

Conversations from Littletown, Kansas

A Catalog of Hopes, Dreams, and Mediocrities of the Lost Midwest

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*To all the dreamers and the lovers in middle America -
I hope this feels like home.*

Conversations - Now

One of the best things to do in Littletown is talk. Actually, one of the *only* things to do in Littletown is talk, especially when you're young and kind of a bum. It's talking, or it's going for a drive through the farmland outside town, or it's wading down in the creek behind Old Marlene's, or it's trying to find the ghosts in the steeple of St. Johns, or it's bumming cigarettes off the middle-aged guys that stand outside the sports bar late at night. But gas is expensive, the creek is icy cold from September thru March, the nuns of St. Johns aren't as graceful and forgiving as you might think when it comes to loitering, and I don't like to smoke. Makes my throat hurt.

About 800 people live in Littletown. It's a bigger population than that, though - most people just live in the unincorporated areas that dot the outskirts of town. The main school is just beyond the city limits and is a small brick building for K-12. The typical graduating class is probably around 20 - but I really wouldn't know since my older brother Benji and I both went to the private Catholic academy, School of St. Mary Most Holy, halfway between here and Wichita. Dad would drop us off there on his way to work since the buses don't come all the way out to Littletown. Most of the commuter kids were rich folks from Wichita anyway, so the buses really only went the one way.

The only reason we were able to attend the school in the first place is because dad's job gave him a really nice stipend to send us there, y'know, keep us from the sinful public school system - the CEO's a catholic himself, and liked my dad and us kids a lot. Felt bad for us, mostly. But my dad made it worth his while, since he was quite the innovator at that little marketing firm. Came up with the "Robert Stevens Method," as he called it. Creative name. Putting that degree to use. He got his bachelor's in Communications and had minored in Marketing, so he thought his "method" of using bright colors on ads was God's gift to mankind. It worked, like it has for companies for years and years, and somehow his boss was convinced that he was heavensent to make 22 Media a titan of advertising in Kansas.

My family came down here from Halifax when I was 11 and Benji was 14. It was for "Dad's work," - at least that's what my parents told me. They had an opening at the branch in Wichita, but the housing market in the city and all surrounding suburbs was pretty

rough for anyone making less than six figures at the time. Which included us. So we ended up just outside Littleton, just an hour-and-a-half's drive from Wichita.

Benji and I left Littleton eventually. We both live in Topeka now. I've got a decent high-rise in Uptown, paying for rent using the money I scrounged up by working at the Littleton Dairy Queen all through high school. I work as a temp in various office jobs, clacking away at keyboards, making coffee runs and answering the phone all day long. It's not much, but it pays decently well and the people there are always happy to have another set of hands. I'm currently saving up for college - within the next year or two, I'm looking to start the process of getting my associates degree to be a vet tech.

Benji is usually couch-surfing inside his bandmates' grungy, sketchy apartments. If it's not any of their couches, then it's almost always mine. But since my boyfriend Everett is usually over at my place, and those two butt heads like they earn a wage for it, that's usually a last-ditch effort. His band does alright - they do "basement gigs" around Topeka and Wichita and sell CDs for a much too high margin, but it makes him okay cash. Enough to buy weed and liquor, at least, which is all he really claims to need.

Life's awfully different now than it used to be. We're awfully normal folk now. Not as tight-lipped and decent as we were. It's funny looking back, really.

Sometimes I look at old pictures and I have to squint to see myself in that girl.

A New Form of Prayer - 2010

“Hey, I made eggs and hashbrowns,” Blair said over her shoulder, eyes unwavering from the yellowing, thin pages before her. She heard nine distinct cracks from just behind her, and a grunt as Benji passed her, fiddling with his left pointer finger. “What are you doing?”

“Stupid one never cracks, the dumbass...” Benji said under his breath. “Dumb... stupid...”

Blair looked up from her book, brow tense. She scanned Benji up and down, noting his unusually baggy sweatshirt, abnormally pallid complexion and stark lack of eyeliner. “Are you still drunk?”

