



Don't Forget a Sibling's Birthday!



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It's April! That means it is time for National Siblings Day. That's right. Siblings Day. April 10th is the designated twenty-four hours to remember those brothers and sisters who hung around the house when we were growing up. I bet you didn't know there was such a celebration. I didn't either. Thanks to SE Gazette, now we all know.

I had two siblings. Both were sisters. My sister Katherine is the one I'll tell you about this time. Katherine has more memory than my computer. Once something goes into her mind it closes like a steel trap. Bam! It's in there forever and she can pull out the information anytime she wants or needs to.

I came back into town late one night from a speaking trip and the next morning was at my desk early attacking paperwork. It was going to be a busy day and that night I was speaking locally. Way too early for someone to be calling, the phone rang and my sister Katherine (my two-years-older-than-I-sister Katherine) said, "I'll be in and out all day. What time are you coming over here with my birthday present?" Oh, nooooo. Her birthday. I had forgotten it. To make it worse, it wasn't just any birthday. It was a big one. What we call in our family an ugly-zero birthday.

I believe the appropriate quote is: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

"Oh, Katherine, I was getting ready to call you. I have your gift right here in my lap. I was wrapping it when the phone rang, but I was also going to call and see if I could take you to dinner tonight for your birthday. If that works for you, I could bring the gift then." (That would also give me time to get a gift.)

"Great," she said, sounding excited. "I'd love to go to dinner. Where're we going?"

"Well, I'm speaking tonight at the Presbyterian church at the Habitat for Humanity banquet. I thought that would be fun." (No response.) "Hello? Hello? Katherine, are you there?"

Katherine's long pause gave her time to carefully formulate her answer. "Jeanne, I would drive from North Carolina to California with a two-year-old in the car before I'd listen to you give another speech, especially on my big birthday. Forget the dinner. Just come on over here with my present. I'll start the coffee." (She was talking about the present I had just told her I had in my lap.)

We hung up. I didn't have a gift in my lap or anywhere else for that matter so the first thing I did was start looking around my office, hoping some gift that I'd been given after a speech would jump off a shelf. "Hello. Here I am. Katherine will like me." I've been given some nice gifts at speeches, but most of them have something engraved on them such as: National Funeral Home Association or Alabama Plumbers Annual Convention.

Then it hit me. I had the perfect gift. I would give Katherine a dinner plate of her good china. Not her everyday china. Her good china. It was something she could always use and pass on to a daughter. The best part of all? I had a plate of the china because Katherine and I have the same china pattern. I would give her one of my plates. Problem solved.

It was Mother's idea that "the three girls" have the same pattern. She figured

we could borrow from each other when we had formal sit-down dinner parties for thirty-six. Mother didn't realize that if thirty-six people ever sit down to eat at my house they'll be eating off of paper plates full of barbecue from a catering truck.

I went straight to the cabinet in the dining room and found a plate that wasn't chipped, but when I pulled it out, I hesitated. I suddenly remembered the family-famous Cashmere Sweater Incident.

One morning when we were teenagers Katherine went to school ahead of me. When she left, I stepped to her side of the room - forbidden territory - and got her only Cashmere sweater out of the drawer and wore it to school. She's older but even then, I was much taller and I kept pulling and tugging the sweater all day. Apparently, to hear her tell it forever, I ruined it. It certainly became a major incident. "Mama! Mama!" To this day - all these years later - when the family gets together at Christmas, she comes in saying, "I didn't have anything to wear because my Cashmere sweater still hangs down to my knees." See what I mean? Memory like a steel trap. Bam!

Remembering the Cashmere Sweater Incident, suddenly the plate wasn't enough for that birthday but the answer was in front of my eyes. I'd give her my serving platter in the good china. It was huge and beautiful and easily worth \$100 dollars when I got the china. Probably worth two hundred now. The pattern is no longer made.

