

DOOR

by miki starr

A REIGNSTORM PUBLISHING
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“At the root of this dilemma is the way we view mental health in this country. Whether an illness affects your heart, your leg or your brain, it’s still an illness, and there should be no distinction.”

-First Lady, Michelle Obama

day of no return.

I hate Fox Harbor.

I wasn’t born here. I was born in a major city – meant to be in a major city. A big city girl through and through. Now I’m trapped in this place. Fox Harbor. Where there is no actual harbor. Eternally trapped in this back woods, *The Hills Have Eyes*, pustule on American civilization.

I’m here thanks to Marjorie’s alleged split personality, Atika Dangerfield. Atika Dangerfield, what a stupid name. Yes, I said alleged, and I say alleged because I don’t believe she exists. Every time my older sister Marjie does some f’kd shit, she blames Atika Dangerfield. And honestly, what real split personality would name herself Atika Dangerfield anyhow? Shit sounds made up.

So, yeah, whenever Marjie gets busted doing some

f'kd shit she claims that Atika did it. The f'kd shit that landed Mom and me in Fox Harbor? My big sister slept with my father. Yeah, real f'kd shit.



Normally I wouldn't have been home in the middle of the day...y'know, school and all. Junior year and I guess I wanted to stick with it and see where it got me, but I was sick that day. That's what I told Andie at least – I mean, Mom. It wasn't a lie, not really. I was sick of school and consequently had just had a big fight with my on-again/off-again boyfriend, Javi, and really wasn't up to seeing him, or anyone else for that matter.

So I was home, just Andie and me and Andie's guilt for being a crappy parental figure. A guilt that could only be alleviated by making me soup and sandwiches every couple hours whether I was hungry or not. Dad was at work, and Marjie had already moved on to live with some kid that was supplying her with whatever she was using those days while she returned the favor with the bank between her thighs.

Needless to say, I was surprised to hear the faint sound of activity coming from the back room in our basement. I'd snuck down there to steal an ice cream bar from the deep freezer while Andie was taking a break from stalker mother duties to use the facilities.

I thought we were maybe being jacked. Not that there was anything of value in that little room but still, kids'll

steal anything these days. I grazed my tongue across the metal in my lip and contemplated investigating. There was a bat leftover from my days of softball, collecting dust and cobwebbed into the corner. I grabbed it, stifling the cough that the dust was stirring up in me, and crept to the little room. The muffled banging sound got louder as I got closer. I pushed the door slowly and it opened with ease, surprisingly quiet.

I gasped, mortified. All I could see before me was big black ass. Chocolate black. Were it nighttime, I mighta missed it. A big black and naked ass that was smiling at me. Taunting. I wanted to move my eyes away but I couldn't. I could see that there were slacks resting down and around the ankles, and I tried to refocus there but I was stuck on that stupid sideways smiling face and the purplish mark, that looked like the map of some small fishing village, just below it. The bat slipped from my grasp, clinking loudly against the cement floor. I wanted to look away but I couldn't until, fortunately, it moved away from me.

“Meg! I can explain!”

My eyes finally cooperated and locked onto a pair that, despite being about three shades darker, looked just like my own. “Dad? What are you...what are you doing?” Okay, it was a stupid question but what else does one say after catching their dad with his pants literally around his ankles?

“I can explain,” he said as he pushed his body off the

bed, struggling to pull his slacks up to his waist, clearing a path to reveal who he was getting on with.

“Marjie?” My eyes must’ve been the size of golf balls. I found it impossible to be seeing what I was seeing, except I was for sure seeing it. “What is...what are you doing? You’re f’kng Dad?”

My sister didn’t seem to be as anxious to conceal her infidelity as our father was. She just laid there on the old twin-sized bed of her childhood, her golden skin glistening with sweat. Hers? His? In that moment I found myself wondering who else’s semen was absorbed into the fibers of that mattress.

“Oh, grow up. He’s your dad, not mine.”

