My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend

Stories about siblings abound in literature, drama, comedy, biography, and history. We rarely talk about our own siblings without emotion, whether with love and gratitude, or exasperation, bitterness, anger and hate. Nevertheless, the subject of what it is to be and to have a sibling is one that has been ignored by psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists.

In My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend, Dorothy Rowe presents a radically new way of thinking about siblings that unites the many apparently contradictory aspects of these complex relationships. This helps us to recognise the various experiences involved in sibling relationships as a result of the fundamental drive for survival and validation, enabling us to reach a deeper understanding of our siblings and ourselves.

If you have a sibling, or you are bringing up siblings, or, as an only child, you want to know what you’re missing, this is the book for you.

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My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend

Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds

Dorothy Rowe
See how we grew up in the same house but lived in different countries?

(Nadia on her big sister Vera: Marina Lewycka, A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian, 2005)

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All of my life I have been studying siblings. When you read this book you will know why. One thing I have learnt is that there is only one thing you can say about all siblings. This is that there is no one thing that you can say about all siblings. They are as various as snowflakes. No doubt this is the reason that psychologists have not studied sibling attachment with the same enthusiasm and productivity as they have studied the mother–child relationship. Where studies have been done of groups of siblings, questionnaires which cannot by their nature pick up the huge variation in sibling differences have been used. Few researchers have studied siblings in their own home over their childhood, though Judy Dunn has studied infant siblings in their home

Yet, for most of us, our sibling relationship is the longest relationship we have over our whole lifespan. Whether the relationship is long or short, it is so fraught with emotion that we cannot put it aside in the way we can ignore an erstwhile friend. When a person does find it hard to sever forever their relationship with a faithless friend, it is often the case that the friend occupied a sibling-like position in that person’s life. Moreover, for the first time in human history, the political stability of the whole world is under threat, not from some power hierarchy but from a brotherhood, the brotherhood of Islam, a movement, not an organisation, which operates as brothers do. They fight among themselves but come together against an enemy, a non-brother. If ever there was a time to study siblings, this is it.

The word ‘sibling’ is defined as two children who have the same parents, but in practice the children in a family often

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include half- and step-siblings. In cultures which allow polygamy this would be more often the case than not. Also, in many families cousins are regarded as brothers. Throughout the history of Christendom a family was likely to include half- and step-siblings because when the wife died, as women then were prone to do from childbirth and disease, the husband would marry again, sometimes to a younger woman who could bear more children or to a widow who had money and perhaps a child or two. Nowadays the popularity of divorce has ensured that many families contain children from the couple’s previous relationships. Hence in the book when I use the word sibling I mean siblings who have the same parents, half-siblings who share one parent, and step-siblings who have been drawn, willingly or unwillingly, into a family where there are already one or more children and the adults in the family expect or hope that all the children will regard themselves as siblings. In a family that contains full siblings, halves and steps, one sibling’s feelings towards a full sibling may be somewhat different from his or her feelings towards a half- or step-sibling, but all these siblings are presented with much the same complexities in having to live together.

The best accounts of sibling relationships come not from psychological research but from memoirs and biographies, and from literature where the writer has translated his or her sibling experience into fictional form. Not all biographers dare to venture into the dangerous territory of childhood and siblings. Many skip quickly past what they call their subject’s ‘happy childhood’. Penelope Fitzgerald’s biography of her father and his brothers, The Knox Brothers, is highly regarded, but it contains only a few pages on the childhood of these brothers, and then in terms of theirs being a happy childhood. No explanation is given as to why the Knox brothers as adults were so eccentric. In some biographies siblings get little more than a place in the family tree. This can also happen in autobiographies. In his extraordinary autobiography Germs, Richard Wollheim mentioned his brother only in scenes where his brother’s presence is a necessary part of the story which Wollheim wishes to tell about himself. It is clear from these brief glimpses of his brother that Wollheim and his brother did not enjoy an entirely harmonious relationship. Wollheim was too truthful a man to
pretend a good relationship where none existed, and he would never have produced anything approaching a hagiography of his brother, the kind of thing some siblings write about their famous sibling. John Faulkner’s study My Brother Bill shows William Faulkner as the ideal older brother and their parents as endless in their love and wisdom. There is no mention of the father’s drinking and the fights which the father had with his wife who devoted much of her time to domestic martyrdom.

In my selection of biographies and fiction I have drawn on those where the writer has tried to capture the pain and pleasure of being and having a sibling. By ranging as widely as I could I have tried to show that, while in different cultures and at different times the demands made on children in a family vary tremendously, the central themes of sibling experience are universal. Each of these themes I have made the subject of a chapter.

The first and major theme applies to all of us, whether we are a sibling or not, namely the overarching need to preserve our sense of being a person and our terror of being annihilated as a person. All our sibling relationships, whatever their nature, are based on this. Even indifference to a sibling can be a way of defending one’s sense of being a person. Sibling relationships are very much about being validated or invalidated as a person.

The second theme is about how we form attachments, loving or otherwise, to our siblings.

The third theme concerns how, for some neurological reason which is far from being understood, every person falls into one of two groups. There are those who experience their sense of existence in relationship to other people, and there are those who experience their sense of existence in gaining clarity, organisation, control and a sense of achievement. For the first group, the fear of annihilation of their sense of being a person arises from the threat of total rejection and abandonment. For the second group, the threat comes from losing control and falling into chaos. We can express these different forms of how we experience our sense of being a person in an infinite number of ways. In families these basic differences are always a source of mutual irritation and incomprehension, and thus always the source of possible invalidation.

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The fourth theme is about how all of us, siblings or not, are dominated by the need to behave in such a way that we can feel safe both physically and as a person. This I call ‘needing to be good’. To earn our parents’ attention and love we have to compete with our siblings over who is the ‘goodest’ of us all.

Fifth, when people are together as a couple or as a group there is always some kind of power struggle, sometimes muted, sometimes fierce. As well as competing over who is the ‘goodest’, siblings struggle over who has power over the others. Power validates: impotence invalidates.

Sixth, siblings can play such an important part in our life that if our sibling dies we suffer a loss different from, but as important as, the death of our parents.

Seventh, sibling differences are not resolved in childhood. In adulthood siblings battle over who has the most truthful, accurate memory of their shared past. Memory is a construction, and so each sibling constructs a memory which best maintains their sense of being a person.

Eighth, loyalty and betrayal amongst siblings has to do with maintaining or undermining the sibling’s sense of being a person.

Ninth, if reconciliation is to be achieved it has to be based on mutual trust. There has to be no threat to the sense of being a person in the sibling relationship.

Most of us are siblings, and most of us know how painful, wonderful and extraordinary the sibling relationship can be. My thanks to those siblings who shared their experiences with me, both those who talked to me and those who told me about themselves through their writings and the testimonies they left behind them.

Dorothy Rowe
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A RELATIONSHIP LIKE NO OTHER

During the Second World War many thousands of children and babies were separated from their parents. A lucky few were rescued and brought up by caring adults but many died while others were crowded into orphanages and given food and water but no personal, individual attention. At the end of the war those who had survived the orphanages were found to be rather strange children who did not fit easily into what might be called ordinary life. Meanwhile in South America a psychiatrist called Rene Spitz was studying babies in an orphanage where they were given adequate physical care but who were deprived of human company, even of the sight of other babies in cots nearby. Spitz found that a large percentage of these babies grew grey, wasted away and died. He called this disease *anaclitic depression*. It was clear to him that there must be more to the mother and child relationship than simply mother love.

In England John Bowlby followed Spitz’s work by looking at what happened to young children when they went into a hospital where parents were not encouraged to visit their children. He found that at first the children cried in protest at the separation then grew silent and fell into an apathy which the reappearance of their parents did little to change. From these studies and others that followed Bowlby developed his theory of attachment whereby the baby forms what Bowlby called ‘an internal working model’ of the mother based on not just what she looks, sounds and smells like but on what she does and how well she meets the baby’s needs. The baby’s prime need is to feel secure, so the baby who gets this from his mother soon becomes strongly and positively attached to her. A baby whose need to feel secure is met only intermittently or not at all forms...
a different kind of attachment. The different kinds of attachments were studied by Mary Ainsworth, and her work and that of Bowlby laid the foundation for what is now a huge area of research based on the theory of attachment. Type ‘mother–child attachment’ into Google and up will come many thousands of references.

The early work on attachment used the term ‘mother–child’, but it was soon realised that the mother to whom a baby could become attached was not necessarily the baby’s biological mother. The term was changed to ‘mothering figure’ but it became clear that the mothering figure did not necessarily have to be female. So now the term commonly used is the unisex ‘caregiver’.

The way ‘caregiver’ is used seems to imply that the caregiver is an adult, yet in fact the majority of children across the world are brought up by their siblings. In the developing countries a mother who has to work keeps a newborn baby with her for the first few months but once weaned the baby is handed to a sibling who may be only a few years older than the baby. Some of these siblings are quite skilled in meeting the baby’s needs but others lack the skill or the concern. No doubt there are many babies who form attachments to their siblings which could in Mary Ainsworth’s terms be described as ‘anxious/avoidant’ or ‘anxious/resistant’. In both these forms of attachment the infants know that they need the caregiver but find that the caregiver fails to help them feel secure. In this situation some infants find it best to avoid the caregiver where possible while other infants want the caregiver to be around but resist the caregiver’s attempts to make them feel secure.

When large families were the norm in the developed countries older siblings often became the attachment figure, the caregiver. In working-class families older children had to care for younger ones while in middle-class and upper-class families, where the parents played no direct part in the upbringing of their children who were looked after by a series of nursemaids and governesses, a younger child’s closest relationship was likely to be with an older sibling. In her autobiography Diana Mosley, born in 1910, one of the famous Mitford girls, speaks with awe and admiration of her father, Lord Redesdale, who expected that everyone, family and visitors, conformed

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to his eccentric rules and customs. But in her account of her childhood she mentions her mother, ‘Muv’, only in passing as someone who just happened to be there. All of her first memories are of her nanny. She wrote:

After tea I used to sit for a little while on her lap. She paid no attention to me but went on talking to Ida, our nurserymaid. Then she put me down in a hurry saying: ‘Come along now, you children, hurry up and get dressed.’ We were changed into clean frocks and taken down to the drawing room to see Muv. An hour later Nanny fetched us, it was bedtime. I said my prayer to her: God bless Mother and Father, sisters and brothers, Nanny and Ada and Ida, and make Diana a good girl amen.¹

Just one year older than her was her brother Tom:

With Nanny and Ida we went for walks: they only took the upright pram and often Pam was in it because she had infantile paralysis, so I had to trudge, and very hot and tired I used to get. Tom and I generally went hand in hand, and he never stopped talking. I loved to listen to him; he was the cleverest person I knew except Nancy, and she did lessons with the governess and was far too grand to bother with us.²

Forty years later Tom was killed in the war:

A telegram came to say Tom was wounded. I knew instantly he had died. Near in age, we had always been more like twins than brother and sister. A day never passes when I do not think of him and mourn my loss. He was clever, wise and beautiful; he loved women, and music, and his family.³

Nanny may have kept Diana physically secure but it was her brother Tom who maintained her sense of being a valuable person. This was a secure attachment in which there was a great deal of mutual love. However, attachment should not be equated with love. We can love someone and still let that person go, but attachment means hanging on, not wanting to let go, yet at the same time we can be resenting the loss of our freedom. One woman described to me how the Irish village where she grew up was one where ‘everyone was close’. She spoke with great love.

