

# SHE CAN PAINT TOO

Jody Azzouni

Originally published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*  
Volume 30, No. 3&4, Fall & Winter 2013  
© 2013 Jody Azzouni

Here's something left over from my childhood. A memory. Me and my sister fighting. I'm seven. She's nine. I'm almost always trailing behind her that way. But not at this moment. At this moment I'm sitting on her, and punching at her from above. It's not doing me any good. She's swinging wildly at me, and she clips me twice in the face. I'm crying. Then, somehow, because of the way she's jerking her long legs all over the place, her foot goes through the fish tank. A world of guppies gushes out through the broken glass.

We'd been breeding them. Family project. Two tanks on tier shelving, the lower one with babies, and the upper one with their parents. So the babies don't get eaten. It was the baby guppies whose home she'd kicked in.

Baby guppies dying on a rug. Sis screaming, Mom'll kill us. I'm getting towels, toilet paper rolls, throwing them down onto the floor, pushing them around on the rug, hoping they'll sop up the water. Before it leaks down like the two other times. When the toilet bowl overflowed.

No luck. The lady downstairs is banging on our door, shouting that water is coming out of her kitchen ceiling. Onto her lunch. Again.

My sister does this sort of thing. She's out of control. Physically, I mean. The time she pushed my head into her bedroom window, the windowpane spiderwebbing out from where my head had hit it. Sis screamed a lot more than I did. Ran out of the house without her coat. Or her shoes.

It was winter. Ice and snow. Cold. She wouldn't come back inside until Grandma promised to tell Mom that the cat had done it. Grandma wrapped in woolen scarves to protect her face from the wind. Calling hoarsely from the doorway to Sis hiding across the street. Behind a car. In a mound of dirty ice and snow.

Grandma had to give her a warm bath. To stop her from shaking. From the cold. She'd been out there for almost an hour. Grandma too.

I wasn't hurt, by the way.

Mom was obviously waiting for her to confess. She kept dropping hints. Amazing how Bitty did that, isn't it? Did what? Sis says. The window, Mom says, how she broke that window. You know, *with her little head*. Oh yeah, Sis says, like she just figured out what Mom is talking about. It's *truly* a Ripley's Believe it or Not moment, Sis adds. Do you think we should call them?

I'm waiting for Mom to lose patience with this bullshit, scream, tell Sis off, punish her like she deserves. No candy. For at least a month. No crumb cake. For at least a year. Never happens. It's Grandma who finally gets Sis to confess. After several days of this. She even tells Sis what to say to Mom. Then Sis is crying, sitting in Mom's lap, telling her how scared she was, sniffing and shaking her head. Like sunlight coming in through the rain. Mom saying, it's okay, it's okay. You're still my little girl. You'll always be my little girl. You too, she adds, looking at me, her arms around Sis. You're my little boy, she tells me. Come over here, she tells me, so I can hug you both.

I don't think it was the afterthought it looks like it was.

Sis would show up late to everything—cute little dress, cute little face. I *forgot* about the line, she'd say, thumb in mouth. Sometimes that worked. Like at movies. And later at clubs. Sometimes. Almost always, actually.

Mom was artistic. Some charcoal, some pencil. I still have all her work. Us as little. Both of us. Lots of other faces too. She liked to draw the faces she saw in the subway. While she was going to her job. Her artwork isn't bad, it really isn't. She had talent. She stopped doing it when Sis started to draw. She said, more than once, that Sis blew her work away. I guess she didn't want to compete with her own daughter. Who knows? But pretty early the official story in our house was that Sis was the artist. Sis was the genius. Sis had all the family talent.

I like reading about disabled children. Down's syndrome. Leukemia. Autism. How it twists up the family dynamics, how everything gets centered around the damaged child. The survivor guilt. The so-on. Fiction too. *My Sister's Keeper*. By Jodi something.

Parents always want more than one kid. I understand that. I want at least two kids. When I get married again, I mean. But it divides the resources of the parents. At least in half. Parents have to be aware of that, they have to take that into consideration. Sibling life. You learn to share. It's good to share.

