Kathryn Leigh

1999, Year of the Rabbit

Hanging on the wall outside my psychologist's office was a painting. A two-foot square grey canvas with a black circle in the middle. I stared at it, playing with the button on my shirtsleeve. It reminded me of frogspawn; a dark speck in jelly.

"It's my first time seeing a psychologist." I said when I entered the room. His name was Dr Kim. I wondered how many people felt like they needed to say that during their first appointment.

"What brings you here today?" Dr Kim asked, resting his hands on the desk. I glanced out the window. The sun was shining; the sky a gentle blue mottled with clouds.

I couldn't remember what I had written in my preliminary forms. "I'm having some difficulties in my life." I said, which was an understatement.

Dr Kim had an ageless face but I thought he was probably older than me. "What sort of difficulties?"

"I'm trying to raise my younger brother, but I think there's something wrong with him. Or me. That's why I'm here. I need someone to help me understand."

Dr Kim had very knowing eyes. "I will certainly try." He said.

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I was living in a small house with my little brother Tokki. We lived there alone because both of our parents had died in a tragic road accident ten years prior. For the first five years after they died, we tried to keep living in the family home we'd inherited. Eventually it all became too much, so we moved to the small house.

"It all became too much?"

"All the books and articles said it would be a good idea to have a clear out. But the more we cleared out, the more upset we were and the more hopeless of a challenge it seemed. It was just bags and boxes and piles of *them.*"

"Your parents?"

"Yes. Everywhere. I remember when we were clearing out the shed, Tokki grabbed handfuls of this old chicken wire and sliced his hand open with it. We had to go to the hospital, and I was so relieved to finally have an excuse to stop searching through everything. We agreed in the waiting room that we should just move out. Have a fresh start, closer to the new school, and to throw out everything that didn't fit in one van."

Whenever I thought about that day I remembered the yellow iodine they dabbed on Tokki's injury and how when the taxi dropped us home there had been a trail of blood dots like wax

seals leading right up to the door of our parents' house. I had tried to take Tokki's hand without thinking and he'd flinched.

"Tokki was moving schools?" Dr Kim asked.

"He was going to high school. It came at the right time, to be honest. He'd gotten into some…issues at the previous school."

"Why was that exactly?"

"Don't misunderstand, Tokki's always been good in school. He isn't too smart but he's good at running, other sports. But he just has these eyes. Girls always liked him, and Tokki….well. I think he liked girls too much. Some of my friends' siblings went to the same school, and my friends would tell me, 'Oh your little brother, he only wants one thing'. And I tried to speak to him about it but he was fourteen, you know? It was so embarrassing."

"I see."

"He's no different at the new school. But I think because he's older people don't care so much. Or they don't say anything, at least."

I felt too ashamed to describe in detail the one time I tried to lecture Tokki about this, how my ill-conceived speech began with 'when I was your age, I wouldn't have dared,' how I remembered too late that when I was his age, I wasn't an orphan sifting through the detritus of my dead parents. And how at the end, without looking at me, he said:

"I see. You're jealous because you're a virgin."

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Tokki and I argued the night after I got back from the first therapy session. I bought us fried chicken but he refused to eat.

"You *know* I don't eat meat."

"I thought that was just temporary. Like a detox."

He gave me a baleful look. "It wasn't a 'detox.' Meat is disgusting. You're doing this on purpose."

I didn't know what to say because yes, I did do it on purpose, because I was concerned that Tokki's diet of rice balls and green smoothies did not contain enough protein. He scoffed and rolled his eyes at my silence and stomped down into the basement, where his bedroom was. Back when we were looking for places to live, Tokki was excited at the idea of having a basement room. At first I didn't understand the appeal of living underground, but when I thought about it, a boy having scandalous relationships with the girls in his school might want a windowless room. Or a room as far away from mine as possible. He would bring a different

girl over every couple of weeks, shamelessly, and I always thought they seemed sweet. Then they would get tired of him. He never shed a tear over it.

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“Do you feel concerned about losing control over your brother as he grows up?”

“I don’t *control* my brother.”

Dr Kim let the statement hang in the air as he took a sip of coffee.

