

The Lake Erie Sisters

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We met the monster six years ago, when my heart stopped working right, and Priscilla's husband wanted to leave her, and Euodia's cat ate poison. A warm December for our area. Well, plenty of them have been warm lately. But that one especially. Not even a hint of ice lacing the edge of the lake. No snow either. Just gray and rain, rain and gray, till everything smelled like mud.

We were all back home for the holiday, the first one without our parents. My older sisters arrived with their husbands three days earlier than me, because they had real jobs, not underpaid graduate fellowships. When I walked in the front door, dry-mouthed and covered in plane sweat, the smell of sugar and butter and cinnamon enveloped me.

"Oh good, you're here," Euodia said. "The cookies just came out of the oven."

"You didn't have to rent a car," Priscilla said. "Someone could've picked you up."

Dad had always picked me up from the airport. But I wasn't going to say it if they weren't. We could all pretend this was normal, our childhood home empty except when we came back to it. Same scuffed linoleum, same cabinet door hanging slightly off its hinges, same family photos, same portrait of Jesus over the sink. The only change was a new smell of dust and mildew barely masked by the cookies.

Euodia came over to give me a quick kiss on the cheek. "It's going to be at least half an hour before the cookies are cool enough to decorate. You up for a walk to the beach?"

I stepped back outside without having removed my jacket. The air was a clammy hug. Christmas lights sparkled from front windows and reflected off puddles in soggy yards. Priscilla and Euodia's husbands muttered about the dull solitude of this tiny town.

"I'd almost rather be back in Afghanistan," Buzz said.

"Don't joke about that," Priscilla told her husband.

In a hundred yards we came to the cliffs. A narrow crescent of shoreline was visible in the darkness. We slid down boulders to reach it, Buzz bounding over them and running ahead while Euodia's husband Matt stayed to offer each of us a hand. On the beach, our feet crunched on the empty shells of thousands of zebra mussels.

"Remember Mr. Altman's biology class when we had to dissect zebra mussels?" I asked.

Priscilla grunted. "Nothing but goo. Sharp on the outside, slimy on the inside."

"Did you know they've been ranked one of the most devastating invasive species of all time? They're part of why the lake keeps having toxic algae blooms. I read about it in—" Euodia stopped when she noticed Priscilla's raised eyebrow.

"Don't let me stop you," Priscilla said. "I know how hard it is for you to go a full conversation without mentioning the *Portsmouth Quarterly*."

"I like to be well-informed," Euodia said. "When's the last time you read a paper?"

"Have you heard of this thing that collects the entirety of the world's media? What's it called again? Oh right, the Internet."

I wandered ahead of the group, half-listening to Euodia and Priscilla bickering, wishing I'd tried harder to steer the conversation to what I really wanted to discuss: the time Pris found me with Mr. Altman's daughter, both of us half undressed. She told me that *she* didn't care, but I'd better not let Mom and Dad find out because it would put them in an early grave. Now I'd never know what they thought, because an early grave came for them without my help.

Behind me, the husbands exchanged work updates—one in the military, the other in library science—in tones that made it clear they were both being polite. I'd come to the end of the beach when a heavy crunch and muffled "fuck" made me spin around.

Matt was on his hands and knees. Euodia and Priscilla both hurried over as Buzz pulled out his phone and turned on its flashlight function. Matt held his hands under the white glow. They dripped with a dark wetness.

"I think we're gonna need a bandaid," Buzz said.

"A bandaid? We need to go to the hospital. Some of those look deep. And what about all the bacteria in the mussels?" Euodia's face was moon pale.

"I'll be fine. It's worse than it looks," Matt said, but he was grimacing.

"What if the cuts get infected?" Pris said.

"You heard the man, he'll be fine," Buzz said. "Here." He pulled a flask out of his back jean pocket and held it out to Pris. "Everyone can have a swig."

I didn't want a butt-pocket shot. But Priscilla glared when I started to shake my head, so I took the warm container and swallowed a mouthful. The cheap whisky burned my throat like carboic acid. My heart wrenched itself from its moorings in my chest. The sensation sent an immediate burst of panic through my body. Not this again. I kept my eyes anchored to the ground as we walked back to the house. By the time Matt cleaned the cuts and covered them in gauze and tape, my cheeks no longer felt flushed with fear.

