

Attic

by Lauren Sallans

The house was normal, a plain house painted blend-in-beige like any other modest family on their street. It wasn't haunted by anything other than the unflappable curiosities of a 6-year-old daughter, Emily, but that was exorcised well enough by the helicoptering of two, stern but loving parents.

"Stay here," Her father told her, hiking the stairs leading up to the square-shaped gap in the ceiling, "The attic is dangerous, there's spiders, and you could hurt yourself. Okay?"

Emily nodded, there were few things frightening enough to snuff out the flame of her mischievous nature—spiders were one of them. So, she stood and watched her father bring down box after box from the attic, stacking them on top of each other on the ground. While her father was occupied with grabbing the last box, and she was out of his sight, she lifted the lid off of one of the dirty cardboard boxes.

The contents were confusing: blue blankets, fleece onesies with dinosaur print, perfectly folded blue bibs with little airplanes flying on them. Surely, none of this was meant for her? She thought back on every item of clothing her parents had ever given her, and it was a blur of pinks, purples, reds, princess crowns and fairy wands. Whose were these?

"Ah!" Her father, receding backwards down the stairs caught sight of her rummaging, nearly dropping the box in his hands from shock, "These aren't for you to touch, sweetheart."

The "sweetheart" was tacked onto the end of his sentence like an afterthought, voice laced with irritation.

"Who are those for?"

“Charity. They’re going to charity. All of these boxes are just clothes, boring stuff. So, run along.” He spoke far too fast to comprehend, and placed a hand on Emily’s back, shoving ever so lightly to urge her in the direction of her bedroom, “They’re dirty, I don’t need help cleaning up.”

Emily took that as her cue to leave, but before turning the corner of the hall, she watched her father fold the clambering stairs back up into the attic and shut the latch. A bead of sweat dripped down his temple, in the middle of a winter evening.

That night, she saw the wire hanging from the attic’s latch swing in the breezeless air like a metronome, begging to be pulled. All she’d have to do is jump up, yank it, let the retractable ladder slink out, and climb it. Simple enough. But she hesitated, listening for a sound to pique her curiosity until she couldn’t resist any longer. In the dead of night, she couldn’t hear anything except the ringing in her own ears, brain desperately trying to fill in the silence. The achingly yank-able chord to the attic door stopped dead in its tracks, stopping its swinging as abruptly as it had started.

A scratching sound rung out, small enough that anyone who wasn’t trying to listen wouldn’t hear. The type of noise that would grant you funny looks if you’d asked, “Did you hear that?” to anyone around you. Quiet, invisible, but overwhelming like the smell of gas in the air. A scratch, then a shuffle. Two sounds that would mean nothing to anyone other than the wide-eyed 6-year-old staring up at the ceiling, pajama-clad and barefooted on the bone-achingly cold, wood floor of the hall. Two sounds that were enough to give in to temptation.

If she stood on her tippy toes, she could just barely knock a finger against the tip of the chord, all it would take was a little jump...

She hopped up, careful to keep her feet arched and light as to not fill the sleeping house with the sounds of her disobedience. She pinched the chord between her fingers, and tugged, sending the rickety ladder down in a flash of splinters. She caught it before it slammed into the ground. Up she went, climbing rung after rung, one foot in front of the other, every limb shaky with anticipation.

Reaching the very top, she poked her head into the opening, squinting eyes trying to adjust to see in the dark of the attic. More shuffling sounds followed, louder, more frantic this time. Everything was black in her vision, until she heard something, someone, turn around. Cutting through all the black, the whites of two eyes glinted back at her.

A sudden grab to her ankle made her scream, and she stumbled. She gasped, preparing to hit the ground hard, but instead, she tumbled down into her father's arms.

"What are you doing? I told you not to go up there." Whether her father was angry, or scared, Emily couldn't tell.

"Nothing." She answered. But just before she'd been snatched down, she could've sworn she'd seen the outline of a small figure crouched in the dark.