“I don’t know.” I drummed my fingers on the desk, dying for a cigarrette. “He just seems unwise.”

“You mean with regards to sex?”

“It’s like there’s nothing at all behind his eyes. You know, the other day when I got home from work there was a man leaving the house. He was older than I am! Probably found him on the internet.”

“I see. Let’s leave Tokki aside for now. Has anything been happening in *your* life?”

I felt irritated at Dr Kim for a moment, but it was because I needed a cigarette. Therapists are meant to ask prying questions; it’s what we pay them for.

“Just the nightmare.”

“One you’ve had before?”

“It’s always the same. I’m inside my parents house during a storm, and my mother’s gone into labour and gone with my father to the hospital. Well, that part’s more of a memory. Tokki was born the night of a terrible storm, and I waited at home. I think my uncle was meant to come and watch me but a tree got blown into his driveway. Anyway, in the dream, instead of my parents bringing a baby home at the end, the police arrive and tell me that there’s been an accident.”

“Your parents died in a car accident, correct?” Dr Kim turned a page of his file on me briefly, and I saw my own handwriting. I wished I could remember what I had already told him.

“Yes, ten years ago. I was eighteen.”

“And we spoke last time about some feelings of guilt.”

I sighed. “I don’t feel guilty like it was my fault. I feel bad for the situation. For the fact that Tokki has to grow up with no parents and I didn’t.”

“You don’t consider yourself his parent?”

The question surprised me. “No. I didn’t make him. He was just given to me.”

“You chose to raise him for all these years, when you would have been within your rights to refuse.”

“For my ninth birthday, my parents bought me a rabbit. I was never any good at looking after it. After that I decided I would never raise anything more complicated than a succulent.”

“And yet here you are.”

I shrugged.

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One night between that appointment and my next, I heard a strange noise coming from downstairs. It was a hot, still night. I got out of bed and walked down the stairs. The streetlamp outside shone a weak orange light into the hallway, the trees in the garden casting shadows across the floor. I followed the sound, a rhythmic scraping coming from Tokki’s room, like a chair being dragged back and forth on a hard floor. I hesitated, then remembered that I was the responsible one in this house. I knocked on the door. The scraping stopped. I waited for Tokki to come to the door, but he didn’t appear. I waited a little more and then saw on the hallway clock that it was past two and decided to just call it a success and go back to bed. Before I managed to get back to sleep, the sound began again, quieter, but just discernible over the usual creakings of the house. I stormed down the stairs.

“Tokki! Open this door.”

The scraping stopped immediately. I heard shuffling and the door opened to reveal my younger brother. His black hair was in disarray, and his large eyes were bloodshot and puffy with sleep. He was eating sunflower seeds from his left hand.

“Is there someone down there? Why are you awake?”

He looked up at me with narrowed eyes.“No one’s here. I had a nightmare.”

“You did?” I felt sorry for accusing him. *Me too,* I wanted to say.

“Yeah. I was in a cage, looking up at mum. You were there, too. I dunno.” He threw the rest of the sunflower seeds into his mouth and licked the salt off the palm of his hand, where the scar from the chicken wire was still visible.

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Dr Kim seemed genuinely intrigued. “And you’ve had this same nightmare?”

“Yeah. I’m trapped in a cage, and I see our mother looking down at me. Then I see Tokki looking at me from far away. I’m terrified but he just stares right at me.”

“But he didn’t mention seeing himself. He says he saw you.”

I had never been good at recalling my dreams. Now, when I thought back to the boy I saw, it was difficult to tell whether it was a younger Tokki or a younger me. Older relatives always said we looked similar. When we packed up all the childhood photographs from the old house, we sometimes couldn't tell ourselves apart.

"I mean, Tokki and I looked alike when we were younger. It doesn't matter anyway, they're just dreams."

"It's possible you were both influenced by the same stimulus. A movie or book, perhaps."

"We haven't been to see a movie in a while."

"Perhaps you should."

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We sat awkwardly at opposite ends of the sofa. An animated movie was playing – *Watership Down*. It wasn't either of our first choices, but we had very specific requirements. I vetoed sex, gore, and anything really cryptic. Tokki vetoed romance, comedy, and anything longer than two hours. The one thing we agreed on was that it had to be something we hadn't seen before. The film seemed cute at first, but I was beginning to feel like it fell into my forbidden genres. We watched in silence. Tokki seemed very tired.

