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Mommy Dearest

Mommy walked into the kitchen with Baby clutched tightly in her arms. She set him gently into his high chair before turning to the stove. Peter had been playing with his Lego's, but as soon as Mommy looked away, he crept up to the high chair, peeking just over the edge of the tray. Baby locked his curious blue eyes on Peter. Each waited for the other to make a move. Slowly, slowly, Peter reached out and poked Baby's cheek.

Baby gurgled happily.

"Peter! What are you doing? Don't touch the new baby!"

Peter scowled, but said nothing.

"Peter, did you hear me, young man? Do not touch Baby!"

Peter mumbled assent and ran back to his Lego's. Mommy was being such a bully! She didn't used to be angry with him, but now it was all about Baby. Peter sulked for the rest of the afternoon. He even skipped dinner and fell asleep early.

That night, for the third time in a row, Peter woke to Baby's crying. Were all babies so loud? Mommy usually rushed to the room quickly so Peter didn't have to endure such torture, but tonight several minutes passed and Baby's wails did not subside. Such a racket! Peter decided to go quiet Baby himself. He padded quietly down the hall and saw Mommy emerge from her room, reading a thick book. Quickly, Peter ducked into the bathroom before Mommy could see him. After she entered the nursery, Peter crept quietly to the doorway of Baby's room unnoticed and peered in.

Mommy was sitting next to the bed, fingers in her ears, poring over the book as Baby banged on the side of the crib, screaming. Mommy's lips moved soundlessly as she read until finally she seemed to have found what she was looking for. She stood, turned Baby around roughly, and began to probe the back of his neck. Peter heard a soft snap like a light switch and suddenly Baby's wails ceased. In fact, Baby wasn't making any sounds at all. His round blue eyes were open wide, like a trapped animal, but he didn't seem to be moving.

Suddenly, Peter realized that Mommy was looking in his direction. He sprinted to his room and jumped into the bed, heart pounding heavily. Peter held his breath, the silence more deafening than Baby's screams. He waited, eternities passing with each second.

A beam of light slid over the edge of the bed, and there was Mommy, silhouetted in the doorway. Peter didn't dare open his eyes as he tried to slow his breathing.

"Peter?" He kept his eyes locked shut and gave a little snore, as though that would make his charade more believable. He waited for Mommy to leave and the light to dissipate, but nothing happened. Was she still there?

The bed sank as Mommy sat down. "Peter, let's talk about what you just saw." Stubbornly, Peter's eyes stayed closed, clinging to their faux slumber.

"Peter, sometimes Baby is very loud and naughty. It's a lot for Mommy to deal with, you understand. Mommy just needs a break. I know it must seem terrible, Peter, but Baby is fine. Now come give Mommy a hug."

Peter's willpower broke at the unexpected offer of forgiveness and he reached out to Mommy, crying. She stroked his head and rocked him as though he were still her perfect little boy. "There there, love, it will all be alright. Just hush now." Peter basked in the embrace, enjoying Mommy's comforting hands. As his tears subsided, he felt her hand come to rest on his neck, and with cold certainty he realized what was about to happen.

He hit Mommy hard in the face and jumped off her lap to the floor. "Naughty Peter!" Mommy's yells tailed behind him as his terror carried him down the hall. He half tumbled down the stairs, desperately searching for a place to hide. Peter tore through the house until he reached the basement door. Mommy had always warned him not to go down there, but her heavy footsteps on the stairs were coming closer. Peter yanked the door open and closed it shut behind him. Blind in the dark, he crawled down as quietly as he could into the musty basement. He felt his way around until he reached the crawl space under the stairs.

Safe at last, Peter began to sob quietly. Mommy had tried to quiet him just like she'd done to Baby. Baby had looked terrified, and who knew if he was even still alive? Peter realized he had no way to escape and no idea what he might do if he could. He was trapped. The tears dripped onto Peter's

pajamas as he sobbed himself into oblivious sleep.

Peter woke with a start, his neck cramped uncomfortably. He could hear Mommy's voice on the stairs and his heart began to race again. "I can't find him anywhere, Jean. Yes, I think he's been sleepwalking again, it's quite normal. Yes, Baby is fine, thank you for asking. Why wouldn't he be?" Mommy walked to the back of the basement and began moving boxes around. "I'm checking the basement now, Jean, and when I find him I think maybe we'll just go somewhere for a weekend. A nice relaxing weekend." Peter's breath was caught in his throat and he squeezed his eyes shut. Mommy had said Baby was fine, but how could he know if that was true? Mommy had lied last night. She could be lying again. Mommy's voice grew closer. "Peter? Peter, darling, where are you hiding?" Peter retreated even further into the cobwebbed corner. "Peter, sweetheart, please come out." Mommy's voice chilled Peter and he clapped his hands over his neck. Suddenly her face came into view. "Oh there you are, Peter! I've been so worried! Come out now and we can talk."

