

Toys In The Attic

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Four things about the attic stood out above all others: the creaking of old warped boards, decades of dust, powder fine and covering all, the smell of mothballs, and the dark.

In the dark there was no play, only the long silence and stillness where they would lean against each other, backs to the big toy chest that had been their mother's when she was a child. In the dark they pretended they were dolls, just two more toys in the attic. Beth and Jamie: Raggedy Ann and Andy.

Sometimes the long darkness was broken by sleep, dreams of the daylight, the outside. Often there was no sleep. Sometimes the silence was broken by the scratching of little claws: rats, or perhaps monsters.

If they were lucky, the sound of a springing trap would mean food the next day. They had run out of food a week ago, and now the rats were running scarce. Mom had never been gone this long before.

I wonder how monsters taste, Jamie thought at Beth.

Kids don't eat monsters, Beth thought back at him. *It's the other way around.*

Sometimes when they became toys they could do that, talk to each other with their minds. Only in the dark though, only if they were touching, and only if they were as still as the dead. Sometimes they even dreamt together.

When the light came they became kids again.

It came from the attic vent, filtering through the slats in fat slices that fell first on Beth and Jamie, and their toys, in the morning, then moving across the room until it touched the edge of *The Place We Dare Not Go* before finally fading to nothing.

The Place We Dare Not Go was a maze of boxes, two generations of McFarland castoffs stacked to the ceiling in rows that ended in impenetrable darkness - from the familiar world of their attic to a world of nothing. Long abandoned clothing hung from the rafters; a black duster faded almost to gray, a raincoat, and a comic robin's egg blue tuxedo. In the light they were just relics, but at night they became sentinels to that world beyond the maze. The place where rats hid from the light, and monsters slept.

Snap!

The sound of death, and of life.

The toys in the old chest gave no notice, nor did Beth or Jamie. They didn't move, didn't blink, remained still as the dead. But inside they cheered.

They watched the subtle movements of the sentinels, and if they hadn't known better they would have blamed it on a draft. They did know better, and so they did not move. They let the monsters think they were just two more toys, because they left the toys alone. They didn't carry the toys away kicking and screaming to *The Place We Dare Not Go*. They did not eat the toys.

Then Beth and Jamie slept, and dreamt of the sun on their faces and grass underfoot.

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The light came again. Jamie and Beth opened their eyes and stretched.

"I'm hungry," Jamie said.

"How hungry?" Beth asked. She'd worked out a 1 to 4 system for eating, a way of saving the food for as long as they could bear. When they still had real food, and some hope that mom would come home soon, they waited until they were at 2 - very hungry - before they ate. Beth had since modified the system. They didn't eat until they were at 1, and crying with pain.

"My stomach thinks my throat's been cut," Jamie said.

"Lets play," she said. She was only at 2, and he wasn't crying yet. They could wait.

"Marbles?"

"Go Fish."

Jamie frowned. "Go Fish is boring."

"Yeah, well the marbles stink." Beth wrinkled her nose.

"Please." Jamie scrunched his face into a grimace, narrowed his eyes and bounced with frustration. "I hate Go Fish."

"OK," Beth said. "We can play marbles." Truth was, she was bored with Go Fish too.

"Yeah!" Jamie pumped a fist in the air, then dropped to his knees and opened the toy-chest's heavy lid. He kept the marbles in an old tobacco pouch pilfered from the duster a few weeks before, when the light had been particularly radiant and he'd been feeling brave.

Beth searched the traps while Jamie dug through the toys. There were six traps, two sprung. Two rats: a large and a small. The attic had been generous that night.

"Found 'em," Jamie said. "Hurry up!"

"In a minute." Her back was to him. He never did like this part. She pulled a barrette from her hair, the silver finish dulled by weeks of built-up grime and hair grease. She poked the narrow end into a rat's eye and dug until it came out.

She pried the other eye out, baited the trap with them and reset it. She put the first rat in her dress's pocket and started on the second.

"Ready," she said when it was over.

He drew a circle in the dust with a finger and emptied the leather pouch into it.

Mothballs colored with crayons from the toy chest. Solids, stripes, multi-colored swirls. Her shooter was red with a black stripe.

"Yuck," Beth said. "They really do stink."

