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Elf Hill

by Joe Williams

Here comes Skipper, driving her pink convertible. And there's Barbie, hopping along on one leg. Nice Skipper's going to pull over and give Barbie a ride.

Oh-oh, Skipper's lost control of the car! If Barbie had both legs, she could run out of the way. But with just one leg she's not fast enough.

The car's going to hit her!

Patty mashed her thumb into the rubber of Barbie's head. The blonde ball popped off in her hand, leaving a stump of plastic.

Patty wished her head could come off so easily. She touched her brow over her left eye, where her chestnut bangs hid an ugly lump that bulged from her skull. Every day it ached with a dull pain she'd almost learned to ignore.

The doctors said she had bits of bone in there. They said she was lucky to be

alive.

At nine, Patty was a pale child, not plump like other children her age, but lean and small. The fields at the foot of Elf Hill, left to grow wild all summer, towered over her. When she looked up she saw the distant blue sky from the bottom of a yellow pit. Animals paraded in the churning clouds, a marvelous circus only she could see. She wished she could reach them.

Nearby her Daddy lay on checkered picnic blanket with his wife, his head in her lap and his face behind a newspaper. Jennifer supported him, the stem of a wineglass turning lazily in her fingers as she watched the children.

Ten-year old Ernie, cross-legged in the grass on the other side of the picnic blanket, studied insects with his magnifying glass. He looked up and waved his magnifier. "Come here, Patsy! See what I found!"

In the month she had known him, the chubby, black-haired boy had broken her tea-set, burned down her dollhouse and lost the teddy bear Daddy had given her while she was in the hospital. She wanted nothing to do with him.

Ernie bent over his magnifying glass. "Okay, just sit there and play with your dolls. This will be my secret."

Patty watched him from the corner of her eye. Although she distrusted him, Daddy had asked her to try harder to get along with her new brother. She got up, dusted off her knees and inched closer. Maybe he had found a gold pirate coin or a special flower made huge by his magnifying glass. As she leaned over his shoulder to see, he focused the sun's rays on a stinkbug. It curled into a blackened ball, a puff of smoke corkscrewing from it.

The smoke stung Patty's eyes. She backed away, the pain behind her left eye

flashing.

Ernie dropped his magnifying glass, scooped up the blackened bug and flicked it at her.

She felt it in her clothes, crawling on her skin. She slapped at her T-shirt, hitting herself, wanting only to get the bug off her. The pain in her head made her eyes water.

Ernie leaned back in the tall grass and laughed. Then he jumped to his feet and waved his hand, his laughter cut short by a yelp of pain. He hopped about in a little dance of misery.

Jennifer's wineglass toppled. The white wine raced across the blanket, but by the time it flowed into the indentation where she had been she was already at Ernie's side. The newspaper fluttered as daddy's head, its pillow suddenly gone, splashed into the puddle.

Jennifer hooked long nails on Ernie's shoulders. "What'd she do to you?"

"She threw her stupid doll's head at me." He showed her the red circle on the back of his hand. "See? It hurts!"

Patty hardly noticed them. She stared at the tall grass, the bug in her clothes forgotten. A little knot of pain throbbed in her brain, keeping time with her heart.

No one else had seen it, but she had. A small figure, not much taller than a Barbie, running into the grass. A stray pet? Had someone moved away and left behind a pet monkey?

Patty pointed in the direction the creature had gone, eager to share what she had seen. "It wasn't me. The funny monkey did it."

Jennifer stared at her through eyes as cold as winter skies. "What funny monkey?"

“The monkey in the grass.”

Jennifer frowned, an expression made hideous by her thick red lipstick. “Has your head been hurting you?”

“Yes.” What did her head have to do with it? “But I saw a monkey . . .”

With a napkin, her Daddy dabbed the wine from the back of his hair. “Now Patty, you know your headaches sometimes make you see things.”

She knew what she had seen. “Can I play with the monkey?”

“Don’t worry about your funny monkey,” Jennifer said, gently. The afternoon sun gilded her hair with false gold. Patty trembled inside. Whenever Jennifer tried to be nice, it scared her. She was like the stepmother in a fairy tale, all smiles and kind words except when she had Patty alone. Then she’d just as soon throw her in an oven.

Ernie squirmed against his mother, but she wouldn’t let him go. She drew him into her lap and plopped next to Daddy, all three of them on one side of the blanket and Patty on the other. “Your father will take you in for some more tests. Won’t you Richard?”

