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HOTEL ROOM WITH MY BROTHER

We were in a hotel room in Milwaukee. My brother lay in the bed, I had the floor. We were waiting for my father to die, in a hospital down the road. My mother and my sister had the double room on the floor above us.

We were arguing about the television. He wanted to watch an old movie, I wanted to watch the basketball game from the west coast. On the night table sat the telephone, which we also watched.

"Look," he said. "I'm paying for this room." In the dark the movie reflected off his glasses.

"Okay," I said.

He looked at me, and then the television, and then the phone. And then me. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes."

He tried to watch the movie. I looked at the ceiling, blue with the glow of the television. I was trying to hear what my mother and

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my sister were up to. I heard their toilet flush. I heard the padding of feet. I heard the toilet flush again.

"They're restless," my brother said. He leaned out of bed to tell me this. "We're all restless."

We both looked at the phone.

"They could call us," I said.

"What good would that do?"

We were in a hotel room in the Poconos, twin beds. My parents were paying. My brother had just got back from a trip around the world, where he'd hoped to discover himself. I was on a between-semester break from my sophomore year at college. My brother wanted to talk, I wanted to sleep. We talked.

"I was in love once," he said. "Let me read you something."

I didn't say anything. I was still mad at him because when we were in the lounge, playing ping-pong, two girls approached us, and I thought we had a chance. But he let them vanish. We were playing mixed doubles and then he put down his paddle and said, "I've had enough," and walked off. The two women looked at me, smiled and shrugged, and laid their paddles on the table. They had blond hair and thin blue waists. I watched them ascend the stairs to the lobby. I was sad. My brother was poking at a stalled pinball game that he had no intention of playing. His shoulders were balled up as if to ward off any attack I would make.

"Do you always sleep with everyone on the first date?" my brother was reading from his bed. The lights were off. "That isn't for you to know," she said.

I just wanted to go to sleep.

"What are you doing?" my brother said. He had turned the old movie to my basketball game.

"I was just thinking about that night in the Poconos when you read me that story."

"You're weird." He turned back to the old movie. "What story?"

"You wrote a story once about a girl who slept with a boy on their first date, and how he didn't know why, and how he couldn't accept it."

"I don't remember it."

"Sure you do. We were in the Poconos. Mom and Dad had taken us after you got back from Katmandu. We shared a room. You read to me in the dark. I don't know how you did it, but you read in the dark."

"She got married," my brother said.

"Who?"

"That girl I was reading to you about."

"It makes me feel uncomfortable," my brother's character said.

"That's your problem, not mine." She rolled over as if to sleep. I touched her.

"You won't talk about it?"

"No."

"I got up and got my clothes on. I can't really say why I was behaving this way. I wanted to believe that she was special. I wanted to believe that I was special. I went to the door. She didn't look up when I left. It was raining outside. I walked home in it."

"Did she mean anything to you?" I asked my brother. He had turned the television off. We were in the dark.

My brother laughed. I could feel him smiling. "When I heard she was getting engaged," he said, "I did something stupid. I flew out to California where she was living. I don't know, I thought I could convince her of something."

"And she wouldn't see you?" I guessed.

"Oh, she saw me all right. We walked the beach. She listened to me. I didn't make any difference."

"And that was it?"

My brother laughed again. "Yes," he said. "That was it."

"I climbed the stairs to my second-story flat," my brother was reading. I was beginning to feel embarrassed for him. I wanted him to stop for his own sake. "I was wet inside and out. I sat on my bed. From the kitchen I could hear the sink leaking. I began to cry. Was it so terrible, not being special? Why did it bother me? I'd slept with other women, she'd slept with other men. She just did it more easily."

I laughed. I was younger than him, and I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. "Keep reading."

"No." He rustled the papers he was holding, in the dark. "I'd rather sleep."

The phone rang. We both went for it. Being on the floor somehow made me quicker. I was breathless and glad that I was one shade closer to what we were going to learn.

"Nothing new," said my mother.

"Nothing new," I told my brother.

"We just wanted to know if you boys felt like coming up for a drink."

"She wants to know if—"

My brother nodded. The light was on. He was already pulling on his bathrobe.

"Sure," I told my mother.

We hung up. I grabbed my robe, looking at my brother. We were both young balding men. He was thirty-three, I was twenty-seven. Our father was dying and my brother and I didn't know each other very well. He was much more successful than me, he moved in a higher circle, taught law school, owned a New York condominium that overlooked a park. He was on the brink of getting married. If this business with my father went on much longer, she would come out to be with my brother, to see him through it. I was on the brink of trying to figure out what to do with my life, of still trying to see if anyone would have me. My sister upstairs was married to an accountant and ran her own advertising agency. I knew where I was. I was on the brink of nothing.

