

Sisters

Elsa was always different. I think my mother's reaction would've made more sense if this were *not* the case. But mother was driven by things I will never understand. Or perhaps I have run out of energy and no longer care. One could make arguments for either, I suppose.

Being six years elder, I remember Elsa when she was very young. And there were already signs. Plenty of toddlers put odd things in their mouths, I know, but Elsa *only* did so with plants. No buttons, dog toys, or silverware, and she despised pacifiers. She simply would not have them. Once she was through breastfeeding, that was the end of the line for everything but food. And plants. I remember pointing this out my mother and she scolded me for "*thinking such nonsense!*" I brought it up one more time, and my punishment was so severe that I kept those thoughts to myself from that point on.

Mother was as devout as they come. She rarely made it three sentences without interjecting the words "Lord" or "Jesus" or some variation thereof, and by the time I was eight I never saw her without a bible nearby. She carried it like a shield against all darkness. Whenever she was nervous she would trace the front cover's inlay with the middle finger of her left hand, whispering to herself. She would quote scripture like a scholar and used it to answer any question that came up. I remember thinking she no longer had original thoughts, only quotes. Perhaps that was her intention.

Looking back, all of this strikes me as rampant insecurity and delusion, if not outright mental illness. But I have my biases.

My father harbors a patience that I find equally confusing, only I love him dearly for it. He was never one to rush to conclusions. In anything. He would always hear us out, Elsa and I, even when he knew we were in the wrong. Not to imply he was lenient in his punishments or easy to sway -- far from it! -- but his responses never felt emotional or reactionary. They were reasonable, and for me, trustworthy. He extended so much patience toward my mother as well, and even though it did not work out and I feel his grace was wasted in her case, I still admire him for it. He had a reputation as a wonderful teacher and I never once doubted it.

Until the incident in the bathroom, we spent our lives in a small house near the coast, all winding sidewalks and afternoon thunderstorms. But a crack began to show around when Elsa started walking, and our homelife outright shattered just after she

turned five.

I was the first to see Elsa do it. She was sitting, Indian-style, in front of a sapling that had sprouted near the edge of mother's garden. She looked at it multiple ways, tilting her head back and forth like a puppy, then smiled wide and grabbed the stem. And I swear upon everything dear to me, right before my eyes, it *grew*. A month's growth in a span of ten seconds. Elsa laughed like she were being tickled, then let go and rubbed her hands together.

"Elsa!" I shouted.

I was elated for a moment, until a thought stampeded through my head was: *what will mother say?*

"I'm sorry, Elsa," I whispered fiercely. "Please don't be upset. But this is necessary."

I pulled the no-longer-a-sapling out of the ground and tossed it over the fence. My mother knew her garden much too well to leave evidence. I thought Elsa might cry, but she barely noticed. She just waddled through the garden as though nothing had happened.

I watched her closely from then on.

It wasn't as difficult as I expected, I must admit. Around that time, my mother's agoraphobia manifested. It started in small ways, like with the aforementioned tick of tracing the seal on her bible. Then she felt something *very unholy* when she was at the General's General Store down the street and would no longer shop there. She suspected it was the stock boy, whom she'd never seen at church, not once. I pointed out that he was from India and probably Hindu, but she just shushed me. My father picked up the slack and started shopping on his walk home from work.

And so it went, with my mother finding more and more places that Satan's influence was growing. My father would try to speak to her rationally for a week or two, then would take the task on himself. Rinse and repeat.

In time, my mother no longer felt comfortable on the drive to church, so she would call our Pastor three times a week for conference. While this made our house feel strained and covered everything in an miasma of paranoia, it made hiding Elsa's gift significantly easier. My mother would sometimes peer at us from her bedroom window while we were in the yard, and she would check in on us around meal times, but that was the extent of our interactions. That's not to say I wasn't a nervous wreck every time we went outside, though. I watched Elsa with the intensity of a brain surgeon anytime she was in eyeline of mother's window. There were some close calls, but all said and told it was not terribly difficult to navigate.

Until one Thursday evening when Elsa was given a bath.

My mother was completely housebound at this point and only left her room to make meals or clean. But, oh, how she missed her garden! She said this to my father often, as though it were a thousand miles away and not right outside our own back door. As a surprise, my father made a cutting from her favorite succulent, potted it, and placed it on the painted ledge beneath the bathroom window, the one above the bathtub that held the soap dish. Mother adored it and for a few weeks, she left her room more often. I remember thinking things were taking a better turn.

