

FOUR HOUSES DOWN

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We'd been living in the house on Black Brook Road for two months when I heard the wailing coming from down the street. It was storming that night, as it did all that August, and the cries had to rise above the noise from the wind and the angry trees and the rain. The wails came every minute or so, each one a sob that would break open into a scream. The sound was so wild that when the first cry woke me I was sure I was imagining it.

I was twelve, starting the sixth grade in a few weeks, and I liked to think of myself as tough. I never cried, I wore boys' jeans, and I practiced defiant stares in the mirror when I got out of the shower. But the noise that cut through that windswept night filled my mouth with a sour taste and made my heart thump loud in my chest. I rolled onto my back and listened, watching the shadows that the shuddering tree branches threw onto my walls. I heard Katrina's footsteps flap across the hallway and she slipped into my room.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered when she saw me awake. She kneeled near the edge of my bed, her long hair mussed from sleep. She was fifteen, and trying to look out for me. "What do you think it is? Wolves?"

"There aren't any wolves here," I said, sitting up. We had moved two towns over from our last house, less than ten miles, but our new street was flanked with deep woods and it felt isolated, belonging to a different type of New England town. "It's a woman, definitely."

"That's even worse," Katrina said. "I've never heard anything like it."

I got out of bed and rested my forehead against the window. The houses were smaller than the ones in our old neighborhood and spread further apart. The street was slick with water and the lamplight jumped across

the pavement as the rain fell. There was a light on in Miss Browning's, four houses down on the other side of the street. Another wail came, and my head bumped the glass. Katrina squealed, but softly enough that our father wouldn't hear that we were awake and come check on us. He had taken to sleeping with the television on; I could hear the drone of voices through the wall. "It's Miss Browning," I said. "The lady with the cats."

"What do you think is wrong with her?" Katrina asked. "Someone should help."

I glanced over my shoulder and rolled my eyes. "Are you volunteering?" I wondered if other people on the street were pushed up against their own dark windows. Although my family was still mostly on the outside of it, the neighborhood was tightknit. It pulsed, breathed like one being. It was the kind of place where the kids played hockey in the street, built forts in each other's yards, and slept over at one another's houses. Whatever was happening at Miss Browning's would become a part of the street's undercurrent of gossip. I knew if I asked around I could solve the mystery.

"She's crazy," Katrina said. "That's what Alex and his brothers said about her, anyway."

"Alex is always making stuff up," I said. But our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Haycock, had also warned me about Miss Browning. She told me to stay out of Miss Browning's yard and not to pet the cats that lived there, because Miss Browning was a "private" person. There was an army of cats that lived in the woods behind Miss Browning's yard. Most of them were all white, with one blue eye and one yellow eye. They had shriveled ears and long, mean faces.

The wailing slowed and eventually stopped. I climbed back into bed. Trina scooted in next to me, pulling the covers up to our chins.

"This place is too weird," she said. "I wish we were home."

I shrugged. "What's the difference? We barely moved."

"Emma." Trina flopped onto her side to face me. "You can't be serious."

"There's nothing wrong with this house." I said. "And, as an added

bonus, it seems like we live down the street from a werewolf.”

Katrina laughed. “I don’t buy your new tough guy act. There’s no way you’re happy about having to go to a different school. You must miss Mansfield.”

“I don’t really care one way or the other.”

“You little liar.”

“You don’t know how I feel.”

“Jeez, relax. I’m just teasing. And I miss home.”

“You just don’t want to be away from Brian,” I said. Katrina was in the process of mourning, publicly and loudly, the loss of her most recent love interest, a floppy-haired, skate-boarder named Brian. Brian had found the prospect of their long distance relationship too challenging.

“So what if I miss him?” Katrina rested her head against my shoulder. “One day you’ll understand,” she said, as if she were wise and world-weary for pining over a boy who had once said that he thought dinosaurs were mythical creatures, like unicorns.

After a few minutes, Katrina got out of bed. She surprised me by kissing me on the forehead, and I snapped my head back. “Are you going to be okay alone tonight?” she asked.

“Knock it off, Trina. I’m going to be fine.”

