

Mouse in the House

Katherine Sanders never felt the staggered heartbreak that people wanted her to feel. She didn't feel anger or disappointment at losing the use of her muscles and other faculties. Some went slowly; others seemed to blink out like a light. That was just how it was.

A few months after her diagnosis she stood up from tea at her friend Tandy's house and promptly toppled over, crashing into the table and knocking a plate onto the floor. It wobbled in a ring like a dropped coin in front of her face. To Tandy's horror, Katherine laughed and laughed and proclaimed, "Oh boy! We're really getting into it now!"

Friends, for she had no more family, worried that Katherine's almost maniacal elation at her worsening illness was a defense mechanism. A denial of sorts. Robbie Shelly speculated that it might actually be a symptom. But Katherine's joy was full and brightly aware of the reality of her condition. The reasoning, if joy can be said to have reason, was twofold. First, Katherine was amazed at the mysterious practices of her body. Its twitches and numbness. Its surges and flows. To Katherine, this gradual shutting down was a decade long curtain call with a thousand encores. And second, with each faltering function, her gift—her most prized and sacred treasure—increased.

Since the age of six, when she fell out of a loft in her cousin's barn, Katherine had been able to receive messages from spirits. Those who had passed away, and those who were never here but were always somewhere just beyond. They spoke to her. And told her things that people needed to hear.

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Following an afternoon of rolling down the hill in their back yard and racing back up, Emma Shely's cousins fell asleep in front of the TV. Emma crept around in the kitchen looking for snacks. She found individual packages of peanut butter crackers. She pulled the crackers apart before eating them, curious about how the peanut butter inside was not like in a peanut butter sandwich, but rather a thin, dry patty. She ate two packages, left the wrappers on the counter, and wandered upstairs to go try to look at her cousin's pet macaw. Light flickered from under the door in her uncle's study. She pushed the door open and startled her older cousin Michael, who was watching a video on her uncle's TV/VCR. She walked over and sat in an empty armchair. "What are you watching?" He rewound the tape without pressing stop first, so that the figures on the screen did a reverse rehearsal behind a curtain of grey and black horizontal lines before her cousin pressed play and they could re-begin their performance. There was a man and a woman. The woman laid in a bed with no clothes on. The man had pants but no shirt and moved across the room through thick afternoon sunlight. He leaned over the woman on the bed and covered her face with his. He touched her and rubbed her. She moved and made noises. Then the man was naked too. He kneeled at the end of the bed peering between the woman's legs. Kissing the redness there and pushing his nose against it. Her legs moved wildly and he held them down. The woman squealed, but her face was out of sight. There was only the redness. When Emma's cousin stopped the tape, she asked "Can we watch that again?"

He chuckled a bit, rewound it again and let the same scene play. Emma said, "Again! Please? Please?"

“I’ve created a monster,” he laughed. “No that’s the end. Go on. Get out of here.”

He shut her out of the room.

Emma Shelty didn’t know the words for what had happened, but while eating dinner with her cousins and aunt and uncle, she began to feel as though what it was had been done to her. But she had barged in. Demanded to watch. And that made her feel she had done it to herself.

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When Jean Shelty read her daughter’s sullen expression and asked what was the matter, Emma just shook her head. Then later in the car on the trip home, her voice came from the dark of the back seat, “Cousin Mike hit me.” Though alarmed by this, Jean picked up on a hint of a familiar enthusiasm in Emma’s voice.

Over the past few years, her daughter had embarked on that era in every child’s life in which, having encountered the laws of adulthood enough to edge toward the rules of language, she had tried to lie whenever possible. She said her little brother pooped his pants. She said there was a big bird at the bird feeder. “No! A very big bird. One so big you’ve never seen before.” And when Jean went to look, Emma’s laugh had a bit of a gotcha to it, but mostly performance. A believing that this is what is done. She laughed and laughed and tossed herself dramatically onto the couch.

