

Brothers, Calendars, and Lies

By Hannah Clague

Lots of things in life tell lies. Ellie's Keep-N-Clean Spray bottle, for example, claims loud and clear that it is the "Best Brand of Cleaning Supply in America". That's a lie; I have proof. It can't even *begin* to remove half the stains that Clean-a-riffic Cleaning Solution can. *That's* the truth. The ads for Nutri-Fast in my mother's magazines lie, too. I'm sure the people in the ads have never even *touched* a bottle of that stuff, let alone lost "50 pounds by drinking just eight ounces a day for only four weeks!" The problem is, though, that the one thing in life that I wish didn't tell the truth always does. It is constantly 100% dead-on, as long as someone remembers to flip the page every month, which is one chore that Ellie would never forget. Calendars, unfortunately, don't lie.

"Tuesday, August 15th," My cell phone told me in its little automated voice. I glanced at my computer, and the bright display confirmed it. Only 14 more days until Sam would get into his car, and head off into the big blue world, leaving me alone in this empty white house, with only Ellie for company. In 335 hours, 25 minutes, and somewhere around 50 seconds, the moving van would arrive, driven by strong men in "Michael's Moving" t-shirts. They'd carry all of my brother's stuff up that little loading platform, and then follow him across the country, covering miles and miles of highway. They'd go all the way to Dartmouth, never looking back, never even thinking about the girl at the window; the one who'd been watching, crying as they drove away.

"BARBARAAAAA!"

I jumped, Ellie's voice pulling me out of my reverie.

"IT'S TIME FOR BREAKFAST!"

"COMING!" I called back, and then rolled off of my bed. My feet hit the floor a little harder than I'd anticipated, and I stumbled, catching a glimpse of my face in the mirror as I tried to catch myself. I ran to the bathroom, turned on the warm water, and then tried in vain to scrub the tear stains off of my cheeks.

"YOUR PANCAKES ARE GONNA GET COLD, BARB! HURRY UP!"

I sighed loudly, quickly pulling a brush through my hair. Ellie always got so uptight about her cooking. It had to be the exact right temperature, not to mention fresh on the

table, in order for her to be happy. She was a *great* chef, though, so I guess she had permission to strive for perfection. But I didn't care whether or not my syrup got down to room temperature before I poured it on my pancakes. It was still syrup, and they were still pancakes.

When I finally reached the bottom of the stairs, Ellie was just putting my plate back into the microwave. She looked at me and frowned as I slid into a chair. "That took long enough, Barbara," she said. "Your breakfast dropped a full two degrees."

"God, Ellie, that's practically ice cold." I smiled a small smile at her, trying to hide the lingering sadness in my features. I attempted a giggle. It sounded pretty real, considering.

Ellie didn't fall for it. She knew me too well. "Oh, Barb. Don't worry," she said quietly. "Everything will be fine." The microwave beeped, and she brought my plate over to the table, setting it down and sliding into the chair next to me. "You and me, we'll have a lot of fun together. Even without Sam." I nodded solemnly, looking away. Of course she would say that; she believed it. Ellie was like calendars; she didn't lie. But how could it be true?

I fought back the tears that threatened to start falling again, and silently started to cut my pancakes into little squares. Ellie watched me for a while, then went back to the kitchen and started to clean the griddle, leaving me alone—just me, my thoughts, and my pancakes.

All of my life, Sam had been there for me. He'd always help me with my homework, and would play make-believe and dress-up when Mom and Dad weren't around. He was the type of brother who would invite his little sister to come to the mall with his friends, and make sure that they hit the pink, frilly stores as well as the hard-core guy ones. He knew that a kid needs attention, and since our parents weren't giving it to me, he took the job upon himself.

Ellie helped him, of course. She had come to live with us before I was born. My mother already had one son, and was having trouble fitting parenting into her schedule, packed as it was with all the parties and things she just *had* to go to. With a second baby on the way, she knew she was going to have even *less* time available for playing mother. So, she hired Ellie. It's the best decision she's ever made, in my book.

Officially, Ellie was our cook. She catered all of the fancy events my parents held, and made up for what they lacked in cooking expertise. But really she was more than that. She acted as our replacement parent; she taught us how to walk, signed school papers, and attended various dance recitals and sporting events. Sam and I, we loved Ellie. Maybe even more than our real mom and dad.

At school, Sam was always the popular one. He was the captain of the soccer team, and everyone believed in the #1 emblazoned on his jersey. Sam got invited to every party on earth. He had millions of friends. Every girl in the school wanted to be his. And then there was me.

Anyone who observed the lunchroom scene at my school would assume that I was with the popular kids. I sat at the table that the kings and queens ruled. But I didn't deserve my place; I didn't belong. They put up with me because my father was a high-powered executive. One with a lot of money. He was like their fathers, so they thought I should be like them. They didn't seem to realize that I wasn't.

