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**AN
UNBALANCED
FORCE**

VALERIE SHERRARD



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DCB

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For Albert
with much love

An object at rest remains at rest
and
an object in motion remains in motion
at the same speed and in the same direction
unless
acted upon by an unbalanced force.

ISAAC NEWTON'S FIRST LAW OF MOTION

TEN YEARS AGO

CHAPTER ONE

When I was seven years old, my father saved me from certain death.

That is a truth that lives in me. It forms itself into the shapes and colors of my world, and rises with me every morning, as faithful as the sun.

I am here today, and not reduced to what is politely referred to as “remains,” because of my dad.

For a number of years after that day, I had a great need to hear the details of my rescue again and again. Often, I coaxed the story from my mother while she cooked dinner or folded clothes or when the two of us were running errands in the car.

There was something about hearing it told to me — something about the story itself —that seemed strangely solid, as though it was a trophy I could display on a shelf. How or why those words formed themselves into a kind of possession I can’t explain. They just did.

“You had just turned seven,” my mother would begin. And then, without fail, she would pause.

I always wondered what those pauses meant. It may be that she was giving me time to transport myself to that day in memory.

Or perhaps those few seconds were for her — a chance to steel herself against the emotions she was about to relive.

“We were living in the south end of the city,” she would say when she was ready to continue. “You remember the place, Ethan — the beige two-story house with white shutters at the windows. Your room was blue with beautiful white clouds painted around the top of the walls. The previous tenants left it that way and you never wanted us to change it.”

I have vivid memories of those clouds. As night fell, they seemed to swell and billow in the dancing shadows cast by a nearby streetlight. They weren’t part of the story, but Mom had her own way of telling it, and I never tried to hurry her.

“You weren’t supposed to leave the yard by yourself. Not ever.”

Sometimes Mom would look at me then. Look right into my eyes, as if she needed to reassure herself that I was actually there, that my disobedience hadn’t stolen me from her. Other times, she’d hurry on to the next part.

“And of all the places you could have wandered off to, you decided to make your way to the only empty house on the block.”

That big old empty house was like a seven-year-old-boy magnet. I’d discovered the place not long after we’d moved to that neighborhood and had already been there more times than I could remember.

“I don’t know what possessed you to do such a thing, but you actually went into the house!”

Reproach has crept into her voice at this point in the story and I’m not one hundred percent sure it’s all for me. Has Mom really never considered that I had probably been on the vacated property lots of other times?

Maybe not. To get there, she'd have to admit she was a stay-at-home mother who often had no idea where her kid was.

And then she'd tell the rest of the story — as she knew it. Mom's account was soft and gentle, free of the terror of that afternoon. I wrapped her version around mine like a bandage.

But partial truths will not do today.

The empty house was faded brick, a tired-looking place. In the heat of the summer, it had a stillness that other homes — homes that are lived in — did not. That stillness gave it an air of mystery. It summoned me with its breathless, heavy silence.

It drew me in.

The windows on the lower levels were loosely boarded up, with spiderwebs and bits of leaves and such in between the wooden slats that had been hammered in place. Whoever had nailed the boards on hadn't taken many pains at the job. Otherwise, it's doubtful the fingers of a seven-year-old boy could have pried off the single slat of wood that half-heartedly covered a small basement window at the back of the house.

Brushing aside the detritus, I pushed my face close to the pane of glass and squinted through the film of grime that covered it. Except for a hulking shape I later discovered was the furnace, the basement was nothing more than a dark haze from where I squatted.

Oh, but it promised more if I could get myself onto the other side of that pane of glass.

The window was an old aluminum slider, seized up with dirt and inactivity. It moved an inch or two in response to my tugs and then refused to budge any further. I pulled and strained to no avail and was close to giving up a few times but the prize of getting into the house kept me going.

And then, quite to my surprise, the window yielded with a sideways jerk. Seconds later, with my heart nearly bursting, I had dropped to the floor inside and was tiptoeing through the deep gray shadows. The air smelled like dirty socks and swamp water and something sharp I couldn't identify.

A quick scan of the room told me there was nothing worth exploring down there so I made my way up to the main floor, relieved to find the door at the top of the steps unlocked. There wasn't much more on that level than there'd been downstairs — an old sideboard and a tall child's chair with foldout steps, which saved the day when I was ready to leave and found I needed something to climb on to reach the window I'd come in. The final object downstairs was a cracked mirror leaning against a wall in an open hallway closet.

I went from room to room. I walked around the perimeter of each one. As I moved about, a peculiar feeling grew in me, which I can only describe as a sense of ownership. This feeling gained strength and seemed more real with each subsequent visit. I reveled in the thrill that I was alone, and no one knew where I was.

I was in *my* house.

On the day of the incident — which happened after at least half a dozen visits there, I discovered the purpose of a pole that had been left in an upstairs bedroom closet. It was a plain wooden pole except for a metal hook on one end and I'd taken to carrying it with me, sometimes thumping it on the floor as I walked around, other times brandishing it like a sword.

On this particular foray, I'd been exploring upstairs when I noticed, for the first time, a framed rectangle on the ceiling of the second-floor hallway. I knew it had to be a passage to the attic and quickly realized the pole was the key to opening it. I

etched it and spent the next few minutes poking the pole's hook at a metal loop until, suddenly, it took hold and a drop-down ladder descended.

For several seconds I could do nothing but stand and stare, trying to take in the incredible luck of finding a way to expand my explorations.

Then I climbed up and into the attic. There wasn't the slightest chance that I could have done anything else.

