



THE ELASTICITY OF THE BRAIN

by Amy Silverberg

WHEN my brother-in-law arrives, I'm driving a rental car to pick him up. My car is at the mechanic's with intestinal problems. I'm not accustomed to the sensitive brakes, so the car shudders down all of my familiar streets.

“How's Marlene?” I say, when he opens the door, but he doesn't answer. He's on me too fast, all over me, like a uniform or a vacationer's tan.

Once home, it's too fast and then not fast enough, and then it's *stop, stop, stop*, though he always knows not to. “Fuck,” I say. I'm always cursing

lately. Especially after we sleep together, when my hair's slicked against my forehead, the blanket twisted between us. "Fuck," I repeat, breathless.

When that's over, we try and discuss Marlene. I make lattes in the fancy espresso machine I'd ordered from a catalogue Marlene once left here. The machine looks out of place on my kitchen counter, baby blue and too large, a relic from the 1950s, stolen from a housewife I'll never meet. We discuss Marlene as though we are doctors. At times, I lose the doctor monotone of my voice, and I puncture the sad, fluid thing beneath it.

I can only talk about my sister in neutral terms, the unfeeling, dispassionate terms of the inoffensive. My sister Marlene has a brain problem. No, more neutral: Marlene has special needs. She didn't used to but she does now. She had an accident, and now her brain isn't the same and it never will be. It might be similar to a heart attack or a seizure, except it wasn't. But the effects were the same: a terrible thing to bear witness to, because you couldn't do anything to stop it.

I didn't see it happen, but I can imagine.

"She asks about you," he says, after we've moved to the sofa. We'll make our presence known; imprint it on every surface of my house. "She

always asks when you're coming," Ted persists. "Debbie's been out twice this month."

Debbie is my mother. Debbie knows nothing. I don't know a lot, but Debbie knows less.

"What else does she say," I want to know.

His hands are addressing the arch of my left foot. "Who, Debbie?"

"No," I say, "Marlene."

"She asks where I'm hiding you," he says. This makes me want to laugh, and I give into the feeling, until my laughter is the only sound in the room, as raucous as applause. When I'm done laughing, I'm exhausted, like a cried-out child, and then he's on me again, a vacationer's tan, or I'm on him, like a uniform. Soon after, I fall asleep with my head hung off the couch, all the blood rushing the wrong way, and I sift through a few gauzy thoughts, in which Ted and I are in a garden, and Marlene is a business woman, and our lives have rearranged themselves into lives other than our own.

At one point in my dream, Ted says, "You need to come visit Marlene," and in the dream, I agree. I can hardly believe it, but I do. A few

hours later, when Ted says I hadn't dreamt our conversation, I still don't believe him.



There are the travel procedures—the airport, the crying child kicking the back of my seat, the nausea, the metallic taste in my mouth, the lunging of heart into throat as the plane descends—What if my car costs a fortune to fix? Who will come to my funeral?—and then I've arrived, only days after Ted, in the muggy armpit where the Carolinas meet.

Ted and Marlene live next door to a veterinary clinic. At night, the cats make high-pitched noises of mating or pain, and every now and then, they sound like people, airing petty grievances. When I'd first visited years ago, I'd watched a blue-smocked woman covered in blood wander outside, blinking in the sunshine, and I told Marlene the place was bad luck. Years ago, Marlene's luck was good enough to joke about.

Marlene has a full-time caretaker. She is Jamaican and cheerful and goes home every night to her family across town, where shells of cars and old tires decorate the driveways. She calls Marlene "Miss Marly," which

makes Marlene smile blandly, like a blind woman being led around by the elbow. Marlene talks slowly but often. The effort required to speak drags her whole face down, as though she's always on the verge of melting. We must repeat ourselves so she can understand. Saliva collects in the corners of her mouth, but her caretaker, Rani, is always one step ahead, a tissue poised, an extra in her pocket.

This is the picture. This is the aftermath of something that could not be helped.

We sit around the back porch drinking mint juleps, which Ted has prepared. He has gone to the trouble to drive to the store, to call to see which liquor I preferred, to come home and crush the mint with a special silver tool I hadn't known existed, and this embarrasses me for both of us.

What is there to say about Ted to make someone understand? He is a man for whom life has always spread itself out in welcome, like plush carpeting. Now, women bring him casseroles. They touch his tan forearm, asking after Marlene, asking after the scar above his lip they hadn't noticed before.