But after she left I couldn’t fall back asleep. I couldn’t stop thinking about Miss Browning’s wailing: the wildness of her sobs, the unapologetic way that she had forced her suffering outwards onto the night. When I finally slept, I dreamt of her odd-eyed cats, spitting and yowling in the tree outside my window.

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I woke early the next morning and got out of bed right away. My father was surprised to see me downstairs, as he got ready for work. I asked him if he’d heard anything last night, and he said that he hadn’t.

“Why, what’d you hear?” he asked.

“Nothing—just that the storm was loud.”

“Was it bothering you? You can tell me if you’re having trouble

sleeping.” His concern embarrassed me. He was always trying to catch me at odd points in our conversations, trying to get me to admit to emotions I wasn’t feeling.

“No, I like storms.”

“All right,” he said. “But the rain’s cleared up today. You should spend some time outside. Maybe actually talk to the other kids. If the Wilson boys are playing basketball, you should join them.” He picked up his bag and headed toward the door, stopping with one foot in the house and one foot out. “And don’t go easy on them, either. Take them for all they’re worth.”

Since we’d moved to New Coventry, I’d spent most of my days reading or playing basketball in the driveway by myself. I’d also been exploring the woods on the other side of the street. I had been using sticks and old boards to build a small clubhouse, and occasionally I’d find strange treasures to collect—sea glass, marbles, an action figure of some off-brand hero, a toy mouse, a plastic ring. I didn’t spend much time with the other kids on the street, and this bothered my father, who’d chosen the house partially because he liked the way everyone in the neighborhood got along. The other kids seemed fine, but in a boring, small-town way.

My dad was worried about me being lonely. A year and a half earlier my mother had died in a car accident, swerving on an icy highway to avoid a crashed motorcycle. She was in the hospital for two days, but she never woke up. I had spent my time since then steering my thoughts away from her absence, trying to outrun the wave of sadness that trailed behind me. I had been keeping my head down, coping by focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. That summer I was just starting to resurface, finding that I didn’t have to be so protective of my thoughts, that they wouldn’t wander quite so quickly to darker places during moments of stillness. I felt like I was climbing out of a murky body of water and the world was taking on crisp outlines that I hadn’t even realized were missing. It was a bad time to come to my senses and reenter the world—the last few weeks of summer were sunless and dank. It stormed during the nights and a slow drizzle fell almost every day. The drizzle wasn’t enough to drive me inside, so it was a summer of soggy socks, squeaking shoes, and toes that blistered and swelled.

I was emerging from my grief into a new feeling of invincible boredom. I was cultivating a new persona: defiant, brave, untouchable. The world had done the unthinkable to me. What other threat could it possibly pose? The new school, the new town, the new drafty house that my father spent his evenings and weekends repairing—they were all just changes in scenery. But Miss Browning was something to fix my thoughts on. I wanted to know more about her. She was a strange-looking woman, but she had a shadow of prettiness about her, like a beautiful building in decay. She was tall and slim, her face angled and sharp. She had silver-blond hair that she wore in a long braid. It was hard to guess her age, but I would've put her around sixty or seventy. I had heard that Miss Browning kept her house full of junk, and her backyard was full of odd refuse: an old washing machine, wheelbarrows, bags of soil even though she didn't garden, dozens of birdhouses. The kids in the neighborhood said Miss Browning performed weird rituals in the shed behind her house, which was why the door to the shed was always padlocked.

Before Katrina woke up, I slipped out to the woods and looped around to Miss Browning's property. When I neared the shed in the back of her yard, I thought I heard something moving inside. I put my ear against the shingled siding. There was definitely someone in there. It sounded like someone was dragging something heavy, or scraping something away. The shed had no windows, and even if Miss Browning had walked out she wouldn't see me unless she circled around to the back. I slid to my knees and cupped my hand over my ear so that I could hear better. After a minute I heard feet sloshing through the grass and I leapt to my feet, ready to spring towards the woods.

"What the hell are you doing?" Katrina hissed, her face splotchy with red. She was in her pajamas, and without her make-up she looked years younger, like an old picture of herself. She dragged me towards the woods instead of angling back across the lawn.

