

# S I S T E R S I S T E R S I S T E R S



Essays by Carol Saline • Photographs by Sharon J. Wohlmuth

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# SISTERS



Essays by Carol Saline

Photographs by Sharon J. Wohlmuth

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*To my sister, Beth, with my enduring love and admiration for your courage and dedication as a seeker of truth.*

*And, Gary, I love you.*

—S. J. W.

*To my sister, Patsy, with gratitude and love for who she is and what she has meant to my life.*

—C. S.



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—C. S.

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—S. J. W.



## Introduction

**M**y sister has always had the knack of giving me terrific birthday presents I'd never think of buying for myself. But, by far, the best gift I ever got from her was an original framed needlepoint that she'd commissioned someone to stitch. The workmanship was beautiful, but it was the inscription that made my mascara run. In just a few words it summed up the eternal essence of our relationship. It simply said: *A sister is a forever friend.*

When I hung my present on the wall, it occurred to me that this would be a wonderful theme for a book. So I was in the right mindset when my friend, photographer Sharon J. Wohlmuth, told me she'd long been thinking about doing a photographic project on sisters.

We were chatting about books and ideas one hot summer afternoon when Sharon commented, "Because of my relationship with my sister, Beth, I've always been intrigued by the spirit of sisters. I can't tell you how often I've watched two women walking down a street and intuitively, I know they're sisters. There's a certain intimacy that makes them so different from close friends. Sisterhood is such a powerful relationship."

By the end of our conversation, we'd agreed to collaborate on this book.

Of the many relationships in a woman's life, the

bond between sisters is unique, stretching and bending through periods of closeness and distance, but almost never breaking. Sisterly ties tend to have fewer emotional knots than the ones that bind mothers and daughters. Sisters are girlfriends, rivals, listening posts, shopping buddies, confidantes, and so much more.

Some sisters never move beyond childhood rivalry. Most, however, develop an affectionate attachment that becomes a critical support system in their middle and later years. Margaret Mead said, "Sisters are probably the most competitive relationship within the family, but once sisters are grown, it becomes the strongest." Her sister commented, "You can tell your sister to go to hell in twelve different languages and if you need a quarter, she'll lend you a quarter."

Research shows that older women who have strong connections with their sisters are less likely to be depressed. In one study, women said they felt the world was a safer place because they had sisters to depend upon in times of crisis. My experience interviewing the women in this book repeatedly confirmed this. Sisters function as safety nets in a chaotic world simply by being there for each other.

Brothers share the biological link, but they're . . . well . . . just different. They rarely seem as emotionally glued as girls who grew up under the same roof. What sets sisters apart from brothers—and also from friends—is a very intimate meshing of heart, soul, and the mystical cords of memory.

There are physical memories: washing in the bathtub, giving good-night kisses and snuggles, watching each other's bodies grow and change; scrutinizing who got bigger breasts and slimmer hips, who menstruated first, which one can eat anything and never gain an ounce, who's aging better, who has more wrinkles. . . . There are social memories: boyfriends, battles over clothes, shopping sprees, school plays, ballet lessons, family outings. And, of course, there are priceless emotional memories: heartfelt advice, unquestioned loyalty, late-night phone marathons; contemplating who was Daddy's little girl, who was Mom's favorite, who got the most attention, who felt rejected.

The interweaving of these funny, joyful, angry, painful, and historic memories creates the foundation—solid or shaky—on which every sister-relationship rests.

Among the sisters we met, those with the warmest, closest sentiments shared several characteristics. Their parents were committed to assuring that their daughters would be friends. Loving sisters exhibited a high regard and respect for each other. In their hearts they felt like equals regardless of where they lived, if they had daily, weekly, or monthly contact, whether there

were great differences in income, lifestyle, or achievement. When one sister was in need, the other became caretaker or care giver. Knowing that a sister could be relied upon in a crisis—or simply to share wonderful news—was a great comfort: “I couldn’t wait to tell my sister” is a phrase we heard over and over.

At the end of my interviews, I’d often ask sisters to talk about what they meant to each other. There was usually a moving exchange that had all of us reaching for a tissue. Then they’d say with the awe of having received a precious gift, “Oh, I never realized you felt that way!” Clearly, this special something sisters have is neither taken lightly nor taken for granted.

Most sisters want what they perceive as an ideal relationship; what most sisters have is a relationship occasionally flawed by conflict. We chose in this book to focus on sisters who genuinely like each other, but we also wanted to include a few who do not get along. They, too, expressed common feelings, particularly a sense of loss. With sadness and some embarrassment, they talked about what the world thinks a sister should be and how they wished their relationship reflected that model.

While affection is the natural bonding agent between sisters, in its absence, anger may substitute as

an equally powerful adhesive. Feuding sisters—even those who no longer speak—maintain a psychic connection through their rage. The space between them isn't empty at all; it roils with feeling. "Being hated by my sister feels like a curse," is how one put it. Many women were eager to privately discuss with me the pain of their alienation, but unwilling to appear in a book where they'd be identified. A few even asked me to call their estranged sister and mediate a meeting. I attempted it a few times, but it never worked—one would be willing; the other coldly resistant.

In contrast to the balanced relationship of loving sisters, angry sisters typically complained about feeling exploited or depleted. One had too much of something—money, parental approval, vanity, ego—while the other felt cheated or resentful. It wasn't material possessions that separated them nearly as much as emotional baggage. As one woman told me, "Nobody can be closer than a sister, but nobody can hurt you more."

Photographing and writing about sisters confirmed for Sharon and me something we've always known, but perhaps not fully appreciated: how lucky we are to have sisters we dearly love.

"My vision, when I started this project, was to

capture the shared intimacy of the biological and emotional bonding of sisters," says Sharon. "Through my photographs I wanted to reflect the unique mystery that is sisterhood. Sometimes that required patiently waiting for a moment when the connection would reveal itself. More often than not, despite the many distractions and restrictions that can characterize a photo shoot, there did emerge a settled moment when the spark I was looking for ignited. While each of the women I photographed had her own individual story, there was similarity to all the relationships. They were all sisters and their sisterhood was magic."

For Sharon and me, creating *Sisters* has been an exhilarating experience. We want to thank all the wonderful women we met who took two strangers into their hearts and so openly shared some of their deepest thoughts. Our lives have been enriched by becoming, if only for a short time, a part of theirs.

We created this book as a gift to our own sisters, but we dedicate it as well to all those women blessed with sisters who have made the highs in life more meaningful and the lows more bearable. We hope you will treasure these stories and images as much as we do.



