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Itching

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Mom said I could stay at Greta's until supper which means I need to leave in six minutes. Mom says I should never stay for supper unless I'm invited, otherwise, it's rude and I have to go home and eat noodles and canned mandarin oranges that taste like rusted metal. I like Greta's mom, she always makes something different for supper, like grilled cheese and tomato soup or tacos. I'm a fourth grader and Greta's a third grader, but we are the same age since she got held back in first. I like to walk to her house after school because it's closer than mine. Today we are playing the game we always play: the one where Greta fights a mythical creature and saves me. I adjust my Spiderman cereal box watch and hope Greta's mom will ask me if I'm hungry.

Right now, I'm a princess and Greta's a knight. My ears sting from the cold so I cup my hands over them, but I can still hear Greta around the side of the house grunting in her grand effort to defeat the dragon who has kept me chained to this tree-tower my whole life. It's almost too cold to not wear a jacket but Mom hasn't unpacked our winter clothes since we moved here in March and couldn't find the box. By the time she found it, it was "damn near summer anyways." Maybe Greta will offer me her cape. I like this game and the way Greta tells me what she sees and warns me when the dragon is about to chase me. When I'm running from the dragon, I feel scared but not the way some kids feel when they are home alone. I feel brave-scared, like I could turn around and if the dragon looked into my eyes, he would turn to dust just like God says we all will soon. Greta barely makes it past the dragon and doesn't have much time, she cuts me loose from the tree-tower with her stick-sword and I sigh with relief. Soon she's blocking the dragon's fiery breath with her garbage can lid-shield. I start running around the corner of the house-castle. Greta shrieks and I do. For a second, I'm flying, soaring through the mist, then my knees hit the grit of the road and my arms slam down, already a little bruised. Greta skids to a stop on the curb behind me and tells me it's okay, he's gone. Extending a scarred hand, she helps me up and commends my performance as "one for the ages." I look down at my torn-up knees and cereal box watch, 5:55. Too late, Mom will be back from work in five minutes.

"I've gotta go, my mom likes me back before 6," I say. "Oh, alright," Greta says, taking her arm from around my shoulders. "Would you maybe want to have a sleepover this weekend? I was going to ask my mom if you could stay tomorrow night since it's Friday."

"That would be really fun," I say, glancing at my watch again. "Okay cool. I'll ask her tonight," Greta says as she jogs back to the house. "Cool." I take off running down the block and my knees don't bother me as much as they should.

The garage door is closing when I make it to the driveway. Panting, I check the mailbox, stick the newspaper under my armpit, and grab the emptied garbage can. When I enter the kitchen, I kick my shoes into the laundry room and head to where we keep the pots, leaving the paper by the keys. "Anna?" Mom says from her stool at the kitchen counter. She is sitting with her head in her hands and a blue-tinted wineglass at her elbow, part of a wedding gift she bought in a set last year but kept after deciding the bride was stuck up and stayed home. "Yeah?" I say, stopping in front of her with a pot in my hands.

"Did you start the water yet?" Mom asks without looking up. "I am right now," I say, turning toward the sink. "I'm going to shower. Pick some fruit from the pantry," she says. She pushes her palms against her thighs to stand, grunting in the process.

I've seen pantries in movies, ones with double folding doors with slats and their own lights. Ones with shelves lined with cans of peaches and pears, spices, different-shaped pastas, and jars of preserves. Our 'pantry' is more like a dungeon and is by far my least favorite place in this house. I creep down the stairs searching for the light switch with my left hand while keeping my eyes fixed on the shifting darkness before me. Flip. The pantry-dungeon flickers with a dim light, but the grimy gray walls and shadowy corners don't look all that different when the light is on. A chill runs down my spine as I notice the cobwebs swaying to a mysterious breeze in the corner. I tiptoe forward, keeping quiet just in case the monster that lives down here is sleeping. I'd be lucky if he was sleeping. Scanning the mostly empty shelves for fruit, I turn a few cans of green beans around before spotting one of mandarin oranges on the second-highest shelf. I balance on one leg and use my left arm to stable myself.
My weight shifts and I feel the shelf tip, sending a can of green beans crashing to the ground, cracking open. The bean juice slowly seeps onto the concrete and the hairs on my neck raise. I'm a goner. The monster's awake, I know it. The light coming in from the small brick glass window shifts and suddenly the shadows swallow my feet in darkness. Holding back a scream, I turn and shoot back up the stairs, leaving the fallen green beans as a sacrifice. Frantic, I miss the light switch with my right hand, but I don't slow down. My feet pound the stairs, echoing into the dungeon. There's no point in being quiet now. When I reach the top, I slam the door behind me and press my back to it, listening for monster footsteps and clutching the can of mandarin oranges to my chest with both hands.

