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Fall

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Fall

The week my dad moved out, our basement flooded. All of our American Girl Dolls and birth certificates floated around like pathetic canoes navigating the filthy, stale rainwater that had swallowed up our childhood. Holly and I, playing rescue, hastily put on Mommy's squeaky yellow rain boots and waded through the musky stench that turned our playroom into a gas chamber, attempting to liberate our favorite toys. Upstairs, stifled by the dense basement door, I heard Mommy talking on the phone with the insurance company, yelling between sobs. That night, pajama-clad Miranda curled up on the tattered armchair, little wrinkled thumb in her mouth, and watched reruns of *The Berenstain Bears* while Holly and I spread all of her waterlogged stuffed animals in front of the fan like a makeshift morgue. Mommy ran frantically between rooms, packing away toiletries, baby shoes, and tuna sandwiches in an Aldi tote bag.

The following afternoon, Mommy drove our clunky van for four hours, no gas station stops, and settled on Niagara Falls as our destination, the closest we could get to fleeing the country without the hassle of explaining that the basement ate our paperwork. I sat on the passenger side and kicked my unlaced Keds back and forth in the space behind the empty seat in front of me.

"Mommy, who is going to take us trick-or-treating this year?" I whined as I caught sight of a cheesy Halloween store beneath the bustling overpass. My dad wore the same dingy soccer ball mask and black windbreaker every Halloween for the eight years I'd been alive, walking the three of us up and down our suburban avenue until we'd press the swollen pumpkin baskets against our chests to keep our sweet treasure from spilling out onto the asphalt. He would retrieve my candy from the blue house on the corner as I waited at the end of the driveway, cowering in fear of the neighborhood Pomeranian.

Holly rolled her eyes at my whining. She had always kept me on edge: one minute she would be blowing bubbles in her chocolate milk with me, the next she would be slamming her bedroom door in my face. I attributed this to her being two years older than I; that's what big sisters do.

"We'll figure that out, Gracie. Why don't we play Mad Libs to pass the time?" Mommy cocked her frizzy head just enough to flash a weary smile, reaching back with her free hand to toss Holly the Mad Libs book that held archives of our previous road trips. Miranda shifted in the car seat behind me. Blonde wisps of dewy hair coiled around her rosy cheeks as her mouth formed an angelic *O*. I had almost forgotten she was there; she seemed to sleep through everything.

"Alright, adjective," murmured Holly, who had never been able to speak above a whisper. She would always mumble her order in my ear at restaurants so I could relay, "Chicken tenders, please," to the waiter. Sometimes Mommy would pay her a quarter to say hello to people when they greeted her in public. Holly adjusted her glasses as she held the indigo Crayola marker ready. Her sleeves were a little too long, tucked between her fingers. Her chestnut bangs hid her forehead from view.

"Foggy," I responded halfheartedly, noticing how the world outside of our stuffy vehicle was a subdued grayscale map. I wondered if things would ever regain their color, or if rain had washed and worn the sky and our basement into permanent dullness. Even our once-beautiful dollies had mildew spreading like frost on their porcelain skin. I felt guilty for ruining them. Mommy, Holly, and I threw words at each other until twilight welcomed us to Niagara Falls, but all I could think about was how my dad wasn't there to yell, "toenail!" for every noun.

Holly and I rolled our matching turquoise suitcases across wet parking lot gravel as Mommy's arms, covered by a shapeless sweater, juggled a sleepy Miranda and an overstuffed purse. After some thoroughly disappointing exploration, we decided that the motel was nothing extraordinary. It smelled like cheap breakfast sandwiches and cigarettes, nothing like the ritzy resorts we stayed at during my dad's big court cases, which had complimentary cookies and heated swimming pools. This place boasted leaky ceilings and baroque patterned wallpaper, peeling at the corners of the room, which oddly resembled throngs of dancing turtles.

"Do you see turtles, too? Or is it just me?" Holly whisper-giggled in my ear as Mommy bartered with the concierge.

Soon after sunrise, we walked to the cloud-covered Falls. Three pairs of warm, sticky hands met the steel railing at the overlook in captivated unison. Miranda, straining to be in our atmosphere, stood on tiptoe on the bottom beam

of the fence that kept us from plummeting into the frothy rapids below. We were enthroned in mist, three constants among the unyielding rush.

“I heard there was a guy who went down the waterfall in a barrel and survived,” I bellowed over the mild roar of the cascades, gripping my dad’s tattered Callaway Golf hat to my chest. He would wear that hat every day in the yard, fervently practicing his shot as I sat on the stone steps and watched every swing, running barefoot to retrieve golf balls from the neighbor’s manicured lawn. Holly’s glasses were fogged, shielding me from her jet-black stare, but I felt her scorn just as strong.

“You believe everything you hear,” she snapped sharply, fiddling with the machine that offered a magnified postcard view.

It’s because I hear everything, I thought. My older sister’s words stung me more than the rogue beads of water that splashed into my eyes. Not that I’d wanted it to, but my keenness for excessive observation had become my enemy. Holly didn’t seem to hear the things that I heard. She didn’t eavesdrop on Mommy’s phone call with Aunt Susan through the locked bathroom door while her voice cracked through the running faucet: “I never want to see his fucking face again.” Holly didn’t ask her friend on the school bus the next morning what that meant. She didn’t sit on the fifth stair, concealed by the living room wall, listening to them hush-hissing at each other at midnight. Holly didn’t read that text from someone named Missy on my dad’s second cell phone while playing Tetris during his conference.

“wish I could see u.”

I didn’t plan on being the only one awake when Mommy snuggled into my twin bed and draped her arms around me, kissing my forehead and sighing, “It’s not your fault, baby muffin.” I didn’t mean to be the only one to realize that we were all she had left. So when my dad, sneaky and silently as he could, packed his prized baseballs and framed law degrees and soccer ball mask away in cardboard boxes, I was the one who grabbed his beloved baseball cap in solemn preparation.

Whoosh. I closed my eyes to calm my foggy thoughts, listening to the buckets of water beating the rocks, to the sound of endless falling and crashing, to the untamed wind. I wasn’t entirely sure how long we were going to be there, avoiding the rotting basement and the reality of a life without my dad, but there was something soothing about the sound of escape. I opened my eyes to see Miranda waddling over to Mommy, who was perched on a rusty park bench with a pencil in hand. Mommy sometimes seemed as if she was in a trance, staring off into space with an uninteruptible blank expression. Today, she looked tranquil, the usual dark circles under her eyes a little less severe. Miranda laughed and clapped her little hands with amusement, as a squirrel scurried across the bench. Mommy smiled wide and scribbled in her journal.

“How much do you think the barrel guy got fined?” Holly asked playfully, leaning over the steel railing next to me.

I laughed, thinking about how much I would get fined for dropping my dad’s hat into the abyss.

“Probably enough to fix our basement,” I responded, reaching down to tie my Keds. Holly’s quiet velvet laugh echoed in my head as Miranda’s giggling resonated in the background, mingling with the rushing water, and in that moment I appreciated my ability to hear.