

The evening Petey Sikorsky ruined his life, business was booming.

That night, Magda Sikorsky's gallery was full to the brim with people, and not just any people, but her ideal clientele. Deep pocketed tourists, the newly nouveau rich, and posturing suburbanites desperate to impress. The sort of people who could be sold an ice cube while living in the North Pole, so long as they were told that particular ice cube was a commentary on respectability politics. Magda's gallery had been designed to lure in these sorts of people like swarming flies to a pot of honey. Every architectural corner of the gallery's sleek white facade and manicured interior screamed "upscale" and the curated selection of sculptures, photos, and paintings were delightfully inaccessible. "The average person has very low self esteem," Magda had once explained to Petey. "They'll pay premium for something they don't understand, just so no one notices they don't understand it."

Petey wasn't sure that even Magda understood the art at this particular opening. He wasn't sure there was anything to understand. The artist, was an absolutely prolific producer of found sculpture (aka trash she took from dumpsters and declared art) and blurry photographs of miscellaneous objects from odd angles. Magda was billing Sierra as "The Dadaist Darling of the Art World" and needless to say, the 25 year old had taken the art world by storm. As for Magda, well, she was eager to get as much as possible out of Sierra before her patrons decided that placing actual pieces of garbage in their living rooms and calling them art was no longer the latest trend in unnecessary status symbols.

Petey's thoughts on Sierra were conflicted. On the one hand, he thought she was a terrible person, pretentious and silly and hypocritical. He had once heard her pronounce Descartes as "Desk-art." He thought her art was as stupid as her opinions, if not more so. As far as Petey was

concerned, Sierra only had one redeeming quality. On the other hand, that one redeeming quality was perhaps enough to make up for all the rest. Sierra was Jeanie's older sister.

Jeanie. If Petey had been asked to explain Jeanie, he wouldn't have known quite where to start. Jeanie wrote notes on and highlighted fiction books she read for fun. Jeanie was afraid of small dogs, but not big ones. She was one quarter of an inch taller than Petey, which didn't bother him, really. Much. She was covered from head to toe in freckles, dark pin pricks in light skin like a galaxy's worth of inverse stars. She had a habit of picking at her split ends in order to avoid eye contact. She was in the grade above Petey at school, and she compulsively eavesdropped on the conversations of strangers in public spaces. Once, when Petey and Jeanie were pulling an all nighter studying for a test in their only shared class (physics,) she had leaned her head on his shoulder and almost fallen asleep before catching herself, jerking up, and muttering something about the speed of light. She was allergic to pistachios.

She had started coming to the gallery with her sister about a year and a half ago, after their mom had died and Jeanie moved into Sierra's apartment and transferred to Petey's school. Every time she'd come to the gallery, she and Petey had ended up off in some corner, talking and laughing about life and about art. They had the exact same opinions about Rothko, about Murakami, about Koons, about everything save for Sierra's artwork.

"You have to see that her stuff is awful," Petey would insist.

"It's not so bad..." Jeanie would say. Then she'd stare at her hands in a way that would make Petey think she was lying, that she knew Sierra's stuff was exactly that bad. In reality, Jeanie was just staring at her hands because she was bad at disagreeing with people out loud.

“I don’t know why you always defend her,” Petey would say. “Just because she’s your sister-”

“Not just because she’s my sister,” Jeanie would say simply, but with surprising force. And so she and Petey would talk about something else.

But this particular gallery opening, the one on the night in question, this had been different. Jeanie hadn’t come over to talk to Petey. She hadn’t even looked at him, or seemed like she was looking for him. She’d made a beeline straight for a particular corner of the gallery, the one with the bench, and plopped herself down in front of a wall of Sierra’s atrocious photos. She hadn’t budged since.

Petey was not sure how best to handle this situation.

There was no real reason, no good reason, why Petey couldn’t just go up and start talking to Jeanie. But Petey had never had much use for people his own age before Jeanie, and so he’d never really learned to speak to them. One of the many impossibilities that formed Petey’s friendship with Jeanie was that his lack of social finesse had never been an issue for the two before. However, this night, Petey couldn’t help second guessing himself, almost compulsively- as if he sensed trouble on the horizon of this interaction. What if she hadn’t spoken to him because she was upset? Well, if she was upset, then of course he should talk to her, to see if he could help. But what if she was upset because of him? Then he should still talk to her, right, in order to figure out the problem and resolve it, that was reasonable. But what if he only made things worse? But how could he make things worse? Would he embarrass himself? It seemed highly likely Petey would manage to embarrass himself, especially given the sailor suit.

