

Mum

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ROGER IGNORED HIS MOTHER AND CURLED HIMSELF INTO A HOLE that Jacks, the family's Springer Spaniel, had dug under a pine tree. All week, she'd promised to take him to Dorney Park, but last night his mother suddenly announced that she was going to visit her great aunt at a nursing home near Philadelphia. Pulling her car onto Argyle Road, she called, "Be back tomorrow!"

How stupid to be left behind with Ellie, their housekeeper. The rattling engine faded into the distance. Roger wished he could stay there and let Jacks cover him with dirt, but he was too big. His teddy bear fit perfectly in the hole.

Paddington's arms stuck up toward him. Roger dropped handfuls of soil onto the smiling bear. He would show his parents that he did not need to carry around stuffed animals. His father complained that a boy of five and a half was too old for it. Roger liked this new sensation of burning in his throat and chest that came from holding back tears. He ran his hands over the earth to hide Paddington's grave.

Back inside, Roger crept through forbidden rooms seeking answers to why things were so different lately. Father was away at more and more conferences, like the one he was attending all this week. Roger poked his finger at the white puff of tissue paper stuffed in a hole over Mother's door handle. She used to bolt herself in until father had the lock removed. Even now, Mother kept the door shut

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and came out only when Father came home from his office at the end of the day. With a high, cheerful voice, she spoke of the small things that had happened, like the milkman forgetting eggs or a neighbor's new car. She presented her cheek to accept Father's kiss. Roger noticed that his father sniffed her face, like Jacks did to Roger whenever he got home from school.

At noon, Roger sat at the kitchen island eating mushroom soup while Ellie whistled and folded laundry. Thunder rolled in from across the tops of the trees. The washing machine, out of balance, started thudding against the dryer. The sky was dark, almost green. Jacks whimpered and paced in circles. The air felt still. Ellie's whistling ceased.

"Ellie?" he said.

His heart pounded. The swinging door to the dining room swelled outward as if a ghost was trying to enter. He ran into the laundry room.

"Ellie?" he called again.

The ironing board stood abandoned.

A sudden upward gush of air passed through the open windows. Rain hissed on the hot pavement of the driveway. It smelled like someone had struck a match. On the kitchen table, papers came to life and slid off as if they were escaping. A door slammed. It sounded to him as if someone was rolling a bowling ball around upstairs.

Ellie ran inside, the mail clutched to her chest, her uniform plastered to her back. She began waving a damp catalog in the air. The last time he'd seen Ellie spread mail on the table had been during the week of his parents' big anniversary trip. They'd planned to be gone for three weeks. But on a Friday at the end of the first week while Ellie and Bill, the lawn man, drank coffee at the kitchen table, his parents walked in the front door. Ellie and Bill stood up immediately. Bill left the house without a word. Normally his father would have lectured them, but this time both he and Roger's mother walked through the kitchen and upstairs with pasted-on smiles, like they were *pretending*.

Other strange things happened this year. Nobody swam in the pool yet except for Roger, even though the Fourth of July was coming

soon. In the past, his mother would bring her little radio and stretch out on the lawn chair with a plastic pince-nez over her eyes, angling a fan of silver foil toward her face. His father would join them in plaid swim trunks, cannonballing off the diving board. This summer, the only company Roger had while he paddled around was Bill, skimming the surface of the pool with a long-handled net, or Ellie, soaking her feet on the pool ladder.

This year, too, Roger kept a secret. He had always loved to sit on the carpet next to the sideboard in the dining room and admire silver pieces on the shelves. One day he noticed that a sugar bowl with four feet was missing. The tongs for the sugar cubes lay forgotten in the back of the cabinet. The next time he looked, the tongs and six silver napkin rings had vanished. He inspected the sideboard and could not find the little silver cup that bore his initials, RFS, and the date of his birth. He tiptoed up to his mother while she was watching television and asked about it.

It was then that he and his mother began their special pact.

“Mum’s the word,” she whispered, her breath on his face.

“Mum?” he asked.

“It means if anyone asks, you don’t know anything,” she said.

For the first time, she smiled at him the way she smiled at grown ups.

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

She tugged the zipper on his jacket.

“You know what you are?” she asked.

From her adoring eyes, he could see it was something good, something wonderful.

“One cool cookie,” she said.

She released his coat and flopped back against the couch. This time, she let him sit up on the cushion next to her. She fondled his hand with both of hers and explained that the missing silver was a test she had devised for Ellie to make sure she wasn’t pawning family heirlooms. Roger didn’t understand, but he didn’t care. He and his mother were friends now.

