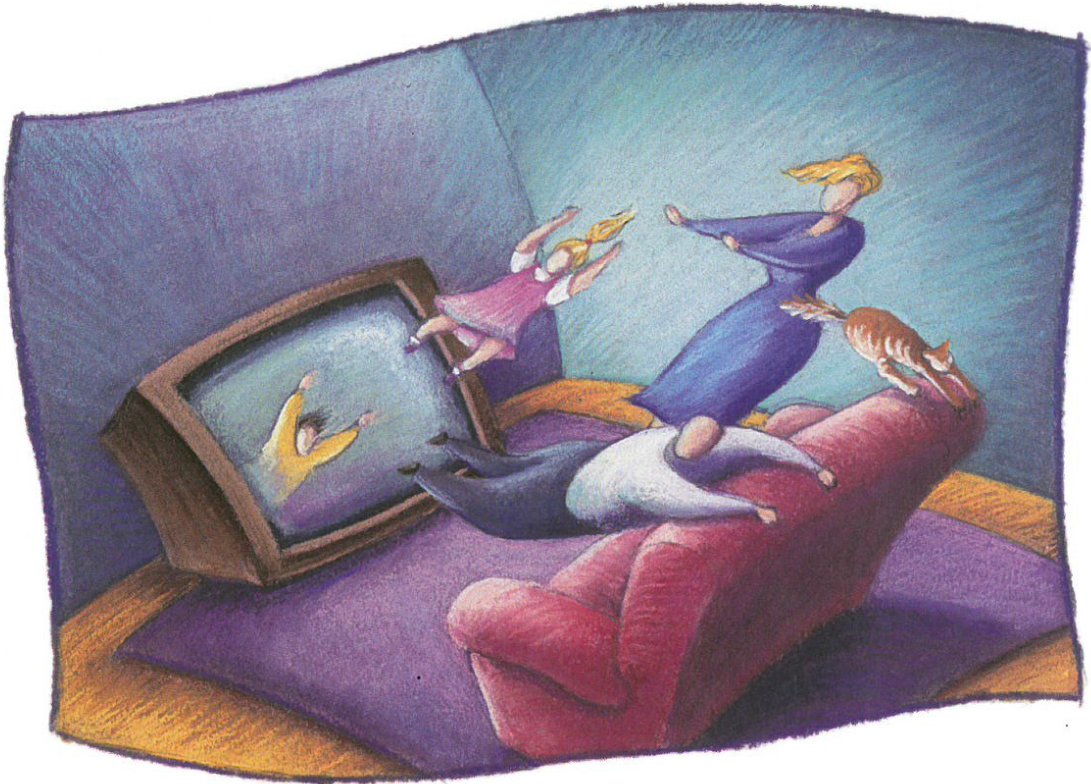


When Television Ate My Best Friend

LINDA ELLERBEE



Focus Your Learning

Reading this short story will help you:

- experiment with memorable language
- discuss how ideas and traditions can be conveyed
- create original texts

I was eight years old when I lost my best friend. My *very first* very best friend. Lucy

hardly ever whined, even when we kids played cowboys and she had to be Dale Evans. Nor did she cry, even when we played dodge ball and some big kid threw the ball so hard you could read *Spalding* backward on her legs. Lucy was world class.

Much of our time together was spent in my backyard on the perfect swing set: high, wide, built solid, and grounded for life. But one June day long ago, something went wrong. I was swinging as high as I could, and still higher. The next time the swing started to come back down, I didn't. I just kept going up. And up.

Then I began to fall.

"Know what? Know what?" Lucy was yelling at me.

No, I didn't know *what*. All I knew was that my left arm hurt.

"Know what? For a minute there, you flew. You seemed to catch the wind and ... soar! Right up until you must have done something wrong, because you fell."

Wearing a cast on my broken arm gave me time to work out the scientifics with Lucy. Our Theory was that if you swing just high enough and straight enough, and you jump out of the swing at just the right moment and in just the right position—you *just might fly*.

July was spent waiting for my arm to heal. We ran our hands across the wooden seat, feeling for the odd splinter that could ruin your perfect takeoff. We pulled on the chains, testing for weak links.

Finally came the day in August when my cast was off, and Lucy and I were ready. Today we would fly.

Early that morning, we began taking turns—one pushing, one pumping. All day

we pushed and pumped, higher and higher, ever so close. It was almost dark when Lucy's mother hollered for her to come home right this minute and see what her daddy had brought them.

This was strictly against the rules. Nobody had to go home in August until it was altogether dark. Besides, Lucy's daddy wasn't a man to be struck with irresistible impulses like stopping at the horse store and thinking, *Golly, my little girl loves ponies! I better get her one!*

So we kept on swinging, and Lucy pretended not to hear her mother—until she dropped *Lucee* to *Lucille Louise*. Halfway through the fourth *Lucille Louise*, Lucy slowly raised her head as though straining to hear some woman calling from the next county.

