

“Searching for Fairytales”

by

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I can't see anymore. The light that stretched under the door, the one that made little finger-shaped shadows on the floor, is gone. As long as it was there I could pretend like it was a hand. My daddy's hand. Or maybe even my mommy's hand. A hand that was pointing everyone to me. But now I am afraid. Not of the dark, because I am seven now and seven year olds aren't afraid of the dark, Mommy says. But Briar still is. She leaves our closet light on every night and she'll hit me if I say anything about it. So I never do.

I am scared that no one will ever find me. That I will die in this closet like when Grandma died in her bed. I wasn't there, but Briar told me she was curled up in a ball, eyes wide, lips pursed open like she was sucking an invisible thumb. Briar wasn't there either, so I don't know how she knows this. But I'll probably die just like that today, only I will be sucking a real thumb and I'll be curled onto a dirty floor, next to Daddy's old work boots. Not the ones that he died in, but the old ones, the ones he bought just two days before the accident. The ones Mommy said were fine and how come he wanted to waste all our money on shoes he don't need when the girls need food, huh? I want to tell Daddy that I think these shoes are fine, too.

Outside, I can hear Briar humming, lalala hmmdeedahdah, under her breath. That scares me more than what she said earlier. "You better not make one little sound. I'll make you pay, Ariel. I'll make you pay," she hissed, before shoving me inside our hall closet and slamming the door. If she's humming this means she really doesn't care about what she's doing, that shutting me in a closet doesn't bother her, not one bit. And if no one ever finds me she prob'ly will still be hmmdeedahdah-ing all day long.

And if I do make a sound, she will really make me pay. The last time she made me pay--because I ate the last chocolate chip cookie and left her with yucky oatmeal

raisin--she pulled off my Barbie's head, threw the body down the balcony and her head down the toilet. When I cried to my brother, Adam, he just shook his head and said that Barbie deserved a worse way to die instead of being tossed downstairs naked. This didn't make me feel better.

Adam doesn't know I'm gone yet. If he did then of course he'd look for me. He likes me best, I'm sure. Because when Briar picks on me, he always lets me cry and he doesn't blame me like Mommy does when something bad happens. Like when Briar messed with the weird smelly cigarettes in his dresser and then tried to blame me, he didn't believe her at all. Also, he never confuses me and Briar even though sometimes Mommy does when she wakes up too early or when she only just barely looks at one of us. "No, Mommy, I'm the prettiest twin, remember?" Briar says when Mommy does this. And Mommy always laughs. But Adam has never ever ever called me Briar and so I like him best, too.

I can hear dishes clanking and water running from outside my closet. Adam is busy then, making the macaroni from the box with little hot dogs cut up inside. I whisper out a promise that if Adam finds me soon, I will not complain and eat all my dinner, even though we have had macaroni from the box with little hot dogs cut up inside for six days this week over and over. I don't complain anyways because Adam says Mommy's heart is sad and it's forgot how to cook. But I think Adam's heart must've always been sad because he could never cook anything besides box macaroni.

Something whistles in the dark behind me. I whimper. Not too loud, because I don't want to pay. My knees are almost over my head and my eyes are wide, wide in the dark.

"Briar, Ariel, dinner's ready."

Briar's lalala hmmmdeedahdah cuts off right in the middle of the dee. Everything is quiet for one second, even the whistling monster behind me is waiting. Then Briar walks right past my closet and into the kitchen. The monster whistles again. I almost scream, but then I don't.

"I hate macaroni and hot dogs," I hear Briar sniff. "I want potatoes."

"Too bad, Cruella. Eat up."

"I. Hate. Macaroni."

"Don't. Start. Eat."

Their voices float on the darkness and splatter into my ears. I won't complain, I won't complain, I won't complain, I chant in my head. *Findme findme findme.*

"Where's your sister?"

Was that squeak me? Or did it come from some new rat monster?

"She ran away! She hates macaroni too!"

"Ariel!"

Adam calls my name over and over and over again, his voice getting louder and softer and louder and softer. Then he stops. Oh no.

The monsters close in on me, press their sticky ghoully shadow fingers all over my body and around my throat so that I almost can't breathe and definitely can't scream.

"Ariel?"

This voice is different. Softer and hoarser at the same time. “Mommy,” I gasp. Adam woke up Mommy even though her heart’s still so so sad.

“Ariel,” she sobs.

“Don’t worry, Mommy, I’ll find her. Ariel! Ariel!” All of a sudden the closet door creaks open and there is Briar, blinking down at me. “I found her.” Adam and my mommy rush over and I know what they must be seeing. A kiddy version of grandma, thumb in my mouth, eyes wide and wet, knees up to my shoulders, shadow monsters crawling all over me.

