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By Definition Only

by Jodie Webb

From the day I was born, I was destined to spend a major portion of my life defending and attempting to redefine who I am. Many stereotypes are made about people of my status. Consider me exception to the rule.

I prefer privileged.

It's not like I asked for this. I begged and begged my parents for much of my childhood to produce me a sibling of some sort.

Their response: Then you'd have to share your toys.

Mine: Not if you have a boy.

Discussion ended.

At Christmas time I got everything I wanted. Well almost. Every Christmas the only stocking that hung on the wall was the one with my name scrawled across the top, because labeling it made it clear to Santa that the Barbie doll clothes and *The Little Mermaid* belonged to me. While other kids my age were having wild screaming fits because this brother got Nerf darts or that sister unwrapped a Rainbow Bright doll, I was forced to entertain myself (and my parents). There is home video footage of one Christmas when I was about three where I received a flat present wrapped in ribbon with two ceramic puppies taped to the top, standing guard to the extravagant bow. Inside the paper's contents was a puzzle that I immediately flipped over to start working on putting the chaos back in order. The pieces fit in with ease, not a complex task for my genius at such a young age. That is, until one of the middle sections wouldn't fit in the hole. It had no interlocking edges, which I assume is why it was so difficult for my naïve brain to comprehend. Regardless, I screamed and bawled. Had I known curse words then, I'm sure a few would have slipped out. There is a brief snow out in the recording (probably in the worst section of the tape that might have included a spanking), which then resumes with me getting guided by mother telling me how to put the piece in correctly.

Mom: Jodie, turn the piece a quarter-turn.

Too much.

Mom again: Calm down, not that much.

The piece is lined up perfectly and slides right in. Screeches of a different sort come from my mouth after that.

Me: I did it!

I'm a genius.

Had my wishes been granted, I wouldn't need to be so focused on perfecting everything. When I wanted to play dress up and mom was working awkward hours at one of her many jobs, dad became the outlet. These times usually came at nap time (dad's, not mine). He would snore away in the puke-green recliner, facing the tv with his head slumped over and his lips bulging with every noisy exhale. He was a sound sleeper, and those bulging lips were perfect with mom's ruby lipstick on. Soon after I finished once, Jehovah's Witnesses were doing their rounds and decided to stop at our house. My dad jumped from his chair and answered the door when the bell rang like an embarrassing alarm clock. They stared at him for a moment as he stood there looking like the rough farmer man he was dolled up for a night on the town without the drag in blue eye shadow and rosy blush (clueless), before turning and making the way toward their car. We've lived in our house for nearly twenty years, but the JWs have never returned to spread their interpretation of the Bible. A situation that could have been prevented had he just done his part to give me what I asked for. But then again, they did tell me I'd have to share...that included parent-time. It's not my fault I'm self-absorbed. I did ask for a brother.

Jealousy began in Kindergarten, during my first year of social interaction with 20 kids my age that all demanded attention of the single adult overseer. It was customary to have a "Special Day" for each child. Like the other kids in my class, my parents came to my Special Day to have lunch and let me talk about myself. Unlike other kids, my pictures showcasing my first five years of life included nothing but me, and maybe a cat or two. When all the other multi-children families were having babies that got brought in by their proud big sisters/brothers for Show and Tell, I was bringing in my favorite snow globe, the pretty Easter-themed one with bunnies that shattered on the bus ride home.

Only children are often thought to be pathological liars. I could easily deny this one but then we'd sit here all day perpetuating the cycle. Mom would clean my room every week (dust and vacuum only, the actual cleaning was my responsibility...totally spoiled I know), so when she didn't see the snow globe on top of the dresser, the event proceeded into one of the most creative lies I've ever come up with.

Mom: Where is your snow globe?

Me: I don't know.

Mom: What do you mean you don't know?

Me: I took it to school.

Mom: I said you couldn't do that.

Me: I know mom, but the aliens under the swing set told me they didn't know what Easter was.

Spank.

It is true that the best lies involve the most truth. I didn't get that memo for a long time. Lying, I can admit (though today I prefer the term truth

interpretation, commonly referred to as bullshit) I have done extensively, all in good intentions like getting myself out of trouble.

When you're five, you feel so clever telling someone something you think they'll never know the truth to, but like I mentioned, I was five.

One time in music class, I lied.

