

## Sisters Lost

By Kat McNichol

*“I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, sir’ ... ‘because I’m not myself, you see.”*  
—*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

When my sister lost her mind, our lives split, became before and after. It was a chasm that separated us with a suddenness that I wasn’t prepared for. I kept hoping everything would go back to normal. I thought she’d shrug and laugh with her twinkling eyes and apologetic grin and say, “A joke, a joke! Just a joke...” That was before I knew she was never really coming back.

She’ll argue with me when she reads this, point to her chest and say, “I’m right here!”  
So why do I miss her so much?

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She was admitted for emergency observation in the summer of her 23<sup>rd</sup> year. When I arrived at the hospital, I did a double take at her door, my heart pounding. She was so broken I almost didn’t recognize her. My vision became a tunnel, or at least, that’s how I remember it – like I was looking at her through a telescope. Everything else fell away.

I tried to catch her eyes with mine, but she refused to look at me, her eyes frantic, focused on nothing. Now and then she glanced at me sideways, afraid. Her shoulders were hunched, her bones visible from weeks of neglecting herself; a ribbon of real fingernail showed under dagger-like fake ones. She looked feral, eyes bloodshot, lids lowered to slits. In that hospital locked up against her will, she trusted no one, not even me.

When she whispered, “God, my God,” my breath caught in my chest. She was gone, buried so deep I couldn’t reach her. And whenever she looked at me with that vacant sideways stare, blanked of any recognition, I felt like I was the one unhinged.

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James had brought her to the hospital, a little man in a fussy, three-piece suit.

“A rich businessman from downtown Toronto,” she’d told me a few weeks earlier. “Would it be strange if I dated a man 40 years older?”

“Yes!” I said, but because she’d met him at the strip club; he paid her \$300 every Thursday afternoon.

“Just for conversation,” she said, turning away.

My sister didn't date men like James. She was a model, a singer, an actress and a stripper, confidently dramatic and stunningly beautiful. The men she dated were beautiful too – sometimes intelligent, often talented, and always dangerous in one way or another. Her last boyfriend was a drug dealer who sold drugs to other drug dealers. He was an important man in the underbelly of Toronto. These were the men she dated.

James seemed more like a father than a lover. Did she know her mind was cracking? Did she look at him as someone who could protect her?

A month into my sister's hospital stay, James brought his statuesque teenage daughter to meet her. By then, my sister was allowed to use the common room to play piano. While she played, James and his daughter watched and whispered and laughed.

I stood in the back in stunned silence. She looked so beautiful performing for her guests, until I saw her eyes, damp and blinking.

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On the morning we were given my sister's official diagnosis, the doctor called us together for a private meeting. As my mom and dad entered the room, James hesitated, not sure if he was invited. I told him to come. “Who is he?” the doctor whispered.

“A family friend,” I replied, and shrugged. Everything is simpler in hindsight; he was a man she met in a strip club – her customer. He was also a man who brought his daughter to a mental hospital to meet his stripper.

He didn't belong, but for reasons that are difficult to explain, we needed him there. With James in that meeting with the doctor, talking about my sister's illness became easier for all of us.

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In a chair beside her bed, I listened as she mumbled in a voice I'd never heard before. “The birds, they fight, and I, but blue bl blue jays! Red cardinals, God, help me! But I am God... aren't I? Am I? Jesus Christ! I will forgive, forgive me, them, no, NO! Stop, forgivvvvnn, shshshssshhhhhhttt... hey, you, sssshhhhhhhhttt, don't look, don't say birds. Don't!”

She was hunched forward, more still than I'd ever seen her, except for her eyes. It's always her eyes I think about now: the suspicion, the fear. Mostly, I remember what wasn't there. Everything else about her was familiar; physically she hadn't changed much. But, to look into her eyes was like looking down a long, dim hallway of worn carpets and gaping doors. The love that had always been there when she looked at me was gone.

For a minute she stopped ranting and we were both quiet. “Kathy...” she whispered, using the name she’d called me as a child. The sudden burst of hope made me almost double over. Until that moment, I didn’t think she recognized me, her eyes so much a stranger’s. Then, looking up, she asked softly, “Should I sacrifice myself for the sins of the world?”

It felt like my heart broke into a thousand pieces.

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After three months in the hospital, my mom took my sister home, and for a while we watched her scream at cars to repent, exorcise the demon from the dirt devil vacuum, and yell angry words of God at our little brother until he moved out -- until finally the medicine *worked* and she re-entered the real world, got a job and met and married a nice, safe man.

Years have passed. She still ends most conversations with, “It’s in the Bible,” except now she uses full sentences and there is no talk of birds.

I feel like I should be happy; she’s alive and not psychotic and we’re one of the lucky families. Sometimes I see glimmers of the sister I once knew. But how do I stop missing the person she was?

I still hold her at arm’s length, and it took me a long time to figure out why. I lost something in that hospital room, and I can’t get it back.

I loved my sister.

*I love my sister.*

And it hurts so badly, I can hardly stand it.

#### Works Cited

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, (1865) 2008. Online.

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