“Nuh-uh. Just hungover.” Benji paused, eyelids hanging heavily over his pink, exhausted eyes. “Alright, maybe a little... I think...” Benji said, collapsing onto the futon next to Blair’s armchair.

“How much did you guys drink last night?” Blair inquired, closing her book and setting it on the table next to her. “You were all pretty... uh, *animated* when I went to check on you.”

“Yeah, well, Mina brought absinthe. Told me if I drank enough of it it’d turn my tongue green like a slurpee.” Benji said, rubbing his temples slowly with his calloused fingers. Blair grimaced at the thought of Benji recklessly emptying a bottle of absinthe, but grimaced harder at the thought that he’d be stupid enough to fall for that green tongue thing. “You said you made food?” Benji asked.

“Yeah, it’s out on the stove. Should still be hot - Everett had some, too, but he ran out to do some errands. He’ll be back soon.”

“Shit, he was here last night?” Benji said, rising from the futon and heading toward the kitchenette that sat not far from the living room in their snug 2 bedroom apartment. “Sorry to infringe on your little date night.”

“I have a suspicion that he’s used to your antics by now, Benj - if you were gonna scare him off, you’d have done it by now.” Blair replied with a laugh, opening her yellowed, old copy of *Carmilla* once more and sinking into her seat.

Benji approached the counter where a small saucepan filled with buttery, golden hash browns and a frypan with a generous heap of scrambled eggs - the kind with heavy

cream in them, he could tell - sat expectantly, waiting for him. There was a certain prayer in this sort of food, and he couldn't tell if that sense of divinity arose from the love that was cooked into them or the abundance of alcohol in his stomach. But really, it didn't matter. He grabbed a silicone spoon from the broken wooden drawer that was falling off its hinges and spooned a pile of both potatoes and eggs onto a thin paper plate. The heat from the food trickled down through the paper and into his cold hands. In this moment, this meal was truly his God, his universe, his everything.

Ungracefully toppling into a barstool on the other side of the counter, Benji began furiously shoveling food into his mouth, scarcely stopping for air. A deep warmth filled his stomach and his soul as he ate. As he finished his plate, he scanned the wreckage - a few crumbs lay peacefully on the counter, and a whisper of butter glossed over his lips. He wiped both away with the palm of his hand and stilled his heart in the wake of his form of prayer, meandering back to the living room on slightly more stable footing.

"Good hash browns," He said to Blair, who was still deep in her book.

"Thanks," She replied. "Now go take a shower. You smell like ass."

Drive - 2007

"Wanna go for a drive?" Benji said, peeking into my room and jingling his car keys loudly. On the jumpring were a bunch of brightly colored guitar picks he stole from his bandmate and a little bottle opener shaped like Illinois from when we last visited.

I laughed a little and closed my book. He seemed to be in a good mood, and that was rare. I hopped off my bed and headed towards my bookshelf. "Sure!"

"Were you seriously reading in here?! You're such a nerd," He exclaimed with a biting laugh. So much for a good mood - Benji was in a perfectly normal mood, which spelled bad news and a headache for me. He strode out of my room confidently without so much as a second glance and I followed, grabbing my bag from the top of my dresser on the way out.

"Make sure he doesn't get arrested, Blair," Dad said as we approached the door. I figured he was joking, but the line between jokes and serious concern was getting pretty thin these days when it came to Benji. "And if you get home late, try to not wake the whole house this time. Alright Benjamin?"

“You got it pops,” Benji replied, swinging the front door open. Dad sighed and opened his book again, reclining in his seat. I think he muttered something to my mom, but I couldn’t make out what. I only heard her reply:

“Let him be. He’s trying,” She said gently. “I know he is.”

We got in the car and Benji cranked the key in the ignition a couple times before it finally started. The sound of the engine churning its way to a slow but even chug was followed by a dull, metallic, grinding sound that didn’t stop once during our drive. It made a big clanking sound every time he hit the brakes, and poured a dark, thick smog out of the exhaust. The floor was littered with Marlboro boxes and the stench of stale cigarette smoke was pungent and sickening. That damn car. I hated it. But it ran, and that's all Benji really needed.

