

## *Don't Go Upstairs*

By Shaun Barger

“Kathy, wake up.”

My sister slumbered in the driver's seat of a rusted out Volkswagen resting on four, mossy cinderblocks. Ants crawled across her lap like a rippling wave of little black beads. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked down at them, vague annoyance twisting her lips.

“Kathy, what are you doing out here?” My heart was still racing. I had spent the better part of an hour looking for her, first in the mansion, the surrounding forest, and then here on a whim.

“I hate it in there,” she said, almost petulantly. She shoved the door open with a screech of old metal, climbing out and briskly dusting the ants from her jeans. “It's unnatural. I'm afraid of what might happen if I fell asleep in there, and I was tired.”

“We don't know what's out here,” I scolded. “Ants could be the least of your problems.”

“Better ants or wolves than those horrible little children.”

I broke off my gaze, and we lapsed into silence. I could feel her eyes burning into me.

“What?” she finally said. “What are you hiding?”

“I...I found this in the dirt over there.”

The knife flashed in my hand, still sharp despite the mud and rust. She stiffened, looking alarmed.

“Tommy...”

“I’ve gotta try. We’ve been here for days now, and they still haven’t told us anything. We don’t know where we are, or how we got here, or what--”

“They haven’t said anything new? Nothing at all?”

“No, nothing new. ‘Don’t go upstairs.’ That’s it, and that was days ago. They just stand there, never sleeping, never eating...”

“They aren’t human.”

“Obviously.” I hefted the knife, holding it up in the soft summer light. “Do you think they bleed?”

I turned to go, carefully hiding the blade in my sleeve. She grabbed my arm, pulling me back. Her face was taut, her eyes big and scared.

“Don’t you remember what they did to Fritz?”

Of course I remembered.

“I’ll be more careful than he was. Fritz is an idiot, a total meathead.”

“And now he’s blind.”

“Well what the hell do you suggest?” I snarled, shoving her hand away from my arm. She didn’t say anything, she just stood there there. Silent and pleading.

I sighed.

We made our way back to the mansion along a rough animal trail. The forest went on endlessly, so far as we could tell. Here and there were the ruins of a house, or the cracked remains of what might have been a street. Nothing was whole, except for the mansion. The car was the least decayed thing I had seen so far.

Lily waved as we pulled ourselves from the brush, out onto the lawn. The blades of grass still glistened with droplets from the sprinklers. I waved back, forcing a smile. She was a pretty, waify little thing. Long black curls, black eyes. Skin like milk. She was smoking a cigarette and lighting another one for her brother Fritz.

He sat on the stone beside her limply, his shoulders slumped. Thick bandages wrapped around his face, covering his eyes. Two splotches of red seeped through, looking as if someone had tastelessly drawn in new eyes for him with a red marker.

“Hey there,” I said, plucking the cigarette from her mouth and kissing her playfully.

“Hey yourself. So you found the kitten?”

“I hate that name,” Kathy hissed, “don’t call me that.”

“Hey Fritz,” I said, putting my arm on his shoulder. “How ya’ doin’ man?”

He didn’t reply, ignoring my hand, smoking in silence.

“As well as could be expected,” Lily said, affectionately mussing up her brother’s wild yellow hair. She snatched her cigarette from my fingers, taking a drag and blowing a long stream of smoke off to her side, blinking rapidly. She sniffed, seeming to lose herself in the ashen curls.

“Mom and Dad? Todd? Have they come--”

“Not a word from the search party, kitten. Not a peep.”

Kathy scowled, and Lily flashed her a lop-sided grin. It was her way of comforting my sis, I guess. Acting like nothing bothered her. I knew better, though. She had cried the night before, when she thought I was asleep. Even then, she hadn’t made a sound. She just shook like she had the hiccups. Like little spasms. The only thing that

gave her away were the tears, hot on my arm. I pretended to sleep. Other girls would have wanted to be held, to be lied to. Lily wasn't like that. She was fiercely proud and unsentimental. It was one of the things I loved about her.

