

## Family Secrets

When Sybil picked up the phone, it was the first time that she had heard from her older sister Edith in more than five years. But Sybil had been expecting this call—her memoir just hit the *New York Times* Best Seller list, and she knew that Edith would find out about it eventually.

The memoir, which recounted Sybil's difficult childhood, described in painful detail what it was like to grow up with a parent who struggled with drug addiction and untreated mental health issues. In this book, Sybil explained how this unstable and emotionally challenging environment deeply affected her and her family, and contributed to her own life of alcohol abuse, severe depression, and estrangement from the rest of her family. Throughout the memoir, she shared many intimate stories about Edith and their parents. For instance, in one such story, Sybil described how she routinely saw her older sister and her friends experimenting with hard drugs.

"You didn't need to dredge all of that up!" Edith exclaimed on the other end of the phone. "You didn't have the right to trample all over our privacy and share all of those details about our family with the rest of the world! You know that I don't go around advertising my childhood with everyone I meet, and now everyone knows. And now my boss and co-workers know that I have alcoholism and mental health issues running in my family. And they all know that I used to use drugs! You had no right!"

Sybil had expected this reaction. She knew that Edith was a very private person, and that Edith felt ashamed about their family and childhood. But Sybil thought that the book was more important than keeping their family's secrets. "I had to," Sybil insisted. "I am a writer ... an artist ... and I needed to create something that would resonate with people, and would affect readers on a personal level. I needed to explain the things that shaped me ... that brought me to where I am today. I needed to reach out to people who grew up the same way. I needed to tell my story!"

"But that's just it," Edith replied. "It wasn't just your story. It was my story, too! And Mom's and Dad's! You dragged us through the mud, without our permission. You didn't even respect us enough to give us a warning. I can't believe that you would betray us like this ... that you would use us in order to sell books."

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What value is there in writing a memoir? How does this value weigh against other important values, such as values associated with friendship, family, privacy, etc.?
2. Is there a moral difference between Sybil writing about her parents' behavior and her writing about her sister's behavior? Why or why not?
3. When, if ever, is it ethically acceptable for one person to disclose another person's struggle with depression or substance abuse?