

—DRAIN DAMAGE

by Jeff Strand

Yes, I dropped my baby sister.

Not on purpose. God, no.

It happened while I was babysitting her. She was six months old, and I'd just turned nine. Too young to be responsible for an infant, but to be fair to my mom, she hadn't gone out for a wild night on the town or anything like that. All she did was ask me to watch Laurie for a few minutes while she went to talk to our next-door neighbor. Laurie was asleep in her crib, so it really shouldn't have been a big deal.

The thing is, when you're nine, you don't necessarily obey all of your mother's instructions. Such as, oh, I don't know, the one about not taking your baby sister out of her crib. I wasn't trying to hurt her. I just wanted to pick her up. She didn't wake up as I lifted her, but she did when I walked around the living room with her—I don't think I was holding her right.

She started to squirm and cry and before I could get her back into the crib, she slipped out of my hands. Laurie hit the ground, head-first.

The floor was carpeted, so it's not like I dropped her onto concrete, but I still let out a gasp of one-hundred-percent absolute horror. I scooped up my sobbing sister and hurriedly put her back in her crib, feeling like I was going to throw up and hyperventilate at the same time.

I checked her head. There was a pink mark, but no blood or skull chips. I watched her for several minutes, stomach acids boiling. She stopped crying and went back to sleep.

As soon as my mom came home, I said "I'll be in my room!" and ran upstairs. I didn't want her to see me trembling. I closed my bedroom door and sat on my bed, an open comic book in front of me, waiting for the inevitable shout of "*Oh my God! What did you do to your sister?*"

It never came.

My dad got home from work, and my mom called me down to dinner. We had a nice meal of Hamburger Helper and my mom didn't say a single word about me potentially ruining my sister. Maybe Laurie was okay.

While Mom and Dad did the dishes, I walked over to the crib and peered over the side at her. The pink mark was gone. Laurie looked at me and giggled.

I had an awful dream that night. Laurie, who had the body of a nine-year-old but kept her infant head, stood in front of the blackboard at school. She was trying to

do a simple arithmetic problem. There was a huge chunk missing from her skull, and I could see her brain writhing around inside. It crawled out, sliced itself in half on a jagged piece of bone, and splattered onto the floor.

I had the same dream every night that week. Although the arithmetic problem changed each time.

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I knew I should tell my parents what I'd done so they could take Laurie to the doctor, but I couldn't bring myself to confess. This wasn't like having a messy room or sneaking some red licorice from my dad's private stash—if I had really hurt my sister, they might send me away. Even though I was scared for her, she seemed fine. Mom and Dad would know if something was wrong with her, right?

Of course they would. Parents knew when something was wrong with their kids. They could sense it.

Laurie was fine.

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I pretty much stopped worrying about it until Laurie's first birthday. It was an outdoor party. She was crawling around on the grass in our backyard, while about a dozen of my relatives chatted and drank. I'd been allowed to invite one friend to the party, so I'd invited Howie Taylor because he had the best comic books.

"You know who's boring?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Your baby sister."

We giggled at this clever, insightful observation.

"You know who else is boring?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Your baby sister."

We giggled some more. Howie was a witty guy, although I still only liked him for his comic books.

Laurie cooed and picked up an earthworm. It was a small one, just over an inch long, and it wrapped itself around her index finger. She smiled, then popped it into her mouth and chewed happily.

Howie burst into hysterical laughter. "Did you see that? Did you see her eat the worm?"

I couldn't even nod. Laurie's birthday cake felt like a chocolate-flavored rock in my stomach. Were babies supposed to eat worms? Was that normal? I had no idea. She was only one year old, so it was entirely possible that her sucking down a raw earthworm was nothing to be concerned about. . .but what if it *wasn't* normal? What if she was brain damaged?

"What's going on?" my mom asked, walking over to join us.

I tried to respond, but my mouth went completely dry. What was I supposed to say? "*Sorry, Mom, I think that my disobedience six months ago has transformed my sister into a worm-chomping freak?*"

"Laurie scarfed a worm!" Howie gleefully announced.

"Oh, yuck." My mom crouched down and poked her finger into Laurie's mouth.