

Sisters Peeling

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Late in the night after my father's memorial service, my sisters and I stopped our small caravan at a Speedway in the stretch of US-40 between Greencastle and Indianapolis. It was early November. "Come with me," my sister Emily said, leading me to the back of her car and opening the trunk. She pointed to a box in the corner. "You want some?" she asked sounding like a drug dealer, which at one point she had been. I saw her slipping back in easy—my dad's ashes were valuable and sort of dangerous—I felt like it may have even been against Indiana state law to have them, let alone scatter them, though I never checked.

When I said nothing, she prodded, "You want even just a little? There's so much to go around." Sarah, our oldest sister, was waiting in the passenger seat—she had already been dealt her ash-inheritance. It was late and it was cold; I wanted to go to sleep. Emily looked at me intently. The way the gas station lights slanted cast a shadow across the top of her face, and I could not make out her expression.

"No," I finally said. "I'm trying to quit."

The nozzle on the gas pump clicked, and she sighed, shut the trunk.

My father most frequently explained the differences between the three of us in a hypothetical story. *Say there was a climbing tree, the story began, and I told my girls to go climb it however they wished. Julie, my youngest, would pick the lowest possible branch and sit still. Sarah, oldest and my right hand, would climb to the middle of the tree, where the branches were still strong and she would wait for further instructions. Emily, my middle, would climb to the top and I'd have to call the fire department to get her down.*

Dad's nickname for Sarah was *Boot*, as if to say, *I couldn't leave the house without you*. For Emily, it was *Bullet*, as in, *this girl can move*. For me, he had no nickname. I imagined my nickname was *Spare*, as in the one that filled in whatever the other two couldn't.

Emily did the pouring, or scattering, or dropping. We were all there the night

he died, but after his body was cremated, Emily took sole possession. She was the only one with hands directly on the ashes. She scattered the first bit following my father's memorial service. All three of us were in attendance, dressed in matching shades of black and gray.

We drove out to my father's house to put him under the crabapple tree where our old cat, Heifer, was buried.

"Dad would like to be nearby Heifer," I said, because it felt like someone needed to say something, and the cat's name sounded ridiculous and poignant to me.

Although we were intent on scattering the ashes, we had come to take my father's navy uniform. The house had been abandoned for weeks. My stepmother—we hoped—was staying with her sister. If she were at the house, we'd be in trouble. She was a meth and pill addict, and my childhood years were fraught with her abuse. My father locked his prescription painkillers in the garage toolbox so she couldn't get to them. She wore dentures because she'd lost all of her teeth.

She had always been volatile, but she had grown increasingly antagonistic toward the end of my father's life. After she left a message for Emily saying she was planning on selling us the ashes after he died, we took action: working with my father to finally make a will. Even though the will left everything to her—except for what my father called, "sentimental trinkets"—nothing could make her less determined to fight us. Tensions were high by the time the memorial came around, and Sarah, who was flying back home to Washington the next day, wanted that uniform before our stepmother cut it into pieces or threw it into a dumpster. It felt like time was running out.

Around the house, my stepmother had posted a multitude of *No Trespassing!* signs. Three were taped inches apart on the garage door. We knew they were meant for us. Sarah checked the house for our stepmother, then keyed into the garage with little fanfare. I followed. Purposeful, she strode across the concrete floor. She pulled my father's uniform off the rack of coats hanging above the deep freezer.

My father kept clothing everywhere but Sarah knew exactly where the uniform was. She must have been thinking about it for weeks, picturing right where it hung. I felt ludicrous and wild standing with the garage door cracked, doing nothing except watching my sister steal something that had been our father's but now technically no longer belonged to anyone. I looked around the garage, wanting to push that feeling further—everything was up for grabs. I wanted to steal something my stepmother would notice. Maybe the old stereo with aluminum foil taped to the antenna. Maybe the car. I took a step in, but Sarah was already pushing me out, the uniform bundled in her hands. I thought for one raucous moment of burning the whole place down, instead. Who cared if she

noticed our theft? I wanted her to see the flames. If I couldn't have my father, or his things, I at least wanted to have a hand in their nonexistence.

Sarah locked the door again, quick like it never happened.

My heart pounded as the three of us made our way out to the tree, mission before us and behind us—Sarah, blossoming thief; Emily, dealing dealer; me, fantasizing arsonist.

No one was quite real without my father there to center us. He felt freshly gone, absent and unable to superimpose or articulate his own characterizations or expectations onto each of us. I didn't realize until later that we treated scattering his ashes as if maybe they would fill this void, and all the other ones too.

