

## Oh Brother

When I was four, I remember my mother's belly getting big. Really big. I thought she was fat, but the funny thing was that the rest of her didn't change much. Her legs, her arms, her butt, they didn't change, not like her stomach, which just seemed to grow like when I would blow up a party balloon: big, bigger and round and full of air. But she told me it wasn't air in there, it was like water and my little brother was in there swimming. At the time, I didn't quite understand, I was only four, and I asked my mom why he didn't drown. Shouldn't we get him out of there fast so he can breathe? She ruffled my hair and smiled that beautiful mother smile and told me not to worry. I would understand when I got older. She said that a lot. "Sarah, you'll understand when you get older."

When Mom's stomach got really large and some time had passed, they sent me to stay with Aunt Linda for a few days. Nothing to worry about, I was told, but they needed to keep an eye on Mom for a few days and my new baby brother had to stay in the hospital a little longer than normal. Just as a precaution. That was fine by me, I loved Auntie Linda's place; she had everything a four-year-old girl could want: dolls, makeup, games and movies about dragons and princesses. I suspected she had movies about aliens and zombies and games for boys too, but I didn't care about those things, so I didn't ask. I stayed at my aunt's place for a week. I wish it could have been longer. Aunt Linda not only had all that stuff, but she could bake too. And she treated me special, like I was the only person in the world. But I was still curious about my brother coming out from the inside of my mom. I still don't know how he could breathe in there. Maybe he had a tube in his mouth like those guys at the swimming pool. The thing that sticks up just above the water so they can suck in air. But the more I thought about it, the more confused I became. Where would the other end come out? Mom's mouth, her belly button maybe? When I asked her about that before she went off to the hospital, she laughed. "Sarah, your brother's lungs aren't

ready to breathe just yet, so he is hooked up to a long string like thing and I help him breathe through that.” And when I looked at her with my “I don’t get it” look, she said: “You’ll understand when you get older.”

Sean Taylor Johnson was born July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1985, and like I said, he had to stay in the hospital for some extra time. Something about not breathing right. But when I came home from Auntie Linda’s, I met my baby brother for the first time. I remember being scared. And curious. He was so *little*, I could see why he wasn’t able to breathe on his own. It’s funny – not funny ha ha but funny strange – his head seemed too big to me. His body was small for the size of that head, like they got it mixed-up at the hospital and took someone else’s head by mistake and put it on that little body. Well, I guess that is how babies look. I wondered if I looked weird like that. Even though Sean looked funny because of that too big head thing, he was still cute. He was my brother, after all.

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I was so excited, I was going into kindergarten! I just celebrated turning five-and-a-half, which meant I got to go to a real school. No more of that preschool, baby stuff. Mom didn’t go back to her accounting job after Sean was born. She decided to stay home, so it’s been pretty cool. My baby brother just turned one a few weeks ago. His body decided to try and catch up and although his head was still a little big, he didn’t look so much like a circus freak anymore. He did have some of these really cool looking spots on his skin though. They were shaped kind of like a little map and they were darker than the rest of his skin. But anything was darker than the rest of him. He was pale white, at least that’s how he seemed to me. Sean had five or six of those weird-shaped spots. I found out later – much later – that they had a name: *café au lait*. French for “coffee with milk”, because of their light brown color. They are often harmless, so my parents didn’t give them much thought. I thought they were cute.

Mom walked me down to the bus stop, pushing Sean in his stroller. Dad was at work. He worked longer hours now that Mom stayed home with us. This was the first time I would be away from home for

such a long period of time. Kindergarten in the Willow School District was full-days, which meant I was gone from 8:30 in the morning until 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. I was independent! And scared. But this was the year I met Cora, and so I had someone to be with and take away some of my scaredness. I found out it is always easier when you have a friend by your side to take away some of the fear. Things just aren't as frightening as when you are all by yourself.

