

Traveling With My Sister

When I was five years old and my sister Peg was nine, we decided to go on a big adventure. She remembered how fascinated she was with the school trip to the planetarium, and she wanted to show me how great it was. I was totally in awe of her. I would have gone most anywhere just to be with my big sister.

Times were simpler then. My mother didn't question the idea at all. Of course we would be safe. There were no terrorists around. Just air raid drills in the school hallways and a few bomb shelters for when the communists invaded.

We got our quarters for the bus and off we went. Peg was sure of the route we were to take. We caught the bus at the end of our block. We started out and I could see the familiar landmarks. Edison School, Wayne Park, Perry Square, State Street. We rode along and watched the people get on and off the bus. It was pleasant enough and I was with my big sister. Important me.

We seemed to be riding for a long time. Things started to take on the air of *déjà vu*. Had we seen the park already, only was it on the other side of the street? Passengers came and went. On and off they entranced and exited and we rode along. I was starting to get a furrowed brow. My sister looked pale. After a while the bus driver stopped the bus and ambled back to where we were sitting. "You girls going anywhere special today, or are you just out for a ride on the bus?" "We're going to the Planetarium," Peg volunteered. "You have to transfer at State Street to get to the Planetarium," he told us. We had been riding the bus for hours. We were due back home soon. There was no way we could get off and transfer to another route and still make it home by supper. We better just go home.

"How was the Planetarium girls? our mom asked as we skulked into the house. "Oh nice, great," Peg said. "Dark with stars," I reported. Why tell her? No sense letting anybody know we got lost on the bus.

Years went by. We grew in different directions. She didn't want me tagging along with her, and she said I stretched out all her clothes and quit wearing them.

I kind of didn't like her, but I always absorbed everything she told me like it was out of the Bible.

When I started high school, I already knew what all the teachers looked like, as well as the undergraduates because I looked at her yearbook every day. The first day of school, I recognized the popular kids and the ones she didn't like because she had given me the scoop on everybody.

Time went by We both grew up. Life got complicated with husbands and children. We kind of went our separate ways and drifted apart for a time. Even though we lived in the same city, we rarely saw each other. Once in a while we would get together for lunch.

On one of those occasions, we were at a restaurant talking of our mom. Usually, our conversations centered on our mother, and how she was provoking us at the moment. If something was going wrong, we could blame it on her. After all, all the talk shows were telling us that all our problems relate back to our childhood and our relationships with our mothers. Mom was aware of this philosophy we shared, and just laughed whenever we tried to place the guilt on her. She had moved to Alabama years ago to escape the frigid winters, and truly made the south her home. She was called “Miss Kate” by all the little kids in her new southern neighborhood.

My brother called telling me that mom had some lingering cold and was to see a specialist in a few days. Apparently she couldn't shake it, and was now beginning to sound asthmatic. Probably nothing we both decided. She's healthy as a horse and strong like bull. But somehow we were uncomfortable.

The report didn't look good. It was a growth and needed further evaluation. Mom talked to us on the phone and sounded bad- raspy and wheezy. But she said, “Don't come yet”. It's probably no big deal.” Every day she sounded worse. She didn't feel any better. By the third day, I called my sister and announced that I was going down to be with her. Peg agreed that was the thing to do and she would come with me. When I called my mom, she was so relieved that we were coming. She confided that she was afraid and wanted us to be there.

Nervously, I made the arrangements through the internet. I called Peg and told her we had a flight out of Cleveland the next day through Priceline. Once your bid is accepted, the tickets are non-refundable. We threw the luggage together and off to Cleveland. I printed out a map and we followed the directions to the airport. We talked and drove, discussing all sorts of things. It seemed like it was taking a long time. I had never seen these sights on a trip to the Cleveland Airport before. It seemed like we were in a bad neighborhood. There were iron grates on the doors of the convenience stores. Rubbish littered the streets. I was starting to get a furrowed brow. Peg was beginning to look pale. Finally, we reached the airport after stopping and asking directions. Yes, we had gotten mixed up. We decided not to talk about it and just get the car parked and catch the plane.

We of course, were the furthest away from the terminal that we could possibly be. The two sisters ran like O.J. Simpson, and arrived at the passenger check-in just as the last travelers were boarding. I whipped out our electronic tickets and the attendant took them from me. I was trying to catch my breath from running all that way, and I leaned on the counter. Relieved, I told Peg that we could relax, that we just made it in time. The lady holding the ticket looked at us and said, “Girls, these tickets are for tomorrow, not today.” I just looked at her in disbelief. Shaking my head, I uttered, “Uh Uh!” Peg just stared ahead.

I guess in my anxiety to get down to be with our mother, I clicked on the wrong date. So who's perfect?

So we called the family in Alabama and requested that they not pick us up at the airport until the next day, that way they wouldn't be there for 24 hours. My mom asked how the mistake happened. I told her it was probably her fault. She laughed as usual.

We certainly weren't going back to Erie to repeat the whole thing again the next day. We found a hotel and went and had dinner and some good gin. We talked and laughed a lot and got up the next day for the trip.

We got to the ticket counter REALLY early this time. We checked in. They didn't give us a seat assignment. We didn't know why. We did not question. We just sat there. It seemed that the flight was overbooked and we didn't have seats. We might have to take a different flight. I was beginning to envision the airport people as my family. They were all starting to look uncommonly familiar. There's that lady we saw this morning cleaning the bathroom. Where is she going with coat on? She can't leave me here. We have a connection. We recognize each other.

Peg went up to the ticket counter. The airline personnel wouldn't make eye contact with her. She tried to explain that our mom was sick and we needed to get down there now. They said they were working on it and to just take her seat. The attendants were on the phone They were back and forth from the plane to the ticket counter and back to the phone again.

After what seemed like forever, they got two people to give up their seats for us and we boarded the plane. I started to cry. Peg looked at me and said, "Stop your crying. It's all okay. Why are you crying now? Besides", she said. "I know you're just paying me back for that pretend trip we took to the Planetarium."

That was 19 years ago. My sister and I and the rest of our siblings lived through the death of our mother. She passed away a month and a half after being diagnosed with lung cancer. The day before she died, she went swimming and to her church picnic with all her southern friends.

My relationship with Peg has never been closer. We talk every day. We love to pal around. We still talk about our mom and jokingly blame her for everything that goes wrong. I am in awe of her. She is my big sister. Just don't ask her directions to the Planetarium.