

To Sam: I Will Never Love Anyone More Than You

I remember the walls – an off white, dripping with the stench of the guests who stayed before us. Burnt cigarettes from the room next door and spilt alcohol stuck in the crevases of the abused carpet. The lemon Lysol can never fully get rid of the presence of the previous. The walls felt confining to the point where I questioned whether I had claustrophobia like my father does. He says it mostly occurs when there isn't a way to escape - a door that won't open, a crowd that you can't walk through - so we've always tried to stay away from tight, sketchy elevators and trains close to capacity.

I remember the place – Florida, Animal Kingdom Resort Hotel. I remember because it was the one with the elephant statues and totem poles that I kept thinking were watching my movements. There was a train to Disney World that seemed to always be 'close to capacity'.

My brother and I had always wanted to go to Disney World. My parents claimed they had taken us before but we didn't believe them. I remember there was a ride my brother begged to go on - I was too short to ride it at the time. My father took him and they waited in line for an hour. I remember that my brother was sad when they came and met up with my mother and I. They never got on the rollercoaster - the seats made my father claustrophobic.

I remember the yelling. It wasn't like the yelling you hear at a football game or the yelling you hear when you and your best friend see each other after a long time apart. It wasn't high pitched or squeaky. It wasn't out of sadness or excitement. No, this yelling was a rampage of noise. Two voices became one, melding together in their anger. It was the unexpected volume of the TV you turn on after your partially deaf grandfather has gone to bed and you can't seem to find the goddamn remote. I was more scared than that time I was forced to watch *The Exorcist* at a girls' 14th birthday party.

It was the first time I had ever witnessed a fight between my father and my brother – not just their voices piercing through my bedroom door, but the hate filled glares and the mouths that didn't shut for more than a second. I imagine my brothers throat may have started to become scratchy since he had to shout louder than my father in order to be heard. You would think that a boy around the age of 13 wouldn't raise his voice as harshly as he did to a man like my father- bigger, older, stronger.

When I was four, I was my brother's sidekick. I was the sidekick because he was older - 3 ½ years to be exact. My brother would bring me to his costume box and dress me up like his little warrior - grey plastic sword and all. We would run through the house and around the backyard, fighting away the demons that tried to infiltrate our castle. It was us against the world. Those are the days he promised me we would always stick together.

I remember the tears spilling from my eyes like water breaking through a dam. Blurry vision became the only way for me to hide in that room and the warmth on my cheeks was of no comfort. I hadn't the strength to pretend to be okay like I had so many times before. Pretending comes more easily to a child that has walls standing between her and the pieces of her family that fought over where they belonged in the picture the puzzle tried to paint for the outside world. I wanted to scream at them both for ruining a once lovely family trip, but the lump of pain in my throat was growing and kept me from saying a word.

The coffee, strong, was beginning to fill the air, infiltrating that which was left of my senses. I remember worrying that the pot would overflow since no one but me was paying attention to it. I didn't really understand how coffee makers worked. I also didn't want to risk getting mixed up in a fight I didn't know how it would end. Is it possible to be smart and naïve at the same time?

My brother was pinned to the ground. I don't remember the point of escalation. I don't remember how my father took him down. I don't remember if my brother put up much of a fight, though I also don't remember who started it. I imagine he fought, or maybe fought back, but my father has always been a strong man while my brother had barely begun to hit puberty. If it was any other day, I would've thought that they were wrestling like the three of us used to do when we were kids. The funny thing is, we were still kids, but no one was laughing this time. My father's knee was crushing his spine. I think my brother screamed like it hurt a lot more than it actually did. Contrary to your possible belief, my father is not a cruel man – he just does what he has to do. My father had to use all of his weight to keep my brother from getting free. I don't know what would've happened if he got free.

Is this what it means to be a family? I had never wanted to run away before then, yet I didn't move an inch. I remember my mother's arms deceiving me of her strength, but unlike my brother, I did

not try to get away. I think I had hoped that if she held me tight enough, my heart would be protected too. But now I wonder why my mother did nothing to attempt to hide what was befalling before me. Why did she not rush me out of the room, pretending like nothing was wrong, just like she had done so many times before? I should have tried to run away.

My brother used to always tell me how much he had wanted a sister before I came along. He would tell me how he begged my parents for a baby girl. But I never knew why. I don't remember my brother ever telling me why it is that he so desperately wanted a little sister. Maybe he wanted someone to blame 'the cookies that disappeared' on. Or maybe he just wanted someone to be there with him - someone who could one day understand.

I remember the ticking. I always seem to remember ticking – the frantic need to go back to any other day - a day with less ticking. To find out that this life is only a dream, a figment of my imagination. The clock was mocking me for the time that I would never get back. I scolded myself for the time I would never get back. The memory that will never change because you can never go back. The arms kept moving, slowly, but always forward. Everything seemed to stop and go, and I never knew which one held more torture. Time is a bitch sometimes. Isn't that ironic? How time is so deceptively real and keeps you from going back.

I remember my brother's face, squished against the itchy carpet. I didn't have the power to save him - to pick him up and take him away - but I would've. We promised each other we would stick together. I thought that he might cry. I had never seen my brother cry before but I thought I heard him once. His voice would crack every few angry words and his breath would stagger like his sobs were trying to take over. But I have no proof. My bedroom walls didn't just keep me hidden – they also hid my brother from me.

