

*Finnegan & His Four Sisters of Fate*

*Adolescent self-absorption* That's what my parents call my habit of lying on the couch to think for hours on end. It's not true. If I were self-absorbed, I would think that this family dynamic started when I was born. I would think that the whole story revolved around my birth. It didn't.

It began with news of my mother's inconvenient pregnancy.

Sunshine, my oldest sister, told me everything. She told me in Vienna, as we squeezed under the eaves of the cathedral to get out of the rain.

There are two ways to see my sister Sunshine. You either wait for her to come home between tours, or you go to any European capital during its summer music festival. The second way is more predictable and exciting. You fly to your festival city of choice, you look at the program and search for her name, and then you wait for one to three days. Within that time, she will give a performance on a big old Estate or in a park. Afterward, you go up to her and say, "Hey! Remember us? We're your family?"

Then we wait some more while she makes excuses and offends people she is scheduled to see and otherwise drops everything to be with us.

And, after we've run away from the crowds and the costumes, we'll do something together and Sunshine will make a connection between the present and the past. It helps her prove that she's thinking of us even though she's always away.

After I made a joke about our parents getting lost in the cathedral, Sunshine said that it was meant to happen. From the beginning of time, she thinks, we were meant to be separated from our parents and to seek shelter from the rain only to be spit on by ancient Austrian gargoyles.

She said, "I always knew you'd keep an eye on them for me."

"I'm sorry I am not better at it, but they never get away for long," I told her.

"You came just in time," she said. She meant the first time.

I freed her from family obligations, from too close scrutiny. She explained how, in my case, the meeting of sperm and egg resulted in not just one baby, but two extra sisters.

She said, "Let's call it 'Finnegan and his Four Sisters of Fate.' I might write a libretto one day."

"They'll never let you do it," I told her. "They'd never produce an opera about Canada. Not unless there's a moose in it. All we have is cows."

Before there was a majestic wild beast standing between us and immortality, we were just another urban family, one generation semi-removed from the farm.

We – before I was really a part of we – were planning a celebration. My mother, three years after completing her PhD and just as many semesters as contract assistant professor, had finally been offered a tenure track position at the University of Toronto. She was 44 years-old, the mother of two teenagers and just about to begin her life's work.

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The same week, Sunshine had been accepted as a scholarship student to music school in Cologne. And while there were many arguments against her going, like the fact that she was only 16, my mother didn't want her to risk losing the opportunity altogether.

So, on the main floor of the house, preparations for a respectable party in celebration of my mother's appointment were underway. Trays of complicated hors d'oeuvres were either chilling in the fridge or warming in the oven. Bottles of red wine were breathing on the counter and glasses were being gathered. The cleaning lady had been hired to take people's coats and assist her cousin, the caterer.

At the same time, Sunshine's going-away party would go on in the finished basement. It had been converted into a recreation room long before my sisters hit adolescence. Forty teenage guests were expected that Friday night. Sunshine and our sister Louise had hidden bottles of beer all over the room where it was waiting for parental attention to slip.

In the chaos of the pre-parallel-parties kitchen, my mother sat in front of her first and last drink of the evening. It was a post-doctor's appointment shot of rye mixed with 7-Up over ice. Exactly what Grandpa Finnegan used to drink at the end of a long hot summer day.

She was not flustered with the organization of final details; she was not anxious with to-do lists or breathless from giving instructions. She was stiff and pale and quiet when my father and sisters came in with two giant cake boxes.

"Surprise! It's not menopause," she told my father. She wasn't smiling.

"Isn't that great!" he said. He was smiling.

"Steve, I am 44 years-old," she said. "I can't begin all this again."

"Oh, another baby will keep us young," my father said.

"Another baby?" Louise mouthed silently.

"Another Baby!" Sunshine shouted.

"And just how did this happen?" Louise demanded. She was 15 and, when the public health nurse had visited her gym class that term, she had learned that sex was natural--and that pregnancy could be avoided. While she learned these things in the most non-judgmental way possible, the nurse had also managed to imply that good girls didn't do it and neither did anyone else with half a brain.

I've never known Louise as an unpleasant teenager, and I don't think Sunshine cast her in a bad light when she filled me in on my very first role in family history. Many, many years after the party, our parents outsourced "the talk" to Louise. She told me it was natural to be uptight in early adolescence. She said that bodies and hormones were unpredictable, but the rest of the world would always be crazier. She even said that the changes were so huge that dealing with those alone made it easy to avoid learning to combine feeling and reason and how to use both

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in relating to other people. She said it was easy to avoid, but braver not to. It was the most embarrassing conversation of my life.

