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Caitlin Invisible.

As a ten year old Caitlin was pretty ordinary. She found the new extension on the house mysterious and interesting. She found her younger brother to be irritating. She didn't always behave for her mother, for which she often felt guilty, but not enough to apologise. But for the most part she liked waking up late at night and staring out of the extension window. It wasn't finished yet and it had an echo, which Caitlin exploited. It was blocked off, as the decorating hadn't been finished yet. Her dad had planned to do this himself, but never found the time. For almost six months it remained empty, with a few tools and scaffolding lying around waiting to be picked up. Access to it is via the utility room, with the washing machine and the deep freezer in it. Caitlin would often go into the room, kind of enjoying the danger of her imagination. The shadows, the cold, the greyness of the walls and ceiling as if it were a tomb. She never stayed long, waiting just long enough to shiver in her bed clothes and then return to bed.

'Caitlin. What are you doing in here again?' her mum asked her. They almost bumped into each other, just inches from physical contact. Her mum grabbed her shoulders and walked her out into the kitchen. 'You're freezing cold now, Caitlin. It's going to take ages to warm you up again.'

'I know,' she said sheepishly.

'We're going to have to lock you in your room,' she joked. But Caitlin was tired and didn't respond.

Her father walked in, 'Is she in that room again?' he asked.

'Yes. If you'd hurry up and finish it we wouldn't have this problem.' He grimaced, turned on his heels and went into the living room to pour a shot of something. Caitlin peered round the frame of the door and watched him pour out a scotch. She looked back before he noticed her and then took hold of the hot water bottle her mum had prepared before returning to her room in silence.

The next morning was bright but cold as she stepped out of bed, before being called. She wandered downstairs calling for her mum. Her eyes were puffy and her cheeks red from the heat of her bed. Her parents always had the heat turned up high. It did get rather hot by the morning, wrapped up in a thick duvet and heavy cotton pyjamas.

'You alright darling?' her mum enquired. She nodded sheepishly.

'Can I have crispies please?' she asked for her favourite cereal and climbed up onto the dining chair, and sat quietly and waited. Harry her brother bounded in fully dressed, screaming and shouting. Caitlin pushed him away as he stood right up to her face and pulled a grimace to annoy her.

'Harry!' she screamed impatiently. He was so annoying.

She quickly got dressed and went out to play, wrapped up warm in a large red duffle coat done up to the top, to cover her chin and protect her from the wind. She grabbed her bike, as Harry grabbed his to copy her and they cycled in circles round the garden, as mum grabbed arm fulls of rotting vegetation to stick in the compost. She circled the garden three times before abandoning her bike to stop Harry copying her.

Saturday night was always spent in front of the television. Her dad had got a family film from the video shop and Caitlin sunk into it; its message, its story. She lost herself in an imaginary world, with the rest of her family sinking into the background, as

if they were no longer there. Then it was bedtime again. She was tired. As mum pushed them gently past the passage to the extension, she craned her neck backwards to look at it. She wondered whether she would be there again tonight. Whether her curiosity would take a hold of her again.

Sure enough at midnight she woke up to the Disney clock radio light in her eyes. She stared at the luminous numbers as she tried to make out the time. The light doesn't normally come on, but she didn't give this much thought. In the house she could hear movement and decided to wait before she climbed downstairs to look in the extension again through its wide tall window. Tall because the house was a Regency building. It needed a Regency style extension and the view out into a centre park, surround by a road and its houses. She waited in bed not moving, before she heard her parent's bedroom door softly clunk shut. She climbed out of bed putting her feet straight into her slippers. She was wide awake now and the house was silent. She crept over to her dressing gown and slipped it on over her pyjamas, pushing her arms out through the fold where she'd last taken it off. It was a bit too small for her now. She probably needed a new one, she thought as she peered out into the corridor. She passed into the landing and down the stairs which creaked a little. She was aware that this is what gave her away last time, so she took extra care, slowly placing one foot on one stair at a time. She turned carefully at the banister and walked towards the plastic sheeting covering the door into the new room. The ground floor was high up over a basement, and there was a good view of the park from here. When she arrived the floor was reflecting light from the moon and the street lamps. She hadn't noticed this before and strained to see what was different about it. Eventually she began to walk across it, slipping on its surface. She stopped again and stooped to touch it. It was covered by a thin layer of ice. 'Has there been a leak?' she thought.

