

SAM PLAYS THE BEETLE-GAME.

Sam plays the beetle-game. They're the best at it, Johnny had said. It's easy to play, too: hide in a very dark, small space. Hold your breath. You can blink, but you can't cry. Johnny had said that Sam was the best at it, which made sense, because Johnny couldn't fit in the cupboard.

THE BUZZING IN YOUR EAR

RILEY TIMMS

Sam doesn't like the beetle-game that much.

Johnny had to leave. He said so. He said that he would be back soon, and he made Sam promise to play the beetle-game if anyone came by. Anyone at all. Even Dad, and Sam didn't understand that, but had nodded anyways. Then Johnny went away into the Fog and Sam was left alone.

Sam plays the beetle-game now. And waits. The beetle-game is very specific: no moving, no crying. If you cry, you lose. That's the rule. It's the most important one, and Sam is very good at it. The waiting too. Waiting.

A shadow passes over the window. Not even a shadow, just a shimmer, the idea of a shadow, just the sound of footsteps outside in the Fog. Breathly breeze of a whispering groan. Sam does not flinch, even though they want to, because they are the best at the beetle-game, because Johnny said so, and so they are still and silent and they do not cry at all. Not even in the way that you can cry when no one is looking- not even that.

The footsteps get closer to the window. Shuffling, stumbling, a dull thump against wooden boards. Sam doesn't move an inch, even when it sounds like the breath is in their ear now. Too close. It sounds hungry, it sounds like crunching and groaning and hurt, and it smells like a graveyard cooked in a microwave. Sam is as quiet as a beetle, and they shake but it's okay because it doesn't count.

It feels like it takes forever. The-- the thing

outside, it rasps and groans and chokes on its own breath, and Sam squeezes their eyes shut and counts to twelve, ten times over. The footsteps mumble and stumble and, finally, stumble away. Back into the Fog where all the bad things come from. Sam wonders if that was Dad. Sam hasn't seen Dad in a long time now, ever since Johnny had to board up the windows and teach Sam the beetle-game and now they eat beans from cans and don't have to go to school anymore. The footsteps go away, and Sam keeps hiding in the cupboard and waits.

Sam waits for a long time.

When Johnny comes back, he'll see that Sam was the best at the beetle-game. And then he won't ever leave again. He will be so happy that he stays, and he won't have to leave and the things that stumble around the Fog won't come near anymore and everything will be happy again. It'll be just like before, when Sam didn't have to play the beetle-game and Dad came home and Johnny didn't look so sad all the time.

Sam hopes Johnny comes back soon. *