Benji slowly pulled out of our big gravel driveway as the hazy August sun reflected onto the windshield and made the wide, sprawling, flat fields of grain nearly glow. “You’re so tense these days,” He said dismissively, removing both of his hands from the wheel to grab his lighter from his back pocket. I quickly put a hand on it.

“Careful,” I said, steering the car down the road. “I just started my senior year. It’s just a lot of pressure. I don’t mean to come off as tense.”

“Damn, you’re old. When the Hell did that happen?” Benji replied. “I feel like it was just yesterday we were getting ready for school together and playing pretend and stuff.”

I laughed a little and gave control of the steering wheel back to him as he thumbed the small red tab on his lighter, making orange sparks flicker and dance off the metal before a flame finally caught.

He brought a cigarette that he fished out of the center console up to his lips and lit it quickly, puffing a cloud of smoke into the car. He rolled down the window an inch or two, and the cloud slowly streamed out into the breezy, warm air outside. I shuffled in my seat a bit, trying to move away from the thick waft of stench. His shoulders fell a bit as he relaxed into the filthy seat behind him.

“Want one?” He said with a snicker, glancing at me through his dark, jagged, horrifically cut bangs.

I rolled my eyes. He was obviously joking, but I couldn’t bring myself to laugh at his new smoking habit.

“Tough crowd,” He chuckled, tucking away the box and lighter away in the center console.

“I don’t get how you like those things,” I said. “They’re so gross. And they stink. Did you know that the vent in my bedroom still smells like smoke and booze from the last party you had down in the basement? Mom almost killed me when she went in to dust my window screens the other day.”

“Concert, not party,” He gently reprimanded. “The band’s getting serious now, you know.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. I don’t think he noticed.

He made a quick turn off the highway and onto the exit that led to the old county road that wove through all the farms outside the city. We’d moved to Wichita from Halifax around 6 or 7 years ago by this point, but the mystique and charm of rural, rolling yellow fields hadn’t yet worn off, and we were both so enamored with the farmland here.

As we kept rolling down the open road, staring at the fields of grain that sprawled out to a far, far horizon, a heavy silence filled the air. The silence was our friend by this point, though; it existed as another familiar passenger in the car. Our childhood inseparability and friendship had all but vanished in these difficult late teen years, our fits of giggling as we played pretend and long, drawn-out conversations about what our rock band would be named someday simply images of the past, transformed into truly unkind yelling fights at 2am and cold shoulders that lasted for weeks.

As we finally made it to the old county road, and as the wide landscape opened up even further, Benji chuckled a bit, completely out of nowhere.

“Hey, remember the time you threw that jar of pickles at me?” He asked.

This sudden, strange question caught me off guard, but I managed to stifle my surprise.

“Right after you shoved me off the kitchen table? That was relish, stupid,” I replied with a chuckle, the incident in question flashing through my mind. “What made you mention that?”

“I dunno. I just remembered it.” Benji took a long drag of his cigarette and laughed again. “I’ve been thinking about that old house a lot these days. We got up to a lot of trouble there.”

“You more so than me,” I replied jokingly, looking out the window. The sun was just about to set, and the warm orange glow was getting dimmer and dimmer by the minute. Soon, the far away farms escaped our view as the light illuminating them slowly snuffed out.

“Don’t you kinda miss it? Y’know, the old house in Halifax? And being a kid, and stuff,” Benji said, glancing over at me with a weirdly eager look on his face.

“Sure,” I replied hesitantly, admittedly unsure as to what he was getting at.

“I think you’re probably supposed to,” He said confidently, despite my reservation. “Because that’s when life was nicer. *And* we weren’t in Kansas.”

“That’s strangely sentimental of you.” I said.

“Shut up,” He snapped. Then, he paused for a moment, furrowed his brow, and shook his head quickly. “I mean... I guess it is, actually. Sorry.”

I glanced over at him and saw him take another long drag from his cigarette. Too long. He coughed a bit, and took a small sip from the can of God-knows-how-old Red Bull that sat in the cupholder between us. He sighed loudly, and I couldn’t tell if it was out of satisfaction from the sip or out of sadness. It seemed a little bleak. Bleaker than normal, I guess.

