

“It’s not going to be for very long. He’s a nice guy—He’s gonna help out. Look, goddammit, I need a break! I can’t keep doing everything on my own. You think maybe you could be a little less frickin’ selfish?”

“Whatever, fine, you need help, but I just don’t understand why I can’t help. Why do we need to have someone live here? I can get a job. I already take care of Sam when you’re not here. I cook dinner, I clean up...I just don’t understand why that isn’t enough!”

We are in the kitchen. My mom is making dinner and my sister is standing in the doorway. I watch the argument bounce back and forth, not exactly sure whose side I’m supposed to take. Mom does need help. But *ugh!* My sister is right too—some strange guy living in our house, what’s that gonna be like?

“That’s right! You don’t understand. You have no clue what it’s like to be the one responsible for everything! I can barely make the ends meet. It’s wonderful that you help out with your little sister, it’s wonderful that you cook *on occasion,*” eye-roll from my sister “but you don’t pay rent, and that’s what I need. Can you bring in \$700 a month?”

“If you’d let me get a job!” arms cross, lips pinch.

“You’re not getting a goddamn job! You’re going to go to school and make something of yourself so you don’t have to live like this!” mom throws her hands up as if her point is made by the air around her.

“What’s so bad about the way we live?” my sister says exactly what I’m wondering.

“Nothing. For you guys,” mom puts her hands on her head like she needs to keep it from exploding. “I’m tired. Do you understand that?” something in her voice makes my tummy feel

scared, “I’m so tired. All I do is work. And no matter how much I work, there still isn’t enough to keep all this going.”

“What about dad?” *Uh oh!* I hold my breath, cringing for what’s coming.

“Ohh myyy gaaawwd!” my mom throws her hands up and laughs—not in a funny way—and turns away from my sister. “Please! Your father pays exactly what he’s supposed to pay, no more, no less. And there’s no way in hell I’m asking him and that dumb bitch for help, got it?”

My dad is a check that comes in the mail every month. I don’t know a whole lot about him except that he has the same initials as me, is left-handed, and that he gives my mom six hundred, twenty-five dollars and thirty-two cents for me and my sister. I asked my mom once why he pays that amount, and she said “because he’s too much of a dick to round it up.” That wasn’t really what I meant, but I decided right then that questions about dad did not make anyone happy.

“Great, so because your pride’s too big, we have to live with some douche...” *Yikes!* I can’t look at my mom because I’m sure she’s about to kill my sister.

Thankfully my sister is saved by a loud engine rumbling to the curb in front of our house. I run to the window, “Great, and he drives a piece of shit,” I say, so my sister won’t have to suffer the wrath of mom alone.

“Samantha! Watch your mouth!” mom looks like her head is gonna spin right off her shoulders. “Dammit! Do you see what you’re doing to her? You wanna know why? This is why! Because the two of you are out of control and I can’t be here every second to kick your ass back in line, now get the hell outta my sight. I can’t even look at you right now!”

My sister pushes off the doorway and walks to her room, slamming her door in response.

At the front door, the new renter taps out *dum-de-de-dum-dum...dum dum*—so lame—and I look over at mom begging to not have to open the door.

She pinches her lips together, and tosses her head in the direction of the door, commanding me to, *go open it*, so I do.

Standing on the other side is stringy hair and denim with steel-toed boots. He crouches down to my level, “Hey there. Sammy, right?” ruffles my hair, then stands up, pushes past me, and goes to mom to hug her like they’re good ol’ friends “Hey, beautiful!”

I watch my mom morph into a totally different person with a big smile and wide open arms for the creepy renter.

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Weeks follow and the creep is always here. He sticks to everything like a shadow. I try to play nice, but he makes this sound in the back of his mouth—a clicking or sucking—that grosses me out. And he stares at my sister like the big bad wolf. She always laughs and smiles now, like she’s got a secret. Mom is never home.

“Sam, we’re gonna watch a movie, wanna see if Kelly can play?” my sister asks.

“Why can’t I watch the movie?”

“It’s not for kids.”

“Then why are you watching it? What, are you all grown up now?”

“Just go play.”

This is how it is now. My sister or the creep tells me what to do, and mom is working. The two of them are like a secret group, with whispers and looks and giggles. It hurts my stomach to look at them.

Last weekend, we went on a camping trip—mom couldn't come because of work. I was told to bring a friend, so I wouldn't be "bored," but that was a lie. They just didn't want me to bother them. I watched them the whole weekend. I felt like I had to know what this weird secret was that made me feel so sick. So I tried, the whole time, to see, but I didn't know, didn't understand what I was looking for. They went for walks, alone. Sent me to bed and stayed up by the campfire, alone. I stayed awake, in the ratty old truck camper, my friend sleeping beside me; and I strained to hear anything, some piece of knowledge that could tell me what this horrible fear was that squirmed like maggots in my stomach. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I got up, and went outside to see what they were doing.

