

Red Rover

I have never believed in fate the way most people do. Ask just about anyone and they will tell you (if they are believers) that there is a reason for everything that happens—that there's no need to worry about the future, because it's all decided. The roads we take are predetermined.

They're right and wrong, of course.

Fate does exist, but only in the past. It stretches out over the months and seasons we have already walked through. For many years I found this comforting. Instead of writhing in fear over making the wrong decision, I have been able to walk forward, always, with a certain sense of calm. The inverse of this, however, is that my long hours of solitude these last years—one lapping into the next in an interminable wave—have allowed me to analyze each step and twist of my path. To know what kind of punishment that can be, you have to have tramped along through life for at least seven or eight decades. So, I sit here, gazing out over pretty gardens, kneading the thick wool blanket on my lap, and I remember my fate.

Most of the people of my memories are lost to death, now. My father to cancer, my mother to a heart attack. Friends are dead or dying. The men I loved are the same. But there is one person who is not dead; one person whose skinny ankles are still ringed with frilly socks that look like lionfish from a poster of tropical fish I had once, at least in the photos I have seen on this tablet here. She is laughing, in these photos. Her hair is brilliantly white, puffed into a soft cloud around her head. She is lost to me too, but nothing has snatched her away.

I pushed her away myself. I never forgave her for that.

I have been thinking about the marker of the beginning of our divergent paths, the first stone that wedged between us. Once, we were inseparable. Best friends, in the way that people always talk about and cry about at weddings and anniversaries. I think I have found it, that beginning of the end of us. It is a calcified lump of simmering resentments and jealousies that found a sudden, impacting cohesion in the space of one afternoon. I have been turning it over and over in my mind until it is as smooth and warm as a river rock.

Red Rover

The shock for me is that this rock; this turning point, came down to something we had done a million times before on a summer day in 1988.

Our boredom that day was not the gentle numbness of Saturday mornings after cartoons, or the floating dizziness of long afternoons at school. This was a stifling summer boredom, a pervasive murmur of dark discontent. It was a sign that we had plunged deep into vacations, a month on either side cushioning us from the structure of our school-year lives. This time of year, we were left with the freedom of daylight, a difficult and wondrous gift. The conditioning of our school lives had taught us to be busy and productive, to be neat and clean, but our freedom was void of those things. Dirt and daydreaming were allowed us, sometimes at least. It made us wild and fierce, although we couldn't have told you why. And so that day, we paced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth over the cracked concrete of the parking lot, hemmed in by our oceans of time.

The parking lot had once belonged to a hospital, before it had been torn down. No cars visited now. It was left to us, a great crocodile made of asphalt. Weeds choked themselves on the chain link fence, and dandelions forced their way up through the wrinkled pavement. The blistered gray concrete had been patched over here and there, tar veins running over its skin. Above the gray was the deciduous jungle that surrounded the lot, and above that was a still summer sky, the color of faded jeans. We had slunk in through a gap in the fence, peeling aside the chain link like it was chicken wire, and we the foxes after the chickens. The parking lot was reserved for our violent games; and that day we wanted blood.

From a distance, we all looked alike: long skinny legs, sun-browned skin, our ponytails frizzing in the heat. There were seven of us, not counting Angie's brother Derek, and somehow, we never did seem to count him. He was older, and technically there to keep an eye on us. Really, he just wanted a quiet place to smoke. He leaned against one of the sturdier sections of fence with cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, a blurry shadow fading into the green.

"Let's play Red Rover," said Emily, licking her lips.

Red Rover

A shiver ran through all of us. We looked at each other, shifting and shuffling our feet, scuffing at loose pebbles. Red Rover had been forbidden to us, by our parents. It was *dangerous*, it was *inappropriately violent*, it was *how little girls broke their noses*. Forbidden, and consequently a rumbling enticement, rolling off Emily's tongue to bounce around us on the pavement.

"I'll be captain," said Emily, interpreting the assent in our silence. "Ashley, you be the other one."

I shrugged, and stepped out beside her.

"Hannah," said Emily.

"Sammy Jo," I cried.

"Lizzy," barked Emily, not wanting to be outdone.

"Aaangie," I shrieked.

And so, we went on. The last in line was my little sister.

"JESSIE," bellowed Emily.

We lined up, glaring as though our rivalry was one bred into us for generations. We squinted our eyes and bared our teeth. We reached for hands, knotted our fingers, and swung our arms back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Emily's team also got to go first, since she was our leader.

