

Chapter 3

Sisters

As a mother of three sons, the idea of raising daughters – four daughters – feels like an unimaginable task. My mother took on this task with gusto, having four daughters who spanned different generations and experiences, with the oldest born in 1948 when my mother was 18 and the youngest (me) born in 1969 when she was 42. Each daughter was different and my mother was a different person for each of her daughters.

Raising my sisters Pat and Jo Ann on the Eastside of Detroit in the 1950's and 60's kept Mom busy. She would sew all of the clothes for her daughters and their dolls, host large family parties that included lots of food and alcohol served in the basement where Jo Ann in her teenage years would play sing-alongs on the piano, and, with my dad leaving for work every morning, create a home with her sewing and crafting, as a good wife and mother did in those days.

My dad famously said, “I worked hard so you didn’t have to.” Later in life, Mom would repeat this story with frustration. She wanted a career. And she worked hard at homemaking. The idea that she was being put in her place cemented her worldview that was clearly communicated to her daughters: go to college, have a career, and never depend on a man for your survival.

The world my sister Chris and I grew up in – the 1970's and 80's – was very different for raising her younger daughters. With my dad's successful metal plating business, we had moved to a series of progressively larger homes progressively farther away from Detroit, and my parents took up golf. Chris and I had some similar experience to Pat and Jo Ann – we all attended Catholic elementary school, we all were expected to achieve all A's on our report cards, and we all experienced those Saturday mornings when Mom would wake us up with either the vacuum running or a classic call up the stairwell – “Giiirrrllllssss” – to let us know that it was time to wake up to do our chores. But the heyday of family get togethers was waning as my parents approached their next chapter when it would just be the two of them at home.

Mom had a few classic mottos that became the basis for the way we were raised: *No Naps! Get up and get going! Do something today!* There would be no lollygagging on her watch because we, her four daughters, would make something of ourselves. We would learn to sew and cook. We would play sports. We would play the

piano. We would distinguish ourselves in the classroom. We would go to college. Each of us would make our mark in the world in a way that she felt she couldn't or wasn't allowed to or didn't know how to. It was through us and our achievements that she felt her success. You could feel it in the way she looked at us – gazing at us with love and deep appreciation for who we were and what we could be.

My brother's unfortunate fate was to be the middle child in this tribe of women. Mom left much of brother's upbringing to my dad thinking that his male influence would be good. Yet, it didn't really work out that way since my dad was orphaned at a young age and was raised by an abusive uncle. He didn't know anything about raising a son with love and encouragement. And so, Paul distinguished himself by... not distinguishing himself. Paul did whatever he could to gain my father's attention and love – working for him, buying and remodeling a small house at age 18, hustling for money with a series of odd jobs – but he never attended college or got married. Though Paul did deliver the one thing to my dad that none of the sisters could: a grandson named in his honor, Edward Orkisz. But that's another story.

Pat was out of college when I was born and had moved away. Jo Ann, too. When they would come home – sometimes for the holidays or when Jo Ann moved in briefly with her young daughter after she left her first husband – I would have the chance to observe them, to see how their life choices had worked out, as a little sister does. Was Pat happy? Did she have a good job? How did Mom respond to her? Where would Jo Ann live?

Chris was closer in age to me with only 5 years separating us. It was her life that I had the front row seat to observe. We shared a bedroom when we were very young and took the school bus together to and from St. Thecla School every morning and afternoon. I think she liked having a little sister. She was a natural leader and impressed my parents with her entrepreneurial nature when her job in high school was teaching piano. Dozens of children from the neighborhood would come to our house for lessons after school, which allowed Chris to save up enough money to graduate from high school early and move to California.

Growing up, the four sisters didn't spend time all together very often. The difference in age and the distance in miles added up. Mom was conscious of her role to keep us connected, and did her part to share updates across the group. Mom would always say that

she would have liked to have had a sister. Instead, her daughters became her companions and her support.

As the little sister, I was the last to leave home. The youngest in the family always plays a unique role – as the bridge from the busy life of a young family to the quiet days when the children have left and the parents are, well, tired from so much parenting; and as a vessel for all of the stories over decades – moments of triumph, of heartbreak, and the wonders found in day-to-day life.

The four sisters would forever be connected. At times, the threads of our lives would weave together, affirming our shared experiences and the ways Mom and Dad brought us together. And at other times, we would feel the tug of difference and debate about what really happened growing up and what the values we were taught should look like in today's world. But isn't that the case with sisters – relationships running hot or cold depending on the season?

This is where Mom's other favorite motto comes in handy: *This too shall pass*. Throughout her 87 years – from being a child of immigrants during the Great Depression, to getting married, to raising a family and all of the experiences in between – she knew that time was fleeting and that whether good or bad, happy or sad, emotions and perspectives shift. Good advice for a group of sisters.

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