

# Sister Rue

AN ESSAY

BY CAROL EDGARIAN

**NOT LONG AGO** my sister came to visit. We are separated by threes—she is three years older, three inches shorter, and we live nearly three hours apart. She lives in the country, I live in the city; she works in the apparel industry, I write. My sister walked into my house and hugged me, then pulling away to take a hard look at me said, “My God, your hair.”

The day before I had called her and confessed to a spontaneous trip to the hairdresser for a semipermanent rinse. I was newly pregnant and in the throes of morning sickness, feeling awful, needing a lift. Our family had always been able to count on good hair—thick and wavy. I wore mine long and layered, or boyish and short. But then I became pregnant, and the bounce on top of my head turned flat and mousy. My hairdresser assured me that what I needed was an auburn rinse to jazz things up. “Anyway,” he quickly added, “if you hate the color, it’ll wash out in six weeks.” Famous last words. Panicked, I returned home to my husband. “You look great,” he said. “Brighter.” Unconvinced, I called my sister and begged her to be supportive, whatever she thought when she saw me.

“Carol,” she said, standing in my doorway, her critical gaze fixed on my head. “It looks orange.”

She was right, of course. Now that we are older, the gift my sister and I give each other is the truth we most fear, put precisely, softened by brown eyes. We are like old crones who have had enough with niceties. We haven’t time.

Sisters. The closer I get to defining what this means the more I conclude what it’s not. My sister is not my friend—she’s too close, knows too much, things I would never want a friend to know. My sister knows things about me from before I was aware anyone was looking, when I was two days old and put asleep in her room,

taking over the play area for her dolls. She peered at me through the bars of the crib, wondering if I would ever be of any use to her, any fun.

No, my sister is not my friend because for one thing a friend would never deliberately make me cry by telling me my breath smells like bananas (a fruit she loathes).

Nor is she a lover, though we have certainly fought like lovers, slamming doors, spitting ugly words, carrying our grudges and jealousies into the night. No, she is not like a lover, though, come to think of it, except for my husband, I have been naked with my sister more often than I have with anyone else. But while lovers base a relationship on mutual attraction, choice, differing parts, ours is rooted in sameness—our bodies, our points of reference, our blood.

When I was born, or so family myth goes, my mother held me in her arms and said, “Carol, my only hope is that you won’t grow up in the shadow of your sister.” At the time, my mother’s fears were well-founded. My sister was a dynamo—bossy, strong-willed, highly emotional. In those early years Leslie cried *every single day*. She tormented our older brother, and her bouts of hysterical sobbing left more than a few adults in tatters. At dinner she frequently had to be excused because her stomach hurt, and among family members she is most remembered for the line “I don’t want to.” Of course, when she was happy she was London on a sunny afternoon, and everybody, friends, siblings, and parents, wanted to be near her. It was therefore understandable that our mother worried about her youngest daughter, who at first seemed so quiet.

True to our mother’s fears, early on I lived in my sister’s shadow, but what our mother never guessed was that I loved it. Behind my sister I could hide. I was plain and introverted; she was dark, beautiful, and loud. She set the rules and I followed: where we played, for how long, what toys I was allowed to touch. Between us grew a body-knowing, an understanding we hold even now, that comes from knowing each other when we were just bodies crashing through the world, unencumbered by words. We slept together, took baths together, sat year after year squished in the backseat of the car, along with our brother. Quite often we were happy, laughing over things we found amusing. I have never worshipped anyone the way I worshipped my sister, nor has anyone been able to get under my skin so completely, to make me so blood-boiling angry.

We grew up in a house of rage and passion, and that is how we fought, like primates, with our teeth, our nails, our fists—slamming, biting each other’s arms, pinching each other purple. Over time our methods became more refined as we learned how to parry and thrust, to negotiate, to wheel and deal, to hurt. It was from

my sister that I discovered how false words can be worse than blows, that a withering look can last a lifetime.

One afternoon when I was eight and she was eleven, she invited me to join several of her friends in the basement. The girls were huddled together, and when I came close they smiled at me.

My sister said, "Pull up your shirt and show them your waist."

At first I refused, but the others encouraged me.

"It's all right," my sister said. So I pulled up my blouse, and the girls all gasped.

"My God," they said, "she's got *hips!*"

I ran from the room, their laughter clipping my heels. It was literally years, *years*, before I could look at myself in a mirror and believe that having hips and a waist wasn't a shameful thing.

Our mother, beautiful and childlike, kept us separate. At thirty-seven she was bored and unhappy in her marriage, and her emotions careened while she searched in vain for a place to ground her energy—digging up the front lawn one day, redecorating our rooms the next. Our mother saw the world in extremes, and her daughters were no exception. She took to saying, "Leslie is the personality; Carol is the brains." "Leslie has gorgeous legs; Carol has nice feet." "Leslie is the life of the party; Carol is the one with class." And so on. These words of our mother's stung our hearts, yet we heard them so often we began to believe them and resented each other for having those qualities the other lacked. To be told at a young age what you *are* before you know yourself to be anything is at best thwarting, at worst devastating. Why couldn't I be hip? Why couldn't she have class?

