

I didn't like her from day one, and it may have been even before that. My mother, Phoebe, told me there was a lot of movement during her pregnancy, and the last three months were the worst. I was constantly changing positions, searching for my own space. At thirty-six weeks, when I had grown to about seven pounds already, I decided I had enough. There just wasn't enough room for the both of us.

When I was four Kate would chase me incessantly. I complained to my mother, the best way a four year old could, by whining and throwing tantrums. Kate meant well but she never left me alone, and, worst of all, she never shut up. Her endless jawing in my ear started before we could even speak actual words, and, with our vocabulary growing, it certainly wasn't going to get any better. Even worse than the chatter itself, as we grew older Kate's speech became bizarre, to the point that she would say things that either made no sense or made me question her intentions.

"I wish I could be a wizard, and make it all disappear."

I usually just ignored her until she became quiet, and then grumbled to my mother later.

"Mary," Phoebe chastised, "Stop whining."

I wasn't fond of Phoebe's short answers. They provided no tangible solution to what I considered a living, breathing, ongoing problem, and instead just allowed her to turn the other cheek. I tried to cut her some slack as I got older. She was a single mother, one who had previous dreams of becoming a physician but instead settled as a nursing assistant due to an unfortunate and untimely pregnancy. My father was a loser, in and out of jail for ridiculousness like petty theft. I met him when I was eight and that was enough for me. I decided that being in a loving relationship with only one parent was far better than forcing a relationship with two just because the other happens to be my father. I often wondered how someone as smart and sophisticated as

my mother could be conned by such a worthless individual with no money, no prospects, and half a dozen other girlfriends.

“You would be surprised how people have the ability to talk you into believing things they think are actually true,” she answered.

I always wondered what she meant by that.

As Kate continued to grow into a giant pain in the ass, I blamed the other half of the gene pool. At first I thought Phoebe was just taking her previous bad decisions out on me, but it seemed to become much more than that. First of all, whenever something went wrong, I was to blame. If dirt was tracked through the house, I did it. When Phoebe’s old Lenox vase was broken, I was responsible. Once Kate snuck in a friend while Phoebe was out and they started a fire in the kitchen. When my mother got home she smacked me for “allowing such behavior.” Each time Kate went into hiding while I suffered the wrath. Kate would always apologize later, for not sticking up for me, for not taking accountability. She would try to smooth things over, and when we were younger her whispering charm always made me forgive her. As we got older, things changed and Kate continued to earn my abhorrence. When we began school she always wanted to be included with my friends, wanted to take the same classes, and even berated me into taking the violin with her in orchestra instead of the flute, which I preferred. Kate tried hard to get me to like her, but I deemed her a giant annoyance. How could I maintain a good relationship with someone who always brought misfortune to me?

What made me dislike her more as we got older was how weird she was. When we were ten she wouldn’t stop wetting the bed. I tried to hide this from Phoebe – in a small part because in some way I did feel sorry for Kate, but largely in part because I didn’t want to have to offer some explanation to Phoebe that would likely be turned around into my liability. Then, when we

were in seventh grade, Kate developed a severely inappropriate fascination with our algebra teacher. On a Tuesday I got called into the office. Mr. Neally was standing with Principal Sherwood while I sat in silence, staring at the wall covered with blue ribbons and “Best in Class” awards. My mother came to pick me up early from school. I wasn’t sick, but I didn’t go back to school for a week.

At that point I realized how manipulative she could be. I tried in vain to disregard her nonsense. Sometimes she relented and let me be, but more often than not she would persist until I conceded to her plan. When we were thirteen, for instance, she talked me into scaling Billy Thompson’s backyard wall so we could steal beer out of the mini-fridge in his dad’s shed. But by the time I was in high school I figured that I had finally grown into a position where I could handle her myself, for which I was unfortunately mistaken.

When I was fifteen I started dating Jason, a high school senior. Our relationship was fortuitous – I, the introverted band geek, and he the tall, handsome jock. He liked me because I was growing huge breasts; I liked him because he had a car. In fact, this was the foundation of our love – his driving capability. Now I could get away, live my own life, without Kate’s persistent presence. We spent weekends at the movies, or we would drive to the lake. Mostly I loved that Jason was the polar opposite of my live-in companion. Jason brought me home after each outing ten minutes early, addressing Phoebe as “Ms. McDaniel” when she answered the door. He would never think to ask me to skip class or finish his homework. Even when we were fooling around he felt guilty and remorseful pushing past second base. And Jason would never, ever, ask me for money, beer, or drugs.

