

Choosing Sides

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Morning

Mornings were always the same — always, except on the weekend; those mornings were different. On Monday and on Tuesday and so on, though, I'd always wake up the first time to the sound of hurried shower water and to the scent of no coffee brewing. Mom always came into my room to rush my morning giggles and to gather what I'd need for the day. Six o'clock and we, hand in hand, knocked on the bathroom door and kissed the face that peeked from behind it. In the mornings Daddy was only a face. Out of our house, my mom would buckle me into my side of the car, which was her side in the evenings when my daddy was along; away we'd roll into the summer-morning dawn or into the winter-morning darkness. We always passed the same houses and trees and paperboys, the stoplight was always red, and Judy, my babysitter, was always waiting when we got there. Unbuckled and kissed good-bye, holding my sack of clothes and some toys, I'd watch my mom drive away to work and I'd wipe at the new sleep in my eyes.

Morning II

When I woke up the second time in the morning, there was noise — lots of noise. Cartoons argued: channel four, channel seven, channel four . . . Young voices laughed and teased, whined and rambled. Bacon sizzled and Judy whistled as she loudly scrambled eggs; moments later, she'd call us in to eat breakfast. Eleven of us and Judy took our places at the long table, her own five kids on one side and five other kids she took care of on the other side. I sat alone on the end way across from Judy. Cereal boxes rotated, forks and spoons clanked, and someone always cried if he didn't get the cereal box prize or if he spilled milk or was spilled upon. I never said I wanted the prize and I always said that I didn't remember when voices would ask in rage just who had had the prize the last time. There was always big noise at the big table; one side was never louder than the other . . .

Who we were

Judy was my mom's sister, my aunt. I was seven and I was twelve

and all the years in between. Perry was older than me; he was Judy's oldest, then came Joey, Marty, Amy, and the baby Debbie. Kim and Kelly were the twins who did not look alike. Greg was their little brother. And Staci and Eric only stayed at Judy's on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We were all cousins, related on our moms' side.

Judy

Judy was nice to me and I liked her, too. Sometimes I'd help with dishes and she'd tell me about when she and Mom were little and hated to do dishes. Standing at her side and half-smiling, I'd wonder if she'd grown to like doing dishes because now she did them every day — it's a perpetual thing.

Judy was a housewife to the fullest. She cooked, she cleaned, she canned . . . and had a job babysitting. Not quite Supermom but motherly all the same, Judy consoled, entertained, scolded, and, at times, ignored us all. I think Marty was her favorite even though they fought all the time. Often caught in the room they were arguing in, I'd be the sidelines; when asked for a call, I couldn't agree with either Mary's wrongdoing or Judy's assumptions. So the one who debated the loudest or longest won.

Me

I was, I am an only child. I have always like it that way. I was never alone unless I wanted to be, and sometimes not even then. I was always in the middle of some argument, of some decision, of some crisis; in the middle is where I was loneliest. I couldn't take sides; I was my own side.

Them

Judy's kids fought a lot. They always picked on each other unless someone else who wasn't Judy's kid was doing the picking. Then, they stuck together—siblings united. When Judy's house wasn't a happy place to be, even the other sitter-kids could look at each other—a brother or a sister—and see home. I'd look at them or even in a mirror and not be comforted. All the others pulled me in, and at the same time pushed me out. They knew that I would not always agree with their ideas; this bothered them. They knew that deep down I wasn't on their side. It angered them when I wouldn't agree or disagree, whether they were right or wrong. They never stayed mad long. I always liked them.

The house

It was big, red, and made of brick. The white trim was cracked and

peeling on the outside as were some of the painted rooms in the upstairs. The house was 'homey' but it really wasn't pretty or even nice. It took abuse and heard abuse. It also heard our secrets. It was where we all cried and laughed the most. It was old and had high ceilings, steep stairs, secret closets, and narrow hallways. Inside, I felt captive and scared, needing to always be near a window so I wouldn't be swallowed in the house's secrets. Outside, I felt left out and curious, wanting to be inside and included in its secrets. I never called it home, or even my second home; yet, I never said I didn't like it there.

Indoor games

To make afternoons a time when we wanted to be outside, Judy made us stay inside until lunch. We passed the time pretending and playing games. Hide-n-seek was impossible for us to play inside (or outside), but we still tried. After doing "one-potato" until the loser was one of us who wouldn't cry or quit because he was "it," the counter would count and the rest would scatter and hide so sleverly that would count and the rest would scatter and hide so cleverly that several minutes later the counter, the "it" would be tired of seeking and make his way to the t.v. room to watch gameshows with Judy. Inside we played board games like "Monopoly" and "Life," though we never finished a single game without an argument. Every game ended with some hostility; when Judy asked who won, I always said I thought it was a tie. Good guys and bad guys, team one and team two, or every man out for himself, we always divided.

Lunch

On pretty, summer days Judy would let us eat lunch outside at the picnic table. Peanut butter sandwiches with grape jelly and slices of banana on them, too . . . somehow baby Debbie always ended up with her sandwich inside-out.

The yard

The front yard was mostly porch, where we played on summer afternoons when it rained. The porch is where Judy would sometimes sit and pod peas or break beans that she'd picked from the garden to can. The backyard was much bigger, with a garage so filled with toys and bicycles that a car couldn't even be squeezed in on its side. There was the picnic table, one big oak tree, and a swingset with only two swingseats. Surprisingly, we were all good about taking turns, but the littler girls bickered over who got to take their turn as I took mine—

each wanted to swing beside me. Since there was only room for one to do this, there were always tears. I thought that even the room for only one was room for too many. A rock driveway separated Judy's yard from Shorty's yard. Shorty was the fat boy who lived next door. Perry didn't like him and had hit him once, so then all of us had to stay on our side of the driveway. Sometimes, when no one else was around to tattle, Marty would sneak over to talk or pitch ball with Shorty. And sometimes, I wanted to.

