

BABY LOLLIS



GARY HARWOOD

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It was the year they found a dead toddler in the bushes, head bashed in, bite marks and cigarette burns all over his body. He was wearing a t-shirt with multicolored lollipops across the front. It was November 1990. Miami Beach police detectives were all over the news searching for the baby's parents, for some clue about his identity, but no one had come forward. My mother was homeless that year. Sometimes she crashed on a relative's couch, but she spent most nights in the streets with Pedro, one of her cokehead boyfriends. I'd get a phone call in the middle of the night: Mami calling collect from Dade County Jail, begging me to convince Papi to bail

POPS

her out. She'd promise to pay him back, promise to change.

Until one day Pedro vanished, and Mami was left with nothing but her habit to keep her company. That's when she decided she needed her kids back. I was ten.

AFTER our parents' divorce, my little sister, Illy, and I moved with our father and his mother — our *abuela* — into a one-bedroom apartment across the street from Flamingo Park. Papi worked all the time, so it was Abuela who took us to school, dropping me off in front of Fienberg-Fisher Elementary and walking Illy across the courtyard to her second-grade classroom. It was Abuela who helped with our homework, who hiked all the way to school when we forgot sweaters or science projects, who came calling for us when we were late for dinner. Sometimes she'd let us play in the alley so she could keep an eye on us from the kitchen window. That's where we were the afternoon after the news about the dead toddler aired.

We were playing stickball with the other street kids and Sara, my best friend, who wasn't really from the streets. Sara and I were complete opposites. I always ran wild around the neighborhood with Illy in tow, even though Abuela insisted that we stay on the block. Sara and her little brother, Steven, never even crossed the street without permission. I was abrasive, loved to curse, and got suspended from school for fighting. Sara always said *please* and *thank you* and answered all of her mother's questions with *yes, ma'am* or *no, ma'am*. She had silky blond hair and wore new clothes and clean tennis shoes. I had a frizzy, tangled mess of curls, was constantly sunburned and dirty, and wore my aunts' hand-me-downs. Sara went to church every Sunday. I spent Sundays in the park shooting hoops with boys from the neighborhood. I had a thick Spanish accent, and Sara spoke perfect gringo English, but she never made fun of me or called me "Spanish girl," like some of the boys on my street. Sara's mom, a single mother and school-teacher, sometimes invited Illy and me over for dinner, which we loved, since she was a great cook. The only thing Sara and I had in common was that both our families lived in the ratty, bug-ridden, art-deco slums of South Beach.

I was on first base and Sara was about to strike out when Frankie showed up uninvited.

"What's up, *mamacitas*?" he called.

Frankie was a high-school kid who came around once in a while and was always bugging us girls to play Spin the Bottle or Seven Minutes in Heaven, which meant letting him feel you

up behind the opossum-infested dumpster. He walked around sucking his thumb, and sometimes, when you weren't looking, he'd stick a spit-covered finger in your ear and yell, "Wet Willie!" Some kids said Frankie was harmless, but I had my doubts. I'd heard he'd gotten kicked out of school for sneaking into the girls' locker room and pulling out his penis. Even though Illy was pretty tough for a second-grader, I warned her to stay the hell away from him.

"Can I play?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes.

Illy crossed her arms. "I don't think so."

Sara lowered her broken-broomstick bat and shook her head. "No way!"

I took Sara's bat and waved it threateningly. "Go home, perv."

"Come on," Frankie said. "If you let me play, I'll show you where there's a dead body."

The other kids groaned and huffed, but I asked, "What do you mean a 'dead body'?"

"I found a dead boy in the bushes."

I knew it was the cops who had found the baby, not Frankie, and they had probably taken him away to the morgue or the police station or wherever it was they took murder victims. What were the chances that there'd be another corpse in the bushes? Still, I considered it. The prospect of seeing a real dead body seemed too good to pass up.

"Show us," I said.

Frankie laughed, his thumb stuck in his mouth.

"You're such a liar," I said.

Sara took a step forward. "Get out of here, perv."

"Yeah," I said. Someone threw a tennis ball at him, but he ducked.

"Fuck you," he said and turned to run. We chased him down the alley, throwing tennis balls and rocks. I waved my stick in the air like I was out for blood.

THE media nicknamed the dead boy "Baby Lollipops," because of the design on his shirt. The police had determined that he was about three years old and that he had been starved and tortured over the course of several weeks, maybe months. His two front teeth had been knocked out and his skull fractured by a blunt object. One of his elbows had been smashed so badly that when the joint had healed, the bones had fused, which meant he couldn't bend his arm. His soiled diaper was duct-taped so tightly to his body that it had to be cut off. Bruises on his wrists and ankles showed that he'd been tied up. When they found him under a cherry bush outside a bay-front home in Miami Beach, he weighed only eighteen pounds.

