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by

Alejandra Alarcon

A narrative written as part of the First To Go Community

Academic Resource Center

Loyola Marymount University

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“I have a secret to tell you. Do you promise not to tell anybody?” Those were some of the most exciting words five-year-old me had ever heard my mother say. I was honored knowing that my mother trusted me and only me, and I immediately promised to not to tell anybody our secret. “I’m going to have a baby. You’re going to be a big sister.” Instantly, one of the biggest smiles I have ever had spread across my face. I couldn’t hold in the excitement, so much so that I started jumping up and down in my car seat as best I could and rolled down the window to exclaim “YAY! YAY! YAY!” at the top of my lungs. I was going to have a little sister; I was going to have a best friend! I knew that my days of watching *Star Wars* reruns with my sixteen-year-old brother were over and that I would now have a companion who would add some plot to my dollhouse storylines. I imagined living in a perfect world with my little sister, one where we would eventually learn to finish each other’s sentences, be able to share our deepest thoughts, and understand each other’s feelings in a way nobody else ever could. I didn’t realize what it would take to attain a relationship like that.

The memory of sitting in the backseat of my mother’s old station wagon and hearing the good news is one of the oldest of my most vivid childhood memories. It seems as if this memory triggers the rest. I remember sitting on my designated red square on the big rainbow carpet in my kindergarten classroom. My teacher, Ms. Martin, was going over the lifecycle of a frog when, out of nowhere, I decided to raise my hand. She called on me and I exclaimed, “My mommy is going to have a baby!” I broke my promise but I didn’t care: I was excited! My classmates clapped for me, and Ms. Martin congratulated my mother when she came to pick me up from school that day. I remember all the trips my family took to the store to buy the little crib we could afford in our small apartment for when the baby arrived.

“Mamá, can we buy the Barney one? The baby likes Barney,” I said to my mother as she looked through the selection of cribs and I through the mobiles.

“How do you even know she likes Barney?” said Kelvin, my older brother.

“She’s my sister, football head. I know everything.” That was the affectionate nickname I had for my brother at the time. It didn’t have significance whatsoever; I picked it up from one of the cartoons I watched at the time. Still, these were the kind of back-and-forth conversations I would have with him while my mother looked around for the things the baby really needed. We eventually came home to set up a crib with a Winnie the Pooh comforter that would keep the baby warm at night, and I took it as my personal responsibility to hang a dancing Pooh, Piglet, Tigger, and Eeyore over the crib so that they would keep the baby company when I, too, would have to go to sleep at night.

I remember waking up one night to my brother’s voice pleading with me, asking me to get up and get dressed. My first instinct was to turn around and look at the other side of the bed. Where was my mother? What if I had had a nightmare? If I ever I woke up and felt scared, I would crawl into her arms and let her warm embrace protect me through the rest of the night, but I saw that this comfort was not available to me tonight. Did she have a long night at work? There were times when my mother would not come home until morning because she would take the graveyard shift at the convalescent home where she worked. This was probably not healthy for the baby, but my mother worked as hard as she could to provide for our small family of three.

Kelvin helped me get dressed, making sure I wore my favorite purple leather jacket that would protect me from the cold. He drove a really old, beat-up bucket at the time – it was the best my mother could afford with every other expense coming her way – and we rode it all the way to the Daniel Freeman Medical Hospital in Inglewood.

We walked into the visitor lobby to check-in. An attendant helped me put on my visitor badge on, making sure not to put it on my jacket since it probably wouldn't be able to come off. We took a seat in the uncomfortable wooden chairs that were lined with a sorry excuse for cushioning and waited there for what seemed like an eternity. I did not worry; I was too tired to see the nurses and doctors rushing back and forth or even notice my brother constantly getting up to ask the attendant questions. Kelvin woke me up and led me to the room where my mother was. She was not able to sit up to greet us; she couldn't turn her neck to look at us either. If she was even able to speak a few words, we would have not been able to hear them over her whimpers. It hurt me a lot to hear the whimpers from my mother because I had always understood my mother as the one who would calm my whimpers down. I took one good look at her and was struck but what I saw. There were several cast-like bandages wrapped around several places of her body. Why were they there? She was in pain, what had hurt my mamá? She was only supposed to be in the hospital to have her baby. *Where is the baby?* I wanted to know where the baby was! I couldn't make sense of what I was seeing and, with my mother down, there wasn't somebody there to calm me down.

A few moments later, a nurse led us out of the room and back to the lobby. She asked me to sit down in a wooden chair while she explained a few things to my brother. I was too tired to fall asleep at this point, so I anxiously waited to have at least my brother's comfort beside me again. He explained to me that my mother had been in a car accident that had caused permanent damage to the bones of her back. What does that even mean? If there was something I did understand, it was that the baby was doing fine – that thought provided me with the comfort and strength I needed to make it through a long night with my mother. I didn't feel the emptiness of the full-size bed we shared until I realized that her vacancy was definite for the entire night. Still,

I was very tired and fell asleep. Kelvin told me to get some rest because even though I wasn't going to school the next morning, there were plenty things that had to be done around the house before my mother came home. He told me she wouldn't be able to help us – not in the morning, not anytime soon – because my mother was going to be on bed rest for what I understood as a really, really long time.

