

Sorry
By: Kelly Stephens

Bryan didn't want to leave the bathroom stall. He didn't want to return to that big room—that sad, awful place with all the grown-ups in their uncomfy black clothes and their cold hands and colder smiles. He would have to stand next to Mom and Dad again as the grown-ups came up to them one-by-one, unsure how to talk to the small boy holding a rag doll or to the man and woman who stood together but apart, like there was a thin wall separating them, too high and too thick to pass. The grown-ups would pat Bryan's shoulder awkwardly, making him want to squirm, and they would look at Mom and Dad and say, "We're sorry about your daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Morgan." Mom and Dad wouldn't tell them that she wasn't Mrs. Morgan anymore and hadn't been for over two months now. Instead, Dad would say a stiff thank you and move a little closer to Mom. He'd stop just before they touched, the wall of air between them, and Mom would try to smile.

Bryan knew her smile was fake because her teeth didn't show—she used to smile like that when Dad would say something mean or when she was tired and sad about something and she'd ask Bryan and Tess to go to bed. She'd been smiling like that all day, and it hurt Bryan to see the redness in her eyes and the way her mouth trembled when she'd periodically bend down and hug him, asking if he wanted to leave. Bryan would only grip the rag doll's arm and shake his head, staring at the box over her shoulder where his sister pretended to sleep. He sometimes thought he could see a dark monster slinking in the shadows behind the box, waiting and watching him with its cold, dead eyes, but then he'd blink and it would disappear. He knew it was still there, though—its stare was a smothering weight on his chest.

When he couldn't lift his heavy arms to hug her back, Mom would release him and stand up for the next round of grown-ups in black. Bryan would try to avoid making eye contact with

any of them. Even though Mom and Dad had told him it wasn't his fault that Tess was gone, that they loved him, he'd still felt like the grown-ups were watching him whenever he looked down or away. All of them, they had stared and stared—always at him, and at the worn rag doll in his left hand. Their stares had made him feel heavy and sick and cold, and even though they stooped and patted his shoulder and said they were *sorry*, he knew they couldn't be sorry—not *really*. It hadn't been their fault.

He eventually couldn't take it. He'd felt cold and sick and sad and *wrong*, so he'd run away, tripping on the blue rug and pushing through the forest of black clothes, away from the scary monster and the grown-ups' eyes, away from Mom's "Bryan!" and Dad's "It's okay, let him go," and to the bathroom where he hoped no one would find him. Sitting on the cold tiles, backed against the hard corner where the stall's door met the wall, Bryan clutched Tess's doll to him. It was soft against his cheek and neck, and out of the corner of his eye he could just make out the stain on its mouth from when Tess had tried to share some of her chocolate milk with it.

She hadn't been like other big sisters. Unlike the other boys' big sisters down the street, she'd never yelled at him or shoved him or called him names, even when he had asked one too many times for the game controller. Back when he'd been 4 and she'd been 5, when Mom and Dad began fighting in the living room a lot, she'd sneak into his room and climb under his racecar comforter with him, a flashlight, her rag doll, and her *Peter Pan* book in hand. They'd pull the comforter over their heads, their own little fort, and she'd read to him, stumbling over the bigger words until she'd memorized it all. It was her favorite story, not his, but that was okay because he loved the voices she made when she read to him and the way she'd jab the pillow and blanket during the sword fights. Their laughter would cover up the shouts from downstairs. Sometimes they were too loud, and then Dad would come upstairs—*thump, thump*,

thump—and, wide-eyed, Tess would jump out of bed and run to her room, just in time to pretend to be sleeping when he'd check on them. Despite the close calls, she came every time, and on those nights Bryan was warm and happy, able to slay any monster who dared visit his dreams.

Some nights took her longer to appear than others, and he'd spend long minutes listening to Dad's yells and Mom's angry-crying voice. Whenever the door cracked open, the voices would flood the room, but suddenly it didn't matter. Tess would shut the door on them, and he'd smear away the tears on his cheeks and hope she didn't notice. Smiling, he'd make room on his bed, telling himself that boys didn't cry in front of their big sisters.

