Out of everyone at the sleepover, Savannah was the only one who cared about me. When we were only freshmen in high school, I told her that I was terrified of losing contact with her, something she didn’t seem to fully understand. I had never met anyone over thirty who was still close with their high school friends; I had seen how my parents acted when they ran into their old classmates. Their faces were always foggy, full of vague recognition and dread. I didn’t want that to happen with me and Savannah—she seemed so important, so valuable.

In high school, I had a certain amount of disdain for most people. Everyone had insurmountable failings: the girls were untrustworthy and alien while the boys were distant threats. I could barely conceive of having a conversation with them, save for a select few who made their way into my nervous circle of friends.

Savannah and I met in middle school. At the time, we had a lot in common—we were both the overweight daughters of bible-thumping parents. We both had middle-class moms with big problems, women who had grown up to be hairdressers and elementary school teachers and who wore blush in streaks on their cheekbones. Her mom was an addict; she was missing more often than not. My mom suffered from untreated mental illness until she was forty-three and I was fifteen.
By the time we were in high school, Savannah and I had been taught how to recite most of the bible and ignore the rest. We evangelized to the so-called sinners of our school, targeting people we didn’t like with zealous texts and Facebook messages. It didn’t make us popular.

No one knew it, but Savannah was the only true believer out of the two of us. I was more zealous, more openly judgmental, but she felt a connection to church that I never did. She felt a home there. I wore belief like an ankle weight. It dug into me and made me worse.

Though no one would have known it at the time, I was splintering off from the church. Hell seemed real, but Heaven sounded absurd, like a playground in the clouds. Angels seemed like fantasy creatures. At the same time, demons felt real as rain, so I held on. I started to experiment with what I considered to be the occult, namely a couple of black tourmaline crystals on my bedside table. Much like all my prayers, they were meant to keep evil at bay.

Savannah knew things about me that no one else did. She knew that my parents had caught me with porn on my computer and had put me on house arrest for six months, something that nearly drove me insane with embarrassment. It went against everything I was supposed to be, everything my parents had believed about me. When my parents found out, my dad sulked, unable to look at me. My mom kept repeating that she didn’t know who I was anymore, that I must be a different person. She sputtered like a broken tail pipe, unable to grasp the situation. This was pre-divorce, pre- a lot of things.

Savannah also knew that I didn’t cry when my grandmother died. I stood over her casket silently, incurring tepid judgement from the other mourners. She knew that my mother, previously non-functional, had recently gone on medication that changed her completely—now, she sighed too much and was overly sensitive, but she was essentially normal. She attended my band concerts and signed my school forms, something I never really adjusted to. Savannah knew,
though I didn’t tell her, that her recovery only made me hate her more. I was the left behind relic of terrible things, the person who remembered what she was able to forget.

By far the best thing about Savannah was that she didn’t compete. When I complained about my being shuttled between my parent’s houses, she could’ve pointed out that she lived in a tiny apartment. She could’ve mentioned that her mom had pawned off her hair straightener for crystal meth and then disappeared for three days. It never occurred to me until later how weird it was that she never took those opportunities to talk about herself—to this day, I haven’t met anyone else like that.

We turned sixteen within three days of each other, both of us born in early June, the beginning of summer. We felt strongly that being sixteen was important, so we planned a sleepover at my house. We themed it after Halloween, something that excited me. Halloween in June felt perfectly dark and ridiculous, and I knew immediately that there was an opportunity here, an opportunity to do something that I would never have been allowed otherwise.

We bought black candles at dollar tree, and two separate cakes for both of us. We spent an hour lightheaded, trying to blow up black and red balloons. I searched through my dad’s things and found a set of bookends shaped like gargoyles and set them on the mantle. I hung black, sparkly streamers from the top of the staircase and called it the final touch.

The night before the sleepover, I convinced Savannah to invite more people. I told her I was proud to finally be hosting something, especially something which featured gargoyles and fake blood on the white countertop. She knew more people than I did, and I needed her to text them. My excitement was contagious; Savannah sat on my bed as I paced, both of us twitching our thumbs over our keyboards as we made a list of who to invite. In the end, Lauren and Madison were the only two who came, but it didn’t matter. Lauren was the only one I needed. I
got her number from Savannah under the pretense of party planning and started texting her that night.

