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Even when we were young, the dark called to my brother in a way it didn't call to me. If such things are allotted to us somehow, if we are given ordinary measures of light and dark between us, the dark reached for my brother and not for me.

Jimmy was born complicated on the inside, in layers that I have only begun to see. The inside layers are as clear to me now as if they had always been visible: thin and delicate, translucent and veined, a glowing tissue-paper lantern, complex and iridescent as a dragonfly wing. This is where the artist lived, where the painter that he grew up to be was waiting, bathing him in the color he would bring to the canvas, the beautiful world pulsing through tiny veins, even then.

I wonder, sometimes, how long it took for the dark to notice him.



When we were little, we drove for days once to visit our cousin's farm in Ontario; my brother and I, buckled in the backseat of our new family car, watched the prairies pass by our windows like an endless golden ribbon. The farmhouse had chickens in the kitchen and cows standing at the back door.

When it got dark, Aunt Jackie took all the kids out to the field to walk in the tall grass, each of us armed with an empty pickle jar. As we

walked, fireflies flew up around our ankles as if we were floating across a field of stars.

I had never seen fireflies before. I was captivated, enchanted by the night. The dark was nothing with a field of stars at your feet. If you were quick, you could catch the fireflies in your hands and put them in your jar. After a while, everyone had bright jars of fireflies but me.

"I can't catch any!" I said, embarrassed that my voice broke, as if I was crying.

"Crying's not going to make you any faster," Aunt Jackie called out from the dark.

I decided I didn't want a firefly anymore.

"Suit yourself," she said.

Later, when my aunt wasn't looking, my brother whispered to me.

"You can have mine," he said.

He loosened the lid and held the jar underneath mine to let his fireflies fill up the empty glass. That night I walked all the way back to the porch by myself, with a magic lantern of my own, as if there was no such thing as darkness.

Everybody needs a brother who can catch fireflies, I thought to myself.

I loved him fiercely.



The night our father died, I sat in the quiet of the hospice room staring at the stillness of his body. I breathed in the silence, the whispers and moaning of grieving had stopped. His wife and her daughter were there, but for a moment I had the peculiar sense of having been left, a child abandoned on a park bench in a strange town.

I had walked with him for three long months to his death, about which I could do nothing, shuffling down the dimly lit corridor to the place where he would finally leave me and go on ahead. When you lose someone you love, the world comes undone for a while.

I knew I could not go back, that night, to cups of tea and boxes of tissues at their trailer. I knew I could not offer any words of comfort to his

wife, Dona. I knew I could not yet endure the tears settling into memories in the quiet of the living room, the absence of his things already packed up and put away. I knew I could not hear anyone speak his name without feeling myself smash into a thousand pieces, an icicle dropped on the cement.

“I’ll come by in the morning,” I said. “My things are unpacked and it’s late. Probably best if we all get some sleep.”

That night, when I’d left to drive to the Oasis Hotel on the highway, having left his body there under the covers, eyes closed and hands turning a bluish white, I was not more than four blocks from the hospice, when I realized I’d forgotten already the shape of his fingernails.

Already.

I wheeled the truck around and drove back fast, running to the door, ringing the midnight bell, explaining to the night nurse that I’d forgotten something. And this was true. I slipped down the nighttime hall to the empty room to study his hands one last time: the square, strong fingers, big enough to once cup both of my small hands inside them.

That night, as I lay in the hotel bed staring at the bulb on the ceiling, the mattress crinkling through the thin sheet beneath me, I dreamed of my brother, Jimmy.

It was a kind of wakeful dream.

But it must have been a dream.



He was there in the room with me, looking just the same, the same soft skin on his cheeks, but his glasses were new, or at least I didn’t recognize them. He was sitting on the vinyl chair beside the bed, leaning forward, reaching out to pass me something he held in his hand.

It was a large, smooth stone, as big as a fist.

I turned onto my side and looked up at him. I didn’t even say hello, I just told him straight out:

“Dad died,” I said. “A few hours ago.”

He said nothing; he just held the stone out for me.

