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*Easter Morning*

Pen on paper

One Easter morning, my sister and I were getting ready to go to church and I was annoying her, poking her and other little sibling things; she threatened to punch me in the face if I touched her one more time. I went to church that morning with a sore nose and an unfounded anger.

My work is by no means a portrayal of my sister as malevolent. This little moment defined our early relationship as one that demonstrated a classic younger sister older sister trope; I annoyed her, and she *sometimes* fought back.

My research taught me that meaningful trusting relationships are formed through trials, tribulations, and sometimes a few punches to the face. Every moment, good or bad, builds to fully form a relationship. This is echoed in my choice to stipple. Each dot represents a moment that strengthened, or sometimes set back, the relationships in my life. One dot doesn't solely change the image, which parallels how one moment doesn't solely change a relationship.

In the artmaking process, I struggled to know when to stop; "just one more dot," I would think to myself. What I discovered from this decision-making is that I don't necessarily need to call my work done, just as a relationship is never done forming and changing. I could add hundreds more dots, and it would still be my sister and I in our little Easter dresses.

# Closed Doors, Bruised Faces, and Birthdays



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The Oxbow School

OS48

*Writers Note: In this essay, I discuss themes of trust, family relationships, and secrets. I explore these themes through research as well as through anecdotes. The anecdotes give my view on the research that precedes them. This is not to disprove or disagree with the sources but rather to give my input on them.*

## **I. Doors**

*Parent-teen relationships are an essential aspect of a young person's life. During adolescence, a teen's brain is still developing, and they need guidance from their parents to navigate through this phase of life. One crucial factor in these relationships is trust. Trust is the foundation of any healthy relationship, and it is especially crucial between parents and their teenage children. Adolescence is a time when teens are seeking greater independence and autonomy. However, they are still reliant on their parents for guidance and support. This can create tension in the relationship, as teens may feel like their parents are overly controlling or not giving them enough freedom. Trust can help to alleviate these tensions by fostering an environment of open communication and mutual respect. When parents trust their teens, they are more likely to give them the freedom they need to explore their interests and develop their identities. This can include things like allowing them to spend time with friends, pursue hobbies, and make their own decisions. When parents show that they trust their teens, they are also sending the message that they believe in their ability to make good choices. This can help to boost their self-esteem and confidence.*

*(Fretwell)*

*On the other hand, when parents don't trust their teens, it can lead to feelings of resentment and frustration. Teens may feel like their parents are being unfair or that they don't understand them. This can cause them to withdraw from their parents and become more secretive about their*

*activities and interests. This can further erode trust in the relationship, creating a vicious cycle of mistrust and secrecy. Keeping secrets can also have a significant impact on someone, particularly in parent-teen relationships. When teens keep secrets from their parents, it can be a sign that they don't feel comfortable sharing certain aspects of their lives with them. This can be due to a variety of reasons, such as fear of judgment, a desire for privacy, or a lack of trust in their parents. However, keeping secrets can also be a way for teens to avoid facing consequences for their actions. While this may provide temporary relief, it can also lead to feelings of guilt and shame. It can also create distance in the relationship, as the teen may feel like they can't be honest with their parents about what is going on in their life. When secrets are kept in a parent-teen relationship, it can create a barrier to open communication and trust. If a teen feels like they can't share certain aspects of their life with their parents, it can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. This can also lead to a breakdown in the relationship, as the teen may seek validation and support from peers or other adults. (Fretwell)*

*To build trust in a parent-teen relationship, it is essential to create an environment of open communication and honesty. Parents should strive to create a safe space for their teens to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or punishment. They should also be willing to listen and empathize with their teens, even if they don't always agree with their choices. Teens, in turn, should make an effort to be honest with their parents, even if it is difficult. They should also be willing to listen to their parent's advice and guidance, even if they don't always agree with it. By working together to create a relationship based on trust and open communication, parents and teens can strengthen their bond and help each other navigate through the challenges of adolescence. (Fretwell)*

*Governing through Trust: Community-based Link Workers and Parental Engagement in Education explains how to form trust. They break it down into 3 steps. One must establish a connectedness with the community the other person is a part of. They also must separate themselves from the sources of the other person's anxieties. Thirdly, they must remind the other person of their affinity. Through multiple interactions in which caregivers make and keep promises, people develop an expectation that others will act reliably, which strengthens their ability to trust others. Adolescents' ability to form trusting relationships is related to their psychosocial adjustment, their willingness to share information with their parents, and their achievement of autonomy in parent-adolescent relationships. (Fretwell)*

Years of my life were spent behind my closed door. I wish the door had been a point of argument, something I could bicker with my parents about. But no, it was much worse than that. The door was brought up only at certain times. Times when my parents were worried about me. The door stayed closed so they wouldn't worry about me. I thought it was better that way. If I never let them in, I couldn't kick them out. The door kept me in the comfort zone of my room. It kept them out of my space, out of my head. I never talked to my parents about my feelings, ever. When I heard of kids confiding in their parents I was confused, it was so alien to me. It was so much easier to keep the door closed than to let them in and have to explain everything. I felt alone, but it was me separating myself from others, not them separating from me. All I ever wanted was for them to be proud of me. I knew for sure they wouldn't be proud of what they saw behind that door. So I kept it closed for years. I even used to lock it. I knew I wasn't doing the most I could be doing so I kept it closed and locked until I could do what I knew I needed to, and get my act together enough to open the door.

