

The Basement

Once upon a time, two small cousins played in basement on icky, snowy days when they weren't allowed to play outside.

Every winter day, the two little girls would ride their tricycles, sift through wallpaper swatches, or role-play teacher and student in the darkest corner of the basement, where two school desks and a chalkboard easel lived.

But one day, the basement door was locked without explanation, and the girls tried without success to pull and tug to open the door.

Because of that, the uncle taped a *Stay Out!* note on the door to deter the small girls from breaking the knob.

Because of that, the girls lost interest and soon, their winter wonderland was forgotten and life went on.

Until finally, the uncle passed, leaving behind the key.

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It's just past dark when Janine and I arrive at her parents' house after the reading of her father's will where we were given the key to the basement. So here we stand, in the dim-lit kitchen, staring at the sign on the door of our childhood winter playground. It's yellowed and curled in around the brittle scotch tape, but that doesn't matter. We read the sign more from memory and moonlight than from being able to see it.

The large thin skeleton key is nestled in Janine's hand with a long string snaking over her knuckles, but she just can't seem to move to open the door, so I slide my fingers around the key, grip it tight and pull it from her. I jimmy and shimmy it into the rusted keyhole and my shoulders sink when it doesn't slide in. I continue to push and twist and jam and hope the old

frail thing won't break until the tumblers finally loosen and the door breathes out toward us. Like giddy children, we giggle and shush each other as we step inside, pushing against the invisible wall of dank mildew.

The door sighs closed behind us, entombing us as a wave of doubt rolls through me and we find ourselves in a suspended state of reluctance, uncertainty and terror. Janine flicks on the flashlight and I cover the bright end with my hand when it blinds us both. My veins and bones glow before I push the light downward so it hits the rickety stairs.

It's been years since we played down here, years since we rode our tricycles around the staircase dodging dust bunnies and boxes, heaps of clothing and discarded toys. Years since we pawed through five-inch binders of velvet wallpaper swatches my aunt kept way past their fashion expiration date. Years since the thrill of an underground winter escape was shut down abruptly and without reason with a single sign telling us in big capital letters to *Stay Out!*

Since then, my uncle never gave in to our pleas for entrance or explanation, so Janine and I consider this the delayed victory we've finally earned. We're excited to revisit this underground lair to maybe learn why he closed it off so permanently so long ago. We descend the creaky rotting wooden stairs one at time until the flashlight hits the floor just below our feet, hitting a purple high heel and faded pink prairie skirt, blouse and cobweb-veiled porcelain face.

Janine drops the flashlight with a gasp. It skitters across the cracked concrete, illuminating in its path dust, crumpled paper and a pair of mouse eyes before it comes to a stop by a child's foot, then blinks out, leaves us in a blinding darkness. Only our ragged breathing and each other's hands remain for company and comfort. I pull free and crawl to where I heard the flashlight land, groping my way across the grimy floor until I find it and click it on. I sweep it across the room and an ominous scene is revealed.

Two rows of desks fill the corner of the basement, each one holding a mannequin child. Their heads are turned to face me, or maybe they're waiting for their teacher to return from the foot of the stairs. There are tears drawn onto their faces and their shirts have red paint splotches near their hearts. Janine puddles onto the floor in a heap of sobs I don't understand until I see what she's staring at. In front of the desks on the chalkboard easel is a message written in Uncle Charlie's perfect penmanship:

*Dear Mrs. Keller & our Beloved Students, It was my job to protect you. I failed. I'm so sorry. I'll never forget. ~Principal Chuck.*

A dark understanding ignites and courses through me. This was what Uncle Charlie worked on all those years ago after leaving his job at his elementary school, defeated and devastated. This was his memorial for those who lost their lives that awful day in the shooting. Seven desks with seven children.

And Mrs. Keller, the teacher who tried to protect them.