

The Devil in Niyah's Eyes

By Bob Papp

"Where is Niyah?" her mother asked again, standing by the stove with arms folded. This time she snarled the words.

With a flinch, Kimmie dropped her gaze to the heap of mac and cheese and hot dog slices chilling on her dinner plate. Keeping her hand from the fork was like torture. Why did she always have to be responsible for her little sister? If Niyah was too dumb to come home for dinner then let her go hungry! She wouldn't say that out loud, though. Not again, anyway. The reasons still rang in her ears from the last time. She was twelve. Niyah was only eight. Momma had to work two jobs ever since Daddy ran off. Kimmie had to be the adult.

"I don't know, Momma," she mumbled again. "Really." She hoped it sounded like the truth.

The real truth was, over the past couple of weeks, she'd spotted Niyah sneaking around the one place that was completely off-limits to them. Being the "adult," Kimmie had decided maybe, if Niyah got a little hurt over there, she'd learn a good lesson. So she hadn't said anything. Now, with Momma in a tizzy, she knew she'd made a mistake.

Her mother snatched away her full plate and scraped everything back into the pan. She did the same with Niyah's and slammed down the lid. "I am going to run to the store." She said the words slowly and crisply. "When I get back, you and Niyah better both be sitting at this table, waiting quietly for your dinner like little angels. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Momma."

"Alright, then. She'd better be safe, Kimmie."

When the sound of her mother's rusted-out muffler finally trailed off, Kimmie threw on her pink jacket and slipped outside.

Their house clung to the edge of a weary neighborhood of smallish homes. Most folks rented and it seemed like the landlords didn't care much for their properties anymore. Some places had plastic tarps over the roofs or they smelled like mold or pee or even dead things. Whenever kids her age moved in, they never seemed interested in making friends. Kimmie worried about them sometimes, but then they'd move back out and she'd never see them again.

She knew their neighborhood wasn't always like this. Back when the huge factory across the street was running, the workers all lived nearby. A lot of the houses looked like they used to be really nice. But the factory closed down before she was born and it had been dark and empty and dead ever since. The neighborhood was dying along with it; it was just taking longer to get there.

The old factory itself loomed over the area for about three blocks. It stood twice as high as any house and taller still in the middle. Bushes and trees stretched from banks of broken windows, like they were clambering to escape. Generations of overlapping gang tags covered crumbling brick walls. A rusty cyclone fence with barbed wire ran all the way around, trapping the building in a sea of shoulder-high weeds. Niyah would be in there somewhere. Kimmie hoped she hadn't wandered too far inside.

Hesitating at the curb, she looked up and down the road to be sure her mother wasn't sneaking back then darted across. On the factory's side, she followed the fractured sidewalk to the spot where someone had cut the fence so it could be peeled back. Nobody bothered to fix it anymore. Sometimes homeless people snuck in there so a trampled path through the weeds marked the spot.

She squatted and crawled through. It felt different on this side. Quieter and heavier and older somehow. With the day ending, the shattered windows were like caves. Her skin prickled and she glanced at the frames of broken glass but could see only vague shadows and shapes enveloped in darkness. Something thudded deep within the building and she jumped as two pigeons exploded from an opening to her left.

"Shit," she whispered. Then, louder, "Niyah! Momma is SO pissed! You better get home right now!"

Nothing. Then, high and to her right something scraped once. A sound like Momma made when she ran a knife on the sharpening stick.

"Momma...Momma, she's commin' back here. Back with the police! If you're in there and she has to get you out with the police then, girl, you're gonna get a whuppin'! And you're gonna be grounded. For like a year!" If her bluff about the police didn't draw Niyah out, she hoped it would at least flush any onlookers deeper into the building.

"Niyah! Come on, girl. Let's go!" Feeling a chill, she drew her jacket tighter and zipped it up to the neck. She liked wrapping herself in cheery colors and usually it boosted her confidence. Now, the pink jacket made her feel distinctly out of place.

With one more whispered curse, she pushed through clutching weeds and shrubs to the nearest door. It might have been painted a pretty royal blue at one time, but now the paint peeled in big curling flakes and rust chewed ragged holes through it. The doorknob was missing. A hasp with a grimy padlock had been wrenched free and hung to the side by one bent screw. The door stood open an inch or two so Kimmie slipped her fingers in and tugged. It screeched as it swung aside. Sucking in a deep breath, she stepped over the threshold.

Her eyes were accustomed to the light outdoors, dim as it was at this time of day. Inside the factory, darkness had already taken hold. She shuffled a few feet further in and the door slowly squealed shut behind her. There was enough debris strewn around that she could

have found something to prop it open but she didn't really want to touch anything. Also, she felt conspicuous enough in her pink jacket. Standing in the only patch of daylight in the whole building would have made it worse.

