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Blood Runs Cold

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Blood Runs Cold

24 Saltaire Road

You will move from your closet-sized room on 44 Great River Drive down the street to 24 Saltaire Road. A yellow house with chipped paint and a flag pole out front. You'll play in the garage because you've never had one of your own before, play with the button that opens the door until it breaks and is never fixed. You will play in the backyard and find a forgotten racist jockey statue with a black face in the bushes, and cry until your dad promises to get rid of it, so it won't haunt you in your sleep. Swim in the pool that's half in the ground and half not. The whole thing is surrounded by deck. Your mother will say they want to put in sliding glass doors from the master bedroom that leads there. You will see it in your head and it is beautiful. The doors are never installed, and the deck has since been ripped from the backyard. All that's left is uneven grass and a hole where the pool had been.

You will fall asleep in a room that shares a wall with the bathroom where you hear everything that happens. Your dad talking loudly on the phone, your brother singing in the shower, and sometimes your mom crying. There's mildew growing on the ceiling. The fan in the bathroom stopped working one day and was never fixed. Brown spots bloom above the shower. The stone tiles by the sink started to crumble, and all that's left are the wooden planks that lead to the damp basement. You will hear, "Why can't you fix anything?" echoing from the bathroom, and you will wrap your pillow around your ears.

You will forget the exact moment your mother started sleeping in the living room and your dad in the den. You will watch the master bedroom turn into a graveyard—the stone, a wedding picture above the bed. You will wish the garage wasn't full of discarded trash and nests of raccoons now, because you think that might be the only place you won't hear them.

You will go away to college and make your own home. Lights along the wall, people who actually smile. You try not to imagine how the conversations go at dinner back on 24 Saltaire Road.

Eyes of the Hurricane

Your mother will take her car and your father will take his work van. They drive away, leaving the echo of screaming and something broken in the walls of your home. Your brother will be sitting at the kitchen, his head hung low. You'll creep down the hallway, afraid another harsh insult will be thrown and bounced off the wall toward you. You'll find the sparse remains of what was supposed to be dinner and hear either yours or your brother's stomach growl. You will offer to make grilled cheese for the both of you, because that's all you know how to make. Your parents have done this before so you know how this goes. You sit across from him, eating in silence.

"If I'm ever that unhappy, I want you to kill me, Frankie."

He'll look up for the first time and nod. "Ditto."

They'll both come back at their respective times and pretend like nothing happened. The house is quiet, everyone in their designated corner. You'll wonder if it's normal for families to hate each other this much. You and your brother never talk about this again.

Unfiltered

You'll grow up giving your mom a side-eye every time she lights one and crying and begging for your grandma to stop smoking so she won't die. Your grandma will cry back that she's sorry. She throws her pack in the shiny garbage can in her kitchen, but you're sure she still sneaks off to the garage and smokes one of your grandfather's. You'll watch your other grandmother undergo open-heart surgery and quit cold turkey after sixty years. She doesn't even have the urge, she says.

While your mother goes to change the laundry, you'll watch the ashtray with her lit cigarette and wonder what would happen if you put your lips to it. You wonder what keeps your mother coming back. You'll creep up to the smoke and cough yourself nearly to death before you were even close to the filter. You run back to your room when you hear your mother's steps.

You'll learn your mom seems to flick the cigarette out of her long pack mostly after she and your father yell at each other, but also after dinner, and also after pulling away from the driveway and also while watching TV and also after her first cigarette.

You'll have a rough day at school, and you'll think walking down to the beach will help, but you think it might not be enough, so you look at the

cigarette pack on the counter. Your mother is in the shower. You knew it would happen anyway.

So, you'll walk down to Woodhull Beach holding the cigarette in the pocket of your sweatshirt making sure it wouldn't break. You're afraid that you'll be seen if you stand close to the road so you walk down the beach about half a mile and then you take the Marlboro Light 100 out of your pocket along with the blue lighter you keep in your room for candles.

You realize you've seen your mom light a cigarette twenty times a day but you still don't know how to do it yourself. You'll hold it over your lap and light it. When you pull it up to your lips, the world stops. It tastes horrible, and you're not entirely sure you're doing it right. You're about to take out your phone to Google "How to smoke a cigarette" but you're on a beach, and there is no service for stupid questions like that. You continue putting it up to your face and breathing in nothing—looking at the waves crashing against the rocks—pretending you are smoking a cigarette.

