

“How many siblings do you have?”

I hate this question. It always takes me a minute to answer, as if i’m recounting in my head, tallying on my fingers, figuring out the best way to lie without lying.

I know the correct answer is two; a younger sibling by three years and an older sister by eleven. But most of the time I just say one.

In my dorm room, the ceilings and walls are covered in draping tapestries and hung string lights. There are white poster boards taped to the walls with dozens of postcards I’ve collected from thrift stores and antique malls. Quotes written on colored sticky notes fill the empty space between the thick cardstock. I like to lay in bed at night and turn onto my left side, squint my eyes and try to read what I’ve written in shaky pen trails.

In my childhood bedroom, there are two quotes that hang above me when I come back to visit. They are plastered together among green-tinted glow-in-the-dark stars, glued with white taffy. They’ve been up there longer than I’ve ever lived in here, placed with delicate fingers by my sister when she moved into this same room at age eleven. I had just been born.

“Be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars.”

The quote comes from a poem called *Desiderata*, by Max Ehrmann in 1927. When I was little, and my sister hadn’t yet moved her things to a trailer in our backyard, I could sneak into her room and lay on the thick purple comforter and re-read the sentence. I couldn’t understand what it meant, but I knew I wanted to.

I was five when I realized that my sister didn’t like me. It only took her shrieks of anger and wailing disappointments spewed to my parents when I attempted to be close to her for me to understand. I’d watch her listen to cd’s through the sliver between her door, wishing she’d invite me in and let me pet the leopard gecko she kept in a tall glass container.

There wasn’t a lot of time to get to know her, to make her like me, to prove I could be a worthwhile companion if not a half-blood sister. I would remember that quote everytime she slammed doors or threw open soda cans down hallways. I would trace the pattern to the palm of my hand with ragged fingernails when she eventually packed her things and moved out at seventeen, a blossoming belly wrapped underneath a torn band tee. The words would read across my mind everytime I came home from school and found my mom sinking into the dining chairs and acknowledging her fear for her first daughter like a sinner confessing at church.

We really didn’t see her much as I grew up. She was busy, raising her daughter alongside herself, battling drug addiction and fighting off abusive boyfriends. Birthday parties were left unattended, ice cream cake melting on a leftover plastic plate. Loud Christmas morning lonely and missing. Easter with the inquisitive family members with the ritualistic questioning: “how is she?”, “have you seen her lately?”, “has she completed rehab yet?”

I was nine when we moved my things into the same upstairs bedroom with three windows and swirling ceiling poems.

“I’m not ready to be by myself,” I told my mom as we trudged up the prickly carpeted stairs to move me into an area of my own. It didn’t feel right, like I didn’t belong there.

“You’re ready,” She told me, dragging the twin mattress with no bed frame to the corner. “Don’t you want space for yourself?”

This space was crowded, and only I could see it. I noticed the deep purple paint that still glowed through the slashes of cheap eggshell. I noticed the broken black fan that was decorated with glow-in-the-dark stars. I noticed how it didn’t feel right to be taking up a room that wasn’t supposed to be mine.

I would lay atop the mattress that decorated the empty floor in the same spot that my sister's bed had been and stare into the cursive letters that trailed upwards on the ceiling and wonder how she made it look so pretty. No wiggles. No displaced curves, like she had written it on the floor if the ceiling collapsed. A perfect quote that burned into my brain, the lyrics dancing across closed eyelids.

“Love yourself, Love others, Love life.”

The second quote reads like a grocery list, a daily checklist to remind myself every night that I couldn’t write the poetry like she could. I scrawled the message with a flattened pencil head, tiptoes digging deep into the comforter that sunk like an ocean wave bobbing against the pier and pressed lead to the ceiling. The letters blurred with my shaking hands, and when I was through, I lay flat against the bed and looked at the two excerpts, side by side, adorned with those green plastic stars and felt secretly glad those quotes could remain with each other.

I was living in a shadow, between the pressing walls of the room that was hers first but somehow mine now. I was reminded about all of our similarities when looking in the mirror she left behind, how my clothes hung in the closet she painted with red and blue handprints. How the window encased air conditioner tickled my stomach when I stood in front of it, looking out into the darkened tree line. I couldn’t help but wonder if her feet had ever stood exactly where mine were, hands wrapped around herself, wondering how to move forward.

