

Anna swirled her pinot noir absentmindedly in a crystal wine glass. The ruby liquid swished just as absentmindedly, mimicking the undulating ocean before it.

“Here’s to you, Kate,” Anna thought as she brought the glass to her mouth. She smacked her lips to flick the dry, bitter taste away. Though she preferred the sweeter taste of Chardonnay to the acrid, complicated flavor of pinot, she was only drinking reds in memory of her sister. This had been their Thursday night tradition, and it was too painful to break habits just yet. Anna had always been thankful for the weekly phone calls and cross country toasts. They had been an opportunity to grow closer to a sister she only knew as a child. Anna was five years older than Kate and had moved away to a life of her own when Kate was barely thirteen.

“Older child syndrome” she thought. “All your younger siblings remain young even when they’re grown up and married” She paused. “Or dead.”

She felt like she had hardly gotten to know the adult version of Kate. This was why she had loved the Thursday night chats and hearing Kate talk about her husband and her art. Anna listened as Kate boasted about her gallery’s success in the unabashed, self-glorious way someone can only talk to their family. But their phone calls always contained an unspoken anxiety that Kate, however close to her sister, didn’t choose to express. Adulthood, it seemed, had equipped them both with steely facades. In their childhood, there was no secret that they could ever keep from one another. They shared everything. But that yesterday seemed as far away as the foreign continent the water churning around Anna’s ankles had last touched.

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They had been given a normal enough childhood. Dad worked in the financial district downtown, and before money became something they didn’t have enough of, he seemed to enjoy his work. He’d take weeks in the summer to drive the family to Ann Arbor and Lake Michigan, “To see the Homeland,” he called it. Anna and Kate’s grandparents lived in two-story, arbor-hidden house their father had grown up in. Grandma spoiled her two favorite grandchildren with fresh blueberries, cold milk and sugar every morning before a trip to the lake.

“This lake is HUGE! I can’t even see the other side!” Kate always began by laughing and running towards the water, stripping layers of clothing away and leaving them in her wake.

“And there are waves! I didn’t know lakes had waves!” Anna raced to beat Kate to the shore.

“It’s windy enough for waves,” their grandmother said, holding her large floppy hat in place. It was almost too cold to go swimming that day. It was only warm when the wind stopped blowing and the sun had enough time to concentrate its glare on everyone’s expectant skin. Kate and Anna splashed around the water incessantly, not out of frivolity but from the basic need to be in continuous motion to stay warm. Even at age seven Kate showed signs of being a better swimmer than Anna, something Anna resented feeling part of her birthright was to be naturally better at everything a young sister attempted. When trying to make their wet sand mounds look like castles had gotten old, Kate took to the lake cutting through the water with ease while Anna struggled with her own sloppy strokes. She followed Kate beyond the orange safety buoy where she could no longer feel

sand and lake grass but only the cold deep beneath her treading feet. Kate floated lazily on her back, swishing her arms back and forth as if she were making a snow angel in the lake's green water. Before Anna began to have second thoughts about being out so far, a tiny something brushed her calf.

"It's only a fish, or seaweed," she thought as she jerked involuntarily. But as she jerked she gasped, and her sharp intake of breath coincided with a wave rushing over her head. She submerged suddenly without control or air in her lungs, flailing in panic. Whatever small fish or clump of moss that had caressed her leg was long gone, and Anna felt nothing but empty water as she struggled to the surface. She looked around. Kate had vanished. "Kate!" she cried out. Water glubbed into her mouth, forcing her to spew and pant. She fought to renew her shout when she felt something bang against her leg again. She started to think what is it, where is Kate, but her questions slammed into silence. A powerful feeling came over her. Wordlessly, she knew what to do. Her hand shot down. It hesitated. There was an unbelievable calmness at work. Left, right? To the right. Instead of a hand or bathing suit, Anna found a clump of Kate's tangled hair. She wrenched upward. After spitting, coughing and gasping, Kate came to her senses.

"Ow! That hurt. Did you have to grab my hair!" she yelled.

