

PART ONE

Females in the Family Way

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A Tale of Two Sisters

Trina is middle-aged, white, twice divorced, and one of seven sisters. She works as an administrative assistant and has a son and a daughter as well as a brand-new granddaughter. Renae is a decade younger, black, and still married to the father of her son. A high-level executive, she is the older of two sisters. Trina and Renae have never met, yet they share a deeply personal connection: both are in conflicted female family relationships, a situation that many of us share.

Trina

Trina, a petite blonde with a slow smile and thoughtful brown eyes, describes herself as the family outcast, a role she thinks her children have inherited. She has six sisters, in birth order: Lydia (who died traumatically at age twenty-one), Lisa, Annie, twins Marie and Carrie, and Nan. Trina is now the second oldest, with the siblings all separated in age by only a year or two.

Trina recognized early on that she was the odd sister out. She explains:

It's funny, when you look at pictures you can see how Mom dressed us in groups, and I was always dressed differently, even early on. Lydia was a rebel who dropped out of school and was always in trouble with drugs and boys. I looked up to her because she had guts and was bold, her own person. After she died, I kind of took her place, going off to the military and leaving the family, then getting divorced, and so on.

Lisa was first in everything—she was my competition, but we got along really well when we got older and lived near each other, but then had a falling out because she’s an alcoholic. My parents wanted us girls to patch things up—they even asked me to give her a car, something they wouldn’t do themselves.

I stopped speaking to her, and to this day we are estranged. I go places knowing she’ll be there, but we don’t talk. It really bugs me that she deceives our parents about her alcohol problem and pretends to be so good. She’s the “needy” one, but one of Mom’s favorites. She’ll do anything for Lisa.

Annie is the sister I feel closest to. Even though she is my next-youngest sibling, she is the one who took care of me. When I got my period, it was Annie who found out what I should do. Our relationship has gone through many cycles. She moved away and we were distant; then I found her a job where I worked, and I convinced her to move back north. For seven years we worked together and went to lunch every day. Then she up and quit to work somewhere else.

The twins are loud and boisterous. They have a love-hate relationship with each other and have even gotten into physical fights. Nan, the baby, lives close by my mom and spends all her days off with her. We’re close, but that might be because there’s a competition between Nan and Annie, so Nan sides with me on issues and supports me in my conflicts with Annie.

Trina’s parents have had a complicated marital history. Her parents were separated for a period of time, during which her mom had a relationship with another man and became pregnant with the twins. They were raised by Trina’s dad and accepted as his own. Her parents separated again and finally divorced when Trina was in ninth grade.

She recalls that when her mom left she went alone, but then came back and took Nan with her. Trina intuitively understood that it would be a natural choice to take the youngest child, but it still bothered her that only one daughter got to go. Eventually all the girls were reunited with their mother (with the exception of one twin, who stayed with their dad).

Trina’s dad remarried, but neither Trina nor her sisters get along with their stepmom, whom Trina refers to as “my dad’s wife.” She

has nothing to do with her stepsisters (“my dad’s wife’s daughters”) and admits she is jealous of them.

She says, “She [her stepmom] took a part of our life away.” This was apparent to her one time when Trina’s father invited Trina and her sisters to a Christmas dinner but then ignored them in favor of his new family.

“I never really felt my parents were there for me—I still don’t. They speak to me directly only when there’s a reason; when I want or need information, I get it from Annie. Everyone talks to her.” Trina looks sad and angry when she shares this.

There’s been ongoing competition among the sisters, with Trina feeling like one of her sisters always bested her, either by needing something more than she did, or by getting more attention from their parents. Her main rival was Lisa, who even beat her to having the first grandchild. As Trina says, “I called my mom, all excited, only to be told that [unmarried] Lisa was already two months pregnant.”

Although Trina’s first marriage fell apart before she got to know her husband’s family, she was able to establish a good relationship with her second mother-in-law.

“Things were very open and honest,” she says. “But my sisters-in-law couldn’t stand me. I was really hurt when my kids weren’t mentioned in their grandmother’s obituary because they weren’t ‘full-blooded’ family. My daughter had gotten pretty close to my mother-in-law.”

