

From Sister to Sister  
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WHAT IS  
CINDERELLA'S  
BURDEN?

WHAT IS CINDERELLA'S BURDEN? What is it that she is carrying, really? And what is the meaning of the pumpkin? What is the crime of staying away from the one whom one serves past midnight, beyond the hour when the one who is wicked and abandoned must be bedded down all alone?

Cinderella, daughter, sister of ash. We were opposite sides of our mother's self-love and self-hatred. The self-love never picked up by any other in my mother's own childhood was really only a loneliness longing for reflection, which was why, perhaps, my sister was always so distant. But my sister was ever so beautiful to my mother and me.

The self-hatred was so precious and hidden at once, it must be given away to another. As the oldest daughter it was I who was chosen to carry it to safety. As a child, so carefully bearing the self-hatred my mother couldn't bear, when I looked at my freer and lovelier sister, how could I have known that there was no room for my sister in that mission, and that my sister's seeming freedom was not, originally, a choice?

It was only much later that I began to be able to look at my sister objectively, and to see what it must have meant for her to adapt herself to an exclusion from a dance going on between my mother and me, already so complicated that no newcomer could have entered it even if she had tried.

Although there were only twenty months between us, those twenty months made all of the difference.

"By the time I came along, there was simply no room," my sister said simply one day when we were thrown together in caring for our mother, who had deteriorated so suddenly, all battles were gone.

During a nightmarish four months my sister had been my mother's main caretaker for a variety of reasons. The two most immediate ones were practical. Although her work required frequent trips to very far away places, when she was actually present she lived in New York City, a subway ride away from my mother, while I lived in eastern Long Island, one hundred miles away.

The second had to do with my youngest daughter's illness, which happened to coincide exactly with my mother's losing of competence and health. From August until December my daughter would spend fifty-five days in the hospital and undergo three major surgical procedures for a rupture of the colon that should never have assailed someone so young.

But beneath this: choices patterns, as old as we were old, as deep as we were deep. When my mother, a few months earlier, had announced that she had willed my sister an "extra" house, partly because my sister, who didn't already live in the country, had promised not to sell it, but also as an expression of her closeness to the one "who had been more available," because I had had others to care for, and "having children was a choice," it had been the end of a certain cycle of thinking of giving and getting, of caring and fleeing, of who had cared most, and who was more drained.

And now we like the players of the next generation in the tragedies of Shakespeare, left standing in the rubble, to make it all right. I thought much of the ends of the tragedies of Shakespeare, and how different it is with women than with men.

In the fairy tales of sisters, where the issue is fairness/unfairness, and chosen and unchosen sister, no queen must die, no

sister murder must take place. Once the unchosen sister has been shown a way to show the fairer outside world her unfairly hidden inner beauty, the bad queen or bad stepmother simply disappears from the story. The previously maligned sister has no desire for revenge against the sister (or sisters) who were more fortunate, but now that there is enough to go around, and the evil enchantress' previous powers have been made irrelevant, she shares her bounty equally.

No one can remember what happened to Cinderella's mother once the inequality among the daughters was rendered irrelevant. It is as if the relevance of the bad stepmother is only active when there has been daughter splitting, and once that is conquered she can quickly lose her powers.

Is that a wish? Is that a true reality?

IN WRITING THIS ESSAY I am very interested in splits and reversals, in the way that patterns come back over generations, even when we attempt to undo them, and the depths of the feelings of real mother/false mother and real daughter/false daughter that make for the fairy-tale splits. I am interested in mirrors, and in ways of breaking down the mirrors, and giving the shards equally to all. I am interested in beauty, in the fact that so often the fairy-tale-tortured and hidden one, whose own beauty is hidden, finds her redemption in washing the face of a death's head or troll. I am interested in knowing what would happen if we all shared our ugliness, beauty, our good and our bad, our hopes and our hatreds, our fears.

IN OUR FAMILY it is possible to begin with the Cinderella version proper, for my mother based much of her understanding of her own psychology upon it. Her real mother had died. And her stepmother preferred her real daughters and was cold and was

cruel to my mother, so cruel that when my four-year-old mother, at her stepmother's arrival, had gotten frightened and had wet the bed, the stepmother had dipped her head in the bed urine.

When my oldest two daughters were tiny, three and a half years old only and five, my mother took them to see *Cinderella* and told them that she too had a wicked stepmother who had favored her real daughters, and that was the first thing my daughters ever learned about their grandmother, that she was an abandoned and unloved child.

In my situation, since I was my mother's real daughter while my mother's real mother was gone, the configuration was supposed to have been an absolute reversal. My mother's divine gift to me, made doubly potent by our family's extreme and deeply practiced atheism, was that great somethingness that had come out of the passed-on nothingness, the manna of the perfect mothering that had no precedent and no remembered flaws, since it had come out of the void.

Like the Christ child given to the virgin, I had come where there was nothing, no seed planted. My father, our father, in the configuration was irrelevant.

It would be later the irrelevancy of fathers I would notice as I looked at the patterns in the good sister/bad sister tales. Or else it would be the relative weakness of fathers.