Just because I don't know the Louise who was so disappointed at having to become my sister, doesn't mean she never existed that day in the kitchen before I was born.

"Finnegan, begin again," my father said. It was his standard joke at having married Michael Finnegan's third daughter. My mother's parents had no sons. Hence the misfortune that is my surname.

Sunshine sang our own version of the *Finnegan Begin Again* nursery song and danced around the kitchen. For her, the announcement was one more reason to celebrate. She, after all, was leaving.

"Maybe it will be a boy," my father said.

"I've always wanted a little brother," Sunshine said.

"Just what we need," Louise said with her hands on her hips, her voice filled with her disappointment in our mother. "How could you do this to us? What about your career?"

"Well, I suppose we could always hire someone to help us with the baby," my mother said.

Louise said, "I hate both of you."

I'm sure she would have stomped off, but the door bell rang.

"Let's just keep this to ourselves," my father said, directing his words to Louise. "We all need some time to absorb it, to get used to the news."

The first guest, as always, was Louise's best friend Liz Moonchild. Liz lived in a foster home where there were never fewer than 8 kids at any one time. The mother of the house took in children to pay the bills and while no one ever went hungry, their cereal was pre-measured every morning, their roasted potato pieces at dinner were counted and everyone got exactly their share. There were rules about cleanliness and curfews, but what happened outside the house, outside of mealtimes and before curfew, just wasn't important. Her life must have been so difficult that she wouldn't have noticed, even at a party, that her best friend was basically anti-fun.

Not everyone was so tolerant.

An hour into the party, Bruce Collins looked Louise in the eye. He had been sipping one of the illegally purchased bottles of beer. He wasn't drunk, but pretending he was. It was part of the party animal image he hoped to cultivate.

"Geez, Louise," he said. "You've been growing up on me."

Then, he walked up to Louise and gave her recently grown tits a squeeze.

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Louise screamed and immediately went into a huddle with Liz.

"Can you believe that pig? Did you see what he did to me?" she would have said.

Given what had happened before the party and her feelings about physical contact between the sexes, she would have been pretty hysterical. Her face would have been red, tears would have been flowing. Everyone at the party would have turned to look, to find out exactly what had happened. Liz would have put her arm around her friend to comfort her, drawn her into a hug.

What made it inevitable, what made it worse, was the combination of names: Lizzie and Louise.

"Lesbians!" shouted Bruce. "Snow White and Pocahontas! A little pink and brown Louise and Lizzie lezzy action."

It's strange to me, how in the days before the Internet, teenage guys still knew the vocabulary of porn.

Bruce Collins had turned two 15 year-old girls into a great, big, homophobic joke. Only they didn't know it was called homophobia in 1989. Sunshine said that the boys in the choir weren't even out when they were in high school. The 80s were dark days. I'm glad I missed them.

That's when the story stops being about Louise's breasts and starts to be about Liz's heart.

Liz was to become much more to me and to everyone in our family, but at that moment, no one knew her as anything other than a very unfortunate, very unlucky girl. Maybe somebody somewhere loved Liz, but if that were true, they weren't around and hadn't been for a long time. She lived where every leaf of lettuce could be accounted for, but at the moment, she was in her best friend's house. Her best friend's parents and sister treated her with enough kindness and generosity to guarantee that she knew how little she had. She was already "different", and now, this one-beer bully shocks her with words she only slightly understands.

Of course Louise took on Bruce in a war of words.

"Who do you think you are? Do I need to call the police and have you charged with assault?"

Of course Sunshine backed her younger sister up.

"Are you going to leave now, or do I have to go upstairs and get our dad?"

Of course, Bruce held up his hands in surrender.

"Girls! Girls! You know I'm harmless. I just wanted to lighten the atmosphere a little. Just, you know, to get this party started."

And, while that was happening, Liz Moonchild saw a boy named Ray sitting in the corner. He was a mystery, which is always an attractive trait to girls. A friend of a friend, and of the opposite sex, is always more interesting than a classmate or casual acquaintance.

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Ray was cute enough. That was all he needed to be. Even if he and Liz had never actually spoken, Liz must have felt there was some connection when they looked at each other across the room, both averting their eyes from the tit tweak drama.

So, Liz walked over to Ray's chair, smiling, being brave in the face of ridicule. She sat down beside a stranger and pressed her lips to his.

It was long after Liz had proven to Bruce, and to everyone else at the party, that she was no lesbian, that it was revealed the very public make-out session had not ended, but just moved.

Liz and Ray had gone into the garden. Maybe where there are still cushioned benches behind the garden shed. That is the only place they could not have been seen through the patio doors on the ground floor.

