

What Lies Within Earshot

By Claudia Schatz

Sunday

Boom. It makes a noise so loud, blood. It's red and dark and hurts your ears, like something real big is breaking into your head.

Mommy rushed us from the backseat and kept saying into the phone, "Oh my God," and "I don't know." I could hear her, even though she turned her face away. I'm real good at listening.

I sat small in the grass near the screaming lights, and Mommy kept just saying, "I don't know," to the please-men. Maybe they should stop asking her.

I was cold, even with the blanket a lady gave us and my friend Evie huddling beside me. Mommy finally came over when most please-men and hospital cars left. She looked me right in my two eyes and said it'll be fine, all fine, and she'll fix whatever's wrong.

I know she was telling the truth because lying is real bad, and Mommy wouldn't do it. Mommy slapped me right across my face when I lied about walking Hedda home after school the day I stopped to watch the chipmunks. She never lays a hand on us, so I know that lying is pretty much the worst thing. Later that night she said sorry real soft and slow to me, and explained that telling a lie is like a knife in your heart. She stroked my cheek gently, like she could undo the slap she put there. She said lying drives you away from others, and you can't get the truth back if you keep it up. One thing leads to another until you're stuck.

That's how I know she was telling the truth. Mommy wouldn't want a knife in her heart, and I don't either. We saw enough blood today, and our ears hurt. Boom.

Monday

No one is saying much today. Mommy just stayed in bed like I always want to when she says, “Rise and shine, beautiful! Early bird gets the worm!” When I opened my eyes I lay there until I realized what sounded funny: only one set of breaths. Hedda’s two years littler than me so she has smaller breaths. I always listen to them; I can’t sleep until she’s asleep and I always wake up before her. Maybe that’s why I didn’t sleep well last night.

I didn’t like how it sounded in there, so I crawled in with Mommy. Usually she’s warm and soft all over so I can melt right in. But no sir, she was stiff and straight. She made a noise when she felt me but neither of us said any words.

Then I heard a sad little bird noise. I hopped up and checked the window. No bird. The TV was my next idea but I heard Daddy in the kitchen so I knew he didn’t turn on Good Morning, This Is News Channel 8 and Today We Are Talking About Sad Birds. I stood in the doorway, listening with my owl ears. Owls don’t even need ears--they have faces like plates that snatch up all the sounds. Then I heard it: the sound that Mommy was making. Sad bird sound.

But I know one hundred percent that my Mommy does not cry. And I can trust my ears to tell me the truth. It didn’t make any sense, and suddenly I was scared. I ran out as fast a cheetah, but couldn’t go to my room because no Hedda breathing and couldn’t go to Mommy’s room because my ears were lying so I ran downstairs bang into Daddy.

I thought he’d say, “There’s my little noisemaker!” Then it would be normal. But Daddy didn’t look right. He didn’t even notice I just crashed into his leg. He was holding a shovel and staring staring right at Hedda’s chair.

She wasn’t in it, that was one thing. The other thing was the metal black shape on the table at her place. You know: please-men and bad guys carry them, good guys sometimes too, like Daddy. Backseats can have them.

I started to scream. Once I started, I realized I had been screaming this whole time. Just not on the outside.

Tuesday

“Any-motional reaction is normal, Hannah.” Laurel has been saying that ever since I got here twenty million hours ago. Laurel’s a lady from the state for me to talk to, Mommy said. I said, no thank you, just like when Mommy serves sprouts. But just like when she serves sprouts, she said, oh yes, ma’am, you will. It’ll be fine, she said.

Mommy doesn’t lie. So I bit my tongue and went in. But I don’t want to come here again. I want to just stay home tomorrow and the next day and maybe forever. But then I think well, maybe not, no thank you. There are too many flowers at home right now, making our living room into a garden.

Laurel said her name is a flower. Well, there’s too much of her right now, too. I asked, “Why am I here, anyway?” Laurel says I am high-strung and may need a third party to confide in. I thought about that: “I don’t think so, I didn’t have first or second parties yet.” Maybe that’s what the flowers are for.

Daddy said sorry to me a thousand times since yesterday, and Mommy squeezed and rocked me, shh shh. I felt bad for making her leave her bed but it wasn’t really my fault. Daddy was the one who yelled upstairs, “For God’s sake, she will not stop screaming!” and Mommy yelled right back as she ran down, “Don’t you ever lay your hand on a broken child like that!”

