

Like a Little Smile

Rebecca Baldwin, Peabody College

My older sister Elena and I are only two years apart, a small enough age gap so that people frequently compare us, small enough that we compete with each other about most things, but large enough that she has an unfair advantage over me. At least on the surface, Elena was, is, and forever will be more put together than I am.

On her first day of school, and on every first day of school, my mom took a photo of us. I was only three, too young to go to school, but Elena was more than ready. In the picture, she is smiling, standing with her knee beveled in front of our door. She wears a black and white gingham dress with pink embroidery, black Mary Jane shoes with white frilly socks, and a pink backpack with her initials sewn into it. Her hair is fixed in two golden French braids. Still in my nightgown with a chocolate ice cream stain down the front, I lurk in the corner of the photo. My hair is a wispy blond tornado, strands shooting out in all directions and covering most of my flushed face. Instead of a pink backpack, I'm holding a chewed-up piece of bagel. My shoes, however, are much more fun than Elena's. Instead of black Mary Janes, I'm wearing the sparkly gold ballet slippers I wore every day until I tripped and ripped a hole in the toe.

The family albums contain other pictures, too. When Elena was eight and I was six, my mom tried to take a picture of us for a Christmas card three weeks before Christmas. In the pictures, Elena is holding an angel ornament on a branch of a dark green tree. She's wearing red and green plaid pajamas and her golden hair floats around her head like a halo. In protest of the photoshoot, I had wrapped myself in multi-colored Christmas lights and lain face down on the ground.

My sister says her favorite photo of us, however, is one in which I am about two years old. The picture captures the height of my baby chubbiness, the phase of my life that earned me the nickname "butterball." I am wearing a denim jumper scrunched up over a sagging diaper. Elena is wearing a matching denim jumper, but hers is cleaner and fits as it would in a catalogue. Elena swears she remembers our mom begging her to "hold your sister up," so she could get a good picture. In the first few pictures from that day, my face puckers. I look hot and irritated. By the final picture, I am red-faced and screaming.

Elena is not only more photogenic than I am. She is a math and science genius, while I took an SATII algebra test just to get out of college level math. Entry-level biology for non-science majors is the lowest grade I've received.

While Elena never missed a day of school, I was less enthusiastic. I stayed in bed even when I knew my sore throat was only from allergies. She's still an immaculate dresser; her necklaces match her earrings and she straightens her hair almost every morning. I only learned that I shouldn't wear my hair wet to dinner when I moved to Tennessee.

Elena earned a perfect score on her driver's test and gets discounted car insurance (although she did once drive our car into the side of the house while trying to pull into the garage). She skipped kindergarten and attended "Junior First" instead. Her birthday is the password on both of my parents' phones. She'd lost all of her teeth by the time she made it to middle school and had a perfect straight smile by the time she made it to high school. I lost my first tooth in fourth grade and had braces until I was sixteen. Elena does owe me some credit for her perfect smile, though. I started her dental work early when, at age five, I slammed my forehead into her mouth because she wouldn't share her lollipop.

In some categories, however, I do come out on top. In third grade, I won a fishing competition and got my picture in the local newspaper. I'm five inches taller, so most people think I'm older. I had to edit Elena's medical school applications so many times, I'm not sure I'd even count her as a co-author. I call our parents more often and remember the family birthdays. I have freckles, which made me my Irish grandpa's favorite, because he insisted, "a face without freckles is like a sky without stars."

Neither of us was particularly rebellious in high school, but we did help each other get away with infractions when we needed to. She was on my side during small rebellions. Elena pretended to need the car whenever I wanted to drink at a party so I didn't have to explain to my mom why I couldn't drive myself. She covered for me when I wanted to skip tennis practice on conditioning days and read in the library instead. I have to admit that, when we were living at home, she helped me more than I helped her.

I chased her success. Usually, I admired her instead of resenting her for the ease with which she moved through life. I do admit, though, that there were times when I hated the precedents she set. When I was a junior in high school, I was placed in an honors math class. My parents responded by asking if I needed a math tutor, as Elena had been placed in AP Calculus as a junior. When Elena had her picture taken for the senior yearbook, the photographer asked if she could use her photo as an advertisement for her studio in exchange for free prints. When the same photographer took my photo two years later, she billed my parents extra for the time she spent photo-shopping my skin.

