

## LITTLE SISTER

Sam woke up sick with cramps and dread; she made it to the toilet and back, panting with effort, pulled off her sweaty shirt and checked her right shoulder. Yup; the Jo-sister was gone.

She phoned the Office Manager at work and asked her to email everybody that she'd be out sick for the day, grabbed a few plastic bags and a box of Kleenex and crawled back into bed. "Serves me right for loving *Little Women* when I was a kid," she thought, during the next toilet run.

It was a drag on several accounts: first, because of the day out sick—being miserable just when the iRite project was heating up—Sam suspected her boss was getting pissed about all the sick days, and working up his nerve to confront her about them. Second, because the Jo-sister was her favorite. Jo-sister was rowdier than the others—just as preachy, but she could laugh at the absurdity of her own little morality tales. And, of course, refreshingly butch.

Life was always a bit more exciting with the Jo-sister; though Sam did tend to get in more trouble with the Jo-sister around—Jo called it getting into "scrapes." Still, it was worth the trouble for the Jo-sister's delight in Sam's freedom—freedom only a man had back in the real Jo's days. Plus, the kid was a pretty good editor.

The Meg-sister had driven her nuts last time. So sanctimonious! A good kid, for sure; but very much a creature of her time. The Meg-sister was shocked pretty much every time Sam left the house except for work—hell, half the time even when Sam left the house for work!

The Amy-sister was okay. Less fun than the Jo-sister, less irritating than the Meg-sister. Always nagging Sam to dress better and go to more parties.

But, there are worse things than dressing up and going to parties. It was during one of the Amy-sister's visits that Sam had met Christy. Five years later, she was still grateful for that.

After the fourth toilet run of the day, after Sam had managed to get and keep down some Gatorade for an hour, she dragged herself to the shower. She felt slimy all over. Soaping up with the fancy olive soap she stocked as a small treat for these wretched days, she heard a very small "Oh, hello" and glanced over to her right arm, to the spot just beneath her shoulder. The outline wasn't clear yet; but by the shyness of the voice she knew it was the Beth-sister this time.

That was a surprise; the Beth-sister didn't show up as often as the others, probably because of her shyness. The Beth-sister didn't tend to stick around as long, either; the second or third time she was startled she'd vanish. And she startled easily. Sam tried to remember how much sick time she had left; sighed heavily when she remembered she was already six hours in debt. She should try to coax Beth into sticking around for at least a month, to give her sick time a chance to replenish. She should try not to be shocking.

With this in mind, she was very careful as she toweled off her right arm, and made sure to wrap her towel firmly above her breasts before letting her right side face the mirror. She tilted herself at the right angle and smiled at the Beth-sister's image in the mirror—the kid was shy enough she might be scared off by nudity. "Hello there, Beth," she said. "I'm Sam. I'm so glad to see you."

The Beth-sister blinked nervously; the face went a bit pale. "Oh, is it that funny dream again?"

"Yes," Sam said in her most soothing tones. "That funny dream. Nothing to be scared of—you'll wake up in your own bed soon enough."

Sam was careful to keep her right side away from mirrors as she dressed—protecting the Beth-sister from that startling nudity—and when she crawled back into bed she lay on her stomach so as to give the Beth-sister a clear view of Cicely, the white-furred, blue-eyed cat.

“What a pretty cat!” The little voice was louder with happiness—cats were always good to draw the Beth-sister out of her shyness.

“Yes, isn’t she?” Sam said. “Her name is Cicely, she loves it when I’m sick and stay in bed all day. Excuse me please.” She grabbed one of the plastic bags and vomited into it as quietly as possible, making sure to face to her left.

“Are you sick?” the Beth-sister asked quietly, when she was done.

“Yes,” Sam said, when she had her breath back.

“I’m sorry. I was very sick myself, last year—I almost died, except my sisters were so good to me.”

“I know,” Sam said, remembering how she had cried and cried over that section of the book—even when she was seventeen, the last time she read it. The year the sisters had begun to appear.

Beth was quiet for a minute, then said diffidently: “I’d very much like to help you, but I don’t seem to have any hands.”

