

To the West

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My sister looked like a dancer in the moments before her body crashed into my windshield.

I don't tell Claire this. Instead, I pick at my cuticles and ignore the scratch of her script onto her narrow notepad.

"It was Katelyn's idea to move west," I say, "and I followed her."

I always followed her. In high school, she ran track, so naturally I did too. But she was the lithe one, the narrow one, the aerodynamic one. She broke two school records. I only ever succeeded in breaking Michael McNally's heart. I blew him in the backseat of his car the night before we left, and he stroked my hair and called me an angel. He asked me to stay.

"We had my mom's life insurance money." I scrape dirt from beneath my nail. "It was money made for running."

But it wasn't enough.

She wanted to be an actor, me a writer. We would move west, find sunshine and gold in Los Angeles. Instead we found a 2-bed, 1-bath house crouched seventy miles from the city that leaked in the spring, baked in the summer, and almost achieved pleasantness during the two falls and winters we spent there together.

Everything was unpleasant once I was alone.

"How did your father respond to you leaving?" Claire asks. She's pretty. Thirties. Heart-shaped face.

"I don't want to talk about him." It's her third attempt in as many weeks. "Or where I grew up."

Missouri. Small town. The name doesn't matter because all towns with populations under 6,000 are the same.

"What about right after you moved to Lancaster?" she prompts. She's been latched to the past like a greyhound with a squirrel. I once heard a rumor that greyhounds can run themselves to death trying to chase an animal, running for miles and miles. I don't know if it's true.

"I got a job at Darby's." The Americana restaurant downtown. "I waitressed while sending writing samples anywhere that would take them."

And in the meantime, I bought a more expensive push-up bra, learned to lean and smile in just the right way, and spent my tips on our mortgage.

"In the beginning, Katelyn drove to LA for auditions. She would come home tired."

In the first few weeks, we spent our evenings in the dirt patch that was our backyard, backs to the earth and eyes on the stars, a bottle of wine and sometimes a joint to share. That was the beginning.

“Katelyn stopped driving to LA a few months later.”

Mom’s money didn’t last long after that. We needed another source of income. I got her a job at Darby’s but she snarled at me when I told her.

“I’m not like *you*, Hannah.” Her lips curled around my name, teeth bared. “I’m actually trying to *be* something.”

So I picked up extra shifts. I didn’t have time for submissions or the backbone for the rejection letters. My writing halted. I paid our bills.

“Moving out here was harder than we thought it would be,” I admit to Claire, but it’s not a breakthrough because it’s obvious. I only tell Claire the obvious things.

I don’t tell her about meeting my sister’s girlfriend for the first time in the fall before the accident. Darby’s closed early due to vent failure in the kitchen and I came home to find them on the sofa, Katelyn struggling to untangle herself from Elle’s arms to bark a bitter, “Why are you home?”

They had been dating for nine months. Almost the entire time we’d been in Lancaster. Nine months and I hadn’t even known my sister dated girls.

When I was six, Katelyn eight, she arranged a wedding to Dirk Kerr, the only cute boy on our block. She marked him as hers and held a wedding in our backyard, the dandelions brushing her bare ankles, a crown of wildflowers in her hair.

“You’re mine,” she said, sliding a grass ring onto his finger. “Forever.”

I clear my throat. “But then Katelyn auditioned for local theater. She told me she’d gotten the lead. We celebrated. Chocolate cake and champagne.”

But Katelyn had lied. It was only one of many she told me.

It doesn’t matter because she didn’t live long enough to act anyway.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I fish it out, holding up one finger.

“It’s my realtor.” I stand. “I need to get this.”

I’m in the hallway before she can object, but women like Claire don’t object. They just alter their eyes to say *I really wish you hadn’t*.

I answer the call, clipping out a quick, “It’s Hannah,” in replacement of a greeting.