Really, I belonged with the literate, all A+s kids. I always had a book with me, no matter what the occasion. The problem was that the so-called "geeks" didn't see me as I really was; they didn't see the book under my arm. They only saw my dad's job, his annual salary, and where I sat in the lunch room. Whenever I approached them, they turned me away, usually with a very long, multi-letter word.

It wasn't fair that the kids at school judged me based on my family, as my parents were a pretty bad excuse for one. Sure, my dad had a lot of money, but he was never much of a father. He never took Sam fishing, or read me a bedtime story in the evenings. He was never home in time to eat the dinners that Ellie cooked. He was always at the office, or at a meeting, or visiting a client. He was never around to get to know us, so we never got to know him. He was a name, "Mr. Williams", nothing more.

Except to my mother. She worshiped my father, always giving him lavish gifts on their anniversary, even when he forgot the day altogether. But he always took her to fancy parties, and bought her anything her heart desired. My mother was the opposite of Ellie and calendars. She lied. She said she loved my father, but really she loved his money. She also said that she loved Sam and me. But when dealing with less-than-truthful people, you can never know for sure.

On the wall in our foyer, displayed in plain sight where no one could possibly miss it, hung our family portrait. My parents had it done professionally. The four of us are sitting there, perfectly matching in our little blue outfits, with fake smiles plastered on our faces. Anyone who saw it said that it was “lovely”, or “charming”. But it wasn’t. Not really. It wasn’t my family. It was only the people who pretended to be. That picture was a lie.

In my life, I had Sam and Ellie. That was it. No friends, no parents, no one but the two of them. That was why I couldn’t bear the thought of my brother going off to college. Without him, only Ellie would be there to pick me up when I fell down, to help me when I needed it. Ellie was great, but I wanted Sam. He was the only person who understood me head to toe, inside and out. He was my brother. And that was something Ellie couldn’t replace.

My pancakes were getting cold. I could hear Ellie in the kitchen, pretending to wash dishes while she fretted about me getting tongue-freeze. I stabbed a couple of syrupy pieces with my fork. No good ever came of making Ellie worry. Plus, she already had enough to sweat over, what with Sam leaving and all. Sam. God, I was going to miss him. I chewed and swallowed, but didn’t really taste anything.

From its spot on the wall, the calendar was mocking me. “Look at me,” it seemed to say. “I’ll show you just how long you have until Sam goes away.”

I frowned at it. Stupid, truthful piece of paper. The date of Sam’s departure was ingrained in my mind, always at the front of my consciousness. I sat there for a minute, staring at August 29th and beginning to wonder just how long it was going to be before my brother came *home*.

I stood up, went over to the calendar, and started counting days. He was scheduled to fly in the day before Christmas. I flipped past September, moving on to October. As the number grew higher, the sadness in my heart swelled.

In the end, the total came to be 132. One hundred thirty-two days from now, Sam would be back at home, having experienced all the freedoms of college without me. I sighed. More than a third of a year to go. And of course, I was stuck with this calendar right here to remind me. It felt like a double pinky promise, knowing that the date was set in stone. Thanks, Mr. Calendar. Thank you ever so much.

“Barbara? Are you done with your breakfast yet?” Ellie appeared in the doorway, hands on her hips. “I’m about done with the dishes. I just need yours to finish.”

I looked my plate. It was full of little pancake squares. Little *uneaten* pancake squares. Ellie saw me glance down and followed my eyes to my breakfast.

“What? Is it too cold?”

“No, it’s not that. I guess I’m just not hungry.”

Ellie sighed. “Okay, then. I guess I’ll just throw it away.” She picked up the plate.

“I’m sorry, Ellie.”

“No, no. It’s fine, Barb. I understand why you don’t have much of an appetite. A lot’s going on these days.” Her smile held a touch of remorse. She obviously realized that I wasn’t exactly up to talking about the Sam thing. “Anyway, your brother’s in the backyard. He might like some company. Is there anything you need?” She turned to leave.

“No. I’m fine, Ellie. Thanks, though.” She nodded and left the room. I was alone again, and suddenly all-by-myself was not something I wanted to be. I decided that I’d take Ellie’s advice and to go talk to Sam. Maybe if I started saying goodbye now, it wouldn’t be so hard when he actually had to leave.

I opened the screen door and stepped out into the steamy August heat. It’s funny how everyone looks forward to summer, only thinking of days off of school and swimming at the local pool. Then, when it actually comes, all they do is sit around and complain about the heat. Not that I blame them. It must have been in the hundreds.

Sam was lying on a beach towel in the middle of the yard, drinking Mountain Dew and aimlessly flipping through the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He looked laidback, the opposite of how I felt. I walked over to him, kicked at the grass until it looked like a decent enough resting place, then sat down, leaning back on my elbows.

Sam lowered his sun glasses to look at me, secret spy style. Apparently my entrance had been amusing, for a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“Can I laugh?” That was my brother for you: Mr. Polite, with Dr. Tease always right along beside.

