

# Martha

*Esther Joy Yoder*

Martha, you are the one who found him, our Joshua, you and Mom. It could just as easily have been me, or any of our siblings for that matter, but it wasn't, it was you. It was you who saw his soft body sprawled in the middle of the street, his four-year-old peachness a cold contrast to the gray concrete beneath his back, his eyes glassy and large. Those eyes, staring up into the all too blue and brilliant sky, the blankness so deep even the sky could not fill it, no white in his pupil, just darkness. Just dark, dark, nothingness.

That is how you knew he was dead. Before the ambulance blared him away with Mom in the back, before you walked down the hall to the IC unit where he lay, monitored by the beeping and the green lights and the tubes and the nurses. Before all this, you knew. He was gone, and his spirit was too far away to be revived. They jumped his heart, but they could not bring the light back into his eyes, those large glassy marbles, so hard, so immutable, and you could not reach him.

You, number eight of thirteen children, it was you who saw number thirteen. You, who were only fourteen at the time, should not have had to bear the load of his gaze. You, named Martha by our parents, after the biblical figure, so you would live up to your namesake and be a good little helper. In her story, she cleaned and cooked and was reprimanded by Jesus for not being more like her sister, who only wanted to sit and talk to Jesus and their guests. But in your story, you took after her sister, Mary, and decided cleaning and cooking and chores were not for you. I have always secretly delighted in the fact that you have not lived up to your biblical namesake, as if your very life proves that a life will be what it will and no one can choose for it, where it will go and where it will end. You could not choose that you would see his end, that you would witness those empty eyes.

I asked you to tell me, almost two years after he died, just what that day was like for you. I had been three hours away, taking a midterm when it was happening. I had been scribbling story lines into a small blue paper book, calmly writing my life while you were running to get a blanket to cover his body, hoping the warmth would keep his brain alive just a little longer. I asked you to tell me, to describe for me what it was like to be there and to find him, because I can only recreate and piece together in my head what you must have seen. I asked you over the phone because to look into your eyes, the very soul of you, while you described what it was to look on him, would have been too much. I asked you for the details and the facts, but I was hoping you would tell me about the eyes.

I overheard you talking to mom in the kitchen, that summer just after he died. It echoes inside me, the memory of your voice. I was sitting on the loveseat in Mom and Dad's bedroom, with the French door half open, and I heard your voice coming from the kitchen, floating to me down the hall. I heard you and Mom talking, you crying and Mom talking, and her words, Oh...Martha, and your sobs. I heard you tell about his eyes, his eyes. You told her they were like the eyes of the dead people in the movies, and that is how you knew he was dead. I was hoping when I called, that you would also tell me this. But you didn't, you gave me the facts.

You told me when you saw him, in that moment, you could not think long enough to be sad, long enough to feel the guilt of letting him play outside alone push down on your chest. People were all around. The street that had been vacant when the car slammed into him and kept driving filled. Cars stopped and people got out, neighbors came out of their houses and crowded around to see. An eternity of commotion, but time had hardly passed since you last saw him: a little red t-shirt, swinging his plastic sword at the invisible Robin Hood in our backyard.

Martha, you told me the facts. You told me you and mom had been downstairs folding laundry, and Joshua had pressed his forehead against the outside of one of the basement windows and said, Hi, Mom, be back

in five minutes, and then held up his hand to show her what he meant. So you both laughed and said, Ok, be back in five. But more time went by than five minutes before the laundry was finished. You told me you went upstairs to get on the computer, and mom went to the kitchen counter and started making cookies. You told me from where you sat in the computer room you saw her lift her head, drop her spoon and run outside through the garage. She yelled over her shoulder for you to grab a blanket, but you ran out behind her instead, to look at him, and then you ran inside to get the blanket. You called the police, but they were already on their way. You told me Mom left in the ambulance, so you had to play fourteen-year-old mother, and round everyone up and tell and what did you tell them, exactly? Tell them their youngest brother was... going to the hospital. You had to make the phone calls. You had to call me.

It was your voice I heard on my answering machine when I arrived home that spring night he died, and it was your voice across the phone that calmly told me the details of his death almost two years later. You told me many things, Martha, but you did not tell me your story. I had hoped for more than details. After all, didn't all twelve of us lose our youngest brother? Is my story so different from yours that you could not share your heart with me as you did with Mom?

Didn't we all change his diapers, push him in the stroller, praise him when he took his first steps, cheer him when he competed in his first little league wrestling tournament? Don't we all feel the ache of him in our arms, where we once rocked him to sleep and smelled the baby shampoo of his satin head?

I thought, after we each held him, taking turns in the hospital room, each of us sitting in the one rocking chair the room provided and rocking his lifeless body after the machines had been shut down, I thought we all had the same story. We all buried number thirteen. We all had to adjust to being twelve. But I was wrong. I realized, while I sat on that loveseat mere yards from where you stood in the kitchen, sobbing to mom about his

eyes, his eyes, that I could not touch you. Martha, this is your story, that it is not mine. It is your own. We each buried him, but you saw him.

You have your own set of picture books, your own soft little memories of him, of changing his diapers and coaxing him to walk to you. You listened to him read, you dressed him for church, and you grieve in your way. I have my own memories of you as a curly headed four-year-old, all blue eyed and pink-cheeked. I bathed you, I rocked you, I kissed you goodnight. I took you on my paper route and rode around with you on the back of my yellow banana seat bike. You were my Joshua, this tiny being with power to flood a stomach-heating responsibility through me. I cannot fathom finding you in the road, witnessing those large, blue, ocean eyes wide and staring into the sky. Did you wonder if he saw Jesus? Did you wonder if he looked into the eyes of the driver who left him to die?

The truth, Martha, is that I am glad I wasn't there. I could not live with his empty gaze, staring back at me in the mirror, peering out from every stop sign, piercing my soul with every photo, where his eyes still had the light in them. I wonder if you dream of them every night. Do you wonder if he saw Jesus? Do you wonder if he looked into the eyes of the driver who left him to die?

I was lucky to not see his eyes. I had no idea he was dead until I walked into the IC unit and saw his body, his perfect, seemingly untouched body peacefully sleeping, clad in a cotton hospital gown, barefoot and peach and perfect except for the blood bubbles he kept blowing out his nose. Each machine generated breath blowing tiny burgundy bubbles. His eyes were closed. You sobbed then, in that room, just as you sobbed that summer day in the kitchen. You saw something I did not see. This is your story.

Martha, forgive me. I have simplified in my mind what alone is yours in your heart.