

The Tie That Bonds

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It was a wet night but not a stormy one and now as the sun comes up it still drizzles. I sit in the chair by the balcony door in my bedroom, looking across the street not really seeing anything. I feel like I am waiting for something, that I have been all night but I don't know what. It feels like something isn't here that should be, like a piece is missing. Maybe it's because I haven't slept but I'm not tired, I haven't been all night.

I look around my room, brushing the white curtains with my hand. Everything in here is white; white rug, white bed, white furniture. It makes the room look larger and brighter even at this time of the morning. If I were to step outside into the hall it would be like stepping into another house. Out there the rooms are slightly darker, filled with reds, blues and greens. But all the rooms are small, this is only a townhouse. It doesn't look that different from any other house really, from the inside or the outside.

The sound of someone walking through water draws my eyes down to the street where a figure walks through the puddles. She walks in the street not on the sidewalk, thin shoes on her feet and no socks, clutching a handkerchief to her face. As she comes closer to the house I can hear her coughing. Hanna had decided to walk home in the cold.

Slowly I get up and walk downstairs to meet her. The door opens as I reach the bottom of the stairs and Hanna continues her coughing. As she hangs up her coat and takes off her soaked shoes I just watch. Her coughing stops and she breathes slowly, deeply, turning slowly to face me.

"How is your friend?" I ask, remembering that is why she

went out yesterday, to see a sick friend. It's someone she she hasn't known for very long but she goes out quite regularly to see her.

"They say she's doing a little bit better but they wouldn't let me see her because of my cold." She snuffles and wipes her nose before coughing again. I look down at her bare feet.

"You look tired." Her comment catches me off guard. Suddenly I feel tired. "Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

"No. I wasn't tired."

Hanna shakes her head and goes into the kitchen.

"It amazes me how you can keep going without any sleep. You keep doing this and you'll catch my cold."

In the kitchen she fixes herself a sandwich and cold drink while I start to heat some water.

"Is Drew here?"

I haven't thought about him since yesterday when we saw each other for lunch. Now his face enters my mind and it feels like I had almost forgotten him.

"No. I'm supposed to meet him later."

Hanna nods and my water whistles. I get up slowly as Hanna watches.

"You need some sleep. You're never going to make it through the day."

Hanna is in her room, I can hear her occasional coughs through the walls. I sit in my chair in the grey, late morning light and wait. It's only 10:30 and I'm not supposed to meet Drew until 12:30. His picture is on my dresser on the right side of the big oval mirror; his brown eyes gaze out past perfume bottles and make-up containers. I have known him for two years, the longest time I have dated a man. He is the only man I have dated that Hanna has liked. His lean

body and beard make him look dignified, like a gentleman, yet friendly. That's what Hanna likes about him, his "friendly elegance."

Beside Drew's picture, right in front of the mirror is a picture of Hanna and me. Standing together no one would know we were sisters. I look into the mirror and stare at my image. There is my long, thick, black hair, my dark eyes, my sharp features. I am everything that Hanna says she wants to be — dark and distinct. But she is small with soft, light brown eyes, brown hair and a rounded face. Hanna has always been a person with hazy, undistinguished features and wants. Nothing is set with her, nothing is certain, she has told me she feels lost like she has no guidelines to tell her where she begins or stops. So she takes in everything, gives out everything, a sieve. She like to remind me of our differences from time to time, particularly after Mom and Dad have questioned her about her future plans. She thinks I'm perfect.

At noon I put on a white dress and hear the front door close. Hanna has left again to go wherever she goes on the days when she doesn't work. Soon after, I leave the house looking down the street as I shut the door but Hanna is already out of sight. I get the car and drive downtown to the cafe where Drew and I meet for lunch. When I get there he is waiting, dressed in a suit and tie.

"You look beautiful." His eyes sparkle as he smiles. I smile back and we are led to a small table for two next to the window.

We order light meals and red wine, a pink flower sits between us as we talk.

"There is a good chance I will get the raise." Drew gently tears a piece of bread off the loaf as he talks. "Have any of the companies you applied to accepted you?"

I put down my glass and dab my mouth. "One of

them has asked me to come in for an interview."

"Great. It would be wonderful if you could start work as soon as you get out of graduate school." Drew reaches for the bottle of wine and pours both of us some more to drink.

