Chapter 5: The Chinese Monkey … Fifth of Nine

As the youngest of four in the Starosciak family, I was the center of attention for five wonderful years. I had grown used to being the baby. Then, in June of 1949, everything changed. An unexpected "intruder" arrived—my new baby sister, named for our Mother.

The day she came home from the hospital is still vivid. Dad invited me to join him for what felt like a royal errand. He opened the door of his shiny white 1949 Ford sedan, with its classy wide whitewall tires and wire curb feelers. There were no car seats, seat belts, or safety features in those days and I was used to riding up front, nestled proudly between my parents. This time, Dad told me to sit in the back.

"It's time to pick up Mom and your new little sister, Rose," he explained. As a four-year-old, I didn't understand why everything had suddenly changed and I was relegated to a back seat.

At Grace Hospital, I watched as an attendant wheeled out my Mother, holding a lightly wrapped cocoon of pink blankets. They slid into the front seat—my seat—and asked what I thought of the baby. They gently opened the snuggly outer blanket and thin receiving blanket to reveal a tiny snoozing baby. I glanced at the adorable sleepy face and declared, "She looks like a Chinese monkey!" It was the sharpest jab I could manage, since swearing was not allowed.

"Rose," Mom said softly, "you can be Mommy's helper with your little sister." But I wasn't ready to be helpful. I just wanted things to go back to the way they were, with me in the spotlight and in the front seat.

Still, even I couldn't resist the charm of this little pink bundle for long. She had a round face, a full head of brunette hair, and dark chocolate brown eyes. She was undeniably cute—monkey comment aside. Slowly, she began to win me over. Her toothless giggles, the way she

wrapped her tiny fingers around mine, and the sweet softness of her baby skin chipped away at my resistance.

Over time, I became more involved in caring for her. I watched her first teeth break through, rubbed her aching gums with a peppermint liquid, and sometimes used a drop of Dad's whiskey when things were especially rough. I took pride in soothing her with a pacifier and loved the trust she showed when she reached out for me. Though I wasn't quite ready to surrender my throne, the bond between us was already taking root.

How I loved going for walks with Mom and my little sister. On one occasion, Mom let me push my baby sister in the stroller. I started at a fast pace, then broke into a run, and released the stroller as I raised my arms into the air. I don't remember purposely letting go of the stroller, but maybe I did. Poor Eleanor, still seated in her stroller, tumbled over and rolled off the sidewalk. Thankfully, the monkey was not hurt, but I was in trouble.

As the years passed, so did my reluctance. Eleanor Gail, or "El," grew into a delightful toddler and, eventually, a treasured companion. When four more siblings joined our family, El naturally stepped into her role as a nurturing big sister, full of patience, energy, and love. She became Mom's reliable helper—just as I once had been for her.

El had a flair for fashion even as a young girl. I still remember her white faux-fur bunny stole, draped proudly over her teen shoulders, no matter the outfit. Whether dressed in casual jeans or her Sunday best, that stole completed her look. As a teenager, she blossomed into a graceful fashionista with a natural sense of style.

Big Sister El Taking Baby Jude
for a Stroller Ride

El's creativity extended well into adulthood. She and her husband Larry built warm, welcoming homes in Michigan and Indiana, filled with tasteful touches and the joyful energy of their five children. She became known for her cooking, too—especially her creative recipes that sometimes appeared on store shelves throughout Michigan. Every dish was prepared with love, and her famous Baked French Toast remains a cherished tradition in our family.

My feelings for that "Chinese monkey" transformed completely over the years. El became not just a sister but my lifelong best friend—beautiful inside and out. We shared more than childhood memories; we shared a bond that only deepened with time. And every year, without fail, I sent her a monkey-themed birthday card on June 21st—an affectionate nod to our beginning. She always smiled when she opened it, never disappointed, always amused.

Rose and Her Little Sister, El … the Chinese Monkey