Red Ribbons

“You know, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Katarina reassures me as she squeezes my hand. She doesn’t mean it though. I shrug at her half-hearted attempt to make me feel better. We both know that she is only saying words to fill the space between us, and that there is an entire congregation waiting in uncomfortable, stuffy silence for me to stand up and speak. I have to do this.

I take a few shallow breaths, try to swallow the lump in my throat, and slowly stagger upright. I wring my hands out on my skirt and shuffle to the front of the room, gradually getting annoyed with the click-clack of my heels against the marble floor. The sound echoes throughout the building and pierces through the dead air. Why they took the carpet out of this room is beyond me. The new (linoleum?) floor seems entirely out of place with the dull stained-glass windows and run-down, splintering benches that you could not pay me a million dollars to sit on with my bare ass. But it was Eileen’s favorite place.

I finally reach the front and take the microphone from Chris, who gives me a pitiful smile and squeezes my bicep weakly. Baffled at how it came to this, to my younger siblings babying and coaxing me out of bed every morning, I begin to sway from side to side. I would be almost embarrassed under different circumstances. I certainly am not living up to my birthright as ‘older sister’, but what was I to do when they asked me to speak? Say no thank you? No, I would rather not talk at my dead sister’s funeral? No, I didn’t know her?

I softly clear my throat and try to glance down at the talking points I frantically scribbled on my palm in the car ride over. Of course, nothing is legible, now. The ink has smeared and with it, any memories I was holding on to of Eileen. My mind starts to race thinking of stories I could tell, something, anything to say about her to this crowd of people.

I lick my lips and break into an awkward, almost robotic greeting. “Thank you all for gathering here today. I want to share a few stories about Eileen that I think she would appreciate me telling. Or maybe she wouldn’t. She’s not here to tell us now either way.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize what I just said. I slap my hand over my mouth, smearing dark blue ink on my frown lines.

I hear a loud sob and look up to see my mom covering her face while Katarina rubs her back.

*What the fuck?* She mouths to me.

*I’m sorry*, I mouth back.

I wipe my hands again on my skirt, rubbing the final remnants of my notes away. I decide it might be safest to start from the beginning- before things went completely sideways.

“Eileen was my best friend growing up. We did everything together. Until I was eight years old, I slept in her room every night, cuddling butt-to-butt with her, wanting to be close but not too close. We would take turns lightly scratching each other’s backs, with just the tips of our fingernails, while counting to 100. Because I was older, I would always go first and pretend to fall asleep before it was my turn to scratch her back. This usually worked out in my favor, partially because Eileen couldn’t count to 100 yet and partially because she was too sweet to wake me up. Eileen was a really sweet kid.”

I look at the room of people in front of me and weed through the polite smiles and tear-streaked cheeks to pick out familiar faces. I see a young man with green eyes and thick black glasses and recognize him as Danny- the neighborhood boy who always loved Eileen. I see Lily- Eileen’s college roommate for all four years at Clemson. She seemed nice enough. I see my Nana, wearing a genuine-fur baby mink coat and drooling on herself in her wheelchair.

*Who wears mink in the middle of June?*

That isn’t even my biggest gripe with Nana though. In this moment, I can’t help but resent her for being alive while Eileen is not. She is going to be 98 next month. Eileen just turned 24. Many nights I laid awake in bed, wondering why God took her and not a different member of my family. A member who was ready.

 I stood near the altar, and a chill ran down me. I had wondered why it wasn’t me. I had certainly proved to be ready.

My Aunt Janie blew her nose loudly and it snapped me back to reality. From my perch I wondered which family members knew the truth. Eileen and I had a very turbulent relationship. We fell into the older sister and younger sister troupes beautifully. Freud would be proud. She was hell-bent on embarrassing me and I wanted nothing to do with her. She would tell my friends inappropriate things about me and go in my room and ‘borrow’ my clothes and always leave her hair in obscure shapes on our tiled shower wall.

One time in the winter when I was nine and she was six we got into an argument over the Barbies we were playing with and she tried to run away. It was a snow day and neither of us had gotten out of our pajamas yet and it was single digit degrees cold outside. Eileen sprinted out of our back door with no shoes on and made a break for our neighbors with the big fence and the Doberman. I was in hysterics behind her, begging her to not run away and trying to apologize for taking her favorite Barbie. I remember how cold my feet were chasing after her. She was a brat.

The summer breeze lazily pushes a door open in the rear of the building and the sound brought me back to the present, again. My arms are covered in goosebumps, and I had broken into a cold, clammy sweat. I don’t know how long I had been spaced out for, but it was long enough for Katarina to start making her way up the aisle towards me. I lock eyes with her and slowly shake my head. She turns around to go sit back down.

“I’m so sorry about that everyone. I’ve been a little scattered this past month.”

By scattered, I meant drowning my sorrows in my dad’s scotch collection. The permanent buzz made my head feel fuzzy, and I can almost see my flask peeking out of my purse, staring at me.

I nervously laugh. “Eileen and I were very imaginative kids. It was just the two of us until the twins came along. We would always play pirates, or fairies, or house together, and the in times where we were fighting and did not play together, we played with our imaginary friends. Mine was named Charles and he was a buttery-yellow Shetland pony. I have never seen a Shetland pony before, so I don’t know where my inspiration came from, but Charles accompanied me all of childhood. I thought I saw him on the front lawn today, actually!”