"Well I was going to stick my head under the water and ask you to calm down so I could politely grab your hand and help you up, but I think you were a little busy," Anna spat back. The huffiness only lasted until the sisters reached the shore. They kept glancing at one another. It was significant what had happened, a horrible gap that had been miraculously spanned in a second, but neither was inclined to put it into words. They said nothing to their grandmother. From time to time Anna secretly looked at her hand. Unless she sat down she would feel dizziness coming over her. She spent most of the rest of the day in front of the house in a chair. By morning the feeling had gone away.

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The breeze from the Atlantic was too cool in Charleston for this time of year. Anna wrapped her afghan tighter around her shoulders and looked out across the water. The gray sky slinked into an even grayer ocean.

"I'm the only Strickland kid left now," she mused. "More blueberries for me." She imagined Kate laughing at the impropriety of the sentiment.

Anna walked away from the shoreline to gather her abandoned deck chair and started back to her house. She tried finishing the commemorative wine, but it tasted too bitter. She tossed the liquid to the side where it congealed with the dry sand like drops of thick blood.

"I miss you, Sis," she said out loud. She waited. It would have been nice if Kate answered. Instead she heard only an echo of their last phone conversation. It had been on the day Kate hung her new red curtains. She had been so excited about her efforts.

"Oh, Anna, I just wish you could see them. They're just so—

"Red?"

"Well, of course, that's what I said. And the texture. Sometimes I just like to go up to them and run my hand and my cheek along them. If there's such a thing as comfort food, maybe there can be comfort fabric?" Kate laughed. "I know I'm silly. But when I've been working on art or decorating or cooking, I get so caught up in it. It's a real release from, you know."

"Family business?"

“That’s a nice name for it,” Kate agreed, in that instant sounding falsely bright. Anna knew her little sister had always admired how Anna had gotten cleanly away, escaped before it was too late. They never really talked about those days.

“What’s Alex think about your latest décor brainstorm?” Anna prodded.

“Oh, Alex is Alex. Red to him is so aggressive. But he’s a good sport. He lets me have my fling. Probably supposes some women take lovers or bury themselves in the bottle and he’s got one who chooses art instead and that’s not a bad tradeoff. So I just go on immersing myself in color, falling into it. By the way, that’s why the phone must have rung twenty times before I finally picked up. Sorry about that.”

They had chatted perhaps five minutes more. Not about anything of significance, only the weather, how Anna had noted the old beach cottages around her coming down on the coast and making room for more tacky condominiums. It was so odd to recall now. The last time you ever talked to someone. And Kate’s thing about red and her saying she “fell into it,” and the memories it triggered of the day she’d nearly drowned, something Anna had almost forgotten.

All such thinking was as unsavory in her mouth as the discarded wine. She walked into her kitchen and picked up the receiver, at the same time rustling through a drawer full of scrap paper before pulling out a crumpled Post-it. She dialed its number and, as she waited for the ring to be answered, glided her thumb over the pen’s indentation made by a hand that would never write anything again.

“Hello?”

“Is this Alex?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“It’s Anna, remember, I’m Kate’s sister, I think we only met at the wedding. I never got around to visiting did I? I’m sorry for calling so early.”

“No, its fine,” Alex replied. “It’s not like I sleep anyway.”

“Okay, well I was thinking about coming in town for the memorial and all. And I wanted to ask you over the phone because it seemed maybe less threatening. While I’m there, can I, I mean would it be okay with you if I look through a few of Kate’s things, maybe take some of her family pictures or things like that?” Anna rubbed her heel on her leg like a cricket to scrape off the stubborn sand as she waited for a response.

“Yeah. Yeah that’s fine. Take whatever you want,” Alex sighed. Anna hung up and grabbed her keys and a manila envelope with a developing tear caused from too many papers shoved between its yellow sleeves. She slipped the envelope under her arm and strode to her car as the sun turned the gray sky behind her powder blue. Maybe it would make no difference, but she was going to see those red curtains for herself. For at least the second time in her life she was going to obey her instincts.