The expectations were always different with me. If I ask about it now, as an adult, my parents will say it is because I was a different kid. I didn’t sneak out or sneak boys in. I didn’t steal or lie or scream. I didn’t get pregnant, drop out and do drugs. I think half of this is true, and the other half is that they’d seen the results of their failures already. My parents would tell me about the potential she had, how brilliantly talented she was, how outspoken and admirable. But I could sense the way their teeth chattered, the sweat pooling at their temples, the crease underneath their eyes. I knew they saw her in me and that scared them. It scared me too.

Growing up in a room she had grown up in first felt cramped. I didn’t know where to put myself, my feelings, my hopes and dreams and fears. I was drowning against the current of not becoming my sister, yet swallowing the fact that I didn’t know how to be myself without the avoidance of her.

I wanted the sister who would slice my palm open and enact bloodpacts, wrap our pinkies together in a twisted promise. I wanted to ask for advice, wear her clothes, and rant about our parents. I wanted to tell her all the things that were happening in my room that was her room too. I wanted to know if it had been the same for her.

My first kiss happened in our room. Against my friends laughter, I led him into mine, closing the doors softly and taking a deep breath to quiet the aggressive butterflies in my stomach. Shaking, smiling, sitting on the sinking bed, his hand grazed my cheek and he kissed me. That night when the last person had left, the silence ringing in my flushed ears as I lay in the dark, I wondered if my sister's first kiss had been in this room too. I wondered if that connected us somehow. I had quietly hoped it had.

My first angry fights with my mom started in our room. Arguments that descended into groundings and silent tears wiped furiously with the back of a hand. Secret tiptoes down the carpeted stairs to sneak dinner back into my bed, crumb-covered sheets and the heaviest pit that I had ever known becoming ritualistic. I would lay and stare into the ceiling, into the words and wonder if my sister and her had fought like this. I wondered what she had felt like before she moved out at seventeen, if it was like this; heavy and cold and drowning.

My first heartbreaks happened in our room. High school relationships and unfaithful friends that always dictated how I felt about myself, placing an invisible glass stone into their hands and praying for comfort, yet shattering against pavement each time instead. Countless nights staring out the front window and wondering if there was something wrong with me. I wondered if she had thought that too.

It's been many years since I was only five and she was only sixteen, avoiding me in the kitchen and shutting the door in front of my chubby face. I know how different our lives are; me in school, living in the city she loved and lived in before being forced to move to Florida when my mom got pregnant with me. Her in a mobile home on the property next to my mother with her two children. It's hard to come back for holidays, the unspoken guilt and jealousy twisting between us like curling smoke. I notice the way she avoids talking to me at family functions, slipping between crowds at Christmas, going for the Thanksgiving dinner after me, waving as she walks out of the door.

I know I have the life she wanted, and there's no way to makeup for that torture of watching your little sister get exactly what you wanted before everything changed.

When I come home now, I am reminded of all the things I could've been but didn't become. I watch her talk to my mom from across the counter, then head back up the stairs I know she's memorized in the dark. I pace across the cool wooden floor of our room, barefoot, and touch each of the walls that boxes us both in. Pet the tapestry that hangs beneath the thrifted bar mirror with coiling leaves on the corners. Caress the roughness of painted canvas, streaks of color and beads of dried acrylic. Brush against the hanging clothes in my closet, past my graduation and prom dress, until I can place my palm on my sister's painted handprint.

My room, her room, somehow our room, the muddled versions of us haunting the corners and living inside the hand printed closet. I am constantly aware of the fact that I got out, left town, and went to school in my sister's city. I notice how my relatives look at me with bright, accomplished eyes and say things like, "Well at least you didn't get pregnant!"

The guilt is all-consuming, redirecting my vision and complicating my presence anywhere I am. I have to be grateful I'm here, doing what I am, because she didn't get this. I did.

I have to know how hard it must've been to go through the things she did, but still not become it. I know what everyone else wants me to think, has made me think, expects me to think. At least I have this. At least I got out. At least I'm not her.

It's strange, laying in my college dorm and not knowing for sure where I am. The fan that sits on top of my wardrobe sounds eerily similar to the window air conditioner. My paintings hung loosely on the walls blur into dripping painted handprints. The quotes I squint at look scarily like the ones glued to our ceiling, written with that curving calligraphy I couldn't copy. No matter where I am, I can feel it; the ceiling is too close, back pressed into the sinking mattress, pit in my stomach. I can almost swear the plastic stars are glowing overhead.