

Dirt Clods and New Kids

I am finally home for Christmas, and I have so many questions to answer. I scramble through my desk drawer still overstuffed with cards, mementos, and things I had not yet thrown away. My journal has to be in here somewhere. I am desperate to look through my past because it might give clarity to the present.

I am disheartened, and I suppose my tears are proof. These last few months of life away from home have been tiring. I am struggling in my independence, shrinking in my chronic pain and hunched over with people's ideas of me. I did not feel like this when I left home. But everything fell apart, so here I am.

My burdens spill over me, and I am forced to address each one. The questions pile upon my heart,

entangling me, demanding answers. I finally find my journal tucked beneath a few books.

Life suffocates me. I live in what feels like a hundred chains wrapped around my heart. How did I get here? It feels like I am living beneath crushing labels. I am the girl with the headaches. I am the good, Christian girl with the perfect, little life. But I am not her, not really. I feel trapped. Is this my own doing, or have others contributed to these imprisoned feelings? Who am I? Do people know I have deep struggles? Does my pain define me? Surely it does.

I open my journal to the scrawled-out places of my past. The letters are uneven, and the words form big loops and valleys on the pages. I read about my life, searching for freedom, searching for who I really am. I go back to my life as a ten-year-old, growing up in a Christian camp with no idea how much my life would turn in just five years. I wipe my eyes; the tears are heavy. I choose this part of my journal because I want to briefly escape the pressure I feel right now. I want to go back to when it was simpler, and my biggest problem was getting blisters on my bare feet.



We crouch in the dust; a layer of sand is embedded in our nails. We have been at this for an hour, but no one relents. Ouch! Someone got me in the eye. Technically, we are not supposed to get hit right in the eye, but sometimes it happens. Seriously, though, that one hurt! My team is going to win this dirt-clod war in the desert! *We are*. After all, this can be considered World War III! At least in a ten-year-old's mind, this can very well pass as the third world war.

Every group of kids needs a *leader*. We never had one of those ceremonies to officially make Hannah our leader; it just sort of happened. One day we realized Hannah was leading the pack of us kids, and that was that. Hannah was stuck as a leader forever. Hannah is pretty stubborn and always very determined, but you know, deep down, quite kind. She has a soft heart. I know that because I am her sister.

Despite the noise of our World War III action, I hear her say, "Those new kids are coming in today, 'member?" A dirt clod spins past my face. Are we

really having this conversation in the middle of a world war?

“Hmm. Well, we only met them that one time. They seem cool, but they are from the city.” I am never quite sure what to think of city kids. Anyhow, it is weird having new kids move to *this* desert...*our* trees...*our* home.

New kids coming to town is like asking it to rain in the desert in JUNE! That rarely happens! And since new kids rarely come our way, we naturally are all quite tentative. What do we do with news kids coming in? How do we show them around the desert and introduce them to our gang? How do we get to know them? I have no idea. We all have no idea.

The dirt clods come faster than ever. I crouch lower in the mountain of sand in our backyard. The other pygmies are probably hidden in the trees. Every now and then, rocks are hidden in the dirt clods. Those are the worst ones because they leave battle scars. We often compare our bruises and scars. We are usually pretty happy about the bruises we obtain from playing in the desert. It is honorable.

I do not know when this dirt-clod war is supposed to end, but about ten minutes into the world war, we all feel it should probably be over now. We emerge from our hiding places, and some of us were not hidden well. Dusty (that is not his real name, but we call him that anyway) is a more daring one, standing out in the open, chucking clods as though his life depended on it. We all gather together in a lopsided circle.

We all wear cut-offs and baggy t-shirts. Shoes are for city kids. The ground may be scorching hot (we do live in the desert, after all), but we have calluses on the bottom of our feet. We start going barefoot several months before the summer so we can slowly build our calluses. It is quite the science.

Our circle is made up of six kids, all different ages, all skinny, all tan, and all wild. Robbi (Dusty's sister) speaks first saying, "Those new kids are comin' soon." At eight years old, she is pretty quick. She knows everything about everyone and is quite smart.