“Now I don’t see any reason--”

Patty’s head tingled with sweat. “I don’t want to go back to the hospital!” Tests meant only one thing. They would stick her in a metal tube and tell her not to move. They would make her drink awful-tasting stuff and then take pictures of her brain.

Daddy leaned over and patted her on the cheek. “You’re not going anywhere, pumpkin. Mommy’s just worried about you. She wants to make sure you’re all right.”

“It was the wind!” Patty blurted, knowing it wasn’t but scared that if she went to the hospital something horrible would happen. “It blew the grass around like there was something in it.”

Jennifer pulled on Richard's shoulder. "She needs help. She's been home two weeks and she's still seeing things."

His hand dropped from Patty's cheek. "We can talk about this later."

"You should listen to me, Richard. After all, I am a nurse's aide."

He gathered the paper plates. "You were until you married me."

"Then you'll agree I know more about medicine than you do. Amnesia is common with head injuries. But these hallucinations of hers frighten me."

Jennifer put the leftover potato salad into a plastic cooler, her awful mouth always moving, complaining, insisting. Hands on her ears, Patty stood on one foot and then the other until she could stand it no longer. She started for the minivan but Ernie dashed ahead, climbed into the middle seat and opened a comic book. The glint in his eye gave him away. He was waiting for her to get in so he could repay her for hurting his hand.

Patty heard Daddy calling, telling her it was time to go, but her legs were rooted as surely as a tombstone, unable to carry her toward him and unwilling to carry her away. She stared at the ground, helpless and weak.

Daddy crunched through the grass and hunkered next to her. He fingered a wayward curl over her ear. "You have your mother's hair. And I know you have her green eyes. Won't you let me see how pretty they are?"

Patty peeked at him and when he smiled, she flung her arms around his neck. "Please, Daddy, can't we leave, just you and me?"

A chuckle rumbled deep in his chest, an empty echo. "Where would we go?"

"We could go find Mommy."

"Jennifer is your mother now. You know that."

Patty knew better. Her real mother was out there somewhere, waiting for her. She just had to find her and everything would be the way it was before she woke up in the hospital. The headaches would go away, Jennifer and Ernie would be gone, and she would be safe.

“I know it seems fast to you,” Daddy said. “But you were asleep for almost a year and I was all alone. They said you would never wake up. If I hadn’t seen Jennifer every day at the hospital . . .” He cleared his throat and straightened, his huge hand holding hers. “Come on, pumpkin. They’re waiting for us.”

Patty didn’t want to go. She pointed at the cluster of houses at the top of the hill. “Daddy, why do they call it Elf Hill?” She already knew the answer, but longed to hear him tell the familiar story.

He glanced up the road and shrugged. “It’s just a name. There’s lots of places around here like that. The developer must’ve been a fan of Tolkien.”

Patty frowned with confusion. “That’s not what Mommy said.”

He grinned. “I’m sure she had a more colorful explanation.”

“She said it’s because the little people live here. She said if you were nice to them, they wouldn’t hurt you. But if you were mean, they would get you.”

“That sounds like her, always making up stories. It came from her Irish blood, I suppose.”

Picking her up in arms so strong she couldn’t have squirmed free even if she had tried, he started back to the van where Jennifer and Ernie waited. Her lips were so close to his ear that she risked whispering a secret.

“I saw an elf.”

His pace slowed, each step deliberate. “No, you saw something you made in your

own mind. You remember those shapes and colored splotches you used to see on the ceiling of your hospital room? The way they used to scare you? Your imaginary friends are like that, nothing more.” He ran his hand through the curls of her red hair so softly she could hardly feel him. “It’s all a part of that hurt in your head. It’s turned your imagination into a powerful thing. Something you can see.”

Patty didn’t understand what he meant, but she could tell he didn’t believe her. She pursed her lips and shook her head. “No, Daddy, it was real. He had a wrinkled face like an angry old man. And a green coat. And a red hat.”

His expression turned suddenly serious. “Enough of that, Patty. You don’t want to upset your mother.”

Daddy lowered her next to the sliding door of the minivan and settled in behind the steering wheel. Patty crawled in back, as far from Ernie’s pinching fingers as she could get.

On the way home, they passed an old oak tree the neighborhood kids called the Arm Breaker. The wrinkled tree grew not more than twenty feet from the road. Daddy slowed as he rounded the curve where the tree stood.

