

## “The Knight”

"Daddy!"

She smashes her face against the window pane. Our scraggly front yard; dead brown grass enclosed by a mean wire fence. Today a figure interrupts the grey landscape, a silhouette in the setting sun. I rip a sliver of soft skin around my fingernail clean off. From where I stand the face is simply a black outline. The figure raises his hand in greeting, and I shift my position until the black outline becomes my father's ashen face.

I place my hands on my sister's delicate shoulders, the blades straining against white skin. She shrugs them off and bounces her fingertips against the dirty glass. “Look!” she cries, the tip of her nose flattened against the window, “Daddy’s back!” My stomach churns like an angry sea trying to drown childhood memories. There were days when my flushed cheeks touched the windowpane, and my thin arms itched to wrap themselves around his neck. I wanted my fingertips to graze the ends of his short hair as I breathed in his scent of cigarettes and cologne.

The roar of the toilet interrupts memory. My mother appears in the kitchen doorway, smoothing her shirt. Her lips set themselves in a straight firm line as she stares at my sister, whose knees are scrambling up the top of the couch, her whole body pressed against the window now.

“Grace, get down.”

Grace’s open face crumples and she slides down the cushions. My mother parts the plastic blinds, an opening just wide enough for her faded blue eye to scan the horizon. The blinds snap back into place as she strides toward the front door, yanking it open with one twist of her wrist. The top of her head underlines the “WELCOME” that she painted on the door herself, the red paint now peeling. Grace stands up from the couch, her bare toes inching toward a ripped sneaker on the floor.

“Mama, can I—“

“No.”

Grace runs her pink tongue over small white teeth. She sits down. My mother looks over her shoulder at me and merely says, “Angela.” I dip my head in a slight nod, because yes, yes I will keep her inside. My mother closes the door behind her and I sit beside Grace, running my hands absentmindedly through her soft curls. Her eyes are fixed on our father, whose grey sweatshirt hides marked arms. His hands clench the front gate, and his thin torso, much too thin, curves over the flimsy metal. Grace’s mouth hangs open, her blue eyes bright, not yet faded like my mother’s. I can see a fairytale in those eyes. She is the little princess shut up in her tower, waiting for her knight to rescue her from loneliness. Her heart beats against her miniature ribcage as he stands below her window. I see a man, spine curved so rigidly the tops of his shoulders meet the edges of his earlobes, bloodless skin stretched over the sharp lines of his skull. She sees a knight clad in beautiful armor, that shines like his bright blue eyes.

Even from here I can tell that his huge eyes are flat, like two placid black lakes.

He licks his lips as my mother stops on the last step of our porch, her arms crossed over her frayed flannel. I watch her left index finger repeatedly trace the toothpaste stain on the right elbow. Grace squints, her dainty features fixed in concentration as she tries to read their lips. I do not have to imagine what words fall from their mouths.

My

fingers catch a knot in Grace’s hair and she jerks her head away, scooting further down the couch. I fold the offending hands in my lap and glance outside, filling in the blanks as they form in Grace’s head. Ever the gentleman, the knight asks to see the princess. But the queen has already transformed into a dragon, her cavernous nostrils spewing fire, her claws crossed in anger. The little princess bangs on the

window, but the knight's eyes never move. His gaze is fixed on my mother, the little princess a useless distraction. The knight wants something else.

I pick up a balding doll from the floor and wave it in front of Grace's face. "What's her name again Grace? Lucy?" She pushes the doll away and ignores me, watching the knight watching the dragon. My father's jaw clenches, the veins in his neck like black snakes. I turn away and stare at my backpack sitting on the kitchen table, cast aside when the figure showed up. My teeth bite into the wet flesh of my inner cheek, as I think of the minutes being wasted not studying.

The clang of metal pierces the air. Outside my father stands in front of the fence, now curved in where it bent beneath his raised foot. The fence looks like it's trying to get away from him. Grace's eyes are wide, confused. The knight has scared the little princess. The front door opens and my mother's hand slides through the screen, her talons outstretched.

"Give me the phone."

I march into the kitchen to get it, as Grace tries to open the front door further. My mother's fingers curl around the phone and Grace pulls her hands away as the door slams shut. She races back to the window and looks confused when I don't follow. Instead I rest my forehead against the cool door and close my eyes. I have three tests tomorrow.

"Who's Mama calling?" Grace looks at me with wide eyes and pouts when I don't answer, puffing out her already round cheeks. I want to shake her, tell her to grow up and stop being so stupid already. On the backs of my eyelids I can see my mother's disapproving frown, compelling me to hold my tongue and return to the couch. My mother stands on the porch, her right thumb poised above the phone's keypad. My father's black eyes are now slits in his white face, options running through his head. A squad car could be here in less than ten minutes. The little princess glares at the dragon and

bangs on her tower window again. I know that the dragon doesn't dare swallow the lump in her throat, hoping that the threat of getting burned will be enough to scare the knight off. But just in case the dragon bought a sword last week. It sits under a floorboard in her closet, holding seventeen rounds.

My father tries to stare her down, but defeat rests beneath the sneer on his face. He kicks the fence one last time, leans over, and spits on the dead grass. I grab Grace's hand as she flinches, tears clinging to her eyelashes. She blinks, and they race down her cheeks, disappearing in the folds of her sweater. My father skulks away down the street toward a waiting car. The hum of its engine fades as it turns the corner, but my mother doesn't move. Her eyes are fixed on the fence. Finally she nods her head a few times, sets her shoulders back and comes inside. The lock on the door clicks into place. My mother shoves her hands in her pockets, but not before I see them shake. She stares at us for a few seconds before shuffling to her room, her door closing with a soft thud.

I realize that I'm still squeezing Grace's hand as she crawls into my lap and presses her ear to my chest. She gently pulls her hand from my grasp and places it on my collarbone, tapping out the rhythm of my heartbeat. A stray tear sticks to her cheek and I wipe it away. As she raises her blue eyes to meet my dull brown ones, I see fear and grief stirring behind her irises. And for once, there is no fairytale.

