Redefining the Universe

When I was a kid, my brother was my universe. We came into the world together, he and I, and we both instinctively knew it, long before our parents explained what twins are. We did everything together. We slept together, ate together, bathed together. We had our own worlds of make-believe that we shared with no one else. When we were encouraged by our parents to play with other children, we were reluctant and aloof. Our universe was impregnable; it couldn’t be helped that we would ignore the real universe.

When we were old enough to understand concepts like childbirth, our mother took me aside one day and explained to me that I came first. “You’re the older sister,” she said. “You have to be responsible and take care of Nicholas.” I frowned at the time, thinking that I didn’t want to feel any different from my brother. I could have easily lived the rest of my life thinking that we both came out at the exact same time. Now that I knew I was older, that I was different, I felt like I had to act different.

Nicholas always insisted on being exactly the same as me. We had to have the same food, the same toys, the same color clothes. He even insisted on keeping his golden brown hair the same as mine, silky strands falling below his shoulders. At first our mother suggested he keep it in a ponytail so that he wouldn’t be mistaken for a girl,
but soon it was time to go to grade school, and our mother insisted that he get a proper haircut. I still remember sitting in the barber’s chair, waiting for my trim, Nicholas wailing the whole time that it wasn’t fair.

“I-I wa-want t-to l-look just l-like N-nikkiiiiii!” He sobbed shamelessly, fat tears rolling from his emerald eyes. Our mother tried fruitlessly to calm him, but he could not be consoled.

_I’m the older sister, I thought. I have to be responsible._ I knew I had to make him stop crying somehow, so I did it the only way I knew how. I hopped down from the chair, much to the hairdresser’s dismay, and put my little brother in a headlock. He grunted, more in surprise than pain, until I started grinding my knuckles into his head.

“Ow, oww! Nikki, stop!!”

“Now, now, you two…” Our mother tried to soothe the situation, but we ignored her.

“Nicholas, you big crybaby!” I shouted, tightening my grip around his neck.

“B-but –,” my brother blubbered.

“No buts! You’re s’posed to be a boy, right?!”

The hairdresser fretted in the background, obviously out of her comfort zone. It’s a good thing the small shop was empty at the time, or my mother would have been mortified, too. For the moment, she just folded her arms across her chest in frustration, waiting to see how I would handle the situation. My brother sniveled helplessly, trying to push me away.

“You can’t even push me off, huh?” I continued berating him, hoping he would see past my callousness; I had never been this cruel to him before. Our small, six-year-old
frames struggled for dominance, but I was the stronger one. Once I’d grown tired of scolding him, I released Nicholas’ head and looked him in the eyes.

He was still crying, eyes red and puffy, cheeks wet with tears. He had his hair pulled over his shoulder and he was stroking the ends tenderly. He looked as if he’d rather die than lose that hair. I sighed in resignation.

“If you’re gonna be such a baby, I’ll have to do somethin’.” I climbed back into the hairdresser’s chair. “Cut my hair off.”

“Nikki…” My mother started to talk me out of it, but I stopped her.

“No, Mom. I don’t want Nicholas to be sad. So I will cut my hair off.”

My mother gave up, exasperated. “I just can’t come between you two. I suppose it’s fine if you cut your hair, Nikki.”

I remember the hairdresser taking my long hair and cutting it off at the base of my neck. It felt strange, as if my head was suddenly naked. She styled it androgynously, so that my brother wouldn’t look too girly. After we’d both gotten our hair cut, my brother looked happy, in a miserable sort of way.

“Thank you, Nikki…”

“You’re welcome, Nicholas.”

We held hands as we followed our mother out of the shop.

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When I was in the fourth grade, my brother was my world. We spent time with each other much more often than we spent time with other children. Spending time with classmates was something that had to be done, and was never chosen to do.
I excelled in sports and physical activities. My body had grown strong and active, and nothing pleased me more than to run and play all day. My brother preferred scholarly pursuits to playing outdoors, but he still played with me more than he read books. With Nicholas’ brains and my brawn, there wasn’t anything we couldn’t do. If Nicholas couldn’t talk our way into something, I would force our way into it. We were young and invincible.