My father loved to fake his own death. He did it twice, before he started dying the third and final time. It happened first when we were in the garden behind my childhood home. I was between Sarah and Emily in the rows of corn, planting helicopter seeds when my father careened toward us, limping.

"Girls, I got bit," he said. "There's not much time."

"Bit by what?" Sarah asked, eyeing his ankle, which had purpled and was bleeding.

"Copperhead. Didn't see it until I saw it, you know?" He coughed, sinking down until he was on his back, a hand outstretched limply into the rows of fledgling corn. "I need one of you to suck out the poison, or I'm a goner."

"I'll do it," Sarah said. She crawled toward him.

He coughed again. "Never mind, it's too late. This is goodbye," he stretched out each word between gasps and then stopped moving.

"Dad, Dad," I said. I opened up my hands, letting the helicopter seeds fall.

Sarah looked at him—emotionless—in the moment that followed. Emily reached out to put a hand on his arm. She seemed hesitant to react too quickly. Both were better acquainted with my father than me.

After a few silent moments, my dad squinted open his left eye. "Gotcha!" he said. He laughed now, laughed harder and harder at his own joke. "Just a wasp bite, dummies!" And Emily laughed too, on the inside of the joke. Sarah stood up and left the garden. I was shamed by my tears, embarrassed by being tricked so easily.

A few years later at Halloween, my father choked on "poisonous" candy. This time I was the only one who believed. Emily was incredulous, repeating herself saying, *you're joking, you've got to be joking*.

"Dad," I said, crying. "Dad, come back."

After a minute or so, he did, of course. He came back to us grinning, purple juice from the candy trailing down his chin, sticking to his brown beard.

"Julie, you are so easy," he said. "You're just like your mother—so easy to fool."

In hindsight, we said his dying was quick. Eight months, then gone. But the summer before my father actually died, his dying seemed to last a long time; it was a slow suspension. We watched him fall toward death in a long descent like through a jar of molasses.

I drove to his house and helped him plant a garden, feeling sarcastic about it. Why plant a garden you'll never see? After we finished, I tried not to think of it at all. By the time we scattered ashes at his house nearby Heifer, the tomato plants were so large they'd fallen sideways—vines laden with ripe, red fruit draping the stone walkway. Waste everywhere.

Years and years earlier, when we buried Heifer the cat, there was not much to be said at the ceremony. He had been a good sort of a cat—the James Dean of cats because he died so young. My mom and I took him to get put down; my sisters were already out at my dad's for the weekend. It was strange for my mother and me to be the ones to do this, because the cat belonged to Emily. Everything always ended up belonging to Emily.

After Heifer had been put into the permanent, forever sort of sleep, my mother wrapped him in a yellow and white beach towel and we drove to Greencastle. Emily pulled Heifer's still-warm body close to herself and cried to herself. Even at eleven, nobody could cry tears as beautifully as Emily. Her brows creased into a perfect V, and her lips would pout, not purse. Emily's suffering was never theatrical, but she did not try to hide or mask her sadness the way I felt compelled to do.

She laid Heifer back on the beach towel, and I realized the moment my mother and I shared, being there at Heifer's end, had gone. I didn't even realize it was a moment until it wasn't ours anymore.

Emily bundled Heifer like baby Jesus and my father dug a shallow grave.

"This crabapple tree will keep watch over you, Heifer," my father said. Then, looking to Emily, added, "And we all thought you were a dang fine cat."

My mother got a small amount of ashes doled out as well. She asked for them she said, to make her own peace. She was owed this for enduring fifteen years of marriage, and also taking over wifely responsibilities in the last of his days. It was my mother who oversaw his transfer to a hospice nursing home. Our step-mother refused to come when we called to say our father was in his last hours, so we called our mother instead. She sat with us all night, and when we all fell asleep near dawn, she didn't. She was the only one awake when he died.

By the end of his life, Emily had taken most of the hats from his house, wearing a new one—mostly baseball caps—every time she arrived at the hospital. At the hospital, Emily would crawl into his hospital bed with him to watch shows

on A&E or the History Channel. She knew all the nurses' names. She gave out cards after his death, each with a personalized note of thanks. She fought my stepmother and took on Power of Attorney, so it was Emily that signed for my father's ashes when they came back from cremation. Emily, whom my father finally named executor of the estate. It was Emily that made the dozens and dozens of calls to all his friends and our extended family after he died. "My dad's passed. Yes, Glen's gone on," she said. Or depending on whom she was talking to sometimes: "Yeah, our honey bunny just left us."

