

# Celebration of Sisters

It Is Never Too Late To Grieve



JUDY LIPSON

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J U D Y   L I P S O N



North Carolina

*Celebration of Sisters: It Is Never Too Late to Grieve*

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This story is told from the author's experience and perspective.

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# Praise for *Celebration of Sisters* and Judy Lipson

“With her memoir *Celebration of Sisters*, Judy Lipson breaks her family’s traditional code of silence by sharing her story—stark, candid, and impassioned: a love letter to her sisters. By describing her role as the middle sister in a sister trio, and remembering the lives and premature deaths of both of her sisters—one to a car accident, and the other to a chronic eating disorder—Judy bravely faces these great losses, and in turn, moves through her grief. Told through vivid memories from early childhood through adulthood, the arc of Judy’s story engages the reader with its intimacy. The message, that talking openly about loss and mental health is healing, will resound with readers from all walks of life.

– Kamryn T. Eddy, Ph.D and Jennifer J. Thomas, Ph.D  
Co-Directors, Eating Disorders Clinical and Research Program,  
Massachusetts General Hospital Associate Professors,  
Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

“Author Judy Lipson shares with her readers beautiful, poignant family memories that bring tears and smiles and ultimately presents a story of survival and yearning for better days. Judy’s book will touch your heart from beginning to end and inspire with the simple message, out of loss and despair there is hope.”

– Joanne Vassallo Jamrosz,  
author of the *Skating Forward* series

“Judy’s story is so moving, from the time she was a young woman up until now, building such strength through family tragedy. So inspiring!”

– Randy Gardner, Two-time Olympian,  
U.S. World Pair Champion

To my sisters, Margie and Jane. I will always love you.



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# Introduction

When I lost my twenty-two-year-old sister Jane in a tragic automobile accident in 1981, and then my thirty-five-year-old sister Margie after a twenty-year battle with anorexia and bulimia in 1990, my life changed forever. Unable to believe in the reality of my losses, I shut down for years that turned into decades. After thirty years of keeping my grief dormant, confronting my feelings was not an easy journey. As an intensely private person, divulging my inner soul to others—a necessary step in facing my heartbreak—required me to step far outside my comfort zone. But this was a mission I needed to accomplish for myself and my sisters, and one that I hope will help others. It wasn't until I could finally grieve that I felt I had brought Margie and Jane home, and subsequently, all of us to a place of comfort.

Why did I fight to confront my grief now after thirty years of silence? Signs appeared. In 2010, I ran into one of Jane's friends, and then one of Margie's friends. Both wanted to talk to me about my sisters, and I just stood there unable to speak. My father was diagnosed with a terminal illness and passed away in 2011, another tremendous loss. My best friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Waves of grief churned around me, but I could no longer ignore them.

When my sisters passed away, I not only lost them, but I

also lost many of our stories. All I have left are the fragments of my own memory—a memory that was altered because of my inability to grieve after each sister’s death and the trauma of Margie’s long illness. Even so, I felt sure that the love of my sisters would carry me through the writing of this book, and I am grateful that it did.

In Judaism, it is common to give and receive gifts in multiples of eighteen dollars or *chai*, meaning “life” and “giving back.” I chose to structure this book into eighteen sections in the hope that it will offer something back to its readers. After years of denial, I finally gave myself permission to take care of myself and find a way to hold my grief with grace. If, in telling my story, one person feels less alone, I will be eternally grateful. *Celebration of Sisters* is my journey in sharing my story and my sisters with you.

## PROLOGUE

# I Will Always Love You

**MEMORY:** JANE SAT ON THE SOFA. MARGIE SANG “HAPPINESS” FROM THE SHOW YOU’RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN. I SAT ON THE PIANO BENCH PLAYING ALONG. “HAPPINESS IS HAVING A SISTER . . .”

