

## Lost Keys

My name is Abel, but I was not the good brother.

That simple thought seemed to devour me like the sun light that suddenly poured into my perpetually dark room. It is as if the sun is casting a mirage to my vision, blinding me, to my hopelessness and guilt. I have been played by a horrendously cruel humor, I thought, as my brother, Michael, walks towards me. The nostalgic smile on his lips tormented me to no end.

“It has been quite a while, Abel!” He said cheerily.

“Brother...” I whimpered. I tried to find support from the ground beneath me, the wall against me, but they all fell apart as Michael approached me. I was in his shadow, from the sun light bursting behind him. Ten years later, my sitting height matched his standing. But no physical difference changed my inferiority. His eyes pierced through me, and once more I was reminded of my reverence and love for this person, and the ugliness of my emotions that bore from that same seed.

I was a weak child since birth, too light and arrived to this world too early. Breathing was difficult, everyone thought I was going to die, but Michael didn't. He told me to breathe, and I lived, as I like to think, by his words. It was decided then that I would shyly hide in his shadows forever, casted by his talented light that everyone saw in him. Michael was good at everything he tried; he was a natural leader. I was contently safe as I hid behind him, known as the fragile child, the one no one expected anything from, and never before had I thought of surpassing my brother in anything, until Ellie came along.

Michael kneels besides me; his eyes are the color of a clearing sky, mercilessly reflecting myself, exposing me. I turned away, I could not face him. He reaches out his arm and pulls me to an embrace. I was forced into the first human contact I have felt in years. It was warm like that one summer, when Michael left me...

Every summer I have spent with Michael was by the mountain side at our grandparent's place. Not too deep into the mountains there is an old storage room, where Michael and I claimed as our secret base. It was there that I found the first thing I was good at, something quaint and absurd. I picked up on locksmith. Such creation that long lived through history of all civilizations with each of their own unique designs, with the delicate meaning of something so

simple – to protect what is important. It is a craft with all the respect and aspect an art has. Its sense of security comforted my cowardice. For every lock there a key to be made; the owner of the key is crucial, for that person had the access to your most prized possessions, the tender parts of you, easily harmed. Sometimes I would not make a key for the locks I made; often I lost them. And always, without fail, my brother’s shock of red hair will appear before me, and in his hand will be the missing key. Or for those keys that I refused to make, Michael learned the pick open locks. My natural love, and enemy, was my brother.

My frail body was not made for vigorous exercises, says the Doctor and our parents and all the people around me. After climbing to the storage room, I would be already too tired to do much more than sitting around. With all the papers that were around, we made sketches of new designs of keys I could make, constructed plans to become heroes, or just a good game of marbles on the wooden floor. The times I made locks, brother read, often out loud to me.

Michael didn’t mind that we couldn’t run around. He had never complained that his little brother couldn’t even play with soccer with him. Every time Michael walked, his friends would follow behind; but when he was with me, he made sure I walked beside him. As I am a grown up now I often wondered if my brother simply pitied me, because he know that he owned my life, and he was my idol.

I am force back into reality as my phone made a buzzing vibration. The screen lit up as a call from Ellie. Michael turns his eyes on the phone, and his face lit up as he read the name and happily looks back at me. My benevolent brother, how could he smile? My eyes lingered on the key around his neck. That was the first present I had made for my brother; it had many imperfections, but it was the first key I made that was not of wood. The matching lock around my neck was just as rusted and old.

“How did you find it, Michael?” I ask softly.

“Pick up the phone, Abel.” My brother grabbed the phone, but he couldn’t figure out how to work it. “Ellie is waiting!”

I snatched the phone from his hands, a bit irritated. “I don’t want to hear her voice.” The phone kept vibrating in my hand. Even my brother’s presence could no longer soothe my coarseness that developed the years I have spent without him.

