

ONSTAGE, SLOUCHING

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It was my little sister's twenty-sixth birthday. It'd been four years, seven months and thirteen days since I last saw her. Ten months and five days since I last spoke to her. And the worst part is, sometimes I didn't even notice. It was a shocking realization, really. How terrible do you have to be to have to be reminded that your own sister exists? To spend weeks not thinking about her at all?

My parents phoned early on the morning of her birthday, Mom trying to be light about it, and Dad coming on the line with his onerous tone, undoing all my mother's hard work by reminding me heavily that it was An Important Day.

God, Dad, she's not dead! I huffed, and, suddenly annoyed at how easily I had reverted back into a snappish teenager, quickly ended the call.

It was Sunday, so I didn't have to go to the office, something I found myself regretting. At least at work I could lose myself in kerning and pixels and fonts and not remembering Norah and all of the things that could've happened differently, or wondering if she was still living in Montréal, if she was still doing theatre work.

I got dressed without much consideration and hurried out the door. I was meeting a friend for brunch and my parents' phone call had put me behind schedule. But actually I didn't mind too much; rushing to get ready focused my thoughts.

Priya was already at the restaurant waiting for me, and as I squeezed past the people in line, she opened her arms wide. I welcomed the hug. She knew about my relationship with my sister and always overdid it slightly on the sympathy, but she meant well.

As soon as I sat down, she barraged me with talk, resting her arms over the menu as if she had no need for it. We covered the basics – our jobs, our recent activities and revelations. I used to work with Priya until three months earlier when she left the design agency to open her own yoga studio. I liked listening to her talk about work. I was very happy to sit back and not say much, just letting her life wash over me.

We eventually got around to reading our menus and ordering our food. I began to relax. I wrapped my hands around the heat of my coffee mug and listened to the low droning of the conversations around me. I let certain words and phrases get through. *No time to think about waffles. Short, but not short-short. Of course Vikings are always misunderstood, nothing you can do about that.*

"So," she said, in that way that she does. She clanked her ring against her mug absentmindedly. I sat up straighter.

"No, haven't heard from her today. But I didn't last year either, remember? It's normal."

“And you didn’t try to get in touch with her?” Priya had this way of posing questions like that very gently, without a hint of mockery or accusation. I always marveled at how she did it.

“I don’t know how I could. The last phone number I have for her is a dud. I called it three months ago and it was out of service. Her email address is still valid but she doesn’t reply. I don’t know if she doesn’t or can’t. She’s like this. She decides she’s an only child sometimes. I’m used to it.”

“Do you want to do something after this? They’re showing *Breathless* at the Regent later. You like that one, right?”

I shrugged. “Thanks, but I think I’ll just go home.”

She looked at me for a second, searching out any hint of a coverup or subsumed truth. Satisfied, she moved on, not one to push her luck.

“Okay, well I’ll be there if you change your mind. Hey, try some of my French toast. They put some crazy spice on it that I can’t identify.”

After breakfast we exchanged a quick hug on the sidewalk and parted ways. It was still early, before noon. What could I do with myself? I could pop in on my older brother Matthew, who would most likely be awake by now. But no, best not. Matthew had inherited our father’s inflated sense of magnitude. Today, he would probably be searching through Norah’s old emails for clues, or dramatically staring at a photo of her, trying to read in her eyes where it all went wrong.

I went home and put the kettle on, paced around my apartment while the water was boiling. It was a fairly small apartment, just big enough for me to feel comfortable. Norah and I had that in common – we never had a need for many possessions. The bedroom we shared for most of our youth was spare. One dresser, two nightstands next to our beds that never had much in them aside from a book or a couple of magazines, our closet of clothes that we fell into sharing as our heights equalized. I’d spent a lot of time wondering what factor caused us to grow so fundamentally apart – was it this? Did our childhood asceticism somehow train her to reject all attachments, even to people?