Today you'll wake up, roll out of bed, grab a sweater and not even bother with shoes. You'll light the Marlboro Light before you're barely out the door. Sit on the bench and count your money in your head because smoking isn't cheap, and you only have half a pack left. You'll take ten showers before you see your dad, even though he knows and the two of you pretend the other doesn't. When you're home, you'll wait for your dad to fall asleep, and you creep into the living room and light up with your mom. You talk about boys that have hurt you, though hers never changes. She'll smile sadly, take a drag and say, "Don't make the same mistakes I did."

Sluggo

Sluggo, 1986 Miller Place High School graduate, lost over a hundred pounds in a summer. Big rimmed glasses, bigger hair. You didn't know her. Somebody told you once she washed down her acid tabs with straight vodka. She got an abortion at nineteen, married the man two years later. She smoked pot under the bleachers during football practice, smoked Parliaments. You heard once she and her friends rented a school bus filled with five kegs on it to go see Iron Maiden. She never ate, that's how she lost it all.

Sluggo, beautiful reckless, Sluggo.

She spends her nights sleeping on a couch on Saltire Road. Answers to a different name. She never told you why they called her Sluggo, just told you not to repeat the word.

"Don't make my mistakes," she tells you.

"Marrying your father was a mistake," she says.

You try to not think that you were part of that mistake but you do.

You always do.

Financial Aid

You were a junior in high school. The word on everybody's lips was *college*. You had never thought about it before. Your mother went to trade school to become a hairdresser, and your father didn't even finish high school. There was nobody in your family that you knew of who went away to college. You remember the day your guidance counselor called you into the office and explained what a safe school was and what a reach school was. You remember the day like bee stings on your fingertips.

You sat down with your mom at the kitchen table, the light overhead broken. She was making dinner and looked a little annoyed when you asked for a moment of her time. You swallowed the lump in your throat, and when it wouldn't stay down you hammered it.

"How much money do you guys have saved for me for college?"

"We don't have any saved up." She didn't hesitate. She gives you whiplash when she stands up to stir the pot with Hamburger Helper in it. Your heart breaks, it falls, it burns. You look at your mother's back and decide not to cry.

"How can I go away to school?"

"There's loans for that kind of thing."

You nod your head and stand up. You walk yourself down the hallway to your room to look at the folders your guidance counselor gave you earlier that day. You think about college. Your reach school was NYU. It was a reach because standing on your tippy toes with a yard stick, you couldn't even graze the tuition price.

Thanksgiving

Your father owned a sprinkler company that consisted of himself and his cousin Guy (when he was free). Your family got by during the summers if your dad was healthy enough to work, which he nearly never was. The winters, though, were terrible. No one wanted sprinklers in the winter. Almost every month, your electric was threatened to be turned off. You ate the cheapest dinners. You reused the same winter jackets until impossible. You didn't have health insurance most of the time. You couldn't remember the last time you went to the dentist. The Ford dealership man would come to your house at four in the morning to repossess the car that your mother drove because the lease was overdue. You'd wake up at ten in the morning and see your mom in the same spot she'd been when the man left with the car. On the couch, a cigarette in her hand, crying, the same word repeated under her breath: *embarrassment*.

One year, on the day before Thanksgiving, you received a different knock on your door. Two baskets full of all the fixings for a large meal. Cranberry sauce, vegetables, dinner rolls, ingredients for stuffing, sweet potatoes, and a

large frozen turkey. At the bottom of the baskets were two \$50 gift cards for the local grocery store. Your dad sifted through the baskets, happy to receive the anonymous gift. Winter was looming, and he'd been out of work already. You turned to see your mother, frowning, a cigarette in her hand.

"What's the matter? Not good enough for you?" your dad said, looking for a fight.

"This is an embarrassment." She inhaled her cigarette quickly and slammed the can of pumpkin pie filling she'd been holding onto the table. "We're not some destination for a food drive. We're not a charity case."

Your dad choked on the smoke that was barely by his face and began to leave the room.

"Yes, we are," he said.

Your mother will cry, but come the next morning, she'll roast the turkey that was given to her. She'll make the stuffing, bake the dinner rolls, and she will smile while placing the food on the table for your family. She doesn't say anything during dinner.

Water Colors

It began happening at night, the feeling of water filling around your bed, slowly inching its way toward you as you tried to sleep, leaking its way through the sheets like a newly dug canal. It leads to your nose and mouth, stops your breath. You were drowning, but you didn't care enough to plug the hole. You were drowning; you let it happen.

