

I hate the sound of my parents' laughter. They're so dorky and embarrassing, I could just die! I can't even have a bowl of cereal before school without them embarrassing me. My dad actually laughed so hard he snorted like a pig! And that made my mom start braying like a donkey!

"Do you always have to laugh like that?" I asked. But they didn't listen to me. They never listen to me. They're such goofballs.

"Lighten up, Jesse!" My dad demanded. "It's a funny story if you listened."

"Maybe I wouldn't have to listen if you two took your parenting duties more seriously!"

"Okay, now what is that even supposed to mean?" My mom asked.

"I'm just saying that you two had a hundred years to be goofy losers before becoming parents. Why should I suffer?"

"How exactly is our laughter affecting you so tragically?"

"The sounds are erratic, mother!"

Honk, honk.

"That's the bus, Jesse." My dad said quietly. "Don't miss it."

School is so lame. I don't need some farty forty-year-old man trying to teach me about trench foot in World War II. Like, if I found and renovated an abandoned, dilapidated house into a livable home, I'd have a legal case for squatter's rights. With property, I could emancipate myself from my parents. Why aren't they teaching me about that?

Also, the girls in this town have no fashion sense. It's so pathetic. I rush out of useless World History so I can meet my BFF Kensie. She is practically the only exception to lameness in this town. She's super stylish and smart because her older brother is a homo in New York City. I wish I had a homo older brother.

Anyways, Kensie and I sat at lunch not eating, even though it was stuffed crust pizza day in the cafeteria, and ragging on Marty Joint for his snot nose during history.

"Oh my God," Kensie said, "Marisa is coming over here."

Marisa Tonei is my mortal enemy. She's always competing with me. Last year, the school put on Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" for the spring play. Naturally, I auditioned for the lead. And, naturally, I was cast.

Then Marisa ran her fat mouth to her mom about how unfair it was to cast a boy as Juliet! Even though I was the prettiest and most vulnerable in audition process! Boys played girls all the time in Shakespeare times, FYI.

Then her mom went to the schoolboard and the Christian Groups. So, I sought out the Queers, because, as we know, my parents are useless goofballs. Anyway, it got super-heated.

Eventually, Mrs. Zbornak decided to cancel “Romeo and Juliet” and mount “The Pajama Game” to avoid controversy.

“Hi, Jesse! Nice outfit.” Marisa said with sneer. “My older sister has the same blouse.”

“Thanks, Marisa.”

“She bought it four years ago.”

“Oh? Back when she wasn’t stupid like you?”

“Calm down, sis.” Marisa chided. Her satellite friends giggled. They all thought they were classy because they covered their mouths when they laughed. “We just wanted to know what you were doing after the game tonight.”

I grinned triumphantly. “Oh, well, I could have been rehearsing as Juliet but you and your Christian mommy ruined that.”

Kensie laughed, as she should.

“You couldn’t be Juliet, Jessie!”

“I earned that role!”

“Whatever! That was last year. Look, we’re breaking into that empty house on Elm Street tonight. It’s haunted.”

I scoffed, “I don’t believe in ghosts. Or God.”

“Then prove it. Unless you’re too chicken.” Marisa smirked before walking away.

After lunch, school should just end. Teachers get so rude. They don’t want to be there either, so they’re mean to us.

Thank God I had study hall with Jake. He’s the quarterback, so everyone loves him. I think he likes me because I tell it like it is.

“Hey, Jake, what are you doing after the game?”

“I think the guys want to party on Jerry’s farm. His parents don’t care what we do unless we lose, then we can’t get too loud.”

“Marisa invited me to some ghost house.”

“The empty house on Elm Street?”

“Yeah, probably. Why?”

“You’ve never heard the legend?”

“Legends are stupid, I prefer fashion... Are you going to come?”

“Nah! I’d rather party than deal with that spooky shit. You shouldn’t either.”

“Oh, I know. But Marisa challenged me publicly, and I’d be a total chickenshit lameo if I let her get away with it.”

I made him laugh so loud that the librarian had to shush us.

Kensie and I snuck out of the game early to meet Marisa and her boring friends. Why didn’t Marisa like me? She’s so cool, and I’m much cooler than her friends. They suck.

The empty house on Elm Street was overgrown with weeds. The windows and doors were boarded up, and names were spray-painted across the dirty exterior. The roof had caved in long ago and there were stuffed animal offerings in varying degrees of weathering.

“This is so gross, Marisa. I’m going to get pneumonia or something from black mold if I go in there.”

“In the 1950s, a boy our age named Joey Ghostberg went missing. The parents and the police searched and searched but he was never found again. The mom totally lost her marbles, and she started trying to lure neighborhood kids inside, as if she was trying to replace her son.”

“So, all these creepy teddy bears are for little Joey?”

