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How My Sister Cured My Writer's Block

by HELEN SHEEHY • MARCH 22, 2013

So I call her on Sunday morning. I ask the usual questions about her week, and then I say, I'm stuck. Send me just one sentence. Can be about anything. It doesn't matter.

There's silence. I wait.

All right, she says.

I wait. Nothing. A week later, I call again, and ask, Did you send my sentence?

Yes.

That's great! How long did you work on it?

About 20 minutes.

Were you thinking or writing?

Thinking.

That's what she does. I've never taken 20 minutes to write a sentence. I write fast, and then I rewrite. She writes everything in her head before she puts it down on paper. The small envelope is pink. I slit it open. There's one folded page. And her familiar slanted script, as if she has etched each letter one by one.

She has placed the sentence I asked for smack in the middle of the page. Twelve words. Each word timed and set to detonate.

My 73-year-old sister graduated magna cum laude from the University of Oklahoma. She became a speech therapist, but she always wanted to be a writer, a poet.

Then suddenly, everything went to hell. Voices started speaking to her. Evil, rough, threatening. Sometimes they came from the television; sometimes they came from inside her head. Talk therapy, antipsychotic drugs, electroshock, months in the state mental hospital, months in a group home — none of it worked. There is no cure for paranoid schizophrenia.

For the last 22 years, she has lived in a nursing home in our hometown in Kansas. I live half a continent away in Connecticut.

My sister is the oldest in our family, and I'm her only sister, the youngest of five. I promised my mother I would always look out for my sister. I take care of her finances, do all her shopping and arrange for a weekly visit to a hairdresser. Twice a year, I visit her. I rent a house, and we replicate the family life that we used to share. We go shopping, play Crazy Eights, cook meals, entertain relatives and hang out.

One other fact I should mention. When she was 7, my sister got polio. She spent months in an iron lung. She was left with a paralyzed right arm and a partly paralyzed left arm. Still, she learned to type and to drive. In school, she was popular and well liked, a beautiful, kind person. Over the years, I've asked myself, Why her? Why not me?

She's mentally ill, I tell myself, but at least her illness protects her from knowing how much she has missed. Like a husband to love her and give her the babies she always wanted. How odd that I, who married and could have children, never wanted them.

My sister doesn't read much anymore, but she writes letters to old friends and relatives. A few years ago, she created a companion who lives with her. His name is Jim. Once, while talking to me on the phone, she said: "I have to go to the bathroom. You can talk to Jim while I'm gone." I think she was being funny.

I asked her what Jim looked like, and she said not very tall, with straight brown hair, and about her age. Is he good-looking? I asked. Not particularly, she said. She laughed when I pointed out that Jim could be as handsome as

she wanted to make him. She gives him presents, and I noticed that Jim's items were cluttering her room. I gave her a basket where she keeps Jim's spare change, his gum and candy bars, his soap and toothbrush.

Despite her dependency, my sister still bosses me around and gives me advice. When I was 12, she taught me to love Jane Austen and to cherish sentences. Some of her letters are only a few sentences long.

They call blouses shirts here, and I protest every time to myself.

The morning snack just arrived. No one is allowed to forget snack time.

I saw a woodpecker in the yard one day. The third I've seen in my lifetime, I think.

But it's the sentence I asked for that haunts me. I read it word by word, over and over. My writer's block is blasted away, replaced by a devastating revelation.

Oh, God. She knows. She understands.

Another decade is traveling through, and I'm here, and you are there.

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