

ELIZABETH SACKETT

# The Perils of Hilda

You are gifted to her in the crib.

Shiny-eyed and chubby, she prods at you with a tiny finger. You're shiny too, new and neatly-dressed with a tuft of light brown yarn hair atop your round head, pale fabric arms spread wide. You grin like a loon, plastic tongue half stuck out.

She has dark eyes like marbles and yours are painted on, blue as soft baby yarn. *Who are you*, she wonders without words. She brings your hard face to her soft cheek and coos.

Your life is not without danger.

An example: her older sister is a whirlwind and offers to throw you off a pier. The girl you belong to is three and holds you tightly to her chest, shaking her head as her dark eyes swell.

"Simmie," their father says (a stern tall man with a mustache the color of potato skins), "behave." The sister, Simmie, smiles widely, impishly.

"Don't worry, Hilda's safe," the mother says, a comforting presence with warm blue eyes. Your girl nods into the woman's hip and you probably breathe an invisible sign of relief into the night as the five of you continue down the pier. It's dark and chilly-warm, a summertime of gazebos and toppling-over ice cream cones. You get ice cream sometimes too, but it's shock-pink plastic, which is just the way you like it.

Another example: at four, your girl takes you to Burger King. You sit next to her and her friend as they nibble French fries and talk about Barbie dolls.

"I have a bunch," the friend says, "but I'm not allowed to play with them."

"Why not?" your girl asks. Your head falls limply onto the hard bench and she holds your hand, a much dirtier tan than it was when you were given one another.

"They're collectors," the friend says. She has long brown hair and neat

clothes, a thin nose like a bird. "I can't mess them up."

Your girl nods as if she understands, which she doesn't.

Her parents take the two girls and leave. You sit patiently on the hard bench for them to return to you, but time stretches languidly into hours.

"Well who are you, little lady," a young man says, scooping you up. He has an apron and a beard and smells like salt. "I bet you're someone's best friend, aren't you?"

Smile at him, daringly. You're not a little lady. You're an adventurer.

For the next few hours, you help him sell burgers at the takeout window. You sit and supervise as he shovels fries into cartons and dumps nuggets into paper bags. When your girl's father, potato-mustache-man, gets there, your work day is almost over.

"She was helping me out," your employer tells him. The father thanks him with a spuddy smile and picks you up in one hand awkwardly, wanting to be gentle and caring at the same time as dignified.

You don't need dignity. It's overrated, anyway.

You're one of the most important parts of her youth, you know. Other little girls have soft teddy bears. Other little girls are gifted with china dolls. You have no respect for china dolls, or anything really. You're a small, round-headed cabbage patch kid with a defiant grin, and you don't have to take anything seriously.

You teach her that. You go through nursery school with her, appearing in the yearbook along with everyone else. She brings you every day and you wait patiently at the piano, smiling your secrets at the other toys. You dress as Tinkerbelle on Halloween, a small green bow in your fading tuft of hair, a little doll skirt that her grandmother sewed for you wrapped around your beanbag body, and laugh in three big *HAs* (as she demonstrates frequently to her grandmother).

You are brought to shoe stores as she prepares to conquer elementary school. She has to buy two different size shoes because of the foot that curled when she was born, and her mother leans over the small shoe boxes, opening them excitedly for her daughter as though they contained jewels.

"What a pretty doll," the shoe clerk says to your girl, smiling. He turns to the mother and makes a face.

You don't care.

Your young girl runs a finger down her smaller foot, the surgery scars on the side of it.

You are unforgettable and unforgotten.

You surpass childhood and become the permanent embodiment of it. Be proud of that—let that smile shine.

As she approaches the preteen years, your body wears down. Your girl considers taking you to a hospital to be repaired because she's going to be a teenager soon and she expects those years to be plagued with social angst. She needs you to be healthy and strong for her.