Uncomfortable laughter murmurs through the crowd. I note the reaction and decide to push my luck with the bad jokes later on.

“Eileen’s imaginary friend was named Picky and she was an ant. Her antennas were an iridescent blue color and Eileen insisted that she wore a pink tutu every day. I have a vivid memory of Eileen in a bathtub, screaming at my mom because she said Picky was too small to swim and she needed to get both of them out of the water.”

Truth be told, that considerate, gentle soul is how I thought of Eileen, even still. When she was in high school, she used to cry over the fact that she could not adopt every animal in a shelter, that homelessness existed in the world, and that some kids would always each lunch alone. She loved volunteering and leading Vacation Bible School. She always thought of the ‘smaller’ people. She was the best of us, or at least she tried to be.

“Eileen was adored by so many people. I called her boyfriend the other day and we were sharing stories about her. He told me he’s worn a promise ring for the past six months because he wanted to marry her, but she wanted to wait until she was in a better place. Everyone thought she meant financially, or physically.”

Thinking about the promise ring makes my stomach turn. Until Ben called me, I had no idea Eileen was that serious about anyone. I had only heard Ben’s name mentioned a handful of times, and it was usually in connection to church, so I tuned it out anyways. I didn’t know she had dreams of getting married but felt like she couldn’t until she saved herself. I didn’t even know she needed saving.

I begin to choke back tears. I don’t know why I’m ashamed to cry in front of these people, but I can’t bring myself to do it. All I feel is an immense sense of anger and guilt. I’m so angry I did not text her more, that I did not try and call her at least twice a month. Half of the time I forgot we were related, only remembering when I would see posts on social media. I would see my mom’s eyes on her face and get transported back to our childhood bedroom. To our whispers in the dark and her nails stroking my back. I let her live her own life while I lived mine.

I clench my jaw and try to wrap my speech up. People are already looking at me like I’ve completely lost my mind. I figured I would give weight to their suspicions of insanity and begin my penance right now. We were in church, after all.

“My sister would be 25 next year, had she not taken her life. And I feel overwhelmingly guilty that I hardly knew her as an adult. I’m standing here today, talking to you all about what a beautiful childhood she had because childhood is all I can recount. I feel like a fraud. I didn’t know her when she needed me. I failed her.”

In high school Eileen had an intense eating disorder. I didn’t fully understand it at the time; I would wonder why she always brought her lunch home, uneaten, hide it in her closet, and then eat a half-pound of Milk Duds, but I never pressed her on it. My dad found a week’s worth of sandwiches shoved under some sweaters in her closet once. That was my first real glimpse that something was off with her. A year later I came home to her passed out drunk in our bathtub. The same bathtub she tried to save Picky from drowning in. It was 3:00 PM on a Thursday.

I went off to college and slowly faded to the background in my family. My mom told me Eileen was thriving. She started dating a football player, getting straight A’s, speaking at church on Sundays, and becoming an example to the entire community. I was happy for her. I felt like she got over whatever demons plagued her at 16. She would prove me wrong next Christmas though.

I came home late after meeting some of my friends for a drink at our favorite dive bar. I saw my kitchen light on from outside and thought it was odd that someone else was awake. Maybe intuition, our sisterly bond, but I knew something was wrong. I rushed inside the house, heart sinking with every step I ran, unable to shake the panic I felt. I saw the delicate trail of deep red dots on the maple flooring before I saw her. She was standing by the sink, shaking, ribbons of red blood running down her forearms. She heard me say her name softly and I heard something clatter in the sink. She turned around, tried to tell me it was an accident and that she didn’t mean to. The light in her eyes had faded and she was unphased by the blood pooling on the floor. I gingerly grabbed her wrists and saw that the cuts were not deep enough to warrant stitches. I wrapped her wrists and bleached the floor, tears silently streaming down my face. I tucked her in, kissed her forehead and told her I loved her, and then went to sleep. I never told anyone about that night.

I don’t offer details on how I failed her to the congregation. Those secrets will have to die with me. The lump in my throat feels like its suffocating me now and at any minute I’m going to join Eileen, wherever she is.

I try to shut my eyes to slow the spinning of the stained-glass windows that creep into my vision, but every time I let my pupils feel the comfort of darkness, I see her face. Her bleach blonde hair and beautiful baby blue eyes set in her perfect oval-shaped face. Her slightly crooked nose from when she broke it years ago and her cleft chin and the dimple on her right cheek when she smiled.

I drop to my knees in the middle of the church. The cool marble floors feel oddly soothing against my skin, which I now realize have been burning up for the past several minutes. I feel sick. I cannot tell if I want to throw up or cry or smash my fists against the floor or scream up to God in the sky and ask him why he took my baby sister from me. Why he let her be successful.

Something in me cracked then. Maybe it was the anger finally giving way to sadness. Maybe it took giving her eulogy to finally process that I would never see Eileen again. My little sister was dead, and all I could think about were the red ribbons from that night. The night that she was crying out for help. The lack of action on my part, thinking that staying quiet would protect her. My failures time and time again. It’s all my fault.