

Girl at the Window

by
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"At least you'll have your own room," Mom said. The car windows were down because the air conditioner was busted. About everything we had was busted.

"At least you'll be starting out in junior high, so it'll be new to everybody."

But everybody except me would be coming from the same grade school. Every time Mom said *at least*, things sounded worse.

"At least we'll have a roof over our heads." She geared down and took the off-ramp. We were pulling a U-Haul with

everything we had, going back to live in Mom's hometown. It was the middle of nowhere, with a water tower up on stilts and the smallest-size Wal-Mart.

"We won't have to live with your grandma," she said, softer. "We'll have our own place. You'll be the man of the family."

At least she didn't say *at least*.

We had supper at Grandma's that first night. Grandma sighed a lot and wore Keds. "I don't know what kind of work you think you're going to get around here," she said to Mom.

"You want to watch your step, mister," Grandma said to me, "and not fall into bad company."

I slept hard those first nights and walked around town all day. I probably wouldn't have minded falling into bad company, but whenever I saw kids, I crossed the street. I never walked past 7-Eleven. I didn't find any new friends, and Mom couldn't find her old ones. The days were real long here. But after Mom got a job in the grain elevator office, she said, "At least we're settling in."

Our house had renters' furniture in it, a living-room couch and beds. Mom slept in the bedroom downstairs. I took the attic room at the back, and it looked like nobody'd been up there in years. The closet door wouldn't stay shut, and there were more hangers than I needed. A foggy mirror hung over the dresser. A pale triangle on the wall showed where somebody had pinned up a pennant. At the back of one of the drawers was the kind of comb a girl uses. I dragged the bed nearer the window in case a breeze came up in the night.

A trumpet vine had crawled up over the back porch roof and grew across my window. The sun came in through the leaves, and one of these mornings I'd be getting up for school. I was in no hurry.

Just after I was sleeping good one night, something woke me. I didn't know what. I wasn't used to this place yet, the way the walls slanted up and met at the top. At first I thought it was crickets. But I heard something else. Something scraped the drainpipe, a tinny sound. I waited. Something thumped the back porch roof. I wanted it to be a squirrel. I wanted that real bad.

A scratchy sound came from the window screen. Fingernails. Long fingernails. I felt them scratching across my brain. I listened so hard, I heard breathing. And it wasn't mine.

No way was I going to look at that window. But I felt my head turning. Sometimes at night the leaves rustled at the window. But I didn't see leaves. A shape was there, filling up the window. A hand was on the screen, and a face pressed against it. The other hand was scuttling around, trying to pull out the bottom of the screen.

I wanted to yell. I wanted to cry.

But now I was on my feet. This was the time to make a run for the door. This was the time to call 911. I couldn't move. I couldn't take my eyes off whoever or whatever was hunched up against the window.

"Say, listen," a voice muttered. "Who locked the screen?"

It had a voice, but it was still a shape.

Now I was by the window, the screen wire pushing in by a cheek plastered against it. My room was every kind of dark, and so was the night outside. The shape was darkest of all, but I saw all this tangled hair. A girl out there was trying to get in the window before she rolled off the porch roof.

It was a girl, so I wasn't so scared. Girls confused me, but they didn't scare me.

"Get back," I whispered, "so I can push the screen open."

The cheek pulled away. You could tell she was surprised to hear me. She was on all fours, swaying, edging back down the slant of the roof. The latch was tight, but I worked it loose. When I eased the screen open, it bumped her chin.

"Ouch," she said. "Watch it."

Then she sort of spilled into my room. She came in headfirst with all this flying hair. I thought she'd hit the floor first, but she did a little somersault. There she was at my feet. She seemed to be high-school size. I couldn't see her face, but she was looking up at me. That's when I remembered I was in my underwear.

"What do you think you're doing here?" she said in a whisper.

Shouldn't I be the one asking that?

"Never mind," she said. "I'm zonked."

