

INTRODUCTION

The day I met Andrew O'Connor was the most emotional day of my life. Well, apart from the last day I saw him, but I'll tell you about that later.

I had been the imaginary friend of many kids before, and I've been the imaginary friend to many after, but none of them have been like Andrew. Sometimes, I still shudder when I think about that first day. The tears in his watery blue eyes. The weary smile that crept across his face when he saw me. The quivery tone of his soft voice. The -- Stop that. If I keep doing this to myself, I'll never get over him. Not that I ever could. Not that I would ever want to.

CHAPTER ONE

Six Years Old

Sun. Clouds. Trees. Flowers. Houses. Lots of houses. Small houses, but pretty houses, all in a neat row on either side of the paved street. A suburban neighborhood. Something not foreign to me but still breathtaking everytime I see it. I wish I could live in a neighborhood like this. I want to mow the grass and tend the garden and get the mail and feed the rabbits that wander in the yard. But that's all a dream; I know that. A dream, just out of reach, that I can never achieve. I smile anyway. I think I'm happy.

I see a young, red-haired boy building a castle with blocks in an empty yard. He's alone. This must be him, Andrew O'Connor. I walk closer to him. He looks up and grins widely. I can't help but do the same when I see the sudden joy on his face.

"Hello," I say in a friendly tone. "I'm your new friend."

He manages to stand up and waddle closer to me to get a better look. Then he takes off in a wobbly sprint. I hold my arms out to catch him, but he runs straight through me. He doesn't see me. He has no idea I'm here. This isn't Andrew.

"Mommy!" the little boy screeches with glee. "Mommy!"

I look around to see a woman in her mid-twenties scoop up the little boy in a loving hug. She kisses his forehead, spins him around a few times, then sits him back down into the grass. She plops down beside him and helps him build the castle. No, this isn't him. He has someone who loves him and doesn't need me.

I wander around, trying to find Andrew, the boy I was sent to befriend. I hear yelling coming from the open door of one of the houses. A man's voice, deep and powerful yet weak and hurt, and a teenage boy's, raspy, frazzled, and, above all, annoyed. I can't tell what's being said, but I can tell that it's an argument, something which I have become very accustomed to hearing, and it was most likely caused by a moody teenager, something that I have also become very accustomed to.

Stomping feet. Slamming doors. Then all the harsh noises cease and all that's left is a crying boy. Collateral damage, I assume. The door opens; the man storms out. The sobbing intensifies as I see the boy, no more than six years old, catch his father by the sleeve of his business casual blazer. Tears run down the boy's cheeks as they look at each other, both longing to say something without knowing the right words.

"Daddy," I hear the little boy say in a voice smaller than himself, "please?" He holds up a baseball.

The man bends down so that he's on an even level with the boy. He brushes away the boy's tears and, but it's no use. The tears keep streaming down his face. "I don't have time today, Andrew," the man says. "I'm sorry. Maybe tomorrow."

"You always say that," the boy, Andrew, says quietly. "And then you never play with me."

"You can play with Brian," the man offers then thinks better of his reply. "Well... I'm sure you can find something fun to do on your own. Just use your imagination." And he had. That's why I'm here. As real as I seem to myself and Andrew, I don't exist in anyone else's world. I'm just a figment of his imagination. "I'll see you tonight, after work. Be good to your brother. He's going through a tough time." The man rubbed his son's short brown hair, then began to walk away, hoping to forget the unforgettable troubles of his son.

"But nothing's fun when you're alone!" Andrew shouts after him.

The man stops and looks back at his son, hopelessly grasping for the right words. “I- I’m sorry, son. I promise it won’t hurt forever. Right now... right now, I don’t know what else I can say.” Silently, desperately, Mr. O’Connor backs off of the porch, turns away from his son, and walks to the beat-up Chevy parked in the driveway. Within seconds, the car is gone, speeding down the street to someplace far, far away from here.

The boy sits on one of the steps on the front porch and covers his face with his hands. I wander over to him; he doesn’t notice. I carefully place a gentle hand on his shoulder, aware that my touch will be cold, foreign, and almost unnoticeable to him, certain that it would be much different than the warm, loving hands of a human. He shudders at the sensation and pulls away. Then he sees me.

