

Jeannine

by Dan Roberts

We stood in the driveway, physically closer than we had been to each other in two weeks. Jeannine, my sister, did not stay at home too much anymore. She had dedicated her existence to her boyfriend, Steven, and chose to live with his family so that the two of them could be closer. My parents were supportive and open, but they would never have let their seventeen-year-old daughter sleep in the same bed under their roof with her nineteen-year-old boyfriend. So after countless years of tension and arguments, my sister had achieved what she had sought for years: independence from her family, but most of all from her older brother.

Now standing in that driveway, our childhood playground, as I prepared for the long journey to James Madison University, we realized that the past five years of our lives had been wasted. Her constant struggles to get out of the house coupled with my harsh attempts to see that she met that goal consumed our adolescent years—the period where we needed each other the most. My parents told me that they were ready to leave, and I gave Jeannine a long hug. It was the first time in half a decade that I gave her a meaningful show of affection. I met her with the love that I had suppressed for so long, rather than the hate and loathing that was quick to my aid in the many years of confrontation that we shared. It was then, as her head rested on my chest and her arms wrapped around me, that I realized the wrongs I had done to her. All of a sudden, I did not want to leave. I had my sister back; how could I abandon her again?

No one can really claim to have a perfect childhood sibling relationship, but we were still very close. At times, we could even be proud of one another. Yet, as in all sibling bonds, these good tidings never lasted. Our games of tic-tac-toe or kickball with our friends would go from friendly backyard, Little-House-on-the-Prairie type moments to screaming matches in a matter of days. However, we would always apologize, never wanting the other to go through any prolonged period of sadness.

On clear days we would invite some of our friends over to play a game of baseball in our yard. Home plate was the old maple tree that had been in our front lawn for as long as we had both been alive. From here, we would play across the narrow, quiet street that ran through our neighborhood into the well-kept lawn of Pierre, one of the many kind, yet aging neighbors with whom we shared our little spot on the map of modern suburbia. A homerun was any hit over a row of sharp, prickly cedar bushes a few feet from the edge of the road and onto Pierre's residence. It was no great distance, maybe the equivalent to a bunt hit in the major leagues, but for a group of eight- and nine-year-olds, it was left field at Yankee Stadium.

We chose our teams, my sister and I the captains of course, readied our gloves and played an intense game of Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide what team would bat first. I knew her moves better than she did. First she would pick rock, against which I would counter with paper. After her defeat, I would grant her best two out of the three tries, displaying the sportsmanship skills I had acquired in my recently completed first year of organized little league baseball. As our right hands came down in the palms of our left, I knew her next pick would be either paper or a repeat of her rock attempt. The count completed, we revealed our aces. Indeed, she had displayed paper to which I had taken a chance and put forth scissors. With the formalities out of the way, the game began.

Jeannine was always petite, yet very athletic. Her outer layers of childhood beauty and winning smile masked a fastball that would take the bark off of trees should one of her pitches go astray. I volunteered to go first, seeing it as the right of the team captain. I brushed my rather long brown bangs

out of my face, stepped next to our bent pitching net, and prepared myself for the bullet that would be released in my direction. Jeannine wound up very fast, much like a windmill caught in a tornado, took a stride forward to force her momentum in my direction and released the ball. As her small, sun-tanned arm flew out in front of her body, her long brown hair would surge over her head and cover her face. I kept my eye on the ball right from the release, just as my coaches had taught me to do. Though the amount of time it took for the pitch to reach me was no more than a few seconds, the moment that I made contact with that ball seemed to last forever. I turned my body, hips first and then upward from there, like a corkscrew. I extended the bat toward the blazing pitch and made contact. With a great smile, I looked up and saw the ball clear the row of cedar bushes by at least three inches. I rounded the bases and gave a nod to my sister, who returned the gesture with a smile and thumbs up sign. Many similar scenarios had played out before this moment, and would continue to do so for years to come. No matter how far I had hit her pitch, my sister would always smile for me.

As young boys tend to do, I would gloat about my front yard successes to my parents, never considering the fact that the sportsmanship I showed on the field failed to follow me off of it. I exaggerated all of the fine details, making three inches seem like three miles, never considering the effect that these comments would have on my sister. I had preached to her the teachings of quality little league baseball etiquette, and now all seemed to have vacated my mind. Of course she was hurt. Yet she would never say anything at the time. She would always save it for the next game. However, no matter how much of her stored anger that she called upon, she could not strike me out, and of course, I would make sure that my gloating ensured the fact that she knew she could not.

Such patterns of behavior would continue for numerous games until finally, all the anger and frustration she felt would come to a boiling point. Her smile would still be there after every home run, but Jeannine could not hide what she was really feeling. We would fight, nothing ever reaching the use of force, but we would shout and try to expose the weaknesses that we knew the other attempted to hide. In the end, one of us would break down, humiliated in front of our friends, while the other, feeling an immediate surge of guilt, would try to heal the relationship. We always forgave and we were outside the next day playing baseball, or any other game that was to our liking. We were always together, through the good and the bad. Yet as we grew up together, things changed. As we embarked on the era of teenage trials, we soon began to lose the emotional hold that we had over one another. The hardships faced during these years would not only separate my sister and me and drive a wedge between our family, but they would also force me to take a look at who I was, and why I did not have the strength to change in order to be a better brother. This failure on my part would turn memories from years ago such as "Great hit Dan," into "Why didn't you do anything when you found out he raped me!"

