**Drift**

Sarah Normandie

*Don’t get lost in the drift.* Those were the last words you said to me.

It was a Facebook comment. Six words followed by a smiley face emoji under the photo I’d posted of my car buried in snow. The smiley face was your trademark. You drew one on every single card you ever gave me.

I had no idea that in two days, you’d leave this world forever.

Your memory haunts me.

“Is this your sister?” A salesclerk asks. We’re at the mall, and you’re buying ten pairs of shoes to match your ten new skirts. It’s the late eighties, and I’m eleven. You’re twenty-three. You just got a new job as a secretary at a construction office. We laugh about how many shoes you’re buying. There is one pair of heels in every color, even red. I wonder why the salesclerk thinks we’re sisters because we look nothing alike. You have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I have blonde hair and blue eyes. We do, however, have matching frizzy perms held tight by Aqua net hairspray.

“Oh, no.” You smile. “That’s my niece. But you know, we really *are* more like sisters.”

“Or best friends,” I say. The salesclerk smiles.

It won’t be the last time someone will think we’re sisters. The word *aunt* never does you justice. You *are* my aunt, but we’ve grown up together, living in the same house. You sing me songs and make bubbles out of glycerin and dish soap. You clean up my scraped knees and rub them with aloe. You make the best chocolate fudge brownies.

But there are other times. Like when I’m nineteen, and no one believes me when I tell them you have a stash of Vodka under your kitchen sink and that you drink too much.

I couldn’t help you. I wanted to try. But I was young, and I could barely help myself.

You and I know the same creaks in the floor, the roll of the eye, the banter of words from your mother, my grandmother, a woman filled with her own complications marked from a lifetime of tragedy. She was fighting her own demons.

You always make things happy though. You have a smile like sunshine, rosy pink cheeks. You love Saturday Night Love and Steve Martin. You listen to Queen *and* Randy Travis. You teach me how to wear makeup and make me look like Madonna. You braid my hair like Boy George, and we laugh as we sing *Wake me up, before you go-go.* We eat bagels with cream cheese on the beach at sunrise. You rub baby oil on your skin and lay out in the back yard in your bikini. To this day, I can’t figure out how you didn’t burn.

I like to remember you like this. When we’d laugh hysterically at the kitchen table over whatever joke was cool at the time. You know, like, “*Well isn’t that special.”* When we’d ride in your truck, the radio turned up as we sang Bonnie Raitt’s, *Let’s give them something to talk about.* You had the loudest whistle at my graduations and school ceremonies. I loved to watch you draw.

When you lost half of your hair from the cancer treatment, I tried to make you feel better. *It’s a new style*, I said. You didn’t laugh. Just sort of smiled. You handed me a couple dollars so I could get a chocolate milkshake at the hospital café. I’d spent the day with you, watching soap operas and talk shows on the tiny television mounted on the dingy hospital room wall. We’d already ripped through two National Enquirers. You were getting tired and needed a nap.

I used to think it was the cancer that changed you. That, and burying your father, my grandfather, in between your treatments. Two cancer patients in the same house is a memory neither of us could forget.

But there was more.

I found your adoption papers hidden under your sweaters in the bottom draw of your bureau when I was fourteen. To this day, I can’t imagine finding out at 24 years old that I had been adopted. I guess when you had the cancer, they figured you should know.

You might have felt different, but I never saw you that way. I tried to tell you, but you didn’t listen. I gave up, and, instead, got lost counting your bottles—under the kitchen sink, in the pantry, in your sock drawer.

I’m sorry you weren’t my maid of honor.

There was a whole decade of drifting.

You paint my little girl’s toes and we eat eggs at the diner. Then you disappear. You hold my baby boy in your arms, but it will be the only time you meet him. The years blend and fly. You’re sick. You’re busy. But never too busy for booze or bonfires. I know because I’m the one that sees the receipts when you die.

*I just thought we had time.*

Today it’s snowing, and the drifts are covering my car, the same way it did in that old Facebook photo.

It’s not until today I understand. *Don’t get lost in the drift.*

I put on my boots and head outside. I look up at the gray sky. I lay down in the snow and make a snow angel, the way we always used to. I think about the years I’ve spent, drifting back and forth from anger to sadness, trying to make sense of us.

But not anymore.

I’m done drifting. Instead, I’ll carve out a new path. I’ll tell your story.

That there once lived one of the greatest women I ever knew. She had a smile like sunshine. She could draw almost anything and make bubbles out of glycerin and dish soap. She liked Saturday Night Live and Steve Martin. She had a hundred pairs of shoes, to match every outfit.

And oh, how she could make me laugh.