On the porch, he's dressed in seersucker shorts and a polo shirt, as though he might run out for a game of tennis. Marlene drinks lemonade

and recounts an animated movie she watched today, which came out years ago, a blockbuster hit for the elementary crowd. The sky is deep blue bath water. It exhausts me. Insects zip around the Citronella candle, large and swollen-looking. Ted pats Marlene's hand, asking about her favorite character, her favorite scene. I find his patience both touching and off-putting. I'd like to look away but I don't. He and Marlene never had children, though they'd tried, and now I wonder if the trying was in earnest or a little halfheartedly. Marlene never talked about it, and now I wish I'd asked.

Marlene looks at me across the table as though I'm half-familiar, like her bank teller or mail woman. She reaches forward to touch my hair, tugging hard enough to make me wince.

"Aw," she says, "don't be old," she says, and I stand up and walk inside.

In the kitchen, I hear Ted correct her, "You mean 'don't be upset,'" but how would he know? I am looking old.



Technically, I met Ted first, before Marlene knew or heard of him. I was twenty-three, Marlene twenty, and at certain angles, you could count the ridges of my rib cage, my body that stalled in adolescence.

I had flown out to spend Christmas with Marlene, where she was attending college in Miami. I relished my role as older, wiser sister, of having done it all before—“no pot for me, Marlene, I didn’t like it in college either”—of being an expert on all things she might so much as even *think* of trying. Growing up, Marlene fared better in love, though I fared better in life. I was self-sufficient, excited by my own thoughts, my own concept of the world. I spent my girlhood surrounded by friends. Marlene was a bundle of anxieties, too tightly wound to ever really enjoy herself. Men wanted to take care of her. They whispered in her ears at parties and bars, their hands on her lower back, their faces rearranged to comfort her. Later, after she was married and I was still single, our roles would reverse, and she would look after me, worrying how I was, what I was doing. Self-sufficiency loses its power when there is nobody around to see it.

During that cool December in Miami, I was still the one in control. We were at a bar called The Old Something—Stout, Goat, Perch—with wood paneled walls and large, over-filled beers, and I was annoyed with Marlene

for acting too drunk, for putting on her damsel act. In retrospect, maybe she was in distress. “You’re not my mother,” she’d said, and I’d responded, “Thank God for that.”

To spite her, I refused to laugh at Ted’s jokes by the bar when I met him, though I knew he wanted me to laugh. I could feel it all down my arms. I said that he should probably save the jokes for my sister who would be pliant in his hands—a girl who falls into traps men hadn’t known they’d set. She made it that easy. I pointed her out, leaning against the old-fashioned jukebox, hands in her hair.

Having a sister is like being in a long-term marriage, our sins too deep and familiar to ever extricate one from the other—we were, and are, forever linked. We sat in a booth with Ted and his stocky fraternity brother, and Marlene kept throwing her head back in horsey laughter when I shouted, not kindly, that she was blinding everyone with her fillings. Ted laughed, said he wished he had a brother, because were there any two people closer than siblings of the same sex? I said, “You can take her,” and his friend said, “Is that a challenge?” and when Marlene and Ted left together for his place, I booked an early flight home and couldn’t shake the sadness I felt, like a small, dark pit I’d somehow swallowed.

At their wedding three years later, Ted's friend, still just as stocky, told the story of that night during his toast, making it sound as though we'd set them up and pushed them together, like benevolent matchmakers. Later, this friend and I danced to *Why Do Fools Fall in Love*, his hands smoothing down the length of me, pressing into my hips. Grinning, he said, "Some things just work out," and I said, "Sure, some," and headed for the bar, my too high heels clicking over the song's last doo-wop refrain.

Their wedding was seven years ago, and what I remember most—more than the stocky fraternity brother—is my father, a month before he died. My father the peacemaker, shushing our mother, admiring my sister's dress and my dark hair twisted up like an elaborate pastry. My father, standing slightly stooped right before he walked down the aisle with Marlene on his arm. I remember waiting for him to say something profound, practically begging for it. "Dad?" I finally asked, and he shook his head.

"It's strange," he said, "I never got used to having girls."



In Marlene's blue gingham guestroom, I call the mechanic back home. The receptionist answers, her gum snapping against her teeth, and she says, "You can pick it up whenever."

"Well why didn't anyone call me?"

I hear pages flip. "Somebody should have," she says.

"Well now I can't come. Now I'm out of town."

"So then what's the hurry?" she asks.

"Am I being charged for the rental car?"

