

Goodbye to All That

"Like this Madelyn?" Kaylee's eyes, inundated with curiosity and determination, begged me to critique her work. Her little hands were folded around her attempt of a duplicate braided friendship bracelet my friend Alyssa and I had made the week before at church camp.

"Whatever. Just figure it out yourself." She winced. Even I had been a little surprised by the harshness in my voice.

It wasn't that I hated my little sister. Or that I disliked her, for that matter. She was just a particular thorn in my side, one that was in just the right place, just out of my reach, so that I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't know why she wanted to be just like me in the first place. It wasn't like I was popular, or had many friends at all, and I was practically failing the 10th grade. But yet somehow, in the senseless mind of a kindergartener, I was the perfect host for her parasitic ways.

It had been like this ever since she could follow me around everywhere I went, which was when she was less than a year old. All I ever heard was *Can you teach me how to do that?* or *Can I try?* or *Can I come?* Maybe even a combination of the three. And after five years or so of this non-stop cycle, I was about to erupt with the frustration building up inside of me day after day, question after question.

* * * * *

"Madelyn my head hurts" Kaylee whimpered when I got home from school one day. She was stroking her head, and her usually buoyant manner was far from prominent.

"What'd you do this time?" I asked sarcastically, just wanting to start my massive stack of homework, opening the possibility of going to the movies with Alyssa that night. But of *course* not, because I was stuck talking to my self-centered little sister.

“Well, I thought since you didn’t wanna, I’d try and teach myself how to do that spinny trick on the trampoline you showed Alyssa last night.” I was amazed I didn’t drop my book bag on my foot when I heard she actually tried to do something on her own. To me, this was like hearing aliens had abducted the president. “But I guess I didn’t do it right, ‘cuz I hit my head on the hard outside of the trampoline.”

I could see her disappointment as she told me this, moving her left hand away from her head to demonstrate what happened. Or to try to at least. As soon as she finished talking, she returned it to the exact same spot on the side of her head.

“You mean the metal frame?” I asked, a little worry beginning to develop inside of me.

“Mmm-hmm.” She murmured, almost inaudible. She pivoted so that her back faced me and removed her petite hand from her pale-blonde head of hair so that I could see her “boo-boo”. I didn’t want to scare her, but it was obvious where her head had struck the rim.

Because there was a big red lump.

* * * * *

I didn’t get to go to the movies that night. In fact, I didn’t even finish my homework. I was too busy trying to keep my mom from finding out that Kaylee had hurt herself trying to mimic *my* trick. I knew her far too well to believe she would let it slide; she *always* blamed me when something went wrong, even when she got pregnant with Kaylee. But this time I knew that it was partially my fault for not teaching Kaylee in the first place. So I wasn’t going to give up my phone privileges for a week just for Kaylee’s mistake.

Kaylee went to bed early that night, which put me in high spirits. I couldn’t remember the last time I could watch what I wanted on TV without having to fight over the remote or share my bag of chips. By then it was after midnight, and I expected that I was the last person awake in the

house, since my mom wakes up around 5:00 every morning for work, until I heard a light knock on my bedroom door. It then opened just enough for my mom's head to stick in.

"Oh good Madelyn, you're still up. Is Kaylee with you?" She seemed wide awake, as if she thought it was still early. She slipped completely into my room, casual as if nothing was strange about her sudden arrival.

"No ma'am," I responded, nonchalantly, "she went to bed a few hours ago."

"Ok. She forgot to take her allergy medicine. Can you give it to her? I have this big project for work tomorrow and..."

I cut her off mid-sentence, avoiding a drawn out explanation for this simple task. "Yeah, sure. I'll go in a sec, m-kay?"

"Thank you Madelyn. It really means a lot." She set Kaylee's medicine on a shelf by my door.

I just nodded my head, trying to end the awkward situation as soon as I could duck out. I had never really seen eye to eye with my mom. It was probably because I didn't live up to her one expectation—to be *the* popular cheerleader at my school, like she had at hers. But aren't you supposed to love your family no matter what?

I waited for my mother's steady yet light footsteps to reach the end of the hall, where she would turn into her room and shut the door. *Click!* She was that predictable. I reluctantly set my bag of Doritos on my bed, being sure that they didn't spill, stood up, and removed Kaylee's medicine from my shelf, gently grasping it in my hand. Opening my door quietly, I moved along to Kaylee's room, which was just down the dark, narrow hall.

I didn't know how I was supposed to wake her up, so I decided upon simply opening the door and turning on the light. Knowing Kaylee, she'd probably think it was already morning and start

getting up to prepare for school.

