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REFLECTIONS

NOW WE ARE FIVE

A big family, at the beach.

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In late May of this year, a few weeks shy of her fiftieth birthday, my youngest sister, Tiffany, committed suicide. She was living in a room in a beat-up house on the hard side of Somerville, Massachusetts, and had been dead, the coroner guessed, for at least five days before her door was battered down. I was given the news over a white courtesy phone while at the Dallas airport. Then, because my plane to Baton Rouge was boarding and I wasn't sure what else to do, I got on it. The following morning, I boarded another plane, this one to Atlanta, and the day after that I flew to Nashville, thinking all the while about my ever-shrinking family. A person expects his parents to die. But a sibling? I felt I'd lost the identity I'd enjoyed since 1968, when my younger brother was born.

"Six kids!" people would say. "How do your poor folks manage?"

There were a lot of big families in the neighborhood I grew up in. Every other house was a fiefdom, so I never gave it much thought until I became an adult, and my friends started having children. One or two seemed reasonable, but anything beyond that struck me as outrageous. A couple



The siblings, clockwise from top left: Gretchen, Lisa, David, Tiffany, Paul, and Amy.

Hugh and I knew in Normandy would occasionally come to dinner with their wrecking crew of three, and when they'd leave, several hours later, every last part of me would feel violated.

Take those kids, double them, and subtract the cable TV: that's what my parents had to deal with. Now, though, there weren't six, only five. "And you can't really say, 'There *used* to be six,' " I told my sister Lisa. "It just makes people uncomfortable."

I recalled a father and son I'd met in California a few years back. "So are there other children?" I asked.

"There are," the man said. "Three who are living and a daughter, Chloe, who died before she was born, eighteen years ago."

That's not fair, I remember thinking. Because, I mean, what's a person supposed to do with *that*?

Compared with most forty-nine-year-olds, or even most forty-nine-*month*-olds, Tiffany didn't have much. She did leave a will, though. In it, she decreed that we, her family, could not have her body or attend her memorial service.

"So put *that* in your pipe and smoke it," our mother would have said.

A few days after getting the news, my sister Amy drove to Somerville with a friend and collected two boxes of things from Tiffany's room: family photographs, many of which had been ripped into pieces, comment cards from a neighborhood grocery store, notebooks, receipts. The bed, a mattress on the floor, had been taken away and a large industrial fan had been set up. Amy snapped some pictures while she was there, and, individually and in groups, those of us left studied them for clues: a paper plate on a dresser that had several drawers missing, a phone number written on a wall, a collection of mop handles, each one a different color, arranged like cattails in a barrel painted green.

Six months before our sister killed herself, I made plans for us all to gather at a beach house on Emerald Isle, off the coast of North Carolina. My family used to vacation there every summer, but after my mother died we stopped going, not because we lost interest but because it was she who always made the arrangements and, more important, paid for it. The place I found with the help of my sister-in-law, Kathy, had six bedrooms and a small swimming pool. Our weeklong rental period began on Saturday, June 8th, and we arrived to find a delivery woman standing in the driveway with seven pounds of seafood, a sympathy gift sent by friends. "They's slaw in there, too," she said, handing over the bags.

In the past, when my family rented a cottage my sisters and I would crowd the door like puppies around a food dish. Our father would unlock it, and we'd tear through the house claiming rooms. I always picked the biggest one facing the ocean, and, just as I'd start to unpack, my parents would enter and tell me that this was *theirs*. "I mean, just who the hell do you think you are?" my father would ask. He and my mother would move in, and I would get booted to what was called "the maid's room." It was always on the ground level, a kind of dank shed next to where the car was parked. There was never an interior stairway leading to the upper floor. Instead, I had to take the outside steps and, more

often than not, knock on the locked front door, like a beggar hoping to be invited in.

“What do *you* want?” my sisters would ask.

“I want to come inside.”

