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WE WERE BROTHER AND SISTER THEN

When dad came home, we hid.

We hid ourselves under the tall, waxy bushes lining the boundaries of our yard. We hid behind our neighbors' metal tool shed or sometimes inside of it when it was unlocked. We wedged ourselves behind the forsythia that banked the front wall of the house across the street or ducked under the canoe they kept alongside their house. We hid ourselves in the trees from late spring, just after they had grown their full coats, to the early fall, just before they shed them again for the coming winter.

While we hid, they argued. The whole neighborhood heard it: the shouts, the broken glass, the thud of things making contact with the wall, doors slamming, silverware drawers emptied onto linoleum in a rage. We waited out their battles and kept watch. Our limbs hung down from our perch until the night came; in the darkness they resembled silvery birch bark. We were like chameleons.

Sometimes we didn't have a chance to hide. When dad parked his blue Oldsmobile askew in the ankle-deep grass of the front yard you'd forgotten to mow, he whipped you good with his wide, brown leather belt. Days later, where the heavy brass buckle had landed on your backside, patches of dark shadow bloomed under your skin like a kind of urban camouflage. He'd left right after on a bender; he hadn't even waited for you to pull your pants up. I watched from the crack of my bedroom door, my tanned skin melting into the wood paneling. In the gray light of sunset, you pushed the mower up the uneven bank of our front yard. Your eyes were still red from crying, but your face was fierce with hatred as you limped along.

Later, as we lay side by side in your narrow bed, you treated me like a confidant rather than a little sister. You put your arm around me in comfort, the dark, earthy smell of boy filling my nostrils.

I hate him, you said.

The anger in your voice hung there, buzzing in my ears like a nest of paper wasps. I snuggled closer to you, pressing my nose into your chest. The four years you had on me made you able to say things I could not. I didn't know how to form things into words then, how to express my anger and sadness and fear. It lay over me like darkness, like a sea—black and silent, the waters below deep and unknown, teeming with life.

I'm going to kill him, you whispered.

The heat of your breath sank into my ear. The danger in those words frightened me even more than the place where we lived.

The time we ran away, it was your idea—you with a fresh shiner and a split lip, me with a tanned hide. The skin around your eye was still puffy and red; the blood hadn't yet pooled around the eye socket like the sheen of oil on pavement after a fresh rain. We packed things that didn't matter in the real world: your baseball glove, my pencil box, favorite clothes and books, trinkets worth nothing. We didn't have a dollar between the two of us.

We slipped through your bedroom window and bolted over the backyard, down the russet dirt path that led to the railroad tracks. The clay crumbled beneath

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our feet and left brownish-red smudges on our sneakers. We walked the tracks that ran all the way up the coast of Connecticut, stepping silently from one wooden tie to another, passing through the reedy smell of the marsh and into town. We sat in the baseball dugout as the crickets sang their din around us. The moon hung high in the sky—a small wedge of silver above the bright net of stars strung across the sky like a hammock.

Your outrage faded as my fear grew. It was less than an hour before my mind reiterated all the possibilities for the next day, less than an hour before I saw the darkness and uncertainty of our future, less than an hour before I was in tears. We walked back home and slunk into the house unnoticed, hid our backpacks in our closets and huddled under the covers of your bed, whispering ghost stories to one another. We were brother and sister then.

Along with age came that coldness inside of you. Your eyes got hard, the same steely blue-green that dad's were. You clenched your fists whenever he came home, gritted your teeth and went silent, stared holes into things. You were sixteen when you finally stood up to him. He broke your nose and pinned you to the floor, pressed his knee into your neck to prove something to you. I was hiding behind the couch when it happened. I held my breath and pressed my body into the blue plaid fabric, willing myself to take form and become a part of it. I tried to pretend I wasn't there—but I was. I saw it all.

You walked out with the clothes you had on and didn't come back. Mom cried at night, quiet sobs that she muffled with her pillow. I hid in your closet, surrounded by your shoes and clothes, Matchbox cars and board games. I held your baseball glove in my hands and caressed the palm, inhaling the smell of the oily leather, turned myself to stone when his footsteps approached. He wouldn't find me there; I would become a statue—frozen in time. The clothes hanging around me became the cover of foliage in the trees. After he had gone, mom opened the door and held out her hand. I slid my fingers into her cool grip and she pulled me out of that place.