She had always known how to make him smile like that, and she always wanted to go on adventures. When they saw *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when he was 5 and she was 6, they decided to go to Narnia through Mom's closet so they could be King and Queen too. Tess had put on Mom's heels and her red lipstick, and Bryan would have used one of Dad's suit jackets, but the spot where his clothes used to be was empty. The bed sheet had been Tess's idea. Seeing the tremble in his bottom lip, she'd grabbed the sheet from a lower shelf and had tied it around his neck. "Your cape, your majesty," she'd said regally. She'd then yanked off her heels and pulled him downstairs to the woods behind the house, where they battled the White Witch who'd taken Tess's rag doll hostage. Picking up a stick, Bryan had grinned and shouted "For Narnia!" as he dueled the White Witch's monsters. Tess had told him to make sure he stabbed the monsters' left elbows—it *had* to be the left or it didn't work and you'd probably die.

She'd always been there for him like that. When he'd been 6 and she'd been 7 and it had been his first day of kindergarten, it was Tess who had held his hand and led him to his classroom. Dad couldn't because he'd gone away for a while, and Mom couldn't because she'd had to drop them off in a hurry. She'd said that she needed to work out something between

Mommy and Daddy and that she was sorry. As she had rolled up the car window—cell phone to her ear, bright red lipstick smeared, and hair spilling from her messy bun—he'd heard her say the word "divorce" for the first time.

Tess had taken the time to bring him to his classroom, even though it made her late and she hated being late. She'd even put his Spiderman backpack in his cubby for him before giving him a tight squeeze and reminding him that she'd see him at recess. Later that day during snack time, he'd opened his bag to find her rag doll. He'd smiled and given Tess a big hug at recess, even though some of the other boys in class had made fun of him for it. Turning his back on their snickers, he'd gone on an adventure with Tess for the rest of recess, sneaking behind trees and watching out for what Tess swore were cafeteria trolls. She said the trolls would disguise themselves as people but that he could recognize them because they would come out of the cafeteria with red stains on their aprons—blood!—and big black bags in their hands. Tess assured him that the trolls hid their victims in them, and Bryan would watch, eyes wide, as the monsters threw their bagged victims into the dumpster.

When he and Tess got home that afternoon and Mom asked how his first day had gone, he told her that he'd had the best first day ever. She'd had her fake smile on then. In the warm light of the kitchen, it looked sad and worn.

That night, when Mom tucked him into bed, she hugged him long and hard. Her warm tears had fallen on his hair like soft rain.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered, rocking him back and forth. "I'm so, so sorry. I love you, sweetie." He hugged her back as tight as he could and told himself he wouldn't cry. Boys didn't cry in front of their moms either.

Bryan wished he could cry now. The bathroom tile was cold and hard and made him ache. He wanted the warm tears to come, but they wouldn't. He drew the rag doll away from its nestled spot against his cheek. Its blue-button eyes stared back at him, accusing. Its crooked, stitched-on smile looked false.

Bryan didn't want to think about Tess being gone—he wanted to smile and laugh and play with her. He didn't want to think about her stuck in that box, sleeping alone forever. He didn't want his last memory of her to make him feel sick inside.

Leaning back, Bryan set Tess's doll on his knees. His finger traced its smile, its blue-button eyes that still stared at him, just like the grown-ups' had. His stomach felt like it was full of big rubber snakes, and it hurt and he wanted to throw up.

The grown-ups in their black clothes didn't really know his sister and they weren't really sorry. How could they be? They didn't play with her or fight with her about dumb things, like that last time when he'd stolen her rag doll and ran with it to the pond in the woods behind Mom's house. It had just begun to snow, and they weren't supposed to go that far into the woods—Mom didn't like them being near the pond. It was out of sight and almost out of hearing from the porch, and the pond was deep besides—over their heads, she'd said. They hadn't listened to her, though, and he'd run pinwheeling out onto the ice, stopping to look back at Tess on the bank, her one foot on land, the other on ice.

He was still 6 and she was still 7, and he laughed gleefully as she shouted at him to *give it back*.

"No!" he said. "We're playing hostages, remember? I'm the villain!" Trying to laugh evilly, he shuffled backward on the dark ice, away from the cover of the evergreens and closer to the middle of the pond where there was a fine layer of snow. In one hand he raised his hostage

in the air, its string hair collecting snowflakes, and with the other he waved his stick, his long-time weapon.

“Come and get it!” he yelled. “I double-dog dare you!”

“Bryan, we aren’t supposed to be out on the ice!” Tess didn’t move from her spot. One boot was still firmly planted on the ground.