You're taken to a jack-of-all-trades. His shop is in a far off town, a lawn littered with stone angels and metal fountains, a shop crawling with old, rusty jewelry. When your girl hands you off it's reluctantly, as though the man could be a demon waiting to suck the shine from your face.

Truthfully, the shine is gone when you are returned, and your body isn't all that repaired. A few amateur stitches keep your head steady and that's about it. Your girl is glad though—she realizes she liked you the way you were.

She rubs baby oil on your face to get the shine back.

Your life is not without perils. Even in high school, she wakes up in the middle of the night sometimes, unable to sleep. Sometimes there's yelling; the sister, the hurricane, yelling her anxieties to the ceiling and to the parents. It isn't her fault. The sister's autistic, an angel wrapped in an indiscernible and frustrating language.

Sometimes the parents yell at one another, their voices floating through the wall. Disembodied, she can see their faces clearly in her mind, depressed and uncertain. She turns to you, thin and awkward, crumpled into her blankets like paper.

You're not the most sympathetic of presences. But you do your best. You grin away the uncertainty, help her create stories. When she falls asleep, you're tucked under a gangly arm, face mashed into her stomach. Things could get better than this, you think. Things could change.

And when they do, it's really damn different.

(It's college; she swears now.)

Sliding casually against the car's back window, watch Long Island leave you behind. Endless green trees like broccoli, eventually, long thruway lines and cars upon cars upon cars. Your face is reflected faintly in the window, black lines in the glass sectioning your nose from your eyes from your chin. You're getting along in years now, aren't you? Your limbs have browned significantly. There's a blush of grey on your shiny cheeks that refuses to be washed out. Your hair is grey as well and the yarn has thinned. You still have that mischievous plane to those blue eyes, though. That hasn't faded.

Anyway, the changes. The car slows to a new world. You are placed on a bed devoid of even a blanket as the dorm room is pieced together around you. It's hot here and your girl wears a purple and blue cotton dress, running from suitcase to suitcase, draping fabric on hangers of hot pink and blue. The dress swishes around her knees like a bell.

When she says goodbye to her family, you can tell her parents' faces are painted on, ready to crack. They take a look at the girl, her brown hair pulled into a messy ponytail, her green glasses a bit crooked on her face, and you think they know they're releasing a child into the world, someone who doesn't quite understand how to walk yet.

You've got this, though. They don't have to worry, they don't have to cry once their backs are turned and they walk towards the car. See, you never stopped being a child. You never learned to walk. And you turned out okay.

The roommate looks at you in disdain when you're alone together. When your girl is there they talk and joke, making undercooked ramen in the microwave and religiously watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Whenever the roommate gets annoyed, she threatens to throw you or one of your friends (two more: a stuffed cookie and your more timid ginger fraternal twin) out the window.

You think of all those years ago, being young and clenched to the chest of a three-year old when the girl's sister threatened to toss you into a lake. The girl, eighteen, sets you firmly in the crook of her elbow.

"Don't talk about Hilda like that," she says. "You'll be okay, won't you, Hilda?" She rubs her nose against yours.

"God," the roommate, Lindsey, says. "It really creeps me out when you get all maternal."

Your existence is reincarnated back to you in college. First, the threat of being tossed off of something.

Then, the scars.

The girl's okay with her scars, or she was. She begins to notice things; the curve of her right foot is different from everyone else's. She cannot move like a dancer. She wants to be an actress, but she's suddenly and intensely afraid of her body, the things that make it different, that make it imperfect.

This has nothing to do with you, really, but you see her as she lies down in the bed, as she hates the way her hips settle into the mattress pad.

And sometimes you are her comfort, like in olden times. With your head tilted down, you can look sad, and when you head is tilted upwards, your grin explodes in the air like a firecracker. It's hard to be sad with that, right?

For the first time, one night, she puts you aside. There's a depressed anxiety being realized in the core of her, something deep and stubborn like the tinnitus she picked up from the scene shop power tools. She's ashamed to look at you; she isn't the little girl who received you, the pretty little thing free from responsibilities and limitations. You make her guilty of not achieving all she should have.

