

Dunes

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On October 20, 1993, the Mirage Resorts, Inc., imploded the casino and north tower, which was televised. The Dunes's death signified the birth of another resort.

"Lily, we're going to be late," Robert says. He paces nervously in front of the door and jingles our car keys in his hand.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "They're always running behind anyway." I slurp the leftover milk from my cereal bowl and place it on the coffee table. "I want to see what they're going to say about the Dunes."

Robert sighs loudly as he moves around the room. He fluffs the pillows beside me on the sofa and straightens the pile of magazines on the floor beside his chair. It's not his fault that he doesn't understand. He doesn't know Lizzy, has never even heard of her.

I pick up the remote control and turn the volume up on the television. The news of the implosion of the Dunes made it all the way from Las Vegas to New Orleans, and a KNYZ reporter is announcing that it will be broadcast tonight at 6 p.m. The screen behind her shows a group of people gathered around the casino's marquee. *Thanks for the Memories*, it reads.

It's been nineteen years since I've seen my sister. I search the crowd for her face, almost sure that I won't see her but hoping anyway.

Lizzy was in the eighth grade when I was nine. It was 1973, the year she stopped celebrating her birthday. In our bedroom, a couple of days before she turned fourteen, she said she didn't have one.

"Everyone has a birthday," I told her.

"Not me," she said. "I don't even have parents."

"Yes, you do," I said, staring at the thirteen strips of construction paper scattered in front of me. The paper roses I had hoped to make Lizzy for her birthday were looking more like a mass of red tapeworms than a bouquet. "Momma and Mr. Tom are your parents."

Lizzy was always saying things like that, like Momma wasn't her real mom, even though we have pictures of Momma in the hospital when Lizzy was born. I never told Momma because I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Lizzy's brown braids bounced off her shoulders as she shook her head.

"Tom's not my dad," she said. "He's a cunt."

"That's not true," I yelled. "You can't say words like that."

Her face turned red, red as the paper scattered across the floor. I thought she was going to cry. I could've been wrong. She might've just wanted to hit me.

"You don't know anything," she screamed. She jumped from the bed, tramped across my paper tapeworms, and slammed the door behind her.

In the waiting room chair next to me, Robert presses his palm against my knee. I place my hand on top of his and trace the top of his wedding ring with my finger. After just two years, it no longer looks new, and I suggest that he have it cleaned. He nods and continues to pop his left ankle, rhythmically, without realization. He smiles at me over his shoulder. It's not reassuring, but it's a nice gesture.

A white poster with bold green letters reminds me to respect myself, protect myself. Plants kneel on the pea-green floor in each corner of the room, and I try not to stare at the woman breast-feeding in a chair across from me.

The table next to me holds a stack of pamphlets warning against the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. I pick up two and ask Robert if he's interested in reading about vaginitis. He says he isn't, but I hand it to him anyway—just in case he changes his mind.

I study the girl on the front of the syphilis brochure. She's thin with long blond hair. I can tell it's blond even in the black-and-white picture. She's smiling at the camera, hands on her waist with her hip jutting out to one side. I try to understand why she's grinning.

"Lily," an overweight nurse in pink panda-bear scrubs says from the doorway, "you can follow me."

The night after Lizzy's birthday, when Momma and Mr. Tom were out together, she locked herself in the bathroom. An hour later, she entered our room in a T-shirt with a blue towel wrapped like a turban around her head. I

had taken advantage of the unsupervised time by retrieving a couple of tubes of lipstick from Momma's makeup kit and giving Mary Ann, my favorite doll, a much-needed makeover.

"What are you doing?" Lizzy asked.

I'd had a hard time deciding if Mary Ann's cheeks should be Berry Pink and her lips Luminous Red, or vice versa. I had finally decided that red lips were definitely the way to go and was proud that I had managed to stay within the pre-painted lines of Mary Ann's lips—although it had taken several tries.

"You like it?" I asked, holding Mary Ann by her plastic shoulders and presenting her to my sister.