“You never do in this dream,” said Sam, in her most soothing voice again. “Don’t worry, you’ll be awake again soon enough.”

“What a funny dream.”

“Would you mind just keeping Cicely company for awhile? I’d like to try to sleep.”

“Oh, of course!” said the Beth-sister. “She is such a very lovely cat.”

Sam brought her right shoulder close enough to brush Cicely’s fur—felt a rough raspy tongue on her right shoulder and heard a giggle—and slept as well as she could. Restless though she was, she was careful not to toss and turn for fear of startling the Beth-sister away.

We will draw a veil across the remainder of that morning and afternoon; suffice it to say it wasn’t pretty. By evening, though, Sam felt human enough to make it to her kitchen and pull together a simple meal of cheese and fruit. The Beth-sister was silent, but Sam could feel her watchful attentiveness.

There was a polite little throat clearing as Sam took a long slow sip of blessedly cool water. “Excuse me,” came the timid little voice.

“Yes, dear?”

“Could I have one of those cherries? They look ever so lovely.”

“Of course,” she said, and selected the very best cherry, removed its pit, and held it to the Beth-sister’s lips.

This part is fun, she thought. I always forget that about the Beth-sister—I like taking care of her.

That was half of what had drawn Sam to *Little Women* in the first place, from what she could remember. She’d always empathized with Jo, and Beth had been Jo’s favorite—Sam had wished for a shy little baby sister to take care of. And the Beth-sister likes cats. And is too timid for much moralizing at all, really—although it’s a drag when she starts worrying.

That reminded Sam of the worst thing about the Beth-sister. She dug her cell phone out of her messenger bag and called up Christy to tell lies about a last-minute business trip to Chicago. The Beth-sister was the least able of any of them to handle lesbian make-out sessions. She’d vanished that way at least three times—and Sam was too low on sick time to miss another day right now.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye,” she said. “Won’t know ‘til I’m back how long it will take—could be a week, could be a month.”

She kept the phone to her left ear during the conversation; the strain on her neck was worth it to keep the Beth-sister away from the combination of disappointment and dirty talk that followed. “I love you too, Snuggles,” she said. “I can’t wait to be home and cover you with kisses.” That was about as risqué as the Beth-sister could handle. “All over,” she emphasized. “Up... down... and sideways.”

Christy was giggling now, to Sam’s relief. “Okay, honeybee. I have to go try and get some sleep—you know how jet-lagged I get.” She hung up.

The Beth-sister said quietly, “Is she a very dear friend?”

“The dearest.”

“Jo is my dearest friend.”

“I know. And she adores you just as much.”

A little sigh. “I miss her.”

“I know. And she misses you too. But you’ll be back again with her very soon.”

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Sam woke up feeling refreshed and energetic the next morning; it was a funny thing about the sisters, she always felt better the next morning after one arrived. After twenty years, she didn’t even really wonder why anymore— just lay for a moment in bed, enjoying the lack of pain and nausea and preparing her thoughts for the day, then said a gentle, “Hello.” The most important thing was to avoid scaring the Beth-sister for at least two weeks. That way she wouldn’t go further into debt on her sick time.

“Hello,” said the Beth-sister quietly.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I think I did,” was the hesitant reply. “It’s funny—I don’t think I’ve ever slept in a dream before.”

Sam paused before replying. “It’s a very funny dream. I’m going to get up and take a shower, then get us something to eat.”

She wore a robe to the bathroom, for the Beth-sister’s sake, and again kept her right side away from the mirrors until she was finished with showering and dressing. Usually she didn’t eat breakfast before work; but this morning she got out some yogurt for herself and last night’s cherries, remembering the Beth-sister’s pleasure, and made them both some tea.

Once again, she enjoyed choosing the nicest cherry and holding it gently to the Beth-sister’s lips. The form was clearer now, she could see that as she fed her—the clear outline of a shy face, and the features were beginning to protrude from Sam’s skin.

“Thank you,” the Beth-sister said.

“You’re very welcome.” Sam had been thinking about how to put the next bit, how to best prepare the Beth-sister for her day. “I need to go to work today, and I need to take you with me.”