In the fairy tales sometimes Cinderella is one of two sisters, more often one of three, as if the perceived goodness, entitledness, must be doubled, multiplied, to double the weight of the "bad" one abandoned alone.

Sometimes she is the true but hated daughter of a bad queen or unnatural mother. But more often she is the daughter of a good, often dead other mother, the one the new stepmother hates. Sometimes she has in her imprint more of man than of woman, and is the daughter of the good but bullied male crea-

ture who cannot defend her against the stepmother's jealousy of the preferred, beautiful dead. She is the preservation of the remembered love that the man bears for his first perfect dead wife, who is so often, at least mythologically speaking, his mother.

The younger she is, the more chance there will be to trick her; if she is beautiful, to exchange her beauty for ugliness.

As I think back over the fairy tales, I am assailed by the reversals, wondering what does it mean that the rejected stepdaughter is so often the youngest, the innocent princess, while obviously, biologically the stepdaughter would have to be first?

And in that moment of my mother's mental disappearance, my sister wept and my own eyes were dry. If I could have given it all up, all of the wishing for reparation and revenge, for the gentle mothering I never would receive, now knowing that it was too late, for just one of my sister's tears, I would have prayed the deepest atheist prayer I knew.

"My task was different," I said softly to my sister, "and it was one at which I had to fail."

And then, perhaps for the first time, we both embraced each other and we cried.

Only much later was I to learn that the good daughter/bad daughter split was not so uncommon.

I SHALL TRY TO go backward. But how strange is the locked cage of memory. And how many the reasons to lock it. Virginia Woolf knew this when she put so much stock in the single stopped image, in its brightness and dullness, the large and the small of it, trying to determine her age on a journey (either to or from Cornwall) by the size of the red flowers on her mother's dark dress, to determine how close or how far she was held by the contrast, to make up for the sensation of Being almost totally lost, and even the memory of motion, accessible only through

the most stopped and stilled silence. And along with the sensation of Being, almost all accurate notions of what was the actual relationship she had with her mother, irreparably lost.

In my mind, when I think back as early as I can, I see not myself but the pose of my own shyness, in a classroom, in a school yard, never liking it too much when I am away from my mother. I see a pose that already prefigures the curvature that will not come for almost a decade, as if body and psychology already are linked . . .

And then I see my sister with her arms spread wide open, rolling fast, rolling freely toward the neighborhood children who are not like the children in our public school, but go to the Catholic school nearby. I have a strange fondness for these children, and a curiosity about them. But they do not like me, for I have so many more words than they do; and even when I try not to use them, they come out. I have a strange way of using them, with a sort of shame.

My sister is wearing the roller skates that I helped her to put on, but I know better than to go along with her. Four freckled boys, all happy brothers with the simple name of Baker, smile at her. And she smiles back. Although she is a bit shy, her shyness is of the endearing kind. And other children like her. Adults also like her.

I know that something about me will make these children shy away from me, and I both show it and hide it as I come running home to my mother and she showers me with kisses, making me, for that moment, feel very special. I do not know just when it is that she tells me that very special people often have a hard time in the world, but that they ultimately are the ones who do great things. Although she doesn't say so directly, I begin to feel that I have just been told a very special secret, that for all my sister's seemingly charming qualities and skills she isn't quite this thing that links me to my mother, that for all its woes, will never become interchangeable.

Because I am the oldest and the first, she will take me upon her knee and tell me about the very special relationship that mothers have with their first daughters. And later, when in early adolescence I will start to show a very special rage, she will tell me that that too is part of the mother and first daughter intensity.

In the fairy tales sometimes the chosen/unchosen child is sent out into the world to be harmed, and in the gift of her compassion for the underdog she will prove herself by washing the faces of the hideous trolls her stronger and more cared-for sisters shun. Sometimes she is kept at home, like Cinderella, completely hidden, until she is discovered by the Beautiful. What is it that the mother/stepmother is fleeing in keeping hidden the "other" child? What part of her own self is it she shuns?

There is a largeness, and an isolation, already in this drama that it will take a lifetime to undo. But here perhaps I must talk a little bit about what it meant for me to be an atheist, communist child. I was one of those children who, although a devout believer in the fact that there were no forces anywhere beyond the human, yet yearned for communion and the sharing of God. I loved always the singing in churches, especially the singing of little tiny children who were giving over their trust to a bigness they could not yet reasonably fathom, yet felt. In my world the only bigness was my mother. Years later when my second novel was published, my most autobiographical, and my father asked "Who am I?" I replied "You are the dead musician because you always played a music that I could not hear."

I think often how the communion with God, with a power much bigger than one's mother or father, must preserve, at least to some extent, the sense of a self separate from that of the mother or father, with which to commune, how it must more easily translate, later on, to a communion with nature and music and art. I think it is different for those who have acquired athe-

ism later on, as a phenomenon of adult choice, or for those who never take their childhood atheism quite so seriously.

The communist chunk went very well with the atheism, and had to do with the enormity of human responsibility. But my mother was also a psychotherapist, and would often try to substitute understanding for feelings. Feelings existed, in fact they abounded, larger than life, all around. But they were there to be conquered. I think that the conquering of feelings, like the conquering of the yearning for God, early on became a contest.

