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Tell the Wolves I'm Home

Written by Carol Rifka Brunt

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Tell the
Wolves I'm
Home

Carol Rifka Brunt

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For Maddy, Oakley, and Julia

Tell the Wolves I'm Home

One

My sister Greta and I were having our portrait painted by our uncle Finn that afternoon because he knew he was dying. This was after I understood that I wasn't going to grow up and move into his apartment and live there with him for the rest of my life. After I stopped believing that the AIDS thing was all some kind of big mistake. When he first asked, my mother said no. She said there was something macabre about it. When she thought of the two of us sitting in Finn's apartment with its huge windows and the scent of lavender and orange, when she thought of him looking at us like it might be the last time he would see us, she couldn't bear it. And, she said, it was a long drive from northern Westchester all the way into Manhattan. She crossed her arms over her chest, looked right into Finn's bird-blue eyes, and told him it was just hard to find the time these days.

"Tell me about it," he said.

That's what broke her.

I'm fifteen now, but I was still fourteen that afternoon. Greta was sixteen. It was 1986, late December, and we'd been going to Finn's one Sunday afternoon a month for the last six months. It was always just my mother, Greta, and me. My father never came, and he was right not to. He wasn't part of it.

I sat in the back row of seats in the minivan. Greta sat in the row in front of me. I tried to arrange it like that so I could stare at her without

her knowing it. Watching people is a good hobby, but you have to be careful about it. You can't let people catch you staring at them. If people catch you, they treat you like a first-class criminal. And maybe they're right to do that. Maybe it should be a crime to try to see things about people they don't want you to see. With Greta, I liked to watch the way her dark, sleek hair reflected the sun and the way the ends of her glasses looked like two little lost tears hiding just behind her ears.

My mother had on KICK FM, the country station, and even though I don't really like country music, sometimes, if you let it, the sound of all those people singing their hearts out can bring to mind big old family barbecues in the backyard and snowy hillsides with kids sledding and Thanksgiving dinners. Wholesome stuff. That's why my mother liked to listen to it on the way to Finn's.

Nobody talked much on those trips to the city. It was just the smooth glide of the van and the croony country music and the gray Hudson River with hulking gray New Jersey on the other side of it. I kept my eyes on Greta the whole time, because it stopped me from thinking about Finn too much.

The last time we'd visited was a rainy Sunday in November. Finn had always been slight—like Greta, like my mother, like I wished I was—but on that visit I saw that he'd moved into a whole new category of skinny. His belts were all too big, so instead he'd knotted an emerald-green necktie around his waist. I was staring at that tie, wondering when he might have worn it last, trying to imagine what kind of occasion would have been right for something so bright and iridescent, when suddenly Finn looked up from the painting, brush midair, and said to us, "It won't be long now."

Greta and I nodded, even though neither of us knew whether he meant the painting or him dying. Later, at home, I told my mother he looked like a deflated balloon. Greta said he looked like a small gray moth wrapped in a gray spider's web. That's because everything about Greta is more beautiful, even the way she says things.

It was December now, the week before Christmas, and we were stuck in traffic near the George Washington Bridge. Greta turned around in her seat to look at me. She gave me a twisty little smile and

reached into her coat pocket to pull out a scrap of mistletoe. She'd done this for the last two Christmases, carried a piece of mistletoe around to pounce on people with. She took it to school with her and terrorized us at home with it. Her favorite trick was to sneak up behind our parents and then leap up to hold it over their heads. They were not the kind to show affection out in the open, which is why Greta loved to make them do it. In the van, Greta waved the mistletoe around in the air, brushing it right up into my face.

"You wait, June," she said. "I'll hold this over you and Uncle Finn and then what'll you do?" She smiled at me, waiting.

I knew what she was thinking. I'd have to be unkind to Finn or risk catching AIDS, and she wanted to watch me decide. Greta knew the kind of friend Finn was to me. She knew that he took me to art galleries, that he taught me how to soften my drawings of faces just by rubbing a finger along the pencil lines. She knew that she wasn't part of any of that.

I shrugged. "He'll only kiss my cheek."

