



UNMASKING – Lara’s Story

A Lumo TV Documentary

Short Story Summary

At an outdoor swimming pool. Lara, a young deafblind woman, enters the water and swims underwater. She explains that being underwater makes her feel peaceful. It is one of the few places where she feels she can see clearly.

Lara sits in an interview room in front of a camera and begins telling her story. She explains that people are often surprised when she tells them she is deafblind. They sometimes tell her that she does not “look deafblind.”

Lara shops for food and returns to her flat. She shows some of the ways she manages with her limited sight. She uses bright lights, dark glasses and a small torch to help her see things. Lara knows that her sight is getting worse and that she will need to make changes.

At Cambridge Clinical Research Centre, Lara has her eyes examined. She explains that she has Wolfram syndrome and that her sight will continue to deteriorate. Her field of vision has become narrow, and she sometimes experiences fuzzy vision, like TV static, especially when she is tired or it is dark.

Back at home, Lara looks through old family photographs and videos and talks about her father. He is also deafblind and now has very little sight. Lara explains that he does not want to use hands-on signing or accept help. She worries that his experience could become her future.

Lara is decorating at a local Deaf club, where her older brother Paul joins her. Paul is also deafblind. They discuss hands-on signing, where a deafblind person feels another person's signs through touch. Paul explains why he does not like using it. Lara listens to his experiences and thinks about why deafblind people may hide their needs.

Lara next meets her other brother Oliver and two friends, including her close friend Laura, at an adventure park. They visit a dark fun maze. Lara finds seeing in the darkness tiring and places her hand on Laura's shoulder to follow her through the maze.

After the maze, the group sit together in a café and talk about deafblindness. Lara explains that she sometimes finds it difficult to ask people for help. Laura says that she is uncomfortable with touch and therefore finds hands-on signing difficult. Lara's brother Oliver talks about their deafblind father and remembers how isolated he can be. Lara says she wants people to think about working together, rather than seeing help as dependence.

Lara returns to the swimming pool. She explains that swimming helps when she feels stressed or overwhelmed. Underwater, she does not experience the same fuzzy visual static. However, she feels that something in her life needs to change.

Lara travels to London to meet Jo Atkinson, a psychologist who is also losing her sight. Lara hopes Jo can help her think differently about her future. They meet in a café and talk about how they need to position themselves to see each other's signing. They make small adjustments so that communication works for both of them. Jo explains how she gradually started using hands-on signing as her sight changed and encourages Lara to be open about being deafblind and about the things she needs.

During their conversation, Jo asks Lara to imagine travelling along a river towards a waterfall. She explains that fighting against change can leave a person stuck. Instead, a deafblind person can learn new ways of doing things through touch, such as using Braille or a red and white cane. Lara finds the idea of letting go of her reliance on sight frightening, but she begins to understand Jo's point.

Jo arranges for Lara to try using a red and white long cane. An instructor teaches Lara how to move the cane across the ground as she walks. Afterwards, Lara and Jo use their canes to cross London's Millennium Bridge. Lara is nervous because using a cane makes her deafblindness visible to other people. As she walks, she feels the bridge's surfaces and vibrations through her cane. She realises that she does not have to keep looking down at the ground. By the end of the crossing, she feels more confident and describes the experience as freedom.

Back in her hometown, Lara stands beside a smaller bridge and thinks about what Jo has taught her. She reveals that she already owns a small red and white symbol cane but has hidden it for several years because she felt embarrassed and exposed using it. She now feels more ready to change.

In a café, Lara searches online for information about deafblind people and communication. She discovers Protactile, a way of communicating through touch, and decides to learn more about it.

Lara meets Lisa and Romain, two deafblind Protactile teachers. The three sit closely together with their knees and hands touching. Lisa and Romain show Lara how they communicate through touch and co-presence. They explain how they mirror their signs in both hands and use different tactile responses, called backchanneling, including tapping on a person's knee to mean "yes", and rubbing the knee to mean "no." They remain physically connected at all times so that everyone knows what is happening in the conversation. Lara asks what happens if someone does not like being touched. Lisa and Romain explain that everyone has different boundaries and that people should discuss what kinds of touch they are comfortable with.

Lisa then asks Lara to close her eyes. Lara, Lisa and Romain move together around a kitchen using co-present touch instead of sight. They explore cupboards and objects and then make a sandwich together. Lara notices textures and sensations that she had not paid attention to before. She feels optimistic about experiencing the world through touch.

On another day, Lara returns to the outdoor swimming pool with her friend Laura. They talk again about Laura's discomfort with touch. Laura knows that as Lara's sight changes, they will need to find different ways to communicate. Lara asks Laura to try learning Protactile with her.

Lara and Laura sit facing each other with their knees touching. Lara begins teaching Laura simple Protactile communication and shows her that repeated tapping can mean "yes." Laura becomes more relaxed with the touch, and the two friends begin communicating together in this new way. Lara says that she can now see hope and a positive future.

The programme ends back at the swimming pool, with Lara alone in the water. As she swims underwater, she recalls some of the people and experiences from her journey, her friends, meeting Jo Atkinson, crossing the Millennium Bridge with a red and white cane, learning Protactile with Lisa and Romain, and teaching Laura. Lara says that as her life changes, she is changing too. She now accepts that she is deafblind and does not want to hide it anymore. Lara describes this as taking off her mask. She is changing and hopes others will be able to change with her.