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Ella Pfalzgraff



The Red Barn



Somewhere in these woods, there is a monster. And it could be hiding anywhere. The light spreads through the treetops, creating shadows on the ground. Shadows big enough for a monster to hide in. The child walks along the path, careful not to step on a stick, or kick a rock, or make any sound at all. If the monster found her here, she'd be dead for sure.

A twig snaps behind her, and the child starts to run, bounding over logs and mud puddles. The forest passes beside her in a blur of green and grey and she keeps running, even though she knows that nothing is chasing her, even though she knows it was just Joel, and not a monster at all.

She stops. To her left there is an old barn with no door and red paint peeling down its sides. To her right is the house. One way is dangerous, the other is safe. She goes right.

The child hears the crackle of car wheels on gravel. She imagines that it's her parents, come to take her home. The father is wearing his red flannel shirt. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows, and he's leaning his forearms on the steering wheel like he does when he's been driving for a long time. The mother laughs at something he said, and she reaches to turn down the A/C. The child imagines riding in the backseat, rattling in her too-big booster seat, the van gyrating like an unbalanced dryer.

But it's not the van. The child knows that's just pretend. They won't be back until the end of summer. The father said so. He said that it would be fun here, with Joel and Uncle Paul. He said that he loved summers here. But he never comes here anymore.

A blue truck pulls in front of the house. There's pictures of horses running on the sides and in the back there's a black box. This is the vet's truck.

Last summer the vet came to put Shooter down. The child ran her fingers over the outlines of horses as Aunt Liz held her close, smoothing her hair back. Aunt Liz smelled like hand

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lotion and medicine. After Shooter died, Aunt Liz stayed in bed for a week. The father said that Aunt Liz was sick, but she didn't look sick. She just looked sad.

The father said Aunt Liz was gone now, that she died. The child wonders if the monster got her.

The child passes by round bales of straw, brown and dusty and smelling of old bread. Trucks are parked all over the yard. All are rusted and one of them doesn't even have a seat. Joel used to play taxi driver with the child, but he hasn't this year. The paint on the turquoise truck is wearing off, and she peels off a strip and crushes it between her hands.

The child sits beside the hay, where she has an easy view of what's going on. Henry is tied to a pole. His head hangs low, as if there's no muscle in his neck, and when he breathes his stomach seems to sink into his ribs. One of his back legs quivers a few inches above the ground. The fur has been scraped off, leaving raw skin, grey and bloody, exposed.

Uncle Paul watches the vet. He's leaning against the barn door, but his back is perfectly straight. Uncle Paul never smiles.

The child stretches out and hay sticks to her bare legs. She wonders if he's going to find out and punish her. She never gets punished at home, but one time when Joel left the gate open, the child told Uncle Paul, and Joel got punished. That's why Joel's arm was in a cast.

"They're going to have to put Henry down." Joel stands behind her. He pulls a stick of hay from the bale and starts ripping it to pieces. "My dad loves that stupid horse. He's fucking crazy, but my dad loves him. He was Dixie's last colt, and everybody thought he'd be a show horse, but he's crazy. Fucking waste of feed." Joel grabs handfuls of straw and lets them fall to the ground. "Dixie went out to the red barn to die. Same place I found Mom." He smacks his hands together and dust falls to the ground. "Are you going to tell him?"

She grabs a stick off the ground and ties it in a knot, pulling so hard it snaps. "No."

Joel took Henry out, even though he wasn't supposed to.

Nobody but Uncle Paul is supposed to take Henry out. But Joel said it was okay, his dad was gone, wouldn't be back for hours.

The child asked, "Can I come?"

"No."

But she went anyway. She followed Joel out of the paddock and into the field. Henry walked beside Joel, his energy barely restrained, his head high like a challenge. Joel swatted at him with the lead rope.

The moment Joel mounted him, Henry's entire body tensed, and he threw himself forward, twisting and shaking. Joel dug his heels into Henry's sides and yanked on the reins, but this only caused Henry to spin in circles, so fast that he fell to his knees. Into the barbed wire fence.

Everything was still. Henry lay on the ground, his head down, turned towards his leg. Then he looked up. And the child saw herself reflected in his eyes.

And then Henry pulled pack, straining against the wire. It scraped against his leg, peeling his skin. And the blood turned the ground red.

Joel held the child's arm so tight it hurt. "Don't touch him."

Henry slid on the slick red dirt. A shrill scream escaped his throat. He kicked out, and then lay still. Joel went to Henry and unwrapped his leg.

Joel wouldn't look at Henry.

The vet and Uncle Paul huddle together, telling secrets. Uncle Paul nods, and then he looks towards the child. He goes in the barn. The vet touches her palm to Henry's rump and he shudders under the weight of her touch.

"Is Henry okay?" The child asks.

"He's very badly hurt," the vet says. "You have to be careful around barbed wire."

"I didn't do anything," the child says.

Uncle Paul is in the feed room, standing over the table with his back to the child. The feed room is dark and empty and Uncle Paul's voice echoes when he says: "It's a fucking waste."

Then he turns around. He has something in his hand, but

the child can't make it out. But then he grabs onto her shoulders, pressing cold metal up against her collarbone. A gun.

"Did you see what happened to Henry?" His breath is warm and it smells sour.

The child imagines that he shoots her. She imagines blood oozing from her skin like it did from Henry's, she imagines it staining the cement. She imagines disappearing, going away for good. She imagines death.

"No."

Uncle Paul releases her, and the handle of the gun leaves a sore spot on the child's chest.

"I'm going to put Henry down," he says.

"He could get better."

"Don't be a fucking idiot," Uncle Paul says. "I know it was Joel."

"It was an accident," she says.

In these woods, there is a monster. It's lurking in the shadows that spread like disease on the ground, breathing as the wind blows. It's following the child as she runs over logs and mud puddles.

The red barn opens before her like a toothless mouth, releasing the foul stench of decay. Lines of red creep down the sides and the windows, like hollow eyes, stare down at the child.

She wonders if Aunt Liz is still in the barn, where Joel found her. Maybe she's hiding there still. Maybe she'll take the child in, comfort her like the last time the vet came. The child knows it will be safe there, that inside she will be away from the monster.

"Aunt Liz?" the child says. She doesn't expect an answer. When people are hiding, they don't answer. But she goes closer to the barn door this time, so close she can see the dark outlines of abandoned farm equipment. "Aunt Liz?"

The child takes a step into the red barn. She's going to hide. Hide with Aunt Liz.

Inside, piles of straw rise to the ceiling. In one corner there's an old saddle, its leather so worn that red stripes appear against the dull and crusted black. It's doesn't look like a place

anybody would live.

The child lies down in the straw. It's so quiet, quiet like a house during a thunderstorm, tucked into bed between the mother and the father, watching reruns of Star Trek. Outside there is a monster, but in here it's safe.

The child looks up and she sees a woman standing on the hayloft, her head turned to the sky. She wears a yellow dress that floats around her ankles. The only sound is the rustling of the straw as the woman stretches her foot over the edge of the loft. She looks towards the child, and then she disappears into the darkness.

"I won't tell anyone," the child says.

She digs her hands into the straw and she thinks of thunderstorms and stickers on pickup trucks and red plaid shirts and somewhere there is the clap of a gunshot and then there is silence.

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