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## About My Sisters 1996-2006

By Ellie Brown<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This is a photographic essay depicting my sisters and our quest for identity during adolescence.

*Keywords:* Adolescent Identity Sisters

### The Beginnings of a Photographic Project

I began photographing my sisters in 1993 during my first photography class in high school. It wasn't until I was a sophomore at Massachusetts College of Art that I began to take it seriously as a project and see its larger potential thanks to the urging of my professors Laura McPhee, Abelardo Morell, Nicholas Nixon, Virginia Beahan and Shelburne Thurber.



*Image 1: Family on Back Steps 1996*

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I began trying to compare my sister's very different lives to my own. We have different mothers; theirs being Jane my stepmother, but we share the same father I was fascinated by how I thought they were being socialized into Girls with a capital G. I loved when I could catch them staring in the mirror pretending to have breasts, playing with their toy ironing boards and dolls or playing dress-up in a princess dress. At the same time, I started photographing their friends. What I discovered defeated my notion that there was an easy definition to what a girl is, as much as I wanted to find it.

At the time I began photographing seriously, Abby was seven and Emily was eight. Emily was adopted when I was 12 because my stepmother and father couldn't conceive. As soon as they adopted her, Jane became pregnant with Abby. They are nine months apart and were always in the same grade. I was absolutely thrilled to have two little sisters because I had always dreamed of having one, not to mention two.



*Image 2: Abby Upside down 1996*

When my sisters entered my life, I was going through some very rough pre-adolescent years. I had lost all sense of self-confidence due to mean female friends and male teasing. My mother didn't know how to deal with my newly desired independence, which resulted in us fighting most of the time and my eventually being kicked out of her house and into my father's. I strongly believe that the timing of their coming into my life during those years has everything to do with when I started photographing them and why I've continued for ten years. I always felt that their upper middle-class upbringing was privileged in many ways that I never could access in my own life. They had two parents, a stable household and many material possessions I was never granted. I moved out of my father's house to attend college when they were five and so we had some years together where I understood their lives, but afterwards I tried to understand my sisters through my camera because we were not close.



*Image 3: Emily on Bed, 1996*

Our twelve and thirteen year age difference has really left a gap in closeness that I have with my natural brother and that they have with each other. I know that every time I would come home to photograph it felt to me as if my sisters and I were spending time together but they resented me only coming to spend time and take photos. (Or at least that is how they remember it.)



*Image 4: Backyard Swing set 1998*

### **A Portrait of Emily**

I will paint a brief portrait of my sisters. Emily is the older of the two and was adopted at the age of two weeks. Emily has always done well in school and may very well be considered an overachiever.



*Image 5: Watching Dad 2001*

She excelled in swimming and collected a huge amount of ribbons and trophies and might have been considered a tomboy. She's goofy and has an oddball sense of humor the family finds endearing. Emily knows more about college football than anyone I've ever met and wants to go into sports management. She has traveled to Mexico and Puerto Rico to work on public service projects. She also developed anorexia in 2004.



*Image 6: Emily Sucking Ice 2004*



Emily's sickness has been a huge strain on the family in trying to get her the help she needs and trying to understand. I live 300 miles away and often feel helpless in that there is nothing I can do to help her but to tell her that I love her and I think that she is a beautiful and amazing person. She's slowly getting better, meaning that she knows to eat enough to stay out of the hospital, but she still displays anorexic symptoms and an intense interest in her appearance that didn't exist before. For a while she wouldn't let me photograph her. She would hide and even on one occasion, cry and run into her room. Now I understand that as her wanting to disappear physically, which a camera will not allow.



*Image 7: Emily Lounging 2005*

In June 2006, Emily graduated high school and is taking a year off at home to do an internship in sports management and take night classes at Boston College. I have high hopes for her because she works so hard to achieve whatever she wants but I also worry that when she leaves home for college next year that she'll relapse into severe anorexia.



