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## The Forerunner

My brother died, in the early hours of a Saturday morning, running, naked, arms outstretched, down the road into the path of an oncoming car. The car wasn't even going particularly fast. He died of concussion, later, on the way to hospital. He was seventeen. That made me the only son.

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They did an autopsy on him and that was when they found the traces of drugs in his body. The pathologist called my mother to ask if she knew that her son was a dope-fiend. I can see my mother now, cradling the telephone between head and shoulder, her glasses perched on the top of her head and her eyes fixed in the middle distance, thinking of something else. "It could have been worse," she said. The pathologist hung up, disgusted. (Later, he included this anecdote in his best selling memoirs.)

I knew what she was thinking of. She had just read a life of Marie Curie and she had told us about the part where Pierre Curie is in a road accident, trampled to death beneath a horse-drawn vehicle. For months, his wife kept the scraps of clothing smeared with the remnants of his brains, poor matted nerves, muscles and blood impressed onto threads. Recounting it, my mother went pale. My brother was unimpressed. "Ma, you're so morbid."

All the relatives came to the funeral, all the ones I

knew and hated, and some new ones I had never seen before but knew I would hate. They came to gloat over my mother. First my father (who had committed suicide a few months before my brother's death), now my brother: surely, now, she would betray some signs of being human? She did not. She sat through the funeral service, straight, composed, wearing what I call her Buddha look, made up of double-lidded, veiled eyes, an intimation of hidden secrets, a preternatural calm. I have seen the same transfixed, unblinking expression on the faces of lizards. When I was little, she could quell me simply by directing that stare at me. She did not cry.

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If my brother hadn't been my brother, I think I would have hated him.

Things came easily to him. Too easily. Exams, games, friends, my mother's wide-eyed, chiselled looks. He did everything well, but not too well; because of that, he could seem facile, a lightweight to some. "That daring young man on the flying trapeze," my mother called him once, satirically, and that was the family image of him – heedless, flyaway. "I don't know whom he takes after," my father used to say, meaning, my mother. I, on the other hand, take after my father. Even as a baby, I had a certain recognisable solidity.

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And of course there were the girls. When I was eleven and he was fourteen, we made a pact. If I would screen his calls for him, he would lend me the pornographic maga-

zines circulating like an underground river among the older boys in school. (The prefects ran the racket, their source being a fatherly bookseller in a second-hand bookshop in Bras Basah Road.) My mother could never be relied on to be either possessive or strict; she'd say, "Oh, hold on, dear," and my brother would be stuck for hours on end on the phone with some girl whom he couldn't remember but who claimed to have met him at the bus stop. Whole battalions of girls claimed to have met him at the bus stop. They fascinated me, these girls, with their long, silky fringes and belts pushed low over narrow hips, but I would never have dreamed of saying anything to them.

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My brother was an insomniac. In his whole life, I had never known him to sleep more than four hours a night. Often, it was less. Dark shadows circled his eyes: he looked perpetually hung-over, prematurely dissipated, irresistibly seedy.

He'd be up half the night, prowling about the flat, making surreptitious calls to friends, smoking incessantly. Sometimes he took long walks around the estate, sliding in at six in the morning, just in time for school. My mother never knew. She took a sleeping pill every night and went out like a light.

A few weeks before his death, my father, who'd magnanimously left home a year earlier when my mother said she couldn't stand to live with him any longer, came over and had a fight with my mother about this insomniac behaviour. According to my father, a friend of his had

driven past the estate the night before and had seen my brother picking the lock of a car. And then, my father said dramatically, he *got* in and *drove* off.

My mother pondered this, and turned to my brother. "Is this true?"

"Of course not."

"Well," said my mother. "He's denied it. So what do you want me to do?"

She was always edgy when my father visited: guilt makes you fidgety, she said once, plants a tightly knotted coil of tension in you.

My father said it was clear that she was incapable of controlling the children and that he was going to sue for custody, my God, he was sick and tired of this. "Go ahead," my mother said. "Just go ahead." She was, is, a Catholic, though she never goes to Mass. She refused to divorce my father, who, still madly in love with her, agreed to a judicial separation for the sake of theological propriety. To everybody, this was yet another example of my mother's high-handed irrationality. My mother liked to say, wryly, that you could take a woman out of the Catholic church but you couldn't take the Catholic out of the woman.

