

# My sister's bedroom door

Kyle Perry August 2012 (Tasmania)

---

My sister was angry, scary, quick to give her opinion and she would frown more than she would smile. I think she inherited her temper from Dad (he'd sit on the couch and yell at the footy umpires on Saturday nights). Her bedroom door would always be shut.

I can remember one day in the middle of some week long ago in my Primary School years. I sat on the couch, watching *Round the Twist* or some other old Australian kids' show. Mum was on the other side of the lounge room. I think she was ironing. I remember my sister walking into the room, glaring at me, then heading over to Mum. Her schoolbag was on her back.

My sister murmured something to Mum, and together - with a conspirator's glance towards me - they walked up the corridor. *Where were they going?* I remember thinking. It was such a strange expression on my sister's face as she looked over at me. My curiosity kindled, I slipped off the couch and stole after them, tiptoeing up the corridor. I stopped outside my sister's closed bedroom door and within I could hear my sister's voice. She was reading to my Mum.

And that was the moment when I first realised something was... wrong... with my sister. She was four years older than me and in High School, yet as I listened to her stuttering and stumbling over her words she could've been two or three years younger.

My eyes widened as I sat down against the wall, ear to the door. My sister couldn't read? As she struggled through each word, I heard the simple words and sentences of a children's book.

As she struggled on one word in particular, Mum gently said, "Piece', like a piece of pie. Remember, sometimes the C is an S sound. Do you remember which one of those letters is a C?"

It was at that moment I laughed. Just once -more in disbelief than amusement, before I put my hands over my mouth. I heard a rustle of cloth inside the room and the door flung open. I leapt to my feet.

My sister stood in the doorway, her eyes chips of flint in her face. In those eyes were both pain and outrage, and dark dark fury. I was afraid. I ran back into the lounge room.



Mere seconds passed and Mum was before me, angrier with me than she had ever been before. I cringed under her castigation and my own sense of guilt, until I finally broke down and ran to my room in tears. I passed my sister's room, with its ruddy-brown door firmly shut.

I have another memory. It was a few years later, in my last year of Primary School, where I was in the kitchen foraging for food in the pantry while Mum prepared us dinner. As Mum chased me out, I saw my sister had left some schoolwork on the dining room table.

There was a sheet of lined paper with some hasty scrawl peeking out. As I plucked it from the pile, I was stunned to see the words on the page were utterly illegible. As I glanced down the page there were some words I could discern, but none that made a coherent sentence. The only word I recognised was my sister's name, written a surgeon's precision in the upper corner.

While I had never heard my sister read after that first memory, I had always *suspected* she struggled with schoolwork. But this? This was beyond struggling. This was functional illiteracy.

"She can't write! And she's in Grade 10!" I walked over to Mum, holding the page up for her to see. "How can she do schoolwork when she can't even write?"

Mum stopped stirring the peas and snatched the paper from my hand. "What are you doing going through your sister's things?" She walked back to the dining table and slipped the page back amongst my sister's school work, before turning on me. "Some people just have trouble with writing. She'll grow out of it. Don't you *dare* say anything to her about it, ok?"

As she finished speaking, Mum glanced towards the corridor. She sighed. I had heard them too. They were my sister's footsteps in the corridor, softly heading towards her room and then closing the door behind her. I looked at Mum, who looked at me and shook her head. She returned to stirring her peas.

I feel my Mum did me a great disservice at this time. By convincing me my sister would grow out of this, I didn't realise how deep the problem was until many years later. Or maybe it was my fault, not my Mum's. I guess I chose to ignore it. When my sister dropped out of school after Grade 10 I convinced myself it was because she hated rules and restrictions. She liked to do her own thing, my sister.

Before she dropped out she'd wanted to be a policewoman. Everyone agreed that was a good job for her - I think they all just felt sorry for anyone who would get in her way. But one day she didn't want to be a policewoman anymore. Instead she liked the idea of



being a personal trainer. I thought she would be good at that too - she'd get anyone into shape, they'd be too scared to stop! But after she dropped out of schooling she went to work at some retail giant. She made good money, though. Working casual.

