

Snapshots

Most of the snapshots of my life are held in the photo albums of my mind. Some were captured by a camera, and those pictures I keep in a shoebox under my bed. I'm lucky to have "shoebox photos" of the earliest things I can remember. For example, three days after my third birthday, Katherine Emily arrived. I remember my dad taking me to see my new baby sister; we stopped at a gas station on the way to the hospital and bought my mom candy and a cola.

That day, the camera caught the tiny smile only a big sister could have as she holds one of the best birthday presents ever. I don't take up even half of a blue hospital chair as I cradle Katie in my arms. She is wrapped all in white, like the little angel that every baby is. My white, hooded sweatshirt has faint patches of sky blue, and just a tiny crimson triangle of a T-shirt peeks out from behind the zipper. Looking closer, a third person can be seen: my mother's wrist-banded hand holds Katie's head up. My tiny arms weren't quite strong enough for that task.

That was the first time I ever posed with Katie. Looking at that photo makes me remember all the other pictures I have of Katie and me, even when there was no camera with film and batteries ready to go. It's these pictures that I'll never lose.

Before Katie and I went off to school, we spent our days in the tunnels and caves of cardboard boxes and secret hideaways under the kitchen table. Our house has never been short on toys (there were six kids born before Katie and me), but boxes have always been a favorite. I remember being able to easily slide through the long passageways, my back not even brushing against the "ceilings" of our tunnels and forts. Katie had an even easier time but often needed a flashlight in the darkness. Our cities of cardboard were draped in rainbows of blankets and quilts. On the insides, however, the less light we had, the better. It's too bad my memory camera has no flash.

"Picture Sales" were the basis for the kids' economy in our house. Competition was fierce in our system of capitalism. Jake is three years older than I am, and I'm three years older than Katie, but we all tried to outdo each other drawing pictures, attractively placing them around our bedrooms, and bringing in the customers. Prices ranged from 1 to 25 cents, and we loved counting the money at the end of the night. Katie and I often combined our assets and tried to steal Jake's business. Our walls were lined with neat rows of crayon drawings. We stocked anything from flowers to people, but supportive parents and older siblings made purchases from all of us.

Katie and I loved having our big sister Megan take us for summer walks. She was in high school, and hanging out with her added "coolness" to our status at Winkler Elementary. Filled with excess energy on the way to the park, beach, or the Hunny Tree gas station for pop and candy, we always loved to run ahead. Megan would let us, usually to the next telephone pole or two, where we would have to stop and wait for her. Shorter legs made the telephone pole seem distant, growing slowly closer as the Queen Anne's lace flew past in the ditch. I can recall countless times that Katie and I woke up late and found ourselves running down the road to catch the bus. Looking back, this has to be one of the more ironic

rolls of my “memory film,” because I ended up running cross-country; Katie wound up in poms and football.

Of my six sisters, Katie is the closest to me in age, and she’s often been my closest companion during family events. We are usually the only teenage kids around at family gatherings and on shopping trips in the family van. This explains why Katie and I are expert mimes. The shopping trips provide hours of being stuffed in the van with our younger siblings, Scarlet and Michael; the visits to Minnesota to see relatives yield seven hours of driving each way. On one occasion, Katie and I boarded the van, choosing the back seat. After 10 minutes of being annoyed by everyone else, we formed an invisible wall between the two front seats and ourselves. We mimed a smooth, perfectly flat, soundproof surface to perfection. The last picture on that roll of memories was Mom telling us to stop it.

The Niagara Falls/Canada/New York trip last year was the closest Katie and I have been. The same week of our shared 16th and 13th birthday-bonfire party, we spent days cramped in the back of my sister Sara’s car, next to her one-year-old daughter, Hannah. Our quiet brother-in-law Brad was driving, and Hannah cried the whole way. That trip provided enough scenes to make a full-length movie, but I have only one shoebox picture of Katie and me in front of Niagara Falls. We are both bundled up like we were in the picture taken 13 years earlier. This time, though, we wear dark blue jeans and gray sweatshirts, our matching brown hair pulled back, hers in a ponytail and mine behind a pale pink bandana. The background doesn’t take us to a quiet hospital room, but to the continuous rumble of beautiful Niagara Falls. On the left, the American Falls turn over beneath a rainbow of October foliage. Farther away, on the right, Horseshoe Falls bubbles under a mist that slowly rises above the horizon. Katie and I lean against the heavy, black railing, and against each other. Our smiles are sweet and happy, reminiscent of Katie’s first birthday.

These two shoebox pictures of Katie and me are just two snapshots in a shared photo album, filled with every cake, thought, joke, and sweater we’ve shared. In the midst of looking through the collection, Katie yells at me, “Hey, that’s my shirt!”

“You borrow my stuff,” I reply.

“Not without asking.”

“You had my black skirt for three months.”

“I asked for it.”