Ellie Blythe was the first girl I have took particular interest in. When I was seven, my father's coworkers' children came along to the mountain side. Her brother Kyle was a year older than Michael, and it was only natural as children that we all went to our secret base together, though I was a bit reluctant. But Ellie changed my mind.

"Neat place you got here." Kyle said, impressed with the amount of work my brother and I had put into improving the storage house. He peeked over to Michael, who modestly smiled. Michael made friends easily, but his superiority to them is also easily seen. Even Kyle whose arrogance never fazes with challenges showed respect to Michael, who had just beaten him badly in a race. But my attention was not on any of that; my brother was the best, that was just a natural fact of life to me.

It was Ellie's unnatural quietness as a six years old girl and her pretty blonde hair that drawn me. I couldn't help but stared at her calming smile; I never quite met a girl that had such a demeanor back then, or could believe that she is related to that snobby Kyle. I showed her the locks I made; Kyle sneered but as Michael glared him he looked elsewhere. Ellie was impressed with them; she really liked the dove-patterned lock I made a year ago. I was pleasantly surprised; few people my age back then had not reacted like Kyle did. I said she could keep it; she smiled at me, and it was that moment I started liking her.

The days that summer went by very fast with Ellie and Kyle's company, though Kyle rarely made sensible comments, Ellie and Michael made the best vacation I had.

That summer Michael seemed just happy as I was that I made friends with Ellie; I shyly told Michael that I liked her, and Michael gave me thumbs-up and said, Go for it Abel! That time Michael was already ten years old, two heads taller than me, and his bright red hair glistened under the sun. My dull brown hair seemed bland in comparison, but again, I had never cared.

Ellie enjoyed drawing, often times sketching out designs I could make into a lock. She was strangely good as young as she was, her hand with the proper utensil created the most vivid images. We were two little oddballs, as Kyle would put it. Michael admired both of our works. Many times he and Kyle went outside, leaving just me and Ellie. I knew he did it on purpose for me, and that is one reason I didn't mind not just spending one summer alone with brother. Me and Ellie became very close, albeit the few words exchanged, laughter was shared.

I made locks for her drawings. Ellie asked why, I replied you have to protect what's precious to you. She nodded, but said why put them away? Wouldn't you want to have them closest to you? It will be safe even without a lock. I couldn't answer to that, and put the locks down.

The peaceful sky's illusion of comfort before the storm arrived. Such were those days.

Near the last days of summer Ellie had a pile of drawing neatly stacked on tables. Sometimes she would not show me her drawings, but I respected her privacy. Today neither Michael or Kyle wanted to go out. The air was heavy and hot even in the mountains; a certain discomfort seemed to heave in my chest that day as Michael went examined through the new locks I made, smiling slightly. Kyle was napping. Ellie kept on sketching today, but her pencil kept chipping. I sat next to brother and read. All was in a queerly quiet afternoon, until a clap of thunder struck down the silence. I looked up. I was afraid of storms, Michael knew that. He moved closer to me, assuring me.

Kyle woke up, a dumb look seem to linger on his face as he sees the sudden and harsh pour of rain outside the window. Ellie looked up from her drawing and bit her lips.

"We better wait till the storm stops." Michael said.

"No duh," Kyle replied, yawning once more, and shuddered a little as another clap of thunder clashed through the air. The lightening that came before it made Michael's features white and pale. I laid my head on his shoulders. I could not show my fear easily, not without Kyle's taunting and... not in front of Ellie. Kyle ran to Ellie who yelped quickly hid her drawing.

"Oh c'mon Ellie, you don't have to be afraid to show your brother your drawings." Kyle smirked. Kyle must be the worst brother I know; he was rude, when he gets mad he pulls on Ellie's beautiful hair, and was easily angered by the smallest things, even with Ellie's quietness. But Ellie said she loved her brother, all in all. She said it a calm voice, as if she didn't have a choice to have such feelings. The same goes for me, but loving Michael was like breathing to me. But then, he gave me that too. Abel. To breathe.