“You’re no fun,” he shot back. “It’s wicked cold out and the ice is thick—see?” Bryan brushed the snow away with his foot. The ice below was gray-white, with a few ridges and what looked like air bubbles, but there were no cracks. He tapped the ice—it held. “*See?* Nothing!” He grinned, triumphant, and wagged his stick-sword at her again. “*I triple-dog dare you.*”

Tess could never resist a triple-dog dare. She had left the ground behind now, taking one unsure step after another. She was awkward on the ice as she drew near, stepping carefully as he skidded clumsily around her, always just out of reach. He laughed as she swiped for the rag doll and missed.

“You’ll never catch me alive!” he jeered, putting on his best villain voice. He ducked under her arm and tried to dance around her, but his boot caught a ridge in the ice. Suddenly, the ice rose to meet him, and in the seconds before contact, his stomach twisted with cold fear. His elbows met the ice with a resounding crack, followed by a deep, wrenching groan from all around them.

Bryan’s breathing hitched in his throat, and his eyes welled with tears from the pain. Behind him, Tess screamed.

“Bryan! Bryan, move! The ice—it’s *cracking!*”

Bryan looked down with horror as the ice spider webbed, like cracked glass. Another wrenching noise, and he began to sink, cold, cold water soaking through his mittens and into his boots.

“Bryan, *move!*” Suddenly, Tess was there, jabbing his arm with his stick-sword. She was low to the ground, feet wide apart as she tried to stay as far away from the sinking ice as possible. “Grab the stick!” Bryan latched on, lurching to his feet as the ice heaved beneath him. It sent him sprawling, and he landed next to Tess, punching new small holes with his knees.

Tess helped him to his feet again and grabbed the hand that wasn’t holding on to her rag doll. Her blue eyes were wide, scared. Bryan had never seen her scared before.

“Go, go!” she screamed at him, tugging him after her. The ice’s cracks were spreading, the groans getting louder as the monster from the deep awoke, worse than the Boogeyman.

Bryan lurched after her, trying to keep his balance on the shifting ice. He was losing feeling in his fingers and his feet. Looking down, he saw the slanting ice, the water slushing his boots.

“We’re almost there, Bryan, just a little farther,” Tess called over her shoulder. Her breathing was uneven from fear. “Almost...there.”

Bryan tried to keep up with her hurried steps, but it was hard to without putting too much weight on the ice. After one loud crack, Tess reminded him to step lightly. “Pretend you can fly like Peter Pan,” she said, eyes on the ice as she tested each future step with her stick. “Imagine Tinkerbell just gave you pixie dust!”

But Bryan couldn’t focus on that. Even as they reached the more solid ice near the shore, his mind was slow with fear, his feet heavy and slow. When he tripped over a bump in the ice, he laid still for a few seconds before he could scramble to his feet again. By the time he’d

almost reached the waiting Tess, he realized that his hands were empty—he'd left her rag doll behind. Tess wouldn't forgive him if he lost it. He immediately turned back—it was only a few feet away—but Tess called for him.

“Bryan, don't! It's okay, leave it!” He heard the panic in her voice, the sound of her boots coming toward him, but he was already scooping up the rag doll. He turned to look at her—she was only a few feet away—when a wrenching noise swallowed up all sound. The ice was screaming, groaning, creaking, and all Bryan saw was the fear in Tess's face, the whites of her eyes, her outstretched hand. Then she was gone. The ice—the monster—had taken her, swallowed her whole.

Bryan was frozen, locked in a silent scream, as he stared at the spot where his sister had been only seconds ago. No, no, no. Not Tess, never Tess, *please* no.

He saw a flash of pale skin, and his muscles unlocked as he lurched toward the hole.

“Tess!” he screamed. “Hold on, Tess, hold on!”

Bryan searched the dark water and thought he could see her blonde hair, her hand just below the surface. Yanking off his mittens and balancing on the jagged edge, he plunged his hand in—and gasped. His bones ached, cold, cold.

He thought he felt her hand, her fingers. He tugged, but she was so *heavy*, so limp. He dropped the rag doll and plunged his other hand in as well. He couldn't feel her hand anymore, but he knew he still had her because of the weight.

“Let her *go!*” he screamed. “*Let her go!*” He pulled with all his weight. The monster clawed at him, pooling over the edge and soaking his chest and arms and face. “Tess! Tess!”

He couldn't raise her—he was too weak, too little. He sobbed, tugging, tugging. Should he leave? Go back to the house for help? But there wasn't *time*! He couldn't leave her, but he couldn't save her either.