Our favorite toys, my sister's and mine, were my mother's thematic apperception tests, cardboard placards with drawings of houses, half peopled, over which one would superpose the remaining cutout people to make stories. They were all, they were so designed, to be family relational stories, of mothers and fathers, of sisters and brothers, and such. And then there were the pattern blocks, used, normally with a timer, for the I.Q. tests. We knew that our mother had tested our I.Q.'s some time ago when she was practicing, and that one of our I.Q.'s was higher than the other. Only she wouldn't tell us which was which. For years I was tormented by imagining that my sister's I.Q. was higher and that my mother knew.

Competition, difference, how little they matter if each can feel loved and unique. Less than ten years after my mother reassures the seven-year-old who is me that it doesn't matter if the other children like her, because I am specially unique, and moreover I belong to my mother, I will find myself sitting on her bed with her long into the night. My father, who was never enough, who never seemed to fill her up, has tired finally of being reprimanded for his smallness. He has found his affirmation elsewhere, and has left her.

I am now fifteen, and at the age of first boyfriends, at the age of first loneliness and first knowledge of betrayal. But no, over and over again I have had this in earliest childhood with girlfriends. And my mother is crying to me about how lonely she

is, and I on her bed, way past my own bedtime, am trying to reassure her that her uniqueness and strength is a wonderful, beautiful thing, that "even if it frightens all the men away, [she] wouldn't want it any other way."

Was there a way that I knew even then, or before that, when I was a child first left all alone in a school yard, that my mother was painfully hard to like? I have no memories of experiencing my mother as a rejected person when I was a very young child, but can only reconstruct my own thinking that because I am more intense it is harder for children to like me. Somewhere along the line I have learned the word intensity, and I know that it is something that describes both me—my "nature" and the thing that makes me similar to my mother—as well as my relationship with my mother. It is the one thing that my sister doesn't have, and over the years, as my jealousy of her grows, I will learn to cherish it. The child in the school yard stands alone, the child who moments earlier was excelling in the classroom, or perhaps the child who was the unknowing victim of anti-Semitism. Later on she will be the one who bravely refuses to salute the American flag, who will be so happily praised by her mother the minute she comes home.

Because I am frightened of the other children, more and more I will stay with my mother, who will pretend to comfort me, even as she assuages her own loneliness. And as my insight, my vocabulary grows, as she is able to confide in me more and more, and I in her, we will know that we are together in this specialness that alienates other people.

We will watch my little sister be liked by her classmates and teachers. And my mother will be proud of her and I will be jealous of her. And my mother will reassure me that jealousy is a natural emotion, that I shouldn't feel bad about feeling that way. And I will try to overcome my jealousy by becoming my little sister's teacher. And she will learn fast.

Almost before I have learned how to read, before I have had

the pleasure of watching the words dance on the page, and entering a magical world all alone, I will teach her to read. And then my mother and the teachers who love her will have her skipped a year in school, so that she is suddenly almost in my grade. And I will have to watch more carefully than ever to be sure that my friends do not find her, and discover that she is far more likable and better than me. And even when I am watching, ever so carefully, there is no way that I can keep people from discovering how wonderful my little sister is.

I HAVE NO MEMORY of my little sister's birth, which came a year and a half after mine. All that I know is what I had been told as soon as I was old enough to comprehend such things, if not much sooner, for always the fact that I had many words deceived my mother into talking to me as if I had been much older. My mother, so the story went, had wanted desperately to conceive. And yet, while all the others "who wanted children far less" easily conceived, she had great troubles for ten years.

By the time I finally came, she was so afraid that the pattern would be repeated that when I was eleven months old she started trying again. Although, as she was often to tell me, she would have wanted us at least two years apart, as often happens in these cases, my sister came immediately, breaking whatever separate bliss my mother had anticipated with me. Later on I would repeat this pattern with my two oldest daughters, panicking because at the age of nineteen it took me all of three months to become pregnant, starting immediately again when my oldest daughter was eighteen months old. And my sister, seeming to evince no curiosity, would stay very far away.

I remember very little of the first six years of my life, which surprises me, because I was, to all accounts, a very verbal child, although only my mother was able to understand me. According to the stories passed down it was suggested that I have speech

therapy so that others would be able to understand me also, and even my father went along with this suggestion, but my mother won out because she was the psychologist of the family, and she "didn't want to make me self-conscious so young."

I suspect that the absence of earlier memories has a great deal to do with the way I learned to turn over all of my conscious thinking to my mother. For as long as I can remember, in my childhood and my adolescence, I told her everything that I thought. In my childhood, I suspect that I didn't have any thoughts that she wouldn't have liked, for I have no memories of anything other than perfect harmony and happiness with her. Later on, in my adolescence, when I spoke thoughts that she didn't like, there were brutal fights between us, that lasted on and off for over twenty-five years.

