

CATHERINE BROWN

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## TWO SISTERS

### **just the facts**

On Easter Sunday, Maude Calloway, 55, and her sister Emmy Schmidt, 53, were killed in a head-on automobile collision on an empty stretch of road just outside of Eunice, Louisiana. The sisters were traveling alone, in separate cars, and actually ran *into each other*. They lived more than 70 miles apart, were not traveling to visit each other, and in fact had not spoken in several months. The cause of the crash remains uncertain; road conditions that Sunday were good, and that particular section of Highway 41 is wide and straight. Although there were no witnesses, the Louisiana Highway Patrol reported that, based upon the complex pattern of tread marks at the scene, one of the cars accelerated less than 200 yards from the other.

### **what they were thinking**

Emmy isn't thinking about anything in particular except the white clouds stretching across the sky in every direction, and how peaceful they look. They remind her of the sweet billowy top of the lemon meringue pie that her mother used to make. Emmy tried for years to get her mother to write the recipe down, but now it's too late. When she sees Maude's car rushing toward her, she honks her horn and swerves wildly to the right, but the blue Camry keeps coming straight at her. "Maude?" She has enough time to say it twice. "Maude?"

Maude is doing what she always does when she has a moment to herself: making lists. Some of the lists are practical, like what she needs to pack for her trip to Pensacola to see her cousin Gem the following weekend, and others are pointless, like which families—

the Reillys, the Murdochs, and the Chases, for starters – weren't in their pews for the 9am Easter Sunday service. There is nothing to do with this information, except maybe allow herself some gossip about it with one or two members of the Altar Guild, but Maude just likes cataloguing things.

Only a few of her lists ever get written down, but tucked into one of the drawers of her desk, in the kitchen alcove that she thinks of as her office, is a List of Lists, a reminder of all the hard work she's put in over the years, keeping track of everything.

Suddenly, Emmy's old white Escort looms up, in the fat middle of Maude's field of vision. Emmy's hogging the road, straddling the white stripe like she always does. She drives like the road was laid down especially for her, and will evaporate after she's through with it. She's always taken her happiness from the strangest things, things that normal people don't even think about, and it drives Maude crazy.

Maude remembers then the first list she ever kept, the one that got her started on her lifetime's work: *Things I Hate About My Sister*.

### **their bodies**

Emmy is skinny, always been as skinny as a pullet. False teeth. Short thinning reddish hair, long rabbit feet. A slumped rounded belly on a bony frame, an ache in her right shoulder from working the line at the Singer Sewing Machine factory all these years, ever since her husband Dex took off.

Maude is doughier, all over. Left breast gone, for ten years. She told no one except her mother and her husband Alton, and now only Alton remembers. She's kept her body a secret for so long that hiding is now ingrained. Even her daughter Johanna knows she can't come into the room when her mother is changing or taking a shower. The scar is no longer reddened but still rough, a knot she can feel through her clothes. She had radiation, and then for six months Alton drove her to Baton Rouge every other week for chemo.

To the few who asked, she said that she and Alton were taking a gardening class together. Now too much time has passed to tell anyone the truth.

It is a great point of pride with her that although she is older, she still has most of her teeth, unlike Emmy, who was profligate and lost hers. Wasted them, like she did so many things in life. Maude's hair is dyed matte black and is much thicker than Emmy's, another point of pride.

### **perhaps**

Maude Calloway and Emmy Schmidt are not speaking to each other, haven't spoken since just after Christmas, because of Katie, their mother. Katie lives in a nursing home in Eunice and is in fine health except for incontinence and no memory of anything except TV sitcoms and game shows.

She'll celebrate her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Family from all over the state will gather to honor the tiny woman. Maude and Emmy just can't agree about where to have the party.

### **their next-to-last conversation**

The day after Christmas. Even though Alton had a terrible cold, Maude bailed Katie out of the nursing home for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, driving her back to Eunice early on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>. She unpacked Katie's few gifts – a soft pink bathrobe and matching slippers from her and Alton, a Walkman from Emmy (pointless, Maude thought) – in her mother's spartan room and helped her back downstairs to the lounge. It was slow going, because Katie brought her walker to a halt every few yards, turning to ask Maude sweetly, "What's on, do you know?"

Finally her mother was hunkered close to the set in front of Regis and Kathy. Maude went to her car and dialed her sister on the cell phone that her daughter Johanna had given her for Christmas:

"I wish you'd driven over this morning; Mama was hoping to see you." She'd started speaking the instant the ringing stopped.

"Who's this?" Emmy yawned.

"I said, Mama missed you. You should have spent the—"

"Mama *missed* me?" Emmy giggled. "C'mon, Maude, she hasn't missed anyone except Alex Trebec in about three years."

"If you'd stayed here like I asked, we could have sat up late and talked." Maude's left palm pushed against the steering wheel, locking her elbow, and the car swerved toward the shoulder. "We don't talk that much any more. And then you could have told her goodbye this morning."

"Goodbye, hello, have a cigar, right?" Emmy giggled again. "What difference does it make to her, Maude? And besides, I'll see her later this week. I'm taking her some of my black-eyed peas for New Year's."