“Mary?” he asks quietly.

“Yes,” I say. “That’s me. And you’re Andrew?”

“Yes,” he replies with a sullen expression on his pale face. He looks at me like I’m a ghost, an alien, or some other freak of nature, which I suppose I am. But it hurts me. It hurts that I have to be viewed this way by every child. For the most part, it seems that the estrangement fades away eventually, but there’s always something there, a small divide that never seems to be filled.

“Umm...” I look around, unsure of what to say to bridge the gap between us, then fix my eyes upon him once again. His eyes are bright, twinkling blue, but in them, I can see the sadness he carries in his heart, the lonely, mournful sadness that no child that young -- no one ever, actually -- should have to experience. I have no idea what caused his sorrow, but from this moment on, I know that I have to do everything in my power to make him happy. “So... you like to play baseball?” I point to the baseball in his hand.

“I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” he interjects, then sighs. “My daddy won’t play with me. He has to go to work today.”

“What about your mom?” I ask. By the pained look in his eyes, I see that I should not have asked that.

“She’s not here,” Andrew replies, clearly hurt yet distant and almost apathetic, like he’s used to this feeling. “Daddy says she’s in a better place. I thought mommies and daddies were supposed to love their kids and want to be with them no matter what. I thought she did. So I can’t see what place could be any

better than here. She's been gone for two months. I just want to know when she'll be back because I miss her... But I don't think she cares, so I don't guess I care."

I struggle to suppress this biting dejection. Imaginary friends don't have the ability to cry, but if I could, I would be flooding the neighborhood. His innocence and ignorance mixed with his palpable grief breaks my heart. As I fight this feeling of absolute misery, I remember the last line of the contract they make you sign to be an imaginary friend: "Don't become too attached". I decide to change the subject and leave the explanation of what really happened for his father to deal with. He had clearly avoided the confrontation for a reason. "Well, you're not here alone, are you?" I ask.

"No," he replies. "The Lump is home. By 'The Lump', I mean my brother Brian, but he also doesn't have time for me. Most of the time, he's out with his friends. When he's not doing that, he's too busy up in his room with his video games and his "homework", but Daddy and I both know he doesn't really do his homework; that's just an excuse to stay away from us. Ever since Mommy left, if he's not out, he just sits in his room like a lump. That's why I call him The Lump."

"I'll play with you," I offer.

He shakes his head but begrudgingly hands the ball to me. I step a few paces away and then toss the ball to him. He catches it and tosses it back but looks completely uninterested. After a few minutes of this, Andrew takes the ball and throws it as hard as he can. It lands in the bushes in front of the house across the street. I start to go after it, but I can tell that he doesn't want me to, so I sit down on the step beside him.

"I just feel alone," he says, and he looks up at me, like he's searching for a nonexistent answer that he knows I can't give him. "Mommy left me. She used to love me; I still love her, but now it's like I'm forgot about. Daddy always has to work, and Brian doesn't want his kid brother always hanging around. And I'm just here all alone."

"I'll be your friend," I say.

For a fleeting moment, I can see hope in his watery blue eyes. "You will?"

"What do you want for lunch, weirdo?" Brian asks as he pulls the freezer door open. "Looks like we have frozen pizza junk, frozen chicken junk, frozen

spaghetti junk, and I suppose I could make you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which is probably the junkiest option of all.” Brian looks at his younger brother.

“So, what’ll it be?”

“Frozen pizza,” Andrew replies quietly. “And a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Mary.”

“Who’s Mary?” Brian asks accusingly. “Your imaginary friend?”

“No, she’s not. She’s real!” Andrew exclaims.

Brian laughs. “I can’t believe my kid brother is that stupid. You’re six years old. Aren’t you a little old to have an imaginary friend?”

“She’s not imaginary! She’s real!” He looks at me. “Aren’t you?”

I want to tell him; I really do. But I can’t. It’s part of the contract they make you sign. He will have to realize on his own that I don’t exist. And when he does, I will have to leave him.

