Impossible Water

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Jason came back today and told me Doug is dead.
I say quietly, sit down, and he walks over to the bay window to stand in the light.
Jason took a theatre class once; he knows the value of a good pose. He stands, hands in pockets, flat squares gripping the coins and lighter hidden there. Jason doesn’t smoke. His shoulders aren’t hunched, but slope flat under brown wool and linen. He reaches up, fingers to forehead, moving the skin around lines.
Doug is dead.
I want Jason to cry, but he doesn’t; he never has. He saves that energy for something more important, he says. I cry a lot.

Sheila, what’s more important than giving your face a healthy watering? I ask and you agree with me. Dad always called us his weepy women. Said not to cry. We never did what he wanted.

“He said I should get them.”
“What?”
“His clothes, Sheila... In the note he said that I should get them.”
“Oh...” Nice Doug. Sweet Doug. Jason spent so much time with you. And this is what you give him. Clothes. Do you wear Frye boots, I wonder? My sister did, phoenix-red with ash-dark lining. All the time. But not now. Where are yours, Doug? Stashed away in your closet with the rest of your shoes. Or waiting for you by the door?
I hear the fish filter gurgling in the corner of the room. Sounding off the round yellow stones. Guppy shit trapped beige in cotton. My tiny Lake Ontario. Metal and water.
“Should I take them?”
“Take them.”
They’ll fit. I know they’ll fit. Jason and Doug weren’t the same, but it doesn’t matter. Doug bought quality and Jason looks G.Q. in anything. He likes to wear oxfords and suit jackets, but tie-dye and burlap are good, too. And a bow tie on the days he teaches Freshman Psych. Even so, I tell him not to take any Brooks Brothers labels. His hair’s too long.
You and I were up on the roof.
Helping Dad with, what? Shingles.
Something to do with shingles. Around the chimney. They were old and cracked, pieces crumbling over onto other pieces, black and brown. Leaves off the Big...
Maple, the best climber, slithering in one corner. Dad said, sit still, just hand me things. He started pulling at the pieces.

We did. What he asked. For awhile we watched the wind move and shiver in the tops of the trees, the Baby Maples. The sparrows dip and whirl Olympics, aiming for their nests buried in the spouting.

We should see those nests, that’s what you said. I said, no, Shella, they’re on the edge, you’ll fall off and die. I raised my eyebrows the way you couldn’t.

You frowned, corners in your mouth. We’re not that high, stupid. You looked at me then at the nest. Carefully, god carefully, you got up and slanted over to the edge. I crawled near. You grinned. Put one red sneaker on silver metal, watching me. Smiling. My smile. I put my blue one on.

You moved. There were two red ones on silver. I followed. Two blue. And Dad’s voice yelled, Girls, what the hell—

Then we hit the ground.

I got a pin in my ankle. You got one in your elbow.

Dad never took us up on the roof again. I never told him it was all your fault— you were my sister.

Jason sits beside me on the bed and I close my Lit book so I can lean forward. My purple afghan slides to the floor. A crocheted mound.

I wonder if I should touch him. Some people need that. To feel warm skin to skin. It lets them know warmth and humanness are nearby. Jason knows that.

I don’t touch him. I hug my knees and watch him for unfamiliar expressions. Only then will I touch him. Not like before.

You and I weren’t the same, either. But we were close. Especially when we were seven. We sang “Wherever You Go” at the school Springfest. Famous Shella and Sheila. Then you had your nose chopped because Mr. Kelley at the modeling school said it was too big. I got braces. I still think that nose made your face look smaller; I know it does mine. I tried to see why you did it, holding my hand at the center of my face, looking into the bathroom mirror. I guess my fingernails were too short. And no polish. My nose came through. Maybe I’m the vain one. I like having people ask me how I broke my nose. Even if I didn’t.

All those exercises you did. Every day. I read books and sketched plants. Later you went to New York, to work for Matina. I stayed at home, a lifeguard at Muncie’s pool. Thought about you. You on the concrete, in those studios, smiling at strangers and those polished lenses. Did you think about me? I walked concrete, too. Sat in a tall, white chair. Smiling at wet kids and tan lines. And the cold, sunshine-water.

He told me he's going back to Oklahoma when he finishes here. The Tumbleweed Queen is still waiting for him, after all. She pokes dogs with needles and reaches up cow's asses with long plastic gloves that cover her hand and arm. She works around the red-clay farms of Stillwater.

Good for you, I laughed. Great.

He smiled down at me and I didn't like his eyes. I started to cry. Couldn't catch my breath. I punched him in the stomach.

Last night I dreamed I surfed to Denver. A tsunami hit the Hudson; I held my breath and became fluid. I don't know how to surf, but I liked it anyway.

You came along, your hair in curlers and white Lancôme cream covering your face, balancing on the board. Just like a Coppertone ad. People were all around us and I clapped and clapped for you. I was riding along behind.

Then the people left, and you were gone, too. I looked for you down through the blue-green waves. Heard you laugh. You called, "Sheila, Sheila, Sheila. Come on." No.

But I listened to you. Always have. Followed you, too. Not anymore. I won't anymore.