Ellie hid behind her drawing as Kyle tried to snatch it from her. Michael made few verbal attempts to stop him, but he never left my side. From the corner of my eyes I see the string around Michael's neck; he always put the key I made for him in his shirt. He saw me

looking, and smiled and pointed to the lock I always wore. I didn't mind him hiding it, I thought. The key was not perfect, but Michael was.

"Ohhh, look at you Ellie!" Kyle has now successfully snatched the drawing from Ellie, who still did not give up on trying to grab it back. Kyle snickered some more. The noise annoyed me. "Give the drawing back to her." I said, feeling a bit brave.

"Oh shuddup Abel, look at who she's drawing!" He flipped the paper over.

The pencil streaks were careful but a bit nervous, like they didn't want to be find. It was of a boy, with flowing hair and bright eyes, a warming smile and handsome features. Light freckles splattered across the nose. There was string around his neck, but the ornament was under his shirt.

I blinked a few times, trying to think of why that beautiful face on the paper looked so familiar. I looked to Michael who seemed just as lost as I was, and then I realized. Ellie drew Michael. What bother me wasn't that, she has drawn me a few times; it was the way she portrayed him, and how she is blushing right now.

"There are more of these, Michael." Kyle said proudly as he stood up, seemingly happy to find something that even dazed my brother. He went through the piles of Ellie's drawings, making a mess and grabbing a few on the bottom of each pile. Each was a different drawing of Michael; Michael reading, sitting, standing, smiling, with a serious expression, running, sleeping, and one of me and him together... I cringed a little as each drawing was shown. I felt something inside of me, being awakened for the first time. A budding feeling that sprang with love and reverence, for the first time. It was such an ugly feeling that I felt the need to move away from my brother, even as the thunder kept drumming and the lightening kept flashing.

"All summer! She has been drawing you all summer, Michael." Kyle went on to say, and Ellie simply hid her face in her hands, her blonde hair swaying. "Oh c'mon Ellie. Summer's about to end, isn't about time you confess?"

Michael looked at me. I didn't want him to, so I turned around. My perfect brother. Something was bursting in my chest. And many years later I realize that agonizing and atrocious feelings were those of betrayal, anger, and most of all envy. Those were all first, and it wore me down, the tiny me back then, against the brother I simply loved and revered all of

my life. Michael was still looking at me, Kyle was still talking. I turned and snatched the key I made for my brother, and dashed out of the storage room, and threw his key as far as I could. I ran out, when my brother said not to before...

The first and only time I have disobeyed Michael...

And then the rest was too much for me to recall further. All ten years I have tried to make the memories a blur, but they were always crystal clear and refused to be forgotten, burned into my soul. A vexing pain is rising in my chest, the lock around my neck was too heavy and I couldn't breathe. Michael is hugging me again. I wish I could hug him back, but how dared I? How dared I even have this dream of him visiting me, smiling at me, and giving me warmth?

"Abel, look at me."

I obey. I look at him. He has not changed a single detail from my memories. All the drawings Ellie drew of him I kept, the rest I locked away with locks without keys. Many years of numbness to any emotions faded away as I felt liquids pour out of my eyes. Michael, my brother. My voice croaked in the room.

"I knew I couldn't leave you like this. Look at you. Stand up and breathe, Abel."

I breathed in, I tried to find balance, I stood without the feeling of gravity pulling on me. He smiled. His key and my lock hit each other and made a ringing sound. My eyes would not move away from it. The blemishes the key has, the rust...

That day I reached my grandparents' house alone, soaked and cold to the bones, tears mixed with rain dried on my pathetic face. I didn't even know I could run so fast, yet by the time I was there I felt like collapsing. They asked me what is wrong? Where are Ellie and Kyle? Where is Michael? I couldn't say a word. They didn't force me. The fragile child, they wouldn't expect anything more. Yet it was that day I wanted to scream, have expectations for me, set standards for me, yell at me criticize and treat me like Michael...

