

Edition 70



joy

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Lies my sister told me



My older sister could answer any question I could throw at her.

Not only that, she was a constant source of wisdom overflowing onto any situation, real or imagined. When we traveled in the back seat of the car, I knew I would periodically be the recipient of all kinds of proverbial sayings. When we walked down the street, I knew that I would receive advice on a spectrum of possible situations. And, especially when we were shelling peas, or picking nuts, or dusting the living room, I would be awash in pithy remarks.

For instance, from her, I was informed about who made the sky black at night—it was a designated profession, like carpenter or doctor. These specialized servicemen fired up huge smokestacks at the right time late every day, so that, slowly, the inky smoke stained the sky night.

I learned that cherry pits were old, dried-up stars that fell from the skies and were inadvertently lodged in the trees. I cried for the poor dead stars until she extended the legend that at night the dead stars rose and shone once more.

Undoubtedly good at mythmaking, my sister excelled in practical advice. I was warned about the dangers of car exhaust streaming from the tail pipes of cars on cold mornings. It was this powerful, semi-invisible substance that mysteriously broke your legs if you were run over by a car. And heaven help you if you were unlucky enough to be run over in an intersection and had not been standing within the sacred lines of the crosswalk, for then your parents could not collect insurance. I, conscious of my parent's poverty, walked within the lines of the crosswalk, just in case of a gruesome accident. And I still do. After all, there is an awful lot of small print on my own insurance documents. Better to be safe than sorry (a phrase that I attribute to my sister, not Aesop).

For the most part, I believed whatever she told me, until the incident in grade five science when I quoted her little known fact, that chickens could be hypnotised by singing. A slight scepticism was introduced within me that day, and it grew the day I found out that the 'tents' in telephone poles (a rare sight now!) were to cover the wires that were being worked on, and were not, as she had informed me, for alternate housing of the extremely poor.

I asked my sister the other day why she had told me all these things (and more). She replied, forthrightly, that she had never said any such things and that I must have imagined them all myself.

I believe her.





skills my sister taught me



1. How to stand on the foot of your bed, pretend you are a tree in the forest marked with an X being chopped down, yell ‘timber’ and fall face down without cracking your head open.
2. How to make raspberry pudding with nothing but an old cottage cheese container and a stick. The hard part is cleaning out the playhouse first and picking very ripe raspberries without eating them.
3. How to make my legs smooth and shiny (taught to me while looking disdainfully at my 4-year old knees). I must wear ‘nylons’ like Mom and all the other ladies at church.
4. How to read. My sister ran a school for me and any neighborhood kids who were too young for first grade and too slow to get away in time. She became ‘Miss Brown’ and was very clear about what she needed us to learn—everything she had learned that day in school.
5. How to imagine and spin a story. When we shared a bedroom, every night I would hear a story about Star. These stories were wondrous, beautiful tragedies. Star would fly and shine in the sky but would inevitably fall. But, she would live again by the next night!
6. How to write, produce, cast, and star in a theatrical performance. Not necessarily in that order, and you can have multiple roles, and should. In the summer of 1964, *Peter Pan* was our crowning achievement. This was followed up by *The Wizard of Oz*, which unfortunately was cancelled early, on account of scaring the neighbor kids with the witch’s legs (complete with striped socks) carefully laid out in the creepy storage room under the house.



7. How to play ‘Statues’ on the front lawn. This was best done on a summer evening when cousins were visiting, as the more statues, the better. And no one better ‘come alive’ and move until the fairy (my sister) pointed to them.
8. How to sing in harmony. This was accomplished during the shelling of peas under the big backyard willow tree. “You hear a note, then you find a note that sounds good with it, then you follow the song.” Simple. And it still works.
9. How to talk about anything—what you are thinking, doing, about to do, might do, or might not do at any given time to anyone, anywhere. Actually, I never needed to learn this lesson, because my sister did it for me. This came in handy many times. For example, when I was four, out exploring the backyard with my cowboy hat on, while I was busy, my sister happily informed our elderly neighbor that I was looking for rattlesnakes.



10. How to ride the school bus following social protocol. The older and more popular you are, the farther back on the bus you can sit. The long back seat is by **invitation only**.
11. How to believe in others. To this day, my sister backs up her friend's story of seeing Napoleon Bonaparte sitting in a tree in her front yard. She described it so vividly, that I still can see in my mind's eye Napoleon Bonaparte, in full uniform, sitting on a tree branch under a full moon.
12. How to understand parents and when you can—and cannot—push parental buttons. For example, my dad was forever threatening to sell our ponies as they ate like little horses and tore through fences like little elephants. One day, when my mom was proofing one of dad's papers he was writing for his Masters' degree and reading it out loud, my sister began beaming and announced to me, "Don't you see?! That means Dad will never sell our ponies!" Something in the way my dad had described our little farm in that paper gave her the assurance that our ponies were safe. A morning of celebration for us! But there was the day when my sister's precocious language skills got her into trouble. We had been loitering over after-dinner chores of clearing away and washing dishes. My mom sternly pointed out that the circling summer flies were beginning to land on the table crumbs. My sister, pulling out her best Russian, said, "Toop, toop, go the little flies!" To which my mother, pressed beyond endurance, swatted her.





