

The bad mother sits on the only chair in the kitchen.

She is clenched, both feet on the floor, arms and back straight, torso zedding forward, as if she is about to do a racing dive onto the dirty linoleum floor. It's hard to sit still, so she clenches the chair to keep herself from running out the door, screaming. There are two other people in the room, cops. The female one is supposed to be making her feel better but won't look her in the eye. They ask if there is anyone they can call. "No," she says.

"Do you have kids?" Lisa asks the cop, but the woman looks away in disgust.

They can't have gone far.

They must be somewhere. *Everything is somewhere*, she tells the kids when they can't find their socks or their toothbrushes. *Just look, damn it!*

The police have taken Lisa's statement twice. There are people outside, looking for the children in the darkness, but they told Lisa to wait inside. Fizzes of static, orphaned words, come through on the cops' radios. It makes it seem like the searchers

are far away, until Lisa remembers they're searching right outside her apartment.

They must be somewhere.

She yelled so loud. She wonders if the cops have already talked to the neighbors, if that prissy bitch next door has already told them she'd heard her screaming at the kids, opening the door and hurling the words out after them.

Just go!

If the neighbor heard her throwing her purse at them.

After they left, Lisa sat on the floor, picking up the coins that had fallen, hoping she still had enough quarters for the streetcar.

When Lisa went out to look for them, they had been gone for forty-five minutes. Until then, she could still hope they were just dawdling, or were coming home the long way around and she'd miss them if she left. But then it was too late for that, and Lisa pulled on her raincoat and ran down the two blocks to Bloor Street, calling their names and peering up onto porches and into the narrow walkways between the houses. A lady walked past her and smiled from under her umbrella, and Lisa realized the woman probably thought she was looking for a cat or a dog.

In the corner store, the fluorescent lights made everything seem rational again, until the man at the cash register told her they hadn't come in.

"I'd remember that, two little kids on their own," he said, and Lisa left the store without saying thank you. She ran back up the other side of the street, calling their

Hansel & Gretel's Mother Waits by the Door for Her Children to Come Home

Ingrid Keenan

names more loudly, still half hoping they'd be sitting on the front porch with some sorry explanation for being late. Lisa knew they didn't have a key, but still she fumbled with her own, unable to open the door fast enough, screaming their names as she ran through the empty apartment.

When she dialed 911, rain dripping off her coat onto the kitchen floor, it had been an hour since they left.

The woman cop leans against the counter, watching her. Lisa gets up and walks over to the kitchen door and gazes out into the wet night. She checks her watch, surreptitiously. It is 11:15. Over three hours.

They only had to cross one small street.

They'll be fine. They're together.

They're probably already—

They probably—

This shouldn't be happening. Make this not be happening. Lay the facts out in a neat row, use them as stepping stones to find the way back out. Three hours ago, there was a logic to all this; now, Lisa stares out the window, waiting for the room to stop spinning around her, trying not to hear what the cops are whispering about.

The facts: Dinner was on the stove. A pot of pasta boiling away; no-name marinara sauce simmering in the other pot. The kids were dicking around, playing catch with his backpack.

Fact: It was Thursday, so there was no money in the bank, and no more food in the cupboard. She would shop tomorrow, after she got paid, but today there was no extra. She had four dollars and twelve cents in her wallet, and one last box of pasta, boiling away on the stove, the pot handle facing out into the room.

Fact: She left the room for a minute, to answer the door. A Greenpeace canvasser.

Fact: He threw the backpack over his sister's head, and she stumbled backwards and caught the pot handle with her elbow, and she jumped back and somehow didn't get scalded as the pot of pasta waterfalled to the kitchen floor. The lousy, grubby, unscrubbable kitchen floor—with the peeling linoleum and sometimes cockroaches—no matter what she does. The last box of pasta all over the floor.

They must be somewhere, but they are nowhere.

Lisa pushes her forehead into the greasy windowpane and shuts her eyes. She can't breathe. She stands there, three hours and four feet away from a terrible decision. She wants to fast-forward. She wants to jump over this intolerable hope. She wants to know how it will end.

No, she doesn't.

The two cops have gone into the hallway, and Lisa can hear the murmur of their voices.

A traitor memory: an article in *Happy Parent*, in the doctor's waiting room, a lifetime ago. *Sometimes you will be angry*, the article advised. *Sometimes you will be so angry you will be afraid that you will hurt your baby. It is important to put your baby somewhere safe, perhaps in the crib with the railing up, and walk away. Get your partner to take over for a bit. Call a friend.*

Find someone else who can watch your child while you give yourself time to cool down. Take a walk. Flip through a magazine. Indulge in a bubble bath.

Fact: There was nothing else to eat. Two heels of bread, soft flowers of mold tracing across them already.

Goddamn it! Get out of here. Go get another box of pasta. Go!

The two little children stared at her uncomprehendingly.

Just go! The purse went sailing across the dirty room, over the spilled pasta and the dirty floor and the backpack sitting in a puddle of steaming water. *Get out of my sight!*

And the boy picked up the wallet where it had fallen, took his little sister by the hand, and went out the door.

They can't have gotten lost, not in one block.

Maybe they ran away.

"Ma'am—" says the female police officer.

But Lisa does not open her eyes. She shuts out the voice, and the kitchen, and the coldness of the window against her forehead, and imagines her children.

"Ma'am."

She imagines the two children who are nowhere; she imagines them somewhere, elsewhere—a million miles from this sleazy apartment with the empty cupboards.

The female cop is talking to someone on her phone.

Lisa imagines her children walking through a forest, holding hands. They have run away; they are on an adventure. They will take care of one another. Her children—

Another cop comes into the room, and Lisa hears his heavy boots walking toward her, but she does not open her eyes. *Hurry, children*, she thinks.

The children hurry. Hand in hand, they scurry beneath Christmas tree boughs, watched by big-eyed, furry animals. It will be dark soon, and they try to outrun the night, drawn by a delicious smell somewhere deeper in the forest. They come to a clearing: a tiny cottage, a playhouse, sweet-smelling smoke rising from a fieldstone chimney. They open the gate, they walk up the flowery path to the front door.

Lisa begins to shake, and the sobs come, heaving intakes of breath without the balm of tears.

Such a sweet house. They'll be happy there.

"Ma'am—" says the female cop again.

The children knock, the witch answers, and the children go into her house, like fools. 