

## Noose

*Written for Reedsy prompt contest #269*

I found the rope in the attic last July when the heat was peaking and I needed to grab an extra fan for my room. Sweating in the dark up there, I tripped on the heavy tail even as I fumbled for the light-bulb cord.

My parents didn't know about it when I asked over dinner, and they still didn't know when we all three stood under the thing watching it sway under its own weight or maybe a draft. The only thing they could figure, and what they decided to believe, was that I'd done it back in high school when Aubrey dumped me after junior prom.

"It's not dusty enough."

It wasn't rotted, either, and the way humidity got into the attic I couldn't see the rope surviving for over a decade of increasing heat without at least heavy mildew. My mom only stored fans and vacuum sealed baby clothes up there for good reason.

"Well," they said, "when else would you have done it?"

To my parents' credit, they did at least correctly identify the lowest point in my life. Academic stress, being let go from my dream job, nearly passing out at my doctoral defense: these things all had more actual bearing and consequences, but none of them laid me flat like teenage heartbreak. After Aubrey, I shaved my head and threw out any colorful clothes I owned. I had discovered Hamlet earlier that year, and I emulated his performative mourning for months. This lasted into the oppressive heat of summer, until a family trip to The Galapagos reminded me that marine iguanas, and my sense of self, existed.

Never again would I be as committed to being miserable as I was from April to July of that year over half a lifetime ago. I could easily see how that version of myself might have made and hung the noose out of dedication to the aesthetic of grief.

I could see it, but only in the realm of theory.

In reality, the fans return to the attic every fall. They come back out by early July at the latest. My summer visits to my parents never last into August.

"Well, I didn't do it," my dad asserted, glaring at the thing like it was his neighbor Paul, "and it wasn't there the last time I went up."

"Then there's no way it was from the Aubrey saga."

He frowned and shook his head, “Maybe you tied it then, found it, and hung it up today to mess with us.”

“Dad. What would I gain from doing that?”

“Don’t get defensive,” Mom warned.

“I’m not getting defensive. I’m asking genuinely why you think I would be stupid enough to prank you at all, let alone with something this dark.”

Mom gave me a funny look then; her brow knit like something I said had struck a chord. It shouldn’t have. Getting written up for being fidgety and messing around with buddies during class was something I had never dared to bring home. It wouldn’t have been appreciated.

“Wasn’t there an Erin you used to torment?”

“No? Erin who? I know a lot of Erins.”

“I swear you used to hide her things and jump out of the hall closet...”

“I don’t think I ever had any Erins over to the house.”

The noose seemed tighter, somehow, after I said that.

The conversation dropped off with my dad silently realizing that he’d accused me of something nasty, and I retired to my room to read a paper a colleague had recommended. After twenty minutes of reading the same paragraph, I closed the laptop and laid awake and staring through the ceiling.

What bothered me most about the noose, both that night and in the subsequent days I spent helping with general yard work and summer chores, was that it had been used. My eyes, no matter what I was doing, would stray to the windowless attic with that fact echoing in my brain. The loop itself was empty, of course, but too tight. It didn’t hang loose and invite as much as it declared—practically screamed—an impossibly fulfilled purpose hung in situ.

The third day after my discovery, my parents asked me to cut the rope down. I made it half way down the second story hall before my feet slowed and cemented themselves outside the door across from mine. There was no reason to stop—it was a hall closet—but I found myself unable to continue on to the trap door access just a few steps further.

Standing there, I remembered opening that door many times, but for the life of me could not explain why. I could not remember what we stored there, and several conflicting answers fought me even as I reached for the knob. The hand holding the saw at my side began to tremble, and my whole body recoiled from the door as if burned.

At dinner that night I told my parents that, the way the noose was tied, it would be too risky to cut it down. It was pulled too tight to the beam, I explained, and I didn't want to accidentally saw into the load bearer. Instead, I had tossed the tail of the rope over the beam a few times to get it out of tripping range and then worked a raggedy T-shirt of mine through the noose itself and tightened until there was no space for fingers, hands, or heads to get caught.

To my disbelief, my parents immediately dropped the issue. My mother's eyes were focused somewhere distant and invisible throughout my reasoning. Chills ran up my spine as my dad simply nodded and continued eating his meatloaf.

I knew in that moment, my gut freezing over, that they would never open the door across from mine.

A day later, at the airport gate, I held my wife for several moments longer than two weeks at my childhood home warranted.

"You look terrible, have you been sleeping?"

"Not really."

"I knew it could get bad, but not that kind of bad." She shouldered my duffel bag and wrested my suitcase handle away. I didn't fight her on it. "I didn't think you ever lost sleep over them. Was it politics?"

"No... weirder."

The explanation came in bits and pieces as we navigated to her car, wrestled the luggage into the trunk, and took off toward home. Her thoughtful silence unnerved me. I knew she was focusing on the road, but something unspoken and unknown settled between us like an atmospheric pressure.

I changed the subject. I asked about her time with her cousins and the new baby. I asked if they'd gotten to go to that new coffee shop she wanted to try. I asked about work— about any office drama I could remember or dredge up. About how the weather had been around home. I asked for her opinion on some national news story I no longer remember.

"Did you go in the room?"

It was the first thing she said after we tossed my dirty laundry in the wash and I'd finally sat down to pet the cat.

"I did."

"Was it a storage closet?"

"No. Look, I'm tired. It doesn't matter what was in there."

“Really? Because you’re acting like someone trying to hide a body.”

“Well, there wasn’t one.”

“I know... I was joking...” She regarded me for a long time, but I avoided her eyes and the question held in them.

We ate dinner quietly, watched TV quietly, and got ready for bed in as mundane a matter as ever. Even as I lay on my side, my wife spooning me in contentment, I could still see the four seafoam green walls and the unmade twin bed covered in stuffed animals I didn’t recognize. The truth behind the door had been an alien landscape adorned with autographed fliers for school plays I’d never been in and posters for cartoons I’d never watched, and pictures of girls I didn’t know. Sociology textbooks... on the shelves they were eerie enough as I knew no sociologists, but several lay like dead birds on the floor by the far wall... splayed with broken spines under patches of chipped paint.

I had scoured that room for clues. I had disturbed every item—every grave good—for anything, *anything* that would explain what any of it was doing there.

And I had found something of an answer only if there were no definition to impossible. I found rejection letters from dozens of local businesses, some that I’d worked for decades ago, in the trash.

And I had found the dates on those letters. And I had found the name of the applicant.

In my own home, hundreds of miles away, a bead of sweat rolled into my eye. Just as I flipped on to my back, rubbing at the sting, the cat sprang into bed and began making biscuits on my bare chest. I welcomed the pain even though it did not make the noose go away. I could see it now, clearly, through my watery eyes. It swayed from the ceiling, empty, and asked the questions my heart no longer wanted answers to.