

GIRL IN THE WALLS

*Girl in
the Walls*

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1

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For my family

SUBJECT: You Are Not Alone

Listen. We know there are people who hide in our homes. They crawl into attic spaces. Tuck themselves behind yard equipment in garages. Flit between the rooms of the house just outside the reach of sight.

Some of us have found nests tucked in the backs of bedroom closets behind the hanging clothes. Or in the void space beneath the stairs. In that sliver between a living room sofa and the wall.

We have found half-empty water bottles and candy wrappers and the remains of leftover food cooked the day before. I found my own wrinkled clothes pressed flat to the floor and stinking like somebody else's sweat. Look in the places behind furniture. The spaces beneath beds. Every deep crevice of a house. No guarantee that once one place has been checked someone will not sneak right back into it.

You can stay home all day and still not find them. They are clever and patient and they know the insides of your home better than you ever will. But you have to find them.

You have to root them out.

J.T.

A NEST BENEATH A HOUSE

The cat, blinking in the afternoon light, padded away down the long length of the gravel driveway. Her paws found the small, flat spaces between the rocks, and the girl, from her vantage point at the guest room window, could hear nothing – it was like a silent film she was lucky enough to look out the window to catch. But she thought about how, even if she were out there, lying on her back on the lawn with her eyes closed, beside the lilies the boys' mother, Mrs Laura, had planted along the edge of the driveway, she still wouldn't hear any sound that would cue her that the cat was passing just an arm's reach away. She loved that.

The calico had appeared in her view as it trod free from the azalea bushes along the side of the house. The girl knew enough about the house – not only the rooms but the insides of the floors and walls between them – to know a small hole in the house's foundation that could allow enough space for an animal to crawl in.

Had she already seen the cat's nest? There'd been a flattened gray mound of half-decayed insulation she'd noticed a few days back beneath the floorboards. The girl would need to keep an eye out for the animal so she could learn its routines and schedule. She didn't want to encroach

by journeying down below when it was napping, when it was clearly trying to be alone. But the cat was across the road, trotting up the steep side of the levee and disappearing over its lip into the batture. Now, since it was gone, the girl wanted to see where it had been.

Tuesday afternoon, the day the youngest of the Masons, Eddie, took piano lessons. She'd go down anyway, even though she heard them there, Eddie and the piano teacher, sitting at the piano in the dining room. They'd both be facing that wall, the one in which she would descend. Tuesday afternoons used to be a safe time to take the trip, as Mr Nick was at his afterschool meetings, Mrs Laura outside in the garden, Marshall at the car wash, and Eddie, typically, tucked away in his bedroom, reading. The piano lessons, an early birthday present, had changed that routine.

But the girl was stubborn. She left the guest room and entered the hallway, the balls of her bare feet treading silently against the floorboards. She opened the door to the attic and climbed the stairs. Pulled free the plywood floorboard and revealed the entrance down into her walls. She'd time her descent along with the piano teacher's melodies, and with Eddie's attempts to mimic them. This was her house. She'd done things much harder than this.

Inside the walls, the piano's keys sounded as though they were underwater. In the dark, she pressed her feet against the wall studs and traced her fingers along the wooden laths to find the miniature grips she'd scraped weeks before. She lowered herself, an inch at a time, patient. More than once, the teacher's melody cut out while the girl's toes were still reaching for the nearest grip, and she held herself still, awkwardly, until the muscles in her forearms and fingers burned. More than once, her elbows and knees grazed the laths a little too firmly, causing some part of her to wonder whether Eddie's mistakes – the

faltering, hesitant strokes – were from having heard her, and pretending to have not.

‘Come on, little guy,’ the piano teacher said, his voice rising into a higher pitch than necessary for a boy who was nearly thirteen, almost two years older than the girl. ‘Just play the notes,’ he said. ‘Come on. Watch my fingers! Just do what they do.’

The girl rolled her eyes. As if the trick to playing well was knowing you were supposed to use your fingers.

The teacher went through the melody again, and she touched her toes down on a floorboard. With relief, she eased the rest of her weight down. Slowly, careful not to bump against the wood on either side of her, she shimmied through with her leg out before her, leading her like a divining rod through the dark.

Two. Three. Four. She counted her steps, brushing the dusty floor with her heel, until she found it. The loose board.

The girl paused. She waited until both Eddie and the instructor began playing their melody at the same time, their rhythm slightly off, Eddie’s stumbling fingers filling the silent rests between. While they played, she pushed down on one end of the thick floorboard, causing the other side to bow up. The board was nearly as tall as she was. She lifted it, gently. Then she slipped down beneath it into the hole, her legs pushing through itchy, rotted insulation until she felt cool dirt under her feet.