When we both went to college, the pattern of my trailing behind Elena continued. Her freshman year went smoothly. She got As in all of her classes, lived in the nicest dorm on campus, made friends, and quickly learned how to function on four or fewer hours of sleep a night. I think my parents expected that my journey would be similar. When I called them the night they moved me in, and every night for weeks after, begging them to let me drop out, they didn't know what to do. My mom asked me over and over again why I was having such a hard time. Sitting on the floor of an all gender restroom in the basement of my dorm, the only place on campus I could find where I could sit alone behind a locked door, I told her I didn't know. Our conversations usually ended the same way.

"You should call your sister."

And I did. When she answered, I would usually be too tired from crying to my mom to talk much. I would let her tell me again what I already knew. Coming from her mouth, the words had more authority. *You're just stressing yourself out; everyone else is having a hard time right now too; they're just pretending to love college; eat more; stop waking up at 5:30AM to go to the gym- that's so weird.* About a third of the time, she wouldn't answer her phone. She was out with her friends, or in class, or at a dance rehearsal. Whenever I got to the voicemail message she set when she first got a cell phone in middle school, I would hang up and text her that she didn't need to call back. She called back anyway.

Our lives carried on like this, with Elena sprinting through college and pausing every once and a while to make sure I was still crawling behind her. Until, at the end of her sophomore year, she started to slow down. One night, in the middle of finals, she went to the ER because her heart was skipping beats, she had passed out three times in a week, and her migraine was so bad she couldn't see. None of us found out until my dad got the hospital bill for lab results. Elena told my parents that she was fine, that her friends had overreacted to her stress around finals and made her see a doctor. My mom told me that my sister was crazy and that she would kill me if I ever went to the hospital without telling her. Elena told me that she'd just been taking too many caffeine pills and not sleeping enough.

When Elena came home for the summer, she was fifteen pounds heavier than she had been at the start of the year. This came as a surprise since she'd been a competitive tennis player and accomplished ballerina for years, and because she was still dancing in college. She said she had discovered a love of biscuits while living in North Carolina, but the sudden change didn't make sense to me or, I could see, to my parents. By the time she left for her next semester, she had lost the weight and more. Her hair was falling out and her hands shook whenever she didn't have something to hold onto.

I didn't say anything to Elena; she doesn't respond well to criticism or unsolicited advice. However, I was suspicious. Elena handles problems by hiding them. Once, she discovered an overdue library book under her bed. Instead of returning it and accepting a late fee, she hid the book for over a year until my mom found it. The book had accrued over fifty dollars in fines.

I may not have said anything about Elena's body deteriorating, but my grandma did. Even at eighty-years old, my grandma notices everything. She is especially quick to point out flaws in a photograph. When I was in middle school and straightened my hair until it was a crown of frizz and split ends, my grandma told me to give the straightener a rest or buy some heat protectant. After I waxed my eyebrows for the first time, she saw a photo of me on Facebook and called to let me know I'd made the right choice. She also told me that I would be doing myself a service if I stopped wearing yellow clothing.

When she called my mom to tell her that my sister Elena looked as though she had an Adam's Apple, her critique did not surprise me—or, I think, the rest of my family. Grandma's eyesight isn't perfect, but it's definitely sharp.

But the lump on Elena's neck hadn't always been there. It started to appear in pictures around the time of Elena's high school graduation. Under her white cap and against her gown and salutatorian ribbon, I hardly noticed the change. In pictures of her freshman year orientation at Duke, the lump is a little bigger. It starts to create a shadow on her neck in pictures of her in South Africa, where she spent a summer researching public and private hospital systems. By the time my grandmother saw pictures of Elena studying abroad in Paris, I couldn't believe that I hadn't noticed the lump. Even in a picture with a backdrop of the Eiffel Tower, the lump stands out.

And so, Elena went back to Duke with strict instructions to go straight to student health. The lump was suspicious enough for student health to prescribe more than extra-strength Tylenol and a good night's sleep. The doctor sent her to an endocrinologist. The endocrinologist sent her to a surgery center, where another doctor stuck six needles into the lump in her neck.