"We don't have to hide," I said. "I wasn't doing anything wrong."

"Like hell you weren't. And that woman is nuts." Katrina yanked me down the path until we were obscured by the trees.

"Calm down. I was just curious."

"Hoarders are mentally ill," Katrina said. "Not crazy in some fun, exciting way. She is clearly unbalanced."

Miss Browning had never seemed sinister to me, only odd. I liked the pale blue of her eyes and I liked that she kept to herself. Once, I had run into her on the path in the woods and she had given me an elegant half-smile that seemed genuine and kind, lacking the put-on cheerfulness that adults reserve for their interactions with children. One of the white cats had been following close at her heels.

Katrina dragged me home and made me promise that I wouldn't go back over to Miss Browning's, warned me to mind my own stupid business or she'd tell Dad what I was doing, and stormed upstairs to shower. I just barely stopped myself from shouting up to her that she wasn't my mother.

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Over the next few days I pieced together more of Miss Browning's story, mining information from the Wilson boys and Mrs. Haycock, who had lived in the neighborhood for forty years and whose own kids were grown and gone. She babysat for the younger kids on the street and had her hand in everyone's business. Although Trina and I insisted we were way too old for babysitters, she made dinner for us every Thursday, when my dad taught his evening seminar. At dinner, I learned that Miss Browning had grown up in the same house that she now lived in. She had inherited it from her parents. As a child, she had been a talented ice skater, even performing nationally. She had been competitive, popular and smart. But as she grew older she became witchy and weird, not liking to leave the house very often, spending all of her time painting and writing in journals. She had worked, for a time, at the veterinary clinic at the university, helping a professor who was a friend of her father's. She had never gone to college, never married. But then, late in her life she had met Mr. Wallace, a sociable man who owned a deli in town and had been a selectman. He moved in with Miss Browning after his retirement. Mr. Wallace had already been married once and had two grown children. No one understood this new match, but the couple had been inseparable until Mr. Wallace died, five years earlier.

From Alex Wilson and his brothers, I learned that the wailing

happened once a year, on the anniversary of Mr. Wallace's death, August 13th. Every year the boys would wait up, huddled in Alex's bedroom under a fort of blankets. They told a similar story to the one that Katrina had recounted—about the hoarding and Miss Browning's mean streak. They said they suspected that she had poisoned Mr. Wallace after he threatened to leave her. And some people thought Miss Browning had bewitched Mr. Wallace, tricked him into loving her and accepting her crazy ways. Laura and Sam Hastings, twins who lived on the other side of Miss Browning's house, swore that one time they saw Miss Browning leaving the woods, stooped over, carrying a heavy sack stained with blood. Whatever was in the sack was about the size of a large dog, Laura had told me during a game of flashlight tag that the Wilsons had organized.

But the story the other kids told with the most reverence was that Miss Browning was keeping the embalmed body of Mr. Wallace in the shed behind her house. They said Miss Browning had an uncle who worked at a funeral home in Willington, and he had embalmed the body in a special way, restoring Mr. Wallace so he looked even better than he had at the end of his life. Since they had never officially married, Mr. Wallace would have been buried next to his first wife, which Miss Browning couldn't allow. So she and her uncle brought the body back to the shed, where Mr. Wallace could stay with her forever. She was, after all, a woman who kept things for too long, who accumulated objects past the point of reason. And once, when the door to the shed was slightly ajar, someone—one of the older neighborhood kids who had already gone off to college—had caught a glimpse of what looked like the figure of a man slumped in an old rocking chair.

The other kids in the neighborhood were happy to feed my interest in the mythology surrounding the old woman, even though I had kept to myself for so long. Katrina was interested in the stories, too, but mostly because they gave her a reason to talk to Alex, who was beginning to take her mind off of Brian. I watched the way she blushed when Alex teased her and the way she puffed up with pleasure whenever he paid her some compliment. I wondered how she could do so little, in the wake of her recent heartbreak, to protect herself from this new threat.

