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Three Stories about Nuns, One about a Brother

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THREE STORIES ABOUT NUNS, ONE ABOUT A BROTHER

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ABSTRACT

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Creative Writing
“Three Stories about Nuns, One about a Brother”

Chairperson: Kevin Canty

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Abstract Content:
“Compline” - Imitative of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” by Ernest Hemingway
“Long Vigil” - Imitative of “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen
“Hiding” - initially imitative of “Progress of Love” by Alice Munro
“Imitation of Bruno Schulz’ ‘Street of Crocodiles’”
“Merritt #1” Imitation of Michael Ondaatje’s ‘Billy the Kid’”
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Compline

It was two hours before the evening meal and the women from the retreat had left the convent save for a middle-aged woman who knelt in the patch of gold-rose light filtering through the stained glass windows. Late-afternoon dust floated in its path, disappearing at its edges. In the morning there had been thirty-four women in the pews of the chapel for mass. Then a flood of families had come into the lobby. A few women had driven away alone in family vans. While the woman who had stayed praying had been an enjoyable retreatant, if she stayed too long she would be there during Vespers, and the two nuns watching her from the sacristy wanted her to leave.

“She’s the one Dolores found last night.”

“Who?”

“She was lying on the carpet.”

“Before or after Compline?”

“Before Lauds, when Dolores was setting up.”

“Did Dolores ask if she was all right?”

“She said it looked like she was praying.”

“Well, I didn’t see her.”

“Dolores dimmed the lights.”

“She didn’t get up?”
“She didn’t. I was wondering if she would. I suppose she was embarrassed. She was probably hoping not to be seen.”

They stood together at the sink, shoulders touching, one running the chalices and thin, gold communion dishes under lukewarm water, the other drying the vessels with a canvass cloth. One nun was quite old. Her thin, apricot-toned hair was in a manish bowlcut. The other was much younger, with long hair. Through the door, which was held ajar by a piece of black boot cover, they could see the late afternoon sun coming into their chapel in rectangles of light. The blonde wooden pews covered in scratch marks were now empty, as the nuns were used to seeing them, and the chapel was quiet save for the buzz of a stray light in the sacristy that needed to be fixed. All they could see of the woman were her legs coming from behind a kneeler at the far end of the chapel, near where the eucharist was exposed.

“She may not have a husband or anyone picking her up,” one nun said.

“What does it matter how she leaves?”

“I didn’t see any more cars in the driveway. The bus service stops at five.”

They had plugged in an iron. Each day they ironed the priest’s vestments after mass. There was a soft thud in the chapel. The retreatant had come down from her kneeler and was now sitting on the carpet, taking off her shoes while looking ahead at the eucharist, as if maintaining eye contact. After her shoes were off, she laid herself face down on the carpet and stretched her arms out in front of her in a v as if performing some rite.
The older nun walked toward the door and leaned out.

“Are you waiting for someone to pick you up?”

The woman came up out of her pose.

“I just wanted a bit more time,” she said.

“We’ll be coming in for Vespers shortly,” the nun said, then turned away.

“She’ll stay all night,” she whispered to her colleague. “We’ve had them three days. Dolores is tired too. We all need some quiet now. She should have left with the rest of them. It said on their programs the retreat ended at noon.”

The young nun continued ironing. The older nun went up to a salmon pink cupboard from which three green vestments hung. She gestured impatiently for the younger nun to reach a box of kleenex on top of the cupboard. The younger nun set down the iron and complied. The older nun marched to the door with the kleenex box, but slowed her steps as she walked through the door. The woman had resumed her position lying along the ground. The nun placed the box of tissues on top of the wooden kneeler in front of the woman.

“We did say on the program that it all ended after mass,” she said to the woman. The woman looked up at her.

“Oh, I’ll be leaving soon,” she said.
The nun motioned to the box of kleenex, and seeing it was too high for the woman to reach without coming out of her pose, she placed it nearer to her on the fuzzy red fabric on the base of the kneeler.

“Thank you,” the woman said, looking up into the nun’s face anxiously. The nun turned away, walking back into the sacristy. She stood by her colleague.

“She’s weeping,” she said.

“She was crying last night.”

“What is she weeping for?”

“Dolores might know.”

“Did they talk last night?”

“She kept her up until five.”

“Why did she let her?”

“It was perhaps serious.”

“Did she say anything about it?”

“That she was a little bit unhinged.”

“Does she have someone to pick her up?”

“It’s not up to us.”
“She looks unhinged. Do you think she’s about forty years old?”

“She looks fine to me. Just having a difficult retreat.”

“I wish she would go home. We’ve had them here for three days. That’s a lot. Time to get back to things.”

“She’s staying here because she needs to pray.”

“What if she’s considering a vocation? I know what it’s like to have a vocation. It’s not an escape.”

“How do you know she doesn’t have a vocation?”

“She shouldn’t even be thinking of a vocation in the state she’s in.”

“You can’t tell. She might be a much more relaxed person usually. She could be just having an emotional weekend.”

“She has a husband. She was talking about him at dinner. Her husband drinks too much. He refuses to go to AA.”

“I think it might be a boyfriend, or a fiance.”

“I wouldn’t want to be married. Men can really mess things up.”

“Women can too. He might have something to say about her. She sure made herself at home here. Even now. Look at her.”

“I don’t want to look. I wish she would go home. She doesn’t understand that we’re behind on things now. It’ll be a busy week catching up.”
The woman was at the door. A piece of her hair had come out of her ponytail and was hanging out in a loop.

“Only 40 more minutes,” she said, looking up at the clock behind the nuns. “My fiancé’s coming to pick me up. He’s just running a little late.” The nun who was the most exasperated walked over to her.

“We have our vespers in half an hour. Dolores comes to set up beforehand, and it’s meant to be closed to the public.”

“I’ll just stay until Sister Dolores comes.”

“No. She’ll wait for you to leave before she comes in. The retreat has ended.”

The nun turned her little back to the woman and began to shake the ironing board loose. All at once it collapsed.

The woman smiled, still full of gratitude from the retreat, and turned around and walked over to the pew to collect her shoes. The chapel was no longer streaming with light. Now it was dim. It was time to turn on the lights for Vespers. Then dinner, but not in silence, because it was Sunday night, their special dinner. The retreatant sat on one of the pews and laced up her shoes. Then she stood. The nuns watched her genuflect in front of the eucharist. She made her sign of the cross very slowly while not breaking gaze with the monstrance. She turned to the right and exited the chapel.

“Why didn’t you let her stay and pray?” The younger of the two nuns asked. They were checking to see that the ribbons were at the right pages in the prayer books. “There was still time.”
“Our prayers are supposed to be closed to the public.”

“But what is it to us to have one more public prayer?”

“Everything to us. It’s our Rule, something all of us were drawn to, each for our own reasons. We’re not Franciscans.”

“But we’ve prayed with them all weekend. What would it have hurt for her to have sat in once more?”

“She had her time with us last night, lying splayed out on our carpet in the dark. Shameful.”

“But that’s unkind of you to say.”

“It is,” agreed the nun. She did not want to be unkind. She was only tired of the retreatants.

“Maybe you don’t want her to hear your famous singing voice?”

“Are you making fun of me? It’s a joke that’s getting a little old.”

“No, sister. I was trying to cheer you up.”

“No,” said the overtired nun, closing the last prayer book with a clack. “It’s been a long time since I’ve cared what people think of my singing voice. Or cared what people think about me, period.”

“You have community, a comfortable routine, and Christ. You have so much given to you. You said so the other day. Our life isn’t hard.”
“And what about you? You have this too, and are you happy?”

“No, I don’t always feel I have a community, and sometimes I don’t feel anything towards Christ.”

“Come on. Stop talking like that. You’re overtired too. Let’s go.”

“I used to stay late after retreats,” the youngest nun said.

“With the janitor waiting outside the doors for you to the leave, with the organizers sitting in the back pews wishing you’d take a hint.”

“I want to say a prayer for her. She was having a hard time. I think I’ll stay here until you come in for Vespers.”

“We’re two different kinds,” the older nun said. She had gone to the six chairs that were set up for the sisters to sing the Divine Office and was placing a prayer book on the kneeler in front of each. “I suppose because I’m a little older than you I’ve come to appreciate practicality and self-control. I’m wary of emotional women, and we get a lot of them at these retreats. More and more. I’m sorry. I’m just tired of them. People used to approach retreats more seriously.”

“Sister, women come to these retreats carrying a lot of pain. It builds up over time, and this is a place for them to give it all to Christ. That can be emotional.”

“Well, we need to increase our numbers. These women are not the right kind to join us. We won’t keep this place if there aren’t more of us. But, yes, it’s an oasis for women. We get wonderful light in here. It’s quiet and away from the city and people’s jobs and responsibilities. And look at the river now. The water shimmers when the sun’s going down. I’m surprised I’m still affected by it.”
“I’ll see you in a few minutes,” the younger nun said, heading towards the kneeler that the woman had occupied before.

“See you,” said the older nun. She turned on the electric lights for her friend in the alcove where the eucharist was exposed, and walked down the hall to their living quarters, continuing a conversation with herself. It was a retreat for women but it was of course necessary that some practical purpose come out of it. You do not need so much weeping. You needed a practical look at your life so you could listen. Nor should there be women lying on the carpet in the middle of the night working themselves up. There should be a rule: no visits to the chapel past ten, and she’d talk to Dolores about that. It would be best to rest and rise in the morning fresh and with a clear mind.

But what was getting so worked up over? It wasn’t squeamishness, though Dolores might say it was. She couldn’t quite say what it was. Not simple annoyance; something was hitting deeper. There was a time when her voice could get lost in a thick chorus of young voices in the chapel. Now it was just the five of them. But she was tired. It was hard in this moment to care. She frowned and stood in the dining room, pausing with a bag of mint tea draped off her finger so it could steep in the boiling water she’d poured into her usual mug.

“What kept you?” asked Dolores.

“Just talking.”

“You were the one who wanted Grand Silence as soon as they left.”

“Just talking about --” said the nun, but she didn’t finish her sentence. She was trying to think of something, but she’d lost it. She was getting old.
“Come to the computer with me,” said Dolores. “I want to show you my Great Niece. They’ve named her Madison Ray. Madison Ray Kendall.”

She did not follow Dolores down the hall. Dolores was twenty years younger than she was. She had some right not to follow her. She was interested enough in seeing the baby, but it was not right to do these things during the Grand Silence.

“I’d love to see her, but I’ll wait until tomorrow morning,” the nun called after Dolores and walked in the opposite direction along the dark hallway. She disliked retreats and retreatants. The chapel with her five other sisters in Christ was what her life was made up of. Like clockwork, they could be relied on to meet together: 5:15 for Vespers, Compline before bed, shuffling down the dark hallways in their bathrobes, Dolores in front with the flashlight, for Lauds as the day broke. It was their Rule. Now, she would go rest in her room. She would close her door and not think of the retreatants or any of these outside people. She would lie on her bed and finally, with no one speaking, she could rest her eyes until she heard the bell. She would try to get up for the bell, but sometimes it was hard. After all, she thought to herself, it’s probably just exhaustion. And this is how it was. She knew the pattern. It comes and goes. You feel God’s presence, and then other times you don’t.
Long Vigil

I stand listening. What my son has said makes my knees heavy, and I want to lie down. The coverlet on my bed is an indistinct color in the light from the window.

There is thumping downstairs, the grandchildren playing, and I guess from a creak at the landing that my son is standing at the door. A jingle; he is patting his pants for keys.

“She didn’t know what she was deciding back then. You let her ruin her life.” Then he’d turned his back on me and walked down the stairs, as if bored now, having finally said it.

Yet how could he understand. He doesn’t try to now. He has a new life with his wife and kids, he likes to think.

Downstairs Bruce is pulling his toy truck back and forth over the radiator. Think of all that’s underneath it: the bobby pins and strands of hair and pennies from the family over the years.

She was my first child. In late February, the second semester of grade eleven, I went into labor. For three years I stayed out of school.

At the hospital, I lay on my gurney with cold, tingling feet, shielded from foot traffic by four canvas sheets stapled along the walls. A dark-haired couple stood somewhere behind the sheets: the man was tall and wore a suit; his plump wife was in a wheelchair. They’d come in to wish me good luck.