“That’s funny,” Lisa, the eldest, would say to the others, who were gathered like disciples around her. “Did you hear something, a little whining sound? What is it that makes a noise like that? A hermit crab? A little sea slug?” Normally, there was a social divide between the three eldest and the three youngest children in my family. Lisa, Gretchen, and I treated the others like servants and did very well for ourselves. At the beach, though, all bets were off, and it was just upstairs against downstairs, meaning everyone against me.

This time, because I was paying, I got to choose the best room. Amy moved in next door, and my brother, Paul, his wife, and their ten-year-old daughter, Maddy, took the spot next to her. That was it for oceanfront. The others arrived later and had to take the leftovers. Lisa’s room faced the street, as did my father’s. Gretchen’s faced the street and was intended for someone who was paralyzed. Hanging from the ceiling were electric pulleys designed to lift a harnessed body into and out of bed.

Unlike the cottages of our youth, this one did not have a maid’s room. It was too new and fancy for that, as were the homes that surrounded it. Traditionally, all the island houses were on stilts, but more and more often now the ground floors are filled in. They all have beachy names and are painted beachy colors, but most of those built after Hurricane Fran hit the coast, in 1996, are three stories tall and look almost suburban. This place was vast and airy. The kitchen table sat twelve, and there was not one but *two* dishwashers. All the pictures were ocean-related: seascapes and lighthouses, all with the airborne “V”s that are shorthand for seagull. A sampler on the living-room wall read, “Old Shellers Never Die, They Simply Conch Out.” On the round clock beside it, the numbers lay in an indecipherable heap, as if they’d come unglued. Just above them were printed the words “Who cares?”

This was what we found ourselves saying whenever anyone asked the time.

“Who cares?”

The day before we arrived at the beach, Tiffany’s obituary ran in the *Raleigh News & Observer*. It was submitted by Gretchen, who stated that our sister had passed away peacefully at her home. This made it sound as if she were very old, and had a house. But what else could you do? People were leaving responses on the paper’s Web site, and one fellow wrote that Tiffany used to come into the video store where he worked in Somerville. When his glasses broke, she offered him a pair she had found while foraging for art supplies in somebody’s trash can. He said that she also gave him a *Playboy* magazine from the nineteen-sixties that included a photo spread titled “The Ass Menagerie.”

This was fascinating, as we didn’t really know our sister very well. Each of us had pulled away from the family at some point in our lives—we’d had to in order to forge our own identities, to go from being *a* Sedaris to being our own specific Sedaris. Tiffany, though, stayed away. She might promise to come home for Christmas, but at the last minute there’d always be some excuse: she missed her plane,

she had to work. The same would happen with our summer vacations. “The rest of us managed to make it,” I’d say, aware of how old and guilt-trippy I sounded.

All of us would be disappointed, though for different reasons. Even if you weren’t getting along with Tiffany at the time, you couldn’t deny the show she put on—the dramatic entrances, the non-stop, professional-grade insults, the chaos she’d inevitably leave in her wake. One day she’d throw a dish at you and the next she’d create a stunning mosaic made of the shards. When allegiances with one brother or sister flamed out, she’d take up with someone else. At no time did she get along with everybody, but there was always someone she was in contact with. Toward the end, it was Lisa, but before that we’d all had our turn.

The last time she joined us on Emerald Isle was in 1986. “And, even then, she left after three days,” Gretchen reminded us.

As kids, we spent our beach time swimming. Then we became teenagers and devoted ourselves to tanning. There’s a certain kind of talk that takes place when you’re lying, dazed, in the sun, and I’ve always been partial to it. On the first afternoon of our most recent trip, we laid out one of the bedspreads we had as children, and arranged ourselves side by side on it, trading stories about Tiffany.

“What about the Halloween she spent on that Army base?”

“And the time she showed up at Dad’s birthday party with a black eye?”

“I remember this girl she met years ago at a party,” I began, when my turn came. “She’d been talking about facial scars, and how terrible it would be to have one, so Tiffany said, ‘I have a little scar on my face and I don’t think it’s so awful.’”

“‘Well,’ the girl said, ‘you would if you were pretty.’”

