

## Prologue

It's fun to learn which celebrities and famous people share my birthday, for no other reason than to confirm my birthday is indeed a momentous day. Notables include Mae West, the original blonde bombshell who once said, "Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere." Also, the *Raging Bull* "You talkin' to me?" actor Robert De Niro. And my all-time favorite, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* stoner Jeff Spicoli, played by Sean Penn, whose famous line, "I'm so wasted!" defined most of my generation. Why did he have to grow up?

Celebrities aside, the most important person I will always share a birthday with is my big sister, Celia, born on Saturday, August 17, 1957. I came along seven years later, on Monday, August 17, 1964. It's certainly not an anomaly for siblings to be born on the same day. But according to my mother, she delivered two weeks early for both births, making it even more statistically unlikely.

The seven-year age gap sometimes affected our relationship, mainly because I always wanted to play with her. Celia couldn't be bothered with my childish antics, especially after discovering boys. As I grew up, she served as my role model, confidante, moral compass, protector, and best friend.

But back to our shared birthdays. I'll be honest, I thought it sucked that our birthdays were the same day because I didn't like sharing anything.

Our parents made a big deal out of our birthdays. We'd have two cakes (which my mother almost always baked and then decorated to perfection), great gifts, and sometimes week-long celebrations. My favorite cakes included Flipper, the dolphin from the television series, and Raggedy Ann. The Flipper cake had teal-colored icing made from pure sugar, which soaked through the vanilla cake and turned it blue, along with our tongues, and the intricate decorations on Raggedy Ann made her look like she might come alive and jump off the table.

Being seven years younger meant I had my celebration in the afternoon with Pin the Tail on the Donkey, musical chairs, peanut butter and jelly or cheese sandwiches, fruit punch, and cake. Later that night, Celia had the cool-girl slumber party with hot dogs and hamburgers, brownies and soda, and dance music. Of course, being the genuinely annoying little sister, I crashed her parties; shockingly, she and her friends always kicked me out.

On my eighth birthday, Celia and her friends celebrated her fifteenth birthday with an impromptu dance party while listening to Donny Osmond and David Cassidy on her new cassette tape deck. I slipped into the room and started dancing with them.

"Hey, get out of here, Judy, or I'll tell Mama," she screamed. I ignored her and kept dancing. Soon, all her friends were also screaming at me, and my mom dragged me away.

"It's not fair," I cried. "Why can't I stay? It's my birthday, too."

My mom looked at me with sympathetic eyes and said, "Because you're the little sister."

As I got older, I found a new appreciation for sharing our birthday. I looked forward to it every year, mainly because I looked up to Celia and wanted to be like her. While August 17 represented the one day of the year that bonded the two of us forever, our connection went far beyond that date.

We no longer celebrate our birthdays in person and haven't for many years. But I will always share a birthday with Celia in my heart. I remember our last celebration together. I had

wanted August 17 to be all about her and nothing about me for just that moment. But she wouldn't have anything to do with that idea at all. She said, "We will always share a birthday, and don't you forget that!" When she spoke, I usually listened. She also told me to continue our birthday traditions even after she was gone.

Today, my heart is a bit heavier every August 17. I may not have the big fancy cakes, fun parties, or even week-long celebrations, but I remember the good times and our unique connection.

My sister's death left me so lost that I wasn't sure of my purpose. Thoughts of her not being by my side left me paralyzed with fear. We'd never see each other get married or have children. We'd never travel the world together and make new memories. But her memory forever remains a guiding force in my life.

It's been many years since my sister's passing, and honestly, I'm not sure I've ever accepted it. How could I? How could anyone? But what I have done is keep her memory alive through pictures, stories, and learning. I have, of course, made plenty of mistakes and bad choices along the way, but isn't that part of life? I think she'd agree.

The following is a collection of my life stories before and after my sister's passing, illustrating how I've carried her with me through all my experiences and kept my promise to her that I never stop living. These stories represent happiness, hope, sadness, tragedy, triumph, love, and meaning, and they show I'm a survivor who doesn't take things for granted. I also don't take myself too seriously.