You'd wake up, wipe the water off your skin. You could pretend like it didn't happen, but your fingers stayed pruny, a gentle reminder of what was to come the next time you tried to sleep.

One morning you woke up with your head in a fish bowl. The entire day, you couldn't breathe. The water was thick and gray and made everything else look that way too. You walked through the day with a kaleidoscope view of what it felt like to be dead. You woke up like this every morning. Instead of reaching for a towel, you laid back down and slept for ten hours, ten days, ten years.

Your mother called these days a waste, but she feels it too. She wastes days too. She sits on her couch up to her neck in water. She hasn't breathed in twenty-six years. You don't know why it took you so long to see it. She ate to punish herself, and then looked in the mirror and cried.

"It's either I eat this Moon Pie or I slit my wrists."

You shiver.

It wasn't until you were in college that she even used the word.

"Sitting around and sleeping only makes the depression worse, you're just making it worse." She sat on the couch then, where she had been all day, her

hair in a messy knot on the top of her head, bags under her eyes crafted perfectly, and a cigarette hanging from her hand. A coloring book is on her lap.

That's what she did to help herself. Color. It started last Christmas when you bought her an adult coloring book. You look at the end table next to the ripped couch she lived on and counted her twenty-five coloring books, four boxes of colored pencils, and two electric sharpeners. She colored to pass the time, the bad moments.

You wonder if that'd work for your bad moments, if you could color in the gray imprint left by the thick water that suffocates you. Could you color in yourself? Scrub the pencils hard on your skin until you could bleed out color.

Burnout

Your brother throws a magnet out of the school bus window because somebody told him to. He cracks the windshield of a minivan and is sued for \$150. Your brother is bored and decides to microwave a bowl of a cut-up bar of Irish Spring, which makes the kitchen smell like burnt cleanliness for two months. Your brother shoots out the back door with his BB gun. Your brother totals his car. Your brother flunks out of community college. Your brother plays with the dog until she cries. Your brother vacuums up his dead fish. Your brother was always the screw up.

You talk to him only at holidays and funerals and you get along fine—great, actually. It's getting him out of his room that's the hard part. He nests in the dark bedroom with his current girlfriend. You don't know what happens in there.

When you were younger you used to wait until he had left the house, crack open the door he always kept shut and take a look around. You found a box of condoms, a pack of Camel Blues, and a love letter from his Russian exchange student girlfriend. You sat hunched over the dirty clothes on the floor not believing the words. You ran your hands over the lifted letters in cursive. You couldn't believe somebody could ever feel that way about someone else, specifically your brother who didn't seem to care about anything.

Your brother who totaled his car for the third time, your brother who leaves his window open when the heat is on, your brother who got caught stealing from the Dollar Tree, your brother who hugged you when your grandmother died before you even knew how you felt.

Your brother uses his money from his part-time delivery job at Domino's to go on a cruise with his girlfriend to Jamaica.

Your brother totals his car for the fourth time. Your mom shrugs. Your dad zips his mouth and locks it shut; he throws away the key in a pit of fire. There are some things your father doesn't want to lose.

The first time you're pulled over, you get a speeding ticket. You'll never hear the end of it.

You're held to a higher standard. You're tired. So tired.
You read his letter until your eyes get blurry.

Daddy's Girl

Your father was the softie; he'd come into your room after you got in trouble for talking back at dinner or when you forgot to clean off your plate. He'd kneel by your bed and say goodnight and show you all the affection you never got from your mother at this age.

People called you daddy's little girl and told you to take off your glasses so you could compare your tan faces. Your father would touch your upper lip and say, "you have to catch up with the facial hair." He'd do anything for you and always did.

And then one day it became more of an effort to get him to do the things he always did. You'd run into your room, stare at the ceiling and wonder what you did to make him care less. You'd look in the mirror and realize you weren't so little anymore.

You realize it's easier to have a conversation with your father when you've been away at school for two months at a time. The car rides home were listening to Led Zeppelin and screaming the words; he'd play the gas pedal like a bass drum. It became less like that. You'd scream at him for the littlest of misunderstandings and then cry, because he'd never understand your years of vented up feelings against him. He'd slam your door shut, cracking the door hinge. When you sleep with the window open you can still hear the wind going in between the door, sticking to the wall and unsticking.

