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Writing Sample: Short Story

Winded

When I was five years old, I named my inhaler Super Jack. I don't know why I decided that was its name. Probably because it was simpler calling it that than trying to explain or understand the chemicals inside of it. Mucolytics, tobramycin, saline. Too much for a little kid. It was this magic mix, this Superman sort of concoction that made me cough up all the bad stuff. Sometimes it felt like the air itself was my enemy, my kryptonite. Super Jack was my sidekick. And the way Mom used to stroke my hair and whisper to me that I was so, so brave, I think I got it in my head that I was some kind of hero. Since then, there's been Super Jack junior, Super Jack Mach 5— the list goes on and on.

I knew early on that I wasn't like other people. As soon as I stepped into that kindergarten, everyone in the Medway school system knew about me, then a few years later, about Laura. When the teachers read off "Mike McLellan" every year on the first day of school, the other kids always turned, eyes jolting open. Some kid on the playground once asked me if I'd stop using my inhaler on a dare. I told him it didn't work that way. I had the inhaler for a reason. I needed it. That's just the way it was, really. The pastor told me and my parents that it was God's will. My parents told Laura and me that God loved us anyway, even if he made us sick.

When Laura came along and she was big enough to use an inhaler too, we named it Super Jill. Mom thought it was cute that we matched them up. For a while, I liked to make faces at her when she sat at the kitchen table, every afternoon at four, taking deep breaths in and out through the plastic green mask they'd given her. My parents got mad when she would laugh in the middle of a breath and salty, green globs used to splutter out of her nose.

I guess I feel a little guilty about that now. After all, every breath counts.

I guess people assume that I won't have as much time, so what time I do have means a lot. But I think I remember things just the way any other kid would. I pinned A+'s to the refrigerator. I can remember finger painting with Laura on the floor and spilling red onto the beige carpet. I remember vacations and snow days. I remember crushes—I wouldn't say I've had a lot, but probably just as many as any guy once I got over my fear of freaking cooties. Let's face it; some made-up disease was the least of my freaking problems.

When I was fifteen, I went on my first date with Sarah Masterson. I thought I was this big shot. We went out for hamburgers at Goldman's while my Mom and Dad sat a few tables away. She grimaced at the way I yanked the pickles out from beneath the bun with my teeth. I laughed at the way she smeared ketchup on her nose, and then told her not to worry. I thought it was cute. I don't remember too much else. We were going to go swimming back at my house.

We didn't really get that far before she said she had to go, her mom wanted her home early.

I can still see the shock in her eyes from when I pulled off my shirt.

They were just scars. Just a few hundred pink and red fibers, stitching me together like some hot, younger version of Edward Norton back from some great war. Maybe I wasn't that much of a badass. But I was fine, one hundred percent fine. I wasn't some fragile, shattered pet that couldn't be touched. I wasn't going to fall apart in the water.

I just thought that maybe she'd be different. Maybe it's cruel, but I'd hoped she wouldn't start crying like everyone else when they saw the doctors' little cuts.

When she was alive, my sister Laura was my best friend, really. She was the biggest goof, sure, and her room was an explosion of pink and purple daisies and she was five years younger than me. But she was a tough little thing. I could pinch my pointer finger and my thumb around her thin wrist, but she could zip through the hallways in her wheelchair faster than any of the kids on the sixth floor of Children's. We practically owned real estate there. The nurses knew us both well. Laura's favorite was Joyce, a plump black woman who taught her how to make paper cranes. My sister had her favorite pack of red and gold paper and strung them up on the curtains around her hospital bed. She made ones for me too, in hues of green and black.

A few weeks after my first transplant, when I first got my scars, Laura caught me staring at the new, pink lines etched across my chest while I was in the bathroom. Scooting her Disney slippers across the tile, she looked up at me, her eyes wide above slender black and blue smears. She always looked so tired.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked.

"Nah," I said. "It's a bit weird, like there's these new little spaces in me and the air goes through me different. But nah."

We stood in silence for a moment, staring into the mirror.

"The lines look like an X-wing," she said. "You know? The pointy W-shaped ones."

"Huh?"

"Those fighter ships in *Star Wars*. You know. The one Luke Skywalker drives."

"Huh... I don't see it, Lore."

Laura grabbed the tube of toothpaste sitting beside the sink.

