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Mixed Girl, Trauma Oncologist

Chapter 15: My Biggest Brother

Larry was fifteen years older than me, so of course he never confided in me about his inner world, but it's not difficult to figure out how he must have felt. Young and idealist Betty, pushed for Dad to adopt Larry—for Larry to be his *true* son. Unfortunately this entitlement allowed Dad to pass along his trans-generational abuse, by whup'n Larry with a belt when he was disobedient. And after six years of having free-reign, obedience wasn't likely a skill Larry had much experience with. So no...what he got from Dad wasn't the love he had hoped for, instead he learned to blindly follow rules.

As the number of children increased and the family chaos increased, being obedient and studious didn't earn Larry the approval and attention he craved. Therefore in a bold move, he decided to join the Army right after graduating from Berkeley High. Since both of our parents were Veterans, that did garner some special attention—and for a moment he must have felt giddy success. Sadly, it was nineteen sixty-five and Larry's military duties would take him to a distant civil war...in a little country called Vietnam.

Most of what I remember about Larry is after his army-days, however, I do recall a basic impression of him during his last years as a high-schooler. Larry read a lot (earning him Buddy Holly style horn-rims), helped with the heavier chores, and got involved with the Unitarian youths at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley. That church still sits atop a ridge on the uphill side of *The Arlington*—a stretch of road that runs from the famous Arlington Circle in North Berkeley into ritzy-rural Kensington.

It was a short drive from our house on Cragmont to the Unitarian church, so when Kim was adopted and I was born, the whole family went up there for our un-Christian, christening. I was adorned in a stiff frilly dress. My big sister (who as far as I knew had always been in my family) wore a larger version in pink with and a matching paten leather purse clutched in her dark hands. After posing for a group photo, Larry scooped me up in his strong arms, saying that this was a special day. I looked at his pale freckled face framed with combed back red hair, and found his hopeful eyes behind his thick black-rimmed glasses.

Then we all piled into the big car and went up to what I figured was a castle in the fog. There was an organ being played that I considered a wind-piano; it had a massive array of pipes coming up from behind it that the sound blew out of. Some of the pipes stood as fat as tree trunks while other ones were so little you could drink through them like straws. They look like a family to me, and I contentedly scanned them all for a long time with just my eyes, but when I squirmed to get down so I could touch them, my mother gave my father a look and passed me to him. As I sat with my Dad, a man in what looked like a night-gown talked and talked. Then after successfully twisting from that lap, my biggest brother scooped me up.

I looked out over the lines that the comb left in his Brill-Creamed hair, as we traveled into the room that had an indoor pond with a gurgling fountain, and was surrounded by indoor trees. He let me climb up on the bench around the water. He was so strong that when I leaned over to splash in it, he could hold me just high enough above the rippling surface that my fingertips touched, but my dress didn't get wet. I felt like an angel. He also held me up to the lowest limbs of the trees, and I swatted at the dark glossy leaves. He kept looking over at the big doors where other people and my family sat. Then he lowered me down and carried me back inside. *That* was the brother who loved me, and he didn't have to do anything to earn my love—my heart and brain just attached to his kind spirit.

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When news of the civilian massacre at My Lia broke, Larry had locked himself in his and Sandy's apartment bathroom and gone crazy hitting his head on the sink, saying he was going to kill himself. Dr. Abraham, a psychiatrist that made house calls for our especially awful family crisis's, came and talked him down; but I guess there were too many other crazy times, and eventually even tough Sandy cashed in her chips.

After the divorce, Larry's life repeated an extended cycle that went like this: get some sort of job and do "pretty good", then "lose it", which involved some sort of violent episode, the police, and county jail. Followed by a trip to "The VA", which meant being shlepped to see him at a hospital where he usually looked fine and was "getting back on track"; so he could then get some sort of new job where he'd do "pretty good" before "losing it". You get the picture. Once during a stay at the V.A. when Larry complained sufficiently about severe headaches, they took an X-Ray of his head and discovered a tumor

the size of a tangerine. They successfully removed it—though he lost hearing in one ear—and the doctors thought that perhaps the tumor explained his “erratic” behavior. Betty of course pinned her hopes on that conjecture, and when Larry “lost it” the next time was baffled—a frequent state when reality just refused to match up with her image of her happy Rainbow-family.

Chapter 16

...I found myself at a faded Aquamarine door on the first floor near a dumpster. I knocked hard once, waited a minute, then knocked again—longer and harder.

“Hey, Larry open up the door...it’s me, Laurie.”

I heard some thumping and then the door slowly opened—and there stood Larry. He had about a hundred and thirty pounds on his six-foot frame. His long beard was shot through with white, his skin was yellow and waxy looking; his beat-up face first registered incomprehension, but then cracked into a huge grin,

“Laurie!! What are you doing here?” Larry croaked

“Well, I’m here to find you.” He tried to throw his arms around me for a hug, but he encountered the backpack. Cambell stood up on the support bar and grabbed my hair in her fists. Larry looked over my shoulder,

“Is that Cooper?”

“Um....no this is Cambell. My daughter.”

I nudged him aside, leaned over, and swung the unit down kicking out the hinge, so she could sit comfortably in the free-standing frame. I looked around and took in the funky room. Larry was garrulous,

“Wow!!...What a surprise. This is great.”

He did hug me, and then sort of sagged. He turned, stepped back and sunk onto the bed he had just arisen from. He reached for a paper bag on the floor and removed a two-thirds empty vodka bottle. I could hear some other things rattling around in the bag. As if this reminded him, he pulled out a few prescription bottles, uncapped them and swigged down some pills.

“My medication...you know, for the...um, cancer.”

He looked embarrassed.

“I know about it...that’s why I’m here. It’s time to go home.”

He grinned again. I told him we were going right now. I pulled Cambell back onto my shoulders, clicked the buckle around my hips, did a little hop to adjust the fit; and motioned Larry to follow. He grabbed a few things, raked his hands through his greasy hair and followed me out.

Driving back to motel number one, I lost focus and thought maybe we should go down to the beach and have a touristy moment—sort of like what a normal sister and brother might do when the former visited the latter. He directed me, and we got out on a grassy strip right next to the water. Larry sat down and faced the ocean. I walked near the shore, and released Cambell to explore.

I looked back up at Larry, who was sitting cross-legged, the sea breeze blowing back his shoulder length hair. He looked like a cross between Charles Manson and George Harrison communing with his Sweet Lord. Then when I looked harder, I could see inside that withered, wiry body; I could see

the wounded little red-headed boy, who had had grown into the wounded strong young man, who had been so eager enlist. I could see all of the pain that has driven him to hide out on the streets for the past two decades, and the pain that harsh life had inflicted as well.

Larry sold his blood for booze rather than beg and demean himself by asking for money from strangers. As he sat in that position on the grass, I could see that he was relieved to finally have it all be over with. He was almost a ghost already, nevertheless the still substantial part of him that couldn't retain body heat was starting to shiver. I grabbed up Cambell, and we headed back to the motel. I had let him smoke a cigarette, coughing weakly, in the open convertible, but when he tried to light up in the room, I said no.

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