Jennifer said, “I think you should tell her the truth about the accident.”

The van swerved, knocking Patty’s head against the window. “Sorry!” Daddy called back. “A squirrel ran across the road. They live in that tree. Someone should cut the damn thing down.”

Jennifer let go of the dashboard and primped her blonde hairdo. “Don’t try to change the subject. You’re not going to get out of this that easily.”

“Look, she’s too young. Let’s not talk about it. Not here.”

“You never did tell her what happened, so it’s no wonder she keeps acting out.

You never gave her a chance to grieve. But it doesn't have to be this way. There are places that can help girls like her."

Daddy sighed. "She's fine. She just misses her mother."

Mother.

The last time Patty had seen her real mother was on this very road. They were driving home from a Disney movie, Mommy and Daddy laughing in the front seats of their silver BMW. She fell asleep listening to the music of their happiness.

When she woke up she was in the hospital. Daddy said she had been asleep for a long time, and while she slept Mommy had gone away. He said Jennifer was her new mommy, and Ernie her brother.

That was when her headaches started.

Daddy pulled into the dead-end street where they lived, on the top of Elf Hill. The ivory siding, green trim and red-tiled roof of their home comforted Patty as much as a mother's hug.

Jennifer opened her door. "I wish you would sell this house. It's unhealthy to live around such reminders."

Daddy hoisted the ice chest. "The market's soft. Best just to keep it."

"We can afford to take a loss. Besides, the view alone is worth a fortune."

While Daddy and Jennifer unloaded the minivan, Patty carried her dolls upstairs. She stood on her bed so she could arrange her crippled collection on their shelf. Mutilated Barbie she put in front, the little plastic nub of her neck pointing skyward. She wondered what it felt like not to have a head. Would that get rid of her pain?

It wasn't long before Ernie swaggered into the room. "Look what I got." From his pocket, he pulled a box of wooden matches.

Patty hopped off the bed. "You better watch out." She knew not to play with matches. Jennifer wouldn't like it.

"No. *You'd* better watch out." Ernie lit a match, the flame bright. He held it up in pudgy fingers and Patty stared at it with wonderment. There was something about fire that fascinated her, something dangerous yet magical.

"Got 'cha!" he cried as he launched the match into her hair. Her hair crinkled and smoked and smelled just like the stinkbug in the field. She shrieked as he threw another match and chased her around the bed, chanting, "Momma's gonna put you in the nut house!"

Patty crouched in a corner and closed her eyes, shielding her face from the rain of matches. What could she do? Helpless and scared, she waited for him to stop.

"Are you crazy!"

The screech startled Patty. Jennifer stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. Ernie clung to her waist, his face a mask of innocence. Jennifer's glare targeted Patty alone.

Patty looked at her clothes, saw the black burn marks, saw the spent match stubs all around her, saw the lick of flame rising from the trashcan. The half-empty box of matches rested near her hand.

"Ernie did it!" she cried, knowing it would do no good.

Jennifer stomped over and jammed a pillow in the trashcan to smother the fire. "Don't blame your brother!" She waved the matchbox in front of her face. "You could have burned down the house. Is that what you want? Why would you ever do such a stupid, stupid thing?"

She ground out the matches on the carpet. "You're always competing for

attention. Well, if it's attention you want, I'll give you all the attention you can stand!"

Patty couldn't stop the tears that puffed her cheeks. "Ernie started it!" But Ernie had already slipped from the room.

Jennifer yanked Patty up by the arm and gave her a violent shake. "Enough of that, young lady. You'll take your punishment and thank me it's not worse. Now, while you help me clean this mess, I want you to give me five good reasons you shouldn't blame other people for the things you've done."

Patty's arm hurt so much it was almost numb. "I want my Daddy!"

"Never mind about him. This is just between you and me, little girl. Just you and me."

After they finished with the bedroom, they cleaned the bathroom. The bleach fumes gave Patty the worst headache of her life, a stabbing pain that made her so sick she threw up. Jennifer said she was just trying to win her pity and made her wash the toilet. And all the time Patty scrubbed the toilet, the smell of puke in her face, Jennifer yelled at Daddy, demanding he take his daughter back to the hospital and leave her there until she learned how to behave.

That night, despite her weariness, the pain in her head kept Patty awake. A blade of moonlight sliced through her curtains. Hour by hour it inched across the carpet, making its slow progress toward the bed where she lay. Still she could not sleep. It reminded her of when she had been in the hospital and they had given her pills to make her sleepy, yet she had stayed awake night after night for fear if she went to sleep Daddy would go away like Mommy had.

