

Nothing was planned. April hadn't even sounded that happy about Melanie coming over, so Melanie said, "Mother, if you keep prying into my private life, I may have to go on drugs or something. Do I have to account to you for every minute? I'm fourteen."

So her mother offered her the going baby-sitter rate with ten dollars on top to sweeten the deal.

Melanie turned her down flat. "It's a matter of principle. If I start baby-sitting the boys, you and Dad will be going out every month or so. I won't be a teenager. I'll be your slave. The twins are only nine, and the baby's seven. They're going to need sitting for years. I'll be an old woman by then." <sup>(2.)</sup>

Melanie knew she'd won when her mother sighed, "I sure miss Trish." Up till last summer they could count on Trish from next door, but now she was away at college. "I guess we'll have to find somebody else."

"Do that," Melanie said.

Then the boys put up an argument. "Hey, we don't need a sitter," the twins, Mike and Mark, said. "Give us the money and we'll sit Clem." Clem, the seven-year-old, said nothing, but looked pained that anybody thought he needed any supervision. "We're way too old for a baby-sitter," Mike and Mark said. "Add our ages together, and we're eighteen."

Then they found out the baby-sitter was a guy. They didn't know him. His name was Ben, a nephew of the Hutchinsons', three streets over, visiting.

"What kind of guy baby-sits?" Melanie rolled her eyes.

## The Most Important Night of Melanie's Life

When Melanie suspected she'd have to baby-sit her brothers, she made a plan to be over at April's house. She and April were best buds. Melanie had listened on the extension to hear her mother talking about the party she and Dad would be going to. It was a business thing, wives included. So Melanie was ready when her mother mentioned it.

"Absolutely not. I have to be at April's. It's only the most important night of my life."

"What's happening at April's?" her mother asked.

"One who likes kids," a twin said.

"And money," the other one said.

Then they heard he was sixteen. "Wow," the twins said. "He'll be in high school."

"Cool," Clem said softly.

It was rain turning to sleet that night, and Ben was late. Dad stood in the front hall, jingling his car keys. "We ought to be there now," he said, "and the streets are glazing over." Mom was all dressed up and ready too. Melanie came down the stairs in a stocking cap and her down jacket from Urban Outfitters.

"Honey, we've got to leave," her mother said. "Just hang around till Ben gets here."

Melanie smacked her own forehead. "You've got to be kidding. What if he doesn't show? Then I'm stuck here all evening with these dweebs. No way." (3.)

She was out the door, aiming at April's. Dad's keys were jangling like church bells. So finally Mike and Mark promised they wouldn't even move till the sitter got there.

When their parents were gone, silence fell over the house.

"It's like *Home Alone*," Mike said in a spooky voice.

"It's neat," Mark said.

Before they could work up a plan, they heard a sound outside. Feet scraping on the welcome mat. When they opened the front door, Ben was there, filling it up. He was definitely high school. He wore a flight jacket, black jeans, ball cap on backward. Ice crystals gleamed in his sideburns, and his eyes seemed to see farther than a kid's.

"Wow, you sure are tall," Mike said. "How tall are you?" They crowded around him but let him in. He was wearing big boots.

"You probably drive," Mark said. "Did you drive over here?"

In those first moments Ben's mind seemed far away. "No, I walked," he said, "partway."

"We're Mike and Mark," the twins said. "You can't tell us apart. This is Clem. He's the baby. He's only seven."

Then Ben did a fantastic thing. He reached down and shook hands with all of them, even Clem. So it wasn't like having a baby-sitter at all. Ben's hands were ice cold, but at sixteen you probably don't even have to wear gloves.

In the living room he towered over them, gazing around almost like he was surprised to be here. "We could run some movies," Mike said. "You ever see *Nightmare on Elm Street*?"

Ben looked down at them. "I've seen something scarier than that."

"What?" Clem said, hugging himself.

"You guys!" Ben said, and they all yelled and started punching one another because Ben was great.

They didn't even turn on the TV. They got out their baseball cards to show. Clem brought out the plastic dinosaur skeleton he'd put together from a kit. They had hot chocolate and a big bag of pretzels. Ben hadn't taken off his flight jacket. He said he couldn't seem to warm up, so they decided to have a fire in the fireplace. He showed them how to lay it and let Clem light it. (4.)