But even as I said it, I thought of how Finn's lips were always chapped to shreds now. How sometimes there would be little cracks where they'd started to bleed.

Greta leaned in, resting her arms on the back of her seat.

"Yeah, but how do you know that the germs from a kiss can't seep in through the skin of your cheek? How can you be sure they can't somehow swim into your blood right through your open pores?"

I didn't know. And I didn't want to die. I didn't want to turn gray.

I shrugged again. Greta turned around in her seat, but even from behind I could tell she was smiling.

It started to sleet, and the little nuggets of wet ice splatted against the window as we drove through the streets of the city. I tried to think of something good to say back to Greta, something to let her know that Finn would never put me in danger. I thought about all the things Greta didn't know about Finn. Like the way he'd let me know the portrait was just an excuse. How he'd seen the look on my face the very first time we'd gone down for the painting sessions. How he'd waited for my mother and Greta to go ahead into the living room, and in that moment, when it was only the two of us in the narrow hallway

inside Finn's apartment door, he'd put his hand on my shoulder, leaned in, and whispered in my ear, "How else could I get all these Sundays with you, Crocodile?"

But that was something I would never tell Greta. Instead, when we were in the dim parking garage, climbing out of the van, I blurted out, "Anyway, skin's waterproof."

Greta pressed her door closed gently, then walked around the van to my side. She stood there for a few seconds, staring at me. At my big, clumsy body. She tugged the straps of her backpack tight against her little sparrow's shoulders and shook her head.

"Believe what you want," she said, turning away and heading for the stairs.

But that was impossible and Greta knew it. You could try to believe what you wanted, but it never worked. Your brain and your heart decided what you were going to believe and that was that. Whether you liked it or not.

My mother spent the hours at Uncle Finn's in his kitchen, making pots of tea for us in a magnificent Russian teapot Finn had that was colored gold and red and blue with little dancing bears etched around the sides. Finn said that pot was reserved for serving tea to his favorite people. It was always waiting for us when we came. From the living room we could hear my mother organizing Finn's cabinets, taking out jars and cans, plates and mugs, and loading them back in again. Every once in a while she'd come out to give us tea, which would usually go cold because Finn was busy painting and Greta and I weren't allowed to move. All those Sundays, my mother hardly looked at Finn. It was obvious that she was being broken up into pieces about her only brother dying. But sometimes I thought there was more. She also never looked at the painting. She'd come out and set the teapot down and walk right past the easel, craning her head away. Sometimes I thought it wasn't Finn at all. Sometimes it felt like it was the canvas and brushes and paint she was trying not to see.

That afternoon we sat for an hour and a half while Finn painted us. He had on Mozart's *Requiem*, which Finn and I both loved. Even though

I don't believe in God, last year I convinced my mother to let me join the Catholic church choir in our town just so I could sing the Mozart *Kyrie* at Easter. I can't even really sing, but the thing is, if you close your eyes when you sing in Latin, and if you stand right at the back so you can keep one hand against the cold stone wall of the church, you can pretend you're in the Middle Ages. That's why I did it. That's what I was in it for.

The *Requiem* was a secret between me and Finn. Just the two of us. We didn't even need to look at each other when he put it on. We both understood. He'd taken me to a concert at a beautiful church on 84th Street once and told me to close my eyes and listen. That's when I first heard it. That's when I first fell in love with that music.

"It creeps up on you, doesn't it," he'd said. "It lulls you into thinking it's pleasant and harmless, it bumbles along, and then all of a sudden, boom, there it is rising up all menacing. All big drums and high screaming strings and deep dark voices. Then just as fast it backs right down again. See, Crocodile? See?"

Crocodile was a name Finn invented for me because he said I was like something from another time that lurked around, watching and waiting, before I made my mind up about things. I loved when he called me that. He sat in that church, trying to make sure I understood the music. "See?" he said again.

And I did see. At least I thought I saw. Or maybe I only pretended I did, because the last thing I ever wanted was for Finn to think I was stupid.

