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WATER THERAPIES

LUCY SITS BY THE POOL, GETTING IT WRONG. She is supposed to be relaxing, but the deck chair is weirdly positioned, poised right at the edge of pool in a way that looks tranquil but feels precipitous. There is just a thin, unsteppable wedge between Lucy and the water, an unseen void behind her. Lucy lies back in the chair and does not relax.

She felt normal until she opened the door to the spa. In a flurry, but normal: she had gone in to work early to complete the shot lists for the story about the nuclear plant, and she kept working through lunch, nibbling at a bag of almonds she kept in her desk. But she got it all done and snuck out just before three saying she had an appointment. Her producer called while she was in the cab, but he himself was calling from another cab, rushing someplace else, and so Lucy didn't even have to say that she had left the office. She just answered his questions about the shoot the next day, told him they'd finally booked a sound guy, told him everything would be fine, hung up, and let her head sink back against the perfumed leather of the headrest.

The door to the spa was made of some dark, tropical wood. Lucy pulled it towards her with a greeting half-formed: Hello Beth! But Beth was not there. In fact the waiting room was not there, just a landing, with an ornate railing, and a wrought-iron staircase corkscrewing down to a lower level. Holding the railing carefully, Lucy looked down to where a white-coated woman sat at a desk, and another woman sat in a fussy chair, one leg crossed over the other, one punitive-looking shoe dangling as she swung her tiny stockinged foot. Both women turned their faces to look up at Lucy, but without warmth.

Lucy descended slowly, teeth locked, eyes squinting, trying to block out the height and daintiness of the steps, trying to ignore the faces in the waiting room below. She held her breath and picked her way, staccato, to the reception desk.

"Do you know if my sister is here yet?"

It must have sounded funny to the receptionist, too, because she didn't answer, but asked Lucy for her name. Lucy told her, and confirmed her credit card information, before asking again. "Has my sister—?"

No. She hadn't arrived. Lucy would just wait then, she would just go and wait by the pool, if that was— She will be here soon. Okay.

The pool deck is empty, but Lucy feels like she is being watched. She imagines the concealed camera capturing her image, feeding it back along the chlorine-smelling hallway, through the doors to the reception desk where the quasi-medical receptionist

sits, judging. She pictures the woman glancing up from her work (whatever that is) and looking more closely, removing her glasses, bringing her face right up close to the monitor, her eyes and lips narrowing, her already tight skin tautening further. She imagines her peering at the black and white image of Lucy's tense body, undefended on the uncomfortable deck chair, her book not read but open on her lap, the mug of tea that she regrets accepting cooling rapidly on the table beside her. She pictures the receptionist exhaling, swinging her neat body out from behind the counter, clipping down the hall, swinging open the door to the pool room. She pictures the questions coming like knives: Do you have everything you need? Are you relaxed? Are you going to swim? Don't you like the tea, after all? Aren't you going to read your book? Is your sister really coming? What are you doing here, anyway?

Of course her sister is coming. Her sister. It's okay to call her that, even if they are just step-sisters.

It's so cold. Lucy changed into her bathing suit and put on the inviting white robe, as directed, but the robe is smaller than it looks, and it leaves stretches of her arms and legs exposed. It would be ridiculous and impossible to go back to the change-room and put her street clothes back on. She wouldn't be allowed back onto the deck in her sweater and jeans. And she is far too cold to swim; so Lucy is trapped, cold and uncomfortable. She draws her body as far as she can into the inadequate robe and waits for her sister.

Beth was the charming one, ever since they were small. It sounds ridiculous, but Lucy knows it's true: she was not a charming child. Loved and nurtured, yes, but the adults never beamed at her, never said "aren't you clever!" or repeated funny things she had said. They were not entranced by her stories, or her paintings, or her plays or songs. Her imagination must have been as vivid as the next child's, but somehow its products fell at the feet of the grown-ups, leaden and flightless, and Lucy felt foolish and dull.

Beth, on the other hand, sparkled with whatever it was that Lucy lacked. Beth enchanted; Beth held the grown-ups' attention. At school, she was always the one called on in class, the one introduced to visitors, the one the principal chose to talk to that journalist that time. People loved Beth. Beth would not make a fool of herself checking into a spa.

Lucy can hear a cold ticking, and she looks around the room for a clock but can't find one. Four o'clock, Beth had said.

