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*Runaway Nation*

From birth, we were called restless. The four Brener-Davis sisters, all delivered by the same obstetrician, one year between each one of us and the next. Rebecca. Petra. Leila. Emma. Our mother, Amelia, was adamant on close pregnancies and names that ended in “a.” “The vowel of possibility,” she said, “the vowel of openness, a mouth gaping like it’s ready to take a bite.” We were said to have come fast, a quick labor each time, one pink baby sliding like a melon into the world, wailing. Each time, Dr. Nash caught us in his large latexed hands, saying, “It’s a girl.” We thrashed our tiny limbs. We thrashed even when swaddled in hospital blankets warmed just for us. From birth, we wanted out.

We lived two miles from the bay of Green Bay in a house the color of dried-out lemons, nestled on a one-way street. As soon as we learned about traffic laws, the one-way street became our favorite thing. We biked down the middle of the road in the wrong direction, breaking the law on the only vehicles we had. The summer we were finally all over ten years old, unified again in the two digits, our mother became district attorney. We liked to trace our bodies in sidewalk chalk and point to the outlines, saying, “Look, there’s been four murders.” We were called bad influences by Mrs. Knoll and Mrs. Leehar across the street. We were called legends by these same mothers’ daughters.

What you should know about sisters is that we are not like brothers. The bond of sisters is bodily. We sync up without trying. We are in pain at the same time, shed blood at the same time. We are four separate bodies, but we are also one. At the start of that summer, when our mother became DA, we attended our cousin Parker’s Model UN event, held in the conference center downtown, dragged there by our parents who wanted to be a supportive aunt and uncle. Parker gave a solo presentation entitled “What is a Nation?” We sat bored in the velvet chairs of the auditorium, watched him in his black blazer, his acne softened under the bright flood of stage lights. He paced the stage, asking, “What is a nation?” “What *is* a nation?” We mocked under our breath, laughing. Our mom shot us a look.

She did not understand that laughing with your sisters when it's inappropriate is the best type of laughter.

What *is* a nation? We had not anticipated caring about the answer to Parker's question. We had filed into that air-conditioned hall praying the presentation would wrap up fast, praying we could get back outside to our summer. Our school district was two weeks into break, our cousin's high school not yet released for the year. It felt like an injustice, being subjected to school-related events when we were supposed to be free. But as Parker continued on, as he began to discuss what constitutes a nation, what makes one legitimate, we started to grow interested, stopped looking for things to laugh at. "A nation," he said, "is a people united by common descent, by common history, who govern themselves." We elbowed each other, nodded. That day, we, the four Brener-Davis sisters, declared ourselves a nation.

Like any nation newly formed, we were burning to assert our independence. But the summer of our nation was also the summer of the Peter Opal case. We were on our back porch eating a breakfast of scrambled eggs and fresh raspberries when we learned the details about the crime. The whole city was talking about it, the man arrested the previous day for dismembering the body of a young girl in the middle of the night. Such graphic crimes were rare in our city, most arrests being DUIs and minor robberies. Because our mom was the DA, she was privy to the details. She didn't talk about the case in front of us, but the screen door was open. Our parents often underestimated how far their voices traveled, how keen our ears were. They stood by the coffee pot, waiting for the machine to beep to announce it was ready.

"Officers said it was like a game to him," our mom said. "He hid parts of her body around his house." There was the clink of her taking down two mugs from the cabinet. "And now they're worried this wasn't his first time."

We moved our raspberries around our plates, watched them leak red. When our parents joined us for breakfast we talked about the usual things. Rebecca recounted a nonsensical dream she'd had the previous night, adamant on us helping her find its meaning. We discussed Petra's upcoming softball game, Dad's condominium open house. Leila and Emma argued over the last piece of buttered

toast. We thought life would proceed as usual. But before we left to meet up with our friends, our parents said, "Wait one minute." They looked at us with their serious faces, said they were implementing new rules for the foreseeable future. No longer were we allowed out past 7:00 p.m. No longer could we attend bonfires in the woods near the bay. We were forbidden from sleeping outside on our trampoline. They'd lost faith in our fence to keep us safe. They wanted us indoors at night, in the house they had worked hard to afford, to equip with an ADP security system.

What we would learn later in life is that their fears were founded. Often crime begets crime. Copycats emerge. Fame-seekers give it a try. We would learn to harbor these same fears for our own daughters every time they left the house. We would ask them to turn on the tracking devices on their phones. We would be wary of parties with alcohol. We would be forced to be careful, to be cautious. But that day, when we left our house and walked to the soccer fields to meet up with our friends, all we knew was that Peter Opal and our paranoid parents were ruining our summer.

