

*The Right Kind of Time*

My sister Heidi, five years my junior, has a laugh and a smile and a reaction to Christmas presents that's so genuine there have been holidays where I've given her an extra gift just to watch the scene she makes as she opens it. Her laugh builds from her waist, making its way up through her chest, over her slender shoulders and neck, and finally squeezing through a smile so big and so contagious that it's nearly impossible not to smile and laugh along with her.

But at thirty-seven years old, smiling and laughing alongside my sister occurs far less frequently than it once did. We see each other at family gatherings and on holidays, and occasionally at church, but she and I are both married now, and our lives no longer unfold under the same roof. Which seems about right for siblings, I suppose—the pulling away that occurs in adulthood. But I find that I think of her often now, perhaps more now than I ever did when we were young.

What I mean is that for a large portion of my life, though I'm not sure I could have articulated this if someone had asked me, I felt that a brother was something a person either was or wasn't. After all, the definition is simple enough: a male with siblings is a brother; a male without siblings isn't. It's black or white. You either are or aren't. There isn't any room for wavering.

Unless, of course, there is.

Because it occurs to me now that there needs to be a verb before the noun, that I actually need to *be* a brother.

But before that thought could even enter my mind, before I could even begin to have the awareness to question something like that, I was eighteen years old and Heidi was thirteen and I had moved out of my mother and stepfather's house in a whirlwind of adolescent

emotions. My relationship with my parents had become toxic and perpetually strained—partly the result of being expelled from high school the year before, as a seventeen-year-old junior; partly because of my reckless use of substances. In the aftermath of my expulsion, I was desperate to get away, desperate to do whatever the fuck I felt like, an angry teenager hell bent on living life on his own terms no matter the consequences.

So after being too hung over to make it to the GED test I had half-heartedly signed up for, after borrowing just enough money for a one-way ticket to Colorado, I said goodbye to Heidi and the rest of my family and did what people in America have done for hundreds of years: traveled west in search of answers.

The answers to human problems, Joan Didion once said, if there were answers, lay someplace in a man's soul. This is interesting because it implies that the answers are always with us, and perhaps all we need to do is unearth them. Which begs the question of why, then, we sometimes leave and go searching.

In Colorado, I certainly found answers, but I'm not sure I knew exactly what questions I was asking. And the answers I did find were complicated and unexpected and unnerving.

In the time I was away, a little over three years, Heidi and I talked only a few times, each of us busy occupying our own little corners of the universe, perhaps too wrapped in our own lives to figure out how navigate the distance between us.

And then suddenly that distance was closing again, and thirty-six months after boarding that plane to Denver, I was on a Greyhound bus heading east, back to Chicago—my rap sheet considerably longer,

my alcoholism fully formed, everything I owned packed in the duffle bag stowed in the cargo hold beneath my seat.

On the way back to Chicago, I called my stepfather from a diner somewhere off Interstate 80, deep in the cornfields of Nebraska. The payphone was just outside the front doors of the restaurant and the sky above me was peppered with stars, the nighttime air chilly and crisp and fresh. Behind the diner, stalks of field corn stretched endlessly into the blackness. From the pocket of my jeans, I pulled out a phone card and dialed the numbers on the back.

“Hello?” My stepfather’s voice sounded distant on the other end of the line. We’d talked less than a dozen times in the three years I’d been gone.

“Hey Dad,” I said. Across the parking lot, the bus driver opened the cargo hold to check the luggage.

“Where are you, son?”

“Somewhere in Nebraska,” I said.

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line, and through the front windows of the diner I could see a waitress refilling coffee cups. “Listen, Tim,” he said, “I know we’ve gone over this, but I need to say it again.” My throat tightened and I pulled a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros in the front pocket of my hoodie and lit it, inhaled deeply while he continued. “Your mother and I are going to let you stay here for a little while so you can get your feet underneath you, but you have to remember that this is our house and our rules. Things can’t be the same as they were before.”

In the months before I’d left for Colorado, my parents and I could hardly make it through a conversation without it throttling into an argument. Heidi and my two other siblings would often be forced to wait out our fights in their rooms, playing quietly, waiting for the slammed door that typically signaled my departure, and the end of the fight. The day I finally left the house for Colorado, bags packed, I think we were all somewhat relieved for the break it gave us.

I stabbed the toe of my sneaker into the ground beneath me, sent a rock flying. “I know, Dad, I will. We already talked about this.”

“I know we did, Tim, but this is serious,” he said. “Your brother and sisters live here, too. You can’t disrupt their lives.”