“Do you... resent me, a little bit?” Benji asked suddenly, squishing his cigarette on the lime green ashtray he’d clumsily superglued to the dashboard.

I said nothing. My stomach stirred and my hands grew very cold.

“I don’t blame you if you do,” He added, anxiously rapping his fingers on the steering wheel. “I’ve been a real ass to you these past couple years.”

“No, I don’t,” I finally said. The words caught on my throat haphazardly and hung awkwardly in the air as another horribly loud pause filled the air.

“Well, I’m just saying, if you did, I’d get it. That’s all,” He said briskly. He seemed relieved to have gotten it off of his chest as he sighed and released the tension in his stiff shoulders. “But you know I care about you, Blair. You *have* to know that, or I swear, I’ll never forgive myself.”

He stared straight ahead silently, a sad, almost sardonic smile making its way across his lips. His dark, dyed black hair was gently waving with the wind coming in through the window, but the rest of him was completely still. His bright blue eyes caught the last bit of

sunlight in the sky, and sparse orange freckles danced across his pallid face as he remained frozen.

I should have said something. I know I should have, but I just couldn't. So I just sat there, wallowing in my so-called lack of resentment, head pressed against the cool, icy glass of the window.

My forehead grew chilly and I shut my eyes. There, tracing itself on my eyelids was the huge picture window on the front of our house in Halifax, snow slowly falling from the sky and onto the pillowy white snowbanks below, and there was our old dog, Lucky, running through the yard. There, too, was Benji, sitting just beside me, taking a section of my hair and trying desperately to braid it. He was terrible at it. I mean, *really* terrible. My hair tangled and fought his hands as he twisted and pulled at the different sections, trying to make some sense of it. But through his frustration, he continued, because I really wanted my hair braided for school. And right next to him, sitting inconspicuously on our corduroy couch cushion was a "How-To" book on braiding hair that he'd bought for himself with his own, coveted allowance from the book fair at our elementary school.

I opened my eyes. I looked back at Benji in the car next to me, and saw that little kid again, trying so desperately and yet still failing. Just outside, the very last of the sun was shining on the fields of yellow grain on our gravel street, leaving a barely perceptible warm glow on the world. The car clumsily barrelled back down our driveway and came to a slow stop right in front of the garage. We'd made it back home before I'd even realized. Benji put a hand on his keys, but I cleared my throat to speak, stopping his movement.

"Hey, can you braid my hair for school tomorrow?" I asked.

He paused, removing his hand from the keys. He looked over at me and offered the first warm, genuine smile I'd seen from him in years.

"It won't be any good," He replied through his grin.

"That's okay, I don't mind," I said. "As long as you try, I'm happy."

Coffee on a Rainy Saturday - 2009

Everett fiddled with his watch as he sat on the hard wooden stool. Rain poured down the window next to him as the smell of fresh coffee whispered through the air. It was quiet here, something he appreciated more than words could say. Warm, too - a relief

from the coldness outside. He could only imagine how Blair was feeling. She hated the cold. Her little nose got so red when the air had a nip in it, and she'd complain non-stop when the weather turned sour. But Everett didn't mind the noise.

Still thumbing over his watch band, he noticed the time. He was still a few minutes early, but his shoulders tensed at the thought of Blair not showing up. He furrowed his brow and took a sip of his espresso. It was piping hot, and burnt the tip of his tongue a bit before he shot the scalding liquid down his throat. He bent over to cough, and as he did, the little bells above the front door tinkled and chimed.

There she was. Her bright skin caught the warm light of the cafe as she stepped inside and wiped her boots off on the worn welcome mat. She clutched her bag tensely under a ridiculous blue raincoat pulled up all the way over her shaggy black hair. She stood still in the doorway for a moment, raindrops falling onto the floor as she slid her coat off, revealing a thin black sweater and a long, loose black skirt - her typical attire, complete only by a long silver chain, a tiny heart locket strung around it at the end.

"Hey Blair," Everett said hoarsely, waving his hand politely but still reeling from the molten coffee he'd drank.