"Very nice, Lily Belle," Lizzy said. She pulled the towel from her head and began wiping at my pink and red stained hands. She wrapped the towel's end around her index finger and started digging the color out of the cracks of my palms.

"What happened to your head?" I asked.

Earlier that day, she'd had long brown hair. Now the hair was gone, revealing a pale scalp. Without looking up, she continued wiping the stains from my hands.

"Lizzy," I asked again, "what happened to your head?"

Lizzy had always looked the most like Momma. She had her pug nose and blue eyes and that fine brown hair. Grandma had given us a picture of Momma from when she was in ninth grade. We'd put it in a frame next to our bed, and sometimes when we had company, they would mistake Momma for Lizzy. I thought Momma was beautiful.

"I cut it," Lizzy said. "I hate washing it. And it always gets tangled."

"You look like Porky Pig," I said.

She smiled and swatted me with the towel.

"Well, you look like Daffy Duck," she said.

"Come on, Daffy, let's get you cleaned off."

I followed Lizzy to the bathroom. The trashcan near the toilet was full of her hair—a ball of long, fine strands created a bed for a pile of shorter, curly black hair. She walked to the bathtub, turned the knobs, and then ran her fingers under the flow of water.

"Whose hair is that?" I asked, reaching into the trashcan.

Her scalp was soft where the hair had been. The top was dimpled in a few places, and the back sloped into a valley before curving down into her neck. It felt like what I thought a baby would feel like. . . .

"Don't touch that," Lizzy said. "It's mine." But it didn't look like hers.

"Come here," she said from her seat on the edge of the bathtub.

I walked over and stretched my arms into the air, letting her remove my lipstick-kissed T-shirt. I steadied myself by placing my hand on her head as she removed my socks. Her scalp was soft where the hair had been. The top was dimpled in a few places, and the back sloped into a valley before curving down into her neck. It felt like what I thought a baby would feel like, a soft newness, what I thought Mary Ann would feel like if she were real.

The nurse leads us to our room and says the doctor will be in shortly. Robert and I sit down in identical plastic chairs. The room is familiar. A diploma stating that Dr. John S. Barry received his medical degree from Tulane School of Medicine in 1984 hangs on the wall in a plain black frame. A picture of two small children, both redheaded and freckled, sits on the desk next to a figurine of a small boy with a scratched knee. "Call the doctor," it reads.

I notice a stack of paper gowns and am thankful that this time I don't have to change clothes. There's nothing more humbling than sitting bare-butt on a white paper sheet with only a thin gown protecting you from a stranger who has already seen you naked. I decide that it was probably a man who invented the exam bed, with its metal legs jutting out to the sides, promising cold discomfort.

Robert smiles the way he does when he wants to have sex, nervously, as if asking for a favor and hoping for good news. On our seventh date, three years ago, he said that he wanted kids. Lots of them. And then he'd leaned in and kissed me for the first time. His mouth tasted like tuna.

The next morning, Momma called the school and asked the counselor to speak with Lizzy. She stood at the kitchen counter in her starched white apron and white tennis shoes with the phone pressed between her shoulder and her ear. She held a cup of coffee in one hand and pulled at the ends of her long hair with the other. She nodded at the wall and occasionally murmured, "Yes," and, "Thank you." She didn't look at Lizzy when she hung up the phone.

"I'm late for work," Momma said. "We'll talk about this when I get home." And she was out the door.

Lizzy said she didn't want to go to school that day, that she wasn't feeling well, and that some morning air was just what she needed. We waited until after the bus had passed then left our book-sacks in our room and walked to the Quarter. The Market was slowly waking up, and Lizzy held my hand as we walked through the rows of tables, watching the vendors set out their treasures.

We made our way to Madeline's Dream-Shop, and Lizzy tried on wigs. She pranced around the store with a rust-red wig, the hair short and spiked, before deciding the color looked too artificial against her skin.

