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We're the Real Accident

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Accident

April's twilight
The first night
I knew I lost you

We stood in the hallway
Chandelier light blaring
Like headlights
In your eyes
I was your little sister again
Young and insignificant

In a sheer migraine medicated haze
I saw your bones' poked-holes
Translucent skin that holds
Your skeleton that didn't break

I needed to wrap
In a cocoon
Cover my healed skin
That healed
Too much—only to need scars again

We're the real accident:
One hundred butterflies
Breaking like glass
Flying high
Slicing into our skin
Though you were the one who crashed
The one in the accident

I believed butterflies could fly
Close together but they're too fragile
Unpredictable mess-ups
I landed on your wings
You chose to fly away

Butterflies metamorphosize to venom
Their beauty an accident
A waste

April is the cruelest month.

T.S. Eliot—*The Waste Land*

April 28, 2012, Dawn

My sister called our house after she smashed her car into an I-85 guard rail a few miles north of the Jefferson, Georgia exit. When my mom hung up the phone, she and my dad immediately left to see the scene of the accident, and I stayed at home to study for my upcoming Political Science final. I studied definitions of direct democracy and natural law. I memorized amendments and court cases. After my final, I forgot the differences between the first amendment and the twenty-seventh amendment, and I forgot what the McCulloch vs. Maryland court case entailed. However, I remember the morning I studied them. My mind amassed with details and dates that pertained to anything but my sister's accident.

She left that morning—a foggy, wet April morning—to meet a man she barely knew. He contacted her a few weeks earlier on a popular, seen-on-TV dating website. When their relationship progressed from phone calls and text messages to Skype dates, they decided to meet in person. Since they only lived one state away from each another, they planned to meet at a park between Georgia and South Carolina.

I heard her leave that fateful morning. I thought about telling her goodbye, but I stayed in bed and decided not to. Like I stayed in bed when the phone rang and I heard her shouting about the accident. My mom asked me if I wanted to come with her and my dad. I told her no. I needed to stay and study. Maybe I told the truth, but slant. I held back what I forbid myself to admit: she chose him over me. I made a choice, too.

Later, when my sister told me what happened, she admitted that she called him first. Before she called her mom, her sister, and her dad—before she called 911—she called the man she barely knew and told him about the accident. Her phone call prompted him to drive to Pendergrass, Georgia to see her. They would no longer meet at the halfway point. He would drive the entire five hour journey from Charleston, South Carolina to our home.

My mom and dad returned home from the accident. Besides air bag burns and bruises, my sister escaped further injuries. Still, the paramedics insisted that she visit the hospital. Again, my mom asked if I wanted to come with her. Again, I told her no. Maybe I sat on the couch. Or, I stared at the phone awaiting another accident. Or, I simply stared because I did not know a friend to call. Just someone to talk to. A silent house on a Saturday morning, no one to call—fears that resonated in each night's darkness. Fears I burnished that Saturday morning.

She saw the road, then it disappeared: her description of how her car met the guard rail, spinning across two lanes of traffic and facing south instead of north. Instead, maybe she disappeared into her thoughts—thoughts about meeting the man she would marry the following spring. In that moment—during the disappearing in the April fog or during the spinning—she knew she loved him. Whatever happened, as soon as she hit that guard rail, she wrecked our sisterhood. An invisible separation began that would rip us apart slowly. In the past, we stood together, attached at our hips, like a single lilac blooming in the spring. That day, we stood apart. She crashed into a guard rail and called him; I sat in an empty house with no one to call and no one to talk to. Two lilacs were born out of the dead land.

It probably surprised her I skipped the hospital visit. Or, she slipped into a hospitalized, medicated haze that left her unaware of my absence. If I visited her, I accepted reality. The amendments and court cases and government terms vanished. All for naught. If I stayed at home, it never happened. *Repeat and repeat again. It never happened. Just keep studying.* When she came home, she bore no scars. *It never happened.* I stayed calm. I heard her screaming and crying over the phone, but I never screamed. I never cried. No, my suffering occurred internally.

She hit a guard rail while I watched two lilacs tearing holes into the ground. The punishment of a little sister left behind. The one who must witness the damage, finishing the separation the older sister started.

