

# Bleed into Me

And then there was the brother (me) who didn't know what to do at the funeral, so just stood there exactly four paces from his brother's casket, following the pattern in the carpet with the toe of his borrowed black shoe. In the inside pocket of the suit jacket he was wearing was the carnation some uncle or cousin had probably meant to pin to a prom date once, years ago. The last time the suit had been worn.

His brother in the casket was waxy and fixed. There were lines in his hair where the comb had dragged through. They must have had to sit him up for that, one person's hands between his shoulder blades, holding him, the other with the comb always in her hands, never between her teeth.

The brother with his toe in the carpet closed his eyes. His father brushed his hand as he passed, dragging smoke in from the porch, crushing his cigarette into the glass ashtray.

"You okay?" he asked.

And then there was the father who didn't know what to say, or how.

The brother shrugged, watched the smoke from the dying cigarette trail up into the parchment lampshade. On the porch on the way in he had stopped to look back at the waiting hearse, and his hand had followed a post up to a support beam, and then he had followed the lip of the support beam to the door. It was a straight line but for one thing: just before

the door there was a fleshy lump in the lip of the beam. The brother kept his hand there, swinging to the left some to let an aunt pass, his hanging tie brushing her shoulder, and when he was alone he pulled his hand down. The fleshy lump was a fishing lure, a soft glow-in-the-dark worm, only some prior mourner had run two stick pins in through the face, longways. The pins had pearly heads, were eyes. He didn't know what he had thought the worm was going to be. He put it back, entered the funeral home, approached the casket then backed off four paces to the side, holding his hands one over the other before him.

Everyone was pretending the small green dumpster tucked into the back of the parking lot was just another dumpster. Everyone was eating donuts and laughing with their whole face. The brother started over with his toe, the carpet.

The day after his brother died he had found in his brother's glove compartment an envelope of photographs of the two of them as children, and it wasn't good. He made himself look at each one, though, until he'd placed the season, the year, their age; the photographer. The glue on the envelope had been used up but the backs of the photographs were still tacky from the album his brother had peeled them from at three in the morning, hunched over in the hall, the front door open so that he could flit away the moment their mother's bedcovers rustled, then hide in the bushes all night guarding the house, his pockets full of silverware and heirlooms and pawn receipts, the open front door locked as if he'd meant to pull it shut behind him, then couldn't afford the sound.

In the car on the way to the funeral home the mother had read aloud every street sign and billboard they passed. "Was

that it?" she asked, about the street the funeral home wasn't on, slipping behind them. The mother who didn't recognize her own town anymore. The brother who was still getting used to the borrowed suit had shrugged. He had had the headlights on at first, then pushed the knob back in, off. Then on.

One morning he had found one of his dead brother's cigarettes smoldering into the front porch, and he had picked it up for a last drag then dropped it instead, rolled it underfoot. Another time he caught his brother ducking out over the front mat at daybreak, and the two of them fought hard on the dewed-up lawn with their parents and neighbors watching, and the whole time the dead brother was holding one of their mother's gilt-edged plates, and it never broke, and the brother ran backwards down the street with it glinting in the sunlight, his arms out, nose bleeding around his smile, shoulders lifted in apology. Ten months later his whole face would be bleeding from a skull fracture, and his little brother would hold his head in his lap under a guttering dome light with the broken-open face towards his stomach and say all kinds of things he never knew he had had words for, things like *don't worry, it'll be all right, just let it all out, I'm sorry*.

It would be at the high school parking lot, all the trucks circled around for the headlights, and there would be a senior cornerback from another town sitting on the not-yet-dead brother's chest, an unlikely chunk of asphalt held over his head, ready to bring down for the third time, the time that would push the two of them into legend—how the one on top didn't want to do it, how the one on his back wouldn't say he'd had enough. And wouldn't, and wouldn't. And he would live through that and more, too—every way there was to die

in Martin County, like he was looking for them—and still show up at the house at three in the morning, to stand in the dark living room and ask himself *what now?*

Once it was the rosewood desk, tied upside down to the roof of a long-hooded car.

Another time it was the condenser unit for the air conditioner.

Towards the end—when he was more a rumor than a brother—it was the plastic forks and spoons left floating in the dishwasher; the long copper wire that ran from the antenna to the television set. The fake jewelry his mother had started leaving out for him, closer and closer to his old room.