WAS IT FROM our father that my sister learned her separateness? I remember a recurring scene at dinnertime. My mother was worried that my father was always looking at me and ignoring my sister. We had one of those booth-type seating alcoves in the kitchen, where two people could sit on two facing benches in an enclosed space, and the people on the inside would have to wait for the people on the outside to get up, in order to be able to move. I remember that my mother kept changing our seats, so that my father would be forced to look at my sister, but no matter which way she arranged us, she was never satisfied that a change had occurred. I have no memories of my sister's or my father's expressions during these sessions, but only of my own embarrassment for them both, my own desire to protect both of them.

My sister later confided to me that it was partially through watching me that she learned separateness. She saw me over and over again getting into trouble when I told my mother too much about what I was thinking. I was the child who drew and wrote,

and of my earliest childhood writings and drawings my parents were both very proud, until I separated from them, and there came into my work a darkness that they felt vaguely responsible for, and didn't know how to handle, a grief that could make certain sorts of jagged rough edges that they were embarrassed for with their friends. It was as if my sister always knew that she should not reveal herself, so much so that once, when she was about ten years old, or so my father's story goes, my parents found a beautiful drawing that she had made tucked under all of her clothing in her bottom dresser drawer. When they took it out and admired it, several hours later they found it crumpled up in her garbage can.

What had my father meant to tell me when he revealed this to me, he who had always hovered as a gentle spirit yet could never reach me?

When parents are much too large, and their children don't yet know how to cut them in half, I suspect they must cut themselves in half. Was it really a smallness that my mother felt inside, that made my father so easily disappear for her, and made us help him disappear, even as we severed ourselves from ourselves?

My mother had such a terrible fear of disappearing, if ever her children should meet. She had given us eyes, two very different sets of eyes, and had pasted them onto our heads, but then, as the fairy-tale mothers did, bewitched them into not being free.

We never really looked at each other, my sister and I, and yet I remember a single occasion when my sister crept into my bed and she wet it, when we were staying in a motel, while we were traveling cross-country. And she got to sleep with my mother, and I with my father, and my father had to change the bed.

I remember some times when my parents had fights, and we would huddle in the backseat of the car together. It is the only memory of physical contact I have, except for my sister's wetting the bed. And when my parents were getting along, and there was

a suitcase between us, it would be jolted from one to the other while the car hit the curves, and we would be very unhappy with each other.

And then I remember my parents' shocked and hurt expressions once when I was found holding a Coca-Cola bottle over my sister's head, a gesture so completely out of keeping for me that none of us knew what to do with it, for generally, perhaps because I was so encouraged to talk to my mother about my jealousy of my sister, I never acted it out. My mother was so proud of this system, this manner of touching the feelings that kept us from acting things out, that keep us in the eyes of the world, ideal sisters, ideal daughters.

I search in my mind for the time when the tides switched, when I was no longer my mother's good little daughter, but suddenly I had become the evil one. Somewhere between preadolescence and the age of sixteen this must have happened, this "acting out" as my mother would call it in her psychological jargon, the time when my need for a separate perception began, and yet I couldn't keep quiet, I needed her approval so badly. It was mainly over the right of a separate perception that the fighting began, I remember, and who could wound whom more deeply, and it happened, not suddenly, but gradually, gradually over time, with many periods of intensified closeness and make-ups that were almost sexual in between.

When I try to remember the doors, it is in this period that they first become important, the fact that my sister seemed to be able to close her door without conflict while I only closed mine with great guilt, and mine could be easily opened if my mother was angry or just needed to talk. My sister's somehow was inviolable. Even now I do not know whether I am more frightened of other people's doors or my own.

It was during this period that I first began to resent the fact that my sister was able to keep secrets while I didn't seem to know how. If ever I would try to talk to her about something that

upset me (especially about my new problems with my mother) I would feel that she was beginning to look down on me, as someone who didn't know how to handle people, that she had shut the door to her heart. It was during this period, when so many sisters begin to gang up on their mothers and begin sharing their secrets, that I remember feeling consciously for the first time the sadness "of not having a sister."

This would be a feeling I would keep for most of my adulthood, so that it was possible for people to know me for years without knowing that I had a sister. We rarely did anything together, although we shared many interests to a much greater degree than most sisters. Good daughters of our parents, we continued to share our atheism, our political beliefs. We shared certain aesthetic tastes, and could continue to get each other the right books for our birthdays, even when we didn't see each other all year long. We heard about one another mostly from our mother, and I remember, for years, everything that my mother would say about my sister's achievements had come into my heart like a dagger, something about the way she did it obliterating who I was and creating an aura of deep inner blackness in me, through which my sister shone. How exactly this happened, this feeling of irrelevance whenever my sister was mentioned, I will never know, only that it became a pattern that was repeated on and off with other women for years to come.

My sister became an anthropologist, going away to far-distant places, and often for long periods of time, so that when she came back everyone in the family dropped everything in order to see her. She stayed single for a long time, and her reasons for being away were so good no one could have faulted her for them.

I was always around, if not always available, especially during the years between twenty and thirty when I didn't know which to take care of first, my children, my mother, or my art. Because I had dived into my choices recklessly and deep at age

twenty, with all of the reckless belief of a twenty-year-old, I often found I had gone in beyond my water level and I tended to need help that wouldn't come, for my mother herself was too needy. And since I had a man while my mother had none, a fact that she would often remind me of in echo of her complaint from my childhood that I had had a mother while she had none, she felt that it was only right for me to continue as her comforter.

