

## Imagine

“Mrs. Reed, your daughter is not schizophrenic.”

Eileen shifted in the hard plastic chair. How had she been that obvious? She opened her mouth to make some excuse.

“I promise you, this kind of behavior is very common in children Katie’s age, especially in only children.” Dr. Bianca had a deep, scratchy voice that made Eileen think she had sung along at one too many rock concerts in her youth. She glanced at Eileen over brown-rimmed glasses. “She’s too young to be in school full-time, and with the move she’s lost what friends she had...it makes perfect sense that she should create a relationship like this.”

Eileen had become very absorbed in the fingernail of her right index finger. “But she treats ChooChoo like he’s so *real*...It just doesn’t seem *right*...”

“Of the children under six that come through my office, I’d say easily a quarter of them have an imaginary friend—but in all my twenty years in the medical profession I have never seen a single child schizophrenic. Schizophrenia doesn’t generally even manifest until the college years. So please...stop worrying.” Dr. Bianca turned and picked up Katie’s file, flipping through it. “And remember to bring her in for the chicken pox vaccination soon. All right—call me if you have any other questions!” She flashed a too-brief smile, picked up the file, and strode out. Eileen watched her go.

Katie was putting a puzzle together in the playroom and talking animatedly. Eileen’s heart sank when she saw that the playroom was empty.

“No, ChooChoo,” Katie was saying. “That piece doesn’t go there. Nooo...not there either. Yes! Good job!” She laughed.

“Hey, Kay-Kay!” Eileen walked over and ruffled her daughter’s hair. “Whatcha making?”

“Me and ChooChoo are doing a puzzle!” Katie flashed her mother a foot-wide grin. “No, ChooChoo!” she scolded suddenly. “Put that down!” She reached out and slapped an invisible hand, a scowl twisting her tiny face.

Eileen fought down her rising panic. *You’re being stupid!* she told herself. *You just paid Dr. Bianca something ridiculous to tell you you were imagining things...why can’t you believe her?* “Let’s go, sweetie. You want to stop for ice cream on the way home?”

Katie jumped up, the puzzle forgotten in a second. “Ice cream! Ooooooo!” She ran to the door, then stopped and turned back. Eileen smiled, but Katie wasn’t looking at her. “Well, come on, ChooChoo.” Katie stood with arms akimbo, glaring into the room. Apparently ChooChoo did not respond. “Come *on!*”

“Katie, sweetie, can’t we please just go?”

“I can’t leave ChooChoo!” Katie shot her mother a horrified look. “ChooChoo, come *on!*”

Eileen had to stand in the playroom for a full fifteen minutes while Katie wheedled and begged, trying to convince the reluctant ChooChoo to come. By the time they finally left, Eileen was wishing ChooChoo would appear so she could punch his lights out.

ChooChoo was in top form at the ice cream parlor, taking twenty minutes to choose a plain strawberry cone, which Katie then left to melt in the car all over the backseat. Eileen was determined to ground Katie during all the time it took to clean the ice cream off the car. She stormed toward the apartment fuming, her hands sticky and dirty.

Eileen shoved two boxes labeled “Katie’s Art and Papers” and “Katie’s Shoes” aside with one foot and made her way into the apartment. The living room, too, was scattered with boxes waiting until Eileen needed some obscure item, like a whisk or a thesaurus, enough to go rooting through them. Under the thick blanket of boxes and scattered piles of half-unpacked items, the room sat stark, white, and bare. It ached for color, whether in the form of tomato juice stains or an ugly couch, but Eileen and Katie had both been too busy adjusting to the new place to make any kind of mark.

The room didn’t seem to bother Katie—she had made straight for the already-opened box marked “Katie’s Toys—Volume II” and pulled out a coloring book and a handful of broken crayons. Eileen’s heart broke seeing the scatted pieces of crayons that hadn’t survived the trip from Greensboro. She needed to buy Kay-Kay a new box of crayons—as soon as possible. Eileen stood by the bare wall and watched Katie playing, chattering away to ChooChoo, and all thoughts of grounding her immediately left her head. She looked so small and fragile crouched there, a sheet of blond hair falling half across her face and one of her Barbie socks fallen down around her ankle. “Butterfly,” Ben had always called her, and she looked like a butterfly at this moment, just out of the chrysalis, wings still wet and trembling.