My father called her implacable. Cold as ice. Hard as granite. My mother wore her faraway Buddha look, and I could understand my father's frustration. My mother and brother were elusive, evasive: when you thought you had them in the palm of your hand, they had already fled, with a swift, unthinking ruthlessness. My parents' marriage had always been a struggle, my father struggling to pin

my mother down, my mother struggling to flee. Often, I had felt my mother's manic desperation, like that of an animal caught in a trap, willing to snap or chew a leg off in its single-minded desire to escape.

"Leave her alone," my brother said. My father hit him full across the face and he went down theatrically, like a ninepin. My mother snapped out of her gilded trance; I stood poised, ready to prevent a murder. Family life's better than Disneyland, my brother liked to say, there's never a dull moment. Magically, a red welt appeared across my brother's cheek.

"*Look* at him," said my father. "I mean, just *look* at him. He looks a mess. He's losing weight, he doesn't sleep, apparently. What sort of family is this, anyway?" To my brother, who was lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling and smiling beatifically: "Get up. You think this is some kind of game?"

"I've had enough of this," my mother said. She marched into the bedroom and locked the door.

My brother got up slowly, touching his cheek. "I think I'll wear this permanently. It's kind of cool. What do you think?"

My father sat down heavily, in the nearest chair. He looked old, defeated; for the first time I noticed that a whole new crop of white hairs had sprouted overnight on his head. "Promise me one thing," my father said. "Promise me you're not on drugs or anything stupid." He was a police superintendent in the narcotics unit. He was highly respected; he really was. It was only around his family that he wore the air of hurt bafflement that I'd come to asso-

ciate with him.

"Dad," my brother said. "I got all A's in the exams, remember? Come on. This is stupid. But I promise." You could see why old ladies would unhesitatingly entrust him with the money they had so cunningly stuffed into their mattresses.

My father gave us both a hard stare. "It's not easy being a father."

"No," we said in unison.

He looked towards my mother's bedroom, wistfully.

"Sometimes she stays in there for a whole day," I said.

"Why are all of you conspiring against me?" my father said. "Why do I get pushed out of my own home and continue paying the bills? What did I ever do?" He was shouting by now.

"Nothing," my brother said. It was meant to be soothing, but it came out different – accusatory. And we all knew, more or less, that that was the trouble. In anybody else's eyes, my father would have been the model parent and husband. But ordinariness, to my mother, in any shape, size or smell, was a death-knell. She would settle for nothing less than greatness. And it was no use expostulating, but who does she think she is? She didn't love him.

As he was about to go, he clapped my brother on the back. "So, tell me, did you really drive off in that car?"

"Dad, what do you take me for? One of those assholes you fuck about with during an interrogation?"

"*Watch* your language." He ruffled my hair (I hate that) and left.

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Soon after this, my father killed himself.

They get confused in my mind sometimes, the two funerals. I have dreams where I'm not sure whom all the people in black are mourning, and my brother drifts past, asking, "Am I dead?"

Of course there are some details that belong exclusively to either occasion. Like the rows of policeman in uniform at the service for my father. They sat, perspiring stiffly in the heat, and afterwards they shook my mother's hand, one by one, carefully avoiding her eyes. They knew about my father's personal life and they knew whom to blame.

The thing I remember about my brother's funeral were the girls. Tall girls, short girls, mini-skirted girls, girls in long shredded skirts and feathery scarves, self-consciously ethereal, hockey-playing girls with achingly sleek muscles. Skinny girls without figures, who huddled at the back of the church, hiding beneath their fringes, their long, slim legs tucked decorously under the seat, looking furtively around. "I didn't know he was a Catholic," they murmured. He wasn't. He was hedging his bets, or so he said.

All these girls were at the funeral. They all cried, silently, into handkerchiefs. As the cortege was leaving the church, one of them ran up to my mother, who was walking alone, a little ahead, and pressed something into her hand. It turned out to be a dried flower. She gazed at my mother directly, red-eyed. "He gave it to me," she said.

