

Sally's Games

By Chris Castle

Jodie walked a few steps behind her sister. She wanted to see the difference and thought the clear clinical white of a hospital corridor might show up any changes. She followed her hair, lighter now, but that made sense. She was still beautiful, the way she walked, that Jodie forever tried to copy. Picked the same clothes to wear, the same summer dress their mum had bought for her before she went away; the shoes the two of them had picked out together, Jodie trying to pay for them, Sally pushing the money away. She was four years older and that was never going to change, but she tried all the same.

"Come on, Dee, keep up." She said, catching Jodie looking at her. "Are you still checking to see if I've got more timber, aren't you?" She said, slapping her bum. Jodie laughed, and then put her hand to her mouth, uncertain of hospital protocol. That was a good word, a grown up word. She nodded to herself, making sure she remembered it.

"I've only been gone six months! What do you think they feed us from a saddle bag?"

"No." Jodie said, hating the squeak in her voice. She wished she didn't always sound so young around her. Lately she'd been standing in the mirror, talking, lowering her voice, trying to sound as she imagined she should. "I was just..." she floundered, trying to think of a good word.

"Scoping my form. Thought I was going to come back with a Yankee accent, didn't you?" She trailed her hand back for Jodie to take.

They used to do that all the time when they were younger, and then suddenly, they stopped. Jodie remembered some days, walking behind her, reaching a hand out, letting it flail, without her looking back. She remembered how cold she felt, how...exposed. She grabbed her sister's arm, maybe a little too hard, felt the warmth of her skin. It calmed her, made her heart settle.

The way the boys used to try and hold her hand was rubbish. It was either too hard or too forceful, like she was always on the verge of running, breaking away. Or even worse, flat palmed, without their fingers interlinking...interlocking? Like they were some old couple. That sort of hand-lock should only ever be with fathers. She drew herself up to her sister's side and they turned a sudden left, and then they were at the ward.

Jodie wished the hospital was larger, the corridors more of a challenge. She felt her stomach roll, suddenly realizing; she was wishing she had more time with her sister instead of seeing her sick mum. Did this make her evil? She felt her blood go cold for a second, and then shook it away. She had to focus; on

what was important; she had called the ambulance when mum had collapsed, had contacted her sister. They stood by the door, and she was not sure which one of them stopped first.

“Okay...” her sister said, drawing it out, like she did when she was nervous; before a date at the door, interviews, at airport lounges. Jodie smiled at that one, how long the ‘oooo’ stretched out for, actually counting the seconds until the ‘kay’ kicked in.

“Its okay, Sal. She really doesn’t look that bad.” She said, trying to think of something calming to say, something grown-up. Re-assuring. “It just looks like she’s got the flu or something.” It was true; she was pale, gaunt, but that was all. Her aunt had visited the next day; spoke to Jodie outside, tapping her own chest, saying if the stroke didn’t show you were lucky. It was true, too. After the first night they waited to see if she was going to be paralyzed, her mouth, and her side. Jodie remembered gran, her lip sagging, her tongue cream yellow. Jodie remembered not wanting to be there, kissing the rough cheek and flinching and later on her own bed, crying with the guilt she felt.

They looked at each other, each equally stiff. Then they walked into the ward, feeling the uncomfortable smell of the hospital, the feel of strangers surrounding the person you had come to see, the public-ness of it. Jodie stood by the side of the bed, on the left, by her mum, half shielding her from everyone else. It was the last bed on the ward and she was glad of that, no matter the concerns for winds and chills.

Her mum rose a little and Jodie bent down, pulled at her pillow. Then Sally was all the way down, hugging her, each mumbling into the others ear. And then Sally was talking, for the both of them, as Jodie stood soldier-quiet, protecting both of them. She listened to them, made sure the water was full in her glass; the flowers were at a pretty angle. She watched as the three of them linked together, chasing the smell from the ward, blocking the harshness of the lights, making the place somewhere they knew for a few minutes at least.

They sat on a bench outside. They had talked to the doctors, Sally asking, badgering. Now they sat each with an ice cream in the sun. It was sunny, just how it was when their mum collapsed.

“How did you make your hair go lighter?” She asked, wanting to balance the illness with what they had now; time together, time shared.

“I cut fresh lemons with my dorm key and squeezed on streaks. You could do it here; the suns strong enough, when it’s out.” Sally held the ice cream up to the sky, as a stream melted over her hand.

“Shit!” She said quickly, running her tongue over the melt, tightening up the circle of ice cream like

their mum had shown them when they were kids. She smiled for a second and then it faded and she frowned.

“Remember what dad would say, when he’d point to his chest?” She said quiet enough to make Jodie tilt her head a little, away from the traffic, the paramedics nearby, talking, clearing out the ambulance, the radio on low.

“The heart is about love.” Jodie said, like it was a school quiz. Then she frowned. “But then he changed it, said it was ‘for love’. She nodded. Eventually she looked over and saw Sally was looking right at her. That’s my expression Jodie thought. She looks like me.

