

## THE BOND

*Cécile Barlier*

He had this exquisite and disturbing gesture, my brother-in-law Max. Here it is: in a delicately carved and painted chest, hand delivered by private courier: a collection of pictures, drawings, and representations of my sister Mia throughout the twenty-five years of their married life. Max wanted me to have this. In the cover note, he explained that nothing was missing from that collection, not one sketch or one painting or one figurine of her that he'd done or attempted over the course of their coexistence. There was no insignificant corner of paper tablecloth on which he drew her on the spot that Max didn't religiously keep and unearth from the grave of memories. All of Mia's evolution over those years was captured with exceptional clarity, structured in binders and small cardboard cases tied with knotted, colored strings, like an elaborate interlocked molecular construction.

What I thought was lost and erased with Mia's death was here, methodically and artistically arranged, her renditions protected with rice paper and silicon packets. All of this obsessive minutia had an intoxicating yet distancing effect on me—like a train of feelings with vastly different cars, through which I could stroll as a visitor to my own interior world. My old self opened every sleeve, unwrapped every package with an all-consuming adolescent fever. The great distance of age and the scorching nearness of juvenile fervor were back-to-back, holding each other's weight.

As I laid those Mias on my dinner table, like a mosaic of mirrors, I had to smile. Was this Mia? Did she age so well—gaining with maturity a polished gloss that made her almost liquid? I was in the same denial I had experienced once: This couldn't be my sister, a woman made with the same blood that I felt burning inside me; conceivably she was a sibling, but that was just how others would perceive her, not who I knew she was in the private cockpit of my skin. And so Max, the painter and sculptor who had spent so much of his life trying to pierce the secret of Mia by stealing and appropriating her image, had glanced over her essence, the compressed spring from which every movement started. Very little of Mia had escaped Max, and surely that was what had kept his love of her so fresh, so unconditional. Max knew.

The Mias from the chest understood that, and were at peace with Max's knowledge. I could see that. Yet I felt the necessity to add my piece to this collection, the one that would make all of them alive again. I sat before the table and closed my eyes. I needed to revisit the few hours that counted, the ones that had crystallized the brutal and crisp impulse that would inhabit me and make her. I had them coming down on me like an inescapable, heavy rain, the droplets exploding upward into light and music as they hit the ground. All I had to do was let loose, recount our story to myself, out of love for her, the purest feeling from my youth.

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I saw Mia for the first time in a small provincial clinic. To me the clinic wasn't small and provincial; to me the clinic was big, colossal as a pantheon. Four of me stacked on top of each other would fit through the entrance. My father took me there, holding my toddler hand. It was a rare instance: my father holding my hand. The moment was solemn, filled with nurses murmuring in the hallways like people whispering in churches. There was an elevator, and my father lifted me up to press the button. This was my first elevator. Now that I think of it, I think of all maternities as elevated, hovering above ground.

The elevator transported us to a new hallway with a door at the end. I wondered what could be behind the door that my father opened with such care. From across the room, I saw Mia in the arms of my mother and asked my father who she was. My father responded with something that I didn't hear. My father repeated the same thing, and I still couldn't hear. My mother smiled and called me to her. I approached the bed and was encouraged to sit on it. I touched Mia's hand. I heard her name for the first time.

"Mia?" I asked.

"Yes. Kiss her," my mother said.

And I obeyed my mother.

There are certain quakes, ways to be moved that recounted would verge on the sentimental; certain words and gestures that sound true only once as they spark out of the unexpected morass of feelings. For me, kissing Mia at the clinic was the first tremor; a shaking that left me in a state of questioning, a state that I haven't left yet.

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After that there was a long stretch of years where nothing happened. I saw my sister every day, and the routine had buried the kiss at the clinic, folded it in some remote emotional drawer. Until that summer.

Our closeness was reignited in the warm water of a bath. It was a peaceful evening, stretching at the end of a day with no school. The bathroom windows were wide open, and through their dark frames, the dusky sky floated in as the vapor from the bath escaped. My mother had appointed me to watch Mia. It wasn't customary for me to watch Mia taking a bath, although it wasn't the first time.

It is strange how you forget to look at what you constantly have before your eyes, how it becomes part of a private scenery, invisible, until you are being asked to watch. That evening, perhaps out of a sense of duty, I started watching Mia in the bathtub.

