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2010
SOCIETY FOR ADVANCEMENT OF POYNTER LIBRARY
FICTION CONTEST
FIRST PRIZE WINNING ENTRY

SISTERS AND MOTHERS

Written by

SARAH SMITH

Everyone talks in whispers, gathered in groups of three to five (no more, no less) and clutching their glasses of brandy, martini, rum and coke. No beer bottles. That would be distasteful. The women wear slinky little black dresses and the men tailored suits and it could almost be a cocktail party if everything weren't so damn quiet. I marvel and sneer at how many have come. We aren't ones for parties. But death is, after all, something else. Death demands attendance.

My sister holds court on the opposite side of the room, surrounded by a deep circle of admirers who pass her Kleenex and water and pat her on the back or hug her softly as she smiles, bravely, and struggles to drink her water. She looks very much the grieving daughter, but I know she is trying her damndest to capitalize on this moment, to get something out of our mom's death, because she got nothing out of her life.

I am the dirty sister. Impolite, uncooperative, sarcastic, bitter, cynical. I am slung across her sofa-chair, a half-empty glass of coke dangling from my hand and my heels kicked haphazardly to the floor at my feet. My dress is too large, lacey and old and wrinkled. My nylons are bagging at my knees again and I know people are staring at my bones, the harsh ponytail my hair is thrown into and the scowl I shoot at the world.

People stay away from me. I can tell they are watching me out of the corner of their eyes: measuring the depth of my sips, the width of my hips, how much my dress hangs off the tips of my collar bones. For the first time, I revel in it. I dangle my slim wrist off the edge of the sofa, let the sleeve fall away and display my bones to their eyes. I want to say: this is what killed her, you fools. This is what she looked like, this is how she died, and you did nothing. You watched her like you do me, whispered behind your hands and into your glasses that she was losing weight again, wasn't she losing weight again, looking ill? And you kissed her cheeks and clasped

her hands and told her she looked beautiful, asked her where she got those *darling* pants, who made that watch? I want to say: you're all doing it. We're all doing it. How many of you are going to flush these catered treats down the toilet, how many are smushing the bulk of the cake into your napkin as you politely chatter about anything but what killed her?

I don't say those things. What use would it do to say those things? And besides - it would be hypocritical. Who am I to talk? I didn't do a thing. Didn't save her, didn't stop her. I followed her. I thought: I can be thinner. I can go further. I can be better at this. Thought, horribly, when they told me: you lost.

~*~

I come home that night and sling off my clothes. Turn the shower on with a hard *yank*, climb inside and let the hot water run down my back. Slide to the floor and tilt my head up to the rain and imagine it is as powerful as I once believed, that it can wash away your sins and fears and hate and pain. And then I cry in great heaves, my whole body releasing tears and cries from someplace outside of me. I watch myself from overhead; my naked body curled on the bathroom tiles, still dripping. I watched this creature scream and cry herself to sleep on the cool tiles, exhaustion taking her before she could muster the energy to turn off the running water. And I fall into dreams; painful, cruel dreams in which my mom's haunted, hollow face stares at me, in which she smiles at me before shooting me dead -- Bang! -- one shot.

When I awake I'm not sure whether I am dead or alive.

~*~

One week later we stand together at the cemetery, solemn and cold in the February chill. Just the two of us: Lisa and I in a little white gazebo at the center of a large, flat cemetery, where a kind-faced woman tells us to take our time. Say goodbye. The box sits on the lectern. In there,

the weight of my mom's body, burned to ashes. It seems amazing that it would be so light. I shiver and cry, my hand flat on the smooth wood, before they place it in the hard ground. What goodbye I can muster already said or gone. We place down daises - her favorite. Private and utterly silent, our memorial. It feels empty.

Melissa is tightly quiet, angry to mutinous, and I suppose I should marvel I'd gotten her off her Blackberry long enough for the graveside service. I ache. Feel like I am breaking apart and so I grip myself with my arms, my fingers digging into my flesh as if the tighter I hold myself the better chance I have to stay together. All sarcasm gone, I break inside.

~*~

My bedcovers are wrinkled and mounded at the foot of the bed. I shiver, draw them back up to my chin, and stare at the ceiling, trying to shake off nightmares. Angry, frustrated, I give up on sleep and stumble across the room to the computer, log onto my email. I shuffle to the kitchen, pour Kix in a bowl, soymilk that splashes over the side to puddle on the counter. Carry bowl back to desk, eat blindly while reading messages.