I told Laurel all this because she would not stop bugging me, just like Hedda. Some people don’t get that you have other things to do besides talk to them or draw them pictures. There’s always a tree to climb, races to run, flowers to talk to, and books to read. There’s glitter glue and somersaults and capes and swings and chalk. Some people just don’t get that you’re busy.

When I went home I couldn't go to my room because of no breathing, Mommy and Daddy's room because of Mommy lying still, and the kitchen because of the empty seat. So I sat in the living room with flowers up to my neck, in that big, sad garden, until I turned into a statue.

Wednesday

Mommy was cussing this morning; no rise and shine for me. She was the early bird, but didn't like the worm. She was shrieking and ripping up the newspaper, walking between living room, kitchen, living room, kitchen. After a while I put my head under the couch cushions and pretended to be underwater where there's no noise.

When I heard her stop, I pulled my head up, like a deer: zip, up their heads go when they see you! Daddy was grabbing her hands and holding her tight. She whined and pounded on him, looking tired even though it was morning. I thought maybe I looked like that too.

I got bored with watching them, standing like two trees twisted together among all those flowers and paper scraps on the floor which is litter and bad. After a long time, Daddy whispered, "We'll get through this," like when Mommy said, "It's going to be fine." I thought parents said those things only to kids. But maybe not.

I think Daddy stole our neighbors' newspaper because he brought in a new copy and slowly, slowly, cut out the picture and words from the front page. It took him way longer than it would take Hedda, because she's fast at scissors even though she's only four.

Mommy said that Evie misses me at school. I said yes I miss her too but that's only sort of true. I kept thinking about that: I didn't tell Mommy the truth and now she'll tell Evie but Mommy never lies and I made her tell one. I made myself go to Mommy's bed. I lifted up her dark hair that I love when she pins with sparkly barrettes and I whispered right into her ear because she's not an owl: "Mommy, it's not true that I miss Evie. I haven't thought about her much." I thought she might be

angry because her eyes got so sad. But she just pulled my face into her neck and said, “Oh, Hannah. Me neither.”

I know that Mommy never lied to me. But I don't think this is what fine feels like.

Thursday

I've visited Laurel, and Mommy and Daddy have seen office-shawls, but mostly we've been choosing to stay home. Today, though, we had to.

We were sitting in the flowers in the living room. They're more brown now, like toast left in too long. I hate it like that. I was picking a few petals up when I heard a Boom and jumped out of my skin like a snake. Mommy grabbed me and said into my face, “It's just the door, baby.” Daddy opened it and WHAM shut it again. Outside was the lady in a man's suit with a puffy microphone who blocks the turkey balloons in the Thanksgiving parade. She's always in the way of what you really want to see.

Mommy said, “This isn't the same lady, just a lady with the same job.”

“Well, there's no parade here,” I said.

Daddy chuckled with his fists clenched. “They'll make a parade out of anything,” he said, leaning on the door like he was holding it closed. They knocked again, and I saw bright flashes. I started counting, to see how far away the thunderstorm was, but Mommy said, “No, this isn't lightning, it's cameras.”

“Well, there's nothing to take a picture of here,” I said.

“They'll take a picture of anything,” Daddy said.

We played Close The Curtains Really Fast, but they just kept flashing their lightning. Mommy said, “Can't they leave us in peace?” and “Where's the decency?” Daddy said, “Should I go out?” and “I should really send them away.”

But none of us moved all day until Daddy went out the back door with his shovel. I sat on the steps and watched him dig a big, deep hole. It looked angry, with rocky teeth and roots criss-crossing. Daddy threw in a Boom. Not the backseat one because that was taken away to be nice and safe. This was Daddy's other one. I guess he didn't want it anymore.

"Are you gonna put the dirt back?" I was picturing the worms burrowing along, doodeedoo, and then they poke their head out and ahh! A cliff where there used to be more ground. I wouldn't want them to lose something they never even realized could be lost.

"Yes," Daddy said, quiet. But he didn't put the dirt back. He was still just staring when I went inside.

Friday

Mommy said I should write Evie a letter. I said ok, I will. I wrote Deer Evie, even though I know that Deer is the animal with the white tail and Dear is Hello Dear How Are You. I did Deer Evie because we like animals. So it's clever if you know why I put it.

I told her hello, how are you, I miss you. I really do, because our house is only real quiet or real loud now. Evie is good at being in between. I wrote I'm sorry if you were scared when we were waiting by the road. I'm sorry if I hurt your ears. Don't worry, Mommy says it will be fine. I wrote that and I felt better. But only for a moment.