The creep was holding my sister's hand, playing with her fingers. He kept pulling on her hand trying to bring her closer to him, speaking quietly. My sister was laughing and shaking her head no, but she wasn't pulling her hand away. And then, the creep leaned over to her and put his face close to her ear, and it looked like...like...I don't know, like he kissed her. And I knew I shouldn't be watching.

I asked my sister, the next day, what was happening. Why was the creepy renter touching her like that.

"It was nothing. You don't even know what you saw. He was trying to calm me down because I was mad at mom. He was just trying to be helpful. Nothing is happening," but her voice was mean like we were fighting, except we weren't.

I don't know what to do. I don't know who to talk to. I feel a panic inside of me every single day. Like a great and terrible knowing, way down in the pit of my stomach; and it scares me, like somehow everyone is disappearing, even me, and I don't know how to stop it. I keep trying to talk to my sister, but she pushes me away, tells me to stay out of her business.

The creep, looks at me like he wants to hurt me. I heard him talking to my mom when we came home from the camping trip. They were alone in her room. The door was closed, but I listened. He told her that I don't respect him, and I that I keep telling lies. That I am jealous of my sister growing up. He thinks he should get to discipline me, since he's the one who watches me most of the time. I didn't hear my mom agree...but I heard other noises.

Everything is confused. He's the one who's lying, not me. He's the one who is bad...but everyone believes him.

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I am walking toward my house from school, I see the creep on the porch. He's sitting on the steps, rubbing a stone repeatedly over a giant knife. I know that knife. He wears it on his hip. He calls it a buck knife, but there are no bucks in the San Fernando Valley... I walk up to the door.

"How was your day, Sammy?" he says, but keeps his eyes on the knife.

"That's not my name." I don't talk to him like I'm supposed to anymore. Hate makes the words come out cold and hard, more brave than I feel.

He cuts his eyes to me, and I see something dangerous, scary, like a mask slipping off a clown only to peek at something worse underneath...then, the clicking sound, “Is that any way to talk to me, Sammy?”

My legs want to run inside, carry me to the safety of my room, but his body is blocking the door. I can't go in the house unless he moves. The stone scrapes across the knife. I want to fall right there, fall and cry and curl up into a ball. But I hold my ground.

“Hey, what's up?” It's my sister.

Help me! I want to scream. *Make him go away!!*

“Come on in, what're you doing standing out there?” she reaches for my hand, but the creep holds up the knife to stop her.

“Why don't you go back inside. Sammy and I are having a little talk here.”

I see a look barely touch her eyes—irritation? Concern? Fear? She pushes past him and grabs my hand, placing her body between me and the creep, she pulls me into the house. As she walks me to my room she whispers, “Did you go in my room yesterday?”

I know instantly what she is talking about—a card. I found a card in her closet. I'm gonna throw up. The images race through my mind—the card was about sex, small pictures, cartoon-like, having sex, in many different ways...the message on the inside...scribbled black ink, *Can't wait for more...* I clench my teeth so hard they feel like they'll shatter, and my legs begin to shake. I didn't get it before, or maybe I did but I didn't want too. Now I can't...I can't look at her, I can't answer.

“You need to stay out of my room, Sam.” I not sure if she's asking or telling.

We reach my room and I go to shut the door, but I hear the front door slam as heavy steel-toed boots stomp towards us.

My sister turns and puts her hands up rushing to explain that everything is okay. I see the creep coming like a wild thing, big and moving for an attack, his eyes lock on mine and there is nowhere to go except further into my room, but he grabs her instead and carries her back towards her room.

He slams the door behind them.

I'm frozen. I don't know what to do. I shut my door and walk to my bed. I want to crawl inside and pull the covers up. I want to hide.

But I can do nothing, because even as my brain starts working again, my door opens and the creep is there.

He steps into my room, slowly, and I realize I didn't turn on the light. It's dark as he closes the door behind him. My Raggedy Ann and Andy shades are pulled down. He crouches down in front of me and my legs crumble me back onto my bed.

He clicks his tongue. "What'd'ya think you know, Sammy? Hmm?"

My brain won't make sense of the words.

"You gonna tell your mommy more lies about me?"

Lies? What lies? I haven't lied. I swear, I haven't lied. "What lies?" Did I think it or did I say it?

