

“Snowflakes”

By Samara Smukler

White was the color of the snow on the ground the day we were born, coating the trees and the town, making everything look just the slightest bit more magical. An ordinary day, now changed. Christmas Eve is an interesting day to be born, a few days after our planned due date, but hey, a person makes plans and life laughs in their face. And so it was, twin girls born on Christmas Eve, one at 11:01 pm and the other just ten minutes later. Identical twins, but then again, no two snowflakes are exactly the same. I came first. They named me Quinn. “Wisdom, reason, intelligence.” Funny, because sometimes I felt like those were the only things I had over you. I was good at school. You were better at everything else. You came last. They named you Noelle. “Christmas.” When you came out, you were as gray as the skies outside. One twin is always weaker than the other, people say. You were small, struggling to breathe. Mom tells us that the doctors had to take you away. She sobbed and sobbed and clung to Dad, crying, “Please don’t take her. My little girl.” I was their little girl, too, but it was you they were worried about. It was you they doted on. This was the first time that had happened, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“Everything is going to be okay,” Dad had said. He was always the quiet kind of comforting, steady, stable. He was good to have around in a crisis because he never panicked. “She’s a fighter, this one.”

You were born at 11:11, ten minutes after I was. *11:11, make a wish*, everyone always says. You came into the world at prime wish-making time. Funny, because the first time I ever remember wishing for something, for anything, it was to not be myself anymore. To be you instead.

Pink was the color of the leotards and tutus we wore for our ballet recital when we were eight years old. Mom did ballet when she was a child, so we had to do it too. I wasn't the best student in the class, but I liked it all the same. Liked the velvety feeling of the leotard on my fingers as I'd lift it from my closet and pack it into my dance bag. Liked the sound of the classical music echoing through the studio as we danced. Liked the calluses on my feet, even, because they showed that I was working hard. You, meanwhile, hated the hell out of dance, but you were a natural. The teacher always placed you at the front of the room, while I lingered at the back, hoping no one would notice if I missed a step. The recital was "the time to show off our talent", our teacher said. You had talent. I had a severe lack of rhythm. Mom was so proud as she helped us get dressed, the pink of our costumes reflecting the blush-pink pride painted across her face.

"This barely fits, Noelle," she was frowning, as you squeezed yourself into your leotard. You had always had a complicated relationship with food. Since you were born very sickly and small, Mom and Dad were always feeding you that little bit extra, wanting you to catch up to a healthy, normal weight quickly. And being at a healthy, normal weight, at this age, also meant baby fat, which was what Mom *didn't* want. As I glanced at your legs, clad in ballet tights, I thought of the sausages in the case at the supermarket, round and plump, and immediately felt guilty. Mom was the one who watched our weight. I shouldn't be noticing. I didn't know why I did.

"Yes, it does," you protested, and Mom shook her head. "I don't think so," she said. She raised her eyebrows. "You're getting a little chubby around the middle, Noelle." I watched her pat your stomach, but said nothing, bending to tie my ballet shoes. "You're such a pretty girl. Don't let yourself go."

Afterward, Mom and Dad gave us pink roses and showered us with praise. Well, showered *you*, more like.

“You could be the next big thing,” Mom gushed. The criticisms from earlier that day had been forgotten. “My little girl, a star!”

My chest burned and my eyes stung, and I turned away.

Later that night, in bed, you whispered into the darkness, “Quinn, do you think I'm fat?” We each had our own bedroom, but we had forced our parents to get trundle beds too, so we could have sleepovers. We hated being apart. We spent hours at night laughing, talking, sharing stories. But I didn't want to talk that night.

“Quinn, do you think I'm fat?” You repeated in a small voice.

I kept my eyes shut and evened my breathing. I couldn't fall asleep, though, especially not after hearing you start to cry.

I should have said something. Told you not to cry. Told you that no, you weren't fat, Mom was just crazy because her mother had always been on her about her weight. Told you that you didn't have to do ballet if you didn't want to. Told you that you were amazing and talented and special. But jealousy spread through me like poison, forcing me into silence.

Mom had told you to watch your weight, but she was still proud of you. She still cared.

