

An American Family

By

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Abstract

An American Family is Tom Pugh's collection of creative nonfiction essays about growing up in a family with four sisters and his parents. The collection spans decades from the 1990's through 2012. Pugh uses humor in his essays to discuss some of the hardest aspects of growing up in a large family. His essays are about life, love, death, and everything else involved in family life.

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The Pugh Family Christmas Safari

Christmas Eve. Santa had already visited, as he always did for the Pugh family. It was 1:45 in the morning and time for our annual drive from Hammonton, New Jersey to Youngstown, Ohio to visit Grandma and Grandpa. My father had been kind enough to load the car for my family. Loading the car in a “kind enough” manner for my father involved some grumbling and incomprehensible muttering about how much my older sisters had packed in the name of beauty. After packing the car, making sure that everyone had gone to the bathroom (because he claimed he wouldn’t stop until we were halfway there) and making sure he had a large thermos full of coffee, my dad settled into the driver’s seat of the GMC Safari and put on his *Credence Clearwater Revival’s* Greatest Hits cassette. Somehow, in all of this hubbub, no one noticed that I had brought both my Batman Returns toys and my talking dinosaur with me.

He took a deep breath in preparation for what was usually an eight to ten hour trip with my mom and five kids, and started driving. My sisters and my mom usually slept during the trip, but I never did because I always wanted to try to see everything in the Pocono Mountains despite the fact that we always left at night and seeing anything was a bit of an impossibility. I was always quiet though, because I had been told before that distance driving is supposed to be peaceful driving. The only time I talked during car trips, was when one of my sisters that sat in the backseat would wake up and smack me in the back of the head for no real reason.

It was always the three oldest, Katie, Amy, and Kristen that got to sit in the back seat, which I considered to be “the cool seat.” I think it earned the cool distinction

because my three older sisters got to sit back there. I was always stuck in the middle seat next to my younger sister, Lizzy, who was nothing more than an annoyance to me.

Despite the ever-present threat of being smacked in the head, the van was a place of safety. I can't remember my family ever having a car prior to the van. Everything about it was huge, and when you're a kid, bigger is better. After all, it was always the big trucks in monster truck rallies that did the most damage, right? Midway through the trip, I noticed it was snowing. This was nice, because in New Jersey, we didn't get this kind of wonderful snow.

The flakes were huge and laying quickly—the type of snowflakes that make a wet noise every time they smack a window. I didn't mind it because I loved white Christmases and Frosty the Snowman. I knew that adults were irritated by it, but it was only because adults are crazy. The brilliance of the snow pattering against the windshield was mesmerizing. Somehow, I managed to keep quiet despite the fact that it was snowing, which meant a white Christmas, which meant maybe we would get to play in the snow at Grandma and Grandpa's house.

“Shit!” my father screamed.

This was accompanied by a loud crunch. We were in a car accident.

My mother was still in a sleep induced state prior to the accident, but she (and everyone else) was now awake enough to know that we had hit something.

“Tom, what did we just hit?” she asked my father, with her hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him down.

He shook her hand off and swallowed. He was visibly shaken.

“I think I hit a bunch of Goddamn deer back there. They came out of nowhere – must’ve been a family.”

I knew exactly what happened. It was the worst thing that could have possibly occurred on the most important day of the year. My father had single handedly hit and killed Santa’s reindeer in our family van. At school, every accusatory finger would be pointed at me. My father had just ruined Christmas.

“You killed Santa’s reindeer!” I accused.

“What?” he asked, outraged by my absurd claim, and the fact that three deer had dashed out of nowhere to ruin the front of his van.

“You did it Dad!” I continued, “You killed Santa’s deer. We need to turn around because we might have killed Santa too!”

“I hope I got Rudolph, Donner, Blitzen and that fat red fucker!” my dad screamed.

What?! My dad doesn’t swear. He definitely doesn’t use the F-word. It was a defining moment that has stuck with me for years. It seemed so unnatural to hear my father saying “the F-word.” This was the same “F-word” that had gotten my sister Katie grounded for two weeks. The same “F-word” was in movies I couldn’t watch. If my dad said it, what could be wrong with it?

I was horrified. He couldn’t have truly wanted Santa to be dead. That would make him the cruelest man ever. Up until that moment, the cruelest man ever was Shredder, the arch-nemesis of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, which coincidentally, my father had taken me to see. The van suddenly went from a place of great safety and protection to a place with lots of fear and tension.

“Tom!” my mom yelled at my father. She was shocked by his outburst and was shaking him to get him to snap out of his mood.

He turned around to stare at me, and in the most cold and chilling voice said, “No, I really do. I hope I killed all of ‘em. I hope we find Rudolph’s red fucking nose glowing in the grille.”

Was he going to say that he wanted to put them in reindeer soup too, much like Shredder always said he would do to the Turtles? Why was he acting like this? Did he know it wasn’t okay?

Katie, Amy, and Kristen started cackling in the backseat of the van. It was a mixture of nervous laughter at my father’s vocabulary and laughter at the absurdity of the events taking place.

Suddenly, the foul stench of burning fur and flesh entered the car. This was accompanied by a sizzling noise.

“Son of a bitch!” my dad screamed again. “It’s the damn deer. There are probably guts all over the front of the van.”

“Calm down, Tom. You’re scaring Tommy and Lizzy,” my mom said.

More cackling from my older sisters.

When we finally stepped out of the van at a truck stop, we found out that there were indeed both deer guts and fur embedded in the grille of the safari. Deer blood was smeared over the right side of the van, the windows, and the door handles. I avoided being in therapy for years because Rudolph’s shiny red nose was not embedded in what was left of the front of the van. But the van had been totaled and it was amazing that the

van still drove. Both headlights were destroyed. The right headlight was missing entirely. If the van hadn't been so big, we would all be dead.

We rested at a truck stop while my father tried to calm down. His calming down involved a call to the highway patrol (to turn himself in for murder, no doubt), a delicious meal cooked by a creepy looking old guy, and advice from a group of burly truckers.

These burly truckers talked with my dad about what happened. Since I wasn't there for the conversation, which probably was full of even more uses of the "F-word," I can only guess what was said. What I *do* know is the truckers told my father that the radiator's condenser was destroyed and that we would have to create a solvent made of pepper and water to put into it every fifteen minutes for the rest of the trip. The solvent acted like a type of cement that would hold it together until we got to Ohio.

We had to get to Ohio soon. My father had evidence of the crime he (and we by association) had committed all over the car. We had to let anyone we came in contact with know about the problem at hand. Last but certainly not least, we had to stop at every McDonald's on the way to fix the van – and collect every toy in the Batman Returns set, which were available with any food purchase. Luckily for m—I mean for my family, one was located just about every fifteen miles on the highway.

No one in the van was talking. There was a sense of tension that could be cut by a knife. I decided to hold a mini prayer vigil with my little sister in the middle seat of the van. That year, I had learned the Hail Mary and the Our Father in my first grade class. My younger sister stumbled as I rattled through them again and again. It was going to take all of our prayers to make sure Santa was okay. Who cared about the family or the van? After about thirty minutes and non-stop prayer that I asked the rest of my sisters to

join into, my father turned around from the front seat and told me that prayers weren't going to help and that we needed to "shut the hell up before he had a goddamn aneurysm." Not wanting to cause any more senseless death, and wondering what exactly an aneurysm was, I shut up.

The pull-string on the *Dinosaurs* toy that I had brought was calling to me. I had to try to bring the holiday cheer back. Maybe a funny phrase from Baby would help.

Baby spoke "Not the mama!"

Oh crap. Why that phrase? There were forty! It was definitely the wrong response. There was an uneasy silence in the car.

Suddenly my dad turned to me and with fire in his eyes said "Tommy, if you pull it one more Goddamn time, I'm throwing it out the window and onto the highway with Santa and the reindeer."

"But why would you do that?"

"I'll pull the van to the side of the road and run it over while I make you watch."

"Tom!" my mother yelled as she glared at him.

He sucked in a deep breath to calm down and went back to paying attention to the road.

"I'm sorry, Tommy."

It was too late for simple apologies. I had believed every word of what he said. My father had murdered a little boy's belief in Santa and his magical reindeer that morning and along with them, my belief in magic and joy. Just hours earlier, Santa had miraculously known to visit our household and deliver presents. Now, my father hoped that the man that brought joy to billions of children around the world was dead.

After our fifteen hour drive to Austintown, Ohio (a drive that typically took seven hours), my fear that Santa had died earlier that day lingered. My father's anger hadn't dissipated either. My mother had to relay the events to my grandparents. It seemed my father couldn't open up his mouth without being furious. Who could blame him? He was tired, pissed off, and the damage the deer caused to the van would cost a lot of money to fix—\$7,000+ to be precise.

When the truckers had given us the quick diagnosis on the van, they said it was a destroyed radiator. They couldn't give the full diagnosis of:

- Destroyed radiator
- Destroyed electronic connections to the headlights
- Exactly how far the grille had been forced into the engine
- Destroyed heating and cooling fans
- Destroyed radio, which explained why my dad couldn't listen to Creedence during the rest of the trip, and why his tape was eaten by the cassette player.
- They also didn't know that when the mechanics took off the hood of the car, the windshield would shatter.

If Santa's reindeer had done that to *my* car and favorite album, I would probably use the F-word, too.

Just two years later, the name "Santa" was replaced by the names "Mom and Dad" on gifts, but his visage still graced the gift wrap. Apparently, it was supposed to act as a memorial to his brutal death. Why would they flaunt that murder to their children and pretend like we didn't remember the dirty deed. Who could have known that this trip would result in the eventual downfall of a hyperactive child's Christmas spirit?

Night at the Races

“Are you sure you want to do this?” my father asked as we drove to Austintown Community Church for my first Cub Scout meeting.

“I’m sure. Joey said that Cub Scouts is really fun,” I replied. Timidly, I added “I just hope all of the other kids don’t have a lot more badges than I do.”

My father sighed, “Don’t worry. I’m sure that they won’t. You’ll earn some of your own. We’ll work on them together.”

“Really, Dad?”

“Really, and I’m sure that when I can’t, Grandpa Lettau will help you.”

My dad was the manager of a chain of department stores. His only night off was Tuesday: Boy Scout night. When we started, I didn’t know if he put up with it for me, or if he actually enjoyed the fellowship of people his own age that had children. It became a little bit clearer when he became one of the part-time Den-Masters.

“Tommy, are you almost ready for the meeting?” he asked.

I walked out of my small bedroom at my grandparent’s house to see my father wearing an adult sized Boy Scouts of America uniform. It was the kind the other Den-Masters wore. He had on the regulation navy blue shirt with our troop number on it in the same white letters as mine had. He was even wearing the matching blue khakis we wore with the shirts and he had...a Cub Scout hat. He wasn’t wearing jeans and a Steelers shirt or a flannel shirt tonight. Surely, Mom put him up to this.

Obviously noticing my shock, he spoke first. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, Dad. That’s great!”

“I bought this on the way home from work. I thought it’d be good if I dressed like everyone else, since I am part of our troop too.”

Wow. He called it “our troop.”

“Dad, why are you dressed so early?” I asked.

“I figured we’d go to Pizza Hut before Boy Scouts tonight, just you and me.”

I thought I was going to have a heart attack – Pizza Hut and a regulation Cub Scout uniform? There are three things you need to know about my father.

He loathes Pizza Hut.

He always tried not to be seen with me dressed in “my blues.”

He was pretty cheap.

“Do you still have your Book-it pin?”

I read a ton of books so I could fill up my Book-It pins with smiley stickers that would get me a free Pizza Hut personal pan pizza. I probably had about five of them stashed in the house somewhere. Of course I had an extra pin available for this.

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That night at Cub Scouts, we learned the biggest event of the year was coming up. We were about to participate in the Pinewood Derby. It was a Cub Scout tradition dating back to 1952. We were supposed to scale down little wooden cars that looked something like Grand Prix race cars. We could paint them and write special phrases on them if we felt like it. There was a weight restriction. Once the wheels, axels, nails, and little person (if we chose to have one) were inside of our car, it could only weigh a total of five ounces. I saw this as something else that I would be doing on my own.

I was wrong. I may have been wrong because despite my newly acquired knowledge of every tool that my grandfather owned, my father and grandfather didn't trust me using them. I could've been wrong because the box said "build with parental supervision" (which usually leads to parents building the cars). It didn't matter which way I was, because my father didn't only take a night off of work. He took an entire Sunday off to help build it.

The car, a block of wood with only two grooves when we got it, came in a small black box, which also included four wheels, and nails that served as axels. On the sides of the box was a phrase that stood out, "Promotes Sportsmanship, Craftsmanship, and Competition." On the top of the box there was a picture of a perfectly carved cart that was painted yellow with a gray racing stripe up the middle on the front of the package. There was a little driver in it, painted red. It was an extremely elaborate car. I wondered where they got the little figure, because he didn't come in our box. I questioned whether or not it was actually the product of a boy scout or his dad. I would soon have my answer, when I found out exactly how involved my dad wanted to be in the construction of my (our) car.

Also noteworthy, is exactly how many rules and regulations we had to follow for the construction of the cart:

1. Car Specifications: Width: - 2-3/4"; Length - 7"; Weight - Not over 5 Ounces;
Width between wheels - 1-3/4"; Bottom clearance between car and track - 3/8"
2. Wheel bearings, washers, and bushings are prohibited.
3. The car shall not ride on springs.

4. Only official Cub Scout Grand Prix Pinewood Derby wheels and axles are permitted.
5. Only dry lubricant is permitted.
6. Details, such as steering wheel and driver are permissible as long as these details do not exceed the maximum length, width, and weight specifications.
7. The car must be free-wheeling, with no starting devices.
8. Each car must pass inspection by the official inspection committee before it may compete.
9. If, at registration, a car does not pass inspection, the owner will be informed of the reason for failure, and will be given time within the official weigh-in time period to make the adjustment.
10. After final approval, cars will not be re-inspected unless the car is damaged in handling or in a race.

We worked on the car for what seemed like hours at my grandpa's workshop in the basement. It was Grandpa's "secret hideaway" which wasn't very secret. He had what was about a 5 x 3 workspace with a table saw, work bench, all kinds of glues and putties that I had never worked with, and along the walls of his workspace, he had rack after rack of tools specific for any project he needed to accomplish. Getting to work in Grandpa's space was special because it was stuff I was not allowed to touch. I was told many times that if I used most of this stuff, I would probably lose my fingers. I didn't know if the people that told me I would lose them were talking about losing them by my own doing, or by Grandpa's, so I stayed away.

Working on this project with my father made it doubly special. Throughout the process that I was thoroughly enjoying, I asked my father question after question. However, he didn't seem to get mad at all. He just answered everything I asked with a simple patience. I think building this car was a relaxing break from what I can imagine was the monotony of the everyday tasks of a department store manager.

“What do we do now Dad?” I asked.

“Now, you nail the back tires in,” he said.

“How do I do that?”

“I'm going to hold them.”

He held the nail steadily and let me hammer the tire onto it, placing it firmly through the wood.

“Oh no!” he screamed.

I panicked. The fun of our father son experience was brought to an end because I killed my dad in a hammer incident – great.

“Gotcha,” he said, revealing that the hand I supposedly maimed was perfectly fine. He ruffled my hair.

“Not funny.”

The wheels were nailed in and we moved on to painting the car.

“What colors should we make it, Dad?”

“What colors do you want to make it?” He asked.

I paused, reflecting on the best possible colors. “Green and silver, those are strong colors.”

“Those are the Philadelphia Eagles colors,” he said with a disappointed sigh and a disappointed head shake. Despite his greatest wishes, my allegiance would not be with his beloved Pittsburgh Steelers.

“And?” I asked.

“You don’t want a black and gold car?”

“The eagle is the nation’s bird.” I answered in a matter-of-fact nature.

I learned this in a scout meeting.

“So why don’t you make your car red, white, and blue?” Apparently, he thought the idea of patriotism was going to work on a child that was obsessed with everything Philadelphia Eagles – it didn’t.

“Because I like green and silver. This is *my* project.”

I don’t know if that ever ended any other arguments between my father and me over which team in Pennsylvania was actually superior, but he reluctantly agreed to paint the car green and silver.

“Well what do we name it, Dad?”

“What about Tommy Special?” He suggested.

What was a Tommy Special? Apparently, I wore that idea on my face, because he continued to explain the concept in detail.

“A lot of Grand Prix racers put the word special on their car somewhere. This is a special car isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well then, let’s win with it!” He held out his hand to slap me five.

With that bit of excitement, we weighed the car – 3.5 ounces. I panicked. If we couldn't get the car to 5 ounces we couldn't compete. If we couldn't compete, I couldn't win with the car that we spent hours building. If I couldn't compete and win, I wouldn't have the total bragging rights that I was really hoping to be able to have. And if I didn't have all of those things, then I wouldn't impress my dad. We tried just about everything. The weights that come in the official "Boy Scouts of America Car Accessory Kits" weren't much of a help at all, despite being advertised as the "surefire way to help you win the race."

As we sat down at the large dining room table a bit disgruntled and more than a little bit disheartened at dinner that night, we told my family what our plight was.

"Basically," I began, "we can't get the car to a legal weight. It has to be five ounces and the way we have carved it, we can only get 3.5."

My dad continued explaining that we had absolutely no more time to fix the car. The race was on Friday. He couldn't get another day off of work to build it with me.

My mom, sisters, and grandma seemed to feel sorry for us, but they didn't really have an answer since none of them had any experience building race cars for Boy Scouts. They also didn't actively jump up from their seats at the table, volunteering for the job. Everyone sat around not knowing what to say – blinking, chewing, silence.

That's when my grandfather played Deus ex Machina.

Grandpa Lettau was a World War II veteran and a war enthusiast. He was one of the most brilliant men I knew. He could solve just about any problem that his family had very quickly and very calmly and never let any of us panic. He always had an answer. This time, his answer was bullets. No, Grandpa was not advocating violence. He just

collected all kinds of guns and bullets. He happened to have bullets that he thought would be absolutely perfect as a weight. They weren't so big. They wouldn't make the car drag at all.

After dinner, Grandpa led us back down to his workshop, where he admired our fine craftsmanship. Coming from Grandpa, this was high praise. The man was constantly building. He had every type of tool imaginable and he was very proficient with all of them. Not only had my dad worked with me all day, but now Grandpa Lettau was joining in and he complemented our handiwork.

"I like the colors. Tommy's idea?" Grandpa asked, chiding my dad. Grandpa loved a good laugh.

"Yup," I said, beaming.

My dad just shook his head and Grandpa laughed – which led to all three of us laughing as Grandpa dug around for a screwdriver and wood glue. He had his box of his treasured Civil War-era conical bullets to get the car to the legal "street" weight – five ounces. He carefully weighed coned bullet after bullet.

While he weighed the coned bullets, I couldn't help but ask all kinds of questions regarding the strange shape.

"Grandpa, why do these bullets look a little bit like bullets today? Weren't your other bullets shaped like balls?"

Grandpa weighed another bullet, before responding with his Jeopardy-esque knowledge. "That's a good question. These are considered to be the bullet that helped win the war. The ball bullets weren't penetrating enough and the Union needed something that would really pierce a man's skin."

“You mean to kill the soldiers, right?”

“Yes. The Civil War was extremely bloody.”

The weighing continued. It was agonizing. We kept on getting bullets that weighed one ounce, when we needed 1.5. If we used two, we wouldn't be okay at all. His idea would be for worthless.

“Got it!” He yelled, holding up the winning 1.5 ounce beauty. It was perfectly trimmed. The bullets idea worked. We used the scale to weigh it, holding our collective breaths. It weighed in at a perfect five ounces. All of us let out huge sighs of relief. The car was ready to go. Five days until the race!

Friday night was the night of the big race. Before we left, I got good luck hugs and kisses I reluctantly accepted from my mom and grandma and a good luck handshake from my grandpa, because “shaking hands is what men do.” He also gave me his lucky silver dollar, an item I didn't know the importance of for a few more years. Either way, tonight was going to be a good night.

We went to the hall of Austintown Community Church in full uniform. When I got there, I was greeted by the smells of pizza, which was being sold for \$1.00 a slice by den moms and older scouts, B.O. that only little boys can produce, and the smell of cologne all the dads in attendance seemed to wear for special occasions – Stetson, the gross stuff that my mom bought for my dad on Christmas. I was also greeted by a thirty-one foot track which was four feet high. This was the speedway that I knew would lead me to glory.

All of us wanted to win the trophy. It was gold. Well, it was gold plated, but at eight years old, you don't know the difference unless someone breaks your heart and tells you. There were two other prizes, second and third place ribbons. I knew I wanted that golden trophy more than anything at that moment. It had a Pinewood Derby car on it and was engraved with "Pinewood Derby Champion 1993." If I remember correctly, there was even a huge number one on what seemed, at that moment, like the biggest and best trophy in the world. This was majestic, and the trophy of champions. Nancy Kerrigan may have been up for Olympic Glory, but gold medals had nothing on this thing.

The Boy Scouts took deep breaths one by one and approached our destiny. It was time for the dreaded weigh-in. A fraction of an ounce over weight and a scout's night could end prematurely. All of that hard work could have been for nothing. I watched at least three kids get told they wouldn't be able to participate. I am sure I was secretly excited when more than one child was kicked out. Temper tantrums, wailing children, screaming fathers that all claimed "the cars weighed in perfectly before they got to the race" were on display to the delight of the legal racers and their guardians.

The fathers were given tools they would need to whittle their sons' cars down, or raise their cars to five ounces. They had until the start of the race. The complaints continued to pour in. "Not enough time," etc. The truth was that every dad wanted his kid to have that trophy and maybe at that point, even the dads saw the trophy in the same golden light as their children did. Maybe the trophy meant even more to the dads than it did to the kids.

Once that process was finished, we moved onto the race. Our Pack Leader explained to all of us that we would be racing in a single elimination mode. Only the first

place winner from each “heat,” a fancy word that was being used as a substitute for “race,” got to move on to the next one. He also discussed the rules of fair sportsmanship, competition, being proud to be part of this, and caring about our fellow scouts. Finally, he said “Let’s race!” and we got to do what we came to do. With children and adults huddled around the long track, watching as four cars zoomed down the wooden racing lanes across a finish line, there were roars of excited cheers and cries of sadness. Both of which seemed to echo forever in the gym this event was being held in.

Despite the fun in shouting “winner” whenever the Pack Leader held up a winning car, the races were held four cars at a time. This seemed to take a maddeningly long time, when in all likelihood, the whole event probably only lasted about two or three hours. However, when you’re a little kid, you don’t want to watch every other little kid’s car go down the thirty-one foot track. You want to see your car and your car only. You also want to hear “winner” and see your car raised into the air.

That happened to me over and over again all night. It never got old. I made it to the final race.

“Well, what happens now Dad?”

“Now you move onto the winner’s bracket.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that you made it, Tommy.” my dad said with a smile and a twinkle in his eye that may have been a tear. “You’re going to be competing against these other kids for first in your age group.”

“We’re still going?” I asked with a groan. Why couldn’t they already just hand me the trophy?

“Yes. Be excited.”

I think this was more for my dad and the other grown men than it was for their children. The adults are the ones that pushed and shoved for the best places to watch the race.

It all came down to me versus some random kid who I’ve long since forgotten. Our Den Masters let our little cars go and it was as if they were moving in slow motion all the way toward the finish line which represented glory for the fake people in the cars and supremacy and boasting rights for the winner.

I was in first place at the beginning, ready to accept the trophy. The little plastic man in my car was zooming to victory

My opponent was in first place, smiling as brightly as I had been a moment ago.

I was in first place once again. Hopefully, this meant that I would win it.

He was in first place – and stayed in first place.

I lost.

