My sister, myself

>Chance made us siblings; we were cordial (with effort) but never close. Then midlife forced us to forge a deeper bond

>> *by* SALLY KOSLOW

The author (left) and her sister, Betsy, were already polarizing each other 40 years ago.

GROWING UP, my sister and I didn't hang out much. Betsy had her friend Birdie for that and I, Suzy from the block. We did, however, share a bedroom. There were two good things about this: our veddy British rose-strewn wallpaper and the fact that Betsy, almost four years younger, was a rapt audience for the rambling bedtime stories I invented, invariably featuring princesses with flourishy names. Unfortunately, our sleeping arrangement also meant I was forced to comply with a younger child's curfew, while our brother, Dick, closer in age to me, got to stay up late.

Ultimately, it was my filibustering—or so I believed—that moved our parents to build a larger house, where Dick, Betsy and I each got our own bedroom. This terminated most sisterly contact.

Betsy was busy with Barbies, and I morphed into a teenager fixated on boys, hair and whether I'd make cheerleader (I did not). I remember little about her from those years, although she was becoming, I realized much later, a budding artist with a curious mind.

Soon I went east to a Big Ten university. When Betsy began college, in Boston, I'd started working in Manhattan, where she

would occasionally visit. By this time I was ready for the role of elder stateswoman, except Betsy wasn't buying the advice I wanted to spew. The turf she'd claimed was Everything Not Sally. I lusted after clothes—what else would you expect of an assistant editor at *Mademoiselle*?—while she was no slave to fashion. Or makeup. Or anything, it seemed, in my world. I married someone like me, a fomer student war protester, good dancer and cynic who liked movies, off-Broadway shows and the occasional illegal substance. Betsy spent her junior year in Jerusalem and returned engaged to a scary-smart Harvard philosophy major studying to be a rabbi, a career she flirted with herself.

Groundhog Day: Betsy and Sally (here, ages four and seven) were dressed alike. Then the outfit would come Betsy's way again, as a hand-me-down.

My sister and I were raised in captivity—well, North Dakota—as Reform Jews, but now she'd kicked it up numerous notches, keeping kosher and strictly observing the Sabbath. This meant that she wouldn't answer the phone or ride in a car after the sun set on Friday nights. When my son was born late on a Friday afternoon in January, my sister couldn't phone me or jump on a subway to visit, for a full 24 hours.

We were two wives in our twenties living only four subway stops apart on a small island 2,000 miles away from our roots, but we shared no friends, no intimacy and no mutual concept of how to have fun. Then again, it's hard to have fun with someone you suspect is judging you as deeply superficial, which is how I guessed my sister sized up my frivolous, secular life. And I admit that plenty of Betsy's choices annoyed me simply because they seemed to represent a rejection of mine. OK, she'd transformed herself into the Jewish Wonder Woman, but would it have killed her to use mascara? Watch the Oscars, a Coen brothers movie or some Princess Diana coverage? Shop a sample sale, for god's sake?

Betsy's first son was born a few months after my second one, but not even this happy coincidence cemented our bond. Soon afterward, she moved to Philadelphia, where her husband topped off his CV with an MBA and a PhD from yet another Ivy League school. My sister and I spoke every week or two, but I always had the feeling she kept a timer nearby so she wouldn't piddle away too many valuable minutes on me.

Then our mother got sick. Our parents had retired to San Diego—climate, climate, climate—but a year later, Mom started exhibiting freaky mental lapses. Within a few years she'd descended into full-blown Alzheimer's, and our parents' sunny retirement turned to film noir. Now my sister and I had plenty to talk about, and the conversations could no longer be brief; we had to solve family problems. But while our relationship reached cordial, we never hit close. Sometimes Betsy would let slip that she'd visited friends in my neighborhood, and I'd feel miffed, knowing she hadn't even called me when she was blocks away. To be fair, we were both on overload, raising two kids apiece and working full-time: She was not only a rabbi's wife, with all the responsibilities that entailed, but a designer of exquisite ketuboth, Jewish marriage contracts, and I was the editor-in-chief of a magazine. We were also, at heart, Lake Wobegon-ish women, people who would sooner discuss flatulence than emotional discontent.

