

My Torture of a Little Brother

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2006

I was the oldest child, which means I was the bossiest child. Sally, David and George were much younger. They existed to serve me.

Danny, however, was another story. Danny was my torture of a little brother.

He first intruded on my life when I was two years old. Before Danny, things were quiet. Mumma would sit me on her lap and read to me. We took long naps together every afternoon. Papa would hoist me onto his shoulders and hop on his bike. We rode to the pond down the road, where he fished with a rod and reel and I fished with a stick and a string.

When Danny came, everything changed. He wouldn't take naps. Danny climbed on every piece of furniture we had. He fell off every piece of furniture we had. He climbed up steps. He fell down steps. He ran across our bedroom and leaped to dive-bomb his bed, hollering "Cowabunga!" He missed the bed. His face was full of band-aids and scars.

I tried to be his friend. I shared my bedroom with him. I gave him rides on my tricycle. We dressed up in old clothes and put on shows for our parents. We got lost in my grandmother's woods together. My mom called us "Hansel and Gretel." I told Danny the story of "Sleeping Beauty" every night before we went to sleep.

But Danny made it his job to torment me. One of his favorite games of torture was The Typewriter. I'd be quietly lying on my stomach on the living room floor, watching "Captain Kangaroo." Dancing Bear would be dancing around -- and around -- and around -- to a really long song. Danny wasn't interested in Dancing Bear. Suddenly I'd be flipped over onto my back, and Danny would be sitting on me, typing his fingers into my belly.

I'd tell him to stop, but then The Typewriter would turn into The Echo.

"Stop it!" I'd shout.

"Stop it!" Danny would echo, still typing, with a sickeningly sweet smile on his face.

"I'm not kidding - leave me alone!" (me).

"I'm not kidding - leave me alone!" (him).

And on and on.

As we grew into older elementary school children, our fights grew in fervor. I can't remember what any of our battles were about, but they always involved wrestling. We beat each other up. I know there will never be world peace because I have felt murder lust coursing

through my veins. I have said “I could kill you!” to Danny, and really meant it. I could taste it. And it tasted good.

I had a particular wrestling hold that brought Danny down. I looped my arm around his neck, pulled hard, and slammed him right down - like that! Boom. Got him every time. It was great to be bigger and stronger.

During summer vacations, Danny and I had brief periods of detente in our ongoing war. He had a gang of buddies that roamed our neighborhood on bicycles -- Mike DeLaney, Denny Stauber, Randy Potter, and sometimes the Schneider kids from down the alley. They all wore crew cuts, dungarees, and PF Flyers. They played “War” with finger machine guns and a lot of spit. They fought in the vacant lot across the street from our house, on the corner of Glendale and Appleton Avenue. They made forts in the scrubby trees and bushes there. Occasionally they would let me and Peggy Potter, the girl across the street, be nurses. The garage was our hospital. The boys came to the hospital after skirmishes so Peggy and I could operate on them. I didn’t understand then the strange thrill I got from bandaging those wounded soldiers.

One day Danny asked me to make him a flag. He must have got the idea from a history book he remembered from school. He told me the design he wanted on the flag: a coiled snake with its head ready to strike, and the words “DON’T DREAD ON ME.”

I got an old white pillowcase from our mom, and my box of crayons -- “magic markers” hadn’t been invented yet. That evening, I drew a coiled snake with its head ready to strike, and the words “Don’t dread on me” on the pillowcase. It was hard drawing with crayon on cloth because the cloth kept wiggling and I had to press so hard with the crayons. I worked for a long, long time.

The next day, I presented the flag to Danny and his gang. They smiled, grabbed the flag, and ran off to the vacant lot. That night I asked Danny where the flag was.

“We burned it and buried it in the vacant lot,” he said, blase.

“You BURNED IT ... AND BURIED IT?”

“Yeah, like in a real war.”

“I could kill you!”

As we grew into teenager-hood, Danny became Dan. His adventures became more bold because he wasn’t afraid of anything. I could slalom water-ski, but Dan could water-ski on a canoe paddle, making a giant rooster tail of water behind him because he leaned way over, with his shoulder almost touching the water. He wasn’t afraid to fall. Even though he was two years younger than I was, he did everything before me -- and before it was legal -- including driving, smoking and drinking.

We no longer shared a bedroom, but his bedroom was right under mine. He played his music LOUD. I'd be trying to read or study and he'd be playing "Tommy" for the hundredth time. I'd jump up as high as I could and come down BANG on my bedroom floor, like a bomb, to give him the message to SHUT UP! But it didn't help. I couldn't beat him up anymore, but I still felt the blood lust. I could kill you!

I was 17 when it occurred to me that Dan and I could be friends. My boyfriend Jim Price was best friends with his sister Lori. They shared secrets. I started talking to Dan. We played hooky from Sunday Mass together, driving out to the moors and creeks of Brookfield, just talking.

Dan was always in trouble with my dad. When he was a senior in high school, he ran away. Mum was crying. Pop didn't know what to do. I was in college, living at home. I knew approximately where Dan had fled -- a rough area just west of Marquette High. Without saying anything to my parents, I got in my Ford Pinto and went to look for Dan. It was dark and I was scared wandering through that neighborhood, but I finally found him - playing his guitar in the basement of his friend's house. I knocked on the basement window and he came upstairs.

I kind of whispered, "Dan, you gotta come home and talk to Mum. She's crying. I could kill you."

Dan came home with me. He went right to Mum. Pop came to me. He was really hot, and red in the face, and he was crying. He hugged me and said, "Thank you, Gail."

Once, when we were in our 30s, I asked Dan if he remembered that wrestling hold I used to bring him down.

"Remember? It went just like this," I said, looping my arm around his neck. I pulled on his neck like I used to, but it didn't budge.

Then with one arm, Dan picked me up. There we were, laughing, my arm still looped around his neck.

"I could kill you," I said.

"I could kill you," he echoed.

The End