I shook my opponent’s hand with a smile and congratulated him, saying “good match.” I stayed for the awards ceremony when I was presented with my second place ribbon instead of that heavy faux-gold trophy. I felt every bit of envy breaking my heart in two. A ribbon. Girls use ribbons to tie their hair. Ponies wear ribbons. Ribbons are not proper boy attire and therefore, not a proper prize. Apparently, the Tommy Special wasn’t special enough. I would have rather received third place. It is one thing to know you’re bronze because you lost by milliseconds, it’s another thing to know you’re silver and you had a chance to place first.

When we walked to my father's blue Chevy Nova, we discussed the race.

"So what'd you think?" he asked.

"I sucked, Dad."

"What?!"

"I lost."

"Tommy, you came in second. You beat a lot of kids tonight. You did well."

"No. We were supposed to get first, remember? Grandpa even gave me his lucky silver dollar."

"You can't always win first," my father explained "sometimes second place is a good place to be."

He watched as the tears formed at the corners of my eyes. Crying was something that boys aren't supposed to do. I knew that.

"It's okay, Tommy. Let it out. You came, you saw, you competed well. Why don't you read your ribbon?"

I read what my red ribbon said: "Second Place." There wasn't even a picture of a car on it. There was no smiley face. There was no sad face. There was nothing. A number 2 an "nd" and "Place." That's what first loser gets. The most un-imaginative ribbon award goes to Austintown Community Church Boy Scouts.

"No. Think about it. What's it mean? How many of your friends didn't even get near second place? How many of their cars did you beat? I'd say you did a lot better than you think you did. I'm also proud you were a good sport in there. Your car's named Tommy Special because *you're* special."

Bingo. That's all he had to say. For a man who was never very good with words, my father sure hit the right ones there.

He reached underneath the front seat of his car and pulled out an Ames bag. He handed it to me.

"I was going to give this to you, win or lose. I'm proud of you."

I opened it up curiously. It wasn't my birthday. It wasn't Christmas. Kids from big families don't just randomly get gifts unless it is a special occasion. I pulled the box out.

"Super Monaco Grand Prix 2?"

"Yeah, it's for your Sega. Maybe you can teach me how to play when I'm home?"

"That'd be great!"

After that ride in the car, he stopped coming to meetings because he couldn't get off work on Tuesdays. I also never got to teach him how to play *Super Monaco Grand Prix 2*. I thought for a long time that it was because I caught him smoking and confronted him about it. Then, I thought it was because I lost. Grandpa replaced him and stayed with me until I was finished. Eventually, I just gave up. Frankly, despite my love for my grandfather, it was not the same. However, I didn't give up before I got a Boy Scout Swiss Army knife, an arrow for learning archery, and learned how to use a rifle. At the end of the year, I decided it was time for me to move on to bigger and better hobbies, none of which involved father/son bonding.

Losing My Baby Brother

I was watching the Phillies play the Cubs. The Phillies had just put in Wild Thing, Mitch Williams. I always watched the games on Sundays with my friend Charles and his dad when my family lived in New Jersey. They had a big screen TV, which at that point in my life, was one of the coolest things I had ever seen. I didn't know TVs even came bigger than our console at home. Watching Wild Thing pitch on it and hearing the crowd cheer on Charles' Dad's surround sound was awesome. It was 1993, the World Series season. Mitch Williams was a baseball God in our opinions.

"Charles, they put him in. They put in Wild Thing!" I yelled with all of the excitement that I could muster.

"Oh, that's great. Your Dad is here," Charles said. "I think he is here to take you home or something."

"But they just put in Wild Thing. I can't leave yet," I protested.

My Dad entered the living room. "Tommy, pack up. We have to go."

"Why do we have to go?" I asked.

My dad paused. "Because your Mom is sick."

I let it sink in. "How is she sick?"

My Dad was clearly becoming irritated with the never-ending questions.

"Just get in my car with your stuff," he said.

I grabbed my stuff. Legos, *Ghostbusters* toys, video games, and everything else I packed in my *Super Mario Brothers* backpack was thrown into my father's backseat.

He began driving us home and I asked questions again.

“Why do I have to go home? Mitch Williams was on. Why do I have to come home just because Mom is sick? We could have stayed and watched him pitch and then came home. I’m sure Mom isn’t going to die. You picked the worst time ever to make me le—“

My father looked at me and I knew that something was very wrong.

“Mom is bleeding,” he said after multiple attempts.

I didn’t understand what he meant and how “bleeding” counted as sick.

“Why does that mean that I had to leave?”

Without any irritation, he said “Your Mom has to go to the hospital or something. She is pregnant. When you’re pregnant and bleeding, it is a bad thing.”

“So Mom has to go to the hospital because she has a cut? How deep is it?”

He didn’t answer for about a minute and I noticed a few things:

- 1- He wasn’t talking when he usually answered my nine million questions promptly.
- 2- He was staring straight ahead and driving with two hands. Usually, he drove with one hand. Sometimes when we were driving, he drove with his knees to make me laugh. Today, he wasn’t laughing.

- 3- The radio wasn’t on. He wasn’t listening to any of his greatest hits tapes.

He spoke in a whisper. “Tommy, something is very wrong. Mom is bleeding from where the baby is supposed to come from.”

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Yes, very weird,” came his reply.

When we pulled in, he told me to get my stuff. He helped my mother to the front seat. Mom was crying, so I gave her a hug and told her the baby was going to be okay, which made her cry harder.

“Just get in the house and tell your sisters we left,” he said.

I was asleep before they got home, so I didn't find out until I woke up in the morning and everyone was around the kitchen table crying. Usually, my mom would be rushing around getting everyone ready. My dad was supposed to be at work.

My Dad gave me a hug. Dad hugging me is weird. Dad crying is even weirder. How long he held me was the weirdest bit of all. He finally spoke “It's going to be okay, Tommy.”

After that, I joined my family in crying.

I had a string of questions I kept to myself because I didn't understand everything that was going on and because I didn't want to hurt anyone. Why do these things happen? He was just a baby, well, almost a baby. He was going to be my brother. I wanted a brother.

Charles had one and he let me know how much fun it was to make fun of them. I didn't just want a little brother for the purpose of tormenting him though. I wanted a little brother for NERF wars, so I wouldn't be lonely when it was just my sisters and I at home, so we could have adventures together. From what I planned, most of them would come at my sisters' expenses. I didn't calculate that we would have driven each other crazy, because that was out of the question.

What was I supposed to do with my special “hospital outfit?” It was probably going to be cold when my brother was born, so my mom got me sweat pants and a

sweatshirt. I don't know why it was important to me, but it was. I didn't wear them because I didn't want to mess them up. I had a tendency to be a little bit rough on clothing.

Why was I crying? I had a wave of emotions and I had no idea why. I understood that I wasn't going to have a baby brother, which was tragic. I did not understand why death leads people to such emotions.

Where did he go? I was told he was taken out of my mom by surgeons. I wasn't told where he ended up. I came up with all kinds of thoughts. Surely they didn't just throw him out, did they? He never had a proper funeral, which I thought was odd.

All of this left me very unsettled.

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Grandma and Grandpa Lettau came to visit. I loved seeing my grandparents, but I didn't want to see them. I knew what happened was a bad thing, but when they came during a time when it wasn't summer, I knew that bad thing had been turned up a notch. I didn't even know what to compare it to.

"Hi, Grandma and Grandpa. Did you guys bring me something good?" I asked. I always asked this.

"Tommy!" mom yelled. "Say you're sorry. You don't just ask people that when they walk through the door."

"I'm sorry," I said, looking down at the floor.

My grandpa saved the day. "We did bring you something good. It's a wiffle ball bat. We can play after dinner."

"Dad, you shouldn't have," my mom said. She was embarrassed.

“Lori, we always do, even when things are rough. Let the kid have the bat. It will take his mind off of things,” Grandma said.

“Say thank you, Tommy.”

She glared. She may have been sad, but she still had the ability to use her mother glare. I felt as if she looked through my soul and burned it.

“Thank you, Grandpa, can we play now?” I asked.

My mom nodded behind me. “Tommy, I think your Grandma wants to say hello, too.”

“Hi, Tommy, how are you?” Grandma asked.

“Well, okay. The whole family keeps cryi –,” I didn’t even get it out before Grandpa changed the topic and gave my mom a big hug. He spoke very loudly to let me know I shouldn’t be talking about that in front of my mom.

“Lori, the reason we are here is to help you. How is everything? Do you need any help? We are here to do anything to make you feel better,” Grandpa said.

My Mom looked like she was going to cry, but she didn’t. I guessed all of the crying was over at that point. “No, Dad. Thank you for coming. It means a lot to me. How was the drive?”

Grandma answered, “It was okay, but your father damn near killed us a few times on the way here. We stopped on the highway for lunch and I thought he was going to get us killed getting back on. And then he sped the whole time.”

“Tommy, I sped so that we could get here to be with you guys,” and then came a Grandpa wink. It made me feel better. Grandpa winks were a thing that we had. It could

mean anything from “this is funny, but don’t laugh until later” to “don’t say anything.” Somehow, I always knew what he meant.

My sisters came downstairs to various presents. Grandma and Grandpa also got one for my mom. It was of an angel woman holding a baby. Every single one of us cried. I didn’t know if it was a good thing that they got the miniature statue for her. It brought up a bad memory we were all trying to bury despite the fact that we couldn’t.

I wondered if we would ever be able to bury it and whether or not we should.

Songs I Don't Love

Barney, an anthropomorphic purple tyrannosaurus rex, sang and danced his ways into the hearts of children and onto the shelves of department stores instantly when his show was initially aired on PBS. A small stuffed animal instantly transformed into a man-sized creature to sing, dance, and tell children how much he loves them. To make matters worse, Barney had a sister that could only be the result of a night Barney's father grew to regret. Her appearance was totally different. Her name was Baby Bop. She had a yellow blanket and a stuffed animal. A stuffed animal with a stuffed animal. I remember thinking that was strange. After singing and dancing with his sister (who does that?!) and cavorting with children millions of years younger than himself, he sang a song about love with them at the end of each episode.

I wasn't having it. That stuff was for little kids. I was seven, I wanted my violence and Ninja Turtles, thank you.

Just because I could change the channel when the purple beast came on, does not mean that I could escape his mighty grinning wrath. Oh no, that would be too easy. *Barney-Mania* had taken over North America. The paraphernalia was everywhere. It was fully on display during one fateful trip to the Jamesway that my father worked at in 1991. Games, food, and a "big contest" all because of *Barney*. We had to go, no matter how much I pled.

"Mom, boys don't like Barney" I said as my mother was in the kitchen cleaning up dinner.

"I don't care. We are going to support your father. You will have fun. There will be games."

“I don’t want to play games. They will be for kids and girls. Why can’t Jamesway have Ninja Turtles again? That was great.”

She went back to working on cleaning the dishes.

“Mom?”

“Get ready.”

Mom, 1. Me, 0.

I griped during the entire twenty minute ride to the store. My sisters and I were piled in my family’s GMC Safari van. It was huge, and one gripe could ping around and cast an echo loud enough to drive a person insane. Eventually, I got a chorus of “Just shut up”’s back at me, which also echoed around. Even my younger sister put me in my place. Lizzy was thrilled to meet Barney and play the games. The possibility of winning something *Barney* related meant the world to her.

“Mom,” she began, “will the real Barney be there?”

Of c—

“NO! Barney isn’t real,” I blurted. I said this in much the same way that my sister, Kristen, had ruined the Ghostbusters for me.

Her eyes became the size of saucers and then the floodgates let loose.

She cried all the way to Jamesway. When we finally got there, I apologized and said that he was real. I was just being mean because I didn’t want to go.

Jamesway was a department store just like any other 80’s or early 90’s department store. The ceiling was about thirty feet high, the floors were linoleum, white with some gray stuff floating on them. Despite the fact that it was clean, it always felt dirty, but perhaps that’s because it was basically a warehouse. There was a peculiar

smell, too. It smelled stale. The air was kept at a perfect temperature. The aisles were clear and kept impeccably spotless. Everything in the store had a specific spot and when Dad was running the show, nothing was allowed to be out of its specific spot.

We walked into the store as a family, after that, it was a free-for-all. My older sisters went to look at jewelry, cosmetics, and the latest in department store fashion for teenagers. I tried desperately to get away from what I was headed straight for...my hell. I was going into the dreaded *Barney* party zone.

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The party zone was very bright. There were lots of purple, green, yellow, and pink balloons all over. There were three games and a microphone set up and a prize table that was covered with a sheet. The first game was a three-cup-shuffle game. A ball was put under a cup and shuffled along with three other cups. They stopped in a line and you had to guess which cup the ball was in — interesting. The second was a rendition of pin the tail on the donkey, but it involved pinning the blanket to Barney's sister Baby Bop's hands — weird. The third and final game was one in which a contestant was supposed to guess the amount of beans in a fishbowl.

I was staring at the prize table with the sheet over the top of it. I had to know what was underneath, but how?

“Wanna know what's under the sheet?”

I was surprised by the voice of my dad, who hadn't been there a second prior.

“Yes.”

“Well then you have to play the games.”

“Which one?”

“Pick one. Which looks like the most fun.”

The answer to that was simple...none. I was in a *Barney* fun zone.

“I don’t really want to play any of them. This is for little kids, Dad.”

My dad stopped and looked me in the eyes. It wasn’t a “do it or you’re grounded for the rest of your life” or an “I’m very disappointed to have you as my child” look. It was more of a pleading “just do it, please.”

So reluctantly, I agreed. I was going to play the three cup shuffle game.

A really skinny guy with scraggly hair that my sister Katie described numerous times as “Jim: Dad’s hot worker” was the game’s host. He introduced me by name and then got the mini-crowd that was forming into the game with a “can we get some applause?”

Watched? Crap. I hated having attention put on myself.

“Before you play the game, you gotta step up to the mic and sing it.”

“Sing what, Jim?”

“You know, the *Barney* song thing that he uh, sings with the kids. You have to sing it to play the game. You know the song, right?”

Yes, I knew the song. The iconic “I love you, you love me” song...Everyone knew it, but most of the boys from my class changed the lyrics to something about killing Barney and hating each other.

“I don’t want to sing.”

Jim looked pleadingly at my dad.

“Tommy, just sing the song,” Dad commanded.

That was no doubt a look and tone the workers knew because they all exchanged glances that were akin to “Thank God it’s not us.”

So, I did it. I stepped up to the black microphone that was resting on a table. I picked it up and began very quietly singing the Barney song about love.

The P.A. speakers. It was on the speakers throughout the store. Pain, agony, and shock were all occurring at once. This was a most cruel joke.

“Louder,” Jim encouraged. “Do we want it to be louder, folks? I can’t hear him.”

Jim could hear me just fine. As could my sisters, who were no doubt laughing wherever it was in the store.

I sped through the rest of the song and finished without turning the mic off.

“Do I just get my prize now? I am a little embarrassed.”

It also echoed around Jamesway. Oh, I was never going to live this one down.

“Nope, you’ve still got to play the game!”

Fine. If I was going to play this game, I was going to win. There’s no use in backing down now that I made a fool of myself in front of the whole world.

Jim and I sat down on wooden chairs across a table from each other and he pulled a marble out of his pocket. He put the marble and three cups on the table. He placed the cups in a horizontal line and placed the ball under the middle cup.

“How does this work, Jim?”

“Watch the middle cup.”

Lizzy was watching all of this very intently while standing next to my mother. She probably knew that unless I won candy or money, she was going to get whatever *Barney*/PBS related prize I won if I indeed won a prize.

Jim placed the ball underneath the middle cup and started moving the cups. He moved them slowly at first and then began to pick up the pace. It seemed to take hours, but he was probably only moving them for about ten seconds. Suddenly, he stopped moving them. He grinned and looked up at me.

“What now, Jim?”

“Now you tell me where the marb—“

“It’s there,” I said, nervously pointing to the middle cup.

A slack jawed Jim revealed that my guess was correct. I had won one of the prizes on the table.

Yes!

I was excited until the cloth was lifted. There were no gift cards, no candy bars, and no cash prizes. Every single toy was *Barney*-related in some way. There were *Barney* videos, *Barney* stuffed animals, Baby-Bop stuffed animals, and backpacks and lunch boxes with the grinning dinosaur’s visage on them.

“What do you want?” Jim asked.

“Is this everything?”

My dad stepped up to me and said, “Pick something nice for your sister.”

I didn’t know what was nice on this table. There were no Ninja Turtles or Ghostbusters here. I couldn’t see any Super Soakers or Nerf guns. What in the world was “nice” about any of this.

“Lizzy, come pick something out.”

Lizzy bounded over with a huge grin on her face. The crowd that had gathered let out a collective “aww.”

“Lizzy, just pick something. I don’t want any of this.”

“Thank you!” she exclaimed and...hugged me.

We stood in front of the table for what seemed like forever. She had most of this stuff. A benefit of having a dad that was a store manager meant that said dad went to the New York City Toy Expo every year and got a lot of this stuff for free. She picked out a video: *Rock With Barney*.

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I walked away from this feeling dejected. I was coerced into playing a stupid game to make my father look good in front of the people that he managed and random customers. I had to sing a stupid song that my friends and I mocked, and I was probably recorded in the process. Worst of all, despite my intense focus and three cup shuffle prowess, I won a stupid *Barney* prize — *Barney*. I was never going to live this down.

I got permission from my mother to go to the toy section of the store to wallow in my shame. I perused the *Turtles* and *Ghostbusters* toys, taking them off shelves, looking at the back of the boxes and replacing each of them, with the same care that they had been placed on the shelves with.

Why couldn’t it have been the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* theme song, or Ray Parker’s “Ghostbusters”? I knew every word to both (though to be fair, the words to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* theme didn’t change much). I could have sung either of them with a lot of pride. After all, both of them are rather manly shows and they don’t openly discuss love. Eww.

Suddenly, footsteps approached behind me.

“I’m proud of what you did.” It was my dad.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I replied and kept looking at boxes.

“It wasn’t that bad, Tommy. You won the three cup shuffle.”

His pep talk wasn’t helping at all.

“I won the game and got a Barney toy.”

“That you gave to your sister, who told me you made her cry in the van.”

“I didn’t make her cry. She said Barney was real and I corrected her. I didn’t hit her or anything.”

“Well, that’s good. You don’t hit girls. But, it is also good you gave her what you won. Family is important.”

I groaned. Family is important. Blah, blah, blah. This is *Barney* stuff.

“No, I like when you guys come here —“

I interrupted. “You like when we come here so that you can show us off to everyone.”

He looked pained. “I like when you come here, because I don’t get to see you guys enough at home. I miss you. You may not realize it yet, but it is really hard being away from family.”

“Oh.” I felt like a complete jerk. He wasn’t just managing the store, he was trying to manage having a family. Having us come to the store meant he could have us where he had to be on a day when he ordinarily wouldn’t see us until we were fast asleep.

My father may have been unknowingly preaching the “Gospel According to Barney and Friends,” but he had a good point. Family is important. Our family was over five hundred miles away from our closest relatives. Mom talked about how she missed

Grandma and Grandpa sometimes. I wondered if I would end up like that when I was her age.

“Will you come back to the party area with me? We have cake.”

“Does it have Barney on it?”

“Yes.”

“Can I have his head?”

After I got to decapitate Barney and carnivorously devour his sugary brain with a plastic fork, my mom, sisters, and I left the store, telling everyone goodbye as we left. When we got into the van, Lizzy hugged me again and thanked me for letting her pick out the video. It was another unwanted hug. I just let her pick it out because I didn't want anything. However, I didn't say anything this time except for “You're welcome.” There was no bickering on the way back.

I look back on that moment now and realize that even though at the time I didn't realize it, my dad was right. He (and inadvertently the fake purple dinosaur) taught me a lesson worth remembering. Family is important. Despite the arguing, revelations of who and what is and isn't real, and how many times I had to hear Barney sing a song about “Peanut...Peanut butter...AND JELLY!” family is something that is a constant.

Thanking Jesus for the Jellybeans

I still remember the assignment: Write a letter to Jesus about why you are thankful for Easter. It seemed like a simple assignment from the teacher at the Catholic school which I attended when I lived in Hammonton, New Jersey. I knew the exact words that would please both the teacher and Christ.

So I started this delightful letter:

“Dear Jesus,

Thank you very much for dying. If you didn’t, the Easter Bunny wouldn’t deliver candy on Sunday.

Your friend,

Thomas Pugh” (Note, we were told to use our God-given names)

The letter had a picture to accompany it. On the first page, was a stick figure Jesus on a cross. I gave him a happy face. Why would Jesus be happy on a cross, you may ask? He was Jesus. In my child logic, Jesus didn’t frown or cry. Next to him on a huge grass mound was a happy Easter Bunny, who was also a stick figure with a blue, yellow, and pink suit. He was carrying a basket full of candy. It was mostly jelly beans and it was just for me.

As you can imagine, the teachers at a Catholic school didn’t take this too well. The first person to let me know how wrong what I had done wrong was my teacher, Mrs. Caruso. At the time, this woman struck the fear of God into me. She was big and always wore black. Looking back on things, she was probably about 5’2. She had gray hair and looked more like a huggable grandma than an easy to hate teacher. But when I was a kid,

adults scared me more than anything. She began a line of questioning that didn't really help matters.

“Thomas, do you know what you did wrong?”

“No.”

“You've used blasphemy in a letter to Jesus Christ!”

“What's blasphemy?” Honestly, find me a seven year old that knows what blasphemy means.

“Something that is said that defames the Lord's good name.”

Also, what seven year old knows the term “defame.” That definitely wasn't on our spelling tests. I knew that I was in trouble, so for once, I kept my mouth shut.

“Do you even know what you did wrong?”

“No, Mrs. Caruso.” In my mind, it was an extraordinarily nice letter thanking Jesus. We were always taught to thank and admire Jesus for what he did for us. Jesus gave us the Easter Bunny, who gave us candy in a basket on Easter. It isn't really rocket science.

She asked me how I couldn't see what I did wrong, and she was waving her arms in crazy ways. So I started bawling my eyes out. Was it because I was a heathen transfer student that came from a (*gasp*) public school? Was it because for some reason I represented Jesus in a happy manner? Was it because I breathed the wrong way? And better yet, was it all because I defamed something somehow that I didn't even know I was defaming because I didn't know what the fucking word meant?

“What—did—I—do—wrong?” I asked each word slowly between choking sobs.

“I just told you! We are going to the office.”

The mention of going to the office inspired a bunch of “Uh oh,” “Ohhhhh, he’s in troubleeeee,” and “Ha ha ha’s” from my sadistic classmates that delighted in the pain of others. They were probably thinking “Hell, at least it isn’t me.” I would have thought the same thing if it was another kid. I probably would have joined in on the heckling. Up to that point, I never knew the feelings that accompanied being dragged from the first grade trailer to the big kid school. I had never even seen the big kid school.

The last time I remember someone getting sent to the office was when Dominic Gudisi (another transfer heathen) got in trouble for saying “Jesus!” during a game of two-hand-tag football. Had I said “Jesus” in the same way? He had to stay an hour after school and sit in front of the crucifix in the classroom thinking about how he hurt Jesus’ feelings. He didn’t cry though. It wasn’t okay for boys to cry. I remember thinking that when I got back – if I got back – that not only was I going to take Dominic’s place as the bad kid in the classroom, but worse yet, I was going to be picked on for crying. Only babies and girls were allowed to cry. Every kid little boy knew that. It’s a rule etched into the “Book of Boy’s Rules.”

As we walked from the first grade trailer to the tall red brick building that my older sisters attended, I moved slower and slower until I was actually being dragged. I didn’t want to see the principal, who my sisters called “Sister Mary, the Hairy Fairy.” This was a universally used nickname, which was a bit fitting because the only things that were visible of the nuns at the school were their faces. The back of their nun-wear was gigantic and billowed out to make them seem as if they could fly. Since it was a very old Italian-Catholic school, a lot of the nuns were very old. Many of them, like Sister Mary, the Hairy Fairy, earned their name status from their hairy upper lips.