Amy laughed and rolled over onto her stomach. “Oh, that’s a good line!”

I rearranged the towel I was using as a pillow. “Isn’t it, though?” Coming from someone else, the story might have been upsetting, but not being pretty was never one of Tiffany’s problems, especially when she was in her twenties and thirties, and men tumbled helpless before her.

“Funny,” I said, “but I don’t remember a scar on her face.”

I stayed in the sun too long that day and got a burn on my forehead. That was basically it for me and the beach blanket. I made brief appearances for the rest of the week, stopping to dry off after a swim, but mainly I spent my days on a bike, cycling up and down the coast, and thinking about what had happened. While the rest of us seem to get along effortlessly, with Tiffany it always felt like work. She and I usually made up after arguing, but our last fight took it out of me, and at the time of her death we hadn’t spoken in eight years. During that period, I regularly found myself near Somerville, and though I’d always toy with the idea of contacting her and spending a few hours together, I never did, despite my father’s encouragement. Meanwhile, I’d get reports from him and Lisa: Tiffany had lost her apartment, had gone on disability, had moved into a room found for her by a social-service agency. Perhaps she was more forthcoming with her friends, but her family got things only in bits and

pieces. She didn't talk *with* us so much as *at* us, great blocks of speech that were by turns funny, astute, and so contradictory it was hard to connect the sentence you were hearing to the one that preceded it. Before we stopped speaking, I could always tell when she was on the phone. I'd walk into the house and hear Hugh say, "Uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . ."

In addition to the two boxes that Amy had filled in Somerville, she also brought down our sister's ninth-grade yearbook, from 1978. Among the messages inscribed by her classmates was the following, written by someone who had drawn a marijuana leaf beside her name:

Tiffany. You are a one-of-a-kind girl so stay that way you unique ass. I'm only sorry we couldn't have partied more together. This school sux to hell. Stay

-cool

-stoned

-drunk

-fucked up

Check your ass later.

Then, there's:

Tiffany

I'm looking forward to getting high with you this summer.

Tiffany,

Call me sometime this summer and we'll go out and get blitzed.

A few weeks after these messages were written, Tiffany ran away, and was subsequently sent to a disciplinary institution in Maine called Élan. According to what she told us later, it was a horrible place. She returned home in 1980, having spent two years there, and from that point on none of us can recall a conversation in which she did not mention it. She blamed the family for sending her off, but we, her siblings, had nothing to do with it. Paul, for instance, was ten when she left. I was twenty-one. For a year, I sent her monthly letters. Then she wrote and asked me to stop. As for my parents, there were only so many times they could apologize. "We had other kids," they said in their defense. "You think we could let the world stop on account of any one of you?"

We were at the beach for three days before Lisa and our father, who is now ninety, joined us.

Being on the island meant missing the spinning classes he takes in Raleigh, so I found a fitness center not far from the rental cottage, and every afternoon he and I would spend some time there. On the way over, we'd talk to each other, but as soon as we mounted our stationary bikes we'd each retreat into our own thoughts. It was a small place, not very lively. A mute television oversaw the room, tuned to the Weather Channel and reminding us that there's always a catastrophe somewhere or other, always someone flooded from his home, or running for his life from a funnel-shaped cloud. Toward the end of the week, I came upon my father in Amy's room, sifting through the photographs that Tiffany had

destroyed. In his hand was a fragment of my mother's head with a patch of blue sky behind her. Under what circumstances had this been ripped up? I wondered. It seemed such a melodramatic gesture, like throwing a glass against a wall. Something someone in a movie would do.

"Just awful," my father whispered. "A person's life reduced to one lousy box."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Actually, there are two of them."

He corrected himself. "Two lousy boxes."

One afternoon on Emerald Isle, we all rode to the Food Lion for groceries. I was in the produce department, looking at red onions, when my brother sneaked up from behind and let loose with a loud "*Achoo*," this while whipping a bouquet of wet parsley through the air. I felt the spray on the back of my neck and froze, thinking that a very sick stranger had just sneezed on me. It's a neat trick, but he also doused the Indian woman who was standing to my left. She was wearing a blood-colored sari, and so she got it on her bare arm as well as her neck and the lower part of her back.