When he took the desk, he left the stapler and hole punch and paper clip cup on the carpet exactly as his mother had had them on the desk.

That next night his mother hid the gun from the men of the house. Because they would protect her. Even against him. In his eyes in the photographs you can even see it a little. That he was already sorry for everything he was going to do. That his mother and father and brother weren't supposed to miss the cutlery and the wedding bands and the rest, but the photographs. And nobody said it at the funeral but the brother standing in the borrowed suit knew that he was only there because his dead brother had been bad enough for both of them, taken it on himself, and in thanks he drew the cigarette up from the glass ashtray, trying to breathe the end red again, then pocketed the ashtray too.

And then there was the mother who hadn't seen the envelope of photographs yet, who wasn't yet ready to see them. After

the funeral when she wasn't wasn't *wasn't* thinking about her son in the ground in his box with the earth baked hard over it like a shell. But one day the shell cracked open, and her son came back. It was three in the morning all night long; things were disappearing again.

At first it was the new set of steak knives, removed one by one from the wooden block she had long ago super-glued at the proper angle to the countertop. Then it was her hair rollers, and then the extra belt for the vacuum cleaner, and then her husband couldn't find the remote one evening, and she knew. Without being told, she knew.

She said his name when no one was in the room, and then with darkness would rush everyone away from the television, off to bed. Once she sat at her missing desk—the stapler and the Rolodex and the lamp all arranged on the carpet in the arc that made the most sense—but then made herself get up; *live*. Because he needed her. She wanted to breastfeed him again, to hold his head to her like that.

"You okay?" her husband asked, and she nodded yes, yes, her uncurled hair falling over her eyes, then disappeared for hours at a time during the day, haunting the pawnshops as only a mother can, inspecting each can opener and doorstop, looking for her son in their curved reflections, their familiar heft. She found her college typewriter at a junk shop on the industrial side of town, and walked out with it cradled in her arms. The warehouses stood solemn around her, in respect.

At a secondhand clothing store that smelled of mothballs and teeth left to dry overnight she found a strand of her pearls in a shoebox spilling over with plastic earrings and dead watches. They were real, the pearls; she talked the clerk down to a dollar-fifty, then forced ten dollars on him, then just emptied her

purse on the counter. But it still wasn't enough: her son wasn't eating the food she left on the kitchen table for him. He was going to starve like that.

The household items she recovered she placed in the living room, the kitchen, the entry hall. It was like going back in time.

After two nights without dinner, her son and husband crept into the kitchen at three in the morning, gorged themselves on the food left there and never talked about it.

When the mother's typewriter disappeared again, she left in its place a new ribbon, and then it was gone as well. She followed it all over town: from the pawnshop on Eighth to the one nestled between all the bail bondsmen on Francis Street, by the tracks. All the pawnshop men were the same, too: leather vests, untended sideburns, faces bisected by vertical bars. And they all remembered her dead son, had all just seen him.

Once, leaving the pawnshop on Francis, she passed the boy who had helped steal her rosewood desk. She cinched her scarf around her chin and followed him and followed him, all the glass of his car still shattered from the weight of the desk on the roof. He wasn't going anywhere, though. Just driving.

At a pay phone she called her husband to ask if he was there, maybe—her dead son—and her husband didn't answer, didn't know what to say. That he was hungry.

That was the night she crouched in the bushes, guarding the house. Her plan was to let him in, then close the door behind him.

He must have seen her though, crept past.

And it wasn't because he didn't love her. She was his *mother*. It was because he couldn't help it. Because he had friends who got out of jail and just drove and drove.

Her husband carried her in the next morning. There were old cigarette butts all around her like ash. After that she couldn't leave the house anymore, but three in the morning was still there for her, for all of them, and she would tie her bathrobe around her waist with the knot that made the most sense and her husband would walk ahead of her through the house, hiding the valuables, rearranging them, and her son who was still wearing the borrowed suit would crouch outside each window to catch what she dropped out—the hair dryers and quilts and baking sheets of their life—and he was still smoking the same cigarette his brother had left, watching the window he was under with one eye, the street with the other.

And then there was the father who would always remember his dead son like this: walking up the sidewalk at five years old in moonboots, each of his footsteps timed perfectly with some roofer's nail gun. It was like he was a giant; the father had been changing the oil then, hidden under their old car.