I glance over at my younger sister Chey who is Robbi's age. Chey is considered the quiet one.

However, something is always going on in her brain, and I mean always!

“I know the new kids are coming in, but maybe we’ll like ‘em.” This phrase comes from the very wild, somewhat rebellious, really cool Dusty. His name matches his fun personality.

Even though Dusty shows some shocking wisdom in his statement, he and my brother Bodie cannot care less about how these new kids are going to affect our gang, our neighborhood, and our LIVES! Bodie and Dusty are the youngest at age six, so they most often are off in their own worlds.

Me? Now I am just the cautious observer. Sometimes they call me the “*goody-goody two shoes*,” but that is all right with me. I keep us out of lots of trouble. We are apprehensive but a little excited about these new kids. Maybe they will be good at making mud and throwing dirt clods, which is all that matters to us.

We all go our separate ways. It was a good dirt-clod match, but our minds are focused on the new kids. *Tomorrow*. We will have our first real day with

them tomorrow.



I can only imagine what those new kids must be feeling today! I cannot help but be super excited about spending an entire day with them. My sisters, Chey and Hannah, stand in the dirt road in the middle of our neighborhood. We position our bare feet slightly apart - time for the signal. On the count of three we all yell, "ARROWHEAD!" On cue, Robbi bounds out of her house. You see, we all live in the same neighborhood, and we created signals and things to communicate with each other. We all begin talking at once. I do not remember all we say - something about candy, our pretend dresses, and of course, we talk about the new kids. We all speak at once, and although we can understand every word each of us is saying, we cannot remember all we cover.

We are off to meet the new kids at Cottonwood Lane. Our brothers will come shortly after us. We probably look a little menacing with our hair halfway down, our dust-covered faces, our bare feet, and our squinting eyes from the bright sun. This is it - the first

full day with the new kids. We brace ourselves for what is coming.

There they are! They walk toward us and are all blond. The oldest is about my age, and his name is Caleb. I am not sure how to feel about him yet. Boys are weird, after all. The second oldest is Micah, but he is more Robbi's and Chey's age. He looks nice enough, but still he is a *boy*. All girls know boys are weird. The youngest is Kezia, and she looks to be about the age of our brothers, Bodie and Dusty.

Hannah begins the conversation. "Hey there." You cannot consider that much of a good start because that is all she says. We all exchange looks, half smiles, apprehensive stares, and then shift our eyes to the ground. Dusty and Chey scuff around with their bare feet, and I stand there looking at the oldest boy. At my age, boys are weird. It is not that I do not like them; my ten-year-old mind cannot fully digest the whole thing yet. *Boys*. Hmm.

Now, I may be the cautious one, but I am definitely the outgoing one of the group. Dusty is also outgoing, but he is caught up in drawing in the sand

with a stick. It looks like it is up to me to get this show on the road. I clear my throat and begin in a voice probably too excited for the occasion. “Hey, so, uh, you wanna play on the swings down at the school?! There is a tire swing out there, and it is lots of fun!” Caleb nods his head yes with a full-blown smile across his face. And this is how we connect - a tire swing, which is all we need as kids!

Micah and Kezia follow their brother’s lead, and off we go. We have nine now: Hannah, Chey, Robbi, Dusty, Bodie, Caleb, Micah, Kezia, and me. As we walk to the swings, Hannah pulls me to the side. Her attempt to be secretive is lost as she loudly whispers in my ear. “You think one of them will be any good at dirt-clod wars? I think I want that oldest boy on my team. You think so?” I shrug my shoulders. I do not know. They are, after all, from the *city*.

“I guess we will find out soon,” I say. Hannah looks at them as potential dirt-clod fighters, and I look at them like...well, I do not know. That oldest boy is my age, and boys are *totally* gross.

So far we made three friends, adding three

more people to our gang. Whether the new kids like it or not, they are about to become good at dirt-clod wars too.