

CHAPTER 7

When I sleep, I dream. And in my dreams I can do anything. I get picked first on the playground for games. I can run so fast! I take gymnastics, and I never fall off the balance beam. I know how to square-dance, and I'm good at it. I call my friends on the phone, and we talk for hours. I whisper secrets. I sing.

When I wake up in the morning, it's always sort of a letdown as reality hits me. I have to be fed and

dressed so I can spend another long day in the happy-face room at Spaulding Street School.

Along with the assortment of teachers we've had in room H-5, there have been more classroom aides than I can count. These aides—usually one guy to help with the boys and one lady to help with the girls—do stuff like take us to the bathroom (or change diapers on kids like Ashley and Carl), feed us at lunch, wheel us where we need to go, wipe mouths, and give hugs. I don't think they get paid very much, because they never stay very long. But they should get a million dollars. What they do is really hard, and I don't think most folks get that.

It's even hard to keep good teachers for us. I guess I don't blame them for leaving, because, like I said, we're a tough bunch to handle sometimes.

But once in a while we get a good one. After squeaky Mrs. Hyatt for kindergarten and game-show Mr. Gross for first grade, Mrs. Tracy breezed into our room for second grade.

She figured out I liked books, so she got some

earphones and hooked me up with audiobooks on CD. She started with baby stuff, like Dr. Seuss, which my father and I had read when I was two, so after I tossed those on the floor a couple of times, instead of punishing me, she figured out I needed something better.

I listened to all of the Baby-Sitters Club books and those goofy Goosebumps books. She asked me questions after each book, and I got every single question right. Things like, "Which of these helped to solve the mystery?" Then she'd show me a pebble, a starfish, and an ink pen. The pebble, of course. She'd cheer after we'd gone through the questions and then hook me up to another book. That year I listened to all the books by Beverly Cleary and all the books about those boxcar kids. It was awesome.

The next year it all unraveled. I know teachers are supposed to write notes to the next teacher in line so they know what to expect, but either Mrs. Tracy didn't do it or Mrs. Billups, our third-grade teacher, didn't read them.

Mrs. Billups started every morning by playing her favorite CD. I hated it. “Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “The Itsy-Bitsy Spider”— all sung by children who could not sing, the type of music grown-ups think is all kinds of cute, but it’s awful!

Mrs. Billups put it on—at full volume—every single morning. Over and over and over. No wonder we were always in a bad mood.

Once she had the tin-pan band on, Mrs. Billups went over the alphabet. Every single day. With *third* graders.

“Now, children, this is an ‘A.’ How many of you can say ‘A’? Good!”

She’d smile and say “good” even if nobody in the class responded.

I wondered if she would teach able-bodied third graders the same way. Probably not. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

“Now let’s move on to ‘B.’ This is the letter ‘B.’ Let’s all say ‘B.’ Good!”

Again to silence. She didn’t seem to care. I glanced with longing at the books on tape and the earphones, which had been shoved into a corner.

One day I guess I’d had enough. Mrs. Billups had expanded from saying the letters to making the sound of each one.

“Buh!” she said loudly, spitting a little as she did. “‘Buh’ is the sound of the letter ‘B.’ Let’s all say ‘buh’ together, children.”

Then Maria, who is always in a good mood, started throwing crayons. Willy began to babble. And I bellowed.

I may not be able to make clear sounds, but I can make a *lot* of noise.

I screamed because I hated stuff that was just plain stupid.

I screeched because I couldn’t talk and tell her to shut up!

And that made me cry because I’d *never* be able to tell *anybody* what I was really thinking.

So I screamed and yelled and shrieked. I cried

like a two-year-old. I would not stop.

Then my tornado explosion took over. I flailed and jerked and basically spazzed out. I kicked so hard that my shoes popped out of the foot straps on my chair. That made me tilt to one side, and I screamed even louder.

Mrs. Billups didn't know what to do. She tried to calm me down, but I didn't *want* to be calmed. Even the aides couldn't stop me. Jill and Maria started to cry. Even Ashley, dressed all in yellow that day, looked upset. Freddy spun his chair around in circles, glancing sideways at me fearfully. Carl hollered for lunch. Then he pooped in his pants again. The whole class was out of control. And I kept screeching.

The teacher called Mrs. Anthony, the principal, whose eyes got wide as she opened our door. She took one look at the situation and said tersely, "Call her mother." She could not have left more quickly.

A moment later the teacher had my mother on the phone. "Mrs. Brooks, this is Melody's teacher,

Anastasia Billups. Can you come to the school right away?"

I knew my mother had to be worried. Was I sick? Bleeding? Dead?

"No, she's not ill. She's fine, we think," Mrs. Billups was saying in her most professional-sounding teacher voice. "We just can't get her to stop screaming. She's got the whole class in an uproar."

