

THIEVES
Sherry Kramer

Running up the stairs to my room, there were 8 steps from the kitchen to the upstairs hallway, always 2 at a time, sometimes more, never less, especially at night, faster, all in one breath both stairways, the stairway from the basement to the kitchen, 7 steps, uneven number, variety of 2's and 3's, not like the top stairs where when in a hurry it was 2 at a time, very fast, and no breathing till inside my room--jump with both feet over the line my blue rug makes with the beige of the hallway carpet, across the threshold of my room and one more jump onto the bed, watching both feet, safe now curled on the bed where I lie each night, blowing up my little brother's breathing into the whispers of thieves.

Lying there, catching air in little gulps that keep me awake and aware of other breathing, I watch for the shadows. It is into my room that they will come first. There are 2 of them, they are ugly men, men with rotted gums and yellow teeth. I hear them tiptoe up the even stairway, one step at a time. They often stop on the fifth step, for my brother turns over in his

sleep, and I begin to think about the light switch. But I do not reach for it. Better to wait, wait until I can see their shadows coming into my room an instant before they do. Are they still on the fifth step? Did I hear--was

that--have they gone up one more step? Yes. They are closer, they start to take the seventh step. There are 2 of them, I can hear them breathing. Can they hear me? I take in less air, I compact my breathing into a tiny space which cannot be heard, even by me. I must know them before they know me.

They are holding their breath, they do not want me to hear them breathing. But I hear, I hear, clearly and all the more plainly for their efforts, each foot on each step. They take the steps together, so the sounds the 2 feet make are blurred into one sound, but it is a definite blur. I know. I know they are there, I know who they are, they are big men, strong and yellow-gray in the half-light, they carry shapeless things in their hands, they want to hurt me, but they cannot hurt me, I know them, I am almost ready to name them, to scream out to them. I know their names, they cannot hurt me.

My parents are asleep in their red and golden bedroom. I cannot hear them breathing or moving, what sounds they make are made early in the morning, when I cannot hear them. They are asleep, they do not know that the 2 thieves are now standing at the top of the stairway, now in the hallway, 2 feet from their doorway and 3 feet from mine, they do not know, and so they can be hurt. They will hurt my mother and kill my father. I know. I say my prayers quickly, my mouth moving but the sounds only in my head, I draw in one big breath before starting and do not let it out until I am done, Dear God before I go to sleep, if I make a mistake I must finish and begin again, it is a long prayer, my hands are pressed together, they try to press through each other. My hands are just outside the covers. in praying the only time they are safe in the night air. my 2 thumbs

joining my hands to my lips and to the sheets, my hands tight claws which will rip God down to protect me.

Goodnight sleeps beside me, the only stuffed animal I ever had with me in bed. And then, it was only after my grandfather died that I named her and set her to sleep well for me, to chase away the dreams. My brother slept with a bear named Tony, before, and long after our grandfather died. Goodnight, a white lamb with a wide square of black satin on the tip of her long nose, and a thin red stitched mouth, fits under my arm and stays there until the danger of the dreams ends with daylight. After my grandfather died, and the nightmares began, I talked to him through her, she was the only way I had to be with him, her fur is stained and her stuffing clumped, I cried into her face as I carried on, unanswered and alone, night after night the soft, terrible conversations with my grandfather who I could not let die, he had died in the night and I had not been there to name his thieves and save him.

It is because of his death, which I should have prevented, which I should have stopped before it walked into his room through the long, dark hallway in my grandparents' house which has no stairway in it except for the 3 brick steps outside the front door, it is because of his death, which was my fault, that I am visited with nightmares which only Goodnight can save me from, for she is my grandfather and she knows all the names of all the terrible things that search for me, more terrible than the thieves on the stairs, even more terrible than his death. Goodnight I squeeze between my neck and my arm as I say my prayers, and if during the night I wake up and find that she is not touching me, that she has fallen on the floor or slipped away from me and under the sheets, I grab her back and say my prayers again.

Goodnight is under my arm, her head with its long nose above the covers next to my head on the pillow I am careful to tuck the sheet under her face so that she can breathe. The 2 thieves are standing in the hallway between my room and my parents'. They breathe more heavily, they are deciding to take the 3 steps which will place them outside of my door. I turn on my side, with Goodnight in front of me, so that she is in-between me and the door, and I wait. I reach up as quietly as I can to make sure that the light switch is still beside my bed, that I can still reach it in what must be less than a second. I know there will not be much time between their shadows and when I must turn on the light to show them standing just inside my room, inside the light I know will freeze them for just long enough for me to call out their names before they call out mine. I kiss Goodnight on the back of her head and we settle into each other.

My brother is screaming no, no, please don't please don't no not me please no. I wake up gasping, how could I have fallen asleep, how could they have gotten past my room, why have they gone into his room, they were to come into mine first, Richard, Richard, I cry, I yell, I switch on the light and sweep Goodnight up with me, I run towards his room, what thing will be bending over his bed, what shadows will grab me before I can get to him, save him, I must save him, Richard, Richard, tell me what claws at your throat, what hands are ripping at you, Richard, and Richard screams Stop-stop-stop-please stop oh no not me nono please no, and I am suddenly, finally, inside his room.