I set the opened can on the table as Mom is finishing up her prayer, making the Sign of the Cross as she reaches for her wineglass. I pour myself a glass of milk and sit down next to her at the table. The TV wobbles at the other end as she scoots her chair forward, reaching for the remote. “What'd you do today?” she asks. “Nothing. School was good, Mrs. Detrek showed us how to draw a dog without lifting our pencils and we got to read about the Greek gods. Oh, and Greta said she was going to ask her mom if I could sleep over at her house tomorrow night. Could I? If she says yes?” “Sure, that's fine,” she says blankly, flipping through channels until she finds the local news. I like this channel, the man who talks about the weather always tells stories about how his son loves the rain and once he went outside in his pajamas and came back an hour later drenched with frogs tucked into his shirt like a kangaroo pouch. “I got a call from the school,” Mom says, scooping sauce from the jar onto her plate, “they are having a lice check tomorrow, one of your classmates got sent home today with it. Aaron? Something like that, she sets the spoon on the flipped lid.

I shovel oranges into my mouth, trying to remember who I sat next to at lunch. It wasn't Greta because she had a dentist appointment during lunch today so it might have been Aaron. He seemed antsy in class, but I don't think he was particularly scratchy. I don't think my head is itchy. I scratch at my scalp and examine the dandruff under my nails for any signs of life. I got lice once last year and it was the worst three days ever. Mom couldn't miss work, so I stayed home alone. We didn't have cable then, so I spent most my time running around the house.

The house we lived in then had a long hallway that ran from the garage door all the way to my room. It was a straight shot so I spent my time seeing how fast I could run back and forth between the two walls, keeping track of my times using the microwave timer. I washed my bed sheets four times and showered three times a day, praying the lice would fall off and drown. The shampoo the nurse gave me smelt like expired milk and it made my hair reek for a week or two after. I bet that bottle is somewhere in the bathroom closet, I'll use it tonight just in case. My head cannot be itchy.

They decided to check our hair at the end of the day so our parents wouldn't have to take work off to come get us. Standing in line, I count what I can see to keep my brain busy. The hallway floor is five tiles across and the wall is eight blocks high and Greta is two people behind me. Three kids have left the nurse's grasp with hairnets on. My head is not itchy. I'm next in line, the girl in front of me has thick red hair cut into a straight bob with bangs. Her hair moves like a helmet, only swaying when she giggles. I imagine little white bugs on her head pulling strands of hair and controlling her actions like the rat from Ratatouille. I imagine them wriggling into her brain and slowly taking over her life, turning her into a zombie. She scratches. If she has lice I probably have lice now too. Mom says lice can jump from one head to another like that. I scratch. Hair-helmet girl gets called forward.

Five tiles, eight blocks which swap colors. Blue-white-blue-white—I hear Greta laughing behind me about how if she has lice she'll stay home and watch TV all day until all the little bugs die. I squeak my shoes on the tile. If I have lice I'll be home but probably won't get to do anything anyways. My head is not itchy. Squeak—back and forth. My head is not itchy. The blonde boy behind me pulls on my hair, stiffness and smelly from all the shampoo I showered with in preparation for the combing. “Go Anna,” he pushes, surely excited to see me fail the test and be sent home so he never has to see my face again. Squeak. Four tiles forward. I crane my neck all the way back, counting the ceiling tiles. The nurse smells like bubblegum and the dentist's office.

“Okay, other side.” I flip, fixing my eyes on her blue sneakers. My hair falls into my face and I gag on the stench. “Stay still please,” she mutters, her nails scratching into my scalp, dividing my hair into singular strands.
“You’re all good,” the nurse says and gives me a slight push away from the line. Sweet relief. Stretching my neck, I head to my locker and then to Greta’s so we can walk to her house together. I packed my toothbrush and pajamas in my backpack today so we could go straight there. I watch Greta go through the line and offer her head for inspection. She bends her neck backward and the nurse, smiling as if she finds this fun, peers at her hairline. But then the nurse leans forward, concentrating on Greta’s crooked part, and her smile drops. She gives Greta a tap on the shoulder and reaches toward the shelf behind her. Greta straightens, rolling her shoulders, and when the nurse gives her a white bottle of expired milk-shampoo and a hairnet, I know it’s over. Greta will have to stay home all weekend, alone. Which means I’ll have to stay home all weekend, alone again. Mom has been complaining about her job at the hospital and our lease is almost up, so I don’t know how many more weekends I’ll be here for. Greta is the closest I’ve ever gotten to making a friend and soon her brain will be infested with tiny bugs dictating her every move and turning her into the living dead and we will never have a sleepover. Unphased, Greta approaches me with a smile on her face and I retreat a little.

“Ready to go?” she asks. “Yeah,” I say, and we walk home with me on the sidewalk and her balancing on the curb like a tightrope. She says she knew she had lice, that her head was itchy yesterday, and not dry-itchy but itchy-itchy. When we get to her house I don’t know what to do but I don’t leave. We stop at the mailbox and face each other. Greta’s arms swing at her sides and she glances around, but no dragons are chasing us this time. “Maybe we could still play outside?” I say, knowing that we shouldn’t. Just then, as if summoned to crush my barely-there hopes, Greta’s mom opens the screen door and tells Greta not to get too close. She got a call from the school and knows about the lice.

“So, I guess this is goodbye,” Greta says, admiring her own dramatics. “I guess,” I say kicking at the road rubble. Greta takes a step back and salutes me before rushing in. I wait in front of the house a bit longer, listening to Greta’s mom explain their plan of attack. I check the time on my cereal box watch, wrap my hoodie tighter around my body and start walking home.

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