A Lot to Tell

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Meggie was the pretty one and I was the smart one. Unfortunately, where I grew up being smart was a social liability, as damning as having acne or dating an Indian. My pretty little sister was adored by all, and to my credit I was never jealous of her. In my mind I could see her at sixteen as if it were yesterday. Who could resist her? All these years I tried to make excuses for her, tried to love her, still going back made my stomach turn. But I owed it to Daddy to go.

I hated the bus. The mingled odors of stale cigarette smoke, chemical toilet, and strawberry something to cover the toilet smell, hung in the air. No wonder my stomach was upset; I could hardly blame Meggie for that. Our father had died, I must be loving and forgiving.

My seat-mate was a garrulous blind, Mormon piano tuner from Jerusalem. He was traveling to Salt Lake City and had already been on the bus for three days. He smelled like it. I had been on the bus for only forty minutes, but I knew everything about him. He knew only three things about me: that I was from Chicago, that I had a piano, and that my father had died in an accident in the mine. The saddest part was that he would be in Chicago in two weeks and wanted to tune my piano. I had given him my address and phone number. Why did these things always happen to me?

It made me mad, particularly at Meggie, who should have picked me up at the airport in Rapid City. I hadn’t seen my sister in twelve years and she was entirely unwilling to save me the degradation of the Trailways bus. She could at least have sent Joe. This from a woman who every year sent a Christmas card saying, “Come visit! Joe and the boys are Great!!! I would come see you, but still have no luggage.” Sitting on the bus I had to face the unpleasant reality that my baby sister was an insincere bitch, on top of everything else.

My new friend Levi lit up a cigar.
"I don’t think you’re supposed to smoke those on the bus,” the Indian woman across the aisle commented.

"I didn’t think you were supposed to smoke them if you were a Mormon," I put in.


The other woman laughed, I couldn’t, I couldn’t even breathe.

"So, “ Levi turned toward me, "tell me about the family you are going to see, Emily."

"Not much to tell," I tried to answer him without coughing. "I haven’t seen them in a long time."

"That usually means there’s a lot to tell, doesn’t it?" Levi replied. The woman across the aisle agreed by nodding vigorously.

God. A conspiracy. The bus turned down Main Street: Welcome to Deadwood. Suddenly I was insecure and eighteen; nothing had changed. We pulled into the Lipp’s Cafe. Their sign, a huge hot pink mouth was peeling and more badly in need of paint than it had been twelve years ago. Chapped Lipp’s we used to call it. I stood to gather my things: the coat that would stink too much to wear, my gloves, my purse, and my beautiful, new, far-too-expensive carry-on. Somehow I hadn’t let my self come back with that same powder blue Samsonite that had irked Meggie for so many years. It had been my graduation gift from Daddy. Meggie never graduated.

"This is where I get off, Mr. Epstein. Do call me though, when you get to Chicago.” I hoped he wouldn’t, thinking at the same time that I had quite a bit in common with my bitchy sister. The big Indian woman got up, too.

"I’m sorry about your Father, Emily. I’ll pray for him. And your sister, too." He had directed the last remark toward the other woman, I was pleased to see. I didn’t want any sincere old Mormon convert praying for my sister. Maybe he had influence.

"Thank you, Mr. Epstein.” I hurried off the bus.
There stood Joe.

"Emmie? Goddamn, Emmie, you look great." Joe adopted his same old legs apart, head forward stance and inspected me closely; he had never been subtle. But it had been cute at eighteen. I felt an unexpected rush of pity for Meggie. He reached out to hug me and I let him, but it was uncomfortable.

"Hello, Joe." The bus driver brought over my suitcase, three-hundred-fifty-nine dollars worth of gray Italian leather and pink French tapestry. Joe picked it up.

"Truck's over there." He gestured vaguely across the parking lot filled with trucks. I followed him to a white Ford with an "I'd rather step in shit than smoke it" bumpersticker and cringed as he tossed my suitcase into the back, suddenly elated that I hadn't married a man who didn't know a three-hundred-fifty-nine dollar work of art from a marine duffel bag.

