Discarded Daughters

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We’re both eighteen. Sitting across from each other awkwardly sneaking peeks. We’re quite similar, poured from the same mold but colored in differently. Here we are two sets of high cheek bones, two sets of almond shaped eyes, mine blue, hers green, that despite our best efforts are prone to looking far too knowing for eighteen year old girls. I’m blonde, she’s brunette; but we both have the same thick and almost wavy trait about our hair. She has his hands. Fingers with squared off tips, the fingers themselves almost make a complete square. Very square. I find myself cataloguing every detail because I don’t know if I will find her again.

She’s made her way through half of a pack of Marlboro Lights in the half hour since she opened the door for me. Maybe she’s chain-smoking due to the awkwardness of the situation; perhaps she’s incredibly nervous. While we share fifty percent of our DNA, we’ve come from very different places. She’s grown up on welfare, dropped out of high school, been arrested; she knows the recipe for methamphetamine. I can’t compete. In spite of this I still can’t look away from her. Of my three other siblings she’s the only one who looks like me, who visibly displays our biological bond. Based on this connection I resolve to rescue her, to be the one to turn her around.

With big sister instincts I can’t help but develop an anxiety. I realize that she could take it all away from me. It isn’t like she’s the only one he doesn’t know. He’s seen me grow up on an every other weekend basis, and even then he didn’t really take time to get to know me. On paper we have the exact same relationship with him. He paid child support for both of us, claimed us both on his taxes, he never carried health insurance on me though, he reserved that for her. I’m still the oldest, she can’t have that. But, I am no longer his only mistake from the 1980’s; I am no longer the only reminder of how he started too soon.

She interrupts my thinking by asking if I would like to see pictures of some of her friends. Leaning over the tattered arm of the paisley print couch she retrieves one of her most prized possessions, a small photo album covered with pink rose prints. While flipping through she tries her best to protect me from seeing the photographic evidence of her shooting up; as she introduces me to the face of a girl
she calls her sister. “She’s not really my sister, but like one,” she says, backpedaling as though my feelings might have been hurt. I get it though. She’s only ever met one of her biological siblings, me. Considering that we share a familiar instability in our home lives I understand her filling the voids with her friends. I just wish they weren’t such a bad influence.

While flipping through the reminders of times and faces that comfort her, she turns the page onto the selection of my senior pictures. About a week before, I mailed her a letter, an invitation to my graduation open-house, and this small selection of my senior pictures. She got the package the day after my party, so she couldn’t make it. But she did call. And over the phone, the night before I showed up on her door step, we had our very first interaction. Between the two of us we had a full ninety minutes worth of questions and answers, and there was a mutual excitement, and apprehension in our voices. She kept saying things like, “I always wondered where I got that from” and “I never knew that about myself.” I about burst with my pride at being the family member that contacted her first, and being the one who got to explain these things to her. I realized that at this very moment she was mine, my sister, and she was trusting me with her, our, family history.

While heroin-chic might work on supermodels with our bone structure, it doesn’t work on her. “You want to get something to eat? I’ll buy” I offer. She’s ready to fly out the door a full minute afterward. Maybe she was just hungry, or maybe it was the prospect of free food that had her so excited. On our way to Steak-n-Shake she assumes a very serious tone and says “Can I ask you a question?” I agree, not knowing what to expect. “Do you smoke pot?” I reveal that I have tried it a couple of times, but haven’t for awhile. “Do you want to? You can say ‘No’ if you want, I don’t want to pressure you.” A bit of a role reversal, the little sister pressuring the big sister. Although, since we’re basically the same age, which one of us is the big one, and which is the littler? I simply reply with “Okay.” We’re about two minutes away from our destination, and for the rest of the ride she busies herself with packing the pipe.

Our first sibling bonding experience is much like that of the Native American tradition of the peace pipe. We sit there, passing the hot glass tube back and forth, exchanging few words, but maintaining a perfect understanding of each other. As the sweet, damp smell swirls above our heads, bouncing off the glass of windows and windshield and permeating our clothes, we start to giggle. It’s nothing over the top, not hyena type screeching, just a warm exchange of similar chortles.

He might have pretended like I hadn’t been born, too, if he hadn’t been mar-
ried to my mother.

We both order cheeseburgers with fries. Considering the THC in our blood we finish our food in record time, and only traces of salt and ketchup remain on our plates. Her mom calls as I was paying the bill, and she’s grinning from ear to ear while she describes how famously we’re getting along, how we look alike, and how I bought her lunch. Even our smiles would be similar, we have the same small mouth but my crowded teeth have been fixed, and hers remain beautifully flawed.

I take her back to the house she’s staying at. She’s living with a “close family friend” whom she calls Uncle Bill. He has served as a surrogate father figure throughout her life in the gaps between her mother’s divorces. As I get the third degree from this Uncle Bill about my lineage, and my future plans I do not volunteer things too quickly. I reluctantly reveal that I will be attending Drake University in the coming months, working on a program in which I will attain both an undergraduate degree and a law degree in six years time. I fear that my academic achievements will stigmatize me in her eyes. I am not as studious as my grades or academic honors would have her believe; I can be street tough and book smart, too.

I wonder if now, when D-a-d meets a new woman, or when he tells them stories to get free drinks, I wonder if we come up. His shunned daughters. Does he have two kids? The legitimate ones. Does he have three kids? The ones he showed off for years. Or does he have four kids? The ones that he’s fathered.

He calls while I’m there. I don’t answer, not only because I don’t care to talk to him, but because I think that would exponentially increase the awkwardness of the situation. She tells me that while meeting me is alright, and that maybe she’ll want to meet our two other mutual siblings, she wants nothing to do with him. But as soon as he leaves a message on my phone, she asks to hear his voice. “Meg. It’s your old man.” He carries on in his gruff, over the top voice. She takes in every word. Daunted by hearing her father’s voice for the first time in her life, she gets quiet, puts out her cigarette, and excuses herself to the bathroom.

I decide that it is time for me to go. She has her own life to attend to, she’s busy, and it’s obvious that we are both overwhelmed by the day. We hug goodbye, resolve to call each other, and keep in touch, like little kids leaving their new friends at the end of summer camp. And just like many of those camp friendships that never develop into much beyond a few good summer memories, our relationship never really happened. Our lives stepped in, and took over. Perhaps the differences were too much for either of us to overcome, or perhaps she didn’t want to let me rescue her, or perhaps she realized, for both of us, that I wasn’t able to.