

Meredith Turits  
284 Seventh Avenue #1G  
Brooklyn, NY 11215  
(914) 953-7907  
[meredithturits@gmail.com](mailto:meredithturits@gmail.com)

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**SLOPE**

BY

MEREDITH TURITS

*Zero*

My earliest memory of my sister is breaking her arm on a seesaw. We were two or three, and I was angry that she wouldn't keep up the rocking motion. The fragmented recollection has me stomping up to her and using my entire body to push her to the grass in our backyard. I remember my mother, miraculously home at the time, chastising me, sending me back inside, and then ordering the nanny to get Anaïs to the hospital. This is the sequence my mind has woven over time, that I've pieced back together from the stories told at family holidays, the photo albums, and the small scar from where the cast dug into her toddler arm. But the sound of her screaming when she hit the ground, her tender bones breaking because I pushed too hard — that's something I can't possibly forget.

I have little clips of memories that follow, ones that become entire films as we age in their scenes. Of course we clung to each other from the start; not only were we bound by blood, but the only markers that made us separate people were our differing first names and genders. Mix a brother-sister bond with a birthday separated by only seconds with absent parents and enough money to buy whatever form of happiness was on tap, and the subsequent interaction

isn't rocket science. It was as natural and expected as anything else on the planet. To find out it wasn't — well, I was never told otherwise.

Our parents were young, loaded, and deep into their careers in international finance, as well as their self-absorbed storybook romance. My father, American with a mother from France, and my mother, French Canadian, had met in business school in Montreal, married quickly, and planted their shallow roots. When they were barely thirty, Anaïs and I happened accidentally, but our births didn't stop their business ventures and European trysts. Three days after we turned a year old, they struck their first massive overseas account together, as if they needed any more impetus to make sure they were absent from our lives. They were back and forth to Paris and Brussels each week — always strangers in our massive stone house — leaving Anaïs and me with just each other, whatever material things we wanted, our constant stream of nannies, and the religious education into which we were essentially dumped. It was a matter of convenience that their legal documents bore an address in Montreal, nothing that had to do with our welfare or upbringing. They traveled so much that it didn't matter where they made their home base, nor who ran the fort, nor how she ran it.

When they were around, we seldom saw them; usually, they arrived from whatever trip they were on, said a hello with nothing to it, checked in to make sure we were keeping our rooms clean (we'd convinced the nannies that this was not our responsibility), and then they were off to theatre, opera, dinner, whichever reality in which they wanted to exist until well after we were supposed to have gone to sleep. Many nights, my sister and I stayed up late with each other, pretending we'd gone to bed, instead reading pages from *Le Petit Prince* aloud, the same scenes over and over again, and dreaming about living on an asteroid that was only for us. Had our

parents come to check on us when they got home, they would have caught us awake, whispering. They never did. Those moments sowed the seeds.

Then there were times when they threw dinner parties — the only time our formal dining room ever got used — and they displayed us to their friends like they were opening a trophy case.

“Our little ones,” they’d say in whatever language in which they were entertaining, my mother flicking her hand to the nanny who, for the first few years, marched us downstairs on cue, before we learned it was expected of us.

When we were probably five, Anaïs bounded down the stairs in her ballet costume during a party they were having. Pride gushing out from under her tutu, she showed them the first three dance positions — the only ones she knew, I’m sure — while I peeked through the railings at the top of the stairs. After a round of golf claps and the mocking laughter of which only people with European sports cars and *orchestre symphonique* season tickets are capable, Anaïs took her dramatic bow, and called me to creep downstairs, too. It was like we performed together for them each time they came. We were charming. Until years later, we never knew to be anything but. My parents’ friends — many of whom had foregone having children (“We’re just too busy, how on *earth* do you manage?”) — would delight in our novelty, in the way we looked and acted so alike. The twins.

“They’re so lucky that they have each other,” my parents would say. From the very beginning, I recognized that was one of the only true, meaningful things they ever said — or would ever say.

We were perfect puzzle pieces, the only consistent thing in each other's lives. And everything pointed to it. We declined playdates with other kids, instead going straight home and retreating to the basement together. We played house, and we were the parents. We set up cushions from an old couch in the corner and made the area our bedroom, acted out a day where we had jobs and were important — I was a doctor and she was a vet — and then pretended to go to sleep on the makeshift bed. Anaïs always giggled and grabbed my hand. One day, she had the idea that we should get married. She made one of her dolls officiate, and then after we said “I do,” the only thing we knew to do, the doll became our daughter. We were six.