In the fifth grade, we met Sora. Meeting her wasn’t so much a choice as a coincidence; you see, Sora also loved to read, so she and my brother forged a common bond through happenstance. Having Sora around wasn’t so bad at first, but I quickly grew tired of it. I couldn’t keep up with their book discussions and I didn’t understand their disdain of physical activity. One night, after we’d bathed and gotten into bed, I tried to tell Nicholas how I felt.

“Sora is boring. She makes you boring, too, Nick.”

“Huh?” Nicholas was taken aback by the sudden topic change. “What do you mean by that, Nikki?”

I battled with my thoughts silently. How could I tell him how much I disliked her? She was boring, a bookworm, and she took my brother’s attention on top of it. I was more apt to play alone those days than with anyone else. I lived in my world with Nicholas for too long; I had no idea how to make friends.

“You know, she’s always into that booky stuff. We used to play outside a lot more, remember?”
“Well, yeah… But that’s because I didn’t have anyone to talk to about stuff like this. You know I like to read.”

“I wish you’d never met her.”

The hateful statement hung in the thick air. Neither of us spoke for quite some time. I didn’t know how to make him understand that I wanted our time back. There’s a bunch of other bookworms out there Sora could be friends with, but only one Nicholas, and he’s my twin, not hers. Ever since he’d met Sora, I felt like our world was falling apart. I shifted in my sheets anxiously. We were too old to sleep in the same bed now, so our parents had gotten us a bunk bed. I laid on the top bunk, wondering what kind of expression was on his face.

“Are… Are you mad at me…?” I asked timidly. I didn’t sense that he was mad at me, but he wasn’t talking, so I didn’t know what else to think. There was a muffled snuffle in the darkness.

“Nicholas?”

“I… I didn’t know…” My brother’s voice was thick with the attempt to hide his tears. Why does he cry so much? I thought to myself incredulously.

“Nick, don’t cry, come on…” Now I felt like a jerk. It hadn’t been my intention to make my brother cry.

“Are you lonely, Nikki? I don’t want you to feel alone.”

“…yeah. I’m kind of lonely.” Hesitantly, I voiced my true feelings. I felt the sting of tears in my own eyes, but I fought them back. I’m the older sister. I have to be responsible. I
was rewarded with Nicholas’ silent sobbing. I sighed and crawled off the top bunk, 
cuddling into the covers on the bottom bunk next to my brother.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry, Nick.”

He wiped at his eyes and nodded. I stared at him in the dark, wondering for the 
first time how we became so different. Just four years ago, we were the same in 
everything. Little by little, our personalities were changing in ways that were tough to 
reconcile. I didn’t know what to do about it.

“I’ll sleep with you tonight, Nicholas, the way that we used to.” My brother sniffled and 
nodded in the dark.

“Okay, Nikki. I’d like that.”

We slept side by side for the first time in a while. It was a sound and comfortable rest.

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When I was in the eighth grade, my brother was simply my brother. The years 
and sense of responsibility had distanced me from him in some ways and brought me 
closer in others. I no longer felt compelled to be exactly the same; it was okay if 
Nicholas would rather sit indoors while I ran the track at school. It was okay if Sora 
wanted to spend an entire day poring over a difficult, old text with him. I didn’t mind 
it. I was part of the track team and I had a lot of running to do. I could still play video 
games with him at the end of the day and he still came to support me during practice 
and competitions. We could still talk about personal things and help each other without 
having to do everything together. He finally let me grow my hair long while he kept his short.
He was okay with me spending time with Sora alone, too. We didn’t have to be together constantly. I remember starting to like Sora a few years back; she wasn’t so bad. She helped me study for tests and improve my grades. She was even sort of pretty, with her long, silky, dark chocolate hair, and her eyes were like the clearest summer sky; they were beautiful eyes, even if they were covered by thick-framed black glasses all the time. The three of us were a team, and there wasn’t anything we couldn’t do. If Nicholas couldn’t talk his way into something, and Sora couldn’t cleverly manipulate the situation, I could still force my way into it. We were young and we were invincible.