The premiere of the Celebration of Sisters ice-skating event was about to start, and Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You” filled the arena. At fifty-six years old, I was about to skate in my first ice dancing performance in a duet with my coach. I wore a purple dress, my favorite color, and black trunks from my youth as a skater, surprised they fit after all these years, over beige tights. I floated across the ice with my partner, skating faster, and crossed one foot over the other to gain momentum, then jumped up onto my partner’s knee, my arm outstretched to the sky. His arm encircled my waist, providing me with added security. The crowd embraced our enthusiasm with applause and cheers. My exhilarating ice dance was a triumphant declaration. *Look at me! I did it!*

As my partner eased me down and spun me around for our final pose to thunderous applause, I felt my chest thunder, and I smiled from ear to ear. I could not help recalling the small Belle Isle Rink where it all started. It was the first place where I’d ice-skated with my sisters, Margie and Jane. On the day of our first group lesson, we’d felt so proud to carry our new white Riedell skates into the rink. Margie, the natural athlete, took to

ice-skating immediately. I struggled and putted along. Jane had been somewhere in the middle.

Ice-skating brought me full circle back to my beloved sisters. As I glided across the ice, I felt free and the weight of my world lifted. I imagined Margie and Jane skating on each side of me, holding onto my shoulders. The joy at my sisters' presence reflected in my radiant face and fluid movements on the ice. I was able to dance away from the pain for that one moment in time. Ice-skating was and is my passion, solace, and peace.

*Margie and Jane, I will always love you.*



## CHAPTER 1

### Jane

**MEMORY:** “I’M DRIVING!” “No, I’M DRIVING!” OF COURSE, BEING THE OLDER SISTER ON OUR LAST SHOPPING OUTING TOGETHER ON COMMONWEALTH AVENUE, I WON OUT. JANE RODE SHOTGUN AS I LAUGHED—AND SHE LAUGHED, TOO, REVEALING THE DIMPLE IN HER RIGHT CHEEK.

On Saturday morning, November 7, 1981, my phone jolted me awake. My phone never rang at eight thirty, especially on Saturdays when I tended to sleep in. I’d had a fitful night’s sleep, as that had been my first night in my New York City apartment. I bolted upright in bed, taking a moment to focus on where I was.

A job promotion had brought me back to New York after a brief stint in Washington, DC. My new position as branch coordinator for Bloomingdale’s eleven luxury department stores required me to travel to Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to ensure consistency in service and practices. I was also the liaison between the different branches and the central buying office.

I loved my new studio apartment in Union Square, off Fifth Avenue, with its good-sized galley kitchen and separate dressing area. Three weeks earlier, I’d strolled down city streets feeling

triumphant. I had received a promotion from Bloomingdale's. *I am twenty-five years old and living in New York City*, I thought. *My life is great.*

Of course, my mother, Ellie, didn't love the location of my apartment. When she came to help on moving day, she practically told the moving men to turn the truck around. But then she saw the twenty-four-hour doorman for the building and was satisfied. She helped me unpack and settle in, then returned home to Boston for my younger sister's twenty-second birthday. My mother was taking Jane to see *Dreamgirls*.

"Judy, did I wake you?" my aunt Stel said over the phone.

I yawned. "Yeah . . . sort of."

"Listen, I have some shoes that I want to drop off," she said. This was not unusual. My aunt had a career in the shoe business, and for years had provided me with shoes. Lucky for me that my foot was the sample size.

Less than ten minutes later, my aunt and cousin showed up and were pacing around my apartment. Although my aunt presented a cool demeanor to others, she and I shared a special closeness. We both lived in New York, worked in retail, and liked to crochet. My studio apartment housed a small sofa where the two finally sat as I opened the bags of shoes my aunt had brought. There was a pair of brown Amalfi shoes with a low heel and a navy pair with a sling back.

Suddenly, the phone rang. It was my parents. They had bad news. In that moment, my world changed in an instant.

My heart stopped. I immediately thought of my older sister, Margie, who had been sick. How many times had my sister been on the verge of death? But it was my adorable younger sister, Jane, who was gone. I cannot remember their exact words. Whatever they were, I didn't believe them. Jane had died instantly in a tragic automobile accident. *Why?* I remember

thinking. *What does this mean?* She had just celebrated her twenty-second birthday the day before.

My parents had called my aunt so I would not be alone to receive the horrific news. Margie was already en route to New York City to celebrate her own birthday with me the next day. She didn't know yet. She would be at my apartment in a few hours. A sick feeling settled in my stomach. I would have to tell her that our sister Jane had died.