Though it was annoying, Jean respected this testing of boundaries, and she was even a little fascinated by it—he processes of development, imagination, and being initiated into the larger world. At one point she pushed Emma as far as she could go. At breakfast one morning, over oatmeal and apples, Emma had asserted to her mother

that she wasn't afraid of the dark. Jean knew this was not true. "If you were in a dark room all alone, you wouldn't be scared?"

"I would just turn on a light!" Emma said, proud of finding what she thought was a logical error in the concept.

"What if the light didn't work? What if the bulb was out?"

"I would just get another and fix it."

"Fair enough. But what if you were locked in the room. And there were no lightbulbs in there."

"I would just unlock the door and go out."

"What if I were holding the door shut."

Emma paused, her eyes narrowed like she was thinking, re-running the scenario to see what she had missed. "I don't understand."

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There had been a few lies more recently that Emma's mother knew nothing about. As interesting as it was to lie to adults, Emma found a new kind of thrill in lying to her friends, mostly because the lies did not have to be rooted in anything believable.

While painting with watercolors in her room one afternoon and finding her water cup muddied, she carried it, careful not to slosh, through the hall to the bathroom sink and dumped it out. She marveled at how the mix of colors turned a dull brown, with the exception of a singular streak of purple that remained intact. Its source, a clump of paint not yet dissolved at the bottom. She rinsed the cup several times to get all the purple out and refilled it with cold clear water. When she returned to her room she decided that

rather than getting the water dirty, she would turn it a solid color. She wetted her brush and smeared it around the blue paint from the palette. Then she dipped it back into the water slowly, watching the blue pigment leech out in spinning ribbons. Growing impatient with this, Emma pushed the brush against the sides of the cup, forcing the blue out in big flows. Soon the water was a uniform blue. Just the color of blue Kool-Aid, she thought. And then came the idea for the lie.

When her friend Becca came over a few days later, they played for a while in the cellar pretending to be on an adventure looking for stolen treasure. Becca got a splinter from an old beam, and the two girls went upstairs for first aid and snacks. Afterward they went up to Emma's room where she produced the cup of perfect blue water and told Becca it was Kool-Aid. Becca paused for only a second, then took the cup. She held it in her unwounded hand, her fingers too short to fit the whole way around it. Her hand with the new neon orange Band Aid on it, she held up close to her chest like swearing a promise. As she brought the cup toward her lips, Emma shrieked and swatted it out of her hands laughing uncontrollably. She didn't have to explain her strange behavior because of the damage it had caused. Becca slapped her and said, "You spilled it! It's gonna stain!" Emma saw the spot on the rug where the blue paint water had emptied out. She ran to the bathroom and grabbed a roll of toilet paper, but by the time she got back, most of the liquid had soaked clear through the carpet. She dabbed at the damp carpet and the toilet paper came up almost clean. It seemed to Emma that a miracle had occurred. She had spared her friend from her stupid cruel joke and the rug had soaked up the evidence.

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Katherine sat in the old wingback chair in her living room. She held a box in her lap filled with letters her father, Patrick Sanders, had written to her when she had been away at college. He would tell her how the garden was fairing and what the weather was like, though she was only a state away in western Massachusetts.

In one letter he said that he didn't recall going to school with anyone named Edmund Hess, that he would have to look him up. Katherine remembered writing and saying that she'd run into an old schoolmate of her father's at the campus greenhouse. She'd happened upon it wandering around in the science building one afternoon. And there in the balmy room with window walls, among tropical palms and orchids, she'd been totally alone. There hadn't even been a spirit or presence to speak to her. But she'd told her father that a mustached older gentleman had thought she looked familiar, and when they figured out the connection, had said to send his regards. It was a lie she'd told without knowing why. Without motive or aim.