“He raised you. He may as well be.”

Marjie rolled her eyes, then rolled her nude body to the edge of the bed. My father, now concealed, approached me, reaching for my shoulders. I jerked away, disgusted.

“What are you doing? You’re f’kng your own daughter?”

“Now wait a minute, Meg. You watch your language.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

He took a deep breath...looked like he was trying to get his thoughts together. My eyes locked onto the tear drop of sweat on his chin that was dangerously close to crashing to the floor below. Death on impact. “Meg, honey, in all due fairness, your sister is right. Marjie’s not my actual daughter. She’s not my *biological* child.”

My face scrunched in a combo of amazement and disdain. “Who are you, Woody Allen?”

“I don’t get it.”

I scoffed. “How could you do something like this? How extremely pervy of you. Sooo, what, you’re gonna leave Mom now for her kid?”

My dad actually looked confused at this suggestion. “No...no, of course not. I’m not going to leave your mother. I’d never leave your mother.”

Marjie jumped from the bed, slamming her bare feet to the cement floor. She pulled her t-shirt hastily over her head. *Alkaline Trio*, one of her favorite bands. She reached into the neck, flipped her full head of thick and golden, curly locks from inside. “Uhm, what? This is total news to me.”

My dad turned to face my sister, his chest still bare. I swallowed bile repeatedly.

“What are you saying, Marjie? You know I’ll never leave your mother.”

“I did not know that, *Lyle*. That isn’t what you told me.”

“Oh, that’s just dirty talkin’. That don’t mean nothin’.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick for real,” I said, backing up and using the wall behind me to keep me on my feet.

“Dirty talk? Just dirty talk, huh, *Lyle*? You think you can choose Andie over me? You know she doesn’t satisfy

you the way that I do.”

“Oh, God,” I leaned over, blowing chunks all over the floor. Bye-bye soup and sandwiches. Andie’s hard work for nothing.

“Disgusting, Meg,” said Marjie who, mind you, was standing there with my dad’s ball sweat still sticky between her thighs and who knows where else.

“Here, let me help you,” I heard my dad say over the sound of my retching but I, again, jerked away. I didn’t want him to touch me. I never wanted him to touch me again. “Believe me, Sweetheart, I’m not planning to leave your mother for Marjie. I wouldn’t do that.”

I coughed and wiped the wetness from my mouth with the back of my hand. I finally willed myself to make direct eye contact with him. “What makes you think that matters? What makes you think that she won’t leave you?”

Dad looked horrified. I assumed that this expression was exactly what mine was moments earlier, and it sort of fascinated me. Everyone says how I look just like him.

“Meg...Bunny...”

“*Don’t* call me that. You don’t get to call me that anymore.”

“Bunny, please. You’re not going to tell your mother are you? You can’t tell your mother.”

Our eyes locked. His pleading. Mine, marking that moment as the last time that I expected to ever see my

Dad again because after an act like this, I knew I'd never want to see him again. And when I was done –
“*Moouoooooom!!!*”

“Bunny! Bunny, please – I mean, Meg. Honey, don't this to me. I'm your father.”

“*MOOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!*”

I could hear the scurrying of my mother's footsteps pounding across the floor above and then down the stairs. She called to me, letting me know that she was coming as fast as she could while asking if everything was okay. I didn't answer. She'd learn today. I only stood there in the doorway looking at my dad and losing sixteen and a half years of respect for him, while disregarding the scent of the former contents of my stomach, rotting in a pile beside me.

My mother, hurried, paused winded beside me. Oblivious. “Honey, is everything o...kay...” Her eyes followed mine and locked onto my father. “What...what's going on here? Lyle, what are you doing home? Where is your shirt?”

I tugged at my mother's sleeve. She looked to me and I pointed past my father. Mom leaned slowly to the side while Dad did his best to continue obstructing her view. She whispered Marjie's name. Marjie, who was still naked from the waist down and suddenly, decidedly bored with the scene, was casually peeling old polish from her fingernails.

