

SORRY  
TO DISRUPT  
THE PEACE

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SHEFFIELD LONDON NEW HAVEN

# I

SEPTEMBER 30<sup>TH</sup>, THE DAY I RECEIVED the news of my adoptive brother's death, I also received a brand-new couch from IKEA. To clarify, I was the only one who happened to be physically present the day my roommate Julie's brand-new couch arrived at our shared studio apartment in Manhattan. That day my phone did not stop ringing because my roommate Julie listed my phone number as the main contact for the furniture-delivery company instead of her own. The delivery driver called multiple times because he could not find the apartment building. There was a mix-up on the invoice or the address of the apartment had

been smudged into a black thumbprint, also, at the time, a large green trash receptacle the size of a dump truck was placed in front of the building, which blocked the view of the numbers above the front door.

It's strange, I said to the driver on the phone, it's as if there are all these unseen forces out in the world actively working against us.

What do you mean? said the driver. Listen ma'am, I'm just trying to deliver a couch.

By the time the delivery driver had located the building, by the time the couch had been delivered, unpacked, and assembled, by the time multiple forms on a clipboard had been signed and shuffled away, I was so physically drained, I collapsed onto my roommate Julie's brand-new piece of furniture and proceeded to sweat into the leather cushions and I nearly threw up from the stench of the cowhide mingling with the scent of my own sweat. As soon as I collapsed and sweated onto the couch and felt nauseous, my phone, somewhere across the apartment, began to ring again. I ignored it for a moment, unsure if I would be able to stand up. I was shocked by how large the couch was, how it nearly swallowed up my roommate Julie's entire side of the apartment. When I finally stood up and located my phone behind an empty box, I was surprised to hear a rough and masculine voice, a voice that had traveled across deserts, a voice that had swallowed up countless scrolls of sandpaper and parchment.

Is this Helen? It's your Uncle Geoff.

Uncle Geoff, what a surprise, I said pleasantly. I thought you refused to own a phone. I laughed a slight and friendly laugh. Wasn't that your quirky thing, to refuse to own a phone?

The voice let out a sigh. Your mother wanted me to talk to you. To tell you what happened.

Go on, I'm listening.

The voice broke out into sobs.

What? I can't understand you.

A few seconds passed as the voice attempted to control itself.

He's gone, said the voice. Your mother wanted me to tell you.

Who? I said. And what do you mean by gone, exactly?

...

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Your brother died last night, he said.

I was looking at the row of boxes that the brand-new couch and its pillows had arrived in, the boxes that the furniture-delivery company did not bother to break down and recycle because they were running late, the now-empty boxes I had arranged so neatly, stacked directly across from the brand-new couch. I had cut off the flaps with an X-acto knife and I was now staring at the flat and even sides as my brain attempted to absorb the information.

He died? I said. Was he sick? What are you talking about? No one told me he was sick!

The voice on the other line stopped speaking and started to wail and it sounded like a thousand rusty needle tips scratching across an endless sheet of metal. As soon as I heard it, I was confident the sound would haunt me for the rest of my life.

It was unexpected. He died unexpectedly.

What is that supposed to mean? That means nothing to me!

It means he took his own life, said the voice.

The boxes I had placed so neatly across from the couch moved closer to my eyes, closer to my brain, and then they melted into a smooth and flat box-colored screen. The needle-scratching sound started up again.

Where are they? I shouted to try to get the sound to stop.

Who? Where's who?

My adoptive parents!

They're at their house. I'll call you later with the funeral arrangements, if you decide to come.

What kind of funeral? I said. Is it a Catholic one?

I'm not sure, said the voice, slightly wavering. No one's going to force you to come, if you have other things you need to do. Whatever you want. It's up to you.

