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# SMTWTFS

MEAGHAN LEAHY

I don't remember how old I was when I learned what Risperdal was, but I remember how I felt when I saw her take it for the first time. Used to treat schizophrenia. Atypical antipsychotic. Dopamine antagonist. The good news? It calmed the irritability, or the doctor said it would anyway. The bad news? Side effects include weight gain, metabolic problems, and death. Also, despair, guilt, and hatred for a God who wasn't even listening, but who's counting anyway?

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I watched as the fifteenth tour group passed through the Quad early this morning, and thought about how happy I was that my college application process was three years behind me. Sure, I haven't entirely figured out my future, but I have the luxury of doing so on the most beautiful campus with the most wonderful people. Could it get better than this?

The sixteenth group walked right next to my bench, and a family of four took up the rear. Well-dressed parents, listening intently to the guide in front of them, followed by two whispering, giggling, teenage girls with a clear resemblance to each other. Sisters.

I guess it could get better than this after all.

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My parents planned that we would be seventeen months apart. They planned that we would be close in age, and therefore experience the same things at the same time. I told that to my friend Jenny once, and all she could say was, "Ew! They planned that?" I wasn't sure why the idea of chronological family planning was so appalling to her. Did she think that the stork showed up on her doorstep shortly after she was born with three more baby girls perfectly aged, ready to live and learn and love and lose together? Did she think that every family was just like hers, had kids with cute rhyming names (Katie, Allie, Jenny, and Annie) who all went to the same school and had the same teachers year after year? (Sometimes Jenny would complain about Mrs. A. calling her by one of her older sisters' names instead. I didn't feel bad.) Did she think that every family had children who grew together instead of apart? That, for everyone, one kid turned into two turned into four, and they lived happily ever after?

Regardless of her thoughts, it felt that way to me. It felt like everywhere I looked there was another perfect family with 2.5 neurotypical kids walking down the

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damn street with their perfect dog, turning into their perfect driveway, and going inside their perfect house. The more kids they had, the more I compared myself to them, and the more I thought about my own family.

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In our home, it's just me and my sister, my sister and me. After my parents found out, they were too afraid to risk having any more children, and I don't blame them. At the time, it could have been anything—literally anything—that caused her condition. Was it her diet? Did my pregnant mother have too many mercury-laden foods? Was she a cold and heartless “refrigerator mom?” Was there mold behind the headboard or did my dad give her a defective chromosome, now lodged somewhere in her genetic blueprints? Many theories have been discredited, like the MMR vaccine link and the gastrointestinal idea, but in the '90s, no one knew that. No one really knew anything except that parents with one kid affected were more likely to have another. Today, it's a 2 to 18% chance.

So, I was born on January 24th, 1993, and she was born on June 22nd, 1994, and we grew up together, albeit a little differently from the family down the block with four (to me, it may as well have been thirteen—when you've only got one sibling, it seems as though any family with more than two kids is huge) similar, beautiful, rapidly developing daughters. One Big Happy Family. Whatever, Jenny. Whatever.

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Paxil is an antidepressant drug of the SSRI variety. Used to treat major depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder. Side effects also

include weight gain, increased risk of birth defects, higher rates of nausea and sleepiness, and also maybe probably definitely death. Who knows? I sure don't.

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I have happy memories of our old house at 9 Salisbury, I really do. Stewart Manor was a great place to grow up, and our avenue was the best of the best. The Limontas (three kids: two boys, one girl), the LaBarbaras (four kids: all girls), and the Coxes (two kids: one boy, one girl) all lived on my block, and if they were busy I could bike the three intersections to the Butchers (three kids: two boys, one girl) or the five to the Kennys (three kids: all girls). Only thirty minutes away from midtown Manhattan, our tiny duplex nestled in the perfect suburban community made me feel like maybe something was perfect for us too.

I remember filling up the big plastic pool and splashing around with the plastic ducks that we took from our Lucky Ducks game. My sister and I pretended to be characters on Sesame Street. I sang Ernie's Rubber Ducky song, and she laughed along. I never really knew if she was laughing at me or at the sky, but she was happy, so it was okay.

I remember every time Mommy came to tuck us into bed, I would wait until I heard her feet glide back down the stairs and once she was gone, I would set up all our stuffed animals on the floor across from my bed and tell my sister to wake up. I performed the Star Spangled Banner and the theme song from Barney and took a deep bow as she clapped for me, in awe of my amazing singing voice.