I can say with certainty that the attic would have become my favorite part of the house ... if that day had turned out differently.

It was a wonderful space, with a floor that stretched the full length and width of the building. Two walls slanted and met at the top, so I knew they were the insides of the roof — made up of boards held in place by heavy wooden rafters. The end walls, which were triangular, each boasted a dome-shaped window.

I hurried across the floor to the closest window, passing by various items that were strewn about. Some of them begged exploration but everything else could wait, would have to wait, having been pushed aside by my immediate desire to look out over the neighborhood.

To see without being seen.

The thought filled me with a peculiar sense of power.

But the glass on the window was murky, covered with a greasy film of grime. I rubbed at a spot with the back of my fist but all it did was smear the dirt. If I was to see the world below, I would need to open the window.

This one proved even more difficult than the stubborn basement window through which I'd first gained entry. I pushed and pulled, tugged and strained without budging it even a tiny sliver.

Eventually, I realized that this window was not merely stuck — it was sealed around the edges with paint.

I remembered my mother complaining that the windows had been painted shut in the apartment we'd occupied before moving to this neighborhood. She'd banged on them with her open palm and ruined one of her paring knives carving along the joints. Finally, she'd loosened them enough to open.

I had no knife, which left me with the solitary hope that banging on them would be enough to do the trick. Working my way around the frame, I smacked my palm on it just as Mom had done, pausing now and then to test the window. After several rounds of this, I convinced myself it was starting to give and doubled my efforts. I made a fist and hit harder, pounding with all the fury of my determination.

Until, that is, I missed the frame and smashed my fist into the glass — smashed it *through* the glass, actually. The sickening realization of what I'd done came over me slowly. I stood frozen in place, my small arm thrust through a jagged hole of shards. Several filthy glass spears were embedded in my flesh. There was a deep gash that clearly spelled trouble. Blood was pulsing from it at an alarming rate, and I knew I needed to get help as quickly as possible.

Even so, it probably took me a full minute before I got up the courage to pull my arm back through. As careful as I tried to be, it was impossible to avoid adding more cuts to my trembling limb. The shards still clung to me as well, and I pulled them out unsteadily with my other hand.

My knees had begun to quake by the time I crossed the floor to the ladder and started to climb down. As I descended, clutching the rungs hands-over-head, blood ran across my armpit and

began to soak my T-shirt. It was brand new, and the thought skittered through my brain that Mom wasn't going to be happy when she saw it.

The total blood loss couldn't have been great at that point, even though it looked like an enormous amount to me, so I have to assume my next movements were dictated by the confusion of fear.

Instead of getting out of the house and running straight home, I found myself standing in the upstairs hallway, staring at the opening in the ceiling. Tears filled my eyes and spilled over at the realization that I'd left the stick up there, and therefore had no way to close the door to the attic. Not for a single second did it occur to me that I could leave it there, leave the door open and the ladder down. In the panic of the moment, I was gripped by the need to cover my tracks.

It took everything in me to keep from bawling as I made my way back into the attic, retrieved the stick and climbed down for the second time. That was when I discovered I lacked the strength to hoist the heavy wooden ladder back into place. I shoved and shoved but could do no more than raise it halfway before my young arms began to tremble from the effort. After several attempts, it finally came to me that my energy would be better spent in getting home.

By the time I made my way to the first floor and then to the basement, I was feeling woozy. Blood loss and shock were taking their toll and as I climbed up to the window and leaned forward to crawl through it, the chair I was using tipped sideways and went crashing to the concrete floor below. It left me half in and half out, draped over the sill and unable to get a purchase inside or out.

Despair came over me, but it was tempered by a kind of exhaustion I'd never experienced before. It actually occurred to me that I could bleed to death, that indeed, I could die, but this thought came with an odd feeling of indifference.

It's there that my own memory blurs and fades to black. Luckily, Mom's version of events is there to fill in the gaps.

"It was the strangest thing, your father stopping by that afternoon. Said he just happened to be nearby — on the way to an appointment — but he'd never done that before."

My Grandma Martel had her own views. "Divine intervention," she whispered from her hospice bed. "The Good Lord sent him to save you, Ethan. Never doubt it."

Mom winked at me and gave Grandma a smile as if she was humoring a small child. I didn't like that. For all she knew, Grandma could be right.

"I don't know what distracted me from watching you that day," Mom would continue. "I was frantic when your father told me you weren't in the yard. We both called and called, and then he said he was going to circle the block."

Dad's search of the block was the next part of her story. A strange compulsion that drew him into the backyard of the abandoned house where he found me, bleeding and unconscious, halfway out of the basement window.

I must have surfaced for a moment as he lifted me out, for there's a vague and hazy memory of him fastening his necktie around my arm to stop the bleeding, his ashen face close to mine, and words tumbling through the years in my memory.

"Hold on, son. Hold on." And then, "Please, God. Please, please —"

I slipped back into the darkness after that and remember nothing else until the hospital. Which is where Mom's story wraps up.

"The doctor said another half hour and you'd have been gone."

Always *gone*, never *dead*. I don't think she could make herself say anything quite so final.

I was in the hospital long enough to be bored of the place and longing for better food. (At seven, that basically meant pizza and burgers.) By the time I got back home, the abandoned house had been closed up with heavy plywood, held in place with an abundance of screws.

I never got in there again.

It was only a month or two later that my grandma died, and Mom inherited the family home. We moved into it in short order.

That was the start of changes I could never have predicted.