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Water and Light

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Water and Light

Trying on her rings is the most frustrating thing in your world. They never fit. You slide the tarnished silver band, adorned with a single deep red stone, over each of your peanut-butter-sticky fingers. It falls off. You slide it over your tongue, close your mouth, and the ring can't escape. Its smooth surface, like her pale hands, glides over your tongue, your teeth, your fleshy cheeks; it glides so effortlessly in your mouth that it slips through the small space at the back of your tongue, down your throat, into your peanut-butter-sticky stomach. You half-smile: the ring is yours to keep.

You wish to swallow your mother. Her hair is as garnet red as the stone; translucent hands show lavender veins, pink cheeks, sapphire eyes. She is a rainbow. You are dirt, earth—brown, brown, and more brown. It's not a matter of beauty, though. It's distance. Impossible distance.

When you were too young to be left alone, you walked the streets of Buffalo together every day, hand in hand. Everything was simple and beautiful and shining. The streets were full of beautiful, shining people and you wanted to touch and meet them all. You ran from the curb of the sidewalk and just before your tiny foot touched the road, she grabbed your arm, spun you around, and enclosed you in a warmth that you would search for for the next fifteen years.

After the move, she starts working full-time. You decide to leave your new apartment and walk to Grandma's all by yourself. You put on your determination boots and slosh through puddles all the way there. You cross a street without a crosswalk, and as your tiny foot touches the road you wonder where her pale hand is, why you aren't being flung backwards into the safety

of her freckled arms. You walk on, and the distance between the two of you grows greater with every step.

In school, you're surrounded by rainbows. The teacher instructs you to draw your family portrait. You pick out four crayons: scarlet, apricot, cornflower, and sepia. Your classmate looks over at your picture and raises an eyebrow. He raises the same eyebrow when you walk in with your mother for open house. Everyone raises an eyebrow. "Were you adopted?" This question haunts your childhood, and you avoid it at all costs.

Your half-sister is born with amber hair, cobalt eyes, and coral lips. In the hospital, she is wrapped in distant yet familiar freckled arms, radiating on a spectrum you can never understand. The two of them are just out of reach; no matter how far you stretch your brown arms, you can't touch them. Your stepfather hovers in the background, a quivering, terrified cloud above the double rainbow. You hardly see him, though. An intense blinding kaleidoscope flows from the infant to your mother and straight past you.

The three of you go grocery shopping and you learn to walk a few paces ahead of them. You don't hold her hand. You don't look at shiny surfaces that reflect the differences between you and your blood mother.

On a rainy day in February, you and your mother look through an iris catalog and decide to draw imagined gardens that someday (with enough money, enough time) you might plant. You gravitate towards the deep pinks, deep purples. She circles and highlights the whites, the sunset reds, the summer oranges. You compare sketches when you're done. Her dreamy layout with swirling lines, bridges, pergolas, glass birdfeeders, and wild clumps of vibrant irises is enough to make you forget that it's a rainy day in February. Yours is simply rows of flowers, separated by thin paths. Unsteady lines that should have been straight prompt another question that will haunt you: "I really can't draw, can I?" She doesn't have to answer for you to understand that there is no way to reach the end of a rainbow.

At your sister's first grade open house, you get the same looks. She and your mother stand hand in hand, both round, dewed in freckles, glowing in ROYGBIV. "That's my big sister," she says, and she's so proud of you she doesn't seem to notice her classmates' confusion. You walk over to the display of handmade pictures hanging on the wall. Your sister's is beautiful, full of swirling crayon lines and steady strokes of color that your peanut-butter-sticky hands could never have made at that age. You feel ten thousand worlds away. She grabs at your hand, but you pull away.

You spend years pulling away. Teasing. Fighting. The damage becomes nearly irreparable, but wasn't that inevitable anyway? No matter how close you get, you'll never reach.

And meteorological phenomena sure do stick together. Everything is your fault. “You’re older, you should know better!” You resent the way their colors fade into one unified gleaming crescent of disappointment—disappointment in you.

During these years, you put up with your stepfather because you have to. He has exploded from that quivering cloud into a dark, desperate rain. He stumbles up and down stairs and slurs his words and your mother pretends none of it is happening. You’re afraid when she goes to work and leaves you with him, not because he will hurt you, but because you’ve never been surrounded by so much gray. “Why do you stay with him?” Your words pour as hard and unfaltering as a heavy storm.

Trying on her rings becomes something you don’t care to do. You ask for your own rings. You ask for your own phone. Your own room. You ask for a lot. And you get it.

Your mother sings as she cleans, kind of a ritual (she loves to clean; you’re so messy). Her voice is only ever half there; severed vocal chords mangle each note. “You’re tone deaf,” you mock over the buzz of the vacuum cleaner. You belt out a clearer version of “Moonshadow,” though you’ve grown to hate Cat Stevens (and your mother’s other favorites). She keeps singing, smiling. You roll your eyes, plug your ears, sing over her until her voice is crushed to nothing.

She tries to do some things for herself. Pilates is what sticks. She pops in Maury Winsor’s twenty-minute tape and lies her round body onto a mat on the living room floor. You are young, a dancer, athletic, you keep up, no problem. You laugh at her efforts until one day, you make her cry. “I just want twenty minutes for myself,” she sobs. You reach out your arms to hug her, but she slips right through. No matter how hard you try, she won’t stop crying.

Years later, you’re propped up on the corner of the kitchen counter while the heat from the oven warms your legs. You look around at your sixth and final home—the water stains on the ceiling, the puckering linoleum tiles. You ignore the impeccable design, the tireless hours of painting, the renovations that your mother could afford. You only see empty spaces, places that are lacking: her inability to cook a good meal, her hot temper, her shrill cracking voice, her favoritism, her lack of education, her poor choice in men, the ways she has failed you.

