

## SARAH

When you lose someone you're attached to, they can haunt you like a phantom limb. My father explained it to me once, how a lost leg trembles, absent fingers reach and curl. When I severed contact with Doren, I felt his presence sharp and keen as ever before. During my brother's time in Stillwater, I didn't visit him, didn't speak to him, pushing his existence—at least as a patient—to a dim corner of my mind. Ignoring Doren didn't protect me from seeing him a dozen times each day, shuffling down Avenue A, whirling in turnstiles, mumbling to himself in the labyrinthine netherworld of the subways. Wanting to run away, I ran right up to him, finding another face, a stranger's expression.

After his release, Doren came back home. A few months later, when my parents called to ask me to look after him, it seemed a chance to redeem myself.

My parents needed me home because they were going to the annual meeting of psychiatrists nationwide. The APA was in Vegas that year. The convention committee often chose an alluring locale; I guess the doctors needed plenty of diversion to recover from all those deadly lectures. Mom was presenting a paper that year, *Boredom and Anxiety: The Ineluctable Link*. Dad was going along for the ride—and the gambling. “Your Mom needs a respite from all this,” he told me over the phone. “And Cherry hasn't had a day off since she came on board.”

I'd stayed away from home so long, I didn't know who Cherry was, but suspected her perky name must have appealed to my Dad right away: he was a believer in, and an admirer of, sunny dispositions.

Neither Doren nor I had one. We were ten months apart—

Mom pregnant with me before Doren smiled his first smile, or held his head up—opposite in our natures. Dad called me his Buddha Baby. I rarely cried, and slept right through the night, compliantly eating the last of the mashed bananas or rice cereal my mother served me from a tiny spoon. Doren was edgy, never at home in the world, prone to piercing cries and restless screams, crawling on hands and feet instead of hands and knees, skipping stages. Food appealed more to his imagination than to his taste-buds; he sculpted medieval castles from mounds of potato, made moats of brown gravy, built turrets studded with green peas, yellow corn and scarlet bits of pimento.

He was a climber. I'd look up from the back steps and spot Doren balancing on the topmost branches of our old oak or waving from the roof of the house, exalted, relishing the danger or unaware of it, I'm not sure which. Watching from below, I was terrified that one day he would jump off and try to fly.

My brother loved to play naked inside as well as outside of the house. He'd slither out of his clothes and I'd crawl into motionless spaces and folds that still held his scent and shape, like a snake's shed skin.

We were often left on our own in the house, the two of us, alone together. Doren's favorite game then was try and find me. I'd close my eyes and he would simply disappear. My wails spiraled upward until I heard a spooky sliding and saw my brother unfold his skinny body from a file cabinet drawer, or slither down from the chimney coated with soot. It took him only seconds to bend his body into impossible spaces, and when he sprang free, his high, hard laugh rang through the house, indistinguishable from a scream.

## HOMEFIRE

I hadn't lived at home since high school, but my old key still jingled on the chain mixed in with all the new ones. The deadbolt slid back without making a sound; I was inside, feeling like a burglar.

Doren stood at the top of the stairs, a beam of light touching his hair and beard. He held a doll I recognized immediately: that delicate ivory lady was Mom's favorite from her collection of doctor dolls. I wondered how he'd slipped her from the glass display case since our mother was the only one with the key.

"Hey D," I called up to him, trying to sound bright and normal. My brother ran down the spiral stairs, his upper body erect and still. "Dory, it's good to see you."

"Hey Sarah." He gazed at me expressionlessly.

"I heard you were home and wanted to come see—"

"See what?"

I looked at my older brother. He was all sucked out, whippet-thin. Last time I'd seen him he was almost stocky like Dad. Now he bordered on emaciation. His eyes were as beautiful as ever: hazel with a dash of yellow in the center, changing color depending on what he wore. That afternoon, they were a startling electric green that made me think of traffic lights. His new beard was streaked russet, crusted in places with a dry yellow resembling egg yolk. His camera bobbed against his hollow chest; on his left wrist was a bracelet of black hairs from an elephant's tail.

"I wanted to see you." I swept a kangaroo vine out of my way

and moved to hug him. Doren's body stiffened as though about to be struck, but I embraced him anyway. He mimicked my hug, thin arms like a robot's.

"What have you been up to?" I asked.

"Thinking, just thinking." His eyes stared into blank space, unfocused and glassy.