She smelled funny. I definitely smelled alcohol. Now she was curled up right at my feet. "Forget about it," she said. And right away she was breathing steady with a little snore. She was sound asleep, dead to the world.

I wondered what she looked like and thought about turning on the light. I thought about going downstairs to tell Mom. Like, *Wake up, Mom. A girl fell in my window.*

Instead, I sat down on my bed to watch this shape tucked in under the windowsill with her knees drawn up to her chin. She seemed to be wearing a very short skirt and maybe boots. I decided to keep an eye on her till morning.

When I woke up, I was stretched out in bed, and sun was coming in green and gold through the vine leaves. For a minute I didn't remember. Then I looked for her, and she was gone. The screen was loose, unlatched. By noon I almost decided I'd dreamed her.

But when night came again, I latched the screen.

It must have been midnight when I heard her boot skid on the drainpipe. I was awake again and waiting, not so worried this time. I even grinned in the dark, thinking about her with one boot on the trellis and the other trying to wedge onto the drainpipe, heaving herself up, trying to get back in without waking the whole neighborhood.

Her knees thumped on the porch roof. The room went darker when she loomed up at the window. Now she was slipping long nails under the screen. Now she was figuring out it was latched again.

I slid out of bed and crept to the sill. "You again," I said.

"You again," she said. "Let me in. Make it snappy." Her voice was blurry, and we were nose-to-nose with screen wire between. Her breath smelled like a brewery.

This time she threw a leg over the sill and stepped into the room. To steady herself, she grabbed my wrist. There were splotchy spots on her hands. They were all sticky. Her bracelets jangled, and her sweater had a smoky smell. She ran a messy hand through her hair, but it fell back to shadow her face. She seemed to stare around the room and then at me.

"What's the big idea?" she said, weaving.

"Are you sneaking back in?" I whispered. "Like after a date?"

"Ssh." She put a finger to her lips. "You'll wake my mom."

"It's not your mom," I said. "It's my mom. You're crawling into the wrong house. You've had too much to drink."

"Drink?" she said. "Just make it a small one for me, and then I'll have to go." But she was going already. Her knees buckled, and she slid down the wall, asleep before she hit the floor.

This is ridiculous, I thought. But the next thing I knew, it was morning, and she was gone again.

Mom didn't know if she wanted me in the house or out of it while she was at work. That morning I walked the entire town. There were no shadows during the day. It was just this boring town simmering in the sun. I even walked up and down the rows of trucks in the I.G.A. parking lot. I walked all four sides of the park, with the water tower in the center of it and not even a wading pool for little kids. I had lunch at Grandma's and walked the whole town again in the afternoon. Tonight I wanted to be really tired.

Of course I might have dreamed her. The girl. I might have dreamed her up because I didn't know anybody else. But in dreams you hardly ever smell people's breath.

That night I latched the screen as usual and left a light on. Anybody crawling up on the roof could see in and know it wasn't her room, right? It made sense to me. I went to sleep by the light of the lamp on the dresser.

Any little sound outside would have sent me rocketing out of the bed, but it was a quiet night. I only woke up because the lamp made me think it was morning. Somebody was standing at the dresser. By the light of the little lamp, she was combing out her long tangled hair. She was all dressed up and ready to rumble. I couldn't see her face in the foggy mirror. She could. She was looking herself over. Then she turned and looked at me.

"If I can't get rid of you," she said, quiet but clear, "I might as well take you with me. You might come in handy."

"Where?" I whispered.

"Where can you go in a town like this? Just out. Come on."

When my feet hit the floor, boards creaked. "Shh," she said.

"Remember Mom."

I just stood there.

"You want to put on some clothes?" she said.

So this was happening. In dreams you often aren't wearing *anything*. When I'd pulled on shorts and a shirt, I turned to the door.

"Not that way." She jerked a thumb at the window. "You have a lot to learn."

