

In 1968 at Dinner Time, Why Didn't I Help My Little Sister or Even Notice How Much She Needed Me?

In 1962, on a cramped, sweaty drive home from a week at our grandparents' beach house, I was jammed between Dana, my older sister, on one side, and two younger siblings, Gordon and Jan, on the other. My polyester t-shirt stuck to the seat of our Chevy Impala. I panted for breath. Up front, my mom held new baby Charlotte, while my dad drove us along slow, pre-I-95 roads with occasional strip malls.

My heart leapt when Mom asked Dad to pull into Howard Johnson's, famous back then for its 28 flavors of ice cream. This was a rare event; sugar in our household was tightly restricted, a shameful treat we were seldom permitted. I reveled in my choice of peppermint as it dripped on the pavement at my feet, but I also complained about the too-large chunks of hard candy I had to crunch through at the end of each bite.

When we got home, I took my sharpest pencil and used my newly-acquired cursive to write a letter to Howard Johnson's. "Can you please make the candy pieces smaller?" I asked, signing it, "Sincerely yours, Karla Jynn (with a mouth full of peppermint)."

Clearly, my observant, eight-year-old self had the wherewithal to see a problem and speak up about it to a major corporation. But later, those skills didn't develop into advocacy for my little sister.

By ninth grade—the void between kid and legitimate teen—I mostly felt vacant at home. In the gap between after-school choir practice and dinner, I wandered to the kitchen, wanting to fill my empty stomach. With Mom gone at work now all day, and Dana preparing for college, my younger siblings—Jan, 11, Gordon, 10, and Baby Char, now seven—lounged away the afternoons watching TV, arguing, and eating too much of the foods they'd be in trouble for by dinnertime.

From the rectangular opening above the kitchen counter, I saw Char lying on the family-room floor next to Jan, her white-blond hair covering her face. I knew my younger siblings had been flopped in that green-carpeted room since school ended, next to a Wheat Thins or Club Crackers box, supposedly doing homework, but mainly fighting.

I could tell Char was crying.

I heard her say, "That hurts! Cut it out!"

Gordon sneered, "You deserve it! You're so dumb."

Hungry, and depressed by the blaring TV and quarreling, I looked away.

But one time, I'd done differently; I'd been helpful to Charlotte.

Earlier that year, when my parents left on another of Dad's business trips, Char was sad. That night I tucked her in, sat on her Raggedy Ann bedspread with my hand on her arm, and told made-up stories. Sadness forgotten, she giggled at the escapades of "Atlanta" and "Montpelier," goats who took off together on worldwide adventures. The attention made her eyes sparkle.

But hearing her distress on the carpet, I zoned out. I said nothing.

When Mom and Dad arrived home from work, they sat on our tropical-cushioned bamboo couch in the family room, with cocktails, in front of the TV. The whine of our high-end exhaust fan muffled the drone of Walter Cronkite on the news.

"Mom! He punched me!" Char hollered. "It's gonna be like those bruises I showed you."

"Kids!" shot Dad from across the room. "Calm down! Drop it. This is cocktail time."

"Stop it, Gordon," grumbled Mom.

Char sniffled and groaned, but no one made a move to comfort her.

Mom's eyes narrowed as she sipped her nightly Manhattan. "What do you think of this one, Dear?" she asked, handing back the Christmas card Dad had given her from their nightly stack. Dad always opened them first.

His cocktail rested on the glass-topped table in front of them as he ripped into another envelope. Glancing over he said, "Not bad. At least they wrote more than just their names."

"I like its abstractness. Kind of unusual," Mom said. She was an art teacher who painted a Christmas watercolor every year. She and Dad

would have 350 copies made at Ollard's Print Shop, and sit for days around the table hand-addressing them. I often helped, as a way of getting some appreciation.

In the dining room, Mom had already set the Danish teak table with our woven placemats and sleek Correlle dinner plates. I wondered whose turn it was to position the knives and forks, and fold the paper napkins that inevitably one of us would forget to open and place in our lap. Then Dad would point and say, "Please hand that to me," his signal of disapproval for not using it. He'd even said it once to Jan's friend, who'd cringed and seemed bewildered.

Gordon's picking at Char continued, a bit more quietly.

I stumbled back to my bedroom oasis, closed the door, opened *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the dozenth time, and waited for Dad to ring the dinner bell.

In 2023, at a sister get-together, I asked Char about how it was for her growing up. Though I had a vague sense, I wanted details, to connect with her better.

She said, "Gordon was on me all the time. He made me feel like I did everything wrong. I don't know. Maybe he felt bad about himself, cause Dad was always on *him*."

The dad part fit with what Gordon had told me, the few times he and I talked honestly, long distance, about our father's dismissive criticalness.

Char continued, "Gordon would grab my arm so hard I couldn't run away. But I learned to scratch him with my nails. That was my *only* defense."

"And he'd say, 'No one's ever going to be your friend! Who would want to be your friend?' A lot."

"He just knew how to get to me every fucking time."

Then she described the kind of punching I'd seen when I was in ninth grade, but never consciously taken in, or done anything about.

"I felt fat, dumb, and out of it in elementary school. Mom harped on what I wore and how much I ate."

I knew exactly what Char meant. I too had been minutely criticized for who I was, what I wanted and said, and how I behaved.

I thought about the time when I was five, in our sugar-scarce home, and crept up to Dana's birthday cake, waiting under a glass dome on the

sideboard. Sneaking the lid off, I swirled two fingers along the backside and licked them, thinking no one would notice.

Later, with a grim face, Mom came into Dana's and my room demanding, "Who stole the icing off the cake?"

Dana laughed and said it wasn't her. I dropped my head and mumbled, "Not me." Mom stared at us both and walked out. I got hot and sweaty, fearing more trouble would come.

As the day progressed, Mom nailed me to the wall with her cocked head and beady eyes, pressing me with questions. "Did you eat that icing? Did you? I think you're lying. The Lord says being honest is *very* important. Go back to your room until I call you again, and then tell me the truth." Numb and dark inside, I obeyed.

The icing inquisition went further rounds until Mom finally got me by saying there would be no punishment if I confessed. Shaking, I whispered, "I did it."

She sighed and said, "OK, I won't punish you. But you can't have any cake tonight."

I burned with shame, on this and many other occasions.

Gathering momentum, Char said, "In high school, I was the best shooter on the team. Mr. David asked me to teach my technique to the other girls. But Mom and Dad never came to any games. They were too busy."

"And geez, my senior prom! They were away at a conference. I went downtown on the train, alone, to pick out my gown. On prom night, Gordon stayed in his room, and no one was around while I got ready. When my date came, I knocked on Gordon's door and begged him to take a pic of us before we left."

I had not known the intensity of our parents' judgments had morphed, for Char, into that level of neglect as she got older. By that time, I had two kids of my own, and no intimate contact with my youngest sister. For *my* prom, Dana had custom-made and hand-embroidered my dress. Mom had ordered the crown of pink rosebuds I asked for. Dad had taken photos.

Looking back on the shame of the icing incident, and the many other "trespasses" that loom in my memory, it's clear my parents trained me to obsess over whether I was good enough. I was programmed to think and rethink everything I did—a focus on myself that left little space for a sister's needs.

I'm saddened by how absent I was when Charlotte so deeply deserved someone on her team, though it's no wonder I didn't know, till decades later, how to be supportive.

I wish I had told Char more stories. Or invited her to my cozy little yellow-and-orange room, to read or play with the Madame Alexander dolls lined up on the shelf above my bed. I don't blame myself, but I ache for ninth-grade Karla to reach out a hand to her.