

A girl sits on her front porch. She is leaning forward, ready at a moment's notice, her eyes slipping past the property line to things beyond.

Something rustles. The girl shifts expectantly. Behind the trees near the end of the property, another girl emerges.

The first girl takes off, her golden hair streaming out behind her. She gallops across the lawn and the two girls throw themselves into each other's arms.

They can't be more than nine or ten years old but the simple delight in their greeting gives a hint at connection far deeper than most would expect.

Their ritual slips back into things more typical of nine year-olds. Laughter, accompanied by the usual intake of attire and showers of compliments.

"You look beautiful, Anna," the first girl says to the second.

Anna smiles. "My mom dressed me up like this. I can't stay long 'cuz I'm going to a party."

"What kind of party?" The first girl asks, taking Anna's hand.

"It's an adult one," she wrinkles her nose. "It's gonna be boring, but my mom's making me come for politeness reasons."

"I love the dress," the girl motions to the sky blue sundress. "And the scarf is wonderful."

Anna laughs. "You always love my outfits."

"They're always wonderful."

"I like yours too," Anna says. "Maddie, you're wearing a skirt! You *never* wear skirts."

"It was to celebrate the last day of school," Maddie says, happy her friend noticed.

The two girls beam at each other, walking arm in arm towards the door.

Inside, the older sister sees them coming.

"Well, look who's here, *again*."

"Zoe, be nice," her mother scolds.

Zoe rolls her eyes. "She's been here *every* day for the past month and you're-" The door swings open and Zoe drops the end of her sentence.

Maddie bounds into the kitchen, full of new energy. "Hi mom, hi Zoe!"

"Hi girls," the mother says. She glances at Zoe who is busy pretending not to have heard anything.

The two girls skip past, taking the stairs two at a time, wondering at how strange people

get once they become teenagers.

Zoe quietly sets down her notebook and trails them up the stairs, listening as she walks. She stands outside her sister's door, pressing her ear to the crack.

“Zoe!” Her mother snaps, having followed her. “What are you doing?”

“I'm sorry,” she apologizes, concern in her eyes. “But listen.”

The mother frowns, but joins her daughter with her ear to the door.

“... I'm so happy it's summer now. We should go to the pool sometime, it's been ages.” It's Maddie speaking. Silence follows. “Jeez, you're mom is really tight with that stuff. My mom could always drive us.” More silence. “Well, I'm sure we could work it out. Can I braid your hair? It's so thick and wavy. You can take it out before your party if you want.”

The two withdraw their ears and look at each other.

“See?”

“Honey, it's an imaginary friend. Stop freaking out.”

“Mom, she's nine, going to be ten in a month, and the friend showed up six months ago. Most people make up friends when they're *little* and lose them once they get this age. Not the opposite.”

“Zoe, you're overreacting. I think it's great that she has such a close friend, even if it's not real.”

“Mom,” Zoe complains in a whisper. “She's having a conversation with thin air!”

“Zoe, you've done enough. That's the end of it, understand?” The mother snaps, her irritation flaring. Zoe watches her thump down the stairs then slowly pushes her sister's door open.

Maddie turns to look at her. “Oh, hey Zoe.”

“Hi,” Zoe says, walking in with the air of one entering a mine field. “What are you doing?”

“Uh, braiding Anna's hair?” Maddie says, acting like it's obvious, holding up fistfuls of air.

“Ah,” Zoe says, her mouth sour.

“Oh, look!” Maddie abandons her imaginary hair and reaches across the floor to pick up a piece of paper. “Look what Anna drew for me!”

Zoe carefully takes the paper from her sister. “Pretty,” she says, trying to force some

enthusiasm into her voice as she examines the blank page. “What is it?”

“Can't you tell?” Maddie is hurt. “It's a castle.”

“An imaginary castle?” Zoe suggests.

“No, a normal one.” Maddie's brow furrows. Zoe sighs and gives her the drawing back.

“What is it? Don't you like it?”

“Maddie,” Zoe says softly, kneeling beside her sister. “There's nothing there.” Maddie jerks away, pain in her eyes. “Maddie just listen to me,” Zoe whispers, but Maddie is already gone.

“Maybe you don't want to give people a chance, but I do, okay?” Maddie says, turning her back on her sister.

Zoe rises slowly and walks out the door. *Try 56 rejected.*

A month passes uneventfully. Zoe reaches try 79 before deciding to let things be for a while.

The family sits happily around the table, the father at the head, with his wife and eldest daughter on his right and son and youngest daughter on the left. The circle shines with happy faces; Maddie's the happiest of all. She glows in the flickering candlelight coming from the cake before her.

“Make a wish,” her mother reminds her. Zoe closes her eyes a moment, drawing her lips together in a slight smile. She opens them, preparing herself to blow her heart out, then pauses.

“I'll be right back,” she says, jumping up from the table. The remaining family members look at each other, bewildered.

They hear the front door creak open, and an excited voice exclaim, “Anna!”. Zoe groans, resting her head on the table, where her mother nudges her, telling her to be polite.

“Polite?” Zoe hisses through clenched teeth. “Polite to who?”

Maddie comes back through the door, beaming. “Anna couldn't stay, but look at what she gave me for my birthday!” Maddie twirls, obviously showing something off. “Isn't it the prettiest scarf you've ever seen? She's had it for a while, but she decided I would like it more, even though she loved it too. Isn't that sweet?”

“A quite remarkable friend,” her mother says calmly. There's a general murmur of agreement around the table and Maddie sits down again, breathes in, and blows out every single

candle.

The house has quieted down. The coffee table is strewn with wrapping paper and ribbons. The mother and father sit on the couch, tea for one, coffee for the other. The wooden stairs creak and they both look up as their eldest approaches.