I remember pushing each other on the swing set that

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Daddy put together and having secret spy missions under the picnic table. She was always the silent spy, and I was the handler. Chatty and full of information to convey.

I have a few unhappy memories, but I try not to dwell on them. I remember when her therapist's voice came running up the stairs almost as fast as Daddy went running down when he heard, "Joe! JOE! Come down here!!!" Mommy was right behind him and then all of a sudden she was back in the kitchen, grabbing at the phone. As she called 911, I learned that watching someone you love lose control over their body was similar to being strapped into a thrill ride at Rye Playland. The High Flyer swings you back and forth in a giant pendulum, and brings you higher and higher until you start flying around in full circles. The Grand Mal Seizure Machine swings you back and forth from confusion and fear, spiraling you lower and lower into utter panic until the ambulance arrives.

I remember when Daddy went into work on Tuesday and didn't come back until Sunday. Something had happened in Manhattan, my mom said, and he was staying at the firehouse. I had this habit of falling asleep on the extra mattress next to my Daddy's side of the bed, because I liked to hold his hand and play The Initial Game as I drifted into dreamland. To combat the loneliness of his absence, I slept in my sister's bed every night until he came home. I don't know if she knew what I did—she couldn't tell me if she understood what the news was saying—but I know she hugged me back as we laid in bed, crying.

I remember when I yelled at my mom four years later, asking why no one cared about what I wanted, and why

I had to leave my school and friends. Why did we have to move to another town just because there was a better program and better bussing for my sister? I also remember yelling at my sister for a different reason, when I was much, much younger. She had taken my favorite Barbie, and wouldn't give it back. I pulled and pulled, and even smacked her, but her yelling was louder and her thrashing was bigger, so Daddy said it was hers now.

I was full of resentment as a kid, but I also loved her. I was mad that I didn't have a real sister, like everyone else did. I was mad that I never got to do what I wanted, or so I thought, because she would be upset. I was mad that she didn't build blanket forts with me or look me in the eye. She usually shied away from my hugs and wouldn't stop stealing my favorite VHS tapes in order to stack them all, one on top of the other. But at the same time, she was the only sister I had. Sometimes watching Ghostwriter together wasn't that bad. It was even kinda fun, having the same favorite TV show and laughing at the same jokes. It was like we had something in common, something other than our genetics and last name. We had a thing, a bond. Jenny and Annie liked watching Bill Nye the Science Guy, and we liked watching the Ghostwriter gang solve the latest mystery. Maybe one day they could solve my sister for me.

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Topamax is an anticonvulsant (antiepilepsy) drug. In late 2012, the Food and Drug Administration approved the drug in combination with phentermine for weight loss, probably because it had previously been used off-label for this purpose. People were voluntarily subjecting themselves to the "very common, >10% chance" side effects of dizziness, paraesthesia, somnolence, nau-

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sea, diarrhea, fatigue, nasopharyngitis, and depression, to drop their unwanted pounds. I hated those people.

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By the time I reached middle school, I grew out of my resentment, but it wasn't all peachy-keen over in the Leahy house. After we moved 1.1 miles to our new house in Garden City, I got my own room. It was cool, I guess—I had privacy and the newfound ability to structure my night around my own needs, not around my sister's bedtime. But in another way, it completely cut out the little time I spent with her after I started growing up. I no longer held sold-out shows of the Backstreet Boys' latest album or sang the National Anthem to a crowd of plush and one human. I hung out with my "real" friends and I stopped paying attention to her, unless my mom started crying. Sometimes, or all the time, she would get upset about my aloofness. My relationship with my sister obviously left something to be desired, but I didn't feel like giving it (nor could I really put my finger on exactly what that "something" was—bonding time? understanding? love? patience?) and she physically couldn't, so that's where it stayed. Stagnant and devastating to my mother, who had planned to have two best friends, born just seventeen months apart.

But it's not like I didn't care about her. We finally went to the same school, and I stepped into my long-awaited role of Cool Older Sister Who Already Knows Her Way Around the Hallways. I told all my new friends that I had a sibling in the self-contained classroom right off the main hallway, and they should say hi to her or help her open her locker if she was struggling.

One day, from the music wing, I heard her voice.

