

## G 'n' Me

*on paths, siblings, and symmetry*

I have one sibling, my sister Gigi, who is five years my elder.

When my now former wife was my fiancé, my mother pulled her aside and confided she and dad wished they had reigned Gigi in a little more and pushed me out there a little more.

Sometimes I think of that and wonder...

My sister and I are alike in the sense we're so dissimilar - in both the conventional sense of norms as well as individually, from each other.

Some items of note:

**Origin** - I was born rather late in my parents life. Dad was 45, mom 40. Mom claimed she initially went to the doctor not because she thought she was pregnant - they tried having a child of their own before adopting my sister - but because she thought she had a tumor. Feel free to insert your own *'his mom was right'* joke here.

Now, Gigi's adoption didn't factor in our lives other than celebrating her birthday twice each year: on the day she was born and on the day my parents brought her home. Otherwise adoption was forgettable...at least by me. It would be *decades* before it occurred to me that mom unexpectedly giving birth might have had an emotional impact on my five-year-old adopted sister.

**Characteristics** - Many common opposites apply to the two of us. She was popular, I was smart, she rebellious, I obedient.....*mostly*. These was this one time I cashed in all the 'goodwill' from being the good one to commit an act of supreme brattiness.

It was during a 10-hour family car trip. Gigi had brought along her new prized possession: a sawed-off cast from her previously broken arm that Bozo the Clown

autographed on the day her Girl Scout troop visited his TV studio. For weeks she loved showing it to others which my jealous-tinged judgment interpreted as smug pride. So, apropos of absolutely nothing actually transpiring in that moment, I decided *enough*, grabbed the cast off my sister's lap, and threw it out of the window of our speeding car. Then I just sat there thinking this is so going to shock everybody I won't get in trouble.

Gigi screamed. Mom yelled. Dad cursed, then pulled over, retrieved the cast, and quietly muttered, "I just can't believe he did that" as we drove on through dazed whispers of incredulous laughter and much shaking of heads.

Now, the record should probably show the first time I told my former wife this story, her...lack of surprise, shall we say...was notable.

Anyway, it was my sister's turn to display an unexpected behavior about a year or so later. It was the end of a school day and for some reason I got the idea to skip the school bus and walk home. "Simple, I'll just follow the bus route." I was nearly home when I turned the wrong corner, got completely lost, panicked and ran to a stranger. Somehow I remembered our phone number, mom was called, and soon I was home.

I did get into trouble over this but what surprised me was why. It wasn't for walking home on my own or approaching a stranger. It was for not telling my sister. Mom went on to tell me Gigi was screaming at the bus driver not to leave until I boarded. I was stunned. Telling her never occurred to me because I had no idea she was paying attention. I was genuinely surprised by her deep concern and recall not being entirely sure what to make of it.

***Divergence*** - Obviously, my read of my sister was incorrect but in the figurative sense.....having dramatically different dispositions, being of the opposite sex, five years my elder, and an early bloomer, as her childhood turned to adolescence and beyond there weren't many mutual interests to connect us.

This accelerated during the summer between my sister's junior and senior high school years. For some unfathomable reason, our parents chose that time to move to a different city, about 40 miles from where we were living, which resulted in my sister being uprooted from her life-long friends and placed in unfamiliar settings for her senior year. Soon after graduating, Gigi ran off for a wild week at the river and returned pregnant. She and her new boyfriend married and moved in with us. It was an awkward time which became unimaginably worse when Gigi gave birth.

Her son, my nephew, Mike had an incredibly rare birth defect. He was born with his stomach split open and all his intestines hanging out of his body. Before Gigi could even hold him, Mike was rushed to the PICU where he spend the next several weeks untouched in an incubator, intestines hanging in a bag above him. Somehow he survived and, other than a hellacious disfiguring scar on his stomach, there didn't seem to be any lasting *physical* issues. Eventually Gigi, her first husband, and Mike move out. Their marriage enters a downward spiral and they part ways with Gigi awarded custody of Mike.

During this time my path takes a distinctly different direction. I become friends with some neighboring kids who attend a church youth group lead by an evangelical pastor. My born again years were relatively straight, narrow, and salaciously boring. And while I admit I wasn't an entirely chaste teen at least I had the common decency to feel confused and guilty after a sexual act.

**Adulting** - I became the first in our family to attend and graduate college. I get some nice entry-level corporate jobs and date some nice, appropriate women. My sister meets and marries her second husband, Dino, who has children of his own. I met and marry my now former wife. We remain childless by choice and travel both the globe as she presents at various conferences while Gigi and Dino raise their blended family in San Bernardino.

Time passes. Gigi's son Mike marries and has two children of his own. Gigi and Dino eventually separate and divorce. Dad falls ill, I come out for extended visits to assist, and we're all together when he passes.