On June fifth, around 7:00 p.m., Madison and Lauren showed up. It felt odd having them in my house. The candles we lit smelled like men’s cologne, and they crackled audibly as we ate pizza in front of the TV. We had put on *Chucky*, lured in by what was supposedly a horror movie classic, something we were all supposed to see at some point. Madison jumped at everything, though no one else was scared. I tried to flinch when the scary scenes happened. I wanted to spread my enthusiasm, make everything seem real and unsettling.

While the movie played, I kept glancing at Lauren, wondering if she might have forgotten what I asked her for. All of us, myself included, were supposed to be against this sort of thing—I hadn’t yet abandoned my Baptist upbringing, and Savannah and Madison were even more committed. I knew that Savannah would disapprove of everything I wanted to do that night, but I also knew she would go along. Lauren was the wild card.

On screen, Chucky walked slowly into the middle of an empty room, knife in hand. Lauren twisted to look at me from her spot in front of the television. She had finished her pizza, and was the first to admit that she was bored of Chucky. He wasn’t scary enough for her; she had come here for something else.

When I invited Lauren, she had wanted to know about my house. She had heard that it was haunted.

I wasn’t surprised that she was interested in my house. When I was a freshman, I had started to tell stories about my house being haunted. At first, I only told them to Savannah. Eventually I realized I was being overheard—to my surprise, people were fascinated. Girls who never spoke to me would stop by to see me during yearbook and ask me to tell the stories, to
confirm that they were true. I would keep my classmates updated, giving new details every morning before class. I never felt like I was lying.

My most popular request was to tell the story about my mom. It evolved from how it was first told, but it always started the same way. “Once, in the middle of the night, I heard my mom get out of bed. I heard her walk down the hallway past my room. I sat up in bed—but I almost hid my head under the covers after a minute, because I heard her. She was in the study, laughing. She was laughing, standing in my dad’s old study, alone.” At this point, people would be silent, hanging on to what I was saying.

“It took me a long time to get out of bed. I walked slowly out of my room so I could look around the corner into the study. My dad had left a jump rope hanging on the door, and it was swinging back and forth. What surprised me most was that the room was dark—my mom hadn’t bothered to turn a light on.

“I put my hand on the wall as I walked down the hallway. I needed it to help me find the doorway and the light switch. When I turned on the lights, I saw my mom. Her eyes were open and she was just standing in a corner, staring and laughing.” If I told the story right, I would get a couple “no ways” and “nu-uhhs” here.

When the story happened, when I really did walk into the study and see her laughing, I didn’t know the side effects of her medication. It wasn’t so obvious to me that she was standing in that place between recovery and relapse, on the edge of getting better. To me, it all seemed impossible, like something that didn’t happen in real life. The story wasn’t a total lie. It actually felt more true to tell it like a scary movie than to tell it any other way, though I had to embellish.

I asked her if she was ok. I repeated the lord’s prayer in my head, in case that mattered. When she heard me, she turned around.
“Mom?” I reached a hand out to her. “She looked like a ghost, her pale blue nightgown hanging above her knees. Her face was slack, her eyes milky, completely iced over.” I wish so badly that she could remember this, that I could tell the story to her, the part where I give her my hand.

“She looked at me. She said, “Your mother isn’t here right now.” Her laughter stopped.” Her condition came with these moments. It was called “identity disturbance,” when she forgot who she was.

After she spoke, she fainted. By the time I had run to get a cold compress, she had woken up, vomited, and gone to sleep on the study floor. It took me an hour to wake her up and convince her to go to her bedroom and sleep. Medication and divorce had taken their toll all at once.

When I told that story at school, I left out the medication. I told it as a story of possession. In the end, I draw a cross on the entrance to the study to prevent her from ever being lured there again.

What Lauren wanted was another story. Houses didn’t just stop being haunted—there had to be a sequel, like Child’s Play 2 or Scream 3. I had told her I had more.

After she turned around, I grabbed the remote and switched off the TV.

“Come on,” I whispered, hoping that my voice sounded urgent, believable. “I want to show you guys something.”

