

First place, Non-fiction

On the Phone

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My mom was on the phone. Some moms are short or tall, young or old. My mom was on the phone. She loved her children fiercely and it was this fierce love that kept her on the phone.

My mom's usual telephone voice rattled with brass tacks. She was the mother of several children with disabilities and had become our fearless advocate. The exception to her rattling style was the weightless tone she used when my dad called from work. "Hi, it's me," my dad would say and my mom would reply happily, "Hi, me!" When the phone rang next, though, the weightless tone would be gone and she would be back to business, pushing hard for opportunities for her children and for other children with disabilities.

This advocacy for children began before I can remember. I was born too early and given 24 hours to live. I stubbornly lived through those first 24 hours and through the days, months, and years that followed. My mom responded to this early danger, not by turning inward and coddling me at home, but by turning outward. She formed a nonprofit organization for parents of premature children, hectored the hospital where I was born into funding the organization, and spent the next few years on the phone, conducting its business. Left to my own devices, I must have looked around me and thought, "I need a sister."

My parents had the same idea. They again looked outward; this time they looked halfway around the world. My sister Sarah joined our family from South Korea. She had medical needs and had ten surgeries before she was one year old. She also had some learning disabilities. A teacher made Sarah cry as she struggled to learn to read. My mom was still on the phone, this time with physical therapists and learning specialists. She found the support Sarah needed. Then, planted firmly in school, gymnastics, and art classes, Sarah began to blossom.

One day Sarah was building a fortress of blocks. Construction of the fortress was disturbing my tea party. I traced a line with my finger on the carpet and ordered Sarah not to cross the line. I wrote a contract, reflecting this one-sided agreement on a ragged piece of notebook paper.

"Mo-om," Sarah called out and thrust the contract at my mom's knees. "Erin's being mean!"

"Shh," my mom said. "I'm *on the phone*." She paused, one hand covering the receiver, and glanced at the paper. "That's a good contract, though," she said. "Erin, you could make a good lawyer."

I made a face. Sarah returned to her blocks. She may have been wondering what it would be like to have a little sister of her own.

The phone rang again. "Hi, me!" my mom answered.

"That means it's Dad," I said.

“I found her,” said my dad. My parents also knew that there was room for another sister in our family and had been looking for her.

Beth arrived from India. She had significant physical disabilities when she joined our family many years ago. She struggled with simple things, like eating and talking. A speech therapist told my mom that Beth would never speak.

Years later, Beth still faces many of the same struggles, but her progress has been remarkable. Today she speaks in one of the richest and most varied vocabularies I have ever encountered. She is a high school graduate, an athlete, and she blogs about movies online.

Sarah, who was once made to feel that she couldn't learn to read, is a Master's student. She still builds with blocks, though they look a little different now. She is a scenic designer and has a full scholarship to a top theater program.

I am a lawyer. My focus is the rights of people with disabilities.

The years of my mom's phone calls are reflected in the lives of her children. My mom carved out opportunities for each of us where they did not exist before. She dreamed of lives for us that were better than we knew we could dream of for ourselves. We are all happy, healthy, and accomplished. But my mom is still on the phone. There are other children who need advocates. My mom isn't going to hang up.