

A Little Red Journal, You Can Read It If You Want

Paige Miller

“Hey Breck, can I come in?” His room doesn’t smell like it used to when we were kids. Like grass stains and wax crayons and that strange, honeyed smell that comes with constantly having sticky sugar impeded in the soft crevices of tiny palms.

It hasn’t been that way for years. Time likes to take those things and morph them into unfamiliar and unknowns before your senses can even register the change. Grass stains and wax crayons fade into unwashed sports equipment that litters a chaotic bedroom floor, and the sweat and sugar smell has been warped into something that could be bottled and labeled as “teenage boy” and put in the clearance section to accumulate dust. God, this kid could use a shower.

You notice these things when you’ve held the title of Older Sister for fifteen years.

“So, I heard the results from Mom,” I say, not sure how light or how casual to make my voice. Instead, I sound awkward and falsetto-like, making me wish for a moment that I was more like my mom than my dad. She’s always been so good with these things. His eyes are outlined in pink when he looks up from his phone. I pretend not to notice.

“Whatever. Just shut the door on the way out, I’m busy right now.” He says, words clipped and lacking their usual patience. The headphones around his neck are pulsing out soundwaves of pretend anger and an overused bass drum.

I hesitate, fingers hovering above the door handle, “I-”

I’m sorry. But the words don’t come, my throat pressing them down before they make their escape, and I’m stuck between coming and going, in a doorway that wants to be shut, in a room that doesn’t smell like it’s supposed to, with a little brother who is no longer little and no longer what I remember...

I was two when my brother was born. Though I was excited to have a sibling, my gender preference was, to say, slightly lacking in subtleties.

“If it’s a boy?” My mom would ask as I sat on her lap after I had come up with yet another baby girl’s name. I hadn’t even considered that it would be a boy. Honestly, what would I do with a baby boy? None of my dolls were boys... I puzzled over this for as long as my short attention span would let me before I came up with a very short list of boy’s names: “*Dance Teacher*”, “*Mold*” and “*Little Sister*”.

And of course, since fate thinks it’s got a sense of humor, my parents came home with a tiny bundle of navy instead of the pink that I wanted. Not only that, but it turned out that none of my names were seriously taken into consideration. Incredibly tactless, in my opinion.

I still think *Mold* would be quite fitting.

Looking back I don't remember exactly when it happened, since childhood memory tends to be painted over with imagination and self-made fable, but I do know that I fell helplessly in love with the little navy bundle, no matter how annoying he would turn out to be. But such is the way of siblings, and as time played out, we became best friends.

“Bee-Bee, Bee-Bee!” He would say, my toddling little shadow clad in a tiny grey newsboy cap and huge, circular glasses, “Flower! For you!” He would bring me sunbursts of dandelions from the backyard, crushed in his little fist as we looked for “dragon eggs” in the rock bed. Breck’s lisp wouldn’t let him say my name right, so he called me Bee-Bee.

And in turn for gracing him with my presence and infinite Older Sister wisdom, he would put up with doing whatever I told him. I had a natural talent for being bossy, and he was gifted with the contrary. A child of endless sensitivity and gentle mannerisms, the kind of little boy that would lay crushed bunches of clover picked from the sidewalk beside a squashed frog on the side of the road just to let the frog know that it wasn’t forgotten. It was like he was full of summer afternoons, and he wanted the world to feel that same warmth.

We spent our early years running through beams of golden sunshine as superheroes and spies and Jedis, jumping in mud puddles in the garden with dinosaur galoshes and giving names to each of the worms we found. The sounds of spring birds and crisp fall leaves and winter winds poured into our ears and found their way into our veins.

But seasons change, and torn knees and mud freckled faces begin to lose their novelty.

I pause at the middle ground of the bedroom and hallway.

“Breck...”

“Just go away, Paige! Get out!” He shouts suddenly like he’s been holding it in. I don’t blame him, it’s just strange seeing him angry. He doesn’t have the face for it. I try and think of something to say, eyes flicking to the rain that’s falling like tiny bullets against the pond outside his bedroom window, but the words don’t seem to come and I just look like an open-mouthed idiot. It’s funny, really, the fact that years ago I would have been the first person he would have wanted to talk to about this. Now I’m not even a possibility.