I was always happiest when I was pregnant, Mom told me once. Beaming at me with love. Hormones or something, she said. So that's like eighteen months, right? In total, I mean.

Christmas in our home was good for children. Mom worked doubletime because there was no Dad and because she didn't have a lot of money. One year I got a fire truck. It was nice. There were fifteen or so gifts for me. Different sized boxes and colors. And exactly the same number for Sis. Different wrapping paper, different colored ribbons, different shapes. Laying this way and that under the tree. On snow cotton, with little figures near them. Mangers and stuff. Sleds. Reindeer too. Little snow mountains twinkling with elves climbing about. Snow globes. Made in Canada. Stout little Canadian loggers in bright flannel trudging along inside them.

All the gifts were labeled. *For Suzy, from Santa. For Will, from Cinderella. For Suzy, from Mom. For Will, from all the elves who work for Santa. For Suzy, from Rudolph.* Our gifts were from all

sorts of beings, most of them not real. Our extended family. All Mom. Not even a faux uncle because Mom had stopped doing boyfriends. It must have taken her hours. Days. Every year.

I still cry when I think about it.

Eight or so of my fifteen gifts that year were like a puzzle I got to put together. We always took turns opening our gifts, lots of pausing to oooh and aaah, eat a little something, play with stuff. Christmas Day. All day long.

The first gift I opened was four toy truck wheels. Just four truck wheels. Um? I say. Wait, Mom says, smiling at me. Then I opened another, and saw the body, the fire truck. Then the hosing and ladders in another gift. We took a break while Mom helped me attach the hosing and ladders to the truck. Snap the wheels on. And then there were firemen in different packages. And the firehouse. Fire hydrants too.

Sis got some dolls, some doll clothing, some doll accessories, a dress, another dress, another dress, another dress, new shoes. Some art stuff: canvas, tubes of paints, a set of brushes, cleaning stuff, pencils, a set of different papers, watercolors. Three or four art books. And some notebooks. With sayings on each page from famous artists. Some postage-stamp-sized samples of their work. Starry starry night. It was kind of cute.

I got clothing too. Socks. Some shirts. And maybe a book. All in all, it was pretty equal.

Mom tried to be evenhanded, but Grandma was flamboyantly partisan. Grandparents have that prerogative, I guess. Don't you just love blond hair? Grandma says to me. I have brown hair. Mom has brown hair. Dad had brown hair. Grandma has gray hair. Suzy is a blonde, a real one.

You're *so* creative, Doctor Ben gushes, looking into Suzy's face, into her eyes, at her hair. Doctor Ben is an old friend of Grandma's. She *is* creative, I say to my toys. And for years I wonder why I keep protesting in my head—saying, she *is* creative. It's not just the men that I say this after. It's the women too. Looks. They distort everything.

It becomes a kind of obsession for me. Saying this in my head.

Cute kids, even if they're stunningly cute, usually don't turn into beautiful adults. The tragedy of child actors. But Sis just got more and more gorgeous. There's this lanky ugly stage most adolescents go through. Because their features don't grow at the same rates. Not Sis. For most of us there's at least acne to get through. Or braces. Knobby knees. Chubby child fat. Not Sis. Luck of a sort.

Towards the end of eighth grade, in the spring, I have a dream. Sis is in my room. It's kind of twilight the way it normally is. At night, I mean, when the light is coming through the window from the street. Her face is shaded slightly by the shadows so I can't see her features perfectly. We're both standing by my bed. She pulls up her blouse, and says to me, look, they're just starting to bud. I wake up then because it's a wet dream. Boys have wet dreams in middle school. They don't have to mean anything. Like most dreams that don't mean a thing. One time I was

dreaming that I was playing ball in the street with some friends, and the ball rolled under the car. I was crawling under the car to get the ball, that's what I was dreaming of, and I woke up because it was a wet dream. That dream couldn't have meant anything.

