

When the Frogs Sing
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I saw my sister a week after her funeral.

The rest of my relatives had already returned to various parts of the country, and my shock was finally giving way to grief. That evening I watched Jack play with his neon colored blocks, and realized I had no idea how to care for a two-year-old boy. That's when I heard the creak of the front porch.

You get used to the sounds of your house when you're living alone. I knew all the pops and groans of the walls in the night. I knew the squeak of boots against snow on the front walk. I could even tell whether it was Sally or Derek coming to visit by the sound of their truck engines. And I knew the creak of the porch that meant someone was standing there.

My sister opened the door.

Jack padded across the floor, emitting a high-pitched happy squeal.

Madeleine scooped Jack up and pressed him to her. "My baby," she said. He buried his face in her shoulder, and she stroked his back.

I could do nothing but blink. I had seen her body when they pulled it from the river.

She looked nothing like that now. She wore her favorite blue sleeveless sundress. Her hair was held back with a yellow scrunchie, her face slightly sun-burned. Alive. She looked very much alive.

I'm crazy, I thought. I'm hallucinating.

She walked to the guest room, Jack clinging to her. I followed more slowly.

She lay Jack down on the mattress and pulled the wipes and the diapers from the nightstand.

"He has a full diaper," she said. "And he's tired. It's way past his bedtime."

My sister had come back from the dead, and all I could think about was how deft she was at changing a diaper.

She finished with the diaper, tucked Jack into bed, and kissed him on the forehead. She spoke quietly to him, and his eyes began to close.

She looked up at me. "Don't worry," she said. "You'll get better at figuring out what he needs."

It wasn't Jack I was worried about.

Madeleine was my older sister, the one person I could always count on. Our parents had passed on when I was five and Madeleine was twelve. She and Aunt Rita had raised me. She had been there for me throughout all the hard parts of my life, including my whole messy divorce. She was the one I always called for advice on anything from jobs to recipes. I still couldn't believe she had gone and died on me.

"Madeleine," I managed, "Are you alive?"

She smiled at me. A little sadly, I thought. And then she disappeared.

The room was empty except for me and a sleeping child.

I knelt where she had knelt, put my hand on the mattress where she had placed her hand. I hadn't seen Madeleine, I told myself.

I went to the front door and eased it open, not sure what I was expecting to see.

A blurry moon strained through low clouds. The hood of my little Toyota gleamed faintly, and beyond that the silvered bark of the pines outlined the edge of the forest. There was no other car in the driveway.

Madeleine had always said she loved the quiet here when she visited. But the night was never really quiet. When you stopped listening so hard the sounds of the forest came through: the rustling of raccoon in the underbrush, the gentle murmur of the creek, the occasional throaty saw of a bullfrog.

Already the memory of Madeleine's visit was acquiring a dream-like quality. In my fatigue and loss, I told myself, I had imagined her.

I shut the door and went to bed.

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Morning brought that rusted-can scent of coming rain. A low, gray sky pressed earthward.

I was up early and had only taken a few sips of my morning coffee before Jack was up as well.

I changed his diaper, trying to imitate what Madeleine had done the night before. No, not Madeleine, I corrected myself. Just the memory of her.

Afterward, I poured a cup of apple juice and a bowl of cereal and sat across from Jack at the small kitchen table. He picked up the Cheerios one by one from the milk. More ended up on the floor and on his lap than in his mouth. The cup of juice overturned on his first attempt.

I started to retrieve the sponge, then sat back down. There was no point in cleaning as long as Jack was still here, making a mess of everything. My aunt had taken care of him while she was here, and had given me constant advice on raising him, none of which I remembered. There was so much to do to prepare for a funeral, and afterwards I was so exhausted I couldn't think. I had never planned on keeping Jack, though I hadn't told anyone yet.

"Mmm," Jack said, and pointed towards the front door.

I looked up from my coffee. "She's not there," I said. "She's not coming back."

