

Sarah

Here's how Sarah told herself the story.

When she was six and Sadie was ten, they played outside all of the time—two little girls with about *this* much energy and no sense of boundaries and the blessing of their parents to explore the world. Because you didn't become an appellate judge or vice president at an investment firm by ducking your head and letting the world skate by outside. You were under an obligation, their dad would to say, to stick your nose in things. Stir the pot. Shake the cage. And the process started by stepping through the front door and seeing what was going on.

They didn't need much encouragement. Like, any at all. Both Sarah and Sadie were athletic in their own ways—Sadie lanky and fast, Sarah a spark plug. During weekends and summer breaks, they'd take off after breakfast (after ridding the table, naturally), come home for lunch, and straggle home for dinner, usually late. The parts in between were filled with exploring the woods around their house—finding salamanders and toads, climbing trees, and playing George from *George of the Jungle*, the last movie the family had seen.

That had been before Christmas and they hadn't seen a movie since. Sadie said it was because momma had said Brendan Fraser was kind of cute, usually after he had appeared onscreen wearing what looked like a bathing suit and not much else. Daddy would scowl, Momma would raise an eyebrow, Sadie would giggle, and Sarah's ears would burn while she counted the long seconds until they got back to the part where he swung on a vine and hit a tree.

They were playing *Jungle*, in fact, that day. Or trying to. Vines like the ones you found in George's woods didn't grow in rural Maryland. A gnarly old grapevine—the bark brown and flaky—was about it and that's if you were lucky. They were tough and you could climb them, but there wasn't much swinging to be had. And you sure couldn't smack into a tree with any kind of force. It was utterly disappointing when reality failed to match art. The grapes weren't even any good that year. Usually—if you could get to them before the crows—they were as

sweet as cotton candy. This year, they might as well have been little lemons, even though they were dark purple and smelled like jam.

“How about clothesline?” Sadie asked after she’d gotten bored with trying to make the grapevine work.

“Whatchyou mean?” Sarah asked, cranky because Sadie was the one who had pronounced the grapevine no good while Sarah was still having fun on it.

“Momma got clothesline in the backyard, dummy,” Sadie said. “Hanging from the pole.”

“So?”

“So, we could grab some of that and throw it over the big gum tree in the woods, the one on the hill. Swing from that instead of these dumb ass vines.”

Sarah’s eyes bugged out at the curse word. “Sadie!” she whispered. “Momma’ll whip you, she hears you say that.”

Her sister bugged her own eyes and pursed her lips like a fish while she stage-whispered like Sarah. “Dumb ass.”

They both giggled nervously, then debated the clothesline idea. Mostly for fun, since they both knew what Sadie wanted, Sadie got. She always had the good ideas. Sarah was the one that got to go in and steal it, of course, since she was small, “like a ninja.” The compliment did the trick and Sarah managed to sneak into and back out of the yard with the plastic bag of line without getting caught, although she did hear her mother humming along to some old song that made her roll her eyes if while she was lifting the bag from its hook.

They took the clothesline into the woods and tossed the bag over the tallest branch of the gum tree they could. The line spilled out like an impossibly long gray snake, then hit the ground. They threw it over once more for safety, then Sadie told Sarah to hold on to the loose end while she tried it out.

“Why you get to go first?” Sarah asked, scowling. “I’m the one that stoled the clothesline.”

“Stole,” Sadie corrected. “Because I came up with the idea. I’m the genius.”

“What?”

“You’ll *get* your turn, Sarah,” Sadie said. “I’ll be done in a second. Now take that end and hold it tight so I can swing.”

“Dumb ass,” Sarah said under breath, but grabbed the bag end and walked it away from the tree. Sadie grabbed the line and ran up the rise from which the gum tree sprouted. A low,

crumbling cinder block wall was the perfect platform and Sadie climbed atop it, bunched the line tight in her hands, and gave her best Tarzan yell before running full tilt off the wall. Sarah could feel Sadie's weight through the skinny rope and, for a second, was scared that she'd shoot straight into the air like they did in the cartoons. But she squeezed her fists around the line and threw her weight against the strain, almost sitting down.

Sadie launched herself off the wall and swung through the air, better than any vine they'd ever tried. Sarah's mouth made a giant "O" as she watched her sister fly farther than either one of them had ever gone before. She had wanted Sadie to try and smash into the tree like George, but was too entranced by the spectacle of her flying through the air to complain. In her mind's eye, she already saw Sadie swing out overhead, completing the enormous arc, then back again. She'd land on her feet on top of the wall and then it would be Sarah's turn.

It was a shock, then, when halfway through the pendulum's swing—Sadie's feet pointed towards the leaves and her head thrown back, laughing as she anticipated the upward swing—the clothesline snapped like it had been cut and Sadie slammed to the ground with all the force and energy she'd built attempting the biggest swing either one of them had ever seen. To Sarah, the ground actually seemed to shake, though it was probably from Sadie's body bouncing as she landed flat on her back.

Sarah started to laugh. She'd hoped for a George, but this was a thousand times better. When Sadie didn't move, though, she stopped laughing and dropped the line. Then she walked up to Sadie—she didn't run over, she remembered that—looked down at her and started calling her name.

A broken back isn't what it used to be, the doctor said. Not that many years ago, it would've been fatal. Or Sadie would be in a wheelchair or brace the rest of her life. She's young, he continued. She won't ever be a track star, but she'll walk again. Probably. With a little pain, maybe.

Sadie lived. She walked. She even ran. But the pain wasn't little and by her freshman year at Maryland she was taking Oxycodone in dosages that would've killed small animals. The prescriptions weren't enough as drug tolerance reduced the pain killing effect of one of the world's strongest opiates to the equivalent of aspirin. It wasn't long before she was looking for

relief from local dealers on campus, then downtown and, finally, in Ellwood Park. The first few times Sadie didn't call home for a week, Sarah's parents would get in the car and drive the hour to the city, scouring every block, hoping to find her. There were fights and interventions and long nights at the hospital. Sarah, used to calls all the time, failed to hear from her in six months. In time, there were warnings from campus police, then calls from Baltimore Vice. Daddy threatened to cut her off if she were selling herself for the drugs. Momma, Sarah knew, had been giving her money without telling him, hoping Sadie was using it for food.

They got a call to identify her body a week before Sadie's twenty-second birthday. Sarah had long since had the authority to look at the autopsy report, but never had. She'd known when she saw her father's face what they'd found. And it was confirmed when they were told by friends that she hadn't been to class in a year, had hardly been seen in that time. Police reports she looked up later told her that Sadie had been picked up more than three dozen times for prostitution and solicitation.

Sarah changed her major from business to criminal justice the next month. Her parents said nothing, but she sensed their approval.

She went in and out of blaming herself, trying on different levels of guilt like new clothes that cycled in and out of fashion. Sarah could've helped Sadie kick her addiction, but you couldn't make someone do something they didn't want to. She might've helped her parents look for her, but how did you find one person in a city like Baltimore? She might've stolen the clothesline, but it had been Sadie's idea.

In the end, she could as easily have chosen medicine if she'd been looking for atonement. But it wasn't the accident that killed Sadie or even the drugs. It was the people that used those items to take advantage, to sell her the drugs she needed so that she, in turn, would sell her body to have them. Those people were the problem and the target that Sarah set her sights on at eighteen.

Sometimes, at night, she still called Sadie's name, dreaming of her sister swinging through the air, fulfilling the promise of the long, sweeping angel's arc, never quite making it.