

"Hide and Seek"
By Giselle Martell

The orphanage wasn't the same without Emily, despite her body still wandering the halls.

Ever since she was called into Ms. Delphi's office, she spent her time around me with no purpose but one: to play games. Emily followed me like a shadow, despite her skin now gleaming translucent in the sunlight. Among the plethora of chores that had to be done, and my lack of rest, I found no motivation to entertain the idea. It was a rather tame change; perhaps Ms. Delphi had sternly scolded her for causing trouble, but it was undoubtedly a strange outcome.

When dinner rolled around and I finished gathering the trash from the second floor, Emily disappeared. As I made my way down, the wallpaper repulsively smelled of rotting sap, as if a tree had cried its final revenge against the stale air. The handyman was supposed to replace it, but a sudden illness befell him, leaving everyone to inhale the fading colors.

I arrived at the entrance of the cafeteria, where a crowd of orphans greeted me. Murmurs through the hall carried the information that had been taped to the door.

There was no food.

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The slapping footsteps cut the majority of the chatter, but the sharp chords of a clearing throat silenced the corridor. Ms. Delphi loomed as tall as a doorframe, her eyes darting across every face, yet she never met anyone's gaze. Then, her eyes suddenly became fixed on someone beside me, and she gave a long grin with eyes that only seemed to widen.

I turned to see Emily standing beside me, the hairs on the back of my neck intermingling with my choppy hair. Emily's wrist clicked unnaturally as she motioned a short wave.

"Bear this hunger a little while longer," Ms. Delphi bellowed in a monotonous voice, unfitting her expression. "Tomorrow's delivery will provide us with more sustenance."

As abrupt as her arrival, she scurried past us down the way I came. She lowered her eyes in a glance toward me, but her eyes seemed darker and menacing.

"Did you want to play a game now?" Emily asked.

I sighed.

As soon as my chin reached my chest in a nod, Emily clapped.

"Let's play hide and seek. You can hide first!" Emily shouted excitedly. And before I could object or ask any questions, she bolted down the hall and slammed her head against the

wall with a thud. I was about to ask if she was okay, but she counted upwards loudly, in a mocking tone.

I rushed down the corridor and up the stairs, determined to find a hiding spot that would avoid my quick capture. I settled for Mary's bed, a younger girl who hid an army of stuffed animals underneath the frame, providing cover from suspicious eyes. I crawled underneath and fixed a small plush rabbit under my head for comfort.

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I awoke to the sound of someone skipping down the hallway.

I tried to widen my eyes, but I realized that the room was completely dark. As my vision slowly started to adjust, I noticed a pair of feet standing at the foot of the bed. At first, I thought it might have been Mary, but the ankles were too slim and tall for an eight-year-old. I stared for a couple of seconds, wondering what the person was doing, until I heard a giggle above me.

My skin crawled as a pair of eyes glared at me, yet I couldn't find from where they peered. I slowly tilted my head up, careful not to move the taxidermied mascots and characters that surrounded me. A bald silhouette hung upside down from the edge of the mattress, five thin strings from the old pillowcase swaying from a shallow breath. The face was darkened by the shadow of moonlight glowing behind, erasing any human features.

My leg jerked, crushing my toes with a firm kick to the wall. A loud knock echoed with a thin, shrill cry that sounded overhead. As a distant skipping grew near, I pushed myself deeper into the corner of the wall. The long legs scurried out of the room with a slight slapping sound against the wood floor, revealing a short naked torso.

I tried to muffle my anxious breaths until I saw the peculiar form of a child skipping down the hallway. I pushed the stuffed animals aside and dragged myself from under the bed. When I stood, Mary was soundly sleeping with a teddy bear wrapped around her arms. Slowly, I made my way toward the door and peered around the corner. The window at the end of the corridor flashed a dim yellow from the flickering lamppost out front.

My feet stepped ahead, allowing gravity to sway me toward my room as I leaned against the wall. I snapped my head back and forth between my two sides and occasionally glanced at the staircase that led to the first floor.

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A pair of feet scampered up the stairs, causing my legs to jump into the open doorway and hide behind the wall. I shut my eyes as the scattering steps rushed past and around to the other side of the building. My shallow breaths forced my lungs to tighten, so I opened my eyes and tried to stare ahead.

A mirror hung over a short sink. It reflected me pressed up against the wall, as well as a short figure with a crudely long neck standing at the doorway. I jerked my head to the doorway.

Flick

The bathroom light turned on, blinding me.

“There you are,” Emily said unenthusiastically.

I gasped in a breath of relief.

“The sun’s coming up. Were you still hiding?”

Pat

Pat

Pat

A sudden shiver ran down my spine as Ms. Delphi peered her head in and looked at me.

“There you are. I’ve been searching for you all night.”