"That's good. You're better Dory, you're home."

"That proves my mind doesn't sound. They disguised those controls but they still snap."

We were both quiet for several moments. "What're you thinking?"

"I've O.D.'ed on thoughts. All sorts of thoughts come to me. Take that lighter." He lifted the silver lighter from the marble elephant whose back was a coffee table. "They extinguish my fire in here, put my ashes in there." He swirled his fingers in the well of the heavy crystal ashtray that lay on the table. "There are hundreds of other things I'm connected to simultaneously."

"Like what?"

"I can't get specific. North, South, East, West. Thoughts stream in four different directions." He shrugged. "These thoughts don't mean anything to me, but I get distracted. They forget what I'm saying."

The kitchen door flew open and I jumped. An Asian woman dressed all in white came in carrying a tea tray. "Your parents will be so happy," she said.

For a moment she seemed like an actress playing a scene. "*Cherry?*"

"Like the fruit." She placed the tea tray with its glass of ruby-red juice and plastic pillbox on a nearby stack table. The pillbox had seven compartments, each labeled with a letter for a different day of the week.

"Doren, it's time for your medicine and juice. I have your favorite, cranberry."

"My brother is twenty-five years old. He's a genius. Can't he take his own drugs?"

"I'm following Dr. Solomon's orders. Both Dr. Ss'." She smiled sweetly. "Come sit," she said to Doren.

My brother walked to the table and took each pill directly from Cherry's hand right into his mouth like colorful hard candies. "Juice me, juice me," he sang. Cherry laughed good naturedly and handed him the cranberry juice. He drank it down in one long swallow.

"That's nice," she said. "Shall we go feed the menagerie?"

"I'll take care of that." Doren spoke in his junior executive voice, then cocked his head listening. "Hush-up," he said to the noiseless room. His lips worked making shapes, not sounds. I tried to decipher them like a deaf person struggling to lip-read, but nothing came.

As Cherry exited to the kitchen, I wished I'd visited sooner.

Doren removed three sodden pills he'd kept under his tongue and lined them up on his fingertip. He smiled at me, victorious. "I have a disease no one will tell me about," he said. "I already get medicine secretly. She's got a machine inside her, pumps it right into my bloodstream."

"You mean Cherry?"

He rocked rhythmically back and forth, holding the small ivory doll away from his face, like a mirror. "You saw her but the appointment was a disguise."

"Explain it to me," I urged.

Doren walked to the bay window toward the spacious, manicured lawn that sprawled away from the house. It was blazingly green, as if lacquered. Late afternoon sun streamed in, casting a funnel of light on the hardwood floor. My brother stood in the orange light rubbing his hands together, as if to warm them over a fire.

"Over here," I said, not making much sense, thinking how lonely and unreal it is to miss someone who's right there. Doren lilted toward me and tenderly rubbed his face against mine, first the left cheek, then the right. He patted my face with both hands, chanting in a low, monochromatic voice. I held back, then joined in to chant and chant.

*Ah sista goah, I love you and the pack  
I give you milk and candy to make the bad go back*

When we were kids, our chant muffled the sounds of our parents downstairs, their voices sharpened like instruments.

"They want me back in," he said with sudden clarity.

"No. Just well."

Doren reached for my hand. He held it gently, as if I were a little girl again, leading me upstairs past the bedrooms, all the way to the top of the house. Pulling hard to lower the attic stairs, Doren tugged me inside the small eaved room and shut the door.

The smell of must was strong, the darkness closing in around us. I felt for the ceiling bulb's cord and yanked it on.

Doren moved about the brownish dark, knowing his way in the clutter. I watched him open an old black trunk and pull out a large photograph, holding it facedown against his chest.

"What? Let me *see*."

Doren slid the picture under his shirt against his bare chest. "Two Daddies," he whispered, "better than one." Stroking my cheek, he said, "We'll go away."

"I have a sweater for you, Dory. In green. Extra tall. Shall I get it from my suitcase?"

"No. Stay. Right. Here." His eyes got vacant, then haunted. "Can you see me?"

There was a burning behind my eyes, the tears felt like someone else's. "Yes, Dory. Even from far away."

My brother smiled. "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," he said.

"Was it unbearable at the hospital? How did you get out of there?"

"No bolt was necessary. When I'm out, they go kidnapping. I reimburse their equilibrium. But you, I love out of bounds."

For me, it was his most lucid sentence all afternoon.