Something Happened

by Alisa Wolf

When I got home on the evening of Labor Day 2000, the light was blinking on the answering machine: one message. I pressed the button. It was my sister.

She had called only sporadically over the previous thirteen years and not at all for the past three. So when she said, “I’m sorry. I realize that those things never happened to me,” and then left her return phone number, the guilt that I’d grown so accustomed to fell away——just like that.

During her absence, I had run through a number of scenarios: My sister had had a kid—a teenager by now—who would contact me out of the blue. Or the police would call to say that they’d found her body. Or I’d be subpoenaed to testify against my parents in court.

That my sister might call and say “I’m sorry” was not one of the possibilities I’d entertained.

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I’ll start with the fall of 1988. I was thirty-years old, and my sister was twenty-eight or twenty-nine (we were one year and nine months apart, and for three months of the year, the gap in our ages closed, from two years to one). She was talking to my parents at this time—I know because I’d had major surgery, and my father had made a point of telling me he’d called her to tell her that she should call me.

“Are you all right?” she asked when she phoned from Albuquerque, where, with a girlfriend and her boyfriend, she’d moved the year before, packing up an old car in Somerville, Massachusetts and driving to the hotter, drier climes of the southwest, which would be better for her asthma. If she had other reasons for choosing New Mexico, I didn’t know about them.

A year later she sent her letters—one to my mother, one to my father, and one to me—on lined paper, torn out of a six- by nine-inch spiral-bound notebook. “I have something to tell you,” she wrote, and then, she revealed that she’d been “incested” by my parents and other of our adult relatives and had uncovered repressed memories of satanic ritual abuse in therapy.

I don’t remember where I sat as I read the letter—everything receded from me except the horror of my sister’s words. I shuttered myself in with them. Though my sister didn’t accuse me of abuse, I felt that I was also on trial. My version of our childhood certainly was.

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I was maybe twelve-years old on what must have been a Saturday afternoon, as I waited with my mother for my little sister to call and say that her friend’s parents had picked her up at the bus station and brought her safely to their house. When the phone didn’t ring at the appointed time, my mother dialed the friend’s number. She tugged on the phone cord, an extra-long one she’d bought to give her more range in our six-room house, dragging it along with her as it stretched

from the wall behind the kitchen table to the sink and into the dining room and then in the other direction to the front door. When she came to a stop in front of the wall mount, it pooled on the linoleum.

“How hard is it to call and say ‘I’m here?’” she asked, rhetorically. The busy signal sounded in the kitchen as she moved the receiver to the wall and then hung up.

“I’m sure she’s fine. She just forgot. She gets caught up in whatever’s happening. She does this all the time,” I said.

“That’s why I made her promise she’d call me as soon as she got to the house. What if something did go wrong? What if they forgot to pick her up?”

Now I was starting to panic.

My mother tried the number again—and then again. Finally she got through.

“What do you mean, you forgot? How could you forget?” she asked when she got my sister on the phone.

She moved her frantic eyes to mine and found, in her older and more responsible daughter, an anchor.

The panic subsided. Her tone turned reasonable.

“We’ll talk about it when you get home,” she said and, with some reluctance, she hung up.

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My mother and sister are the protagonists in this scene, but I’ve put myself in a pivotal role: I soften my mother’s hurt by taking some of it on. I was—at least in my mind—the peacekeeper, the one with a finger on the pulse of the family angst, the shepherd who guided the errant flock back into harmony. If I relaxed my vigilance, my family, I worried, would fall apart.

Whatever part I played in my sister’s memories of abuse must also have been a minor one. She did not accuse me. Neither did my parents blame me for their sorrows around her accusations. Yet I inserted myself into the story, between my sister and my parents. Just as I once imagined her eating an ice cream cone in the backseat of a station wagon with her out-of-state friend while my mother paced the kitchen, I now imagined what she might mean by “ritual abuse.”

I conjured up scenes based on what I could bear to read of newspaper articles and sections of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation newsletters that my mother sent to me: underground tunnels, animal sacrifices, and leering adults. I pictured Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*, being drugged and laid out for sex with the devil; Sally Fields in *Sybil*, flashing back to the naked bulb over the kitchen table, where the little girl she’d once been lay helpless as her mother assembled her implements from the kitchen drawers and cabinets.

“These things really do happen,” Gloria Steinem said in a speech I heard on NPR during the fifty-minute drive back home to Medford, Massachusetts, from a job that brought me once a week to Maynard.

Steinem's audience broke into spontaneous applause.

I squeezed the steering wheel. I had another side of the story to tell, but Gloria Steinem didn't want to hear it. And neither did a lot of other people.

* * *

I confided my sister's accusations to a friend.

"Something must have happened to her," she said, as we lay in the sun on a Cape Cod beach. My sister's accusations were too unbelievable not to be believed.

Did whatever it was happen when my sister was a senior in high school and my parents split up? I was away for a year, studying and working in Israel, and from my sister' letters, I gathered that she had barely managed to drag herself through her last year of school and graduate. A gifted pianist, she'd removed herself from consideration for a scholarship to the Longy School of Music in Cambridge. She cried, she wrote, all the time—even now, over her letter to me.

