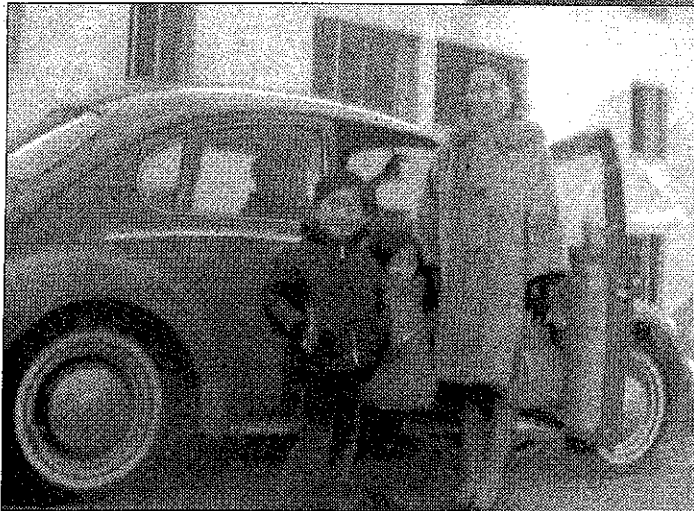


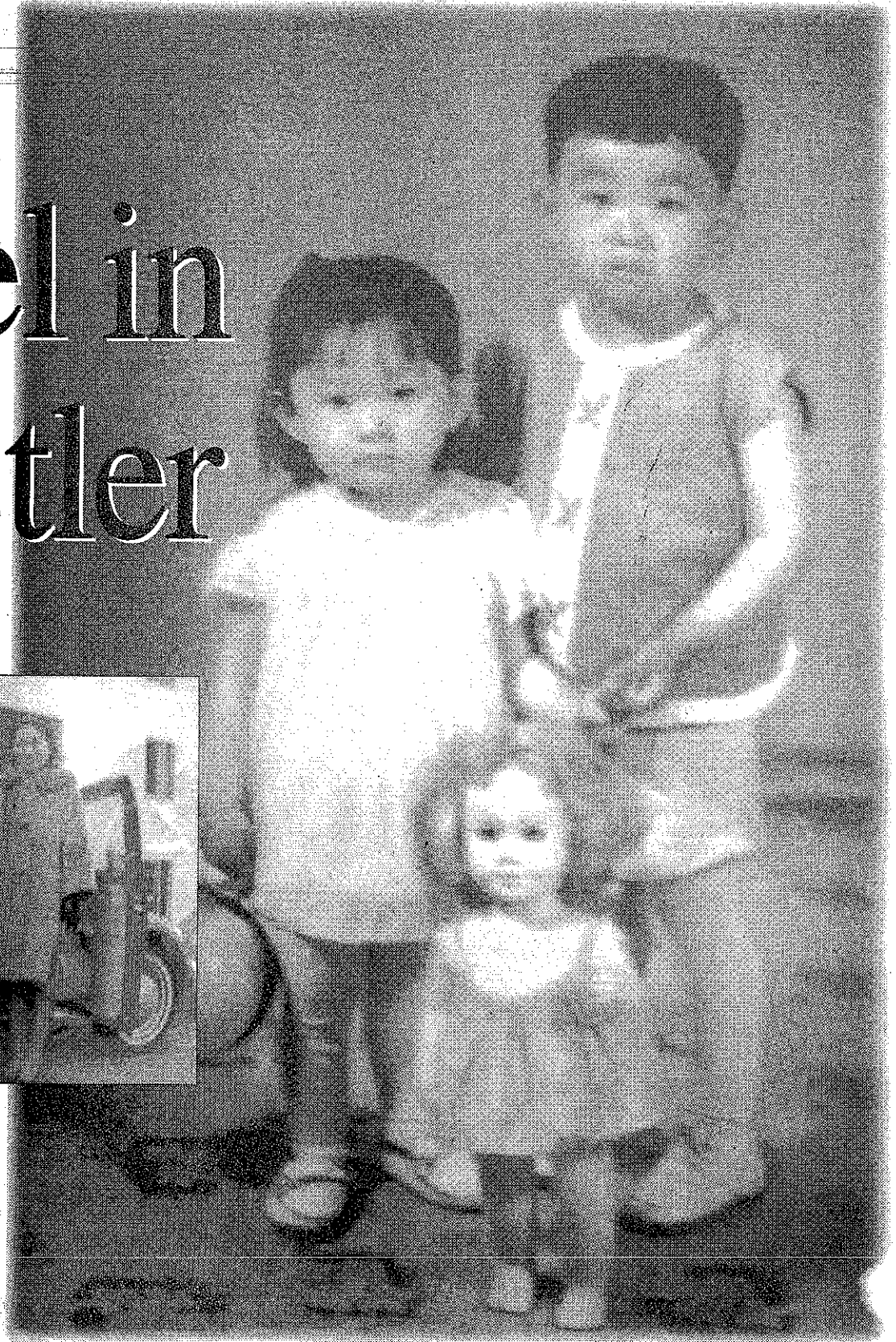
**BROTHERS
AND SISTERS**

Gretel in Whistler



Contributed photos

Columnist Stan Chung in his childhood days with his sister and family. Chung compares their relationship to that of fairy-tale characters Hansel and Gretel.



*"Am I alone? Spies hiss in the stillness,
Hansel, we are there still and it is real, real,
that black forest and the fire in earnest."*

— Louise Gluck

When she rolls out of her bed in the morning, my sister lies still and checks for pain.