The sailor suit had seemed like a good idea earlier in the day, when Magda had sent him off with a hand wave to get dressed for the gallery opening. Petey had been plotting this particular minor rebellion for a few weeks, ever since he'd found the suit in their attic, a relic that had been purchased for Petey to wear for a picture on a holiday card when he was 10. In the five years since he'd worn the suit, Petey had grown, though not as much as he would have liked. The collared top of the suit now barely grazed his midriff. The stiff wool shorts did not quite button, and gave him a perpetual wedgie. The matching sailor cap fit perfectly, and sat jauntily on his mop of black curls.

Magda, when she had seen this particular outfit choice, had stretched her very white teeth into a broad smile.

"Why Petey! Don't you look just precious," she had crooned, in the tone of voice Petey hated most. It was the tone Magda took when she knew she was saying exactly what Petey did not want to hear.

"Thank you," Petey replied stiffly, his excitement about seeing her reaction to the outfit deflating from his face like so much hot air.

"You know... some mothers might accuse you of deliberately dressing to embarrass them, if you were their child and you showed up to one of their important events dressed that way," Magda said in a deliberately cheery, almost sing songy tone.

"Why Magda, that sounds almost like an accusation," Petey had responded.

"Not at all, not at all! Though some children might only show up dressed like that if they were counting on their mothers making them change clothes," Magda folded her arms and

looked Petey up and down. “Got that out of the attic, did you? I bet it’s quite tight. A bit uncomfortable, maybe?”

It was. Petey said nothing.

“Well, we all must make sacrifices for fashion,” Magda had declared smiling, and then returned to the work of preparing the exhibit. And so, Petey had spent the gallery opening thus far in the sailor suit, and now found himself with one more reason to feel uncomfortable walking up to talk to Jeanie. An hour before, he had thought Jeanie would find the costume funny, that the two of them could laugh about it. Now he was less sure.

But whatever. He couldn’t stand around staring at the back of her head all night.

“Jeanie?” he asked, walking up to her beside the bench.

“Mmm?” Jeanie responded, not looking at him. She was still facing the wall of Sierra’s photos, her eyes partially glazed over.

“May I sit here?” Petey pressed.

“Mmm.”

Petey sat. It was a start. “You’re not going to say anything about what I’m wearing?”

“Mm-what?” Jeanie said, finally turning to look at him. She had the vaguely disoriented quality of someone who had just been woken up from deep sleep. She took in the sight of Petey in the sailor suit placidly. “Oh. Is that some sort of, some sort of piece?”

“...Yes. It’s performance art, yes,” Petey nodded firmly, deciding to cut his losses with the lie and not go into the full story. Sleepy indifference wasn’t quite the response he’d hoped for from Jeanie, but he’d take it. “Where’s Sierra? I didn’t see her when you came in.”

“You know what she’s like with that 8 ball,” Jeanie waved a hand dismissively. Her eyes flicked back to the wall of photographs. “She’ll get here eventually.”

The two sat in silence for a few moments. As it so happened, Jeanie and Petey both suffered from occasional bouts of restless leg syndrome, and at this point in time both of them started tapping away, with neither’s beat quite falling in line with the other. Meanwhile, Jeanie looked at the wall and Petey looked at Jeanie.

“Are you ok, Jeanie?” Petey, eventually asked. The tapping stopped. “You seem more out of it than usual. You’re looking at these photographs like you’re expecting them to start moving, and... Could you just tell me what’s going on?”

“Mmm,” Jeanie shrugged. She would have been content to end the conversation with that, but she knew Petey wouldn’t drop it, so she sighed and added, “I’m just wondering which one’s will get sold.”

“Since when do you care which of your sister’s crap pieces get picked up?”asked Petey.

“...You think that they’re all crap?” Jeanie’s brow furrowed with concern

“Everything Sierra makes is crap.”

“I hate it when you say stuff like that,” Jeanie said. “You know I hate it.”

Petey’s face contorted into a pout. “I know.”

Jeanie decided to change the subject. “You see that one in the middle? The sort of upper right middle, number 17. I think that ones me. I think Sierra took it while I was sleeping, I’ve been trying to work up the willpower to be upset about it, but I’m not even really all that surprised.”

“Is that why you’ve been staring at this wall?”

“You’re like a dog with a bone sometimes, Petey.”

“Dammit, Jeanie. This is going to drive me nuts!” Petey jerked up, gesturing at the wall.

“Is that why you’re doing this? Are you trying to drive me crazy?”

Jeanie only rolled her eyes, then glanced behind him. “Your mom’s coming.”

