

playthings

Zoe

stalks about

the attic, small hands across her chest, fury building with each crossing of the faded yellow carpeting. Why weren't they a normal family, that ignored each other in times like these? Didn't they have any respect for her boundaries, her need for solitude every once and a while? Jesus, they were like personal mosquitos, helicoptering in and out of her ears at will, remorseless.

"Her footsteps echo through the whole house, Willard," Janet says. "You absolutely have to go and talk to her."

Her hair but still boasts robust streaks of black, even at fifty-two. The lines at her mouth and eyes are distinguished on her.

Willard, on the other hand, is agreeably paunchy and rougish of face. His salt and pepper hair looks as if he grew it out of a Chia pet, which isn't so far off from the truth.

Those goddam hair plugs were expensive.

He placates Janet with outstretched hands, a kiss on the cheek, and then heads through the little hallway to the attic stairs.

In the kitchen, a refrigerator ticks dumbly. Colored piercings on its metal face hold up the scrawls of unpracticed hands: crayon family portraits, lopsided landscapes, the odd report card with a bright blue "A" circled at the top. Scribbles to be cherished until they become commonplace. A mouse skitters from a cartoonish hole in the baseboard, unsure of where it needs to go or why. The stove is cold, crowned with old pots from dinner. A silence grows sullen wings and flits through the remainder of the house.

In the basement, fine thin dust from the rooms and lives above settles on forgotten furniture. The mouse from the kitchen joins a host of others, its family, squeaking excitedly. A shaft of light fizzles and dies after trying to illuminate a gothic headboard, ultimately leaving the entire space dark and illicit. The stone floor steals warmth when it can find it, but otherwise remains chilled.

It needs its energy for listening.

Eleanor, in the next room, kicks at an already overturned table, scuffing her good penny-loafers. Mother will not be pleased, but who cares? She hears footsteps and freezes mid-destruction. Her heart hammers irregularly, honking oxygenated blood to her face and chest, blooming under her skin like a crimson mark of shame. The person who scares her most is her own father, for reasons that, at eleven years old, she is not fully capable of articulating. As the footsteps recede towards Zoe's room upstairs, she relaxes a little and starts to rectify what damage she's done. It is not she who is in trouble this night.

The living room appears vacant, its usual homey warmth having evaporated in the crisp chill of oncoming night. A few promiscuous sunbeams fritter away their last moments on the back of a dozing black cat. The red leather of his collar is faded. The small golden disc proclaims the cat Sylvester. He prefers to hide down here when the stomping begins upstairs; for some reason, these monstrous captors of his forget from time to time that they have a pet at all, and fending for himself is easier, anyway.

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Zoe
hears her
father's incoming foot-
steps and scrambles to make everything
presentable. One sock out of place and it would be
the belt again. Zoe does not like the belt, and she does not much like
her father, either, but she figures most fifteen year old girls don't like their fathers.
Willard enters without knocking, one hand on his brass buckle already. He grumbles at her,
indistinctly, and sits heavily on her bed, issuing a cacophony of squeals from the ancient springs.

Hearing the squeak, Janet sighs and sips at
her brandy. Zoe was from her first marriage,
a tattered flag she did not want to be aired out
as much as it was. Willard was a jealous
man, but he came from money, and the house,
her contribution to this new union, was the
talk of every social function she threw, so
there was a sort of give and take. Stability
had been her gambit in the end with George,
and look at her now. If she has to deal with
an unruly seventeen year old now and again,
it is of no grave importance. She hears a
crash and sets her brandy down.

The lights in the kitchen flash on as if
someone has just walked in for a glass of
milk. In fact it is still entirely empty. Under
the incandescence the fridge opens slightly,
then closes. The stove jerks awkwardly to the
right, then comes back to its starting position.
A pot clatters to the floor, pushed by nothing.
The table against the far wall scootches a few
feet towards the center of the room, then
upends itself and the leftover plates.

Eleanor has set her room right again, at least
as good as it will get. The puffy pink curtains
have a slash of red nail polish across them
which she can do nothing about, but she
suspects that Zoe's misbehavior will absolve
her of any belting. Being the good child is
not difficult when Zoe is around, but she will
be leaving for college soon, and that will
leave Eleanor to her parents' every whim.
Maybe she could abscond with Sylvester into
the woods beyond their yard, live a plaintive
hermetic existence like that Thoreau fellow.
He seemed intelligent enough.