Extending her hands to avoid bumping into anything, she wandered away from the light still seeping around the door. Above her, a low ceiling opened to the high interior of the main factory floor. Green fiberglass panels covered skylights along the roof, shedding a dim, otherworldly glow. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed catwalks crisscrossing above at different heights. Hulking shapes with massive pipes and coils of tubes lie scattered across the floor and smaller, more complicated forms lurked in shadowed recesses above. The vast space stretched to either side of her, with intersecting pillars and half-walls, collapsed walkways and stairs, and doors leading to hidden places. She held her breath and heard water dripping and the fluttering of distant wings and the scritch and scratching and scraping of a world where she did not belong.

"Niy—" Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Niyah." Mildew and rot stung her nose and she feared her mother would smell them upon her and know where she'd been. "NIYAH!"

Above, toward the far exterior wall, she heard a whump like the step of an elephant and tired metal creaked.

"N—Niyah!"

"SSHHH!" Kimmie couldn't tell from where the shushing had come. It seemed close but far away and everywhere at once.

"Niyah?"

"Shut up, you dummy!"

She squinted around but still couldn't pinpoint the source of her little sister's voice.

"Niyah, come on! We gotta go! Get over here!"

"No! And shut up, Kimme. I'm busy! You're gonna ruin it."

"What?"

Again, metal groaned from somewhere above and Kimmie jumped at a loud clang, like a gate snapping open under force.

She swallowed and stepped back, pressing against a damp concrete pillar. "Niyah, is that you? What are you doing?"

"I'm *hunting* Kimmie! And you're ruining it. You're giving me away. Just go!"

Kimmie squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to be a good sister, really she did, but it was like she and Niyah lived in different worlds. Sometimes she'd catch her sister talking to herself, muttering weird conspiratorial things that freaked her out. Or playing alone under

the porch, arranging sticks and stones in what looked like shrines. She never said anything to their mother because that was the last thing Momma needed, more stress and worry. But she never tried to talk to Niyah about it either because it scared her. Kimmie knew she needed to try harder to reach Niyah in whatever world might be real to her.

She dropped her voice to a near whisper and hoped it would carry to her sister. "Ok, Niyah, but what are you hunting?"

From above, something huffed like a blast of wet wind. Two heavy thumps followed. Then, for a long moment, nothing. Finally, Niyah responded, her voice sounding frail and thin, "Daddy's killer."

Kimmie winced and sighed. "Daddy's not dead, sweetie. Momma said he just ran away from us. He was doin' drugs and he didn't even know what was real no more. And he knew he wasn't any good for us so...he ran away. It's just like Momma said."

"*Momma's wrong.*" Niyah did something to alter her voice. Maybe she was talking into a big canister or a huge iron pipe. The voice still sounded childish but seemed to come from everywhere, rumbling and vibrating and rasping all at once.

"Niyah, d—don't do that. You're scaring me."

"I didn't say it, Kimmie. It's here. It's Daddy's killer."

Kimmie pushed away from the pillar and stepped into the open, scanning the railings and catwalks for her sister. She had to be above somewhere, but not far off. This was more than just talking to herself and playing with sticks and stones. Niyah was losing her grip on reality. She needed help and it was more than Kimmie could give. Momma needed to know but first they both had to get out of there.

"Niyah! I'm not playing. You get down here right now!"

"Kimmie! Get out of there!" Niyah had run to a railing just one level up. She wasn't trying to hide anymore or even keep her voice down.

"I'm serious, Niyah. Don't make me start counting." This was a trick their mother used. Neither of them wanted to know what would happen if Momma ever reached 'five.'

Niyah looked up then ducked back from the railing, disappearing from view.

The eerie voice returned, now in a taunting singsong. It came from behind her and farther up, nowhere near where her sister had been: "*One, two, and three.*"

She spun, searching for the source.

"*Tasty children come to me.*"

With a gasp, Kimmie backed away. From the balcony above she heard the sound of running feet. In that direction, she spotted an open metal stairway leading up, maybe 50 yards off. "Niyah?" She bolted for the stairs.

When she'd halved the distance, a tremendous rending erupted from above. A deafening sound of tortured metal bending and breaking, followed by the colossal clatter of something striking the floor where she'd stood just moments before.

She shrieked, stumbled and fell, banging her knee on concrete. "Ow! Shit. Niyah! Where are you? What's happening?" As she struggled to her feet, she heard more creaking above then a thunderous explosion from behind that sounded like a dump truck dropped from an airplane. With a scream, she continued toward the stairs, limping now as pain bit into her knee.