Petey turned and followed Jeanie’s gaze. Sure enough, there was Magda, click clicking her way across the gallery floor on a pair of immaculate patent pumps. She had a sort of vague smile on her face, her very best “hello I am the ever so approachable gallery owner and what can I sell you today?” expression. Jeanie and Petey both felt that there was something intensely predatory about Magda when she made that face, but neither could ever quite pinpoint what it was. The flare of her nostrils, maybe.

“Hello, you two. Jeanie, what a lovely sweater you’re wearing.” Magda said, her face relaxing when she reached the bench where the two were sitting. Jeanie took a moment to look down self consciously at her sweater, which was oversized and the color of oatmeal and smelled perpetually like someone’s grandfather.

“Hi Magda,” Jeanie and Petey said in unison, half singsong. It’s worth noting that neither would have been so sassy if the other wasn’t present. Jeanie was actually terrified of Magda. As for Petey, well, Petey tended to be more rebellious when he had an audience. Particularly when the audience was Jeanie.

“What brings you over to our little corner, Magda?” asked Petey.

“I actually needed to speak to Jeanie. I was wondering if you’d be willing to help me out with your sister?”

“Sierra is here?” Jeanie asked.

“She’s late, but she’s here,” Magda said to Jeanie. “She’s got that damn 8 ball with her, and you’re much better at managing her when she’s like this than I am.”

“Mmm...” Jeanie wasn’t quite sure she agreed with that assessment. She thought it was probably less that Magda was bad at handling Sierra and more that she didn’t want to bother.

“Jeanie doesn’t want to leave this wall of photos,” Petey piped in. “She’s watching it.”

“Really, how interesting,” Magda said in the vaguest of tones possible. She turned to face the other end of the gallery. “Sierra! Sierra, darling, over here! Dr. Michaels, would you mind bringing Sierra over? There’s someone I’d like the two of you to talk to!” Magda then turned back to Petey and Jeanie with a pointed look. “Best behavior, ok kids? Dr. Michaels is thinking of buying the whole sculpture garden.”

Petey and Jeanie watched as across the room a bespeckled and liver-spotted man took Sierra by the arm and essentially began to drag her over to their bench, as though the woman was a rag doll. Sierra was good looking in that effortless sort of way, with a jaw strong enough to cut glass, eyes that Petey felt looked dead but others had described as “dreamy,” and with hair a livid red that hadn’t seen a brush in so long it had matted together in places. Jeanie noticed that her sister was actually wearing one of Jeanie’s dresses, one made of a sort of shiny silk. It looked better on Sierra, so Jeanie resolved not to be too annoyed. At least she’d put on clothes. Besides, the sheen of the dress sort of went well with the magic 8 ball her sister had clutched in her hands.

“I’ve been having such trouble- such trouble- trying to get her to tell me about her work,” said the man, whom induction would indicate was Dr. Michaels.

“She won’t talk to you unless you ask her direct questions,” Jeanie explained, looking as though she wanted to sigh but was fighting the urge.

“But I did ask-”

“And even then, she won’t answer you unless the magic 8 ball tells her to,” Jeanie continued. Jeanie had explained this to people many, many times.

“This is who I wanted you to talk to, Dr. Michaels!” Magda gushed. The sharky look was back in her eyes. “This is Jeanie, Sierra’s sister. She’s very familiar with her sister’s process, she can help the two of you communicate.”

“Like a translator?” asked Dr. Michaels.

“Oh boy,” muttered Petey. He shifted uncomfortably, watching Jeanie’s face flush. In general, Jeanie shied away from conflict, which meant she tended to bottle stuff up. When she did snap, it more often than not had to do with her sister.

“She doesn’t need a translator,” said Jeanie, tensely. “She just needs patience. If you want to know something, ask her. If she doesn’t answer, ask again until she does. It’s not hard.”

“I don’t know why she can’t just talk to me,” huffed Dr. Sikorsky.

“It’s art!” Jeanie exclaimed, her voice coming out in a sharp little squeak. This made her blush more deeply, and she found herself stumbling over her words. “It’s about, it’s about... free will! And, um, waves, and something to do with accepting the randomness of, of- about how

everything is meaningless, and how that means that it's meaningless to- dammit. I'm bad at this, Sierra you know I'm bad at explaining this. Would you just talk to the guy, please?"

Sierra shook the magic 8 ball. "Ask again later," said Sierra.

"Look, Magda why don't you wait till whenever 'later' is and do the asking, I don't think I'm going to be any help after all," said Jeanie. She suddenly had the overwhelming urge to take the 8 ball and smash it onto the ground, and she really might have, but then they would have been right back to where they started.

