

No friends. The term many people use to make fun of other people, strangely most commonly used by people with friends. But I was in no position to use it myself. At least on anyone else. Because – you guessed it – I am currently the least friendly person on the face of this earth.

My loneliness began about a year ago. My parents had been divorced for a while, and my father got remarried to a woman with a daughter my age – my step-sister. We used to be great friends, meeting each other often, talking, gossiping, just like any two sisters would. But then the accident happened and everything changed.

My step-sister Avery lost her vision. She was completely blind. And even worse, my father and his second wife died in the accident which took place on the fourth of July. My mom took Avery in and we moved into a town just off of Boston, Massachusetts. The Bay State.

Avery suddenly changed from my best friend to my worst enemy. I hated her for always having hand to hold and guide her, and for always getting the attention of people first. It was never, “Leah how was your weekend?” No, always, “Avery! I sure hope your weekend was alright!”

It wasn't as if people didn't like me. I'd had friends where we used to live, but as soon as Avery became blind, she was the talk of the town. All my new friends here seemed to automatically be drawn to her. She was like a magnet. And being blind didn't drag her down. She was still getting good grades and still as nice as ever.

The only thing was the sunglasses. She always wore them because her eyes looked very unappealing if you saw them – they had been damaged. I was sure that if I took them off somehow, everyone would see her and abandon being friends with her.

Today, I sat alone at my lunch table as usual, looking around awkwardly. Not a usual situation for your average thirteen-year-old. Avery always left a seat across from her for me, but not one of her friends had the heart to tell her I didn't sit there. I tore my eyes away from my baloney sandwich to look at her a moment. Then, as her laughter and black sunglass gaze burned a hole through my stomach I put my lunch away and grit my teeth.

“Leah?” Avery said quietly that night as she stared from her bed at the ceiling which she could not see.

I didn't answer. I caught my breath and stared at her empty eyes (she slept without her sunglasses)

“Well, if you're there, I want you to know that I would like you to sit with me at lunch.”

*Weird!* I thought. *She's so wired! How does she know I don't sit there?*

Avery sighed and closed her eyes.

The next day, our homeroom teacher, Mr. Davis, introduced us to a tall willowy lady with a bright red braid curving over her shoulder and to her waist like a snake.

“This is Cara. She will be helping you out, Avery, and guiding your around from today.”

*Great. Another friend for Avery,* I thought.

She made her way to Avery's seat, wobbling on her tall heels a large radiant smile spread across her face, which, of course, Avery didn't have to means to see.

Cara turned her bulb-like green eyes on everyone in the classroom as Mr. Davis introduced them. They lingered longer on me when she learned I was Avery's step-sister. I found myself shrinking a little in my seat.

Avery groped for Cara's hand to shake, and instinctively, I turned away. I hated when she did that. It was like she was some kind of creature, and bothered me. A girl behind me snickered.

“Now we know someone who has scarier eyes than blind girl,” she said in a low tone. So they had seen her eyes. I whirled around to see it was one of the girls who sat at lunch with Avery. The girl behind her laughed at this.

“Yeah and it looks like she forgot to tell her mom to do her hair this morning!”

I looked at Avery's hair. It was golden brown with so many knots it looked less like hair and more like a jumbled mess.

“It looks like a birds nest, doesn't it?” I said anxious to hear their response.

They laughed loudly and I joined in with them. It felt amazing to hear someone make fun of *her* for once. I laughed heartily until Mr. Davis, who had resumed teaching, said,

“Is there something I can help you ladies with?” His piece of chalk hovered over the board.

We shut up and smiled, shaking our heads. My glance shifted to Cara, who had her large green eyes focused on me.

Over the next few weeks I began to realize that Avery's "friends" were mostly like Jenna (the girl who sat behind me in homeroom). They all either pitied her or envied her for having good grades and getting a mentor like Cara.

I went from having no friends to having secret friends after school who were not being true to my step-sister. It was an improvement.

Avery also created a bond with Cara, who we learned was a college student. She talked about her at night to me, and the things she taught Avery and showed her to do. She had had experience with other blind kids.

One day, after school, Avery was walking home, holding my backpack to guide her as she went. As usual my face was red and burning, turned down so that no one saw me with this strange girl who wore sunglasses in the cloudiest weather.

Jenna came up from behind Avery. I saw her. She put a finger to her lips and, with a grin, stuck her foot out in front of my step-sister, who tripped and fell face first to the pavement.

"Avery!" Jenna scolded, catching her in time. "Be careful, there are many tree roots here."

