

This Time Next Year

The day my sister got accepted into the University of Southern California I stayed home from school because I had a fever. The acceptance email had come the day before, but she didn't check her inbox very often, so she read it at 7:53 on a Tuesday morning. While she jumped up and down, my mom cried and tried to hug her. She got an elbow to the face and no apology. She didn't seem to mind though and just stepped back, continuing to congratulate her eldest daughter.

My sister, Sophia, was a senior at Hayden-Prior, a private school near my house. It had 6th grade up to 12th grade and they had to go to mass every morning. The front was gigantic with a bunch of windows and made entirely out of brick. I thought it looked like a loony bin but nobody in my family thought that was funny and Mom said, "You really shouldn't call it that. Hayden-Prior does not look like psychiatric hospital, Vivian." I stopped saying it, but it was still true. The place looks like it's filled with ghosts, but when you go inside you get something way worse – teenagers. I'm not scared of them. I just don't like them.

Sophia could have gotten into any college she wanted because she went to Hayden-Prior. My mom and dad both wanted me to go there the following year, but said I was allowed to choose between there or Peterson Middle School, the public middle school 12 blocks from my house. Some of my friends were going to Peterson and it only had 3 grades before you went to high school. It was a lot smaller and looked more like my elementary school. It was definitely less scary, but I still hadn't fully made up my mind. Sophia said she didn't care what I did, but she also said public school kids are dumber.

That morning I stayed home sick from school, Sophia left a little later than normal because she didn't have to drop me off, which meant her and Dad left at the same time. Mom

liked to wave goodbye to Dad before work everyday, so she went out front with them, leaving me alone in the living room for a little bit. I'd been watching cartoons since 6:30 at that point and I knew once my mom came back I'd have a long day of sitting on the couch ahead of me. I'd been eyeing a lipstick Sophia just bought, and I figured the only way to improve my sick day was surely to take something. I began my trek upstairs.

Her room was furthest from our parents and my room at the end of the hallway. On the door was a sign with her name on it. The sparkly pink "Sophia" seemed to expand as I got closer, like it was trying to block the door. Looking away from the sign, I pushed open the gold knob and stepped into her glamorous room.

The walls, carpet and furniture were all white, and her bed was pushed into the center of the back wall. When you walked in, you stepped right onto the pink runway of a rug that led to her nightstand. I didn't need in there though, what I wanted was in her vanity on the right side of the room. Next to the vanity was one of two windows in her room, and it faced our side yard. Once I think she snuck a boy in through this window with a ladder. Just in case, I crawled over to it, hunched at the very bottom of the window frame and pressed my forehead straight to the glass. It looked like Sophia's car might have still been home, but I figured I'd pick up the pace just in case.

Her vanity has one big drawer in the middle and one smaller drawer on either side. In the far left drawer I knew were all of her hair supplies, the far right were all of her nail supplies, and in the middle was the holy grail: her makeup. I pulled the drawer open in reverence. I'd never seen it myself; she was too scared I'd take or break something. Exactly like what I'm doing right now, as I reach way down to the bottom, dig around for a second and snatch up the first tube I can grasp. It was pink. Like Pinkalicious, Sleeping Beauty pink. Perfect.

Luckily, just as I slammed her drawer shut, I heard my mom slam the garage door below me. I darted down the endless hallway and into my own room so fast I got a little dizzy. Once I was stable, I shoved the stolen treasure under my lime green pillow for safe keeping.

“Viv? Are you alright?” my mom called from downstairs.

“Yeah, coming!” I coughed weakly, the whole excursion having taken a toll on my sick body.

For the rest of the day, all my mom could talk about was next year. Where Sophia would live, how often she would visit, how much closer my school would be and how her and I could do more together with Sophia gone.

“Just think, when it’s really nice you could even walk home from Hayden-Prior!” she said.

“I thought you said I could choose?” I said.

“Of course, Viv. It’s up to you, I’m just thinking ahead.”