I suppose he already knew.

When I sat up to reach for it, when I felt it firmly in my hand, I must have woken. He was gone and there was no stone, but my hand could still feel the weight of it, as if it had just been there.

And I knew right then what that stone had been for.



When we were little, our parents bought a cabin on Cluculz Lake from an old woman who had loved the cabin for twenty years.

“Just don’t move those stones,” she’d said, pointing her arthritic finger to the small circle of stones at the bottom of the hill, toward the lake. She was giving my mother a few directions before she handed over the keys.

“The flowers come up there every year, about the same time as the Blue Martens come back,” she said. “The stones protect them, you’ll see. Just don’t move them.”

I believed her. I didn’t need to know then that from the beginning of time, women in quiet corners of the world had carried stones and made circles with them for protection, calling down the sacred and the divine, like some force field that would stand guard against what they feared.

Her words were authority enough. The stones would not be moved. They would circle the place the flowers belonged without wavering, without rest, through every cold winter and every long night. And every spring the green shoots pushed through the earth in the center of the circle of stones about the same week that the birds came back to live in the summer birdhouse.

When I was brave enough to explore the forest on my own, in the places where twigs snap and pine needles softly blanket the forest floor, I found a clearing, an opening in the woods, dark and gentle, circled by the trunks of strong trees. It was a place that would become mine, a place that I would carry inside myself for the rest of my life, the trees marking out a boundary, familiar and strong.

One spring, I found something in the clearing that frightened me. There were soft white feathers scattered all across the space that was mine. And when I looked further I saw a tangle of twigs up against a stump at the edge, eggshells scattered and smashed, a rounded basket-like indent

in the earth, shaped by twigs and feathers, more egg shells, more feathers. And then I knew.

A terrible thing had happened.

I ran from the forest to get my father. Someone should know about this, I thought, running for help.

“Something terrible has happened!” I shouted to him.

He ran with me over the logs and through the branches and ducked inside to stand in the clearing. He stopped and scanned the ground, then looked at me with gentle eyes, relief, a look I was too young to understand. He was always good at this sort of thing.

“What do you think?” I said finally, when I’d caught my breath and been quiet long enough. “Maybe a wolf?”

He was quiet, thinking. He touched my hair with his hand and then bent down.

“Looks like a fox got in,” he said, taking his hat off and reaching for a piece of white shell, studying it.

I was amazed. How calm my father seemed in the face of this. He placed the shell in my small hands and cupped them inside of his.

“But how could it?” I asked him, incredulous that this could be true. I felt my lip quiver and my eyes grow blurry with tears. “How could that happen?”

“Well, sometimes these things happen,” he said.

I was certain it had been a wolf.

We were quiet.

“Do you think the mother and father were killed?”

I tried not to think of them being eaten. I tried not to notice all the feathers, scattered violently around the clearing.

He was thinking about what to say next.

“No, they’re probably all right,” he said. “They must have been out getting food.”

I thought about what he said for a long time before I asked, because I wasn’t sure I could bear the answer:

“But why did they leave their babies alone?”

“Well,” he said, pausing, thinking. “Sometimes they just have to.”



He could not have known then, how things would turn out.



Later that afternoon, I felt I had to do something; that there was something that should be done. And so I filled my t-shirt with stones from the lake and carried them into the forest, making trip after trip until I had enough stones. I gathered the shells and feathers from the ground and put them inside the nest. Then I made a circle around the nest with the stones, marking it, protecting it. The stones would not be moved.

Many years later, when I was married with children of my own, I went back to find that place, and there, up underneath, in the same clearing, was the circle of stones, standing guard, marking the place that had once held a family.

The night my father died, I felt in my hand the stone that Jimmy had kept for me, for the circle of stones in the clearing.

This, I have come to realize, is why I write these pages. They are the stones I carry from the lake to tell this story: to lay the questions we could not answer on the soft ground; to mark the place on the earth that once held a family. Through every winter and every long night, the circle of stones remains for those who come to the forest long after we are gone.