



Dodge County, my friend Mark once said, is like a black hole. It sucks you in and never lets you go, not without a fight. The people I've seen come and go have all done so only after a fair amount of scars and bruises, clawing for every inch out of town. What Mark never knew was just how far the black hole extended, beyond the county limits and reaching out with the magnetic force of a thousand planets. What Mark never knew was just how far the hole is willing to go in order to make sure no one gets out. Not without any scars.

The phone call went something like this:

'I don't know any of the details yet because we're out of town. The doctors won't say anything over the phone, other than she's stable. Just get home as fast as you can, please. Please. Steal a car if you have to, sweetie—just get there so she's not alone. We're taking the first plane we can get, but the entire airport is shut down until they can plow the rest of the runways.'

Five minutes later, I was inside my roommate's beaten-down Volkswagon, tearing through the city streets to find the nearest freeway onramp. All I could think about at first were my mother's words. I played them over and over inside my head to try and determine if there was anything she wasn't telling me. If any voice inflections may have betrayed her otherwise calm demeanor and carefully chosen words.

Now I'm driving. Back to my hometown, going eighty-five on Highway 42 South, swerving into the breakdown lane to pass the few drivers who either don't notice me bearing down on their six or are too stubborn to get into the right lane. I've already decided a cop won't stop me now. After two hours of driving, I'm too close now to be stopped. Would he understand? Maybe. I wonder how long a car can go before a trooper calls for backup, and how much longer before they decide to try a risky bumper tap maneuver to swerve me out of control.

By the time I'm fifteen minutes away, I can't stop the tears from coming. Why was the hospital so vague? They would have to tell, I think, if my sister wasn't all right. They would have to. They couldn't keep something like that to themselves without breaking some sort of goddamn law.

Jesus Christ this is too much.

She could be paralyzed. It was a car accident, something about a pile-up on the highway just south of town. Multiple injuries, according to the AM news report that crackles through the Volkswagon's shitty speakers like a walkie-talkie. No names released. I turn it off before the announcer on-scene can discuss fatalities. I wouldn't make it the last fifteen minutes if I knew for sure. I need some hope—it's the only thing keeping my eyes from tearing up completely and blurring my vision down to twenty-eighty.

She doesn't deserve to be paralyzed. She doesn't deserve any of this bullshit. She's still in college, just beginning to realize how fun life can be. It's the town. It's the goddamned town. It wants to bring me back no matter who it hurts in the process. I can't leave. I can't go back to the city if my sister's hurt. I can't go back if she's dead.

I reach the hospital and drop the car into park, feeling the wheels skid over the wet asphalt and jerk to a stop between two spaces reserved for the doctors on duty, but a fifty dollar parking ticket is the last thing on my mind. I run inside, compose myself as best I can before reaching the information desk in the E.R., and take a deep breath.

'My sister,' I say. It takes two breaths to get both words out.

The young woman—pretty, maybe, under any other circumstance—looks up from the computer. The leafy fragrance of alcohol-heavy perfume wafts in my direction. 'Ah,' she says, smiling a perfectly practiced smile. 'Right. Your parents said you might make it here before them.'

'Where is she? Is she okay?'

'I'll have someone get you.' The woman stands up and walks past the glassed-in waiting room and down the hall, which opens up farther down into a massive square room with doors on every wall. In the center of the room are four rows of desks where doctors and nurses hurry back and forth between areas, taking various folders and tools before heading into one of the closed doors.

The smell of this place is too clean. I would rather smell the blood and the vomit and shit and disease than inhale the stench of purifying chemicals. It's a mask—the very fact that these pleasant aromas exist in this place is to mask something far worse.

The woman comes back with an old man wearing a vintage black suit with a white collar. When I notice the cross around his neck, I manage to take one step back before I see my vision begin to tunnel. My legs feel light. My head begins swimming, fading away the sounds of ringing phones and the busy waiting room. I collapse on top of the information desk. Everything has gone black, but I can feel a pair of strong hands under one of my armpits. Another pair of much gentler hands holds onto the back of my shirt to keep me from falling over.

'Easy,' I hear a rough voice say through the haze. His voice echoes inside my eardrums. 'Easy there.'

My vision begins to return. I will my hands to grasp the edge of the desk so the receptionist and priest can let go.

'Easy,' the priest says. 'You okay?'

I feel tears welling up inside my eyes. I can't answer.

The priest wraps his bony, fragile arm around my shoulder. 'Come on. Let me take you to your sister.'

Every muscle in my legs wants to keep me from getting close to the emergency ward. All that exists there is pain and suffering, neither of which I can handle. I feel the heel of my right foot slide along the tiled floor, squeaking before the priest's strong grip can move my body farther along.