I took the epidural. My mom and two aunts stood over me and watched as I pushed and grunted. My daughter might have gone to the dark-haired couple. Her life would have been different. Would she have been the same person? She would not have gone to the convent. I would not give my daughter away, though I did not instantly love her. Just instantly owned her.
It wasn’t until two days later when my mom was down in the hospital parkade arranging our bags that I looked into my daughter’s face and felt it could be love. At the last minute, so I could say it happened at the hospital. I had heard a soft pop. My daughter’s small white face was turned up to mine, her mouth open, and a bubble of saliva expanded and retracted as she breathed. I thought: what if she were to open her eyes just now. Then the bubble popped and she opened her eyes. When my mom came to take her out of my arms to put her in her basket seat, she was surprised that I hesitated letting her go. She gave me a grim smile. It was the first moment I felt I was grown up.

She was my first child and so was the most surprising. She was born with jaundiced skin and black hair on her arms and legs that later turned downy in the sun and then, when she was a toddler, disappeared. A little milk came out of her left nipple on the second day while I was napping, which they say happens every once in awhile to babies. No one noticed the daily changes but me, in my basement bedroom, with the family gone all day. It was only I who paid such close attention to the slackening of her expression, the sudden, startling smiles during sleep, how her eyes were drawn to light, no matter the room. Then it seemed all at once, though it had been only a month and a half, that my mother was holding her in the kitchen saying what lovely skin, and I realized that the white pimples were completely gone and her skin was no longer jaundiced.

No one but I knew her all those years she sought a friend and would sit on the stoop next to me and cry, seeing the neighborhood girls playing on the sidewalk close to our house, but when they called out to her, how she’d burrow her head into my side and sob louder. You did not feel the weight of her in your arms before laying her down into the car seat or endure the band of sweat on your breasts where her body had pressed, nor did anyone but I feel the weight of the
seven bags of groceries hanging off the arms in tight bands, but still I walked across the parking lot without falling, without setting her down. You did not hear her crying in the early morning or see her slim body wriggling spasmodically in her sheets, though it had been a happy day and I’d done so much to make it nice, and when asking what was wrong, she turned her back, tense and tiny as a dog’s, and put her dripping nose up against the plaster of the wall to cry harder as if to provoke. She would not utter a word that made sense. Nothing made sense in the middle of the night, nor was remembered clearly in the morning. It is only now that I try to remember what she was saying. Perhaps there were clues. The arms grow heavy again. Useless light is wasted on the bed sheets in this room I am standing in.

We listened to soothing music that bored me: Chopin, Debussy. I wanted my usual stations but resisted turning the knob. When I had her brother I was 19 years old. I listened to music all day from the radio on the counter at the Kwick Mart. It made time pass faster. Everything had changed then. There was always noise after I picked up the kids and brought them into the house.

Why do I say this as if to convince someone? And anyway, a mother’s love is expected.

She was my first child. I would walk the blocks to my parents’ house pushing her in a simple canvas stroller, her bum sagging halfway to the sidewalk and her chubby legs tan, a white band along her ankle behind the darling sandal. She was a companion to me, but the nights in my apartment were long. I was tired, but because I was seventeen, I would not sleep, spent too many hours at night watching television, calling friends during commercials. My daughter was asleep in my arms and my body was tired. I wanted to go lie in my bed. That would mean getting up, but I didn’t want to wake her. I would only sacrifice her waking if the phone rang and it could perhaps be a friend.
When she was two years old I met a man who could be a boyfriend. I kept a piece of us apart from him because admiration was lacking in his eyes when he looked at my daughter. After I got pregnant for the second time, my parents loaned me money to get me started in another town, away from my crowd.

After we left Don, Mark kept saying how much he missed him, so we joined Big Brothers. Who should be assigned to us but a man I’d met two years before at a prayer group. I’d liked Steve at once: a tall, shy mechanic from Pennsylvania. He hadn’t said a word to me then and said very little at our door when he came to pick up Mark, but Mark came home saying Steve had bought him a jumbo box of popcorn and played catch with him on the field between innings, that he thought he might like him, he really thought he did, and that Steve would call again, and Steve did. I was 25, Steve was 43. He still claims that because of my age he didn’t think it was possible that I might think of him in a romantic way until the night I invited him over for spaghetti and put the kids down right after dinner.

My daughter was eight then. Her complaints were reminding me of the drudgery of my own schooldays, the anxiety-riddled sleepovers, how the kids who laughed loudest kept the rest of us up too late at sleepovers, caused us to have to stay in at recess, and if we were outside, got us trapped in uncomfortable, barbaric snowball fights or, in the summers, games of red rover that made you want to tear your hands away, but you couldn’t, you were always trapped.

And even having known the misery myself, I believed she would find a friend. I thought she might have the sunny childhood Steve spoke of. He liked us all sitting together for an after-school snack. He would place grapes or toast with nutella or pizza pops cut in quarters on two plates for the children, and we’d sit down across from them. He’d ask, “Tell us a few good things about your day.” Sometimes I was so happy I laughed behind my hands as if I were making fun
of the whole thing. But really I couldn’t believe my luck, how in love I was, and it was good love -- clear, strong love that made you feel good waking up in the morning, not remorseful -- and it is still this way. Lasting love.

There was Teresa, the daughter of a friend from church. I knew she didn’t think too much of my daughter. My daughter must have understood this too. The night she was asked over for a sleepover, she begged, “I don’t really want to go, Mommy” right in front of her outside the front doors of the church. That was terribly embarrassing, and I wanted to make up for it. That was one mistake I made, a moment when I was not loyal to my daughter, did not believe in her like I should have. I was relieved that snub-nosed Teresa, who was below her, had agreed to behave toward her as a friend.

My daughter lay on her back in the lower bunk bed, pleading with me. She dug her fingers into the worn flannel bed sheets as if I had the strength to pull her off the bed, wailing “Mommy, I’m sick. I don’t want to go.” She writhed to the side, exposing the light brown hair at the nape of her neck, which had become damp in her protest. She looked at me again. Her face was flushed, panicked, and blotchy. “I have a stomach ache. Ow, I’m going to puke.” And when I scolded her for not having her pajama and toothbrush ready, she sat up straight on the bed and said, “Mom, I’m really sick. I’ll go next weekend. I promise! Please, please.” Then she said, “I want to stay here with you guys, I don’t want to go.” Seeing my face, she turned away, clutched her stomach and shrieked, “Steve! Steve! Steve!”

She so rarely protested. I think of Mark at that age, how his face would darken and there was no getting in, how he had the instinct so early -- at three, four years of age -- to shut his door and demand that Steve and I not open it. Perhaps because he was railing against two.
Steve would say to me in his good-natured way, “Why did you make her go? She doesn’t ask for much. You should listen to her when she asks for something.” Was I not listening? Not watching? Maybe I was not watching. But I remember so much.

My daughter’s face in childhood was discerning, dissatisfied. It was hard to find friends. So who turned that face so bright? My son complained when she was grown and at the convent about the yogurt containers past their expiration dates and the stale, donated muffins and how it was too chilly in the night when we visited her past September and the salmon pink blankets that remind one of fibreglass, but he’s forgotten how at the convent she stood laughing in a circle in the kitchen with her friends telling a story; they placed their hands on their long skirts and and bent their heads down, laughing harder and with more freedom than she ever did when she lived in our home.

Where does it come from, that looseness? It was the opposite when she first found God, back from the summer retreat with the sisters. Steve was new in our house, and perhaps not to offend she confided in him when he knocked on her door at night and asked if he could sit down. She didn’t talk so often to me then. This was not our time. But when she had her first menstrual cramps, she let me rub her stomach. Other nights I would sit and listen to them talk from where I had been banished, in the living room, with a book or remote control on my knees. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I knew Steve would tell me later when we were in bed. It was the occasional rumble of this kind man’s voice I listened for when he went to talk with my daughter in her bedroom, not the squeaking, frantic sounds of my rather silly daughter. It was not until we left for the month in Europe with Ralph and Lorraine, Teresa’s parents, that my daughter began preferring me again to Steve, calling me too often and complaining if we had moved hotels and not called to let her know.
“We shouldn’t be here without you guys, mom. It’s selfish,” though she was fourteen, her brother ten, and they were in school, that’s why we’d picked September. Our neighbor Flo stayed with them until bedtime. I’d be sitting on the balcony of my vacation rental overlooking a six-hundred-year-old water fountain, active still, bicycles weaving in and out of tourists listening to her go on about how Flo made tuna sandwiches without mayo. I did hear in her voice that she was truly distressed. So I called Flo and asked if she might add the mayo or perhaps change over to peanut butter, not an easy thing to ask. My daughter cried on the phone the next time I talked to her. “They’re so soggy now. My finger goes right through the bread and makes a hole.”

The time after we came back, when I found my daughter with her forehead against the plaster on the wall and I went over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, she let out a shudder as if she had been waiting all this while for someone to touch her right there, and she said, “Mom, I don’t want to be at school. I want to be closer to Christ.”

Then she told me how when I had been away with Steve in Europe she would put the blankets up over her face because she knew a man was sitting on her bed. She said she could feel exactly when he sat down: it made her bedsprings bounce. He would never touch her; he just sat watching her. One night it got too hard to breathe where she was hiding her face. She poked her head out of her covers and saw Christ. She had known all along it was him. Seeing him there, she was no longer afraid, though she thought it better that he go. Then he disappeared and did not return.

She was in tenth grade. She walked the six blocks home from the high school so she didn’t have to have lunch in the school cafeteria. I read her diary. She was writing love letters to Christ. At times while Steve and I were watching TV she would nudge us forward and lay her long body behind our heads at the top of the sofa, against the wall.
The nuns persuaded me over the phone to send my daughter to their boarding school, where she could work on her relationship to self and to Christ while earning a high school diploma in the US. Every few years a girl from the more religious families in our parish will still go there for her schooling. Many have come back and married or attended university; you see them at weekday mass at noon at the cathedral. One notes the influence of the school in the length of their skirts, the number of kids they go on to have and the way they keep their eyes on the altar once the Liturgy of the Eucharist has begun.

The school’s in a brick mansion. A bright white statue of Mary oversees a rose garden. In the hallways, girls travel in beaming packs. When you talk to these girls on the phone, conversation is sometimes formal and strained. Administrators read letters from family and friends first “so as to monitor influences as we are charged with their care.”

There was a tall, red-headed girl who my daughter told me was her best friend. But she was expelled early on, in April of my daughter’s first year there, because of an incident with one of the international girls, someone from the Phillipines who spoke very little English.

Our daughter called once a week. “We went out and did mission work before mass.” “We asked people in the neighborhood to give the church another chance.” “We went for ice cream and there was a Baptist youth group there. We all held hands in a circle and prayed. It was cool.” Now that the redhead had been expelled it was no longer one friend, instead a group of friends. “We’re really getting into volleyball. We might play in the regular league with other high schools. On Friday we got to see The Titanic.”

That first year, we begged the nuns to let her come home just for a few days over Easter. Her brother was playing an important hockey tournament and was not adjusting well to her
absence. They did not allow it. “Through experience we have found that the first year can be too hard when there’s a lot of family influence. Attachments need to be made here.”

There was a night when her breaths came staccatoed over the phone and she wept. She was so far away. I felt helpless.

I asked to speak to the head nun. There was a long wait, nearly twenty minutes. “She’s worked up,” Sister Margarete said when she finally picked up the phone. I could not discern whether her voice sounded kind or unkind. “It will pass. I’ve seen this play out over and over again. Just trust us,” and three days later -- it was a Wednesday, a surprise, for she was only to phone Sundays -- our daughter called to tell us she had been given permission to talk as long as she wanted. She was feeling better now. They’d won a volleyball game. She was learning to sew a wrap-around skirt in Home Economics.

“At St. Rita’s, our most important rule is the rule of charity,” the brochure had explained. How different from a regular high school. If one was caught gossiping, one was put on dish duty at St. Rita’s. She had been a frequent dish washer the months after her redheaded friend’s departure. She had taken that badly. But she had been a model student since.

In the summers she came back to us. Her first days home, she seemed happy and open, but then she would begin pushing us away. We were too eager. We clamored. Steve stood at her bedroom door asking if she’d like to play tennis far too early in the morning. She began sleeping in. She had no appetite.

Oh, she had a way of brightening up for the women at daily mass who had sent her letters and if Father Bill took us into the rectory for a plate of cookies to ask about the school, but in the car on the ride home, the expression closed, the answers to my questions became short, until we were riding the last block to the house in silence.
She complained she was fat, and cupped her stomach into her hands when sitting on the sofa. “It’s like I’m pregnant,” she said, and would not believe that it’s normal for the stomach to bulge out when one sits down and there’s no woman safe from this. When I sat beside her, I felt her eyes on my front. She developed acne on her forehead, so that it turned a purple-red and glistened. I tried to help her with this, begging her to keep her bangs clipped to the side so as not to spread oil. Perhaps I shouldn’t have done this. I always saw her thoughtful, deep, blue eyes first. Through all her phases. I should have told her that. When she wore a dress for church, Steve always said she looked nice, even though she’d look away angrily.

