**My Brother, He’s Family**

Beating on my brother’s head, I yell and yell and yell. I watch my skin meet his and the terrible ripples that quake over his body with every pound. Around us bangs a drumbeat of terrified screams and confused sobs. *Bang, bang, bang.* He hides his squeals behind his hands, but I peel them away and reveal the mess. And exposed again, I hit and hit and hit. My hands are slick and sticky, sliding all over his cheeks, my blood joins his as his teeth nick my knuckles. Beat. Beat. Beat.

“You’re a freak! I hate you! I hate you!” My words spit in his face.

As my hand reaches up to strike him with another clobber, that mean little ball is caught in a hand much larger. In that mitt my fingers twist but I don’t scream. I’m ripped off my brother and sent spinning across the carpet of concrete. My skin tears as I skid. From the floor I watch my father approach my brother. He cleans and comforts the mess I’ve left. He picks out the strings of hair that stick to the swollen face and swipes them behind its head; he licks his thumbs and cleans the patches of dirt spotted across the wide, battered forehead. Brought to his feet, I watch my brother limp to the house. My father seals him in behind the backdoor, then turns to face me. I try to sink my body into the concrete. My legs have turned to mush. I cannot run.

I’m already aching when I’m picked up again. And landing, my body cries. I’m spun onto my back. Behind the blur of my eyes, I can see the sun and the light around the clouds, and then the black mountain of my father. My mouth is agape, tongue erect, but no sounds dare wander out in protest. Each hit, and my body grows limp. I do not know if it’s the physical or mental exhaustion that tears him from me, but he does step away, huffing like a hound.

Then it’s the fangs of his fingers which grip me and bring me to that red face to suffer eyes of terrible righteousness. A hand unlatches from my shoulder, and from it unfurls a dagger. He sticks that finger into my chest and pierces me with it as I cower under him.

“He’s your brother, don’t you forget that,” he snarls. “Freak?! You’re lucky he doesn’t know what that word means. But one day he will, and he’ll always remember that it was *you* that called him it.” He shakes me, I can feel his hands tightening. “And you know what? He’ll believe you.” In his vice I cannot hold it any longer and let out tiny squeaks of pain. He lets me go instantly. I collect my spilled body and drag it up from the floor. I see the change in his eyes. We have both come down from terrible heights, and after that energy has fled, you’re left with only the ruins of your rage.

He’s not looking at me anymore, perhaps he can’t stand the sight of me. He looks at the door where most likely still stands the obedient mound of my brother. “In there, that’s your family – whether you like it or not. And one day you’re all he’ll have. This world will beat him to a pulp. I’m asking you to protect him. Do right by him because no one else will.”

He holds out his hand and I grab it. I’m placed on my feet, then led inside with a hand on my back. I think about his words, and I think about my brother: I’m all he’s got; he’s family.

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The following day, we’re hand in hand. He’s lagging behind me, pointing at all the pretty birds in the sky. I have to yank on his arm to move him forward. He’s laughing, thinking we’re playing a game. When I look back to him, he smiles and wants me to smile back.

Down the hill for school, I quicken my pace, almost trotting with the fool falling over himself behind me. We’re very, very late. I wish he knew this. I look back and try to tell him, but he just doesn’t understand.

When we make it to the gates, the playground has been deserted. Over the long pathway stands a shelf of classrooms we must pass under. Nearing the windows, I look up and spot silhouettes shuffling past. I pray that no one looks out and sees us, or at least doesn’t linger. But they do spot us, and they do linger – as always. At the sight of us holding hands small crowds gather, some trying to hide it, some not. I can see in the sun stroked glass of the windows their smirks and laughter. My feet quicken under me, my hands tighten around his wrists and I throw us under that arch away from their stares. We hurtle into the foyer, my brother struggling to keep up behind me. I snake the corners of corridors and finally, at his little crèche where they keep him (and the rest), I let go and catch sight of the red ring around his wrist before looking away.

I tap his cheek, “alright, have fun,” I say and scarcely hear the little *goodbye* as I bolt to my own classroom.

I absorb their laughter and jokes, the teacher frowns down at my excuses which do not blame my brother. None of them believe me and I shelter at the back of the class.

With the sound of the lunch-time bell, I rush to find my brother waiting outside his class. I drag him away, but not before ripping the swollen, red thumb out from those puffy, lathered lips. He has to eat with me, that’s what dad says.

We queue, hand in hand, laughing at their jokes.

“Here they come.”

“Babysitting again, Charlie boy?”

“Got a little something on his mouth there, right there, right…”

They keep it up, and he laughs all the more because he thinks they’re his friends. Whilst they poke and prod him, I can see their eyes glancing over at me. Smirks tighten on their faces. Is this onslaught for me or him? Who are they punishing? I don’t retort. And with bruises that lace me like a vest, I do not want to fight.

