

## Flowers from Arlington

My best friend moved to Florida when I was 7. I was devastated. The day she left, we had planned to give her a surprise going away party. Before she arrived, my mother sent me to the store three blocks down the road to get some balloons. I walked into the small run-down convenience store, and a rush of memories hit me like the cool air from the air conditioner. I watched shimmering mirages of Zoe and myself passing through the store. I saw us chaining our bikes up and tumbling inside, giggling, to get slushies to refresh and refuel us from our summer adventures. I saw us hunkered at a sticky table in the corner sharing cookies, hot chocolate, and secrets in the winter. I saw us sitting on the sidewalk outside making up stories about all the people stopping for gas as they passed through our tiny corner of the world on their way to some larger and grander destination. I used the two dollars my mother had given me to buy a pack of zebra cakes; Zoe's favorite food to eat when she was sad, and walked in a haze back to my bike parked outside. I hopped on and peddled myself down the street past the public library where Zoe and I used to go for story time every Sunday when we were toddlers. Past the Cul-De-Sac where we shared games of Annie Annie over, four square, street hockey, soccer, and baseball with the other kids. I rode past the municipal swimming pool where we spent broiling summer days playing marco polo and daring each other to brave the high dive (we talked big but neither of us ever did it) until the sun went down and we stood thin bodies wrapped in towels, shivering with teeth chattering, our hair the texture of straw, our skin wrinkled from water and chlorine. I rode all the way past the clinic where I got my first cast when I broke my arm falling off the monkey bars at recess trying to jump to the third bar because, "Zoe bet I couldn't do it!" She was the first one to sign it. I rode until I reached the edge of town and leaned my bike against the exit

sign. I sat on the hard ground-sparse with dead brown grass, dried out from a recent drought-and considered my options. Picking at a scab on my knee, I debated the idea of continuing my odyssey even past the town's limits, of riding my bike nonstop for the rest of my life. Then I remembered that all I had with me was a pack of zebra cakes and 75 cents. I sat there all day watching the clouds pass above me and thinking of anything but Zoe. I counted to 1,000 then 3,000 then 800,000 all the way to one million. I listed all the names of the trees that grew in the forest on the North side of town, then all the birds that I had seen in them when I went bird watching with my brother Seth.

When the Sheriff found me, the sky was just starting to darken, the stars just starting to peek out from the folds in the sky that they occupied during the day. He put my bike in the trunk, opened the passenger door, and drove me home. When he pulled into the driveway, my mother was standing on the front steps arms crossed and livid. Normally I would have sunk lower into the cushioned seat at seeing my mother's puckered face, but on that day, I simply slid out of the Sheriff's car and walked right up to the imposing figure guarding the front door. "And just what do you have to say for yourself young lady? I was worried sick, sneaking off in the middle of the day, running to God knows where! How was I to know that you weren't kidnapped, hit by a car, dead huh?" I stared up at her ashen face surrounded by closely curled amber hair, "Is Zoe gone?" "What did you just say?" "Is Zoe gone?" For a moment her face was blank with confusion and shock before she remembered herself and pulled back the expression of a stern mother, "Yes Zoe is gone. Her flight left an hour ago, and you should have seen the poor girl, waiting all day for you to come see her. Her mother had to drag her out that door crying because they were going to miss their flight waiting around for you." I was grounded for a whole month and my biking

radius shrunk from five blocks to just two, but the only lesson I really learned that day was that I didn't know how to say goodbye.

I'm reminded of that day now, as I drive along the winding road surrounded by the inky night. In the distance I can see a cluster of twinkling city lights reflecting the stars from the sky. If home is truly a feeling and not a place, then it's the feeling of seeing the soft glow of lights in the distance as you drive through the night, returning from a long journey. When I bump along the road, I can hear my paltry treasures rattling in the back seat of my Sudan. The oak frame jostles against the door of the car, and the tissue paper surrounding the flowers in the adjacent seat crinkles. The frame holds a perfectly creased American Flag. When it was handed to me, I marveled at the deep shades of red, like crimson silk rather than the washed-out hue I was used to on paper flags. I was also surprised by the weight of the folded cloth, my cheeks undoubtedly flushed with color when I almost dropped it onto the perfectly manicured lawn. I had thought about the possibility of this event when Seth was deployed, had even thought of it when he first signed up, but in my morbid prophecies, I played the part of the grieving sister. I bared that weight and that weight alone. Perhaps that is why I was so unprepared when they handed me the flag. I had always imagined that if worse came to worse, my mother and my father would huddle together and accept the gift in place of their son. I was always somewhere in the background mascara tracks trailing from under the black veil hiding my tormented eyes. But when I stepped onto the lawn of cemetery, when I passed through the rows and rows of headstones, I did so in a dreamy haze much like that day at the Stop-n-Go oh so long ago. When I kissed the smooth black coffin, I thought of the day Seth left for summer camp. It was the third day of summer, I had just turned 10; Seth was 13. The night before he left, we sat at the dinner table playing Uno, and he babbled on and on about how excited he was to learn how to ride a horse. Finally, I

