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Opening Extract from...

The Ginny Moon

Written by Benjamin Ludwig

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GINNY MOON

BENJAMIN LUDWIG

HQ

ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For my wife, Ember,
whose heart was open.

GINNY MOON

6:54 AT NIGHT, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7TH

The plastic electronic baby won't stop crying.

My Forever Parents said it's supposed to be like a real baby but it isn't. I can't make it happy. Even when I rock it. Even when I change its diaper and give it a bottle. When I say *ush, ush, ush* and let it suck on my finger it just looks dumb and screams and screams and screams.

I hold it close one more time and say, *Nice and gentle, Nice and gentle*, in my brain. Then I try all the things that Gloria used to do whenever I went *ape-shit*. After that I put my hand behind its head and move up and down on my toes. "All better. All better," I say. From high to low like a song. Then, "So sorry."

But still it won't stop.

I put it down on my bed and when the crying gets louder I start looking for my Baby Doll. The real one. Even though I know it isn't here. I left it back in Gloria's apartment but crying babies make me really, really anxious so I have to look. It's like a rule inside my brain. I look in my drawers. I look in the closet. I look in all the places a Baby Doll might be.

Even in the suitcase. The suitcase is big and black and shaped

like a box. I pull it out from under my bed. The zipper goes all the way around. But my Baby Doll isn't inside.

I take a deep breath. I have to make the crying stop. If I put it in the suitcase and put enough blankets and stuffed animals around it and push it back under the bed then maybe I won't hear it anymore. It will be like I put the noise away inside my brain.

Because the brain is in the head. It is a dark, dark place where no one can see a thing except me.

So that's what I do. I put the plastic electronic baby in the suitcase and start grabbing blankets. I put the blankets over its face and then a pillow and some stuffed animals. I'm guessing that after a few minutes the noise will stop.

Because to cry you need to be able to breathe.

7:33 AT NIGHT, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7TH

I'm done with my shower but the plastic electronic baby is still crying. It was supposed to be quiet by now but it isn't.

My Forever Parents are sitting on the couch watching a movie. My Forever Mom has her feet in a bucket of water. She says lately they have been *swollen*. I walk out into the living room and stand in front of her and wait. Because she is a woman. I'm *a lot more comfortable with women* than I am with men.

"Hey, Ginny," my Forever Mom says while my Forever Dad presses the pause button. "What's up? It looks as though you might have something to say."

"Ginny," says my Forever Dad, "have you been picking at your hands again? They're bleeding."

That was two questions so I don't say anything.

Then my Forever Mom says, "Ginny, what's wrong?"

"I don't want the plastic electronic baby anymore," I say.

She brushes her hair off her forehead. I like her hair a lot. She let me try to put it in pigtails this summer. "It's been almost forty minutes since you went into the shower," she says.

"Did you try to make it stop? Here. Hold this until we can get you some Band-Aids."

She gives me a napkin.

"I gave it a bottle and changed its diaper three times," I say. "I rocked it and it wouldn't stop crying so I s—" Then I stop talking.

"It's making a different sort of sound now," my Forever Dad says. "I didn't know it could get that loud."

"Can you please make it stop?" I say to my Forever Mom. And then again, "Please?"

"It's great to hear you asking for help," my Forever Mom says. "Patrice would be proud."

Far away down the hallway I hear the crying again so I start looking for places to hide. Because I remember that Gloria always used to come out of the bedroom in the apartment when I couldn't get my Baby Doll to stop. Especially if she had a man-friend over. Sometimes when it cried and I heard her coming I used to take my Baby Doll and climb out the window.

I grab the napkin tight and close my eyes. "If you make it stop I'll ask for help all the time," I say and then I open them again.

"I'll go have a look," my Forever Dad says.

He stands up. When he walks past me I *recoil*. Then I see that he isn't Gloria. He looks at me funny and walks into the hallway. I hear him open the door to my room. The crying gets louder again.

"I don't know if this idea is working," my Forever Mom says. "We wanted you to see what it was like to have a real baby in the house, but this is not turning out like we planned."

In my bedroom the crying gets as loud as it can get. My Forever Dad comes back out again. One of his hands is in his hair. "She put it in her suitcase," he says.