The guys retreated to the den to watch *Die Hard*. Euodia's cat trotted over to join them.

The three of us didn't bother asking if they wanted to decorate cookies.

We spread old newspapers across the table and divided tasks. Pris only wanted to do the misfit shapes. Bats and bunnies and Abe Lincoln heads that belonged to different holidays. Euodia confiscated the special icing nozzles because she had the steadiest hand. I mixed drops of red and blue and green dye into the white cream, then shook silver nonpareils over Priscilla's decorations. Euodia said to keep the sprinkle madness to myself. She didn't want me to ruin the artistic integrity of her ornate snowflakes and monogrammed stockings.

"Don't you have an entire class of fourth-graders to torture?" Priscilla wanted to know. "Why do you have to pick on June?"

"I'm going by Junia again," I said.

"Oh my god, you change your mind about this every year," Pris said.

"I wrote the wrong name on all the gift tags for your presents," Euodia said.

"It's fine. I just don't feel like a June anymore." That's what Mom had called me, and my ex, who only became an ex because I told her I wasn't ready for her to meet my family.

I stuck my finger in the red icing and swirled a glob into my mouth. Intense sweetness melted across my tongue. The unfrosted head of a snowman mellowed the sting of sugar in my throat. One more finger of icing, then another bite of cookie, icing, cookie, till sugar spat white lightning through my veins. The crackle made me want to play a dozen games of hide-and-seek and climb trees in the woods like when we were kids. Back when Christmas was still fun.

Euodia and Pris had launched into a well-trod argument about our New Testament names and who had it worst growing up. That's when the second heart palpitation struck, followed by three more.

"I'm gonna head upstairs," I said suddenly. "Feeling tired."

"Alright," Euodia said. "Sleep well."

My heart continued to thump as I marched upstairs to my old bedroom. Now it was filled with sewing equipment from Mom's retirement project—a Bible-themed Etsy shop. The ceiling was still speckled with plastic stars that barely glowed.

I pulled a book out of my backpack for distraction. But the thumps worsened, uncomfortable booms at my collar bone. I coached myself not to panic. Just three months ago, the surgeons had taken care of the real heart problem. That's what they told me. No more dangerous arrhythmia. These were ectopic beats, the heart's valve closing a millisecond too soon. But behind closed eyes, I saw that horrible night before the surgery: the blood, the convulsions.

A flush flooded my arms, the precursor to a panic attack. I hopped out of bed and did several pushups. Adrenaline turned my arms to steel. Sometimes exercise restarted the heart's proper rhythm. But not today. The premature beats persisted. I was aware of every movement my heart made. A hum when it swallowed new blood, a whoosh to squeeze it back out, a thud when it beat too soon. More relentless than I'd ever felt before. Could this be some new disorder?

I padded down the stairway back to the kitchen. Pris pulled her head up from the table to shoot me a worried look. "What's up?"

"Heart palpitations." I wanted to evaporate as soon as I'd said the words. I hated admitting anything was wrong, hated being so scared of something everyone called harmless.

"They're the benign kind, right?" Priscilla came over to squeeze my shoulders. "Just try to take deep breaths."

"I'm going for another walk." I pulled on my mauve bomber jacket. My hands shook inside the pockets. Tacky sweat pooled at my armpits.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" Euodia asked. "Because we shouldn't wait till the last minute, you know."

"No. Like Pris said, they're benign." Another palpitation thundered against my chest, turning my breath into a wheeze. "It's fine. I'll be back soon."

Outside, clouds crushed the sky to a black sliver over the horizon. The wet grass squelched under my boots. I walked down the hill our house stood on and crossed the road to get back to the rocky coast. Lights gleamed along the rim of Lake Erie. The water stretched farther than I could see, interrupted only by one small island. We'd paddled there on kayaks as kids, Euodia and Priscilla shooting ahead, splashing each other.

