

# BROKEN THINGS

SYDNEY STOOPS

## The Hangers

I was always pretty bad about keeping my room clean. At the age of nine, I found myself leaving empty cups wherever I could, and scattered books of all sorts laid everywhere. But the worst contributing factors to my messy room were the clothes: jeans, tops, tights, and socks strewn about and shoved into any space imaginable. Instead of monsters, you'd find winter coats and dirty nightgowns under my bed. Even the giant carpet stain from my sister's lipsticks couldn't be seen underneath the piles of panties and velvet holiday dresses. I never minded the mess, but my dad did.

One Sunday afternoon, I was “cleaning” my room. I had been going at it for almost six hours. My ceiling light wobbled as the attached fan spun around and around, casting a kind of shaky light on the purple walls. I couldn't get myself to pick up a single item of clothing. I had just found a book under my bedside table titled *Ab! Insects!* So instead of making my bed, I sat on the floor and read about praying mantises. When I was about to move onto stag beetles, I heard the stairs creak.

I loved the ways those stairs sounded under my family members' feet. I could tell exactly who was walking up by the way the stairs groaned beneath them. Mom was so petite that I couldn't really hear her until she was in the hallway; Danni, my younger sister, always hopped up the stairs, giving out loud thumps instead of creaking. Kayla, my older sister, and my dad sounded very similar: slow heavy steps, long drawn out creaks. I listened to the creaking for two whole steps—heavy and

slow. I slapped the paperback cover shut and slid it under my bed as fast as possible. Since I wasn't sure who was coming up, I quickly started to fold a shirt that laid crumpled next to me. I kept my eyes away from my opened door as if I'd been folding the whole time. When I heard the steps enter the hallway and stop at my door, I glanced over. He stood there, hands on his hips, with no emotion on his face. He held a tape measure in his left hand; he'd been working on something all day, but I couldn't remember what.

“What the hell have you been doing this whole time?”

I didn't dare look at him when I replied. “Cleaning.”

“Bull. Shit.” His voice rose, and my cheeks got hot. Why had I wasted so much time? He stomped over to my closet, turned around to view my entire room, and held his hands out, the way Father Matthew did at mass when we were supposed to pray with him. “This is fucking ridiculous. Do you just not care about your mom and I at all? We work so hard to give you things, and this is how you treat us?”

My breath quickened, and I continued to look down, eyes wide. If I blinked, I risked letting a tear form.

“Look at all these empty hangers!”

I didn't look. He was yelling now, and even though I could only see his work-boots from my downward gaze, I could tell his face was as red as mine. Or redder. “You don't want to use them? Fine.” And with that, he turned around, wrapped his hands around as many hangers as he could, and ripped them to the floor, pulling a few old dance uniforms and the hanging-rod down with them. I shook, unable to hold the tears back any longer. I stared at the pile of broken hangers and the halved wooden rod. I attempted to swallow my sniffing and quiet sobbing.

“I'm coming back in an hour, and if this still isn't cleaned up, you'll really be in trouble.” He stormed out of the room and into the hall. I could barely hear the creak of the stairs over my heart beating in my ears.

By the time I was done, it was dark outside, and the sound of tree-frogs drifted through my window. I was laying in bed, reading, when I heard two soft knocks on my open door. He stood in my doorway as he did earlier, only this time, he had a somber look on his face and a bowl of popcorn in his hand.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” he asked. I nodded. He walked over to my bed and sat on the edge. “Your mom and I are watching a movie and I thought you’d want some popcorn too. Garlic salt, just how you like it.”

I took the bowl but didn’t start eating.

“The way I acted earlier was wrong. It’s just that when you guys disrespect your rooms, it’s like you’re disrespecting us and the things we do for you. I know this house sucks, but that doesn’t mean we treat it like garbage. I’m trying to be better about staying calm, but it’ll really help if you guys do your part, okay?” I nodded again. “Okay.” With that, he pat my leg once and left, his creaks slow and deep on the stairs.

I didn’t think our house sucked, and I couldn’t tell if I was still in trouble, but I knew that the next day would be like nothing happened, and I was okay with that.

