Not An Idiom

The game starts. I know it’s a game based on their voices, which I can hear from downstairs. They don’t ever act like this, so it must be play-pretend. What do they have to talk loudly about anyway, besides me and Polly? We’re the center of their universe. Today’s tragically hot, and tomorrow’s the Fourth. It’s so hot that Dad decides to sleep out in the doghouse, which is really more of a converted shed. Dad sits me and Polly down to tell us this. My thighs and calves and even the backs of my knees stick to the couch. I keep Polly at arm’s length. We aren’t to be alarmed by the doghouse thing. It’s simply too hot to share a bed. Dad asks us if we could imagine having to share a bed. The answer’s clear. We help him set up the doghouse, which is really more of a converted shed, with three oscillating fans, two pillows, a flashlight. We inflate the air mattress, and I tell Polly that there’s clearly some sort of game going on. Lastly, we decorate the outside of the doghouse in red-white-and-blue streamers. Inside the peoplehouse, Mom’s already cooking for tomorrow. I ask if it’s still happening and Mom reaches towards my head to pat it and says that we’d never cancel the barbeque on the Fourth, even if the sky was falling in. She doesn’t actually touch my head though. It’s too hot. My hair feels like swampy strings. I wouldn’t want to touch it either. Mom makes me and Polly take showers before bed.

It’s still ridiculously hot on America’s birthday. Polly and I shuck corn on the back deck and make floppy wigs out of the silken strands. This is how we help. I explain to her that we don’t know if the game is a pirate game or a scavenger hunt, but we’re going along with it. Mr. and Mrs. French come and bring stuff for s’mores. They also bring a speaker. It blares out everything we want to hear, even the Macarena at my request. I eat four hot dogs, and everyone remarks
what an appetite I have. There’s frisbee, kayaking at the pond, and even a bit of football. The fireworks happen at night. I like the blue ones best because they’re so blue they’re white, unbelievable. Polly likes the gold ones.

The radio announces FERDIE’S FOURTH OF JULY MASSIVE MATTRESS SALE. Mom looks up from doing the dishes and tells us she’s actually in the market for a new mattress, funnily enough. I wonder why there are big sales around big holidays. I also wonder why she needs a new mattress. Bad springs, she says. They poke all night. She scrawls something in cursive and asks me to deliver it to Dad. I can’t read cursive yet. It may as well be in code, but we’re gonna learn cursive this year in school. Dad takes the note, reads it, groans, and tells me to tell Mom yes. That’s how we end up at Ferdie’s Mattress Emporium on July 5th. Polly and I make snow angels on the bare mattresses until we get scolded by a mean lady. We learn that some mattresses offer boatloads of support, very firm. I want Mom to get memory foam, but she says no. She selects a nice one, I guess. I try to ask her if Dad would want memory foam, but she’s set on this one. The guys at the store strap it on top of our car, and we drive home with heavy, flapping wings above us.

The heat continues. Dad continues in the doghouse, which is really more of a converted shed. Polly and I play in the doghouse, looking for clues and treasure. What we discover is that the shed’s still got some of Midnight’s fur in its corners where the broom could never reach. I don’t really remember her, but I miss her. Dad lazes in the doghouse until sundown when he mows the lawn. Sweat makes his shirts dark. Mom asks me to bring him a moist towelette to cool off. I wonder why Dad’s exempt from having to shower, which I have to do day in and day out. Stand
and scrub and soap and be bored and nearly drown of boredom, nearly slip down the drain, glug glug glug, into the sewers of boredom. Dad doesn’t have to shower because there’s no shower in the doghouse, even though, as a converted shed, it could fit a small one. He’s also an adult, so he gets to shower or not however he chooses. We bring him a pack of cleansing wipes and a stick of deodorant. I’m not sure how he’s brushing his teeth or flossing. He’s so lucky. I wish I could move into a converted shed.

August is an impatient month. It’s still hot. School looms. This brings bunches of errands: the haircut, the dreaded visit to the dentist, and the only fun one: picking out three new outfits at the department store. I select an orange dress that will be good for the fall or so the salesgirl says. Polly only likes to wear pink; she fills our cart with the color. I think Dad’ll move back inside when the heat breaks for real. Till then we have the longest extension cord known to man, so Dad can still make his work calls. We also bring him paper and pens and pencils. Instead of calling the house from his phone, which wouldn’t be in the spirit of adventure and play, we (primarily, I) run notes between the peoplehouse and the doghouse. It’s fun because it’s part of the game. I wish I knew what the game was. Back from the department store, I show Dad my new outfits. He tells me I’m beautiful.

