

Riddance

I killed my sister when she was 3-years old. I was 8.

It was June 13th, 1993. I got off the school-bus and saw a blister pack of blue pills on the pavement. I picked it up and looked at the foil, tried but failed to read the ingredients. I put the sachet in my blazer pocket and walked home.

Mother was preparing dinner. Emily was in her nappy, banging a wooden spoon on the counter. She ran unsteadily to me as I entered the kitchen.

‘Ron-Ron,’ she said.

My mother looked up from the frying pan. ‘Ronald, it’ll be ready in ten. School okay?’

I nodded and told Emily to come with me to my room. She stood looking at me as I took off my blazer. These were her last moments. She was studying me, her brain still absorbing the movements one makes to take off a jacket. I don’t remember the baby idiosyncrasies of her forming personality, but I do remember the movements and reactions of her little body as she was dying.

My 8-year old mind heard the crunch of the sachet when I threw my blazer on the bed and it came up with an idea—why not give Emily the pills and make her swallow them, see what happens?

I didn’t have to force her. As most babies do, she lifted her fat hand to her mouth and chewed the pills as casually as if they were Tic Tacs. She made a little flinch as the pills started dissolving on her tongue.

I kept the empty pack for years, hidden it in a toy-chest under my bed. Years later, I googled the ingredients.

Titanium dioxide.

Hydroxypropyl Methylcellulose acetate succinate.

Triethyl citrate.

Talc.

Hypromellose.

Duloxetine Hydrochloride.

The pills turned out to be antidepressants. Another man's sadness was a family's tragedy.

But I'm the one to blame. I was 8-years old but I was also stupid. Not even stupid. There should be another word to define it because the saying, that "we all make mistakes" doesn't and shouldn't apply to me. I killed my sister, ended an innocent life before it had a chance.

It only took ten minutes before Emily started belching. By that time, I had already forgotten what I had done to make the association. My mother and I were at the table, looking at her in her highchair.

When dad died, people kept saying how I was now the man of the house, but I knew I was far from that at that kitchen table. As soon as Emily started choking and turning purple, I remembered the pills. I didn't say anything. I just left the table, ran to my room to find my blazer, and hid the empty sachet in my toy-box.

When I returned to the kitchen, Emily was convulsing. Mother was holding her face, crying, 'What's wrong? Baby, what's wrong?'

Only I could answer that question, and I am answering it, finally, now. Here.

A few weeks ago, I was on my second date with Christine. We were at a Thai restaurant in Barnes, London. She asked me a question with a hint of mockery. 'What's the worst thing you've ever done?'

Back when I was 8, and then 9, and then 10, perhaps I didn't have a fully-formed standard of conduct, which would explain why I didn't experience any proper guilt. Then later, when Emily would have been in her twenties, I felt guilt like a creeping illness. Still, my ethical standards were forever tainted by withholding the source of an accident that resulted in the death of my baby sister.

But even *accident* is not the right term. I gave Emily the tablets, I saw her chew them. I let her die.

I stopped eating. Christine put down her fork.

‘By the look on your face, I’d say it’s murder,’ she said. She laughed.

I stood up and walked out of the restaurant. By the time I made it to the riverbank, I realised that I had left my coat behind. I never saw that coat again.

I remember, years ago, mother had employed a housekeeper. Mother had two jobs then, and came home at ten o’clock at night—she used to close the front door, open her bedroom door, close that too, and I would hear her weight on the bedsprings from my room.

After mum left for work and before my school-bus showed up, I used to put the photos of baby Emily face-down on the mantelpiece. When I returned home, they were upright. Martha, the housekeeper, must have been re-setting them. This carried on for a couple of months, every day for two months. Though Martha and I never met, we knew each other. She was resilient, and so was I.

For years, I kept the memory face-down: the memory of Emily’s bloated face and how mum and I could hear her little heart beat itself to death in our kitchen. Emily breathed hard and fast and her eyes sought some kind of understanding. She didn’t even cry—I kept telling myself that this is because she didn’t feel any pain, but I think it’s because her body was trying to reject what she had swallowed, and her brain, unlike mine, was trying to make the association. But it couldn’t. Her brother would never hurt her. But before Emily died in mother’s arms, she said, ‘Ron-Ron.’ Perhaps she had made the accusation after all, perhaps she had made the association. Perhaps she would have been a very smart girl. This too we would never know.

I still live in that same house with my mother. Every day, whenever I walk past, I look at that patch of pavement where I had seen those pills. It’s like I want to blame it. But if I do, I have to blame my eyes, with which I’d seen the shiny foil. I’d have to blame my brain for concocting such an experiment. Ultimately, I’d have to blame my heart for the years I spent ignoring Emily’s ghost.

Except 3 days ago. I woke up in the middle of the night for a snack and saw Emily by the fridge, smiling brightly and drooling. ‘Ron-Ron,’ she said and she stumbled barefoot towards me and held on to my knees.

I sat on my heels and held her face between my hands. I kissed her forehead and picked her up. I walked with her to my room but spotted my mother in the corridor.

‘Are you seeing things again?’ she said.

‘No, mother.’

‘What are you holding?’ she asked.

Mother came forward and took hold of my elbow. She pulled me to my room, sat me on the bed, and bent forward, opening my bedside table. She picked up the blister pack.

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‘You didn’t take yesterday’s and today’s,’ mother said. She sighed and popped a pill out of the pack. ‘Open up,’ she said.

I opened my mouth, swallowed it and felt my mother’s lips on my forehead. ‘Goodnight, Ronald.’ I put my head on the pillow and saw mother leave the room and close the door behind her.

I looked for Emily, but she had disappeared.