“Ah, Thomas, What are you doing in my office? Have you been a bad child?” I don’t think I had met her prior to this moment. If I had, it was in passing, or I was introduced to her by someone. I wasn’t initially accepted into St. Joseph School as a kindergartner, because for some reason, I felt compelled to color all over the registration forms. Maybe she remembered that.

I told her that I didn’t know, because I didn’t have any idea. I refrained from asking what “defaming” meant because at that point it seemed like swearing, which I know could get me into this office. Yet, I was in the office of the nun for drawing a picture of Jesus and the Easter Bunny, who in my mind were synonymous with each other in much the same way as baby Jesus was with Santa Claus.

It was at this moment that Mrs. Caruso shoved the letter under Sister Mary’s nose.

“Look at how Thomas has blasphemed against our Lord!”

More tears poured from my eyes. At this point, I couldn’t stop.

“Thomas, do you really thank Jesus for dying so you can eat candy?”

I thought about my possible answers, but figured that lying to a nun was probably an easy way to go straight to Hell. I was a rather imaginative little kid and remember thinking that this woman had a direct connection with God and the ability to tell him to send me to Hell, which is the worst place that a human being could possibly go.

“Yes. But—

“Mrs. Caruso, I think you can be with your good students now. I’m going to work up here with Thomas for a little bit.”

“Good students.” That automatically labeled me as a bad student and I still didn’t have any idea why.

“Thomas.”

“Please call me Tommy,” I offered, expecting that maybe she would use a friendlier name. We could be friends, right?

“Thomas, do you think Jesus would be thankful if you died and he received candy?”

Looking back, I wonder if Jesus was much of a candy eater.

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s right. Do you see what you did wrong?”

“No.” She had asked a bullshit loaded question.

“Let’s call your mother. Doesn’t your mother work for a church? I bet she can explain why you don’t like Jesus.”

She laid down the guilt hardcore. She must’ve been a lawyer or something prior to being blessed with the title of principal at a Catholic school.

“567-8413.”

Each time the rotary dial spun, it seemed louder and faster.

“Would you like to tell your mother what you did wrong so that I don’t have to?”

I remember when I did something bad at the public school. It was better to just let my parents know what I did instead of pretending that I did nothing wrong. Inevitably, a letter was put into my backpack, or a teacher called the house. The better option was just to spill the beans myself.

“I’ll talk to her.”

My hands were shaking. My heart was pounding. I was still crying, and now shaking accompanied it. I had to call Mom’s office. This was usually reserved for

medical emergencies or something terrible. We were instructed not to call unless we absolutely needed to, because it wasn't professional to keep getting calls from your kids.

"Is my mom there, Linda?"

"Who is your mom?"

"Linda, this is Tommy."

"Is something wrong?"

"Just—let me talk to Mom."

She yelled for her.

Though my mother answered the phone in her soft voice. It had a bit of a panicked hinge to it.

"Tommy, aren't you at school? Are you sick? Why are you calling?"

"Mom, I wrote something bad about Jesus."

"What?! What did you write?" My mom was obviously pissed off. An angry mom could be worse than an angry Sister Mary. I didn't have to go home to face an angry nun.

"I don't know. I just thanked him."

"Let me talk with whoever you are with."

Sister Mary must have been able to hear both sides of the conversation. She had a huge grin on her face when I handed her back the black phone of death. I awaited my sentence while sitting in an overly large leather office chair. I looked around the room and saw a lot of bookshelves filled with books that looked holy. Big crosses and saints adorned most of them. Some of the books had a crucifix with Jesus on them. He didn't look happy. He looked skinny (like my stick figure) and sad. He had a cut on his side and was bleeding.

“Your son made Jesus a card in class today.”

I could only hear Sister Mary’s part of the conversation.

“No. It was not a nice letter. He thanked Jesus for being dead!”

“His exact wording was, ahem*,

Dear Jesus,

Thank you very much for dying. If you didn’t, the Easter Bunny wouldn’t deliver candy on Sunday.

Your friend,

Thomas Pugh”

I must’ve been the most clueless kid in the world, because despite her reading my letter to Jesus and hating it, I thought it was a perfectly fine. It was to Jesus. It was nice. I made amazingly life-like stick figure drawings, and that Easter basket had amazing detail. I even wrote (and probably misspelled) all of my favorite candy. There were probably three bags of Jelly Belly jelly beans in it. What was wrong with thanking Jesus for an Easter Bunny that brought jelly beans? God creates everything and Jesus is part of God, right? I had to have been right. If not, I was being taught false information.

“What do you mean he was being a kid?” said Sister Mary, who looked furious.

“Children are supposed to understand that this is one of the most important holidays in the Church.”

I did, which is why I wrote such a kind letter.

“You really think he should get away with something like this?”

Like what?

“Will you at least tell him what he did wrong?”

Thank God, someone would let me know why I'm in trouble! Maybe I was going to find out what "defame" meant.

Sister Mary looked like her habit was going to explode.

"I think that you're a truly awful parent. The fact that you're not willing to take care of this issue is highly disturbing. I think you also don't know why this is such an important holiday."

Well, if my mom doesn't know, how will I? Almost immediately, Sister Mary's demeanor changed.

"What do you mean pull your kids out? That seems a bit drastic. At Saint Joseph School, we provide a caring atmosphere. Our school is full of love. We would never do anything to hurt your children. This is just our form of education and punishment. It gives your children a well-rounded experience."

I felt more than a little hurt. I didn't know what the majority of what she was saying meant, and I was still sniffing and crying occasionally. Mostly, I didn't feel loved by anyone at the school.

She hung up the phone, blinked a few times as if she had a realization—or verbal bashing—and walked away from the desk so she could sit in the chair next to me. As she stared at me, I squirmed.

"Tommy, why are you so scared? You realize we enjoy your presence here at Saint Joseph's. Why do you think the teacher brought you up here?"

"I don't know."

“It was so your teacher could show me how proud she was of your work. But just so you know. Jesus died for the many sins that you’ve committed. The Easter Bunny and Jesus have no connection.”

So, I was a major sinner, a blasphemer, AND the Easter Bunny didn’t mean anything in relation to the death of Christ? What in the hell was this holiday all about? Why was I being lied to?

I was taken back to class after Sister Mary helped me wash and dry my face. As I trudged back into class, where the students knew I had done something terrible, I saw them whispering. Surely, they were aware of how I entered the dungeon and came out thirty minutes later, alive and rather confused.

The other heathen, Dominic turned to me and struck up a conversation. “How long do you have to stay after school, Tommy?”

“I don’t have to. Sister Mary the—I mean, Sister Mary, said that Mrs. Caruso is proud of my work.”

Dominic’s eyes widened and he screamed, “Jesus Christ!”

A Look in the Mirror

I waited. I refused to go until I absolutely had to. I was physically and mentally wearing down. Feeling my body change in ways that I didn't want and wasn't used to was simply not okay. No matter how many times people tried to get me to leave the house, telling me that it would be for the best, I would not listen. My mother was one of those people.

"Tommy, if you just get it done, it will be better for you. I know how much it has been affecting you," she routinely began.

I was perturbed. Hearing her say things like that, which intimated she in some way understood what I was feeling made me feel more helpless than I already was. I didn't have an outlet. I could not vent. Every time she said things like that, I had one reaction that seemed to always work. I made her feel like I felt.

"No, you do *not* know how much this is affecting me. You do *not* vomit regularly. You did *not* lose forty pounds without dieting. You *can* sleep at night. You *don't* look like a heroin addict. You do not know."

I always kept myself from crying in front of her. I saved it for my own time. I saved crying for places like the shower or my bedroom. Both of these places left remnants of the thing I actually hated losing most.

It is funny how much hair defines a human being. I always had a wavy mop top. There is a picture of me that was taken right before my first haircut in the 80s. My hair was past my eye brows. It isn't that my parents liked long hair, they just blinked and missed the fact that it got ridiculously long (for me at least). My grandfather is in the

picture holding clippers. He was an army man from World War II. The after picture is much different.

Memories of things like looking at that picture and laughing came to my mind every time I went to see my oncologist. I looked around the waiting room and I saw people that were withering away from the same vomiting issue I had. Many of them were losing their hair. To make themselves feel better, they had special wigs, caps, and occasionally a flashy cap with buttons or, on one occasion, flashing lights. To each their own.

I didn't want that.

I turned to my mother, my constant cancer companion, "Mom, do I have to lose my hair?"

I was almost twenty-seven years old at the time. I knew very well what the answer was, but the experience of terror made me a child again.

She was my rock. "Tommy, maybe not. It doesn't happen to everyone according to the pamphlets. You read the pamphlets, right?"

No. I did not read the pamphlets. I never liked instructions. I was more of an "experience the fun and ask questions later" kind of guy. To me, learning about what to expect was a little like cheating on a test. The answers weren't supposed to be provided, especially since the outcome wasn't the same for every single person. However, my main goal throughout my cancer experience was making sure others made it through okay. I did what I had to do.

"Yes, Mom. I did."

She looked relieved and I was happy she was. I was not happy that just about everyone in the lobby didn't have their original hair.

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I woke up to blood on my pillow. That had become a routine thing. The scabs that had come on the back of my neck popped in my sleep. It was gross, but it was something I couldn't change. I also couldn't change the fact that every single morning I woke up to less hair on my head and more hair on my pillow. Every single morning I stayed in my bed a few minutes so I could cry everything away for a little bit before I got in the shower.

The shower. Showers are always a place I enjoyed. I treated my shower time as solitude. I went there to not only get "Zest-fully clean," but also to think about the rest of the day, my future, and what I liked to write or planned on writing in the future. I would often spend a longer time in the shower than my sisters or my mother, which always prompted teasing. Such is life. I wasn't spending much time in the shower anymore.

My routine had become monotonous. I picked out what I was going to wear (gym shorts, and a band or novelty t-shirt), grabbed a towel, walked to the bathroom, shut the door. I stripped down and stared at my new body for about ten minutes in the mirror. The chubby me had faded away rapidly. People that didn't know I had cancer wanted to know what the miracle diet I used to drop forty pounds in about two months was. Dropping from over two hundred pounds to about one hundred seventy five was drastic. My caustic answer of "cancer" always left them slack jawed, but I didn't feel bad about it. I did feel bad about the new me.

I don't even know why I felt bad. Yes, I was sick, which is putting it lightly. But I was losing a lot of weight. It's what I tried to do for a long time without much avail. Cancer gave me a golden opportunity. If I had the energy to work out, I could have a six pack...if I had the energy to work out, which I did not. I stepped in the shower.

Warm water — my favorite. Warm water was my favorite. Now it burnt even if it was tepid. Cold water — I guess this will do. Shit! Cold water felt like the arctic. Since there was no happy medium, my showers happened quickly. I put the body wash on the scrub, rubbed it on my skin — ouch, and washed my hair — also ouch. My skin was becoming very sensitive. Even the special soap and shampoo for sensitive skin and hair that I was using wasn't helping much.

I looked at my hands. That soft, hair of mine had become brittle and light brown and gray. It was falling out in clumps. I could not control the change. The change wasn't just on my head, but it was all over. Even my eyebrows were disappearing. I got out and dried off, something that took more of my hair with it. I looked at myself in the mirror. Not only was I fading away in appearance, but my hair was leaving. I wasn't supposed to care about that. Only women with cancer were supposed to have issues losing their hair. Why was this bothering me? It was just hair. Lots of guys are bald. It was no big deal.

Only it was a big deal. It was a really big deal. My dark brown hair that was barely controllable and often took gel to control is something I liked. I styled it in an attempt to look cool (something that didn't really work). I took at least ten minutes working with it (even if it was relatively short on a regular basis) to get it just right. My hair was part of me. It wasn't *Saturday Night Fever*—"Not the hair!"—part of me, but it is something that went with me wherever I walked. Now, my hair trailed behind me.

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“Mom, it’s time,” I was trying to let her know it was time to go to Lou, my long-time barber’s shop for what would be my final haircut for a while.

“Time for what, Tom?”

“Time for my haircut,” I choked up. My shoulders shook. I wretched a bit, but no tears came out.

“Oh, Tom,” She hugged me. I didn’t want a hug. I just wanted to go and have this done with. It was made into a production.

I had to wait an hour to leave for the haircut at Lou’s. I decided to go and not to chicken out numerous times as I sat on the couch in the living room watching terrible TV.

Pros: No more crying every morning (at least because of hair loss)

Cons: Dude, no hair. You aren’t Bruce Willis. You can’t pull this off.

In the end, I grabbed the cap my sister, Amy sent me from New York City and headed to the barber shop. We got in the car and listened to nothing. It was perfectly quiet. My mom didn’t talk because she knew I was nervous. I didn’t talk because if I did, my stress would get the better of me and I would vomit all over the car. It was so tense that you could cut through the air in the car with a knife. I looked out the window.

Mailbox...mailbox...mailbox...mailman...mailbox...dog...car...car...repeat. I am sure there was an almost accident or two, there usually is around this city, but we arrived at our destination after about five minutes.

I stepped out of the car. Ah, sunshine. It was sixty degrees and my face felt like it was going to melt off. This was definitely not a good start at all.

My mom rolled down the window of her car before I went in, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

The honest answer was not nice and it involved the word “no.” What I told my mom was “Yes. I have to. If I don’t do it now, I will have to later, right?”

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I walked into the barber shop knowing my fate full-well. I hung my coat on the rack and clenched my paperboy hat in my fist before grabbing a number. It was seven. Even though I consider seven to be a lucky, I wasn’t considering today a very lucky day.

“How ya doin’ today, Tom” Lou asked as he trimmed a balding man’s remaining hair.

I decided lying was the best option. Over the past month and a half I had learned no one really wanted to know the truth and once they did, they freaked out.

“I’m fantastic. I just graduated.”

“That’s great,” he kept trimming.

I sat down in what seemed to be the coldest seat ever. I’d been coming to this barber shop since I was an eight year old, but the chairs never seemed to be freezing. Coca-Cola merchandise adorned the walls and I tried to count exactly how much memorabilia my barber had collected over the years, but I lost track and my mind began to race again. On the TV, there was news of the NFL strike and only one thought went through my head. Awesome, maybe the season will be cancelled and my heart won’t be broken again.

My mind raced again. I counted over one hundred undoubtedly old magazines on the magazine rack, with books for children interspersed here and there throughout the

whole mess. A gumball machine that still cost a nickel per gumball rested next to this particular rack, though I chose not to count the gumballs. It would have taken getting up, and I just wasn't in the mood. It's funny how you get called up when you're not in the mood.

I looked in the mirror at myself and thought about how I had the hair of my grandfather. It was a wavy mess unless I used gel. I tended to use too much. Tomorrow that wouldn't be a problem. I tried to make myself feel better, reminding myself that despite the fact that I was losing the hair on my head, I would also be losing the hair on my face. No more cutting myself with a Gillette Mach III, which I like to compare to a fish hook.

Lou spoke first. "Are we going with the usual, remembering the scar on the right side?"

I clenched my teeth hard for something I didn't think would be difficult to say.

"Actually Lou, I'm gonna have you buzz it off."

He was shocked. "What?"

After a pause he asked, "Why would you want to do something like that?"

"I just need you to buzz it off."

"Are you okay? You've been a mop top since you were a kid. Don't you need it a certain length for that zombie movie you're ma –

"It's falling out. I just got my second treatment of chemo, Lou."

Very quietly, Lou just said "Oh."

I heard his deep swallow and felt awful. There is no easy way to say that. There's also no easy way to hear it. I didn't know how exactly to tell people about cancer. I couldn't even say the word "cancer."

"Well, Tommy, I'm gonna cut it so you still have some hair left. It's gonna grow back in and then come out each time. It'll be slower that way."

It was cut in silence. One of the most uncomfortable silences I've ever felt. The two of us were accompanied by the sound of a buzzer, ESPN, and the faint sound of cars in the parking lot. I watched as my hair fell down. It didn't look dark brown like it usually did. It was light with a dull grey tinge to it. My mind raced again. This wasn't so bad. Both of my grandpas, some of my uncles, and a few of my friends have done this too.

The difference was that I wasn't in the Army. Something forced me to do this.

Before it was done, I received a warning from Lou. "Tommy, you look different. Are you ready?"

If not now, when would I do it? I responded "Yes" and was spun around to look at the shaved stranger in the mirror.

Who is that? Oh my God, it's me. How is everyone going to respond?

Either way, one thing was certain: I could throw out the hair gel.

I paid him and tipped him extra for not asking me anything else about the cancer and not giving me a hug indicating that he thought I was going to die. I looked at the floor one last time before I grabbed my new cap and headed out the door. As I walked out the door, I heard the broom sweeping my hair into a pile to be thrown away. I left

completely unprepared for my future, not focusing on the present, and wishing I could have my past back.

My mom was waiting outside of the shop, “You look good.”

I knew I didn’t, but I welcomed my constant companion’s words of kindness as I finally cried.

What I Learned

When I was a kid, I was really sick. I caught everything the kids in my classes had. Someone's cold became my bronchitis. Another kid's sinus infection became my pneumonia. For years, there didn't seem to be any real type of cure for it. My parents tried everything and took me to countless doctors. The doctors sent me to countless surgeons. The surgeons wound up taking out my adenoids and performing an antrostomy (a surgery in which doctors cut windows into the sinuses). Neither of these helped.

I protested the antrostomy from the time I found out about it until the night before. "Mom, I am going to miss out on going to see the dinosaur bones on the field trip." I really wanted to see the dinosaur bones at the Academy of Natural Science at Drexel University. My class took *one* field trip that year. I would be missing it.

"Tommy, we will take you to see it. I promise you will get to see the dinosaurs soon. We'll even stay longer than your class. You'll get to see everything for as long as you want. You just need this surgery."

As usual, I found a way to drive my mom up a wall. Technically, it was her fault for having taken me to see *Jurassic Park* in the first place.

"Well, I really just want to see the dinos — " I protested.

"If you don't be quiet about it, there will be no dinosaurs. You will never see *Jurassic Park* again. I will have the surgeons take out the part of your brain that knows about dinosaurs," was my mother's irritated reply.

With my knowledge of dinosaurs on the line, I shut up and had the surgery performed.

Honestly, the only thing I remember regarding the surgery aside from the conversation regarding the loss of dinosaur privileges and multiple protests, is that I vomited a lot of blood after the operation into kidney dishes (the kidney bean shaped vomit catchers that hospitals have).

The surgery didn't help.

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It wasn't until second grade that we finally went to an immunologist, who, after a long examination process and countless tubes of my blood being extracted diagnosed me. I had something called common variable disease. A really easy summary is that I didn't have enough white blood cells to fight off common illnesses around me. The "simple" way to temporarily fix the illness on a weekly basis was through weekly treatments at a hospital.

At these treatments, I went to a children's community room and chose a recliner. There were many kids there. Some of the kids were getting the same treatments as I was, but most of them were there for something strange to me called chemotherapy. I went in and I got my treatment, a blood transfusion of stuff called Gammagard. It was made up of 10% human plasma. I knew then that it helped my white blood cell count go up.

I went to the hospital every Thursday at 8:00 AM, had blood tests, waited an hour, then I got stabbed somewhere in my arm by what seemed like a gigantic needle at the time. Despite the innate "boys don't cry knowledge" every young boy there (I was nine when I received my first treatment) cried when they were stabbed by the needles. We didn't make fun of each other for it. It was as if we had some sort of unspoken agreement that kept us from doing so, a pact of sorts among the sick kids. Each illness hurt

differently for each person there. Some of the kids there lost their hair. I didn't understand that, so I never asked them why.

Something else happened.

Every once in a while, one of the kids that was having chemotherapy at the same time as I was, finished their last treatment. Unlike my illness, they didn't have to come to the hospital forever. When they were finished with the treatments, everyone was happy.

What I learned about chemotherapy during that time was that it was truly awful.

Whenever a kid finished his last treatment, he got to ring a bell at the end of the hall. No one knew if it was truly his last time, some of them relapsed, but for this moment, they had smiles on their faces bigger than those of any other person. Even Superbowl winners couldn't match them.

I was on the same schedule as some of these kids. We got to know each other. I was the one that always tried to make everyone smile. When we weren't bonding over jokes, we were playing Super Nintendo or Sega Genesis. We even watched movies to pass the time. Usually I was the one that brought the movies. These things brought all of us together. Our families (usually moms for some reason) smiled and even fell asleep sometimes. My guess is they were as thankful as we were. We got to bond with other kids while they got to either bond with each other, or sleep for once. We forgot about our pain for a few hours.

Sometimes, the kids never made it to the bell ringing. At the age of nine, I learned to question my own mortality. I couldn't stand seeing some kids not come back for video game tournaments or movie marathons. The only things adults told the little kids was that

they wouldn't be back. It was the worst way to say someone died. During one particular month, there was a string of deaths. We weren't stupid. We knew.

I was sitting in the community room with a bunch of children with IVs in our arms when a child was rushed past us on a hospital bed. The nurses were moving very quickly.

"Out of the way!" a short nurse yelled at anyone (even kids) that got in the way of the hospital bed.

All of us knew it was important.

The adults in the room with us exchanged nervous glances.

Suddenly, a child, James, asked the question that was on everyone's minds. He posed it in a way that anyone was free to answer, but no one wanted to. He posed it in the way that only a child could. It was simple, to the point, and heart-breaking. "Is she gonna die?"

No one answered him quickly because we were all still in shock.

"She's gonna die, stupid!" Anthony finally spoke up.

"She's not going to die, Anthony! Be nice. No one here is going to die. All of you know emergencies happen around here all the time. She'll be okay," his mother tried to assure us.

The adults were pale, matching their sick children. The children were angry.

I remember thinking, though not speaking it at the moment, that all of us were way too young to die. Sure, some kids did, but not *these* kids. Not *that* kid. All of us were at the hospital to get better. None of us went to the hospital with the expectation that we were going to die. None of us wanted to die.

To be perfectly fair, absolutely no one knew if this girl was going to die. We began taking up Anthony's mom's mantra: *Emergencies happen in hospitals all the time*. It basically was to make us all feel better. That girl was going to be okay. We knew it. The nurse was running, so the girl was going to get there on time, wherever "there" was.

She wasn't going to die because none of us were going to let her die.

That girl never got to ring the bell.

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"Am I going to die?" I asked this question to my mother a few years later as we were driving down the highway one day. I don't remember where we were heading. At this point in time, I recently had an extended hospital stay because I had a severe case of bronchitis. I hadn't been able to get a transfusion of Gammagard in months due to lack of blood donors, Big Pharmacy, and what insurance would and would not cover.

She paused. It seemed like forever until she spoke. Her answer was calculated.

"Why are you asking, Tommy?"

"I've been wondering about this for a long time. I get transfusions with kids that die. I get sick when I don't get my transfusions. It seems kind of logical."

What I didn't tell her is I was reminded on a daily basis by some nasty kids at school that I was a sick kid (I.V. Pugh was my nickname) and I would likely die before anyone else. There was no need for her to know that.

"Well," she began, "no."

"No? You're sure?" To say I wasn't convinced is an understatement.

She pulled into the parking lot of a very crowded shopping center.

"You're not going to die, because I won't let you," was her attempt to reassure me.

It was much like the girl that we weren't going to let die a few years prior.

"You're not going to let me?" I was confused as to how that worked. A person can't be willed to or not to die. Life happens.

Her eyes were glassy like she was going to cry, so I dropped the topic. I didn't want to see my mother cry. It was highly uncomfortable. I was a twelve year old and I didn't do the whole crying thing. I heard it happen sometimes. I don't think she knew. It made me feel worthless and helpless. I buried it.

"Can we go shopping?" I asked to make her forget the whole death discussion.

"Sure."

I practiced the art of burying uncomfortable questions and topics for many more years in my life, too many to comfortably say. This isn't anyone's fault. That I learned it as a child and saw that it worked to alleviate the problems in my life was simply a sad fact of life. I buried everything up to and including many aspects of a later bout of my own with cancer. I didn't tell anyone how I truly felt because I wanted to spare the feelings of everyone else.