I'm in a bar one time. I guess I've had too much to drink again. It's really a pain, I say, to be the younger brother of the real babe—the one *everyone* in high school wants to fuck. I'm talking pretty loudly, and I'm pretty sure I'm talking to just myself. No one is sitting near me anymore, and the bartender is at the other end of the bar, looking at me. I mean, I say, you have to *jerk off* as much as any other guy in high school, right? And you know when you're in the bathroom or in the shower, or wherever you do it, that *all* your friends are jerking off to your sister. What second-rater are *you* supposed to jerk off to instead? I mean, is it *incest* if you do it thinking of your sister, or is it just you going along with everyone else?

I mean, I say, I've always had this really bad ethical dilemma. I mean, I say, I guess that's what pornography's for. To keep it outside the family. Then the bartender's saying to me, the rest of us are trying to have a relaxing drink here. Talk some sports. Maybe some politics too. It's a sports bar. We keep it light. Part of me can tell the bartender's trying to be nice about it.

I'm pretty sure I got belligerent. I get belligerent when I'm drunk so why should this time be different? But all my bar memories kind of blend in together. Like a good scotch or something. I was asked to leave. I think that's what happened that time. I just left. Quietly.

I think I was still in high school when that happened. No maybe it was later.

It was a lot later. It was in my twenties. No, it was later still. It was in my thirties. I was already married to Paula. It was that late that it happened. I don't think I like to know how recent that memory is. That's why I keep pushing it back in my head, thinking it happened a lot earlier.

Most visual artists develop pretty late, that's what I read. Not like musicians. But Sis was already extraordinary in high school. Because of her I learned stuff that I might not have learned for years. If someone nicknames you *prettyface*, another girl I mean, she's not being nice. It's kind of vicious, actually. She's jealous, she's out to get you. That bitch, my sister would say.

*Prettyface*, my sister would mutter. Sounds like a cat's name. And then she'd go back to painting. Obsessively. At that point she was painting old people's faces. Setting them into their backgrounds as if they were jewels. Old people's faces. You look at the paintings and they look like Norman Rockwell or something, two old people sitting on a porch sipping lemonade, or maybe standing in line at an old-fashioned post office. But if you stare long enough you realize the old faces look like jewels. The optical angles are off a little, the coloring in the faces is a little dramatic. And the faces are set against a slightly flat background. A setting. Everything's a setting for the faces. Some of her teachers weren't getting it. She had to explain to them what she was doing.

Old faces. They're not the sort of thing teenagers are likely to be into. This is me, well into my forties, saying this. I don't remember what I thought about it then. I don't think I was paying much attention to what she was painting. Then, I mean. Later she told me that Grandma was the



first person who noticed how talented she was. That's just not true. Grandma never got past the blond hair. I know. I was there.

I'm with Paula when Henry sits down across from us. Your sister, Henry says to me, she's out of control. Paula rolls her eyes.

It's Henry's fault. He'd spread it around that he'd slept with Sis. And that Sis had pushed for it. Went down on him so he could come in her mouth. The usual stuff. Sis denied it. To me anyway. Who knows? They're both liars. My rule: If you're going to date a girl with my sister's looks, you make sure she has no idea how pretty she really is. Or you pick a gorgeous girl with no talent or brains. Who knows it. Or she's got to have a limp. Or no legs. Something. Otherwise you come in second. Girls like to date *up*. I still tell people that. Not that anyone asks me anymore.

So this website shows up, announcement emails sent to everyone at school. And when you click on it, you see a face, really well done, kind of blurry but you can tell it's a guy and that he's having a really good time. His head is kind of thrown back, his tongue is lolling out a little. You can get parts of the image into focus but not the whole thing. You can't really tell who it is. A photograph that's been doctored. That's what it looks like. So you scroll down either because you think of it or because someone at school told you to, and you realize the guy is in a bathroom masturbating. His big ugly hands are in sharp focus, wrapped around something pretty small. Another night on the town with the girls. That's what it's called.

The hands move, by the way. Up and down. The tongue too. Side to side. It cracks me up.

Henry. I feel sorry for him. He's clearly out of his league. He clearly hasn't had any experience with this. He doesn't have any sisters. He doesn't have a goddess in his family. So he doesn't know how to handle goddesses. That you don't. Can't. That the goddess is always on top. Because she's a goddess. You just have to stay low, stay off of her radar.