Brown was the color of our hair, until the summer we turned twelve. You begged and begged Mom to have it dyed blond, to go with your new image. You were skinny now. You had never been overweight before, but now Mom *definitely* couldn't get away with telling you to lose a few pounds, and I knew you were proud of that. But that wasn't the only change; the days of ballet and pink roses were long gone, giving way to cheer competitions. (“Dance is kind of like cheer,”

you'd told Mom.) You did cheer, so I did too. But I didn't love it like you did. On the mat, doing stunts, I felt nauseous and on edge, anxiety rather than adrenaline. But this was what gave us a common interest, so I kept it up, afraid that we'd slip away from each other in the confusing world of middle school.

"Quinn, do you want to have yours dyed too?" Mom had asked me. I thought about it for a long moment. For years and years, all I'd ever wanted was to be like you. Be as outgoing as you, as bubbly, as charismatic. We looked the same, but you were the one who got noticed. You were the one who was popular. I was just along for the ride. I'd always believed that we were one and the same. Identical. But no two snowflakes are alike, and if I didn't make the distinction now, I'd walk in your shadow forever.

"No," I'd answered her. "Blond isn't really my color."

When you walked out of the salon that day looking like a completely different person, I knew something had changed. A line had been drawn, and I couldn't keep pretending that the chasm between us wasn't there. I couldn't keep trying to call to you across it when you wouldn't answer.

Gold and silver were the colors of the necklaces our parents got us as presents for our eighth-grade graduation, from the small private school we'd attended all our lives and would continue to for high school. Oak Valley Prep, "forever Owls". Yours was gold and mine was silver. First place, second place. I tried not to think of it in that way, but I couldn't help it. It had almost become a reflex.

At the graduation ceremony, awards were handed out. I was on the Headmaster's Honor Roll, and won the Best Writer Award. My English teacher had enrolled me in a couple of writing

contests that year, saying I had “promise.” So far, I’d placed in a few. I mentioned them at the dinner table a few times, but it seemed that nobody remembered. So I found peace in words, in stories. I felt more at home in fiction than in my own home sometimes. I never told you that. I’m telling you now.

You won MVP of the Lacrosse Team. Lacrosse had taken the place of cheer over the past two years. Mom hated that you played sports; she called it “unladylike”. Sometimes I think that’s why you first did it. It was your big metaphorical middle finger to Mom, since you were her golden girl and couldn’t literally give her one. She could never say no to you, and within months of joining our school’s lacrosse team, you became the captain. Mom didn’t end up hating it as much as she initially had, because it was another thing that she could use to live vicariously through you. More games, meets, competitions where she could cheer you on from the sidelines, say “That’s my little girl!”. So lacrosse didn’t end up being so much as a middle finger as it was a high five, a pat on the back, a *congratulations*. Or maybe it was a pinky promise. *I promise I’ll never disappoint you. I promise I’ll make you proud.* You also won the Owl Award; the award everyone coveted but only one boy and one girl could earn. Oak Valley Owls were decent students, but more importantly, they were popular with their peers, outgoing, well-liked, and involved within the community. Your grades were less than stellar, but you were easily the most popular girl in our grade. You were nice to everyone, even the out-there kids, kids not even the “nerdy” kids were nice to. To their faces, at least. You read to sick kids at a children’s hospital and dog-sat for our neighbors’ old dog when the neighbors went down to Boca Raton over winter break. You were a great teammate on the field and off. Before the principal even called the name for the award, I knew it would be yours. And I clapped. Cheered. I should be so proud of my

sister. Even if you didn't exactly act like a sister to me lately, too busy with your new friends and boys and parties and all of these other things that I couldn't possibly compete with.

There was a graduation party that night at Devon Donovan's house. Devon Donovan was one of the more popular guys in our grade. So of course he only invited the more popular people. Which meant you. You, and not me.

"I thought we were all going out for dinner after the ceremony," Mom said when you told her about the party. I watched her face fall and, glancing at you, thought, *There. Now you know what it's like to disappoint her.*

"We can go tomorrow night," you suggested. "A belated celebration!"

The smile was back on Mom's face quicker than you could say "kiss-up".

"Perfect," she declared. "I'll book at the country club."

"Quinn," Dad started, looking over at me. "Don't you want to go with your sister to the party?"

"Wouldn't that just be lovely!" Mom was beaming. "Quinn can go with Noelle!"

