WHY THE WILD BUNCH

Growing up in an unruly gang of siblings, novelist CAROL EDGARIAN learned the meaning of love and war.

THIS IS HOW IT WAS IN THE NOT-SO-QUAINT PAST, when parenting was considered a leisure activity—akin to throwing horseshoes or grilling steaks on the hibachi—and children were left to live by their wits, subject to the rule of the pack.

My pack consisted of my brother and sister—a pair of omnipotent, impervious, haughty emperors. Photos from that time prove they were really just two scrawny kids from the burbs with high-water pants and bangs cut far too short, but my siblings were nonetheless superior to me in age and experience, and in those days that counted for everything.

Consider: It's Christmas, and we're heading to church, gliding down snow-covered roads in our father's Buick. Our parents are up front, in their own world, while the three of us are in back. Everyone's a bit stiff and excited; it's the holiday, and we're wearing our best clothes and coats. I'm sitting, as ever, in the middle—the dreaded, windowless, bump-at-your-feet, no-comfort, low-man-on-the-totem-pole middle. In my lap, I'm holding a white fur muff so tenderly, reverentially—cleaving to this small bit of pride. But on either side, my brother and sister keep elbowing and pinching me, smirking and whispering in my ear that I am taking up way too much room—in the car and on the planet.

"Nern," they hiss, a name that makes no sense, comes from nowhere, except that it is the one word guaranteed to make me explode. "Nern." "Stop!" I wail. At which point our father, torn from his holiday revelry, roars: "Chrissakes, that's enough! You people fight more than any other kids in America."

This line, though often repeated, always stopped us cold. Could it be true? Did we in fact fight more than any other kids in America?

We rode our bikes, and we rode them far and fast. To amuse ourselves, we played war in the backyard. We hunted and killed each other. We knew everything necessary to vanquish one another as prey because, on a molecular level, we each understood how the others thought. But left alone to be our fully barbaric selves, we also had a great deal of fun and mischief. Our inside jokes were the funniest; our successes, the hardest and best won. We didn't talk a lot. We knew one another so well it wasn't necessary. And when we did talk, it was in shorthand.

HAVING SIBLINGS, IT NOW OCCURS TO ME, IS LIKE JOINING THE MAFIA: THE ONLY WAY TO FREE YOURSELF IS TO MOVE TO ARIZONA AND CHANGE YOUR NAME. AND EVEN THEN...

Having siblings, it now occurs to me, is a lot like joining the Mafia: Blood is required, as is violence, loyalty, one-upmanship, flatulence—and the only way to free yourself is to move to Arizona and change your name. And even then...

Bit by bit, we grew up. We fed the dog, we fell in love, we French-inhaled, we broke free. We washed the car, and we bashed the car. We were moody. We differed on politics and clothes and lifestyle and food—to the extreme.

We went off to school and returned home on holidays—older, wiser, different but the same. And so the cycle began again—love, hate, boredom, war, laughter. Our parents divorced and each remarried.

When I was 17 and in boarding school, my mother, newly remarried, summoned me home. "Tell you when you get here," she said in a dire tone. I rode two and a half hours on a Greyhound bus certain she was getting divorced again or had cancer.

"You're never going to believe it," she said as I came through the door.

Back at school, I was having sex with my boyfriend and a week earlier had made a trip Boston to get contraception. I thought of the one thing most unbelievable: "You're pregnant," I said. My mother sat up: "How did you know?"

That summer, as her belly grew huge, my mother and I went to Lamaze classes; I was her coach. And when the baby was born—the youngest by 17 years—she became, in a way, my baby too.

That sister is in her 30s now, with a couple of kids. I have three daughters. My older brother and sister each have a son. The new generation doesn't play war; their parents are around too much. And instead of extricating myself from the mafia, the mafia followed me—all the way to California. All of us, except our father, moved in a herd.

Then last summer, when our father was very ill, rather than visiting one by one, as we usually did, my siblings and I went home together to see him. Without saying so, we knew we'd need one another. I left my two youngest daughters at camp in Vermont and drove four hours south. Meanwhile, my brother and sister were coming in on the red-eye from the West Coast. "This flight could be a nightmare," my brother said dryly. "I like to sleep on planes, you know, and she's going to want to talk."

We spent the first day visiting our father and meeting with his doctors. "Be cautioned," my cousin warned us, "he's really declined." We were steeled, but are you ever steeled enough? It had been three months since I'd seen him, and the change was radical. Our father, the roaring king of old, sat in his chair with his head tipped to one side. Over dinner, we told stories and bad jokes, competing to get him to smile.

After we said our good-nights to him, we caravanned to our hotel. It was blistering hot, and as we checked in, I asked about the pool. "Closes in 10 minutes," the clerk said. We gave one another a look and took off, tossing our bags into our rooms and wiggling into our bathing suits. We ran laughing, chuffing across the parking lot. We had met up with all our old anxieties: about our father, of course, but also about returning to the old war grounds, about being together. We were so different—our politics, our careers—so very different.

The pool was large, nestled under a grove of pines. The pool boy was closing up. "Hey," I called after diving in. "What would you say if we agreed to lock up?" "No problem," the kid said. Then my sister, floating dreamily with her arms out, added: "I would kill for a beer." "I've got beer," the kid said brightly. We tipped him handsomely, and he handed over the padlock and the beer, as eager to move on as we were to not move at all—but to float, to hold time.

We told stories. We made fun of one another. Around us, overhead, the night turned dusty and blue. Later, we ate in the bar, then took our drinks to my brother's room, where we sat on the bed and went through a large box of our father's photos. There we were in picture after picture: three young colts, all limbs and teeth and elbows, side by side.

I've told my daughters that I will feel I've done my job if, when they are grown, they think of each other not only as friends but also as allies.

The next morning, as I drove away, our other sister, the baby, the one with a different father, called me. She was itching to hear the report, tracking us, wondering not only about our father but also about how we savages got along. In shorthand, I told her. ◆

COURTESY OF CAROL EDGARIAN

From top: The author at 19 with her youngest sister, Jennifer Morris, 2, in 1980; the Edgarian clan on Easter Sunday, 1965, from left: Leslie (age 5), Glenn (8), and Carol (3).