He searched for more missing items so they could keep being friends. Once he discovered an empty glass behind a potted plant, but

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that was it. Nothing had disappeared from the sideboard in a long time, and the closeness he had enjoyed with his mother faded.

He slid down from the chair to tell Ellie he'd finished his soup, but, seeing her lips moving, he stopped. Father had explained to Roger that Ellie's lips moved that way when she aired her "inside thoughts." The way his father said it, there was something silly about it, that it was like when Jacks tried to bite car tires.

At this memory, he felt an ache in his stomach. Ellie was not his mother or father. She was a worker, paid to be in the house with him. She was a word his father had taught him: an *employee*.

Roger went to the screen door and gazed at the weeds growing between the bricks in the patio. The thunder rolled away beyond the kennel, over the field and out past the old logging road that led through the woods. The storm was still happening, he thought, but it wasn't happening here anymore. He might as well go dig up Paddington. No one would be back that day to care if he held on to baby-toys or not.

A new idea hit him. He pressed his palms into the sagging mesh of the screen door. *What if his parents had left him and they were never coming back?*

Maybe this was why, all spring, the house was slowly being emptied of the silver. Maybe it was why cobwebs gathered in the corners of rooms and why his mother took long drives when she could no longer lock herself in her bedroom. Or why Father had started attending more and more conferences—maybe he wasn't even going to conferences, but to find a new house that they would live in. Without him. It could explain the tree limbs fallen on the yard, and the dandelions, and Bill only coming three days a week instead of five. It could explain Ellie talking on the phone more often, being more kindly toward him than scolding.

Maybe his parents had planned this all along.

Ellie must know they had gone. But if he asked, she would say it wasn't true. And then he would be unsure again. No. Better to feel the tearing inside that he felt now, than to have hope. Dumb, baby hope belonged in that grave with Paddington. He would find out for himself. He would go in the basement and see if the suitcases were gone.

“Ellie? Will you come to the playroom with me?” he asked.

“In a minute, hon,” she said.

He sat at the top of the stairs to the basement waiting for her. A damp waft of cool air hit him from below. He edged his way down the steps on his bottom until he was able to peer into the room.

“Ellie!” he called.

“In a minute!” she answered.

All he needed to do was look inside the boiler room to see if his mother’s big trunk was there. But he had never gone down to the playroom alone. He was afraid of closets and utility rooms—shadows hid in them, like spiders and boogey men.

“Ellie!” he yelled.

He heard her muffled, angry words, then silence. He waited, the minutes growing longer. He’d gone too far. Now she wouldn’t come. He forced himself to run down the remaining stairs and across the playroom to the door of the boiler room.

He opened the door and pushed until it thudded against a coiled garden hose. The boiler room, usually empty of the patio furniture in summertime, was a floor-to-ceiling puzzle of white chair frames. It was impossible for him to climb through the chaos where Father kept the suitcases. Raindrops rattled against the panes of a second door that led up a back staircase to the yard.

In the center of the room, something caught his eye. Two large patio tables were stacked, one upside down on top of the other. They were just over the drain hole. From underneath one of the tables peered his mother’s face.

She wore a detached, pleasant expression, like the golden Buddha that sat on an end table in the living room. Roger saw something strange in his mother’s features. Daylight gleaned off the vacant surface of her eyes. The lids closed. When they opened again, her eyes were looking right at him.

The pleasure slid off her face. Roger’s legs were rubbery. His feet stuck to the ground. As his vision adjusted, he saw, below the face, two glowing domes. Naked knees. She was squatting under the table, directly over the drain. There was the sound of water. Tinkling.

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Quick, so he wouldn't see any more, he leaned all his weight back, pulling at the doorknob. It was not right to see his mother doing that. But no, that was his *actual* mother he'd been thinking of. This creature and his mother could not be the same. His mother wore bright lipstick and shimmering blouses. This one seemed pale and sick. Maybe it was something bad, something pretending to be her.

It felt like forever as the door arced toward the frame and finally closed. In order for the door to lock, he had to push the button in, but it wouldn't stay. The tip of his finger began to hurt from holding down the button. He didn't think he could run across the basement to the stairs without risking the creature bursting out of the door and overtaking him. He might end up being kept in the basement with it.

Despite his terror, he felt sorry for her, whoever it was. She looked strange, but more familiar than anyone. But if it had been her, why didn't she say hello? Why did she act like he was a stranger?

