

**LISA
GARDNER**

**Fear
Nothing**

headline

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My older sister discovered my condition when I was three years old. Our foster mother walked in on her wielding the scissors, while I stood there, bare arms obediently held out, blood dripping from my wrists onto the olive-green shag carpet.

My six-year-old sister said, ‘Check it out, she doesn’t even care.’ And slashed the scissors across my forearm. Fresh blood welled.

The woman screamed, then fainted.

I peered down at her, wondering what had happened.

After that, my sister went away. And I was taken to the hospital. There, doctors spent weeks running various tests that should’ve hurt more than my sister’s sharp-edged ministrations, except that turned out to be the point: Due to an extremely rare mutation of my SCN9A gene, I don’t feel pain. I can feel pressure. The scissors, pressing down against my skin. I can feel texture. The smoothness of the freshly sharpened blades.

But the actual sensation of my skin splitting, blood beading . . .

I don’t feel what you feel. I never have. And I never will.

After Shana carved up my arms with sewing shears, I didn’t see her for another twenty years. My sister spent most of that time in various institutions, gaining the distinction of being one of Massachusetts’s youngest kids ever placed on antipsychotic meds. She attempted her first murder at eleven, then succeeded at fourteen. Our own peculiar family legacy.

If she became another casualty of the system, however, then I became the state's poster child for success.

Given my diagnosis, the doctors were not convinced foster care could adequately meet my needs. After all, babies born with the same genetic mutation had been known to chew off their tongues while teething. Then there were the toddlers who suffered third-degree burns by placing their hands on red-hot burners and leaving them there; not to mention the seven-, eight-, nine-year-olds who ran for days on shattered ankles or keeled over from burst appendixes they never knew were inflamed.

Pain is very useful. It warns you of danger, teaches you of hazards and provides consequences for your actions. Without it, jumping off the roof can sound like a great idea. Same with plunging your hand into a vat of boiling oil to grab the first fry. Or taking a pair of pliers and ripping out your own fingernails. Most kids with congenital insensitivity to pain report that they're acting on impulse. It's not a matter of why, but of why not?

Others, however, will tell you, a note of longing in their voices, that they did it to see if it would hurt. Because to *not* feel something known by so many can turn it into the Holy Grail of your entire life. A singular driving force. A relentless obsession. The pleasure of finally feeling pain.

Children who suffer from pain sensory disorders have a high mortality rate; few of us live to adulthood. Most require round-the-clock care. In my case, one of the geneticists, an older man with no wife and kids, pulled some strings and brought me home, where I became his beloved adopted daughter as well as his favorite case study.

My father was a good man. He hired only the best caretakers to monitor me 24/7, while dedicating his weekends to helping me manage my condition.

For example, if you cannot *feel* pain, then you must find other ways to register potential threats to your physical well-being. As a small child, I learned boiling water equaled danger. Same with red-hot burners on stoves. I would feel an item first for texture. Anything that registered as sharp, I was to leave alone. No scissors

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for me. Or hard-edged furniture. Or kittens or puppies or any life-form with sharp claws. Walking only. No jumping, no sliding, no skipping, no dancing.

If I went outside, I wore a helmet and appropriate padding at all times. Then, upon my re-entry, my armor would be removed and my body inspected for signs of damage. Including the time my caretaker went to remove my shoe and my foot twisted around a full one-eighty. Apparently, I had ripped out all the tendons walking down to the gardens. Or another time when I arrived covered in bee stings. I had stumbled upon a hornet's nest and, with a five-year-old's naivety, assumed they were dancing with me.

With age, I learned to conduct my own physicals. Daily temperature checks, so I can judge if I have a fever, which might indicate my body is suffering from some kind of infection. Nightly inspections, standing naked before a full-length mirror, where I study every inch of my skin for bruises and lacerations, then inspect my joints for signs of swelling or stress. Next, on to my eyes: A red eyeball is an angry eyeball. Checking my ears: Blood in the ear cavity could indicate a ruptured eardrum and/or possible head injury. Then my nasal passageways, the inside of my mouth, teeth, tongue and gums.

My body is a vessel, a useful item, to be inspected, managed and tended. I have to take extra care of it because the lack of molecular channels to direct electrical impulses from pain-sensing nerves to my brain means my body can't take care of itself. Someone with my condition can't afford to trust what I feel. Instead, I need to go by what I can see, hear, taste and smell.

Mind over matter, my geneticist father would tell me time and time again. Just a simple exercise of mind over matter.

When I made it to thirteen without succumbing to heatstroke, internal infection or basic carelessness, my father took his research one step further. If there were a couple hundred kids in the world born with this condition, then there were about forty still alive to contemplate adulthood. Studying these cases revealed further weaknesses of a life spent never experiencing physical discomfort. For example, many subjects reported difficulty empathizing with others, stunted emotional growth and limited social skills.

