

"Sister"  
Caroline Bybee

Sister is cradling the camera in her lap, a big black-and-glass baby with a leather strap. photography is her new kick, the idea that she can capture our entire lives in too-bright, over-exposed snapshots.

"look here!"

snap.

i would rather just forget.

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we have very different views of the world, Sister and i. she sees beauty everywhere - in slugs, rain clouds, and my smile.

she carries the camera like a girl on a mission (a woman, she insists), blasting "bohemian rhapsody" as she stumbles over her own feet and her too-long blue jeans, photographing blades of grass and the sun.

she is never deterred when these prints come out as nothing but smears of yellow and green. she only flashes me a smile before thumb-tacking them to her bulletin board.

it is a great collage: blurred colors and half-developed smiles.

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Sister is a barefoot angel with briar burrs in her hair and a hand on her hip. "why?" she asks me, snapping a picture even as her lips puff out in a pout.

i throw up a hand in defense and reprimand. "because I said so."

she hates this answer. whirling in a huff, she takes a photo of the linoleum, wet and grey with dirty mop water.

her dirty feet are leaving foot prints. she photographs this too.

"you always say that."

"it's always the answer."

she is not satisfied, but there is nothing she can do. she stomps out, the camera thumping against her chest. her dirty grey footprints cover the area that I've just washed.

i will clean it again.

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when we take a trip to the ocean, Sister brings the camera. i tell her that it will get sand in the crevices, that it will be ruined and she will be sorry, but Sister has learned to be sassy and will bring the camera.

"because i want to."

she spends the entire day in cut-offs and a halter-top, sitting cross-legged on a beach towel. with the camera to her eye, she captures the seagulls, bickering over the pieces of popcorn i throw and the fat sun-bathers to our right, their white skin blinding.

later, after she has developed the photos and admired her handiwork, she gives me the last picture on the roll: a picture of the waves, frozen at the peak of their curl, foam crest sharply in focus.

Sister gives me the ocean.

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the night that i am leaving, Sister can tell that i am on edge. "what's the matter?" she snaps my expression before i can swat her away.

i braid her hair in silence, trying to find the words to tell her. "nothing," i say, knowing that she will hate me for the traitor i am. "everything is just fine."

after she has been tucked in - i place the camera carefully on her bedside - i gather my things and make for the door. she is the only one i will miss, and when the rotting wood stairs creak on my way out, she is the only one i am afraid to wake.

the engine grumbles non-compliantly to life, all of my worldly possessions dumped into the truck bed. the gravel crunches as i pull away.

a light flashes from Sister's window.