

My Brother's Girl

I hadn't seen Kathleen for many years and suddenly there she was, loose and heavy, not exactly fat but enlarged, so that the body I had panted over was nowhere to be seen. I remembered her as a startling blonde with a daffy laugh, forever wearing a necklace whose pendant pointed—purposely, I thought—directly towards her breasts. I was fourteen when she became engaged to my brother, and the announcement that we would be related provoked a spasm of erotic zeal, followed by a healthy dose of Jewish guilt; the two emotions wreaked havoc until Jacob told me the marriage was off. After that, Kathleen slipped into the ether. Her pictures were destroyed. The one time I asked about her, Jacob punched me in the arm. He had married someone else and all his loyalty went to her. I once asked my mother what had happened to Kathleen, hoping for a last name, which I had never been able to recall. But this was after the stroke and Mom was having trouble with names. Straining to recall her almost-daughter, she looked like she was passing a stone. There was nothing to be done. She was the only one still around; Jacob was already gone.

I found Kathleen because of Irena Aguerre. I was trying to be an actor, but my career had stalled and I had gone back to the bakery where I once worked. Irena, who owned the place, always treated me as a lost son. Her most profound gift was a meddling spirit. She knew I had broken up with someone and refused to leave my broken heart alone.

"I've found the love of your life," she said one day.

"I'm not really looking."

"Don't ruin this for me. I've been plotting all week."

It had been a bad morning and the pastries were going unsold. She leaned on the table and watched me as I pounded the dough.

"You haven't dated anyone since whatshername. You're almost forty, David. You're like those pastries: good food that's quickly going stale."

I was flattered by her intentions, but I had little faith. All the women I'd met were fatalistic creatures with their share of problems: wine, misery, too many romantic ideals. Each was a secular Jew who thought it quaint that I wasn't. They adored my yarmulke, but when I told them I couldn't date on Friday nights, they suspected me of leading a double life. Few of them were involved in the arts. They seemed to confuse me with an aspiring typewriter salesman: someone chasing a profession that no longer existed.

"She's a converted Jew," Irena went on. "The man she loved wouldn't marry her so she went through the whole process. The day after she was confirmed, her fiancé left her to marry some girl who writes about hotels."

“Domestic or international?”

“What does that matter?”

“Jacob married a travel writer. She gets paid to go all over the world.”

“It’s probably not her.”

That, I thought, would be quite the coincidence. Two travel writers, two converted Jews... “If her name is Kathleen, give her my number,” I said. “Tell her I’d like to meet.”

Kathleen called a few days later. “Well listen to you! Sounds like little Davey is all grown up.” She had the husky quality of a singer who has smoked too many cigars. All those times I fought to remember Kathleen, I rarely tried to dream up her voice.

We met at a kosher restaurant in the Plateau. It was Saturday night, barely an hour after sunset. I stepped through the door and there she was, though I almost looked past her, because I was expecting the startling blonde of my youth. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks soft, like clay that hadn’t set. A Star of David rested over the buttons of her blouse. Like the pendants she had worn when I was young, I imagined the bottom-most tip was purposely designed to guide the eye down, down, down ...

“Little Davey!”

“It’s just David now.”

“I ordered us a bottle, do you mind?”

“Only if I have to pay for it.”

She poured me out a drink. “*L’Chaim!*”

I gave the quick sketch of my life. A year on a kibbutz. Theatre school. The bakery. Failed auditions and old whatshername, who Irena was trying to help me forget. It pained me to say it all out loud.

“Little Davey, the struggling artist. It’s an honorable thing, to struggle. You probably have more character than half the men in this room.”

“And what do you do?”

“I work for the Humane Society.”

“You’re a dog-lover?”

“It’s not just about dogs.”

“It’s always dogs on the posters.”

“Dogs engender sympathy. Who pities the hamster?”

“Do you like it?”

“Sometimes. Other times, it’s depressing. We like animals when they’re easy. The moment they become hard, we lose our humanity.”

“I take it you’re a vegetarian.”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you?” Kathleen sighed. “Forty-five and I’m still a work in progress.”

She ordered steak. She told me she had studied religion before taking a master’s in international law. I was surprised. She’d been an adventurous girl. She and Jacob met while white water rafting on the Ottawa River. He was there for a bachelor’s weekend while Kathleen had been the guide, the trained wilderness expert who took people through the rapids in rubber rafts. Barely nineteen, she proved her worth by saving a man’s life. Jacob would have wanted her even without the heroics. We had been raised on a steady diet of synagogue girls and Hebrew school brunettes. None had wanted him and by the time he met Kathleen, he was exhausted by rejection. Kathleen appeared right when he was poised to want her most.

“You’re still Jewish,” I remarked now.

