

A Faithful Invention

— AN ESSAY BY —

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The origin of *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* dates back to 1978, when my half sister—I’ll call her Caroline—stole my six-year-old sister out of her sickbed and disappeared. I have no recollection of that day. The story was told to me years later by my mother, after Caroline attempted suicide by swallowing a bottle of Tylenol capsules, and I was finally introduced to the many particulars of a tragedy that had been unfolding around me for as long as I’d been alive.

In 1978, Caroline was in her early twenties. She wasn’t living with us anymore by then, but she was at the house frequently, to do laundry or borrow money, or maybe just to harass my mother—her step-mother—whom she hated, for reasons that were both obvious and inexplicable.

When Caroline showed up that day, my mother was in a bit of a bind. Our father was out of town on business. My mother needed to stop by the pharmacy to pick up medicine for my sister, and to pick me up from preschool. She had called several friends but hadn’t been able to find anyone. Caroline offered to babysit. My mother didn’t trust her, but rather than wake her feverish child and drag her out into the cold, she accepted the offer. When my mother returned maybe twenty minutes later, Caroline’s car was gone and so was my sister.

CAROLINE WAS WHAT people used to call *wild*. A college drop-out, she couldn’t hold down a job or make up her mind about what she wanted to do with herself. She had a lot of long-haired, guitar-playing boyfriends who smelled like dope and trouble. She treated our father like an ATM and never let an opportunity pass to put him at odds with my mother. Unbeknownst to her much younger half siblings, she had long exhibited behavior that suggested deeper issues than a “wild” streak: threats of violence, teary

ultimatums, arrests, hallucinations, and, above all, unrelenting anger and sadness.

In spite of all of the trouble she caused, Caroline had always held a peculiar sway over me. When she still lived with us, she would often invite me into her room while she smoked and listened to her collection of classic rock records. She had long, straight hair then, parted down the middle, like a young Judy Collins. She told me, in confidence, that I was her favorite, and I believed her. She gave me my first rock records—*Best of the Doobies* and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's *So Far*. My favorite song was "Helpless." I would sit and listen to that song over and over, hypnotized by Neil Young's strange, keening voice, the shimmering reverb guitar, and the sparse, resonant piano. I still have that record, and it still floors me, with the combined power of beauty and nostalgia—as Neil might say, "Dream, comfort, memory to spare."

ANY PARENT WHO has lost a child for even a few minutes understands the agony my mother suffered in the hours after Caroline ran off with my sister. Finally, with darkness falling, Caroline's car rolled up to the curb, stopping just long enough for my sister to climb out before speeding off down the street. My sister walked slowly up the sidewalk, still in her nightgown, clutching a Slurpee from 7-Eleven. My mother met her halfway and embraced her, sobbing with gratitude and relief. Where have you been? my mother asked. They'd just been driving around, my sister said. She'd been bored and vaguely miserable, but was otherwise unharmed.

NEAR THE BEGINNING of *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, six-year-old Richard "Rocky" Askew is unwittingly abducted by his half brother Paul—a charming but difficult nineteen-year-old with a troubled history and a taste for Neil Young and the Doobies. Shortly afterward, Paul disappears. Rocky's childhood becomes defined by the absence of his beloved brother and by his involvement with Leigh Bowman, Paul's emotionally traumatized ex-girlfriend. Years later, Rocky and Leigh become entangled with Rocky's new neighbors, Brad and Jane Culver, and their twenty-nine-year-old daughter, Patricia, who move into an imposing colonial mansion known as Twin Oaks, situated at the top of a rolling hill adjacent to the

Askew home on the outskirts of Spencerville, a small town at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. A grisly double-murder in Spencerville with alarmingly personal implications forces Rocky into a reckoning with the past and the present that is both traumatic and regenerative.

Only Love Can Break Your Heart is a coming-of-age novel, but it is also a Southern Gothic and a murder mystery in which the damsel in distress is a prime suspect. It is a story of fathers and sons and brothers, of love and betrayal and reconciliation. As much as anything else, *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* is a faithful invention: a deeply personal fiction, steeped in emotional truth, which I consider to be more accurate than the facts.

I think we read and write stories because we want to make sense of what bewilders us—about the people we love; about our families and communities; about the acts and moments in which we are shaped, and scarred. For me, the art of fiction comes down to being honest without telling the truth. I couldn't write truthfully about my half sister; that story isn't mine to tell. Instead, I simply began with a sound and a place and an image that still haunts me: a small child in a car with someone she trusts, oblivious to the hazards of love, jealousy, and madness.