"What?"

"I had to follow the sound. I didn't see it anywhere at first.

She crammed it in there with a bunch of blankets and stuffed animals, zipped it shut and then forced it back under her bed," he says.

"Ginny, why would you do a thing like that?" my Forever Mom says.

"It wouldn't stop crying," I say.

"Yes, but—"

My Forever Dad interrupts her. "Look, it's going to drive us all nuts if we don't put an end to this. I tried to make it stop, but I couldn't do it, either. I think it's at the point of no return. Let's just call Mrs. Winkleman."

Mrs. Winkleman is the health teacher.

"She said she gave the emergency phone number to Ginny this morning," my Forever Mom says. "It's on a piece of paper. Check in her backpack."

He walks into the hall and opens the door to my bedroom again. I cover my ears. He comes out holding my backpack. My Forever Mom finds the paper and takes out her phone. "Mrs. Winkleman?" I hear her say. "Yes, this is Ginny's mom. I'm sorry to call so late, but I'm afraid we're having a problem with the baby."

"Don't worry, Forever Girl," my Forever Dad says to me. "This will all be over in a few minutes, and then you can get ready for bed. I'm sorry this is so intense and nerve-racking. We really thought—"

My Forever Mom puts the phone down. "She says there's a hole in the back of its neck. You have to put a paper clip into the hole to touch a button and shut it off."

He goes into the office and then he comes out again and walks down the hall into my bedroom. I start counting. When I get to twelve the crying stops.

And now I can breathe again.

2:27 IN THE AFTERNOON, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8TH

When I was in Period Four which is social studies Mrs. Lomos came into the classroom to give me a message. She is my guidance counselor. She has big circle earrings and wears lots of makeup. "Your parents are coming to school for a meeting," she said. "They're going to bring you home afterward, so when we hear the afternoon announcements and the bell rings, just stay in Room Five with Ms. Dana. You can work on your homework for a little while. They'll call you in at some point. They want you to be part of it."

So right now I am in Room Five which is where I go for part of language arts with all the other special kids. Because I have *autism* and *developmental disabilities*. No one told me yesterday that there was going to be a meeting today. I'm guessing it's about the plastic electronic baby.

Ms. Dana is at bus duty. I see her out the window wearing her orange vest. She is standing next to Bus Number 74. Which is my bus. Behind it and in front of it are other buses. Lines and lines of kids are getting on them. In the hallway all the sports kids are getting ready for practice. Alison Hill and

Kayla Zadambidge are already gone. They are the other two kids who go to Room Five with me and Larry.

The buses usually leave by two-thirty but three minutes is not enough time for me to get on the internet. I've been trying for a long time to get on by myself but I'm not allowed to use it without an adult. One time when I was with Carla and Mike I put Carla's laptop under my sweater and brought it into the closet. I was typing *Gloria LeBla*— in Google when the door opened and Carla found me. She took the laptop and when I stood up she *got in my face* and yelled and screamed.

And that made me scared, scared, scared.

So once at school when I was doing a report about big cats I tried to Google *Gloria mostly sells Maine coon Cats* because that is what Gloria does to make money. But my teacher caught me and when I came to this new school at my new Forever House my new Forever Parents said I can't go on the internet, ever, because they need to keep me safe. Then Maura said that both she and Brian love me and that the internet *just isn't safe. Just isn't safe because we know you're looking for Gloria* is what she really meant even though she didn't say that last part.

And my Forever Mom is right because Gloria is back at the apartment with my Baby Doll. I don't know what town the apartment is in. I need to know if she found my Baby Doll or if it's been too long and now I'm *too late*. If I'm not too late I need to pick it up out of the suitcase fast and take excellent care of it again because Gloria sometimes goes away for days and days. Plus she has a lot of man-friends come over. And she gets mad and hits. Plus Donald, when he's in town. *I really wish I could be here more often, but I can't*, Crystal with a C used to say to me when I told her the things Gloria was doing. *So make sure you take excellent care of your Baby Doll, just like your mom says. She'll always be your little baby, no matter what.*

I come up out of my brain and start picking at my fingers.

