

Anne Enright

## Little Sister

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5 The year I'm talking about, the year my sister left (or whatever you choose to call it), I was twenty-one and she was seventeen. We had been keeping our proper distance, that is to say, for seventeen years. Four years apart – which is sometimes a long way apart, and sometimes closer than you think. Some years we liked each other and some years we didn't. But near or far, she was my sister. And I suppose I am trying to say what that meant.

10 Serena always thought she would pass me out some day, hence the underage drinking and the statutory sex. But even though she was getting into pubs and into trouble before I was in high heels, I knew, deep down and weary, that I was the older one – I always would be the older one, and the only way she would get to be older than me, is if I got dead.

15 And of course, I liked it too. It was fun having someone smaller than you. She always said I bossed her around, but I know we had fun. Because with Serena you are always asking yourself what went wrong, or even, Where did I go wrong? But, believe me, I am just about done with all that – with shuffling through her life in my mind. [...] We had a great childhood. And I'm fine, that's the bottom line of it. I'm fine and Serena is no longer alive.

20 But the year I am talking about, it was 1981 and I was finished uni and starting a job. I had money and was buying clothes and I was completely delighted with myself. I even thought about leaving home, but my mother was lonely with us all growing up. She said she felt the creak of the world turning and she talked about getting old. She cried more; a general sort of weep, now and then – not about her life, but just about the way life goes.

30 I came home one day and Serena was in the doghouse, which was nothing new, because my mother smelt cigarettes off her, and also Something Else. I couldn't think what this something else might be; there was no whiff of drink – perhaps it was sperm, I wouldn't be surprised. It was three weeks before her final school exams and Serena was trashing our bedroom while my mother stood in the kitchen – wearing her coat, strangely enough – and chopping carrots. I went in and sat with Mam for a while, and when the silence upstairs finally settled, I went to check the damage. Clothes everywhere. One curtain ripped down. My alarm clock smashed. A bottle of perfume snapped at the neck – there was a pool of Chanel No. 5 soaking into the chest of drawers. I had a boyfriend at the time. The room stank. I didn't blow my top. I said, 'Clean yourself up, you stupid moron, Da's nearly home.'

40 None of us liked our father, except Serena, who was a little flirt from an early age. I don't think even my mother liked him – of course she said she 'loved' him, but that was only because you're supposed to when you marry someone and sleep with them. He had a fused knee from some childhood accident and always sat with his leg sticking out in front of him. He wasn't a bad man. But he sat and looked at us shouting and laughing and fighting, as though we were all an awful bore.

45 Or maybe I liked him then, but I don't like him since – because after Serena he got a job managing a pub and he started sleeping over the shop. So that's another one, now, who never comes home.

For three weeks the bedroom was thick with the smell of Chanel, we did not speak, and Serena did not eat. She fainted during her maths exam and had to be carried out, with a big crowd of people fanning her on the corridor floor. All of June she spent in the bathroom squeezing her spots, or she sat downstairs and did

50 nothing and wouldn't say what she wanted to do next. And then, on the fourteenth of July, she went out and did not come home.

We waited for ninety-one days. On Saturday the thirteenth of September there was the sound of a key in the door and a child walked in – a sort of death-child. She was six and a half stone. Behind her was a guy carrying a suitcase. He said his name was Brian. He looked like he didn't know what to do.

We gave him a cup of tea, while Serena sat in a corner of the kitchen, glaring. As far as we could gather, she just turned up on his doorstep, and stayed. He was a nice guy. I don't know what he was doing with a girl just out of school, but then again, Serena always looked old for her age.

60 It is hard to remember what it was like in those days, but anorexia was just starting then, it was just getting trendy. We looked at her and thought she had cancer, we couldn't believe this was some sort of diet. Then trying to make her eat, the cooing and cajoling, the desperate silences as Serena looked at her plate and picked up one green bean. They say anorexics are bright girls who try too hard and get tipped over the  
65 brink, but Serena sauntered up to the brink. She looked over her shoulder at the rest of us, as we stood and called to her, and then she turned and jumped. It is not too much to say that she enjoyed her death. I don't think it is too much to say that.

70 But I'm stuck with Brian in the kitchen, and Serena's eye sockets huge, and her eyes burning in the middle of them. Of course there were tears – my mother's tears, my tears. Dad hit the door jamb and then leant his forehead against his clenched fist. Serena's own tears, when they came, looked hot, as though she had very little liquid left. My mother put her to bed, so tenderly, like she was still a child, and we called the doctor while she slept. She woke to find his fingers on her pulse and she looked as though she was going to start yelling again, but it was too late for all that. He went out to the phone in the hall and booked her into  
75 hospital on the spot.

