

C o u n t i n g

T h u n d e r

It was the dead of summer and the once coveted but now forgotten neighborhood on the edge of town had a familiar hot haze in the air. The dying street, once filled with the laughter of young families, now fell silent except for occasional muted sounds from the very few kids left behind. Their small exclamations lingered quietly in the air. A reminder of what was.

The county was planning a new housing development on the acre of forest that butted up against the drooping chain link fence which ran about a mile from east to west. Over the years, the kids had surreptitiously cut holes in the fence and, sneaking through, had built secret forts deep within the blanket of sweeping foliage on the other side. When the construction started, all the trees were gone within a week. The air slowly filled with dust. Months later, the workers started to disappear with the trees, and all that remained were crumpled plans and drooping holes in the long, crooked fence.

2/3/2008

A basketball pounds against concrete in the hands of a young girl dressed in basketball shorts and a Tony Hawk t-shirt, her long and stringy blonde hair lightened by hours in the sun.

Okay, this one you have to bounce it three times, do a spin and then a granny shot.

The girl bounces the ball. 1.2.3. Does a spin and brings the ball between her legs.

She scrunches up her freckly nose as her eyes target the rim of the ratty basketball hoop ahead of her. She puts every ounce of her strength into this shot.

The ball flies! Up, up, and over to the right completely smacking down the sign in front of the neglected yellow home:

***House for Sale:
FORECLOSED.***

Dust! A slightly older, equally freckled and blonde boy yells as he runs after the ball. He is the cooler, older, hand-me-down brother Dust spends her whole life trying to copy.

Dust stood still, peering across the street at her neighbor's. The normally empty driveway had a U-Haul and a couple of kids bikes thrown on the grass to the side.

Hunter! yelled Dust. She traces her hand up along the side of her body and points.

*There's a girl in
the window.*

2/4/2008

The sound of Family Guy echoes through the mildewy home and into the kitchen.

Dust, barely peering over the sink, watches the long line of black ants trailing from the dirty dishes all the way to the floor and through the house.

I told you to go home, she says.

An overweight man lying on the couch with a beer, grumbles.

Dust bites down hard on the soft squishy part of her hand, something she learned to do to stop herself from crying. She bit so hard the marks would last for an hour at least.

A deep breath.

Okay.

She was used to the mess, she didn't mind the dirty dishes or the smell that was now a part of the house's construction. She hated the ants. The way she saw it was that she had to save every last one, and every time she brought them outside she told them they had to stay there, or else she would kill them.

Although she made threats, she could never follow through on her word, and she spent hours collecting them all into a tiny jar and letting them out on the grass, where she would sneak out and leave them crumbs to take home to their ant family.

This is the last time.

Dust pours the jar out on the grass and a hundred little black ants start to crawl. She notices one ant crawling over the bend of her pinky finger. As she picks up her finger to look at him, her gaze goes beyond and across the street.

A short brunette girl, around Dust's age but with a lot more ribbon in her hair, struggles as she tries to ride her bike.

She looks up from her bike and meets Dust's gaze.

2/4/2008 - night

Dust sits on a pink princess bed across from the ribbon girl.

How come they calls you Dust? The brunette asks as she paints cheap blue eyeshadow on Dust.

Well my Dad says it's cus he can never get rid of me, no matter how hard he tries.

That's weird. My Dad just calls me Em. Or lovebug.

Em stands up and walks to her closet, pulling out a silvery sequin dress.

I think you would look pretty as a girl.

I am a girl.

You don't look like a girl.

Em holds the dress up to Dust. She tilts her head to the side,

My mom says every girl is prettier in sparkles.

Emily was the one who taught Dust how to be a girl. She was accustomed to blending in, but Emily made her feel seen.

Dust had spent her entire life in the background but when Emily became her best friend, everything changed.

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2/21/2008

Dust stands by herself in the backyard, surrounded by tent material and poles.
When Dust decided she was going to do something, there was no chance in stopping her.

Hunter walks through the back gate.

What are you doing Dust?

I'm building a tent. Emily is sleeping over tonight.

Hunter hadn't been tracking closely, but he did notice Dust seemed to be out of the house for hours at a time.

Is that the new neighbor girl? Dust nods and clicks the poles together.

Why don't you just stay at her house? He says.

I want her to like it here, she's going to be my sister, she replied without hesitation.

*You can't just make someone
your sister, Dust.*

Yes I can.

They hadn't gotten any rain all winter, but this storm would make up for all of the inches lost. It was hard to tell if the gusting winds or the torrential rain that was shaking the tent more.

Emily & Dust sit side by side, tucked into separate sleeping bags.

Lightning lights up the entire tent. Emily counts.

One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand – thunder booms.

Dust is panicking but doesn't want to show it. *I-is it getting closer?*

As the leader of troop 32, Emily was sure she could keep them safe.

Until one one thousand become no one thousands and the lightning felt like it was inches away.

I'm sure your dad will come and get us, Emily screams over the thunder.

Dust knew this was an impossibility, but nods her head and says,

*If we die, I just want you to know that you're my sister and
I love you forever, even after I move!*

Tears pour from her eyes as the girls hug tight. Emily says,

You can live with me instead.

3/17/2008 - night

He didn't notice until they packed up the entire house. And he actually wasn't the one who noticed, it was Hunter.

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Emily peered out her front window and saw the big man from the couch sitting on the curb outside next to the moving truck.

OUTSIDE:

The FORECLOSED sign was now replaced with a SOLD sign. The man's face was mottled by the lights of a police car and all splotchy and red – hard to know if this was from the beer or the hysterics.

INSIDE:

It was pitch black. The crinkle of a bag of chips filled the space with the initial crunch. The chips were so loud for someone who was trying to chew in silence. CRUNCH. A crack in the door was followed by Emily's silhouette entering the shadowy closet.

They left. She said.

All of them? Dust replied.

Yeah. I bet they didn't even notice.

Now we can be sisters for real.

And now you can have a mom!

Do you think she'll like me?

Of course she will, you're my sister now.

You're my sister now too, no matter what.

Pinky swear?

The girls lifted up their tiny pinky fingers.

P i n k y s w e a r .

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In that moment Dust knew she'd be okay. Even when the cops came pounding on the door later that night and tore the girls apart, she knew she'd be okay. She kept a piece of her sister with her wherever she went, and when she saw a flash of lightning she knew that wherever she was, and wherever Emily was, they were both

Counting Thunder.