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Everywhere Lonely

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So my Irish twin, Kate, calls me up in the middle of the night and says she’s twenty miles outside of Asheville and can really sense the Blue Ridge Mountains, big and black in the distance, and they’re just what she needs right now—that, and some good whiskey, and her little brother’s company.

“What?” I say and hear techno music thumping in the background.

“I need your company.”

I fling the covers away and sit up in bed. My day blowing leaves for the moderately wealthy begins in eight—no—seven hours, and the last thing I need is to listen to a twenty-eight-year-old woman with a 401K, an MBA, and an SUV spill her guts. Too: She still writes Mom concerned emails about my lifestyle.

“How could the First Born possibly be lonely?” I ask. The pumping base stops, and I hear electronic buttons being pressed followed by swooshing sounds and blaring car horns.

“My God, this mountain air is better than Prozac.”

“Perhaps you should up your dose.” On my feet now, smoking and flicking ashes on the carpet, I picture her working through some therapeutic checklist of which “Take Fresh Air” is #37. I smile. Then cringe.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“I said I’m happy to play the host.” The swooshing sounds cease, and the music resumes: thump, thump, thump.

“Jonathan Donnelly, you’ve always been a lousy liar.”

“Guess that’s better than being a wife. Or a Republican.” In high school, Kate and I played in a three-chord rock band together called the Mangy Muppets. She had a raspy, Janis Joplin singing voice, dark red hair and freckles to match. I wore black combat boots and strummed an out-of-tune Stratocaster. Weekdays were for Chemistry and Calculus and SAT prep, but Saturday nights at the Grey Eagle belonged to us. It was there the drunks—all two dozen of them—fished
out their lighters as I did my guitar solos and Kate head-banged to a 4/4 drumbeat. Most of our songs, which Kate and I co-wrote, were about greed, need, and hurt. And I loved them all.

I stub my smoke out on the wall, fall back in bed, and stare at the stucco above me. I listen to my sister say I’m a sarcastic prick, but that it’s good to laugh and that I’ve got her pegged, always have. I listen to her reasons for wanting to go camping. At high altitudes. In December.

“All the living things, and the open space, and. . .”
“I don’t want to know the real reason, do I?”
“I’ve never been out in nature.”
“You do know it’s twenty-five degrees out? And past midnight?”
“I know you have an extra tent.”

She lays on the horn and calls somebody a blind idiot. Holding the phone away from my ear, I clear my throat.

“It’s too dangerous. Even people in your tax bracket get hypothermia.” There’s a pause, laughter.

“Here is what’s going to happen. I feel alive and I want to go up the mountain. For one night. Tonight.”

About to hang up the phone and go back to sleep, I hear noises: skidding tires and a *thunk* sound that can only mean she’s hit something—something living. I bury my face in the pillow, wait. It’s a deer. She thinks she’s hit a deer. Bambi. Maybe. Dead.

“He was so small,” she says all frantic. “His eyes looked sad.”

The crying begins. Sniffles. Teeth chattering. The car door slams. She mumbles an *Our Father* and gets every other word wrong.

“This is a sign,” I say. “Mother Nature just dialed you direct.” She cries harder and curses August 14th, the unholy day I was born. I tell her to check the road.

“But I don’t see anything. Will it be all right?”

I remember when we were kids birds used to fly right into the sliding glass door in our basement. Kate insisted that we have a funeral for every single dead bird. After she dug the holes and handled the carcasses, it was my job to say that yes, this bird was dead, but that some other bird loved him and because some other bird loved him he was going to Bird Heaven.

“Tell me it’s going to be all right.”

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Her voice is soft now, an almost whisper. I picture her standing in the middle of I-40, searching the highway shoulder for bloodied deer tracks, a cold wind stinging her cheeks, the mountain watching. Slowly, I pull the covers up over my head and press the OFF button on the phone. Beep.

