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Fratricide

by Alexis MacIsaac

“Be good to each other.”

The brothers' father said it with his eyes closed, before the doctors and nurses drugged him into oblivion. Allan later told me he and his brother Joey had both nodded when the words were uttered. They understood them as an order, as binding as a Will and Testament, and the brothers were certain they would abide by it.

Allan was fourteen and Joey thirteen when their dad got sick. Allan was the one who found out their father died first. He picked up the telephone after it rang twice, and when he heard the muffled weeping of his mother on the other end, he knew it was over. Still, it came as a surprise, the news that his father was gone. He kicked at the floor and crushed his fist against the wall. Joey had looked up at him, his eyes shining. He knew before he was told too. He pushed away his bowl of porridge and blinked back tears. And then he stood and walked past his brother to go lie on his bed where he stayed for exactly one day, with his baby blanket thrown over his face so that he was swallowed by the dark.

While the boys could manage their grief by confining it within the parameters of their father's final words, their mother had no such anchor, and she found herself adrift. In later months, after three wakes and a funeral, she could not find distraction in her sons. Their sharp chins and sharper eyes reminded her too much of the man whose hand held hers until it didn't.

Allan remembered her screaming at Joey once when he offered to make her tea.

“Go away!” she spat, over and over again. Her housecoat in tatters and her hair unwashed.

Allan understood then that he and Joey had been orphaned. His mother was alive but not living. A person to whom he was attached and whom he was forced to acknowledge, but who had rescinded her maternal connection to him and his brother. He told me he would later wonder if there had ever been a thread to bind them to each other at all, or if the attachment had been completely severed when the doctor cut the umbilical cord.

While she slept during the day, the boys would sometimes alternate placing a finger under her nose to make sure she was still breathing. They grew accustomed to the empty pill bottles that littered the floor and would sometimes leave a glass of water and a piece of buttered bread for her before they left for school.

In the mornings, Allan would get up early and set the porridge to cook on the stove. Then he would gently shake Joey awake in the room they still shared, so that they had time to eat before the school bus picked them up at the end of their laneway in Almonte to take them to the school. The boys began to understand that there was a clear demarcation between the before and the after, and the after was a shadow that they had to run from, or else it would overtake them the same way it had taken their mother.

In the summer months, with school dismissed, the two were left alone, and they took to venturing far into the woods surrounding their home to build forts. Allan always drafted a rough blueprint. They’d travel along the stream, up onto the hillside, cracking branches underfoot and startling birds, and when they reached a spot to their liking, Allan would tell Joey to gather certain types of branches and sticks, and Allan would decide how they should be assembled. Sometimes, it would take them all summer to refine a build that only they would ever lay eyes on, but Allan remembers the moment of a fort’s completion as the happiest occasions of his teenage years, before he turned eighteen and went on to study at university.

“Joey got hurt the last build. Cut himself with a knife. Almost needed stitches. I had to use my shirt to stop the bleeding. It was worth it, though. That last one was remarkable.”

All this family history was relayed to me by Allan after we got engaged. When we were first dating and I asked him about his upbringing, Allan would shrug and say nothing. I learned to live with those pregnant silences; I sat with them. But later, I occasionally poked or prodded at them like a child, until I’m sure I wore him so thin that he thought he might turn to air, and he eventually began to tell me what it was like living in rural Ontario with a dead dad and a mother who may as well have been dead, and a brother who was forever littler than him and who couldn’t be trusted to do anything unless ordered to by Allan.

“The community was good to us. Always dropping off food, checkin’ in. But sympathy’s no substitute for a parent.”

Allan inherited the house and the land after his mother died. Though he had many opportunities for jobs out west, he’d been determined to stay in Almonte. “God’s country,” he said, even though I suspected he’d long abandoned his belief in any deity. I never said so, but I felt like Allan carried a grudging duty to stay, that even if he had ever wanted to leave, he wouldn’t be able to admit it to himself. Allan once told me he had wanted to start his own company, but thought better of it, given the likely precarity, so he became a high school teacher instead. I never thought it was his vocation, to work with children, but Allan treated it as though it was, even though he smoked and drank more during the school months. Outside of school, he always had a project on the go, many of which he abandoned: buying useless land, building a garden only to allow it to be eaten by weeds and insects, raising chickens that ended up in the jaws of coyotes. I felt that Allan expected more, that life was harder now than he imagined it might be, and he wasn’t quite sure how to repair his discontent, so he kept himself in motion, unable to take a pause and bravely look within.

It was Joey who decided to move, though he'd kept it a secret from Allan until the last minute. Allan had always thought Joey would get some honest job with the local police or maybe even working construction so that he could stay close, but Joey had other plans.

