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45 Months as Twins

by Catherine Kapples

My heart is jumping. I pat my hand on my chest to calm it. I look down at the cold bottle of Dr. Pepper tucked under my arm. I don't like the taste of coffee yet. I don't think I ever will. I prefer cold drinks or any drinks cool enough to drink from a straw. I drink a glass of Dr. Pepper with ice every morning, usually from a travel mug, so people just assume it is iced coffee, but this morning I have to settle for a bottle and no straw. I try to slow down my breathing once the elevator doors open. My brother Edward is asleep on the wooden bench outside of the entrance to the hospital's neurological wing. His breath hums as evenly as a cicada. I sit down on the bench beside him and scan the eggshell walls lined with pictures of green landscapes and smiling babies. I exhale a long breath. My heart still feels jumpy. I fold my arms over my chest and stare at the end table filled with TotalHealth, Brain-Mind, and Scientific American magazines. The table's dark mahogany makes me think of coffins.

"Hi, Grey," Mom says. Edward awakens at the sound of her chirpy voice. "Mallory's conscious. She has seven staples behind her ear now, but fortunately they only had to cut a few strands of hair. She's lucky to have such good roommates. You know they're the ones who took—"

"Those girls didn't take her," Dad says. My parents frequently interrupt each other and talk one after the other, mother, then father, as longtime couples do. They started dating during their freshman year of college, when they were still called Neddy and Mary. Before gray hairs. Before square-toed therapy shoes. Before they were old enough to be my grandparents.

"Those girls could've easily been the ones with the head injury," he said. I look down at my feet and rub my fingers along the stitches that left a faded outline of railroad tracks above my left eyebrow. I hear him fold the Sports section of the Boston Globe and drop it on the coffee table. My dad is the kind of man who lashes out at strangers if he has to wait for a table or anyone who drove only five miles above the speed limit in the left lane on the highway, but is always forgiving of his children. His rage is the kind of overenthusiastic rage of fans at baseball games after the umpire makes a call against their team or the suppressed rage of people waiting in long TSA lines in airports while late-comers, whose flights have already begun boarding, cut to the front of the line.

"So Mallory's totally okay?" I try to hide the disappointment in my voice. I feel so low. All I want to do is crawl under the waiting room's scratchy couch and lie there with the clumps of dust bunnies, balled-up tissues, and spearmint wrappers. I had hoped Mallory would need more than an empty stomach and seven staples. I had hoped she would be in the Intensive Care Unit or in a more critical condition at least. She has had enough success stories.

"She's going to be fine. She's not feeling great right now, but she'll be fine. She was just over served last night, that's all," Dad says. Edward shakes his head slightly. Because of his fifteen-year seniority, Edward takes his role as big brother seriously. Growing up, he gave me piggyback rides and carried my duffle bags. He got me through calculus, called on
my birthdays, and learned the right things to say about my experiments with home hair color kits. Today he seems surprised about our sister’s latest escape from punishment, though. Mallory, who always buys the orange properties in Monopoly and only enters a pool using a ladder, never gets in trouble with our parents.

Two and a half months a year, Mallory and I are the exact same age. We’re Irish Twins. But this month and the past two months we haven’t spoken to each other. This month only I am eighteen. This month I could sleep in fourteen-hour marathons without waking up to the cock-a-doodle-doo from Mallory’s rooster alarm clock or the fans from her blow drier or the steady creak from our closet doors opening. Eighteen years of stories hung in our shared closet.

I want Mallory to not remember the summers of sleeping out on the dock after playing gin rummy on the porch. Those nights on the dock, lying side by side under the bright stars and above the murmur of the ripples of the bay, we would worry about our parents dying before the end of our tennis seasons, ring ceremonies, proms, and graduations. We would wonder to whom they left us in their wills. Our only aunt or our only brother? Or one with each? I didn’t want Mallory to remember how she would wrap her strong arms around me and tell me they would never split us up. She would always fall asleep with her right arm next to my shoulder. I told her that I wouldn’t roll off the dock because of the ladder she propped up against the pillars that resembled the gates parents put up to keep babies away from stairs. She kept an arm around me anyways. I want her to forget summers on the docks, but I want her to remember our forty-five months of being the same age. Forty-five months as twins.

She is not one to let butterscotch candies melt in her mouth.

Mallory’s room is just a couple doors down from the nurse’s station. The last time I saw her was nine and a half months ago. The last time I talked to her on the phone she yelled at me and I wanted to cry after I hung up.

As I trudge into the room, Mallory rolls over, turning her face away from me. The room smells of latex and clothes worn too many times before washing. Her sandy hair presses against her pillow and sticks together in greasy strings. I can see the top of her spine through the split in her hospital gown, each vertebra extended, and two small bumps for shoulders. I sink my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. Except for her darker, greasier hair, she doesn’t look all that different.

“Mallory, honey, someone’s here to see you,” Mom says. She strolls over to the side of Mallory’s bed and bends down to her eye level. She tucks a loose strand of hair behind Mallory’s ear. Then she wraps her long, skinny arms around Mallory’s neck. She pulls Mallory close against her tiny frame and burrows Mallory’s greasy head into her consuming embrace. I can almost smell my mother’s vanilla scent. I can almost feel her soft, dry hands, which were always red from scrubbing pots, rubbing my upper back.

“Hi, Grey,” Mallory says automatically. “When... when did you get here? Did I see you...were you...last night?” Her voice is thick and cool. She is not one to let butterscotch candies melt in her mouth. I watch her as she kicks her feet under her covers, as if her legs are swimming the sidestroke. Listening to Mallory talk is like watching a fresh coat of paint begin to harden. Her sentences are slow to formulate. Words blended together. Her pale blue eyes are quiet, empty, and ranging. I want to see into her, through her, but I can’t. Instead I look at the bandages and IV lines that run up and down her arms. I had wanted her to suffer, I had wanted her to not remember everything, and I had wanted her to survive, but what if she hadn’t remembered anything.