

Lauren woke halfway through her own scream: “What!” The bed she was in was her own. The child in the doorway, the one who had wakened her, she was fairly sure, and then certain, was not.

The child, really just a girly shape in the doorframe, hesitated a fraction of a second before, with a strangled yelp, she turned and scampered.

Lauren launched herself. Did she yell for the figure to wait or only thunder after it? Daylight would bring clarity, a chance to reconstruct everything that happened in the dark. Daylight would ask, why didn’t you wake Shawn, your husband, who was lying right there beneath his C-PAP machine? Shawn was separated from the waking night only by a scrim of machine-assisted sleep. But he seemed beyond reach. Decommissioned.

And so she was running down her own hallways, chasing a phantom girl in need. They came to her belatedly, the words the child had spoken to wake her: “Katie’s mom? Can you . . . could you get up?” That’s who Lauren was tonight: Katie’s mom. Katie was having a sleepover. There were three non-Katie girls in the house: Maddie, Hannah, Jade.

The hallway rugs were all askew. Lauren stopped to steady herself. Had she had wine? It was Friday, so . . . but no, she wouldn’t have had more than a glass. Not with other people’s children in the house. Still she could not seem to shake off sleep. Her vision was gummed. The house prodded her with a two-tone beep, followed by the robotic lady-voice of the security system: *Front. Door.* A vein of night air threaded the hall. The girl was out.

For a long time, Hannah had sat in the dark, debating. Impossible to say how long: the dark did things to time. Finally, she decided: I have to get the mom. I have to. Even if she’d been a little passive-aggressive earlier about the girls’ noise. *Sounds like y’all are having fun*, she’d said, her mouth tight. Even though she’d stared a little too long at Jade’s bracelets, judging. Stopping herself from commenting with a big sip from her cup. Probably wine.

Only Maddie had the guts to smirk at the mom and ask, *So where’s your shit zoo?* And the mom

had to smile and pretend she hadn’t heard the girl’s emphasis and sing, *Oh, hiding, hiding! This company is a bit much for an old dog.*

A woman like that didn’t like to be disturbed. But she might still be up, watching movies on her tablet like Hannah’s mom did. *Sleep*, Hannah’s mom would say, as if remembering some place she’d once been on vacation, *It’s elusive. Be grateful you get that good girl-sleep, thick and sweet as cream cheese frosting. When you were little, I’d watch you sleep for hours.*

This place, Katie’s house, was a labyrinth. The length of the hallways did not seem justified given the scarcity of doors. Earlier, when they’d had all that crazy energy, they chased each other deep into the house and back, causing the hallway rugs to scrunch sideways. *Better fix the runners*, said Katie, using a word for rugs that Hannah didn’t know. *My mom hates it when they get like that. But the chase went on.*

They were too old for running and chasing. Or, they almost were. No one actually said *let’s play hide and seek*; the game just formed itself out of high spirits and forward momentum. They loved its horrible tension: wrapped in a living-room curtain, staying narrow and still, knowing you must soon burst out, must run for base.

Alone in the night, Hannah walked the rugs as carefully as planks until she reached the door to the big bedroom. Behind the door, a dim mechanical hum. She turned the knob like she was handling a grenade, but alas, it made its tell-tale clack and she was announced. The mom sat up but did not turn. Beside her lay some kind of robot, no, a coma man, kept alive by machines.

“Um, Katie’s mom?”

The woman screamed something: *zap*...or, *nacht*? Some kind of curse?

Hannah ran, down the slip-sliding runners and into the night: friendless, possibly cursed, and pursued by a woman who was no longer pretending to be her host.

Lauren was outside now, had been circling her house for . . . had it been long enough to wear a path in the grass? What was she doing out here? What came to mind was a storybook from her long-ago girlhood, about a doll with an acorn head who is judgy and bossy to all the creatures in the wood. She’s in the middle of scolding a squirrel when it eats her head. Her stick body in its homemade dress runs on.

Lauren tugged her mind toward the present. She was in her own dark yard. She was looking for a child, not her own, but important nonetheless. If the girl wasn’t found, the consequences would begin.