

## Unclaimed Baggage

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My cousin was a life guard, though she hardly qualified for a job at the city pool. Not able to swim. Not trained in CPR. No red bathing suit. She simply guarded her own life, which existed in numerous bags that she took with her wherever she went.

Janet feared that someone might steal her belongings from her house, so she packed all her important documents and objects of value and carted them around town. She frequently ran errands to the post office and the grocery store. Her paranoia was evident to all, as she unloaded bags upon bags at every stop; most times she made two or three trips to get all of her luggage unloaded.

This was how I first learned of Cousin Janet. Mama and I went to Hays, the local grocery store, to buy something for supper one evening. As we neared the entrance, I spotted her, the Bag Lady, with a load on her back that gave her a certain Quasimodo-like posture. She looked the age of an up-and-coming senior citizen; she was well-qualified for AARP. I produced an expression of bewildered amusement and told my mother to look at the woman.

She mirrored my face of confusion and nodded. "That's your cousin, Janet." She was quick to add that this cousin of mine came from my father's side of the family.

I wiped the smirk from my face, and my laughter subsided. A rush of embarrassment came over me; I would die if someone found out that I was related to her. Mama suggested that we shop on the opposite side of the store. I gladly followed.

Some baggage is better left unclaimed.

I was in Cousin Janet's shoes my third grade year. Seemingly unwanted, unloved. My brother, Nathan, and I attended the same school for the first time in our lives. My elementary school experience had only just begun, but he was in the sixth grade and was, no doubt, prepared to leave for the world of junior high.

Nathan was a rotund fellow, despite being very athletic. It happens in the South. Fried foods, heavy on the gravy, and a slow metabolism—every man's dream, every man's fate. I was slim, with a long, swinging ponytail that made the other girls jealous. I was growing out of the cute, cheek-pinched stage, and Nathan was just growing taller. We shared the same blue eyes and the same brown hair, only his was a good bit darker, almost black really. We had deep summer tans.

I told my friends about him. They didn't have an older brother, so I thought I was cool. But Nathan thought otherwise. I first learned this when I attempted to stand with him after school one day. He was with his friends, and I bashfully crept up beside him to wait for our mother. He told me to go away, so I ventured off to another part of the playground.

My brother broke my little nine-year-old heart. What had I done? Was I not a claimable sister?

Nathan and I shared more than blue eyes; we also had Emily, our older sister, who would not have dared to claim either of us. She was seven years older than I and three years older than Nathan, so we weren't too close to her. She was in her first year of high school when I was in my first year of elementary school. And although she, too, shared the blue eyes and brown hair, there was little else to suggest that we were a family.

Those were not what Emily now would consider her proudest moments. She went through a period in her life when she didn't care what our parents had to say. She deliberately did the opposite of what they told her to do; thus, it was a constant battle

in the Hay household. I was told that that was what constituted being a teenager, so I vowed never to grow up. But if that didn't work, I would bypass those seven years of my life. It seemed like a feasible plan.

The night that my dad took Emily's bedroom door off the hinges was one for the record books. She had lost her privacy privilege, so my dad and his friend removed her wooden shield of protection. She screamed and yelled, then screamed and yelled some more. I stared in amazement, listened to her incessant wailing, and decided that I never wanted to be crazy like Emily.

My Aunt Pam was a social worker, so she knew the true meaning of crazy. But before she became a social worker, she felt that God had called her to be a nurse. She went through hours of rigorous, and somewhat pointless, training at a local technical institute to get a degree that would allow her to work at the hospital in town.

One day, she went to the hospital to get some field experience, and, unfortunately, that's precisely what she got. A portly African-American woman was her mentor. She and Pam went into a patient's room; she was going to show my aunt the art of getting an overweight man into a wheelchair. Usually, they had machines that performed the task, but the mentor insisted that it could be done manually. Pam watched as the woman showed her how it was done.

"Now first, you gotta sit the patient up on the side of the bed. Then you gonna roll the wheelchair close to the bed and lock the wheels. Now you betta make sure the wheels on the bed are locked too. Then you gonna put yo' arms around the patient, rock back an' forth, and then swing them around into the wheelchair."