"It's only been two days," I assured my sister. She was tough in her own way, but only twenty. Just a kitten. Two days had passed since her boyfriend and both of our parents had struck out to find help, or some sign of civilization. "Two days, and they took enough food to last for weeks. Dad, Todd and the others are all big guys, they can handle themselves. There's nothing to worry about."

She nodded, still looking worried. Her boyfriend was such a little shit for going off and leaving her here. I got angry just thinking about it. A cold breeze cut through the air as the sun began to sink.

"Come on," I said, "Let's get inside."

We called it the mansion because we weren't sure what else to call it. It was huge, tall and painted a greyish blue, like the sea before a storm. It was built like a great wooden box, with no windows above the first floor. No ivy climbed the sides, no gutters lined the edges. Sterile, square cut hedges lined the boundaries of the vast lawns surrounding the buildings.

The porch was white, thickly painted wood, creaking under my feet as I made my way to the entrance. As we swung open the door a dozen or so scared, sullen faces looked up at us. They began to breathe again, letting out long sighs of relief (or disappointment) as they recognized who we were. They were scattered about the massive room in little hushed clusters.

There was no furniture, no decoration. Just vast open space with harsh light from hanging glass globes shining down on plush red carpeting. Long windows dotted sterile white walls. There were two doors across the huge empty room from the entrance.

The first one led to a big, communal bathroom with six shower and six toilet stalls.

The other led to the pantry, a room full of canned food and bottled water. No matter how much food you took from it, every time you closed the door it would fill up again – a seemingly limitless supply.

A huge, spiraling staircase rose from the floor against the southern wall, left of the entrance if you were coming in. Standing before it were what appeared to be twin boys, no more than eight or nine years old.

Powdery was the only way to describe them. Hair, skin, eyes, clothing – it was all powdery white, as if they weren't children at all, but strange, pale creatures imitating their shape with unsettling results. The only difference between the two of them was what they held. The boy on the left of the stairs held a small pair of silver sewing scissors. The boy on the right held a needle looped with a long white thread.

“What is this place?” Fritz had demanded, three days before. “How did we get here? What do you want from us?”

Fritz, Lily, my sister, her boyfriend and my parents were the only people here that I knew. We had all just woken up, laid out in neat lines like corpses on the carpet. The others were all strangers, just as confused as we were. Fritz, big macho guy that he was, had been the first to shake himself out of his daze and into a rage.

The little boy with the scissors had smiled at Fritz, a sickly sweet smile. He did that from time to time, as if enjoying some sort of cruel secret. The other one never so much as smiled, let alone spoke.

“Don’t go upstairs,” the boy with the scissors replied. Fritz looked at them, baffled.

“What? Is this some kind of joke? Is the person who brought us here upstairs?”

When the little boy simply smiled again, not answering, Fritz shook his head, moving to go up the stairs. He put his foot on the first step.

The twins flickered and Fritz fell back, screaming, clutching at his face. The smiling boy held his scissors before him, admiring the eye now neatly skewered on the blades, glistening wetly in the artificially light.

The boy with the needle held Fritz’ other eye in the palm of his hand, his expression blank unlike the cruel pleasure painted across his counterpart’s. As one they slipped the eyes into little black satchels hanging at their hips.

The twins were so quick that no one had even been able to see them move. Not only had they taken Fritz’ eyes, but in that *fraction* of a moment, his right socket had been neatly sewn up, although blood still seeped through the lids. It had poured from the other socket, where the one boy must have simply jammed his scissors in and torn the eye out.

No one tried to go past the children again. People pleaded with them, begged them to send us home, but it was useless. They wouldn’t even speak. At this point, everybody seemed resigned to just ignoring them and keeping as far away from them as possible.

As I strode over to the corner Lily and I had staked out as our own, I fingered the knife in my sleeve, eyeing them. Sensing my gaze, the boy with the scissors looked up at me and smiled.

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The following day, I awoke to a cry. I sat up, groggy, as everyone streamed out the front door, looking frantic. Panic rising in my chest, it hit me that Lily was no longer beside me. The realization jerked me into complete wakefulness. Rising to my feet, I rushed to join the others.