I could picture my mother on the other end of the line trying to figure out what was going on. Luckily, it was her day off. I knew she'd be there in a few minutes. So I gradually calmed down and finally shut up. The other kids quieted down as well, like somebody had clicked the off switch.

"Old MacDonald" continued to play.

My mother arrived faster than I thought possible. When I saw her jeans and dirty sweatshirt, I realized she'd dropped everything and jumped in the car. She ran over to me and asked what was wrong.

I took a few deep, shuddering breaths, then I pointed to the alphabet on my talking board and

screamed some sounds of frustration.

“This is about the alphabet?” my mother asked.

Yes. I pointed, then pounded on the answer.

She turned to Mrs. Billups. “What were you working on before all the screaming started?”

Mrs. Billups replied, in that superior tone that teachers dressed in nice red business suits use when they’re talking to mothers with dirty shirts on, “We were reviewing the alphabet, of course. The sound of the letter ‘B,’ if I recall. I always start with the basics. These children need constant review because they don’t retain information like the rest of us.”

My mother was getting the picture. “So you were going over the ABCs?”

“Correct.”

“It’s February.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“School started in August. You haven’t gotten past the letter ‘B’ in six months?” Mom was balling and unballing her fists. I’ve never seen my mother hit anything, but when I see her doing that, I always

wonder if she might.

“Who are you to tell me how to run my class?” the teacher asked angrily.

“And who are you to bore these children with mindless activities?” my mother snapped back.

“How dare you!” the teacher gasped.

“I dare anything for my daughter,” Mom replied, her voice dangerous, “and for the rest of these children!”

“You don’t understand—,” the teacher began.

Mom interrupted her. “No, Mrs. Billups, it is *you* who does not understand!” Mom looked like she was trying to calm herself down, because she then said, “Look. Have you ever said to yourself, ‘If they show that stupid commercial on TV one more time, I think I’ll just scream?’”

Mrs. Billups nodded slowly.

“Or, ‘If I have to sit five more minutes in this traffic jam, I’ll simply explode?’”

“Yes, I suppose,” she admitted.

“Well, I think that’s what happened to Melody.

She said to herself, 'If I have to go over those letters one more time, I'll just scream.' So she did. I really don't blame her, do you?"

Mrs. Billups looked from my mother to me. "I guess not, now that you explain it that way," Mrs. Billups finally said, her voice now as calm as my mother's.

"Melody knows her alphabet, all the sounds of all the letters, and *hundreds* of words on sight. She can add and subtract numbers in her head. We discussed all this at our last parent conference, didn't we?" I could tell my mother was trying to control her temper.

"I thought you were exaggerating," the teacher said. "Parents are not always realistic when it comes to these children."

"If you call them 'these children' one more time, I might scream," my mother warned.

"But Melody *does* have mental and physical limitations," Mrs. Billups argued, trying to put Mom in her place, I guess. "You have to learn to accept

that."

And the fire was back. "Melody can't walk. Melody can't talk. But she is *extremely* intelligent! And *you* better learn to accept *that!*" Mom spat out.

The teacher backed up an inch or two.

"Didn't you read her records from last year?" Mom demanded. "Melody loves listening to the books on tape."

"I try to approach each child with an open mind and not be influenced by other teachers. All the records are in a box someplace."

"Maybe you should find that box," my mother said, her lips tight.

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Billups countered.

"Maybe that's your problem!" Mom replied with a grin. Then she tilted her head and turned toward the CD player. "Oh, one more thing. May I see that wonderful CD you're playing?"

"Of course," Mrs. Billups said, smiling a little. "The children love this."

"Do they?" Mom asked.

The teacher lifted the disc from the player.

Twinkle, twinkle, silence.

Willy sighed out loud.

Mom took the CD, dug down in her purse for a moment, gave Mrs. Billups a five-dollar bill, and deftly snapped the disc in half.

“That music was cruel and unusual punishment!”

Freddy and Maria cheered.

Gloria whispered, “Thank you.”

For a moment I almost felt sorry for Mrs. Billups. She looked so confused. She just didn’t get it.

Mom walked over to the sink in our room, turned on the warm water, and soaked a stack of paper towels under the faucet. She came back to me and gently wiped my face with the warm, soggy wad. Nothing had ever felt so soothing. She then brushed my hair, adjusted the straps and buckles on my chair, gave me a quick hug, and went home.

Mrs. Billups quit her job after spring break, so we ended up with a series of subs till the end of the year. I think she had figured it would be easy to work with

people who were dumber than she was.

She was wrong.

CHAPTER 8

For a long time it was just me, my mom and dad, and my goldfish, Ollie. I was five years old when I got him, and I had him for almost two years before he died. I guess that's old for a goldfish. Nobody knew Ollie's name but me, but that's okay. Ollie had been a prize from a carnival Dad had taken me to, and I think Ollie's life was worse than mine.

