Snapshot

by

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I got a snapshot in the mail today, with a letter from my older sister Dana, who lives in South Carolina in a rented cottage by the sea. A weathered boardwalk stretches from her front porch to a cliff, whence the beach below is reached by steps going down. I'm familiar with the shingled cottage, the boardwalk, and the cliff from photos Dana's sent with other letters.

The latest shows her daughter, Tovah, four years old, climbing up a sand dune. Higher on the slope, her back toward the camera, Dana stretches out a helping hand. I imagine it's her husband, Ron, who took the picture.

"Little brother—," Dana writes, "—this is us coming back from looking for killdeer eggs. Tovah didn't quite grasp that the birds playing lame were leading her *away* from their nests. She kept dashing after them, and got so disappointed every time one flew off.

"Ron went on ahead and lit a fire—it was really cold that day, a nasty breeze coming from the east—but Tovah wouldn't go home till we'd found a nest. She's very stubborn is your little niece."

Ron went on ahead and lit a fire. How cold could it have

been? I lift the photo by its edge. Dana's rumpled hair spreads loosely on the shoulders of a sweatshirt, the fleecy fabric warm enough, I guess, against a Carolina winter. Tufts of grass, vigorously green, cling to the dune she's helping Tovah climb. Up here in Toronto the trees are bent with ice, and the grass has long been hidden under drifts of snow.

The coffee-maker by my stove emits a cough of steam. I get up to pour a mug, the first of many. The grimy gas-range timer says a little after two. I return the chipped carafe and go over to the sink. By bending down and peering up, I can just make out the sky above the roofs across the street. Yesterday's striated grey still hides the sun.

The kitchen table rocks when I sit down. The apartment, heated by erratic pipes, has moved into a chilly phase. I wrap my hands around my mug and study Dana's letter. Her left-slanted writing isn't easy to decipher. The letters, though equivalently made, seem somehow incomplete, as if constrained by worry.

"Tovah found another sand dollar last week. She's got quite a collection now. The other day, she asked if she could spend them. Her dad got a laugh out of that! We've been taking lots of walks recently, exploring the beach. She'll be back in daycare soon. I don't want to see her go."

I read between the lines. Dana has to get a job. Ron's broadloom installation business must be slow again. She's

gone to work before, mostly as a waitress. I have a picture of her looking harried in a polyester shift with "Chubby's Diner" on the pocket. The employment never lasts. Tovah gets sick—small, childhood things: an upset tummy, a fever, an earache—and Dana quits.

Yet she finds time for so much else.

"The Read and Write Committee have moved their meetings to Wednesday, so I may have to give it up. Either that, or stop working with the deaf kids at the pool. Family Services is setting up a crisis line. They need people for the phones. I'm giving Butt-Out seminars to pregnant mothers."

Saint Dana, her husband calls her, or so she's written me. No mischance of childhood or parenting escapes her rehabilitative efforts. The work is volunteer; payment would be sacrilege. She and Ron could buy the cottage where they live if she kept a paying job.

A phone call interrupts my reading: a client—a regular—whose wife is out of town. Without thinking, I walk the phone into the bathroom and check the mirror. Sleep still rings my eyes, making me look thirty-four, not twenty-four, but the puffiness and creases will be gone by seven, which is when he wants to meet for drinks, dinner, unburdening his conscience, bed. I agree.

The shift from Dana's letter to my life and back again has made me lose my place. I scan the page, landing on a

sentence near the bottom.

"You know, little brother, I'm still convinced you'd love it here. I'm always saying so to Tovah. 'Your uncle Rick would love it here. . . '"

Little brother. Your uncle Rick. Your little niece. Her Dad. Word-cages—Dana's way of emphasizing family ties. At least, I think that's what they are. I could be wrong. Perhaps for her they're talismans, or invocations.

". . . the coast reminds me so much of Long Point. Mind you, Lake Erie is a pond compared to the Atlantic. Still, it feels the same. Maybe it's the trees—the aspens and birches, and inland, huge willows. Do you remember that old willow on the causeway from Port Rowan to the cottage? The one Jem said looked like a witch? There's one just like it on the road to town."

I remember. A gnarled giant, split by lightning, one half dead, the other trailing whips of leaves. But Dana's memory is faulty: it was I, at six, who first described it as a witch. Not Jem. Not Jeremy, our brother, the one whom Dana never traps inside an epithet.

"Our stretch of beach even has those same purplish patches of iron in the sand. Tovah's been using a magnet to collect the filings, just like you used to do." No, *that* was Jem. "She's got a pill jar full of them. And the dunes here, Rick. They're beautiful. Remember picnics at the Sandhills? I can

still see Jem, somersaulting down the slopes, making himself so dizzy he couldn't stand up . . . "

. . . and Dana at the top, restraining me, chewing at her lower lip till Jem's unmoving form leapt up with whoops that carried dimly to us on the wind.

I get up to pour another coffee, taking Dana's snapshot with me, holding it to catch the flat grey light that enters through the kitchen window. From behind, her tangled hair and sweatshirt give no indication of her age. The smallboned figure, bent-legged on a grassy dune, arm outstretched, could easily belong to Dana at eleven-twelve-thirteen, in the summers after Mom had gone—re- married—and we vacationed at Long Point alone with Dad, in the blue and yellow cottage with its soaring poplar shadowing the roof.