I thought about how disrupted *my* life had become; about the trouble I’d found in Colorado, the fights and the felony, the drugs, about the vodka I drank the night before I boarded the bus. The headache from my hangover had settled in behind my eyes and I squeezed them shut. Opened them to see that everything had gone blurry. I blinked a few times, rapidly. “Geez, Dad. I said *I know*. It’ll be fine.” I watched the bus driver close the cargo hold, heard the lock snap into place. I flicked my cigarette into the rocks. “Just cut me some slack, Dad. I’ll see you soon.”

By the time I was back in my parents’ house, Heidi was sixteen. She was a fierce volleyball player with a nasty vertical and could ignite the crowd in her high school’s gymnasium. She was an honor student with an affinity for books, and she worked with kids in the youth group at church.

She was the opposite of me in many ways, but there were also parts of us that must have sprouted from the same maternal cells. Before drugs and drinking and anger and rebellion had stalled me, I had been a wildly competitive athlete—soccer and skating and snowboarding. All throughout my childhood I had loved to read, and I’d always enjoyed and gotten along well with kids. It was almost as if Heidi was the version of me I would have been had I stayed in school and kept away from substances and found a way to restrain the adolescent rage I carried within me.

But by the time I was back in my parents’ house with Heidi, the gulf between us had expanded. The smile I remembered her flashing widely and often before I left for Colorado was noticeably absent. I’d walk into my parents’ living room, where she’d be sitting on the couch

watching TV, and she'd barely register my presence.

"Hey, sis," I'd say, searching her body language for clues to what she was thinking. "What's up?"

She'd look at me for a beat, her acorn-colored hair drawn back in a ponytail, lips closed and pulled in a tight line over the tiny gap in her two front teeth, and then she'd get up and leave the room or change the channel or busy herself with the K-Mart sale papers our mother always left lying on the coffee table.

At first, Heidi's attitude toward me was puzzling; I couldn't understand what I had done to her. I'd moved out of state for my own reasons, I'd thought, and couldn't she see they had nothing to do with her?

I now think that it wasn't quite as simple as I once convinced myself it was. I now think that while I was plowing through my teenage years, angry and rebellious and laser-focused on myself, she may have been watching me. During the time that I was away, junior high had turned to high school for her, and it's possible the picture Heidi saw of me had become far too hard—or too painful—to look at.

I also wonder, though, if there's really any truth to that. Was she actually avoiding me, as I thought she was back then, or was she simply engaged in her own life, worried about the same things that all teenagers are worried about—high school and friendships and the answer to the question of what she wanted to do next? I wonder now if her silence was less about anger or disappointment than it was about the chasmal gap that exists between the middle of one's teen years and the beginning of one's twenties. But back then my thoughts were less probing, less lucid, more selfish, and when I climbed the creaking stairs from my parents' basement and stepped into the kitchen, sleep clinging to the corners of my eyes, the smell of alcohol leaking from my pores, all I could think about when Heidi passed by me was myself.

Late one afternoon, after I'd been home for a few months, I

walked into the kitchen as my mother was setting the table for dinner and asked her why Heidi wasn't talking to me.

"She's hurt, Tim," she said while setting plates on the table. "She just needs time."

I leaned against the counter, shifted my weight to one foot. "Yeah, but what did I do? I can't even get her to tell me."

My mother set the last plate down on the table and turned to face me. "I think she feels like you left her when she needed you most." She put her hand on the chair next to her and looked at the ground for a second before finding my eyes and holding them. "Think about it, Tim. She looks up to you and you left to do your own thing."

I broke my mother's gaze and looked past her, out the window behind her to the steady stream of cars driving down Central Avenue. I could smell the green bean casserole baking in the oven, could hear Heidi moving around in her room directly above the kitchen.

"Maybe," I said. "But can't she see that I had my own problems going on? I mean, it wasn't like I meant to leave her." For a second I thought about what it must have been like for Heidi to see what I was going through and the way I chose to deal with it. My parents had tried to downplay my arrest record and drug use, but she wasn't naïve. The fights my parents and I had before I left were loud and sometimes violent. During one of them, I'd stormed down the hallway, grabbed a family portrait off the wall, and scratched out my face with a scissors.

"So what should I do?" I asked.

My mother walked toward me and stopped. Put both of her hands on my shoulders and gave me a tired smile. "Like I said, Tim, you just need to give her time."

So I did give Heidi time, but it wasn't the right kind of time. It was time that just sort of presented itself because I had found a way to wrap myself back up in my own problems again. I came home hammered virtually every night, only staying in when I absolutely had

to, and even on those nights I'd walk to my neighbor's house to eat ecstasy or smoke weed or drink capfuls of methadone. Like many of the promises I made when I was steeped in addiction, the one I'd made to my stepfather at the truck stop in Nebraska had been broken almost immediately. I'd told him that things would be fine, that I wouldn't disrupt the lives of my younger siblings. But there I was living under his roof, rarely sober, disrupting the routine he'd spent the previous three years smoothing out.

