It’s raining the day my older brother runs into the street outside our house. Pouring sheets of rain like the biblical flood. If it weren’t for the cracks of thunder in the sounds of my mother’s fear, I would think everything had already been washed away. Maybe it has, I don’t know. I’m sitting on the counter of the sink in the bathroom at the top of the stairs. I’m looking in the mirror, rather than out the window that is across the room, but I know what I would see if I did look. Dusk hangs pleasantly above the forest, the first few stars shining clearly across an empty sky. This storm can not be blamed on something as comprehensible as weather fronts.

A lot of my childhood was spent in the bathroom at the top of my house’s staircase. It was one of the few places I could be alone in a house with about seven to ten people inhabiting it at any given time. I liked to look in the mirror. I would spend hours every week just looking at myself. I would watch myself smile, I would watch myself sing along to songs, and especially I would watch myself cry. I had this ideal of what it should look like; sparkling drops of tears hanging off my eyelids, watery smiles tinted with vulnerability and beauty. Princess tears.

Crying was a very private and personal experience for me and I wanted to be alone when I did it. I didn’t want to bother anyone else. Didn’t want them to see the imperfections when I didn’t cry like I thought I should.

July twenty-fifth, two-thousand and twelve, the middle of summer. My siblings and I are melting under the blistering heat of the summer sun. Covered head to toe in sunscreen and begging my dad to buy us something cold and/or sweet at one of the ungodly overpriced snack carts at the Orange County Fair. He will eventually give in and buy us a funnel cake and everyone knows it. We will cheer and tear into the hot dough. We will burn our fingertips and
laugh, and eat ourselves sick. And once the paper plate is little more than a forgotten grease stain, we will lick our fingers clean. That’s what days like this are for; spoiling your kids and driving home with them sugar crashed in the backseat. It’s those idyllic family pictures posted to Facebook; a photo album family. “Look at how happy my children are. Look how perfect”. We don’t capture the lightning strikes on camera.

The day my older brother ran off screaming into the crowds at the county fair, I was ten years old. Waiting in line for a rollercoaster. Not a big one, but one of those small rollercoasters, where the cars are shaped like caterpillars and the highest drop is maybe ten feet off the ground. The ones built for kids like me who were too afraid or motion sick to experience anything stronger. But the thing is, I don’t remember actually riding the coaster. I don’t remember the wind in my hair or my stomach dropping on the way down or whether or not I screamed. The only part I remember is the line. Standing in line while my dad chased my brother down. Telling my mom that I didn’t need to go on the ride, even though I had been asking to for hours. That it was okay, we could go home if we needed to. That if she wanted to go help my dad, I could sit by myself somewhere and wait for her. I remember her saying it was fine and that we were almost to the front. To enjoy myself. But I could see that only half of her was still in that line with me. Only half of her would watch me ride the rollercoaster and ask me at the end if I had fun. The rest of my mother was somewhere else. It was wherever my brother was. It was days like that one that began building the foundation of what I considered my strength. An unspoken promise to my family that I would not be another thing that worried them.

There’s a low hanging fog in the air tonight. Silent and suffocating. I’m on the bathroom sink again, longing for the days of summer storms. The feeling of dancing in the rain and feeling each drop soak into my skin. Longing for the before. Before the numbness. A mirror image of
myself stares back at me, its eyes dead and blank. I wish for something that could lift this haze. For a moment, I think I see the lights flicker. Think I see the clouds on the horizon and an end to the drought. Rain always accompanies his moods, but me...I don’t control the weather outside these walls. I sit on the white marble sink, surrounded by toothbrushes and broken shaving razors. I sit and I wonder whether I could still feel a lightning bolt if it struck me. And how long it would take for them to notice the scar.

Mental illness isn’t linear. My older brother was explosively, visibly ill from a young age. I think a lot of families might’ve written him off as a “problem child” and spent the first decade of his life punishing him. My mother didn’t though. My mother has a lot of theories around parenting and one of them is that her children don’t act out unless something is wrong. Something was wrong, still is. A chemical imbalance runs through my mother’s side of the family and it causes mood disorders. Depression. Depression in a child looks a lot like misbehaving if you don’t know what to look for. An adult not being able to get out of bed and go to work is a warning sign, but a seven year old refusing to get up for school is more ambiguous. It took a long time for the individual instances of him reaching breaking point to connect into a clear picture of what was going on. My illness didn’t look like that. My illness lived in my shadow, always with me but innocuous to everyone else. I designed it that way.

The day my younger brother wandered off in the mall, it’s a perfectly normal day. No screaming or howling winds. Not a raindrop in sight. Just a child who wanted to go to the Lego store not even twenty feet from where the rest of us stood. My dad scolds him for heading off alone and then we continue with our outing. A simple problem with a simple resolution.

I wish I remembered more of that day at the fair. I want to be able to describe the way the wind felt in my hair and how my sister smiled like she wasn’t a sullen fourteen year old. I wish it
wasn’t just another snapshot in the scrapbook of my brother’s mental illness, but it was. That day was not an anomaly. The crying and screaming was commonplace. I’m not even sure if all my memories of that day are real, or if some are fragments of other days that have stitched themselves together to make me feel like I remember my life in a cohesive manner. I want to say that the car ride home once my parents had chased my older brother down was the kind where he did not calm once safely strapped into the seat. I think I remember him struggling against the seatbelt and threatening to jump out of the moving car. I think I remember my mother arguing with him like she always did. But I don’t truly know. I may never know all of it. I may never fully understand what was so overwhelming about the world to my older brother when he was younger, such that no outing was without risk. There was no telling what could upset him and there was no certain way to calm him once the fuse had been lit. Nothing was reliably soothing to him back then. I don’t know if he’s ever found anything that is…

Today my mother doesn’t sit in the passenger seat while my dad drives. She is in the middle seat of her minivan holding my older brother. He struggles against her, trying to reach the handle of his door. Screaming that he will throw himself onto the highway if given the chance. Screaming at her to let him go. She refuses. She holds him. She talks to him. I watch them from the backseat and it’s as if I am still in the bathroom at the top of the stairs in our home. Staring into that dirty mirror, at the missing section of glass in the upper right hand corner. But I can’t even see myself in the reflection anymore. Only the image of my mother wrapped around my older brother, as if she’s trying to use her own body to shield him from a storm.

The one observation from my childhood that I’m fairly certain of is that the person most impacted by my brother’s mental health problems was my mother. She would never admit it, but
the years of watching her child fight the world and not being able to help him and being judged by family members for her methods of trying, really wore on her. She’s also the type of person to cry when she is frustrated, rather than just when she’s sad. I inherited that trait too. I have a lot of memories of her crying, as much as a parent may try to hide that from her children. But I watched my mother almost as much as I watched myself, especially as I grew older. She’s very pretty when she cries and yet everytime I see it, I hope I never will again. Even today, I wonder if it was so wrong of me to try and be someone who didn’t add to her stress.

July twenty-fifth, two-thousand and twelve. My father posts a photo with the caption, “Orange County Fair”. In it, my brother and sister are hugging and smiling and I...am nowhere to be seen.