There was only one real marble in the circle, Jamie's shooter. He loved it, kept it in his pocket and would not let her touch it.

The game ended when Jamie's special marble missed its mark and skipped out of the ring, rolling toward the shadows of *The Place We Dare Not Go*.

"No!" Jamie screamed and jumped awkwardly to his feet. He ran only three steps before falling. He was much thinner than a few weeks ago, and getting weaker all the time. "No!" he cried. His shooter rolled into the shadow of the hanging raincoat, into the darkness of the row beyond. She heard it roll across the wood for a few seconds, and then it was gone.

Jamie lay there and cried for a while.

Beth bagged up the mothball marbles and put the pouch back into the toy chest. She had tried to teach him Blackjack once but he hadn't got it. She would try again when he was done crying.

The first cramp gripped her gut and she cried out as much in surprise as in pain.

"Jamie."

He sniffed. "Yeah?"

"You still hungry?"

"Uh huh."

She gave him his rat and went off to the far eve near the locked attic door to eat hers.

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It had been so long since Beth had heard anything but the native sounds of the attic that she almost didn't recognize the sound of the car engine outside. The vent was beyond her reach: she could not see out. If she slid the toy chest beneath it she might be able to reach the wooden slats, but not look through them.

"Jamie, come here. Hurry up." She shoved the chest toward the wall, her sneakers barely able to get traction on the worn boards. She lifted the lid and let it fall open, then hauled toys out by the armload.

"What are you doing?" Jamie stepped next to her and gathered the scattered toys into his arms, trying to put them back in. "If you make a mess..." he didn't have to finish the thought. She knew what their mom would do if she saw the mess.

Beth slapped his arms open and let the toys piled in them scatter at their feet. "We can pick 'em up later. Just help me."

For a moment she thought he might cry. She knew if he started she wouldn't be able to calm him down in time to help. He didn't cry, just looked at her a little shocked. "OK," he said, and helped her empty the heavy chest.

When it was empty she slammed the lid back down. "Help me slide it over."

He did, and when it was against the wall, under the vent, she climbed on it and pulled him up.

"Can you lift me up?" She was doubtful, but it was worth a try. She could lift him up, let him look outside to see who was there, but she trusted her own eyes more than his. Sometimes when they spent too much time up here his imagination got away with him and he became overly fanciful. No telling what he might *think* he sees down there.

"I can't lift you," he said. "You're too big."

"OK, I'll lift you then. Step up, hurry." Beth laced her fingers together, hands joined in a stirrup, and when he stepped

into them she lifted him to the vent. She could still hear the faint hum of a car engine outside, but fainter than before. Whoever was out there was leaving. Not her mom then, probably a lost driver using the private drive to their house to turn around.

"Can you see?" Beth's voice was strained. Jamie was much thinner than he had been a few weeks before, but he seemed heavier than ever. She was getting weaker too, Beth realized.

"Yeah, it looks like cop car. It say's *Serif* on the side."

"You mean Sheriff?"

"I guess," he said, and shrugged.

"Help us," Beth shrieked. "Please help us!" She sagged against the wall. She was getting tired, the muscles in her arm hurt from Jamie's weight, and yelling made her head spin like she would pass out. "Yell at him!" she said. "Make him stop!"

"He's going the other way," Jamie said, but screamed with her anyway.

"*Help us, we're up here! Please stop!*" Jamie drummed his small fists against the slats while they screamed. Even after the sound of the Sheriff's cruiser's engine had faded to nothing, they continued to shout, and Jamie to pound at the vent.

When the first drops of blood fell on her trembling arms Beth gave up, and only after she lowered Jamie back down to the

chest did he stop. His fists were pulped, bleeding, swollen; the skin worn down to meat where they had drummed their desperate message, and riddled with large slivers.

Beth gathered her dress up to her knees and ripped at the hem. The cloth was old and thin - it ripped easily. When she was finished her old dress was three inches shorter.

She went to her little brother. He sat against the wall, not crying, only staring into an unreachable distance somewhere within his own mind. She lifted his bloody hands from his lap, and when she released them, they did not fall back. They hovered like a pair of charmed snakes. She'd seen him like this before. It scared her when he was like this, but she knew he would get better. He always did.