"What if I already have plans?" I spoke. "With my own friends?" *Friend*, actually, but no one in the family was cruel enough to say that to my face. Elizabeth was a nice girl. We were mostly school friends. Hanging out over the weekend proved difficult, since there was a long list of things that she wasn't allowed to do, including drink soda, watch PG-13 movies, listen to songs with curse words in them (even if they were bleeped out), and do anything remotely social that wasn't related to school or church. So it was easier to just sit together at lunch and talk about interesting things, like homework.

"I didn't realize Elizabeth was throwing a rager," you aimed back with a smirk.

“Girls!” Mom interjected before I could retaliate. “What is going on with you two lately? You two are sisters. You need to act like it.” Mom was an only child growing up. It was only her and her parents, and they were much older, and overbearing as all hell. I knew Mom had felt lonely growing up, and I knew she wanted us to count on each other. But at the same time, she didn’t realize that she was part of the reason you and I weren’t so close anymore.

“Okay, fine,” you conceded, looking at me as if I were nothing but a speck of lint on your white graduation dress. “Come with me tonight.”

This was my first real party, and it reminded me vaguely of the first time we ever went to New York City. Do you remember that? We were ten years old, and the feeling I got walking through Times Square the night we arrived, was the same feeling I got walking into Devon Donovan’s house. So much light and sound and color, exploding and merging in a strange concoction.

I had almost had a panic attack that night in Times Square. Dad tried to pass it off as a joke. Mom told me to grow up. But not you. You protected me like the big sister you were at heart.

“It’s okay, Quinny,” you’d said to me. You’d held my hand until we made it through the crowds. You’d kept me safe.

No one held my hand walking into Devon’s house. No one looked out for me. You breezed ahead of me, over to a group of your friends, enveloped by a cloud of Victoria’s Secret PINK body spray. Gone without a trace.

An hour later, you were nowhere to be seen, I had talked to a grand total of two people (“Where’s the bathroom?” “Um, I don’t know.”), and I was holding a red cup in my hand, afraid to drink out of it, not knowing what could possibly be inside. I felt lost, alone in a house full of people. I needed to find you.

“Where’s Noelle?” I asked, sweeping my way through the groups of people. “Has anyone seen my sister?”

No one answered. I stumbled upstairs. Knocked on the first door I encountered.

“Who is that?” a guy’s voice asked from inside.

“Noelle? Are you in there?”

“Oh, crap,” another voice said, quietly enough that they thought I wouldn’t hear. But I did.

“Is that your sister?” The guy again. Then, louder, to me: “Uh, this room’s occupied. You want to get up to some mischief, go somewhere else!”

Hushed laughter. My stomach churned. Something inside me said, *Walk away*. But I didn’t. Couldn’t. My feet felt like they were nailed to the floor.

“She’s so damn *annoying*,” the other voice said now, clearly thinking that I’d left. “And she was literally forced to come here tonight.”

“By who? *You*?”

“Hell no. Our *mom* made me bring her. Because, you know, she’s such a loser that she wasn’t *actually* invited anywhere.”

The guy whistled lowly. “Harsh.”

“Yeah, well, she needs to hear it from *someone*.” A sigh punctuated the air. “Mom wants us to be so *close*. Like two sides of the same freaking coin. Because, like, that’s how it’s supposed to be. Identical twins and all, heaven forbid we do anything apart. Heaven forbid we’re our own people, right? But I just want to be free from it sometimes. From *her*. You know?”

“Yeah, sure, I get it. Now are we going to actually....” The voice faded out. Kissing sounds.

I swallowed. My heart sank to my feet like a stone tossed in a river. *Plop*. All I knew was that I needed to get out of that house, *now*.

Once I was outside, I called Dad's cell with shaking fingers.

"Hey, Dad? Yeah, yeah, it's me. Quinn. Caller ID is a thing now, you know. Anyways, can you come get me now? No, not Noelle too. She wants to stay a little longer. I...I just want to go home. No, no, I'm not crying. I'm fine. Just tired. Okay? I'll text you the address. Love you, Dad. Okay. Bye."

I hung up and closed my eyes to stop the onslaught of tears.

You came home much later. I heard you talking to Mom and Dad about the party, with a smile in your voice, excitement in your tone. I heard you getting ready for bed in the room next door, as I lay alone in the dark. You never knew that I'd heard you that night, at the party. You never knew that I'd heard what you said.

