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Cat Clemons

“I don’t know anymore. How are you?” He’s doing what he’s always done. Parry, block.

My fingertips absently trace the yellow swirls that decorate the couch I’m sitting on, but my mind is racing.

“I’m fine. Tired, I guess,” I say, anxious to get my brother back on topic. His voice is exhausted and despairing. I hesitate in pushing him any harder; his week was every bit as long as mine. Yet concern and curiosity drive me forward.

“Andrew, what’s going on?”

He sighs, his breath clogging up the speaker momentarily. “I don’t even know if Angie and I are still dating. In the past month, I’ve gotten three texts and two emails from her. We talked on the phone once, for half an hour.”

I press the phone to my ear harder, as if in doing so, I will wring the answers to life from its cordless existence. “You haven’t talked to Angie on the phone in a month?”

Some people have good families. I was blessed with a great family. In many ways, they have anchored me to the only normal parts of life I possess. They have surrounded me with love and smothered me with care—maybe too much at times. My siblings are the people I am closest to in this life. As the youngest, I was constantly in awe of everything they could do that I could not. It seems as if the first half of my life has been waiting until I was “old enough” to do what the big kids were doing—whether that was wandering out from our beach-house alone or playing in the cranberry bogs behind our little cottage.

Andrew, my oldest brother, has always been a demi-god to me. He could do no wrong; bold, adventurous, always pushing the limits, daring. I was his faithful cohort, and he was the leader of every exploit embarked upon. Unlike many older brothers, he never pushed me away as the annoying youngest sibling that I’m sure I was. He always had a special task for me, some sort of job that no

one else could do, something that made me feel useful and needed. He blocked my pain of being left out or left behind more times than I can remember. Parry, block.

I remember one afternoon when I was about ten years old at our family beach house in Massachusetts. My three older siblings and I had gone to dam up the entrance to a creek, preventing the coming tide. The plan was to hold the dam for as long as possible, and just as it broke, get into the water and be swept down the creek in the crash of salty waves. My parents, always concerned for my safety, had charged my oldest brother to watch over me. We had spent the day outside, our skin soaked with more than the sun, crab-fishing. In total, we had caught 107 large crabs by the time the tide tore through our dam. Cut off from reaching our cottage by the water, we had brought a rubber dinghy with us to cross the bay and reach the mainland. However, the dinghy could not fit all four of us and the 107 crabs we wanted to take back as spoils of the afternoon. Andrew, the ever-resourceful eldest, finally decided that I should sit in the dinghy while my three older siblings swam, propelling our vessel. This was a plan that kept me, his little charge, quite safe. That is, safe from the water, but not from the surplus of crabs, waving sharp claws at my fingers and bubbling fierce crab-threats, while scuttling around the dinghy to hide under my legs or scramble over the sides into the water. The trip to the mainland was uncomfortably long for me as I prodded crabs' claws from my skin and away from my sibling's hands, which were clinging to the side of the dinghy. Even in this wet, salty, and scuttling environment, my brother's care for me was evident; he was in the water so that I didn't have to be. Parry, block.

When I was about eight, I remember bursting into tears when my father briefly mentioned at bedtime that Andrew would not be around forever. While shaking my head at my childishness now, I can also understand my reaction. I have never lived in a world where Andrew has not been a huge part of it. The thought of living without him in my day to day life was harsh enough that my eight-year-old self was sure the world was coming to an end.

Sure enough, when I was eleven, Andrew left the family. He leapt out of the nest and into Life Action Ministries, a missionary team that travels the country for ten months of the year. For seven years, I had to get used to seeing my brother once in the summer and once

in the winter. After the fifth or sixth time I said goodbye, knowing I wouldn't see him for months and months, I was finally able to speak through the tears to whisper a goodbye. But even after all the times I run at full speed down the train platform and am met with a hug from my hero, I have never successfully stopped the lump that forms in my throat. My friend, my leader, my brother, is home.

As I grew older, I came to recognize more and more traits Andrew had mastered. He kept the peace. He knew when to love and when to fight. When he spoke, Mom and Dad listened. When everything was going wrong at home, even though he was hundreds of miles away, he was the one who wrote me a long email saying how proud he was of me. He would call me randomly when I was at my wit's end because God had placed me on his heart, and my big brother was faithful to heed the call. He parried with my pain, whittling it into the shadows. Parry, block. Parry, block.

Andrew clears his throat again over the phone, bringing me back to reality. I'm sitting in Cedarville University's Health and Sciences Center. I can smell the chemicals that waft through the building. The seat is rough cotton and nylon beneath my restless fingertips. My brother is still on the phone that is now hot, clutched in my hand.

"No, we haven't talked on the phone for a month."

My mind spins. Andrew-- responsible, long-suffering, a man after God's own heart-- is someone who isn't trusted? The accusations piling up around him, laid there by Angie's parents, are humiliating and insulting. Andrew and Angie's relationship is perhaps the most monitored relationship I have ever seen. My brother rarely texts Angie and sends all complicated topics through email. If they were allowed to talk on the phone, it was for twenty minutes per week, and Angie's mom had to be in the room to hear the whole conversation. The unrealistic expectations and regulations placed on the relationship were enough to make me livid; I didn't know how my brother was able to keep his calm.

In my moment of anger and indignation, I could feel my chest physically aching for the emotional agony that my older brother was enduring. For months, the relationship had been on and off, both smooth sailing and a rickety rollercoaster, with little warning and barely any communication between each transition. Andrew never complained, but in the past few phone calls to me, his voice had been getting more and more worn through. He had been experiencing

severe depression and discouragement. The sudden lack of strength and confidence in his voice did more than just worry me; it frightened me. He had poured himself into God's will for Angie and him; countless hours of prayer and counsel were behind him. The failure of the relationship would be a blow to many people, not just him.

"I'm so sorry, Andrew. That's ridiculous. How can there even be a relationship where there is no communication?"

The answer: obvious. There cannot be.

I grab a piece of paper and a pen and write three words: "drip drip drip". My heart is breaking and I don't understand why. I feel guilty; this pain is not my pain, but borrowed wounds, I write. I'm sorry. I ache because I love. And I love you.

The phone call ends, and as I slowly take the phone away from my ear, a piece of my blurry life comes into sharp focus. The pain I feel isn't wrong. Pain is what Andrew has always blocked for me; shielding me is how he loves me. The pain that tears through me like a knife now, separating my ribs and exposing my heart, is my clumsy attempt to block his pain; to love him in the way he has always loved me. I am willing to sit in a crab-filled dinghy to let him show his love, but I am more willing to get out of the boat and kick with him to show mine. Parried. Blocked.