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Red

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Red

Strands of grass reach up around Betty's feet and between her toes as she darts across the lawn. Willa races next to her, soft red ears and wet tongue flopping in time. This is what they always do together. Run.

The hands of the cool morning slide over Betty's face and bare arms as she counts out five hundred steps to the end of the driveway. Yesterday, she touched the silky petals of the white flower. Today, she triumphantly slaps down the purple flower's velvet head. It bobs until Willa snaps it into her mouth. Her yellowing teeth gnash the petals into a soft pulp as they walk back up the driveway together. Betty pats her curly head, knowing she likes eating the purple ones most.

At the top of the driveway, Betty takes the porch steps two at a time. They are pretty with the yellow pots and the red flowers, but the steps have big spiders nesting underneath them, ones with swollen bodies and strong thin legs. She likes her house and her yard, though, because it's "elegant." She had heard Jane call it that once. She doesn't like Jane, or any of Dad's girl friends, but she likes how "elegant" spins off her tongue. "Elegant," like castles are. White columns stretch up like marble tree trunks to hold up the house. It's black, and even though Betty supposes most castles are white, she likes having a different castle than other little girls. Twilight purple, dawn yellow, cloud white, and cotton candy flowers drape across the yard like a patchwork blanket, but only the ruby red flowers get to be close to the house because that is Mommy's favorite color. She likes the way her black castle looks with its flowery red moat.

A sparkling glass window surveys the driveway from the living room, and above it is Betty's bedroom window. It is her favorite place to sit in the whole house because she can see the swaying heads of flowers in the day and the whispering stars at night. Ever-growing ivy vines grasp the side of the house like hands cradling a baby; Betty can touch some of them if her window is

open.

This morning Mommy waits on the front porch, arms crossed as she leans into the marble column. She wears a stiff purple dress, her brown hair with the blonde highlights swirls around her shoulders. Strong black heels and lean crescents of light from the early morning sun accent the slope of her calves. Willa darts ahead to stand next to Mommy, quivering for attention. “Mom! Mommy, did you see how far Willa and I ran today? We got all the way to the end of the driveway!”

“Baby, how many times have I told you never to go that far?”

“I know, Mommy, but did you see me?” Mommy leans over and hooks a finger under Betty’s collar, pulling the cheap red cotton of her shirt taut. She catches a whiff of perfume, and identifies it as the favorite of all Mommy’s collection. It comes in a lean tube so thin it would shatter if the wrong fingers touch it, like something out of Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty.

“I saw you,” Mommy said. “And I don’t want to see you do it again. Now hurry up, you’re going to be late for school.” She lets go of Betty’s collar and walks back into the house, moving like water in her thick black heels. Betty rubs her fingertips in the soft fur behind Willa’s ear before darting inside the house, slamming the dense front door behind her on accident.

The walls inside are swamp green, and though there are plenty of large windows it is always dim. All over the house hang paintings of Red Setters that Betty’s mother and her family owned, even back before Mommy had been born. At the end of the hallway a painting of a regal dog looks down at anyone who walks through the front door. Betty named him Prince Charming—he is her own royal knight.

After Mommy thrusts lunch into Betty’s bright red backpack, she runs out of the house, off the porch, over the spiders, past the flowers, and down the driveway. She reaches to the road just as the bus pulls up. Before she climbs up the ridged metal steps into the mustard caterpillar bus, she turns to wave to Mommy, and maybe Dad too if he was looking. She didn’t see them before

the bus driver honked the horn at her and said she'd better hurry up or she'd learn something new before she got to school.