The shop's walls were lined with plastic heads. There were heads on shelves and wire racks, bodiless heads and full-formed mannequins, each naked except for the multicolored wigs. Lizzy moved through the store, plucking the wigs from their places. She tried on several, mostly blond—some long and curly, others short, the ends tapered around her face—before deciding on one. "This is perfect," she said, leaning over and puckering her lips at the full-length mirror. The wig was cut into a bob, the back receding high into her scalp and falling down into a V toward the front. The bangs were long and heavy and seemed to start from the back of her head. She looked more like a stranger than my sister.

"We've looked at the tests," Dr. Barry says, making eye contact and clicking the head of his ink pen. Robert reaches over and takes my hand because he is a good husband and that's what good husbands do.

"They show severe fallopian damage," Dr. Barry says. "Any pregnancy, at this point, would probably be tubal."

He talks about pelvic inflammatory disease and the rate of infertility and how some people never experience symptoms. His eyes are dark under his strawberry hair. He looks older than he is, and I wonder how his hands feel without gloves as I watch him tap his pen against his pantleg. He talks about treatments and options, and I nod when he looks at me to let him know that I am listening and that I understand. Robert sits toward the front of his plastic chair with his hands clasped, elbows resting on his knees. His posture and green shirt make him look like a frog.

On Friday nights when Momma worked late at the diner and Mr. Tom was out drinking, Lizzy would take me to the Quarter. She would stand outside

the strip clubs and watch the silhouettes of the dancers while I talked to the hot dog vendors. My favorite vendor was Mike. He would give me free hot dogs on "good" nights and tell me stories of pirates and battleships and the love between Marc Antony and Cleopatra. One of his front teeth was badly

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chipped, and a thin scar ran up from the corner of his mouth and curved around his nose. He never told me how he got it.

When we went home, Lizzy would dance in front of our mirror. She'd strip down to her bra and panties and move her body in circles as David Essex sang "Rock On."

"Still looking for that blue-jean baby queen," he sang, as her blond wig glowed beneath the sixty-watt light bulbs. "Prettiest girl I've ever seen."

Lizzy said her "real" mother was probably a famous showgirl from Las Vegas. She said her mom had to give her up for adoption because it was impossible to care for a young child and maintain her super showgirl status. She understood her mom's decision, she said. One day soon they would dance together beneath those bright Vegas lights.

Her dad, she said, was probably the owner of the Dunes.

"I'm really sorry," Dr. Barry says. His lips are pulled tight across his face, as if years of frowning have molded them that way, making them thin and flat. I nod, moving my gaze away from his face, and focus on the children in the picture on his desk. They're both squatting, the boy with his arm around his sister. Her arms are folded across her chest, but she's leaning into him. And smiling. She looks younger, I decide, but not by much.

"We had your records faxed over from Dr. Burk's office," Dr. Barry says. "He's the only other gynecologist you've seen?"

I realize he is talking to me and not Robert. I nod, watching his fingers move through a stack of papers. He pulls a yellow sheet from the stack and rolls his chair closer to us so we can see.

"It shows that in 1982, at eighteen, you tested positive in a chlamydia screening. You were immediately treated, and your following checkups were clear."

I can feel Robert looking at me. Not at my eyes. My chin maybe, my throat.

Dr. Barry shifts in his chair. He pushes away from us with his left leg and crosses his right one over it. He doesn't sit back. "The longer a disease, something like chlamydia, is in your body without being detected, the more damage it does." He speaks slowly, in a soft voice. He alternates looking at Robert and then at me. "The severity depends on the amount of time it is left untreated after that initial contact with the virus."

Robert raises his eyebrows when he talks to Dr. Barry. His right hand is clenched into a ball, and he's rubbing it in circles against his left palm. The children on the desk are still smiling. I smile back, to let them know that everything is okay.

Momma worked all the time, and sometimes, when she was gone, Lizzy would lock me in our room. Mr. Tom would turn the sound up on his TV, and I would lie awake in the dark dreaming up faces to go with the voices drifting through the walls. I would cradle Mary Ann's plastic body in my arms and tell her stories of princes and castles. And occasionally hurricanes.