"How's school? Everything going well?" I asked. I saw him nod out of the corner of my eye, and then yawn so widely I heard his jaw crack.

Halfway through the movie, I decided to come clean.

"My therapist actually suggested this. I'm sorry if it's awkward." I muttered.

Tokki stared straight ahead, black eyes reflecting the screen. "It's not what I expected."

The lights flickered and went out. The movie went silent.

"Oh. Another power cut?" Tokki murmured, still watching the dead TV.

"Maybe just the fuse. I'll go." I said, fumbling my way in the dark.

The fuse box was downstairs in Tokki's bedroom. I half-expected him to stop me going there, but he didn't move from the sofa. Everything looked very grey and sudden in the light of my phone torch. The stairs down to the basement were very steep, and smelled like him. The fuse box in the corner had a little red light blinking on it. Something about the air in the basement made me sneeze; through my blurred vision, the fuse box had two little red blinking eyes. I shook my head, touched the fuse box, opened it, flicked the correct fuse. The lights upstairs came back on, illuminating the top of the basement stairs. Through the floor I heard the sounds of the film coming back to life.

It was still dark in Tokki's bedroom. I stood there for a moment. His bed was just a mattress on the floor. It was neatly made, the duvet decorated with a checked pattern that looked a little

like a chain link fence. On the walls were dozens of posters. Idol groups I was too old to know, a dated Playboy pin-up. There was a half-empty mug and a plate with celery leaves on the desk, alongside an open biology text book and the white, clean skull of a small animal. I recoiled, then put my hand out to touch it. It was dry and slightly cool beneath my finger, and definitely real. I suddenly felt sick. I took the crockery up the stairs, intending to ask Tokki where he'd gotten the skull from, but when I entered the living room he was asleep. The light from the television flickered green and blue across his slack face. I put the plate in the kitchen, and when I turned around, a rabbit on the television was ripping another rabbit's throat out; the red shone on Tokki's hair. I went and sat down next to him, not watching the screen. When the film ended I sat and stared out the window.

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"You didn't speak to him about the animal skull?"

"I couldn't. It felt like we were finally getting along."

"Why would bringing it up have made you fall out?"

"Two years ago, something happened-"

The blinds rattled urgently. Dr Kim raised his eyebrow. "Excuse me." He stood up, crossed the room and closed the window. Grey clouds were racing across the sky, with a bank of black ones on the horizon.

"Is it meant to storm today?" I asked, regretting bringing up the incident.

Dr Kim sat down, placing his pencil in the crease between the two pages of his notebook. "Please continue."

"I already took him to therapy. They said there was nothing wrong with him."

"I am not here to judge what you did or did not do. I am just here to listen."

I felt a bead of sweat run down my back.

"Excuse me for a moment." I said, and left the room. There was a bathroom at the end of the corridor. I went and locked myself inside. It smelled of bleach. I splashed cold water on my face, and stared at myself in the mirror. I looked exhausted, and not in the least like my younger brother. I had five o'clock shadow and felt decades older than twenty-eight. I steeled myself and headed back to the therapy room. As I approached the office door I caught a glimpse of the ugly painting I noticed on the day of my first appointment, an eternity ago. The black circle in the middle of the grey square was bigger than I remembered. The corridor lights flickered and the circle seemed to dilate like a pupil. I went into the office and sat down. Dr Kim was sitting very still, like he hadn't moved at all since I left.

"Okay. I was sitting at home. It was two days after Tokki's sixteenth birthday." I sat on the edge of the chair, not looking at Dr Kim. "It was the evening. Tokki was in his room, playing computer

games. Someone started knocking at the door, so I went and answered it and it was a middle aged couple I didn't recognise. So I said, how can I help you? And they said that I was lucky they hadn't called the police, and was Tokki here? I said yes, and what were they talking about? They said that Tokki was clearly disturbed, and that if they ever caught him near their daughter again then they would call the police. Obviously I realised then that this must be one of Tokki's girlfriends' parents. So I asked what exactly he had done, and they said-" My voice shook. I tried to visualise a calm void, but it looked just like the horrible painting outside.

