

David Ambrose

A Memory of Demons by David Ambrose Chapters 5 and 6

Chapter 5

Julia Katharine Freeman weighed in at six pounds twelve ounces. Because she was the first child of a woman over thirty, her parents had taken their doctor's advice and had all the tests available. Aside from being reassured that their baby was healthy, it meant they had not needed to waste time thinking about boys' names when they knew for sure they were having a girl.

The first time Tom and Clare brought their daughter home, she seemed to positively gurgle her approval of the light, brightly-painted room they had prepared for her overlooking the leafy garden.

"I think we got it right," Tom said, watching her happily batting a small hand at the delicate mobile suspended over her cot.

"I think we did," said Clare, catching his eye with a smile.

Throughout the following weeks and months, Julia did her share of screaming through the night, catching small infections, and giving her first-time parents one or two stomach-churning scares. The worst was when she crawled into a linen cupboard and fell asleep, leaving them frantically searching the house for what seemed a lifetime but in fact was a little under twelve minutes.

Making friends between baby and household pets was one of the subjects they had read up on in advance. The best advice, endorsed by friends who had tried it, was to place the child on a rug with the pet or pets in question, and let them get on with introducing themselves to each other - while, of course, keeping a careful eye on things. But both Sam, their black Labrador, and Turk, their Siamese cat, seemed delighted by this new addition to the family; though, to be honest, Turk initially tried to feign lofty indifference, but soon began to purr with satisfaction as the small pink hands learnt how to pat and stroke him without poking him in the eye or pulling his whiskers too hard.

Clare had continued working through almost the full term of her pregnancy. She had planned on taking at least a year off to look after Julia; then, perhaps with the help of a nanny, she thought she might ease herself back into work, much of which she could anyway do from home. But that was a decision she would make later. She had still not gone back to work by the time Julia started to talk, which was just after her second birthday. Her first word out of nowhere one morning was "melon". Why she should have made that choice baffled and amused them both. They weren't even sure that she'd ever seen a melon, let alone tasted one.

“ I don’t believe she said the word at all,” Clare maintained. “It was just a baby noise, like poo-poo or coo-coo.”

“No, she was really making an effort,” Tom insisted. “It was something she was trying to say.”

“Okay, so let’s see if she says it again. Come on, sweetie, talk to mommy and daddy. This is mommy... this is daddy...”

The three of them were sitting cross-legged on the floor of Julia’s room one Sunday before breakfast, with old Sam sitting off to one side, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, observing the ritual with genial curiosity.

“Daddy... Mommy... Julia... Daddy... Mommy... Julia...”

Both Tom and Clare repeated this mantra several times, tapping each other or Julia herself on the chest to demonstrate which name applied to whom. The child watched with bright-eyed interest as first her father’s finger, then her mother’s, moved around their little triangle. She quickly caught on to the idea that they wanted her to repeat what they were saying. And so she tried.

“Mom-ma... Dad-da... Mom-ma... Da-da... Mom-ma...”

Clare let out a squeal of delight and swept the child into her arms. “She did it! She’s talking! Oh, aren’t you a clever little girl! You’re talking!”

They continued with the exercise, wanting to be sure that this wasn’t just some fluke but that Julia really had grasped the idea of what communicating in words was all about. Certainly, it was clear that she had got the hang of mommy and daddy; what she had more difficulty with was her own name.

Clare repeated, “Mommy... Daddy... Julia...”

“Mom-ma... Da-da...”

“Julia,” Tom finished for her when she stopped yet again, unable to go further. He tapped her softly on the chest several times to emphasize that this little person right there was Julia.

She seemed to understand. She fixed him with an intense wide-eyed gaze, then copied his gesture, tapping herself on the chest.

“Mel-on-ee,” she said.

Tom and Clare looked at each other, more amused than anything else. “Does she know any Melanie?” he asked. Clare shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Julia,” Tom repeated, turning his attention back to his baby daughter. “Mommy... Daddy... Julia.”

The child frowned. This was starting to confuse her.

“Mom-ma, Dad-da,” she said, more firmly than before, waving an arm at each of them in turn to make absolutely clear that she had got the point they were trying to make. Then she hit herself on the chest with an open hand, and repeated, “Mel-on-ee”.

This time their smiles, Clare’s and Tom’s when they looked at each other, were replaced by mild concern. Was there something wrong with the child’s hearing?

“Can’t be,” Clare said. “She got ‘Mommy’ and ‘Daddy’ all right. Maybe she just can’t say ‘Julia’ yet.”

“Then how come she can say ‘Melonee’, or ‘Melanie’, or whatever it is?”

Clare thought a moment. “Maybe it’s Susan,” she said.

Susan was the girl who baby-sat for us once or twice a week. She was the fifteen-year-old daughter of a neighbour, a smart and totally reliable girl.

“You mean Susan calls her Melanie?”

Clare shrugged. “Maybe Susan’s got a friend called Melanie. Maybe she’s heard them talking on the phone and made the wrong association.” She shrugged again. “I don’t know. I’ll ask Susan. It must be something like that.”

They looked at their daughter, and she looked back at them, her face reflecting the puzzlement she saw.

“Julia,” Clare repeated softly, but with an undertone of quiet urgency, resting her hands lightly on the child’s tiny shoulders.

“Julia,” Tom echoed as she turned to look up at him, searching his face for confirmation of what her mother was trying to tell her. “Julia.”

