

# FICTION



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**BARTH BENEDICT BREITEIG CUDD GAFFNEY-ROSENFELD GRILL  
KAMSOKE KOHLER MILLER MIRSKY MUIR MUSIL NOLTE  
OCAMPO ROSS RUMMEL SEGAR STROM**



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*A Year in the Life of  
Ophelia Otterman, Age 12*

RAYMOND STROM

**Spring**

The tulips are back. Three of them. Three pink winks along the path that leads from the back door to the garage. When she sees them from the window, Mother sets down the glass she is washing, peels off the yellow gloves, and runs out the door to snap the flowers right off of their scapes. Then, without a word she comes back in and goes back to the dishes, leaving three bloomless stems where the winks once were.

I am eating cereal at the table, spelling words in my Alpha-Bits. She used to notice when I dawdled. Used to notice when I was fucking around. But now she only talks to me when she wants something done.

Go check on your brother, she says.

I tip the bowl up and drink the milk before finishing off the last of the cereal in three large spoonfuls. One word remains in the bottom: HELLO. I place this on the counter near Mother, but she only scrapes out the food and sinks the bowl into the dishwasher.

Upstairs, three of the four doors are open. My sister is in the bathroom smoking marijuana—no one is as regular as she claims to be. My brother

is in the room at the end of the hall, tied to his bed. As if he could leave if he tried.

Brother, I say. We thought that was so funny before the accident, calling each other Brother and Sister instead of our names—I didn't know then that he was probably just high. Brother, I say once more, but his painkillers have put him to sleep again.

Most of my family's history happened before I was around—I have been told bits and pieces. My brother spent all of high school in and out of drug treatment centers, and my sister spent all of her time trying to be like my brother. Then there was the accident. Now I eat my Alpha-Bits in silence.

Brother is unresponsive when I try to turn him over to let his bedsores breathe. Only the smell answers. This is not new. I slide my hands beneath his back and lift him on to his side before pulling his clothing away from where it is stuck to his body. Blood soaks the shirt after I pull. The deep ulcer has broken again. My breakfast is suddenly on the floor and I can't stop heaving.

Most everyone thinks my brother was high when the accident happened. He wasn't. He was seven months clean when a drunk ran a stop sign and put him in a wheelchair. And at first he had refused to even take pain medication, until the chair gave him bedsores. Pride was always his downfall. Too proud to admit he had a problem. Too proud to admit he was in pain. Too proud to admit that he had bedsores, until they passed through his skin and his muscle and into his bones.

After Mother cleans what I could not, she sends Sister and me out into the yard with hand trowels to get the bulbs up. Without the blooms the scapes have fallen limp in the grass, but we find what we are looking for quickly and dig into the ground. Sister stabs straight into the base of the stem, splitting the bulb in half. She is totally useless since she went back into the bathroom again after she saw what had happened. Both of my bulbs are dug out intact before she digs out the first half of hers.

In the house I hold the three dirty bunches of what looks like garlic out to Mother. I tell her two are still good, but she only tells me to throw them away.

## **Summer**

Sister's breasts have come in. We cannot talk of anything else. Even

Brother gets in on it. Tits McGee, he says, and coughs because he doesn't laugh anymore. Mother says he won't but I know he will die soon. I ask her why she lies to me and she changes the subject. Have you seen your sister's tits, she says.

I have, I say, and go to pack a bag for the beach.

I see a lot of Sister's tits at the beach. Everyone there sees them. And talks about them. She likes it—takes it as a compliment mostly. She likes the way she looks. I wear sweaters at the beach, but not because I don't like to go.

Sister lays out our blanket on the sand right near the parking lot. She wants to know what guys drive before she makes any decisions. Or she did at first, now we set up here so people know where we are. Lately, David has been visiting us. He drives a motorcycle and, like Sister, smokes marijuana. They only let me smoke cigarettes. They think it's funny when I cough.

When Sister and David go to splash in the water, I stay on the blanket and think about Brother. He will never feel like we do at the beach again. Feel the heat of the sun on the sand. The splash of the ocean. The weight of a breast in his hand. Tears well but do not breach; instead, I reach into David's hat and pull out his cigarettes.

Look what we have here.

From behind me, a strong hand grabs my wrist, shakes the cigarette to the ground. The voice again: How old are you?

It is a pair of policemen, armed with questions.

I came here alone, I say, though I don't know why I lie.

At home, Mother cries when she sees that it is me standing behind the officers.

Smoking, they tell her, rifling through other peoples' things, they say, Lord knows how she got there by herself.

Thank you, I'm sorry, Thank you, she says.

Then, upstairs to me, tucked into my bed though the window was still bright with afternoon sun: Please, I'm sorry, Please. Kneeling at my bedside in prayer, head down until she is asleep. The blanket wet with tears.

When the front door slams Mother goes downstairs. I go into Brother's room and close the door. He sleeps until the screaming starts. He opens his eyes and looks at the door.

Brother, I say, Sister's in trouble.

He takes my hand and pulls me close to him. If I had tits like that, he says, I'd be in trouble too.

Somehow, that's funny—Brother lightly coughs twice while I laugh. I lay my free hand on his forehead and brush his hair back with my thumb.

I'm gonna miss you Brother, I say.

I already miss me, he says. Closes his eyes.

Outside, the bathroom door slams and after about a joint's time, Sister's door slams. She doesn't come by my room to say goodbye, but I hear the motorcycle take her away.

### Autumn

It is a rainy day just after the last of the leaves have fallen when I know that Brother will not be there when I get home from school. The trees tell me. Broken claws reaching for the sky. I had thought it would feel different after he was gone but it was the same. My mother sits me down at the table and tells me what I already know. Then she reads from the Bible while I watch the rain.

Vanity of vanities, she says, the sun also rises.

At some point we have dinner. Push the food back and forth across our plates for a while before we go to bed.

Late that night I am in Brother's room. The men who came to take him away took his bed as well. The smell remains. I open a window and the autumn rushes in. Outside the window, the storm clouds are breaking, revealing a moon that either will be full or recently was. The clouds are steel grey and sharply defined by the moonlight. I grow cold quickly but do not leave. Brother will never be this cold again.

Sister doesn't come to the funeral. Mother doesn't know where she is—couldn't get a hold of her to ask.

After the service, we stop at the flower shop. Mother leaves me in the car and returns with a large paper bag filled with bulbs.

Back at the house, we each take a shovel from the garage and begin digging a long row that runs along the path that leads from the back door to the garage. Neither of us mentions the previous fall when Mother was out here with the same shovel, days after the accident, digging up the same row. Nor do we mention the spring. The only sound is steel on earth in an even rhythm. Our black dresses become brown with soil.

## Winter

I am outside shoveling what I hope is the last snow of the season. It is loose but heavy and wet. The sun is out and so are the first of the returning birds. The work is hard but I can feel my arms growing stronger with each shovelful. The winter was long and cold but it will be over soon.

Mother is in a state, has been for months. She is sitting on the couch and looking out the window. After I take off my coat and boots, I curl up next to her, put my head in her lap.

I've been thinking about the tulips every day. When they come back in, things will change.

Ophelia, Mother says, look. She stands and points out the window. I get up and take my spot at her side.