"Hey Everett!" Blair replied enthusiastically. She hung her coat on the coatrack at the entryway and made her way over to the table. "I hope you weren't waiting for me too long. The rain, you know - it always starts at the worst times."

A familiar quip. Everett smiled. "I know."

"I'm going to grab something to drink, okay? Be right back."

Blair smiled and walked over to the counter, where the barista greeted her and exchanged pleasantries. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and squinted at the menu above the counter. That's right. She really needed a new contact prescription, but her insurance wouldn't cover another pair of lenses until next month. Scummy, cheap office worker deductibles. Finally, she recited her order to the barista and thumbed through her wallet, probably looking for her card. It clattered to the floor as she laughed nervously, picking it up and placing it in the worker's hands. The worker returned it to her and got to work making her coffee. Blair walked back to the table, her face a twinge redder than it had been when she left.

"Hopefully you didn't see that," she said under her breath.

“I’m sure people have done worse. At least you didn’t drop the coffee, right?”
Everett said with a smile.

“Yeah, don’t jinx it,” Blair retorted.

She reached a delicate, pale hand into her black purse, retrieving a little red circle of plastic. With the push of a button on the side, she flipped it open, revealing a small mirror, a sponge, and a tiny pile of ivory powder. She carefully patted the sponge into the powder, brought it up to her face, and with unimaginable grace dabbed some of the makeup onto her small nose and round, red cheeks.

“Uhg, the humidity messed up my foundation,” Blair said as she carefully pressed the powder onto her soft, fine features. She did it with such ease and... elegance? “I don’t want it to crease, y’know?”

Everett did *not* know. “Oh, yeah, yeah, of course. I get it. No problem,” He said with as much confidence as he could muster.

Blair chuckled. Whoops.

“Sorry,” Everett said, a blush covering his face.

“What are you so nervous for, Ev?” Blair said with a sweet smile. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Of course we’re friends! I’m sorry, I just... It’s a little different this time, you know?”

Blair smiled, her eyebrows soft and eyes relaxed almost knowingly.

“Order for Blair?” The barista said from behind the counter.

“I know,” Blair said, gently placing her hand on Everett’s. It was warm to the touch, and so soft. She rose from her seat and smoothly walked to the counter, retrieving her piping hot drink. “I’m just giving you a hard time.” She added, sitting back down.

Everett hesitated, a small sweat breaking on his forehead. “Extra hot vanilla cappuccino with soy?”

Blair’s smile dropped for a moment, and her eyes widened.

“Yeah,” she said. “How’d you know?”

“You always get that when it’s raining,” Everett said, looking down at his own drink. “Like how your nose gets all pink when it’s rainy *and* cold and how you hate the rain in Kansas and how it was always a bit more tolerable in Halifax.”

Blair smiled wide, her pink gums on display.

“Sorry. We’ve just been friends for so long, you know, I pick up on these things.”

“To be loved is to be known, right?” Blair asked.

“Yeah,” Everett replied. “To be loved is to be known.”

I Never Knew They Made Ziploc Bags that Small - 2002

Benji was humming some song and rapping his fingers against the dark oak dining table as we sat together waiting for Dad to come home so we could eat. We never ate dinner together at the table, not unless there was reason to celebrate, like if I got an A on a test or Benji got a C. This time, though, it was because dad got a promotion at work - one that would seriously affect our income and scoop us away from our horrible little dance just above the poverty line.

“Name the artist,” Benji said, punching me lightly in the shoulder and beginning to sing. “*Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage!!*”

“How should I know?!” I replied, leaning away from him a bit. “It sounds scary.”

“It’s Smashing Pumpkins, dumbass, you should know that,” Benji said with a chuckle. “I feel like I’ve failed you as an older brother.”

“Yeahuh,” I replied, scraping my plastic fork gently across my paper plate. An accurate evaluation on his part, but not because I didn’t have his mixtape memorized back to front.

At the center of the table, Mom had put together a little bread basket, filled with dinner rolls, slices of whole grain bread, (the fancy kind that ran you 4 dollars per loaf instead of 1.25,) and those little cracker-like breadsticks that were sprinkled with sesame seeds. After a moment of very visible contemplation, (if Benji was one thing, it wasn’t subtle) Benji took two of these breadsticks and placed them between his teeth and his upper lip so they looked like long tusks. He started barking like a walrus, clapping his hands and crossing his eyes, and I giggled heartily. He was never in a good mood like this. The air was different that day. We all felt hope for the first time since I could remember.