Kathleen fingered her Star of David. “Jacob never thought I’d do it, you know. When I finished, they gave me a certificate. I sent him a picture, did he ever tell you that?”

I shook my head. “I like that you stayed with it. I’m glad your encounter with my family wasn’t a complete waste of time.”

“I guess now’s as good a time as any to ask about him. You knew I was going to. We might as well get it out of the way. Is he rich and oh-so-successful?”

I wondered if I was being tested, like in the movies when someone thinks you might be a spy. Kathleen frowned, probably seeing how my expression had changed.

“Oh God, was he elected to public office or something? I never pay attention to anything ...”

“He’s dead, Kathleen. He’s been gone for two years.”

Her frown spread like a stain. She clutched her Star of David, that jewel that was never her birthright, and I suddenly wished I hadn’t dragged her from the past. To her, Jacob still lived. Now he was dead all over again. I was terrified I’d have to relive everything: the discovery, the funeral, the argument about where he would be buried and how. I drank my wine and glanced past her at a couple, younger than us, who were staring into each other’s eyes. How unfair that I should be here instead of there, reporting on my brother’s death instead of staring into a twenty-year-old’s eyes. Kathleen waited, eyes damp. I knew the only way I’d get through the story was if I told it as fast as I could.

“He was stealing from his company. They caught him. He was facing jail and he took a bunch of pills.”

Done. I swallowed another pool of wine. The food came but Kathleen only pushed her steak around with her edge of her fork. She kept blotting her eyes with the napkin. Her mascara came off in spots of bright blue.

“I had no idea. We weren’t friends online. I sent him a request last year. When he didn’t reply, I just thought he was being an ass. What happened to the girl he left me for?”

“He married her. Her name’s Rachel.”

“Jacob and Rachel? Like the Bible?”

“The wedding toast was a breeze. The jokes wrote themselves.”

“I suppose they also had twelve sons.”

I shook my head. Jacob couldn’t have kids. Low motility or something. They kept trying anyway. In the Bible, Rachel was declared barren right up until the time she had a son. The modern Rachel had tracked her ovulations with meticulous care; Jacob, meanwhile, bought a motorcycle and embezzled three quarters of a million dollars. All because of some broken sperm.

“So what’s she like?”

“Nice. Pretty. She can tell you which hotel to stay at in every country. She’s still in the house where they used to live. Last year, she decided to repaint everything but she did a lousy job.”

“Is the house very far from here?”

“Not really. Why?”

“I’d like to see where they lived.”

“Are you serious?”

“I can pay my respects.”

“They have cemeteries for that.”

“All right then. The house or the cemetery: you pick.”

I probably should have picked the cemetery. But the house wasn’t that far and I wanted to see it again. Anyway, I knew Rachel wasn’t home. Yesterday, her profile had been filled with pictures of California. She was writing about the Holiday Inns of the west coast.

The house was on a street dominated by clans of Orthodox Jews. On Sabbath mornings you could see them walking to synagogue. Now that was done for another week and the

neighbourhood had come back to life. Children swung off their porch swings. At a stop sign, two Hassids were crouched over the open hood of a car. The night was warmer than it should have been. It was a false summer; the real November was out there somewhere, ready to lead us into months of decay.

As we pulled in, I noticed a lamp shining in the front room.

“I thought you said she wasn’t here,” said Kathleen.

I checked my phone. Rachel had just posted a picture of a California beach. I scrolled down and found a post written from inside Trudeau Airport. *The line-up at Starbucks is longer than the line-up at security. #travelinglife.*

“She must have left the lights on,” I said.

We left the car. Kathleen examined the lousy paint job with an academic air, as if she’d have to report on it in the morning. I leaned against the hood. I hadn’t been to the house in a while and it seemed to have fallen into disrepair. The lawn had a shabby look; it seemed like a place owned by nobility in decline.

Suddenly, Kathleen took off her shoes. Barefoot, she stepped onto the overgrown lawn, ducking beneath the shaft of light on her way to the window. The long grass cracked beneath her as she stood on her toes. Just as her head crested the sill, the lamp went out.

“She’s home!” she exclaimed.

In fact, Rachel had just added timers to the lights. The traveling life had long ago taught her the value of caution; she had written tracts about how to be safe on the road. Suddenly paranoid, I scanned the house for cameras. By the time I glanced back, Kathleen was moving towards the side of the house. The side gate was padlocked, of course—ensuring doors and windows were locked was number two on Rachel’s pre-departure checklist—but that didn’t stop Kathleen. She had once been the athletic whitewater tour guide who saved a man’s life; without much grace or finesse, she pulled herself up on the gate, struggling at the top, before rolling over the edge. I called her name in a whisper that was more pathetic than fierce. From the street, a car drove by and seemed to slow as it passed the house.

