

Sisters

by Phillis Ideal

Four little girls raced up the stairs to the second-floor bedroom to claim their favorite ensemble from the dress-up trunk. Each step took them farther away from the clinking cocktail glasses, and raucous laughter of the adults, assembled in the large living room on the ground floor. The turn of the century house's spacious rooms, high ceilings, and cushioned window seats was the perfect setting to play "Little Women," based on Louisa May Alcott's novel and 1949 movie.

They had seen the movie countless times and knew the story by heart, but their script was made up, and the clothing their mothers had donated was reconfigured to adorn the character they had chosen to play. Jo was tailored, Amy was frivolous with ribbons and bows, Meg was plain and sensible; and Beth, who was ill and had no costume changes, wore the same nightgown throughout the dress-up session.

Each time they climbed to the top of the steps, they encountered a large framed photograph of the sisters who lived in the house. It was a textbook example of sibling rivalry: Morgan, who was seven, could not tolerate four-year-old Abby, who wanted to be included and copy her older sister. The photograph captured Morgan glowering down at Abby, her eyes narrowed, her young brow wrinkled, and a smirk pulled at one corner of her mouth. She wanted her little sister to vanish and nothing of her to ever be found. Better yet, she wished she had never been born. She cut her sister out of snapshots that left gaping holes that lassoed the depth of her envy. In contrast, Abby was grinning ear-to-ear, always obedient when asked for a big smile.

Morgan, who fiercely played Meg, the eldest sister in "Little Women," rearranged the original story in which Beth dies of scarlet fever near the end of the second half of the book. She commanded that Beth die immediately, almost at the beginning of the play

session, to get rid of Abby, who always was assigned the role of the sick Beth.

“Beth, you are dead,” she would trumpet “and no longer with us. So leave.”

Two patches of bright anger bloomed on Abby's cheeks, a soggy stream of tears drowned her face, and sobs shook her small body. She wadded up her gown so she would not trip and stumbled toward the stairs, once again, to report to her mother that she had not been allowed to play. The other girls were uncomfortable with this bullying but dodged confronting Morgan, counting on an adult to handle this reoccurring situation. Morgan was the ringleader and the glue of grounding the story. If the other two girls had refused to play according to Morgan's rules, they feared the dress-up game would break up, and they would lose something that they might never get back- the path of who they could become. The girls were selfishly intent on inhabiting their chosen role models and speaking through their favorite character.

Abby began to howl as she reached the living room filled with half-drunk adults. Her grandmother picked her up and said, “I have just the answer. You and I will make some wonderful sugar cookies. You can stir the mixture and lick the bowl and help me cut out different shapes. These cookies will be just for you, and we will keep them in this cookie jar in the pantry. You will not have to share them with anyone.”

Morgan's envy reached a fever pitch when she saw the pleasure that making cookies afforded her little sister. She watched her swirling the flour, sugar, and butter in a large bowl with a tasting spoon to lick as she popped the cookie sheet in the oven; and had a short wait to again feel sugar's soothing effects.

One night when Abby was fast asleep, Morgan changed out the sugar for salt, and eagerly awaited the next time that Abby made cookies and had her first bite.