Maria Jose Silva, my younger sister, was born at 2:22pm on August, 17, 1998. Even at the time of her birth, I understood that she was already going to live in a world far different than mine. We were no longer living in the three-bedroom, two-bathroom house on Sundale Avenue. My grandfather, the provider of the family, had just recently passed away, and my grandmother's income was not enough to maintain a family of five in the house. My grandmother moved closer to my uncle's family and lived in a little bachelor pad in Downtown, Los Angeles. As for the rest of us, we moved to a very small one-bedroom apartment on the other side of Hawthorne. The walls were so pale, as if somebody has drained the life, the beauty, the wonder from them – or maybe that's how I wanted to see them; maybe that was simply how I felt, too. We couldn't afford to decorate the walls so we had to rely on things like the Winnie the Pooh mobile to add hints of colors here and there. My mother always encouraged me to use what whatever materials I could find to add some decorations of my own but I never found the time for that. My brother and I were forced to pick up additional responsibilities throughout the house. It wasn't my mother's fault; she tried to help us to the best of her abilities but those abilities were extremely limited as there was only so much she could do from her bedside. Although I was only six years old, my childhood halted at an abrupt stop.

One of the last things my grandfather bought me before he passed away was a Winnie the Pooh alarm clock to match my baby sister's furniture. I absolutely loved the alarm clock because

it woke me up with the same melody that my sister's mobile played. I valued it more for its utility once my little sister was born. At 6:00am each morning I would wake up to "*Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh. "Tubby little cubby all stuffed with fluff..."*" Regardless of how sweet the melody was, I only understood it as my cue to wake up and get out of bed. I would walk over to the bathtub and place two plastic baby seats inside before filling it up with water. I would go over to the crib and Kelvin would help me place Maria into my arms.

"Don't drop her, Alejandra, and make sure to hold her head up, too." Sometimes this would come from Kelvin; sometimes this would come from my mother who would watch me from the bedside. I sat my sister down on the yellow plastic seat – we only had a pink seat and a yellow seat and because pink was my favorite color, I figured she would be okay with the yellow – and bathed her as best I could. Sometimes my mother would lean against the hallway wall and practically drag herself to the bathroom to help me out, but it was mostly my responsibility to bathe and dress my little sister.

Kelvin was getting ready to enter his senior year at Verbum Dei High School when Maria was born. It was a time for him to focus on college admission and financial aid applications but, instead, he decided to take on a nightly part-time job to help support the family. I spent a lot of time alone with my mother and sister, and I had to make sure they were both well taken care of since neither of them was capable of doing it for themselves. This meant that I was in charge of breakfast, lunch, and dinner. For Maria, it was one spoonful of formula for every four ounces of water I put in her bottle, and I prepared several of these bottles throughout the day.

As she got older, Kelvin would buy the little Gerber jars of baby food and we would take turn feeding her. My mother requested that we stop buying the fruit-flavored jars because – couldn't keep this a secret – Kelvin and I found them to be more delicious than any yogurt or

applesauce we have ever had. The rest of us weren't so lucky with our meals. If I was ever hungry in the afternoon after coming from school, I would climb on our kitchen counter and reach into the cabinets for a box of Kraft Macaroni & Cheese and a tin of Kool Aid. Regardless of how many times I practiced cooking the macaroni, I somehow managed either to undercook the pasta, overcook the pasta, or add too much cheese. My mother suggested that Kelvin buy more frozen foods so that at least we would have some variety to choose from but I didn't entirely know how to work the oven and those became our special reserves for dinner – if Kelvin was home from work, that is. I was introduced to Nissin Cup Noodles and learned to heavily rely on those for quite some time.

It was at dinnertime that I missed my mother the most. I yearned for a home-cooked meal from time to time but knew that it was pointless to ask for one since there was absolutely no way my mother could get out of bed and support herself upright for long periods of time. I would eat at our small built-for-two dining room table alone.

Once things settled down, I got the chance to work on my homework. I hardly had much and I was always able to figure it out by myself. When I was done, I would go outside and open our mailbox to see what was in store for my mother. At some point she had taught me how to write a check and send a letter so it also became my job to make sure the bills were getting paid. Those were my easier chores. Seeing that I was not left with much to do, I started cleaning the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, and my room. But regardless of how tedious I found these chores to be, nothing could compare to having to feed my sister her mushed up baby food, pat her back when she needed to be burped, change her diaper, and hold her in my arms when she began to cry – and, boy, did that baby cry! Having a little sister was nothing like I had expected. I wanted to be the big sister that would build a relationship with her sibling by playing

with her, getting to spend time with her in other ways. The closest I got to this were on the rare evenings when I would carry my little sister to my mother's bed and climb on board with both of them. It was as ideal as it would possibly get.

This is how the relationship between Kelvin and me began to change, and how the relationship between Maria and me first started. He took on a more fatherly role over us, and I took a more motherly role over Maria. This didn't seem too different for me since I always had a problem seeing my family relations as clearly as everyone else has.

Another one of my fondest memories is that of me working on a school project in fifth grade. I was never one for leaving a big project for the night before but this one left me no other choice. I was sitting by myself at the dining room table in front of a big, blank poster. I had a permanent marker as my weapon of attack against it but the poster was intimidating and, frankly, I was comfortable having it win this round. I simply did not want to draw out my family tree. Where do I start? Who do I include? How do I show divorce? How do I show remarriage? How do I show stepchildren? I know there are illegitimate children somewhere! How about the people we know nothing about? Who do I ask? Who would know? Where do I start?! These were only some of the millions of questions racing through my mind all in an instant. The questions kept coming at me like a series of arrows, and the arrows struck me down to the ground. The only reasonable thing I could think of doing was cry. My family was not like everybody else's; my family was broken beyond repair. I instantly realized that no matter how much hope I had from something conventional, it would simply never happen and that thought alone was enough to crush a ten-year-old's hope for a "perfect" world.