

Death in the Family

by Keeley Young

trigger warning: depictions and discussions of various forms of abuse

Eddie

There used to be dolphins leaping from out of a picture frame on the backside of the toilet door. But when she left, it was the first thing we tossed. Or the second, I suppose. The true first, the true primary thing that went the way of the garbage can, was her stuffy, overflowing purse. Maggie had fished out her wallet, and with a little shriek as her hand brushed against a used tissue, she spun on her heels and raced to wash her hands, the wallet never leaving her sight. She claimed the physical weight of it, as much as the contents were to be divided up between us. Maggie, Pete, and me.

The last of the Garvey kids.

When Maggie and I were both seven, and Pete was only a year younger, our eldest brother shot himself. Brandon Garvey had been a baby out of wedlock, when Mum and Dad were fooling around in high school and got caught with their pants down in front of the hapless Geography teacher they'd both had a year earlier, who had failed Dad for making wildly inaccurate assumptions about how the people of Africa lived. But Mum and Dad never considered him destined to be a nightmare child, and by many degrees he wasn't, until he was caught violently humping his pillow completely in the nude, and then out of the blue bolted down the entirety of a bowling lane so that he could set the pins back up himself. A couple months later he was having a sleepover at one of his friends' places, he found the gun in the case, and he pulled the trigger.

Charlotte just had cancer.

The house would remain empty and barren, otherwise. Things needed to be trashed, or packed into boxes and stored in Pete's rented storage unit, even though he complained it would probably mean he would be rearranging the floor plan every time he went looking for a book from his childhood. Some of the clutter from the kitchen cupboards I realised I could keep, once I'd rinsed off the traces of my mother. Maggie would sell the sofas, the beds, and swipe the televisions. Pete would sell the old jalopy of a car that Mum had never ceased driving, especially for menial trips to the bank, where she would most likely have been abusing the bank tellers.

When we would call her, it became like a drinking game for whether she had visited the bank that day – take a shot if she did. I would have a bottle of vodka on the table beside me, uncapped, one hand trying to read the faux-braille, the other hand clutching the phone to my ear. *Yes, Mum, but did you go to the bank today?*

A bead of sweat was making like a snail down Pete's pale-white face. "Her AC crapped itself then?" He shifted in the chair, stood up, and moved to the tiny panel on her antique in-the-wall aircon system. We'd helped a couple of times with finding someone to come fix it, and making sure she let them inside the door. Pete banged the face of the white box like he was in the ring. Maggie and I were staring at each other, with raised eyebrows and her with her phone in her hands, as she'd already begun posting ads for the furniture online, waiting for a nibble. It was like Mum had left the oven on and died. And I felt like banana bread that was burning.

Ever the bark-and-no-bite woman, my mother died in the least dramatic way possible. She simply never woke up. We all have keys to the house; we never gave them up once we moved out not too long after graduating high school. Once Dad went the way of the dinosaurs, the three remaining kids, entirely grown now and withering away slowly too, would stop in to make sure she hadn't tried to take a wall out with the old baseball bat from when Pete played, or hanged herself with her bedsheets. I pulled into the driveway the past Thursday afternoon. Her recycling bin was knocked down. Upstairs, behind the closed door of her bedroom, she'd made a morgue out of her musty bedroom.

Pete had his head halfway into the freezer, trying to make use of it before we unplugged it. Downstairs, she'd had this fridge-and-freezer mostly for Dad's beer and her copious amounts of frozen

meat she persistently would only buy from two different places. She'd still been buying his beer, though the old creep had died about three years ago. A sentimentalist would say, in her heart, the old flame had never been put out with the extinguisher of death. But she bought his beer to drink herself, because when they first met, he said he'd be disgusted if his woman was on par with how much he would be drinking.

The nights I spent with my drunken mother made me crave every single ex-boyfriend.