They'd both been busy when I was in the hospital for heart surgery. Priscilla recovering from her second miscarriage, Euodia taking care of a neighbor's kid. All of us pretending we hadn't last seen each other at our parents' funeral. Jessie was the one who took me, who sat with me afterwards while I cried and blamed it on the sedation drugs, the one who said I needed to stop letting my sisters off the hook for how they treated me. The one who dumped me.

The pounding of my heart lessened as I walked. I took several lungfuls of cool air, then scrambled down large boulders to the water's edge, avoiding the beach we'd visited.

I sat on one of the rocks, dampness cutting through my pants. The pounding began anew, so forceful I thought each strike would knock me off my perch. Terror spread through my body. I buried my head in my hands, rubbing the bones of my face, telling myself I was fine, I was fine, I was fine. I wasn't going to die with the same violent abruptness as my parents.

Does it hurt? came a garbled voice to my right. *The little heart, does it hurt?*

I sat up so quickly I lost my balance. Elbow crashed into stone, foot landed in water. I snatched my soaked shoe out and winced. But seeing the monster dispelled all pain.

It was some nightmare version of a mermaid. Gills clamped shut against its neck, rimmed with red. Bulbous orange eyes. Webbing around its fingers, between its arms and torso. Lower body sinuous and scaled. A fin rising along its spine that glinted blue. Clouds reshuffled themselves above us. Moonlight pearled onto its scaly gray face. Zebra mussels clustered along its chin and chest like an Elizabethan ruffle.

Does it hurt? the thing asked again.

"The fear hurts," I said when I could find my voice. Wasn't this the question I'd wanted Euodia and Pris to ask? But I hated that I needed them to ask it. I hated how

much I wanted them to see me, to accept me, to take care of me. So much easier to talk to some make-believe monster. "It hurts to think something might still be wrong. Not knowing if it will kill me."

It blinked transparent lids over orange eyes, then slithered across the rocks to bring its upper body closer to mine. I smelled iron and algae and decaying organic material.

Do you want the thumps to stop? The creature's mouth was a cavern of jagged teeth.

"Doctors tried to fix it."

We make a trade. A new heart for your finger. It gestured at my right hand.

"Which finger?" I'd give anything to fix this. What was a single finger in exchange for a life where my heart wouldn't terrorize me?

Here. It reached out to touch my right index finger, my skin pale against the dark rock.

"Will it be painful?"

The creature made a burbling sound.

Another trio of disruptive heartbeats determined me. "Alright. Yes. I'll trade."

The creature nodded and slithered closer. Its breath smelled like mayflies on the summer lake. Its presence was the electric charge preceding a storm. It plucked a single scale from its cheek and gestured for me to open my mouth, then placed the scale on my tongue. The sharp, hard edges cut into my throat as I swallowed. It placed one hand on my chest and pressed. A burst of ice shot through me, more sudden than the drugs that had once reset my heart. Before I could scream, the ice was gone. I placed a hand over my breast and felt the movement of air in and out of my lungs. But my thundering heart had stilled.

"Thank you." Relief came, so intense I thought I'd gone weightless. "What now?"

The thing gestured at my hand and I held it out, palm down. I shut my eyes, imagined the monster's damp skin against mine, its serrated teeth. But instead I felt the pop of a cracking knuckle, followed by a strange emptiness next to my thumb. I opened my eyes to see the finger on the rock between us. No blood burbled up from my stump; it was perfectly healed. I scratched a vague itchiness around the empty digit.

The creature gingerly plucked the severed finger from the ground. I watched as it dragged my finger along its chest, scraping away the zebra mussels. The black and white shells clattered on the rocks. The thing scraped until all the flesh was gone from my finger and only pale bone was left. This it threw into the lake. Red halos remained on its skin where the mussels had once clung. The skin of its face had changed from slate gray to a luminescent silver.

Our trade is complete, it said. Then it dove into the water and disappeared.

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I crawled over the rocks and walked back to the house, thumb grazing the gap where my finger had been. It was real. The monster that people whispered about, the one who appeared in ghost stories told around campfires. And it was being suffocated by those invasive mussels.