From the bottom step she looked up and spotted her sister silhouetted at the top. "Niyah! Come on, let's get out of here!"

"No, Kimmie! You get up here. Now."

Something in her little sister's voice flipped their roles. Kimmie, shaking at the bottom of the stairs suddenly understood she was no longer the adult in the relationship. At least not now. Not in that moment. Not there. Not in Niyah's world.

She hesitated then nodded once. Grabbing the rusty railing, she started limping up.

"Faster!"

"I—I can't Niyah. I hurt my knee."

Niyah plunged down the steps, so fast her feet would have blurred if Kimmie could have seen them in the darkness. She passed her then spun and started pushing up on her butt.

"Don't turn around Kimmie. Just move."

"Four, five, and six."

So much louder now. Kimmie whimpered. They were more than halfway up the stairs but the grating, hollow voice was right behind them, at the bottom.

"Little bones will break like sticks."

Two more steps then Kimmie stopped. Where were they going? What would they do when they reached the top?

"Move, Kimmie. Move!"

One more step, then the staircase shuddered and groaned. She spun and stared over her little sister. The thing below them looked back and grinned. It filled the stairs with its dark bulk and spikey fur, like a black porcupine the size of a dumpster. Faint green light glowed from deep-set eyes. Its head looked like a twisted dinosaur wolf and its teeth...its teeth....

Kimmie gibbered and slumped to the step behind her. The stairs shook again as the thing crawled closer. She jerked at the touch of small cool hands wrapping around her face, forcing her head up.

"Kimmie, look at me. Look at me."

Blinking, she found her little sister's face filling her view.

"Listen to me Kimmie. It's not real. You have to believe me."

"But—"

"No! Don't believe your eyes. Believe me instead. It's not real."

"Seven, eight, and nine."

"Say it with me. It's not real."

There it was again. That thing in Niyah's voice. The power that was more than just being the adult between them. It was the absolute certainty of knowing something hidden and vital. A forsaken truth. The type of knowing that no eight-year old should have. Or twelve-year old either. It made Kimmie wonder what Niyah really did know. What she'd seen and what she'd suffered. Her brow furrowed as she concentrated, staring deeply into her sister's eyes. Looking for her truth.

"Tasty children, now you are m—"

"It's NOT REAL!" Kimmie screamed.

Behind Niyah, the thing stopped mid-word and just breathed deeply. The creaking of the factory intensified, as if the spirit of the building itself leaned forward in anticipation.

Kimmie bit her lip hard, focusing on little Niyah's glistening eyes. At the edge of her vision, she saw a shadow like a massive claw, lifting over them both, opening. Niyah's hands pressed her face so hard she thought her head might pop. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried her hardest to *believe* her little sister. "Nothing there," she whispered. "NOT real."

With a grunt and a sigh, a gust of air reeking of dead things washed over them. Then something shifted. Pressure lifted and she felt lighter, almost like she could drift away.

Kimmie opened her eyes again. For a moment, Niyah seemed to glow while shadows around them receded. Then, the effect was gone.

Niyah sniffled and withdrew a hand to wipe her nose.

"W—Wha—" Kimmie stuttered, but her sister interrupted her.

"I saw it happen," Niyah whispered. "I saw it kill Daddy. He—Daddy came in here to hunt it. So it could never ever get us. I followed him and he didn't know. But i—it got him instead, Kimmie. It got him. And I s—ss...I saw."

With a sob, Kimmie clutched her sister and held her tight, as tight as she could without breaking her. As if, through the embrace, she might squeeze the horror from her mind.

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When their mother returned home, Kimmie and Niyah both were washed and sitting quietly at the table. Kimmie kept glancing at her sister but Niyah stared at nothing, her face puffy and blank.

Turning on the stove, Momma started stirring the pot and said, "It's one big lump now. Don't be late again, girls. Either of you. I hope whatever you were doing was worth it."

Kimmie shot her sister another look but nothing registered on her face. That power she'd shown before, the complete confidence in being right about something so wrong, was gone, replaced by the memory of whatever traumas she'd endured. That meant Kimmie was the adult again. The responsible one. The one who had to try to make things better for her little sister. To find a way for them to be stronger than their fear and their hurt.

"One and two," Kimmie said. Her sister's eyes turned on her, glistening now, and her lips pressed tight in defiance. Kimmie met her stare and continued, forcing calm into her voice, "Momma, we love you."

Niyah's expression broke and she squeezed her eyes shut, nodding. "Always," she whispered. "But three and four, I'll be back for more."