



Younger

Years later, she was still calling her sister, trying to understand what exactly had happened. It still made no sense to her, but her sister, older, couldn't help. Her sister had completely forgotten—or would have if the younger sister wasn't always reminding her. The younger sister imagined, each time she talked to her sibling on the telephone, each time she brought the incident up, her older sister pressing her palm against her forehead as she waited for her to say what she had to say, so that she, the older sister, the only one of the sisters with a family of her own, could politely sidestep her inquiries and go back to living her life.

Her older sister had always managed to do that, to nimbly sidestep anything that came her way so as to simply go on with her life. For years, the younger sister had envied this, watching from farther and farther behind as her older sister sashayed past those events that an instant later struck the younger sister head-on and almost destroyed her. The younger sister was always being almost destroyed by events, and then had to spend months desperately piecing herself together enough so that when once again she was struck head-on, she would only be almost destroyed rather than utterly and completely destroyed.

As her mother had once suggested, the younger sister felt things more intensely than anyone else. At the time, very young, the younger sister had seen this as a mark of emotional superiority, but later she saw it for what it

was: a serious defect that kept her from living her life. Indeed, as the younger sister reached first her teens and then her twenties, she came to realize that people who felt things as intensely as she were either institutionalized or dead.

This realization was at least in part due to her father having belonged to the first category (institutionalized) and her mother to the second (dead by suicide)—two more facts that her older sister, gliding effortlessly and, quite frankly, mercilessly, through life, had also sidestepped. Indeed, while the younger sister was realizing to a more and more horrifying degree how she was inescapably both her mother's and her father's child, her older sister had gone on to start a family of her own. It was like her older sister had been part of a different family. The younger sister could never start a family of her own—not because, as everyone claimed, she was irresponsible but because she knew it just brought her one step closer to ending up like her mother and father. It was not that she was irresponsible, but only that she was terrified of ending up mad or dead.

The incident had occurred when their parents were still around, before they were, in the case of the mother, dead and, in the case of the father, mad. There were, it had to be admitted in retrospect, signs that things had gone wrong with their parents, things her older sister must have absorbed and quietly processed over time but which the younger sister was forced to process too late and all at once. The incident, the younger sister felt, was the start of her losing her hold on her life. Even years later, she continued to feel that if only she could understand exactly what had happened, what it all meant, she would see what had gone wrong and could correct it, could, like the older sister, muffle her feelings, begin to feel things less and, in the end, perhaps not feel anything at all. Once she felt nothing, she thought, knowing full well how crazy it sounded, she could go on to have a happy life.

But her older sister couldn't understand. To her older sister, what the younger sister referred to as *the incident* was nothing—less than nothing, really. As always, her older sister listened patiently on the other end of the line as the younger sister posed the same questions over again. “Do you remember the time we were trapped in the house?” she might begin, and there would be a long pause as her older sister (so the younger sister believed) steeled herself to go through it once more.

“We weren't trapped exactly,” her older sister almost always responded. “No need to exaggerate.”

But that was not how the younger sister remembered it. How the younger sister remembered it was that they *were* trapped. Even the word *trapped* did not strike her as forceful enough. But her older sister, as always, saw it as her role to calm the younger sister down. The younger sister would make a statement and then her older sister would qualify the statement, dampen it, smooth it over, nullify it. This, the younger sister had to admit, *did* calm her, *did* make her feel better momentarily, *did* made her think, *Maybe it isn't as bad as I remembered*. But the long-term effect was not to make her feel calmer but to make her feel insane, as if she were remembering things that hadn't actually happened. But if they hadn't happened the way she remembered, why was she still undone more than twenty years later? And as long as her sister was calming her, how was she ever to stop feeling undone?

No, what she needed was not for her sister to calm her, not for her sister, from the outset, to tell her there was no need to exaggerate. But she could not figure out how to tell her sister this—not because her older sister was unreasonable but because she was all too reasonable. She sorted the world out rationally and in a way that stripped it of all its power. Her older sister could not understand the effect of the incident on the younger sister because she, the older sister, had not let it have an effect on her.