"Were you calling me, Mother? Okay, okay, I'm coming. Yes, ma'am. *Right now.*"

Lucy and I walked together to the end of my driveway. Once in her front yard, she slowed to something between a meander and a lollygag, choosing a path that took her straight through the sprinklers. Twice.

When at last Lucy sashayed to her front door, she turned back to me and, with a grin, gave me the thumbs-up sign used by pilots everywhere. *Awright*. So we'd fly tomorrow instead. We'd waited all summer. We could wait one more day. On her way in the house, she slammed the screen door.

BANG!

In my memory, I've listened to that

screen door shut behind my best friend a thousand times. It was the last time I played with her.

I knocked on the door every day, but her mother always answered saying Lucy was busy and couldn't come out to play. I tried calling, but her mother always answered saying Lucy was busy and couldn't come to the phone. Lucy was busy? Too busy to play? Too busy to fly? She had to be dead. Nothing else made sense. What, short of death, could separate such best friends? We were going to fly. Her thumb had said so. I cried and cried.

I might never have known the truth of the matter, if some weeks later I hadn't overheard my mother say to my father how maybe I would calm down about Lucy if we got a television too.

A what? What on earth was *a television*? The word was new to me, but I was clever enough to figure out that Lucy's daddy had brought home a television that night. At last I knew what had happened to Lucy. The television ate her.

It must have been a terrible thing to see. Now my parents were thinking of getting one. I was scared. They didn't understand what television could do.

"Television eats people," I announced to my parents.

"Oh, Linda Jane," they said, laughing. "Television doesn't eat people. You'll love television just like Lucy. She's inside her

house watching it right this minute."

Indeed, Lucy was totally bewitched by the flickering black and white shapes. Every afternoon following school, she'd sit in her living room and watch whatever there was to watch. Saturday mornings, she'd look at cartoons.

Autumn came. Around Thanksgiving, I played an ear of corn in the school pageant. Long division ruined most of December. After a while, I forgot about flying. But I did not forget about Lucy.

Christmas arrived, and Santa Claus brought us a television. "See?" my parents said. "Television doesn't eat people." Maybe not. But television changes people. It changed my family forever.

We stopped eating dinner at the dining-room table after my mother found out about TV trays. Dinner was served in time for one program and finished in time for another. During the meal we used to talk to one another. Now television talked to us. If you absolutely had to say something, you waited until the commercial, which is, I suspect, where I learned to speak in thirty-second bursts.

Before television, I would lie in bed at night, listening to my parents in their room saying things I couldn't comprehend. Their voices alone rocked me to sleep. Now Daddy went to bed right after the weather, and Mama stayed up to see Jack Parr. I went to sleep listening to

voices in my memory.

Daddy stopped buying Perry Mason books. Perry was on television now, and that was so much easier for him. But it had been Daddy and Perry who'd taught me how fine it can be to read something you like.

Mama and Daddy stopped going to movies. Most movies would one day show up on TV, he said.

After a while, Daddy and I didn't play baseball any more. We didn't go to ball games either, but we watched more baseball than ever. That's how Daddy perfected *The Art of Dozing to Baseball*. He would sit in his big chair, turn on the game, and fall asleep within minutes. At least he appeared to be asleep. His eyes were shut, and he snored. But if you shook him, he'd open his eyes and tell you what the score was, who was up, and what the pitcher ought to throw next.

It seemed everybody liked to watch television more than I did. I had no interest in sitting still when I could be climbing trees or riding a bike or practising my takeoffs just in case one day Lucy woke up and remembered we had a Theory. Maybe the TV hadn't actually eaten her, but once her parents pointed her in the direction of that box, she never looked back.

Lucy had no other interests when she could go home and turn on "My Friend Flicka." Maybe it was because that was as close as she would get to having her own pony. Maybe if her parents had allowed her a real world to stretch out in, she wouldn't have been satisfied with a nineteen-inch world.

All I know is I never had another first best friend. I never learned to fly either. What's more, I was right all along: television really does eat people.

Activities

1. In small groups, prepare a T-chart showing the contrast between life before television and life after television.
2. The author uses many descriptive words to express how slowly Lucy walked to her house: *meander*, *lollygag*, and *sashayed*. Use a thesaurus to make a list of words with similar meanings and try to re-create the image using some words from your list. Which words do you prefer?
3. Television was responsible for many changes in the author's house. Some of these "changes" are things that we might take for granted now. Imagine that there was suddenly no television in the world! What would change in your life? Discuss in groups and assign a recorder to take notes. Present your ideas to the other groups.