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Opening Extract from...

Mathilda Savitch

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I have a sister who died. Did I tell you this already? I did but you don't remember, you didn't understand the code.

My sister's name was Helene. Helene and Mathilda. Everyone always said we were the opposite of each other. Night and Day was the famous expression. I'm the younger one, but it still feels backwards that Helene died first.

She died a year ago, but in my mind sometimes it's five minutes. In the morning sometimes it hasn't even happened yet. For a second I'm confused, but then it all comes back. It happens again.

She was sixteen at the end. Practically seventeen, just a few months to go. But sometimes, the way she dressed, you'd think she was even older. Plus she had an excellent way of moving. A person who didn't know her might think she was showing off, but the truth is she just had a natural sway to her. And then add to that her legs. They went from here to

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Las Vegas, which is how Ma once described the length of them.

Some of the memories I have of Helene are from the beginning of my life, when I was a baby. Ma looks at me like I'm crazy when I tell her I remember the day Helene was carrying me, and then she started running and she climbed over a fence with me still in her arms.

"What fence?" my mother says.

"A white fence," I say.

When I say this my father puts his hand on my arm. "Stop," he says. Lately that's getting to be his favorite word.

I think about Helene a lot, but basically I'm not allowed to talk about her. To Ma and Da, I mean. Not that this is a rule. It's more like a law, I suppose.

The other memory I have is Helene and I are in a hole and it's dark and wet. Somehow we're upside down. I remember water getting in my mouth. Maybe we're in a well is my first thought.

"You never fell in a well," Ma says.

"What about a grave," I say, "or a ditch? People fall in holes all the time," I say.

Ma goes white like I'm the vampire of questions. My beautiful Da looks at me and I stop.

The thing is, Helene died from a train. That's the problem. She didn't jump, a man pushed her. We don't know who this man was and the police say, at this point, we probably never will.

I wasn't there when it happened. Neither were Ma and Da. Why she was at the train station is still a big question. A boyfriend is what I think. Helene had lots of them, sometimes even boys from other schools in other towns. She was

pretty popular. She had red hair, it was the most amazing hair in the world.

It happened on a Wednesday, which is such an ordinary day. It happened in the middle of the afternoon. A man pushed Helene in front of a train, it's unbelievable. I always think it's a mistake. But then it proves to be correct.

Do you believe in curses? That there can be a curse on a person or on a bunch of people at the same time, like a family curse? How will we all die? I wonder. And when?

Helene was going to be a singer. She was a singer. There are recordings. Da made them on his old tape recorder. No one can listen to them now, they're the most dangerous thing in the world. On one of the tapes it's Da singing some stupid song with Helene. Both of them are laughing as much as singing. If you listened to it now, it would be Da singing with a ghost. The laughing would kill you.

Ma says the recordings are lost but I know where she keeps them. Plus, I have things hidden too. In my room, under my bed, I have some of Helene's school notebooks. I have letters and drawings and birthday cards. I also have some e-mails she printed out. And there's tons of stuff still left in her room. A person, even a sixteen-year-old, leaves a lot of stuff behind. For a long time I couldn't look at any of it, but then I realized there might be clues. I've started to spend more time in H's room, but only when I'm alone in the house. It's a better room than mine and I wouldn't mind living there. Ma would never allow it though. Sometimes I leave the door to H's room open, even though I know it irritates her.

I remember once, when I was little, I was looking out H's

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window and I saw a hummingbird. Come quick, I said, but by the time Helene came over it was gone. Maybe it'll come back, she said, and we both stayed by the window for almost a minute, waiting. I guess we didn't have anything better to do. When I think of the two of us standing there, waiting for that stupid bird, it drives me crazy for some reason. I feel like screaming.

Why does a person push another person in front of a train? Does it have a meaning for the person, the pusher? The explanation of most people is madman. The voices of demons telling him to do it. But how did he get away is my question. It doesn't make sense. Two men at the train station said they tried to grab him but he slipped away. He just pushed her and then he took off. The police say it happens all the time.

In my mind it's almost as if the man disappeared after he did it. Like he had one job on Earth. To kill Helene. And after that there was nothing left for him to do but vanish.

I hate him. The feeling is tremendous. I've never felt anything like it. If we knew who the man was he'd be in jail. We could go to the jail and ask him questions. Ma and Da wouldn't but I would. I would be all over him. Even if it was the voices of demons I would pull the demons out of him and make them explain. I would use every bit of my magic.

Next Thursday it will be the day Helene died all over again. It'll be exactly one year. I marked it in my calendar like this: H.S.S.H. Which is Helene's initials the right way and then backwards. If you stare at the letters it's almost like someone telling you to be quiet. Ma and Da haven't said anything about the big day. I want H.S.S.H. to be a day we'll

all remember. If Ma and Da think I'm going to ignore it, they've got another thing coming.

The thing is, Helene was supposed to live forever. That's just the kind of person she was. You always felt she had some secret power that was going to make her immortal. I wish I could describe to you the color of her hair but there's nothing to compare it to.

If the man was caught he'd probably be electrocuted. But electricity doesn't kill demons as far as I know.

People say the hair was like pennies, but it was better than that.

And she smelled like lemons. When I said this out loud once, Ma looked away, but Da said he had to agree. He whispered in my ear. He said I was right. He said it was lemons all the way.