The frozen meat was thawing out on the linoleum. Maggie, at first, was setting it down methodically, as if she was trying to organise it all, but once Pete reminded her it didn't matter what parts of the dead cow, pig, or chicken she had crammed in the freezer, Maggie started to just toss it across the floor, playing shuffleboard with dead trotters. I don't know why we didn't just shove every plastic-wrapped chunk of meat into one of the white laundry baskets and drive it down to the RSPCA and dump it into their freezers, but Maggie said she had it sorted, she had some brilliant idea.

Pete closed the freezer door without squishing his head behind it. "Are we burning her clothes tonight, fire pit in the backyard, maybe some toasted marshmallows?" His voice was playful, but he stepped to glance out the window over the washing machine, suddenly mesmerised by something. An overwhelming, dulling stare. He was pretending to flick open a lighter with his fingers.

Some nights, when Pete and I were pouring ourselves shots of vodka and mulling over how neither of us can keep a steady relationship afloat, unlike Maggie – who can seemingly balance a few all at once – those nights we talk about how our father hit us. About two weeks before Mum died, I was sprawled out on the sofa, a blanket carelessly tossed over me, and Pete was in an armchair, with his shirt off. We were watching a horror movie, knives piercing flesh. "Remember the roses he left on your ass," Pete said. "Like he was planting a garden, the sick fuck."

He'd been driving home from the liquor store when he pulled over in front of some stranger's house and started clutching at his heart. Thought *here we go*, here's the heart attack, the stroke by Death's skeletal hand. He'd been dreaming it all up, the pangs, the corruption. But he died a year later anyway. Almost to the date. Someone had the painful mission of explaining to my sick, deflating father that all those cigarettes he smoked ever since high school were knives piercing flesh. Dad started to think the so-called large-bosomed woman at the supermarket who used to sell him cigarettes was now in conspiracy-swirling cahoots with the doctors, and Big Pharma. Then he got drunk one night, buckled himself in the driver's seat, and made the local news.

Maggie disappeared in a car that was the meat substitute of the Witch's cottage from Hansel and Gretel. She didn't mention where she was headed, but Pete and I didn't question her, either. We were lying down upstairs, in my old room, on my old double bed, the bed she left laid out like a trap for her future grandchildren. Charlotte had wanted kids, until the cancer. One of the windows in this room was jammed, maybe my doing, or Maggie's. Or age, too, this decrepit grandma of a dweller Mum and Dad never moved out of, after taking out a mortgage to buy it when their first child was four years old. Little Brandon. They'd always say he took a couple extra years to stop wearing nappies. They'd also always say he *truly shouldn't have killed himself like that*. As if they would have preferred to stumble into his room and find him spinning around like a lampshade after an earthquake.

Pete and I were lying there, our shoulders nudged against one another's, and for once neither of us had some quippy, smart-ass response about all the death in the family. Oddly, I wanted to hold his hand, but I didn't. I was sweating more than I had in memory. Except, perhaps, when I was sixteen and I held my breath because I wanted to ask the boy I liked if he had a crush on me too, and we were in the middle of the bush, on an excursion from school. The rejection tasted of bark, and that room, that stupid bedroom, it tasted like that too, and I'd hidden a picture of Mum and I when I was in grade one in my pocket. I felt the edges of the photograph slow and subtle, staring up at the ceiling, watching the inanimate hump of the light fixture. Pete started to hum. A song at first I thought I didn't recognise,

and then he neared the chorus, and I caught myself hearing the words ringing in my ears. It was a song she used to hate, any time it came on the radio. She would make a racket about this song, this song alone, or sometimes there were others. But because we were teenagers at the time, this harmony stuck. At birthdays, we would sing karaoke of this song, belting it at the top of our lungs, and she would either shake her head, dismayed, or she would laugh at us like the fools we were, trying to annoy her on purpose. But there was no comparison in her eyes, at least, to the petty crimes we were truly guilty of over the years. Maggie never told anyone where she was going, or she would get so cranky with Mum she would toss things out the one window that didn't have the flyscreen. Pete would use too many swear words in the one conversation and blame Dad, or he would threaten to hit someone over the head with a baseball bat. And then they would glance to me. I would lock myself in different rooms in the house and refuse to let anyone in, unless I suddenly wanted Maggie, or Pete, or I would tell my parents that I was gay, and their spankings weren't changing anything.