At the soccer fields, we sat inside the south goal, surrounded by net. Our friends Darcy and Rae, two sisters who lived down the block from us, were also there. Darcy was the same age as Rebecca, Rae the same age as Emma. Due to proximity of both age and location, it made logical sense that we would all be friends. We liked Darcy and Rae, we did, but not as much as we liked each other. Rae had been born with a bad leg, wasn't able to run properly, which meant we typically just sat on the soccer field and talked. We didn't mind. That day, the discussion, inevitably, was about the Peter Opal case.

"Our mom was crying about it," Darcy said as she traced circles on Emma's back with the stem of a dandelion. "He worked at the bakery on Mason Street. She recognized him on the news immediately. She said Peter Opal had always been nice to her when she ordered bread."

The boys in the neighborhood, six of them from four different families, were playing a game of two-hand touch near centerfield. They had arrived after us, had only recently started hanging out at the soccer field because they knew it was our spot. When the oldest boy, Noah, heard Darcy say the name Peter Opal, he stopped running his buttonhook route and waved the other boys over. They

wanted to know what we knew.

News stations had not yet released the name of the murdered girl, but we determined she wasn't anyone we knew. We figured if she was a girl we knew, even if only vaguely, we would've learned through the school district email alert system. When two eighth-graders were killed by a drunk driver the previous year, all our parents received a letter about the memorial service held near the intersection. Among all of us at the soccer field, we represented four different schools in the city, and none of us had heard a peep.

"I just can't believe it happened here," Darcy said.

"Why not?" Noah's best friend, Dominic, interjected. Dominic was thirteen, constantly chewed cinnamon gum and attended the gifted and talented school in the area. "Wisconsin is known for its serial killers." He blew a small, red bubble then popped it with his teeth. "Everyone knows that. Dahmer. Gein. Spanbauer. Our winters make people insane."

"Hey, no"—Darcy waved the dandelion to get everyone's attention—"Our winters make us appreciate summer."

Dominic laughed at her optimism.

"Either way," Rae said. "The dude's in jail now."

"But how do you know it was only him?" Noah said. "Maybe someone is still out there." He made ghost noises and wiggled his fingers, tickling the top of Darcy's braid.

"Cut it out." She batted his hand away.

In the distance, we heard the faint jingle of the busted ice cream truck playing some tinny nursery rhyme. Noah abandoned teasing Darcy and ran to the far side of the soccer field to flag down the truck as it was about to turn left. We kept dollars from our mom in the pockets of our jean shorts for such situations. We abandoned the goal, abandoned the conversation about Peter Opal, and we each took our turn buying ice cream. We forgot about violence and stood on the sidewalk, licking streams of chocolate and vanilla before they dripped onto our hands.

The rest of the day, we played Capture the Flag on the playground near the soccer fields. Rae sat on the park bench and monitored the game to make sure no one cheated. More boys from the neighborhood joined, most in late elementary or middle school like us. But even Greg Mertin, who was a senior in high school, joined. He lived across the street from the soccer fields, and it was common knowledge he didn't have high school friends. He joined the girls'

team, acting like it was a generous thing for him to do, like he was a martyr.

We played seven games over the course of the afternoon. The boys won four, we won three. Just as we were about to start game eight, try to tie it up, we received a text from our dad. The sun was starting to set, the slides and playground equipment growing shadows. He said it was time to return home.

“You too?” Darcy said. She held up her phone.

We nodded.

We left with Darcy and Rae, the two of them a small island off the coast of our nation. It was a terrible feeling, turning our backs on the chance of a tie, being forced inside. The boys weren’t called home, and they didn’t seem to miss us, their laughter and yells continuing as we walked farther and farther away from the soccer fields, the land we had conquered before them.

Summer evenings continued like this. We would be out in the world, out riding bikes or swimming in the bay or simply tracing our bodies in the driveway once more, seeing if we had grown, and we were called inside before dark. From our living room window, we would catch glimpses of Noah and Dominic walking down the street, their hands full of bagged marshmallows and slim pokers for bonfires. Every night our parents had the news on, and every night the Peter Opal case continued.

“I hate how they lead with the most graphic details,” Mom said one evening while we set the table for dinner. “Why don’t they lead with the fact that the victim’s family has started a track scholarship in her name? Why the details that will keep people up at night?”