We stood at the bus stop on the first day of kindergarten, Mom with her scarf tucked into her North Face Winter Jacket and Sean smiling up at me through the stocking cap that covered most of his face. I remember my baby brother always smiling, always happy. My excitement – along with my fear - grew when I saw the long, yellow bus with the large black letters on the side coming down the road. All the other parents were hugging and kissing their kids, some of them trying not to cry. Sheesh! I thought, it's just kindergarten. I wouldn't show my fear. Mom bent down, pulled my hood tighter around my face and gave me the biggest hug ever given on the planet Earth. I felt some wetness on my cheek and soon realized that, like the other crazy parents, my mom was crying too. "I love you Mom," I whispered in her ear. I had to be strong for both of us. I thought I was going to cry, but I looked at Sean in his stroller, sucking happily on his finger and making those cute gurgling noises. I could tell he was trying to wave goodbye or something. I let go of Mom and bent down to kiss my brother. He giggled in my ear. Then burped. He smelled like sour milk and love. Good enough for me. Boy was I lucky.

Earlier that summer I had visited the school to check out my classroom and stuff and I think Mom had to make sure everything was signed just right, that I had all my shots and wasn't going to make anyone sick or anything. So I sort of knew my way around, it wasn't like it was all brand new. That is one reason Mom let me ride the bus the first day of school instead of her taking me. She told me that it was better to start right off riding the bus and not being dependent on her or anyone else to get to school.

I gave my mother one final hug and gurgled back at Sean, then turned and boarded the yellow monster along with a couple dozen other kids. I quickly made my way to a window seat so I could watch my family as we pulled away from the curb and headed to my new adventures. Twenty minutes later we

pulled in front of Morgan Creek Elementary. I took a deep breath and my lunch bag and my dreams and headed to the gym so we could all have that first day assembly thing they do at school. Like a welcoming committee and let's talk about rules and regulations. I sat down on a bleacher next to a girl in pigtails. She didn't even say hi or turn to look at me. On my left was some boy and I wasn't about to talk to him. So I just stared straight ahead. And then the girl nudged me with her elbow and asked me if I wanted to be friends. She told me she just moved here to Seattle from Chicago. What's Chicago? I'd asked. A city like Seattle, she'd said back.

After that day, Cora and I were the best of friends. She and I did everything together. We were in the same kindergarten class. Miss Belcher was the best teacher ever. There was that time Cora and I snuck Fred, the crazy pet turtle Cora got for her fourth birthday, into the classroom to show off when there was recess or break time. But Fred had a different plan. He wanted to climb up Miss Belcher's leg. I think Fred wanted to go to sleep between her boobs – there were huge – but he never made it. You know, turtles can be very slow. So when he snuck out of my desk in the darkness while we were watching a movie and went for it, well...it didn't turn out very well. I heard a scream and then a sound like someone falling. Then, and I will never forget this, Miss Belcher yelled "fuck" pretty loud. Now I didn't know what that meant, but I did know you weren't supposed to say it unless it was like an emergency or something. But this was an emergency, I guess. Then the lights came on and Principal Bergen was standing in the doorway looking at Miss Belcher on the floor. Turns out she sprained her ankle when she jumped up and tried to run in the dark after feeling Fred trying to crawl up her calf. We found Fred running for the corner, trying to hide, but he wasn't even halfway there when Principal Bergen picked him up and stared at us. She held Fred high in the air, his little legs still moving, and I could see Cora out of the corner of my eye. She was trying not to laugh. See, Cora was smart and that's why she had me put Fred in my desk. Susie, who sat next to me, pointed at me and said that I'd brought the turtle to school. I got in trouble that day, but I covered for Cora even though I didn't have too. She was my friend after all. I

missed recess for the next two weeks, but that was okay because I loved to read. I did a lot of that the next few weeks.

When I came home the day of the Fred thing, I curled up next to my baby brother and told him all about it. Sean looked at me with those big eyes of his and just grinned at me. Even though he was only a little over a year old, I knew he could understand what I was telling him and he laughed and laughed when I got to the part about Principal Bergen holding Fred up in the air, her face all flushed from the excitement. I always shared my day with Sean. Besides Cora and my mother, he was all I had. I didn't see my father much and when I did, we didn't talk or play. He seemed to always be in his own world. I think I hung out with Sean a lot when I was home because Mom and Dad argued a lot. They didn't think I heard them or that I knew, but I did. I would lay in my bed at night and listen to them fight and then I would hear Dad slam a few doors, say some words like the one Miss Belcher said that day at school and then he would get in his truck and drive off. Sometimes he wouldn't come back for a day or two. Mom would pretend everything was alright, but Sean and I knew it wasn't. Mom looked tired and sad whenever Dad left like that. I thought maybe she would go after him, but she never did. Probably because I wasn't old enough to look after my baby brother just yet. I wasn't turning six until next month.

