Two sides of the river

Holden Lee

Suzie often had friends over. In her room they shared iPod earphones and took turns holding Suzie’s hamster Peaches, caressing her golden hair, feeding her veggies from the refrigerator and letting her scrabble up their sleeves. Over laptops opened to facebook, they chatted about weekend plans and prom and sympathized over the difficulty of pre-calculus and their mothers’ calls for them to clean their rooms. If her sister Maura wasn’t in her own room Suzie would introduce Maura to her friends. Maura would smile and say hi, and her friends wouldn’t think anything of her except that she was a little shy.

Once, Emily caught a peek of Maura’s bedroom through the door to the sisters’ shared bathroom. Emily stood at the entrance and stared at the landscape that Maura had built. Almost every square inch of carpet had been covered: with foot-tall mountains made of plaster and painted to look like weathered stone, tens of houses, some made of Lego and Lincoln Logs and other folded from cardboard, and a castle of wooden blocks with a clay dragon leaning over architecturally accurate battlements, but that had a landing pad containing a remote-controlled helicopter. A train tooted across a bridge with its load of branches and marbles, over a river made of blue fabric, besides which stood a small plastic fisherman with a rod bent from a paper clip. Emily followed the tracks as they dove through the arches of an aqueduct and spiraled up to a chair and disappeared in the caverns under the table. On the walls hung maps of places that didn’t exist, with carefully drawn compass roses and purposefully torn edges.

In the center sat a skinny girl with reflective, silver-framed glasses and hair that trailed to the ground. She was assembling trees, out of brown-painted straws and green pom-pom balls.

“This is amazing,” Emily said, and the girl looked up.

Maura looked caught off-guard. “Thanks,” she said.

“You must be Suzie’s sister.”

“Maura.”

“Do you mind if I take a picture?” She had already taken the camera out of her purse and turned it on.

“No!” Maura dropped her tree, leapt towards the bathroom door, and shoved it shut. But Emily had already clicked the shutter before Maura closed the door.

When Emily came back, she told Suzie, “I didn’t know Maura built things.”

Suzie nodded. “Ever since she was a kid.” Suzie looked up from her computer. “There’s this story Mom likes to tell about her…”

“Tell me,” Emily said.

Suzie reached over to fence in Peaches before she got too close to her anime collection before she continued. “Maura never likes it when Mom tells the story in front of her,” she said, “She says Mom’s always too show-offy.”

Emily twanged Peaches’s whiskers, first the left side, then the right side, and watched as Peaches shook her head and squirmed away. “Well she’s not here and you’re not her mom.”

“All right.” Suzie dropped Peaches back into her familiar woodchip nest. “We were around three years old, and it was our family reunion, during Christmas. We each got a dollhouse, our cousin Henry got a Lego set. We were all playing together when Henry asked where his present went. Our parents all started hunting around the room looking under all the abandoned wrappers, and they realized Maura wasn’t around either. They started a frantic search around the house – Grandparents’ house wasn’t quite a mansion but it was close – though it didn’t take long to find her. She had wandered off into one of the spare rooms and she was on this chair, building on top of this three-foot high tower of Legos. It wasn’t anything fancy – just rectangular and straight up and up and up – but it was her first time touching the things so everyone was naturally surprised. And Grandpa decided to go out and buy another Lego set for her as a present. And I ended up with two dollhouses, because she wasn’t interested in hers.”

“She’s like those young geniuses at Lego-world, then. And now she builds stuff like this,” she showed the photo on her camera to Suzie. Emily had caught her in mid-stride, her toes finding the spaces between the tracks and houses with ease.

Suzie reached out her palm and Emily deposited the camera there. Before Emily could react she pressed two buttons, delete, confirm.

Emily snatched it away. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, she doesn’t like people photographing her stuff.”

It never made sense to Suzie. Maura had once turned her room into Redwall for several weeks and reenacted five of the Redwall books there, complete with all the hares’ ballads that she memorized and sang to tunes she made up on the spot. Suzie and her parents made up the audience. Their dad brought his tripod and videocamera the first day, but she refused to start until he took it away. She hadn’t quite done anything like that again, and Suzie wished she could see it again sometimes, but there were no tapes. She thought that if Maura had ever wanted to go into acting, the video could have made an impression.

