

BETWEEN THE LINES

by

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Lina is sitting in the hallway of the hospital alone and waiting. Her parents are in the Doctor's office with her sister, Sophia.

Lina is seven years old and Sophia is five. While she's waiting for her family to get out of the office she decides to wander in the hospital. She knows what to do; from this hallway three lines are drawn on the floor, a red, a blue and a yellow, each of them leading to a different wing of the hospital. She wants to find this room where they keep the newborn babies and people can see them from behind a glass. She remembers that when her cousin was born and she went to see him he was behind this glass with many other babies, but when Sophia was born she was put in a transparent box and she was alone. Her dad told her then that if you are the baby's sister you can see it in the box, but if you are not you can see it from behind the glass.

Lina reads that the yellow line leads to the orthopedic clinic and since it reminds her of the word pediatrician she decides to follow this one. But in the end she only finds people with their arms and legs in casts, holding on crosiers or sitting on wheelchairs. She's sure that if she finds a wheelchair she can beat all of them in a race. However she sees that the yellow line is substituted by a green one. That gives her an idea! She's going to follow all the lines in the hospital. This is better than babies behind a glass, better than racing on a wheelchair! Now she will be an explorer! She follows the green line and plays with it. She's stepping on it on her tiptoes, her heels, she even jumps on it. A nurse tells her to be quiet, so she stops jumping. She walks on the line and tries to step only on it. If her feet touch the floor it is cheating.

She finds this game very amusing and thinks that when Sophia gets out of the doctor's office she will teach her how to play. Hopefully her mother will let them play together. Sophia is never allowed to run or walk too much. Maybe Lina will invite her mother to play with them too and see that they will not run. After all Mother looks so sad these last days that some fun would cheer her up.

The green line ends, and Lina finally reaches a new wing of the hospital. Its name is difficult. Cardio-something. She sees doctors running up and down the hallways; people lying on beds and having machines attached to their bodies. They have a machine like that at home. It's Sophia's and they use it to play music for her when she can't sleep; this is what her dad told her. This music is very disturbing for Lina. These sounds that go like beep beep the whole time, sounds she can't even sing or dance with, make her want to leave the room. She only tolerates it because she knows that Sophia likes it. But now why would these sick people need them? Time to follow the blue line.

She ends up in a corridor with closed doors and doctors and nurses running from the one room to the other. All of them are wearing green robes, and they hide their faces behind masks, so it's difficult to see their characteristics. A door opens in front of Lina, and the doctor who comes out of it recognizes her and asks her what she's doing

there. Lina tells him her parents are with Sophia and she'll find them after she explores the hospital.

“Sophia is with me now. Go find your parents.” The doctor tells her.

Lina doesn't understand. Why did the doctor take Sophia? She had never seen him in this uniform. What's happening? She keeps walking, and in the end of the corridor she finds a big sunny room with many chairs and some people sitting there. This place looks familiar to Lina.

Now she remembers! She's been there before! Many details come to her mind now. She was there with her mom and dad and her grandparents. Her mother and her grandmother were crying, and when she asked why they were crying her dad told her they had hit their head on the elevator door, and Lina was wondering how both of them could be so careless. Then everyone stood up so Lina could only see their legs. Right! Back then she was too short to see grown-ups' faces when they were standing. And it was after they came home that they bought this annoying machine which makes that awful music Sophia likes to hear.

So... They had been to the hospital for Sophia before, and Sophia is now with the scary doctor, who wears a mask, and she has that machine attached to her most of the time, and she can't run and her mother is crying. All this can only mean one thing! Her sister is sick! She runs to the hallway where her parents left her. She finds them hugging each other. She goes near them. They're both crying. Lina tells them not to cry, but she bursts into tears. After a few minutes they see the doctor coming. Now that he took off his mask he doesn't look too scary. He walks towards them and says:

“I am sorry, we did all we could.”

Reflecting on Self-Transformative Experiences

“Between the Lines” is the first short story in which I transform a childhood experience into fiction. However my short story is more than a citation of facts, as I have altered some of them. I have used a number of narration techniques, and I have also been influenced by the works of Jodi Picoult and Dr. Sayantani DasGupta.