The floor in the elementary school was lined with green marble of varying shades. Looking at the floor told you how old the section of the school was that you were walking through. The original part of the school's floor was a bright sea foam color, which connected to the dark and dreary dark teal that came later on in the school's development. Music class was up on the top floor of the newer section. Getting there involved not stepping on the cracks for both colors of tile and a hand glide up the thick wooden banister at the stairs. The music room provided a window view of the entire playground (every child's Mecca), but once the music started, no one was allowed to look out the window at the kids who were experiencing free time.

It was shortly after *It's a Small World* when I announced my proud news.

I raised my hand. My music teacher rolled her eyes, assuming that I'd be the twelfth kid who *needed* to use the lavatory (bathrooms had a shower these adults always said).

Mrs. Music: What Jodie?

Me: I have a sister.

Mrs. Music: No you don't.

Me: Yes I do. Her name is Elizabeth. She was born December 29th. Mom went into labor after reheating leftover ham from Christmas. She was holding water up in her stomach that spilled all over the floor and dad said we had to go to the hospital right away—

Mrs. Music cut me off: Ok, Jodie. Well congratulations on being a big sister.

Me: I don't really like it.

At least I didn't lie about my feelings. I didn't like it, but the *it* wasn't so clear. She thought I meant I didn't like being a big sister, I meant I didn't like not having a little one. Communication skills aren't always the most effective when you're five. Not my fault.

Stubborn. Persistence sounds better in comparison and that I was. Playing house was one of my favorite activities. Mom had taught me how to wrap a baby in a blanket, which was always loose in comparison to my mom's attempts at supporting a newborn. Once she'd wrap it up for me, I'd leave it with her to drag around. I forced my mother to carry around a plastic newborn baby doll that looked mistakenly life-like, wrapped in a blanket everywhere we went. At the library, when I would run screeching up and down the aisles randomly ripping a book off one shelf and then a couple aisles down put it back on another shelf, one middle-aged woman bundled in an overgrown trench coat commented on my mother's capabilities: You

have such a well-behaved little girl, does she sleep through the night?

Mom's answer: Only when I give her nighttime cold medicine.

Child services stopped out at our house one evening with the local Sheriff's Department to discuss my mother administering cold medicine to a baby. One of the brown suited men with his gun strapped in his holster pulled me aside to ask me if mommy or daddy had ever touched me "in a bad way".

They never found a baby. Intelligent men knew that the doll was nothing more than just that.

The Women's Auxiliary at St. Paul's Lutheran Church were always excited to see a new face they could add to their membership for the dying congregation, so when my mother walked down the aisle after the service, baby in tow, an elderly woman stopped her.

When was your baby born? You look so good for having given birth. When were you thinking about scheduling a baptism?

My mother's burden always rested on the fact that she'd have to tell them I just had an immense imagination and liked to pretend too much to address the reality of the situation: that I was an only child who would never have a baby sister or brother to share, fight with, kick, bite, love or hate.

Harassment peaked when I was about nine on a gloomy night when my mother and I drove into town to bring me to my best friend's house (the only playmate I had outside of school). I'd been relentless up until this point and didn't see the significance in stopping anytime soon. Mother, on the other hand, had other things in mind.

The journey into town was only about a ten minute drive, but that ride was the longest I'd ever experienced as my mind raced from the knowledge I was unaware I'd be given.

I asked again: When are you and dad going to have another baby?

Her response was blank and blunt: Never.

Why?

I kept on pleading: But mom, then I could have someone to play with, so you wouldn't have to drive me into town to play with my friends. We could save money on gas. Mother was shocked at how thrifty I'd become at such a young age.

Mom: Do you know how much it costs to have a baby?

Tough question.

My response: Nine hundred dollars.

Mom's: A lot more.

My persistence: Well, I will save my money so you guys can have one, so I

can finally have a sibling.

It wasn't that far-fetched an idea on my part. For being an only child, and always defending the fact that I wasn't spoiled, regardless of what other kids my age with brothers and sisters believed, I'd already proven that point wrong. I didn't do chores for stupid weekly allowances so I could buy candy from the vending machine after school for the bus ride home. Instead, I did chores for important things. From an early age, I had discovered a love for horses and in addition to begging my parents to produce me a child, I'd also requested they produce me my very own horse.

I'd learned negotiation skills quickly, always having to deal with adults. I earned points, which were the non-monetary equivalent of a dollar doing lists of chores my father had laid out in a plan. Each day I'd get off the bus and eat a snack. Then it was on to feeding the cats in the barn or picking up the black walnuts that had fallen off the tree so that when dad came by on the lawn mower, he didn't ruin the blades. He'd oversee my work, and together we'd *discuss* how many points I'd receive each day. I like to think that I earned a good work ethic from this experience. After a few months of etching tally marks, I'd reached the 500 point mark. This meant one thing: I'd fulfilled my end of the bargain, and dad was obligated to buy me my horse.

