

# Wuthering Nights

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First prize, Fiction: 2024 Marysville BookNest writing competition

Kaden scrolled his phone, thinking of all the ways he'd like to spend his Friday afternoon. A trip to the corner shop for hot chips was a necessity. A game of basketball might follow. And, since he'd been particularly responsible with his pocket money, perhaps a round of minigolf or a trip to the local shopping centre. But Kaden could hardly bring his seven-year-old brat of a sister along.

He glanced impatiently at the school gate. The stream of kids had slowed to a trickle. Ava was still nowhere to be seen. A chilly breeze blew against Kaden's bare legs. He glanced up at the patchy sky, noting a dark army of clouds in the distance.

The parked cars had all but scattered when Ava appeared, backpack bouncing behind her as she ran.

'Took your time,' Kaden grumbled.

'I was trying to find Shay.'

'Who's Shay?'

'My new friend. We played Simon Says at lunch.'

'She'll be home by now. Hurry up, would you.'

Ava bit her fingers and followed after him. They walked in silence. Kaden tuned in to the rattling of her keychains to check she was still following.

'When is Mum coming back?'

'Late, like she told you this morning.'

The rattling was joined by a second sound.

*Thunk*

*Slap*

*Thunk*

‘Why couldn’t we go to the wedding?’

‘Because we weren’t invited.’ He spun and tore the stick from his sister’s hand.

‘Hey!’

Kaden tossed it into a garden bed.

Ava’s chin jutted mutinously. She bent to pick up another stick.

‘Stop that, or you’re not getting dessert.’

‘Yes, I am! Dad said we could have as much of the chocolate mousse as we want.’

‘*If* you behave.’

‘I am,’ Ava grumbled. Nevertheless, she let the stick lie.

Sensing he could be at risk of putting his sister in a very disagreeable mood, Kaden strove for a friendlier demeanour.

‘So, what class is Shay in?’

‘She doesn’t go to school. I wanted her to come in with me, but she couldn’t.’

Kaden gazed at her suspiciously. ‘How big is Shay, exactly?’

Ava thought about this for a very long time. Longer than he thought the question warranted. Hesitantly, she raised her hand to about the height of her own shoulder.

Kaden exhaled quietly.

Probably a toddler visiting with her mum or something.

At last, they arrived at the edge of town. Here, the houses were spread apart and backed by blocks of undeveloped land. They walked down their driveway, stepping over Ava’s scooter and Kaden’s deflated football on the way.

When they got inside, Kaden pulled Ava's snacks from the fridge and went straight to his room.

He turned on his PC and settled in for eight blissful hours of Fortnite (more, if he was lucky). That was one good thing about his parents being away.

An hour in, Kaden caught a glare on the screen. He swung around. A shaft of sunlight blazed through the cracked blind. He got up to shut it properly and paused.

Ava was climbing over the back fence into the open land on the other side.

Teeth grinding, he hurried out to intercept her, forcing his feet into his runners and storming across the lawn. Wind whipped his hood back from his head. Kaden watched a heavy cloud smother the last rays of winter sun. He could distantly see Ava's pink jumper ahead. She was crouched in the long grass about twenty metres from the fence.

'What are you doing?' he called.

Her head shot up guiltily. 'Playing.'

'Out *there*?'

'Yes. Shay came to say hi.'

Kaden frowned doubtfully. '*Sure*, she did. Stop making excuses and come inside.' As he said those words, a light drizzle touched his face.

Ava rose defiantly. 'I'm not lying!'

Kaden held his arms wide. 'Then where is she now?' He spun in a circle, searching the grass and a nearby grove of bushes for signs of movement.

'I don't know. You probably scared her away.'

'Good!' Kaden snapped. 'Now do you want your chocolate mousse or not?'

Ava crossed her arms over her chest and stomped past him.

Kaden put the lasagne in the oven and turned it on. He reread his mum's instructions to check he had the temperature right and set the timer. Ava was in her room, playing some game with her teddies. Kaden hoped she would remain there for the rest of the night.

He trudged back to his room, slumped onto his desk chair, and put his headphones on.

He had barely commenced his game when the screen froze.

What the fuck?

He glanced at the Wi-Fi icon at the bottom of his screen.

'Ava!' he yelled.

Receiving no response, he charged from his room.

Straight into a dark corridor.

Strange. Usually that light was left on.

Ava darted from her room at the end of the hall. 'My light went off!'

Kaden groaned.

Great! Fantastic! Just what he needed to top off his rubbish afternoon.

'I think the power's out.'

'Let's ring Mum and Dad.' She dashed past him to the landline in the living room.

'We can't use that phone. We'll have to use mine.' He took his iPhone from his pocket.

His gaze went right to the battery. 'Two percent. Ok, forget that. We'll just have to make do until it comes back on. Shouldn't be long.'

The house was full of deep, blue light. It would be pitch black soon. As if on cue, the rain got heavier.