It’s only when we sit, shoved into the furthest corner of the cafeteria, that I feel I can breathe again. Opposite me is pure joy, shoving piles of food into his great, big mouth. He gets my extra slice of bread and most of my mash. When he’s licked out his, he gets my yogurt as well. He’s growing all the time. It’s like being in a zoo exhibit. And those that do not gawp pretend we don’t exist. I hide my face in my hands and let my brother play with the mashed potato I’ve left.

I see my friends, and with them is Sally. I think they can’t see us over here in the corner. I keep looking toward them despite not wanting them to spot me. But they do, and getting lunch themselves, they sidle up to us and find room on our table. We talk and joke. I’m wriggling in my seat, one eye always on my brother. Sally is speaking into my ear, but I can’t listen, I can’t focus.

“Some of us are going into town on the weekend… some food after… we could go… back to mine… want to come, Charlie?”

I nod at her suggestions and make up laughs where they probably suit.

“She’s awful, isn’t she… I hate her… boring… detention… doing after school? We could—”

My brother is lifting mashed potato high. I launch over the table and grab his hand, the mashed potato squeezing through our fingers as I force his hand down. He begins to cry. I’m shouting through my gritted teeth. He’s getting louder. And when he’s done, we find the table is empty. He traces a finger along the mashed potato on my hands and slides it in his mouth.

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From a window I watch boys collect on the green field stained in a lowering sun. I see them laugh and joke, push and shove. Their kits look immaculate, and when the football is thrown toward them, I watch them scurry around the field. Mike, who took my place, is passed the ball and stumbles the return; I wince but can’t seem to look away.

“What are you doing here?”

I’m woken by the cleaner who stands behind me.

“Nothing…” I mutter and flee the room, away from her questioning eyes.

In his hovel I find my brother. He suckles on his thumb; I snatch it from his mouth. I ask him questions about his day and listen to the replies. Placing his hand in mine I walk him out of the school and we head home. I wonder what I’m going to cook tonight, and what I’ll leave for my father when he returns long after we’ve gone to bed.

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Mid-lesson, and we’re interrupted by a messenger at the door.

“Charlie Simmons to the Nurse’s office please.”

I know, and so do they. I pack my things in a hurry and leave the class with my eyes to the floor.

In the office I find him. He’s blubbering, there’s a shadow on his forehead and when he sees me, he latches on in a suffocating hug. I hug him then push him away, wanting to see the blur I caught on his head before he hid his face in my chest.

On his big forehead reads ‘freak’. I feel my stomach scrunch up. The nurse points me to some of the little bruises he’s received. Some are old, some are new. She says he was found in the boy’s toilets hiding in a cubicle. The boy’s toilets are nowhere near his classroom, so we’re all confused. He isn’t talking, but part of me knows who did it. I stay in the office while the nurse treats him. She scrapes away the words on his forehead. When the black scribble is peeled off, that big pale patch is left a stinging red, and etched on it are white lines which spell out his branding. It’ll wear off, she tells me. But I can’t shake the sorry sight and turn to trap my eyes.

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It’s the end of the day and having avoided the eyes that ask and answer their own questions, and brushing past the boys I think did it, I pick my brother up outside his classroom and ask him everything else about his day. He’s talking so happily, totally forgetting about earlier. I think of all the times I’ve beaten him and the way he crawls up to you after, looking to make things right. I squeeze the thick skin of his hands and walk up the hill with him.

He's blabbering on about something when I see ahead a little congregation leaning and joking around a wall. I recognise their pointed, ugly faces. They laugh in the same way they do when we stand in the lunch queue. My brother’s gone silent, and I know for sure then it was them who branded him. I let go of his hand.

“Stay here,” I start off, but stop. “Go home. Take the dirt track. I’ll meet you later.”

He doesn’t speak, barely nodding, letting me stomp forward before quickly gripping my wrist and pulling me back.

“W-wait! I want… Ice-cream.”

“What? Fine”, I say and try to wiggle from his grip.

“F-from the shop, I want ice-cream from the shop!”

The shop is at the end of the little dirt road we use as a short cut.

“Then wait here, and I’ll get you some after.”

“No, no! I want it now,” he insists.

He isn’t letting go of me, and looking to the boys ahead I turn back to my brother and can see those wide eyes pleading for me to leave them be. I look hard into his face, trying to scrape away at his pleading look. I sigh and loosen, nodding and patting his shoulder.

“Alright,” I concede. “Let’s go get some ice-cream.”

Walking home, big cones in our hands, the double scoop drips down on his fingers. I’ve pulled back to watch him scamper ahead. He licks on his ice-cream and points and laughs at the birds and sometimes the cats if they come out to greet us. From back here I pretend I don’t know him. From back here I pretend I’m any other boy that just happens to be walking the same way home. I watch the fool dawdle and play and lick at his cone and laugh at the sky. I think I’d like to keep the distance, but he trips and almost loses his ice-cream. I hop back beside him and quickly hold his hand and keep him steady. Hand in hand we head home.

“Thanks for the ice-cream.”

“No problem.”

**End.**