We sat in their hotel room sipping Kahluas. It was three a.m., all the television stations were off the air. Outside, Lake Michigan turned gray and white under the moon. The traffic lights blinked yellow. Officially, we weren't allowed in the hospital until nine, but we had a special pass that said we could come visit whenever we wanted. We were thinking about it.

"Well, why not?" said my sister. She was pregnant with her second. "Maybe he's awake and they've forgotten to tell us."

We looked at each other. My father had been in a coma for four days. Awake? What was awake?

"Come on," my sister said. She started to pull on her sneakers. She always wore sneakers when she was pregnant.

"We should," my mother began uncertainly. "We should get dressed."

"The hell with it," said my sister, snatching up the car keys. "Who's going to see us, anyway?"

The room in the Poconos felt like an unlit vault. I kept waiting for my brother to start reading again. When you stop like that, you don't stop. You don't stop until you're finished.

"Daniel," I said. "Go on. Please."

He didn't say anything.

I got up and peered over him lying in bed. His eyes were wide open.

"Come on," I said. "I'm listening."

"Go away," he said.

I went away.

The inside of the hospital was yellow baseboards, green wainscoting, white walls. The floors were white with black specks. Our feet squeaked over them.

"We shouldn't be doing this," my mother said.

My sister was leading us down the hall. "But I can feel it," she insisted. "I can feel that he's awake."

My brother and I looked at each other. Light reflected off our bald heads. I was thinking about the girl he had lost, the father we were going to lose, the girl he had, the nothing I had.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked him.

He dug his hands into his bathrobe pockets. He shivered. "Don't ask."

We pushed through doors, pried open the elevator, ascended to the ICU. Our waiting room was empty, our nurse's station was empty, the lights were dimmed. We could hear voices from my father's room.

"You see," my sister said. She thrust out her belly as if it were the right answer. "I told you."

We tiptoed to his room. Dad, we were going to say, Dad you did it. You made it. Seven bypasses and you made it. Four days comatose and you made it. Eighty pounds overweight and you made it.

I came back.

"Your eyes are still open," I said.

"I told you to leave me alone," my brother said.

"I can't stand the guilt." I sat on the end of his bed. "Look, would you please keep reading. For my sake?"

"For your sake."

"For our sake." I patted his feet through the blanket. "That way we'll get to know each other. We don't really know each other."

"You're obnoxious," he said.

"Yes." I nodded in the dark. "But you're my brother."

They were doing things to our father. The respirator made sounds like a bird underwater, the heart monitor spiked. The nurse said, "You can't be here."

The doctor was the thirteenth one I'd seen connected to my father's case.

"Who are you?" my sister said.

"Sarah," my mother warned her.

"Please," the nurse said.

"But look," my sister said, pointing at my father.

His eyes were open. He was looking at us. There was a tube down his throat, one coming out between his legs, several more snaked into his chest.

I waved at him. My brother waved. My sister waved. My mother pushed past the nurse, squeezed next to my father. She kissed him under the tube. "Sweetheart," she said.

My father bit the respirator.

"That's it," we said. "Fight, Dad, fight. You can do it."

The doctor said, "You have to leave." He shook his head at my mother. The nurse shook her head at us. We fell silent. The heart monitor gave out a low scream. My sister cupped her mouth. My mother would not let go of my father.

My brother touched her. "Come on," he said, quietly. "I know a great waiting room."

He led my mother out.

That next morning, in the Poconos, I chased him down the slope. He was skiing very fast. I was trying to catch him. I was trying not to fall until I caught him, and then it would be all right if I fell.

He leaned around a curve.

"Daniel!" I shouted, and tasted his name in my scarf.

I took the curve all right and saw him vanish over a rise.

I thought of the slope and how much further down it had to go.

I saw the rise and how I could not see beyond the rise. I tried to calculate how steep the drop was. It had to be very steep.

The rise approached. Still I could not see past it. I could see the mountains across, and the highway that cut through those mountains. But I could not see the rest of the slope that waited for me.

I ascended the rise. I was going to be alone when I fell. It was not going to be all right.

I began to fall. I fell. My head bounced against the snow, and I saw, over the edges of white, my brother. He was pulled off to the side. Fresh snow capped his skis where he had cut for the sharp turn. He was holding his arms out, waiting for me.

I couldn't sleep on the floor. I felt dust in my lungs, smelled the carpet shampoo. My eyes stung.

"What's the matter?" my brother said.

"Nothing." Outside it wasn't even dawn, we still had a lot of arrangements to make. "I thought you were asleep."

"I don't think either of us is going to get any sleep."

"No." I closed my eyes so he couldn't see me.

"Hey." He reached down and squeezed my shoulder. I curled away from him. "It'll be all right." He shook me. My eyes ran. "Look," he said.

I looked. All I could see was a dark blur. Then my brother, getting out of bed. He sat on the floor. He sat there, quietly, patting my back. Several times he cleared his throat, as if he were going to tell me a story.