If this were a fairy tale, Beth would have been the fairest, the youngest and most appealing sister, Lucy the cruel stepsister. The ugly stepsister. They would have hated each other. But instead they were friends, best friends even, closer than sisters, certainly closer than stepsisters are ever supposed to be, close from the day Lucy's father and Beth's mother married.

The girls were eight at the time, and were bridesmaids. They were dressed in velvet

smocks from Laura Ashley: midnight blue for Lucy, forest green for Beth. Lucy does not remember her father saying the words that married them both to this other family, but she remembers Beth taking her hand and holding it through the vows, and not letting go until the two girls had left the chapel. Then, momentarily out of sight of the aunt who was in charge of them for the day, she grabbed Lucy, hugged her tightly, and whispered "I love you" in her ear before running off to join the party.

Lucy is so cold. Next to the door there is a delicate table of bamboo and glass, with towels piled luxuriously on it. Someone has scattered rose petals artfully over the towels. Lucy gets up, pulls her robe around her, and strides defiantly to the table. She grabs two towels, and the petals fall to the floor. Lucy brushes them under the table with her icy foot.

Back on the chaise, she arranges the towels carefully, tucking them behind her knees and around her feet. I look like a mummy, thinks Lucy, but she is slightly warmer now, and she leans back and closes her eyes, breathing deeply and with determination.

They were more like twins, really, connected by a deep and easy understanding. Sisters would have fought more. Their parents read up on how to make a blended family work and were careful around the girls, allowing them to be different, allowing them to hate one another if necessary. But they didn't. They loved each other, and together they loved all the same things: books, gymnastics, fairies. They were indivisible, giggling and ignoring their parents before running off to one of their rooms to read, head to toe in the same bed. They wanted to share a room, but Beth's mother read that this was a bad idea, so instead they had nearly matching, mirror-image rooms next to one another. As with the bridesmaid dresses, Beth's room was decorated in green, Lucy's in blue, although really Lucy preferred pink.

Even through their adolescence, through junior high and high school they remained friends. They went to the same small private school; they belonged to the same clique of nice, smart girls. Their misbehavior was modest, and usually shared. They covered for one another with their parents, and they talked late into the night, dissecting relationships and imagining futures. Beth followed most of their group to McGill for university, but Lucy won a scholarship to Western and so she went there instead, alone.

The door to the deck opens, and Lucy twists around in her seat, but leans back when she realizes it is not Beth. The two women who come in are loud and cheerful, producing a lot of hooting noises about how cold it is, but they make their way to the shallow end of the pool where they sit on the top step with their legs in the water. Lucy pulls the towels back around her and pretends to be sleeping.

Although she missed Beth, Lucy found that she was well-suited to college life, well-suited to living in a dormitory and studying late into the night with her roommates. She never felt the lack of privacy, never felt the need to be alone. She was never homesick, because she felt like she still lived at home. They were apart during the

school year, but each Christmas vacation and each summer she and Beth moved back into their parents' house, worked at their father's firm, and hung out with the same group of old friends. Without ever voicing it to anyone, Lucy assumed that after graduation she and Beth would be living there together again, that the years spent apart were not taking them away from childhood, but bringing them closer to reunion.

The two women at the end of the pool must be mother and daughter. Lucy doesn't want to eavesdrop on them, but they are so loud.

"So, Tara found shoes she likes, so we should go and look at those this weekend."

"We have that fitting, too. Don't forget."

The younger woman sighs dramatically.

"It's just so much to do!"

"I told you! I told you!"

And the two women break into more laughter. What's so bloody funny, thinks Lucy.

In the end there was no reunion. Everything turned out quite differently—disastrously, in fact: Beth's mother and Lucy's father split up while the girls were in their senior year. The divorce was an utter shock to Lucy, but Beth seemed to have known it was coming, and even implied that Lucy's father had been the one to blame. To blame for what? No one was talking about what had gone wrong, or not to Lucy anyway. There was no discussion, no dispute, no quarrelling over the house or finances.

"But what about us?" said Lucy, when she and Beth met for brunch over Spring Break to talk about it, "Who will have custody of us?"

"Oh, Luce, we're adults, now! There is no custody of us!" Beth laughed.

And that was it. Their family simply evaporated, and after graduation Lucy moved into her father's condominium high above the harbor, with its new furniture and its series of stark photographs in nickel frames depicting empty, sun-less seascapes. Lucy slept on a pull-out couch in the den until she found her own apartment a few months later.