Don't deny it was her, he tells me. Okay, I say, I won't. Let's say it was her. So what? I can't do anything about it. I'm the younger brother, not the older brother. I haven't any clout. Especially with her. Paula sniggers. There is no older brother, Henry says. There's just you. So you're out of luck, right? I say.

Everyone knows it's me, he says. I guess he's trying to get me to sympathize with him. It doesn't look like you, I say. It doesn't really look like anyone, I add. Fuck you, he says to me. Things can happen, he says to me, she should know that. She does know that, I say. Things can happen, I say slowly. Even worse, I say, things do happen. And then other things happen. Over and over. That's what it's like. Things happening all the time. Funny, Henry says. Real funny. And then he walks away.

Sis has no fear. That's what I realize about her one day. That's why you can't win with her. She just lost fear somehow and it never came back. That's so weird. That's not supposed to happen to a girl, that's what I think. She had fears once, she really did. That's why I told you about the fish tank and about the window. So you could see that she had fears once.

Suzy didn't sleep with him, Paula says. Who? I say. Henry, she says. How do you know? I say. It isn't as if Sis confides in *Paula*. Look at his hands, Paula says, they're really really ugly. Who cares about hands? I say. I'm thinking: Henry's built, he's got a great car, a lot of money, his parents' co-op on weekends. Paula rolls her eyes again. Hands are the things that *touch you*, she says to me. Hands are often the first things that get to go inside, she adds. Hands? I say. Whole hands? *They* get to go inside first? I'm grinning. But this kind of thing doesn't work with Paula. Paula doesn't do laughter. Or jokes. Fingers, she says intensely. She leans forward, looking at me. Henry's fucked, she tells me, Henry's totally fucked. He's not going to ever get to touch a girl again. Not in this school. That's what your sister did to him. Okay, I say, and I'm backing away from her. On my side of the seat, I mean. As much as it's possible to.

I don't like your sister, Paula tells me. When we first meet. She's too happy, Paula adds. Happy people are superficial. Or cruel. If they looked around more, they wouldn't be happy. No one who looks around can be happy. About anything.

Paula is a fashion cliché. She always wears black. God knows what color her hair really is. And blood-purpled lipstick. Or black. Depending on her mood. Tattoos all over her body. Up and down her legs. All over her shoulders and back. Her ass. Her thighs. It's all *really* something without the clothes. I know.

Paula reads all the time. Celine. Rimbaud. Knows a lot of that stuff by heart. Drops it into conversations. In pretty nasty ways and pretty often. She's real good at insinuating stuff. It shuts people up.

Paula's not *ugly*—far from it. But she's not pretty either. Pretty doesn't apply to looks like Paula's. Her looks are too serious, too demonic, too threatening, too *violent* to be pretty. Paula herself isn't demonic. Not really. Her personality, I mean. We're in high school. It's all about appearances in high school. That's what's so insidious. The appearances become real. They get stuck on you. Even if you tried something on as a joke.

Paula's looks were dark, really dark. That was the impression. Like a shadow coming into the room. Something sucking away the light. Or maybe a vampire. That was the idea. She was practically an albino. And still it looked like a shadow had come into the room. When she showed up, I mean. She killed conversation. Among us, I mean. Among teenagers. Even among the girls.

It was weird sitting with the both of them, hanging out, smoking cigarettes. Not talking. Sis was always about bright clothes and intrinsic cheerfulness. Freckles and shit. Sloppy artist clothes. Paint on them. And that face. Then there's Paula. Some sort of war of *looks* going on. And me sitting in between. Like background. Yin and yang. Light and dark. And the line between them. Or something. Sis is drawing. That's what I remember most. Sis is always drawing. Paula is staring at Sis. A lot. Like she wants to *eat* her. You can't miss it.

It was the best time in my life. The two girls everyone wanted most. Always sitting with me. Me and the two babes. Talking to no one. Girls do hierarchies. And above all these hierarchies, looking down at them is Me with the two goddesses. I could tell because even the adults looked at us. Longing. I got to see the longing look a lot. Kind of a smile. But all twisted up with sadness. People slowing down to look. Even though it hurts.