Your father asked if you were crazy when you said you were seeing a therapist at school and when you said no, he asked why you needed the attention so bad then. He called your anxiety an attitude problem, your depression a bad day.

He told you once, a couple months ago, that you were driving a wall in between the two of you. You don't deny it, but you know who drew the line first.

Uncle Frank

Your father went through friends like water. They'd be super close for a couple months and you'd be forced to go to these people's houses for dinner and coffee. Your mother would scoff, and you stayed quiet the entire night while you heard your father be called Uncle Frank by the kids.

Sage was the kid who created the name. "Uncle Frank," she'd squeal in joy when she saw him coming through the door. He'd lift her up and hug her. Her laugh still echoes in your ears.

Giovanni was his godson, the only child he ever personally picked out a present for in his life. He always took you with him to Walmart or Toys R Us and asked your opinion on what to get but ignored your ideas anyways.

He thought Angela was the most beautiful little girl he had ever seen. He told you this and you stared at the Christmas picture her family had sent that year. You looked at her blonde hair and blue eyes then looked in the mirror at your brown hair and brown eyes. You knew he thought you were beautiful but you started to think maybe not like Angela.

Sophia was the worst. She went on hunting trips with her dad and yours. You see the pictures on Facebook—your dad and Sophia hugging on a ferry somewhere in Connecticut. She practiced archery with the two dads. Soon after, you tell your dad you want to learn. He buys you a small pink bow and starts to teach you. You get busy with school work and college applications, and he gives it away to her because she grew over the summer and needed a bigger bow. You were too busy now anyway.

24 Saltaire Road (Reprise)

You were eight years old. Your mother was smoking pot in the basement with her friends. Your father was doing shots of Jägermeister with your brother in the kitchen. But they found their way to each other come midnight to share a kiss. You had just moved into your new house, and there were no decorations on the wall in the living room except for the Christmas tree that would be taken down promptly by your mother the next day. There must have been fifty people there, crowded in that living room, and in the morning there'd still be a bunch of them on the floor sleeping off their hangovers. You'd step your way over, snickering to your friends who stayed the night about your mother's friend Kate who fell asleep on the stairs. The ball dropped quickly; you remembered your brother's friend Vinny saying the world was going to end shortly, but you looked around at your new house and your parents kissing over their glasses of champagne and thought there was no way it could, not now.

Today, you sit in the living room painted three different colors since then. You think about the kitchen tiles that bubbled up with water from the leaking dishwasher. You think about the stains on the kitchen table from hair dye. You think about the bathroom downstairs that clogged once and has since been unusable. You think about the basement that floods with the tiniest amount of rain, the broken light in the shower, the broken light in the walk-in closet, the hole in the door of the den that your dad created with his fist. You sit in the living room and hear the screams, the ghosts.

You were thirteen years old. Your parents could still bear each other.

It was Mother's Day. You woke up and stepped out of the hallway to the sound of your parents laughing louder than you've ever heard them in your

entire life. It was a harmony of laughter, their voices swirling together, caressing each other and creating a song that could kill you with pure happiness if you were exposed to an excess of it. Your Aunt Elenore always said, “There’s nobody else for your mother and father.” You never believed it—except there, looking into the living room, your mom clutching your dad’s wrist, her mouth wide open with laughter. You believed it then. He had bought her a birthday card by mistake, and it made the both of them roar.

You decide you want moments like that every day. You want a birthday card on Mother’s Day and a harmony of laughter. You want what your parents seemed to have, except you never want it to fade. You spend a lot of time thinking about how much it sucks that they don’t get along anymore, that all the differences that were charming in high school aren’t anymore. But now you think it’s not just the illusion shattering. Your mother said to you once, “That’s not the man I married.” It froze your bones to your skin. Because you could be doing everything right with the right person and then one day wake up next to somebody different. How could you ever be sure you weren’t making a mistake?

You watch your brother switch girlfriends like socks, and lose every single one of the pairs along the way. You watch yourself cling to guys who pretend to be something they aren’t. You wonder if it’s destiny to end up like your parents.

You think of 24 Saltaire Road. The yellow chipped paint and the broken garage door and the broken bathroom fan and the crumbling bathroom stones and the light overhead the kitchen table that hasn’t worked in years, and you think of the broken hinge on your bedroom door. You think of how all those things can be fixed with just a little effort, all those things, like most things.