She was still little, maybe five. Her hands were playing with the edge of the tub. The water had softened her skin to the point that it was wrinkled and much lighter in color—almost lilac. After a few minutes of watching her hands, I remember feeling swallowed into my own focus, absorbed into magnetic observation. I moved my face closer, so as to look at Mia's fingers from under a mental microscope. It wasn't exceptional: me getting into this dream-like zone. I was the sort of child to experience rapture, my own mind flying above myself. But never had I seen Mia's skin so close, like an elemental phenomenon. Without knowing I was moving, under an urge deeper than simple

curiosity, somewhat like a sleepwalker, I was pushed magically toward a narrow circle until I was inches from her hands. . I was carried away by the movement of her fingers, the un-ended circle of her fingerprints, the delicate nuances beneath her nails.

Our story could have ended there. My mother could have called us. Mia could have laughed out loud or thrown water at my face. That ecstatic moment would have been submerged like an Atlantis under the waves of family reality, lost forever. Instead Mia's right hand got away from the edge of the tub, and she placed a finger on one of my eyebrows. In a slow motion, she traced the line as if she was drawing me. It was a childish gesture, but it carried a depth that made my world suddenly larger, more tender.

I am not sure I knew in that moment that new possibilities were emerging out of the bathwater, that emotional islands materialized under Mia's forefinger, drifting to form a continent. It is easy for me to recognize it now. It is easy to become your own historian with the help of a lifelong telescope. Part of the magic, however, is to be ignorant at first of the pivotal seconds that make you. As I now realize, the first lines of my drama had just been traced by Mia.

Did we stay in the bathroom for much longer? Did Mia feel as I did a sudden expansion of our cosmos? Can one explain such changes?

That evening, I remember staying in my room, pretending to be sick. I didn't have dinner. My first move was to unearth from my desk the few drawings and birthday cards that Mia had given me over the previous few years. From one moment to the next, I uncovered in them a new universe; Mia's tenderness was rushing toward me as if it had been looking for me forever; her pictures and words were running, taking me along like a wave, deep in the stream of my veins. I was feeling a dizziness similar to the one that can be felt in a dream when one dreams of flying. My legs were shaking, but other than their motion, I felt paralyzed; nothing like this had ever happened to me, and it was all under the effect of a simple sisterly gesture. But the gesture stayed with me, and the thought of it was intoxicating, so much so that I was trying to repeat it, my own finger tracing my brow in the same slow motion. In the span of a few hours, the wall that separated me from Mia had been taken down, and I discovered in myself a new intensity.

I became worried for Mia and her own feelings. And as I worried, I waited. I was waiting for her to wake up and come down for breakfast. I was waiting for her to come back from school. I was waiting for her to look at me, to talk to me, to lift a finger; to see if the gesture from the bath would be repeated, and with it the warm vibe that had seized me and lifted me up to a place of

passion and grace. My eyes would land on her, always more anxious, probing her face, sometimes estranged and disappointing, while her features were undeniably the same: she would now be devoid of the tender strength I had seen. Her face would be weary and common, as if she was putting on the mask of an unknown and prematurely old child. I didn't understand how this duality could be. Although duality was at the core of her, I could see it as I started to truly look. Mia's eyes were dark yet luminous; her short light hair was flowing toward her forehead in a hasty attempt to hide its audacity. Her pointed chin was split; she would start a smile and soon cancel it. Every piece of her was loaded with ambiguity, and I've never known anyone more mobile, more changing. Now I know that certain bubbling of the spirit can transform a face, yielding a splendor or ugliness that the years cannot.

But it was too soon. I wasn't ready to accept Mia's coming and going, my own internal clouds only dissipating when she would deign to shine on me like a lazy sun. I chose to flee.

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Seven years later we were taking a vacation on a small and sunny island in the south. My parents had allowed me to take a friend along so that I would



not feel too isolated. I had a friend named Matthias. Matthias and I were roommates in the boarding school that I had attended since the summer of the bathroom incident. I wanted him with me during that vacation, to shield me from myself. Every summer until that one had been a torture, enduring in the face of Mia the lightning that she'd throw abundantly without knowing. Seeing her after a long stretch of absence meant that I was electrically charged, exposed. Every time I had hoped that I would stop feeling what I felt. Every time her apparition would annihilate that hope. I was terrorized that all my bottled-up passion would pop a cork and wound her, because I couldn't care less about my own wounds, and also quite frankly because I kept licking my blood like a bee feeding on nectar.

