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WHERE THE FAULT LIES

MY PARENTS MET AT A BAR called The Kicking Dicky and bonded through a mutual respect for dizzy-headedness. They were married ten months later at city hall. In a photograph from that day, my mother looks sober and miserable in her second trimester, while my father leans cockeyed against her, red-faced and giggling. My sister told me that she'd never seen them kiss and that our mother had always threatened to leave him and his "shitty old house." She'd hated our home from the start. "This place is limbo incarnate," she said. "A tooth rooted in Hell."

My sister and I were both born in that house, as my mother elected to have home births because hospitals were too authoritarian. My sister told me that on the day I was born she lay in her bed, petrified, while our mother's screams tremored the house and set off car alarms. She never knew that our meager mother could make the ground quake. The next day, she heard the neighbours talking about what our mother had done and how they'd felt her in the night as I broke into the world.

My knowledge of her comes almost entirely from my sister, as my own memories were formed too young to be trusted. She loved us, but she couldn't be a drunk and a mother at the same time. Both commitments require undivided attention, and the liquor must have given her more comfort than we could. She left in the night, soon after my fourth birthday. A year later, the police contacted our father to tell him that a telephone pole had crushed her car on the Yellowhead Highway by the 305 in Saskatoon.

When I was seven, my sister and I were left alone in the house for a week. She made us peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches until the bread ran out. After that, she dipped a spoon into each jar and eyed the ratio of butter to jam. She turned the mixture upside down, and I curled my tongue into it, licked it off stiffly in one swoop. I'd get a spoonful first, and then it would be her turn. We sat on the dappled kitchen floor surrounded by specks of dust that whirled, drowsy and orbiting, in the rays of sunlight.

Our tongues capped with tacky mounds, we giggled with our mouths full and found it funny that we couldn't speak in our swirling summer snow globe. We were alone, but not lonesome, together.

When the sputter of a truck sounded in the driveway, we pulled ourselves onto the counter by the window. Our father fell out of the driver's side, cursed the concrete, and stumbled to the house. The screen door yelped open and then banged after him. He crossed in front of the kitchen and pulled himself upstairs using the railing like a rope. I spat my mouthful into the sink—a slick thud when it hit metal—and ran after him. He lay belly-down on top of his rumbled bed, mumbling and stinking sour and sickly sweet. I shook his thigh. “Where have you been? Do you have presents for us?”

My sister appeared in the doorway, jam jar in fist. She fished in his pant leg pocket, took a ten-dollar bill from his wallet, and threw the worn leather onto his head. He didn't flinch.

She took my hand, and we walked three blocks to the store to buy soft bread and stalks of berry licorice. Then we ate peanut butter and jam sandwiches in the front yard, sepia grass speared sharply beneath our bare legs. She braided my straw-yellow hair, and it hung down my spine so I could blow bubbles with my pink gum. Holding onto the end of the braid, she walked me along the chain link fence like I was her pet, and I barked at all the bleeding hearts choked in weeds.

When I was eleven, my sister told me that she was running away from home with Sammy Finch, her first boyfriend. I sobbed into my pillow long after she'd snuck out of the bathroom window. She came back at sunup, musty with weed and cigarettes, and told me that she'd only been kidding. I was too relieved to be spiteful and made her pancakes while she dozed on the sofa. My father's steel-toed boots stomped down the stairs and paused by the front door. He eyed the puddles of mix yet to brown in the pan.

“Want any?” I asked.

He grunted and was about to open the front door when he noticed my sister and lingered, his hand on the screen latch.

“Where's she been?”

I balanced on the balls of my feet. “She's sick.”

His jaw clenched and the muscles beneath his cheek flashing as he studied my face for a fib. “Damp cloth for her forehead—cold water.” He looked at the bowl of mix, batter-dotted and streaked down its sides. “Don't eat all

that unless you want to clean up your puke.”

I settled back onto my heels when the spring door snapped shut behind him. It was rare that he returned to the house after work. He felt more at home in the pub.

