

A quiet place

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I am fifteen years old and sitting on my bed with a sixteen-year-old boy. We've been together for three weeks, or so I'm told. I can't figure out how I've arrived here. I may as well be a doll, or rather a thing without a face, a sack of something warm and wet. I'm under the impression that this boy on my bed is a man, and my secret is that I am still a child. My bedsheets are white and patterned with small red poppies like an elderly woman's tablecloth.

The space where my thighs touch is sticky with sweat. It's a warm and humid night. Three mosquitoes fawn over my bedside lamp, safe from the wind that has picked up outside. The plant by my window is battering against the glass pane, but it seems to be in desperation, not malice. I check my watch. This is the time that the man-boy usually goes home, and I get the chance to lie in bed awake and think through everything he did. If I don't think through it all straight after the fact, I'm afraid I will make up something that didn't happen at all, and what I make up will be worse.

I wonder when he'll say it's time for him to leave. I do not like to be alone with him, but everyone else seems to be fascinated by us and our *alone together*. They get this look in their eye when they ask me questions, as if their lives have suddenly been touched by colour, as if nothing has ever been so titillating.

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The wiry hairs sprouting above each corner of his mouth have an orange tinge to them even though the rest of his hair is close to black. They tickle my neck as he kisses me, his mouth leaving a cold trail from my chest to my chin like a garden snail. I shiver. I don't know what to do with my hands. They lay limp in my lap, and I stare at myself in my wardrobe mirror as the man-boy makes his way up and down. I make eye contact with my reflection and can't look away. He asks me if something is wrong and I shake my head.

When Mother knocks on the door, I am relieved. The man-boy recoils like a spring finally reaching the end of its tether.

"Elsie," says Mother, casually smoothing down her apron as if she doesn't know what was about to happen, as if she can't see the sheen of the snail trail on my neck. Her apron is dark blue with white lace trim, and she wears it around the house even when she's not cooking. I'm still shivering.

"Where is that extra ball of wool you had?" she says, still ignoring the stale tension in the room. Mother is good at ignoring stale tension.

She has been teaching me to knit. I think it's one of her ways of trying to get to know this strange new Elsie, the one I've recently become. I appreciate her effort, but I don't like knitting, mostly because we're both terrible at making the stitches straight, and we both end up going silent every time we try.

I stay seated. Any wrong move could reveal a secret.

"It must be in the wardrobe," I say, my voice strangely hoarse. I've never heard myself sound like this, too old. I swallow.

Mother strides in and turns to the wardrobe, and I take the opportunity to steal a glance at the man-boy beside me. He's

smirking and has that glint in his eye, the same one that everyone gets when they ask their questions. Surely Mother knows now, just by the look on his face. I feel sick when I think about her knowing.

When Mother opens the wardrobe, Elvis, my toy elephant, falls out and hits the ground trunk-first. I've stuffed him in there with the other various animals that used to live on my bed with me.

Mother plucks Elvis off the ground and holds him close to her face. "You've been replaced, my friend," she says to him, and then she grins and throws Elvis at the man-boy beside me, and they chuckle at each other like two old friends. I close my eyes in a slow blink. My cheeks feel as if they're being pricked by feather-thin needles.

"Did you find the wool?" I ask. The man-boy shuffles closer to me, no longer afraid of Mother. They've broken the safety glass.

"Fine, fine, I'll get out of your hair," Mother says, now smiling to herself, happy with what she's done. She reaches into the wardrobe and grabs the ball of wool from my underwear drawer. "Aha!"

Then the man-boy smirks at me. "Oh, Maud?" he says, and the sound of his voice saying Mother's name startles me.

"Yes?" She's looking at us over her shoulder from the doorway, so close to leaving.

"Would you mind if I stayed over tonight? My parents are out."

My ears go cold and I can't look Mother in the eye. For the first time, I hope she can hear my thoughts. She must be able to sense that I don't want this, that this was all his idea. I try to

breathe slowly, but all I inhale is his suffocating cologne. It smells like the inside of an aeroplane. I want Mother to tell him that he's insane to think there's even a possibility that she would allow her only daughter to spend the night with a man-boy she barely knows. The audacity.

But Mother says, "Of course." Her voice is distant, as if she is thinking of something else entirely, the scarf she'll be knitting in bed later. She is playing with the ball of wool in her hands, fingers casually searching for the loose ending. I try to ignore the man-boy's hand on the small of my back. The ball of wool is dark green, the same colour that Mother used to knit tiny socks for me when I was a baby, before I could think. I want to go back to the night I met Mother, start over, tell her all of my secrets from the beginning. That way I wouldn't be so afraid of becoming unrecognisable.

When she leaves, I don't know what to say. I've been given away to someone against my will, and I'm the only one who knows it. I can't say it out loud. I should want this.

Mother closes the door behind her.

"Finally," says the man-boy, squeezing my thigh. He laughs. "I didn't think she would say yes."

"Neither did I." My voice catches, and I don't know whether or not I want him to notice.

"You look weird," he says.

"I'm okay."

His grip on my thigh tightens, pinching the skin. "Do you want to lie down?"

"No, it's fine."

"I guess we could do it standing up."

I lay myself down quickly, then. The man-boy laughs at me. My feet have gone numb. He gets up to lock my bedroom door. When he returns, he strokes my head as if I am his pet. I don't know why I have to force myself not to cry. I tell myself, Elsie, don't be ridiculous. You aren't a child. This is normal.

I want to push him off at first, but then the feeling of his heavy weight on my chest somehow calms me. All I have to do is close my eyes and wait, and that is easier than the alternative. I can pretend I am someone else entirely, someone older and more experienced, someone who doesn't say she has a fever when she really has period cramps, because being sick is less shameful. I become another new version of Elsie. This makes me feel better. I focus on the weight on me like a weighted blanket, this man-boy who has no idea who I am.

What a strange thing to do with a stranger. I take solace in the fact that my thoughts are impossible to read. Not even my own mother can peek inside.

Afterwards, I smell the man-boy's cologne and sweat rubbed into my skin. He falls asleep beside me without saying a word. I am naked from the waist down. Now I don't feel like crying anymore; I just want to sleep. But I won't sleep, not until I've relived every detail, tortured myself with a play-by-play. I've done things the original Elsie would never do, and now she'll never take me back, even if I do manage to catch her. The other things could have been forgiven. This time I've gone too far.

I watch the man-boy's face twitch, random eyelash spasms. He looks younger than before, the picture of serenity, breath slow and even, one hand under his head. A boy-man, or maybe nothing more than a boy at all. I wonder what it would be like inside his mind. It must be nice, the quietest place on Earth.