Tired of hearing about next year, I went back to school the next day, even though I still felt bad. Sophia told me not to puke in her car on the way there.

“I didn’t even puke yesterday. I had a fever.” I said.

“Well don’t breathe in my car then.”

She always dropped me off on her way to school, way far away from the doors because she didn’t want to be seen with me. It was okay though because she let me sit in the front seat even though I wasn’t technically big enough yet. Our schools were 5 blocks apart and the whole drive there she tried to make her stuffy uniform cute. At the first red light, she took her hair

down. I figured she slept in rollers with how perfect it looked. At the second red light, she rolled her socks just below the hem of her skirt, and at the third she wiggled the skirt up a couple inches. The fourth was green. She sighed, “Grab me the lip gloss from the glovebox.”

I paused. Then our hands bumped as she reached over my lap for the glovebox, eyes still on the road, and I reached for the center console.

“That’s the center console. The glove box is on your side”

“I knew that. I was just testing you.”

“Sure thing, Viv.”

As we passed through the last light and pulled into school drop off, I could see some of my friends arriving too. Ruby was getting out of her car, and it looked like Sam was walking inside, which meant her little sister made them late again and she’d be in a bad mood. Sam liked to be 15 minutes early and had strong opinions about how things should and shouldn’t work. I liked Ruby a lot better than Sam.

As we pulled up to where I was supposed to get out, Sophia reached over, gave my knee a squeeze and said, “Kick butt today, okay?”

As I crawled out of the passenger seat I mumbled, “They won’t know what hit ‘em.” And trudged into school, not looking back. The walk to the gymnasium felt like an eternity. I knew they’d have questions about why I was gone yesterday. I stopped in the bathroom to blow my nose. Then went to the water fountain for a drink. And then I peeked in the library for a second just in case they’d sat somewhere different for the first time in four years. They hadn’t, so I headed back to the gym.

Upon opening the door, I could tell I was going to get an earful. Ruby spotted me immediately, and when she saw me, so did Sam. Before I had even sat down Sam began asking questions.

“Why were you absent yesterday?” She said.

“I was sick.” I said. I dropped my bag and folded my legs underneath myself.

“You missed a spelling test and we played Just Dance in art because we had a sub and Tara showed us her bralette that doesn’t fit her at recess.”

“You’re not sick anymore though, are you?” Ruby asked.

“Not really. I wish I came to school,” I said. Sam looked like she wanted to be listened to again.

“You should have been. Skipping is for losers and besides, if you’re fine today you probably weren’t really sick yesterday. What’d you do all day anyways, just puke?”

“I watched a lot of TV and my mom kept talking about next year. Sophia’s moving to California and they all think I should go to Hayden-Prior.”

“My mom says girls who go to Hayden-Prior get bratty.” Sam said.

“Sophia isn’t bratty.”

“Yeah, she is. She’s rubbing off on you. You’re both annoying and you don’t know it.” Ruby said. Sam laughed a little, then said, “Ruby’s right. You act like you want to be her, wearing her clothes and taking her stuff. You even walk funny cuz you think it makes you look older, y’know? It’s embarrassing.” I didn’t know how to respond to that. I figured they were probably right; they were always talking about what I should do different.

“What are you guys making for the history project?” I asked. Thankfully they moved on, rambling about how great each other’s ideas were.

The rest of the day was tense. I spent my entire afternoon thinking about going home. I didn’t pay attention in math, Spanish, quiet reading, or science. I got a headache during lunch that wouldn’t go away, thinking too hard made my head hurt and the nurse said she couldn’t give me more medicine without Mom’s permission. So I thought about going home. By the time I was clambering into Sophia’s car in the pickup line, I was ready to cry. She was listening to a sad pop song louder than I would have liked her to be, and as soon as my door was shut we peeled out of the parking lot.

“Today was the worst day ever.” I said, pulling my knees to my chest and leaning my head way back till it hit the seat. I was too short, so it just made my chin jut in the air.

“I had a bad day too and I *don’t* want to talk about it,” Sam said.