“Oh.”

“I can cover you up, so you can sleep all day, but I thought you might want to be able to look. I need to tell you though, it’s—not what you expect.”

“Oh.”

“This is a very funny dream, it’s very different from what you’re used to. I’m worried it might frighten you. Should I cover you up?”

“No. I can be brave. I would like to look.”

“Okay. You can tell me later if you want me to cover you—and I will.”

“I think I can be brave.”

“Thank you.”

Years before Sam had found that the sisters could see through lightweight shirts, through silk and cotton; it took a heavier fabric to block their eyes. Now, mindful of the Beth-sister’s fragility, she put on one of her usual boy’s button-ups but also wrapped a wool scarf round her neck, draping it so as not to cover her right arm, but easily pulled over if needed. It does go with being sick, she thought, taking a last look in the bathroom mirror to make sure everything was buttoned and zipped before heading out to work.

That morning was the weekly Simple Key status meeting, and once again Dan hadn’t fixed any of the bugs found in the previous week. He made the same assurances that he had for the last two weeks, promising they would be fixed by Friday. Sam hung up the conference phone—she’d booked a room for this meeting, she didn’t like to take these calls at her cube—and took another look at her issue-tracking spreadsheet. No, she couldn’t push this off any longer—the client was too frustrated, she needed to call Bill. She dialed the next number.

“Hey Bill, it’s Sameira. Pretty good, pretty good—reading the new Gibson, it’s a blast. Oh, you’d like it. You know me, though, I only call with bad news. Yup, it’s Dan. Yup, the bugs from two weeks ago still aren’t fixed. He’s vanishing into a hole again, and I need you to dig him out, get him moving. Can you call Lori too? She sounded frustrated over the phone

today—could use some reassurance that you’re on it. And Bill, I don’t know what you’re doing next Tuesday—but if it’s at all possible, I need you on the call. It’s the only way to get Dan to behave.”

She hung up and updated her spreadsheet, took a quick look at her calendar. Another hour before the next meeting, this one a WebEx on iRite. Good. Time to review her notes, write up another status slide to go over with the developer. Sometimes seeing their accomplishments and next steps laid out in a PowerPoint—and watching her update deadlines as they slipped—got the guys moving.

There was a polite sound from her shoulder.

“Yes, Beth?”

“I don’t want to be impertinent, but I’m very curious.”

“Ask away.” That sounded a bit rough; she softened her tone. “I mean, I’d be very glad to explain. What are you wondering?”

“That was a man you were talking to just now, right?”

“Yes, that was Bill.”

“And you were—it sounded very much like you were telling him what to do?”

“Oh, not exactly. It’s just that he’s the only one who can get Dan moving when he stalls out like this.”

There was no reply to this; Sam looked at the little face on her right shoulder—another oddity, she could always see them through light cloth, though nobody else ever seemed to. The face looked puzzled.

“I guess I was,” she said slowly. “Yeah, I was. I don’t like to give orders—and I can’t really, I’m not Bill’s boss—but I’m the only reason that this project has gotten this far, and we all know I need Bill to push Dan to get it any further. So yeah. Yeah, I figure out what needs to be done, and I call Dan up and ask him to do it. Tell him to do it, really. You’re right.”

The little face said something so quietly that Sam couldn’t hear. “What?”

“Jo would love this place,” said the Beth-sister. “She couldn’t bear that she wasn’t a man. It doesn’t matter for you, does it?”

Sam thought about that. “Not the way it did for her,” she said. “I mean, there’s still plenty wrong but—No. It really doesn’t.”

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That evening, on the way home from work, Sam detoured to Stacy’s Books to pick up a copy of *Little Women*. She had to figure out how to make the Beth-sister stay for at least a month.

It had been twenty years since Sam had read the book. It was different then she remembered.

It was still fun, first of all. Yes, treacly and sentimental. But Jo was still refreshing, funny and brash—Sam smiled over her scenes—and Beth was adorably good.