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warmth of the way in which everyone knew one another and helped one another, quite unlike Londoners who keep themselves to themselves. Then she said, ‘Of course, when I was 16 I couldn’t get out of the village fast enough. I wouldn’t go back there to live.’ Attachment always involves degrees of love and hate. We can be attached by bonds of hate just as strongly as we can be attached by bonds of love.

A child’s attachment to his parent is always fraught with love and hate because if the parent has the power to protect him he also has the power to hurt him, and because the attachment inhibits his independence and freedom. However, a child grows up and in the ordinary course of events these issues are resolved. The child becomes an adult who takes responsibility for himself, and the parent–child attachment changes to a disinterested loving relationship between two adults. Of course this does not happen in all parent–child attachments, but what we could call the natural history of attachment gives us a baseline against which to measure each individual parent–child attachment. Attachments between siblings do not have a natural history.

As we shall see, many of the processes which bond the child to the parent are also active in creating the bond between siblings. However, there are some significant differences. In some parent–child relationships the parent and child compete for the love of the parent’s partner, but in all sibling relationships the siblings compete for their parents’ attention, approval and love. The sibling bond develops and the rivalry is enacted in an arena where the parents’ perception of each child and the events in the life of the family all play a very significant role. Many siblings who fought with, loved and were attached to one another grow up and become adults who share a close friendship, but there are so many possible variations in this development and so many siblings who never become friends that it is impossible to describe a natural history of sibling attachment. However, sibling attachments are so important in the lives of most of us that we must try to understand them. In some attachments love prevails, in others the main theme is rivalry, and in yet others the hate and neediness destroy the two partners.

Primo Levi’s biographer Carole Angier described how, when
Primo Levi’s sister Anna Maria was born just 18 months after him, ‘he waited impatiently for her to grow up, so that he could talk to her . . . when he was seven and she was five, he sat her down beside their cousin Giulia, who was also five, and taught them how to form the letters he had just learnt at school . . . as brother and sister grew older, they grew closer, until they seemed to be able to communicate without speaking. They invented a private language which not even their parents could understand; and thought and spoke so quickly that they were hard to follow even in Italian.’ Carole Angier quotes Primo Levi’s first biographer, Fiora Vincenti, who wrote

It would not be accurate to call this merely affection between brother and sister. The bond which grew between the two children, and which existed ever since, was certainly something more: a spiritual affinity, which expressed itself in solidarity and profound understanding. Levi does not hesitate to call the emotional bond between himself and his sister fundamental for his development as a human being: the bond which, in more ways than one, helped him to overcome the obstacles of his extreme introversion.

Primo Levi’s introversion was not simply shyness, though as a child he was very shy. It was reserve – what Carole Angier called ‘his most characteristic and unvarying trait’. A shy, reserved person needs a partner who is outgoing and can do his socialising for him. Primo found such a partner in his sister Anna Maria who, though reserved, was ‘confident, outgoing, attractive . . . He was older and his intellect and knowledge superior. But if either was the leader, it was Anna Maria; if either was the protector of the other, it was not Primo of Anna Maria, but the other way around.’ When siblings complement one another in this way they form an attachment which can weather many storms because in such an attachment each validates the other. When Carole Angier set about the enormous task of gathering the necessary information about Primo Levi for her autobiography, Anna Maria refused to speak to her. Anna had spoken to another biographer of Primo Levi, Ian Thomson, but she told him nothing that was not already common knowledge. Biographers are a scurrilous lot, well known for ferreting out

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the less savoury aspects of their subject’s life. Anna Maria saw
her task of validating her brother as going on forever.

In Hollywood in the 1940s, Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havi-
land were famous not just for their acting and their romances
but also for their rivalry as sisters. The family was living in
Japan when Joan was born in 1917. She was just 15 months
younger than her sister Olivia. Fifty-eight years later Joan
decided to write her autobiography *No Bed of Roses* after their
mother died and Olivia neglected to invite her to the funeral.
Joan wrote: ‘Only after burning the telephone wires from coast
to coast were my daughter and I permitted to attend.’ Her
autobiography tells of her career and her marriages, but the
constant theme of the book is the relationship between the two
sisters. Joan wrote:

> Because of eczema from a diet of goat’s milk, I was
> swathed in cotton wool from head to toe until I was
> almost two. Mother was highly ‘germ-conscious’ and
> insisted on strict nursery procedures, a fact which kept
> the sisters apart, creating a breach we were never to
> span. Brown-eyed, olive-skinned Olivia, Mother told me,
> never toddled towards the crib of her tow-haired, hazel-
> eyed baby sister. . . . Perhaps my being a puny child had
> a great deal to do with her resentment, as I am sure
> I was a fretful infant, and in the nursery she was no
> longer pre-eminent with the servants or her parents.10

In comparing their lives Joan noted: ‘From birth we were not
encouraged by our parents or nurses to be anything but rivals,
and our careers only emphasised the situation.’ When Joan
was six the family moved to California where at Stanford Uni-
versity in Palo Alto, Lewis Terman needed gifted children as
subjects for the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test which he was
developing. Both Joan and Olivia were tested but Olivia was ill
that day and Joan scored higher than her. Joan wrote:

> Unfortunately Olivia was told of the results of both
> our tests. Joan was undeniably her enemy. Besides the
> inexcusable intrusion into her life – that of Joan’s birth –
> this latest display of arrogance was the last straw
> for the older sister. I regret that I remember not one
> act of kindness from her through my childhood.12

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In 1941 both Joan and Olivia were on the short list for a Hollywood Oscar. Joan won. She wrote:

I froze. I stared across the table where Olivia was sitting directly opposite me. ‘Get up there, get up there,’ she whispered commandingly. Now what had I done! All the animus we’d felt towards each other as children, the hair-pulling, the savage wrestling matches, the time Olivia fractured my collarbone, all came rushing back in kaleidoscopic imagery. My paralysis was total. I felt that Olivia would spring across the table and grab me by the hair. I felt aged four, being confronted by my older sister. Damn, I’d incurred her wrath again . . . Actually Olivia took the situation very graciously.13

In 1946 Olivia won the Oscar: ‘After Olivia delivered her acceptance speech and entered the wings, I, standing close by, went over to congratulate her. She took one look at me, ignored my outstretched hand, clutched her Oscar to her bosom, and wheeled away just as Photoplay’s photographer captured the moment with his camera.’14 Perhaps Olivia feared that Joan might snatch the Oscar away from her!

Some siblings compete with one another simply because such competition adds excitement and interest to their lives but for others, like Joan and Olivia, the rivalry is far more important than that. As each sibling sees it, the success of the other means the invalidation of the one who lost. Every competition, be it over IQ tests or Oscars, is a fight to the death. One sibling may not want to engage in this battle, but if the other sibling sees her rival’s successes as her own invalidation she will attack her rival who will then have to defend herself.

J. R. Ackerley’s biographer, Peter Parker, wrote that Joe Ackerley was for a quarter of a century ‘an important figure on the British literary scene. From 1935 to 1959, Ackerley was literary editor of the BBC’s weekly magazine The Listener, where he created some of the liveliest and most authoritative arts pages to be found in any journal of that period. . . . “By common consent he was the greatest Literary Editor of his time – perhaps of all time,” wrote the distinguished journalist and editor Anthony Howard.’15 Peter Parker’s biography runs to 465 pages but only 11 of those pages are devoted to Ackerley’s childhood,
even though the family was a most peculiar one and Ackerley himself a very unusual person, as was his sister, Nancy West.

Peter Parker tells how Ackerley’s mother, Netta, an actress, disliked sexual intercourse and tried to abort two of her three children. She possessed what Peter Parker calls ‘an almost terminal vagueness. Although she was unaware of the fact, Netta lived largely in a world of her own, only occasionally making contact with the lives of others. She often literally had no idea what day it was. Part of her trouble was that she never quite recovered from her early on-stage success as an ingénue, and it was a role she continued to play throughout her life, to increasingly macabre effect.’

The father, Roger, kept a bachelor flat in central London and, unknown to his wife and children, a second family conveniently placed on Roger’s route from home to his office in London. He believed that the rearing of children was ‘an entirely female preserve’. ‘A succession of female relations, nursemaids and housekeepers assisted Netta in bringing up the babies.’

The first child, Peter, was born in 1895, Joe in 1896 and Nancy in 1899. Peter was sent away to a prep school in 1907 and Joe followed him in 1908. This meant that the three children were together at home for nine years in the care of servants and a mother, a childlike figure lost in her own fantasies. Much must have happened to the children in that time but the participants and witnesses were silent on the matter. Nancy made no record of her life. In his memoir *My Father and Myself*, Joe wrote at length about his brother Peter, but mentioned Nancy only to disparage her. Writing about his father he said:

To what extent he directed his business I do not know; he certainly did not direct his home. Even in family quarrels, the only ones we ever had, the jealous disputes that broke out between my sister and mother, he seldom intervened, he did not take sides and put people in their places, though there were many times when he should have done so.

Yet Joe and Nancy’s lives were far from separate. Peter was killed in 1918 in the last weeks of the war. Nancy married in 1926 and went to Panama to live but the marriage did not last. She returned from Panama in 1932 and, according to Peter Parker, she ‘threw herself and her child upon Ackerley’s mercy.'
This was the position she was to adopt for the rest of her brother's life. He went on: "Rejected" by her husband, unable to cope with a young son who himself was showing signs of disturbance, and at war with her mother, Nancy saw her brother as a lifeline and she clung to him with all the tenacity of someone who is drowning.