“Oh. ‘M sorry.”

“It’s whatever.”

The pop star serenaded us for three blocks before Sophia spoke again.

“Have you seen my Better Than Sex mascara?”

“No. And Mom says not to say that word.”

“No, she says you can’t say that word, not me. I’m an adult.”

I wanted to tell her she’s only 17, but I didn’t. Sophia had tried to teach me about sex last month, but she was a week and a half late, Mom had just given me The Talk. That was when I

decided Sophia was just as smart as Mom, which made her basically an adult. It's rude to talk back to adults, so I just said, "Oh. Okay."

That evening, on my third Ibuprofen of the day, I laid wide awake in bed. My door was propped open so Mom could come check on me without waking me up, but it just let in the light from the hallway. There was a thin line stretching out down the hallway floor, illuminating the carpet. The line seemed to dance, flickering in and out from under my sister's closed door. In the light I could watch Sophia's shadow move around her room without her ever opening her door.

I was supposed to be asleep an hour ago, but I couldn't fall asleep no matter what. Closing my eyes helped, but even then, all I could focus on was the feeling of the tiny pink tube squishing against my skull and pressing into the back of my ear. I moved slower than I ever had in my life to reach up and pull it out. Lifting my arm above the blankets so there wasn't any fabric noise, I did a tiny sit up and slid it just below my pillow. Then I laid slowly back down, the tube resting directly in front of my face. It was slightly less pink in the darkness of my room, and a little shiny. There were three words on the side, slightly raised, but I couldn't make them out in the dark.

I don't know how long I laid there staring at the stolen makeup before I heard my parents' voices below. They weren't talking very loud, but it sounded important because my Dad was using his business voice.

"I don't love that the bus doesn't go to Hayden-Prior, but if you're okay with driving her, I don't mind. I see why you believe it is necessary for Vivian to attend Hayden-Prior, and there is no question that Soph belongs at USC. We can make this work, I have no worries." There was a really long pause before my mom spoke.

“I’m a little worried about Soph being so far from home, especially so far from Vivian. And with her starting at a new school... She said most of her friends are going to Peterson, but I just don’t think it’s a good fit for her.”

“I know you said she can choose, but ultimately it’s up to us. If you think Peterson would be that bad, then she shouldn’t go, it’s as simple as that.” Mom started to sniffle a little, but I didn’t hear her reply. I rolled over too quickly, pulled my blankets over my head, clutched the little pink prize I’d won for myself like it would change the future.

Without thinking, I opened it. I liked the sound it made as I pulled the wand out. I put the wand back in and pulled it back out a couple more times. I had to be careful not to touch it to anything so I didn’t get lipstick on my sheets. I pulled the cap off one more time, then closed it and shoved it into my pillowcase. I decided tomorrow I’d put it on. I’ll probably look just like Sophia. I dozed off thinking about what I’d look like at her age, how pretty I’d look in the lipstick, maybe even prettier than her.

When I woke up the next morning, my face was dry, my nose was runny and slightly puffy, and my eyes felt heavy. My appearance didn’t go unnoticed at the kitchen table.

“You look awful Viv. Doesn’t she look awful Mom?” Sophia said, grabbing her toast and circling the island to join us at the table.

“I wouldn’t have said awful. But honey, you do look a little tired. Are you feeling alright?” Mom said.

“I feel fine.” Sophia was much more blunt than my mom, stating, “You look like you were up all night crying.” Like she knew anything.

“Can we just go now?” I asked. Thankfully, they let me stalk to the car alone. The whole drive to school, I planned. Tonight, when Sophia locked herself in her room for hours, even though we all knew she didn’t fall asleep until midnight, I would lock myself in the bathroom. I’d make sure I had soap and a washcloth, and that way I could wear the lipstick without anyone ever knowing I’d taken it.

Thoughts of my scheme carried me through the day, and even Sam’s snarky comments couldn’t pull me down. For the second day in a row, I couldn’t wait for school to be over, but this time it was different. My friends could definitely tell I wanted to leave, especially at recess when we were all sitting on top of the monkey bars.