Those Julys and Augusts, an aunt we never liked came down the beach at noon to fix us lunch when Dad was up in Tilsonburg, selling crop insurance to tobacco farmers there. Dana fretted during noontime meals, unhappy at surrendering the wardship of her younger brothers to a stroke-afflicted woman who spoke in slack-lipped sneers from the working corner of her mouth while a bobbing cigarette trailed smoke up past a sightless, squinting eye. But when she left—*"Now don't get into trouble, you kids"*— Dana took control again and oversaw our afternoons of monkey-in- the-middle, frisbee in the lake, and banshee sprints through the bath-warm pools

that collected in depressions near the shore.

When Dad returned from work, he and Jem played catch, and while the evening shadows spindled to the water's edge, Dana walked me to a wooden-awninged canteen where we picked up quarts of milk and ice-cream. Feet sluicing through the sand, she'd say sometimes: "I feel responsible." With five years difference between us, I didn't know if she meant Mom and Dad and their divorce, or Jem and me, but I sensed her need for comfort and pretended that I understood, which made her take my hand, or stop to hug me.

My reverie is broken by a chugging in the heating-pipes. I prop the picture on the window sill, take my coffee to the table, back my chair toward the radiator. My eyes are tired, scratchy from returning home so late the night before. I let them close a moment. Those evening walks with Dana long ago, cool sand slipping through my toes, heels sinking to a warmer layer beneath . . . did they furnish practice for a later me, or did my empathy reveal an inborn skill? My clients like to talk, before and sometimes afterwards. They make up stories to excuse their time with me, inventing narratives to justify the simple human fact of who they are. Some of them—the regulars—have come to think they love me, because I seem to *understand.*

Dana knows that I'm "in sales," but I wonder if I wrote one day and said, "What I sell is me," would she feel as distanced

from her little brother's life as I feel now from hers? The letters that she sends across the border sometimes read like missives from a place more foreign than her husband's Charleston birth accounts for.

I open my eyes, reach forward for my coffee, slosh a little on the letter. "*. . . Jem, somersaulting . . .*" blossoms inside a splotch of brown. The ink separates, bleeds greenish-black into the paper. I rub the damp spot with my finger and lift the page. Underneath, another sheet of curbed handwriting, Jem's name visible in several places, easy to pick out because of Dana's odd-shaped J's; the hook turns down, not up. "*. . . Jem tearing off . . . the Wilcox's dog, chasing Jem . . . Jem running after . . .*"

. . . and I recall a blur of motion, two years older than myself, whirling in an aureole of sand and lake-reflected light: scudding down the beach beneath a train of skittish kites—not one, but four, strung together, red-green-yellow-blue; swimming in the easy Erie breakers with determined strokes that dared a shifting sandbar he could stand on to have drifted out beyond his stamina; careening round a corner of the cottage, watergun in hand.

And climbing. Too young—so Dana's apprehensive grip upon my shoulders said—not half as strong as Jem, I could only witness from below his leaping up to branches out of reach, or finding crevices in rocks too smooth to hold, or

monkeying up poles along the beach whose orange pennants warned of undertow. Just once, with cigarettes we'd stolen from the aunt, Jem helped me scale an absent neighbour's roof, where we crouched behind the railing of a widow's walk and blew lopsided smoke rings. I wonder how we ever slipped past Dana's heed that day.

I wonder, too, how Jem assayed unnoticed the poplar by the cottage. Its bottom branches lopped for hydro wires, it rose a full forbidden hundred feet above a sagging, unsound roof. Where was Dana when he clambered on the hinge-flapped wooden box that housed the water pump? Were she and I out front, shelling peas in high-backed wooden chairs when he grasped the eaves and swung up to the roof? Were we husking corn as he jumped and caught the lowest limb? Were we hulling berries while he swarmed the mass of glittering leaves? I have a memory of food, some routine summer dinner preparation halted by a rustling in the tree, Dana turning, yelling, "Jeremy, get down here *now*!", a startled scrabble high up in the leaves, and a body plummeting through branches—how could it be head first?—to the concussing, fatal roof below.

Dana can't remember peas, or corn, or berries. She maintains a different, telling memory. Twelve years after Jem, in the anxious weeks before her marriage, she recalled: "We were arguing that day." I saw no need to contradict her. She'd

be moving soon and wanted closure to a fractious adolescence after Dad remarried, in the years between Long Point and Ron. I nodded, let her speak, and said I understood.

I don't bother with the closing of her letter. It finishes, I'm sure, with more of summers at Long Point—nostalgic evocations, persistent confirmation that she's outgrown the happenstance of tragedy. Instead, I get up for a dishrag to wipe the bottom of my mug. On the sill above the sink, a snapshot of a little girl climbing up a grassy dune, aided by her mother. "My niece," I say aloud, "my older sister, Dana." The spoken verbal cognates of a kin-related unit with delineated parts and obligations do nothing to affect me. I take the photograph and tuck it with the letter in its envelope.

We never were as close as Dana thinks. If once we were, now, like a single cell, we've split apart, sharing chromosomes of memory, but detached. And, as sometimes happens when cells divide, small aberrations have crept in.

That final summer, Jem had reached a boyhood age of bridling at Dana's watchful custody. They disagreed from time to time, as siblings do. But they did not, as Dana claimed, argue on the day he died. Like my clients with their stories, her imperfect recollection discloses an overriding need to account for who she is.

In another confidence made just before departing for her

husband's snowless winter coast, to a landscape that recalls for her the contours of a sun-warmed Erie beach, Dana told her little brother, then nineteen and living on his own, as if he'd never heard the words before: *I always felt responsible.*

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