Here Peter Parker is reflecting the view that all of Joe's friends took of Nancy, all except one, Francis King, who edited My Sister and Myself: The Diaries of J. K. Ackerley. When Joe died in 1967 Nancy, who had lived with Joe ever since her attempted suicide in 1949, gave Francis a large parcel which proved to be Joe's diaries from August 1948 to July 1957. Here Joe wrote about his friends who included E. M. Forster and James Kirkup, men who shared and understood Joe's situation as a homosexual man at a time when homosexuality was illegal. They understood the loneliness and yearning for love when even the public suspicion of homosexuality, much less a conviction for this crime, led to public ruin and, in the case of a conviction, a jail sentence. When homosexuality ceased to be a criminal offence many homosexual men were able to form lifelong, loving, publicly recognised attachments. However, many homosexual men have as an ideal lover a person who is impossible to find, and as a result they spend the best years of their life in a hopeless search. Had Joe devoted to writing the time and effort he devoted to risky sexual adventures he would have left behind a large body of outstanding work and not just three small books and a handful of essays. He found no sexual peace until he acquired a dog, Queenie, who became the one great passion in his life. He wrote: 'Looking at her sometimes I used to think that the Ideal Friend, whom I no longer wanted, should have been an animal-man, the mind of my bitch, for instance, in the body of my sailor, the perfect male body always at one's service through the devotion of a faithful and uncritical beast.'

In October 1948 Joe went to visit Nancy who then was living in a room in Worthing. His account of this visit would remind many readers only too vividly of those visits many of us make to relatives and friends whose conversations are made up solely of complaints and excuses as to why they have done nothing to resolve their difficulties. At the end of this account he wrote:
Once she had youth, beauty, money, husband, child, a home of her own; now, a woman nearing fifty, she lives quite alone, absolutely friendless, in poky bedsitting rooms at 35s. a week, cooking on a hotplate and washing up her dishes in her bedroom in a tin basin. Once she had the world at her feet. Now she has nothing and no one, only me. And to me she is devoted; I get, when she is calm, the best of her nature; yet how terrible she is.  

How was it that a brother and sister, so intelligent, talented, once so lively and beautiful, could in middle age have become so frustrated and unhappy? Why could they not live independently of one another? Joe often claimed that he wanted to get rid of Nancy and he frequently recorded how she would berate him for his selfishness and lack of consideration, but as much as they wished to separate they wanted to stay together.

The reason lies in what psychologists call the Principle of Partial Reinforcement. This principle keeps gamblers chained to the gaming table no matter how much they lose, smokers, alcoholics and drug addicts to their noxious substances no matter how ill they become, abused women unable to leave their abusive partner, my depressed clients anxiously attached to hurtful mothers, and siblings unable to be together or apart. It is a principle we all understand. If when we carry out a particular action we invariably get exactly what we want, we soon come to take for granted the source of that reward. Mothers who wait on their children hand and foot and accept whatever the children do without criticism or correction soon find themselves relegated to the role of servant and doormat. If when we carry out a particular action we are invariably punished, we try never to perform that action again. As toddlers we discover the pain that strong heat invariably gives us and so we try never to burn ourselves again. However, when we carry out a particular action and find that sometimes we are rewarded and sometimes we are punished, we keep going back time and time again, enduring the punishment in hope of the reward.

This was the nature of Joe and Nancy’s attachment. Joe’s account of their life together between 1948 and 1957 reads like a dreadful play where one scene is repeated over and over with mounting horror. As an example, Joe recorded how when

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Nancy was still living in Worthing he arranged to meet her at Haywards Heath for a walk. He wanted to get away once the walk was over but she wanted them to have tea. He agreed, but when he then tried to leave she protested, ‘Oh Joe, you’re not sending me back to that room! Oh Joe, you can’t do it, you can’t do it. O please Joe, oh don’t I beg you. I can’t stand it, I can’t, I can’t. I’m frightened! I’m frightened! I think all the time of suicide. I shall kill myself, I know. Oh Joe, don’t, don’t!’ He tried to calm her with a hug and explanations about his situation in his small flat but she said, ‘No, no, it’s got to happen now, now. I can’t wait any longer. You’re just fobbing me off as you always do. You’ll just go back and forget all about me.’ He kissed her and petted her but all he wanted to do was get his train home. He wrote in his diary:

But I was dreadfully worried about the whole business. Besides the anger I felt against such behaviour, and the hatred I feel towards her for this sort of emotional blackmail she so constantly subjects me to, there had been a sort of frantic note the whole time that frightened and worried me. And I feel so dreadfully sorry for her, possessed by such jealousy, yet so sweet with her gifts and her pullovers and her restlessly fidgeting fingers.

Next morning he sent Nancy a cheque for £50 to buy some winter clothes. She returned the cheque with a letter where she said, ‘You have gone out of your way to make me feel like an exile, no welcome in the only home left to me to go to.’ She ended her letter with, ‘Please don’t ring up any more, or try to come here. I would much rather be left alone now.’ Joe responded with ‘I went out directly after breakfast and sent her a wire to say that I had an invitation for her to the flat, and was writing, love Joe.’

Joe and Nancy must have developed this well-practised drama in the nine years they spent together as children. As a small child Nancy was exquisite and Joe was a most beautiful boy. Nancy always said that Peter was her favourite brother but Joe must have fascinated her. Joe would have done what big brothers usually do, play with his little sister and tease her and sometimes the teasing would go too far, especially when Nancy failed to do exactly what Joe wanted. A complaint which

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recurs in Joe’s diary about Nancy and women generally is that they do not do what Joe wants them to do. When they were children Joe would have used his teasing to punish Nancy. When she complained loudly about this their mother and the nursery maids would no doubt scold Joe. From this Joe would have learnt to feel guilty about Nancy, and to feel angry with Nancy for making him feel guilty. Nancy learned that the best way to get Joe to do what she wanted him to do was to make him feel anxious and guilty, and she could achieve this by making an enormous fuss. Noisy complaints from Nancy were an effective way of getting her mother’s attention while her father would seek to quell the noise by indulging her with gifts and treats. Joe would try to escape from her but would be drawn back to her by his need to expunge his guilt. Both parents lacked the wit to see what was going on between Joe and Nancy and help them change this kind of interaction, so it persisted for the rest of their lives.

When Joe reluctantly retired from The Listener he had little to do. Not long before Joe’s death a friend lent him his house in Brighton for a fortnight. This house was almost opposite where Francis King lived. In his introduction to My Sister and Myself Francis King wrote:

Joe had now long ceased to be literary editor of The Listener and, frequently idle and bored, had taken to drinking heavily. Nancy, who had always shown a pathetic eagerness to share in all his activities, shared in this one too. Almost every morning of that holiday in Brighton, they would make their way down to our local, the Temple Bar, just before it opened; and, just after it had closed, one would see them dragging their way slowly up the hill again, back to the once spotless house that Nancy rarely cleaned.26

He went on:

At the time of these diaries Joe’s and Nancy’s symbiosis was a ghastly caricature of the kind of marriage, devoid of sex, that is held together merely by feelings of obligation, pity and guilt. But, as in many such marriages, the two participants, exhausted by their own conflicts, eventually reached an undemanding and even mutually
helpful modus vivendi. Joe’s friends, many of them women-haters, would often say that Nancy had ruined his life; but it could be said with no more injustice that, kind only to be cruel, he had subtly ruined hers.27

Victor Cicirelli, a psychologist who has carried out extensive research into sibling relationships, tried to describe these relationships in terms of three interconnected dimensions, affectional closeness, rivalry and involvement, dimensions which relate respectively to the relationships between Primo and Anna Maria, Joan and Olivia, and Joe and Nancy. He summarised research by other psychologists who had tried to create different typologies of sibling relationships and concluded: ‘They share the problems common to all typologies: difficulty in classifying all cases, and use of nominal measurement which does not allow for degrees of variation within a type.’28 That is, sibling relationships vary so much that they cannot be fitted into the neat boxes which psychologists like to create. Affection may predominate in Primo’s and Anna Maria’s relationship, rivalry in that of Joan and Olivia, and the hate and neediness of intense involvement in that of Joe and Nancy, but elements of affection, rivalry, hate and need are there in different measure in each of the three relationships. Such is the nature of sibling attachment.

Sibling attachment: the younger child

Popular though attachment theory is, it is not without its critics. Judy Dunn, whose studies of sibling relationships are widely acclaimed, found that ‘one limitation of the idea of the internal working model is that it is so vaguely conceived that it can be used to explain almost everything. What exactly is an internal working model? The answers range widely.’29 Judy Dunn went on to list nine different interpretations of the internal working model. I shall spare you, dear reader, a description of what these different interpretations are because to do so I would have to resort to ‘psychologese’ and I try never to inflict that on anyone. It is not surprising that Judy Dunn can list nine interpretations. She could have listed ninety-nine or a million and nine. All the people who heard John Bowlby lec-
ture or who read his books created their own individual interpretation of the ‘internal working model’.

In her writings Judy Dunn frequently comments on ‘the dramatically wide range of individual differences in the quality of the relationship between siblings’. She wrote that in 1984, but by 1993 she was writing very cautiously that ‘the possibility that processes of a cognitive-attributional nature may be important’. ‘Cognitive-attributional’ is psychologese for the way in which we interpret, give meaning to, what we encounter. By then she was well aware that while outside observers think siblings grow up in the same environment, they actually grow up in different environments because each child perceives the environment in his or her own individual way.

When psychologists write textbooks and research articles they are writing for their colleagues. They have to be very careful about how they do this. Slander a psychologist about his love life and all that will cause is much enjoyable gossip amongst his colleagues, but criticise a psychologist’s beloved theory or, worse, produce evidence that the theory is wrong and you can be embarking on a fight unto death. Psychologists are only human. If as a psychologist you have invested years of your working life researching a particular theory, if all your professional publications are based on this theory, and if your professional reputation is built on the accuracy of this theory, then the theory becomes part of your identity and to attack it is to attack you as a person. Criticism of the theory threatens you with invalidation.

From the beginnings of the academic study of psychology in the late nineteenth century, psychologists have always taken the stance that they are studying their subject matter, people, objectively in the same way as geologists study rocks. They tried to ignore the fact that, while rocks do not study geologists, the subjects of a psychologist’s study study the psychologist. The school of psychology which dominated the profession in the twentieth century, behaviourism, taught that what went on in a person’s mind was unimportant and all that mattered was what the person did. When a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Aaron Beck showed a direct link between the ideas a person held and the depression the person was experiencing, psychologists were forced to take notice. However, they were comforted.

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by the terminology Beck had chosen. A depressed person’s ideas were ‘dysfunctional cognitions’ and the psychologists, being untroubled by dysfunctional cognitions of any sort, could put the person right. Psychologists who practise what they call ‘cognitive behaviour therapy’ have always been remarkably reluctant to admit that our thoughts determine our actions.