Simple. Hardly anything to it.

UNDER THE FLOOR

The cat's nest was tucked away in a corner of the crawl space beneath the house, just beyond the reach of the thin beam of light that bled from the hole in the house's foundation. The nest was hard to find, hard to know what it was even if someone were looking right at it. The cat had left few signs behind. The shed fur upon the flattened insulation. The faintest imprint of its paw in the dirt. The light warmth beneath her palm. Anyone else would have missed it. Since the girl had moved back into her home, into the walls, she liked to think she saw the world differently.

She lay on her back and stretched out her arms and legs, imagining herself a sea creature undulating out over the dark ocean floor. It smelled like earth down here. Wet, rich earth. She relished the scent. It wasn't easy for her to get.

Down here, the piano's keys were muted, but she could still hear the thumping of the instructor's heel banging the rhythm for Eddie. He banged and banged as though the kid were an idiot. She took a deep breath of the musty air, feeling it cling to her tongue, and let out a tired sigh.

She knew it was none of her business, but it still frustrated her when people talked to Eddie that way. It was how the mailman talked when he handed over the mail, or their neighbor Ms Wanda the few times she

came over when he was out walking in the yard. Even Marshall would talk to him that way. That was the most ridiculous of all because, in the girl's opinion, it was Marshall, the long-armed ape, who was the most deserving of being talked down to. But Eddie was smart. She knew this because she read his books – the best ones in the house – about ancient histories or (her favorite) mythological stories about mysterious, magic worlds. She appreciated someone with a good imagination. Even if he was strange.

While the rest of his family ate their meals together at the kitchen table, he ate his alone in the dining room. And there were other things: how sensitive he was, how quiet, how much time he spent playing board games against himself – even the most boring ones, like Monopoly and chess.

But then, what if she were to map out all the strange and annoying things she knew other people did when they thought they were alone? Mr Nick, with his lingering stares into empty rooms. Mrs Laura's mumbling. Or Marshall, cursing at himself in the guest room mirror, rubbing the short bristles of his hair between both hands. Even before she'd moved into the walls, the girl would watch her classmates at school during quizzes, when their sense of the world around them shrank and their minds pulled in upon themselves. She'd seen boys' hands creep up through the bottoms of their shorts. She'd seen girls bite the tips of their fingernails until they bled.

She shrugged. When it came to being strange, Eddie likely fit right in.

The girl rolled over onto her stomach and arched her back. She allowed herself a small grunt, and enjoyed the pull on the tight, wiry muscles. All things considered, as the girl crawled on her hands and knees under the floorboards, blinking in the near dark, smelling the sweet,

musky scent of the house's underside, her hands and knees kicking up faint, floating particles of dust . . .

Well? She figured she wasn't necessarily in a place to judge.

THE LATE AFTERNOON

Outside, the Louisiana spring heat had come in swift. The buzz of cicadas filled the humid air, their calls pulsing loud as a siren. But to the girl, it was monotonous and steady, predictable enough to be soothing.

Along the edge of the tall grass that surrounded the back yard, a muscled, black snake could be seen, even from the house's third-story attic window, inching its way towards the patchy grass beneath the broad shade of the live oak trees. Mrs Laura stood over rows of moist earth in the vegetable garden with her hands on her hips and mud on her knees. And around the corner of the attached garage, just visible over the lip of weathered roofing, Eddie. His piano lessons over, his tousled black hair bobbing as he paced back and forth.

From somewhere, a barred owl let out a garbled call.

It was quiet inside the house. The sun, resting orange above the levee on the other side of the road, cut in across the front yard through the upstairs windows, leaving the speckled outlines of cypress trees on the hallway floors. The clock in the foyer tolled a single, deep note, signaling a quarter of an hour until six. Back from work, Mr Nick lay downstairs on the library sofa, napping, and Marshall, let go early from the car wash, had sealed himself in his bedroom, silent except for the occasional flutter of his fingers across the computer keyboard.

As the heat of the afternoon slowly faded, the old house exhaled. Warm air respired from the pores in roofing shingles and white strips of siding, and rose invisible into the pink sky. The wood in the floors and walls cooled, making occasional, gentle popping noises. Downstairs, the dryer rumbled to a sudden halt.

Softly, so easy to ignore unless someone was still and listening for it, the attic door hinges chirped as they opened and shut again. The sounds of bare feet followed, quiet as an insect, treading in intricate steps across the patterns of light on the floor.