He lived in a small bowl on the table in my room.

The bottom of the bowl was covered with tiny pink rocks, and a fake plastic log sat wedged in the rocks. I guess it was supposed to look like something from under the sea, but I don't think there are any lakes or oceans that really have rocks that color.

Ollie spent all day long swimming around that small bowl, ducking through the fake log, and then swimming around again. He always swam in the same direction. The only time he'd change his course was when Mom dropped a few grains of fish food into his bowl each morning and evening. I'd watch him gobble the food, then poop it out, then swim around and around once again. I felt sorry for him.

At least I got to go outside and to the store and to school. Ollie just swam in a circle all day. I wondered if fish ever slept. But any time I woke up in the middle of the night, Ollie was still swimming, his little mouth opening and closing like was he trying to say something.

One day when I was about seven, Ollie jumped out of his bowl. I had been listening to music on the

radio—Mom had finally figured out I liked the country-western station—and I was in a good mood. The music was sounding orangey and yellowish as I listened, and the faint whiff of lemons seemed to surround me. I felt real mellow as I watched Ollie do his thing round and round his bowl.

But suddenly, for no reason I could figure, Ollie dove down to the bottom of his bowl, rushed to the top, and hurled himself right out of the bowl. He landed on the table. He gasped and flopped, and I'm sure he was surprised he couldn't breathe. His eyes bulged, and the gills on his side pulsed with effort.

I didn't know what to do. He'd die without water — really fast. So I screamed. Mom was downstairs, or maybe outside getting the mail, but she didn't come right away. I screamed again. Louder. I cried out. I yelled. I screeched. Ollie continued to flop and gasp, looking more desperate. Ollie needed water.

I howled once more, but Mom didn't come running. Where could she be? I knew I had to do something, so I reached over to the table and

of me, out exploded a flash of wriggling gold fun. A puppy! A golden retriever puppy! I shrieked and kicked with joy. A puppy!

The clumsy little dog raced around the room, sniffing in every corner. I watched her every move—loving her right away. After exploring every table leg and piece of furniture, the puppy stopped, made sure all of us were watching, then squatted and peed right there on the carpet! Mom yelled, but only a little. That's when the dog knew she was in charge.

She checked out Dad's bare toes, but she stayed away from Mom, who was trying to soak the spot out of the rug with paper towels and that spray stuff she uses in the kitchen. Finally, the puppy circled my wheelchair around and around, like she was trying to figure it out. She sniffed it, sniffed my legs and feet, looked at me for a minute, then jumped right up onto my lap like she'd done it a million times. I barely breathed, not wanting to disturb her. Then, wow, wow, wow, she turned around three times and made herself comfortable. I think she made a noise

like a sigh of satisfaction. I know I did. I stroked her soft back and head as gently as I could.

I was the one who named her. Mom and Dad kept suggesting dumb names like Fuzzy and Coffee, but I knew as soon as I saw her what her name should be. I pointed to the bowl on the table, which held my most favorite, favorite candies—butterscotch caramel. They're soft enough to melt in my mouth, so I don't have to chew, and oh, are they delicious!

"You want to call her Candy?" Dad asked. I shook my head no, gently, so the sleeping puppy wouldn't wake up.

"Caramel?" Mom asked.

I shook my head once more.

"Why don't we call her Stinky?" Dad suggested with a grin. Mom and I just glared at him. I continued to point to the candy dish.

Finally, Mom said, "I know! You want to call her Butterscotch?"

I wanted to shriek, but I forced myself to stay calm. I tried real hard not to do anything that would

knock the puppy off my lap. “Uh,” I said softly as I continued to stroke the dog’s silky fur. I didn’t know that anything could be so soft. And she was all mine. It was the best birthday I ever had.

Butterscotch sleeps at the foot of my bed every night. It’s like she read the book on what a great dog ought to do: bark only when a stranger is at the door, never pee or poop in the house (she got over that puppy stuff), and keep Melody happy. Butterscotch doesn’t care that I can’t talk to her—she knows I love her. She just gets it.

One day, a few months after I got her, I fell out of my wheelchair. It happens. Mom had given me lunch, taken me to the toilet, and wheeled me back into my room. Butterscotch trotted behind—never in the way, just close by me all the time. Mom popped in a DVD for me and made sure my hands were properly positioned so I could rewind and fast-forward the film. She didn’t notice my seat belt wasn’t fastened, and neither did I.

She traveled up and down the stairs doing several

loads of laundry—I’m awfully messy—and I guess she had started fixing dinner. The rich aroma of simmering tomato sauce floated up the stairs. Mom knows I love spaghetti.

She peeked her head in to check on me and said, “I’m going to lie down for a couple of minutes, Melody. Are you okay for a few?”