"Good point," she says, "That's gonna cost you."

I think about pleading with her, about asking, "Do you know where I am? What I'm doing? Do you have any idea?" but I only hang up. There had been a few months after Marlene's accident when I would overshare with anyone who so much as looked at me, but the crazy impulse passed, as most of them do. It might be partly from the pills I'd been prescribed, which hem me in, but don't help the cotton dryness of my mouth or the frequency of my smoky, purplish daydreams.

After I hang up, Ted brings Marlene into my room to say goodnight. When she's not trying to talk, she looks normal, so much so that it takes strangers by surprise when she begins to speak. In shops and in restaurants,

their faces undergo a flash of recognition: *There's something wrong with her.* They smile sweetly or turn away, to give her privacy. There are many different versions of people trying to be kind.

Marlene bends down to give me a wet kiss on the cheek, which reminds me of a childhood vacation we spent at a lake house. She was in love with me then; I had just turned fourteen and she followed me around as though attached by a string, enamored by my very presence. This is the way it is now with Marlene. Everything has become a symbol.

“Good night, Jillian,” she says, and I say, “Good night, Marlene,” and she winks both of her eyes, more like a twitch, and Ted says, “Be right back,” and then I say nothing.

When he appears again, alone and sheepish, he sits at the edge of the bed, careful not to touch me, careful not to rearrange the blanket and bedspread I helped his wife pick out. “I thought we could go to the outdoor market tomorrow,” he says. “Marlene likes it, and you might too.”

“Okay.”

“How is this for you?” he asks, flipping on the ceiling fan.

“Fine,” I say. I think about a book I began on the plane, about the elasticity of the brain. It might explain some of Marlene’s flashes of

lucidity, when she appears as the old Marlene, if only for a moment, as though the brain is remembering its old shape, feeling around for its old habits.

Here in South Carolina, my thoughts are unusually clear. Also, I've cut back on the pills. Next door, cats whine in their crates. "Maybe Marlene would like a dog," I tell him.

Ted pulls at his shirt collar. "Okay," he says, "I'll let you sleep."

When Marlene had her accident, she had been driving to the airport. She did not have a plane ticket but she did have a bag packed. She must have been on her way to meet someone somewhere, that's all Ted has ever been able to tell me. So there were things about Marlene neither of us knew, sinister, lusty parts of her brain and heart she kept completely secret.

When Ted visited me without Marlene, soon after her accident, I had recently been in love with a man six years my junior, who had freckles even on the backs of his knees. I could have poured myself into him, made him walk around carefully through the world with me sloshing inside of him, as though balancing an over-filled glass. It didn't work out; he moved to the Middle East to study minerals or sand or maybe oilrigs—I hadn't been listening, I'd been spilling all over the floor.

Ted appeared at my door, looking desperate and tall. I'd become the container. He poured himself right in. Most importantly, he was the only person who knew Marlene better than I did, and there was some sickening appeal in that. Now her brain is unknowable. Maybe it had always been that way, and we tricked ourselves into thinking anything different.



The next day, we drive into Charleston and walk down the cobblestone roads to the outdoor market, panting in the humid, rose-scented air, listening to the clomp-clomp of horse drawn carriages, when my mother calls.

“You don’t tell your mother anything,” she says, in lieu of hello.

“Let’s ride the horses,” Marlene says, in her stretched out words, and Ted says, “No, honey, that’s for the tourists,” which I guess she might as well be.

“It was a spur of the moment thing,” I say into the phone. “Just to check on Marlene.”

“I could have come spur of the moment. We could have made a trip out of it. Gone down the coast.”

“It’s nothing like that,” I say.

After a drop of dead air passes, she says, “Then what is it, I wonder.” My mother, the queen of rhetorical questions. I think she suspects something, in a way only mothers can, even when they’re not close to their daughters, even when they’ve squeezed out the juice of their mother-daughter relationship until it resembles something like an old, dry sponge. Occasionally, when she truly wants to hurt me, she accuses me of becoming like her—hard, guarded, incapable of intimacy. It is a fate worse than the one I’ve already chosen.

Today, Ted has given Rani the day off. “Marlene has two of us,” he says, “three seemed a little excessive.” So that’s how we walk through the market, one of us on either side of Marlene, as though she is our child, though I am often ignored, like a recently acquired stepmother, kept at arm’s length.