This was years before he ever had to hold a gun on anybody in the living room and mean it. Years before he had to sit in emergency room after emergency room with his wife, telling his youngest son that he did good, he did fine, there was nothing else he could have done. He was slick with blood, though, the son. Trying to read a magazine.

The first thing the father did after the funeral was get a different job, and then a different job, and then a different

one after that. He was a security guard and a customer service operator for a video game company and a parachute packer. But none of them lasted. During the day he filled out applications and watched the sky, to see if people would fall from it or float. After the video game company fired him he bought the game at one of his wife's pawnshops and called customer service with questions that always came down not to *how*, but *why*?

He thought he might like to work at a lube shop. Or a zoo. But then he became a roofer, until the roof collapsed out from under him one day and he fell for a moment into some other family's life. They were in the living room building something complicated but magical from popsicle sticks. The two fathers stood looking at each other, and the lesser turned, walked out.

The reason the roof collapsed was a young boy had been walking up the street, and the father had gunned a nail into the shingles with each step the boy took, until the boy was past and there was a creaking half moon of embedded nail heads before the father's knees.

He fell through and didn't stop falling for days, and when he stood it was into another job, writing fortune cookies. It didn't last. He grew his sideburns out and tried to hire on at a pawnshop, but they could tell right away what stage of grief he was in. To prove them wrong he hung from the steel bars of their windows until the sirens came. One of the fortunes that had gotten him fired was that when a father is walking around the house with his dead son, the wife is the only one who can take him away. It had no rhyme, though, the floor boss said, no *reason*, but that was the whole point.

That afternoon the father found a glass ashtray on his workbench. It had been polished for hours. He appreciated that and sat watching it, the vent hood for the kitchen range pushing all his wife's cooking into the garage. It was almost like eating.

He walked the zoo, looking at the animals.

He walked the backyard, watched his formally dressed son steal his mother's typewriter. They looked at each other across the wild grass, and then the son eased out the gate, slipped down the alley.

Nobody ever got anything out of pawn in this family. They always had to buy everything twice, three times, more. The father smiled to himself: *more*.

He tried getting a job as caretaker at the cemetery, but they could see he was still grieving too, and that he didn't have any references. He stood over his son's grave for hours anyway, tending it with his shadow, no pay. One afternoon he stole everyone else's flowers—real and fake—and placed them at his son's headstone by color, but the next morning they were gone again.

"Something's wrong here," he said to himself.

His oldest son was dead. That was what was wrong.

He dug the old moonboots out of the garage and left them on the grave, but then his wife brought them home next week, from the salvage store. His oldest son rustled when he walked, each pocket of his suit choked with flower petals.

The father wanted a parachute too, like other people had. Or to fall through another roof, into a house he *knew*, a living room not piled with items his wife was remembering from a life they'd never lived: shoe buffers, boxes of fire alarms, mirrors

with the backing peeled away so you could see the wall behind them.

One morning he found pictures of his two sons arranged in chronological order on the kitchen table, and then the phone rang, and his remaining son was in jail. He had been riding around with one of his dead brother's old friends; they had been looking for a desk.

On the way home the father asked his son for career advice. His son offered him a cigarette. He took it, smoked with one elbow out the window—the son the same, just with the opposite elbow—and remembered the emergency room that time with all the blood. The way the magazine kept slipping from his son's hands.

He wanted to work at a lube shop because he wanted to be under cars again, to be changing oil again, to see the world as a horizontal stripe again, one his dead son could walk up out of. He was too old, though. And cried too much. They didn't tell him that but he knew.

"You should be a comedian," his remaining son had told him minutes after he had asked for career advice, right before they got to their garage. A comedian. So the father walked down the street away from the lube shop trying to make up a joke. Because the world was a funny place. To prove it, a long car drove by with no windows and a beautiful rosewood desk balanced upside down on its roof, two dim shapes in the front seat, their arms out the window trying to hold the desk down.

The father smiled for the first time in weeks.

*And then there was the father who lost his son*, he said, already gathering speed after the car, so he got a job as an an-

imal handler, just to feel the chimps' hands laced behind his neck, and the street roared with laughter and he ran through it carrying his dead son in his arms, holding his broken face to his stomach, telling him like his other son had that night in the high school parking lot that it would be all right, he could just bleed into him, he would save it all.