The kettle had just boiled when my buzzer buzzed. It was Matthew, and I wasn’t surprised. We’d spent so much time together that I swear we could read each other’s thoughts, or at least sense the ghostly trails of past ones. He’d probably sensed me within a half-block radius of his apartment. We lived ten blocks from each other, which probably strengthened this eerie connection. I made a second cup of tea and put it into his hand when he came in.

He slid out of his shoes and flopped onto my couch, as much as anyone can flop with a cup of tea in their grip. He looked at me, the same sad eyes as our father.

“I know,” I said. “Did Dad call you this morning too?”

Matthew rolled his eyes, “As if I needed reminding. And what did he want me to do? Go to Montréal to look for her!”

“Well . . .”

He snapped his gaze up at me. “You’re not serious.”

“No, of course I’m not serious. Where would we even start? And do you think she would appreciate us showing up and combing through the city, hunting for her like some fugitive?”

“She’d be pissed, I know. Dad just gets in my head sometimes, I suppose.” He took a pensive sip, holding the tea in his mouth a moment before swallowing. “Anyway, how long has it been?” He posed the question rhetorically, but I knew he knew exactly how long. “If she wanted us to be in her life, we would be, right?”

“So what do you think she’s doing today?”

“I don’t want to talk about her,” I said. But then, “I have no idea. I don’t even know what she likes or does anymore. I don’t even know if she’s still writing plays. God, remember That Play?”

* * *

Norah moved out at eighteen. She graduated high school and went no further. She started a theatre company with her roommate. It was small, but gained a local reputation for being somewhat daring.

When I was twenty and Norah nineteen, I went to the opening of one of her plays. She had always been reticent when it came to her theatre work, about her creative process, but this one was particularly hush-hush.

Matthew, our parents and I sat proudly in the first row, taking care not to crease our playbills. When the curtains opened, Norah walked onstage slowly. She was completely naked. Matthew made a panicked squeak in his throat and immediately stared at his feet. My parents held a barely-whispered summit, angry. She remained naked for the entire first act, after which my father and brother left the theatre and went home. Mom and I remained but were too stunned to speak about it. We left as soon as the curtain went down, returning home to the anger of Matthew and Dad. As a family, we discussed it for hours. We didn’t understand why she’d done this to us, made us feel shame and confusion for her.

The next day, we all went to our parents’ house for a pre-arranged barbecue that Mom wouldn’t let Dad cancel. Norah was met with frostiness from the rest, but I pulled her aside. We sat under the crabapple tree in far corner of the backyard, on the rickety white bench that had been the setting of posed family photos in its stronger, brighter days.

“I noticed Dad and Matthew left after the first act,” she said. “The signage and playbills did say there was nudity, you know.”

“But why didn’t you warn us it was *you*?” I asked.

“*Warn* you? As if I were ashamed? If I’d told you, it would be all you’d think about.”

“Well, it kind of *was* all we thought about.”

“So you didn’t notice that my nudity signified the dream state? You didn’t notice my character represented the first-generation Canadian? I really thought you’d like that one. It’s the kind of thing you’re always talking about.”

“I get the need for artistic expression. But can’t you be aware of other people?” Could she really not see how her actions had upset us?

“Claire. Look around. Look at Dad running to do the washing-up at the earliest possible second. He’ll stay there until I’ve left, and he’ll complain about me all night. Look at Mom telling funny stories to Matthew to keep him from coming over to tell me how *concerned* he is. And you, the family representative as usual. You think I’m not aware of other people?”

She had been right about one thing. I was the ambassador. I was always the one Norah looked up to. Just fourteen months between us. I shared my toys with her, and, once she grew, my clothes. In our room at night, she would crawl into my bed and we whispered stories to each other, about fantastic worlds that seemed more real than our own. She would fall asleep clinging to me, her breath hot on my arm.

Everyone still looked to me as Norah’s interpreter, the one who had always understood her best. The truth was I was just guessing. I hadn’t understood her in a very long time.

* * *

Matthew gulped down the rest of his tea and said, “Well, I should go,” but stayed where he was, slouched so far down on the couch he was almost sitting on his shoulder blades. He needed company but didn’t want to admit it. I put in a DVD and opened two bottles of beer.

