

“Sam!” Ben called once more, but then Sam was there in his pajamas, rubbing his eye.

“What is it?” he asked sleepily. “What’s going on?”

“Alright, Sam,” Ben squared him by the shoulders, “I need you to listen to me. It’s back. Somehow ... it found us.”

“What?”

“Just ...” Ben scrambled. “Here, help me with this.”

They flipped over the kitchen table so that it blocked the soiled picture window where Ben had first seen the creature. They pushed a couch against the table that Ben had already levied against the front door as the creature continued to pound. Then it stopped, and the rain swelled in Ben’s ears.

He looked around wildly. There were too many entry points to secure. He settled on the basement door. He remembered seeing a hammer in one of the built-ins filled with machine parts and used it to shuck the deadbolt from the jam. The ancient air that puffed from the basement musked with the sharp stench he’d been ignoring since Thursday, and as he coughed he had the sensation of opening an Egyptian tomb. He blindly searched the wall until he found the light, then grabbed a kitchen knife and Sam’s hand, and made down the stairs.

Surprisingly, the basement had been finished before it had become undone. It was arranged as a studio apartment, a bachelor pad. With a kitchenette, Murphy bed cocked against a wall and flannels hangered on a pole above a few pairs of dusty boots, it was obvious that someone had lived here. Beneath the cobwebs, the furniture was about ten years out of style. There was a large saw blade hoisted onto one of the cinder-block walls. A vibrating mass of fruit flies hovered over a heaping pile of bloodied bandage scraps. On an end table, Ben found a framed photo of a younger Earl Sloane embracing a woman he had never seen and a boy he didn’t know.

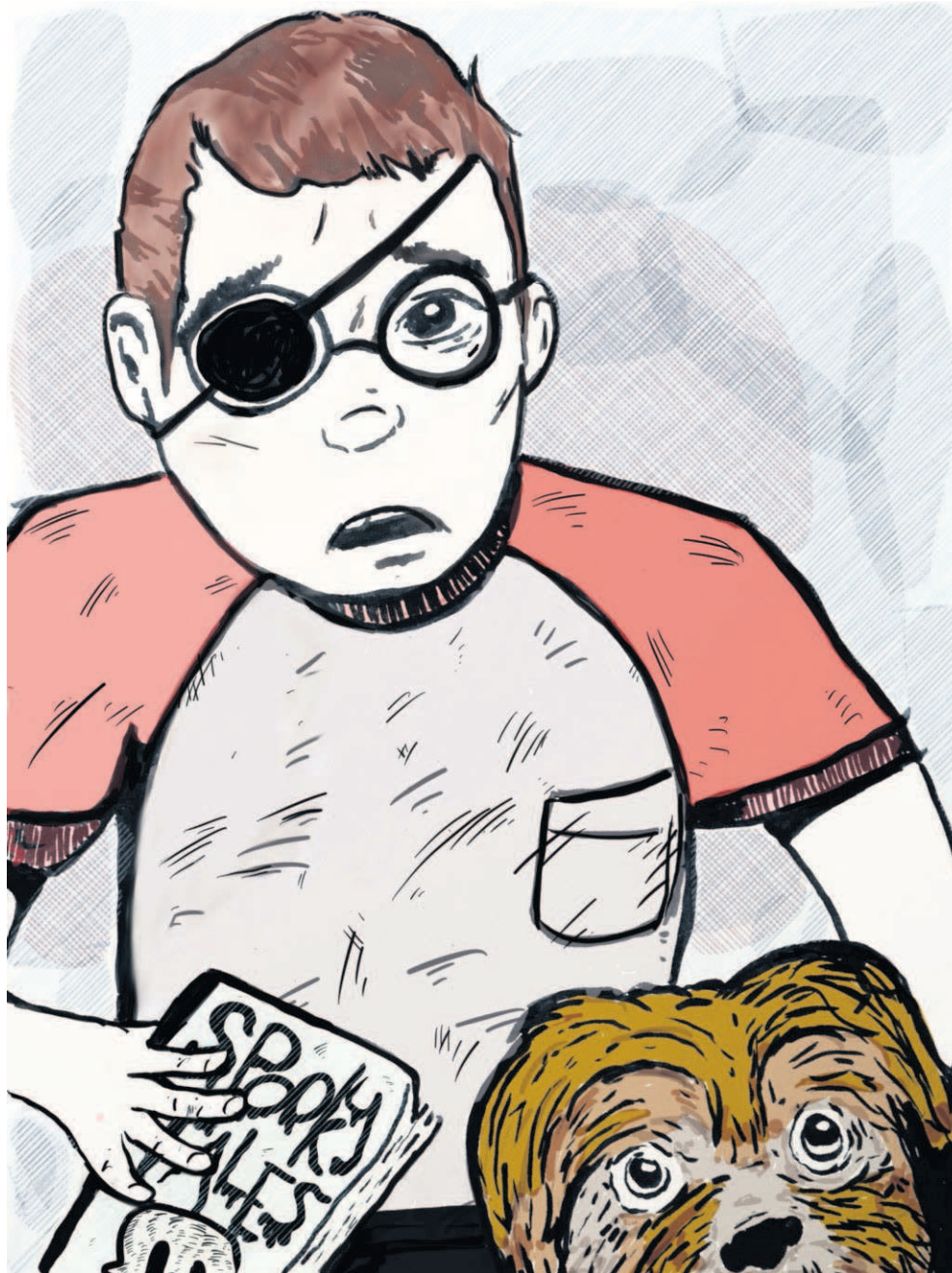
Oh Earl, Ben thought, what have you done? This is Earl Sloane’s house. This is Billy Sloane’s room. *He is always looking for a ride home.*