She saw me, at the age of twenty-two, already with two children, not as a frightened and overextended child mother but as a grown woman with two children herself, who surely had room for the mother who had raised her and loved her so dearly. And so the dance began of my withholding myself, dreaming that her money might help open the doors toward a separateness I had relinquished too early, and she, with a will as tough as her atheism, withholding even the simplest offerings. And so it was that my time and concern became my currency, her money hers, the issue of who could withhold what might have helped the other the battleground. Because my mother had never had a mother, the fact that mothers and daughters should expect different things from one another never came up.

My sister had made a professional choice that not only allowed her to travel away but also allowed her to be financially independent. Was it out of a secret fear of losing my mother that I took on her own mother field of psychology and became immersed in exploring "mother wounds" and imprint? Or was it because imprint was handled so strangely in our family? It was different now that I wore the perverse pride of being more difficult and thorny than my sister, and in failing at impossible tasks, as I waited for the fairy-tale moment in which my years of being my mother's little confidante while taking care of three children, while my sister wandered free, would be rewarded and I would wear the golden crown.

If my pattern was to rush into the most complicated and impossible situations I could find, my sister's pattern was to



move more slowly and to wait, protecting herself until she was ready. My sister only very gradually approached the intimacy I had shared with my mother, never coming close until sometime in her thirties when she was a fully formed adult and I was starting to move away.

Was it her return that allowed me to withdraw, in this period when I suddenly began to be aware that money would not come from trees, or from my mother, and I must begin to concentrate on making a more viable life for my children and me, when I began to know that my husband would not fill in where my mother would not? Or was it the withdrawal that I had been too fearful to dare—like the doors—that finally allowed my sister to become the daughter of my mother's deepest dreams? For those who have been caretaker children never move away gracefully. Their retreat is always seen as a betrayal.

IT WAS AS IF we had always moved in an opposing rhythm, my sister and I, taking turns, filling opposite spaces, so my mother would never be left all alone. It wasn't until after I had separated from my husband that my sister got married. It wasn't until I went away to college that she began to go out with boys.

The issue of children was a bit more tricky, since it was one in which we couldn't take turns. So I had my children very early and my sister had none. My sister stayed very far away from my children, all the years of their growing.

Was it because her choices were so different, or was it the way I did it that so frightened her, in echo of my mother's self-consciousness and intensity, as I struggled both to repeat what my mother had done and to undo it?

I only went to college for one term. It was right after my father had left my mother. The summer right before that I had gone to Europe on my father's ticket. When I came home for

Christmas vacation my mother and I got into a talk that lasted all night long. I only remember a few words, my own "the hollowness of academia" and "I want to talk about life and *they* want to talk about Faust's masks," and hers "Then why do you want to travel three thousand miles?" and "I am not invested in your going to college the way so many other middle-class parents are." But I remember well the tone and intimacy, so like the all-night talks in which I used to comfort her, or those in which she used, much earlier, to comfort me.

So I stayed home. I remember very little about my sister from that period, only that after a while my mother and I fought very brutally, and that my sister avoided both my mother and me. Within a month I had met my twenty-four-year-old husband-to-be, and he made me a beautiful piece of sculpture, stopping very often to make love to me while he worked. As soon as the sculpture was finished, my mother commissioned him to do one of my sister.

I remember how I cried and wept, feeling that I didn't have a chance, that once he had stared at my sister and molded her forms, all would be lost. Nothing could comfort me, nor reassure me that my sister wouldn't somehow triumph and begin to push me out of beauty, love, all things. But I didn't have to worry. In another few months my sister went off to college, where she stayed four years, and then continued on through graduate school. By the time she finished graduate school, I was already the mother of three children.

Later on, whenever I would talk about what it had meant to allow a not-yet-seventeen-year-old to enter a life of no security, my mother would talk about the importance of choice, and what she would call "the strength of my will," which she had "heard" and honored.

And of my secret desire to be there in order to comfort her, the pattern of leaving school which I would later see when I

taught college freshmen, following a divorce? To experience this along with me would have meant journeying to a place she would not go.

The college story, among the stories of my childhood, is one I have never been able to share with my sister, for her version of it is so much closer to that of my mother. And she gets angry at my sense of the burden I bore in staying home.

It is strange, I am thinking, how little revenge comes into play in the fairy-tale stories of sisters, or the thought of making a cudgel out of one's own pain to wield over the head of the one who was spared, how little the slaughter appears that one finds in the stories of brothers and princes, and even of mothers and daughters alone. For Snow White's cruel betrayer queen does die quite violently, and we do not have trouble knowing how she died.

I wondered a great deal why the desire for slaughter is so absent from the fairy-tale stories of sisters, when in real life the sister who is slated for badness and failure feels so strongly the desire for revenge against both mother and better-loved sister, or she feels how the wishing to murder turns in toward the wish for self-slaughter.