"Bend down a little bit," she commanded. I leaned forward, feeling the insides of my torso shift awkwardly. She popped the top of the tube and rubbed her thumb against a little blue

blob of it. Grinning, she pressed the toothpaste against my skin in three thin lines above the left and right vertical cuts. I stood back to admire her handiwork.

“Pew! Pew!” she said, pointing her laser gun hands at the bathroom mirror.

I stared at the ridiculous image, my chest done up in light blue Colgate to make little lasers from my X-wing scars. My new lungs shook with the happy, rapid in and out of air.

I tried to be normal. Or as normal as you could be with Cystic Fibrosis. As normal as you could be when you know that you could die in a month. Sure, I had to go to the hospital a couple times a year, and mom used to freak out every time I sneezed more than twice in a short span of time, but I dealt with it, I guess. When I was younger, I tried baseball. I wasn't the best runner, obviously, but I could throw pretty good. I tried out for the play freshman year, but the director didn't give me the lead. I think it's 'cause I'd have had to play dead. So I was peasant number three.

For a long while, I felt most normal whenever I was with Julia. I had other friends, sure, but if I wasn't playing Parcheesi over cocoa and IV packets of saline with Laura or just hanging around watching TV with mom and dad, I was with Julia.

We met in American Lit. Senior year. I remember thinking that she was way too smart for that section of the class. She should have been in honors. But, as she claimed, the teacher didn't “like her style.” So she was plopped amongst the rest of the not-so-English-minded people like me. She'd read most of the books on the syllabus before we even started the school year. She went to art galleries on the weekends and knew the names and birthdays of artists whose names I couldn't even pronounce. On Wednesday nights, like some ritual, she treaded the train tracks

from Medway to Millis, her dad's old Canon around her neck, and took pictures of dog walkers and wandering couples and blades of grass.

Not too far into the school year, on an early autumn day, I decided I'd join her.

We started off as friends. I say started off because, well, it became quite clear that we weren't just friends.

Julia didn't make me feel normal because she was so different. It wasn't like that. Julia made me feel normal because she didn't treat me any different. She didn't constantly ask if I was okay. I wasn't the sick kid who couldn't do certain stuff. For a few months, unless I was green in the face or strung up in the hospital, I was limitless.

When she pulled up in her mom's beat-up old Volkswagen, always narrowly missing our mailbox as she made the sharp turn into our driveway, I never knew where we were going. She never knew either. We'd never been very decisive. Burger joints were the perfect place for her to order anything but a burger. We would walk through a drive-through to order soft serve. I badgered her to break the rules and sneak into movie theatres. Blasting The Decemberists on her car's crackling stereo, we'd open up the windows and drive all the way down neverending Howard Street, zipping past the farmhouses that shrank and crumbled into the weeds.

I remember that one trip to the supermarket for fish, which led us into Boston, to Faneuil Hall for Pizza Regina. Julia and I sat by the harbor for hours, licking the grease off our fingers and talking about anything, everything.

We talked about the future.

"I'm naming my son John Singer Blahblahblah, after the painter, and my daughter Emma Rose Blahblahblah, for my aunt," she told me, leaning back on the cool green bench, her eyes

slowly gliding across the harbor. The dinner cruises were coming back in, their passengers' chatter growing clearer and clearer across the water.

I grinned. "You're gonna marry someone named Blahblahblah?"

"Psht. Jerk. No, I'm seventeen and who the hell knows who they'll end up with at seventeen? I'm quite happy being just Julia Nemo for now."

She turned to me and smiled, "What about you?"

I'd been asked the same thing before. It was always a punch to the gut. I turned my eyes to my sneakers scratching at the cobblestone.

"I can't have kids," I mumbled.

"Shouldn't stop you. You'll adopt." She gave my hand a squeeze. "What'll their names be?"

I turned. Her head was cocked a bit to the side, strings of blonde hair caught in her lips.

"James Patrick McLellan," I told her, giving away the two secret wishes I'd never really shared with anyone before. "And Laura Quinn McLellan."

Laura and I spent a good chunk of that December in the pulmonary unit. A nasty cold had been going around school and we'd been hit with it, even though we always made sure to stay away from the kids popping cough drops like candy and hovering around the boxes of tissues on the teachers' desks. Catching whatever that kid had meant more than just the sniffles to us. Honestly, I sometimes wonder if Laura was in the hospital twice as much as I was because she had CF worse or if she just couldn't stop hugging people all the time.

