

It is a few months into freshman fall. My parents call to tell me that my sister Claire has replaced me with a dog. *After we dropped you off, she cried for two straight weeks, they say. She said she wanted a dog, and, well, what were we going to do?*

*The dog's name is Sheldyn, they say. They tell me he is a runt. But he is obedient, quiet, and easy to care for – perfect for Claire, they say.*

A week later, I discover via a single Facebook photo that my parents did not tell me how ugly Sheldyn is. He is a poodle-bulldog mutt with crooked legs, severe underbite, and mottled, dirty beige fur. But, my sister's smiling face hovers just behind his, so I say nothing.

--pause--

It is winter of freshman year. My family picks me up at the airport, and I realize that my little sister has grown half a foot – maybe more. I realize time at home doesn't stop in my absence.

When we arrive home, I see that Sheldyn is even more pathetic in real life – ugly, cowardly, and stinky. It's disappointing to think that he has replaced me.

On the weekends, my sister goes to Chinese school. We've enrolled her to make room for the AP classes she'll need to take in high school to get into college. Claire, a seventh grader, is not interested in college apps. But I, fresh out of the process, dictate my expectations in every conversation. She tells me I'm behaving like a parent, but I don't take the hint to stop.

--pause--

Now, it is the winter of sophomore year. Sheldyn is less afraid, more loved, and more a part of our home. When we return to the house from a day at work or play, he yaps excitedly at our feet as though he has been waiting for years.

My parents tell me one evening that Claire has had a boyfriend. *Only for two weeks – thank goodness – they say. But I am terrified. My sister is growing up, I think. My little baby sister Claire, is growing up.*

--pause--

It is the summer between my sophomore and junior year. My sister says she is joining the high school band, and I tell her this is a terrible idea. *No leadership opportunities, I say. Let me do what I want, she says. Don't you want to*

*go to a good school?* I say. Only I don't – I keep silent. But the threat is there, always, ever since the big happy letter arrived in my inbox on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

--pause--

This past winter, Sheldyn is so comfortable at home that he now demands his own personal space. You cannot disturb him when he lays, sleeping, or he will bare his fangs in anger. But if you call him, ask for his consent, then he will happily come to you and play.

Claire is thriving in her freshman year of high school. *We've never seen her happier*, my parents say. Every day, she has stayed at school until 10 at night marching in the band. *We've never seen her so tired*, they say.

While I am at home on break, my parents call me to the table for a chat while my sister is at practice. *Claire is struggling in Chinese School*, they say. *She might get a... B*. Rather than shooting for the UCs and Ivies we expect her to want, she talks of state schools with fantastic marching bands.

The B arrives. We sit Claire down one evening after dinner. *What do you want from life?* my parents ask. *We want you to be happy*, they insist, *but we're worried*.

--pause--

My sister sits a ball in the corner of the couch and cries. *You don't know what it's like*, she says. *To have all this pressure. I always feel like such a failure*.

I realize that I have failed -- failed to understand what my sister wants, forcing upon her what I want instead.

I have come to respect Sheldyn's space more than I respect my sister's. Though she bares her fangs in frustration as often as he does when disturbed, I have failed to heed the warnings. And I have hurt her.

When I was first replaced by Sheldyn, I was bitter. Not because he was ugly, but because my sister could replace me with something else. There was something that wasn't me that had stopped her tears.

Now I realize, perhaps it is for the better. Sheldyn cares for Claire in a way more honest than mine. His affection isn't tainted by elitism or success – he loves her regardless of stupid things like high school grades or college admissions.

I hope that, someday, I can make up for the injustices I've done to Claire, the microaggressions I've sent her. And maybe I can replace myself with a brother she deserves.