

The Sister



A girl named Caroline lived with her twelve brothers in a house on the edge of the woods. The youngest, Philip, was her friend and responsibility. Mother and Father had died years ago of an illness. The brothers talked about how hard it had been to watch, something Caroline couldn't remember. Each of the brothers had a job. Some wore suits and some wore coveralls.

Philip had been born with one eye, due to his mother's fever during pregnancy. The eye rolled around in his head, searching whichever room he found himself in for his sister. The brothers avoided or ridiculed him. He was a reminder of the bad times. They'd all expected him to die inside their mother, but he had thrived and become another mouth.

She'd never seen the brothers cry. Except for Philip. She and Philip cried often, as a game. If one cried over something real, the other cried in response. They sat across from each other doing this on many nights. One time, Philip found a dead kitten in a nearby field and wept that something small had died, and Caroline joined in, though she cried for Philip and not for the kitten.

They cried and felt great relief and slept in the same bed. She liked to watch the tears dribble from his eye onto the pillow.

To get some time to herself, Caroline gave Philip her comic books. They were a mixed bag of superheroes and dramas, either villains or boyfriends. One day, she left him reading in her room and went walking in the woods to gather black cap berries to put in their yogurt. When she arrived home, Philip was gone and the fire roared in the kitchen.

“Where’s Philip?” she asked her eldest brother, who stood glowing by the fire. He tossed a stick into it.

“Who?” he said.

“Philip!”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

She had occasionally felt burdened by Philip, but she always tried to keep this to herself and never talked to her brothers about her feelings. They didn’t have time for feelings.

She went out into the forest to look for him. It never occurred to her that her brothers might have killed Philip. She imagined him hiding somewhere: inside a tree or in another form, like a boy in a story. She stopped and searched within every hollow tree, and when a fawn appeared, she stared at it for a long time to see if she would recognize Philip. She did this every day for weeks. She knew that in fairy tales, sisters were often heroes.

At dinner she asked the parliament of her brothers what had happened to Philip. She just wanted the truth.

“We don’t know who you’re talking about,” they said.

Their denial frightened her, so she retreated to her bedroom to cry and think. She listened to Philip’s favorite music, which was her favorite music. What kind of game were her older brothers playing? Of course, Philip was real. She’d spent every waking minute with him for five years. But he never reappeared, and she began to doubt herself. She possessed no pictures of him. He never wanted to be captured.

She turned to her computer for answers. Out of habit, she typed in the search field, “Where is my brother?” and nonsense that had nothing to do with her populated the screen.

Many years passed, and she left the house. Her brothers wanted her to stay and take care of them, but they couldn’t keep her there. She moved out while they slept. She carried Philip with her, though she never spoke about him with anyone. In school, she met a girl named Samantha who wanted to love her. At first, Caroline found it difficult to take the love while still holding Philip inside. She had promised herself she would care for him, even in his invisibility.

She and Samantha shared a bed, studied and ate together. The stories Caroline told about her life were fiction.

After graduation, Samantha became successful, and they moved into an apartment in the city. Caroline found herself surrounded by new people who wondered aloud at her mysterious quality.

At a party, a man approached her. “What is it about you?” he said. He was directing a play and

asked her to come audition for him. She'd never thought of acting before. To receive so much attention, to be looked at so closely!

Now, during the day, she worked for a bedridden writer, typing scribbled notes into a computer. At night, she walked on a stage while holding a fake baby wrapped in a blanket. "I never thought I'd be this happy," she told the audience. In act two, she smothered the baby.

Once in a while, she'd receive a call from a brother to inform her that one of the others had died. The oldest of a heart attack, the next of lung cancer from breathing in particles of something at his job, another fell off a trail while hiking. She didn't go to the funerals.

The play became a hit. After a performance, she and Samantha walked home instead of taking a car. They walked off the great avenues and down very old, narrow streets. Boys appeared everywhere she looked. Some wore leather and sprawled on steps in front of shops, or wore T-shirts and put their skinny arms over their heads as if to display their track marks. Some called to her and called her "lady." "Hey lady," they said, though she was not much older. They seemed feral, shape-shifting in the dark.

At the height of her glittering new life, as people surrounded her at the stage door after a performance, she spotted Philip in the huddle. She knew it was him, somehow here after all this time. But he had two eyes instead of one, and when he finally made it to her, he handed her a little book of blank pages. At first, she held it without speaking. How transformed he was, looking just like anyone else in the crowd.

"That scene," he said. "When you kill the baby. She has to do it, of course. But it hurts every time."

"What name would you like me to write?" she asked finally.

When she handed the book back to him, he held it to his chest and waited for her to finish with the rest of the people. Then, they walked together down the avenue away from the bright theater. She could have called for a car, but she was afraid to change the moment in some way. She couldn't bring herself to ask him where he'd been or come right out and say: "Do you know who you are?"

She let him lead—something she was no longer accustomed to, letting men lead her places—and found herself in the roaring tunnels under the city, where they entered together a gleaming tube which would take them home.

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