The story of my adulthood is one of not a single but of many, many turning points, toward that desire and away, a slow voyage toward acknowledgment and reversal, in which writing and the making of art would occupy a crucial and a saving place.

It has always been easier for me to write about mothers and daughters when I have deliberately omitted my sister. For I see now how much more difficult it is to sort out the pieces when one's could-have-been self is portrayed in one's own tabooed voice. It is easier, I suspect, to give ourselves a voice when we are writing about our mothers, because the obvious inconsistency in our sizes saves us from feeling that we are usurping a voice where it should have been equal. Also perhaps the fact that we are

starting the story later, that our mothers have the head start of a whole generation, saves us.

It is harder with sisters, where the roads forked so closely, to be ever a symbol of a self never made or a road never taken. And the knitted, knotted threads: whose triumph becomes whose sacrifice? All that we accomplished by not being the other, and all that we couldn't accomplish. They are the face of our opposite possibility, and of our impossibility, our longing and our shame.

AS IF I COULD redo the mother and daughter conundrum that so haunted me and get it right, I had my daughters and I had them strong. So serious, such an old young mother was I at twenty and at twenty-one. And then again at twenty-four, as if each child might hold the mystery. I watched three girl children learning how to be sisters, learning how to love and fight. And I was never still. At first I painted, then I wrote. By the time I was twenty-two and had two children, I had given up painting and turned to writing permanently.

My three girl children grew so differently. There was nothing in their relationship I took for granted. They hated in a way I didn't remember. They also were attached in a way I didn't remember. How still, how very still it was for me when my three children were very small. Aged I haunted the playground where already I could not make small talk with the mothers ten or fifteen years my seniors. I was once again the small child in the playground. Rachel, the first, was shy, and Gwynne the second was not. In a world of emptiness and repetition I sat, and wrote of old, old people trapped on park benches, and wrote about two sisters, "opposite halves of women lost," in a first novel about four very old people, dying alone. Where then bury my sadness?

In a world of happiness at home, so like the first remembered world I had shared with my mother, I was the hidden

beauty whom my husband with his sculptor's tools and princely artist's eyes alone could see. And he would render up my portrait endlessly, and make me beautiful, making me all that I had ever wished to be. Gone were the days when my mother had had him carve a likeness of my sister's face, her flowing hair.

My sister almost never came to visit us. She was busy with college, with being young. Then later on she was busy with working. When my mother was living in Chicago, my sister came for a while to live and work in New York. But it didn't matter. We almost never saw her. Then my mother returned to New York. Soon afterward my sister left for Cornell, to take a second degree. The dates, the exact chronology is blurred. Somewhere along the line, between my leaving college and my having children, my mother remarried, and thus her move away. Somewhere along the line, my mother and her husband returned, and then her husband left her. Somewhere along the line, my sister decided to study anthropology, and then the trips began, to Alaska, to Indonesia, the rare dramatic photographs that lined my mother's bureau tops, the rare Indonesian rugs, a softening, stories, golden earrings for me . . .

Life moved, life moved in fits and starts. I was more tired in those years than I could know, more worn than I could know from mothering. My first book took its shape so dark, so sad, my parents and my sister turned from it. My children grew, not simply. They were sensitive and wore my tensions well. They were not "good" children in the way my sister and I were.

How then to tell the rest of the story, my separation from my husband, which came after twelve years of happiness with him, despite the other inner sadnesses that no one could break, my going over to women in a search of some lost perfect communication I remembered from my childhood, my husband's heartbreak and our years of rough fighting, years of disappointments with women, sometimes the children shying away from me, sometimes their coming back, years sometimes of happiness,

or temporary happiness, a more permanent living relationship in which finally to settle and a friendship with my husband rekindled in hardship and sorrow, and the years of hard knocks that had come to our third.

How to tell the story of beginning to work with women, of beginning to teach other women, and the feelings of jealousy that were kindled when the other women were able to use what I had to offer, perhaps better than I could, when they seemed to know how to say, more than I, what others could more easily hear, years of loving other women, of being close to other women, and enjoying the communication, looking always for the lost sister. How to tell the story of gradually coming out of jealousy and beginning to appreciate from the inside my own imprints, of beginning to enjoy the challenge of working with them and with my own particular history, of beginning to enjoy working with other women.

How to tell the story of my three daughters, of watching them be sisters, watching them know that it was all right to fight, and even to hate and be sisters, and not being frightened.

It was my youngest, my third, who showed me how it can be when the riches are unevenly distributed. While Rachel and Gwynne overcame the obstacles of a divorce and the poverty of being daughters of two artists who had less separately than they had together, coming out of it all with only "normal-sized" wounds, Jane had the sorts of physical problems for which there are no easy solutions. She went through years of wearing a heavy metal brace that went from a leather hip girdle that pulled in her small belly to a plastic chin rest holding up her small chin. From the age of eight until she was twelve, when it was clear the bracing had not worked, she bore the brace in silence, trying too hard to be brave. If only I had known then how to help her cry. But I was not a child who had been taught to cry. The cries came only very slowly, and were part of her healing.

"If only this curve had been given equally to my sisters and

me, with one-third each, none of us would have had to worry," she said, at twelve, when finally she had to undergo spinal surgery.

