

ALONE IN MY HOUSE

Judith Ingram

I'm alone in my house,
a little blonde-haired girl
no longer fit for the company of others.
Daddy has been here, been with me.
I want to die from the pain,
from the guilt and the shame.
He's left me alone now and shut the door behind him.
But he's taken the keys to my house with him.
Keys that should be mine are now in his pocket.

Through the window I can see sunshine
that never touches my face anymore.
Its yellow light shines on my friend's house
and she plays in the green grass with the bright daisies
laughing into her father's face as he lifts her
warming under her mother's smiles,
loving and being loved.

I draw back from the window into the shadows of my house.
They mustn't see my face or my tears.
No one is supposed to know that a child lives here.

Will Mommy come to see me today?
Who will Mommy be today?
She brings her warm Mommy-smell and her soft breast
that my child's cheek used to know.
But now her eyes are cold and her arms are stiff
to keep me distant.

But maybe today I'll see in her eyes
a light of recognition.
Mommy, remember me?
I used to be your little girl.

I used to be your sunshine, your angel
before Daddy came,
before the dark shadows and the secrets came to live inside my house.

If I clean my house, if I scrub,
maybe Mommy will come.
Maybe she'll stay and hold me on her lap like before.
I'll sweep the bare floor.
I'll polish and I'll scour but I won't get the stains out.
I can't get rid of them,
the ugly, dark reminders that I'm a bad girl.
I can't make my house like it was before
when there was sunlight,
when there were sweet words for me, and love.
I know Mommy won't stay with me in my house now.

My friend is at the door, and I'm afraid.
I shrink against the wall and I make myself small and still,
like a mouse.
I can't let her see me, not in my house.
She knocks, and I bite my lip to keep from calling to her
to open the door and let me out.
But, if I leave my house, how will Mommy find me when she comes?
If she comes.
No, I must wait here, alone, and believe
that Mommy will remember me and come.

It is dark now.
My friend has gone from the door and Mommy isn't coming today.
I huddle in my corner, in the deepening shadows,
staring at the warm lights streaming from the windows of my friend's house.
No lights here, only darkness that I pull around me like a shroud.
I'm so afraid of the dark.
But I think I'm even more afraid of the light.

Can't somebody help me?

Doesn't anyone understand that a child lives here in this prison, in this hellhole?

Where is my rescuer? God? Are you there? Can you hear me?

But no, put away your fantasies.

God doesn't listen to bad little girls who live alone in dark, dirty houses.

Scrub and scrub and maybe God will hear you.

Maybe he will visit you in your house if it's clean enough,
if you can hide the stains.

Tomorrow.

Maybe God will come, maybe Mommy will come
tomorrow.

I'll scrub harder, I'll believe harder
tomorrow.

UNWELCOME CHILD

Judith Ingram

In darkness she waits,
pale in the stone-cold chamber
where memory pools, silent and still,
 absorbing all and reflecting nothing,
 allowing no eye to plumb its secret depths.

In daylight I walk
where sunbeams dance on fragrant air
and life sings renewal all around me.
 I fix my gaze on a distant vision
 and ignore the heavy silence within me.

Darkness and light, child and nonchild
distant yet joined together
by paths long since obscured,
 overgrown with the passing of years,
 buried beneath the careless debris of living.

The Child visits me at night,
veiled in the protective shroud of our sleep.
Safe from the sharp stare of the noonday sun,
 she leaves her silent pool to sojourn with me,
 trailing our memories in her wake.

Incognito she walks through my dreams,
scolding me with a viper's lashing tongue,
entreating me with the cries of a lost kitten under a box,
 matted fur stinking with neglect,
 frail ribs broken by the blow of a brutal foot.

She cries to me in her own language,
her words harsh and foreign to my adult sense
and unwelcome to my heart still warmed by the day.
They stir up fear and unbury pain
best left forgotten and unnamed.

Against my will, I know her.
Denied the free air of adult reason,
she haunts the chambers of my unwanted past,
omniscient ruler of my shadowlife,
jealous keeper of my emotions.

I feel no joy but by her leave.
Happiness she meets out in careful measure.
Transient moments of sweetness she cannot taste
she snatches away too soon,
leaving us both bereft.

