

S. the Sisterhood

Friend, foe or more than family? Deleen Wilson talks to three sets of sisters whose relationships have survived unusual circumstances



Khanyi, now 33, couldn't believe Nosizwe had left the country. 'I went to all her friends to see if they knew where she was, but nobody did. I didn't even know if she was alive.'

In light of this, being the first-born of twins may seem inconsequential. Not so. Identical twin sister Natacha Rizzo, 23, born three minutes before Samantha, says: 'Samantha hates it. It's because I am very mothering towards her.' But to Samantha it's much more than that. 'Natacha can make three minutes sound like three years. It really irritates me!'

Position within the family hierarchy often influences the personality of siblings. The first-born carries all the insecurities and anxieties of the new parents and is often forced to adhere to strict behavioural codes, severe social limitations and being pushed to achieve academically. These restrictions can lead to the child becoming quiet, reserved and contained in nature.

This predetermined behaviour is referred to psychologically as your 'life script'. Jackie Meyercowitz of the Family Life Centre says: 'This means that regardless of our position within the hierarchy, our personalities are conditioned from a young age by our parents' expectations, culture, school and religion. We always look at where a person fits into their

The identical Rizzo twins — Natacha, left, and Samantha.

Hollywood has it that there are only two kinds of sisters – those who share everything from their cashmere pullovers and secrets to their kidneys and wombs, and those who steal their sibling's boyfriends, slam the door in their face when they're down on their luck or gently push them in front of an oncoming truck to pocket the family fortune.

Such sentiments are subtly portrayed in Jodie Foster's close-to-the-bone *Home For The Holidays*, where Holly Hunter's screen sister tells her: 'If I just met you on the street and you gave me your phone number, I'd throw it away.' Hunter wearily replies: 'We don't have to like each other, Joanne – we're family.'

The truth is that the relationship between sisters is more complex than any movie could ever capture. This is largely because of its evolution over a lifetime and how it is affected by an array of incidents – some significant, some not.

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In 1982, when she was only 20 years old, Nosizwe Makhanya, 35, was active in the ANC underground. 'It was a very dangerous time and I had to leave the country. I thought it would only be for a short while and I didn't say goodbye to my sister Khanyi. I expected to be away for a few weeks, but it was five years before I spoke to her again and another five until I saw her.'

Not knowing the circumstances surrounding her sister's departure,

family structure when they come for counselling.'

What isn't acknowledged, however, is the long-term effect the displacement of the first child by other siblings has on them later in life. Not only must they adjust to sharing the limelight but, they are often relegated to a seemingly inferior position.

Intensive parental input is exhausting, hence second-born siblings are increasingly left to their own devices. Younger siblings



Trust, understanding and acceptance are the foundations of sisterly bonds and such qualities can only be formed over time

Smiling through the years — The Kleinhans sisters. From left, Ruby, Amy, Hilfred and Crystal.

are often mothered and cared for by the eldest.

Ex-Miss SA, Amy Kleinhans, 28, says: 'My elder sister Hilfred was the kind of child parents dream of having. Quiet, responsible, thoughtful. When I arrived, it was like a storm had hit. I was more difficult than the twins put together, who were born eight years later. Hilfred looked after me and made sure I didn't get into too much trouble. Of course, I always did, and she'd often get told off for not having stopped me.'

So younger siblings are able to test their independence on a safe and yielding target, and by the time they tackle the rest of the world they simply assume it will sit up and take notice. Such confidence usually permeates all aspects of their lives — making them more outgoing, sociable and influencing their career choices.

Hilfred, 31, who has two children of her own, says: 'Amy was always in the middle of things, surrounded by lots of friends. She would talk to anybody and bounced through the day with energy and confidence. When she won the Miss SA title I was so excited for her. I am a very private person and would never have been able to stand up there in front of all those people.'

In turn, Amy volunteered to take on

the responsibility of her younger twin sisters Ruby and Crystal. 'I suddenly enjoyed being seen as a responsible person who people looked up to and turned to for advice.'