I'm a self-described late bloomer who, by definition, becomes successful, attractive, etc., later in life than other people. I'd also add to the list gets married and has a child after forty. Was that my plan? Who knows? Honestly, I'm not sure we ever plan how our lives will look. As the saying goes, "Make plans, and God laughs." Intended or not, this is my life. But my story doesn't begin or end here.

To be clear, I don't believe I have an extraordinary life. Or maybe I do. Anyway, where is it written that celebrities and

athletes are the only people who can share their stories? (Though I've read my fair share of books about the rich and famous). But I have another purpose for sharing my journey. I want others who have suffered an inconceivable loss or another life-altering event to know that life goes on even if it seems unimaginable. I'm living proof of this revelation.

My mother once wisely told me, "Judy, there are many things you can't change in your life, but your hair color isn't one of them." While I took this sage wisdom and began dying my hair at age twenty-eight, I understood her advice had nothing to do with my vanity. She meant that life is constantly changing. Some days we'll laugh, other days we'll cry, but then we rewind and begin anew. In truth, I've never been a fan of change. And while life might not always seem fair, ultimately, the choice to surrender or keep living is ours.

In Celia's last days, I made her promises I vowed to keep. I promised to celebrate the good times—like birthdays—and learn to accept the bad times, even when they don't make sense, and to never stop living.

So many people in my life never got the opportunity to know my wonderful sister, Celia. I will forever keep her memory alive through my promise to live my best life, even with all the ups and downs thrown my way, because, in terms of universal time, we're only here for a moment.

# Part One



## Chapter 1

I grew up in Houston, Texas, during the 1970s and 1980s with my mother, Barbara; my father, Robert; and my big sister, Celia. But I entered the world at the Caney Valley Hospital in Wharton, Texas, a small town fifty miles southwest of Houston that sits along the Colorado River. This idyllic setting is where I spent many summers and holidays with my grandparents, Jack and Bertha Roth.

While best known for its agriculture, cotton fields, and friendly folks, Wharton had also been a destination for many Jewish immigrants arriving from Europe beginning in the later part of the 1800s. At that time, Joe Schwartz, a successful dry goods merchant, arranged to bring his sister, Hannah Kreitstein, brother-in-law, Isaac Kreitstein, and other relatives to America. Hannah and Isaac were my great grandparents, and they became part of Wharton's tight-knit Jewish community.

The story of Wharton and many of its characters, including Joe Schwartz and the Kreitsteins, comes to life in American playwright and Academy Award-winning screenwriter Horton Foote's 1999 book, *Farewell: A Memoir of a Texas Childhood*. Foote wrote about his memories of the many kind families and colorful people he met while growing up in Wharton, daring to paint Texas and Texans in a far more intellectual light than Hollywood or Broadway ever did.

Joe Schwartz owned a successful clothing store that shared his name. The haberdashery sat in the middle of the town's square with a grand staircase ascending to the second floor from the main level, looking like part of the *Gone with the*

*Wind* movie set. By contrast, my great grandparents owned a less-successful small shoe repair business.

In his pages about the Schwartz and Kreitstein businesses, Foote wrote about the perceived prosperity between the two merchants. He marveled at the mystery of how the Kreitstein's shoe repair stayed in business. Foote's father explained that the Jews in town, unlike the Gentiles, were loyal and always ready to take care of each other. This was symbolic of the Jewish community of Wharton.

In 1905, shortly after my great grandparents settled in Texas, my grandmother, Bertha, was born. The family quickly became part of Wharton's Jewish fabric. When she was twenty-six years old, Bertha and her parents took a train to visit relatives in New York City. During this trip, Bertha met a handsome gentleman, Jack Roth, and was instantly smitten. She told him he should visit her in Texas because she knew he'd love it.

Jack took Bertha's advice, and not only did he fall in love with Texas, but he also fell in love with Bertha. They were married in 1933. The following year, my connection to Wharton was solidified with the birth of my mother, Barbara.

My grandfather became the sole proprietor of a liquor store called Joe's Package Store, named for my Uncle Joe, my mother's younger brother. I never understood why it wasn't called Barbara's Package Store after his firstborn. My uncle never appreciated my logic. I practically grew up at this store. "Your first words weren't Da Da or Ma Ma; they were Old Crow and Johnny Walker," my mother always joked.