For instance, her older sister could not even begin to conceive how the younger sister saw the incident as the single most important and most devastating moment of her life. For her older sister, the incident had been nothing. How was it possible, her older sister wanted to know, that the incident had been more damaging for her than their mother's suicide or their father's mental collapse? It didn't make any sense. Well, yes, the younger sister was willing to admit, it *didn't* make any sense, and yet she was still ruined by it, still undone. *If I can understand exactly what happened*, she would always tell her older sister, *I'll understand where I went wrong*.

"But nothing happened," her older sister said. "Nothing. That's just it."

And that was the whole problem. The sisters had played the same roles for so many years that they didn't know how to stop. Responding to each other in a different way was impossible. Every conversation had already been mapped out years in advance, at the moment the younger sister was first compelled to think of herself as the irresponsible one and the older sister was first made to be a calming force. They weren't getting anywhere, which meant that she, the younger sister, wasn't getting anywhere, was still

wondering what, if anything, had happened, and what, if anything, she could do to free herself from it.

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What she thought had happened—the way she remembered it when, alone, late at night, she lay in bed after another conversation with her sister—was this: their mother had vanished sometime during the night. Why exactly, the younger sister didn't know. Their father, she remembered, had seemed harried, had taken their mother somewhere during the night and left her there, but had been waiting for them, seated on the couch, when they woke up. He had neither slept nor bathed; his eyes were very red and he hadn't shaved. Somehow, she remembered, her sister hadn't seemed surprised. Whether this was because the sister wasn't really surprised or because, as the calm one, she was never supposed to appear surprised, the younger sister couldn't say.

She remembered the father insisting that nothing was wrong, but insisting almost simultaneously that he must leave right away. There was, the younger sister was certain, something very wrong: what exactly it had been, she was never quite certain. Something with the mother, certainly, perhaps her suicidal juggernaut just being set in motion—though her older sister claimed that no, it must have been something minor, a simple parental dispute that led to their mother going to stay temporarily with her own mother. And the only reason the father had to leave, the older sister insisted, was that he had to get to work. He had a meeting, and so had to leave them alone, even though they were perhaps too young—even the older sister had to admit this—to be left alone.

Her older sister claimed too that the father had bathed and looked refreshed and was in no way harried. But this, the younger sister was certain, was a lie, was just the older sister's attempt to calm her. No, the father had looked terrible, was harried and even panicked, the younger sister wasn't exaggerating, not really. *Do you love me?* the younger sister sometimes had to say into the phone. *Do you love me?* she would say. *Then stop making me feel crazy, and just listen.*

So there was her father, in her head, simultaneously sleepless and well-rested, clean and sticky with sweat. He had to leave, he had explained to them. He was sorry but he had to leave. But it was all right, he claimed. He set the stove timer to sound when it was time for them to go to school. When they heard the timer go off, he told them, they had to go to school. Did they understand?

Yes, both girls said, they understood.

“And one more thing,” the father said, his hand already reaching for the knob. “Under no circumstances are you to answer the door. You are not to open the door to anyone.”

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And after that? According to the older sister, nothing much. The father left. The sisters played together until the timer rang, and then they opened the door and went to school.

But that was not how the younger sister remembered it. There was, first of all and above all, the strangeness of being alone in the house for the first time. There was a giddiness to that, a feeling they had stepped beyond the known world, a feeling the younger sister never for a moment forgot. A feeling which made it seem like not just minutes were going by, but hours.

“But it was just a few minutes,” her older sister insisted.

“*Like* hours,” said the younger sister. “Not actually hours but *like* hours.” All right, she conceded, not actual hours—though she knew that when it came down to it, there was no such thing as *actual* hours. But for all intents and purposes she had already lost her sister, once again had rapidly reached a point where she could no longer rely on her sister to help her understand what exactly had happened. But she kept talking anyway, because once she had started talking what could she do but keep on?

