“Pincushion”

When Sandi and I were young, she would push my wheelchair down to the base of the water tower, where Mrs. Lowry’s double-wide marked the southern boundary of the trailer park. The tower’s rusty legs framed our play area like the four corners of a house, and in our imaginations it was the closest thing we had to our “own place”. We would play a game Sandi called “Pincushion”, where she would prick the tips of her fingers with a pin until little red beads sprung up, both of us with our eyes squeezed tight in concentration, and then, breathlessly, she’d ask if I had felt it. Twins, she would always tell me, can feel each other’s pain. I would smile to let her know that I could, though I had no fingers to feel with, because I believed everything my sister told me, and because above all else, I wanted her to be happy.

Our mother was Connie Sprague, a pugnacious weed of a woman who was fond of cigarettes with every meal and daily affirmations that if it weren’t for us worthless kids, her ass wouldn’t be so flat and our coward father wouldn’t have run off and left her to rot in that stinkin’ park. In the spring of 1972 she gave birth to twin girls who had been embroiled in a kind of civil war for bloodflow in the womb. The casualties of our developmental hostilities were self-evident once our birthday arrived. Sandi was born healthy and hale, screaming in concert with our mother as she would for years and years to come. My father counted her fingers and toes and then left for a cigarette. Seven minutes later I slid out, a little pink bullet, with no arms to impede my progress into the world. My father wasn’t there to do half as much counting, and he was gone for good by the time the rest of my myriad disabilities began to reveal themselves.

My mother loved blaming Sandi and I for her every misfortune, as though heaping blame on our narrow shoulders was cathartic to her in some way. She was that brand of woman who believed the entire world had conspired to keep her landlocked in low-class misery, and that Sandi and I were the chief co-conspirators in this plot.

"Mom hates us," Sandi would sometimes say, often with blood streaked on her fingertips, as if our little psychic game had inspired in her a kind of famial clairvoyance. If I had been born with the ability to speak, I would have reminded her that mom wasn't always so awful. She could be playful, even fun at times, like when we used to play *Star Search* in the living room, and she would sing Patsy Cline songs and pretend to be Ed Mcmahon for Sandi and I. There was that one summer day when she dragged somebody's old box spring into our yard and put on music and had a dance party with us girls. Sandi had laughed and smiled so much that afternoon. Connie Sprague had it in her to be kind, even loving, but those moments when they arrived were fleeting, and the spaces between were long and dark and unforgiving.

For a time I was enrolled in public school, participating in half-days in the same building as Sandi. Our mother lugged my chair in and out of the trunk of our rusted out Chevy Nova twice a day, always with some shopworn complaint about the effort and how ungrateful I was, which always amused me since I had little way of expressing gratitude, or ingratitude for that matter. In the afternoon Mom would head off to her job at Cowlings Chemical, where she'd been working since she was a teenager. Most days she'd leave me in front of the television. My favorite show was People's Court, because when it came on it meant Sandi would be home any minute. I'd hear the bus downshift and then the door would burst open and she would fly right into the latest transgressions committed against her by Steve Bullock on the bus ride home. Steve was a

freckled strap of leather that lived three trailers down from us, who was always the focus of my sister's bubbing outrage. I think he was sweet on her even when they were youngsters. She'd tell me stories about her day while she cleaned and fed me and gave me my meds, and I would hang on her every word. As time went on, the anger that was etched as deeply into our mother as the green tattoos on her arms began to manifest in Sandi, coaxed into existence by the other girls, the ones I knew by their meanness if not by their faces. The ones who laughed at Sandi's clothes and made her ashamed to be poor enough to be eligible for free lunch. I remembered all of her stories, because I lived vicariously through her and on the bad days I wished I could experience even the cruelest indignities for her because she was beautiful and perfect and I could not comprehend why anyone would direct an unkind word her way.

On weekends our mother wouldn't come home until very late, and sometimes not until morning, and Sandi and I would stay up and watch horror movies borrowed from our grease-monkey neighbor, Skeet. We would eat whipped cream right from the can, which she'd spray into my mouth, and then she would laugh at how ridiculous I looked and I would laugh until tears spilled from our eyes. It was easy to forget in those happy, late hours that in the morning, when Mom did come home, she would be the worst version of herself.