Mom was working overtime, anticipating a highly publicized trial. Despite damning statements made on record, it seemed Peter Opal planned to plead not guilty. The case had been picked up by national media because the murdered girl wasn’t even a permanent resident of our city. She had lived in Denver, her parents divorced, and the crime had happened while she was staying at her mom’s house. People online were blaming the mother for negligence, which is perhaps why the mothers in our neighborhood were now adamant about keeping all us girls inside. Our dad was working overtime too, though his work wasn’t related to Peter Opal. Or perhaps it was, in a roundabout way. That summer, more and more people

were interested in apartments, housing costs too high. But perhaps another factor was the draw of security that comes with living so close to other people, with sharing a wall. In his home office, our dad worked diligently on selling apartments that were still not fully constructed. In the den, our mom answered questions from the press. And in the living room, the four of us were sprawled out on the carpet, bored out of our minds.

We held our first State of the Union the week after we were first called inside early, a week after the best parts of summer, evenings and nights, were consistently being taken away from us. We had asked our parents to reconsider, to let us stay out later like normal, but they wouldn't hear our case. Rebecca and Petra, being the older two, had strategically broached the subject after helping our mom unload the dishwasher. They brought over a recent newspaper article stating Peter Opal had no chance at bail, pointing out that this meant the threat was over. Nothing bad had happened since. Plus, Noah's parents weren't initiating a curfew, and us girls were certainly more responsible than the St. Matthew's class clown. Couldn't our parents relax? Just a little? Despite rehearsing their argument, Rebecca and Petra were swiftly shut down. "I'm sorry, but no," our mother said. Our father nodded in agreement. Rebecca and Petra shared a bedroom located over the garage, and this was where we met after negotiations with our parents failed.

The main talking points that night: The new rules were oppressive. The previous summer, when we were younger, we had had more freedom. How did that make any sense? Our dog, the only male in the household aside from our father, was allowed outside at night more than we were. No one questioned his coming and going through the doggie door. We were human girls. If we wanted to attend a bonfire in the woods when the stars were out, we felt we should be able to.

There is disagreement among us about whose idea it was that night to secede from our parents, to run away for an evening simply to prove we could survive outside at night. We figure it was Rebecca, who had taken the most history classes and would have been familiar with the word secede. But then again Leila read more than any of us, read graphic novels about futuristic teens who saved their planets, who questioned authority, so some days we think it was her who suggested the idea. We don't know for sure because each of us had the capacity to say it. What we do remember definitively is

this: how we talked in whispers, how we sat in a tight circle, pretzel-legged, the tops of our knees touching, how we agreed on a night one week from then because we needed time to prep.

The first thing we needed was money. Money would allow us to take the bus elsewhere, and we knew we needed to go elsewhere. If we stayed too close to home, we risked someone in the neighborhood seeing us and calling our parents. We were angry at ourselves for spending what little cash we had on ice cream. The morning after our first meeting, we walked again to the soccer fields. We brainstormed other ways of obtaining cash that didn't involve asking our parents. We didn't want to raise suspicion.

So, we decided to ask Greg Mertin for help. Greg had just turned eighteen. We knew his birthday was on June 6th, D-Day, because he had once had a military-themed birthday party, and all the neighborhood chastised his parents. The incident was neighborhood history, brought up yearly, whenever kids requested large birthday parties and parents had to think through the optics of the chosen theme.

That day, we knocked on Greg Mertin's door. No cars were in the driveway, his parents at work at the nearby bank. The four of us stood on the Mertin front porch, which had recently been painted. The wooden floor planks were a perfect white, like freshly poured glue. The aroma of paint persisted even in the open air. We looked at the bottoms of our shoes, nervous the paint was so fresh we would leave tracks. But our soles were clean.

"Hi?" Greg said when he came to the door. He was wearing the same shirt he had worn at Capture the Flag, a graphic tee with the name of some heavy-metal band we had never heard of.

We asked him to buy us scratch-offs from the gas station down the road. Many times we had seen Darcy and Rae's dad come home with a stack full of them. He had even let us do a few ourselves once, handing us each a quarter to rub against the shiny boxes. Greg looked at us, blinked.

"Why do you need scratch-offs?"

We gave him the lie we had rehearsed at the soccer field. We wanted to buy a bunch of Funyuns and Doritos for a girls' picnic we were planning, and our parents wouldn't give us money for unhealthy snacks. We wanted to try to win enough to buy all the

chips we wanted. We figured the lie was both specific enough and yet harmless enough that Greg wouldn't press us. We were right.

"Sure, whatever," Greg said, and we followed him to the gas station four blocks from his house.

