

## Family Differences

When I was younger, family to me was like a winery—unnecessary and pretentious. If my father didn't care enough about my mother and her two daughters to stay loyally monogamous, why should I care about him and his bastard babies? My sister and I were still forced by the shared custody agreement to see him and my three half-siblings twice a month, though. We'd drive two hours every other weekend to Madison to meet them, and he would take the five of us either to a mall, mini golfing, or some other activity that didn't require us to talk too much, or else it'd inevitably end up in some kind of fight. My mom said it was good for us to maintain a relationship with our dad and half-siblings, yet she never stayed with us. She would plan some alone time or a day with her girlfriends, which was hypocritical of her.

My sister, who looked exactly like Mom, (I looked more like Dad which pissed me off) always had a better attitude about the whole arrangement than me. Probably because she was older and more mature. She actually appeared invested in the half-siblings interests, maybe because she was the oldest out of all of us. The oldest half-brother was less than year younger older than me, and my jaw visibly clenched whenever I thought too hard about the timing and biological facts of that statement. My sister once said unconventional families are no less filled with love, and that that was why I needed to let go of my grudge against Dad. Just because our situation was different did not make it bad. I didn't possess the courage to tell her how naive and stupid that sounded. I think she could tell from my face though, because one time she said,

"You can't live your life with hate. You know that, right?" I didn't. But I guess she was so optimistic because I was always so pessimistic. We balanced each other out. And when Mom suddenly remarried out of the blue, I felt more betrayed than when Dad turned traitor. Her and I were always a team, a unit against the cruelty of "people who break up families" because my sister liked to play Switzerland in that regard. But there she was, forcing me to be the flower girl, and splitting the remnants of our family even further apart. And she just had to marry a guy with four kids. *Four*. At the least, she could've married somebody with two at the most. At this point, it was getting difficult keeping track of which sibling was half and which was step.

My sister was the one to eventually teach me the importance of family. And sadly, not in a good way. Or a verbal or physical or "being there" way. She had to die on a kayak expedition her friend invited her to in the Grand Canyon; her skull cracked open by underwater boulders when a wave tipped her overboard. I found out coming home from school on Friday, all psyched to spend the weekend with my friends. I knew something was wrong when Mom and Dad were in the kitchen, a place that'd been void of the two together since the divorce years ago. The first words out of my mouth were,

"What's wrong?" I said it rather sardonically. When they didn't immediately chastise me for my sass, my heart stuttered a little. When they directed me to the couch in the living room, my hand clenched on my backpack and my brow furrowed, heavily suspicious. I finally noticed the matching tear tracks on

my parent's faces when we sat on the couch. My heart started picking up speed, the waiting causing fear to pulse inside my veins. I thought I could handle it, that whatever they were going to say could never beat my worst thoughts.

I was wrong.

They said the words, the combination of my sister's name and death, yet I didn't really react. Not outwardly. I remember a ringing in my ears and something from underneath my heart festering exponentially and coming to swallow my entire existence, like a hurricane. You see and hear it coming but you *know* you can't do anything to stop it. Everything was blurry and not from tears. I wasn't crying, I knew I wasn't but I couldn't see. I couldn't see. My parents tried to calm me down, tried to get me to focus, but I just kept repeating, "I can't see. I can't see."

Eventually they took me to the hospital, and I think the doctors injected me with anesthesia or something. When I woke up, everyone was there. My parents, my stepmother and father, my two step-brothers and sisters, and my half-brother and half-sibling set of twins. The funeral was held, my sister's side of our shared bedroom preserved into a makeshift memorial, and everyone else pretended everything was healing. My step-siblings and I rode the bus every morning and afternoon and I still went to visit my half-siblings up near the city every other weekend. While the world continued to spin, I stayed put, afraid to move forward, too traumatized to think back on happy memories. I barely said anything, barely ate, and I guess my siblings, regardless of their partial biological or legal connection to me, cared much more about me than I'd ever cared about them, I realized; when one random afternoon, all seven of them crowded into my claustrophobic bedroom and apologized. I asked what for, not really paying attention.

"Because it wasn't one of us who died." That shocked me out of my stupor better than any electric chair ever could.

"What?"

"She was your true sister. It probably would've been better for you if one of us died instead of her. We're just. . . sorry for that." I stared, unable to speak. Such a revelation, realizing how horrible a person you are, to your own siblings no less, was difficult to accept.

"Do you hate us?" A whisper spoken at the foot of my bed. It was from the youngest of the group, only six years old. For the first time since my sister died, tears gathered in my eyes and fell like a waterfall. I picked up my youngest sibling and hugged her.

"No, I don't. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I mumbled into her shoulder, speaking to all of them. I realized I'd have to balance myself out now, without my sister to be the guiding light of optimism. I'd have to be that for all my siblings, prefixes no longer included.