While we waited for Margie, my aunt helped me pack to go home. I was clueless as I walked around my new studio apartment. My efficient mother helped me unpack and settle in. Everything unpacked, put away, pictures hung on the wall. Having lived in a hotel for a month while my apartment was getting ready, I was still getting used to where my belongings were. Where were my clothes, my suitcase, my travel toiletries? I couldn't locate anything and was floundering around. I was usually so organized, but I could not focus. I was grateful my aunt and my cousin were there to help navigate the packing process and travel logistics.

I didn't know how long I would be gone. My cobalt-blue suitcase with the gold strap down the middle somehow got packed, half empty, with whatever black clothing I owned.

Then there was a knock on the door. Margie arrived.

Knowing I had to divulge the news frightened me. I opened the door and was shocked by my older sister's appearance. She looked like a lost child. Her small statue seemed even tinier, cheekbones more pronounced, coat falling off her shoulders, and the overnight bag overpowered her. But Margie knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. She just stood in the doorway and did not move.

"We lost Jane," I blurted. That was one of the hardest moments in my life.



My aunt somehow managed to get us both back into the apartment. The focus naturally had to be on Margie. We both were hysterical. My aunt and cousin calmed us down and scurried around making arrangements so we could fly home to Boston. Or perhaps the arrangements had already been made by my parents. I have no memory.

At some point I called my best friend, Denise. She and her boyfriend came over. They were both speechless. The hugs were greatly appreciated. I could see the pain in Denise's eyes. A vision of Jane and me in my car flashed through my mind. At the end of Jane's freshman year at CW Post on Long Island, I had driven down from Boston to pick her up. I remembered how good that trip was. Jane hadn't treated me as an outcast, which felt good for a change, though I think my status might have been elevated because Jane herself was at such a low point. Her freshman year had not been successful. I'd stayed overnight. The next day, we'd loaded up my father's green Buick and drove home without any major fights despite our close quarters.

I couldn't believe Jane was gone.

I gave Denise a key to my apartment, and she promised to take care of things for me in New York. I didn't know how long I would be gone from my new home.

The one-hour flight from New York to Boston seemed like an eternity. Margie and I held hands and cried for the entire flight. Family friends picked us up at the airport. Inside our childhood home, people were scattered around the house in silence. It was all a blur. My father grabbed Margie and me and embraced us in hugs. My mother was curled in a chair, her body racked with irrepressible sobs. Margie and I went to her.

That evening, I tossed and turned in bed. In the wee hours of the morning, I finally succumbed to a fitful sleep

but was awakened by a terrible dream. Startled, frightened, and disoriented in my adolescent, pitch-dark bedroom, I felt relieved to see my mother. She couldn't sleep either, so she had come into my room and turned on the light. We cried together.



On Sunday, November 8, Margie's birthday, people streamed in and out of the house offering their condolences, but it was all a blur. Margie and I sat in my father's study trying to put together our thoughts about our sister Jane on orange-lined paper. We just couldn't bring ourselves out into the fray of people and chatter.

The funeral was held on Monday at Stanetsky's Funeral Home. I suppose there was a large gathering, but I don't remember much of it.

The rabbi read our words as part of his eulogy.

Jane—to us always, Janie—our dear, sweet little sister, you were the essence of this sisterhood to us. From our earliest memories on Indian Ridge Road, when you cried having your picture taken—you were always so cute, lovable, and at times trying, but always, our dream sister. We walked you to school, we fought with you, we protected you from dogs, we ate Raisinets together on Saturday nights. We grew up together through thick and thin—all the good and the bad. But most of all, we loved each other. Words are not enough. We just want to say, we will always love you.

I have no recollection of Jane's funeral. Immediately after, our family began the Jewish tradition of sitting shiva, when the family stays home to grieve, remember their loved one, and receive visitors. My sole memory of the shiva week was with my mother's friend Audrey. People brought lots of food,

and the kitchen counters were loaded with platters of bagels, lox, cream cheese, deli meats, cookies and pastries, and fruits. I never understood the need for so much food. I supposed it was more for the visitors, not the immediate family. None of us could eat.