But because of her easy-going personality, Amy had a different approach to the 'mothering' role. Crystal, 21, explains: 'Amy made even the most mundane chores seem like adventures. And as we got older, we could talk to her about anything. Sex, boys, you know, all the usual teenage problems. Even today, if there is something I can't discuss with my parents, or if I need money, it's Amy I turn to.'

Ruby is less lyrical about the state of her relationship with Amy now, lamenting the changes that adulthood has brought — she has just turned 21. 'When her husband Leighton came on the scene, I was actually envious of him and the position he now had in her life.'

Twins — identical and fraternal — are an intriguing notion to most people. On posing the rhetorical question: 'What's it like to be a twin?', Samantha asks: 'What's it like not to be a twin? It's all we know but it has been the main topic of conversation with people we have met for the past 23 years.'

There is an unknown quantity to

twins and their relationship can only be understood by other twins. Natacha says: 'As with a lot of identical twins, we are telepathic and know when something is wrong with each other. I have stormed into Sammy's house, ripped the car keys out of her hand and told her she is not driving to Cape Town. Of course, she wouldn't listen and went anyway. She rolled the car and it was a write-off. She said her first thought lying there was "I don't want to tell Tash!" It's not a vision. It's a "knowing thing". A feeling of heaviness comes over me, with sadness or anxiety, and I just have to get to her.'

Samantha agrees. 'I have called Tash up at midnight, crying and worried because I have sensed something was wrong. My boyfriend thought I was crazy.'

But it's not always easy, Natacha assures me. 'As children we had to share everything – even birthday presents. As a result, we have been fighting for our independence from a young age.'

Clearly, it is a bitter-sweet relationship – the joy of never being the lonely new girl at school nor having to endure long, wet Sunday afternoons with no playmate, yet there is also the longing to hear your name spoken instead of always being referred to as 'the twins'. But like it or not, time creates an intimate and comfortable relationship, as Crystal confesses with a giggle: 'We are actually like an old, married couple, asking each other how their day went.'

Trust, understanding and acceptance are the foundations of sisterly bonds and these can only be formed over time – the bickering over clothes, the united front

against parents. And later, the sharing in personal hopes and defeats, helping organise weddings and holding each other's babies for the first time.

But the absence of involvement in each other's lives creates different paths, which can be difficult to bridge. Amy's reign as Miss SA only lasted a year, but she was fearful of the effect the distance would have on her relationship with her family, especially the twins. 'I was worried that I would lose that special place in their hearts to someone else. I tried to guarantee my position by buying them anything they wanted. But I realised much later that it was unnecessary.'

For Nosizwe and Khanyi Makhanya, the physical separation was longer and the wrench more painful. Nosizwe's 10-year exile was a period in her life that cost her dearly. 'Khanyi and I had been extremely close as children. But the time apart had an irreparable effect on our relationship.'

Nosizwe suffered emotionally and physically while in exile and as a result became withdrawn, making it difficult for Khanyi to get close to her again. But Khanyi suffered too. 'My father died the year after Nosizwe left, my mother had a debilitating mental illness and my first brother was perpetually in detention. I was only 18 when Nosizwe left and I had to take on all that responsibility.'