Jack had not said his first word yet, but he knew how to get his point across.

He continued to stare at the door. I walked to the front door and opened it.

Condensation beaded the wood of the porch, clung to the spider grass along the gravel walk. When I turned to show Jack that there was no one on the porch, I caught a glimpse of something blue through the trees.

Jack came up behind me, peering around my knee.

There is was again--a flash of blue that could have been a sundress. I took Jack's hand and hurried after it. He didn't protest.

I was half way down the driveway when I realized I still had on my slippers and Jack had no shoes at all. His socks were already soaked through, but if I went back to get us both properly dressed, I would lose sight of her.

I picked up Jack and continued.

We were soon off the trail, but I knew the property pretty well. Down past the old spring, across the dirt road that led to the coast. I caught an occasional glimpse of her, a pale arm or leg, but she was gaining ground.

I shifted Jack onto my other hip and continued.

"Mmmm," he said, pointing.

I wasn't going crazy, I told myself. He saw her too.

It had been half an hour without sight of her, and we were nearing Sally's property. The forest got thick here, the brambles of the whitethorn competing for space with the new pine growth, making it impossible to continue.

I stood for some time looking into the thicket, straining for a glimpse, but she was gone. I just wanted to see her one more time. I missed her more than I thought possible.

"Do you see her, Jack?" I said.

Jack was no longer interested in the chase. A group of quail darted past us in the undergrowth, tufted heads bobbing, and Jack pointed at them, laughing.

I felt like lying down in the dirt right there and crying, but I had to take care of Jack.

I don't know how I made it back to the house, carrying a child who got heavier with each step, back straining. I could feel every rock and root through the thin soles of my slippers.

When I stepped onto the porch and set Jack down, I wanted nothing more than to collapse in my own bed and go back to sleep. Instead, I drew a bath for Jack, washed his hair against his protests. Much of the bathwater ended up on the bathroom floor because of his splashing. When I turned my back to wash my own face, he stood up in the bathtub and then slipped against the side of the tub, hitting his elbow.

I picked up the wailing child, thinking, I can't do this. I was exhausted. With Jack here it was impossible to take a shower, to cook a meal. If he went to bed at eight, that

left me about two hours to actually work, not enough time to make enough money to pay the rent, let alone regain my sanity. I simply could not do it.

I set Jack down.

The number was in a stack of papers by the phone. I ignored Jack's crying and searched through the papers, finally finding Serge's number in Madeleine's old address book. She had penned a red unhappy face next to it. After several clicks and a long silence, the international call went through.

I would be okay after Jack left, I thought. I wouldn't hallucinate that my sister was alive.

"Serge," I said. "It's Grace, Madeleine's sister."

"I got the news yesterday," he said. "I'm so sorry."

I tried to remember what he looked like. Blond, thinning hair, a melancholy kind of face. He was handsome, I suppose, if you went for that haunted-poet kind of look. He and Madeleine had never married; he had discovered he was gay about the same time that Madeleine had discovered she was pregnant. That didn't stop him from running off to Europe. "The big jerk," was how she referred to him, but I think she never really got over him.

"We need to figure out how to get Jack to you," I said.

There was a long silence.

"Serge?" I said.

"I'm not sure what you expected," he said. "I can't possibly take him. I work full time."

"I do, too," I said.

“Listen, Grace. I’d be happy to send support if you need it.”

“You don’t understand,” I said. “He’s—“ He’s driving me crazy, I had been about to say. But I realized that the house was silent, that Jack had stopped throwing handfuls of paper around, and was staring up at me. Kids understand a lot more than you give them credit for, Madeleine always told me.

I looked down at Jack. “Never mind,” I said.

What had I been thinking? Serge hadn’t flown out for the funeral. He had never even met Jack. I shouldn’t have bothered calling.

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Trying to shop with a child is impossible. Trying to do almost anything with a child is next to impossible, but we needed food.