Eileen walked into the kitchen and stood staring into the sink at the remains of breakfast. The generous ice cream cones would keep both of them satiated for awhile, but Eileen knew she should fix something or other. Something better than the prepackaged macaroni and cheese she'd been reverting to. She turned on the water and ran it over her sticky hands. The water splashed over the piled-up dishes, mixing with bits of different meals and turning into a scummy wash that sank down the drain. The dishes should be cleaned, too...there was definitely something growing in a half-full cup of orange juice.

When she was still married to Ben, Eileen had had so much fun trying out new recipes she'd found in a magazine or a cookbook she'd checked out of the library, experimenting with Thai cuisine one week, Ethiopian the next. But lately it just hadn't seemed worth the effort.

And she needed to make a run down to the Laundromat. Just because Katie didn't mind wearing her "Someone in Winston-Salem Loves Me" shirt every day of the week didn't mean Eileen had an excuse not to do laundry.

Eileen pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down. The second hand seemed to be moving very slowly.

She didn't know how long she'd been sitting there when it occurred to her that she hadn't heard Katie's voice in awhile. She leapt up and ran to the doorway. Katie was sitting where Eileen had left her, systematically pulling all the paper off the crayons and setting it carefully in a circle on the floor. She glanced up at her mother, then looked down again.

Eileen sat back down in her chair and looked at her hands. *She knows*, she thought. *She knows what a completely inept mother I am.*

She had felt defiant and courageous setting out from Greensboro two weeks ago...leaving Ben and her old life behind...anything had seemed possible then. But this town was so dead...nothing in it but her job at the newspaper, and she wasn't even looking forward to that.

Those indeterminable lunch breaks spent with Andy the webmaster who had once passed the entire lunch hour discussing a particularly nasty virus that he'd been battling on his computer all week and exactly which files it had corrupted. Paula wasn't much better. She seemed to think Eileen—and everyone else for that matter—was extremely interested in her sex life, and in between bites of her veggie burrito she explained her most recent exploit in graphic detail. But they were the only two people working on the Daily Trumpet who weren't white males over fifty, and as excruciating as their company was Eileen preferred it to eating alone.

She had spent too many meals eating alone when she had been with Ben, working at the reception desk in the hospital, a job that was dull and made her spend far too much time away from Katie. She could only endure it because in the brief lulls between patients she could grab a second to write another sentence on what she had thought at the time was a novel. But the other receptionists had all been Hispanic and had stuck together in an inseparable gaggle, and most days Ben had been too busy, so Eileen had ended up alone in the hospital's Wendy's or eating a bagel in the back with the smokers. Of course, when Ben hadn't been busy and had taken her out to eat it had been wonderful...Eileen was struck with a sudden image of Ben, blond curls falling over his forehead and his

glasses askew, and it felt like a giant hand had suddenly taken hold of her throat and begun to squeeze.

“Mommy?” Eileen looked over to see Katie standing in the doorway. At first she was sure she must have cried out, but Katie just walked over and sat in the other chair, swinging her feet.

“What, sweetie?”

“Mommy, you oughtta get a friend like Choochoo.”

“What? I mean, I—but sweetie, imaginary friends are for kids, not grownups!”

*And doesn't schizophrenia run in families? No! Stop thinking like that!*

“Mommy gotta get a ‘maginary friend,” Katie insisted. “Make macaroni and cheese?”

After an excruciating day at work when one of her articles was rejected for being too controversial and Paula spent the whole lunch hour discussing the talents of her newest conquest, a twenty-year-old mechanic named Phil, Eileen decided to stop by the art gallery to cheer herself up. She spent almost half an hour just looking at the pieces, drinking in the colors and shapes. There was one of a giraffe she thought Katie would especially like, so Eileen splurged and got it.