My idea to write the short story “Between the Lines” has derived from a personal childhood experience. When I was five years old, my youngest brother had to be hospitalized for a while, something which was very upsetting for the whole family. Since I was too young to understand, my parents never explained the situation to me, and, although there had been times when they could not hide their emotions, I was unable myself to fully understand the tension that was created due to this situation. Luckily, my brother healed completely and is now a perfectly healthy boy. But very little was explained to me until I found out on my own.

This started happening gradually, during some precautionary visits to the hospital, which were held once a trimester at first and once a semester later. Since the hospital was not in our city, my parents had to take me with them for my brother’s medical exams, and I had to stay in a waiting room. It was there, when one day I was bored of waiting, that I discovered this game with the lines which were drawn on the hospital floor. My initial motivation was to find a room with newborn babies and stare at them, just like Lina in the short story. However, by following all the possible lines, I discovered that there was no such place in this particular hospital. What I also found out was that my brother’s visits were not just routine as I was told, but visits due to his condition. By wandering in the hospital, I found a second waiting room which I had forgotten I had been to, but it came back to my mind after I saw it again. Similarly to Lina’s case, I remembered my family being gathered, and I also remember seeing only their legs because I was too short to see anything else. By seeing the name of the clinic, I started assuming what my brother’s illness was, an assumption that was later confirmed by my mother.

My story and Lina’s story have many things in common, with the difference that mine, luckily, did not have a tragic ending. Another difference between the stories is that in my personal experience I found out about my brother’s condition several years after his surgery, while in Lina’s case it happened just before her sister died from the operation. Our stories are similar in the sense that we both found out not because of someone telling us, but by connecting memories that we had but did not know how to use. I have chosen to transform my memory into fiction for a number of reasons. To start with, I believe that my short story, with the alterations I have added, would be far more interesting to and would have a greater impact on the readers. This happens because the simple citing of facts and memories from my experience would not efficiently highlight a young child’s psychology or the shock that I experienced when I realized what had been hidden from me. The use of fiction and of this semi-omniscient point of view has been, for me, the best way to make the readers identify with Lina, to understand her naïve way of thinking, and to gradually realize what has been happening to her family.

The process of transforming memories into fiction has proved for me to be much harder than I had thought it to be. In order to give my story the form that I wanted it to

have and make it bring up certain emotions, I had to reflect on my past, revisit many of my memories and the impact that they had upon me, and then write it in such a way so that all these reflections would be evident not only to me, but also to anyone else who might read it. This is also the reason that I have chosen to compress time and only provide the story of Sophia's illness not linearly, but as if it is being watched through a peephole, where only fractions of information are given which then have to be decoded for a young child to make sense of what has been happening. I believe that such alterations from real life events have been necessary for the short story so that it has on the readers the same effect it had upon me. In particular, I may have changed the facts that I and Lina experienced, but the emotional impact remains the same for me and for those who read about Lina. Had I decided to use an autobiographical account for my experience, none of the above would have been transferred as efficiently in the short story, as it would have read as a boring citation of facts.

When I started writing "Between the Lines" my goal was double: On a first level, I wanted to create a story which would superficially seem straightforward and happy, the story of a young girl playing in hospital, while at the same time a second but sad and pessimistic story would be created, this of her sick sister. On a second level, I have made an attempt to describe the subconscious feelings a child experiences and to portray how everything she perceives becomes a memory which she does not know how to process, so she just keeps living in her girly world, being reckless and playful, until all information bursts out. In order to achieve this, I have chosen simple words and short sentences, just like a seven-year-old child would do, and I have also refrained from using any medical terms, even when that was necessary. I have placed emphasis instead on what they stand to demonstrate, so as to be on the same level with Lina.

