



The stairs up to my attic are narrow and steep. The fifth step is loose and wobbles when you stand on it. All the other stairs creak and groan.

My whole house creaks and groans. It's a big, old house. And it's kind of falling apart. Mom and Dad don't really have the money to repair it.

"Trina — hurry!" my brother, Dan, whispered. His words echoed in the steep attic stairwell. Dan is ten, and he is always in a hurry.

He's short and very skinny. I think he looks like a mouse. He has short brown hair, dark eyes, and a pointy little chin. And he's always scurrying around like a mouse searching for a place to hide.

Sometimes I call him Mouse. You know. Like a nickname. Dan hates it. So I only call him Mouse when I want to make him mad.

Dan and I don't look at all like brother and sister. I'm tall and I have curly red hair and green eyes. I'm a little chubby, but Mom says not to

worry about it. I'll probably slim down by the time I'm thirteen, next August.

Anyway, no one would ever call me Mouse! For one thing, I'm a lot braver than Dan.

You have to be brave to go up to our attic. Not because of the creaking stairs. Or the way the wind whistles through the attic windows and makes the panes rattle. Not because of the dim light up there. Or the shadows. Or the low ceiling covered with cracks.

You have to be brave because of the eyes.

The dozens of eyes that stare at you through the darkness.

The eyes that never blink. The eyes that stare with such eerie, heavy silence.

Dan reached the attic ahead of me. I heard him take a few steps over the squeaking, wooden floorboards. Then I heard him stop.

I knew why he stopped. He was staring back at the eyes, at the grinning faces.

I crept up behind him, moving on tiptoe. I leaned my face close to his ear. And I shouted, "BOO!"

He didn't jump.

"Trina, you're about as funny as a wet sponge," he said. He shoved me away.

"I think wet sponges are funny," I replied. I admit it. I like to annoy him.

"Give me a break," Dan muttered.

I grabbed his arm. "Okay." I pretended to break it in two.

I know it's dumb. But that's the way my brother and I kid around all the time.

Dad says we didn't get our sense of humor from him. But I think we probably did.

Dad owns a little camera store now. But before that he was a ventriloquist. You know. He did a comedy act with a dummy.

Danny O'Dell and Wilbur.

That was the name of the act. Wilbur was the dummy, in case you didn't guess it.

Danny O'Dell is my dad. My brother is Dan, Jr. But he hates the word *junior*, so no one ever calls him that.

Except me. When I want to make him *really* mad!

"Someone left the attic light on," Dan said, pointing to the ceiling light. The only light in the whole attic.

Our attic is one big room. There are windows at both ends. But they are both caked with dust, so not much light gets through.

Dan and I made our way across the room. The dummies all stared at us, their eyes big and blank. Most of them had wide grins on their wooden faces. Some of their mouths hung open. Some of their heads tilted down so we couldn't see their faces.

Wilbur — Dad's first dummy, the original Wilbur — was perched on an old armchair. His hands were draped over the chair arms. His head tilted against the chair back.

Dan laughed. “Wilbur looks just like Dad taking a nap!”

I laughed, too. With his short brown hair, his black eyeglasses, and his goofy grin, Wilbur looked *a lot* like Dad!

The old dummy’s black-and-yellow checked sports jacket was worn and frayed. But Wilbur’s face was freshly painted. His black leather shoes were shiny.

One wooden hand had part of the thumb chipped out. But Wilbur looked great for such an old dummy.

Dad keeps all of the dummies in good shape. He calls the attic his Dummy Museum. Spread around the room are a dozen old ventriloquist’s dummies that he has collected.

He spends all of his spare time fixing them up. Painting them. Giving them fresh wigs. Making new suits and pants for them. Working on their insides, making sure their eyes and mouths move correctly.

These days, Dad doesn’t get to use his ventriloquist skills very often. Sometimes he’ll take one of the dummies to a kid’s birthday party and put on a show. Sometimes people in town will invite him to perform at a party to raise money for a school or library.

But most of the time the dummies just sit up here, staring at each other.

Some of them are propped against the attic wall. Some are sprawled out on the couch. Some of them sit in folding chairs, hands crossed in their laps. Wilbur is the only one lucky enough to have his own armchair.

When Dan and I were little, we were afraid to come up to the attic. I didn't like the way the dummies stared at me. I thought their grins were evil.

Dan liked to stick his hand into their backs and move their mouths. He made the dummies say frightening things.

*"I'm going to get you, Trina!"* he would make Rocky growl. Rocky is the mean-faced dummy that sneers instead of smiles. He's dressed like a tough guy in a red-and-white striped T-shirt and black jeans. He's really evil-looking. *"I'm coming to your room tonight, Trina. And I'm going to GET you!"*

"Stop it, Dan! Stop it!" I would scream. Then I would go running downstairs and tell Mom that Dan was scaring me.

I was only eight or nine.

I'm a lot older now. And braver. But I still feel a little creeped out when I come up here.

I know it's dumb. But sometimes I imagine the dummies sitting around up here, talking to each other, giggling and laughing.

Sometimes late at night when I'm lying in bed, the ceiling creaks over my head. Footsteps! I

picture the dummies walking around in the attic, their heavy black shoes clonking over the floorboards.

I picture them wrestling around on the old couch. Or playing a wild game of catch, their wooden hands snapping as they catch the ball.

Dumb? Of course it's dumb.

But I can't help it.

They're supposed to be funny little guys. But they scare me.

I hate the way they stare at me without blinking. And I hate the red-lipped grins frozen on their faces.

Dan and I come up to the attic because Dan likes to play with them. And because I like to see how Dad fixes them up.

But I really don't like to come up to the attic alone.

Dan picked up Miss Lucy. That's the only girl dummy in the group. She has curly blond hair and bright blue eyes.

My brother stuck his hand into the dummy's back and perched her on his knee. "*Hi, Trina,*" he made the dummy say in a high, shrill voice.

Dan started to make her say something else. But he stopped suddenly. His mouth dropped open — like a dummy's — and he pointed across the room.

"Trina — l-look!" Dan stammered. "Over there!"

I turned quickly. And I saw Rocky, the mean-looking dummy, blink his eyes.

I gasped as the dummy leaned forward and sneered. "*Trina, I'm going to GET you!*" he growled.