

Secret-Keeper

Playing with the neighbor's boy Sam wasn't always Eliza's favorite pastime. Each Saturday they'd sit in front of his house, searching for caterpillars between the slick, green blades and dried husks of weeds. The sun watched them as intently as they did the grass, or perhaps it was looking for caterpillars too. The real fun, however, didn't start until Sam brought out the toys: a combat jeep, as small and shiny as a beetle; a plastic shooter that was always slick with bubble soap; fistfuls of dinosaurs, some forever frozen in a hungry roar, others in a panicked stare; and, finally, the Green Camper. It was like holding a green, sub sandwich with wheels and windows. With a click, the roof swung open like a treasure chest. Bed, bathroom, sink, dinner table—everything a house had but with a driver's seat. Unlike the blue squares on the sides, the inside windows had stickers: at the table, the sun peeked over black mountains in an orange sky, but it was also bright and yellow above the sink, while the moon hung by the bed.

Then there's the dinner plate. No matter how much squinting, it always maybe possibly had yellow scrambled eggs or cheese, with probably green peas, and a red steak. Yet, it couldn't compare when Eliza would put in a caterpillar and shut the lid. Anything was possible now. Underneath, the bug could be washing dishes or sleeping. Maybe it was eating pollen and grass, with a red berry on the side. Maybe it liked to watch the sunset while it ate. Every time she checked inside though, the bug always found a way out. So she simply put in a new guest.

But the sun eventually set. Sam's mom would call for him, reminding Eliza of his family's shrill telephone. His dad echoed her, though he sounded more like the tone when the other person didn't answer the phone, and Sam scooped his toys into a hug. Every weekend, the camper disappeared, cradled in his arms. The toy would usually return every Saturday, but the undeniable fact that hung in the air, melting a blinding hole in the sky, was that it wasn't hers.

She didn't plan to steal it. Eliza didn't mean for her and Sam to sit near his mom's petunias, which stuck out their purple tongues. She didn't plan for the wasp to land on his hand while he was holding the beloved toy, nor did she calculate that he would shriek and toss the plastic treasure into the bushes before running to safety. By the time his mom called for him, the toy was still in the bushes, forgotten by Eliza's neighbor. It only seemed natural to bring the toy back with her. Her mom disagreed. The shining plastic did not go unnoticed behind Eliza's back. Knowing, questioning tones prodded Eliza, who feebly wrote it off as a gift. The crossed arms and furrowed eyebrows saw right through it. Her mother's finger, messy with pen ink, pointed like a striped compass to Sam's house.

“You go right back out and return that toy, Elizabeth. It isn’t yours,” her mother said.

The last three words felt like her heart banged its knee. It was a sudden strike that stung as it went away. It was a reminder that hurt each time she remembered, ‘it wasn’t hers.’

Eliza soon stood in the house’s shadow. Nearby, the petunias still stuck their tongues out. If she wanted, she could have put the toy in the exact spot where it landed. Maybe his mom would have found it, and returned it to him, then she’d see it again, back in his arms. But Eliza turned and went behind her own house, the bending blades tickling her ankles above her socks.

A cluster of trees stood as if a giant’s child jammed sticks into the earth. Eliza liked to think of those as her own woods, despite seeing houses less than a mile away. She sometimes walked over just to hear the frogs, though she had never seen one, and they always stopped talking when she looked for them. This time, the frogs were murmuring, like they didn’t want her to overhear something.

She came to a stop, and there was a cracked tree stump, as long as one of her mom’s shoes. There used to be a tree, but it fell over during a windy storm. Eliza was at school at the time. It didn’t hit the house, but Eliza felt like her mom could have touched the leaves if she reached from the back window. She never did, and instead answered that, “It was rotten on the inside and couldn’t support itself,” when Eliza asked why that tree was the only one that fell over. Now only a stump remained.