Jason stares at the pale blue wall, at the Escher print he bought me for Christmas. He hasn't turned to look at me yet.

"Did he say why he . . .?" I ask so quietly, a murmur.

"No. It was just a note," his mouth cringed, "saying who got what. Just a list."

I look at the print on the wall, too, seeing water run down etched steps, uphill. A fountain-tower above the ground.

A long time ago, Doug knocked on the door. Soft, insistent. Overcoming the ebb of Rampal.

It's open, I bent low over Dickinson's poem, pen above paper.
The door pushed wide, he came in. Jason's friend.
Hi, Jase said his Ziggy Stardust tape's up here. It was a soft voice, like his knock.
Yeah, I looked to the stereo, In there. Back to Dickinson again.
Silence. Then, Nice.
Hmmm?
Nice.
Oh.
Who?
Oh.
I watched him bend easily, knees down first, then forward, to the carpet. An obtuse angle at his waist. One hand reaching for the tape case.
The body is 97% water. Liquid in motion.
I asked, What're you two doing downstairs? and drew a fat line through one written sentence.
Listening to Kate Bush. Never for Ever?
Oh, My album. Doug's neck bent toward the tape. Good album, have him play Delius for you. Oh, night. I wanted to hum, on the water. On the water.
Oh, yeah. He found the tape, small and black behind other titles. She sings all right, I guess, he spoke. A little strange though. Don't you think?
I shrugged and studied my pen where it was stopped in the margin. I was quiet.
Yeah, Doug, and I'll bet you listen to Barry Manilow.
Study hard, he smiled at my book.
Hmmm.
He left the door open behind him. Evaporation.
My stomach was tight.

In November Jason and I went to the Print Shoppe and he asked me to like one. But I've never studied Escher. He pointed to his favorite, the black lizards, one going into another. I chose the impossible water instead.
In December I hung it straight, alone. Jason was talking long-distance on the phone. When he saw it later, he remarked, Good job, and turned up the T.V.
In January he started to talk about the print. He decided to like it. I'd lie in bed, 6 am, under heavy mothball wool and stitched quilts, watching the steam as it curled, shaped, and dissolved above his Peanuts coffee mug. Lucy Van Pelt. The Doctor is IN.
Five cents, please.
Your time is up.

When I saw you at the hospital, Sheila, they'd already cut off your fingernails. You must've scratched yourself before they did it, though. Your face was red-striped and medicine-swollen. High cheeks, squirrel-nut-filled.
But you weren't angry. You said that you didn't care that they'd found you. Or not. And you laughed.
You asked me to bring over the glass flute you'd bought while doing a spread for Weathervane in Corning, NY. I never heard you play yours.
You smashed it against the clean, golden-rod walls, splats of shiny glass beneath
the television stand. The night nurse ran in with a hypo. Sheila, what have you
done now?
You just smiled and introduced us. She picked up the cutting pieces one by
one.
I asked you what else you wanted. You kept on grinning at that hypo set aside
on the far table. I left the hospital thinking about your red Fryes, waiting for
you near the door.
I left the state that weekend.
I only play my flute now late at night; I think of sharp glass slivers and long
silver needles.
Jason leans, his back toward me until he is against me. I am a flesh-and-cloth
comfort chair. Comfort. Some people need that. He reaches back and pulls at my
arms, wrapping them in front of him. I don’t think, but shift my thighs. My legs
raise to cross and enclose his waist. Covers puff and fold around us.
We sit like this, listening as city buses pause outside on different routes. We
are like before.

Mornings ago and we were still in bed. Jason woke me, behind me, poking
me. Hard and solid. I raised my leg, back, over him, feeling. Pulling him, tight.
His hands are on me, touching me, sliding under my night-shirt, cupping,
kneading. I roll over, against him, and begin to play my own finger-touching part.
Then he is above me on me in me. Back and forth, warm skin to skin. I move-and-wiggle
around and around, smiling, kissing, breathing. He is biting my fingers
and groaning, groaning.
And the phone is ringing. Doug. Calling to see why Jason isn’t at the library
yet and I am smiling, smiling, smiling.

But Doug is dead.
Doug is dead. And I am a label. And there is Oklahoma.
And we are sitting on my bed in my room and it is today and now.
And I feel Jason’s fingers slide up along my thigh. Lightly. Exciting. I think
he is smiling to himself. I hate it.
My teeth are clenched, jaw-tight. I want to pull his hair out. Slowly, in fat
handfuls. But my hands are inside his.
Instead I shift again. Try to loosen myself. It’s over. It has to be. I breathe
and say, “If you feel better now, about Doug, I have to get back to work.”
Jason tightens and pulls away. “Yeah.”
I can see his face. I wish he were mad.
You didn’t leave a note the second time, Shella. You didn’t leave anything. I still wonder what happened to those boots.

Jason won’t ask me to go to the funeral with him. It’s on Tuesday; I wouldn’t go anyway. Doug’s father taught my Linguistics class. He really liked Chaucer. But I never talked much in class. Besides, my workshop is that night.

Things to do.
People to see.
And the water comes down.

— S. C. Anthony