Many times, my mom debated flying out to Duke for the biopsy, but finally listened to my sister who insisted she would be fine. I sent Elena a pair of comfortable pajamas to wear for the 48 hours the doctors recommended that she stay in bed while she recovered from the biopsy. I should have known that a rest-related gift would be wasted on Elena. The night of the biopsy, she posted a video of her and her friends at a Bowling for Soup concert. The next morning, she sent me a picture of her neck, swollen and bruised like someone had tried to strangle her. I could see six pockets of deeper purple surrounded by yellow where the needles had gone in. I told her she was an idiot for going to the concert, but also asked if Bowling for Soup had played 1985.

A few days went by before the results came back. All that the results from the first biopsy told her was that she needed a second biopsy. This time, my mom ignored Elena's protests and went to Duke to be with her. She also forced Elena to rest during the twelve-hour car ride from Durham to New Jersey the day after the biopsy. Conveniently enough, the second biopsy happened to coincide with the start of Elena's spring break.

When the doctor called with the results from the second biopsy, my dad was making lunch in the kitchen, my mom and I were on the couch watching *Law & Order*, and Elena was standing at the table, eating peanut butter with a spoon. None of us could understand what she was saying through the peanut butter and the tears, but we guessed easily enough. My mom dropped her magazine on the floor and started crying before she could even get Elena to tell her what the doctor had said. My dad stood frozen with a half-made turkey sandwich in front of him. I sank deeper into the couch and wanted to look away, but I couldn't stop watching Elena trying to wipe away tears before they rolled down her cheeks.

When my mom asked her for what must have been the tenth time what the doctor had said, Elena dropped the spoon. It landed with a sickening splat and peanut butter sprayed across the floor. Not even my dog moved to clean it up as Elena told us she had thyroid cancer. My mom hugged her with one arm while wiping the tears from her eyes with the other.

When Elena calmed down enough to talk, my mom took the doctor's phone number and disappeared into her room to call him back. Elena had signed a document foregoing patient confidentiality the day my dad got the bill for the first EKG, so my mom had all of the access to Elena's doctors she wanted.

Time for logistics. Time to determine if the cancer had spread to Elena's lymph nodes, if surgery was the only treatment path, if she could somehow keep a part of her thyroid. Elena is a fiercely independent person. As a child, she taught herself how to write. She still writes individual letters from the bottom up because she wouldn't listen when my mom and all of her teachers tried to correct her. But when my mom held out her hand for Elena's phone so she could copy the number, Elena let the phone drop into my mom's palm and sank down next to me on the couch.

I said something like "you're going to be okay" or, maybe, "are you okay?" She asked if the *Law & Order* marathon was still on and when I nodded she curled into a tight ball underneath a blanket and cried silently until the TV lulled her to sleep. I rubbed her head until she told me to stop because I was messing up her hair.

At first, the surgeon in New Jersey couldn't schedule Elena's operation any sooner than two months out. A week later, my mom got a call to say his schedule had an opening. I tried not to think too hard about what that opening meant. My mom told me to pray that the change in the schedule meant someone had been misdiagnosed or, maybe, suddenly cured. Two weeks later, my parents drove Elena to Morristown Memorial Medical Center, where she would have surgery to remove her entire thyroid. The second biopsy had told the doctors that the cancer was malignant and, because they had done the second biopsy on the other half of Elena's thyroid, they knew that the entire gland had to go. Both wings of the butterfly, diseased.

Without her thyroid, Elena would be unable to produce any hormones for the rest of her life, which meant she would have to take medication for the rest of her life. The surgeon said he would do his best to leave the lymph nodes. In fact, after the surgery, that was my second question. *Is she awake?* Followed by, *Did he leave the lymph nodes?* He did.

During the pre-op, he signed the side of her neck in black sharpie so he wouldn't forget which side to cut into first. Big, looping letters, like a signature on a check or a prescription pad. My mom didn't seem to be able to let go of her indignation at the doctor signing my sister's neck. *How could he "forget" which side of her neck to open? Are all surgeons that conceited? Would the sharpie cause an infection?* Earlier in Elena's treatment, the surgeon had also refused to bring in a plastic surgeon to close the incision. My mom told me she asked again and again until he finally snapped at her, saying that if he couldn't do his own closings, people wouldn't consider him one of the best surgeons at the hospital. He insisted that the scar wouldn't be bad.

"Just like a little smile," he said.

He also said that, eventually, when Elena was old and wrinkled, the scar would just look like another crease in her neck.

“Everyone gets them,” the surgeon said.