“You’ve been acting weird is all. It’s like your brain is broken.” Ruby said.

Sam piped up, her usual judgy self, to say, “Oh my god Ruby, you can’t just tell someone their brain is broken.”

“No, not, like, bad. Just, she seems like she’s not really here.”

“She seems like her normal dumb self to me.”

They didn’t really mind that I didn’t answer. Besides, they were right, my mind was under my pillow.

Even family dinner felt torturous, and I was quiet for most of it. Dad made some casserole he and my mom really like. Sophia and I tolerate it. Today it was even stronger than usual, like my tongue was being sliced open by some unnamed meat. I’d been pretty much ignoring my family throughout the meal, so I froze when I heard my name. In the middle of

suffering through another forkful of casserole, my mom broke the silence. “So, Vivian, have you thought anymore about where you’d like to go next year?”

I was quiet. I blinked, and Dad went “Answer your mother, Vivian.”

Choking down my bite, I coughed a little and mumbled out some terrible answer about how, no, I hadn’t thought about it and could I please be excused. Sophia stifled a slight laugh. My dad didn’t laugh though.

“No ma’am. The enrollment deadline is coming up and your mother needs an answer.”

The casserole on my plate was challenging me to take another bite to buy myself some time. Each piece of macaroni smiled up at me menacingly.

“Ruby and Sam are going to Peterson.” I said. My mom sighed.

“Viv, I know you love your friends, but change can be good! Besides, Sam isn’t the nicest young lady, is she?”

I dropped my fork. Dad shot me a very mean look.

“She’s my friend.”

“Well, sometimes we can’t see who our friends really are because-” Sophia cut off Mom’s lecture, asking, “May I be excused?”

Grumbling at Sophia’s interruption, my dad just nodded at the kitchen. She walked calmly to the sink, rinsed her plate, put her plate and fork in the dishwasher and washed her hands silently. She made her way towards the stairs with ease but paused at the bottom.

“I think Viv should get to go wherever she likes,” she said. Then she walked upstairs. Her steps were measured, the kind you take when backing away from a wild animal, but she kept going until we heard her door close too quietly.

My dad turned to me, brushing his hand across his face.

“You may be excused.”

I didn't move carefully like Sophia. I booked it to my room like their anger was chasing me. It was a little early, but I knew if I just hid out in my room for another hour my plan could still work. Once my parents were done with the dishes, they'd sit down to watch TV and stay there until they went to bed. Sophia was probably already cooped up in her room for good, but it would be safer to wait. So I did. For an hour, I sat and waited. Finally, as soon as I heard to TV come alive downstairs, I knew it would be safe.

I collected the lipstick from my pillow and shoved it in my sleeve. I crept quickly to the bathroom and closed the door as quietly as possible, then locked it. I wasn't supposed to lock doors, it's not allowed, but they wouldn't know. I collected a washcloth from the cabinet below the sink first. I was tingly all over as I pouted my lips at the mirror. Finally, I pulled the tube out of my sleeve and began to unscrew it. But the satisfying *pop* of the lid revealed not a tube of lipstick, like I expected, but a tiny black brush.

I didn't know what to do with this. I couldn't put it on my lips and look at myself in the mirror. I turned the tube over in my hands and read, *Better Than Sex*. Below that read *Volumizing Mascara*. She knew it was missing. She asked if I took it yesterday and I lied to her.

There was a knock on the door and I jumped out of my skin.

“Don’t come in, I’m busy!”

To my absolute horror, Sophia called back, “I need to shower. Go fast.”

“I can’t, go away.”

“Oh my god Vivian, stop whining!” Sophia said as she tried to push the door open.

“It’s locked? Unlock it now Vivian.”

“No. Just wait your turn!” I shouted, and the other side of the door went quiet. I knew she’d be back, so with shaky hands I closed the mascara and threw the washcloth under the sink. As I reached for the door handle it swung open, Sophia crouched on the other side with a bobby pin in hand. I was careless. I was still holding her mascara in my hand.