I remember being seven, and doing a finger-painting project for Easter during school. Anaïs wanted pink paint, but the teacher had run out. My sister started crying, staring with her arms crossed at her big piece of construction paper until I walked up next to her with red paint and white paint, poured some into one of the little trays on the floor, and mixed her the most pastel shade I could. And instead of finishing her picture, the first thing she did was dip her entire palm into the pink paint, walk up to my easel, and put her handprint on my picture. She told me to do the same to hers.

When we were ten, I went to the ice rink after school every day and sat in the bleachers during Anaïs's figure skating practice. I sat and read, peeking out over the top of the pages. She always smiled at me from the ice, making sure that I was watching — but only when she did something right. I quickly learned to turn away and pretend I didn't see when she fell. And the more we were a pair, the more we took the power and ran with it. We learned we could bend the rules in school, but also demand anything we wanted from the nannies, exploit whatever guilt our parents had. While we were educated in French, we spoke English with our parents and the

stream of babysitters my father plucked out of the university one after the other. We plotted against our caretakers in French we thought was secret, know-it-all ten-year-olds insulating ourselves from what we believed to be the entire world, and emerged only when we knew exactly what we wanted, and exactly how to get it. One day, a nanny took us grocery shopping after she picked us up from school. The last second at checkout, as she shuffled through her purse for the credit card my parents had supplied her, we dropped a couple of candy bars onto the belt. When she found them while putting away the bags once we got home, she scolded us and then went to hide them. We pointed to one specific cabinet and told her that that was where our mother hid things she didn't want us to touch, and the nanny consented, figuring it was out of our reach. The cabinet, though the highest one, was right next to the stove. Anaïs used my shoulders to get onto the counter, and together, we were able to climb onto the stovetop and open the cabinet. Our faces mirrored the same guilty grin as she reached her arm into the back of the cupboard and emerged with the buried treasure. She jumped back down onto the floor, hoisting two blue chocolate bars into the air. "Victory!" we both yelled at exactly the same time, which splayed us across the kitchen floor, engulfed by laughter.

After a while the manipulation was no longer a challenge, but merely part of our formula. We demanded clothes, toys, sugar, impromptu trips to wherever. We demanded to be put in the same classrooms, the right to sleep in one of our beds together, to stay up until all hours, reading, whispering, scheming. We resisted going to church, our protests always in unison. We honestly believed that the two of us together were bigger than god.

When we got to the age for separate Catholic schools, I hated that I wasn't with her every second. We were twelve and for the first time actually making use of our separate bedrooms.

She brushed her hair in front of the mirror for what seemed like hours, and I started masturbating into the tub drain whenever I showered. But she remained my best friend, despite whatever divergences our lives were taking, despite the stupid preteen, sibling conflicts we managed to create. My life was still her life, *our* life, even though it operated separately during particular hours. *Le Petit Prince* stayed on the bookshelf, but I was still the irreplaceable confidant she talked to about the cute boys who were all over her — god, that dark hair of hers — and the brother who would do her math homework when she didn't want to. She batted her eyelashes at me, cooed my name, and whined that she couldn't understand — she was sharp, of course she could — and within minutes I wrote answers that she hastily copied into her own handwriting the next morning. We were fourteen.

Our schools shared a chapel and a courtyard. Sometimes, after being herded into the building for prayer, Anaïs and I quietly slipped out a side door that was never monitored, and hid in the courtyard. She put her palms, chapped, resisting gloves, into mine, and depended only on my care to warm her while we talked over the hymns we heard buzzing from inside the building, their familiar melodies and meaningless lyrics. The alarming aged honey color of her eyes staring into mine. We shivered with nerves waiting to get caught, even though we both knew we never would. I'm sure at some point, someone on the staff figured out we were skipping, but at that point we'd made the school so wholly ours that they didn't care, either. The pretense of the Catholic bullshit was just that — pretense, and they knew we knew it — and we were such a good advertisement for them that our behavior never actually mattered as long as they could still flash us as the poster children.