My parents told me that failure was not the end of the world. I agreed with them at the time, and even now I feel that such a generic solution to childhood anxiety still holds some merit. The confidence I held in this statement, however, would prove to be comfort in a half-truth. My parents never told me that my failure could end the world of another. The failure I speak of, though, is not a sub-par grade on a school exam, or a physical inability to complete my chores around our one-story battleship-blue ranch home. Instead, I failed my sister emotionally. We would face several hardships in the years to come, much like we had during our childhood. The only factor that varied in this bond of moral support during our adolescent years was that we no longer faced these hardships as brother and sister. Rather, when troubles arose we became Dan and Jeannine, related only in the fact that we had the same parents.

In an article published in *The Globe* entitled "Another Way," author Melodie Davis makes the statement that "Brothers and sisters can help each other through rocky times in growing up." This simplistic statement was accurate at describing the relationship I used to have with Jeannine. Moral and emotional supports are the two most important aspects of the brother-sister relationship. For a time, I provided both to my sister. I was a jack of all trades in my youth. If she were punished or grounded from dessert, I would always be there to sneak her a cupcake to take some of the edge off of the solitary confinement. When our parents would go to work, I could fill her lonely hours of the day better than anyone with games of *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers*. Even when we fought, I would always forgive her, even if I knew the conflict was not initiated on her part. I could never argue with her; if she had said she was to blame, I could not purge that idea from her mind. However, as we grew older, the problems that tormented her changed. I could no longer solve her problems with pastries and card games, and if I did not have those solutions at my disposal, I was useless to her, and she knew it. She felt like I had abandoned her.

The alterations that my sister was making to not only her physical appearance but to her mentality toward the world around her began to show shortly after the death of our grandmother. As children, we would oftentimes spend the night at her quaint two-bedroom apartment, which she shared with her sister, our Aunt Rose. As we excitedly hopped into our pajamas at 9:15 p.m., and hurried to get comfortable on the large, cloudlike red couch, we knew that the night ahead would be full of our favorite television shows, cinnamon toast, and time together. Our grandmother was always there to guide us through the treacherous waters of life. She had all of the answers that we needed and she never forgot to make time for us when we needed her. Above all, however, my sister and I learned from the examples that she set.

My Aunt Rose had been diagnosed with a form of mental illness known as dementia. Her fragile condition forced doctors to suggest relocating my aunt from her home with our grandmother to a nursing facility so that her condition would not burden the rest of the family. My grandmother refused. Instead, she gave up her life to take care of her sister. She took a "work at home job," and dedicated every waking hour she had to Aunt Rose, and ensured that no matter how fast her sister's mind deteriorated, she would never forget the family that loved her. From this, my sister and I learned at a young age that the bond we developed in our lives at that point would last for all time. However, with the passing of our grandmother, we began to lose sight of the lessons we were taught. We would regain their meanings in the later years, but for a time after her death, my grandmother's lifelong advice, and her presence were mourned rather than taken to heart.

Jeannine and I lamented the loss of our grandmother separately, no longer caring for the other in our time of need. Without our grandmother there to help us, it was as if we forgot how to show our affections. I tried everything in my power to alleviate the situation and set our lives together back to the way they once were; yet at the age of twelve, I had only so many tools of comfort at my disposal. My attempts were noted by my sister, but ultimately unsuccessful. She knew before I did that our lives had changed, but most importantly she knew that I was now only her brother; I was no longer her confidant, no longer her safety net. She had been exposed to one of the most traumatizing events with which life can come at a person, and she wanted to persevere on her own.

A few years after my grandmother's death Jeannine began hanging out with the "wrong crowd," and my family and I could see the changes in her personality. At the tender age of fourteen she was smoking, drinking, and experimenting with drugs that had names that were beyond my powers of pronunciation. She was ruining her life, and no counselor or psychiatrist could stop her actions. My

parents exhausted their resources, their advice, their very life energy, but never their love when dealing with my sister. My mother and father exemplified the values that they had worked so hard to instill in their children, including my younger brother, Matt, who was too young to remember all of the events that would transpire in the years following the passing of our grandmother. However, even they could not quell the festering flame that seemed to exist within my sister.

Soon, it was my turn to try to understand the pain that had built up inside of her soul. I was always the dependable child and I could always help my sister through anything. However, things had changed. She had seen things and experienced a life that I only knew about through the movies. She acted as though she knew I would not be able to understand her, but I could see in her eyes that she hoped I could. Yet her problems were beyond my comprehension. I could not help my sister, for I too was still suffering from the tragedy of the past few years. My emotions were drained and my confidence in the world around me was not yet restored. I knew how my sister felt, but I just could not understand why she chose to ruin her life as a means to escape from the pain she was going through. Why couldn't I talk to her anymore?