“No, Even after the mom’s death, kids continued to report a woman in vintage clothes trying to lure them into the house. Every decade since, at least one kid has gone missing. Taken by the grieving Ghost Mom. The names on the house are the kids that went missing in there.”

I read the names, but I actually didn't believe Marisa's story.

"Okay. So, what are the terms of the deal?" I asked. "I want to get this over with... Jake's probably waiting for me."

"Well then, he's going to be waiting for all eternity! You're going to go in there for ten minutes."

"Five minutes."

"Fine. Five minutes."

"And then you're going to go in for five minutes."

"No way!"

"Yes way! You can't challenge me to do something you won't do! That's beyond boogerish! Are you kidding me?"

"Okay, five minutes! We'll go in together."

"Fine. It'll be quicker. By the way, I'm not scared."

"I'm not neither."

"You so are."

We climbed onto the porch and approached the boarded-up front door.

"Are we so dense that no one brought a hammer?" I asked.

"Shut up, Jesse! Just try."

Gross, I already needed hand sanitizer. To Marisa's credit, the boards came off surprisingly easily. The door swung open on its own, and I'll admit I felt a chill staring into that dark, empty house. Marisa turned on her flashlight and I wasn't reassured. It was dusty, dirty, and decrepit. Ravaged by time, weather, and vandalization. Used needles littered the floor.

Marisa and I stepped inside and wandered into the foyer.

The door slammed shut!

Marisa and I ran to the door, but it wouldn't open. We screamed, and I heard Kensie screaming back from the other side. We began banging on the door and Marisa dropped her flashlight, leaving us in darkness.

Suddenly, lights came on and retro song played from another room. I looked around and the house was transformed. It was vintage, but when vintage was modern! I shuddered taking in my kitschy new surroundings.

“Oh, fuck.” I whimpered.

“We’re totally inside Joey Ghostberg’s house.” Marisa was so scared that she was crying.

My heart dropped when I noticed the photos on the wall. Me at three years old. A woman holding a twin boy and girl. Marisa at eight years old. Both of us in matching little sailor outfits!

“It’s not Joey Ghostberg’s house, Marisa. It’s our house now!”

For some reason, Marisa started following the music.

“Marisa, what is your malfunction?” I asked, but she didn’t respond. \

I didn’t know if it was hypnosis or what, but I pounded on that front door as hard as I could, desperate to make my escape. The ghost mom already had one Joey with Marisa, she didn’t need me!

“Darling! You’re home!” I heard a woman say after Marisa entered the other room. I snuck over to the doorway and peeked inside.

“And what is your name, sweetheart.”

“Marsia Tonei, but it’s spelled with an I.”

“Oh my! Absolutely. But these clothes, my darling? I swear, you children have such misguided views on how to style yourselves. Now, where is your brother?”

“I got three brothers. Mikey, Massi, and Marco.”

“Oh you!” The Ghost Mom’s eyes looked directly at me. I gasped and stumbled back. “Darling, there you are. Are you feeling shy?”

“No, I’m not feeling shy, you whacko ghost!” I said. “I’m feeling freaked out, and I want to go home now!”

“That attitude.” The music stopped. The room ran cold. “I will not accept such impudent behavior, young man!”

Before I could blink, The Ghost Mom had crossed the room.

She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me upstairs. Her grip was so cold I literally screamed when touched me. The longer she touched me, the more it burned. It burned like holding frozen metal, and I didn't even realize I was still screaming until my vocal cords cracked.

She pulled me into a pretty pink bathroom and sat me on the toilet.

"Naughty Boy." She said, turning the water and running a bar of soap under it.

"Look, Lady, I'm warning you, you better not –"

She plunged the bar of soap in my mouth, scrubbing my tongue despite my fight against her. When she was done washing out my mouth, she let me collapse and stepped back as I barfed up the soap.

"When you are ready to behave yourself like a good boy, you will change and join your sister and myself downstairs for your homecoming celebration."

I just glared at her until she was gone. Then, I washed my face and primped in the mirror before going into the hallway. A door at the end of the hall opened, and I assumed it was for me.

In the pictures on the wall, I was wearing a gross baseball uniform. Number 17? Number 17?! The walls were blue with a stupid, tacky baseball motif. Baseball? Team sports? I don't know if you can tell, but I don't play well with others.

The clothes made me angry, but I changed into them anyway. I just didn't want the ghost mom to punish me again. Even though I looked like a total goober!

"Jessee! Marisa! Dinner!" The Ghost Mom called. I walked out of the room. At the same time, Marisa walked out of her room. Dressed like a dork with pigtails and a fluffy pink dress.

"You look so dumb." I couldn't help but laugh.

"Shut up, Jesse! You're so obnoxious. This is serious!"

"Yeah, well, you're the one who walked into the living room. What was that about?"

"The ghost hypnotized me, moron! But I'm back now, okay? We can't live like this, Jessee. And I'm so, so sorry for daring you come to this stupid house. It's just, I wanted to scare you or like tease you because you're always so nonplused and cool and you never care. But I just wanna be friends with you, and we're not friends. And I hate it!"

