

Sleep

HONOR JONES

4th ESTATE • *London*

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IT WAS DAMP DOWN UNDER THE BLACKBERRY BUSH, BUT MARGARET liked it there; she was cozy, like a rabbit. It smelled clean—it was funny how dirt could smell so clean. She couldn't see in the dark which berries were ripe, but she nibbled on one anyway, puckered, spat. She rested her cheek against her arm and looked across the yard.

A whoop and a stampede—the boys were running by. They must have spotted Bidy. The bright spot of the flashlight whirled. It made her dizzy trying to follow it. Hammock, grass, basketball net, grass. The flashlight made a photograph each time it hit something—little circles of backyard, punched out of time.

The light lit the door of the toolshed and stayed there, wobbling. She couldn't tell which boy was which in the dark, but one held the flashlight, one went for the door. Tactics, she thought, impressed. They shouted and knocked over some rakes and buckets, but the shed was empty.

Margaret laughed into her elbow. The boys stopped to scheme, and she could see that Danny was holding the flashlight. Danny was her best

friend's brother, and so they could almost certainly never fall in love and get married. The boys were making a plan; they had to be more strategic, she could hear Neal, her own brother, saying.

She played with a stick in the dirt, making up signs for the fairy people who would come out later, telling them who she was: *Here lay Margaret, child of man*. The fairies would have tangles in their hair and see-through wings of dusky violet and the pointed toes of Barbies. She didn't believe in fairies, but she liked to pretend.

The light came again, straight into the blackberry bush. For a second it was like being inside a room when someone flicks the switch. The world got solid and sharp-edged and jumped at her—leaves and thorns and shadows of thorns, the dirt so close to her face and suddenly, specifically, dirty. She cringed her eyes shut tight so no one could see them shining like an animal's. When she opened them again the boys were on the other side of the yard.

They'd given up on the ground and were looking into the trees. Biddu would be in a tree, Margaret could have told them that. And it took only a few more minutes before the light found her, pinned her up against the branches. Biddu kicked her sneakers like she didn't care and swung down to the victorious brothers.

But they would never find Margaret. She had known as soon as she burrowed down under the blackberries that no one was going to find her. She was too low to the ground, too good and hidden.

It was fully dark out now. She couldn't see the bats against the sky anymore, the bats that lived in the attic and weren't all bad because they ate the mosquitoes. If she was outside after her own dinner, looking up, she could catch them sometimes sluicing out of the house, so many wings so close together it was like one streaming body, like the house was a factory churning out black smoke. They were up there, eating, but she couldn't see them. She tried pretending them away, but that never worked; you could pretend things into existence but not out of it.

The damp had soaked through her shorts and she shivered. She was bored of flashlight tag. Elbowing her way out from under the brambles,

she shouted, “I win, I win,” and linking arms with Biddy, skipped toward the lit-up house.

THE PARENTS WERE on the porch, around the glass table. “Ice cream’s inside,” Biddy’s mom, Mrs. Murphy, called to the oncoming children.

“Bring me a bowl too, would you?” Margaret’s dad asked her. The fathers were handsome in their off-hours polo shirts, but Margaret’s father was handsomer. And in the doorway her mother in the hot pink sundress—Elizabeth, commanding the screen. Elizabeth oversaw the children tramping through, but when Margaret reached the threshold, she put an arm out and stopped her.

“You’re filthy,” she said.

Margaret looked at her mother’s face to see how she meant it. But it was safe, she didn’t look angry; she looked as if she was thinking of a cute word, like *ragamuffin*. She glanced down at her T-shirt and jean shorts. They were smeared with dirt and her knees were brown, but filthy? Elizabeth was always exaggerating. Besides, this was clean dirt, blackberry dirt. She toed off the heels of her sneakers and lined them up beside the door the way she was supposed to. She said, “I’m not filthy.”

A mistake. Dumb, Margaret. “You are literally,” Elizabeth said, “covered in mud.”

I’m not, she thought again but did not say.

“Look at yourself.”

Elizabeth pinched at her T-shirt as if she had to touch it but didn’t want to. The shirt lifted away from her chest and the air came in. “Take your clothes off here and give them to me. I don’t want you tracking that mess through the house.”

Margaret looked around the porch, at the Murphys, at Danny on the other side of the door. “Here?”

“Don’t be a princess.”

Elizabeth took the hem of her T-shirt and pulled. Automatically Margaret’s arms went up, like she was still a little kid who was used to being

undressed by her mother. The shirt covered her face, and for a moment it was safe, she was back in the blackberry bush, in the good dark, but then the air was on her. Elizabeth had said she'd buy Margaret a training bra when she started fifth grade that fall. She didn't need it for support or anything yet, but you could see that she would soon; you could see already that she wasn't a child or a boy. "Skin a rabbit," Elizabeth said, reaching for her shorts.