Paula's father was rich. Is rich. Really rich. For years I didn't know what happened to her mother. Paula never talked about stuff like that. Later I heard that she'd committed suicide. In front of Paula. As a little girl. She'd shot herself in the head. Successfully. Her father told me this.

Paula's father was a lawyer, a really creepy guy. When he was in court, doing his thing I mean. I've watched him in action. A lot. He'd always say stuff that the judge overruled. Over and over. Strike that from the record sort of thing. But it always worked. The jury had already heard it. The judge had already heard it. He was good at saying things that stuck in your mind. Whether you wanted them in there or not. Really really clever. He insinuated all over the place.

But not at home. At home he was doting and totally in love with his daughter. It was obvious. So weird.

I worked in a lab once. They did experiments on cats. Eye movement stuff. Electrodes in their brains. The poor animals would die after a week or so. The guy who *did* this day after day was the nicest guy in the world. So ordinary. I kept looking for the signs of a twisted psyche in his

face, kept waiting for weird horror-movie twitches, subconscious expressions of hatred towards everything sentient. Nothing. I was over his house for dinner. Mashed potatoes, hamburgers, string beans. His wife, two kids, all totally normal. They had a dog too. Rover. It was called Rover.

Weird like that. Paula's father. At home, I mean. No sarcasm, no pissing contests, no verbal manipulation. Just good old-fashioned sweetness and love. Anything Paula wants. Every gesture he makes towards her says I love you. I finally decided this must be what organized crime thugs are like at home. Sweet. Loving. After they wash their hands, I mean.

For some people, high school is as good as it gets. The pinnacle. Then they have to start down at the bottom again. Where they usually stay. There's college. And then life. Not Sis. Somehow she just kept bobbing to the top. Looks, looks can do it. And she could paint too.

She skips the galleries at first. Puts her stuff in the clubs. Where the really rich young guys hang out. Rock stars. Etcetera. They want her. They buy her stuff. Then gallery owners hear about her work. Or they hear about the buzz surrounding her work. Surrounding her. They come begging.

I mean it. I witnessed the begging. Sis sitting there, snorting coke, not offering anyone any. You can buy it from the gallery, right? she's saying to some prince or other who's pawing her. I mean, you don't have to buy it direct from me, right? she says. All this while the gallery owner watches.

Your sister is such a cliché, Paula tells me. You saying the stuff is no good? I ask her. I mean honestly, I say, what's your opinion? Good is a term that doesn't apply to modern art, Paula tells me. It's a category mistake, she says. This isn't her real opinion. Category mistake. This came out of a book somewhere. She's in college. Taking courses. Like all of us. Sis too. Sis is still in college. But somehow she's already making it out there. In the world.

That prince, he signs a deal with her that requires him to publicize her work after he buys it. Display it this often, spend so much a year advertising it. With her name. Big. Sis is shrewd. On top of everything else that she is. This contract, it's supposed to benefit both of them. So that her stuff, some of which he owns, stays valuable. Gets even more valuable.

I go to a lot of her openings. Sometimes they're in galleries. But mostly she shows off her new stuff in the clubs first. By the time it gets to the galleries half of it has sold tags on it. Especially the ones with faces people think they can recognize.

I go to a lot of her openings. Paula never does. Sometimes I sit near a painting and people-watch. People-listen, actually. I didn't know clouds could do that, some woman says. I laugh inside when I hear stuff like this. Most of the time people are arguing over who the people are. Sis uses a computer program she designed to blend different faces together, and to work fractal imagery in under the skin. It makes you want to keep looking. Sort of like at a fire, she tells me. Or a flickering television screen, she says. You think you want to watch television because of the content? she asks me. No way, she says. It's much more primitive, it's just the chaotic flickering that gets you. I laugh inside a lot when I watch people look at her work. It's full of visual

trickery. To keep people staring at it. Without their knowing why. Sis is always reading up on vision science. Neurophysiology. She's quite the manipulator.