After lunch we go for a walk around the shops. The rain has stopped but the clouds still cover the sky muting the sunlight and making everything look hazy. Bright coloured clothing flashes at us from behind windows trying to draw us in as we walk by.

"Are you still planning to move after you graduate?" Drew winds my arm around his, pulling me closer to him.

"I would like to but I'll probably have to wait. It might take some time to save enough money to get the type of house I want."

We stop by a jewelry store. The gems manage to catch the light and sparkle at us despite the lack of sunshine. Drew points out several pieces that he likes. I look down at the front of the window display and see a simple gold ring set with a small red stone. It looks delicate and beautiful in its plainness compared to the over-adorned pieces around it. Just the sort of thing Hanna would like.

After dinner we decide to stay downtown and stop in at some of the night-spots. As we walk I catch sight of a red and blue neon sign that flashes the name The Downstairs. A neon arrow points down a flight of stairs to a dirty basement door of the building. I remember Hanna mentioning the place so I steer Drew towards it.

Inside the club is smokey, dim lit and crowded with moving people. Recorded music blasts over the speakers mixing with voices of people laughing and shouting. Drew and I push our way through the crowd to find a place to sit. Looking around I spot Hanna sitting at a booth with a group of people I have never seen before.

"Patricia! What are you doing here — this is hardly your type of place!"

Hanna yells at us over the table as we get closer. The group of people around the table squeeze together to give us a place to sit.

"Hey — this is my sister Patricia and her boyfriend, Drew."

Hanna points at us so all those who can't hear what she says will know who she is talking about. They all look at us and nod. Someone says something to Hanna but her voice is lost in the noise. They laugh at their inability to make out what's being said.

"It's awfully crowded in here," I yell across to Hanna. She nods and says something that sounds like "All the good places are." I look around at Hanna's friends. All of them are dressed in old-looking clothes, the colours having faded a long time ago. The man next to Hanna knocks over a glass spilling a dark liquid onto her shirt. She looks at the stain, shrugs and continues her shouting with the girl across the table. I begin to wonder what I am doing here as the noise level seems to increase. Turning to Drew I motion that we should go and he gets up. Hanna notices us leaving and waves. Her friends all raise their arms and the entire table waves at us as we wade through the crowd.

I get home late but Hanna isn't in the house when I get there. Although I feel tired I can't get to sleep. I toss in the bed until I hear the front door close. Hanna's home and it's only three in the morning. She usually doesn't come home at all if she stays out this late but she might have to work tomorrow. The door to her room closes and I hear music as it drifts through the walls. I stare at the curtains until I fall asleep.

I wake at 9:00 a.m. and go downstairs to eat before getting dressed. Hanna is already there.

"Hi. Sleep well?" She pushes sandwich crumbs off her placement and looks up at me. I just nod and sit down.

"Mom called."

"When?"

"Her usual calling time — 6:00 a.m. She was quite surprised to find me up at that hour." Hanna rubs her eyes and snuffles.

"What did she want?"

"Just wanted to know how everyone was — and why you weren't up yet. She rolls her eyes and then looks down at her sandwich.

"I said 'Mom, it's Sunday. Patricia has to sleep sometime.'"

I start to feel uneasy so I get up to make some tea.

"I already put some water on." Hanna points towards the stove and the white kettle on a burner. "Mom wants you to call her back."

I pour myself a cup of water and select a teabag. As the water begins to soak up the flavor I walk into the living room to the phone.

"Hi Mom."

"Patricia, how are you? Are you feeling alright? Hanna said you were asleep when I called."

"Yes — I'm fine. What did you want to talk about?" I look down and see that the water in the cup has turned dark brown. I pick up the tab at the end of the teabag string.

"Just wanted to see how you are. Have any of the companies contacted you yet?" I take the teabag out of the cup and then dip into the water again.

"No, Mom, not yet..."

"We thought the CAM Company might have called back."

"They have already turned me down." The string on the teabag is soaked so I pull the teabag out and hold it above the cup, watching the dark drops fall into the brown water.

"Maybe if you tried again. You're doing so well in your business classes — "

"Mom, they don't want me, I told you that. Their decision is final." I take the bag between my thumb and finger and squeeze it, forcing all the liquid out of the bag.