"God you look great, Emmie. Really. Even better than when you were a kid." He looked at me as if he was too amazed to even start the truck.

"Orthodontia," I told him.

"What?" God, the man was so dense.

"Got my teeth fixed, Joe," I said. He used to be so damn cute. Now he looked much older than thirty, with no neck, a beer belly and a crew cut.

"Oh, yeah." He started the truck.

"Wait, Joe. Tell me about Daddy first. I can't ask Meggie—she was so upset on the phone...she told me it was a mining accident." I knew I couldn't talk to Meggie about Daddy. Somehow the conversation would get back to that luggage; it was inevitable.

Joe paused to collect his thoughts, few as they were.

"Well. I suppose it was an accident, and it did happen in the mine, but I don't guess anybody but Meggie would call it a mining accident, you know what I mean?"

I didn't, but he was clearly expecting some kind of response, so I nodded. "Go on."
“Well, you remember that big ol’ Indian woman, Juanita-Mae Smallberry?”

I didn’t, but I nodded again. This could take a while.

“They had her up there at the mine office—on account of her having a bad heart I guess they didn’t want her down in the mine I guess. Only not everybody knows this about her heart, see? Who knows if your Daddy knew or not, know what I mean?”

“Joe...” I said, hoping to get the story moving a little.

“O.K., so she has a bad heart, right? I guess her and old Daddy were doin’ it in this old elevator, on break, right? Well, it must’ve been pretty good, if you know what I mean, ‘cause Juanita-Mae has a heart attack. Dies immediately, they say. Your Daddy’s only mistake was lettin’ a big woman like that be on top. So he suffocates or gets crushed or something before they find him.” Joe looked as if he was going to laugh.

“Do you really think this is amusing?” I snapped.

“Hell, no, Emmie. You can only respect a guy who can go out like that at seventy. Hope I do.”

You will. Joe and Daddy were cut from the same cloth, that much was obvious. A mining accident would be far too heroic for either of them, too much to hope for.

“So how’s Meggie taking it?” I asked after we had started for home.

“Not very well.” Joe hesitated. “She don’t want you staying with us, Emmie. She thinks we’re gonna run off together, I think.”

“You and me?” I asked, surprised. I had not even considered the possibility before I saw him.

Joe looked genuinely disappointed; he had considered it. “I told her she was crazy,” he said quietly.

“Should I stay at the hotel? I don’t want her anymore upset than she must already be.” She thinks I could be as cheap as she was, and run off with somebody else’s man, as if I’d want him. I should thank her. I could have six no-neck little Joes at home.
"No. Shit, you think I’m gonna let that woman tell me who I can have in my own house?" His sudden anger startled me.

"Actually, Joe, until yesterday it was Daddy’s house. Now I suppose it’s Meggie’s. And I really don’t want to upset her, this must be awful for her. She was so devoted to Daddy, and so good to him." The disloyal bastard. He should at least love her.

"Emmie, you know your Daddy always loved you most. After you left for college it just about broke his heart. And you never came back.."

"Is that what broke his heart? Not his pretty baby Meggie getting pregnant at sixteen?" I had promised myself I wouldn’t mention it. I would be loving and forgiving. It had been easier in Chicago. "You said you’d wait for me, Joe. You said you’d wait forever." I hadn’t cared in years.

"I loved you, Emmie. I still do, I guess.” His voice was low and tight. “It was all a mistake with Meggie. I missed you, that’s all.”

"Missed me so much you married my sister? Two months after you promised to wait forever? Well, she’s your wife now. You’d better not be saying the past twelve years and six babies are all a mistake. Be happy with her. You deserve each other.” I said it with more malice than I actually felt. What did it matter, twelve years later?

We drove in silence to Daddy’s house. The muddy yard was filled with pieces of things: cars, lawn mowers, dirt bikes, garbage. The house had settled at an odd angle, and the front porch had fallen off in a heap and lay halfway down the side of the steep hill. I was glad I lived in a condo.