When I go to these gallery openings I recognize a lot of people. From television I mean. And the movies. Sis's circle. Mom complains about how she's always hearing about Sis on television or seeing stuff about her on the web or in those magazines at the checkout lines. They never mention the art, Mom says. That's an exaggeration, I tell Mom. Prices. They mention the prices a lot.

But I know what she means. It's all gossip. Whose boyfriend Sis has been seen with. The stalker thing with the judge. And the girl wars. That television tart. Sis is on covers of magazines a lot. Just like an actress. Or a model.

One of her publicists explains it to me one time. Until Suzy, she tells me, the inner circle was just music, movies, fashion and television. The money was always there in art—big money—but the publicity wouldn't stick. Because the artists were too old or weird-looking. And because visual art isn't very photogenic, she says. I laugh. No really, she tells me, it just sits there on the wall doing nothing. It doesn't *perform*. That's why musicians are in the publicity circle, and visual artists aren't. Musicians are like actors or fashion models. They're visually dynamic. They perform. They *undulate*. They rivet the eye.



Until Suzy. Suzy's a genius, she says to me. Suzy with that better-looking-than-a-model face of hers. Pure eye candy. And that body. She performs in public, the publicist tells me, and she keeps the art in the background. Where it belongs. Shows off all the price tags.

She clubs and publicizes it, the publicist tells me. She sleeps around, and publicizes it. She fights with her boyfriends. In public. She fights with her girlfriends. In public. She drinks in parks and gets arrested. She spreads rumors. About herself. Always about herself. That volatile soccer boyfriend. It's all brilliant bad-girl shit that she does. The publicist says to me: She's a publicist's wet dream. I'm coasting here, she adds, getting paid for nothing. Then I'm watching the publicist say: What a cute sweet little genius she is. And I'm thinking to myself: she wants Sis as much as I do. Maybe even more. At the moment, anyway.

Sis buys Mom stuff. All the time. Shares on some island off of South America. A house in Italy. One in the Hamptons. Why would I want to go to the Hamptons? Mom asks. Why South America? But she does a couple of times, and she takes her friends too.

Paula's looks wear off on me. Eventually. I start closing my eyes when we're fucking. Thinking about someone else, that's what I'm doing. I feel guilty, but if I don't do it I won't get an erection. And that'll be worse. She might figure something out.

Paula was always depressed. This is what I think. Systematically depressed. We're living together. Paula and me. For years. Somehow it seems to me that her father is grateful because I'm doing this. Really grateful. He doesn't need to be. I loved Paula.

Paula was lucky. For the most part, I mean. Her Dad loved her so much. And me. You can tell that someone's lucky if most of the bad things that happen to them are the things they do to themselves.

I go on a ski trip. Just a weekend trip. Totally innocent. A couple of guys and me. Paula's very sullen about the whole thing. As usual. Snow's going extinct, she tells me, and that's how you treat it? Trampling all over it like a brute? Oh come on, I say. This is Paula's way of getting into ecology. Uniquely twisted, as usual. At least she's original. Male bonding, she tells me later that evening, isn't that the stuff Al Qaeda cells are made from? Bunch of guys eating halal meat together, complaining about how the world is? No girls around to talk sense into them? Uh huh, I say.

Just some guys on a skiing trip. Nice guys. After I joined AA, I couldn't see them anymore. That was too bad. They were really nice guys.

I still think about them once in a while.

Here's how it feels. Childhood is forever. That's a given. The rest of your life is quick. Like a rubber band being pulled and then snapped. Except for the tragedies. The really bad times when time stops. So the agony lasts longer.

My ski trip had to be cut short. By Paula going into the hospital. Pills. A lot of pills. Her father finds her. Coma. I'm sitting by her bedside with her father. Tears keep running down his face. They don't stop. I'm embarrassed. She's his only child. She's his only child. You didn't know, he tells me, you were just on a ski trip. I nod. And that's when he tells me. About how her mother died.