She returned to her old loneliness. She lay in bed. She ignored Teresa’s calls. She understood it was just Teresa’s mom Wendy being nice. My daughter’s depressiveness no longer disturbed me.

There was that friend she loved especially, the girl with the red hair. On the rare afternoons she’d let me rub her back, she’d tell me about her friend with the red hair. She had smoked cigarettes with her at the pond on the property next to the school grounds every day during Recreation. I knew from her voice that my daughter had been a little in love in ways that I’d been in love too with older girls, my babysitter Martine, for instance, who told me I had perfectly feminine ankles, but scorned my cd collection, which was made up only of decades of dance hits. My parents had bought me them for Christmas, but I’d asked for them. I had no money to buy the cds she recommended to me. My daughter told me about the day her friend’s cigarette pack fell into the water. She and her friend had tried to dry the cigarettes on a sunny patch on a rock. Only two cigarettes were saved, and that’s when my daughter admitted to her friend that she hated the taste of cigarettes. She admitted it because she wanted her friend to be able to enjoy both her smokes and not waste one on her. Then another girl had been invited to
come with them the next day, the Filipino girl who’d told them during gym she’d used to smoke cigarettes at home.

The happiest days of our summers were when my son would sleep in too late to hear any calls coming in from friends. My kids would come out onto our back deck, sleepy-eyed and hoping to be served omelettes and orange juice, and if Steve were off work, we’d form teams of doubles for Rummy, playing for hours. I would fix a pitcher of iced tea, and once we ordered pizza, which we rarely ever did. We had to watch our money back at that time because of the boarding school and sports fees. But Steve and I were so grateful to have what we wanted most. The kids, of course understanding our mood perfectly, joined forces and convinced us to order the pizza.

Those were some of the last moments of closeness between my kids. I have not made much mention of it until now, that formality that grew between them over the years, the wrangling I had to do later to have them talk to each other on the phone or to encourage my adult son -- he should not need convincing -- to go make a trip to see her at the convent.

I see the widening of intimacy that happens in other sisters and brothers too, children of my friends. It’s not something anyone makes much fuss about. But I consider it a terrible moral corrosion, the loss of intimacy between sisters and brothers. I had never predicted their separation, never thought to find ways to put a stop to it. Three years’ difference is not so much among siblings, nothing when they are older. I did not have Mark at a happy time in my life but I was glad my daughter would have a sibling. My parents were sickened by what I had done, getting pregnant again when I knew full well the consequences. I was 19. My son Mark had such a hard time when his sister left for the boarding school. Now I can see he understands his wife and son, a new child on the way, to be his closest kin.
He was in grade seven and very tough in other ways, but he would walk into his room and close his door and not come out for a good half an hour after talking with her on Sundays, and when we said the family rosary and it was the fifth decade and I had not yet offered up an intention for her, he’d say in a voice full of strange bitterness, “You forgot about her. Nice. Good job, Mom.”

I was glad for my daughter’s physical removal from the girls at the high school. I would sit in the bleachers at his basketball games and watch Teresa and her friends: their eyes flitting down to their phones while some girl’s enthusiastic talk trailed off self-consciously. Always looking up the bleachers or across the gym to find someone they wondered about more. How could my daughter have endured it, who wanted to be married to Christ? How could she have explained this to girls like these and have been accepted?

The house has become quiet these days. It is too big for us. My son is pressuring us to downsize, to get a small condo just for me and Steve.

He comes up the stairs, a few at a time, with my grandson in his arms. I can hear him murmuring something to his son. They’re in the room now. The child is looking into my face with fretful expectancy.

“Hold him for a bit?” my son asks and hands him over. The little body wrapped about my hips is hot and clammy. I walk over to the dresser and point to the framed pictures.

“Who is this?” I ask.

“Aunty,” he says, but his expression is blank. I want to give his pampered bottom a whack.

“Your aunty loves you.”
I must look too stern because he wriggles in my arms and cranes backwards to be put
down, and when I set him on the floor, he goes over to the bed to slam his chest into the mattress,
looking up at me dully, just as his dad used to do.

I was giving her an out. Why wouldn’t I have let her escape from teenage life? She asked
me for this and I hadn’t thought things through. I should have considered her nature. She wasn’t
like the other girls at the convent, she was never light and easy-going. Of course it would be
more natural for her than for them to want to stay there. Of course it would be more her nature
than those other girls to find solace in the church.

There seemed so little time to think things through. It was the time in the life of my
family where the world outside was taking over. There were hockey tournaments, basketball
games, conversations over the phone from eleven until twelve each Sunday, packages to be sent,
monthly bills for boarding. There were the movies with Steve, there were the dinner dates,
racquetball practices, the couple's prayer group with the Mulroney's and Fitzpatricks and the
Allens.

And then she flew back to tell us some news. She had been scouted to try out for the
Junior Olympic volleyball team. What a marvel. Her red-haired friend’s dad, a coach at the
nearest college, surfacing at the right time.

The right place, the right time, and an utterly surprising turn of events. Mark and his
friends did bottle drives every weekend for two months so she could go to the camp. The church
and high school were behind her. They collected seven hundred dollars. Steve and I took out a
loan. We sent our daughter to the camp in Baltimore. We gave up our June visit with her to do
so. Then, the first week of school, the nuns excused her so she could come to us for a short visit
and there she was coming up the walkway, face clear of acne, a relaxed slope to her shoulders,
chewing gum. When she stood at our kitchen counter and reached for a glass, I stared at a gorgeous dip in her lower back I’d never seen before as she reached for a glass and I couldn’t help myself; I came behind her and put my arms around her middle and squeezed her in a hug, and she let me squeeze. She gave a proud snort and pretended to sort through the glasses in our cupboards to find the right one.

She was asked to speak at Mark’s high school pep rally on the first day of classes. She let me straighten her hair. Cheerful, removed. In the car on the way there, I asked if she wanted to say a prayer together and she said no thanks, it would probably be better to go through her notes. I stood at the back of the gym, sheltering myself at the side of the bleachers behind a group of tall boys so that none of the teachers or my son or my daughter would look at my face as she spoke. I didn’t trust my face. I didn’t quite believe she would pull it off. Maybe in this case I let her down once again, but this time she was victorious. I felt dizzy and sick when I heard her being called to the podium. She was wearing sneakers with her long skirt. I hadn’t been able to convince her to wear more appropriate footwear. Her straight, shiny hair was held tightly in a headband. She was introduced as Mark’s sister and a friend to many at the school, one of the city’s young stars, someone who could speak about the power of drive and resilience. I looked down when she went on about Jesus. But the boys in front of me didn’t snicker. There was a pause, and then the gym erupted into thunderous clapping and hooting. Mark was sitting on the gym floor at the foot of the bleachers with his homeroom class. A boy to his side was flicking him with an elastic, and he leaned away from him, shielding his body with his hands, but I could see how he was keeping his lips rigid so an embarrassed, proud smile wouldn’t break out on his face. I’ll never forget that roaring, stamping crowd.
Then in January they pulled her out from the convent and she spent a year living in a dorm with other athletes, doing all her classes by correspondence.

My daughter calls from the bedroom next door. It is two-thirty in the afternoon and yet she is still in bed. My grandson and I walk into her room; I’ve got him on my hip. The room smells musty. I go to open the blinds at the side of the bed, then hold my grandson toward her; he reels back to me.

“Aren’t you going to do anything with your day?” I ask. She is very overweight. She has been living in the house for four years, and I’m afraid some days when I walk into my own home and it is silent. I call for her and hear nothing.

She has a lovely face, but she has lost her faith, and there is a slinky self-disgust in many of her expressions and movements. She is reading a book. What book, I ask, and she raises it up for me to see, grimacing: *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It’s from my bookcase. I read it during some very difficult years, after she had broken her leg and was involved with that girl. I’ve noticed she’s been reading through our books. Last week it was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. She is running out of things to do since she has stopped making trips out of the home, even to the library or to church. She is a thirty-four year old woman who is in a lot of trouble. There’s no pulling her out of herself. She is too heavy. The air, this close to the bed, is sour. I crank the window open. There is bright sun today and it’s high enough in the sky that our backyard tree is not shielding the light from my daughter’s face, and there’s nothing she can do to resist this small gift from nature; even if she were to close her eyes it would be bright orange and colours would dance inside her lids; she would still be warm; and for this I am thankful. Small moments like these have become spiritual for me.

“Sometimes it helps to just get up and shower,” I say.
She stares at me as I place my grandson on the floor. He is quiet now, holding onto my pant leg and staring at his aunt with two fingers in his mouth.

My daughter’s eyes narrow into slits. “You want me to get married and be out of here.”

I don’t say it but my aspirations for her have fallen lower.

She has been talking this way. She is angry at me these days. Both my children are so resentful of me. But because I have been her advocate all day, first with her brother, then with myself, I have less patience now.

“I wouldn’t trust you to be married. You have no idea of the sacrifice. You’ve no idea what I’ve sacrificed for you.”

I will never turn her out of this house. I tell my friends only about how she makes me laugh, which she does do sometimes. They ask after her all the time, “And how’s your daughter?” genuinely believing that this might be the month she turns herself around.

Two nights ago around sunset, our summer dinner hour, she rose out of bed to the smell of tomato sauce simmering on the stove. We heard creaking in the bathroom, then a roar of water. She likes her evening baths. We were just serving up but we paused.

Steve walked cautiously to the bathroom door.

“Will you have dinner with us tonight?” he asked.

There was a long pause in which both of us braced ourselves.

“Sure,” my daughter said from behind the door. Steve came back into the kitchen to cover the pots. I poured us each a glass of white wine and followed him into the living room. He put on a Tom Waits album. Almost an hour later, our daughter finally came to the dining room table, a purple towel wrapped around her anxious, bloated face. Her forehead and chin were shiny, her temples still wet from drawing back her hair. But I saw that she had put some blush on
for us, not the right colour for her, a purplish pink, wet and pasty on her skin. My heart beat slow and painfully for her. Steve said, “You look nice,” and went over to the stereo to turn down the music a little. I wanted to get up and hold her, rock her back and forth. Instead I sat down at my place at the table, eyes lowered, hoping to not provoke. Steve came back from the living room and pulled out a chair for her, placing a hand on her shoulder quickly before going back to the kitchen to make up her plate. She tilted her chair back like she was a teenager and looked out the window behind my head.

She agreed to watch a documentary series with us after dinner, which was about wildlife in Costa Rica. I made us all peppermint tea and brought it in on a tray to the living room. We watched three episodes back to back until it was pitch black outside. We rose in comfortable silence. Steve and I brought the tea cups into the kitchen and listened to our daughter’s slow, laboured steps down the hallway, into the bathroom. We heard the thump of the drawer below the sink. She left the bathroom not having brushed her teeth. She closed the door to her bedroom. I walked by to say goodnight, but the lights were off already. She was lying in the dark; she would not be able to sleep very soon, I thought, as she’d slept most of the day, but I’d given her what I could. I’d give her more if she’d take it. I’d give her everything.
I got a call from my sister when I was on the bleachers watching my daughter’s basketball game. I kept my eyes fixed on my daughter a moment longer before picking up. She was finally taking a shot, her arms worryingly pale and fragile. She was just getting over pneumonia and had lost ten pounds. It made her look younger. It made her more reliant on me. It was late April. The bleachers were half empty. Girls’ athletics. My daughter’s shot has a notoriously high arc to it. This time I got to see the ball swish through the hoop and the man behind me say, “Great shot,” as I brought the phone up to my ear.

My sister was so formal with me. She had been for years. I could hear the set nervousness in her voice as she asked if I was going to put in an order for any butter lambs for Easter. She had forgotten to ask how my daughter was. I hadn’t talked to her since January, but I knew she’d heard about the pneumonia through Mom.

“We’re going to have to pass this year. We may be travelling if Shannon’s team makes provincials. How are you?”

“Well —” my sister said, and then there was a quick silence. This is how she’s always been with me — rather private, but wanting, or feeling obligated, perhaps, to share. “—I’m leaving.”