The little morality stories were surprisingly satisfying. The world of the book was so simple—somebody does something wrong, there’s a consequence, Mother comes in and explains the moral. Reading over dinner, Sam found herself thinking about her favorite show, *It’s Me or the Dog*, about the woman who came in and corrected dog owners, explained what they were doing wrong, and taught them how to do right—the stories followed a very similar pattern, and offered the same sort of pleasure.

She also found herself nodding over a few of the lessons. Yes, it is important to stay busy—to have hours for work and play each day. Celebrate little successes, build in routines. I wonder if that trick would work for Dan?

And it was funny the things that the author needed to justify—the long explanation for how putting on plays was perfectly wholesome, for example.

But Sam was also angry at Mother. What was this woman doing, leaving her children alone while she ran around helping other women’s children?

A suffragette, a feminist for her time—but also, by modern standards, quite neglectful of her own family.

Sam got caught up in the stories; but also took notes on things that the Beth-sister might like. After reading for an hour, she got online, downloaded some piano music, and spent some time on eBay finding a miniature piano, an antique, put in a bid for *Buy it Now* and had it shipped to her work address.

She put on the piano music. “Oh! How delightful!” said the little voice. “I hoped you might like it.”

The Beth-sister closed her eyes in joy, to listen to the music. She sang along, very faintly.

Jo went back to reading.

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“So nice you could join us,” Seth said at the next day’s iRite meeting, sitting with Sam in the conference room waiting for the others to call in.

“Hmm?” Sam asked, trying to sound cool though she felt herself stiffen. “Oh—because I was out sick on Monday? Believe me, you have nothing to be jealous of.” She wrinkled her nose. “I spent the whole day within a few feet of the bathroom . . .”

Tony came on the line, and they jumped right into a conversation about how the feeds should be communicating with each other, the various benefits of “BRS events” vs. “simple http.”

Sam did her usual job, translating between the different players, making sure misunderstandings were cleared up, and capturing action items. After the meeting, she jotted up her notes for Hadi, so he could write them up and send them off along with action items to the team. The whole time she was bristling a bit about Seth’s crack; after she sent out her follow-up email she walked over to the break room, made herself a cup of tea, and took it outside. She found an empty table outside Starbucks, sat down and closed her eyes and breathed.

A polite little throat clearing from Beth.

“Yes dear?”

“That man didn’t like you being sick, did he?”

“No, he didn’t.”

They sat quietly for a moment.

“I get very sick too, sometimes, but my family is quite kind.”

“I know,” said Sam. “I’m glad. They should be.”

“I wish that man was kind too.”

“Yes. Me too.”

“I hope you are better soon,” said the Beth-sister.

“Thank you.”

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That afternoon, Sam went to get a burrito on her own—she didn’t want company. She took her iPod, with the piano music on for Beth, and went back to reading *Little Women*.

It was the sad part she remembered; the very sad part where Beth was so sick she almost died. Sam found herself tearing up as she read it— a bit embarrassed, but again struck by how satisfying the story was. She flipped ahead to the end of the chapter to make sure Beth survived the fever— vaguely remembering that she did that the last time she read the book, too. When she had reassured herself of Beth’s survival, she went back and read more slowly. It was really quite fun— so pathetic! So nakedly sentimental! To let herself wallow in these pitiful emotions; in the pleasurable sadness of Beth’s illness, Mother’s absence, the sisters’ guilt. And then to have it all turn out all right—so comforting when Beth lived.

She closed the book at the end of her lunch break with a sense of great satisfaction.

“I’m so glad you got through that fever,” she told Beth.

“Me too.” Said Beth. “Although—well. Never mind.”

“What is it dear?”

Beth’s voice was hesitant. “It’s just—I’m not as strong as I was.”

“Oh darling. I’m sure you’ll get stronger.”

“Yes. I’m sure I will.”

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Sam called Christy again when she got home from work.

“Still stuck in Chicago,” she lied, “I miss you.”

It was a sad conversation, and an awkward one; figuring out how to translate her affection and her desire into terms that wouldn't scare the Beth-sister away, but also wouldn't seem too odd to Christy. She played whimsical and used a lot of baby talk. She was sorry to hang up the phone.