Sylvester watches the kitchen breathe with
vain disinterest, licking one paw. He yowls
obscenely when the collar around his neck
slipslides into the cool side of the color
spectrum, now a dashing blue. He is
otherwise undisturbed and soon goes back to
dozing. The eccentricities of this house do
not concern him. As long as he can still beg
tuna from the woman, he will remain fat and
happy as ever. What a grand life, he thinks.

The family of mice in the basement explore the chiffarobe, an ancient, gratuitously ugly dresser
Janet's mother willed to her. Father Mouse is peeking out of the top drawer when the whole
thing careens forward, shattering the silvery mirror. His family scuttles forth to investigate, but
the pieces are gone before they can even sniff, evaporated like water left in the sun. The dresser
pushes itself back into position. The stone floor listens.

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“Zoe,”

Willard says,

“this can’t go on any

longer. You will be off to college in

just a few weeks, and these tantrums just won’t do there.

You have to be able to control your temper better than this. You know, it’s unbecoming of a young lady such as yourself.” He tries a smile. Zoe scoffs at it but otherwise says nothing. Better for him to infer her response than to make the wrong one. Zoe makes a decision, but mulls it in her mouth before verbalizing it. Willard will not be pleased.

Now empty, the bedroom breathes like the kitchen. The queen size bed slams against the opposite wall, cracking the footboard. Janet’s favorite lamp, once resolute on the bedside table, topples but the bulb does not shatter, exquisitely. Gorgeous shadowplay on the ceiling and walls. The dresser from the basement materializes in one corner, crowding the space tremendously. There is a smell of half-chewed candy in the room now, too, incongruous and unexplainable.

Stepping into the kitchen, Janet is sure she has lost her mind. She would have heard Eleanor’s door open and close (the girl is an absolute terror to jambs everywhere), Willard is upstairs with Zoe, and the cat isn’t nearly big enough to overturn an entire mahogany table like this. The pot on the floor, maybe, but not the table. Her hands search the air blankly, unsure of their purported use in this foreign situation. Have they been robbed? Are they *being* robbed? She heads to the living room, as if to consult Sylvester for his version of events.

Of all the family members, Eleanor is the only one thus far who has seen the strange events in the house with her own eyes. Her room periodically rearranges itself, and she enjoys mussing it to see what the unseen hands will do in retaliation. Many times the destruction is immediately rectified, leaving a lingering scent of peppermint and hairspray, like having a child breathe into your face. She sits on the bed as it whirls through the air and replaces itself in front of her door.

Sylvester has exited the living room well before Janet’s entrance. Now Janet is left to gape at the couches, which have somehow been reupholstered from their normal brown suede to a blinding white leather. She absently smooths the front of her dress, her hands making a *ssh* sound that should soothe her but instead mounts the anxiety in her stomach exponentially. She feels faint but also worries that sitting on the couches will cause her to disappear entirely. One of them edges towards her and she makes a strangled cry in her throat.

There is a scraping noise in the basement, like a thousand matches being pulled across stone.

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Zoe
finally decides
to speak, her voice clear
and her back straight. Proper, like
Father taught her to be. It might soften the
blow, anyway. "I will not be attending UVA in the fall,"
she says, the words standing porcelain between her and her step-
father. Their fragility becomes common knowledge to them both in a
matter of seconds, and are shattered when Willard removes his belt and winds
the leather around his fist. His face burns with ignominious fury as he lands the first blow.

The velveteen duvet on Janet
and Willard's bed rolls itself
back, as if a ghost is getting
cozy within the sheets. The
empty room's walls register
Zoe's yelps of pain, storing
them, saving them for later.

The wallpaper sickens and
peels slightly at the place
where the ceiling meets the
top of the walls, an inverted
Christmas present
unwrapping itself. The
smell of peppermint
intensifies.

The kitchen remains
forgotten now, too, and as
action moves upward the
house seems almost to shiver
with delight.

husband.
her
confront
to
stairs
the
up
clomps
and
daughter
eldest
her
of
cries
the
hears
Janet
solicitude,
her
with
house
the
Cleaving

Eleanor lays back on her
bed, sighing happily to
herself. For some reason the
constant, subtle
rearrangement of her home
gives her a sense of utter
peace unlike any emotion
she has the capacity to
otherwise describe. It just
feels *good* to have her room
look different every now and
again, like spring cleaning
without the effort. If it is
ghosts, she decides she likes
them very much.

