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## *The Video*

I'VE CALLED KANSAS CITY "HOME" all my life. While I don't remember the first three years, I'm told they were spent in the Green House, a ranch-style home our family owned in the eighties. We lived in the heart of the city before selling the house and moving to the suburban south.

Thanks to thriving blue-ribbon schools, a revitalized downtown, and well-kept parks, people have raved over our suburban town for as long as I can remember. For starters, a downtown diner served cinnamon rolls as appetizers. Early in elementary school, I learned that a Confederate robber named Cole Younger, who ran with the infamous Jesse James after the Civil War, was also from my hometown. At the time, he was our city's biggest claim to fame, even if he was an outlaw. In an odd way, he gave me hope. People who grew up in suburbs

in the middle of the USA had, well, a shot at making history books. Maybe that was why my mom agreed one fall afternoon to accompany me to the cemetery that sits in the middle of town and snap a photo of me behind Cole Younger's crumbling concrete grave. I cherished the photo for years. It was a reminder that extraordinary people could come from ordinary places. People like me.

"We moved out here for the schools," my dad consistently said when welcoming guests into our modest three-bedroom yellow house and explaining what had led us to the suburbs. It was part of a story I cherished no matter how many times he (or my mom) told it.

"We met at college in northeast Missouri during business school," one of my parents would often say. And then the details trailed of how they dated, left behind their small Missouri towns, got married, and then moved to Kansas City for jobs.

I loved hearing the origins of my family's story of how and why we landed in Kansas City—it almost always led to the cold December night I made my grand entrance.

"There was a blizzard, it was almost Christmas, and I was studying for my insurance test." Dad would grin as he told about the night I was born.

"We were so glad to have you because we struggled to get pregnant because of endometriosis," Mom often chimed in (cueing my gagging sound and puke face).

Dad would continue the story. "When I got home from the hospital that night, I walked in the front door and spilled the nuggets I'd ordered from the drive-through all over the floor. I was so tired, I just sat there and ate them."

Dad would laugh at himself, which triggered more of Mom's memories.

"Your eyes were wide open, and you looked around the hospital room once they got you swaddled. The nurses had never seen a baby so alert after being born!"

I'd smile proudly; it felt awesome to be unique from the start. Pleasing and "pleasantly surprising" adults became a reputation I never let down. According to notes Mom scribbled in my leather-bound photo album, I hit my developmental milestones on time and delighted all who met me. There were pictures of me on a blanket, pictures of me playing with my favorite toys, and pictures of me sleeping soundly in my wooden crib. Without a peep, I let friends, family, and neighbors all snuggle and hold me.

Mom always loved taking pictures, and they chronicled the details of our lives. From mundane moments of me playing with a laundry basket in our Green House to the adventures we had at the zoo and the Kansas City Plaza, the photos showed me getting bigger and bigger—something that was also happening to Mom's belly. In the midst of my announced accomplishments like "Danielle potty trained herself at thirteen months old!" another little human Ripley appeared.

"Danielle is a great big sister to her baby brother, Andy!" read the caption under the photo of a one-year-old me holding an eight-pound baby brother.

In memories that exist only through photos and stories, just weeks after I turned one, I had a constant companion. He looked a lot like me and my parents, with his jet-black hair and fair skin. At first Andy and I were two

peas in a pod. Matching outfits, pool playtime, and riding on our plastic horse, Clip Clop, we were practically always together. Andy was my close playmate and friend. But over time, something changed. I realized he was a gross and annoying *boy*. As we got older, he became a challenger and opponent. It didn't matter if it was across plastic Battleship boards or a deck of cards and a game of war, the two peas in a pod evolved and became more like cats and dogs. As we grew into our individual personalities, we couldn't have been more different.

Andy was boisterous and rowdy; I was quiet and shy. I followed the rules; he liked to test them. Andy loved Chiefs football and outside stuff like hunting and camping. I preferred staying inside, making art, and going to museums and libraries. Not only were our hobbies and personalities different, our health adventures were quite different too. I rarely got sick, with the exception of the chicken pox, and visited the hospital only one time. I had hit my head on the edge of our porcelain bathtub and needed stitches smack in my right eyebrow.

"I thought you were going to go into shock!" my mom later told me as she watched me shake and turn white in the ER. The thought of needles, bleeding, and a doctor sewing me up nearly had me undone. It was all very new for me, but not for them—because of Andy. The hospital was pretty much his scene.

