

Like A Sister

Buzz, Buzz. Michael knew who the text was from so he didn't bother to check. Besides, it was his dad's wedding day and he was the best man so how would that look? Michael straightened a crease on his pant leg and looked across the aisle at his new sister. Janet had decked out her daughter's wheelchair in white and purple flowers. They matched her bouquet. Although Michael had never known his own mom he chose not to call Janet "mom." It felt like betrayal. He wondered if Lena would want to call his dad "dad" or rather by his first name. Lena cut her eyes at Michael, he quickly looked away. He didn't understand why she made him so nervous, she was just mentally challenged; she couldn't even talk. Nevertheless, she made him uneasy so Michael just avoided her. He felt it best to just give her space. After the engagement Michael's dad had a talk with him about the new situation.

"I hope this doesn't make you uncomfortable," he said. *How would it not?*

"You used to want a sister" *Yeah, a normal sister.*

"Just treat her like a sister," hesitantly he added, "She is your sister."

My sister. Aren't brothers and sister supposed to fight and get in arguments, I can't even communicate with Lena and she's confined to that wheelchair for the rest of her life. What kind of relationship are we supposed to have? At the end of the ceremony Janet and Michael's dad pushed Lena down the aisle to the outdoor reception area. Thankfully, they were having the ceremony and the reception in the same venue so it would be easier for Lena. A year ago Michael would have never thought that he'd start his senior year with a new family; maybe a new pet or something but definitely not this. Michael trailed down the aisle behind them, throwing fake smiles back at all his obscure relatives. For example, he hadn't seen his cousin Andrew since he was six at Aunt Monica's wedding yet Andrew was smiling at him like they

were best friends. Speaking of best friends he hadn't responded yet to his best friend Patrick's text. Patrick was the only one who knew about Lena, and unlike Michael he loved to bring it up. Patrick's text read: "Hey. Don't forget to bring my sweatshirt tomorrow, you should bring your sister, lol". *Lol, Laugh out loud*. It wasn't funny. In fact Michael never found it funny when Patrick made these kinds of jokes but nevertheless he responded back with a sarcastic "Sure, maybe I will. Lol."

Janet and Lena had moved in some months before the engagement so Michael was almost used to seeing their belongings around the house. Lena's room was across the hall and on lazy Saturdays she was usually in her room watching stimulating videos her doctor prescribed. The door was always kept wide open in order for Janet to keep watch because if Lena moved enough she could fall out of her chair and she would need assistance to get back in it. Michael had never seen this happen but he'd heard it. Whenever it happened Lena wailed unbearably in a distinct tone impossible to tone out, then followed Janet's rushed steps and the sound her knees made as they hit the hardwood floor, and then finally the calming noises Janet uttered as she eased Lena back into the chair. It always took around ten minutes and when she finished Lena's wails would gradually subside.

The morning after the wedding Michael slept in until eleven. Before Janet and Lena moved in, Michael would always be up by seven but he soon found out so would Janet and Lena and that's when Janet fed Lena breakfast. When Janet would see Michael in the morning she would always ask him if he wanted to help her feed Lena. It was easy to come up with excuses for the first couple of times but after a week or so he was afraid Janet might catch on to his lies so he started sleeping in. To be honest he wasn't really sleeping, he was just lying awake in bed until he heard Lena being rolled from the kitchen to the living room for more "stimulation."

Once he'd heard the familiar sound of the wheels, Michael hopped out of bed, got dressed quickly, grabbed Patrick's jacket, and made his way out of the house.

Michael was meeting Patrick and some other friends at a local coffee shop. None of them really liked coffee that much but the shop was a popular place for people to hang out. Michael had to park across the street from the coffee shop because their parking was full. After he parked he grabbed Patrick's obnoxious red jacket and waited for the signal to cross the street. Patrick's jacket was neon red with purple tiger stripes. His mother had got it for him as a joke yet Patrick wore the jacket everywhere. Everyone at school made fun of him for wearing it but he didn't care, he wore it anyway; Patrick wasn't afraid of anything, especially what people thought of him.

From Michael's position across the street he could see the entrance of the coffee shop. To the side of the entrance was a woman kneeling in front of something. As Michael crossed the street he stared at her curiously and saw that she was kneeling in front of someone in a wheelchair. For a moment he thought it was Janet and Lena but thankfully it wasn't. This woman had different hair and the person in the wheelchair was a boy although like Lena he was mentally challenged. Now a few steps away from them Michael heard the woman talking to the boy about how they make the coffee.