In the hallways, the ever-familiar *What Do You Know about Germs?* posters were covered in metallic garlands of red, green, and silver. In Laura's room, a small parcel of presents sat in dad's customary chair, waiting to be opened the next morning.

The nuse came into the room, pompom snowmen clipped to her ear lobes.

"What can I get you, honey?" she asked, standing beside Laura to peer down at the Scrabble game on the bed tray.

Laura smiled. "Can you make any words here?"

"You can't push the help button for Scrabble," I groaned. "Joyce, come on, please don't help her."

Joyce smirked as she leaned in to take a look. She pushed letters on the wooden slot side-to-side with her pinky finger, pinching and shifting and rearranging.

"Ah, there. Ya see that?" Joyce said. "You can get lots of different things, movin' them around."

"Are you gonna help me with mine?" I complained.

"You've got years on this girl. Gotta play fair," she replied. "But I *will* get you some juice. What'll it be, loves? Apple or grape?"

I took grape. Joyce shuffled off to the refrigerator, no doubt coming back with a round of Pulmozyne for Laura and apple juice to cover up the smoky, stale aftertaste. I stole a quick glance at the clock. 7:35.

"I gotta go soon," I told her, offering a smile. "Gonna call Julia in like ten minutes."

Her face fell slightly, "Oh. Um. Okay."

"Can we finish when I get back?"

"Oh...I dunno if I'll be up. I'm really, really sleepy."

Laura's eyes blinked rapidly, already combating the forces of slumber land.

"You can just...go," she said, "and I'll go to bed."

"You sure?"

She nodded. I turned back to my letters.

"I mean, you know you're gonna beat me even without Joyce—"

"Do you love Julia?"

I looked up from the row of wooden pieces to meet Laura's eyes, their creases firm and fixed between lines of soft purple.

"I think so," I said.

"What's it feel like?"

"What?"

"I dunno...being all like...lovey... Like... when you kiss do you...feel...you know?"

"Know what?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

Laura shook her head as Joyce walked in, holding the nebulizer in its case, cups of juice on a tray. She handed me my plastic cup of sugary purple and smiled.

"Doing okay, honey?" she asked, filling the nebulizer's body with that awful concoction of steroids before handing Laura the mask. "I'll be in for your treatment in a bit, alright?"

"Okay."

I flipped my letters upside-down to hide them and put the little tray on the bedside table. I turned to my sister. A cloud of mist was hovering about the machine beside her bed. Laura's gaze was distant as the drugs and oxygen pushed through the mask and raced down her throat. She always hated that thing.

"Do you want me to—"

She cut me off with a slight shake of her head and a weak wave of her needle-clad hand. I walked out.

“Robin said the Christmas dance was pretty cool,” Julia told me later, her sigh crackling through the phone. I couldn’t use my cell; there wasn’t ever any reception in the unit.

I pulled back the curtains in my room. I inhaled, much deeper than I had in days, my nose catching a strong whiff of Clorox from the receiver. Outside, Longwood Ave. was motionless. The city seemed gray, the air heavy with the promise of snow.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Mhm. They took lots of pictures. You can see them on Facebook.”

“Not going online for a bit, remember?”

“Oh... Right. Sorry...”

“No, no. It’s okay,” I offered a smile even though she obviously couldn’t see. “I just don’t want people to freak out. Or just badger me. Like all the time. It sucks.”

“Everyone asked me loads of questions before break.”

“Yeah? What’d they ask?”

“Is it just a cold? Flu? Surgery? Therapy?”

“What’d you tell them?”

“Freak accident involving cheesecake and a barrel of monkeys... No, I just told them it was a little cold and they were keeping you for some test or another.”

“Thanks...”

There was a rare moment of quiet, uninterrupted by coughs or wheezes or family.

“Sorry, Jules...about the dance,” I murmured, curling myself up onto the hospital bed.

“No... no, it’s okay,” she murmured. I could tell she was disappointed.

“You could have gone with someone else, you know. I would have been cool with it. I just have a cold.”

“It wouldn’t have been the same... not without you.”

I fingered the plastic tube dripping fluids into my other wrist.

“I’ll be at the next one,” I promised. “You can count on it.”