Annie is still the woman Trina calls her best friend—in fact, she doesn’t feel close to any other women. Annie’s kids were Trina’s favorites and vice versa—Trina’s daughter was more attached to Annie than to her grandmother. Trina explains her strong bond to Annie without hesitation: “I know Annie will always be there for me. My other sisters would, to a degree, but it’s Annie that’s the certainty.”

Still, she admits that there has always been a subtler, more aggressive side to Annie, who has tried to sabotage Trina’s relationships with men, set her up for problems with their mother, and criticized Trina’s parenting style. That rivalry, to a lesser degree, extends to other sisters as well.

“Annie always wants what everyone else has, and she battles with Nan to this day for our mom’s attention. She’ll always try to be doing things with her and calling her to make sure she’s more involved than Nan.”

The close relationship between Trina and Annie changed this past spring.

“Annie called as usual and invited me for our traditional Easter dinner, but she refused to include Mark, the man I’ve been dating for over two years. I introduced the idea of Mark into my family very carefully, because at first, the thought of my dating a black man was very upsetting to some of my sisters and Mom, who made it all about her. Everyone eventually came around, but Annie has held out, which I don’t understand. I can’t believe she’s that prejudiced.”

After the revelation about Mark, Annie sent Trina a series of guilt-provoking e-mails and said she never wanted to see her again. With a sad shake of her head, Trina says if a friend had treated her that way, she would have cut off contact with her.

“I saw in Annie a person who was not very nice. I considered ending the relationship, because if I ever married Mark, he would never be invited over and she wouldn’t even talk about him with me.”

Although Trina’s relationship with Mark continues, she avoids mentioning him to Annie, still hopeful that she can change her sister’s mind.

“I should hate this woman,” Trina says, reflecting on her sister’s refusal to change her mind about Mark. “Twice she has set me up for problems at work, once which led to me getting fired, and now this.”

Trina has met Mark’s ex-wife and teenage daughter, as well as his sisters. They have all been welcoming and don’t mind that Trina is white. In fact, Trina thinks she could have good relationships with all of them—but it’s the friendship with Annie that matters most to her. It’s clear as we speak that she still wants to find some way—any way—to resolve the conflict between them.

Trina will always carry a hurt inside her because of her past relationships with her sisters, particularly Annie. Those wounds are being played out in everyday ways as Trina sees her children slighted, herself excluded, and the rivalries ongoing among her siblings.

Renae

Although Renae comes from a small nuclear family, the pain she feels as a consequence of her female relationships is just as significant as Trina's is. Renae grew up with her mom, Pat, and an extensive network of women who are like family to her—but it's her only sister, Casee, that she's closest to.

"My mom, who is an only child, instilled in us that we must be very loyal to each other. We might have conflicts inside the house because, for example, I was light-skinned and had long hair and she was darker with short hair, but outside it was different—we stuck up for each other. Casee liked to fight, so she protected me many times."

Although their parents were careful not to label either of them, certain expectations were conveyed nonetheless. Every night Renae sat down on the sofa to watch the news and read the paper—she still has a mental image of herself surrounded by her dad's college textbooks. Meanwhile, Casee was free to play or do something else.

"Casee was the rebel, but her critical thinking skills are not sharp, so she would always get in trouble. For example, if I wanted to go out and meet a boy behind my parents' back, I would just say I was going out to meet a girlfriend. Casee, on the other hand, would do something dumb like not come home on time or sneak out of the house. Of course, she got caught—sometimes I think she wanted to."

Both girls were closer to their dad, which Renae attributes to her mother's fussiness. "With her, there was never enough," she explains.

Although Renae now appreciates that her mother's strict budgeting and discipline kept their family intact, when Renae was growing up, she viewed her dad as the good guy. That added further tension to a relationship that was already conflicted.

"Dad was a professional and made a lot of money, but he thought nothing of blowing his entire paycheck on presents, which meant we had many lean years and lived in the 'projects' early on. Mom resented that I never recognized this was my father's fault," she says, clearly ambivalent. "She was the responsible one, but then she expected us to turn against our father because of his behavior."

At age fifteen, Casee got pregnant. She wanted to marry the father and have the child, but she was forced by her parents to have an abortion, which led to serious depression and ongoing substance abuse. Before Casee graduated from high school, she got pregnant again but kept the baby, a girl named Shanay. Her third child, a son, was born right before Renae's wedding, although Casee wouldn't even admit she was pregnant.