The landlord had forbidden holes to be poked in his beautiful white walls, so Eileen was trying to use a self-sticking hook, but the painting kept falling off the wall. On the third try she didn't catch it and the glass in front of the painting broke, scattering all over the carpet. Eileen was trying to pick up tiny pieces of glass out of the carpet when Katie came in. “Mommy—“ she started.

“Katie! There’s glass! Don’t move!”

Katie stopped calmly. “Mommy, what’s your ‘maginary friend’s name? Choochoo wants to know.”

The glass was all but invisible in the white carpet. Eileen whirled, frustrated. “Well, you can tell Choochoo to mind his own business, Katie, all right? Because I don’t want an effing imaginary friend!”

Katie gasped, a tiny little gasp like a baby bird, and jumped back. When her foot hit the floor she let out a louder cry and fell.

“Katie!” Eileen rushed forward. Katie looked up at her with wide eyes. Eileen crouched down and cradled Katie’s foot in her hands. A large, jagged piece of glass was lodged in her foot, and blood had begun to ooze around it. Katie frowned and looked down at her foot. As if she hadn’t noticed it until that moment, she began to shriek.

Eileen’s first instinct was to call 911 and her mother and Ben and have them all come and just take over, but luckily after she had removed the glass, washed the cut, and bandaged it, the cut had almost stopped bleeding and Katie’s shrieks had lessened to sobs. Eileen made her hot chocolate with mini marshmallows and sang all her favorite Raffi songs until she fell asleep. Then she went back to the living room and kneeled down on the spot where Katie’s blood had stained the carpet. She kneeled there and stared at the tiny circle it made, tears streaming down her face.

Eileen stood and watched Katie sleeping. Her bandaged foot stuck out from under the covers, so Eileen gently pulled the blanket over it. She reached up and gently stroked Katie’s hair. “Joanna,” she murmured. “Her name is Joanna.”

“You wouldn’t *believe* the RAM on those G5s.” Andy took half the salsa in the bowl on one chip. “And if you try running Linux out of OS-X—whoo! That baby’s flyin’!”

“Speaking of flying,” Paula said seductively (she said everything seductively, from saying ‘good morning’ to her daily litany.) “My God was I flying last night!” She laughed a tinkly laugh and nibbled her quesadilla.

“I bought a painting yesterday,” Eileen tried.

“Have you seen the dpi on those new Epson printers?” Andy said through a mouthful of salsa. “I saw a printout of the Mona Lisa where I swear you could see Michelangelo’s fingerprints.”

“I once dated a guy named Michael...my God he was a good kisser...and an even better—“

Eileen let their voices wash over her, eyes concentrated on the one empty chair in between Andy and Paula. *Maybe Katie’s got it right after all*, she thought. How wonderful it would be to be able to create a friend out of your imagination who was exactly what you needed, and would go away when you didn’t need him or her anymore, and would demand nothing but the occasional strawberry ice cream cone.

But how did Katie do it? How did children create things and people that seemed so real that they could talk to them and receive a reply?

Eileen continued to focus on the one chair. Surely something that could be done daily by a six-year-old couldn’t be that difficult. She tried to picture what her ideal friend would look like. She was drawing a blank when suddenly an image came to her, unbidden and whole, of a woman with short brown hair and brown eyes with a sarcastic

glint in them, wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Very different from Eileen with her long hair and skirt and slightly anxious gaze...maybe that was why her mind created her. But wherever she came from, before Eileen could think twice, there was Joanna, sitting in the empty chair.

“Joanna?”

The woman looked up and grinned. Eileen blinked and she was gone.

“I dated a Joanna once too...” Paula said. “That was in my lesbian days, of course.” She threw her head back and laughed.

Eileen tried to concentrate, to bring Joanna back, but it was no use. When she came back to listen to the conversation again, Andy and Paula were arguing about internet sex. The two seemed to have finally found a topic they could both take an interest in.

On the drive to Katie’s school, Eileen couldn’t stop worrying. What Dr. Bianca had said about children’s imaginary friends was one thing, but what was this? Had she completely lost it? Was she really going crazy? And if so, why did she so want to see Joanna again? *Imagine* her again, Eileen told herself firmly. *Imagine* her...she’s not real.