Suddenly, Ava's alert eyes blazed with excitement. 'It's like when we went camping, isn't it? Maybe we should make a cubby.'

'Do whatever you want. I'm going to find a torch.'

Kaden searched through the useful drawer in the kitchen. He found several batteries, but no torches. Remembering an old lantern his dad kept in the shed, Kaden stamped into his shoes for the second time, pulled up his hood, and reluctantly stepped into the rain.

It wasn't far to the shed, but Kaden's runners were soaked by the time he reached it. He pulled the rusty latch and opened the door.

The shed was already black, hiding the traps of cobwebs Kaden knew to be set within. He groped for the light switch, remembering the futility of such a task a moment too late.

Heaving a sigh, he held a hand before his face and stepped inside.

Rain thundered on the tin roof, twice as loud as it had sounded inside the house.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the dark, and he could vaguely see the mounds of boxes. Then, the old bikes. Finally, his dad's handyman desk (which had been used twice in the six years they had resided there).

Power tools were on the shelves above it. And there—blissfully—was the old lantern.

Kaden desperately hoped the battery still worked.

He located the switch and turned it on. Light filled the space, casting sharp shadows on the walls.

At least something had gone right tonight.

Soaking himself a bit more thoroughly, Kaden made his way back to the house. He slid the squeaky door shut behind him and crossed the living room.

Mouth souring, his gaze fell upon the electric oven in the kitchen.

He dropped the lantern on the bench and stared up at the roof. What was he supposed to do now? The internet didn't work. The oven didn't work. The phone didn't work. His iPhone was out of battery. He was wet and cold, unable to warm himself by the heater. To top it off, he had to take care of his baby sis...

Kaden froze. He could hear Ava's voice down the hall—a happy, cantering sound, at odds with his dark mood.

Leaving the lantern behind, he crept towards her room. She spoke as if in a dialogue with someone, pausing after her speech to allow an answer which never came.

Perhaps she was speaking to her toys?

No. Kaden had heard her speak to her toys before. Annoyingly often. She always made the voices for them.

So, who was she talking to?

Kaden paused at the door, listening.

'No, we have to pull it over the chair to make it bigger.' Pause. 'Well, you'll never fit if we leave it how it is. Your head will go right through the roof.' There was a shuffling noise within.

Only then did Kaden notice a faint orange glow in the crack of the door.

His neck prickled.

Bracing himself, he burst inside.

Ava shrieked.

The light went out.

Kaden stumbled forward and crashed over what he presumed to be a sheet. His shoulder smacked against something hard as he fell to his side.

'You ruined it!' Ava screamed, kicking Kaden in the ribs to add insult to injury. 'And you put out my candle. I spent ages lighting that!'

Kaden sat up. He could just see Ava's shadowy form as she bent to retrieve a white stick from the ground. No doubt it had been perched somewhere near the door.

'Where the f- *hell* did you get a candle?'

'The celebration box.'

‘And the matches?’ Kaden said, shooting to his feet.

‘Same place.’

Kaden ripped the candle from her hand. ‘Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to have an open flame in your bedroom? You could have set fire to the whole house!’

‘Actually, *you* nearly set fire to the whole house. *I* was being careful.’

Kaden glared daggers at her. He wished she could see them in the dark. The faintest trace of lantern light came through the open door, but that was all.

‘Who were you talking to?’

‘None of your business.’

He gripped her arm. Hard. ‘*Who* were you talking to?’ he repeated.

‘Shay,’ she mumbled.

Kaden’s hand slackened, and she pulled her arm free.

His heart began to thump in his chest as he felt a chilly breeze over his face. He fumbled in the direction of Ava’s window and shut it tight.

Ava slumped on her bed, rustling the doona. ‘Is dinner nearly ready? I’m starving.’

Kaden forced his breathing to steady. He felt his way to Ava and sat down beside her.

‘Can you tell me more about Shay first?’

‘Why?’

‘You said she was shorter than you when I picked you up, but just now I heard you say her head would go through the roof of your cubby.’

‘Yeah, she’s big now.’

A lump formed in Kaden’s throat. The wind howled outside. The rain pounded like a storm of arrows on the roof. Distantly, a floorboard groaned.

Kaden jumped.

‘W-where is she now?’

‘I don’t know. I lost her when you came in.’

Instinctively, Kaden’s eyes searched the darkest corners of the messy room. Shape after shape appeared, each spookier than the next.

A chill tickled Kaden’s spine.

No, Shay could not be a real person. He would have heard her.

An imaginary friend, perhaps?

‘Can you tell me anything else about her?’

‘She always wears black,’ Ava said conversationally. ‘And she likes to play with me.’

‘What about her face? What does it look like?’

Ava thought about this.

‘She doesn’t have a face.’

Kaden’s stomach dropped.

What little girl invents an imaginary friend without a face? Dressed all in black, no less! Usually, it was fairies with purple hair. Mermaids with sparkly tails. Unicorns which shat rainbows. Ava could only be talking to some creepy ghost!

