

- **BUILD TENSION BY HAVING THINGS LIKE SLIGHTLY-OFF**

SOUNDS/SIGHTS GO UNNOTICED OR BRUSHED OFF BY PROTAG

- **BUILD TENSION BY HINTING AT MANNEQUIN'S INTENTIONS, THE
SIGNS OF WHICH ARE, AGAIN, UNNOTICED BY PROTAG**

- the repetition of "tell you" emphasizes the telling not showing vibe

The first job I ever had was at a small, family-owned clothing store in a slow part of my already slow hometown. And in the ten or so years since I've lived as a single woman in New York, it should tell you something that it was the most terrifying night of my life.

I was fifteen during the short time I worked there, and was hellbent on growing up. And that job was to me the start of my career

Even then I knew that before I started on the rest of my life, there were still a number of milestones I would need to pass - though I figured the sooner I could get them done, the sooner I could get away from my parents. So while other kids my age were just starting to figure out boys, I was saving up for college by the time I hit puberty. (make narrator's hindsight recognize how braggy this sounds)

I'd been working there a little over a month the night it happened. I remember (doing something) and overhearing Mr. Brown asking around for volunteers to stay late and do inventory. When I tell you I jumped at the opportunity - my hand went up so fast, you could practically hear it *woosh* by.

I texted my friend and she agreed to pick me up whenever they were done at the festival. Mr. Brown figured it would take me until eleven, long after the festival was dead and over. I had to be done by nine.

Later that night, minutes after everyone left, I got started on my task list. First up was the clothing racks - I made my way down the rows, picking up piles of and finding them homes on hangers as I went. It wasn't until I got to folding and straightening up stacks of shirts on display stands that I started to feel that something was off. It wasn't much at first. Just this creeping, subtle feeling. Like I was being watched.

My first instinct was to check the windows. I even opened the door and checked each way down the sidewalk. Not a soul in sight. There wasn't even so much as a car for miles. Though to be fair, for a Saturday night in a small town, this really wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

Satisfied with the extent of my search, I went back to doing my closing, but as much as I tried distracting myself by folding clothes, I couldn't shake the fact that the farther I got from the windows, the worse the feeling got. And at around five shirts into my folding, I realized that I hadn't actually folded a single one.

This is getting ridiculous.

I breathed. In and out. I did that a couple more times, and on the fourth or fifth breath I heard what sounded exactly like someone's footsteps creaking the floor from just behind me. As I opened my eyes and turned to look at what it was, I saw, once again, nothing. Even for a small town, this was strange.

Next on the to-do list were the mannequins. Though just as I stood to check the collar, I looked up and saw the mannequin's head bent down, its blank eyes facing mine.

I stumbled off my feet and crawled backwards on all fours, my heart pounding against my chest. As soon as I found my footing again, I got up and ran. It was my first, gut instinct. I went out the front door, locked it, and sprinted across the parking lot - getting as much distance between me and the store as I could. I got about halfway to wherever the hell I was going when I stopped at a street corner and started to really process the situation.

After a minute or two in the ghostly silence of the intersection, the thoughts of a once panicked, scared little girl sobered into what I figured was the rational decision making of a new adult, and I considered my next course of action - either I run away, tell Mr. Brown what happened, and get fired, or I keep running, never to go back to that job again, and get fired. Either way, I get fired. Or, I thought, I could go back, finish my shift, and get some sleep that I truly, deeply needed. I chose the latter.

When I got back and unlocked the front door, I didn't notice it right away. My head was so caught up in a battle against my thoughts that I didn't realize until I was right at the spot I was before - where the *mannequin* was before - that it was gone. That they were *all* gone. Every mannequin, all across the store, had vanished out of thin air.

I didn't know who to call - my mom, Mr. Brown, the police, my friend - I just knew I needed to call someone. Anyone. Now. I ran towards the breakroom, found my purse, scooped it up, and got out my phone. As I left through the break room door and headed towards the front, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was dead. Out of battery. Gone.

Just as I was about to panic and run home on foot, I thought of one other option - the manager's office. I unlocked the door with Mr. Brown's spare, and flicked the light switch. Nothing. Great. I went in the room and, guided by the faint glow from a Cisco handset at the far end of the room, I felt my way around to the other side and sat in a seat. I picked up the phone and thought of the one number I ever bothered to memorize - I just hoped she and dad were awake. Once I dialed the number, I simply sat in my seat and waited as it rang. And rang. And rang. And-

BEEEEEEEEEP.

In the pale glow of the receiver, I could just make out a plastic, white finger pressed down on the cradle. I followed the finger, the hand, the arm, all the way up until the rest of the body faded into shadow. All my senses could grasp in that darkness was the sound of a steady, warm breath, close enough to feel. Then the lights came on. Where that breath just was, a perfectly normal mannequin stood in its place - lifeless and still. My eyes slowly moved towards the other side of the room, where I saw the rest of the mannequins - each seated in chairs at a table, each with their faces turned to mine.

This time I didn't run. Even to this day, I couldn't tell you why, but I didn't. I was more scared in that moment than I think I will ever feel in my entire life, but when the time came to it,

I simply walked out the manager's office, out the front door, and never set foot back in again. No phone, no car - I walked for miles. Away from the store, away from home, going further and further into the midnight mist that swallowed me whole.

Remembering all this, with so many years and miles separating me from that night now, I couldn't tell you what I saw, or what I experienced. And to tell you the truth, I have no intention of ever figuring it out. That's why I'm writing all this down now, so I can finally have a place to put this godforsaken memory that isn't just inside my head; so that once I finish this page I'm writing now, I can crumple it into a ball, and toss it into my fireplace. Erased. Gone. Complete.