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Keepsake

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She's clearing out dead sunflowers along the back fence to make room for Mary's ashes. Linda is no doubt watching from the kitchen window but Rose won't give her satisfaction by checking.

Mary planted the sunflowers five years ago and they had thrived every summer but this one. Each year, she tended to the flowerbeds that lined three sides of the picket fence. She preferred the fresh start of annuals even though that required additional effort. One year she'd plant petunias, the next begonias or geraniums.

During the first two weeks of May, she'd carry trays of two-inch plastic pots to the greenhouse. Rose helped her sister cart them from the car but that was the extent of her contribution.

Frequently, Mary would take a break from her gardening and stand with one hand on the back fence. That's where Rose remembers seeing her most.

She pulls more dead sunflowers and tosses them on the pile she's started. At least the crows are gone. Just an hour ago the backyard was filled with them, some as plump as hens. She had to chase them from the cherry tree and Saskatoon bush they'd completely stripped last month. Those are the only perennials that Mary planted and both now crowd the struggling lilac next to the greenhouse.

The yard across the alley is littered with piles of two-by-fours, crumpling drywall, and electrical wiring. Mr. Gimble is renovating for the third time in four years. Rose hopes the new construction provides the necessary emotional distraction. She can't imagine how he continues to stay in that house after what happened.

"Need any help weeding?" Linda calls from the deck. Her high heels clatter on the cedar like the hooves of a frantic deer.

Rose shakes her head and Linda goes back in. When Mary was alive, Rose never spent much time alone with Linda and Russ. Whenever they visited, Russ did most of the talking.

“I thought that was you.” Herb Gimble stands on the other side of the fence. The sun is over his shoulder forcing him to shield his eyes with a hand.

“I’ll join you,” she says, and moves quickly to the back gate and out into the alley.

His hair is slicked down and he smells lemony. “Your sister was a lovely woman. I’m going to miss her. I enjoyed our talks. She spoke so fondly of you.”

Rose tilts her head slightly as she digests the notion that Herb and her sister were acquainted. Mary wouldn’t have kept that a secret.

It’s true that she liked to take her daily walk but she always went alone, crossing over 4th street to Riley Park. Occasionally, she invited Rose, who always declined because she enjoyed having the house to herself for that hour or two. It occurs to Rose now that her sister only asked because she knew that Rose would decline.

Herb’s shoes are pushed on, the laces dangling. His shirt and pants don’t match but both are neatly pressed. She can’t imagine her sister spending time with him, yet his smile is pleasingly spontaneous.

“We used to meet at Riley Park in the afternoons when it wasn’t raining. If it rained or was too cold we had tea at the house and talked.”

Rose has secrets, but not Mary.

“The day she got the news about her cancer we drank a bottle of burgundy. She asked me to play both sides of *Let it Bleed*.”

Rose remembers that late afternoon eight months ago when Mary came in from her walk all red-faced and quiet and went directly to her room and didn’t come out until the next afternoon. Only then did she tell Rose that she had late stage ovarian cancer. She hadn’t cried and Rose had admired her sister’s courage. Until now she had assumed she’d been the first to know.

Herb’s eyes are suddenly moist and that doesn’t come from just walks and coffee. Mary possessed the one quality most men can’t resist—pliability.

She fiddles with the latch of the gate but doesn’t open it. Instead she says. “What happened to Joan must have been so painful—”

“Terribly so. Mary told me I was a fool to look for reasons because there aren’t any. I suppose she’s right. Still a person can’t help but wonder.... Mary was so wise I loved

listening to her. She helped me pack-up a few things. She said you'd take it hard. Being her twin. She was worried about you. Made me promise, well you know—"

"Yes," she says, not wanting to hear exactly what he's promised.

Joan had been fighting with her sister Geraldine at the Stampede C-Train Station when she fell in the gap between the arriving train and the platform and had been scraped along for forty feet before the train stopped. A few seconds is all it took. The human body is no match against such unflinching forces.

No one is really sure what the two sisters had been arguing about although several news outlets were quick to speculate that the quarrel had been over Herb. What is certain is that Geraldine nudged her sister, ever so slightly, witnesses said, but that had been enough to throw her off balance.

The news story of two women in their late sixties fighting over a man about to turn seventy caused a sensation. It was not what older women did. Not in public. Rose had listened to the nonsense people said on those rightwing radio phone-in shows. The one she had listened to most was *Ramsey Live*. People said how unseemly and unbecoming of the elderly, unnatural even. *Grandmothers gone wild* someone said, and that too got turned into headlines.