'Sorry to give you a scare there,' he says once we're in the large open room. 'Your sister's doctor and nurse are busy with another person from the crash. A young man who wasn't as lucky.'

I feel the tension in my heart loosen ever so slightly. Sorry. Scare. Not as lucky. The words play over and over in my head, cooling my nerves slightly and slowing my heart rate so my lungs can take a deeper breath. But just how lucky was my sister in comparison to the young man? I wonder. The young man could be dying—compared to that, anything short of death could be 'lucky' in the priest's Book.

He leads me into room number four and I see my sister laying on the stretcher still tied down to the neck brace or whatever the fuck you call it and I hear her whimper my name but she can't move—she has to look down over her fat, bruised little cheeks, wiggling her fingers thank God she can wiggle her fingers and thank God she's conscious and thank God she can talk and she remembers my name and thank fucking God I will pray to you every night for the rest of my life for not taking her away so soon.

'She's doing all right,' the priest says. 'The nurse is coming in just as soon as she gets the x-rays back.'

I hold her hand and stand next to her for a moment, looking her over. Except for the few light blue bruises across her cheeks, I can't see anything else wrong with my naked eyes. 'Her neck,' I say, turning to the priest. 'Is her back hurt?'

'Just a precaution at this point,' the priest says. Looking into his gentle brown eyes lowers my blood pressure by forty points. They're the color of wood finish used on window frames—his eyes. 'They don't want to un-strap her until the x-rays come back.'

I turn to her. 'I'm gonna call Mom and Dad, okay? Just wait right here.'

The priest grabs the receiver from the rotary phone hanging on the wall. He hands it to me. 'Just dial nine.'

'Thanks.' I dial nine, then the number of my parents' cell phone. My mom picks up after the first ring, frantic. 'I'm here with her,' I say. 'She's okay, it looks like.'

'What about x-rays?' Mom asks, unable to calm herself.

'They're coming back right now.' I watch the chubby little middle-aged nurse walk into the room. 'Hold on.'

'X-rays are fine,' the nurse says with a smile. She starts un-strapping the neck brace, letting my sister slowly prop herself up on the bed. My sister looks confused, unable to comprehend everything that's happened over the course of only a few hours' time.

'X-rays are fine,' I say into the phone. I use my finger to tickle my sister's bare feet. The toes wiggle.

'Why are you tickling my feet?' she asks quietly.

'I think she's fine,' I say into the phone. 'Her feet are okay.'

'What does that mean?' Mom asks. '*What does that mean?*'

'I don't know. I guess it means she can feel her feet.'

'Get as much information as you can about what happened,' Mom says. 'Our plane is taking off in twenty minutes. We'll be there by two. Just stay with her. Find out about Miriam. Have they said anything about Miriam?'

'I didn't even know she was in the car.'

'Find out where they took Miriam,' my sister says. 'Find out if she's all right.'

'Okay,' I say, both into the phone and to my sister. 'Call me when you get off the plane.'

'I'm calling you from the plane. In an hour. Find out everything you can. Find out what happened. And ask them to do more x-rays to be sure. And don't let them take her out of the hospital. I want her overnight just in case. Tell them we have good insurance.'

'Okay. Talk to you in an hour.' I hang up the phone. I take a seat next to my sister and we wait for the doctor. The priest comes back with a nun, and both of them have a tray of hospital food: one orange, a cup of 7-Up and a small box of Raisin Bran.

'Try to have some food, sweetie,' the nun says. 'You've had a rough night.'

My sister grabs my hand and holds it hard. 'I could use some soda.'

The nun smiles. 'Okay.' She hands my sister the cup of soda. My sister drinks it down quickly, sitting up in the bed. I run my hand along her spine because that's what I've seen doctors do on TV. What I'm looking for, I have no idea, but it feels a lot like my spine and so I think she's okay for the most part. My sister hands the empty cup back to the nurse, who sets it on the tray next to the bed.

'Find out about Miriam,' my sister says. Her long blonde hair is straggly, hanging in sweaty clumps over her face, and I use one finger to sweep it away from her eyes. 'See what hospital they took her to. Go visit her. Her parents won't be able to get back into town right away because they're all the way in Montana. Go check on her.'

I nod and leave her with the nun. The priest has left for another room, possibly to the young man who wasn't as lucky. Now, 'not as lucky' could mean almost anything, considering how lucky my sister has been. I stop at one of the desks in the middle of the main room and wait for one of the nurses to notice me. It's the pudgy, little one from before. Her nametag says Carol, with an extra 'L' whitened out.