She lost her mind. As I should have expected.

“You- GOD I can’t wait to get out of here! Leave my shit alone Vivian!” We both heard our parents react from the stairs, already on their way after the initial spat. We stumbled out of the doorway, pulled by our parents’ anger.

“Language Sophia. Vivian, what did you take?” my dad asked, clearly pretending to be calm.

“Nothing! I didn’t take anything!” Sophia gasped and yanked the mascara out of my hand.

“You’re lying, obviously. This is mine, and when I asked her about it, she lied to my face and she locked the bathroom door just now because she was gonna do something with it I bet. Stay out of my room and my things!” My dad just sighed.

“Leave me alone!” I said. We were all expecting Mom to have something to say, but she just stood there. Dad was looking between the two of us, waiting for my explanation, but Mom was just standing there. It was like she saw something in the space between Sophia and I, she was completely checked out.

“Mom?”

She looked up, tears in her eye.

“Girls, please. A year from now, Sophia will be gone. All I want until then is..”

I started crying as soon as she started talking. I was always a big crier, but it was like my mom saw something I hadn’t even felt yet.

“Viv? What’s going on honey?” I just cried harder. For a second, the four of us stood in silence, my hiccups and stifled sobs uncomfortably loud, but then Sophia groaned.

“Stop playing the victim! You always do this, you bother me, you get in my things, and then when Mom and Dad come try and help, you cry into their arms like you haven’t done anything! I’m tired of you getting away with it just because you’re the youngest. Stop acting like a damn child.” And she spun around, the offending mascara in hand.

“I hate you!” I said. It was like all of my energy exploded out of me. “Soon you’ll be gone and you’ll never have to see me ever again!”

She just slammed her door in response. My Mom and Dad were in shock. My mom had tears brimming in her eyes, but my dad just looked plain mad.

“Room. Now.” So off I went.

I cried myself to sleep that night. At some point I stopped remembering why I was crying in the first place, but I couldn't stop. I heard my mom's feet outside my door twice, but neither of us moved. I thought she talked to Sophia once, but I never found out for sure, and nothing ever came of the conversation if they did.

Most of Sophia and I's fights ended this way. We ignored each other until we either had no choice but to interact, or until one of us brought a peace offering. Sometimes our parents made us apologize if it was really bad, but it never changed anything. We had to decide on our terms when we were okay again. The apology was implied. It took two days of uncomfortable silence and even more uncomfortable conversations before we were okay again.

I found a pink-tinted chapstick laying on my pillow on the second afternoon. On the third morning, when I got in the car, I smiled at her. I was wearing the chapstick. I don't know if she noticed, but she seemed to get that things were going to be okay. I broke the silence.

"Yesterday at school, Sam said you were right and I should stay out of your stuff." She smiled for a second.

"I fucking hate Sam. She's right this time, but she'd not a good friend to you."

"I know. Is she the reason Mom wants me to go to Hayden-Prior?"

"No, actually. I think she's worried about you being alone when I'm gone. Don't tell her I said that. It's just the school that fits me, and she wants you to be as happy as I've been here. And it's close. Everybody hates chaperoning." I nodded.

That evening, at dinner I told my parents I would go to Hayden-Prior. I cried when I told them, so they were really skeptical at first. Pretty much as soon as I stopped crying though, they

were okay with it. They wanted it for so long, they weren't going to ask too many questions now. Sophia was more worried about my decision than they were, but she gave me her old uniform to try on and showed me how she rolled up the waistband so it looked cuter.

“For now, you can wear it like this, but each school year you can roll it one more time. Plus, then they think you're just growing.”

When I tried it on, I didn't think it looked half bad. I looked at myself in my new uniform and shiny pink chapstick through the mirror, then glanced back at my sister.

“Are you scared for next year?” I asked. She smiled a little bit.

“Of course I am. Are you?”

“Nope.”

We both laughed.

