Family Ties

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

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Family Ties

My sister, Jesse, filled my wineglass again, spilling some on the table. Then she filled her own. It was almost two in the morning, and the flea bites on my legs itched.

"You should spray for those fleas," I told her.

"I've been meaning to, but I haven't gotten around to it." She slurred some of her words.

Why did I come to visit her? We were talking on the phone a couple weeks before. She had just moved to Washington and wanted me to see her apartment. I promised I would come and then, I couldn't get out of it.

"Are you coming?" my sister asked. The last call came ten minutes before I left.

"I'm packing my car now."

"I was worried you would change your mind. I'll see you soon."

"It's a seven hour drive. I won't get there until noon. Unless I get lost, which I always do. Then I'll get there later.

I forgot the thermos of coffee in the house. The phone was ringing again. I didn't answer it. It was probably Jesse again; it had been the last twelve times. Who else would call at five a.m.?

Now I was here in her kitchen. We were both drunk. The kitchen walls were dirty, littered with fingerprints and food. The carpet smelled of animal urine.

"I'm painting soon. The landlord gave me paint. The last tenant had cats."

"You should spray first," I said still itching.

Then she started to cry. She always did. Every visit was the same. We would drink, then she would cry.

"I'm not in therapy anymore," I told her as I handed her a roll of toilet paper. Her nose was running. "But," I went on, "it helped. My doctor got me through the brick walls. He said I could tell him anything because Mama wouldn't find out. You should try therapy."

We had this conversation before.

"I've tried. It doesn't help." Finally, as she talked, she wiped her nose, and then blew hard, causing it to bleed a little.

"Why don't you try a woman therapist this time? Maybe a man can't break through the brick walls."

"I will," she says. "But first I'll spray for the fleas."

"I loved him," she tells me, still crying.

I let her cry as I drink my wine and light a cigarette. It was probably good for her.

Her wrists are scarred with large welts. The holes from the stitches still show in some areas.

"I wear long sleeve shirts," she says as I stare at the scars.

"Have you tried again?"

"A couple of months ago," she says nonchalantly. We have both accepted that she wants to die. It's been going on for ten years. "This time I took pills. It seemed easier."

She was thirteen but looked eighteen when she tried the first time. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better if she had bled to death. Nothing had changed; she was still trying.

We grew up with a crazy mother. We didn't know it then but she was looney. She used to give me enemas when she was angry. She would just beat Jesse. She always liked my sister more than me. Sometimes we would go for ice cream at night—Jesse, Mama and me. I would get a one-scoop ice cream cone. Jesse would scream and carry on until she got a banana split. She would make Mama eat her cone. I talked about that in therapy and got rid of my anger.
"Did you hear what I said?" Jesse asks. "I said I really loved him. I've never loved anyone else."

He was Alex.

"I think he loved me too," she says. "He was just afraid. It was the day of my birthday he told me I was beautiful. Then he kissed me on the mouth."

I had been there and watched. In the kitchen was Alex kissing my sister while my mother was in the living room dancing alone to Tammy Wynette.

Birthdays were usually a time for a case of Genny Cream. They were both drunk that day. They even let Jesse and me have a beer.

Alex was lying. She wasn't actually beautiful. She was tall and thin with round breasts. Her teeth were crooked and her hair was straight, almost brown. Her face was too plain to be beautiful.

"I knew he meant it," she says as she fills our glasses again.

"That you were beautiful?"

"No, that he loved me. He snuck in my room that night and said it over and over again. He said it for two years until Mama found out.

"Well, Mama said he was a good lover and she should know," I said. "She had enough of them."

Jesse was crazy like Mama. She was just younger.

The day Mama found them together, she dragged me in the room. We stood there watching them sleep together. Then Mama got a wild look in her eye and started slamming the bedroom door shut, over and over again, until the wood cracked. The whole time she kept screaming, "He's mine."

Every year Mama changed her hair color. At that time it was a deep black, almost blue. It was wild like her eyes as she looked at Jesse. Alex had put his pants on and now stood against the wall. Mama never looked at him. She jumped on the bed and bloodied Jesse's mouth, but she never looked at him.

"I heard their bed squeaking," Jesse says, spilling her wine as her hand leaps up. "I heard their bed squeaking that night and slit my wrist. I couldn't think what else to do."

We were put in a foster home after that. I was almost eighteen and Jesse was fifteen.

We went to separate homes.

"I'm tired," I tell her. I go lay down on the couch, covering myself with the red and black afghan.

An hour later, I wake to vomit. She always buys cheap wine that gives me a headache and makes me sick.

She's sleeping on the edge of the couch, sitting up with her legs drawn up under her.

I watch her breathe and wonder when she stopped sucking her thumb. Her teeth are all crooked because she did it for so long. Maybe she still does sometimes.

I try to wake her so she'll go upstairs. "No," she says, "I want to sleep here."

She has a son. The next day we go to visit him at a special school. They took him away from her after he found her nude covered with blood. The blood made him freak.

When he sees me, he throws toys at me to get my attention. Then he quiets down and colors a picture with me in the coloring book I brought him. He uses lots of reds and blacks. The picture of the family picnic is grotesque when he gets done, but I don't say anything to him. I don't want him to throw any more toys at me. Alex will be seven next month.

After we leave the school, I decide to go back home. I still have a headache and she still has the fleas.

The phone is ringing when I walk in the house. I take three pain killers and ignore it.
"I let the phone ring five hundred and ten times," she tells me when I finally answer it.
"I wanted to make sure you got home all right."
"I got lost twice."
"Did you have a good time?" she asks. I know she's crying. "Next time, I promise I'll spray the fleas."

-Linda DeMaso