

As Quiet as a Little Mouse

Estella tells her little brother that they are going to play a game. He is very excited. Leon loves playing games, especially when he wins.

"It's called, *As quiet as a little mouse*," she says. "Do you think you can you be as quiet as a little mouse?"

He definitely can. Easy.

She opens the heavy door of a large wooden wardrobe. It sits in the corner of the bedroom where Estella and Leon's parents used to sleep and is crammed full of their clothes. She parts the hangers to create a little gap and steps inside. Her brother quickly follows. They burrow their way to the back of the wardrobe and nestle behind the familiar smelling clothes. Estella stretches out an arm and pulls the door closed. All the coats and dresses and suits that their parents had worn during the good times spring back into place, leaving the children hidden from view.

"It's dark," whispers Leon. "And all the dust is getting up my nose."

"Shush. We must be completely silent. We mustn't make a sound, not even a little squeak. If you do then you will lose the game and I will be the winner."

"No Tella, I am going to win the game. I will be the winner."

"Good. No more talking then."

Brother and sister stand side by side in the darkness; and wait.

There is noise downstairs. People are in the house. Leon, who senses this is more than just a childish game, reaches for his sister's hand. He clutches it tightly and keeps as quiet as a little mouse. He listens as the sound of boots climbing the stairs gets louder. Men are shouting. Estella doesn't understand their words, but she knows the meaning.

Someone enters the bedroom. She hears them circling the room before their heavy footsteps approach the wardrobe and stop. There is a moment's silence before the wardrobe door is violently flung open. A beam of light shines through a gap in the clothes, hitting a spot on the back wall of the wardrobe, just above Estella's head. She watches the dust motes caught in the shaft of light. She forgets where she is for a moment and admires the beauty of the particles circulating in a whirling vortex. They dance to a melody that no one can hear.

Estella is suddenly brought back to reality by the terrifying sound of shattering wood just an inch or two from her ear. It makes her jump and she's worried that she might have caused her mother's fur coat to move. She stares straight ahead. She dare not turn her head, but sees from the corner of her eye the butt of a rifle embedded in the back of the wardrobe. As it is withdrawn it leaves a gaping hole in the wood and splinters in Estella's long hair. Leon tightens his hold on his sister's hand. They can hear the owner of the gun breathing. He is standing right in front of them. They are separated by the mere width of one of their father's overcoats. Estella is worried that the thumping beat of her heart will give them away. The children keep still, terrified that the man is going to plunge his rifle into the wardrobe once more. If he does, Estella knows they won't be as lucky again. But it doesn't happen. Instead, the man is fiddling with something. Estella cannot work out what he is doing. Then she hears a match being struck. For a moment she thinks he is going to set the wardrobe alight

and is relieved when a whisper of cigarette smoke filters through her parents' clothes. He exhales loudly. Estella exhales silently. He shouts something. His voice is loud and threatening. His comrade in another upstairs room replies. Estella senses he is now turning away. There are footsteps and the familiar creak of the floorboards. Yes, he's walking back across the bedroom to the door.

Estella is about to allow herself to relax a little when Leon takes in a sharp gasp of air. She recognises it as the prelude to a sneeze. She let's go of her brother's hand and places her hand firmly over his mouth and nose; and grips. She grips as firmly as she can. Grips for life itself. The footsteps stop. The man is listening, she's sure of it. Both children remain quiet and still. Estelle maintains her grip. She can feel the silent convulsions of the repressed sneeze pulsating through the body of her little brother.

Please go away. Please go away.

The man is still there, she knows he is.

Please. Go now. Now!

A voice calls from downstairs. The man answers. Estella is convinced he is going to come back to the wardrobe, but he doesn't. She hears his footsteps receding from the room, then slowly descending the stairs.

Only when Estella is quite certain they are alone does she release her grip.

"They've gone," she tells her brother. "You've won Leon. You are the winner."

Leon doesn't answer his sister.

"Leon? Leon, speak to me." She is holding her little brother by his shoulders. She shakes him, but he's not responding. He is slouched against the back of the wardrobe. Panicking, Estella pulls the clothes to one side to get a better look at him. His eyes are closed. He isn't breathing. He is as quiet as a little mouse.