Nights of chain-smoking in dive bars and flirting with young, disinterested men would sharpen to a razor's edge my mother's antipathy for the life she had, and her words for us on those mornings were unguarded and wielded with an intent to cut deep. She never attacked me quite like she did when she came home with eyes overexposed to the "What ifs" of her life, and I became less her daughter and more an anchor that kept her moored to her failings.

"The little medical malpractice lawsuit that got away, that's what you are."

When Mom was feeling particularly nasty, she would start ranting about how it was all Sandi's fault that I was the way I was, because we shared the same placenta and Sandi had taken the lion's share of blood that was pumped to us, and I ended up the way I did. "One test is all it would have taken," she would say, twisting and contorting my medical history into a more palatable one where the doctors could have, *should* have warned her about me. "But your coward father didn't want to risk it. Cared *so* much about you two, until you were born, then that all changed real quick. One look at you, Little Miss, and he was gone. But not before, no ma'am. He was afraid I'd miscarriage, even though that stupid doctor said the test only carried a one in five hundred chance of that even happening. Should have sued their asses off for not letting us know you were all fucked up. That money would have changed my life."

In her blackest moods, she would just stare at me and mutter, "Selective reduction" over and over again, until her thirst for petty vengeance had been quenched by the tears rolling down my face.

When the malpractice talk would start up, Sandi would push me out of the house, our mother enraged but too hungover to venture out into the sun, and in the shade of the water tower she would hold my head in her hands and stare into my eyes.

"Twins are psychic," she would say. "They can read each other's minds. Talk to each other. It just takes practice." Then she would put her index finger to her temple and strain so hard her face would turn the deep red of the summer's first real sunburn. When she could hold it no longer, the air would burst from her with the sound of an untied balloon, and then she would fall across my lap, gasping for air, the tears in our eyes now disguised by laughter. She couldn't know how hard I tried to reach her in those moments, to bridge that gap between our identical

minds, find the plug in the switchboard that would allow me to let her know that I was okay, that everything would be okay, and that I didn't resent her for what she did to me in the womb.

When my sister got old enough to notice boys, she also noticed the differences between herself and the girls in her class who got all of the attention. She would sit on her bed and carve big 'X's into the faces of her classmates in a three year old yearbook, the only year Mom was able to afford one. She became sullen; she poured herself into chairs, slouched over homework, and adopted an air of indifference that in my adolescent naiveté looked incredibly cool. She didn't tell me as much as she used to; our after school feeding and cleaning routine became a chore done mostly in silence. When she did talk, she would complain in ways that reminded me so much of our mother. Some nights when we were watching T.V., I would look at her, sunk down into the couch, arms crossed over her thin chest, and watch as her eyes scanned the room with utter disdain, taking an inventory of water stains and ripped upholstery and reused paper plates, making a mental log of everything she hated about the place. Sometimes I would catch her looking at me, and when I smiled she would only look away.

By the time we were sixteen, Sandi had fully adopted our mother's tenacious cynicism for the world. She hated how poor we were. She hated that she had to share a room with me. Hated what the girls at school said about her. She was dating Steve Bullock and she hated him too, because he was a park kid and so was she, which meant she would never get the guys she wanted, and so she settled and was miserable for it. She wore that misery on fraying shirt sleeves, but despite that I never expected to be the subject of her loathing. We were twins, after all.

"I wish Mom had aborted you," she whispered to me one night, as we both lay in bed. "Then we wouldn't have to live in this shit hole."

All of that hating had made convenient our mother's revisionist history, and perverted in Sandi's mind our origin story to one where Mom aborting me would have resulted in a successful medical malpractice, and with it untold riches. I'd never felt anything but unconditional love for my sister, and to be hated for the sin of living was beyond what I could understand or bear. I could barely see her through the tears standing in my eyes, but when I found hers in the dark, I sent a thought to her.

"Why do you hate me?"