Mommy’s nails dig into my shoulders as she pulls me up and shakes me extra hard. The kind of shake you should never ever do with babies and small puppies.

“How could you do that to me? How could you? What did I do to deserve such an ungrateful child? Huh? HUH? WhatdidIdowhatdidIdowhatdidIdo?” She is screaming and shaking me and finally Adam has to pull her away and lead her back to her room, Mommy looking so tiny as she sobs into Adam’s shoulder. Briar goes off, because she doesn’t care if she’s not the one in trouble.

When Adam comes back his eyes zap and burn me. “Why didn’t you just come out, Ariel?” he demands. “That door doesn’t lock. Why didn’t you just come out?” He doesn’t wait for my answer, just walks right into the kitchen and smacks Briar in the back of the head. Her eyes fill with tears. “The next time you lock your sister up, I’m gonna make your life hell, you understand?”

Briar begins to cry but doesn’t say anything. Adam pays her no mind, just zaps us both with his laser eyes and tells us to eat. And like I promised, I don’t complain, just keep quiet as I taste box macaroni with little cut up hot dogs inside for the seventh time this week.

When it is bedtime, I peek into Adam’s room. It smells weird and is always messy, even though he doesn’t have much, just a bed and a dresser and a stereo. Music is playing.

“Go to bed, Ariel.” He always knows when I’m here, even without looking.

I walk right up to him. “Will...will you tuck us in, Adam?”

Adam’s back gets super straight like a stick or like spaghetti when it’s not cooked yet. He turns and looks right at me. “I’m not Dad, Ariel.”

“I know—“ My voice is small so he doesn’t even hear me.

“I’m not here to do everything for you and Briar. You’re not a baby, Ariel. So grow up.”

“I—“

Adam’s voice stabs me. “I’m busy! Go to bed!” He looks down at his papers, covered with Xs and Ys and numbers and dashes with dots and stuff. I wonder if Adam’s heart is as sad as Mommy’s, because it doesn’t look like any alphabet I’ve ever seen and I think if people start writing in gibb’rish it could definitely mean a sad sad heart.

I leave Adam alone and go to tuck myself in. On the way I peek into my mommy’s room, but she is lying down and quiet. I don’t think she is sleeping, but I don’t want to bother her in case this is her fairy tale time.

I don't think Adam knows because he is a boy and boys like boy things like cars and stupid loud music and transformers and stuff. But I figured it out all on my own, how Mommy's always looking for fairy tales.

Adam's Adam, the beast from Beauty and The Beast. The Beast was all mean and ugly and hairy, which isn't like my brother at all, but there it is. One time I heard Adam say that Mommy trapped Daddy 'cause she loved him so much. I think he said he was the trap. So maybe that's why his name is Adam. Because the Beast traps Belle there in his life just like Mommy maybe trapped Daddy in this one.

I think Mommy got me and Briar mixed up though. Ariel's the tough princess, who always *always* fought with her parents and wanted to see the world and play with forks and stuff. Briar Rose was the cursed princess. The one who was supposed to sleep forever and had to live in the woods with old ladies so she didn't prick her finger. But in real life, Briar's the tough one. She argues and fights and always wants to go places and know things. I'd like to sleep for a long time, and I wouldn't mind living in the forest, because one time Daddy took us all camping and it was so much fun even if all Briar did was complain and complain and complain.

Mommy probably likes fairy tales so much because in the end everyone always gets to be happy forever and live only with the people they like and no one's ever trapped or cursed and they get to live far far away, wherever that is. And no one ever ever dies and leaves people behind with sad sad hearts.

I turn off the light in me and Briar's bedroom. Briar squeaks and runs to turn our closet light on, then runs back to bed. "Don't you tell, Ariel. I'll make you pay," she hisses. *I won't*, I almost say, but don't.

It's a long time later and I am about to fall asleep even though I haven't been tucked in, when I hear Mommy crying again. I cover my ears because if I don't I'll cry too. I gasp when I feel a sharp pinch on my arm. Briar is standing by my bed, blinking down at me. I move over and she slides into bed with me. She presses all the way against me and lets me hug her and she hugs me right back. I think about Mommy's fairy tales and how she got me and Briar's names wrong. I know that Ariel's the tough princess but Briar is the tough twin, but only when it's really dark and our closet light is on and Mommy is crying and we are all alone does Briar let me be the strong one like I'm supposed to.

And even though I can't see him, I can hear little sounds in the hallway and I know he's there. He doesn't want to be Daddy, and he won't ever tuck us in, but I know Adam stands out there watching over us every night, like a wall between my mother's crying and ours.

And I wonder if he is crying too.