

THE BACKWARDS BOOK | RENN VOLLER

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The Backwards Book
a short story
by Renn Voller

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The clock struck seven past nine when a blood-curdling scream echoed down from the upper hallway of a Millbrook family home. A father jumped up from his usual spot on the sofa where he had just started his usual routine of thinking about nothing at all, after a long day of thinking about getting home. The father, named Ted, rushed to the bedroom of his daughter, named Ellie, whom he fathered with a mother named Helen.

Ellie had become a difficult child since the family moved to Millbrook. Come to think of it, Helen had become a lot more unpleasant to Ted as well. Some night, like this one, she hadn't so much as greeted him as he stumbled through the door and let his heavy work bag slip to the floor. But Ted did not come to think of it. It was seven past his daughter's bedtime and his attention was focused solely on avoiding her toys, which littered the dim stairs. His otherwise slouchy, severely sedentary and slightly saggy body rocketed past all obstacles. This was not an acceptable time for blood-curdling screams.

When Ted flung open her purple bedroom door, he found his daughter in none of the situations that could justify screams this alarming, this late. He found her, in fact, entirely alive and perfectly intact by any standard of visual inspection.

Ted had gone into fatherhood being told left and right about the difficulties of raising children. Someone, Ted thought often, should have at least warned him that the little tyrants were at their worst when they were just bored and tired. Ellie had, for no specific reason, decided to start thrashing around her bed the moment Ted entered the room; a bed that was otherwise perfectly good for sleeping. Ellie demanded a story. Not even an interesting one, nor one of the new ones Ted had bought months ago and had thus far failed to convince her to try. No, it would either be the princess story (which Ted had read so many times the pages had started to come loose) or the one

about the blue frog that sparkled each time it croaked. Ted sat himself down on the edge of her bed and watched her skip across the room to her bookshelf.

“Oh, a new book! Thank you, daddy!” Ellie pushed the book towards him and flung her tiny arms around her father.

Glancing around her small frame, he found a rather raggedy-looking hardcover book. Bone white title with faded edges, that gave it a soft glowing appearance – like leftover coals in a firepit.

‘The Backwards Book’

This had not been the first time Helen had brought home odd trinkets from one of her second-hand market strolls, though, this time, Ted wasn’t sure why Helen had thought this had been a good book for Ellie. Ellie, entirely satisfied with getting exactly what she wanted, obediently slipped back under the covers and stared at Ted expectantly.

The first pages of the book were empty. Brand new, untouched, bone white.

“Daddy!” Ellie whined.

Ted flipped through a few more pages as his daughter’s tiny feet had already found their way from under the covers and into Ted’s side.

“Go find another one, sweetie.” Ted breathed out, defeated, “This one is a notebook. You have to write your own story in it.” His thumb brushed the edge of the pages and let the entire book slide past. Ted was already on his feet when he reached the last few pages and saw something. Tall black font across the entire page. Ted dropped back to the bed without warning, missing one of Ellie’s feet just barely. Ted flipped back to find the page again.

‘To start – begin at the end.’

Thumbing his way around the pages, he found another filled page. The one right before the last.

‘They ran – too late’

The page before that.

‘To run away is to run towards...’

Ted flipped another page.

‘...the Backwards Man.’

Entirely inappropriate for a children’s book. Entirely inappropriate for a book for any demographic that Ted could conjure up in his mind. What normal person would buy an unsettling book like this – with just a few printed pages all the way at the end?

A child screeched next to Ted, and his mind returned to the room, but not before considering that his wife had, in fact, bought such a book, and found it appropriate to put it on their daughter’s shelf. He looked beside him and recognized the little, loud human as one of his own making. His curiosity entirely piqued now, he returned his attention to the book.

“Honey, wait a second,” Ted murmured somewhere between apology and excuse, “go pick out another book.”

Ted inspected the pages more closely now. Frantic writing. Static pages. Nothing happened. It was entirely empty save for those odd pages in the back – until he flipped all the way to the last page and then returned towards the beginning of the book.

Another page appeared.

Ted rubbed his eyes, shook his head and scratched his ear. All the tools he had to reset his tired mind. Another page had appeared, right in front of him. He counted the pages that were filled, memorized the last, or first, page – flipped to the end and back to the beginning.

An extra page appeared once again.

Poorly drawn. Hastily etched things. Upsetting and frantic and ugly all the same. Some part of him accepted it without hesitation, if only to avoid having to question his own sanity.

Ted started at the end again and read the story in reverse.