That summer started splendidly, with such treacherous beauty! The insular air was blinding and heavy with invisible particles; Matthias and I would squint our eyes, perched on boulders, ready to dive in a perfect crescent; we'd jump and elevate our bodies before hitting the water headfirst. Infinite water stretched before us and under us, sometimes inside us, as we'd drink the cup in a dizzying race across the bay. The island soil was rammed hard and fine, like rice powder, and we grappled in reckless marathons, risking our lives along the cliff with juvenile madness. On the vertical rock faces and horizontal

overhangs, we proclaimed ourselves the gods of free-climbing, relying on our fingers and toes to overcome perpendicular nightmares.

Our interminable tests of strength finished us off breathless and leaning on the oak tree trunks overlooking a purple sunset. Matthias rarely broke the silence, and his quietness was reassuring and comfortable.

For the first time in ages, I was untroubled, happy. And I wasn't interested in knowing why. I had forgotten everything, fully immersed in my body and its contact with the elements. My tensed muscles kept asking me what I could do next that would be bolder and riskier.

In hindsight, I can see that this was one more escape attempt from Mia's chiaroscuro gaze over the dinner table. But in the deepness of those summer hours, I felt freer from her; I thought I was getting detached, earning back my body inch by inch along with the hushed lightness of friendship.

As for Matthias, he seemed immune to girls, or if he wasn't, he was very discreet about it. It isn't hard to understand why I liked that about him. But it is hard to imagine sexual indifference in a young and strong body; Matthias seemed to be a specimen. He was from a Nordic family, with a bulging and wide forehead, straight eyebrows sloping up toward the center, and pale gray eyes lined with generous upper and lower eyelids, which seemed to make him

constantly smile. Indeed he smiled a lot, although rarely showing his teeth; and that joyous disposition came under a long and thin nose, slightly scarred in the middle like one of a boxer.

Two weeks had gone by with exhilarating physicality and unparalleled freedom. Vacations were coming to an end, and days seemed imperceptibly shorter. I anticipated the next term with dread, since I loved that island intermission so much, and the subterranean atmosphere of the school and dorm threatened me with a deportation from my newly revealed body. I was sharing with Matthias secret conspiracies that would make us prolong our stay, which he received with a benevolent smile. But the moment of our departure had been assigned by fate, and that hour was hanging over me like a sharp pendulum, bearing in its blade the inevitable stroke of midnight.

I decided that our last night on the island would be in the wild. We would sleep in the small eastern cove only accessible at low tide. There only, cradled with the lapping of the waves, we would make an honorable exit. I am not ashamed of my youthful pomposity, because it was truly innocent. My theatrical sense wanted to pay tribute to the elements that had given me such vigor.

We took heavy covers and bottled water, and waved good-bye to my parents. Mia wasn't in sight, which I almost didn't notice.

To this day and from that night, I bear in me a bittersweet taste for sleeping in the open. Every evening when the time comes, I am surprised by my willingness to lie in bed covered with a ceiling; a ceiling on which a face can so easily form as condensation and come down—down—and still down on me like in the classic tale of torture.

That night, as Matthias and I sat and then lay on the sand, the vaulted darkness folded at the edges where it met the ocean. There was no limit to our breaths, no limit to the words we exchanged about ourselves, about our take on the universe. Everything including us could go the distance, and I wanted to never find sleep amidst the flooding quietness of that summer night. How I wanted to hold the fort of those hours with my friend!

And hours later it was the silence that woke me. Was there someone else next to us? I opened my eyes slowly and just halfway. I observed with such rigid anxiety that my eyes started to water. Something icy and implacable was running up my naked legs. An intruder, an assassin could come near us soundlessly in that state. Yes, there was someone next to Matthias who seemed to be kneeling, like in prayer, but without the hands extended. The arms were on the sides and then floating to hover over Matthias' face and his torso, hesitant and ill assured. I knew the contours of that shadow. Was it Mia? No, it wasn't

her demeanor, the indecision, the cowardly slowness of the moves. Then through the shutters of my eyes, still pretending to be asleep, I saw Matthias sit up like a ghost and grab the head gently by the hair to bring it to his face.

