SWAN SISTER

By Katherine Vaz

My sister, Rachel, was born wrong. There was a mistake in every cell in her body. She lived for a while in an incubator at St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York City and looked so tiny in her glass nest. “She’s our little swan,” said my Mother. Rachel was wild, and beautiful, and seemed ready to fly away. She stared upward, each of her eyes just one drop of pale blue. “Hello,” I whispered. “Don’t you want to stay with me?” I was eleven and had been waiting for a sister for a long time. She was rose-pink. Her head was iridescent like a soap bubble.

One night while holding Rachel, I saw my uncle Jack tapping on the outside of the window of the intensive care unit. He and my mother had not spoken in years. He walks fast, talks fast, reaches high.  My mother is slow, a young spirit with no sense of time. Sometimes instead of going to work, she decides to go to Central Park and sketch the trees, and my job is to call the pet store where she’s a cashier to say she has the flu. She escapes in her mind to places we can’t always reach, and when my father comes home from working at his fruit stand, he helps me make tomato soup filled with carrot pieces cut into daisies. Mother taught me how to twirl around until I’m too dizzy to stand; Uncle Jack used to get impatient when I did that. He didn’t like the paper-clip necklace Mother made for me.

But he came to the hospital and put his arms around Mother. Rachel had worked a miracle in summoning him back to us. Suddenly our Mother was calm and strong. Uncle Jack was the one to cry. Mother said only, “She’s my joy for as many hours or days as I have her.”

“You have me now, too,” he said. 

When Rachel was allowed to come home, I invented a plan. I would show her New York. It was the city of my birth, and my mother’s birth, and my father’s. If Rachel saw how astonishing it was, and how much I loved it, she would decide she could not possibly leave us. We lived in our own small nest on West 18th Street, high enough to see the river turn into melted silver when the sun went down. I held Rachel up to our window and said, “It’s so exciting here!” The clouds were like white wings drifting along, above the wide world, bird-high.

The doctor said it was a fine idea to help Rachel enjoy every single minute. We were given permission to take her out. She had a tube attached from her nose to an oxygen machine that was green and thin and had wheels and a handle so that we could push it around. Mother offered to steer the machine while I carried15 flights. The first man to fall in love with my sister, other than my father and Uncle Jack, was Rafael, the doorman. “Who is this angel?” he shouted when we crossed the lobby. 

He took my sister from me and said, “She’s a sweetheart.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mother, happy as a breeze. “Jessica and I are going to show her the city.”

“Will you marry me?” Rafael asked Rachel.

Her face was too weak to smile, but she politely shined some light off her eyes.

We made a strange parade, Mother wheeling the machine and my sister in my arms and the tube connecting her to the canister of air as we strolled slow-motion down West 18th and stopped at Tillmore Bakery Supplies, with its ballerinas for cakes, candles with sparkles, and sugar roses. She would have no birthdays, but we wanted to show her the promise of every celebration imaginable.  In the narrow aisles, shoppers stepped aside as I showed Rachel the bins of confetti, party hats, (I put one on), and the books on how to make wedding cakes that looked like white temples. I showed her cookie cutters shaped like half-moons and turkeys. Rachel slept. “Please try and pay attention,” I said. It was almost like our first sisterly quarrel. Mother giggled and took the party hat off my head and pretended it was a megaphone that she held to her mouth to boom out, “Earth to Rachel!” 

My sister perked up and grabbed my finger with her right hand as we went back onto the street. Summer was already tipping toward fall. The leaves were turning their usual fire colors, and they scuttled through the streets until people, or taxis and cars, crushed out all that fire under their feet or tires. Maybe it was Rachel’s second miracle (or third, fourth, hundredth) that when people saw us walking at half-speed with the oxygen machine and my sister attached to it, instead of being in a hurry (like Uncle Jack), they also slowed down and said, “Oh, heavens,” or “Oh, my.” My friend Lizzie sounded like this when we found a tide pool last summer. *How pretty*, I thought. *How easily crushed.* 

We walked under some scaffolding around a bank. “Look, Jessica! Look, Rachel!” said Mother. A construction worker had taken off his metal hat and was bowing to us.

We turned down Sixth Avenue so that Mother could show Rachel the pet store, Animal Kingdom, where she worked. Chihuahuas jumped at the glass in the window display when I lowered her into view. My sister’s legs had no strength but I felt a tremor in her, telling me that she would have kicked with pleasure if she could have. She had raw, thin skin so much like the flesh of these puppies that they forgave her for being a bird. The pet store smelled of grain and the milky scent of baby animals. Mother introduced Rachel to her boss, Doris, who had red hair that she brushed upward into a flame. She was the person I lied to whenever I called to get my mother out of work, and I often feared that Doris would explode into a torch.