She looked back at her mother, then back at Tom. Abruptly, her face lit up with one of those dazzling infant smiles of recognition where all doubt is swept aside and everything is suddenly right with the world.

“Joo-ya,” she said, swinging her arms and clapping her chubby hands in front of her. “Joo-ya.”

Chapter 6

He could not remember where or when he'd had that first drink. As every alcoholic knows, the first drink is the only one that counts. The others just follow on, drink after drink, with no end in sight. It's part of the disease: a pattern. If for some reason you forget where it leads, that first drink, you start again... and pretty soon you find out.

Of course, Tom knew perfectly well that you don't really forget. What you do is push the memory down into your subconscious and slam the lid. And suddenly the lid becomes a bar stool.

Which was why, however many drinks later, he found himself stumbling through a tangle of undergrowth and wild grass, falling on the muddy earth, picking himself up and struggling on. Up ahead of him the ground rose towards a few straggling bushes that seemed to mark the limit of what might once have been a garden. All he could see beyond that was a cold slate-grey sky.

He made an effort to clear his befuddled brain and recall where he was and how he got there. But his mind remained resolutely blank. He could remember nothing of the last few hours. Or was it more than hours? Days even?

He looked back in the direction he had come from - and for the first time saw the house. It sat, like an exposed tooth in a well-worn gum, on the far edge of the hollow he was struggling to climb out of. It looked abandoned, not quite a ruin, but with its windows broken or boarded up and tiles missing from the roof. There was a strange tower at one corner, like an imitation Gothic castle.

What was that place? Why did he have to get away from it as though his life depended on it? He knew that something had happened in there. Was it something he had done? Or something done to him? His mind was blank, all memory wiped out by shame or shock, or fear of discovery...

The sound of a car passing by was so close that it startled him. Instinctively he flung himself to the ground, looking around fearfully. He heard the hum of tyres on a slightly damp road, but could see nothing. It was followed by the sound of a heavier vehicle, a truck maybe, going by. Still he could see nothing, and figured that the road must be just beyond that crest of weed-choked trees and bushes up ahead of him.

He knew he had to get away from there unseen, which meant he must be careful of that road. But why was he so afraid? What was he running from? Why could he not remember?

He looked up at the sky again. The clouds were low and a pale light was slanting from the horizon. It could not be long after dawn, which meant he must have

spent the night, or part of it, inside that house, on the far side of the half-rotten door that he could see swinging in the light breeze on its hinges.

What had happened in there? What had he done?

The thought of going back to find out filled him with a terror so overwhelming that it made him almost physically sick. He staggered on, not caring as foliage and branches scratched his face and hands and tore his clothes. He fought his way through until he reached the road, which was deserted now. He started down it, only half-consciously taking in the bleak post-urban sprawl of empty warehouses and crumbling factories with their smokeless chimneys stabbing skywards. This was not a place where people lived or worked any more, just passed through on their way to somewhere else.

Still he felt afraid of being seen, so he continued to run, possessed only by the insane thought that if he ran fast and far enough, he would become invisible...

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He must have blacked out at some point, because the next thing he remembered was opening his eyes and finding himself in a darkened room. He sat up sharply, disoriented, his heart beating fast. Then he saw the familiar red figures of the digital clock beside his bed. They read 3:30 am. But how did he get there? How long had he been there? It was not possible that the horror he had just lived through had been a dream.

Instinctively he turned in search of Clare's sleeping form, but her side of the bed was empty. Where was she? What had happened to her? Had she been part of what he had been running from? Had he left her behind in that terrifying house?

There was a sound, a soft footfall. He turned, and saw her standing in the door, a robe loosely tied at her waist.

"Sorry," she said, "I tried not to wake you."

He absorbed the sight of her with a mixture of relief and fear. "What happened..?"

"Julia was crying. She's sleeping now."

"I mean... how did I get here?"

She looked puzzled. "What d'you mean? You were asleep."

"No, I... I wasn't... I was..."

He swung his feet to the floor and stood up, feeling none of the sharp knife-thrust of pain that he might have expected after soaking his brain in alcohol the way he must have done. His thoughts were clear, his hands and vision steady.

“Tom, what are you doing..?”

He was picking up his shirt and jeans from the armchair in the corner where he sometimes left them. There was no caked or drying mud on them. Nor on any of his jackets when he opened the closet where they hung. His shoes sat in neat rows on the angled ledge below. What had he done with those torn and filthy things he had been wearing?

“Tom..?”

She came up behind him, and he turned. “I don’t understand. I was running through this overgrown garden, through mud and dirt...”

“Darling, you were dreaming.”

“No, it was real... I was running from this house...”

“This house?”

“No - a house I’d never seen before. Something had happened there, but I don’t know what it was. I just knew I had to get away.”

“It was just a nightmare. Come back to bed.”

“Not just a nightmare. I... I’d been drinking.”

“Oh... one of those.” Her robe fell open as she slipped her arms around him and pressed the soft warmth of her body against his. “You told me you still dream about it sometimes, but the nice thing is you wake up sober, no hangover. Look at you - you’re fine.”

“It was just so... frighteningly real.”

“Come back to bed.”

She led him by the hand, pausing only to let her robe fall to the floor. “You and Julia both,” she said as they slipped beneath the covers. “Bad dreams, that’s all.”

He held her close, saying nothing.