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Upperclassman

“I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”

A Lifetime to Learn

I like to think I'm a pretty quick learner. I absorb new subjects easily, I recognize and understand patterns with ease, and I pick up new skills with minimal effort. My sister, on the other hand, has difficulties with these. Learning does not come as easily for her. She often struggles through assignments; what she accomplishes in an hour, I can often complete in half the time. But after reading Ashley Rhodes-Courter's memoir, *Three Little Words*, I discovered something that had taken my entire life to learn, something that my sister had tried to teach me for so many years prior.

Catalina has always been a little different. For starters, she never came home from the hospital like I did. In fact, the first time I saw her was in the airport — a rather unusual place to meet your new baby sister. My dad would often call us salt and pepper after my light and her dark hair, an obvious distinction photographers for our family pictures would never fail to mention. But the dissimilarities didn't stop there. Whereas I was the quiet, complacent child, my adopted sister was the rebellious, outspoken sibling who relished in finding a reason not to do what she was told.

The older we grew, the more divergent our lives became — and the more they began to mirror the life of Ashley. In her memoir, Ashley describes her childhood the physical and psychological struggles of living in foster homes. As a result, Ashley developed difficulties in trusting others and coping with anger from the injustices of a flawed system. When she finally was chosen for adoption, her words of “I guess so” at the court hearing would set the stage for the next chapter of her life.

Like those three words that came to have so much significance in Ashley's family, there were also a few recurring words that effected mine. “I don't care” was the favorite phrase Catalina soon adopted as a universal response to anything my parents had to say. Her blatant

display of apathy irritated me. How could someone just *not* care? Hypocritically, I didn't bother to find out.

Similar to the responses of Ashley and her younger, more ostentatious brother, Catalina and I would react to situations in contrasting ways. I would avoid punishment at any cost, happy to do my chores without a fuss just as Ashley did at the Moss's foster home. Catalina, on the other hand, would act out, a cry for attention that I failed to see. Although Ashley recognized the cause of this behavior in her brother, I often criticized my sister for being so problematic.

The more I read about Ashley's experiences, the more parallels I began to see in my life, but as a blind, outsider observer. Still today, my sister mirrors Ashley with her incessant nail biting. Never attempting to seek a reason behind this behavior, I dismissed Catalina's inability to break her habit as simply a lack of willpower. Only after getting an insider's perspective from Ashley's story did I begin to see just how wrong I was with this faulty assumption.

Life with an adopted sister wasn't always filled with fighting and turmoil. Having an adopted sister had its perks, too. We went to many of the adoption picnics that Ashley described, and we also celebrated my sister's adoption day each year. For Catalina, these were meant to foster friendships and solidarity and to share our love as a family. For myself, however, I saw an opportunity for fun, games and especially food. Even though I was reminded many times why we celebrated these occasions, my selfishness prevented me from fully recognizing the significance they had to Catalina.

The further into Ashley's story I came, the more I began to see things I took for granted in my life that didn't come so easily for my sister. Relationship dynamics between Ashley and her adoptive parents, Gay and Phil had an uncanny familiarity to those between Catalina and our parents. It was the rare occasion that an argument would develop between my mom and dad on account of something I did, but with Catalina, they were all too common. Like the dinner table disputes over how to handle Ashley's picky eating, my parents would disagree on how to

respond to Catalina's latest outburst of disrespect or backtalk. And like I had done before, my response was simply to escape to my room and ignore the situation.

Many times, just as Gay tried to foster a better relationship with Ashley, my mom would go out of her way to treat my sister with a special trip to the mall. However, they always seemed to end in an argument. Then when Catalina hit her teenage years, she started incorporating the vocabulary of her friends into her claims, further exacerbating the situation. Baffled by what seemed like such a counterproductive response, I'd shake my head and walk away, leaving behind any chance to see and understand a potential cause.

When I finally put down *Three Little Words* after finishing the last few pages, I was utterly deflated. That it was possible for me to live my entire life ignorant of the majority of my own sister's internal conflicts was beyond me. It was unfathomable that I had failed so miserably even attempting to show empathy for Catalina's circumstances. Yet the evidence was right there, spelled out, black and white. Ashley's life and mine were just two sides of the same coin, and I never saw the other side my sister was on. Reading Ashley's story helped me to learn about all the ways I failed to understand and identify with my sister, but it also did something more — it has enabled me to learn *from* my mistakes, too.