Ninety-one days. And believe me, we lived them one by one. We lived those days one at a time. We went through each hour of them, and we didn't skip a single minute.

80 I met Brian from time to time in the hospital and we exchanged a few grim jokes about the ward; a row of little sticks in the beds, knitting, jiggling, anything to burn the calories off. I opened the bathroom door one day and saw one of them in there, checking herself in the mirror. She was standing on a toilet seat with the cubicle door open and her nightdress pulled up to her face. You could see all her bones. There was a mile of space between her legs, and her pubis stuck out, a bulging hammock of flesh, terribly split. She pulled the  
85 nightdress down when she heard the door open, so by the time I looked from her reflection to the cubicle, she was decent again. It was just a flash, like flicking the remote to find a sitcom and getting a shot of famine in the middle, or of porn.

90 Serena lay in a bed near the end of the row, a still shape in the fidgeting ward. She read books, and turned the pages slowly. I brought her wine gums and LLC gums, because when she was little she used to steal them from my stash. Serena was the kind of girl whose pocket money was gone by Tuesday, and who spent the rest of the week in a whine. Now, it was a shower of things she might want – wine gums, Jaffa Cakes, an ice-cream birthday cake, highlights in her hair – all of them utterly stupid and small. We were indulging a  
95 five-year-old child, and nothing was enough, and everything was too late.

Then there was the therapy. We all had to go; walking out the front door in our good coats, as though we were off to Mass. We sat around on plastic chairs: my father with his leg stuck silently out; my mother in a welter of worry, scarcely listening or jumping at some silly thing and hanging on to it for dear life. Serena sat there, looking bored. I couldn't help it, I lost my temper. I actually shouted at her. I said she should be

100 ashamed of herself, the things she was putting Mam through. ‘Look at her,’ I said. ‘Look!’ I said I hoped she  
was pleased with herself now. She just sat there listening, and then she leaned forward to say, very  
deliberate, ‘If I got knocked down by a bus, you’d say I was just looking for attention.’ Which made me think  
about that car crash when she was small. Perhaps I should have mentioned it, but I didn’t. Brian, as official  
105 boyfriend, sat in the middle of this family row with his legs set wide and his big hands dangling into the gap.  
At the end of the session he guided her out of the room with his palm on the small of her back, as though  
he was her protector and not part of this at all.

110 It takes years for anorexics to die, that’s the other thing. During the first course of therapy they decided it  
would be better if she moved out of home. Was there another family, they said, where she could stay for a  
while? As if. As if my parents had a bunch of cheerful friends with spare rooms, who wanted to clean up  
after Serena, and hand over their bathroom while she locked herself in there for three hours at a time. We  
got her a bedsit in Rathmines, and I paid. It was either that or my mother going out to work part-time.

115 So Serena was living my life now. She had my flat and my freedom and my money. It sounds like an odd  
thing to say, but I didn’t begrudge it at the time. I just wanted it to be over. I mean, I just wanted my  
mother to smile.

120 Five months later she was six stone and one ounce, and back in the ward after collapsing in the street. I  
expected to see Brian, but she had got rid of him, she said. I went to pick up some things from the flat for  
her, and found that it was full of empty packets of paracetamol and used tissues that she didn’t even  
bother to throw away. They were stuck together in little lumps. I don’t know what was in them – cleanser?  
Maybe she spat into them, maybe her own spit was a nuisance to her. I had to buy a pair of rubber gloves  
to tackle them, and I never told anyone, not the therapist, not the doctor, not my mother. But I recognised  
something in her face now, as though we had a secret we were forced to share.

125 I went through her life in my head. Every Tuesday night before the goddamn therapy, I sifted the moments:  
a cat that died, my grandmother’s death, Santa Claus. I went through the caravan holidays and the time she  
cried halfway up Carantoo-hill and sat down and had to be carried to the top. I went through her first  
period and the time I bawled her out for stealing my mohair jumper. The time she used up a can of fly-  
130 spray in an afternoon slaughter and the way she played horsey on my father’s bocketty leg. It was all just  
bits. I really wanted it to add up to something, but it didn’t.

135 They beefed her up a bit and let her go. A couple of months later we got a card from Amsterdam. I don’t  
know where she got the money. The flat was all paid up till Christmas and I might have taken it myself, but  
one look at my mother was enough. I could not do a thing to hurt her more.

140 Then one day I saw a woman in the street who looked like my gran, just before she died. I thought it was  
my gran for a minute: out of the hospice somehow ten years later and walking towards St Stephen’s Green.  
Actually, I thought she was dead and I was terrified – literally petrified – of what she had come back to say  
to me. Our eyes met, and hers were wicked with some joke or other. It was Serena, of course. And her  
teeth by now were yellow as butter.