For Labor Day weekend Mom wears white. She says she can’t afterwards. She also has on these big wedged shoes. Polly and I sit on the grass watching Dad atop the doghouse, forming patties for the grill with a baking tray on his lap. He’s silly. We laugh. Mr. and Mrs. French come and bring guacamole with them. The taste of it is bad, glunky. I pretend to like it because I’m going to be a third grader. Mrs. French asks Mom how she’s holding up. An odd question. She asks in a
serious sort of hushed voice, which is also odd. Everything else is normal. We four stand waving goodbye like one unit at the end of the night. The neighbors disappear into their house, and Dad returns to the backyard. Mom makes me and Polly shower.

We return to school. Mom bakes cookies and gives us three each, steamy in Ziploc bags. She has me deliver a Ziploc to Dad, too. We also have lunchboxes, water bottles, and new pencils in our backpacks. I have notebooks. Polly’s not old enough for notebooks yet. I help her find the right classroom. My own classroom is bright, and Ms. Deirdre asks each student to say one thing we did over summer. I say that I helped my dad move into the doghouse as part of a game. Ms. Deirdre wants to see me before recess, but I skip out of the classroom and onto the swings before she can call after me. Back in class we refresh our addition and subtraction skills. I want it to be lunchtime so I can have my cookies.

Our mailbox gets decapitated soon after school starts. There’s a group of boys who have a baseball bat, and this is what they do at night. I go out back to tell Dad about the vandalism. He tells me that he can fix it himself if someone brings out his toolbox, but Mom insists on calling a handyman because it’s hassle-free that way. I run back out to tell him this, and he asks me to bring him more paper. He sends me back inside with a note for Mom. I pant and groan at the end of all this. I wonder why Polly doesn’t have to go back and forth. I glare at her, sitting at the table doing her homework. She’s small and weird, straining to reach up to the table. She holds her thick pencil the way a dog might, like it’s her first time holding such a thing. It’s still new to her. My moment of nastiness recedes. My role in the game is clearly more active than hers. I should be grateful. Plus, she eats her boogers. I’m not jealous of a booger-eater.
The leaves get brittle. We work on multiplication tables in Ms. Deirdre’s class. Polly’s lucky; she’s only just starting adding. Mom takes us to the pumpkin patch, and we get twenty-six pounds worth of pumpkins and even a pimply gourd. Dad stays at home because he’s swamped with work. It’s cooling off, but it’s not cold yet, meaning it’s still too hot for him to come back inside. Dad decorates the doghouse in fake cobwebs and places a stuffed spider with purple and black spindly legs atop the roof of the doghouse. I help him stretch the cobwebs to make them ghoulish and realistic. Mom decorates the front with tombstone markers made of styrofoam, ghosts made of sheets, and a human skeleton made of plastic. I ask Mom where Dad does his business, and she said out in the woods, like a dog.

Mom’s birthday is October 15th, making her a Libra. She begs us not to make a fuss, but Dad wants to make a gesture since Mom’s so good and nice. He buys every flower from every store in town. This is his first errand in months, I’m pretty sure. He weaves the stems together, pricking himself red and weepy, to create a flower drape, which goes atop the doghouse. He places Marisol (that’s the spider) like a crown on top of everything. Mom gets home and finds Polly, whose job is to bring her outside. Mom and Dad embrace, which is good because they don’t seem to do that much. He welcomes her into his abode, which is really a doghouse, which is really a converted shed. Polly and I are assigned to the cake since I’m mature enough to use the oven.
The next day Mom has a decree to read from Dad. I’m pretty sure it’s part of the game, and Mom’s a really good actor because she really seems truly sad. She sheds a tear, which I inquire about for the rest of the day, but she won’t say anymore than what’s on the paper. It reads:

Although I love my family, I’ve never been happier than I am now. Please respect my wishes to remain here indefinitely. This is where I belong.

I sit outside with Dad and Marisol the spider some nights. We count nines on our fingers, a trick he showed me so I can ace Ms. Deirdre’s timed multiplication quizzes. At the costume store Mom picks out a big dog suit for Dad. In the doghouse he tries it on, and his hands become giant paws with black pads. His poses are to die for. Sit, lick, play dead. I go as a pirate, and Polly goes as a genie. Mom dresses up as a nurse like Clara Barton from hundreds of years ago. Nurse and Dog work together to light a path from the driveway around to the doghouse using paper bags and tealight candles, which is sort of like them spending time together. I remember her birthday. They also spent time together then. That was good. I think Dad will move back into the peoplehouse soon. Mom encourages the trick-or-treaters to go around back and get a doggie treat (Milky Way, Kit Kat, or Snickers) from the doghouse after getting a lolly from her. Chocolate is better than lollipops, but any house with two opportunities for candy is a winner. I think we’re the most fun house of the night. If this is the game, we’re winning.

