Daughters of Edward Darley Boit

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She turns her face away swiftly as he enters. The wooden hall outside had omitted the telltale sounds of a gentleman’s shoes; since it most certainly was not—could not—be father, it must be Will. Father...

She leans against the urn’s cool surface and stares at glossy wooden walls; she feels him there. His gaze takes in the four of them, Clarice standing modestly to the side, Eliza beside her slightly openmouthed. Sophie clutches her bright white doll and gazes with completely spherical round eyes into his. She does not understand; she does not know the truth; and yet her eyes probe as Clara’s and Eliza’s do not.

Perhaps she has the long imagined gift of the young to sense evil.

He pauses for a moment, drinking in the three gazes. His eyes linger over the darkened girl against the urn, her gaze resolutely straight.

“You will all be leaving with me for the time being. I assume you’ve been told?”

Clarice nods slightly, a little head jerk. The silence reverberates off the walls, ricocheting off the wood, a soundless crash against eardrums.

“I should take you all home— a good night’s sleep is in order.”

The stillness is absolute.

“I think you girls need to get out of here anyway— it’ll be much more relaxing in the country.”

His hand reaches to Clarice. Her eyes travel down the arm and upward to his and she steps forward and touches the fingers.

“No.” The voice floats from the urn in the corner. “Don’t touch him.”

Will pauses. “Sarah.”

Silence.
"I was afraid he would do this. Oh Sarah, I don’t know what your father told you –"

"You are never," the voice replies composedly, "allowed to speak of that honorable man again."

"I know you’ve trusted him, I know you’ve lived with him your whole life, but everyone has flaws –"

"EVER."

His head bows slightly, a small surrender. Clarice’s hand wobbles in midair, frozen. It falls to her side slowly as if dragged through lead, face confused. Sophie’s hands are intertwined in her dress, doll by her side now on the dust-strewn floor, big round eyes staring from the urn to Will.

"Clarice, Eliza, Sophie," he says evenly. "Leave us for a few moments please."

"Stay close," whispers Sarah vehemently to Eliza without averting her eyes. Clarice gently prides one of Sophie’s hands out of her dress. Their eyes lower as they follow Eliza through the heavy oak doors which shut with a ghostly click.

"If there is one thing that is more important than anything else in the world right now," Will says, striding toward the urn, "it is the truth."

Sarah’s gaze on the wood is abruptly obstructed by his black suit. Her eyes do not avert. Gaze through him...

"When Edward talked to you, he wanted sympathy and support. Of course he wanted you to believe him, to feel for him – to have his own daughter love him, fight for him, instead of being ashamed –"

Sarah’s face is smooth. Gaze through him. What a pretty button, she thinks as it bobbles up and down on the suit with his frustration. So round.

"You have to understand!"
"SARAH!"

As quickly as his hands reach, she sidesteps. His fingertips meet cold ceramic, the urn tilting dangerously backwards.

Will steadies it, jaw jutting out. His hands comb through his wavy black hair.

Sarah steps backward slowly, each movement measured. Her eyes follow Will’s tie as it swings back and forth. An angry pendulum. Back and forth.

His chest expands and contracts, contracts and expands. “You have to listen. There is nothing I can do to make you believe, but you must listen, and then you may decide for yourself.” The pendulum settles into a rhythm with the heaving chest.

“And if I don’t?” Sarah is examining the floor. “You’ll what?” Bending, she lifts the doll Sophie left behind and gently strokes it. Its white dress has been dulled by dust and dirt.

Will is motionless.

Sarah’s eyes travel up, up, tie, neck, chin, nose, eyes. “You’ll beat me senseless like you did the woman at Thomas Pier?”

Time hits a brick wall; wounded, it cowers in a corner. The room is a broken clock.

Will’s jaw hardens and his lips separate.

“Will you,” she says swiftly, cutting him off, “break my arm? Twist it backward so I can no longer feel?” The doll’s arm becomes putty in her hands. “Punch me unconscious until I bleed?” Its head pounds into her palm. “And then maybe,” she says, “blame it on Eliza? Or maybe Sophie? Have the police chuck them into jail with father? How lovely of you to become the agent of our reunions.”