"I didn't know you were here, Jenna," Avery said blankly. Cara ran onto the sidewalk at that moment, grabbing Avery's hand.

"Come on, Avery, I'll walk you home," she said kindly, staring at me in disbelief.

I laughed behind their backs, along with Jenna, who couldn't contain it anymore.

That night in bed, Avery told me something I never thought she would.

"I know my friends aren't true, you know. Like whenever they hold my hand they squeeze it too hard." She stopped, waiting for a response, then continued when she didn't receive one, "And when Jenna tripped me today, it wasn't the first time. Just now I have Cara to help me. Although I do have other nicer friends, it's no fun having so called friends who you know are not who they say and you know you can't trust and are only friends with you because they

sympathize with or envy you. I tried to get you to come and help me out but...” she sighed. “You’re probably not interested in all this. I just thought you should know.”

Although the feeling of pure jealousy didn’t leave me that night, her words did spark a memory. We had been at a park along time ago, playing Marco Polo, and I was blindfolded. I was running around, hating the feeling of having to rely on just my hands and hearing. I felt like the whole world was tricking me, creeping up on me from behind and those thoughts had caused me to run into a slide and leave with a nosebleed.

I thought of how being that way all my life would be, especially with bad friends and a sister who neglected me.

Then all those comments drifted back to me, people asking about Avery, Avery this, Avery that, and mom forgetting to leave dinner in the freezer for a few nights because Avery was at her friend’s house and needed a ride. The fire in my stomach returned, running through me like I was greased on the inside. With all my mixed emotions I felt just that: greasy and gross.

The next week was my birthday week. I looked forward to that day where mom left chocolates in my lunch and a note on the fridge along with a present when I came home. Eagerly I opened my lunchbox and peered inside. There were two things: a baloney sandwich and a bag of Lays potato chips. I groaned.

I went to my locker after yet another lonely lunch period and was surprised to find it covered in wrapping paper, ribbons, a balloon and a banner. In big letters on the bottom it said *From Avery*. I remembered our old tradition before the accident.

“Happy Birthday!” Avery called, walking over with Cara leading her to me, her hand on her shoulder. “Do you like it? Cara helped me.” She beamed and reached for me. She gave me a hug. I pulled away within seconds, face burning yet again and muttered thanks.

As soon as she was out of sight, I turned and noticed Jenna, standing against my locker, one eyebrow raised. Together we tore it down, laughing and stuffing it all in the trash.

“Oh and...” Avery came back. “I forgot to ask, is purple still your favorite color?”

Cara, who stood beside her, was staring open mouthed at the bare locker. She turned her powerful gaze on me.

“Is it?” Avery asked again.

I looked down, feeling a little ashamed. “Yes.”

Jenna slipped a piece of paper in my hand and walked away, winking. Cara just shook her head and led Avery away.

I went home after a hectic afternoon at school, and lay on the couch for a moment of tranquility. The guilt of having torn down a blind girl’s hard work was still eating away at me. *But that blind girl is your step-sister, I reminded myself. And you hate her.*

I remembered the piece of paper Jenna had given me after taking down the decorations and quickly unfolded it. It read:

Meet me at the back of the clock tower at five this afternoon. We have business to discuss.

I checked the time: four-forty-five. *I’d better go*, I thought. I slipped into my shoes and headed for the clock tower, which was at the other end of the town. Avery was studying braille (which she’d been working hard on for a while) with Cara, so I didn’t have to worry about her.

Jenna and her friends Katherine and Abby were waiting by the back entrance of the clock tower. I hurried over to them, clogging my nose as I passed Katherine, who smelled unbearably of smoke.

“What is it?” I hissed, looking nervously around. No one was really allowed here.

“We’ve decided on something,” Jenna announced, crossing her arms and grinning wickedly. “If you want to help us, you can. If not, we’ll do it anyway... I think you’ll rather enjoy it.”

“What is it?” I repeated – I was starting to get a little uneasy by the fact that mom would be home soon...

“We think blind girl needs to be taught a lesson. She’s getting a little above herself with her new companion – *Cara*.” Jenna spit the name out with obvious distaste, as though she had something bitter on her tongue.

“It’s always Cara this, Cara that with her,” she continued, in a high, squeaky tone, trying to imitate Avery. “And she’s getting some other friends now, who are always chanting, Avery this, Avery that. So we decided to call her to the docks tomorrow, and do little dare for her. We’ll see how much she trusts us.” She smirked and raised an eyebrow to see what I thought.

It was brilliant. I would be there to watch the fun and I would know that Jenna felt the exact same way about Avery – sorry, *blind girl* – as me! And if the dare was too bad, blind girl wouldn’t do it because she knew the true identity of her “friends.”