"He thought he'd be better at something academic. But I had to be the one to remind him to study," Allan said to me once. He'd been sitting in his father's favourite chair which he rocked back and forth in a way that was never peaceful, and I remember the way Allan's voice had softened when he spoke of Joey, even as he clenched the armrests of the chair so that the veins on his hands grew thick. "I was the one who snapped him into shape."

At that time, Joey was only an impression in my mind. I didn't ask why he never came home and why I had never met him. I think it was because I didn't want Allan ruminating on this, that I was afraid of what might be uncovered.

"Little brother is coming to town," Allan announced to me one evening.

"When?" I asked, trying to hide my surprise.

"Dunno. Didn't say. Just said he was planning a visit soon."

Joey was to stay with us for a week. On the morning he arrived, we hadn't expected him. He'd called us from the highway saying he was on his way. Allan was mowing the lawn when I came out of the house to tell him. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve and complained that his brother couldn't plan anything to save his life. Later, I heard the car rumbling along the gravel road that led to our house on the hill. Its red colour jarred. I was used to muddy tires and cracked windshields. Allan and I stood outside on the porch, as if anticipating a child's long-awaited return. When Joey emerged from the driver's seat, I saw that he was softer than his brother, not in body, but in the way he seemed to regard the world. He seemed open where Allan always was closed. He handed me a bag of groceries he'd clearly just bought in town, and after I'd said "thank you. You really shouldn't have," he moved toward me, and I could see he didn't know whether to hug me or shake my hand, and I thought it was sweet that despite being a grown man, he hadn't quite acquired the assertiveness men tended to have toward women.

Allan embraced his brother briefly, the two of them clapping each other on the back as if old pals.

“The place still smells the same,” Joey declared, rather oddly, I thought. But Allan gave a quick nod and said, “Wouldn’t smell any different.”

“Let me get us all a drink,” I said.

“No alcohol for me,” Joey said. “Water’s fine.”

Allan scoffed. “Water?”

Joey shrugged. “Just don’t have a taste for drink at all now.”

“We’re still on well water,” I said. I wanted the reunion to be free from the awkwardness that arises from separation. I wanted Allan to not care about Joey not drinking. I wanted to remind Joey that the house from which he came was largely unchanged, including the water that flowed from the brook and that tasted faintly of sweet earth.

Joey seemed uninterested in speaking of himself. But I could tell from the leather interior of his car and the clean lines of his clothes that he was doing pretty well for himself. He sat on a chair in the kitchen, his bum close to the edge of the seat, like he didn’t belong there. I realized that he didn’t belong even though this house was once his home; he didn’t inhabit it with the same ease as his brother, as if his time away had been more formative than the years spent in Almonte and that he could never have known this had he not left. He eyed the broken tile on the floor, the wallpaper that peeled at the edges in the kitchen; yet he didn’t seem to do so with any kind of judgement. More of a sadness, the origins of which I could only guess at.

“I ran into Denny Graham at the store before I came,” said Joey. “He told me it’s KFC tonight because it’s the old anniversary with his wife.” He started to laugh. The glass of water trembled in his hand. “I remember him saying how much he loved KFC back in the day. Pushin’ eighty and still craving a bucket.”

Allan smiled without his eyes. It was as if he didn’t like what Joey was saying, but he couldn’t quite figure out why.

“Old Denny should be left alone to enjoy his chicken,” Allan said, after taking a long sip of beer. He was leaning against the counter, looking down at his brother.

Joey reddened. “Oh sure. I just thought it was funny.” He looked at me and said, “I thought a lot of the old furniture would be gone, but it still feels like the house I grew up in.”

I nodded, smiling. I hadn’t bothered Allan about the furniture or the dated prints of forests and Catholic prayers framed and mounted throughout the house, because until we were married, the house was still just his, even though I worried that it wasn’t healthy for a man to be attached to fixtures of an unhappy past.

“How is Toronto, anyway?” Allan asked. His voice quiet. It seemed like he was inviting a certain kind of answer, but I wasn’t sure Joey understood this.

“It’s good. Great, actually. I didn’t think I would be a city person, but turns out I am.”

Allan laughed, but it sounded forced.

“I suppose you don’t have any plans to settle down anytime soon, then? Do you little brother?”

Joey set his water on the table. He wiped some condensation from the glass and studied the quarter-empty vessel intensely. He was thinking about what to say. And why, I wondered, did it take so long for him to answer a question that seemed easy. But there was an edge to Allan since Joey’s arrival. Like the reunion had been better imagined than realized. Like Joey was surprising Allan in ways that were disturbing. Like Allan had no armament against this discomfort aside from asserting his dominance as elder.

“Maybe I’m making him a bit shy,” I said. “No need to tell us about your private life, Joey.” I tried to smile.

