

Move

Two of these walls are green. One is blue. Both hues are pastel. Atop the comforter with geometric shapes is a young boy, ten years old, curled tightly into ball and napping restlessly. The sheets of the bed are all wrinkled because two little boys have just been jumping, wrestling on them. Shaggy brown hair covers his face. There are glow-in-the-dark stars patterned on the ceiling to keep him company at night and protect from the monster he is sure sleeps under the bed. He can smell its rotting breath when he is trying to sleep.

The wooden door has a hole in it; no one really is very sure where that came from. The door is hollow, and a collection of items have been tossed into the gaping space. A toy car, a pen. They sit at the bottom, clanking every time the door slams shut. Through it, sometimes shouting can be heard. Angry voices climbing over each other then falling into eerie silence.

Socks have been stripped off and flung carelessly into the closet, not quite making the hamper. Contributing to the clutter on the floor is the doctor's kit dragged in days ago by little brother, stethoscope twisted around plastic reflex hammer. Big brother indulges the little one and lets him diagnose all sorts of scary diseases. On weekends all of these objects can be seen trembling ever so slightly with the booming stereo emanating from the garage below. Thrashing bass on Saturdays, sports announcers on Sundays. The boy's father likes to crank loudly with tools he flings around the room. He prefers to stay in bed on these days. It puts more distance between himself and all the clatter below.

CD's spill across the dresser that the boy and his mom painted: white, to make the room brighter. It was a special project and they stayed up all night eating chocolate chip cookies while they worked. Slid behind the dresser is a shoebox with a constellation of things the boy pulls out to touch a lot. Toys that belonged to a shaggy little dog, seashells from the time he saw the ocean, ribbons from school. The boy takes these out and spreads them across the rug, feels the ridges of seashells

and the smoothness of ribbons. They are solid, easy to hold. He likes this feeling, grasping a memory in the palm of his hand. He reorganizes the objects and places them carefully back into the box, returning them safely to their place behind the dresser. On the dresser is a walkie talkie: it is used to talk to the little brother even though they share a wall. They tell jokes, and giggles emanate from the device's speakers. The boy does not like to open the door very often; he is afraid the clamoring voices will make their way in. Sometimes, it is more than just voices. On occasion, he can hear loud, sudden sounds. Car doors slamming, he pretends.

Late at night when the house is quiet, wispy remnants of angry words dissipate and seep into the walls, staining them the way smoke clings to a jacket. Every so often, the door with the hole in it can be heard creaking gently open and shut. Small footsteps patter across the floor and blankets are shifted. The two boys fall asleep together, snuggling with each other and the company of stuffed animals slumbering on the bed.

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One afternoon, mom is at work and the monster is unpredictable. A trembling storm cloud. He is currently sat at the kitchen table, trying to teach eight-year-old little brother a card game, but it is a confusing one, with lots of rules. The breaking of rules is not acceptable.

“Okay, so now I go?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.” There is smoke seeping from the nostrils as little brother makes a move. “No, see now you’re cheating. You can’t play that one, are you trying to cheat?”

“Why can’t I put this one down? I thought you said – “

“If you aren’t going to at least try to understand, then stay in your room all fucking day,” with a swipe, the cards are flung from the table. Little brother begins to tear up. He wobbles in the chair. It is difficult when he does not understand. Big brother can’t stand to watch.

“You’re being mean, he doesn’t understand this game. He’s eight, it’s confusing to him.”

“Are you giving me attitude?”

One moment, a question. Then, the toaster that was plugged in on the counter next to the table is ripped out of the wall. It smashes next to big brother’s head, and the chair is on the floor. Big brother says nothing. He takes little brother upstairs, tucks him into bed. He is shaking now. Walks out the front door.

Down the road from the small townhouse there is a family video store. It’s June, and June is when the air tastes sweet on the tongue. He squeezes eyes shut and breathes in sugar on the breeze. To keep the nausea at bay. He comes onto the freestanding video store that stands in the center of a lonely street. No passersby around, he ventures in to find the store itself just as free of people. There are rows and rows and rows of movies. Some of them play on small screens around the store. There is even a bean bag chair in front of one of the screens. He sits down. He does not know anything about the movie on the tiny television. There is blood. He watches. Watches for hours. Does not leave, does not speak to the employees with wary eyes, just stares at the screen and squishes the tips of his fingers into the pellets of the chair. When the clerk comes over to ask where his parents are, to tell him that he has to go home, he is crying.

