I want what she's got...

While competition between siblings may be mostly harmless during childhood, it can bring out the absolute worst in us if it develops into envy in later life, as *Judith Woods* reports

Illustration JOSE LUIS MERINO

Sibling rivalry. What could be more natural, more healthy? The very phrase conjures up nostalgic images of ruddy-cheeked boys, straining to beat each other at tree climbing or Ludo. Or little girls, eyes shining with eagerness to outsmart one another in the classroom, guilelessly striving to please their parents at home. But spool forward 25 years and very often that competitiveness has crystalised into an emotion that is much less healthy and much more shameful – sibling envy.

It's bad enough being second best to your schoolmate at sports as a 13-year-old; how much worse to feel completely eclipsed as a 33-year-old by your brother's high-flying career or your sister's perfect partner? And no matter how much we love our brother or sister deep down, when sibling envy takes hold, it has a corrosive effect on our ability to express affection. Overt rivalry in childhood is upfront, dynamic and character-building, a necessary rite of passage that enables each child to find their niche within the family. But sibling envy in adulthood is a stagnant, secretive emotion that finds its insidious expression in anger and *Schadenfreude*.

'There's always going to be a little bit of jealousy between siblings, which is a normal part of human nature, but when that turns into envy it brings out the absolute worst in people,' says Karen Doherty, a mother of four and co-author of the new book *Sibling Rivalry: Seven Simple Solutions*. 'Sibling envy is like a festering wound and it sours our relationships to the point where we can't bear the idea of our siblings being successful, or even happy, and instead take pleasure in their failures.'

Zoe, 38, admits that she can barely look her elder sister in the eye sometimes, such is the depth of the resentment she feels. 'Every time I walk into my sister's house, I feel my stomach contract with horrible feelings I've never been able to put a name to, but I suppose envy is probably the right word,' she says. 'My sister is four years older than me and has the sort of fabulous life I will never have: a handsome French husband who earns so much she can stay at home with her two gorgeous children – a boy and a girl, obviously – an amazing social circle and designer clothes. I work for a relative pittance in the social-care sector and I haven't had a date for two years. Although I try my best not to be chippy and angry, I don't always succeed. Without meaning to, she makes me feel like a failure – and she always has.'

Therein lies a telling clue to the pernicious nature of sibling rivalry: 'She makes me feel like a failure' is an expression that really says more about the speaker, rather than the subject of the remark. While it's only natural to compare ourselves with our brothers and sisters, there's often an irrational knee-jerk tendency to irrationally blame them for our own limitations. But unless they are openly critical, they can't be held accountable for our feelings of inadequacy. Usually – and there's no surprise here – parents are responsible for sowing the seeds of a tension that extends far beyond the playground.

> 'My sister has the sort of fabulous life I'll never have. Without meaning to, she makes me feel like a failure'

Ironically, it's not always the gifted child who is lavished with praise and treated as special. 'Sometimes parents erroneously try to level the playing field by protecting and supporting the child who doesn't excel at anything, thereby making the others feel less appreciated or loved,' says Doherty, who freely admits that she and her younger sister in particular had a very fraught relationship. 'I was the middle child and a very hard worker; my brother above me wasn't as good at sports or schoolwork and my sister below me had a quiet personality, so my parents would squash me down and boost them up. I was in my 30s with children of my own before I was able to talk about my feelings and confront both my sister and my mother. I told them I felt they ganged up and undermined me – they've never done it again since.'

That you can choose your friends but not your family can be an extremely painful truism. If you feel inadequate in the presence of an ultra-successful friend, you can always withdraw or even cut them out of your life completely. But family occasions – births, deaths, marriages, anniversaries, Christmases – will necessarily draw you into the fold and back into the familiar patterns of behaviour. Some people, *in extremis*, do decide to cut all ties, but it's arguable whether they feel better afterwards. Shelley, 37, hasn't spoken to anyone in her family for five years, ➤

apart from an aunt, to whom she remains close. 'I got married when I was 30, and I was utterly traumatised when I discovered that my younger sister, who was 28 and in a long-term relationship at the time, deliberately set out to get pregnant with her first child in time for my wedding, so that she would be the centre of attention. She did and she was,' says Shelley. 'When I tried to bring the subject up at a later date, my parents just blanked me. They hate confrontation at the best of times and they have never been able to see through my sister's attention-seeking, so I just lost it and told them they would have to choose between us. They said nothing, so I walked away and there's not a day when I don't feel miserable about it.'