The door shuddered against his back as if she was trying to get at him. He heard a slamming noise coming from inside. He screamed. His throat felt like it was ripping. Jacks bolted down the stairs. Ellie ran an obstacle course of a train set and scattered storybooks. She tried to pull Roger's hand away from the handle. He clawed at her forearm with his free hand. Jacks barked.

Hindered by his blubbering deep breaths, he tried to explain that he'd seen someone in the boiler room. Someone bad, threatening, pretending to be his mother.

"I thought we were supposed to be a big boy this weekend," Ellie said.

She breathed heavily and patted her forehead with a handkerchief. He thought she was annoyed because she had to come down the stairs.

"I saw it," Roger protested, feeling his anger rising.

"Honey, it's nothing to get worked up about."

"You don't know," he said.

Pushing the door open, she said, "I don't, do I?"

A nest of blankets lay next to the hot water heater. The edge of the cement pad was wet as if the door to the outside had recently been opened.

“Now, you see? Mommy’s just playing her hiding game. We can leave her alone and not go looking for her, all right Roger? Tomorrow it’ll all be back to normal,” Ellie said.

Jacks wound his way through the jumble of lawn furniture and sniffed at the drain hole. He lifted his leg and urinated on the spot.

“Jacks!” Ellie scolded.

The dog looked at them, wagging his little motor of a tail.

Ellie stooped over and picked up an amber container next to the garden hose. It looked like the one he had seen in his father’s bathroom. Father had taken big purple pills for his bad back. One remained in the vial.

“But, but it might not have been her,” he said.

He pushed at his forehead with all ten fingers.

“Honey, don’t get yourself worked up,” she said.

“What if it was a robber?” he asked.

“It wasn’t a robber.”

But her voice sounded worried as she studied the container and put it in her pocket. She crossed the basement and began to mount the stairs ahead of him. Terrified he’d be left behind, he dashed past her, tripping and bruising his knees on the treads. The creature in the boiler room had imitated his mother. Who was to say that Ellie wasn’t in on it herself? She might lock him down there too, for no reason.

Everywhere Ellie went, he followed, clinging. He wished he could have Paddington in his arms. The more she tried to chat the day away with a lighthearted tone, the more distressed he felt.

She spread a puzzle of a castle across the dining room table.

“Ellie?” Roger began.

“Look for the corners first,” she said.

“Will you come outside with me?” he asked.

“Oh, honey. It’s pouring rain. Help me find the corners,” she replied.

“But I have to get Paddington.”

After a few minutes of working on the puzzle together, Ellie pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen. He tried to follow her.

“I’m keeping the door open. I’m right here,” she assured him.

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He moved the pieces around. He couldn't concentrate. He kept turning around to see if someone was creeping up behind him.

In hushed tones, he thought he heard her say the name Bill. He had never heard her call Bill on the phone before. She lowered her voice but he heard her mumble "purple" and later, the brand of his mother's car, "Mercedes."

After a few minutes, Ellie hung up. She took the pill container from her pocket and hid it behind a cookbook.

"Who was that?"

"My daughter," Ellie said.

A lie!

As if to distract him, she began the ritual of making cookies. She took three eggs from the refrigerator and cracked them into a bowl. Usually she let him help. This time she didn't even think to ask for his assistance, but did it herself, mechanically, with a furrowed brow.

Roger wondered if Bill was in on it too. His father often checked to see if they drank from the tall bottles. This must have been because he didn't trust them. Sometimes they did pretend they were working when they were sitting at the kitchen table having coffee.

A shaft of sunlight cut across the island.

Opening the screen door, Ellie held his hand and walked across the grass to the clothesline. Jacks bounced ahead of them. The air was cool and clean. It felt strange pretending that everything was normal; he had a sense that the two of them were both going along with someone's plan. They could hold hands and walk together because they were not actually enemies; the feeling was more that they were playing for different teams.

The sun dropped behind the trees, turning the branches black against the sky. The white brick building behind the house was cast in a peach-colored light. The previous owners had used part of it as a kennel, and Roger sometimes liked to crawl up the ramp on all fours and play inside the cages.

Ellie snapped and folded a wet sheet that had been left out in the rain. Roger crept around the corner of the building, hunting for Jacks' tennis ball in the weeds. Shadows moved down his arms. A

flock of starlings plummeted toward the roof and lifted, shifting their shape against the dusk.

Roger wished dogs were staying in the kennel. He thought of last winter, when an elderly neighbor on Argyle Road had died in his garage with the car running. The man had left behind two fat old Boxers. Father housed them in the kennel until new owners adopted them. The building felt lonely without them. He looked at the orange sunlight reflecting off the row of windows.

