's all. Go back to sleep, and when you wake up tomorrow, things will be back to the way they were.

"Frank will be gone?"

Yes, now go to sleep.

"Goodnight, Billy."

Goodnight.

Then they were gone, leaving me alone in the darkness. Normally, I would have lied there, scared out of my mind. But all I felt was peace. Peace.

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"Frank, wake up!" Sarah screamed at her husband. But Frank continued to thrash around in their bed, fighting off his invisible attacker. Christ, is he having another flashback? Sarah wondered as her husband screamed and clutched at himself.

"Goddamn it, Frank!" she cried in frustration. "Don't do this to me. This day has been hard enough."

But Frank went on screaming and flailing. Without warning, his eyes flew open as his entire body stiffened, flat as a board. Then he lay still as a droplet of blood coursed down the corners of his mouth.

"Oh, God! Frank, what's happening?" Sarah felt for a pulse and found none, staring at the lifeless eyes of her second husband. In death, his face was frozen in terror. As a nurse, Sarah knew that she should begin resuscitation if she were going to save his life. But something was keeping her frozen in place, staring at her husband's face. In a flash, she realized that she didn't care whether or not he survived. She didn't think he was meant to, and that brought an overwhelming sense of relief.

Her body shivered at the sudden cold, the hairs on the back of her neck beginning to rise. Someone was in the room with her, she realized as an icy wave of terror gripped her heart. Was Frank's nightmare coming to life? Sarah thought as she slowly turned her head around.

Three children were standing by the door gazing solemnly at her, their expressions that of pity and regret. Standing before her were Karen Peters, Marcy Anderson, and . . . Bill? How can this be Bill? He was thirty-five years old when he died. The boy standing before her was that—a boy. But she had seen enough of his boyhood pictures to know that it was Bill.

“What are you guys doing here?” Sarah asked, her eyes bugging out of their sockets. She knew instinctively that they had killed Frank.

“I love you, Sarah,” the boy said in Bill’s voice as he and the girls vanished into thin air.

Sarah did a double-take, but the children were gone. “They weren’t there,” Sarah said shakily. “Bill didn’t come back from the grave to rescue his daughter. You’re going crazy, Sarah.”

Am I? she wondered as she gazed down at Frank, who was still very dead. She shuddered at the thought of him coming back to haunt her. And those girls! How am I supposed to tell my eight year-old daughter that her best friends were killed by a hit-and-run driver on the way home from school this afternoon? She would never understand what happened. Death wasn’t supposed to come to children, but it had. Tears filled Sarah’s eyes as she remembered their lifeless faces as they were rolled in on gurneys. She and the doctors had tried everything to save them, but to no avail. They were gone.

“But my baby isn’t,” she said aloud as she raced from her bedroom. Glory was sleeping soundly. Oblivious to all the pain around her.