I knew that leaving meant to come back into the world. And for a second I imagined her at the bottom of the bleachers looking up at me, figuring out how to weave through the people, a heavy purse over her shoulders like the rest of the women walking up, wearing jeans. The word leave set off in me a feeling of relief as well as dread — what you feel when a door you’ve been trying to push open suddenly gives, and you have to now do the thing you set out to do. I’d
brought up the subject over the years, mostly for selfish reasons. I really wanted her around. I had given up because, far from being dissatisfied with her life as a nun, my sister had seemed happy. She never felt she belonged with anyone but God, she’d told me once. She’d taken the first of her vows at twenty-one.

“I just came off a ten-day retreat to discern,” she said.

“Did you tell Mom and Dad?”

“No.”

“Where were you? The house in Washington?”

“No. There’s this place in Rhode Island. Where I did the retreat last Easter.”

My daughter was sitting on the bench next to her coach, her eyes on the court. There was a space between her and the rest of the girls. The three nearest her were laughing. Her best friend Monique reached over and touched her on her bare shoulder, glistening with sweat, and said something. My daughter didn’t turn to her but kept her eyes on the game.

“I can’t believe you’re sure,” I said to my sister.

“You go through periods when you don’t feel in love. I know to expect that. But this feels different. I’m not sure, of course. But it’s time to leave.”

My daughter was lining up with a teammate to go back on to the court. Her coach scooted forward in his wheelchair, tugged quickly at her shorts. She leaned down. A whistle shrieked. He patted her once on her leg and she was jogging off. She looked up at me quickly, the first time all game; then, when I waved and smiled encouragingly, she looked away.

My sister was quiet on the line, waiting for me to encourage her, to remind her, as I had so many times, that coming out of the convent gave her an opportunity to start her life fresh over — a unique scenario, really, in ones early 30s, an opportunity I was certainly jealous of. To step
back out into the world as a woman, fully formed, with nothing but the skin on your bones and your soul: my sister had always done things different than the rest of us.

When we were kids, my sister wrote in her journal every night. Of course I read what she wrote. My mom did too. We felt it was our right. But soon even looking at that journal sickened me. She was writing to Christ. We never talked about God between the two of us, and then being faced with this: *I want to dedicate my life to you. I love you so much it feels like my heart will burst. I know I won’t ever be happy unless I am only yours. I want NOTHING, NO ONE else.*

These were the kind of notes some pug-nosed girl in a headband with a nasal voice would write to Christ. Not my sister. I had always thought my sister to be aloof — but she was aloof towards people, it turned out, not towards God.

In grade nine, she started sneaking out to early morning mass with my mom before school.

“*What?*” she’d ask me if I stared too accusingly when she got back in. Or I’d wake up to the sounds of her spoon clinking against the cereal bowl in the kitchen and her murmured conversation with mom. They’d been to mass, and it never ceased to put them in good spirits.

Days she went to mass with mom were special days. My mom would even be in a good mood after school was over because she’d brought one of her daughters to mass that morning.

She’d walk the three blocks with me to school, where whatever promises she’d made to Christ the night before must have been torturous to realize. At lunch, while I sneakily passed my old friends — pockmarked girls with babyish morals, I now felt — and sat next to my new boyfriend, one of three drummers in our school band and a move-up socially for me, my sister walked the three blocks home to heat up leftovers and have lunch by herself, reading the funnies in the paper and sometimes turning on the TV to catch the end of *Passions.* (But I wasn’t missing
out on much, she assured me. *Days of Our Lives* is more believable. Weird things are happening on *Passions. Possessions. Exorcisms.*)

My sister didn’t go out on weekends. She had friends from elementary school who still called, but I never saw her call them. Or she’d agree to go to a movie or for a walk down by the river but come home glum and lie down in the living room and watch me and my mom and dad move about the house. Weekends when I went out, Laura rented movies with my parents. If I’d come home early, I’d find her sitting between Mom and Dad on the couch with a bowl of popcorn on her lap, looking childish and indulged.

The kind of life my sister led in high school is hiding. But I would allow my own daughter to hide. Sometimes I wonder if I don’t encourage it, now that Charles has moved into a bachelor suite behind the Safeway and it’s just us and so much more comfortable. Even if you walk down the halls seen by nobody, or graduate high school not once having expected so much as a kiss, the upside is you get to come out with your dignity preserved, and there are a lot of years ahead of you to have those romantic experiences. It didn’t feel that way at the time.

I’m quite sure my sister had never even kissed anyone before making her vows. We had a party for her before she left. None of her old friends from elementary school were invited. None of the youth group people either — she was too embarrassed. She was twenty-one. She had no idea how pretty she was. Tall, straight brown hair — thinner but lighter than mine — hanging down to her lower back, a slimmer waist than mine. I got the stockier build — from mom. Athletic was how my dad put it. Laura wore the same dress most days, a simple dress she’d found on a sale rack at the mall. She’d liked the dress enough to have bought it in two colours: maroon and moss green, and both suited her in different ways. The fabric was made of a soft jersey and clung to her body, showing its shape, though I don’t think she knew that at the time.
and I never said anything. I didn’t have the words. The cut was modest. It had a wraparound tie at the middle. It was exactly her. Maybe that’s how I would have put it then.

There were about fifty guests at her going-away party. Mom borrowed white catering tables from the church. Normally it was fifty bucks to use them, but Mom had done a lot of volunteering at St. Francis Xavier over the years and so the church didn’t charge us. We put the church tables out on the backyard lawn and soon they were covered in dishes people had brought over. Green jello salad with pink and yellow mini marshmallows wobbled above a tarnished silver tray we carried from the kitchen to the back yard. We served minced ham sandwiches made with sweet store-bought white bread, cut in quarters with the crusts lobbed off, a crock pot full of pulled pork, a few competing trays of perogies from different families. Yellow lemonade in our big glass bowl with the diamond-shaped pattern. Some relatives drove in to say goodbye, though we weren’t close with our relatives. A few neighbors drifted over to the house, let themselves in through the front gate.

There were three priests in attendance. I remember because I was embarrassed. Also there were two monks from St. Peter’s Abbey in their brown robes and white sneakers, embarrassing too. My sister had been driving up to St. Pete’s for solo discernment weekends and had become quite close with them as she had been invited to eat her meals at their table in their farmhouse. They made their own bread, she’d told us, at the height of her admiration for the monastic lifestyle. Our favorite neighbor Wilsa stood in our kitchen the whole time, refusing to come out, saying to whoever came into the kitchen get something, “This is terrible. Honestly, it’s as heartbreaking as a teenage wedding.”

We drove 18 hours to drop off my sister at what was called the motherhouse. This was a stately, red-brick, three-level building at the end of a long street lined and shaded by arbors. The floors
and much of the furniture were in a rich mahogany. Thick drapes hung over the windows. The nuns kept non-essential lights off so that when you entered the vestibule even in the middle of day you were standing in a kind of darkness.

It was much more comfortable once you got past the front room. The kitchen and dining room at the back of the house was where much of the life was. The dining area was surrounded by four bay windows that let in sun, even in winter. A long table was set at all times for the next meal. There was a side table with a bunch of salt and pepper shakers lined up two by two beside a series of sugar bowls and a black CD player that they played classical music out of during the usually-silent evening meal. They kept an industrial-sized aluminum canister full of boiling water on this same table, and there always seemed to be one or two ladies with open, serene expressions standing around, waiting for the tea to steep. Sometimes these women were retreatants, but most of them were nuns with short, assertive hair cuts and healthy glowing faces. Usually there were 15 to 20 nuns living on the premises. My sister was the only novice.

When my daughter Shannon was young, I’d overhear her bragging to friends about the packets of cocoa powder they had for kids at the motherhouse. She’d boast about all the empty retreat rooms. My sister would lead her down the halls. My daughter would poke her head into all the doors of the empty rooms comparing the colour of bedspreads. She’d go running up to the windows to consider the view, and then she’d get to choose which room to sleep in herself, and I’d be put up in the adjoining room. When she was seven, eight, this was her only chance to get away from me.

When my daughter hit her pre-teens, I had to get used to her making fun of this same place. “Let the trees clap their hands,” she’d say, prancing around our house, suitcase already open in the living room and her clothes strewn around. “Let the trees of the fields clap their
hands!” Sitting in the back seat of my car, spreading her long legs out over her friend’s knees and jostling the door handle unnervingly with her foot, she’d go on about how she’d had to eat expired yogurt for five days. “We get these little mini boxes of cereal each morning, and just to survive, I have to not look at the expiry date on the bottom of the box. Pretend that this batch they bought at the store normally, that it wasn’t one of the ones that was donated. Then after I eat one, I look to see when it’s expired. One time it was two years old!”

Monique looked into my eyes in the rearview mirror to see if I was offended.

My daughter looked a lot more like my sister than she did me, her dad, or anyone else in the family, both sides. She had inherited my sister’s slimness, the easy gestural grace, the heavy eyebrows, and the glossy, light brown hair. But she had not inherited the earnestness and the reverence. That made her more popular at school. She had been well-liked since kindergarten, and I had detected a corresponding meanness over the years. She was in a position to be choosy about friends, she had had to turn some away.

But somehow, with such easy pathways into friendship, she was a little unhappy and held herself aloof. This too reminded me of my sister. That restlessness. The way she preferred her own company, always, to that of others.

There were a few squabbles between me and my sister once she had settled into life at the convent, but very few.

“Mom and Dad always talk about you like you’re the pious one,” I said once, “but you’re the one hiding. What’s more selfish than hiding?”

She laughed. “Sorry. So it’s you they should be calling pious.”
I was fucking pious — by that time of my life I was. I was five years into my marriage. My daughter was three. I woke every morning to her whining for me. I’d used to love sleeping in to eleven, twelve, but for my daughter, I got up before six. Getting up so early never got easy. My husband would come home exhausted from his lawyering work at eight or nine most nights expecting attention too. My mom, who I’d never gotten along with that well, would drop by unannounced to help, and I dreaded the silences when we sat on the bar stools in the kitchen looking down at my daughter, hoping she would do something to lighten our spirits since we didn’t have much to say to each other. Still, I invited her over whenever I could muster the energy — even, sometimes, when I didn’t feel I had it in me — so that she could have the distraction, to get her out of the house. She missed Laura. Laura promised she prayed for us three times a day. Well, that seemed easy.

Charles and I made the drive up to see my sister take her her final vows one year after we were married. I had imagined her wearing her usual habit, which I was used to by then, and so was surprised to see her standing at the back of the church wearing a baggy, white, businesslike dress. The back slit was stitched up. She’d borrowed it from a nun friend of hers who was in her forties. Pulling up the long drive to the convent, I had got it in my head that this was like her wedding day. But once the service began, I only felt disloyal. My sister standing at the altar before the three priests reminded me of a child acting in a play. She was reciting a long litany from a pamphlet in her hand, but the words meant nothing to me. I turned to look at Charles. He kept his eyes respectfully toward the altar. Suddenly his eyes widened. I looked toward where my sister had been and couldn’t see her. “She’s lying on the ground,” he whispered. I stood on my tiptoes and caught sight of her arms stretched out in the shape of a cross. I got a lump in my throat. I wanted to drag her up. It was a mistake, I was sure of it. For the long, silent minute my
sister remained outstretched, you could hear the coffee percolating obscenely in the next room. It was a small chapel, just for the sisters. A child in the back began to chirp loudly, then said, “What, Momma?” My sister remained prone on the ground, arms outstretched. I thought about the carpet her nose and forehead were pressed against. I could only imagine was unclean. It was where the priest always stood to give out communion. It wasn’t like her to draw attention to herself and I wondered if she were uncomfortable. Then I realized this might be a transcendental moment for her and I felt a jolt of irritation. I thought about the coffee, that I’d soon get some. That’s how I got through that long, terrible, drawn-out moment. I had a terrible feeling the whole day, just as she admitted to me years later she’d felt on my wedding day.
My sister was once abducted. Or that’s what my mom said for a few minutes. It was by a family friend, Wilsa. The day the sun danced. Well, Wilsa was close to us, practically family. It almost gave her the right. It was all smoothed over in the end.

It happened at a conference. Somehow Wilson had come with us. It was a Charismatic Renewal conference. Wilsa was not religious at all, but my parents had told her she might get something out of the event, the bishop was said to be a very powerful speaker. We’d be passing several Saskatchewan landmarks on the drive there that she’d never seen: Vermillion, host to the world’s largest Ukrainian easter egg, which was a monument you could park your car in front of in the middle of town, fields of fluorescent yellow rapeseed.

The conference was held in a long yellow brick building on a sprawling property with a forest, a grotto, and acres of thrashed wheat. It had once housed eighty seminarians. Now the church rented the space out for retreats and camps. There were a couple dozen families attending the conference, about a hundred of us, from various parts of Saskatchewan, and a bishop from Ontario and two other priests.