One tabloid printed a grainy photograph of Herb's face peering out from behind a curtain, and the next day through his lawyer he made an appeal for privacy.

Herb will have told Mary about the family intrigue behind the accident. Mary had a way of drawing out such intimate details. He'll run out of words with Rose long before he gets to anything that personal, and she prefers that because she isn't Mary in the ways he'll want her to be.

"Do you have a spade? There's something you could help me with." She glances toward the house where Linda stands in plain sight at the kitchen window. Rose turns back to Herb and his gaze shifts from the open gate to her.

"I'll be right back," he says, and crosses the back alley into his own yard. He stops long enough to heave aside several two-by-fours that have slipped loose from the pile.

He opens the garage door, revealing floor to ceiling cardboard boxes, and barely room for him to inch past.

When he doesn't return, she goes after him and finds him in the garage bent over a plastic toolbox fiddling with a clasp.

"It'll be in here," he says.

This end of the garage has been cleared out except for two toolboxes and a set of saw horses spanned by a sheet of one-inch thick oak plywood.

He finally frees the clasp and swings open the lid. The toolbox is empty. He doesn't offer any explanation, simply closes the lid and goes into the house, leaving the door open behind him.

She follows through into the kitchen, which is surprisingly spotless, every dish put away. There are several yellow post-it notes on cupboard doors. One says: *Honey?* The other: *Potato Salad?*

He asks her if she'd like tea and she says she would and he fetches the kettle from the counter and fills it with water and plugs it in.

"I was standing right here when the phone rang. I didn't pick it up right away. Figured whatever it was could wait. But it just kept ringing.

"I admired the way Mary could compartmentalize her past and only remember what she wanted. Maybe that was why she smiled all the time. But I've read that we don't forget anything, it's all stored in our brains somewhere even when we can't find it anymore."

The kettle boils and he unplugs it and opens a narrow cupboard next to the crudely repaired patch of drywall where the phone must have been. Now there's a small cordless next to the toaster. He fishes through several tins and takes out a tea bag and drops it into the pot and pours enough water.

He looks at life through hurt eyes as she did for a year or more after Ollie died. It haunted her that everything she did from then on would be unknown to him.

She sets her teacup next to bite marks on the pine kitchen table and runs her fingers across them. Maybe there'd been a dog at one time, although there's no sign of one now.

Herb dwells on the past, and she usually dislikes that, yet in him she finds it slightly endearing even though the past can be like quicksand, the more you struggle with it the faster it pulls you under.

"It'll be more comfortable in the living room," he says. He appears to have forgotten about the shovel but she doesn't remind him because that impulse has gone. She'll bury Mary's ashes another day.

The living room is sparsely furnished with a matching leather couch and love seat facing each other and a tweed easy chair between them on one end. The chair looks new while the others are old enough that Joan likely picked them out. The square rosewood coffee table centered between the sofas has several large chips out of it. On the far side of the room is a walnut upright piano and next to it a pile of books tall enough to be teetering.

“Those are Joan’s books from when she was still teaching. Mary liked to select one at random and read to me. I loved the sound of her voice. A couple of the books gave her trouble because of all the profanity, but she soldiered on.”

It didn’t take much to offend Mary. She could take offense at *damn* or *son-of-a-bitch*. Rose prefers vivid sex scenes bordering on the raunchy to the bland stuff she’s read in some of Mary’s books.

She takes a long sip of tea. It’s Orange Pekoe—either Red Rose or that horrible No Name brand from Superstore that she refuses to buy, even though Mary always suggested it. She sets her cup down and goes to take a gander at the books. She’s certain he hopes she’ll pick up one and read to him, like Mary. Like most people he may think twins are emotionally interchangeable, but he’ll find out soon enough how different she and Mary are.

She recognizes only one title, *Grapes of Wrath*, and below that *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, by Flannery O’Connor. She’s not sure if that’s a man or a woman. It sounds like a man’s name but only a woman would come up with a title like that. Women see things converging while men see it all flying apart.

“If you see anything you like, feel free to borrow it.”

She picks up *The Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller, a novel, although the title suggests a geography book. The sort of title a man would come up with though. “How about this one?” She holds it up for him to see and then sets it back down.

“You sure? That might not be the best choice to start with. Mary couldn’t read that one,” he says, but nods to indicate the choice is hers.

