

# In the House

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**front porch:** *second person*

The story begins here.

As she stands poised, about to enter, our heroine is on the verge of transformation. Once she opens the door, events will be put in motion, actions will begin to occur. Once she opens the door, she will begin the inevitable change that will lead to her conclusion. Once she enters the house, she becomes a different person.

We know something about our heroine already: how she seems like you, the reader; how you'll slowly begin to see the world through her eyes. Even when she's *she*, she's *me*.

You know what's about to happen because you've been here before. But she hasn't. She's only just beginning: carefully walking up the front steps, placing her hand on the doorknob, pausing a moment to think.

We can observe her now. See? She's about to push the door open and begin. As the door creaks open, it's already too late.

**split level entry:** *choices*

Up is the kitchen, with its assortment of motives, the dining room, a long hallway, all the bedrooms and their unmade beds. Downstairs is dirty: the laundry, the garage, the unfinished basement with its carpet remnants and castoff couches. Down is the realm of children, cement floors scattered with half-loved toys, cardboard houses, incomplete puzzles.

Upstairs belongs to her.

**foyer:** *pause*

Sooner or later, she'll have to choose. She bites her lip and appears to consider. Surrounded by doors and stairs and windows, she bides her time and breathes.

**stairs:** *rising action*

She hates the gold shag carpet.

**kitchen:** *conflict*

There's a secret he's keeping. On the counter a butcher block with a chef's knife, a bread knife, sharpener. In the refrigerator, three kinds of beer and half a dozen mustards. In the spice cabinet: cinnamon, cloves, cayenne. He knows how to make a coffee cake from scratch and what to use to inspire sneezing, coughing, burning eyes, an ailment that looks like the flu, how to induce a miscarriage, how to seduce and tease.

She's making dinner. She possesses secrets of her own, different from his. She lets him stand behind her as she uses a knife on the meat, cutting through the muscle, avoiding bone. She doesn't worry about the names, only: sharp, sharper. Only the way her finger bleeds when she slices through skin and the blood spreads and she can't tell her own blood from the ooze of the meat. She doesn't yell or call out. It's only an accident, as so many things are.

**hallway:** *a preposition*

against a textured wall  
away from the kitchen  
around the corner  
behind a door  
beside the light switch  
close to  
down the empty hallway  
into the darkened corridor  
next to the bathroom  
out of the bedroom  
away from

**master bedroom:** *plot*

He's holding her down against the bed. What is she saying? Listen closely. You need to know what she wants, what she calls out as he presses his mouth over hers. Something is happening. Everyone is waiting, watching: him, her, you. Observing the ways in which they manipulate each other's bodies and then wait for a response, another event to follow the first.

Think of what happened in the kitchen. He has secrets, things he's not telling, the ways he moves her into the bedroom in the first place, with recipes and lies. The way she's supposed to want it and not want it. The secrets she has, what's beneath her pillow, what's under her shirt, between the sheets, inside her top drawer between her socks.

This is what brings events to where they are: he's holding her down and she's struggling, but struggling is so often interpreted as surrender.

**closet:** *dramatic questions*

- Who is he?
- What happens and what is simply *imagined*?
- Did the woman scream or moan?
- How will she get out of the bedroom?
- What is she doing in the closet?
- Will the children think to look in the closet?
- What children?

**children's room:** *sub-plot*

The beds are much smaller, but aside from that it's like any other bedroom, any other room, with its books on the floor: *The A to Z Guide to The Opposite Sex*, or *Where the Wild Things Are*.

There are seemingly abandoned stuffed animals still clutched in darkness. The worn spot in the carpet where the dog sleeps every night and where he turns his ritual circles before lying down and fixing his eyes on the young girl asleep beside him. He barks in his sleep, and when she awakens, he is always watching so that she begins to wonder if he sleeps at all, but that's his job, to watch and guard and to ensure that no one disappears, that there are no unexplained events, that each and every event has a beginning and a clear, discernible resolution.

**bathroom:** *first person*

This is the site of concealment, where the door locks and the layers are shed: clothing, make-up, jewelry, barrettes. She becomes an *I* again, or *I* become her, who knows really? But there she is in the mirror, stripped down to the barest secret of skin taut over bones, where nothing can be concealed from the mirror and the harsh lighting, the cruel gaze of the cotton swab and tweezers.

