

Gifts from the Past

By: Suzann B. Goldstein

Bits of my early life emerge in sudden flashes of memory. They spring up without warning, dissipate quickly, and leave behind a faint aura of recall. Although tinged with sadness, I see them wrapped in warmth and laughter, as gifts from the past.

My brother Stan, four years my senior, stars in many of these impromptu memories. As children we played together, confided in each other, and talked about our dreams, fancied transgressions, and daily happenings.

Stan died in an automobile accident when he was twenty-six and I still grieve for him. Every year on Yom Kippur, I recite the ritual Mourner's Kaddish in his name; every year on Rosh Hashana, I light a candle in his name; and a bronze plaque with his name on it hangs on our temple's memorial wall. These are my public memorials to him.

In private, however, I become sole and grateful witness to Stan's spontaneous appearances. In my head then, I envision his distinctive and vivid flashes from the past. For instance, I'll suddenly remember my sixteen-year-old brother saying, "Granny called Daddy at the store again to tell him that we're fighting." At that, we're thrown into a fit of giggles, which ends the latest battle

of the sibs. Stan and I can easily imagine our father, busy in his small hardware store, rolling his eyes heavenward as his mother-in-law asks - again - for help with the kinder.

Granny's oldest, our mother Edna, died at forty-two leaving behind her husband and two young children. Strong and willing in spirit but lacking an iron hand, Granny stepped into the breach. Stan and I were playful, loud, and, maybe, a little reckless. We were too much for her. But we loved Granny so we tried to subdue our antics. That lasted for a short while and made her happy—for a short while.

A companion memory quickly pops up and sparkles with the same childlike exuberance. This time, after some minor bickering with Stan, I start crying. Unable to deal with my tears and Granny's worried exhortations to "Play nice, children," my brother finds a way to end the fight. He picks me up, flings me over his shoulder, and runs wildly about our apartment. I stop crying and start laughing, one after the other.

Another brother image plays in my head like a short, well-done documentary. In this film-like episode, Stan is honorably discharged from the military after spending eighteen months in Germany. He arrives back home in Bridgeport, steps off a local bus, and walks toward our apartment building. I run to him. We wrap our arms around each other and hold on tight. Then, with both of us laughing,

Stan twirls me around, sets me down, and holds me at arms length. He looks me over, his eyes opening wide with surprise. I had grown up since we last saw each other, an unexpected turn of events for my big brother. He left home, and I was his baby sister, an awkward teenager. He returned, and I was a young adult.

Stan had matured as well, looking just as handsome but a little older and more filled out in body, and stronger somehow. No other major changes for him though.

We spend the rest of the evening and the early morning hours sitting on the cement curb that borders our building. And we talk, both of us trying to make up for lost time. Hurried anecdotes, constant interruptions, bursts of laughter, new viewpoints, and sudden, unexpected grins characterize a markedly disjointed conversation. The night is perfect. Our relationship is undiminished; I'd worried about that. Had the time we spent apart loosened our sibling bonds? Maybe a little? No, not one bit. Documentary flash is over.

Oh, I know—flaws abound in all relationships. And I confess, as sibs we argued and disappointed each other from time to time. I confess, too, that I've forgotten certain details of some events. I may have even fudged them a little—but not a lot.

And so, I recapture Stan at will. I remember how he always supported me, encouraged me, and shared in my joys and sorrows. Those memories are my brother's lasting gifts to me: his gifts from the past that I've stored for the future.