I hoped that her crush on Alex would at least make her less homesick

and bring some peace between her and my father, who had been at each other's throats since the move. Katrina resented Dad's decision to uproot us and his refusal to listen to her side of things. She didn't want a clean slate, the way my father and I did. Her room was plastered with photographs from our old life. Above her bed she'd hung a large photograph of her and my mother holding hands in front of our old house in Mansfield. Katrina is probably five in the photo, and she's staring up at our mother with a big, guilty grin, as if she's done something terrible that she is immensely proud of. Aside from Katrina's room, the only other photograph of our mother on display was a framed picture of our family in front of Niagara Falls, which hung above the bureau in my room. Katrina had insisted that I put it up when we were unpacking. My father didn't talk about all the photographs of our family that had been boxed up for the move and then never unpacked, and we knew better than to ask about them.

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One afternoon, maybe two weeks after the wailing, we were drawn inside the Wilsons' house by a bad spell of rain. The gang was feeling antsy and cooped up, and when conversation turned to Miss Browning and the corpse again, Sam Hastings finally lost his patience with me.

"If you're going to keep talking about it, you need to actually do something," he said.

Katrina tried to get him to shut up, but it sounded enough like a dare that I was hooked. He wanted me to break into the shed that night and report back on what was really in there—if it was haunted by Mr. Wallace's ghost or contained his embalmed body.

"Or both," Mark, the youngest Wilson, said.

I asked how I'd get around the padlock. He said there had to be a way to break in—the metal clasps were probably easy to pry off the doorframe. He could even lend me some of his father's tools. There were grumblings from a few kids—ones who thought I didn't understand how real or big the risk was. But there was no way I was going to back down and lose face

in front of the group. And I thought I would finally get a satisfying answer, something that might placate my obsession.

On the way back to our house, Katrina asked me if I was serious about breaking into the shed. It was illegal and senseless, as far as she was concerned. She said I was just being reckless.

It was the wrong thing for her to say. I loved the idea of being reckless, of being the type of girl who didn't care what happened to her.

"If you insist on being such an idiot, then I'm coming with you," Katrina said. "If anything happens to you, Dad'll kill me, so either way I'm dead."

Knowing Katrina would be with me pushed away any doubts I had. For the first time in a long while, I was excited about something. I was rediscovering how good anticipation felt.

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That night I waited for my dad to drift to sleep, my ear pressed against the wall. I had stashed a bag with a flashlight, a screwdriver, and a hammer underneath my bed. The rain fell in steady pellets outside. The air in my room was heavy and damp. I couldn't wait to get out into the freedom of the night.

When I went to fetch Katrina she was already awake and dressed, chewing on her cuticles. "In and out," she said, her knee bouncing. "We'll take one look inside that shed and then we'll come straight home." I nodded.

We listened for signs of wakefulness from our father's room, but only heard the television. "It's a good thing he sleeps with the TV on now," I said.

"He does it because he can't stand to be alone with his thoughts for even a second," Katrina said, her voice tight with anger I didn't understand. "He doesn't want to think about Mom. Which is why we moved, you know."

"I know."

"You do?" Katrina asked, sounding both impressed and troubled.

"I mean, obviously."

"Well, it's messed up. It's not normal. He can't just pretend she never existed, like we can erase her or something."

"That's not what he's doing at all," I said, because I needed to defend

our father and I didn't have the words to defend his choice. But even back then I knew Katrina was right. We were trying to mask my mother's absence with more absence, widening the hole she'd left in our lives until we couldn't see the edges of it, until it was so big that it wasn't recognizable as a hole.

Katrina looked at me as if she felt sorry for me. I said, "Let's go," and we tiptoed down the hallway, not putting on our clunky boots until we were out on the porch. Once we were outside I could breathe again. I wanted to run all the way to Miss Browning's. I felt none of the dread that showed on Trina's face.

"Thanks for coming with me," I said as we walked.

"You're going to owe me for this forever."

"I know."

"You don't actually think there might be a body in the shed, do you?"

"No." I was disappointed at having to acknowledge this, but I still felt that the adventure would be worth it and something important would be revealed to me.

