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“The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

— Rumi

Stella had been working with Rachel every week for the last year. During one of their conversations, Stella mentioned that her brother, Michael, had died in a tragic car accident nineteen years before. “He died in 1983 when I was twenty-two years old. I was living with my mom and Michael while working at a local automotive store.”

“What happened?” Rachel asked.

Stella explained that at the time of his death, Michael had been an eighteen-year-old senior in high school, so she didn’t see him much. Lynn, her sister, was still in Nevada, using and dealing drugs at the age of twenty-seven while living with her little girl and the boyfriend whom she hadn’t married yet.

Stella saw Lynn at times, but not too often, and her mom was busy with her career as a wedding planner, so she wasn't around much either. Her parents had divorced in 1981, and soon after, her dad had moved to San Francisco with his new girlfriend, Susan. He'd started his own financial consulting business. Stella had visited him a few times after he moved. In late spring of that year, he'd called to say he'd had a heart attack and needed open heart surgery. He asked her to come so she could be with him before his surgery.

Stella guessed he was scared he might die. So she made arrangements with work to take the time off. Stella asked Michael if he wanted to go with, but he wanted to stay home and hang out with his friends. Michael wasn't close to their father. His high school graduation was only a few weeks away, of course. He didn't seem too concerned about the situation. Their mom, of course, didn't care one way or the other. Stella thought maybe she didn't care if her father died.

"When did you go to California?" Rachel asked.

"I flew out the night before my dad's surgery, and the next morning we woke up early so I could take him to the hospital to be prepped. I took my suitcase with me because I was scheduled to leave the next day; I figured I would just stay the night in the hospital with my dad. Before

the surgery, my dad lay in his hospital bed reading the Bible; I remembered thinking that was weird because I had never seen him read the Bible before.”

“Well, some people are private with their beliefs around religion.” Rachel said.

“My mom and dad were career-driven,” Stella continued, “so most of their time was spent working. When I was younger, we went to Mexico for a family vacation, but as Lynn and I became teenagers, we were basically left on our own. My mom paid a lot of attention to Michael, and my dad was working all the time.”

“How was it for you to see your dad in the hospital?” Rachel asked.

“During his surgery, I stayed in the waiting room, and I thought I might have fallen asleep because the only thing I remember was the nurse coming in to tell me that my dad was going to be all right. She told me that I could go see him in the Intensive Care Unit if I wanted, although it might make me uncomfortable because he had a lot of tubes coming out of his body. I just shrugged because I had lots of practice detaching from my feelings and pretending everything was just fine.

“I didn’t even recognize my dad when I came into Intensive Care. He

didn't look like himself anyway; he was all swollen and unresponsive.”

“After sleeping in the waiting room all night, I left California and flew home to Seattle. My boyfriend, Bradley, picked me up at the airport. We had plans to spend the weekend together just hanging out at his house. That night I was sitting on the couch when suddenly I felt really sick, as if someone had punched me in the stomach.”

“What did you do then?” asked Rachel, looking Stella in the eye.

“It was so bad I leaned over my knees and rocked back and forth for what seemed like hours. The deep pain and nausea gradually went away, and by that night, the stomach ache was gone, except that I felt hollow and still wrong somehow, like I was waiting for the pain to come back.”

“What did Bradley say to you?”

“He really wanted me to stay the night, but I wished I could go home. However, I'd promised to spend time with him, and I missed him.”

“The next day, some friends came over; it was one of those unusually hot spring days when you could wear a bathing suit in Seattle. We lazed around in the sunshine, listening to music and laughing, but underneath, I couldn't get over the feeling that I wanted to go home.”

“The phone rang and Bradley ran to answer it. He was gone for a long

time so I went in to see what was going on. When he saw me coming, he dropped his voice to a whisper, and he looked guilty, like he was hiding something. I could hear a girl's voice coming from the phone, so I sat down at the kitchen table and looked at him until he hung up.”

“What did you think was going on with Bradley?”

“I didn't know. That's why I asked him who he was talking to.

“Instead of answering, Bradley knelt down on one knee by my side and grabbed my hand. He stared at me and opened his mouth, but he said nothing. I saw his Adam's apple jumping in his throat. *Maybe he's going to dump me for another girl*, I thought, as that same feeling I'd had the night before started to come back into the pit of my stomach. Then I heard him whispering, but at first, the words made no sense.

“‘There's been a terrible accident,’ he said. ‘It's your brother—that was your neighbor; they're trying to get hold of your mom, but they can't find her—your brother is dead.’

“I felt like I was a long way away, and Bradley's words were all mixed up with the music coming from the backyard, faint and fading in and out, like I was going deaf. Even after Bradley stopped speaking, his words seemed to continue, echoing in my head. Then I heard screaming

ripping through the kitchen, and it took forever before I realized the screaming came from me.”

“‘We need to get you home,’ Bradley kept saying. ‘They can’t get hold of your mom; you need to find her and tell her about Michael.’ Those words repeated over and over in my head, all through the time it took to get my things, get into the car, and drive the two hours back to my house. Those words were all I was aware of, lodged in my mind like a pebble in a shoe. I had to tell my parents that their only son was dead. Me. I had to tell them.

“But I knew I couldn’t. By the time I was home, I’d remembered that my mom had gone with her current boyfriend somewhere for the weekend; they were sailing in the Puget Sound, but I knew she’d be home soon because it was Sunday afternoon and she’d be going to work the next day; my mom never missed work. *I can’t tell her, I can’t tell her*, kept thundering through my head. My mom adored Michael; she would hate me forever for telling her he was dead.”