Eileen was in such a good mood she stopped by the grocery store on the way home and made tacos for dinner, one of Katie’s favorites and Eileen’s as well. After dinner she was humming and doing the dishes when she felt Katie’s tiny hand tugging at her.

“Sweetie?”

“Choochoo wants to know what Joanna looks like.”

Eileen stared at her for a second. She didn't remember even mentioning Joanna again, but she must have. "Can't he see her?"

Katie shrugged.

"Well...okay." Eileen described Joanna for Katie and Choochoo, down to the details of her little gold hoop earrings and untied shoelace. Katie drank in the description like the most exciting bedtime story, and she looked a little disappointed when Eileen couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Didn't she say anything, Mommy?"

"Um...no, she didn't."

"Oh. Maybe she will later." Katie skipped off.

The next day Joanna surfaced at an unexpected time. Eileen was sitting at her desk, proofreading an article, when her boss walked up.

Mr. Menders was a huge man with a stomach bigger than Eileen's apartment's bathroom, wispy gray hair only just covering an overlarge head, and an endless assortment of ugly ties. Today's tie was magenta with little orange and green squares on it. Eileen watched the tie as he approached.

"Ms. Reed," he said in his phlegmy voice. "This most recent article of yours, the one about the graffiti on the bridge."

"Yes, sir?" Eileen's heart sank. She knew what was coming. That had been a good article, too. But she should have known that an article describing graffiti as a work of art wouldn't work for a community this conservative.

"What are you trying to accomplish with this article of yours?"

It was then she appeared, standing behind Mr. Menders with her arms crossed.

“What the hell do you mean what is she trying to accomplish?” Joanna snapped. “She’s trying to write about the world, to inform, interest, and amaze, to make your readers think! She’s trying to do what every other one of your writers should be doing every day, but don’t, because they’re too worried about offending your conservative ass!”

*Hey, that’s good*, Eileen thought. Of course she couldn’t say anything along those lines *really*, but...”I’m trying to make our readers think,” Eileen replied. Her voice was shaking a little. “Trying to make them decide what really is art and what is vandalism. Making them decide for themselves instead of just accepting everything they read. Expanding their—their minds.”

Mr. Menders looked a little taken aback. “Well,” he said. “Well.” He stopped, rubbed his chin, and looked at Eileen. “I’ll get back to you, Ms. Reed,” he said finally. Eileen stared after him. He hadn’t said he was going to cut the article.

She turned to look at Joanna. “Don’t let him push you around!” Joanna said, coming over and sitting on the edge of Eileen’s desk. “You’re the artist here. Him? He’s just a brainless manager...doesn’t have a creative bone in his body. You’re the one really running the show. Remember that.”

And she was gone.

At lunch that day Eileen looked back to see Joanna waiting in line behind her. Eileen stared. *She’s in my imagination*, she told herself, *she’s not real...how is she going to order?* She burst out laughing, and Paula in front of her turned around and gave her a look.

Eileen ordered her burrito and waited to see what Joanna did, dumbfounded by the sheer weirdness of the situation. Joanna walked up to the counter. “Triple cheese quesadilla and a large Coke,” she said. The servers ignored her. Eileen felt a little surge of relief. She had been starting to make herself nervous. *Of course she’s not real*, she reassured herself. *I can make her disappear if I like*. And Joanna disappeared. But then Eileen looked at Andy and Paula waiting by the cash register, arguing voraciously over whether online porn should be illegal..

“Come back, Joanna,” she muttered. Joanna appeared obediently, carrying a steaming quesadilla on a tray..

“All these sites have turned the internet into a massive sex shop!” Andy was complaining as he counted out change. “The internet is for an exchange of ideas, not smut like that!”

“Who says porn isn’t ideas?” Paula demanded. “I get lots of ideas!”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Joanna interrupted, dropping her plate on the table with a thump. “Can’t you two ever think of anything to talk about other than sex or the internet or sex on the internet?”

Eileen couldn’t figure out why Paula and Andy had stopped talking until she realized that she had spoken at the same time as Joanna. Joanna gave her an encouraging smile. Eileen gulped. Had she just alienated the only semblance of friends she had?

