

Home

I feel like I'm flying as I propel into a back tuck. I sense my coach's hands reach out to spot me and then withdraw when she sees that I have enough speed, control, and rotation to stick the landing. I land—legs were together, toes were pointed, and the best part is that I wasn't thinking about anything except the feeling of flipping through the air. The best gymnasts practice until every movement is memorized, until the only thing they have worry about is focusing. I'm not the best gymnast. Even though I can jump far and high, run fast, and throw hard tricks when I'm in the right mood, I'm usually distracted. If it's a good day, I'm distracted by talking to my friends, Megan and Joie mostly. If it's a bad day, I'm usually not talking to anyone because I'm distracted by my thoughts. On those days, I don't stick landings and I'm too scared to hurl myself off the vault. Even if I'm having a good day, I doubt myself too much, which is a problem because a big part of gymnastics is believing that you can do it. My coach always says that I have a lot of "mental blocks." But today's practice has been great. I feel warmed by the high-fives, smiles, and "great jobs" that my coaches are showering me with.

I get back in line. I look around the gym—at the Mommy and Me classes, the level 7 gymnasts on beam, the boys' competitive team on pommel horse—then towards the trampolines, where I see Sarah, jumping on the especially bouncy trampoline, laughing hysterically. I don't know whether to smile or wince with embarrassment.

After practice, Elin is waiting for us near the waiting room. I walk in, grab my book out of the cubby, and slip on my socks and brown Converse. Sarah runs to put on her pink Crocs. "How was practice guys?" Elin asks. "It was so good! I landed a round-off backhandspring back tuck with no spot!" I say, already eyeing the vending machine and hoping that she's in a good

enough mood to buy me a grape flavored Propel. I try my distinctive puppy dog face and it works. She's in a good mood. I drink it in the car and read my book. *A Mango Shaped Space*. The binding is creased from many reads. I've read it almost as many times as I've read the Harry Potter books, which is saying something because the covers of my Harry Potter paperbacks have eroded to the point of falling off. The girl in *A Mango Shaped Space* has synesthesia and doesn't tell anyone, but eventually people find out. She feels alone because she views the world differently than everyone else. And the people she depends on, her grandfather and her cat, Mango, die. She has to learn how to accept the world and how she sees it on her own. I like the way it's written and I like the title. I really like the idea of the letter B being a blue tinged iceberg.

We're almost home. I didn't even notice because I was so absorbed in my book. Elin is driving along the windy roads to our house and has put in Sarah's favorite CD. "Disturbia" by Rihanna plays and Sarah moves her entire body to the music, almost like she's hula-hooping. She occasionally laughs to herself as she rotates. We pull into the driveway. We live on five acres of land, but it's covered with my Dad's plant collection. I wish we filled it with a lot of animals. I would especially love it if we had a llama because they're my favorite animal. But my parents say that llamas spit too much and that they would end up taking care of it if we got one and that I would get sick of it once we had it. They don't realize that I'm used to taking care of things. I take care of myself all the time and I'm good at comforting my friends. Plus, I want to be a vet. They still won't let me have one. At least we have two dogs.

When we get home, Elin drops us inside and goes over to the guest house, where she lives. She's off for the night. Au-pairs are only supposed to work 40 hours a week, but my

parents need her to work more sometimes and she's a nice person, so she does it. When she first came to live with us, I didn't like her. I thought she was bossy. She walks me and my two best friends, Ellie and Finley, to school from their house every morning and she used to tell us not to run up and down a huge dirt hill by our school or to walk slower so she can keep us in her line of sight. She tells me what to do a lot and I wasn't used to that. We've gotten closer though because I started appreciating how she takes care of me. She'll give me a hug if I'm having a bad day and she teaches me songs in Swedish and she always asks about the book I'm reading or gymnastics or horseback riding or school. I like having someone that notices me and she can be really fun. She feels like my sister more than Sarah does. I'm sad that she'll be going back to Sweden in less than six months. My parents say she might be our last au-pair.

I go into the kitchen and hear my mom greet Sarah. Her voice sounds drunk. I bet if I looked in the trash can, I would see a bottle of wine. When she's drunk, she's either crying or angry. I'm not sure which one is better. I hate being yelled at because it makes me feel like I've done something wrong, so I guess her long hugs where I can tell she's been crying are better, even if they make me feel uncomfortable. I hate alcohol and I'm never drinking it when I get older. Not even a drop.

I go to the fridge to see what leftovers we have. Turkey, chard, mashed potatoes, and peas. Score. I love chard and so does my Dad. I make myself a plate and sit at the table. I wish my family ate together more. I like going to my friend's houses because they eat together. My friend Breton is a picky eater. He mostly eats vanilla yogurt and chips and salsa. But even if his mom made salad and stew, they all sit together. Him with his chips and salsa and everyone else with their stew. A lot of my friends act like it's annoying that their families want them to sit at

the table for thirty whole minutes and talk to them about school and sports and whatever else. They want to get back to video games or running around in the backyard or playing some sort of game. But I think it's nice. In truth, I'm kind of jealous.