In the ninth grade, I realized that I was starting to look at Sora differently. She seemed prettier, sounded smarter, and it was getting harder to stop thinking about her. I wanted to spend more time talking with her, too. Alone. I started wanting to tell her things that I didn’t even want to tell my brother. She became my best friend, and I couldn’t help feeling that Nicholas was being left out. *I’m the older sister*, I thought. *I have to be responsible.* I decided that I would try to explain my feelings to Nicholas. Surely he would understand.

We were too old to sleep in the same room and take baths together anymore, so after dinner and our baths, I knocked on Nicholas’ door. I had bathed second, so I still had a towel around my neck and my hair was damp. I wore a red tanktop and baggy grey sweats.

“Come in,” my brother called out after a moment. I opened the door and walked inside. He was sitting at his computer perusing some website, completely immersed in the digital world of the internet. I sat at the foot of his bed nearest the computer chair.
“Whatcha readin’?” I asked casually.

“Nothing much, some research for a school report.” He turned the chair around to face me. He was wearing a white T-shirt and blue sweats. “So what’s up? It’s been a while since you decided to drop in here.”

“Oh, I just wanted to talk a little.” I felt nervous, as if revealing my feelings about Sora would widen the gap between us in a different way, perhaps an irreconcilable way.

*When did it get this way?* I mused. *I used to be able to tell him anything without fear.* I sighed inwardly and prepared myself.

“Don’t you think Sora is pretty?”

“Sora? Well… Yeah, I guess so.” Nicholas frowned, confused. “I don’t really look at her that way, though.”

“Well, I’ve started to.” I absentmindedly tapped my feet on the floor; I was always full of nervous energy.

“Oh, yeah?” It was an invitation for me to explain myself, not really a taunt.

“Yeah. I don’t know why, though. She’s just…” I struggled to find the right words.

“She’s just really cool, I guess,” I finished weakly.

“Yeah, she is.” Nicholas grinned at me. I couldn’t tell if it was in a teasing way or not.

“Remember that time I said I wished you never met her?” I asked him.

“I remember.”

“Well, I don’t mean that anymore. I’m… I’m glad you met her, actually.” I stared at my tapping feet, wondering exactly what I was trying to tell him. “She helps me with school and listens to me complain. She’s really nice.”
“She is,” Nicholas agreed. “She’s pretty handy to have around.”

I exhaled sharply and stopped my restless feet. “Is it okay if I think of her that way?” I felt silly asking it, but I felt that I had to have Nicholas’ blessing. If he says no, what will I do? I played with the idea in my head while I waited for a response. I wondered if Nicholas even understood what I was asking him. Our psychic bond had weakened over the years and I’d felt a hollow resonance in my heart ever since I’d realized it. That hollow space was there even now, as I tried to reach out to my brother. After a long silence, he finally spoke.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” he replied. I met his emerald eyes with mine, trying desperately to find the hidden feelings behind those deep pools of green. Were there even hidden feelings at all? I just felt like the answer was too simple. He stared back at me with a bemused smile on his face, and then I gave up; I couldn’t find the hidden feelings. I knew they were there. I knew he felt differently, I could feel it in my gut, but we’d lost our ability to communicate silently long ago.

“Cool,” I said. We spent the rest of the night playing video games.

School the next day was tough. Nicholas and I only got a few hours of sleep before we had to get going to school, so the morning was dragging. I laid my head on my desk and groaned, feeling sleep tug at my eyelids; my morning run had me pretty wiped out, so the lure of repose was almost irresistible. Glancing around the room, I found my brother sleeping at his desk. I chuckled to myself quietly. Of course he fell asleep… I thought, fondly. But I should set the example, like always. There was still a little time before class started, so I figured I’d go pinch his ears as a lesson. Before I could get
up, I accidentally made contact with Sora’s clear, blue skies; somehow, my tired brain made the connection that she was looking at me, which instantly (and irritatingly) made me nervous. Before I could hide my embarrassed red face, she smiled at me. Ah… I thought, burying my face into my folded arms. For some reason, the energy spent avoiding eye contact sapped the rest of my reserves. *How can I tell her how I feel…?* Before I could figure it out, I drifted off to sleep.