I squinted against the bright morning sunlight. Everyone was congregating around something at the edge of the lawn. Many of them were sobbing. *Wailing*. Shoving my way through the crowd, I froze, going cold.

Cradled in Lily's embrace was my mother, her arm completely mangled, hanging from her shoulder in meaty strings. It looked like it had gotten caught in a wood chipper.

She stared right through me, her features dull. Vacant. She was moving her lips, but no words came out. The way she stared, it was as if she could still see what had done this to her, lurking behind me.

Lily was screaming orders at people, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. I stood there, deaf and dumb. People all around me were hassling my mother, demanding to know about the others as Lily shouted them down one after the other.

"Wake up, Tommy!" my sister shouted, shoving past me with an armload of medical supplies. She dropped them in a heap on the shortly trimmed lawn beside Lily. I shook myself out of my stupor, sound coming back in a rush.

"This is all I could find," my sister said. "I just grabbed it all."

“Good job kitten,” Lily breathed. She looked up to the crowd gathered tightly around them. “Is anybody here a doctor? Anybody here with medical experience?”

The crowd became hushed. No one spoke up, no one offered to help. Anger flashed in her eyes, but quickly drained away.

“Okay,” she said, “okay, we need to clean this, clean it and wrap it up. That’s all we can do now. Here Kathy, hold her, squeeze her hand tight, this is going to be rough...”

“I’ll get some water,” I volunteered, coming to life. I turned to rush inside, not waiting for her reply.

A big black bird flew by me, swooping through the front door. Something seemed to be hanging below its fat, black body, swaying gently as it disappeared within. Looking back, I saw that that nobody else had noticed the bird. Their attention was completely focused on my mother.

Following it into the mansion, I saw that it had taken perch on the scissor boy’s shoulder. My stomach twisting with revulsion, I realized that the bird was holding a bulging black bag with a mouth in its belly, a mouth like a human’s, with fat pink lips and big square teeth. It released the bag into the boy’s outstretched hands, smacking its gums and flapping its horrible purple tongue. It whispered something into the boy’s ear, and the boy giggled.

Removing the satchel at his side, he held the bag up over it. Looking straight at me, he began to pour the contents of the bag into his own. It was full of eyes, dozens of eyes. Then it struck me – they were from the search party. It was all of their eyes, all but my mother’s.

The knife felt hot against my side in its makeshift hilt. Trembling, I put my hand on it and slowly began to approach the boy.

“Don’t go upstairs,” he said pleasantly. Tying his satchel, he slung it at his hip once again, patting the horrible little bird and sticking the empty bag back into its mouth. Gibbering around the cloth, the bird flew past me and out the door. The boy looked right up at me, his little scissors once again in hand. The other watched dispassionately as I stood there, shaking with fury.

Letting out a trembling sigh, I pulled my hand from the hilt and forced myself to walk away. Grabbing an armful of water bottles from the never-ending pantry, I tried my best to ignore the scissor boy’s mocking and the horrible clamoring of my own thoughts – the realization that Dad, Todd, and all the others...I stopped, smoothing out my face before going back outside.

Lily was picking away the dirt and leaves crusted into my mother’s torn flesh, gently wiping it down with a bandage soaked in alcohol. Kathy held her, squeezing her hand tightly, big brown eyes wide with worry as she whispered into her ear. My mother didn’t even seem to notice Kathy or the tending of her wounds. She was in her own hellish little world.

I kneeled beside her, dropping the bottles and cracking one open for Lily to clean with. Everyone stood in a silent ring around us, watching.

“Do you think....do you think the others are...?” Kathy couldn’t finish the statement.

“They’re fine,” I said, with as much confidence as I could muster. “Mom must have gotten separated, or decided to come back on her own. You know how she can be. I’m sure they’re *fine*.”

Lily gave me a quick, mournful glance, knowing the lie for what it was, but Kathy smiled faintly, and nodded.

“Yeah,” she said. “Todd and Dad are tough. I’m sure they’re fine.”

Then my mother began to scream.