Perhaps it was the crudely drawn image of a child lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs that took Ted by surprise. The way her limbs twisted unnaturally. The damage that was done to her tiny body. Perhaps even more so the manner in which it was drawn. As if whatever had drawn it had only had the few seconds it took for Ted to flip the pages. Black lines almost thick enough to resemble ink stains and thin, rapid scratches on the paper.

The image before that was that same child, not lying down, and not in a pool of blood and guts, but instead, hauling herself down that same flight of stairs in tiny, unsocked feet. A dark, awkward figure drawn behind the child, almost looming over it, as if launching itself to attack.

Another child was shoving her feet into Ted’s side at the same time. Ted, however, didn’t seem to have enough blood left in his body to register it. Blood was rushing to his head. Ears pounding, face flushed, eyelids itching. The room started to spin.

Under unrelenting screams of his daughter, Ted continued to cycle through the book that seemed to grow heavier and more corrosive in his hands every time he did so.

The dark figure behind the girl came into view on the newly added page. It was not a monster, not at all – just a man, stumbling, dead before he hit the ground. Toys flying through the air, obstructing his escape. No chance.

The man – back to life on the newest page – and the girl traced their steps back to a small bedroom. They flew backwards in time into a sitting position on a bed, where the father read a story to his daughter.

Once more, Ted ran his fingers through the remaining pages, checking if they were really blank. Then he was on his feet. Unsteady. Shoving Ellie aside without thinking. Mind gone, his anxiety flattened out, then whirled inside a torrent of confusion. He looked about him and was surprised he was

standing. Something started to click in his mind. Some primal evil began to form in his imagination. He could not stop turning the pages back and forth, forth and back, uncovering the story from end to beginning.

Another page – another drawing, crude and rushed. A woman's face, barely visible through the blackened page. A ray of light. A few vertical lines. The figure starting out from behind a corner – a door?

Then there was the creak.

Mere steps away from Ted's left. He clenched his jaw as he inhaled sharply. The hairs on the back of his neck standing up – eyes wide. The closet door creaked, no doubt about it. He threw another look at the page and frowned. In the haze of confusion and fear, something in him was certain the face drawn on the page looked exactly like his wife – whom he hadn't heard all evening.

The room was dead quiet. Ellie's sobbing had stopped. Her feet no longer kicked around on the bed. Ted turned his head towards his daughter, whose eyes were fixed on her closet door.

Helen was in that closet – wasn't she?

Surely.

Perhaps?

Perhaps he was in over his head and this was all a coincidence. Or it was all a joke. A strange joke unlike any his wife had ever played on him. But people can surprise each other, even after all these years. She would jump out any second now and screech and stomp her feet on the floor and they would all laugh and Ted would pretend he wasn't terrified and on the verge of fainting.

Then there was a muffled sound.

The door creaked open just a hair – slow and deliberate.

Ted leaped across the room and flung open the door.

In all the commotion, Ellie looked down at the book that had crashed down onto the floor with a heavy thud. What she saw confused and terrified her all the same. It was a man, or man-shaped at least. Human-adjacent. Something that barely fit in the closet on the drawing. It sat with its spiny, rounded back towards the viewer. Ribs and bony hips piercing through its skin. Thin streaks of black hair long enough to touch the ground. Limbs frail-looking, elongated. Unnaturally long, folded along all sides of the figure.

Aside from one hand, twisted and placed on the head of a dead Millbrook mother, keeping it upright, and right in the thin ray of light.

The thing's head hung backwards down its back, as if its exposed, curved neck was broken or boneless. Thin lips spread grinning above its sharp white eyes and veiny, pale skin.

If Ted had had the patience for just one more page – he'd have seen what his daughter was staring at. His mind might have come to the same

conclusion as hers. He could have run out of the room, down the stairs, out of the house – instead of towards the closet.

But it was too late.

Ted stood in front of the thing that was holding his wife's head.

Its face moving into the light, staring right at Ted, and then the shine of teeth – too many and too thin and too long.

Helen's neck slumped as the thing let her head go and then her entire body rolled over and dropped out of the closet.

The thing behind her started unfolding its long, bony legs. Its limbs extended and hooked around the door frame – lifting itself out of the closet slowly. It rose until it reached the ceiling and then still stood hunched. Its long body gliding across the ceiling until the head hung down so far behind Ted he had to turn around – entirely surrounded by that one devilish creature.

"The Backwards Man," Ted mumbled.

Ellie's feet made muffled thumps down the stairs by the time Ted understood.

The hunt had already begun.