

Recognition

Ashley Schroeder

My sister sat on the wooden steps, fanning herself with a section of a newspaper. Perspiration dotted the nape of her neck below her short, light brown ponytail. Her cheeks were flushed. Although her body showed signs of warmth, her face revealed that the summer heat did not bother her.

"It's just like I remember it," I said. My back was to the street as I stood on the front walk, facing the house, a couple yards from my sister.

"I didn't have the heart to change anything." She talked without looking at me. "I promised Dad I wouldn't."

I smiled briefly as I walked toward the three-bedroom ranch, the house I hadn't seen in five years. After I had left for college I rarely came home, and after graduation I had moved to the other side of the country. I had to get away. I had to get away from this small North Carolina town, where the general store on Main Street has been in the Marshall family for three generations. But now I was back.

I could feel the sweat bead on my forehead, each movement costing so much of my energy. When I reached the wooden stoop, I crouched to pick up a ratty old baseball from the bottom step. It was torn and soiled. Neighborhood dogs and children had gotten to it.

I turned to sit on the step, facing up at my sister. She continued to stare off into the neighbor's yard. My jeans stuck to my knees as I tried to sit, my moist flesh merging with the fabric. I stretched out my legs in hopes of relieving my discomfort, but I knew that shifting my body would not be enough to free me.

"The kids have gotten big, or at least they look big in the last picture you sent me," I said. "Rachel's eight?"

My sister nodded.

"And Riley's four?"

"Five. She's starting kindergarten in the fall."

I threw the baseball a foot or so into the air before catching it. I threw it

again. I should have known how old my nieces were. They were the closest that I'd ever have to my own children.

"I can't wait to see them again." I hadn't seen them in two years. I had a feeling that Riley wouldn't even recognize me.

"They should be back in a few hours. Harry took them to the zoo for the day. We both think that they should stay busy for a while."

It was difficult to see my sister after all this time. I wasn't particularly happy to see her; I knew that she felt the same. She never forgave me for skipping town and leaving her to take care of our dad, as well as our childhood home, which she took over when she married. She let Dad stay. She took care of him while he was sick, up until the end. I was just her selfish sister who wanted nothing to do with them. I think she would have preferred if I didn't come back at all.

When I realized that she wasn't going to engage me in any conversation, I stood and climbed the stairs past her. I stopped on the porch just in front of the screen door.

"I'm going to start going through Dad's stuff."

She nodded her head, refusing to look at me. "I can't help you."

"You can't or you won't?"

"I don't know."

I snorted. "I figured as much." I turned and entered the old house, letting the screen door slam shut on us.