

Andy

My birthday is tomorrow; I'm going to be ten. Andy's birthday is the same day; he'll be thirteen. That's all we really have in common. His mom is my mom's sister. I don't really know why he's coming live with us. I haven't seen him in four or five Christmases. When Aunt Laura started showing up at our house with bruises on her face, mom stopped talking to her.

Andy's dad seems okay. He doesn't really talk to the kids at Christmastime and doesn't come with Aunt Laura when she visits anymore, even though they only live ten minutes away. I do remember one time, at Thanksgiving, Andy spilled something – I think a glass of water. His dad got so angry and made him go down into our basement for the rest of the night. I took him down a piece of pie when no one was paying attention. He ate it really fast and said “thank you” real quiet. I didn't know what I was supposed to say, so I went back upstairs, but I asked my mom about it before bed that night.

All she said was, “Not all daddies are as nice as yours, sweetheart.”

I didn't know that someone could be a bad dad. My dad's a good dad I think. He's nice to me and my mom. He doesn't really yell and he always gets me good presents. I thought all dads were like that.

Andy is going to sleep in the extra room by my room. He didn't bring many things with him, just clothes and a few books. He doesn't have any toys, but maybe he's too old. I'm not really sure what boys do for fun but I don't think he can read the same three books forever. My mom and I went to the store to get him some more books and a small TV for his room. He said “thank you” as quietly as he had the night in the basement.

He doesn't have to go to school at all this week. He's so lucky. *I* want to stay home from school every day. Today there was only a half-day of school so I got to come home in time for lunch.

My mom is sitting in the kitchen. She isn't cooking anything or cleaning anything like she usually is. I don't think I've ever seen her sitting still like that.

She looks at me, her eyes sort of red, and asks if I'm hungry. She starts making grilled cheese sandwiches and I go upstairs to ask Andy if he wants any.

I had imagined him sitting in his room watching TV and reading his books all day but when I open his bedroom door he's in bed under the covers. He's still wearing his pajamas and the room smells like dirty clothes.

“My mom is making lunch – grilled cheese. Are you gonna come eat?” I say in a voice that might have been too happy.

“Can you bring me one? Maybe some juice too?” he whispers. I tell him I will bring our sandwiches upstairs and we can eat together. I go downstairs and ask my mom for a tray, like the kind she puts my soup on when I’m sick.

“Why do you need a tray?” she asks.

“Me and Andy are gonna eat our sandwiches in his room. He wants some juice, what kind should I bring?” I ask.

“You shouldn’t bother Andy. He is probably tired,” she says quickly. She sounds a little angry.

“I-I thought he’d be hungry too. He didn’t come down for breakfast, so I just thought...”

My mother’s face softens and she puts the plates with the sandwiches out on a tray and pours two different kinds of juice, so that Andy can pick his favorite.

The phone rings and she gestures for me to take the tray and go upstairs. As I walk away, I hear her getting angry “No we don’t have a comment. Please just leave us alone.”

When I get back to Andy’s room he hasn’t moved. He is still curled up in his bed, staring at the door, waiting for me. He sits up a little so that he can eat his lunch. I sit down on the edge of the bed and offer him the juice. He chooses the apple, so I drink the grape.

We eat our sandwiches in silence until the crust. I can’t stand the silence any longer. I never did understand how people could sit together and not talk. It’s so boring. I ask Andy if he misses his parents. He doesn’t answer for a long time.

“Only my mom,” he says in a whisper.

“Not your dad? You don’t miss him at all?”

“No, I’m glad I’ll never see him again.”

“Won’t he be there when you go home?” I ask, confused.

“I’m not going home, because no one will be there,” he says almost so I can’t hear him.

I don’t know what he’s talking about. I don’t realize that he isn’t going home because my home is his home now. We have to share my birthday and my house but he keeps his secrets to himself.

I’ve been waiting for my birthday for almost a month. My mom made two little cakes last night, one for me and one for Andy. After dinner my mother brings me and Andy into the living

room. Her eyes still look red and she looks sad, even though it's supposed to be a happy day. She wants to give me and Andy our presents.

