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My Sister Flew on Broken Wings

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My sister Andrea was already thirteen years old when I first got to know of her existence, ten years younger than I. My father had kept her a secret from my siblings and me — odd considering he had three other children out of wedlock, one of whom grew up with us in the same household.

She was a very attractive girl, with smooth dark brown skin, large, deep-set eyes fringed with long lashes; a small, curvaceous figure and a firm polished manner of speaking. Years later, after we had been out of touch for several years and then resumed our relationship, that was one of the things that always stood out about her for me — her finished, articulate, manner of expression. So it was difficult to believe that beneath the cool, attractive and polished exterior lay a troubled young woman who abused illegal drugs.

Andrea was a bright woman and an avid reader, as her husband and the relatives on her mother's side of the family often said. She had completed two years of university in New York, pursuing a degree in psychology before she dropped out. "She could read between the lines so

well,” was how her ex-husband Anstey, who was himself a college graduate, described her to me one afternoon following her funeral.

The funeral was well attended and the turnout of people from her workplace and her son Philip’s school was very comforting. She had been a capable, lovely person, whose colleagues often asked her for advice. Unfortunately, a lifetime of abusing marijuana and then, briefly, cocaine had led to her becoming psychotic and, finally, suicidal, so that at the age of thirty she was dead.

At the funeral, Ian, the English owner of a luxury villa on Barbados’ west coast, gave the eulogy. He had met Andrea while she was working as a sales girl in the jewelry store at the luxury resort Sandy Lane. He had fallen for her and their friendship had developed to the point that he would send a chauffeur-driven car to take her to work. I met the chauffeur at the funeral, and she told me how Andrea always used to talk about me. That brought tears to my eyes. Revealingly, Ian told Andrea’s mother, “with all my money Andrea never asked me for anything.”

On both her mother’s and father’s side of the family there was a predisposition to psychosis. That reality meant that her choosing to use marijuana from the time she was about twelve years old would eventually lead to her becoming psychotic. However, she had prided herself on being ultra-cool whenever she was high on marijuana, a friend who used to smoke with her told me. In her late twenties, Andrea experimented with cocaine, which precipitated her first suicide attempt. I went

to see her in hospital after the suicide attempt and asked her “Why did you do it?” She never answered my question.

Over the years, I had often wondered why Andrea appeared so rudderless when she had so much potential. In her late teens, Andrea had entered a nation-wide beauty contest and won, and her face had been the front-page photograph of both local newspapers two days after the competition. As a young adult, she had had the friendship of worthwhile young women, one of whom was a young woman whose early life had been difficult but who was successfully holding down a job and was one semester away from completing her degree; another had married into a very well-to-do family who owned their own business.

Upon reflection, I realized her drug abuse and subsequent illness had made it impossible for her to complete anything she started: she had joined the school newspaper at secondary school and then abruptly without explanation abandoned it, and after divorcing her husband and dropping out of university she returned home and moved from job to job.

Following her death, I got to know Andrea’s mother, and I finally began to understand what might have lain at the root of her malaise. I realized my father’s departure from Barbados when she was a child had deprived her of the guidance and moral support of a parent she respected. She once told me how she would spend hours on the abandoned plantation our father had at one time owned where she felt close to him. With a mother

whom it was difficult to respect and with whom she fought constantly, she had tried to figure things out for herself. But she was too young and inexperienced, and, eventually, learning by trial and error exacted too heavy a toll on her emotionally and physically.

After the suicide attempt she had deteriorated from being a very attractive girl to a very plain one, but with the right medication and the help of her family she resumed grooming herself and got the job where she met Ian. However, in the course of their relationship, Ian also hurt her in some unexplained way and she stopped speaking to him. After a while, she stopped taking her medicine and her health steadily declined, and in the months prior to her death, Andrea spent long hours arguing with a male friend about whether she should commit suicide.

Finally, one afternoon she went walking by the seashore and never returned. Some days later, when her body washed ashore, it was found frozen in the attitude of a swimmer though Andrea had never learnt how to swim. It was her final act of defiance. The coroner's report confirmed that she had drowned, though she was so badly battered and bruised she was almost unrecognizable.

The drug abuse had taken its inevitable toll. But looking back, I realize her life was not a waste. She had produced Philip, a beautiful child with looks and intelligence like hers. Andrea's colleagues at the jewelry store, the final job where she had at last managed to settle, genuinely respected her. They had shed silent tears at her graveside.

I doubt there was anything any of us could have done to save Andrea. In the weeks before she died, Andrea phoned me repeatedly, but I was never home when she called. When I did get in touch and offered to come see her she had flatly refused. But I am comforted by the memory that some weeks before her death, having encountered her on a bus on her way to work, I had gone to sit with her and given her a hug. As Andrea drew to the end of her life she knew I loved her — and Andrea loved me.

Her life was not a failure. Though she never fulfilled her potential, she was someone people would remember with affection. Andrea had lived her life her way. And as in life, so in death, she had asserted her right to make her own choices, choices that had left her battered beyond repair but — finally — at peace.

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