Screaming. The class stopped singing and turned to look at the door, and then the Abercrombie-clad, evil little thirteen-year-olds started to echo her self-inflicted agony in whispered shrieks and feinting movements. I took one look at the demons, their stupid faces red from laughing so hard, and I bolted out of my seat. I had one foot already out the door before I remembered to turn back and explain to my teacher that she was mine (not theirs, not theirs to ridicule). She was my sister and they were making fun of her and I needed to leave right now.

By the time I got to her classroom, she was already in the Nurses Office, waiting for my dad to come and get her. I waited too.

A few more episodes like that, and we stopped going to school together.

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Things have to get worse before they can get better (at least according to every grandma ever on the topic of the flu), and, man, they sure got worse. Before I moved on to our local high school, my sister enrolled in a special school for kids just like her. She screamed until her throat was so raw she couldn't say a word. She rubbed at the skin just under her eyes and on the bridge of her nose until it bled in a steady stream down her face, unable to clot and scab and heal because she would just go at it, again and again. She lost about thirty or so pounds because her latest thing was essentially doing crunches while sitting upright on the couch. We tried a new medication and the symptoms abated, only to be replaced by new ones (at least they were more manageable—repeated shaking of the head, eye move-

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ments, repetitive counting and conversation).

The better things were the increased eye contact (they're the windows to your soul, I've heard, but I had never seen how blue hers were until my 16th birthday) and the improved speech ability. We worked from scripted responses—if you asked her how her day was, the answer will always be, “It was good,” regardless of how it actually was—but we were able to have an almost-normal conversation. I would wait for her bus to arrive outside and open the door, she would come upstairs, and I would ask what she did that day. The whole family would gather around the coffee table and listen. It was right out of a sitcom, except the same episode aired every day.

Best of all, I grew up. I got over the resentment, the needing-to-fit-in-at-school. I'm not saying our relationship was perfect—or is for that matter—but I realized that she had thoughts and feelings too. One December afternoon, she got off the bus crying. I asked what was wrong, she said, “It was good,” and kept silently crying until Mom came home with pizza for dinner. I still don't know how her day went, or what made her so sad—and I never will.

Our experiences thus far were uniquely intertwined yet distanced: so many things happened only because we both lived in the same place, but we weren't living and learning and loving and losing the same way that freakin' Jenny and her siblings were. My own feelings weren't insignificant; I was allowed to feel neglected, angry, and guilty. I was allowed to feel pissed at God for not giving her diagnosis to me, and I was allowed to simultaneously feel just a tiny bit relieved that it

wasn't me, really. But everything I was feeling, I'm sure she was feeling to the nth degree. That's what all those tantrums were: anger, rage, sadness, frustration, excitement, happiness, love—all simmering under the surface until they boiled over.

I went to the Spring Fling and worked on the student-run literary magazine. I excelled in my honors classes and took more AP exams than I'd like to count. (More importantly, I leaned against my locker as the boy from first period World History flirted with me.) The rest of my high school career was par for the course, maybe not as glamorous as the movies but as well-above-average (just like my grades) as it could be.

But I'll always wish she was standing next to me in the pre-Prom pictures. I'll always wish she started life-guarding with me when she was old enough. Once, before I had my real license, my parents were with some friends for a much-needed night out, so I told her to get in the passenger side of our 2000 silver Toyota Camry and strap in. We drove around the block, like twenty times, with the windows down. We blasted Katy Perry's “Firework,” and for a second I felt like this is how it would have been if, you know, we had been like every other family in this too-small town. I made her promise not to tell, even though I knew she couldn't. I guess I did it because it felt like something normal kids would do.

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Clonazepam is a benzodiazepine drug having anxiolytic, anticonvulsant, muscle relaxant, sedative, and hypnotic properties. Muscle relaxant? Sounds like a good idea. But the commonly associated drowsiness, motor impairment, personality changes and behavioral disturbances don't seem as great. And doesn't the

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induction of seizures or increased frequency of seizures directly contradict what we're trying to do here?

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Freshman year, I went over to the Law School to get some paperwork notarized. On April 24th, 2012, I became the Standby Guardian for my sister. I became the First Successor to the modest trust my parents have set up for her future, slowly saving their civil servant wages for the day they can no longer provide for her. No waiting until I'm twenty-five and having a relative handle it in the meantime—I'm one tragic accident away from losing my parents and subsequently becoming responsible for another human life.