I wanted to show how illness is understood by a young child and how the parents contribute to her viewing it this way. In this case, we see that Lina views illness as a game; the machine attached to her sister's chest to monitor her heartbeat is seen as a machine that plays music; the wheelchairs are meant for racing; and the hospital is the ideal setting for an exploration. Lina's father plays a major role into making her think in this way. In my story, the father is portrayed as the one member of the family who tries to keep as calm as possible and to keep the balance at home, since it is he who finds all the excuses to explain Sophia's situation to Lina as something natural and not as something disturbing. Her mother, on the other hand, seems to be more absorbed in taking care of her ill child and being upset about her situation. In my opinion, the two parents represent a typical example of how a family might cope with illness. First we have the mother who worries about her child's health, tries to do the best for her and makes sure that she will not compromise her health, while emotional breakdowns are expected to take place. The father's contribution is also very important, as he is the one who keeps the family united. He stays by Lina's side, when she is neglected by her mother. He explains things that would be hard for her to understand and keeps life at home as normal as possible. I believe that this is a good combination of parental attitude towards children's illness, as it is inevitable that the sick child will gain more attention. However the parents should never forget that this is not their only child. The other child, Lina in that case, who is quite neglected by her mother, has needs too. Lina's father is here and fills this gap. As a result, a relatively peaceful environment is created for Lina who does not have to live as if she is ill as well.

I was inspired to create such a parenting scheme by Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper* where we also meet a mother who is devoted to her ill daughter, Kate, and a father who tries to release the tension that is created. In this particular book, Kate suffers from leukemia and her mother has a savior child, as neither she nor her husband or son are suitable blood and bone marrow donors. In this book the mother, Sara, becomes so absorbed in trying to save her sick child that she ignores her son's learning difficulties and does not even notice that he is a juvenile delinquent. Sara is an exaggerated example of parent who neglects the whole family in favor of one child only. The father, on the other hand, appears to be more relaxed; he tries to release the tension in the family; he is the one who discovers Jessie's delinquency and acts more spontaneously in order for the family to have some fun, most of the time against Sara's will. Based on these two parenting models, I have created Lina and Sophia's parents with the difference that I have kept the mother's ignorance towards Lina much more subtle.

Another aspect of the short story that I would like to comment on is its title. I have chosen to name my short story "Between the Lines" so as to highlight how Lina has found the truth by following lines. The title works as a word-play in the story as its meaning can be both literal and metaphorical. Lina actually follows the lines that lead to different wings in the hospital, and she has a certain experience in every wing she is led to. However, in each one of the places she visits, a new memory is triggered by what she sees there, and the combination of these memories leads Lina towards realizing what is happening to her sister and what is being hidden from her. Now Lina has managed to see between the lines in a metaphorical way and decode all the information that she lately ignored. Therefore, the title has been chosen so as to stress that two stories exist in this piece of writing, one which is obvious and one which is hidden by allowing only bits and pieces of information to be revealed.

The name "Lina" and the word "line" are similar both phonologically and morphologically. I chose to name the main character Lina before deciding on the title of the story. So the similarity between the two is just a coincidence which I am pleased to discover now. In the short story, I have tried to exploit this similarity so as to portray how Lina is tied to the lines, how she mingles with them to the extent that she cannot escape and has to keep following them until she is led to the truth. To me, the lines and Lina are actually one, as the lines are a symbol of Lina's subconscious into which she dives to connect the dots and discover what is happening.

An essay that has had an important impact on me and which I relate with my short story is Dr. Sayantani DasGupta's "The Doctor's Wife." The reason I connect this essay with "Between the Lines" is that it also depicts the impact death has on doctors, which seems to be quite similar with what the patient's family and the doctor experience. Mainly, this essay has triggered the thought of what happens after the patient dies, and I have tried to think how the situation would be in Lina's family. As Dr. DasGupta points out, doctors see death come in slow motion, exactly like Lina will view her sister's death from now on, while her memory will revive everything that she has lived with her sister. This will also be the case for her parents who will never forget seeing their daughter give in to her sickness. A second point that connects Dr. DasGupta's essay with "Between the Lines" is the powerful image of the doctor's former patients who are still present in the doctor's consciousness. DasGupta says the patients metaphorically "climb into bed" with the doctor at night. This has made me think that Sophia, in her parents' mind, will always climb on her parents'

bed, since she will never be forgotten, and maybe sometimes Lina will be on her parents' bed too, unaware that her sister is keeping them company as well.

To sum up, in the short story "Between the Lines" I have employed several narration techniques to transform an experience into fiction, and my writing has also been influenced by Dr. DasGupta's and Jodi Picoult's work.

Works Cited

DasGupta, Sayantani. "The Doctor's Wife." *Hastings Center Report* 37, no. 2 (2007): 7-8. Print.

Picoult, Jodi. *My Sister's Keeper*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2005. Print.