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*Quiet Torrential Sound* by Joan Ackerman

“A sister is both your mirror and your opposite,” a quote said by Elizabeth Fishel, the author of nine books that focus on the family dynamic. This can be easily applied to the sisters in Joan Ackerman’s “Quiet Torrential Sound” as they may come from the same family and have similar experiences, yet they view the world in dramatically different lenses. Through characterization and plot, Ackerman creates a distinction between the two.

There are clear differences and conflicts between Claire and Monica shown through what they order at the cafe and how they behave. Monica focuses primarily on superficial appearances, casting her own feelings aside in favor of how others will perceive her. She orders a diet coke, a horrid tasting drink, just because it will make her look healthy and superior in her eyes. On the other hand, Claire seems to value living her life to the fullest by ordering a Coke and milkshake. While this option may warrant looks of disdain from the waiter and her sister, it will ultimately make her happy. Their orders are not just a reflection of their appetite, but rather a symbol for their personalities. Monica is about the “diet” appearance with a tang of bitter flavor while Claire is the complete opposite. She is sweet and superfluous in her choices, not caring about what others will think of her choice, but rather how it will personally taste for her.

Despite the assumption that Claire is her own person and pays no heed towards what others think of her, it's obvious that her sister is the exception. When Monica reprimands Claire for her sugary order, she gives in and changes to a diet coke. It isn't explicitly said, but one can

assume that Monica is the eldest sibling, as she creates the status quo and expects her sibling to follow her actions. While Claire may present herself as a rebel who cares about her own happiness before others' expectations, she folds at her sister's words.

Monica has this habit of viewing herself as better than others, almost acting as if her nitpicking comments towards the other characters are made solely for their benefit. Monica states, "We were only just moments ago discussing your figure in the car," to convey to her sister that she truly knows best. She even forces her opinions onto the waiter at the restaurant by forcing them to listen to her rambles about the values of classical music, the benefits of decaffeinated coffee, and the presence of a nonexistent fan. Monica perceives things to be there when they actually aren't. She claims there is caffeine in the coffee as well as a fan in the cafe, when the rest of the characters know there isn't but they fold to her will for convenience. Claire has dealt with this behavior her whole life, and probably knows that it's better to just agree at this point. Likewise, the waiter isn't paid enough to care so they pay little attention to her comments.

Monica's demeaning tendencies even extend to the sibling's discussion of the concert. When contemplating buying seasonal tickets to the concert hall, Monica still finds a way to bring her sister down stating, "There's no such thing as dishonest classical music---Claire, please don't pick at your face--- it simply doesn't exist." Monica strives to be viewed as a cultured important woman by explaining the significance of classical music with an interjection on how she generally knows what's best for others. By placing the jab at Claire in the middle of her dialogue, Ackerman is conveying how Monica's characterization involves her valuing superficial topics, while making comments to remind the other characters that they are beneath her.

Despite Monica's aura of self importance, the waiter and Claire remain largely unaffected. The waiter toys with her by insisting there is no fan in the cafe, and jokingly admits to putting caffeine in the coffee just to mess with her. Monica is so wrapped up in her confidence, that she doesn't realize when she is wrong. Claire has been dealing with this kind of behavior since childhood, and is partially used to it by now. She occasionally gives in to her sister's wishes, by ordering a diet coke and thanking her for the trip when reprimanded to do so. Yet towards the end of the story, Claire talks about a workshop she attended on masturbation, which makes both sisters realize they've never had an orgasm. Monica tosses her words aside and proceeds to tell her sister to shut up and continues to talk about classical music. Once again, we see a clear distinction between the siblings. Monica is so focused on outward appearances and her cultured taste in music, that she reprimands other characters for not being like her. Like the flip side of a coin, Claire has more of a focus on what she feels rather than how something looks to others. Masturbation and female orgasms are normally a topic of taboo, yet Claire wants to experience all that she can. Despite Monica's feelings of superiority, she too has never experienced an orgasm, but she has more trivial things to worry about. Even though Monica is extremely self righteous, she does have manners, and ends the story by leaving the waiter a ten dollar tip for all their troubles.

While they may share the same DNA, the sisters couldn't be more different. Through the different elements of drama the author forms an obvious distinction between the two primary characters. One values appearances and how they are perceived by ordering healthy options and listening to cultured music, while the other wants to live life to the fullest by eating sugary sweets and experiencing orgasms.