

It's Complicated

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I'm six years old and my little sister is in the hospital, barely breathing. Severe asthma, they tell us, and advise my parents to put her in a bedroom with someone else in case she has another attack. "No," I tell my mother. No, I don't think it would be fun for Betsy to move into my room. No, I don't want you to rip up my dust and dander laden carpet and take away all of my plush toys. "No," I tell her.

She says, "Too bad."

It's pouring rain outside our room. Thunder cracks and growls, rattling the window in its frame. Green plastic stars glow from the ceiling, matching the glow of digital numbers, 12:01. The rustling of sheets from across the room tells me that Betsy is awake, and in the glow of the next earth-shattering lightning strike, I see her sitting up in bed.

"Sally?" her voice wavers with fear or sleep or both. "Sally, I'm scared."

"It's just a storm," I tell her, somehow managing to sound both condescending and reassuring. Then reluctantly, "You can come over here if you want," being sure to make it clear that I certainly don't care one way or the other.

Her clammy bare feet sound sticky on the hard floor between our beds. I

lift up my blankets and let her slide in, scooting into the cold spot to make room.

I'm curled up on the couch, head bent in a halo of lamplight, so immersed in the book I'm reading that I barely notice Betsy standing near the couch. When I glimpse her at the edge of my vision, I pretend I don't, preferring to ignore her than give her whatever it is she plans to request. Refusing to take my unspoken hint, she continues to stand there expectantly. Irritated, I look up, "What do you want?"

"Um," she chews anxiously on the end of a blonde-streaked braid, "could I borrow your bag? I'm going to a sleepover."

"My *new* bag?" Surely she isn't asking me for my brand new, blue-gray, soft canvas messenger bag? I haven't even used that bag yet. She'll probably burst the seams with her overnight supply of stuffed animals and *kid things*, I think condescendingly, sophisticated twelve-year-old that I am.

"Yes?" She can clearly hear the displeasure in my voice.

Much to my dismay, I can't think of any good reason not to let her have it; it's not as if I'll have great need of the bag at home. "Fine, take it," I concede grumpily, "but just this once."

"Thanks Sally!" She sounds relieved.

"And get your own bag," I offer as a parting shot, annoyed that she is so happy. "It's mine, jeez," I grumble, and as she traipses down to my room, I bury my head back into my book.

Later that night, the bag incident nearly forgotten, I force my stiffened limbs to move from the couch, creaking my way down to my bed. Flipping on the light, my eyes catch something making a dimple in the center of my pillow. It looks like a white butterfly has alighted on the flowered sheets. I pick it up, a folded piece of paper, its edges still ragged from being ripped out of a notebook. Unfolding it, a piece of gum falls out on the pillowcase, bubblemint, my favorite. I unfold the note, ponderously smoothing the creases as I read.

"Thank You," in Betsy's round, slapdash hand.

I maneuver my way out of the minivan, plastic shopping bags turning my fingertips white with their weight. Betsy and Mom follow close behind as I push through the kitchen door and drop my load of new clothes on the hardwood floor. Betsy heads straight to her room to put on a pair of new jeans, and I putter around the kitchen, searching for bread and peanut butter for a snack.

"How did the shopping day go?" asks Dad, and Mom answers quickly.

"It was fine, but Betsy looked like she had something to sell if you know what I mean." Her voice holds a strange mix of humor and concern. Mom is right of course; Betsy's green cami stretches tight across her flat ten-year-old chest, her black skirt flows breezily just a little too high for comfort, and she hobbles around in clunky black platform sandals a half-size too big. The shopping trip isn't the first incident, nor the last, in which Betsy appears in public dressed as a teeney-bopper jezebel. Ashamed and embarrassed, I make sure all of my jeans-and-t-shirt friends know

that I despise this anomaly of my family, this giggling, gossiping preteen who I know nothing about. Sitting as far from her as possible on the bus-rides home, I whisper stories of all the stupid or wanton things she'd done that day, which at the time seem unforgivable. I enjoy a smug satisfaction in watching Betsy make a fool of herself. I am mortified to be related to this mini-skirt clad stranger, but on the other hand, in the nature of siblings everywhere, every mistake she's made makes me look that much better. *I wasn't like that when I was her age, I say sagely to my friends and my parents whenever I get the chance. I never dressed "like I had something to sell, if you know what I mean."*

"Are you wearing makeup?" The awkward silence around the dinner table pressed down on us, and Dad and I suddenly became very attentive to our forks, ears pricked to hear the outcome of the inevitable battle. "Betsy," Mom repeated, as if there was any chance of her not hearing the first time, "are you wearing makeup?"

"No." Betsy's reply is abrupt and defensive, but I can see the sparkly purple shadow on her downcast eyelids, and I know Mom can too.

"It's okay if you are," my no-makeup, undyed-hair Mom says in a tone that implies a number of things regarding Betsy's makeup, none of them anywhere near "okay."

By this point, Dad and I are glancing up from our broccoli quiche to giggle and wink at Betsy's denial. Our smiles don't go unnoticed, and Betsy pushes away from the table angrily.

"I'm not! Okay? I'm not wearing any makeup!" She storms out of the room, footsteps shaking the silverware, and tears blurring her newly applied mascara.

The three of us left at the table watch her go, and in the back of my mind, a self-congratulatory voice gloats, "*I've never worn makeup. I've never left the dinner table in a huff. Nope, never done any of that stuff. I'm so good.*" But at the same time, I struggle to name an emotion that is entangling itself with my smug disapproval. Is it... admiration? Jealousy? Surely not, but there's no denying that Betsy has some moxy, daring to experiment with makeup in a terrifyingly hostile environment. Her struggle reminds me of my own awkward preteen years, when I was torn between the disapproval of my friends and that of my mother. Eventually I just gave up on the idea of trying to be like other girls, bowing to parental censure. Betsy, on the other hand, is standing up for her own identity, no matter how laughable or distasteful we might find it. I suppose I can't help but be a little envious.

I'm standing in the bathroom, bare feet chilled against the tile floor, hands resting lightly on the countertop. Betsy stands behind me, patiently twisting a curling iron up and down my stubbornly straight locks. Sighing impatiently, I pick invisible lint off of my dress, grimacing as another section of hair falls into a limp ringlet around my shoulders. With the clock ticking down to 6:00, I can hardly stand the tedium of forcing my clearly unwilling hair into a shape suitable for Homecoming.

With a final flourish, Betsy pulls the iron from my hair, bouncing my new curls with her fingertips. "There, done!" She squints critically at my unadorned lashes. "Are you *sure* you don't want anything?" she asks, ominously reaching for her pencils and mascara wand. I glance at her raccoon-eye makeup and gooey glossed lips with that familiar twinge of smug disapproval.

"No thanks!" I laugh, waving my hands defensively in front of my face as she leans over my shoulder in an attempt to smother me with liquid-liner and grinning at her disappointed glare in the mirror. *She is my mirror image*, I think, seeing our matched reflections, impossible to tell where one blonde head ends and the other starts, *exactly the same and perfectly opposite*.