Psychologists have always wanted their study of people and animals to be a science – the equal of physics and chemistry. The fact that people think and interpret has always been an impediment to this. Physics and chemistry and the various sciences that followed in their wake study objects which are separate from the sciences themselves. Their work is based on definitions where the object being studied is defined in terms of some other things. Astronomers and geologists can define the moon as a rock which travels around the sun. Thus the moon is a rock, not a cloud, and it travels outside the earth, not inside it. In contrast, look up the words ‘thought’, ‘idea’, ‘belief’ and ‘opinion’ in any dictionary and you will find that these three words are each defined in terms of the others but basically they all mean the same thing, something that people do in the privacy of their own heads. These four words can be used interchangeably though with some fine distinctions concerning the appropriate situation where they might be used. These words cannot be defined in terms of anything outside themselves. They all refer to an activity we know so well, that is, that we are continually investing ourselves and our world with meaning.

Meaning is impossible to define clearly and unambiguously because it has no opposite with which it can be contrasted. We cannot conceive of the opposite of ‘meaning’. We do use the word ‘meaningless’, but then we mean ‘I can’t quite work out what meaning best to give to this situation’ or ‘This situation is unacceptable’, which is what people mean when they talk about ‘meaningless violence’.

Whatever we encounter we invest with meaning. We live in meaning like a fish lives in water. To step out of meaning is to die.

We are meaning-creating creatures. We live to create meaning, and we create meaning in order to live.

The purpose of life is to live and human beings are remarkably efficient in adapting themselves to whatever is available

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that will help them stay alive. We eat whatever food our environment provides; we adapt our day-to-day habits to the climate; and we form relationships with whatever people are around us. Thus, in forming attachments, a baby does the best he can with what is on offer. No mother is perfect and siblings can help make up for her deficits.

In the literature of attachment theory the baby’s development of the internal working model of his mother is so important that the other internal working models which the baby is creating are overlooked. Siblings are rarely mentioned. Neither are fathers. Judy Dunn commented: ‘The great majority of parenting studies are studies of mothers’ behaviour. We are still strikingly ignorant about many aspects of fathers’ behaviour and relationships.’ What is also forgotten is that the baby is also hard at work trying to make sense of the world into which he has been born. Babies look hard and long at the world around them, and when faces swim into their view they try to make sense of the face and the context together.

At five months May is on her baby bouncer on the kitchen floor and sees Milo coming close to her and moving away. Sometimes he is quiet and sometimes he is noisy as he plays with his toy train and fights with his older brother Fred. Next day May is in her mother’s car in her carrycot. She faces the back of the car. Milo close beside her is strapped into his child’s seat. He cannot move away but he can make a noise until shushed by his mother who, at the wheel, is directly in front of May. Milo stretches out his arm, touches May’s cheek and says, ‘Baby.’ He turns to me sitting beside him and again stretches out his arm to touch May’s cheek and says in explanation to me, ‘Baby.’

May watches all this very intently. It is not just her internal working model of Milo that she is creating. She is also learning, amongst other things, the contrasting concepts of near and far. People and objects can be near and far; sounds can be near and far. She cannot see her mother but the sound of her mother’s voice tells her that her mother is not far away.

Newborn babies have been shown to prefer to watch people in movement rather than objects in movement. Research by Andrew Meltzoff and others has shown that infants gradually develop an understanding of why people do what they do, what psychologists call a ‘theory of mind’. To understand why a
person does what he does we need to know the context in which the person carries out his action. We cannot understand why a man strikes a match unless we know that he is in a kitchen and standing in front of a gas ring, or that he is beside some tinder-dry undergrowth which, once lit, will start a bushfire. As she stares around her a baby is creating many internal working models. She is creating many meanings which develop and change with every new experience.

A baby’s first meaning for her mother is made up of sound, smell and sight. Before they are born babies know the sound of their mother’s voice and very likely the sound of their siblings’ voices. Even though the sounds in the mother’s environment are to some degree muffled by the mother’s own body and the noise made by her heart pumping and her blood flowing, recordings made from the womb show that speech sounds emerge clearly from the background noise. We usually find clear sounds more interesting than muffled sounds, and so the baby in the womb would be listening not just to his mother’s voice but that of his siblings. In the last weeks before Eli was born his siblings Miles and Alice became increasingly impatient for him to be born. They would put their faces close to their mother’s tummy and instruct Eli to hurry up and arrive. Eli must have been born knowing that his siblings were loving but bossy.

Small children stay close to their mothers, which means that for much of the time they are close to their baby sibling. When small children take notice of a baby they put their faces close to the baby, often nose to nose, and then pull back. In The Scientist in the Crib the developmental psychologists Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl wrote:

Babies are very near sighted by adult standards, and unlike adults they have difficulty changing their focus to suit both near and far objects. What this means is that objects about a foot away are in sharp focus and objects nearer or farther are blurred. . . . The newborn’s world seems to be a bit like the room full of Rembrandt portraits at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Brightly lit faces, full of every nuance of movement, life, expression, and emotion, leap out from the background of gloomy obscurity, in startling psychological chiaroscuro.
Thus a baby sees his sibling’s face a foot away very clearly. Then the face moves forward, blurring and blocking the light, and then moving back and the face is well lit and distinct. Such an experience must be very memorable, especially when it is often repeated.

As the sibling faces come and go the siblings are likely to be talking. Their words are often interspersed with shouts and yells. All the time the baby interprets and remembers them in some way or other. May has had to learn the difference between Fred’s shout of laughter and his shout of complaint. They are equally loud, but the first means that Fred is happy and the second is likely to be followed by screams from Milo or Alice as Fred wreaks his revenge. Through Fred, May had probably learnt many other things as well.

In the weeks before and after her birth May probably learned a great deal about Fred’s enthusiasm for Australian wildlife. When I was leaving for a trip to Australia Fred told me that he wanted to learn about the dangerous animals and the creepy crawlies there. Once in Sydney I discovered there were many books about such things written for children Fred’s age. These had big, close-up pictures and short pieces of text that would not overawe a lad who was not particularly interested in reading. Every two weeks or so I sent one of these books to Fred. I imagined his pleasure at getting a parcel from overseas and then reading them with his mother Isabel, but I also thought about Isabel sitting on the couch with Fred close beside her, sometimes talking quietly and sometimes shouting and whooping with joy at the sight of a crocodile’s massive jaws or a sinister red-backed spider, and with May curled up inside her or feeding at her breast and listening to these dreadful words and sounds. When I returned I asked Isabel about this imagined scene and she assured me that she had interspersed the crocodiles, snakes, sharks and spiders with possums.

Isabel is very skilled at containing and moderating her children’s emotions. This is one of the parent’s main tasks and it begins right at the moment of the baby’s birth. A newborn baby’s brain is far from fully developed, but what is present at birth are the brain structures that create the meanings ‘I am in danger’ and ‘How dare this happen to me?’, that is, the emotions of fear and anger. These emotions are necessary
in order to survive both physically and as a person, but the un-
limited and uninhibited expression of them can itself be a dan-
ger to physical health and to a coherent sense of being a person.
When a mothering person holds a distressed baby and contains
his expression of fear and anger by providing food or removing
the cause of some physical discomfort, the baby is restored to
himself, whole and happy, which is the experience of being vali-
dated. Older siblings left in charge of their baby sibling have to
learn how to do this. The siblings who are not much older than
the baby cannot act in a mothering way but they can act as a
distraction, and being distracted by something that engages
our attention in a pleasant way can have a very calming influ-
ence that restores our sense of being whole.

Studies of newborn babies show that they ‘not only distin-
guish and prefer faces, they also seem to recognize that those
faces are like their own face. They recognize that other people
are “like me”’. Babies soon show that they can distinguish
children from adults and find children infinitely more interest-
ing than adults. When Isabel put May in her bouncer on
the kitchen floor May had a choice. She could look to her right
and watch her mother cooking and tidying with quiet efficiency
or she could look to her left and watch Fred and Milo playing
quietly in a sea of Lego with the occasional spat when the older
brother decided that he wanted something that his younger
brother had. There was no doubt which May preferred. Her un-
wavering gaze was centred on her brothers. A few weeks later
Isabel told me, ‘I’ve just bought May a new high chair so she
can now join the others at the table – but, of course, she finds
them much more interesting than me or the food. So now it’s a
real challenge to get her attention for long enough to get each
spoonful into her mouth! Still, she loves being up at the table
and the others love her being there too – so far!’

Newborn babies can do much more than gaze at faces. Andrew
Meltzoff discovered that ‘One-month-old babies imitate
facial expressions. If you stick your tongue out at a baby, the
baby will stick his tongue out at you; open your mouth and the
baby will open hers.’ It seemed that this ability to imitate was
innate but to prove this Andrew Meltzoff ‘set up a lab next to
the labour room in the local hospital and arranged with the
parents to call him when the baby was about to arrive. For a
year he would wake up in the middle of the night, or dash out of a lab meeting and rush to the hospital, in almost as much of a hurry as the expectant parents themselves. But this meant he could test babies less than a day old; the youngest was forty-two minutes old. The newborns imitated too.\textsuperscript{38}

Empathy, it seems, grows out of imitation. Andrew Meltzoff has demonstrated that as early as 18 months infants know that ‘people (but not inanimate objects) are understood within a framework that includes goals and intentions’.\textsuperscript{39} By the time children reach two they have acquired the ability to be empathetic. In \textit{Scientist in the Crib} there is a delightful example of this. One of the authors, Alison Gopnik, had had a terrible day. A research paper she had written had been rejected by a journal, a student had criticised her teaching, and when she got home she discovered that she had failed to leave that night’s dinner out of the freezer to defrost. As any ‘good, strong, tough-minded professional woman’ would do, she flung herself on to the sofa and wept. Whereupon her son who was not yet two got a large box of Band-Aids from the bathroom and proceeded to stick them on whatever part of her he could reach.\textsuperscript{40}

In the same way many two-year-old children empathise with and try to comfort their older siblings. In her Cambridge study Judy Dunn found that some as young as 14 months attempted to comfort their older siblings.\textsuperscript{41} However, understanding how another person feels also gives us the knowledge of how to upset that person. Judy Dunn told the story of Andrew, at 16 months, and his 5-year-old sister Elly. She wrote:

The mother of Andrew and Elly is telling a visitor in the kitchen that Elly is frightened of spiders. ‘There’s a particular toy spider she just hates,’ the mother comments. Andrew runs out of the kitchen, goes to the playroom, searches through the toy box and finds the toy spider. He runs back into the kitchen and pushes the toy spider in Elly’s face – Elly cries, Andrew laughs.\textsuperscript{42}

Research comparing older and younger siblings has shown that ‘Usually older siblings do better than younger siblings on things like IQ tests. But, consistently, younger siblings do better on tests of their understanding of the mind. . . . And the more brothers and sisters they have, the better they do.’\textsuperscript{43}

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This is a very important finding because it shows that there are individual differences in how well people understand that other people have their own individual point of view. Many people do not grasp this but instead they operate on the principle that ‘anyone who sees things differently from me is either mad or bad’. Amongst those who do know that other people see things differently and are not necessarily mad nor bad, there is considerable variation in the ability to make accurate guesses about how other people see their world. Just as we all like to think we have a sense of humour, so we all like to think we are good at reading other people minds, but that is not the case. If it were the case we would not make such huge errors in dealing with one another.

