

BE IN MY HEART

ASHLEY PETERS

I

“Admiration is our polite recognition of another’s resemblance to ourselves.” – Ambrose Bierce

It felt right in that moment, as I sat cross-legged on top of the porcelain toilet lid of the bathroom my sister and I shared. I watched her hands fuss over the knots in my hair and play with my face, smoothing aloe vera over the t-zone of my brick red sunburnt face. Her fingers were like sprites, dancing over my insecurities and kissing them away. Her slightly pooched belly touching my chest warmed my body and my eyes fell in sleep, never dreaming of what that warmth would bring.

I push the white door ajar with the palm of my hand, stepping into the dark abyss that once was my childhood safe haven, now inhabited by a new replica of a sister I hadn’t quite won over with my shaggy hair and tooth lacking grins. I tip toe across the freshly installed luscious carpet to the bed I shared with my sister for years, and the floor squeaks in all the places I once knew to avoid but no longer could recognize. I cling with child fingertips and toes to the wooden steps to hoist myself up onto the mattress, but pause to peer over the edge to watch the baby swaddled next to my sister napping the night away, while my knuckles turn white with the passage of time. What gives? Could that baby not sleep elsewhere? I give up staring it down and search for an empty space to lay my body in relationship to the other two, one that had impeccable timing. Didn’t she know to wait? Settling on the inside, I pull myself up onto the bed, on top of the covers and cram in next to the cold wall. I close my eyes to sleep.

I sit in the audience, beside Danny watching my sister up on the stage. She is poised and speaks. Her creamy tone of voice is enchanting, forcing the crowd to hold their breath as she shows the beauty of her trade through her model. The fingers that used to fuss over my hair now dance around the brunette sitting on the pedestal. Absorbed in her passion, she radiates the power of the lioness she so often loses

sight of these days. Section by section she cuts the woman's hair and instructs her followers in the front row. Admiration runs through my veins and flutters in the pit of my stomach.

II

“Both within the family and without, our sisters hold up our mirrors: our images of who we are and of who we can dare to become.”

– Elizabeth Fishel

We sit at the bar, holding each other close for a photo being taken. Compared to her lioness face and marble eyes lined with black liner, my naked anime eyes are held in place by a youthfully round face. Our noses hold the same bulbous shape gifted from our great grandmother Mckigny. Our lips smile the same, yet mine are wrinkled free and coated in Burts Bees, hers painted with candy apple red lipstick. She is my mirror: I trap inside me the inspiration she shows to the world, and the free spirit she has given up shines through my youthful face. Captivated by the world she has drawn for me, and unrestricted from its limitations, I am able to experience all of what her heart desired.

I leave for college in less than two hours, two thousand miles separating us from one another and she hasn't shown up to say her goodbyes with the rest of them. A private moment is all that we need, so I drive the one-mile that separates our childhood home to the house she has married into. She greets me with cold hands, cold hands that lead to a warm heart. She hands me a bag filled with girly things I would never think to buy myself, and doesn't say a word. I embrace her with tears slipping down my cheeks and walk away from the only person I let see me cry. I sit in my driver's seat for minutes before I am able to drive away and open the card from my gift bag. Inside, handwritten from my sister and my soul mate are the words, “Be in my eyes and be in my heart.”

III

“Sister is probably the most competitive relationship within the family but once the sisters are grown, it becomes the strongest relationship.”

– Margaret Mead

The summer of spiritual discernment came and brought my sister to my side. Snuggling with her son Titus on that elephant of a couch,

sipping red wine and picking the breading off of her coveted fried okra, I drop in his mouth the burnt and salty pieces. The front door is open to the warm wind washing in, making the small of my back sticky with sweat, not to mention the added body heat of an overactive 3-year-old boy. Danny comes and picks the tike up by his ankles, swings him face to face with me and a slobbery kiss goodnight wipes my face. I roll off the couch and step through the open door, to the closing of the September sun and to my sister with her third attempt of becoming a smoker. "You know, smoking is so gross," she says with a wink. "I love you," is all I say as I stand shoulder to shoulder with her. She quietly weaves her fingers into mine, "I know."

And now as I remember that photo, the one of her belly and my face so close in proximity, I sit quietly back in the second row of her family's CRV. I think of the trauma my sister has experienced from having a baby girl at the age of fifteen, yet how strongly composed she has always appeared to be. I thank God for her strength I have stolen at times, but mostly I thank him for breaking her down and letting him in this morning at church. So now, I enjoy the quiet between all of us, riding the roller coaster highway through the oak tree forest winding back home. Danny's hand is resting on the top of her thigh, the other hand parallel with his gaze out the windshield. He is leaned towards her, always is, as if he, just like me, has given way to the gravity between them.