He brings his hand up to my face, rubs it, then grabs my hair in his fist. "See this? I got it all ready for you." It's the knife. "Know what I'm gonna do with this if you tell any more lies?"

I can't breathe.

“You won’t know when, but one night, when you’re asleep in your little bed, I’m gonna come outta yer closet, and I’m gonna take out this big knife,” he moves his face up to mine, scratches my cheek with his stubble. I smell Budweiser on his breath, stale and stinking like mold on bread. The clicking again, right in my ear this time, then a whisper, “and I’m gonna cut you up into a thousand tiny little pieces...”

I squeeze my eyes shut and tell myself any minute someone is going to come in and save me. Any minute, my sister is going to realize she loves me, and hates him.

“Guess what part I’m gonna start with?” A rough hand grabs my mouth, like a favorite aunt does when she tells you how cute you are, but this hand is not love; this hand is motor oil and dirt and sex with my sister, and a big scary buck knife; this hand is control and pain, and I am a weak Raggedy Ann doll. “Your lying little tongue.”

He throws my face from his hand, and in the seconds that I am falling back onto the bed, my mind spins with one thought—Mommy!

But I am a caged thing, a rabbit; heart beating only for the purpose of escape, only I cannot escape, and my mom is not here, so I scramble to the safety of the covers on my bed, the blackness behind my eyes, a hole deep inside of myself where the monster cannot catch me.

In the distance, I hear the creep laugh. He mutters something more, but I have burrowed myself far away from his words.

And then the door closes.

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Sleep. I don't sleep anymore. A month or so passes. I feel sick all the time. My mom takes me to doctors, tells them something's wrong with her kid. I see the worry in her eyes. They check everything. Make me drink chalk and take pictures of my stomach. Nothing.

I hear my mom say things like, "hypochondriac" or "childhood depression," and her worry turns to mad. She yells at me, "You need to snap out of this. I can't worry about you. I don't have time, I have to work!"

I can't bring myself to tell her the truth. I can't tell her I'm terrified to go to sleep. I can't tell her that the closet monster lives in my room, and that he's having sex with my sister. She won't believe me. She'll think I'm lying. Think that I'm trying to ruin things for her, not being helpful, causing problems.

So I try to be good.

Everyday bleeds into the next, every fake smile, every stupid conversation, forgotten because they don't matter, because none of it is true. I feel like I'm in that movie *Coraline*, and everyone has sewed on button eyes, like if they can't see all the lies, then they aren't lies at all. Some days I want to scream as loud as I can and rip the buttons right off their faces, so someone will finally see how much is wrong here...but I don't because I am alone and no one hears you when you're small.

So it goes on. Doors close, whispers float on dead air, the creep is in one room with my mom and then in another with my sister, and the pretend becomes normal, just like you'd expect in a world of make believe.

“This is my baby brother, Ty,” the creep parades the bald-headed, leather-clad douchebag into the house.

Ty is quiet, uncomfortable. He looks a little like I feel, like paper, two dimensional, not really here, not really anywhere. And he looks like he hates the creep.

I sit quietly on the brown pleather sofa in the living room, watching as the creep bullies Ty into drinking with him, first Budweiser, while the sun's still out, then Jack Daniels as the light fades. I'm not sure why I stay and watch, maybe I'm curious about Ty, maybe I need to understand the sad eyes in the hard face, maybe something about Ty feels a little like safety...like the monster won't come out if he's here.

The creep keeps making jokes about Ty being in jail. Only, they didn't start as jokes...first it was, *I'm so glad you're here man. I'm so glad you're out. Goddammit, my baby brother right here, drinkin' beer with me.* Then, as the liquor flowed from piss yellow to dark amber the teasing became, *myyyy little brother...man, hope you didn't become somebody's bitch in there, tell me bro, did some big-ass biker put you over his knee?* Every stupid joke is followed by a weasel-like laugh, and I can see Ty cringe. I can see him hold back his anger, keep it locked up tight. Like he knows just to let the creep talk.

But then the creep calls my sister over, has her sit on his lap, keeps making jokes about prison and bitches, and touching my sister like he says some dirty biker probably touched Ty. That's when something flies across the room, and Ty is on his feet, and he's screaming at the creep to, “Leave her the fuck alone!”

The creep throws my sister to the floor and tries to stand, but his legs look like rubber and he falls back in his chair.

I'm frozen. Kind of thrilled. I see the creep, a stupid gaped-mouth look on his face, hanging onto both arms of the chair, and I want to jump up on the couch and cheer for Ty. But my sister is on the floor, crying, hiding behind her hands. Was she crying the whole time? I think she was. I think that's what made Ty move. I think Ty doesn't live in the same fake place we have all gotten comfortable in, the place where truth no longer exists. I think he snapped the way I have prayed to do, but I am nine, and small and weak, and I don't have a bald head or leather or a prison record, but Ty does, and I feel like maybe heroes don't have to wear capes.