\* \* \*

After the initial frenzy caused by my mother’s arrival, people sank into a deep, stunned silence. Lily did as much as she could, but my sister adamantly took over caring for her. I left Kathy to it, giving her space. So long as she had even the faintest wisp of hope that Dad and the others were still out there, looking for help, I would tip toe around her. Ugly reality was a sleeping giant. But so long as it slumbered...

I couldn’t sleep that night. I doubt I was the only one. Every time I closed my eyes I could see the boy filling up his gruesome little trophy bag.

Lily slipped into a troubled sleep almost as soon I wrapped my arms around her – probably from the sheer exhaustion of the day. But even then she had nightmares, kicking and whimpering long into the night.

I drifted off eventually, but when I awoke it was still dark. Choked with a desperate feeling of claustrophobia, I carefully slid my arm from under Lily’s head, pulled on my shoes, and went outside.

I had never really paid attention to the constellations before, but the stars here seemed wrong to me. The dippers and the North Star were nowhere to be found. That was

the extent of my knowledge, but even the rest of them, the whole vast, milky spattering, seemed completely off.

“Hey Jack,” came a voice from around the house. A whispering, almost serpentine voice, like silk. I spun around, blood pounding in my ears.

“Who’s there? Who is that?”

“Come here Jack, I’ve got something I think you’d like. Something I know you need.”

I didn’t recognize the voice – it wasn’t any of the other people from the mansion, so far as I could tell.

“My name’s Thomas,” I said, hand going to my knife. With the scraping of rust against cardboard, I slowly pulled it out. “Not Jack. What do you want?”

“Oh, I don’t want much,” the voice said, reasonably. “Come on, Jack, come behind the house, unless you want Lily and the kitten to die like all the others.”

I wheeled around, snarling, looking for the source of the voice. “You hurt them, you so much as say their name again and I’ll kill you. I swear to God I’ll kill you.”

“No no no,” the voice assured me. “I don’t wanna hurt them. I want to *help*. Come on Jack, now Jack, hurry up Jack. This is your last chance.”

After a moment’s hesitation, I slowly began to make my way around the house, knife held at the ready. A light shone down each of the building’s sides, keeping the darkness at bay, which was so thick as to look almost palpable. Around the back of the house, the lawn was much smaller, the hedge boundary dividing it from the forest barely twenty feet away.

“Ah, there you are.”

In the shadows between two hedges, a big, disembodied smile floated in the darkness like the Cheshire Cat's grin, two piercing, vaguely human eyes hovering above it. I took a step back, pressing myself against the wall.

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Ah, don't worry, she can't see us here. For now, at least. You aren't her first batch, you and the others. Not by a long shot. And you won't be the last -- if there ever even *is* a last."

"Her? Who...are you talking about the one who brought us here? The one upstairs?"

"You got it, Jack. You're a sharp one, huh? Sharper than that toy you're holding, at least."

The grin snickered.

"Who is she?" I asked, fighting back a desperate urge to run. "Why is this happening to us?"

"What what who who why why -- none of that matters. It's all about the rules, and what she wants."

"Rules?"

"She can't hurt you directly. Rule is you can only break a rule breaker. Once you break a rule you're off the yellow brick road, you're no longer protected. That's how she gets away with it. That's how she gets what she wants. By giving you no choice but to break the rules, by putting you in a cage, opening the door, and saying *don't leave*. Take a step, and she collects."

"Our...eyes? She collects our *eyes*?"

“Certain things have power, Jack. Certain things have power that only certain things have. But no more time for who’s or what’s or why’s right now. Things are winding down around here, Jack. Things are shuttin’ down real quick. Look up at the sky.”

I did, and gasped. One by one, the stars flickered out, quicker and quicker. The already liquid darkness began to deepen. The grin widened.

“That’s how she does it, that’s the next step. In the morning, you’re gonna find that the food no longer refills, and you’ll have to start rationing. By the end of the week, she’ll turn off the water.”

“But *why*?”

“*Who what when why*,” the grin mocked impatiently. “To drive you to desperation, of course. To make you break a rule. Look down.”

I did. Sitting at my feet where nothing had been before was a small wooden box.

“Open it.”