Larry walks in. He puts his backpack down on a desk and leans his arm braces against the wall and sits. Arm braces are like crutches except they attach to your body. They make Larry look like a grasshopper. Larry has brown hair and brown eyes. My eyes are green. Plus he sings all the time and doesn't like math the way I do. "Hey, babe," he says.

So I say, "Larry, I am not a babe. I am thirteen years old. Don't you know that yet? This is *tedious*."

Tedious means when you say something over and over and people get irritated like when Patrice used to tell me all the time that I was *a little like a baby doll myself* when I was in the apartment with Gloria. That was what she said when I tried to tell her that I needed to go check on it. She didn't understand at all.

Larry stretches out his arms and yawns. "Man, am I tired. It's been a long, long day," he says. "I have to stay until my mom picks me up to go to my sister's volleyball practice."

"You should do your homework while you wait," I say because that's what Mrs. Lomos told me to do. I take out my language arts book and turn to page 57 which has a poem on it by Edgar Allan Poe.

"Nah," says Larry. "I'm going to check my Facebook. I just got one yesterday."

He gets up and puts his arms in his arm braces again and goes to the computer. My eyes follow him.

"Do you have a Facebook?" Larry says when he gets to the computer. Without turning. He types.

I look down at my hands. "No," I say.

"Then, babe, you've got to get one." He looks at me. "Here, let me show you. All the cool kids are on it, you dig?" Larry says *you dig?* all the time. I think *you dig?* is mostly an expression.

"I'm not allowed to use the internet without an adult," I say.

"Right. I remember," says Larry. "Why won't your parents let you?"

"Because Gloria is on the internet."

"Who's Gloria?"

"Gloria is my Birth Mom. I used to live with her."

Then I stop talking.

"Is she easy to find?" says Larry.

I shake my head. "No," I say. "I tried to find her three times on the internet when I was in different Forever Homes but I keep getting *interrupted*."

"What's her name again?" says Larry.

"Gloria," I say. I feel myself stand up. I feel excited and ready because I know Larry is going to help me.

"Gloria *what*?"

I lean forward and look at him sideways over the top of my glasses. I push my hair out of my face but it falls back. I wish I had a scrunchie. "Gloria *LeBlanc*," I say. It's been a long time since I said the name *LeBlanc* with my mouth. Because that is what my name used to be. It's like I left the *original* me behind when I came to live with my new Forever Parents. With Brian and Maura *Moon*. My name is *Ginny Moon* now but there are still parts of the *original* me left.

So it is like I turned into the original Ginny Moon.

"Spell it," says Larry so I do. Larry types and then he steps away and points to the chair. I sit.

And I see her.

Gloria, who hit me and gave me hugs afterward and cried. Gloria, who left me alone all the time in the apartment but gave me fancy drinks when we sat on the couch watching monster movies, who said she was *a smart cookie no matter what anyone says* because she *passed the GED with flying colors* which in my brain made me see a parade of girls in pretty skirts twirling batons with streamers and cheering.

Gloria, the second-scariest person I know.

Gloria, my Birth Mom.

