

Agnatic Sisters & Family Trees

When Janie got the test results, she got in her car and left the city. She didn't know where she was headed, nor could she possibly clear her mind long enough to think about it through. So she just drove.

And there it was, the same boundless, disgusting, helpless pit in her stomach. The one she, three months earlier, had thought she would never have to experience again.

The steering wheel in her hands was the only anything left to hold onto.

Later, her face stiff with salty dried tears, her head numb, apathetic, she registered something familiar in the strange images flooding past her window. Then, she found herself pulling into the driveway of the only house she could still call home, despite having resented it since childhood.

Metal clinked against thin, cheap, light blue plates. Three pairs of knives and forks. Family dinner.

Janie stared at her half-sister, Adonia, and the shapes her mouth was making with the teenage words and worries that were pouring out of it. Their father sat opposite them at the dining room table, his large body weighing on a fraying wicker chair. He slurped, delicately, at bits of microwave lasagna. A little at a time. Thoughts screaming in her head, Janie tried to let Adonia's words get through to her.

"Dad," Adonia said, sighed, "Da-ad, hello, DAD!"

“Ye-es? Hello,” he said, coming back to here and now from whatever daze he had been in. What had Adonia been talking about? No one had been listening.

Adonia shoved an oversized piece of lasagna in her mouth.

“I’m spending the night at Molly’s tonight.”

“Alright.”

“Or I might not... I might come home. Depends.”

“Just come in quietly if you do.”

“Yeah, fine.”

Janie tried to find something to add, just to be a part of this. Instead, her breath caught in her throat. Her brain was spent.

Adonia stuffed a final forkful of food into her mouth, then stood up, shoving her chair back loudly.

“See ya, Janie.”

Janie watched her little sister disappear up the stairs to her bedroom.

How could a person change so much in what seemed like an insignificant amount of time? Adonia had been a tiny little thing just moments (or was it months? years?) before. Fragile. Shy. Her clothes had once had animals on them. Giraffes. Elephants. Pink and purple tigers. Hair in stringy little pigtails. Now Adonia was almost as tall as Janie. She was still growing, too, would probably end up taller. Her clothes hugged her tightly, showing off her emerging womanly curves. Her eyes were dark with make-up that actually made her look good. Janie had learned how to put on two shades of eye shadow and some mascara when she was fifteen and hadn’t really learned any new tricks since.

Adonia flew down the stairs, 3 steps at a time, a black backpack over her shoulder, a blur as she swished out the door, slamming it behind her.

One daughter and one father were left sitting across from each other. Janie twitched her foot.

Giggling. Teenage voices. Shouting. Mindless laughter. Janie couldn't make out anything coherent. She hung up, stuffed her phone back in her pants pocket, and fidgeted in her armchair, tried to get comfortable. Adonia had called twice already since she had left a few hours before. At least *she* seemed to be having a good time.

"Dad," Janie said. He sat sinking into his brown plaid couch, a permanent and irreversible butt dent in it. Yup, her father was the guy who had given up wearing real clothes years ago in favor of an olive-colored velour sweat suit.

No response.

They were in the living room, the TV was on to fend off the silence. She stared at her father concentrating on the screen flashing images of a burning building on the 11 o'clock news.

"Dad," she said once more.

He was distracted again, had been his whole life. It astounded her that his private thoughts could possibly be that fascinating.

"*Dad.*"

"What's that?" he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen.

"I'm trying to talk to you here."

"So talk."

"Okay."

She realized she didn't have anything to say. Or rather, know how to say it.

"These windows look clean, what do you use on them?"

"You're asking me how I clean my windows?"

That's not what she was doing at all.

"I don't think Mom ever cleaned our windows."

Janie's mother had left an ugly hole in the left side of Janie's chest when she died three months earlier. Sometimes she could swear it made her walk lopsided. She hated her mother for making her asymmetrical, had tried to remedy it, had wanted to feel something other than that emptiness. More often than not, it had resulted in sweaty groping, short, disappointing waves of intensity, then not being able to sleep tangled in strange arms. She would stare at the men she had been with while they slept, willing them to wake up and look at her- one look would have been enough- with eyes that said, *and* meant: Devotion. Affection. Support. Understanding. Any or all of the above.

They always slept soundly.

Her father puffed on his eyeglasses, then wiped them with his shirt.

"How often would you say people clean their windows? Like on average?"

Janie said, exasperated. Her father finally turned to look at her.

"Hrmp," he said.

She laughed. Uncomfortably. This was pathetic.

Her father seemed so much older than he had at her mother's funeral: hunched over, his mouth always slightly open, a prickly, gray stubble on his chin. What an eternity those three months had been.

Janie wondered if she would ever understand her father. Or if anyone ever had.

Just tell him, Janie.

She looked at the screen together with her father for a few moments. Took in a mouthful of air.

