

My Siblings

It was easy to tell when Maddie felt bored because she liked to roll her eyes. We were sitting outside at a cafe, it was quiet and there was little to say. She told Truckie that she watered her houseplants with cow's milk, that the calcium was good for them like oyster shells in a garden bed. She liked to say things for no reason.

I told him, "She doesn't."

He said, "Do you?"

She said, "Yes, like I said, it's good for them."

She finished her coffee and swirled some remaining drops around in the bottom of the cup. She liked to entertain—not others, but herself. The server came around and gave me a refill. Truckie took a refill too and Maddie waved her hand to say she didn't want one.

At some point my expectations of Maddie became bitter and my attitude was unhelpful.

"Who's watering your houseplants with milk anyways, now that you're gone?" I asked.

"Hey, don't start" said Truckie

"No really," I said to Maddie, "and what about your job? Is Travis going to pay the rent?"

Travis was Madison's idiot boyfriend. He didn't have a job. He didn't have a life. Maddie left him in New London because she thought she wanted to get clean. Travis was probably still on Maddie's kitchen floor where he was when Truckie and I went to pick her up. They lived together in New London. That's where Travis was born and maybe he's still there. Not Maddie though.

She belonged somewhere where she could do her art. That's what Truckie and I were talking about in the car when we picked her up—what would be best for Maddie. Truckie said he was happy she was finally asking us for help, but what was he even saying? He was trying to play the role of good boyfriend, but he was acting like he had never met her. I touched my forehead and closed my eyes. We both knew better than to think she would actually take the help she was asking for.

“Hey,” he said, “we’re just making do.”

Truckie offered to show her this place in Canterbury that he thought she would like.

“It’s in the woods and it has an entire barn in the back you could use as your studio.”

He was really trying to sell her on this one, so I joined in.

“The windows in the dining room face East, so there will be plenty of morning light for your houseplants,” I said.

And I smiled at her because I was just so excited. Truckie pressed hard on my toes with his heel. Sure, I was thinking she’d be better off locked in a closet or stranded at sea. She was an addict. She’d asked for help ten plus times in those past two years, but I’d learned better than to say it.

She said, “I’ll check it out. Should we go today? Can I stay with you two for a couple nights? I should go back to New London to collect my things.”

Truckie drove her to Canterbury and told me to go home, that he could manage without me. I imagined her telling him she loved it. I imagined her leaping around the barn planning the entire layout of her studio. Her easel would go *there*, and Travis’s drum set would go in the corner and maybe they would build a stage because the space was big enough for a set, and there was plenty of parking...their friends would just carpool from

New London and it would be a show. She would turn to the adjacent wall and picture it, closing one eye and using her hands as a frame. She would say, *And my collection will hang here*. Like she called the studio wall in her current apartment, she would call it the *Wall of Discord*.

I imagined it was all a game to her, so it was a game to me too.

“Where is she going to put Travis’s drums?” I asked

Truckie when they got home, and we were in our room.

“How’d you know that?” he said, before telling me the story.

It was classic. She thought, I’ll just go back, gather all my problems and bring them with me, start fresh. So, she stayed with us in Rhode Island for a few nights, she had Truckie follow up with the realtor, and on Friday she took the train back to New London. Well, she called me the next day and told me she’s staying.

She told me it would be too hard for her to find a job all the way in the woods, which was true enough, then she told me that Travis didn’t want to move so far from his friends. I told her I understood, and I did. I understood that she could only briefly entertain the possibility of something different for herself, that in fact she preferred to stay the same. I cried a lot that night.

I remember a time I used to look up to Maddie. Owen is my little brother, he was our brother, and when things would get violent between him and our parents, Maddie would take me in her car to hang out with her friends at the pier. The three of us grew up in a small town in Southeastern Connecticut, our parents paid little attention to the things that mattered, so we could basically do anything we wanted. Maddie is four years older than me.

Owen had less freedom because he was younger and because when he was ten, he had brain surgery. For all his life he's had seizures that happen multiple times a day. Sometimes his memory confuses him, overwhelms him, escapes him. Forever he has felt the absence of his memories like somebody's taken them away. He's told my mom a million times he hates her. He used to threaten her with her life and his own. He used to hit her and scream at her, but now he is older, so some things are different.