“Did you have any other support from friends besides Bradley?” Rachel asked.

“Our neighbors were still at my house, trying to be there for me, but I hardly noticed them. When Stacy, my friend whom I’d known forever,

hugged me, it felt weird, as if a total stranger had just thrown her arms around me. I was consumed with fear. Soon my mom would be home and I would have to tell her, but I couldn't tell her, and I didn't know what to do.

“Finally I had an idea. I found my mom's address book and found the numbers of her best friends and therapist. In fact, my mom had met her friends in group therapy with this same therapist. I called them and told them what had happened and asked them to be there for my mom and tell her when she got home.

“Then I called Susan in California and told her what had happened. I asked her to tell my dad, but she couldn't do it, so I asked his doctor to tell him. He was still in Intensive Care, but I couldn't worry about him now.

“Just after it got dark, me, Bradley, Stacy, and my mom's friends heard her car pull up in the driveway. I immediately ran downstairs into my bathroom, where I sat on the toilet with my arms hugging my stomach. I heard the front door shut and muffled voices, and then I heard my mom say, ‘No. No. No.’ Each ‘No’ was getting louder, and then I heard a deep animal-like scream like you hear on the nature programs when an animal is killed. I was alone in the bathroom, crying and wishing it

was me who was dead.”

Rachel reached over to grab a tissue for Stella.

“Thank you. That night after everyone had finally left, my mom went to bed. She was exhausted and looked awful. I thought she’d take something to make her sleep, so I was surprised to hear her calling me to come into her room and sleep with her so we could comfort each other.

“I got out of bed and walked down the hall and climbed into bed with her.

“My mom commented on how this must be rough for me, but I was just worried about her. It’s funny, but I thought it was really my mom who needed comforting. It was the only time I could remember my mom showing me the nurturing side—the only time I had felt she needed or wanted me.

“The next day when we woke up, my mom told me, ‘I need you to go to the coroner’s office in Seattle with me to identify Michael.’ I told her I would.

“It had been only a few days since my dad’s surgery. He had gotten the okay from his doctor to fly to Seattle for the funeral, but he hadn’t

arrived yet. Nobody suggested asking Lynn to come; I wasn't sure if she had even been told yet. So there was only me and my mom. She seemed almost back to her normal self—all business, all orders, no feeling. Only her face looked like she had aged ten years in a night.

“Both Michael and his friend Steve were in the morgue. They had been in the backseat of the car, which had been traveling eighty miles an hour in a residential zone where the speed limit was twenty-five. The driver, who didn't go to the same high school, lost control of the car and it hit a tree, flipped upside down, and landed in the front yard of someone's house. There were small children living in that house, but luckily, they weren't playing outside at the time. Michael and Steve died instantly; the driver died on his way to the hospital, and the one other passenger walked away without a scratch. They had been partying all day down at the beach close to Seattle. Michael didn't even know the driver of the car; he'd just met him that night at a party. He and Steve had caught a ride home since the people they'd originally come with had already left. They were only a mile away from their home when they crashed. It was six o'clock on Sunday evening, the same time I got my sudden stomach ache.

“I didn't have to identify Michael in the morgue. I went into the room

with my mom, but she was the one who looked at him. My mom told me to stand by the wall.

“Then my mom went over to the body and looked down. ‘Yes, that’s my son,’ she said, as she walked back toward the door.

“Mom,’ I told her, ‘I don’t feel right about leaving him in this cold, empty place all by himself in that awful drawer.’ I was crying. I had never thought much about death, about what happens after you die—whether anything or nothing happens. To leave him there felt like abandoning him forever.

“Stella, let’s go,’ my mom said, grabbing my arm.

“My mom decided, without consulting my dad, to cremate Michael, and his body was sent to the local funeral home in Seattle. Making the decision, she stayed calm and authoritative like she was at work. Just before his cremation, we were allowed to go in the room to say goodbye. My mom went in first. She was only in there for a couple of seconds before she came out again, saying that the body in the room wasn’t her son. After a lot of confusion, they found out that when they went to identify the body, the coroner’s office had shown them Steve’s body instead because both bodies were so mangled they weren’t sure who was who. I was shocked that she had mistakenly identified the

body they showed her as Michael.

“Michael’s body was actually at another funeral home, and it took another day for the funeral homes to switch the bodies. Again we were allowed to say goodbye to Michael before he was cremated. I went in after my mother. I had never seen a dead body before and was nervous. I sat by Michael’s side and stared at him. It didn’t look like him. He was all swollen and gray, and there was a white sheet drawn up just underneath his chin. They had to do that because he had been decapitated during the car accident. I couldn’t quite believe that that body was really my brother, the brother who’d lived in our house for eighteen years, whom I had known through all the stages of his life. I was suddenly overcome by the love I’d had for him that I didn’t know was there, but that had probably been there all the time. I begged God to bring him back and made all sorts of promises like I would be a good girl and take care of my brother if only time could be pushed back. I felt so guilty that he was dead and I was alive and that I hadn’t loved him enough when he was there. I ran out of the room sobbing.”

Rachel had been quiet the whole time Stella spoke about her brother’s accident. “Stella, at the age you were, you showed so much courage and made some serious decisions regarding contacting your mom’s friends

to give her support.”

“Thank you,” said Stella. “At the time I felt like it was my entire fault. It sure has made an impact on my life for a long time. I want to heal this time in my life. It was very painful,” Stella said, wiping her tears.

Rachel slid over to Stella and wrapped her arms around her. “You will heal this when you’re ready. Let’s schedule next week.”