I let the fight peter out, not wishing to waste a memory on an argument about clothes. There will be plenty of hair-pulling, name-calling, and angry situations between Katie and me to come. I want to save my film for better times.

The Climb

I have this fear. It causes my legs to shake. I break out in a cold sweat. I start jabbering to anyone who is nearby. As thoughts of certain death run through my mind, the world appears a precious, treasured place. I imagine my own funeral, then shrink back at the implications of where my thoughts are taking me. My stomach feels strange. My palms are clammy.

I am terrified of heights.

Of course, it's not really a fear of being in a high place. Rather, it is the view of a long way to fall, of rocks far below me and no firm wall between me and the edge. My sense of security is screamingly absent. There are no guardrails, flimsy though I picture them, or other safety devices. I can rely only on my own surefootedness—or lack thereof.

Despite my fear, two summers ago I somehow found myself climbing to a high place, while quaking inside and out. Most of our high school had come along on a day trip to the Boquerón, a gorgeous, lush spot in the foothills of Peru. Its prime attraction is the main waterfall, about 100 feet high, that thunders into a crystal clear pool feeding the Aguaytia River. All around the pool and on down to the rushing river are boulders large and small. The beach is strewn with rocks. On both sides of the fall, the jungle stretches to meet it, rising parallel to it on a gentler slope.

After eating our sack lunches within sight and sound of the fall, many of us wanted to make the climb to an area above it. We knew others had done so on previous trips. A few guys went first to make sure they were on the right path. But after they left, my group of seven decided to go ahead without waiting for them to return. I suspected we were going the wrong way, but I kept silent, figuring that the others knew better. We went along the base of the hill until we reached the climb. It stopped me in my tracks.

The climb ascended steeply above us. Along the right edge, the jungle hugged the rocks; passage through its trees did not look feasible. The majority of my view was filled with rocks. Looming high to the sky, the boulders rose in a tiered manner. Peering back down toward the river, I saw a steep slope of rocks all the way to the water. All I could think about was how far it would be to fall.

My tense thoughts were interrupted by the realization that my friends were already beginning to climb! My anxiety increased as I watched them.

Do I turn back? My whole being shouted, "Yes!" Will I regret it later? I really want to get to the top, but...

I voiced my uncertainties to my friends. They dismissed my fears and encouraged me to stick it out. Questioning my own sanity, I decided at least to attempt the climb.

I chose a path that seemed easiest. My friend Tom was ahead of me. Then, suddenly, he slipped and slid backward about 10 feet! I watched, paralyzed, until he stopped himself and assured us he was all right. My heart was hammering.

Now those who had tried the other way came back; it had not worked. Consoling myself that my friend Seth would be right behind me, I shakily began the ascent. The “path” led up a narrow area between boulders. In it, we reached a place where there just were no good handholds. Seth braced my foot, and those above sent down words of encouragement. I was soon past the first challenge safely, but not feeling much better about the rest of the climb.

The difficulties only increased from that point on, with scary spot after scary spot. Though I knew I should not look down, I could not always ignore the long drop to the boulders below. My breathing sped up, but my heart pounded even faster, growing loud in my ears.

My friends kept right on climbing. But they did not forget me. Someone was always behind me to help hold my feet steady when necessary, and someone else was always ahead to offer a hand up. I trusted them more than myself; I knew my feet could easily slip. With friends supporting me by words and actions, I slowly gained ground.

Finally we came to the worst section yet. To me the slope looked very close to vertical. The slight handholds were few and far between. Being short, I knew the stretches would be difficult enough in normal conditions. In my current panic, it would be much worse. The alternative was to go back down. Which was more difficult? I didn't want to go either way, but obviously I had to go somewhere.

The trouble was, we were not getting any nearer to the falls. By now, we realized that this route was not the way most frequented! But knowing this did not get me any closer to safety.

Since getting up this next part was next to impossible, and waiting for a rescue helicopter was not an option, with fear and trembling I decided to go down, but not by myself. Melody agreed to go with me, earning my eternal gratitude. She paused to pray for safety; I did not trust my voice enough to pray aloud.

Now, with our backs to the rocks, the drop was continually in our line of vision. It seemed even steeper than before. The song “Angels Watching Over Me” ran through my head as we began, Melody going first. I kept up a steady stream of chatter, my trembling voice betraying my fear.

One of the first tough places we came to gave us trouble. Cautiously stretching one foot down, Melody could not reach the bottom of the boulder. A slip would mean an extremely long drop. So we tried a different route where a fall would be shorter. It was somewhat wet and would entail a short slide to reach the bottom.

Melody made it safely. I hesitated, unsure of my footing, and picturing myself at the bottom of the cliff, bones broken and pain wracking my body, if I still lived.

“You can do it! I'm right here,” Melody called. She waited patiently, not pressuring me to hurry.