I fell to slumber as soon as I was dried. Sleeping seemed the only escape. I locked the room door.

I was woken up by a constant banging, it was violent and hurried. I didn't want to get out, but they would not stop yelling my name. I didn't hear Michael's voice, so I opened the

door. Kyle and Ellie were back, the rain had stopped. I looked around at the panicking adults. But Michael was not here.

“Where is Michael?” I asked as I could not suppress my curiosity.

“Did he not come back with you?” Kyle said with large, scared eyes. Ellie looked afraid.

The adults went on a search. Kyle and Ellie sat down with me near the sofa, and Kyle said that Michael was stricken for a minute before quickly running after me. “But he went the opposite direction for some reason,” Kyle said. “The direction where you threw his key.” Michael was still looking for it, I thought, the key he had always hid away anyways.

“He took care of that key, Abel, he really did.” Ellie said, her voice was squeakier than usual. Her eyes were reddening. “Abel, what if something happened? The road is muddy and slippery, and the hills are kind of high, and he went somewhere he didn’t really explore before. What if something happened... Kyle...” She began crying on her brother’s shoulder. Kyle held her gently. It was strange to see him act this way. But I was the only one not worried. It was Michael, my brother. Nothing could stop him, I thought, but at that moment, that thought had a bitter and sour taste to it.

The faith I had in my brother.

The irony that rang through with it.

They found his body at bottom of the hill, in the river. The key was not found.

Imagine the destruction of me – my brother owned my life, had I not say so?

Almost all the parts of me was gone with Michael that day, the emptiness and null that immersed myself in the years after, and finally creating the final lock on myself, one that no one can penetrate or open. Because my key was gone. Forever.

So imagine again as I see him now, feeling his warmth and seeing his smile, and feeling disgusted by myself. But he carelessly embraced me, forcing me to breathe, to live, when I lost all will for anything that day.

“You have grown tall and handsome, Abel.” He wiped my face. “Now stand straight. And stop wearing saggy clothes like that, and cut your hair. Smile more. Talk to Ellie, and mom and dad, and make friends. Be happy. Do you understand?”

I nodded silently. Words seemed not to form, but Michael could always easily read what was on my mind. I hope he hears my screams of apology, I hope he knows I love him, I hope I can relive that day, I hope he would punish me for what I did. But Michael shook his head and smiled. Silly Abel, he said. How could you blame yourself?

“This is the last time I’m finding a key for you, Abel.”

“A key that I threw away.” My voice cracked. “I’m sorry.”

“But you always do that, Abel. You don’t want anyone to truly see you. We all love and protect what is precious to us, but locking it away forever is not the way. Don’t be so afraid.” He had to tip-toe to pat my head, like all those years back then.

He took his key and picked up my lock. I looked at him as he pushed the key into the lock, and slowly with some difficulty, with the rusted dust and imperfection, it opened. The weight on my chest lifted almost at the same time. The lock slipped to the floor. Michael smiled once more. He took off the key and put it around my neck.

“Locks are not for living things, my dear brother. But since it is your first present to me, I will have to keep it.”

Blankly I blinked a few times, and then almost for the first time I began to truly see. Michael’s warm eyes, a bit moist like my own. The beautiful sun light from the window that I always locked. The mess in my room and the people I have hurt by my coldness. And Michael, my brother. My brother that had always meant to protect me, but at the same time too, he put the lock on me. He knew. So he came back. Whether this is a dream or a gift to me from God, it mattered not, because once more I listen to my brother, I will breathe, and live, on the 17<sup>th</sup> year of my life, my key was found.

“I love you, Michael.” I said softly as I embraced him. The phone starts vibrating again.

“But of course, me too, Abel. So remember to breathe.”

He fades from my touch, slowly. A glowing light shone as it poured into me. I would join him to my own end, but as for now, it’s time to start answering phone calls.

“Ellie?” I said as I breathed in slowly.