

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

Eight years ago, my little brother Johnson was hit by a car. He was four at the time.

I remember the moment when the collision with a black sedan sent him flying across the asphalt like a skateboard from underneath an inexperienced skater.

I remember my mother screaming in Chinese, tears and snot running down her face for someone to save her son. I remember joining in her sobbing for reasons I can't articulate. I remember the flashes of blue on the uniforms of the paramedics, and losing sight of my brother in the engulfing wave of onlookers.

After that, I don't really remember much at all.

At the age of four, Johnson was in many ways still a baby, with an almost perfectly round face and short stubby child fingers. He laughed at the littlest things, doubling over and scrunching up his nose while his mouth hung wide open until finally, when he came up for air, you could see light in his eyes and roses in his cheeks. But, when he was provoked, he could open up his mouth and howl like a banshee. Johnson's passions included his toy cars and dinosaurs, and also annoying me, his older sister. I was three years his senior and going into second grade, but that age difference could be tripled for all the attention that I paid to him. However, if I sat down to read my big kids' books or to play house with my dolls, my brother would invariably be there as well, asking to join me. The answer to that request was always, "No, go away!"

My annoyance and later frustration with my brother only seemed to encourage him to try and tick me off. He would cut the pages out of my books and then attempt to tape them back in—upside down. He overturned the table while I was hosting an afternoon tea for my dolls. Eventually, he decided that the best strategy was just to demand that I include him in my games, because "mommy said so".

Now, I can't say that I found much comfort or inspiration in your books during that time, for a few reasons: First, I was in second grade at the time and my age limited what books I was allowed to read. And also, well, because my books used to regularly get their pages cut out. Finally, one particular novel of yours would not be published for some time.

So, it wasn't until several years later that I read your book *Smiles to Go*. I can't truthfully say that this was the most riveting book that I've ever read. To be sure, *Smiles* was no heartstring-tugging, gut-wrenching epic of a novel. In fact, the story of Will Tuppence is quite ordinary, and perhaps it is this ordinariness that makes *Smiles* so difficult to neatly characterize. For me, *Smiles to Go* deals with the relationship between Will and his younger sister Tabby. The novel's simple telling of the frictional connection between the Tuppence siblings made me chuckle, then cringe, and then finally, cry as I saw the many ways that the story ran parallel to my own relationship with my brother. Tabby's fixation with the chess trophy and Black Viper (the skateboard) resonated with me as I remembered just how much my brother loved messing with my toys. I could sympathize with Will's frustration with Tabby as the older sibling, and for that reason, as his frustration fermented first into animosity and then to hatred, I began to develop the same sort of feelings towards Tabby's character. What I didn't count on was Tabby's accident.

The day Johnson was in that car accident, our family had just sold our old car. Coming out of the used-car dealership, we needed to cross a wide street before reaching the parking lot. I grabbed my mother's hand and, under her instruction, reluctantly held on to Johnson's fingers as we made our way across the street. I was petulant from having my present task forced upon me and I resolved to make the experience as unpleasant for my brother as possible by surreptitiously digging my fingernails into his palm. Johnson wasn't willing to come quietly either, and he squirmed and dragged his feet the whole way. When we had a little less than ten feet to go, my brother began tugging on my hand to go faster. I pretended not to notice. So, when he decided to break loose from me and race across the street unfettered, I let him go without much thought...

When Tabby is hospitalized in *Smiles* after trying to go down Dead Man's Hill, the scene of my brother's accident was called forth in my head. I understood Will's shock in seeing Tabby's condition, because I had felt the same way in the wake of the collision. And, when Will first responded not with a newfound willingness to love, but with bitterness, I understood that, too.

My brother is now twelve years old and no longer as baby-faced as before. Miraculously, he survived the accident with no broken bones, and his other injuries healed completely a long time ago without even leaving scars. Like Tabby, he is still as full of energy as before. All that's left is to walk him down the aisle for First Day, right? No. Unlike Will, I didn't discover Ozzie's secret during my brother's recuperation. My brother and I still fight, and lately, I don't always win. I've discovered that he's growing taller. In a couple years, he could probably beat me every time in a shouting match. I feel like my baby brother is slipping through my fingers and, if I don't figure it out and close my hand over his, I may live to regret it. Does he love me? Maybe he did once. Maybe he still does. But, Mr. Spinelli, your novel opened up the window a bit. In your novel, Will did not come to love his sister because of her accident. He learned not to push her away by allowing himself to see the ways that she expressed her love for him. Maybe I will learn the same thing, even if it's been eight years already. Maybe I can still walk my brother down the aisle for First Day. Maybe I can love him.

Best wishes,

Cindy Kuang