She pulled the shards from his hands, the ones that were not too far under the skin to grab with her fingernails, then bandaged them with strips of cloth torn from her dress.

She didn't put the toys back. She sat cross-legged in the center of the mess and gathered them: Tonka trucks, teddy bears, a few porcelain dolls, Matchbox cars, a large plush puppy dog.

One of the Barbie's reminded her with the force of a revelation, of her mom. Hair in a plait, burgundy evening dress with black pumps; waiting with a painted smile for her next drugstore Ken. She slammed it into the floor again and again, until its limbs were bent and twisted, and the head had come

off. Then she threw it as hard as she could into the shadows of *The Place We Dare Not Go*. She had always feared and loved her mom, a confused sort of love, but at that moment she hated her worse than monsters or death. Giving her mom to the monsters in the shadows, in effigy if not in fact, felt good.

She pulled the toys around her in a mound - a burial cairn - until only her head and arms were uncovered.

Beth went away for a while in search of whatever happier place her brother had found.

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She did not find him in her sleep, but when she awoke the toys were cast off of her, and Jamie lay asleep with his head in her lap. The slanted bars of light - weak light, dusty light - fell upon the threshold of the monster's place. She scooted backward, pulling her brother along with her, until her back was against the comforting solidity of the toy chest.

She watched the place where light and shadow met, that black whispering place.

The light fell slowly until it touched the broken Barbie doll. There was a scratching sound in the darkness of the box maze - monsters or rats - then the mom-Barbie was gone.

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Jamie was sick. Very sick. Very sick and very weak. He hadn't played in four days, hadn't moved from his quiet place in

two. He was lost in himself again, and this time Beth didn't think he would come back.

All of the rats were gone, and she hadn't realized until then how much they had depended not on just their meat, but their juice. She was very thirsty.

Beth played solitaire and waited in vain for the sound of the Sheriff's cruiser, or her mom's old Saab. She feared she would hear neither. She should have known when her mom left them this time it would be the last. The sleepless nights stomping down the halls of the old family home, cursing her bad luck at being saddled with worthless property, a broken down house, no money to pay the taxes, and two thankless brats who would never be able to pull their own weight.

Then the new boyfriend had come unexpectedly.

Beth tried again to pry open the door that sealed them in and cut herself on the nails driven up from below that held it shut. She crawled back the toy chest through a sea of cheerless faces, frowning teddy bears, sneering dolls, and the pot metal grills of toy trucks that looked like the grins of demons. She kept a fearful eye on the toy dog, which had once given her so much comfort, but now watched her with its own hateful button eyes.

Beth settled next to her absent brother, there but not there, and slept.

She awoke with the last of the afternoon light.

It was cold.

Jamie was awake, walking toward *The Place We Dare Not Go*, his steps slow but purposeful.

"No," she said, or tried to say. It came out in a dry croak. "Jamie."

He stopped. "I'm going to get my shooter," he said. "They can't have it. I won't let them, it's mine."

"No, come back." She found the energy to sit up, but could not find the strength to follow him.

He turned, and if she had the strength she would have screamed. Her brother had truly become just another toy in the attic, not Raggedy Andy, but Raggedy James. His skin was pale cloth, his clothes stitched to them, his sneakers black cloth sewn over toeless feet. His hair was wild, matted yarn, his mouth an unmoving stitch-line, and his eyes as black and spiteful as the once loved dog that now watched her from its own shadows.

"It's my shooter," he said. Then he stepped into maze of boxes and was gone.

Beth shivered. She felt a clammy hand in hers and realized it had been there all along. Jamie's hand was limp in hers. She let it drop to the floor.

He did not stir.

"Jamie." She tried to shake him awake. He would no wake.
He was cold too.

She moved away from him, then lifted the heavy lid of the toy chest and crawled inside.

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Mom had told them time and again not to get into the rows of boxes that occupied the one side of the attic. She told them the things in those boxes were old family business, not theirs.

Beth and Jamie had their own reason to stay away from them.

The Place We Dare Not Go was the forest of their attic kingdom. To them it was as real as anything else in their small world, a world limited by size, if not imagination. And as the days shortened and the coldness grew, the outlines of the attic shadows grew less distinct.

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Beth half-slept, shaking away the last of her strength while she waited for the scraping of claws against the surface of her last sanctuary to stop.