Maura always a few of these odd requests but Suzie was her sister, so of course she went along with them.

“You don’ t just delete photos from someone else’s camera like that.” Emily dropped the camera back into its case and dropped the case back into her purse, which she zipped up. “Gosh, I can’t have the freedom to photograph what I want?”

“That’s *Maura’s* stuff you’re photographing,” she said. She said it loudly, for the benefit of Maura listening through the walls, but she looked at Emily squeezing her bag underneath her shoulders and thought, Emily wasn’t going to show her any more photos now. Emily always took photos when people weren’t looking, of math-nerd Ben with a noodle hanging from his mouth during lunch, or June trying to extract a pencil from the floor without getting up from her seat. People didn’t object, because the pictures could always be made to look adorable, if Emily was showing you the pictures and saying, “Isn’t that cute?” Suzie could, of course, find all the captioned photos on facebook later on, but she liked it when Emily showed them on her camera.

Emily leaned back into her laptop, popped her earphones back in. Suzie looked at Emily and tried to think of something to say. She would entice her with Peaches again but Peaches was sleeping now, curled up with her nose against her side, twitching in hamster dreams.

Finally Suzie said, “It would be nice, to be that good at something since you were a little kid.”

Emily flicked one earphone out, and let it hang against her chest. Her face had lit up.

“I never told you, did I? About that time I stole daddy’s camera when I was four?”

Emily ended up showing all her photos to Suzie, and when the camera looped back to the first one she didn’t give any hint that there had been one at the end, now deleted. But Suzie only half-listened to her commentary.

Maura and Suzie were twins but nothing was split evenly between them. Maura got all the creativity, smarts, and cold-minded calculation ability, and Suzie all the flesh, fatty cheeks that dimpled when she laughed, and hair that twisted into knots when she overslept. Suzie had 20-20 eyesight and the ability to sit at new tables at lunchtime, to learn the names and interests of everyone in her class in a few days.

For a while, their musically inclined mother had forced them to lay piano every day. At first Maura’s piano teacher, Mrs. Smith, said Maura had a unique touch for piano because Maura always altered the feel of the pieces she played by adding a few notes or elongating or shortening them as she saw fit. But she never corrected her posture, so that six months in, the quarter that Mrs. Smith placed on the back of Maura’s hand would shake off on the third note. Mrs. Smith shook her head and said, “You have to learn the skill set before you try to be creative,” and told Maura’s parents when she thought Maura wasn’t listening, “She showed a lot of promise at the beginning, but she’s too stubborn to learn.” Her dad, a quiet man who didn’t like forcing things upon others, thanked the teacher and canceled her lessons, waving away her mom’s sharp protests. Suzie, on the other hand, lasted two years, making slow and steady progress, to the level where she could play Jingle Bells on demand, and not forget even years later.

Every day either Maura would visit Suzie’s room, or Suzie would visit Maura’s room.

Most often Maura came over. Even though Suzie’s door was always open, Maura still knocked on the door frame before coming in. Suzie pointed out that an open door meant she could come in anytime, but Maura said she did it “out of respect.” Maura lost all formalities when she came in, though, taking Peaches out of her cage and setting her loose on the floor. She stretched out on the floor padded with Suzie’s sweaty clothes and read the new hardcover books Suzie got from Borders, or bits of Suzie’s manga collection. Maura was quiet, and Suzie had the odd impression that after she finished a book and put it back on the shelf, probably not to be disturbed again, that it was sitting on a shelf in Maura’s head, rather than in Suzie’s room.

Suzie knew that when Maura’s doorknob clicked open that Maura wanted her to come over, and she would finish the section of her homework she was working on, unplug her laptop and tuck it underneath her shoulder, make her way to the door, and knock quietly. Often this happened only once in several days, and Suzie knew then that Maura was working on something big. She never liked other people to see things that were under construction.

“Careful when you’re crossing the railroad tracks,” Maura said as she opened the door.