I nodded and pointed my arm toward the door to tell her to go ahead. My movie was getting good anyway. Butterscotch sat curled next to my chair; she’d outgrown my lap. So Mom blew me a kiss and closed the door.

I was watching something I’d seen a million times — *The Wizard of Oz*. I think most people in the world can quote sections of that movie—no extra brains required—because it’s one of the movies that gets played over and over again on cable channels. But I know every single word in it. I know what Dorothy will say before she even opens her mouth. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto!” It makes me smile. I’ve never been to Kansas or Oz or

anywhere more than a few miles away from home.

Even though I knew it was coming, when the movie got to the part where the Tin Man does that stiff little dance to the music of “If I Only Had a Heart,” I cracked up. I laughed so hard, I jerked forward in my chair and found myself facedown on the floor.

Butterscotch jumped up immediately, sniffing me and making sure I wasn’t hurt. I was fine, but I couldn’t get back up in my chair. Worse, I was going to miss the part where the Cowardly Lion gets smacked on the nose by Dorothy. I wondered how long Mom’s nap would last.

I didn’t scream like that time Ollie had jumped out of the bowl. I wasn’t upset, just a little uncomfortable. I tried to flip over, but I couldn’t from the position I had landed in. If I could have seen the television from where I had fallen, I might have been okay on the floor for a little while. Butterscotch makes a great pillow.

But Butterscotch went to the closed door and

scratched. I could hear her claws ripping at the wood. Dad wouldn’t be happy when he saw that. But Mom didn’t come. So Butterscotch barked—first a couple of tentative yips, then louder and more urgent. Finally, she jumped up and threw her whole body against the door, making loud thuds. She’d bark, then thud. Bark, then thud. Mom couldn’t ignore all that racket.

I’m sure it was only a few minutes, but it seemed like longer. Mom came to the door, looking groggy. Her hair was all messed up. “What’s going on in here?” she began. Then she saw me. “Oh! Melody, baby! Are you okay?” She ran to me, sat down on the floor, and lifted me onto her lap.

She checked everything—my arms and legs, my back, my face, my scalp, even my tongue. I wanted to tell her I was fine. All she needed to do was put me back in my chair, but she had to do the Mom thing and double-check.

“Butterscotch, you’re a good, good girl!” she said as she petted the dog and hugged me tight. “Doubles

on the dog food tonight!”

I’m sure Butterscotch would have preferred a nice thick bone instead, but she can’t talk either, so both my dog and I get what they give us. Mom carefully put me back in my chair and made sure my seat belt was latched correctly. Butterscotch curled up right in front of me, making sure, I guess, that if I slid out again, she’d be there to soften the fall. That dog is amazing.

Mom restarted the video from the beginning, but somehow that yellow brick road had lost some of its magic glow. Nobody *really* gets wishes granted by the Great Oz.

As I watched, I wondered if *I* were blown to Oz with *my* dog, what would we ask the wizard for?

Hmmm. Brains? I’ve got plenty.

Courage? Butterscotch is scared of nothing!

A heart? We’ve got lots of heart, me and my pup.

So what would I ask for? I’d like to sing like the Cowardly Lion and dance like the Tin Man. Neither one of them did those things very well, but that

would be good enough for me.

CHAPTER 9

When I was eight, things changed.

I think I knew Mom was going to have a baby even before she did. She smelled different, like new soap. Her skin felt softer and warmer.

She picked me up out of bed one morning, then almost let me fall back on the mattress. “Whew!” she said. “You’re getting awfully heavy, Melody. I’m going to have to start lifting weights!” Her forehead had broken out in sweat.

I don’t think I’d gained any weight. It was Mom

who was different. She sat down on the chair next to my bed for a few minutes, then suddenly ran out of the room. I heard her throwing up in the bathroom. She came back a few minutes later, looking pale. Her breath smelled like mouthwash. “I must have eaten something funky,” she mumbled as she got me dressed. But I think she knew even then. I bet she was scared.

When Mom finally figured it out, she sat down with me to break the news. “Melody, I have something wonderful to tell you!”

I did my best to look curious.

“You’re going to have a baby brother or sister real soon.”

I grinned and did my best imitation of surprise and excitement. I reached out and hugged her. Then I patted her stomach and pointed to myself. She knew what I meant.

She looked me right in the eye. “We’re gonna pray that this little one is fat and fine and healthy,” she told me. “You know we love you, Melody—just as

you are. But we’re hoping this child doesn’t have to face the challenges that you do.”

Me too.