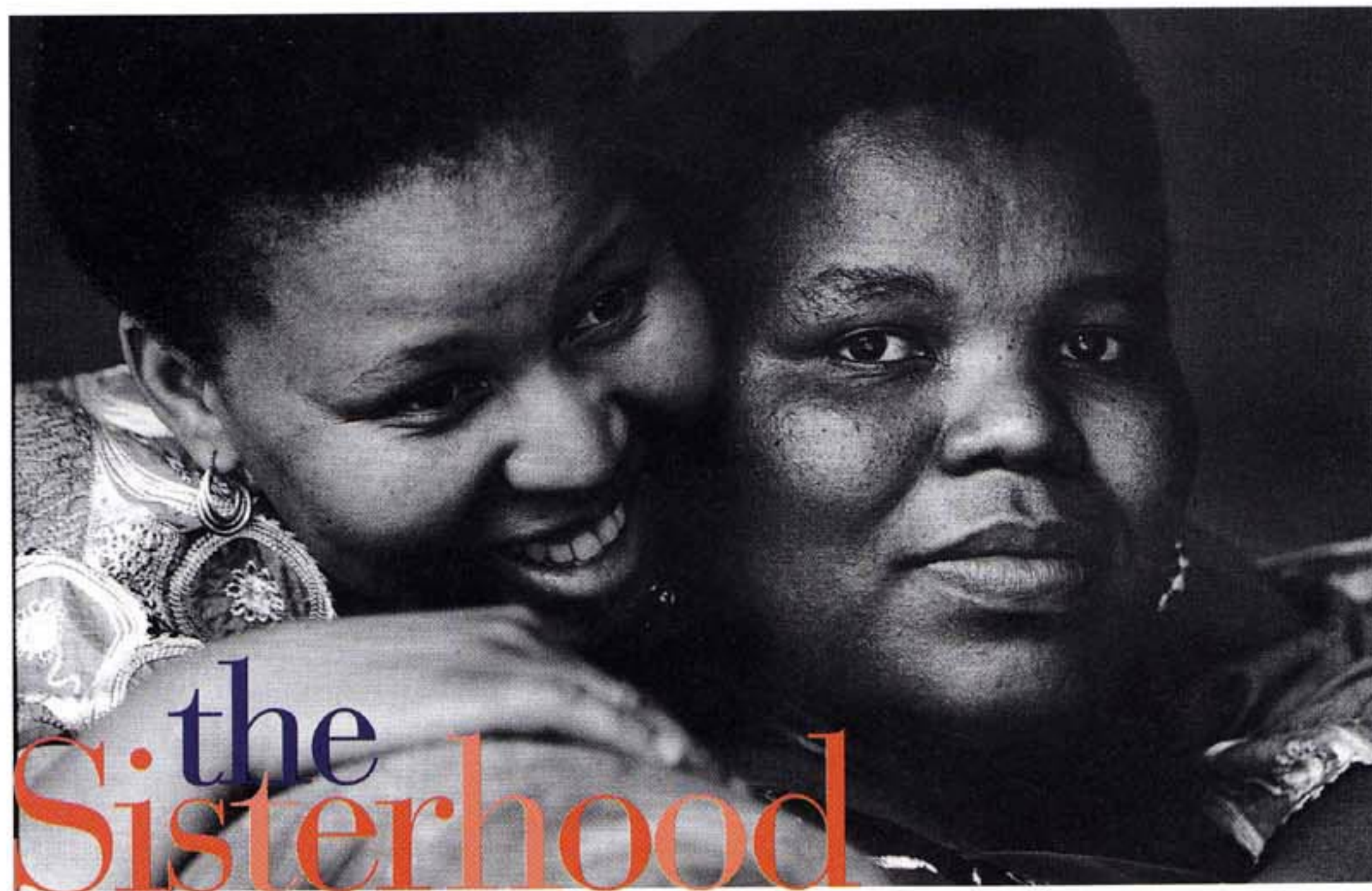
'Although I was shocked when she left, I wasn't angry then. After a while I understood her motives. When she eventually called, I thought she was coming home to help me but she didn't. I thought her refusal to return meant that she didn't

care about us anymore. It was as if our previous closeness meant nothing to her.'

Her sister understood this. 'When I phoned to say I was getting married it only confirmed her suspicions that I was living a carefree, wonderfully selfish life. She later discovered some of the difficulties I experienced in exile – some of them are visible. Then we talked and cried together, and sharing in each other's pain helped bring us closer.'

Blood is thicker than pain and Nosizwe and Khanyi worked hard at building a new relationship. 'I have my precious sister back and I don't want to lose her again,' admits Khanyi. 'I can't stop mothering her and even though she is doing well now, I still go to visit with a car full of groceries for her and her family. That was my role for so long that I can't give it up – even now.' □

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Photograph by Liam Leonard

Reunited after 10 years, Khanyi Makhanya, left, and her sister, Nosizwe.