Beth, who had just started law school, moved in with Paul. Paul had been around for a while, but Lucy hadn't realized he was so important. When Lucy went to visit them in their high-rise apartment just off Yonge, she was surprised to see the dining room set from their old house plonked down at one end of their long living room. She felt somehow that all their old furniture should have dematerialized, disintegrating like their former family. Instead the table sat there solidly, covered in coffee cups and two piles of textbooks, Beth's and Paul's.

Lucy has given up on pretending to sleep, and is pretending to read. The mother and daughter have climbed out of the water and now they thwack along the pool deck in their oversized robes and flip-flops. As they pass Lucy's chair the mother stops and leans in.

"Sorry if we disturbed your quiet time!"

And they giggle and thwack their way out the door.

Beth and Paul married young, right after law school. Lucy felt that their wedding was too soon—but too soon for what? She didn't know; she just wasn't expecting something this decisive yet. She still thought there would be a few more years before everyone committed to their life, forever. Lucy had only just started working at the CBC, and she was still temporary. Everything was still temporary: her sort-of boyfriend, her rented apartment, her job. So when Beth called to tell her she was engaged, her immediate reaction was heartfelt, if tactless: Why now?

"Why not, Lucy?" Lucy swore she could hear Beth roll her eyes. "We love each other."

It was a winter wedding, and Lucy's dress, again, was dark blue velvet. Perhaps Beth had chosen it randomly, or perhaps not. Lucy was the maid of honor, which seemed natural to her until one of Beth's aunts sidled up to her as they were leaving the church and told her that "it was kind of Beth to include you, dear."

Lucy had suddenly felt guilty, as if she were misrepresenting herself. She had looked around the foyer for Beth, hoping that a smile from her would confirm her own place in her sister's day. By the coat rack, Lucy's father and his girlfriend, and Beth's mother and new step-father formed a tight, chattering group. Beth's mother had a new, younger hairstyle than the last time Lucy had seen her. Her father had a tan, and a new, younger girlfriend. All four were smiling brightly, laughing easily. Beth and Paul appeared, holding hands, and joined their group, smiling and lucky.

Lucy trailed behind them, out of the church, shuddered at the cold wind, smiled for the pictures, danced at the reception, made a mediocre speech, failed to catch the bouquet.

And then they were they. Beth and Paul, and then Ethan, and Sophie, and Katie. When Ethan was born, they moved into a house at the opposite end of town from where Lucy and Beth had grown up, and this became a kind of home to Lucy. A place for Sunday dinner, and for Christmas. These were the people who would bake her a cake on her birthday, if no one else did. It was a busy and loving home, and Lucy always felt welcome. Auntie Lucy. "Well, she's not your real aunt, but—" Beth explained to the kids, and Lucy pretended not to hear.

Lucy is not sure what to do now. It is almost time for their massages, but there is still no sign of Beth. She would like to get into the hot tub, but it is in another part of the spa, and she told Beth she'd meet her by the pool. She is beginning to feel annoyed, but she shies away from that. As a rule, Lucy resists being angry with Beth. She owes her that, at least.

Lucy did a terrible thing, it's true, but she is still confused about how it happened. She feels as if she skipped over some steps, ignored some decision points, that she tumbled into the betrayal accidentally, like falling down the stairs. But there's no denying that it happened.

They had been at Beth's great-uncle's funeral, and the whole day had felt unusual, out of normal time. Perhaps it was the shock of the grief that spilled out during the service, or perhaps it was just the formal, dressed-up feeling, the smell of fresh shoe polish, the oddness of being away from work in the middle of the day. Beth had picked Lucy up that morning, but she had promised to drive her grandmother home, so Lucy went home in Paul's car. Lucy felt exhausted by the funeral, jumpy from too many cups of tea. It was a rainy October afternoon and already getting dark at five o'clock. Paul concentrated on the traffic, and Lucy listened to the radio, happy in the front passenger seat, where she rarely sat. She determined not to think about the empty weekend stretching ahead of her, but let her mind float in the warmth of the car, the extraordinary banality of a rush-hour commute, the illusion that she was going home. At a traffic light, she looked over at the car next to her, and saw a young woman gazing back at her. Lucy smiled at her, and realized that she and Paul looked like a couple, driving home from work on a Friday. Going home. The light turned, and Lucy smiled at the woman in the other car as Paul turned left.