Lying in her bed, Patty caught a whiff of something burnt. She sniffed the frizzled end of her hair. It smelled of chlorine. Her charred T-shirt was in the trash outside, and

the pillow Jennifer had used to smother the fire was in the dryer. So where was the smell coming from?

She slipped out of bed. When she opened her bedroom door, the smell grew stronger, making her headache throb. Yet no smoke hung in the hall. Just that faint but awful smell.

It reminded her of when Jennifer cooked a roast, but it wasn't the same. That was a dry smell. This was raw and wet like a burst blister. A memory flashed through her of a dead dog by the side of the road, baked to the pavement by the summer sun. It seemed strongest outside Ernie's room.

The doorknob scorched her palm. She turned it quick and opened the bedroom door.

The room breathed in around her. The breeze tugged on her baggy nightshirt and made her chestnut curls dance. Her uncomprehending eyes darted about, trying to make sense of broken images.

Blue light rippled through the room, like when her mommy and daddy took her to the aquarium and they went through the glass tunnel under the water and everything was dark and blue and there were rays floating above her. It scared her to be under the water but that was nothing compared to the fear she felt now.

A greasy film crawled down the walls and covered everything with a sickly sheen. It reflected the wavering blue light as if the room were made of melting ice. On the dresser, the plastic case of a television sagged inward. And there on the bed--was that Ernie asleep with a gray blanket across his stomach?

A blanket? No! A torso, burned black and burning still. Jets of blue flame flickered across it. Arms and legs, white and untouched, stuck out of the bubbling lump.

The fire had been in here for hours, smoldering in the blankets and the stuffing of the mattress, suffocating Ernie, then using his fat for fuel and his bones for a wick. Burning him as slowly and cleanly as a candle.

But with the door open, the fire breathed again. Air flooded the room and in an instant the fire consumed the bed, the oily walls, the carpet. Flames and smoke roared out, driving Patty back. Then the air hit Ernie and he also breathed, life rushing into starved lungs with a horrible, parched cry.

Patty didn't scream at first. Not until the charred thing on the bed raised its blackened arm.

She screamed again, louder, when the blue eyes boiled from their sockets. An instant later the smoke detector joined its shriek to hers.

Colors danced before her eyes, pulsating to the throb in her skull. All around her, little gray elves crept from their holes and crevices and pranced about, waving their emerald-crested walking sticks. They mocked the burning figure in the bed, laughing silently as he gurgled and thrashed in agony. They plucked at the hem of Patty's nightshirt and smiled up at her. They pointed to Ernie, doffed their crimson top hats and bowed. A final convulsion and he lay still.

The elves scattered at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Jennifer bounded over the top, calling, "Ernie! Ernie!" She charged down the hall through a cloud of smoke, her nightgown plastered against her legs. The little people fled her pounding feet and scurried back to their hidey-holes.

Jennifer stopped at Ernie's door, arms raised against the heat, and sobbed at the sight of what lay on the bed. She tried to go in but the heat and smoke pushed her back. Then she turned, eyes as fiery as the room beyond, and slapped Patty to the floor.

The girl's head hummed and for a moment she couldn't breathe. Then the sobs came from her in an unstoppable gush.

A kick to the ribs rolled her over. Jennifer grabbed her by the hair and lifted her. Patty screamed, the pain in her scalp more real than the fire.

Jennifer held her face to the furnace of Ernie's room. "You were always jealous of him, you crazy freak. You crazy, brain-damaged freak!"

She picked up Patty's legs and swung her by the hair and feet toward the flame-filled doorway, ready to throw her in with Ernie. It wasn't me, Patty wanted to yell. The elves did it! But the smoke seared her throat and all she could do was cry in terror.

Daddy's shout came from the stairs. "Thank God you've got Patty! We've got to get out of here!" He grabbed Jennifer's arm and she dropped Patty. Her jaw banged the floor. Stars flashed.

Jennifer tore away from him. She ran to Ernie's bedroom, stopped at the threshold and stood there poised, like she wanted to jump in and die. Her nightgown fluttered in the heat as firefly ash swirled around her. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and a wild keening came from her, the sound a cat makes when it's left out overnight.

