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Abstract
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Telltale Signs of Disaster

by Kelly Magee

Burnt patch of lawn, glass in the carpet. Door ajar. Shades drawn.

The presence of flies. Staggering.

If the birds speak of your mother. If their songs spill blood. If your father is a huntsman/king/woodcutter who hammered your house onto the edge of a dark wood near a hunched old woman who lives alone. If she has suspicious moles/warts/crooked features. If hair branches from her head. If any part of her house is edible.

If you are the old woman. If you are in danger of becoming an old woman. If you live alone and forget to comb your hair.

A whiff of gas/woodsmoke/rotten eggs.

Rattle of chains/in the chest.

A call from an unknown number after midnight. The message is three minutes of wind and clattering.

When your phone goes straight to voicemail. When it rings and you don’t pick up. When someone picks up who isn’t you.
An orange pickup thrown into reverse after the male driver passes a girl walking alone at night. Let’s say she only has one shoe. Her phone is dead. She’s spent the night ignoring her parents’ calls and getting kicked out of clubs. Let’s assume her jeans are too tight. Let’s assume there’s abundant cleavage. Let’s assume the very history of trauma she’d rather we didn’t assume. She doesn’t know where she left her shoe, but if it feels like she’s walking on glass, she must’ve stepped on glass.

The driver leans out his window and says to the girl: “You look like trouble.” He’s got it exactly backward.

Trouble, for him, is less straightforward. Girls everywhere pause to consider what it might be. They resist the low-hanging fruit, the closest cases and violent childhoods. Let’s give him the humanity we didn’t bother to give the girl. Ghosts – he’s troubled by ghosts. And the dark because that’s where ghosts live. And his high school biology class because it reeked of dead things. He was the kid most upset by the dissection of the fetal pig. Sometimes he dreams he is back in class, scissoring the plastic and slopping the carcass onto its padded tray. The formaldehyde stink troubles him long after waking.

The yellow of the pig’s flesh. Not animal, not meat.

The way it wrinkled upon touch.

The girl isn’t bothered by dissection, but the man’s trouble becomes her trouble. That’s how power works.

The girl gets into the orange truck because that’s how stories work.

Girls everywhere disagree. “We wouldn’t have gotten in the truck,” they say, which could be true, but they have all, at least once, seen the signs of disaster and seated themselves next to it.

The phrase, “I’m sure it’s fine.”

When you realize language is a trap you have to talk your way out of.

“My boyfriend is expecting me,” the girl tells the man, though everybody knows there’s no boyfriend.

Broken glasses. A ripped shirt. A girl who doesn’t look like she’s been raped. A girl who is handling everything very well. A girl who hasn’t let it define her.

“Did you hear that?” the girl asks, but the man’s not listening. A drop of sweat/rain hits her face.


The phrase, “She seemed fine.”


Hoodies. Perfectly-placed rage.

Let’s say the girl had black hair and brown skin. Let’s say the orange truck was a police cruiser. How does the story change? Explain your answer.

Girls everywhere open their notebooks and bite their erasers. They realize language is a trap they have to write their way out of.


The glass that’s embedded in her foot.

A blank screen. Lack of evidence.

A door that swings open on its own. Birds/bats/ghosts in the rafters. The girl is sentenced to 30 years of being an old woman. She doesn’t look her age. The cop followed protocol.


The phrase, “Unsinkable ship.”

A thumping sound from the attic/basement/garage/trunk/grave.


Decay pockets. Deadwood.

Let’s say the girl’s head is shaved and the cop is a father. Does the story change? What if he’s her father? What if he’s the father of her unborn child, or will be soon enough?

Girls everywhere insist the details matter. They explain their answers in the space provided, using the entire back of the page, and then they all get home safely because life is mostly getting home safely until it’s not.

Red ink.

Categorical syllogisms.

Drained aquifers and disoriented sea turtles and habitat destruction.

Power outages.

Visits from exes or in-laws or angels.

Voices.

What if the girl is secretly a swan/mermaid/princess and the cop secretly handsome? Use evidence to support your answer.

The phrase, “If the shoe fits.”

The phrase, “Cat got your tongue.”

Failure to stop. Failure to appear. Failure to testify. Failure to indict.

Civil unrest.
Disorganized speech. Disorganized behavior.

Appeals to ignorance. Appeals to tradition. Appeals to force. Appeals to nature.


What if the girl goes missing? What if she just goes home? What if it turns out she’s a ghost or dreaming she’s a ghost or hunting a ghost? Do not explain your answer.

Girls everywhere roll their eyes. She’s not a ghost.

Abrasions. Bruises. Lacerations. Punctures. Remember the glass in her foot. Remember to watch out for speed/language/rusty traps. Please write in complete sentences, using an if/then structure, e.g., If disaster is everywhere, then the girl is already a survivor.

When she doesn’t tell us what happened. When it seems as if nothing did.

Having a body. Having a story.

Girls everywhere prefer a different ending. They rewrite all night.

Kelly Magee is the author of Body Language, winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize, and Nobody Understands You Like You, forthcoming from Gold Wake Press, as well as several collaborative books. Her work has appeared in Gulf Coast, Nimrod, Monkeybicycle, Barrelhouse, Crazyhorse, and others. She teaches at Western Washington University and can be found at kellyelizabethmagee.com.