"I think this is going to be fun," my mother says, even though she doesn't sound like she believes it. "Isn't this going to be fun? Andy, we've got your favorite kind of cake and we're really happy to have you here with us..." She trails off. Her voice sounds strange and tears are forming in her eyes.

I don't understand. I look from my mom to my dad and then to Andy. It's his fault my mom is sad. What is there to cry about? It's my birthday! Everyone should be happy and excited. When Andy came everything got sad and quiet.

My mom rubs the corners of her eyes with her fingers. She pretends to smile and hands Andy and me our birthday presents. Then she hands Andy another present. I stare at my mother. Where's my second present?

The second gift is wrapped in different paper from the one my mom bought. It isn't wrapped as nicely and doesn't even have a card. On the top, right on the paper, there is a birthday message written.

"You have to read the message out loud. We always read the cards out loud before we open presents," I say loudly.

Andy's eyes don't move from the writing. He doesn't look as though he will ever open the package, like he will just stare at those words forever. Impatient, I lean over and look at the writing. It reads: "To Andy. Love, Mom".

"Aunt Laura," I say, again too loudly. "Why isn't she here?"

My mother and father freeze. Andy is still staring at the birthday message scrawled on the wrapping paper that isn't as pretty as my mom's. Nobody says anything but my dad stands up and holds his hand out to me. I take it, and we go into the kitchen.

He does not sit down; he only leans against the counter. I sit in my chair at the breakfast table and wait to get yelled at. I don't know why I'm getting yelled at but I can tell it's coming. When my dad finally looks at me, there are tears in his eyes. I have no idea why everyone is crying today but it's starting to make me mad. Can't they be sad on some other day? Can't they save the crying for a day that isn't my birthday?

"We decided to wait until tomorrow. We know you've been looking forward to your birthday for months."

I don't want to hear whatever my dad is about to say. I know that it will make me sad or mad or both. I want him to stop talking and I want Andy to go home. I want things to go back to normal. I just want my birthday.

“Aunt Laura isn’t here because...” He trails off. “She’s not here because she... she died yesterday, the day Andy came to stay – that’s why he’s here. Aunt Laura died and so did Uncle Jim. He died too so...they’re not going to be here. That’s why Andy is going to live with us...permanently.” He says the last word really slow.

“Why wasn’t there a funeral?” I ask. I remember going to my grandma’s funeral. I didn’t actually know her and the funeral was boring but I know that is what’s supposed to happen when people die.

“There’s going to be a service tomorrow but there won’t be a casket like at Grandma Ruth’s funeral. Aunt Laura’s body is already at the cemetery, it had to go there as soon as possible because...it was broken.”

“She was broken? What does that mean?”

“Well, she got...hurt and that’s how she died. That’s why we couldn’t look at her like we did with Grandma Ruth. So your mom...your mom decided there should be a service at the house but no casket and no cemetery.”

“Are we having a ceremony for Uncle Jim too?” I ask.

“No, we are not.” The tone he uses makes it clear I shouldn’t ask why. I wonder if my dad didn’t like Uncle Jim.

My mother comes into the kitchen and takes a small cake out of the refrigerator. It’s a chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. In white, cursive letters, the words “Happy Birthday Andy” are written on top. She sets it on the counter and my eyes stayed glued to the cake for a long time.

A knife slips into the cake. My eyes trace the arm holding the knife and arrive at my mother’s face. She lifts a piece of cake away from the rest and sets it gently on a plate. She hands the plate to me and I walk away.

When I get to Andy’s door, I knock. I hadn’t knocked earlier but I don’t want to surprise him, especially now that I know about Aunt Laura and Uncle Jim. A small voice tells me to come in and when I do, I see Andy sitting on his bed. He is clutching the package with no card to his chest. He still hasn’t opened it and he’s still staring at the writing on top of the gift.

“I didn’t know about...I brought you cake,” I stammer, not really sure what else to say.

“Do you know what happened? For real?” Andy whispers.

“They died. That’s what my dad told me. So you’re going to be living here, right?”

“He killed her.” His voice is now the loudest I have heard it since he got here. He is almost speaking in a normal volume.

I don’t respond. I don’t understand what he is saying. I can’t understand. He continues anyway.

