The Swingset War

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The Swingset War

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It is no surprise that Michelle punched out my first tooth that the fairy collected. I saw in horror her fist speeding towards my face. It was quick, and yet slow enough for me to flinch in anticipation of the pain. Blue sky flashed in my eyes as I fell backwards off the swing. This was a classic interruption of our constant bickering: bloody and tear-filled. That was my relationship with my sister Michelle."

Cover Page Footnote
"First Prize Winner" Appeared in the issue: April 1997.
First Prize Winner
The Swingset War

It is no surprise that Michelle punched out my first tooth that the fairy collected. I saw in horror her fist speeding towards my face. It was quick, and yet slow enough for me to flinch in anticipation of the pain. Blue sky flashed in my eyes as I fell backwards off the swing. This was a classic interruption of our constant bickering: bloody and tear-filled. That was my relationship with my sister Michelle.

Michelle was three years older, wiser, and stronger than I was and very influential in my ways of thinking and it so happened, in my loss of teeth. We were growing up in the middle of a four hundred acre farm with only our baby sister, a few cats, dogs, chickens, and a series of spooky old barns as our playmates. This forced us to be inventive and dangerous to our own health at times, but fortunately the only bones broken were my little toe and my teeth.

The battle had been short and unceremonious, and now I lay with my mouth full of blood and dirt in the midst of my loud wails. My front tooth, which had come free with the impact, was washed down with the mixture. The fear of swallowing my tooth brought about another series of melodramatic wails that brought my mother running out of the house and to my rescue from Michelle, who at this point was threatening my life if I told the truth.

Michelle’s punishment was one of the worst. She was sent to our room and I was babied for awhile by our mother. By mid-afternoon I had grown restless and rambunctious so we were allowed to go out and play again. Michelle was still a bit upset at her confinement, so of course, she unleashed her anger on me. For the next hour she took pleasure in telling me tales of the tooth fairy and her magical dimes she left for teeth. Dimes that bought candy at stores. Dimes you could trade for prizes from dispensers in the store foyer. Once the magical machine had given Michelle a long sticky rope with a hand on the end. I remember it clearly because she promptly stuck it in my mouth and it became so tangled that my mother had to cut the clump out. Imagine a machine that took money, which is worthless to a child who is isolated, and traded it into a toy! I was elated that every day was a war filled with fighting, punching, and many tears. Michelle treated me any way she wanted. Not that day though. That day I was determined to stand my ground or at least aggravate the Hell out of her. So there I was on my swing and I could see her anger as she marched over to me and demanded, “Get off my swing, baby.” I hated when she called me baby. “I said move.” She hissed at me through clenched teeth. She shivered at the tone of her voice, and squeeked out a “No.” That single word started the biggest war yet; the Swingset War.

I had planned for this moment, and was mentally reviewing my battle plan when...I went blank. I realized that Michelle was going to pummel me. My plan of attack was frightened out of me. What was I doing? She was much larger than me. Nausea swept over me and I felt dizzy. I hunched over in the swing and my shoes suddenly seemed very close to my face. The worst vocabulary words that an eight-year-old can know were spewing out of Michelle, bringing me back to the crisis at hand. With all my strength I looked up in time to see Michelle’s fist connect with my mouth. I flew backwards off the swing and landed in the dried dirt inhaling a mouthful. The battle had been short and unceremonious, and now I lay with a mixture of blood and dirt in my mouth that was promptly swallowed in the midst of my loud wails. My front tooth, which had come free with the impact, was washed down with the mixture. The fear of swallowing my tooth brought about another series of melodramatic wails that brought my mother running out of the house and to my rescue from Michelle, who at this point was threatening my life if I told the truth.

To Michelle’s amazement and my own, a shiny quarter was under my pillow the next morning. So much for Michelle’s dimes! This was great because it meant that if I swallowed my tooth, and the fairy had to extract it from my stomach, then it was worth more money! It then became a tradition for my sister and I to try to swallow our teeth. Did I mention that we exasperated our mother?
First Prize Winner

The Swingset War

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Michelle was three years older, wiser, and stronger than I was and very influential in my ways of thinking and it so happened, in my loss of teeth. We were growing up in the middle of a four hundred acre farm with only our baby sister, a few cats, dogs, chickens, and a series of spooky old barns as our playmates. This forced us to be inventive and dangerous to our own health at times, but fortunately the only bones broken were my little toe and my teeth. Of course I wasn’t worried because my teeth grew back, leaving me with the idea that I could regenerate limbs. Needless to say, our mother was constantly exasperated with us.

Nothing hurts a sister more than when her big sister rejects her. I followed Michelle everywhere and constantly tried to gain her approval. One would assume that my willingness for her companionship combined with our isolated dependency upon one another for entertainment would have made us very close. The truth is that every day was a war filled with fighting, punching, and many tears. Michelle rejected me as a sister and a friend.

I felt smug that day as I sat on Michelle’s swing and refused to let her boss me anymore. I was going to stand my ground and not allow her to bully me anymore. She needed to realize that I was here to stay. Michelle believed that because she was older that she was also right, and could do anything she wanted and treat me any way she wanted. Not that day though. That day I was determined to stand my ground or at least aggravate the Hell out of her. So there I was on her swing and I could see her anger as she marched over to me and demanded, “Get off my swing, baby.” I hated when she called me baby. “I said move.” She hissed at me through clenched teeth. I shivered at the tone of her voice, and squeaked out a “No.” That single word started the biggest war yet; the Swingset War.

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To Michelle’s amazement and my own, a shiny quarter was under my pillow the next morning. So much for Michelle’s dimes! This was great because it meant that if I swallowed my tooth, and the fairy had to extract it from my stomach, then it was worth more money! It then became a tradition for my sister and I to try to swallow our teeth. Did I mention that we exasperated our mother?
Childhood with Michelle consisted of many bruises and loss of teeth. She even knocked me unconscious twice. Adolescence wasn’t much better and neither was early adulthood. Not sharing love and happiness with Michelle or comforting each other’s pain is what I regret the most about our relationship. I wanted her to see my strength and weakness. We are connected from birth to death. Not just friends. Sisters, Alike. I needed her to lead the way for me, and sometimes I still do. For five years we have lived a thousand miles apart and we just had our first normal conversation this Christmas. “Normal” means that we didn’t argue and we actually enjoyed the visit. How ironic that being apart may be what actually may bring us closer together. My wish is that we someday share love and comfort. I have heard, and know it’s true, that “No one can love you more or hurt you more than a sister.” Maybe she and I can finally put an end to the Swingset War.

-- Suzanne M. Wood

Second Prize Winner

Indonesia

He was gone before I pulled my first trout from the lake my blue eyes dulled the proud sparkle from my uncle’s teeth mother’s brother’s joy is little next to son’s father’s recognition

I held the thermometer so close to the desk lamp the day of the father-son picnic that my male chaperone agreed my bed was my place for that day

there were phone calls I would that they were more than my digits over the span of a lifetime

he returned on an airplane for visits from the East a great deed proven by great expense to the name of which I am the last

each talked of our side of the canyon curious of life on the other side but the bridge was broken my penalty sealed

his too for I am now master of my mind what I say and think was born from mother and sister

Some days I become afraid do I not truly know what it is to be a man for how can a woman reduce herself to show me

He wants to fix that bridge believing his vast wealth can cover the cost reducing the experience of a lifetime to a sum

-- Johnny Lopez

Matthew J. McGowan

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