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The Baker

By

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Evan had a photographic memory, knew how to count cards, never forgot a person's name. These things made people consider him smart, but he knew different. He could stare at a book for hours, the words sliding off the page each time he tried to reach the end of a sentence, the meanings running across the desk, dropping to the floor, scurrying into mouse holes. Dyslexia. Sure, now it had a fancy name, a good reputation, school funding. But when he grew up it was just a reading disorder, something that marked you as slow, lazy, stubborn in your refusal to learn.

He'd overcome it, mostly, through hours of practice with his younger sister Penny and her readers. She'd help him, with her little finger under one word at a time, her Strawberry Shortcake ruler grounding the words on a single line, her endless patience as they started again and again, heading back to the beginning, trying to gather all the words before they could sneak off, scamper away.

And now it was Penny who needed his help. Evan had no readers, no rulers, no means to guide her through this heartache. So he sat, staring at the phone, waiting. He called, left messages, but heard nothing back. She was buried in grief. He could feel it, even from this distance, thousands of miles of silence between them. He could feel the weight of her sorrow the way she'd felt his frustration all those years ago, over words that spoke so clearly to everyone but him.

All Penny had ever wanted was to be a mother. It suited her like no one else. Sure, almost everyone had kids. It was assumed, expected, unimpressive when you thought about it, how many people out there were having babies without a clue what challenges parenthood would bring for them, what strains it would put on their marriages, how much of their carefree independence it would cost them. But Penny knew, had always known. She took care of everyone around her, played mother to a hundred friends. How then, could she come so close, only to lose her child? And with it, her ability to have more children?

The word grief, so small, wasn't enough to encapsulate all that she must be feeling. Evan imagined her despair like his words, overflowing the page, spilling freely, spreading wide, refusing to be contained.

They'd been close as kids, when she'd been the brave one, three years younger but mastering so much before him: taking on the high dive while he watched clinging to the pool wall below, getting up on stage to sing while he cheered her on from the front row, heading across the country for college while he finished up at the local university. That's when they'd started drifting. While she was out west, getting political, experimenting, shedding skin after skin, morphing into someone he didn't know. She came home less and less, and he barely recognized her when she did.

Their parents got sick, one after the other, and she was too busy to come, with her independent theatre performances and corporations to battle. Evan buried them both, and took over the bakery. A business he hadn't wanted, all those pre-dawn mornings and dusty airborne flour, but it had been his mother's love, so how could he sell it? At least there was no reading involved.

He remembered every customer's name, every detail they shared with him, every order they'd placed. It was how his brain worked, faces and details filed together, using up that space where all of those easy reading skills should have been.

Business had picked up since he'd taken over. People liked to feel remembered, recognized, significant in someone's life, even if it was just the local baker. That was how Penny had made him feel all those years ago. Like, flawed as his brain was, he mattered to her.

He boxed up his best orange scones, a torte with shiny fruit slices, a few pieces of spicy pumpkin bread, a perfect strawberry shortcake, and sent them to her. A gift from all of them: the brother she'd drifted away from, the parents she'd left behind, the bakery she'd rarely set foot in. He carefully printed her address on top of the box, then decorated the rest of it with words she'd helped him learn: peace, patience, promise, passion, adoration, affection, family, fondness, trust, truth, heart, hope. He let the words flow free, dripping from the top of the box to the sides, trickling down to the bottom, pooling beneath the baked goods.