I never had this same bond with Norah, despite our early closeness. Once school arrived, we were divided forever. In the playground I became more attached to Matthew. A whole year older than me, he taught me about the world. We dug up worms, climbed things, and built forts. I let Norah have all my toys because Matthew’s world was more interesting. I liked swinging from branches with him, observing the movements of our friends from high above. The elves and goblins Norah and I had invented in our earlier life became silly and babyish.

For a while she refused to let me go, and followed me crying. Her tears embarrassed me and I took refuge with Matthew. Sometimes I wonder if this rejection felt permanent to her, if the event was larger to her than I could have imagined, and if I wounded her in a way I still didn’t understand.

* * *

Later that night, I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t stop thinking about going to Montréal. I wasn’t actively deciding to go, but images and slips of thoughts would pop into my head. The price of a flight, or of a train ride. The cost of a hotel.

In the morning, I was awoken by my ringing phone. It was Matthew.

“I think we should go.” He said.

“That’s eerie. I was thinking the same thing.”

We didn’t tell our parents. They’d just want to come along. Either that, or our father would never stop phoning us, desperate for updates, imagining that we’d find Norah working in a seedy strip club, her eyes vacant and dead.

We booked days off work and took the train to Montréal the next day. Before I’d even finished unpacking in my hotel room, my brother was knocking on my door.

“Let’s make a plan.” He said. He had a backpack, and took from it a notebook where he’d been writing notes, making plans. He pulled out a laptop and opened a map of Montréal online, and began cross-referencing his notes to this map. We were to start bright and early tomorrow, retracing our last known “leads,” as he called them – her old landlord, her old job. He wanted to start right away, but I was able to talk him into dinner and beer on some terrace nearby. He’d inherited our father’s tendency to clamp, vice-like, onto an idea and shake it until it died. Over the years I’d become good at talking him down. In truth, I think he liked me to. He’d never liked hearing how much like Dad he was.

At eight o’clock the next morning, he was at my door again, ready to get started. After a quick and unusually quiet breakfast, we made our way to the last known address we had for Norah. It was a three-storey building on Avenue d’Esplanade in Mile End, with one exterior staircase winding up to meet a series of four rust-red doors. Hers was the third one. Matthew marched up the stairs and raised his hand to knock.

“Wait!” I whispered. “You can’t just knock on the door!”

“Why not?”

“You don’t know who lives there! It might not be—” but he was already knocking.

A few seconds passed, too long if someone was at home, and I felt relieved. I grabbed Matthew’s arm and was pulling him towards the stairs when the door opened. An old man came outside, blinking in the light and addressing us in annoyed French.

“Hello, do you know Norah Batacan?” Matthew said, “She lived here a year ago.”

“Who?” The man said, then continued in furious French.

“Are you her landlord? She lived here for two years. I’m her brother. Norah? Norah Batacan? Looks somewhat Filipino. Asian? Une jeune fille – no – femme?”

He was getting nowhere. The man was gesturing to his watch and waving his hands around and speaking faster and faster.

“He’s pissed.” I said to Matthew, “I think we woke him up, and he doesn’t understand us anyway. He probably thinks you’re offering him a woman at eight-thirty in the morning.” Over his shoulder I could see people sitting outside the café across the street were beginning to take interest. Finally I was able to drag him down the stairs and around the corner.

“What’s next in your plan, Poirot?” I asked, “Please tell me it’s not going to be like this all day.”

He didn’t say anything right away. We walked down a street and then another, and another. I wasn’t keeping track of where we were going. Matthew was getting carried away,

and I was worried that what began as just a lark was turning into something more urgent. I remembered the way he looked at the man, eyes huge, desperate for some lead.

After a few minutes, he slowed, and then stopped wordlessly in front of a park bench. We sat. It was still fairly early in the morning, but the August humidity was already strong. I heard cicadas in the distance, or all around us, buzzing their frenetic tones. When Norah and I were kids, we used to think that they were dying in the heat, screaming as they sizzled.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He was leaning on his knees, his fingers interlaced, palms up. He spoke again, and it looked like he was reading from notes. “Now that we’re here, I can’t help but expect the worst. I’m really trying hard not to run down every alley or kick in every door. Why? What do I think will happen?”

