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Sisters

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Sisters

I.

“Do you think I’d look good as a blonde?” I ask my sister Cassandra as we sit in parallel spa chairs at Grace’s Nail Salon. Toes tied in tissue to prevent us from smudging our freshly painted nails, we twist our upper bodies to face one another while staying still for the nail technicians.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Aliyha. Your skin tone is too tan for that. Plus, are you really going to keep up with your roots?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t go as light as Mom’s hair, maybe more of a dirty blond?”

“You’re sisters? But you look nothing alike!”
The nail technician pries into our family situation
as she paints a top coat on Cassandra’s toes.

She is right: my sister and I
are both the spitting images
of our own fathers.

Two opposing specimen
that make others
doubt our relation.
Cassandra’s nose is pointed,

while mine rounds out at the bottom.

Her hair sprouts outwards like sun rays

while mine points straight to the ground.

Cassandria's mouth stretches
across most of her face,

while mine stays within the boundaries
of the width of my nose.

We look most alike in the summer,
when she tans enough to match

my complexion, so long as I stay out of the sun.

Yet even with similar skin tones,
our bone structures contrast
too much to pass for more than cousins.

Our dissimilar faces
emulate the same look of disgust
at the nail technician's impolite question.

Her forehead wrinkles,

and my chin scrunches up.

II.

"Sis, Marcos is at the door." I shake Cassandra awake from her mid-afternoon nap on the living room couch. We hadn't seen her dad since her thirteenth birthday. She is sixteen now. Cassandra orients herself, smooths her hair down, and asks me if I'm certain it's her father. Peeking through the curtains, I steal another look.

Same forehead-to-face ratio (though wrinkles run across his), same full lips (though his are pursed into a fake smile), same hazel eyes (though his gaze feels unfamiliar). I rearrange the curtains before he can notice me, then turn to my sister and nod to confirm his identity.

I always felt illegitimate
when Marcos came around,

though he hardly ever did.
Whenever he did,

he swooped in and showed
my sister a different world,

one I wasn't a part of.
Before my memory began to stick,
I am told that Marcos

would take her away for whole nights.

I probably assumed she was going
on a fun vacation
and wondered why she couldn't bring
Mom and me along.

This visit, Marcos brings Cassandra
to the mall for a belated birthday gift
that he believes will make up for
all the other birthdays he's missed.
They are only gone for a couple hours,
yet the house feels empty.

A part of me wonders
if she won't come back.
*Would Marcos offer her
a better life?*

*Would she decide to live
with her other half-siblings?*

*We've had Cassandra
for sixteen years straight.
Maybe Marcos came
because our time was up.*

It is hard to accept
the fact that Cassandra
has twice the number
of dads and siblings.

DJ and I try to distract ourselves by playing games on the Wii but Cassandra's avatar pops up on the homepage. We scroll through the song choices on Just Dance, looking for any new songs we might've unlocked. After we

settle on “Eye of the Tiger,” DJ and I spread out on the living room carpet, swinging our arms to make sure we have enough space between one another. At the start of the dance, Cassandra’s high score flies across the top of the screen. Neither of us even come close to it.

Cassandra always comes back. This time, she came home with a purple iPod that was small enough to fit in her palm. We stay up all night downloading songs from the family computer onto her gift from her father. Cassandra sits on the front edge of the rolling desk chair while I sit cross-legged behind her. We download whole albums of Avril Lavigne, Taylor Swift, and The Jonas Brothers.

“Did you have fun today?” I ask Cassandra
while we watch the loading icon pinwheel
in the center of the screen.

“I guess.”
She shrugs, scooching further
back into the chair. I tell her

about how DJ and I played Just Dance
and reassure her

that her high score was still intact.

Once all our pre-teen bops are downloaded, we tiptoe back to our bedroom. Cassandra untangles her earbuds in the dark so that no light can seep through the cracks of Mom and Dad’s bedroom door. I slip into my bed and dog-ear the blanket corner for Cassandra to join. We lay side by side on our backs, so that we can share the earbuds.

III.

The sound of bangles clanking against one another draws me and Cassandra into the living room. We find Dad laying out silver and gold jewelry on the coffee table, which means Grandma Ruby sent us another glamorous package from Pakistan. As always, Dad hovers his hands over the table until we agree to be extra careful with his mother’s jewelry. I know only to touch the gold pieces since Cassandra will want all the silver ones.

Cassandra embraces my father’s culture as her own. Each week following a package from Grandma Ruby, we both show up to school in our Pakistani jewelry elbow-deep in rainbow bangles.

But as she gets older and begins
questioning her identity,
she stops
getting excited about the jewelry
and lets me claim
all the pieces.

“Now, lean against the wall and look straight at the camera!” Cassandra instructs me as she turns the dial on her radio. “Too Cool” from the Disney movie *Camp Rock* fills our bedroom as Cassandra rushes to get into position. She holds her iPod Touch horizontally and makes sure I am the focus of the camera before she begins to film our music video. I mirror my sister’s movements as she shows me what to do behind the camera. *Strut away from the camera, look over your shoulder, wink.* Whenever I forget the lyrics and mouth something completely different, Cassandra assures me she’ll be able to edit it out of the final cut.