I didn't know yet where Jack would go, but I would think of something.

It took an hour, but I managed to get Jack's shoes and socks and coat on and bundled into the child-seat in the back of the car. By the time I slid behind the wheel, though, my hair was plastered to my forehead with rain and the windshield was fogged.

The drive into town normally took half an hour, but I drove more slowly because of the rain and the drive stretched to forty five minutes. Jack was sound asleep by the time I pulled into the Stop and Shop parking lot, and I remembered Madeleine telling me that sometimes when she couldn't get Jack to go down for his nap, she would drive around with him for while. Works better than a sleeping pill, she had told me once with a grin.

I sat for a moment in the car, listening to the drum of rain against the roof, and watched Jack sleep. If nothing is as loud as a crying child, then nothing is as peaceful as a sleeping one. I realized how much he looked like Madeleine, with his fine black hair falling over his forehead and the small furrow between his eyebrows. I almost wished I could sit there forever in that small metal sanctuary, a place that seemed outside of time, and pretend my sister were still alive.

He didn't wake up when I picked him up, just nestled against my shoulder and continued to sleep. He seemed lighter than the day before.

The store was practically deserted. Sally waved hello at me from the register, and I started down the aisle, holding Jack with one arm, and tossing items in the basket with the other. I would have to buy more of everything now, I thought. At least until Jack was gone.

Madeleine appeared abruptly in the cereal section.

She pulled a bag of goldfish crackers from the shelf.

"You'll need lots of these," she said.

"Madeleine," I said. My eyes watered. Maybe I was going crazy, but it was so good to see her.

"And you should definitely get some sippy cups. There are a bunch at the U-Pack." Just last week Rita and I had packed up all of Madeleine's things and left them at the U-Pack storage facility outside of town. It seemed like ten years ago.

I felt the exhaustion hit me like a sudden strong wind. Jack became abruptly heavier in my arms.

"I can't do this," I said. "I can't take care of him."

"Sure you can," she said.

Jack sighed in his sleep, nestled further into my arms.

Irrationally, I felt a twinge of anger because I had spent the last few days explaining to Jack that his mother was not coming back. Death was a hard concept for a two-year old. Maybe it was a hard concept for adults, too.

"Are you all right?" It was Sally, right behind me.

I wiped the tears from my face. When I looked up, my sister was gone.

"How do people get through this?" I said.

Sally had stopped by right after my sister died, bringing a basket of food: fresh-baked bread and apples from her orchard. I realized belatedly I had never thanked her for it.

She reached out and took Jack from my arms.

I was talking before I knew what I was doing. "Madeleine wants--she would have wanted me to take care of Jack, but I just don't see how I can work with him around. I can't leave him alone for one minute. I can't even shower when he's awake."

I was lucky enough to be able to work at home, helping out with a friend's on-line business and doing odd web page work here and there. But it would be impossible to work with Jack there.

"You need a babysitter," Sally said. "I could do it, if you wanted. I could use the extra money."

I hadn't even thought of that. I had Madeleine's insurance money. And Serge had said he would send support. But I couldn't keep Jack. The disruption to my life was too

great. I would have to cut down on my work, my gardening, everything. The house would never be clean again.

"I just miss her," I said.

"Of course you do," Sally said.

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Dinner that evening was instant oatmeal and blackberries, foods Sally had recommended as easy to prepare and "kid-friendly". She was right: Jack ate everything, even if it did take an hour to get all the oatmeal down. Afterwards I managed to clean up while he ran back and forth between his room and the kitchen, moving his small collection of toys alternately between the couch, the kitchen table, and his bed. I wondered what sort of elaborate scenario was taking place in his mind, but he never said anything out loud, just hummed to his truck occasionally.

At eight, before he could gear up into that frantic destroy-the-house energy, I declared bedtime. It was easier than I thought. I got his pajamas on and tucked him into bed, and he fell asleep before the end of the story I read him.