“That’s how you’ve always been,” I said. “You’re more like Dad than you realize.”

“I am not!”

“Remember when Norah was fourteen and had her first boyfriend? You used to drive to the coffeeshop they went to with their friends, and sit in the parking lot watching them from the car.”

“I wanted to make sure that little shit didn’t try anything with her!”

“That ‘little shit’ was the son of a woman Mom worked with for fifteen years. They used to come over for Easter dinner, remember? He was a good kid and he wouldn’t have hurt her.”

“Oh, you don’t understand. Let’s go.” He stood abruptly and started walking. He was closed, all business again. “I want to see if her last employer knows anything.”

Said employer, a set designer at a local children’s theatre, didn’t know anything. In fact, she was quite unpleasant for someone who spent her days creating bright and cheerful environments to delight small children. She waved us away, rolling her eyes.

We loitered in front of the theatre box office for a while, feeling low. The teenage girl slouching at the ticket counter fixed a scrutinizing gaze at us from behind her thick glasses, chewing her gum with an open mouth. I was tired and hot and about to give her a piece of my mind, when she spoke.

“You asking about Norah? I knew Norah.”

Matthew practically ran to her. “You did? Tell me.”

“Yeah. She used to work here. But you knew that, heh. She left last spring. Got another job in NDG somewhere. Not a theatre or anything. A café, maybe? Don’t talk to her anymore, though. I mean, like, I used to, but then she stopped answering my emails. She’s flaky that way.” With a shrug, this vital information was delivered. She was willing to give us this news, but seemed not to care much what we did with it. As if Norah was just some random person she knew for a little while – which, of course, she was.

And so began our haunting of NDG. We caught the stifling métro at Laurier station and, thanks to the train’s jet-engine din, sat in silence. There was a system map above a nearby door, and we were able to plot our course along with the automated voice announcing each station. I daydreamed the voice as belonging to a real person. It was a somewhat ageless

voice, both young and self-assured. A voice that would carry well across a room. Maybe she rode the métro herself, and critiqued her pronunciation of the stations, her tone and her cadence. Maybe she tried to *not* ride the métro, so she wouldn't have to be confronted with old work and old ideas.

Matthew elbowed me and I came back to the present, to the electric guitar chime of the doors opening. "We're here."

We exited the train at Vendôme, which was dark, but featured a long bank of seats molded to the wall in an almost shocking orange.

"Yup, I think this is NDG. Let's go."

We walked up a flight of stairs through heavy air, and emerged blinking into the sunlight.

"Where are we going? That girl at the theatre didn't even say where Norah's job was." I said. It was only getting hotter, and my only thought was for a glass of icy water, or better yet, a beer, despite the early hour.

"She said a café. There can't be that many."

"Do you even know how big this neighbourhood is?"

He looked at me, suppressed a smile and looked away, "We'll find out. How big can a neighbourhood possibly be?" It was the curious Matthew of childhood, of swinging from trees, of flinging worms at our friends.

We found our way to Sherbrooke and walked in a randomly-chosen direction, the backpack-warmed bottle of water we were sharing doing nothing to cool us off. Thankfully, the street was lined with large, shady trees. Short brick buildings offered some shadow, and we fell into a silence as we walked. Matthew's head was constantly swiveling, and every now and then he'd duck into a café or bistro. I went in with him the first few times, grateful of the air conditioning, but quickly began to feel a strange, panicked embarrassment for him as he quizzed confused and sometimes irritated employees about Norah.

Instead, I opted to lean in the doorway out of the sun, listening to the snippets of French from people passing by. It felt so different from where I lived, from anywhere else I'd been. Maybe it was the language barrier or something else, but I felt wholly unnecessary to the city. It didn't need me to move there, to make my mark. Montréal didn't care about me one bit. Maybe this feeling is what made Norah stay.