He hung up on me and the wailing sound went away, but the needle-scraping sound stayed with me, chilling me to the bone. Stop your scraping! I screamed to no one. I plugged my ears with the foam peanuts left over from the boxes and the sound of my breathing drowned out the scraping. I sat down on the floor and pulled off the pillows from the brand-new couch and propped them up behind my back. A Catholic funeral, I thought to myself, he would have hated that; he only went to church to appease our adoptive parents, he didn't really believe in religion, he didn't believe in anything like that. I turned around and allowed myself to begin sobbing into my roommate Julie's brand-new leather pillows to muffle the sounds I couldn't hear anyway, poor little adoptive brother, I sobbed. I must have sobbed for hours. As my sobbing ebbed, I began to search my mind for the cause of his life-taking. Were there clues? There must have been clues. There must have been clues and signs hiding all over the place, the place of his life.

I continued to come up with nothing except an image of his small brown Korean eyes that looked nothing like my Korean eyes, as we were each adopted from different biological families, and I remembered suddenly the last time I saw him, the time he had come all the way from Milwaukee to drop in on me in New York City, the time I tried to give him a hug, he had refused me, he had

turned away sharply, muttering something about how he was sick with a bad cold and he didn't want to infect me. I remembered it was strange then, how he pulled away from me, his one and only adoptive sister. I want to hug you, you silly little man, I might have said. I might have pulled him close to me and hugged him anyway. I was always forcing people to do things they didn't want to do.

Twenty-nine years old and gone. I went back to my sobbing and then my sobbing turned into a percussive shaking and a small vase with plastic flowers fell off my roommate Julie's bookshelf, but it didn't shatter into pieces, it just rolled dumbly across the wooden floor. I began to worry my roommate Julie would walk in and see me staining her new pillows with the fluids of my grieving. The eye is a terrible organ, I thought as I glanced around the apartment for a box of tissues. It took me a while to compose myself. I have always moved at the speed of caves and mountains.

When I finished my mucous-ridden sobbing, I decided firmly that I, Helen Moran, would go to my childhood home in Milwaukee and be a supportive beam of light for my adoptive parents in their despair. You're the only one left; you will be the one, I decided, and I marched right up to the boxes and put my hands on them to steady myself. Yes, I will go to that house, I said to no one. I pictured in my mind the house at the bottom of the hill, a dark house I had not set foot inside for many years, a house as large and spacious as a medieval fortress, with enough square footage for at least one or two more Catholic families. It was not a cheaply built house, as my adoptive father liked to say. *It did not come cheaply built.* My parents are somewhat rich, but, like most Midwesterners, they are the cheapest people I have ever known. Despite their lack of financial stress, they are extravagant in their

cheapness, their discount-hunting, their coupon-scissoring, their manuals on how to save. It was important, they said, to think about the catastrophic future, to always have a backup account filled with hundreds of thousands of dollars. To think about it too much depressed me. My entire existence was infected by this cheapness, this so-called frugality. Of course, it would be wrong not to acknowledge that these values of cheapness or frugality were what allowed once-orphans like myself and my now-dead adoptive brother to grow up, and to thrive even, in the comfort and security of the not cheaply built house. But there would be no more thriving for us, as one of us was dead.

My brain was working very hard inside the housing of its skull. Was it surprising they themselves didn't call me? We hadn't talked in months, so perhaps not. I wasn't even that upset they didn't call; I preferred not to talk on the phone, especially under awkward and distressing circumstances. What else could a human being do in this situation? I wondered. When I received the phone call informing me of my adoptive brother's death, I knew it was imperative that I return to the Catholic fortress, I had no choice but to offer a helping hand to my shell-shocked adoptive parents during what must be a time of severe physical exhaustion and emotional anguish, despite the distance presently between us.

At your service, I imagined myself saying as I bowed to them, like a humble servant. Then I would envelop them in the warmth of my charity and my supportive beam of light. I am a helpfulness virtuoso and it is time to take my talents to my childhood home, I would have to tell my roommate Julie. That's how it will go, I said to myself. But then, throughout that time of saying to myself how it would go, it dawned upon me: how can I, Helen Moran, help my poor adoptive parents

withstand the death of my adoptive brother when I understand nothing regarding the circumstances of the death itself?