A few weeks after the thing with the turtle, I was playing with Sean, tickling him and watching his face light up when I noticed a couple of small bumps on his neck. My first thought was maybe they were warts and I gave them to him. From Fred, the turtle. I had carried Fred to school in my sweater pocket and kept my hands in there to hide him. So did I give warts to Sean? But then why didn't I have any? But wasn't it frogs that had warts, not turtles? Or was all that made up stories to scare little kids from playing with frogs and turtles? Then Cora came over and I kissed Sean on the cheek and went out to play, forgetting about warts and turtles and frogs and the bumps on my little brother's neck.

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It was when I went into the fourth grade that Mom went looking for work. She had to because my father decided to go live somewhere else. Seems he found some other person to do whatever grown-ups do with each other. That was another one of those things that I was told I would find out about later. When I asked Cora about it, she told me that it was all about sex. “What’s sex?” I’d asked.

“Come on, I wanna show you something,” she said, jumping off the branch to the soft dirt below. We were in the backwoods behind the house Cora was born in, perched on her favorite tree. We did that a lot: climbed up the tree and had long conversations about life, or watched the sunset or read good books. Cora wanted to be a writer and she told me to be a good writer you had to read something like a zillion books before you could write about anything. She’d read that somewhere, she said.

“So have you read a zillion books?”

“Not yet, but I’m getting close. Real close.”

She took me by the hand and led me through the underbrush. I could barely make out the old trail that was overgrown with weeds, bushes and low-lying tree limbs reaching out like those hands in my dreams. Trying to grab me. I was doing my best not to get my face slapped or my arms scratched by the stickers and branches. Cora still held my hand, tugging me along as if we were running from something.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see. We’re almost there,” she said, pulling me along.

We stumbled out into a clearing that really wasn’t much more than a small break in the overgrowth. It was as if the land just needed to take a big breath from the suffocation of plant life. Cora let go of my hand, turned to me, grabbed me by my shoulders and looked directly at my eyes. It was a little frightening, her eyes boring into mine like that.

“Don’t tell anyone about this place, okay?”

“Uh yeah, sure, why so serious?”

Without another word, she turned and went to the far end of the clearing, motioning me to follow. I did. Cora stopped suddenly, so sudden that I almost knocked her over. “What the heck, Cora why—”

“Just wait a minute Sarah!” she scolded. With a mischievous grin, Cora began moving tree branches and other debris from what I had first thought was just a pile of vegetation, but turned out to be purposefully placed to conceal the opening to a small cave.

“You’ll have to duck walk or crawl because it isn’t very big at first,” Cora said.

“W-What if there are bats or snakes or something?” I moaned. I never did like small spaces or the dark. I still slept with a nightlight, a habit that would continue into my adulthood.

“Don’t worry Sarah, there isn’t anything like that. You worry too much!”

“And how do you know there aren’t any snakes or lizards? Maybe it’s a bear’s cave.”

“Stop being such a scaredy-cat, I have something to show you.” Cora got down on all fours in the dirt and crawled through the opening. I took a deep breath and followed. Once inside a few feet, the darkness covering us like a warm blanket, Cora produced a small flashlight. “Come on,” she said, rounding a corner, moving deeper into the earth. I followed the beam of light, staying extremely close to my friend, the claustrophobia beginning to grip me and causing my heart to work overtime, my throat to tighten. But I couldn’t be a *scaredy-cat*. What would happen if they found out at school that I was afraid of the dark or tight places?

“Here we are,” Cora said, standing up as the roof of the cave expanded to accommodate our small frames. There was a makeshift seat of smooth stone covered by an old blanket that I guessed Cora had snuck from her mom’s closet. She sat down and motioned for me to sit next to her, which I did.