One time in junior high, when Marlene and I were getting along particularly well, we both had crushes on the same boy. I remember lying on our backs in the grass behind our house after our parents had gone to sleep, making up rhyming songs about him—Chris who lives at the end of Colby, Chris whose bread never gets moldy—each of us singing a verse, and then shaking with laughter, as though there could be nothing funnier than sharing a boy, breaking him in two between us. Now I think about retelling the story, but then I realize Ted’s heard it before, and Marlene wouldn’t remember it anyway.

When we first started sleeping together, Ted would confess the worst of their marriage—the terrible things he’d thought, the mistakes he’d made—and I’d listen, as though this would somehow atone for what we were doing, for wearing each other out like comfortable socks.

Once, while moving above me, he said, “I used to picture her mother. Naked, on all fours.”

“Hm,” I said.

“All the time,” he continued, breathless and sweating. “Early on at least. Even on our honeymoon.”

With him still pressed against me, I said, “She’s my mother, too,” and he said, “I’m sorry,” and kept going, only slower.



Marlene likes a certain area of the outdoor market best, a strange, garage sale region in the back corner under a blue tent, where scattered among the homemade items, like woven baskets and silver pounded pendants, people sell old keys and used stockings with long runs. Marlene is most interested in these things, which are of no use to anyone, least of all her.

She wants a green velvet hat, which is partly crushed in the middle. She picks it up and fingers the frayed edge. The man selling it smiles at her, gap toothed and surprised, like he knows he’s taking her for a ride. She tugs on Ted’s arm like a child, and like a father, he relents, looking worn out around the eyes. I watch his hands—large and tan—on the small of her back, a back still the same shape and size as any woman’s back (similar to mine), as he presses her forward.

“Whatever you want,” he says, smiling indulgently, and she picks a large rusty key, and says, in her slow, heartbreaking way, “This too.”

After we leave, Marlene swings the plastic bag back and forth so that the rusty key keeps knocking against my leg. She runs square into an old woman and Ted puts his hands on her shoulders and tries to direct her.

“Don’t be upset,” she says to Ted, and I look at him. He looks tired—prematurely aged. He puts an arm around her, squeezing, which she attempts to wiggle out of, but after a while, she just walks that way, between us.

“Don’t be old,” she says to me, and I say, “Too late.”

Ted agrees to go on a horse drawn carriage ride, because, I remind him, how often are we all in Charleston together? This is sort of a vacation—close to a vacation—an upstairs neighbor, a cousin, a mutant vacation. I try to sit in the bench seat across from Ted and Marlene, but this makes Marlene uneasy, and Ted says, “Here, sit between us.”

We clop down the strange streets of this town, with its jarring, confederate flags in the windows, its stubborn sense of history, its permeating nostalgia. The air is heavy, fragrant with citrus, noisy with bugs. Our huge horse, called Freddy, flicks its long eyelashes and brays. I watch Freddy closely, the way he turns his head as though checking for cars—the delicate flaring of his nostrils, the swell of his belly as he breathes.

Marlene tries to speak, but it is difficult to hear her over the tour guide's drone through the microphone and the clang of the carriage's wheels. The tour guide is old and grizzled. He points out the fourth Pentecostal church we've passed.

My sister smiles at me, her mouth shut primly, my brother-in-law's arm around her, and I forget for a moment the new twisted permutations of our lives.

Ted snakes his arm around Marlene, and touches my shoulder. It is brotherly, I think, though he might mean for it to be romantic. Still, I feel the heat of him all down me, and I think of that night at the bar, so many years ago, and the way our lives have unfolded, the deep creases you cannot smooth out.

Between us, Marlene is smiling, touching my hair, talking nonsense—no, not nonsense, because it makes sense to her, to the new grooves of this new brain. I resist the urge to shake her.

I'm thinking about my stupid car, and the stupid rental car, and how nobody ever cuts you a break, when our carriage suddenly lurches into the carriage in front of us, and I can see it all happening the moment before it actually happens: Marlene throwing her arms up as though on a roller

coaster, and Ted diving in front of her, to protect her. My hands move nowhere; they remain plastered to my knees. We stay that way, arms around our loved ones, until the carriage comes to a stop. The tour guide coughs into his microphone and says, “Well that could have been worse.” Marlene nods wisely, like nobody knows that better than her.

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© 2017 Amy Silverberg. Published by [LITTLE FICTION](#) | [BIG TRUTHS](#), June 2017. Cover design by Troy Palmer, using images from The Noun Project (credits: [Alina Oleynik](#)). Edited by Beth Gilstrap.

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