On a lighter note, I actually have my license now, so no more definitely-illegal activities for us. But there was this one time this past summer when my sister and I went to the mall and picked out earrings, then got a slice or two or definitely five at our favorite pizza joint, and walked around town with Starbucks cups and big sunglasses on. When we got back home, we scooped ice cream and had a dance party around the kitchen in our pajamas before watching Good Luck Charlie on Disney Channel and then going to bed. Her new therapist is working with her on e-mailing. The other day she wrote to me, listing the things she did that day (went to the gym with Daddy, going to a special dance). I almost responded that I was going out to get ice cream with my roommates and my boyfriend, but then I remembered that she won't ever have those relationships, so I said I was studying for a test instead. When I came home for spring break, then-boyfriend in tow, she came up to me—unprompted—and said “I'm glad that Meaghan's back! Meaghan's home!” I introduced her to him, trying not to cry.

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I wrote my Common App essay on what I learned from her. On what I learned from watching over the years as she took more medication than should ever be allowed for a vibrant, kind, and naturally athletic young woman. Catapres, Risperdal, Haldol for the tics. Paxil, Seroquel, Celexa, Zoloft, Neurotonin for the autism symptoms. Klonopin, Topamax, Zyprexa all under her latest doctor. These were the bottles I became familiar with over the years. I watched as each new medication was introduced, then taken away, only to be replaced by another. She was never on all eleven drugs at once, but always one or two at any given time in her life. She recently tried Clonidine and Clonazepam for the tics (they've gotten way, way worse; that moment where she stopped shaking long enough to meet my boyfriend is a rare occurrence these days) before my dad decided he didn't want his little girl to be stuck on the couch in an over-medicated haze. He would rather watch as she shakes her head back and forth and listen as she repeatedly asks to wipe her hands, than see her without the energy to laugh and play. Without the energy to live.

Something I've always found to be intriguing is that even with all of these medications, we never needed one of those weekly pill organizers in the house. No plastic container with SMTWTFS emblazoned on the front, implying that the neurologically disordered are too stupid to know how many to take and when. Nope, Kelly is a smart chick. She knows to take one Zyprexa and one Cylexa every night before bed and if I forget to get it for her, she will come and interrupt my binge-Netflix-watching-session to tell me the exact dosage. I guess Jack Bauer can wait. This is the everyday in our house, the Sunday-Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday-

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Thursday-Friday-Saturday.

I got into Boston College, I believe, not because of my grades and extracurriculars (although they may or may not have had something to do with it), but because of Kelly Ann Leahy. The admissions officers read my essay and they couldn't not fall in love with the young woman I told them about. The strong autistic girl who battles everything that holds her back—her sister, the world, her own disorder—every day, and consistently comes out on top. I bet they wanted to accept her instead of me, but settled for the lesser option.

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The perfect family in that sixteenth tour group stood outside of Devlin Hall, laughing and chatting as the sun kissed their blonde strands perfectly. Perfect. After all these years, I still can't escape that word, still can't escape the idea that another family was more perfect than mine. My Common App essay explains how Kelly changed me, how my resentment for her diagnosis grew into love for her personality. But reading over it again, I feel like a fraud. There's a small voice in my head that never stopped resenting the picturesque family on the lawn, or down the block, or on the sitcom—never stopped comparing us to them. Back in high school, I accepted my sister for who she was, sure, but I never accepted my family for who we were. I picked the best things about this experience and I polished them off, showing only the good things to admissions counselors. They didn't see what I did to make my sister's life harder—I ignored her, I neglected her, I yelled at her—and they didn't see what I did to try to make up for that either. They didn't see the swimming lessons or the ice cream cones, they didn't see the joyride or the webcam self-

ies framed in her room. They didn't see my confusion.

I told them that I had already come to terms with the fact that the cultural idea of normal was never going to be mine. But that was a lie. I'm still struggling with it every day.

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It's 2015 now, and Kelly's twenty-first birthday is in a few months. All this time, no one outside of me, my family, and the recipients of my Common App has ever read what seventeen-year-old me wrote in 2010 about my younger sister, my role model. But I think everyone should, so here it is. When you're done, call your siblings and tell them you love them, and, most importantly, that you're thankful to be able to tell them at all.