"And they grind the beans just like this" she said as she shaped his hands to demonstrate a grinding motion. The boy wasn't responding, in fact he wasn't even looking at her but she kept going as if she wasn't having a one-sided conversation. Janet talked to Lena all the time about everything. After they had first moved in Janet explained that talking to Lena was another form of stimulation.

“You should try it some time, she’s a great listener,” she joked. They were sitting in the kitchen: Michael, Lena, and Janet. Janet then got up to go to the bathroom so it was just Michael and Lena. Michael had looked over at Lena and was battling finding words to say against the fear of sounding stupid. In the end he settled for “Hey.” Not surprisingly, Lena didn’t respond, instead her headband fell into her eyes. Michael knew she couldn’t fix it on her own and so he reached over to adjust it when suddenly her hand jerked toward his. Without meaning to, Michael flinched and pulled his arm back. She hadn’t even touched him but he reacted to the sudden motion. Before anything else could happen, Janet came back from the bathroom. Michael excused himself because his hands were shaking and he didn’t want Janet to notice. He couldn’t understand why he reacted that way; he knew that Lena couldn’t hurt him. All throughout that night he couldn’t get the image of her hand still outstretched toward his after he had already pulled back.

Brushing his thoughts aside, Michael entered the coffee shop and to his relief spotted his friends immediately. He didn’t want to be left alone with his thoughts for fear of reliving the memory.

A couple of hours later, Michael and Patrick left the coffee shop together. Patrick was coming over to play videogames. After the engagement Michael’s dad bought him a lot of very expensive videogames. Michael figured he was bribing him into acceptance and it bothered him a little but he didn’t say anything. When they got to the house Lena was in her room watching videos and Janet was with her reading a newspaper. After the customary greetings the boys got situated in Michael’s room with junk food and *Call of Duty 4*. After a few minutes Janet came in and told them that Lena was asleep and that she was going for a quick walk around the neighborhood. It was 3:15, she said she’d be back in fifteen minutes.

Ten minutes later Michael heard a thump. He assumed it was in the game so he ignored it. But Michael could not ignore the distant wails that followed. *Please no, Please no, Please no. Don't let her have fallen, Janet's not home, what am I supposed to do?* The wails gradually got louder and Michael started shifting in his seat.

“What is that?” asked Patrick.

“Hold on a second, I'll go check,” Michael responded even though he already knew what it was. Michael walked out of his room, shut the door, and walked across the hall to Lena's room; he opened the door and froze. The first thing he saw were her hands tightly clutched against her body, her fingers like gnarled tree branches. Her legs were still in a seated position just horizontal on the ground instead of vertical. And then her face. For the first time Michael saw emotion in her eyes, Michael could not discern whether it was fear panic but either way it wasn't good. Her neck was stiff and her head was slightly elevated from the ground, the wails from her open mouth got louder as a pool of drool settled on the hardwood. Michael glanced at the clock it was 3:17. *Lena could wait three minutes right? Till Janet got back? This is not my responsibility. I could just say that I didn't hear her above the sounds from the video game. Janet would believe me.* The tone of Lena's wails changed, they were deeper and more drawn out, Michael looked down at her and saw another pool of liquid forming right below her eyes. He'd never seen her cry before; he didn't even know she could cry. Michael then dropped to his knees in front of her put his arms around her waist and lifted.

“I'm sorry, Lena, I'm so sorry,” he told her over and over as he struggled to lift her back into her chair and finally be a brother.

Janet opened the front door and took off her walking shoes. All throughout her walk she'd been thinking of Michael. She had been so excited that Lena would finally have a sibling

but Michael just seemed so disconnected. Heading up the stairs to Lena's room she thought she would check on the boys first. When she opened the door to Michael's room she saw it was empty, she was hoping the boys were home so she could make them some dinner and talk to them. Sighing at her lost opportunity, she walked across the hall and into Lena's room. She was immediately accosted by sounds that did not sound like Lena's stimulation videos. Janet looked into the room and froze. Lena was sitting in her wheelchair holding a joystick, at her side was Michael coaching her fingers with his own hands.

“Just like this, and whenever you see that guy press this one, like that.”

“Hey,” Janet interrupted with a wide grin, “Where's Patrick?”

Janet thought she saw disappointment flash in Michael's eyes, just for a second.

“He had to leave,” said Michael, “Anyways, I think I'm having more fun playing this game with my sister.” From that day forth, every Saturday until he went to college Michael played videogames with his Lena. She never got better at the games but it didn't matter to Michael, she wasn't the one that needed to grow in the first place.