

Grow up, Baby

By Anna Wostenberg

A beautiful fall evening in Danville, California, leaves covering the grass and the warmhearted, sleepy sun setting over the browning hills, painting the sky all sorts of shades of pinks and oranges and purples. Before my family had fallen apart, back when we all liked each other. My brother Dane is six years older than me and in this moment I was maybe five or six years old. He and I were playing on the front lawn of our cul-de-sac as our mom looked on and perused the mail. The front door of our house was open and the dogs and cat were going in and out as they pleased.

Dane lay on his back, gross boy feet splayed up into the air. "Come lay on the grass with me, Anna!" I hated the feeling of grass on my bare arms and legs. It always left me with itchy hives.

"No!" I refused, scrunching my tiny, pretty face into a look of disgust.

"Fine, then. Sit on my feet!" At this, my mom's eyes shot up from the mail.

"Dane..." she warned. "Don't do anything stupid. Don't launch her into the air."

"Yeah!" I cried. But I sat on his feet willingly anyway, unaware of what would happen next.

"I'm not gonna do that, Mom!" Dane assured her. And he didn't. At first. I perched on his feet, swaying back and forth as he bent his legs at different angles, trying to keep my balance. "Pick your feet up," Dane said. I listened.

Next thing I knew, I was flailing through the air and my tiny left arm broke my fall. Then the searing pain charged through my arm and into my brain like an unrelenting lightning bolt. I wailed over my mom's screams, both at me to calm down and at Dane for being an idiot.

"What were you thinking?! Are you okay?! Bill, get out here!" My dad came loping outside from where he'd been on the couch, watching the news. He gently took my arm. His presence stopped my tears in their tracks and only sniffles remained fighting.

"Where exactly does it hurt?" he moved my arm this way and that, carefully, slowly. I winced when it hurt and he'd nod, thinking about my reaction. "Dane, go get your Boy Scouts neck kerchief." Dane, who'd been paralyzed with fear of hurting me but mostly of the punishment he'd face later, uncharacteristically and wordlessly went inside and retrieved the kerchief.

My dad quickly and effortlessly wrapped my arm in a makeshift sling and fastened it over my right shoulder. "There. I'll give you some Motrin for the pain, but I think it's just a sprain. Don't move it for a few days, okay?" He carried me inside and plopped me down in front of the TV, flipping to Nickelodeon. My whimpers and sniffles quieted as I cradled my arm and limply pressed an ice pack to it and lost myself in whatever show I'd been watching. I didn't even notice that Dane had joined me on the couch.

"Sorry," he muttered, looking down into his lap.

"It's okay," I whispered back.

I look at him in this moment, his pubescent figure slouched into the couch, trying to blend in. And I realize how delicate and sensitive he actually is. How human he is. And suddenly, almost fifteen years after the incident, it all begins to make sense.

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As a girl, I'd had a lot of toys, especially Barbies. So one year for Christmas, I'd gotten a My Size Angel Barbie. It was beautiful, with a matching dress for me and she really was my size! But as I got older, I started to play with her less. She had a perch in the corner of my bedroom and that's where she spent most of her time.

One day, Dane had come into my room asking if he could borrow my My Size Angel Barbie.

"It's for a project," he'd insisted weakly. "I'll show you when I'm done."

"What project?"

"A fun project," was all he'd offer.

"No. She's MY Barbie," I said snottily, going back to playing with my other toys.

"Come on, you don't even play with the stupid doll anymore!" He sauntered over to her corner and picked her up.

"Yes I do!" I didn't, but there was no way I was going to give my Barbie over to brother.

"No you don't! You haven't touched it in at least a year!" This was true.

"Yeah huh!" I whined.

"Stop being such a baby! Why won't you share?" NOBODY called me the B-Word and got away with it. I was definitely NOT a B-Word.

"Fine! Take her! I don't care!" As he walked out of my room triumphantly, the Barbie tucked under his arm, I dove into my bed and pulled the covers all the way over my face, an act of defiance and shame that I'd done as a girl, trying to hide from my family.

What felt like an eternity later, hunger drew me from the sanctity of my bedroom. I emerged from my balmy cave and walked the long hallway to the stairs. That's when I saw her. Dangling on the end of a noose from the second floor bannister was my My Size Angel Barbie, her dress all disheveled and hair tangled.

"MOM!" I shrieked at the top of my lungs as I bolted down the stairs, nearly stepping on my puppy, who had been napping on one of the steps. I barreled into the computer room, where my mom was online, probably on QVC's website.

"What??" she asked, irritation bubbling through her voice.

"Come here! Look at what Dane did!"

"What now?" she groaned and rolled her eyes as she followed me into the entryway by the stairs. I pointed deliberately but silently at my Barbie, searching for and expecting her anger to boil over. But it didn't. For a moment, my mother's face was blank. Then a smile widened, as she tried to hide it and stifle a laugh. She wasn't very successful. "Dane!" she called. "Get down here!" She giggled.

"Yeah, Mom?" he asked innocently as he emerged from his room at the top of the bannister.