The task was complete. The woman had actually done something that surely had to be impossible.

Later that day, my aunt went into the same man's room. He needed to empty his bowels, so Pam decided that she could imitate what her mentor had shown her. She could manually get the heavy man into the wheelchair. It had looked so simple.

Pam helped the man sit up on the edge of the bed. She rolled the wheelchair close to the bed, locked the wheels, and then put her arms around him. They began to rock back and forth. She started to swing him around, but in mid-swing, the man panicked.

"I can't do this! I can't do this!"

"Yes, you can! Yes, you can!"

As they danced in the air, Pam's foot, which had been against the bed, was quickly moving away from her. She had forgotten to lock the bed. To make matters worse, her shoestring had gotten caught around the wheel of the bed. As she descended to the floor, with the large man cascading down on top of her, the leg that was attached to the bed slowly stretched out in the opposite direction.

There they lay. Pam managed to maneuver her shoestring from the wheel of the bed, but, before she could get the man off of her, the mentor walked in.

"Whatch ya'll doin' on the flo'?"

Pam became a social worker.

*Four eyes. Fat boy. Buck tooth. Metal mouth.* So was the familiar discourse between my brother and me. We were both in the midst of awkward stages in our lives—at a time before contacts and orthodontics attempted to beautify my appearance. And for him, it was before his straightened smile was unveiled and when he was obese beyond measure. Nathan was in junior high school, and I was almost there.

I was three years younger and three times as smart. I made straights A's, while he was just the average got-in-by-the-skin-of-his-teeth honor student. I tried to be the perfect child; he tried to sabotage the perfect child's success. I made our parents happy, and he caused them to question his existence.

That was Nathan in a nutshell. And everyone knows what is inside nutshells. Nuts!

Emily tried to be the opposite of perfect, on purpose. She drove my whole family insane with her juvenile stupidity. But she was in college now, so we saw even less of her than we had before. She had always said that she wanted to go as far away from home as possible, yet she ended up only an hour away. Nevertheless my parents threw a party when she left.

Although he was skilled at taking doors off of hinges, Daddy was especially amazing on the piano and the organ. That was his outstanding claim to fame around town. So, when a cousin of his asked him to play for her wedding many years ago, he gladly would have taken her up on the offer, but he was in graduate school in Texas. He couldn't make it.

The wedding party desperately needed someone, anyone, to sit at the piano and play the bridal march. My Aunt Pam knew the notes, so she was the chosen one.

Pam played "Here comes the bride" over and over and over again, using only one finger. Luckily, my dad finished graduate school before any more family weddings occurred, and Pam was erased from the list. She was far less than perfect on the piano and was constantly reminded of her brother's superior ability to play.

According to my mother, Janet was Daddy's second cousin, twice removed, or something along those lines. It was very distant, but there was still a connection.

Cousin Janet telephoned on occasion. She picked favorites, and my dad, for some reason or another, was at the top of the list. I answered her calls because I thought they were entertaining; Daddy avoided them at all costs. I suppose Janet simply wanted to talk to someone, anyone, who would listen. She and her daughter had a horrible relationship; actually, they chose not to have a relationship at all. So maybe she thought Daddy was a good listener.

We always teased about the messages that Janet left on the answering machine when my dad didn't want to answer. She insisted on saying her name numerous times in the same breath.

"Hello, Dennis. This is your cousin, Janet...Janet...you know, your cousin, Janet."

Those were the messages I looked forward to. They were hilarious and provided never-ending listening pleasure. Janet was bonkers.

Her house was a cockroach motel. She was the world's most adamant packrat; Janet kept everything, from cans to newspapers to bubble wrap. Stacks of newspapers rose to the ceiling in every room of the house, and only a tiny trail existed so that one could walk through the mess. And walk through the mess one did; cat feces were everywhere.