One time we were in the kitchen and our mother was making a cake for Owen's birthday. Every year the cake was the same for all of our birthdays. It's called Mississippi Mud Cake, a chocolate cake made with whiskey and served with whipped cream. It used to be my favorite. The recipe is still around, but I doubt anyone would make it. I don't think it would taste good to me anymore.

I was whipping the cream with a whisk and adding sugar to taste. Owen was eleven that day and he was mixing cornstarch with water to make gak. I watched him mix more and more of it together until the bag of cornstarch was almost empty. Our mom took it from him and said, "That's enough."

Owen didn't care. He had plenty of gak. When he squeezed it in his fist it was solid, but when he let go it melted in his hand and he called it *brains*. This is one of few memories I have in which the three of us are spending time together and none of us are angry.

I remember admiring our mother because she looked happy. She was mixing the cake batter then she poured whiskey into her open mouth and that made my admiration subside.

She said, "Last year we used those candles that turned back on when you blew them out, Owen. You were so tricked."

Sometimes she told him things about the past hoping he would recall, but also, she would say it with a tone that suggested she guessed he wouldn't.

He said, "You don't think I remember? I was there. Did you forget that I was fucking there?"

I stopped my whisking, but still held the whisk.

She said, "No sweetie, I know you were there. It's just..."

"It's just that you think I don't remember. You think I don't remember because you think I don't remember anything!" He was getting louder.

"No, sweetie," she said.

"Don't call me that!"

He went over to the butcher block and picked up a knife.

I screamed, "Owen, don't!"

Now our dad was in the room.

"Owen!" he said. Now Maddie was in the room. Our dad grabbed Owen's arm, shook the knife out of his hand and smacked Owen hard across the face so he fell over and he hit his head on the porcelain sink. He was unconscious. My mom held his bleeding head and she was crying.

Maddie said, "Get out! Go! Leave!" and my dad went out of the house. I watched Owen's eyes roll back into his head. His body began to tremble, and he was gargling on his drool.

Maddie took my arm and dragged me out the back and into the parking lot. She pushed me into the back seat of her car and shut the door. She dialed her phone outside and when she got in the car, she put on her seatbelt, pulled out of our driveway and was talking to our mom's sister, our Aunt Stacy on the phone. She used a tone that was flat, "My mom needs your help. Go help her. She's home."

After she hung up the phone we drove in silence. This had all happened before, or variations of it, and Maddie always put me in her car. I didn't look out the window. I didn't close my eyes or rest my head. I didn't twiddle my thumbs. I watched her as she watched the road. She looked both ways before taking a left at the light by our house and when she looked right, she also looked at me. She didn't have to say anything. We both knew that he would probably be okay. He would sleep for a few days like he sometimes would when he had a grand mal seizure. That's what our mom told us it was when his eyes would go back in his head and he would shake, and he would pee himself. Usually they weren't so extreme. Usually he would just fall down and moan and wake up really tired—no gargling, no pee and no trembling. We knew our dad went to the shooting range, and that he would probably stay on his friend Joe's couch overnight. In the morning he would come home, he would fight with my mom, then he would be allowed to stay. Maddie probably felt guilty and scared like I did because we couldn't do anything for Owen.

She still played cassette tapes in her car even though we had iPods. She put in a mixtape that I think her ex-boyfriend made her. It was one of the ones she made a copy of for me even though I had nothing to play it in. She blasted it in her car and thrashed her whole body. She kept looking back at me while she was driving. I know I acted embarrassed, but actually I thought she was really cool. When we got to the pier, she

turned down the volume and cranked down her window. Her friends raised their cans of beer at us as we pulled up next to their cars in the lot. Truckie was her friend before him and I got together.

He stuck his head into her window, looked into the back seat at me and said, “Sup suds! Whatcha doing all the way back there?”

Suds was a stupid nickname he used to call me because one time he made me chug a beer and I threw up all the suds right when I finished. I was in the back seat because Maddie put me there. I don’t know why.