"Patricia, you never know. If you'd try again...." Mom continues to talk and I say as little as possible. After she hangs up I fall back onto the sofa feeling drained and useless.

"Mom get at you again?" Hanna's soft eyes soothe me.

"She just can't take no for an answer. This is what you get for being perfect."

The look on her face makes me feel warm and welcome, the emptiness is filled. I close my eyes and relax.

"Why don't we do something together today. I'll take you down to the mall and buy you a new dress."

"I can't — I'm going out with Drew today." The warmth slowly recedes and Hanna gets up. "I thought you had to work today."

"No, Julie switched shifts with me this week. Well, maybe you should get dressed."

"I'm sorry...." She shakes her head and looks away.

"I could use the rest, I didn't get much sleep." Now she looks tired, worn and alone. The ticking of the wall clock distracts me and I look at the time. I should start to get ready, I promised Drew I would meet him early today. Hanna goes back into the kitchen coughing slightly while I head up to my room.

I put on a black dress and a long string of pearls Drew

gave me. As I turn to look in the full length mirror they catch the light and glow, pale greens and reds flow around the spheres like oil in water. I spray on some perfume and hear the doorbell ring. I finish dressing and go downstairs to see who it is. In the hallway Drew is talking to Hanna who is standing in the kitchen doorway. Drew looks up and sees me.

"I thought I would come by and pick you up today." He smiles and holds out his hand to me. As I get my coat he opens the door.

"Take care of yourself, Hanna. Hope you're feeling better soon." Hanna snuffles and smiles. She says goodbye and waves to us as we leave.

The sun is out today so we take a walk in the park. In the center of the park is a pond and we sit down on a bench overlooking the water.

"You're very quiet today. Are you alright?" Drew runs his hand over my hair gently as I turn to look at him.

"I'm fine. My mother called today...."

"Um. She try to get you to try again for the CAM Company?" His arm slips around my shoulder but my uneasiness refuses to leave me.

I look at the pond and watch the ducks swimming. Two ducks swim past, glossy green feathers shining out from a mass of brown on the front duck. A smaller, lighter duck swims behind. It doesn't look anything like the other but somehow it seems to belong with the big duck. I am relaxed watching them swim past.

"I got you a present." Drew's voice draws me back to the bench. He reaches into his pocket and brings out a box.

"You know, we've been together for two years today. I thought I would get you something to celebrate."

I open the box and gaze down at a ring set with a large green stone. I remember seeing it next to the ring with the red stone.

"I noticed you looking at it yesterday, I thought you might like it." Drew slips the ring on my finger and I give him a hug. In my mind I see us together, in love but still something seems to be missing.

When I get back to the house Hanna is sitting on the living room floor eating chocolates and reading a magazine. She looks up, her hands smeared with chocolate.

"Hanna — "

She looks at me with a questioning look, her eyebrows raised.

"You're getting chocolate everywhere." I sit down on the couch. Hanna looks at her hand and picks up a napkin to wipe them off.

"How's Drew?" She looks at her hands to make sure all the chocolate has been removed.

"Fine."

"Great." Hanna looks at the magazine which has chocolate smears on the edges of the pages.

"Do we have anything here for dinner?" I ask.

"I don't know — I was going to go out." Hanna doesn't look up as she talks. Her comment makes me remember the club I saw her at the other night.

"I should have known. By the way, who were those people you were with at the club the other night?" I don't think I've ever seen them before."

"Neither have I," she states matter-of-factly, holding the chocolate box up to me.

"You don't know them?" I don't know why I'm so surprised, Hanna spends most of her time out with people she hasn't known very long. She has always seemed more

comfortable around people she doesn't know. If she knows someone for too long she lets the relationship decay until that person becomes a stranger again.

"I met them at the club. Nice people. Oh, I almost forgot, someone called about an interview. There's a note in the kitchen."

Good, another interview. The note says it's for Core Inc., a good business. Mom should be pleased.

"Is it someone good?"

"Yes, very good. I was hoping they would call me in."

I stare at the note as I walk back to the living room.

"They seemed eager to see you."

Fantastic. I sit back down on the couch and beam at Hanna.

"I better get this job, I never thought it would take this long to find one. I only have one semester of school left."

Hanna looks at me, smiling.