The small building with metal siding had a big red neon sign, "Joe's Package Store." Behind the counter, Papa sat on my favorite wooden chair with a green vinyl cushion. This chair used to sit in my great grandfather's shoe repair store and, before that, in the shoe department of Joe Schwartz.

While small in size, the store seemed larger than life to me. Liquor bottles of all shapes and forms lined the shelves stacked from the floor to the ceiling. A front window displayed seasonal selections and promotional items to draw customers inside.



I felt so grown up sitting in his chair behind the counter, ringing up customers on the manual cash register. By today's standards, if Papa allowed a minor on the premises of a store that sold alcohol and tobacco, he'd be arrested, but things were different then. I kept both the chair and cash register from his store, and each time I see them, my memories take me back to my grandfather's store. I can still smell his cigar.

Unfortunately, my memory of my grandmother, Bertha, is limited. She passed away in 1968, shortly before my fourth birthday. I do recall her carrying me around the house and singing "Hello, Dolly." In Horton Foote's memoir, he remembered her as a jolly, friendly soul who spoke with a broad Southern accent.

My mother told me Bertha was a fiery force in town, too, and it had nothing to do with her flaming red hair. A born and bred Whartonian, Bertha knew everyone in town. "My mother never met a stranger," was always my mom's description of Bertha.

But, while taking care of everyone else, she forgot to take care of herself. She passed at the young age of sixty-three. My grandfather never remarried. When my grandmother died, I gave Papa some of my Kiddle dolls. These tiny little dolls came in different colors and faces. I placed them on top of his TV to keep him company. Many of the dolls disappeared over the years, and the only one left had fiery red hair, just like Bertha. When Papa died, I buried the trinket with him, so it could keep him company.

While living in Austin, Texas, my cousin, Fred—Joe Schwartz's grandson—told me about Mr. Foote's appearance at the Texas Book Fair, and we both wanted to meet him. Since Fred, a born and raised Whartonian, and I both had ties to Wharton, we were eager to meet Mr. Foote and tell him about our shared connection.

"Mr. Foote, I want to thank you for the nice things you wrote about my grandfather, Joe Schwartz, in your new book," Fred said upon meeting Horton Foote. Fred then turned to me and said, "She isn't thrilled about how you described her great-

grandparents, Isaac and Hannah Kreitstein.” Fred and his smart mouth. As I extended my hand to Mr. Foote, I felt the heat rise in my cheeks from sheer embarrassment. He cautiously looked at me while shaking my hand and said, “They were lovely people.”

Fred innocently teasing me represented our close relationship. He’s always been more like a big brother than a cousin. And as far as bloodlines go, we’re second cousins once removed. Nonetheless, we were in the same gene pool. No matter how close or far apart the genealogy family tree spread, Fred became an integral part of my life, especially after living with my family during the summer of 1972, after he graduated from NYU business school.

My mother taught elementary school and had summers off with my sister, Celia, and me. Fred mainly spent time with his friends and did his own thing, but he still found time to hang out with us and visit the beach, see movies and go to Houston Astros baseball games, or play board games at home.

On occasion, Fred would bring his friends to our house. One evening, he showed up with his girlfriend, Paula. My mother and father were out for the evening, and Celia was at slumber party. That meant I was home with the babysitter. Fred and Paula rang the doorbell, and the babysitter answered. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Fred, the Havesons’ cousin, and I’m staying here and forgot my keys. Can I please come in to get them?” he asked.

The babysitter said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t let anyone in the house without permission from Mr. and Mrs. Haveson.”

Fred looked down at me as I stood next to the babysitter in the doorway. “Judy, please tell the babysitter who I am so I can come in and get my keys,” he said.

At the tender age of eight, I channeled my inner sarcastic self, looked up at Fred, and turned to the babysitter. “I’ve never seen him before in my life.”

We all got a good laugh out of this memory eventually. This began a special bond between Fred and me that forever made us more than merely second cousins once removed.