“Remember what I said. Don’t you dare tell anyone about this, not even Sean.”

“Sean’s only five, who’s he going to tell anyway?” I always shared everything with my baby brother and was baffled as to why I couldn’t tell him about this.

“Just don’t.” From behind a pile of rocks, Cora produced a bunch of magazines, but I couldn’t immediately see what was on the cover because of the angle and the darkness of the room. Cora moved closer to me and put the magazines on her lap, shining the light down on the glossy cover. What I saw made me feel funny. There was a man, naked from the waist-up, the lower part of his body hidden by the couch in front of him. Even though you could only see the upper half of his body, you knew he was completely naked.

Cora was watching me. I knew she wanted to see how I would react, so I kept my cool. I really didn’t know what to think. And then, without a word, Cora opened the magazine to its center, revealing the man on the front. But this time he was *lying* on the sofa, his thing resting limply along the inside of his thigh. I gagged and swallowed hard. “Gross!” I managed and Cora laughed.

“You are such a putz! This is what makes babies. The guy puts that *thing* inside the girl and they make a baby. That is what they call sex.”

“Where did you get these?” I was real curious now and picked up another magazine and flipped through the pages.

“I found them in the garage with a bunch of stuff that was going to the recycle facility. Must have belonged to Mom. They’re old, did you notice the date? 1968, almost twenty years ago.”

“Well, no boy is ever going to put that thing in me,” I said, that funny feeling crawling inside me again. “You think your mom let a boy put their thing in her? Why does she have these?” I added, nodding to the magazines.

Cora shrugged and I can tell she was a little unnerved with all the questions. “It’s called a *penis*.”

“A what?”

“Penis,” she said again, but louder this time. “And yes, of course some guy put it in her. Where do you think I came from? And you?”



I was shocked; I didn't know what to say, how to respond. So I stood there looking at this guy's *thing* for a minute more, intrigued, before I took the magazine from my friend, closed it and hid it behind the rocks.

Later that night, at home, I almost asked my mom about where I came from, about sex, but decided against it. She seemed tired and detached. Ever since Dad left, Mom just seemed to have lost her happiness to a place where she just couldn't find it again. Maybe she would recapture it, like a lost pet, at her death, which would come much sooner than any of us expected.

"So you should have seen it," I said to Sean. He was five-and-a-half and I know he didn't understand things like I did – I was ten, after all – but I still shared with him everything about my life. I was the only one to teach him and to be there for him, Mom sure wasn't helping, so I just had to take care of him because if I didn't, who would? "It was BIG, and it was UGLY, and you'd better not ever stick yours in a girl. It's for peeing, that's what I know."

He smiled and said, "You're a weirdo, Sarah." We were working on another puzzle, this one of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and he slipped in another piece. And that's when I saw a few more of those strange-looking bumps that I thought were warts. These were on the underside of his arm and I noticed them when he snapped the top of the tower into place. I didn't say anything, but looking back now, I wish I would have.

Sean went into kindergarten that fall and I was a big fifth-grader. Cora and I had separate classes, but that didn't keep us apart. We hung out at recess, sat together at lunch and met in the bathroom to plan our next debacle, which usually consisted of playing a practical joke on an unsuspecting kid. And the poor soul was usually a girl Cora didn't like or felt was a threat. But like I said before, Cora was smart and she never seemed to get caught. Someone else always took the fall, but it wasn't me anymore. Cora protected not only herself, but me to.

In the spring of that year, Mom enrolled Sean in little league baseball. Sean really didn't care about playing and I think Mom did it just so Sean would have other boys to hang out with and the coach could maybe be a dad to him too, since our father wasn't around anymore. Maybe he would take him places, like camping and fishing, you know, Dad stuff.

It was at one of Sean's game that Mom told me I had to attend where we first noticed it. I had coaxed Cora into coming with me so I didn't have to listen to Mom whine about Dad and maybe make a fool of herself by flirting with some of the other single men, or even some of the married ones. I actually blackmailed Cora. If she didn't come with me, I told her, I would let Vickie know who really pulled that prank on her, even though the teachers never found out. I'm sure Cora didn't believe I would really do such a thing, but she came with anyway – she was my best friend after all.