The Kathryn Donnelly Circus comes to my town twice a year. Every visit is the same. Kate brings a handmade rosary from Mom, a firm handshake from Dad, and her husband, Dennis—who takes his cell phone with him in the bathroom. Kate and Dennis peddle real estate in the Triad area, frequent Gold's Gym, and snort coke when they close a really big deal. When in my neck of the woods, they study the housing market, plunk down $250 a night to stay at the Grove Park Inn, and insist on showing me a good time: exotic Indian dinners, Grey Goose martinis, and live jazz. These jazz clubs are invariably dim and smoky, and as my body sags from too much liquor, and I meld into the bar made of oak and search the frenetic music for some semblance of a melody, my brother-in-law starts the show.

Him: Finish school.
Her: Fall in love.
Him: Invest your money.
Her: Call your Mother.
Him: Avoid debt.
Her: Play your music.

Around Act III of this play, my gut rumbles and I have to remind myself why I live in Asheville in the first place: the nameless Hippies that gather everyday at the Fountain, the esoteric paintings in all the shop windows, the tattooed bartenders that don’t ID anybody, the Scarf Girls in the used bookstores that never take their eyes off Chomsky, and the mountains—always in the background somewhere, waiting, silent. I mow lawns and mop floors to live here. When I’m off, I wander down College Street, following the sound of music and the smell of imported beer. Sometimes when I find what I’m looking for I remember what I lost—playing music with my sister. That’s when it all hits me fast: damp basements and tapping drumsticks, amplifier feedback and ringing ears, long van rides and Ritalin, small stages and sweaty upturned faces and laughter and beer. Sometimes I remember
too much. Sometimes I get the urge to use my fists again. That’s about the time I pack the truck and head up the Parkway with a couple pairs of Levis, a bottle of whiskey, some peanut butter and Saltines, and my Washburn Acoustic. I swim naked in the Pisgah River, hike up Cold Mountain, and touch the blue-gray clouds. I smoke dope. I breathe. I think. When the moon comes up and the temperature plummets and all the day-trippers head home shivering, I start an illegal fire and strum Neil Young. My voice echoing through the trees, I wash my mouth out with whiskey and wait for the rumble in my gut to quiet down.

Kate staggers into my living room, neck and back slumped forward, her hair redder and longer than ever, every freckle on her face aglow like the last embers in a dying fire. Strapped to her back is a North Face camping pack the size of a surfboard. Bottled water and energy bars show through the mesh side pockets. A fancy watch with compass covers her right wrist. As she struggles with the extra weight, swaying and panting in front of the TV set, I put on a deadpan. I’m in my slippers, by the doorway of my bedroom, drinking coffee. I’m waiting for her to shoot me the look: the blue-eyed laser-beam glare I used to get when she caught me reading her diary as a kid.

"Morning," I say. She gives me the look. I move to the arm of the couch, slurp my coffee. She drops the pack on the floor. Thud.

"This is serious."

"No, it’s not. I’m guessing your better half made a joke about ‘extra weight’ or ‘cellulite’ and you hopped in the car, distraught and over-caffeinated." I lift up the side of her sweater, pinch a half an inch, and chuckle. She laughs too and for the moment we’re friends again. But then, her freckles still glowing, she swats the coffee out of my hand, staining the walls, carpet, and my favorite D.A.R.E. T-shirt.

"He wants children, a son. I’m not ready."

Fists clenched, I do my Anger Routine like I was taught: count to twenty, name as many state capitals as possible, and breathe through the nose. When I get to Dover, Delaware, I remember that this is my sister—my high-strung sister—and the violent urges surging through my veins subside. It usually takes me at least until Providence, Rhode Island to calm down, and I learned this doing one-hundred and eight days in the Buncombe County Jail. Armed with a roll of paper towels
from the kitchen, she stares down at the soiled carpet. I put my arms behind my back.

“Maybe I’d be a good uncle.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because I had an abortion last week.”

Everything slows way down. My sister’s hands shake as she scrubs. Although my eyes are blurry, I can see that her fingernails, usually shiny and polished, look sallow and worn-down. Fighting the urge to brush the stray hairs off her forehead, I unclench my fists and bend down to help. We take turns scrubbing. But the stain won’t come up.

“Fuck it,” I say and go change my shirt. Standing in front of the closet mirror in my bedroom, I don’t look at my face. Or the knife scars on my chest and arms. Prayer, the twelve-step program, regular exercise, the touch of a woman, nothing keeps the past at bay except good old-fashioned denial. I can feel my sister’s eyes on the back of my neck, blue and hot.

