

Are You Ready for Some Football?

“Where are you going?” my brother asked impatiently.

“Nina and I are going out to get lunch,” I replied.

“But it’s Sunday, you can’t leave,” he said, still trying to comprehend my statement.

“I don’t care,” I shot back, before fully contemplating the weight of my words.

All heads on the couch turned, and before I knew it, I had all eight eyes of my brothers’ fixed on my face in looks of disgust. None of them could believe that I could be abandoning them, abandoning Sunday football, just to go out and get some lunch.

Sunday in the Browning household, is a day filled with religion, but not with the type of religion centered on god or a place of worship. No, on Sunday my brothers worship football and their temple is the big screen TV in the center of our living room. Every Sunday, I am shaken out of bed by the yells and screams of my family. Every Sunday, I stroll down the stairs, half-awake only to just make it to the couch before I plop back down and resume my sleeping status. Every Sunday, is football day in the Browning household, and football comes first.

Growing up with four older brothers, I was always taught that football was life, and I never doubted that every other family lived as I did. I was treated as an equal in my family, and because my brothers could never comprehend how to treat a girl as an equal, they simply treated me as one of their own, as a boy. I grew up with the same haircuts they had, the same clothing they had, and the same mannerisms. To my mother’s dismay, there was not a single feminine bone in my body. I loved growing up as a boy because I never had to pause and think about my actions like other girls did. I always was the first to jump in the mud and play soccer because I never thought twice about it. I was always called a tomboy at my elementary school, but I never

understood it, because I saw myself as a kid and never drew boundaries between genders like others did.

When I met my sister, everything changed. Normally siblings do not “meet” one another but rather are born into the family. However, when my mother started dating Fred, her now-husband, my brothers and I were forced into an arranged meeting. It was Monday night, and just as the “ARE YOU READY FOR SOME FOOTBALL” blared out of the television, the doorbell rang, and my new sister came through the doorway. I sprinted off of the couch, excited and nervous to meet her because even though I loved my brothers, I always wondered what it would be like to have a sister. I ran towards the door, wearing my Michael Jordan jersey and matching shorts, to be confronted by a girl who was pristine, wearing all pink, and staring at me as if I was some type of alien. I knew immediately that we would not get along.

“Hi, I’m Nina,” she said tentatively, stretching out her hand cautiously as if contact with me would somehow contaminate her precious form.

“Hey, I’m Jenna,” I mumbled back, understanding the look in her eyes and all of the sudden feeling an overwhelming self-consciousness.

It was in the next year of getting to know one another, that I would be confronted with the gender boundaries which I had so expertly hidden from my entire life.

“Girls don’t do that, why are you such a boy?”

“Why can’t you be more of a girl?”

“I just don’t understand you!”

My sister brought into my world the very thing that I had tried to ignore. Nina had destroyed my perfect illusion of happiness, and now I was aware of just how different I was. My

sister finally made me realize that I was a part of a separate gender and therefore had to act differently.

It all started out simply enough. It was Nina's first week in the house, and my family and I went out for our weekly night swim. I called to Nina, figuring that maybe I had judged her, and that she was fun underneath her perfectly feminine exterior.

"Hey Nina, do you want to come in the Jacuzzi?" I asked, hoping that somehow we might find some common ground.

"No, sorry, chlorine is bad for my hair so I really shouldn't get it wet," she responded.

"Why can't you just wash it after? Come on, everyone is going in," I replied desperately.

"You just don't understand! If you were a girl you would get it: chlorine is just really bad for my hair," she yelled.

I was crushed. What did she mean by, if I was "a girl"? I *was* a girl, as far as I knew.

I was in fifth grade that year, and I went to school the next day with a completely different perspective. My friend Billy asked if I wanted to join the boys and him in a game of basketball, and for the first time in my life, I looked over at the girls who were sitting and talking amongst themselves. I thought about how they would see me, looked back at Billy and said no. It's not that I didn't want to play, because I did, but for the first time I thought about whether or not it was too boyish of me to be playing basketball. So instead, I walked over to the girls, sat down, started talking and never again played in any basketball games that year. It sounds dramatic, but hearing my sister tell me that I was not a girl shifted my view on everything I did.

My sister and I grew closer to one another as years passed. We both rubbed off equally on each other. As I became more feminine, she loosened up on her views of what a girl did and did not do. However, as I became more feminine, my brothers and I became more and more

separated. I still watched Sunday football with them because I still enjoyed it but I was also going out for manicures with my sister, and talking to my friends on the phone about boys. I no longer could share everything with my brothers, because I no longer was fully a part of their world.

To me, a seventh grader, I was just trying to find myself and figure out who I was, but to my brothers, every day they were losing more and more of me to what they called, “the dark side.” I was torn between the new friendship with my sister and the old bond I had with my brothers, and I did not know which way to go. The final straw came when I ditched Sunday football to go to lunch with Nina. Sunday was the final bond that connected my brothers and me, and I had stomped all over it when I told them that I was leaving with my sister.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving us to go and hang out with *her*,” the emphasis that my brother put on that final word was stinging, and I could hear the battle lines being drawn.

“It’s not that big of a deal, we’re just going out to get lunch,” I said, trying to get all of them to understand the simplicity of my actions.

“It is a big deal to us, you’ve never missed a Sunday before, and you’re telling me that you’re leaving just to go out and get lunch,” my other brother interjected.

“I’m sorry, I won’t go, I’ll just stay and we can watch the game,” I responded, tears filling my eyes, realizing that I had apparently committed the ultimate betrayal.

“No, go, obviously lunch is more important,” my final brother yelled.

I didn’t understand. I had finally become the person I had wanted to be. I was a girl, who enjoyed watching football, and who also liked to go to the mall with her friends. I was a girl, who still loved to get down in the mud, but who also liked to tan out by the pool. I was a girl who finally saw herself again as a person without the boundaries of gender getting in the way. I

had found the balance in myself that allowed me to enjoy both worlds, but my brothers just couldn't stand to see me leave theirs.

Eventually, my brothers and I found a happy medium. They grew up and their Sundays filled themselves with other priorities besides football, and they understood my reasons for not being there. We all grew up and apart, and they now span the country, at different colleges and different jobs. I miss all of them terribly and every Sunday is still filled with the absence that I long for them to fill. Even though I walked out on Sunday football, it is still in my heart, and I wish for the days that we can all sit down again by television and hear those comforting words, "ARE YOU READY FOR SOME FOOTBALL?"