“Hannah, it’s Trent Walker,” he says, shouting into the phone in the way my dad used to before the accident, before we stopped talking. “I just got off the phone with the Cask’s.”

I lean against the wall outside Claire’s office. There aren’t any seats at this end, the exit separated from reception for patient confidentiality. The exit hall has only a droopy houseplant urging me to make a swift getaway to the parking lot. As if I need convincing. I frown at its browning leaves.

“They’ve been reviewing the results of the home inspection and they’re not happy.”

I straighten, running my hand through my hair. “But we listed the roof as needing repair. We disclosed the water damage. They knew—”

I tilt my head back and stare at the ceiling. There’s crown molding in here. Katelyn wanted crown molding.

“The house is in bad shape, Hannah,” Trent drones. “Worse shape than we thought. It looks great at first glance, but the inspector’s report lists foundation issues, and the water damage in the east wall is severe enough to warrant total replacement. The house would have to be gutted.”

I hear what he doesn’t want to say. That Katelyn and I should have shelled out for a home inspection before we bought the place because these issues started long before we threw everything into the trunk of that old Pinto and drove out here.

But we had dreams, not money.

And, in the end, Lancaster had tragedy, not fulfilment.

“It’s more work than the Cask’s want, Hannah. They withdrew their offer.”

I close my eyes and inhale, expanding my diaphragm in a way that would make Claire proud. I hold my breath for three counts, then release.

“I need to sell this house, Trent.”

I need to get out of this town.

“I forwarded you the inspection report,” he continues. “The house is in really bad shape. And add to that....”

He starts but doesn’t finish. We both know what he’s going to say.

It’s damn hard to sell a house literally and figuratively stained.

Before mom died, we would spend evenings on the back porch, Katelyn fetching fireflies for me because she knew I loved them but was too afraid of smushing them to properly catch one. I would hold the jar and she would come running back with five, six, seven between her palms, all safe with her delicate fingers. She would dump them into the jar and I would screw on the lid and we would both sit, mesmerized by their glow.

There were fireflies in Lancaster, but Katelyn was always asleep by the time I got home, her bedroom door locked. I should have known she had secrets, but I only learned them after the accident.

Like how she'd tattooed our mother's signature right below her hip in a shocking display of proprietary rights for a woman who was only a shadow on our childhood, a ghost lingering at the edges. She became the star only when she scribbled a hasty goodbye and slit her wrists longways in the tub. Katelyn was fourteen and I was twelve.

After school that day, Katelyn was the first upstairs. I was there moments later as Katelyn keened, half in the tub, arms around mom, soaked and dripping and frantic.

There's an irony in how I mirrored her actions eleven years later in our driveway, keening and flailing and clinging to her, the car idling down the way, but irony doesn't interest me anymore. Life isn't about the metaphors, the between-the-lines. It's about the moments, the details.

Details like her hair, so thin and bright and blonde, like mom's, dyed dark brown-red by the blood leaking from a gash I had caused.

The blood still stains our driveway. My driveway. That's the problem with concrete. It's porous. Outside contaminants seep in.

Someone tried to help at one point, throwing a pile of sand over the stain while it was fresh in hopes of reversing gravity. All it did was leave me one more thing to clean up.

I duck out of the cab and hurry up the main walk, eyes on my phone. Claire has already sent me the obligatory *I am disappointed you left therapy early* text. "I want you to focus on being more present this week. Use your breathing to stay focused in a situation. We will touch base on how that works next week."

I swipe her notification away and open the email from Trent while fumbling with the door lock. I get it open and stumble my way inside while the inspection file downloads.

Thirty-four pages. Thirty-four pages describing my house, the 1,600 square feet Katelyn and I once called home. The floor of the living room where she did yoga in the first three months, claiming it centered her soul. The shotgun kitchen where I ate Darby's leftovers while tallying our expenses and telling myself it was okay to go to work, come home, pay bills, sleep, rinse repeat.