Madison’s eyes got wide and Lauren smiled. Savannah walked behind us. She knew where we were going and it didn’t scare her. If anything, it annoyed her.

My mother was a collector of porcelain dolls, which was very convenient when you wanted to scare your friends. There was one doll in particular that she said reminded her of me—
she had named it Lady, and it had lived in my room since I was two. It was surprisingly big, about a foot and a half tall. It wore a purply mauve dress, a crooked hat, and was covered from finger to toe with spidery porcelain cracks. It sat on my dresser, exactly opposite my full-length mirror.

If you laid on my bed, the doll was looking down at you. The AC in the room made her eyelashes lift up and down, flirting silently. If you rolled over, not wanting to look at her, you would have to face the mirror and her reflection in it. There had been many times when I had woken up from a nightmare and seen what looked like her nodding at me in the mirror.

I could tell that Madison was already creeped out. She was keeping her distance, staying closer to the door than anyone else. I stood by the doll, standing like a tour guide as I started my process of storytelling.

“This doll belonged to my dead grandmother. In my family, a lot of people think it’s older than the civil war. The weird thing is, it was there when my grandma died. It was sitting on her dresser, looking down at her as she lay in her old wooden bed, too frail to move it away. She died looking at this thing,” I gestured up at it, trying to convey vague disgust, as if I really held my grandmother’s death to be it’s doing.

“What does it do?” Lauren asked, leaning against my bedpost.

“It makes my showers run cold. It leaves tiny handprints on my windows. And I think it gives me nightmares.” My confidence was convincing, though even I found my details to be a little blurry. I kept talking, embellishing as we looked up at the doll.

The truth was I had always wanted to take a rock to that doll, smash it into a million porcelain pieces, but there was nothing supernatural about that.
“Madison.” I pointed at my bed. “I’ll pay you five dollars to lay right here, with the lights off, for five minutes.”

Lauren laughed. “Lock the door too.”

“Ok,” I grinned, pulling five dollars out of my desk drawer and handing it to Madison.

“If you scream, I’ll come open the door, but try to make it to five minutes.”

“What if I don’t want to?” Madison opened her arms wide at her sides. She looked scared but smiled still, caught up in what we were asking her to do. It was strange that I felt guilty for pressuring her into it, even though I knew the haunted doll was a fake.

“Don’t be a baby,” Lauren smiled, her face vicious. She pulled us all out of the bedroom, letting the door shut behind us. I held the knob in place, my impromptu version of locking it.

We stood outside, waiting in half-silence. I joked that we might hear the creak of a doll’s head moving, and Lauren laughed, holding her finger to her lips to shush me. I felt high—Lauren was exactly what I had wanted her to be. Any regret I had felt about inviting her was gone, replaced by cold relief.

I hoped, secretly, that Madison would see the doll’s head move, that she would scream, unable to handle even five minutes in my bedroom. It would prove me right, turn my lie into the real thing it should’ve been. That doll did use to terrify me, and I did used to believe that my mom was really possessed.

Savannah, ever the thinker, had set a timer on her phone while Lauren and I chattered. To my disappointment, it went off without Madison ever making a sound. She walked out of the bedroom, her arms crossed over her chest.

“That was not fucking fun,” she said, her chin jutting out at Lauren.
We set up our sleeping bags in dad’s old study. It was the room Lauren really wanted to be in, though I could tell that Madison wasn’t enjoying the idea of sleeping in a room where my mother had supposedly been possessed. She put on a show of not believing anything I said, but she looked visibly nervous.

I was grabbing sleeping bags from the hallway closet when I heard Lauren slide a deck of cards out of a small black bag. I turned to see a pack of very pretty cards, each one with a golden lattice pattern on the back.

“So,” Lauren said, beginning to shuffle her tarot deck. “Who wants their reading first?”

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I had worried from the beginning that my mom would catch us in the act. Being caught with tarot was almost worse than being caught kissing; some things can be written off as instinctual mistakes, and some things can’t.

I used to tell Savannah that I had a mom-sense. I knew where my mom was in my house, no matter what was happening—I could hear her voice over the drone of headphones or the sound of a shower running. I was tuned into her, forever aware of how she was. I could hear her sadness or rage like a ticking in my head, clocking it before she even knew it was coming.