And it seemed to me that once she had left school my sister began to grow almost amiable. Over the course of a few years, she became less angry and more grown up and then some days I would walk by her room and the door would be open. Not all the way open, but it wasn't closed. Sometimes I could peek my head in and she would say "What do you want?", but she wouldn't say it as though she were angry.

Everything began to change one afternoon when I was in Grade 12 and she was 22 or 23 and still living at home. I walked into her room with one of my favourite childhood books and put it on her bed.

"What's that?" she asked. She was lying down, listening to the radio.

"It's my favourite book. I just finished reading it again, because they're making it into a movie. It's going to be released this year and I thought we could go see it together, so I wanted you read it."

"No thanks," she said.

It was an icy response, but I laughed it off.

"You'll like this book, I promise," I said. I left it there on her bed and walked out of the room.

Later on that night, I found the book beside my bed. I frowned at it, then picked it up and took it back in to her. This time the door was shut, but I pushed it open anyway.

She was lying on her bed listening to music again and reading a magazine.

"Put the magazine down and read this book," I said, dropping it onto the mattress beside her.

"Get out of my room," she said. She didn't even lift her eyes from the magazine.

"I want you to read it!" I said. I think I was whining. "Please won't you read it?"

"I don't want to read your stupid little kiddies book. Take it or I'll burn it."

My cheeks went red. "It's not a stupid book," I said. "You wouldn't know a good book if it smacked you in the face."



Her lips pouted like a baby's and she began to mimic me in a high-pitched voice, "*Please read my book, it's for grown-ups, I swear it is!*"

I grunted in outrage and rolled my eyes. I snatched the magazine from her hands. "Is it a good magazine, sister dear? Because we all know you're just looking at the pictures because you can't read the grown-up words," I said, holding the page open for her. "C - A - T spells 'Cat!'"

I saw it in her eyes, a sudden vulnerability I'd never seen before. Not the fiery retort I expected or harsh words she always had. Instead, tears began to form in her eyes. She broke down and cried.

Without a word I left the room and shut the door behind me. I ran to Mum, terrified and horrified and not knowing else to do. She asked me what was wrong and so I spoke my sister's name and pointed to her room. Mum left what she was doing and went to her. I ran to my room and sat down on the bed, hugging a pillow to my chest.

I heard their voices, muffled through the walls. I rose to my feet when I heard Mum walking to my room. I left the pillow on my bed and I faced the door squarely. Mum entered my room and closed the door behind her.

"Why did you say that to her?" she hissed.

"I didn't... I didn't mean to..."

"She's telling me that she's stupid and useless. Why would you say something like that to her?" There was black thunder on her face.

"You told me she'd grow out of it!" My voice was wavering. "You said it was just a phase!"

Mum's eyes flashed. "I *cannot* believe you would say that to her. I am so disappointed with you."

"You should've told me! How was I to know that she's 22 years old and she can't even read a book!" I cried.

"Keep your voice down," she hissed.

"There are people who can teach her, Mum. There are people who can help!"

"Enough. I will not hear any more of this."



“She can’t go her whole life never learning to read, Mum, surely you know that” I cried. “Why aren’t you doing anything about it?”

Mum’s face turned from black thunder to cyclone fury. “*That is enough, Kegan!* I am well aware of the difficulties your sister faces and your father and I have *tried* time and time again to teach her, so don’t -”

My own anger rose within me, and I raised my arms in fury, cutting her off. “Of *course* she doesn’t want her Mummy and Daddy teaching her how to read! She’s an adult now - there are *professionals* who can do it, Mum! Find her a tutor or something! Ring the number off that TV ad!”

“*No. I will not hear anymore. Enough!*”

I clenched my jaw shut and glared at her. The tears began to glisten in my eyes and I knew that my Mum couldn’t do what needed to be done. I pushed past her, knocking away the hand that tried to stop me, straight to my sister’s room. The door was shut, but I shoved it open.

“Get out of my room!” she croaked when she saw me. She was sitting on the bed, eyes red and puffy, sniffing miserably. “Get out! *Mum!*”

“Do you want to learn to read?” I demanded.

“*Mum!*”

Mum came running in behind me, screaming my name. “*Back to your room! Now!*”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me out of the room. I shrugged out of her grasp and stormed back to my room, slamming the door shut behind me and falling on my bed. I closed my eyes and pounded the mattress until the fury left me.