She rolled over and faced the wall, as if she knew what I was trying to do. After that, she hardly acknowledged me, treating me like little more than needy furniture. She'd go out most nights when she was supposed to be taking care with me. Sometimes she didn't even leave the T.V. on when she left. On those nights, if Mom didn't go out after work she would walk in and find me in my chair, alone in the dark. She'd spend the rest of the night stewing, and when Sandi would come home, her and Mom would scream for hours, until their anger for each other was spent and all they had left was a simmering contempt for each other, for their lives, for me. It was always me at the center of their arguments then. I never felt so worthless, less a person than some broken object, than when mom and Sandi had it out, screaming about the burden of my being as if I wasn't sitting right there in the room with them. My body had been a prison to me my whole life, but in that last year that Sandi lived with us I realized that in their eyes, I was the jailer, and they were serving the life sentences.

Sandi dropped out of school senior year and moved into a place in the next town over with Steve. I didn't see her much after that. Mom only ever brought her up to complain about how she was never around to help with me anymore. Sometimes when Mom would take me to Walmart I would catch a glimpse of blonde hair much like my own, and my heart would race at the thought of seeing my sister again. It was never her, and she never visited. I hoped enough time away from Mom would soften the jagged edges around their relationship, and when I finally saw Sandi again, she'd be happy. Then Mom had her first heart attack, went on disability, and stayed home with me full-time, and that's how things were for a while.

Mom had her second heart attack the day after Sandi and I turned thirty-seven. We were still living in the park, in our fourth place by then, having moved around the property from trailer to trailer like white-trash hermit crabs. Mom was taking me to get my hair cut and had just put my chair in the trunk when I heard her collapse against the side of the car. She lay in the grass for twenty minutes until she was discovered by some boys on their way to do some creek fishing. I was left with a neighbor friend, Marsha. All day I wept, blaming myself for causing the heart attack, and hating myself for being unable to do anything except sit in that car and listen to my mother die in the weeds. I waited all day for the hospital to tell me that she'd died, surprised at how heartbroken the thought made me.

Mom was "touch and go" for a few weeks, and then one day the door opened and there she was. The heart attack had ruined her, devoured the last of her youth and turned her into a withered, ambulatory skeleton, her hair wispy and with more gray than before. On her arm,

supporting her under the elbow, was Sandi. They were arguing loudly about some old grievance from when Sandi was a kid. My heart soared.

Years of hard living had given Sandi the same deeply-lined, weathered skin and brittle hair of our mother. She was too skinny and she'd lost a few teeth along the way, but it was still my sister in there, and I was thrilled to have her back. She'd gotten a call from the hospital when Mom was admitted and had unwittingly become a caretaker.

"I went to the hospital thinking I'd be picking up some remains," she told me that first night back as she chain-smoked on the couch. "Figures she'd fight to stay alive just for one more opportunity to make my life hell, right?"

"You think the thought of you living under my roof again was what brought me back?" Mom shouted from her bed. Despite her frailty, she hadn't lost her ability to shout. The heart attack couldn't take that from her. "If I knew you'd be the one taking care of me I'd have ran for the light at the end of the tunnel!"

Sandi talked with me late into the night that first night, as though nothing ugly had occurred between us all those years ago. She had become someone who communicated almost exclusively through complaints; in that way, and in so many others, she'd completed her evolution into our mother. Every story came tethered to some hardship she'd been forced to endure, always through no fault of her own. In me, she rediscovered the perfect conversationalist; someone who would listen to her spin her wearisome yarns and never interrupt. I learned of her marriage and divorce, of the nephew I had who lived two states away and who no longer talked to Sandi, and of how she was working at the same chemical plant that

had burned away so many years of our mother's life. She was profoundly unhappy, and sharing that unhappiness was her greatest joy.

Sandi moved in with the intention of helping out until mom got back on her feet. "Once she's back out in her field scaring the crows I'm out of this shithole," she was fond of saying. I had this grandiose dream that time would mend the old fences, and Sandi would become a permanent fixture in my life again, that maybe I would have my sister back for good. The doctors said to give mom a couple of months; I figured a lot of good could happen in that time. But just a week after Mom came home an infection in her chest seized her heart and she died in the back seat of Sandi's car.

