

A Happy, Safe Thing

My older sister, Minnie, and her new husband, Sax Smithers, whom she met six months ago, are going to show up half an hour late for their wedding reception. They get held up on the way to the American Legion because all six guys from the pharmacy, where Sax sorts boxes of pills, want a ride, right then, in front of Shepherd of the Hills Methodist Church, in Grandma Tillie's brand new 1983 Cadillac convertible. Then, Minnie, excited not just about the wedding, but also about her graduation from Smoky Ordinary High School yesterday, smuggles me into the passenger seat, ignoring what Mom and my stepdad Frank and Grandma Tillie have said over and over about my heart.

"Okay, Sheryl," Minnie tells me. "Slouch down in the seat, and nobody'll know." Minnie's best friend, Gina Potts, is in the driver's seat. On the front steps of the church, Frank is hugging the pastor again, and Mom, who's still in the doorway, is too weepy to see us. Minnie, behind me, pinches my cheek and then snuggles up to Sax as if leaning forward from their back seat perch to talk to me has kept her away from him for too long. Sax smiles with his eyes closed.

My heart brought Minnie and Sax together; it's how they met in the first place. My heart is built backwards with a hole in the middle of it. The pharmacy where Sax works and where I pick up my heart medication after school on Wednesdays is next to J.E.B. Stuart Jr. High; I just finished the seventh grade there. My stepdad Frank makes Minnie pick up my medication sometimes, when I'm too tired, and that's how Sax recognized her and felt all right talking to her that "destinied" (as Minnie says) Sunday

morning at P&W's Eatery, where Minnie waits tables. Now, she always says to Grandma Tillie, who wanted Minnie to study court stenography at the community college, "See Grandma T? You can make your future anyplace. I started making mine December 30, 1982, at a restaurant on Coover Street."

About my heart: It keeps me from riding in airplanes because the air is too thin, and Mom, Frank, and Grandma Tillie keep me from riding in convertibles, too—or pickup trucks or hayrides—because Mom says it's not good for me when the air rushes past and makes me catch my breath. My heart also keeps me from running, biking, or swimming, but I can walk far enough and can play badminton in the backyard. I can beat all comers at badminton.

Dr. Brooster, our cardiologist up at Fairfax Hospital, says mine is a best-case scenario. He says one in five thousand kids have a heart like mine, and so far, at thirteen, I've outlived all the others like me. After we saw Dr. Brooster in April, I sat in the hall watching a bright blue fish in the aquarium try to push a smaller yellow fish out of some thick plants—as if the plants were going to hurt him, I thought, as if the blue fish were the mother and the yellow fish the child. I overheard Mom say to Dr. Brooster, "How long? Five years? Ten years?" and he said, "She's doing fine." And then I heard Mom say, "Maybe you just don't want me to know."

I tried to stare at the aquarium when Mom came out of Dr. Brooster's office. But I saw her mouth tight and worried. When she looked at me, we both put on happier faces.

Now, as we drive out of our way on the bridge over Lake Iroquois, Gina Potts honks the horn while Minnie and Sax yell and hoot, holding each other tightly. I look from the gravel spitting off the tires to my sister and Sax. They had their first kiss in a

rowboat on the lake, and now I watch them steal another kiss in the back of the Cadillac, Minnie's veil blowing over both their faces. On the other side of the bridge, the town disappears into Virginia forest, pine and oak trees thick as cotton. Just as it seems we're on our way to Haymarket, the next town over, Gina turns us around. As we drive the last eight blocks toward the American Legion, the dark sky, gloomy since the morning rain, makes the town look brighter, especially Pink's Tiny Pink Grocery and the orange Phillips 76 sign and the hands of well-wishers waving in the gray afternoon.

We pull into the circular driveway and coast to a stop in front of the Legion Hall, which Minnie used to call "the soldier palace," where Mom and her two friends from Tuesday night Apostle Bingo at Redeemer Baptist are busy on the big side lawn getting ready for the reception. They have moved almost everything from under the big white and yellow striped tent she rented and into the building, because the sagging middle of the tent, heavy with water from the early morning downpour, is leaking into a family-sized fried chicken bucket.