“Well. I guess it’s good seeing you again, Daddy, I think I’ll go for a walk.”

“It’s a nice night for that.”

“Yeah.”

She hesitated a moment, then slipped out the door.

Darkness. Janie was walking into it. Trusting it blindly. Each step forward was a leap of faith.

The cell phone again.

“Hey Adonia.”

Giggling.

“Are you going to form sentences this time?”

“I’m lost.”

You and me both, Hon.

“What do you mean, where are you?”

“I love you, Janie. Did I ever tell you that?”

She hadn’t. The two half-sisters never kept in touch. They didn’t have much in common. With twelve years between them, the only thing they shared was an uncommunicative father and a couple of memories from happier times.

“Why’re you acting so weird?”

“I’m in the park. It’s dark, Janie.”

“The park? What’re you doing there now?”

“Swinging.”

One major thing this ridiculous little town lacked was enough streetlights. A town full of shadows. Many other major things were also lacking here. A movie theater. Decent restaurants. People with ambition. Janie wished she hadn’t been forced to spend so many weekends in this place growing up.

She could hear the swing before she could see it. It sounded like a seesaw.

“Hey,” Janie said, sitting down to dangle next to Adonia, who was soaring through the air intently. Feet stretching way up into the sky. Coming parallel with the bar. A sound rang through Janie’s ears: the one the three-year-old version of the teenager sitting next to her made when, years ago, Janie had pulled her way up high on the type of swing that looked like a black rubber diaper. That sound had been exhilarating.

Janie had to remind herself to breathe.

“Adi, slow down.”

Adonia swung her feet from side to side and skidded her white shoes against the gravel. Janie twisted to look at her sister. She was met with an unfocused stare.

Oh. She should’ve known.

“Adonia, are you drunk?”

Adonia straightened herself up.

“No.”

“Really?”

“Maybe...”

Silence.

“Probably.”

“Shit.”

Silence.

“Where’re your buddies?”

“I-un-o. Home? They went home.”

“Why didn’t you go home?”

“I’m swinging.”

Janie compared her sister’s situation to the memory of her own experience, the meter by which all normalcy was measured. Fourteen was young. But she could recall herself at sixteen, corduroy pants around her knees, whizzing on her neighbor’s tulips, belligerently explaining to her friends how pee is an excellent fertilizer. Still, she silently cursed Adonia’s mom for leaving Adonia with their father. How could anyone walk out on someone they *made*?

Kids will be kids. That terrified her. A kind of nostalgia she hadn’t experienced before rose in her. She wished she could start over.

They sat swaying in silence.

“Adi?”

“Yeah?”

A car horn honked somewhere in the distance.

“How’re things with you and Dad?”

Adonia stared at her for a while, then took a flying leap off of her swing and started sprinting across the park. Janie trotted after her.

She should've known better than to attempt to have a heart-to-heart with an intoxicated teenager.

She watched as Adonia's excursion across the field was cut short. Adonia tripped and fell flat on her face and didn't seem to be in a hurry to get back up. She was mumbling as Janie approached, arms stretched towards the heavens, hands opening and closing, like she was trying to grasp something up there.

"Blink. Blink. Blink. Look at all the stars. Blink. Blink. Bliiiiink."

Janie flopped down next to her, stretched out on her back, let the massiveness of the sky come down on her.

"Adi, how much did you drink?"

"Jason did like twelve shots!"

"Yeah? Did you do twelve shots?"

Silence.

"Shots make me sick."

"Whatever, I can do millions of them..."

"Can you now."

"Bliiiiink. Blink. Bliiiiink. Janie! Do you see all the stars?"

"Yeah, I do."

They lay like that for a while. Janie closed her eyes and curled up a bit, draping her arms across chest, mimicked a hug.

"WE SHOULD CLIMB A TREE!"

Janie opened her eyes. "What?"

"A tree! We should climb one. It's *fun*."

Janie hadn't been in a tree for fifteen years, at least. She wondered if it would be different now.

Adonia stared at her with hopeful, blurry eyes.

She sighed. "Alright, okay...let's climb a tree."

Janie pushed on her little sister's butt. So far tree climbing hadn't been all that wonderful. Adonia was having balance issues. And she was taking much longer to reach the first limb than what seemed reasonable to Janie. She gave another push to the rear end hovering in her face and finally Adonia crawled up onto the branch. Janie pulled herself up after her and they situated themselves there. Neither had it in them to try to climb any higher.

"So now what, Adi?"

They stared out into the night. Janie couldn't seem to escape this darkness. Adonia slid over and put her head sloppily on her older sister's shoulder. Janie scrunched her chin back to look at her, then put an arm around the kid sitting next to her.

This moment resembled the idea of sisters Janie kept in her mind. Sisters in a tree. Staring into the darkness. Contemplating. At least they could pretend.