At first it was just a story on the six o'clock news — police detectives holding press conferences, trying to learn the identity of the baby John Doe. But as the days turned to weeks and Baby Lollipops remained unclaimed, it became part of our daily lives. Maybe it was because the dead baby had been found so close to our neighborhood, or maybe because we had cherry hedges on our street, right next to where we rode our

bikes after school and egged each other on Halloween and break-danced on flattened cardboard boxes spread out on the sidewalk.

Every TV station was broadcasting reports about Baby Lollipops: Who was he? Where did he come from? Why hadn't anyone claimed him? What kind of monster would torture such a precious little angel? They aired shows about child abuse and child trafficking and child labor and homeless children and the children of refugees who had washed up on our shores on makeshift rafts. Before the discovery of the body, the news had been dominated by the infamous Miami drug wars, but now it sounded as if it were more dangerous to be a child than a drug dealer.

News vans with reporters and camera crews pulled up to our playgrounds and softball fields and interviewed anyone who would speak to them, even though no one could tell them anything. The story even made *America's Most Wanted*. The toddler's picture was everywhere: all over the pages of *The Miami Herald*, on fliers strewn about South Beach parking lots and taped to light posts in front of Fienberg-Fisher Elementary. The little bruised face, the lollipop T-shirt, the small eyes, closed as if he were sleeping, looking so innocent I could see how everyone called him an "angel." That picture. It was everywhere. Always with the same caption: "toddler (unidentified)."

ONE night, several weeks after they found the body, I couldn't sleep. My sister and I were on Abuela's old sofa bed. Illy snored while I lay awake listening to Miami Beach's late-night traffic: car horns blaring, taxicab doors slamming, tires screeching. Around midnight I heard a knock at the door. It was my mother. She'd often show up at 3 AM with gifts for Illy and me: an embroidered sweater, a leopard-print blouse, a used Barbie with matted hair. She'd say she had bought them from some fancy boutique on Lincoln Road, but her gifts always smelled like dumpster.

I let her in, shutting the door quietly so I wouldn't wake Papi or Abuela. Mami's hair was a lighter blond than usual, but her dark roots were showing. She wore a black lace top with no bra and jeans cut so short that her ass cheeks hung out. This was my mother's way: she was twenty-seven but dressed and acted like a teenager, flaunting her curves and using her body to get what she wanted, such as rides from men, cigarettes, or cocaine. Even when she was still married to my father, she'd take us to the beach and sunbathe topless, and Illy and I would spend the day trying to drive away the losers who offered her a light or a beer or told her how striking her green eyes were, though we knew they just wanted a closer look at her tits. Once, when on a whim my mother insisted on walking me to school, I refused. I wouldn't tell her why — I didn't want to hurt her feelings — but she kept nagging me and nagging me until I spilled it: "You look like a prostitute." I regretted saying it the moment the words came out. She looked hurt at first, her eyebrows crinkling like she might burst into tears. Then she slapped me hard on the mouth. I could tell she did it not to discipline me but to get back at me. This was also my mother's way.

Mami sat next to Illy on the sofa bed and shook her awake. "Get up," she said. "We're leaving."

"What do you mean 'we're leaving'?" I asked.

Mami picked up my sneakers and thrust them into my hands. "Put these on."

Illy sat up, looking confused. "Where are we going?"

"Just get your shoes on," Mami said.

I tried to think of a way to get this idea out of her head. We couldn't just leave with her in the middle of the night.

"Can we say goodbye to Papi and Abuela?" I asked.

"We'll call them in the morning. We don't want to wake them."

"But what if they wake up and we're gone?" I said. "They'll be worried." But my mother was already pushing us out the door. "I think we need to ask Papi or Abuela."

Mami pulled the front door shut and blocked it so I couldn't get back inside the apartment. "I'm your mother. I don't need anyone's permission to take you."

I thought about running or calling out for my father, but Mami was unpredictable. Once, she'd chased me down that same hallway, pulled her flip-flop off, and beaten me with it because I'd refused to get a haircut. When I went to Papi and explained that I didn't want to cut my hair, he said I'd better just do it to avoid problems. He worried my mother's screaming would get Abuela evicted.