During the summer after my return, she was getting ready to go on her year course in Israel, as I had done the year before. She didn't want to go, but she didn't want to stay home either. I urged her to go. It was the best option she had. She'd be fine, I said. She'd have fun.

On the ride to the airport with my father behind the wheel, my mother in the passenger seat, and me in the back beside her, my sister was jumpy and talky, and nothing I said to reassure her seemed to register. We walked to her to the gate and left her, still unsettled, with other kids going on her trip. Later, as my father steered us through the tiled walls of the Callahan Tunnel, I pressed my forehead to the window, relieved that my sister was gone. I was hoping, as my parents seemed to be, that since we couldn't seem to do anything to help her, she'd figure out how to help herself while I went on to college.

We had failed her.

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A year later, I met Leslie as she walked off the plane from New York in a suede jacket with fringes that was all the more hip for being several years out of style. She had about her an air of sexual sophistication that made me feel hopelessly suburban. I wore a pleasant skirt I loved and now suddenly and intensely hated. Leslie's radiance rendered me dim, like a lamp left on in the daytime.

She leaped in to my arms.

"I have so much to tell you," she said.

"Me too," I said.

We headquartered ourselves in the partially renovated basement. Nestled among the castoff skates and neglected tennis rackets, snow boots, and outgrown parkas, we smoked menthols and burned vanilla-scented candles.

Our talk went back to the year I'd been away. My mother had found my sister a

therapist, a good one.

“He told me that I shouldn’t worry so much about taking care of you,” she said.

What did she mean, she took care of me?

“We took care of each other, didn’t we?” I asked.

I leaned toward the flame, and my shadow loomed up on the cement wall behind us. Somehow by the time we finished parsing the therapist’s words, we ended up on the opposite side of what I had to learn the hard way he had meant: The problem, we concluded, was not that we tried too hard to make sure the other was okay but that we’d been apart at crucial times. We were two sides of the same coin: The smart one and the artistic one; the overweight one and the athletic one; the mama’s girl and the one who turned men’s heads. But underneath it all, we were both lost. We didn’t know how to be in the world. Now was our chance to teach each other what we needed to know balance ourselves out.

By daybreak we had sketched out our plans to move across the country, to California. Within the next day or two, I returned my student loan, and we made our intentions known to our parents.

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Six months later, the man who was going to hitchhike with me up and down the California coast to show me how to live on the road, off the grid, and by my instincts walked me and my sister to the San Francisco Greyhound station. Leslie had declared her intention to return home, alone, “to work things out with Mom.” She needed to be with my mother, she said, without me there to monitor their relationship. I got that. I could help her by staying out of her way.

I did so for as long as I could: four more months.

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In our early twenties, about five years before either of us had heard of repressed memories, my sister and I looked together at a recent snapshot of the two of us. In it, I stood an inch or so taller and a step behind her. I had on a knit dress, red, that I’d picked up in a Santa Barbara thrift shop. It made me look fat, but I loved the feel of wearing it because it contained me, like swaddling around a baby. My sister’s clothes were casual and loose—jeans and a T-shirt. I wore a tight smile. Her smile was broad, effortless. She appeared completely relaxed in her bones and muscles, while I seemed tippy, unsure of how to arrange my limbs.

“As usual I’m in my head,” I said.

“Knowing me,” she said, “I’m in my feet.”

This picture would have been taken during the period of intimacy that immediately preceded her long estrangement. It was the early eighties. I was a college dropout, waiting tables in Cambridge and living on and off at my mother’s house and in various rooms and shared apartments in Somerville and Cambridge, and she was working sporadically and living bohemian-style with her boyfriend. We met regularly at her place outside of Davis Square or in Harvard Square to renew our dedication to changing what we called our “modes of

being." We sat over bottomless cups of coffee at the Mug and Muffin or French presses full of a finer grind at the new Coffee Connection. We rolled Drum tobacco, littered café tables with found objects—stones, plastic toys, lost bangles and earrings—dug lighters and paperbacks out from the bottoms of our bags, and annoyed our waitress by staying on through the lunch rush. But as the heady effects of our talks wore thin, we had to meet more often and at greater length to achieve the same high.

My sister was the first to kick the habit. She said our closeness wasn't doing either of us any good. Although I agreed with her in theory, I wasn't ready to give her up. Like a jilted lover, I craved what she withheld. She enrolled in U. Mass Boston, a commuter college, and though I'd reapplied to U. Mass Amherst, intending to pick up where I'd left off two years before, I couldn't manage to get myself there. I enrolled at the commuter school a semester after my sister did. A semester later, she dropped out.

"Is it my fault?" I asked her.

She didn't say that it wasn't.

* * *

In 1991—three years after she'd left the Boston area—I sat under the bay windows of my third-floor Medford apartment, leaning on the coffee table to write in a spiral-bound notebook on lined pages much like the pages my sister had written her letters on a few years before. I had cut my father's obituary out of *The Boston Globe* and taped it to the page. I wrote carefully around that square of type, thinking that my sister would be angry at me for not letting her know sooner that he'd become suddenly ill while on vacation in Las Vegas and, within five days of being diagnosed, had died. Had I done enough, I asked my invisible jury, to try to contact her? She had withheld her phone number from me and my parents, and it was unlisted. Should I have called the police for help locating her? Would an operator have patched me through if I'd explained the situation?