After we spent the rest of the day separated, we came home together. And as soon as we walked through the door, she left her uniform in a pile on the floor. It was a routine that was never broken regardless of the circumstances — boyfriends, social commitments, whatever. It wasn't urgent, but more a ceremony. Something necessary. She always bypassed the coat hooks in the downstairs foyer and ascended the stairs, dropping first her jacket, then her cardigan, removing her black shoes, and stepping out from her plaid skirt. She did it in the doorway of her room, as if she couldn't cross its threshold without first undressing, and she never paid mind to who might pass her in the hall as the ritual unfolded, door wide open. Her room was at the top of the stairs. I walked past it towards mine, past the pile of clothes, and turned my head to look into the space where she was tending to something, long and upright in only dark tights and a collared shirt, which was so ill-fitting that it nearly covered her hips. Sometimes, she called my name as I walked down the hall, turned to look over her shoulder to halt me in my tracks, and I walked inside, stepped carefully, graciously over the heap on the ground, and sat down on the bed or at her desk chair. I slowly folded my blazer and placed it over the back of the chair, my own shoes lined up next to hers. She told me to come lie on her bed and read next to her until, and I did until the sunset caused the ambient light to fade to a point where I could no longer make out words on the pages. Usually, she lied with her head on the pillows while I lied opposite, my head resting at the foot of the bed. Those days, she never dressed back into street clothes. Well before the light made it impossible to read, I stopped concentrating on my book, and my eyes would trace the silhouette that her toes made in the tights, the black threads smothering nearly any hint of her skin, of something lighter beneath the surface.

When we turned fifteen, our parents took us to Paris. We arranged to stay with my father's relatives, but when we got there, the same bullshit that we supposedly left at home resurfaced. My parents declared they'd be staying alone in their apartment in Montmartre, and left us with the family we didn't know, the cousins who were nearly ten years older than us. We had free reign of the city and spent days just wandering, at all moments trying but failing to act much older and more responsible than we actually were, which translated into chocolate croissants for nearly every meal, wine that tasted like vinegar from the corner shops, and carrying a baguette everywhere we went because simply, that was what we were supposed to do. The second to last day, we passed a sex shop in the Marais. The place was different than how either of us imagined a sex shop would look; there were no dark curtains shrouding a tiny, secret entry, just a big, open, purple façade with windows that spanned nearly floor to ceiling. We stopped walking at the same time, about a quarter of the way in front of the shop, its hardwood floors and pristine, clear glass almost stately in front of us.

She started to ask me a question, but only managed to get the first half out before I interrupted her.

“Yeah,” I said. “I do.”

So with her eyes — my eyes — she told me to step inside, breaking the glance for a second to look over my shoulder again. Just the look of her stretching to peek in, and how she grabbed my hand and let me lead her in — it was my first shot of a new kind of tension, one with which I later became very familiar, my nerves and veins and senses stinging in my throat. Anaïs passed through directly behind me, too shy to acknowledge the person at the counter who couldn't have cared less that we were too young and looked too alike for such an adventure.

When the woman yelled her standard customer greeting towards the doorway, I nodded back. None of the other people in the shop — there were three — stirred.

As we paced through the store, even more expansive than it looked from the outside, Anaïs's face just grew redder. She walked towards a small wall of videos and stopped in front of the packages. She walked a little deeper in, pausing again and looking around to see if anyone was watching her. She started fingering the edges of the items on the glass shelves — sex toys whose uses she couldn't even comprehend. I swear she ran her hands and her eyes over everything in that shop. She giggled at the sight of flavored condoms, then stood in awe in front of a shelf of rubber dildos, their vulgar contours the same jewel tone pinks and purples of her bedroom. I stayed on the other side of the store, quiet, giving her space to explore. But as soon as I started watching her fingers move, my peripheral vision, interest in the objects around us, in anything else — they all just shut off. Seeing her like that injected me with a sickness and a wildness and an unbridled fucking *need*. When she was done, she came back up to me, an odd smile on her face, like this oil and water mixture of illicit victory and embarrassment, and motioned with her chin towards the door. We left the shop, my fists balled in my pockets and Anaïs's head down as we went back through the glass door and out onto the narrow street. We walked to the house. She lied down for a nap. I went back to the shop and bought a magazine with a thin girl on the cover, her hair long, dark, her eyes ready. The sweat from my hands curled the corners before I even got back.

***For information regarding this manuscript or other fiction, please contact  
Stéphanie Abou at Foundry Literary + Media at [sabou@foundrymedia.com](mailto:sabou@foundrymedia.com).***