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Tinder

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Tinder

To better identify it, Laura killed the bug by squeezing it between two pieces of transparent tape. She held it to the light.

Minutes later she stood on the porch, arms folded, as her mother tore through two cluttered suitcases Laura brought back from England. Gray clouds of leggy things swarmed the porch lights, sick yellow in the blank Ohio night, but so far nothing alive—or even dead—had been discovered behind the seams or zippers of the green suitcases, two different sizes: large and massive.

“You see how I’m doing this?” said Laura’s mom as she shone a flashlight around the suitcase’s interior. “This is what you gotta do.”

Her mom bent down and picked at the wheels, run-down from being dragged through every major train station in Europe. The thin folds of her flimsy nightgown tented over the floor as she leaned over. A dry and chipped-paint toe showed itself through a hole in her slippers. Laura tried not to look. The sight of the toe made her itchy, like she was looking at spiders.

“They like to hide,” said Laura’s mom. “You have to be very thorough.”

Laura leaned against the thin screen door in her plaid pajama bottoms and University of East Anglia t-shirt. She watched as her life for the past six months accumulated on the gritty concrete porch floor. Her mom flung a fistful of lacy underwear. It landed in a corner cobweb among dry leaves and dead flies.

“I’m gonna have to wash everything again,” Laura complained.

“Not a bad idea,” said her mother, inspecting a sexy nighttime thing. Laura blushed. Her mother violently shook it out. It joined the underwear and the spiders.

“Can’t we do this in the morning?” asked Laura.

“This is something you should have done before you left England,” her mom said. “It’s not gonna wait another second.”

“Let me do it then,” said Laura. “It’s my stuff.”

Her mother shook her head, slowly. “I know you.” And she left it at that.

Laura gritted her teeth but was too fatigued to fight.

“It might not even be a bed bug,” she said. “Just a normal Ohio bug. It might not have come from my suitcases at all.”

“Maybe not,” said her mom. “But don’t you think it’s a good idea to check?”

“Yeah,” said Laura. “Sure. Just—don’t look so angry.”

“Don’t look so angry?”

“You don’t even know what it is yet. There’s nothing to be angry about.”

“I’ll be angry if I want to be angry.”

Laura scrubbed at her eyes with her palms. She looked around. The early night tinge of the quiet street clashed with the weary 3 a.m. sensation balled up in Laura’s stomach. She felt tired beyond the need for sleep. She wanted to not exist for a while.

“Okay,” said Laura. “Okay. Can I go to bed?”

“Excuse me?” Her mother looked up from a thin and tenuous sweater she was close to unraveling in her finicky fingers.

“I’m jet-lagged as hell,” Laura said, “and you won’t let me help look. I can’t just stand here, dammit. I feel sick—”

“Laura,” said her mother. Her voice was as sharp as her eyes were tired. They looked at each other, exhausted.

“You wanna look for bed bugs?” asked her mother. “Go tear apart the guest room. Check the sheets, the mattress, all the little crevices. Okay?”

Laura closed her eyes, like it was her intention to fall asleep right there, arms folded in the darkness and chilly murk. Then she went inside.

The bedroom was as nondescript as a Best Western lobby. The carpet in the room was new and beige. The curtains were new and beige. The posters that used to adorn the walls (deeply weathered faces of musicians and beat poets) were rolled up loosely in the closet, replaced by bland Impressionist landscapes Laura’s mother found at local garage sales. There was even a small wicker basket of old hotel soaps.

A few of Laura’s things were on the floor—books, discarded socks—and the bed was unmade. She scratched at the bed sheet with a fingernail. She looked covetously at an assemblage of pillows at the

headboard, soft and silken and cool. She crawled onto the bed. She rested her cheek.

On the porch, Laura's mother paced among piles of clothes and European souvenirs. Flowery skirts from Mediterranean Spain. Boxes of sugar cookies from Austria. A hand-woven luxury tablecloth from Hungary. Guidebooks upon guidebooks. Journals. Ticket stubs.

Laura's mother cupped in the palm of her hand a bulging insect corpse. She compared it to the dead thing squished between tape.

She pulled open the screen door and slipped inside, but not quickly enough to stop a few dusty, skittering moths from coming to flap at the front hall light bulb. She knocked on the guest room door.

"I found another one," Laura's mother announced to the closed door. "How's your search going?"

No response. She peered at the lit door edges. She went inside.

Laura was asleep on the bed. She lay on her side. Her sloping hip was an exaggerated reminder of her new womanhood, but her arms were curled childishly around a pillow. She looked beautiful and sad and several ages at once.

Laura's mother stood in the doorway, her breath furious and shallow. Her eyes flared. Then she noticed a little shadow on Laura's bare arm. A tiny creeping bug. Pursing her lips with self-righteous satisfaction, she grabbed a discarded museum pamphlet and slapped at the shadow. At Laura's arm. Hard.

Laura cried out and awoke. "What the hell?" she said. She rubbed her arm.

Laura's mother pinched up the bug and compared it to her collection of two. She looked at her daughter. Then she left the room.

"Where are you going?" said Laura. Her mother didn't answer.

Laura followed her to the backyard. The grass was shadow-dark and slippery. The sky was cold. Laura's mother walked to the rear where a metal fire pit was kept. Laura watched as her mother lifted the lid and threw a fire starter on. It nestled beneath the dry logs and sticks. She struck a match and dropped it to the fire pit.

"Choose what you want to save," said her mother. "And fast."

Laura stared at her from behind a hazy headache. Her mother stood very straight, as dignified as someone could be while wearing a thin, ratty

nightgown in the clenching Ohio night. Her face was sharp in the wakening fire.

Laura ran to the front porch.

Her life lay there in the dirt. She saw now that it was more than the last six months. It was everything that had ever happened to her. There were high school pictures in tacky frames. Shirts that had followed her, clung to her back for years. A beach towel she won as a door prize when she was twelve. A gold-edged journal, a gift from a boy she once liked. Laura stared at these things until she heard the sound of her mother's slippered feet scuffling up the drive.

Without touching a thing Laura went inside.

By the time her mother had carried an armful of clothes to the backyard Laura was already there, shaking out the expansive guest room comforter. It shone in the backyard fire.

"Hi," said Laura.

The guest room pillows were piled on the grass beside her, along with sheets and an afghan crocheted by some forgotten relative. Laura picked up a pillow and fluffed it.

They looked at each other, their arms full of bundled cloth. Her mother took a step forward.

"Go ahead," said Laura. "My clothes first. And then the bedding. And then my suitcases, and then the curtains, and the mattress, and the carpeting, because we don't have any clue where these mystery bugs live, do we? We're just guessing. So we'd better burn it all. Just to be safe."

They held each other's gaze.

Then Laura's mother sank into a lawn chair. Laura's clothes made a pile in her lap. Her arms rested loosely on top. She stared into the fire.

"Whenever you're ready," said Laura.

Her mother didn't move.

Laura stood there. Then she sat down in a chair beside her mother. She draped the comforter over her legs.

As they watched the fire—panting, desperate for something to consume—a mosquito buzzed between them. They followed it with their ears. They chose the same moment to swat at it. Their hands collided in the air.