“Nice roller coaster,” Suzie said and for half a minute, she scanned the breadth of the two thousand pieces of K’Nex Maura had put together.

“Thanks,” Maura said, standing by the new construction with her hands clasped, shy and photogenic.

They lay on the bed together – the only space big enough to fit them both. Maura hung a blanket by a nail above the wall behind her bed, so that it made a tent over them. They watched documentaries together and fed each other Goldfish.

It was a curious commonality they shared. They took the same Engineering Foundations class sophomore year – Maura taking it for obvious reasons and Suzie taking it so maybe she could learn how her sister built things – but it turned out the teacher was more interested in showing them videos of Bridges, Tunnels, and Skyscrapers than placing wood planks and power tools in their hands. Maura didn’t seem to mind, oddly, but leaned forwards in her seat and covered her worksheet with drawings of bridges. They both liked the way the video zoomed over a thousand years of technological development, liked the way that it flashed the ten highest buildings in the world at the end of the video, as the announcer said, “Who knows what the skyscrapers of tomorrow will look like?”, trite though it was.

They were silent awhile, after they went through a whole series of clips entitled “NASA Social Media.” The narrator’s words, “When will we return to the moon again?” ghosted in their minds. They listened to the furnace grumble to life again and Mom pushing the vacuum cleaner in the living room. After these videos Suzie always felt her usual topics of conversation trivial, felt like she had to break the quiet with big questions.

“What do you want to do,” Suzie said, “After college and all?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t be shy. What’s Under Construction in your head that you’re hiding?”

“Nothing.” Maura lay on her side and looked away.

Suzie lifted away the tent flap so Maura got a full view of the roller coaster. “You’re going to make the next Harry Potter theme park aren’t you? Based on the next fantasy series to grip the world by storm.”

“Maybe.”

“And you’re going to write that fantasy series too, aren’t you?”

Maura cuffed Suzie’s head with her pillow. “Stop gibbering!”

Suzie laughed and unhooked the blanket. She dangled her feet over Maura’s bed and then turned back, “Oh I’m having trouble in pre-cal again.”

“Again?” Maura mock-grumbled.

Maura slid a notebook from her shelf and tutored Suzie about limits. Suzie liked listening to her, because the way she talked about it, it seemed like delta-epsilons were the building blocks of something larger, that Suzie couldn’t quite comprehend. The train going in loops distracted her, though, in a way that Katy Perry and Lady Gaga never quite did as she did her homework.

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Two night before they left for college, Maura invited Suzie to witness the Armageddon of her room. Suzie didn’t know what one wore to an Armageddon, but thought that her usual “Why the class of 2011 ROCKS” shirt wouldn’t fit the mood, so settled on a plain tan-colored shirt and a black skirt instead. Suzie studied some Maura as she tiptoed over to the bed, looking to see she was about to show some previously hidden violent side, but her face was impervious.

She flew her remote-controlled plane into the front wall of the castle, then into the back wall, collapsing them in a rockslide of wooden blocks. She swept away the straw trees but slowly, so their trunks didn’t bend and their cotton tops didn’t get squished. She took one of the down-ramps in her train tracks so the train derailed, then snap snap snap disjointed the tracks. She started the roller coaster, but the scaffolding collapsed like dominos as the coaster moved, and Suzie just managed to catch the fact that a few key K’Nex connectors had been removed and placed on the adjacent shelf, just so it would come down like this, a beautiful moving sculpture. Bare tan-colored rug spread out and swallowed up the whole floor. At the end Suzie kept looking at the rug, its little hairs flattened in places like rug that had been under furniture for a long time, as she helped Maura put away her stuff.

Suzie wanted to ask, if she had gotten into MIT too, would they be sharing a room? She entertained fantasies about Maura building up her new fantastical fortresses in a double, about tiptoeing through them as she woke up in the morning. She had reminded herself to be more careful in her steps from now on, and practiced tiptoeing in her room, pretending that her hamster-stained clothes over the floor were actually towers of blocks. She had come close to talking to Maura about it, but for some reason she feared Maura would insist on a room to herself, because even a sister couldn’t make that ultimate breach of privacy. Suzie knew Mom would be on her side, though, because she would never pay for two dorm rooms when she could just pay for one.

