

2004 Third Place Personal Narrative

My Aunt Robin was a Mother

My cousin, Daniel, was a skinny little tow-head. He was nine and a half years old; I had six months on him, but you’d never have guessed it to look at us together. Daniel was little like an old man is little, except that he was a whole lot faster than an old man is. I admired my cousin and would have loved to switch places with him if it just hadn’t been for his unpredictable mother. She grounded him for anything. She grounded him so many times that summer that I ran out of things to do without him.

The second week of June Daniel was back again—that was after he’d gotten himself grounded for nearly two full days—and we were throwing things off the balcony of Daniel’s attic. Actually it was more of a loft than an attic, and it looked down over a low banister into the cabin’s living room. Posters lined both sides of the loft’s ceiling. Who knows how old they were—to us they were dinosaurs, only they weren't bones but still alive after all these years: posters of Madrid Bullfights and sailing posters all in French. Daniel was hunting among the piles of attic junk for things he could throw down. I was waiting below in the living room to grab them up and throw them back. I threw faster than he did, so I was on the bottom.

When Daniel’s mom had grounded him two days ago we’d been making paper airplanes. Daniel's house was marvelous; its pop tarts and comic books had always seemed limitless, but that day we discovered that they weren’t the half of it. The real beauty of Daniel's house was hidden in the cupboard above the watercolors and below Monopoly: a great stack of Western Sun manila paper. It was a stiff, sharp kind of paper. It was apparent that whoever had produced that paper had aeronautical precision in mind. It made a mean paper airplane.

We made every airplane we knew how—we made them in abundance—and when we had plenty of both those kinds we started making up our own. Pretty soon we found a shortcut—the rejects that we crumpled flew farther and faster than our laboriously crafted inventions. Immediately we applied the concept: we skipped all
The tedious folding and tearing that took so long and yielded so little, and we began to go, instead, straight to the crumpling.

The two of us worked a feverish assembly-line. Daniel pawed sheets off that enormous stack of paper; he pushed them toward me and I struggled to cram them down into handfuls as they passed to the ground behind me. Our finger tips became dry and red. Smears of blood appeared where that stiff paper nicked our hands, but there were things more important to us than pain. That huge stack fought us. The package claimed to have 540 sheets, but they'd slipped in twice that many. Never had the attic known such earnest and maddened activity. At last our fingers trembled to a stop. It was finished. We stepped back a little scared at what we had done. What might be the upshot, we didn't know, but we believed it would be great. This sprawling mass of papers mixed with blood and ambition meant something great. It had to.

Daniel couldn't manage more than "wow," in his most expressive soprano. "Wow."

"Wait 'til we show these to your Mom."

"Yeah."

Daniel's mother was a mysterious woman. She had big glasses and round eyes. She was forever surrounded in my mind with wonderful packages of cookies and forbidden sugary cereals. Her reading voice was purse-lipped and hypnotic. I never knew what story she was reading and it didn't seem to matter much because all her characters had the same owly voice. But as nice as Aunt Robin was, I was wary of her. I never knew when she'd take off those amiable round glasses and shock us with a bolt of her myopic temper. Daniel always took the brunt of it; he acted like a lightning rod until I could slip away, and leave him to his fate. Moments like that that made me glad again that I wasn't Daniel. I loved the boy, but loyalty has its limits. When those glasses came off, Daniel was on his own.

Later that day when I came back from lunch I was surprised to see Daniel looking sad. He came to the door and held onto it like a walker.

"She's really mad." He looked to the house for a second.

“Oh,” I said.

“She didn’t like the airplane bombs. I can’t do anything for the rest of today.”
I gave him a moment of silence. There was nothing to say.

“How long?”

“I don’t know. A long time.”

"Can I have your knife, then?"

"Yeah." Daniel gave it to me, a little fold-out knife.

I assured him that I’d let him know what was happening in the outside world. Daniel let go of the doorknob and walked back into the house, very small and very dignified. I would have asked for his bug net, too, but he was gone before I thought of it. He wouldn't be needing that for a long time.

That had been two days ago. Now Daniel was in the attic and I was in the living room. Daniel took a run at the banister and threw down a whole armful of magazines. They scattered down all around the big oak chair. With a little scrambling about I managed to get a couple back over the loft, but they were hard to throw and there were lots of them.