But then the creep vaults himself from the chair, rage twisting his face as he runs from the room.

Everything in the space around us vibrates, like hatred and anger have become living things. Time moves too fast to understand, but I feel slow and sluggish like I'm stuck in a nightmare. My sister runs to me, grabs my hand and yanks me from the sofa. Ty stands furious in the middle of the room and screams at us to leave, as the creeps stalks back into the room, stringy long hair flying backwards with movements too fast to track. I see a flash of light in his hand. No, not light, metal? Steel? The knife.

My sister and I are stuck, two crippled lumps in a doorway, bound to the floor by tangled legs and arms and screams and tears.

We watch as Ty and the monster collide—leather to denim, greasy hair to bald head, locked together in a spastic dance, swinging through the living room and down the two steps into

our add-on den. The glass of the sliding door that separates the rooms crashes and rattles, but somehow stays in place even as their clumsy rage promises a violent shower of deadly splinters.

All the while the monster manages to hold the knife to Ty's throat, even as they jerk and punch and twist. And then the monster brings his knee up hard—into the private place. Ty's body lunges forward with heaving force, thrusting his neck onto the blade with a momentum that cannot be stopped. The monster screams and yanks the knife away. And my hope drains as Ty sinks to the floor, in a ball of gasps and gurgles and blood.

My sister, moved by some instinct I didn't think she had, drags me from the doorway, through the house and to a room, where she slams and locks the door. She huddles us behind a bed. Our bodies cocooned within hair and tears; a shuddering mass. There is no sound beyond the door.

Time passes; I'm not sure how long, I can only tell by the slowing of our breaths and quieting of our sobs.

“Are you okay?” her voice is small but hard.

“Where's mom?”

“I don't know.”

“What if she comes back and, and...” I begin to dissolve again.

“Shhh! He won't hurt her.”

There's a bite in her words that makes me angry. Is she defending him? Was she saying that he wouldn't do such a thing? I want to rip my hair out of my head. *God! PLEASE help me!* because I do not understand what has happened to reality? *Please! Someone! Save me!* because everyone is upside down and backward, and I am trapped in this funhouse mirror

“Shhh! Stop it, stop it!” she shakes my body, but I’m not there. “What’s wrong with you? What the hell is wrong with you?” she slaps my face hard, because I am screaming—once, then again.

I hate her. I want to hurt her. Kill her. Hug her and beg her to make it all stop.

“You need to calm the hell down! Listen we need to get to a phone. We need to call someone—”

From the front of the house, we hear the door open and shut, and then “Hello? Where are you guys?” It’s my mom. My mom is home!

I’m not sure if it’s desperation or salvation... or just a natural response to my mom’s voice that moves our feet, but we both jump up and run from the room. A jerky paralysis slows us at the hallway. We turn the corner, but there’s nothing. A few things knocked over, but no Ty, no blood, no monster.

My mom casually throws her stuff down onto the couch and turns to ask what’s going on. Her face reflects the confusion and terror that must be streaked across our own.

I turn to look up at my sister. She’s sobbing and my mom is pulling her in, “Baby, what’s wrong? What’s going on.”

“He killed him! He killed him right here!”

“What—killed who!” my mom cries in response because the fear is contagious, not because she understands.

“And me and Sammy—we were so scared—but he’s gone—they’re gone—mom—I don’t—”

“What the hell are you talking about? Who’s dead?” she shakes my sister, as my sister shook me moments before.

I bury my body between them, choking sobs suffocate me, and still I am grateful for the words I hear, grateful that I am not alone, grateful that there was a Ty, and that his brother killed him, because now we might be free.

“Ty! He killed Ty! He had a knife—and there was a fight—He got mad because, because...And then he got a knife and he, and he—he cut his throat!” Each word is sweet life giving air.

“I don’t understand. What the hell are you talking about? Who the hell is Ty? And if he killed him, where the hell are they?” She holds my sister out in front of her, searching for the answers in her face. “Okay, I’m gonna get to the bottom of this,” she screams the creep’s name, “Where the hell are you!”

I feel her begin to leave and I wrap my body tight around hers—*NO! You can’t go after him!*—the knife, the closet, the promise. I can’t let her go when we are so close to the way out.

“Not now! I can’t deal with you right now,” she says as she works to disentangle herself from freedom.

