

Standard Deviation
By Theresa Azemar

One night, as you are watching *Wheel of Fortune* with your family on the living room couch, your older brother pulls out a gun and says he has something to say. Your mom stands and screams his name like it's the only word that's ever been on her mind. She keeps telling him *whatever this is, it isn't funny*. You mute Pat Sajak and ask *what the fuck is going on*. Your question probably doesn't come out that smoothly, or at all, but before you can finish, your brother makes himself small and begins to cry. He crumples to the floor. For the first time, you realize how long his legs are. His body folded over itself and his hands covering his face, he holds the gun like it carries no weight. Like a wand. When he gives himself the chance to breathe, he says *I hurt dad*.

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When you and your brother are both in elementary school, you get checked out of class nearly every week because of something he did. Sometimes, it was *get in the car—Malcom sharpened another girl's finger*, or *Malcom threatened to reintroduced smallpox to the entire school district*, or *Malcom threw a butter knife at some kid during show-and-tell*. Your brother knows that he's a bad kid. Everyone who's met him knows that he's a bad kid. This is your brother's personal normal. This is the standard he is held by.

You are actually a good kid. You win the math bee in your third-grade class. Things like that are always so easy for you. At the donut party for the winners, the teacher hosting the event makes a comment that she is glad that not every child in your family is *hopeless*. You surprise yourself by clenching your fists so hard that your nails cut into your palms and make you bleed.

You are allowed to bring a plus-one to the donut party, but your brother is in detention. He calls it his cage. He imagines he's a chameleon and turns into whatever touches him. He spends hours just dreaming from bell to bell; most people think he's stupid for it. Lately, he's spent most of his days in his cage; he goes entire school days without saying a single word to anyone.

You wrap an extra donut in a napkin to bring home.

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These days, he sends you more letters than usual. Now, they're shorter and sloppier. He asks you broken questions.

Hey B, how could mom have loved me?

B, do you think I'll ever get married?

What does it all mean, B? B, did I let you down?

B, I need your help. I need...I need...I need...

When you have visitors, you keep the stack of envelopes locked in your junk drawer. You'll get to them. They're not going anywhere anytime soon.

Another day, you get home from walking your dog, and you remember that it's been a few months since you last visited your brother. His birthday was one of these days. You say you'll go tomorrow. It's always so easy to say that you'll visit him tomorrow. In your mind, he is standing in the very last place you saw him, frozen and only generally discontent. It's always so easy to imagine that prison isn't too bad for him. It's always so easy to imagine that he's eating well. That his cage is not a cage. That his conditions are not his conditions. That his body is his own. Everything is always so easy.

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At your dad's funeral, it is too difficult to get yourself to cry. Imagining that he is still with you, that is the easy part.

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When you are so little that you will barely remember, you envy your brother's relationship with your dad. Early Saturday mornings, your dad calls from the base of the staircase:

Mac, let's work in the yard together!

You wanna play in the sprinklers, Mac?

Hey, B. Could you tell Mac to come downstairs for a second? I gotta show him something.

Your brother always comes drudging down the stairs to put on a pair of sneakers and be a body until your dad is done with him. In the meantime, you help your mom with little things around the house. Sometimes, enough time passes that you forget where your dad and brother have even gone off to. Whenever they return, your brother's hair and clothes are disheveled from a tiring morning. He doesn't want to do very much talking for the rest of those days. The Saturday morning ritual stops when your brother passes your dad in height. By that point, he doesn't have to worry very much about giving a convincing *no* for an answer.

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In 9th grade, a bunch of older kids in the back of the school bus make fun of your stutter. They call you a *sp-sp-spaz*. You get this fiery feeling in your chest like a missile is trapped inside of you. Sitting there in the front seat, this is the first time you ever think that it might be good to

die. When some kid starts to do a robot impression, you turn and look to the back of the bus again, your face and your neck flushed and burning. Your brother is in the back too, sitting silently and looking blood red mad. One of the mean kids says something you'll never forget, and when the bus comes to a stop at next red light, your brother kicks open the backdoor emergency exit and throws the kid into the street.

That year, the bus driver gets fired and your brother finally gets expelled. Everyone knew he'd do it eventually. The kid from the bus who said that you were not yet fully evolved actually wins the science fair that year. He never apologizes.

The next summer, your older brother takes care of you while your parents are at work. He even helps makes snacks. You wrap grapes in little spinach leaves and eat them with your eyes closed. It tastes like peaches. He looks up riddles online to ask you. He confesses some of the funnier things he got away with before his expulsion. You try to look surprised. He teaches you where babies come from, and you both share a laugh over the grossness of it all. He warns you to never hurt a woman.

You play cops and robbers. He always plays the cop. He's pretty good at it. You think that maybe one day he could work for the police.

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He slaps his girlfriend at the thanksgiving table.

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You never tell him that you knew what happened to him.

You never tell him that his social deviations were a great help to your success.

You never tell him that he is the reason why your college essays stuck out.

You never tell him that his daughter called you *dad*.

You never tell him that his ex had another child.

You never tell him that he will always be more than a prisoner to you.

You never tell him your mom's last words.

You never tell him that you're sorry about everything.

You never tell him you love him.

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You learn his inmate number to the tune of a nursery rhyme. The first time that you visit him, you go with your mom. She is still alive. You drive there in your dad's old car.

The waiting room smells like a pharmacy. This surprises you, as you've placed both places in unwaveringly separate positions in your mind. You decide the people in this waiting room look pretty sick, too.

When you finally get to see him through the glass, he smiles, and you wish he wouldn't. He is suddenly so thin and so tall. You try not to breathe too hard so that his brittle bones don't snap. His head is shaved bald, and he has scars all over his face. You won't remember the conversation that you have with him that day, but at the time you know that every other conversation that you will have with him from then on will sound just about the same. One thing that he mentions that you know you'll never forget is that *there are guys in here for doing the kind of stuff that some parents will never get locked away for*.

Your mom is crying and crying the whole visit through. She doesn't have much time left, and she feels like she failed. You'd never tell her this, but you agree.

On the glass, your figure mirrors your brothers. You can't believe how much you both have in common. For a moment, you consider how easy it would have been for you to be him and for him to be you. A simple shuffle in chromosomes. In a sense, you're both the same. You wonder why you are the brother who doesn't end up in a cage.

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In your sociology class, you teach about mass incarceration. You grapple with the fact that your brother earned his position as a slave to the system. He strayed too far from the norm; he was an outlier. You hear your students refer to prisoners as *deviants*. You want to tell them that deviation is inevitable. You want to tell them that you aren't born a criminal. That there are no good guys or bad guys. That nothing is ever *that* easy. It's all about your margin for error.

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Now that it's all really *finally* over, do you think that there was anyone who knew him *truly*? That there was ever anyone who didn't write him off as a troublemaker? Do you think that any of what's happened is surprising?

All those people who you lied to and told you were an only child, will they ever know him?

You are always trying to cluster around the mean, trying to be as close to normal as possible. The choices you make are your only means of measuring the uncertainty of it all.

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When you are 14, your brother swears at the church youth pastor for saying that you are both going to hell. When your brother is asked to leave, he snatches his bag and says he'll do it gladly.

B, are you with me, or what? He reaches out to you.

You stay frozen in your seat, and, when the time comes, you listen to the sound of his footsteps as he walks away from you for good.