

WITH OR WITHOUT HIM

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[Assignment: Comparison and/or contrast, as a means of organization, cannot be an end in itself; it simply provides a pattern of development. As you choose a topic, you will need to arrive at a clearly defined sense of audience and purpose. With particular focus your essay may become interesting and informative.]

"You're Aaron's sister, right?" Those words echoed in my head. Can't they see me? It was like there was a constant shield in front of my heart. Essentially, I was him. My very identity unconsciously revolved around his successes as well as his failures. Didn't anyone care about my feelings? Didn't anyone want to know what I thought? No one knew my anger because it was concealed behind a make-believe smile. No one knew me without him. My friends often said I was lucky to have a big brother watching out for me, but they were oblivious to the pain I felt as a shadow.

The day that I would win my freedom had finally arrived. I woke up to the sounds of voices muffled behind my closed door. The three of them were confirming schedules and disagreeing about the route to take. Aaron was on the phone reciting his last goodbyes. My tired face released a silent grin. Although I felt I would be rewarded for all my hardships, deep inside I knew we would always live for him. The last day I would be haunted by every mention of his name guided me as my only hope. I staggered to my door and entered the dining room filled with his belongings. The "team" was running back and forth loading the car and finishing last minute perfections. It was as if I was a ghost. I was a stranger in my own house.

I knew my life would never be the same when we drove away from Aaron's collection of memories toward his distant future. I could almost smell the flowery feminine scent that would be drifting from my very own bathroom. I could see the snack drawer still full of choices which were usually long gone. My birthday, thirteen days prior to his, would no longer be a celebration for both of us. I didn't mind sharing my day as much as I minded his being the center of attention. I guess it was asking too much for someone to recognize me one day of the year. I was not even concerned with being noticed anymore. It was better to hear silence than to be reminded of Aaron's every move. My own hallway would be peaceful. Yes, even my life would be mine.

My dream of being the only child would finally come true. My parents could no longer blame me for his incompetence. I wouldn't have to pick up his shoes, carelessly left on the living room floor. I wouldn't have to fold his shirts because basketball practice ran longer than expected. The attention I had been starving for would finally be mine. And, since I was entering high school as he left, I could build my own reputation. They wouldn't know he was excellent in science and math. They wouldn't know I struggled through those two subjects my entire life. I could be anyone I wanted to be because he would be gone. People might even focus on me as a person. Expectations of my performance would be

based on new experiences, not my stereotypical past in which he was always included. Our community saw only one explanation behind any achievement I made--Aaron. I would certainly be a misfit if it weren't for good ol' Aaron. The chains that held me down were suddenly broken in my mind. I would never hear--"But Aaron was great at this, what's wrong with you?"--again. What's wrong with me? I'm not Aaron, so how could anything be right.

Sure, we fought like any brother and sister do. Only behind his fist was anger from annoyance, but behind my fist was more envy than he could ever imagine. I tried every tactic to be noticed--from locking myself in my room to running away from home--but all proved that my timid nature could never withstand his indomitable personality. I attempted to join in with admiration as the others had, but I was so jealous I couldn't see straight. The more I tried to be like him, the more I fell behind. The more I fell behind, the angrier I became. My anger was turned into words directed toward Aaron. He tolerated every hateful word, which made me spiteful of his gentle patience. The older he got, the more he could persevere. All my energy could now be spent living for myself instead of living only to test his perseverance.

I could grow into a mature, independent adult without relying on his outspoken opinions to guide what everyone assumed were my feeble feet. Aaron always had something to say, as if anyone would forget he was present. My decisions would no longer be influenced by his uninvited advice. I could escape the trap that had misguided me to believe I was nothing. The scenario was as predictable as a television sitcom, but without the happy ending. I would come home with important news and he would always top my story. My life was never quite as exciting as he made his out to be. If I was on the honor roll, he was on the high honor roll. If I won a spelling bee, he invented the winning word. After all those years of settling for mediocrity, I would prove to the world that I was strong and capable of achieving anything he could achieve. Most of all, I could prove to myself that I was not a failure just because Aaron was a success.

The trip is over. I am alone. My life sure has changed. My bathroom smells of that flowery feminine fragrance I had longed for. The hallway is peaceful, and the snack drawer is full. But I'm too lonely to eat. So, I walk into his room, but he is not there. There is no one to fight with because no one seems to care. The attention I wanted does not feed my empty heart. The distance I felt between us has built a wall I cannot break down. A picture of me as a child stands on his shelf--where had the time vanished?

All of a sudden I find myself in high school, and there is no one I can ask for advice. Aaron would have known which lunch hour was best, which teachers to choose, which clubs to belong to--he had lived it all. I have always relied on Aaron without giving it a second thought. Because of my brother, who was always an over-achiever, teachers see my faults without considering the potential I might have. I am a nobody. Where is Aaron when I need him most? He would have never abandoned me if he were here. No one even questioned if I was "Aaron's sister." I shouldn't worry about my reputation because I am too scared to form one. I am

terrified without a big brother to back me up. No more comparing almost means no more me.

Looking back, I realize that I had forgotten all the times my brother helped me out when I was in trouble, like the time he "saved my life" by explaining to my parents that I didn't really mean to turn a flip and break our couch. I had forgotten his advice that made my life easier, like the time he suggested I tell Mom the truth about accidentally breaking her favorite figurine. Instead of death, I faced a one-week grounding, and reverence for telling the truth. Gone with his belongings were his valued and respected opinion, like the opinion he had about a no-good boyfriend that saved me from a broken heart. I had everything to myself, but I was essentially left with nothing. I hated myself for desperately needing his company. I needed someone to fight with. I needed someone to show me how to love life. I needed someone just like my brother.

Who said those words? I realized that I had an entirely new outlook on life because of the absence of my brother. I learned that absence makes the heart grow fonder in the most difficult way. I had focused on the negative parts of our relationship instead of being content with the positive. I created negative thoughts out of perfectly positive situations. For instance, one time I walked home from school thinking that Aaron had forgotten to pick me up, when actually he was busy helping set up a surprise party for my graduation. Clearly, a new life was not what I wanted. I desired something that would have to evolve from my own commitment to simply be myself. Previously, I wanted to be noticed as an individual. Presently, I want to be content with who I am as an individual. Now that I am known as an individual in our small community, people still call me "Aaron's sister." The smile I give in response is no longer make-believe, but truly genuine. I would hate to think of sharing this title of high esteem with anyone else. Being Aaron's sister means that I am also a close friend. My brother gave me love and attention when no one else would. Instead of counting the days until he left, I should have appreciated him while I had the chance. Now I am struggling to make up for lost time. I feel like I could never be the help that he has been to me. Through all his advice, all his favors, all his opinions, and all his love, I learned that it was not my feet that were feeble, it was my heart. My envious heart never showed the gratitude I owed to him. Aaron only wanted the best for me, and I had wished the worst upon him. If someone could see this dreadful past in me, they would know why I wish no one knew me without him.