

FAIR GAME

“Another child abducted. This time murdered. They found her in the woods. Been interfered with. And those others, one stuffed down a well and another in a cupboard. Awful. Imagine doing that to them,” the paper rustled violently in their grandmother’s hands.

“Hush, Mother! The children..”

Linda the older girl, stared down at her food, frozen with shock. She didn’t want to see her horror confirmed on the women’s faces. It made her fears too real, too menacing. She darted glances at the other guests in the breakfast room of the BnB. Her little sister was intent on dragging toast soldiers around in the egg yolk on her plate.

On their arrival the day before, Buddy Holly’s music ushered in the landlady’s daughter grinning confidently from the doorway, a large gobstopper bulging in her cheek.

“Hello, I’m Sally,” she’d said, rolling the candy around in her mouth. She had taken the group up to their rooms and set out the towels. The room with the single beds was for the two sisters. Their mother and grandmother were to occupy the other room.

Linda felt like a third wheel. She’d been forced to miss school to babysit her little sister while the two women attended to more important business. But she didn’t dare voice that objection. Linda resented missing school. She’d surprised everyone by winning a scholarship. She missed the security of the routine, the days filled with quick-witted friends, with books, words and creativity. Linda guessed Sally to be about twelve or thirteen as she herself was. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror, Linda flushed at her own sensible dress and the flat lace-up shoes her mother insisted on.

As Sally lounged in the doorway, her unruly black curls, tightfitting roll-up jeans and forthright manner unnerved her. The girl then did an about-face and thundered off down the stairs. Intrigued by this prospective new friend, Linda saw new possibilities in the seaside holiday her mother had promised.

Over the following days, a cold half-light filled their room and raindrops skimmed down the panes of the skylight. Linda was filled with dread at the prospect of the hours spent alone babysitting her boisterous younger sister. A small cupboard set into the back wall of their room gave her goose bumps and from time to time she jiggled the key to make sure it was locked. Every time the tree branches scratched on the attic windows she jumped.

For once in her life, she wished she were one of those carefree girls who lived for netball and rounders, girls who giggled and read movie magazines. She wished her head weren’t swarming

with Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred Hitchcock and Agatha Christie. Too many skeletons, cadavers and monsters from the grave inhabited the space behind that small door.

After a few days Sally appeared at the door whenever Linda's mother and grandmother went out. Sometimes the girls went downstairs to play in the breakfast room, hiding frantically when the landlady approached. Sally's games and ribald jokes at the expense of the adults always pushed the limits, were just out of view or hearing of the paying guests. Whenever Sally incurred a scolding, her eyes simply glazed over. Later, she said things to buck them up, telling them to pay no attention, that her mother's memory was rubbish. She sometimes said that her mother was full of hot air. Linda didn't know what that meant but she'd overheard her grandmother whisper to her mother, "The woman's a boozier. Common. Lets the girl skive off school." Linda didn't know anything about Sally's father. She'd never seen him.

One day their new playmate came to visit them up in their garret. Solemnly surveying the room, she pointed to the little cupboard recessed into the back wall.

"Bet you don't know what's in there," she said. Linda drew back in alarm, gruesome images seeping out. She reached out for her little sister and gripped her tightly. Sally laughed and lunged at the pair, "Boo!" she said, making them jump and the little one started to cry.

"It's nothing scary. Don't cry Rosie. Here have a lollipop," Sally said, handing it to the little girl who instantly stopped crying and made a grab for it.

"So, don't you want to have a look? I hid his magazines there under some towels when Dad left," said Sally. After that, Linda, feeling emboldened by Sally's matter-of-factness, sometimes pulled out some of the magazines and marveled at them when her mother went out. Linda slid the magazines out, peeped at the pictures, snapping them shut at every approaching footstep in the hallway. She couldn't work out why any woman wanted to get undressed for a magazine, never mind bending over naked. And she couldn't work out why Sally's dad wanted to look at that.

One unexpectedly warm and sunny afternoon, Sally knocked on their door saying she had pocket money and asking if the girls could come down to the esplanade for some ice cream. To Linda's surprise, her mother agreed and gave her some pocket money too.

"Just this once, Linda. Nanna and I have an important appointment so it's handy actually. Now, all stay together and make sure you're back by five o'clock. Not a minute later. "

Half an hour later, the trio arrived at the esplanade and soon they were inside one of the games arcades, all flashing lights, pings, bells and juke-box music. Some local teenagers were lounging over the pinball machines and they greeted Sally with play-punches as she led her two new friends from machine to machine, periodically stopping to play. To the delight of little Rosie they won a few trinkets.