Years later after her father had died, she'd found herself in another greenhouse. One at a small plant nursery just outside of town. It was filled with much more humble plants—ferns and ficus, gladiolas—some on tables, others in pots hanging from the ceiling. She was not alone in this greenhouse. Several women from town were browsing and murmuring to one another. Katherine found herself wishing that her father would speak to her. Come into her mind the way others who had died did. But he never had, and never would, and in that moment she felt it was because of the lie.

She felt sudden pinch of pressure at the bridge of her nose. A tunnel of darkness narrowed her field of vision, and she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

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The last lie that Emma told was also without aim. On icy days recess was held indoors. Emma loved days like these. Being in the gym without the structure of gym class. The shrieks of classmates amplified and echoing off the cinderblock walls. On this day, in a lull between games of four square, Emma noticed a number above one of the equipment closets. 184B. It seemed to have a significance. When her friends noticed her staring at it, she said she could see a ghost hovering around just above the number. Holly, a girl in Emma's class, and Abigail, two years older, pushed her for details. Emma told them that a man had once been trapped in that closet. And that he had died. He had been killed and needed them to find out how.

Emma felt like there ought to be a word for when you're not so much lying, as saying something that you believe to be true without knowing that it is. She really could see something floating there. Translucent, opalescent. She squinted and watched how it moved. After school, instead of waiting for the Anders boys to walk her home, she headed off through the field behind the school. This was a shortcut that she and the other kids who walked home usually only took on warmer days. The snow had stopped temporarily. The ice had crusted over the layers of snow that had accumulated through the early winter months. Her footsteps breaking through sounded powerful. Like they were made by something much bigger than her own small self.

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A thump along the south wall of the house woke Katherine from an afternoon nap in the living room. It was shortly after 3:00, and Tandy wouldn't be by for two hours at least. It happened again a few minutes later, and this time, Katherine saw the shadow cut quickly through the sunlight in the shape of the window on the wall. Ice and snow melting off the roof.

"There's a mouse in the house." The words whispered into her mind. She worried about the skinny feral cat who seemed to have taken up part-time residence in the barn. His paw prints in the snow sometimes clung to the area just next to the perimeter of the house. Right in the line of what was now falling sheets of heavy wet snow and daggers of ice. Mr. Watkins, who talked to her sometimes (though not lately), had gone that way—trying to knock the snow off his roof with a broom and took an icicle to the eye.

Twenty minutes later the sun disappeared and the wind turned up and snow started to fall again.

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Tandy pushed through the front door with a grunt. Just the brief walk from the driveway to the front steps had caked her boots with slush and powdered her hat and shoulders and the front of her coat. "Good gracious! Man alive out there!" She stomped on the rug in the hall way and struggled to remove her wet coat and boots.

Katherine heard the commotion but couldn't make out what Tandy was saying. She called from the kitchen, "I'm in here!" The kettle was just starting to make that roiling putter that precedes a boil. When Tandy came in, mid-sentence in damp socks,

Katherine interrupted forcefully. "Get the kettle, will you Tandy? I can't stand if it gets to whistling."

When Tandy finally brought the tea to the table where Katherine was sitting, she renewed her line of questioning that had begun at the door. "Who shovels your walk, Kath?"

"Robbie Shelly," she answered with a tone of indulgence that escaped her friend. She hurried forward to keep it that way. "Can you believe the light this time of year? Just these past couple of days it's been getting surreal. The sunset reflects off the copula at town hall in this kind of halo and I can't see my computer monitor or even look at a piece of paper. Between the blinding light and the blinding snow..."

"I know. I personally can't believe it stays light so late already. I get on the commuter bus and it's still light out. That's how I know the thaw's right around the corner. I saw three deer today. On the bus. Heading up Mountain View Lane, where the road curves sharply and that deep ravine opens off to the side. The force from turning always makes it feel like we're going to swing off the road and tumble down in, ass over ankles. And today these shapes along the hill across the ravine caught my eye. The trees are sparse there and they stood out against the snow. Three doe. Two of them sunk in up to their shoulders, if deer have such things. I don't know. The steep side of the hill must have made the snow just endlessly deep. And the third deer was up slightly higher on the hill, and free to move around or escape, but paralyzed just the same. All of their heads turned in unison as they watched the bus disappearing around the corner."