I opened my mouth, some smart retort on my tongue, but he was already chuckling away, rolling around on the ground.

“Ugh. You ask me for permission to laugh at me; then don’t pay attention long enough for me to say no. Nice, Sam.”

“What? You’re the funny one. I have every right.” He smiled at me full out, his laughter flaring again. I rolled my eyes, then stared up at the sky, and began counting the sheep-shaped clouds while I waited for him to get over it.

A few seconds later his shadow blocked my view.

“Okay, Barb. Sorry about that. I’m ready now. What do you want?” His expression was totally sincere, but I ignored him. I come out here to tell him how much I’ll miss him, and he wastes almost a full minute of precious time *laughing* at me. I hate him. And I wasn’t even all that funny.

Sam looked at me, concern now touching his features. “Barbara, what is it? You aren’t usually so sassy. What’s your problem?” He spoke softly, gently. He really wanted to understand.

I sighed. “You know what my problem is, Sam.”

He looked at me some more, trying to read my face. I stared back, pain obviously the dominant emotion on my face.

“Barb...”

When he spoke my name, I broke. The tears I had been hiding from Ellie started to flow freely now, and strange sobbing noises escaped between my lips.

“Oh, Barbara. Don’t cry. Shh. It’s okay.”

Unlike most brothers, Sam knew me well enough to know exactly what I needed when I cried. He pulled me into his arms, and just held me there. That was all. That was enough.

A little while later, after I had shed enough tears to fill the Atlantic Ocean, Sam shifted me to the side, and stood up. He extended his hand, reaching back down to pull me to my feet.

“Come on. I want to show you something.” He grabbed his towel and magazine, handed me the pop bottle, and led the way into the house.

I’d been in Sam’s room bazillions of times. The navy blue walls, chunky carpet, and faded bedspread were like a home to me. I knew all of his stuff by heart, from the old Peyton Manning action figure to the ever-present pile of dirty laundry in front of the

dresser. But as I walked through the door he held open for me, I got this odd feeling that told me something was off. I looked around, wondering what had changed. A poster was missing from the wall, and all of his soccer trophies had disappeared.

“Where’s all your stuff?” I asked him, perplexed. Had some evil crook come and stole all of his prized possessions?

He smiled a small, sad smile at my horrified expression. “I’ve started packing, Barb. It’s all in boxes.” He pointed to the far corner of the room, where a stack of cardboard cubes stood, brimming with things my brother was taking with him on his long journey to Dartmouth.

I found myself jealous of a bunch of Sam’s junk. “Can you fit me in one of those?” I questioned. “I think they sell big ones at U-Haul. You could bring me to college with you!”

Sam laughed, and the sorrowful atmosphere lightened just a bit. “Sorry, but I kind of think not.” He glanced at me. “Hey, don’t look like that. Sure, I’m leaving, but it’s not *that* bad. The world isn’t coming to an end.”

I shrugged and looked away, feeling melancholy again. “So. What did you want to show me?”

Sam bent over and picked up one of the boxes. He dug through it, looking for something. “Aha! Yup, this is it. Come here, Barb. Look.” He sat down on his bed and patted the bedspread beside him. I crossed the room and peered over his shoulder, curious about what he wanted to show me.

Gingerly, my brother pulled an old, tattered photograph out of the box. The edges were ragged, and the once-vibrant colors were fading. It looked like it had been handled often. “Here, look. It’s you and me when we were little. And Ellie too, of course.” He handed me the photo, being extra careful not to hurt it.

It had been taken years ago, when I was around three and Sam was eight, but I remembered the day like it had been only yesterday. Ellie had decided we needed to get out of the house, and lugged us to the Toledo Zoo. Sam and I had loved the animals, but they had not loved me so much. Sam had wandered off to find a bathroom, and Ellie had taken me to see the lions. When the leader of the pride growled at me, making me cry, Sam had appeared out of nowhere. He just showed up, to make his little sister all better.

Ellie had snapped a picture right at that moment. He was standing there, arms open, and I was running into them.

Ellie is not a photographer, and her angle had been off. She had managed to get her left foot in the picture, who knows how. Looking at it, I realized that *this*, not the framed knock-off on the wall, was my real family picture.

“See, Barb? You’re my little sister. I’ll always be there when you need me. Even when I’m all the way in New Hampshire.”

I looked up at him, tearing my eyes away from the photograph. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

In just 332 hours, my brother was going to leave me. I knew it for a fact. But I also knew that he’d be there whenever, however I needed him to be. He’d be right on the other side of my cell phone, just seven numbers plus an area code away. Besides, he was coming home for Christmas, which was only 132 days away. I was relying on that number. Sad, but true.

I had circled December 25th in bright red, so that I could watch it getting closer and closer. I wasn’t worried, though. I knew that the day would arrive right on time, because calendars, just like my brother, keep their promises.