He takes a sip of tea, and with the cup at his mouth there is a youthful set to his eyes and an immediacy she didn’t catch before and is not used to seeing in men her age.

She circles the books and almost slips on a pink scarf bunched near the piano. She recognizes it as one of Mary’s, and when he puts down his cup and carefully positions it, she retrieves the scarf and stuffs it into one pocket of her slacks. She returns to the books for the *Tropic of*

Cancer and goes to the couch. Across from her in the love seat, he crosses one leg over the other and it shakes noticeably.

She sets her tea down and joins him in the love seat. This close he's all heat and lemony again. How she has missed that. She had curled into Ollie every night craving heat.

Herb rests his hand on her neck and strokes it lightly. She has missed that too. She shouldn't do this so soon after Mary, but there is this craving.

"You're not at all like her."

She doesn't know if he means Mary or his wife but it doesn't matter. In this moment she wants him to continue with his hand. He kisses her neck softly and not in the rushed way Ollie would—always in a hurry for the more exciting places. She rests a hand on his thigh and inches it along until she finds what she is looking for and unzips and reaches inside.

She's never done anything as bold as this and that gives her courage—but why not? In all those years there had only been Ollie, and before Ollie just a couple of stupid boys, not even men yet, unversed in a woman's body.

Her life is divided into the known and the impossible, with most of it falling in the first column. She wants more of the impossible so that there's more to her remaining days than some daily haunting.

She turns to face Herb and his eyes have a light in them she's missed. They don't kiss at first but take in the other. This proximity means they are no longer strangers although any thought of this only hours ago would have seemed impossible.

When they kiss their mouths are dry and she holds back—their lips barely touch, his breath—tea breath. Then something lets go in her and she presses her lips fully onto his.

He's not yet hard in her hand but something is happening there and she likes the feel of him and lets her hand linger a good while before moving it away. That will have to wait. He makes no complaint, unlike Ollie who would have said she wasn't playing fair.

She focuses on his lips and breathing, enjoying for the first time in a long while the breathing of another, so close and yet completely out of sync. His lips taste of salt mixed with Juicy Fruit gum. Ollie's lips were always buttery and a bit too firm while Herb's are plump and pliable.

They continue kissing for so long that her lips go a little numb. Not since she was a teen has she been so focused on someone's lips. She can't remember the first time she necked with

Ollie, or anyone for that matter. Time conspires to make it all blur together. Now, in this finite place with her eyes closed kissing a man practically a stranger, she feels as though she has slipped through a crack and is no longer certain where she will be when she opens her eyes again.

In the past, from such kissing a little bubble of love formed and in time grew into something too big for her to contain. She's learned how cruel love can be, and how fatal.

This is not the first spark of love, though, but merely play—joyful, simple play. There'll be nothing percolating and she will not miss that feeling of falling backward for what feels like forever, but is nowhere close to forever.

She has thought it too late for such surprises, but here she is. One minute she's clearing out a place for her sister's ashes, the next she's kissing a man. It is that incongruence that makes all things possible.

When they finally push apart, he zips up and smiles. They sit for the longest time without speaking or moving, her head as busy as his must be and yet oddly empty, as if the kissing erased all that came before.

When she leans forward and samples her tea it is already cold. She pushes the cup to the middle of the table and picks up *The Tropic of Cancer*.

"You'll come back?"

"Maybe tomorrow?"

"I'll walk you out." He leads the way through the garage to the alley.

In the bright light he is careful to offer her only his hand and she shakes it and waits for him to say something, and when he doesn't, she lets go, and crosses the alley. She hears him clear his throat, but she doesn't look back.

When she reaches her yard, she shifts the bulky Miller book between her hands to open the gate. What possessed her to borrow it? Will she really read it or did she merely want something she'd have to return? Hadn't he urged her, insisted even?

She leans against the gate to hold it open and looks toward his yard, no longer just an eyesore, spilling over with remnants of tragedy, but pleasantly familiar—a place she's been.

He's not there watching as she hopes. The garage door is closed the way she's used to seeing it. She shuts the gate and takes the stone path to the back door, again sensing Linda watching her, ready with dozens of questions, no doubt, none of which Rose plans to answer. She feels

in her pocket for the scarf, half expecting that Herb has slipped it from her, but it's balled up where she thrust it. She moves it around in her fingers and feels the rough seam and some frayed bits before she finds the smooth silky middle.