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My adoptive father immediately ordered up a full psychological assessment. Could I sense pain in others? Recognize signs of distress on a stranger's face? Respond appropriately to the suffering of my fellow human beings?

After all, if you never cry over a paper cut, will you weep when your sixteen-year-old best friend suddenly severs all ties, calling you a freak? If you can walk miles on a shattered knee, will your heart constrict when at twenty-three your birth sister finds you again, and the letter is postmarked from the Department of Corrections?

If you've never experienced one second of genuine agony, can you honestly comprehend your adoptive father's last dying breath, as he clutches your hand and gasps:

'Adeline. This. Is. *Pain*.'

Standing alone at his funeral, I thought I understood.

But being my father's daughter, I also realized I could never truly be certain. So I did as he trained me to do. I enrolled in a top-notch doctorate program where I studied, I tested, I researched.

I made pain my business.

A useful specialty for more reasons than one.

By the time I arrived at the Massachusetts Correctional Institute, my sister was waiting. I signed in, stuffed my purse in an available locker, then waited my turn to pass through security. Chris and Bob, two of the longtime corrections officers, greeted me by name. Bob passed his wand over my medical bracelet, same test he did the first Monday of each month. Then Maria, a third corrections officer, escorted me to the enclosed privacy room, where my sister sat with her cuffed hands on her lap.

Officer Maria nodded her consent and I entered the room. The eight-by-eight space contained two orange plastic chairs and one Formica wood table. Shana already sat on the far side of the table, back protected by the cinder-block wall, front taking in the view of the corridor through the single window. The gunslinger's seat.

I claimed the chair opposite her, my own back exposed through the window to the passing masses. I took my time, pulling out the

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plastic chair, positioning my body just so. A minute passed. Then two.

My sister spoke first: ‘Take off the jacket.’ Her tone was already agitated. Something had set her off, probably well before my visit, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t be the one to pay the price.

‘Why?’ In contrast to her edgy command, I kept my own voice deliberately calm.

‘You shouldn’t wear black. How many times do I have to tell you that? Black washes you out.’

This from a woman clad in drab blue scrubs, her shoulder-length brown hair hanging down in greasy hanks. My sister might have been pretty once, but years of harsh living conditions and fluorescent lighting had taken their toll. Not to mention the hard look in her eyes.

Now I removed my fitted Ann Taylor blazer and hung it over the back of my chair. Beneath it, I wore a long-sleeved gray knit top. My sister glared at my covered arms. Brown eyes boring into mine, she took a few experimental sniffs.

‘Don’t smell any blood,’ she said at last.

‘You don’t have to sound disappointed.’

‘Please. I spend twenty-three hours a day staring at the same ass-white cinder-block walls. Least you could do is bring me a paper cut.’

My sister claimed she could smell the pain I couldn’t feel. There was no scientific basis for this, just sisterly superiority. And yet on three separate occasions, within hours of leaving her, I’d discovered injuries she’d already warned me about.

‘You should wear fuchsia,’ Shana continued. ‘You’re the one living on the outside. So live a little, Adeline. Then maybe you can bring me some real stories. No more job, patients, pain practice, blah, blah, blah. Tell me about some hard-bodied guy ripping a fuchsia bra from your bony chest. Then I might actually enjoy these monthly meetings. Can you even have sex?’

I didn’t answer. She’d asked this question many times before.

‘That’s right; you can feel the good stuff, just not the bad. Guess that means no S and M for my little sister. Bummer, dude.’

Shana delivered the words tonelessly. Nothing personal. She attacked because it was what she did. And no amount of imprisonment, medication or even sisterly attention had ever been able to change that. Shana was a born predator, our father's daughter. Murdering a young boy when she was only fourteen had landed her behind bars. Killing a fellow inmate as well as two corrections officers now kept her here.

Could you love a person such as my sister? Professionally speaking, she was a fascinating study of antisocial personality disorder. Completely narcissistic, totally devoid of empathy and highly manipulative. Personally speaking, she was the only family I had left.

'I heard you signed up for a new program,' I offered. 'Superintendent McKinnon says your first few paintings show a good eye for detail.'

Shana shrugged, not one for compliments.

She sniffed the air again. 'No perfume, but your outfit looks professional. Means you're working today. Going from here to your office. Will you mist yourself in the car? Hope it's strong enough to cover Eau d'Institution.'

'I thought you didn't want to talk about my job.'

'I know there's nothing else to talk about.'

'The weather.'

'Ah fuck it. Just because it's Monday shouldn't mean I have to waste an hour serving as your pity project.'

I didn't say anything.

'I'm tired of it, Adeline. You. Me. These monthly meetings where you show off your bad taste in clothes and I have no choice but to sit here and take it. You have enough patients you should be able to leave me alone. So get out. Tooodle right along. I mean it!'