My sister often fantasized about her escape. She dreamed of meeting someone, falling madly in love, and moving to Paris. She said that she'd send for me after I finished school, and I'd go to college in France and become an architect or a teacher. But she never fell in love—not really. She only fooled herself over and over. In her teens she began to spend time in foggy basements, smoking joints and sucking back beers with people who coddled her. The delinquent's darling, she skipped class, graduated with a D-average, and condemned me for caring about my grades. “Fuckin' drip,” she'd sneer. I'd slam my bedroom door in her face, and she'd slam the front door after her. We grew to pity and disdain one another. She couldn't see that it was her—not me—who'd changed.

Sometimes she'd forget that I was her enemy and would get into bed with me. She'd play with my hair, and we'd fall asleep in each other's arms. But the reprieve never lasted, and she'd be gone by the time I woke up. She dated deadbeats who couldn't afford to go to Europe, and they shared their resentment over amber bottles. Her latest tangle took off when she got knocked up. The bottle couldn't be of use to her then, so she sought comfort in me. I was glad that she was mine again, but also wary of the itch.

The return to our sisterhood was short-lived, as I'd gotten into Northern College in Timmins, Ontario. It wasn't Paris, but it was as far away as I could get. The night before I left the three of us loitered at the kitchen table. We sat in silence, our tongues fat with everything we didn't say. I knew that my sister was scared at the thought of living in our father's house without me, and when she toasted to my accomplishment with sparking apple juice (she was heavily pregnant by that point), it felt like she was toasting her own bitterness.

My father flicked his lighter in the dusk, bit a Next Gold King Size between his teeth, and manoeuvred it into the flame. He'd become fond of smoking outside on the front steps, but only in the evenings after drinking a few Labatts.

“What're you playing at?” My sister glared at him.

“The fuck does it look like?” He drank back smoke and sighed it out.

“You can't do that around me.”

My father gestured to the hallway. “There’s the door, sweetheart. Get some fresh air.”

Her hands puckered into fists.

I cleared my throat. “C’mon, just put it—”

“Shut up,” she said. “I don’t need you to speak for me.”

She sat sparking, and I sat stung, while he looked at us and snickered.

“You hear that?” He took a deep drag, blew it toward me, and nodded in her direction. “She’s pissed ’cause you get to go off.”

She scoffed. “You’re malfunctioned, old man.”

He motioned between the two of us with his cigarette. “The only problem I got are you two ungrateful snots. I worked my ass off—slaved away my whole life so you had a roof over your heads and food in your guts—and have you ever once shown me any appreciation? Nada.” He pointed at my sister’s belly. “If you think I’m doing the same for that, you’re fried as an egg on hot tar.”

She stood, her fists on the table like an ape, and shouted at his self-satisfied face. “If I had any say in it, you think I’d choose you? You think I’d pick this shithole?”

“You can fault your mother for that. I wanted you two as much as a boil on my ass.”

My sister, agile despite her condition, reached across the table, yanked the cigarette out of his mouth, and threw it in his lap. He yelped, jerked to a stand, patted his thighs down, and looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

“I hope this place burns to the ground with you in it!” She kicked at his chair as she passed him.

“You’re just like your bitch mother!” He yelled as she lugged herself upstairs. Then he lit another cigarette, took a beer from the fridge, and walked out the front door. I didn’t see him again before I left.

My sister drove me to the airport at dawn, and we stood together and cried.

“Come stay with me after the baby is born,” I said.

“Might do.”

I knew she wouldn’t and was relieved. I cupped her belly in my hands; it was warm and firm—insulated. Better in there than out here, baby.

I visited home two years into my degree and was taken by how much our father had aged. His hair was peppered, cracks had etched into his skin, and his body seemed heavier and looser. I’d been home only once before—three

months after Daisy was born—and she'd looked like a bald little gnome. Now she had sunshine curls hanging in her face as she perched quietly on my father's knee and played with the label on his beer.

"I said it." He looked smug. "Your sister is just like your mother."

I should have known that my sister and father would erode one another. The last time I spoke to my sister her voice was worn thin, like she'd already gone. She had played the role of mother once and didn't want to again.