Eight years later, at the age of twenty, as she lies in her hospital bed with a ruptured colon, railing at her unfair hand, I am trying to honor her outcry, not to silence or squelch it, as I speak of what it means to have been dealt an unfair hand and yet to have to cope with it, to know it is the only hand you will be given, as I try to talk about the time lost, even in my own life, in wanting a sharing of fate that is, alas, no matter how much we might wish it, impossible.

And as I tell her how I would wish to take this burden from her or at least to be able to share it, knowing that that wish alone can't ease her burden in the secret of our separateness, a sorrow, but also a relief for separateness in general washes over me, as if at last I have come back into my skin.

As I look forward and backward from my daughter to my mother, in this moment of realizing the limitations of my own mothering, I am coming into the knowledge of what it means to accept what is given. There is something religious in my sense of the knowledge being given to me, so that increasingly the word prayer enters my vocabulary, although still it is only a longing. Even in my awareness of my own helplessness in the face of a new kind of mother love, I am coming into a loving so different from that of the rescued and rescuing loves of the fairy-tale dreams.

But the events do not seem to be affecting just me alone. Among my own children, Gwynne, who has always been closest to Jane, is now veering away. As if in echo of my own relationship with my mother, she is realizing that nothing she has ever done for her sister has felt like enough. Rachel, who has protected herself from her two younger sisters in order to grow old enough, is coming into the picture with enough now left over to

go around. Although geographically she is a continent away, she is suddenly the one who can be called up at two in the morning, New York time, and kept on the phone for hours. She is suddenly the beloved of the youngest sister in her trouble, for whom, just months earlier, there was so little space in her heart.

TIME PASSES. Jane is well once again. And the time has arrived for the others to feel sorrow, exhaustion, and anger. My mother is well once again, and is settled in a place where I can only wish her health and happiness, wishing for her all the dreams that she never did realize, that here in this place where there are others who are also alone now and there not by choice, but through a breaking down of the body that will come eventually to all, she will not be abandoned, she will not be alone. It is a Quaker retirement community that my sister and I have found for her together, working cooperatively as sisters, perhaps for the first time.

And now it is time for the next generation. Gwynne is painting and studying acupuncture. Jane is weaving. And Rachel, a graduate student in chemistry, is going to get married. She is entering an intact happy family in style. Her sisters will be bride's maids. They are both happy, amazingly happy for her. And even my sister, and even my brother-in-law—as shyly we begin to admit that we mean something to one another, that we want to mean something to one another—show shyly that they are strangely happy about this, that they too are wanting to come.

In a telephone conversation I remind Jane of what she said when she was twelve, about wanting to divide her curve equally among her sisters, and she grows silent for a minute, for she has just told me that she "never wished what I went through" on her sisters, "although often I would wonder why it was me."

Now she says, "Then maybe I did wish it on them, but I

don't remember thinking anything like that." She hesitates, then asks, "And if you could have given each of us a third of the curve, would you have done it?"

"Yes," I say, "for a third of the curve wouldn't have caused any of you any problems."

"And if you could have given us each one operation, instead of my having three?"

But here it is my turn to be silent. I try to explain that with the curve it is different, because I wouldn't be giving anybody any pain. (The stomach surgery caused some of the most deadly pain that I have ever seen.)

"But you would also be taking away pain," she counters.

I finally have to confess that her question is unanswerable, as I lead her into other safer, more general areas of thinking about sisters and she tells me in a speech that runs on and on, that is both formal and quaint, and reminds me of the little girl coping who wore the body brace all those years, and the little girl hiding her pain, that "siblings are important because you know them the longest. You will probably outlive your parents and you don't meet your friends or your husband until later, but your sisters are there for almost the same time that you are. And you don't have to take a vow, and you won't ever lose them; they are just a given, which is why it hurts so much if something bad comes from your sisters. They are the only people who will be at equal levels, and not be responsible for you or try to control you."

And I think that for all of the ways I had worried that the "unfairness" would wound her, she knows something deep and permanent that my sister and I are only now beginning to discover.

Then, remembering my image of the golden crown, I ask her whether she expects to be somehow rewarded for the time when she carried a heavier burden, as I explain my own fantasies and my own reactions to the fairy tales, how so often the one

who suffers most wins in the end. She seems to smile for a minute, even through the distance of the telephone line, as I hear her soft laugh, and perhaps a moment of relief. Then she says:

"No, I never think I'll come out better off than they are. But if I can get through it—and often I doubt that I can—if by the time I'm thirty I can have a normal job, a boyfriend and a cat, a home. And if I will be living alone, or with a friend, or with a significant other . . . If I can have all of this [which Rachel and Gwynne now have], I know that I will appreciate it more than they do, that it will mean more to me."

All three of my daughters agreed to talk to me about sisters, but in the days Rachel and I spend together we are so happy in planning her wedding, there is a way in which we don't want to look back. "Rachel has found something that is very special, and I don't want it instead of her. But someday I would like to have it too," Jane has said. And I feel that in sharing that "something," in reaching out to her sisters, she is making her statement. Knowing that such pomp will mean more to Jane than to Gwynne, she has decided to reverse precedent, and has asked Jane to be the maid of honor.

