

Stephen King said,
“The most important
things are the hardest
to say.” Show us why.

*2019 Power of the Pen State Tournament
Best of Round (8th Grade Power Round)*

A Brother's Rift

Marie Kanzinger

I look at the stands. Watching the caps and gowns shuffle on stage; the blue tinted clothen colors of smiling students with diplomas fresh in their hands. Thirteen years of school leads to this moment.

Yet I was never one of them.

I see him, my younger brother, smiling just as widely (if not wider) as any student beaming onstage. Valedictorian. A word that never came in my direction, never seemed to even be an option for someone like me, now a title he holds.

“Hey, man,” I say casually, like all older brothers do, giving him a quick pat on his shoulder.

“Hey,” he says, his smiling slightly fading off his face.

But his faded smile is my own fault, I guess. In some ways, he's hardly ever truly smiled when I'm around.

Some words to describe me: high school dropout, lazy, that one who snickered in the back of class when the teacher's talking, and that one you didn't know where they went on Friday nights.

I've heard them all. And he has too.

When I was younger, I played basketball like all boys like me do in high school. My brother, he went to every one of my games no questions asked. He did my chores when I was out late at night; sometimes doing stuff that I couldn't even remember the next day. He even helped me with my homework, and by that I mean he did it for me. No questions asked.

And where was I, you may ask, when my brother played lacrosse, won countless speech and debate tournaments, and won competitions I don't even know the name of?

Well, the only important thing was, I wasn't there.

I wasn't there when he scored his first goal, got all dressed up for his dances, and wrote things that he spoke that people described as, “unreal”.

I wasn't there when mom got sick. I wasn't there when shattered glass covered my old home from a father who had too many sweet sips of poison. I was too busy sipping my own poison.

Countless days spent in the shadows, not even watching from afar.

Although I wasn't there for my brother, I couldn't help but be jealous from afar. He's got everything. Good grades, which to me is like climbing Mount Everest, a trophy shelf, and friends who genuinely laugh and smile when he's around.

It caused a rift between us. No, “I love you,” no, “You did good, brother”. We just sat on a worn out couch. The TV might as well be static as we silently sat together, hardly ever more than a formal greeting passing between us.

He stares at me. Waiting. For something. For anything from a brother who never really was family.

Words flood my mind. Anything I could say - my jealousy biting at the backs of my teeth, trying to force its way out in yells.

But, for once, I look at him. I really look at him this time.

His eyes are like mine, warm and brown, similar to dad's who left two years ago. His crooked smile like Ma, who still smiles to this day no matter what her family is doing. And his hands have the same lines and crevices as my own worn out fingertips.

For once, I look at him like I'm looking at myself. What I could've been.

Four words. That's it. That's all that comes to my mind.

"I'm proud of you," I say, surprised to feel a heaviness in the back of my throat.

And for once, he smiles for me. Genuinely smiles. It's brighter than anything I've ever seen as he pulls me in for a proper hug. For the first time as something like brothers.