When we got to the shed, Katrina stood on lookout, watching the rear-facing windows of Miss Browning's house. I saw what Sam had meant about the padlock; the metal loops that the padlock circled through were rusted, as were the nails that held it to the wood of the doorframe. Using the screwdriver, working the edge in slowly, I was able to tear one of the plates free.

"How will we put it back?" Katrina whispered. "She'll know."

"We can hammer it in," I said, knowing we wouldn't. I laid my hand on the doorknob, the skin on my arm prickling underneath the heavy fabric of my raincoat. I pushed my wet hair out of my face and Katrina gripped the back of my coat. I pulled the door open a crack, and shined the flashlight beam into the shed.

"What do you see?"

There was so much junk filing the shed that it took me a moment to fixate on anything specifically. The shed was crowded with smooth slabs of wood, which had landscapes painted on them—vivid scenes of forests and beaches and snow-covered fields. On high workbenches there were also

birdhouses, painted like miniature post offices and churches and police stations. There were small wooden statuettes of cats and people. In one corner there were dozens of hand-painted dolls with rosy cheeks and bright blue eyes.

"It's amazing," I said, and I could feel Katrina's grip relax. I moved so that she could peer in, shining the flashlight for her so she could take in the wonder of it. "They're not bad."

"They're beautiful," she said, laughing. "They're actually really beautiful."

I wanted to respond, but couldn't. I was oddly moved, impressed by the complexity of this woman's life, which we had assumed had been so empty. If the shed had been better lit, it would have looked like the interior of an antique store or the window display of a toyshop around Christmas. I wished I had brought a camera.

Katrina took a sharp breath and grabbed my arm. The flashlight beam jerked to the floor, throwing the room into darkness. Katrina tried to pull me away from the door, but I wouldn't budge.

"What?" I demanded.

"Don't look." Katrina pulled frantically at the back of my jacket, yanking so hard that I needed to grip the doorframe to keep my balance. "Come on, Em," she whined. "We have to go."

I scanned the flashlight over the room, trying to hold the beam steady against Katrina's hysteria. When the light swept all the way to the wall I was standing against, I saw what had frightened Katrina and I swallowed a scream. It had been too close for us to notice immediately, just an arm's length away. I pulled the door open wider and took a step into the room, Katrina still gripping my jacket in a tight fist. Against the wall, immediately to our right, the figure of a man sat stiff and upright in an old armchair. He had salt-and-pepper hair and an uneven smile. His hands rested, palms up, in his lap.

"It's a doll," I said. "It's just a doll." But we both knew that it was different than the other dolls. It was bigger, carved more carefully, painted less gaudily. And it was too ugly and too flawed to be a typical doll. Although neither of us had ever seen Mr. Wallace, we knew that this was him. It was a

doll made to look just as he had looked in his last years in Miss Browning's house, after age had carved its imperfections into his features. The surface of his skin wasn't sanded smooth; it was carved to look crumpled and loose. The spaces under his eyes were sunken, painted a lavender-blue and finely pockmarked. His nose was too large for his face, and the tip of it was slightly bulbous. His upturned palms were wrinkled and painted a jaundiced shade of yellow. The fingers seemed poised to snap shut on anything that landed in their reach. His smile was what unnerved me the most. His expression was almost mischievous, and I thought maybe the wickedness was an invitation, alluding to a secret shared with a lover. But the expression was also unreadable, private and turned in on itself. I couldn't tell how much of this effect was intentional, but Miss Browning seemed like a skilled and dedicated artist. She had been trying to capture a specific look of his, I was sure. One that she had loved, or maybe one that had always troubled her.

I thought of the months, or even years, that Miss Browning must have spent carving and painting this intricate statue—all the time focused on recreating the man she would never get back in the flesh.

Katrina had relaxed next to me. She was examining Mr. Wallace as intently as I was. To my surprise, she looked calm. "It's amazing," she said. She reached out for the statue and I snatched her hand away.

"Don't touch him," I hissed.

I don't know how long we stood there after that, studying the mystery of this man caught between the living and the dead, trying to read his inscrutable expression. Outside the shed the rain picked up and tapped at the roof, like fingers drumming impatiently.