“Why don’t you just quit?” You interrupt her as she complains about her third shift job at the nursing home. Her voice breaks a bit as she explains that she can’t just quit. She wanted to go to art school. She wanted to move to Montana. She wanted, wanted, wanted. She wanted a lot. And she got none

of it. You can't help but carry a heavy question on your adolescent shoulders: Does she want you? Did she ever?

With each haunting question, you retreat a little farther into yourself. You build your wall a little higher—high enough to block the lighted arc that stretches its colors and (possibly) longs to be near you.

Trying on her rings begins to have a certain appeal again, but not because they are hers. Because she has nice jewelry. You've begun to define her by what she has. "Oooh, can I have this when you die?" You don't even flinch when you ask. Digging through her boxes of vintage jewelry, you're always attracted to the things that shine the most. A sterling silver band with a large colorful stone is what has caught your eye. "Yes," she assures you. "It's yours. You can have it now." You slide it onto your finger and ignore the hurt in her voice. Still digging, she picks up one of her favorite pieces. It contains no stone, no shine, just a gold band; engraved on it, the name 'Nancy.' "Who's Nancy?"

"I don't know. I got it in a lot of random jewelry on eBay." At this point, you don't even try to understand her. Her rings never fit. It's still so difficult, so frustrating. You know she hears your eyes rolling.

Adolescence is fading, and you are forgetting. Forgetting to tell your mother when you will be performing in school concerts. Forgetting to tell her that you've broken up with your boyfriend of four years, that your best friend is moving away. Forgetting to tell her about your pregnancy scare, about getting drunk for the first time—so drunk that you have only the memory of concrete and lips. Forgetting to tell her when you're going out, when you're coming home. Forgetting to tell her of your accomplishments, of your screw ups. She's almost evaporated into the sky, completely forgotten.

Your family from Georgia visits for the first time in years. You hate these things. People pile into cars to meet at the cousins' farmhouse and you join, of course. It's the same as always—beer and barbeque, the parents reminiscing about their pot-smoking days (as if they are over), playing pranks on Grandma, watching all the rainbows, some ugly and some beautiful, all in incredible prismatic layers of generational similarity. "Doesn't little Erin look just like her mother?" "Debbie sure has her father's eyes!" "Oh, Connor got that spunk from Aunt Sarah!" You spend the day in a mist and the distance is greater than you could ever imagine—they are just illusions, tricks of the eye. You are here. Where are they?

In the fading light, a drunken aunt approaches you and whispers in your ear: "You're so quiet and soft spoken, *just like your mother.*" You brush it off. You're actually pretty loud, anyway. Certainly not soft spoken. Right? You're just quiet around them because they're practically strangers. You think. What

does she know anyway? But the words linger like a fine dew stuck to your skin. *Just like your mother. Just like your mother. Just like—*

Your mother decides it's time to go and on the ride home, you let her sing uninterrupted.

When your stepfather gets too drunk for the last time, she tells him to leave. She's done and she means it. You sit alone in your room and listen to your mother and sister cry through the thin floors when he finally leaves. You wish you could cry, if only to be closer to them. But you can't. They love him. You can't help but think it. You can't help but hate yourself. After fourteen years of gray retreating in a single moment, you can't help but realize you love him, too. And all of a sudden, you can. You can cry.

All at once, you're almost an adult, and you're sickeningly nostalgic. The sky is changing and you need to ground yourself. After all, you're more made of earth than anyone you know. You pull out home videos from when your hands were still peanut-butter-sticky. As you sit on the floor, eyes locked on a world you've nearly forgotten, you don't notice the holes in the wall of your old apartment, the faded carpet, the lack of furniture, where she tried as hard as she could not to fail you. You notice her voice. It was beautiful—deep, clear, vibrant. It flooded the room with unimaginable hues. “Before the surgery, I could sing, too. Like you,” she sits on the couch behind you and remarks. She can't see you overflowing onto the carpet, but she can sense your awe. *Like you.*

You desire to know more, to see the other half. Old pictures and stories occupy months. “You were such a rebel.”

“I was just passionate, stood up for what I believed in.” *Like me.*

“Why'd you end up going to nursing school? Your art is beautiful.”

“I had no support from anyone. Your grandma and grandpa didn't help me.”

“Did you go because of me?”

“No, not in that sense.” *She sacrificed for me.*

You want to ask, you want to ask so badly. It's on the tip of your tongue. She touches your head with a gentleness that you recognize from a million times before and you know the answer.

One day, you hate that ring you picked out. It's gaudy, atrocious. You ask your mother if you can look through her boxes again. This time, you pick out a smaller silver band with a thin oval opal resting in its center. “That's my favorite, you know. Opal is my birthstone.” As the words leave her mouth,

you are overcome with a terrible sense of guilt. “Yes, you can have it when I die,” she jokes. Except it’s not even a little bit funny.

Trying on her rings becomes easier with time. You grow into them, into her. It only takes a few months to begin to fill in the gaps of whole years, the gaps where things can’t touch because they’re destined not to.

You stop searching for the end of the rainbow—it’s just reflection, refraction, the perfectly angled combination of water and light.

Just water and light. Earth and blood and bone. Lavender veins; pink cheeks; brown, red, amber hair. Particles of matter that are just as much alike as they are impossibly distant. You turn your mother’s ring over and over on your finger, and you’re flooded with a familiar desire. You clench your teeth to keep from swallowing.