“What do you want to do today? For the rest of the afternoon, I mean. I’m heading back at seven. Seeing as we’re in town anyway...” raising her eyebrow.

“I don’t know...” Jodie said, trying to think of something after all these months of waiting.

“I’ve got it!” She reached over, squinted, pinched Jodie’s ear. “We’re getting that pierced. What do you reckon?” She said, letting go, her eyes sparkling. It reminded Jodie of when they talked about Xmas presents. Then her sister rose, and Jodie followed not even answering, their arms crooked and linked to each other.

They zigged zagged between the streets, the business suits and the students, all a flash. Jodie held tight as her sister led the way, fearless. They brushed gently passed people, looped round others, until Jodie found herself tapping into the same strength, edging people by, cutting round. Until the two of them moved as one, swooping through the city and everything thrown in front of them.

“Where I had mine done,” Sally said, raising her hand to the Quarter. Jodie knew the place, had walked past it enough times, been on the brink with friends once or twice. Almost, just, not quite. She felt her hand being pulled up quick.

“I only want you to do this, if this is what you want.” She said, with the same serious hospital tone. She didn’t want that. She wanted to keep pushing on, buzzing, and darting in and out of the sunlight.

“I do. I’ve been waiting for so long, sis. My friends all talk about it, but never do a thing. And mum...”

“Come on,” she said, starting to march them both forward, until they reached the doorway, and Sally waved her hand at the man in the back of the shop.

“Miss Deveareaux! When did you get back?” He called out smiling. Jodie waited for the day someone would smile like that she stepped through their door.

“Jay!” They hugged gently, then broke apart. He held her by the shoulder, asking about her trip. They talked for a little while, until they fell into a quick knowing silence. Then Sally lifted her t-shirt to show a

butterfly, wild and perfect running over her stomach, her ribs. The man, Jay clapped his hands, laughing, admiring it. Then she turned and looked at Jodie, her face shaping into a perfect O.

“Look on the bright side, goldfish; at least Mums already in hospital.” She said, grabbing Jodie’s hand and leading her to the seat.

They sat in a bar a little later, Jodie trying not to pick her ear, the plaster. She watched as her sister ordered a beer for herself, a half for Jodie. The barman knew them, did the math in his head. She walked back smiling. She kept looking nervously at the barman until her sister thumped the drink down in-front of her; - a straw poking out of the side.

“Very funny,” she said, quickly, spooning it out and dropping it on the table, looking around. The trail of beer left a pattern on the table, like a sea horse.

“Remember when mum and dad used to bring us bottled coke with straws in?” She said, sipping her drink, grinning at the taste.

“You can’t get the glass bottles anywhere now.” Jodie said, more thinking out loud than anything. She was sad thinking about it, how things from their past were disappearing and uncontrollable.

“Yeah.” Sally said and she noticed the same sadness moved onto her. She picked up. “Sore?” She said, investigating the ear. Jodie fought the urge to touch it.

“It’s okay.” She lied. She tried to shake the sadness off of her, but she couldn’t quite shake it. “Sugar’s good after a tattoo, isn’t it?” She tried to ask the question lightly, but knew she sounded petulant. She looked away, down to her glass.

“I did it the night before I left. I was going to tell you...but I just wanted a secret to take away with me, okay? Something I knew that I could hold onto until I got back to surprise you with, make you laugh...” she reached into her back pocket, into her purse. She brought something out, unravelled it.

“It’s my St. Christopher’s. The chains rusted out and the hook’s broke, so I keep them in there instead. And here’s the change mum gave me at the airport for a coffee and a sandwich. And here’s a review of the film we saw before I went away. That’s what I took away with me, Dee that’s what really mattered.” Jodie looked at her sister and they both broke into smiles.

They sat back to sip they’re drinks. They people watched, men and women, guessing ages, secrets. The sun began to open up and they moved to the seats outside. Jodie watched as her sister rifled for something in her bag. The queen of lost treasures; phones, cards anything you could think of. Finally she pulled out a pen, a black felt tip. She looked over, her eyebrows arched. The barman brought over another

pint and another half.

“I figure one tattoo deserves another,” she said, smiling. “Where’d you want it? On the ribs like sis, or...elsewhere?” Jodie lifted up her right forearm.

“I see...” she swigged from her pint, deliberately leaving a foam moustache on her lip. “I see...” and she leant forward, both of them trying not to laugh.

And the two of them sat there, at the table in the sun, talking, sipping their drinks, Jodie sitting still as her sister went to work on her arm. Passers-by watched. One or two stopped and chatted for a while. But really it was just the two of them. Jodie closed her eyes from time to time, her mum safe, her sister close by, the sun out. And then she opened her eyes and saw the blonde streaks of her sister’s hair tumbling down, bright for a moment and then slipping into the shade of the summer’s day.

© 2011 Chris Castle