“You have something else to talk about?” Paula asked. Eileen stared at her, amazed.

“Well, I...Mr. Menders might let me keep this new piece I did on graffiti...I was sure it would be too controversial...have you ever had an article cut?”

It didn't turn out to be the most intellectual of conversations, but at least it Eileen didn't find herself checking her watch every two minutes to see when she could go back to work. Maybe there was some hope for Paula and Andy after all.

Katie was spending that weekend with Ben, and as Eileen stood in front of the apartment building watching the blue pickup disappear behind the dry cleaner's, her body seemed to get heavier. Everything seemed so dull when Katie was gone. Even the sky wasn't quite as bright a blue. She sighed and walked back inside. She was reaching for the TV remote when Joanna appeared in front of her, sitting on the couch, and gave her a dirty look.

“What?”

Joanna snorted, dropped a newspaper on the couch behind her, and strode out of the apartment. Eileen stared after her, unsure why she was being snubbed. She sank down into the couch cushions and stared at the blank TV.

After a few minutes of this excitement, the picture on the cover of Joanna's newspaper caught her eye. It was a couple dancing, and the newspaper wasn't really so much a newspaper as one of those “your guide to night life” inserts. Eileen picked it up and looked at the cover more closely. “Find Love Tonight!” it proclaimed in tall red letters. “Friday: Singles night at Club K.O.”

*This is the kind of thing someone like Joanna would go to,* she thought. She was about to put the paper down again, but she paused and looked at it again.

*Well. Why not?*

Her makeup was still in the bathroom drawer where she'd put it on the first day they'd moved in. Eileen was putting on her usual conservative brown eyeshadow and

pale red lipstick when she paused. “Joanna would pick brighter colors,” she said to her reflection. “And the *red* dress!”

Eileen walked out of the apartment in a red dress she hadn’t worn since before she and Ben had started sleeping in separate beds, purple eyeshadow, and bright red lipstick. She felt outrageous and it felt good.

*Joanna would walk more confidently*, she told herself and straightened her back.

Club K.O. wasn’t much of a club, but the music wasn’t bad, the drinks weren’t expensive if not too special, and Eileen watched dancers moving on the floor under the play of the rainbow lights.

“Hey...you eat at Maria’s, don’t you?”

He was smiling at her, soft brown eyes watching her over gold-rimmed glasses. She tried to keep from looking at the way his muscles curved in the arm that was resting on the bar and the little tuft of chest hair that poked out of his shirt where the second button was undone.

“Every day almost, with my co-workers. I think I remember seeing you there. I really like the three cheese quesadilla.” My God, what was she saying? And who was she kidding, I think I remember seeing you there? As if she hadn’t stared...

He grinned., and she melted a little. “I like two of the cheese in the quesadilla...the third I think is a little much. I’m Richard.” He put out his hand.

She took it, faintly amazed.

Afterwards, she wasn’t sure at all why she said it. But she was so happy that a little issue like having to explain to Richard later that her name wasn’t actually Joanna, but Eileen seemed incredibly minor.

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That Monday Eileen was so preoccupied with the weekend's events when she was rushing to pick up Katie that she almost didn't see a hitchhiker who had to jump up on the curb to avoid her. "Oh, I'm sorry," she called out to him, rolling down the window. "I didn't see you. And I'd give you a lift but I live in town."

"No problem, ma'am!" the hitchhiker grinned cheerfully. He looked about sixteen, with startlingly blue eyes, spiky red hair, and a faded denim jacket. "No harm done. I didn't even drop my ice cream!" He held up a pink cone. "You have a great day now!" He started walking on down the median, licking his cone and holding out his thumb. Eileen sat a moment trying to figure out why he struck her as familiar, but when the light turned green she tore down the street—she was late picking up Katie—and forgot about it.

Katie was full of news about the new friends she'd met at the playground and being invited to a birthday party. Eileen thought it was strange she hadn't mentioned ChooChoo once. But then, she hadn't talked to Joanna since she had stormed out of the apartment.

As Eileen turned into the parking lot she saw Joanna walking towards the bus stop. Surprised, Eileen stopped to watch her. Joanna smiled, winked, and kept walking.