“Andie, let me explain,” my dad said, stealing my

mother's focus.

“Lyle...oh, Lyle. You didn't.”

“Andie, honey, just listen—”

“Marjie? But she's practically your daughter. You've raised her since she was just a little girl. She's just a child.”

“But she's not a little girl anymore, Andie. She's a woman – a grown, adult woman. She looks so much like you.”

Mom's face scrunched with disgust. “Who are you, Woody Allen?”

“That's what I asked him,” I volunteered.

“I don't get it,” he complained, flustered.

Mom and I shook our heads. Mom shoved past her husband. Grabbed his shirt from the floor and flung it in his face. “Cover yourself.”

“Andie...”

“Cover yourself in front of your daughter...in front of Meg.”

He continued trying to plead his case as he pushed his arms through the sleeves of his shirt.

Mom gathered Marjie's sparse clothing and shoved them at her. “You too. Have some decency, Marjorie.”

“Atika.”

“Excuse me?”

“Marjie’s not here right now, Andie. But I’ll be sure to tell her you stopped by.”

Immediately angered, I cried out, “She’s lying, Mom! She responded to Marjie the entire time. She suddenly becomes Atika when you show up?”

“Shut up you nosey, annoying, little shit,” Atika/Marjie-Marjie/Atika spat.

“Marjorie Grace!” Mom gasped, then stopped.

I could see the trembles beginning. The bottom lip, it always began with the bottom lip. Mom began to cry. I felt as though she was always crying. Then I felt bad for being disappointed in her. She was hurt. She should have cried, but I didn’t like it, not a bit. She stood there, shaking and crying and clutching her eldest child’s clothing, disgusting panties included. I wanted my mother to scream and yell and hit them both and put them out of our home. But she would never do that.

“Marjie, how could you do this? To me, your own mother? Why do you hate me?”

Atika/Marjorie only rolled her eyes and snatched the clothing from our mother’s hands. Finally she continued dressing. “It’s Atika. Atika Dangerfield. We’ve met. And maybe, Andie, if you took better care of your husband we wouldn’t be in this little predicament, now would we?”

“Marjie, c’mon now. Don’t be like that. You don’t have to talk to your momma that way,” said Dad, I mean, Lyle.

“*My name is Atika,*” she screamed at the top of her

lungs, her face a roma tomato.

Mom jumped, visibly shaken. Her hands went up and her fingers raked aggressively through her wavy red hair, her nervous habit...what she did when she was on the edge of a break. I didn't think she could handle another one. I knew I couldn't. I was afraid that if she fell apart, we'd never be able to put her back together. We don't always get along, but she deserved better than this to be her downfall. No one deserved this.

I stepped past Lyle and grabbed my mother by her forearms, pulling her hands away before she drew blood, and guided her toward the exit. Her pale, Irish skin was flushed. Her cheeks rosy red and covered in hives. She stopped in front of the man formerly known as my father.

“Andie, just let me explain myself.”

“Explain?” Mom laughed cynically. “Explain how you've been sleeping with my daughter, a girl that you raised like she was your own child, this is what you wish to explain to me? Don't bother, I think it's self-explanatory. You should leave. I want you out.”

“Andie, honey. C'mon, let's not be drastic.”

“Drastic? I want you out!” Her fingers started en route toward her scalp again. I gently took her wrists, tried to guide her away, but she wouldn't move.

“But it's my house.”

I looked at Lyle, made myself look at him and asked myself if my dad was always such an ass. Mom seemed to

contemplate his words for a moment. I noticed that she'd stopped crying – and it frightened me a bit.

“You’re right. You’re right, it is your house. We’ll leave.”

“We who?” Dad – Lyle asked, wide eyed.

“Megan and me. C’mon, Meg. Go pack your things.”

“Don’t be silly, Andie. You’re not going anywhere, you have no place to go.”