When Paula comes out of it, she's different. She doesn't talk anymore, for one thing. Or hardly. I bring her home. Continue living with her. Brain damage. There's been a lot of brain damage. That's what the doctors say. Maybe she'll get better. There's no predicting with these things. No predicting at all.

Her Dad comes around. All the time. In between all the kinds of rehabilitation she's getting. That he's paying for. Darling, can I open the shade a little? he asks. Um, Paula always says. Darling, would you like a cookie? he asks. Um, Paula says.

He's grateful. To me, I mean. That's why I never have to get a job. I just take care of Paula. Feed her sometimes because she seems to like me feeding her. Although she can do it herself if she wants to. I drink. A little more than I used to. Sometimes Paula drinks with me. More often she just stares at the glass when I put it down in front of her.

She still rolls her eyes occasionally.

A couple of years later we get married. Um, okay, she says, when the reverend asks her if she wants to. I do, he says softly to her. I do, she says, imitating him, watching his lips. My sister is at the wedding. She makes it clear to me that she doesn't approve of what I'm doing, that she thinks this is unnecessary somehow. She's at the wedding ceremony but she misses the reception. Photoshoot or something.

Mom approves of both of us. Whatever we do. That's what Mom is like.

Sometimes nothing happens. Most of the time, I think. Other times too much happens. My sister is in a car accident. Less than a year after the wedding. She's the one driving, of course. Really fast. She's on something. Everyone in the car is. That *new* prince she's been fucking around with is killed instantly. Sis has a thing for royalty. Especially British royalty. That's what's always been reported, anyway. Now she's killed one. Changed the line of succession.

This is when I fuck up big time. I'll admit it even before I tell you what I did.

I'm visiting Sis in that posh hospital she's staying at for her reconstructive surgery. Her third operation. I'm thinking how amazing it is that it takes so little to wipe beauty off a face. Almost like makeup, it's that frail. Just a scar here, a new bend in the flesh there. Some discoloration. The nose different. The jaw too, in a way you can't be sure about. It's still her, alright. But the beauty is all gone. Totally gone. Like sunlight fucked over by clouds.

Loss and freedom. That's what I'm feeling. It's a horrible mixture of emotions. So there's guilt too. Because I'm thinking more about how I feel than about what's happened to her. I don't approve of me. Not at the moment, anyway.

I'm watching the doctors talk to her. Reconstructing this. Doing that. These guys sound so confident. Months. A couple of months. Maybe a year. She's got the best cosmetic surgeons alive. Working on her face.

It's gone, all gone. I know it. I've stared at her face, memorized it for far too long to be fooled by these guys. Accidents are so brutal that way. Age creeps up on you, wrinkles you slowly. Lets things fade away slowly, gives you a chance to keep up with who you are. Age is kindly. At least that way.

I really don't remember what triggered my remark. I should, but I don't. I've tried to remember but it just doesn't come back. Maybe people will be able to look at your work now instead of just gaping at your face all the time. *That's what I say.* I would have gone on this way, I think: Your art, I mean, they won't be distracted. They can look at your art. See your talent. What's really important. Not your face. But I'm not saying anything. Instead, she's screaming at me. Stuff about being sick in the head, an alcoholic, that I'm a bastard, a jealous, envious fuck, all sorts of stuff I don't remember. Can't remember. Her face, it's even more distorted. That's how I remember it. I'm running out of there. I can still hear her screaming. That's the memory I have.

Fifteen years. She doesn't talk to me for fifteen years. That's a really really long time. I send emails, leave messages at art galleries. I even send her letters with stamps on them. Not all the time. I'm not obsessed with this, not at all. Just once in a while, every few months. Fifteen years. Paula doesn't change much. Not even in fifteen years. I do change. I join AA. Get better. Start to help other alcoholics.

When Mom dies I think: Sis *has* to see me now. Funerals. These are the times when people make up. Sob into each other's shoulders. With the dead watching over them to make sure they behave. But Sis actually wears a veil and avoids me. Walks away, when I try to approach her. A couple of times. Actually has someone with her who pushes me away when I keep trying. Someone she brought for that purpose, I guess. I don't make a fuss. I'm past that.

