I love you forever, I'll love you for always

Being the oldest sibling is not easy. My brother Charlie seems to think there is no better place to be. As my only baby brother, he must have his own burdens. Maybe he feels like he always has to prove himself, that he'll always be second place. As hard as I try, I will never truly be able to understand his role in our tale. But just the same, he will never truly understand mine.

I dedicate this story to you, Charlie, in the hope that one day you will understand the impact you have on my life. That from our many fights, stories, and moments of friendship grew a relationship I would not trade for anything in the world.

I was twelve years old, going into seventh grade. We had just moved from Chicago to Philadelphia, and it was the first day of school. Walking to school alone was something new for us. We had walked to school before, but there is a difference between walking through your quiet neighborhood with a parent and walking across big city streets with only your brother beside you.

Reaching the school grounds that morning, I was struck with the reality that I was totally and completely an outsider. I was alone in a school of hundreds, alone in a state where I was not born. I no longer knew where I was, I was no longer anywhere familiar, I wondered if I even knew who I was. Looking over at my brother, who was three years younger, it was hard to read his expression. But his darting eyes and the way he held my father's hand betrayed him. I could see similar thoughts flashing across his eyes. He looked up at me, and in that moment the three years of difference began to shrink in size. Both lost in our own worlds, we had turned to each other.

I realized then that no matter what happened that day, we would walk home together. In a school of hundreds, we would not be alone, because we had each other. We could be stronger together, if we tried.

For the first few weeks things ran smoothly; walking home together, sharing stories, keeping a routine. But then we started having problems. Charlie no longer met up with me after school, which meant I would have to look for him. Then he began hiding from me, began running outside of the school grounds. Inches from the streets, where I could no longer see him. My hunt for Charlie became a daily thing. It was a game, but he and his friends were the only ones playing.

The absolute worst feeling would be when I was looking around the playground, swarming with people, and then I wouldn't be able to find Charlie. Time seemed to warp, seconds becoming minutes and minutes becoming hours. Worrying myself to death. I was the one responsible for him! It was my role as an older sibling that my parents *trusted* me with! My mind would jump to conclusions. Questions turned to awful possibilities.

What if he got run over? What if his friends went even farther away? What if there was a fight? Is he hurt? Or kidnapped? Does he not understand he's only a fourth arader? No. please no. Don't say I'll never see him again. What will I do?

My muscles were tense, my breath caught in my throat, my heart beating sporadically, it was hard to breathe, my brows so creased they seemed to dig into my skull, hot with anger then cold with sorrow, tears creeping up behind my eyes and----

And then I would see him climb over the school bounds wall and run away. I was relieved, then furious. What was he thinking-- no, he wasn't thinking. Not at all.

GET BACK HERE! CHARLIE I AM NOT KIDDING I AM IN CHARGE OF YOU AND WE ARE GOING HOME RIGHT NOW!!!

I lost it. I grabbed him so hard by the arm my fingernails dug into his skin and I began literally dragging him to the exit to leave. To me, this had been building up for far too long, but he couldn't see those moments, those minutes that felt like hours when I felt the awful responsibility of being the older one. So when I grabbed him-- him, a fourth grader messing around in a bubble where he always felt safe with not a care in the world-- he didn't see me in my panic or my struggle. He only saw my anger.

Him, kicking me and trying to punch me and scraping me so hard I started bleeding. I was furious. I couldn't think. I ran toward home. Leaving my brother alone in a position far worse than if I had stayed.

Looking back on this now, I still struggle because that feeling comes back to me. Utter helplessness. Utter hopelessness. But it was not just about me. I had been so frustrated. I had lashed out, not thinking of the consequences of leaving him behind. The immediate problem had been about how I felt, but the more important thing was about us. How we stick together no matter what, just like that first school day, how he is there for me when I struggle, and how I am there for him. We can have these fights, and still do, but it is not these big moments that make the relationship, it is the small ones that urge us to grow.

Having a sibling doesn't mean you make no mistakes, that you always agree and never fight. It's deciding to always come back. It's learning from your mistakes. It's growing back and growing together. It takes *effort*, and although sometimes you feel like discarding the pieces and never coming back, your sibling is such a huge part of your life that to lose them would be infinitely worse. Coming back that day, I was angry and uncertain. But if I did it all over again I would make the same mistakes, and come back with open arms, ready to face the world together. As siblings, now and forever.

On our last walk to school, I wore a dress, some makeup, blue hair, and a sad smile on my face. My brother walked beside me, in a nice outfit. My parents followed behind, with the same attire. In my mind, I remember a quiet, nostalgic walk, walking the path we had walked hundreds of times before. I could almost see our younger selves ahead of us. Bickering. Laughing. Talking. I shook my head. Those kids felt so far away, and yet as close to my heart as the blood that pumped in and out.

Two years. Who knew it would end like this.

It had stormed the night before, I remember that. Branches littered the streets, but cars drove on as always. The only difference was the emptiness we felt inside. And the cloth that covered my nose and mouth. Reaching the empty schoolyard that day, I felt a sense of... loss. Today should have been a happy occasion, and a sad one. There should have been tears, goodbyes, laughter, and hope. It should have been filled with people. I should have delivered my speech to an audience of all my friends, family, teachers, classmates. We should have walked out of that

school met by applause as we left the world we knew and entered one we had so long longed for.

Instead, Emptiness

There was nobody there, nobody but us. The contrast was extreme. But it gave me hope that in light of all that had happened, we could still celebrate. I still gave my speech, I still saw my friends, I still said my goodbyes, even if it was online. There were still tears, laughter, moments of joy and wisdom. My school had still found a way to move us forward. But I know I never could have gotten there without my family. They had driven me to be my best, and to learn from my mistakes. My parents, of course, always pushing me, always loving me, always being there no matter what. And my brother too. In those smaller moments, when things seemed too hard, when I just needed a break, when I needed *him*, he was there.

It was fitting that at such a huge milestone, in those last few moments, I was with my family: My mom. My Dad.

And my baby brother, Charlie.

l love you forever, I'll love you for always,

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Artist's Statement:

After reading 'Trevor Noah, Born A Crime', I tried to decide how to write my own memoir. Trevor talks a lot in his story about his identity, and the different things that shaped him in his lifetime. When I first think of my identity, I think of myself, but also the people who most influence me. In his book, Trevor talks a lot about his mother and the impact she has on him. Like how through everything, even his mother being shot in the head, they could still come together, laugh, and move forward. So I began thinking of my family, and the most complicated relationship was with my brother. We had had so many ups and downs, but I wanted to express how much he means to me and the impact he still has on me. No matter what happens between us, we will choose to be by each other's sides.

When trying to figure out the structure of my story, I turned back to Trevor's memoir. In an interview with him that I watched, he talks about making his story almost a love letter to his mom, without it ever being in letter format. He wasn't talking to her specifically, but the story he told was very much to her. So I thought I would do the same thing. I didn't know if Charlie would understand what I was trying to say, but I did my best to write what I thought and show my side of the story. I had a struggle putting this together and making sure I gave the right perspective. I didn't want Charlie to be seen as one sided, because like any human, he is not. So it took more than just writing things out, I had to step out

and ask other opinions as well to make sure I portrayed our story the best way possible.