“I can’t hear anymore about it.”

“I wasn’t starting a conversation. It’s my problem.” She touches the biggest scar on my forearm. “Why wasn’t I there for you?”

“What could you have done if you were?”

“Been there.”

I spin around so fast it makes me dizzy, face her. She takes one step back. Then another.

“Your money was there,” I say. “That’s not nothing.” My sister shivers, a full-bodied twitch, and wraps her arms around her flat stomach. I ease past her, into the living room, stepping over the stain in the carpet.

“We can’t go up tonight. They’re predicting snow.” Blood pumps into my brain. I feel her hand, warm and strong, on my arm. A realization: no one has touched me in months. Not even a handshake. Her eyes are blue cracked red.

“No,” I say and she pulls an envelope from her back pocket, shoves it into my chest.

“Here. I know we’re not friends anymore. Or rock’n’rollers.”

I look inside the envelope, and it’s cash: ten, crackling one-hundred dollar bills that stink of silk and chemicals and fresh ink. I run my
fingertip along the jagged edge of the bills. I think about the three thousand I owe Brady Long, esq. I fantasize about new CD players and bags of good coke and extended road trips in Mexico. I taste metal. My stomach moves, and I work my way from Juneau, Alaska to Lansing, Michigan to Montpelier, Vermont without looking up. I throw the envelope back at her.

"The answer is still no." Her nose is running, dripping onto the carpet. I bend down and wipe it clean with my bare arm. "I do know another place we can go."

Thirty minutes later and we're tiptoeing through the back door of Rick's Outdoor Sporting Goods, Kate carrying a grocery bag full of Ballpark franks and two pints of Jameson. Once inside, I punch the alarm code, grab the big yellow flashlight marked JANITOR, and switch it on. I open the door leading out to the sales floor and aim the narrow beam of light down the center aisle. Kate giggles.

"Follow me," I say. As we move towards the front of the store, Kate's new hiking boots squeak and I shine the light on the various sales departments I have to dust and mop: lanterns and grills on the right, fishing and tackle on the left, and the rifles in the back by the toilets. When we reach the kayaks, Kate puts her arm on my shoulder. I stop.

"It's really dark in here. No moonlight."

I nod and quickly realize she can't see me.

"I feel like if I move a foot to either side I'd be lost."

I nod again, grunt.

"You have to clean this place? All by yourself?"

The flashlight flickers on and off. I hit the compartment where the batteries go and curse. Kate jumps, and the booze bottles clink together.

"Sorry," she says.

I feel around for her hand. But I can't find it.

"Come on, we're almost there." We move forward: ten, eleven, twelve steps. In the middle of the store, I shine the light on a mock campsite where Brenda, the store's stoner general manager, set up a four-man tent, two high-tech folding chairs, and a fake fire. Surrounding the campsite is a six-foot high cardboard cutout of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the leaves changing everywhere red, yellow, and brown.
In the valley of one of the mountain peaks is a waterfall. Kate sits the groceries down by the campfire rocks made of plastic. I hand her the flashlight, grope around for a place to sit.

"Wow," she says and props the flashlight up against one of the rocks so she can admire the view. Uncapping the whiskey, I drink and watch thousands of dust mites rise off the burning flashlight. I watch my sister explore the smooth cardboard mountains with her fingers. I watch her try to dip her hand in the clear pool beneath the waterfall. When she moves beyond the light, I sense her movements and listen for her quick breaths in the dark.

"Where are you?" She completes a second and third lap around the mountains, stops in front of the tent. Half of her is in light, the other half in shadow.

"I'm sorry about all this."

I tell her the store is closed on Sunday and Monday and to sit down and shut up and start camping.

"That's not what I meant."

I grip the bottle, take a big gulp, and feel the liquor sliding down my throat and into my belly. Kate, anxious to be a real camper, sits down beside me, kicks the leg of my chair. I pass her the bottle. While she sips without making a sound, I ignore the darkness beyond our little mountain range illuminated. I forget about the Plexiglas rifle cases, smudged with fingerprints and fried chicken grease, and the old-fashioned cash registers I clean with a feather duster, and the racks of canoes that attract spider's webs. I focus on the fire, the flashlight, and the view. Quiet.