"Did you do this to your sister's Barbie?" Her look of amusement made me fume.

"Mom! Why aren't you yelling at him??" I was stamping my feet in anger.

"Because it's kinda funny!"

"No it's not! He hanged my Barbie from a knot!"

"It's called a noose," Dane piped in. He was smirking smugly as he watched from the safety of the second floor.

"That's what I said!"

"Oh, Anna, stop taking everything so personally. It was a joke," my mom said.

"Dane, be nicer to your sister," she scolded half-heartedly. "Take her Barbie down and give it back," she said. She'd already walked back into the office.

I screamed in anger and stormed upstairs, slamming my bedroom door as loudly as I could, barricading myself into my room with my toys.

Looking back, I analyzed why my brother would do something so cruel, so mean-spirited? And I started to realize that maybe he was just trying to connect with me, as a big brother, in the only way he knew how. But he did get a reaction out of me, which was often our only means of interaction when we were younger.

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"Anna! You wanna help me practice for Assassins?" Dane came barging into the family room, without regard for whatever I was doing.

"Shut up!" I cried. Dane walked between me and the television, a big smile on his face. "Stop!" I screeched. The shrillness of my voice echoed through the house.

"Come on, kid! Let's go get some Nerf guns and have a Nerf war!" He'd called me "Kid" which was a name he reserved for when he most wanted something from me. To my silence he sang, "I'll buy you a Nerf guuuuun..."

"Fine!" I clambered up off the couch in my awkward, lanky puberty-ridden state and grabbed my UCLA hoodie off the floor. I masked my excitement so that my eagerness to go with him wouldn't make him suddenly change his mind.

"Mom, can I have some money to go to Target?" he called from the bottom of the stairs.

"Take twenty dollars from my purse!" she echoed back from the computer room. "Don't forget, I'm going to Bunko tonight and Dad is working late!"

Ignoring her, Dane and I climbed into the ancient Ford Explorer and his show tunes came blasting through the speakers. I loved listening to show tunes with him.

"What's Assassins?" I asked.

"It's a game the seniors play. You have teams and you basically try to shoot people and the only place you can't shoot them is at school."

"So, they're going to come to our house??" This concept terrified me, mostly because I knew what was coming next.

"Yeah... by the way! Would you mind walking out of the house before me for the next few days? Just to make sure nobody is out there?"

I glared at him, hoping he'd see me, even though his eyes were glued to the road. "No!"

"Come on! Please?"

"What's in it for me?" This had come to be the most commonly spoken phrase in our family.

"My undying love for my little sister?" I ignored this response, but my agreement weaved within the silent sound waves and my rolled eyes.

"Alright," started Dane, "I have to practice my aim." Nodding my understanding, I built my wimpy fort at one end of our upstairs hallway, closer to my bedroom and Dane built his at the other, using my parents' master suite doors as a shield. "Ready? Go!" Dane cried.

Filled with too much confidence but also a little bit of fear, I waited, crouched down under the safety of my fort for an eternal minute or two. The silence was terrifying. I had no clue if he had sneaked closer to my side of the battlefield, waiting to pounce; or if he was standing his ground, waiting for me to make my

move. I took a deep breath, counted to three, and peeked my head ever so slightly over the top of my fort.

POP! "OW!"

"Oh shit!"

I toppled backward, my hand clutching my right eye and my Nerf gun clattering to the ground. The tears involuntarily tumbled over the barriers of my lids. Next thing I remember, Dane is standing over me, prying my eyelid open with his pointer finger and thumb.

"Can you see?"

"Ow! Yeah!" I was trying to wriggle free from his grasp. "That hurts!"

"But you can see, right? Let's go get some ice." Dane clumsily filled a dishtowel with ice and offered it to me. I accepted and placed gentle pressure on the already swelling eye, glaring at him with my uninjured one.

"I'm SO telling Mom that you shot me in the eye!" I saw the panic flash across his face. I smirked victory on the inside, milking my injury and hurt on the outside. But Dane was clever and a broad grin chased his panic away.

"Hey, Kid, you wanna see something funny?"

"Fine." Dane led me to the computer room and quickly opened up iTunes on the aging desktop computer. The sound that emanated from the speakers was quite possibly the silliest song I'd ever heard:

"I'm not wearing underwear today! No, I'm not wearing underwear today! Not that you probably care, much about my underwear! Still nonetheless I gotta say! That I'm. Not. Wearing. Underwear. To-daaaaay!"

I immediately burst into a fit of giggles, doubling over in my office chair.

"What the heck was that?!" I squealed.

"A song from *Avenue Q*, one of the musicals I saw in New York!"

"That's the funniest thing I've ever heard!" I breathed between laughs. Tears had inch-wormed down my cheeks, stopping at the corners of my mouth. I instinctively licked them away as I slowly regained my composure.

"Wanna hear another?" Dane asked.

"Yeah!" I quickly agreed, the pain from my injury completely forgotten.

This moment, I understand now, was a turning point in our relationship. We began to keep things from our parents, a united front, like siblings do. We'd reached a place where we viewed each other as friends rather than enemies.