She exhaled slowly through her parted lips. Adonia lifted her head, turned to come face to face with Janie, pointing at her with one fingertip.

"Woah, hey, there," Janie said.

Overwhelming wafts of alcohol reached her nostrils. She tried to pull her face out of the main trail of stench.

"Janie, where do you think my mom is, Janie?"

Janie's stomach lurched. Both their mothers had failed them. "I don't know, Hon. I wish I knew."

Adonia's head fell forward awkwardly, then she moved it heavily back onto Janie's shoulder. She hummed. Cleared her throat.

Then, Adonia threw up all over her sister's legs.

The door slammed behind them. Adonia moaned.

"My head hurts," she whimpered.

"It's going to get worse."

Adonia moaned more. She lowered herself onto the plush, peach-colored carpet by the stairs. Janie collapsed into the butt dent on the faded couch opposite her.

It had been quite a feat to get Adonia back to the house, having to stop several times to repel more poison from Adonia's tiny body, Janie carefully holding back her sister's hair each time.

Adonia's eyes fluttered where she lay on the floor.

"Adi, you can't sleep there."

"Don't worry, Janie, it's *okay*. I want to."

Janie got up off the couch with energy she didn't know she had left, to try to pull Adonia up on her feet again. Putting one arm under each shoulder, Janie heaved. This produced a shriek.

"Leave me alone!"

"Adonia, *shhhh!*"

Janie gave up temporarily and let Adonia slide back down to the floor, where she spread out on her back again.

“What’s all this racket?” Their father appeared at the top of the stairs.

Dread.

“Adi’s sick, Dad. I think she ate something.”

Adonia reeked of puke and alcohol.

“Just go back to bed, I’ll take care of her.”

“I’m up already.”

He walked slowly down the stairs, one step at a time.

“It’s really okay, Dad.”

“Give her some tonic water. It’ll calm her stomach down.”

He lowered his creaking bones to sit on the first step. “Are you alright, dear?”

Adonia moaned the moan Janie had been putting up with since the tree. Their dad pulled his fingers through Adonia’s hair and pushed it gently out of her face.

Janie glanced up at him. A wave of jealousy washed over her. She realized that Adonia had a bond with their father that Janie knew she would never have.

“Dad, I got her.”

He looked worried, gazing down at his youngest daughter. He brushed her hair out of her face once more, then glanced at Janie’s jeans, which were splashed with puke. Janie looked away.

“Alright, then,” he said. “See you in the morning.”

“Night, Dad.”

Adonia moaned again.

Janie lay awake for hours, staring up at the ceiling in the dark. Adonia stirred, sleeping restlessly beside her, her hair frizzed out to all sides. Janie's heart raced.

Early morning light flowed in through the curtains. Janie had gathered her things together, including her filthy pants, carefully folded in an airtight plastic bag. Now she sat in a chair next to the bed, twitching her foot. She hadn't slept more than a few minutes all night.

"Adonia," Janie whispered, "Adi."

"Hm?" she answered, her eyes flickering open.

"Adi, I need to take off, get back. You alright?"

Adonia squinted and readjusted herself. She moaned her notorious moan and brought her palm up to her forehead.

"I'm *never* drinking again."

Famous last words.

Adonia pulled the covers over her face.

"Hey, maybe you can come visit me in the city sometime. Have a girl's weekend."

The younger sister popped her head out from under the blankets.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"My friends are going to be so jealous!"

"Okay, it's a deal, then."

Janie got up, picked up her bag, walked towards the door. An awful cramp had appeared on her left side, just below her ribcage.

She exhaled slowly.

Her sister lay watching her, hand on her forehead, hair all askew. Janie sat back down on the side of the bed.

“Janie, what’s up?”

Adonia stared blankly at Janie, who gazed back at her. She grasped for words, but could find none.

Tears swam to Janie’s eyes.

Adonia, Janie’s little sister, who was fourteen years old with a massive hangover, Adonia, who was absolutely drained, who had stale puke breath and frizzy hair, Adonia, whose mom had just up and left her five years earlier, Adonia, who had, in the not too distant past, graduated from giraffes and pink and purple tigers, she leaned forward and gave her older sister a gentle hug.

Tears couldn’t wait. They spilled out and down Janie’s face.

“Thanks, Adi.”

“For what?” Adonia lowered herself back onto her pillows, wincing, raced her hand back to her forehead.

“Adi?”

“Yeah?”

“I mean it, let’s keep in touch more, okay?”

“Okay. Yeah. Sure.”

Janie smiled at her through her tears.

“Good. Okay, look, I have to go now.” She wiped her face with her sleeve. “Tell Dad bye from me.”

“Sure,” she said, pulling the covers back over her head.

Janie got up again to leave, glanced back before closing the door behind her.

As she walked down the path towards her car, she touched the left side of her stomach, massaging it. She desperately needed to talk to her mother.

End