Peter shook his head frantically, not daring to speak.

"Peter, stop being ridiculous!" Mommy reached in angrily and dragged Peter out of the crawl space. She scooped him up in an unbreakable hug and began to pry his hands off of his neck. Peter squirmed out of Mommy's grip, scratching at her arms as he fell. He clambered up the stairs, knocking boxes into Mommy's path and desperately looked for another place to hide. He darted into the kitchen and started to pull the oven door open, not thinking about how heavy it was. As he started to crawl inside, his stomach began to churn.

The interior of the oven smelled terribly burnt, and there were the leftovers of something all over the oven rack. Peter began to pull his legs inside too when his hand touched what was unmistakably bone. It was much too large to be a chicken bone, or anything else Mommy cooked for that matter. Peter realized with horror as he touched an infant-sized skull that he was sitting in the charred remains of Baby.

All of the bile in Peter's empty stomach rose to his throat, but even as he gagged, he ran into the next room, seeking a safe place. He could hear Mommy's angry footsteps coming up the stairs, so he snuck into the only room available: the utility closet. Carefully, Peter climbed on top of the dryer

as he'd been scolded for doing so many times. He opened the door of the washing machine and let it close slowly above him. He was careful to not make noise and especially to not think about the soot on his pajamas.

Cramped uncomfortably in the washer, time dragged on for Peter. He didn't dare make a sound or try to move in case Mommy should hear. Seconds passed, and then minutes. How would he know when it was safe? Could he risk peeking out now?

A loud thunk reverberated above Peter's head. A cold jet of water sprayed onto his head and the machine began to fill up. In a panic, Peter began pounding on the door, but it barely moved. He could hear Mommy's laugh, muffled. "Be a good boy now, Peter, and stay put until I come back. I have to take care of Baby."

What Mommy meant by that, Peter didn't know. He waited a few moments until he was sure she was gone, and then he began pushing on the door as hard as he could. No matter how hard he tried, he could not get the door open. Frantically he began jumping with all his force to try and move whatever was on top of the washing machine. His feet sloshed with every jump as the water rose higher. Finally he began to feel progress. The door was lifting a little more each time! With one last burst of strength Peter slammed into the door and heard something hit the floor. He shoved the door open and emerged, soaked up to his chest. Mommy's old steel sewing machine lay on the floor.

Peter dragged himself through the kitchen and out the front door into the bright afternoon sun, exhausted from his struggle. Once outside, he realized he had nowhere to go, but he didn't want to go back to Mommy. He wandered down streets, heading for the only landmark he knew: the local playground. Before he reached his destination, Peter noticed a police car driving alongside him.

"Young man, are you lost?" the officer asked. Peter nodded. "Well, let's get you home then."

"No!" Peter shouted vehemently. "Mommy is a bad person! I won't go back!"

The officer seemed taken aback by Peter's hysterics. He immediately opened the passenger door to let Peter in. He tried to ask Peter more questions about Mommy, but he got nothing but sobs and unintelligible responses.

When they arrived at the station, the officer wrapped Peter in a thick gray blanket and made him some hot chocolate. “Everything will be okay, son. I’m going to see if we can’t get a relative to come get you.” Peter gave half a smile. He sprawled out on the hard chairs in the lobby, ignoring his wet sooty pajamas, and let the terrible events of the day fade away as he drifted to sleep.

“...all wet and dirty, and he got pretty upset.” Peter was aware of voices nearby.

“Understandable, he’s at an excitable age, Officer.” That voice sounded familiar.

“Well, considering the shock he’s had, let’s not wake him.” Gentle hands slid under Peter’s back and legs as the officer picked him up. The swaying motion of footsteps rocked Peter back into his half-asleep state. He felt himself being set carefully in a car, and the door slammed shut. Another door opened and shut, this time on the driver’s side. With a quiet hum, the car started and Peter sighed contentedly, prepared to doze off again.

“Peter, honey,” the familiar voice said. A hand stroked his hair. “Wake up, sweetie.”

Peter blinked and met Mommy’s eyes.