Dr Kim's hands rested near the pencil, but they didn't pick it up.

"They said that he had killed her pet rabbit."

An eyebrow raise. "And had he?"

"She had an indoor rabbit. Tokki was in her bedroom, and she went to the kitchen to get some snacks. When she came back, the rabbit was dead and Tokki was gone."

"That is very strange. It isn't possible that it died of natural causes?"

"They showed me a picture. There was a lot of blood."

I had tried many times in the years since to forget the blurry image of the grey rabbit with its filmy eyes, fur covered in blood, blood on the carpet beneath it.

"Do *you* think he did it?"

"I called him up out of the basement, obviously. His girlfriend's parents wouldn't even cross the threshold. He stared at them and then at me. When they accused him, he just said, 'Why would I do that?' He never outright denied it, but there was obviously no evidence that he had. And…Tokki has always been strange, but never violent. I never believed he could do something like that."

"Until you found the animal skull in his bedroom."

"I don't know how that got there. I don't know why. And I don't want to ask. I took him to a therapist and they said there's nothing wrong with him."

"He has been through some traumatic things. You both have. Sometimes these things manifest. Not that I am accusing him." Dr Kim leaned back in his chair. "Traumatic incidents can cause anger."

"There was a time, about a year after the funeral, when Tokki would say, 'our parents didn't die, they were killed.' I used to get angry at him for saying that. I told him, the police said it seemed like they swerved to avoid something in the road. But the rain was so bad they skidded into the wall. It was a tragic accident, but it was nobody's fault. The weather's fault, maybe. I read online that sometimes children like to project, when they have been through something they don't understand…"

I realised as I was saying this that my cheeks were wet. Dr Kim handed me a box of tissues. My hand shook as I gripped the box, its corner digging into my palm.

“I killed the rabbit,” I said.

Dr Kim sat up straight once again, brow furrowed.

“You killed the rabbit?”

“Not Jaein’s rabbit. I have no idea how that happened. I killed my rabbit when I was a kid. It was the night Tokki was born. My parents drove off to have him, and I don’t remember whether they told me to bring the rabbit inside or not. Obviously they had other things to think about. But the storm was so bad I didn’t want to go outside. I remember opening the door and looking out at the cage, and seeing the rabbit in there. When the lightning flashed I couldn’t see anything at all. The rain was so heavy it was deafening, and the wind kept trying to blow the door wide open. So I shut it and locked it, and ate cereal and watched cartoons. My uncle never showed up, but I didn’t care. I fell asleep on the sofa, and when I woke up the storm had blown over, but I looked outside and saw the rabbit lying there dead.”

“What did you do?”

“The chicken wire cage had half lifted up from the wind. I just pulled the rabbit out and put it in the gap between the fence and the garden shed. I hoped my parents would just think it had escaped. When they came back with the baby that was the first thing I said to them, “The rabbit escaped!” It must have been obvious I was lying, but they weren’t upset with me. They just said, ‘you have a brother to look after now,’ and showed him to me.”

“And do you feel guilty about that?”

“It’s the only thing in my life that I regret.” I said, taking a tissue from the box. “If I could go back and change one thing, I would bring the rabbit inside.”

Dr Kim finally picked up his pencil and began to write something. Then the power went out. We were both plunged into darkness. I waited for Dr Kim to say something, but all I heard was the continued scratching of pencil on paper.

We sat there for a few minutes, until it became clear the power was not going to come back on.

When Dr Kim eventually spoke, he sounded tired. “It’s probably best if we both head out before we get stranded. It’s going to be chaos on the trains. ” He fumbled on the desk for something. “Unless you’d like to continue your appointment in the dark.”

I turned on my phone torch. “No, that’s alright. We only had ten minutes left.”

“Ah, thank you.” Dr Kim slipped his notepaper into a folder and slid it into a desk drawer. “Perhaps I should invest in a new phone for such situations.”

I glanced out the window. The sky was the colour of a bruised plum, occasionally punctuated by the silhouette of a bird or a spinning leaf. Dr Kim had his coat on, and was standing by the door.