She sits down beside her mother, resting her head on her shoulder.

“What is it Zoe?”

“She's scaring me,” the girl's voice is at a low whisper. Her mother wraps an arm around her, drawing her close. “She walked into my room asking me for an extra coat hanger. So I gave her one, and followed her into her room asking her what she was going to do with it. She just looked at me like, duh, and said that it was for her scarf. So then I left, or pretended to, but I could see her pretending to hang up her scarf, being so careful and loving with it. And it wasn't for attention either, because when I said something, she was all startled, like she didn't know I was there. Then she started talking about how pretty the scarf is and how the colors match the sea exactly, and how she loved the pattern and didn't I think the texture was just wonderful? So I just played along and kissed her goodnight. But when I left and I could hear her saying her bedtime prayers, she was thanking God for such a wonderful birthday with such a wonderful family, wonderful gifts and a wonderful friend like Anna.”

“Oh, Zoe,” her mother whispers.

“It's worse. Remember her 'sleepover' with Anna last week? I could hear her giggling and laughing across the hallway. So I cracked open her door to see what the fuss was about, and she was just lying there on her side, propped up on one elbow, talking to the empty sleeping bag beside her.” Zoe hugs her mother tight. “She's really scaring me. And when I talk to her, she honestly believes that Anna is real, she believes that the scarf is hanging up in her closet, right at the end of the row where she put it.”

Both parents are silent.

“I didn't know things were that bad,” the father says softly. Even the mother looks worried now.

“I'll tell you what,” she tells Zoe. “I'll take her in to Dr. Robert to check her over, if that will make you feel better.” Zoe nods and her mother kisses her on the forehead. “You'd better try to get some sleep.” Zoe nods again, but she knows that's one promise she can't keep.

Zoe sits on her bed in her room. Soft light bathes the walls, a light that is normally accompanied with the waft of dinner and the clanging of pots and pans. But tonight, the whole house seems dead, trapped in the summer heat.

Zoe twists a loose string on her shirt. Wrapping it tightly around one finger, she watches her finger slowly turn purple before pulling it off. The curls slowly straighten, only a few kinks lingering. But even when she wraps it so tight it digs into her flesh, the kinks won't go away.

The door opens with a dry squeak.

Zoe looks up as her brother comes in, his mop of brown hair scattered messily across his forehead.

“What do you want?” she asks, her voice as tight as the string in her hand.

“Oh,” he says, halting in his path. He tosses his rubik's cube from one hand to the other, standing indecisive in the doorway. “It was just so quiet and I was bored so I was wondering what you were doing...”

Zoe's expression softens and he comes in to sit beside her on the bed. They are silent as he examines his rubik's cube that has already been solved. Zoe smiles slightly and takes it from him, shuffling the pieces until no two alike remain by each other.

The quick, confident movements of her brother's hands pull Zoe out of her slow and insecure mood. She watches his work, focusing on not listening for another phone call, not thinking about what the last one said. She won't know any more until they get home anyways. The doctor said it was schizophrenia. Maddie will start her medication tonight. And right now, they are eating ice cream in the park as Zoe's mother explains things to Maddie.

But as the remainder of the day slips away unheeded, Zoe keeps straining her ears anyways. She knows Maddie and no explanation will satisfy her stubborn sister. Not even an explanation aided by ice cream.

Her brother takes his gaze off the rubik's cube, his hands slowing. He looks out the window, then at his watch, at Zoe, then back to the window. She knows what he's thinking; it's the same thing she has thought the whole day long.

Zoe pokes at one square of red he failed to fix. He smiles a little and his hands pick up their pace again.

But when the front door opens they jump up to see and understand, leaving the square

unfixed.

Maddie wakes up. She bounces out of bed. The sun is shining and it's a wonderful day.

Then she remembers the day before and all its confusing contents and she feels a cloud blocking the sunshine.

Maddie pulls back her curtain. There isn't a cloud in the sky. She shakes her head, trying to reorganize her thoughts. Nothing is gonna block her sun today.

Maddie walks over to her closet, contemplating what to wear. Before planning her outfit, she pushes the clothes back to the end of the row to look at the beautiful scarf first.

She freezes. Then, as though to make sure she's not seeing things, she pulls the hook off the row, gazing at it aghast.

The last hanger in her closet is empty.

Four years later.

The room has changed. The walls have gone from paisley pink to mint green. The dresser is now sky blue instead of purple, the walls decorated no longer with photos of ponies but beaches and friends.

A girl walks in, shutting the door behind her. She walks to her closet, then to her bed. In her hand is an old coat hanger.

The paint is chipping away to reveal rusted metal beneath, but the girl doesn't seem to care. For a moment, she holds it close, shutting her eyes.

Though much of her still looks the same, Maddie has changed. The spark in her eye is dim and her perfect posture seems to hide a beaten down girl within.

The moment ends and she stands, returning the hanger back to its sanctuary in her closet. She knows well from experience what happens when her mother sees her with it. The speech never changes, starting soft and gentle, like her mother doesn't expect her to understand.

*She's fake, a figment of your imagination,* the words of her family echo in Maddie's head. Like she doesn't get that. If Anna were real, she would still be there.

But a little piece of her is still holding onto Anna. And Maddie knows it.

She knows exactly what her family would say if they knew. A hallucination, they say. Her mind playing tricks on her. The thought makes Maddie bristle. You don't walk up to someone

with a scar gouged so deep into their flesh that time will never wash it away and tell them the creature that made it never existed.

She turns to the window, pushing back tears. The wind rustles in the trees, tickling their leaves and making them dance.

She watches the way the invisible force works. The intricacy of its dance, the freedom of its laughter.

No one can see the wind.

No one says it's fake.