

The Sleepover

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I could've been a murderer—it's not something you really hear us say when reminiscing about our childhood years. Still, we watch those 48 Hour Mysteries, we get hooked on teenage soap operas where the girls are wearing heels to tenth grade and getting stalked by their dead best friend, we spread a rumor that the girl who lives down the street killed her dog on purpose and buried him the backyard. No harm done, until you read the headlines—*From Best Friends to Killers, Teen Girl Killed by Her Best Friends, Killed Because Her Friends 'Didn't Like Her.'* There's something pulling you into these stories, maybe it's the disturbing thought of children capable of murder, or maybe it's the prickling at the nape of your neck as you think *that could've been me.*

When I was eleven, my friend Tara had an end of the school year sleepover at her house. I had been friends with her since kindergarten, and by second grade, we had clung on to a tight group with girls circling around us. Everyone in school knew us, we claimed the swings at recess, and we all wore jean jackets. But as the years went on, we were split up into different elementary school classes, and my first friend from kindergarten branched out. It was really her own fault, bringing three more girls into our group, forming an uneven seven that constantly shifted and clashed as we tried to exile one of our own. She should've known before inviting us all to her house to celebrate "graduating" from sixth grade. But this sleepover became the beginning of the end, the incident, the reason my mother took away my cell phone for two years and deleted my AOL Instant Messenger accounts.

I remember sitting in her basement, passing the phones around, Amanda coming late because she had a softball game, lucky her. I remember Julianna sitting alone in the corner; three different cell phones flipped open in front of her, one in her hand as she T9 texted out her message. I remember us all laughing in the background when we heard Lauren leave the last voicemail, ending with a loud *you're fat* and smiling as we all screamed around her. Suddenly, the memories shift to a bedroom, crying as our parents were called, silent and looking down as we're pulled one by one into the hall. Samantha walked back and forth from the door to the bed where we were all huddled, telling us what she heard from outside. I remember thinking about

how stupid it all was—where were these mothers when their daughters cornered me in the bathroom in fourth grade, or just last week when my lunch was thrown in the garbage as a “joke.” And that was our explanation, as it had been for the last five years; we didn’t mean any of it, it was all a joke, we didn’t think she’d take it so seriously.

It wasn’t until years later that I realized what was really said over voicemails and text messages to the girl on the other end. I was talking to my friend Kristen about this night—she wasn’t there. Kristen left our group about two months before this sleepover; fading out by leaving her seat empty at lunch, leaving our four square group, and ignoring me during choir. She saw the end coming, she heard the rumors we made up during lunch and she knew better than to go along with it. She got out before one of us went too far. Eventually she became friends with Korynne, the girl we were all taunting, and the day after the sleepover, when the rest of the sixth grade girls found out, she read the messages sent over text and heard our laughter and screams in the voicemails. She saw and heard the words we attacked her with—she said we told Korynne to kill herself.

I panic when I think about this exchange. I think, well it wasn’t me, I just said all of us hated her, I just said she didn’t have any friends, I just said she was a whore. And it’s repulsive—to think about this, but also to think about how I didn’t even know what it meant. Somewhere through the years of childhood development, we latch on to language we shouldn’t use because it’s daring, even when we don’t know what it means, and we throw it around. Somewhere throughout sixth grade Korynne became friends with Tara and Lauren but ruined it all over some boy whose name none of us can remember. So one of us started ignoring her during kickball, another one pushed her to ground during gym by “accidentally” knocking into her, and on the night of the sleepover I called her a whore while someone else in the room was sending her death threats.

Still, when I think back to this night, I don’t think about what I specifically said, unless it’s to clarify that I didn’t say *that*. I wonder who said it first, if I was the only one who didn’t know, if the mothers scolding me thought I was a sociopath because I rolled my eyes and said it was just a joke. For all these years I saw that night as parents overreacting; that without the knowledge of those words said, it was just another typical sleepover. A group of girls gang up on another—isn’t this how everyone’s elementary school years went? Still, the fact that I didn’t tell her to kill herself doesn’t matter in the end. It was still seven against one, it was text blasts and

ten voicemails left, it was the next headline on *Dateline*. When I think about this night—the beginning of the end, the incident, the reason my mother questioned the girl she was raising—I realize that although I may not have told her to kill herself, I might as well have.