

## Jem

### Jacquelyn Steineman

She sits glad for the silence. He has been using his fist, pounding on the door making snowflakes of dust fall that were seen only as the door gaps for light. It feels like forever to her. She is finally able to stop rocking on her feet, swaying between her clothes, to stop trying to be somewhere else, someone else. She loosens her grip from around her knees but when she hears his footstep, she immediately tenses back up. They stop in front of the door. If only she had a hidden passageway that could lead her somewhere else like Jem did. She looks down at her doll trying to remember the cartoon from last Saturday. Instead she sees his shadow creep to the door and stop just short from coming in. She tightens her hands as the silent tears come again.

Her mom leaves to find a job helping others feed themselves. She only hears that Mom will be gone from home that much more if she finds one. She tells the little girl how important it is that she is good and listens. For her to "be a good girl"-- this is her mom's way. She is in a blue plaid dress that she hates for her mom, to be that "good girl." She has her golden brown hair pulled back into piggy tails that she hates for her mom, to be a "good girl". She hates being a good girl. The girl smiles at her mom but she wants to cry, she wants to die. She is only eight but she feels the weight of her school bus having turned over and crushed her. She watches her mom leave from the window. She waves and smiles as the silver hatchback crunches over the gravel driveway. She feels his hand being placed on her shoulder; the weight is overwhelming, the curtains sweep through her fingers and swipe across her nose as a death toll.

They sit on the couch watching a cop show that is more fake than her cartoons on the TV that is on the floor, it is wood and seems so huge to her. She can smell the sweat and mildew on the stained, dirty, dark orange fabric of the couch and she wants to flee. She lifts her legs to try to move away. He notices. His big dirty hand reaches out and clamps down on her leg. She tries not to see it lying against her bare white skin. She doesn't want to look up and so she just looks at his pants with the fading paint stains. She stops and looks down at her white Mary Janes. She tries to swing her feet, to knock his hand off. It doesn't work. His hand starts to move up her thigh. It passes under that blue plaid's hem.

She sits at the kitchen table waiting. She knows it will come, this was all a trick. He is lulling her into feeling safe. She wishes that she was big enough, strong enough, that she could take that skillet that he was using and beat him with it. She could brand him with the hot cheese from the sandwich, smearing it into his face until he could not see her ever again. She is so caught up in her fantasy that she is scared when he places the plate in front of her. The metal of her chair scrapes against the black and white linoleum floor. He smiles a knowing smile and asks her if anything was wrong. She cannot open her mouth to speak.

She runs around the coffee table. She runs into the kitchen and around the yellow, round table. She pulls a chair out behind her to slow him. She hears it hit the floor as he trips over it. She can still feel him behind her getting closer. Her left piggy tail had come undone and it now bounces against her with every step. Her vision is blocked as she tries to run out to her room on the left. Her precious shoes are more of a problem than the joy that they had brought when she and her mom had got them. The hall is clear but she grabs the door on the way around to not fall down and it has slowed her down even more. She barely makes it to her room without him. She has seen in a movie how a chair shoved under a door handle was better than locking it. She grabs the one that she had placed by her door, throwing off the clothes and stuffed toys that her mom had piled onto it. She tries her best to shove it tightly under the door handle.

She wants to move his hand. She wants to run. Instead she holds still, she pretends that she is not really there. She is Jem with a hologram that will be here while she is somewhere else. He will be done soon if she can just wait long enough. For some reason she cannot do it today. Every touch is too much to bear. He keeps grabbing her hand and trying to have her touch him, to show him her love. It is too much. She pushes against him. He barely notices at first. She twists her body and he finally notices. He tells her to stop, to hold still, she only tries harder. Somehow, maybe a lucky jab to his middle, or her foot coming up and her knee jerking at him but she is free. She jumps up from the couch and looks left and right wondering where to go, she is confused by her freedom for a moment.

Her sixty pounds have not done a decent job with the chair. He is at least three times her weight, her height, her size. She is shocked when the chair flies out from under the door. She just makes it to her closet. She pulls the door closed and holds tightly onto the doorknob. She doesn't let go. She knows that he knows she must be in there. There are no real hiding spots in her room, under her bed or in here. She is waiting for him to tear the door from her hands. She keeps waiting until her hands start tingling and start to hurt. She finally hears his feet fall on the floor coming closer. She tries to hold on tighter but her hands hurt so much and she lets go before he has even reached the door. She sits down and awaits her fate. She finds Jem and whispers to her for help. She knows that he will be madder than ever before. He lifts his fist and pounds on the door. He doesn't speak, just pounds. She starts to rock back and forth wondering when he will stop playing. When will he just open the door and finish it?

She hears the gravel rumbling as a car pulls into the driveway. She hears his footsteps hurry away with one final pound on the door. She wipes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She knows that he is gone and that it is safe for now. When she steps from the closet she reaches up to fix her hair. She doesn't want her mom to know. She could hear him in the kitchen picking up the chair; he doesn't want Mom to know either. She picks up her own chair and puts back on it her clothes and toys though it is not as neatly as Mom had had it. She runs into the living room when the door opens. She is relieved that it is her mom. She buries her face in her mom's stomach and hugs her as tight as she can. She knows her mom is talking but she cannot hear her. She can feel a hand lying on her head, petting her in a comforting way. When she is relaxed she moves her head. Her mom asked her again, "How was your day with your dad?"