Sandi suffocated any despair she might have felt with feverish talk of suing the hospital for malpractice. The infection was preventable, she excitedly told me one night.

"I could hire someone on to take care of you, and we could finally get you out of this park!"

It was painful to watch her pin all of her hopes on that lawsuit - a variation on those old teenage fantasies where I was never born and Sandi got to live the life she deserved; reparations delivered with a death certificate. She contacted lawyers and would sit cross-legged like a teenager on mom's bed, smoking and telling me all about malpractice cases that reached eight-figure payouts, and all I could think was how much she resembled Mom in those moments. I wondered if all families were so preoccupied with the potential wealth contained within their dead.

A few weeks after Mom's funeral, the phone rang. I watched Sandi as her body stood in tense anticipation of the good news. Her back was to me, but I didn't need to see her face to

understand what it meant when she slumped against the door frame. She hung up, then she threw the phone into the wall and began pacing frantically back and forth, cursing and spitting like a wild animal. When she finally calmed down, she told me that the lawyer wouldn't take the case.

"They said that the payout in a lawsuit like this wouldn't be high enough to make it worthwhile." She smoothed the covers on Mom's bed with a surprising tenderness. "The asshole said that Mom isn't worth the effort. How could anyone say that about somebody else?"

Her face crumbled, and she fell onto the bed and allowed herself to mourn, whether for herself or mom I did not know. I reached out with my mind, tried to tell her that everything would be alright, that we still had each other, and that she wasn't our mother. But she didn't hear me.

The next night, Sandi woke me up with a question.

"Was Mom really worthless?"

Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy from crying, and in them I saw a genuine love for Mom, and mingled with that the acceptance that she and Mom had been cut from the same cheap cloth. I saw a woman who understood that she had become the woman she'd never wanted to be; a woman whose life wasn't worth redemption. I tried to shake my head. I hoped she would understand, be reassured, and go back to sleep. She did not.

Sandi put me in my chair and pushed me out of the house without explanation. It was a clear, warm night, with a pleasant breeze and a wide, clear sky full of stars. Sandi told me stories about all the times Mom had given her hell when we were kids; there was warmth in her voice, a softness that hadn't been there before. She spoke of her like someone might of an old, well-traveled heirloom whose only remaining value was sentimental. Then the shadow of the

water tower loomed over us, and I swallowed and blinked as I was suddenly flooded with a nervousness that I couldn't explain.

Sandi parked me in the long grass and walked around our old childhood place, picking at things on the ground or touching the nearby tower legs, which had gone dark red with rust. As she walked in and out of the shadows cast by those big metal legs, I saw her face shift from happiness to agony, as though some invisible force had reached inside of her and twisted her heart, again and again. She gasped and choked down a sob, then laughed, then fell to pieces again. My heart broke for her a thousand times over.

"Do you remember that game we used to play?" she said, suddenly kneeling before me. Her voice cracked a little. I nodded my head as best I could. She sniffed loudly and wiped fresh tears from her cheeks. "Pincushion, remember?"

The wet stains on her cheeks glittered in the half-light, and for a moment I thought she might have something in her hand.

"Let's play it now, okay?" A pained smile broke across her face. I begged her with my mind to hear me, to hear me say that everything would be alright. That she wasn't Connie Sprague, she was so much more. I sniffed and smiled, raised my eyebrows, lolled my head. *It will be alright,* I screamed.

Her hands worked below my eye level. There was a quick jerking motion. She sucked air through her teeth, her eyes squeezed shut. Something fell into the grass at my feet. Her face relaxed; all the tension and pain melted from her features, and she was suddenly the girl I remembered. She locked eyes with me and put an index finger to her temple, where it left too much blood.

"Do you feel that, Mandi?" I heard her say, though her mouth never moved. *"You do, don't you? You always have."*

I smiled, because of course I did. I always could. Every anguish she'd ever felt had driven a pin through my own heart, and now in that battered organ she could finally see my generous appraisal of her.

"*Everything is going to be okay,"* I thought, my eyes swimming with tears. Sandi smiled, her eyes heavy, and she laid her head in my lap. "*We're all worth something*," I thought to her.

"I know," she said.