
In Her Shoes

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**First Place
Prose
Arbuckle Award**

If you could demand that someone demand your forgiveness, I would have. She owed it to me now more than ever. Her actions had turned my life upside down. I felt like I was struggling to make it through a cold winter night with no shelter from the storm. I was alone.

My sister Jessica was a high school junior and I was a sophomore, but we attended different schools, thankfully. I had always found her to be annoying and difficult to get along with; she just wasn't the type of person I liked and she felt the same way about me. To me she was overly needy, and to her I was probably too immature. It had always been like that. Sibling rivalry had seemed to transfer into hatred between us over the years, a game of who could hurt the other most.

The animosity began in the first five years of my life. My family and I lived off of Kibby Street, not the best part of Lima, Ohio. We Gonzalez children were not permitted to leave the yard and were only allowed to play with preselected, parent-approved neighborhood children. This made Jessica and our older sister Cassandra my primary playmates. Still, for the most part, I preferred to play by myself. I was a loner in that respect, and in my mind nobody's company could be as good as my father's. Playtime was only a way for me to pass the time until he was home from work and could then spend time with me. This separated me from my sisters.

But after we moved from our Lima home, animosity grew into hostility. I became more isolated from my sisters when my family moved into the farmhouse. The house sat on two acres of land with eight different barns. I quickly adapted to this new life, soaking it up like a sponge to become a country girl. However, this life soon wore itself out with my sisters. Cassandra was a teenager, so she was never home. Jessica was just barely a year older than me and only a grade ahead of me in school, but she had a need for companionship. I found this to be extremely bothersome. It got underneath my skin, so we would fight and argue. I called her names like "retard" because of her learning disabilities and "crazy" because of the fact she was seeing a psychologist. In return, she'd pick on my physical flaws like my "bushy" hair, or having few friends, or being a tomboy. These name calling matches would usually turn physical into cat fights of hair pulling and scratching; once in awhile, our fights would escalate into something a little more violent, but this was seldom. The older we became, the further apart we grew. We would seem to avoid each other to avoid these confrontations. We simply did not like one another, and the times when we would get along became fewer and further between.

These overpowering feelings between us had elevated dramatically in late January of 2000 (for me at least) as Jessica had gotten herself pregnant and had had a baby that October. He was a cute little boy, bald with blue eyes. At this point he was about two months old and at times I would jog my memory yet not be able to think of one time I had held this infant. But that didn't really bother me. I didn't want to hold him; I didn't even want him to have been born to begin with. His birth had just changed my life so much. I was so mad and wasn't ready to forgive him and my sister yet for what they had done to me. When she had gotten pregnant, I was forced to forfeit my bedroom to her as it was bigger than the room she was in at the time. As I had

anticipated, the infant's sperm donor was well on his way to long gone. The "father" of my sister's son and my sister had been together for probably two years before the birth of their son. Once the pregnancy was over and parenthood set in, he slowly began to exit the scene, leaving behind the woman and child that he had "loved" so much. I guess it just wasn't fun for him anymore, so I was working to feed their mistake as I was the only one in my family who was physically able to work. I was the one who had to endure the feel of the sorrowful and arrogant stares from the "prominent" Catholic families of my school and parish when they'd see my very pregnant sister waddle about at church and school events.

My parents had abandoned me because of her and her kid. They would stay out of Jessica's way to give her the opportunity to mother her child, but if need be they were there at the drop of hat (or bottle in this case). There was a baby in the house again and they were grandparents for the first time. I was constantly told not to be selfish or jealous; it was just that Jessica (and her baby) needed them more. This would make me livid; she was constantly in the spotlight. They'd even put those two before my little brother and sisters. Kimberly, the youngest, was slightly over a year old and still needed our parents.

It was a late December evening and both my sister and I had retired to our rooms for the night. I was tired from the waitressing shift I had just pulled, but still needed to make an attempt to finish my homework for the next day. I sat on my bed with my books opened and began on my math. I got through a couple of problems and then my sister's son began to fuss.

I could hear my sister attempt to calm him with a soothing voice of reassurance that he was fine. His fussing grew into crying, forcing my sister to make a mad dash downstairs to get the infant a bottle. When she returned I could hear her begin to bargain with her son, "Ok, Miguel, Mommy will feed you your baba, but then you will have to be quiet and go to sleep so Mommy can finish her homework." Apparently her child did not like this offer because he continued to bawl. I couldn't help but think that this was what my sister deserved for being a teenage mother. In an immature way, I was almost pleased that the infant refused to cooperate with my sister. He continued to cry.