A knock on the door. Officer Maria, who could see everything through the shatterproof window, checking on us. I ignored her, keeping my gaze upon my sister instead.

Her outburst didn't bother me; I was well accustomed to such displays by now. Rage was Shana's preferred emotion, serving for both offense and defense. Plus, my sister had reason enough to hate

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me. And not just because of my rare genetic condition, or because I'd found my very own Daddy Warbucks. But because after I was born, my mother chose to hide me in the closet, and there hadn't been room enough for two.

Shana cursed me, her eyes a flat display of dull anger and deeper depression, and mostly, I wondered once again what had happened this morning to put my battle-hardened sister in such a mood.

'Why do you care?' I asked her suddenly.

'What?'

'The color fuchsia. Why do you care? About my clothes, what color I wear, whether or not it makes others find me attractive? Why do you care?'

Shana frowned at me, clearly perplexed by such a question. 'You,' she said at last, 'are a fucking retard.'

'And that,' I observed, 'is the most sisterly thing you've ever said to me.'

A winning barb. Shana rolled her eyes but finally, grudgingly smiled. The tension in the room eased at last, and both of us could breathe again.

Shana might talk a good game, but according to the prison superintendent, my sister seemed to genuinely look forward to these monthly meetings. Enough so that during extreme episodes of disorderly conduct, the threat of losing my upcoming visit was often the only punishment severe enough to bring her round. Hence, we continued our monthly dance, which had been going on now for nearly a decade.

Perhaps as close to a true relationship as one got with a born psychopath.

'How are you sleeping?' I asked.

'Like a baby.'

'Read anything good?'

'Oh yeah. Complete works of Shakespeare. Never know when iambic pentameter might come in handy.'

'*Et tu, Brute?*'

Another faint smile. Shana relaxing further into her chair. And so we went, another thirty minutes of conversation both pointed and

pointless, as we did the first Monday of each month. Until Officer Maria rapped on the window, and just like that, our time was up. I rose to standing. My sister, who wasn't going anywhere, chose to remain in her seat.

'Fuchsia,' she recommended again, as I undraped my black jacket.

'Maybe you should follow your own advice,' I said, 'and introduce some color into your artwork.'

'And give the shrinks more to study?' She smirked. 'I think not.'

'Do you dream in black and white?'

'Do you?'

'I'm not sure I dream.'

'Maybe that's a perk of your condition. I dream plenty. Mostly blood-red. Only difference is sometimes I'm the one with the knife and sometimes it's dear old Dad.'

She stared at me, eyes suddenly flat, like a shark's, but I knew better than to take the bait.

'You should keep a journal of your dreams,' I advised.

'What the fuck do you think my artwork is?'

'A disturbing explosion of deep-seated violence.'

She laughed, and on that note, I headed out the door, leaving her behind.

'She okay?' I asked a minute later, following Officer Maria down the corridor. There were no visiting hours for the general population on Monday, so the halls were relatively quiet.

'Not sure. You know it's nearly the thirtieth anniversary.'

I gazed at the CO blankly.

'Shana's first victim,' Officer Maria filled in. 'The twelve-year-old neighbor, Donnie Johnson? Shana killed him thirty years ago next week. Some local reporter has been calling for an interview.'

I blinked. Somehow, I'd managed not to connect those dots. As both a therapist and a woman dedicated to self-management, later I'd have to ask myself why. What pain was I trying to avoid? A moment of ironic self-reflection.

'She won't answer any questions, though,' Maria was saying. 'Good, if you ask me. I mean, that boy can't very well talk now. Why should his killer?'

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‘Keep me posted.’

‘No problem.’

At the front, I collected my purse, signed out and headed for my car, parked in the vast lot hundreds of yards from the sprawling brick-and-barbed-wire compound that served as my sister’s permanent home.

In the passenger’s seat lay the rich purple-pink cardigan I’d been wearing when I arrived. Except I’d changed tops while still sitting in my car, removing my jewelry, per visitation rules, and opting for a more subdued look given the environment.

I’d set aside my new sweater, purchased just two weeks ago, and I swear, the only fuchsia-colored item that I owned.

Now I looked up at the brick corrections facility. There were windows everywhere, of course. Even a narrow slit in my sister’s segregation cell. But from this distance, myself hunched awkwardly behind the steering wheel, further obscured by my SUV’s tinted windows . . .

I could never explain everything about my sister. But then, I suspected she often thought the same about me.

Putting my Acura into gear, I drove toward downtown Boston, where I had a busy afternoon ahead of me, filled with patients seeking relief from their various afflictions, including a new patient, a Boston detective recently injured on the job.

I loved my job. I looked forward to the challenge, as I greeted each patient, then said, as befitting a woman with my condition, ‘Please, tell me about your pain.’