When the temper finally died inside me, I felt miserable and hungry, but I didn’t dare leave my room. I had a feeling when Dad got home, his anger would be monumental. I knew I had to have something prepared in my defense. I reached over to my mobile phone and dialled the TV-jingle-hotline. I talked with the consultant, wrote down the details of the adult literacy classes in our area. Then I waited.

When Dad walked into my room later that night, bringing me a plate of dinner and a face that promised a tough reprimand. I held the paper out to him and before he could speak I laid out my case.



By the end of my monologue he was nodding. He still looked angry, but he was nodding. He took the paper and walked out of the room. I ate my cold dinner in silence, feeling remarkably relaxed. I knew my Dad would have it under control. He was stronger than my Mum - he knew what needed to be done. As I sat there, I heard their muffled voices through the closed door.

In the following weeks, my sister began attending classes for adults learning to read. But it was only two nights a week and that was too slow for my sister, so Mum and Dad found a tutor who could teach her on the other three nights as well. My sister wasn't dumb - she had just been taught the wrong way. With the one-on-one help of a trained tutor, she began to learn swiftly.

Before long I walked past her bedroom to see her lying on the bed, reading books - easy reading books, but still books. Within a month those books were becoming short children's novels. Easy reading books, but not *too* easy. That same week she signed up for *Facebook* and posted a status. One afternoon later she sent me a text about opening the garage. They were little things, but huge for her.

Then finally came the day I walked into my own room to see her lying on my bed, reading *the* book - my favourite book, the book that had started it all.

She growled as I entered. "Get out, I'm reading."

"But it's *my* room!" I said. But I didn't really mind. She smiled a wicked smile as I left.

She loved the book, like I knew she would, and when the movie finally came to cinemas we were there opening night - early, so we'd have the best seats. We went to McDonald's afterwards and had chocolate sundaes while we talked about the parts of the book they'd missed in the movie.

Last week my sister finished reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. She told us just the other night that she is signing up for a diploma course to become a personal fitness trainer, with a qualification in massage. She was really excited when she was telling us about it. Mum had to leave the table because she was starting to cry. Dad was really proud too, but he doesn't show it like Mum does. He finished the meal and went to watch a footy game on TV.

My sister and I stayed at the table, talking. "You know what?" I said to her. "You should try writing your own story."

"A story?" she said, amused.



“Yeah, write a short story. It’s not so hard, and it’s fun.”

“And what would I write it about, dear brother? Fairies and hobgoblins? Forbidden romance?”

“How about learning to read?”

Her cheeks flushed. “Why would I want to write about that,” she said evenly.

“It could help people, or help yourself, or just be fun,” I said.

“That would not be fun,” she replied.

“But it could be helpful to people,” I countered. “And you’ll realise how amazing you are to have come so far so quick.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to write about that.”

“Well, you could always write it from someone else’s perspective,” I ventured. “That’d make it fun, and would help you practice your writing.”

“From someone else’s perspective? Like whose, yours?”

I shrugged. “Why not?”

She laughed. “From *your* perspective? And what would it say? ‘*I was the most annoying little brother in the world and my sister was beautiful and amazing...?*’”

“No way. It’d start with me saying how much of a tomboy you are. Here, wait a second,” I said, running to my room.

I returned to the table with a notebook and an expensive pen and opened to the first page. I clicked the pen and began writing.

“What are you writing?” she asked me.

“The opening line,” I said. I read it out loud as I wrote:

*“My sister was angry, scary, quick to give her opinion and she would frown more than she would smile.”*

She gasped. “Excuse me! I am *not* angry and scary!”



I handed her the pen. "I guess you better write the rest then."

She snatched the pen from my hand. "I guess I will, then," she said, sliding the notepad in front of her.

And in the background, Dad was shouting at the umpires.

---

*Winning entry in the short story writing competition "It's Never Too Late ... To Learn To Read", funded by the Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation Science, Research and Tertiary Education, through Adult Learners' Week 2012 National Grant Funding. The competition was a partnership between the National Year of Reading 2012, and Tasmanian Writers' Centre.*