Pete stopped humming. He sat up, drawing his phone from out of his pocket, and he started to tell me about how he planned to sell the car. "It's pointless keeping it in one piece," he said, imagining the little money bags he would be carting home after selling each broken-down cog and gear of the car, as if it were like taking everything separately to some old-timey medieval marketplace. He said, maybe we should keep a souvenir, a keepsake, something worthless in money but worth the memory, but then shook his head. What, will we keep the handle you use to wind up the window? Display it in a glass case in the museum remembering the deceased. No, even the handle might be worth something to someone. I'll keep the photograph. Pete will have been canvassing the place, too, finding things to pocket when none of us were noticing. He hadn't stopped staring at me. While we had been talking, it was a normal, comfortable sort of eye contact between two brothers, but returning to that silence, Pete looked as though he wanted to say something else but couldn't. I saw her cold pale-green eyes blink open where she was lying dead in her bedroom, as if I were in a horror movie, with Norma Bates. Pete has always looked more like her. It drove me insane that in something as simple as making eye contact with my brother, my best friend, it was as if I was biting down hard on the bristly lines of an old, dry towel whilst she stepped down on my foot, wearing a tradesman's steel-capped boots.

I called him first, when I discovered her body. I didn't want to hear Maggie's shrill cry first, I wanted to hear his muttered voice, while his mind shoved him in two different directions. To be mournful over the death of the woman who birthed you, or to be nonchalant, because taking care of her now was beyond necessary. In the last few years of her life, they'd stopped having conversations that weighed more than grapes. He said he was on his way home, but he'd make a U-turn and come see her one last time before we rung up the morgue together. Then I called Maggie, who cried, and then told me to make sure plenty of the windows were wide open. Check under the sink for garbage bags, she'd said. When we were all there, three paper-people in a chain, we plugged our noses or picked up the telephone.

"Do you want to tackle the shed yet?" I said that without breaking my stare with him. The backyard shed used to be a halfway split – one side for Dad, for his gardening tools and the mower, and the other side for us kids, for our backyard toys, like the baseball bat. It was sitting there still, leaning in a corner, colour fading. Pete's baseball days. A ball out of the park, and the crowd goes wild.

Pete sighed. "After you," he said, making a grand gesture with his hands, like out of one of those fancy ads for a luxury five-star resort, where the staff treat you hopping into an elevator like a celebrity boarding their private plane. I stepped in front of him, creaking down the staircase. Surprisingly, the stench of her corpse vacated the building by the end of Thursday. We kept candles lit, turning her bedroom into a shrine, the one night it would be, before blowing every candle out as we retreated down those stairs and locked her heavy white door.

It was late afternoon by then, and the shed in the backyard stood like a vulture gnawing at the flesh of a rotting zebra. Or, alternatively, it looked exactly like a shed would look in one of those junk mail Titan mini booklets, except older, and more unique. Opening the door had started to feel like you were shaking a man who'd been caught pickpocketing, because it was set on a track like a train carriage. Pete moved out of the way to let me do it, to watch me do it. I felt the little laugh building in his throat before he'd even started to stuff it back down. A butterfly was flying around his head. When the door finally clicked to the edge of its track, Pete lunged immediately for something collapsed in the middle of the stuffy shed – a rake. He stood there for a moment, looking like he should be knee-deep in crops and chicken feed, before he set the rake outside on the grass, forgetting about it entirely. If the kitchen had been the inside of the oven, the backyard shed found us swimming around in magma. Everything we found begged to be thrown in the trash, or taken to the dump, or easily could have stayed in the shed for whoever bought the house next to throw in the trash, or take to the dump. Pete joked that maybe Maggie needed some of the sharper tools for her bear-sized meat sculpture she must be at home assembling.

