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The Things She Carried

As I survey the contents of her bag, I realize that the things she carried are not a dramatic representation of herself. They do not delineate my memory of her as I had hoped that they could. They are merely objects, odds and ends that she had accumulated during her lifetime. She was too vibrant to be defined by such things. She was not one to throw her possessions away no matter how meaningless they were, and she was constantly disheveled and unpredictable. It was this essence of spontaneity that I loved about her.

The painkillers are the first things that catch my eye, strewn haphazardly throughout the various pockets in her bag. Her desperation is made apparent by their assortment- she was willing to try any pill to find relief from the debilitating pains that plagued her back, her head, her legs. The capsules draw my mind back to a night four years ago. *I am sitting on my bed by the windowsill in my nightgown. My skinny legs are starkly white in the glow from the streetlamp and she is beside me, fully dressed, tracing my calf with her index finger. It reaches my ankle, and stops. As she leans toward me and draws back a lock of my hair, the bed sheets rustle and I am mesmerized by the shadows that lie in such perfect contrast to her collarbone. The beauty in this moment, of which she is the centerpiece, is almost poetic and my youthful inferiority makes me uncomfortable. Her breath is warm and measured against my ear. "Little sister," she whispers, "please don't be like me."*

But that is what I want, more than anything, to have her poise in every

situation, her ingenious solutions to every problem, her charisma, her allure. As she slips out of the window she hesitates, and the moon illuminates her hair, and she is so flawlessly beautiful that it almost hurts. And then she is gone. I climb under my covers and before I drift into sleep, I follow her route in my mind. First, she will hurry to a waiting car. Then to a club or a rave or a hotel or a blanket in an empty park. I'm not sure of the specifics. I am only twelve years old but I am not ignorant. Although she is wonderful and although she is my sister, I know that what she is doing is considered by most to be unlawful and disgraceful. By night she is a truant. But who can blame her? By day she is under the kind of pressure that would crush most normal human beings. But according to most normal human beings, she is gifted. She is brilliant. She is a virtuoso. Or any other number of adulatory descriptions. To me she is just a sixteen year old girl- albeit a distinctly special sixteen year old girl- who carries nearly impossible expectations on her shoulders. I know that when I wake up in the morning, and smell her hair, there will be the distinct scent of cigarette smoke and gasoline with the faintest trace of alcohol. It is an aroma that has become familiar to me. There will be a Ziploc bag of pills on her bedside table, one that she can add to her plethora of self medications. And of course, she will be there, lying deflated and exhausted under her covers.

That night I slipped from uneasy contemplations into uneasy dreams. Now I am slipping from the past back into the present as my fingers brush over a red plastic lighter and a lipstick and two bobby pins and come to rest on her wallet. I am about to commit the ultimate invasion of privacy. But it doesn't matter anymore. It is neon pink with a faded inscription that reads "Abaco, Bahamas". This is ironic because, despite her haphazardness, my sister was the epitome of sophistication. So the wallet seems garish and childlike as I pull apart the Velcro strip that holds it closed. This is

supposed to be a dramatic moment for me. I am supposed to feel something in the pit of my stomach as I review everything I have spread out in front of me. But I'm numb. I am just as desensitized as I have always been. In our family, it is protocol not to be emotive. Not to react. When she used to dissolve into tears or scream or slam doors, my parents would become visibly tense. They would walk around the house on tiptoe and it was understood that I was to do so as well.

First I finger the blue plastic library card that was so very dear to her. Most children, upon receiving their first pass into the world of free literature will meticulously sign their name on the space provided, tongue in cheek, in concentration. That's how I did it. But for her it was easy, and her signature was flowing and neat. She had been able to print at the age of three and write at the age of four. Next, I come across her license. I remember when she passed her driver's test. It was one of the few examinations that she had to take at the same age as all of her counterparts. And of course, as in everything else, she passed with flying colors. I brush my finger over the several admission tickets to the art museums she had visited over the course of her travels during the summer that she turned fifteen. She loved art, and she was good at it. She had considered it as a profession until my parents caustically scolded her that such an occupation was not up to her caliber. As an artist, she wouldn't be living up to her potential intellectually. At first she raged and argued, but in the end she realized that it wasn't worth the effort to disagree with them. They had a plan for her, and I think it was the inevitability of this that scared her so much.

The last thing I pick up is a small scrap of paper. It is probably only two by three inches large- it is the kind of lined paper that would come out of a tiny notebook. It has three creases and it is very worn. It has obviously been folded and unfolded many times. I have seen it before. And I have read it once. I remember how

proud I was to be in her confidence, as she showed it to me and told me I was the only other person who would ever see it.

Finally that knot in my stomach begins to form. Finally, all those feelings I was not allowed to express are materializing in one moment. When we were both younger, I was always considered the stoic one, the “rational” sister. I don’t think I’ve cried since I was five years old. But now, the words on the paper begin to blur with my tears. It is a poem that she received when she was sixteen, the age that I am now. It’s from the first boy that was ever able to truly understand her and after she met him, it was like she became a new person. No more pills. No late nights. Except once.