We hardly spoke for the rest of the summer. I wondered if you ever even noticed.

Red was the color of the blood in the toilet when I realized what you were doing to yourself. It was a normal morning, freshman year of high school, and you were hogging the bathroom, post-breakfast, as per usual.

"Noelle!" I pounded on the door. "Noelle, I need the bathroom, we're going to be late if you don't hurry!"

No answer.

"Noelle!" Still nothing. "Okay, fine, if you don't answer me, I'll just come in...."

I pushed open the door to find you bent over the toilet, heaving. As I stepped closer, I saw that the water was tinged with red.

“Noelle.” I froze. “What's going on?”

“It...it happens sometimes.” Your voice was hoarse, and you wiped your mouth with the back of your hand. “It's normal.”

“Noelle,” I said seriously. “Come on. I'm your sister. You can talk to me.” Suddenly, it all began to make sense. You had been “bulking up” because of lacrosse season. At least, that's how Mom referred to it. You weren't stick thin anymore, so what? You looked healthy and happy and like you were having fun. But just like they always seemed to, Mom's comments had begun to take a toll on you again.

For a second, I saw a flash of something cross your face. Vulnerability? Fear? Defeat? Who knew? You looked like the same eight-year-old girl whose mom had told her “not to let herself go”. Small. Weak.

The flicker of emotion disappeared as quickly as it had come, and your eyes narrowed. “Don't you dare tell anyone about this,” you snapped. “Not Mom, not Dad, not anyone, okay?”

“I can't just leave it,” I retorted. “And you can't just keep doing this to yourself. It isn't right.”

“I can stop it,” you said, with conviction I was sure was false. “It's just until homecoming, so I can fit into the dress Mom got me. Okay?”

“Why don't you get your own dress? One that fits you. One that *you* like. And stop buying into Mom's crap, okay? She just has some kind of, like, body complex. I don't know. But you've got to stop letting it affect you!” See, it was easy for me to see that, and say that. I wasn't Mommy's little angel. Mom had never shown me the kind of love she showed you, so it was easy for me to realize her flaws that stood out like cracks on a sidewalk. I thought of the old superstitious

saying. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.* Step on a crack, break the idea that your mother is perfect and that everything she says is gospel.

“It's not that easy,” you protested. “You can't tell anyone, Quinn. *Anyone*, okay? Swear.”

It felt like we were eight years old all over again, and I'd let you cry over your weight while saying nothing. But I'd said something now. I'd tried. All I could do now was surrender and let you take care of it.

“Fine,” I said. “Swear. But you're stopping this when you say you are.”

“Yes,” you told me. “I am.”

Gray was the color of the sky on the day your car swerved off the road and hit a tree the following year. Was it an accident? I don't know. I'm afraid to think about that. So I think about the way you looked that day, bags under your eyes, baggy sweater shrouding your emaciated frame. You were almost like a tree branch. One gust of wind and you'd just blow away.

It was the weather, Mom said. It's not safe to be driving in such a storm. Noelle would never do something like that. Yet two words, unspoken, hovered in the air. *Would she?*

Would she?

Well? Would you?

White is the color of the blanket on the hospital bed you're lying in. All of these wires and machines are surrounding you. The doctors say you'll come out of this soon. You've had the surgeries and everything. Now all that's left is up to you. The waking up. The healing.

Mom comes here every day. She sits by your bed and cries. Dad is always here, too. Your friends. Your boyfriend. Me.

I'm sitting here talking to you, because the doctors say that you can hear voices. You can recognize them. Maybe one day you'll talk back. Maybe you'll say something soon, wouldn't that be great?

So I tell you stories. I tell you stories of us, of our childhood and our teens and everything in between. Of the experiences that made us. The ones that broke us, too. But I think we can still be fixed. I think there's still hope for us, just like there's still hope for you.

Our story began in a hospital. It was snowing outside, kind of like it is now. Snowflakes are drifting through the air, and I'm watching them fall and thinking of you and me. No two snowflakes are exactly the same, but they're both special in their own right. Just like us. If only we had realized that sooner, you know?

I watch a snowflake drifting through the air, about to touch the ground, but it doesn't fall and crumble into nothingness. The wind carries it, making sure it finds its way home.

Wake up, Noelle. Come back. Be the you I've always known.

Find your way home.