My father had been fired months before, as he was too unstable for construction work. He spent most of his time asleep on the couch, and I'd often find Daisy on his chest surfing sleep with him, his hand on her back. Sometimes he'd forget that my sister was gone and leave Daisy in her care only to return and find her squalling in the dark.

I had no choice but to stay, and five months after I'd moved home the phone rang. Though she remained silent, I knew it was her. We listened to each other say nothing, and a fever grew until I couldn't stand it any longer. "Take a drive on the Yellowhead." I threw the phone in the sink and turned on the tap. It was the only time she ever called.

The day before the earthquake, Daisy and I collected stones from around the neighbourhood. She spent most of that night cleaning off the dirt and lining them up on the kitchen counter while telling me about her plans to become a geologist when she grew up (they'd just begun a unit on earth science at school).

In the morning she sat at the table, hair twirled in her small fingers as she leaned onto her elbows, eyelids heavy, and yawned.

"Did he wake you again?" I asked.

She gazed in silence at knots of yellow egg jumbled across her toast.

"Eat all of that," I said as I went upstairs, watching the stains change on the carpet as I climbed to the top. The floor of my father's room sagged like the silver-prickled skin on his neck, and it grunted and grumbled when he walked. I heard the whine of mattress springs as I paused at my father's door and saw him hunkered on the edge of the bed, groaning as he put calloused, long-nailed feet into a pair of tattered slippers. His chalky hair, ruffled and in need of a trim, was stuck to his forehead.

"You need to remember not to lay on your back," I said. "You woke Daisy again."

My father blew heavily. "I roll in my sleep, so sue me."

I crossed my arms and stared at the lines in his face while he scratched

his belly. “Maybe bunk in the living room weeknights.”

“Sleep on the couch in my own house?”

“It’s my house now,” I corrected him. “You stopped paying the mortgage months ago.”

His eyes glazed. Confused, he searched for this truth somewhere in his liquid memory. What I didn’t tell him is that I didn’t even want his house—that it was a box of cheap, fetid memories.

I left him and called over the banister to Daisy. “Brush your teeth. We’re leaving in two minutes.”

I heard her chair scrape across the linoleum as I went to my room, closed the door part way, and counted to fifty, focusing on every syllable.

Daisy was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, her purple backpack slung low over her small shoulders.

“Bye, grandpa!” She listened for a reply that never came.

“He’s still asleep,” I said.

The truck rumbled through our seats while I reversed out of the driveway. My father stood at his bedroom window, watching us, and Daisy waved to him. From here, his eyes looked black, like the mold in his wood panes. He stared right through her, and we left him behind in that filth-streaked hole in the wall.

On my lunch break at work, the computer screen was filled with calculations and estimates: strip and reshingle the roof—\$2.50-\$3.50/sq.ft; replace the windows—\$25-\$40/sq.ft; strengthen the foundation—\$300-\$400/lin. ft. Pressure was building behind my eyes, and I massaged my temples the way people do in the movies, but it didn’t help. I’d never been any good at math. I used to ask my sister to look over my homework, and she’d erase my answers and redo the work herself, her brain wired to fire faster and with more accuracy than mine. She excelled at French, too, and won a school trophy when she was thirteen. They were both foreign languages to me.

“What’re you looking at?” Shirley said as she leaned over from behind my shoulder and sucked ramen noodles from a styrofoam cup, each flick of starch speckling the computer screen with oily broth. She was several years older than me, and we’d become chums even though she’d only worked there for three months.

“My father’s house needs repairs.”

“Yikes.” She peered at the figures. “That’s a sweet penny.”

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes until Shirley patted my

shoulder.

“Break’s over, mama,” she slurped. “We gotta get that cabinet finished before two o’clock or Chuck’ll shit a brick.”

Chuck was the owner of Alchemy Restoration—a furniture repair company that specializes in damage from the elements—and the cabinet was an antique rescued from a house fire, its wood polluted by the toxins in smoke. Our job was to strip, clean, and leave it in an oxygenated room for twenty-four hours before cleaning it again. Traces of the toxins would still linger like scar tissue long after it was gutted and treated, but it had sentimental value and its owner smoked a pack a day anyway.