"Here," Kate says and drops the bottle in my lap.

She sighs and I tell her that words don't echo in here and hit the bottle hard and wonder if my big sister ever got any of the telepathic messages I sent her when I was gone on coke and booze and hatred.

"You know the owner of this store gave me a job after I got out of jail. He even let me sleep in the stockroom for a couple weeks until I found a place of my own. All I had to do was find him some dope once in awhile." I feel a hand on my knee, a squeeze that pops my joints.

"I told Dennis what I did. After some broken dishes and two Xanax, he said he loved me anyway. Can I ever forgive him for that?"

All the air in my lungs escapes. I want to look at my sister, play connect
the dots with her freckles. I want to tell her something, anything, about how I feel empty and full and scared when I’m alone on my back in the woods outside and I’m waiting—waiting for the sky to drop or the trees to dance or God, upon high, to laugh. But I don’t. Instead I offer her hard liquor. She accepts my meager gift, and I slap her on the back.

“Jesus Christ,” she says. “Walking out of that doctor’s office after.”

The flashlight flickers again, and I kick it. The light still burning, I tell Kate I saw a shrink when I got out of jail.

“So are we impervious to psychoanalysis?”

“She said everything I did, the fighting, the drugs, playing music, I did because I was lonely. ‘Everywhere lonely,’ she used to say. ‘That’s the human condition.’” I feel the hand slide off my knee, gently and with a scratching sound.

“Everywhere lonely?”

The words sound heavier in the dark. I nod. We don’t talk. The light shines bright on our mountains scene, and I listen for rushing water, for the red and yellow leaves to stir in the trees. I hold my breath—the way I did when the Uniforms yelled, “Lights Out.” My hands and feet go numb. I know the real moon is out there somewhere, hiding behind a real cloud, and I hear my heart beating in my ear. It takes me a minute to realize Kate is speaking and that I’m not alone. She steps into the light, mascara smeared at the corners of her eyes, long strands of fragrant hair covering part of her face.

“Okay. We’ve seen the scenery and confessed our sin. Now what?”

“Usually I sing.”

“Perfect. I want you to sing to me.”

“I didn’t bring my guitar.”

“I brought it. It’s in the car.”

Pliable from the alcohol, I grab the flashlight and do as she asks. When I return, I put the flashlight back in its place and sit Indian-style by the fire. I tune up, Kate lying at my feet. While trying to remember that prayer Mom taught us about strength and serenity, I pluck the E-string.

“Kate,” I say and she punches me in the knee.

“No. Sing. Now.”

So I sing. At first I sing early Beatles, pre-mustache, pre-revolution songs about true love. I get into it. I pretend I have shaggy hair and
adoring fans and toss my head about as I hit the higher notes. Kate laughs. We both drink.

“I’m more popular than Jesus Christ,” I say and play some more, the chord changes sloppier now that a nice numb feeling has settled into my stomach. After “Help,” I reach down and stroke my sister’s hair and inhale the spring scent of her organic conditioner. Even though the music has stopped, she continues humming.

“Play some of our songs.”

“I only remember one.”

“Then play it.”

“I’ll try.” The opening riff—little more than a perversion of “Satisfaction (I Can’t Get No)”—is fast and fun. As I play, I remember opening our five-song shows with a howl and a bright red E-chord. The words pour out of me. Kate sings along, her head propped against my shoes.

“Maybe if you’d have sung the songs things would have turned out better.”

Kate yawns. My mood shifts. Next, I play a Leadbelly tune, something about pine trees and a lack of sunshine and faithful women. My voice is so gravelly it scares me. I sing the gloomy chorus over and over and over again, strum the chords softer and softer each time through. Finally, my voice gives out, and I shake Kate’s shoulder. But she doesn’t move. I tug on her hair.

“Wake up.”

“Is it over?” she moans, half asleep.

The flashlight flickering, I kick it, and the light settles on the waterfall. The light is weak, but I can make out the rocks and the cool, clear water and a sliver of trees on the mountains above the falls. I set my guitar aside, focus my eyes. But the light flickers once more then dies.