An austere, reverential
stillness collapses over the
living room with Janet's
departure. The couches do
not move any more.

flame flicker
a begins to in

the basement, fascinating

the family of mice...

playthings

The
door slams
open and Janet
tumbles in after it, eyes
wild and hair coming undone.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she cries.

“I’m teaching her not to throw away her future!” Willard roars.

His belt connects one more time before Janet leaps into its path, arms out wide. Her mouth is cinched shut, tears stinging the corners of her eyes. Zoe whimpers quietly. “She needs to learn!” Willard is nearly hysterical now, at being found out and at being defied. It is a new feeling, losing control of his women like this. At least he still has his Eleanor; leverage.

More wallpaper peels
itself from the walls,
decaying with every
breath the house takes.
It seems to be shrinking,
shuddering inward, afraid.

Eleanor’s bed shifts
away from the door.
As if telling her dan-
ger has passed by her
uninterested. She gets
up and opens the door.

The kitchen vents,
placed at intervals
around the baseboard
in a haphazard ring,
begin to cough out
smoke from the basement.

Vents in the living
room bring smoke
about the clawed
feet of the couches
like eerie morning fog.
Sylvester returns, sleepy.

The fire licks against the chiffarobe, igniting it easily in the bored, dry air. Something exciting is coming, and the whole house can feel it pressing in like a hundred pairs of eyes waiting for a miracle.

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Zoe
suddenly goes
absolutely rigid, right
there in between her quarreling
parents, and begins to seize in earnest as a
woody scent permeates the attic. Willard stands dumbly
with his belt limp in his hand, as limp as his drive to do anything
about the situation, even as Janet pushes him aside and tries to resuscitate her
daughter. There is a small
knock
at the door and Eleanor comes in.
“There’s a fire downstairs,” she says.

Now the wallpaper in the
bedroom is totally off,
hanging in flesh-like sheets.
It’s a wonder there isn’t any
blood crying from the bare
walls; the place looks
demonstrably, forcibly
guttured, as if in anger or
contempt. The scene is dark,
illuminated only, still, by the
overturned lamp and its
unshattered bulb.

The kitchen floor has started
to ripple with heat, the
linoleum melting. Flames
can be seen peeking from
behind the vents. Destruction
is coming, and yet the house
and its occupants remain
impassive and implacable in
their current trajectories,
sealed into their variant
courses of action like bubbles
of air trapped in ice.

Eleanor’s room,
empty, has an elegiac
quality to it, like the
viewing room of a
funeral parlor. The
red slash of nail
polish on the curtains
seems a gory mouth
lacking the context of
the room’s inhabitant.
The moon can be seen
from the window.

The now-leather
couches snatch a flare
and begin to combust
in earnest. Sylvester
yowls annoyedly but
remains unfearful for
some reason. He
instead hops to the
floor, where it is
cooler, and licks a
paw as if it is the most
interesting paw ever.

the basement is a blaze. the chiffarobe eaten for fuel. the mice obliterated.

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Zoe
abruptly sits
all the way up, back
straight and proper, and points
at the opposite wall, at nothing, a soundless
scream rending her mouth a wide 'O' of ghastly
terror. Janet wails into her hands without taking her eyes
off her daughter. Willard seems deflated and can't look at Eleanor,
who can't understand why no one listened to her proclamation. Shouldn't they
be finding safety outside by now? Away from the encroaching, hungry flames from below?

there is
a moment
before the
bottom floor
is fully
engulfed, but
it passes
by unnoticed
by all
except Sylvester.

flames. all flames down here.

all.

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A mother opens a door and a little girl gasps as her reverie is shattered. Her dollhouse is on fire, the little wooden family clustered on the faded yellow carpeting of the attic space. Her red-nailed hands black with ashes. A mother could ask what is going on, but first she has to put out the flames. A melted plastic cat lies in a pile of bubbling faux-leather. A discarded set of furniture, brown suede couches and tiny woven sheets for the bedrooms, is at a little girl's knee. A little girl has a smile on her face, and a mother does not have time to decipher it.