

## Demons and Dinosaurs

By Sadie Jensen

My brother loves dinosaurs and I'm the older sister. Aidan's job is to play innocently with his toy dinosaurs and I'm supposed to protect him. When Aidan was still young enough to sleep in footie pajamas, he would run around, slipping on the hardwood floors with his soft, covered feet and pretend he was a dinosaur. He once slid into the kitchen with an empty wrapping paper roll tucked horizontally under his neck and proudly exclaimed that he was a long neck. My family smiled at his creativity and I snapped a picture of him to forever remember this happy boy.

When I graduated into the halls of middle school and Aidan had to start riding the bus alone, the happy boy we once knew started to chip away. My mom wore a happy mask while Aidan was at home, but that mask slipped off and revealed wrinkles filled with worry when Aidan left. Aidan was different from his classmates, his stomach was more round. The bullying only intensified on his bus rides when Aidan's classmates realized that there was less adult supervision on the bus and more opportunities for torture.

The details of my brother's bullying were whispered into my ear by my mom after she made many failed attempts to the school to halt the torment. The boys would stroll down the aisle of the yellow tank to get off and they would pass by my brother sitting near the front. Each grab a tuft of his sweet, golden hair and pull in one swift motion. Then the boys would get off the bus with smirks splashed across their faces and compare fistfuls of hair to see who had caused the most pain. Aidan would get off the bus with water in his eyes and with his small hands trying to conceal the flesh spots glowing on his head. On those days I would put up no fuss to drag out my forgotten, plastic Barbies and pretend like it was totally normal to have a pet dinosaur in Barbie land.

It wasn't until high school that Aidan was able to make some friends and started to have a good time with people his age. He finally put away the green, rubber dinosaur friends when it was obvious that he had outgrown them years ago. Aidan was a junior when I left for my first year of college. The night before I left, Aidan, who was much taller than me but still had that same sweet, golden hair, gave me a bear hug causing the orange soda can, which I thought I had drained, to squeeze a few sticky drops onto my shirt. His caramel eyes looked at my face and he said in his deep teenage voice, "Lacy, I have two things to tell you before you leave tomorrow. One: Come home a lot because I can't handle it here by myself. And two: party like a rock star." I shot back a look that exclaimed that it wasn't even

necessary for him to tell me his two points and the next morning I turned my back on Aidan and drove away.

Then the leaves turned from green to orange and eventually the frost crept up and strangled them until they unwillingly fell to the ground. It was time to leave my college life that I had become so accustomed to and move back home for a month where there were now impossible rules and interrupted daytime naps. I had failed Aidan. I didn't come home as often as I could have because the toxic draw of college days and nights overcame my desire to travel home. I had had a few worried conversations with my mom that Aidan wasn't doing well and was starting to revert back to those tortured school bus days. He had been put on medication to help with some bouts of depression and recently the doctor was starting to suspect that he was suffering from bipolar disorder. I loved my brother, but all my mom could talk about was Aidan. Our phone chats were filled with updates on Aidan's life instead of updates on my own life that was a hundred miles away from her. She still had no idea my roommate wasn't coming back next semester, I made the highest grade in my American history class, or that I was starting to get serious about the boy I was seeing. I don't think she even knew his name.

When I walked through the door of my house trying to escape the cold air seeping in my lungs, I barely had time to drop my heavy clothes filled bags whose straps were digging into my skin before my mom leaped on me for a favor. "Lacy, Aidan forgot to take his night and morning meds again and he's eating at Denny's so could you run these up to him?" I nodded my head with a pained smile as she handed me the bag of brightly colored pills. When did Aidan start taking this many pills?

I reluctantly got back in my car where the cold had already overcome the warm air that had just filtered through my vents. I drove the short distance to the run down Denny's on the edge of town. As I walked through the glass doors smudged from greasy hands, I saw Aidan sitting in a cracked booth alone in the smoking section. Smoke appeared as a dark rain cloud above his head and he flicked his cigarette so causally like he had done it the same way all of his life. When did Aidan start smoking?

I tried to smoothly slip into the booth but the fake leather reached up and grabbed my jeans so I instead had to improvise to a hopping motion to get to the center of my seat. Aidan slowly looked up at me with his caramel eyes that now had red webs sprayed across them and grey smudges underneath his eyes as if someone had tried to color in his face with pencil marks. I pulled out the rainbow of pills from my pocket and pushed them across the table. "Looks like someone forgot to take these. You know, Mom is going to flip if you forget again." A waitress calmly walked up to our table and asked Aidan by name if

his friend wanted anything. He stared up at her while I shook my head and smiled as concerned thought bubbles started to float up in my head. I was confused why the waitress knew my brother so well.