To read another person’s mind is not to move into the realm of the supernatural. All you have to do is pay careful attention to another person. You listen to what the person says and note the intonations, the emphases, the coherence of what is said. You watch what people do, not just what they intended to do but their unintentional acts, their movements, their gestures, the fleeting expressions on their face. Most of all, you watch their eyes. One of the good things that television has done for us, though not for politicians, is to show faces clearly in close-up. Politicians have learned not to look shifty when they lie. Instead, they make their eyes go blank, devoid of the expressions that would give them away. Their simulation of sincerity is particularly blank. This blankness is often hard to spot in conversation because we shift our gaze as we talk to one another, but on television when the person’s gaze is either to camera or slightly to one side of it, the camera and the lighting reveal any blankness or any other expression, clearly.

Some people find the reading of other people’s minds immensely interesting, and so they polish this skill and become quite perceptive of what the other person thinks is private. Most young siblings find their older siblings immensely interesting, but to keep up with their siblings, to join in their activities and to defend themselves against their older siblings, they have to learn how their siblings think. No wonder little May on her baby bouncer is watching her siblings so closely!

Firstborns do not have to keep up with older siblings so they have no special reason to develop their skill of reading other
people’s minds, unless, of course, they have other reasons for doing so. It may be that they have been born into a family whose behaviour the infant finds especially hard to comprehend, or it may be that the infant has to learn to read other people’s minds in order to survive.

When I used to spend a great deal of time with people in their late teens and early twenties who were going through a period of psychosis I found that they were extraordinarily perceptive of other people. It is extremely disconcerting to be with someone who has been expressing some very strange ideas and who suddenly interrupts this discourse to remark dispassionately on something which you are feeling but which you thought was well hidden. I found that these young people had grown up in families where adults lied to them. Sometimes the adults had lied in order to protect the child from some awful truth. Sometimes the adults were sexually abusing the child while claiming to be the child’s protector. We are always engaged in trying to make sense of what is going on, but the more disparate the events are that we encounter, the harder we have to work to make sense of them. A small child who observes his mother being assaulted by her husband, and who is then told by the mother that she is not at all upset and that his father is a good man who loves his family, will have to work harder to make sense of those experiences than the child who simply observes his parents laughing and cuddling one another. The child lacks the experience of life which would enable him to resolve the conflict between what he sees and what he is told. So he finds himself with a problem he cannot solve. He watches people more and more closely and thus he develops a greater skill in reading other people’s minds than the child who simply observes his parents laughing and cuddling one another. The child lacks the experience of life which would enable him to resolve the conflict between what he sees and what he is told. If he is being told that his perceptions are wrong by adults unwilling to face the truth of the situation he can come to doubt his own perceptions, and this doubt can then become the precursor of a psychosis.

Some children are born into families where the new baby becomes the focus for conflict, anger and despair. The baby becomes aware of these emotions and knows that he is not safe. Babies are born with the ability to distinguish people from objects. They can distinguish human movements and sounds from those made by objects. Before birth babies can distinguish

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pleasure from pain. Thus they know safe from unsafe, good for me from bad for me. All this knowledge enables them to know that humans, not objects, create those special meanings, emotions. Babies cannot name the emotions but they can be extraordinarily perceptive of them in the people closest to them. They know when their mother is sad and they know when she is angry. If the mother directs her anger at the baby just once the baby finds the experience shocking and memorable. Many loving mothers remember with guilt how their baby reacted with enormous upset when, at a difficult time in her life, she let the loving mother face disappear to be replaced by the face of a wicked witch. If a baby is born to a mother who is often angry or into a family where the majority of the emotions expressed seem dangerous to the baby he has to learn not just how to read these emotions but to anticipate them and do whatever he can to deflect them from him.

This was my experience from birth. To survive I had to watch my family very closely and learn how to anticipate their actions. Of course I do not remember my first years. My mother would always talk about her aches and pains, and she would complain fiercely and endlessly about how the world had yet again failed to live up to her expectations, but she rarely talked about the past, and she never talked about anything even remotely connected to sex. I have often joked that my mother had resented my arrival because while she thought that people would accept one virgin birth – that is, my sister – people would not accept a second virgin birth – that is, me. I always felt that my existence shamed her, but there was more to this than the nature of my conception.

When I was 20 my father told me that he had had to work hard to love me when I was born because I was a girl and he had wanted a boy. He went on to say that the baby my mother had aborted some three years before my birth had been a boy. I already knew this. When I was about 11 my sister told me. She had ended her account with, ‘You’re lucky to be alive. You should be grateful.’

Abortion was illegal in the 1920s and the women and doctors who were found guilty were sent to prison. I suspect that my mother had had an abortion because she felt that she could not cope with a second child, but when a few years later she fell
pregnant (‘fell’ as in ‘fall from grace’, which was how my mother saw pregnancy) my parents dared not risk another abortion. So I was born to parents who did not want me and to a sister who knew nothing of my imminent arrival. This happened on her sixth birthday. She was sitting on the birthday chair in the classroom when someone came and told her that she was very lucky. She had a special birthday present, a baby sister. Whatever she thought of this present when she saw it, lucky it was not. Soon after my arrival she was sent away to stay with an aunt. This may have been only for a few weeks but to a six year old it would have been aeons of times. I had caused her to be taken her from her mother (my sister was always as close to our mother as I was distant), her father whom she loved dearly, her bedroom (her treasured place where I was always an intruder), and her position of an only child of which she was very proud – everything that supported her sense of being a person. A vast emptiness must have opened up inside her. (Years later I discovered that this was how she experienced the fear of annihilation as a person.) However, there was one thing she could do to try to fill this emptiness. She resolved that my task in life would be to restore to her everything and more that she had lost. I have to report, dear reader, that in every aspect of that task I have failed, principally because I have never tried. Of course, the only way I could restore to her the position of only child would be to die, and I had no intention of doing that.

My sister had been sent away because my mother was not coping, and when my mother did not cope she did it ferociously, battering the people around her with her wild anger, outrageous demands, and a complete unawareness of what pain she was inflicting on others. (‘Indifference’ would be more accurate than ‘unawareness’, but it was not the indifference of the cruel but the indifference we all feel about others when we are battling for survival as a person. Simone de Beauvoir said of her mother, ‘She had too much to pay back, too many wounds to salve, to put herself in another person’s place.”46) The two people with her, her youngest sister, whom we called Auntie Doff, and my father, were always very frightened of her. Many years later, when Auntie Doff was in her nineties and living in the time past when she was a young woman, I would visit her at the nursing home. She would be pleased to see me, but within

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minutes she would be urging me to go home for tea ‘because your mother will be waiting’. Mother had been dead for many years and the family home sold, but my aunt had not forgotten what she had learned as a very small child. She must not upset her sister Ella.

When I was born the ferocity of my mother’s anger and complaints would have been all around me and very close because I had trouble feeding. Once, on a rare occasion when there were visitors to dinner, my father said something about how my mother had had breast abscesses after I was born. Mother gave him one of her fierce black looks and Dad shut up like a man shot dead, but I had gained a little more knowledge of my first year. When I was at high school I once worked out that if one day I had been dutifully riding my bike home from school, directly and not deviating to the beach for a swim, thinking only of the homework I was going to do the minute I got home, and a meteor came out of the sky and killed me, my mother would have said it was my fault. I do not doubt that she blamed me for those breast abscesses.

My mother had grown up in a family where the parents beat the children so my mother beat me. I soon learned to watch what I said because I knew that if anyone said or did anything that displeased her she was likely to retire to her bedroom and not speak to the offender for days, even weeks. Her silence was deafening, and came with a black miasma that seeped through and filled the house. On some rare but unforgettable occasions when I was alone with her, she went into a crazy rage and would beat me and declare that she was going to kill me and then kill herself. Years later when I was listening to those depressed people who reminded me so much of my mother, I came to understand why she had this rage to kill herself and me. If, to feel whole and at peace you have to know that everything is right and calm and in its proper place, you can also feel that by killing, erasing everything that mucks things up, you will restore everything to unity, completeness and calm.

I never felt that my mother loved me and indeed there was no way that she could. I always knew that I was a large part of what mucked everything up, and with this my sister concurred. My mother deplored that I grew taller and, in her and my sister’s eyes, disgustingly fat, but one benefit of this growth
was that I no longer feared my mother’s physical strength. But I still feared her anger, and along with that came the feeling that she was killing me in a slow and subtle way. In my infancy I had developed a chronic disease, bronchiectasis, where the lungs secrete a sticky mucus which, if not coughed up, destroys the soft tissues of the lungs. I coughed and wheezed and, unable to breathe properly, was often very tired. My mother complained I was lazy and my coughing disturbed her sleep. She did not take me to a doctor but gave me boiled sweets to suck to stop me coughing. Breathing continues to this day to be a daily battle, and I loathe boiled sweets. I would like to see my ability to understand why people do what they do as a mark of some kind of special intelligence or virtue but I have to admit that it arises from a need to be vigilant and know what the danger is.

When an infant gazes intently at the world, working hard to make sense of it, the meaning the infant creates can be called a conclusion. The infant watches her siblings and perhaps draws the conclusion that one sibling is entertaining but not always reliable while another is quiet but can be trusted. Some of the conclusions we draw in our first years we modify with further experience, but other conclusions stay with us until our death, just as my aunt’s fear of displeasing her sister stayed with her. Enough is now understood about the way our brains operate for us to know that when we draw a conclusion, that is, learn something, a pattern of neuronal connections is set up in the brain. These patterns can change over time with further and different experiences, but first time experiences that are then repeated can form neuronal patterns which are very strong and lasting. Also, a newborn baby’s brain is not complete, but how each brain grows and changes depends on what the infant experiences in the first few years. Deprive a baby of the kind of care which validates that baby and the baby’s brain will develop differently from the brain of a baby who is surrounded by acceptance and love.47

In all, it is not surprising that the attachments which babies make to their siblings can be as strong and as long-lasting as the attachments they can make to their parents. Michael Rosen called the bedroom he shared with his brother ‘almost the cradle of my existence’. Of course, while babies are forming

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attachments to their siblings, the siblings are also getting to know the new arrival in their family.