He became more frustrated with every wail he released, as did my sister. She continued to plead with him, "Miguel, please!" The conversation of her pleading and his screaming continued on for a good ten minutes.

Obviously at this point I had given up on doing my school work. I wanted to hear what was going on in my former bedroom.

"Miguel, please just *shut up!* I have to do this!" Jessica yelled. By now she had joined in on the crying and was only putting her child more on edge by scaring him. I sat there on my bed listening to the both them cry. My sister raised her voice again, "MIGUEL, PLEASE!" She had had enough.

After the release of her second scream, I had no choice but to get up. I walked into their room. My sister was sitting on her bed sobbing into her hands, her crying infant lying in front of her. Books were scattered about the bed and floor.

I could feel the puzzled stare of my sister's face as I leaned in front of her to pick up her hysterical infant, my nephew, and his bottle. No words were exchanged and, as hard as I tried, I could not get my eyes to meet hers. I was ashamed.

I cradled the baby in my arms, whispering ever so softly into his tiny pink ear. I assured him that everything was ok, and that his mommy wasn't mad at him. I placed his bottle near his lips; he took it gladly. His cries became muffled as he calmed himself; I was amazed. The two of us

arranged ourselves on my bed. Then, out of nowhere, it was as if the almighty hand of God reached down from the heavens and smacked me across the face, because it hit me. . . this was the first time I had ever held my nephew.

In that moment I was a mess of mixed emotions. My heart was numb with shame. I had turned my back on an infant with no exact nor meaningful reason to do so. The feeling of my tiny nephew in my arms melted my frozen interior, warming my soul. I felt so horrible about the way I had acted over the past two months of my nephew's life, as well as my sister's entire pregnancy. At sixteen years old, my behavior over the past two months had become the biggest regret of my life. These unwelcomed feelings began to settle in.

As guilt, shame and regret climbed into the bed with Miguel and me, my mind was at a stand still. *Had I ever really laid eyes on this child before?* I tried to convince myself that of course I had; we lived in the same house, his room was just across the hall from mine, he was my sister's son. But alas, I had never *really* looked at my nephew until that exact moment. He had such a Hispanic name, derived from our Mexican heritage, yet Miguel Louis Everardo Gonzalez was so fair skinned. Even with all the crying he had done that night, his face wasn't all that red. His cheeks were pink and sweet like cotton candy at the county fair. The little bit of hair that he did have was a golden blond, as if receiving a shining light from an angel's halo, or maybe even a halo of his own. His tiny eyes allowed one final tear to be shed. I had always known Miguel's eyes were blue, but I had never realized just how blue until then, as he stared directly into my face, still guzzling his bottle. It was as if God had filled his eyes with the blue waters of the ocean; they glistened even in the dim light of the lamp on the night stand. He was so tiny and seemed so frail. I feared if I were to drop him he would break into a million pieces, like a China doll dropped on cement.

What have I done? When my seventeen-year-old sister was giving birth, I was hanging out with my boyfriend, and when my nephew was brought home from the hospital, I was getting drunk. Not only had I chosen to be absent at both of those once-in-a-lifetime events, but I had continued to remain astray from my nephew and my sister in the first two months of Miguel's life. My childish, selfish anger and grudges had taken time and moments away from me that I could never regain in this lifetime. *What kind of person was I?*

My self-pity party was interrupted by Jessica entering my room. Nearly a half hour had passed. Her normally very pale face was red and wet. Her under-eyes were swollen from all the tears she had cried.

"Here, I'll take him," she sniffled.

"Are you sure? It's ok," I assured her.

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears again. I knew she felt horrible for having lost her cool with her infant son. I think she was feeling what I was feeling too. We were on a new level of understanding, and an unspoken, mutual forgiveness passed between the both of us. The wall that had once divided us had become a two-way mirror. We didn't have to walk in the other's shoes to understand and see what the other was going through. We were sisters, perhaps for the first time.

My sister and my nephew made their exit from my bedroom, and I got ready for bed (I decided I'd just turn my homework in late). When I turned off my light that night, it was as if I had turned on my tears. I cried under my covers, my head buried in my pillow to smother my sobs. I asked God for forgiveness for my ways, remembering the countless times I had called my sister a "whore" and a "slut." She never deserved that. She knew she had made a mistake, but she

was dealing with it, and rather well actually. I knew the next couple years would be hard for my sister as she was just around the corner from her senior year, and then college. I explained to God that I was over it now and I was prepared to be a good sister by helping her as much as I could with her son and life as a teenage mother. Life was not only about me anymore. I vowed I'd never make this mistake again; I would spend the rest of my life trying to make this up to them. They didn't need my forgiveness. It was I who needed theirs.