When Dad died, Mum refused for anything of his to be touched, tossed out, even glanced at. Three months later she filled the boot of her car with all of his clothes and dropped them in a heap on her brother's doorstep, without a second thought. But she only seemed to spend time in the backyard to hang out the washing. Nobody touched his decaying, decrepit shed, only because she paid no attention to it at all. There was still a half-drunken can of Pepsi sitting under a folded-up ladder in the shed. Pete poured it out on the concrete near the stairs up to the porch off the back of the house, shaking his head sullenly. Pretending it was all Dad's fault he forgot to throw out the trash before he swerved all over the road. I'd found a baby shovel with lips of crusted dirt, and I was lying down in the grass flicking off the dirt, ants crawling all over my legs. Pete nudged me in the side with his bare foot.

"You get fascinated by weird shit," he said, turning his back to me as he continued rooting through whatever he was finding in the shed. The mower was sitting in the middle of the backyard like a holy landmark, where all paths of grass lead. I propped myself up on my hands after tossing the little shovel aside, staring into the corner where I'd found the baseball bat. He'd noticed it too, but neither of us said anything. If we'd kept it in a glass case in the museum of Pete, at least it wouldn't have ended up covered in all that figurative blood. Well, can't intercept the past, *old sport*.

Pete was wearing gloves by then, sorting through things, holding them up to me like he was presenting Show and Tell in kindergarten. This is a stuck-shut tin of paint, this is a nail bent backwards, this is...something. He crooked his head to one side, his face scrunched up. "Is that Maggie's car?" I was surprised I hadn't heard the car too, but he was right, she had just pulled into the driveway again, hopefully sans meat. Maggie's car was little, like her. But it had an enormous boot, because she liked making on-the-whim purchases and shoving absolutely everything in there. One night she came over with a corpse in the trunk – that's what I'd thought, until she ripped off the white sheet and displayed it all out, one gigantic artificial-but-felt-real cactus in a pot. She'd bought it on sale, she said, with puppy eyes, on brand. I can't remember why she stopped first at mine – but I invited my twin in for dinner, and she said yes, and once we sat down in front of our plates of spaghetti and started talking, it didn't matter.

Pete was yanking hard on the shed door when Maggie poked her head out into the backyard carrying a take-out bag from McDonalds. "I feel like being fat and leaving greasy pawprints on the dining table," she said, giving the bag a little shake.

The swivel fan blew its breath at the three of us sitting around the table, as Maggie handed me a wrapped cheeseburger, and then a sleeve of chips, half of which had been emptied into the bag first, probably from a fast-food worker who couldn't care less. Pete slurped a mouthful of Coca-Cola through

the paper straw and made a loud *aaahhhh*, purposefully over-the-top and dramatic. He glanced over at me with that full grin and winked.

Maggie had grabbed down a small round plate from one of the cupboards above the oven and she'd set her double cheeseburger on it, out of the wrapper. She'd offered the both of us one, but we'd shaken our heads, running our fingers through smears of tomato sauce. "Is someone going to tell Charlotte?" Maggie said this without looking at either of us, right before she gnawed into the burger and chewed on it, glancing up only once her mouth was swishing like a washing machine.

Our sister Charlotte had died of cancer when she was sixteen. But when our father died, Maggie visited her grave in tears and laid flowers and confessed that there had been another death in the family. The last had been hers. Charlotte had been feeling more exhausted than normal, but our parents shrugged it off, because Charlotte was just in bed earlier each night, and she wasn't wandering off in the middle of the night to go meet up with an ex-boyfriend who was two years older than her. Those meetings she confessed to Maggie, the two of them sitting two steps down from the top, out on the back porch. *So Charlotte's tired, whatever, leave her alone then*, Mum would say, but Maggie was just so worried, so confused why a sixteen-year-old girl would suddenly want to act like a grown woman. On a thunder-cloud Tuesday, Charlotte was trying to pay attention to her English teacher explaining the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet when she fainted, without the flair of a sigh and a hand across the forehead. She had leukemia. My parents, on purpose, kept Pete and I in the dark on everything, and I never wanted to ask questions, or receive answers. Maggie would know everything – especially, always, the why. Why they couldn't save her. Why my parents had already visited the cemetery three months ago.