“I have settled, actually,” Joey said, quietly. He still stared at his glass. Allan took another sip of beer. “I meant to tell you I bought a house out there. With a woman I’ve been with for a while. I was going to bring her here, but didn’t want to impose.”

“Not ashamed of us, are you?” Allan said.

Joey paused. A look came over his face that I couldn't decipher.

"Of course not. She's from a farm herself. She'd get on in Almonte, no problem. She'd probably love it here." He turned to me. "Did Allan ever tell you about the forts we used to build? Way deep in the forest?"

"He did. Said it was pretty magical."

"We liked having them as a secret," Joey said. "Felt like we weren't quite a part of the world when we were out there. I used to think it might be nice, to live forever like that."

Quiet descended upon the room for a moment. Joey broke it.

"Strange that I ended up in a city when I loved the forest. But maybe not so strange. You can stay hidden in a city."

"You've always liked hiding, haven't you?" said Allan. He crushed the second can of beer between his hands and placed it on the counter next to the compost bin. I didn't want him to have another one. It wasn't even 3 p.m. At this rate, he'd be passed out before suppertime. Allan got another from the fridge, offering Joey one too.

"Joey doesn't want alcohol," I said.

"Sure he does," said Allan. He placed the beer in front of his brother on the table, next to the water.

Joey tried to laugh. He was being deferential. He was trying to navigate the tripwires his brother was setting, but it was as if he was half-blind and limping. He didn't stand a chance. He pushed the beer away.

"I don't drink," Joey said. "You know why."

Allan paused. He cracked open his beer.

"Beer isn't pills," he said.

"It's all the same to me."

Allan gulped his beer. Each swallow a bullet. When he finished, his eyes landed on his brother.

“A lot of nerve coming in my house and judging me when you didn’t see her ‘til the end.” Allan’s voice had grown louder.

“I don’t think Joey meant anything by it,” I said, blood pumping at my temples. But neither of them seemed to hear me. Their eyes were shackled to each other.

Joey turned to rock. He said, “I’m not judging you. You made your choices, and I made mine.”

“You think I had choices?” Allan said, quietly.

“We all have choices.”

“No,” Allan said. “We don’t.”

“You chose to stay with mom. Chose to look after her. And you got it all. The house. The land. That was fine with me, but don’t claim to be a victim when you made your bed.”

When he’d finished, no one breathed. Allan looked as if his hands might spring loose. But he stood there, at the counter, a few feet from his brother. He wasn’t going to make a move.

“You’re a real selfish fuck, you know that, Joey? You were like that even when we were kids. Made me do all the work. Even when we played out in the woods, you didn’t carry your load. I even took the shirt off my fucking back for you when you hurt yourself. Remember that?”

“Allan, stop it!” I said, knowing my words were useless.

Joey stood. His glass of water shook and I thought it would fall and shatter and spill water over the table and the floor, covering everything, but it didn’t topple. I thought he would leave. He had revealed a facet of Allan that had been unknown to me. But instead of leaving, he opened his mouth to speak, and I saw him as larger than Allan, even though he was a few inches shorter.

“I remember that time you gave me your shirt. It was the last fort we built together. Before we went our separate ways. I remember I cut myself and was crying and you told me to shut up.”

Allan's face darkened.

"If that happened, you must've done something stupid."

"I knew it. I knew I shouldn't have come back here. I thought it might be different now that we're older. But you've lied to yourself again, haven't you?" Joey turned to me. "That future husband of yours. He spins a yarn. He's the hero of his own story, but he's not the hero in anyone else's, I guarantee that. Did you know he used to hit her? Our mother? When she was passed out?"

A piece of metal flew, thudding pitifully against Joey's chest. He didn't even flinch.

Allan screamed, "Fuck you! You come back here, after all the wreckage. You have no fucking idea what I went through. I took care of you after dad died! I took care of *her*! But not one of you took care of me!"

Joey blinked, and I worried he might cry. But his eyes stayed dry.

"You take care of you," he said, his voice steady. "You always have. You only wanted me around to make yourself feel better about where you landed."

I saw that it was true, what Joey said. The way Allan's eyes turned inward, as if he couldn't face the truth that existed outside his imagined story. Allan hated Joey even as he loved him. He hated him because he reminded him of his awful past and he hated him because he reminded him of a future he may have wanted. Joey had shrunk the shadow chasing him and Allan had worn his as a cloak.

"Goodbye, brother," Joey said, after a moment of silence.

He turned to leave and I wished in the time it took him to get to the door and open it that he had offered to take me with him.

Allan looked beyond me, as if I wasn't there.

"Be good to each other," he muttered. "Be good to each other."

He went to the fridge and got himself another beer, opened it, and took a long drink.

"Goodbye, brother," he said, only to himself.