She slowly walked across the floor concentrating carefully, so as not slip over and cause a loud noise. The ice cracked under her feet, making what seemed like a loud enough noise to wake her parents, stopping to check over her shoulder before continuing. As the window got into view she was looking at what looked like several cars and people on the green. The trees cast shadows across it, the silvery moon-light illuminating the room, the sheen on the walls from the shiny surface of bare plaster. She stopped and watched from a safe distance, shaking slightly from the cold. Light flashed around and quiet voices muffled up from the green to her, before she turned with a start to see her mother move silently past the door with the plastic, which she had left pinned back against frame. She could see her mothers pink dressing gown and fluffy slippers, shuffle past her. After a long pause she looked back, trying to pick up what was happening, unconcerned by her mothers movement in the other room. What was going on?

She stepped forward and saw that the car was a large machine with doors open and people walking like zombies into them and then walking back out a couple of minutes later. People were coming from all round the green, walking slowly towards the machine, as if mesmerised by it. Then she saw her mother, father and Harry all doing the same thing. They never looked up at her, or spoke or did anything to tell her why they were doing this. She moved a bit closer. Now she could see tall thin grey beings herding people in and out of this strange machine, silver and black and menacing. She began to shake and cry. She turned round and walked as quickly as she could out to the hall. Immediately she felt a breeze coming in through the open door, swinging aimlessly, like

during the summer holidays when they played out the front. But it wasn't summer. It was bitterly cold. The alien figures which seemed to be in control did not look at her, or stir in surprise when she inched out of the door onto the street. She would be clearly seen from the park. She didn't try to hide. Even her parents didn't look up at her. She saw them enter the jaws of the machine; large open doors, flat and silvery, the rest of the ship hidden in the shadows and waited, knowing they would come out again, but worrying they may not. Eventually they marched past her as if she wasn't there. As if she was invisible, moving slightly to get out of her way.

'Mum,' she cried. She ignored her. 'Dad,' she cried, but he didn't respond. Then as her father turned to close the door, she suddenly flung herself forward so that she wasn't locked out. She landed on her bare knees with a carpet burn for her trouble. She rubbed it and stood up. All three of them walked slowly and robotically up the stairs. As she cried and called their names they continued to ignore her. She was terrified. They all walked slowly back to their rooms, and closed the door in Caitlin's face, as she bolted backwards to avoid having her nose smacked by the closing door. She wept and sat on the carpet outside, knocking on the door and crying for her mum. Eventually the door opened and as if nothing had happened her mother spoke to her, seemingly back to normal.

'What's wrong Caitlin?' she asked. She knelt down and picked her up in her arms. 'What's wrong sweetheart?' she asked again. Caitlin was hysterical, and by this time her father had got out of bed disturbed by how upset she was. They tried to calm her down, to get some sense out of her, but it was hopeless. Caitlin's mum began to cry herself, as she bobbed Caitlin up and down in her arms.

'What's wrong with her Bobby?' she asked her husband.

'I don't know. I think I'm going to call a doctor and then I am going to check the house.' He strode off to the office and called Dr Peters. He promised to come and see her within the hour as Caitlin's sobbing continued. Bobby ran round the house to check for intruders and noticed the front door, although shut, had not been bolted properly. He remembers bolting it tonight. He always did it, even when Sarah, his wife said she'd done it. He then went into the extension noticing for the first time the plastic sheeting pinned up to the door frame. Someone had possibly been here. He walked into the cold extension and stood still in the silvery moonlight as Caitlin had done.

Sarah continued to ask Caitlin what was wrong. Eventually she had brought her crying under control, and she spoke, taking big sighs in between her words. Bobby stood not too far away, his brow furrowed, leaning heavily on his arm, his hand folded backwards against kitchen worktop. He looked stressed, unsure what was happening.

'I went into the new bit' (her name for the extension) 'and it was icy on the floor.' Sarah looked at Bobby.

'Is it icy?' she asked. He shook his head no.

'I don't think it is,' he added and turned and stuck his head through the door, then taking a couple of steps into the room, returning immediately. 'No it isn't.'

'I saw everyone climb into the space ship and then come out, and then you and daddy didn't see me. You just walked passed and I didn't know what to do. And I had to jump into the front door,' she explained.

'But me and daddy haven't gone out love,' Caitlin's mum argued.

‘Why did they leave me out mum?’ she asked, curling up her face in her hands, to wipe away the tears.

‘What do you mean?’ Sarah asked.

She began to cry again, because they didn’t believe her. ‘You don’t believe me,’ she cried and sobbed uncontrollably. Sarah put her down, as she was becoming heavy and knelt down to her level, while she wept with her hands on her face.