“Bye, Lyle.”

I hadn’t realized when I packed a bag to leave that day, I wouldn’t be coming back for a very long time.

day #one.

Andie was raised in the tiny, Midwestern town of Fox Harbor, although I don't think she was born there. She never spoke much about her childhood, at least not pleasantly anyhow. She never told stories about...about... hell, I don't know, baking cookies with her mom for the school fund-raiser or shopping for dresses for the school dance. Y'know, corny shit.

Corny shit that kids and their parents do on those ridiculous television shows that my friend Cam likes to watch. Corny shit shows on corny as shit stations based in small towns like the one I found myself in. The type of ridiculous shit that I imagined that the people of Fox Harbor did. Like bring casseroles to new neighbors and throw theme parties for every lame town milestone event.

Founders Day. That's a thing, right? A perfect occasion

for some high-strung, overachieving, every committee leading teenage girl to put on a show and invite the entire town, and they come because obviously they have nothing better to do. I assumed besides the roles of like, sheriff and mayor and store clerk, people in small towns who have Founder's Day celebrations, towns with such names as Fox Harbor, did nothing greater than dabbling in irrelevant drama. This includes sitting around waiting for some kid whose future consists of gas station attendant and/or teen parent finding their self-worth in prideful party planning – where irrelevant drama will inevitably unfold.

So anyway, Andie never told Marjie and me tales of picking out dresses for stupid shit like the Founder's Day Ball. Maybe television got it wrong, or she majorly missed out on the perks of being a small townie. Nor did my mother ever tell us where she was born. I suppose I never quite cared enough to ask. All I think I know is that she and my Uncle Cal, her older brother, moved to Fox Harbor from wherever they came from when she was like three or four, and there she lived until she was nineteen and, not surprisingly to me, prego.

Townies.

After that she just left – or was kicked out. That story is probably the most malleable of all Andie-Stories. How drastically it changes depends on her mood when she's recounting it. Whatever is true and whatever may be false, the one constant is that when she left her parent's

home, the only thing she took with her was the baby blanket that her great-grandmother knitted for her and her mother's name, sorta. Her mom is named Margaret so Andie named her first born Marjorie, in honor of the woman she hates. Interesting concept. Name your child after the one person you like least in all the world. Maybe that explains the depth of Marjie's mental and emotional issues.

So, pregnant Andie fled her small town home when she was nineteen, not to return except for on three occasions over the span of twenty-three years. Once when her father died. I was three years old when it happened and she took me home with her. I can't remember anything about the trip, but there's one piece of photographic evidence that shows me sitting on the lap of a homely looking, overweight bleach blond with ample bosom. Until I was seven, I assumed she was my grandmother Marge. She wasn't.

The second time was when she got upset with Lyle about some f'kd shit he did to her. Until recently, he was a really awesome dad, but he's always been a pretty sucky husband. Whatever he did must've been really bad because she ran away from home. Yes. Literally. Like a child, she ran away, but that's Andie. She didn't take me with her that time. I was in the 6th grade. Got up to get ready for school and couldn't find my mother.

No one knew where she was for a week, so Dad – I mean, Lyle – called his sister Donnie and had her come

by and help out with taking care of Marjie and me. About three days in she flipped out on him about not being able to deal with Marjie on top of taking care of me and her own kids. Told him that they *“need to get that girl some help ‘cause something ain’t right,”* and then she left, too. I didn’t care, not really. Growing up with Andie for a mother and Marjie as a sister, you learn to be independent early.

The third occasion was after Lyle, her husband of seventeen years, slept with her first-born daughter from a previous relationship.



The first thing I noticed about the woman standing in front of me on the strange porch, the woman who I was pretty certain was my maternal grandmother, wasn’t the shotgun that she held aimed at my heart. It wasn’t the fading red hair that I can only assume when she was much younger, perfectly matched my mother’s. It wasn’t even how she had the exact same green eyes as Andie, like someone 3D printed them and handed a pair to each.