It was a pointless argument. A boy his age did not need caffeinated coffee at 9pm, but he wouldn't let it go. Why couldn't he just have listened? Why was it so important to him to have that stupid cup of coffee? How did everything get so out of hand? It was a family trip. A special occasion. Why couldn't we just be normal for once? I remember my father's voice. Dark, strong, relentless. I never wanted to hear it again. And my father was barely clothed. When the cops showed up, he was

practically nude. That may not tell you anything... but it tells me everything. This story is not about my father.

There are hundreds of pictures of my brother and I spread throughout my parents house - most of them are the two of us together. There's this one picture that is my favorite. I found it in the red scrapbook - the one that was dedicated to me (my brother's is the blue one). I think I was 2, which means my brother was 5 or 6. We were walking, my brother was a few steps ahead of me and he was holding my hand. I remember nothing from the day, not a single thing. But that picture has always showed me something - us. My brother and I, together, unstaged, unplanned. Just me and him, doing what we do best - sticking together.

The neighbors probably heard the heavy pounding on the door from down the hall. If this was fiction, the knocking would have come from an angry mother with a noise complaint - we would have been the cause of her sweet little daughter waking up in the middle of the night crying about a nightmare she had had. I don't remember who opened the door. My mother was sitting with me in a corner, my brother was on the floor, and my father was on top of him. No one else was in the room and I can't imagine a family like mine to leave the hotel door unlocked. What we lacked in subtlety, we made up for in safety. But someone must have because I remember the two men in the doorway, the shine of a badge being waved at my father's face. As they walked in, the weight of the gun in its holster became prominent. I had never seen a gun before, and for a second, just for a second, I thought that the bullet might leave its barrel, planting itself into the body of the boy I had come to know as my brother. But the gently placed hand never moved from its position, and the gun stayed strapped to the hip of the man who yielded it.

I don't remember the rest of this story. The remaining events have been stolen from memory. My brother never stood. The policemen stayed with their hands on their guns. I never got the chance to shut my eyes. I never truly left Florida. But my father eventually found the time to put on a pair of pants.

I never understood the intense anger that could develop throughout the first stages of a person's life. Not until my parents gave up and decided to send my brother away. I remember the day my parents sat me down. No one made eye contact. The tension overwhelmed the room so much that I

thought something might explode. Distanced glances and gloomy smiles are all that greeted me that afternoon. The sun was out, but everything seemed to turn grey. I felt confined between them, just like I did in that room with the off-white walls and the stench that I knew would never go away.

They were stalling, like race cars on the starting line. I remember, for the previous three days, asking and asking, 'Where's Sam?'. At a friends, they'd say. Out for the day, they'd say. Then came the day when they had no choice but to tell the truth - their truth. We sat on the dull beige couch in the family room, squished together like sardines, but we were not a family in that moment. I didn't want to be a family in that moment. My brother was stolen from me, and I was granted no goodbye. They told me the story of how he left - how he was sent away, and I remember wishing I had the ability to turn off my hearing. The disgustingly sympathetic tone that was held in the air pushed me farther away from how, I assume, my parents wanted me to feel. I had no desire to borrow emotions from my personal library - the one that hid away my soon to be hatred.

When I was 10, about to turn 11, I would follow my brother around whenever he had friends over. I remember worrying that he was having fun without me - growing up without me. One day, in the basement, while his friends were playing pool, my brother came over to me. I had been hiding on the stairs around the corner from where they were. I thought he would tease me, or yell at me for being there, telling me to get lost. But he didn't. I don't remember all that he said. I do remember this:

'I will never love anyone more than you.'

How did he leave? Well, most people would think that either my parents drove him somewhere or someone came and picked him up. But it's a little more complicated than that. It was more of a witness protection program style pickup but without the luxury of having a choice, knowing it was going to happen, or getting the chance to say goodbye to the little girl that slept peacefully in the next room. From what I understood, it was getting woken up in the middle of the night and being told that you are being sent to Utah, of all places, for an unknown length of time.

One of the first letters I received from my brother was not till weeks, maybe even months later. I had already sent two, maybe three letters myself. I remember being told that every letter sent and received was read by multiple people to make sure no 'sensitive information' was present. That was when I learned, there is no such thing as privacy in boarding school. Within the letter, written on

college ruled notebook paper, sealed with blue masking tape, contained the words, 'I don't know the next time I will see you. It might not even be till I turn 18.' I was being told that the chance for me to see my brother within the next three years were slim. And I believed it. And I started to cry. I held onto that letter thinking it was the only piece of my brother I would have in my possession for a very long time. It was like he had written his own eulogy. How gullible children can be sometimes.

I remember wanting to ask why they sent my brother away, but I knew the answer. The day the police came knocking. The day the tears would not stop. The day my father, half naked, pinned my brother to the ground over the too strong-smelling coffee, my brother's face squished against the itchy carpet. The day my mother held me without protecting my heart. That was the day it began. The anger took hold of my brother's soul and refused to let go for the next 10 years. And the day they sent him away – that was the day I lost my best friend.

The permanent etches on my skin - XI XX XCIV - mimic the ones on his - VI XIX MCMXCVIII - they are the first pieces of evidence of what we mean to each other. I remember when I told him what my first tattoo would be. If we hadn't been sitting in the car my brother probably would have hugged me - though his reaction wasn't the one I expected. I figured he would be thrilled - which he was - but I did not expect for him to respond with what HIS first tattoo would be. November 20th, 1994. June 19th, 1998. These are the dates that are ingrained in our bodies, the importance of which are only meant for my brother and I. And to this day, we promise to stick together.