‘Get her a drink Bobby,’ she asked. Caitlin’s father walked across the kitchen and poured a juice and gave it Caitlin, as she gulped trying to catch her breath between sobs of tears. They moved into the living room and Sarah put on the heater and sat her daughter down in a chair. She sat close to her, leaning over her.

‘Tell me again Caitlin. What happened?’ she asked, desperate to understand. Bobby stood as he done in the kitchen, leant against something, with the deep look of distress and worry across his face.

‘A spaceship. You all got into a spaceship,’ she trembled as she spoke.

‘But there’s no such thing Caitlin. You must have dreamt it,’ Sarah told her.

‘She dreamt it,’ her father added, nodding.

The bell rang and Bobby answered the door to the doctor; his white and green doctor’s car parked half way up the drive, the back end jutting out onto the pavement. He walked in changing the atmosphere immediately as doctors do, Sarah looking briefly around her to check that the house was clean and tidy. By this time Harry had emerged in his night clothes from the edges of the doorway leading into the living room. The doctor came in and knelt down.

‘Hello Caitlin,’ he said gently, reaching into his bag.

‘Hello,’ she said sheepishly and cutely.

‘Now what’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘My daddy and mummy and Harry went outside and into a spaceship and they didn’t see me,’ tears rolled down her cheeks.

‘Are you sure you didn’t dream it Caitlin, because sometimes people can dream very lifelike events, as if they’re actually happening?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I woke up, went downstairs into the new bit and I watched from the window and there was ice on the floor.’

‘There wasn’t ice on the floor,’ Sarah added. ‘She’s also got into the habit of going into the extension late at night and staring out of the window.’

‘Does she sleep walk?’ he asked as he checked her eyes, her tongue and her ears to check for fevers. He checked her temperature as Sarah answered.

‘She may have been sleep walking I suppose. I never thought about it. She seemed so awake.’

‘Mmm,’ he stood up. ‘I can’t see anything obviously wrong, but I will leave you with something to calm her down, if you need it.’

He left and Sarah and Bobby stood over her as she sat quietly. Harry was shuffled off to bed, while Sarah set up a bed in Caitlin’s room, to watch over her. Bobby promised himself that he would add a door with a lock to the extension in the morning. But when morning came the crying started, and Caitlin’s little body shook as she screamed, ‘why did they leave me out!’ over and over, until Sarah began to cry as well. Bobby grabbed the pills the doctor had left and asked Caitlin to take them, but she refused. Bobby was getting angrier as Sarah became more inconsolable. It was time for the doctor again.

Bobby and Sarah got dressed one at a time so they could keep Caitlin in her bedroom, while Harry wandered round upstairs looking lost and traumatised. As Bobby removed his vest to get dressed, he noticed a spot of blood on his shirt. He went into Sarah and asked her where it had come from.

‘I don’t know!’ she snapped. ‘You can see I have Caitlin to deal with you silly man.’ He left quickly and threw the garment into the washing basket, then went downstairs to call Dr Peters again.

‘She’s upsetting everyone and she refuses to take the pills you prescribed,’ he explained. The doctor promised to return with an appointment to see a child psychiatrist by the end of the day, telling him he could not get to see her immediately and he should try again to get her take the medicine he had prescribed. At that he returned the phone to the receiver, looked up the number of a colleague and dialled it.

Dr Wendell answered the call and they discussed the case. Dr Wendell felt that the case was so unusual she should be at least assessed, if not brought in for observation.

‘Is there a possibility she was sexually assaulted?’ Dr Wendell asked Dr Peters. ‘There are well documented cases just like this. Was there an intruder in the house? Was the father fully engaged in the problems?’

‘He seems to think she had a bad dream.’

‘Mmm,’ Dr Wendell pondered for a while. ‘That doesn’t tell us a great deal. I will meet you at the house at four o’clock, and we’ll see what we can do for her.’

Having worked hard to build a career, Bobby had every reason to assume that he would be under the spot light now. It occurred to him that if he agreed to her being assessed in a psychiatric facility, she would have the chance to explain what happened, that the spot light would fade, that separately they would prove he had no influence on her disturbed state of mind. It was imperative that he talked to Sarah about the possibility that a spell in hospital might be what is needed. He would need to speak to her now. He rang his sister, who lived a mile away and explained to her what was occurring. He asked her to come and help while they made arrangements for Caitlin to be admitted to hospital. She agreed and arrived in ten minutes or so and climbed the stairs, after letting herself in.