From then on, she put Dad in charge of lifting me. And although she never talked about it again in front of me, I knew she was worried. She gobbled gigantic green vitamin pills, ate lots of fresh oranges and apples, and she had this habit of touching her bulging belly and mumbling a prayer. I could tell that Dad was scared too, but his worry showed up in funny little ways, like bringing Mom piles of purple irises—her favorite flower—or fixing her gallons of grape Kool-Aid or big plates of grapes. I don’t know what made Mom crave purple stuff.

Instead of watching hours and hours of the Discovery Channel, I found myself in my room staring at an empty TV screen—just thinking in the silence.

I knew that a new baby was really time-consuming. And I also knew *I* took up a lot of time. How would my parents ever have time for both of

us?

Then a really horrible thought popped into my brain. What if they decided to look into Dr. Hugely's suggestions? I couldn't make the thought go away.

One Saturday afternoon a few months before the baby was born, I was curled up on our sofa, dozing. Mom had put pillows around me to make sure I didn't fall off. Butterscotch slept nearby, and Dad's favorite jazz station played a saxophone snoozer. Mom and Dad sat together on the smaller sofa, talking together quietly. I'm sure they thought I was asleep.

"What if?" Mom said, her voice tight.

"It won't be. The chances are so small, honey," Dad replied, but he sounded unsure.

"I couldn't *bear* it," Mom told him.

"You'd find the strength," he said calmly. "But it's not going to happen. The odds are—"

"But what *if*?" she insisted, interrupting him, and for only the second time I could remember, my mother started to cry.

"Everything is gonna be fine," my father said, trying to soothe her. "We've got to think positive thoughts."

"It's all because of me," my mother said softly.

I perked up and listened harder.

"What do you mean?" Dad asked.

"It's my fault that Melody is like she is." Mom was crying really hard then. I could hardly make out her words.

"Diane, that's crazy! You can't hold on to that kind of guilt. These things just happen." I could tell Dad was trying to be reasonable.

"No! I'm the *mother!*" she wailed. "It was my *job* to bring a child into the world safely, and I screwed it up! Every other woman on the planet is able to give birth to a normal baby. There must be something wrong with *me!*"

"Sweetheart, it's not your fault. It's not your fault," and I could hear him pull my mom to him.

"But, Chuck, I'm so scared this baby is going to be messed up too!" she said in a shuddering breath.

“Please don’t go there—don’t even think like that,” Dad murmured. “Statistically, what are the chances? Two children who . . .”

And I suddenly couldn’t hear him anymore because my head was pulsing with the things I wanted to say but couldn’t.

I wanted to tell Mom that I was sorry she was so sad and so scared.

That it wasn’t her fault.

That I was just the way I was and she had nothing to do with it.

The part that hurt the most is I couldn’t tell her any of it.

During Mom’s entire pregnancy, however, my parents’ attention to me never wavered, even though, yeah, I worried that it would. Dad did lots more as Mom got closer to her due date. He did some of the laundry, most of the cooking, and all the lifting and carrying. I got to school on time every day, got my stories read to me every night, and the three of us waited and hoped and prayed.

But Penny was born perfect and copper-bright, just like her name. From the minute she came home from the hospital, she was a really happy baby. Mom truly did carry a little bundle of joy into the house.

But I guess a new baby is rough on any parents, especially if they already have a kid like me at home. Sometimes there would be arguments. I could hear them through the bedroom wall.

“I need more help around here, Chuck,” Mom would say, trying to keep her voice low.

“Well, you pay more attention to the baby than you do to me!”

“If you’d help more, I’d have more time for you! With two kids, and one of them Melody, it’s not easy!”

“I have to go to work, you know!”

“I have a job too! Don’t throw that in my face. Plus, I’m up twice a night to nurse the baby!”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry, Diane.” Dad always softened and let Mom win.

“It’s just I’m so tired all the time,” Mom would say,

stretched out my arm. I could just barely touch Ollie's bowl. I figured if I could get the fish wet, at least a little bit, I might be able to save him. I hooked my fingers on the edge of the fishbowl, and I pulled. Water splashed everywhere—all over the table, the carpet, me, and Ollie. He seemed to flop a little less for a second or two.

And I kept wailing. Finally, I heard my mother thundering up the stairs. When she came through the door, she took one look at the mess and the dying goldfish and shouted, "Melody! What have you done? Why did you knock over the fishbowl? Don't you know a fish can't live without water?"

Of course I knew that. I'm not stupid. Why did she think I'd been screeching and calling for her?

She scurried over to the mess, scooped up Ollie, and gently placed him back in the bowl. Then she ran to the bathroom, and I heard her running water. But I knew it was too late.

Either because of the time out of the bowl or because the bathroom water wasn't the right

temperature, Ollie didn't survive.

Mom came back in and scolded me once more. "Your goldfish didn't make it, Melody. I don't get it. Why would you do that to the poor little fish? He was happy in his little world."