It was never my intention to get into this business, but my options were limited after moving home to take care of Daisy. I got the job because my sister flashed her breasts at Chuck once in high school, and he’d been pining for her ever since. Chuck called me into his office at four o’clock, and I sat across from him on a shabby, orange pleather bench while he propped his feet on the desk and reclined in his chair, dry grievances squealing from the hinges.

“Great job on the cabinet today,” he said.

“Shirley helped.”

His mustache bristled at her name. She had confided in me that they’d had a brief, surreptitious affair last month and that he’d loathed her ever since but couldn’t fire her because he was afraid she’d tell everyone.

“I’m sure you took on the brunt of it. You don’t jabber, and you get things done.”

“Thank you, Chuck.”

“I’m giving you a dollar-fifty per hour raise.”

“Thank you, Chuck.”

“Don’t tell anyone.” He stared at me and pursed his lips. “How’s your sister?”

“Happy.”

I hoped that was true, wherever she was.

I picked up Daisy from after-school care and asked what she wanted for dinner on the drive to Val-U-Foods. Cookie-cutter homes, clipped yards, and great columns of bark blurred past the truck windows.

“Steak,” she said.

At eight years old, she could ask for ketchup or ice-cream, but she was a sensible girl—an old soul. I once dreamt that she was my mother reincar-

nated, and it spooked me for the entire day after.

“Broccoli?”

“Beans!” The only vegetable she’d eat.

“Beans it is.”

While we waited in line at the checkout, I weaved sections of Daisy’s ponytail into a loose braid. She turned to look at me, hair slipping from my hands, and asked for an orange.

“Only if you’re quick,” I said.

“Watch how fast I can be!” she yelled and skipped away, neon bangles trilling on her wrist.

“Takes after her mama,” said an older woman standing in line behind us, nodding and smiling. “You’ve got strong genes.”

I felt my cheeks bloom and studied the conveyor belt. Shelved above our groceries was a magazine with a picture of the Eiffel Tower. My eyes traced its cross-beam structure, standing proudly, still, for the city that loves.

That evening Daisy sat at the kitchen table, homework fanned in front of her. She pinched the tip of her tongue between strawberry lips and hummed as she labelled a colourful diagram about tectonic plates. I sat across from her, skimming a battered earth science textbook while the steaks fried.

“Have I ever been in an earthquake?” she asked.

“Don’t think so.”

“Have you?”

“Small ones, that I remember.”

“A lot?”

“No.”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick says a fault lies close to us.”

“He’s right.”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick says we’re due for a big one that’ll destroy everything.”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick said that to me when I was in third grade, too.”

Dimples—like two small tide pools—appeared when she smiled.

Daisy didn’t notice my father standing in the kitchen doorway watching her. He was wearing the same beater and briefs from earlier and hadn’t even bothered to put on pants.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” I said.

He shifted toward me, and we sized each other up.

“You get some Labatts?” His voice was thick, gravelly.

I returned to the book. “I picked up your medication. It’s in the bag on the counter.”

In recent years he’d developed high blood pressure, heart disease, an addled mind—gifts from his long-time infatuation with alcohol.

“I wanted beer.”

I turned a page.

He smacked the doorframe with his palm, and his muddy eyes bore into mine when I gave him a look. The sound made Daisy jump, and she watched him watching me.

“If I want beer, then you get it.” He smacked the doorframe again and spat on the floor.

“Daisy, please clear your homework,” I said.

I could feel him staring at me while I mashed the potatoes—the same way I could feel heat shift through my body. It split under my skin.

I spooned food onto dishes, placing two of them on one side of the table for Daisy and me and dropping the third on the other for my father. His steak slid across the smooth porcelain, and a green bean fell to the floor. My father looked at it while he stalked into the kitchen. He got a glass of water, but didn’t offer one to us.

“I’ve looked into doing repairs on the house,” I said.