Because this is *not* fine. Hedda wouldn't say it's fine either, because she's just a copycat. But I'm big enough to say by myself that it's not fine at all. Not by me, mister. Sister. Hedda's my sister, and she wouldn't say it's fine. Wouldn't won't can't. She *can't* say it's fine.

My face felt hot and my pencil was sweaty. Mommy *said* it would be fine right into my face and I know I heard her right because I heard all sorts of things this week and that was definitely positively one hundred billion percent something I heard. I'm real good at listening.

Oh no. This letter was not going well, my hand shaking and making a sloppy mess. I decided to pretend I was an iceberg so I wouldn't feel hot and bothered. Hot and bothered, that's what Mommy says. Mommy says it's going to be fine. But it's not.

I put I'm sorry one more time and Love, Hannah. It's ok to say love when it's your best friend or your grandma. But if you put that to a boy then people sing songs about you and not nice songs.

After, I gave the envelope to Mommy and she dropped her lips on top of my head for a second but I jumped away. I couldn't help it, because Hedda can't say it's fine and neither can I. Mommy said it was. But it's not.

Isn't that a lie?

Saturday

Daddy says don't think about tomorrow. All right, but I can't help it since tomorrow we're digging a hole and putting a stone on top of it.

The lady and the cameras finally left because Mommy said, "I am fed up with this treatment," and got the please-men to scare them away. After that, Daddy took a deep breath, put on his work clothes and went out. Mommy took a deep breath and lay down in her bed for the one-millionth time this week. But first she said, "I love you as big as the universe."

That's from when I was little. I'd say, "I love you as big as a chair." She'd say, "I love you as big as a bed." I'd say, "I love you as big as a kitchen." She'd say, "I love you as big as the house." I'd say, "I love you as big as a tree." And she'd say, "I love you as big as a lake." It kept going all the way to the universe and then she kissed me and I fell asleep listening to Hedda's little breathing. It didn't have to be the same every time, the universe just had to be last. The actual steps don't matter for a lot of things. It's just the ending.

I sat in the dead flowers again. We don't throw them out. I didn't know why, because they're so ugly, like dead animals hanging on trees. But then I heard Daddy say, "Hedda's flowers."

Sitting there, I was getting all hot and bothered again. I tried to be an iceberg or a walrus. I put my hands under cold water but couldn't feel it. Daddy says nerves make you feel, but I wonder if there's two different kinds because I tell Hedda, you're getting on my nerves.

No, I do not say that to Hedda. Not anymore. She can't even say it's fine. Not because she doesn't know how, but because she doesn't have a mouth now. I don't even think she has a body.

Yes she does, I remember. But don't think about putting her little-breath body in the ground.

I pick up the dead flower vases and weigh them in my hands. Even all together, they don't weigh as much as Hedda. They aren't even close to equaling my sister.

I smash them. The shattered pieces burn my feet, like when we play Hot Lava. Every vase crashes to the floor. It's the first sound all week that doesn't hurt my ears. This isn't a living room now. There's nothing really truly alive in the whole entire house. Maybe in the whole entire world.

Oh no, now Mommy will be mad because I ruined Hedda's flowers on top of just ruining Hedda. I run away through the house like a cheetah but I'm no cheetah, I'm just me. I listen to everything like an owl but I'm no owl, I'm just a girl. I try to cool this burning in my throat and hands and face but I'm no iceberg, I'm just small and warm.

I smash through the backdoor to the hole Daddy never filled in. He lied, too. Just like Mommy. Poor worms. I think I know how they feel.

Daddy left the shovel, but I don't want to touch metal so I shove the dirt with my feet, my hands, my whole body; any part of me so no one will ever see the metal L-shape like the one that made red blood come out of Hedda. I was being careful, too, when I picked it up from under the front seat and pulled on its hook. That's when the Boom happened.

I hear the sad bird noise, and this time it's me.

I don't want to see or hear or taste or smell that Boom ever again. I'm putting it away for good, since Mommy couldn't tell the truth and Daddy couldn't put the dirt back for the worms.

I scream and holler and stomp and crush the dirt back into the ground as hard as I can. Rocks and roots and sharp things hit me, but they bounce off because I am harder than a stone.

It's all back where it belongs. That's what 'it's fine' looks like: every speck back in place. No, Mommy didn't make it fine. I had to make it fine. Now the Boom can never come out and make the sound that took away Hedda.

I'm real good at listening. No one else notices, but I hear it: one last shot in the earth, underneath me.

Boom.