

## Who Was To Blame?

*By Nancy Martz*

How do you love someone who scratched your face bloody on the way to school? Who repeated your secrets to your enemies? Who taunted you about your dead pets? Who told lies about you? Who exaggerated and laughed at your failings? And whose mother wished you failure in life just to please the bipolar one?

On the other hand, how do you turn away from someone always rejected in her need for friends? To whom no one listened but her mother? Who never smiled? Who sobbed behind her closed door? Whose hope for a better life always ended poorly?

My friend Kate grew up in such a home with her bipolar sister, Brekka, and her mother who was in total denial that anything could be determined wrong. It was a time and place where mental illness was too shameful to seek help and to admit to anyone, even one's own family. Kate had to guard her every facial expression when her sister acted out or there would be hell to pay. In fact, Kate was blamed for Brekka's mental illness. Eventually it would destroy their family, turning Kate's other sister into an alcoholic, their father into the arms of another woman, and Kate herself into a fugitive who travelled the world just to escape. Fortunately Kate's escape brought new vistas and opportunities for her, and she became a successful business woman with a satisfying life.

Those who stayed behind in that family circle all died young, except for Brekka, the bipolar sister. That's how Kate became Brekka's last refuge. I went once with Kate to her home state where Brekka still lived. I was struck by how sweet and meek Brekka seemed, but by then she was under a psychiatrist's care and was swallowing handfuls of pharmaceuticals to regulate her behavior. Other times Kate went back there alone to intervene in her sister's downward spirals and to rescue her from psych wards and nursing homes. Each time, Kate would come back to Colorado in despair and tell me how Brekka would alternate between desperate sadness/emptiness and frightening rage, still blaming Kate for everything.

Quite by accident through a fall and a subsequent cat scan to determine injuries, Brekka was recently found to have liver cancer. Katie shared with me a valentine from Brekka telling her about the diagnosis that also said,

*Thanks for sharing so much of your heart and caring so much about mine, dearest Katie. And for your support, encouragement and loyalty through the years. What I am was never your fault. Love, Brekka.*

It's just one tragedy, that of my friend and her family; yet I wonder of the many heartaches we never know exist in families all around us.