"Sure enough, three days after she delivered, she walked down the aisle," Renae says, laughing.

After her parents divorced, Renae's dad remarried, so she also has a half brother. Clearly, though, relationships with other women are at the heart of her family: both those she grew up with and those who came into her life later.

Despite Renae and Casee's closeness, Renae's relationship with her sister has turned out to be a disappointment for both of them. "We've talked about it," says Renae. "Casee says I don't understand how difficult life is for her. She's tried so many programs through welfare but ends up with the same pattern of finding men who are abusive, which leads to a relapse with her addiction. She sees me as having an easy life with a husband and a son and a good job. She doesn't realize that while she was out partying, I was at home reading books to my kid, and while she was finding one problem man after another, I was in college."

Both of Casee's children have struggled. Shanay, now a teenager, lived with Renae for a time to try and change her life, while her brother, Bill, has been in constant trouble with the law. The sisters realize that in some way their children's lives mirror their own: Renae's son is on track to attend college while Casee's children face an uncertain future.

Still, Casee and Renae have managed to stay closer to each other than they have to their mother.

"Our mom created this situation," Renae notes. "After her own mom died, she wanted an excessively close bond with us, but we could never give her enough. So now we have this tight bond with each other, exclusive of her, sort of an alliance against our mom because we don't want to deal with her. We call her 'your mom' to each other."

Renae says her mom is a "people collector," a practice Renae has

emulated in a different way, building a network of fictive kin that includes her godmother and various aunts.

“My godmom is another woman I’m close to. We’re like spirits—I’m more her daughter than I am my mom’s. When all three of us are together at a family gathering it can get strained, because both she and my mom want all my attention, and I get caught in the middle.”

Renae clearly wishes her relationship with her mother were different, but their concern for Casee is the only area where they see eye to eye.

“My mom is always giving advice, always telling me to do such and such when she doesn’t do it herself, and she’s envious of my life, so she’ll give me lots of suggestions about that. If my husband and I have a fight, she takes his side! That really gets to me, but I have been praying for our relationship to change.”

Alice, her father’s aunt, is another woman Renae is close to, but her mother tries to horn in on that relationship, which doesn’t work: she doesn’t understand that Renae and Alice love to shop and that they have their own special system for the excursions they take. “She gets upset when she’s sitting waiting and is the outsider and doesn’t understand why we don’t enjoy having her along,” Renae says.

Although Renae’s relationship with her husband’s sister got off to a rocky start, Renae has a better relationship with the woman who married her husband’s only brother. “We both understand what it means to be married into the family,” she explains. Her relationship with her mother-in-law couldn’t be better.

“I love her,” Renae says. “She gets that she’s not there to criticize but to encourage, and that the relationship isn’t about me and her. Some of the best advice I’ve gotten has come from my mother-in-law—very practical advice that prepared me well for marriage. She told me, ‘Some years you will hate him,’ so when the years came and I hated my husband, I was ready for that.”

Renae talked about differences she sees between herself and white women when it comes to family: “The woman takes over the race issue. Many of the values, issues, and behaviors are the same, but ethnicity makes things play out differently.”

She notes that because black women have had to head

households, there was often a need to create a powerful sisterhood that bonded them together. “I feel an automatic connection with other women who are black—we walk through life in the same way and have a common lens we use to view the world,” she says. “I’ve lived in the projects and lived in a nice house, so I know both sides. But there’s a poverty mentality, so that instead of understanding and being happy for me, the question is, ‘How come that didn’t happen to me?’”

Sister or Sinister?

Biological or social sisterhood can be intensely supportive or devastatingly destructive, as Trina and Renae discovered. While the type of bond may vary, the behaviors are strikingly similar: exclusion, ridicule, gossip, and a host of other relationally aggressive behaviors that fan the flames of “kitchen wars.” These emotional battles among female relatives are larger in magnitude and impact than the offenses of even our dearest friends.

More love, more difficulty, more anguish, and more of everything are the hallmarks of both distant and close female relationships within families. Although the vow “for better or worse” is voluntary in marriage, we don’t have a choice about the women we grow up with or those who enter our families and our lives for decades when we’re adults.