Soon after mother decided to wash Elsa instead of asking me to. I would have praised her for this had it not gone so awry. As mother was washing her back, probably wondering aloud how she always managed to get so dirty, Elsa touched the flower-shaped succulent. And like that, my mother saw how different her youngest truly was.

Mother's scream shook me from the trance of my studies. It took me a moment to place where it came from, but I quickly sorted that she was in the bathroom. There was such terror in her shriek that I did not bother to knock or ask what was wrong. Deep in my gut I knew it was about Elsa, so I simply barged into the bathroom.

Mother's hands were vice-like around Elsa's throat as she held her under the water. I could see the veins in her neck from where her hair was pulled back. Elsa was thrashing, sending water over the edge of the tub. I screamed for mother to stop, but if she heard me she gave no sign. She was still screaming herself, after all, and it was the text from the *Twenty-Third Psalm*. An anger that I had never felt before rose up in me, white hot and electric, and I slapped my mother with such force she stopped making all sound. And more importantly, let go of Elsa. Before she could do anything else, I pulled Elsa up by her arm, wrapped her in my arms and whisked her out of the bathroom. My mother watched us go, wide-eyed with terror, then started screaming again. I slammed the door.

I brought the sputtering and crying Elsa to our shared bedroom, wrapped her in a blanket as fast as I could manage and grabbed my chair from beneath the study desk. I ran down the hall and slammed the chair beneath the doorknob so my mother could not leave. Then I tended to the whimpering Elsa until my father came home a half hour later.

It is still hard for me to understand why my father did not have her committed. It is not that he didn't believe me. When he came home and saw the state Elsa was in, he let me hysterically recount the evening's events before he tended to my mother, and I saw no

doubt in his face. If anything, I think it confirmed a fear he'd been carrying. But instead of making mother leave, he decided that the three of us would go. He spent the bulk of his savings finding her a care taker, then purchased train tickets for us to stay with his two sisters, four hours west.

He explained some things to me on the train, holding our bags in front of him like they might get stolen, even though the train was largely empty. I wondered what was in them, but didn't ask. Elsa slept on the seat next to me, her knees curled beneath her chin. She was handling this better than the rest of us.

My mother was not born into a normal family, he explained. Odd traits showed up in two of her siblings, and one of her uncles was also not right. He would not tell me exactly what these traits were, only that they were "otherworldly." She left home at 14, because she never felt safe among her family. She was taken in by her Aunt and Uncle who ran a small church out here on the coast.

My father met her there one summer, just before he entered college. He'd been hired to paint the fence surrounding the property, and he was smitten after just one sentence. But I already knew that story.

"She'd grown up with strange blood in her family, and she always hated it," he said. "To her, only Satan could bring forth such strangeness. Or *wickedness*, she'd say. We used to debate it some, until it became a non-topic. I loved her, and I pitied her, so I let it go. But she always feared that this blood was inside her, too. She admitted it to me once. It was the first time I'd ever seen her cry." He looked out the window until he'd collected himself. "She's so frightened of anything out of the ordinary, especially if it's related to her in any way."

"Did you know about Elsa?" I asked him. He was slow to answer.

"I suspected, but I hoped it wasn't the case. For your mother's sake. But I never ..." He took a deep breath and stared at his hands. "I never thought she'd go that far. Despite all the evidence in front of me. I never thought she'd hurt her. I didn't think she was capable."

We were quiet for a while. I noticed he couldn't look at Elsa.

"What are you gonna do with her?" I asked.

He must have heard accusation in my tone, because he looked stricken. "Watch her. Love her. Protect her. I don't care about any of this nonsense. She's my daughter, same as you. And no goddamn plants will ever change that."

I nodded, relieved.

We arrived at my Aunts' house late in the evening. Sandy and Gretta. The two of them had moved in together after Sandy's husband died ten years ago. Many mistook them for twins, but that's where the similarities ended. Sandy didn't talk much and Gretta rarely stopped.

Gretta was the one who answered the door. She practically lifted my father off the ground when she hugged him, then did the same to me. She was laughing and saying "goodness!" too much and was clearly glad to see us. She stopped when she saw Elsa.

"You were still in someone's tummy when I saw you last," she said, suddenly serious. Elsa blinked up at her. "Sandy! Put the kettle down and come meet little Elsa!"

Sandy came to the door, wearing a flour-dusted apron and her hair up in a bun. She looked down at Elsa with folded arms. "So this is the one who can help us with the gardening?"

Gretta laughed loudly and so did my father and I.