I was shaking, mortified. I could only lift my upper body onto my elbows and mutter inanely: "What are you doing?" They got out of their embrace and looked at me without talking; something was depriving them of speech. Finally Mia put a hand in her hair to brush it away from her face, and the moonlight caught her temples and the bridge of her nose. At last, she stuttered: "I wanted... I wanted..."

Her voice was faltering. She was there, kneeling, eyes lowered, like a thief caught red-handed. That anxiety, our standoff, me frozen under my blankets, her shriveled into herself and stunned by shame, was unbearable. Matthias tried to put an end to it: "Listen, it's fine, we just kissed, we both wanted to kiss."

Suddenly the weak silhouette got up from its kneeling position. She came closer to me, with a mean smile, a smile that was visible in the eyes only, shining like those of a crouched cat, and for a moment she looked like an African demon mask, suspended above me in the night sky; and then her smoky voice floated to me like a curse escaping from her pinched lips: "Yes, I wanted to

kiss...you understand? I wanted to kiss... Matthias is a good kisser...you see... I liked kissing him... Maybe I'll do it again.”

She was staring at me with such cruelty, like a slap across my face, and her fingers were curled in a fist, ready to punch. I wanted to be swallowed in the sand under me. Was she crazy? But this only lasted one second. Then Mia pivoted onto herself and walked away from us, her blond hair slowly shrinking into the night until it became a dot at the end of my vision.

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In light of such history, wasn't it absurd that I chose to attend university in the small provincial town of my parents? I could have moved to the capital, gone to a school where I was accepted or I could even have moved abroad for a year or two; instead, I decided to stay there, in agreement with both my father and mother. Back then I would never acknowledge to myself why I stayed: a camouflaged attempt to be closer to Mia once again—just a few miles away—after years of avoidance. Over the years, our occasional encounters during special family events had been like calving an iceberg, where one can watch slabs of ice crash down into a milky gray lake and find more ice beyond the fallen ice. But now I felt older, quieter, more mature; I could “take it.” Also

I had a few days to get acclimated; Mia had been sent away for the summer and wouldn't be back in town until after my first week at school.

Oh, my choice seemed hardly questionable, even to myself. The local university had a grand reputation, in great contrast with the raggedness of its buildings. And after years in the obscure and remote boarding school, with nothing to offer but a flawless academic record, this seemed like a step up into a wild, wide-open world. Upon my first visit to the campus, I sensed that circles of friends and acquaintances were formed fast and without effort; that they were mobile and could be undone or reshaped as fast as they assembled. This was dizzying in a way that I liked. In a matter of hours, I had taken a tour, which included enrollment in all the courses I was interested in and checking the buildings where I would take them. The only place I hadn't checked was the library. I was told it was closed for a conference that day until four. I was there at four sharp after a quick stroll through the city of my childhood, which felt small and foreign yet distantly familiar, as if I was drunk while taking a tour of my own house, little details popping up absurdly before my befuddled eyes.

I came through the library door, and inside it was silent. The reading room was empty and well lit, with red chairs and blacktop tables. I picked up a book

at random and sat, pretending to study. And soon someone came in, and someone else, and again and again until the room was half full. Every now and then, I would lift my eyes from the book and look around, checking if anyone looked interesting. I was in a social mood, ready to break into a conversation like one shakes the numbness of their legs.

Legs were what I saw first as she sat across the table, swinging them on to the side. She had the thin and nervous muscles of an adolescent, maybe a bit too thin. As I looked up from my book, Mia was staring at me mockingly. Then the corner of her lips subsided and her eyes opened up, and she put on a disarming look of sincerity, one that would take no tall story. “Well, I’ve been looking for you! But where else could you have been? It has been awhile, hasn’t it? Shall we have a coffee?”