Janet had about twenty cats. Some lived in cages, some didn't. The oldest cat was said to have been about thirty; death was but a breath away for the poor feline. In such a situation, though, demise may have been the most appealing option. She also had a large turtle and obviously no ingenuity in the art of pet naming. His name was Mr. Turtle. He was her companion when she went on her excursions; he rode in the passenger

seat of the car. Poor guy. But at least he got to leave the house, which is more than can be said for the cats. Poor cats.

Nathan was in college, and I was a senior in high school. But he continued to dwell in our midst, devour our food, and manage to squander our parents' money. He was still incomprehensible to me, but we had somehow managed to grow closer, despite our many differences.

One day, we received an astronomical cell phone bill. My mom went into orbit. Nathan had sent over seven thousand text messages in one month, and he didn't have unlimited text messaging. How unfortunate for him! But I rather enjoyed times like those, when my brother was in trouble and hadn't dragged me down with him. That way, I could enjoy the game from outside the ring, and the front row seats were superb.

Round one: the confrontation.

The unsuspecting brother entered the house to find an angry mother waving around a bill that was roughly one mile long. He wore a look of surprise. My mother explained that she had received the bill. But she didn't use words—the infuriated glare said it all. Nathan chuckled.

And then came the big question: "How did you send seven thousand text messages in one month?!"

Round two: excuses, excuses.

"That's the only way that I can talk to Amanda during the day."

"Why can't you wait to call her at night? We do have free nights and weekends, you know."

"I can't call her at night. She has to babysit."

"Well, I still can't understand how you can send seven thousand text messages. Do you send her one word at a time?"

"No!"

Round three: things heat up.

"You went three hundred five dollars and thirty-five cents over your text messaging limit! You have to pay me back. I can't afford that."

"I will!"

He stormed out of the room and stomped up the stairs.

Intermission.

Daddy came home from work, and Mama showed him the bill.

Rounds one through three were repeated.

I remember when my sister got her first cell phone. She was sixteen and one of the first in her high school to get a phone. Emily had it all.

Shortly after she received the phone, we went on a family vacation to Florida, where we figured that the phone would come in handy. My mom, my brother, and I decided to go to the Citrus Bowl, back when the event was still named after a fruit, and not a credit card. Emily and Daddy went shopping and were supposed to pick us up after the game.

We waited for hours on end, imagining all of the horrible things that could have happened to them. They weren't there, and we couldn't reach them. The beloved cell phone did not work. Luckily, other Arkansans were stuck in that dark, dingy part of the 'hood, and they kept us company while we waited.

Finally, hours after we were supposed to meet, Emily, Daddy, and a hobo, whom they had picked up to give them directions, arrived. Tears streamed down Emily's face;

it looked like she actually cared that we were almost never going to see each other again. It looked like she actually loved us, in spite of how much she was supposed to hate us. For the first time in a long time, I felt like we were a happy family.

Daddy said that he didn't even know Pam when they were in high school. He was always at my mother's house, scoring future son-in-law points with her parents, so he was oblivious to his sister.

Now, they were inseparable. I came to the realization that my father talked on the phone more than any other man on the planet, and most of the time he spoke to that sister of his, whose presence he had now discovered. Maybe people's eyes open up when they age; maybe that is the secret to their wisdom.

Garfield, or Lucifer, as Nathan called her, was my angel. She warmed up to me and could mildly tolerate my mom, but toward everyone else, that cat was just plain evil. One would think that I trained her to act that way, but there was no need to. My kitty hated Nathan the most. He pestered her relentlessly, so he got what he deserved. The really awful thing about Garfield—even worse than her scratches—was the odor of her litter box.

My dad took out the kitty litter; it was his job. No one else would touch it, and no one wished to smell it. Daddy was the brave soul who dared to empty it. I tried to make up for shying away from responsibilities such as those, so I made myself an exhaustive list of chores. Put the dishes in the dishwasher. Fold the towels. Clean my bedroom. Whether or not every task on the list was accomplished was another story; nevertheless I had things that needed to be done.

We never were truly assigned chores around the house but were politely asked by our parents to help when help was needed. In such instances, I chose to pitch in. In such instances, my brother chose to cop out.

Nathan always got his way. What he said went, and arguments only made things worse. It must have been that he was a muscular, athletic, six-foot-three man. My parents were intimidated by him, so he was able to weasel his way out of working around the house. Cheater.