That afternoon the *Requiem* floated over all the beautiful things in Finn's apartment. His soft Turkish carpets. The old silk top hat with the worn side to the wall. That big old Mason jar filled to the top with every possible color and pattern of guitar pick. Guitar pickles, Finn called them, because he kept them in that canning jar. The music floated right down the hallway, past Finn's bedroom door, which was closed, private, like it always was. My mother and Greta didn't seem to notice the way Finn's lips moved along with the music—*voca me cum benedictus . . . gere curam mei finis . . .* They had no idea they were even listening to a death song, which was a good thing, because if my

mother had known what that music was, she would have turned it right off. Right. Off.

After a while, Finn turned the canvas around so we could see what he'd done. It was a big deal because it was the first time he'd let us see the actual painting.

"Take a closer look, girls," he said. He never talked while he worked, so when he finally spoke, his voice was a thin, dry whisper. A flicker of embarrassment shot across his face, then he reached for a cup of cold tea, took a sip, and cleared his throat. "Danni, you too—come in, have a look."

My mother didn't answer, so Finn called into the kitchen again. "Come on. Just for a second. I want to see what you think."

"Later," she called back. "I'm in the middle of something."

Finn kept looking toward the kitchen like he was hoping maybe she would change her mind. When it was obvious she wasn't going to, he frowned, then turned to stare at the canvas again.

He pushed himself up from the old blue chair he always painted in, wincing as he held on to it for a second, steadying himself. He took a step away and I could see that, other than the green tie at his waist, the only color Finn had was in the little splotches of paint all over his white smock. The colors of me and Greta. I felt like grabbing the paintbrush right out of his hand so I could color him in, paint him back to his old self.

"Thank God for that," Greta said, stretching her arms way above her head and giving her hair a shake.

I stared at the portrait. I saw that Finn had put me slightly in the foreground even though we weren't sitting that way, and I smiled.

"It's not done . . . is it?" I asked.

Finn came over and stood next to me. He tilted his head and looked at the portrait, at the painted Greta, then at the painted me. He squinted, looking right into the eyes of that other me. He leaned in so his face almost touched the wet canvas, and I felt goose bumps prickle on my arm.

"No," he said, shaking his head, still staring at the portrait. "Not quite. Do you see? There's something missing. Maybe something in

the background . . . maybe a little more with the hair. What do you think?"

I breathed out and relaxed my chest, unable to hold back a smile. I nodded hard. "I think so too. I think we should come a few more times."

Finn smiled back and rubbed his pale hand across his pale forehead. "Yes. A few more," he said.

He asked us what we thought of the painting so far. I said it was fantastic and Greta didn't say anything. Her back was turned to us. She wasn't even looking at the painting. Both her hands were in her pockets, and when she twisted slowly around, her face was blank. That's something about Greta. She can hide everything she's thinking. The next thing I knew she'd pulled out her mistletoe and was standing there holding it up in one hand. She waved it in an arc like she was cutting the air above our heads, like she was holding something more than just a scrap of Christmas leaves and berries. Finn and I both looked up and my heart seized. We looked at each other for the amount of time that's maybe one grain of sand in an hourglass or one drop of water from a leaky tap, and Finn, *my* uncle Finn, read me—*snap*—like that. In that tiny slice of a second, he saw I was afraid, and he bent my head down and kissed the top of my hair with such a light touch it could have been a butterfly landing.

On the ride home I asked Greta if she thought you could catch AIDS from hair. She shrugged, then turned and stared out the window for the rest of the drive.

I shampooed my hair three times that night. Then I wrapped myself in towels and crawled under my blankets and tried to sleep. I counted sheep and stars and blades of grass, but nothing worked. All I could think of again and again was Finn. I thought about his soft kiss. I thought about how just for a second, just as he'd leaned in to me, AIDS and Greta and my mother had disappeared from the room. It was only Finn and me in that tiniest of tiny moments, and before I could stop myself I wondered what it might be like if he really did kiss my lips. I know how gross that is, how revolting, but I want to tell the truth, and

the truth is that I lay in bed that night imagining Finn's kiss. I lay in bed thinking about everything in my heart that was possible and impossible, right and wrong, sayable and unsayable, and when all those thoughts were gone there was only one thing left: how terribly much I was going to miss my uncle Finn.