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**ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST**

## **WINNING STORY**

Southwest from Venus

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**Word Count: 1.397. Non-Fiction.**

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There's a plane headed southwest from Venus. Should I report it?

My brother was so funny. Until he wasn't. There was a plane flying southwest from Venus. Should he report it? He wanted to know. Venus was 29.3 million miles away, but so was my brother.

"Olive my wife. Safe word pill." Once in a text and then at least a dozen times more on the phone, urgent, scary-fast, rapid-fire words: "I love my wife. Safe word pill." I felt his heart racing. Or it might have been mine. But I had the ambulance sent to his house.

I wish it hadn't been a typo. I wish Olive was his wife. I wish he didn't love. But that's unfair, because history came before her and he was doomed before he began.

"Chris is in the hospital."

"Oh, that's too bad."

Unmotivated, shutdown, underreactors. I don't think I knew until that day how damaged we all were. That day, history was present.

And then he was gone. Escaped the watchful eye of the deathwatchers. Suicidal, we had said. Already apologized for what he is about to do, we had warned. Free to go, no shoes, no wallet. He was only missing for five hours, but in my head, for those five hours, he was dead. Not a positive thinker in the family. Glasses half empty all around. Next month, I'd have a birthday. I'd be having a birthday as the sister of a dead brother. Christmas. I'd celebrate it as the sister of a dead brother. I'd smile at something and then I'd remember. My brother was dead. My head ruins the future all the time. But he was only dead for five hours. And only in my head.

We looked for him, realizing what a feat it is when the missing are found. We drove for an hour and a half along roads he must have walked, helplessly looking out the windows. He had done the only thing a forty-year-old man can do – he called his mother.

The police came. The in-laws came. The private, the hidden, became a social event. The police were given an education in American history by my dad. The Gettysburg Address. They wouldn't have needed to go back four score and seven years, but if they had a glimpse of the past, they would know. The damage. We carry it from even further back still. Dad always has a current obsession – then it was a book about the battle at Gettysburg, the radio from Mars, and his production notebook from one month of his two decades working at the meatpacking plant. February, 1983. Over 33 years ago. How many hotdogs. How many sausages. Things and details always. The past. Always.

My brother had been found. He had become too tired to kill himself. We were unmotivated, all of us. Not always a flaw, I guess. You'll never be disappointed if you don't try – our family motto. Death for him that day was not a let down. He couldn't be bothered to try it. Too hot. Too sunny. Got sleepy. I don't remember how many miles, but there was asphalt under his skin. That kind of thing bothers you less, I presume, when you're walking to kill yourself. But he was up now, alive, feet made of asphalt and all sense went out the window. To the birds. You become uneasy, unsettled, untethered a bit from reality when you're in the middle of a conversation that thinks it's one conversation, but is two. Another. A conspiracy theory and a plan from my brother. An unrelated conspiracy theory and a misunderstood acknowledgement of the plan from my father.

Hitler had been there. And Einstein. My brother was not a reader of things other than Google. How had he connected these two? Psychosis is a funny thing. My brother was Einstein, living next door to Hitler and he might have to do something about it. And who could blame him? I guess it's for the best that we're unmotivated. Not lazy. Disheartened. Just tired. What could we be if we could just WAKE UP? I could be anything I want. My brother could have killed Hitler. The past comes. Maybe not from Gettysburg, maybe not from Einstein, maybe not even from Hitler. But it comes. That day it was obvious that my dad had been through something. Sixteen people, two rooms. Alcoholic parents, poisoned babies. That day it was obvious that there was a long-term effect from my mom being beaten by her alcoholic father. Overcompensation.