The scale is pushed back beneath the counter, under the sink, no need for weighing and measuring when

everything is so revealed. I have only to look in order to see the purple rising on her arms, the places where skin has been rubbed raw, the nicks and cuts, the abrasions, the curves where she should have stopped, and the hollows where she should have kept going.

How there is always too much and not enough and how in this light the reasons are so obvious, but when I flip the switch, there she is, I can't see anything and this nothing fills the whole room.

**front room:** *clues*

There are large brass candlesticks on the mantle. Some scraps of paper and ash in the fireplace. What is beneath the couch, ordered from a catalog and delivered to just this spot? Beside the couch, matching chairs and a large throw rug. Photographs of the children in various stages of development, black and white wedding photographs in which everyone smiles and looks as if they are trying to smile.

The room echoes with conversation and arguments. She might be sitting in the armchair reading a magazine but she's saying to him, *no* and *that's exactly what I thought you were going to say*.

If he has secrets, she has habits, the way her leg dangles over her knee and the rhythm in which she slowly moves her foot. The perfectly timed flipping of pages and the way she seems to hum without thinking about it. How long she waits before standing up and moving around, rearranging the cups on the coffee table, shuffling the newspapers, calling to the dog, *here boy, here*. The slight tilting of her head as she listens for sounds from far off, as if thunder might be moving in, as if anticipating the picture window's inevitable shatter into a hundred glittering eyes.

**attic:** *climax*

A woman screams. This sound is always attributed to the attic, that way no one has to go up and investigate. It could be the ghost of a dead woman or it could be a crazy woman or a woman who is alive and screaming for a reason. Because of violence or pain or emotional suffering. She has many reasons to scream.

She pretends not to hear. She hears the screaming and believes the sound may originate inside her own body. She is so often confused that she cannot remember if she heard the screaming or if she is a product of it.

He says he doesn't hear a thing, *come back to bed*.

**stairs:** *pace*

One false step might send her hurtling downward faster than she expected.

**basement:** *flashback*

The photographs of young girls in lilac dresses (this is someone else's childhood), odd socks (mismatched, abandoned), remnants of toys (doll arm, bear missing eyes, earless rabbit), desire (it was once so free, she often happened upon it, a catch in her throat, now it retreats from her as she searches, where can it be?), matched ivory washer and dryer (automatic, self-timing, silent), an old playhouse (solitary, one is an only child in the basement), her own distant childhood (the whole thing took place outdoors and entirely in summer, it was never dark, never snowed).

**sliding glass doors:** *allegory*

See the house to the north? That's where the happy couple lives. They have two dogs and no kids. They are always tan and always running laps around the neighborhood, waving and displaying their general good health. They are always throwing tennis balls and saying *good dog, good dog*. They drive white cars, and paint their house white, and their dogs are white, their jogging outfits white.

In two years, the husband will come home one night and find his wife at the kitchen table eating lasagna. He will pull a chef's knife out of the butcher block and force it through her white shirt and into her body, blood spilling all over the table and the white carpet. Then he will drive away and on Monday they will find her body. After a six state manhunt, they will give up looking for him. He will be happily remarried and living in Arkansas in a split-level rambler.

Either that or they will get a divorce and sell the house. The people who move in will not be nearly so happy. They will not wave or throw balls for their dogs. Instead they will have barbecues in their backyard that will erupt with laughter and then later shouting. The police will come and things will get quiet and then a few hours later the shouting will resume and then it will stop.

It is the way things go, the waving and the shouting. The houses are soundproof now, so whatever goes on inside stays in there, sealed up inside the rooms and spaces no one visits. That is one of the other stories.

**back door:** *conclusion*

Here she is again, her hand poised on the doorknob, about to move, to set events in motion. Or cause them to cease. That is so much more difficult. How do events stop arriving, one after the other, like a series of lightning strikes? She can't simply stand behind the door and ignore them. The events will find her.

How will she get out of the house? Perhaps she could kill herself, using the contents of a bottle simply labeled *solutions*. Or maybe someone could come to the door. Nothing so simple as the postman, or a person delivering a package. A woman. A neighbor, perhaps, who simply comes over as a diversion, in order to borrow something. Something to read.