We walked with Mami past the piss-soaked handball courts in Flamingo Park and my run-down elementary school. Illy and I were wearing pajamas and sneakers with no socks. I held my sister's hand and searched the night for a police officer, a stranger, anyone I could walk up to and say, "Help! We're being kidnapped." But a police officer never appeared, and when we did pass a stranger, he just stared at my mother's tits.

Mami took us to one of those moldy motels on Collins Avenue, across the street from the beach. I spent most of the night thinking about Papi and Abuela, wondering how scared they'd be when they didn't find us in the morning. And I thought of my friend Sara, who was probably safe in her own bed, in the bedroom she shared with Steven because their mom couldn't afford a bigger apartment on her teacher's salary. And I thought of ways Illy and I could sneak out of the motel room without waking Mami. But I knew that if Mami caught us sneaking out, I would catch a beat-down. When the sun started to seep in through the blinds, I turned on the TV.

Every station was reporting the new developments in the Baby Lollipops case: Police had finally identified him as three-year-old Lázaro Figueroa and had charged his mother and her female lover with his murder. The two women had dumped his body and fled to Orlando, where Miami Beach detectives had tracked them down, after which they'd confessed. The medical examiner had determined that it had taken Lázaro three days to die from his injuries. For three days he'd lain under the cherry hedge, body swollen, brain damaged. Outside the police station a mob waited for the two women to be transferred to Dade County Jail. As the detectives brought them out, the crowd erupted, spitting at the women and yelling, "Baby killers!" and trying to punch and slap them as they were hustled

by. People all over the city were outraged and told reporters that they were praying for Lázaro, and that they hoped the two bitches who'd killed him got fried.

I couldn't get the thought out of my head that it was his mother who had done it. His own mother. We are supposed to love our mothers. We are supposed to trust them and need them and miss them when they're gone. But what if that same person, the one who's supposed to love you more than anyone else in the world, the one who's supposed to protect you, is also the one who hurts you the most?

When Mami got up to use the bathroom, she took her purse with her. Though she tried to keep it from me, I knew her morning routine: sniff a couple of lines of coke, smoke a cigarette, then brush her teeth. I'd seen her do this since I was eight. As soon as she closed the door, I shook Illy awake, grabbed her hand, and ran out of the motel. I had a plan: When Mami noticed we were gone, she'd come after us; I was sure of it. But she'd assume we would take the same route home we'd used the night before. She wouldn't find us if we went a different way, south along the sand until we got to 13th Street.

We jogged down the beach with our sneakers in our hands. There were hundreds of jellyfish washed up on the shore, like translucent blue bubbles, tentacles coiled in the sand. I didn't notice that Illy had stopped running until I heard her scream. She was holding her wrist with one hand, face wrinkled with pain and tears. She had reached down and picked up one of the blue bubbles. I ran to her as she threw herself on the sand, screaming and gasping for breath.

Behind her, headed right for us from the direction of the motel, was Mami. She was barefoot, her blond hair a tangled mess, black mascara smeared beneath her eyes. I measured the distance between her and us. If I just grabbed Illy's hand and ran, how long would it be before one of us tripped and fell facedown in the sand? Would our mother keep running after us, or would she give up?

I remember when Mami and Papi still lived together. They would scream at each other in their bedroom until Illy and I burst in and made them stop fighting. Once, right before Papi left her for the last time, Mami grabbed us and held us out in front of him. "Take a good look at them," she told Papi, "because once you leave, you will never see them again."

That morning on the beach, when our eyes met, I knew that Mami would catch us. I also knew that she would never let us go.

WHEN Illy and I were little, before we moved to Miami from Puerto Rico, before the divorce and the drugs, Mami took us to Fort San Felipe del Morro in Old San Juan, and we spent the whole day at the fortress by the sea. Mami held my hand, and I held Illy's hand, and we walked up the stone steps behind other families and tourists. Mami snapped pictures of Illy and me feeding the sea gulls and stray cats by the sea wall. She bought a red kite from a vendor and taught us how to fly it on the front lawn of El Morro. After a whole day out in the sun she was exhausted, and she sunbathed on the grass while we flew the kite. She looked tired but happy,

her face turned up to the sun, her auburn hair pulled away from her face, beads of sweat collecting at her hairline. This is how I want to remember my mother: carefree and beautiful. When I looked at her, I hoped that one day I would be just like her.

AFTER the lifeguards treated Illy for a Portuguese-man-of-war sting, Mami took us back to the motel. For the next two days we wore the same pajamas, hand-washed our underwear in the shower, and ate Frosted Flakes and bologna sandwiches. On the third morning, the housekeeper knocked on our door and told us we needed to check out.

