

Dirty Laundry

by Catherine Davis

All night the crack of light that shone under their bedroom door had never gone out. And first in the kitchen, then right on the other side of the wall in their parent's room — noises.

There's a small slanted hole through the edge of the door, and another in the frame. Anna pushes the door closed to check. The holes match up. She pulls her parents' room door open again and touches the hole on the inside edge, where furry little splinters poke out all around, soft and prickly at once.

Things like: bumping, heavy stuff dragging around, her father's voice, then that banging tremor. Beside her in their narrow bed, Rosie had breathed slow and deep, eyes closed, so Anna had known it was stuff you could be pretty sure wasn't real.

"It was about the dirty clothes," Rosie says out of nowhere, appearing right behind her. Anna jerks her hand from the door, steps back. She's inside their parent's room now, and feels a chill.

"There," Rosie points, "in the box." The large cardboard box is between their mother's dresser and the desk. It's piled high with laundry that isn't done yet; one corner is splitting where the clothes are pushing it apart. On the other side of the cluttered desk, the window is all the way open, and the screen is missing. Two of the curtain hooks are off the rod, the curtain droops down at the top, sucks in and out of the gaping window with the breeze. Anna looks back at Rosie, sees that she is watching it too.

Anna had watched her own curtains turn gold in the sunrise this morning. Then she'd tugged Rosie's rag-bear away and laid it over her eyes. Same as all night, she hadn't been sure whether tell she were asleep or awake.

"That's how he got out," says Rosie, startling Anna all over again. "He told Mama to stand there," she points at the wall across the room, "and watch the clothes."

Her little sister says this exactly the same way as when filling Anna in on a cartoon that that she'd missed part of. Rosie had listened, all right. "There's his hammer." On their mother's dresser, the hammer lays crosswise on the smooth marble, sticking over the edge, precarious. Rosie's eyes look like those train tunnels — that once you go in, it's so black that you're sure you're never going to come out again. It makes Anna cave, right in her middle.

This door had been shut tight when Anna got up. Usually this door won't close for anything, because it is warped. It's a crappy construction. So Anna had crept on by down the hall. But when she reached the kitchen, her father had been sitting right there, beside a full ashtray, head resting back on the wall, staring at the ceiling above the sink. The overhead light was on — light that made the olive walls look grim in the day. She'd just turned to sneak back to her room when he got up, scraping his chair, and went out the back door. The screen slapped shut as Rosie came in, jamming her knuckles into her eye sockets just like their mother told them never to do.

"Mama's fixing us some Nestlé's Quick." Rosie turns and heads out of the room. "She said to get you." Anna grabs for Rosie's

nightgown to pull her back in and shake her, like their mother does when she wants them to tell the truth. Shake her or worse: Rosie deserves it, because surely a devil is in her. But Anna has missed. She's alone again in the dark stuffy room, not a place to stay. On the way out, she feels the slanted hole on the molding and the matching one on the edge of the door. Easy to see now.

Nailed it shut, that's how he made the door stay closed.

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The holes stayed. Nearly every day, Anna found some excuse to pinch Rosie in hidden places 'til she bruised, or sometimes she'd just slap her so hard that her cheek shone. She threatened Rosie that if she told, Anna would nail her into their parents' bedroom, where it would be just like a coffin. Rosie glared with her black eyes, but she kept quiet until the year that she got bigger than Anna and punched her in the face. They both lost interest around the time Rosie chipped Anna's tooth.

After five years, their mother got sick with cancer. When she died and their father sold the house, those door holes were still there.

The new people probably patched them up.