The strangeness almost didn't matter. What mattered was my body. Missing finger, healed heart. For years, I'd felt haunted by the possibility of sudden death, and whatever judgment might await me, even if I said I didn't believe in the afterlife. Now, I was free.

"Are you feeling better?" Eudoia asked when I came through the front door.

I hid my hand behind my back. "Yeah. I'm gonna head upstairs. G'night."

For once, it didn't sting that neither of them came up after me. I didn't need their help or their concern. Not anymore.

I lay flat on the bed and felt the smooth flow of my blood. Nothing in my chest, none of the fear that had always lingered at the edge of every moment. Except the nothingness was more than the absence of abnormality. I couldn't feel *anything*.

I placed my left thumb against my right wrist, the reliable pulse that no one ever noticed me checking. The place that told me I was still alive. But the gentle throbbing was gone. Next, two fingers to my neck. Easier still to find the river of blood beneath my skin. But the jugular was a lazy current of heat without any steady thrum.

It didn't mean anything. The monster had kept its promise. I was cured. Now I wouldn't need anyone to take care of me, not ever again.

But that night I slept uneasily. I dreamt of the beach. Sand castles tilting at odd angles. Powerboats anchored near the sandbar. The shadow of seagulls swooping down to chase empty chip bags. I waded into the warm, shallow water, green muck puffing up from the bottom. After a few steps, zebra mussels were everywhere, their razor edges needling my feet.

I tried to back out of the water, away from the sharp shells. But they formed a mound behind me. A tower of black and white, so tall I couldn't see land. The shells cascaded over me, cutting every bit of flesh on my body. I woke sweaty-faced, a scream trapped in my throat.

* * *

Brushing my teeth was hard. Hooking my bra was hard. Buttering toast, cutting an apple, holding a fork were all hard. Writing by hand was awkward, but not impossible. Typing on a computer wasn't much better. A whole row of keys I didn't know how to find with any other finger. I wrapped my right hand with an elastic bandage and stuffed cotton balls where my pointer should've been. I told the others I'd jammed my finger last night on the rocks.

That evening, Matt cooked us steak and roast vegetables, then everyone got ready for the stocking stuffer treasure hunt, our Christmas Eve tradition. It was my turn to hide gifts, and no room but the kitchen off-bounds. The others sat at the table,

sipping beer and gin martinis. I flitted through the house to deposit packages of chocolate truffles and hand lotion and gift cards. Everything was decorated with a sprig of holly that I clipped off the bushes outside.

Once the gifts were hidden on bookshelves, in desk drawers, and behind board games stacked in closets, I skipped back to the kitchen and announced the hunt could begin. I thought about making myself a cup of herbal tea, but instead poured a second martini. Warmth pooled in my stomach. When was the last time I'd been drunk? Alcohol had always upset my heart.

A shriek from upstairs slashed my tipsy glee. I ran up the steps. Everyone congregated in Euodia's room, the space crowded with a circle of bodies. At the center sat Euodia, kneeling next to her cat, whose flanks heaved as vomit poured from its mouth. Waxy green shards flecked the foamy liquid.

"We have to get her to the vet," Euodia said.

"They won't be open. It's Christmas Eve," Priscilla said.

"What the hell happened to her?" said Matt.

I crouched down to the peer behind the closet door where I'd hidden a gift card. The package was still there, ribbon punctured by tooth marks, sprig of holly half-eaten.

"I put holly on the presents. I didn't think she'd eat it. I'm so sorry."

"What is wrong with you?" Euodia cried. "Holly is poisonous for cats!"

"I didn't think. I'm really, really sorry." My sinuses burned with tears. I loved Euodia's cat, who sought and reciprocated affection much more than my sister. He had soft black fur and chirped when he wanted to be pet. Now he was mewling in agonized tones.

"I don't care if it's Christmas Eve, I'm finding a vet. Somebody look up how to help a cat who's been poisoned. Everyone else, just, finish the treasure hunt." Euodia glared at me. "Are there more presents in here?"

I shook my head. Pris and Buzz crept out of the room while Matt thumbed at his phone. "Euodia, I think I can help," I said at last. "Please, just come with me."