## **The Kitchen Wall**

It was April, and school would be out soon. I was so excited to go into sixth grade. Not only would I be one year closer to middle school, but *Eclipse* would be in theaters later that year. I had become obsessed with *The Twilight Saga*. All I wanted to do was read. I was so close to finishing the last book. One day, instead of doing homework or chores, I sat on my bed, learning about vampire pregnancies. Then I heard the stairs creak. I didn’t like the way they creaked anymore. I knew it was too late to act like I was doing something, and even if I did move, my mattress would creak the same way the stairs did, and he would know I was being lazy. I sat there and read as much as I could before he stepped into my doorway with a basket of clothes in his hands.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” he said, as if he was genuinely surprised.

“What?” I tried to act like I had no idea what he was talking about. He looked around my room, nostrils flaring, chest inflated. He shook his head and tossed the basket to the middle of the floor. It hit with a loud thump, and the clothes fell out onto my carpet.

He pointed down the hall and quietly ordered, “Downstairs. Now.”

I slid off my bed and walked past him, head down. I could never

really tell what the creaking of my own steps sounded like, like how I didn't really know what my voice sounded like. Once downstairs, I walked all the way to the kitchen. The sun was setting, so the walls were a deeper shade of red than usual. He followed me in and told me to sit down. I pulled a bar stool out from underneath the peninsula-shaped counter and sat.

"I am so tired of you not doing what you're told and sitting on your ass all the time." Every word was sharply articulated, and I could feel his eyes burning a hole into the side of my head. He paced with one hand on his hip and the other on his baseball hat, attempting some relaxation technique my mom had taught him. My neck was stiff, and my eyes glanced around at everything but him. There were several stacks of clean, folded laundry spread around the dining table. Next to them sat several pairs of balled up socks and a dark leather belt with a silver clasp on the end.

"This is going to stop, right now!" He growled and reached for the belt. When I heard the loud crack, I jumped and squeezed my eyes shut, but I opened them when I realized I didn't feel anything. He hadn't hit me. I slowly looked up. A hole the shape of the belt buckle was stamped perfectly into the wall.

He walked away and returned with something in his hands, but I couldn't look away from the speckled pattern of the countertop. He smacked the Sunny Beaches calendar down in front of me, the one that usually hung in the laundry room. "I want you to sit here and write *Mary's grounded* on every day of the next three months."

I sat for a moment and looked at the picture for April. Above the month was the image of a father flying a kite with his son on a rocky beach. They didn't look very warm in their jackets, but I didn't care; I wished that I was the little boy on that cold beach. A black pen rolled over the boy's face.

"Get started."

## **The TV Trays**

About a year or so had passed since the kitchen wall incident. We were preparing for Christmas and I was probably thirteen years old. I don't remember the details exactly, because I was upstairs, but something

was happening beneath me in the living room. Over the course of a month, that living room was under some serious construction. My dad, being the handyman that he was, decided to completely remodel the fireplace and lay down hardwood flooring to replace the flattened tan carpet. This process included the destruction of my mother's favorite part of the house, the mantel.

She loved having the mantel to hang holiday decorations, such as spiderwebs, fall leaves, and homemade Christmas stockings displaying each of our names in green and red glitter glue. She hated the house as much as my dad did, but having something so traditional and convenient gave her some peace. Every December, she would be seen standing on a little stepladder, her petite frame on tippy-toes, unable to reach the back of the mantel.

She had no idea that my father intended to rip the thing out. After noticing her headlights appear and then shut off in the driveway, I heard her enter from the garage door and walk over to the living room. I held my breath.

"Where's my mantel?" She sounded as if she were scolding a child.

"Oh, you don't want that nasty thing up there. It takes up so much space. Now we can mount the TV up there like you wanted." He always tried to tell her what she wanted.

"Mike, I loved that mantel. Can you put it back up?"

"No, no, no, no, no." He chuckled through the succession of *nos*.

"Well, why not?" She tended to whine like a 5-year-old when she was upset, and my father wasn't fond of it.

"Now, dammit, Anne, I work my ass off to make this place look nice, and you're gonna stand there and complain about it." The rest of the conversation was hard to hear, but I could tell my mother was very upset. I followed the sound of her steps to their bedroom, where she quietly shut the door. I rarely felt bad for my mother, especially when I recalled the many times she had looked me up and down and asked, "Are you sure you want to eat that?", but this was different. I liked the mantel too.

