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Wanáǵi-Tačháṇu Máni Mitán

(My Little Sister Walks the Spirit Path)

The stars were out that night as I lost myself in the grass, beating my chest and gnashing my teeth. It's interesting how those actions seem so odd when you read about them in the Bible, but when shit hits the fan, it's some primal instinct.

I had just finished getting my new truck registered at the county administration building. My mom and grandma were in the parking lot, they wanted to meet with me before they took my sister to the hospital. She had been sick for a few days and wasn't getting better. Her doctor had tested her for strep, mono, and a battery of other sicknesses, but they all had come back negative. She had a plethora of disabilities that worked together to make her immune system weak, so any illness was scary. She had been sick for a few days and it just kept getting worse. I was confident, however, that my sister was just fine and that she would pull through this like she pulled through everything else. This little girl had gone through 20 surgeries in her twelve years of life, I was sure she could handle a little flu. I think my confidence was a coping mechanism for my worries, though. I was always worried about her. This little girl was the center of all of our lives. I opened the door to my grandma's car where my sister was sitting, half awake. I looked at her little face and told her how much I loved her, that she would be okay and that we're all rooting for her. I took her up in my arms and gave her a big kiss on the forehead. At the urging of my mom and grandma, I let go of her because they needed to go to the hospital. Looking back, I am glad that I took the time to tell her that, and to give her a hug and a kiss. That was the last time I saw my sister.

After my sister went to the ER, she took a turn for the worse. Her liver and kidneys were failing and she was in a lot of pain. It didn't take long for her to start being sassy to the nurses, who decided to give her Versed to 'calm her down because she was cussing too much. Suddenly, she lost her vision. The medicine the nurse gave her to shut her up had damaged her liver even more, to the point that she went blind and mostly unresponsive. It was soon that she started showing symptoms of pneumonia as well. Monument Health decided, after damaging her liver and calling my mother a bad parent for crying too much to comfort her child, that they couldn't provide the level of specialist emergency care that Kymberlyn needed and called for the life flight to take her to a specialist hospital in Omaha, NE.

I was devastated. Because I was the oldest and most responsible sibling, I had to stay behind and watch my younger brother and the pets. Over the next four days, her health only seemed to get worse. She was put on life support and the rest of the family went down to Omaha to be there for her. I wanted to stop everything in my life and go to Omaha, but I couldn't, and that hurt. I just had to keep going. I had to take care of the dogs. I had to play a show in Aberdeen. I had to work through the worry and the grief and all of the things that wounded my heart. I knew that Kymberlyn would want me to keep going, so I did.

After playing the show in Aberdeen, I was getting ready to lie down to sleep at a friend's house when I got a call from my grandma. She was bawling so hard I could barely understand her. My heart sank in my chest. "We have to take her off life support." I could barely understand my grandma through the tears. "They said she has a brain bleed and there's nothing we can do." I cried uncontrollably. My tears were like raindrops in a downpour. I couldn't fathom this happening. At that moment, my sorrow was so great that I went numb to my bodily sensations. I floated out of the basement of the house we were crashing in on a cloud of pain and confusion. Each second that

passed felt like it was scarring my mind. I see the pity in the faces of each person I pass and I hate it. I fly out the door with the last of my strength. As soon as my bare feet touch the grass, I collapsed into a writhing ball of messy, complicated emotions.

“Why? Why God? Tunkášila, why?” I pleaded with God as I beat the ground with my fists, asking why He would do this, why He would cut her life so short. I asked him to take me, the sinner, the one who has done so many horrible, horrible things, instead of taking this sweet, innocent young girl. As I drowned in great sorrow, my teary eyes looked to the sky, feeling lost. I could see Wanáǵi-Tačhánu, the Spirit Path, and knew that soon my sister would walk it. She would be safe and wouldn’t be in pain. Never again would she have to struggle up an incline or over a bump in a wheelchair. Her arms wouldn’t dislocate every day anymore. These things bring me some comfort now, but in that moment of great change, I have to admit it still hurt. Maybe that makes me a monster, but I think it just makes me human.

As I lay crumpled on the ground, the world kept going around me. My bandmates gathered the things that I had left haphazardly in the basement. They said we were going to try to speed down to Omaha so I could see my sister before she passed. The next thing I remember, we were flying down the interstate toward Omaha when my mom called me. “You aren’t going to make it down here in time,” she said, bawling. “I’m gonna get you on video call so you can say goodbye to her.” The truck had stopped and by this time I was outside on the side of the road. My mom set up a video call with my wife, who was still at home, and me. On the phone, I saw my sister. She was hooked up to a dozen machines and her face was so swollen I could barely recognize her. She’d gone through so, so much for a girl her age and she’d taught us all how to love in a way we never loved before. That night, I got to see her face one last time and tell her how much I loved her and how much I cared about her and how sorry I was for being a mean older sibling. I wept uncontrollably as I told her how I wished I spent more time with her and

how I regret being a bitch to her and how she really was a big reason for me to keep on with a positive life. Without her and my mother, I don't think I would still be sober. After what will always feel like not enough time, she had to go. I didn't want to hang up. I didn't want to say goodbye. I don't think anyone ever does. But I had to. I collapsed again, under the bright starry sky in the middle of the highway. I wished I could have been there, but my mom reminded me that my sister would have been so grateful that I stayed behind to watch her puppies. When I got back in the truck, everyone was crying. Kymberlyn meant the world to all of us. She was the glue that held us all together.

At that moment, hundreds of miles away from where I was, my sister took her last breath surrounded by her closest family (save me and my wife) while our mom sang a lullaby to her. My mom still rocks her ashes to sleep and sings that song some nights, while I weep rooms away. Our lives will never be the same.