Come on out of there, now, she said. You're too old to be hiding like this.

I was getting too old for a lot of things: too old to cry, to climb trees, to hide. I retreated to my bedroom and kept my head down, took knocks on my shoulders, suffered forefingers dug into my sternum, endured yardsticks on my bare bottom.

Mom tried to get you to come home, but you wouldn't. I even found you, walked halfway across town after school to talk to you, but my tears couldn't move you anymore.

Grow up, you said. Stop crying. You're not a baby anymore.

I was fifteen when a friend's older brother pressed his body against mine in the dark basement of their parent's house. I didn't cry—I was too old for that. I fought back with teeth and hands and knees and nails. Above us, the party went on, oblivious—my shouts lost in the thumping music.

You were working construction in town a few days after, wearing a dirt-smudged white tank top and a yellow hard hat, your muscles taut as you shoveled broken asphalt into a wheelbarrow. When you saw me, your face went from hard to soft to hard again in an instant. You threw your shovel down and walked away from the job, stepped right over the caution tape.

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What happened? you demanded. Did dad do this?

You lifted my chin to the sky, studied what the boy had done to me, the dark bruises his fists had left behind. Your eyes went cold.

I shook my head. I wouldn't let the tears come, even though I wanted to. I set my jaw and tried to look at the world like you did, with that meanness that made you strong.

You tell me who did this, damn it.

I gave you his name because I trusted you. Then I asked, What are you going to do?

You grimaced and looked away from me, saying, I don't know, I don't damn know.

I watched you walk away, but inside I knew. I knew what it was that I had trusted you with. Not with a secret, not with the knowledge—I trusted you to set it right, like any big brother would.

You were only nineteen when they sent you up to Cheshire to serve out your time, just a few years younger than I am now. It's been seven years, and I've never told anyone why you beat that boy to death, not even mom. I let her keep on believing it was a random act—a stupid bar fight gone wrong, her boy in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's better than her knowing about that coldness you have inside you—that it passed from father to son like some inherited gene, like some kind of cancer. It's bad enough that you won't see her when she visits, that you won't answer any of her letters.

Dad's doctors have told him to stop drinking—that his liver is giving out, that it will kill him if he doesn't. Somehow, the bottles appear as fast as mom and I can pour them down the sink. We patrol the house, morning, noon and night, and dispose of his newest acquisitions, but I don't know why we bother.

I don't hide from him anymore. His skin has turned sallow, stretched over bone and sinew like rubber the color of chicken fat. He is slowly wasting away to nothingness. His belly has swelled like some badly malnourished child and his breath has turned sour. The doctors say he doesn't have much longer, and mom nods, wipes a tear from the corner of her eye with a tissue. I want to ask them, How much longer? How much longer will we have to stand this? But instead, I hold her hand, pat her arm, and tell her it will be all right. It will be all right, I promise, you used to whisper to me when we were young.

He isn't strong anymore, not like he used to be. I could kill him myself—if I wanted to, if he weren't already doing it for us. He's not the man he was when we were young, that much I know. His meanness left him after he got sick. I don't know if he's sorry; he won't talk about it. But he cries sometimes in his sleep, soft low moans at first, followed by choking sobs that wake him. I sit at his bedside, hold his bony hand and look into his eyes; they are blue-green and soft, not hard and jagged like they used to be. They've melted like icicles in the spring. They are like your eyes were when we were children—soft and warm and endless—the way they were when we were brother and sister and not these strangers we have become.

These days I read to him from *The Hartford Courant*. We sit in his darkened bedroom, the bitter, stuffy air closing in on me as I read aloud—obituaries first, to make sure we haven't written his yet; then the weather, to see if tomor-

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row it will finally rain; and finally the local news, when he asks me when you will come home. Because I don't want to upset him, I say soon—always soon, although I don't always know if it will be soon enough.