We got out of the car and Maddie shook her head at Truckie.

He said, “Uh oh, that’s okay, we got you.” Truckie already knew most of the situation, and the others, they kind of knew. So, we stayed out until nighttime and they let me drink and smoke weed and cigarettes, and Maddie looked after me. Mostly she clamped her arm around my neck to keep me close. She didn’t mind me doing the regular stuff—I was thirteen—but she pointed to some guys that were standing next to a different car and told me, “don’t talk to those guys, okay?”

It was exhilarating to be hanging out with the older kids, drinking beer and listening to music. Maddie’s girlfriends would sit on my lap and say, “Maddie, can I kiss your brother?”

That really embarrassed me, and it made Maddie say, “Ew.” Her boyfriends would carry me on their backs and sometimes fling me into the freezing ocean. Maddie never acted for a second like she didn’t want me there. Probably all my friends from school were hanging out with their parents.

After high school Maddie didn't go to college. She stayed with me in our parent's house and she was depressed. She stopped inviting me to the pier and she didn't pick me up outside the band hallway anymore. That's when Truckie and I got together. He would pick me up at the bell and we would go to his mom's house. Maddie was usually elsewhere, neither of us spent any time at home and our parents didn't ask. Truckie and I hung out with her sometimes, but mostly she would get very drunk to where she couldn't speak.

I tried to get her to stop drinking, but she told me she knew what she was doing. I was trying to stay her friend as long as possible, so I didn't try harder. We were buddies when she was sober, and she was indifferent to me when she wasn't. One time I had to drag her from the front seat of her car by her hair because she wanted to drive home. She was drunk and screaming and she spit in my face. That's when we started moving in separate directions. Eventually she started hanging out with the guys that used to hang out by the other car. By the time I graduated high school Maddie had overdosed on heroin six times. My parents were hysterical. They occupied themselves by punishing her even more. They stopped giving her money and they kicked her out of the house. She didn't have a home.

One-time Maddie tried to get sober she left Travis, and we spent the weekend with Owen and our mom. We were always doing big projects with her since we were kids. One time we planted a row of thirty linden trees along the stone wall and at the edge of the hayfield behind our house. It took days just to dig the holes, then we planted the trees and covered their roots. Those trees are beautiful now. We planted them for the bees, and they remind me of Maddie. We spent a lot of hours weeding the patio in front of my mom's dentist office—she's a dentist—or moving furniture between our house and our aunt's

house. My mom and my aunt liked to trade couches and rugs and what not, and that was made easy for them by us kids. But this particular weekend we were painting all the bedrooms upstairs. Two of the rooms, Maddie's and my own, were mostly empty and Owen's room we just pushed everything to the middle. We spent a lot of time laughing and I got to see something from my mom I hadn't seen in a very long time. Maddie was going hard with the roller, covering the wall with the color she had chosen, a pale gray. The way my mom looked at Maddie was like she was looking at a beautiful painting or a broken mirror.

She said, "You look so much like my mother."

Maddie looked at our mom and gave her a smile that was like a quiet apology. She let her eyes linger on our mother for a moment, then looked back at the wall and continued rolling more slowly. I think that was my mom's way of telling her that she was proud of her, that there was a line of beautiful, strong women before her who would also be proud. She was seeing the Maddie we all wanted, even Maddie wanted, but she was the girl we couldn't have.

Maddie ditched the house in Canterbury idea, and she died that week. Of course, Travis called me and not my parents. Imagine if he'd called my parents and I wouldn't have had to tell them that she was dead. I knew before I answered. The call shouldn't have been complicated but he made it so.

He said, "Hey man, I'm really sorry-"

I said, "Cut to the chase, you wad," so he did, and I hung up.

I wasn't disappointed in her, but I do feel like she ditched early. That's just me being jaded. I was most angry at her when she was still alive, when she was hanging onto threads but not hanging onto me. I try to forgive her to let her in. I have this feeling like if she is inside me, she is everywhere. But she was so close to dead for so long that after a while I realized it had nothing to do with me, so I forgave her. I don't think any of it is my fault, but I still wonder why I'm here, relatively unscathed. I'm mostly just sad.