She blew out a rough breath and sniffed back more tears, but left the poor cat curled in a knot. I lead my oldest sister outside and unwrapped my right hand. Cotton balls tumbled to the ground like snow.

At first, she refused to take me seriously. She said I'd had too much to drink. She trained her eyes away from my finger.

"Just go down and see. You'll only be gone two minutes if the—thing—isn't there."

"But I need this hand," she finally said. "I can't write with my left hand."

"Maybe you can offer something else. I don't know how this works."

Euodia's eyes flicked to the yellow glow from the upstairs bedroom where the sick cat might be moving closer to death. The only sound coming from indoors was the creak of footsteps across old wooden floors.

"Fine." Euodia took a deep breath. "If it exists, maybe I can talk it down to a pinkie. I'd rather have one less finger than lose my cat."

"I'll wait here for you."

Euodia shuffled down the front lawn, arms crossed over her chest. She'd adopted the cat right after she broke up with her last boyfriend. Just three weeks before meeting her now-husband. The luck cat, she said. I'd taken care of him when Euodia and Matt went on vacation. I even knew how much the cat liked to chew on plants. I hadn't been thinking.

Did I want the monster to take my sister's finger? We'd be united by an unexplainable experience. A thread tying me to her after a lifetime of being the queer one who didn't bake, and didn't go to church, and didn't want kids. Maybe I wanted a calamity to mark someone else. Maybe the monster had infected me with malice.

I fidgeted for ten minutes, waiting for my sister. Eventually she appeared at the top of the rocky cliff, silhouetted by the moon. No clouds in the sky tonight, just an endless stretch of star-studded velvet. I traced my eyes against Euodia's body, looking for evidence.

"Did you see it?" I asked.

Her lips pinched into a bitter smile. "Yeah. I saw it." She pulled one hand out of her pocket and displayed a strip of flesh that smelled like fish. All five fingers were still attached. "It gave me this. For the cat to eat."

"And you're—are you ok?"

"I'll be fine."

Euodia pushed past me and went back inside, slamming the door shut. I waited a long moment, resentment making my skin itch. She could've said 'thank you.' She could've said anything. Had the monster taken a finger from her other hand? How had she felt when she saw it? But no, no reason to tell me anything. It was my fault the cat was sick. What idiocy to think anything could make us closer after two decades of unspoken resentments. Not even a healing monster had that power. I went inside, desperate for the holiday to end.

Upstairs, Euodia and her husband sat in their room, petting the purring cat. He pawed his face clean, bending his head down to stroke long whiskers.

"It worked," Euodia said.

"What happened?" I said.

Euodia looked up at me from her cross-legged seat on the ground. Illuminated by the incandescent bulbs of the bedroom ceiling fan, I could see a milky film over her left eye.

"Holy shit. Are you...?"

"Blind in this eye? Seems that way. Or at least, blind to everything around me. I can still see a river of zebra mussels. Too bad they're ugly."

Shame pummeled me, followed by a burst of glee, then an even stronger wave of shame.

Matt remained silent, gently stroking the cat, who had climbed into his lap. Euodia glanced at them, her expression softening. "Worth it."

For the rest of the night, Euodia let her bangs fall over her eyes and kept her glance low. We all sat in the den to watch another movie, Buzz not talking to anyone,

Priscilla pretending to sleep. The cat wound a sinuous path around the furniture, her eyes glinting orange.

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When we got back from mass the next morning, Euodia baked cinnamon rolls for breakfast, with cream cheese frosting on top and caramelized sugar crusting their bottoms. Buzz was the only one who ate an entire serving. I untwisted the ribbon of pastry, chewing on small bits. Priscilla changed into sweatpants without eating and slipped out the front door for a run.

"We can open presents when Pris gets back," Euodia said.

I retreated to my bedroom and sat on the lumpy mattress, trying to remember the last time I'd seen Priscilla go for a run. Euodia came to sit down next to me. She took my right hand and ran her fingers over the smooth skin.

"Did it hurt?" she said.

"Not that part. The heart healing hurt. What about yours?"

"No. It just felt icy cold."

"Are you still seeing zebra mussels?"