Fred later married a remarkable woman named Kay, and she became a big sister to Celia and me. They had four children:

Leslie, Mark, Jay, and Nancy. According to genealogy, Fred's children and I are third cousins once removed. Does that even count as family? But because of my close relationship with Fred and Kay, my cousins also forever hold a special place in my heart.

Mr. Foote said nice things in his book about my great grandmother, Hannah, describing her as a friendly soul who was always sympathetic to families who were less fortunate or experiencing tragedies.

Tzedakah is the Hebrew word for charitable giving, and this is what my grandparents always taught my mother, and in turn, she taught me. It doesn't matter whether you have a lot or very little; there's always someone less fortunate who needs help. But tzedakah isn't only about giving money.

For my grandfather, tzedakah included helping his regular customers at the liquor store. All the town folk loved Mr. Jack. "Judy, my best piece of advice for you is always to be sincere," he'd tell me. And this is why he was so beloved.

Not only did he provide his customers the ability to purchase wine, beer, spirits, cigarettes, cigars, and gum, he provided tax and legal advice. His being neither an accountant nor a lawyer made no difference to these fine folks. He also acted as a delivery service for some regulars, especially for one customer, Miss Camille, who lived in a pink house down a long dirt road. Her home hid behind overgrown weeds, and you could barely see it from the street. Papa drove to her house every Friday evening and left a brown paper bag with a fifth of bourbon or scotch or whatever she was drinking that week on her driveway.

She'd come inside the store on occasion while I was in town. I remember she dressed in church clothes, always with a hat on her head and big pearls around her neck. And she always smelled lovely.

"Well, look at how grown-up you gittin', missy. I remember when you was just waist-high," she always said to me in her Southern twang.

“How will you get the money from Miss Camille?” I would ask Papa. “She never pays you.” He would look at me and say, “I just add it to her tab.” I secretly wondered if Miss Camille ever paid her tab.

My happiest Wharton memories are in Papa’s cozy house. Not because it was big or grandiose with expensive decorations and fancy furniture, but because it was the exact opposite. The little white house with the vast yard sat on Avenue C and Texas Street. Pecan, pear, and fig trees filled the space. The figs and pears were the sweetest things I ever tasted, and I would sometimes eat them right from the tree, even the ones that fell on the ground. We’d jar the pears and figs and soak them in water with lemon rinds and sugar. Once they were ready, we’d eat them straight out of the jar. And I’d gather the pecans scattered all over the yard that had fallen from the tree. When our car turned the corner onto Avenue C, I couldn’t wait for my treats.

Just past the front steps of the house was the living/dining room. With its sunken sofas, high back armchairs, color television, and worn carpet with squeaky floorboards from heavy foot traffic, this room represented the heart of the home. A window air conditioner unit sat in the corner, constantly running and loudly humming, especially during the hot summer months. In the evenings, I’d often find my grandfather sitting at the dining table, counting his money from the day’s sales that he would deposit in the bank the following morning.

“Papa, you are so rich,” I’d always tell him when I saw the twenties, tens, fives, ones, and occasional fifties and hundreds. It was only later that I learned it was typically a couple of hundred dollars at most.

“Judy, I will give you advice related to money,” he said to me one night while counting the day’s sales.

“What is it, Papa?”

“Never squander your money,” he said. “Don’t deny yourself pleasure but give yourself limits. Independence is the best thing in the world.”

I’ve never forgotten his words.

The kitchen was compact but functional, and my grandfather cooked many meals for himself. He is responsible for my love of Cream of Wheat, celery or mushroom soup and noodles, challah French toast, and midnight snacks although not eaten at midnight. When he got home from his store every night after 9:00 p.m., he made himself a “midnight snack.” Typically he had ice cream, but on Saturday nights, his snack included chips and a cold beer, which he ate and drank while sitting in front of the TV watching wrestling matches.

Next to the window in the kitchen sat an expandable table with three chairs on top of the checkered black and white linoleum-tiled floor. The fourth chair wouldn’t fit, so it rotated around the house as extra seating for company. Yellow cabinet doors lined the kitchen and often stuck as if paint had dried them shut. Built-in shelves on the wall displayed many of the tchotchkes collected from his worldwide trips.