Mami shut the door in her face and sat on one of the beds for several minutes, as if in a trance. Illy watched *Scooby-Doo* while I waited for Mami to tell us that we were finally going home. But when she spoke, she didn't even look at us.

"Your father," she said. "This is all his fault." Then she got up and locked herself in the bathroom.

After a few minutes I heard my mother's voice. I turned down the volume on the TV and pressed my ear against the bathroom door. Mami was having a conversation. Then she was laughing.

Illy walked over to the door and listened. "Who's she talking to?"

"I don't know."

After a while Mami stopped talking and was just laughing by herself. Illy and I sat on the floor and waited. I could tell Illy was confused, maybe even scared. It had been scary to me, too, when it had first started.

I was eight, and Papi had just left Mami for the last time, in a big, dramatic scene that had spilled out into the street. He'd hailed a cab on Alton Road, and as he'd gotten in the back seat, he'd promised to come back for us. Mami had promised him she'd find out where he was staying and set him on fire in his sleep.

After that was when Mami started seeing him — the man who followed her to the laundromat and to her job as a hotel housekeeper. One night she claimed she'd found him sitting on our toilet when she stepped out of the shower. When I told her I hadn't seen any man, her eyes bulged, and she yelled, "I've given you everything. *Everything!* And now I have nothing left."

"What's wrong with her?" Illy asked at the motel. "Who was she talking to?"

I sat on the bed and considered what to tell my sister. How many times had I asked Papi the same question? He'd always avoided the details, saying simply, "Your mother is sick." He'd let me discover her drug use on my own. I never knew whether my mother's madness had caused her addiction or her addiction had led to her madness. At the age of ten I preferred to think that the drugs drove her crazy. Maybe the thought that my mother had done this to herself was less frightening than the idea that madness was something that could just happen to you. Because if that was the case, then it could also happen to me.

"She was talking to herself," I said finally.

When Mami finally came out of the bathroom, her hair was all messed up, as if she'd been pulling it. She gathered the few things she'd brought with her.



MICHAEL LIMBERT

"Get your shoes on," she said. "We gotta go."

On the walk back I gave my mother the silent treatment. Since we were going home, it was finally OK to hate her for what she'd done. And for what she was. It seemed easier than hating my father for never standing up for us, or myself for letting her take us, or God for letting her be crazy.

Every time we passed a cherry hedge, Illy and I picked the fruit and speculated about whether or not it was the same bush where they'd found Baby Lollipops. Mami was having a conversation with herself about the pains of giving birth and how, once your children are expelled from your body, they begin to turn against you. They begin to look like their father. She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, lit a cigarette, then kept walking.

"Why were you talking to yourself?" Illy asked her.

She studied Illy's face, her eyes narrowing. "What do you mean?"

"Like two minutes ago," Illy said, "and in the motel bathroom."

"I wasn't talking to myself." She was on the verge of laughter again. "I was talking to Pedro."

Illy and I looked at each other, neither of us saying what we both knew: that Pedro had left her, and that there had been no one else with us at the motel. But we said nothing.

WHEN we got home, Papi kissed us each on the forehead and stepped into the hallway to talk to

Mami while Illy and I went to the kitchen. Abuela warmed up some rice and beans for us and asked about where we'd been. She said Mami had called and spoken to Papi. I told her how I'd thought I'd never see her or Papi again. Illy told her about the "jellyfishes" and showed Abuela the stings on her wrist.

When Papi came back into the apartment, he didn't wrap his arms around us or pick us up and twirl us in the middle of the living room like I'd imagined he would. He just went to the bathroom to get ready for work. I wanted to shake him and scream in his face: Did he know how scared we'd been? How many times had Mami threatened to take us away, to keep us from him? Why hadn't he tried to find us?

I didn't say anything, though. I knew my father avoided conflict. Even when they were still married, no matter how many times I'd shown him the bruises from one of Mami's beatings, he'd never even said a word to her about it. I realized then that if my mother wanted us, she would have us.

WHILE Lázaro's mother and her lover sat in jail, they turned on each other. They tried to blame the death on the baby sitter and on drugs. After the arrests, people had come forward with stories of how they'd called the Department of Children and Families [DCF] on the mother countless times. DCF had taken three older children away from her and had even taken Lázaro away once, only to give him back. People said his torture and death could've been prevented if only someone had listened.

After school let out for winter break, the neighborhood kids hung out at the Flamingo Park pool. Sara and I would test the water to make sure it was cold as balls, then pick an unsuspecting boy and push him in.

Frankie showed up at the pool one afternoon, sucking his thumb and checking out the girls as always. I was glad Illy hadn't come. The thought of him undressing my little sister with his eyes made me sick.