Seamless seamless noncommunication. "He's got a vault under the house. He dug out the foundation and buried the old cement in my yard. I can tell because I saw the newer concrete in the house. He sends his son over to look through my windows to see if I've worked it out or if I've found the stuff he's buried. He might shoot me in the vault and no one would hear. He wants my house because of my shed. Because of the stack theory. Do you know what stack theory is? I've seen the footprints outside the shed. He's after the wood. The neighbour was up and took some of our wood and he took a saw and an empty gas can. I had three gas cans. Now I only have two. Not that I'm scared that he threatened to kill me. It's the principle of it. I know why I went crazy and thought I was Einstein. Because I am Einstein. And my neighbour is Hitler. I'll catch him. I've got a video camera recording all the time. Somehow he managed to get in without being seen, but he won't be able to do it again. Something's not right anywhere." All at

once and none of it real. Shared delusions while my mother prepared food as usual in the kitchen and I, who may have been the only one who felt crazy, stared out the living room window in amazement at the bright colours of the hummingbirds. In the house, everyone keeps talking because no one can hear what anyone else is saying.

If I had written a piece of music for the living room that afternoon, I would've called it "When Paranoid Delusions Collide", or even: "When Paranoid Delusions Collide, I Look at Hummingbirds through the Window." Because what else is there, except what's out the window.

Those were the best photos I'd ever taken of hummingbirds. Clear, bright, focused.

My brother was sitting at the computer. He had been laying in my parents' bed. I had gone out to check on him, after a quick glance at the Gettysburg book. Luckily, for me, it was then the policeman's turn to be shown. I checked on him, laying there, exhausted. I was exhausted too, I realized – my brother had been dead to me for five hours, after all. I felt naughty still, being in my parents' bedroom. Also, suffocated. My dad is a collector. Of everything. All four walls of the room, floor to ceiling: things. Tin cans full of keychains, plastic tubs of McDonald's Happy Meal toys dating back a good thirty years, women's brooches, figurines, ration books, drugstore calendars dating back at least ten years.

And the gun is still under the bed.

The dolls are kept upstairs.

Quiet children. That's how we were described. Quiet was accurate but not all. But then again, children only needed one adjective. Sad. Scared. I would've given us three. This is what we've come from. I looked for clues, as a way of staying detached, as a method of prevention.

How to not become. How did it happen to my brother? He was living history. I hadn't been close to my brother. I hadn't been raised to be. I had been raised by the words: There is nothing more important than family. And raised by the example: Forgive not the smallest trespass. Isolate. Actions are loud, and so, even now, we have very little contact. Not for any reason. Just because we were raised as solitary creatures and it never occurred to us to be close.

My brother never wanted to become our father, but he did one worse. He became a combination – our father and our mother. Twice as much damage, one person. With just enough of our father's father thrown in to make him miserable. Maybe when people who don't get along have a child, the child inherits bits of each and cannot get along within himself.

It's worse when someone with a sense of humour goes crazy – it takes a while to become obvious. My brother was always saying ridiculous things, so when he said, "Somebody's coming. Gotta take cover for a minute. They're either going to work or they're coming to kill me" I laughed. It was funny. Except he wasn't being funny. He was taking cover.

One month later, he stopped being audibly crazy. I don't know if anyone noticed for a while. He just got quiet and withdrawn – same as always/before, although now we all wondered what was going through his head. If you're an animal, you have to worry about dying every day of your life. So he said. My brother has a child.

I didn't even know my brother knew where Venus was.

I don't remember anything about my birthday last year – except that I was the sister of a brother. And my dad, still talking about Gettysburg, still singing Sonny James, still playing a

creepy old music box – only five dollars! All at the same time. I have a nostalgia still for white noise. Home.

It has left us all holding secrets that we do not want. His psychosis hasn't vanished, it has been diluted amongst the family. We have all taken a part of it to make it more manageable. All the unmentionable trauma, so instead we talk about Gettysburg and Hitler and Einstein. We go at things sideways. Indirect. A sneak attack at real emotions at a safe distance. A safe time. Four score and seven years ago. Longer still, when people bled on a field. This is what we relate to. Because if we stop thinking that Einstein could have stopped Hitler, or the battle on the field in Pennsylvania needn't have been so bloody, then it's time to think he's an alcoholic, she's gay, he was nearly killed by his father, she was nearly killed by her father. They all lost their minds for a little while and didn't know where to look. So it's a good thing that General Robert E. Lee was stopped. It's a good thing there are heroes. Because we need them now. Safe word pill. There's a flaw in the plan.

Safe word pill. There's a flaw in the plan. Tell Violet I'm bipolar.