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Great-Grandma

On a cool summer night in the early 1970s, a young girl on a farm on the island of Barbados awakens in the middle of the night to sounds coming from the family room. Wendy is the fifth of her parents' six children, the third daughter of a choleric butcher and his temperamental wife. She shares a bedroom with her older sisters and her younger brother, who favors the tacky flowery wallpaper carefully applied to the walls in the girls' room than the stiff, bland boards of the boys' room. Their home is a young structure made of ancient wood, hidden in the brush on the edge of a cliff like a predator searching for prey. The world outside their windows at night is pitch black and walled in on all sides by trees. The night clutches the family home in her grasp at every chance, her stars and moon hardly visible beyond her dark fingers. The children usually sleep through the night. Protests against this are met with dreadful resistance and squashed right away. At least, this is so with the older children. As the butcher and his wife have had four children's worth of experience raising their young, Wendy's discipline sometimes slips through the cracks, lending her obedience to her own will.

Wendy's eyelids fly open, but really she's been awake the whole time. She tries to shut her eyes, turn over, and go to sleep, nestling herself deeper into the nest made of her siblings' sleeping forms. The noises from the other room are tantalizing to the curiosity of a small child: she wonders about the hushed whispers and the creaky footsteps on their floor. Eventually, her curiosity wins: Wendy maneuvers over her siblings, throws her little feet off the bed, and hurries to the door. Confident in her familiarity with her own home, she steps out without peering and comes face to face with an all-consuming darkness. She feels that she has lost her eyesight; she extends her hands looking for reprieve. She winds the darkness between her little fingers; she

bats at the shadows with her palms. Soon she feels the thick wicker of the deck chairs that her mother had brought in from the rain and any potential thieves; she feels the cool glass of her mother's beloved coffee table. The shadows start to yield and she can see forms within them: the outline of the things she was touching, the outlines of things she has yet to touch. She considers going back but is amused by her misadventure. She continues to prod.

Her hands find soft cotton. She clutches it in her hands to savor it with her fingers. Her mother's skirts are always cotton and always feel so nice. But they never smell *so bad*. Wendy wrinkles her nose at the smell, indignant as children are. Her eyes readjust in the darkness, straining more quickly to make sense of what had offended its sister sense.

A new form has appeared in the shadows. It is solid, tall, and patiently occupying space between the living room and the kitchen. It looms over Wendy. The child is awash in wonder as she stares up at the figure. She tries to decipher what it is, and then, once she comes to a conclusion, ponders *who* it is. A new instinct tells her to step back; she obeys. A cosmic machination (or maybe the imagination of the child) causes the little girl to make out a face: a mangled, crooked mouth; stern, unblinking eyes; a long ragged dress that obscured everything from her waist down.

"Go back to bed, Wendy," it says.

Wendy does not know this person.

She runs. She finds her way through the labyrinth of her home at night as easily as if it had been day.

She runs back to the room she shares with her siblings; she takes no care to close the door quietly or to not disturb the floorboards with her footsteps. She springs into bed, sending her siblings flying into the world of the waking. All at once they bear down on her with

chastisement, but Wendy does not know what to say. The entirety of her adventure and discovery is summed up with a plea for her oldest sister Beverley to check the hall. Beverley, the second born of their parents' children, weighs her options, remembers the sting of her father's belt, and rectifies the situation by holding Wendy close and begging her to go back to sleep. The other children slip away into slumber; Wendy watches the door tilt open slightly and then promptly shut, and then she shuts her eyes and convinces herself to sleep.

The words never find Wendy to explain what had happened, but she learns many things about the incident anyway. Only a few days after the encounter with the figure, while playing in her mother's room, Wendy discovers a photograph of a woman bearing the same face that has since haunted her. When she asks who it is, her mother calls the woman "grandma." When asked where she is, her mother tells her "Long dead." The little girl's ventures into the darkness are halted each night by the presence of this figure who, though now familiar, was no match for the terror of a young child. The figure is more successful in stopping Wendy's night adventures than her parents could hope to be. Years later, Wendy, a young woman, learns how to describe the smell of the figure: freshly wet earth, mold, mothballs, rotted meat, and expensive perfume like the kind her relatives brought from England. Years later, while laying in bed in her cramped apartment in New York City after a long day of work, she awakens to the concoction of ominous scents and remains frozen. She chides herself for leaving a bed that she is still in. Her mind floods with the memory of the figure, whose likeness has never left her. Her only solace is that this frozen state leaves her able to watch her infant daughter sleeping peacefully nearby in her crib, unaware, uncaring, unconcerned.

Something touches her toes.

A light touch. And then a flick. Just a little flick. A light ticklish touch. She would laugh if her muscles weren't so tense. She feels a depression on the edge of the bed now. She lives alone.

Wendy finally looks down. There is the figure, its face now illuminated in the light of the TV's static. She glances to her nightlight, finding the bulb of the traitorous thing blown out. The figure smiles. Something about its smile soothes the young woman who had once been the little girl. The feeling of familiarity shines through and fills warmth where cold fear had been; it is easier now to smell the expensive perfume over the multitude of terrible things. It continues to sit, playing with her toes; it isn't looking at her, not directly, not in the face. It seems distracted. It looks up.

"You'll be OK, Wendy," the figure says. "Go back to bed."

It gets up. It goes to the door. It leaves. The door never opens. It never comes back. Not outside of Wendy's dreams anyway.