

My sister and I both died on our sixteenth birthdays. We were fraternal twins, though you wouldn't necessarily know it from a first glance. Ash had the posture of a dancer and a confidence readable in every gesture, as if all her actions were part of a subtle but commanding performance, a summoning to gather round and watch. I, on the other hand, tried to hide behind hair grown long over my eyes, a boy who sought the nearest corner upon entering a room and let his sister take the center of the floor. If you'd met the two of us back then you would have said life had given its clear vote to one over the other. And yet when death came for us it chose her over me, holding her in its grasp and tossing me back to a world I barely recognized without my sister in it.

Before the day we turned sixteen we lived the whole of our lives in the same house. The nicest house on one of Royal Oak's nicest streets, though in both cases only marginally so. The Royal (as we called it, "Be Loyal to the Royal!" the slogan of local businesses) was pleasant but consistent in its modesty, having none of the monster renos or brand name designer shops of Grosse Pointe or the newer suburbs miles farther from the City of Detroit. Most families we grew up with were in the middle of the middle-class, professionals on their way up or down, a smattering of tradesmen who'd borrowed all they could to move north of 8 Mile. By comparison to most of our neighbors, we were exceptional. Not because of money, but because of Ash. The girl everyone said could be a model, an actress, a President of the United States one day.

Ashleigh Orchard was Royal royalty.

Ashleigh on straight-A report cards and graduation Honors Lists and the Detroit Free Press Metro section review of a "stunning turn" by the star of Dondero High's production of South Pacific. But in the real, living world, she was only ever Ash.

Beautiful Ash. Though it is the sort of beauty that comes with an asterisk.

Beautiful in the way our own father once called "uglybeautiful," her features so excessively lovely taken on their own that, in their assembly, she suggested the alien, the genetically modified – too-blue eyes set too far apart, limbs and fingers too extra-terrestrially long. By looking at our family – at her – you would almost certainly mistake us for lucky. But inside the walls of our house on Farnum Avenue there was a secret. My father, mother and I were aware that a monster lived with us, however photogenic, however scholarship-guaranteed. And because she was only a girl, because she was one of us by name, because we feared her, there was nothing we could do about it.

So we tried to manage, in our ways. Dad retreated into work, leaving earlier in the mornings, returning later and later at night. He was an in-house "liability man" at General Motors with an office in the middle tower of the Renaissance Center where the company leased space from the hotel that occupied the other floors. His windows on the 42nd floor overlooked the Detroit River, so high up he could look across to Canada and the flat tobacco fields beyond. In the year before Ash died, he spent a couple nights a week sleeping on the sofa there. Hiding.

Our mother was a self-described homemaker, but in reality she was an earplugged sleep-inner, a noontime sherry drinker, a Chardonnay zombie by the time we came in the doors from school. Sometimes I'd find her curled up under the bed or passed out in a flower bed with gardener's gloves still on, keeping their grip on pruning shears and trickling hose. Once, I discovered her in the tub, the water cold. She was still alive, though barely so. Her naked body surprisingly heavy as I attempted the impossible: heaving her out while trying not to touch her at the same time. We both ended up in a pile on the bathmat.

"Thank you, Danny," she said when she could find the words, using the walls for balance as she tried to bring some dignity to the walk back to her room. "That was gentlemanly of you."

She died there, in that same room, two years before Ash did. A "domestic accident," which is what they call falling asleep drunk and drowning in the tub so that you don't have to use a different word for it. Dad found her after coming home late from work, his wife's eyes looking through him from six inches under the surface.

It wasn't the usual suburban strain of depression that plagued her, but a terror she did what she could to quiet. A knowledge of what lies on the other side, waiting for us to call out to it, open a door for it to pass through.

And guilt too, I think. The regret of being the one to bring Ash into the world.

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What sort of things did Ash do? Why was she a girl whose own mother might wish was never born?

Let me tell you a story. A short, terrible little story.

In the winter when Ash and I were twelve, there was a day of sun that followed a cold snap, a melting of snow that left slicked streets and dripping eaves. The very next morning, the cold returned. Sidewalks and driveways turned to ice rinks. And hanging from every roof, icicles as long and sharp as spears.

"Monster teeth," Ash said when she saw them.

When we got home from school that day, the icicles were still there, though the forecast called for higher temperatures later in the week.

"We need to save one," Ash said. "They're too pretty to just die."

She made me get a stepladder. When I returned, she directed me to the icicle she'd chosen, and that I had to climb to the ladder's top to pull away.

