

Umbilical

By Michael L. Ricketson

It was that time of day when the sun dips just below the horizon, when the creatures of the day fall silent, and the nocturnal critters wake and rustle around outside his bedroom window; that was the time of day 8-year-old Ricky dreaded. It meant his bedtime was fast approaching. It also meant that as soon as his mother tucked him in and left the room, *they* would show up one by one. They didn't even wait for him to fall asleep anymore.

It all started on his 7th birthday. While everyone sang happy birthday, he heard a voice saying, "The day is coming. It won't be long." He could tell it was an old lady, like the ones the nursing home brings to the church on Sundays. The ones that pinch your cheek and say, "My, aren't you a cutie." He knew the voice didn't come from anyone at the party. There weren't any old people there.

The next day at school his classmates were misbehaving, as kids do. He could swear he heard his teacher scream, "Freaking brats", but he was looking right at her and her lips didn't move. That night at dinner his mom and dad were arguing about

money or dad's drinking or anything. He never paid attention to what they fought about anymore; they did it all the time. When they quieted down, he heard his dad say, *Stupid Bitch*, and his mother say, *Asshole*. This time he knew he heard it in his head.

He started to concentrate and realized he could listen to what people were thinking. It overwhelmed him when he started hearing everyone that was nearby whether he tried to hear them or not. With practice, he learned to turn it on or off whenever he wanted.

One day, by accident, he rolled a hot wheel's car across the bedroom floor just by thinking it. He accidentally discovered many more things he could do, including predicting the future and finding things that others had lost. It was precisely by accident that he finally met the old lady with the voice from his birthday party, and *them* from the other side.

One night, after going to bed, his body began to tingle like a small electric shock. He felt a vibration start inside his belly and move through his body. It grew more intense until he thought he would fall off the bed. As soon as he opened his eyes and sat up, he heard someone say, "There you are." It came from the old lady standing in the corner.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Your Great Grandmother, Lilly." She picked up on the confused look he gave her and added, "I died before you were born."

"I seen you in pictures. I heard you at my birthday party."

“Come here and give me a hug.” He went to her and they embraced. While hugging, she whispered in his ear, “Now I want you to trust me. Hold my hand and don’t be afraid. I want you to turn around and look at your bed.”

He was asleep on the bed. A bluish-silver cord ran from his chest on the bed to his chest where he stood next to Lilly. His hand trembled and he moved closer to Lilly.

“You’re in the astral plane right now,” she said. “It’s a place between the living and the dead. Everyone comes here from time to time and don’t even know it, usually when they dream. Some people, like you, are very special. They can control when they come here.”

“Is that why I can do things?”

“Yes, but you’re extra special, like me, and many others here and in the physical world,” she said.

“So I’m not the only one with weird stuff going on up here?” he tapped the side of his head with his finger.

She smiled and nodded. “Come with me to the window. Remember, don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not,” he assured her.

“There are things here, not people, bad things. They want to take what doesn’t belong to them. They want to take peoples’ life energy.”

Outside in the yard, shadows moved about. They weaved in and out the trees and bushes, floated in place, and darted back and forth. Some were ovals, others just blobs of blackness. One large shadow came close to the window and Lilly raised her

finger, wagging it back and forth while shaking her head. It quickly floated away, blending in with the night.

“That cord connecting you to your sleeping self is your lifeline. It’s your umbilical cord. They use it to steal energy from the living. They are the reason people get sick.”

“Like when our teacher got cancer?”

“Exactly,” she answered. “And because you’re so very special, they want you even more. People like you and me protect everyone else. We try to keep the bad things away.”

“Like a wizard,” he said.

“Yes, but you aren’t strong enough yet. I’m going to teach you things like...”

“Like Harry Potter. This is so cool. I can’t wait to tell mom.”

“Let’s just keep this our secret for now. Just remember, no matter what you see, don’t be afraid. I am always with you. Your never alone.”

That was six months ago. A few days later *they* started showing up. He doesn’t see Lilly every night, he hasn’t figured out how to go there when he wants. He tells Lilly he is not afraid of *them*, *they* just creep him out. He hates trying to go to sleep with *them* floating around his room.

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