### **what they think is funny**

Emmy: all the usual things: babies just learning to walk, old Bugs Bunny Cartoons, Johnny Carson before he quit, knock-knock jokes, the way the bank manager walks down the street as though something was stuck in his rear end, anything her son Josh says.

Maude: Jerry Springer, people getting tongue-tied or making Freudian slips or having temper tantrums, people rendered speechless by surprise.

### **the town**

In the absence of any real information, people make things up:

"Emmy had that old terrible car. Maybe the brakes failed."

"It was broad daylight, I know, but I heard that Maude fell asleep. She pushes herself so hard, always over there at the church, and then driving all that way to visit her mother twice a week."

"Not to speak ill, but Emmy wasn't the brightest candle in the bunch, was she? Maude did more for her over the years than most

people'll ever know."

"Alton's just broken, a broken man now. He was always so good to Emmy, too."

### **long ago**

"Emmy, you are going to fail 10<sup>th</sup> grade." Maude pushed her glasses up her nose. "They'll put you in the "Specials" room with Tommy Hughes and Grace Crenshaw. Grace eats her own boogers. Would you like that?"

"I'm not reading it, Maudie." Emmy bit into an apple and propped her elbow on the crooked spine of the book that lay, spread-eagled and face down, on the kitchen table: *Wuthering Heights*. "It has a sad ending, and I don't like sad endings. Mama won't let them keep me back."

"Mama will not always be here to pick up every little thing that falls in your path, Emmy!" Maude straightened the notebooks and papers in front of her into a neat stack.

"I know that," Emmy said. "But she's here *now*, isn't she?"

### **before the funeral, Emmy's children in her kitchen**

Two Dunkin Donuts coffees, Betsy's black and Josh's with lots of milk and sugar. Without their mother inside it the house is shabby. The furniture is old and drooping, and every room needs paint or wallpaper or some new thing to enliven it. Under her single bed, in a yellow plastic storage box, is her will, along with all of her other important papers (marriage license, notification of divorce, the deeds to the house and the land and the insurance and and and. The leavings of a person who had no intention of leaving any time soon).

"You could live here," Betsy says. The house is out in the country and not convenient for either of them, but Josh has lots of college debt and could use the money he'd save on rent.

"No, this place is Mama's." He rubs his hand over the red oil-cloth on the kitchen table. Josh and Betsy have never lived in this

house; Emmy moved into it only after her mother became too confused to live on her own.

The children move softly from room to room, picking out only a few of their mother's personal things to take away. Painted china plates from the hutch in the dining room, a silver plate pitcher, some costume jewelry.

Emmy has lived here as she always lived – lightly – and her own things are now so mingled with her mother's that it's impossible for her children to tell what belonged to whom.

For her cousin Johanna, Maude's daughter, Betsy takes a cameo brooch. "I think I'm supposed to say, 'Mama would have wanted her to have it,'" Betsy says, knowing it isn't quite true. Johanna will have all of her mother's things, a houseful of cut crystal and antique rugs, soon enough. More importantly, their mother wasn't the kind of person to plan that far ahead, especially about something so solemn.

### **their best memories**

Maude: the November day that Johanna was born. Her swollen feet, wet leaves sticking to her handsome new pumps while she waits for Alton to park the car. Even going to the hospital to have her baby, she had taken the time to put on panty hose.

A difficult labor and delivery, rain squalling against the windows. Alton smoking and cowering like a dog at the edge of the hospital parking lot, too squeamish to come up to the waiting room. When Johanna at last arrived, red and wrinkled and screaming, Maude realized that she finally had something that was hers alone.

Emmy: her children, her mother when she was still herself, sunset, fried perch.

### **their last conversation**

Five days after the earlier one, and also by phone.

“Are you eating supper?” Maude’s voice was hoarse. “What’s all that noise?”

“Sorry, Maudie.” More crunching sounds. “Do you want me to call you back when I’m done?”

“No, that’s okay. This won’t take too long.” She tapped her pencil on the list in her lap. “Listen, this spring is Mama’s 80<sup>th</sup>, and I want us to throw a party for her—”

“Oh, Maudie, she’ll love it!” The chewing stopped. “I mean, she won’t know who anyone is, but she’ll for sure know it’s for *her*, all those people gathered around just for her. And, if we have it here, the kids can—”

“Emily, don’t you think your house is—”

“My house is what?”

“This house is bigger, that’s all.” Her pencil tapped in short frantic bursts. “And Alton and I would love to have everyone.”

“Maude, please.” Emmy held the receiver in her right hand and rubbed her arthritic shoulder with her left. The winter light revealed the frayed seams and yellowing stains on the kitchen’s magnolia-patterned wallpaper. “Alton hates company. And if it’s here, the kids can swim in the creek. Mama might remember that this was her house, once.”

“You’re not using your head, Em.” Maude’s eyes were squeezed shut, a little moisture at the outside corners. “How in the world would you make food for fifty people in that kitchen?”

“People would bring stuff, we’d manage. We all had parties here when this was *Mama’s* house,” she said, and hung up.