Her rheumatoid arthritis can be disabling, but she has kept the autoimmune disease at bay through exercise and lifestyle.

It's hard to know exactly what she means by lifestyle.

She walks downstairs to her piano studio, where she has made a small bed for me. I've slept nearly 10 hours, which is a lot more than I usually get, but I can barely get up to check my work phone for messages.

"You ready?" She asks. OK.

I don't know if I'm ready to go for a long walk. Visiting my sister is like going on vacation, and the first thing that always hits me is how tired I am. From her basement window, I can see snow-covered peaks and the circular shape of a cirque.

"How long are you going to be?" she asks.

Three minutes, I say quickly.

My sister lives in Whistler, a ski resort two hours north of Vancouver. She has lived there most of her adult life with her husband, two teenage boys and doodle dog, who refuses to come to me.

Like most people, she considers her life pretty average, despite her 60-student piano studio and design consulting business.

Hardly, I say to myself.

We jump into her station wagon with heated steering wheel and leather upholstery. We drive to a little known area away from the Olympic tourists. There are remnants of old cabins and an old mill from the days when Whistler was a yet undeveloped fishing camp.

We meet up with her friend, Heather, who holds a golden retriever and a cup of coffee.

There are little plastic bags tied like flowers to the dog leash.

"Where do you live?" she asks.

I tell her and we are off on a fast-paced walk on the valley trail, an iconic series of trails that my sister helped design when she worked as a landscape architect and planner for the resort municipality.

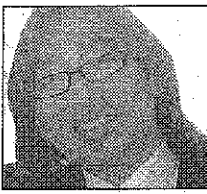
"Look at the sky," she exclaims.

Heather looks great for 50. She skis, looks after her teens, plays squash and seems to be the kind of stunning, practical woman my sister has become.

"I didn't know what to say to women without careers before," my sister said on the way to Heather's gorgeous lakeside place.

My sister explains that it is a significant family achievement to position someone who can play the role of family caregiver without being forced into the workplace.

Although I know women who find being at home difficult and still others who seem to mainly shop and attend yoga classes, I don't



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say anything.

"I don't miss the job," says my sister, who walks her dog every morning as if it were the most important thing a person could do.

Maybe it is, I wonder.

"Look at that sky," says Heather again.

"We might have to head up and get some runs in."

What a life, I say to myself.

If I had this kind of time, what would get me up in the morning? Would I look as good as these two? Do I even like myself enough to care for myself in this way?

The walk feels so good.

It is February, and the skies have cleared. Even though the 2010 Olympics are on with the women's downhill being held on the mountain today, the locals know where to ski and find solace even under the noses of 50,000 visitors.

I can barely keep pace with the women and their dogs. They chat amiably, but they are moving fast. They point out changes in the landscape.

The village is now investing in public art. There is a new train station on Nita Lake. Heather's husband is a custom builder. My sister's husband is a city manager.

My sister is about five foot four. She is three inches taller than our mother. She is the type of woman who communicates clearly with people.

Some would call her direct.

When we were very young, our parents left us for a year in Korea while they went to Canada. We lived with our grandmother in Seoul.

I remember the newspaper in the outhouse. My sister was about two years old. I was nearly four. There is a black and white photograph of me holding her hand. It is the Korean way to be told repeatedly to take care of your younger siblings.

I wonder now what I told her when our parents left. I wonder, too, what I told her when we met our parents again in Canada.

We didn't recognize them. I even asked for proof, which made my mother cry. They were strangers to us.

We were Hansel and Gretel. To be abandoned and then adopted by strangers.

She didn't talk for the longest time.

Her only constant was me. My only constant was her.

My sister and I are one.

When she was in Grade 5, my sister sprained her ankle at the ski hill. She held up pretty well. She was carried onto the school bus, where I waited for her. I hid because I didn't want to show her that I was sobbing. I was supposed to take care of her, and I had failed.

I have grown up to be a caretaker kind of person, but I am now aware that my sister has always considered this trait a bit of a weakness.

Before I married, she told me that she wanted me to find someone to protect me. I listened to this advice because before then I had no idea that my sister saw how foolish I really was.

"You're not like me," she says to me on the trail under the icy blue sky. "You don't know how not to care."

When you watch your sister grow up, you like to think that you're partially responsible for her successes.

I grew up trying to entertain her, make her giggle and get her to act more like a brother.

I tried to teach her how to box, how to fish, how to wrestle, how to play tennis and, when we were older, how to allow me to chase her female friends.

She put up with her older brother's cavalier interests. She put up with me trying to pretend that I had rescued her.

One of the biggest moments of my life was when my sister's husband left her. She doesn't know that I constantly worried that he wouldn't come back. I really missed him, but I knew it wasn't up to me to figure out how to save a young marriage.

It took my sister months of therapy and soul-searching to travel across the country to Nova Scotia to get her husband back – to feel what it is to apologize from the deepest part of you – and to know what it means to rescue love from heartbreak.

Only that little girl in the photograph would know.

I'm not the smartest guy in the world when it comes to love, marriage and relationships, but my kid sister taught me a lesson when she told me nearly 17 years ago that her husband was coming back home.

She told me that they were going to build a family from a foundation of rescued love, Gretel's love that was to be forged from mistakes and humility and forgiveness.

When I go to Whistler, I am treated to an insider's view of the spectacular jewel that has admirably hosted the 2010 Olympics.

But, most of all, I am treated to the company of my sister and brother-in-law, who continually teach me not to fear the fire and the black forest because it has brought them renewed hope and a deeper, profound and lasting love.

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