“You think I’m cool?”

“Of course I do, Jesse. And you would have been a really good Juliet.”

“Thank you, I know. And you are the only bitch in this whole town who I genuinely, truly... acknowledge.”

“You’re such an asshole, Jesse! Hold me!”

Marisa and I hugged and sobbed at our miserable situation. Suddenly, a chill ran through me, and I felt the cold, still embrace of death wrap around us.

“My babies!” The Ghost Mom whispered to us.

I made a sound like this: HHHGGUUN! Marisa just started screaming and screaming and shoving! The Ghost Mom tried to calm her but that only made it worse.

“Don’t touch me, lady! Don’t touch me, lady! You have no business touching me, lady!”

I could have used the distraction to run downstairs and out the door, but I couldn’t because I liked Marisa now. Besides, they were blocking the stairs. I did try to push the Ghost Mom down the stairs, but she grabbed me by the ear. She grabbed Marisa by hers and pulled us downstairs.

“Never, in all my years have I encountered such impudent, insolent, foulmouthed brats! You will sit down to dinner, and you and you will behave like good children ought to!”

“Lady,” Marisa said, “I don’t know who you think you’re dealing with, but we’re 90’s kids over here!”

“Yeah! We’re millennials”

“What is that?”

“And you’re just some stupid old boomer!”

“Yeah, boomer! Boomer! Boomer!”

“Quiet!”

“Look, lady, you’re not cut out to control us. We’re liberated, and we go to the mall.”

“The where?”

“And this boy over here he's gay? He's a gay kid.”

“All children should be gay and happy.”

“No, you ignorami. He’s a homosexual!”

“Ahh! Not homosexual!”

“Yeah! He likes to dress like a girl, and he tried out for *Romeo and Juliet* to play Juliet!”

“And I was perfect for the role!”

“Well, I think I would have been better. They were trying to do something politically.”

“Shut up, Marissa!”

“You shut up!”

“Stop it! Stop it now! I demand you to stop! I demand you to stop!”

“Get real, lady! And guess what? Not only am I gay, but she tells me all about menstruation and tampons! I know all your secrets, and I don't even care!”

Marissa picked up her plate and threw it at the Ghost Mom. It made impact and didn't seem to hurt her. Her ghostly powers might have given her a higher pain threshold, but we played video games and understood extreme violence.

Marisa kept throwing plates and glasses at her while I ran to the window and pulled down the curtain rod. With my big stick, I laid thrashes down upon her. Marissa found a baseball bat. Engraved on it, read “For Joey, from Mom and Dad.

She swung it over the ghost momma's head

“Hey, Jesse! check this out! It says Joey! She hadn't even changed it to your name! This was a genuine artifact of her dead son!”

She beat the sobbing ghost mom with it. “How's that feel, you old ghost fuck?”

The Ghost Mom's skin did not break, nor did she bleed. But her broken bones contorted her limbs, and she seemed to experience an unparalleled fear that she might heal in this grotesque, distorted way.

“Wait, wait, wait! Stop! I can take you home! I can take you back to your evil 90s dimension, where you're free to be disgusting degenerates who endure

homosexuality and celebrate ungodly blood! Please! I think I've learned my lesson! Yes, I think I'm ready to move on! To find my husband and child in heaven!"

Marisa smirked her usual smirk. "As the daughter of a Catholic pastor, I can assure you that you will go straight to hell, and that you will never see your dead son ever again!"

And with that, the floor erupted into flames, grotesque horrific arms emerged from the fire and pulled the Ghost Mom's mangled body into the pits of hell.

Marisa and I took great joy watching her scream and writhe in unending agony until the flames, leaving behind an old envelope.

"Dibs!" I said, snatching it up before I even knew what it was.

The house began to shake and rattle. The wind began to switch! the house. to pitch! And suddenly, the hinges started to unhitch. Marisa and I held each other, screaming our lungs out.

When it was calm, we looked around and it was the foreclosed, abandoned ghost house from earlier in the night.

Marisa and I hugged each other, basking in our strength of character.

Suddenly, there was a bang at the front door! Had the Ghost Mom traveled to our dimeson? Another bang, and Jake crashed through the door! Kensie rushed inside, brandishing a tire iron with the rest of the football team rushing in behind her.

"Kensie?" I asked.

"I thought you got sucked into some kind of ghost dimension by Evil Old Predator Lady Ghostberg, so I rallied the football team!"

"Well, fellas, you're too late! We just beat the ghost mom and sent her to hell."

"Then let's party!" Jake cheered.

I opened the envelope and found the lost deed to the house. After that night, Jake and his blue-collar contractor dad helped me renovate the empty house on Elm Street while I sued my parents for emancipation on grounds of excessive goofiness.