Humbled and without will, I allowed myself to be carried along by her outside the library into a popular cafeteria. There, in the deafening cacophony of students’ declarations and cheap music, I asked Mia a dozen silly questions to which she responded wholeheartedly and with unexpected openness. I was at once troubled and content; her voice did that to me. She spoke with a certain haste and ease about indifferent things, and I was grateful that she had not paid attention to my temporary discomfort, that she had forgotten it.



It baffles me that I can't remember the name of that cafeteria where we ended up spending so much time that fall. I've buried it at the bottom of an internal ocean where the soil is smooth and abyssal. Was it named after its owner? Or a place? Or a time? I will call it the C.

From our encounters at the C., which soon became a weekly ritual, a new way to observe Mia started for me; until then, my veneration for her had been mostly imaginative; by that I mean that all that moved me about her was crafted and sublime, exempt from materiality. I hadn't dared to envisage what her days were like; and this had been made easy by years of separation. Mia had been the receptacle of poetry, the messianic queen sent to save me. The world and its objects were nostalgic rubbles ennobled by the possibility of her traveling through them: a fig tree odor, a dark shade of yellow, an ant walking between the floorboards, salted almonds, an enormous sky. With the exaggeration characteristic of the over-focused, I had meticulously wiped off any concrete detail of her existence. I had lost any notion of how she spent time, where she got her hair cut, what she liked to eat. And so, in the same way that a child born deaf can only hear what sounds like a muted piano, and all the noises he can imagine are trills and scales from the same instrument, I never envisioned her being other than transcendent and cruel and innocent. Never before had I

thought of Mia in terms of simple material constraints, physical obligations, weekly schedule. Now in the course of our discussions at the C., she was placing all of that in front of me as if we had been lifelong friends: her small high school stories, her quick-witted jokes, her impulsive maternal temper. One foggy but still warm afternoon in the second week of the term, she confided how she had to sleep on her back since she had bruised her rib cage while rummaging in a trash can looking for a hairpin.

From then on and much against my will, I was compelled to take in all the particulars of her life. Why was she so accessible when she had been so fearfully deep, incomprehensible? The more Mia shared with me, the more unsettled I was. Yet, there was no apparent tension, no ostentatious expression of distress; on the contrary, there was a warm disposition, an opaque complicity growing between us, and the nature of that made the atmosphere calm yet weighted and stormy, less bearable than a cloud bursting. From the outside, nothing betrayed us—we looked content, and perhaps I thought we were, but that was only the bloated look of the starving.

Amidst that tension, I was struck by Mia's solitude. Often on the weekends, she would stay entire days without getting out of the house, or only to bike the distance for coffee at the C.

Midway through the first quarter, I became invested in trying to break that seclusion. And one day over coffee, I invited her to an upcoming dance.

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It was a mild fall day; the light and warmth of it had settled in the air with a thin veil of lightheartedness. A young moon was there, with a barely visible halo crescent, as if self-conscious of its own glow. Obscurity was moving in on us as we walked through town to the campus where the party would take place. Mia didn't speak. She was wearing a polka dot black-and-white dress with a black cardigan and flats. The fading light seemed to be brushing her face from underneath her, her skin and hair intensified as if captured through a camera obscura. I felt complete. I felt in the walking by her side that life was giving me the ultimate accomplishment. Why? Because in walking next to her through the descending evening, we belonged to each other in our parallel paths, and what else could I do to top that? From the second we stopped walking till the day I died, I'd live knowing that this moment would belong to a sepia-colored place in my soul. I knew it with the same vividness as the mystery of faith revealed, and the realization brought me a pleasure only found in the darkness of repression, a pain as sacred as the restraint preventing it from being manifested.

Somewhere in my looks, troubled and moved, Mia read an invitation.

“Come, let’s sit on this bench...we don’t have to go right now...please sit near me...no, not like that...please do not look at me, or I won’t be able to talk.”

Night had fallen by then, and the bench was far from any streetlight. I sensed Mia very close to me, through her breathing, a bit heavy, getting lost in the dark. Then her voice rose and murmured so low I could barely hear: “I...love you...not in the way I’m supposed to.”

Did I flinch? Did those words spark an instinctive physical retreat from the shock? I must have made some gesture of withdrawal or surprise, because I felt her collapsing and moving away, like someone shunned and punished. “Do you despise me now?” she asked almost inaudibly. “Are you horrified now?”