I sealed the envelope and mailed it to my sister's Albuquerque address. I let some time go by, and then I wrote another letter. Again it went unanswered, so I wrote a third.

About a year later—circa 1992—my sister called.

"Are you still in touch with Mom and Dad?'" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have 'memories?" she asked.

I knew which kind of memories she meant.

"Didn't you get my letters?" I asked.

"Yes. But I didn't open them. I didn't feel safe."

In a moment I've taken back a thousand times I blurted out the news I'd tried so hard to break gently in my letters.

“Dad died,” I said.

“What?”

My sister’s breathing thickened. She began hyperventilating. She said something about it being her fault.

“It’s not your fault, Leslie. Okay? Don’t take this on,” I said.

Then, as if to set me up for the punch line of a tasteless joke, my sister inquired after my father’s wife.

“How’s Alice?” she asked.

I could say I was trapped and had no choice but to tell her. But it was also true that I was angry, and I couldn’t resist delivering the blow.

“She died too, six months later.”

“What?”

My sister got off the phone. I didn’t hear from her again for another year.

* * *

That was the year my mother and I fought at her boyfriend’s vacation house, and when we got home, she said she didn’t want to have a relationship with me anymore. It was too hard.

“We used to be so close,” my mother said, wailing with distress over the phone.

Our closeness, I thought, had pushed my sister away. Our closeness was part of the problem.

But I couldn’t bear to lose my mother too. We could work this out, I said, and I persuaded her to go into therapy with me.

“Something must have happened to you,” the therapist said, when, after six sessions, she couldn’t account for my anger and anxiety. “Do you want to find out what that was?”

My heart rose into my throat. Of course I wanted to know. Then the therapist said something about my father, and I realized she was suggesting I had repressed memories of incest.

My mother and I wrote our last checks (dated February 1993) and went out, into the cold, Davis Square night.

“Your father had his issues, to say the least, but he didn’t do that,” my mother said.

“I know,” I said.

“Do you want to get a cup of coffee?” she asked, and we walked together toward

Au Bon Pain.

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Three years before my sister called to recant her accusations, our letters came back “return to sender, address unknown.”

“We don’t know if she’s dead or alive,” my mother said.

“She’s alive. We’d know about it if she weren’t. Bad news travels fast,” I said.

My mother wasn’t reassured. She hired some kind of private detective, who came up with nothing.

Meanwhile I continued trying to make sense of my sister’s accusations. I didn’t believe them, not literally. But surely something had happened. Whatever it was, I could have and should have prevented it. Or my mother should have.

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Later on the night of Labor Day 2000, I lay in bed and wondered what I would say to my sister when I called her back the next day. The gap between us yawned wide, crowded with countless cups of coffee we hadn’t sipped together, birthday cakes we hadn’t made for each other, and the death of our father, which we’d mourned separately. I hadn’t been to either of her weddings. She hadn’t been to my civil union. Neither of us had had kids, and we’d each made this choice without the benefit of the other’s advice on the topic.

We would get into all that. But first, after a brief exchange of logistical and personal information (How, I’d ask her, did you end up in Montana? What happened to your first husband, and when did you marry Mike?), my sister asked if getting back in touch with us would cause tension between my mother and me.

“Are you kidding? I talked to Mom this morning. Things are already better between us,” I said.

“I thought you’d be mad,” she said.

“No. Just the opposite,” I said. “I think calling us took a lot of courage.”

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A couple of years after my sister’s Labor Day call, we stopped hearing from her again. She and Mike had left Montana, seeking work somewhere in Eastern Washington. Between the day that they hit the road and, six months or so later, we received an email from Mike with the subject line “don’t worry,” one image kept coming back to me:

It was an afternoon in 1985, two years before my sister left the Boston area. She and I both happened to be in Kenmore Square, walking on Commonwealth Avenue in opposite directions. As I raised my hand to wave, my sister veered into the gutter, head down, and cut around me. The friend I was with continued walking ahead of me, and when she realized I wasn’t keeping up, she turned and doubled back. In the meantime Leslie disappeared—her shoulders, the back of

her head—around the corner of Brookline Avenue.

“Who was that?” my friend asked.

I squinted at the spot in which my sister had so recently stood.

“That was my sister,” I said.

Alisa Wolf is a writer and editor who has developed feature articles for consumer and trade magazines as well as marketing collateral and blog posts for a financial services firm. These projects have covered a wide range of subjects, from star gazing, to smoke-detector legislation, to investment portfolio construction. She has earned an MFA from Vermont College, and she now develops and teaches adult education classes in fiction, memoir, and essay writing near her home in Medford, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared or is upcoming in *Agni Online, Calyx, Cimarron Review, Concho River Review, The Legendary, Pisgah Review, Red Cedar Review, Reed Magazine, The Prentice Hall Reader 11th Edition,* and *Schuylkill Valley Journal.*