“I’m going to upload this music video to YouTube and we’ll go viral!” Cassandra exclaims, so confident in her shaky, middle school camerawork and my awkward elementary school composure. Cassandra sifts through her wardrobe and hands me in her trendy Mudd jeans and a cheetah-print over-the-shoulder top for the next scene. Although she never does end up posting any of the music videos we make together, we still enjoy our roles as director and star.

The three of us lay on our sides one night; Cassandra in the front, then me, then DJ at the caboose of our train. We are only thirteen, nine, and six, respectively. DJ traces intricate pictures on my back with his pointer finger as I do the same to Cassandra. She pretends that she’s deep in concentration over the lines I’m sketching, trying to guess what image I’m massaging onto her back. But I know she’s dozing off to the free massage she has earned as the older sister.

We are all small enough to all fit in Cassandra’s twin size bed, which is across the room from my own. Occasionally, my fingers drift to Cassandra’s armpit, and I tickle her to test if she’s still awake. She groans and kicks me, but soon she’s back to guessing what I’m drawing.

“Quit moving! You’re gonna ruin your eyeshadow!” Cassandra scolds me as I sit on the bathroom counter. Cassandra’s grip on my chin tightens while

I continue to fuss over the eyeliner she draws on my eyelid. Eventually, she makes nearly symmetrical lines on both my eyes, despite having to start over multiple times because I teared up.

"There! Aren't you glad that *I* did your makeup?" Cassandra steps back to get a better view of the complete look.

"If I had let Mom do it, I would've shown up to the eighth grade dance with blue eyeshadow up to my eyebrows!" I tilt the handheld mirror at different angles to truly appreciate my smokey eyes and blood red lips.

"And bright pink blush caking your entire cheeks!" Cassandra and I laugh about Mom's outdated makeup look.

"You're turning into a slut, just like your sister," Dad says from the bathroom doorway, gritting his crooked teeth. He doesn't like that Cassandra wears makeup to school, and now he finds her painting my face just like hers. He retreats to the living room before Cassandra can think of anything to say.

IV.

"Stop, don't hurt DJ!" I shout to Dad right before he flings one of DJ's WWE action figures in his direction. I don't remember what he did to make Dad angry, but I'll never forget the gut-wrenching clap of plastic on DJ's bare back. Cassandra and Mom are still unpacking the car from our family beach trip, but Cassandra runs into the house at the sound of her siblings' screams and finds my father shuffling around the wobbly coffee table while I try to outrun him on the other side.

"Get away from them!" Cassandra declares through her braces, standing between her siblings and her stepdad. Although she is only sixteen, her commanding tone is enough to stop my dad in his tracks.

The car trunk slams shut and Mom
assesses the damage
as she joins us
in the living room.
She finds us each
frozen in position:

Dad crouches on the edge
of the couch and holds
his bald head in his hands;
Cassandra acts as a wall
with her hands on her hips
standing between her stepfather
and DJ, who sits against the wall

and hugs his knees against his chest;
and me, still in my defensive stance
on the other side of the coffee table.

Dad “tsks” at us kids
and escapes to his room.
Mom follows him once
she sees that Cassandra
is assessing the extent
of DJ’s injury.

Cassandra kneels beside DJ, who rubs his own back from the brash impact of the toy. The outline of a ten-inch action figure is stamped onto his back in red, surrounded by a swollen ring of purple. I hear Mom yelling at Dad behind their closed bedroom door. Her words sound wet, like she is crying as she speaks. Before I can hear the bulk of their argument, Cassandra turns the TV on to Disney Channel on the highest volume setting.

V.

Cassandra looks down at the grocery list on her phone as I push the cart through Stop & Shop. I direct us toward the cold cereal aisle, but Cassandra tugs on the cart to redirect us towards the fresh produce.

“You need to eat more vegetables, Aliyha,” Cassandra reprimands me, making me roll my eyes. We agree on getting salad for tonight as long as I can also pick up a roll of cookie dough.

After looping through the aisles for the rest of our list, we wheel the cart to the cash register lane with the shortest line. Cassandra lets me through first so I can bag the items while she swipes Mom’s card to pay for the groceries. I bag pasta for DJ, fruits for Cassandra, and candies for myself.

“Crap! We forgot to get Mom’s coffee!” I say to Cassandra after bagging our last box of cereal.

“You’re sisters?” the cashier questions us
after overhearing my comment.
The two of us paste polite,
yet fake smiles on our faces.

The ends of Cassandra’s lips point
upwards to her furrowed eyebrows,

and my eyes look down

at my flip-flopped feet as I
snap the hair tie against my wrist.

The cashier seems taken aback
from our confirmation of relation.
She continues to interrogate us,
as people often do
when stumbling across half siblings.

Yes, we're sisters. No, we don't have the same father. Yes, we're still very close.