

The Closet

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When we get home to California, Kleeko is gone. She won't tell me where he is or when he's coming back so I hide in the closet. I'm almost asleep when she finally comes to my room and calls my name.

"Char?"

It's quiet for a long time after she says it and I picture her standing in the middle of the braided rug, plotting. Then, she says it again a little louder.

"Char?"

I hear her footsteps creeping toward the closet and I wonder what I'll do when she finds me. She doesn't like being alone. She's probably nervous now. It would be funny if I jumped out and scared her.

As the door to the closet creaks open I can see the shadow of her wrist on the knob. Then, a crack of light points at me where I am crouched down, arms crossed. Once she catches my frame in the corner, she throws the door open all the way and the light from the room exposes part of her face. Her wide eyes meet mine but I do nothing. As she stares at me there's a wildness to her that I haven't yet seen, like she's finally had enough and she's either going to collapse or explode. I can't tell if it is anger or fear in her eyes, so I scan the rest of her to figure it out. The shadows play tricks with the light on her face, but I think it's fear. Yes, she's afraid of me. That's definitely what I see.

Just as I squint back at her to tell her with my eyes that I know she's afraid, the door slams in my face so hard that my whole body feels the blow. I close my eyes as the ringing in my ears echoes through me. She is quiet outside the door. She knows I'm in here and she's just standing there.

Then, I hear a shriek, a howl really, and it hits me in the chest with a heavy thud. It's the sound a person would make if they were being cut in half by a chainsaw, a sound that is meant to alert the neighbors sitting quietly on their lawn chairs behind their private fences. My body, still vibrating from the first blow, jerks a second time. Panic ripples outward from my chest and my limbs twitch nervously in response.

Then I hear her calling, "My baby! My baby!" But it fades quickly as she gets farther away from the closet, toward the front door. "Somebody's taken her!" Another door slams then, but it doesn't shake the floor this time so I don't jerk quite as hard. I can faintly hear her screaming, "Help!" Drawing out the word for as long as her lungs can keep it going. I imagine she is running down the street, shaking her head and holding her cheeks again.

I don't know what all this is for and I don't know what comes next, but I don't cry. Soon, I can hear people inside our house opening and shutting doors and telling my mother, "We'll find her, June. We'll find her."

"I already checked in there," I hear her yell out. "She's not there. She's gone."

"Did you look in the closet?"

"Yes, yes, I already looked in the closet," she cries, "Somebody took her. I just know it! Oh God!"

"Where was she the last time you saw her?"

"I don't know. I can't think. I don't know!"

"June, where did you see her last?" Another voice says.

"Outside," she screams. "She was just out there in the yard and now she's gone," she wails.

"Oh my God. My baby! My poor baby!"

I hear people head outside, but the man from next door comes into my room and checks the closet, even though she told him not to. When he sees me in the corner he shakes his head and says in a pleasant voice, "Well, there you are. What are you doing in there?"

I don't know what I'm doing in here so I don't answer. He smiles and reaches out his hand.

"I found her!" He yells, turning his head toward the door.

"Oh, thank God," I hear a woman's voice say from the other room.

People begin to file into my bedroom one by one. One of them shakes their head at me and says, "You gave your mom quite a scare, young lady."

My mother walks in last. A woman has her arm wrapped around her shoulders tight, like she's trying to hold her together because her whole body is shaking now, not just her head. She's breathing funny on purpose, pretending she can't catch her breath.

She reaches out to me with a longing in her eyes, but she's looking through me, behind me, longing for something far beyond what I am capable of giving her. The man from next door blocks her at the doorway with his hand and whispers, "June, you need to be calm. Show her that you're happy to see her and that you're not mad at her." Deep guttural noises that almost sound like words spit from her mouth. He is holding her back by the shoulders, trapping her like a race horse at the gate, trying to tell her how to be a mother but she doesn't listen. She continues to reach past him, to the thing she is longing for, the thing that's not me.

He releases her and even though she is coming toward me, arms open wide, I can't help but feel that she will run right past me, leap over the furniture, climb out the window and keep running.

"Your mother loves you," he says as I stiffen under her embrace.

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