“Roger!” Ellie called.

Her voice evaporated into the air. He waded through the grass. He could hear nothing but his breath in his ears. In the sea of green, he stopped, remembering what he had just witnessed.

One of the windows was open.

A chilly, wet feeling crept down between his shoulder blades. Father was very strict about keeping the kennel locked. He turned back to it. The windows looked like they were on fire. Halfway down the row, a narrow black slit interrupted the blazing line.

Ellie’s voice sounded close now, “Let’s go inside and make dinner, honey.”

He stepped onto the lawn and took her hand. Ellie led them toward the screen door. He did not turn back to look at the kennel. He did not need to. He knew that his mother was there.

Now he remembered. It *had* happened before, like Ellie said. One night, Mother had screamed at Father: she’d slammed the door and left the house crying, dropping blankets and clothes as she stumbled across the yard to the kennel. He’d watched his father stand at one of the open windows, begging her to come back in the house. Father wasn’t here now. Only Ellie. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t think he could face this strange, altered mother alone.

His teeth chattered. Ellie put her hand on his head.

“Some nice pigs-in-a-blanket will warm you up,” she soothed.

That night, he asked Ellie to let him sleep in her warm yellow room with the slanted roof at the top of the house.

“Your father would be upset with me,” she said.

“I won’t say anything,” he promised.

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“That would be a lie, then, wouldn’t it?” she said.

“No it wouldn’t. It would just be like . . . It would just be like when you keep mum,” he said.

Never before had he mentioned his mother’s pact to anyone. He felt guilty, like he was giving away something special.

“Mum,” she said. “Where did you learn that?”

“Patrick,” he said, naming a boy from down the road.

Ellie made the clicking sound she used when cars drove too close behind her. This time, she meant it for Mother.

In the night, he woke up to snores sounding like fabric being torn. The room was bathed in silver light from the full moon. White showed under Ellie’s half-closed eyelids. Her mouth puckered like a fish every time she inhaled. He reached out to touch her shoulder but brought it back. He knew from trying that he couldn’t bring people out of sleep. They were somewhere far away. If he woke them, they would be angry and the distant place would remain in their eyes. It only made him feel lonelier.

Each of her snores jolted him from sleep, letting him down, hurting him, abandoning him. He remembered her phone call earlier in the day. She’d turned away from him and lowered her voice. A new idea came to him: maybe Ellie and Bill had tied his mother up. She was being kept against her will. He imagined how terribly hungry she must be after all this time. If they were truly up to no good, he had the chance to save his mother. He could be more grown up than he’d ever been before. A wild, impatient hope sprang up in him. It was not that his parents had abandoned him; it was Ellie and Bill who had taken advantage, stolen silver, and neglected the house.

If this were true, then his mother would be relieved when he went to her to set her free. She would be overcome with joy. She would take him in her arms and hug him, rocking him back and forth, thanking him, petting his head, her eyes shining with gratitude. To think that he’d waited this long, while she was out there, trapped!

He tiptoed downstairs to the laundry room. Jacks lay there, warm, curled into himself. Sensing Roger’s presence, the dog rose, shook himself and began sneezing with excitement by the screen door.

“Do you know too?” he whispered.

He climbed a wooden stool in the pantry and took down a box of cereal with a jogging, smiling couple on the front. He dropped some of Ellie's chocolate chip cookies into the box, then slid open the door.

He edged his way along the kennel toward the ramp and doggie door at the far end of the building. Reaching the ramp, he stopped and held his breath. There, in front of him, so close he could reach out and touch it, was a large, glowing object.

It was his mother's car. Silver, covered in dew. It was concealed by the grass and faced the house, like she'd driven from the direction of the field, on the old logging road.

Pinning the cereal box under his arm, he crawled up the ramp, leaving a trail of spilled cookies that Jacks choked back as he followed behind. Inside, Roger felt his way along the full-sized cages lining the sides of the kennel. A pigeon fluttered, rearranging itself in the rafters. He moved toward a dim, red light. His heart beat with hope. For many long months, he'd felt mother falling away from him. Now, he was going to save her. She would be forever grateful.

A heat lamp cast an orange glow onto a sleeping human figure, curled on one side. Her knees were slightly bent, tucked under the hem of a sweatshirt that read "Penn State."

Mother did not wheeze and heave in slumber like Ellie; she did not move at all. There was a small circle of dried vomit on the floor in front of her mouth.