We gave him the single dollar we had between us to buy the scratch-off and waited outside the electronic doors, near the ice-box and newspaper dispensers. The front page was a photo of Peter Opal next to a photo of the murdered girl. Her name was Natalie Johnson, and she looked a bit like us, brown hair and brown eyes that were naked, no mascara. We discussed this as we waited for Greg. Maybe she had a mother like ours who wouldn't let her wear makeup until she turned sixteen, or maybe Natalie hadn't liked makeup, finding it cakey and annoying to wash off before bed. We stared into her printed eyes and speculated.

"She looks like you in third grade, Petra," Rebecca said. "When you had bangs and never smiled with your teeth."

"My hair did *not* look like that," Petra said. "You're misremembering." She pointed at Natalie's face. "She has Emma's nose. See the way the nostrils are so slim. And there's even a small freckle."

Emma leaned in closer to look, then felt her own nostrils.

"Yeah, but we all have Emma's nose," Leila said. "It's Mom's nose."

When Greg returned, we used our painted fingernails to scratch the ticket, the outer layer turning the skin under our nails gray. We won three dollars. We asked him to buy two more with the dollars we'd made. He went inside, came back out. This time, we won nothing. We asked him to go in again with our last dollar, but he sighed and took his duct-tape wallet from his back pocket. He said he wanted to go home and play video games. He handed us fifteen bucks, then jogged back in the direction of his house.

Thanks to Greg Mertin's impatience, our bus money was secured. Next, we needed a runaway location. We returned to the soccer field to consider our options. With fifteen dollars, the four of us would be able to make it to the east side of town, no farther. There was Keller Park on the east side, which had a pavilion with a decent roof and a water fountain. But homeless people usually slept under there, plus police often drove by to kick them out, and the police would certainly question us kids, maybe even recognize us as the DA's daughters. There was our friend Jade who lived near Keller Park, but going to her house felt like cheating. The point was to



prove we could survive on our own.

What we landed on was the Bridgewater Development. Leila had suggested the location, the luxury apartments still under construction, the apartments our dad was selling. We had driven past them two weeks prior, our dad making a U-turn and pulling into the apartment lot to talk us through the floor plans as if we cared. The building was six stories, brick with large windows. An East Wing and a West Wing. Not all the units in the West Wing had windows installed yet, and some were still covered in plastic. If we could use our fingernails to scratch off lottery tickets, we were confident we could use our fingernails to dig a hole in plastic and climb inside.

Six days later, the morning we left, our mom was extra kind to us, which made the leaving difficult. She joined us for breakfast on the back porch, brought us freshly made orange juice squeezed from oranges her friend had shipped from Florida. The juice was pulpy and cold, our glasses dripping with condensation.

“What’s your plan for the day?” Mom asked. It was a typical question, one she asked most summer mornings. But we sat for a second in silence, feeling found out. “Still angry with me?” she said. “That’s okay.” She used her pinky to pluck a piece of pulp from her teeth. “I know you are. I know Noah Price has been having bonfires and you missed them. But you understand why we worry, right? You understand how this world is more dangerous for you right now than for Noah?”

We nodded, but we didn’t understand, not really. We did not view ourselves as potential Natalie Johnsons.

When our mom bent down to pick up her napkin blown off the table by the wind, we stared at each other with hard eyes. *We’re still doing this.* Emma was staring into her lap, and Rebecca had to squeeze her hand to get her to look up, to nod back at us. We were having some doubts, each of us, sensing the way this might scare our parents. But we didn’t know how else to make our point. And while we figured our parents might be mad at first, we believed our mother specifically would understand. She had told us many times late at night, on nights when we all crawled into her bed because our dad was away for a conference, that when she was younger she never thought she would return to her hometown, never thought she would raise kids in the city where she grew up and wanted so badly

to leave. Some days she wondered if she was letting her younger self down, if we should all just get up and move to another state. What we are saying is that we inherited this desire to run, to be bold, from her.

We spent the day as we normally did, at the soccer field. Darcy and Rae were there as usual. When they saw our four backpacks leaning against the goalpost, bulging full with items, they asked us why we brought them. We said, "It's a sister secret." They kept asking what was in the backpacks. Were we going to a sleepover? Were they not invited to something? We said, "We can't say." They ended up going home early, annoyed with our dodginess, but we didn't care.

At sunset, Rebecca's phone chimed as usual. A text from our dad, time to return. We powered down the phone, each placing a finger on it so we were all complicit in the act. We made our way to the bus stop, paid with half the money from Greg Mertin. We were the only passengers on the bus, and we sat in the back, in a place where the driver couldn't see us in his mirror. We stood during sharp turns, attempting to ride the waves of the pothole-filled roads. Emma was the best at it, her sense of balance unwavering, arms outstretched and stance wide like a seasoned surfer. Petra kept almost falling, muttering curse words under her breath. We laughed. We loved the way the blue that precedes the black of night started to surround the bus. We felt like we were in an aquarium. We decided if we could be any type of fish, we would be female bettas. But we wouldn't cannibalize each other, we promised.