The first thing I noticed about the woman standing before me on the strange porch was how differently she looked from the woman who was holding me in the photo taken someplace in this little town, thirteen years earlier.

In the middle of the night we arrived – sorry, middle of morning is a better account. Sometime after 3 a.m. I’m from a major city, meant to be in a major city with the

ways and habits of a kid from a major US city. We fled to a small town with small town innocence. Better adjective, naiveté, where it would seem that a person could show up on your porch after a twenty-three year long absence and know exactly where you keep your spare key.

What I did not anticipate discovering in a small town is the penalty for tampering with said key is a slug to the chest. In my mind, slugs to chest were reserved for major city living. I survived sixteen point five years in the city without ever having a gun shoved in my chest and suddenly found myself facing the reality that I may die in Smallville because the grandmother who I never knew didn't recognize me.

“Mother! Oh dear, God, what are you doing? That's Megan, your granddaughter!”

The old lady and I locked eyes, the fading version of Andie who was holding a shotgun barrel to my chest, wrinkled her already wrinkled face and took a closer look at me before turning her gaze to meet my mom – though not moving her gun. She turned to me once more, taking a few steps closer until we were separated only by the barrel, which was now free to blow my head off if she felt so inclined.

She let out a harsh puff of air, one that smelled faintly of cigarettes and highlighted by orange juice. She took a quick step back and placed the gun at her side. It was in that moment that my life occurred to flash before my eyes. I saw my best friends, Cam and Shonie, dressed in

all black, taking selfies in front of the hole the coffin that contained my body had been lowered into. I saw my on-again/off-again making out with Yaves Mendoza beneath the shade of an oak tree. Asshole.

“Mother, how could you do that? How could you pull the gun on your own granddaughter?” My mom asked this question in a way that made it seem as though our being there was no big deal, as though we were there every other weekend.

“You were gonna shoot me?” I blurted the question out without really thinking about it and the potential consequences first.

“What are ya doin’ here?” the old lady asked, addressing my mom, her speech accented with the flavor of the South. Surprising.

“Visiting you, Mother. What else?” Again, as though this was no big deal.

“Don’t give me that *Mother* bullshit, Andie, what are ya doing at my house—”

“Were you actually going to shoot me?” I interrupted.

“—at 3 o’clock in the goddam mornin’?”

“Hey,” I cried out in mounting hysteria, attempting to command attention that she refused to give. I knew immediately why Andie hated her. “*You actually pulled a gun on me? You were gonna shoot me?*”

Andie continued, equally unfazed. “What’s the big deal, *Mother*? I’m here. Your daughter is here, what’s it

matter the time?”

“You need to go back to whatever hole you crawled out of and take your spawn wit’cha. I ain’t got time for your nonsense, Andrea.” Andie’s mother turned away, turned toward her front door and reached for the screen handle.

“*Hey,*” I screamed, charging forward, reaching out and grabbing her spindly arm, forcing her to face me. “You hear me talking to you. You’re not *that* old!”

Andie’s mother, the faded redhead best known as Marge, swiftly kicked the butt of the gun, flipping it into her palms as she took a step back to once again get a better aim at my chest – this time shoving it in good and firm. I felt my stomach bottom out and I swallowed hard, trying my best to not show how I felt. I’m from a major city – meant to be in a major city where slugs to chest is a regular occurrence. I could handle this.

Somewhere in the background Andie yelled for the lady who gave her life to put the gun down. I could hear her anger and emotion although she didn’t truly sound frightened. It was that realization that served to slow my heart rate and suddenly, I wanted to laugh. I wanted to laugh at the f’kdupness of the situation. The very first time meeting my grandmother at an age I’m old enough to recall, and she threatens to murder me. Good times, good times.

“Gimme the key you took.”