As a baby, he was born with clubfoot, which required multiple major surgeries before he turned six. This had gotten us all used to things like wheelchair ramps, casts, stitches, scars, and bloody bandages. But outside of his foot surgeries, Andy was also accident prone.

“Mom, I sliced my finger on the neighbor’s mailbox as I rode by it on my bike,” he said as he ran into the house one summer afternoon, which led to a row of black stitches and hours in the emergency room.

“Hurry. Get in the car. Your brother smashed his finger moving a big rock at Boy Scout camp” came the reason for another hospital trip several summers later.

One time, an ER visit of his was actually my fault.

“Andy jumped out of the tree and can’t move his arm!” I said while rushing into my great-grandparents’ living room. We’d been visiting my mom’s grandparents and got permission to play outside after we couldn’t take any more sitting still in the dark living room, which smelled like pipe tobacco and old people. We found a perfect climbing tree in the front yard and quickly scaled its branches. After a while, I wanted to go inside for a Little Debbie Star Crunch, something they’d promised us if we were good. So I hopped out of the tree. I looked up into the branches, trying to get Andy to follow. He hesitated, but I insisted.

“Come on, jump! Are you *chicken*? Come on, chicken, jump!”

I wasn’t usually so mean, but I really wanted the treat. Never would he have been taunted had I known that once he jumped and hit ground, he’d break his arm, need a cast, and visit yet another set of doctors.

It was odd that Andy and I were so different, since we were practically always together. Being only one grade apart, we attended the same schools and the same Sunday school classes, and since we both had winter birthdays, we even shared some of our parties.

“Happy birthday, Dear Danielle . . . and Andy . . . happy birthday to you!”

Mom had rented a party table at the skating rink to help our birthdays feel special. We each got to invite a handful of friends, and we filled the mustard-colored benches with half boys and half girls. The spinning disco ball, plus pop music bouncing off the painted cinderblock walls, distracted me from the reality that it wasn't just *my* party. My friends didn't seem to mind as much as I did, and the further distraction of doing the limbo on roller skates—*whoa*—eventually helped me get over it.

Although I often would have loved a party of my own, or a life without my younger brother around all the time, I eventually began to accept him. Because we were close to the same age, we learned how to entertain ourselves and coexist. We'd spend hours playing Nintendo or tossing the football across the backyard with our neighbor, Dave. I eventually started to like my little bro, although I would have never said that out loud. When we sat side by side trying to rescue a pink princess in Mario Brothers or race around the bases at the baseball diamond, I'd recognize how much we needed each other and how fun he was. While I wanted always to be older and wiser, when we'd play together, I'd recognize how we were pretty much the same. Unfortunately, this all came crashing down when puberty entered our lives.



I assumed it was going to be an ordinary fall school night—one where I'd head outside shortly after getting

off the bus and grab a handful of chocolate chip cookies from our cookie jar for an after-school snack. I didn't think much about the changing seasons, but I did love the crisp air of fall. Because the weather hadn't yet turned cold, the neighborhood kids and I had big plans after school. Our yellow house was in a newly built subdivision and conveniently backed up to one of the prestigious city parks. Backyards of all our neighbors bordered the park, which incubated us as we played. A mini-paradise where we could all run freely. Besides evergreens and climbing trees, the park had a shelter house with picnic tables, a full-size basketball court, a dirt-filled baseball diamond, and our favorite, a wooden swing set surrounded by sand. Because the park was practically hidden in our neighborhood, few people knew about it, and we almost always had it to ourselves.

Each afternoon, all of us kids from the neighborhood would get off our bus and meet in the park after school to play before it got dark outside. One night before I ran out to meet my friends, Mom stopped me and said I needed to come home early. "Tonight you and I are going to a program at your old school. We got a letter about it. It's just for us girls."

She pointed to a single-page typed letter sitting on the kitchen counter inviting us to a girls-only evening. This was new. I wanted to play in the park, but I also liked the idea of a night for just Mom and me. I craved her attention and approval; time to be alone, as just us girls, sounded really fun.

"All the fourth-grade girls and their moms are invited."

*Strange*, I thought. But fourth grade was starting to

bring new things, and this must be one of them. Thanks to my teacher, I'd been encouraged to write more mini-books and plays, which she then let me share with our class. Mom and Dad also trusted me with more responsibility. They gave me an old stereo to set up in my room, and unbeknownst to them, I wasn't listening to Christian cassette tapes but Top 40 radio and pop songs. Although I still wanted to play outside with the neighborhood kids each afternoon, fourth grade was also bringing new feelings. Sometimes people called me a "tween." I assumed that was right—as long as it meant I wasn't a little kid anymore, yet not yet a full-blown teen.

