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A Sign

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Abstract

"A Sign" is a narrative about the experience of grief and how relationships are strengthened by shared experience. It tells the story of two different women who come together and inhabit a space of mutual understanding in the wake of their mother's death.

Keywords

grieving, family, signs, death, healing

Disciplines

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Comments

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A Sign

It was a perfect early-September morning. A gentle breeze traveled through the warm air with the once-forgotten but all-too-familiar chill of autumn, coaxing blue waves to meet the shoreline. Seagulls hovered over the lake, glided down to touch its surface, and explored the shore, conveying their presence with faint wails, mostly drowned out by the steady current of the water. For a moment, the cloudy sky gave way to a warm and glistening sun, which shone down on the windshield of a silver 2007 Toyota Camry. Elizabeth sat in the driver's seat, her face masked with a pair of cheap and loud peach reflective sunglasses. She lifted them off and held them at a fair distance, revealing a tired face, drooping with exhaustion but livened in the slightest with sharp green eyes. Her mother's eyes. Squinting dramatically at the piercing reflection of the sunlight on the car's hood, she decided it was best to keep the glasses on. While they didn't complement her simple black sundress, they would hide her dark circles, any disapproving eyerolls bound to accompanying impending interactions with sympathetic extended family members, and the inevitable post-tear puffiness. Across the worn, sand-dusted excuse for a parking lot, Elizabeth's younger sister Margaret emerged from the passenger seat of an SUV, approaching the Camry in a pair of black chinos and comfortable sandals.

Margaret closed the passenger side door on her husband and two daughters, leaving them to take in the slightly underwhelming view of the lake accompanied by the hum of some local radio station playing 80s hits. John Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane," was playing, just like it always did—a cruel reminder of normalcy for Margaret as she turned her back to the car. The songs the radio stations always overplayed on her morning commute to the city didn't cease to be overplayed just because she wasn't driving to her office for another day of number-crunching. Mellencamp stops for no one.

Catching her sister's steady advance in the rear-view mirror, Elizabeth heaved a sigh, fixed her decidedly inappropriate shades upon her face, popped her trunk, and got out of the car. This was the closest she and her sister had been in years, physically that is. Their emotional proximity was still questionable and having seen as much of one another in the past week as they had, they were past the point of hugging each time they met up. They exchanged their standard greeting: two soft and tragic toothless smiles and two resigned sighs of mutual understanding.

"Hey," managed Margaret, internally questioning the sunglass choice, but silently accepting that there must have been some explanation that she would never come to understand. Divorced twice and living alone in Colorado, her older sister would always possess a quality of unapproachability. She was bold and complicated and fabulous—and she reminded her very much of their mother. That's why Elizabeth and their mother never really did see eye to eye. They were too much of the same amount of wild.

"Hey."

"You've got it?"

"Yeah, it's here in the trunk."

"Just rolling around in there?" Margaret scoffed.

"No, not just rolling—" retorted Elizabeth with a chuckle. "How are you supposed to transport the thing anyways?"

"It's beyond me." Margaret sauntered to the vehicle's rear as her sister lifted the trunk open to reveal, placed inside a cardboard box and cradled in the fleece emergency blanket that Elizabeth stowed in the trunk of her sedan ever since she could remember, the steel urn which contained their mother's cremated remains.

“Here we go, mom,” said Elizabeth, gently lifting the vase from the box and turning to her baby sister. Margaret’s face was expressionless. Elizabeth was under the assumption that after the hell of a week that this particular week had been, this morning would be liberating or empowering or emotional beyond belief, but it struck her that standing here next to her sister, she felt mostly nothing. There seemed to be nothing left to feel.

They had decided that they would arrive at the beach early, before the carloads of extended family imposed themselves upon their mother’s wish with superficial grief and the satisfaction of having contributed a tacky flower arrangement to the cause of comfort. This was the duty of a daughter, Margaret thought. To get there early and do what needed to be done. But there was little formality to this. The service was long-since over, the funeral home director forfeited all responsibility with the “classic three-band pewter urn” full of their mother’s ashes—\$69.99— and a pitying look. Elizabeth had opted for the cheapest urn option, given her mother’s desire to lay to rest in the lake. No urn at all seemed inadequate— at least that’s what the cremation guy backhandedly suggested.

