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UNDERNEATH

Like anywhere else, this house has a basement where things accumulated. Dust furs the plastic furniture inside the girl's dollhouse. A crack runs across the bottom of the dish pan in the child-sized sink where the girl once stood, imitating a mother. For several brand new weeks one Christmas, hidden tubes in the toy amazed them all with running water. Stacked in the sink sit tiny cups, grimy from sand box tea parties, and the old muffin tin the girl and her friends splashed water through whenever they got out the hose.

Bicycles with rusted chains lean into the wall, the handlebar streamers mostly dog-chewed or plain gone, stripped by a bored sister and brother dizzied by summer. Deep in the laundry basket, clothespins hide under the pillows that plumped the station wagon's far-back on drive-in movie nights. Two sorts of clothespins—the pinchy kind and the kind you could draw faces on.

The basement was where the kids burrowed out of reach, the little animals. When they played, the dad didn't know what to do with them, he was glad to have the floor between him and the boy, a babbling maniac, and the girl, bookish, goddamned owlsh in her spectacles.

While mothballs in the cedar closet preserved the mother's favorite suits from the 1940s, everything else in that wardrobe the girl long ago pilfered for dress-up—high school graduation dress, wedding gown, old aprons and housecoats the mother received from her own mother but never shrugged into or tied on.

The mother mowed the large yard, even the copse grass on the steep hill where the machine half-lost its hold on gravity. Neither the boy nor the girl ever saw the father pull the mower's cord except when he was timing the spring-time-new spark plug in the oily-smelling garage.

Atop scaffolding the mother had painted the stairwell ceiling. She lived up there for three days. They handed sandwiches to her, and refilled her thermos with tea.

The father called her *she-who-hates-me*.

She called down at him *loverboy*, with great sarcasm. Paint splattered in his hair when he passed below her on his way down the steps. This was no accident.

The dad had organized all his tools high up on peg board so the children couldn't reach them, and when the mother called for a screwdriver to release a penny from a slit in the radiator—and with the dad out of town on a sales jaunt again—the boy dragged a chair in merciless screech across the cement floor, then reached across the jutting-out box with all the baby-sized drawers of screws, nails, tacks, bolts, nuts, washers and any other tiny metal thing (dozens of them!), risked his armpit to the cobwebs to lift the red handle. The tool popped up and fell to the floor like a weapon, scraped the floor like a knife. The girl, always with her eye on him, jumped out of the way just in time. Once, she hadn't. Five stitches in her scalp at the Emergency.

Beside the washer machine, soap powders leak out of their box ends, lined up along the stationary tub, free dishes pulled out, some smashed in fits, or for effect. The weight bench the boy asked for when he turned teenager claims its rust. The toy box lid became so cluttered by heavy things atop it that everyone in the family forgot what treasures they'd once played with.

On hangers from the line strung across the basement ceiling are still clipped old bathing suits, rubbery material and hard cups waiting for breasts that were cut away with their disease and tossed.

The down flight of stairs bisects the basement. The laundry area holds the door to outside, for quick exit to pin wet clothes to the line. The play area has the door to the old coal bin, the creepiest of rooms, with the creakiest of doors, rarely opened, locked, in fact. When the boy and girl were small, the dad teased them about mummies and coffins behind there “that you’d be sorry you laid eyes on,” his most hideous laugh puncturing the air.

After the mother died, the girl couldn’t walk down the steps without the coal bin magnetizing her eyes to its keyhole, and her fearing something behind that locked door was set on stomping out her heart. She divorced the basement and its toys, a clean break the dad didn’t know how to comment on, so he said nothing.

Across from the ever-locked coal bin stands a wooden table, bloodied by oil and battery acid, car parts strewn across it, as if someone were assembling a plane’s jet engine, *or a bomb*, the boy once whispered to the girl, who lingered at the top of the stairs and would not come down.

The girl ceded her brother the whole sub-floor. He sometimes teased her about the mummies, and about Dracula, who, in dreams, became her mother. Her brother might have been a brat, a braggart, she wouldn’t argue with you there, but she loved him the way a mother loves, in place of her mother, with no help for it, with all hope packed tightly inside her and ready to detonate.

Her sparkly cape for baton twirling, his nicked-up baseball bat, tangled line in the tackle box, the wood frame of the jiggly screen door easing a break-in—none of this valuable or tempting to burglars. Yet, in aggregate, the elements of the house loom large, nightmarish, a bad molar finally yanked, tilted baseboards, cockeyed cabinet hinges, each rusty key in its lock memorized inside and out, a schematic burned in their bones. End-of-the world movies flash four body outlines on the walls, a nuclear happy holding of hands. Step close, see for yourself. The bomb went off here.