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Discovering Sibling Struggles

Nothing sends shivers down my spine quite like those innocent-sounding words: "Do you want to go shopping with me, Tyler?" While it may appear to be a simple question, with only two possible answers, the only acceptable answer to my father is yes. He rarely assigns me tasks related to household chores, aware that I would prefer almost anything over wandering the aisles of Wegmans in search of groceries. That is why I knew I had to say yes.

As I grabbed my sweatshirt and phone before leaving the house, I knew that shopping was going to be about anything other than shopping. My father let me take control of the music when we got into the car. Maybe it was because he realized that the silence of him collecting his thoughts was going to make me nervous about why he asked me to come. The first few minutes passed with the rhythmic beats of my favorite music, providing a temporary distraction from the impending conversation.

About halfway through the drive my dad slowly reached out his hand towards the dial to turn down the music. The silence before he spoke felt like it lasted days or even weeks. Eventually he said the words "I just wanted to let you know something about Haley". Maybe it was because of him driving or maybe it was because of what he was planning to say, but he couldn't look me in the eyes. "Your sister is going to try therapy".

When I heard those words, I felt a sudden hole in my chest. It felt like a part of me that I thought I knew was ripped out from the inside. Although me and my sister obviously live together, we don't talk much during the typical day. My sister generally sits downstairs and watches shows like Gilmore Girls and Friends on the living room TV, while I sit in my room upstairs because I play video games with my friends. I didn't know anything about what she was going through. All I ever heard was the screaming that seeped into my headset while I was playing online with my friends. All I ever saw was my parents trying to console her and try to help her calm down. All I ever thought was that this is how it was for all girls her age. I didn't know what to say. How could I know so little about someone I'm with all the time? We sat in awkward silence for over half of the drive.

As he continued to drive, the weight of what he said still lingered in the air. I couldn't help but wonder why he had chosen to tell me about this. Although she was only 2 years older, her world seemed so different from mine. I remembered all the times that we sat at the airport waiting for the gate for the economy section of the plane to open. We could be there an hour in advance, but the second my sister sits at the gate, we aren't allowed to leave. She was so worried that we would miss the flight that she insisted that we couldn't move. This always irritated me, as I didn't understand at the time that it was a problem that she couldn't control.

After a few moments, I mustered up the courage to speak, breaking the silence that had grown increasingly uncomfortable. "Therapy for anxiety?" I finally responded, searching for the right words. "I didn't realize it was that serious."

My father glanced at me briefly, his eyes still uncertain. "Yeah, she's going through a tough time and mom and I think this is the best way for her to get the help she needs. Anxiety is hard to navigate, and we thought the therapy might help her learn some new coping strategies she can use."

I nodded. It felt strange to think about my sister as someone who needed help. I always saw her as the typical older sibling, who teased me and bossed me around, but never realized the inner struggles she was facing. I thought about how this made me feel. Did this suddenly make her seem different in my eyes? I realized that it did not. Even though she hadn't changed, she was now a sister in need of support.

As my thoughts settled, my dad added, "We're going to be driving her to the therapy place for the time being so it would be nice if you could find someone to drive you back after practice". Realizing that my parents would need to dedicate more time to my sister's well-being, this is when I understood that their attention would be stretched thin. While I knew they would assist me when asked, I recognized the importance of not adding to their already full plate with my own concerns. At this moment, I felt both sad and more grown-up. I was being counted on to help and this was something that I knew I could do. I was sad to realize that my sister was not able to make herself relax on her own. I felt grown up that my parents knew they could rely on me and that they trusted me enough to share this news. I decided to emphasize self-sufficiency and acknowledge that my share of attention in the family might be reduced. It marked the beginning of my thinking that supporting others effectively requires making sure you don't need the help yourself.