More time comes and goes. Gigi is driving along the freeway, mom riding shotgun, when a wheel pops off a vehicle going the opposite direction, jumps the divider, and crashes through my sister's windshield pinning her and partially paralyzing her arm. After a series of grueling and scaring surgeries where nerves are removed from her legs and stitched in her upper torso, she nearly complete movement and with the stubborn determination that is her essential characteristic, she carries on as if nothing happened. Shortly thereafter, Gigi meets and marries her third husband, her former high school sweetheart, Rick. For the first time she seems truly happy in her relationship and it is clear to all that Rick is devoted to her.

About this time my marriage starts to break apart and mom comes down with Alzheimer's. During her illness Mike begins a drug-fueled, crime-ridden descent that begins with him stealing the money I had placed in his grandmother's purse. The stress of caring for mom and protecting her while fighting off my nephew becomes too much. My relationship with my sister and her entire family splinters. We don't speak for over a year. I tend to mom's decline while my sister, unbeknownst to me, tends to her son's decline which eventually lands him in prison for life.

**Reunion** - Throughout our separation I always thought we'd reunite, but I was surprised by its smoothness...its near normality. Mom's health continued to decline and when she reached the point of being admitted to the hospital I called Gigi and just said "Mom in the hospital, I think this is it." Within an hour Gigi and her family were at Mom's bedside and from that moment on, everything begins to settle between G and me. Together we handle her passing and what to do with her belongings.

Afterwards we do part ways, at least geographically. Gigi, Rick, their daughter-in-law and her children all move to Hawaii. Meanwhile my wife and I separate and I spend time defining life post-marriage. Living in Orange County no longer feels like home but more like the ghost of home so I move to West LA and settle into a rather modest lifestyle.

Meanwhile, back in Hawaii, paradise seems illusive. For reasons that are still unknown to me, Gigi's daughter-in-law and grandkids move back to California. Then over the next few years both my sister and my brother-in-law's health slowly deteriorate. Eventually my brother-in-law dies and my sister is left alone in Hawaii...alone, except for her menagerie of pets numbering over a half-dozen. After about a year she sells the property at a loss, uses all proceeds to put everything back in a shipping container and she moves into a granny flat located, appropriately, at one of her grandchild's home. This sounded a bit suspect given the mysterious circumstances of their prior parting of ways. It didn't last more than two months or so and without any remaining assets to work with, my sister found herself, five dogs, and one cat living in her compact car.

It was at this point Gigi called saying she was coming down to visit over the holidays. "What about your pets," I asked. I reminded her I basically live in a studio with no yard. "Are you going to be boarding them during your visit?" No, she said. She'd continue to sleep in her car and tend to the pets. Unease sets in on my part and I start to get a panic-y feeling, perhaps not unlike she might have felt when I didn't board the school bus decades earlier.

Her visit extends well past the holidays and she announces that's she and the kids, which is how she refers to her pets, are going on a few extended road trips and would be using the streets around my neighborhood and my bathroom as a home base. Where are you going, I asked. To meet my sister, bothers and my mother who might die soon, she replied.

Now it turns out that over the past few years she had researched her biological family of origin and found a sister, or step-sister. Apparently bio-mom had a series of children with a series of..suitors.

So, because bio-mom is in the hospital on her deathbed and as I understand it has a track record of occasionally unpredictable reactions, the first time my sister meets the person who birthed her she is presented to her simply as a friend of her step-sister. Take a moment and let that one sink in.

As I hear all this my admiration for my sister is . . . unspeakable.

She continues to make a few excursions, contacts a few old boyfriends, some cousins of ours and eventually settles back into my neighborhood and spends her days going to the dog park to take care of her kids as she calls them.

Back in my place, my mild apoplexy is turning into full-blown....something. My modest means meant I was unable to help in any really significant way. What if her car's engine blows, hell what if an axial breaks. What if . . .

My inability to help makes me question my own choices. Rather than confront those underlying issues, it was easier to turn that anxiety into anger and direct it at what I saw as my sister's misplaced priorities instead of getting clarity on my own.

After a year I tell her this can't continue. Secretly I hope this will prompt her to return to northern Cali somewhere near her daughter-in-law and extended family should anything go wrong. She eventually heads in that direction and they find her a job. I become reluctant to reach out fearing how things might be going. Months pass.

When I do reach out it's once more a flashback to the school bus/walking home incident but I'm the one acting distraught over my sibling's condition and she's acting like everything's fine. What's the problem? The job is going very well. And while she's making enough for a her own apartment, she's placing money aside and working on a solution that will allow her to keep the dogs. All of this happening while the rest of the

world is upended because of a fucking pandemic. I hang up and try to take in what just happened. Then it occurs to me that once again I had misread my sister.

Gigi clearly prefers where and how she is living with her dogs more than she would living literally anywhere else without them. She says she's happy and I believe her. So what's my problem? I'm happy enough with my monk-like existence and certainly more at peace than I have ever been at any point in my life.

So whether by accident, coincident, fate's design, or a little of all three, we've each lived life on our own terms. No doubt we both have regrets, things we'd do differently, things we wished we had known...or acted on a knowing. And while our lives have taken dramatically different directions, both of us are currently living contently in what one might call neighboring, outer tiers of conventionality. It's like the two of us went in opposite directions only to end up in similar places.

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