Later, I wake up with my head in the campfire, drool leaking onto the plastic rocks, one arm wrapped around the guitar. My head is spinning. I sit up, glance around the campsite. No Kate anywhere, just her empty hiking boots by the tent flap. Before I limp to the back of the store, I munch a hotdog from the opened package and fumble for my shoes, the store still drowned in darkness.

“Kate,” I say and stomp my feet into my sneakers. I walk down the
center aisle, sense where the door leading to the office is and open it. Inside the light hits me quick. After my eyes adjust, I find my sister sitting on the cot I used to sleep on. She’s staring at a deer head mounted above the owner’s desk, a prize buck he brought back from Montana. Her arms pressed against her chest, she rocks gently back and forth, the cot squeaking. I put my hand on her shoulder.

“Kate,” I say but she won’t look at me.

“His eyes are light brown.”

“Don’t do this to yourself.”

“His antlers look healthy too.”

“Let’s get out of here.” I squeeze her shoulder blade, and she seizes my hand, pulls me in close enough to smell her morning breath.

“You wouldn’t ever do that, would you?”

I take another look at the head. It’s sculpture now, permanent, beyond pain, not real.

“No,” I say. “I wouldn’t.” I brush a few greasy strands of hair off her face.

“That deer I hit got away. I know he did. I can feel it in my bones.”

I pick her up like a baby and carry her out of the office.

“There’s a chance,” I say and shut off the overhead light.

After we clean up and break camp, the sun is threatening to come out from its hiding place. We lock up the store, and I tell Kate I have to go to work. But she insists on buying me breakfast before she leaves town.

“Waffle House,” she says as we pull into the half-empty parking lot. We hustle inside and blow warm air on our hands and take a booth. While waiting for the coffee, Kate stares out the window—at the mountains, big and brown in the distance.

“The trees look like skeletons.”

I unzip my jacket, but don’t take it off. I don’t want anybody to get a look at the scars on my arm.

“I wish our mountains were real.”

“Too many compromises,” she says.

Before the pancakes come, I go to the bathroom to wash up, splash water on my face. Avoiding my reflection in the cracked mirror, I soap
my hands, rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat. The water is loud in my ears. When I turn the faucet off, I hear someone banging on the bathroom door.

“I’m almost done.” I elbow past a trucker-looking guy in overalls and walk back to our booth. But Kate is gone. I sit down and look out the window in time to catch her black Suburban running a red light. As she speeds down the road, her right blinker flashes and she aims the car towards the exit marked Blue Ridge Parkway, strands of her dark red hair blowing out the window. The sun is hiding behind gray clouds. Our breakfast arrives.

“I think it’s going to snow.” I take the hot coffee mug from April, our waitress. I thank her and notice the iron-gray streaks running through her ponytail. She reaches into her apron.

“She wanted me to give you this.”

She drops Kate’s envelope on the table. I slide out of the booth, stand, and study April’s face. It looks like a topographic map, bumps and craters everywhere. She smiles, revealing clean white dentures. Blowing nicotine breath my way, she asks if I need something else.

“No,” I say. “I’m not angry.” Then a sense of calm washes over me, and I pick up my plate of pancakes and frisbee it across the room, careful to avoid hitting any customers in the head. When I hear the jukebox glass shatter, my hands stop shaking.

“I’m not angry.” I start counting, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. April flaps her skinny arms in front of my face.

“Get it together, honey. Or I’m calling the law.”

I put my hands behind my back and pace the floor. The tree skeletons on the mountainside mock me.

“Atlanta, Georgia. Bismarck, North Dakota.” April backs away.

“Stop it. You’re scaring the customers.”

“Boise, Idaho. Boston, Massachusetts.”

“Frank, call the police. We’ve got another one.”

“Columbia, South Carolina. Columbus, Ohio. Dover, Delaware.” I clench my fists tighter behind my back while Frank, the cook, waves a greasy spatula at me. I’m nearing the end of the line, Topeka, Kansas, and I can hear things outside: police sirens, screeching tires, and boots hitting concrete.