Kaden glanced about the room again. Was it watching him now, unseen to all but Ava?

A gust of wind blew, rattling the window.

Kaden’s stomach dropped as another possibility occurred to him. Perhaps the reason he had not heard Shay was because she had been talking to Ava while standing outside in the gale.

‘I’ll be back.’ He shot to his feet, pausing at the door to issue a last command. ‘Do *not* talk to Shay while I’m gone.’

Kaden felt his way to every door and window in the house, making sure they were locked, and the blinds drawn.

Of course, he could be shutting her *in* the house instead of out.

Kaden groaned, turning about to ensure he wouldn't be surprised by an attack.

Would anybody hear him if he screamed?

Probably not over the rain.

Fervently, he begged the power to come back on. He begged the storm to pass. He begged his parents to return early.

When no such miracle occurred, he began to wonder if he should go for help.

No, that would mean stepping out into the fray with a psycho woman... spirit... *thing*... lurking about. And to be totally honest, Kaden would rather face a psycho than one of his neighbours.

Hell, he wasn't even brave enough to ring up and order a pizza. Did he really think he could withstand the embarrassment of begging a distant acquaintance to hide him from a faceless ghost?

No.

Ava was not afraid of Shay. He shouldn't be either.

*Probably.*

She did tend to leave when Kaden was around. He hoped it was because Shay was afraid of him, and not because she hated him as much as...

*Ava.*

He had left his little sister alone in the dark.

How long had he been gone?

Five minutes?

Ten?

It suddenly occurred to him that she hadn't made a sound in all the time he had been gone.

Kaden sucked in a steadying breath. He took up the lantern and strode to her room.

Ava was curled up on the bed. Her eyes were shut. Her chest rose and fell steadily. She was... asleep?

Surely not.

He crept closer.

Apparently, yes.

Kaden slumped to the floor, leaning back against the cupboard. As he listened to her soft breathing, his heart found a comfortable rhythm again.

Maybe he was being a bit dramatic.

Kaden watched his sister's tiny form in the lantern light. The moment she was born, and indeed several months before so, he had seen her as a pest to be eradicated.

There had been a few tolerable years in there when Kaden had recognised value in her. Namely, in her eagerness to fetch him things and unwittingly take the blame for his petty crimes.

Then, she had grown an attitude, and it had been downhill from there.

For the first time, Kaden began to wonder if he had a better reason for disliking her.

She annoyed him, certainly. She took up way too much of their parents' attention. She always ate the chocolate biscuits before he could get to them.

It was a rather pathetic list.

Did Ava have better reasons for disliking him?

Kaden did not have to think on that question very long before arriving at his conclusion.

Yes. Yes, she probably did.

Kaden sighed to himself.

Perhaps he should try to be a little bit nicer. His fear over her safety a few moments ago was surely proof that he cared about Ava more than he thought.

Kaden got to his feet. Carefully, he draped a blanket over his sister. As a final precaution, he closed her blind, lest Shay still be lurking.

Kaden was about to let her sleep away the night in peace, but as the lantern light passed over her dilapidated cubby, he got another idea.

Kaden was in the cubby when Ava woke. First, came the mumbling. Then the tossing. A minute of silence followed. Finally, there was a gasp of surprise.

He envisioned what she was seeing: a great, glowing canopy stretched over most of her room—strung from the curtain hangers, chairs, and cabinets.

He heard her little feet on the carpet as she searched for the entry.

Ava's face appeared in a crack between two sheets, lit with awe as she spotted the fairy lights and cushions. The story books and chocolate mousse. Her teddies smiling at her from a nest of blankets. And Kaden in the centre of it all.

'Welcome to your cubby! Take a seat.'

Grinning from ear to ear, Ava complied. 'This is so cool!' She stroked the head of one of her teddies and hugged another to her chest.

'Which story would you like to hear first?'

Ava made her selection and settled down under a blanket with her mousse. Kaden started to read.

Usually, he hated reading aloud. His voice always sounded stilted and quiet. For some reason, it was steady with Ava. Not only strong, but alive with the drama of the tale.

Halfway through the book, Ava's gaze landed on something over his shoulder.

She giggled. 'You have a Shay too!'

Kaden spun in alarm. All he saw was a blank sheet.

Then his gaze softened in understanding. 'My shadow?'

‘Yes. Of course, yours probably has a different name than mine.’ She sucked her spoon thoughtfully. ‘I think his name is Shaun.’

‘Shaun,’ he repeated. ‘Yes, that fits him well. Shall we get back to the story?’

Ava nodded keenly, snuggling up beneath her blankets.

Kaden had barely started to read again when he heard a series of beeps. The roof light turned on. Ava poked her head out to investigate.

‘The power’s back on!’

‘Yes.’

She ducked inside again, in time for Kaden to watch the excitement in her eyes fade as she realised the consequences of such an event. She stared at Kaden uncertainly.

He settled back on the cushions. ‘Turn the light off, would you? It’s ruining the atmosphere.’

Ava jumped to comply.