Her childhood begins to feel like a lie. Something beautiful and fragile she is shedding, a reverse metamorphosis. You're part of this lie.

But she can't quite shed you.

You sit on her bookcase and look at her *Intro to Anthropology* text all night.

You become a traveler.

On the smaller-scale, she brings you to class sometimes. At least once. No one in the classroom knows, but it's a particularly terrifying astronomy examination, and your irreverent round face poking out from her ballet canvas bag could do her a whole lot of good, so she slides you in at her roommate's sugges-

tion.

Maybe Lindsey merely wanted you out of the room. Maybe she had a cancelled class and wanted to eat ramen and read fan fiction without your grin haunting her, your eyes following her. It's a nice suggestion nonetheless. She gets a point in your book.

You're packed neatly between notebook and scarf and occasionally your face is jostled to the top and you see the sunny, flat planes of the college campus.

You'd rather go back to sleep but you grin nonetheless.

You ride planes too, and buses. You get used to it. Backpacks and tote bags and the occasional suitcase, a few Fredonia sweatshirts and some tutus for padding. You collect the memories into your worn stitches; the sleeping man your girl spills water on in the tiny airplane, the little knick-knacks she picks up for her parents and stuffs into her backpack with you, the crowded, silent buses to Buffalo. You wait in her suitcase as it goes bump-bump down the belt at LaGuardia. You nap in her backpack as she somehow musters the ability to nap through the constant scream of airplane engines. You sit, folded a bit, in your girl's purse as she orders food in a British accent at the Rochester airport.

You watch her become a traveler, too. She watches people. Kids in bright colors running around their parents' ankles, the way young boys with guitar cases seem to lean carelessly against airport walls, the messy curve of handwriting belonging to a girl who sits across from her, buried in a notepad. Your girl doesn't need to go that far to get away from herself.

At twenty-one, she explains you to her friends at her new college. "She's part of me I think," she says, lounging on her black and white bedspread with you leaning against her kneecap. "The silly, outgoing part of my personality, I guess."

Her new roommate, Anna, raises her eyebrows.

"I guess that makes sense," she admits.

"I'm not crazy," your girl says.

"Not at all," she has you say, nodding your plastic head.

She doesn't keep you on the bookcase at this college. You move around the suite, lounging on the table, on the microwave, atop the ottoman. You're a familiar face, now. Maybe these people understand you.

Which doesn't matter, really. You don't need to be understood. When your girl's boyfriend tells her you're scary, it bothers her more than you. Of course you're scary; stick a flashlight behind your head, you glow like a jack-o-lantern.

She hurricanes at her friends, letting the actuality of her anxiety and depression settle. It's acknowledged, a fact to work with, something else lying on the ottoman in the fluorescence of campus lighting. It can be fixed.

She lies in bed with you next to her—not in her arms, but next to her.

The last reincarnation is the repair. Your head wobbles from your feeble torso; surgery is required.

“Have you ever thought of, you know, retiring her?” Anna asks from Skype over the summer. The girl glares into the webcam for a good long while.

She takes things into her own hands instead of leaving you with a doll repairman; instead of leaving you in a shop like a yard sale, she digs through her grandmother’s old sewing kit. In a few minutes, there are thin white stitches somewhat unevenly stretched across your collar.

“The surgery is complete,” the girl announces with a wry smile.

“How’s the patient?” the mother asks, not a stranger to treating dolls as a part of the family. She has a collection of them. *We’re all mad here.*

“You were brave, weren’t you, Hilda?” your girl says, gingerly touching her handiwork.

This is a hard summer, but it’ll be past soon. You’ll be back at college, getting your education in staring at *Doctor Who* posters and quietly observing roommates as your girl studies theatre and pretty words. And your girl isn’t wobbling anymore. She’s still a child, but she’s learning to walk.

And you grin up at her as she traces the stitches. You like the scars.