

## The Babysitter

We attacked a babysitter once. It was the long cold part of winter, after the holidays had passed, and someone had given us Nerf guns for Christmas. Probably Kimmie, my grandpa's new blonde wife. I guess because kids are easier to win over than adults.

The babysitter was the last of a long string of girls with names ending in 'y,' girls who talked on the phone with their friends too much and didn't let us choose the channel. I don't remember this one's face or name, but I remember her shape. Hourglass.

It started in the basement, when one of us aimed our new toy guns at her. I think it was Sammy, but it could have been Jake. We'd never been allowed to have guns before. We didn't know the rules. Suddenly the girl was under fire, and screaming stop and scrambling up the stairs to escape.

The chase ended on the plush beige carpet of the piano room, in the shadow of the baby grand piano no one played, where we pulled the branches off the artificial Christmas tree a week earlier and put them in a box for storage. We tackled the girl, and pinned her to the ground.

I kneeled on her wrists. As the oldest, I was an expert at using my body to hold down someone else's.

"TICKLE HER!" yelled Sammy, the youngest, who was clamped onto her kicking legs, getting her at feet.

It's true what they say about mob mentality. If you can count three kids as a mob.

The girl's arms were thick and strong and grabbed at me while I grabbed at her, but I knew what I was doing. I could feel her frantic laughs, hot little pants of breath expelled on my neck and my face when I leaned in to reach for her armpits.

I think it was Jake who yelled "get her boobies!" But it could've been me.

She shrieked as we touched her with wiggling fingers, and her screams incited us. Her body felt like the bread dough my mom made and sometimes let us touch.

We writhed around like that on the carpet until I felt something wet on my arm and I looked down and saw a sheen of sweat across her face. I froze and

looked out the large bay window that faced the street to check if anyone could see us. It was snowing outside, big fat flakes clumped together, and dark.

The babysitter took advantage of the moment and squirmed out of our grips, punting Sammy in the process. She ran out of the room, Sammy at her heels, and straight into the bathroom. I heard the lock click as Sammy threw his weight against the wood.

We paced around the bathroom for a while, like hyenas, taking turns pressing our ears against the door, listening for movement, calling out a lone desultory taunt.

When it started to sink in, what we'd done, we skulked up the stairs, where we laid on our bellies and stuck our heads out through the slats of the railing that overlooked the floor below. We waited. From our spots we heard the bathroom door unlock and open slowly. Then, a fury of footsteps across the kitchen. She'd made a mad dash to the laundry room. We held our breaths and in the quiet we could hear the harsh tones of telephone buttons, slowly and deliberately pressed, calling the number our parents had left on a post-it note in the kitchen in case of emergency.

That was how we took the Miller's title of hardest kids to babysit on the block. The Millers were glamorous, and had a giant chore chart in their kitchen, which my mom doubted they really used. Because everyone knew the Miller kids were bad. They kicked, bit, and pulled down their pants and peed on the floor when it was bedtime. Once, when their parents were gone, the oldest threw the youngest down the laundry chute. But they'd never done what we did.

When our parents got home that night we must have been punished, but I can't remember. I stayed up to hear the fight my parents had when we'd been put to bed. My room shared a wall with theirs and I pressed my ear against it to hear.

"It's those damn *guns* that *Kimmie* gave the kids," my mom hissed, whispering not to wake me.

"What your father sees in her I just can't say."

"*Don't* try to make this about my dad," my dad said, his voice mean and slow and hard. "*He* didn't torture that girl. You *heard* her crying on the phone."

My dad blamed me. "Val is old enough to know better," he said. "She's practically old enough to babysit the boys herself."

I felt the heat crawl up my shirt and neck and scalp but didn't push my blankets off, just slid deeper underneath them, so that if someone were to walk into my room the bed would look empty.

In the morning the Nerf guns were gone.

Later that same winter, my mom got a call from Mary Miller, who was out West, where the Millers went every February to ski. I was an expert at telling who was on the other end by what my mom was saying, but she was hardly saying anything, pacing down the hallway that connected all the bedrooms.

"Who is it?" I whispered, finally, and she mouthed to me, *Mary Miller*, and shooed me away. I could tell by the way she broke the silence with sharp gasps that it was something bad.

As the oldest child and only girl I always heard the neighborhood news first. When my mom got off the phone, I'd say, "So, what's the scoop?" and she would tell me. I wasn't sure if the privilege would extend to this phone call, but I waited to find out, digging my toes into the carpet and watching from my bedroom doorway, arms crossed, one hip against the doorframe.

My mom paced up and down the hall again, then into Sammy's bedroom, across the hall from mine. She kept gasping, and bringing her hand to her mouth like Mary was right there with her. "Oh, Mary," she said, again and again. My eyelids were heavy. It was bedtime.

When my mom finally hung up I didn't even have to ask. She said, her voice far away like through a phone, "Doug had an accident. Skiing."

Doug was the best dad on the block, even though his kids were bad. Last summer he helped us build the tree house in our backyard, and we played in the driveway out front he always waved with both hands when he was biking by in special spandex biking clothes. He wasn't the kind of guy to get into an accident. Or maybe, I thought, he was.

I sucked in my breath like my mom had done earlier and brought both hands up to my mouth.

"Is he okay?" I asked, making my voice small.

"I don't think they'll know for sometime. But Mary said when the paramedics came to rescue him he told them he knew, he knew that he was paralyzed."

I gnawed gently on my finger and studied her face to see how I should react.

“So awful,” she said, shaking her head and looking away from me.

I thought of the Miller’s house at the top of the hill on our street lined with custom-built houses that all looked the same. I thought of the Miller’s garage, which was different than ours, because of its long workbench cluttered with tools and spare parts. Doug built custom wheelchairs for a living.

“Can he walk?” I asked.

“Not if he is paralyzed,” my mom said.

It was spring before he came home from the hospital in Denver, and in that time the neighborhood kids and I began a giant banner in our basement, taping paper together to make a ten-foot sign that read, “Welcome Home Doug!”. I oversaw the planning in pencil, making sure that everything was perfect before we traced the words in color, filling in each bubble letter with ink painstakingly, running several markers dry. We brought the banner to the airport when Doug came home, and we made it onto Karel 11 News, which featured Doug holding himself up on a walker, his legs stiff like a doll’s, dragging across the concourse. That was the last time I ever saw him try to walk.

That’s how the Miller’s got their title back. Mary would leave the kids at home with Doug and he would call a sitter. It was only a year or two before I started getting called. Babysitters started young in our neighborhood.

In his new condition, Doug could not control the kids. He chased them in his wheelchair but when they bit him or each other it was up to me to punish them. Sometimes, Doug would disappear into the bathroom, which the Millers had remodeled to accommodate his wheelchair. When he came out he would say, “I’m so sorry, but I just can’t get my pants today.” I zipped his pants as quickly as I could, hoping that the kids weren’t watching, his legs dead beneath my hands, the zipper making a metallic hiss as its teeth were forced together.