Really, the whole thing with the 8 ball had been Jeanie's fault, which was possibly (probably) why she was so very defensive about it. It had all started with a stupid conversation. Jeanie had known the conversation was stupid at the time, and that she was better off keeping her mouth shut, but she hadn't. Jeanie loved her sister, but she didn't always understand her, and though she tried, she didn't always understand her art. Still, Jeanie knew that Sierra at least took it seriously, and so she tried to take Sierra's opinions seriously. But on the day of the conversation in question... well, Sierra wouldn't stop going on and on about nihilism, and how nothing means anything, and about the illusion of free will, and how cause and effect could all just be an illusion, and basically just regurgitating all the philosophical and self contradictory nonsense that generally fueled her strange behavior and stranger works of art. And Jeanie didn't get it, and she had been frustrated and insecure about not getting it, and she was already consumed with her own insecurities about art and if she was good enough and thoughts about being compared to her sister and... and Petey's words kept ringing in her head. She was beginning to think Petey was right, and that she didn't always get Sierra's art because sometimes there was nothing to "get." And so Jeanie had pointed out that if what Sierra had described was

really how she viewed the world, it didn't make much sense why Sierra did anything. Why bother eating, or moving? Why bother making art? If there were no actual choices, and if even if there were choices they wouldn't matter because nothing matters, why did Sierra even bother to go through the motions of life? Jeanie hadn't expected Sierra to listen to her. Jeanie, as a general rule, didn't expect anyone to listen to her... but Sierra, being Sierra, couldn't help but be the exception to this rule like every other. Not only did she listen to Jeanie, but she was convinced.

And so Sierra stopped. Everything.

She stopped moving, eating, she tried to stop blinking (with less success than the rest.) Right there in the living room of their apartment, Sierra just... laid down and stopped. Froze. No matter what Jeanie said or did, she wouldn't get up. She wouldn't talk to her. Jeanie didn't know what to do. She could call the hospital, but this... well, this wasn't the first time Sierra had gone to a questionable extreme. Rather than get her sister sent through the psych ward and pumped full of pills that wouldn't do anything to help but would just result in a terrible few days of withdrawal once Sierra was out of the hospital and refused to keep taking them, Jeanie decided to see if Sierra would eventually break out of this particular funk on her own. So with a guilty conscious, Jeanie had gone to sleep... only to find Sierra still on the living room floor the next morning.

Now, Jeanie was used to dealing with artistic temperaments. Jeanie and Sierra's father was a self proclaimed airbrush tattoo guru, and before he'd taken off when Jeanie was eight, she had clocked many hours of experience in talking him out of decorating her skin with flowers before sending her to school. Her mother, before she had died, had been convinced that she was psychic, and Jeanie had swallowed her tongue for years of dream interpretations over breakfast,

knowing it wasn't worth the fight. And so when faced with her older sister, lying motionless on the floor of their apartment for going on twelve hours, it didn't take Jeanie long to think of a way to help manage the situation. Jeanie figured Sierra had backed herself into a corner with this whole performance, and needed a way out that wouldn't hurt her artistic pride. If Jeanie could talk Sierra into behaving like this, she figured she could talk her out of it.

And so Jeanie had skipped school that day and gone to the dollar store, and come home with a plastic bag. After a few more hours of Sierra showing no signs of changing her mind, Jeanie had sat herself down beside her sister. "Sierra," Jeanie began, "I think I spoke... thoughtlessly earlier, when I said you should do nothing because anything else would be a choice. You lying here on the ground like this is also a choice, if you think about it. Everything's a choice, right? So whether you ignore the urge to eat, to move to sleep or give into those urges... it's all the same. So is actively resisting the urges you feel, urges to eat, to move, to sleep... either obeying those urges or forcefully ignoring them is a choice."

Sierra didn't move. Jeanie hadn't figured that little speech alone would be enough, but that's why she had brought a prop. Jeanie pulled the magic 8 ball out of the bag, and placed it next to Sierra's head.

"I've brought you something, here," said Jeanie. "See? This way, whenever you have the urge to do something, or are asked to do something, or find yourself considering speaking to someone, shake this. That way, you're not the one making the choice. Does that make sense, Sierra?"

Sierra didn't move.

“I’m really sorry I said that stuff earlier, you know. I was being a jerk,” Jeanie said, not moving from her crouch besides her sister. “I’m really sorry. Aren’t you hungry? Do you want to get some food?”

At first, Sierra didn’t do anything. Then, she sat up and picked up took the magic 8 ball, shook it, then read it.

“Yes,” Sierra said. “Let’s get some food.”