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Here there is no little brother, just a picture of him. Here there is community college and a small shared bedroom in a rickety house, and the picture on the nightstand. A reminder of the little brother, who is not so little anymore, still stuck at home with a monster lurking. In it, little brother is a toddler with feathery white-blond hair peeking out from underneath a bucket hat. He sits in a garden, surrounded by daisies and tulips. The walls of this rented room are white, but there are cracks in the paint, and dents from years of being lived in. It feels more like home than the place where the boy grew up. He hangs prints on his walls; *The Wave*, goes up first. His favorite. He admires the intimidating nature of the water, the way it bends and lurches and froths.

The room is at ground level, and the window allows voices to trail their way in at night. Excited gibberish of passersby float in to lull him to sleep. Fragments of conversations, snapshots of other lives. There are still dirty socks spread all over the floor; he usually misses the hamper. Some of them land on top of the box fan set up to keep the sultry summer heat at bay in the absence of air conditioning. Things are haphazardly strewn all around most days, but the disorganization doesn't bother him. There is no one to be angry at his messiness. The night stand and the dresser were left behind by the last person who lived here. They don't match. He doesn't care. He thinks it is charming. The space is his.

Sometimes there is a girl here. She has a flower tattoo that covers her right shoulder. The boy traces it with the tip of his finger and then they fall asleep holding hands. She asks him about the little brother on his nightstand, the monster he still fears might be under his bed. He finds it is comforting to tell those stories, even the painful ones. It is like breathing out a sigh that has been stuck in the back of the throat for years. Most nights, now, as he stares into the dark before falling asleep, he still wonders about the rotting breath. He imagines he might smell it, faintly, even here. He wonders how little brother can stand it. Then morning comes, and the sunlight dances across the small space, and he pads into the kitchen for coffee.

Once, little brother comes to visit in the car he saved up for over the last summer. He does not speak much of home and asks of big brother's life instead. Big brother cannot find the words he wants to say. Sentences stumble clunkily out of his mouth, so they decide to eat popcorn and watch their favorite tv show on a laptop set between them on the bed. At night, the little brother goes to the closet for a sweatshirt to sleep in. On the floor, he spots a shoebox.

"What's this?" He asks.

Big brother glances his way, “Ah. Bunch of random stuff from when we were little,” popcorn garbling his words. The younger one pulls the box out and sits on the bed with it, removing the top. He pulls out an old tennis ball.

“Was this Chewie’s?” He smiles, tossing it in the air and catching it.

“Mhm” Big brother joins him. He pulls something else out of the box. “This is one of the seashells from the beach we went to in Florida,” he frowns at himself for keeping it after all these years. Remembers the way that vacation ended. Little brother and big brother each with an arm around mom, all holding back tears alone in a hotel room together. He wonders why these things ever felt important to him. If little brother remembers the same things he does. He palms the seashell anyway, slips it into his pocket.

“You know,” he pushes the box into little brother’s arms, “why don’t you take this back to the house with you? I don’t need it taking up space here.”

“Yeah?” The younger one asks.

“Yeah.”

The two fall asleep, curled together like they did when they were little.

In the morning, little brother hesitates on the porch, sharing a messy, one armed hug with big brother.

“You’ll call? If you need...” Big brother starts.

“I’ll call.” Little brother assures, because what else is there to be said?

After little brother leaves, the boy goes for a walk. Down a street he has never explored in this still new town. Wandering past the coffee shops and record stores and vintage clothing places, he stumbles onto a tiny video rental. He stands in front of the store, wondering how it stays in business. The old, blinking sign reads “Family Video.” It looks like a cramped, tiny place; much

different from the one he used to live down the street from. He wanders inside, the door groaning as he pulls it open. The lighting is low, casting a yellow pallor on the half empty shelves of videos. There is only one screen here, playing a film he does not recognize loudly. There are two small chairs for children to sit in. He crouches down, takes the seashell out of his pocket, and sets it carefully on the chair.