Lizzy would come to bed later, dress herself in her thickest clothes, and put on her wig. Her breath was always quick and nasal, escaping in short bursts as she tried to breathe through her mouth. She would slap my hands when I tried to hug her, and wrap her arms around herself with her back to me, and rock, forward and back, on her hip. I'd wipe imaginary tears from Mary Ann's face and sing love songs until we fell asleep.

Robert and I don't talk on the way home. I watch the dirty streets out the window of our car as Robert shakes his head and presses the buttons on the radio. He gets out at The Frame Shop to pick up my birthday gift while I wait in the car. It costs more than we can afford, but he says twenty-nine is as big a birthday as any. It's a week late, but I couldn't decide on a print.

Robert props the frame up against the back seat of our car. I'd asked for the picture to cover a hole in the wall behind our bed. It's been there since before we moved in two years ago, right after our wedding. It's not a big hole, and Robert says you can't see it with the new paint, but I know it's there. I turn in my seat to study my birthday present. It's a copy of Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*. I try to imagine what he was thinking as he painted time melting down a hard wooden box.

Robert looks from the road to me then back to the road. His eyes are red, and the hair on his face has grown dark since this morning. "Lily," he says,

I sit beside Robert on our sofa, not talking, eating popcorn, and watching the Dunes fall to the ground on the evening news. The building falls straight down in a matter of seconds, and a black cloud of smoke takes its place.

but I am looking at the picture. With it, our walls will be scar-free.

Nearly a year after she first shaved her head, Lizzy left me, and I've never blamed her. She woke one morning at three o'clock, and I watched her pack her clothes into a little red suitcase Grandma had given us the Christmas before. She pulled the clothes from their hangers in the closet and stuffed them into the bag without fold-

ing them. When she finished, she sat the suitcase by the door and crawled into the bed beside me. I felt the hard soles of her tennis shoes against my leg.

"Where you going?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But I'll be back. I'll come back for you."

"Momma's gonna be sad," I said.

Lizzy put her arms around my back and pulled me into her. She kissed my forehead and then Mary Ann's.

"Don't stay up late," she said.

She rolled back out of the bed and picked up her suitcase. Her side of the bed was still warm when I heard the click of the door as she closed it behind her.

I sit beside Robert on our sofa, not talking, eating popcorn, and watching the Dunes fall to the ground on the evening news. The building falls straight down in a matter of seconds, and a black cloud of smoke takes its place. The TV reporter talks about the rubble and the casino owner's plans for a new resort. She says the city estimates that cleanup will take a few months. I wonder if it's worth the trouble, if the new casino will have fewer problems than the old one just because it has created a new image. I wonder if the infrastructure was too weak to support the building any longer or if someone decided that it was just time for something new.

I cry over my kernels, salt mixing with the salt in the bowl. Robert turns off the TV and brushes my hair from my face.

"What happened?" Robert asks. "What do you remember?" His face twitches as he fights the thing that is boiling in his chest. "Talk to me, Lily," he says. His voice sounds as if it's squeezed through a pile of rocks in his throat.

I close my eyes and try to remember something, anything, to tell the man sitting next to me. But all I can do is picture Lizzy's face. I remember how soft her scalp was each time she shaved. I remember her dancing and her declarations. I remember the sound of her laughter, how rare it was, and how, when it happened, my throat closed up.

Mostly, I remember the sound of the lock sliding across the outside of our door, the shadow of Lizzy letting herself in then dressing in the dark, and the way our sheets moved as she rocked slowly on her hip.

"She never came back," I say. I look at Robert, who is blinking slowly, waiting. I can see myself in his eyes. My face is distorted, my nose and forehead larger than they are. "Lizzy," I say. "My sister. She said she would come back, but she didn't."

Robert shakes his head and opens his mouth. He does not speak.

In this moment, I am sorry for him, for feeling all these things and not knowing what to do with them, but I know that we cannot help each other. We've built ourselves up too high.

I pick up the remote and turn the television back on. A young woman is standing in front of a screen and pointing at the week's forecast.

"We might see some rain this weekend," she says and smiles, almost apologizing to the camera.

Beside me, I can feel Robert's hand squeezing the sofa, close enough to touch.