Partly because he needed to be ready to stop my mom from decking the surgeon and partly because he knew how poorly I handle hospitals, my dad told me to stay home until Elena was out of surgery. I faint most times I get a shot and, until I was in high school, someone had to hold me down when doctors needed to draw blood. When I was seven, I threw up on a nurse because I saw my dad with an IV in his arm. So that day, I sat on the couch at home, petted my dog, and flipped between channels until my dad called me and said that Elena was out of surgery. I left the TV on and got into my car. I rushed to the hospital so I could be there when Elena woke up.

The ascent to the top level of the parking garage seemed to last forever. So, too, did the elevator ride to the main entrance of the hospital. I found no nurse at the nurse’s station when I arrived, so I hovered there near a bank of phones that wouldn’t stop shrieking.

I flinched at most of the sounds in the hospital. My shoes squeaking on the sterile tile floors, the gurgle of the coffee maker at the nurse’s station, the hacking coughs of patients hidden behind pale yellow curtains, the incessant beeping of machines. How could the doctors tell a normal beep from an emergency beep? Was there a difference in tone? In frequency?

As I walked down the hallway, the patients I passed seemed older than I had expected. I had imagined a hospital wing for twenty-two year olds who never got sick or missed a day of school and who were going to be fine and not even have a scar, just an extra little smile. But in this hospital wing I could just barely see through the gap in a pale yellow curtain an old man with tubes covering his face. In the room next to Elena’s, there was a middle-aged woman with no hair, staring at the wall in front of her as though she was asleep with her eyes open.

Elena’s room was at the end of the hallway, next to a large window that looked out onto the towering parking garage. The door to her room was open, and, as I approached, I felt relieved to discover that nothing attached to her was beeping. My mom sat in the corner, on the phone, I’d later learn, with my grandma, and my dad sat in the chair next to Elena’s hospital bed, watching a Giant’s game on the tiny TV mounted to the wall.

Elena was barely awake, her eyelids floating between half open and half closed. I crossed the room and sat at the foot of Elena’s bed, the way I used to when we got home from school and I was trying to distract her from her homework. She groaned quietly as I sat down. A soft mechanical whir vibrated around us as weight sensors in the bed adjusted around my body. The nurse told me that this new technology helped prevent bedsores. I wanted to tell the nurse that Elena would only be in the hospital for another day, so she didn’t need this special bed, but the nurse was busy checking numbers on machines and switching IV bags. I looked at my shoes to stop myself from fainting when the nurse slid a needle out from under the skin on Elena’s hand.

Although looking back now I can remember the room and what the nurse said and what my dad was watching on TV, my first and only thought when I saw Elena was that the doctor had lied.

The scar looked nothing like a smile.

A jagged red line stretched across her entire neck; if a smile at all, the smile of a clown in a horror movie. The skin around the scar was swelling and already starting to bruise. The picture Elena had sent me of her neck after the first biopsy was nothing compared to this. Little translucent strips designed to prevent infection lined up one after another across the length of the incision. When Elena swallowed, the stitches looked like they might burst. I couldn't stop looking at the scar. Even though I was old enough to know better, I convinced myself that if I looked away, the skin would rupture and blood and the lymph nodes the surgeon had worked so hard to save would pour out all over the bleached white hospital room. I was grateful then and am still grateful now that her sedation kept Elena from noticing how much I was staring.

When Elena fully woke up, she could barely whisper. If we wanted to talk to her, we had to stand directly over her so she wouldn't have to move her neck. She had already been through so much, but the treatment wasn't over. The pain didn't seem fair. *But I was the one who cried and fought every time I needed a vaccination*, I thought. *I was the one who pretended to be sick to get out of going to school. I was the one who flushed my Flintstones multivitamins down the toilet.* Elena didn't deserve to suffer; she'd done everything right.

The next phase of her treatment seemed to me even more cruel. When the doctors declared that Elena was ready to go home, two nurses put her in a wheelchair and rolled her into a room insulated by metal walls located in the basement of the hospital. Another nurse brought in a small metal box and left Elena in the room alone so she could take a radioactive iodine pill. Hormones made in the thyroid travel all over the body. So can cancer cells made there. The radioactive iodine pill targets the remaining cells and decreases the risk of the cancer metastasizing. Because the pill was radioactive, none of the rest of the family could be within ten feet of Elena for a week without risking exposure.