When referencing this example of my dedication to my mother, she made some illustration as to how a horse is not like a child, and certainly there were not enough chores on this side of Stevens County to ever make it worth them having more offspring.

Discussion ended, her part at least.

Dedication is subject to my persistence, and rightfully so. I pushed and pushed the issue about having a sibling.

She turned the vehicle around and drove us both home.

Mom: You do have a sister.

I knew it. They'd finally did something with hornets and doves (I didn't understand anyone's obsession with getting stung and bitten that produced yelps like the ones I heard at night barging through their closed bedroom door) and I would finally have my dreams of childhood come true!

This isn't *Cinderella*, more like *Bambi*.

Mom: You have a half-sister somewhere out there in the world. God took her when she was born to live with a family who could take better care of her than I could.

Silence.

Madness. At that age, I couldn't decide who I was angrier at: Mom or God. Both obviously weren't concerned about my well-being. Mom's concern failed when she didn't give me this sister that was rightfully mine, and God's agreeing to take her away to be better, but not me. (Another episode of jealousy). I couldn't be blamed, I'd been led astray my entire nine years of life believing that I was an only child. *Now* they decide to tell me that my

life's been a lie.

Much like the grieving process, discovering life-altering episodes such as this also involved the denial stage. I spent ten years in denial. I relied on outward social connections to experiment with pot, drinking and lying about my age and cup-size (thanks to silicone inserts and padded push-up bras), who undeniably had older siblings to teach them these crucial tidbits of knowledge to survive middle school and successfully enter high school. Throughout the course of my denial, I had managed to graduate high school and move on to college. Binge drinking and prescription drugs were the Miracle Gro to my adult development. Drug-induced euphoria produced my perfect adult life (post-partying days). I imagined ways of pulling information out of my mother about this long-lost sister of my very own. Most of these ways involved overly dramatic sobbing hugs, as seen in Lifetime movies, or in crowd-startling manners on the Oprah Winfrey Show where we'd not only emphasize the impact having a blood sister has made on my life, but how perfect everything has been since the initial meeting.

I emailed Tyra.

A few days later, my phone rang. I've learned to not answer phone calls when you don't recognize the number (and even less often when you do). If it's important they'll leave a voicemail.

Beep.

Producer Lady: Hi Jodie. My name is Producer Lady and I'm from the Tyra Banks Show!

Pause, as if waiting for the audience (my voicemail) to holler and applaud.

Producer Lady continued: We read your story on our website and are interested in having you come on the show. Please give me a call back so we can talk. I'd like to find out a little more information about you and your situation. Thank you so much, and I look forward to talking to you soon!

Message saved.

Inconsiderate. I didn't know the number, but I did actually *listen* to the voicemail and returned her call promptly. Sounds pretty considerate to me. Mrs. Producer Lady needed the crucial information about my story, which included my date of birth, sibling's date of birth, had I attempted to make contact on any previous occasion with my sibling, and my dress size.

My answer: May 27th, I don't know, no, 12.

Lying involves the most truth I'd learned.

Mrs. Producer Lady informed me she'd do everything she could to find out more information but without specifics to go on, she'd have a hell of time.

I knew what she meant. She'd only dealt with getting me a sibling for a few days. I'd been going on nineteen years.

The taping day had come and gone, I'd stayed in college, wearing sweat

pants and yesterday's makeup, rather than having my Cinderella moment in a Tyra embrace as she comforted me, reassuring that *she knew how I felt*. Of course she did.

Puzzles can be great forms of artwork to make a place really feel like home. A thrifty idea that fulfills two purposes: a procrastination method for homework and poor kid's interesting decorations. This one was a mermaid blowing a brightly colored conch shell and the ocean flowed out from it with a golden moon glowing in the background. I had chosen that one because I knew it'd be the first thing people would see when they walked into the living room. All it needed was one piece, wherever that stupid thing is.

Jodie Webb is freshly graduated from Southwest Minnesota State University where she double majored in Marketing and Literature/Creative Writing. She is currently trying to decipher what being an actual adult really entails, while keeping a child-like mentality in her arsenal. She currently, more like temporarily, resides in Marshall, MN. This is her first publication.

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