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Tunnel Slide

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Tunnel Slide

Deep breath. One foot in front of the other. I stepped into the McDonald's PlayPlace behind my older brother Devin. Before I knew it, he had already taken off his shoes and put them in the cubby. I desperately unvelcroed my light-up Disney Princess sneakers and threw them off, teetering after him. At eight years old, Devin's legs were way longer than mine, and he was a lot stronger and faster, too.

"Wait for me!" I cried, crawling into the play tunnel.

"No, catch up!" Devin's voice echoed back to me.

Smoke danced around my head in my friend's basement one weekend during my sophomore year in high school. She was already high and she passed me her wax pen after taking two hits. Pulling the smoke into my lungs once, twice, three times, I thought that nothing was working. Everyone else was high except me. After the seventh or eighth hit, my body went chillingly numb. The sounds of my friends' voices became distant and muffled. All I could hear was the beating of my heart getting louder and louder. I felt the blood drain all the color out of my face, leaving me like a white sheet of paper—a ghost. I couldn't feel my limbs and I couldn't move. I was panicking.

My tiny six-year-old hands reached before me, climbing up the yellow tunnel. My heart raced with anxiety. *What happens if Devin gets too far away and I get lost in here? What if I get stuck in here forever?* Suddenly, when I looked up ahead of me, all I saw was the tail end of Devin, his feet disappearing into another tunnel. I sped up, gripping each step up the yellow tunnel as tightly as I could to propel myself further, faster. I yelled for my brother but he was gone. I turned left, down the green tunnel, bumping my knees against

the bottom. Dead end. I turned around, going faster, tripping over my own hands and knees.

“Gotcha!” he yelled with a laugh, popping out behind a corner.

I screamed, fearing for my life. Tears ran down my cheeks.

“I wasn’t gonna leave you. Don’t be such a baby.” Devin guided me further into the labyrinth of the McDonald’s PlayPlace tunnels until we reached the top of the slide—the way to freedom. He picked me up and put me in front of him, hugging me from behind. We pushed off and down we went, out of the darkness and into the light waiting for us at the bottom.

Deep breath. One foot in front of the other. I try to get up out of my chair. I don’t like this feeling. I was stuck in a thought loop, and I couldn’t get out of it. *You’re dying. You’re having a heart attack. Do you feel how fast your heart is beating? It’s going to explode inside your chest and there’s nothing you can do about it. This is it; this is the end.* I couldn’t tell what was racing faster—my heartbeat or my thoughts. *Deep breath. One foot in front of the other.* My panic gave me tunnel vision, darkness hugging my eyes. I took the stairs up one at a time, slowly, until I finally reached the top, leaving the basement. I needed to leave; I wanted to go home.

“I’m sorry my parents are making everyone leave so early. It’s just because we have to wake up early. You sure you can find a ride, Jenna?”

“Yeah, don’t worry.” I forced the words out of my mouth, stumbling slowly, delayed. I walked out of my friend’s house into the rain. I dug my phone out of my pocket and dialed Devin’s number.

“Devin? It’s me.” I choked on emotion, trying to hold back my tears. “I need you to come pick me up.”

There were voices in the background, telling me that he was definitely with his friends. “I don’t know, Jenna, you can’t just ask someone else?”

“Please, I’m bugging out. I need to get home.”

“No,” he said and hung up.

I sat on the curb just outside my friend’s house, looking up towards the night sky, letting my face get wet with the mixture of rain and tears, waiting for Devin to pop out from behind a corner, waiting for him to remind me that he wasn’t going to leave me—waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel slide that never came.