

Fall 2010

Kendra

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For half of my life, I carried my little sister. I carried Kendra to the pool, across parking lots, up the stairs, and into bed. I carried her backpack off the bus, her drink to the table, and the unsettling weight of her illness. Today, I'm only left to carry the memory of her in my heart.

January 29, 2010 my sister passed away. She was fifteen years old, and her lifelong struggle with adriamycin-induced cardiomyopathy came to an end. Specifically, my sister deteriorated from heart failure; the aggressive chemotherapy treatments she was given at eighteen months old had damaged the muscles in her heart. Kendra was able to live because of seven different medications that simulated and carried out the necessary functions of the heart.

When Kendra was alive, she was debilitated by her condition. She could not play outside; she could never run among her friends. She lived on the sidelines of life. This was never as clear to me as the night of Halloween last year. Pushing her wheelchair down the street, we had trick-or-treated at two houses. She looked up at me and sighed, asking to go home. She was tired. Silently, I let the tears roll as I wheeled her back to the house; this was not the healthy, candy-crazed sister I used to run around with on Halloween. This was the heart wrenching truth; and I despised it.

This was the greatest challenge in my life. I was swept up into a whirlwind of doctors, medicines, monitors, and hospitals. I always knew I was going to outlive my sister, but I was in no way prepared for that day to be when I was only seventeen years old. Trying to balance high school, a social life, a part-time job, and the painful issues I came home to was taking a toll on my morale. I had slipped into a phase of my life I like to relate to as "Escapism". In history, the era of Romanticism was classified by the belief that feelings and intuition ruled over reason; dreams replaced reality. And that is just how I justified my actions. I skipped school and drove. I endlessly drove across the countryside of New York State, admiring the depths of the rolling horizon. It preoccupied my mind, getting caught up in the simplicity and beauty of nature. I ran away from my feelings, and displaced them with mindless daydreams.

Since then, I have been trying to bring myself back to earth, back to school. Starting this new chapter in my life without her has been even harder than I imagined. My sister loved school more than anything, and this fall session seems so foreign and strange without her. As a freshman at Western Connecticut State University, I have no major, no sense of direction, and no sister. I see other students stumbling around, trying to figure things out just as I am. Somehow, I can't help feeling like I am even more lost.

At a glance, you see me carrying a backpack, a water bottle, and a notebook as I walk across campus. But if you take a closer look, you will find I am carrying a tattoo on my shoulder. A tattoo of a sparrow, wings spread in flight with the words "you are free" etched into my skin. You can see the chain around my neck cradling a heart; a heart containing my sister's ashes. On my wrist you will notice a baby pink bracelet reading, "forever in my heart." But if you cared to go even deeper within me, you could see my sister's spirit I am carrying. I know I will find the crossroad from pain to happiness. Until then, I'll keep trucking along with all these bittersweet things I've come to carry.

After reading Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, I understood the concept of carrying a physical burden due to an emotional burden. The men in Vietnam symbolically kept items that carried emotional weight. After the passing of my sister, I

began to carry many physical things because of the pain I was experiencing. I even wore her nightshirts and slept with her teddy bear. After the war, the men carried many psychological effects; pain, guilt, horror, grief. I, too, felt these effects after the death of my sister, and still continue to feel the confusion of these burdens today.

At one point in the book, Tim O'Brien talks about how the men never felt so alive after being shot at. I was able to relate to this feeling the most. Once my sister died, I felt so strangely alive, awakened. I laid in bed at night and listened to my breathing, knowing that my sister could no longer breathe as I did. I became aware of my littlest actions, separating my existence from my sister's. Life and death never seemed so black and white.

The Things They Carried was a very interesting perspective of war. After reading the book, I felt like a soldier. I empathized with those who had trudged through battle, watched a comrade die, and consequently lost all sense of sanity. The feelings were very similar to what I had just experienced with the loss of my sister. My family had fought long and hard all these years, but the enemy had taken our best soldier. Now we are left to carry her "things" and the beautiful memory of her soul.