Eliza knelt. Cold mud pressed against her knees, and she pushed the toy into a dark pocket under the trunk. It didn’t fit all the way, but she straightened out the tall grass around it, as if wrapping a mummy. When the camper was encased in a cage of blades, Eliza put her hand on the plastic roof, but she did not open it. She went inside, a lump of clay in her chest.

She spent all night thinking about it. As she laid in bed and the kiss on her forehead hadn't dried yet, Eliza asked herself if bugs read bedtime stories about people like she did caterpillars. Eliza wanted badly to check, to know, especially since she knew where the camper was. But her stomach tightened when she pictured her mom catching her with the toy, flashing her smudged fingers and her voice clapping like a heavy box against the floor. Eliza told herself that she would check tomorrow and lulled herself to sleep with the thought.

The next morning, she told her mom she was going to look for lizards.

On her way to the stump, Eliza worried that the toy was gone, as if drove off and left her behind. But its green shell was where she left it. However, she noticed thin, white threads in the way of her outstretched hand. An eight-legged shape sat on a fuzzy zig-zag hanging in the air. It looked like someone pressed yellow stickers onto its black body. Her breath washed over the spider, and she jumped back when it shook, making the whole web vibrate violently.

The web's zig-zag reminded her of a zipper. Her eyebrows went up. Eliza leaned forward, careful not to breathe on the spider as she whispered, "...Are you hiding it?"

The spider stopped shaking. It shifted around and added more lines to the web. A smile spread across Eliza's face. She covered her mouth and excited air slipped past her fingers, "I want to hide it too! It's a secret, though. Don't tell anyone. But you can help if you want."

The spider walked in circles around the web, and she decided to leave it to its work. Confident, she headed back home. She paused to whisper over her shoulder, "*Thank you.*"

Each day after school, she visited the spider. At first, she only inspected its handiwork, like those people that walk around with clipboards and jot stuff down. But ever since she let the spider know that "you look like the beads Anna puts in her hair" she decided to also let the

spider in on the fact that “I thought Tommy was eating candy once, but he was actually sucking a penny” and then in hushed tones, “Mrs. Gully has a really big nose. It looks an eagle beak, and I always think that she’ll poke the globe when she leans over it.”

No matter what she told the spider, it always stayed on its zipper and listened. Eliza liked to lay on the grass and trace the bumpy shapes of clouds above them. All the while, she let words spill from herself, like pouring out a box of cereal, “I think snow is fun, but I don’t like winter at all. The cold hurts and I hate slipping. I don’t like having to wear gloves. I don’t like wearing the big jacket either. It’s like a big, burnt marshmallow that sits in the closet...I went into my mom’s closet once. I came home from school early, and Mom wasn’t back from work yet. I never saw it before. It had clothes like mine does, but there was a big metal box with a knob that looked like an oven dial. I don’t think it was an oven though. There was a pretty white dress I never saw her wear before. It had a lot of white balls on it—pearls. There were lines and lines of pearls. I accidentally pulled one off. It wouldn’t go back on. I was scared, so I left it in the closet. I don’t think she noticed yet. That was a long time ago. I never told her. I don’t know if I should. But I don’t want to. I don’t want to talk to her or Sam...Does he miss his toy? Does he think about it? Did he ever think about it? He never played with it. I always did. I don’t think he really liked it. But I did. I liked the toy. He didn’t. He never did. I hate Sam.”

Eliza paused, hearing herself. She didn’t feel proud or satisfied afterwards. Eliza glanced to the spider and added very quietly, “I don’t hate Sam.”

She turned over and occupied herself with the spider. It weaved its thin, black legs through its web, which shuddered slightly as it worked. Eliza smiled, “You’re really lucky. I bet you have stuff you hide too, but you’re probably really good at hiding them. That’s why I’m happy you’re helping me. You’re really nice.”

Eliza's mom called her name from the front door. Eliza cupped her hands and returned the call. She waved to the spider, "See you later. I'll tell you more tomorrow."

Suddenly, as in the kind of suddenly where you trip and don't realize it until you hit the ground, it was Saturday. Her mom, still tying up her hair into a knot on top of her head, stepped beside the couch. She asked, "Are you ready to go to Sam's?"

