

She and I

We can never know too much about our characters. Revelations lurk in the details.

John Dufresne, *The Truth that Tells a Lie, the Lie That Tells a Truth*

My sister is a natural blond; I am an unnatural blond. My hair color is a mix of expensive highlights and my own silvery grey. She passed her hair color on to all four of her children; I have passed my hair color on to no one.

She doesn't like to drive, especially in the dark. A year younger than I, she complains that her night vision has deteriorated. She thinks the cars passing us on the interstate are veering too close, and so she swerves erratically into the next lane to avoid being sideswiped. She brakes suddenly at red lights, yards from the intersection. I brace myself on the dash or clutch the door handle, and she laughs a tiny embarrassed laugh. "See what I mean?" she says. I, on the other hand, love to drive and always have. As a teenager, I'd drive two hours to the beach and back in a single day, the single-lane highway surrounded by scrubby pines and a wide sky. Pumping the accelerator in time to whatever was on the radio. The Eurythmics: *Sweet dreams are made of this...*

I still love to drive, often volunteer to pick up friends from the airport 100 miles away in another state. Green farmland blurs by, car dealerships, small towns with eerie names like Slaughter Beach and Broadkill. I pass the Dover Air Force Base, the C-17's like monstrous beasts, the sun casting prisms across the fields. Lucinda Williams on the stereo, me singing along, a happy out-of-tune wail. My love of driving is part of the reason she asked me to make the trip with her eleven years ago when she decided that her children, raised in the Midwest, needed to see the ocean. Both boys had been diagnosed by then. The word *terminal* trailed behind them, a distorted shadow--short and squat and squished beneath their feet on some days, elongated and twice their height, looming ahead of them on others. She hated that her children had never jumped over waves, body-surfed, built elaborate cities in the sand. She was afraid the boys might die before they had the chance.

We both love the ocean. I live six miles from the beach, and though I once vowed I would look at it every day, I often forget. She lives 1700 miles away in a state known for its dairy farms and football team and its long brutal winters. She dreams of the yearly vacation she takes to the crowded seaside town we vacationed in as girls, the same town we brought her children to eleven years ago. We both love the smell of salt and rotting wood from the boardwalk, the lighted Ferris Wheel spinning the night in circles. In April, when it's still snowing where she lives and the afternoons are dark, she searches the internet for ocean-front rentals. She'll pay extra for the view and even on the muggiest nights at the beach, will sleep with the windows open so she can hear the booming cadence of the sea. During those two weeks, she will walk the beach every morning no matter how bad her pain, no matter that she sleeps with oxygen now, no matter that she is now dying from the same disease that took her boys. Each year she wonders if this will be the last year that she's well enough to travel. I never wonder about things like this. I take the ocean for granted and try, but can't imagine, how different it would look if I thought I might never see it again.

Sometimes, thinking of my sister, I think also of the "Hospital Room Writing Exercise" by Richard Bausch that I often give my students: *Describe a hospital room from the point of view of a man whose wife has just given birth to their child. It is July 3, 7:30pm on a cool breezy day, blue mountains in the distance. Inside the room, there is a nightstand with water glass, plastic pitcher, bowl of fruit and a small clock radio. There is a hardback chair, a box of Kleenex. After you have described the room, do it again, the exact same weather and time of day, exact same water glass and mountains in the distance--only this time, describe it from the point of view of a man whose mother or father is now dying in that room.* Bausch says it should be a completely different description, a completely different point of view. What a person feels and knows, where he came from, who he loves and what he has lost and is about to lose--these alter everything.

Even the color of the sky.

Even the shape of a mountain.

And so I stare at the ocean and wonder what I would see if I were staring at it through my sister's eyes, which are greyer than mine--a soft, green-grey, like the color of winter at the beach.

Would it be more beautiful (as last things often are)?

Or more terrifying?

We don't speak much of terror, though she has mentioned more than once her fear that she will die in her sleep. Most people who think of death in the abstract--which she cannot do--think dying in your sleep is the perfect way to go. I am one of those people. She, however, has woken a number of times to the sound of her husband's voice or one of the girls as they try to rouse her at two in the afternoon after she has slept through the alarm, the phone ringing incessantly, people panicked and worried when she never showed up at wherever she was supposed to be. She says she feels herself slipping in and out of awareness, but though she wants to respond, wants to open her eyes, she cannot. This is how Sam died, I think when she tells me this. He was seven. She is only 45.

Unlike her, I don't fear death, which is easy to say when you are healthy. I fear growing old and being alone and poor and being in pain and having no teeth and no one who cares about me. This is not all that unlikely. I have no children, no husband, no pension, no retirement fund. I am terrified of getting sick and spending my days fighting to stay alive only to die anyway. Or getting sick and fighting to stay alive only to be alone and poor and in pain with no teeth and no one who cares about me. Unlike her, I think that if I died in a car accident today, I'd be perfectly fine with it.