Sam's last two girlfriends had left her over these absences; she had said she wanted someone she could live with, someone she could rely on. Christy had been remarkably tolerant, but Sam knew it was hard; made a quiet promise to herself that she would make it up to Christy next time the Jo-sister was in town.

"She sounds like she misses you a lot," said the Beth-sister, some time after she'd hung up the phone.

"I miss her too."

"Do you usually see her often?"

"Every day," said Sam.

"You're very dear friends, aren't you?"

Sam paused. "Yes. The dearest."

No response from the little face; but the silence was sympathetic.

"She's not only my friend, you know. She's more like—more like my wife."

Another pause; Sam waited to see if the Beth-sister would startle and vanish.

"You can do that here?"

"Not exactly," said Sam, "We can't get legally married but—yes. Yes, we can." She needed to strain to hear the next words.

"Jo would love this place. She never thought—she never thought men were very beautiful. She always said she wished she were a man, she'd marry us and keep us safe."

"I know."

"You know a lot of things."

"It's a very funny dream."

Sam stirred her tea, alone and in companionable silence.

"You should see her," said the Beth-sister.

“I don’t want to frighten you. Some of the things we do might—frighten you.”

“Like the things men and women do?” The voice sounded like it was smiling; Sam looked up in surprise. “Oh, I know about those,” said the Beth-sister. “I live in a very small house. But I didn’t know that women could marry women. I’d like to see.”

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The sex was very gentle, more so than usual, though not unprecedentedly so. Sam was acutely aware of the Beth-sister’s watchful presence, tracking the view from her right side as she kissed Christy, unbuttoned her pretty cardigan and found her favorite bra.

“You wore the special underwear,” she said, nuzzling.

“I missed you,” Christy said, and gasped at the first little bite.

Sam went slowly, avoiding the usual rough talk, and it was exciting—it felt somehow virginal, new. Christy seemed excited too—frustrated, but excited, interpreting Sam’s slowness as a tease. Finally she grabbed Sam with arms and thighs and got her teeth into Sam’s ear—Sam did manage to make sure it was the left one—and grunt-gasped, “Fuck me now, make me come,” and Sam pumped into her, half-losing track of the sister and half ceasing to care—and did as she was ordered.

She got herself off with her vibrator then, excited to the brink by Christy’s orgasm, and nestled into the crook of her dear girl’s arm.

Little cooing noises, then; I love you’s and private names and drifting images. Just before sleep, Sam realized that there were two voices cooing, two sets of contented breathing. She opened her eyes and looked to her right shoulder to see the Beth-sister’s face smiling at her dreamily. “Thank you,” the little face said, “I didn’t think I’d ever see,” and closed her eyes.

Beth had to stay. Sam had to find a way for Beth to stay.

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Sam woke up Thursday morning to the Beth-sister coughing. It was painful to listen to, and it seemed to go on forever.

“I’m so sorry, dear,” she said when it ended.

“It is difficult,” the Beth-sister said. “I get frightened sometimes. It seems to be getting worse.”

Sam listened to the Beth-sister’s breathing; she was almost panting.

“I have a sickness too,” she said.

“I know,” the Beth-sister said. “It’s me, isn’t it?”

The Beth-sister’s voice was so light, so clear, that it was not possible to lie to her. “Yes,” Sam said. “Yes, you are the sickness.”

Beth nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind,” said Sam.

The Beth-sister smiled. “Of course you do! I mind being sick—I hate it! I’m so jealous, sometimes, of the other girls. How could you not mind it?”

“That’s not it,” said Sam, slow, feeling her way. “I mind it. But—it’s worth it. It’s worth it to have you.”

There was a pause. Beth nodded, sharply; Sam felt it through her whole body. She got up, and put on the piano music.

“How did you know that I would like the piano music?” asked the Beth-sister, after they’d sat for a while with the music playing, Cicely dozing on their lap, Sam nodding off over *Little Women*.

“I don’t know if I should tell you,” said Sam.

“Are you afraid of frightening me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s another thing you knew right away—that it’s easy to frighten me. You know an awful lot about me.”

Sam turned the novel over in her hands, and decided to risk it. She turned her shoulder towards the book, showed it to the Beth-sister.

