

THE SUNSHINE

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My cousin Katie and I grew up close despite our distance, with her in Alberta and me in BC. We were best friends, but our relationship wasn't without its faults. The biggest of faults being how much more beautiful and outgoing everyone found Katie. At every family event, we'd be side by side and Katie would be showered with compliments. I can't blame them really, Katie was easy.

Being only three months apart in age we had been baptized together. As my mom tells it, the moment I hit the water I lost it. I screamed, I cried, and I couldn't be settled. I'm known for my lingering scowl, Katie's known for her smile. And smile she did in the priest's hands, with those big brown eyes and the gap between her teeth as I sobbed in my mother's arms behind her.

She and I could be buried alive, and I'd be throwing dirt and spitting threats until the end, whilst Katie just smiled up from the bottom of her grave. No matter the bitter situation, just like a sunflower that blooms in the grey of autumn, Katie was the sunshine you could find in the rain.

When I was a teenager I visited Katie in the small town of Calmar, Alberta, where she lived with her older brother Jesse, his wife, and their family. It was in the middle of rural Alberta where the only things to do were either get slushies from the Fas Gas or burgers from the Burger Barn. One night Katie's sister-in-law sensed our boredom and asked if we would like to babysit for one of her friends.

Katie was good with kids. She was nine when she moved in with Jesse and had been changing diapers and rocking babies to sleep ever since as an unofficial live-in babysitter for her brother's four children. I'm the youngest of my cousins, with no siblings, making my childcare knowledge limited. Under the condition that Katie was to do the babysitting and I could just supervise, we agreed.

The friend of Katie's sister-in-law was a friendly woman who picked us up in her minivan. The sun was setting as we pulled into the driveway of her rancher, which was sitting in the middle of the longest stretch of farmland I'd ever seen. I'm used to an environment with acres of thick forests surrounded by snowy mountain ranges and rocky beaches. I still find it eerie the way Alberta stretches on and on. You could walk miles and miles and never really be gone. No change in scenery. Only countless hay bales spread across endless crop fields that meet the prairie blue sky at the horizon.

The most exposed kind of trapped to be.

Throughout my childhood, I mostly saw Katie when my mom would take me to Edmonton to visit family. This one time we stayed with my grandparents, whom Katie was temporarily living with while her mom worked on getting her shit together. It would have been a perfect trip if it weren't for the cockroach infestation in my grandparents' apartment building.

One night Katie whispered me awake, "Will you go to the bathroom with me? I'm too scared to go alone."

We'd walk through the dark apartment on tippy toes trying not to trigger the roaches, but as soon as we flicked on the bathroom light they would scurry under the cabinet.

"They aren't as bad as the bed bugs," Katie said, "We had them when we lived with my parents. I woke up in the middle of the night once, and one was sitting on my chest staring at me. I wanted to scream but I couldn't."

She frowned, "The kids at school would ask me why I had mosquito bites all over my face in the winter, but they were actually bed bug bites."

My mom had to force me to shower for a while after that. I cried in the porcelain tub, too scared to leave. I knew that despite their absence in the bathroom light, the cockroaches were still there, squished together underneath the cabinet. After that visit, I started having nightmares that bugs would crawl up my nose and ears. A fear that both Katie and I still share.

We arrived past the girls' bedtime. Their mom assured us she would only be a couple of hours, then left us to get the girls to sleep. The two girls were a dream. Quiet and sweet as we read them stories until their sleepy heads drifted off in their princess beds. The entirety of the two hours flew by and it seemed Katie and I would be paid for barely any babysitting at all.

But two hours turned into seven, and before long the sun had started to rise. The girls' mom was supposed to be home at midnight, but by five in the morning our phones died and any chance of outside communication died with them. We searched the house for chargers but came back empty-handed.

Katie pulled out her personal phone and held down the on button for one last attempt at salvation. A white screen flashed and we gasped. It turned on with 1% battery remaining. Katie typed out her sister-in-law's phone number faster than I thought possible and hit call.

We stood motionless listening to the phone ring.

Ring

Ring

Ring

"Hi I'm unable to come to the phone right now, please leave a message."

Followed by a beep.

Katie practically screamed into her phone "Your friend hasn't come back—"

The screen went black. We stared at the dark phone with open mouths as the prairie sunrise flooded through the kitchen window, casting a maroon shadow across our faces as tears rolled down our cheeks.

We were trapped.

The day Katie was removed from her parent's custody; her mom was nowhere to be found. Her oldest brother Jesse came to pick her up to spend the weekend with his family. Katie sat on her bed and watched as Jesse darted around her room, wondering why he was packing up all her belongings for only a weekend.

That Monday she sat on the couch as a social worker explained that she was no longer able to go back home or to see her mom. Katie was devastated, but time went on and things started to get better. Supervised visits with her mom became unsupervised visits until finally the social worker allowed Katie to have a sleepover at her mom's. She could hardly contain her excitement as Jesse dropped her off.

But then her mom got drunk.

Katie shivered as she and her mom watched TV together. It was cold in the apartment but her mom didn't seem to notice as she lit another cigarette. Katie had started to feel ill from the cigarette smoke filling the room and got up and walked away.

Her mom was yelling at the TV as Katie gazed at her face in a mirror hanging in the hallway. The prize-winning smile she'd had as a baby was now lost beneath the frown we'd all grown used to seeing. Her fingers were ice as she separated a chunk of her eyebrow hair from the rest. She grasped the hairs at the root before ripping the chunk of hair from her face.

At about ten in the morning, we heard a car pull into the driveway. The minivan that picked us up was nowhere to be seen, but there was a semi-truck parked in the driveway. The mom walked towards us with a man trailing behind her. It looked as if they had also not slept.

“Hey girls, sorry for the delay.” She pulled the money out of her wallet and let us know her friend was going to drive us home.

We followed the man out of the house and over to his semi-truck. He opened the door for us and said, “There’s only one other seat so one of you will have to sit on the bed in the cab.”

I had an anxious mother and if she had taught me anything, it was to not get in a semi-truck with a strange man. How many true crime cases had started that way? Fear flushed my body as I turned to Katie.

I’m pretty sure she saw my fear, because with sad eyes she said, “I’ll do it.”

The entire ride back Katie was stumbling around grasping onto the front seats because she refused to sit on the bed. The fear of never going home sat in my chest until the man dropped us off on the highway. We made the tired walk from the highway to her house scuffing our feet the entire way.

Katie passed out the minute her head hit the pillow, but I lay awake. To me, Katie was always sunshine. She could always brighten a room with her smile, but now I know why. She was constantly moving home to home, never knowing who she’d end up with. She never had anyone who would have noticed that she didn’t come home from babysitting that night.

Katie had to be the sunshine, because the rest of her life was rain.