She had decisions to make for the evening. Whether it was to be a night for reading, or for something else. Her current book was a collection of Norse myths, a thick and battered paperback that she had tucked in the nook of her arm as she listened at the top of the curving staircase. Months ago, from a conversation Mrs Laura had on the phone, the girl had learned that this book was meant to be a Christmas present to Eddie from a great aunt in Indiana. But it had only arrived earlier this week, after having been lost all this time in the mail.

The girl had been the only one home to receive the yellow package when it finally arrived on the front porch. The doorbell rang, and there it was. Its wrapping torn along the seam, the silver lettering of the book's spine peeking through.

That day, she had squinted out toward the levee and road to make sure no one was passing by. Then she reached her pale fingers into the warmth of the sunlight cast upon the welcome mat, and she snatched it inside. She studied the book, saw that it had gotten wet at one point (from a snowstorm, she guessed – some mail truck barreling through an Indiana blizzard and slumping into a ditch after catching black ice), but even though the corners of the book were warped, and ink bled blue on certain pages, the stories were readable.

Eddie wasn't waiting for the book, wouldn't notice it was missing, unlike any of the other books on myths and fantasy on his bookshelf, since everyone in the family had thought the present had been lost before it came. Sometimes she reread a chapter two or three times before moving on. No need to hurry through this one.

The staircase steps creaked as she descended them. Bothersome. She could hoist as much of her weight as she could onto the wooden banister that bordered the curving stairs, but the steps would still find some way to complain. Some sounds in the house were unavoidable.

Downstairs in the foyer, the front yard loomed, framed through the windows like an old landscape painting. The acre of green lawn and flowers, and a road with the steep green levee beyond. Up there, on the dirt path along the top of the levee, a boy in overalls floated into the frame of the window, and in a few moments, drifted effortlessly out again. Beside the girl, the antique clock ticked, and from the next room over, the library, she heard Mr Nick shift his weight on the old sofa. He let out a single snore.

She might listen to television tonight, if she wanted – the void space beneath the foyer stairs was close enough to hear most of the words if Mr Nick had the volume high. Or, she could draw in her notebook in the enclosed back porch, sprawled behind the wicker love seat on her stomach with her pencil and paper. There, once it grew dark and became hard to see, Mrs Laura would come in from the laundry room and flip on the porch's overhead bulb, as if for the girl, and leave it on until Mr Nick did his rounds of the rooms before bed.

Those were some options. In the meantime, she was thirsty.

She went through the living room, with its plush sofa and armchair and its quiet, carpeted floor. Into the kitchen, where the refrigerator opened with a small suction sound.

A tink of the drinking glasses touching as one was removed from the cupboard, followed by the soft thump of the fridge closing again.

The windows of the kitchen looked blindly out at the trees that grew up along that side of the house. The neighborhood was mostly undeveloped, in a parish just south of New Orleans, and the only neighbor's house that was visible from any of the windows was Ms Wanda's single-bedroom home which rested far back across a field, beside the woods' treeline. Still, the girl ducked her head, careful, and squinted through those windows to see the afternoon sky, as much as she could manage. There were only a few thin, pink clouds trailing. Looked like it promised to be a clear evening. In that case, she'd have to come back at some point tonight, after the Masons had gone to bed. She'd lie on the kitchen countertops. From here, shielded by the bulk of the house from the white glare of the roadside streetlights, she would see stars. Above the mass of oak and hackberry branches, there'd be Orion, the Big Dipper, others. Constellations the girl's mom had taught her, when they'd stood outside in that same yard. The girl tucked in a warm arm, tracking her mom's finger as it traced the dim pinpricks of light.

But for now, there was nothing but the gentle whine of the dishwasher opening, a glass with a film of orange juice pulp appearing beside the Mason family's dirty dishes, and a padding of feet on the tiles, leaving the room.

The antique clock in the foyer struck six, and its mechanics let out the loud cries of a nest of baby finches. Mr Nick at once sat up and placed his feet on the library floor, stretched, and walked through the foyer and living room. He entered the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets for pots and pans as he began to prepare dinner for his family. A few minutes later, Eddie and Mrs Laura's voices could be heard just outside the back porch as they

wiped their shoes clean on the mat. Upstairs, Marshall's stereo, without warning, soared to life with heavy-metal electric guitars and double-bass pedals.

In the laundry room, between the thick silver tubes behind the machines, the girl opened her book to the earmarked page. In that chapter, Odin, the oldest of the gods, journeyed beneath the roots of a great tree to a witch and paid her one of his eyes in order to gain wisdom.

'There are many ways to see,' Odin said, as a pair of ravens rooted up from under the ground between his feet. The birds shook their dirty wings, wrapped them around the god's legs, and pulled themselves to his shoulders. 'An eye on its own,' Odin said, 'can give you only so much, and now I have so much more.'