“Help!” he screamed. “Mom! Help, somebody! *Help! Please!*”

He screamed and tugged and cried, saying her name again and again like a prayer as the hole began to freeze over. He continued to reach into the monster's throat, even as Mom ran at the sound of his screams, only a few moments too late. She carefully made her way across the few yards of ice to him, drawing him away from the hole, away, away, holding his arms and hands to her chest, rubbing them, breathing on them. Too late, too late. He heard her asking him what was wrong. What happened? Where was Tess? He couldn't answer, couldn't even point. He should have saved her. He was sorry! Sorry, so sorry! He didn't *want* to be the villain anymore—she could have the rag doll back, just come back!

“P-pond,” he finally whispered. “Tess. Cold.”

He lost track of time after that. He was sleepy and heavy and cold, but he remembered Mom's sobs, her voice on her cell phone, the sound of sirens, the grown-ups who took him away from the monster who stole his sister. Cold hands and arms carried him away from Mom and through the dark trees to others who looked at his hands, still cold, cold, cold. He couldn't feel them, and it made him scared. He was put in a car then, and Mom and Dad were there with Tess's rag doll, and there were more sirens and lights and people in white, and there were white sheets in a white room, and blurriness and tiredness and sadness, like being sick but worse.

“Bryan?” Dad's hoarse voice echoed off the walls of the bathroom. He had found him.

Bryan gripped Tess's doll to his chest when Dad came into his stall to bring him back out. The funeral was almost over—did he want to say good-bye? Bryan didn't want to get up,

but he did, taking Dad's hand in his free one, which was still healing from the frostbite. He ignored the spreading empty-cold inside—the monster, still there—and marched with Dad's tall figure down the hallway, past the groups of strange-cold faces, and to the dark box where the monster waited and Tess slept like Sleeping Beauty. Mom was there, too, beyond the monster, and Bryan saw her kiss Tess's forehead before turning to them. Tears slipped from her eyes, tracing the new lines on her face. She tried to smile, but she couldn't anymore. Her lips trembled and her shoulders shook, and then she was sobbing, loud and uncontrolled as she hugged herself, trying to keep it in when there were so many grown-ups silently and awkwardly watching. Dad went to her, passing through the monster's shadow, and then he was hugging her, whispering into her ear and rocking them gently as his eyes grew red and wet. Bryan had never seen Dad cry before, and he guessed Mom hadn't either, because she whispered something and hugged him back.

Somewhere beneath the layers of ice in his chest, something splintered. Bryan slowly moved toward the box, toward the monster that blocked him from his sister. It was hulking and black, all sharp claws and teeth and gaping jaws that could eat him whole. As he stepped up to it, it seemed to rise ten feet high. He stared it down, his jaw set, and then, clutching the rag doll to his chest, he took a deep breath and stood up to his full height of three-and-a-half feet.

"I'm not afraid of you," he said. He stepped forward, through the monster, and to Tess's side. The wall of shadow vanished.

Bryan sucked in his breath and clutched the rag doll even tighter when he saw her. She seemed cold, and he wished he could tuck her in like she did for him when he was sick. He would only let her do it then because otherwise he was a big boy, and big boys didn't need to be

tucked in every night, especially by their big sisters. There was no blanket to tuck her in with, though, and she seemed so lonely.

Clutching her rag doll in one hand, he stood on tippy toes, balanced on the rim of the box, and then tucked the little doll in the crook of her arm where she liked to have it when she slept. Ignoring the slight burn in his stomach, he leaned forward and touched her cheek—empty-cold, but no longer monster-cold. His stomach was burning now, mixing with the monster-cold, fighting it, burning it up—and the heat hurt, like his hands had when they’d begun to heal. But that didn’t matter. Only Tess mattered, and the fact that she would always be 7, even when he became 7, 8, 9.

His chest was burning now, and his face, and his eyes. His tears were hot, too, but he tried to smudge those away. Big boys didn’t cry, especially in front of their big sisters. Though maybe it was okay sometimes; maybe it was okay now, just this once.

“I can be strong, too, Tess,” he promised. A tear fell from his nose and splattered on her freckles. He gently wiped it away with his bandaged hand, and then, leaning down, he placed a hot kiss to her cold cheek and whispered a choked, “G’night, Tess. I’m sorry,” before he withdrew, with the *sorry, sorry, sorry* still ringing in his ears.