Too soon they were at her place, and Paul walked her to her front door. She said thank you for the lift, and Paul leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. But Lucy took his face in her hands, and kissed him on the lips, her hands sliding back into his short, grown-up hair, under the collar of his raincoat. She closed her eyes, and for a moment: warmth, light, laughter. The smell of something roasting in the oven. Heavy curtains drawn against the darkness of a Friday night. Home. Lucy sank into the kiss, tried to fall, tried to lose herself.

But of course he pulled away immediately, and Lucy opened her eyes to see him glaring at her, his eyes full of injury. And then there was no changing anything. It was all over, then.

Beth invited her for tea. Not, Lucy noticed, a real meal, but a pretend meal that she wouldn't eat without a guest. Lucy was a guest, she was company.

They sat in the dining room, a pot of tea and a plate of cookies between them. It was a Saturday morning but the house was empty, the children probably out at soccer or somewhere with Paul. Beth poured tea for both of them but left her cookie untouched. She crossed her arms in front of her on the table, watched Lucy. She waited for her to eat, and Lucy, obediently, ate. They were terrible cookies, store-bought, but Lucy knew she had to eat them, that rebuilding trust demanded that they sit down to eat together, demanded obedience from Lucy. Because she was sorry, she honestly was.

"I just don't understand why."

But her hand was raised; Lucy could not answer. Beth continued.

"I don't understand why you would want to hurt me. Why you would want to hurt my family. Because you've never even really liked him, have you? All I can think is that for some reason you were mad at me, or something. You've always been jealous of

me—you've always wanted what I have."

Now she waited, as if she had asked a question.

"You really hurt this family. You really damaged us. But you know what? It's over. I won't let you ruin my life. It's a blip, it's a non-event. We'll move on. We'll still be family. You'll still be Auntie Lucy. I don't want the kids to suffer because of what you did. So we'll just continue on."

Beth propelled Lucy politely, but definitively, out of the dining room, to the front hall. She handed her her coat.

"I'll just never understand why you did it."

"Because I was lonely," said Lucy, but by then the front door had closed.

Lucy decides to leave. She will go back to the change-room, have a hot shower to warm up, and just leave. Forget the massage. Forget spa day. Beth has probably forgotten. Beth probably had something better to do. Beth meant nothing by it, but still, she did it.

Because miraculously, they remained a family. Lucy was never exiled, and Beth never brought the matter up again. Beth and Paul's home remained open to her, but something was off: you still had a standing invitation for Sunday dinner, but then you arrived to find dinner hadn't been started, that other guests were expected, that the bottle of wine you brought was never opened. Sometimes, when you arrived, they weren't even there, but arrived home as you waited on the porch, spilling out of the station wagon with laughter and a moment's surprise squashed quickly before they ran up the stairs to hug you. Sometimes they didn't arrive at all. But mostly the lights were on and you were part of a crowd, you were asked to slice the bread, or toss the salad, or hold the baby. In return, this was where you spent Christmas, this was the first phone call you made when you lost your job, or got a promotion, or needed advice. This was your new family, and it would have to do.

And Lucy stayed, and watched her sister enveloped in her family, watched her and Paul and the children, all snuggled up together in the family room, watching a Friday night movie, or opening stockings, or sharing a joke, while she perched on a footstool, smiled brightly, and was sent home after dinner in a cab.

And now here she is: Beth, walking onto the deck, smiling. Lucy is suddenly warm, feels the warmth of her sister, her pretend sister, wants to burrow into her terry-cloth robe and hug her truly. But Beth kisses her on the cheek, and the kiss is polite and breezy and hurtful.

"Sorry I'm so late, Luce!"

"I'm sorry—" Lucy blurts out suddenly, "I'm so sorry." She is close to tears, and she knows she has said something foolish.

"What on earth are you talking about, Lucy? Honestly."

Beth smiles at her, and throws her robe onto the chaise, as if it weren't even cold in here.

"Let's swim before our massages."

And Beth dives in, covering half the length of the pool in a few, strong kicks before she surfaces. Lucy watches from the deep end, and slips into the water.

It is so cold. Lucy dives deep, forcing herself through the cold water, forcing herself to embrace it. She skims the bottom, touches the mosaic tiles on the pool floor. I never want to come up to the surface, she thinks; I want to be a stone.

But she must, and when she does, there is Beth, above her on the edge of the pool, smiling down, and Lucy hopes, as she does each time she sees her sister, that this time she will push her back under, and hold her there until absolution comes.