

Sarah and Me

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I have no clear idea of what exactly happened, but this is what I remember.

Dad is driving. Mom is helping by pointing out recently established speed limits and opportunities for him to practice safe driving habits. She likes to do this. It makes her feel useful.

My sister Sarah and I are in the back seat of the car, bickering over territory. Sarah is ten and I am eight. In three months, I'll be nine - almost catching up to my big sister. During the part of the year when she is two whole years older than I am, she acts like she is the boss of me. I think it's all in her head. I think we will always be eighteen months apart.

"She's taking up the whole seat with her stuff," whines Sarah.

"Am not," I say.

"Look at all this stuff Lucy brought"

"It's my stuff," I yell.

"It's taking too much room!"

"Mom said I could bring whatever I wanted!"

"Mom!"

"Girls, girls," says Mom. "Quiet down, your father is trying to drive."

Even though Sarah and I are each buckled into our own separate sides of the vehicle, with a whole huge expanse of back seat between us, we still argue over space. My entire boxed set of Ramona and Beezus books, my stuffed elephant Woof, and a string of plastic beads are sprawling between us, but Sarah hasn't brought along anything on this outing, so why is she complaining, anyway?

Sarah is in the act of shoving my books into my hip, Mom is turning around in her seat to quiet us, and I am feeling indignant about being crowded, when the whole world slams sideways. Books and beads fly through the air. Sarah tilts like a domino into my shoulder. I feel the seatbelt dig in as I crash into the right side of the vehicle.

Everything happens in silence and slow motion. Just as Mom and Dad are wrapped in the airbags that have surrounded them, a huge whiteness explodes beside me and blocks my view, but I can see Sarah smashed up beside me. She looks angry.

Then blackness.

Much later, I hear adults talk about a heavy piece of metal that could easily have decapitated somebody. Did it come through the left side window? Is that what hit me in the head? No one ever answers that question.

Blackness.

I am aware of Mom and Dad talking quietly. I can almost, but not quite, understand what they are saying. I want to join the conversation, but nothing seems to work. My mouth and tongue don't want to move. I can't make my voice work. I feel like my mouth is full of cotton. My eyes won't open. I remain still.

Blackness.

I am not alone. A woman very far away is talking. Is she talking to me? I think she wants me to do something. She's calling my name.

"Lucy, Lucy," she says. "Lucy, can you hear me?"

I don't answer. If I let her know I can hear, she'll want me to do stuff. I'd rather just drift.

"Lucy, wake up," she says. "Wake up, honey. Open your eyes."

Who is this person calling me "honey?" I'm not her "honey!"

Then I hear Mom's voice.

"Lucy, darling . . . Is she awake?"

Mom sounds excited. And afraid. Her voice becomes wavery like she's crying.

I open my eyes. My head hurts. The lights are too bright.

"Lucy, honey! It's Mommy! Honey, wake up. I'm right here. You're going to be alright now. Everything is going to be alright."

Mom's using that crooning tone like when I have a nightmare. I open my eyes again. It's too bright and it makes my head hurt. Everything looks blurry. I'm not in my own bed. The light is wrong and it smells funny. Like the kitchen after Mom scrubs the floor, or the dentist's office. Gradually, I can see better. Besides Mom, I see a strange woman in a print shirt and blue sweater. She must have been the first voice. She leaves. Sarah is standing beside my bed. I give her a meager smile. I don't think she's mad at me anymore.

Blackness.

I hear a man talking. He wants me to open my eyes again. I don't want to, but he insists. He points a bright light in my eyes. He holds my eyelids open one at a time and points his bright

light. My head hurts. I don't like it at all. I have a big bandage around my head. It itches, but the man says not to touch it.

Finally, I am given some water to drink. I am very thirsty. I don't want the food they bring. It smells bad. I am in a hospital. Because of the accident. I'm in a bed with rails on the sides so I don't fall out, like I'm a baby or something.

Blackness.

A long time passes. All I remember is blackness and being wakened to eat or drink. I have to go to the bathroom in a pan in the bed. I don't like it. I can sit up when the bed is raised, but mostly have to just lay there and get bored and sleepy. Sometimes when I wake up, Mom and Dad and Sarah are there. Sometimes it's just Sarah.

Blackness.

Sarah and I are running in the grass. She has Woof and she giggles as she keeps him just out of my reach. If I was older, and taller, and faster, I'd have him! When the lady with the blue sweater comes in my room, Sarah fades away. It was just a dream.

Blue sweater lady puts me in a wheel chair and pushes me down the hall to a big room with tables and benches and exercise bars. Sarah comes with us. I have to answer a lot of questions. They show me pictures of things and I have to tell them what they are. I know I've seen all these things, but it's hard to remember the words. When they show me a picture of an elephant, I say "Woof." Sarah giggles in my ear because she knows I'm thinking of my stuffed elephant. But blue sweater isn't happy. She picks up the next card.

