




DUALDIAGNOSIS

“Please God don’t let it be me. I’m not like her, I can’t do what she does.”

Amy Mercer

My graduation from eighth grade was only weeks away. In the fall, I would be going to a private boarding school. I couldn’t wait to say goodbye to my “friends,” Tiffany and Lisa, who were small-town backstabbers. I had to

find the perfect dress for my big send-off, so Mom, my sister Erin, and I drove from Vermont to Philadelphia to visit my grandparents and to shop. Erin slept in the back seat during the seven-hour drive, waking only to request a drink or a bathroom stop. She was not normally a sleeper. Her biggest fear was being the last one awake at night. She always wanted to sleep in my room, and because I would never let her, she’d fall asleep on the floor next to my door. Erin was the first one awake in the morning. She’d leap down the stairs to stand in front of the wood-burning stove and fill up the silence of our drafty home.

Mom and I rode along in the front seats, and while I was surprised that Erin was silent in the back, I was glad to have Mom to myself.

“I need to go pee,” she said, a sweet smell coming off her skin as she leaned forward. Mom and I had been talking about my going to boarding school in the fall. Our moment alone was interrupted with another stop.

“We’re never going to get there!” I said. By the time we arrived in Philadelphia, Erin had wet her pants. While my grandmother took me to Bloomingdale’s, Mom took Erin to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with Type One Diabetes. Her blood sugar was so high from all the juice we’d given her to keep her quiet and to quench her thirst that she was nearly comatose. Mom called Dad at home and the entire family gathered to pray for her recovery. At the hospital, I listened and watched while the doctors told Erin how to test her blood sugar levels and how to give herself a shot. Surrounded by Mom, my grandmother and grandfather, Erin looked smaller than her 11 years. I stood by the door, and wondered if anyone would notice me walking away.

I was diagnosed with Type One Diabetes six months later. No one gathered in prayer. It was fall at Proctor Academy, and I had launched myself into a new life. In the middle of the night, I stood in the small corner bathroom, the rest of the girls in my dorm long asleep, and drank water, gulping it from a tall plastic cup. I had been dreaming about water.

“All you do anymore is sleep, Amy!” my roommate said the next day.

I knew she was right. That morning in French class, I held my head up with my hand and blinked rapidly to stay awake. I told my teacher that I had to go to the infirmary, and he agreed, with an exaggerated sigh. Standing in the infirmary holding onto the edge of the nurse’s desk, I asked if blurred vision was a symptom of the cold bug that was going around. They nodded their heads knowingly. I went back to my next class and squinted at the board. Eventually the nurses admitted me to the infirmary, and Mom came to get me while I was sleeping. As she helped me into the car, I could smell my own sweet breath. I knew what she was going to say, and I didn’t want to hear. I thought of my sister giving shots before she ate, pricking her fingers to test her blood sugar, and I thought, “Please God don’t let it be me. I’m not like her, I can’t do what she does.” This was *her* disease.

Erin and I are four years apart. She is an extrovert, funny, passionate, impulsive and loud, while I am an introvert, a listener, easy going and quiet. We are like “Fred and Ted” from the Dr. Seuss books, “Fred likes to stay in, and Ted likes to go out.” We have the same hazel eyes and our voices sound the same, but she is a great singer, and I can’t carry a tune. We are the same height and we both have long fingers and big feet, but I have a flat chest and she is fully endowed. She says how she feels the minute she feels it, and I hold it in and tuck it away.

Two diabetes diagnoses in six months seemed like too much for everyone to bear. I was relieved to go back to school, to stay away, to distance myself. I moved out west and did my best to pretend I was like everyone else. I only saw my sister on vacations. Returning home after college, Erin and I gradually began to share our diabetes stories. Our differences faded to the background, and I began to see how we were the same, how there was something thick like a rope holding us together. I saw that this was *our* disease.

Walking up from the beach during a recent family vacation, I ran to help Erin who was stumbling, her blood sugar low. I helped her up the steps, and my husband brought her juice. Watching her hands tremble as she drank, I could feel her confusion melt away as the sugar kicked in. Standing alone on the screened-in porch, I could see myself in her, I could see the vulnerability that surrounds us like a shadow, reminding us every day of our limitations, our differences. Reminding us that we are alone, together.

Later that day, we marched down the beach complaining about Type One Diabetes and its overbearing cousin Type Two, hogging the headlines, the money, and the research. After 20 years in good health, we talked tentatively about the future, the changes we’d seen, the changes we hoped to see. We walked back to our families by the water. We dug a hole in the sand for our children. Back at the house, we checked our blood sugar, did our shots, and had dinner.

Leaving the beach at the end of our vacation, I could feel the pull of the invisible rope, weathered by sun, wind and rain, holding us together as we drove off in opposite directions.

Amy S. Mercer lives and writes in Charleston, SC, with her husband and children. She and her sister have had Type One Diabetes for 16 years, and they still talk every day on the phone.