As I eat, I see Sarah's PECS spread across the table. They're small cards that have a picture paired with a phrase or word. They're new strategy that her speech therapist thinks will help her communicate. They say stuff like: I want. I feel. I see. Happy. Sad. I love you. Cookie. I hope that it'll work and then I can have a sister I can actually talk to. I try to play with Sarah and make her laugh, but she mostly likes just watching the same movie thousands of times. Some of her favorites are Lilo and Stitch, the Barbie version of The Nutcracker, and the animated version of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. It's hard to play with her because I've already watched those movies a million times and she doesn't like to do anything that I like doing. Plus, she talks to herself in ways that don't make sense to me. She just says random words. She doesn't understand the rules of hide and seek or Marco Polo or any of the games I play with my friends. Sometimes she hits me or scratches me or pulls my hair. In the moment, I'm scared of her. Then, I become angry and want to hit back. Not just for what she's doing to me right now, but for everything she's done. I almost never do though because I did once and I felt so guilty.

She pulls the hair of little girls in the grocery store and sometimes she'll poop or pee in pools or in our car. She's pooped in the pool at the YMCA a lot. They let her come back even though she's too old to be doing that. I think they feel bad. She's also pooped on one of my stuffed animals before. At least in the car or at home, no one stares at her and wonders what's wrong with her. People usually don't say anything once my parents explain, but you can see the horror in their eyes. Their faces say "I'm glad that's not me." Their whispers and stares say

“She’s a freak. I feel bad for that family.” I feel guilty when she hurts people in public because I should have noticed her eyes dart to a little girl or seen her get a little too upset when my Dad tells her that she can only have one donut, not two. I can always tell before she attacks. Even if I’m too late to stop her, I usually notice before her target does and I feel the embarrassment engulf me just as her hand grabs hair and pulls without restraint. Mostly I just feel so jealous of those people. The little girl whose hair she grabs will always cry and scream and confusion will cloud her eyes, but she and her family get to walk away and take their anger and confusion and hurt with them. And I have to stay.

I start to walk towards my room. My Mom has already gone to bed and my Dad is on the couch with his computer illuminating his face. “Goodnight Dad,” I say. “Goodnight,” he says back. We don’t make eye contact. In my room, I sit down at my desk and start on the math assignment my teacher gave me. It’s some algebra. I’m only in fifth grade, but my teachers say that kids like me need extra work that’s harder so that we don’t get bored. English is my favorite subject and I’m a little less good at math and science, but they give me extra work for every subject that I can do if I want. At school, my teachers react to me like I’m special. On all of my assignments, they write “A+” and they always tell me that I’m one of the brightest students they’ve ever had. They say they’ll see my name on a book binding someday. I like the attention, even though I don’t think I’m that smart. I just feel different than everyone else. A lot of the time, I’ll find books at the library that are meant for teenagers or adults. Sometimes the books will be about someone who has an eating disorder or someone whose family is cruel to them or an orphan. I always hide them from my parents because something tells me they would stop me from reading them. At my age, I’m not supposed to know what those things are. But I do.

I start getting ready to go to sleep. My parents recently put a lock on my door for my safety. Sarah doesn't usually come into my room, but it helps in a different way than they expected. I have trouble sleeping because I overthink and start feeling like I'm breathing wrong and then I start feeling like I'm dying. If I'm not worrying about my breathing, I worry about robbers breaking into the house. Locking the door is a small way for me to feel like I have control. No one can get to me. I lock the door and lay down in my bed.

Sometimes I'm jealous of the orphans in some of the books that I read. Life is usually pretty terrible for them. But adoption is always a possibility, so there is potential for their lives to get better I suppose sometimes kids that have parents get adopted. In *Matilda*, her parents are mean to her and ignore how amazing she is, but her Mom eventually signs the adoption papers that Matilda has kept around the house since she was old enough to know what adoption meant. Matilda ends up living with Miss Honey, who appreciates her and treats her with kindness. I think it's his best book. A lot better than *James and The Giant Peach*.

After an hour or two of thinking, I fall asleep with my Webkinz scattered around me like a tornado. I dream. I am a wine bottle approaching the end of a factory carousel. I will be crushed at the end. I feel overwhelmingly anxious in a way that makes sense in the moment. My next dream is almost as vivid. I am living my life as I usually do, but everyone in my family seems off. They're different in some way and when my Dad starts walking towards me, I understand what's going on. This isn't my Dad—it's his evil twin and he wants to hurt me. I scream. I wake up.

My alarm clock tells me that it's 5:30 am. Only 30 minutes before I usually wake up. I creep through the dark hallway into the kitchen. My Dad will probably be up by now, but my

Mom is probably asleep. Sarah's PECS are still on the kitchen table. I want. I feel. I see. Happy. Sad. I love you. Everything I wish I could say. "Good morning," says my Dad as he pours a cup of coffee. "Good morning," I say. It is just another day.