"Look what you've done now!" Louise shouted at our parents when she found out about her best friend's pregnancy six weeks after the party.

Steve and Barbara Smith were shocked. They weren't shocked that fifteen year-olds were having sex. They weren't shocked that their youngest daughter saw them as a bad example, as people whose libidos lacked the control necessary in a parent. They were shocked because they really did feel responsible. It had happened on their property.

When Louise told them that Liz's foster parents had made her leave – probably because a pregnant teenager needs another potato and maybe some extra spinach – our parents had to get personally involved.

There was no pressure, really, on them to do anything. Houses in our neighbourhood have been almost destroyed by wild parties and the parents involved have had mostly sympathy from the others. Surprisingly enough, teenage girls in foster care don't have the contacts to ruin anyone's reputation but their own.

Once Liz had been moved out of our high school's catchment area, once she and Lou could no longer see each other every day, once their friendship was dissolved by circumstances, no one who knew my parents need ever have known about Liz's pregnancy or that it had happened in my parents' backyard. My parents could have just stayed away from Liz and everything that happened to her.

Instead, they made an appointment to see her social worker.

Where we live, when a girl finds herself pregnant, rejected and homeless, there are some great places she can turn to. Those places we all know about, run by churches and feminists, Samaritans and volunteers, are lifelines for young girls in trouble. Those places, as sorry as they were, had to turn away Liz Moonchild. Liz was already a ward of the state and the Children's Aid Society was responsible for providing for her needs. They had a place where Liz could wait among other pregnant teenagers and others who were "difficult" to place in foster homes.

The Children's Aid society had a homeless shelter of its own.

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Our parents are many things, but not naïve. They'd served Thanksgiving dinners to the homeless and Dad was on the board of directors for the agency that had opened the first food bank in Canada five years before. They knew what they were looking at and they knew that even though the facility wasn't perfect, it could have been worse.

They also probably knew that the social worker had hundreds of kids in her files. So many that, until there was a big problem, none of the little problems were even looked at.

It wasn't until Professor Barbara Finnegan-Smith asked a frazzled looking woman in glasses why Liz had never been put in touch with her own mother's family, even though there were programs in place to enable visitation, it wasn't until she asked why Liz had never been enrolled in a Native culture class for her self-esteem that anyone had even considered the possibilities.

The social worker called Liz into the meeting.

"Where am I going next?" She asked. "I really need to stay in the same school. I still want to finish the year."

"You'll come home with us," my mother said.

"I thought I could live alone," Liz said. "Maybe get my own apartment."

"Have you seen the kind of places where kids on student welfare live?" my mother asked her. "Why not just stay with us while you have a look?"

"I can't do that," Liz said. "I couldn't handle it. Lou is my friend, but it wouldn't feel right."

"Oh, you wouldn't be a guest. You'd be part of the family," my mother assured her.

"Yeah, even trying that might drive me crazy," Liz replied, probably rolling her eyes. "I don't know how to live in a family. In case you haven't noticed, I don't have one."

"Well, it seems you do have a grandmother," the social worker said casually as she flipped through the first pages of Liz's files. "At least you did twelve years ago. I can't believe the dust that gets between the pages sometimes. We really need to have someone vacuum the filing cabinets on a regular basis."

"Let me see that," Liz demanded.

"You know I can't let you read your file," the social worker said. "Just let me see if this telephone number is still working. Oh! I'll have to call central office for a long distance code. Do you want to come back later?"

Liz went pale and started throwing up in the waste paper basket.

My mother stayed to hold Liz's hair out of the way, choking back the urge to start barfing in sympathy.

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"I think I'll stay right here and wait with Lizzie," my mother said. If they hadn't waited, Liz may have had to wait in bureaucratic purgatory for another 12 years to learn about her origins.

My father left the room. He needed to think.

He hadn't known my mother wanted to bring Liz home. Had no idea it was even up for discussion.

I am not the first couch contemplator in my family, nor am I descended from the first armchair philosopher to grace our line.

The old man says, but only when it suits him, that reflection has always served our family well.

Like when Arthur Smith, of the very United Empire Loyalist family, married a 15 year-old orphan who worked as a milk-maid on his father's dairy farm. Great-Grandpa Smith liked to say he thought about whom he wanted to marry for three days and three nights and made the right choice. It was not a decision anyone understood, especially my great-grandmother. On her wedding day she couldn't speak a word of English, but that changed and everything worked out. They're both dead now.

Reflection has worked for my father too. Today, Smith Brothers' Dairy makes nothing but yogurt. Sorry, nothing but Organic Yogurt. One core product gives a man like my father enough to think about.