“Stop it, Benji, stop it!” I said through my laughs. “Mom’s gonna be so mad, we haven’t even said grace yet!”

“Hey, I’m not eating them, am I? They’re just in my mouth,” Benji said, his words muffled by the breadsticks. “Jesus would understand - there’s a difference.”

“Jesus might, but mom-”

“Benjamin Lewis Stevens!” Mom said, barging into the room with something in her hands. “What is this?!”

She extended her palm to reveal a small ziploc baggie - I didn't even know they made them that small - with some green bits in it. It sorta looked like herbs, like basil or parsley from the spice cabinet. I'd have laughed if Mom wasn't so beet red with anger, thinking this was some silly, spur of the moment pop quiz about Italian cooking for Benji, but if Mom's face wasn't enough to dissuade me from laughter, Benji's certainly was. His face sank, breadsticks dropping from his mouth and crashing to the ground below him. His eyes were wide, revealing the entirety of his bright blue irises, and his already pallid face became white as a sheet. All the hope that had been in the air that day suddenly shattered and fell to pieces on the floor.

“I- I don't know-”

“You don't know?” Mom replied, a sharpness in her voice that I'd never heard before. Something was definitely wrong, but I couldn't figure out why. “What were you thinking, Benji? This is illegal!”

“It's not mine, okay?” Benji replied angrily, his gaze low to the ground.

“Benji, what has gotten into you? You'd been doing so well. Is something going on at school?” Mom asked, sitting down at the table opposite him.

Benji didn't reply. His shoulders sank into himself, and he looked meek and timid, a rare feat for him. Something about this conversation made me want to jump out of my skin and hide, but I wasn't sure why.

“I don't want to talk about it,” Benji said softly.

“Honey, you-”

“I said I don't want to talk about it, can't you listen?” He said again, more forcefully.

Mom's face hardened as she leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. She shut her eyes for a brief moment; she almost looked like she was in prayer, begging for some help in this situation. She opened her eyes again and fixed them on me.

“Blair, go to your room,” She said, stone cold.

I furrowed my eyebrows. “What? I didn't do any-”

“Now,” Mom said sternly. “Go.”

Bad Morning - 2000

“They’ve got an opening in Wichita,” My dad said softly before bringing his coffee mug up to his lips. “Second biggest branch is there, and it’s the only executive position that won’t saddle me with a massive pay cut.”

“Hm. It’s not Canada, but it could do, with your folks down there and all,” My mom said from the kitchen.

“What’s Wichita?” I asked.

“It’s a city in Kansas - in the US, not too far from where dad’s from in Iowa,” Mom said. “It’s supposed to be pretty beautiful countryside out there, too. You remember visiting Ames, don’t you, Bee?”

“How big is Wichita?”

“Same as Halifax,” Dad replied. “But we wouldn’t live in the city. We’d live a little ways away.”

“What about Bailey?” I asked. “Will Bailey and Marie come with us, too?”

“No, honey,” Mom said, placing a bowl of cereal in front of me and then returning to the kitchen with my empty glass of orange juice. Rice Krispies. We never got Rice Krispies, but Benji wanted them when he got back from the E.R. “Auntie May and Uncle Bobby and Bailey and Marie are staying up here.”

“But why, Momma?” I whined.

“Blair, that’s just how things work,” Dad said, closing his newspaper. “Don’t be obstinate, you know that. May and Bob can’t just uproot and go.”

“But *we* can uproot and go,” I mumbled. “Nobody cares if *we* uproot and go.”

“That’s life,” Dad said, taking another big gulp from his coffee. “Take it up with your brother.”

“Richard, are you kidding?” Mom spat, returning from the kitchen and sitting beside me at the table. Dad huffed and took his coffee and newspaper to the living room. “Blair, honey, this will be a big change for you and I know that. I also know that it feels really unfair. And like terrible timing, and like the world is so mean for doing this to you. And it is.”