It always came back to my closed door. Every major conflict we had came back to my bedroom door. But it wasn't just my door and we all knew that. What it all came back to was not a piece of wood, it was trust. They followed all of the steps, I mean they went above and beyond doing all the steps, but it wasn't enough. We couldn't form a trusting relationship with each other unless I opened up. The fatal missing piece my whole life was my cooperation. Even now, with my cooperation, the 3 steps aren't enough. To form trust, trust must be tested, and trust must prevail. Trust is not a thing to be had or not to be had, it's a spectrum and it can strengthen and weaken over time.

## **II. Bruised Faces**

*Exploring Mentalization, Trust, Communication Quality, and Alienation in Adolescents discusses how mentalization affects trust in adolescence. “‘Mentalization’, [is] the ability to identify thoughts and emotions in one’s self and others.” (Clarke) The findings are that as the mentalization of self and others increases, trust is challenged. “Trust may be underpinned by mentalization as the capacity to mentalize allows an adolescent to infer others’ motivations and intentions when deciding whether or not to trust someone.” This further suggests that trust is not necessarily inherent but it is much easier to form before mentalization increases in children. Communication quality, defined as the extent and quality of interactions with others, has been associated with both attachment and trust. Examining the quality of communication during adolescence is useful because communication between parents and their adolescent children may be more complex than during earlier stages of child development. Adolescents and parents typically renegotiate the rules of interaction, which is a key aspect of adolescent individuation from parents. (Clarke)*

Growing up you quickly learn your parents are perfect. They are always right, always seem to know the answers to your questions, and can always help when you need it. When you enter your teenage years you start to realize they are human. Just as much as you are. You make mistakes, and they make them too. You have good traits and bad traits and so do they. This realization about my parents came upon me gradually. More unusually, however, I had this realization about my sister who is only 2 years older than me.

Until I was 15 I thought my sister was perfect. She got good grades in all her classes, she did what our parents asked of her, and her room was somehow always perfectly clean. In 7th grade, I decided to teach myself a song on the piano because I hadn't been playing for a while. I spent hours learning all the notes and ended up learning the first page. I showed my sister and she asked if she could try; she got to page 3 before making a mistake. In elementary school I had to go to a tutor because I was bad at reading comprehension; she read for fun. Where she excelled, I struggled. I never understood how we had grown up together and ended up so different from one another. One time someone who knew both of us asked me, "Which one of y'all is what you would expect from how your parents raised you?" I acted like I didn't know the answer. The answer was her. In my mind, she was the ideal child, their ideal child. One Easter morning we were getting ready to go to church and I was annoying her, poking her and other little sibling things; she threatened to punch me in the face if I touched her one more time. I went to church that morning with a sore nose and an unfounded anger. She didn't get angry with me or bother me unless I deserved it. I didn't even see her as real.

All it took was a little effort for her to become real to me. Research would suggest it was my ADHD that hindered me from understanding her. But she hid every prior struggle from me so easily. When she lost a game or messed something up she wouldn't shed a tear. In my brain, she

didn't feel as deeply as I felt. I thought she wasn't as complex as me or the people I knew. Of course, I was wrong. She is just as complex as the rest of us and she feels just as deeply. And it only took me paying attention to realize that. Looking closely at the little things that bothered her and figuring out why they did, I realized we weren't all that different. I realized she was a lot like me. She just dealt with it differently. We had our upbringing in common and we dealt with that in different ways, but it was the same at its root. I read in *Exploring Mentalization, Trust, Communication Quality, and Alienation in Adolescents*, that once people start to understand the thoughts and feelings, and motivations of others, they cast doubt upon their relationships. But this wasn't the case for me. My relationship with my sister grew stronger once I understood her thoughts, feelings, and especially motivations. I had spent a whole life with her, and plenty of opportunities to form a relationship with her. But it wasn't until I mentalized her that I was able to take our bond to a new level.

### **III. Birthdays**

*"Secrecy is the conscious commitment to withhold information from others."(Bedrov) People typically keep secrets as a form of self-defense, with the main goals being to avoid criticism and uphold healthy relationships. Information that suggests significant fitness costs, such as ill health, mating infractions, and social exchange violations, is a common component of distressing secrets. All of these factors can lead to stigmatization and social rejection. Secrets are also kept to protect those who are close to us because revealing them could make them feel distressed, hurt, or betrayed. (Bedrov)*

Practicing piano was especially difficult for Carissa. She would practice little sections of the songs she was learning. In between sections, she would scurry over to the photo albums on the



nearby shelf. She would look at photos of her mom but quickly put them away in just enough time to go back to playing the piano to avoid raising suspicion. This balancing act went on through all her hours of practicing. Over and over she would play a few notes, run to the photos, and run back to the piano. She was 5 when she saw a photo of her mother and wondered, how old is she in that photo? It was then that she realized she didn't know her mother's birthday. She thought she wasn't supposed to ask about it. She never talked about her mother growing up. She assumed her father and sister didn't want to bring up the subject. Over time she would get little hints here and there about it. "Your mother was born in the year of the rooster," her grandmother once revealed. "Your mother was a Sagittarius," her father once said. Once she had to file something so she needed her birth certificate. It was kept next to her mother's death certificate; she remained frustrated for days that she didn't look at the death certificate to see her mother's birthday. She wanted to know this simple little thing so much. Each December she could feel it coming but she never knew quite when. Eventually, Carissa had a family tree assignment for school so she had the perfect excuse to ask about her mother's birthday. She built up the courage to ask her father and he was surprised by the question. "What do you mean 'when is your mother's birthday?' Do you not know?" He said with genuine confusion. "You never told me and I never asked," a young Carissa responded. "December 16th," her father responded. This taught both her and me that secrets aren't always kept on purpose. When people shy away from tough topics they often don't get discussed at all. Secrets can be scary, but asking is the solution. Carissa and I both ask a lot of questions now; they are the key to learning what you want to know.

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