Why couldn’t I find a word? Why did I stay mute, as if indifferent, embarrassed, numb, instead of showing her that I cared beyond anything she could imagine? Instead, all the moments with Mia flushed by in a torrential outpour and had this chilling effect, as if the code behind them was suddenly decrypted. I understood Mia with terrible clarity: our first kiss at the clinic, her tender gliding over my brow from the warmth of the bathtub, her hatred

as she kissed another to provoke me, her tenacious and glacial flight from my ever-growing tenderness during my rare visits, her openness at the C., and the hope that friendship would kill love. Her love, I had always sensed it on me, shy or passionate, tender or cruel; I had rolled in its dew. However, when she pronounced the word, from lips that looked exceedingly similar to mine, with a sensual inflection, I felt a tremor at once soft and petrifying, some throbbing gush behind my temples. And despite my passion for her, me, the young, estranged, distraught, and unspoken lover, wracked and shivering, I couldn't find one word to respond to her declaration.

She was sitting, hunched, shattered by my silence: "Is it so terrifying? So terrifying?" she uttered. "You won't forgive me? ... Well, it's better that you know now; now it's not so oppressive. Anything is better than this repression and counterfeiting. It's better to stop it right there..."

How much sadness was in her words, how much resignation! The vibration of her voice was traveling beyond my skin, gliding in my blood, piercing me with shame for staying so cold, so confined in front of a woman who had given me more than anyone and who was humiliating herself before me. I wanted to speak, I wanted to respond, I wanted to shout, but I was trapped in

the glass bubble of appearances, and my mouth wouldn't obey me. I felt pitifully small and embarrassed, so much so that Mia tried to give me courage: "Don't just stay like that, atrociously still. Please get a grip on yourself. Are you so ashamed of me? Now I said it. Let's at least part ways with respect, like friends, like family..."

I couldn't find any strength, let alone any collectedness. Mia had triggered what looked like infinite passivity and what concealed unlimited panic. I was confronted, exposed, and so was the unbearable weight of my feelings. I had revered them while they remained wisely underneath; I had cocooned and nourished them like soft animals. And now Mia was tearing the skin on my chest open and baring the eye of the unspoken. In that moment I hated being scared, I hated my cowardice, I hated my own hatred. But Mia, who was faster, had already forgiven me. She touched my arm gently and stood up. I sensed her in the darkness going to the other side of the bench and sitting on the ground, her back to my back. "Is it better like that?" she asked.

Now that I think of it, I picture us on either side of that bench as the two faces of the same being, non-different like a fire and its heat, like one having taken two forms to allow the exchange of feelings.

And there Mia's voice arose again, and she told me everything.

Mia divulged herself to me in complete nakedness; she avidly exposed the premises for her torment, the self-doubts and the self-loathing, the turpitudes of her heart, the meanderings of her desires, the ever-growing clarity of her condition. There was a wild sensuality in her confession—a bold womanliness. Only one who has been deeply ashamed can delve with near drunkenness into cruel self-incrimination. Bit by bit, Mia tore out the layers like heavy clothes in the heat. And with a haggard look and teary eyes, I saw for the first time the immeasurable richness of her being—and the far greater complexity of what bound us.

Oh, her voice in the night, her voice in the darkness! I felt it drilling into the coatings of my fear, like a missile bird across the layers of air and water. Soon it would resonate as my own, as if I was telling the words. I could tell her story through her lips, my own lips moving at the same time, knowing the words before she pronounced them. And at some point, I must have spoken along with her, like overtone singing on the other side of the bench, like another self.

Then our voices ceased to be heard and only darkness remained. I knew she was there, behind the wooden slats of the bench. I could just extend my

hand and touch her. But again she was the first to move and stood up, exhausted, staggering slowly toward me. I stood up too, lifted up by some dream-like force. And the obscure instinct that was usually clouded by the weight of self-consciousness had gained brilliance and sharpness, like a tiny blue flame on a candlewick. She pulled me into her, and I pulled her into me; our lips joined in a nervous tremor.

It was a kiss like no other, a desperate and voracious kiss, like an embrace in the face of death. We were letting go of who we had been, and the fear of what would become of us was the living breath of our hunger.