It was exactly like her mother to leave them in charge of a life-altering task with absolutely no instructions aside from “spread my ashes at my favorite spot on the Lake.” There weren’t really instructions for things like this. Margaret glanced over her shoulder and waved her arm back at the SUV, motioning for Steve and the girls to join them. Just as they began making their way towards the beach, cars started rolling in. They hadn’t invited every soul that graced the memorial service, but this family was huge, and death was a family affair.

Elizabeth, Margaret, Steve, and the girls made their way to the empty boarded deck overlooking scenic Lake Michigan. It was late in the season, and empty, aside from the mass of aunts, uncles, and cousins slowly gravitating towards the deck. Margaret hadn’t been back to this

spot since family vacations as a girl. She recalled observing glowing sunsets over the beachy horizon in baggy sweatshirts and feeling the same nip in the cool evening air that she felt this morning. Breezes used to fling sand up in tornadoes, whipping the back of her bare legs, but this morning the wind didn't move the sand at all.

The family gathered in a huddle on the deck, making pleasant conversation—surprisingly lively, but respectfully so, for a group that had just lost one of their own to lung cancer. If the memorial was the sad part, concluded Margaret—who had admittedly never spread someone's ashes before—then this must be the celebration. Family members intermittently made their way to Elizabeth and Margaret, who stood side by side, Elizabeth still cradling the urn. Uncle Dave and Aunt Cathy expressed their wholehearted sorrow, sprinkled with reassurances that “this was what she wanted.” As if they had any more idea than the two daughters what their mother wanted. Cousin Judith swiftly made her way to Elizabeth and Margaret, and they exchanged a glance in preparation for whatever wise counsel she was bound press upon them.

“Your mom was a wonderful woman. I think it's amazing that you two are adhering to her wishes in this way—bringing us all here for her. It's just beautiful here.”

“Yes, she really did love this place,” offered Margaret politely. She was antsy to get this show on the road and move beyond the burdening small-talk.

“I'm sure she'll show herself to you somehow today—let you know that she's at peace now. Look out for a sign.”

“Well, sign or no sign, we'll know that she's with us,” responded Elizabeth this time, weakly smiling. Margaret nodded in agreement, but they both stifled back a chuckle as Judith moved on. They weren't the type to buy into grandiose signs—their mother had taught them better.

After the chatter had subsided, eulogies were uttered, and peace was made among the family, Elizabeth and Margaret took the urn down to the waves. The family looked on from the deck as the daughters watched the waves curl up just out of reach of their toes. Elizabeth unscrewed the urn and glanced at Margaret, and the daughters took turns reaching into the capsule, grabbing handfuls of the fine white ash, and casting it out to the sea in dissipating clouds. The overcast sky did not open up to any gleam of sunshine, the rhythm of the waves was no different than it had been just moments before, and the wind was the same gentle and steady draft that Elizabeth felt on her face when she first stepped out of the car. The daughters finished the deed, rinsing their hands in the freshwater waves before returning to the deck. No one tells you that the ash sticks to your skin. No one tells you any of this.

Margaret immediately met Steve and the girls on the deck, encompassed by his large embrace. The girls squeezed one another's hands and Margaret backed away from her family, turning to Elizabeth, who firmly grasped the now-empty urn. The crowd of the rest of the family having scattered themselves, Steve walked the girls back to the car. It was time to head home, they had realized, and get back to the ordinary. Margaret walked Elizabeth back to her car, looking on as she replaced the empty urn into the box in the trunk. They stood next to the car, deciding simultaneously that this was as good a time as any for a goodbye hug. As the sisters ceased their embrace, Elizabeth turned her head to observe a gull flying directly above them and— in that very moment— excreting a steady stream of white, sticky bird shit which landed directly on the hood of her car with a loud, ugly splat. The sisters looked at one another with wide eyes and broke into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Grabbing her sore, aching abdomen, Elizabeth managed, amidst involuntary heaves of hysterics, "It's— a— SIGN."

Nodding in agreement, with a smile of both satisfaction and recognition, Margaret gasped, “Yes! A sign from mom.”