I kissed him on the forehead, the way I'd seen my sister do, and lay back on the bed. I had intended on staying awake in case Madeleine came back, but I must have been more tired than I realized. I woke sometime in the night to the sound of frogs singing outside the window. The rain had eased, and moonlight filtered past the edges of the curtains. Jack's breath was deep and even, the untroubled sleep of the young.

If he grew up here, I thought, he would become familiar with the sounds of the forest, with the animals of the day and the night. He would know that when the frogs sang to each other it meant the worst of the storm was over.

I listened to their watery reassurances for a while, and then dragged myself off to bed.

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The next morning I found the key to the U-Pack under a stack of unopened mail: bills I would have to deal with soon, condolence cards I did not want to read.

Getting Jack into the car was easier this time. He even sat still while I put on his tiny socks and shoes. He was a relatively quiet child, I realized, thinking of the wailing children I often saw in the Stop and Shop, being dragged down the aisles by harried mothers and fathers.

"When are you going to say your first word?" I asked him. Jack looked at me solemnly. I handed him his bag of Goldfish crackers and started up the car.

Water pooled in the furrows by the side of the road reflected patches of blue -- the sky seen through the earth.

I had a backlog of email to go through, I thought, and before I realized it I was planning the coming week. I would ask Sally to babysit a few hours each day, so I could catch up on my work. I would have to cancel the next few jobs that came in, cut down on the workload. I would call Rita and ask about the children's books she had recommended. I would sort through all of Madeleine's things, decide which to sell and which to keep.

The U-Pack was just outside of town. The ten-foot area was jammed full with boxes and furniture, not even dusty yet. There were the magazines that had been stacked on Madeleine's coffee table. There were the kitchen chairs we had sat in many an afternoon drinking coffee and talking books and boyfriends.

"Look at all this stuff," I said.

Jack looked at me quizzically. "Fuff?" he said.

"What?" It was the first thing I had heard him say.

"Fuff," he said again, more definitely. He pointed to a box.

"Stuff," I said. "That's your first word, Jack."

I would have to tell Madeleine, I almost thought, then caught myself. I would tell Rita, and Sally. Someday Jack would ask me what his first word was, and I would tell him it was "stuff".

"That's a great word," I said. "It can mean all sorts of things."

Jack nodded, arms crossed over his chest and chin in his hand in a perfect imitation of my serious pose.

I laughed. It seemed forever since anything had struck me as funny, and I found I couldn't stop for a moment. Jack began to laugh, too, in that high-pitched genuine way of children.

Finally, I wiped the tears from my eyes. "All right, Jack," I said. "Let's see what we can fit in the car."

Along with the spill-proof cups I found things I hadn't realized I needed: outlet covers, foam to place on the hard corners of the coffee table, child-proof locks for the cabinets.

We loaded the car, Jack insisting on carrying Jasper, a white teddy we found wedged under some of my sister's books. Jasper was more two dimensional than three, but he started to plump out as Jack carried him around.

I placed a box of Jack's toys next to his car seat to occupy him on the trip home: plastic zoo animals, a wooden train set, a five-note keyboard.

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We saw her one last time as we were driving home. She was walking along the side of the road in the opposite direction, on the narrow strip of dirt between the road and the forest.

One moment the road was empty, and the next, I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw her sundress rippling in the wake of our passing.

She seemed less substantial this time.

I slowed the car, but it would be dangerous to turn on the narrow one-lane road.

"Look, Jack," I said.

He twisted in his seat, held his hand against the glass. I saw that the window was already covered in small hand prints. There would be many years of smudged windows still to come.

As soon as he was old enough, I would begin to tell him about her. There were so many stories to tell, pictures and letters to show him. I would keep the memory of her alive, I thought fiercely. That's all we can really do.

"Say goodbye," I said.

Jack waved.

I glanced back once more.

Before the next inevitable curve of the road swallowed her up, Madeleine raised her hand and waved goodbye.

END