In truth, I really didn't want to give away my good china platter but I was desperate. So I pulled out the \$200 dollar platter (by then thinking long and hard about its true financial worth), dragged it across my backside to get the dust off, shoved it into a couple of big brown grocery sacks and slapped a used, red, stick-on Christmas bow on top. Off to Katherine's house in Graham I went. A seven-mile trip.

But guess what? I remember things too and as I drove along the Interstate, something else hit me. The family-famous Baby Chipmunk Incident. Why was I giving her a platter that was probably really worth \$300 after she pulled that Baby Chipmunk Incident on me? I pulled off the road to rethink. Recalling the Baby Chipmunk Incident changed everything.

As a young child I had seen some baby chipmunks in the yard. They were so tiny and cute. Stripes on their backs, little tails sticking straight up. Scooting fast. Of course, chipmunks are somehow connected to the rodent family but in my opinion, they do good PR for their relatives. Someone over the course of time has even dressed several of them up, named one Alvin and made several more his backup singers. You remember. "Christmas comes but once a year." They've also made movies. But always remember. They're still rodents.

As a child, though, I thought the baby chipmunks in the yard were cute and I told Katherine I was going to catch one of them and keep it as a pet. She was older and knew everything and was kind enough to share her vast knowledge. "You won't catch one, Jeanne, but, uh, if you want to see some of them up close, you could sneak up on them at night in the bathroom. They swim around in our

commodos when it gets dark."

"No, they don't!"
"Yes, they do. Baby chipmunks," Katherine said, "especially in the summer when it's hot, hold their breath and come up through the pipes and swim around in the toilet bowl. It's like a little swimming pool for them. You can hear them splashing if you're real quiet. When they cool off, they hold their breath again and swim down the pipes to the outside where their mother is waiting on them. She's too big to get through the pipes."

"Nuh'uh."
"Well, don't believe me then, Jeanne. Sit down in there one night without looking. You'll find out."

In later years, Katherine said she remembered telling me all that but thought she told me later it wasn't true.

She did not tell me it wasn't true. For two weeks - until Mama and Daddy found out - I spent a lot of time at night with my ear to the bathroom door listening for splashing. If the lid was down I was scared to go in there. I kept a yard stick nearby that Daddy had gotten at a convention and I would slowly lift up the lid before getting too close. Even today if my hotel room is on the ground floor and it's dark, I think about it.

Remembering all this as I sat on the side of the Interstate, I couldn't help but wonder why I was giving Katherine my \$400 platter. But that Cashmere sweater popped into memory again and she was waiting and I didn't have anything else and I had lied to her. I pulled back on the Interstate and kept going to Graham.

She was waiting at the door when I got out of the car and walked toward her so I sang out, "Happy Birthday! Now don't get upset. But I put more money in your gift this year than we usually do. A lot more. But it is a big birthday and I was able to buy something I think you'll really want."

I plopped the gift in her hands at the door and headed toward the kitchen. Gone forever was my \$500 dollar platter!

As I poured myself a cup of coffee, I could hear her tearing the sack open but at that point, the only thing she said was, "How many times have you used this red bow?" Then she got quiet. Too quiet. For the first time, something in my stomach told me the platter might not have been a good idea.

I peeped around the kitchen door. She was staring down at her gift.

"Jeanne, they don't make our pattern anymore. Where in the world did you find one of these?"

I took a swallow of coffee and answered as honestly as I could. "Ebay."

"Ebay? Really? Did you have to pay a lot?"

"Yes, but if you like it, Katherine, it was worth every penny."

"Well, that's interesting," she said and flipped the platter over to point to a piece of masking tape on the back with a name. "Because *this is my platter!* I lent it to you two Christmases ago."

Before I could speak, her steel trap mind opened and she pulled out, "you might as well have stretched my Cashmere sweater over a baby elephant."

And that's how I lost my \$600 platter in my good china to my sister.

Happy Siblings Day, Katherine.