*Image 8: Graduation Anxiety 2006*



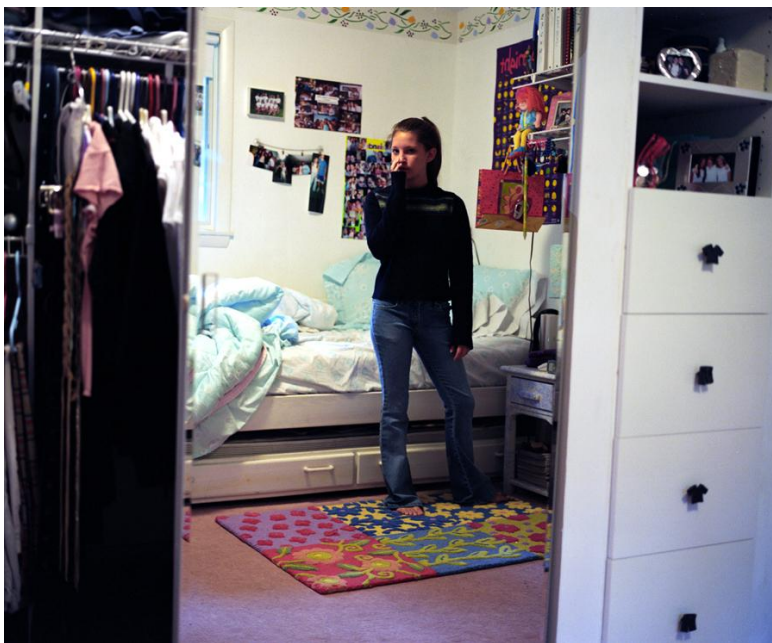
*Image 9: Emily Spreading Gown 2006*

### A Portrait of Abby



*Image 10: Abby and Grandad 2004*

Abby, the youngest, was always a funny and charismatic child. She often would do hysterical impressions of people and well as lip sync and dance to songs she liked. From an early age, Abby always showed an interest in her appearance, spending a lot of time in front of the mirror and playing with clothes. In middle school Abby joined a materialistic, partying and mean popular group and her personality completely changed. She became mean and manipulative and obsessed with material possessions.



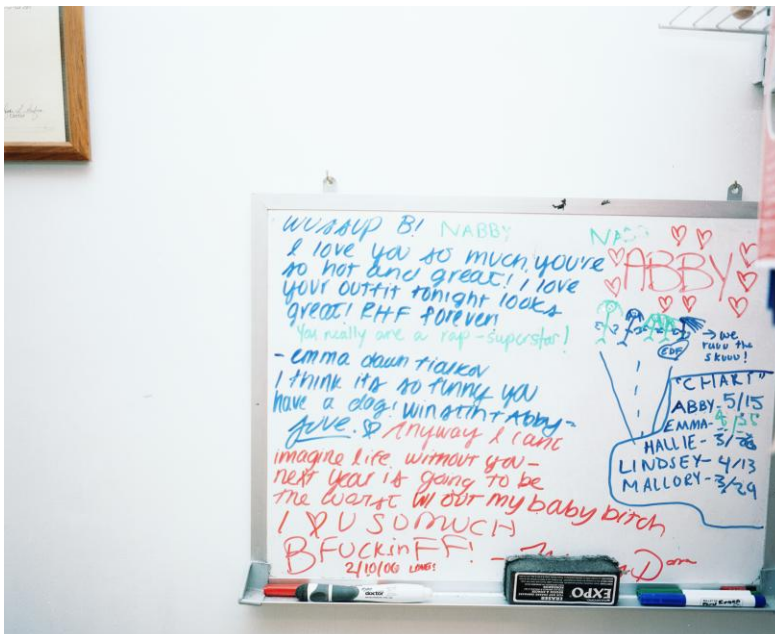
*Image 11: Abby's Room 2002*





Image 12: Abby Brushing Hair 2004

She failed to graduate high school because to too many skipped classes and has yet to learn to take responsibility for her life. In the past year she's refused to let me photograph her anymore and so any recent image I have of her is of her back turned to the camera or of her empty room.





*Image 13: Abby's Photos/ Whiteboard*

Abby makes me and also love her and I feel like I've had so little impact as a positive female role model in her life. I want her to succeed and it's hard to watch her mess up again and again, to learn her lessons the hard way. At this point she's had multiple run-ins with the police and probably will not pass her first semester of junior college. Before pre-adolescence Emily and Abby were best friends and since then it's on and off. Currently they are constantly at war, but it's the kind of war where Abby will hurl profane insults and Emily will just say, "oh, she's so mean to me."

### **A Quest for Identity in Ten Years**

In this essay I have juxtaposed older images that I feel converse well with the newer images. We can see physical changes absolutely but the personalities we see may be presented more subtly.



*Image 14: Emily 10 ¾ 1998*



*Image 15: Emily's Messy Floor 2006*

For these ten years I have been fascinated with how a girl, specifically my sisters, develops identity through her adolescence. I am interested in how she may show or hide that identity and what steps she took to own it. I can look at my own process of developing my identity and find non-similarities to my sisters.



*Image 16: Shaving Legs 2001*

It is my hope that this quest is expressed in the images and will in fact open dialogue about what girls go through emotionally, academically and physically to find or not find their strong woman inside. I have done a lot of research over these ten years about girls, their confidence and their voice, referencing writers, sociologists and psychologists like Carol Gilligan, Peggy Orenstein, Naomi Wolf, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Jean Kilbourne and others. It's been a very powerful for me to show this work to a group of girl scouts or high schoolers and talk about my sisters' issues and the images to have

the audiences critique and respond from their point of view, still being in the middle of it all.

I wish my sisters only the best and thank them and my entire family for ten years of putting up with my camera and me. I hope someday they can see this work as something beyond images of themselves and emblematic of something larger. This essay is dedicated to Emily and Abby.



Image 17: Em and Abby at Fence 1998

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