

DREAM OF A CHILD CARE WORKER

Dan Carlson

I woke up.

Tears were flooding my eyes, flowing down my cheeks and soaking my pillow. It felt like it must be morning but the room was pitch black and silent. I put up my hands to feel the moisture of my tears as I rolled over to look up at my alarm clock blinking on the shelf. 1:30 A.M. I didn't want to forget this dream. As I sat up in bed and tried to remember, the tears stopped.

We were in a big room, my colleagues and I. It was a friendly room, and we had a job to do. One wall of the room was entirely made up of rows of tiny cages, with glass doors in front. Against the inside of the glass doors I could see reflections of flames. I walked up to one of the doors and looked inside. Huddled on the floor of the cage was a young girl, maybe 3 or 4 years old, with blond dirty matted hair and a filthy dress. Her arms and legs were covered with ugly sores and bruises. She shrugged her shoulders and looked over at me with her empty eyes. A fire was burning at the front of her locker, but she didn't seem to notice. Now I understood the job we had to do in this room. We had to choose which of the children to bring out of the cages. I didn't feel any particular emotion about this, but I did sense the weight of responsibility and I knew we couldn't bring them all out. We had to choose a child who would most benefit from being saved.

I stepped over to look inside another glass door. A little boy was huddled back in the far right corner. Maybe a year old, ragged and bruised, he had some cuts on his feet. He was wearing pajamas, but one of the sleeves hung loosely like something was wrong with the arm inside. I looked at his face, and looked in his eyes, and I recognized him. He was Danny. He was I.

I still didn't feel any particular emotion or surprise, but thought it wouldn't be right for me to decide on my own. I really should ask one of my colleagues to help me decide about Danny. So I brought someone over and we looked inside. By the time we got back, the tiny cage had filled with smoke. It looked like part of Danny's side was now blackened from being burned by the fire, but I tried to block that from my mind because it seemed less and less likely he would be a good choice to save. My colleague nonchalantly answered my question with: "Well, I don't know; whatever you think," and walked away. I knew

in another minute it was going to be too late. I thought a few seconds. I decided yes. So I opened the door. I looked back through the fire and smoke and saw Danny silently looking back at me, his big round eyes red-rimmed from the smoke. I reached in to bring him out of the cage. He gratefully put his arms out to me and around me as I carried him out, and I was glad I had decided, yes. I wasn't sure I made the right decision though. I wasn't sure. Maybe I would be wasting my effort. Maybe he wouldn't benefit much. Anyway, I had said yes. And then from somewhere, I don't know where, tears came gushing up into my eyes and flowed down my cheeks. I was curious about what could trigger such a strong emotional response. I got up out of bed and went to the mirror. I was a little bit surprised to see Danny's red-rimmed eyes looking back at me. That seemed to be the end of the dream — anyway, that's all I can remember.