We reached Bridgewater Development forty minutes later. The bus driver told us to have a good night, to be safe. We said "Yeah, okay." It was proper night at this point, and as we walked we looked up at the stars, pointing out the constellations we knew. At Rebecca's recommendation, we took two laps around the development, scanning the site for good openings, for potential security cameras or alarms. We determined our best point of entry was the West Wing unit nearest the large construction dumpster. The fence was flimsy enough to slide under, our skinny undeveloped bodies allowing easy squeezing. From there, we hurried over to a first-floor unit without a window. We dug our fingers into the plastic, all of us, and it ripped. We climbed inside, Rebecca, Petra, Leila, Emma, just as we had planned.

We stayed in an unfinished one-bedroom unit, unspooled

sleeping bags from our backpacks, misted ourselves with bug spray we knew we needed due to the lack of real windows. The unit was stuffy and dry, causing us to sweat. Leila's thick hair started to stick to her neck, one of her biggest pet peeves. She asked Petra to braid it. But we had forgotten hairbrushes and hair ties, so Petra knotted Leila's hair into a messy bun. She did the same for Emma. We fanned each other's necks, took turns drinking from the large thermoses of water Rebecca had packed.

We walked around the apartment with small flashlights, taking in the concrete floors, the hole in the counter where the sink would go. As we toured the unfinished space, we made plans to live together forever. We would get a similar apartment, we decided. Back then, we had no plans of leading separate lives. Such a thought seemed impossible, just as impossible as being harmed simply because we were girls. We stayed awake all night. We were not thinking of Peter Opal or the fact that there were others out there, that there would always be others out there. We simply were too excited to sleep. We wanted to take advantage of this night of self-sovereignty. In the West Wing apartment, we held another State of the Union. The topic? Whether we thought we would be friends with our parents if they were our age. Mom? Most likely. We would let her into our nation if she was a sister, not a mom. Dad? Maybe. But was he more like a Noah or like a Greg when he was a boy? Probably a Greg, we figured, due to a weird taste in music, which strangely made us shift closer to a yes. But neither would be officially permitted. Our nation was just for us.

We stayed up all night, watching the sun filter into the apartment, turning the walls light orange. In ten years, the apartment complex would partially burn down from faulty electrical wiring, an oversight made in the rush to complete the project. No one would die, but belongings would be burned beyond repair, thirty people temporarily rehomed. The unit in which we stayed would be one of the units encompassed by flames. The West Wing would be gutted, rebuilt. And by the time we all were in our twenties, we would be scattered across the country. Rebecca trying for a baby in San Diego with her wife, Joy, Petra completing vet school in Denver, Leila painting and sculpting in Austin, Emma returning to Green Bay after dropping out of school in Chicago. And we would know harm too. The way a strange man's words on the street can make you flinch, the way a trusted lover's hands can do the same. In Em-

ma's case, she would be raped two weeks after turning twenty-one, her apartment broken into by a drunk college student, an engineering major who knew how to pick locks. We would have nightmares about it for weeks, months, years—how we wished it had happened to any of us but Emma.

But that night we stayed safe, we stayed free, and the next morning we packed up our things, ready to leave. We used the last of the money from Greg to take the bus back to the soccer fields. From there, we walked back to our block.

We spotted the police cars as we rounded the corner to our house. They took us by surprise, but now it seems obvious that they would be there, that of course the police were called when the four daughters of the DA went missing. Our neighbors Mrs. Knoll and Mrs. Leehar were standing on their front porches, watching the scene, sweaters and robes pulled tight against them in the early morning air. Their faces, typically ones of disapproval, were now stiff with concern. As we walked down the block, we approached quietly, our sneakers scratching the pavement as we walked.

"There they are!" Darcy and Rae's mom, the first to spot us, yelled. Everyone turned, gasped.

What we didn't know then, what we would hear later once things calmed down, is that to everyone, we looked like dead girls returned. Our hair was a mess, still knotted, some strands coming loose like they had been pulled, our skin oily and dirty from bug spray and heat. We looked like something terrible had happened. People started running toward us. Policemen, Greg Mertin and his mom, Mrs. Leehar, Mrs. Knoll, our parents, crying. It felt like a whole nation of people. Their eyes were puffy, their clothes wrinkled, and we realized they must've stayed up all night too. We were enveloped in a commotion so swift, so encompassing, we didn't even get to say the declaration we had practiced on the walk over. "Let us out, please. We beat the night."