I tore through another chunk of the burger with my teeth, letting Pete take the question first. "It shouldn't be you again, Mags," he said, offering her a chip. I set my burger down on the wrapper and raised my hand, well, figuratively.

"I found Mum," I reached out with my right hand to hold Maggie's. She was looking at me with a smear of tomato sauce in the corner of her lips. She squeezed my hand. "I can do it before the funeral."

Charlotte's grave always had more flowers than our father's.

I would tell people that he hated them, flowers. I never so much as had a chance to ask my father if he cared for them. That's not the sort of thing I think would've granted me much.

Maggie unthreaded our hands and took another bite of her burger. There was a cooler breeze circulating in the kitchen-and-dining now, tasselling her hair. My twin, who barely spoke yesterday. Who learned how to speak and sing before anything else, seemingly.

Pete and I washed and dried that one little plate of hers, as if only one of us would have buckled under the effort of it. She was in the bathroom washing the day off her skin, so I stood there beside the sink with a hand towel slung between my hands, smirking at my brother.

"We should head home soon, all of us," he said, drenching his hands in suds. I shook my head, and he laughed, he said, you're tired, we're stumbling back here tomorrow morning anyway. And he was right, about everything. Pete said he would load everything he could from what we dumped out of the shed into his car, or store it under the house, like the mower, he didn't know what to do with that just yet. Maybe he'd have to disassemble it. Or tie it to the towbar and drag it down each stretch of road, clanging it against the asphalt. Then you should go home, he said, once you've finished helping me. I could've used that baby shovel. When I found her lying there in bed, and I knew there would be no pulse, I thought about asking if it were possible to bury her in the backyard, so she could remain at the house like a ghost. The little no-good shovel would have taken me a lifetime to dig the hole deep enough, but it would have felt like a last punishment from them, my parents.

But then both would be in the ground.

It startled me to think about another family staking claim on the house as theirs. It would go on the market sometime after the funeral, once it was stripped back to a shell. Dad had left the house to us

– the exact name he'd signed off to never mattered to us. The house had been in his name when they bought it, our parents, so it would fold to his children once she died. Now her ghost watched everything get shoved into the trunks of cars and her ghost would watch the For Sale sign be stumped into the front lawn. I supposed, in some way, her ghost would linger on the property anyway, despite the body being carted off with the ambulance, and the body decaying in the morgue, and the body soon to be buried in the ground beside every other gross-and-disgusting body.

I heard the shower stutter out, and the squeaky screen bump on its tracks. Someone should probably fix all the doors in this house before we sell, I'd thought, downing a sip of Pete's drink while he was distracted watching the news. There was a landslide that killed twelve, and there was a stabbing in a suburb down south, but the victim was recovering in hospital. Pete had his feet up on an ottoman, and he reached for his drink, glancing at me as he finished it off.

Maggie was in her old bedroom, the childhood bedroom. I'd wondered where she'd gone when we sat just the two of us without her for a while, and the news lapped back to talk about the landslide again. This time, a reporter from the scene had the fear of death in his eyes. Or he was just tired and exhausted, maybe from the jet lag. Maggie was sitting on the unmade bed, folding a blue-and-white dress into an uneven square. "Every time I tried to throw this out, it was like she had a tracker on it," Maggie said when she noticed me lingering in the doorway, leaning against the wood. It was a formal dress she wore for Grandad's birthday one year; I think when we were thirteen. She held a shoulder in each hand and flung it out, unravelling it again. For a second, the image of Mum holding the dress, beaming about it, flashed in my head. Then I saw Maggie wearing it, shorter and with more freckles and a hairstyle she'd grow tired of in a week. I saw her standing at Grandad's shoulder, him in that chair, blowing out the candles. Then there was Maggie getting her hair pulled by our cousin, two-years-older-than-us Olivia, who called Maggie a little brat and would probably want to swing her around by her pigtails if she ever had them, so she avoided them. Maggie got her first period in that dress. It was flushing around in the washing machine the next morning, and Mum pretended it never happened, and she shoved the dress sitting on a hanger into the closet again, and she leapt out in front of Maggie whenever she tried to throw it in the bin or burn it in a petite wastebin fire.