Was it a good practice? No.

Was it convenient? Yes.

Am I still working my way out of it slowly eighteen years after that van ride?

Yes.

Will I be successful? Yes.

Did anyone let me die? No.

I Don't Know My Sister

If I said I knew my sister Katie well, I would be lying through my teeth. Katie is roughly nine and a half years older than I am. Even my earliest memory, (sitting in a theater with my father and sisters watching *Willow*, or was it *Batteries Not Included*?) didn't involve her, because aside from the fact that my sisters were there and I know the two movie possibilities, I don't know if she was in the sister group. It bothers me that I do not have many memories of her from when I was a child, but I have managed to rationalize that if my earliest memory involved me at the age of three, she would have been twelve or even thirteen years old. Katie was an extremely popular teenager and always away from the house. It isn't exactly my fault we have a rather lapsed relationship.

The only way I remember Katie from when I was a child was through the guys she dated. All of them seemed to want to impress my family, which meant impressing the little kids first — Elizabeth and I. There was Jeff, Jim, and eventually the one she married, Mike. I ranked them based on the cool stuff they did.

Jim had a Trans-Am. He was also a bit of a prick. The Trans-Am was one of the coolest cars I had ever seen when I was six. It was new. I didn't question how he could afford it. I wasn't of the age where I asked such questions yet. I just remember that it had flip up lights. He started the car at night for their dates and before they took off, the lights would pop up and out of the car. It was like something out of *Back to the Future*, which I loved. It wasn't quite as cool as the Delorean, because Doc's Delorean also had doors that flipped upward, but I knew that I would probably never see Doc, Marty, or a Delorean in person. The Trans-Am would have to do.

My father drove a blue Chevy Nova and my mother drove a GMC Safari van. I would not classify either of those like the cars that I saw in movies (except for family comedies). Their cars had rough, hard plastic, bucket seats complete with boring seatbelts and more boring decor. Jeff's car had leather seats. It had tinted windows. The car had a CD player. I didn't know what a CD player was, but I assumed it was automatically cooler than a cassette player. It also had two doors. I didn't really understand the logistics of two door cars considering a family needs four, but if it was on his car, it was fine with me.

I wanted more than anything to go for a ride in the Trans-Am. It was fast. When my parents weren't home, he burned out of the driveway, letting me and the rest of the neighborhood know that he would probably win any race if anyone felt the need to challenge him. I didn't question how high speedometers went. I didn't care. It looked like the important cars on TV and in the movies and I wanted to be part of what was important. So, one day I asked for a ride.

"No. Your shoes are dirty," Jim replied.

Jim underestimated my tenacity, "Jim, I have other shoes. I have dress clothes."

Before I heard his next "No" and silly reasons as to why I was not allowed to take a ride in the Trans-Am, I ran upstairs and changed into church clothes.

No one asked why I was in my church apparel and for some reason, he decided to let me go for a ride. Katie must have pouted. Maybe he had a change of heart. I didn't care. We were going to go for a ride.

Then, I stepped in mud. It wasn't the kind of mud I could rub off of my shoes on a pavement driveway, either. The stuff was thick. The mud was caked deep on my penny loafers. I tried to sneak past Jim, but of course he noticed.

"Is that mud?" he asked.

"N—well, yes," I replied.

"No ride."

I pleaded with him, "Can I go in my socks? See, there's no mud on my socks."

"No ride in muddy shoes, grody little boy socks, or even worse, bare feet."

He shot me a look that was a mixture of "Ha ha" and "I knew you'd mess up somehow."

I walked into my house, completely dejected. I blew my chance for a ride in the Hollywood car. A once in a lifetime chance flushed down the toilet because of a storm the night before. Oh, cruel world. Woe is me.

Jim followed behind me.

I don't remember the rest, but Jim was gone shortly after that. I am sure it's because he didn't give me a ride — it couldn't be because Katie fell out of love with him or anything like that.

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Jeff had Nintendo games. I was a video game prodigy. Big families don't really have the luxury of owning many games, but I was good at what I had. Jeff brought over most of his brother's collection. Katie and Jeff's match was a great one. Whereas he didn't provide me with the chance to ride in a Trans-Am, he did provide me with the opportunity to play games I ordinarily wouldn't have the opportunity to play. I spent

countless hours playing *Mario Bros. 3*, *Paperboy 1* and *2*, and *The Karate Kid Part III*. I have no idea why the third *Karate Kid* movie even had a game, but I had it, and I beat it.

Sometimes, Jeff even took time to play the games with me. It was cool, because I really didn't have that many friends to play games with. My dad was usually at work and when he was home, he didn't really hop on Nintendo with me. I also knew not to ask after a long day of work. He would rather watch TV if he didn't get in at 11:00 at night or later. I took any gaming partner when I could find one, though I often thought Jeff let me win. I didn't like how he let me win, but for some reason it was okay.

We were playing *Tecmo Bowl*.

"Jeff, why are you running the wrong way?" I asked this after he had done it multiple times.

"I'm still learning the controls."

"You're the 49ers. You only need one play: Montana to Rice. It's not rocket science!"

"Oh. Well, Reggie White's fast. He would sack Montana easily, right, Tommy?"

Frustration set in, "Jeff, are you letting me win?"

"No. I am just bad at the game," Jeff replied.

"Okay, let's play something else."

We played *Battletoads*. He was terrible. Maybe he wasn't just letting me win.

Jeff and Katie dated for what seemed like forever. They took Elizabeth and I to see movies and lunch or dinner. The lunch or dinner was usually McDonald's or Taco Bell, but that was super-special when I was a kid. They let us get whatever we wanted. Katie and Jeff spoiled us rotten, something we weren't really used to. The one movie I

remember seeing with them specifically was *Beauty and the Beast*. The animation was amazing. The songs were fun. The villain was cool. And I loved the humor. I didn't get some of the adult humor, but I laughed because they laughed. It was a good time for all of us.

Then it was over. I felt confused. It was almost like I was dumped. I had an older friend that played video games with me, brought me random games, didn't pick on me, and even took Elizabeth and I to the movie theater. I thought that's what couples were supposed to do for families. I thought he cared. I thought they were great together. I thought it would never end. Katie was devastated, I was devastated. I don't remember Lizzy's reaction, because it didn't really matter.

He came over a few days after they broke up. Katie handed him a cardboard box. I don't know what was in it. She told me to pack up the thirty games he lent me.

"Tommy can keep those, Katie."

"No, he can't."

I jumped on the opportunity, "Katie, Jeff just sa —"

"Give him the games back."

When I handed him the games back, I walked upstairs, but I stopped midway to see what would happen. I watched him kiss her on the cheek and leave.

Despite the fact that I was frustrated I had to give up the games that for all intents and purposes could have been mine, I questioned why he kissed her. I wondered if love was still there. I questioned if he would ever be back.

I watched Katie turn and start to cry. I walked upstairs. I hated seeing my sisters in pain. The games didn't matter anymore. What mattered was her well-being.

To my knowledge, he never came back or called again. The love was gone.

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I was nine. Katie just came to Youngstown after spending her first year of college at Cabrini College, in Philadelphia. It was summer and everyone was busy. I was holed up, rather ill a lot at home and in and out of the hospital. My dad was recently diagnosed with emphysema, and my mom was working three jobs trying to support the family, Amy and Kristen were working at an ice cream parlor, Liz was busy with Girl Scout stuff and play dates with her friends. Katie got a job at the local Cracker Barrel. She was a waitress and hostess. Cracker Barrel is where she met her husband, a chef, Mike.

She and Mike had an instant connection. I don't know exactly what it was, but when he met my family, he was very charismatic. He was outgoing, giving, and seemed to genuinely care. To me, he seemed to have a heart of gold. I was lonely and looking for pretty much anyone to listen, play games with, or even play outside with when I felt healthy enough to. Mike fulfilled all of those roles, while dating my sister at the same time. He was like Jeff, but a much better version.

Mike was fun. He drove a car that he named Xena, the Z-24. It was a red Chevy Cavalier. It also had a CD player, something that my parents still did not have. It was fast, or what I thought fast was when I was a kid. He drove around listening to Nirvana and AC/DC's "Big Balls," which at nine years old, I understood to be rather crass. I laughed at that song and loved going for car rides with the windows down. The car didn't have flip-up lights, but he wasn't a prick, and he drove Liz and I around.

My dad was home, but always depressed. My mom was not home much at all and when she was, she was stressed. I spent time with her, but it was at hospitals. None of

which was what could be considered quality. So I treated Mike like he was a big brother that I could tell anything to. In response, he treated me like a little brother that he could teach things (both good and bad) to. The relationship worked well and it worked wonders for my self-esteem. He was there for me when I needed someone, anyone, to be.

However, eventually I noticed little things that were bothersome to others. My family is very Roman Catholic. It didn't matter that Katie was dating the son of a pastor of another faith, but it did matter that Mike went out of his way to point out how Catholics were wrong. He rubbed my mother the wrong way on many occasions with this behavior. At first, out of respect, he attended both the church that my family attended, and his own. Katie attended both as well. I always thought it was to appease my mother and pretty soon, I found out that was the case. Katie stopped attending Mass. This caused an uproar. I think that if I was nineteen years old, and I went to church services in which I was constantly told that I would burn in Hell if I didn't repent and go to those services, I would probably go. It was a play on her psyche, she couldn't be blamed too much, so my mom blamed Mike.

The fact that he despised the Catholic Church didn't really have much of an affect on me though. I still just saw this as an opportunity to snag an older brother. He continued to treat me pretty well. He still played games with me, played outside, would take us to movies, and all seemed well. He and Katie became engaged about a year into their relationship. I was ecstatic. My mom cried when Katie called her on the phone to tell her. At first, I thought they were happy tears. I thought that people only cried happy tears when they became engaged or married. But that night, I found out that they weren't necessarily happy.

I got very good at sneaking around my house and overhearing conversations during my tenure as younger brother. I heard part of one between Katie and my mom that night, after Katie came home.

“You know, Kate — marriage is a big deal. You are young. You don’t have to get married quite yet.”

“I know, Mom, but I love him.”

My mother drew a long breath, “You’re sure that he is the man you want to be with for the rest of your life?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Don’t you like him?”

I stopped listening, so that’s all that I heard. I doubt that my mom ruined Katie’s happy night by answering truthfully. The truth, at that point in time in my family, was something that was hard to find much of. Instead, I am almost positive that she said he would make a good husband. I was worried that I would officially know what my mom thought of him. If I did, it would probably shade my opinion a little bit and there were some things that I did not like knowing.

One thing that bothered me about Mike, was that occasionally his ribbing hurt a bit. He was ultra-competitive and knew how to put a person down. Somehow, Mike knew exactly what was bothering people. He would pick at the scab until it became a wound and never stopped picking. Pretty soon blood would be everywhere, but he wasn’t done. I didn’t say anything, because I figured that’s how older brothers acted toward younger brothers.

This was never more evident than when my sister Amy came home from New York City. Everyone was excited to see Amy. After she left for college, she didn’t come

home much. I wouldn't understand the reason until many years later, but I did notice Mike picking at her. He picked at her about her hairstyle, living in a city full of crime, and about living where a bunch of gay people lived.

Amy was hurt. I saw it on her face and I felt it. We have always had a strong connection. It hurt me to see this. How could he claim to love Katie, be nice to Liz and I, and be spiteful toward either of my other sisters? At that point in time, I knew no reason as to why Mike would dislike her. Amy was my sister before anything else. That she was blood was the most important factor. Nothing is stronger than blood

He and Katie got married when I was twelve years old. They had two sons, Mikey and Ryan. For years, they lived twenty minutes away from my family. It took seventeen years for me to even grasp the beginning of what I truly thought about my brother in law. It would only come after he hurt my sister and nephews in a way I see as mostly unforgivable from an outsider's perspective, but I am not involved in that marriage. I only wish I knew my sister better. Maybe one day, it will happen.

Separation

My mother called for me while I was sleeping. "Tom!"

It was on a hot Thursday night in July of 2014. She sounded panicked. I knew from the sound of her voice that something terrible happened. Usually she saved that voice for a death in the family. Given that my grandmother had been sick for a long time, I thought that she died. My grandma was ninety, that was always my first guess upon a panicked mother.

She stared at me with tears in her eyes and began, "Tom, you know that Mike hasn't exactly been kind to Katie?"

She posed this like a question despite the fact that it was simply a truth. My brother-in-law had not been "nice" to my sister Katie, nine years older than me, since the day they were married, and maybe even before that. I feigned ignorance because I didn't want to face the truth out loud.

"No?" I said and I watched her eyes as they grew wide. "Well, yeah. He hasn't been very nice to her at all."

"I just got off the phone with Katie. She said that he was saying some terrible things about the world being better off without him and that the boys and her would be better off if he was dead."

To my knowledge, suicidal thoughts were something new coming from my brother-in-law.

"Oh," I said and looked at the ground. I didn't want to think of a world without my brother-in-law.

"Well, I told her that if she and the boys need to, they can come and stay here for a while."

"You mean for the night? Until he calms down, right?" I asked.

The look on my mother's face said that she meant for more than the night. All of a sudden, the prospect of my sister divorcing my brother in law became a very real and tangible thing.

"I mean until they can get their feet on the ground, I don't know."

"So how long?" At twenty-nine, I was way too old to be living at home, but due to circumstances out of my control, I did. I was used to an adult schedule and coming and going when necessary. There were never kids around to worry about. I had forgotten how to live with them.

"However long they need," came her quick response.

"Where will we put them?" I asked this with the knowledge that our house is big, but not big enough for seven people any more. As my sisters moved out, we acquired stuff that filled their spaces.

"Tommy," she only called me by this name when she was serious. "We will keep them here as long as they need to be here. I don't care how long that is. I don't care if I need to sleep on the floor. I will take care of your sister and the boys."

When my mother put it that way, I too knew that I would do anything that I had to to help out my nephews and my sister, Katie.

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After not hearing from my mother all day and putting the idea of my sister Katie ever actually leaving her husband out of my head, I treated Friday like it was any ordinary date night with my fiancé, Kate. When I was preparing, I got a call from my mother.

She was using her panicked voice from the night before. "Katie is leaving Mike. I am going to help her pack up right now."

"Okay, let me call Kate and tell her. We will be on our way to help in a little bit," I told her.

I called Kate, and we decided that we would meet at Katie's house. More cars meant that we wouldn't have to make as many trips to and from their home to my mother's house.

I tried to focus as I drove to Katie and Mike's house, but my thoughts were jumbled. Mike had been terrible to my sister for a long time. He imposed his rules upon her and ran their home like it was a prison, with my nephews, Mikey and Ryan, caught in the middle. Katie was forced to report to him any time that she needed money to spend on clothes for her or the boys. Many times, she ordered them to my mother's house because that way, she wouldn't be made to feel like an awful person for spending money on the clothing she needed.

I thought about exactly fifteen years prior to this separation and the promise that I made to Mike when I was fourteen years old. I didn't even really know my sister due to our huge gap in age, but I knew the value of family and my sisters and I promised him at their wedding reception that if he ever hurt her, I would "kick his butt." At the time, as

the brother to four sisters, I felt like I needed to say it. It wasn't only that, but I knew that my family didn't like him much. It was Katie's decision to marry him, but if he was as bad as everyone in my family said he was, I needed to make that bold proclamation.

I didn't really believe that I could despite my fierce love of family. I would most likely get laughed out of an altercation with him if one did ever occur, but what I said at that moment, I wholly meant. At all of four feet six inches tall, no one really listened to me when I said it. He and his best man exchanged "yeah, right" glances at each other, complete with eye-rolls and said nothing back. They were probably too afraid to hurt my fragile young ego.

I didn't keep that promise. But there have been many times when I think I should have.

Years went by and I watched as the verbal abuse got worse. I did not know what to say. How could I say anything? It was not really my relationship or my place to inject opinion. It was only on this trip to their house that I fully remembered all of the terrible things that he had done to my sister. Leaving him was his earned comeuppance.

Memory number two involved another incident, this one on an anniversary when my oldest nephew was very young, a toddler maybe. Katie was ecstatic. She was dressed up and ready to go out. I got the idea that Mike never took her out anymore. She came in carrying a diaper bag, a carrier that could be converted into a car seat, and some cars that Mikey liked playing with. She was pregnant with my youngest nephew, Ryan, and looked a bit tired by the time that she got midway up the driveway. Mikey toddled at her side. As usual, Mike let her do the carrying. He did a half-hearted wave from inside of the car.

"Tommy, go help your sister," my mom said, trying to hold back frustration.

I helped my sister up the front stairs and took some of the things she was carrying. My mom perked up when a toddler Mikey ran in and hugged her leg.

“Hello, Mikey! Are you excited to stay over here tonight?”

He mumbled something and Katie replied coherently for him, “Yeah. He’s been yammering a mile a minute about it since we left the house. He wants to show Dad and Uncle Tom his cars.”

I perked up. “That’s cool, what’d you get Mikey?”

He held up two new Hot Wheels cars.

“Those are very cool. What sounds do they make?”

“They go vroom, vroom, Uncle ‘Om,” said Mikey, who was still having problems verbalizing my name.

“Good.”

Katie smiled. “Well everyone, I have to go. Mike is taking me to dinner!”

We all said goodbye and she walked outside, into what had become a storm.

When she got to the front door, Mike backed up. I saw him laughing behind the window. She got to the door and he backed up again. This happened twice more before he let her in. She was drenched and humiliated.

My mother was holding Mikey, who was clutching for dear life to a yellow car, in her arms. “Your father is such a bastard,” she said with tears in her eyes.

I was only sort of shocked. “Mom! He talks now. Mikey, don’t repeat that.”

All my mom said before walking into the kitchen with my nephew still in her arms was, “It’s the truth.”

At that moment, I was shocked by both Mike's actions and my mother's words. There was a part of me that sided with her. There was another part of me that wanted to hold onto a belief that it was just some kind of idiot day. Maybe Mike didn't know what it was that he was doing and the effect that it had on my sister. I liked being blind to these things. Not focusing on the difficult subjects came easily to me until I saw things like that, at which point I internalized them. How could I fix it? Was it mine to fix?

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I got to the house. I was the first one there. For some reason, my sister Katie had left. I walked up to the door and was greeted by my nephew and his yipping dog, Max. Mikey was clutching him in his arms and looked completely unaffected by what was happening. I was shocked by how *okay* he looked. I expected to walk in and find him in a sobbing heap on the floor, his father yelling at him for something or other. I expected that I might even have to break something up. I built up a bunch of vivid and somewhat violent scenarios in my head about what their father may or may not do. I was terrified.

The first words out of his mouth were, "My mom left out trash bags, Uncle Tom. Is that really what we're packing stuff in?"

He handed me a black hefty bag.

"Yeah, I suppose so," I replied, "I am gonna stay downstairs and pack up some stuff for you guys. Go let your Dad know that I'm here."

I was trying to remember every movie that I had seen about divorcing couples. If *Lifetime* movies were correct, fathers always tried to keep big ticket items to keep the kids coming back. Despite his very small frame, Max, the annoying yipping dog, was probably the biggest ticket item. However, putting him in a black trash bag and tossing

him in my car on a ninety degree day seemed highly inadvisable. While Mikey went upstairs to let his dad know that I arrived at the house, I unhooked the Playstation 3 and put it, every cable and plug, and all of their video games and controllers into the bag and ran to my car like a thief. Into the trunk it went.

I was walking back to the house when my nephew greeted me, still holding Max, from the porch. This time, he looked like he was near tears while Max was being squeezed to death.

"Dad wants you to stay outside until Mom gets home. He doesn't want anyone else in here without her."

"Okay. I will just sit out here and wait."

"Is Ryan in there too, Mikey?" I asked, worried that he was also possibly being yelled at.

"No. Ryan is at Bible Camp. He will be back tonight."

He walked back in the house.

I sat on their lawn, waiting for someone, *anyone* to save me from the torture of waiting by myself and wondering exactly what was going on in that house. I called Katie's cellphone number three times and three times I got the voicemail.

Mikey walked out of the house. His head was down and he was slouching. It seemed like he was just yelled at. "Mom left her phone here. I'm holding it for her until she gets back." He walked back into the house with the same slouch that he walked out with. His head was hanging lower, as if he was awaiting more verbal anger.

Kate was the second one to arrive at the house. She pulled up to the curb.

I walked to her car. I could feel the disappointment inside of me, mixing with the other million thoughts and emotions. I was glad she was there to ease some of them.

“Hey, hon’. Mike has ordered me out of the house until Katie arrives. He doesn’t want anyone in there.”

She looked frustrated. We all wanted to help Katie get out of there as soon as possible. “Well, where is everyone?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. I just want to get done and get out. I hate this.”

“I know, Tom.” She got out of the car and gave me a hug. I needed it. Kate's hugs are always soothing. We went back to sit on the lawn.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I didn’t answer the call. A minute after it was finished, it started ringing again, so I checked who was calling: Mom.

She sounded exhausted, like she had been running a marathon or something, “I am on my way! Is Katie there yet?”

“No.”

“When she gets there, you have to do something *very important* for me.”

I wondered if she was going to advise me to walk in with some sort of bludgeoning object to protect my sister with. Nope.

“Tell Katie to write a check to you for cash,” my mom said matter-of-factly.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because Mike will probably try to close the account. It would cut Katie and the boys off from any of their money if it’s in both of their names, which it probably is.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

My mom yells when she is talking into the phone. I'm pretty sure she doesn't understand that modern technology is really strong and can pick up voices easily. Kate heard every word.

Kate looked at me and said, "Tom, it's almost 5:30 now. Don't most banks close at 5:00 or 6:00 on Friday?"

I was panicking. "She better get here soon."

At 5:45, Katie finally arrived. I ran to her car with Kate saying behind me to "just act casual."

I blurted everything out with a quickness that I didn't know I could muster. After all, it was the time to panic. "Hi, Katie. I'm glad you're finally here Mom told me to tell you to write me a check so that you can have money because Mike will probably close the account and, you have a check right? Because its almost 6:00 and all of the banks are going to be closed soon." I breathed. She looked shell-shocked.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ramble all of that at you at once —"

Having finally had the chance to take her own breath, she looked at me and said in a hushed tone, "Our bank is right down the street." She wrote a check for \$300.00 to Thomas A. Pugh in record time. "Take this inside and they will cash it."

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Kate waited in the car as I went into the bank to withdraw the money.. It was deserted. We were the last ones in. As I was walking in, the tellers were closing their drawers and counting all of the money for the day. I felt like the person that walks into a restaurant closing at 10:00, right at 9:55. The glares were piercing and the silence became deafening, but I didn't care. I walked up to a particularly peeved looking teller.

"Hi, I would like to cash this check."

"Okay. Are you a member at this bank?"

"No, but my sister, Katie Cline is and she wrote this check less than half an hour ago."

"I'm sorry. We ca—"

I panicked. My sister needed that money. "Please. My brother in law and sister are separating. Right now, she is packing up her life into trash bags. She sent me here to cash this, because she is terrified that he is going to close the account and leave her and her children penniless. She needs this money and I promised her I would get it. He is at the house with my sister right now and I just need to get back."

The teller looked sympathetic for a few seconds and then shook her head in compliance, acknowledging her place.

I resorted to the last option. "Listen, if I need to have an account here to take out money, then I want to open an account right now."

The manager was behind her. He groaned. A new account meant more paperwork. I was a customer of their bank; they would have to do it that night.

The teller looked at the check. "Alright, 'hon. Where do they live?"

I gave her the address.

"Right. What is her phone number and middle initial?"

I gave her the answers.

The manager was behind her and growing more impatient. His face was a violent shade of purple. "For the love of God, just give him the money so that we can get out of

here. It's obvious that he's not lying. This is his sister for God's sake. Just give him the cash."