'What can I do for you?' she asks. She keeps a cordial voice even though she looks stressed. Many of the doors in the emergency room have a blue plastic flag hanging over them, like the one on old-fashioned mailboxes to notify the mailman that there's mail to be sent out. Perhaps, in a Catholic hospital, this is how the nurses notify God that the room in question has a pick-up.

'My ma wants me to get some info,' I say. 'Like, how my sister is, where her friend is staying, what happened. Whatever you can tell me, if you've got a minute.'

She nods. 'What we know is a truck spilled over on the highway just outside of town, and there was a small pile-up of cars. Your sister came in later, when another pile-up occurred toward the back of the traffic jam.'

I'm praying now with every ounce of my soul that my sister wasn't at fault. I'll give my soul right now, I promise you Lord, I'll give it to the devil if only to save my sister. I'll let the goddamned spitfires of Hell lick at my naked skin for all eternity if only to keep everything from changing. She's too talented. She's going to find the cure for cancer some day, I guarantee it God. You let her live her life, and you take me instead.

'Your sister told the trooper that she was stopped,' the nurse continues. 'And that she was rear-ended by another car.'

'What about her friend?' I ask. 'Miriam? Is she here?'

The woman frowns. 'I know she was taken on a flight-for-life at the scene, probably to Saint Luke's on the other side of town. Let me call over there and try to get some information and I'll get back to you.'

'Okay, thanks.' I return to my sister's room and take a seat at her side. God, the chair feels so comfortable. My legs are numb from the rush of blood that's been traveling through my brain at sixty-eight miles per hour. 'They're checking on Miriam,' I say. 'What do you remember?'

'We got hit by a truck,' my sister says. She starts choking up. The nun is there in a flash with a box of tissues. 'I stopped when I saw the traffic, and I turned to talk to Miriam and I saw the truck coming fast in the rear-view mirror. And I screamed and fell back and then everything went black and when I woke up, I had a headache and my lip was bleeding and my shoes were gone.'

'Jesus fucking Christ,' I say. The nun winces, but doesn't say anything. 'Holy shit, I mean. Why were you driving? You don't even have a car.'

'It was Miriam's,' my sister says. 'We went to go visit Jenny in the city. I told her I would drive home because she drove up. You have to go to her hospital and be with her. She wasn't awake when I saw her. There were doctors all around her. You need to go be with her and make sure she's all right until her parents can get back to town.'

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Just try and rest for a little bit. I’ll try and figure out how she’s doing.’

We sit in silence for awhile, and my sister seems to nod out for a little bit. All the while, the nun stands over her, looking at her, silent, compassionate, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I would pay for her to stay with us, at least until my parents can arrive. What else can I do? I can’t be in this situation—not now, not ever. I don’t know what to do. This nun, she’s perfected this exact situation. She’s seen it before. No matter what happens, she has experienced the outcome and she knows how to deal with it.

Carol pokes her head inside the room and motions for me. I sneak out, quietly so my sister can rest peacefully a little while longer. I follow Carol back into the waiting area. We go behind the receptionist’s desk, to a closed brown door, and wait patiently for another fifteen minutes. Someone on the other side of the room is wailing. It could be a baby if not for the pronounced denials and profane language occurring between sobs. They’re cursing the same God I just blasphemed against. A woman and two younger girls walk about, followed by the receptionist nurse. All of them are in tears.

We walk inside and sit down on opposite couches. The nurse sets her hands on her knees. ‘What do you want to know?’ she asks.

I shrug. ‘Just . . . tell me how bad it is.’

‘Miriam is dead.’

I lean back in my chair. No tears come right away. I’m in shock—I must be. ‘Holy shit. Holy . . . holy shit. How?’

‘She died of a neck injury on the scene,’ Carol says. She leans forward, clasping her hands together. ‘If you think it’ll be easier, I can tell your sister for you.’

I shake my head. ‘I need to talk to my parents first. Holy shit. I need to tell them before we do anything.’

The hospital smells too clean. I wish I could pick up something—anything—other than the stench of sterility, of cool clean metal and rubbing alcohol, of bleach and antibiotics. To taste something on the tip of my tongue, even if it’s secondhand smoke. This place does its best to hide beneath my sensory radar, as if it doesn’t want to exist at all.

‘Okay,’ Carol says after a moment of pause, as if she’s honestly contemplating going into room four and telling my sister out of the blue that her best friend is dead. What am I supposed to do? What the hell can I do? ‘But I think she already knows.’

‘Let me just wait for my parents to call first,’ I offer. I’m on the verge of begging her. If only to stop her from barging into my sister’s room, I would gladly knock the end table vase over the back of her head.