There is an email from my sister, inviting me to dinner sometime this week. She wants me to prove to her I'm alive, but she doesn't want to see me. When she looks at me she sees our Mom. Not just because of size or behavior or our particular peculiar laugh, but because we do - did - look alike. I might as well be a threat taped to her doorstep. I understand this. I do not want to be a threat to her life and sanity, happiness.

I am tired of sickness. And I am tired of the constant reminder that is mourning: the constant focus, the constant grief. I have not fallen apart, not self destructed, am no larger or smaller than when she died. This is not a comfort. I am tired.

I close the email without replying, without reading any others, exhausted already. I climb

back in bed, my soft purple duvet inviting and cool. Turn on my side and stare at the wall until it blurs behind tears. I drive to my sister's the next night.

~*~

Melissa greets us at the door, a plastic smile on her face. "Hello, Laura!" She says with forced enthusiasm. "How are you? I'm glad you came. Can I take your coat?" I try not to snicker at her attitude. May I take your coats? Okay, sure. I say, "No, I'm fine. Lissy, you know I get cold," and her smile freezes for a second before she continues into the living room. I remember that she is going through the same thing I am Funny, I forgot. "How have you two been – really?" Lissy is sitting on the couch now, next to her husband, Max. I have perched myself at the edge of a sitting chair facing them, and when I ask this, Lissy takes her husband's hand and says, "We're doing as well as can be." She smiles, and for a blinding moment I want to slap her for acting so normal, so enthusiastic, so fake. She looks deep into Max's eyes, and I feel as though I am only an observer to a play, waiting for the right time to applaud. I look sappily into Max's eyes, wiggle my eyebrows again, "Are you well, my dear? You really do look quite lovely tonight." Lissy doesn't like my sarcasm, straightens, no longer smiling. "I've invited a friend to dinner tonight. I hope you don't mind."

I mind. I mind a good deal. Not that I don't trust my sister or anything. Good intentions, all that. But I hear the undertones screaming out beneath her words. I smell it. I should have expected it. Intervention. Because, you know, my sister has never once invited a friend to dinner with me. Not sure whether she's ashamed of me or shrewd enough to realize that I don't like to eat in front of others, but she never has before. We don't share friends. We don't share

much of anything, come to think of it, but a sharp pointed nose and a disdain for sixties rock music. The Beatles. My ass.

Lissy goes into the kitchen – purportedly to check the meal, but probably to also escape the tension in the room. Max shrugs and goes back to his book. I’m pretty damn sure he doesn’t want to be a part of this. “I really ought to be going.” I murmur. “Have a lot of things to do tonight. I’ll have to do this another time.” He looks up at me, his eyes widely innocent, “You don’t have anything to do, Laura. Stay.” I turn to leave, and in that moment a man walks in.

I stop. He offers his hand. “I’m Rob, pleased to meet you.” He is young, his thirties, with a look so disheveled it has to be real. Rob. Dr. Rob, more like it. Probably Dr. Johnson or something equally unremarkable, so he goes by Bob to seem more approachable and memorable. Doctor of Psychology? Doctor of Psychiatry? Doctor of Internal Medicine? It doesn’t really matter, they’re all the same. “Hi, Rob. Doctor?” I say, a little smoke almost puffing from my ears. “I’m sorry, I’ve got to go. Tell Lisa ‘nice try’ for me. And go to hell, while you’re at it.” He puts his hands out: in supplication, in comfort, to stop me – I don’t know. He says, “Don’t leave, we just want to talk.” I snort. Walk around him to the door, but Max says “Laura.” And I stop, turn. He says, ‘Come here.” I turn. I’m angry. At her. At him. Everyone. So angry. I hate them all. I need her. I want what she can give me. I want to be well, I want to be happy, I want to be alive. I want to be sick, I want to be hurting, I want to die. I want my mother. I want to be saved. I don’t want *this*. Every painful dichotomy rises up in me and I stand frozen until Rob wraps his arm around me and guides me to the chairs.

Rob is still standing there, his hands tucked into his corduroys, a bemused look on his face. I gesture him to sit, switching personas wildly. “Come, sit, make yourself at home. Lissy’s just gone to take a Xanax or four, she’ll be back in a minute. How are you doing this *fine*

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