The point was, time slowed down for the younger sister and never really sped back up again. There was a giddiness and a sense that anything could happen, anything at all. There were only two rules: the world would end when the timer rang, and under no circumstances were they to answer the door. But within those constraints, anything could happen.

What did they play? They played the same things they had always played, but the games were different too, just as the girls, alone, had become different. Her older sister, as always, went along with what the younger sister wanted to play, playing down to her level, but this time anything could happen. The small toy mustangs they played with dared do things they had never done before, cantering all the way across the parents’ bedroom, where they gathered and conferred and at last decided on a stratagem for defeating the plastic bear, which, once bested, was flushed down the toilet and was gone forever. The two girls watched with sweaty faces and flushed cheeks as the bear disappeared: anything could happen. The younger sister pulled herself up on the bathroom counter and opened the cabinet and used the

mother's lipstick on her own lips, something she was never allowed to do, and then used the lipstick to paint red streaks on the horses' sides, bloodied from where they had been gashed by the bear in battle. The most injured mustang limped slowly away and found a cave to hide in. He lay down inside it and hoped that the cool and the dark either would help him get better or would kill him. At first the cave was just the space under the couch, but the mustang wasn't getting better, so the younger sister stuck him in her armpit and called that a cave and held her arm clamped to her side. When, later, she reached him back out, the blood had smeared off all over inside the cave, and the horse was miraculously healed and allowed to return to the pack.

"It's not called a pack," her older sister told her over the telephone. "It's a herd."

But the younger sister knew they had called it a pack, that anything could happen and that *pack* was part of it too. They had known at the time it was a herd but they had called it a pack, and they had said it wrong on purpose. They were building a whole world up around them, full of things more vivid and slippery than anything the real world could offer. Just because her older sister couldn't remember didn't mean it hadn't happened.

And the sisters had become mustangs as well, had joined the *pack* as well—couldn't she remember? They took the two biggest rubber bands they could find and stretched them from their mouths over the back of their heads like bridles. They took old plastic bread bags their mother had saved, and filled the bottoms with paper napkins and rubber-banded them to their legs and then slipped shoes over their hands. And suddenly it wasn't just pretend but something was happening that had never happened before. Couldn't she remember? It was ecstatic and crazed and like they were fleeing their bodies—it was the only thing like a religious experience the younger sister had ever had, and she had had it when she was six.

And then suddenly it all went wrong.

They heard the timer go off and ran to turn it off but they were still wearing shoes on their hands and neither of them wanted to take the shoes off, so they tried to stop the timer by trapping its stem between two shoes and turning it, but the timer stem was old and too smooth to turn like that. So while the timer buzzed on, the younger sister had neighed at her older sister and together they had cantered to the dining-room table and taken a

chair, supporting it between them with their hooves, and brought it to the stove. The younger sister stood on it and leaned over the burner, feeling the enamel warm in one spot from the pilot light, and turned the timer off with her teeth, by twisting her head.

That was, the younger sister knew, the sign that the world had come to an end, that it was over, that now they had to go to school. Only it wasn't the end, for as soon as the timer was turned off, the doorbell rang. It froze both of them and they stood there, bread bags on their feet and shoes on their hands, and kept very still and very quiet. They were not to answer the door, their father had been very clear about that. But they were also supposed to go to school. How could you go to school when someone was at the door, ringing the doorbell, trying to come in?

My older sister, the younger sister thought, *will know what to do.*

But her older sister was standing there not doing anything. The doorbell rang again, and still they waited, the younger sister nervously rubbing her hooves together.

They waited awhile for the doorbell to ring a third time. When it did not, her older sister leaned close to her and whispered *Come on*. But they had taken only a few steps when they heard not ringing but a hard, loud knock: four sharp, equally spaced blows right in a row. And that stopped them just as much as if someone had yanked back on their bridles.