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*I am certainly not the only person in the world with a sibling. A friend from school is one of fourteen kids and another is one of eight. In fact, most of my friends come from larger families than my own, but I like to think that living with my sister is a little different than having thirteen siblings.*

*My sister Kelly Ann is a sixteen-year-old girl with autism and Tourette syndrome, and she has been this way for most of her young life. Diagnosed with autism at age two and Tourette syndrome around age eleven, my sister has had to deal with more obstacles than most kids her age, as well as most adults I know. To be honest, one of the challenges she has had to deal with is me. My parents love to tell the story about the day they brought Kelly home from the hospital and I stormed out of the living room upon seeing a new baby. As a child, all I saw was that if Kelly threw a tantrum she would get her way, and I'd be forced to watch Barney instead of Justice League. Sometimes I would even yell at her for repeating gibberish over and over. Don't misunderstand me, I love her, but I think, I always resented her for being the younger, prettier sister who ultimately got everything she wanted.*

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*It wasn't until I grew up and came to terms with Kelly's challenges that I realized she didn't have it as easy as I thought she did. First, autism hinders social interaction and communication. The tantrums she threw were not to get her way like I once thought; they were actually to express the feelings she couldn't tell us verbally. And all the times I ran out of the house to hang out with my friends? Kelly was never able to have that escape. I had taken the autism for granted because it had been there my whole life, but it wasn't until Tourette syndrome manifested in the summer of 2005 that I sat up and took notice. It was at this point that my little sister taught me more than I ever could have learned from a chalkboard.*

**Endurance.** *Every day, Kelly has hundreds to thousands of tics due to the Tourette's. Many of them are self-injurious, such as when she rubs her face so much that the skin breaks, and when she screams repeatedly until her throat goes raw. Regardless of how physically taxing her tics are, Kelly always seems to continue through her day as if nothing is wrong. Before this realization, I would call it quits if I were a little tired while running or too cold while swimming. Now, even when I am very tired or cold, I've realized that I can't just stop when things get tough. My sister has taught me to finish what I start.*

**Patience.** *Since being diagnosed with autism, Kelly has had a string of different therapists come to our house in order to teach her things the rest of us do naturally. Using the bathroom independently, writing legibly, and reading out loud are things that took her years to learn, and these skills didn't come easily. When the Tourette syndrome developed, a giant wrench was thrown into our lives and Kelly had to relearn many of the skills she had previously acquired. Through this process, Kelly has taught me that patience truly is a virtue. If she gave up every time she became frustrated, she never would have made it past where she was at age three. My sister has taught me to be patient with her, myself, and others.*

**Innocence.** *Kelly still quotes her old Barney tapes and watches Caillou on TV. Although this could be considered immature to an*

*outsider, I actually find it refreshing. After coming home from a day at high school where everyone seems to be growing up too fast, spending time with my sister in a manner reminiscent to our younger years is time I value. While our topics of conversation are not typical of two teenage sisters, they are easy and they are honest. Her influence has kept a part of me young at heart, even though the rest of me has to grow up. With Kelly's help, I like to think I'm maintaining my innocence while still being informed, and enjoying the present moments of my life.*

**Independence.** *My sister will never be fully independent, and as I get older this fact starts to sink in more. I'm never going to have Kelly drive to pick me up from the airport, be the maid of honor at her wedding, or be the godmother to her children. She will live with my parents until they're gone, and then I'd like to think she'll live with me. Because of this, I am faced with the challenge of thinking forward – considering both her needs as well as my own. I am forced to think about a time in the future when the outcome of both of our lives will be my responsibility. Because of this, my sister has taught me a greater, more important form of independence. The sixteen years of her life have been filled with ridicule, whether it is laughing children or adults who can't seem to stop staring. Instead of crumbling at the will of these ignorant people, Kelly continues to work to overcome her challenges. Thanks to her example, I've stopped being so self-conscious and I'm happy with who I am. This allows me to focus on how I can continue to work on my own goals without being sidetracked by superficiality.*

*Kelly has influenced my life in ways that can't be paralleled. My childhood has been different because of her influence, and I expect the same of my adulthood. Kelly's impact on my endurance, patience, innocence, and independence (among other qualities) has helped me grow into the person I am today. I know her continued influence will help me develop into the person I want to be: a responsible student, a good friend, and a devoted sister.*