Mom takes down the Halloween stuff on November 1. Dad keeps the spider. For company, he says. Mom lets us keep the Jack-O-Lanterns till they sprout mold. I like lifting the lid on my dewy way to the bus stop so I can see the development of green, white, brown, speckles, spots, muck. Polly screams away in terror. You can really tell she’s a kindergartener. Even Marisol the
spider spooks her sometimes. I get home from school and Dad whistles to me. He’s still wearing his dog suit because it’s a bit chilly out. He hands me a folded up note to give to Mom. He hugs and kisses me and tells me I’m a trooper. Not sure what I’m a trooper for.

Mom decides that we need a more permanent way to communicate so that I don’t have to run back and forth a thousand times a day. She makes a pulley system by stringing rope from our backdoor to the doghouse. I never knew she was handy like that. If we have a pickle jar we can’t open, we take it out to Dad. Surely someone who can make a pulley system can open a jar. But maybe people can only do about half of things, and that’s why you marry someone. With clothespins we can instantly send messages. Polly and I drag scribbles and secret codes across the line. Polly’s are mostly scribbles. I send my cursive practice so Dad can see my improvements. He sends back a note with three question marks. I guess the swirly As, Bs, and Cs on repeat don’t mean much altogether.

The first frost hardens our world, and Dad calls us on the phone. He never calls. Polly and I actually hear his teeth knocking together. We race out with all the blankets we can find. I wonder how long indefinitely is. I thought it meant till it’s really cold. I ask Dad why he’s still out here when it’s really cold, and we have heat inside. I shiver in my long sleeve shirt as an example. He says he just truly, honestly loves his own space. I suppose I get it; I’d hate sharing a room with Polly. He says he’s happy and loves to be alone to think about things. I ask him what kind of things, but he tells me it’s too cold for me to stay out here shaking and shivering.
Thanksgiving’s nice. We eat the big meal with the screen door open and sit at a folding card table so we can see Dad, and he can see us, except Mom sits facing in, so they can’t really see each other. We have yams and potatoes and buttered rolls and green beans, which this year I like. Polly still doesn’t like the green beans since she’s only in kindergarten. Dad, whose face is getting so hairy, eats from on top of the doghouse with Marisol the spider and a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He yells out for the gravy boat. Mom doesn’t want the nice china to break in transit, so she pours gravy into a paper cup, which I deliver to Dad. He thanks me with a hug and kiss and another hug. After pie he strings a message across the rope in the evening. It says, thank you.

Our oven clonks out. From too many yams, Mom says. She calls a guy to service it. I alternate practicing my cursive and my nines for school on Monday. Dad’s not happy when the truck pulls up and out comes a big, uniformed stranger. Four pieces of paper come down the line in rapid succession. Mom snatches them from my hands and disappears into the office. I can’t help peering into the office later. I can be a terrible snoop. But there’s no evidence of the pages.

Polly and I begin our Christmas wish lists as soon as I can justify it (November 28). I write down that I want a dog adopted from the shelter. I make Polly do the same. Our combined asking power could make it happen. We decorate the tree and set aside Dad’s favorite ornaments so he can hang them from the doghouse shingles. At school we learn about these expressions that mean something different than what it sounds like it should. Quit pulling my leg, all eyes on me, up in the air, cat’s out of the bag, in the doghouse, joined at the hip, a bull in a china shop, skeletons in your closet, it’s raining cats and dogs, and spill the beans are some examples. We’ve all agreed to
understand the secret meanings. I try to explain them to Polly, but she doesn’t get it, and I can’t remember what they’re called exactly. Idiot expressions? It’s funny. I wonder why we say different things than we mean, why we dress our words in big-brimmed hats and feather boas. We could easily say that it’s raining hard. I drink so much hot chocolate in December. I could say that I drink cats and dogs of hot chocolate. We have to trek to the store for two new space heaters that glow orange scary and more extension cords for Dad. One day it snows cats and dogs, so Dad invites us to a snowball fight in the backyard. Idioms, I remember they’re called. I want to tell Polly, but she’s clawing inside her nostril (digging for gold is the expression) and I get grossed out.