They were all hunkered down on the hearth, so now it was like a campfire. Mike said, "You know any stories? They got to be scary." Ben thought about that, rubbing his chin. He shaved.

"All my stories are too scary for you guys," he said, so they all yelled and pounded on one another until Ben began, "It was a dark and stormy night."

"Heard it," Clem said.

But they got him quieted down, and Ben told a story about a ghost in a tower somewhere in England. In life, the ghost had been a knight, so in stormy weather you could hear his armor rattle.

Clem's eyes got round. 


A beautiful young girl came to visit this castle, and she started having these nightmares about a suit of armor. It was empty armor standing over in a corner. But in the dream she'd seen the finger on one of the chain-mail gloves move. Her nightmare drew her nearer and nearer. Something urged her to release whoever was inside.

Her dream hand came out to lift the helmet's visor. There within, staring back at her, were the empty eye sockets of an ancient skull. Black beetles glittered in the sockets, but all other life had long fled. Her screams echoed down all the corridors you get in nightmares.

The twins and Clem were sitting closer to Ben now.

The dream returned until the girl was no longer able to sleep. One night she threw back the bedcovers. Wide awake,

she was drawn up the turning steps, higher and higher into the tower. Holding a flickering candle aloft, she came upon a heavy door that swung open. In the corner stood the suit of armor she'd known from a dozen nightmare nights. She moved nearer. Her hand reached out. Hoping against hope that seeing the skull would rid her of her terrible dreams, she lifted the visor.

Inside the helmet a young man's piercing eyes met her gaze, but his voice was hollowed by the years. "I died too young, before I could love," he said. "Will you redeem me? Come away to share my lonely exile in a world beyond this one." 

Ben's voice died out, and the crackling fire burned low. Clem's eyes were perfect circles. It was an okay story until the end.

"Ben, you know any stories without girls in them?" Mike asked.

Then behind them, the front door banged open. Feet stamped out in the hall. The twins and Clem jumped a foot.

Melanie stalked into the living room, jerking at her stocking cap and unzipping her down jacket. "Me and April had a major fight. She's such a—"

Ben was climbing to his feet, turning toward her. Melanie froze. "Oh, wow," she said, looking all the way up at him.

"I'm Ben." He put out a big hand.

The stocking cap fell from Melanie's grasp.

"Hey, Melanie, clear out," Mike said. "We're telling stories. No girls allowed."

"Are you all right?" she gasped, trying to pull Clem closer.  
"What have you been doing all this time? We just got word from the Hutchinsons."

"Who are they?" Mike asked.

"Ben's aunt and uncle. Oh, it's too terrible. Ben... I shouldn't even tell you."

Their mother's hand covered her mouth. "Boys," Dad said, "the reason that Ben didn't come to sit for you tonight is that he had an accident. On his way here, he was struck by a hit-and-run driver. They found his body by the side of the road. He was dead before your mother and I ever left home tonight."

Now the eyes of all three of them, Mike and Mark and Clem, were perfect circles.

"And where's Melanie?" their mother asked, looking around. "Isn't she home yet?" **(S.)**

"We've been having a great time," Ben said, just to her.  
"Yeah," she said in a voice nobody had ever heard from her. "They're nice little boys."

She and Ben were shaking hands, very slow.

"You're in high school?" Melanie said in this new voice of hers. She seemed to be a bug caught in the beam of Ben's gaze.

"I was," he said.

"Better yet," Melanie murmured.

"You want to go out for a little while?" Ben asked her.

"Hey, no fair," Mark said.

"Why not?" Melanie said. "Before my parents get back."

Then in her regular voice she said to the twins and Clem, "You creeps don't even think about getting into trouble, okay? Like make my day, right?"

Ben reached down, swept up Melanie's stocking cap, and handed it back to her. They turned, very near each other, and walked out of the house without a backward glance. **(7.)**

Silence fell. Mike said, "I knew when he put that girl into the story, things were going to turn out stupid."

The three of them sat slumped before the dying embers of the fire. "What could he see in Melanie?" Mark wondered.

"It's a mystery," Clem said.

They forgot how long they sat there, watching the fire flicker out. Then they heard the sound of a car, and right away the front door banged open again. Their mother and then their dad raced into the living room, coats flapping. They didn't wipe their feet or anything. Their mother dropped to her knees and tried to get her arms around all three of them.