I wondered if maybe Ollie wasn't so happy after all. Maybe he was sick and tired of that bowl and that log and that circle. Maybe he just couldn't take it anymore. I feel like that sometimes.

There was no way I could explain to Mom what had happened. I really *had* tried to save Ollie's life. I just looked away from Mom. She was angry, and I was too. If she hadn't been so slow, Ollie might have made it. I didn't want her to see me cry.

She cleaned up the mess with a sigh and left me with my music and an empty spot on my table. The colors had vanished.

It was a long time before I was ready for another pet. But on my eighth birthday my father brought a big box into the house. He seemed to have trouble holding on to it. When he set it on the floor in front

her voice muffled.

“I’m sorry. I’ll do better. I promise. I’ll take off work tomorrow and take care of both girls. Why don’t you go catch a movie or take Mrs. Valencia out to lunch?”

It would get quiet once more, but even so, somehow I always ended up feeling a teeny bit guilty. Life sure would be easier if they had only one child—one with working parts.

I once got one of those electronic dolls for Christmas. It was supposed to talk and cry and move its arms and legs if you pushed the right buttons. But when we opened the box, one of the arms had come off, and all the doll did, no matter which button you pushed, was squeak. Mom took it back to the store and got her money back.

I wonder if she ever wished she could get a refund for me.

But Penny! Penny really was a perfect baby. After just a few months she was sleeping through the night and smiling through each day. She sat up exactly

when infants are supposed to, rolled over right on schedule, and crawled on cue. Amazing. And it seemed so easy! Sure, she fell on her face a few times, but once she got it, she was off.

Penny zoomed around like a little windup toy. She learned that the toilet was fun to splash in and that lamps will fall if you grab the cord. She learned that golden retrievers are not ponies, peas taste funny, dead flies on the floor are a no-no, but candy is really good. She laughed all the time. She learned her sister, Melody, couldn’t do what she could do, but she didn’t seem to care. So I tried not to care either.

Dad and his camcorder followed Penny around like the paparazzi follow a rock star! We have hundreds of hours of footage of Penny being cute and doing adorable things. And, well, I admit it, sometimes I got kinda sick of watching a new video every time she learned something new. It sorta sucks to watch a baby do what you wish you could do.

Penny holding her own bottle.

Penny feeding herself teeny-tiny Cheerios from

her high-chair tray.

Penny saying “ma-ma” and “da-da” just like the babies on *Sesame Street*.

Penny crawling on the floor and chasing Butterscotch.

Penny clapping her hands.

How did her little brain know how to tell her to pull herself up to a standing position? To hold on to the sofa for balance? How did she know how to stand on her own? Sometimes she'd fall over, but then she'd pop right back up. Never ever did she lie there, stuck like a turtle on its shell.

Dad still did our nighttime reading, but now it was Penny who snuggled on his lap. I was too big and too hard to balance, so I sat in my wheelchair, my dog at my feet, as the two of them read the stories I knew by heart. Butterscotch still slept only in my room. I liked that.

It really did make me glad to know Penny was learning the same books I loved so much. I wondered if she was memorizing them. Probably

not. She didn't need to.

I think Penny's third word was “Dee-Dee.” She couldn't quite say “Melody,” but she got the last part! I loved it when Mom put Penny in bed with me after her morning bath. She'd grab me and plant wet, baby-powder-smelling kisses all over my face. “Dee-Dee!” she'd say again and again.

By the time she was one year old, Penny could walk. She wobbled all over the house on her fat little legs. She fell a lot, dropping down on her butt, and laughing every time she did. Then she'd get back up and try it again.

That was something I'd never get to try.

With two kids in the house, our family routines changed. It took twice as long to get everybody ready each morning. Mom made sure Penny was dressed in pretty little outfits every day, even though she was just going next door to Mrs. V's house.

My clothes were okay, but I was noticing that lately they were more useful than cute. Mom seemed to be choosing them by how easy they'd be to get on

me. It was kind of a bummer, but I knew I was getting heavier and heavier to lift, and so changing me was harder.

I probably should mention that feeding me is a real process. I can't chew very well, so I mostly get soft foods like scrambled eggs or oatmeal or applesauce. Since I can't hold a fork or spoon—I try, but I keep dropping them—someone has to place the food into my mouth, one spoonful at a time. It's slow.

Spoon, slurp, swallow.

Spoon, slurp, swallow.

Lots of food falls on the floor. Butterscotch likes that. She's like a canine vacuum cleaner.

Drinking stuff is hard for me too. I can't hold a glass and I can't sip from a straw, so somebody has to very carefully hold a cup to my lips and tip a little bit of liquid into my mouth so I can swallow. Too much and I choke and cough, and we have to start all over. It takes a long time to get a meal in me. I hate the whole process, obviously.

And some mornings were really stressful.