What My Sissy Didn't Know

I worry obsessively. I imagine the worst possible scenarios before they occur. I always daydream about funerals. Before her car accident, I had already imagined my sister's death. Above all the other people I love, I imagine her death, her funeral, her ending the most. In my imagination, her funeral plays out like this: I read a eulogy that consists of an excerpt from Charlotte Bronte's "On the Death of Anne Bronte":

There's little joy in life for me,
And little terror in the grave;
I've lived the parting hour to see
Of one I would've died to save. (1-4)

At age thirty-two, Charlotte lost her sister Emily; then, at thirty-three, she lost her sister Anne. Bronte's poem captures a sister's grief, so her words replace the ones I cannot say. Then, as men in black suits and ties lower her casket, I wail and kick and scratch at air, grass, dirt, whatever I can grab with my hands, as my hair covers my red, tear-streaked face. That night, I look down at my green grass-stained, bloody knees and wonder how that happened. I forget how I make it from the funeral to my bedroom. My features, my temperament will look so distorted my closest friend may think of me as a stranger. But my sister is my closest friend. No one notices.

If I think the worst thing happens, it will not come true. Beyond the funeral, my mind blanks. Why would my life continue without my sister? What would I do? We should grow old together. Live next to each other. She should be the last face I see on this earth. Not the other way around.

After the accident, after she met the man she would marry, she berated me for showing so little emotion. If only she knew the thoughts I kept to myself. *Yes, you hit a guard rail, and it hurt. Yes, you will never be the same. But you almost took yourself away from me. Does that hurt? Don't you know I would trade places with you? Or, you should have taken me with you. Let's go back. I will sit in the passenger seat thrown head first in the windshield, skull cracked, heart open, memories wiped clean. You will survive. And you will marry him.*

I hear the song of judgment in my ear: *sadistic, morose girl—you're sick.* I wish I never worried. I wish that the tendrils of thoughts I follow will lead to the flowers of the field. *They do not labor or spin.* But I overdose on emotions. I am Ophelia face-up, staring at the ceiling instead of floating in the water, praying that sweet flowers—not the appalling lilacs—will enwrap me so I may finally rest.

April 28, 2012, Dusk

That night, we stood in the hallway. *Where are you going?* I remember asking her the same question over and over. She told me she loved me, but she avoided my question. I felt like a little girl again—the annoying little sister who pried into her big sister's business. Maybe she thought that she made her intentions obvious. She held a packed up suitcase in her hands, leaving for the night. He rented a hotel room, and she wanted to stay with him. What did my question matter—she already made up her mind and grew impatient for me to leave her alone. A part of

me refused her determination. We both knew what men do. We learned from our father: men will deceive you. They will love you for a little while, then they will hurt you—either emotionally, physically, verbally, or mentally. I considered these punishments absolute. But I hid beneath her silent answer. I let her go. Long before the accident, she had stopped listening to me. Petals rip. Lilacs break.

Endless, cyclical thoughts revolved in my mind as I stood there.

You love me? Say something else to me.

You need comforting? I need comforting, too.

Tell me it never happened. Tell me it will never happen again. Tell me you will never act so carelessly again.

Stay and reassure me that you are here. But are you still my sister? What did you do with her? Who are you? Who are you?

My real sister, my sissy, would never leave me. You make it so easy to leave me.

T.S. Eliot knew his months. I lost my sister in April—the cruelest month. She left the house that morning, and she never came back the same. After that day’s horror, she added to the wreckage and told me goodbye. I stood alone in the hallway, stranded in a waste land. *Here I dance round the lilacs broken lilacs broken lilacs. Here I dance round the broken lilacs at twilight when you left me.*

May 2012: Losing Track of Days

She loved him, so she told me. Less than a month after meeting him, she sat on my bed and told me she planned to leave the next day and move in with him. She looked forward to living in Charleston. Another, fresh accident. The lilacs throbbing anew. Tears fell down her face as she apologized, but I wanted more. I thought about the girl with grass stains and bloody knees mourning her dead sister. She lost her sister unwillingly, while my sister left me of her own volition. No kicking. No screaming. No battle scars. She thought I could live without her constant presence, so I would prove that I did not need her at all.

I refused to think about her, but I felt her everywhere. Some mornings I woke up, and I thought she still lived there. I heard the familiar sounds of her tiptoeing through the kitchen at six o’clock to start her day. I reminded myself of my mistake. Our house dwindled from four of us to three of us. I had never been the only child, living at home without my older sister. Blanks in my memories. Without her, memories stopped forming. The lilacs marbled. Nothing worth remembering.