I felt hot, fat tears pool in my eyes and trickle down my face. Mom smiled softly and brushed her cold fingers against my cheeks, wiping them away.

“But it has to be this way. You’ll understand why when you’re older. I promise.” She said, her smile fading. “And I promise we’ll take care of you in the adjustment. It’s gonna be hard, but you’ve always got your Momma on your side. Okay sweetheart?”

“Okay Momma,” I said softly. Somehow, I didn’t believe her.

“Why don’t you go play with your brother? I think he’s still downstairs,” She said, walking into the living room. I ate another spoonful of rice krispies as I heard the rumblings of an argument beginning from behind the doorway. I hopped off my chair and made my way toward the stairs before I had to listen to anything.

“Don’t bother, idiot-stick,” Benji said from the bottom of the stairs. “I’m not in the mood.”

“You’re never in the mood. And why do you call me that?” I asked, walking down the stairs and approaching him. The basement was dark as could be, only illuminated by the soft glow of the TV screen in front of him. He sat cross-legged just a foot away from it, playing Donkey Kong Country on our SNES. A blanket enveloped his small frame as a little heater oscillated just next to him.

“Cos you suck, dude,” Benji said with a laugh. He paused his game and looked up at me with a mean smile. Something made it fade, though, and he stared at me with wide, sad, glassy big blue eyes. “You can sit next to me and watch. Don’t distract me, though.”

I took a seat next to him, as silently as I could manage.

“It’s cold down here,” I said quietly.

Benji huffed and paused his game again. “What did I just say about not distracting me?”

After some contemplation, he took the edge of his flannel blanket and lazily draped it over me, patting the ground closer to him. I scooted closer and he continued playing.

“I’m tired,” I said softly.

Benji paused his game again and looked down at me. “You just woke up. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know. I got sleep, I just don’t want to do anything. Like I can’t, you know?” I said.

Benji chuckled a little. “Yeah, I know.”

I stared at the TV screen, eyes unblinking as Benji continued to play. He was really good at this game - he'd had a lot of time to practice recently, being out of school and all that, even before holiday break had started. When we were at the hospital it's the only thing he would talk about. He was pissed we didn't grab his SNES on the way out the door so he could play it at the hospital. Even if we had, I doubt the doctors would have let him use his hands so much in his condition.

I looked over at his hands - they were tense as they wrapped around the controller, his wrists wrapped in thick wads of soft white gauze. I hated looking at them. It filled me with this boiling, hot feeling - it's not like I was mad, I was just...

"Do you think it would be easier for you and Mom and Dad if I wasn't here?" I blurted out. I didn't mean it.

I felt the air around me thicken with tension. Benji turned his whole body to face me, the blanket falling off his shoulders. "Don't say that. Don't... Don't do that. Hey, listen to me," He said sternly, taking my chin gently in his hand and turning my head to face him. "You don't get to do this too, you hear me? You're my happy little sister. You don't get to be a depressed fuck-up too. Not because of me."

I stared up at him and felt another hot, fat tear cascade down my cheek.

He huffed and rolled his eyes. "Come on, man," He said quietly, bringing his pale, cold, bandaged hand up to my face, wiping away the wetness. "Just... You gotta be strong. You gotta be strong because I'm not. And Mom and Dad need you to be strong. They really do. So you gotta stick around, and you gotta be strong, and... And you gotta pick up the slack, and you gotta be good, okay? You gotta be good."

I didn't move, or speak, or breathe as he continued to look down at me with a sort of frenetic desperation in his eyes.

"Okay?" He repeated firmly.

"Yeah," I said.

"Promise me. Promise me you'll be strong."

"I promise."

Twister - 2003

My bed used to be right below my window when we first moved. Covered in a sweet, buttery yellow comforter with a pinkish fleece blanket draped over the top. My mom made the comforter for me - it was a quilt she'd made in a class when she was pregnant with Benji. She embroidered a note at the bottom - "For my sweet little girl, so Mama can always hold you." They initially thought Benji was gonna be a girl at his first ultrasounds, so she had the quilt made for *him*. When he came out a boy, my mom was initially horrified at her mistake, but realized she might one day have a girl - thus, my parents went to the fabric store and got new blue and green fabric, and embroidered it with "For my strong, handsome boy, so Mama can always hold you." The old quilt went into a closet, and when I came around, it was mine. Wrapped in my blankets, I'd watch each night as the sky became darker and darker and the moonlight gently kissed my forehead as I drifted off.