"Red Rover, Red Rover, send *Angie* right over!" Emily's voice floated above us in the still summer air for a moment, high and thin and ferocious. Angie's pounding footsteps pushed it up and away. She pumped her gangly arms, straining for greater speed --and tore through the opposite line.

Red Rover

Panting and triumphant, Maggie trotted back with Hannah in tow. We cheered and slapped high fives, patting Hannah on the back.

“Congratulations, yeah,” we cried. “Welcome to the good side!”

Emily, Lizzy, and Jessie scowled at her back, their lips pulled up in sneers.

“-- send Emily right over!”

“Red Rover, Red Rover, send Ashley— “

“—Sammy Jo right over!”

Lines were broken, lines held firm. Our eyes grew fever-bright, our mouths hung open in the joy of physical violence normally withheld from us. Scabbed knees bled freely. A few of us had scrapes on our palms. Our sneakers boasted new scuffs. Everyone’s ponytails straggled desperately down their necks.

It was our turn. Victory glowered at us from across the way; only Emily and Jessie remained facing us, brows furrowed and arms swinging menacingly. Emily was tall and strong, although about half of her was legs. Her old jean shorts were patched and frayed, her knees bore clusters of scabs like military medals. The top of Jessie’s corn silk head skimmed Emily’s shoulder; her white romper with red flowers was still free of dirt and blood. The lace edging on her socks stuck out like the frills of the lionfish around her skinny ankles.

I knew then how to seize victory. The terrible weight of boredom that had been pushing on my lungs all morning sailed cleanly out of me with a simple sentence.

“Red Rover, Red Rover,” I chanted, “Send JESSIE right over!”

I leered tauntingly at my little sister, wagging my interlocked fists in a challenge, a dare.

Red Rover

Jessie threw her chin into the air, jutted her elbows out. Emily nudged her, a dark look of now-or-never, and my little sister leapt towards me, challenge accepted. Her fair hair streamed out behind her as she ran, and her lips curled back in a snarl.

Her footsteps were the only sound to punch through the air after my call, an almost peace, though our hearts thudded in the anticipation of battle. They slammed frantically against our rib cages in an effort to move, to do anything but stay still. This was our story, to float in stillness, waiting for that one moment when a jolt of adrenaline could make us choose. To fly, to fight, and then. . . .

Sixty pounds of elbows, hair, and lionfish frill slammed into our arms, only to bounce off again. For one frozen moment, I saw her upturned face, her eyes closed. Then she pirouetted gracefully, and smashed into the pavement.

Everyone froze.

For a moment, silence reigned, soaking in the broken tension of the game. But then Jessie's cries rose like a siren, sprawling through the parking lot. The other girls all bolted, the spell that had held us undone by first blood. Derek tossed his cigarette butt onto the ground and smeared it around with his shoe.

"She gonna be okay?" he asked.

My stomach had dropped to my knees. I hadn't really considered what would happen after Jessie lost, hadn't thought the adrenaline and the victory would have a price tag.

"Yeah," I said. "C'mon, Jess, get up."

She sat up and spat snot, blood, and two pearly teeth onto the concrete. Then she resumed sobbing. I slid an arm under hers and heaved her to her feet. We hobbled home together awkwardly. I held Jessie up and away from me, trying not to get her blood and her snot and her tears all over me. Empathy held no sway. Dread roiled in my stomach, and Jessie, who was hurt--but not that hurt, was determined to make the most of it.

Red Rover

Our father was not pleased.

He had been painting the back of the house, stretched up on a ladder to reach the siding just under the eaves. He heard us before he saw us, and the paintbrush clattered to the ground as he leapt off the ladder, and strode down the driveway, thunder in his face.

Half of Jessie's face was smeared with blood; she looked like something straight out of the Animal Planet specials on the African Savannah. Her romper had a black mark all down the front from where she'd fallen on the asphalt, and her knees were oozing. Worse, her first words incriminated me hopelessly.

"Sh-he made me do it," wailed Jessie. "It's h-h-her F-FAULT!"

We hustled into the house, limping and dragging into the kitchen as though we'd just survived a war. My father's toughened, cracked hands seized Jessie and set her on a stool near the sink. They reminded me a little of the crocodile asphalt in the parking lot.

Then, one of those hands slapped me briskly across the face. I hadn't seen it coming; tears stung my eyes, but I chomped down on my lip and scowled at Jessie before risking a sideways glare at my father.

"Ash-LEE m-m-ade ME!" sobbed my sister, snot and tears blending on her chin to form a milky, drippy mask.