Eliza's stomach fell to her feet. She shuffled around, eyes glued to where her stomach probably landed. She didn't want to go to Sam's. Her mom continued to flick her thumb against the hair pin—Eliza could hear the soft clicks—and she asked why. Eliza continued to shift on the cracked leather couch. She said that she wasn't feeling well. Her mom gave up on her hair, letting it unravel like a dog's tongue. The knitted eyebrows told Eliza that she didn't believe her, even before her mom said, "You don't seem sick... Eliza, is something going on?"

Eliza's response pressed her throat, somehow crawling its way past her hesitant lips. She just didn't want to go to Sam's. Her mom asked why she doesn't want to go. Eliza flattened herself against the couch. Her mom repeated the question. Eliza suddenly looked up, saying that she wants to be with her mom instead. Eliza wasn't sure what flickered in her mom's gaze, but it looked a lot like guilt and sympathy. Eliza's mom went quiet, though her lips kept twitching as if to start talking. After a moment, her mom sat beside Eliza, put an arm around her shoulders, she said quietly, "I'm—I'm sorry, Eliza. I can't take you to work with me."

Eliza put her head against her mom's chest. She could smell soap and onions from the apron. Her mom rubbed her arm, and Eliza heard her voice in her chest, "...And you're sure that you don't want to go to Sam's?" She nodded. Eliza then felt her head lift as her mom's chest did,

like a balloon, only for it to sink back down as her mom sighed. She patted her arm, with soft and loving, little slaps, “Alright. I’ll see what I can do.”

The next day, Eliza sat in front of the tree stump and talked into the webs, “...so, Mom called a lady she knows that wasn’t working that day. She smelled like the little bag that Mom has. The one with makeup and nail polish. She had a really scratchy voice, and watched boring shows, and she gave me stuff to color. It was fun, but I didn’t like her. She pinched me a lot.”

Her name was Mrs. Bartleby, but Eliza kept pronouncing it Mrs. Beetleberry, so they settled on Mrs. B. She arrived lugging around a diamond-patterned sack with purse handles. Clusters of bracelets jangled on her dough-like arms, which were dotted with moles like chocolate chips. Her lips were consistently knitted together into a red ‘v’ while her eyelids were dark blue hoods half-hung over her gaze. After Eliza’s mom left, the house was filled with the constant drone of gameshows. Eliza and Mrs. B mostly sat at the kitchen table together. Mrs. B had crossword puzzles and gave Eliza coloring books with yellow packages of crayons. Eliza nearly filled out a book that talked about camping, where she almost completely used up the green and brown. She also made a squirrel purple, having liked the color. When Mrs. B saw this, her red lips spread, and she pinched Eliza’s cheek with a cooing sound.

The next Friday, it seemed like her worst fears had come true. Sam’s mom knocked on the front door. Eliza refused to leave her room and stuck her head in her pillow for good measure. Her mom let Sam’s mom in anyways before going upstairs. Eliza felt the bed sink to the side. Her mom murmured, “Eliza, Sam’s mother is here to see you. Come on downstairs.”

Eliza didn't want to. Her mom's voice tightened like a fist, "Eliza. Don't be stubborn. She just came to see you. She even brought something nice for you. Come downstairs."

She curiously lifted her head. Her mom guided her onto her feet, and the smell of cookies struck her nose, urging her forward. Sam's mom sat at the couch and turned her head with a pink smile. Her hair reminded Eliza of silky copper-wire, especially since it always curled up at the ends, no matter what. In the yellow bulb light, little stars seemed to sway from her ears. When Eliza reached the couch, she saw a plastic Tupperware full of chocolate chip cookies.

"Help yourself, sweetie," she said, as if her voice was a silver dinner bell. Eliza sat down and took a soft, still-warm disk. Sam's mom continued, "I wanted to check in on you, Eliza. You haven't come over for a while, so we wanted to make sure you were alright. Your mommy says that you aren't sick, but that you chose not to visit. Would you like to talk about why?"