Slowly, gingerly, I leaned over. Holding my breath, I flipped open the lid and quickly pulled my hand away.

Inside the box was a glass eye. Green, just like my own.

“Touch it.”

“What is it? Why?”

“With this you’ll be able to get past the twins. With this you’ll be able to go upstairs.”

Steeling myself, I nodded, and slowly moved my hand to touch it.

“I should warn you,” the grin said, before I had made contact with the glass.  
“There’s a price. It isn’t much. A pittance really, considering what you’ll be getting for it.”

“What?”

“One of your eyes. There has to be a price, I’m afraid. Another one of the rules. You can buy anything, so long as you have the proper currency.”

I looked up at the grin’s ghostly, almost cartoonish face with horror. Then, after a few moments, I nodded, and touched the glass.

I fell to my knees, clutching at my face and biting back a scream. Bloodied and wet, my eye sat on the velvet where the glass had once been. The lid snapped closed and floated off into the darkness.

“When you approach them, hold the knife in front of your good eye, edge out. You’ll know what to do, after that.”

“Are we dead?” I hissed. “Is this hell?”

The grin chuckled.

“Not yet you aren’t. But we’ll see.”

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The grin hadn’t lied. When we awoke next morning, the food had not been replenished. There was still enough to last us for weeks, but that did nothing to quell the panic.

Disorienting as it was, I had quickly grown accustomed to walking around with only one eye. The glass one was identical to the one it had replaced. So far, no one had even noticed the difference.

I ignored the bickering and arguing of the others, going over check on my mother. She'd been struck mute by whatever she had seen. She would just sit there, gazing into empty space. It was as if her body was here, but her mind was trapped elsewhere, reliving God knows what over and over again.

I found her sleeping nearby and to my relief saw that her expression was peaceful. I kneeled beside her and touched her cheek gently, to wake her.

Her skin was like ice. A gaping, empty feeling filled my gut like a pocket of air and I realized that she was gone – that there was a reason she looked so peaceful. I sat back, feeling cold all over, as if the chill from her skin had come into my own.

I looked up to see my sister standing there, pleading with her eyes. I shook my head, apologetically, and her face seemed to turn to stone. Without a word, she turned and walked away. She went out the front, and Lily, throwing me a look of uncharacteristic sadness and despair, ran to go after her.

It was too much to bear.

"I'm done with this," I spat, standing and walking over to the twins. I yanked the knife from its cardboard hilt, holding it before my remaining eye, edge out.

"Don't go upstairs," the boy with the scissors replied, flashing me a smile that dared me to do otherwise.

*"Don't go upstairs,"* I imitated, and brushed past him.

There was a hiss and a clang and a flicker of movement. Agony seared through my skull as the boy with the needle and thread snatched the glass eye from my face and sewed up the hole. I stumbled back, gritting my teeth and bearing the pain.

The boy stood there, looking at the fake in his hand with confusion, the first emotion I'd seen him show. The eye exploded into blinding white fire, shooting up his arm and engulfing him.

The other boy stood there, annoyed and confused that I'd deflected his scissors. With a roar I jammed the knife into his chest, grabbing him by the throat and pulling it out, only to stab him once more before flinging him away. The yellow blood that poured out was like wax, molten and hot on my hands.

I grabbed the satchel from his side, holding it close. Looking over, I saw that the other boy had been reduced to dust. Panting, I began to climb the tall, spiral staircase.

Little hands grabbed at me from behind, and I looked back to see that from the waxy yellow blood a dozen or so more of the horrible little children had sprung up, wielding scissors and needles just like the originals. They moved slowly, however, no faster than normal children, and as I backed up the stairwell I kicked at their faces, fighting them off as they tried to rush me.

The others had watched all this in stunned silence, but at that moment screamed into action, ceasing to be people and becoming a *mob*. As one they surged forward, tearing and beating at the children, pulling them back. Free of the little hands, I ran the rest of the way up the stairs into a vast, black--

The sun was setting, and it was starting to snow again. I was delirious with pain. Whimpering as snot and tears froze on the collar of my coat. It was cold, but I couldn't stop sweating. I looked down, and then looked away quickly, wishing I hadn't, the pain seeming to swell as I confirmed for the hundredth time what I already knew – that my leg was badly broken.