"Sorry, man," Paul said when she turned around, horrified. "I was just playing a joke on my brother."

The woman had many thin bracelets on, and they jangled as she brushed her hand against the back of her head.

"You called her 'man,' " I said to him after she walked off.

"For real?" he asked.

Amy mimicked him perfectly. "For real?"

Over the phone, my brother, like me, is often mistaken for a woman. As we continued shopping, he told us that his van had recently broken down, and that when he called for a tow truck the dispatcher said, "We'll be right out, sweetie." He lowered a watermelon into the cart, and turned to his daughter: "Maddy's got a daddy who talks like a lady, but she don't care, do she?"

Giggling, she punched him in the stomach, and I was struck by how comfortable the two of them are with each other. Our father was a figure of authority, while Paul is more of a playmate.

When we went to the beach as children, on or about the fourth day our father would say, "Wouldn't it be nice to buy a cottage down here?" We'd get our hopes up, and then he would bring practical concerns into it. They weren't petty—buying a house that will eventually get blown away by a hurricane probably isn't the best way to spend your money—but still we wanted one desperately. I told myself when I was young that one day *I* would buy a beach house and that it would be everyone's, as long as they followed my Draconian rules and never stopped thanking me for it. Thus it was that on Wednesday morning, midway through our vacation, Hugh and I contacted a real-estate agent named Phyllis, who took us around to look at available properties. On Friday afternoon, we made an offer on an oceanfront cottage not far from the one we were renting, and before sunset our bid was accepted. I made the announcement at the dinner table and got the reaction I had expected.

"Now, wait a minute," my father said. "You need to think clearly here."

"I already have," I told him.

"O.K., then, how old is the roof? How many times has it been replaced in the last ten years?"

"When can we move in?" Gretchen asked.

Lisa wanted to know if she could bring her dogs, and Amy asked what the house was named.

"Right now it's called Fantastic Place," I told her, "but we're going to change it." I used to think the ideal name for a beach house was the Ship Shape. Now, though, I had a better idea. "We're going to call it the Sea Section."

My father put down his hamburger. "Oh, no, you're not."

"But it's perfect," I argued. "The name's supposed to be beachy, and, if it's a pun, all the better."

I brought up a cottage we'd seen earlier in the day called Dune Our Thing, and my father winced. "How about naming it Tiffany?" he said.

Our silence translated to: Let's pretend we didn't hear that.

He picked his hamburger back up. "I think it's a great idea. The perfect way to pay our respects."

"If that's the case, we could name it after Mom," I told him. "Or half after Tiffany and half after Mom. But it's a house, not a tombstone, and it wouldn't fit in with the names of the other houses."

"Aw, baloney," my father said. "Fitting in—that's not who we are. That's not what we're about."

Paul interrupted to nominate the Conch Sucker.

Amy's suggestion had the word "seaman" in it, and Gretchen's was even dirtier.

"What's wrong with the name it already has?" Lisa asked.

"No, no, no," my father said, forgetting, I think, that this wasn't his decision. A few days later, after the buyer's remorse had kicked in, I'd wonder if I hadn't bought the house as a way of saying, See, it's just that easy. No hemming and hawing. No asking to look at the septic tank. Rather, you make your family happy and iron out the details later.

The cottage we bought is two stories tall and was built in 1978. It's on proper stilts and has two rear decks, one above the other, overlooking the ocean. It was rented to vacationers until late September, but Phyllis allowed us to drop by and show it to the family the following morning, after we checked out of the house we'd been staying in. A place always looks different—worse, most often—after you've made the commitment to buy it, so while the others raced up and down the stairs, claiming their future bedrooms, I held my nose to a vent and caught a whiff of mildew. The sale included the furniture, so I also made an inventory of the Barcaloungers and the massive TVs that I would eventually be getting rid of, along with the shell-patterned bedspreads and cushions with anchors on them. "For our beach house, I want to have a train theme," I announced. "Trains on the curtains, trains on the towels—we're going to go all out."