She sits alone on her child-sized throne,
wielding her weapons of power and powerlessness.
She strangles my heart with screams I cannot utter.
In my fear, she cries, "Protect me!"
In my sadness, she cries, "Don't abandon me!"

How can I live with her,
this relentless challenger of my adult façade
who teases and torments me with truths I dare not own?
In her righteous anger, she shames me.
In her naked vulnerability, she terrifies me.

Yet how can I live without her,
the self and not-self that is Me,
the Child and Wise Woman of my soul?
In her stinging truths, I find the path to healing.
In her tenacity for life, I find courage to hope.

Of what use to me is sunshine if I cannot feel its warmth,
or rain if its cool mist cannot refresh?
My capacity for joy and love are locked away
 in a chamber, cold and dark,
 held fast in childish hands.

I cannot reclaim my spirit
unless I reclaim the Child as well.
The path that leads ahead also reaches back
 through the tangled overgrowth and debris
 to the birthplace of my eternity.

I decided long ago to leave the Child and the chamber
and live in the world of sunlight,
although I cannot fully feel its warmth
 nor taste the sweetness of its pleasures
 nor shake the terror that stalks me at night.

If I venture back to the chamber,
will the Child come out with me?
Or will she capture me with her neediness,
 forcing me to share her pain and her fear,
 trapping me in her world of dark water and shadows?

I long to take her small hand in mine
but I fear her touch would shatter me.
For all her small size, her strength exceeds my own
 as she bears the pain and grief I cannot face
 and she suffers alone that I might have life.

CANDLE LEITMOTIF

Judith Ingram

Darkness absolute,
prison walls old as childhood,
guardian night that came too late
shields with insular silence
and deflects the stray beam of a sunlit world.

Voice soft and kind,
formless and foreign above my ear,
sears lonely senses like sweet pain:
“Precious One, you are not alone.
Let me take your hand.”

Memory stark and sudden,
another voice mangled with rage
spews poison darts through childish defenses.
A child’s body twists in cruel hands,
her heart crippled with crueler words.

Mind mist slow and thick
deflects the Tormentor’s hot spears
and shrouds a fragile mind in welcome darkness.
Self-created walls to shelter crippled wings
disallow the healing touch of a loving hand.

Candle small and white,
tiny light masters the darkness
as the Helper voice returns:
“Precious One, you are not alone.
Let me take your hand.”

Walls built of fear,
protecting and entombing long years,
weaken before the bright flame.
 Steady warmth melts salt tears frozen long since
 and quickens seeds of emotion fallowing in deathlike sleep.

Hand slow and faltering
reaches for the Helper's hand,
fearing a slap but hoping for salvation.
 Human clasp warm with compassion and firm with truth
 cradles my need and infuses new hope.

Stairway tall and steep,
daunting without safety rails,
leads us upward into Light—
 two steps forward, one step back,
 following the flame to a higher place.

Lovesong sweet and bright,
unlike songs I've known,
a gift from my Helper,
 teaches about the Light
 and banishes old lies with lyrics of truth.

Cries sharp and accusing
freeze my step and silence my song.
Hated cohabitant of the shadows below,
 the child alone and terrified
 beseches me not to abandon her.

Hand steady and resolute
takes the candle from the Helper.
Handclasp loosens as I turn to descend,
 the press of human compassion
 still warm against my palm.

Figure small and quivering,
her cheeks tear-streaked in the candlelight,
clutches a ragged stuffed dog we both know well.
My own eyes stare back at me and then at the flame,
back and forth, wide and wondering.

Compassion newly learned
fills my heart and dissolves my hate,
bending my knees as my voice entreats:
“Precious One, you are not alone.
Let me take your hand.”

Small hand slow and faltering
reaches out for mine,
fear and longing grappling in uncertain eyes.
Suddenly a small body nestles against my heart
and my tears christen the downy head just under my chin.

Companions hand in hand,
co-seekers of a new vision,
we dismantle fear’s dark wall brick by brick,
climbing steep steps to the lilt of a lovesong,
following the flame to a higher place.

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