Sam shuddered as they heard glass breaking upstairs. They stacked the staircase with what little furniture was around, then slid the mattress off the Murphy bed as a final act of barricade. They heard the kitchen table effortlessly slap against the basement’s ceiling, then heavy footsteps squinting creeks off the floorboards.

“I’m scared, Dad,” Sam whispered.

“I know you are, buddy,” Ben said. “I love you, and you need to know that Earl was wrong. That thing is his son, but it’s not a ghost. It breathes. Which means it’s alive. And that means we can kill it.”

Ben clutched the knife in his slick palm,



fretting if this wobbly Goodwill find would do much to anything larger than a spider. The footsteps paused before the threshold of the basement door. Ben could hear only the faintest trickle of rain over Sam’s Lamaze. Then, the door batted open with such force that it rebounded, slamming shut again, only to volley open once more, slowly this time on a nasal hinge. Ben could now hear the creature moaning like it meant something.

Just one push sent the barricading furniture cascading down the stairwell like dominos and Ben and Sam had to retreat against the cinder block to avoid being crushed by so much plaid. Ben saw one boot emerge on the stairs, then another. The creature’s stench worked as a force field, leading Ben and Sam to choke on their tongues as its sour aura spread throughout the room.

As it reached the bottom of the stairs, Ben realized he had never seen it lit. It stood on the carpet, dripping, as Ben covered Sam’s one good eye. Its bandages wept darker than he had expected, percolating with muck and debris, as if the wrappings were the only thing holding this abomination together. If that were the case, it should make it easier to spill this thing.

“Okay, Sam,” Ben whispered. “Like we talked about. Hide.”

As Sam scurried into the closet, Ben stood, knife in hand, wondering how each separate failure in his life had led him to this moment. The creature’s eyes were rimmed with red honey. This was it, he told himself.

Ben Driscoll hadn’t served in Vietnam. He had been born three months early enough to slip the draft. He had always crossed this off as a blessing. And it’s hard

to say if he would even be alive right now to lunge at this demon, or to have met Jessica, or to have sprouted first Audrey and then Sam into his life, or to have held his son’s cheek after he gave an eye, or to bury his wife. What became clear in his first moment of combat is that he could have used some training *mano a mano* as the creature backhanded him cold before he could even jut the knife into its breast. He went dark across the carpet, his vision blurring on a pair of boots.

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*He will not remember dragging the boy in the pajamas from the closet, but he does know this room. The boy will shake and whimper as he notices the man on the ground. The man on the ground will not move but to breathe. He will not understand why these people are in his room. He will never know how he got here.*

*He will not recall the boy standing up to face him. “Hey,” the boy will say. “Hey! Look at me!” He will follow the boy’s volume the way a moth tends a lantern.*

*“Look!” the boy will say, peeling back the patch on his face to reveal a pale crater of socket. “Look! I am a monster just like you.”*

*He will peer sideways at the loud boy.*

*“This isn’t where you live anymore,” the boy in the pajamas will say. “Let me take you home.”*

*He will not remember the boy extending his hand and leading him out of the basement. He will stop four times as the boy drags him through the cold, wet rain as they approach an old wooden house up the block. He remembers cleaning this house as a teenager.*

*Who is this boy leading him up the steps to the porch? The boy will knock three times on the door. He will not understand what they are waiting for. Yet he will recognize his own father opening the door, though he’s older, and more crooked slumping against the gun.*

*“Oh my,” his dad will say. “What’s all this?”*

*“He’s alive,” the boy will say. “Don’t you see? He’s breathing. He has always been alive.”*

*His father’s face will fall into limp disbelief. His dad will take his free hand and set it over his soggy heart just to know that it beats.*

*“Well, come in,” he will say. “Come in.”*

*There will be a fire burning and the room will squeak underfoot. He will get hungry when he sees the dog even as the boy drops to his knees and calls it King. His father will direct him away from the dog with one hand on his chin. He will not remember meeting his eyes.*