Daniel threw the comforter before I finished. It was a big blanket. It spread out and hung in the air for a moment -- everything above me turned brown and tan comforter -- and then it came dropping down into the great oak chair with a thud that shook the room. I stopped grabbing magazines; that wasn’t a falling blanket sound. I looked up towards the balcony and moved back a few steps to get a better view, but nobody was there.

That's when the comforter spoke. I stared at it and it spoke again—a high, reedy sort of noise; it didn't actually say words, but made a sound like groaning in a harmonica. I approached the chair and lifted the side of the blanket with the buttons. There was Daniel's head. It was definitely his hair. They were his eyes, too, but wearing an expression I'd never seen before, and that noise was coming from him. My mind was working quickly. I stared at him another couple of seconds.

"Hey, you fell..." I paused, thinking, "...out of the balcony." He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Are you all right?" He made a sound like a hiccup and stayed where he was.

I looked behind me through the big sliding windows. Nobody was there --- nobody had seen. His mother was at my house. I could close those blinds and nobody would see what had happened. Daniel would be all
right. Maybe I could get my mother over here and Daniel's would never have to know; maybe we could get him into our house until he got better. Maybe he wouldn't get better.

I held the chair's big arm and looked at Daniel's face. He didn't look like he was getting better. He looked like he was dying.

"Hey," I said again, "are you all right?"

If Daniel's mom had flipped out about the airplanes what would she do now? She'd send Daniel away. Maybe he'd go to the army. He'd be gone. She'd tell my Mom and I'd never get to come up to Bear Lake again.

What if Daniel died and they sent me to the army? Why did Daniel have to throw himself out of that attic?

"Quiet," I said, "Your Mom's going to hear you."

He groaned steadily louder but at least he sounded human, now.

"Hey, be quiet!" I said again. I folded the blanket down over him again to deaden the sound.

He might be all right. I'd hide him in the attic and bring him food until he got better. I could carry him...I'd given him horse-back rides plenty of times. I'd tell his mother he was sleeping over at my house and I'd just sneak him part of my lunch after I was done, or some graham crackers. We had lots of the nasty cinnamon kind -- he could have all of those he wanted. I just had to close those blinds and get Daniel upstairs again, and make him stop groaning because then she'd hear him. Didn't he understand that he had to be quiet?

"Daniel...she's going to hear you!"

Then I heard a sound. The big sliding window behind me was opening, and I turned around to see a great pair of glasses. They were already starting to come off those round eyes. Daniel's mother looked as angry as I'd ever seen her; my brain went numb and I backpedaled into a corner. I wanted to be as far from her as I could when the lightning struck. She swung towards me.

"Where's Daniel?"

I pointed to the comforter and she seemed to hear the sound he was making for the first time.

"He fell," I said, "I told him not to."

She looked at me for about a second and a half; she looked from me to the chair and then with two big steps lifted the comforter off Daniel. Daniel's mother stood still for a moment while I held my breath. Then she
deflated like one of those balloons you find in trees; she sank down to her knees and put her hands to his head. She felt it carefully all over then down his neck and shoulders. She cradled his head and stayed that way for a long time. Daniel moved for the first time I saw: he reached to hold her around the neck. She rocked him gently.

"It's all right, baby. You just got the wind knocked out. It's all right, honey." His groans had lost the harmonica sound. He was moaning now, and choking like my little brother when he'd gotten lost in the store.

"Oh Daniel, Daniel. You're all right, baby. You're going to be fine. You're going to be just fine."

She slid him onto her lap and pulled the comforter back over them both. She didn't seem to be watching me much, so I slipped through the window door she'd opened. Aunt Robin didn't look angry.

I stayed away from Daniel’s house until after dinner. Aunt Robin had cleaned up all the magazines. She sat Daniel and me up at the table, each with our own pile of Oreos and a cup of milk that looked like an ice-cream cone and went to her bedroom, leaving the gallon of milk on the table between us.

"Did you see how far I fell? I fell from way up there! That's probably thirty feet! You saw how I looked, didn't you? I'll bet that's that farthest anyone's every fallen without dying. If you fall from any higher you die for sure."

"Your Mom's sure cool," I said quietly.

"I'll bet if I didn't have this I would have died." Daniel was sitting on the comforter that Robin had wrapped around him before setting him in the chair.

"Yeah," I said.

Robin came back into the kitchen. Her eyes looked a little funny but her voice was like normal, only a little more owlish. She asked me how I was and I said fine. She leaned down and gave Daniel a kiss on the head and for one moment I wished that I were him.