Sibling attachment: the older child

It is possible to discern a common pattern in the way most younger siblings get to know and become attached to their older siblings, but there is no common pattern in the way older siblings first meet and perhaps become attached to their younger siblings. Older siblings can range in age from ten months to twenty-odd years, while step-siblings can be well into middle age when their elderly father sires a child. Each older sibling has already established or been given a particular individual role in the family. This applies even to the youngest siblings. Robert Rose junior had established himself, at least in his father’s mind, as a great sportsman by the time he was two, the year before his brother Peter was born. In Australia to be a great sportsperson is the equivalent of being a living saint in a Catholic country (though it must be said that Australian sportsmen tend not to lead saint-like lives). There is an extraordinary photograph of two-year-old Robert Rose in Peter Rose’s biography *Rose Boys*. In case a reader might miss the significance of this photograph Peter Rose described it:

The two-year-old is playing football with his father. . . . Robert is wearing dark corduroy overalls and what may be a baby tie. I like his little boots. The toes are grooved, as if he has kicked a football before. . . Dad, very attentive, props on his haunches as the little boy kicks the football. It flies off to the right, catching the sun, perfectly focussed. The expression on Robert’s face is remarkable for its portent of what he would become. He grimaces, so great is his intensity. His kicking technique is flawless. His right arm shoots back out of range and his left one crosses his body and his outstretched leg. His toddler’s instep is doubtless taut. Young Robert is kicking for his father, and he knows how to do it. All his later determination and obsession are printed on his face.48

Many sportmen want to have a son who is a sportsman. My father longed for a son who would achieve what he had been

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prevented from achieving by the advent of the First World War and by family responsibilities. Robert Rose senior, the most famous of the five famous Rose brothers, all Australian Rules footballers, wanted a son who would carry on the family name. By the time he was two Robert Rose junior showed that his father had the son he wanted. Robert Rose had an heir. Peter, the second son, could only be a ‘spare’. Peter Rose recorded no anecdote about how young Robert greeted his birth but he did record that, ‘Mum once calmly observed that Robert and I had fought every day as children.’ This suggests that Robert had not greeted Peter’s arrival with undiluted joy.

How an older sibling greets another sibling’s birth depends so much on how the child has been prepared for it. Miles aged eight and Alice aged six had felt and conversed with their baby brother for months before he actually arrived. I was present at Eli’s birth and I saw their faces when, just minutes after Eli slid gracefully into the world, they were called into their parents’ bedroom. I had never seen such joyful wonder on a child’s face as was on theirs. Eli saw his siblings’ faces within minutes of seeing his parents’ faces as Alice and Miles took turns in nursing him. There could not have been a happier welcome into the world.

Eli, Alice and Miles had been born to parents who always talked to their children about what was happening in the family. There was no such tradition of talking to children truthfully in the family into which Olive Compton-Burnett was born in 1875. In that Victorian family the children lived in the nursery and spent little time with their parents. Olive’s parents went on to have another five children but in 1882 her mother Agnes Ann died. Her father James turned to Olive for comfort and companionship, but on her eighth birthday he brought home a new wife. The biographer Hilary Spurling wrote:

Oliver had come to think of herself as her father’s especial companion, allowed downstairs after her brothers and sisters were in bed to dine with him on the nights when he came back from London. What must have been particularly bewildering for a small child – and made her dismissal even harder to bear, when she was abruptly banished to the nursery again – was that her father was so evidently
in love with the newcomer. . . . Olive, who remembered her own mother clearly, never forgave this usurpation and always bitterly resented her stepmother’s presence.50

Katherine, the stepmother, went on to have seven children, the eldest of whom became the novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett. Katherine ‘never cared greatly for small children, her own or anyone else’s’.51 ‘Ivy shared her mother’s lack of maternal feeling and, once she had left the nursery herself, never voluntarily had anything to do with small children.’52 Yet, as Hilary Spurling noted, ‘Few other novelists have caught so sharply the desperate emotions of very small children, or noted how quickly they acquire worldly wisdom.’ Hilary gave as an example of this worldly wisdom a conversation between Nevill Sullivan in Parents and Children who ‘at three years old is sufficiently shrewd to have grave misgivings when his mother promises him a present for tomorrow.

“No, today,” said Nevill with rising feeling. “Today.”

“Tomorrow will soon be here,” said Luce.

“It won’t,” said Nevill, in a tone of experience.”53

Those of us born into a family where the adults see no reason to keep a promise made to a child if the keeping of the promise would inconvenience the adult in any way know that by three we were as wise as Nevill.

Whatever their age, all children are displaced when a new sibling is born, and this displacement is felt immediately as the threat of being annihilated as a person. Even those much older siblings who no longer live at home can still feel disconcerted by the thought that there is now another person who shares their genes, while the thought that there may be significant changes to their parents’ will can be very disturbing. A large difference in age can mean that an attachment is never formed, or it may be that the older sibling assumes a parental role which requires some kind of response from the younger sibling. Older children who still live at home can deal with the threat to their sense of being a person by defining their relationship with the new sibling in a way which bolsters their self-confidence. Younger children have not yet acquired the skill of forming self-serving interpretations so they express their distress in jealousy and naughtiness. Simone de Beauvoir illustrated this in the open-
ing paragraph of her autobiography. She wrote:

Here is a photograph of Mama holding a baby in her arms who isn’t me; I am wearing a pleated skirt and tam-o’-shanter; I am two and a half, and my sister has just been born. I was, it appears, very jealous, but not for long. As far back as I can remember, I was always proud of being the elder: of being first. Disguised as Little Red Riding Hood and carrying a basket of goodies, I felt myself to be much more interesting than an infant bundled up in a cradle. I had a little sister: that doll-like creature didn’t have me.54

Simone’s interpretation of her relationship to her sister Poupette worked well because, as she wrote: ‘She alone endowed me with authority; adults sometimes gave in to me; she obeyed me.’55 Had Simone’s sibling been a boy he may have fought her in the way that Peter Rose fought his brother Robert, but Poupette seems always to have been overawed by her big sister. She must have felt impelled to obey Simone because Simone used the only power a three-year-old has to protest about the threats that adults made to her sense of being a person. Simone wrote:

[Grow-ups] had the power to cast spells over me; they could turn me into an animal, a thing. ‘What beautiful legs this little girl has!’ enthused a lady who bent down to feel my calves. If I’d been able to say: ‘Silly old woman! She thinks I’m a boiling fowl,’ I’d have been all right. But at three years of age I had no means of redress against that fatuous voice, that gloating smile: all I could do was yell, and throw myself screaming to the pavement.56

The adults around Simone regarded such behaviour as naughty. In a conflict with her mother and her nurse ‘all flailing legs and arms, I would cast myself upon the ground, resisting with all the weight of my flesh and bones the tyranny of that insubstantial power; I forced it to take on material form: I would be seized and shut away in a dark cupboard among the brooms and feather dusters; there I could kick my feet and beat my hands against real walls instead of battling helplessly against the abstractions of another’s will’.57

In her books Judy Dunn frequently comments that small
children are far more intelligent in understanding the actions and intentions of their family than standard intelligence tests would show them to be. This should not be surprising. We all have to be intelligent about those matters which to us are matters of life and death. A newborn baby studies his mother’s face because this is the face which will determine his survival, not just physically but as a person. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, ‘Any reproach made by my mother, and even her slightest frown was a threat to my security: without her approval, I no longer felt I had any right to live.’

Every time we learn something we learn its opposite. Discover what pleases your mother and you know what will upset her. No wonder Judy Dunn’s Cambridge study showed that ‘It was at the moments when the mother picked up the baby to cuddle or caretake that firstborns were likely to do the one thing that their mothers had expressly forbidden, or which particularly irritated them. Tipping the baby’s bathwater out, fiddling with the television, investigating the forbidden kitchen cupboards, all occurred just when the mother was most absorbed in the baby.’ This study showed a 93 per cent increase in naughtiness by the older sibling after the birth of the younger sibling. There was also an increase in tearfulness, clinging, anxiety and particular fears, all reactions to the threat which the child felt to his sense of being a person. Some children created rituals for bedtime, mealtimes, bathtime and saying goodnight to their parents. Such rituals are desperate defences where the child tries to impose order and control on a world which has become dangerously chaotic. An older, more self-confident child can make the discovery that the best defence against adults who threaten your sense of self is to attack. Thus a four-year-old boy could say to his mother on the birth of his sibling, ‘Why have you ruined my life?’

Like Simone de Beauvoir many older siblings soon discover that the younger sibling can be useful. The younger sibling is biddable and so naive that the older sibling can persuade the younger to do things which the older sibling would not dare to do. However, if you are going to boss your sibling around you need to be able to understand the younger sibling’s way of communicating and you need to learn how to communicate in a way that the younger sibling understands. Perhaps solely in
order to please their mother many older siblings use the same kind of baby talk to the baby that the mother uses, but then they find how pleasurable it is when the baby takes notice of them. Also, the baby has been listening to the sibling since he was in the womb and very likely finds it easier to understand his sibling than his mother because his sibling has always spoken a simpler form of the language. We all prefer to speak to someone who appears to understand us rather than to someone who does not. As the psychologist Victor Cicirelli reported, older siblings will make strenuous efforts in communicating effectively with their younger siblings. He wrote, ‘Older siblings showed a great deal of accommodation to the young child’s low level of language competence, including gesturing and demonstrating, speaking louder, paraphrasing, eliciting imitation, and speed. They also solicited repetitions of words or phrases by the young child, and interpreted and expanded the young child’s utterances.’

In some families parents come to rely on the older sibling to interpret what the younger sibling says. Karen and Laura were twins but when she was born Karen’s tongue was slightly enlarged. She began to speak at the same time as her sister but not as clearly. Their parents would ask Laura what Karen had said and Laura would repeat it, perhaps not word for word and not always with exactly the meaning which Karen had intended. This left Karen feeling that she was not allowed to speak for herself, a feeling which persisted even when her tongue naturally adjusted itself to the size of her growing body.