Inching carefully to the edge, I could see in the corner of my eye the boulders and river far below. As I started down the rock, my foot slipped! My heart jumped into my throat as the terror I had held just under the surface swept over me.

I'm gonna fall! I inwardly shrieked.

It had been only a small slip, however; I was not in midair! I took a few calming breaths, and my heart repositioned itself where it belonged.

With no further mishaps, we came eventually to the last troublesome spot, the stretch between two boulders that had given me problems on the way up. Thankfully, the rest of our friends had given up climbing to the top and had now caught up to us. There were two possible descents from here. One way included a short jump down. I decided to check out the other way. Seth was working his way down this second route when he fell a few feet and bruised himself! I again looked over the first option.

Do I want to jump? There's a big drop if I jump wrong or don't stop on the ledge! But the other way...!

I knew if I was to get down, it would have to be Seth's way. He was willing to help me however he could. I inspected the "path" he had taken. There was some low vegetation, matted down and sloping slightly toward the edge. Then came a drop down to a narrow inlet between rocks. That was not so bad. The hitch lay in the fact that there was no handholds or footholds, and my short legs would not reach to the rocks.

"Uh, I don't know about this. I don't like the looks of it!" I said, my voice quavering.

"You can make it, Amy! I'm right here. I won't let you fall," Seth promised.

Slowly, painstakingly, I backed over the vegetation.

"I'm coming down," I warned, my voice unsteady.

"I'm ready," answered Seth. "I got you."

His assurances gave me the strength to go on. I trusted him implicitly. Flattening myself onto my belly, I edged my feet into midair. Seth held them tightly and slowly lowered me, guiding my feet to a firm place as I let my body slide over the leaves, twigs, and rock. When my feet made contact with the solid rock, I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I could feel the fear draining out of me.

My arms and legs were scratched up; I was dirty and sweaty. But none of it mattered. I was at the bottom!

"Yaaaaaaahhhh!" I yelled. I never felt so alive, and so thankful for that life.

H's Hickory Chips

I look at the old tin building; it seems to have been there since the beginning of time. Its strong posts and nonchalant slouch make me wonder if it will be rooted in the same place forever. As soon as I walk in, the strong, rustic smell of hickory wood assails me. It takes me back to my family's last Fourth of July

barbeque, when the hickory chips smoking the ribs gave off their thick aroma. I wait for my eyes to adjust in the dark, humid place, not taking a step until they do because of the ageless spider that could have made its home in my path. My tongue already asks for a drink of water as I breathe the musty air littered with sawdust. Spraying on sticky repellent, I wonder if the thirsty mosquitoes will stay away.

I walk to my work area, making sure I do not trip over the precious finds and the hopeful antiques. I brush against a wall of the old building that is really more of a shed, and a mat of spiderwebs clings to my shirt and refuses to come off. The gentle hum of the small fans and the roar of the monster ones fight against the humid air.

I pull out a machine that is supposed to tie the two-pound bags that are full of hickory chips, but it has a mind of its own. Placing the bulky machine on the high bench with its layers of gritty sawdust, I hope it has decided to work today and load a bag into it. As I pull down the top of the machine, I stare it in its mechanical eyes, willing it to work. I pull the bag back out of the machine and look down on another battle lost. For now the brute has won the war of wills, and I prepare myself with a box of red ties to close all 1,000 of the smooth bags by hand.

The clang of the shovel dumping its first load onto the ancient scale can be heard throughout the shed, signaling that work has begun. The salty sweat begins to bead on my forehead, and for the first of many times, I wipe it away, leaving a smudge of dirt and dust. Already I yell “First shower!” to assure my place in line after our work is completed. I hear my three sisters shout numbers throughout the shed. Amanda, the last to call a number, frowns, knowing she will have to wait a long time for the hot water to return after all the showers.

My grandfather walks into the shed, a cane in one hand and a pack of icy cold colas in the other. His deep Southern drawl permeates the building as he asks if we’ve had lunch yet. Our eyes brighten and smiles play on our faces as we silently hope he will offer the traditional sloppy whopper and golden fries. He leaves as silently as he came in, and our stomachs start to growl with anticipation for lunch.

My sisters’ and aunt’s chatting and soft laughter has started as they begin to catch up on each other’s lives. I look around, wondering what people would say if they could see the Horne sisters outside of the house with no makeup on and their hair in disarray. I laugh and keep the thoughts to myself, listening in as my aunt’s next story begins.

At the end of the day, when all of the work is done, I pull the pallet—our makeshift gate—closed and pet my grandfather’s latest endeavor at a vicious watchdog. I sigh with relief that it’s over. Even though sometimes I dread the thought of work, especially when I know it is going to occupy another Saturday, the time spent with my family and the laughter shared will always be worth the sweat and scrapes. The memories will always be treasures in my mind and will continue to be among the things I laugh about and love the most.