Instead, Doris gave us a toy cloth mouse with a small bell attached to its collar. I shook it in front of Rachel and her head tilted.

“You taking care of yourself, sweetie?” Doris asked my mother. Doris has a voice like a volcano erupting. 

“Rachel is taking care of all of us,” said Mother.

We visited Mr. Wing, who runs the stationery store where I buy pens and notebooks for school and fold-out maps of the subway. I call him my “Quarter Friend” because one day I was fumbling with my money, and customers were impatient behind me, but I could not bear to use my special quarters with the mementos of the states on them. Mr. Wing laughed and said, “I’m also a collector.” He likes Georgia with its huge peach, which leaves me no choice but to roll my eyes and say, “But Mr. Wing, how *common*!” He never fails to act like this is the richest joke he’s ever heard. He keeps a shrine with joss sticks and oranges on a shelf with a red paper poster of the Double Happiness symbol. “Ask for happiness, and also a long life, Jessica. A long life without happiness is useless, and a happy life that isn’t long is not good either,” he once explained to me.

That day he gave Rachel a red envelope with a dollar in it and said, “For good luck.”

Oh the wonders we took in, my baby sister and Mother and me! We saw fish with open mouths, like trophies, in the window at Balducci’s, and the bricks and spires of the old courthouse that makes me think of a palace in Moscow. It’s now a library. Rachel whined and fussed; was she sad because she could not read books? Mother said, “I’ll take you to the big public library with its stone lions, and Jessica and Father and I will read to you at home.” I would take her to art museums and show her Monet, who paints the world as if it’s melting. And to gardens with birds-of-paradise, lilies, and other children.

We backtracked to West 14th Street for a surprise visit to Antonio’s, my father’s store, where he sells fruit, vegetables, bread, and candy. Sometimes in the alley behind, the pale green and yellow wrappings from the apples and pears get loose and fly about. They look like molted canary feathers. When I handle the fruits there, I imagine them full of bird-singing.  I put them to my ear and listen. Today I held one to Rachel’s ear; she’d been born knowing the language of the skies.

Father was cutting open a burlap sack of lemons when we walked in, and he stopped and smiled. The world froze. “My girls,” he said.

He helped Mother steer the oxygen machine around a stand with a pyramid of red apples. They gleamed. They had white kisses on them from being polished and stacked in the light. 

Father said, “Rachel isn’t too tired, is she? Are you, dear?”

He wiped his hands on his apron. He was skin and bones, his hairline already receding. Even his mustache was thin. He handed me a caramel and suddenly, unwrapping it, I was struck as if I had been sleepwalking through my many foolish days and now I was jolted awake—because all of us were here, my sister fluttering against my chest, my mother exhausted but at peace. There was sweetness in my mouth. We were surrounded by fruit that was red like a robin’s breast and brown as a warbler, ready to sail out of my father’s store to feed people. Outwardly father was quiet, (Uncle Jack once said he had no ambition), but on the day of Rachel’s great adventure, I put my head to his chest and discovered that there was singing, loud birdsong, inside him, too.

The weather turned colder after that, and we agreed to keep Rachel inside. But I longed for the day to take her out again, and I began to knit a jacket for her. Mother bought me thick yarn, blue and white. I wanted to work small waves of blue into a white background. I sat by Rachel in her crib and my needles clicked out a little music that made my heart sing. They made a *tap, tap*that lulled her to sleep—but many nights she fussed and many mornings she awakened short of breath. “That’s part of a swan’s story, Jessica,” said my mother when she saw me worrying. “Swans disappear at night and perform bold deeds and must race back by daylight, panting.” Mother taught me a cable stitch, and I kept unraveling my work until it came out just right. I did a front panel, the blue yarn peaking along, and started one of the sleeves—not easy! “You’ll be wearing it by Halloween,” I told Rachel.

I imagined the night as a swarm of crows, biting at her feathers. They must have nipped her without mercy, because often at first light she was red and crying. I finished the collar. It was rough, not as smooth as it should have been, but I knew I had to hurry. 

We ventured into the city one more time: Uncle Jack called to say that he was getting an award for the best sales of stocks and bonds for his company that year. Invitations engraved in gold arrived, including one for Rachel. And one for me: I ran my fingers along my name, indented on the page: *Jessica*. We took a taxicab because we thought Rachel’s life would not be complete without a genuine ride in one. The driver kept saying, “Poor child, poor child,” until Mother said, “What are you going on about, Sir? She’s off to Wall Street. She’s in heaven.” Mother was in her black velvet dress and I wore my cranberry velvet one with a matching sash. Rachel was in green togs that made her skin less yellow.

Uncle Jack was wearing a black suit in a theater-like room. When he saw us, he stopped talking to some people and came to hug us. He took Rachel in his arms and said, “It wouldn’t be the same without you here.” 