Matthew came out of the seventh café looking deflated. A hot breeze threw his dark hair across his face, which added to the aspect of misery he was projecting.

"Maybe this is pointless." He said. "Maybe it's a sign. She obviously doesn't want us in her life, so why are we forcing it?" He pushed his hair out of his eyes and dragged his sunglasses on. In their reflection I could only see myself. It was true – she didn't want us in her life.

"I just thought of something. What if she's joined a cult?" He gripped my shoulders overdramatically, his voice heavy with the same ominous tone he never wanted to admit he got from our father.

“A cult? *Norah?*” He was crazy. The three of us hadn’t been to church since we were children. Our parents were Christmas and Easter Catholics, and so didn’t put up much of a fuss. Religion was as much a part of our lives as chicken pox or tornadoes.

“Maybe you should go back to the hotel and try to relax a little,” I said. “Watch TV, read or something. I think you’re getting too wound up.”

“I am *not* wound up! This is important!”

“I know, but you’re getting carried away. Why don’t we try tomorrow? We can come back here early, before it gets too hot. Don’t you think it’s too hot?”

“What’ll you do?”

“I don’t know, stroll around. I think I saw a few stores I might like to check out.”

“You know, this isn’t some tourist vacation. We’re here to find our lost – to find *Norah*, not *shop*.”

He turned and walked off without another word, but I could tell his anger at me had deflated slightly despite his huffiness. We’d always been good at that, good at never actually saying aloud that the other person was right, but capitulating all the same.

I watched him go for a minute, watched him walk without looking around to take in the world around him. He was lost in his own world.

I went in the opposite direction, back down Sherbrooke into Westmount. The air was full of that wet-towel humidity and I tried to find some shade as I went along. Soon there appeared a small road, not much more than a long driveway, lined with trees that I gratefully hurried to get under. It led to a grand stone building, a sign announcing it as Victoria Hall. I noticed a small white building attached, shining in the hot sun. I was inside before I thought any better of it. It was some sort of conservatory. More humid than outside, but blessedly silent. I slumped onto a bench, breathing in the scent of flowers. The sun seared my shoulders, but for the first time since I’d arrived in Montréal, I felt relaxed. I hoped Matthew would be relaxed later. We could go out for dinner, maybe do something Montréalish, whatever that meant. Anything to thaw him a little. And then we could go home, put this little adventure behind us.

Thinking back on it, it doesn’t make sense, but something made me look up, and when I did, I saw *Norah*. I saw her. Walking outside. From the other side of the sweaty glass windows I saw her. I stood up and ran outside. I watched her stride down the street. Her hair was long, twisted up into a messy bun at the crown of her head. Straight-cut bangs. She was wearing heels, which she never used to wear.

Mesmerized, I found myself following her. She walked down Sherbrooke, out of Westmount and back towards the NDG neighbourhood. I made a fool of myself, ducking behind lampposts and in doorways like a cartoon cat burglar. It had been years since we last saw each other, but it was definitely her. My heart was pounding.

After a few minutes of walking, she turned and went into a hair salon. I stopped in my tracks and looked around, not knowing what to do now. Next to the salon was a café with a small patio area out front. I sat out there for a while, nursing an ill-advised hot drink. It was

hard to see inside the salon, and I made a few attempts to peek, leaning over the patio railing as far as I dared. She'd been in there for a long time. Did she work there? Norah a hairstylist? This was as foreign to me as anything could be.

After about half an hour, my impatience got the better of me. I stood up and walked to the front door of the salon. Before I could think about what I was doing, I opened it. Cool air rushed to greet me and I blinked in the doorway for a minute, my eyes adjusting to the sudden dimness. The salon was busy, and bigger than it looked from the outside. A woman was looking at me curiously from the front counter. I'd forgotten how similar Norah and I used to look. Maybe we still did?

"Hi. I'd like a trim with Norah," I said, "Is she free now?"

"She's finishing up with another client, but it won't be long. Coffee? Come with me – we've got one of those coffee pod machine things."