When we saw all the family vans in the seminary car lot from the highway, my sister and I groaned. But as soon as we opened our car door in the gravel lot, the fresh air stirred something childish and primal in me. I saw three the Mulroney brothers taking turns slamming one of those cheap plastic balls you get in candy dispensers outside gas stations onto the ground so it bounced so high you couldn’t see it. The ball popped off the hood of our car and into the woods. I ran to catch it before they did.
I don’t remember too much after that, what my sister was up to at the retreat, until the incident with the sun dancing, the weird thing with Wilsa. But I’ve thought of it many times since.

On the second-to-last day of the conference, a Saturday, Laura was hungry and disturbed. She had skipped breakfast and she’d skipped lunch because she hated the food at the retreat and wanted to be home.

Mom saw Laura standing alone while a swarm of kids ran around her. Bright white light streamed in from the open gym door, making a broad, yellow rectangle of light on the speckled gymnasium floor, and you could see dust floating in the air in this rectangle but nowhere else. Next to the rectangle of light, my dad was trying his best to converse. He stood with his fists in his back pockets, rocking on his heels, a vulnerable, sheepish expression on his face. It was always funny to see him out in public. At our home it was easy to forget he was shy. Laura caught my eye but I didn’t want to go talk with her. I was about to go outside to play basketball with the Mulroneys.

Mom walked up and put a hand on Laura’s shoulder.

“You need a break,” Mom said, laughing.

Laura’s body relaxed under her touch. My mom was perhaps the person who understood Laura best.

“Go for a walk, or you could even go lie down.”

She crossed a field electric with crickets. The sky was light blue and clear. It was beginning to get hot out. I was running through the field, chasing the youngest Mulroney boy while I waited for his brothers to come out of the gym with the basketball. My sister walked past me, down to slight slope, and past the line of trees that divided the rest of the property from the
ravine that ran along its base, public land. There she found a bench. She could see just glints of
the water through the trees. She moved to the place on the bench unshaded by the trees and
closed her eyes and waited for her face to warm up in the sun. She sat there with her eyes closed
listening to the sounds of the tiny green leaves rustling in the wind above her — it sounded like
hundreds of sheets of paper moving along tiny table tops.

And then the unmistakable sound of feet pounding the earth rhythmically, coming closer,
and she looked up to see a woman jogging along the ravine, ducking tree branches. She was
wearing a professional-looking runner’s top in a deep blue with reflective strips along the
shoulders in a flattering, feminine line and tight jogging pants, brand new, white running shoes.
The woman and Laura looked at each other as the woman ran toward her; they held each other’s
gaze, both a little dazed, then the woman smiled quickly as she ran past. Laura continued to sit
on the patch of sun, not thinking of much, enjoying not having to think. Then she heard a voice,
not out loud, only in her head, say: “Pray for me.” She knew it was the woman. Not her exactly,
but her imagination, which could still be a prompt from God. She closed her eyes again. The sun
was warm on her face. It was as if she were all golden. And she felt her blessedness all at once,
as happened to her at times. She wanted to stay in the moment forever. It was easy for her to be
with God here away from everyone. She knew for certain she was loved by God, meant for God,
and had been created for God. She wanted to be holy and pure for the one who made her. That’s
all she wanted to be. And she couldn’t be that at school. She needed something like this, to be
near running water and in sunlight down at a creek. To be some woodland creature — even a
squirrel —she was certain she could be more what God had created her for and therefore happy.
But how to be content and true in a world of people, and for so many years. She didn’t know
how she would do it. She wanted to stay down at the ravine. She wanted to stay hidden and safe and blessed.

It had been six hours since she’d had anything to eat. She had a pounding headache. The sun was high in the sky. She wondered if we might have chilli that night. She’d seen some of the kitchen volunteers unloading a crate of kidney beans from the back of someone’s car.

A voice was pushing through. Talk to me. But she couldn’t think of anything else she could think or say.

Thank you, she said, eyes closed. Thank you for my family. What would I do without them. Thank you for bringing me here. Thank you for baptizing me. Thank you for the church. Thank you for this warm sunlight. And she stopped, eyes still closed, remembering the woman in her jogging outfit that had smiled at her as she’d passed. Thank you for my vocation. What was it in her eyes? She was an anxious woman. Something inside that woman was pleading. Maybe it was because of a man. Pray for me. She said a Hail Mary for the woman.

Then a strange thing happened. She heard footsteps returning from around the corner where the woman had ran. And in a scramble, she tried to prepare herself. What was God asking her to do? Perhaps the woman had dropped something, her phone most likely. But it was God sending her back. God worked this way. It could be explained in practical terms every time, and Laura liked this, was not disappointed by the lack of transcendence in the world, how everything could be explained practically. In some ways it was a relief. She would say, “Excuse me. This is weird, but I was just praying for you.”

But she did not turn to look at the woman right away because she was also shy and a self-conscious person. She heard the rustling. She braced herself. Her heart pounded at the premonition of the whole thing. She wanted to avoid what was being asked of her, but she would
do it. She would say the thing. The footsteps were coming nearer. She heard a squeak. A female sound. And then she looked around to see my father. With his arms around Wilsa. Wilsa’s head was bowed against my father’s chest.

Laura ran. Ran up the ditch and out of the trees. Across the field. She looked for me. She spotted a group of us kids huddled together excitedly at the grotto. We were pointing up at something in the sky. She stopped running, shielded her eyes from the sun so she could make sure it was me there with them. She recognized my black and white striped tank top, a hand-me-down from her. She slowed down, hesitant, and then she began speed-walking in my direction. I was down on my hands and knees, crawling. Everyone was looking down at me then instead of up at the sky. They begin waving their hands at Laura. Some of them craned their necks to look back once again at the sun.

Laura looked behind her to see if Dad was chasing after her. He wasn’t. Just the line of trees. They are still down there. A sickening wave of nausea pushes up against her stomach.

A girl, Marybeth, is crying. Her wet, red face stares into Laura’s.

“Look at the sun. Dancing.”

Just a few meters off, out in the open, no shade, is a massive wooden cross, no Christ figure on it, just a bare, declarative cross. Triumphant in this place. It is standing on a concrete pillar.

I look up from where I am crouched and see how my sister’s blue eyes have turned green, how her eyelids have swelled up; the whites of her eyes have been shot with pink.

“It’s the end of the world!” a girl named Marybeth is saying over and over.

There is a haze around the sun. The sun is a strange orange gold. A golden orb around it shifts and trembles.
There’s the white statue of Mary. I’m scrambling towards Mary on my hands and knees, for dramatic effect. My sister walks past and kneels and places a hand on one of Mary’s feet. I see from her back that she is crying.

“It just happens when you stare at the sun,” says one of the girls sharply, coming up to squat down beside Laura.

“Shilah,” Laura says. I go up to her. She won’t look at me. She is shaking. “Go get Mom. Quick. It’s really important.” I feel a shift in my body, like clicking into a heavier gear.

I run. I run past the boys playing basketball with on the court. They stop for a minute to watch me run. I run through the long, blonde stocks of wheat, the mounds of dry dirt, the dry, hardened ridges from the tractor’s wheels pushing into the plastic soles of my sneakers. The kitchen and the gym are one way, the chapel another. There is a pond in between, a boardwalk all around, with a bench on which you can sit and stare at the water. The bishop’s sitting there, wearing his purple cap and black robe, his sad, lonely back to me, facing the pond.

I run past him to cross over to the chapel first. The chapel is empty. I stop and catch my breath, the sudden darkness inside causing black blotches to dance around the altar. I run out the door and past the bishop again. He is reading a book, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. He turns looks up at me, holds up a hand.


I do so reluctantly. “Where is everyone?” I ask.

“What’s the matter?”

“My sister’s going insane. She thinks there’s a miracle. She thinks the sun’s dancing and that it’s the end of the world.”

“This happens a lot,” he says. “You shouldn’t be staring too long at the sun.”
“I know!”

I turn my back and run past the pond, which appears at the corner of my vision as a shining round mirror, reflecting the sky. At the gymnasium the air smells like garlic bread.

My dad is coming out of the gym, hoisting a cross with two other men across their shoulders. A woman is reading a meditation aloud from a pink pamphlet. My mom is standing to her right, her eyes closed. I go up and touched her arm. She opens her eyes, sees that it is me, and closes them again. My dad is watching. I go up to my dad and say, “Laura’s having a mental breakdown at the grotto.”

As we speed-walk across the field, I try to explain to my dad how her face had looked — pale, stricken, and crazed — and how her face had been muddy from crying and kissing the earth and that she’d taken clumps of dirt from the ground and thrown them.

My dad’s step quickens.

That had been a lie, but I didn’t have the time to remember it was a lie at the time I was saying it. Actually, the frantic girl clawing at the ground had been me. My friends and I had been playing that it was the end of the world, that we were children witnessing the miracle of the sun. I’d gotten a bit carried away. I had even felt myself about to cry, though I didn’t believe in anything the girls were carrying on about. I had been hungry or too wrapped up in it all. And then my sister had come.

One of the girls ran up to us.

“She took her away.”

“Who?”

“Wilsa. She was screaming and pushing her. She didn’t want to get in.”

My dad patted his shirt pocket.
“She does have the keys. I wonder why she didn’t tell me?”

Ten minutes later, my dad and I were backing out of the parking lot in a friend’s minivan. Mom was saying through the open window, more to herself than anyone else, “You can’t just take off with someone’s kid.”

My dad put the car in idle and cranked down the window a bit further.

“I don’t even know what’s around here. Where would she have gone? The town?”

And my mom lunged at the car.

“Just go!” she said. “Geeze, Don.”

We found our little rusty red car just half an hour later parked on the main street. Through the window of a coffee shop called Dutch Dreams, Laura was sitting at a table with Wilsa. We opened the door and came in. Wilsa and Laura were the only patrons. Laura was pulling out the inner coil of a cinnamon roll. When we opened the door and announced our presence, she did not look up. Wilsa sat across the table from my sister, a take-out cup of coffee in front of her.

Wilsa said to my dad, “She’s coming off it.”

My dad asked if I wanted a sandwich or something and I went up to the display case to look at my options. Next thing I knew, Wilsa was edging toward the door looking very polite and startled and determined, and saying, “I think it’s just best. You stay on. There’s a motel down the street. Just pick me up tomorrow.” Laura was folding her napkin into fours, looking fixedly at the salt and pepper shakers on the table. Then Wilsa was out the door.

She was being dramatic. Mom called up Wilsa a few days later. Wilsa and Laura and Mom and Dad had a conference about the incident in our kitchen. There was laughter. Before Wilsa we out
our front door, she gave Laura a big hug. Laura never asked, But why did I see dad? Or, then who was the man then?
Imitation - Bruno Schulz’ “Street of Crocodiles”

It later became necessary for us to sleep in the attic room, draftier than the rooms on the main floor and cluttered with grandmother’s old sewing machines in their medicinal beige and clove greens. An accordion-like partition could be drawn across the room, an installation from the days my mother and aunt were finishing nursing school and living together. At night we would hear the toilet flush, then the kitchen radio turned on, the clamor of pans and utensils bashing against one another, relentless chopping for an immeasurable period, then the powerful scent of onion in the frying pan, joined by beef, the smell of blood being heated that sickens the stomach waking up to it in the middle of the night.

The lower rooms, where we had been able to sleep peacefully in the summer, now vibrated with men’s voices and instrumentation. Grandmother would first turn on the radio on the cabinet near the front door. Then the kitchen radio could be heard, the dial turned higher until the radiators along the floors of the lower rooms rattled and clanked. The late night radio host’s voice from the cabinet nearest our rooms would loop together with the melancholic orchestral ballads turned up to the dial’s fullest capacity in the kitchen, then my grandmother’s voice, shrill and excited, could be heard crying out at intervals. There would be bawling, weeping, sweeping, slamming, great gulping laughter that sometimes turned into sobs. We came to understand she was conversing with her sister in the Caribbean.

Mornings after, Grandmother would sleep until noon. She would walk past us as we watched fishing shows and golf tournaments in the living room and not greet us, then we’d hear her scrape the meat from the frying pan into the garbage bin and dog dish. At these times she wore her shiny black nightgown with the violet and pink lilies, a gift from our grandfather when
they’d gone to Hawaii. She wore her bed attire late into the afternoon, chastened and sulky like a teenager who had recently been reprimanded, then she’d slink back into her bedroom. She would call out to us then, inviting us to kneel at her bedside to say the rosary. She smelled of cold cream, and when she eased herself into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin, her face, exposed to us, was like a drowned muskrat’s, grey and with whiskers. A sweet, determined, volatile expression was in her clenched-closed eyes and lips; lines emanated from them like embedded rays.