Olivia should've been my parents' kid.

"It's ugly," I said, stepping into the room.

Maggie just laughed. "It's not, not really. It's ordinary." She crumpled it into that awkward square again, running a finger over the fabric. "It was ugly once it turned red."

She tucked the dress underneath the pillow, almost like blocking it out of her memory entirely, if that was at all possible. I sat down beside her. Her room always seemed to get the most sun, but it sat mostly in darkness now, except for the bedside lamp casting out its rings of light. "What are you doing with all that meat?" She looked at me and she couldn't stop laughing.

She stopped and took a breath. "I was going to do something with it," she said, pausing to stifle a chuckle, "but I, uh, changed my mind and drove down to that new estate and just started pelting meat at all the houses they're building." She couldn't stop laughing, and neither could I, and we sat there watching a mind-version of Maggie gripping tight to thawing-out steaks and pork legs and blocks of mince that had started to look like a brain, and then she'd aim her arm and let the meat collide with wood and concrete and metal, and mind-version Maggie would be cracking up laughing too.

We re-joined Pete out watching tv, the three of us in a line on the couch for a split second pretending all our feet would fit atop that tiny square of an ottoman. He'd flicked away from the news, moving from channel to channel, being unimpressed with everything. It was Saturday evening, but free-to-air tv bored all of us. Pete, Maggie, and I split the cost of every streaming service we wanted, but our parents stayed blissfully ignorant in their land of Australian reality television and ads and Foxtel, Dad had loved Foxtel. But when he died, she drove her squeaky jalopy down to the bank and harassed

them for an hour, begging that they cancel the payment for Foxtel because she had no use for it anymore. She'd called Pete that afternoon, yapping on, and I sat within earshot, her voice echoing out of the phone. After ten minutes, I got up, walked outside, and thought about crossing the road without looking both ways. When I went back inside, he told me she'd hung up on him, right after asking him to drop in as soon as he could to help her look for wherever the phone number for the company was, wherever it had been lost in any of the piles of white paper shoved in shoeboxes. He took the bottle of vodka down from the top cupboard and poured himself a shot.

He stopped on a rerun of an old sitcom from the 90s and I realised why I didn't want to go home tonight. I had barely slept last night. I hadn't slept at all Thursday night. I couldn't take my eyes off something on the ceiling, and it wasn't something real and physical, either, just something purely dreamt up in my head. I was watching home movies that were obscured by the ceiling fan. I wasn't missing my mother, or Dad, or either of the siblings I've lost over the years. I saw those beatings again, and I saw Maggie when she was four, clutching a teddy bear tight to her chest after she'd stumbled down the last of the stairs. I saw Pete when he was eighteen get in that car accident with his girlfriend at the time, and how he stopped driving for six months, and that look on his face when we went to the speedway a couple weeks ago and he remembered it all over. And then I saw them, my parents, clawing their way out of the ground. Not for a second did they appear as zombies or ghouls – they looked like their ordinary selves, and they were taking everything back. Somewhere between witching hour and dawn, I stopped trying to sleep and watched the entirety of a sci-fi movie about aliens lying in bed with earphones in.

Maggie's phone started ringing, and she flipped the phone upside down, saying it was Jett. He's a guy she'd been seeing for a couple months now – he doesn't know her mother just died. He probably wanted her to come around to his for dinner and sex on the couch, in the bedroom, and in the shower.

