

## SOMEONE TO PRAY

Diane McKinney-Whetstone's first and deepest lessons about girlfriends came from her sisters

Lainy's hair was on fire. Our mother was out of the house Christmas shopping, and the five of us girls, ranging in age from 5 to 13, were gathered around the television. We didn't notice when 6-year-old Elaine lit a candle and drew it too closely in to her bang. I looked down and saw orange flames shooting from her beautiful suit of thick hair. I screamed. We all did, except for Lainy, who was unaware. I barreled across the room and covered her head with my gathered nappy wool skirt. My older sister Paula helped me hit against the skirt to smother the flames, Gwen darted from the house to summon help, and Lindy, the youngest, jumped up and down hysterical, calling *Mommy*, *Mommy*, like a prayer.

By the time Gwen returned a minute later with the next-door neighbor, a breathless Mr. Hill, catastrophe had been averted, and Elaine suffered only a cut-off bang. And then came the teasing. We joked that Gwen couldn't wait to call her boyfriend Mr. Hill, a jab because he was a middle-aged Steve Urkel nerd. We held our sides as we replayed the image of poor Lainy caught under my skirt. Our laughter was the kind that starts deep in your stomach and opens your chest and brings tears to your eyes, and you're so in sync with one another it feels as if you're sharing the same skin—until the next minute and you're fighting.

We fought about everything—over games of jacks and double Dutch, over who would get the car window, whose turn it was to do

the dishes, or who “borrowed” whose blouse without asking then dripped cherry water ice or hoagie grease on it. But we knew how to put the squabbling aside for a purpose. We'd lock arms and concoct elaborate schemes to persuade our mother to let us stay late at a party or to nudge extra money from our father for school clothes. Paula, Gwen and I once cut holes in the heels of our socks and went to Dad's office, allowing the holes to show as we paraded in front of him. We were a team at such times. We were there for one another, learning how to give and take and compromise, how to differ and not draw blood.

I look back and see Mommy's hand in how close we became. “Take your sister with you” was her constant refrain. Our friends had to also be friends with the sister closest in age; Mommy would never have allowed us to socialize otherwise. One part of me yearned to fly solo, but the other part was grateful to have someone looking out for me, another pair of eyes assessing the scene. I never felt alone with one of my sisters at my side, and afterward we would gossip and giggle all the way home and continue late into the night without the restriction of phone curfews.

Even now the five of us are more than biologically bound. We are best girlfriends, limitlessly. And as the years pass and our various life fires erupt, we still find a way to laugh with one another and nestle into the understanding that there will always be someone to snuff out the flames, someone to run for help and someone to pray. Mommy insisted but we wouldn't have it any other way.

“We were there for one another, learning how to give and take, how to differ and not draw blood.”

Diane McKinney-Whetstone's first novel, *Tumbling*, was recently rereleased in paperback by Harper Perennial.

