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Truth or Dare

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Introduction Justine Picardie

I am sitting on a top bunk with my younger sister and our best friend, Simon; sometimes we're in the bedroom that Ruth and I share, sometimes we're at Simon's house, while our mothers talk to each other downstairs, low murmurs that do not reach us here. Or if we're not in the bedroom, we're on a garden wall or a climbing frame outside – always the highest place we can find, because we're playing truth or dare, a game that involves a leap into danger; and yet it's liberating, too, a bid for freedom, which is why we return to it over and over again.

You must know the rules of the game – we all do – whereby the telling of a truth (a secret by any other name) may be more dangerous than the alternative act of daring. In fact, the revelation of truth is in itself a kind of dare – turning yourself inside out, letting the world hear the beating of your heart. What is more

frightening: to kiss Simon, or jump off the top bunk, or to admit to loving him?

As children, we abided by the rules: the truth was always told (if truth was the choice we had made that day); a lie was never substituted; a secret was only a secret, because it contained within it the potential to be shared. That's how it seemed to me, anyway, as if there might be some awful retribution if we sacrificed truthfulness for an easy life (as if I would be judged by an implacable god of honesty; turned away at heaven's gates, never to see or feel or know what might happen next).

Eventually, we stopped playing truth or dare: we grew out of it, I suppose, even though it had grown into us in ways we did not realize then. I was probably about ten when the game faded; the same age as my younger son is now. (Halfway through writing this piece, I asked him if he still played truth or dare, and he looked surprised – not because he didn't know about the game, but because I did. 'How come you found out about it?' he said, unable to disguise his disbelief, as astonished as I would have been as a child if my mother had told me that she, too, had played truth or dare with her brothers, once upon a time.)

But it was my sister's death, a decade after Simon's, that made the telling of truth seem so necessary again;

about the past and the present and how I had come to this hard place, and how I might move on. It was not that I'd been living a lie until then, though in adult life we may decide, for all kinds of good reasons, that some things are unsayable. 'Better left unsaid': that's the theory, anyway, except now the truth felt visceral, vital and alive and far more than a diversionary pastime, in the way that the game itself had been *not just a game* when we were children. Simon died when I was still at Cambridge; he had been at Oxford, but was killed in a climbing accident in South Africa – the country where our parents had first met as university students themselves, long before marriage and children. This was the place of Simon's birth, as well as his death, almost as if he had completed a full circle long before he should have done; not that it seemed like a circle to me then, nor a zero, nor any kind of symbol at all, but something wordless, a shadowy horror which could not be fashioned into a meaningful shape.

Simon was a year older than me, and had occupied a very particular role in my life – all of my life – which was a curious mix of fraternal and romantic. I had never known his father, who died in a plane crash when Simon was still a little boy, but his mother was one of my mother's closest friends, which made it

seem as though we were almost part of each other's family (close enough for our first kiss, beneath the blankets on his bottom bunk, to have felt forbidden). He was tall and fair and clever and handsome, and he took risks, too, in a way that I did not; or at least, different kinds of risks to me, though as teenagers we were both still caught up in those reckless leaps, that seemed to be moments of freedom, but might have been something else. I chose difficult, dangerous boyfriends – as if daring myself, as if daring Simon to declare himself – and he climbed mountains. 'Why?' I asked him, one Christmas, when we had come home to my mother's house for the holidays.

'Because of that split second of uncertainty,' he said, 'when your hand slips and there is no ground beneath your feet.'

When he died, I felt he was not mine to grieve – he was his mother's son, and her loss was unimaginable, terrible and savage and hers alone; so it was not for me to say that I missed him, it was not my place to speak of him, his story was not mine to tell. After Simon, other friends died – close friends, my own age, too young, not peacefully – but it was his ghost that came to life for me again when my sister died. And it was as if the two of them had been reunited in a final round of the game – both of them in a high place,

ready to leap, or perhaps already soaring free, leaving me behind.

And there was nothing for me to do but try to tell the truth; no other way to attempt to survive (just as my sister – my fierce and irrepressible sister – had written about what it felt like to have terminal cancer, refusing to go quietly, calling out to the world as she contemplated the silence of the dead). This was the voice I heard inside my head as I wrote a memoir that charted the search I made for my sister, and for myself, after her death. 'Truth or dare', it whispered, 'Dare to tell the truth.'