"I'm not in the mood to have sex," she said, leaning her head on my shoulder.

She whispered in my ear once, a couple years ago, that she was never with these guys for the sex. The phone stopped ringing. She flipped the phone back over, staring at his name on the screen until it faded off into the black.

Pete turned the TV off as the credits rolled for the 90s sitcom. He stood up, went into the toilet, and when he came back, he told us it was about time he sorted out the things from the shed and loaded up his boot. And he glanced at me, and said, "You can stay tonight at mine if you want." Maggie feigned her version of envy, but we all understood she rarely chose to sleep anywhere else besides the luxury-made mattress she spent a nice chunk of her pay on. She always chose to express her fear-of-missing-out without words, giant gestures taking up space. We made our way downstairs, pretending to take upstairs in one last time, as if weren't coming back here tomorrow morning to sort through everything else. We were realising how much time we had wasted today, simply by remembering the past. I'd wasted ten minutes alone staring at a stain in the carpet that had been there since I was born. That was Brandon, Mum would say. His vomit was like permanent marker.

Pete tossed the shovel in the boot, and the paint tins, and the baseball bat. At first, he'd made slow progress with some of the bigger things, like wedging the rake in, but soon enough he was clearing it all up, and wheeling the mower inside to sit awkwardly in front of the washing machine. He took a few pictures of it, wondering if a work friend of his would pick it up and take it off his hands without another location change. He was texting someone else when I came back downstairs, after realising I'd left my keys upstairs in the back bedroom. Something about leaving them alone for the ghosts unsettled me. Pete glanced up, smiling at me. "Let's say goodnight to Maggie and drive back to mine," he said, and we walked out through the garage to the driveway, where she was standing there, on the phone. She rolled her eyes at us, listened for a minute more to whatever he was rambling on about, and then hung up on him.

“I wish I could shove him in the hole before we shovel the dirt back in,” she said, wrapping her arms around me. She shoved the phone back in the pocket of her jeans, making a half-assed promise she’d stop seeing him, but I could never be sure with my sister. Maggie liked to keep people close, even when she severed some part of their ties. She would be seeing this guy, and flirting with other guys from her past, and they would all know about each other, and they would all size each other up but be fine, and okay, with it. Maggie stroked my hair as we parted. “If I’m awake again at four in the morning, I promise to call you,” she said, giving me one last grin before she turned to Pete, wrapping him up. I supposed in some sick twisted way, if we’d both woken up early in the morning, and I wasn’t worried Pete would throw a punch if I tried to wake him up, we’d be there at 5am on Sunday morning throwing her clothes down the staircase.

We waved as Maggie drove off into the darkness. We were waving at nothing, expecting Maggie to glance in the rearview mirror at the two trunks standing idle on the footpath. Swaying a hand back and forth. On the drive back to Pete’s place, he let me pick the music, and I played one slower song until I felt the entirety of my chest sink, and it left a gross tang in my mouth, so I skipped through in search of something Pete and I could scream-sing along to. The car ride was four minutes of quiet and then time was unacknowledged until he was pulled up in front of the garage door, watching it creep upwards like a flamingo raising its leg. I checked the time on my phone: 8:39pm.

Pete had taken a couple *scenic routes* without asking me. I think he wanted to keep sitting in that loud sound for longer than the trip would usually take, and I never said anything. He’d make me smile the most when he sung every word in a song.

I climbed in beside him in his bed. He was sipping from a glass of water, sitting up, leaning back against the black bars of the headboard. Sleeping in the same bed felt natural for us, ever since we’d go camping, and when we road-tripped through two states. He never gave a shit that other boys thought I might grope them in their sleep, or pull their boxers down and take pictures of their dicks. Hell, Pete would wrap his arms around me some nights when we were camping, if I’d thought the flimsy material of the tent would rip from the claws of some mythological creature they thought didn’t exist. Other kids would say Maggie and I were the Scaredy-Twins. But Brandon had his fears too, and Charlotte would sob into her pillows those nights out of the hospital, and Pete locked away the baseball bat.