I followed her to the back of the salon, looking for Norah as we went. I found her standing with her back to me, blowdrying a man's hair with an almost hypnotic rhythm. Being so close to her, contained in a building with her, made my heart race again. What was I doing? Did I think I was going to get to the bottom of her life while she shaped my bangs?

I wanted to make up some poor excuse and run out, but we were already standing in front of the coffeemaker, and the woman was watching me expectantly. I picked the closest pod to me, and was ready to retreat. But infuriatingly, she was in a chatty mood.

"Not too much. My brother and I are visiting and - " I stopped myself, remembering that I was not here to talk about how I came to look for my wayward sister. The woman didn't seem to notice my truncated sentence.

"Oh? Where from?"

"Kingston." I lied. She had nothing further to ask about Kingston and, blessedly, grew bored. Before I knew it, I was being led to the now-empty chair where Norah had been standing. Would my sister even recognize me? Would she look at my face and not be able to parse the just-beginning crow's feet and clearer skin?

I gulped the scalding coffee as soon as it was set down in front of me, and soon her face appeared behind mine in the mirror. She looked just as I remembered, but something had appeared in her eyes over the years, something difficult. She stopped in mid-step, her hand raised as if to shake mine. It hung uselessly and almost comically between us.

"It's me." My voice was high-pitched; I could hear it squeaking out of me.

"Claire?"

I couldn't read the emotion in her voice at all. It was nearly perfectly balanced, but there was something. What was it? Surprise? Annoyance?

"What are you doing here? Did Mom send you?"

"No. I'm here – I'm here for a haircut. I thought I just wanted a trim, but I think I'm actually in the mood for something more drastic."

"*Claire.*"

“I don’t mean colour or anything. But maybe shorter than it is now. Maybe here?” I made a plank out of my hand and held it just below my ear.

Norah stared at me in the mirror, jutting out her chin, and I could tell she’s weighing her options. “Very well.” She said. *Very well*. My siblings and I had been raised with bits of our mother’s British vernacular. We’d grown up shedding these words – *barmy*, *advert*, *washing-up* – but Norah clung tenaciously to our mother’s phrases. Hearing one of them from her now made my eyes sting with tears. She didn’t notice; she was running a comb through my hair, which I’d worn past my shoulders since I was ten.

“Your hair has a slight wave to it, and it’s fine. I think we should work in some long layers.”

“Sure. That sounds good.”

“Are you sure you want to go that short? I mean, it’s just so drastic.” She laid her hands on my shoulders, her lips tensed slightly.

“I’m sure. It’s okay.”

She led me to the sinks and draped a towel around my shoulders. I leaned back and tried to relax. I even found myself enjoying the feeling of Norah frothing the minty-smelling shampoo into my hair. I was here. I had found her. It felt normal. It felt fine.

She wrapped a towel around my hair quickly and neatly. Back at her chair, she unwrapped the towel and my damp hair flopped down around my shoulders. She began to twist sections of my hair and pin them up. She was silent, closed off in her thoughts. I didn’t know where to place my gaze; it flitted between the mirror, her shelf of styling tools and my lap, covered by the apron. I suddenly felt trapped, cornered with my hands hidden. What was I doing here?

“So your story is you came all the way to Montreal for a haircut.” She said finally. Her chin was tucked in like a preening bird as she snipped at the ends of my hair.

I attempted an ingratiating laugh. “Well that’s not a very warm welcome now, is it?” I glanced around at the reflection in the mirror. The other stylists were very close by and all engaged in their own conversations, but I was growing uneasy.

“Come on. Don’t make dumb jokes. I have my own life. I don’t want the family descending upon me whenever they remember I’m here.”

“I’m hardly *descending*.” I could feel my cheeks growing hot.

She pulled a clip out of my hair roughly. “Well, you’re here, and with Matthew I assume. Like my face was on a milk carton somewhere.”

She fell silent, and so did I. Her scissors were working so fast that it seemed like she wasn’t connecting with my hair at all. I looked at my lap, at the damp piles of hair dropping onto it. Our shared shade of dark brown. I raised my eyes to my reflection. The longest pieces of my hair were grazing my neck a couple of inches below my ears. Norah was focused on her work, or on not looking at me, I didn’t know which.