"Mommy!" he cried.

Her head jerked. She lifted it as if she was balancing a glass of water on the upright temple. An inch, then another, then another, until she was vertical enough to begin turning toward him. She stiffened her arms to prop herself up. He searched inside the box for a cookie to give her.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

His voice sounded hoarse. There was so much he wanted to say, but seeing her, he was struck dumb.

Her hair trembled around her face. She traced the perimeter of her mouth with her tongue. In the light, it looked black.

He dug his hand into the cereal box, finding only loose flakes at the bottom. She stared at him like she was trying to figure out who

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he was. His fantasy of being the great rescuer was slipping away. He told himself that all he had to do was the right thing, the perfect thing.

“I brought you cookies, but they fell out,” he said.

He reached his fist toward her. Cereal dropped through his fingers onto the floor. He inhaled in deep, shivering breaths. Warm tears moved down his cheeks. He was failing.

Her voice croaked out of chapped lips, saying something he could not understand. She banged her fists against the ground like a child deprived of a toy. He moved toward her. Before he even settled onto his knees, he felt her palm pushing through the front of his pajamas. He fell backward against something warm and soft—Jacks, who yelped. Roger gripped the chain link of the cage. He saw Mother pressing her hand into her eye.

“Can’t you just give me one god-damned night?” she begged.

She wiped her mouth and hinged back onto the straw bed, facing away from him.

He felt like someone had rung a giant bell over his head. He could hear nothing but the ringing and could barely command his legs to move in stiff, electric jolts away from her. He barreled through the tall grass. Halfway up the back staircase to Ellie’s room, he sat down. Ellie’s snores ripped through the air, taunting him from above. Everything felt like it was collapsing in on him.

He closed his eyes and let his body go heavy while his fists gripped the spindles of the banister.

He seemed to be falling down a well. At the bottom, moving toward him, he saw a glowing black sun. It soothed him. He wouldn’t bother his mother anymore. She would miss him, but she could never have him back. After a time, his hands relaxed. He wedged his back against the stair and fell asleep.

In the morning, a wet nose sniffed Roger’s ankle. Jacks wagged his entire body with the pleasure of the new day. Ellie lifted him into her arms, whispering about pancakes. She tried to draw Roger out. He pretended for her, a little, so that she might leave him alone.

After breakfast, he waited on the driveway with Ellie. The rattling engine returned. When Mother stepped out of the car, Ellie muttered something to her about lateness. His mother wore the same skirt and silk blouse that she'd worn the day before. Strands of her hair draped across her cheek and stuck to the freshly applied color on her lips. Her hand shook as she pushed the car door closed. Ellie searched her face as if she needed to decide something before she could hurry off to church. Mother made herself tall, so that Ellie pulled back. Ellie got into her Beetle and drove off.

Mother held out a shopping bag to him.

"Hey there, little partner. Got ya a present," she said.

He felt himself being pulled by some invisible energy toward her, but a stronger energy pulled him away. He was tempted to ignore the bag she offered him and walk off, but he knew that would have been an invitation for false apologies. What difference did it make?

He took it.

Mother brushed her hand against his cheek and tottered through the breezeway and into the house with a blanket in her arms. She hooked her shoe around the edge of the door and pulled it closed, accidentally slamming it. Father's swordfish, mounted above a long antique wooden bench next to the door, slid down and wedged itself between the bench and the wall.

He lifted the present from the bag. He recognized the blue coat, the yellow hat. Paddington. Given to him not because he'd buried his beloved friend, for she could not have known that. Not because she wanted to defy his father's wish that he outgrow his toy either. Not because Ellie steam cleaned the old one monthly, under Father's orders. In the sparkling, cloudless June morning he knew why his mother had done it; she didn't remember there had ever even been a Paddington.

He lowered the bear back into the bag and sat on the warm driveway, staring off toward the swing set. The bright green leaves of a birch tree waved back and forth at him in the breeze, tittering. He felt like he might float up in the air. His mother didn't really notice him. She cared only for herself. The relief of this made him want to laugh, to scream in joy.

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He dropped the bag, remembering that he'd left the real Paddington out in the rain all night.

While his mother slept and Ellie fanned herself at church, he took a gardening trowel from the garage and re-buried Paddington good and deep, so that Jacks wouldn't unearth his secret. He took the phony bear into his room and placed it on his highest shelf. Father would say he was a big boy to give him up, not realizing that the clean one was only a decoy. He wouldn't touch it. He wouldn't look at it. And his mother would see.