"Oh, brother," my father moaned.

We sketched a plan to return for Thanksgiving, and, after saying goodbye to one another, my family splintered into groups and headed off to our respective homes. There had been a breeze

at the beach house, but once we left the island the air grew still. As the heat intensified, so did the general feeling of depression. Throughout the sixties and seventies, the road back to Raleigh took us past Smithfield, and a billboard on the outskirts of town that read, “Welcome to Klan Country.” This time, we took a different route, one my brother recommended. Hugh drove, and my father sat beside him. I slumped down in the back seat, next to Amy, and every time I raised my head I’d see the same soybean field or low-slung cinder-block building we’d seemingly passed twenty minutes earlier.

We’d been on the road for a little more than an hour when we stopped at a farmers’ market. Inside an open-air pavilion, a woman offered complimentary plates of hummus served with a corn-and-black-bean salad, so we each accepted one and took seats on a bench. Twenty years earlier, the most a place like this might have offered was fried okra. Now there was organic coffee, and artisanal goat cheese. Above our heads hung a sign that read, “Whispering Dove Ranch,” and just as I thought that we might be anywhere I noticed that the music piped through the speakers was Christian—the new kind, which says that Jesus is awesome.

Hugh brought my father a plastic cup of water. “You O.K., Lou?”

“Fine,” my father answered.

“Why do you think she did it?” I asked as we stepped back into the sunlight. For that’s all any of us were thinking, *had been* thinking since we got the news. Mustn’t Tiffany have hoped that whatever pills she’d taken wouldn’t be strong enough, and that her failed attempt would lead her back into our fold? How could anyone purposefully leave us, *us*, of all people? This is how I thought of it, for though I’ve often lost faith in myself, I’ve never lost it in my family, in my certainty that we are fundamentally better than everyone else. It’s an archaic belief, one that I haven’t seriously reconsidered since my late teens, but still I hold it. Ours is the only club I’d ever wanted to be a member of, so I couldn’t imagine quitting. Backing off for a year or two was understandable, but to want out so badly that you’d take your own life?

“I don’t know that it had anything to do with us,” my father said. But how could it have not? Doesn’t the blood of every suicide splash back on our faces?

At the far end of the parking lot was a stand selling reptiles. In giant tanks were two pythons, each as big around as a fire hose. The heat seemed to suit them, and I watched as they raised their heads, testing the screened ceilings. Beside the snakes was a low pen corralling an alligator with its mouth banded shut. It wasn’t full grown, but perhaps an adolescent, around three feet long, and grumpy-looking. A girl had stuck her arm through the wire and was stroking the thing’s back, while it glared, seething. “I’d like to buy everything here just so I could kill it,” I said.

My father mopped his forehead with Kleenex. “I’m with you, brother.”

When we were young and set off for the beach, I’d look out the window at all the landmarks we drove by—the Purina silo on the south side of Raleigh, the Klan billboard—knowing that when we passed them a week later I’d be miserable. Our vacation over, now there’d be nothing to live for until

Christmas. My life is much fuller than it was back then, yet this return felt no different. “What time is it?” I asked Amy.

And instead of saying, “Who cares?,” she said, “You tell me. You’re the one with a watch on.”

At the airport a few hours later, I picked sand from my pockets, and thought of our final moments at the beach house I’d bought. I was on the front porch with Phyllis, who had just locked the door, and we turned to see the others in the driveway below us. “So is that one of your sisters?” she asked, pointing to Gretchen.

“It is,” I said. “And so are the two women standing on either side of her.”

“Then you’ve got your brother,” she observed. “That makes five—wow! Now, *that’s* a big family.”

I looked at the sunbaked cars we would soon be climbing into, furnaces every one of them, and said, “Yes. It certainly is.” ♦

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