On Laura’s thirteenth birthday in February, Mom baked a towering vanilla cake with strawberry frosting, topped with sprinkled ice cream cones of different shapes and sizes to make it look like the Disney World castle. Real candles were out of the question; even the nurses we’d come to know as aunts wouldn’t allow that.

But Joyce dimmed the lights and we all huddled together around my sister in her pink-covered hospital bed: my parents, the nurses, Julia, and I. I raised my arm above their heads to point the beam from a flashlight keychain onto the cake. Little shadows shimmered among the frosted turrets as the light lit up Laura’s face. She’d been there for a week, but it looked like she’d been in since Christmas. The skin beneath her eyes was black and purple, and her dark brown hair hung thin and mousy against her hollowed cheeks. But she smiled so wide when they started to sing.

“Happy Birthday, dear Laura, Happy Birthday to you!”

When it was time to blow out the fake candlelight during the final line of the song, Laura could barely raise a big enough breath to blow it out. Her lungs were too clogged, too tight. She choked. I’d known the feeling time and time again. Julia noticed, hesitated. I gave her a small nod. She stared, seemingly unsure of how to handle frail little Laura, who wanted so badly to

make her birthday wish. Julia's gaze quivered, shaking from staring at the cake to looking to me to help her.

"I can't," she mouthed. "They're hers."

For God's sake. Why couldn't she have blown them out, if not for Laura, then for me?

Another nurse, Madeline, puffed up her cheeks like some wild-eyed blowfish and aimed a steady stream of air at the cake, her tongue making obscene noises that made Laura giggle.

I clicked off the flashlight as everyone started to clap. Mom covered Laura's face with wet, embarrassing kisses and Dad tousled her hair, grinning as all hell and booming, "My little girl's a *teenager!*" Julia was scared to touch her. I could tell. There was so much she still didn't understand. Laura pushed all her strength into tightening her arms around Julia's waist as to encourage her, as though to tell her to not worry about her body cleaving in two from the force of a hug.

As Laura lifted her weak arms towards me, I knelt on the edge of the bed, letting her rest them on my shoulders. I felt her cold wrists around my neck and I pulled her closer.

She was fading and I knew it even then.

"What the hell? This is the third time, Mike."

"Jules, I know, but I can't just leave."

"We haven't done anything together in almost two weeks."

"I see you every day in English."

"Like that counts as a real romantic date or something?" she growled, almost too low to pick up on the phone. "So am I dating all of Ms. Tovel's Lit. class, then?"

“I didn’t say that!” I snapped. “What’d you do if I was in the bed hooked up to the machines, huh? What would you do, Jules?”

The chirp of a ventilator in room three-oh-seven filled the silence on my side of the line.

“Don’t say that,” she whispered.

“I’m not saying it’ll happen,” I said, hand to my face, my words spilling out in a sigh. I tried to lower my voice. “I’m feeling fine.”

“They told us Laura was fine last week. Now look.”

“Laura is different. She’s smaller, weaker.”

“But you have the same thing, Mike,” Julia choked. I could picture her throat clenching, her eyes widening as her voice squeaked through the phone.

“We’re here, Julia,” I mumbled. “We’re here as long as we can be. Laura’s on the emergency list for a transplant. She’s gonna be okay.”

“I know but what about you?”

“I don’t care right now about me.”

“I do!”

“So then come to the hospital,” I said. It wasn’t a request. “You’ve been here, what, once?”

“Everything there is... it’s... I can’t,” she whispered. “I can’t go. I can’t break down crying just ‘cause I entered the place. Just... please, call me when you’re back? I miss you. So much. And I love you even more.”

“I love you too,” I muttered.

I knew it even then.

It happened two weeks later. The funeral was beautiful and brutal all at once. I don't remember much at all. I'd written something, and a cousin added it to her eulogy. Something about watching Red Sox games, teaching her to ride a bike, folding paper cranes. It had heart to it, sure. But my mind was somewhere else; my brain could barely process Julia's tears, the way she clamped my hand so hard it hurt.

At the Millis Cross Inn, they served little teacakes, sandwiches, and pot after pot of strong French roast. I sat in the corner. People came up to me, watery eyes meeting mine, to say how sorry they were about Laura. I nodded.

"Thank you for coming," I said. I said it over and over. I couldn't say anything else.

Dolosa was a virus. Dolosa slept inside my sister, woke up, and killed her. God freaking damnit.