He set the glass down on the bedside table and inched down so that we were face to face, lying on our sides, and he told me again about the baseball bat. He’d loved the feeling of scoring a home run, always. It’s electric – the wind is levitating you off the ground as you near the final base, dirt kicking up at your heels, a million other little boys trying to catch the ball to pelt it at the back of your head. It was the one and only sport he wanted to play, because other sports just missed the mark for him. Pete spent birthday money on the perfect baseball bat – and he’d spend afternoon after afternoon, once he’d finished his homework, just practicing on his swing and nudging me into throwing the ball square at him. My aim improved because of him.

But he’d brought a weapon into the house. Mum liked to practice her swing too. He started noticing the way I would walk some days, like stepping on eggshells, moving at a snail’s pace. It made him exhausted, he said, it made him tired of playing baseball – he had no dream career in it, he would never imagine himself the grand champ to step out onto the pitch, so he quit. Mum started to swing for that home run when he would speak, because his words were starting to come out clearer, and he talked back. She would beat him with the bat, and he would wrestle it out of her arms and swing it around, only dreaming of scaring the living daylight out of her. But sometimes she would bruise. And you would think they were the twins, with matching purple marks taking shape on their bodies.

I never spoke a word when Pete made any form of confession. He would finish the story, and he would say, always, “Don’t let this force you to see the world any different.” He would never be

pretending I saw the world in a shade of ecstasy – but he would hope, perhaps, that I did not choose to fret too much on the part of us that wants to grieve. That wants to be devoured.

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We chose a picture of our mother from when she was in high school, before she gave birth to our brother, Brandon. She was young, and naïve, and her mother must have helped her style her hair. Late one night, we were sitting on the floor in front of the swivel fan, trying to keep photos from flying everywhere. Pete was holding up a picture of our mother looking ghastly thin from a year ago; Maggie was rifling through the older pictures, shaking her head at him. *She looks deceased in the coffin – the least we can do is make her look alive for the little booklets.*

The service was too long and it was a sweaty and stuffy day, all I wanted to do was stop wearing black. It was the first time I'd worn black since she died – I think Mum would have killed us all if we trampled around her house dressed like mourners. Pete, Maggie, and I stood there at the front of an audience and shared a eulogy that would settle her body. Behind us, in the coffin, she said nothing.

I was starting to get a headache from the sun, and Maggie held my free hand with hers as we stood outside on the lawn. We appeared to her in that row, the three of us again, always repeating, and we were reared for one last Show and Tell, because history had requested it. That one sacred memento in our hands, which could be torched or buried or scattered within a breath. Maggie with the dress. Pete with the baseball bat. Me with that photograph.

It was the first day of grade one for me and Maggie. Our parents walked as far as they could with us, telling us with sweet remarks that this would be another year of making new friends, and keeping the old ones, and running around in the playground, and scraping our shins. It was the perfect first day of school. I'd spent preschool being tied with string to my sister, but now I was making friends without the noose – for a kid in grade one, it felt like a noose, being tied down by their sister and befriending her friends. The photograph was of my mother and I in the morning, before I waved goodbye, before Maggie and I promised we'd never leave each other's sides. It was the perfect first day of school, because nothing went wrong. Not once. Maggie would complain, say one of her friends from last year was ignoring her now, but I had the widest grin and there was no containing it. Over the years, my mother had the chance to change the narrative of the day, say I was a bully to my twin sister, but she didn't. She reminded me each time that I was the boy that wouldn't shut up about his day. There was some of that young naïve girl left in my mother.

As they lowered her body into the ground, I slipped the photograph in my pocket and reached out to hold Pete's hand. It was sweaty, and a little calloused. It lasted all of thirty seconds before he stepped toward an outstretched shovel, heaped an anthill mound of dirt onto it, and did his best to cover her face. He was humming as he handed me the shovel, soft for only the Garvey children to hear.