"If I get this I might be able to get one of those houses we were looking at."

"So, Mom's talked you into getting one of those houses."

Hanna looks down and shakes her head as she crumbles chocolate wrappers in her hand.

"What's Mom got to do with me wanting a house?" I feel upset but I don't know why.

"You didn't even like those houses. Every time you make a major decision like that Mom was the one who suggested you do it. The only reason you got that expensive car was because Mom said it wasn't proper for you to be seen driving the old one."

I shake my head and fold my arms. "This has nothing to do with Mom and neither did the car. I got it

because I wanted it."

Hanna looks at me, her gaze making me uncomfortable.

"I don't need Mom to tell me what to do. I don't need anybody."

It's 7:00 a.m., I've slept through my alarm and I have to be in class by 8:30. After that I have the job interview and another class. I rush into the bathroom only to find there is no hot water. After the cold shower I put on a blue dress and Drew's pearls. By 7:40 I am ready. Now I have to find my car keys which are hiding somewhere in the living room.

"Where are my keys?" I scream at the couch but it's Hanna that answers.

"I think they're on the small table."

I find them and rush past her to get my purse and books. Hanna stands in the hallway watching me as I head for the door.

"How about a doughnut..."

I turn quickly to tell her I don't have the time and the pearls catch on Hanna's out stretched hand. We move to get the necklace free and it breaks, flinging pearls around the small hallway like a shower of hailstones. I leave slamming the door behind me.

After my interview I decide to skip my after noon class. If Mom found out she would really get upset.

At first I think about going home then I remember that Hanna's at work today so I head downtown to the bookstore where she works. Mom and Dad weren't happy when she quite college to work, they said she was ruining her life. They always wanted her to be like her older sister. Hanna quite anyway. She only works part time but she never seems to need money.

When I get there Hanna is fixing the window display.

"Patricia, I thought you had an afternoon class?"

I feel uneasy again as something tells me I should have gone to class. I ignore it.

"How'd the interview go?"

"Fine — really well, I think."

Hanna places a book on a wire stand and steps back.

"You're just in time. I get off on five minutes."

Hanna places a few books on the shelves before she gets ready to leave. She says goodbye to the other girl and we leave. Rather than go home we decide to walk around the shops.

"Nice dresses — probably expensive. Green — isn't that Drew's favorite colour?" Hanna stares at the dresses in the window as I watch the cars pass.

"I'm supposed to meet him tonight," I say absent-mindedly. Hanna faces me with a smile and we walk on.

"You've been seeing a lot of him lately."

"So."

"He's a nice guy."

Drew's face emerges in my mind and suddenly I remember this morning and the pearls.

"What am I going to tell him about the pearls?"

"Don't worry about it."

"But Drew gave me those pearls." I feel panicked. They were the first gift Drew gave me.

"He'll understand—it was an accident."

Hanna stops at another window, her calm face reflected in the glass.

"I can't get them fixed."

"The only reason the pearls meant anything to you was because Drew gave them to you. You still have Drew, so who cares about the pearls."

I begin to feel calmer.

"I suppose he'll understand."

"Of course he will, you've been together a long time. You know I keep wondering when you two are going to move in together."

My breath catches in my throat and my mind starts to race. "We couldn't...."

"Why not?" Hanna stops and faces me. "Don't tell me you're afraid what Mom might say."

"I'm not...."

Hanna looks away and smiles. "Mom never liked him, she never liked anyone you went out with. You really should stop trying so hard to please Mom — "

"I can't just do something like that on the spur of the moment."

"That's Mom talking." Hanna points at me, her eyes narrowing. "What are you afraid of? You've known him for two years!"

I start to say something but Hanna cuts me off.

"Look at you, you have everything you could possibly want." Hanna makes a sweeping motion with her arm to emphasize her point.

"You're going to be on your own soon, it's about time you made your own decisions. You gotta take a chance sometimes. And if everything goes wrong you can always blame me for it."

Hanna smiles and picks up my hand to look at my watch.

"You'd better get going if you're going to meet Drew at the usual time." She lets go of my hand and starts to walk away. "Say hello to Drew for me, okay?"

She waves and heads down the street. As she walks away I hear her cough and looking at her I see that she has no shoes on. And as I watch her I feel the missing piece lock into place.