The power that the older sibling acquires in being the senior partner in the enterprise of communication allows the older child to be bossy. This bossiness can be expressed in terms of orders about how to behave, but it also can be expressed in teaching. Both children benefit from this. The younger child gains knowledge and skills; the older child strengthens his sense of who he is. Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

Teaching my sister to read, write, and count gave me, from the age of six onwards, a sense of pride in my own efficiency. I liked scrawling phrases or pictures over sheets of paper: but in doing so I was only creating imitation objects. When I started to change ignorance into knowledge,
when I started to imprint truths upon a virgin mind, I felt I was at last creating something real. I was not just imitating grown-ups: I was on their level, and my success had nothing to do with their good pleasure. It satisfied in me an aspiration that was more than mere vanity. Until then, I had contented myself with responding dutifully to the care that was lavished upon me: but now, for the first time, I, too, was being of service to someone.  

Much of what a young sibling learns from an older happens not in a classroom-like setting but in play, not just in board games and traditional games like hopscotch but in fantasy play. In such play the older sibling gains as much as the younger. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, ‘I owe a great debt to my sister for helping me externalise many of my dreams in play: she also helped me to save my daily life from silence; through her I got into the habit of wanting to communicate with people.’ 

Simone described two kinds of fantasy play she shared with her sister. There were the fantasy games they played when adults were around, based on banal events like ‘selling hats or defying the Boche’s artillery fire’. (This was during the First World War.) Then there were ‘other scenarios, the ones we like the best. At that evening hour when the stillness, the dark weight, and the tedium of our middle-class domesticity began to invade the hall, I would unleash my fantasies; we would make them materialize with great gestures and copious speeches, and sometimes, spellbound in our play, we succeeded in taking off from the earth and leaving it far behind until an imperious voice suddenly brought us back to reality. Next day we would start all over again. “We’ll play you know what,” we would whisper to each other as we prepared for bed.’ 

Not all siblings play together. My friend Fay has an older sister Paula and a younger brother Sean but she feels that they grew up as ‘three only children’. Fay longed to learn from Paula ‘the sensible one’, but Paula shut her out. ‘We didn’t play together. We only kind of teamed up when there was a common enemy like our cousins. When the cousins came we had to get dressed up to such an extent we absolutely hated it, loathed and detested it, so we had that in common.’ 

The strongest attachment between two siblings comes about
when they both realise that they can, indeed they must, band together against the adults. The older sibling may have felt that his world was shattered when the younger sibling was born. He may resent the intruder who steals his parents’ attention and love; but in a world where dangerous, unpredictable giants hold all the power and all the rewards, he at last has an ally.

**United we stand**

Allied against their parents children do what the powerless always do when faced with an enemy. They form an alliance and develop a way of communicating which is kept secret from their enemy. Michael Rosen told me how his brother Brian would read him those subversive comic novels, the Molesworth books. ‘I can remember him standing there in the room, reading these things out to me, hour after hour, and then us looking at the pictures and relating them to the teachers we knew, so that it then became a shared vocabulary. We have a huge shared language of gags, and language play and references and so on that once we get going it’s so exclusive, excluding, that people just go, “Oh, just leave them to it.” We don’t see each other that often, but if we did we’d just become such insufferable bores, because there is that shared stuff.’

Sometimes children have to form an alliance because their parents are incapable of parenting them. In 1975, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was a dangerous place to live. Alexandra was only six but her parents forbade her to go their bedroom during the night because they might mistake her for an intruder and shoot her. So when she wanted a pee she had to wake her big sister Vanessa who was not armed:

Then Van has to light a candle and escort me to the loo, where I pee sleepily into the flickering yellow light and Van keeps the candle high, looking for snakes and scorpions and baboon spiders. . .
I have my feet off the floor when I pee.
‘Hurry up, man.’
‘Okay, okay.’
‘It’s like Victoria Falls.’ . .
Then Vanessa hands me the candle – ‘You can

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‘keep boogies for me now’ – and she pees.
‘See, you had to go too.’
‘Only ’cos you had to go.’

This is how Alexandra Fuller, known to her family as Bobo or Chookies, begins her account of her childhood with her parents, whom she calls Mum and Dad, her sister Vanessa, and the three siblings who died. Although she tells her story very sparingly, letting the events speak for themselves with little mention of what these events meant to her, her book is suffused with her love for her sister Vanessa.

By beginning the book with such an intimacy Alexandra reminds us of how well siblings can know one another. A married couple over the years may get to know how each other pees, craps, farts, smells, coughs and sneezes, but even then their knowledge of one another is not as extensive, so well explored, as the knowledge that two siblings can have of one another. A marriage may dissolve in bitterness and recrimination, but though separated the couple may still feel attached by their intimate knowledge of one another’s bodies. The attachment of siblings through such knowledge can be even stronger than that of couples in marriage. Children find the products of their body endlessly interesting (some never give up this interest). They talk about their products, compare them with those of their siblings, notice and comment on how they each produce such products, and find them to be the source of much humour. These products are also the means of disparaging the other sibling, a means of expressing disgust and rejection, while the acceptance of the other’s products means acceptance of the other person.

Vanessa often disparaged Alexandra and her products but she also showed a degree of acceptance, which in Alexandra’s eyes made her a pearl beyond price. After Zimbabwe became independent of Britain in 1980 the Fullers lost their farm to Prime Minister Mugabe’s government and had to move to an area which old maps designated as ‘Not Fit for White Man’s Habitation’. Dad got the job of rounding up the cattle which had run wild during the war of independence. Vanessa and Alexandra went with their father on one of his trips. They made camp on the banks of the Turgwe River which in the drought was no
more than ‘shrinking, slime-frothed pools of water, warm and green with stagnant life’. Dad warned the girls not to drink the water from the river, but after two weeks they were running short of drinking water so they had to use the river water, but only after it had been ‘boiled for ten minutes and strained to get rid of the lumps of dirt, hippo shit, the worst of the silt’. One long hot afternoon the girls became bored waiting for their father’s return. Vanessa went to sleep but, restless, Alexandra made herself some tea with water that had not been properly boiled. She took only a few sips because it tasted so vile.

By the time Dad comes into camp, Vanessa is holding me up over a fallen log, rear end hanging over one side of it, head hanging over the other. I am naked; all my clothes are in a bag in the tent, soiled with frothy yellow shit. Vanessa has a grip on my shoulders; there is shit streaming from my bum, vomit dribbling into a pool between Vanessa’s feet. . . . Vanessa wipes my mouth and bum with a fistful of leaves and grass. She bathes me, running water over my burning skin from a bucket, and then wraps me in a towel. She carries me into the tent which is rank from the smell of my soiled clothes. . . . Vanessa props me up and tries to feed me some hot tea. I am so thirsty my throat seems stuck together, my tongue feels swollen and cracked. As soon as the liquid hits my belly, I vomit again. My bum and mouth are raw and begin to bleed. . . . Vanessa licks her finger and wipes the edges of my mouth with her moist fingertip. I loll back against her arm. She says, ‘Hold on, Chookies.’ She strokes sweat-wet hair off my forehead and rocks me. ‘Hold on,’ she tells me.

Siblings who live together are likely to share a great deal of physical contact, in playing together, in rough and tumble, in sharing beds, bedrooms, showers and baths. In showing one another love and compassion they may kiss, hug and cuddle one another. Of course this does not happen in all families. Although my sister and I shared a bedroom and a double bed I have no recollection of ever being comforted or cuddled by her. Every family has its own style of physical contact, and the amount and kind of physical contact probably plays an important part in the degree of attachment which siblings form. In
her wonderful book *Animals in Translation* Temple Grandin told how brain research on social attachment has shown that social distress is linked to thermoregulation, the regulation of bodily heat:

Thermoregulation comes up all the time when people talk about relationships. We use the expression ‘maternal warmth’ and we say people are cold or warm. Warm people are loving, kind and connected, and cold people are the opposite. Also, people who are feeling lonely usually want to be touched, which comes from the fact that in the wild babies keep warm by staying close to their parents’ bodies.

I know this sounds strange, but researchers believe that social warmth evolved out of the brain system that handles physical warmth. That should tell you something about how important social attachment is to animals. In all mammals a baby has to have strong social attachment to its parents in order to survive. A baby wolf needs social contact to stay emotionally warm as much as it needs physical contact to stay physically warm. *Social attachment is a survival mechanism* that evolved from the survival mechanism of keeping the body warm.67

Animal and human siblings may comfort one another but they also fight. Fighting amongst animal siblings has been seen as the way animals, especially male animals, learn to fight to win. However, research has not supported this hypothesis. The movements in real fights are different from those in roughhousing play. In animals the brain circuits for aggression are different from those in play. (They may also be different in children and there may be some research on this but investigating what goes on in animals’ brains is more ethically acceptable than doing the same kind of research on small children.) Temple Grandin wrote:

The other piece of evidence that play fighting isn’t about learning to win is the fact that all animals both win *and* lose their play fights. No young animal ever wins all his play fights; if he did, no one would play with him. When a juvenile animal is bigger, stronger, older and more dominant than the younger animal he is play fighting with,

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the bigger animal will roll over on his back and lose on purpose a certain amount of the time. That’s called self-handicapping, and all animals do it. . . Some behaviourists say that the fact that all animals self-handicap might mean that the purpose of play fighting isn’t to teach animals how to win but to teach them how to win and lose. All animals probably need to know both the dominant and subordinate role, because no animal starts out on top, and no animal who lives to old age ends up on top.68

Siblings learn about hierarchy in their disputes but much, much more happens in their fights. Sometimes a sibling starts a fight with his sibling in order to distract himself from a fear aroused by the situation he is in. This is what Vanessa did one day when the war was still raging in Zimbabwe and the family’s dogs had become ill:

We are not supposed to leave the valley without an armed escort because there are landmines in the road on the way to Umtali and terrorist ambushes and Dad is on patrol, so we are women-without-men which is supposed to be some weakened state of affairs. But this is an emergency. We put the dogs in the car and drive as fast as we can out of the valley, up the escarpment to the dusty wastelands of the Tribal Trust Land and round the snake-body road which clings to the mountain and spits us out again at the paper factory (which smells pungent and rotten and warm) so that when we drive past it as a family Vanessa holds her nose and sings, ‘Bobo farted.’ ‘Did not.’ ‘Bo-bo fart-ed.’ Until I am in tears and then Mum says, ‘Shuddup both of you or you’ll both get a good hiding.’69

Some of the fights between siblings are far more significant matters than family hierarchy and fear. Siblings may scream insults at one another, or exchange heavy blows, or destroy each other’s possessions. Some do all three. Such fights are bitter and vicious, necessarily so because each sibling is fighting for survival as a person. The cause for which each child is fighting is far greater than mere rivalry for their parents’ love.

