

# Song of the Needle

by Mark Krieger

Noah looked out from under the table leg where he was crouched, hiding. He watched his family's shoes around him as they ate breakfast. Listened to the rumble of their voices above him. The clank of a spoon. His father's thick, sharp intermittent voice. His mother's like the basement drier, a steady tumble of notes.

His little sister was seated in the high chair that used to be his, rapping her spoon against the plastic tray table, making a kind of song in the back of her throat. Ah-ah-ah-ah... Suddenly all noise stopped. She'd done something to win their affection—her pink toothless smile? a slight tilting of the head and squinting of the eyes?—because all at once she was showered in a cry of praise. Even his father chuckled a little.

You're my little Jezza, sang Noah's mother. That's right, you are—

Noah tore off all the clothes his mother dressed him in only minutes before. He sat on his haunches in his underwear beneath the center of the table, listening.

Outside the patio windows yellow spring sun beat down, melting the lingering white snow piles into swamping pools in the backyard. The grandfather clock in the living room chimed the hour.

Now Noah's mother's voice grew edged as she called out his name. Noah curled into a tight ball, his face hot and bursting. He pressed his knuckles against his teeth.

Her chair scraped back. She lifted the red overhanging tablecloth and suddenly her large head appeared upside down right before him.

Noah cackled and tumbled backwards, striking the back of his head against the table leg.

Noah! she said. Get out of there this minute and get those clothes back on! I told you already. We're leaving.

Noah remembered BUNNY! and through the magic of his eye, his hands and arms and cheeks were soft with white fur. He squeaked, a little off-key, angling out between his father's chair and the table leg.

Try and catch me daddy. I'm a bunny.

On all fours he scurried away from his father's hand that worked to hook Noah by the ankle.

Noah!

You see, said Noah's mother. See what I have to deal with all day. Just like Mrs. Stenelli said.

Rising sharp and final above the drumming of his own limbs against the floor, Noah heard the fury of his father's black shoes crashing behind him. His stomach leaped and now part of him no longer wanted to be caught. With his palms and knees and even his face, he felt each individual step, the solid quake of an encroaching giant.

Stop! cried Noah. His father's arms were rough and powerful but his fingers were as tickly as feathers. He twisted and squealed in his father's lap. Not that way daddy!

No-aaahhhHHHH!

Daddy you tickin me!

I am not tickling you!

You are, cried Noah. You ticklin!

Noah's older brothers and sisters laughed.

Noah felt the stinging slap against his back thigh. The tickling feeling went away.

Now listen to me, said Noah's father. Your mother and I have talked with your preschool teacher and she says you've been very disobedient at school. You're a big boy now and you need to listen to what your mother and teacher tell you to do. You're not a damned bunny. You hear me? No. More. Bunny! Not at school and not at home.

Noah noticed how large and ugly his father's nose was, the long black nose hairs peeping from the nostrils, the pocked skin. How fat and wide his face and how bushy his chocolate-colored eyebrows. When he talked his breath stunk. When his father spoke to him in

this way, which was much of the time, these features came alive to Noah.

His father frowned down at Noah. Are you listening to me?

Noah was still a moment. Then he snatched his father's pointing finger, sniffed it carefully, and nibbled on the moist orange flesh of a freshly picked carrot.



He didn't like the doctor's room. The medicine smell. The tight faces of nurses wheeling in and out of the room. The fake excited way they spoke to him—like it was his birthday although he knew it wasn't. All whispered to Noah of something menacing. But what, he didn't know.

He'd been told he was going to see Doctor Leibner today but he was never told why. His world was filled with endless rules and tasks and no explanations.

Noah watched a young nurse with a clipboard tilt towards Noah's mother. Something about him. But their words scrambled and scattered in his mind and he had to study his mother's face for signs.

Noah watched his little sister being bounced up and down on her thigh. Watched how her arms were around her plump little belly in the white onesie. He remembered his mother had a smell. But he couldn't remember the smell anymore. Something soft and warm, hinting of honey. Maybe he was too big and heavy to be held now. He wished someone would hold down on his head so that he wouldn't grow anymore.

Show me your peek-a-boo, she said to Jezebel. Go on!

He wished Toc Toc was around. Sometimes Toc Toc came around and sometimes he didn't. Sometimes Toc Toc wasn't there but his voice was. Sometimes he told Noah to do good things. Sometimes he told him to do bad things that got him into trouble. Sometimes Toc Toc came around at night when Noah had lost his white blankie or his stuffed monkey and his mother and father would shout if he climbed out of bed one more time to go searching for it and he wept

into his pillow until he thought his face might explode—then—there was Toc Toc with that wild funny hair of his and Toc Toc would chase away his misery.

