

HERS/HIS

MY SISTER'S ROOM



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Everything I longed for lay on the other side of that door

The year I was ten, I wanted everything my sister had, from her gold bangle bracelet with real amethysts, to her breasts. Most of all, I wanted her room, or at least unlimited access to it. For that was where everything else reposed—the bracelet, the bras, the secrets of life. Until that year we had shared the same room, although “share” is a misleadingly benign way to describe what we did within that four-walled space. My senior by six years, there was precious little my sister wanted to share with me, and she found our enforced roommate status a constant trial. My chief recollection of those early days was being an intruder, an embarrassment on my own premises. Mine was the perennial comic entrance, made to the accompaniment of grimaces and “Oh, no’s” from my sister and her friends.

Early on, my sister had drawn a line down the center of the room, and this she guarded as fiercely as the Berlin Wall. Physically, there was nothing to prevent me from crossing the border, but such trespass was at my own peril, punishable by loud protests and such sneering repulses as “Get back on your side of the room before you stink up all my things, you little creep!”

Still, I didn’t know what banishment was until we moved out of our two-bedroom apartment into a three-bedroom house. No invisible line separated us now. The doors between our two rooms were solid and im-

penetrable—and my sister’s was always closed. If she could have put police locks on it and lined it with lead, she would have.

Now I wasn’t an intruder in my own home; I was an exile. When the door to my sister’s room closed behind her, it seemed to close on everything most desirable in the world. Inside was a lair full of sexual secrets, attested to by the tampon boxes, garter belts and nylon underwear. Self-assurance rested inside that room. I was too young to understand that what I perceived as my sister’s self-assurance was tentative, hard won and costly. I didn’t realize it had less to do with place than with the number of yearning years lived on Earth, that it was not transferable. For me, everything desirable lay on the other side of that door: sophistication, understanding, respect, allure. And the greatest treasure of all, of course, the key to my sister’s heart.

I envied my sister’s friends, who freely entered and left that room. (For me, the door might be opened a grudging half inch, accompanied by the question, “What do *you* want?”) Theirs were the voices and the laughter that sounded from the other side of the door like the twitters of Paradise. What made them so much more acceptable than I? What did they know that I didn’t? And was that knowledge secreted somewhere in a drawer or on a shelf of that room?

The few glimpses of her room I managed were enough to secure the room, in my mind, as a place of unutterable glamour and elegance. It was a corner room in the rear of the house, with windows on two sides facing our backyard. In the spring, you could practically reach out of those windows and touch the large cherry tree that grew just feet away.

It smelled good in there all the time, either from the cherry tree or whichever glamorous scent my sister was trying that term.

My own room seemed cramped and babyish by comparison. The new, pink and white plaid wallpaper, though chosen by me, was childish compared with the dark green and white linear paper on my sister’s walls. My new cherrywood bed and dresser were old-fashioned when set beside her cool modern furniture. There was a low dresser of blond wood, with a matching mirror; a sleek, businesslike desk; and twin beds covered in green quilted fabric, with taffeta dust ruffles (two beds, so that friends could sleep over and whisper the secrets of the universe to one another at night). It didn’t matter that those beds were our old, childhood beds refurbished, or that the green carpet had been cut down from our old living room rug. They were precious to me.

I spent five years trying to get into that room, usually managing it only when my sister was elsewhere. In her absence, ignoring the death threats against trespassing, I would enter it and study its artifacts with no less awe than the discoverers of Tutankhamen’s tomb inspected their finds. I tried on the lipsticks and the jewelry as if performing a mystical rite. Perhaps my sister’s makeup and trinkets were invested with her power. Perhaps they could impart some of that power to me, and make her like me.

My attempts to enter the sanctum sanctorum when the high priestess was in residence, however, were doomed to failure, although I tried everything short of setting myself on fire to gain admittance. But my sister quickly became suspicious of my fabricated reason for “having” to come in and see her, and stony in her refusal to grant me entrance. It was no different on the day I was eleven and came home from school to discover with a shock the evidence of my first period. Pounding on my sister’s door with the news that I was bleeding, that I was sick, that I was dying, for God’s sake, I heard from the other side her implacable tones: “Bette, you’re *not* getting in here.” (Afterwards, when my mother congratulated me and explained that I was becoming a woman, I remember feeling ambivalent; while it was certainly preferable to death, it still hadn’t gotten me into my sister’s room.)

Five years after we moved to that house, my sister left it permanently to get married. We picked out new wallpaper for her room, and finally I entered it as proprietor.

Yet the move didn’t mean as much to me as I’d thought it would. I had the room, of course. But my sister was no longer in it.

by Bette-Jane Raphael