The teller looked like she was going to cry. I didn't feel particularly bad. I was as sick of the game as the manager. I knew it was protocol, but my sister and nephews well-being hung in the balance.

"K 'hon, she wants three hundred? What kind of bills do you think she would like?"

I hadn't thought about that. The action of getting the cash seemed a hell of a lot more important than the denomination of the bills. "Honestly, she didn't specify. I'm guessing a mixture of tens and twenties would be good. She just needs the money."

She counted the money onto the counter in front of her, and left it for me to grab. I guess getting yelled at by her boss meant that we didn't get an envelope. All the same, I pocketed it and Kate and I went back on our way to help my sister Katie.

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When we got back to Katie's house with the money, we noticed two things. First, my mother and youngest sister, Liz, had arrived to help pack. This was both a good and bad thing. Katie needed the extra help, but Mike hated my mother. The second thing that Kate and I noticed was that a police car was parked in front of the house.

"Oh, fuck!" I yelled out, then I mused over whether or not a murder had taken place, something which we both decided wasn't funny. I joke when I get uncomfortable.

No one was at the back door, so we just walked in. The house looked different than it did when I was last in it. There were large piles of items in the dining room. Everything from a TV and DVD player to random photos of my nephews were in the

piles. There was a piece of paper that read "Mike's Stuff." I was glad that I snagged the Playstation 3 for the boys when I did.

They were yelling. Mike and my mother were about five feet from each other finger pointing and gesturing wildly. Katie was sitting next to Mikey on the couch. A police officer stood just to the side of my mother and Mike. Max was in the basement, still yipping.

My mother was making accusatory statements toward Mike. "You called the police. I don't know what you were expecting. We just came in to get items that Katie and the boys will need and leave. We don't need the police here."

Mike was riled up and looking to fight. "I called the police because you people shouldn't be in my home taking all of my family's stuff. This has nothing to do with your family, yet you seem so eager to make it seem like I am some sort of lunatic and your daughter needs to leave."

"Mike, Mike... we are just here to help Katie and the boys get their personal belongings."

"No! You're in my house and I don't want you here."

It was the officer's turn to speak. "Scuse me sir, but she has a point. Your wi— Katie, is it? She's gonna need help packing her things. As long as no one bothers you, yells at you, or hits you in any way, I can't really do much of anything. Are you folks going to be okay?"

Both grumbled and the police officer turned to Mikey, "Call me if your Mom and Dad need anything."

Mikey sat on the couch with his head down.

The rest of us trudged up the wooden, slightly crooked stairs to the second floor. Once there, each of us took a room and started packing things. Everything from the boys' clothing to their favorite toys went into bags. Katie, Liz, my Mom, and Kate worked on Katie's bedroom. I worked on clearing out the boys' room. I looked at Ryan's bed. The best way to describe it is to say that it was chaos. On his headboard, he had a bunch of trophies from sports, his football cards, a wrestling action figure, and a Green Bay Packers cheesehead hat.

On his bed, which was complete with a Green Bay Packers comforter and sheet set, rested the largest stuffed animal collection I had ever seen. I looked at each one as I tossed it in the bag. "Dog Cline," "Bear Cline," "Elephant Cline," etc. He introduced me to all of his stuffed animals years ago. As a twelve year old, I was amazed that he still had them. He wasn't terribly inventive when it came to naming. I got a kick out of it and then remembered that I was taking his stuffed animals from their house to Grandma's. It was a welcoming home, but it wasn't where their stuffed animals lived. That house was being packed up. I thought about my nephew and wondered what he would be feeling. Luckily for him, he was at Bible Day Camp and didn't have to witness any of this. Katie let us know that his uncle was babysitting him until we were finished.

Also on Ryan's bed was a brand new mattress guard for "accidents." Ryan, at twelve years old still wet the bed on occasion. This happened almost any time that he was in a strange place, even my mother's house. However, to see the guard here was weird. I remembered bed wetting being a hallmark of fear in children. I was slowly torn apart. I imagined him having a death grip on his stuffed animals at night while listening to his parents fighting. I also imagined wetting the bed at home probably got him made fun of

by his father. The kids had it rough in my imagination, which I think is pretty spot-on. I shed a tear, shook my head, and kept bagging.

Mikey's side of the room was immaculate. It was easy to pack everything. Clothes were folded and his bed was made. There was no sign of stuffed animals anywhere on his side of the room. On his headboard rested a few Minecraft figurines. It was a game that he was obsessed with. It wasn't as sad as Ryan's side, but the cleanliness and perfection that Mikey always sought was probably something else that Mike could pick at. I couldn't stop imagining awful scenarios for both of them.

I moved very slowly. I didn't want to be the one packing up their lives, but there was another part of me that desperately wanted my sister and the boys out of that house. The sooner, the better. No one deserves that kind of treatment. Kate joined me and the room was finished a lot faster. We left some things there for the next pickup, Saturday morning. Chief among those things left behind, was Mikey's collection of nutcrackers. They were a sign of happier times, when he used that collection to earn a Boy Scout badge. He had since quit the Scouts.

We carried the bags down the stairs and found Mike talking to my nephew on the couch on our way to take them to my car.

"I don't want this. This is all your mom's fault. I never said that I wanted to go. Make sure that your brother knows. It's important that you know this is all your mother's fault."

Mikey was sobbing with his chokehold on Max, who was up from the basement. "If you don't want it, make it stop."

"I can't. Your mom and grandma want us to be unhappy. Your grandma has always wanted us to be unhappy."

"Where will you go, Dad?" Mikey asked.

"I dunno. I'll probably move somewhere else to work in another plant. Once you guys are gone, there is really nothing for me here. I'll have no reason to stick around."

The idea of his father leaving only made my nephew sob more. He had a box of tissues that were rapidly being depleted. The remnants of his tears were in the tissues scattered all over the floor.

I felt my jaw clenching and unclenching. I wanted to deck my manipulative brother-in-law.

Kate noticed my anger. "Just keep walking. If you hit him, he'll press charges. The faster we get out of here, the better."

She was right, so we carried everything to the car and came back in to help pack things from Katie's room.

When we got into the house, Mike was taking down all of the blinds and curtains in the house and lifting open all the windows.

My mother and Katie were pleading with him to stop. Kate and I both watched in disbelief at his idiocy. "Mike, this is still our house. You are going to let everyone know that we aren't here. People will break in and take what's left. You can't do that," Katie said.

"Whose check pays for the mortgage, Katie? I can do whatever I want in *my* house."

I burst out. "What you're doing is fucking stupid!"

He stopped and looked at me with a twisted grin and arrogantly said, "Well Tommy, sometimes life is stupid. We can't help that, can we?"

I was about to grab for him, but Kate stopped me and handed me bags that my mother and sisters brought down stairs before they witnessed Mike's curtain rearrangement.

"It's probably best if we just take these to the car."

Since she has always been a voice of reason, I listened to her.

On our return trip, Max was running out the door. He was going full speed into the backyard. He was small and I couldn't jump fast enough to grab him before he was between my legs and had passed by Kate, who was right behind me.

"Shit," I yelled out.

We thought that we left the door unhinged and came in to tell everyone that the dog got out and we needed help when we noticed that Mikey was crying and tying his shoes.

"Why'd you let Max out, Dad?"

"Because dogs should have a home, Mikey. This is not one," Mike replied coldly.

"Dammit, Mike!" was all that I heard my mother yell because Kate and I both turned tail to help Mikey catch the dog. Max never left the yard and leapt back into his arms. He knew where home was, despite what Mike tried to tell my nephew.

I told Mikey to stay where he was. Katie and my mother were still in the house. They needed to get out of there, too. Mikey sat on a chair next to the garage.

Katie was standing and shifting her weight nervously from side to side, "Well what about insurance? Both of them need braces and new glasses, Mike."

Mike shrugged. "We'll see what the court decides."

All of us — except Mike — looked shocked.

Katie, Kate, Liz, my mom, and I left for the cars. We found Mikey sitting in a plastic lawn chair, with Max. Mikey was rocking back and forth, as if he were holding a baby and choking on his sobs. Snot was running down his face, so my mom handed him a tissue.

His mom looked at him, took a deep breath, and said, "Mikey, it's time to get in the car."

Everyone got in their fully loaded cars except for Mikey and Max, both of whom remained in the chair. I noticed Mike walking outside, beckoning to Mikey. I rolled down the window. "Hey Mikey, your mom's leaving. She has to pick up Ryan. Get in the car." With his head down, he walked to the car.

I waited until everyone pulled out, got a good, last look at both the house and my future ex-brother in law, and then drove to my mother's house.

I couldn't get the image of the wrecked Mikey sitting with Max in the plastic lawn chair out of my head. He looked like his world had been shattered and I can only imagine that it had been. After all, the separation of parents is pretty traumatic from what I've heard

When we got back to the house, we ordered pizza. The boys absolutely loved pizza and even if something could get Mikey and Ryan's minds (and Katie's for that matter) off of what was happening while they ate, it would be a good thing.

While he was eating, Ryan, my twelve-year-old nephew, who was seemingly unfazed by everything, looked up at me with his mouth full and said "Uncle Tom, can you set up the PS3? I want to play *NBA 2K13*."

I jumped on the opportunity to make him laugh. "Ryan, I'll do it, but you probably don't want me to. I'm just gonna put up a hundred points on you and make you never want to play again."

"Uncle Tom, you're old. You can't play games any more. I'll beat you by one hundred and one," Ryan replied in a deadpan voice and shook his head from side to side. He was smiling. My plan worked.

"It's on, Ryan!" I yelled.

I don't turn down challenges, even if they come from someone eighteen years younger than me.

Kate looked at me and blinked a few times trying to be comically disapproving. "You're trash talking to an eleven year old."

I'm more than a little competitive and didn't see anything wrong with it. "I know."

We went back to eating pizza.

Mikey just ate his pizza. He didn't say a word to anyone. He just grabbed and ate until he was finished, at which point he got up, threw away his paper Pizza Hut plate, and retreated to my mother's bedroom, where we blew up air mattresses for the boys. He played on his iPad and texted his friends from there, dead to our house.

After pizza, Ryan beat me mercilessly. "Uncle Tom, remember how you said you were good at video games when you were younger?"

"Shut up, Ryan."

"Uncle Tom, remember how you said you were gonna beat me by one hundred points, and then I said I was going to put up one hundred and one?"

"Shut up, Ryan."

"Uncle Tom," he began as his player, LeBron James, bounded down the video game court and sunk a three-pointer, "I just scored 102 points on you. End game."

We played multiple games that night. He beat me again and again and again. My ego was crushed by an eleven year old. He certainly trash talked better than I did when I was his age, something that I'm sure he learned from his father, but my skills were still far superior when I was his age—I hope. Surely, he couldn't beat me on the original Playstation. The *original* Playstation... God, I felt old. He beat me in basketball, he beat me in football (both college and professional), and he even beat me at go-cart racing. It was brutal.

"Uncle Tom, are you letting me win?"

"No, Ryan. I wish I could say that I was."

This went on until midnight before I gave up. He had sufficiently exhausted me, and he had done it all with a smug smile on his face. I was just glad that I could take his mind off what was happening for a while.

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The next morning, Mike stopped by the house. He was told that he could see the boys in public places. He incorrectly considered my mother's home a public place, but he was let in by Katie anyhow. Katie didn't talk.

Mike walked over to the couch, where the boys were sitting, and sat down in between them. "Well boys, this is a mess, huh?"

They both agreed.

He continued. "You know I don't want this, right? This is all on your mother. I never said that I wanted this. She just took you away."

It was the same exact speech as the night before, only this time Ryan was able to hear it.

He continued until my mother said, "That's enough."

"Oh Lori," he said snidely, "I was just headed out anyhow. I was in the neighborhood."

He left, slamming the door behind him on his way out.

We looked around at each other. Everyone was shocked into silence.

Katie was on the phone for the rest of the day texting. I continued playing video games with Ryan, determined to beat him, while my mother baked with Mikey downstairs. He had no interest in the games despite multiple invites from Ryan, who said that he promised not to beat him as badly as he was beating me.

I was desperately trying to connect to Ryan, who reminded me of myself at that age. He used sarcasm to cover up sadness and he buried himself in sports knowledge and video games to feel better just like I did when I was sick.

"Ryan, how are you doing today?"

"Oh. I'm fine. You ready to lose again?"

I failed at attempting communication.

Suddenly, I heard sudden yelling coming from down the hall.

It was my mother. "How could you even consider going back? It's been one day. He just put you through hell." I got up from my chair.

“Hey Ryan, I'm just going to close this door. Keep playing the game.” I closed the door to my bedroom, and left to investigate.

My mother was in her room, yelling at Katie, who was getting dressed. "He put you through hell. Why would you ever take yourself or the boys back? You deserve better than that!"

"He's my husband."

"He's not being a very good one."

They fought for what seemed like hours, going back and forth, repeating the same things. Eventually their argument came down to a simple, "The boys and I are going out to dinner and shopping today with Mike."

To which my frazzled mother replied, "Well that's about the dumbest possible thing you could possibly do."

My mother left Katie crying and alone in the room.

I wanted to go to my sister and give her a hug, but I didn't really know how to approach a my own sister, crying because her world is being torn apart. I felt like I was failing as a brother.

Ryan opened the door. "Can I come out now, Uncle Tom?"

During this yelling and crying, Mikey was at track practice, something he did every day before coming back to the house and shutting us all out of his life. I completely forgot that I left Ryan in the room all alone. I wondered how many times life at home had been like that for him. Parents yelling back and forth while he and his brother were stuck, forgotten in a room. I don't know for sure that's what happened, but I assume it did. I didn't have to fail Ryan as well.

"Yeah, buddy. Come on out."

Later that night I went to Kate's and recounted the entire event. I aired my feelings, saying that I don't think she should go back to him. I thought that Katie was making a mistake. I was frustrated. I said everything that I previously couldn't in front of her family, and everyone else living at the house. They listened to every word consolingly.

When I was finished ranting, she gave me the wisest piece of advice I had received all week. "You have to trust her thoughts and judgments because you can't change them. Only Katie gets to make her choices. You can disagree, but belittling them and her will only make things worse for Katie."

I kept that in my head and it became my mantra. I believed it and listened to it again and again in my head the whole way back. "*Only Katie gets to make her choices.*" I disagreed with it and then re-agreed. It was a constant internal battle.

Once I got back, I saw Ryan sitting on the couch. "Where have you been, Uncle Tom? It's late."

"I was at Kate's. What did you wait up for?"

"It's time for me to beat you in whatever game you want to play."

Once again, we played. Once again, he beat me mercilessly. This time, he pulled out his phone and took a picture. "For Instagram," he said.

"What in God's name do you have Instagram for?"

"I'm an important person, Uncle Tom. People want to know who I'm beating at video games."

We continued playing. I used this as a golden opportunity to pry into his day.

"So, uh...what'd you guys do tonight?"

"We ate," he replied as he kept his eyes on the screen. *Swish*, and another three for LeBron.

"Did ya' do anything else?"

"Yeah, we went to Home Depot. Dad had to replace the blinds and curtains that he broke yesterday for when we all move back in later this week." He paused. "Oh—"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He had a pained expression on his face, like he knew he was going to be yelled at. "I wasn't supposed to say that."

I was disappointed that he was so afraid to even talk to me. "It's all right, Ryan."

Ryan paused and played the game, humming and bobbing his head back and forth, I wondered whether or not he was upset.

"Ya' know, we could be playing Wii U right now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I want it for Christmas, but today we were shopping and Dad told me I could get one. Mom told me no and that I had to wait, because Christmas is so far away. Isn't that dumb? I mean, Dad said I could have it."

I laughed to cover up my cringing.

"Dad also took Max. He said that he missed Max and we could come over if we wanted to see him."

Brilliant.

"Don't you think I should have been able to have the Wii U? I could be whoopin' you in *Mario Kart* right now instead of *NBA 2K13*."

"No, Ryan. I think it's best that you wait until December. It's not that far away. Listen to your mom. She is really smart."

Two days later, the boys were doing something with Mike and Katie again. I was depressed. I wanted them to be okay. I didn't know what *okay* truly meant, but I was pretty sure it involved my nephews and sister being away from Mike for a while. To get my mind off of things I decided to play some video games, just like Ryan always did.

My thought process as I was playing was, "Which game does Ryan kick my ass in most?" So, I picked *NBA 2K13*. I would beat him at his own game with the players that I grew up watching, the 1992 USA Olympic "Dream Team." I practiced shooting, dunking, and three pointers (pretty easy with Larry Bird). I would beat him. Oh yes, I would.

Upon arriving back at the house, he rushed upstairs to the game room. I shut the system off so he didn't know that I practiced for five hours.

He furrowed his eyebrows at me. "Uncle Tom, why are you in here already?"

"Just getting the game ready. Would you like to play basketball again?"

"Not really. I always beat you."

Well, I wasn't expecting my plan to be foiled quite like that. "Well, I'm trying to learn. One more time? Maybe I can play as the Dream Team. That way the game might be closer."

"Uh, Uncle Tom, you can be any team and I will beat you."

Not wanting to let him in on my secrets, I decided to pry again. "So, what'd you guys do today?"

"Just stuff, Uncle Tom."

"Is your dad gonna move in with you guys when you move back?"

"Yeah. He's already fixing the house."

I wasn't happy, but I had to feign it. "Oh. That's good."

"Yeah. Let's just play the game. I want to beat you and go to sleep."

My video game characters were beating his video game characters! I button mashed with prowess. Video game Michael Jordan stole the ball, passed it to Larry Bird — three points. Larry Bird passed to Michael Jordan — three more points.

"Is all you do shoot three-pointers, Uncle Tom?"

"Well, Ryan" another three pointer was sunk, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Midway through the game he paused, looked at me, and asked, "Uncle Tom, have you been practicing?"

"Nope, Michael Jordan was just that much better than LeBron James."

"No way!"

"Ryan, tonight *I* am beating *you* by twenty points. Yes, way."

He was indignant. "Well, I scored 100 on you last night."

"You did," I replied.

That's when I scored 100 points against him. I beat him 113 to 96. "Hey Ryan, can you take my picture for your Instagram account?"

And he did. He said he was going to label his picture "My Cheating Uncle Tom."

It was the last time we played *NBA 2K13* that week.

On Friday of that week, Katie left while everyone was out of the house. Most of their important things were gone when I got back from wherever it was that I went that day. Without all of the extra stuff lying around, the house looked empty.

I looked at my father, who was in his recliner in the living room, watching something about Nazis on the History Channel. Maybe he could answer my questions.

"Dad, where's Katie and all of their stuff?" I asked.

"It's gone." My dad worked mostly in simple sentences since his strokes in past years.

"Did she take it all herself?" I was shocked. It took five of us and four cars to bring it to the house.

"She took it in one trip," he looked sad, took a breath and kept going, "she said she can get the rest later."

"Oh. Did she say if she needed help with anything?" I asked.

"No, Tom. She went back. She went back. Why'd she go back?"

I didn't know what to do. Obviously my father was upset, but I was as well. I hugged him. "It will be okay."

Although, I didn't know if it would be okay. I'm pretty sure she knew that no one really agreed with what she was doing, but the words of Kate echoed in my head when I thought about it too hard. *You have to trust her thoughts and judgments because you can't change them. Only Katie gets to make her choices. You can disagree, but belittling them and her will only make things worse for her.* I was allowed to have feelings about it — and I did — but the most important feelings belonged to Katie. I helped move Katie and

the boys to our house. She wanted to protect her sons more than herself and would do anything for her children. I left her alone in that room to cry by herself and she packed up their things and left by herself a week later.

I walked upstairs and looked in my mother's room. All of Ryan's comfort stuffed animals, the happy Clines, were packed and gone. The only thing left in the room was his Nintendo DS charger. He left that thing everywhere. I laughed, sighed, and kept walking. When I looked into the office/video game room, I gasped. It was all gone. Any signs of Ryan's video game prowess and my defeats were out of the room. When I saw that, I realized that they were gone for good. I hoped that things got better for them and they ended up as happy and loved as Ryan's stuffed animals were.

He Shoots

I wanted to be the next Larry Bird. I had crowned myself as such. I was a seven year-old four foot, two-inch basketball prodigy that couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. I was the kind of athlete that earned participation ribbons, never the MVP or large team championship trophies. I wanted more. I was destined for glory. I just had to figure out how in the world I could possibly attain said glory. So, in lieu of any actual plan, I went out for the basketball team.

When you're a seven year-old, you don't really go out for anything. You are pretty much universally accepted in a league as long as your mom sends a check that doesn't bounce to the right people. So trying out for the team just meant I got to go to an evaluation with all of the coaches. They had these evaluations so that none of the teams were unfairly stacked with six and seven year old all-stars. We were going to spend forty-five minutes being taught the proper ways to do a lay-up, shoot a free-throw, shoot a three-pointer, dribble, pass, dribble with two hands, and do a bounce pass. After we learned all of these life-skills, we would be put to the test.

I was with about ten other kids in my session and we were all given basketballs and told to do the same things.

First: Dribble.

Easy. The ball bounces, you just need to keep control of it as you move. Flick wrist, ball hits floor, bounces to your palm, repeat.

Second: Move while dribbling. You're not allowed to run while holding the basketball.

Not quite as easy. A lot of our basketballs went flying because we didn't know this strange twist was going to be thrown into the scheme.

The coaches began making checkmarks and writing things down on notepads.

Third: Shooting the ball.

I jumped forward (a no-no) and released the ball on my way down instead of at the height of my jump (another no-no). The ball flew forward and smacked a wall. It bounced toward a little kid who dove out of the way. The dribbling and shooting around me stopped and my possible future teammates and opponents laughed and pointed. This was not a good start. It didn't help that I did this again and again. This was a black spot on the way to my NBA MVP future.

Fourth: Shooting free throws.

The same thing happened. I jumped forward with a slight lean and released the ball. This time, it at least hit the net – the very bottom of the net was slightly grazed. More laughter ensued after the other kids sunk ball after ball.

I was put on Coach Smailey's Purple Raiders. We were sponsored by a local doctor and we had jerseys. My jersey had a big "3" on it. Having my own jersey made up for the disappointment of how much I currently stunk up the court.

I looked at my basketball jersey on the way home. My sister, Amy was in the car. "Hey Amy, why doesn't this have my name on it?"

I don't think she was thinking clearly when she said, "Because they need to use them again next year for another kid."

"What? You mean I don't get to keep this?"

She realized her error, “Oh. Um, Mom — does Tommy get to keep his Purple Raiders jersey?”

My mom was the saving grace of the conversation, “Yeah. Of course you do. You’re the first to wear it. No one else has ever worn that jersey before and they won’t after because it’s yours and its special.”

I was appeased.

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The practices were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays from December 1st until Christmas break and then they started again after the start of the new year. Our games would be held every single Saturday and if our team did well enough, we would get to go to the playoffs. Playoffs. We could be champions. We could have trophies! At the time, I didn’t know that all of us got participation trophies even if we were awful.

For me, the practices continued much like the embarrassing evaluations. I couldn’t get shooting down. Every single time I shot the basketball, it deflected off the rim or even worse, went underneath the backboard entirely. I could dribble, but God help me if I tried dribbling while moving. Usually, I focused too hard on the dribbling and not on my footwork, which resulted in my tripping over my own two feet and smashing my chin on the floor numerous times.

I learned to get out of the way of the ball when it could be rebounded, too. I was hit in the forehead numerous times by elbows that came flying out when a bunch of kids were trying to grab a ball that missed the mark. I was also whacked a couple times by the ball. I didn’t know which hurt most, so my thought process led me to believe the

basketball was not my friend. Get out of the way or get bludgeoned. I wasn't quite as competitive as the other Michael Jordan and Larry Bird wannabes.

I got really good at passing the ball. Passing the ball served two purposes: The first purpose was that it didn't get me laughed at. I perfected the bounce pass and the chest pass. I could peg anyone on the court. It was called an assist if the person that I got the ball to scored. So I figured that I might as well get as many assists as possible. Plus, the coach always said "Good job, Tommy" when I passed the ball. He didn't have the same pained look on his face as he did when I shot the ball. It was refreshing to have the eyes off of me and on other kids.