Polly and I race downstairs on Christmas morning to stockings stuffed full and a tree bombarded with gifts. We bring Dad his stocking and a cup of coffee. We’re surprised to find only our names on the tags under the tree. None for Mom or Dad. Mom insists that there’s a present for Dad under there. We readily accept this and begin tearing through red and green paper. There’s no puppy in sight. I shed a few secret tears, but I don’t want to be ungrateful. I’m a trooper after all. At the bottom of the pile we strike gold: a tiny box with DAD written on it. I deliver it to him. Polly sticks a candy cane in her nose. He opens the box. Inside is a bell like at a hotel front desk. It’s just what he wanted. He rings for more coffee. He rings for slippers. Christmas dinner is ham, potatoes, and green beans. I like the green beans; Polly doesn’t. Dad rings for more ham, says he’s so hungry he could eat a horse. Polly’s crying because she thinks the ham’s made of horse. Mom has to make mac and cheese from a box. Dad rings and tells me he can actually see in a bit through the sliding glass door and wants to know what’s cooking. I tell him mac and cheese, and he asks me to bring him a small scoop. I do.
For New Year’s Eve we get those fun glasses in the year’s shape. Dad rings for a beer. For chips and dip. For fun glasses. For a new pen. To write resolutions, he says, since the others are out of ink. And a pencil, too, since all of his are dull. I tell him that’s what happens if you don’t sharpen your pencils. Polly has to go to bed, but I’m allowed to stay up. Mom and I watch the ball drop at midnight and clink our plastic glasses. Dad rings to clink. On January 1st, Dad rings for a box to put his ornaments in.

February’s my least favorite month, but it’s Polly’s favorite because her birthday is the 5th. She’s an Aquarius. We wear lots of pink all month to combat the cold. Polly’s party’s at the movie theater. We see the new animated flick, the one about fireflies and dragons. Her friends can’t sit still. I slurp my Blue Raspberry Slushy and feel mature. We do a Valentine exchange at school, which means I have to cut, glitter, and sticker 19 cards, even for the classmates that I don’t particularly like. On Valentine’s Day proper we wear saddle shoes and pink skirts. Polly wears pink ribbon in her ponytail. We go to school with bulging manila envelopes containing our doily and construction paper creations. Ms. Deirdre teaches us about Saint Valentine. I wonder a lot about love today. We get takeout for dinner. Italian, because it’s romantic. Are Mom and Dad romantic? Mom arranges the chicken parmesan, pasta primavera, garlic bread, and two skinny glasses filled with golden bubble liquid (same from New Year’s Eve) on a tray. She lights two skinny candles, which are also sort of golden. She asks us to open the sliding glass door and screen so she can teeter to the doghouse. Polly and I sit down to our spaghetti and meatballs in front of the TV. I guess Mom and Dad are romantic. I don’t know, and not knowing makes me feel like I’m not the brightest bulb in the box, which is an idiom meaning stupid.
I demand that everyone’s in green on St. Patrick’s Day. Even my socks are the shade of shamrocks. I inspect what Dad’s wearing before school. I notice the doghouse, which is really more of a converted shed, is messy with shirts, crumpled paper, and cans. No green on his outfit. I pinch him. He reminds me he doesn’t have full wardrobe access, and green happens to be a color he’s lacking. I scoot inside to remedy this. In Mom’s room I dash through the drawers that I thought were Dad’s, but they’re empty. Weirdly, one of them contains Mom’s bulkier sweaters. I’m able to find a green cap, which I bring to him. It covers up his rumpled hair, which probably needs a trim. We search for four-leaf clovers at recess. Even Ms. Diedre joins in.

My birthday’s two days after St. Patrick’s Day, March 19th. I’m a Pisces, and I wear a beautiful green dress. I get to bring seven friends to the bowling alley. We play, and I get three strikes. We have pizza and cupcakes. Dad stays behind, with the promise that he has a special gift for me. We get home all tired out. Dad rings for us. I bound outside, and lo and behold: a puppy. I cry and scream and scare it a little. I’m so grateful. But where will Dad sleep? Mom explains that the puppy can sleep inside, and Dad can stay outside. It can even cuddle in her bed if it likes. I want to name it Daffodil, but Polly says that’s a girl’s name, and the puppy’s definitely a boy. Look how he pees! Polly says Spot, but I say that’s common. It’s the best birthday ever, and the night is warm enough to have cake outside. We sit in lawn chairs arranged around the doghouse. I hold the squirmy puppy on my lap. We’re a full family.

April has rain and one weird day of snow. Dad rings for an extra blanket. At school we have a big test on everything, including idioms. I get those questions right. I hit the nail on the head.
It starts to get hot. School speeds up and slows down. The puppy grows. May does this to us. The first weekend of summer, we sit around the doghouse with Dad and Marisol the spider on the roof. It’s May 28th, Dad’s birthday. He’s a Gemini. He says through a forkful of vanilla sponge that he sure hopes he doesn’t kick the bucket anytime soon because he’s never been happier. His beard is almost a full year scraggly. It’s white in some spots. You’re all such troopers, he says. He sheds a few tears of gratitude. I notice that the grass needs mowing. The puppy lick-kisses Mom right on the mouth.