Three months after they met, on a cool summer evening, she was staying in with me while my parents had a night out. I had dozed off on the ottoman and she was lazily flipping channels. The harsh sound of the doorbell jolted us both out of our stupor. She walked to the front door and I followed her. *He is standing on the doorstep with two handpicked bouquets of wildflowers- one for her and one for me. “I’d like to show you both something,” he says. So we grab our coats and he drives, probably for an hour or so, until we stop on the side of a road that is so unused it is not even paved. I lie in the back, covered by a blanket. Their whispers from the front seat are soothing and I can tell by their tone that they are both happy. I am drifting back into a contented sleep when he says, “It’s time. It will only take a minute and she’s safe in the car.” They don’t know I’m awake so they slip outside and walk hand in hand out to the field that is next to where we have parked. After a few moments, I quietly follow them. They’ve sat down on a picnic blanket and her head is on his shoulder. In a few minutes he points up, and suddenly the night is illuminated by a comet. They watch it pass across the sky and then he stands and pulls her gently up with him. And together they dance barefoot, under the stars and the moonlight, in a*

field that is filled with flowers and surrounded by trees. And once again, like the night last year, I am moved by the beauty of it all. But this time an aspect of melancholy does not smother everything. This instant is perfect and I think that finally, finally she has reached a state of bliss. All the outside pressures aren't affecting her at this moment. I'm filled with an inconceivable amount of affection for this boy who has made her so incredibly happy.

For the rest of that summer she didn't seem to mind our mother's nagging. Next year she would be free of it all. She would be a freshman at Yale and he would be there with her. She told me that she was considering taking some art classes. Two days before she was to leave, they both decided to take a trip into Boston to see a movie, have lunch, and say goodbye to the city. She kissed me on the forehead before she left and apologized that I wasn't allowed to go. I was distracted when I said goodbye. Around six o'clock that evening, I was in my favorite armchair, reading a book on the history of the American Indian and my parents were relaxing on the couch and watching a television program. The phone rang, and I distinctly remember how my mother picked up the receiver with a smile on her face. As she listened, the smile evaporated and her expression changed "Where?" she whispered. And then she repeated it, but this time her voice was high and panicked. Then she dropped the phone, dazedly collapsing against the cushions. My father picked it up and began to talk with whomever was on the other end and I saw the color drain from his face. He set it down gently and turned to me. "Something happened to your sister." After that everything was a rush. It's all very vague and blurred. My father must have carried me to the car because after hearing his words I went into a momentary state of shock. We went to the hospital first. I remember my father comforting another couple, as they sobbed into each other's arms. I remember a nurse leading us into a white room

that was so clean it made me feel sick. I remember her saying something along the lines of, "I'm so sorry. They were both pronounced dead at the scene." I remember screaming and screaming and screaming. I remember two closed coffins. I remember being hugged by people I didn't care about or didn't even know. I remember three years of agonizing and debilitating grief. I remember the day the troopers brought us her bag. And I remember my mother putting it inside her room then locking the door, and forbidding me to ever go inside.

Now, sitting here at her desk, three years after her death, I can't stand it anymore. At first I thought it would be selfish for me to try to come to terms with my grief. I thought it wouldn't be fair to move on, because at least I was alive. I've realized now that yes, I was alive, but I wasn't *living*. There were many times I held a razor to my wrist in the shower or contemplated a bottle of pills in front of the bathroom mirror because there was nothing, *nothing* that could make the heartache go away. I let go of my grades, lost interest in sports. I was tethered to her memory, and it was almost an unbearable burden. And I had to do *something*. So, disregarding my mother's behest, I opened the forbidden door, and stepped into her room. Doing so was like stepping into the past. I expected the customary waves of sadness that set in whenever I allowed a thought about her to enter my head. But, curiously, it was relieving to see everything that had once been hers. It was relieving to sit on the edge of her bed and press one of her pillows against my face. And it is relieving to rifle through the things she had carried with her when she died.

I begin to put the wallet back into her handbag when a photograph falls out. It is a picture of two girls, both with sun bleached hair and tanned faces. They are wearing bandannas and hiking boots, and the taller one has an arm thrown affectionately over the shoulder of the other. Her other hand is on her knee, so it

seems she is catching her breath as she smiles for the camera. This girl bears a striking physical resemblance to me, and suddenly the tears return, provoked because the girl in the picture is my sister. The smaller figure stands stiffly with her hands in her pockets. She is at that lanky and uncertain stage in adolescence when a girl is never comfortable with her body. She is not smiling like her older sibling. Her expression is serious, but I know that she was enjoying herself. Because I remember that afternoon. She and I and our father were backpacking for a weekend and we knew we were close to our campsite. She challenged me to a race for the top of the ridge, and I obliged. I know she let me win, but it still felt good to reach the ledge first. When our father caught up, he pulled out his camera. I never liked taking pictures with her because she was so photogenic. So I didn't bother smiling. As I look at us now, I see how much we truly did resemble each other. But if she was still here, I could now respond to the request she made to me one night four years ago. I am not like her. We are vastly different. Perhaps her influence on my life has shaped me, but I am my own person. I think that now, after saying goodbye to her in my own way and letting go of the pain I have carried for so long, I will finally be able to find out who that person is.