I paced. It became clear Kathleen wasn’t coming back. Holding her shoes in my teeth by their tiny leather straps, I sprinted towards the gate. I managed to get a leg over before my arms gave out. Down I went into a hard straddle, smacking the top of the gate between the legs.

“That looked like it was really embarrassing,” said Kathleen.

She was by one of the back windows, trying to look inside. I tossed her the shoes before leaping into the yard. The best feature of the yard was the cracked stone cistern, orphaned by the house’s previous owners. It was a raincatcher now and often could be found leaking tears of brackish water. The rest of the yard was unhappy—Rachel traveled too much to be anything but neglectful. Half the garden was food for raccoons and squirrels. The zucchini flowers had never known a healthy day.

Still barefoot, Kathleen stepped onto the deck and moved towards the impenetrable French doors. She ran a hand along the door frame. “There’s no mezuzah,” she said.

“Not every door needs one.”

“That is a matter of religious debate.”

A light appeared on the second floor, casting an eerie glow.

“You sure she’s in California?”

“She left last night.”

“On Shabbat?”

“Why don’t we go down to Saint Laurent? Do you have a favorite bar?”

A horrible sound came from behind the French doors: the metallic click of something hooked scraping against the glass. I jumped back. The sound came again. Then the lights in the kitchen sprang to life and we saw a pointed face, long and narrow and full of bones.

“It’s a dog!” said Kathleen.

“She got him after Jacob died,” I said.

He was an ash-grey Greyhound, sleek and strong. I saw it now: the lights weren’t on timers anymore. They were activated by motion as the dog ran through the house. Seeing that he had our attention, the dog fell back to earth and ran to the other end of the kitchen, where he hovered over an empty bowl. His jaw began to move. He was barking, or trying to: his mouth moved but there wasn’t even the whisper of a sound.

Kathleen was horrified. “She padlocks the gate to protect the house. The *house* she protects. But the dog she leaves alone.”

“Maybe she’s coming back.”

“From California? Look at it. It’s starving. Do you have a key?”

“Why would I have a key?”

“There might be a spare. At your parent’s house, Jacob used to keep a spare somewhere outside the door.”

“Jacob’s not here anymore,” I said, but Kathleen was already headed back to the gate.

Once again, I followed, rolling over the wall without any grace. I knew Jacob had planted a spare key outside this house, just like he had when we were young. Rachel told me where it was and, after his death, she left it there so I could let myself inside. I hadn’t used it in months and there was a good chance it was gone. Kathleen checked the doormat. Then the mailbox. At last, in what

I can only guess was inspiration, she ran her hand along the top of the door. Her plump hand flew out in triumph, a small key poking towards the sky.

“There will be an alarm,” I said.

“Maybe she forgot to set it.”

I doubted it. Setting the alarm was number one on Rachel’s checklist.

Kathleen chewed her lip. “Go start the car. We’ll grab the dog and leave. You can bring him back once Rachel comes home.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m not leaving a hungry animal alone.”

She already had the key in the door. I grabbed her wrist, but she elbowed me aside. As soon as she opened the door, the alarm began to wail. I imagined the next sequence of events. The blinking light on someone’s switchboard. A call from the alarm company. They’d probably call Rachel’s cell; somewhere in California, the traveling life would be interrupted. And there still might be cameras. She might even be able to access them online. From that hotel with its beach-view she would see my face as Kathleen snatched up the dog.

I reached past Kathleen and punched a code on the keypad. There was a hiccup and then the alarm went still.

“You know the code?”

“I used to come here a lot. To feed the dog.”

Kathleen frowned even as Rocco pounded toward me with his silent bark. He leapt into me, paws on my chest, licking my face with all the relief of one who has been saved. It had been almost a year since I last saw him. But dogs are just like us. They have good memories; they never forget.

There had already been an accident. I cleaned the mess while Kathleen and Rocco rolled on the floor. He was lonely—they both were—and when I came back they were wrestling over a chew toy. Rocco’s tail wagged with joy; Kathleen’s own bottom seemed to wag as well.

“She snipped his vocal cords!” she said. “And look at these teeth. What’s his name?”

“Rocco.”

“Look at you. All alone and you can’t even bark. You deserve a good meal, don’t you boy? Don’t you?”

I went into the kitchen to find the kibble. Rachel had renovated but she still had her gadgets and cookbooks on exotic cuisine. I missed the smell of her cooking. She loved the Indian spices; you could smell her curry even if you were in the bedroom behind closed doors. The fridge was bare. I took this to mean she

had emptied it before leaving. None of it made sense. If she was leaving for a long time, why would she leave the dog? The answer, so obvious in hindsight, struck me even as I saw the note on the refrigerator door.