When Sarah came home from Washington, she had him dictate all his stories and memories to her. She wrote them down in a notebook. Sarah didn't want anything to get lost.

When I visited him, I sat at the foot of his bed and put my hand around his shrinking ankle through the bed covers. I told him to sleep while I read. My only real job came in talking to doctors. I sat with my father the previous March when he asked Dr. Schmidt, head of palliative care, what it would be like at the end. "You will get less hungry," she said. "You will only want to sleep."

My father nodded. I nodded. This was the only time we ever admitted to the inevitability of his death. Maybe it was why I was charged with the task—my father and I both knew not to discuss it outside the room.

The same night as the memorial, we also scattered ashes on a one-lane country road nearby the house. My father named this road for my sister because he thought of her as he drove it. We drove on Emily's Road all summer, mostly for the scenery. It was an exhibit of the best of what little western rural Indiana had to offer—narrow and winding creeks, rusted bridges, thick groups of trees that broke open into pastured clearings—so it seemed a fitting place to let three or four pounds of dad go.

When Emily finished pouring out the ashes, she tied the plastic bag to the barbed fence. We formed a circle, ritual now. We started to pray. In the middle of Emily's words, a car slowly crept down the road, headed toward us with little room to pass. I pictured how they saw us: a group of adults standing in a circle with linked hands far past midnight in the middle of the country.

"We are in a cult," I hissed, toward the center of the circle, my head turned slightly toward the car. "Everyone thinks we are in a cult."

Unabashed, Emily continued on. She wanted to finish this too. "Dad, we know you weren't in a cult. Dad, we know you'd never be in a cult. Amen."

Sarah was motherly by nature and family design, but when I went to visit her in Washington later that winter after dad had died, she outdid herself—always baking chocolate chip cookies and asking when I took my last anti-anxiety pill. We went for runs by the Sound. We watched three seasons of *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer. She let me go to bed at eight p.m.

A few days prior to Christmas, we got our only present: a family member had sent us matching anchor necklaces with ashes encased inside. Emily called, furious. Her question was twofold. One: How did they get any ashes? After all, she was the only distributor. Two: Who would surprise someone with this?

“Rule Number One!” she shouted at Sarah and me over speakerphone. “You do not surprise someone with someone’s remains! That’s Rule Number One, okay?”

“Okay, yes.” I said.

After a few minutes, I told them we must become like Kate Winslet in the movie *Titanic*. I made up this solution as I was saying it; my real urge was just to get rid of the necklaces as fast as possible. I thought of my father inside of them, looking out while I lived my day-to-day life. I didn’t tell them this particular form of ashes disgusted me more than depressed me. I just told my sisters we had to find bodies of water because some things were too heavy to be worn.

“We must do this for Dad,” I said. “For Leonardo DiCaprio.”

This was how three equal parts of my father ended up in Deception Pass, in Puget Sound, and in a small, unnamed creek near Plainfield, Indiana, where we once released a snapping turtle named Snappy. I was with Emily, just a few days left in December, when she dropped hers in the creek. The first real snow was falling fat around us.

“Do it, drop him,” I encouraged. I had just arrived home from Washington hours before. I had taken my third anti-anxiety pill of the day and was drinking a large chocolate milkshake. This was my favorite combination: numbed to everything except the sugar high.

“Bye, Dad,” Emily said; she dropped the necklace and we listened as it made a satisfying plop into the water. She was solemn, almost religious. Her hands were gripped on the rail, and she leaned over to look down into the water. She wasn’t wearing gloves.

“Bye, Dad,” I repeated, taking a drink of my shake. “Hope you find Snappy!”

My father’s slow death was an object of great weight. It had its own gravity. We all circled around it, pulled close, unable to break away. After he died, and after the ashes had been scattered, that weight imploded and we flung ourselves away from each other, unable to touch such similar looking sadness.

In January, I got into a bad habit of logging into my sisters’ email accounts. I missed them, but I couldn’t speak to them. I also knew too many passwords. I found an email Sarah sent to a tattoo parlor in Washington about using my Dad’s ashes as part of the ink for a tattoo she wanted to get. I read the email greedily. I felt like I did when I’d used all her Candies perfume. Or like when I’d taken the lid off of her terrarium without her knowing. The whole ecosystem

died and she never knew why.