Occasionally, waking from her naps after the rosary at five or six, when the sky was dimming, she would think it night turning into day, and the radios would be turned on one by one. We would hear the introductory clanging and banging in the kitchen and, hoping to be fed supper, would follow the orange and tan roses and daisies, the crusty green vine-patterned pathway on the carpet to the kitchen. Encountering us at the doorway, the dining room behind us, with its tarnished silverware and pearled salt spoons, she would raise her wooden spoon in the air in a frozen, exasperated stance. Tears streamed down her face, drenching the collar of her black nightgown. Light mucus trailed beneath her nose, caught in the grey moustache hairs. The eyelashes of her blue eyes spiked like star points. Shoo! she would yell. Shoo! Shoo! We would scurry into the living room, fall into her velvet rocking chair, hanging on to one another without sound, pinching each other’s stomachs and thighs and writhing so as to stay invisible. She would come into the living room and offer her hands to us, as if holding on to her arms she might have the strength to pull us up. With sticky fingers, she would bless our foreheads, an ironic smile on her face. Wiping her nose on the collar of her gown and still sniffing, she would ask us to come with her into the kitchen to chop vegetables, and what kind of cake would we like that night, angel food or plain vanilla.
Every day it was the same moves, only I was getting weaker. At night the winds were sharp and I would crouch behind trees to shield myself. After a few hours of shaking, it was easy to understand that if sleep wouldn’t come then it wouldn’t. Hypothermia was out, and after 17 gashes, big and small, to my wrists, I was finding it impossible to bleed. Day four or five, my priorities changed from our children over to you and then to hunger. That made me almost be seen twice so I left town. The cave I stayed in was above Merritt and had been used by trappers. There was an old kerosene burner, rusted by several years of weather. The cold mud of the place each morning caused some depression in me and I would think about our babies and very much about you. The afternoons got hot as there were no trees and I was quite exposed. When the sun came out mid morning I would lie on the flat rock nearby the cave. It would take a long time for
the sun to come out strong enough, but when it did, getting warm was like reaching heaven. They say when you close your eyes looking into the sun you see white, but I saw blues and purple and orange. At those times our kids were alive and with Mother. Van Gogh abandoned me at the trailer park at the base of the hill, and it was the sight of him sleeping at a flagpole that brought Kim Robinson my way, for they knew to look for our dog.

For that week I made a blanket of pine branches inside my cave piled so heavy I was somewhat crushed under its weight.

The hunger did wondrous blocking of my mind. It was our intention that the children not live a life of humilty Kaitlyn was cut it was loving Daddy who did it, and three places on her neck poured blood like a ribbon collar, pooling inside her shirt. Funny she said sorry.

I saw no human and heard no human voice, killed no animal, as I did not see many and could not get at them with just rock and branches and also lacked energy whether from the killing of my children or from considerable nausea. Succumbing to the berries with their dusty blue jackets caused me to vomit. Also all those days I did not drink water, was unwilling to go down to the trailers, though I could see the lights, eleven of them, shining, at night the people living in them seemed closer.

When Kim Robinson found me he said the skin was hanging off my bones and he did not think of being afraid because of the condition I was in. As they say now in the papers. He had a gun attached to a leather strap on one of his small shoulders but he never had to take the gun off, nor
did he ever point it my way. He hiked to his truck, and carried back two bottles of water, wet on
the outside with a little bit of dirt. He gave me one and set the other on a rock. After I had drunk
them both I introduced myself as a man named Kendall, a bricklayer on my way to Kamloops.
His face changed then. I knew I was in. He mentioned my bald spot, prominent in the pictures,
and let his dog off its leash and it lunged and hung on to the jean of my ankle. I was hesitant to
kick the dog in front of its owner but did. It bit my arm, straight through the shirt, though later
Robinson denied that. It was a big dog.

I asked if he was planning to shoot me and he said if he’d been there to see me kill my children,
he would have, but he wouldn’t shoot me now, he had called his friend with the RCMP. He had
spent three hours each morning looking for me as he knew the backcountry well, having been a
trapper in the area for more than fifty years. He walked away from me to watch for the trucks
and something I remember: his cigarette smelled wonderful in the pine. I wanted to sit outside
the cave, for it was almost over. We went out to the rock and sat smoking several minutes
together until the authorities came.
FOUND OBJECT: Transcript.

Transcript: Conversation between Allan Schoenborn (Accused) and Darcie Clarke (Mother of the three victims) recorded at Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre, June 30, 2008: Time: 13:54 hrs.

Clarke: Hello.

Schoenborn: Hey Hon.

Clarke: (Sighs)

Schoenborn: How ya been?

Clarke: Ya' pretty good.

Schoenborn: You look good. Where you been stayin' ?

Clarke: Right now I'm at Logan Lake.

Schoenborn: Yeah?

Clarke: Yeah.

Schoenborn: Yeah. I didn't know if you would get the information I passed for you. Lucky you got it.

Clarke: Didn't get much from your letter.

Schoenborn: (Sighs) So you wanna know if I did it to get at you? No.
Clarke: Well, why? I don't understand.

Schoenborn: Some kinda act of desperate protection, on their part.

Clarke: You killed them to protect them?

Schoenborn: Things weren't right.

Clarke: Not with you. With us everything was fine. Should've just walked away.

Schoenborn: Eh?

Clarke: Should've just walked away.

Schoenborn: I didn't walk away.

Clarke: (Sigh). Obviously.

Schoenborn: I couldn't. In my frame of mind, thinking that they're in trouble, I can't walk away.

Clarke: What did you do to them?

Schoenborn: Eh?

Clarke: What did you do to them?
Merritt, #2

The rooms in the old house were drafty. There were fourteen of us sleeping in different places, a bunch of kids out in the tent, Shaun and my brothers Randal and Tom still playing cards downstairs in the kitchen, though it was almost two in the morning. It had been a long day, new relatives coming in on the hour. Dad had given me and Mom the bed and was lying on the floor with my uncle. My grandma had grown up in this house, the only daughter of a doctor and congressman for whom Merritt’s nursing home had been named. For years Shaun and his wife, who’d bought the house, had been sending emails to the family to come stay for free, and now everyone had come at the same time under terrible circumstances.

My dad and my uncle were blocking the pathway to the door, covering almost all the carpet between the two of them. They were both tall men, and each slept completely straight in the dark with their blankets pulled up to their chins and their arms clamped down at their sides. The windowpane next to my head was letting in a chill. Even colder air was blasting up from the vent at the baseboards beside my bed. Someone downstairs must have accidentally turned on the AC. It was October, and already so cold in Merritt that the kids shouldn’t have been allowed to sleep outside.

I crept past my dad’s head, grabbed my jacket from the chair, and went to listen at the landing.

Shaun, mom’s cousin, was talking below.

“Almost didn’t recognize him. His skin was hanging off his bones. I gave him a smoke to calm him down. Asked how long it’d been since he’d drank anything and he said not since the day before.”
“He was probably dehydrated.” That was my brother Randal.

“He seemed so out of it he wouldn’t have been keeping track. There’s nothing to drink up there. He doesn’t know the hills.”

“Except for when you took us trapping.” That was my brother Tom.

All weekend Shaun and his wife Trudy had been forced to go to the front door to greet guests, many of them more my family’s guests than theirs. We’d gotten so many flowers that they’d had to put the overflow on the sitting benches in the vestibule. There was a strong smell of pollen all through the main floor. Upstairs you could smell it too, laced with the scent of natural tea tree cleaner. Shaun and his wife had been very generous welcoming us all. Their Costco bill must have been enormous.

As I creaked down the stairs, the men in the kitchen stopped talking. They were hoping one of the wrong people wasn’t coming down, my mom needing a glass of wine to get back to sleep, or my dad with this newly meek, girlish expression.

When I reached the dining room, Shaun got up and passed me, heading toward the fridge, his large jowly cheek looming before me flushed from drink. A brown rivulet of tobacco juice trailed down a bristled path that ended in the middle of his chin. He’d been wearing the same red dress shirt for two days now. Tonight he wanted his wife to get some rest so he was staying downstairs. His legs were still jumpy from the adrenaline, his wife had said to my mom. That night since her husband wasn’t coming in she’d taken her grandson into the bed with her to make use of the room.

“Want a drink?” Tom asked.

Illuminated by the orange light of the kitchen lamp, my brothers Tom and Randal gazed up at me with affection. Three empty mickies of cheap green label whiskey sat on the table and a
platter of deviled eggs with the saran wrap pulled off it, the paprika wet on the whites. The kitchen island was cluttered with about ten varieties of hard alcohol and a couple of uncorked bottles of wine. We’d all been drinking since late afternoon, not just my uncles. A patch of purple had dried on the floor under a box of cheap merlot. They’d been cutting into a withered block of deer sausage on the table next to a deck of cards. Randal plunged his thick fingers into a glass jar of ringed hot peppers. I looked away as he dropped them into his mouth.

“I’ll pour you a drink,” said Tom, getting up. He steadied himself on the back of his wooden chair. “Woah,” he said, and sat back down.

“We’re staying up with old Shaunie,” said Randal.

“It’s a vigil,” said Tom, slurring his words.

A fly buzzed around Tom’s head. He turned around, slowly, uncomprehendingly. “Want ice?” he asked. “There should be some ginger ale some place.”

“You ladies drank it all,” Shaun said from the kitchen, where he was sucking juice from a carton. He drew his arm up and wiped juice off the side of his mouth with his shirt.

Then he walked back to the table. We stayed quiet and watched him. He seated himself with a creak, then bowed his head, staring down at his hands, as if praying. No one spoke.

“Shaun was telling us about finding him,” Randal said.

“He still won’t tell anyone exactly what they talked about,” said Tom.

Shaun kept his head down. He said in a quiet, almost disappointed voice, “He was sitting in the dirt. In a cave. Really far up. I don’t know how he found it. I’d never taken you guys that far up. He was shivering. He reminded me of some kind of animal. Really. I knew right away he couldn’t do me any harm. I said, wait right there and I’ll go down to my truck and get you a
bottle of water. I actually had a couple in the console. Of course I called the RCMP as soon as I was out of earshot.”

Shaun’s large head had remained bowed during the speech. Tom was making a terrible, accusatory face at me.

“What?” I asked Tom.

He didn’t say anything, so I asked again, “What?”

“You want to know what me and Randal saw in that house today? No. You wouldn’t want to know. Precious him,” Tom said.

I looked at Randal to see whose side he was going to be on.

“It’s good that she’s going with Mom,” Randal said. Then he looked away from me. “But I won’t be paying him my respects. The day of the funeral. Unbelievable.”

“It was big of you, though, to get the children’s outfits this afternoon,” Shaun said.

“I didn’t do it for him,” Tom said.

“You would have thought the police would have cleaned the place up more.”

My breath quickened.

“Has anyone checked on the kids?” I asked.

Out on the front porch, the night was clear, cold, and black. You could see stars all across the sky in this town. At night, by some trick of light, the hills looked lighter than the sky, almost tawny.

Two red lights blinked from the hills. The town was completely silent. It was amazing, really, how quiet. Where I lived in Vancouver, though we had an incredible view of the water, you were always aware of the freeway. Here not a single car, not even the sound of electricity on the poles.

Shaun had told us that when he couldn’t sleep, he often went out to sit on the swing on the front
porch. He would imagine Dr. Gillis opening the front door to make a midnight call to the nearby reservation or a ranch.

I walked around to the side of the house and opened the gate to the back yard. There were two small tents pitched close to the back patio deck. I went to the first and listened. Slowly pulled the zipper down a section to try to peek in, but it was too dark to see who was inside. It might be some of the kids I didn’t know that well, offspring of second cousins who’d just arrived. They’d be scared if they woke up and saw me looking in. As I walked over to the second tent, the patio light came on. Shaun was standing inside the patio door looking out. I tried to remember what people looked like out in the dark, if you could see their expressions. I could see his, and it was emblazoned on my mind as I turned away and unzipped the tent -- such a loud noise for a small thing -- and turned my phone on so I could scan the children’s faces. My niece Layla was sleeping in the middle. I was tempted to wake her. I had hurt her feelings not wanting to play Scrabble with her earlier, and now I wished she would sit with me on the couch.

I didn’t want to go back up into the bedroom with my mom and dad and uncle. Even to sleep next to them was too close. We were all sick of each other. We’d been together in Shaun’s house for ten days now. And tomorrow was the funeral. This was a house full of people who wanted more than anything to fast-forward through the next day.