During the pregame warm-ups, I watched my little brother run bases with the rest of the team, but I noticed he was falling behind. *Way behind*. It was as if his little legs just couldn't move any faster, that his muscles could barely hold the weight of him, that his brain couldn't fire the messages quick enough. Knowing what I know now, I think the brain was the problem.

So I watched my little brother struggle, while my mother ogled other men. Cora nudged me, then whispered: "I think something's wrong with Sean."

Later that night, Sean told me he didn't want to play baseball anymore. He was crying and said his head hurt. There were more of those bumps now, some behind his ear and a few more trying to hide under his neckline. When he bent over to pick up his Lego set, his pajama top pulled up to reveal a dozen or so of those wart-like manifestations crawling down towards his tailbone. I assured him that he wouldn't have to play if he didn't want to. He smiled and hugged me fiercely as if he also knew something was terribly wrong.

The next day I told Cora about what I'd found on Sean's skin and she said it was probably just a rash or something. I told her it was most definitely not a rash, it was something more and he needed to see

a doctor. I could tell she wasn't hearing me and when I looked closer, I could see she'd been crying. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"We're moving back to Chicago," she said matter-of-factly.

I felt suddenly sick and dizzy. I must've heard her wrong. "W-what?"

Cora let loose then and the tears came. She grabbed me and hugged me tight. We were sitting in her favorite tree and she almost knocked me off the huge branch. The sun was beginning to lower its reddish-purple mass behind the horizon and the chill began seeping into me. I hugged her back and cried for the next four days.

I convinced Mom that Sean needed to see a doctor and when I asked her why she hadn't taken him already she went off about Dad and leaving her with no medical insurance and how was she supposed to take care of two kids and, and, and....

For the next few years I numbly trudged my way through elementary school and part of middle school while watching my little brother go through a million different tests, seeing different specialists. It's not that it took long to diagnose him – it didn't - it was just that once they found out what he had, they wanted to use him as a lab rat. Sean was afflicted with a rare condition called neurofibromatosis, or NF, and because it was rare, the UW scientists wanted to study him so maybe they could win the Nobel Peace Prize or something. Make a name for themselves or whatever. Seems all those bumps were tumors, thankfully benign, but they were now on Sean's face and all over his body – he began to look like a sideshow circus freak. I found out later that neurofibromatosis was also called *Elephant Man Disease* because John Merrick suffered from NF along with some other genetic abnormalities.

I lost touch with Cora about a year after she left. She stopped texting and facebooking and I think she found another best friend. I had not. *My* best friend was now covered in grotesque-looking tumors. If we went anywhere, people would stare or make remarks under their breath. They would pull their children in the opposite direction, hiding their faces in the laps of their coats and pretend we didn't exist.

In my ninth grade year, I finally fucked the hell out of Johnny Stricklin; he'd been after me for the past two years. I guess you could say we were a couple, but I never felt that close. I took him to the cave where Cora and I shared those nudie magazines so many years ago. Our secret place that was no longer secret. After the hurt went away, I fucked him hard, as if the physical exertion would cleanse my soul and rid me of the pain. It didn't, of course. I went home that evening and crawled up next to my deformed brother and wrapped my arms around him. He cried himself to sleep as he always did now, but before he drifted off, he asked me if it was ok to die. I didn't know what to say.

Three days later, Sean passed. Mom was out with one of those scientists she met while Sean was undergoing the tests, probably screwing him while her only son was dying. I found out that it wasn't NF that killed him, it was those pills in the medicine cabinet. Those and a lot of shame, I think.

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I roll over and look at the red digital readout: 3:14 a.m. Tom is softly snoring next to me. I slip out of bed, and as quietly as I can I make my way down the hall to Sean's room. He is seven months old now and his skin is clear. I check constantly. I sit in the rocker and, by the light of the streetlamp coming through the window, thumb through old photos of Cora and my baby brother. It's been almost six years since Mom passed and I don't think about her much. But I seem to always think about Cora and Sean. I get up, check on my sleeping baby to make sure nothing has erupted on his skin in the middle of the night and then I open my laptop, log onto Facebook and begin my search for the Cora I knew so many years ago.