A loud crash from outside on the back patio interrupted my thoughts, followed by the groans and growls of my angry father. I heard my parents' bedroom door swing open and my mother stomp to the

living room. By then, Danni had entered my room and was sitting on my bed.

“Who the HELL do you think you are?” My mother was so brave when it came to my dad. I just wished she were around every time he exploded.

“Don’t talk to me that way. I do so much for this family.” They both started yelling, and Danni and I sat in silence, listening. It ended when my father left the house, slamming the door behind him. The rumble of his car’s engine slowly faded as he drove away. Shortly after, the familiar soft creaks of my mother’s feet on the stairs broke the silence. She entered my room and gave us a kind of crooked, sad smile.

“I’m so sorry, girls.” We didn’t reply. What were we supposed to say? *It’s okay, mom?* “I thought your dad was getting better, but he obviously isn’t.” She sighed and sniffled slightly. “How would you guys feel if dad didn’t live here for a while?” We failed to respond again. I simply shrugged my shoulders. She apologized again and tucked us in, reminding us to say our prayers.

I always said my prayers, but that night I decided to stop. I had asked for the same thing every night for three years, but my dad never changed.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of egg-grub, a concoction of my mother’s. It consisted of eggs, bread, and potatoes. Simple, but delicious. I slinked down the stairs, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Upon entering the kitchen, I noticed it was just my mother and I. Danni was still asleep, and Dad’s car was still gone.

“Good morning, baby,” she cooed as she handed me a paper plate to slop my grub onto.

I flashed a sleepy smile and proceeded to fill my plate, then sat at the table and looked out the window. I usually hated winter, but the closer we got to Christmas, the closer we were to having Kayla home. She loved winter. When she was still in high school, I would ignore my tingling fingers and the frozen snot in my nostrils just to make snowmen with my cool older sister. There was snow now, but it wasn’t fresh. The footprints from yesterday remained, and some grass poked through the white here and there. Our dog, Abby, scratched at the door. I stood to let her in, still chewing. I’d almost forgotten about the sound from last night when I saw two of our wooden TV trays dismembered in the snow. I had

half expected blood to stain the surrounding white fluff.

It was nice to just sit and eat without being rushed to clean or shovel the driveway. My mother stood at the stove, humming, hips slightly swaying. The garage door suddenly opened, and my father strode in carrying a box of Krispy Kremes.

She continued her little dance as if nothing were out of the ordinary. I stared at my eggs with my eyebrows furrowed. I was no longer hungry.

## The Coat Seams

By the time I'd reached my junior year of high school, I'd figured out that a clean house, a tidy bedroom, and finished homework kept Dad off my back. It had taken years of imitating Kayla to master the technique of invisibility. Looking back, I felt bad about the times when we'd be cleaning before Dad got back from work and she'd say, "Jesus Christ, Mary. Please hurry, we need to have this done before Dad gets home." I would stick my tongue out and make faces behind her back. I hated when she left for college. She really saved our asses.

Danni hadn't quite gotten the picture yet. She was going through a smart-mouth and *I don't care* phase when she hit seventh grade. She missed the bus often and had a bad habit of talking (more like yelling) back to my parents. This usually ended with my mom crying or my dad entering Danni's room and slamming the door, though shutting it didn't do much to soften the roar of his voice telling her, "Some kids have it a lot worse, you know! You spoiled little brat!" She was a lot stronger than I was. She waited until *after* he left her room to completely break down.

That morning in December started like every other, with Danni missing the bus and blaming it on our mother. My dad was already in a bad mood, and he would be taking her to school. I was walking behind them to go to my truck, since I now drove myself to school. *Be good, Danni*, I thought as I followed them out to the garage. The garage door was already open, and it was freezing. It was dark outside, but light enough that I could make out the cornfield across the road, ahead of my dad and Danni.

"This has got to stop, Danni." His voice was colder than the air. I then heard Danni mutter something in reply, but I couldn't catch the

words. “What did you just say to me?” I paused. I was still in the garage, but they had made it all the way to his car.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, reaching for the car door; but before she could grasp it, he grabbed the hood of her coat and yanked her back. I was surprised to hear the seams pop from a good fifteen feet away. As she was dragged back to the garage towards me, she slipped on some ice and squealed.