This is not to say I don't love my life. I love mornings, reading in bed with a cup of strong black coffee. The sky is dark outside and I watch the light climb slowly up the edge of the world. She, on the other hand, loves nights, will stay up until two, three, four in the morning. If I get a text after midnight, I know without looking that it's from her.

Unlike me, she likes her coffee diluted with flavored creamers, and when we go to Starbucks, she orders Mochaccino's with extra whipped cream. She's always been thin, which is amazing considering what she eats. In restaurants she orders seafood linguini in thick cream sauces, extra blue cheese dressing on her salads, grilled Rueben sandwiches or cheesesteaks. I too am thin, but I order the grilled salmon on a salad, dressing on the side. Or grilled sirloin on a salad, dressing on the side. Always a salad. Always the dressing on the side. She is also one of the few women I know who doesn't just pretend to glance at

the dessert menu, but studies it carefully and if she can't decide between the flourless chocolate cake and the Creme Brulee, will order both. "Bring extra forks," she'll tell the waitress and even those of us who insist we are full, couldn't eat another bite, really shouldn't... are secretly grateful to her. She gets most of her nutrition through an infusion pump now, but in a restaurant she'll still order something fun: a cup of cheddar cheese soup or a shot of Baileys with her coffee. If it's breakfast, a waffle the size of a dinner plate loaded with strawberry compote and whipped cream. I eat my scrambled egg whites and feel ridiculously virtuous and overwhelmingly sad. Later, driving home, she'll complain that she's so full she has to loosen her pants and I'll say I know, but I don't.

I feel this way often when I am with her, aware of how much I don't know.

We both love to read, but whereas I pour through novels or the newest *Poet and Writer*, she reads *The New York Times*, especially the political and science news. She can name all the editorialists, and at Thanksgiving, will quote Frank Rich or Thomas Friedman just to instigate a heated discussion about the nuances of the Israeli-Palestinian debate or the economic bailout or the global implications of our increasing debt with China. I'm not sure I understand the global implications of anything. She is a little appalled, I think, that I don't read the paper regularly and when I do, prefer *The Book Review*, first, the style section next. She also reads classics: Thoreau's essays, or Thornton's *Bridge of San Luis Rey*. She read both of Elizabeth Edwards' books as well as Roger Rosenblatt's *Making Toast*, his memoir about moving into his daughter's house to take care of her children after she suddenly died. I don't think it's a coincidence, my sister's reading books written by people who are either dying or are trying to pick up their life in the aftermath of death. I, too, read about death, prefer books that make me cry, though even in the saddest stories, a part of me is analyzing the writing. This is one of the big differences between us, I sometimes think: I want to know how to *write about* death, which is the only way I'll ever be able to make sense of hers. She wants to know how to die.

She saves everything: Huge plastic bins full of her children's clothes, Sam's collection of Beanie Babies and match box cars, Zachary's Power Rangers, his binders full of Yugio cards, the art projects he did with the art therapist who worked at Children's Hospital where he and Sam--and then just he--spent

so many weeks. The last time I visited, I tried, at her request, to clean out her coat closet. I put in a discard pile a lone Batman glove that had belonged to Zachary, but she snatched it back. And then she spotted the detachable hood to the puffy red winter coat Sam wore when he was six and she grabbed that too and clutched it to her chest and said quietly, "He loved that jacket." In the end, we threw out one ratty scarf that our mother had given one of the girls years ago and two mismatched gloves that belonged to her husband. It was the same with the Tupperware. Even if it had no lid and was stained orange from the spaghetti sauce it once contained, she didn't want to throw it away. "But couldn't we use this for *something*?" she asked. "Maybe store craft supplies in it or..." She looked at me helplessly and I tucked it back into the cabinet. All day, no matter what it was--a coffee cup from an insurance company that no longer existed, worn hand towels, a crock pot she hadn't used in years, three cappuccino makers all stuck in the back of a closet--just as we were about to carry it to the trash, she'd take it back, imagining a time in the future when she would need this exact item, then regret no longer having it. I understood, although I wasn't sure if it was the past she was clinging to or that unimaginable time in the future when she would still be here, doing whatever it was that required an extra cheese grater or a plastic water pitcher. Or maybe it wasn't about the past or the future at all. Perhaps after losing so much, it was simply unbearable to lose another single thing.

Lately even the unread magazines and newspapers stacked in piles by her couch are accumulating. When the piles get too overwhelming, she culls through them for the articles she might want to read later. From the advertisements, she cuts out words and phrases that she wants to save and puts them in carefully labeled envelopes. She has an envelope for each of her daughters, she told me the last time I saw her. Each word captures some quality of the girls, perhaps a memory. I too save words and phrases that I cut from literary journals, then laminate on bright cardstock: *inky wings*, *midnight-washed*, *wild bloom of summer*. I use the words as prompts in my creative writing classes, sometimes spread them out on my table when struggling with my own work. Later, I find random words scattered here and there in my apartment: *all the boats between us* by the coffee pot, *ghost letter* under the forks.