When I was ten and Leslie was thirteen our parents divorced. Our brother was sent to prep school, and Leslie and I took up residence in separate rooms of our mother's new house. Leslie locked her door and played the stereo, sitting cross-legged on the bed, rocking back and forth with her eyes closed for hours and hours. I read. We rarely saw each other; she was always downtown with her friends, and when we were together we fought. But there were other times: when she taught me to French inhale on the roof of the garage; when she gave me her favorite purple smock blouse, which I wore until its seams fell apart in my hands; and all those hours in her room—Leslie rocking on the bed, me on the floor—listening to Joni Mitchell, Bonnie Raitt, Jackson Browne—music we loved. We didn't speak much to each other; after the divorce even words became dangerous. That first year I grew four inches, while Leslie began to put on weight that would take her ten years to lose. At Christmas our mother offered us each \$75 to spend any way we liked. Leslie

went to the thrift store and came home with seventy-five pieces of clothing—men’s vests, flannel shirts, worn jeans—each bought for a buck. I went to Lord & Taylor and picked out a pair of gray wool slacks and a white angora sweater. Under the tree Leslie had a huge box, and I had two slim ones. Our mother smiled brightly and pursing her lips said, “How could you girls be so different?”

There were years when we barely spoke, when we only saw each other around the holiday table. Our mother, unable to handle more than one daughter at a time, deepened the schism by keeping us apart; if one sister was home for the weekend, the other was told to stay away. One Christmas when Leslie was in college and I was in boarding school, we spent a week together in the house. At dinner that first night, our stepfather looked across the table and said, “Carol, you’ve really come into your own.” Without fully knowing what he had done, our stepfather, faced with his wife’s two daughters, seemed to have chosen one. On Christmas Eve Leslie asked me what I was planning to wear the next day to see our father and the other relatives. I told her I didn’t know but that I’d probably wear pants. The next morning, while getting dressed, I decided at the last minute to put on a skirt. I came upstairs, and there she was in pants. She was furious. “I hate you,” she cried and, slamming the door of her room, refused to come out for the remainder of the morning.

When I graduated from college Leslie decided not to attend the ceremony, though she lived in the same town. She disappeared for the weekend with friends. There is a photo of us from that time taken by our brother. Leslie and I are sitting on a park bench with our backs to each other. Now we laugh at that picture, calling it “the War.”

In our late twenties, our lives beginning to settle, we declared a truce. Our friends, who had witnessed years of drama, couldn’t believe the sudden rash of phone calls, the weekends spent together. But we weren’t surprised. It was as if we had been waiting all those years for the noise of our family to die down so we could continue being sisters.

“After a certain age,” Proust wrote, “the more one becomes oneself, the more obvious one’s family traits become.” For me, my sister is, first and last, a mirror. In her face, her walk, the timbre of her voice I find myself. Not that we look alike, for we don’t, really, but it is in her that I rediscover myself, then and now.

When we are together we show each other our battle scars, the marks life has left on us. We talk of work, love, our houses, the way we look. All of it matters.

Once when I was on a tight deadline and had turned off the phone, Leslie left several frantic phone messages on the machine: “Carol, call me the minute you get this.”

Her voice sounded dire, and of course I presumed the worst. I called her back, and she said, “Care, what was the name of that lipstick you loved?”

“This,” I bellowed, “is why you called? *This* was what was so important?”

“Yes,” she shouted back, “and don’t tell me it isn’t!”

Last year Leslie had a miscarriage. For two long weeks she suffered with wrenching cramps. The doctor said there was nothing he could do: it would end when it ended and perhaps, just perhaps, it was not a miscarriage at all. Each day we agonized on the phone. When at last Leslie lost the fetus, we both wept. Having a baby was something each of us counted on, the step that for so long we had put in the future, focusing first on our careers. Now, well into our thirties, we were finally ready to have children, but what if we couldn’t? What if our bodies turned against us? What if we had waited too long?

Several weeks later, when she came to stay with me, we held each other for a long time, and then she said to me, “You’ll never guess, Care.”

“What.”

“On top of everything, now I’ve got BO.” And she lifted up her arm for me to smell.

We have a younger sister, Jennifer, born when I was seventeen and Leslie was twenty. Jennifer grew up apart from us, practically an only child, but when we three are together, along with our brother, there is no mistaking the ties of blood. The dichotomies of our mother’s personality have affected each of us differently, but at root there is much that is the same. There is the voice and the quickness, the shorthand phrases that serve as a bridge, making intimacy immediate. There are the eyes that look over my clothes and hair. Do I have a pimple? How many pounds have I gained or lost? Do I look happy? And there is the sorrow we all harbor, which is our mother’s too.

A month after Leslie’s miscarriage I became pregnant with another girl. My friends and my husband gathered around me, but it was to my sister that I often turned. We had talked so long about how much we wanted to be pregnant together, how we wanted our children to be like, well, sisters. But the fates had never seen us as the same, and they did not then. When I was five months pregnant, Leslie learned she had breast cancer. She found the lump and called me immediately. Then there was the wait following the biopsy. Before we knew for certain that she had cancer, my sister and her husband and my brother and his family all came up for the weekend. After visiting for a while Leslie and I did the only thing we knew to do. We trooped upstairs to my bathroom, and shedding our clothes, stood facing each other—me with my belly, she with her lump—and we touched the belly, we touched the lump.

## SISTER RUE

“It’s huge,” she said, awestruck, feeling with cold palms as her niece kicked inside me.

“Yours too,” I said, wincing. And then, unable to help ourselves, we cried.

We didn’t have much more to say, the proximity of birth and death, the mirror image of it with us, in our bodies. We didn’t speak of unfairness, luck and unluck—differences—or of our worst fears, though they were with us too, just as they had always been, when in those earliest years we turned out the lights in our shared room. All we needed to say we said with our hands and eyes. We gamblers, grudge keepers, lonely hearts, know nothing but what passes between us in a moment, what is, finally, patient and wise. Sisters. ●