Eliza treated the gooey chocolate like glue and shook her head. She sunk her fingers into another cookie, but she didn't open her mouth for it. The moms exchanged looks over Eliza.

"Well—" Sam's mom pressed her hands together, and her pink nails clicked against each other. She managed to smile, "You're still welcome to come over tomorrow, just like before. Sammy's really missed playing with you and asks about you all the time."

The chocolate stuck to Eliza's hand, flooding her fingerprints. She shuffled in her seat and kept her eyes downcast. Sam's mom dropped her shoulders. However, she pulled up a smile and stood from her seat, "Oh, I should get going, but I appreciate you letting me come visit."

Sam's mom turned to Eliza and touched her shoulder, "And if you ever need anything or want to talk, you can trust me, Eliza."

She nodded and finally swallowed the cookie that melted across her tongue.

Her mom thanked Sam's mom for coming over and shut the door with a click. Eliza looked over the cookie in her palm. It was crumbled and misshapen. The Tupperware disappeared into her mom's hands. Eliza met her mom's hard eyes, "Elizabeth, this is becoming a problem. You can't keep putting this off. I'm going to have you go to Sam's tomorrow."

Eliza cried out, chocolate flinging from her lips. Her mother snapped, "Then you'll have to tell me what's wrong."

Eliza went quiet. Her mother straightened and rumbled, like a storm you see coming and can't stop, "Alright then. You'll go to Sam's tomorrow."

Just before the sun set that day, Eliza sat in front of the spider's web, knees drawn to her chest. Her voice was dull and barely above a whisper, "I don't want to go to Sam's. I miss playing with him. I'm really lonely. But I'm scared. I don't want him to be mad at me."

She stared at the green plastic's fuzzy veil. Eliza made a hollow smile, "No...he won't be mad, because you're keeping it safe. He doesn't know, so he won't be mad. It'll be okay."

It was cloudy that Saturday. Eliza barely said a word, even when she greeted Sam and they sat down in his lawn. Even in the dim light, Sam's woodchip-colored hair still shone. They looked for caterpillars. He found one. She kept searching. The grass felt dry and itchy. He found another. Eliza couldn't find any. Sam offered her one, but she shook her head. She knew there was nothing to put it in. Her chest tightened when he grabbed his toys. But he didn't say anything as he drew out the dinosaurs. Eliza watched a few minutes, twiddling her fingers as he had a raptor jump onto a car. She glanced at a stegosaurus and picked it up. She had it hop along the grass. Sam's raptor hopped after it. Eliza's dinosaur hopped away faster now. Sam's raptor edged closer, with Sam making breathless roars to accompany the chase. Sam's dinosaur jumped

onto hers' back. Eliza let her dinosaur drop and pulled away suddenly. She turned to the cars and faced away from Sam. His cloudy blue marbles blinked, and he started towards the cars as well.

“Sammy! Time to finish up!” his mom chimed.

“Come on, Sam,” his dad echoed.

Sam picked up the toys one by one and gathered them in the crook of his arm. He had all the dinosaurs, from the T-Rex to the triceratops; he counted each miniature, military man from their platoon; and the clusters of cars clicked together. He paused.

“Where’s the combat jeep?”

Eliza went still. Her heart started running inside her chest. Her ears burned with the sound of Sam searching the grass. Her shoulders bunched up. Sam stopped and turned to her. His words wormed into her head, “Eliza? Do you know where it is?”

She started to shake. Her whole body, her arm.

“Eliza?”

She whispered something. He didn’t hear her. She then opened her hand. The jeep was in her palm. She repeated, “I have it...”

Eliza repeated again, tears flooding her eyes, “I have it...”