But MIT gave her a rejection letter while welcoming her sister with confetti in a tube. No way was Maura going to Boston University; Suzie didn’t get off the waitlist for Harvard because she shouldn’t have gotten on in the first place. They both got into Harvey Mudd in California, but Maura submitted her confirmation of enrollment to MIT before consulting Suzie, and Suzie chose BU so they could be within walking distance. Her mom didn’t talk about this after but it didn’t take Maura’s calculating mind to infer her mom’s disappointment from the way she congratulated Maura and didn’t congratulate her.

Their parents drove to school with them in their van, with Suzie and Maura huddled in the middle row, crowded around by clothes, books, and lamps, Maura holding a comforter in her lap and Suzie carrying Peaches’s cage. Pots and pans banged in the trunk. Three big plastic containers containing Maura’s building material - all that they had been able to fit among the other luggage - squeezed between the middle and back rows.

Their mom spent a day buying cases of instant noodles and cereal bars from Costco, but had to go back the next day for work. She touched Maura’s cheek and said “Make sure you make friends,” touched Suzie’s cheek and said “Keep your grades up” and also “Take care of Maura. She’s not used to being on her own. Why don’t you pretend you’re an MIT student and go to some of the orientation events with her?”

After their parents had hugged them and left them on the curb, Suzie thought Maura would object and free her of this embarrassing responsibility but she didn’t. It turned out to be good that Suzie agreed, though. Maura loosely held onto Suzie’s fingers as they pushed through crowds of enthusiastic pre-frosh. Suzie made frequent stops to introduce themselves to the people around Kresge Oval, in the dorms, and during lab tours, to upperclassmen behind help desks and freshmen trying to catch the melted drops leaking from their ice cream cones. She turned her gaze sideways as she did, to see if Maura was picking up on her sociability. She cringed internally but tried not to flinch when she told people yes, they were twins, yes they both got accepted here.

Around 6pm they made their way back to her dorm, McCormick, for Make Your Own Pizza Night, and as she always did when they encountered a group of people that looked like they knew where they were going, asked them where they were going.

“EC,” said the head guy, who had brown hair and a nose jutting out like a ship’s prow, and was walking backwards at the front of the group and swinging his arms. “Going to check out this roller coaster they said they’d built. I’m Jerry, by the way. What about you?”

“I’m Suzie. This is my sister Maura. We’re twins.”

“Twins!” He leaned back against an iron fence. “What are you thinking of studying here?”

“Course 2,” Maura piped up.

“That makes two of us,” Jerry said, shaking Maura’s hand vigorously, even though she hadn’t proffered it. “Why don’t you come with us?” He leaned over a bit, because Maura was short. Although not as short as she was when she hunched over with hands in pockets, in the way that told people she was thinking, and not to be disturbed.

“We’re getting dinner first,” Suzie spoke for Maura. To her she said, “Don’t worry, I’ve got East Campus on our list, after dinner.”

“You can grab food at EC,” he said, “There’s food everywhere.”

Maura disentangled her hands from Suzie’s and Suzie felt the wind blow away the warm moisture that had accumulated there, after so much time holding hands that she had stopped noticing it.

“We’ll join your group, then,” Maura said.

Jerry ran to the head of his ten-person group again. Maura followed, with Suzie trailing behind. As if a string were connecting them, Suzie thought. She felt a bit like their mom now. Maybe she should have prioritized East Campus on their list of events to go to. She should definitely have; it was a very engineer-y sort of place, after all.

“So *I* thought I could build stuff,” Jerry said, “But not compared to these MIT people.”

“Maura can build things,” Suzie piped up. “She built a roller coaster out of K’nex all on her own. You should have seen when she turned her room into Redwall, too. And then Lord of the Rings. She built miniature castles and everything.”

“You like fantasy stuff? You should check out the science fiction library…”

“Hi I’m Tiffany but you can call me Tiff. Sorry what was your name again?”