My parents didn't know any better than to prop me up against the window. I'd been used to a little window by my bed back in Halifax, and I'd watch the moon caress the surface of the ocean before I dozed away. And my mom, despite being a lifelong, devout Catholic, always believed that the moon could heal you in some ways while you slept. So below the window I stayed, counting stars and basking in moondrops.

A blaring alarm. Piercingly loud, and urgent as could be. It was coming from outside my window.

"Blair! Blair, get up!" Benji said from my doorway as I slowly woke. Loud, fast footfalls approached and I felt his hand around my arm, grabbing tightly and pulling me from the cozy, warm nest I'd made in my bed.

A shatter. Pain. Piercing pain in my leg. My leg. I couldn't see. I can't see.

"My leg," I muttered, still half asleep.

"I know, I know, just- just come on, okay? Come on," Benji said, out of breath from hoisting me out of my bed. My feet were on the ground, but I couldn't feel my left leg.

"Benji, my leg," I said louder. Panic. I couldn't breathe.

"Just calm down," Benji said, walking me to my doorway.

I tripped over what felt like a big piece of wood as my brother painstakingly supported me out of my room. He caught me with a soft grunt. "Careful," he reprimanded. Boiling tears started welling in my eyes and a lump formed in my throat as Benji dragged me through the hallway. My leg felt hot - hot and wet and painful.

I don't remember how we got outside, but we did. The world outside was a nightmare - the sky was green and dark and the wind whipped specks of dirt and debris into our eyes as we shuffled toward the backyard. Benji wrenched the cellar door open, and helped me down the stairs, sealing the opening behind us. For a moment, everything felt so quiet, and dim. And then terribly loud, and so, so dark. The floor was so cold on my skin as I sank into it, faintly hearing the cries and screams of my mom as she rushed to my side.

"She's only 13, she's- she's very short and this is a lot of blood. At least a quart. Might be more. Benj, don't let up now, sweetheart," My mom said into the phone.

"Did I pass out?" I whispered.

"Yeah," Benji replied. He knelt beside me as I laid on the cold concrete. His eyes were wild and bloodshot. He glanced downward to a bloodied rag he was holding to my leg. "Deep breath, Bee, this isn't going to feel great."

Benji pressed his palms hard into my calf. The pain was blinding. I must have screamed - I must have. Benji's eyes were shut tightly and tears streamed down his face as he sealed the wound. His hands and arms were covered in blood. Again. I think it was probably the most frightening sight I'd ever seen - I thought I was dying, and I thought he was dying too.

Darkness again. But this time there was something soft under my head. It smelled like mom. It must have been her sweater. That soft green one she always wore. Then there was something cold on my face. Something icy cold.

"Benji, don't put the water on her! You'll kill her!"

"Sorry Mom, I just- I just don't like her passing out. Sorry, Bee."

They weren't even supposed to be here. Why were they here?

"Mama, you were in Wichita," I said as loud as I could manage.

"Don't talk, sweetie, lay your head down," She replied, gentle fingers covering the receiver on her Nokia. "Yes, I'm still here - when exactly will an ambulance be able to get out here?"

As minutes passed, and as Benji's shaky hands stayed firmly pressed to my leg, I felt some lucidity trickle its way back into my psyche. "Is it a storm?" I asked, looking up at Benji.

"Yeah," he replied. "We drove home as fast as we could. Figured you'd gone to bed and all. Earplugs in. Sleeping like a log. And under a window." He reached a bloodied hand up to his forehead to wipe away the beads of sweat, streaking dark crimson in its wake. "I was right. But we weren't fast enough, I guess."

"Not fast enough," I replied.

"But you'll be okay," he said, a crazed sort of look in his eyes. "I promise."