We walk out of the room. Carol goes back to the emergency ward, thankfully keeping away from my sister’s room. I walk past the reception area, to the empty white hallway that opens up into a much larger, decorated lobby area with plush couches and an empty piano in the corner. Before I can reach the nearest couch, I feel my right leg buckle. I collapse against the smooth, cool wall and begin bawling. I feel my left leg lose its strength and I fall hard on the tiled floor. My wet hands break the fall for the rest of my body. I crawl to the carpet, climbing onto the first couch my blind hands can find. I can’t see anything more than blue and purple blurs around the room. The tears are too thick. They burn. My chest hurts from the deep screams that come out with every breath. My voice echoes in the large empty room, bouncing off the glass walls before traveling into the trauma ward.

Someone puts an arm around my shoulder. I can’t see who it is—I can only feel a soft tissue being pressed into my hand. I use it to blow my nose, then wipe hard at my eyes. I want every tear out. I want to know who’s sitting next to me. I want someone’s chest to cry into.

The nun lets me bury my face in her chest. I don’t fight it because I can’t stop crying. I can’t hold back the tears. I have to let every single one out or I’ll explode. I can feel her wrinkled yellow hands on the back of my neck, but I want them to stay there because they feel so warm. I can feel her hot breath on the crown of my head, the heat emanating from her chest. I let her hold me like a baby and don’t struggle when she begins to rock silently back and forth in the chair.

‘Don’t tell her yet,’ I say between syrupy wet sobs. ‘Let me talk to my parents first.’

‘Of course,’ the nun says. She understands. She has been in this situation before. She knows exactly what to do.

It takes another moment for me to gather myself. Ninety seconds later, I can rub the tears away and see again without feeling them begin to grow a fresh layer of water. My nostrils are clogged so I have to breathe through my mouth. The dry air cuts against my raspy throat.

Carol sits down next to me. ‘Your mom just called. I’ll have the receptionist transfer the call to the phone by the piano, okay?’

I nod.

‘Just wait for the blinking light before you answer.’

‘Okay.’ I take a deep breath and watch Carol and the nun walk back to the emergency room. When they’re gone, I manage to find the strength to pull my body to its feet and walk clumsily over to the piano. I sit down at the

bench, staring at the dark phone sitting on the end table next to the nearest couch. The light blinks on. I hesitate for a moment before picking it up.

'Mom,' I say.

'I'm here,' she says, still hurried, still frantic. 'We're about an hour out.'

'Mom, Miriam's dead.' I can barely choke out the words. They hang in my throat and suffocate my lungs into violent seizures.

My mom screams. I hear my father in the background asking for answers and my mom chokes out the words and I hear my father scream. The sounds will haunt me until the day I die. They bring more sobs to my throat. I can't stop crying enough to repeat what the nurse told me at first. They have to take each word by the minute. In the background, I can hear the voice of a stewardess who's probably trying to discern whether to get them tissues or apprehend them as terrorists.

'Listen,' Mom says in high-pitched, whining nasally voice. 'You have to go to the bathroom and run water over your eyes. Flush out the red. You can't tell your sister. You can't let her know that you know. You need to wait until we get there, do you understand? This is important, sweetie. The next twenty-four hours are going to be very important. She's going to blame herself for this. She's going to want to trade places with Miriam. You need to be strong until we can get there. She's going to need all the support she can get. Do you understand? Oh please tell me this isn't so.'

I don't know how to answer.

'You need to be strong until we can get there,' she says.

'Okay.' I take a deep breath. 'Okay. I'll wait.'

'Go to her,' Mom says. 'Stay with her. Don't let her know. Laugh with her. Try and get her to sleep. Don't let her leave the hospital. Don't let them kick you out.'

'Okay.' I hang up before she can say goodbye. I can't hear her tell me she loves me or I'll break down again. I get up slowly and walk to the bathroom in the reception area. I splash cold water and look at my eyes in the mirror. They're still bloodshot. The Dodge County water supply has been tainted with a mixture of fine grains to keep my eyes red. To expose my secret.

I splash more water on my face before returning to my sister's room. She opens her eyes when she hears me sit down. The nun is again standing at her bedside, silently holding a tray of food like a waiter at a fancy dinner party.

'Did you find anything out?' my sister asks. 'Did you find out where they took her?'

'She's at Saint Luke's,' I say. Each word bites into my heart. I reach over her bed and grab the orange to keep my shaky hands occupied. 'They couldn't find anything else out right now. Mom and Dad are almost here. Another hour till they land, then another hour to get back into town.'