“*Little Women*,” said Beth.

“Yes. It’s a book about you and your sisters. Jo wrote it when she grew up.”

“Oh!” The Beth-sister’s breathing quickened. “Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

There was a long pause. “Would—would you read it to me?”

Sam smiled. “I would love to.”

Another world of pleasure opened then; Sam hadn't read aloud in years, not since college, and had forgotten how much she loved it. Curled up under a blanket, cat on lap and hot chocolate within easy reach, she read the old familiar stories to Beth. The Beth-sister was a perfect audience—she had so many delightful little noises to express excitement, or fear, or joy—enraptured in the story. They started reading a few chapters together every evening, before bed.

The Beth-sister's cold lingered. Sam googled herbal teas, fed her chamomile and mint, but still found herself waking up in the middle of the night to quiet, stifled little coughs. The Beth-sister tired easily; she asked to be covered while Sam was working, so that she could rest. Sam pulled out *Little Women* and skipped ahead to see what happened to Beth in the story. She had a familiar sinking dread when she saw that the illness never really went away—felt a rushing in her ears when she reached the part of the novel where Beth died. Sam had to leave work early that day, invent a migraine under her boss's frown; she couldn't focus at all.

Walking home from Bart, she put a hand lightly, protectively on the top of her right arm, cupping the little face through the scarf. The cherry blossoms on her street were in bloom; the sky was beautiful. How could it be so beautiful, when her little sister was dying?

There was a stirring under the scarf. Sam pulled her hand away, loosened the scarf and smiled at the Beth-sister. "How about we stop at the store on the way home, and pick up some cherries?" she asked.

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Over the next days, it was impossible not to see that the Beth-sister was getting worse. Her coughing fits grew more frequent, and more intense; she tried to stifle them, but even when she managed to stay silent Sam's whole body shook. Sam sat in meetings, taking notes, shaking with the force of those held-in coughs. She spoke, raised issues, listed action items, over coughing that only she could hear. When a coughing fit ended, everything sounded so shockingly still—Sam's own voice in the quiet startled her, almost made her wince.

Sam stopped reading *Little Women* in the evenings. She picked up *Anne of Green Gables* at Stacy's, started reading it out loud instead. The Beth-sister never asked why. She seemed to enjoy the new novel, but was quieter with it.

Sam read *Wikipedia* articles, reread the novel for clues while Beth was resting, bought strange herbal remedies online and tried to make Beth well. The Beth-sister drank everything down, visibly not trying to flinch at the taste. The miniature piano arrived, and the Beth-sister was not strong enough to play it. Sam saw the box in her office, guessed the contents from the size, shoved it under her desk and never mentioned it. It bumped against her knees as she typed and she pretended that it wasn't there.

A week went by, and the Beth-sister got worse and worse.

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Sam was so sick; they both were. It was not bearable, it was not possible to survive this. She twisted and turned, heard moaning and coughing, was unable to distinguish her own moaning from Beth's; perhaps if she turned on her side, surely she would feel better if she could turn on her side.

She didn't turn onto her side. There was Beth, sweet Beth, little sister growing on her right shoulder; she couldn't crush Beth. She writhed, trying to find a position where there would be less nausea, less pain. She heard Beth crying, softly.

It was not bearable. It was not possible to survive this. It was not possible to survive, knowing that Beth wouldn't.

"I'm so sorry," she said,

"So am I," said Beth.

Sam's whole body ached. There was no way that she could lie that there would be less pain, less nausea. She forced herself to be still. She turned her head to the right, and strained towards Beth. She kissed Beth's forehead, Beth's half-closed lips. Beth smiled a little. She looked like she was in pain.

Sam curled into herself, like she was wrapped around something precious, like she was protecting someone. She wrapped her left arm around the front

of her body and stroked Beth's sweat-damp hair and she lied to her. She told her that she would be all right, that everything would be all right. That everything would be OK.

She made a little song of it, a rough little song that got rougher and rougher and quieter and quieter.

It was not possible that she would sleep; but eventually she did. When she woke up, the pain was gone and everything looked very sharp and very clear.