

The Death of Great Aunt June

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Mark sat with his hands hanging between his knees, his back slumped. Usually, he had better posture, but the stiff oak pews were unforgiving. He stole a glance towards the grand entrance of the cathedral to his left, and then the tile flooring. His mother always told him and his sister to look towards the front of the room during mass, and to pay attention, for God's sake. For their own sake, the siblings chose to occupy the last pew by the door. Mark shifted his weight. The priest was talking, but he was deaf to his words. The last time he tried to pay attention, the man was speaking Latin, anyways. Mark adjusted his tie, and then wondered if he should have worn it, or if he had overdressed. It was hard to tell how formal you had to be for a dead woman in a casket. That morning, when his mother presented him with the tie, she hissed something to him about respect, and he pointed out that Great Aunt June probably wasn't too concerned with his attire anymore.

His younger sister Lena slipped back into the funeral and plopped down beside him. She gave him a small smile, then furrowed her brows as she stared towards the front of the room, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

"I bet you didn't actually have to pee," Mark whispered to her. "You were just bored."

"Shut up, you imbecile," she said, tugging at the hem of her dress.

Mark shot back that he was older, therefore wiser.

"By two years," Lena said, "and you're a guy, so you don't even count."

"What?"

"Everyone knows it takes guys longer to mature."

Mark grunted. The two sat and looked towards the shiny casket and onslaught of flowers.

"I have to be more mature than you," Mark said finally, "I'm going to college in a month. You have to stay in high school for two more years."

"Go to hell," Lena said. "I bet you'll flunk out."

Mark stared at the floor. Every time he thought about leaving his little sister behind, his chest tightened, and his heart felt hollow. But no matter. Older brothers could show no fear. Now was the end of an era. It was always Lena and Mark versus the entire world, but Mark could feel him-

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self slipping further away from it every moment. He eyed the glossy, black coffin and thought about the great aunts of Great Aunt June, and their funerals. For an eerie moment, he imagined her, sitting in the pews, staring ahead at someone else's coffin in disinterest.

"I bet you won't graduate from high school," Mark said. He remembered when he was in second grade and Lena started kindergarten. He puffed out his chest and pointed her out to all his friends on the playground as she struggled across the monkey bars, blonde pigtails swinging.

"I bet you'll live in Mom and Dad's basement," Lena said, staring ahead. Mark couldn't read her expression. He thought about the time she poured a glass of ice water on his head when his alarm for school didn't go off. She'd laughed so hard she snorted. *"At least you won't be late,"* she had told him.

From the corner of his eye, Mark saw his sister's hair, and how the sun shined through and around it, a halo of light. He wondered when it was she took her pigtails out for the last time, never to put her hair up like that again. He received no answer, other than blood buzzing in his ears and the echo of dress shoes against the floor. The priest had stopped speaking. People were standing up, some with bright red eyes and others with looks of total boredom. Mark and Lena stayed glued to their seats for some time, watching black-clothed people leaving and the coffin being carried away.

"How'd she die, anyways?" Lena asked.

Mark shook his head, and his hair fell in his eyes. "Time's a bitch," he said. "She gives you everything you have, then she rips it away." His words echoed in the now empty cathedral. Lena rolled her eyes and stood up.

"Come on," she said. "We don't have all day." From the pews, she looked older to Mark, with her hair pulled back and her hands on her hips. "The bitch probably wants us to get going."

As he rose to his feet, Mark thought about seeing his sister on some weekends and the holidays, and hearing her voice over courtesy phone calls and answering machines. Lena yanked the door open and left, calling for him to hurry up as her footsteps faded. Mark faced the rows of pews and stained-glass windows alone, and the door slammed shut.