It was Toc Toc who taught Noah about Bunny. Toc Toc whispered this secret to him a few weeks back in the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink where Noah was hiding amid the sharp odor of cleaning bottles. This after he'd been spanked harder than he'd been spanked in all his life. Spanked with the dreaded metal spoon so viciously he couldn't sit down properly for the rest of the day. His mother said she was going to play Bunny with him. On his hands and knees Noah had shuffled across the hard kitchen floor onto the soft bed of carpet. When he stopped and turned around his mother was there, her hands shaped into pinchers. Her smile was for him alone. She crouched and started after him. He cut around the coffee table and hurtled onto the couch, burying his face between the cushions, cackling, waiting for her. But when he looked up, she wasn't there. Her voice echoed from the kitchen. Cheering for his little sister. Jezebel had taken up her spoon and eaten her first bite of mashed peas all on her own. So *proud* of you! his mother cried. Something dark settled over Noah. The words set his face into flames. When his mother went into another room for something, Noah rushed up to the highchair and struck his little sister over the forehead with the blunt corner of his metal train. Like a toy, her arms sprung into the air. She fell back against the padded chair, her arms still up as though the lever of the toy had jammed, her mouth open wide like a hissing snapping turtle but no sound uttering out. She tipped back forward, catching her breath, and released a screech so terrible that Noah dug his fingernails into his lips without knowing it. He watched blood bead from the white gash then stream down into her eye...

Toc Toc revealed all sorts of secrets to Noah and he was never too busy for him when he was around. Toc Toc filled the hole in his chest. But it seemed the older Noah grew the less Toc Toc came to visit.

Show me your peek-a-boo! His mother repeated. Then she kissed the fat of her cheek and neck until his little sister giggled.

BUNNY! He thought. BUNNY! BUNNY! BUNNY! And he leaped off the chair onto the floor.

No-aaahhh? Don't. You. Dare. Remember what your father said?

The Bunny was in the garden, looking up at the snake with big glasses. The Bunny giggled. He was huddled between bright green rows of lettuce and carrots stems when the garden gate swung opened and in walked a man with a long white coat, black pants, and a broad fake smile.

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They laid him down on a padded table lined with an icy white sheet of paper. Noah began to squirm and whine. He didn't want to lie down on this terrible crackly paper. An old nurse held down his wrist on one side while his mother held him down on the other side. The old nurse's jowls jiggled angrily as she struggled with Noah.

Now the man in the white coat came drifting towards Noah, talking to him in that false voice. He knew the thing he dreaded was approaching but he didn't know what. Then he spotted it in the doctor's hand, a lean needle glinting the light.

He cried out as the needle stung into the flesh of his right arm. He kept kicking and carrying on although the sting of the wasp had numbed somewhat after a certain point.

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First there was nothing. Then the ceiling began to ripple like water. The room turned into a Merry-go-round, rushing and spinning about him.

All at once a terrible violence seized his chest. It clutched him and began squeezing so tight that Noah's arms and legs became heavy as boulders. A loud buzzing filled his head.

He didn't know what was happening to him. He wanted to shout for help but something—the buzzing?—wouldn't allow his jaw to work.

The pitch and violence of the buzzing climbed, rattling Noah on the table: The Song of the Needle.

There were figures scrambling all around him. We got a cardiac!

Then from the bottom of his vision Noah discovered what was wrong with him. It was something black that'd somehow gotten tangled into his body. Blacker than anything he'd seen in all his life.

The Black Thing must've swum into his arm from the needle and now it burned and screeched its terrible song in Noah, dragging its nails through the alleys of his veins. It drank the breath from his throat, squeezing it from his chest.

He wanted to tell them what was wrong but couldn't.

Now the Black Thing leaned all its weight against his chest and suddenly Noah's whole body began to fill with the Song. It poured through each of his arms, spreading to the tips of his fingers, buzzing loudly. It filled his throat and nose solid like hot, black, snow, jamming in his throat. It flooded his head, shoveling against the dome of his skull until Noah thought it might crack open.

The Black Thing spread over the room, eating away his mother's face as well as the doctors and nurses who dashed in a frenzy around him until they too were swallowed in the black singing cloud.

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He was above them now, peering down at his body lying motionless on the table. The buzzing and pain were gone and if he felt anything now it was a great sense of wonder.

People continued rushing about the room. His mother was crying. He could hear everything they were saying and everything they were thinking. He wondered why everyone was so upset because Noah himself felt just fine.

From behind the room, Noah noticed a pinpoint of light. One by one brilliant shafts of sun came playing through the very fabric of

creation. Deep and soft beyond understanding. More and more this soft silent light came pouring forth.

Before him a shadow crossed the light. He knew it was Toc Toc, big as all the world. He was in the light, part of it, yet somehow separate. He was too immense, too monolithic to be taken in with eyes so small but Noah knew his presence better than anything.

The great shadow curled across the light and Noah understood Toc Toc was reaching for him and he was not afraid.

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Noah opened his eyes. He saw his mother's fists against his chest, striking him. His collar was damp with her tears.

Please Noah! she wailed. My ba-aby-y-y! Oh pleeeeeease!

When she saw his open eyes, she tore him from the table, squeezing his body violently against her own. She screamed into his ear. Shrieked in a rattled voice.

Suddenly the room filled with doctors and nurses again.

She carried on. My baby! My baby's come back to me! She kissed his head and his cheeks and his ears and his mouth, and each of his eyes, and his head again and his cheeks... She rocked him back and forth. I'll never let you out of my arms...

Noah...? she said, stroking his hair. All eyes were on Noah and the room fell into deep silence. Noah, you hear me...?

But Noah wasn't looking at her anymore. His brilliant blue eyes were fixed on something just above and beyond her head. A world that had nothing to do with her anymore.