I am very tired. I want to sleep all day and all night, but nobody lets me. My head hurts and I feel dizzy and like I'm going to throw up. I whine.

Every day blue sweater comes and takes me to the big room where I have to do hard things. My arms and legs forgot how to move. She says I have to teach them all over again, like when I was a baby. I don't remember that. I whine.

Mom and Dad and Sarah come to visit. Usually, Sarah stays with me while Mom and Dad go for supper. She tells me I have to hurry and get better because Mom and Dad are very sad. When I get better and can come home, they will be happier. I'm trying. It's very hard. Some days I just want them all to leave me alone - stop making me try to do stuff.

Slowly, my arms and legs start to learn how to move better. I can even walk a little if I hold onto the bars and blue sweater lady helps me with a belt she puts around my middle. Her

name is Joanne. She's nice, but she keeps pushing me to walk, and remember the names of all the pictures. I don't call the elephant Woof anymore. That makes her happy. Sarah giggles that quiet giggle of hers. She remembers what I said before.

The day I come home is very tiring. I have to get dressed mostly by myself. It's very hard to make my fingers button the buttons on my blouse. My left hand is really weak. It doesn't obey as well as my right one. But with blue sweater lady's help, I get ready to go. She looks sad.

"I'm going to miss you, Lucy," she says. "You're a fighter."

"We'll be back to visit," says Mom. "We'll stop in after therapy."

I groan to myself. More therapy? I know now what therapy is. It's blue sweater and others making me do hard stuff. It's having to try to do things I can't, and trying, and trying until I can. Then they make me do harder stuff. Therapy is not fun. It's like if someone tells you to fly up to the ceiling, but they don't tell you how. You have to keep trying and trying until you figure it out for yourself. And my head still hurts.

I just want to go home and sleep forever. I want to curl up in my own bed and read my books and whisper to Sarah and not have to do therapy ever again.

But that's not what happens. What happens is, Mom takes me back to the hospital every few days, but to a different room with a different-colored-sweater lady who makes me do more hard stuff. It sucks!

My birthday comes a few weeks after I get out of the hospital. Mom says a big party with all my friends would be too much excitement, so it's just Mom and Dad, Gran and Gramps, and Sarah. Everybody brings me books and gifts - a new stuffed elephant. They all make such a big fuss, I feel bad for Sarah. I think she's jealous. She stays behind the couch most of the evening and won't even eat a piece of cake when I offer it.

Sometimes Sarah comes for my therapy. She watches me from across the room. I'm nine now - only a year behind her, so she doesn't really gloat, but she gets a smug look when I can't reach the ball, or forget what purple is. She also smiles proudly when I take steps by myself with just the walker - or manage to write my name in wobbly letters.

After a long time, I only have to do therapy once a week. I'm so happy. Sarah and I have all kinds of plans for what we'll do when I get better. Sarah says we can go outside together and play hide-and-seek like we used to. We can dance and twirl and roll down the hill in the park. We can run on the sidewalk all the way to the end of the street. I'm looking forward to that. I'm

getting tired of sitting in my wheelchair all the time. I long to move about freely, pump my legs and run for the sheer joy of it. Will I ever be able to do those things again? Sarah thinks so.

I just have to be patient. That's what Mom says. I tell her what Sarah and I are going to do. She doesn't say anything. I don't think she's listening. She starts talking about bringing me some new books to read, and taking me for a walk in my wheelchair.

The weeks and months pass, and soon I don't have to go to therapy at all. I can walk all by myself now with my walker. I can dress myself without help, brush my teeth, comb my hair, and read out loud to Sarah when she's around. She only shows up around bedtime now. She must be busy with school.

I'd be in school too, if it wasn't for the accident.

Sarah doesn't come to whisper to me so much anymore. I look for her in the dark corners of my room every night, but she's rarely there. I guess now that I'm getting better, she has other, more important things to do.

Before I know it, Sarah is about to turn 11. I don't think Mom and Dad even remember, they're so intent on getting me well. I ask Mom if we're going to have a party for Sarah. She stares at me like I just asked if we were going to Italy for lunch. Then she walks quickly into her bedroom and closes the door. Sarah tells me she doesn't mind. We'll have a private little party in my room - just the two of us. I give her a poem I have written in my uneven writing. She is very touched - I can tell, because there are tears in her eyes when she finishes reading it. The poem says:

My sister Sarah is leaving me behind.

Her face is turned away.

I know she loves me in her heart and mind,

But cannot stay.

After Sarah's birthday, she doesn't come to visit me anymore. She's really gone. I know now why she always stayed in the background. I know now why Mom and Dad ignored Sarah. I know now why they have been so sad. It's not only because I was so broken. It's because of Sarah.