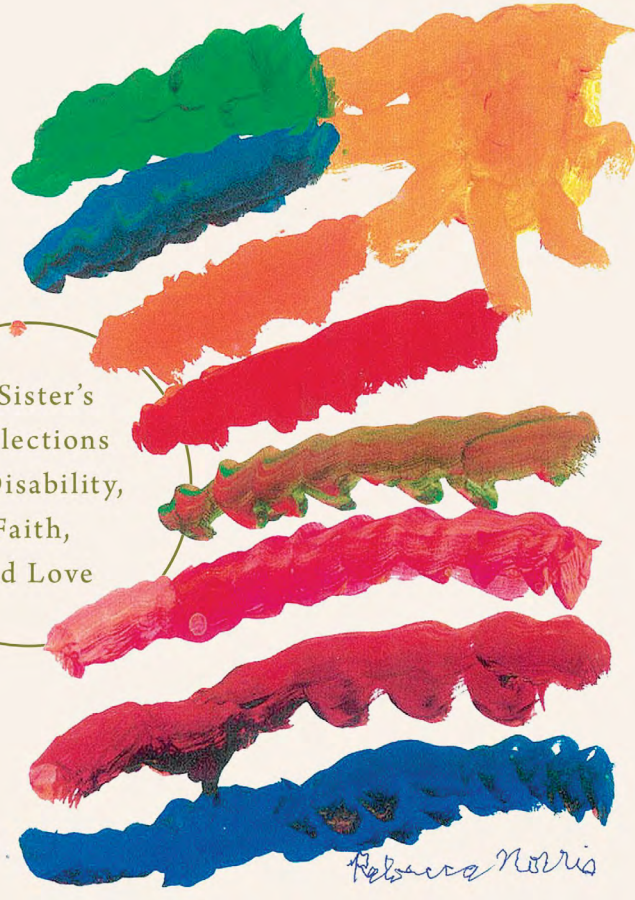


REBECCA SUE



A Sister's
Reflections
on Disability,
Faith,
and Love

Rebecca Norris

KATHLEEN NORRIS

Bestselling Author of *The Cloister Walk*



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PART FIVE



*“What Will Happen to Me If You,
Dad, and Mom Get Sick?”*



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“I FEEL HURT BECAUSE YOU WROTE A BOOK AND I DIDN’T”



I TRY NOT TO INDULGE in what-if scenarios, but with my sister it was difficult not to wonder what Becky would have accomplished had she not suffered brain damage during birth. Becky lived with a strong sense of regret that could turn into resentment and jealousy, especially of me. Sometimes she expressed this openly, blurting, “I wish I had found a husband like you did.”

When my book *Dakota* was published she sent me this letter:

Dear Kathy,

I feel hurt because you wrote a book and I didn't. Happy for you and I try to read your book and I was bored with it. Mom and dad and everybody talking about it. I feel left out but it will pass. Hope you understand how I feel about your book. I telling you how I feel and I starting to cry while I write this letter.

I suspect many writers wish they had siblings who could express their unease so openly. It can't be easy to have a writer in the family. It can't be easy to have a sister who writes a bestselling book, especially if all of your life you've felt excluded from the party. One great thing about Becky is that she put it all out there—the jealousy, the bafflement over why people were making a big deal about something her annoying



sister wrote—and oh, I love her, and it’s making me cry to admit all of this.

Becky was in her early forties when *Dakota* was published. One might expect that by that time she’d learned the guile that most of us employ in social relations. But she was like Adam and Eve before the Fall, with no idea that she should hide her more unsavory feelings, unable to pretend that all was well while fierce emotions raged within.



“YOU SHOULD WRITE A BOOK ABOUT ME”



ONCE WHEN BECKY GOT aspiration pneumonia, she had exploratory gastrointestinal surgery, during which a large hiatal hernia was found. I sat with my parents, who were then in their early eighties, in the waiting room during the lengthy operation. When the surgeon came out he said, “The good news is that we didn’t find cancer.” He added, “But we almost lost her.” My mother gasped, and the doctor continued. “She has a strong constitution and she’ll be okay. But it will be a long recovery.”

We were able to see Becky briefly in the surgical recovery room, but my parents were distressed to see her hooked up to so many medical devices. Becky squeezed our hands but was unable to talk due to the tubes in her throat. The nurse reassured us that the tubes would be taken out when Becky was stronger, and so far her vital signs were good. I promised my parents that I’d visit Becky every day and give them updates.

One day as I was about to enter Becky’s room with a small teddy bear I intended to give her, a nurse stopped me and said that it would be better if I didn’t go in. He said that Becky had become extremely agitated after my last visit. “Do you know why?” he asked, glaring at me, as if I must be guilty of treating my sister badly. I was surprised and told him that I did a lot for Becky. I guess this is just old sister stuff, I said. He looked doubtful. I added that my parents were counting on



me to report on how she was doing, but I could stop at the nurses’ station to avoid upsetting Becky. I was hoping I’d be able to see her in a few days.

When Becky suddenly suffered respiratory arrest, she was intubated again and moved back to intensive care. She eventually pulled through and soon was speaking with pride about having to take “swallowing tests” and to drink something no one in the family had heard of, thickened water. And as much as she enjoyed eating, she was less worried than I when her doctor determined that for a time she would need a PEG tube, a gastric feeding tube in a small slit in the abdomen that goes directly into the stomach. This meant that she could not go back to her group home immediately but would stay in a nursing home for a time.

At the home, Becky typically made the best of the situation, attempting to make friends with the staff and other patients, although many were unable to communicate verbally. The aides were pleasant but incompetent and allowed Becky’s incision to become infected, a potentially life-threatening condition. Her gastroenterologist, a fierce advocate for his patients, threatened to remove Becky from their care and put her back in the hospital until she was ready to go home.

Becky was strongly motivated to get well and regain some measure of independence. I was encouraged by her steady progress, relieved to see her returning to form, and enjoying all the attention she was receiving. We began to talk about what movies we would see when she was better.

Becky had begun to think that my success as a writer could benefit her. One day she said, “You should write a book about me, so I can be famous like you.” But I could not forget that when my sister was in the ICU she had not been able to stand the sight of me. I’ll always wonder if that was because in my life she could see an image of what hers could have been.



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