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feminism is for boys, too

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feminism is for boys, too

Kathryn Willoughby

3rd place

My brother is afraid of showing emotion.

When he was twelve, Joseph was beaten up. His American accent among the sea of British ones made him an easy target for years. The bullying culminated with a punch to my brother's stomach. They left him on the ground, cheeks scraped by gravel, eyes filling with tears.

As his friends showed up, Joseph cried. He cried, and they laughed. Not the people who hurt him—his friends. They called him a girl. They said he was weak. They humiliated him, and the well of tears permanently dried up.

My parents called Joseph “sensitive” as a child. When he was born, he got a blanket and, by age two, named it Bee. He slept with it his entire childhood. Carried it with him unashamedly. People at our church knew who Bee was, and asked about him. Joseph would reply, “He’s right here,” because, duh, it’s rude to talk over people instead of talking to them.

When he was six, my mom taught him to tear up his old socks to make them into rags, and Joseph cried. “I don’t want to hurt them,” he whimpered into my mother’s shoulder. “They’ve been good socks.”

He was the subject of all my fights with my mother. “You favor him because he’s emotional,” I spat at her again and again. I took her failings out on him. Screamed at him, “I hate you!” with all the venom a bratty eleven-year-old can carry.

He hated that I was sad, so he responded with apologies I didn’t deserve. His lip trembled as he cried, “I’m so sorry. I don’t want her to like me more. I swear.” He wrapped his arms around my waist, a crying cherub cuddling a sinful mortal.

My brother is nineteen and I have not seen him cry in years. Last Christmas, he told me he was sad that I moved away. His face was so expressionless it almost felt sarcastic. I near slapped him.

But then his lip twitched, almost imperceptibly, and I saw the fight for stoicism in his eyes. I felt the demands of masculinity weigh on him. I charted the muscles he'd gained like a map toward acceptance. Like a white flag of surrender to the bullies of middle school.

That night, I spotted his blanket, Bee, in his hands. He doesn't take it to college—no one there knows—but in the safety of his room, he still clutches it every night. Wrapped around his right hand, he sleeps like it's been there all along.