‘Hi, Stacey,’ Sarah said.

‘We needed to talk Sarah,’ Bobby said, ‘so I asked Stacey to watch Caitlin.’

‘Okay,’ Sarah said sheepishly, and went down to the kitchen to talk.

‘She needs to go to hospital,’ Bobby said in a matter of fact way.

‘I agree. At least for a few days so they can assess her.’

Bobby was immediately relieved and surprised. ‘Okay. I thought that was going to be difficult,’ he said.

‘Why?’ she asked, puzzled.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. They continued to chat about what might have happened, including an intruder, or a dream. But there were no readily available explanations of how their sweet, good girl could have suddenly exploded into psychosis from nowhere.

That evening she was removed from the house, screaming and crying into an ambulance. The doctors agreed with her parents that she must have an assessment in a safe environment. Sarah cried and cried, as her child was carried onto a stretcher, and

restrained on it, before the ambulance slowly pulled out of the park and disappeared. Sarah went and cried for a while on her own, while Bobby tried to talk to Harry about what was happening to his big sister. He didn't really understand, except to say that he had blood in his shirt like daddy. Bobby shrugged this off, not having the energy to go and find Harry's shirt and check it. He must have overheard him telling Sarah. He and Harry sat closely together in front of television as they watched Dr Who and munched on a large bag of crisps. Eventually, after having a shower Sarah came downstairs and joined them. She said very little, and did not concentrate on the show, letting its details pass her by. She was very upset and desperately wanted to go to her and stay with her. They had offered to put her up for the night at the assessment centre, but she had decided to come first thing the next day. It was a decision that Bobby had pressed her to take, but she was now regretting. She wanted to be there and was beginning to think that she faced a sleepless night.

'You could take one of those pills Dr Peters prescribed,' Bobby suggested. 'That should do the trick.' Sarah didn't answer. She had already decided to stay up and drink coffee and then leave first thing for the assessment centre, which was about fifteen miles away and would take forty-five minutes to get to. She even got out the map and checked and revised the route, so she wouldn't get lost. As first light came through the cracks in the curtains, she took a shower and dressed, returning to the living room to watch the morning programs, with news and magazine articles, which she paid little attention to, checking the clock every few minutes, before she went and cleaned the kitchen and prepared breakfast for Bobby and Harry. The clock ticked loudly at this time. The room was silent and still after all the chaos of the last thirty-six hours. She even went into the extension and looked through the window and checked the floor to see if she could tell if there had ever been ice there. She checked the locks on the windows, and the integrity of the room, to see if there was any sign at all that something strange had happened. But there was nothing. She noticed a small piece of mud which fell off her slippers and picked it up quickly before it got trodden into the expensive carpet. She smelt it, then wrapped it up in tissue and put into the swing bin.

As soon as eight o'clock came round she headed out to the car. But she noticed that the grass had a large indentation in it, as if the grass had been flattened by something. She closed the open car door and walked slowly over to it. She took out her camera and snapped a picture. She checked it on the screen and then looked round quickly before climbing back into her car.

She set off and drove quickly as she could, pushing through the rush hour traffic and arrived at the hospital at ten to nine. She got out of the car carrying some things for Caitlin to make her stay more comfortable. Bed clothes, her favourite toys and some books. She went in and waited for the nurses to show her in. She followed the nurse through the corridors seeing strange and pale looking people, with no life in them. Young girls mainly, the occasional older girl. She found Caitlin in the last room of the corridor.

'Hi darling,' she said stopping for a second at the door before going in then gently closing the door behind her. She noticed the graze on her knee, but didn't mention it to her. 'How are you doing?'

'Okay. I don't want to be here though,' Caitlin replied. It was all adding up. Could her daughter's story be true? But what was she going to do. She couldn't discharge her and take her home and she shouldn't publicly support her daughter's claims.

‘Mummy. Why didn’t they include me? Why did they leave me out?’

‘I don’t know dear,’ she said, trying to think clearly, unable to stop thinking about what might have happened. She had no memory of anything, but there was evidence. She removed the camera from her bag and took a photo of Caitlin’s knee.

‘Do you believe me then mum?’ she asked, hoping desperately she would say yes.

‘I believe something happened to you, but I don’t what yet,’ she smiled at Caitlin, and finished her sentence just as the doctor arrived.

‘Can you come with me please Mrs Turner,’ the doctor led the way back down the corridor without Caitlin and arrived in the doctor’s office, closing the door behind them.

‘As you can see things have calmed down for Caitlin. What do you think happened?’ the doctor asked. Sarah knew this was a loaded question and thought carefully before she answered.