I walked in with Joe carrying my suitcases. Meggie stood bent over looking into the oven, trying to keep two babies back by hitting at them with a damp, gray dish towel she held in her free hand. She looked surprised to see me.

"Emmie," she said as she closed the oven. I put my things down on the kitchen table and hugged her. She stood stiffly and let me. I suppose everyone has to age, but I was
shocked at the change in Meggie. Joe, well I had imagined what would happen to Joe. But my pretty sixteen-year-old sister had become my mother, beautiful, but sad and defeated, the way I remember Mama looking before she died. There were two little Joes holding her, one clinging to each leg, sneaking glances around her to look me over. They wore dirty tee shirts, the bigger one was He-Man, the smaller one was the Incredible Hulk. They both wore disposable diapers, sagging in the seat. Their little faces were glistening like glazed doughnuts; didn’t she ever wipe their noses?

Meggie tried to kick herself free of them. “This one’s Josh,” she pointed to the Hulk, “and this one’s Jeremy,” she pointed to He-Man. “Put Emmie’s stuff in the front bedroom, Joe.”

Joe did as he was told without comment and hurried around back out the door. Meggie gave each of the superheroes a cookie. “Go turn on cartoons,” she said. They waddled off silently.

I still had not spoken. “Meggie, I’m so sorry about Daddy. It must be awful for you.”

“No, not really. I mean, I’m sad, but I don’t have anything to feel guilty about at least. I was always here for him.” She looked at me with practiced innocence. Mama had never looked like that. Same old Meggie. Well, if that was how she wanted it to be.

“I know you never worried him. Oh, maybe that once when his blood pressure got so high.” Loving and forgiving I had left on the bus.

“What do you mean by that?” Meggie hissed, keeping her voice low. I don’t know who she thought might hear; the two baby hulks were engrossed in the ThunderCats.

“Well, of course it wasn’t your fault he nearly had a stroke. He was just naturally so worried when you went into labor and you were only supposed to be seven months pregnant. And so soon after the surprise of the wedding!”

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Meggie held her ground. “It was scary for all of us! We could have lost little Joey; he was a whole two months early! That’s the only reason it seemed so soon after the wedding. We’re just so lucky he’s a strong, healthy boy.”

“It was awfully lucky to have a premature baby weigh ten pounds. I don’t know much about babies, but usually when they’re premature they tend to be small and sickly. I was certainly relieved when both Daddy and the baby survived the early birth.”

“You would have loved it if our baby had died, wouldn’t you? You would have come right home and run off with Joe, right? You’ve thought it was my fault all these years, haven’t you? Emmie I was sixteen years old! Do you think I actually wanted this?” Her gesture embraced the messy house, the piles of laundry, the dirty-faced babies.

I was surprised. I had expected her to dissolve into tears, to apologize, anything but to state what I knew was the truth.

“Oh, Meggie! I never wanted your baby to die. How can you say that? I just never knew why you would want Joe, when you could have had any boy, and he was the only one I could get. I don’t blame you or Joe, exactly. I don’t know why I even said those things; I don’t care at all, anymore. I’m glad you’re married to Joe. I want you to be happy.” I didn’t even sound sarcastic, I thought as I paused to catch my breath. But Meggie burst into tears.

“I’ve made such a mess of my life. I was jealous of you because Daddy loved you best. Don’t deny it now; who did he buy an entire set of luggage for? Joe never wanted to marry me, Daddy made him. He always wanted you. I spent all day yesterday worried out of my head, sure you were going to come take Joe back.” She put her head on my shoulder and sobbed. “But you wouldn’t want him, would you? I mean, here you are, looking so beautiful with your four-hundred dollar suitcases. What would you want with Joe? He’s probably heart broken.” She seemed to perk up
slightly at the last thought, because she smiled. “I do love
him mostly. He’s all I got.”