On the way home from practice one night, I explained this to Amy.

"So wait, you don't shoot the ball?" Amy asked.

I answered matter-of-factly. "Right, because I miss. I pass the ball and help the team that way."

"Does the coach let you practice shooting?"

"Not as much as the other kids because I'm really good at assisting them."

She didn't like this answer. "Would you like to be better at shooting?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Well. Yeah, kind of. It would be nice to actually be able to get the ball in the net by myself instead of always assisting."

"Would you like me to work on that with you?" She offered.

The idea of working on perfecting my basketball skills (or lack thereof) with my older sister brought me great joy. Amy and I didn't have many of these rituals, but I enjoyed working with her anytime I got the chance, so I jumped on this. Getting some side work would probably help me out quite a bit. Even if it didn't help me with shooting,

at least it could help me with my dribbling and passing skills. Amy could see how amazing I was at assisting. We began practice the next day.

Practice with my sister occurred in the garage. We didn't have a basketball hoop to set up, so in lieu of said hoop, there was a piece of plywood with a big "X" on it. The "X" marked where the hoop was. The makeshift hoop was placed in our barn style garage at regulation height for youth league basketball. There was tape on the ground to mark the foul lines. Coach Amy ran me ragged. She knew I could pass, so I dribbled with one hand while running in circles. I dribbled with both hands while running in circles. I shot at the X again and again until I got the proper shooting form. I also had to rebound the ball when it ricocheted off of the faux backboard.

I finally got it. I could pass, dribble, rebound, shoot (properly) and if the "X" was correct, I would excel at shooting free throws. The ball was my friend. I was going to be league MVP. We were going to win the championship. I *was* the next Larry Bird.

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Saturday was our first game and I was excited. I finally mastered the fundamentals of the game and I was ready for my introduction to the league. Coach Smailey kept on making me pass when I got the ball, calling me "the best assister he had ever seen," but I would prove him wrong. Wait until I got the ball. I would prove them all wrong.

I forget who we were playing against, but I do remember sitting on the bench for a long time. The kids ran up and down the court. The score was low because it was a youth league game. As kids were filtered in and out of the game and off the bench, I sat there and played endless games of rock, paper, scissors with other kids. The time wore

from each of the eight minute long quarters. The first quarter was gone, the second quarter was gone, the third quarter was gone. It was the fourth quarter and I wondered when I was going to get to play.

“Hey coach, there’s um — five minutes left and we’re winning and I didn’t get to play yet and all the other kids did. I thought I was supposed to get to play for at least sixteen minutes.”

Coach Smailey had been caught and seemed out of sorts when I told him this news, “Oh! Um — well, we’re winning by ten points now, so I guess you can go in.”

He called a timeout so I could get in the game.

I was finally in. My debut was here and I was about to take off. Someone passed me the ball. I had an open court in front of me. I dribbled with one hand, I dribbled with two hands. I was dribbling while running in front of Coach Smailey. *See this? This is what you could have had all game.* I kept running.

I heard Coach Smailey yelling, “Pass the ball, Tommy!”

But why should I pass the ball? I was at the net. I shot — with my old form. The ball nailed the rim and bounced back toward me. I was too stunned to do anything but protect myself from the ball. It bounced off my forearms and some kid grabbed it and took off toward our hoop. Coach called a timeout to pull me from the game.

He was livid and pointing in my face, “What were you doing?!”

“Shooting the ball. You don’t let me shoot the ball. I just wanted a chance.”

“You aren’t a good shooter! You’re supposed to pass.”

That was when Amy stepped in, “Excuse me? You have kids on your team that you’re telling not to try to shoot the ball? Fuck you. We are done here and Tommy isn’t coming back.”

“Hey. You wait, young lady. You shouldn’t be talking like that.”

Amy grabbed my hand, “Tommy, do you want to leave?”

“Yes,” I replied, having had enough of basketball.

She pulled me forward saying, “Let’s go.”

And just like that, Amy and I left.

“Don’t worry about that game or that coach. You did a good job. And — don’t tell Mom what I said,” she said with a laugh.

I finally realized what she had done. “You swore.”

“He deserved it. Want something to eat?” Food bribes were how she was going to get me to shut up.

He did deserve it. The promise of something to eat made me forget how she used the F-word.

“Pizza?”

The food bribe worked. “Sure.”

Just like that, my basketball career in the New Jersey Catholic Youth Basketball League ended. I kept the jersey.

That Which Should Not Be Spoken

Amy is my second sister, seven years older than I am. Due to a myriad of child illnesses, she was home with me a lot from the time I was born until I went to preschool. She is the first person I walked to, ran to, and talked to. Amy has not just been my sister, but has also been my coach, and a very good confidant. I feel blessed to have her as a sister.

My father worked as a manager at a chain store and my mother was working on her master's degree in theology at La Salle University while working a full-time job at a church when we lived in New Jersey in the 80's and early 90's. This left my older sisters, Katie, Amy, and Kristen (in that order) to raise us in our formative years. Katie was in high school and was always busy doing something or other, so I didn't have much of a relationship with her. Kristen wasn't home much because of various activities and when she was—for some reason or another—we always butted heads. Amy was the one that I connected with and seemed to always be home, watching my sister Liz and I.

I remember sitting in the living room in our house in New Jersey watching all of the “bad shows” my mom told my sisters not to watch and definitely not to let Lizzy and I watch. Yet, many times, there we were, watching the newest “bad channel,” Fox, MTV, and the one show on Nickelodeon that my mom despised, *The Ren and Stimpy Show*.

“Tommy, are you going to sing it with me?” Amy asked every Saturday.

“Yes!”

And so began our ritual with much dancing, “Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy, Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy...”

The Ren and Stimpy Show made me laugh because of the farts. Amy laughed because of the jokes I didn't understand. What mattered is that we were laughing together.

Amy showed me movies like *It*, *Arachnophobia*, and *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* during my formative years (basically from the time I was five until about seven years old). We also watched *The Simpsons*, *Married with Children*, and *Beavis and Butthead* when my mom wasn't paying attention. Amy didn't treat me like I was a stupid little kid, someone to be shoved aside and yelled at. She encouraged me to try new things and not to be afraid of anything (including my mother's wrath over television choices and what was appropriate), which I don't think she realized.

People always tell me when a person has a lot of siblings, they should not pick favorites. Those people are full of shit. I am Amy's favorite, and she is mine. Sorry to my other sisters — I love them too, but we have a bond that is almost like the one that twins are said to have. I love my sister, and if she ever needed anything, I would drop what I was doing to help her. We have always had this kind of relationship.

When I was about eleven years old, I had extreme insomnia, so most nights, I was awake when just about everyone in my house had gone to sleep. Most of the time, I just played video games or read in my room until I was so exhausted that I finally conked out. One night, the only other person in my family that was awake was my sister, Amy. She was downstairs with her friend, Aaron. According to my parents and pretty much everyone in my family, Aaron was "different." He was one of my sister's theater friends. I had no idea what in the world they meant by different, so I just rolled with it. I really

didn't care who was down there, I was thirsty. I made it down the stairs and heard hurried hushed whispers from the kitchen.

I stopped in the living room, sat down on the couch, and eavesdropped, a skill that came in handy when living in a house with four sisters. I loved my sister, but I figured that a younger brother could always use a little bit of dirt if he ever needed to get himself out of trouble. I was intensely focused on what I was hearing in the kitchen.

"I have something to tell you," Amy began, "I'm Bi."

"Oh, girl, that's so great!" Aaron said.

I heard shuffling in the kitchen. It's what I can only assume was a shuffling of feet and an excited hug.

There was much celebration occurring in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, on the couch, there was much contemplation. "*Bi — What does 'bi' mean? Bi sounds bad despite the fact that she seemed happy.*" I thought.

This was way before I had my own computer or Google, so when I hurried back to my room without drinking any water, all I could do was keep pondering what the word meant until I fell into a very restless sleep.

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"Fag!" The brown haired boy that was busy shoving me called out as I tumbled to the ground.

I dusted myself off and replied with the only thing that made sense at the time, "I'm not a fag, you're a fag, fag."

We all knew it was bad, but no one in fourth grade knew exactly what the word meant. Yet we continued using the word because we knew it was the ultimate way to emasculate each other.

This argument occurred over a game of two-hand tag football. It was the only way that we were permitted to play football at the parochial school that I attended. Two hand tag football usually ended up being tackle football even though we played on the pavement. How else could the aggressions of little boys be let loose after being bottled up for hours on end in boring classes?

There were other things we called each other while we were on our blacktop gridiron. We called each other things like “shit head” and “asshole,” which we also knew to be terrible. Any time one of us was caught saying this by an adult, we got in trouble, which meant, of course, to keep using them toward peers. However, on the long list of things you can say to a fellow fourth grade boy, “fag” still ranked as one of the most detrimental to manhood. Therefore, when really wishing to make someone look like the aforementioned asshole you replaced that word with “fag.”

This word only had a place at school or during times in which we didn’t think our parents were listening. None of us wanted to get trouble for using it, but we wanted to be like the cool kids that did, and all of the cool kids used it. We knew it had something to do with the term gay, but truthfully most of us didn’t have a firm grasp of what exactly it fully meant to be gay, anyhow. It was another thing we understood as bad and something we shouldn’t aspire to be. The majority of us had a loose understanding that it meant being in love with another boy, which we all saw as weird and gross.

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I walked into the kitchen and found my sister on the phone with her friend, Heather. Sometime over the night she talked with Aaron in the kitchen and on the day she called Heather, I found out what bisexual means. I didn't fully comprehend it. My sister had a string of boyfriends throughout her life. She had them in New Jersey and two in Ohio during high school. Why would she also want to date girls?

"Heather, can I talk to you later? I have something really big to tell you, but there's someone in the room that isn't supposed to know."

I was that someone, but how was I "not supposed to know?" A little bit too late for that to work. I had known for less than twenty-four hours, but had not really understood what it was that I knew. I couldn't contain it any longer.

"I know already. You're bi!" I blurted.

Amy looked at me in horror.

"Shit. Heather, did you hear that?" Amy asked, panicked. "I'll call you back."

I was already up the stairs and had the door slammed shut when she was coming up.

"Tommy, can I come in," she asked.

"No," I managed to choke through my tears. I didn't want to know this, but apparently, it was true.

She opened my door anyhow. Its faulty lock betrayed me.

She stood and stared at me as I sat on my bed hugging a pillow and crying. I felt as if I said something that was absolutely terrible and let out a secret that I was not

supposed to be part of. I felt like in some way, shape, or form, I had broken trust with one of my best friends. It was terrible.

“It’s true. I’m bisexual,” Amy said.

I didn’t have a response, so she continued.

“That’s not a bad thing. You know that, right?”

“It’s not?” I asked.

“No. I am glad I know. I am glad you know, too.”

I don’t remember much else about the conversation, but I remember how very happy she looked when she told me. She looked almost like she won the lottery or something. She was letting someone that she knew wouldn’t judge her for what she wanted to do know, and it made her happy. I do remember that we still didn’t exactly talk about what bisexuality was, how she found out, or what I was supposed to do, say, or think. So, I shut up. I bottled any feelings and a million questions that I had inside.

Back at school, the arguments on the pavement that served as our battlefield continued. These arguments continued to contain the word “fag” spouted again and again by various members. Any time I heard or witnessed these arguments, I was extremely uncomfortable and I wanted to get away, but where was I supposed to go? I knew if I went on the playground and played with the girls, I would be called out by the hecklers. Just like being shoved and called names was something I didn’t want to happen, I didn’t want to be seen as a girly guy. I continued to play two-hand tackle football.

Then it happened. I was thrown to the ground by a bigger kid after I blocked for another kid. The argument began.

I broke the monotony, “You asshole!”

His response, “Fag.”

To which I replied as follows, “I’m not a fag. You’re a fag. Fag.”

I regretted it as soon as the words were out of my mouth. She wasn’t there to hear me say them, but I had inadvertently disrespected one of my best friends in order to save my own ass.

The media blew things out of proportion. When I was thirteen years old, “Ellen” was cancelled. Everyone in my class finally fully knew what they were saying when they called someone gay. Still, it didn’t end. Now, being gay was a damnable offense by the media and by the seventh graders in my class. As the grade school years went by and the 1990s progressed, the kids on the playground added new terms. They would say things like “rump-wrangler” and “fudge packer.” They called each other “homos.” We were miniature playground homophobes and I was a pretender just trying to survive another day on the paved gridiron.

I was the playground equivalent of Judas.

I met Mike when I was nine years old. He dated my sister Katie until I was fourteen. That year, he married her. I was just happy to have some testosterone in a house full of women. Another guy who eventually ended up being my brother in law. A brother! Not the little brother I wanted to train in the fine art of Nerf and how to properly terrorize the women in the Pugh household, but a brother all the same. I was blindsided.

Mike played video games with me, took me to football games, and made me feel included in all of the possible ways that he could. He laughed at me over crushes and teased me over childhood stuff — the things older brothers tend to do to younger brothers

(to the best of my knowledge). It was nice having an older brother because I felt there was finally someone at home — aside from my dad, who I saw as ancient, that I could kind of relate to. What I didn't take note of, is how much he chastised Amy.

Amy was dating a guy when Mike and Katie first started dating. Her boyfriend at the time was a typical high school boyfriend. It was a regular high school relationship of the “end it during senior year in a heartbreaking fashion” variety. Mike thought women dating men was the normal thing. He didn't know anything about Amy and her bisexuality (which at that point, I didn't either). While she was dating her high school boyfriend, no one knew she was bisexual. It wasn't until a year after they broke up that I found out. I kept it a secret, albeit one she never asked me to keep.

Mike always used the word “gay” or “fag” to describe stupid things or people that he didn't like. I didn't know why. I always heard it on the playground, so I thought it was just something that he grew up with. I didn't question it, even when I found out that Amy was bisexual. I let it go because I didn't want to lose my brother-in-law, who I respected and who I thought respected me.

In 1996, a year after I found out that she was bisexual, Amy left Youngstown and Youngstown State University's Dana School of Music, to move to New York City to attend AMDA, The American Musical and Dramatic Academy. I missed her, but despite my missing her, I knew she had to get away from this place. Youngstown was not conducive to the arts or people that are very artistic in the 1990s. Youngstown was not a place where people that are different are accepted. My sister was different and she was very talented. She needed to be where her talents and individuality could be appreciated.

When Amy came back to Youngstown to visit for Thanksgiving, her long hair was completely gone. Everyone was shocked and at first no one recognized her when we waited for her at the airport terminal (back then, you could do that). She bleached her hair completely white/blonde, and she was rocking a boy cut. And that's not all about Amy that changed, she seemed to have more confidence. It was different and she was different (in more than a few ways), but I was happy for her.

Apparently, and very stereotypically, Amy's hair is what gave away her secret to everyone. Not only was Amy bisexual, but she declared herself gay when asked. When Mike found out Amy wasn't straight, he became malicious. He let anyone that would listen know that in his religion, he was taught it was wrong. I listened without saying anything because I was afraid of what might happen if I did. He was bigger than me. He never hit me, but if I spoke out in her defense, would he? He stopped talking to Amy unless he needed something dire, like the potatoes to be passed during dinner. Even after they were passed, she didn't get a thank you. She just got a nod.

This behavior continued even after Katie and Mike's wedding, which Amy sang at, as requested by Katie. Mike didn't respect her at all. However, Amy kept on living. She looked hurt by this and was definitely hurt (a solid guess) by the fact that Katie married a man that (openly?) hated her not because she was rude or had wronged him in anyway, but because of her sexuality. Something that was a part of her that she couldn't change, and that she didn't want to change. Because as she told me years before, a person's sexuality is not a bad thing.

Right after the birth of my first nephew, he asked my mother to breakfast. She found this odd, because Mike never particularly got along with her. Nevertheless, she

thought maybe with the birth of his child, her first grandchild, things would be changing for the better. They met at a restaurant and according to her, he peppered my mother with questions about why Amy chose to be gay. He asked how my family could accept a gay sister and most importantly, how she could accept a gay daughter. He asked what my mother did wrong to “make Amy gay” and many other inappropriate and highly offensive questions. Each time, he cited that in his religion, gays are “not accepted by God” and they wouldn’t be accepted into Heaven and tried citing passages from the Bible, which don’t really say anything about God hating homosexuals at all.

I didn’t hear this story until six years after it happened, but had I heard it, I would have lost all respect for him instantly. How dare this man (calling him one is a nicety) treat my sister, his sister, like that? Has he no shame? Religion or not, that is his wife’s blood. Was Katie getting this same kind of treatment at home, where she couldn’t avoid those kinds of questions by up and walking away?

When his father died, he started sharing duties as part-time pastor of his church, a position that his father held before him — a “position” that at the very least anyone can attain with a license bought for only thirty dollars through various websites. By that point in time, he was married to my sister, Katie, and they had two kids. He treated Amy like crap any time that he saw her. I remember going to my sister’s house in preparation for a shopping trip before Christmas.

Katie was upstairs and I heard, “So what am I supposed to say?”

“Tell them I’m not coming.”

But Mike opted out most of the time. He opted out for many reasons. He opted out because he hated that we were Catholic, he opted out because he was “tired,” and

most often, when she was in town, he opted out because he didn't like Amy. We never discussed why, but the reason was definitely clear.

As we walked to the car, Amy had a grin on her face.

"Katie, can I borrow the keys? I forgot something in the house."

"Sure," Katie replied.

Amy grabbed the keys and hurried back to the door. She unlocked it and yelled upstairs "Bye, Mike! I'll be back later."

That moment only added fuel to his fire, but it didn't matter at that point. Katie tried to look upset, but it was impossible to. Amy made the most of an awkward situation. As usual, she made us laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

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I thought that in high school, homophobia would die down a little. From 2000 to 2004, it only seemed to intensify. We heard about kids dying because they were gay on Channel 1, a ten minute news segment with teenage anchors that we were forced to watch every single day before our first class began. These kids were murdered or sometimes they committed suicide because no one understood them. Some of them had the bravery to "come out" when they were in high school, not fully realizing kids can be extraordinarily unkind. They were ostracized for their deeds and actions.

Sometimes, the minute the word "gay" was said, some teachers turned off the televisions and began their lessons early. At parochial schools, we weren't allowed to hear about things that "only those outside of the Church would do," on TVs paid for by a government grant. The conversations with new kids (I went from a class of thirty students to a class of over one-hundred students) remained much the same. The only difference

was that conversations about stoners, whose sole purpose seemed to be getting high and skipping class, were thrown into the mix. For some reason, the stoners were thought upon a lot more highly than any gay people. More and more people were identifying as gay in the media, and more and more people were being ostracized for it. All the while, The Catholic Church came into numerous scandals involving not just relationships between priests and children, but gay priests, a behavior in its congregation the Church had denounced for centuries.

I was driving around Youngstown with one of my friends, when my sister came into the conversation.

“So, your sister’s kind of hot,” my friend said.

I wasn't up for this conversation. “My sister is much older than you, has a job, and lives far away. Shut up, dude.”

“Still though. How’s she like it in New York?” He asked.

“She thinks it’s fantastic. You can’t really beat that city if you want a job or even something to do. Youngstown sucks,” came my reply.

“Didn’t you say she lives with someone? Is it a boyfriend?”

I remember being silent while going through the options in my head. Tell him and possibly be made fun of or shut my mouth and live my life only being made fun of for being a chubby nerd and band kid, not also having a gay sister.

“No. It’s not an anything. She lives with her friend. They live together because rent costs a lot of money in the city. It’s hard for any one person to live in an apartment alone.”

“So you’re saying she lives with a woman?” He asked.

I tensed up. I hated this conversation. “Yeah. She lives with her best friend. They share rent. It makes buying food and stuff a lot easier.”

“Is she gay?” He asked with his eyebrow raised.

I swallowed. “Nope.”

He accepted my answer, but I was pretty sure he knew what I kept as a secret. What everyone kept as a secret. I had a highly successful sister that was living in New York City with a highly successful woman. Was I proud of her? Yes. She was one of my best friends. Was I a scared teenager that didn’t want to be ostracized any more than I already was for being a geeky band kid? Yes.

At the same time, I became very aware of the way that my sister was treated when she visited from her home. She was ostracized by my family.

New York City is very different than Youngstown, Ohio. During Amy’s visit, she came to Christmas Mass with my family. While there, I noticed that she wasn’t looked at in the same way that the rest of my family was. Despite knowing it wasn’t right at all, I realized exactly why it was. Outsiders are often looked at strangely when they enter a new church, but Amy wasn’t an outsider despite the fact that she was a part of my family. This was years after Amy cut her hair. It had grown back out. She didn’t wear a shirt that said “I’m Gay” on it. She was just a regular person attending a regular church on an ordinary Christmas day.

My mother worked for Catholic churches from when I was very young until I was eighteen. We ALWAYS had to be on our best behavior at church. Despite the fact that my sister was an adult, she wasn’t considered as being “on her best behavior”—despite the fact that she sat quietly with the rest of us—because of her sexual preference. My

mother introduced my sister to her friends in the church very quickly and answered questions that were addressed to her in an awkward manner.

“Hi, I’m _____. You must be another member of the family,” asked by random person A.

Amy attempted an answer, “Yes, I’m —“

“This is my daughter, Amy. We love having her home. She is visiting for Christmas. She lives with her roommate.”

“What do you do for a living, Amy?”

“Amy is a very successful woman living in New York. Isn’t that fantastic? She graduated from multiple colleges including a baby ivy league. Great, right?”

All of these were answered very quickly and left no stones unturned. My mother was ashamed for some reason. I wondered why she was ashamed of my sister, at that point in my life. I wouldn’t put two and two together until years later.

During this strange “conversation” that Amy was part of (kind of), she appeared very uncomfortable.

The person my mother was talking to didn’t seem at all phased. I suppose this is because at that church, it was a regular event to brag about children and which ivy league schools they would be attending or had recently graduated from. However, my mother wasn’t bragging. My mother was saving face. Having a gay child and trying to work in a Catholic Church is the one thing that is worse than getting divorced while working for the Church. Normal work places probably would try to make a person going through a divorce feel welcome. The Catholic Church just hands them walking papers.

During my senior year, I finally realized how absurd it all was.

I was moving slowly, dragging ass because I would rather stay home and play video games than head to church and hear a boring Christmas homily, the same homily that the priest always gave, when I realized that Amy wasn't only dragging ass, she wasn't even moving to get ready.

"Amy, why aren't you getting ready?"

"Because I'm not going to church," Amy said nonchalantly.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I don't feel welcome there," Amy stated.

I was confused. This was new. "Does Mom know?"

"She doesn't care."

It was as simple as that, but it completely broke my heart. I wanted her to be there. Prior to that point in my life, I saw church as a family function. We went as a family. Amy is my sister, she is part of my family, so she should go with us.

Was she wrong in not wanting to go? No.

Was it right that it came down to this on Christmas? Definitely not.

Did I wish she was there? Yes. It wasn't the same without her. There was a void and it couldn't be filled. Did my mom respond in the same fast way when asked about her whereabouts and what she was up to? Pretty much. She ended it in the same way, by noting Amy's accomplishments. Though she stopped mentioning Amy's roommate. Maybe my mom got the same questions I did. What hurt, was that my mother didn't put up a fight to get Amy to go to church. Had I not wanted to go, all hell would have been let loose. It should have been that way for any child, no matter how old they were.

My sister's "roommate" Carolyn, is a woman she has been in a relationship with for the past eighteen years. They have one of the healthiest relationships of any couple I have ever met and they complement each other very well. I consider Carolyn a member of the family — a sister-in-law and an amazing one at that. After I heard my mother use the word in church as a description of Carolyn, I stopped saying "roommate." Whereas it was true, my sister has been in a relationship with the same woman for longer than Katie has been married. I don't call him her roommate. It seemed to be a double-standard. I also didn't not acknowledge her. She was and is my sister's partner.