"Be careful!" Ash said, a real concern for the ice that I'd never heard her genuinely express for another human being before.

When I handed it over to her she cradled it like a baby as she carried it to the garage and hid it under a bag of pork chops at the bottom of the freezer chest.

Months passed. At some point in the spring we both watched a TV show, a police procedural where the killer used ice bullets to shoot his victim through the skull. Only a trace of water was found in the pool of blood left on the floor, puzzling the detectives. "Ice! Completely detectable!" the prosecutor declared during the trial.

That night Ash repeated the line, like a song lyric, on her way up to bed.

From the day I pulled it down for her she never mentioned the icicle and neither did I. There wasn't one of those days when I didn't think about it though. Imagining the electrocuting pain of it driven into the back of my neck as I

slept. Waiting to open my eyes in the night and find her standing over me, the icicle held in both hands like a stake, her face set in the blank mask she wore when she wasn't acting and was her perfectly hollow self.

Summer came. Long, unstructured days of waiting for something to happen.

And then it did.

I went out into the yard to look for something in the garage and found the dog instead. We'd only gotten him a few weeks earlier, a yellow lab stray dad brought home from Animal Services. Another gesture at normalcy.

Ash was listening to the Sex Pistols a lot at the time. She named it Sid.

The day was hot and the flies were already buzzing around Sid's body as if looking for a way in. It was the blood that had drawn them. Red and glossy, still wet. All coming from its eye socket. The eye itself missing.

The dog appeared to be smiling. As if it had been trained to Lie Down and Be Dead and was waiting for the command to rise.

A puddle of pinkened water spread out around its head. I knelt down and touched it.

Still cold.

And at this touch, a thought. Spoken not in my voice but Ash's.

This will never stop, it said.

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They tried sending her away.

Not that they sold it to Ash that way. They called it an opportunity.

We couldn't really afford the prep school tuition and boarding fees at Cranbrook, but dad said it was worth it no matter the cost. He told her it was a chance for her to "change course."

This was when we were thirteen.

I remember driving with her and dad up to Bloomfield Hills to drop her off. Me sitting in the front passenger seat, Ash in the back. She didn't resist, didn't argue. There were no tears from her or any one of us. She just looked out the window as our suburb greened into a fancier, more distant suburb, a trace of smile at the corners of her mouth. As if it was all her idea.

After she was shown her room she closed the door on us both without a word. I could feel dad fighting the urge to turn his solemn walk into a run to the car. Dad took me to his office. A drive down Woodward Avenue and into Detroit

all the way to the Ren Center. He said he wanted to get some things from his desk but it was really an unacknowledged celebration. Just the two of us, trying out jokes on each other, dad telling stories I'd never heard before about when he was young. The city crumbling and beautiful all around us.

I'm not sure anyone really thought it would work. But for the three months Ash was out of the house and up the road in Bloomfield Hills something like peace visited our house. A quiet, anyway. The recuperative stillness of a veterans' rehab ward, the three of us wounded but on the mend, shuffling around, feeling a little stronger every day. I cut my hair so that anyone could see my eyes. Mom even dialed back on the drinking. Tried out a recipe for Beef Wellington she found in a never-touched Julia Child cookbook. It remains the most delicious meal of my life.

Sometimes I thought of Ash and was reminded that my sister had never done me any direct harm. Threats, manipulations, frights, yes. But with me, she never carried all the way through in the way she did with others. I was the only one she spared, the one she kept close even if she didn't know how to love, and in recalling this my happiness was momentarily grounded by shame. Yet soon the horizon of a life without her would come into view again and I wished only to see more of it.

And then I came home after school to find my father standing in the kitchen, red-faced, silently reading a letter torn from a Cranbrook envelope, and I knew Ash was home, that we would never try to ship her off again, that we would be punished for the attempt we'd made.

She'd been expelled. That's all my father would say about it, though the letter contained more information than that. A naming of specific, unspeakable crimes. I could tell by the way his face changed as he read it. His features not just falling but going slack, a deadening.

When he was finished he folded the letter up into a rectangle the size of a business card. Left the house with it clenched in his fist. Ash's door was open when I went upstairs. A rare invitation to look inside and find her sitting on the edge of her bed, calmly writing in her journal.

When she sensed me standing there she looked up. Pouted. Blinked her eyes, the lids darkened by make-up the color of a bruise.

"Miss me?" she said.