When we finally released each other, like in a seizure, with throbbing pain, we stepped back and stood up straight, facing each other as if looking into a fateful mirror. Gradually I felt her body become heavier, and her head started shaking a bit. I moved forward and took her head in my hands and kissed her again. Kissed her. Again.

I abducted my sister to my dorm room.

The moments that followed belong to memory even before they became memory. They were the carnal unwinding of our history. Perhaps we remembered them long before they existed. Perhaps our remembrance made them



exist. Ashes to ashes, flesh to flesh. Through the stubborn frame of that reminiscence, I conceive of our lovemaking as a medieval fresco: with an outburst of violence, both savage and codified. I see us as two groups rather than two beings; two similar formations moving forward, then dismantling under the shock before regrouping for a new assault. That night, we consummated our love. Completely alone and together; two wings—torn from our togetherness, bloodied and miraculous—knowing we'd never fly again—knowing we'd always be flying. Mia's salt on her skin, the taste of amber on my lips, Mia's eyes looking nowhere, my omniscient blindness. How long did it last? At what point did we lose the grace? At what exact moment did we disentangle ourselves from each other?

Still today, it is the after that I fear the most. The time of loss: when our eyes met and paused; when our eyes, now empty of the blindness, saw again. How could we tolerate it? The shame. As soon as the heat of our bodies ceased to trouble our senses, I let go of her. It was like the violent jolt of a fractured body. With ache, I sat up and turned my back to her. It lasted a few minutes, my inert body having nothing in front but void, my bed abruptly altered into the edge of a bottomless pit. Slowly my head became too heavy, rolled forward, along with my shoulders, conceding to fatigue and exhaustion; and then, like

a weight too heavy oscillating for too long between two positions that topples all of a sudden into the slope, I let go of my upper body forward and folded in two, my head between my knees, my hands sweeping the wooden slats on the floor.

I felt Mia ruffling in the sheets, moving toward me. And I bounced back up, as if in a last convulsion. I turned toward her with my hands clasped on my face like a mask, and I heard my own voice: throaty and vaguely menacing: “Go away...Go away...do not come near...for the love of us both...go now...go!”

She understood. She always understood. She left like a runaway, leaving tenuous hints of herself on a once beloved land.

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We never saw each other again. Our parents suffered terribly from it. They never understood what could have driven us to that iron will of separateness. We offered no explanation. Their obstinacy could not drill any closer to the fiery core that they must have sensed. Maybe they brushed away their intuition. How would one expect them to do otherwise? We had to make complex plans to attend their funerals separately. What happened between Mia

and me remained forever trapped like an air bubble under an oceanic boulder. Only my brother-in-law Max had glimpsed what had been.

Max helped remarkably; he wrote to me on and off; he called throughout the years to keep me posted on the important things: the wedding, the children, Mia's artistic accomplishments. He never asked any questions.

I even met him a few times, and I learned to like him, to love him—perhaps a bit like my sister did. And today again, sitting before his many representations of her, at my dinner table, with more clarity than the young shaking brother I was then, I know I owe Mia everything I was and have become; since that night of fifty years ago where she opened us up like one inserts a knife into a resilient oyster shell. Any true expression of love has carried the echo of that moment. Since that night, I owe my sister the trust I have in my ever-enduring capacity to love.

The feeling, that trust, is me, a “me” that I had almost forgotten, buried as it was in intricate shells of adulthood and ripeness. Yet it was always so present and so pressing. It is the only possible me, pushing against a frame that has taken years to build, celebrating the frame as one more piece of its own edifice. All my life, I have loved and created and given in memoriam of that feeling. Not out of grief though. I was and still am burning its very alive truth serum.

I was never alone. Mia's breath was behind my own, inside my own; and in recalling our times, I want to give her my blood, my love, my own flesh, so that it can speak and sing again and so that she, gone since only yesterday, can lie again next to me as I age.

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Her short stories, "A Gypsy's Book of Revelations" and "Forgetting," have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her work is featured or is forthcoming in *Amarillo Bay*, *Bacopa Literary Review* (first place for fiction, 2012), *Clare Literary Journal*, *Crack the Spine*, *Cerise Press*, *Knee-Jerk*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Penmen Review*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *Serving House Journal*, *The Tower Journal*.