A rotary telephone hung on the wall with a long stretchy cord, which enabled you to take the hand receiver with you while cooking or if you needed to go into the next room as if it were a portable telephone before they even existed. A small storage closet sat next to the phone they called the “broom” closet, but more than brooms filled the space. It became my ultimate hiding place.

“Has anyone seen Judy? It’s time to leave,” my mom would yell through the house, pretending not to know where I was hiding.

“But I don’t want to go back to Houston,” I’d often cry, stepping out of the closet.

“I know, but you have to go to school,” she’d say.

“I hate school.”

“Oh, you have to go to school, Judy. Education is so important,” Papa would say. “Besides, you’ll be back soon.”

And I knew we would.

Before I was born, Celia got very comfortable owning the title “only grandchild.” For her seventh birthday, in anticipation of my arrival, my grandparents bought her a Charmin’ Chatty Cathy doll, so she’d have something special to

celebrate that had nothing to do with my birth. This doll was the second most popular behind the Barbie doll, but unlike Barbie, Cathy had a string in her back you pulled, and she talked. She said phrases like, “I love you” and “I’m hungry.” I’m sure Celia would have preferred she’d say, “Ignore the baby” or “Let the baby cry.”

My mother always told the story of when they brought me home from the hospital. She had set up my crib in the main bedroom of my grandfather’s house. It was the largest room, with a smaller room next door, where Celia slept. One evening, Papa came into the room to check on me, and out of the darkness, he heard, “Stay away from *that* baby!” Having a new baby sister was an acquired taste for Celia.

But one of my all-time favorite Celia stories is when she decided to play beauty shop with her Cathy doll and cut her hair.

“What do you mean her hair won’t grow back?” she cried.

“Celia, Cathy is a doll, and once you cut her hair, it won’t grow back because Cathy is not a human,” my mother pointedly explained.

After my mother put me down for a nap, Celia crawled into the crib to cut my hair. She hid the hair and scissors under my blanket as if no one would ever find them. Before she escaped from the crib, my mother walked into the room and busted her.

“Celia Hannah, what are you doing in that crib with those scissors?” my mother screamed. “You could have seriously hurt your sister.”

“But Judy’s hair will grow back,” she said. That marked the end of my sister’s beauty school aspirations.

As siblings, we were an odd pair. She was always taller than me, and as adults that didn’t change. She stood five foot ten to my five foot three. When we were younger, my mother loved putting us in matching outfits. In one picture, she posed us together in front of the house in handmade red dresses with a white border, two big pockets on the front, and white tights.

“You always looked so cute in the dresses Mama put us in, and I always looked like I was wearing a potato sack,” Celia complained. The dress appeared stretched on her long lean body.

“Trust me, just because my dress looked shorter and less stretched than yours didn’t mean I looked cuter. They were still hideous outfits,” I’d tell her.

We also had different hair colors. Celia’s hair was dark brown, almost black; mine was light brown, or what my mother called dishwater blonde. We even had nicknames based on our hair color: Blackie and Brownie.

We had your typical sibling rivalry where jealousy ran deep. Mainly I envied her because she was older, wiser, and taller than me. These emotions became very clear when it came to our Papa. It makes sense when you think about it since Celia had him to herself for so many years before I entered the world and ruined her life. Papa became an expert mediator between us, and no matter how angry or frustrated we got with one another, he always steered us in the right direction.

“You two are sisters, and you love each other. Stop bickering and get along.”

Coming from six children, he knew the importance of family, especially siblings, and taught us the same. Life was more straightforward with him, and I’m so thankful for his wisdom.

Our seven-year age gap never seemed that significant to me when we were having good old-fashioned fun together. I always felt so fortunate to have an older sister to look up to and teach me about boys, fashion, music, make-up, and how to stay out of trouble with our parents, something I often struggled to overcome.

We would have loved having another sibling, but it wasn’t in the cards. My mom didn’t have fertility issues preventing her from becoming pregnant after Celia, but, as she put it, “Nature stopped me from having more children until you were born.” Celia and I had the best life together as sisters regardless, and I couldn’t wait to see what the future held. I never imagined we’d run out of time.