I have turned on the light. My brother squirms in the bed, a thick rag among the twisted sheets, the blanket stuffed under his feet, his hands across his eyes, his legs trapped in his else
inside the

bedroom with nlm, ~ere ~ inside the room but bookcases, chairs, and a desk, all perfectly still, not a one of them has moved or changed into something else. Even the clothes in his open closet are nothing but shirts and pants and jackets. Are you all right Richard, I whisper, but I know he is all right. It is nothing but a dream, my thieves have not touched him, they could never touch him, his screaming like this tells me, his arms above the covers show me, he does not know my thieves and he knows none of his own. Tony is on the floor, I pick him up, putting his face next to Goodnights under my arm so that she may tell him something of her secrets, and then I hand the brown bear with the large beige ears and plastic face to my brother, who only wishes to be left to his sleeping. His nightmare is over, he screams and does not remember what things he tries to name, he does not care that they have visited him as long as they have gone away now that he is awake, he does not know that each night I save him, and that what I save him from is more terrible than any of the things which wrap him tightly until he almost suffocates in the dark.

I turn out his light and walk along the hallway, pressed up against the grained surface of the wood panels. I pass my room, see that it is as I left it, the closet doors shut, the wastebasket firmly against the door, the door tightly against the wall, the curtains motionless, every drawer of the bureau closed, the metal rings on the drawers silent, each stuffed animal lying quietly in the corner. I pass my room, and go to stand at the top of the stairway.

The 8 steps down to the main floor are still, each step following the one before it in exactly the same pattern as the one after it. The thick beige carpet does not change at any point from its imprinted design. I cannot see the footsteps of the thieves pushed into these ledges of lines and squares

which flow onto the landing at the bottom, but I know where they have stepped and where they have not. I know that their left hands have traced the banister as they mounted the stairs, and that their right hands grabbed at it instinctually as they dashed down the steps to just inside the living room when they heard me answer my brother's screams. They stand now around a corner which is hard to make out from where I stand at the top of the stairs.

I cannot clearly hear their breathing, but I breath loudly, unashamedly, they cannot help but know that I am here, my brother's cry for help has discovered me and my strength. But they do not know my name, not yet, for they have never dared enter my room, something has always stopped them at the top of the stairway, has left them standing between my room and my parents', sometimes for an entire night while I lay in my bed, not sleeping, only counting their breaths and mine, matching them until they were one. The thieves will not come up the stairs again tonight, they will wait beyond that corner, occasionally looking at the large clock that hangs on the wall facing the stairway. After I am sure that my parents and I are safe, after I have let the thieves know that I stand at the top of the stairs only to tease them, knowing that I can name them first, I go quietly to my room, turn off the light and go to sleep with the sheets covering all but my face and Goodnight tightly against my stomach. The thieves will not leave until they are frightened away by the sounds my parents make in the morning, my mother and father, like my brother, unaware of these thieves that I have fought off in the night, the shadows I have kept from leaning over their beds.

And then my brother forgets to take Tony from the chair by the window when he goes to sleep, for he slept and sleeps now without ever

hearing thieves. Goodnight still sleeps with me, but now her head fits into a different place against my chest, and I no longer try to talk to my grandfather. My arms and legs lie exposed to the night air, and once I hear my parents make the sounds they make when they think I am asleep and cannot hear, in the morning.

Now the thieves come to me less often, but each visit is more terrible than the last, for the thieves have become younger, stronger, less horrible, and every time I hear them on the staircase and in the hallway I know they are coming closer and closer to knowing my name. Soon, I know that they will call out to me before I can name them, and then I know that there will be nothing to stop them from taking that last step into my room, nothing to stop them from standing over my parents' bed in the night and blotting out all the stars with their dark breath. For I am beginning to forget the thieves' name; I can remember it in the day time, when I work beside my mother in the kitchen or read a book, but during the night, when I know I am powerless without that knowledge, I struggle to find it and fail, holding Goodnight with both hands more for her protection than for my own. Still, the thieves have not quite understood the way to name me, and so they stand in-between my room and my parents', knowing that if they only wait long enough, the name will come to them, or, as they hope, I will tell them myself. I know, during these long nights when I fight to keep from telling them, that I have not saved my parents or myself by my stubbornness. I am only postponing the time when I will not be able to stop their footsteps in the hallway, when the sounds of my parents in the morning will not drive them away.

On the night that I stopped trying to remember the name I had known so well so long ago, one of the thieves was already in bed beside

me. The hallway that connected my room to my parents' was thousands of steps long, I could no longer know that I would be able to reach for the light switch in time, there was a weight on top of me that would not let me move except to

help that weight move deeper into me, for I had told the other thief my name in the exact second that he had learned it without my telling. And it was not until after the ragged breathing of the 2 thieves had stopped, had changed into a double, single sighing that neither of us could hear, that I remembered the name that it was too late to remember. The dark cloud had already spread the hundreds of miles between my bed and my parents', I could not see their faces, even though I stood there, leaning over their bed. I wrapped both arms around my thief and cried into his face, hearing our footsteps on the staircase, our breathing in the hall.