Before long, Linda realised that their games were being paid for by a man. An older man, a stranger. He had appeared from nowhere. Yet there he was standing close behind them, watching their games. She could feel his breath on her neck. He bent over and put his hand on her shoulder, gradually sliding it down her arm. Her first impulse was to run, to scream -- but every muscle, every nerve was frozen. She had no idea what he wanted but she knew this was odd, somehow wrong, very wrong. She wanted to run, to put distance between herself and this awful nameless feeling, this awful nameless man. Her mouth was dry and her tongue stuck fast. Shivering, she lowered her eyes, gripped her little sister's hand tightly and took a step away. His hand dropped but she had the memory of his body brushing up behind her. Had her friend noticed?

"Terrific game, girls! Let me pay for your next round," he said. Sally laughed, "Might as well," and let him pay for several games in a row. When she won more lollipops the smallest girl jumped with delight. Sally thought she had him worked out, whispering to Linda, "Silly old goat. He's always hanging around. Lives down our street somewhere." Then he suggested a ride on the big wheel, "What do you think of that?" he said.

"No thank you," Linda said and gripped her little sister even more tightly. That wasn't the arrangement. They were to stay together, as her mother had instructed them to do. She wanted to say something to Sally but she couldn't find the words.

"Oh well, if you don't want to come, what about you Sally?" he asked her.

"Why not? Just one ride. Wait for me, ok?" she called out to them. Watching her from the ground made Linda feel giddy and she began to tremble. The ride seemed to go on forever. Sally was waving wildly at them and the other two girls waved back. At the end of the ride, the man and the other girl didn't get off. Soon they were going round and around again. Little Rosie tugged vigorously on her sister's hand trying to pry herself loose. She'd had enough. As her older sister tightened her grip she started to cry loudly. Linda was rigid, her eyes scanning the big wheel for her friend who seemed to be lost to that ever-spinning machine. It was already past four o'clock and starting to drizzle. She felt her stomach churn.

Eventually, the giant wheel halted and Sally came flying towards them.

"Run! Run!" she said, "Don't stop." Her wild locks streamed behind her and there was something different about her. Gone was her usual confident demeanor. A sickening sense of dread crept over Linda's being. She felt her heart pounding, the blood pumping in her temples. Her legs carried her in and out of light and shadow as the trio flew down narrow laneways, through parkland and across busy roads.

“I think we lost him. The creep,” Sally said. There was something diminished about her, she seemed somehow deflated, the colour drained from her face. Her normally steadfast gaze and toothy grin were replaced by downcast eyes and a tightness around her mouth.

“That sleazy pervert.”

“Wha-a-a-t?” Linda gawked. Sally looked back at her then dropped her eyes. Linda could hear her breathing. Twice Sally opened her mouth to speak, hesitated then swallowed.

“Don’t you get it, you idiot? Why didn’t you go and get help?” By this time, Rosie was howling loudly. “Can’t you make her shut up?”

“I – I – I thought you were just waving at us.” By now, she wished the earth would open up and suck her down into a dark pit. She wished she were at home in bed hidden under the blankets and safely near her mother. A sense of the unfairness of it crept over her. She had followed her mother’s instructions, eluded danger. Nevertheless, she had found herself being screamed at by someone she had trusted, someone she had considered a friend. Worst of all, she felt childish, immature and silly.

Then to her horror, Sally started wailing with rage. “Fuck the lot of you!” Linda stood there frozen to the spot, her little sister still howling. She waited for Sally to cry herself out in the dark. Then Sally looked at Linda, said sorry, said that she had nobody to tell, nobody would believe her and her mother was useless, she was sick of being the grown-up for two clueless parents.

The miserable trio walked the rest of the way home in silence. When they reached the BnB, Linda’s mother yanked her elder daughter inside and slapped her face.

“It was my fault,” Sally said in a low voice as the scene played out in front of her.

“How dare you disobey me? Do you know what time it is? Do you have any idea how worried we were?” Tense with fright and anger, she gripped her daughter by the shoulders. A sliver of silence hung between them. The colour returning to her face, their mother enfolded her two girls in a tight embrace.

Standing hunched against the door, Sally felt a dark stone within. A strangled look masked her face. From the depths of that mask, her eyes blinked rapidly. She felt betrayed by life. In the living room, her mother was deep into the bells and buzzers blaring from her favourite television game show.

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