It was not that I envied his build, but sometimes I wondered if my five-foot-five-and-a-half frame would get to cop out of things that needed to be done if I had been as rough and tough as Nathan. Unfortunately, I never came to know that feeling. Thus I continued with my chores and became cognizant of the fact that Nathan was really a very useful human being, whether I could see it then or not.

Now that I think about it, Garfield was originally my sister's cat. A boyfriend gave the cat to her for her birthday. I remember how dumb I thought Emily was for naming the cat Garfield. She was a girl, she wasn't orange, and she wasn't fat—not exactly bound to win a lookalike contest with the cartoon character.

But my sister wasn't dumb, as it turned out. She had a rhyme, a reason, even if it was unclear to everyone else. Emily's intentions made more sense as time wore on, as we both grew older and learned more about each other.

Pam and Daddy didn't have many pets when they were young. They grew up in a broken home, in the 1960s, in the South. That, in itself, was more than enough fun; they had no need for pets. They had crazy cousins to keep them entertained.

Recently, my parents and I went to the Knoxville airport to pick up a relative. I was excited to be in an airport; I had only been in one before, so I was very intrigued by

the whole process. A mob of people exited the plane. Everyone looked tired beyond belief and past ready to climb into bed. Before they left, however, they had to report to the baggage claim to fetch their luggage. I could tell by the faces of the passengers of the plane that they were less than thrilled about having to stay at the airport any longer.

A crowd of people waited for their bags to come around in the luggage parade. I asked my mother what happened if you missed getting your bag. She told me that the belt would come around again, but eventually it would be labeled as unclaimed baggage.

Nathan and I were the typical brother and sister, I suppose. We went through the name-calling stage, the reluctant acknowledgment stage, the anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better stage, and many more. But, quite frankly, I enjoy the stage that we are currently in—the appreciative-of-one-another stage. We live about two hundred miles away from each other, yet we are closer than ever. He still picks on me, and I still don't fully understand him. But I love him; I loved him all along. It was his job to pester me; I think that is in the guide to being a big brother.

The same is true with my sister. Emily and I get along better than ever. I actually got a chance to get to know her, and she seems to have calmed down a lot since her teenage years. I will never understand what was going on inside her head, but I know she now realizes how miserable she made us. And she's sorry for it.

Pam's relationship with my father is the best it has ever been. They are living proof that sibling rivalry is just a phase, a very exhaustive yet interesting phase.

So even though there were times when we chose not to claim each other, in the end, we found it better to claim that which was rightfully ours than to let it be placed in the hands of a stranger.

I don't hear about Janet anymore, but I like to dream up stories of what her life has become. She resides in an assisted living place in Florida, with all the excitement of underhanded bingo games, rigged by the overly cheerful girl in a tacky nurse outfit; and the handicapped ninny who wears pantyhose to breakfast and rolls over your foot just to grab the last helping of over-easy, undercooked eggs; and that grouchy veteran who insists on giving his account of bloody battlefields so many times that you could tell the stories, in great detail, to him.

Janet doesn't fit in with any particular group. She doesn't knit, crochet, cross-stitch, or any other fanciful hobby related to sewing. She still has her teeth and her hair, and she is the only gal on the hall who can read past the top row of the eye chart. But she no longer has her bags; they took her life—all that she owned—away from her.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in late September, she sits in a livid, dust-covered chair and sips on a cup of sweet iced tea, just the way she likes it. She longs to let the warm outside air envelop her, to feel the cool breeze roll off the all-embracing, sapphire ocean. Janet closes her eyes. She finds herself on the beach, in the slight shade of a slender palm tree, without the extra baggage weighing her down.

As we left the grocery store, I saw my cousin, Janet, waiting as the bag boy unloaded recyclable plastic sacks into her old car. After he completed the task, she pulled a crumpled dollar bill from her coat pocket, placed it in the young man's hand, and sweetly smiled at him. He smiled in return and made his way back inside the store.

So that's my cousin, I thought. She seems like a perfectly claimable being.