Until my sister let me have it. She was being honored at a luncheon in Philadelphia, but pleading deadline, I skipped the event. The next day, an e-mail scudded into my inbox, virtually vibrating with Betsy's fury about how I, the fancy editor, didn't value her more homespun accomplishments. That's when I think we both realized something had to change. Our mother, who was only in her sixties yet could no longer recognize us, was a blunt reminder that good health and life itself are fleeting.

It was Betsy who made the next move, suggesting we meet at a Jersey Shore bed-and-breakfast. Our 19 hours together included a stroll on the boardwalk, dinner at a fish restaurant and a twin-bedded room with wallpaper eerily reminiscent of our shared bedroom back in Fargo. We fumbled a bit at first. Correction: It was tense and uncomfortable. But before long, we had launched a yak-fest where one minute it was 2002 and the next, 1962. While we danced around our differences, we chatted about parents, work and kids, who, fortunately, we didn't have to try to please, because neither they nor the husbands were sitting beside us with glazed eyes. I returned to New York surprised: I'd had a good time.

Not long after this, our mother died and our father remarried. Soon Betsy

and I were united in expressing our mutual contempt for our stepmother, and our beach visits became a ritual.

Slowly, I began to understand why Charlie Brown classified a big sister as the crabgrass of life. I realized what a drag it had been for Betsy to experience the *Groundhog Day* of my recycled wardrobe; since our mother thought it adorable to dress us alike, Betsy had to wear the same J.C.Penney togs twice. I also got why my sister invented an identity as an artist. The women in our family have all been word people. Our mother wrote research papers for a history club, and our grandmother, a devoted subscriber to *The Atlantic*, taught English to immigrants. I scribbled adolescent poetry and edited the high school newspaper. Betsy said that she hadn't wanted the same old, same old, but what she especially hadn't wanted was to fail, which would have been humiliating. She found art and God and simply kept going.

I learned too that while I suspected I was being judged as shallow, Betsy felt sized up as frumpy and plump—a verdict multiplied exponentially, my sister says, whenever we were with my husband's family, who always look as if they've sailed out of Bergdorf's (and often, they have). "Who wants to be in a place where you become a loser just by walking through the door, when in another universe"—a synagogue, let's say—"you get positive reinforcement?" Betsy asked me. Good question.

One of the benefits of growing older is becoming sure enough about yourself to value what's different about your sister and to bravely transgress into her neck of the woods. We've done a fair amount of that now. I'm not planning on become a wonky Jew, and it would be easier for me to recite sonnets in Urdu than do Betsy's delicate calligraphy, but I've learned to appreciate my visual instincts, whether I'm putting them to use in picking paint for my walls or a cover for a book I've written. My sister has started to blog about philanthropy and the environment. When someone compliments her on her writing, she just says thank you. "I've realized I don't have to tell them about my older sister, the writer," she says.

An anthropologist observed that sisters probably have the most competitive relationship within the family, but once they are grown it becomes the strongest. Betsy is never going to turn All Sally and see a movie every other week, nor do I intend to urge my loved ones to chip in on a heifer for a third-world country to commemorate my birthday. But a connection, I've finally realized, depends less on similarities than deep respect. Valuing what's unique about the other is what's required. I can't point to one epiphany that turned everything around for my sister and me. Our increasing closeness has been low-key and steady, much like our childhood back on the Great Plains.

{ **Betsy is never** going to turn All Sally and see a movie every other week, nor do I intend to urge my loved ones to chip in on a heifer for a third-world country to commemorate my birthday. }

It has taken me a long time to understand what my parents grasped the moment she was born: My baby sister is very special. She grew up to be brainy and talented, funny and thoughtful. Once in a while, she even listens to my advice. Is that tinted ChapStick she's wearing?

SALLY KOSLOW is the author of a novel, *Little Pink Slips*. Previously, she was editor-in-chief of *McCall's* and *Lifetime*. Her sister, Betsy Teutsch, blogs at moneychangesthings.blogspot.com and displays her artwork on betsyteutsch.com.