The trouble is, in trying to write the truth, it can turn into something else. (And truth, for me, was inextricably linked with Ruth, as a word as well as an idea: for to be truthful was also to be full of Ruth, and in this attempt at capturing the truth of what it meant to lose her, I was also bringing her back to life.) Anyone who has told a story knows how the chaos and messiness of life can be shaped into a neater narrative, with a beginning and a middle and an end; the rough edges of misery, rage, fear or confusion, chiselled away to make a joke or a sonnet or some other form of wordplay; the choking lump in your throat transformed into fluency. And as I continued to work on the book, I wondered, too, about my claim

on the past; a past that in resurrecting I was also remodelling, because my memory was not – could not be – the same as anyone else's; my story was not my parents' version of events, nor my husband's, nor my children's. Searching, late at night, for a guide in the thicket of confusion (for this was a wasteland without a map; uncharted territory, to be newly navigated each day, even as the days turned into months), I found a passage in Jacques Lacan's preface to *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*: 'All I can do is tell the truth. No, that isn't so – I have missed it. There is no truth that, in passing through awareness, does not lie. But one runs after it all the same.'

On the whole, I was finding Lacan as impenetrable a guide as everything else at the time. But those words seemed marvellously clear to me, unlike the murmurs of my ghosts.

Since *If The Spirit Moves You* was published, I have heard other people's stories: in letters and emails from strangers; in the middle of parties or at the edges of a crowded room. It's as if in telling my tale – an ordinary one, that speaks of the grief and loss that is part of being human – I have also become a listener to those others who want to share their spirits with me. And I always listen carefully, for these are the stories that cannot be ignored, and every

narrative is different, and yet also the same, as well. There are few constants in life, but they underpin our stories: we are born, and we love, and we die.

Of course, a ghost is not the only secret waiting to be discovered: there are joys, as well as sorrows, that refuse to be silenced; memory reveals itself in a myriad of ways, with quiet, fleeting moments holding their own against more apparently dramatic scenes. As the stories in this collection begin to make clear, there are as many different forms of truth-telling as there are tales to be told: an infinite number, as wide and as deep as the sky, limitless and without boundary, like the place I imagine my sister and Simon to be.

It is no coincidence that the initial idea for *Truth or Dare* (this book, that is, rather than the game, which must be older than the words attributed to Jesus by St John in the New Testament, that 'the truth will make you free') chased around in my head while I was on a quest for my sister. And as you might expect, there are various other journeys and searches undertaken within these pages. Nick Hornby, for example, writes about learning to drive so he can take his son Danny, who is autistic, to the places they need to go; his piece is as swift and deft as an escape to freedom, at the same time as containing within it the idea of capture and endings. The idea of escape is also alive in Andrea

Ashworth's passage across the desert, as well as an exploration of what might constitute happiness (and how it both eludes and possesses us). Elsewhere in the anthology, there are expeditions into the past, discovering the unknowns hidden within the familiar; odysseys to Blackpool and Lapland and Las Vegas.

But what all these writers share is the courage to take that leap: to try to express that which is closest to their hearts. It is an act of bravery on the part of a writer, to say, yes, this is how it is; this is who I am; this is what it means to be me. Some of them have already explored similar landscapes in fiction – because a novel can be an act of daring, too, that goes hand in hand with autobiography, performing a similar duet or double-act to that childhood game we most of us have played. So there may well be resonances to be found here, for anyone who has read Esther Freud's novels, or those of several others who have contributed to this collection. (I'm not suggesting that readers should become literary detectives, searching for clues and mirrored writing – but even so, someone who has loved, say, the happy ending of Sabine Durrant's first novel may feel it to be a precious, hard-won victory, having read her memoir.)

For all that, these pieces can be read without any other context, taken simply for what they are: as

voices that speak with a rare candour and openness, whether telling of first love or of rape; birth or death or the arc of a life, glimpsed and held and let free. But I don't want to say any more – it would be giving the game away. Truth or dare – which one will you choose?