

The sun recedes slowly beneath the horizon, the seemingly light blue sky melting into darkness. The wind howls harshly beyond the rotting wooden houses as porch lights begin to dot the street. Mothers call their children inside for dinner and fathers pull into the driveways, home from work and ready to see their families. They would gather around the table and spend a meal laughing and sharing stories and just being a *family*. Just being happy with each other's company was something the less fortunate could only dream of. Life was never that simple.

Tiny hands ring a soft blanket in anticipation at what is to come next. This part of the day is always the most terrifying, and Emily's heart sinks to her toes when the beat up station wagon barrels down the empty road. She knows what to do when Daddy gets home. She knows that she must hide underneath her bed until the yelling stops. She knows she should cover her ears, but even then she could still hear the pitiful sound of her mother hitting the floor.

The car comes to an abrupt stop in the driveway as Emily rushes to hide under her bed before he gets out. She wishes her mother were there to comfort her, to do something other than sit silently and stare at the door. She wraps herself in her blanket and curls tightly into a ball, almost as if to disappear. Her heart thumps widely against her ribcage as the front door opens and slams shut, causing the walls to shutter at the impact. She can picture her mother now. Her dull brown hair lazily strung over one shoulder. Purple circles beneath her dark, sad eyes. Black and blue spots showing on her arms no matter how hard she tries to cover them. Her nimble fingers gripping the armrests as she sits in the ragged chair facing the crumbling white wall where the television used to be. It is rather heart breaking to picture the most important person in your life disintegrating at the hands of their "true love".

The house is eerily quiet save for the thumping sound of boots against wood. Emily cups her hands around her ears and waits for the fighting to start as it

always does. She doesn't hear much of anything besides the sound of her blood pulsing through her ears, and she silently whispers a prayer to The Man Upstairs, hoping beyond all hopes that this day, just this day, her mother can be spared from her torture. But, as usual, it seems like hopes are miles away.

Emily's scrawny legs shake in apprehension and she hugs them to her chest in a failed attempt of comfort. Muffled voices and the notorious clanking of beer bottles pierce the silence. That's all they are for a while, just muffled voices. Not calm, but not angry. The voices you speak with when discussing your child's failing grades or their blatant inability to get involved in any activities in life. Worried with anger writhing just beneath the surface, but not quite there. Yet.

Dust bunnies are blown in swirls and scatter beneath the bed as Emily releases rattling breaths. Lately things have been getting uneasy around the house; you could feel the tension like a ghostly hand on your shoulder. Cold and intruding. It used to be that Emily would have to stay in her room until Daddy passed out on the couch, then she and her mother would have a quiet dinner together on the rotting wooden kitchen table. Afterwards her mother would tuck her in bed and together they would pray the same prayer they do every night; that Daddy would come back to them. But now Emily is forced to stay locked in her room all night and go to bed with an empty stomach and a heart heavy with sadness.

Time and time again she thought it was her fault for all of her parent's fighting. She thought it was her fault that her mother put on a lot of makeup even though anyone could still see the purple underneath.

People gave her mother weird looks as she passed them on the street, seeing the noticeable bruises on her face and arms, but she would always walk with her shoulders back and chin held high like nothing in the world could touch her. She'd look down at Emily, squeeze her hand, and give her a small smile. But even her own daughter could tell she was dying inside.

The conversation just outside Emily's room was beginning to rise, and the door was becoming paper thin, for the little girl that cowered in the darkness of her bedroom could hear every word.

"You have got to stop this Johnathan. You can't keep doing this to us. You can't keep doing this to *her*," her mother said anxiously.

"I can do whatever the hell I want to do Meredith. Quit being such a freaking baby about everything" At that, heavy footstep made their way towards the kitchen and the refrigerator door whooshed open, followed by the gentle clanking of glass.

"Please John, please. It hurts so much. I can't keep doing this. I feel like I'm falling apart and I can't hold myself together anymore. Think about Emily, think about what you're doing to her. She's just a kid." The last part came out as whisper, as if her mother was choking back her sobs that she so desperately wanted to release.

It was quiet for a while, leaving the words hanging in the air. Emily chewed on the inside of her cheek as apprehension came rushing through her tiny body, dowsing her in the icy cold feeling of fear.