“I’m in.”

Blind girl presented me with a letter the next day, which she had written herself in braille. It was purple.

“There are these special stamps for each letter that you can use to puncture the paper! But I’m still learning, so I made a few holes,” she told me excitedly.

“Uh-huh,” I said, grabbing my books and closing my locker.

“And I getting better at-“

“Jenna!” I called, hurrying away before blind girl could finish. She was probably planning to give the letter to me, but really I didn’t have time to pore over a letter in a language I didn’t need to know and translate every letter of it. I’d probably be seething and ready to explode by the end of it. “Wait up!”

Jenna turned and made a face that clearly said, *got to run*. I sighed and slowed down. My step-sister was right next to me in a flash, like a hawk, with her letter in hand. Honestly, sometimes I wondered if she was even blind.

“Here, it’s for you,” she said, stuffing it in my hand. Oh boy, I couldn’t wait for dare day.

“Leah,” a voice said, stopping me as I was about to escape. Blind girl drifted away, holding someone’s hand. The voice belonged to Cara. I turned to her and winced at the power of her gaze. “Leah, I want you to know that what you’re doing is not right. You have one sister, or step-sister, that will be with you forever, no matter what. Are you really going to be kinder to these stranger friends who will not hesitate to treat you in the same way as Avery and will

probably not be your friends after middle school than that one person who will spend her whole life with you? Think about it.”

I gulped and rushed away, trying not to think of her words, but failing, thinking of nothing else.

On that day where Jenna would dare blind girl after school, I was absolutely sure I was in. I had given Cara’s words lots of thought and was positive my step-sister didn’t trust me enough to take the dare.

We stood at the dock, the scent of salt water filling our nostrils and gusts of wind blowing our hair back. Jenna, Katherine and Abby stood lined up along a wooden dock, and I stood on the other side. My step-sister stood between us, her sunglasses off, glowing empty eyes showing. Jenna kept wincing.

“Bl- Avery, I dare you to walk straight, without stopping.”

Without a hesitation, blind girl walked, arms outstretched, closer and closer to the edge of the dock and to the water below.

My mouth was opening and closing, not knowing what to say. I had no idea this was what the dare would be. I tried to move, say something, but my limbs seemed frozen, my voice shrinking down into my throat. My hands were numb, voice lost, and the silence of the moment frightened me.

I wanted to stop her. Bli – no, Avery – Avery, who trusted me so much to walk blindly off a dock for me, Avery who I couldn’t do so much as sit with her at lunch. Envy had eaten me, burned me on the inside, overcoming the friendship we had had before. And now my envy was taking out all its power it had worked on me on my poor innocent sister.

What was I doing?

“Stop!” I shouted, but it was too late. Avery’s foot slipped off the edge of the wood and she plunged to the water below.

“No!” I shrieked, running to the edge and diving in myself. Avery had never known how to swim, but I wasn’t bad, had her in my arms within seconds. It hadn’t been long enough for her to drown, but I was scared by the long red gash on her forehead.

“Call 911!” I screamed to the openmouthed Jenna as I climbed onto the docks. “Now!”

Two hour later, Avery was in a hospital bed, unconscious, with mother and Cara by her side. I had asked to go in but apparently she had asked for Cara and Mom and only two people were allowed. The doctor explained that she’d hit her head on a rock and could go home in a few days.

I went home alone, feeling miserable.

The next morning I was the first one to the hospital besides Mom and Cara. I presented Avery with a gift I’d worked on all night – a letter in braille responding to the one she gave me.

“Good thinking,” Mom whispered to me. “Yesterday was her birthday.”

Before I could stop the pain of guilt from overtaking me, I was in tears at her side. She ran her fingers across my letter and read it aloud:

“Dear Avery, I hope you will accept my apology for being such a horrible sister to you. From the time you became blind, I resented you because of the attention you got. But now I realize that that was a stupid thought. If anyone should get good friends and attention, it should be you, who already is facing a life of darkness. If anyone should get a better sister than me, it should be you.”

She sniffed then continued,

“An apology is not enough, I know, but I hope you can forgive me. And I hope Cara knows how much she had played a role in bringing us back together. She made me realize what I was doing a little late, but it was like she was meant to be there to help you while I was being a complete brat.

“I also want you to know that I will never make the mistake of thinking I have no friends again. Because if someone has such a loving sibling as you, they don’t ever to look... the very best companion will always be right there next to them.

“Love, Leah.” She groped for me, and for the first time, I didn’t turn. I didn’t even wince.