It was like that for hours—for what, anyway, seemed like hours. Her hands were getting sweaty in the shoes. Her feet in the bread bags were much, much worse, the napkins at the bottom of each bag grown damp. Her mouth, too, hurt in the corners because of the rubber band. Her older sister took a few steps and the younger sister, not knowing what else to do, followed. Her older sister, she saw, had taken the shoes off her hands without the younger sister noticing and had gotten the rubber band out of her mouth and was now creeping very slowly past the door. The younger sister followed, trying not to look at the curtain-covered window beside the door, trying not to see the shadow of whatever was on the other side, but seeing enough to know that, whatever it was, it was big, and seeing too, when the knocking started once again, the door shiver in its frame.

In their bedroom, her sister helped her get the shoes off. They had been on long enough that they felt like they were still on even once they had come off. The rubber-band bridle got caught in her hair so that her sister had to snip it out with a scissor, which made the bridle snap and raised a

red stripe of flesh across her cheekbone and almost made her cry. The rubber bands holding the plastic bags to her legs had left purple grooves on her calves, and her feet were hot and wet and itchy. She dried them off on a hand towel and put her shoes on while her older sister stood on a stool by the bedroom window and tried to see out.

“He’s still there,” she said.

“What is it?” asked the younger sister.

“I don’t know,” said her older sister. “Who, you mean.”

But the younger sister had meant not who, but what. She wanted to climb on the stool beside her sister and look out as well, but was too scared.

“What do we do?” she asked.

“Do?” said her sister. “Let’s play until he’s gone.”

So they had begun again, with the plastic horses again, only this time it was a slow negation of everything that had happened before. Before, it had seemed like anything could happen; now all the younger sister could think about was about how they were trapped in the house, how they couldn’t leave, how they were supposed to leave but couldn’t. The mustangs were just ordinary horses now and could no longer move their plastic legs but simply stayed motionless as they were propelled meaninglessly across the floor. The bear was gone for good and she and her sister weren’t horses anymore, just two trapped girls. Everything was wrong. They were trapped in the house and she knew they would always be trapped. The younger sister kept trying to play, but all she could do was cry.

Her older sister was comforting her, telling her everything was fine, but the way she said it, it was clear nothing was fine. Everything was hell.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“He’s probably not even there anymore,” said her older sister. “I bet we can leave soon.”

And, to be truthful, it probably was soon after that, though it didn’t feel that way to the younger sister, that her older sister went back into the bedroom and climbed up on the stool again and looked out and said that it was safe now and everything was fine and this time seemed to mean it. They gathered their books and their lunches and opened the front door and darted out. The whole street seemed deserted. The older sister, who hated to be late, made them both run to school, and the younger sister reached her class

FUGUE STATE

even before Mrs. Clark had finished calling roll. When you looked at it that way, almost no time had actually passed. When you looked at it that way, as her older sister in fact had, really nothing at all had happened.

But for the younger sister there was less of her from there on out. Part of her was still wearing shoes on her hands and a rubber band in her mouth and was somewhere, sides bloody, looking for her pack. And part of her was still there, motionless, trapped in the house, waiting for the door to shiver in its frame. She was still, years later, trying to figure out how to get back those parts of her. And what was left of her she could hardly manage to do anything with at all.

“So what do you want me to do?” her sister finally one day asked, her voice tinny through the telephone. “Play mustangs with you again?” And then she laughed nervously.

And yes, in fact, that was exactly what the younger sister wanted. Maybe it would do something, it was worth a try, yes. If her sister would only do that, perhaps something—anything—could happen.

But after so many years, so many telephone conversations burning and reburning the same paths through their minds, so many years of playing the same roles, how could she ask this of her older sister? She knew her role enough to know she could never bring herself to ask this of her older sister. Not in what seemed like a million years.