“So are you still writing plays?” I asked timidly.

She made an exhalation of breath, sharp and short. “No.”

“How long have you been cutting hair?”

“Just over a year.”

“Do you like doing this? I mean, better than doing plays?”

She was silent for a long time, pulling parts of my hair straight down on either side of my head, squinting at their reflection.

“Plays are tiring. Finding new ways to get people’s attention became very mechanical.”

She moved around in front of me and started trimming my bangs (*fringe*, she called it). Her face moved away from mine and I could smell the slightest hint of the vanilla perfume oil she’d always worn, dabbed on her neck. She fell quiet again. She was freezing me out.

Of course she was reacting this way. Why wouldn’t she? We were a closed unit, Matthew and I. We had closed *her* out. The whole family had. It was the family’s private mythology: Norah the different one. Norah the difficult one. We had pushed her away at every turn, while acting as if there were some defect of hers that made her unable to be pulled neatly into our family. And here I was, sticking my nose in as always.

“I’m sorry, Norah.” I said, staring at my lap. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. There was another long silence before she spoke.

“It’s okay.” She paused, and seemed to be considering what to say next, “Really, it’s good. I was upset for a long time, but now I realize it’s okay to not be friends with your family. I don’t belong, but I like it that way.”

I raised my eyes to look at her in the mirror. She was already looking at me, her left hand absentmindedly shaking out the new layers in my hair. I waited for the spread of hurt feeling to arrive, but there was nothing.

“I think I understand.” I said.

“Do you really?”

“I think so. Well, does it matter? I don’t have to understand, do I?”

“You tell me.” She was smiling slightly. She reached for the hairdryer and sank into her work again, making the quick, graceful movements of habit. She was my little sister. She was tall and beautiful and wise and remote. I wanted her to write a play about this. I wanted her to stand onstage again and wear a ridiculous hair contraption she’d made herself and have this persona say things that hurt to listen to. And I wanted her to have something secret in her life, a quiet space where she didn’t have to be analyzed.

“You know, Matthew went to your old apartment,” I said, smiling, “He woke up the old man who lives there now.”

I told her the story, described Matthew’s awkward French, the people across the street who watched the spectacle. I got carried away and exaggerated a few things, and she laughed loudly, stopping what she was doing now and then to pay attention. I felt a little bad for turning our brother into a cartoon, but I would have said anything to keep her laughing.

Soon, she was done. She picked up a hand mirror and showed me my hair from all angles. It was shorter than it had been in decades. It was light and clean. I could look myself right in the face.

She took off my apron and we walked to the front desk. She insisted that the cut was on the house, but I insisted on at least tipping.

“I really like the cut. And I’m not just saying that.” I said.

“When I first started training for this work, I planned out a haircut for you that was just like this.” She said it, then looked down quickly, blinking rapidly.

“Maybe I can come back sometime?” I asked.

She gave me a slight smile, a little nod. I wondered if she believed I would come back.

I hugged her quickly, tightly, and left the salon. I walked back to Vendôme. I got on the métro and sat by the window, cupping my hand under my chin and staring openly at my reflection. Touching my hair. People sat down and stood up and sat down all around me.

Station: Georges-Vanier!

Station: Lucien-L'Allier!

That night Matthew and I would leave Montréal. We’d get last-minute cheap tickets back home. We’d all meet at our parents’ house for platefuls of pancit and confess to our secret investigation. I would lie to them, tell them that Norah emailed me, that she’d befriended an Italian painter and had been invited to spend the rest of the year taking an art course in Florence. And when that story ran its course, I would think up another one.

But before any of that, I’d knock on the door of Matthew’s hotel room. I’d make him accept Norah the way she was, no matter how long it took, and I would demand he join me in the lie. He’d pace the room, get upset, but grudgingly agree. He’d look at my face, my new and unnatural hair, and not understand me for the first time in his life.

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