The old Chevy rolls into the driveway, and Mr. O’Connor gets out. He walks up to the house with a greasy bag in one hand and a leather briefcase in the other. Before he can put the keys in the front door, Andrew unlocks it and greets his father with a hug. He’s feeling a little better than he did this morning, but the hole left from his mother is still there, and there’s nothing I can do to ever fix it.

“I brought home your favorite food!” Mr. O’Connor announces with false excitement. He tilts the bag down for Andrew to look inside.

“Burgers?” Andrew asks, pulling out a shiny, tin-foil wrapped sandwich.

“Not just burgers,” Mr. O’Connor replies. “Cheese burgers!”

Unimpressed, Andrew takes the tin-foil bundle to the dining table and unwraps it, revealing a soggy burger, complete with droopy lettuce and too much ketchup. I watch the smile fade from Mr. O’Connor’s face as he looks at his son. Andrew takes a bite and then looks into the bag, seeing two more burgers. “What about Mary?” he asks. “You got three burgers. One for me, one for you, and one for The Lump. What will Mary eat?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had someone over. I would have gotten dinner for her, too,” Mr. O’Connor says, clearly pleased that Andrew was socializing with friends. “So, where is she?”

Andrew’s eyebrows scrunch together. “She’s right next to me. Duh.”

Mr. O'Connor's eyes search for a minute, and then he focuses his eyes on the empty space beside Andrew. The wrong side. He knows that "Mary" doesn't exist. "Oh, yes, I see her. She's, uh, very pretty," he says, less pleased.

"I guess." Andrew examines my face. "Not as pretty as Mommy."

"Well..." Mr. O'Connor takes Andrew into his arms. "No one's as pretty as Maria."

Maria... almost like Mary, the name Andrew gave me.

"Okay, so," Mr. O'Connor says, shaking the memory of his wife away, "would Mary like anything to eat?"

"I don't know. Ask her," Andrew replies.

Once again, he looks at the space next to Andrew. Once again, it's the wrong side. "Would you like --"

"She's over here," Andrew says with a dull voice.

"Yes. Of course." He looks at me this time, but he doesn't really see me. "Would you like anything to eat?"

"No," I say, even though there's no point. "I can't eat."

"What's that, Mary?" Mr. O'Connor cups his hand around his ear and leans closer. "You want some cookies?"

"You can't see and now you can't hear? She said 'no'... but I'll take the cookies," Andrew says.

"Ha ha. Nice try." Mr. O'Connor ruffles his son's hair.

I watch Andrew eat his burger and wonder what it would be like to be able to eat. To taste. To smell.

"So where's Brian?" Mr. O'Connor asks.

"He left a while ago. Said he'd be back before you got here," Andrew replies.

"He left? What do you mean 'he left'? How could he leave? He's a thirteen-year-old kid. He can't drive."

"I dunno." Andrew notices his father's frustration. "He just left. Said he was going to the park to play basketball."

"I'm sure he is," Mr. O'Connor says. "I... I just want to make sure he's okay. Finish up your burger, and then we'll go to the park. You can bring your

baseball, and we can play.” He looks to the wrong side of his son. “You can come too, Mary.”

When we get to the park, we see the basketball court. Abandoned. No one’s playing basketball today unless they’re imaginary like me.

Mr. O’Connor runs a shaky hand through his hair and looks around for Brian. “I knew it,” he says angrily. “I knew it. I knew it. That boy never does what he’s supposed to.”

“Wait! Daddy!” Andrew points into the distance. “Over there.”

Far away, Brian is sitting on a lonely park bench, dribbling a basketball. After a moment, he drops the basketball and begins crying. He had seemed so strong when I met him earlier, so impervious to the pain. This Brian seems like a completely different person.

“Daddy, should I go get him?” Andrew asks.

“No, no. Let’s go on home, son.” Mr. O’Connor says and guides his youngest back to the Chevy.

“You’re not gonna talk to him?”

“No. I think he wants to be alone right now.”

Andrew doesn’t understand why, but he nods and gets back in the car.