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Creative Nonfiction

Lewis

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I Live in Fear

When you buy a picture frame, a photograph of people pretending to be the ideal, caring, and friendly family is typically already in the frame. I haven't met one of those picture-perfect families, but I am certain Sam, my big sister, is exactly how you imagine the ideal older sister to be in those cheesy photographs. Her heart is soft, strong, moral, and compassionate. In our family pictures, her arm is wrapped around me, and she wears a gentle, closed-mouth smile, and her eyes are attentive and caring. When she was in elementary school and preschool, a doctor, teacher, or store owner sometimes offered her candy or a sticker when she would leave, but Sam only said yes if she could also have one for me. I don't know of any other child who turned down food for any reason, especially for a sibling.

Sam and I are four years apart, but we are very close. Growing up people constantly complimented how well we got along. We thought this was silly, until we realized how annoying siblings from other families were. We dispute about where we should eat, get frustrated when the other won't make a simple decision, but when it comes to big things like respect, kindness, and doing the right thing, we agree or at least understand the other person's perspective. But, acting morally is much more intuitive for Sam. I constantly have to evaluate and adjust my outlook and behavior, and read quotes every day to remind me of the character I want to have. However, analyzing and correcting my behavior becomes frustrating, like when you get the grocery cart

with a wonky wheel that constantly tugs the cart left or right, so you must correct the way you push the cart the whole time to keep from crashing. I am the wobbly grocery cart, making Sam more like a train riding along tracks that guide her and keep her from harming people.

We had a fight, back when I was in the second grade. We have never discussed it. One time we talked about how we do not talk about it, but that is the closest we have gotten. I know she wrote an essay about the fight once in high school, and I am writing about it now; otherwise, we have avoided applying words to the event. I'm not sure why we don't talk about it, but to understand why we don't talk about it I'd have to ask to talk about it, and break the unwritten rule that we don't talk about it. It's all very straight forward.

I don't know what Sam feels, but I know I feel guilt. I feel like I got away with something, and am in a fluid state of fear of being caught. When I think about the fight my body slowly tenses from the outside in, like when playing hide-n-go-seek and you hear the seeker nearby, and you flex all your muscles to stay still and not be found. I know I am safe from the seeker, or distant from the fight, but it feels like if I move the wrong way or slightly mess up I will be caught. I feel this way because I hurt Sam. I made her feel inadequate. The fight did not separate us, it made me discover my greatest fear: hurting someone I love, and not realizing it until it is too late.

“You love her more!”

“Sam I don't! I promise I love you more.”

“Liar!” Her door smacked the door frame so hard the walls vibrated.

To understand why this conversation occurred you must know I was a confident, extroverted, attention seeking child. Sam was quiet, introverted, and not a fan of physical

contact. A few months before this fight, our family friend -- who I will call Zoey -- lost her mother to cancer. Zoey was about Sam's age, and needed affection and someone to hold onto, and I didn't hesitate at the opportunity for attention, a lap to sit on, or a hand to hold. But, I also didn't think of Sam. I never thought how my actions affected the one person who never acted without thinking of me. Sam never got a lollipop without getting one for me, never went to a friend's house without asking if I could go, and never woke up or went to bed without checking on me. I didn't ignore her or neglect her. What I did was worse. I acted without thinking of her.

I was scared. I could not see straight. I was eight years old and wanted to break things. I wanted to run away. I knew I couldn't survive without Sam, but more importantly I knew Sam would never leave me. So, I got a crayon and some paper, wrote as best as I could, and I slipped a note beneath her door.

Sam, I am sorry I made you feel I loved Zoey more.

Love, Bean

I ran back to my room, slapping my boney feet across the concrete floor, and considered what my life would be like without Sam. I was shaking. I did something awful without trying. Like rain on a car window, tears darted down my cheeks. Then, I heard folded paper scratching beneath my door.

Bean, I am sorry too. I should not have said that. Meet me in the closet.

Love, Sam

Our bedrooms were adjacent and connected by a sliding door at the back of our closets; this sliding door allowed us to enter the other's closet and walk through it to the bedroom of the other. After reading Sam's reply, I creaked open my closet door and sat on the floor. Sam slid the

connecting door open and parted my clothes hanging on the rod above me. I looked up and she looked down. We hesitated to lock eyes because we knew we would cry more if we did, and our cheeks were already damp with tears. Sam squatted beside me, we hugged, she apologized for accusing me of loving Zoey more, I assured her I could never love anyone more than her, and we laughed about the convenience of secret sliding doors. Sitting on that closet floor, Sam forgave me. I could not forgive myself.

That day was the first time, I began to understand why I am the little sister. Sam is my protector, the wiser one, the caring one, and the picture-perfect older sibling you imagine when you buy a picture frame. She plays her part. But, I am only in photographs because my sister dressed me, convinced me to get in the car, and sat me down. I am only smiling because my sister is tickling me so my parents don't get irritated. And, I am only here today because she supports me, guides me, and forgives me. I am the little sister because I could not protect her from the one thing in my control: myself. I am the little one, because she is the bigger person.

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