I had never failed when it came to alleviating the insecurities and uncertainties in my sister's life and I refused to let this be the first time. Instead of showing the care in dealing with my sister that I had in the past, I determined that her new lifestyle called for a different approach to her problems. In a way, I utilized a method of "tough love." I told her that her self-centered attitude was cutting her off from the family, and that in this way she was doing more harm than good to herself and to those in her life. I accused her of being jealous of the attention I had received for my success in school and that her charade of personal torment would not help her situation. I never meant to hurt her; I only wanted to make her see her actions as irrational, much like the perception that I held. I wanted to make her realize that no matter how horrible life seemed to get, it was never that important.

Seeking to reinforce the shield of ignorance that I had masterfully constructed in order to deal with my sister, I began to read any book or essay I could find on sibling rivalries. I yearned for anything that would tell that I was correct in the new philosophy that I had adopted toward the relationship between my sister and me. As my research progressed, I became steadfast in the knowledge that whatever events were transpiring in my sister's life, they would, with time and the proper point of view, solve themselves (Dowshen 2). Statements such as this one published in a sibling rivalry analysis in *KidsHealth* helped me to sleep at night. They told me I was right and that my sister would realize that her life would fix itself. The maintenance of my emotional façade continued for almost a year and a half. Nothing could break the barrier that I had constructed and I was determined to keep it that way. However, the energies that I was expending on myself were detracting from the energies that went into the bond that existed between my sister and me. I was failing to maintain our relationship, and I was working hard at nourishing the attitude that acted as the catalyst to its decay. I was working so hard to keep the same mindset that I had always had, that I failed to realize that everything else was changing. I could not see the types of situations that my sister was exposed to on a daily basis. This blindness prevented me from responding to her needs, and hindered my attempts to console her in her times of despair. I was guilty of living in the past. I always saw my sister as the same pretty girl with the amazing fastball, the girl who I could always apologize to, no matter what I had done. The problem was that now I did not feel the need to apologize. I pretended to know what was best for Jeannine, even though my view of these necessities was limited to baseball, tag or nights at my grandmother's, and that is when it hit me. We did not have any of these things anymore: I was no longer in little league, the yard seemed too small for play, and my grandmother was

gone. It had finally sunk in that things had changed, and that I had failed to see it, and had therefore failed my sister. I had spent so much time attempting to keep things the way they used to be that I really did not comprehend my sister's conflicts. In the end, my efforts only succeeded in damaging our altering relationship further.

The most profound blow came when my sister told me that she had been raped. She did not want to discuss the details of the event and I was not about to press for them either. This type of situation was a far cry from what we had been through together as children. I refused to believe the story that she told. Apparently it had taken place about two months before she had actually confessed the event to me, and she said there was nothing she could do about it. I was a different story however. To this day I do not know if she wanted me to physically seek revenge against her assailant, or just comfort her with words that would bring us back to our youth and that only I could say. Yet I did neither. My defenses were breaking and the reality that I had worked so hard to maintain was slowly transforming into insanity. I now saw through my sister's eyes, something I should have done rather than forcing her to see through mine. The environment in which I existed was revolting. Everything that I had based my life on was gone. My grandmother was dead, my sister was on her way to the same fate and I could not do anything about any of it. I was paralyzed by the realization that I was not ready for the world in which I would have to live. The pain and confusion were too overpowering. In one final attempt to salvage my ignorance and longing for the past, I told her that I did not believe her. It was the worst mistake I had ever made. I knew that if there was any hope to salvage the bond we had shared, I had just destroyed it. When I told her that I thought she was being untruthful, it was only because I could not fathom the gravity of the situation. She had been raped, she had come to me for help, something I had wanted her to do for years, and this time I refused to do anything. I was beginning to see the world as she had for so many years, and it chilled me to the core. I was afraid, but instead of admitting to that fact, I decided to maintain my façade, while in the process losing the faith of my sister. To this day I am still searching for a way to earn her forgiveness.

Everything changes. It is a trite and clichéd statement. It is also a lesson that I learned the hard way. My failure to conform to my sister's needs damaged a trust and love that took fourteen years to form.

As we stood in the driveway that day, saying our final goodbye, I did not want to leave. My sister had finally gotten her life together on her own, she was enrolled in a community college, worked a full time job, and found a man that would never hurt her, no matter the circumstances. She had done it without my help, and I was proud of her for it. I wanted to stay, but in my heart I knew that she wanted me to go, not out of spite or hate, but because she knew it was time for me to "grow up" (Schimpf 1). She knew that the opportunity I had at college would help me to adjust to my new view on life, and that it would also spare me the pain that she had gone through. I hope that in the future, I can be the brother that Jeannine needs. It will take time, but I feel that our relationship will heal. I will always have a sister that loves me, and I hope, that she can forgive me this one last time.

Works Cited

- Davis, Melodie. "Another Way." *Globe*. 2 February 2000: 1-2.
Dowshen, Steve. "Sibling Rivalry." *KidsHealth*. June 2000 <<http://kidshealth.org>>.
Schimpf, Megan. "As We Grow Older, Sibling Rivalries Turn to Bonds that Tie Us to the Past." *Michigan Daily*. 12 March 1998.