I will never forget what Audrey said that day when she pulled me aside. "There will come a time when you won't remember your sister," she said softly. Her words stayed with me for three decades. I often felt tortured because I could not remember everything about my sisters after they passed away.

The week after Jane died, I was still in a complete fog, unable to believe my sister was gone. Yet, I was whisked back to my life in New York City. I think my father wanted me to resume my "normal" life and separate me from my mother, whose grief left her hanging by a thread.

I was thrust into the height of the Christmas season for the retail industry. Yearly sales depended on this condensed period. Whatever your position in the company, "all hands on deck" was the motto, which meant everyone had to be on the sales floor helping customers at all times. My cousin, who also worked at Bloomingdale's, had notified Human Resources that my sister's death was the reason for my week-long absence.

On my first day back to work after Jane's passing, my body shook and I started weeping. I could not hold it together. The familiar door, desks, chairs, and hallways seemed foreign, out of place. A very kind coworker escorted me into his office where I sat and cried. I had always been so strong and had held everything and everyone together. I *had* to compose myself. I worked for a tyrant of a boss who had no tolerance for crying and no compassion for what I was going through. Had I cried in front of her, my career in retail would have been finished.

Over the next few weeks, I walked through the motions of

my life like a robot in a fog. Often, my concentration floated away. At times, customer demands seemed so frivolous. I had no choice but to smile and provide excellent customer service in an attempt to hold onto my reputation as always providing a stellar job performance. So I just kept moving. No time to think about the fact that I recently buried my younger sister. I did not understand grief, the process, or the experience. There was no one to talk to. I had no clue what I felt. On the outside, no one knew I'd lost my sister. I did not talk about it with anyone, and if anyone did know, they did not bring it up to me. The glow in my personality that people used to comment on had evaporated. My being felt empty.



Thanksgiving had always been my favorite holiday. I always traveled home. I loved the smell of the turkey cooking in the oven and watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on television with my sisters. That year, dinner invitations had arrived from assorted family and friends. It was only three weeks after Jane's death, so our family decided to have Thanksgiving dinner in a restaurant. Margie was not present—I don't remember why—so my parents and I sat at the table in the restaurant and picked at our food. The evening was devoid of laughter and conversation. We each held empty space in our hearts to contain Jane's absence . . . and Margie's.

That Thanksgiving weekend, my closest friend from high school got married. I was a bridesmaid and did not want to disappoint her. I was suddenly living by a code of silence and secrets about my grief, and I never expressed my feelings to my friend, so I put up a good front and showed up for her.

Dressed in a burgundy bridesmaid's dress, my legs shook and my knees kept buckling as I walked down the aisle. No

one there knew that I had recently lost my sister. While dancing with one of the groomsmen, I blurted out that my sister had died three weeks ago. We stopped dancing and he stared at me. Then I proceeded through the movements of the wedding celebration. When I look back on it, I don't know how I had the strength. I was still in shock over Jane's death.

December was cold and lonely. New York City was decorated with lights and Christmas music played on every station. There was joy in the air, but my heart was broken. I loved window-shopping with friends during the holidays, ice-skating at Rockefeller Center, having a hot chocolate at Serendipity . . . but it all passed that season.

After Jane's death, Margie and I, working long retail hours, did not communicate very often. Although we did not speak about our loss, Margie sent me a poem she'd written. She expressed her feelings so eloquently in her own words.

Who has broken into our lives?  
Who has spoken to our brokenness?  
Who keeps breaking into our presence?  
We don't have all the answers.  
We do have a lot of questions.  
We search in a world of bereft.  
Descend upon our hearts, for we need renewing away.  
We await your love and power to heal and bless.  
Refresh us now. Enlighten us now.  
Our bodies have given us pain and we need healing.  
Our emotions have been bruised, and we need your comfort.  
Descend upon our hearts this day.

Looking back, I realize how much I had changed and how much my family had changed with that one phone call. A part

of all of us was gone and could never be replaced. I did not know who I was. We had always been three sisters. Now we were two.