For a month, Elena couldn't be around small children or pregnant women, and she couldn't travel by airplane. When my parents drove her home, she sat all the way in the back seat and I drove in a separate car. She also couldn't eat anything with iodine in it for six weeks, until she could get a scan to see if any cancer cells remained. If she ate iodine, which includes almost everything with salt in it, the pill would target the iodine instead of the cancer cells, and she would have to start the process all over again.

For the week Elena was radioactive, she lived in our basement alone. Every few hours, my parents or I would leave food at the top of the stairs for her to come get. We all became well versed in salt-free and non-iodized sodium foods. Elena could eat Thomas' English muffins, a single serving of grilled chicken (unsalted, unseasoned), lettuce (no dressing), unsalted raw nuts, Italian ice (lemon flavored, only Rita's brand), Honey Maid graham crackers (original), and clear alcohols.

The clear alcohol was my favorite part of the list. Once, when my parents were out at a business dinner and I was in charge of bringing Elena her plain grilled chicken breast, I added a fifth of vodka to her tray. She turned the TV in the basement to MTV and I did the same in the family

room, and we video chatted each other while playing a drinking game. Every time someone on *Teen Mom* got censored, we drank. Elena couldn't tip her head back far enough to take a whole shot in one gulp, and neither of us could find a mixer without iodine in it. So we sipped vodka and watched other people's lives fall apart to distract ourselves. When our parents came home, we both pretended to be asleep.

I hadn't understood science in school—not as well as Elena, certainly—but the iodine pill and subsequent isolation created an even larger puzzle for me. How could Elena swallow something so dangerous that no one could go near her for a week, and not be in danger herself? I thought about this problem for days before I finally asked my dad.

"Radioactive stuff is dangerous because it can cause cancer," he said. "She's already got cancer."

Elena's treatment seemed like a lot of trade-offs to me. Even though she is healthy now, she still has a scar that looks nothing like a smile. She couldn't eat for weeks, but the iodine worked. Radioactive energy can give people cancer, but if a person already has cancer, what more can happen?

As in most situations, I think Elena handled her cancer diagnosis and treatment better than I did. I did my best not to bring up the fact that she was sick, not to stare at the scar, and not to eat salty foods around her. But, after she was out of isolation, she wasted no time trying to make me take her diagnosis less seriously. She now had a way to win every argument, and she didn't hesitate to use it.

"Beck, can you get me a glass of water?"

"Get it yourself."

"I can't, I have *cancer*."

Or:

"Can I turn the TV on?"

"No, I'm reading."

"But I have *cancer*."

Or:

"Can you clean up from dinner?"

"Can't you do it?"

“No I—”

“—I know. You have *cancer*.”

When her scan after a second round of iodine treatment came back clean, my parents, Elena, and I cried and hugged. I told Elena that she needed to come up with a new excuse to boss me around. My mom retreated to call my grandma and I grabbed my car keys. Elena and I sped off to Chipotle, the mecca of iodized sodium.

In the weeks following the surgery, Elena’s scar seemed to change color every day. Some days an angry rash would appear around the scar when Elena had overused the prescription strength scar cream. Some days the scar looked like it was still bleeding, or might start bleeding again any moment. On the day we went to Chipotle, I noticed that the scar looked a little bit purple for the first time. Instead of a raw scab or open wound, it looked like damaged skin doing its best to heal. I told her that her scar looked better and she glared at me.

“I’m serious,” I said. “It looks like it’s starting to heal.”

“It’s itchy as fuck,” she said. She compared the sensation to the feeling of wanting to pry braces out of her mouth every time she got them tightened. She told me that she wanted to claw the skin off of her neck and grow a new layer. I told her an entire neck of scar tissue would probably look worse than one line.

At Chipotle, I watched as she stuffed herself with rice and seasoned chicken and licked the salt off the tortilla chips.

“I’m glad you’re starting to get back to normal,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. She dipped a chip in guacamole and shoved it in her mouth. “Yeah, that really sucked.”

I nodded and, after a moment, stood to get a refill of Diet Coke.

“Hey,” Elena said. “Get me some.”

She shook her cup at me and the ice rattled around. I glared at her and started to walk toward the soda fountain without her cup.

“Hey,” she said. “I had *cancer*.”