145 I stopped her and tried to talk, but she came over all adult and suggested we go for coffee. She said Brian  
had followed her somehow to Amsterdam. She looked over her shoulder. I think she was hallucinating by  
now. But there was something so fake about all this grown-up stuff, I was glad when we said, ‘Goodbye,  
so.’ When I looked after her in the street, there she was, my sister, the little toy walk of her, the way she  
held her neck – Serena running away from some harmless game at the age of seven, too proud to cry.

150 The phone call from the hospital came six weeks later. There was something wrong with her liver. After that it was kidneys. And after that she died. Her yellow teeth were falling out by the end, and she was covered in baby-like down. All her beauty was gone – because, even though she was my sister, I have to say that Serena was truly, radiantly beautiful in her day.

155 So, she died. There is no getting away from something like that. You can't recover. I didn't even try. The first year was a mess and after that our lives were just punctured, not even sad – just less, just never the same again.

160 But it is those ninety-one days I think about – the first time she left, when it was all ahead of us, and no one knew. The summer I was twenty-one and Serena was seventeen, I woke up in the morning and I had the room to myself. She was mysteriously gone from the bed across the room, she was absolutely gone from the downstairs sofa, and the bathroom was free for hours at a time. Gone. Not there. Vamoosed. My mother, especially, was infatuated by her absence. It is not enough to say she fought Serena's death, even then – she was intimate with it. To my mother, my sister's death was an enemy's embrace. They were locked together in the sitting room, in the kitchen, in the hall. They met and talked, and bargained and wept. She might have been saying, 'Take me. Take me, instead.' But I think – you get that close to it, you bring it into your home, everybody's going to lose.

170 So, it was no surprise to us when, after ninety-one days, Serena walked back into the house looking the way she did. The only surprise was Brian, this mooching, ordinary, slightly bitter man, who watched her so helplessly and answered our questions one by one.

175 I met him some time after the funeral in a nightclub and we ended up crying at a little round table in the corner, and shouting over the music. We both were a bit drunk, so I can't remember who made the first move. It was a tearful, astonishing kiss. All the sadness welled up into my face and into my lips. We went out for a while, as though we hoped something good could come of it all – a little love. But it was a faded sort of romance, a sort of second thought. Two ordinary people, making do. Don't get me wrong, I didn't mind that he had loved Serena, because of course I loved her too. And her ghost did not bother us: try as we might, it did not even appear. But I tell you, I have a child now and who does she look like? Serena. The same hungry, petulant look, and beautiful, too. So that is my penance I suppose, that is the thing I have to live with now.

185 I am trying to stop this story, but it just won't end. Because years later I saw a report in the newspaper about a man who murdered his wife. The police said he was worried she would find out about his financial problems, and so he torched the house when she was asleep. He made extraordinary preparations for the crime. He called out the gas board twice to complain about a non-existent leak and he started redecorating so there would be plenty of paint and white spirit in the hall. He wrote a series of threatening letters to himself, on a typewriter that he later dumped in the canal. I read the article carefully, not just for the horror of it, but because his name was Brian Dempsey. The name of the broody, handsome man who had slept with my sister – and also with me. Which sounds a bit frank, but that was the way it was. Brian. I could not get those threatening letters out of my head. He started writing them two whole months before he set the fire. I thought about those eight weeks he had spent with her, complaining about the dinner or his lack of clean shirts, annoyed with her because she did not, would not, realise that she was going to die. I even wanted to visit him in prison before the trial, just to look at him, just to say, 'Brian.' When the case finally came to court, there was a picture in the paper, and I thought he looked old, and terribly fat. I looked and looked at the eyes, until they turned into newspaper dots. Then, when I read the court case, I realised it was another Brian Dempsey altogether, a man originally from Athlone.

200 That was last month, but even now, I find myself holding my breath in empty rooms. Yesterday, I set a  
bottle of Chanel No. 5 on the dressing table and took the lid off for a while. I keep thinking, not about Brian,  
but about those ninety-one days, my mother half crazed, my father feigning boredom, and me, with my  
own bedroom for the first time in years. I think of Serena's absence, how astonishing it was, and all of us  
sitting looking at each other, until the door opened and she walked in, half-dead, with an ordinary, living  
man in tow. And I think that we made her up somehow, that we imagined her. And him too, maybe – that  
205 he made her up, too. And I think that if we made her up now, if she walked into the room, we would kill  
her, somehow, all over again.

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