"Not anymore. Now it's just black."

"I'm sorry." Most of my anger had crumbled overnight. I wanted to have one real conversation with my sisters, and I wanted to run away from them forever, and the two opposite impulses were equally strong.

Euodia sighed. "Maybe an eye doctor can do something." Her bony shoulders leaned against mine, strands of her blond hair sliding over my own dark locks.

"Buzz wants a divorce," she said after another long moment.

"What? Why? When did he say that?"

"Last night. Pris came into our bedroom. She slept on an air mattress."

"Is he serious?"

"Seems like it. But I don't know, he's been weird. Maybe it's some kind of PTSD from being over there."

"What's she going to do?"

"She doesn't want to get a divorce." Euodia looked up at me, green eyes drilling into mine. "She's pregnant again."

"Why didn't she tell me?" It was more painful than the heart healing, the ever-growing evidence that my older sisters would always be best friends or worst enemies, while I remained a perpetual onlooker, a guest in their antics.

"June, she's been worried about this all weekend. She just didn't think about it."

"It's Junia."

"Right. Sorry."

For a moment I stewed. But then came that same stab of meanness, the urge to make all three of us marked. Had the monster made me a monster? There was no one

left in the world who could tell me that I was or wasn't, so I said, "What if the creature can fix it?"

"How is some lake monster supposed to help a messed-up marriage? Bring them to the beach for counseling?"

"I don't know, but it fixed your cat and my heart! Priscilla should have the option."

"Fine. But I am *not* going to encourage her."

We cornered Pris when she got back, her face shining, breath still coming short.

"Can this wait until after I've showered? I stink."

"It's important," I said.

Priscilla raised an eyebrow at Euodia.

The three of us walked into my bedroom, locking the door behind us. Euodia told her story first, then let me explain how it started. Priscilla cringed at my hand, Euodia's eye.

"I think I'd rather not give up any vital body parts," she said.

"And the monster might not be there anyway," Euodia added.

"Look, maybe you don't want to fight for your marriage now, but what about when the baby comes?" I said.

"You told her?" Pris shot at Euodia.

"She's going to be an aunt, too."

We three sat in a row, Priscilla between Euodia and I. Pris got up first, followed by Euodia. They pulled the door firmly shut behind them, their murmuring voices barely audible, though I heard my name among other indistinct words. One of the old glow-in-the-dark stars tumbled from the ceiling in their wake.

* * *

Priscilla never told me what changed her mind, though she might've shared it with Euodia. To me, all she explained was what happened.

The monster came again. It asked for her ear. Pris said she wanted to keep it attached to her head. The creature instructed her to lean down and turn sideways, ear pointed to the sky. Hundreds of zebra mussel shells poured into it with the sound of an avalanche. When Priscilla sat up, she could hear nothing from that side of her head. Those were the last of the zebra mussels on its body, Pris said. Suddenly it was sleek and clean and almost beautiful.

My sister came back from the lakeshore with a bracelet made of bone that she tied around Buzz's wrist. When shipped out again, he promised that would be his last tour. Seven months later, Priscilla had a baby named Hannah. The little girl's eyes were steely gray with green specks. Buzz started a woodworking business. The three of them bought a house down south and have lived there ever since.

* * *

Euodia and Priscilla host Christmas these days, even though we still haven't sold our parents' house. There are always cookies and movies and a fluffy black cat, and a little girl named Hannah who loves toys, but not as much as she loves the fish in her aquarium. I'm the only one who still visits the old house. I look for the monster every time, imagining how beautiful it must be without those mussels slowly choking it to death.

That creature is the reason I quit my anthropology program and switched to environmental science. It's the reason I met you at the Stone Lab in the middle of Lake Erie, where you smiled at me over a steel table covered in dissected fish, an iridescent scale stuck to your chin.

I need you to know this whole story, Maeve, even though it sounds unbelievable, even though you'll probably never see the Lake Erie monster. I need you to know that when I tell you I love you, I mean it, but I'll always be scared it isn't enough. Because of who my sisters are and who my parents were, but most of all because of the monster, and what it did to my heart.

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