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UNDERNEATH THE SURFACE

George stood outside the building and lit a cigarette. The cold air caught short his breath and he coughed. Red hues came into his cheeks. Pulling a shard of mirror out of his pocket, he looked at himself approvingly, failing to notice the droplets of blood. The outburst of ferocity acted as a natural equalizer, softening his countenance. His black pearl eyes reverted to hazel green.

With a casual stride he made way back to the apartment. The door was ajar. He walked slowly toward the bodies. I lay tranquil. He looked at the young man and back at me. He tried to piece together the scene. No, no, no, I was at Clare's. This is incorrect ... my sister doesn't leave her house at night.

Shattered mirror lay around the phone. I saw my own reflection. What was the address, the apartment number?

"Hello, I'd like to report a ..." I crashed to the floor. A black topped pimple on the back of my neck burst. A force of rage came down upon my head. The blood in my veins exploded as though air had been pumped into me. A second blunt-force followed. George's eyes implied no life, no disgrace, transformed into the apparition of a dead man. His pale, gray skin glossed over with my splattered blood. Some had made its way from his face and arms, dripped onto the floor. Wearing surgical gloves, he grabbed one of the young man's hands and wrapped his fingers around a steel bar. The body was pulled closer to me. He used sandpaper and rubbed my knuckles and back of hand roughening the skin. He tossed a rolled-up bill beside me and sprinkled powder.

Only the bravest are able and ready to face danger, to meet a spectacular end. American Indian warriors wore paint, rode their favorite steed and welcomed battle. I grimaced. The rank odour of human waste wafted through the walls. The apartment was faintly lit, furnished with crates and newspapers stacked higher than pizza boxes. No wonder we cherish colour - white walls are analogous to unrealized dreams. The sight of blood was unsettling, spilled like ketchup. George focused on the young man's contorted face. His head hung low, the weight too heavy for his neck. I kneeled beside the man, placing my index and middle finger on his neck. I looked at George.

"He's dead. Good God! How can you possibly not remember what happened?" George stood erect. I knew what I had to do. My eyes darted around. Over on the other side of the couch, the phone was off the hook. I picked up the receiver.

Dead women don't tell tales. But I do. If I knew then what I know now, I might still be alive. Most assuredly, I would have conquered my fears; that mischievous feeling night brought on, after the sun abandoned the shadows and everything turned black. That was my time to worry. I can still see my younger brother, George, and me sitting on top of the kitchen table. Mom wanted to take our picture. He kept wiggling his legs and messing up the tablecloth. He was always an open circuit of energy. Mom was a perfectionist, a powerful woman. Her flash-fire temper would brook no

foolishness. A crack on the head and he settled down. I looked away when the photo was taken. Even then I hated to be in pictures.

I would have made an ideal fourteenth-century hermit. Simply leave me alone to my own devices, a book being my drug of choice. Mom and dad cultivated a potboiler marriage and I inherited aroused feelings of anxiousness. Mom is West Prussian and dad an Irish Newfoundlander. I would joke that they made me a meticulous drunk.

"You're just like Mom," George would say. George was a carbon copy of dad, addicted to good times. I liked him the most in our family. He made me laugh. He had a head of a computer, remembered every date. It was all a blur to me.

George needed to drop by for an unexpected visit. It was past ten in the evening. I didn't want company. Worry travels faster than the speed of light. He needs money, probably another gambling debt. Either that or rent's due. He's like a dog that shakes reserve with his teeth and releases anxiety. A minute later, he knocked. He must have been around the corner. He stood at the door.

"What happened to your hand?" I noticed the battered knuckles.

"I can't remember," he replied. He kissed me on the cheek each time he saw me. We kissed our mom this way too. He made himself comfortable as though he was visiting mom's house. He took off his jacket.

"You look horrendous," I observed. Another night of binge drinking was my first thought? He towered over me, six feet four inches to my five-foot three-inch frame. He spied my glass of wine. Typical.

He said he and a friend picked up a bottle of Gin, smokes and other stuff. George could strike up conversations with strangers. I never would. I minded my own business. His new friend returned from China with malaria pills. They ground them into powder with cold medication. No doubt George was behind the grand plan. They snorted it.

"Remind me how old you are," I scolded. He adjusted himself in the chair. I knew I was hearing half of the truth and even then one quarter of the half-truth. "Tell me you didn't steal these drugs from the hospital? Mom would be beside herself if you jeopardized your internship." I felt he needed sisterly perspective.

"I took Malaria medication in India. I was besotted with night terrors, dreamt my body turned into a cow!" George registered no reaction.

"I don't remember last night," he repeated. "I came to and my friend had been beaten." I poured myself another glass.

"Did you check to see if he was breathing?" George's skin was parchment. "You've got to go back, to see if he's alive." I didn't want to go with him. I didn't want to get pulled into another family drama.

It's a common practice in Newfoundland to drown kittens, tied up in a burlap sack, when the wayward mother is no longer able to care for her litter. But drowning puppies with large, doe eyes and too-large paws was very nearly impossible, especially if they were prize Newfoundlander dogs, like Gods in the water. George crumbled into tears, his whole frame vibrated with emotion. I was never just like mom. I looked down at a grown man crying and a pain jump-started me. Another glass of wine vanished.

"This time I'll help you, but you owe me big."

We walked. I told him how out of the blue mom called me the other day, to say she thought she wasn't a very good mother. She beat us. She said no one taught her how to be a mother.

"Why do you suppose she was so hard on us?" I asked.

"Because we deserved it," George said, matter-of-fact. We arrived at the building. I waited off to the side while he stood in the lobby, his head turned toward the wall. A tenant leaving hardly glanced at him. He quickly caught the open door, calling out to me to come in. I looked at him more intently this time than ever before. I thought of him as a six-year old. Mom fastened him into a harness, tethered in the backyard. He rebelled and threw all of his toys over the fence. George's shoulders hung low. His gait dragged as we ascended the staircase.

I was murdered in the Year of Our Lord, two thousand and one. There was no shock or fear on my face. In the end, I looked like a static photograph.

I miss winter. I miss walking past a symphony of chickadees hidden in the spruce trees, the lower the temperature the louder the chorus, collectively bitching about the cold. Well ... this is all fine and dandy, I tell myself. If I knew then what I know now, most assuredly, I wouldn't have left my house that night.