Julia bit her lip and said very, very little, except to ask me to pass the honey for her lemon tea. She kept her head hung low, her hands in her lap. But by the time they started to clear away the last of the saucers and mugs, I could tell she wanted to talk.

I held the back door open as she wrapped a shawl tight around her ribs. She wandered through the chipped lattice archway, wary of how the wet stones shifted beneath her heels. As we wound about the garden, I waited for her to say something, anything. I had nothing to tell. I had nothing to say. All I had had was spent the few days before, poured out into the confines of my pillows, clenched into the lines in Julia's hands, absorbed by her vacant, searching eyes.

"We're by the tracks," she whispered, her cheeks trying to turn up a smile beneath lines of watery makeup. "See? They're right down through the woods."

"Huh."

“We could go...we haven’t walked the fields in a while. Maybe...um...take your mind off it a bit?”

I could have smacked her. Like train tracks could have led me anywhere other than through puddles.

“I don’t think so.”

We settled ourselves on a cold granite bench but didn’t speak for a long time. Birds chirped anxiously through the mist and cars’ wheels crunched in the parking lot as their drivers headed home. I sat there tapping my toe against an anthill squirming with tiny life.

It killed my sister. The doctors couldn’t do anything.

“She never got to go,” I mumbled.

“What?” Julia breathed, ceasing the numb twirl of her fingertips against my back that she usually used to try to comfort me.

“She never got to go,” I repeated. “Like, anywhere. To prom. To the Sox game I bought her birthday. To the Great Wall. Places every kid wants to go.”

Julia pressed her fingers into mine.

“I’m sorry, Mike,” she said.

Like ‘sorry’ could do anything.

April brought a thick humidity that seemed to melt my guts. My breath had a taste that hinted at the slime in my lungs, my skin was salty with sweat no matter how many times I took a shower. I could barely breathe. Needless to say, I could understand how Julia might have preferred to kiss a frog. At least she’d get a prince outta that one, instead of just me.

“Why’d you turn it off?” I asked from the other side of the couch, glaring at her as she lowered the remote to the DVD player. She stared at the pictures hanging in our living room.

“We need to talk,” she said flatly.

“Can’t it wait?”

“You’re going to Boston tomorrow morning. So, no, not really.”

“So let’s talk. Talk about what.”

Julia glanced at me before dropping her gaze back to the fibers in the carpet.

“It’s the elephant in the room,” she whispered.

“What.”

“Everyone’s thinking it.”

“Thinking what?”

“Thinking about... this next trip. To the hospital,” she twisted the ring on her finger, the skin beneath it turning an upset shade of pink. “Mike...I’m scared.”

“Scared? Of what?”

“For Chrissake, Mike. They put you back on the transplant list and you’ve only had your lungs for three years.”

“Oh...” I shook my head fast and hard and tried, *tried*, to offer a smile. “Ha... that’s what this is all about... you got me nervous... Um...It’s just a thing...like, uh... when you put your name on a wait list for a table at a restaurant and you—”

Julia twisted to face me, curling her knees onto the couch cushions and leaning forward on her arms. Her eyes were sharp, lit, angry.

“What if you don’t get it, Mike? People don’t just die perfectly preserved to give you a new set of lungs.”

I laughed, hacking up a bit of phlegm that slid uncomfortably beneath my tongue, “I’ll get it, Jules. I’ll be *fine*.”

“You don’t—“

“Those doctors have no idea, Julia. They’re dumb as shit. They told us Laura’d live to thirty, not thirteen, yet here we are, huh? Fuck the doctors, I’m living ‘till I’m eighty-one.”

Julia’s pointed gaze softened before she buried her face in her palms.

“You don’t get it,” she whispered.

“I know it’s gonna be okay. I’m like Superman or something.”

“Shut up.”

“I’ve got so much time left on me, Julia. Quit your worrying, okay?”

“You don’t get it,” she spat up in some kind of strangled cough, thrusting her fists against the couch. Her eyes glimmered above squiggled lines of muddy mascara.

“You’re not the only one who has a say in this, Mike McLellan.”

“No,” I mumbled. “I guess I wouldn’t be.”