### **their hopes**

Emmy: to get Katie out of the nursing home. Emmy didn’t have enough pension to retire and take care of her, and private nursing care was too expensive. Working full-time and living in her mother’s house, Emmy was able to save more than half her salary each month.

But at the time of the accident she still had nowhere near enough to bail her mother out for good.

Maude: that her mother might regain her senses long enough to recognize her oldest daughter *just one time* before she died. That during that moment of clarity she would promise Maude that she had loved her daughters equally, always.

### **at the funeral**

Betsy and Josh help Johanna guide her father into a pew. After the crash, Alton brought the heavy, three-footed cane he'd bought after his knee surgery up from the basement, and he hasn't let go of it since. The organist switches from Bach prelude to *The Saints of God*, and the older man's shoulders hump up and down. Josh puts a clean handkerchief into his uncle's spotted, trembling hand, and pats his sister's arm.

The three children had agreed on the joint funeral; Johanna didn't consult her father. When she'd taken him out to lunch the day the ashes came back from the crematorium, he stood at the deli counter for ten minutes, unable to decide between turkey and ham.

The wobbly pews are lined with all of the people who would have been invited to Katie's birthday party: lanky backwoods nephews in unironed shirts and suits from Goodwill, stern and silent uncles. Katie's twin sisters, three years older but without any mental impairments whatsoever, sit frail and angry in the front row, alone except for the cousin who drove them over from Beaumont.

Only Katie herself is missing, spared one last chance to say goodbye to her two daughters, of whom she never speaks. Everyone agreed it was the right choice. Katie can't sit still for very long, unless she's in front of a TV and one of her favorite programs is on.

And Katie loves music – when it began, she would have sung along, whether it was a hymn or something instrumental. Katie sings all songs the same way now: “La, la, la la la,” very loud.



**then, finally**

Emmy is headed into Eunice to see her mother. Maude's on her way home after being at the nursing home for less than half an hour. Visiting hours began at noon; Maude was knocking on the home's locked front doors at 12:02.

She brushed past the aide who'd unlocked the door and took the elevator to the second floor. When the doors opened there was Katie, wearing a bright red scarf that Maude didn't recognize, and the headset to the Walkman around her neck like a necklace. The body of the Walkman sat snugly on the arm of Katie's walker, secured by its Velcro strap.

"Oh, hi," Katie said. "Do you know what's on?"

"It's Easter, Mama, no game shows right now." She took her mother's soft upper arm and tried gently to turn her around. "Can we go sit in your room for a little while?"

"Isn't it time for *Bewitched*?" Katie eyed her suspiciously. But Maude didn't let go, and Katie eventually allowed herself to be herded back to Room 224.

Sunlight streamed into the room through the dusty green mini-blinds. Katie's bed was neatly made, the corners tucked in hospital-style; the sun made a hot puddle in the center of the tan chenille bedspread. Katie's roommate Noreen was still asleep, her back to the room. Her two hearing aids sat on the night stand next to the bed; Maude didn't bother to lower her voice.

Maude pulled the only armchair to her mother's side of the room and settled her mother into it. She leaned back against the bed. "Mama, Emmy and I want to have a party for you. A birthday party."

"How nice!" her mother said. "Who's Emmy?"

"Emmy and I are your daughters, Mama." Maude flattened her palm against the empty left side of her chest and touched the secret that her mother no longer shared with her. "It's your 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, and we want to have a party for you."

“I’ll be 74 on the first of May. May Day!” Katie squinted up at her daughter through her thick glasses, and pawed the air beside the chair, her bony hand in an absent-minded search for the walker. “And besides, you’re not Maude. I don’t know who you are, but you’re too awful sad to be my Maudie.”

### **what happens next**

There is no one left to host a party for Katie. The grandchildren bring balloons and flowers and bottles of sparkling apple cider to the nursing home, and put pink crepe paper streamers around the windows in the TV lounge, but nobody comes. The uncles and nephews don’t want to make another long drive so soon after the funeral, and the cousin who drove Katie’s twin sisters from Texas is not available. One of the aides has made her a chocolate cake, but Katie forgets again and again that it’s her birthday. She falls asleep that evening with dry crumbles of icing at the corners of her mouth.

### **their fears**

Emmy: That her husband might show up and want something from her, after twenty years’ absence. Centipedes. That when the time comes her son and daughter won’t know how to be happily married, since they never saw it done. That Mr. Kramer, who’s in her Adult Bible Study group, will try to ask her on a date. That someone will serve olive loaf at Bible Study. That her mother will suffer a long slow painful death. And sometimes, when her dream self runs young and strong through a sun-studded hay field, that her sister will catch her.

Maude: That Alton will die. That Emmy will have been right, about everything.

### **it could even be that**

It went the other way. Emmy is a deeply kind person and Maude has been miserable for as long as Emmy can remember. Emmy re-

ally wants to have the party but in the end she would have given in just to make Maude happy. But perhaps before she got to that point she saw how frayed and desperate Maude looked behind the wheel and decided to put her out of her misery. As always, Emmy was profligate. With everything. She never gave a thought to what would happen to her.