Organic Yogurt, unlike yogurt of the other kinds, is not served in plastic cups. Instead it's sold in glass jars. You know, the way nature intended. Smith Brothers' Organic Yogurts champion the cause of holistic and wholesome living. They are also good for your gut.

Privately, it's not all smooth churning in our family dairy business. Smith Brothers' Organic Yogurts is actually just Smith Brother. Each flavour is originated by my father working alone in his test kitchen. It's not about my father and my uncle working side-by-side the way their parents and their parents' parents worked with their sisters and brothers.

They were an unlikely pair. Brothers usually are. Unlikely pairs don't always feud with each other. Sometimes they just go on side-by-side letting the other live. If you were to ask the old man, he would say that is exactly what he and Uncle Reeve do, live and let live. That just tells you how the mind of a man who has dedicated his career to Organic Yogurt functions.

Two fortunate brothers coming of age and taking over their dairy dynasty should be a happy story and, mostly, it is.

As a young man, my father looked at his bank balance and knew, deep in his soul, that there was more than enough. All he had to do was work in the test kitchen with his milk, his bacteria, and his gelatin-free compotes.

Point being, my father knew he could afford the risk of running a responsible business as long as he didn't do it to get richer.

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Uncle Reeve came of age and took a look at his bank balance too. The numbers he saw were the same as the ones my father saw, but Reeve believed he needed more. If my father was a man freed by family net worth, Uncle Reeve became a slave to the challenge of making more than his forefathers had created. At least, that's what I think.

Reeve became so busy managing his investments that he needed a cleaning lady every day. After that, it wasn't very long before he couldn't even boil an egg himself. Then, the stress from all the financial risks he was taking became so great that he needed custom-fitted black-out blinds on all of his windows so that he could fool his body into believing that the sun rose and set according to breaks in the trading day. After that, there was the need to make enough to ensure his status as the "financial genius" columnists wrote about in business magazines.

My father got to be the traditional brother while Uncle Reeve got to be the successful one.

And then my father crossed into Reeve's territory.

As my father sat on the steps of that youth facility, family tradition abandoned him. I am sure he sat down, elbows resting on his knees, face muscles and shoulders relaxed. I am sure he appeared deep in thought, even though he found himself unable to think. It was impossible to reflect because he'd fallen into poverty tourist mode.

Smells, institutional and stale, remained on his clothes while outside, the garbage cans were waiting for pickup. Exhaust was constant. The streetcars squealed, and there were voices. He found himself eavesdropping on the conversation of three street punks sitting on the bottom step at street level. He stared at their grey-tinged skin, observed how the bones in their arms and backs bowed slightly under their ripped t-shirts.

"I am, like, so hungry," one said. "I need fries with gravy."

"And ketchup," said the other.

"Could you possibly spare some change, ma'am?" the third asked an old lady who was walking by.

He watched the kids count the coins.

"How much more do we need?"

My old man listened to them describe their hunger, their cravings. He wished they'd notice him and ask him for change so he could tell them to add some cheese curds to their meal. He became, possibly, the only responsible adult in the world to wish *poutine* on others for its nutritive powers.

He was disgusted, but inspired.

Dad brought Mom and Liz home from the holding centre and went to work in the test kitchen. The street punks' bones were bowing in his mind for days. After weeks of experimentation, he

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created an iron and calcium rich masterpiece that would change the entire Organic Yogurt industry and make Steve Smith its icon.

*Goth Baby Black Organic Yogurt* was coloured and flavoured with an unlikely blend of blueberries, mulberries, blackberries, spinach and lady's bedstraw flowers. It's dark and murky greenish-purple could pass for black in daylight.

By accident, the product became the darling of food editors in its returnable mini-Mason jar shrouded in a black label bearing a glow-in-the-dark skeleton logo.

*Goth Baby Black Organic Yogurt* nourished entire subcultures of youth for nine months of fad-driven frenzy before the product was lost in a sea of imitators. Luckily, none of the imitations out-last-ed the fad and we still make the stuff for a small, but dedicated, group of Punk and Goth music fans.

*Goth Baby* was a marketing fluke. Created with existing company resources, its development didn't need any outside advice or investment. It's a chapter for the business text books.

In the 80s, anyone could make money. At least, as Grandpa Finnegan would say, "he's so lucky, he's got horseshoes up his ass."

Upon reflection my father decided that getting involved with the supposedly unfortunate, deeply unlucky Liz Moonchild turned out to be a very good idea. It turned out OK for me. I acquired two more sisters. One the same age as the sisters I already had and one just seven weeks younger than me.

Sunshine says we should call it *Finnegan and his Four Sisters of Fate*. She might write the libretto one day.