I smoothed her pretty reddish hair. “Neither of them
is good enough for you, Meggie. They’re both lucky you
ever put up with them.” I was thinking how alike they
were, Daddy and Joe, but Meggie didn’t know what I meant.
She looked confused.

“Daddy and Joe. They’re lucky they got you and not
what they deserved.”

“Well, Daddy got Juanita-Mae. I’m not sure how
lucky that was.” She giggled a little, crying at the same time.
I giggled, too. When Joe came home with the four bigger
little Joes we were laughing. He did not look pleased.

I had forgotten the smell of the Hills, the cold, clean
pine smell and the fresh mud. I remembered it as I stood in
the cold March rain at Daddy’s grave. Daddy and Juanita-
Mae had bought the grave plot together only two weeks
earlier. Brother Oliver, a friend of Joe’s mother who had
never met either of them, said it was because they were
sinners and knew they were going to die. Which was a fairly
bizarre notion, that sinners would have better information
than anyone else. I secretly hoped it was because they were
in love and wanted to be together through eternity. Which
is an even more bizarre notion, because as far as I knew,
Daddy had never done anything noble or romantic. I sup­
posed he actually got a good deal, or owed some salesman a
favor.

Joe had threatened not to attend the funeral, since
Juanita-Mae’s family from the reservation would be there.
He was standing on my left, scowling. I couldn’t tell if it
was at the Indians, or if his too tight dress pants were both­
ering him. Meggie was on his left, crying and looking beau­
tiful. She really had loved Daddy. I was trying to ignore
Brother Oliver’s peculiarly irritating voice and odd inter­pre­
tation of eulogy. It was difficult. The six little marines were
stoically indifferent, they had taken their orders—to be

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men—very seriously.

I saw the big Indian woman from the bus. It was Juanita-Mae’s sister. I walked over to her as they were getting ready to lower Daddy into the grave. Meggie joined us.

“Would you mind if we asked them to put Daddy on top?” Meggie asked as if it were a normal request. It wasn’t and the other woman laughed loudly. Brother Oliver and Joe shot wicked looks in our general direction.

“Did you know your Daddy and Juanita-Mae was gonna get married?” the woman asked.

“I’m glad.” I hoped it was the truth, with Daddy it was hard to be sure. But some how it made me respect him more to believe it.

“It’s only right that the man should be on top,” she agreed.

“Well, at least under the circumstances,” I said. Meggie giggle. Juanita-Mae’s sister giggled. I laughed. Joe stood near Brother Oliver and radiated displeasure. I looked at Meggie, and she smiled back at me. She wouldn’t bother to put Joe on top. Neither would I. And that was the difference between Daddy and Joe.

When we got back to the house, Joe started drinking. Meggie and I retreated to the attic. We sifted through musty trunks, dug through metal wardrobes filled with prom dresses, and picked through Daddy’s old suitcases. I remembered the sisters we had been, telling secrets and playing dress-up in this attic on winter afternoons. I remembered how easy it had been to love her.

Later that afternoon I packed my clothes into Daddy’s old vinyl suitcases. Meggie gave the boys hotdogs and grape Kool-aide for lunch. I kissed her goodbye, and the boys, too, but on their foreheads, avoiding the slick areas around their noses and mouths. I was glad I was not a mother.
"You know, at least one good thing came of all this," Meggie told me.
"I know, Meggie."
"I mean, I won't be calling to tell you Juanita-Mae Smallberry's your new step-mama." We both laughed, she hugged me and neither of us cringed.
"Maybe more than that, too." I kissed her again, this time on the forehead, hoping that she might think it was a sophisticated city ritual, and not that I was semi-repulsed by her monster babies.

I walked out and through those old suitcases in the back of the truck, and drove to Lipp's to catch the bus. Joe would have to walk up and get the truck when he was sober. Tomorrow I would be back at work, and soon I hoped Levi Epstein would be coming to tune my piano. I had a lot to tell him.

-Elizabeth Birmingham