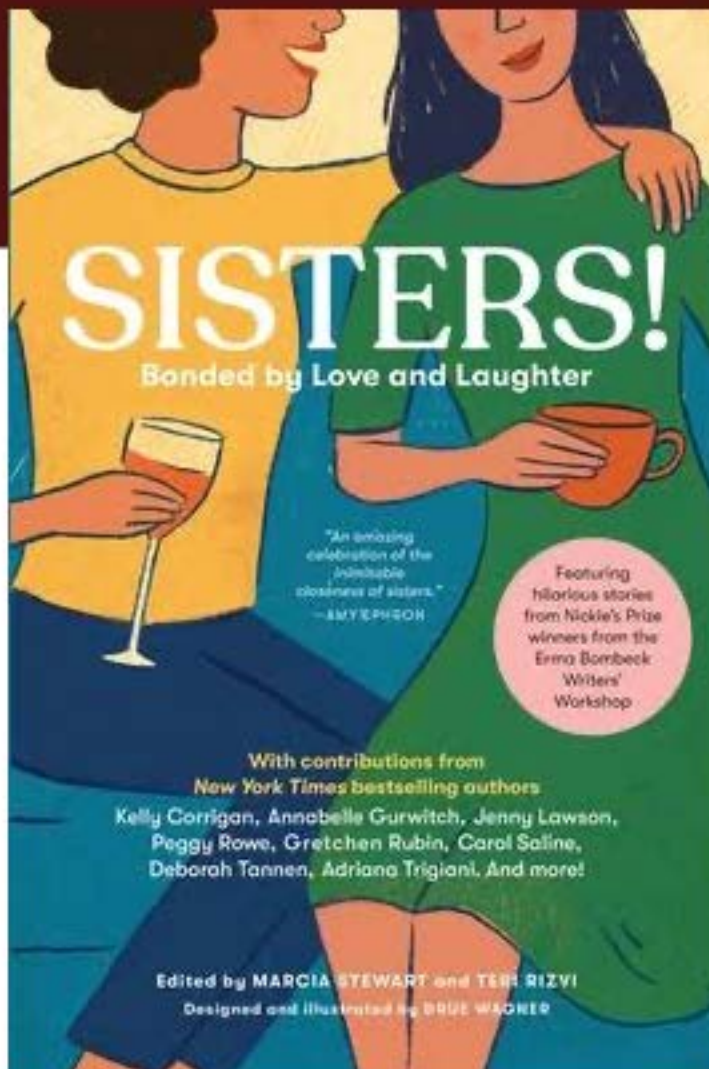


Words with Sisters

by Rich Stim

Essay Selected for:



Words With Sisters

1.

Years ago, my sister and I sat on her bed at our home in Long Island, and we played a board game called Careers. You had to write down a prediction of how much fame, fortune, and happiness you would achieve (it had to equal 60 points) and then choose a career — politics, law, sports, space, show business, big business — that would help you achieve your prediction. We played in my sister's room, a converted attic with some memorable features: a window that opened onto the roof, a chimney painted white that ran through the center of the room, and a display of dolls from around the world. Also, on the plus side, the room was about as far away as you could get from my mother.

I must have been 13 when I started cheating at Careers (my sister was almost 16). I was fascinated by con-men and swindlers at the time, so I made up a system using duplicate fame-fortune-happiness predictions. It was a half-baked plan, and my furtive moves may have raised my sister's suspicions. I tried other Careers scams, and a few weeks later, she caught me in a different fraud. After I rolled the dice, I tapped my token on each square, creating an audible cue. Then, I would double tap it on a square to avoid landing somewhere undesirable. It worked a few times.

There was no fight when she caught me — we didn't fight — but she called me a cheater and displayed annoyance and maybe disappointment. She didn't have to say it. I could read it on her face. "What kind of brother cheats on his sister?"

I don't remember playing much Careers after that. Things changed. She had her sweet sixteen and was busy with high school friends.

A few years after that, she was off to college at Syracuse, and a few years after that, I left for Indiana. Eventually, we both moved to the Bay Area. I settled in San Francisco. My sister in Berkeley. My mother said we moved as far away from her as we could get.

2.

My sister and I began playing Words With Friends in 2013. I was grateful she'd fit me into her busy WWF life. She had many friends playing simultaneously, and I had none. We had different strategies. She was a defensive player, keeping the premium squares off-limits, and nesting her words into impenetrable squares and rectangles. I had a brash style, making bold moves and risking exposing triple-point squares. Neither of us acknowledged the incongruity, that we were playing a variation of my mother's favorite board game, Scrabble.

My mother was a serious game player, dominating, competitive, and always in a hurry. My sister and I avoided playing with her, but we liked it when my mother played Scrabble with her older sister (my aunt Shirlee). They were tight siblings, intimate confidants, who always lived within 10 miles of each other. As teenagers during the Depression, they were fatherless. They worked in their mother's clothing store while earning college degrees. The best side of my mother emerged when she was with her sister, fiddling with the wooden tiles.

3.

In 2014 my mother died. My sister called me with the news. We had about four weeks to manage the funeral and to prepare the house for sale. (Our father had already passed 11 years earlier, drowned on a family vacation.)

We decided to move back into the house to take care of business. Just my sister and me.

Back on Long Island, in our mid-sixties, we slept in our childhood bedrooms, managed my mother's funeral, and listened to the guests describe someone we never knew. Once that was over, we plunged into the exhausting task of erasing our existence from the family home. The physical work involved — it was like a home renovation in reverse — wore me down. Furniture and appliances disappeared, carpets and rugs and lamps vanished, and our sibling relationship ricocheted around the barren house. My sister didn't share my concerns about meeting the deadline. She socialized with neighbors, hung out with my mother's friends whenever they dropped by and drove into the city to see her daughter.

Sometimes siblings battle after a parent dies. My sister and I vowed to avoid that outcome. So, halfway through our visit, I was surprised when I found myself in a screaming argument over what to do with my mother's living room chairs. My sister and I had opposing approaches to emptying the house. She favored the "keep" pile (which meant she had to ship it cross-country) and debated every family heirloom, often discussing its provenance. (I supported the toss/giveaway pile.) Often, she tried to convince me to take items back to California. I started wearing a sign, "I don't want it."

Despite the strain on our relationship, my sister and I continued to play Words With Friends, a virtual Switzerland among the chaos.

One morning we had a strangely explosive argument driving to the lawyer's office. My sister, no slave to punctuality, had caused us to be at least twenty minutes late for a meeting that had been very difficult to book. My sister wasn't fazed by the delay. The tone escalated. We both lost control, and almost simultaneously, we each accused the other of behaving like our mother. That shut us both up because it was true.

We were silent, considering the ramifications. Two sibling sexagenarians channeling their unstable matriarch. Sitting in traffic gridlock, I had my epiphany, and I think she had hers. I won't bore you with the details, but I vowed to be a better brother, to respect my sister for who she was, and to stop cheating at Words With Friends.