‘I honestly don’t know,’ she replied.

‘She seems to have had some kind of psychosis, some kind of sudden onset. Normally this happens to children as a result of a trauma, usually of an assault of some kind. I want to keep her in for a few nights, and if she continues to make progress she can come home. But I would like to have regular contact with her as an outpatient Mrs Turner.’

‘Okay,’ she said in a monotone voice. She really wanted to tell him that she believed her daughters story. But she mustn’t. ‘I would like to stay here tonight doctor. Is that okay?’

‘There are facilities we can offer you, yes. That will be fine. I’ll organise something for you.’ The doctor got up and showed her out. She quickly returned to Caitlin and sat down on her bed, as Caitlin sat curled up with her knees to her chest, looking very vulnerable indeed. Sarah turned to her and said,

‘Caitlin.’

‘Yes, mummy,’

‘I think I believe you. But can you promise something?’

‘What?’ she asked, her face brightened a bit.

‘We need to keep this to ourselves. Our own secret okay?’

‘Okay mum,’ they hugged tightly for a minute or two.

Sarah took her out for a meal with a sticky pudding and then they walked through the mall and bought some new clothes and returned to the hospital mid afternoon. They chatted with the staff and patients. There were some really nice people here, each with their own stories. But gentle and kind. They were generous towards her, and Sarah appreciated that. By nightfall Sarah had difficulty getting off to sleep. She was puzzled and bothered to quite a degree as to why Caitlin felt left out. Why when everyone else around her had something awful done to them would she feel left out? It was one of those puzzles which asks deep questions of humanity and being accepted and included in things. Part of social learning; to be loved, accepted and to operate as a social group. She tossed and turned thinking about what she’d seen. She looked at the photo’s a couple of times and at ten thirty she rang her husband. They chatted for a short while, but she never

mentioned what she'd seen and what she now believed. Sarah must try not to talk about it. Maybe she would talk to Bobby another time, when things had calmed down.

It was late when Sarah woke with a start to a noise or a bright light. Hospitals were noisy places at night. She needed the loo, so she got up and wandered into the corridor. As she passed the common room window she saw figures moving around and walked briskly over to it to look. She saw Caitlin and the tall slender figures she'd talked about, with the machine just as Caitlin had described. She stood still, her heart thumping and saw her climb into the machine and then come back out again a second or two later. She was in a trance just as she'd described. Sarah wanted to take a picture, but the camera was in her room and she couldn't tear herself away, until Caitlin was back inside. She saw Caitlin walk past the window and out of view, so Sarah ran as fast as she could, passing the nursing station and noticing the staff asleep, slumped uncomfortably in their chairs. She whizzed down the corridor and into Caitlin's room. She was already in bed and the window was slightly ajar. She woke her up.

'Caitlin, they came for you,' she said excitedly.

'Did they?' she replied sleepily.

'Let me check you,' Sarah said. Caitlin lent forward and Sarah pulled down her top from the neck and checked between her shoulder blades. There was a very small horizontal thin red line on her back. She took her camera and snapped a picture. She climbed into bed with Caitlin and they held each other and drifted off to sleep. By morning the hospital was back to normal. Noisy and busy. Sarah decided it was time to leave. There was little point staying. She discharged her daughter and climbed into the car. She took the camera from her bag again, and walked round to the side of the building where she had seen the alien machine. A branch had broken, but that could have happened any time. There were no signs that anything unusual had taken place, so she returned the camera to her bag and left. But Caitlin seemed pleased they'd come back for her. It was their secret. These strange beings had by accident or by design, left two witnesses to their experiment or their mission. And who knows what was to become of them.

At home, Sarah sat back in her chair, folding print outs and a disc with the photo's into an envelope. She lent her head back into the large executive chair and sighed. Then she reached for a craft knife, and lifted it up over her shoulders. She used her fingers to find a small lump and then guided in the knife. She just caught the tiny capsule before it slipped away, as she winced with pain. She held it up to the light and looked at it. An unassuming smooth silver capsule, with no seams. She opened a plastic specimen bottle and dropped it inside. Then she took a tissue and wiped it down. She sealed it up and put in her desk drawer and locked it. All these things would for now, remain a mystery. She had no clue who to tell or what to do. She would just wait to see what the next few months and years would bring. Proof of extra-terrestrial life, sitting in her desk drawer and a petrified daughter not too far away in her room, curled up in a ball, too tired to speak. Too traumatised to be Caitlin again.