Gloria's shirt and hair are mostly different but at least she has pictures of Maine coons all over the page. And Gloria still has glasses and is really, really skinny like me. I haven't seen her or talked with her since I was nine years old. That was when the police came and she said, "I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, Ginny!" I'm thirteen years old right now but I'll turn fourteen on September 18th which after today is in nine days because:

```
  September 18
– September  9
_____________

             9
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Plus nine is how old I was when the first Forever started. The two months cancel each other out, mostly.

"Babe?" says Larry.

He is talking to me. I come up out of my brain. "What?" I say.

"Do you want to see if she's around to chat?"

I am excited. Because *chat* means *talk*.

Larry points to part of the screen. "Here," he says. "Just click here."

So I click and then I see a place where I can type.

"Type what you want to say to her," says Larry. "Just say *hi* and ask her a question."

I don't want to say *hi*. Instead I type the question that I keep asking everyone and that no one ever, ever, ever understands:

Did you find my Baby Doll?

And then I wait.

"You have to click Send," says Larry.

But I don't really hear him because the pictures of the police and Gloria and the kitchen are moving so fast that I can't see

anything else. I am going deep in my brain again. I see Gloria with her face squished against the wall and the police holding her there. I see the broken-down door and the light coming in from outside and two cats running out. I don't remember which ones.

"Here," I hear Larry say. "I'll click it for you."

In front of me I see the arrow move on the screen. It touches the send button and then I start counting because when something might happen I need to see how high I can count before it gets here especially when it's the answer I've been waiting four whole years for.

Six seconds pass. Then some words appear on the screen under the ones I typed. The words say,

Is this you Ginny?

But that isn't an answer to my question. I want to pick at my fingers but I can't do that because there's a question on the screen and it's my turn to type. So I type, Yes this is Ginny. You did not answer my question. And click Send like Larry showed me.

Then one more word blinks onto the computer screen. It is in capital letters and it is screaming. The word is:

YES!

And then,

YES WE FOUND YOUR BABY DOLL WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?!

I want to write *Are you taking good care of it?* but my hands are shaking so hard now that I can't make them do what I want. Plus Gloria asked a question. I open and close my hands three

times and put them between my knees and take them out again and type, In Room Five with Larry.

And then she writes,

WHO IS LARRY WHAT IS YOUR ADDRESS?

Now I am picking at my fingers. I have to because I don't want to talk about Larry or what my address is. I only want to talk about my Baby Doll. Because even though Gloria said *YES!* and *WE FOUND YOUR BABY DOLL* I don't know if she's telling the truth or if my Baby Doll is okay. Because Gloria is *unreliable* and *inconsistent* and she's the one who lies. So I open and close my hands two more times and remember to breathe and then I type, Larry is my friend. 57 Cedar Lane Greensbor—

I stop typing because I hear Ms. Dana in the hallway. I hear her talking to someone else. Another teacher, I'm guessing.

Which means in a minute I'm going to get caught.

"Babe?" says Larry. He is standing behind me. His voice is *anxious*.

So I type, I have to go, but as soon as I click Send I want to go back and also say *Can you please, please, please bring my Baby Doll to me?* but my turn is gone and Ms. Dana will come in any second now.

I stand up fast to move away from the computer. Then someone touches my shoulder so I *recoil*.

I almost fall. When I see that it is just Larry and no one is hurting me I lower my arm and look at the screen again where I see another word. It says,

MANICOON.COM

Then,

THAT'S WHERE TO FIND ME JUST IN CASE.

Then,

FUCK IT I'M ON MY WAY I'LL BE THERE TOMORROW.

I look away. I don't see Gloria or the apartment or my Baby Doll. I see only Larry with one of his arms out of a brace and his hand up in the air. "Whoa, dude," he says. "Are you all right? Come on. We need to sit down and get our books out." Then he bites his lip and says, "I'm going to shut the computer. Don't freak out on me, okay?" He reaches and puts one hand on the mouse and clicks the words Log Out and then clicks the X up in the corner of the screen. He goes to his desk and sits. I push the chair back and get up and rub the dirt off my hands and look at the picture of Edgar Allan Poe.

Ms. Dana walks in. "Ginny, your parents are ready to see you," she says, "in Mrs. Lomos's office."

I stand up and take my backpack and leave the room. When I get into the hallway I start running. I run with my fingers touching the wall. I feel like I might fall if I don't keep touching something so I run and run and run. I am still excited but I am also scared.

Because Gloria is coming. Here to my school.

2:50 IN THE AFTERNOON, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8TH

My Forever Parents are outside the door of Mrs. Lomos's tiny office. "Let's step into the conference room, Ginny," says Mrs. Lomos.

We take five steps to get to the conference room which is across the hall. My Forever Parents sit at the table so I sit too. "Hi, Ginny," my Forever Mom says.

"Hi," I say back to her. She sits with her hands on her big round belly which is as big as a basketball. My Forever Dad's belly is big too and his face is round but he doesn't have a white beard or a nose like a cherry.

"Ginny, your parents came in to talk about what happened last night with the electronic baby," says Mrs. Lomos.

I sit and wait for them to talk. But they don't.

"They let me know that you put it in a suitcase," says Mrs. Lomos. "Is that true?"

"Do you mean the *plastic electronic* baby?" I say.

She looks at me funny. "Yes, of course," she says.

"Then yes," I say.

"Why did you put it there?"