My brother had been found alive only two days ago. He’d been hiding in the hills above Merritt. He’d murdered his own children: Je-Anne, Luke and Samuel. He’d tried to kill himself too but hadn’t managed. It had been Shaun who’d found him ten days after the warrant was sent out for his arrest. The whole town had been looking for him. He’d lasted ten days, a miracle, because my brother wasn’t good at too many things. By the end I’d thought he really might have
been dead, or smart enough to have found a way to skip town. Of course the police and RCMP had been pulling out all the stops to get him.

I could walk the streets pretty much unrecognized while the search was on. No one in this town knew my family, though we’d spent some vacations here as kids. My brother had mental problems -- not something people were talking about. We would be having a funeral for the children tomorrow, a triple funeral.

“Layla,” I said pretty loudly. She didn’t budge. Her pale face was turned up, her mouth slack and open so that she looked like a funny little animal. I zipped the tent back up, felt that familiar sick flip in my stomach.

We’d spent some time with the kids five months ago. Mom and Dad and I had driven the two hours from Vancouver to Merritt to pick up the children so Luke, the youngest, could spend his birthday with his dad. My brother Tom had set our brother up with a lucrative job on the oil rigs in Prince George, which had surprised us all. Tom had been the one griping all year about him needing professional help. But what bugged Tom and Randal even more was him not being able to provide for those kids. He’d made it six months, and we hadn’t heard much and had supposed it was because they were so busy. His wife was so grateful for the new influx of money that she didn’t put up any kind of fight about us picking up the kids for an overnighter like she might have done other times. She was a good woman, just often exasperated with my brother. We went to get them at her little trailer home at four o’clock, just after school was out. It was a trailer that had been fixed up to look like a house. It had white patchwork gratings along its base. Our visit there had been short. She was watching a program and had sat back down to keep her eye on it after opening up the door for us. We brought the kids over to Shaun and Trudy’s, who’d offered
to make us lasagna and put us all up for the night so that we could set out early the next day and get to Prince George for noon.

At Shaun’s, Je-Anne, my brother’s eldest and the one I knew best, followed me around with shy determination. Even when I was talking practicalities with Mom or Dad, what should be packed in who’s car and the like, I could feel her looking up at me admiringly, and it made me want to turn what I was saying into a joke. I sensed she was expecting and waiting for a joke or something funny, had heard from my brother I was funny or something. I hadn’t seen her in a year.

“Can I drive with you?” she asked in her small, faraway voice as we were playing a silent game of Scrabble near the restored fireplace. I guessed my brother must have mentioned me every night when they were saying prayers. He probably told her each night how her aunty loved her. Of course I did love her. I loved my nephews too. His youngest, especially, was just like him. My brother had been the most sensitive kid. It had always been Tom and Randall, me and him.

There were things I’d wanted to do for the kids, that I’d planned on doing. For instance, the summer of the restraining order. The boys were just two and four, but Je-Anne was six. I’d thought to have her come visit me in Vancouver. It would have been easy. Just a three-hour drive, and I could have picked her up on one of the many bright, sunny weekends I had available to me as a researcher at the university. Sandy, my partner, or lover, or whatever you want to call her, mostly worked nights. She might have watched Je-Anne during the day if I’d put up a strong enough fight. But, being a police officer, she had opinions about schizophrenics. “Your brother has all the classic signs,” she’d told me. Family members were especially in danger, she warned. I hadn’t told her about the domestic assault charge my sister-in-law had placed on my brother. I
hadn’t wanted to. In the end, I didn’t invited Je-Anne to come see me. I had thought that it would allow me to do more for Je-Anne in the future, when she was a teenager and was especially desperate. Right now she got along very well with her mom. Sandy might be more open to my brother if he got the treatment the court was ordering. I knew he would do it for his kids.

Je-Anne was so polite on that drive up to Prince George -- too polite for an eight year old. We sat in the my car watching Mom and Dad packing the boys into the Volvo in the dim morning sun. Thomas’ short, sturdy body was draped across Dad’s front. A chubby tan leg hung out of my dad’s arms. I hardly knew him.

“Thank you for driving me,” Je-Anne said, though I hadn’t even started the car. It was just she and I, quiet in the car. She already had that tinge of the poor about her, a spray of shame, the kind of girl that would have a person like my brother for her dad. She was shy on the drive, but cheerful. During lags where I couldn’t think of anything to say, I could sense an intelligent conversation behind those eyes. I made a point not to ask any leading questions about her life with her mother. I thought she was at the age where she’d appreciate that.

At Prince George, when we pulled into the McDonalds parking lot, which was entirely crammed by trucks, she said it again.

My brother was sitting smoking inside the cab of Tom’s company vehicle. As soon as we pulled in, he jumped out of the cab and threw out his smoke. He speed-walked toward us. He was looking into my eyes. He looked proud and eager. I didn’t know if it was of me he was proud of, having just spent five hours straight with his daughter, or if it was his daughter he was proud of, knowing she was a sweetheart that no one could hate and he’d guessed how good her manners would have been on the drive. Je-Anne got out of the car. She hugged him, not letting go. One of his sons plowed into his side.
“Woah,” he said. He knelt down, holding Je-Anne’s two hands in his.

“M’lady,” he said, and kissed her small fist. Lukie, the birthday boy, jumped on my brother’s back, holding onto him by his neck. My brother tried to ask about our drive out but his voice was too clogged up with strain.

Tom had since told Shaun how our brother had been too cheap to let Lukie get a Big Mac meal that day. He’d forgotten about his kids because he’d gotten worked up showing pictures of George W. Bush’s artwork on his phone, trying to make a case for how there were hidden messages. I had noticed a bright, acrid smell to my brother as I stood next to him in line. His jean jacket and pants were dirty, but so were those of most of the other men standing in line. The only difference between him and them was that he looked weak and pathetic, not like a worker. It was hard to imagine him doing any heavy lifting, doing eleven-hour days. But according to my brother he was putting in the hours.

It was impossible to say anything in his defence to family, to guests of the house, this weekend, the weekend of the funeral. It felt ungrateful, somehow, to defend him before Shaun. Instead, I’d been focusing on the trial. Called up to the witness stand, I would say, “My brother was such a gentle dad. He even braided Je-Anne’s hair. One summer he had a bunch of leftover wooden panels from a construction job he was helping out with. He’d been kicked out, but his wife had let him come over in the evenings and work on a sandpit for the kids. We had a sandpit ourselves growing up. We’d never used it much -- it actually became more of a dumping ground for our toys than anything, but my brother is sentimental. He really is. With the leftover wood, he started building a tree fort. Of course, he never ended up filling the sandpit with sand -- that’s how he was, didn’t really finish a lot of the things he started -- but the treefort, he managed to
make it work. He painted it green, so his kids called it the greenhouse. His kids adored him, and he treasured those kids. I never heard him so much as raise his voice at them.”

There was no good coffee in Merritt, including at Shaun’s house, and this made me float through my days with a terrible, aching headache. I missed the gym in my condo in Vancouver. I missed waking up next to Sandy. I liked all that space between us on the bed that didn’t mean a lack of interest in each other but expressed the mutual agreement we had made to be, first and foremost, best friends, and we both liked our space. She would carry a perfect cup of espresso in a rattling white cup and saucer to the bed for me, her hair wet and dripping and wrapped in a towel. Then she would leave me to read my magazines for an hour and I would hear her clunking around the kitchen. If she had time and was in a good mood, she’d come back into the bedroom and open a tube of coconut oil and massage my feet.

“Oh, there’s a cute little espresso shop just three blocks left, and then head up to the highway. Just one block before it,” Trudy had told me. I’d left the house, a warm, textured, fall-leafy breeze on my face, feeling hopeful and refreshed for the first time in days, though there was still that lingering anxiety -- “But your brother is on the loose, or he’s dead on some train tracks, and anyway, the kids have been murdered.” The coffee shop -- a converted railway house -- was boarded up.

I walked across the train tracks and into a Taco Bell, which shared a large parking lot with a small motel called “Buccaneers Inn.” It surprisingly did not smell like tacos in there, but of ammonia. They did have coffee, and at least on that first day it was fresh. I hadn’t been to a Taco Bell since college, but I found I actually liked the Dorito-blasted tacos they now served. You could make it kind of healthy by requesting extra diced tomato and shredded lettuce. Every day at around three o’clock, my mom and Trudy forgave me for walking over to the Taco Bell so
I could work on a paper at Taco Bell’s bright tables. I had my cell phone with me. I could receive updates on the hunt for my brother. But at the same time, life had to go on.

I believed he must be dead back then. It was easier to believe that than that he had killed his own children and was alive. His life would come shimmering before me. I would hide my face with a napkin. It was the dripping snot I was most embarrassed of. People would come up to my table and say, “Are you crying about those kids?” And they’d tell me what they’d done when they’d heard the news, that they’d pulled off the road, called their spouses, kept their kids home from school the next day, etcetera, that they’d prayed. The town of Merritt was proud of how hard kids’ deaths had hit them. It brought me, I guess, a cheap comfort.

In my head, I was addressing a congregation at my brother’s funeral, though I adapted my speech at times for a jury. I would say, “Even as a child he was sensitive and got very upset about defenseless things being hurt. I remember one time Shaun went up to the hills with the boys to trap. My brother was so excited to go, at five in the morning he was sitting at the kitchen table, already dressed, boots on. Well, by breakfast the boys were already back. My brother ran straight into the kitchen. He buried his little head in my mom’s sweater and started to sob. He wouldn’t let go of her for like half an hour. My uncle Shaun and my brothers had been teasing him for screaming when he’d realized a lynx in their trap was dead.”

Usually at least once as I was sitting doing my work in the Taco Bell, a loud, obnoxious dingding would fill the restaurant. None of the patrons -- it was lonely old bachelors who stayed sitting at the tables, mostly -- paid it any notice. Every once in awhile a couple of old guys drinking coffee would remark that it looked like a passenger train heading to Vancouver. I could see the matching maroon curtains of each passenger cabin. I’d fantasize I was on it, heading to Sandy, heading to Vancouver. “Shut your phone off for a while,” she’d urge me. “There’s
nothing you can do. There’s nothing you can do for your mom to make her feel better. You’ve
got to take care of yourself.” Whatever had happened or was going to happen to my brother, I
needed to find out soon -- I was going to burst -- but I wanted to find out about it in Vancouver,
in my condo overlooking Kitsilano and the ferries and cruise ships making their passages in and
out of the harbor. I wanted to be there, not in Merritt, when I heard the news. I wanted to be
away from my parents until they settled down. I didn’t want to witness the grave disappointment
sinking into my father’s face. And I didn’t want to watch my brothers feel sorry for themselves
by drinking beer. At the last minute, just under the wire, so as not to deprive anyone of comfort, I
would return to Merritt and put in my time, put my arms around Mom, hug her as long as she
needed me to.

I wanted Chinese food -- bok choy, ginger beef, sesame chicken, dripping, glistening,
sugary noodles. Or sushi. It was only homestyle or fast food in this town. I hated, hated Merritt.
It was dingy, dusty, plain. I was sorry my brother and niece and nephews had spent so much time
here.

And I had an idea that I had not shared, that I had kept to myself, just in case. My brother
might have escaped town hitching a ride on a train. It wasn’t something just anyone would think
of, but my brother just might have, depending on his state. He was an old fashioned person. He
didn’t have internet, had never earned his driver’s licence, and he’d always reminded me of one
of those dusty-jacketed, lonesome figures, hitching rides from town to town, the kind I saw in
movies or read about in books. I’d send up a sincere prayer that my brother was alive and already
on the other side of the country and that later in life, after the pain and the horror had lessened
somewhat, he would come back to us and that he would have forgiven himself and that somehow
we could forgive him and no longer feel disgusted, but of course that could never be. He’d
changed everything. Then I’d be afraid of him falling off the train, lying under train tracks somewhere, or lying down across them deliberately.

How could I prove he had loved his kids more than anything in the world? Because he really did. Before he’d killed them. And even as he killed him. I did believe him when he said in his delusional state he’d killed them out of love, thinking he was protecting them. It was strange that what did them all in was his belief in heaven.

My brother’s last text to me had read,

“I dont want my Children to live the same life of humility as their Mother and of course me. Payments are getting hard. She stays with her mom when i come see the kids. I would like to reunite, JeAnne being teased at School.”