“Please lead the way,” he said. I scuttled past him, phone held ahead of me.

We parted ways at the door to the building, which Dr Kim shared with numerous therapists and other professionals in need of small office space.

“I’ll see you at your next appointment, then.”

“Yes.”

“I think we made progress today.” Dr Kim nodded, the wind snatching the words and making them sound insincere.

I wanted to reply, but there was an enormous roll of thunder and rain began falling in earnest. We both turned and went our separate ways. I felt enormous guilt at having revealed Tokki’s secret. When I emerged from the subway, rain was lashing down. I had no hood so my hair was soaked through within moments. The gutters were like tiny fast-flowing rivers. The rain hurtled sideways, leaves and branches scattered across the pavement like limbs. I thought of Tokki, alone in the house. I remembered the nightmare, trapped in a cage while the sky turned purple above.

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Our house looked very small and crooked when I arrived there. I rang the doorbell, but no one answered. There were no lights on inside, but then again, every window in the street was dark. The freezing rain poured out of the gutters on all sides, and I couldn’t find my house keys in any of my pockets. I hammered on the door.

“Tokki! Open the door!”

I peered through the panel of coloured glass in the door. I thought I saw movement inside, but it was hard to tell with all the shadows from the thrashing trees. Someone’s car alarm began to wail. I tried to open the front window but it was locked. I tapped on the glass. The wind continued to howl down the street; every plant in the garden creaked and bent in surrender.

Something touched my back, and I yelled in shock.

It was one of the neighbours.

“You locked out?” she asked, voice raised against the wind. For a second I saw long dark hair under her anorak hood and thought she might be Tokki.

“Yes. But I think my brother is in there!”

“I didn’t see him come back. But I heard the kids didn’t get let out of late night study because of the storm! They’ll probably call you. Come into ours for now!”

I stared up at the blank windows. If Tokki was inside, he'd be in the basement, at least. Stomach in knots, I followed my neighbour across the road, into the warmth of her house, and shut the door behind me. As soon as I was inside, I tried to text Tokki, but I had no phone signal.

"No one has any signal. I suppose the mast got damaged." My neighbour said, pouring me a cup of tea.

I stared out the window at the small house across the street.

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The storm didn't let up, and I heard nothing from Tokki all night. I must have fallen asleep, because my neighbour had to shake my shoulder to inform me that one of the trees in our garden had fallen. I stumbled to the window to look. It was a tall beech. It had fallen forward, torn roots exposed, and broken the fence and the front window. The air was sodden and still when I ran out into the street. Our front door hung open, swinging back and forth on its hinges. The frame must have been damaged when the tree fell. I stormed into the corridor, which was strewn with natural debris, rainwater soaking the doormat. The back door had blown open too; twigs and leaves scattered across the kitchen floor.

"Tokki! Tokki?" I shouted. I searched the ground and upper floors of the house. No one was there. I went to the basement. Tokki's bedroom door, and knocked. Silence. I thought I heard movement.

"Tokki, I'm coming down."

It was dark, but the light turned on when I flicked the switch – evidently the power was back.

"Tokki? Sorry if I woke you."

Silence.

I stumbled to the bottom of the stairs, and the smell of earth rushed up to greet me. There was a scattering of rubble and dirt across the usually clean floor. Tokki's mattress was upturned and balanced against the wall, hiding the poster with the Playboy girl. On the ground where the mattress had been, previously hidden from view, was a hole. I walked over to it, staring down. It cut through the floor into the earth beyond, twisting away into the dark, a black void in the grey lino.

"Tokki?" I whispered, leaning down. The hole was pitch black like I had never seen. If you had told me that it stretched to the centre of the earth, I would have believed it. I knelt down at its edge and reached inside. The damp ends of tree roots brushed my hands. I heard a car roar down the street above, heart quickening, but I knew where safety was. Tokki knew all along. Rain soaked me through. Only one shelter can keep a storm out. I glanced around me as I dug my fingertips into the dirt. There was nothing in the room, only myself and the rabbit skull staring at me from its place on the desk.

It watched as I crawled inside the hole and disappeared.



Wiktoria Szamotulska