I had a futon in my parents' unfinished basement that I slept on where blankets hung from the ceiling to simulate walls, and my chemical-induced snoring could be heard at all hours all throughout the house. My parents were fending off questions from my other siblings, too—a five-year-old sister and a twelve-year-old brother.

“Why does Tim snore so loudly?”

“What's wrong with him? Is he sick?”

I came home from waiting tables one evening to find my stepfather standing at the top of the stairs looking down at me as I slipped my shoes off on the landing, his body framed by the doorway. He was still wearing his work clothes; had yet to take off his tar-spotted work boots. He sounded tired when he spoke, but his voice was firm. “We'll give you one more month, son, but you need to move out.”

Over the years, I've often wondered what Heidi thought of me back then, what she saw when she looked at me walking in through the side door of my parents' house with my condiment-stained apron slung over my shoulder, smelling of grilled cheese sandwiches and fryer grease. Surely she was disappointed in me. Because I wasn't just her brother. I was her *older* brother, and there was certainly a responsibility that came with that role. At least there seems to have been, because now, almost two decades later, I feel that responsibility in a way I've never felt before. Perhaps it's guilt that I feel from days that have long passed—the way my excessive drinking or drug use or

fighting may have affected the home she lived in—or maybe it’s simply me lamenting lost time. Whatever it is, though, it’s acute, and when I see Heidi sitting against the windows in the back of our church, leaning over her knees as she grabs a handful of her daughter’s shirt just before she runs out of reach, smiling and pulling my laughing niece to her chest, the responsibility I should have felt twenty years ago beats against the inside of my temples like a migraine.

Five years after I moved out of my parents’ house for the last time, I checked in to rehab. While housed in a snow-covered Minnesota facility for just under a month, I had limited communication with the outside world, but the outside world occupied almost all of my thoughts. About a week into treatment, just as my liquor-soaked brain was starting to make sense of some of the things I was hearing, Heidi sent me a letter. She told me she loved me and that she was praying for me. She told me she hoped my recovery would be successful. She told me she was proud of me.

As I sat on the edge of the twin bed I’d been assigned, my elbows resting on my knees as I held her letter, a slight tremble in my fingers, I felt that familiar guilt swell up inside me again. It didn’t seem possible with all the mistakes I’d made, with all the birthdays and family parties and Christmases I’d missed, that she could somehow still be proud of me. It was only later, much later in fact, after I’d left rehab and struggled through my first year of sobriety, that I realized that maybe, just maybe, not everything was about me.

During a Sunday afternoon visit to my parents’ house recently, Heidi and I sat side-by-side on the couch, both of us sunk deeply into the cushions, watching Heidi’s eighteen-month-old daughter bounce around the living room. I rolled my head to the side and looked at my sister, at the curl of light brown hair that draped against her cheek.

“Do you remember when I moved back from Colorado and

you wouldn't talk to me?" I asked.

Heidi watched as her daughter ran up to her, put both of her tiny hands on her knees. "Hey, sweet girl," Heidi said to her, covering one of her daughter's hands with her own. Heidi turned to look at me. Smiled and spoke softly. "Not really, brother. It was a long time ago."

I nodded and smiled back at her, loved that the word "brother" came so easily, that it sounded so uncomplicated. I looked at my niece—at her milky skin and perfect little fingers and the way her lips drew a smile on her face that reminded me of her mother.

Perhaps Heidi was right and it was a long time ago, and the things that I was worried about for so many years had passed without me knowing. Maybe what my mother had told me all those years ago about Heidi being upset had been both right and wrong: perhaps Heidi did need time, but it wasn't because she felt that I had abandoned her. Perhaps she was simply living her own life, and it wasn't quite everything I'd made it up to be.

Which is often the case, I think now, how one person remembers something as huge and monumental, and another hardly remembers the thing at all. And what of all that guilt then? All the time that was spent wondering?

I turned back to Heidi, and then let my eyes wander around the living room that we'd spent so much time in as kids. The furniture was newer and the paint was a different color and the fifty-year-old oak floors had been refinished some years before. So much had changed since we were young, since the world we lived in had been so small.

"You're right, sis," I said, looking back at her. "I guess it was a long time ago."

From my spot next to my sister, I watched as my niece ran away from us, her footfalls landing in the same places mine had when I was a child, in the same places Heidi's had, another little girl laughing her way through the long rectangle of sunlight that came in from the window, the shadow stretching away from her twice as big as she was.