We could not stay long because Rachel began to cry again, but Uncle Jack ordered a limousine to take us home. I said, “Rachel! Maybe people will think we’re rock stars.” I’d brought along my knitting in a brown paper bag, because I knew that time was running short. I still needed to fix the hem and finish a sleeve.

That night I sat up even though my eyelids kept dropping. I stitched the hem in place. Just as I was starting on the right sleeve, Rachel returned early from her night flight, wailing, and I had to comfort her. Father got up; it was almost his usual time. There’s a courtyard below us, and I showed Rachel that pieces of the moon had gotten caught in some of the bramble bushes. Father nursed a cup of coffee and stood with us. The sky flipped stars into his cup, tiny ones, a size that could fit over Rachel’s eyes. He said, “It’s my favorite time. The night is ending and the day is beginning, and they’re both together for a moment, right now. It’s like there’s no one else awake.” 

“Almost no one,” I said.

“Right,” he said. “There’s you and me, and Mother and Rachel.” It was four in the morning. Rachel wailed worse than ever, and he took her from me to see if he could quiet her. Her screams brought Mother to us. We tried to pat Rachel, sing to her. She hollered; she raised the roof. She hit high notes and then low ones and started in again all over.

“She’s in pain,” said Mother.

An ambulance took Rachel and Mother to the hospital, and Father and I rode in a police car, but I was frantically knitting. I needed to finish the jacket. Hospital clothing is so horrid, and I wanted Rachel to look nice.

When Father and I got to St. Vincent’s, Mother met us in the hallway of the emergency room. She was serene, so I thought Rachel would be fine. I had three rows of the last sleeve started. I’d been getting the thread wet with sweating. The soles of shoes in the corridors made a squishing sound, and some nurses were laughing as if they were in one world, but I was stuck by myself in another.

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She hovers, comes back to me, now that I have my own baby.  My father’s heart gave out at an early age. My mother went from carefree to careless until, finally, she needed to move in with me for constant care. The strain taxes my marriage; just as the baby arrived, my mother began to collapse into infancy. 

Uncle Jack showed up less after we lost Rachel, though he remained close to us for another year. I credit her with that. Now he’s too busy for my mother and me, but I sense that this shames him, and I manage some forgiveness because it seems a mere breath ago that he was guiding me so that I could shut my eyes and not see the graves leading up to where my sister would lie. I’d been allowed to kiss her that last time on a table in the hospital. My mother put my knitted jacket on her, with its missing sleeve. 

No one could console me about it being unfinished. A failure to clothe and protect; a racing hard only to end up wanting. That tiny arm naked, those blue eyes glassy.

She managed a full stretch of life in a short while, brief joy as big as creation: She went to a place of many parties and a hundred candles. A man asked to marry her. Friends greeted her wherever she went. She soothed my mother and won over Uncle Jack. None of what anyone does lasts long. But the notes of some songs never lose their pitch, and on occasion my swan sister, my generous sister, dips down a wing made purely of cloud, and she whispers to grab hold.

In the midst of my fretting over my mother and child and marriage, though, I have a crawling sense of incompletion, of dread.  It is Rachel, who by her very absence warns me that no assurances can be sought.

Because lately my mother has taken a fancy to wandering.  This morning I awakened to find her gone.  I bundled up my baby and went out.  I was jostled; I stalked around the party-supply place, but she was not there.  I did not exactly trace our Rachel route, but I hoped that by some magic, I'd stumble across my mother at Animal Kingdom.  I did not.  I returned in stomach-hardening hope to my apartment, with the baby wailing, wailing--empty.  

My hand rests on the phone to call—whom? The police? The doctors? Uncle Jack? My friend Alice at the firm, to tell her that maternity leave is less restful than parsing copyright law? My husband at work, who’ll repeat that enough is enough? And then Mother strolls in, humming a tune that is aimless and jumbled but that calms the baby.

I stare, trembling.

“Jessica, Jessica,” she warbles. “Rescue-ah, hoop-a-la…”

“I’ve made sandwiches,” I say. I want to shake her. “Sit. Stay. Mother? We’ve talked about this. You must not—*must not*—leave me like this.”

Tomorrow she’ll go out again, I suspect; shall I make the call to have her confined before she gets terribly lost?

My daughter croons. She wears Rachel’s finished sweater. Blue and white and warm. Dear Rachel, I try to image your face grown and reflecting into mine, telling me how to keep the days from diminishing.

The clock replies with its annoying tick. The refrigerator purrs, announcing itself ready to cede to a newer model. I set out a bowl of fruit we won’t finish before it sinks past ripe.

Mother ties a big cloth napkin around her neck the way people do when eating lobster, and she bites mindlessly into basil-and-tomatoes on old rye as if it were a feast made marvelous by unseen hands.

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