My father grabbed a rag and tried to wipe Jessie's face, but his hands were shaking and she was still screaming too much for him to do it effectively.

"You're her sister," he bellowed at me, still dabbing Jessie's face. "You're supposed to look out for her, not push her around!" Jessie howled louder as he attempted to blot at a stream of blood dribbling out of the corner of her mouth.

He glared at me over his shoulder. I opened my mouth to explain and was slapped again. My father dropped the rag into my unresisting hands.

Red Rover

My face burned, and my throat got thick. I sniffled and glowered up at him, the injustice dancing before my eyes.

“Don’t sass me,” he fumed. “Help your sister get cleaned up.” His eyes were glistening, and I obeyed sullenly. He dashed into the next room, and I heard him dialing the telephone.

“Ames,” I heard him say, in a shaky voice. “Something’s happened to Jessie, she fell down. . .”

“I don’t know. . . .”

“Well, Ashley was there, not a scratch. . .”

“I’ll call if we go to the emergency room—“

“My TEESH,” squalled Jessie, her voice whistling into the void at the front of her mouth between swabs with the rag. “She knocked out my TEESH!!”

I heard the phone slam down, and my father stormed back into the room. He snatched the rag from my hands.

“Go find her teeth!” he barked. “Christ, Ashley, I expected you to be the responsible one here.”

“My TEESH,” wailed Jessie, now truly disconsolate as another thought occurred to her. “I NEED my teesh f-f-for sha TOOSH FAIRY!”

I ran out of the dim house and back into the baking heat, snot slicking my upper lip and mingling with the saltwater that dripped that way. I retraced our wobbly path jumping from one splatter of blood to the next of water or slime.

The parking lot basked silently in the sun; the long wrinkly crocodile gloating over its prize. The token of our broken boredom lay over the crocodile’s heart: a crimson splatter and two little blood-slimed teeth.

Red Rover

I suddenly felt the danger of the place, the wildness this sheltered little arena inspired. Rules didn't apply here, parents didn't apply here; parents didn't even know about it. It was a kingdom of children, and it plopped a tiny seed of indignant rage in my throat. All of my words were knotted around my tongue, the words I hadn't been allowed to say. I hadn't pushed Jessie; she had lost. She was always looking for attention, always trying to show me up, shut me out, keep me down; I hadn't made her do it—I hadn't, I didn't, it wasn't. . . .

But it was, really. I see that now, though I didn't then. The rock had risen up through that wrinkly pavement to settle heavily into my chest.

I approached the heart gingerly, vaguely afraid that a yawning mouth full of sharp teeth would open up and swallow me. The sun beat on my head and neck. I squatted down, grabbed a dandelion leaf from a wilted looking plant nearby, and neatly plucked up the teeth.

The boredom and the tension had leached away completely, replaced by an aching echoing feeling in my stomach.

I loitered for a while, scuffing my feet and kicking at nearby pebbles. My tears dried on my cheeks and the river of snot subsided into the occasional snuffle. I climbed back through the hole in the fence regretfully, mechanically.

But blood, once spilled, could not be put back. And teeth, once lost could not be replaced. And though my childish self couldn't possibly know, peeling that fence back and climbing back into the jungle that would carry me to the real world, the teeth and the blood were the beginning of the end of Jessie and me. I was already carrying that rock too tightly to let it drop back to the pavement, where it belonged.

Once, we were inseparable: in trouble together, out of trouble together. Now, I sit here in the pretty gardens, looking at Jessie laughing in green grass, Jessie with small blonde grandchildren, Jessie with a gold ring, a birthday cake, a dog. Nurses bustle around me; they fuss over my blankets, then retreat when I grump at them.

Red Rover

I cannot help but grin at what I am about to do. It seems the crocodile violence never really left me; even in the frail bird-body of an almost-grandma, the taste for blood still sings.

They aren't around when I make amends. It's easy enough—a quick bash with the white French door, and my two front teeth drop onto my tongue in a rush of coppery blood. It hurts—Good Lord, it hurts—but after so many months of bland numbness, of floating in sedation, the pain is salty and full of life. I suck the blood away, and drop the teeth onto Jessie's face on the tablet. I think of taking a picture to send to her, but no doubt it would be horrifying. Age hasn't been as kind to me as to her. So, I content myself with looking at the teeth, trying to keep the blood from running out of my mouth.

“We're even now,” I tell her, blood dribbling down my chin. “An eye for an eye--” A nurse has seen, she is sprinting over.

“And a tooth for a tooth.”