

"This porcelain doll – you'd better put it back," our sister, Lily, said with a disapproving frown. "There's a little girl looking for it."

We crept back up the rope ladder to set it down in our drafty attic. Brandon swore he saw the ghost of a little Victorian girl with "silver eyes looking right at us."

"Maybe our great-great-great-great aunt," I joked.

Brandon looked at me with the most serious face a six-year-old could muster and said in a very small voice, "She.... she doesn't think it's funny."

I remember I'd spent the rest of the afternoon denouncing the existence of ghosts and comforting Brandon, who refused to ever go into the attic again without Lily.

Lily. She was not just our sister but also our protector, our teacher, our mother, our father. Not because she wanted to be. And she wasn't a very good father or mother. In fact, she was quite terrible sometimes because of her temper and her own childishness...but mostly because she always told us exactly what she knew.

And whatever she touched, she knew. A scarf dug up from the give-away pile that'd never made its way to Goodwill, a broken porcelain doll scavenged from the attic, a tattered teddy bear our mother kept with her fine pearls – we'd uncover these mysterious treasures on rainy days, when we were confined to the limits of our large, old and mysterious house...and our mother, unconfined by anything, attended "higher social functions."

As children, we didn't think much of my sister's uncanny skill. We simply saw it as amusement. We pretended to be archaeologists, and we'd bring our artifacts to our sister, who'd set down her book and sit Indian style on her carpet. Then she'd close her eyes and magically tell us the secrets of the ordinary scarf or pearls or letter-less envelope.

Perhaps that's why I always saw too much meaning in the world. Perhaps because of the way my sister could cradle an inanimate object in her hands and bring it to life with brilliant stories of where it had been and whom it had once belonged to.

I was seven then, and Brandon was six. I was bossy to him then, fancying myself older and therefore much wiser – If only I had known then, what was to come...I would have been a better big brother. I would have let him call dibs on artifacts and take the first pick from book orders my mother religiously ordered from (though she had no idea what we read and half of the books would collect dust on the living room mantle until Lily

packed them into the drawing room bookshelves). Years later, I regretted the daily trivialities, tantrums and fights.

I wrapped my coat tighter around my thin frame, as though the black fabric might protect me from the foreboding atmosphere around me.

In my head, I cradled memories of the last time I saw my sister. In her late teens, she'd stopped talking to our mother. To be accurate, she had squeezed her tangled emotions into monosyllable words until the August she graduated from college, turned twenty-two and left home forever.

"You're old enough now, Michael, to take care of both Brandon and yourself," she'd said when I helped her pack her suitcase.

"Where are you going?" I'd asked.

"I need time to sort things out," she'd said.

And that was that. We missed her dreadfully the first year. Our mother bawled, mostly for show, and lamented about this and that. She called our housekeeper to increase her house visits from weekly to daily, so that Mrs. Beck became more of a nanny now.

But a year after Lily left, when I turned thirteen and Brandon turned twelve, it started happening. He went crazy.

I learned how to cook and dismissed Mrs. Beck. Our mother whined about it, but I couldn't risk Mrs. Beck's hawk eyes detecting the maniacal look in Brandon's eyes and his panic attacks.

He saw ghosts everywhere. The echoes of people long gone both entranced and frightened him, pulling him into its magnetic embrace until he suffocated. He fell in a mental spiral from a sane 12-year-old boy to an ethereal teenager with eyes that knew too much. Eyes like Lily's, I realized. But unlike Lily, who went off into the world alone, Brandon shrunk into a shell. He became too unstable to go to school, and even our mother began to see what was happening to him and hired a no-nonsense, lips-sealed nurse. She knew, perhaps, more about it than she let on – After all, it ran in the family. Which side of it, I didn't know. My father had left years ago.

Then he disappeared the day after I turned sixteen.

Carrying a backpack stuffed with Brandon's things – clothes, picture books, and the blue scarf he always wore – I looked for my sister.

After three weeks, twenty-two phone calls to distant relatives and my sister's college friends, and thirty-four door bells, I found her in an average, normal city with neat rows of townhomes and clustered nests of apartments.

She lived in a blue townhome with an unassuming white door. She looked the most normal person in the world when she answered the door – as though she didn't carry a family power. As though she couldn't read things by touch.

Her face lit up when she saw me, grim-lipped and bedraggled.

"I missed you, you know," was the first thing I said. Then a torrent of emotions overwhelmed me and I felt a teardrop stalk down my nose.

"I'm not a psychometric anymore," she said over the rose-painted brim of her teacup. "I don't do it anymore."

"But every time you touch something –"

Her voice wavered with emotion when she said, "It was terrible, growing up like that, knowing too much, never telling anyone except for you too. I was constantly scared they'd lock me up in a mental hospital like our father."

"Our father?"

"He died ten years ago. His file said, "claimed to read auras." It happens you know, to us. Superhuman ability comes at a great price. Over-existence or craziness or something – it gets you, it tears you apart from the inside until you die a slow, painful death."

She stood up and packed Brandon's scarf back inside his backpack.

"I got rid of it, my psychometry. I defied my genetics, so to say."

A million questions were swarming in my head like angry, anxious bees. "How?"

"That's a long story."

"Nevermind, then, just tell me, did you know about Brandon?"

"I had my fears."

I felt dangerously close to tears again.

"Why didn't I do anything?" she said. "Because I spent years trying to change it. From the beginning, it was up to himself to shed his omnipotent gift, and *that* is a very hard thing to do."

She hands me a newspaper with tears brimming in her eyes. The headlines say "15-year-old Boy Commits Suicide in Local River."