Then Margaret was through the door and up the stairs in her white underwear, moving fast so she couldn't see anyone seeing her. Behind her, Elizabeth was her good mother again, bundling up the dirty laundry, saying to the other kids, still gathered by the door, "Don't forget to put the ice cream back in the freezer. I don't want ichor all over the countertop."

"Don't want what now?" she heard her father asking.

Icker? Margaret repeated the word as she climbed up on the bathroom sink, contorting her knees under the tap. It was a new word. Ick, ick, icker. It meant filthy too, she guessed. Her mother had many words for that, and she was right: Margaret was filthy. The dirt ran down the sink in pleasing long brown lines. But Elizabeth wasn't mad that she was filthy; she was mad that Margaret had said she wasn't filthy. Icker on the countertop, she said to herself, liking the sound of the words.

There was no lock on the bathroom door. There were no locks on any of the doors. Elizabeth had always been afraid, when Margaret and Neal were little, that they would lock themselves inside, that it would happen during an emergency, such as a fire, that locks were therefore a fire hazard. When they'd first moved into the big house, Elizabeth had replaced all the hardware on the doors with matching antique latches—each had a handle of black iron the length of a grown-up's fist and on top of that a tongue you pressed with your thumb. Margaret liked the way the latches rattled into place, but she didn't see why they couldn't have normal doors that locked like other people's did.

Sometimes Margaret would push the dirty laundry basket in front of the bathroom door. The room was quieter when no one else could get inside. She would perch on the counter and look at parts of her face really

close in the mirror. Or take her shirt off and turn from side to side. Bid-
dy's nipples were a pale ballerina pink, but hers were much darker, almost
brown, an ugly color. It meant her boobs, when she got them, would be
bigger—that's what Bid-
dy said. But then one time she heard footsteps
and the latch jumped up and down—Elizabeth, trying to get in. She'd
had to ram her shoulder hard against the door to push it open. Why
should Margaret want to lock her own family out? She got in major trou-
ble for that. That was a big, big fire hazard.



A few weeks earlier they'd all gone to Bid-
dy's house for dinner. The sum-
mer nights were like this: backyard, burgers, ice cream, repeat. That night
she and Bid-
dy had been playing with Barbies in the basement—they were
too old for pretend, so they played with Barbies only in the basement,
furtively—when her mother plunged down the steps and pinned Marga-
ret against the wall.

She was yelling something. The yelling wasn't words, it was more phys-
ical than that—like the hands clamped around her arms, and the wall
knock-knocking at the back of her head, and all over and around it the
good-mother smell of sunscreen and Lubriderm lotion that always an-
nounced *Elizabeth*.

It was Bid-
dy's brother, Danny, who stopped it. He stood on the stairs,
saying, "But wait, it was us. We did it. It was us." He had to shout before
anyone noticed. Elizabeth dropped Margaret, looked at Danny, and turned
and walked past him up the stairs.

When she was gone, Danny crouched down and told Margaret and
Bid-
dy what had happened. The brothers had been making prank calls
from the phone in Bid-
dy's parents' bedroom, and some lady had reverse-
dialed, tattled to the parents. She had loved Danny long before that night,
but she loved him extra now. Not even the dads would stand up to Eliza-
beth.

Upstairs they could hear the grown-ups laughing, that shouting laughter

grown-ups do. “They really thought they’d got away with it,” Mr. Murphy was saying. “For a year, in every boardroom on Wall Street.” The snorting sound of female disbelief.

“Come on,” Danny said. “Let’s see if there’s dessert.”

For the rest of the night she had tried to read Elizabeth’s face to see what she was thinking. Was she sorry too? But there was nothing to read—the anger had passed and been replaced; she had on her grown-up-conversation face, then her doing-the-dishes face, then her no-whining, it’s-time-to-go face. If the boys got a talking-to, Margaret and Bidy didn’t see it.

But why had Elizabeth thought Margaret had done it? The kids were always talking about superpowers—if you could have any superpower, what would it be? Margaret usually said mind reading. But what if she could read her mother’s mind, and all her mother was thinking was that Margaret was bad, bad, bad? Better say flying instead.

NOW SHE WRAPPED a towel around her waist and started to leave the bathroom. She needed to get new clothes. She needed to go downstairs and eat ice cream. Bidy would be waiting for her; Bidy was sleeping over. But she stopped at the door and came back. Carefully, with wet toilet paper, she wiped everything down, each thing she’d touched: the sink, the hot tap and the cold, the honey-colored marble that she’d sat on. She had turned the bar of soap brown. Under the clear water she cleaned the soap itself.