Then we were both outside, crawling down the slant of the roof, ladies first. She'd had practice swinging herself over the gutter and shinnying down the drainpipe. I followed,

scrapping a knee on the tin. I wanted to climb down the trumpet vine, but it wasn't there. Trumpet vines don't just crawl away. But I was more worried about getting dizzy. I don't like heights. I dangled, and dropped.

We went around the house and started along the street. "Where are we going?" I said because we were going somewhere. We weren't just strolling.

"What you don't know, you can't blab," she said. "But think about it. Summer's over, and school's about to start—senior year. You know how senior year starts around here. Everybody knows that."

I didn't:

Now we were coming up on the park. A line of cars were pulled up at the curb, all classics. A few low-riders, a customized '57 Chevy. Under the park trees people were sitting at picnic tables. High-school people—seniors with sideburns. Girls with long falls of hair. People with beers and boots. They looked straight through me, but it was pretty exciting.

What they said I couldn't follow. High school talks its own language. And they kept their voices down. "Who brought the paint?" somebody said, and I heard that.

Somebody lifted a box out of the weeds and handed around cans of spray paint. "Far out," somebody said.

They were drifting now, like shadows, to the long metal legs of the town water tower. From down here it looked a mile high, with a winking red light on top to warn planes. I sort of knew then what was happening.

They started up a metal ladder. Their cleats rang as they

climbed like a long centipede senior. The girl hung back, then hitched a boot on the lowest rung. "Stay close behind me," she said over her shoulder. "Catch me if I fall."

She was a tough girl, but scared now. She didn't like climbing any higher than a porch roof. I didn't either, but I was more scared of being left behind, down in the shadowy park. I didn't want to be left out while the seniors spray-painted their year across the big round tank like a spaceship above us. Either way, I was scared, so I went up.

Above the trees it was cooler. I looked up to keep from looking down. The first seniors were already up there, working their way around a rickety catwalk. The girl and I got higher and higher till we were there too. I forgot and looked down at streetlights winking through trees and out to dark fields and more fields.

They went to work with the cans hissing in their hands, spraying the giant letters coiling around the tank: CLASS OF—

They wanted letters taller than they could reach. They bounced on the catwalk to get higher, and metal moved under our feet. I hugged the water tank, and I really didn't feel so good.

Now they thought of how to do it. Before she could say anything, two guys lifted up the girl. She held a spray can, and her hands were splotchy with paint. She caught her breath but wouldn't show how scared she was. She worked as high as she could reach, up there on the guys' shoulders, spraying in the giant, looping letters so the whole town could see that the seniors had left their mark. Fresh paint glistened in the dim light.

Time skipped a beat. I saw when her hand with the spray can swayed away from the tank. The catwalk rattled. The guys grabbed for her. But she'd lost her balance.

She collapsed into the air, off their shoulders, out of their hands. Her arms flew out, and the spray can fell faster than she did, end over end into the night. She screamed all the way down to sudden silence, and the dark went darker.

She'd told me to catch her, but I couldn't. How could I? Every second she fell was a year, and I couldn't do anything. All I could do was scream my head off, up there on the tower above the town, and finally I was all alone.

You probably saw it in the paper. I was headline news and made my name in this town before anyone knew what it was:

SLEEPWALKING BOY
RESCUED FROM WATER TOWER
VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT
CALLED OUT IN MIDDLE OF NIGHT TO
TALK DOWN FRIGHTENED YOUTH
INCIDENT RECALLS 30-YEAR-OLD
TRAGEDY WHEN SENIOR GIRL FELL
FROM TOWER IN SPRAY-PAINT PRANK

So she hadn't been a dream, but she wasn't real either. She'd died in a fall from the water tower all those years ago. My

room up in the attic at the back of the house had been her room then. She'd gone out that window and across that back porch roof on a late-summer night just before school started.

Now, all these years later on late-summer nights, she wants back in.