I was curious about the abyss. The abyss, round and dark as a child's mouth. How did he die? I wondered. Was it in a violent manner? Uncle Geoff didn't specify. Was Uncle Geoff even my uncle at all? Or was he my adoptive mother's cousin? Then the image of the abyss began to take hold of my thoughts and suddenly, I could not stop thinking about it and saying things to myself as I stood in my shared studio apartment in Manhattan propping my body up against the boxes.

I said to myself: I'll just go have a quick look-see, I'll just stand in the middle of the house and look around, still as a statue, a quick little look is all I will take. The more I thought about it, the more invested I became in finding out what happened to my adoptive brother, because whatever happened to him was surely very odd. I believed that. When a human being takes his or her own life, the circumstances are always very odd and serious and they must be looked into. It must be done with the rigor of a proper metaphysical investigation. Perhaps to investigate his death would revitalize my own life, and if I could communicate my eventual findings to them, it would strengthen and support the lives of my adoptive parents as well. I began to feel rational and purposeful. It's unnatural to not want to be alive anymore, I said to myself. *Life itself is the instinct for growth, for survival, for an accumulation of forces...* That's what Nietzsche said, philosopher of life!

I kept propping myself up in front of the boxes and saying more and more things to no one. I will look thoroughly around the house, I said, an investigation virtuoso, leaving no room unturned, because a thorough and professional investigation of the house is precisely what the situation calls for. I pictured it in



my mind: I walk up to the door of my childhood home, a door painted black with a brass kick plate, and ring the doorbell. My adoptive parents open the door and greet me warmly with a plate of cookies and skim milk or day-old muffins and lukewarm tea. I saw us setting aside our various issues and presenting to the world a unified front, I saw us braiding our grief into a rope, a strong and shiny rope we would take out and show people who asked us what it was like to lose someone to suicide.

I would have to examine every fiber of his bedroom with a magnifying glass. It was simple, I could see. Of course I would have to begin there. When he was living, my adoptive brother lived off and on with our adoptive parents for most of his twenty-nine years on the planet. In fact, he spent more than three-quarters of his life in his childhood bedroom, if you included sleeping. There was information there in the house, in the bedroom and in the closet. The closet would contain the most information, I said to no one, that disgusting closet that accumulated piles and piles of clothes, books, broken vases, empty picture frames, batteries, suitcases, pieces of garbage, broken computers, little jars with baby teeth. The insides of my nose started to burn because even though I was approximately nine hundred miles away from my adoptive brother's closet in suburban Milwaukee, situated as I was upright with my hands on the boxes in my shared studio apartment in Manhattan, somehow the smell of the closet in Milwaukee wafted up through my nostrils and got stuck inside my nasal cavities and caused the passages to burn. I recognized that burning, that sulfurous stench as the singular property of the closet: its dead-animal odor. Because a small animal settled in between the walls and died in there, behind the closet. Because it took my adoptive mother an entire summer to figure out what the smell was and to call pest-control services. They had



a terrible time removing it, they were only able to remove pieces of the dead animal with the aid of a small and specialized scraping device from China. The other dead-animal parts had already been absorbed into the rotting wood and there they remained, they were there causing that sulfurous stench long after I moved out of the house, and long after I left Milwaukee to begin my life in New York City.

It made me laugh a little, the idea of going about my business, my metaphysical investigations, in the middle of this familial nightmare. Helen Moran, are you mad? I should have asked myself. Helen Moran, I should have cried out, *are you an insane monster?* The truth is, I would only have laughed or coughed into my hands or averted my eyes because I could not think of anything else to do, not a single thing. The idea of the investigation had already taken root inside my brain. A little self-knowledge can be a very productive thing, I said to no one. I am a very productive person, I said as I opened the windows of my shared studio apartment. I shouted things to the passersby on the crummy sidewalks below. I can be a very helpful person! I screamed. A woman pushing a double-wide stroller looked up at me with concern. At your service, bitches! I shouted. I saluted the pigeons and the rats. I said to no one, What you are doing, Helen, is not only very ethical, it is what is required.