Hey Gretchen! Thanks again for doing this....

I went back into the other room. “She didn’t leave the dog alone. Her sister’s coming. She might be here any minute.”

Kathleen sighed. “Fine. But I’m using the bathroom first.”

I fed Rocco and made myself a drink. I’d be laughing about this tomorrow. I’d be grateful too. Renovated or not, the kitchen still reeked of the past. A Van Gogh print hung in the same place. The table was the same and on a standing shelf I recognized a Crockpot that had belonged to my Bubie before she died. It had come with the family from Poland. From Warsaw to Montreal; from my grandmother’s yellow kitchen to the one Jacob left behind. I knelt down and scratched Rocco behind the ears. He was barely six. Young, even for a dog. It was good that he was here. Until now, I guessed Rachel had given him away.

From upstairs I heard a crash. Rocco took off. I followed even as another clamor split the air, trailed by the sound of breaking glass. In the bedroom, we found Kathleen seated at the foot of the bed. Silent as Rocco, she was the eye of the storm. The rest of the room had been destroyed. Drawers overturned. Clothes thrown to the four corners. The mirror was smashed and the closet door gaped wide, each hanger naked and bent out of shape.

“Tell me it was like this when you got here.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” She produced something from her lap. A Bible, the King James version. She stretched it towards me. I didn’t need to take it, but I did, if only to keep it safe. Rachel’s name was on the first page, right above the stamp bearing the name of the academy she had attended in her youth: Emmanuel Christian School.

“He told me he could never marry outside the faith. That’s how he phrased it. ‘Outside the faith.’ He told me it would kill your mother. But more than that, he said it was important to *him*. Was any of that true?”

“Of course it was. It’s just Rachel. He fell in love with her.”

“Yeah, well, he fell in love with me too.”

Kathleen stood up, straightening the creases in her skirt. Her face fought to stay composed. No one, I think, had ever honoured her for what she had given up for Jacob—or what she had given up after he no longer wanted her to. I think she always hoped that someday she would tell him. His death had meant she never would; the bible meant that even if she had told him, he probably wouldn’t have cared. After he married Rachel, my brother had given up something too.

Rocco had wandered over to the bed and Kathleen reached out to stroke him behind the ears. “Saint Rocco is the patron saint of dogs,” she said. “I went to a Christian school too.”

“She didn’t name him,” I said. “I found him at the Humane Society.”

“*You* found him?”

I sighed. “I’m the one who snipped his vocal cords. He was keeping me awake.” I was going to add that Rachel never forgave me for this—I think I might have added everything if there had been time—but right then the front door opened and Gretchen called out in a scared, uncertain tone.

It took time to calm Gretchen down. Even more time to convince her not to call the police. I tried to repair the bedroom, but Gretchen just told us to leave. Kathleen didn’t accept my offer of a ride home. She disappeared into the night. I would try calling her many times, but she never answered and eventually I gave up. I was used to Kathleen slipping away; I doubted I would see her again.

Rachel called on Sunday. I had a headache; I ached as if I had run a race. “Well, you certainly got my attention. You want to tell me what that was about?”

“It was just one bad idea after another.”

“Gretchen sent pictures of the bedroom.”

“That wasn’t me.”

“Do you and your new girlfriend do this a lot? Break into people’s house just to feed their dogs?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. It was Kathleen. The one Jacob almost married.”

“Boy, you really have a type, don’t you?”

“That’s not what it was.”

“You need to find a better way to mourn him. One of these days, someone’s going to get hurt.”

Through the phone, I could hear the wind and imagined her on some balcony, the wind toying with her hair. Her brown hair, molasses dark. I wondered why I had ever asked her to change it; it suited her well.

“I suppose this is my fault for never moving,” she sighed. “I should have just disappeared.”

“How’s California?”

“I have to go. Next time you start thinking you made a mistake, send an e-mail. Don’t break into my house.”

“Do you really want me to send an e-mail?”

“What’s it going to say?”

“I’m sorry about the dog.”

“Don’t tell me, tell him.”

“Why didn’t you move the spare key?”

“To be honest, I forgot all about it.”

“You don’t forget to do anything.”

She made a clucking sound and then fell silent for what seemed an eternity. “Send an e-mail, since you think you’re so smart. If I reply, I guess we’ll know.”

I don’t think Kathleen advertised what happened on our date. The very next week Irena came into the kitchen to say she had another girl. “I am making it my mission to get old whatshername out of your head!” I listened to the sales pitch, but it was a lost cause. Covered in my thin film of flour, I thought only about what I would write and how I would write it and I thought—I prayed—that I could still find a way to make Rachel smile as she stood in her hotel, thousands of miles away.