“The house is fine.” He took a swig and sat.

“It’s old.”

“So am I.”

“The structure is weak. It’s dangerous.”

“It’s stood for years, and it’ll stand for more.” Stubborn was his favourite condition—second only to being drunk.

“I’m not asking. Expect work to start soon.”

“You can’t buy a six-pack, but you can waste money on crap we don’t need.” He put his glass down heavily onto the table. This should be beer, the noise said.

“It’s doable. I got a raise today.”

“Who’d you have to fuck to get that?”

Daisy shrank in her chair. I flattened my palms against the cool of the tabletop and took a deep breath. He smirked and pushed further.

“Do me a favour.” He leaned toward Daisy.

I nudged her arm—“No, eat your dinner”—but he had her full attention.

“Don’t grow up to be a bitch like every other woman in this family,” he said.

“Enough!” I gripped either side of my plate, skin stretched thin across knuckles.

He cackled and then sawed at the seared meat in front of him. The water in his glass trembled, straining against the wall.

After dinner, Daisy washed the dishes for a bowl of ice cream. She popped bubbles of detergent with rubber-gloved fingers and pretended the forks were miniature dolphins leaping and splashing in the sink. I went to my father’s room and shut the door behind me. He held the bag of medication in his right hand, his glasses in the other. From the corner of his bed he watched me. His belly was still heaving from the walk upstairs. I crossed the filthy carpet in four strides and slapped him across the face. We were together in that stale room, connected by my palm and his cheek, and we shared that still moment.

“YOU FUCK...”

“If you ever talk to me or Daisy like that again, I’ll cut out your tongue and tell everyone that you bit it off in your sleep.” My voice was not my own. It was my sister’s, and he recognized it. “I am not some piece of shit under your shoe. And if you snore again tonight, you’ll sleep on the lawn from now on. Clear?”

His eyes narrowed to slivers. “I see what you’re doing. Put money into this house so you can sell it from under me. Then you’ll take off, just like her, and leave me on the street.”

He threw the bag of pill bottles at me, but I didn’t care. I simply picked it up and threw it back at him, socking him in the chest.

“I hope you choke on them,” I said.

He stood and stepped toward me, his mouth twisted and his fists set, but I was ready, too. It was building hot, deep in my chest. It had waited this long, and it couldn’t wait any longer.

We heard it before we saw it, as the earth groaned, windows rattled, pictures dropped from their wall-mounts, ceramics plunged to their deaths, and the floor skipped under our feet. I took the stairs two, three at a time. The walls shuddered and creaked so loud that I couldn’t hear my father behind me, but I felt him slip and kept moving. Daisy was standing at the sink, screaming, and when I tried to take her hand the wet neoprene snapped and she fell backward. A dish shattered beside her head, and she began bawl-

ing. I picked her up and ran to the door, praying that the house stood long enough for us to get clear. My father somehow managed to beat me there, and we both sprinted into the street, dogs barking and birds distancing themselves from the ground. A brand new shed belonging to the house next door collapsed, sending earth into the air. Holding my breath, I waited for the fall, but the plates suddenly stopped shifting and settled into each other again.

“Holy hell!” My father whooped, happier than a hog in shit.

We stood in the street like three fools, and the house stared back at us. I told my father and Daisy to stay where they were while I checked inside. I don’t know what I thought I’d find, but my eyes started to well as I walked the driveway, and by the time I was inside they’d flooded over.

There wasn’t much damage in the kitchen, and for some reason I opened the refrigerator in search of answers. A jar of strawberry jam sat on the top shelf, and I took it in my hand, felt the weight of it, and let it go. The preserves splattered the floor and the cupboards, and I soon began hurling peanut butter and milk as well. I also threw dishes and cups, chairs and utensils, spices and fruits, as my screams shattered across the kitchen. When the energy was gone, I sank to my knees, dipped my fingers into the jam globbed on the floor and the peanut butter stuck to my jeans, and raked my teeth across them. Overhead, specks of dust floated down from the beams and plaster, finally shaken loose after all these years.