According to Professor Kevin Browne, a forensic psychologist at the University of Nottingham, when siblings are young they compete for parental attention and affection, but the glittering prize changes with age. 'When parents are elderly and the children are adult, they are no longer so concerned with gaining affection. Instead they vie for material things such as property and money and often go to extraordinary lengths to make sure they are getting their fair share.' Tensions often run high when inherited wealth is at stake, but in many cases dividing up the estate is merely the catalyst for deep feelings and long-held grudges that surface after the death of a parent, when they are no longer there to arbitrate.

When Karen's father died five years ago, he left his beloved collection of first editions to her elder brother Alistair, which she found distressing. 'I was the keenest reader in the family, so I'd always assumed I would get dad's books,' says Karen, 42. 'I was raging when they were given to Alistair. I inherited furniture and a few paintings but it still hurts that my dad didn't entrust his pride and joy to me. I'm bitter because I suppose it makes me feel that I wasn't loved as much as my brother. Weirdly, my other sister wasn't bothered in the slightest about who got what, but I suspect that's because she's from my dad's second marriage and wasn't in direct competition with us.'

While it is an extreme case, sibling rivalry was reportedly at the root of the rage that triggered Derrick Bird's killing spree in Cumbria last month. Bird apparently believed he had been robbed of his inheritance, after discovering that his twin brother was given £25,000 by their father to help him out of a financial hole 13 years ago. With sizable debts of his own, which he feared would land him in jail, 52-year-old Bird shot dead his brother David, along with 11 others.

Jan Parker of the Association for Family Therapy and co-author of *Raising Happy Brothers and Sisters* says that favouritism within a family – whether intentional or not – is agonising for all involved. The child who appears to be the most loved can feel utterly bereft at being ostracised by his or her siblings. 'The "favourite" can be in as much pain as anyone else, but their story is seldom told,' says Parker. 'It can be a lonely place to be, especially when the players grow older. Our sibling relationships are very often the longest relationships of our lives and to be estranged from our brothers and sisters is a very uncomfortable position to be in.'

Marcia, 36, still cringes at the thought of how her parents treated her as their 'golden child' due to her musical abilities, which saw her gain a prestigious musical scholarship to a private school, while her sisters attended a local grammar. 'I was always being wheeled out to perform for my parents' friends and, as I got older, it became more and more excruciating. My two elder sisters would tease and bully me.

I know it was because they felt excluded, but it hurt me really deeply. Even now, I'm scared to speak to them about it, because I don't trust them with my feelings. We've all been successful in our careers, but they think I've done better just because I play the violin and travel abroad a lot with orchestras, and I don't think they'll ever forgive me for that.'

> While it is an extreme case, sibling rivalry was reportedly at the root of the rage that triggered Derrick Bird's killing spree last month

What happens in childhood invariably shapes the rest of our lives – for good or ill – so the pressure is on the current generation of parents to try to manage early sibling rivalry in a way that it doesn't have a damaging effect later on. One way is to ensure the whole family celebrates each child's uniqueness and abilities, so all achievements are shared and enjoyed.

'It's very important not to compare children, or impose your notions of what constitutes success on to them,' says Karen Doherty. 'Children develop at different times and excel at different things; one child may grow up to be a nuclear physicist, the other a primary school teacher, but that doesn't mean one will be happier or more fulfilled than the other. Children aren't stupid – they know if their sibling is brighter or better at mathematics, but they might be talented at art or have a real gift for friendship.

'As a parent you should always strive to accentuate the positive. One son might be outstanding at football, the other not very good at all, but you still need to turn up and cheer from the sideline for both of them – that's one of the non-negotiables of parenthood.'

But what if you are the one who is eaten up with sibling envy? Is it possible to forget those grudges nursed from childhood, the long list of real and perceived slights or the fallout from blatant favouritism? The answer is a resounding affirmative, according to Edinburgh-based chartered psychologist Ben Williams. 'People are usually very surprised to discover they can change their attitude,' he says. 'Envy is due to low self-esteem and self-confidence, and by working on these you can stop external events – such as your sister's dream wedding or your brother's new car – from making you feel inadequate.

'You can't control what your sibling does, but you can control your reaction to it, and once you acknowledge that you are on your way to overcoming your envy and emerging from your sibling's shadow.' ■

Disclaimer - Karen does not have a sibling named Alistair and her father is very much alive! The Karen in that portion of the article is a misprint.