

Kaitlyn Price is supposed to be asleep, but it's too hot.

The little girl sits in the near dark of her living room under a grey metal ceiling fan. It gyrates above her head, cycloning wild black curls across the back of a tweed brown couch. Her strawberry shortcake undershirt itches where it sticks to her body, wet with sweat.

Kaitlyn has that empty feeling she gets in the pit of her stomach when she's all by herself. It's really late. She leans her head back against the couch, closes her eyes.

Something loud makes her jump, her eyes popping wide. It sounded like someone knocked over a pile of books. She's not sure where it came from.

The house seems empty. Kaitlyn slides off the couch, passes discarded containers of chips, empty cans of soda, a lonely box of Kix cereal. She pads her way to Mommy's room, hoping Mommy made that noise. Maybe she's awake and she'll read Kaitlyn a story.

But her mother is in bed. One floppy hand extends over the mattress, reaching toward a bottle brimming with a clear liquid Kaitlyn knows better than to drink. The television on top of Mommy's dresser flickers soundlessly.

"Mommy?"

No answer. Mommy's lips are parted in a snore. White teeth snake below her top lip.

Another noise. A voice. It sounds like someone saying Kaitlyn's name.

She follows the sound to the front door, propped open with one Nike shoe. The useless breeze flickers in, no match for the heat. The streetlight out front pours a pool of light across the shaggy brown carpet as Kaitlyn opens the door wider.

Someone stands on the porch. A shadow, features erased by backlight. Kaitlyn takes a step back, trying to decide whether to scream.

"Hi," says the shadow.