But when I turned the light on, she didn't even budge.

"Kaylee?" I whispered, seeing if she was faking. "You forgot your medicine."

No Response.

I decided that she must be in a pretty deep sleep, so I tiptoed over to her bedside and gently nudged her shoulder, whispering her name over and over.

But her limp body just lied there, still and unresponsive.

I just shook her, back and forth, calling her name at increasing volume and speed as if it would change anything.

Kaylee?

Kaylee?!

KAYLEE?!?

But Kaylee didn't respond.

* * * * *

The thing about hospitals is that nobody takes you seriously unless you're in critical condition.

None of the staff would let me know how she was doing, even after persistent begging. They just gave me a certain nonchalant look, as if I didn't change anything. As if I didn't matter. All they would do, doctor after doctor, nurse after nurse, was rush by, their long coats waving a breeze that smelled of sanitation chemicals into me.

But I kept trying. I felt strangely unimportant, excluded, and unwanted there; but I realized it was probably how Kaylee had felt all those years I'd done the same thing to her.

* * * * *

Around 4:15 that morning, a man in the now familiar doctor attire came out of Kaylee's room with an indecipherable expression.

"How is she?" I managed to get out, my voice shaking as tears fought to flow down my cheeks. "What's happening to my sister!?" My voice, trembling, was more demanding this time. It may not have mattered to him, but what happened to my sister was all that I cared about now. Even our own mother had ditched about fifteen minutes earlier to get a coffee from McDonalds. Only after preaching to me in front of everybody at the hospital that it was entirely my fault Kaylee was hurt, that is.

But she didn't have to. Because I already knew that. That's why I wasn't going to budge until Kaylee recovered.

"I'm sorry," he said, as I guess all doctors must do. But there was no sympathy in his fatigued voice. "I don't think she's going to make it."

"What is wrong with her? Isn't there *anything* you can do?"

"She's got a pretty serious concussion, and she's slipped into a coma. There's not much we can do." He looked at his watch, proving again that he didn't care what happened with *my* life— *our* lives— mine and my sister's.

"She's only six..." I couldn't hold back the tears any longer. I *knew Kaylee*. And I knew she wouldn't die until *I* did. She never did *anything* until I did.

"You can go in and see her now if you want to."

I didn't hesitate. I *had* to see my sister. It was my fault she was here. It should have been *me* lying unresponsive in the hospital bed.

But it wasn't.

It was a little kindergartener. It was a little, innocent young girl with her whole life ahead of her.

It was my sister.

And she *would* get through this. Because when she did, things would *never* be the same.

Goodbye to all that.

And hello to a new me. A new us.

* * * * *

For the four days Kaylee was in her coma, I never left her side. Not even to eat. A concerned nurse routinely brought me meals that were meant for Kaylee, even though she was out cold. I only stood up to use the small restroom across the hall.

Our mother stopped by occasionally, glaring at me with her blaming eyes, always saying that she wished she could stay but had so much to do with work. I pretended to understand. If Kaylee wasn't her first priority, I didn't want her there anyways.

I spent most of the time just talking to Kaylee. Rerunning our lives together like a broken record. Just talking. Apologizing. Telling her how much I loved her. Telling her how much I needed her. Because it was true. Even if it took something as horrible as this to make me realize it, I *did* love her, and I *did* need her.

I couldn't accept that this pale, unresponsive body was Kaylee. *My* Kaylee. It was so different from the energetic, happy-go-lucky little girl she usually was. And I actually missed her voice. I missed her pleading for me to show her. Teach her. Bring her along.

Love her.

* * * * *

"Come on! You can do it! Just try it like I showed you." I laughed as Kaylee tried to imitate my motions, exactly, from the jump to the landing. Over and over she landed on her butt, making a pouty face and crossing her arms as if she'd never get it. But just as quickly as she'd fallen, she'd spring back to her feet, ready to give it another try.

"I think I've got it this time!" Kaylee bent her knees and jumped, doing a complete flip in midair. The same thing she'd tried four months earlier when she hit her head, knocking her into her coma. She'd made a miraculous recovery, according to the doctors, waking up after only four days of being unconscious. Now she was back to her normal self, as if nothing had happened.

But I wasn't.

Having almost lost Kaylee, I was a new sister to her; I did anything she asked, as silly as it was, and let her come along with me everywhere I went. I didn't mind either. Because she was my sister. And you're supposed to love your family no matter what.

And I loved Kaylee.