She continued to repeat this, and Sam grew scared as she got louder with more tears each time, “I have it. I have it! I have it, *I have it!*”

Sam’s mom hurried outside. Sam wasn’t sure what to say She just started crying. Sam’s mom shushed and lulled into Eliza’s ears, until her yelling subsided into hiccups. The jeep was returned, and Sam went back inside. His mom wiped up Eliza’s face, offered her anything she needed and finally escorted her home. Eliza’s mom was still in her uniform and concern flashed over her face. Sam’s mom said with a shaky breath that “She just started crying.” Eliza’s mom

nodded and thanked her for bringing Eliza, who was led to the couch. Eliza's mom handed Sam's mom a cleaned Tupperware box and wished her and Sam goodnight.

When the door shut, Eliza's mom didn't say anything to Eliza, staring at her instead. Eliza didn't raise her gaze. Her mom simply said, "This can't last forever. You know better."

Eliza sagged her shoulders. Her mom sighed and walked off. She came back with a DVD, Eliza's favorite, about kids exploring Aztec ruins. Eliza's mom dimmed the lights and sat down next to her. Onions and ketchup wrapped around Eliza as her mom pulled her close. Eliza had trouble focusing on the flashing and dancing images. She glanced at the window, which seemed to sweat because it was raining outside. Eliza looked back to the TV and sunk into the couch.

On Sunday morning, the grass squished under Eliza and drew wet lines across her ankles. Her socks felt soaked by the time she reached the tree trunk. The Green Camper gleamed in the dim light, completely bare. The spider was nowhere to be seen. She walked around the tree trunk, then back again. A rushing sensation ran up her face. Eliza dropped next to the toy and opened the hood, but it was empty aside from the water that flooded the kitchen and bedroom.

Her lips quivered. She shoved the lid shut, letting out a sob. The camper rattled in her hands, "You were supposed to stay! Why'd you leave? *I need you!* Come back! Come..."

Eliza leaned forward, eyes and nose dripping onto the camper. There was a muddled shape stretched over the roof, shaking. It was her reflection.

She tore the toy from the ground, as if uprooting a weed. Mud and dirt fell from its wheels as she raised it over her head. Eliza stared at the tree trunk, the toy shaking in her hand. She sucked in, as if preparing for the glassy crack of plastic. But then the air came back out as a whine. Eliza crumbled forward, slapping the toy onto her lap. Aside from her hiccups, it was

quiet outside. Even the frogs stopped talking, as if holding their breath. Eliza stared at the soaked tree trunk. Its gleaming body turned dark orange as the sun peeked through the tree wall. Eliza finally stood up, not letting go of the toy.

The grass in Sam's lawn crunched beneath her feet. The sagging petunias rested in the shadow of the house. Her shoes clacked against Sam's brick, front steps and squelched into the welcome mat. Her muddy knuckles tapped against the green wood. A moment passed. The door clicked open and was filled with a man.

His striped tie was loose, knotted together but not yet tightened. His grey suit was crisp and fresh from the iron. Dark eyes, like coffee marbles framed by a thick jaw, dropped onto Eliza. The thick eyebrows went up, and the hard line serving as his mouth softened.

"Um..." Eliza held up the muddy toy, and the words rattled out of her, "This is...Sam's toy. I took and want to...give it back."

Sam's dad blinked a few times. He stepped aside for her and directed with his broad arm, "Go on ahead. Sam's room is down the hall, second door to the right."

Eliza shuffled into the house, suddenly aware of how the dirt crunched between her shoes and the wooden floors. The living room to her right had grey-green furniture, with a slim TV and a folded newspaper next to an armchair. The sun passed through white curtains, traveling past her to the dinner table and struck the fresh, purple flowers with large brown centers. The kitchen past it had grey marble counters, with white-and-blue tiles. Everything looked polished. She passed the first door, and faintly heard running water and Sam's mom singing like a scratchy violin. Eliza knocked on the second door. Her mind flashed with worry, since maybe she forgot her left and right and ended up at the wrong door.

Sam murmured, "Come in."

She took the cold handle and moved inside before her mind could catch up with her. Eliza stepped just short of a dinosaur on the floor. Sam, dressed in a black suit with a striped tie, sat on the carpet, with a pair shiny black shoes beside him. He blinked in surprise.