Patty could hardly move. The kick to her side had taken her breath away and with each tortured gasp the smoke strangled her. Darkness pooled in the edges of her eyes, slowly squeezing her vision into a gray tunnel.

Daddy bent over her. She cried out from the pain in her ribs as he lifted and carried her, bawling, from the house. Black smoke poured from the roof, coiled skyward and blotted out the moon. Orange light cast crazy, flickering shadows across the yard.

Daddy laid her on the dew-damp lawn. "Stay here."

“Don’t go!”

“I’ve got to get Jennifer.” He laid a sooty hand against her cheek. “Don’t worry. I won’t lose her.”

Her mouth hung open in amazement. He was going back for her? After what she tried to do? Her tears mixed with the soot from his fingers, and when she wiped her cheeks, she wiped away his touch.

She looked at the house, roaring with flames, smoke gushing from the upstairs windows, and prayed he would come back alone.

Her prayers went unanswered. Daddy, blackened by ash, stumbled from the front door. In his arms he carried Jennifer.

He dropped her in the minivan then came back for Patty. The van reeked of seared meat. The smell issued from a black, blistered stretch of Jennifer’s arm where the fire had burned away part of her nightgown and eaten away the skin from her wrist to her neck.

“Hospital’s not far,” Daddy wheezed through ragged coughs. “We’ll be there before the fire trucks get here.”

Dressed in his boxer shorts and T-shirt, he got behind the wheel and drove off so fast the tires shrieked. Each time he coughed, the van swerved.

Jennifer, slumped in the passenger seat, wheezed as she breathed. Please die, Patty begged her in her mind. Please, just die. Free Daddy to come find Mommy with me.

Jennifer’s cracked lips parted, sending bits of skin flaking onto her chin. “You killed him,” she hissed. “I know you caused it somehow, you and that damaged mind of yours.”

Patty tried to remember standing over Ernie's bed, dropping lit matches on his sleeping body. But it wasn't a memory--it was a dream.

Driving one-handed, Daddy wiped smoke from his watery eyes. "Now Jennifer--" She slapped him with her good arm. "Shut up. I'm talking." Her eyes shifted to Patty. "The doctor told me you'd never wake up. I should've known better. A cord unplugged. A misplaced scalpel. An air bubble in your IV. Oh, there are so many ways to die in a hospital."

"You don't mean that!" Daddy glanced, horrified, at his wife.

A trickle of tears burned hot against Patty's cheeks. "I want my Mommy."

Jennifer laughed, low and rasping, a deathbed laugh. "You still think she'll protect you? You fool. She was hurt as bad as you when your father crashed into that tree." A smile creased her withered lips. "She died in the hospital a year ago, and you've kept her alive in your mind all this time."

The pain behind Patty's left eye hammered into her.

"Stop it!" The shout sent Daddy into a coughing fit. The van swung around the curve where the Arm Breaker stood sentinel, a dark shape alongside the road. The headlights cut across the scarred, battered trunk.

Colors melted like crayons behind Patty's eyes. Through a haze she saw the small elves crawl from beneath the seats of the van and clamber up the dashboard. They threw aside their walking sticks and grabbed hold of the steering wheel.

Daddy struggled with the wheel, fighting the small hands that held it pointed at the big tree. The misshapen trunk glowed in the headlights. It filled the windshield, swelling so huge Patty could see the flakes of silver paint caught in the old gashes of its bark.

She clenched her hands so tightly her fingers hurt. The little people had punished Ernie and now they were taking her to her mother. They were Mommy's friends, sent to help her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Jennifer leaned for the steering wheel, but the seat belt caught her short. She unfastened the catch and reached for the wheel.

The little people smiled.

The van jumped the curve, jostling the passengers. Gravel rained against the wheel-wells like buckshot. Jennifer steadied herself and groped again for the steering wheel.

In an instant, Patty saw everything. The windshield, shattering. Her father, screaming. Jennifer, unbuckled, rocketing from her seat.

A branch splintered through the windshield. Wood ripped through flesh. Jennifer's head, her mouth a surprised O, spun in a red shower.

Patty found herself flying, flying over her father's shoulder, flying toward the tree, her cramped fingers letting go of the steering wheel.

For a moment she hung suspended, her mind racing and her body frozen on its way out the windshield. Then the airbag in the steering column exploded, knocking her back.

Daddy, hanging by his shoulder strap, groaned and began to stir. Patty, lying in his lap, ran curious fingertips across her forehead.

It didn't hurt at all.

The End