When people asked me what my mom was like, I used to say she was evil. I could shock people by reciting quotes from her, the top-ten greatest hits of insults.

When my dad left, he called my mom a controlling bitch on the way out. He said she was manipulative, that she used guilt like a weapon. I can’t say that he was wrong. She was
amazingly smart and cutting, held back at every turn. She was a living paradox; she loved me and hurt me with every step.

It’s hard to explain to people what she was like. It’s even harder to explain why I hated her for getting better. When she walked into the study on my sixteenth birthday, a hesitant smile on her lips and her hands clasped demurely around her coffee mug, I felt like vomiting. She had surprised me, somehow, and she looked comfortable, draped in an old yellow afghan off our downstairs couch.

She had just come home, her face and hair damp from the light rain outside. She started to ask how Chucky was, then looked at Lauren’s hands, her attention caught by the flashy cards she was holding. Lauren didn’t know or care that tarot was supposed to be a secret, so she hid nothing, continuing to shuffle. We had only just started—I had my cards for the past and present laid out in front of me, both of them featuring a man carrying a pile of sticks. In the past, his back was hunched, overladen with logs. In the present, his back was turned and his face buried in the bundle of sticks he held, all wrapped together by a thin green ribbon.

Madison looked up nervously while Savannah looked down and away. My mom shifted her weight to her right hip, her eyes flitting between me, Lauren, and the cards. She looked pleasantly confused, as if she wanted to be a part of whatever thing we were all holding between us, the thing we had intentionally kept away. Sometimes her medicine made her seem slower, like she was moving through water.

“Is that… tarot?” She pronounced it like ta-rot, unsure of what she was dealing with. She leaned over to get a better look at the cards, her clothes hanging loosely off her body.
“Yes,” I said, listening hard. With her new voice, lower and calmer, it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. I didn’t know if she was being polite for my friends’ sake, or if she really cared about what we were doing.

My mom’s jaw moved as if she were chewing on something. She kneeled, picking up my present card and flipping it over to look at the illustrations. She let herself lower to the ground clumsily, crossing her legs as she sat. She looked like a yoga instructor, her heels placed gently in a loose half-lotus.

She picked up another card and turned it over in the low light. “So,” she looked up at me. “How do you play?”

“I don’t know how it works. Lauren is the one doing the reading,” I said, mashing my thumbs into the backs of my thighs. Madison looked at me, and then my mother. She seemed surprised and amused that my mother wasn’t a horror movie freak, a walking *Grudge* reference with long black hair and ragged fingernails.

Lauren sat forward, shifting her body to face my mom. “I pull three cards for the past, present, and future. Then I tell you what they mean. For example,” Lauren shuffled and then pulled a card from the top of her deck, her nails shiny and pretty against the card backs.

“Your past card is the two of wands. You can see the man holding a globe in his hands?”

My mom nodded, biting the inside of her lip and staring intently at the man on the card.

“That globe is the world. It’s all your potential in your hands, if you can only broaden your horizons,” Lauren opened her arms wide slowly, giving us a visual of the inner expansion needed to reach your highest potential. She closed her eyes as she started to shuffle again, preparing to dive for the second card.
My mom mouthed **wow** at me, pointing at Lauren and then at her card for the past. “That seems just a little too accurate,” she said, laughing and bringing her cup to her lips.

“Does it?” I asked, picking at my cards on the ground. “I thought you didn’t believe in any of this.”

My mom raised her shoulders up and down. “It’s like anything else. If it’s done with the right intentions, it can be ok. It’s just a fun sleepover thing.”

“If you say so.” I watched as Lauren drew the second card, wondering how long it would take to do my mom’s reading and get her to leave.

Her second card was the world. Lauren drew her head back and snorted. “That card is amazing,” she jabbed her finger into the carpet as she spoke. “It’s possibly the best card in the deck. It shows major change, the perfect ending and beginning. Your past card,” Lauren lifted it up to show us, “is fulfilled by your present. You’ve already reached that potential,” she gestured from the globe to the world, drawing an imaginary line between the two.