"What a thing, that," Katherine said. Tandy thought she might still be thinking about the light.

But Katherine was thinking about how to get Tandy to leave before Robbie came back. And then she her face changed, her eyes seemed to shift focus. “Ernest keeps telling me there’s a mouse in the house.”

Tandy never thought twice about Katherine’s ghost stories or the messages she received. Who was she to presume what was true? She said, “Well I don’t doubt it, this weather. Poor things’d be fool to stay out there. I’ll send my brother over. Set some traps.”

“Oh Christ, no. Sorry. Please, no. I’ll take all the company I can get.”

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When Jean Shelty got home late from work, the house was dark. Prone to jumping to the worst conclusions, she opened the door slowly and listened for sounds of intruders thudding around and knocking over lamps. The silence of the house breathed back at her and the heat kicking on gave her a start. She tracked muddy snow all over the kitchen flipping on all the lights. She played the answering machine messages while she pulled off her boots and went to put her bag in the office. Rob had called to say he wouldn’t be back until 8. Things had run late at the state house. An unlikely story, but Jean didn’t mind so much anymore. She stared at the mysterious blue stain on the ceiling that she’d only noticed for the first time a few weeks ago. It reminded her of maxi pad commercials where two hands swoop in from either side and pour blue liquid out of two identical test tubes onto two pads. Blue, she thought must be the only safe color. Red is too on the nose. Yellow has other implications, and all the secondary colors have

at least a hint of one of those. Blue just politely suggests the idea of moisture. Says, you know what we're talking about, but let's not be crude.

Jean mopped up the melted snow on the kitchen floor, then pulled leftovers out of the refrigerator. It wasn't until she put them in the microwave and opened several drawers trying to find wax paper to put on top that she wondered where Emma was.

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Robbie Shelly marched his daughter up the front steps to Katherine Sander's house and opened the storm door to use the brass knocker. A Christmas wreath still hung around it, and Robbie's arm brushed loose little clumps of pine needles onto his shoes. Emma shivered behind the storm door and burrowed her chin into her scarf. It took a full two minutes for Katherine to make her way to the door. Her eyes widened when she saw Robbie, but he nodded his head toward Emma to indicate that he was not alone. "I've brought a little thief to return some stolen goods. Emma, what do you have to say to Ms. Sanders?" Katherine winced at such formality from Robbie and at being used as an excuse to scold a young girl.

Emma held out a porcelain tea pot, a few silver dollars, and some old cashier's checks. She tried to say that she was sorry, but she knew it wasn't true. Embarrassed, angry. Her throat swelled around the words. She thought of the safe darkness of the barn, only the soft winter half-light peeking in at her, as she crept around the muddy floor and found all sorts of treasures. Even ones she hadn't carried home in her backpack. A broken music box, photographs, a collection of letters and old books. She wanted to be back there.

“Jean found them in her room. We didn’t have a clue as to where they’d come from until we saw Patrick’s name on the checks. She gave us quite a scare a few nights ago. Came wandering home after dark, after we’d called half the school. Wouldn’t say where she’d been. But we know now, don’t we, Emma?”

Emma looked up for the first time at Katherine’s face, it looked older than her hair, which was slick and black. And her hand twitching against the glass on the storm door.

Katherine looked at Robbie and felt something changing in her feelings toward him. The way he seemed like a proud tom cat, dropping prey on her doorstep. The cat’s intention is not really like what people say—that they do it as a gift—really they just think you don’t know how to hunt for yourself. Then she looked at Emma. “Well I appreciate you coming forth Emma, but there’s really no need. I haven’t been out in the barn in years. As far as I’m concerned, a theft of things that no one is putting to their proper use, is no theft at all.”