

# *Sketch*

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## The Innocence of Juniper

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# The Innocence of Juniper

—*Sherman Turner*

I AM MATTHEW Leander, madman. I no more believe in sanity than I believe in God. I haven't since Juniper died.

Juniper was our daughter; our only daughter. She was to have been the Saviour of our marriage. My wife and I had fallen upon hard times. Not financially hard, but emotionally. Spiritually. We were eight years married with no children. That speaks for itself.

Juniper was born crying. When we brought her home she was still crying. Not just occasionally, or when hungry or wet, as most babies do, but always. Constantly. For two days she cried continually—a forty-eight-hour cry. Then she began to cough.

Have you ever heard a baby cough? It's unlike anything else. A little like the sob of a blind puppy, but with a different sort of ending. A quick, cut-off, glottal stopped-up ending followed by a sucking-in-of-air and then another cough. Cough then suck; cough then suck; cough then suck. That's what she started doing. Were she not so small that I could hold her in just one out-stretched palm of mine, I'd have thought she was trying to say something, trying to form words she didn't know with her small, wet, coughing mouth that seemed stuffed over-full with her pink tongue—trying to tell me something that could not wait until she had learned to speak. Could a child know something that important?

Abby—my wife—had four miscarriages before Juniper was born. A lot for one woman. And a lot for a man to take also. Each time we had hoped and dreamed and made plans for what we imagined would be. Only to be disappointed—four times crushed. Fate doesn't like plans. But what are marriages for if not for children? For bitterness? Distrust? Hate? Defeat? Ours seemed to be. My wife and I—our marriage—had fallen upon hard times. I've already told you that. New life was sorely needed. Juniper was to be it. But now that I look back upon it, it seems unreasonable of me

to have ever expected a healthy child to be born from a sick marriage.

I think Abby and I knew from the first that Juniper was going to die. We did everything we could for her, of course. We took her to doctors. But they examined her and found nothing wrong. All they could suggest was that we change her formula. But it wasn't her formula that was making her cough. And changing it did no good. The doctors didn't know what she was dying from. But she was dying all the same. And with her death our loveless marriage would end. It was inevitable; because her death, for some reason, was inevitable. Only I know why. . .now.

I'm reminded of a girl I knew in school—long ago, before I met Abby. She had never smoked a cigarette in her life, but she had lung cancer. For three years she fought off the lung cancer. Then, while in the hospital, two nights before she died, she smoked her first cigarette. A nurse came into the room and caught her at it.

"What in the name of heaven do you think you're doing?"

"I'm sinning," the girl answered. "I'm doing what I'm dying for, so I won't be innocent."

The nurse gave her a sedative and a pain killer and put her to sleep. No one thought any more about it. She had been delirious for several days, and would be again until she died. Only I understand. Just me.

Juniper was innocent—but she was dying. Dying as though she were guilty of some unforgivable sin that required an elongated, painful, coughing and sucking death as atonement before she would be allowed to pass. How could she have sinned? All she had ever done was be born.

I was sitting in the study, three weeks and a day after bringing Juniper home. Abby was in bed upstairs, asleep, with Juniper sleeping in her crib an arm's length away. Even while asleep she coughed. Slower and softer than when awake, but never stopping; relentless.

I thought I'd find some relief from it if I drank a glass of wine and read awhile. But I did not. I could still feel her coughing. Yes, feel. I could not hear it, but I could feel it—in my nerves and muscles. For two days I had felt her every single cough. Wherever I was—even away from the house—I felt her cough. Twenty-two times a minute she coughed;

twenty-two times I shuddered. Every minute; every hour; for two days. I was feeling it now.

I drank my glass of wine, but it would not stop nor go away. It became louder—the sound. Cough then suck. My body twitched, each time more violently, as the sound grew. I took another glass to calm my nerves. My hand shook as I drank it. The sound did not stop; it increased. It came closer. It came down the stairs, into the study, until it seemed as though the four walls themselves were coughing and sucking. I could not get rid of it. The blood pounded in my ears and against my temples and my feet moved me from the study, up the stairs, to the door of the bedroom.

I opened the door. It was dark inside except for the one small night light next to the crib. Abby was sleeping, making soft, in-and-out noises. Juniper was awake—coughing and sucking. I crept across the room, quiet as a cat, to her cribside.

Her blanket had come off. I pulled it back up around her and touched her face with a finger to see if she had a fever. My eyes fell on her mouth and I watched her as she coughed. Each cough was individual. They sounded the same, but were different. She moved her lips and tongue each time into a new position. Only a slight change, but enough so that I could see it even in the dim light. Each cough a new cough, as though each one were meant to carry a new meaning. She was still trying to tell me something—it was unmistakable. Trying harder now, for her coughs were louder than they had ever been before. Louder; more urgent. What was it she had to say before she died that could be so important? I leaned over closer, putting my ear almost on top of her mouth.

“Say it,” I whispered. “Say it, Juniper. I’m listening for it.”

The bedside light came on. Abby sat up, a look of fear on her face as I saw her through the slates in the crib. I did not move—not now.

“Say it,” I whispered again.

“Is the baby all right?” my wife asked, throwing off her covers.

“Say it. Say it, Juniper. I’m listening for it.”

“What in the name of heaven do you think you’re doing?”

I did not answer—I listened for it. Cough then suck; cough then suck. I could almost hear the words.

“Almost. Almost. Just a little louder, Juniper.”

“Get away from there! You’re scaring her.”

“Be quiet! I can’t hear what she’s saying.”

“Have you gone crazy? Get away, you’re making her cough worse.”

Abby reached across the crib and shoved me back with both her hands. She shouldn’t have touched me—not when I had almost understood. I grabbed the sides of the crib and with a jerk slid it across the floor and into Abby. The upper railing hit her in the stomach and knocked her back. She fell on the bed and gasped to get her breath.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“You touched me. You shouldn’t have touched me.”

“You were hurting Juniper.”

“I was not. It’s a filthy dirty diseased world. That’s what’s hurting Juniper. I was only listening to her. She was trying to tell us something.”

“What did she have to say for herself?” Abby asked in her sneering, challenging tone of voice.

“I don’t know—you made me miss it,” I answered quietly. And then I whispered, “She’s through trying.”

We both looked at Juniper. Her coughing had stopped. She lay soundlessly on her back in the crib. Her tiny eyes were wide open and staring straight up at the ceiling.

“Oh my God! You’ve hurt her!”

“No, I’ve helped her,” I answered.

“I’ve helped her.”