But I still can’t force myself to walk out the door. So I do the only thing I can think of, I step back into his room and lean my back against the wall, and sink to the floor without a word. He tells me to go away again, though it’s half-hearted at best. I ignore him. So we sit in silence weighted with teenage anger and the regret of an older sister who knows she’s messed up.

“That boy said *what* to you?” I say through clenched teeth. My hair bow is coming undone. I angrily pull it out and throw it into my backpack. I can hear the blood in my ears over the shouts on the Elementary school bus. Years have changed us, Breck has grown even more outgoing and friendly. I was the opposite and preferred listening to talking. Neither of us was the most popular kid in elementary school, but that doesn’t seem to matter as much when you still have good friends and people to play with on the playground.

Though Breck still hadn’t managed to ditch the lisp or the glasses.

I repeat my question, and Breck flushes with embarrassment as he studies the cracked leather of the school bus seat. I grit my teeth as I scan the bus for the boy who was about to learn what happened when you messed with my little brother.

He never asked me to do this, I think me drawing attention to the situation probably embarrassed him more than if I just left it alone. But there’s this code that comes with being a sibling, and that code is very simple: I get to bully my brother, you don’t. And in those moments my “quiet girl” cliché would flip and I would become someone who, unlike my brother, had no problem making threats and shoving mean fifth graders into snowbanks. Though I couldn’t help but turn right back around and direct that same temper at him. Why didn’t he stand up for himself? Why did he have to be so sensitive about *everything*?

I later realized that fear made me act the way I did. I was terrified that he would get hurt or that the older kids would continue to beat him down that I just...Stopped.

I stopped asking if he was ok when someone made fun of him and I could see the beginning of tears in his eyes. I began to scoff and his scrapes and his bruises when he would get hurt, and told him to just get up, when before I would have given him a hand to help. No more band-aids or sympathies or listening to what upset him for the sixth time that day. I became a master of artificial ignorance.

And in turn, Breck stopped complaining when he fell or scraped his elbows. He stopped looking to me for help when he was hurting or when he needed someone to talk to, and he cried on his own, where I couldn't see.

I told him to stop calling me Bee-Bee, and when talking didn't work I yelled. I yelled enough that he became afraid of slipping up. He never called me that again and I pretended that I didn't cry the day I realized I had gotten exactly what I had wanted.

As I got older and experienced the wonders of being an emotionally unstable teenager, I developed a lovely habit of shutting myself in my room for hours on end when I wasn't out with friends. And each time he knocked on my bedroom door his voice was a little more hesitant than it was before, his eyes slightly less hopeful. It took me years to realize my mistake and to understand that I had gotten exactly what I wanted. Everything I goddamn wanted.

I can't stand it anymore, "I'm sorry you won't be able to play hockey again."

"Paige," Breck says my name in exasperation as if a big enough exhale will shove me out of his room, "Just go away."

His room is a disaster of the very equipment he will never again get to use. Skates and hockey sticks and faded jerseys. A damaged brain and a month-long hospital stay could do that to a person. So can the doctor that tells you that your passion is no longer an option. That blow to the head you took from that teammate with the anger issues? Because you got the goal and he didn't? Yeah, that will cost you your childhood sport. Instead, find something new. Join the fucking chess team. Try a book club. Yeah, because that compares. Who needs hockey when you've got a book club? I chew thoughtfully on the inside of my cheek as I get up and leave, wondering how long it will take him to notice the red notebook I left in my place.

The numbers on the calendar just keep going up. Now the door is shut just as my hand is poised to knock. Just in time for me to want back the brother who I treated like he wasn't good enough. Here's the thing about being an older sibling, it's weird. It's like holding a scale that balances parenthood and friendship, and to be the perfect older sibling you have to be right there in the middle because if you tilt it in either direction, you're no longer playing the role you're supposed to. But then you remember that you're ten, or twelve, or fifteen and you realize that life is not some theater production or some metaphor, and even if it was, you're still shit at both sides of the scale. And now I'm stuck wishing that he was how he was before I had tried to change him. Not all of his change is because of me, I know that. But some of it is, and now he thinks being angry and holding in tears are what make you strong. I wished I had realized before that I was jealous of that tender strength that lived in his heart, instead of trying to stomp it out.

Later that day I pass by his bedroom, and on his bed lays a carefully placed red leather notebook, a ballpoint pen sticking out between the first freshly used page.

Hidden in there is a short note that I had written, I hope he reads it