decided I was sick of his ramblings and I threw my hand of cards at him before storming off to my room. When he slid onto the bed next to me nearly 15 minutes later, he poked my side and said, “Why you so mad Mary Ella?” “Because all you’ve talked about for the past week and a half is stupid horse riding!” “Mel, you love horses. Don’t be sad I’m only going to be gone for three weeks.” So maybe my angry shield was a bit transparent. I sighed, “First Zoe leaves, now you’re leaving, next mom and dad are going to leave me to!” “Don’t be ridiculous Mel, I’ll be back in no time, then we can go get blizzards at the Dairy Queen and I’ll show you lots of pictures of the horses. I’ll be back so soon, you won’t even have to say goodbye.” That sold me. I turned to him and wrapped my arms around his neck; I even rode with him to the camp the next morning and waved goodbye out the back window of the car too. When they lower the coffin, I felt the dirt filling my lungs like sandbags. I choked for air around the dry feeling of dust rattling around in my chest. I wanted to tell someone that Seth was afraid of the dark when we were little, that he always had to sleep with the hallway light on, that he was scolded every month when the electricity bill came for his impractical fears. *God forbid you fear the pains of war Seth, but never sleep with the light off.* Before I make a fool of myself, I straighten my back and quiet my quivering vocal chords, I sew my mouth shut and remind myself that I am not 7 and I am not 10, that this is a role I have played before, that I am well practiced and much wiser than when I was young. So, when the funeral ends, I graciously receive the condolences offered, but I do not linger. I do not throw myself at the foot of his headstone or collapse from the grief seeping into my veins. I walk with swift elegant strides out of the cemetery, I place the flag in a frame I bought the day I got the news, and I put it in the backseat of my car. When I put the keys in ignition, I tell myself that I am ready to leave this place and never look back, ready to leave this moment of my life and never look back; this string of moments really, lined up like

Christmas lights that I would like to watch blink out one by one down the row. I tell myself this, and yet, I get out of the car and make my way to an unguarded field at the edge of the parking lot. I spend at least an hour culling an array of flowers, the clouds pass over my head, sweeping away the blue and followed slowly by shades of tangerine and dusty rose, and I am once again reminded of the day Zoe left; the day I spent watching the clouds at the edge of town. When I do finally leave, it has grown late and I consider stopping at a hotel while trying to stave off the ache for sleep in my bones, making its way into my blood, fluttering at the tips of my eyelids and pulling at my concentration, but I drive on. I drive until I am welcomed back into the warmth of the city lights, and then I drive a little further, to the North end of town this time. I list the trees in the forest encompassing me as I walk. Then I list the all the birds I had seen in them when Seth and I had time for bird watching. I do this until I reach the spot that my feet seem to drift to like logs in a flooding creek. The tissue paper crinkles in my hand and I bow my head under the weight of the stars and the drooping curtain of night. Like Atlas, my shoulders crumple. "I brought you guys something," I whisper into the breeze whistling across the grounds, shivering slightly in my black dress. I set the flowers down at my feet, "All the way from Arlington." I am quiet for a moment, still trying to shake loose all the dirt still caught in my aching lungs. "I know you couldn't come to say goodbye, so I brought a little bit of Arlington to you. It was beautiful there, they picked a very nice spot." I try to conjure up comfort I can't find, that I can't give. "I'm sorry, I wish he was here with you guys, I wish you were all together, he never liked being alone." I laugh a little; high, and shrill, and definitely not mine, "When they buried him, I seriously thought about stopping them to tell them how scared he was of the dark." "I thought I had learned," my voice breaks because I am so disappointed in myself, how could I not know by now, lord knows I've had plenty of practice. "I thought I knew how to say goodbye." The sky is

dark and indifferent, with no sign of morning, but one thing I have learned is you can't spend all your time waiting around for better days, so I wipe the tears from my face. "I promise I will figure it out someday, I'll learn if it's the last thing I do." I kiss my fingers and press them to the cool glossy surface of each headstone resting before me, "Goodnight Mama, goodnight Dad."