“Get up! How DARE you talk to me that way?” He kept pulling her along, her feet barely touching the ground now.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Her voice cracked as she wailed. All I could do was step aside as they fumbled back into the house. I closed my eyes and contemplated going back in too, but I knew that would only make things worse. I continued towards my beat-up 2000 Silverado and went on my way to school.

I texted my mom later that day and asked how Danni was. She replied, “Dan is OK, I dropped her off late. Just scared her a bit. Did it seem bad? Dad feels terrible.” I told her it scared me too, and that he should feel bad.

Later, I asked Danni how she was, and she said she was fine. She said he made her pancakes and was really quiet all morning. I decided that he knew how bad that outburst was when he hardly spoke to me that evening and stayed in his room while my mom watched a movie with us.

## **The Christmas Futon**

About a year later, Dad wasn’t as angry, and Danni wasn’t as bratty. She even gave me a very sweet present five days earlier on Christmas morning, a little framed quote that read *Sisters are Friends Forever*. I gave her a manga coloring book and a realistic time-turner, like the one Hermione wore in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. She had also received a brand-new futon from my parents. I had never seen her more excited about a piece of furniture. When they told her to go look in the barn for her present, she raised an eyebrow and asked, “The barn...?” We all followed her out back, and when she opened the barn door her face froze for an instant. She spun around and ran to hug them. To her, a futon was a cool, adult thing to have in her room. Her grin lasted the whole day.

Five days later, on December 31, my mom went to work and my

dad stayed home with us.

“All right, no more sitting on our asses,” he said, “We’re gonna clean clean clean.” This was bad. He was never happy when he had to clean, and Danni’s room was trashed. The futon had been moved up to the spare bedroom, which wasn’t really a bedroom. Every time my mother found something that didn’t seem to have a place, she would throw it in there. You couldn’t step two feet past the doorway.

That was the day my dad decided we would move the futon into Danni’s room. She worked rapidly to clear a place for it, then went downstairs to let him know she was ready. He was already in a bad mood. He had been working on my truck’s engine in the barn and seemed highly vexed. I tried to maintain a positive attitude, hoping it would rub off on him, but once he tried to move the futon from one room to the other, it all went to shit.

My father is a big man, 6’4 and very muscular. The spare room was at the end of the hallway, and Danni’s door was perpendicular to it. The futon frame was wood and metal and extremely heavy, yet my dad insisted on lifting it himself. He struggled to get it through the doorway, grunting and letting out gusts of breath the whole time. At that point, the futon had made it out of the spare room, but not quite into Danni’s. She and I were now trapped in the spare room, and Dad was pinned against the wall in the hallway in front of Danni’s door. He tried to push the futon through the threshold and realized the angle was all wrong, but when he attempted to move it around, he couldn’t; and he stopped and just started laughing.

“Oh man... Of course this can’t be easy,” he chuckled. “I hate this fucking house.”

He shook his head and continued to laugh quietly. Danni’s eyes flickered over to me, and mine flickered over to my dad. He began slamming the futon into her door repeatedly, shaking the walls, while shouting, “I. HATE. THIS. FUCKING. HOUSE.”

Tears fell from my eyes as I watched, and Danni jumped to stand behind me. He kept going, until the top half split from the bottom and scraped through the doorway into Danni’s room. The constant slamming had put three holes in the wall and one in Danni’s door. We stood silently. He stayed in her room. Danni looked at me with her eyes wide and her face drained of blood. My shaky hand pointed to the hallway, motioning

her to go downstairs. After she left, I took a breath and regained my composure.

I peeked into the room and saw him standing with his hands over his mouth, face glistening and eyes squinting with agony. He sobbed softly and muttered nonsense to himself.

“Look what I’ve done... Oh God, look what I’ve done.” His voice was high and stuffy. “She wanted this so bad. And I fucking destroyed it.” He backed up to the wall and sank to the ground. “I’m a monster. I’m a monster. I’m so sorry... you girls deserve so much better,” he whispered. His eyes then grew wide and he said, “Your mom’ll divorce me for sure this time. She has to... Oh God.”

His face fell into his hands and his shoulders shook as he bawled on the bedroom floor, surrounded by splintered wood and the bent futon frame. I had never seen my father that way before. I looked around the room, possibly searching for an answer.

Then I walked over to my father, knelt beside him, and wrapped my arms around him in a tight embrace repeating, “It’s okay, Dad. It’s okay.”