"Chuck! Can you bring me Melody's pink T-shirt from the clean clothes basket? She spilled juice all over her shirt!" Mom yelled up the stairs.

"Didn't you put a bib on her, Diane?" Dad yelled back. "You know she makes a mess! Why don't you wait and dress her *after* she eats?"

"So you want me to feed her naked? Just bring the shirt!" Mom snapped. "And a diaper for Penny. She's got a stinker."

"She's two—isn't she old enough to be potty trained?" Dad asked, coming downstairs with a blue T-shirt I had outgrown in one hand and a diaper in the other.

"Right. I'll get to potty training tonight—on the twenty-fifth hour of my day!"

Dad picked Penny up. "Uh-oh, that's a bad one," he said, his nose scrunched up. "Did you give her sweet potatoes again last night? I thought we stopped giving her those because they always give her the runs."

CHAPTER 10

“Well, if *you* had gone to the grocery store like I asked, I could have given her something different! And that shirt is blue, not pink, and too small for Melody!”

Mom stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“Sorry, girls,” Dad said to us. He whistled softly while he cleaned Penny up, threatening to call the Haz-mat team. That was funny.

Then he finished feeding me breakfast, not caring that my oatmeal was getting all over the juice-stained shirt. “Why not? May as well make a real mess and make it worth all the stress!” he said with a laugh.

I smiled at him and smeared oatmeal on my tray.

Mom came back down with fresh makeup and a freshly painted-on smile, her hair done, and with my pink shirt. She and Dad hugged in the kitchen, both took a deep breath, and we actually made it out of the house on time.

We had lots of days like that.

Penny wakes every morning asking for her “Doodle,” a soft, brown stuffed animal that might be a monkey or maybe a squirrel. It’s so beat-up, nobody knows for sure what it really is. She drags it everywhere. “Doodle!” she cries if it’s been caught in her blankets. “Doodle!” she cries if it’s right next to her. Of course, it sounds more like “doo-doo” when she says it. That makes Dad crack

up.

I smile when I hear footsteps outside my door. Big ones and little tiny ones. My mom and Penny. And Doodle, of course. Sometimes my legs and arms are stiff from being in the same position all night, and sometimes my toes tingle. My bedroom door opens—Dad never gets around to fixing that squeak.

Mom traces a finger along my cheek. Maybe she's checking to see if I'm still breathing. I am. I open my eyes. I wish I could say, *Good morning*, but I just grin instead. She pulls me up and hugs me, rarely stopping to sit in the rocking chair anymore, and rushes me to the bathroom because I usually have to go really bad first thing in the morning.

Penny trails behind us, wearing a huge red and white hat like the one in *The Cat in the Hat*—the girl has a major hat obsession—and always with her Doodle. Butterscotch is never far from her. She lets Penny put hats on her and somehow endures Penny's hugs, which can sometimes feel more like choke holds. I've gotten a few! She barks to alert Mom or

Dad if Penny gets too close to an electric plug or the front door.

Our bathroom is painted ocean blue and is large enough for Penny, Butterscotch, me and Mom—and my chair—without feeling crowded. That's a good thing, because we spend lots of time in there. Penny and I make pretty big messes. But at least I don't have to wear diapers. It's bad enough that someone has to put me on the toilet, but diapers? Yuck!

Even though the doctors said it would be impossible, by the time I was three, Mom had me potty trained like any other kid my age. I hated sitting in dirty diapers, and she hated changing them, so I figured out a way to let her know I had to go, and she'd hustle me to the toilet.

Mom and I can sometimes talk without words. I point to the ceiling, and she somehow just knows whether I'm talking about the ceiling fan, the moon, or the dark spot where the rain leaked through during the last thunderstorm. She can tell if I'm sad, and she can sense when I need a hug. She rubs my

back and makes me relax when I'm tense and upset. She tells dirty jokes sometimes when Dad isn't listening, and we both crack up.

One morning, as she was getting me dressed for school, I pointed to her stomach, then covered my eyes as if the sight were too much to look at. It was shortly after Penny had been born, and she still had a good-size baby bulge.

"You calling me fat?" she asked, acting insulted.

I laughed a little and said, "uh," which is the closest thing I've got to a *yes*.

"Take it back!" she said, tickling the bottom of my feet.

Instead, I held my arms out like I was making a big circle and laughed out loud. *Huge! Enormous! Like an elephant!* I could tell she knew what I was thinking.

We both rolled with laughter, and then she hugged me tight. I wish I could tell her I loved her.

Mom knows when I'm hungry or thirsty, and whether I need a glass of milk or just some water.

She can tell if I'm really sick or simply faking it, because sometimes I do pretend I don't feel good just so I can stay home. She can tell what my temperature is just by feeling my forehead. She only uses the thermometer to prove she's right.