"Sounds fun . . . I'll be back soon!" Making sure Mom knew I wanted to attend our program, I squeezed at least a little bit of playing time.

An hour or so later, Mom's loud voice echoed off the neighbors' houses and every tree trunk. "Daniellllllllleeeee! Annnnddddyyyyy!"

It was our signal to run home. We couldn't miss it (nor could anyone else within a half mile). She was the loudest mom on the block—she'd later call it her "teacher voice." Dinner was ready for us on the stove once we got inside and washed our hands, a big pot of spaghetti and meat sauce. I loaded up my plate; it was one of my favorite meals Mom made. We usually ate around the table, but since Mom and I had plans, we ate in shifts. After quickly clearing my plate, I loaded it into the dishwasher. (I was careful to do all the chores Mom asked so I could remain her Angel Face.)

Anticipation turned into excitement as girls-only night drew closer. In the car on the way to the event, I wondered what it could be.

Music? Clothes to try on? Nail polish or makeovers?

I hadn't attended anything like this before except Girl Scout functions, which I didn't love so much. I wasn't really into camping, hiking, or using the restroom in port-a-potties. I hoped *this* would be fun!

Turned out a school not too far from our house—in fact, the one I used to attend—was hosting the event. As we pulled into the parking lot, I started to reminisce. Mrs. High's kind voice and pretty handwriting in kindergarten. Losing my teeth in Mrs. G's first grade. Making ice cream in coffee cans we rolled down the playground. Now, in a "historic" school setting, I was ready to make even more memories! How cool.

After parking and getting inside, we saw signs telling us we needed to be in the library. Remembering the way, I felt pride as Mom followed me, and I immediately recognized the short tables pushed to the sides of the room once we walked in. Dozens of chairs were lined up for some type of mini-assembly. It certainly wasn't arranged for the spa night I had in my mind.

Looking around, I realized not much had changed. The wall posters reminding me to read books and stay off drugs were the same. The school's computer lab still sat in the corner, set apart with glass windows and a wooden door.

"This is a floppy disk. See how it flops around?"

I remembered our computer lab teacher's lesson on file storage well. He'd asked our class to huddle around him so we could hear the jiggling noise. I hadn't seen a holey floppy disk actually *flop* since that day. Though it hadn't been that long ago, a lot about computers had already changed. The floppy disks like the one my teacher

showed us had been replaced by small, rigid plastic disks (which, weirdly enough, were still called floppy disks). Adults often talked about something called the “internet” being on its way.

Noise in the library got louder, and I looked for other friends or even moms I knew, but nobody stood out. I recognized a few girls who played in my softball league, but none from my team. I started to get a funny feeling in my stomach.

*Why exactly are we here?*

“Welcome, and thank you for coming!”

A cheery woman with hot-rollered brown hair walked to the front of the room and stood in front of the TV cart. She was wearing a lot of makeup, a fancy dress, and tall high heels. Motioning for us to take a seat, she said the program would soon begin. Mom and I followed directions. As the room hushed, the lady returned and explained the purpose of our invitation: we were going to watch a movie about growing up. The funny feeling wasn’t so funny anymore. *This* was the exciting girls night? Boring.

“Can someone get the lights?”

The video began.

At the sound of a tape winding through the VCR, the TV screen lit up with a scene featuring teenage girls sitting on their bikes, talking. My eyes perked up. At ten years old, I liked riding bikes. Even more, I liked watching older teenage girls. I listened in.

“My mom said my chest is growing, and I need a bra . . .”

“My mom said I’m going through something called puberty.”

*Puberty?* This wasn't bike talk. Or was it? Shuffling uncomfortably in my chair, I looked away. My attention turned to reading titles on book spines, but the video's offscreen narrator got me to once again look up. "These are fallopian tubes. Each month an egg is released . . ."

On the screen, illustrations of girls' organs had lines and labels pointing to each part. Animations explained that as girls grow up, they release eggs each month and go through a process called "menstruation." I vaguely knew what this meant—period stuff. Mom had very briefly mentioned it, but this video was *way* more in depth. Wanting to barf, I looked around the room to see if any of the other girls looked as awkward as I felt, but it was so dark, I couldn't tell. The video played on.

More animations that showed little white eggs moving through things that looked like alien tentacles officially freaked me out. It was especially scary to learn what happened to "wash out" the unfertilized egg every month. Blood. I don't know if it was a graphic or the way the narrator said it, but in one split second, everything clicked. I realized why the school was hosting the video for Mom and me.