Suzie turned to the other nine people in the group, who she had forgotten to introduce herself to, even though she was usually the first to do so. The secretary in her head filed down the names automatically, as she always did, names that Suzie, unlike Maura, probably wouldn’t need after orientation. She nodded to their conversations but instead thought about how Jerry wasn’t walking backwards facing the rest of the gang anymore, and watched Maura periodically nodding her head.

At East Campus they discovered that the roller coaster wasn’t finished yet. A few people covered in wood dust and wearing yellow-tinted goggles were still working on it, pushing wood through bandsaws plugged into thick power strips that extended all the way through the open front door of the dorm. Most of the action was clustered around the barbecue pits, though, with people flapping paper plates impatiently against their hands.

“Want to help?” said a muscular guy, half a head taller than Maura, Jerry said, “You bet,” and Maura affirmed.

“Know how to hammer? Good. No one’s putting the actual coaster together. Just put the nails where the circles are.” He tapped the body of the coaster with his knuckles and then disappeared under the scaffolding. The wood boards were propped up in the correct positions but not yet nailed. Maura and Jerry shrugged at each other and started.

Suzie watched with her back against a tree. She considered getting a burger and maybe one for Maura, too, but instead checked facebook on her smartphone, searching for people they had met and considering friending them, then decided against it. When Maura took a break from hammering, Suzie approached her, cautiously, as she always did when she entered Maura’s room.

“You don’t have to stay, if you don’t want to,” Maura said. “Thanks for today.”

“No problem,” Suzie said, gave her a hug, and walked past the crowds and back across the BU bridge.

Maura ended up moving from her single room in McCormick to East Campus, without their parent’s knowledge. Maura trusted Suzie enough not to inform their parents, and of course, she didn’t.

To make up for her time absent at BU, Suzie baked a hundred chocolate chip cookies and knocked on doors to introduce herself to people. Some of them opened their doors wide and they would talk for five minutes, her new friend explaining his or her interest in history or biology or theater, and Suzie saying that alas, she was still undecided. She learned who opened their door cautiously, as if hiding some project they were working on, and she wondered if they were people like Maura, if someone at MIT was walking around giving cookies like her and Maura was also opening her door cautiously, or maybe that was high-school Maura, now gone.

On iChat in the evenings, Maura told Suzie about how she was building a solar-powered car with her friends, while Suzie strained to see past Maura’s head on the screen to see the three big plastic boxes still underneath her bed, gathering dust, while aging Peaches communicated cryptic text messages by crawling over the keyboard.

Maura had bigger things to make now, Suzie supposed, or maybe it was because Maura had a roommate, who Maura didn’t talk to much but shared her endless stock of instant noodle bowls with, and even though Suzie went over sometimes and met her in person, she still felt a bit jealous. It perturbed her though, that when Suzie ended the chats Maura’s button stayed green.

Peaches died in October. Rather than bury her on either side of the Charles Maura made the decision to set her afloat on a raft that sank as it sailed into midstream, and Suzie threw a peach into the water, because her roommate, Arya, told her the story about how after the famous Chinese poet Qu Yuan had drowned himself, citizens threw rice dumplings into the river so the fishes would eat the rice instead of the corpse. Maura bought another hamster at the pet store, who looked adorable when he stood up on his hind legs and put his hands together, like he was shivering in a coat too big for him.

Suzie thought of what to call him, but it was Arya who named him, Blueberry, because when Arya fed her one he stood up on his hind legs and ate the whole thing within a minute, until his cheek fur was stained purple. Suzie bought three boxes of hamster tubes and spent two hours making a McDonald’s-esque playground for him, that sat half on Suzie’s desk and half on Arya’s, the sort of thing Maura would have liked. Her neighbors made Blueberry the mascot of the entry in her dorm and nominated Suzie for social chair for the upcoming year. She took her new friends out to restaurants and movies, until she knew the area about Boston well enough to rattle off recommendations for places to eat and party to random inquirers on facebook. In the evenings she listened to Blueberry’s scrabbles and wondered what her next steps were.