I wanted to be defiant, tried to be actually, but a

double-barrel shotgun to the chest is the best disciplinary tactic anyone had ever bestowed upon me. Admittedly, I would have maybe been a little less *charismatic* had Andie kept a shotgun on hand. I reasoned that it wasn't worth the trip to the morgue and dropped the key that I'd taken from the hiding space, per Andie's instructions, into her pale and deceptively fragile looking hand.

She closed frail fingers over the small gold key, dropped the gun to her side again, and turned her back to us. I was angry...beyond. Angry at that bitch for pulling a gun on me when, despite my being half-black and tan tinted, she must have recognized me as her grandchild considering I actually still look very much like Andie. Angry at Andie for bringing me to a place that she nor I were wanted.

I turned away, steam from my ears trailing me as I headed toward the car. It'd taken us seven hours of driving to get there, no way we were going home that night but maybe we could find a hotel to crash at for a few hours of recovery.

Andie didn't seem to take the hint.

"Mother," she cried out, running fast after her. "Mother, come on. You can't just leave us out here. It's the middle of the night."

"Goodbye, Andrea."

"Mother, stop. Momma, wait! Please, don't be this way. I'm your daughter, your only one. That's your grandchild."

Andie's Mom halted inside her doorway. Leaned in, set the shotgun just inside. Stepped back out, letting the screen door slam behind her. She walked toward Andie, her floor-length white gown covering her bare feet, flowing in the breeze her fast movement created in the otherwise stiff air. She stood several inches shorter than Andie, yet seemed much taller.

She pointed a finger in her daughter's face. "I ain't seen you in what, six years? Six *years*, Andie, and I barely ever hear from ya. I'd think you were dead for Cal calling me. You show up with this gal I don't know at 3 o'clock in the mornin', snooping around my stoop, and I'm just s'posed to let you in my life? No, Andie, no doing. You need to get back in ya car. Whatever done brought you here, you need to go on back home. Deal with it there. Don't bring your manure to my door."

"Fine, fine. You're right. Tomorrow. Just let us in to get some rest and we'll head back tomorrow. First thing."

"Oh no, I'm not falling for that shit. Tonight, Andrea. You go back where you come from *tonight*."

"Momma, be serious. Home for us is hours away. We're exhausted," Andie pleaded, but her momma's response was turning away, starting back to her door. "It's dangerous, you know. We could...I don't know, fall asleep behind the wheel."

Crazy Lady stopped abruptly, turned to face my mother. Her face, which had been flushed and pink, was now crimson. She rushed back to her daughter, practically

running. Slapped her – hard. With every bit of strength. She slapped my mother so hard her body bent sideways. Andie’s Mom stood there for a moment heaving, her faded waist-length hair covering half of her face, thin nostrils flared. Andie’s hand went up to soothe her burning cheek, but her expression was unchanged. My mother, Andrea Jeanine Blakely, who cries for every reason and none at the same time, was stoic. Tears jumped into my own eyes, tears which I quickly blinked away.

Andie’s Mom turned her wrath toward me and I instinctively took a step closer to the car, seeking shelter. She jerked her head a sharp left before turning away and stomping inside, but leaving the front door open behind her.

I hesitated, there was no way...no way. But realizing we were left with few options, I dreadfully reached inside the backseat and grabbed my duffle bag. Slowly, I climbed the steps and approached Andie, who had yet to budge since her mother hit her.

“We’re leaving first thing in the morning,” I told her at an octave that I was certain only she could hear. “There’s no way I’m spending more time in this whack job’s house than I have to. No wonder you never visit this place.” I turned to walk away, but paused and turned back. “What was that all about, anyhow? I mean, I don’t get it. Why did she slap you?”

She didn’t look at me. Her eyes were fixed onto

someplace in the distance. Something unseen maybe. She swallowed hard but still did not offer any indication of her true emotion. “I told her that I could fall asleep behind the wheel.”

I shrugged. “And?”

Finally, she moved her hand from her reddened cheek and started toward the car. “That’s how my father died.”

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