Puberty didn't just happen to the girls on TV; it was going to happen to me! Ohhhhhh no.

I bit my tongue to stay quiet. On the inside, I pan-

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just happen  
to the girls  
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it was going  
to happen  
to me!  
Ohhhhhh no.*

icked. *Why are the teenage girls on their bikes so happy? This is horrible!*

I needed a distraction, so I let my eyes wander again to the bookshelves. More memories of sitting with my kindergarten class came to mind. I remembered a favorite book I checked out often, one about a girl's routine for cleaning her room. The book was patterned, and everything had a place. In the story, nothing went wrong. Everything ended up happy. If only I could have transported into her story, or even back to kindergarten days. But that wasn't an option, and neither was going through puberty. Scared and disgusted, I slouched into my seat.

"Okay, moms and daughters . . ."

The video finally ended, which meant cheery high-heel lady was back. The lights flipped on, but none of us girls dared to look around the room or make eye contact. It was so awkward. Cheery lady's voice was an octave higher than it had been before the video played. She clearly liked talking about puberty, but I was done. Unceremoniously, the evening finally ended.

"Questions?" Mom's voice broke the near silence, the calming sound of our tires humming along the highway. Our drive home was quick, our conversation about the evening even quicker. I was glad Mom couldn't see the sour expression on my face, although my attitude likely told her how I felt.

"No, I'm good," I lied.

I did have questions, a lot of them. But I didn't know how or what to ask. Disappointed that the evening had gone nothing like what I'd expected, and scared about puberty, I didn't want to talk. Why didn't I get a say in

what my body did? Why did it have to be so gross? I felt a lot of things, but I didn't want to share.

Looking down, I fumbled with the zipper on a pink goodie bag in my hands. Cheery lady had insisted we take one on our way out. It was full of things I didn't consider good (or spa-like), things called tampons and pads. Holding them in my hands made everything in the video feel so final. So real. I wanted to toss it in the trash, but I didn't want to be rude.

By the time we got home, it was late and dark. Fortunately, my brother was already in his bedroom. I'd been nervous to see him after watching the video. Actually, I didn't want to be around any boys. Did they know what girls' bodies did? Did it freak them out as much as it did me? I couldn't shake the fear and shame that came each time I thought about my body and what the video said it would one day do.

Dad was sitting in his olive-green recliner in the living room watching the news when we walked in. Mom stopped to talk as I made a mad dash for the stairs. Before locking myself in my bedroom for the night, I tiptoed into Mom and Dad's bathroom. I'd been hiding the goodie bag under my shirt, and I needed a safe place to stash it.

*I hope I don't need this for a long time*, I thought as I searched for a perfect hiding place. Inside Mom and Dad's small bathroom, there was a linen closet with a stack of old, raggedy towels that rarely got used. I put the bag behind them hoping that if Dad and Andy did find it, they'd assume it was Mom's.

"Good night," I yelled down the stairs to my parents,

who were having a hushed conversation under the sound of the TV. I assumed Mom was filling in Dad about what we'd just experienced. Oh brother, it was going to be weird around him too.

"Good night," they replied in unison.

I closed my door, got into my pajamas, and climbed into bed. I didn't want to think about the video, but I couldn't help it.

*When I get older, I'm going to make eggs and then bleed every month.*

Great. The mere thought of blood terrified me. From what I'd seen and experienced so far in life, blood meant crime scenes and accidents—never good things.

Blood running down the side of the white bathtub was why I'd been rushed to the hospital for stitches. It was also what had put Andy in the ER multiple times. I'd seen a lot of blood on Andy's feet after his clubfoot surgeries. I would never forget peeking into his bedroom and seeing bloody bandages hanging from his feet.

I'd also been schooled at church that Jesus shed his blood because of our sins, the worst of the worst. Blood always seemed to bring death, destruction, or dying.

I didn't yet understand all the ins and outs of puberty, but I did gather that periods only happened to girls, which made growing up as a girl even more frustrating. I didn't know what the boys had to deal with, if anything, but surely it wasn't as bad as monthly *bleeding*! Andy was so lucky! And I was so bummed. We had finally reached the point where we tolerated each other. I even saw Andy as my equal. Although he still annoyed me and we were very different, we were also the same in many ways. Plus,

he was a great playmate. But puberty—it was going to threaten everything. It would suck all the fun out of life (or so I thought). Unfortunately, there was only one way to find out: go through it.