“Aidan, what are you doing here? Come on let’s go home.” I tried to make my voice sound carefree but I’m sure the confusion in my eyes spoke louder than my words.

Aidan took a deep breath while rubbing his hands violently through his dirty, dulled blonde hair. His eyes gazed towards mine and his lips pulled into a smile on the right side of his face. “Lacy, I have to be honest with you right now. I don’t know if you’re a demon or not so I just can’t trust you.”

All of the air was vacuumed out of my lungs. I could literally feel the pressure of my eyes as they bulged out of their sockets. My little brother just told me that he thought I was a demon. I was in shock and I had no one there to slap me back to focus. Aidan drew another long drag from his burning cigarette and for the first time I noticed two burn marks on his left wrist that were the same size as his cigarette which was his nicotine provider. I was very quickly beginning to understand why it was so important for Aidan to take his brightly colored meds twice a day.

“I’m not a demon, Aidan. I’m your sister. I’m wearing my clothes; I drove here in my car. You know me and you know that I’m not a demon.”

“How do I really know you Lacy? How do I not know that this isn’t my own Hell?”

“Because its not Hell, Aidan. This is the real world that we have been living in day after day.”

“No. I don’t know that. I don’t know if anything is real anymore.”

“Listen, remember when we were little and sometimes when I would play with my Barbies and we would make your dinosaurs their pets to make them the cool house on the block. No demon would know that. That was just us. Remember the dinosaurs.”

“There are no more dinosaurs Lacy. Just demons.”

The smell of greasy eggs and buttered toast were beginning to choke my nostrils. I heard the banging of metal against metal and the sound of mellow conversations all around us. I looked down and stared at the hard, black tray full of ashes that crumbled against one another. I was supposed to protect my brother and now I couldn’t get him to trust that I was real and not a fragment of his worst dream. I needed to get out of there.

I asked him if he was going to be ok by himself for a while and his tortured nod provided my release. I forced myself out of the smoke filled booth and pushed my legs towards the smudged glass door. My hands made the keys shake as I jammed them into the ignition and my size seven foot lurched my car into motion before I noticed the cold starting to tingle at my fingertips.

As my hand reached for the silver, frosted door handle, the words that were to be delivered to my mom were already formed at my lips. I found her sitting at the kitchen table with neatly stacked of bills around her and her glasses slid halfway down her nose. Her mouth stayed the same perfect gap as I rushed through what I had just experienced and kicked off my shoes exposing my mismatched socks. Before I could finish the last of it, we heard the familiar rumble of a car's engine sliding up the driveway. My mom leaned back in her chair to balance it on its hind legs so she could get a better look at who was about to interrupt our conversation through the fogged up window pane.

"Lacy, it's your brother. He's not in the right state of mind and if he sees you here it's just going to make things worse. Run to your room and lock the door and don't come out until I come get you. Do you understand?"

I answered her question inaudibly as I started to sprint towards my safe haven. My socks made me slip on the hardwood floor as I tried to turn the corner to my room, just like my brother's footie pajamas had made him do so many times before. Now instead of him slipping and sliding towards me, I was slipping and sliding away from him. I reached my door and quietly closed it right as I heard my mom and Aidan's voices starting to rise. My back felt the hard wood of my door as I slid to the gentle carpet.

As I heard my brother's screaming voice, I just wanted to make him that happy child again. Dinosaurs are what made him happy. The thought of them would bring a smile to overrule any kind of tear shed on his innocent face. I don't remember when that happiness was stolen from Aidan but now if only I could restore it by simply dragging out his box of faded green dinosaurs from our cob webbed basement. Instead I was the one hiding like a child.

I heard screams and slaps of flesh hitting our granite counters. And then came the silence. I listened to the silence as my clock turned a full hour and then decided to venture onto the wooden floors of the hallway. I crept through the graying house as the sun was slipping out of our windows. I reached the kitchen and the floor had disappeared. My mom's neatly stacked bills that were once piled onto the table now covered the floor. A smoked cigarette was crushed onto the floor with a bright flash of blood dried on its embers. I had a feeling that the next time I saw Aidan, there would be three burn marks on his left arm instead of two. There was a lonely bill left on the counter with the scribbling's of my mom's handwriting that simply stated "Aidan to hospital." I was left alone to dream of happier times and futures that were stolen from my brother's grip by a packet full of rainbow pills.