Eliza let out a shaky breath, glanced at the Green Camper and held it out, looking at him past it, "I'm sorry. I took it. I-I hid it."

"You...had it?" Sam repeated, eyebrows knitting together as the pieces in his mind did. Finally, his eyebrows raised, "Oh."

Eliza braced herself. Sam suddenly looked uncomfortable and scratched the back of his neck. He murmured, "I thought I lost it..." just before he turned and rummaged through a pile of vehicles. There were also plastic models of beaches, jungles and robot cities, with piles of dinosaurs, cars and military men with their boots stuck in Lego bricks. It was like a dumpster, but none of the toys were broken. Sam finally turned back around, holding a shiny, Green Camper, "...since I couldn't find it, Mom got me a new one."

Eliza lowered the camper, "Oh."

The sound of running water and Sam's mom filled the air, and they averted their gazes. Sam finally pushed out a few words: "You can," he said, "...keep that one if you want."

Eliza blinked. She then lowered her gaze, "...Thank you."

Another moment passed. The water stopped running, but the singing walked around upstairs. Sam shuffled his crossed legs, murmuring, "Um, I have to leave soon. But we could play when I come back?"

A smile tugged at Eliza's lips, "Sure."

Afterwards, Eliza pulled the door shut after her, and Sam's dad stood at the end of the hall, dark marbles settled on her. Eliza watched her feet as she moved back the way she came. He spoke up suddenly, like a voice over a radio you forgot you left on, "You heading home?"

Eliza's head snapped up, "Y-yes."

"I'll walk you back," he both offered and stated.

They followed the sidewalk. His large steps made much heavier crunches against the concrete. Eliza shuffled her grip on the camper, since her fingers were getting stiff. They stopped just short of her porch. A figure moved from the window, and then Eliza's mom opened the door.

"Hello, Mr. Garrison. What," her eye fell on Eliza, "seems to be happening?"

"Morning, Ms. Roldolf. Your daughter just came by to return Sam's toy. She fessed up to stealing it a couple weeks ago," as Sam's dad talked, Eliza's face flushed. It felt so much worse coming from someone else's lips. Eliza glanced at her mom. The lack of a frown or crinkled eyelid made Eliza even more nervous. Sam's dad finished, shrugging, "She walked herself over to Sam and told him upfront. They talked it out, and Sam let her keep it on goodwill."

Her mom slid her gaze to Eliza, expectant. Eliza nodded once.

Eliza's mom said evenly, "Well, I'm happy to hear that. Thank you for letting me know."

Sam's dad tipped his head much like tipping a hat, "Not a problem. Hope you both have a good morning."

He turned to leave but paused, glancing at Eliza. Sam's dad patted her back, and it felt like a clawless bear paw, "You're a good kid."

Sam's dad then headed back home. Afterwards, Eliza heard water dripping from the rain gutter and splatting against the grass with a soft *tip, tip, tip*. She glanced to her mom and asked, "Are you mad at me?"

A moment passed with her mom staring at a streetlamp. Her mom answered, “No. If anything, I’m happy for you. It sounds like you took care of it on your own.”

Eliza glanced to her feet. She smiled, filled with fuzzy relief, “So, it’s okay if I play with Sam later?”

“So long as you get back before dinner.”

“Okay.” Eliza went quiet and looked around, suddenly unsure what to do with herself. She asked, “What should I do now?”

Her mom, leaning against the doorframe, shrugged, “That’s up to you, sweetie.”

Eliza’s eyes dropped from her front door to the toy in her hand. The mud had dried, making the surface green with a layer of brown. The windows were also covered in mud, and bits of grass and dirt stuck from the wheels. On the ground, near her feet, she saw a caterpillar inching along. Eliza watched it for a long moment.

She set the toy down by her porch steps. The floorboards creaked under her, and Eliza moved to her mom’s side, “I want to hang out with you.”