I can tell stuff about what she is thinking too. By the end of the day, after she's been at the hospital all day, then fixed dinner, then bathed Penny and me and put me in bed, I can tell she's kinda reached her max. She breathes hard. Her forehead is sweating. I sometimes reach out and touch her hand with mine. I can feel her calm down, and she'll trace her fingers along my cheek, just like she does in the morning, and give me a kiss good night.

Every Saturday morning after I've been fed, Mom reads the newspaper while she has her coffee and Penny smashes bananas on her high-chair tray. Butterscotch doesn't like fruit, but she stays close by, just in case somebody drops a piece of bacon. Mom's off on weekends, so she relaxes. She sometimes reads articles to me or tells me about the latest hurricane

or uprising or explosion in the world.

“More fighting in the Middle East,” she says.

I’ve seen it on TV. Bombs and tears and faces of fear.

“There’s a new Superman movie coming out soon,” she reads as she shakes the newspaper flat. “Maybe we can go catch a matinee.”

I love superheroes. I guess Superman is my favorite because he can fly. How great would *that* be?

Mom reads me the comic pages also. I like Garfield.

“Garfield is cheating on his diet again,” Mom says. “He ate Jon’s lasagna and Odie’s meatballs.”

I laugh and point at Mom’s hips.

“You calling me fat again, Miss Dee-Dee? Just because I finished off your spaghetti last night?”

I grin.

“You’ll be sorry when I start feeding everybody lettuce for lunch!”

We both laugh. Mom’s not even close to being fat, but I like to tease her.

For my tenth birthday I got a whole book of Garfield cartoons—now, that’s what’s up! I made Dad read it to me over and over. Garfield is a cat who has a lot to say, but all his words are written in little circles above his head. He can’t really talk, of course—he’s a cat!

But sometimes that’s how I feel—like wouldn’t it be cool if I had somebody to write the words over my head so people would know what I’m thinking? I could live with that—large floating bubbles above me, speaking for me.

Wouldn’t it be cool if somebody could invent a bubble-talking machine before fifth grade starts in a couple of weeks? Hah!

When I try to talk, the words are exploding in my brain, but all that comes out are meaningless sounds and squeaks. Penny can say lots of words and pieces of words. But my lips won’t come together to make even simple sounds like that, so most of my noises are vowels. I can say “uh” and “ah” pretty clearly, and, if I concentrate, sometimes I can squeeze out a “buh”

or a “huh.” But that’s it.

My parents can usually figure out what I need just by listening carefully. To outsiders, I probably sound like one of those children who was raised by wolves. My communication board, even with everything Mrs. V has added to it—well, it sorta sucks.

For example, one afternoon earlier this summer, I had a taste for a Big Mac and a shake. Vanilla. I love fast food. Mom wasn’t home, and getting my father to figure out what I want is sometimes a big job. I pointed to the picture of my dad, the word **go**, the word **eat**, and a happy face. That’s all I had to work with. I gotta give him credit—he tried. He asked me a million questions, so I could point to **yes** or **no**.

“Are you hungry?”

Yes.

“Okay, I’ll fix you some tuna salad.”

No. I pounded on the tray.

“I thought you said you were hungry. Do you want some spaghetti?”

No. Gentler this time.

“So what do you want?”

No answer. Nothing on my board could describe it. I pointed to **go** again.

“You want me to go in the kitchen and cook you something?”

No.

“You want me to go to the grocery store?”

No. I was starting to get upset, pounding the board with my right thumb once more.

“I don’t get it. You said you wanted me to get you something to eat.”

Yes. Once again I pointed to Dad’s picture, then **go**, then **eat**, then happy face.

I could feel one of my tornado explosions starting. I started to kick, and my arms got all tight. It was driving me *crazy* that I couldn’t tell him about a stupid Big Mac.

“Calm down, sweetheart,” Dad said softly.

My jaws felt like steel bars. I knew I was breathing hard, and my tongue wouldn’t stay in my mouth. I hit my board once more, aiming at no word in

particular.

“Argwk!” I screeched.

“I’m sorry, Melody, but I can’t figure out what you mean. I’m going to fix you some noodles and cheese. Will that be okay?”

I sighed, gave up, and pointed to yes. I calmed down while he cooked. The noodles were pretty good.

A couple of weeks later my dad and I were in the car and we passed by a McDonald’s. I screeched and kicked and pointed like Godzilla was coming down the street. Dad must have thought I was nuts. Finally, he said, “Would you like to stop and get a Big Mac and a shake for dinner tonight as a treat?”

I shouted, “Uh!” as loud as I could, and kept on kicking with absolute delight as he pulled into the drive-through. He never did make the connection between that fast-food stop and my request a couple of weeks earlier. But that’s okay. Even though it took us an hour to finish, it was one of the best hamburgers I’ve ever had.