Then there was the text at Easter. It was a strange, soft-focussed image of an Easter bunny with “Bless you, Sister,” written across the grass in white icing-like font. That was the first holiday he wasn’t allowed to go to Merritt. He was traditional in his way, had become sentimental about religious holidays after having the kids. At the last minute he’d come to my parents’. Easter Monday, sitting in the passenger seat beside me at a stop light on route to the Greyhound station, he told me his wife was a whore who was fooling around on him with a deli clerk at Safeway, but by the time the light turned green he was sobbing and saying she was good with the kids and she understood him, and that she was his sweetie. He said, “I’m sorry you have to see me like this. I’m going to get back on my meds.”

He was drumming the dashboard. “Je-Anne’s the one I have to save. She kind of reminds me of you. I don’t know why they’re teasing her at school.”
We were at the top of the street of our parents’ place in Vancouver, where you could see the mountains beyond the street light, snow-capped still in early Spring. I didn’t bother thinking what he meant by “save.” Half the stuff he’d said that weekend hadn’t made any sense. I didn’t think he was a dangerous person. I thought he was an annoying person, a nuisance, and I felt sorry for his wife that, off his heads, he behaved almost like a child. I was hoping he wouldn’t mention that people took the mountains for granted here, that he bet they didn’t notice the mountains when they were here stopped at this light. He’d said this earlier when we’d been at the same intersection with mom. Mom and I had just stayed quiet, looking ahead. We hadn’t worried for anyone. We just wanted him to go home.

His wife and his mother in law lived in a trailer park directly across from Merritt’s only grocery store, a Safeway. She hadn’t found the children until the day after they’d been killed, though she’d been just 500 meters away. This is something that the newspaper had reported. It was something that Sandy heard sitting in our condo in Vancouver watching the news and she’d taken up a collection at work and the cops had sent me a cheque for $500.00 made out to my sister-in-law. The funeral expenses were basically covered, but Sandy knew from working with people on the streets that it might be good for her to take a trip over Christmas, get away from the familiar setting when things got rough.

Her mom’s trailer was at the edge of the compound, the house closest to the road. Only a chain linked fence divided it from the sidewalk and you couldn’t avoid seeing it from the Safeway lot.

Each time I came back to the car with groceries, I sat for a few minutes debating whether or not I could go knock on her mom’s door. I wanted to give my sister-in-law a hug. I wanted to smell once again the smell of those trailers where the kids had spent their days: it smelled of
tupperware and dirt and something hammy. But I also didn’t want to because maybe it would make me feel sick. Maybe it would turn me and I couldn’t love my brother again. I worried she might do something terrible and violent, screech, throw a pair of scissors at me, or just stand there, and I wouldn’t know what to say.

The morning before the funeral my brothers had had to see her. My brother had been found. His wife was apparently almost comatose with confused grief. They had volunteered to get the clothes for the children in their caskets. She had needed some of her things too. She’d made a check list. They’d gone in to see her twice, first to pick up the list, then to drop off her things. They hadn’t told me much about it. Immediately after coming in, they’d started drinking in the yard.

By then Shaun’s house was packed with people. Trudy and my mom had underestimated how many of our guests would come by not having had their meals elsewhere. Mom and I had gone to the Safeway to get burger meat and hamburger buns and fixings for salad. I was happy to get out of the house.

The children’s grandma’s place looked to be packed with people too. There were a lot of men in the lot in front of the trailer home and a bunch of kids running around. A ratty old camper with an orange pylon in the back window was now parked next to the trailer. Two pup tents were pitched near the fence. I recognized some of the men as the kids’ uncles and I saw the familiar checkered shirt of a man who’d once been a friend of my brother’s. They’d set up a portable barbeque on the gravel beside the house, and you could smell the hickory scent of their hotdogs even in the car.

“Want to just stay in the car and I go in and get the groceries?” I asked Mom.

“No!” she said.
I checked my rearview mirror. A few of the men who’d been sitting on the stoop were now standing up, craning their heads our way. My mom and I got out of the car and walked toward the Safeway entrance. The air was hazy like there was a forest fire somewhere near town, as there sometimes was, but it was all from their barbeque. I heard one of the men holler, but couldn’t make out the words, didn’t know if they were directed toward us. When we came out of the store, the men who had been standing were sitting down again. We exited the lot from behind the Safeway. My mom started to put on her seatbelt, then whimpered and let it slap back. She drew up her legs. She lay down her face into her kneecaps. She was making that moaning cry I’d been hearing all weekend. I thought to put a hand on her arm. I felt bad for her but also annoyed. It was unnatural in our family to be so physically close and to have not one ounce of pride left. The last time I had hugged her I’d counted down the seconds until I could let go. I wished she would have forced my brother to get treatment. I wished she and my dad had taken some action. I wish I had too. I had always thought that deaths, funerals, must bring families together, but I now thought the opposite.

She pulled her head back from her knees and looked at me.

“You have to come see him tomorrow with us, okay?”

She hadn’t even bothered to wipe her nose. Snot was glistening beneath it.

“I’m going to,” I said. “I was going to anyways.”

“Your brother needs you there.”

“I know! I was going anyway.”

Our visit was slotted for nine a.m. and the detention center was in Kelowna, 40 minutes away. The funeral was at two. We’d have enough time, and it might be good to be out of the
house. One more day and I could leave this place, take a break, and I would do anything to fast-forward through the next day.

I was sitting in the car in my fuzzy fleece pyjamas. I had the heat on as high as it would go. 2:30 a.m. I touched Sandy’s name on my cell phone log. I listened to the drone of phone ringing. I forgot whether or not she was working the night shift or was at home sleeping. On the fourth ring she answered.

“How are you?”

“I woke you up. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Did you change your mind?”

“I was going to go, but I don’t want to.”

“Can I just come down to see you? I’ll take you out for breakfast while they go.”

“I guess...I was wondering...do you want to come meet me halfway?”

“Like --okay. Tomorrow, after the funeral.”

“Or like -- now? If you could? I just don’t want to be there when wakes up. Or be in the house...I don’t know...when they’re talking to him and he’s disappointed that I’m not there.”

“Sure. Sure!”

“Stay in your pyjamas,” I said, suddenly feeling happier than I had in weeks. “I’m in mine right now. I’m in my car, actually.”

“So you want me to...okay. Okay!”

“It’s freezing in the house.”

There was a short pause.

“We’ll meet each other halfway. Just start driving and --”
“Of course. Thank you for… for reaching out, letting me help.”

“Hey, Sandy?”

“What?” Her voice had taken on a soothing, therapeutic tone and at the end of her sentences she wondering a moment at herself, a bit pleased at how she was doing. And I loved her for this.

“Do you think you can…I know it’s crazy. But there’ll be places in Chinatown that’ll be open. Could you possibly pick me up some ginger beef? I want it so bad.”

“I will,” she said. “I’ll pick some up.” There was a little worry creeping into her voice now. “It’s no problem. I’ll pick some up. One more day until it’s over. Then we can order food in every night for as long as you want.”

A stupid, wonderful idea. I drove fast. No one was on the highway, no one but me. Loopy, ghostly mountain passes I knew so well from when our family had driven in the dark after sports tournaments or weddings. My lights lit up the white edges of the signs to Vancouver. The green on the signs looked fresh and clean, like they’d recently been rained on. I gunned the engine, 100, 120, 140 kilometers an hour. I kept just the pad of my fingers on the top of the steering wheel. I turned on the radio, cranked it up so high it thundered. Three songs, the brilliant highway, the hills gone, now the mountains looming, everything black and clean.

Seventeen wounds to his own wrists, one of the police officers had promised us. And that story my brother had told us during his call from jail about climbing up the tree where no one would stop him and scraping his cuts on the tree, wanting badly to die and join the kids. He had said his children were waiting for him, were alive in heaven, and he meant to join them. His dog had stayed below barking. That’s the only reason he’d had to come down.
Out of the darkness, red lights flashed. Then the loud, blaring, clear-throated blast of a horn. I turned down my music. A couple hundred yards ahead of me, white sticks were coming down. A train blasted its horn two times again and then the bright orange front truck came barreling past, followed by the boxcars, one by one, making a horrible, clanking racket. I killed the engine and stared ahead looking at the cars. It was odd being this close up to the train in the night, and I was the only one around. I was so close to the train my car’s windows rattled as each bin, illuminated for a second, passed me by. Most of the boxcars were a fluorescent orange and black but there were some round coal vessels linked up with the train too. Each car had a little ladder attached to it, even the coal vessels, and a place where you could almost sit and brace yourself against the elements. Did no one hop trains any longer? Train designers were making it easy, almost comfortable, to do it. And all that space between the bottom of the box cars and the tracks. You could almost sit straight up underneath a train and not be killed. Maybe it was harder to die by train than it had once been.

I felt a rush of relief, a fond, good feeling toward my brother, the first in days. My brother was still with us.

The train was barreling on. It almost seemed farcical how long I had been waiting, watching the same box car flash past me again and again. I hadn’t remembered to keep the heater on. I turned the ignition on and saw the time. 3:58. I was cold and I was tired. I was no longer hungry, and Sandy I could wait to see for another day. What the hell was I thinking. Drive away from my family. And kill my mother. Make her lose her mind. A call was coming in from Sandy.

“I’m just passing Kilgard,” she said. I told her to turn around.

The front door was locked. I opened the gate to the backyard. Shaun was sitting out on the back patio with Layla, who was wrapped in a shiny tiered sleeping bag, on his lap. The kitchen lights
had been dimmed. My brothers seemed to have gone up to bed. I went past Shaun and tried to open the glass door to the kitchen but it was locked.

“I was sitting right here in front of them when they locked it.” Shaun said, “Just wait til I finish the smoke and we’ll go around up front.”

I sat on the dewy patio beside him. Layla was sucking her thumb though she was eight. Another line to add to my speech: “He sucked his thumb up until grade six. We’d find him hiding in closets. It was a family joke. He was by far the most sensitive of us all.”

We used to pitch a tent on another of Shaun’s properties just outside of town. Trudy would come out early mornings and unzip our tent and put a tray of warm muffins inside for us so none of the stray goats or hens would eat them. Then she’d be off to teach Home Ec at the high school, and Shaun would walk the highway to the diner at the old gas station. Only then would we wake up and go inside their house and turn on their TV and make coffee in their kitchen, take out the giant jug of orange juice that they had bought just for us.

Did Shaun remember wrestling with my brother on the carpet in his old living room? I remember him crawling on all fours along the floor, my brother riding him like a bronco, face red, his buzz cut sweaty and damp.

Layla had her face politely nestled into Shaun’s shirt to avoid his cigarette smoke. He was holding his arm way out to keep the smoke away from her face.

“I haven’t been able to spend as much time with this one as I usually do,” Shaun said.

Nobody said anything for a long while.

“Your brother’s sick,” Shaun said eventually. “I talked with him for 20 minutes while we waited for the RCMP. You don’t want to know the shit he was rambling on about.”

His granddaughter kept her head turned low into Shaun’s shirt.
“It’s none of your guys fault, though,” he added. Tears and snot were in my mouth now. My stomach muscles cramped. I hated, hated crying.

It was so hard to get the words out. It came out in squeaks, but I did it for him, for my brother. “He thought he was saving his kids.”

Layla rustled.

“He didn’t save them because they died,” she said.

“He thought --”

“Shh,” said Shaun. He cupped his hand over Layla’s ear, but gently.

I followed Shaun into the house. The lights on the main floor were off. Five a.m., the clock with birds sang. Out on the back patio we had watched pink spreading across the sky.

Shaun headed to the kitchen. I walked up the stairs as quietly as I could. My mom was asleep, facing the window. She must have woken up because there were rolled up sweaters along the base of the windowpane to keep out the draft. I made sure to step between my dad and uncles’ heads, then climbed up onto the bed beside my mom, close up to her where the blankets were warm from her body heat.

I wanted to fall asleep. Needed to.

How could he do it? I edged closer towards Mom until her bum tipped up into the cup of my stomach. Tomorrow I’d face whatever kind of state my brother was in. When my Mom and Dad and I walked through those doors toward him, I knew he’d look into my eyes first. It had always been me. He had always trusted and loved me. He wouldn’t be thankful or unthankful that I’d come. He would have expected it.

My brother had been a loving father. It was something I knew and might tell him someday. He was not allowed to go to his own kids’ funeral. That, of course, I understood, but
he wouldn’t tonight; tonight it would tear him up inside. This night I loved him most, loved him most in the world. It was like his wedding night. He was all I could think of. Tomorrow I would try as hard as I could to not look away. But for the next few hours, I could close my eyes and see nothing but the inside of myself. This was the saddest night. There was nothing any of us could do to make the wrong thing right.