

Deep Freeze

It was the coldest winter of my eight years and I was stuck in the house with my mother's secrets and my little brother's ghost. I played in the long, wailing hallways, building mountains and cities with wooden toy blocks, still cold under two sweaters. My mother was always around, but never there. She left rooms just as I entered them; I saw her more in the family pictures framed on the wall than I did in person.

In the summer I loved our house, with its faded brick walls and arching bay windows. I would scamper out, collect grass-stains like old coins, and sit in the kitchen while my mother poured me juice. She was different in the warm months, too. She seemed unburdened, though never as happy as she had been when my brother was alive. The winter chill and the grey haunt of threadbare memories drained her. I lived to dread the soap-shard moons and thick, pregnant clouds. My winters were normally spent sequestered in my bedroom, reading heavy, leather-bound books I barely understood. For that sliver of the year I was like the heroes in my favourite stories orphaned in a large and unforgiving world.

That winter, however, I wasn't allowed to linger in my bedroom. The windows let too much air into our house; it was simply too cold. I wasn't allowed to turn on the new television, as we had to save energy. I took up exploring, wandering the house's skeleton, looking for anything to keep me from my boredom.

The house was much bigger than I had known, given that I only spent time in my bedroom, the kitchen, the playroom, and the living room. I opened drawers and cabinets. I looked under beds. I stared up at the paintings in the parlour. I spent a day rummaging through boxes in the attic, finding all sorts of oddities, like a scalpel, a skipping rope, a child's shoe.

When I was sure my mother wouldn't find me, I played in my brother's room, which was preserved as if he would come home from the hospital any day now. I didn't remember him well. When he died, he was two, and I had just turned five. I held his baby blanket close to my face, feeling the soft rub of fabric, and ran my fingers up and down the wooden frame of his hollow crib. Sometimes I sat in his closet, looking through his toys and teething rings, and imagined that he was not in Heaven but lost in another world having adventures. My brother, riding polar bears and fighting witches.

Though he'd gone through the looking-glass, my winter wore on. The days clumped and blurred together into one long day, and every night was the same. I might have been dreaming, but in that bodiless space between sleep and wake, I often found my mother sitting over me, touching my hair and face. On occasion, I felt a harsh tug at my head, like she was weeding my scalp. Other times it felt like she was trimming my nails. But I never asked her about it.

I became a great explorer, navigating my house with skill and care. The garage was the only uncharted territory that remained, and I was afraid of it. For one, the garage was forbidden to me. I guessed it was because of the cold, the way it worked under your skin and gripped your bones. Secondly, a strange, grating noise whirred from deep inside the freezer. In my mind, that noise became the growling of a beast on the hunt, or the whirring of a malicious robot. But it was mysterious, and the mystery promised a solution to the flatness of my life.

The garage yawned into my view, a finger of light appearing against the dark floor, then vanished when the door closed behind me. For a moment it felt like the garage had swallowed me. Then I remembered the light switch, standing on an empty milk crate to reach it.

Hat snug over my ears and scarf tight around my neck, I passed a couple happy but shivery hours, sorting through plastic tubs of Christmas decorations, cleaning supplies, and old

books. Pushing past mountains of gardening tools and paint cans, I searched every cabinet and shelf of the garage. My adventures had no end goal; I just enjoyed how the knowledge gathered in my brain, like a snowball becoming larger as it rolled down a hill. Soon, I was an expert on the garage, having seen everything except for the contents of the freezer.

The freezer intrigued me the most, perhaps because I was not allowed near it. Mother had told me this many times and she'd even taped a sign to it that read, *For Mother's eyes only. Do not open!* Lining the bookshelves I kept in my head, right next to my brother's exploits, were stories of the freezer. It was bottomless. It was home for a very small yeti. It was a portal to another world! Outside of my imagination, though, I acknowledged that it was probably boring, like most things adults don't share with children. I never genuinely thought of opening it, but I did notice that it was plugged into the wall. I pulled the cord away from the outlet. Too many times had my mother claimed we needed to preserve our energy.

When I unplugged it, the loud noise died away. Before I pulled the plug from the wall, my arm pressed against the freezer and I found it was warm to the touch. Why would a freezer be warm? It didn't matter. When it was no longer connected, the heat was sucked up by the cold air.

That same night I felt my mother's weight on my bed. Her nimble hands stroked my hair. I was more than halfway asleep, and I murmured, "Mother," hoping she would kiss my forehead or pull my blanket up around my chin.

"My baby," I heard her whisper back, and the candle-glow of comfort glowed steadily in my chest. A strand of hair snapped away from my head, and as sleep smothered me, I imagined my mother lovingly tucking my hair into a locket or a jewellery box, so she might always have a piece of her baby.

I blinked awake with the delicate, pale pink morning, curled up in the frosty stillness. It was as if the house was still asleep; I was alone and full of promise like a secret not yet shared. I was wrestling a large sweater over my head when I heard my mother's shriek.

She was in the garage. All the stories I dreamed up came to life. She had been attacked by the garage-dwelling monster! The yeti in the freezer had broken free! I sprinted down to find her, my breath making clouds of dragon smoke in the air.

I opened the garage door and found my mother bent next to the open freezer, weeping. She was holding her face in her hands, great sobs shaking her whole body, incoherent words breaking apart on her lips. Why was she crying? Why was the freezer open?

I dragged one of the milk crates over to the freezer and stood on it to see. My mother had vanished into her dark fog of pain and paid me no mind. The palms of my hands brushed against the side of the freezer and found it frigid as the ground.

Stiff, icy peaks of flesh clung to the insides. It looked like how I imagined the inside of a womb - the parts of a person before they became a person, except frozen, all wrong. Half-formed organs stuck to jutting bits of bone, slowly coming together in an embryonic soup of watery skin and blood. I thought I saw the beginnings of a skull, a hollow socket where an eye could've been. Something else made me think of a small hand.

Revulsion seized my stomach, and I stumbled, the milk crates slipping out from beneath my feet. I landed on my backside with a painful jolt. My mother desperately gripped the mouth of the freezer. Beside her on the ground was a scalpel, and a vial containing a few hairs, a couple nail trimmings. Mine, I thought.

"My baby," my mother sobbed, tears slowly freezing on her cheeks. "My baby, my baby."