

## Half Sleep

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Yates was the kind of kid who picked spiders off the floor and threw them outside. He was gentle always and he spoke to me like I was an adult. He played piano and sang like Elton John and he told stories that made everyone laugh even though they always ended badly. Most importantly, he was my brother.

When my parents would go out he and his friends would watch me. They played basketball and drank beers in the driveway. I kept score and shot steady free throws for both sides. He didn't smile often, but when he did it was real.

When I started sixth grade he finished high school. We had a big barbecue planned, but he only stayed for a minute and then drove off with his friends to do what my parents called "God knows what." He was never home before midnight and he moved out that winter. Our house calmed down after that. For months it had been building with the weight of unasked questions. My parents wanted him to at least stay truthful. I only knew that he barely spoke anymore and got irritated if he spent more than two hours with me.

Things started disappearing. My father said it was possible he had left his cordless drill on a job site. Then his miter saw was gone as well. My mother lost some money or at least couldn't remember spending it. My father sat on the couch with his head tilted toward the ceiling thinking of places the money could have gone. He wondered out loud if my mother had gotten her nails done or made a trip to the grocery store or been mugged. She fumed back that it doesn't cost ninety dollars to get her nails done. I remember sitting in the living room listening to hushed voices snapping from the kitchen. Yates stopped coming to the house.

One late night, before they changed the locks, I heard the squeak of a hinge and the brush of weather stripping sweep the wood floor. I knew it was my brother by the creep of his steps. He padded lightly, heel first, toward the kitchen. I heard drawers roll open and the woolly jingle of junk being moved. The drawers closed and the footsteps continued, eluding the creaky seams. My heart was a gong in my half sleep.

The hollow door of my room swung slowly and I noticed a change in light and breeze. I could feel his presence in the doorway. Though it was too dark to see, I could envision his greasy brown hair that turned blond some summers and his big sad eyes. I could almost smell him, his smell, like the must of a cabin and stale menthol cigarettes.

His steps led to my window and to the acoustic Gibson Hummingbird that leaned by the sill. It was my father's guitar. The one he had taught Yates on and that Yates had promised to teach me on. I could picture his thick fingers with the nails bit down to nubs working the neck of the guitar. Those same fingers were now reaching to take it away.

I didn't stop him. I imagine I could have, but I didn't, and I kept the guitar's disappearance from my parents for months because I didn't want them to be wounded like I was and like Yates was. All I told them was that I knew he still loved us and that he was hurt as we were hurt. What I never told them—to spare them the agony of strict detail—was that when he left the room I could feel his presence in the doorway for a long while, staring at me as I slept, as if he wanted me to wake up, and then I heard the gush of a broken throat and the soft chirping breath of his tears.