Outdoor games

Choosing sides in the overgrown lot behind the library, the 11 of us merged with the other neighborhood kids to play kickball, "steal-the-bacon," or "red-rover." Neither team ever wanted the very young ones on their side, but we always let them play. Teams were never fair because having two sides meant one side would lose. Perry's team always won after a long fight. Even when I was on his team, I'd silently agree if he was accused of cheating and I wouldn't stick up for him. "Whose side are you on, anyway?" he'd scream at me.

Parade

We all had something to ride at Judy's house. I kept a second bicycle there. None of us was allowed to ride in the street because the littler ones might follow us. So, in a long line we'd ride up and down the sidewalks, pretending time and time again to stop for gas. We were such a parade of bicycles, tricycles, scooters, and wagons! Up and down, back and forth, we stayed on the correct side of the walk at all times; there was a side for going and a side for coming. I'd ride up and down on my bike for a while, then I'd park at my best friend Jane's house and sit on the steps to her porch with her; we'd watch the parade go by. Jane wanted to switch the sides of the parade route to make the going coming and the coming going. She asked if I'd vote for the change if we got all the kids to vote; I told her that it really didn't matter to me which side I rode on . . .

Going home

Every day at five o'clock my daddy and Mom would pull up in the Pontiac in front of Judy's house to get me and take me home. I was always ready to go, but we never left right away. Of course I always got hugs before Dad would turn aside to help Joey fix a broken model airplane or to talk to Perry about hunting. And I got hugs before Mom and Judy sat down for a chat and a cup of coffee. Yet, this last half of an

hour at Judy's was the hardest and the longest. Trying to be patient, I'd sit on the living room floor and listen as the women discussed grocery prices, birthday gifts for my grandpa, and some things I just didn't understand. From time to time, Mom would tell me to quit biting my nails, or Judy would tell me to quit twisting my hair. Then, they'd talk about me, and to me at the same time, often wanting me to show the other something I'd done or to fetch something off the table, from the car. When they did make different requests simultaneously, I was unsure who to listen to first, unsure of whose side to go to. So, I'd stand, unmoving, until one of them repeated herself. Later, finally driving home, my daddy sat on one side of me in the driver's seat, my mom sat on the passenger side, and I sat in the middle, feeling almost secure. I talked to both my parents, trying to look at each of them an equal amount of time. I wasn't about to ever be accused of being a momma's baby or a daddy's girl. I stayed out of their spats.

Spat

One night when I was twelve I heard my parents through my open bedroom door.

"... but she is only 12 years old, and that is too young to stay at home alone . . ." protested my father.

"... needs some responsibility. It would be good for her, and she'd probably be happier . . ." rationalized Mom. On and on the discussion inched, flowed, raged. It ended with a mutual decision to let **me** decide if I wanted to keep going to Judy's house to be babysat or if I wanted to stay at home alone. Though I wasn't supposed to know, I knew that Dad didn't want me to be in the house by myself and that Mom thought it was just what I needed.

Climax

I was told to decide. I felt as if I had to choose a million different sides of everything I'd always managed to resolve by choosing not to decide. This time there was no way I could say that it was a tie or that I didn't know or that it didn't matter. There was no middle road, and I knew the choice I made would be a permanent one. I wondered if I should do what Dad wanted me to do, or what Mom wanted me to do. If I stayed at Judy's, I felt I would be on Dad's side and Judy's, but I'd also be choosing to go against what was my own side—being my own side, my own person. In the end I found my side, and I didn't consider it Mom's any longer . . . just mine. I still woke up twice in the morning, once to the running water and once to my alarm. I sat on the left side of the bus, trading stickers (taken out of a box of Trix cereal) with my friends. I

played kickball after school and told Perry that he was **too** out, even though he was on my team (I had chosen him). I had Jane over for a snack. We rode our bikes to the park on the correct side of the street and we swang side by side. . .

Walking by

I walked by Judy's house often going to visit Jane. Sometimes Judy would be on the porch breaking beans and watching the bicycle parade, and we'd talk. Sometimes, though, no one would be outside and I'd look up at the big, red brick house, wondering what was happening inside, what secrets I was no longer included in. I wondered, but I was glad to be in the outside instead of still left out on the inside.

Reunion

At a family reunion of my mom's side a few years back, but after I'd started staying home alone while my parents worked, I overheard Marty teasing the once-baby Debbie about how skinny she was. "Skinny-minnie slid down the drain . . . beanpole, beanpole, beanpole," he taunted.

Out of curiosity and perhaps some meanness, I agreed with Marty. "Debbie," I said, "you're going to blow away. You're looking as light as a feather. . ."

As Debbie blushed, Marty interrupted, "She looks just fine; you leave her alone." Shocked at Marty's tone, his change of mood, and stern expression, but yet familiar with the sibling defense system, I smiled . . .

Now

Years and years have passed since I used to wake up on two different sides of bed, to different sides and sounds of morning. Decisions still aren't easy for me to make, but I'm making them. I still feel a longing to be outside when I'm inside, and inside when I'm outside. And though I have learned to choose just one side and stand beside it, words still echo in my mind: whose side are you on? and which side? is it safe?