My jeans were filthy, black with blood. Though you couldn't see it through the material, my skin had ripped open at the break, a piece of bone poking through.

"I'm so stupid," I wheezed, "I'm so stupid. Why did I climb that? Why did I think I could climb that, oh why..."

I finished the sentence with a series of hiccupping sobs, but didn't start crying again. I was too tired to cry.

Kathy didn't talk. Though half my size, she dragged me along the snowy trail, red faced and dripping with sweat. But her little jaw was set. Her eyes hard, determined.

A long trail of bloody splashes against the white wove back and forth behind us. We were far from home, deep in the forest. Farther then we promised we'd ever go, though we always went farther then we said we would. And it was cold, so cold, and now I wished that I had listened, wished that I that I stayed closer to home, wished that I had never come out today at all.

"I'm gonna die!" I croaked. "I'm gonna diiiieeee--"

"Shut. Up." Kathy hissed through gritted teeth.

I bit off my cry, still whimpering.

"We're almost there," she grunted.

Nodding, I took a step. Then another, one foot before the other on the rain-slick pavement. The cool drizzle painted the world green and blue. I walked along the sidewalk, heart beating in my chest, butterflies the size of a catcher's mitt fluttering in my stomach.

There. There she sat, in the distance. On a wrought iron chair, at a wrought iron table, out in front of the café. An overhang kept the drizzle at bay. Lily sat alone, sipping a cappuccino, a small paperback held delicately before her with dainty white fingers.

*“She’s early,”* a voice whispered to me.

“She always does that,” I muttered. “We aren’t supposed to meet for another twenty minutes. And here I was, hoping to be the first one here. So much for that, with Little Miss Punctual.”

*“What are you thinking right now?”*

My movements seemed slowed, the world sliding by sluggishly around me. Lily hadn’t noticed me yet, completely absorbed in the novel. She was beautiful – aching so. In the rain dimmed light, she looked almost ghostly, like she wasn’t real.

“I’m trying to think of something clever and charming to say to her. And I’m hoping that I don’t make a fool of myself.”

*“Is that difficult for you?”*

“It was easier when she was a total stranger. Asking her to coffee was easy. Flirting’s easy.”

I was almost to the café. She still hadn’t noticed me.

*“But conversation of substance?”*

I smiled, faintly.

“I was scared, but when I finally sat down with her, it was the easiest thing in the world. We had this fluency, you know?”

*“How long ago was this?”*

“Three years.”

*“This memory burns like a jewel.”*

Lily looked up at me, and smiled.

My stomach lurched as the world shifted, my rain softened surroundings further softening, like a camera lens going out of focus. When the edges returned, I was sitting at another table, watching her talk and laugh enthusiastically with a darkly dressed, chestnut haired man. With another lurch, I realized that I was watching myself, on my first date with Lily, three years prior.

*“Certain things have power,”* came the voice, this time from across the table.

Shifting my gaze, I let out a cry. A porcelain woman sat before me, snow white and life size, a doll dressed up like a geisha. Her eyes were dark glass, her lips perked up to one side in an eternal, mischievous smile. She held a cup of tea, lifting it to her face in a pantomime of sipping. She was inhumanly graceful. Artificial.

She raised her other hand. Floating above her palm like orbiting planets were two eyes, glistening wetly in the dim afternoon light. One green, one blue, spinning faster and faster.

The light shifted, the world went out of focus, and then it settled again deep into the night in front of a tall, yellow Victorian. Lily's house. I watched from the street as she and I kissed gently in front of the doorway.

*“Your first kiss, the blossoming of love,”* the porcelain woman continued, standing beside me. *“That has power.”*

The world shifted again, to a sun drenched field. Two dark haired children, squealing with laughter, launching a kite into the air. The boy waded through the grass,

sprinting to send the yellow diamond up high despite the lagging wind. The little girl cheered the boy on, letting out a high pitched *whoop* as it took flight.