In the afternoon, when the pool was about to close, I headed downstairs to the girls' locker room. I was the last one there; all the other girls had gone home. After a quick shower I wrapped a towel around my naked body and rubbed gel into my hair and put on deodorant and ChapStick. I'd just pulled my panties on underneath the towel when I turned around and saw Frankie.

I drew the towel tighter around me. "What are you doing in here? Get out, pervert!"

He didn't display the slightest hint of shame, just sucked his thumb and rubbed the back of his head with the other hand.

"Whatcha doing?" he asked.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing?"

"Taking a shower."

"Get out!" I scrambled to get my T-shirt from the mess I'd left in my locker.

"Show me your tits."

I reached for my tube of hair gel and flung it at him.

He started laughing. "Come on, just flash 'em real quick."

"My dad's gonna kick your ass!"

"Girl, please." He pulled his thumb out of his mouth and mocked my accent: "My dad's gonna keek your ess." He chuckled. "Come on, just one time."

Maybe it was because Illy wasn't around to keep me strong. Or maybe it was the way he said it, like he wasn't just laughing at my anger or my accent but at what I'd actually said: that my father would kick his ass. Even Frankie could tell it was an empty threat. He probably knew all about me and my crazy mother who lived on the streets half the time and talked to herself and insisted there was a man who followed her everywhere. My mother, who had told me so many times how the worst thing she could ever imagine was having a daughter who was a *puta* — a whore. My mother, who used her body to get what she wanted. Maybe it was the thought of my mother that broke me, made me believe there was no use fighting it, that someday I'd be exactly like her.

I opened my towel. Blinked once. Closed it again. "Get out."

WEEKS later my mother came knocking in the middle of the afternoon. She had a new place, she told us, and Illy and I could come live with her now. As she started tossing our things into a black garbage bag, we cried and clung to Papi. We didn't want to go, we told him. What if this apartment of Mami's didn't even exist? What if she never brought us back this time, and we never saw him or Abuela again?

Papi just stood there. I was tempted to run to Abuela, who

was in the kitchen making dinner. She was the one who took care of us anyway. But I knew if I did, my mother would blow up. Anytime we'd ask Abuela's permission for anything in front of her, Mami would turn bright red and say, "That old woman is not your mother!" This would lead to me screaming at my mother that she needed to respect my grandmother's house, which would lead to my mother slapping me, which would lead to me bursting into tears and threatening to call the cops on her, which would lead to her slapping me again while Abuela watched helplessly, being no match for my mother, which would lead to my father sitting me down when he got home from work and lecturing me on not starting trouble.

Mami tossed the bag at my feet. "Start packing."

"But we don't want to live with you," I said.

She looked me up and down, then stared my father in the eye. "Tell them this was only supposed to be temporary."

I searched Papi's face, waiting for him to deny that he had promised us to our mother.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," he said.

Illy burst into tears. "It's not fair!" She ran to the kitchen to bury herself in Abuela's arms.

There comes a time when we realize that our parents cannot protect us. That as much as we want them to, or need them to, even they cannot save us. There comes a time when we realize that we must save ourselves.

I stared my father hard in the face and picked up the bag without taking my eyes off him. "I will never forgive you." Then I packed some of our clothes and schoolbooks and walked out of the apartment without saying goodbye.

I tossed the bag down the steps of the building and stood there with my arms crossed, waiting for my mother. I was wiping tears off my face when I spotted Sara, Steven, and their mom coming out of their building. Sara and her mom wore identical floral dresses with yellow daisies on them, and Sara's hair had been curled. Steven wore a short-sleeved button-down shirt and a pair of khakis. I sat on the steps, trying to make myself invisible as they hustled into their mom's Ford Taurus, which was parked in front of our building. As the car pulled away from the curb, Sara rolled down her window and waved. Steven did, too. Even their mom stuck her hand in the air. I put on a fake smile and waved back as if it weren't the last time I'd ever see them. Sara, with her perfect mom, who took her kids out to dinner just because, who invited me to go to winter festivals and Easter pageants at their church. I missed them already.

THEY buried Lázaro Figueroa that December, after a funeral service at St. Patrick's Catholic Church on Miami Beach. The children from St. Patrick's school filled the pews, and the children's choir sang "On Eagle's Wings." Small memorials popped up all over Miami Beach: teddy bears and crosses and prayers written on poster board and images of baby Jesus. And lollipops. An entire city mourned the loss of a boy no one knew. We carried him with us. And even though he belonged to no one, he belonged to us all. ■