He tells me that when he came home from school the day before he moved into our house, his own house had been quiet. He says he’d been relieved that it didn’t sound like his dad was home. There had been no sound in the house except for the TV, which he’d thought his mother was watching. When he’d gotten to the living room there was no one there. The only thing in the living room was a mug lying on its side leading toward a dark puddle of beer seeping into the carpet.

He says that’s when he got “The Feeling.” He says his body went entirely cold, starting in his stomach. He’d walked toward the stairs and climbed them slowly. He looked in his bedroom, then the bathroom and then the hall closet.

“I knew there wasn’t going to be anything there, but I thought...*maybe* she’d be in there and then I wouldn’t have to go in her room. I would have done anything not to go in that room,” he whispers.

His eyes are dry but I can tell he’s going to cry. I’m not sure I want to hear this part of the story. I don’t know what is coming next but I am getting “The Feeling” too. My toes feel as though they are downstairs instead of connected to my feet, and my stomach feels like it does when you’re in an elevator. It feels like maybe my insides aren’t held in by my outsides anymore, like none of me is held together by anything and I am just floating in the dark.

Andy waits. He knows I’m not ready, but when I finally meet his eyes again, he continues. He tells me what he saw when he’d opened that door and how every time he closes his eyes, he sees it again. He says that he will never forget his mother’s face. I guess she looked like she was screaming, her eyes wide. There was a coat hanger, the wire kind, wrapped tightly around her neck. It had started to cut into the skin and blood soaked into the carpet like the beer had in the living room.

Uncle Jim was on the floor too, but on the other side of the bed. There was a small gun nearby on the floor. His dad’s head had been facing away from Andy so that the back of his skull was in full view. The back part was gone. There was just a hole, exploded from the inside and everything that belonged in someone’s head was on the walls instead. Andy says that he threw up on the floor.

He begins to shake. I’m not sure if he has been the whole but this is the first time I’ve looked away from his eyes since he told me about opening the door. I want to be a grown-up right now. I know that if I were older I could say the right thing or make it better like my mom

does. The things that Andy is telling me are foreign. I'm not even allowed to watch movies where people kill other people, so how am I supposed to imagine my uncle killing his wife with a coat hanger?

I ask him if he is mad.

He answers that, yes, he is. He uses a few words that I know I'm not allowed to say in front of my parents, even though I'm not sure what one of them means. I won't tell on him though. I'm not even sure if I should tell my parents that I know about Uncle Jim and Aunt Laura. They'd probably be mad that I know, but they wouldn't be mad *at* Andy. Andy can probably do anything and not get in trouble, at least for a while.

We sit there for a really long time. By the time my mom comes to find us the chocolate cake is a little crunchy on the outside. I think she knows as soon as she looks at us. We haven't moved an inch. We are just sitting staring at each other's shoes. My mom asks if everything is okay and we nod our heads. She leaves as quietly as she came.

The service for Aunt Laura is on Sunday and I hold Andy's hand during the whole thing. It isn't like Grandma Ruth's funeral at all. It isn't in a church; it's in my living room, and no one is crying or sharing stories about Aunt Laura. I look around and see angry faces. I think everyone hates Uncle Jim, especially Andy. He hates Uncle Jim the most.

I don't leave his side once. I'm not sure how many people know exactly what Andy saw that day but I don't think he told anyone what he told me. I feel special, like I have to protect Andy from all these people who don't understand. He doesn't even know a lot of them and he probably just wants to go back to his room.

My mom tries to separate us a few times, but even she doesn't understand. There's nothing anyone can do to make me to let go of his hand. After a little while, after we say "hi" to all of the grown-ups neither of us will ever see again, we go downstairs into the basement. We sit in the corner that Andy had been banished to all those Thanksgivings ago.

The concrete room is lit by a single bulb dangling from the ceiling. I have to stand on a box to turn it on. He doesn't say anything to me and I don't say anything either. After a few minutes I notice that he is crying. His whole body is shaking, but he isn't making any noise. He is just crying, like he might never stop, but he is silent.

I'm not sure what a grown-up would do, but I just let him cry. I don't say anything and I don't look at him. I just let him cry. I don't know how long we sit there and it probably doesn't really matter but when my mom finally comes to find us, Andy's face is dry and I am still holding his hand.