'She wasn't moving,' my sister says with glassy eyes. 'I called out to her and she didn't answer.'

'Don't worry about anything for now.' I reach out and grab her bare foot. 'You lost your shoes.'

My sister looks down. 'They came off when the truck hit us. So did my socks.'

I shake my head in wonder. 'Unbelievable. I thought that only happened when someone got hit with lightning.' Maybe the two events aren't all that different.

'Turn on the TV,' my sister says, pointing to the TV hanging from the corner wall. 'Maybe they have some details about the pile-up. It was really big.'

I glance at the clock: ten-twenty. Five news stations in the county. The biggest accident, most likely, in Dodge County's history. Of course there'll be people on the scene. They'll mention the injured. They might have footage. My heart has begun to speed up. 'Let me try and find out some info from the hospital again,' I offer. 'I'd rather trust their word than a TV report. Deal?'

'Okay,' she says.

I nod and walk out of the room. I return to the desk and find Carol. She's already walking toward me.

'Your sister's x-rays and tests check out fine,' she says. 'Other than a few bruises, she looks great. We're ready to discharge her.'

'What? No,' I say. I can feel the tears welling up again in my eyes. 'We can't leave. I can't take her home right now. Not before my parents even get here. My mom wants her here overnight for observation.'

'She doesn't need to be overnight,' Carol says. 'We can't keep her here for no reason. It's just hospital policy.'

'You have to. I can't take her anywhere right now.'

'We can't keep her here,' Carol says again. 'The best we could do is try to put you into a room at the hotel across the street.'

'My mom doesn't want her to leave!' I shout. I lower my voice immediately, glancing back in the direction of room four. 'We have good insurance. My parents will pay whatever the cost is even if the insurance doesn't. You have to let her stay until they come.'

Carol sighs, and I can feel her frustration. I understand, Carol, but you gotta level with me here. 'Let me talk to the doctor and see if there's something we can set you up with. And after that, I think you should let me tell your sister.'

'Not until my parents get here,' I say again, in the most firm voice I can possibly manage.

Carol gives me a pitying look, a last-resort type of look that she must reserve only for late nights. 'I think she already knows. She saw her friend at the scene of the accident.'

'I don't care. Not until they get here.' I leave her and walk back to room four.

Everything turns into a dream. My sister, sobbing. The television on, turned to one of the local news stations. A reporter at the scene, explaining in detail how the first of the crashes occurred, and then the second pile-up toward the back. A young woman—a woman, they call her—pronounced dead at the hospital as a result of the collision.

'She wanted to check,' the nun said. 'I couldn't stop her.'

I tear off my jacket and lay down on the gurney and hold my sister close. Her tears soak through my shirt almost immediately. I have to muffle the sounds escaping her lips with my chest to keep them from returning to my nightmares. It should have been her. She shouldn't have been driving in the first place. She should have been the passenger and she's the one who should have died. What to say to that? How to respond? Words come out of my mouth, incomprehensible condolences that couldn't possibly mean anything. Words of affection are all I can manage. Words that have never been so true, that are always exchanged with little more than a simple 'I know.'

The nun is saying a prayer through tearful breaths. This, she has not seen. This turn of events that even God couldn't have possibly predicted with any accuracy.

'I should be dead,' my sister says into my chest. 'It should be me.'

No. Why can't it be me? I'm the one who should have given his life to this black hole, this unending void. Not you. Not the one who volunteers for community service and gets straight-A's and is always the first to volunteer to house sit and pet sit and baby sit for free. There is no such thing as karma. All the riches in the world, all the happiness and all the love couldn't balance out this moment. All the justice couldn't undo the pain.

I alone deserve the void.

I refuse to leave. When the resident doctor comes in and cheerfully announces that they've booked us a room at the hotel across the street, I ignore him. I close my eyes and hold on tight to the nun's warm hand. United we stand.

My parents arrive two hours later. I relinquish my spot at the foot of the bed and let them have their turn. I have no energy left to do anything more than sit in the corner and close my eyes. My body and mind are numb, exhausted, barely registering anything more than the most important of moments. The nurse takes my mother outside and the two talk at great lengths about the medical procedures and policies of the hospital. My father picks my sister up and carries her like a baby, out of the emergency room and into the parking lot, to their car which has been parked illegally on the grass next to the E.R. entrance.

I follow them home in my borrowed car. Dodge County is silent. No sound escapes this black hole, on this darkest of nights where even the stars are afraid to show themselves, out of fear of being drowned in blackness. This black hole of a place, this vacuum of despair and darkness, it doesn't let you escape without any scars or bruises. My sister can take the bruises, I've decided. I'll keep the scars.