I stand alone in the middle of the living room. Sinking. I see my sister on the couch, crying, rocking, a child dressed up in the body of a grown woman. I see my mom stomping off towards the back of the house, the yard, wherever, on a mission to discover what she really doesn’t want to know. I am detached, as much from them as from my own self; and suddenly, I don’t care. I don’t care about the secrets, or the closet, or the knife.

I turn and I walk towards my sister's room and I know what I am going to do. If there is no Ty, then I will be Ty. I am going to drag that goddamned elephant directly into the center of this room and rip those buttons right off their eyes once and for all.

The lights are off in the hallway, but I do not stop. The light is off in my sister's room, but I am not afraid. The door is shut to the closet, but I know exactly where to look.

I put my hand on the knob, and pull. A giant heap, wet and gurgling, flies out of the closet. Arms reaching, clumsy, falling, flailing all over me. Terror rips through my lungs, my head, my limbs. Pain pounds in my ears, as I pound at the weight of the wall that threatens to bury me alive.

And then...

I am drifting in a place far away, voices like an old radio station are playing in the background...

There's light, but it feels good. I hear seagulls and water...

...can't send him back to jail...

I think I'm at the beach. I love the beach. I love to put my whole dripping wet body right down into the burning hot sand. Mommy always laughs at me and tells me how silly I am, how gross I look...

... hold her up...shhh, it's okay, baby...

but I don't care, I don't care how gritty it is or if it gets in my suit, I just love how warm it is. I hear my mommy sign, feel her rub my head...It's so good to be warm.

"Ma'am, is this your residence?"

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Okay. So my partner is talking to your roommate, separately. Just so we can make sure everybody...well, you know...just to get everybody’s account of things.”

“Mmhhh, I understand.”

“So, you arrived home at what time?”

“It was about 9 o’clock. I, uh, got off work—I work downtown—and I uh, stopped off at the store on my way home.”

“And who was here with your children?”

“Well, my oldest daughter is 15, so she was here watching her little sister. I guess my roommate and his brother arrived just maybe an hour before I did.”

“Okay, so you were not here at the residence when the men attacked your roommate and his brother in the alleyway behind your house?”

“No, no I wasn’t. I just can’t believe this... it’s such a safe neighborhood. I’ve never worried about leaving the girls alone.”

Icy tethers pull me back, away from the beach, away from the nice warm sand. I feel the cold sticky imitation leather on my hands and the back of my legs. My head is pounding, but through it I hear a voice. It’s far away, but I know it’s my mom. It’s the same voice that laughed at the sand on my body, that soothed me, that used to be soft and sweet and nice, and would sing me songs or tell me stories when I wasn’t able to sleep... but now, it’s lying.

My chest feels hollow and heavy; still I manage to lift the lead and walk it toward the front door, where the voice is.

I see her down the hall, at the door, with a man in a uniform. He's writing something on a paper attached to a metal box.

“Well, robberies are like that. Usually it's just moments of opportunities. They might've seen your roommate and his brother pull-up in the alley, and just because it was dark and secluded...you know? So you said before you didn't know your roommate's brother.”

“No, I've never met him.”

“Why is that?”

“I think, uh, I think he just got out of jail, actually,” laughs. “I mean I really didn't even know he was bringing him over. In fact, I'd be pretty pissed about it, but considering what happened... Is he ok, by the way?”

“Oh yeah, it was a superficial wound. Just a lot of blood.”

A terrifying image slashes through my soupy brain. Ty, in the closet, hiding. I had opened the door to get the card, but he was there—a closet monster, soaked in blood. He flew out at me, fell on me, crushed me.

I look down, in a panic to see if I am alive. I am. And I am clean with my jammies on, hair wet and combed back. I remember the dream—the beach, the water, the warmth...the voices. The lead seeps from my chest and fills my veins. I see the officer; look back down at my clothes, and I know what is happening. She's pretending like we're normal, like nothing's wrong so he'll go away and she can put the buttons back on.

I want to move. I want to run to the door, but I am an anchor.

“I'm just so grateful my children didn't have to see that. I can't imagine...” her voice echoes in the hall. Loving, safe—lying! I hate that voice.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I mean, your roommate’s brother was probably the target, you know, probably some people with a score to settle...they might’ve known he just got out, knew he was with his brother... you get the idea. I’m sure no one is coming back, but I would recommend having that talk with your roommate regardless of his brother’s condition. You don’t need people like that around your kids.”

I watch him put his papers inside the box, and place his hat back on his head. He’s leaving. Any second he’ll be gone. I manage to slide one foot forward ...*no, please don’t leave me here...* the other foot moves.

“Well, you take care, and try to have a peaceful night.” *no, don’t go!*

“Thank you, officer.”

She closes the door, and locks it.