What I remembered, I wished to forget. No one asked me if I missed her. They thought of it as a fact. They told me, “I bet you miss her.” Our relatives, especially our grandparents, brought it up every time I saw them. However, I changed the subject as quickly as possible. I felt slighted. I thought, “How dare you speak her name in front of me? Do you know what she did to me?” They would never fathom how much it hurt to hear her name.

Before she moved away, our grandparents and other relatives always used to ask, “How are the girls?” No one asked, “How are Serena and Victoria?” They thought of us as “the girls.” The two of us until she separated us. The girls. Serena and Victoria. Serena. Victoria. One girl stayed. One girl left. *Round and round the broken lilacs.*

We spent close to twenty years together, living in the same house. Best friends. I looked at our pictures hanging on the walls and decorating the fireplace mantle. Betrayal shot through me. *One lilac. Two lilacs. Broken lilacs.* A large picture frame held multiple pictures of us

together. My favorite picture: she cradles me in her arms on Easter Sunday—my first Easter. With her hair permed and her smile bright with braces, she whirls me around in our Easter dresses. I sit in her arms, pink and precious, without any hair yet, my cheeks like bubbles, pouting.

At twelve years old, she called me her baby, refusing to acknowledge that our mom gave birth to me. Her baby doll miraculously brought to life. In a way, she helped shape my identity on that end of January evening. She chose my first name—after her Britta dolly, of course.

I scoured photo albums to see the two of us together. Christmas pictures where we sat side by side on the couch, my mouth agape in surprise and my sister laughing. If I could go back in time, I would go back to those years. Relive the moments when I spent time with one of the first people I loved.

I remembered a homemade video of us at Christmas. I was probably four years old. My mom, my dad, my sister, and I arrived at my grandmother's house. My sister carried me in her arms. Our relatives tried to talk to me, but I buried my face in her neck. I did not want to talk to them. I preferred to rest my head on my sister's shoulders. I still do.

I avoided new memories; however, in all of my searching for pictures and past memories, I confronted my denial and admitted silently that I missed her.

Ice Queen

In the past, I experienced friends leaving me, cutting off communication without a warning. I developed a coping mechanism for such loss: I shut down. So, I followed suit when it came to my sister. We talked on the phone, but I mostly listened. I spoke meaningless words, recounting my day and prattling about other insignificant details to fill the conversation. I stopped sharing anything personal with her. After all, why would I, when she found a reason to run away from her crazy younger sister. She fled the sister who took two anti-anxiety medications. One medication to start the day. *The pill to get through the day.* One medication to end the day. *The pill to sleep and forget the previous day.* One trial pill. *What pill will I take next?* She escaped my weekly doctor visits—psychiatrist and psychologist visits. My fucked-up in the head sickness. Her words echo in my mind: *Am I not enough for you to stop pulling your hair out?* She decided to answer her question for me. She no longer involved herself in my sickness. She left me. *Alone I dance round the lilacs broken lilacs broken lilacs.*

Leave me, and my love crystallizes, sparkling like fresh ice. Consequences of a January baby. Ice queen. Frozen. Prick your finger on the ice, sister. Undo my curse.

After: For Sissy

I believed you would leave me first. I knew you would find someone to love besides me. You left, sweet sister, and I think of the way Gertrude mourned Ophelia's death in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*:

Sweets to the sweet: farewell!

Scattering flowers.

I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;

I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,

And not have strew'd thy grave. (5.1.228-32)

She scatters flowers for Ophelia, who loved flowers. She loved them so much, she drowned wrapped around them. But you left no flowers to console me, but the appalling lilacs, and the flowers of the field seem forever denied to me with my constant worrying. No, you need not prepare my death bed nor my bridal bed. I still suffer, though. Two lilacs, broken lilacs, mocking me, reminding me of what we used to be.

Tulips

My sister tells me
Over the phone
He bought me tulips

She sends a picture:
Three tulips perfectly cut
Spaced just far enough
Not to touch

But what of the purple flowers
Outside my window
The trying purple
Seeping its pigments
Stuck-clung to the dirt

She wouldn't know tulips
Until she saw these tall
Flowers of the field fall
Unwanted and untouched
Where the cows slumped
Back and forth
Before packing a slaughterhouse

Poor purple flowers punished
With summer and stench
And a girl missing her sister
A girl with an urgency for color
Dull tulips
Grieved for—Now
Not later

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