Okay, I say to myself, I'll show you. And I take everything. From Mom's house. Everything Mom had. All her artwork. All our childhood things. The toys, the clothes, the whaletooth scrimshaw that's been in the family for a generation or two. Her jewelry. The works. All mine now. Even Sis's high school diaries. I'm sure she'll contact me. She loved the scrimshaw. She was always staring at it as a child. Tracing out the intricate lines with her finger. You look at her paintings, and you think you can see the designs of the scrimshaw whaletooth underneath it all. Sort of like a skeleton.

Nothing. She doesn't try to contact me, and still doesn't allow me to contact her. Fifteen years. It's a long time.

It's Paula who gets us back together. By dying from a stroke. They tell me it's connected to what happened to her eighteen years earlier. That's hard to believe, but a doctor reassures me of this. Says that it's very likely. I visit Paula's father a lot after that. I still do. He likes to see me. Because I remind him of Paula. Because he can reminisce with me. And cry. Cry a lot.

Then I get a condolence note from Sis. Belated. Almost a year and a half after Paula dies. She's living with this stone mason now. I guess that's what he is. An artist too. Marty. That's his name. Marty. She writes me an email the way people sometimes do, saying Marty this and Marty that, without realizing that she's never told me who Marty is, when they met or anything. I figure it out from the email. It's pretty obvious, actually. That they're married. That they've been married for a while.

They're living in Vermont. They've been building their home. From the ground up, as it were. A castle in Vermont. Hand-built. Their hands. They find the materials for free, at construction sites where beautiful old houses are being demolished. Or they ship the stuff in from Europe where good stuff still exists in abundance. They do all the plumbing themselves. They stain windows. Work stone. Tile.

She lets me visit their castle, and it's breathtaking. Large stone rooms, cobbled floors, the windows a cool fifteen feet above me, the light from them drifting down on us like angel wings. Fountains in the bedroom. For negative ions, she tells me. There's wood everywhere, beautiful old gnarled wood. Carvings. We can do this shit, she tells me, so we do.

Marty is older than her, and he's pretty much got a beard for a face. Eyes that hide under bushy eyebrows. I'm thinking bear, Canadian bear. It's an odd thought. Especially since he's from down South somewhere and still has the accent. Then I'm thinking: Not her type. Well, not her type once.

Beauty is different for us now. We older people, I mean. You don't just age on the outside, you age on the inside too. Ugly doesn't stand out so much with us anymore. We all kind of get to share in it now. But seeing her is still a shock. What I still can't forget has evaporated, and I keep thinking obsessively, it's ruins. I'm looking at ruins.

That's an exaggeration. There are some scars, but she's what people would call a handsome middle-aged woman. She looks pretty typical actually, with beautiful eyes. She's showing me her new work. There are no faces, no humans in it. I don't ask where they've gone. But I guess I look puzzled. These are landscapes, she tells me. I look again. I don't see trees, I don't see rocks. Is that a sky overlooking it all? I can't be sure. Are those mountains? Animals? Is that a cloud?

Nevertheless, it's not flat, it's three-dimensional. There's depth. Without all the standard signposts. That's what's stunning—how she pulled that off. She's still a trickster. Eye candy.

It's landscapes, she says, places none of us have ever seen. That we haven't been to yet. Um, I say. Sort of like new beginnings? I ask. She looks at me sharply, and I worry I've done it again. I mean cosmically speaking, I say. I even stutter a little. I'm trying to be careful. You know, I say,



like planets starting their lives all over again. Somewhere else. Shedding their old landscapes like skins. Innocent planets, I add. New planet lives in new galaxies. I fall silent.

She smiles, and I can see the nerve damage in her face. How the muscles don't move right.

That's a wonderful thought, she says, a lovely thought. Her smile is twisted, and that throws me momentarily. But it's just a smile.

Then she's running off. I hear her calling: Marty? Marty? Will just had a lovely thought, a really really lovely thought. That's what she's yelling. And her voice echoes. Reverberates. Because of the way they built their castle, I guess. *I think it's not too late to put it into the new brochure.*

That's what she's calling out to Marty.