

Brother Dearest

Five years ago, a younger me could've been asked what she feared most. "Spiders," she could've said indifferently, "or maybe high places." What more could a seventh-grader fear? Five years ago I'd find out what I truly feared in the worst possible way; I knew nightmares meant nothing, but when nightmares happen right before your eyes, they're impossible to ignore.

Frantic voices shook me awake and led me to my sister, who sat on her bed with a puffy, red expression. Looking back now, her mascara smears and anxious solemnness made her look beautifully ugly. I knew better than to provoke her with a question and made my way to the living room. My own anxiety had lingered in, completely sweeping me away when I finally found my father. His distress was clear in his expression and it shook me to the core.

"What's going on?" My sister, Jaylyn, demanded. "I need to know what's going on." Daylight winked at me through the window, reflecting off the hood of a sheriff's car.

His distress shifted to a false strength. "Jessie, Jaylyn... Max was in an accident."

What exactly came after those few words blurred in my mind; time seemed to stop and speed up simultaneously. I stood there, paralyzed by shock, while my sister tried to press for more information. I was in a stupor until my dad started to leave and Jaylyn rushed me to get ready. I was still oblivious as I got in my sister's car, how much could I possibly know when the only word I'd heard was bike...

Keeping calm was a struggle, yet our car ride was deafeningly silent. Jaylyn occasionally had an anxious burst or glanced at me, expecting me to say anything. I

had been trying to process what may have happened, what awful thing could have brought my brother to Grand Rapids?

Jaylyn turned down the radio I never heard. “Jessie, did you hear what happened?” Her face was still red from the tears. She forced a chuckle and grimaced, “I could barely understand what Dad said.”

“To be honest with you,” I muttered, “I could barely hear anything either. All I heard was bike... Do you think he broke his arm?”

“Jessie!” Jaylyn boomed, her anxious expression turned quickly enough to shatter my false calm. “He wouldn’t be in Grand Rapids for a broken arm.” She was right, something terrible had put my brother in Grand Rapids. How could I be so foolish? I broke down as soon as she finished her sentence, her apologies couldn’t bring me back. My vision blurred with my tears, I was lost in my emotions until she set her hand on my knee. We were in Reed City at this point, halfway through our longest journey. “Jessie, it’s going to be alright. Maybe we should just listen to music until we get there, okay?” Her half a smile gave me what I needed to calm down. My sister was shattered, she and my brother were closer than anything, yet she still carried on. At that moment I looked at her again, she was the strongest person I’d ever known.

Sundays were meant for the calm, but Grand Rapids had no time to relax. What had seemed like a trek in tar quickly turned to a sprint, heightened emotions only added fuel to the fire lit under us. We left our car in a parking complex and rushed to the hospital; before I knew it, I was sitting in a waiting room. It was the worst type of family reunion: my older brother, Justin, and my grandma had followed closely behind us, and

I had heard my aunts were flying in as soon as they could. The tension was suffocating and any idle conversation died as soon as it started, the only thing worth mentioning was what brought my brother here.

My little brother, Max, crashed his bike going down a hill. His skull had cracked open, and he was airlifted to Grand Rapids. It was an eternity passed before we were allowed to be with him. We could only go in two at a time: his brain was swollen, too much stimulation would only worsen his condition. My sister and I were brought to his room together, the last ones to see him.

Walking into that room ushered a new wave of emotion. My brother was only ten and looked even smaller in his bed, doctors and monitors keeping vigil. Purple splotches and dried blood made it clear he had been through physical trauma, but he laid there like he was only sleeping. He was unconscious, oblivious to the nightmare he was truly in. My brother looked like an angel, and seeing him so beaten and broken made me realize what I truly feared: struggle and hardship that may be all for naught. An anxiety attack came quickly as I left my brother to lie there, my dad held me closely and brought me to a quiet room adjacent to the waiting room. I spent the rest of that long day watching the city carry on like nothing had happened, desperately waiting for any news that may take me away.

I was in that room for hours before my dad came in. He was on edge, but compared to his demeanor before he left, he looked peaceful. "Hey, baby, do you need anything?" I shook my head; I needed my brother to be okay, but my dad could only do as much as I could. He must've read my mind. "He's going to be alright, Jessie," he said. "He's scheduled for surgery later tonight." It was nearly five when he came in, and

the night came as quickly as that day had started.

My brother is fourteen now, and that day seems like a twisted dream from long ago. He fought for three months to come home, and continued to fight after that. For three years he had no voice, and for two he had to use a walker to get around. His first independent steps and his saying my name made me realize how long he had been gone, and how much I had missed him. I look at him now and can't imagine him ever being in that state, had his scar not lived on his head, you'd think nothing ever happened.

His journey was harrowing, there were days in his three months when he'd cry because he didn't think he was strong. Those days were overshadowed when he laughed at the cartoons he was watching in bed; the accident took his voice but still graced us with his personality, his spirit.

I remember those who treated my brother, those who came to our aid when hospital bills and stress piled up, and those who became friends in such a dark time. As I write this with teary eyes, I look back and I thank whoever fashioned it to be so my brother can still be with me.