She remembers so well: her father stumbling into the house bedraggled
and cut, his torn white coat and exposed black shirt striping his heaving chest. “Sarah, Sarah,” Her horrified gaze at the man who had housed them since their mother died. “The police are coming. I’m sure of it. Please. Will took his fists to a woman down on Thomas Pier. He’s told the police it was me… Sarah…” He’s pleading. “Don’t let them do this… for you and your sisters… set them right.”

She had just stood there, wide eyed and disbelieving. Disbelieving when the black cars pulled up. Disbelieving when they handcuffed him and said meaningless words, jumbled into meaningless explanations. “Please, no.” The black night swallowed the velvet cars and she still did not believe.

She believed now.

The tie pendulum falls silent, resolutely perpendicular, refusing to keep time. An abyss yawns between the two.

Will steps forward; reaches across. “You are coming with me. Right now.” Two quick movements later his hand grips her shoulder. A shock volts through her body and she twists away.

The hand assumes a vise grip on the forearm with the doll – a hand that had already beaten a woman, a hand of iron. It steers her toward the wooden doors. Will jerks them open forcefully. “I’ll be back,” he says shortly, shutting them again on a bewildered Eliza, Claire, and Sophie outside.

He says nothing of Sarah.

The vise grip does not lessen as they move, dreamlike, through hallways and large oak doors and into the crisp, black freshness of the day’s initial hours. The outline of a black car appears abruptly in the winding driveway. Will yanks the passenger door open and pushes her in.

She has no choice.

The silence stifles the air.

Streets wind and curve out of sight, small lights visible for seconds before
winking out behind a bend. A multitude of lights appears to the right and the car slows and turns, parking under the circular glare of a building, a beacon in the shadows.

Will steps out. He sheds his black coat and rolls his white sleeves up, waiting. The passenger seat does not rustle. He steels himself, jerks open the door, and assumes his clasp on an arm whose fingers had just begun to regain their feeling.

“I shouldn’t have to do this.”

A whirl of hatred surges through her free hand; it snaps up, clawing, tearing at skin; her body twists; her teeth seek that inflexible grip; Will jerks, locking her arms together; she is thrashing; biting; her face in his – a desperate, high-pitched shriek –

“LET – GO – OF – ME – NOW!”

Nose to nose and Will’s eyes are steel and lit from within. He shoves her away, relinquishing his hold.

“I stopped him,” he hisses. I STOPPED HIM, dammit! Can’t you see that? I couldn’t hold him off so I called the police to save a life! I don’t care what the hell your father acts like at home – when he’s even home – his actions become my problem when they affect other people and he can’t control them any longer. Liars will beat down the world someday. So will addicted men. You happen to be the daughter of a good man who managed to place himself squarely in the center of both categories.”

Sarah is frozen. You’re free. Run.

“Come, or drown in ignorance. The ignorant are simply the close-minded. Come, or you will not only tell these lies, but live them.”


“At some point we convince ourselves we have no choice simply because we do not want one. Those who are given the chance to truly love or hate with
certainty should take it.”

Run.

Go.

Truly love...

Sarah comes.

Will’s tie is gently swinging again. The pair’s footsteps echo through narrow white corridors, past uneven rows of doors, down an endless white tunnel of slanted walls and through an opening.

Sarah gasps.

The woman on the bed’s face is maroon and crimson from impact. She lies immobile, right arm in a sling, eyebrows drawn and lips pursed as if relieving an anguished memory.

Why? The room tilts. Why? She whirls but a pair of fluttering eyelids distracts her.

The eyes see Sarah first, confused, before they flicker to Will. The eyebrows lift as she searches his face, a hidden corner of memory stumbled upon in the confusion. “Thank you,” she says, her chest contracting with the words, lips cracking. “Thank you…”

Time reels and clocks are spinning, speeding, running, racing. The still-clutched doll falls from Sarah’s hands as she lifts them to her face and cries.

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