I thought it through. She would have him under her skin, literally. She would carry his mark on her. Dad would have loved it. I felt disgusted by the idea, thinking of my dad fused to my actual skin. I wondered, suddenly, if Sarah even wanted to throw her necklace, or if she did it because I insisted. Another question I couldn't ask.

I was queasy, but I had to admit, it was brave. I waited for her to call me and tell me, but she didn't, and I couldn't tell her because I didn't want her to have to go through the hassle of changing her passwords; she'd had the same ones since she was sixteen. I also didn't want to go through the hassle of finding out what the new ones were. I had become too much a voyeur into my sisters' lives. A new sort of gravity had begun to pull on me. I looked for signs of change. Mostly there were none—just spam emails from eBay—but sometimes I found things like this. Sarah using the ashes of her own accord, marking herself as different.

Months later, Sarah sent me voicemails from my father that she'd burned onto a CD. In the fever of his death, I had deleted all of mine, worried that they would haunt me. Instead, I was haunted by their absence. Sarah and I had spoken only sporadically that year, testing out the strange new waters between us. Usually it was surface level; I thought we both feared what was underneath. It seemed like such a great intimacy, then, for Sarah to share these conversations—like she had sent them to someone who didn't know her father at all. For some time I couldn't listen. When I finally built up enough courage, I skipped to the one she had marked as being about me.

For hours, I listened to the voicemail. I rewound and replayed over and over how my father said my name. I was shocked by it, how he strung the vowels together easy, like he'd said it a million times. Suddenly the weight of my father having been the one that named me was clear to me. Everyone else, even my sisters, were just repeating something he defined. I could not shake the feeling I was hearing my name for the first time.

The final stop we made on the Tour de Dad's Ashes was the site of our childhood home in Plainfield. The house was bought and demolished by the airport when my parents were divorcing, along with the rest of the small neighborhood of 1950s cookie-cutter constructions. All that was left were trees, street signs, and one remaining house where an elderly deaf woman who had refused to sell still lived.

The neighborhood was shaped like a U with the looping together of two roads: Melody Lane and Harmony Drive. We lived on Melody. We pulled in front of our vacant lot. We parked our cars facing the yard and left the lights on so our path was lit.

My father was a nut about the back yard. Among other things, he built a fort—anyone else would have called it a tree house—for the three of us, and it was toward that tree we made our way.

The grass was tall and unmanaged. It was a cold night. It seemed right that this was the last place we stopped, as if we had been slowly peeling away years and not realizing it. We had to move backward until we got to the very start of my father's life as a father.

Emily had just begun to pour the ashes when a patrol car pulled into the lot across from us. The police officer turned on his spotlight.

"Emily, put the ashes away; this is illegal!" I said, breaking the circle we had made around the tree to pray. I was still not sure if this was true—that this act was illegal—but in situations where trespassing on airport property was involved, it seemed likely. "Put them away. Make like this never happened."

I felt panic rising inside of me. What were we doing with all these ashes? Why hadn't we looked up Indiana laws regarding what we were doing? *Why would we come to airport property at night after 9-11?* I did not want trouble with the police or the CIA over my dead father. I started backing toward the cars.

"Let's get out of here, let's get out of here now," I said.

"This isn't a crime," Emily said, her back to me. She faced the police car.

"Emily, yes it is." I suddenly realized the most relevant information to this situation. "Emily," I whispered. "*You have two felonies*, give the ashes to me." I was using all my tactics. "This is totally illegal. This is a third strike."

Emily didn't listen. She walked slowly toward the spotlight with her hands over her head, one still holding the bag of my father's ashes. She was calm. She knew the drill. The spotlight illuminated her small figure, the silhouette of one of my father's hats on her head.

Sarah started following her. Sarah would not abandon Emily to the police alone. I felt like an idiot—a chicken—for not joining them. I jogged to catch up, slowing when I was just behind Emily.

"At least don't tell them we are scattering Dad," I whispered to Emily.

"We are scattering our father's remains," Emily said calmly toward the direction of the spotlight.

"This is our childhood home," Sarah said.

"We mean no harm," I added; my voice was always a plea.

"Again," Emily said, as if admitting our crime once wasn't enough. "We are just scattering our father's remains."

The spotlight flickered, shut off completely. I blinked at the sudden dark.

The shape of a police officer emerged from the door. He was worried we were part of a bad car accident that happened just up the road. He was worried we might be hurt.

No, we all said. No, we aren't hurt at all.