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and attention. Each sibling knows the other so well that each knows what the other will find the most threatening. They want to turn the other into a non-person, no-thing in order to make themselves safe. Fights occur because one sibling has said or done something which the other finds a threat to his sense of being a person. He needs to assert himself as a person and so he attacks in order to deal with the terrible emotional meanings that make up his perception of the threat to the sense of being a person. These meanings include feelings of being worthless, of catastrophic loss, betrayal, abandonment, desperate hurt, torment and anguish, murderous hate, feelings of being robbed, lost and defeated.

I well remember the desperation with which I fought my big sister. Contemptuous of me, she would act with complete disregard of me and my interests in order to fulfil her own needs and wishes. I would feel that she was reducing me to being nothing but dust beneath her feet, and so I had to fight her in order to survive. On some occasions my sister deliberately instigated a fight as older children do, but on most occasions she would express great surprise that quite inexplicably I was suddenly so angry with her. To this day my sister sees me as someone who may become angry with her for no reason whatsoever. The psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell can provide an explanation. She has pointed out that when a second child is born the first child loses his identity. He had been the mother’s baby. Now there is another. For the first child this is a trauma which will diminish with time but never go away completely.

In a similar way the trauma for my sister continued to recur. I became a very pretty toddler. I learned to read without being aware that I was learning this complex skill. My sister saw me as being prettier and cleverer than she was, and every time a relative or neighbour commented favourably on me my sister saw this as a rejection. She dealt with the repeated trauma by using her preferred mode of defence, repression. She has often told me that she remembers little of her childhood and she is amazed that I remember so much. Thus, as a child and teenager she had no conscious memory of the loss of her identity when I was born and the threats to her identity which followed, but unconsciously she wanted to do to me what I had done to her. Our physical fights ceased in our teens but I came to dread

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having to meet my sister because I knew that without fail she would say or do something which would get under my guard and hurt me. If I protested about what she had done she would produce some rationalisation that absolved her of all responsibility and put me in the wrong.

Anyone who has a somewhat fraught relationship with a sibling knows how difficult it is to talk about these incidents which cause intense upset and frustration yet in themselves are utterly trivial. If you talk to others about them you sound petty and mean: if you try to talk to your sibling in the hope of improving your mutual understanding inevitably mutual misunderstanding increases, causing more upset and frustration. If you try to sever relations with your sibling, or simply reduce the number of times you meet, other family members will make clear their disapproval, and you will be told that ‘Blood is thicker than water.’ Few people seem prepared to accept that attachment between two siblings can take many forms. Most sibling attachments are composed of contradictions which allow no complete resolution.

Not all attachments are primarily loving. Some siblings are attached by a hatred that can never turn to indifference. For one or both of siblings the other looms so large, so threateningly, that it is not possible to walk away. When we see someone as being a danger to us we have to be aware all the time of where the person is and what he is doing. There is an old saying that reminds us to keep our friends close but our enemies even closer. If we see someone as having the power to destroy us our hatred becomes a defence whereby we can assure ourselves that we have the power to destroy our enemy and keep ourselves safe. Having an enemy means that you are important to at least one person, your enemy, and your enemy adds excitement to a life which otherwise may be very dull. For many people, and not just siblings, their hatred of their enemy becomes the only thing that gives them and their life significance, and they cannot give it up.

In some sibling attachments the love which one sibling gives the other is never quite enough. Sophie, only 15 months younger than her sister Ester, wanted to talk to me about her relationship with Ester but found it hard to describe. She said, ‘We’re very different, both in personality and appearance, and
we have a relationship that is in lots of ways close, and very important, and I suspect very painful to both of us, but always difficult. There is always conflict somewhere, and I suppose I feel that there’s a significant degree of competition between us.’ She added, ‘Although they’re not very well-formed memories, I have a sense of feeling quite protected by her actually. Yet, if I look back at what my memories of childhood are, a lot of it is about competition on some level or another. I enjoyed it up to a point. But I think it’s very exhausting. I’ve always had a sense that there was something wearing, or draining about endlessly competing.’

It seemed that Ester’s protectiveness had an element of possessiveness in it. Sophie told me about an incident when she was about eight when Ester became very angry with some girls who had treated Sophie badly. ‘I remember being aware, even then, that this was a sort of contrast to our interactions at other times. It was as if it was okay for us to compete – and this is my perception, I’m sure not hers – for her to be unkind to me sometimes, but it was definitely not okay for anybody else to do it.’

Sophie said, ‘When we’re together and getting on, it’s terrific fun. I find her very funny and interesting to be with, and lively, and it’s just exciting and warm.’ Yet, ‘I often feel very anxious and tense about our meeting because I think we could have a row, and we often do have a row, and I’m quite defensive and she, I think, is quite combative.’ Recently they had fought over something which to an onlooker would seem utterly trivial, something that could have been sorted out with a minimum of compromise and forbearance on both sides. There could not be any compromise or forbearance on the part of Ester because as she saw the incident it posed the question, ‘Do you love me more than anyone else?’ Sophie said, ‘I think she sets me challenges all the time. If she goes away, or if she needs something doing, it’s me that she wants to do it. It feels like a test. Most of the time I’m very happy to do it, but there’s a sense that I don’t have a choice, because if I say no I would be rejecting her in some way, making her feel that she isn’t loved. I think she wants to feel that she comes first, that she is more important to me than either anyone or anything else, and somehow if something else gets put first, then I don’t love her enough.’

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I asked, ‘Does she come first in your affections?’ Sophie replied, ‘No, I don’t think she does.’ I commented to Sophie that people can get stuck in a situation where they want two opposite outcomes. They suspect that they are not loved as they wish to be loved and they want the object of their suspicions to prove them to be both right and wrong. Possibly Ester cannot bear to give up her hope that she is first in her sister’s affections while she fears that if her suspicions were proved right then the pain of rejection would overwhelm and annihilate her. If that is the case then she will stay stuck in a circle of affection and recrimination, unable to live together peacefully or to part. Sophie said, ‘We’ve tried when we’ve had a big row, we’ve tried not seeing one another. It’s usually her that suggests it. Then that dissipates and gradually we creep back into the same kind of routine.’

Sometimes the attachment goes only one way. One sibling longs for the other to love him and take notice of him, but the other sibling does not respond in any positive way. Max was the youngest of four children. Although as a child he shared a bedroom with his brother Alec, who was nearly six years older, they were never friends. Max said, ‘Alec beat me up quite hard. He meant it. My brother hated me. I had no relationship with him at all.’ At school Alec had a reputation for being ‘a bad boy’, with the result that when Max arrived at the school the teachers expected the worst of him. Alec left home at seventeen to work as a jackaroo in the bush. Max said, ‘After he left home I wrote to him for years. I worked hard to keep in touch.’ When I asked him why, he said, ‘I don’t know. Perhaps I wanted his acceptance.’

On Max’s parents’ sixtieth wedding anniversary he organised an elegant garden party and spared no effort in making sure that his brother was able to attend, even though by then the two men normally avoided one another. Max had decided that as he was now 40 and had, through his work, developed all the skills of peaceful negotiation and getting along well with others, he should approach Alec in the expectation that they could now put all their past difficulties behind them. Unfortunately Alec had not reached the same point of view. He made it clear to Max that his hatred of him had not diminished in any way. Max was deeply hurt but then he had a sudden flash of
understanding. He said, ‘I realised that Alec was afraid of me. He thought that I had got my mother’s love while he had not. I found it all very distressing, but when I chose to see his behaviour as jealousy I could let go of my anger and hurt.’

Both Sophie and Max, like most people when they talk about their relationships with their siblings, commented on how different they were from their siblings in what is usually called ‘personality’ or ‘temperament’. This seems to be seen as the main factor in determining the nature of a sibling relationship. People often say, ‘It was always a clash of personalities’ or ‘Our temperaments weren’t compatible.’ When questioned they say that what they mean is that there was something so distinctive, so individual, about the way each sibling interpreted themselves and their world that compatibility of outlook was often hard to achieve, but if achieved it was greatly valued.

In her research on sibling relationships with one another, their family and friends, Judy Dunn acknowledges that sibling attachment can take many forms. She makes occasional references to ‘children’s temperamental characteristics’ and says: ‘The personalities of both children in a friendship dyad and both children in the sibling pair probably need to be taken into account in looking for connections across the relationships.’ In her study with Robert Plomin of why siblings are so different she wrote: ‘The term personality covers dozens of dimensions . . . Sibling correlations are very low for nearly all personality traits. The few exceptions reach no higher than .40 [on a range from 0 to 1] and include traits that might more properly be considered attitudes, such as masculinity–femininity, tolerance for ambiguity, and traditionalism (conformity and conservativeness).’

In psychology ‘personality’ and ‘temperament’ are hugely problematic. It is a problem of the psychologists’ own making. We all know that we are individuals, no two of us are the same. However, when psychologists wanted to study what they called individual variation they were certainly not going to ask people how they experienced themselves. That would be ‘subjective’ and ‘unscientific’. Psychologists have always preferred to study fictions that can be measured and counted than real lived experience. They prefer to study what people can be seen to do rather than ask them to talk, in their own words, about
their own experience. If they do ask people about their attitudes and habits psychologists prefer to use standardised interviews and questionnaires which cannot help but allow those interviewed to lie, dissemble and deny. Sometimes a questionnaire forces a person to lie because it contains questions which are not relevant to the life of the person answering the questions. Of course, none of us will reveal our private thoughts and weaknesses to someone we do not know and trust. Judy Dunn always made sure that her interviewers got to know the mothers and children they interviewed, and the mothers and children got to know the interviewers. In such interviews, differences in temperament and personality shine through what the mothers and children say about themselves, but personality questionnaires are useless in capturing this. These tests measure ‘traits’, little lumps of stuff that psychologists think exist inside us, lumps called ‘sociability’, ‘moodiness’, religiosity’, ‘traditionalism’, and so on. What psychologists call traits are no more than abstract nouns abstracted from the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, meanings and interpretations which people create.

Making questionnaires is a profitable industry and so there are a great many personality tests. To make a questionnaire psychologists give sets of questions to large numbers of people, questions which have to be answered using a rating scale that yields numbers which can be correlated together. Then, using a statistical analysis sometimes known as factor analysis or principal component analysis, psychologists extract factors or traits. One trait which turns up in just about every questionnaire is ‘extraversion’. In the largest study yet completed of extraversion in siblings a correlation of only 0.23 was found. This means that in a family some but not all siblings are likely to possess the trait of extraversion. But we already know that. In any family it is likely that one child will be sociable and outgoing and another quiet and thoughtful. Sometimes these two siblings get along well together and sometimes they do not. That can be expected because each of them sees themselves and their world in such different ways.