On March 22 Jason asked me to prom. On the eve of prom he dumped me. Someone had sent him 100 text messages three days prior from my phone. Some of them were disgusting. None of them were pleasant.

Phoebe grounded me for blaming Kate.

“It just wasn’t meant to be,” she added.

He would be the first of many boyfriends I lost to her. By that time my mother’s excuse became “just wait until college - you’re almost there and then things will be much better.” I had my hopes on several state schools that had decent pre-medicine programs. I really wanted to become a psychologist, considering how much practice I felt I had already experienced. In high school I commanded several advanced placement and SAT prep classes which qualified me for even more difficult programs. I had my choice of more than ten schools, but in the end I chose State College. Kate, ironically enough, had no interest in medicine or psychology. She preferred art, music, and the abstract. However, she was equally as smart and just as qualifying for any college. As such, to no shock of mine, she chose State College.

“Maybe we can be roommates,” she suggested one evening during a study session for finals. I stared at her blankly, not wanting to address her. She continued in a soft tone.

“I think it would be great...we make a good team...”

I left abruptly during her proposal. When I became a psychologist, I decided, Kate would be my first case. Why was she so delusional? This is what I needed – someone to scare away all my boyfriends, to drain me away from my studies, and to get me involved with nonsense, possibly arrested. I bet Phoebe would love hearing my voice on the other end of the jail cell pay-phone line. How can one person hate themselves so much to make their only friend a person who abhorred her? How can someone have such a self-loathing personality?

I leaned on the countertop to think. Maybe it wasn't Kate. Maybe the problem was me. Perhaps I was the awful person. I allowed myself to be controlled by this person, permitting her to weigh me down and become her lifelong punching bag. I was tolerable of her behavior, and too weak to stop it. I didn't have the strength to fight her, but I no longer could let her run my life. But I realized that if this continued, I would not make it through college. I had to end it.

I looked down at my bleeding wrists as my mother walked in the room.

"My God, Mary, what have you done?"

The paring knife lay next to me, and I started feeling faint.

"Hurry," I said to Phoebe apologetically, "before Kate sees me like this."

When I opened my eyes my wrists were bandaged and bound tightly to metal bars. The light was too bright for me to focus initially, and I could only concentrate on my back pain from the hard mattress underneath me. I heard whispering near the right side of what I determined to be a hospital bed. Statements like, "it will be a shock," "you should call her father," and "no State College for a while." I started floundering against the rails to attract attention. Better get it over with, I thought.

Phoebe walked over and petted my head, her porcelain face now in focus.

"My sweetie," she cooed, her eyes gazing at me pathetically.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She sighed and answered, "You really did a number on yourself this time.

"I never figured you would go as far as to hurt yourself. The fits, and the anger – I always hoped you would grow out of it. I'm sorry that I was so wrong. Now look at you," she trailed off, sobbing. I watched her gently catch tears from her high cheekbones for a few minutes.

“You will need to stay here a while,” she said at last.

I lay quite for a moment. Maybe this was better. I could be alone for a while. I wanted to make sure she wasn't going to be able to bother me.

“Where's Kate?” I asked.

My mother shuddered.

“Oh, baby, shh,” she said, resuming her head petting. I grew frantic.

“Phoebe answer me! Where is my sister? What is going on? Is something wrong?!”

My flailing set off the bed alarm and the nurses ran into the room in droves. One came near me with a syringe, trying to steady my left arm while I continued to berate my mother.

“Where is she?” I screamed. “Where is Kate?”

It took only moments for the drugs to filter through my veins. I became lethargic, and my questions became slurred.

“Where...is...my...sister?”

Finally, Phoebe answered me.

“Mary,” she said sternly, “there is no Kate. I have only one daughter. I have only ever had one daughter.”

I closed my eyes, falling victim to a syringe that would keep me filled for months to come. There would be no State College for a while.