"She must have loved him so much," Katrina said.

"It's crazy. She's completely insane." My stomach felt knotted, as if someone had taken a fistful of my insides and squeezed. "Let's get out of here." I kept my eyes on Mr. Wallace as I shoved Katrina towards the doorway. I imagined the statue blinking to life, its textured hair turning soft and rippling in the wind.

After we left the shed I stopped and picked up the rusted lock. "Leave it," Katrina said, but I was already hammering clumsily. She hushed me, but

I was determined to nail the shed door shut. The hammer slipped against the wet metal and caught the side of my finger. I cried out more loudly than I should have.

We turned towards Miss Browning's house and then took off running, not caring that the mud was climbing up the legs of our jeans and we were leaving big, messy footprints in Miss Browning's lawn. When we reached the street we kept running, our boots making sucking sounds against the wet pavement. We shucked off our boots on the porch and I bolted the front door once we were inside, even though I knew a lock would not keep out whatever it was I didn't want following me home.

Katrina went into the bathroom to change and wash up while I went into my room. I stood next to my bureau, unsure of what to do next. The image of the doll was burned into my memory and I was shaking. My thoughts tumbled over each other until I couldn't keep them straight. I felt as if I was on the verge of remembering something I had long since forgotten, something I would keep on remembering and then forgetting for the rest of my life.

My mother was a professor of biology. One evening a few months before her accident, she had been driving me home from a friend's house when she pulled the car over and pointed out my window at a large Victorian house. A strange swarm of dark, writhing shapes was billowing out of the attic window. "A colony of bats," my mother explained, leaning so close to me that I could smell the sour-sweet of her breath. It looked like the house was breathing black fire. Soon, the bats scattered and were gone. "The world is a weird place," my mother had said. "A pretty wonderfully weird place." And we sat in the car for a while longer, not speaking, with the gray dusk closing in around us.

I would live the rest of my life without her. I had loved her, and now I could never have her back. How could you face the fact of that head on? How could you spend months locked in a shed with it, build a monument to it? And why would you want to live inside of your memories—be enveloped by the false promise of their warmth?

I reached for the photograph of our family on the wall and I ripped the cardboard backing out of the frame. I yanked out the picture and I tore it into

long thin strips. I let them flutter to the ground and then I got into bed, turned out the light, and pulled the covers over my face.

Even though I knew that Katrina would come into my room, when the door opened I jumped.

"It's just me," Katrina said, her eyes wide in the dark of my room. "Are you all right?"

"I'm freaked out," I said.

"I know," Katrina said, sliding beside me. We fell silent, comforted by the familiar way the bed held each other's weight. We listened to the steady static of rain on the windows, the tremors of wet leaves in the wind, the rhythm of our sleeping neighborhood. Katrina rolled onto her side, facing away from me, and I curled up against her. The storm had left a muddy smell on our bodies, and I breathed in her scent: wild, salty, familiar. I pressed my face into the soft hair at the nape of her neck, sensing that there was something fragile in the moment, and that the closeness I was feeling towards her wasn't permanent, but would come and go throughout our lives without explanation.

Long after I thought Katrina had drifted to sleep, she spoke. "We can't tell anyone about Mr. Wallace. Okay?"

And we didn't. We told the other kids that the shed had been filled with boring knickknacks. We made up details about broken lamps and poorly constructed birdhouses. The other kids lost interest in our story, and we could see the extreme disappointment in their faces. And we were fine with that, knowing that we owed Miss Browning the right to her private incarnation of grief, aware of how glad we were that no one could pry into our own minds and unearth our own secrets to judge them against the impossible standard of normalcy.

Later that night, when the thunder that had been threatening finally came and shook the windowpanes, Katrina and I woke next to each other and held hands, and I did not hide the fact that I was afraid. I remembered that I had torn the photograph, and with a desire so fierce it felt like being set on fire, I wanted the picture put back into one piece. I understood, then, that even with all that I had lost, I was not done losing. I understood that I was not done acquiring things worthy of being lost. I closed my eyes and I listened to the storm rage.