Gwynne has told me that she is eager to talk about her sisters, and has even suggested I formally interview her. She brings in a bowl of cereal and finds a batch of pillows so that we may sit at right angles to one another on my bed. She is the daughter with whom I have had the most intimate conversations over the years, although she will tell me, early on in our talking, that she doesn't remember any of them, that she doesn't remember that we ever were close.

It is awkward, this interview, for we are too close to talk things over like strangers, too involved to reveal the real secrets, yet neither of us desires to stop this. For a long time I cannot find the right questions and she cannot find the right answers, as she explains how it felt to be "stopped" and "kept from growing" by her younger sister and "detached" from her older, how she feels

very guilty about the violence with which she has tried to break free.

I see in my mind as we talk, Jane very little and sitting on a stairway, on the bottom step of the stairs that lead to her sisters' downstairs rooms, waiting for one door or another to open. I see a little girl, so sad-faced, so lonely, waiting to be let in.

And then I realize that she is my own self in a playground, at the rim of a classroom, and her sisters my demons. I realize my fear of her sisters, even as I realize my fear of her, how much I have raised the three children in fear and in sorrow and how in many ways I was afraid to be a real mother, but hid down among the cinders, and yet slowly, with their own striving and their sorrows, they taught me how to be a mother and love.

And out of the fairy tale wishing to share the bad mother and break the bad mirror, I look back at my sister, that shy girl of barely eighteen who brought to three children in twenty-six years a single pair of white cotton lace-trimmed rubber panties, that I loved, strangely, and used for each little girl in turn, she a shy little sister of eighteen, and I a shy new mother of twenty, and our own mother not knowing how to teach us how to be either sister or mother.

Now, twenty-six years later, I see her reaching out to my children, who are finally older than we were when I first had them and she first went away. I see her shyly reaching out her hand to me.

We will be silent, my sister and I, on the matter of the will that rewarded her for coming back healed as the appropriate adult daughter and punished me for being burdened and worn. Made in the height of my mother's anger which preceded her temporary amnesia, it is what we will leave to the future.

And I for the first time will leave it to my sister to determine, what is willed, what is stolen, whether what has been wanted in madness, and carved into being in madness and need, has validity, substance, once the madness is done.

And my sister and I, as together we hold up the puzzle, what was willed, what was chosen. Did we choose? Were we chosen? Now I choose once again to become a good daughter, as I did in my childhood, never mind what was given, never mind what was lost. I choose to take good care of my mother, along with my sister, and to let *what was* rest, at least for a while . . . I realize, slowly, slowly, that I will never undo what my mother has done to us, but that I would like to get to know my sister, and perhaps it might be possible.

There is so much left to be discovered about sisters, about how to bond late if one didn't bond early, about how to undo, or make gold out of what has been lost . . . or how to redistribute the gold and the frogs. And perhaps so much consists merely in seeing more clearly, without the black and white imposed divides, what was gold, what was frogs.

There is a time that goes beyond anger, that goes beyond blame, that becomes, as I learned from my daughters, the moment to play one's own hand, to make sense of the false distribution, the false mirroring and allotment of tasks, and go forward, taking with us the separate experiences, and the memories that will bind us at last.

"It is funny," Gwynne says to me as she sits there on my bed, "Rachel, Jane, and I don't agree on anything, practically, but we all remember our childhood as a time when we wandered hungry and uncared for and alone, and we had to figure out what to do for ourselves, because you didn't know how to be a mother."

And I think to myself, *yes, it is in the right to demonize me together that these three girls, despite everything, have been linked.* And I think of how free Gwynne is to tell me these things, and how frightened my mother was of my perceptions, of the fact that my sister and I might dare separately talk.

I am thinking, as Gwynne demonizes me with such ease and I listen with something that is also relaxing in me, about

how surely there is a reason for the invention of witches and wicked stepmothers, even among those who have been naturally mothered and well, in the community of daughters in their search for a same-sized shared fate.

And then I remember, and I do not know why, how when she was a very little girl Gwynne was so frightened of witches that every time one appeared, even in a most innocuous puppet show, we'd have to go away.

"It is funny," Gwynne says, "despite everything, I think we all knew that you loved us."

In the fairy-tale stories there is always the waiting for a rescuer, the waiting to be seen.

Is there a moment, I wonder, when we stop caring about being seen, and then suddenly, like diamonds, the eyes of the others, each seeing their own world, their own fears and dreams all around the shared histories that we couldn't quite share, will come clear?

"It is strange," Gwynne says to me softly, "I don't think I have been jealous of either Rachel or Jane, or wanted to be like them, instead of being me."

*In the time that intervened between the writing of this article and preparing it for publication, my sister and I have become closer. My sister and brother-in-law traveled to China to adopt a baby girl.*

*However—and this time it was my sister who pointed it out!—the pattern of her waiting for me to finish doing something before she is able to begin remains unbroken. It was not until my three daughters had moved fully into adulthood and the oldest one was married that she could make the choice to have a child.*