"You said you loved me. You said that you wouldn't ever dare think about hurting me, but look at what you're doing to this family John! I love you John, and that is the only thing that has kept me here. But I can't keep suffering like this and putting Emily through all this pain if you aren't you anymore. Come back to us John, we need you." Her mother was crying by now, and it hurt Emily to her core to hear such a sorrowful sound. She didn't ever want to have to hear her mother cry. Ever.

Her father didn't say anything back, he just turned on the television and sat on the couch, turning his back on his wife that is crumbling at the seams.

"Do you love me?" Her mother asked desperately, searching for some sign that her real husband was still inside of the monster before her. Silence.

“Do you love me?” She screamed manically. More silence followed, and by then Emily was already shaking. The only sound Emily could hear was her pulse beating behind her ears and throughout her body.

There was shuffling behind the door and the door to the room next to hers slammed open. Hangers scraped the back of the closet wall as her mother savagely shoved clothes into a suitcase.

“Meredith, what do you think you’re doing?” Her father called from the living room. Her mother just kept packing. Emily heard her father get up from the couch and stalk over to his bedroom.

“Meredith,” he said in a sour condescending voice.

“Sweetheart, I asked you what the hell you think you are doing. You know you need to answer me when I ask you something,” he seethed, spitting out his words like venom.

“I’m taking Emily and we are leaving. We are never coming back John. Have a nice life,” her mother spat.

A weight was released from Emily’s chest; it was like breathing for the first time. She was leaving. She was so relieved she could almost scream and run and jump around. She and her mother could leave and ever look back. They could find a better place to live with new friends and new things to see and she could finally be *free*. It took all of Emily’s strength not to combust in joy. She stayed quiet beneath the bed, but her smile was as bright as ever.

“No!” Her father growled. There was a loud thud and her mother screamed.

“You’re not leaving! You. Are. Not. Leaving.”

Her mother screamed and screamed and screamed and the little girl’s insides twisted at the God-awful sound. Every sound was like a dagger through her chest.

This was worse than the other times. Emily could tell this wasn't just a normal night. Something bad was about to happen.

She was frozen in fear, unable to breathe or even think. Her hands cupped her ears in a tight seal, but even that wasn't enough to keep the sound out. Emily heard her father yell and the sound of skin scraping against wood. Seconds later her bedroom door swung open, sending the picture frames hanging on the wall crashing to the floor. Light leaked into the tiny dark room from the living room, outlining her mother in a pale yellow halo.

"Get your stu—" Her mother crumpled against the floor and her father straddled her chest, his hands closing stiffly around her throat.

"Don't you ever do that again, you hear me! I own you, Meredith. I own you!"

He slammed her head into the floor. She tried to yell but his hands cut her airway off. In the light Emily could fully see the monstrosity unavailing before her. Dark red blood gushed from her mouth and dripped from nose. She twitched and writhed beneath his iron grip.

Emily's eyes were blurred with tears and she was shaking like a mad dog. Her voice was caught in her throat.

Time and time again she watched as her father drove his wife's head into the wooden floor boards. Her actions were becoming sluggish and her attempts to escape his hands were given up. She turned her head to look at her daughter huddled terrified in the confines of her bed. She lifted the corners of her mouth in a sad grimace. Her eyes glistened as she saw Emily, and a tear rolled down her cheek and hit the ground. They shared this time together, saying the goodbyes they knew were coming. They were never going to escape. That is how things work; the bad guys always win. It is a shame.

Emily witnessed silently as the pathetic smile was swept from her mother's beaten face. As her arms fell limp at her sides, unmoving. And her heart stopped

beating. That was the last memory she was ever going to have of her, and it made Emily's skin crawl. Her father noticed she was dead and sat up straight. He stared at the body for a while, as if he couldn't quite believe what he had done. Her mother was still staring at her with dull lifeless eyes, and the monster followed the gaze and found her. The little girl's blood ran cold as she met his eyes. He was wild, crazy, terrible. He haunted her dreams at night and plagued her thoughts during the day. He followed her like a shadow, and she could not be more afraid.

His mouth curved into a smile as though it was carved in his face with a knife. He laughed a jolly kind of laugh that would have calmed Emily, but it only struck her with a new kind of fright. Her mother wasn't there anymore to protect her. She was on her own.

She wept for her mother. She wept for what was to come. All the while her father smiled his devilish smile, well aware of the hell to come.