My mom sat, her face an open wound as she listened. She looked like Bambi. I could imagine what she was thinking: she had reached some the light at the end of an ugly tunnel, and now her daughter’s weird friend was confirming it all, telling her with divine knowledge that she had risen out of blackness.

I looked at my shitty cards, weighted down by logs or sticks or whatever burdens they were meant to represent.

“Can you finish my reading?” I asked Lauren, poking her in the side. “I wanna know what these sticks mean.” I tried to smile conspiratorially, to bring back that feeling we had when Madison was stuck in my room, staring up at a haunted doll that wasn’t actually haunted.
“Gimmee a second,” Lauren started to shuffle again, intent on finishing my mom’s reading. I could feel the connection in the room, everyone’s eyes on Lauren’s hands. Savannah looked like she had seen a ghost—besides me and my mother, she was the only one who knew how to interpret these cards. She looked at Lauren from her spot across the room, her gaze intense.

“Fine, I’ll just wait.” I picked up my two cards and looked down at them, my face turned away from my mom. She kept looking at me, trying to see understanding that wasn’t there.

I listened for the sound of a card leaving the deck, scraping softly against the pressure of the cards around it. Lauren seemed lost in thought, her hands mindlessly shuffling as we all waited. When she finally pulled a card, she rolled back with a gasp, putting her hands to her forehead.

“This,” she held the card up, rotating it for all of us to see. “Is the four of wands. Your journey is complete. You are loved and divinely protected.” Lauren placed the card down in the future position, finishing the reading.

My mom exhaled audibly, shaking her head in disbelief. She caught my eye. “I mean that’s just crazy right?”

“What’s crazy about it?” I hoped my mom could see my dad in my face. She always said that she could.

“I mean, it just seems so accurate,” she looked around to the group for support.

“It is accurate,” Savannah said. She started to pop her knuckles, something she did when she was nervous.

“No it fucking isn’t.” My own cards looked up at me from the ground. I wanted to shred them, then go into the other room and throw Lady out of the two-story window.
“How isn’t it?” Savannah was stubborn. It was the other side of her loyalty and patience.

“What, she feels better now so I have to just forget about everything?”

“God,” Savannah rolled her eyes, “You don’t have to forget but you could at least forgive.”

“You only say that because your mom’s a crackhead.”

Savannah didn’t need to say anything, but she would anyway. Her defense came from all sides, silence that flooded in. Shock and disgust. When she did speak, I just stared at my cards, trying to smother her voice with the ringing in my ears.

“Hey Leah,” Savannah stood up, grabbing her bag from off the couch. “Why don’t you tell Madison and Lauren the truth? That doll was nothing but a gift from your mom and you told everyone it was haunted. Your mom isn’t possessed, she’s sick and you used that to make yourself popular.” She sucked in air and pressed her lips together. I knew she wanted to say more, but if she did she would start to stumble and cry. Instead, she left, pulling out of the driveway around 1:00 a.m. I checked the time, wondering absently if she would be safe on the road.

“You thought I was possessed?” my mom mumbled, her face blank.

“That makes a lot more sense,” Madison said, nodding slowly. Her expression reminded me of a teacher who finally caught a student she suspected of cheating for weeks.

Lauren stared at me. “None of that shit was true?”

“I wasn’t lying,” I said.

“Well,” my mom looked at Lauren and Madison. “I can safely say I was never possessed. So there’s a lie in there somewhere, isn’t there?”
My cheeks were wet. There was, somewhere in me, a failure. I had edited the past and all my red marks, my scribbled-out lines were found out. My mom had moved on, sculpted the world as she wanted it, had even drawn the world out of the deck of cards. I was sitting with my hands full of dead wood, torn paper. My face burned.

Lauren nodded. “My readings are always accurate,” she said, her eyes avoiding me completely. “It doesn’t really matter what anyone thinks of them.”

Her and Madison grabbed their things. When they left, the room felt empty.

Pre-everything, my dad used to tell me stories. He told me that he fought a saber-toothed tiger at work. He told me he battled demons who kept organs in jars. He told me before he left that our house was haunted, but that we could exorcise it. He was creative and macabre. He insisted that a metaphor was truer than the truth. He never mentioned that you could only change so much, that other people keep their own score.