I scroll through the pages of offences, not quite reading, and let them absorb into me. These are the things that are wrong with the place you loved. These are the issues you should have seen. These are the problems you should have repaired.

I told Trent to lower the price again. I'm going to lose money, but I've been bleeding it since the accident.

I just need to get out of this house.

I drop my phone on the sofa and let myself wander to the traitorous east wall. Two thirds of it compose the back wall of the living space. The other third is in Katelyn's room.

In what was Katelyn's room.

Trent convinced me to box up her things before opening the door to potential buyers. A house with a driveway grave was bad enough. Seeing a dead girl's room would be triggering to some more hesitant buyers.

I enter the empty space and press my hand to the wall.

I was working a double at Darby's when a willowy brunette asked about hanging posters. "For the production of *Exit Row*?" she prompted, holding up the stack. "Can we hang one here?"

"My sister's the lead!" I exclaimed, beaming and reaching for the poster.

"Patty Hendrix has a sister?" the girl asked at the same time I saw the name. *Featuring Patty Hendrix as Sasha*.

"No," I murmured, cheeks heating. "Katelyn. Katelyn Marrow."

"Oh," the girl replied. "You mean she's the understudy! Cool. So, can we hang one?"

The next morning, I found Katelyn in the kitchen, back to me. Prepping toast for breakfast.

"You're a fraud," I said from my bedroom doorway.

She turned slowly. Somehow, she was thinner. When had that happened? Why hadn't I noticed?

"What?"

I exited my room, holding up the poster. "The play? The lead role?"

Patty Hendrix's name screamed from the page.

"Hannah, I—" she started but I slammed the poster onto the kitchen table.

"When were you going to tell me? Here I am, thinking *finally* things are working for you, *finally* my hours of working and paying your half of the bills are going to be worth it because you're going to be something, and then I find out you lied to me?"

"I—"

"I stopped writing for you. I put myself on hold for you because you couldn't admit for one moment that you might not be good enough."

She opened and closed her jaw, narrowing her eyes before speaking.

"I never asked you to do that. You followed *me* out here. I wanted to do it alone, but my *baby sister* had to tag along." She scowled. "I'm sorry you're not happy."

"Not happy?" My voice pitched. "Katelyn, I am *miserable*."

"Then leave."

Two words, neatly punctuated with a period.

We ran away together once, when she was ten and I eight. I don't remember what we were protesting. I made it halfway down the block before looking back and crying.

I wouldn't look back this time.

"Fine."

I wasn't dressed. I didn't have my wallet. I whirled towards the back door and snagged the keys from the bowl. The Pinto sat in the driveway, expectant like the night Katelyn and I left home, awaiting a different, brighter future. I started the car and turned the radio up to silence the void in my head. I pulled forward.

The accident itself is fragments but I know I saw her. I know I saw her, lips open, running to the car, running in front of the car. I know I did not move my feet.

Claire is professional enough to not look giddy as I enter her office for the second time that day. She does not ask about the broken skin on my knuckles from where I hit the damned wall.

The drywall had crumbled and then collapsed. I could smell the water, the rot. It had been there long before Katelyn and I moved in. I needed to stop pretending it wasn't a problem.

"Our house is a wreck," I say finally, staring at my hands. "If I want to sell it, I have to fix it, but I don't have the money and I don't know how."

My stomach coils.

"I want to talk about Katelyn, but I don't know how."

A heartbeat passes. Then two. Claire stands.

"You moved out here to be a writer, right?" she asks, grabbing a blank legal pad from her desk before coming back to me. "If you don't know how to say it, maybe you can write it."

She offers the notebook to me, then hands me her pen.

"You don't even have to share it with me. Just getting the words on paper might help."

I stare at the blank pages to avoid staring at her, and then, because I am nothing without habit, I leave early. In the back of a cab, I put the pen to the page.

My sister looked like a dancer in the moments before her body crashed into my windshield.