I grinned in spite of myself, taking my wife's hand. I looked into her eyes, green as my son's. She smiled back; a beautiful, weathered crescent.

I pulled back from the scene, shuddering, confused. Those children were my sister and I. The man was my father, his wife my mother.

*"A father's memory of his children, one of his happiest, one that kept him going through the darker times – that has power."*

Another shift, another night. The porcelain woman and I stood in Lily's bedroom atop the yellow Victorian. On the bed before us, Lily and I writhed under dark blue sheets, painted by the moonlight from the wide, open window.

*"Your first time making love to her."*

The bedroom changed, to another bedroom, another night.

*"Your father's first time making love to your mother. These, these have power."*

I cringed, looking away.

"Why are you showing me all this?" I cried, clenching my eyes shut and shaking my head. "What the hell do you want from us?"

*"These memories,"* the woman continued, *"they belong to me now."*

I opened my remaining eye, and the moon painted walls slipped away, replaced by a vast, black room. The floor closed behind me like a living thing, blocking the stairs from which I came. It was shiny and slick, like obsidian, only with a strange inner light that illuminated everything with a faint blue glow.

Seated on a chair at the center of the room was the porcelain woman. She still held the cup of tea eternally grasped in her hand, and mimicked drinking it as she casually looked me up and down.

“Keep what memories you have,” I said, as evenly as I could, “but let us go.”

I held up the bag of eyes.

“You can have these. They’re mine now, I reclaimed them. I’ll give them to you if you send us all home.”

Her frozen smile seemed to somehow deepen, cruel and mocking on her painted white face.

“I’m afraid,” she finally said, “you’ll find that you’re one eye short to buy freedom for the others, to bribe me into sending them home. And I’m afraid that means you have a very difficult decision to make.”

Lily and Kathy appeared from the darkness, limp and suspended in the air by string like a couple of marionettes. I cried out.

“What did you--!”

“Hush now, they’re merely sleeping,” she explained. “No need to make a fuss. But now for your choice. Only one of these girls is going home.”

“Wh-what?” I stammered. “No! Take one of the others. One of the men.”

“I’m afraid it just doesn’t work that way. It has to be either your lover, or the kitten. Almost everyone I brought to this place came with more than one person they love, and no matter who it was that managed to come up those steps, they would have had to choose. The choice just happens to rest on you. How *fortunate* for the others.”

“Well then I’ll stay! Take me, I don’t care about me, please, just send them home!”

She laughed, prettily.

“Oh, I’m sorry! *You* won’t be going anywhere. I thought that much is clear. You’re *never* going home. And it’ll be with your remaining eye that you’ll be buying Lily or Kathy’s freedom. Refuse, and all three of you remain.”

“It’s a shame, really,” whispered the familiar voice of the thing with the Cheshire cat smile. It appeared beside the living doll, eyes and grin floating in the dim blue light. “A shame that you don’t still have two eyes. Then you could have sent them both home. A wiser man would have given me another man’s eye. Cut his throat for it. You already said you don’t care about the others. Too bad for you, *Jack*.” The floating face giggled.

I stood there, silent, breathing hard, looking back and forth between my sister and Lily. I couldn’t choose how could I choose? It was sick, impossible.

“Is the choice really so hard?” the china doll breathed. “Is it really even a choice it all? You’ve gone and made your own life with Lily. You two were happy. You still are, I’ve seen how you hold her, how you look at her. Such love is a rare thing, not to be taken lightly. Rare as a woman like her.”

“I don’t know,” the grin sighed, “Putting a death sentence on your own flesh and blood? And just a little girl...”

“But shouldn’t Todd have protected her? Her lover. Or what about your father. Shouldn’t it have been their responsibility to protect the little kitten?”

“Just like it should have been Fritz standing there,” the grin agreed, “paying the price to set his own sister free. He had no one else to protect. Too bad he had to serve as the example.”

“Yes, but--”

“*Shut up!*” I screamed. “Just shut up! *Please!* Please just...stop.”

They looked at my expectantly, obediently going silent.

With a trembling finger, I made my choice. The world disappeared in red as I slid the blade into my remaining eye.