My mother turned on her the full, frightening serenity

of her Buddha look. "Thank you, dear."

Outside the church, the girls held a heated discussion. Should they or should they not go with the family to the Columbarium?

Most of them elected to go. They were incandescent, alight with self-inflicted grief; they were proud of that grief, jealous of anyone who tried to wrest it away from them. Many had hardly known my brother and I thought it very peculiar that anyone would want to enter this charged, infected atmosphere of mourning for no good reason. I said, "Hi," to one of the girls, and she gave me a look of horror, as if I had indecently propositioned her or something. I wanted to tell her that it was possible to be anaesthetised by grief, that I'd had an excess of it in the past year. Years later, I imagined, they'd still be talking about this day, with nostalgia for the time when they could still love, purely and fiercely, from afar. My brother, the icon. My little groupies, he'd call them, lovingly.

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Now and then I go to the Columbarium to put flowers in the little metal holder beside the stone tablets of my father and brother. It's a depressing place, I admit, miniature HDB grey blocks housing the ashes of the dead. My father and brother are placed side by side: my father's photograph shows him to be eternally forty-five, my brother is forever fourteen, gazing, wide-eyed and startled, at the camera. (After that, he refused to pose for photographs.) My mother never comes. I don't know why I do, unless it's a primitive suspicion that the dead are not really gone, that they need succour like everybody else.

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The only girl who didn't go to the funeral was Rachel. She was sent to stay with relatives in Israel, or so I'd heard; she was supposed to purge her mind of all that had happened. I could see her at the beach, in some zebra-striped bikini and a pair of the blackest Africa shades, her little mouth set in a straight line. She would be outwardly demure and inwardly seething, plotting her escape.

When Rachel appeared on the scene, I knew she was different, somehow. She was quite mad, for one thing, and that appealed to my brother. Any streak of insanity appealed to him. He told me the story of Rachel on a combined schools camping trip. The instructor had fried a couple of slugs, to show how one could survive in the wild without provisions, and passed them around for consumption. No one, not even the boys, would touch them, except Rachel, who swallowed one unblinkingly.

I was quite keen to meet his slug-eating girl, but when I did, I was disappointed. She was small and slender, with a halo of hair surrounding an angelic, heart-shaped face; she looked terribly fragile, like somebody capable of breathing her last at any moment. When she smiled, her eyes narrowed and almost closed altogether, and her face wore an expression which I recognised from reproductions of the Mona Lisa. She was half-Jewish, half-Chinese, and had already been expelled from one school for disruptive behaviour. Without her parents' knowledge, she smoked a joint every morning for breakfast.

She was only two years older than I was, but the gap seemed vast, unbridgeable. "Hello, kiddywinks," she'd say

when she saw me, and I'd go red all over. I didn't like her. She was dangerous.

The first time they made me try the stuff, nothing happened. Or rather, nothing seemed to happen. The three of us were sitting on the sofa, the two of them watching me benevolently, my brother's fingers entwined in Rachel's hair. "This is boring," I said. "You have to go with the flow," my brother said. They were both free falling, floating, moving in lunar time. I tried to get up to go to my room, and found I couldn't move. My legs wouldn't move. I broke out in a cold sweat; sweat was pouring off the bridge of my nose. "Hey, you guys," I said. And then I was sick all over. I was sick for the rest of the night.

"The stuff was too strong, I guess," my brother said, sorrowfully, after helping me to the bathroom for the fifth time and holding my head over the toilet bowl. But I knew that wasn't the real reason. I was meant for the straight and narrow. I had no wish to expand my horizons or climb onto higher planes of consciousness. I relished normality. It was just that, in my family, normality had been scuppered in its infancy.

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So anyway, there was Rachel and there was my brother and there didn't seem to be any room for me in between. I watched them together, and I knew they thought they were the favoured ones, the ones who could glide through barriers and emerge on the other side, intact, more alive. "They'll learn," said my mother, who viewed all my brother's amorous escapades with detachment.