When I visit New York City, I am greeted by Amy and Carolyn, my sister-in-law. Amy always makes sure to show me all of the newest things going on in New York City. We go to indie theaters, Central Park, Broadway, F.A.O. Schwartz (which even as an adult, is still cool), and Upright Citizens Brigade. The fun never ends.

The last time I visited, showing my fiancé Kate New York City for the first time, Amy took us to her new office.

Amy pointed at a wall in her spacious office, "And that's where I want the moose head to go. Carolyn doesn't think that this kind of office needs a moose head, but I think it adds flavor."

I nodded. "Totally. An office isn't an office without a moose head. If you want to go all out, you should really add a deer and a duck as well."

Kate just shook her head at us, obviously agreeing with Carolyn.

Amy moved from behind her desk and out her door, leading us to a drawer in the corridor near her office. She opened it revealing t-shirts, albums, fliers, and all kinds of swag from famous people.

“You guys can take home anything that you want. This is our swag drawer. Everything in here is up for grabs.”

Kate and I didn't raid the drawer out of propriety, but she meant what she could. Amy has worked her way up in the corporate world into a company that can afford a swag drawer with thousands of dollars worth of merchandise in it that they give away...free. She offered the swag with a big smile on her face, just glad that she has family visiting and that the family visiting is truly proud of her.

Amy loves her real home, New York City and the life that she has made for herself there. I love that she found it.

I sat with my eleven year old nephew on a couch during the summer. He was yammering a mile a minute about his week. He just completed a week of vacation Bible school and was looking forward to what the rest of his summer held.

He looked at me all smiles and said, “Ya' know, Uncle Tom, I liked Bible school.”

“I know. You've been letting me know for the past thirty minutes. I'm glad you had fun.”

“Bible school was a little bit hard for me though.”

He shocked me. This kid was a preacher's son. Bible school should have been second nature to him. I went to Catholic schools my entire life and if you handed me a Bible, I probably would struggle to find where different books were. This kid has been memorizing page numbers and verses since he was six.

“Why in the world was Bible school hard for you, Ryan? I thought you liked it.”

He began, "Well, the counselors had a game for us that was hard. All week, they challenged us to be nice to each other."

My nephew is one of the most sarcastic and outspoken individuals that I know and he's only eleven.

I laughed, and when I finally finished replied, "I would have paid to watch you struggle with not saying anything mean to anyone all week."

"Not funny, Uncle Tom."

"I know. Sorry. Why was being nice hard?" I asked.

He looked at the ground and replied, "They didn't let us call each other names."

I was shocked. "...and that's why it was difficult? You couldn't call people names at Bible school?"

"Well, yeah. Usually we call each other gay, but any time that we wanted to say something mean or bring someone down, we had to be polite."

"I see." I said.

"You look weird," he said.

I tried not to get angry, "What does gay mean?"

My nephew squirmed, "It's just what we say instead of stupid."

"So your friends aren't really gay?"

"No, they're little kids. Little kids can't be gay." He was shocked.

"In this house, we never say the word gay to bring someone down. That 'we' includes you anytime that you step foot through those doors. Got it?" I asked. I tried to be stern, but I doubt it worked.

"Got it."

I told myself a bunch of lies that I hoped would end up being true. I told myself my nephew didn't know any better. I told myself it was just something random and stupid he heard on TV or something. I told myself it was just some fad he would get out of and that the word "gay" wouldn't really be associated with hatred despite the fact he was being raised by a relatively homophobic father. Finally, I told myself what I kept on telling myself was a crock of shit. I let myself know this type of thing wasn't just a fad or a phase. I let myself remember the playground and what I thought when I was his age.

My Experience as William Tell

My mother and I struck a deal when we got to the department store. If I was good, I would get to look around in the toy section for five minutes. The whole idea of being good on this day was no small challenge, I was trying on clothes for school. These weren't any ordinary clothes, they were dress clothes for a parochial school. This meant I would be trying on blue and black khakis and long sleeve white shirts for at least thirty minutes. And shoes — what if she threw in shoes?! That was another kind of beast. Five minutes for what could have been an entire hour of torture. This seemed like a small amount of time, but I wasn't dumb enough to argue.

Trying on the school clothing seemed to take forever (I was right, shoes were involved). However, I was on a mission, so I grinned through the whole thing, remarking a few times about how I was really looking forward to starting at a new school. Saying I was sure the kids would be the same and I would find good friends in no time. All the while one thought permeated my brain — Nerf Bow and Arrow...Nerf Bow and Arrow...Nerf Bow and Arrow.

There were aisles and aisles of toys. Every aisle looked the same, but they didn't have the same things. There was the action figure aisle. In this aisle, Ninja Turtles, Batman, and Ren and Stimpy action figures could be found. Psh. Those figures were so three weeks ago. What I wanted was in the next aisle, so I made sure we sped through that section. I couldn't stand in front of an action figure for too long and give her the wrong idea.

I made sure that we stopped in the Nerf section. I had one mission. It was a dangerous one and there couldn't be more on the line. I had to show my mother exactly

what it was that I wanted. There were Nerf Missile Launchers, Slingshots, Footballs, and these weird new footballs called Screammers. Then, there was the beautiful Nerf Bow and Arrow set. It was in its glory right in front of us. The box was rectangular. It had a kid that was older than me on the cover and he was wearing a headband with a feather attached. “NERF” was in big bold yellow letters on the left side of the box. On the right side... “Bow ’n’ Arrow.” Underneath that, what could be my death sentence. The box said “For Ages 8 and Up.”

“Mom, I want a Nerf Bow and Arrow for my birthday. Can I please get one?” I begged this question as if I was begging a person to spare my life.

I kept trying to seal the deal. “All of the cool heroes have one. Green Arrow protects his city, Hawkeye protects his city — Rambo protects whatever it is that Rambo is protecting.”

“You watched Rambo movies?!” Mom was clearly missing the point.

“No, I didn’t. In pictures he has a bow and arrow and he makes things blow up with them. He also has guns. Can I have a Bow and Arrow *and* a Nerf gun for my birthday? Any Nerf gun will do.”

I already had a Nerf missile launcher my grandma got me for Christmas. What I should have asked for was a bandolier or utility belt of some sort to carry all of this stuff. Do they make those for kids under the age of ten?

She let out a long sigh. I should have known to shut up.

“Mom — all of the co—,” I couldn’t even get the words out before I got the Mom glare.

Two eyes bore through my own eyes and into my soul. I knew that if I didn't shut my mouth my heart would surely explode.

I shut up.

"Did your father or your sisters show you *Rambo*?" She asked.

"No" - It was the truth. They hadn't shown me *Rambo* movies. Instead, we watched *Wayne's World*, *Married with Children*, and *Terminator 2*.

The conversation ended there and the trip from Jamesway to home seemed to last forever. We drove in silence and I had no idea why. I guess I wore out the idea of training to be an eight year old mercenary.

Hopefully she got the message. I needed this Nerf Bow and Arrow. I needed protection. The bullies weren't at school, they were at home — my sisters. I had three older sisters and would have three Nerf arrows. It would be just enough to get the job (or any job) done. My number one target, Kristen, was surely going to be the first one to get shot. That'll teach her to call me stupid.

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It was the day I was waiting for, my eighth birthday. I woke up really early, because I wanted to open my presents before school started. I bolted down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Mom. What did you get me for my birthday? Can I open it before school?" I asked with a huge grin.

She handed me a rectangular package that was probably wrapped in wrapping paper featuring characters I was obsessed with that month. I really didn't care. I had to get to what was underneath.

Could it be? The wrapping paper was torn off and it was! I had my very own Nerf Bow and Arrow. I started opening it.

“No. You can open it after you get home from school,” she said this and then handed me my cereal, which probably featured marshmallow versions of characters that I was obsessed with that month.

I tried to push it. “Can I stay home?”

“No. You can’t stay home and play with the Nerf gun, now go get ready. You’re going to be late if you don’t hurry up.”

“Can I take it to sch—“ My idea was immediately spoiled by her logic.

“No. The nuns will take it away from you.”

The nuns weren’t my target, but she was right. They would take it away from me, call her to tell her what an unholy terror I was and she was an awful parent for giving her son something like that, and possibly do something worse, they might break it. Those nuns weren’t to be messed with. I was so close. To have this taken away from me would be awful. My time was coming. I just had to get through an eight hour day to create my master plan.

Four arrows, four sisters, happy birthday to me.

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The day at school seemed to drag on forever. I didn’t really care about wearing a birthday boy button or having candy and cupcakes in class. Seriously, who came up with the idea of candy and cupcakes in class on your birthday? It’s your birthday, why should you have to go to school with candy and cupcakes for the other kids? Isn’t that backwards? The “get out of homework free” pass was pretty great. No one wants to do a

lot of homework on their birthday. They really hammered us with it in first grade. But this night was a night that I needed time with. Tireless planning had to be turned into training and action as soon as I got home, but the bell wouldn't ring. 1:30...1:31...1:35. Ugh.

Finally, the day ended and we all went home on school buses. My house was just five minutes away. I ran from the back of the bus once it stopped, into the kitchen to retrieve my prize. Mom put it on top of the refrigerator for one reason or another. Oh well, climbing on counters and kitchen chairs wasn't that difficult for me. 2:40, voila, weapon gathered and in hands. Time to get to work.

The first target had a foam arrow firmly aimed her way would be my sister Kristen. She was thirteen years old and had chosen me as her personal whipping boy. She did it in front of her friends and in front of my best friend, Jonathan. Kristen was a bossy older sister and always looked for some way to get me into trouble even if it meant blatantly lying and saying that I hit her, which I didn't do, because "Boys don't hit girls" was firmly planted in my head at a young age.

What wasn't planted in my head by my family was that boys don't hit girls with foam Nerf arrows. I found a loophole in the system after seeing repeated advertisements for the Bow 'n' Arrow on TV. In the commercials, the arrows were advertised as being able to "fire accurately for over twenty-five feet." I didn't know how accurate that claim was, but I figured it was worth a shot.

Kristen had cheerleading practice every day, which left me about an hour and twenty minutes to practice aiming while she was gone. I started small. I searched all over the house for the best action figures and stuffed animals to shoot the arrows of

destruction at. Ted (my tagalong teddy bear), the *Ninja Turtles* villains, The Penguin from *Batman*, and some *Crash Test Dummies* (toys, not the band) action figures.

I lined them up on a bench and stood at the apex of the stairs. I pulled the handle back and let the first arrow fly. I misjudged the size of the arrows when I lined up the figures and I wiped three out. However, it worked! It really, really worked. This thing worked like a charm and then some. If I could wipe out evil villains, my stuffed bear, and some Crash Test Dummies with it, I could surely take down my evil older sisters with the arrows.

I practiced for a while. What really brought me joy was shooting the Crash Test Dummies. They not only were knocked to the ground, but exploded into a bunch of rebuildable pieces upon impact. I laughed harder every time that I did it, but eventually smashing the Crash Test Dummies got old.

Okay, time for a new challenge.

If Kristen was going to be coming home at around 4:00, I would be at the top of the stairs waiting. I cut the target from the back of the box. After judging about how tall Kristen was and how she walked through the doorway when she got home, I put my target up with duct tape. I practiced at a relentless pace. No one could say that I wasn't determined.

Pull back, let go, thunk. Pull back, let go, thunk. Pull back, let go, thunk.

I went on like this day after day so that everything was perfect.

One day, I took position at the top of the stairs, loaded, and had my eyes dead-set on the imaginary target, which was about to become a very real one.

The door knob started turning and she came through the door.

Pull back, let go...

“You son of a bitch!”

Oh, crap.

I ran as fast as I could, but I was newly eight years-old. She was faster than me and I barely made it up to my room before she caught up to me. I slammed my door and locked it.

Her fists pounded against the door. I sat with my back against it pondering exactly where it was that I went wrong. Was it the fact I shot the wrong sister in the head first? Did I perhaps hit her on the wrong day? Maybe she got kicked off the cheerleading squad or something.

You should be nicer to your sisters, they're the only ones you've got rang in my head in my mother's voice.

I never heard my mother say, “Be nicer to your younger brother, he's the only *one* you've got.”

Maybe this double standard and my extreme lack of judgment on what should have been a joyous day led to the pounding that was still going on behind me. Maybe it was an extreme lack of foresight that led me to this moment. As I pondered these things, I finally had the chance to do something I hadn't done yet. Complement myself on such a good shot. Surely the next one would go better, there would be a lot more planning. A guy can't just run into something “willy-nilly” as Grandma says. How could I have made that mistake?

Pound. Pound. Pound.

“Tommy, open the door. I just want to talk,” Kristen said sweetly.

For some reason, I fell for this. I opened the door and she lunged at me. I was shoved to the floor and my new treasure, the Nerf Bow 'n' Arrow set and its darts were stolen from my arms. I watched in horror as she bolted with them to her room on the third floor of the house. The door slammed and locked behind her.

“Kristen, Kristen, open up. I’m sorry. Please don’t break it. It’s my birthday present. Don’t do it!” My begging didn’t get a verbal reaction. I did get hear a noise that confirmed my worst fears. The window that was usually less than cooperative was being opened. Oh, my God...She was going to launch it from her bedroom window! I ran down the stairs as fast as I could. If she threw it, and I made it to the driveway fast enough, I would be able to catch it. Birthday and Bow 'n' Arrow could still be saved.

I made it out the door and to the front porch when I heard the shatter of the plastic against the driveway. My long walk to the driveway confirmed it — I was not fast enough. Why did this have to happen? I had such grand schemes prepared and only the first step of my initiative was launched. The blue, yellow, and pinkish colored plastic was spread over a five foot radius. The once strong foam arrows were bent at odd angles and torn in parts. Oh, cruel world. I had and lost the birthday present to end all birthday presents in a matter of days.

I collected the pieces of blue bow and yellow foam arrows and brought them inside only to see Kristen smiling at me from the living room.

Kristen mocked me. “That’s what you get.”

“You’re buying me a new one,” I stated.

“No, I’m not. I don’t care what Mom and Dad say. You got what was coming to you. You can’t just shoot us in the head with your new toys and expect nothing to happen.”

We had a captive audience. All of my sisters were in the living room and nodding with what she was saying. They all agreed, probably because they knew what I had hatched for them as well. I have no idea why the youngest was nodding — peer pressure, I suppose. Ah, to be so affected at such a young age.

I pouted in my room until my mother got home, at which point both I and Kristen ambushed her so that she understood our sides of the story. Kristen got to her first, filling her head with malicious lies.

“He shot me in the head” (truthful, I guess). “He isn’t allowed to just shoot us all with Nerf guns and get away with it” (as we established, that isn’t the same as hitting girls). “He is probably planning on shooting all of us with that thing” (who let her in on the plan?)

It was my turn. “Mom, she threw it out of her bedroom window. It’s still all over the driveway. You can see it! Yes, I shot her. I was aiming for the door and she happened to walk through. Technically it wasn’t my fault.”

Mom wasn’t having any of it. “Tommy, go to your room. We will talk about this later.”

We talked about it later. It was decided that night that I was not allowed to have anymore Nerf weapons or weapons of any sort until I was old enough to realize that I shouldn’t be using them on my sister.

“Mom, it’s a foam dart. It can’t hurt anyone. The kids on the commercials and shows shoot each other with these all the time,” I protested.

“Tommy, they want to be shot. They are playing and having fun. Kristen did not want to be shot. She was not in on any of your fun,” my mom replied.

"But—" I tried to state my case more passionately.

"No," she stated firmly.

The Nerf dreams of an eight year old were over before they even really got to begin. It would be twenty years before I obtained another Nerf gun, which would be followed by the purchase of two more — strictly for academic purposes. There is probably still a dart that could be earmarked for Kristen, but I may have learned my lesson. As of late, I have been thinking that teaching her daughter, my recently born goddaughter, the joys of Nerf. I really don't think infancy is a terrible time to start thinking about training a child to take your path in messing with her mom. Maybe Hayden will agree with me about the earmarked darts. Time will tell.

Fun Family Photos

There are numerous photos of me crying. In all of the pictures, the rest of the family is laughing. Every time I try to explain why I was crying in the photos, my family members shake their heads saying, "that never happened" or "it's all in your head." Well, that was the problem. It involved my head. It involved my sister Kristen smacking me upside it. I guess that were partially correct.

Family photo number one:

We had a photo taken right in front of one of the Paramount King's Island signs I am wearing a very vivid bright purple shirt with "R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps: Monster Blood*" scrawled across the front. My hair was out of place, as it always was when I was ten years old, my face was beet red, tears were streaming down face. All around me were smiling Pughs. People dressed up as Scooby Doo and Fred Flinstone were also present in full costume. Why was I crying? Kristen smacked me upside the back of the head.

I loved every other minute of King's Island, but the force of that smack was sudden, violent, and loud. No one noticed. A good natured Barney Rubble captured the whole thing for us on glorious Kodak film, but he (or she) didn't want to say a word...I actually don't know if the costumed actors were allowed to. What a conundrum!

The second photo worth mentioning was taken at Sea World in Cleveland when I was eleven or twelve, back when there was a Sea World in Cleveland. My mother, grandmother, and Uncle Mark took my cousins Dan, Mike, Jim, and assorted members of my family: Kristen, Lizzy, and me to see Shamu, Mamu, and all of the other sea creatures that were present at the park. It was pouring down rain, so all of us had to buy blue

ponchos with Shamu on them. If the tears could be discounted, it would be a hilarious family photo.

As usual, the family photo was taken in front an amusement park sign. The sign had sea lions in front of it. The majority of us agreed that the sea lions' show was one of the best parts of the park. Their "splash zone" was actually worthy of being called a splash zone unlike some of the others, and it left all of the kids smelling like stagnant salt water. The adults decided to sit higher up and "let us enjoy the sea lion bath."

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These moments and some others that I've previously written about, could lead a person to think that my sister liked beating up on her little brother. For many years, I thought that. However, there was one outlying night in 2003 when she proved different.

I was sitting alone in my room, messing around on my computer, when Kristen walked in without knocking. I tensed up, not knowing what to expect. We tended to butt heads a lot.

"Tommy, do you want to go to the theater?"

I was shocked. "Why?"

"Because I want to go to the theater and I have no one to go with," Kristen replied.

There were two options here:

1. Think I was being used and say no. I kind of thought that I was.
2. See this as good nature and the opportunity to forever change the somewhat unhinged relationship that I had with my sister.

I wanted a better relationship with my sister. "Well, I have no money to go." I was sick throughout high school. Holding down a steady job was rough.

"I'll pay," she offered.

"Why?" The statement caught me completely off-guard. I wasn't used to people just randomly buying me movie tickets, let alone Kristen buying me movie tickets unless it was my birthday.

She continued surprising me. "If you want dinner, too, we can get dinner."

"Sure. That sounds good." I was on alert, but I wanted to have a better relationship with my sister, so I went.

We had dinner at CiCi's Pizza, which is a pizza buffet place. For \$5.99 all you can eat pizza, it wasn't too bad. The buffet had six different types of pizza, three types of what CiCi's called "pasta," and breadsticks and sauce. It seemed like a great idea despite the conventional wisdom that I would regret pigging out on \$5.99 cheap buffet pizza later on.

"Thanks for the food," I said.

"No problem. What do you want to see?"

I got to choose too? "Where are we going?"

"Movies 8." Movies 8 was what was once a Cinemark theater that charged \$1.50 for second run movies. Because it was so cheap, it was an extremely popular movie theater. Because it was so popular and second-run, the seats were sort of broken on occasion and it didn't have the latest technology or arcade games. That was part of its charm, though.

"I brought the newspaper. Let's check the times." Back then, if a person wanted to go to the theater, they checked the times by doing one of four things:

1. Checking Fandango online at home. Smart phones did not exist and texting was relatively new.
2. Checking the newspaper.
3. Calling the movie theater.
4. Going to the theater and checking the posted listing.

We consulted *The Vindicator*, Youngstown's local newspaper. Based on the movies out at the time, we decided to see *Gothika*.

When we walked into the theater we were overtaken by wafts of movie theater popcorn smell, bright colors brought on by tacky pink and purple neon lighting, black and checkered lobby floor scheme (the same as the floor at every Cinemark theater) and throngs of people in front of the concession stand.

"Want popcorn?" Kristen asked.

"Sure."

I was surprised about as surprised by the popcorn as I was by dinner and the movie. At that moment, I thought something terrible was going to be sprung on me.

Was someone dying?

Did someone die?

Was she not kidding when she told me I was adopted? (Something I actually believed until I was ten)

No. Sometimes movie theater concessions are just movie theater concessions.

We got our popcorn and drinks and went into the auditorium to watch the film.

Gothika is a terrible movie that has Halle Berry (post Oscar), Robert Downey Jr. (Pre-Iron Man), and Penelope Cruz. It currently holds a 14% "Rotten" approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. When it comes to mind, I remember nothing and the words "bad movie" flash in front of me.

On our way out to the parking lot, after the movie she turned to me and said "Sorry the movie sucked."

"Well, don't worry. You didn't write, direct, or act in it. I wish we had some kind of warning it was going to be so bad," I replied.

"Ice cream?" She asked.

It was sudden. Adding ice cream to the mix of buffet pizza, movie theater popcorn, and movie theater drinks was probably a truly awful idea. I didn't want the night to end, so I agreed.

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"You're going to love it here," she said as we walked into Coldstone Creamery, "sometimes the workers sing."

Actually, the idea of a bunch of high school kids singing is my hell. I think she knew as much. I don't really hold back when discussing disdain for most high school musicals, but I rolled with it. "So what do they sing?"

"Usually it's just something they make up."

I was feeling rather puckish. "Do they take requests, Kristen?"

"Don't be *that* customer."

Damn. My plans to be *that* customer were foiled.

Upon entering, I felt horrible for the high school kids working. They were singing some weird version of "It's A Small World," from Disney World. The new lyrics were "You're at Coldstone after all." Oh. God. The singing was bad. It was screechy and I thought that even the nicest of nice people were probably cringing and just wanting to eat their ice cream in peace.

"Really? Do they sing the whole time?" I asked.

"Only if you tip them, Tommy."

"Are you going to tip them?"

"Of course."

When we got to the front of the line, I saw the toppings. There were more than I had seen in any one place before. I was having overload.

Excited, I asked, "So...I can get any toppings in my ice cream?"

"Yeah, pick whatever you want, Tommy."

I picked in no particular order:

Vanilla Ice Cream

Gummy Bears

Snickers

Twix

The high school kid behind the counter looked at me from behind wide-rim glasses and asked "Is that all sir?"

"Yes."

"Your cone?" he asked.

"Waffle," I replied. Psh. As if there's any other kind of worthy cone.

When I was being handed my overloaded waffle cone, the singing began. I looked over and as if in slow motion, I saw Kristen putting a dollar in the tip jar. Oh crap.

"If you're happy that you came here take a bite." The workers stopped and stared at me. I took a bite. I thought it would end.

"Cause you know that Coldstone does it right (clap clap)"

"So we'll raise our voice and holler just to thank her for her dollar." there was a dramatic pause.

Suddenly more stares directed toward me. Kristen was trying to hold in laughter at this point. "So if you're happy that you came here...take a bite."

I took a bite and we sat down.

"Dude," I said, shaking my head.

Kristen burst out laughing. "I know, isn't it hilarious."

She was still smiling, but it wasn't malicious. I couldn't help but smile, too.

That was a fun family moment. There weren't any cameras around to capture that family photo, but I wish there were. Kristen didn't know how much she made my day. We have our disagreements (usually big arguments), but that moment was something big that I could hold. It was an entire night of genuine fun. It would have made for a way better photo (in my opinion) than the ones in which I was crying.