I was still in the pulmonary unit when she went to prom with Brett Hayes. I’d hoped that she would have told me about it. Called me up and stuff. But what would I have said? How could I have told her no, she couldn’t go, when I was the one who promised I’d be there to take her? And I wish I could have been there, really. I wanted to be there. I wanted to see her in that blue and gray dress she bought and tried to hide from me. I wanted to be the one that practically held her up in the matching heels that she could never handle walking in, as though I had the strength to do that with the flu to top all flus. I wanted her to be in that dress, in my arms, in my life.

I know. I should have seen it coming. Julia deserves to be normal. I just really thought she was different.

Apparently, it was a really big deal when the hospital let me out for graduation in June. Some random biological warfare was drumming up in my chest. And this time, it wasn't just a cold. I'd felt blocked and clogged to the point where I'd wake up in the middle of the night, feeling like I'd forgotten how to breathe.

The whole release from Children's was timed to the teeth. Temporary discharge at eight-oh-five a.m. I had time to walk up on the stage, grab my diploma, sit down, throw my cap, disappear into the crowd for a picture, then drive back to the hospital at twelve, arrive around one.

Five hours left. The last five hours ever? Who knew.

You could still see the pick line on my arm under the robe, but when Mom saw me, it was like I'd died already.

"Mom," I coughed, smiling as wide as I could while she hugged me tight. "Save it for the speeches!"

Dad bit his lip as he handed me that matching navy cap. I loosened my arm from underneath Mom and held it weakly out to him. He wrapped his arm tight around us both. I wondered if they felt it too. Like there was something missing, a huge hole in all of us that nothing could close.

When we got to the school, I could see the football field, lined up with hundreds of chairs, headed by the podium. I felt dead tired by the time I climbed out of the car. As my dad slid the car door shut, I heard a voice, one I hadn't heard in weeks.

“Hey there.”

Julia’s voice was sweet over the bustling crowd in the parking lot. I turned.

“Jules... You look so nice,” I said.

“Seriously, Mike?” she returned, smirking. “No one looks sexy in a graduation gown.”

My laugh was halted by a dry fit of coughs and I saw a glint of fear flash in her eyes.

I struggled to clear my throat, “Sorry.”

She pursed her lips, hesitant. But she came closer and wrapped her arms around me, resting her head against its former place on my shoulder.

“I’m glad you got to be here,” she whispered against my neck.

“Hey, what’d I tell ya? I’m pushing back my expiration date. This can’t be my one big milestone, huh?” I told her, bravely kissing her forehead.

She pulled away to look up at me. The corners of her eyes always pinched a bit when she tried to keep from crying. Even if I hadn’t felt my breath grow even shallower, my ribs pinch even tighter, I knew that I was trying to hold it back too.

“I gotta go find my parents...um...before we line up,” she murmured. “I’ll um... Well I’ll see you after?”

“Definitely.”

I watched her take the longest, deepest breath, heard it come out and drag. She turned quick on her heels, nearly stumbling into another passing family.

We lined up alphabetically. Julia stood close behind. I can’t remember much of the ceremony, to be honest. Ryan Wilkinson made the senior speech, about how it was time to go out into the world, to grow up and be whatever we wanted to be. Astronauts. Doctors. Monkey Therapists. Whatever it was he said, the crowd must have liked it. I looked around at all the other

gown-clad people, their eyes bright and shining, filled with dreams and wishes. I guess I kind of felt jealous.

The principal spoke about motivation, about propelling ourselves and picturing ourselves in the future. I tore off the corners of my program and shredded them into my palm. I didn't know *what* to see myself as in the future. When I thought about it long and hard, all I could see was Laura.

They called the names, one by one. Michelle Aristorenas. Row after row stood up to tread up the podium. Brian Foster. My chest grew tight. Sean Lyons. I heaved myself up from my seat and started to walk towards the microphone. Sarah Masterson. And then...

"Michael McLellan."

Hiding a cough behind my hand, I felt a glob of mucus and saline against my teeth. The applause washed over me in chaotic rolls, like waves upon waves hitting me in the face, some thunderous tsunamis. I wasn't valedictorian. I wasn't some award-winning essayist. If I'd gotten in to an Ivy League, they wouldn't have given this response.

All I could hope to feel or think was please, please don't stand up for me. Please don't get people rising for me. But they did anyway. After all, who couldn't help it? Who couldn't help but stand up for the guy who lost his little sister three months ago?

I got it. I was alive. They all thought it was a miracle that I made it that far.

"Please," I pleaded in my mind. "Sit back down. I'm not going anywhere yet."