By the time Betty comes home at the end of the day, she is ready to run with Willa again. The mean bus driver opens the dusty doors with a hiss and she bustles past him, her backpack swinging against seats and other kids' shoulders. Once on the sidewalk, she lingers and watches it drive away. A tendril of wind tagging behind the bus plays with Betty's hair as dead leaves scuttle across the road. The flowers along the driveway nestle together, the fingertips of the grass fluttered. Betty pulled her red cardigan around her and put the hood up. The porch looks empty from the end of the driveway. Willa always waits on the porch for her to come home, right next to the marble tree trunk on the right, but she isn't there. Betty runs up the driveway, five hundred steps. She slams each small foot on the porch steps, trying not to think about the spiders swaying in their webs underneath. She glances behind her when she reaches the front door to make sure Willa isn't hiding and playing a trick, but only the wind follows. She decides to go inside to say hi to Mommy and ask where Willa went.

Betty puts a hand on the crisp, gold doorknob. It doesn't budge. She tries again, hands wringing the neck of the knob. She knocks on the door, waits. She knocks again, then walks to the living room window to see if someone is inside. The tips of her fingers rest on the ledge of the window as she stands on her toes to peek in. The dark shapes of Mommy and Dad move on the far side of the living room. A lamp in the corner sheds gold light, and Red Setters watch them from the walls. Mommy holds a glass of red wine in her hand, and stares at the wall behind Dad. He makes big movements with tight arms, his neck jutted out so their faces are close, but they don't kiss or smile. Then they freeze for a moment, angry bodies arched into each other, until he leans back. His shoulders relax. He reaches out with a slow hand and runs his fingers down the arc of Mommy's collarbone. He picks up her necklace and in the soft lamplight Betty sees it's her favorite, the one with pearls. They gleam pink in Dad's fingers as they dangle over the wine glass in Mommy's hand.

Betty thinks maybe now they'll kiss, and then she can tap her hand on the window and they'll open the door. Instead, Dad closes his hands around the necklace and pulls it from around Mommy's neck. Betty gasps as the pearls release from their strand, imagining the patter their bodies make as they hit the floor. She wants to run away and find Willa so they can chase each other down the driveway and not come back until the pearls re restrung and the door unlocked. But just before she steps away from the window, another shape enters the living room—it wasn't Willa. It was Jane.

Betty unshoulders her pack and props it against the side of the house. She doesn't want them to see her, or know that she saw them or the rupture of the pearl necklace. She skitters off the porch and down the steps, calling for Willa. Hot red tears sting in her eyes as she glances under the porch, but all she sees are the swaying spiders. She pounds back up the porch steps and slams herself into the door, only to have it swing open under her weight, as if someone hadn't closed it all the way. Betty picks herself up from the floor as Prince Charming looks past her like he had expected more than a little girl to come through the door.

She walks to the end of the hall and peers into the living room. Pearls are strewn about the floor like wilted petals, but the lamp is off. She turns around and patters to her bedroom, slow on the stair steps so she won't be heard. She swings open her bedroom door on silent hinges and exhales in the relief of her own room. She decides to sit in her favorite spot in the whole house and look for Willa. She will watch the wind thread through the flowers and blow away the blue sky until the stars appear. She will wait for her mom to come find her and tell her that Willa is waiting downstairs, that Jane is never coming back, and that Daddy will eat dinner with them.

Then she notices. Her bright red wallpaper is torn in sharp slivers from floor to ceiling, the dark wood bones of the house showing beneath. Her red blankets are gone too, and the drawers in her dresser lay empty on the floor. A few white t-shirts and tattered jeans lurk in the corners like agitated cats. Betty walks past her bed, now nothing more than a naked white mattress,

and sees Daddy in his little blue car out the window, driving away. A thin white arm holds a fluttering red scarf out the passenger window. Suddenly she notices a little brown animal sprinting after the car. It stops at the end of the driveway, and Willa—it must be her—nips at the front tires. Suddenly the car accelerates, and the slim arm snaps the red scarf back into the car as the tires scream while they drive away.

Betty's floor creaks—Mommy stands in the doorway. She holds the glass of wine in her left hand, curled next to her breast like a small animal. In her right she clutches a handful of lacey red fabric, fragile and forbidden. Mommy unfolds her elegant left elbow and sips her wine. She pauses with the rim of the glass hovering near her lip and glances around Betty's room.

"I've always hated the color red," she whispers as the wine slips between her lips.