But Mom, She Totally Deserved It

My youngest sister, Elizabeth, followed me everywhere when I was younger. As an eight year old, it drove me up a fucking wall. I just wanted to play H-O-R-S-E with my friends. I didn't want the tagalong with me all the time. Any time that I voiced how I felt, I got yelled at. What a cruel world. It seemed like a daily summer argument.

"Mom, she won't stop bugging me," I told my mother as I trudged into the house on a daily basis to rat out my sister.

"It's because Lizzy loves you. You should be happy that she wants to be around. Some sisters wouldn't want to," was the constant reply.

Elizabeth stood by the whole time, grinning a grin so wide that it only added to my irritation.

"Can't you keep her in the house? It's nice and cold in here. Outside it's too hot for her. She's only six," I pleaded.

My mother was growing irritated. "No. Kids need to play outside during the summer."

"But —" I tried.

My mom gave me a glare that told me to leave the house.

I left. Elizabeth followed.

"Why won't you stop following me?" I asked Elizabeth.

"There's no girls to play with," she said.

"That doesn't mean you get to play with me and *my* friends, Elizabeth. You are so annoying. Leave us alone."

She sniffed.

Oh God.

The tears welled up.

Please no.

She bawled her eyes out and ran inside.

One minute later — “Tommy!”

I was hiding. I didn't know what she told my mom, but it was probably pretty damning and probably pretty spot on. The brush that I chose to hide in offered a lot of cover with its leaves. Surely, I would be able to live here if I needed to. The leaves even sprouted berries. They might have been poisonous berries. I had no idea, but whatever fate those berries led me to would be better than the wrath that I would face if I had to head inside of the house.

Pleasedon'tseeme. Pleasedon'thearme. Please don't.

My allergies were not my friend. Those leaves set me into a sneezing fit that lasted from the time I was discovered behind the shrubbery to the time I was yanked out and drug into the house protesting that I didn't do anything to deserve being yelled at.

“Then why is Lizzy crying?” my mother asked.

“Because she's a girl. Girls cry all the time,” came my reply.

We got into the house where Elizabeth was crying on a couch.

She apologized to me. “I'm sorry, Tommy.”

My mom was frustrated. “Don't apologize to him, Lizzy. He is the one in trouble.”

Yes, in trouble because Elizabeth ratted me out to the man.

“Go take a bath, now. After that, go to your room and think about what you did.”

I was the kind of kid that loved being outside, in the mud, playing with whatever gross thing I could find. I came inside at dusk to take baths, and that was only if we weren't allowed to catch lightning bugs that night with the neighborhood kids. Baths happened at 9:00 or later. Baths were not a 3:00 part of my eight year-old regimen. I grumbled and groaned from the living room to the bathroom.

“If you keep grumbling, your punishment will be worse,” my mom warned.

Worse than an early bath and being kept inside while I could hear the kids outside and the sound of a ball pounding cement? That would be tough to top.

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We ate family dinners every night in the dining room with all of my sisters and my parents present. It was a rule that we were all there for dinner and at dinner, we prayed, passed the food, and then we discussed the events of the day. The conversations generally began with my mother and father discussing their days. My mom asked my dad how his day managing the store was. He asked her how her day at work was. They discussed thoughts/intentions for our family that they felt we needed to hear. We began yammering at them about how everything in our lives was — all at once. With five kids doing that, it became loud quickly. I prayed for loud today, but I didn't get it.

Everyone was silent, because everyone was waiting for it. I was going to be blasted for not being kind to my little sister who “didn't know any better” and was “just an adoring little sister.”

I braced myself.

“Tommy, why aren't you talking?” My father asked.

Surely, my mom filled him in.

"I'm tired. It was a long day," I replied, which was partially true

"Do you have anything you want to tell me?" He asked.

I put my head down and made sure to avoid eye contact. "No. I played H-O-R-S-E today. I lost, because I suck."

My older sisters laughed. I don't know if it was at me, at the general tension of the table, what I said, or what they knew was coming.

My father pried. "Don't use that word. Were you mean to your sister today?"

"He wasn't mean. He just wanted to play with his friends, by himself," Elizabeth interjected.

Why was she sticking up for me?

"He was being deliberately cruel to you, Lizzy. He should have let you play with him," Mom said.

And back to Dad, "Tomorrow, you can go outside. However, you have to include your sister in everything that you do. If you don't, you will be in big trouble."

I got to live another day. Thank God! Wait — let her hang out with me all day?

I was shocked. "I have to let Elizabeth hang out with us all day?"

"Yes, or be in big trouble. It's your choice."

What did "big trouble" mean? Was this a yelling, spanking, or confining to a room for a while big trouble? None of which were very appealing. Getting yelled at was awful. Being spanked just hurt. Being confined to a room wasn't very bad. My parents always seemed to forget that I had my old console TV and a video game system and books upstairs. A grounding meant video games and books. All the same. It was summer. My friends didn't want to be inside playing video games unless the weather was awful. I

elected to let Elizabeth play with us without consulting any of my friends. Their butts weren't in the balance.

I should have taken the big trouble.

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It was a bright and sunny day. The perfect day for a back yard game of wiffleball. Luckily for my friends and I, my grandpa just bought me a softball wiffle ball set. It was complete with the ball (which was near impossible to throw properly), bases and home plate, and a big red softball wife ball bat. With Elizabeth in tow, we set up the bases, and players were placed on teams and given positions. Elizabeth was given a position in our outfield. There was some logic in this.

A- Elizabeth would not be forced to make a big play. If you hit a wiffle ball hard enough for it to go into an outfield, you were an amazing power hitter.

B- She would be away from all of us. We wouldn't have to communicate with her. She would most likely find a patch of daisies and not participate, but that still counted as participation enough to keep me out of trouble.

C- She would be happy to play and it wouldn't matter. What mattered is that she would give me a gold star review for the day.

I.

Was.

Brilliant.

The game went by without a hitch. She was happy because she "got to play." I was happy because she left me alone. My friends playing for the other team were happy that no one could hit a wiffle ball into the outfield with a cheap plastic bat. My mom and

dad would be happy because Elizabeth wouldn't cry and for one day, assuming that my older sisters didn't do anything bad, they wouldn't have stress caused by any of us.

When the game broke, Elizabeth went inside for a bit. My neighbor and I had a genius idea.

“So, my dad bought me a G.I. Joe play tent for the back yard. I haven't put it up yet. What we are going to do is set it up, and make a ‘No Girls Allowed’ sign. Sound good?” He asked this as if he thought I might say no.

“Heck yeah!”

We found the tent, opened the box and began putting it together. It was made of a solid plastic rod frame set. The “tarp” covering was a plastic sheet that the sun beat down on and made the inside feel as if it was a hundred degrees. That didn't matter though, because the outside of the tent had an amazing illustration of the ‘Joes attacking the Cobra's main base. The last thing we needed was a sign and tape for the outside of the tent. When we found those, we moved even faster. “No Girls Allowed” was printed on the sheet, taped outside of the tent flap, and we went inside the tent, our own new base.

It was small, but it held what was important. We had a bag of Lay's potato chips, Hi-C cartons, a few action figures, and the wiffle ball bat.

“Wanna know what'd be hilarious?” I asked.

My friend just stared at me and finally responded with a simple “Huh?”

“If we whacked the next person that came through with this bat. We can make fun of the guys for not paying attention to the sign.”

He pondered this. “Hmmm. Sounds like a good idea. It's a plastic bat. You can barely even hit a ball with it.”

The time passed by and our rations were low. The cheap plastic tent was hot inside and there was barely enough room for both of us. Conversation died down. We waited for something, anything, but the neighborhood was completely quiet.

There was a sudden rustling.

“Dude, did you hear that?” My neighbor asked.

“Yes.”

I reached for the bat. It was somewhere in the midst of all of the stuff we managed to fit in the tent.

I got ready as the rustling got closer. The flap was lifted. Without looking at the face, I swung as much as the cramped space would allow.

Crack.

“Oh, crap!” I yelled.

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Our parents yelled for us as soon as they heard Elizabeth’s high pitched scream. There was blood on the bat. I chucked the evidence and ran faster than Elizabeth inside.

“Mom! Elizabeth tripped and fell.”

“No, she didn’t.”

Elizabeth came in clutching her mouth with one bloody hand and two baby teeth in another.

“Tommy, sit in the chair at the table and don’t move. Elizabeth, come with me.”

My mother guided my sister upstairs.

I heard water running and screaming and “it hurts”ing for what seemed like hours. Each time she yelled “it hurts” added more time to my punishment. Crap. Crap. Crap. Scream.

When it finally stopped and Elizabeth came downstairs with my mom, my mom told me to stand up, give my sister a hug, and apologize. I did as was told, hoping a hug was my only punishment.

“And I’m not done with you. You are lucky that you only knocked out her two front baby teeth. You could have broken her jaw, her nose, or even worse. She is bruising and it looks like we abuse her.”

“Mom, we had a sign up outside of the tent. I was going to swing at anyone that came in. She deserved it for breaking the rules.”

“And you don’t hit girls!” My mom yelled.

“I didn’t think it was going to be a girl!” I replied.

My mom stared at me. “So, your plan was to smack anyone that came into the tent in the face with a baseball bat?”

I thought it was a perfectly natural plan. “Yeah, but it’s just a wiffle ball bat. It’s not my aluminum Louisville Slugger or anything.”

This was not what my mother wanted to hear.

“Tommy, what if you knocked out a neighbor’s teeth?”

I thought for a minute about my answer. “Then I would be sorry.”

I still wasn’t fully grasping that whacking someone in the face with a bat, whereas was warranted, was still a stupid choice of protection.

“You owe me two dollars,” my mother said.

“But I just have five.”

She smirked. “The Tooth Fairy pays a dollar a tooth. The only way that I calmed her down was to say that the Tooth Fairy would be coming tonight. Be glad you didn’t knock out five.”

I protested. Lizzy was getting my money now? “Mom!”

“Don’t start. And don’t ruin the Tooth Fairy for her. Right now, you are going to give me two dollars and head to your room. I don’t know how long you’re going to be up there.”

I did as I was told. I walked across the living room on my way to the staircase and was stopped by my sister, who was sitting on our couch, with a bag of ice on her cheek.

“Hey Tommy, guess what?”

“Ugh. What?”

“Mom said the Tooth Fairy is coming tonight!” She said it with a new front toothless smile.

Despite wanting to tell her all about how the Fairy wasn’t real, I just kept walking. No need to make the impending punishment any worse. What waited for me? Yelling, spanking, grounding, and being stuck in a hot house for weeks.

S.I.C.K.

My youngest sister, Lizzy, has always loved causes. She joined them, she started them, she lived and died by the people involved in the causes that lived or died. The whole family was always amazed at the amount of causes she was involved in. No one had any idea where in the world she found the time to be in them all, but somehow she did. As a high school student, she maintained honor roll, cause chairperson extraordinaire, and annoying sister extraordinaire.

She was a junior in high school when she created a support group/cause called S.I.C.K. at Ursuline High School. S.I.C.K. stood for "Students Involved in Caring for Kids." She started it because she grew up in my family. I was chronically ill, and at the time of the start of S.I.C.K. I was a college freshman that was in and out of the hospital numerous times with seizures. Epilepsy that was thought to be under control with the help of various medications was in full swing. I was miserable.

I was not part of the planning of this program. In fact, every time that Lizzy tried to help, I became very irritable. I am the type of person that would rather be sick in silence, than be surrounded by many people, despite their good or not so good intentions.

One day, she approached me to discuss her cause, which I am pretty sure was started with good intentions. She stood in my bedroom doorway while I worked away at my desk, typing a paper for class.

"So, um, Tommy..." she started.

She only called me Tommy when she wanted something or had to ask me something that she knew would probably upset me.

"Yes?" I asked.

She stepped a foot into my room. I was already annoyed.

"I, um, well, I started a program at school." She said.

"That's great. Good job. I am trying to do my homework, why are you telling me about this program?" I was irritated. She interrupted my work. I tried to have silence while I was working. Something that never seemed to work growing up in a large family.

"See, it involves you," she spat out.

I stopped typing and spun my chair around to face her. "It involves me?"

"Yeah. I told mom and she likes it. It's really helpful to all of the kids that are in it. Even dad thinks it's great."

"Just tell me what it is and how it involves me." I said. I didn't want to be part of anything.

"Well," she looked at the floor, "it's called S.I.C.K."

"Why?"

"It stands for 'Students Involved in Caring for Kids.' It's really helpful to other kids."

"Well, how does it involve m-- wait a second. Are you insinuating that you are my caregiver?"

"Well, no. But your illness has had an effect on me, just like it's had an effect on you."

I was fuming. "Please kindly get the fuck out of my room."

She approached me and I pointed at the doorway. "Please close the door behind you."

When she left, I tried to focus on my writing. I couldn't do it though. My brain wouldn't let me.

How dare she?

Who in the hell does she think she is?

Is she the one that convulses and can't properly hold a pencil?

That night at dinner I didn't speak. My mother thought that it was fine. My father, also chronically ill, probably knew about it and if so, he didn't seem upset. The tension in the air was so thick it could be cut with a knife. My mother obviously knew. Liz told her everything. However, neither Liz nor my mother brought it up.

"How was work, Mom?" she asked my mother.

"It was good," she started, "It was very busy. Church is always hectic during the Christmas season."

"Yeah, school is also. We are working on studying for midterms and finals," Liz added quickly.

I think they expected me to explode, so they kept everything safe. My father and I both kept eating our spaghetti. I ate slowly. I didn't have much of an appetite.

My mom finally spoke to me. "How was school for you, Tom?"

"It was fine. I'm just writing final essays and studying for finals. The typical college student stuff."

I reminded everyone that I was a typical college student whenever I had the opportunity to. I didn't want special treatment or to be recognized as being different in any way. I was ashamed of my epilepsy and I wanted nothing more than to get through college without it being an issue.

"Right," my mother said, "college was like that when I was a student too. That was thirty years ago."

I left the table and put the rest of my half-eaten spaghetti into the trash. I'd had enough. It was time to go back to my writing, my studying, my trying to be normal.

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A week later, I arrived home from Youngstown State University to find five teenagers in my living room. They had taken up every space on the furniture. I noticed notebooks, markers, and a stuffed animal out. I could distinctly see the word feeling.

Jesus. It was a self-help group.

I knew my quiet homework time would already be destroyed.

"Everyone meet Tom. Tom, meet everyone," Liz said as she gestured to the room.

I waved hello, nodded in their direction, and went upstairs.

This was S.I.C.K. I had inadvertently walked in on group planning for the first ever meeting for the cause. Those people wanted to meet me. I didn't share the sentiment. Away I went.

Liz followed me. "Tom, they want to meet you. They want to know why I started the group."

"So tell them why you started it. I have homework. I'm tired. I don't want to meet anyone. I don't have to get to know those people for your group to flourish. Just go do your thing. I am sure it will be fine."

She left with a dejected look on her face. I really didn't care. I wasn't having any of this S.I.C.K. cause crap. I didn't want to be a reason for a cause. I wanted to be quiet, paid no attention to, and normal.

I was mad. I decided to just take a nap. Naps were good. When I woke up, they would be gone. I would be able to go downstairs and avoid anyone if I wanted to. There would be no questions or stares and I wouldn't be poked or prodded like a lab rat by a bunch of high school kids who I had an unhealthy level of disdain for, despite the fact that I didn't know any of them. Yes, a nap.

Instead, I had a Tonic-Clonic seizure.

Tonic-Clonic seizures are what most people think of when they hear the term "seizure." I convulsed, bit my tongue, fell to the ground, and knocked things over. I lost complete control of my own body.

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I woke up to paramedics and S.I.C.K. kids around me. I was used to the paramedics. I was not used to people that I didn't know looking. I felt helpless and afraid. Was I crying? Was I cut? Did I say anything awful? I had a tendency to yell out during my seizures and sometimes I said mean things to people. I was mad, hopefully I didn't tell any of them off.

My parents weren't home, so I went to the hospital. Liz followed us. The only people that I talked to until my mother got to the hospital were the paramedics. Liz and I sat in the hospital room, completely silent.

Again and again, after I was asked the protocol seizure questions: Who is the president? What day is it? What is your name? What city are you in? What is two plus two? How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? (Okay, the last one would only be asked by a puckish paramedic), I was finally asked "Do you remember anything?" Again and again, I lied. I was pissed. I tried not to

remember any of it. It didn't work, but no one else needed to know. It was believable because I didn't usually remember anything prior to my seizures.

The hospital's neurologists wanted me to stay overnight since it was a particularly bad seizure. They wanted to run the gamut of tests: Blood, E.E.G., CAT Scan, X-Rays and all of that at a local hospital could take a day or two, depending on what they found and how I felt. I reluctantly agreed to the stay despite the fact that I just wanted to go home.

I took naps between the tests and the next morning, I woke up to a bag of gummies that I wasn't allowed to eat. It was from my sister and the rest of the S.I.C.K. kids. They were relentless. I didn't want to know them, be an active adult member of their group, a spokesperson, a part of their cause, or anything. But *hot damn*, I wanted that candy.

After I got the okay, I ate it all, three bags of candy from S.I.C.K.. I didn't feel bad until afterward. Technically, was I just using them for sweets? I still didn't want to know any of them, but their sentiment was kind. Maybe I had been a little too harsh with my sister.

My mom came to visit me when she was finished with work. She walked in on me eating peach rings. "You realize that if you eat it all, you'll get sick, right?"

I was not in the mood for her truths. "The hospital food is gross. I'm in pain. I just want something to make it better."

The sugar felt weird on my bitten, bloodied, and healing tongue. The peaches tasted delicious. The bit of pain that came along with each delicious ring was one-hundred percent worth it.

My mom tried to get me to talk. "It was nice of them, wasn't it?"

"Nice of whom?" I asked.

"Elizabeth's friends—to get you the get well gift."

I could only agree. "Uh, yeah."

"Do you think you were maybe a little bit hard on her?" she asked.

"Maybe."

We left it at that. I was hard on her and I knew it. I didn't need some sort of *Brady Bunch* guilt trip.

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When I got out of the hospital, Lizzy and I created some sort of agreement about S.I.C.K. She didn't discuss it with me. It wasn't talked about at the house. She kept it to Ursuline High School. The group flourished under her leadership. They did a lot for sick children in the hospital. One of the members had a little brother with Leukemia.

I remember Lizzy and her friends making blankets for the kids and doing various other things for them. I always felt a bit awkward and guilty for shunning these people and keeping them out of my life. But at the same time, causes aren't for me. That she started it because of growing up in a family with a sick sibling—me—made me feel connected without my permission. It was something that I didn't want.

By not discussing S.I.C.K. or the various S.I.C.K. happenings, I could focus on trying to be a normal college student. The trying to be a normal college student thing barely worked out during my freshman and sophomore years, but things ended up eventually getting better.

Lizzy even used S.I.C.K. on multiple college and scholarship applications. Apparently starting student groups that take care of sick siblings looks really impressive to colleges in which causes are all the rage. Despite not earning her brownie points with me, they earned her quite a few scholarships to multiple colleges.

Growing Up A Pugh

As I've written essays about them, there are many things that I've learned about growing up in a large family — things I didn't fully realize until I put them on a page. There are bad memories, but hopefully the good outweigh those. There will be illness, but hopefully that doesn't last. These things and many others lead to life lessons. Without my family, I wouldn't have these memories. Without my family, I probably wouldn't write (though, if I did write sans family, I joke that it would be vampire teen fiction complete with love triangles). I would be a very boring person with absolutely no stories to tell at parties or in an essay.

I won't venture to say that I have the definitive American story. What I will say, is that my family has *an* American story. There are millions of families just like ours in America. These families may not hit deer on Christmas, thereby killing Santa and ruining Christmas for the masses, but they might still have Christmas or various other holidays. Maybe they only have family photos in which everyone is smiling, but they still have the photos and probably memories that accompany those photos, both happy and sad.

No one family is the same as another, but families aren't beautiful little snowflakes. There are always going to be a gamut of emotions in families. Scared, sad, angry, excited, happy, and tender time will run wild in families.

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The people in these essays are still alive. They're all still bringing these emotions to Pugh family functions during every single holiday or get-together. No one ever knows what to fully expect when we are all boxed into a spot for a long period of time. Life happens.

My father is sixty-three and runs a gamut of emotions. My dad has had a lot of medical issues over the past fifteen years, among them, he has had multiple strokes, but after every one he regains full vocal ability and always remembers when the deer ruined his beloved van. Hearing him tell the story, complete with uses of the f-word, is better than I could ever write. Though, when explaining the situation to my nephews, he just says that he used bad words. He also complains about the CCR tape that cost him \$6.00 — something insurance didn't cover and something that brings my nephews to other questions, such as "Grandpa, who is CCR." That question leads to even more stories.

Dad was, is, and always will be a story-teller and perhaps that's where I first found my love of telling stories about family and my nostalgia for all pop-culture from my childhood. I'm sure that one day, my niece or my nephews will ask which TV shows I am talking about in my essays. When I answer and tell them I can show them videos online or the shows on Netflix, I will get "Uncle Tom, you're so weird. Why did you like this?" That's what my initial reaction was to CCR, The Rolling Stones, and a bunch of old sci-fi movies that my dad showed me until I grew to appreciate them and his love of them as being part of who he is.

My mom is sixty-two years old now. Despite how she is aging, she still tries to manage her house, her kids (despite them moving away), her husband (Dad is house-bound now), and her job as a chaplain. I don't think she has stopped being exceptionally busy. I've only ever heard stories about my mother doing something that involved moving somewhere or doing something with us or some group of people that needed to get somewhere. She has two bad knees and recently told me that she wants to retire

around the time she reaches seventy. I would take bets saying it'll be more like seventy-five or eighty.

Katie is still living with Mike. Whenever I think of this, I remember what my fiancé, Kate, told me regarding my sister's choices. "You have to trust her thoughts and judgments because you can't change them. Only Katie gets to make her choices. You can disagree, but belittling them and her will only make things worse for her." I really do try, even when I see it affecting her or my nephews, I try to keep that in my head. Katie is a strong woman. I love her dearly. Mikey is still super-quiet and involved in everything at school. Ryan is still trash-talking. He got his Wii-U for Christmas and has beaten me at just about every game he owns for it...I'll always have the Dream Team.

Amy is still in New York City, which is one of my favorite places. She lives in a marvelous apartment in Manhattan and has a wonderful partner in Caro. I couldn't be happier for her. All of my sisters have done well in life with what they wanted to do, but Amy set her course when in 8th grade, she told my mother she "wanted to work and live in New York City." She holds a high position at her job, lives close to the park in a high-rise in a desirable area of Manhattan, and she just keeps moving up the ladder in everything she tries. Youngstown was way too small for her. I don't know if there's a city that's big enough for my sister, but for now, New York will do.

Kristen and I get along for the most part. It's a shocker, I know. She is married to Derek and lives in Cleveland with my brother-in-law, Derek. She recently gave birth to my goddaughter, Hayden. They are a happy family. The three of them take lots of photos. Hayden has a lot that cover my mother's refrigerator. If she ever has a brother, I wonder if he will be crying in the family photos? There is still a NERF arrow ear-marked for

Kristen, but it won't be shot by me. I'm hooking Hayden up with as many NERF toys and as much sugar as she wants. After all, isn't that what a good uncle does?

Liz is almost finished earning a master's degree in School Counseling. She put all of the people skills that she learned over the years through endless volunteering to good use. She will now use those people skills on little kids. Hopefully those little kids are ones with good personalities, the kind that just want to er...play wiffel ball and protect G.I. Joe tents — ones that totally don't mean to knock teeth out or inflict harm.

And me? I'm doing very well. I am about to graduate after many, many years in academia. I have an absolutely brilliant fiancé, Kate. Kate is my family. We have our own stories that I might write about one day — with her permission of course. I continue to value life's experiences both big and small. A lot of times, while having some of these experiences, I think to myself (or say out loud with random strangers around) *there's an essay in that.*