



Fourteen: Growing Up Alone In A Crowd

Stephen Zanichkowsky

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Born eighth in a family on its way to becoming almost twice that size, Stephen Zanichkowsky immediately learned that his life was to be no Cheaper by the Dozen romp. Instead, he and his siblings fended for themselves to avoid the wrath of their father and the heartbreaking emotional distance of their mother. Silence and terror ruled. A brother was taken away by the family one day, never to return. A sister was born with a mental deficiency that was never explained. As the years went by, each child left home as soon as he or she turned eighteen, creating unaccustomed "space" by skipping the others' weddings and graduations. With artless narrative style, Zanichkowsky embarks on a journey back to the family's Lithuanian Catholic roots in Brooklyn and follows its members on a tortured climb to suburban comfort that, for him, culminates in his escape from home and the draft. Along the way, he seeks answers to lifelong questions: Why was his father so angry and uncontrollable? Why did his parents continue to have children when they didn't have enough love, patience, or money to spread around? Forty years later after leaving home, Zanichkowsky reaches out to his siblings--most of them divorced or living alone--and discovers a group of people still learning how to form relationships with others. In the process, the boy that once retreated into his own world emerges, whole and self-possessed. From Fourteen: I was born into a system with an established order, with people cemented into positions long before I got there. As I got older, the biggest kids gradually filled me in with things I needed to know, as if I were a new hand at the factory and needed to learn which drawers certain tools were kept in. They showed me where the shoe polish was kept; how to fry an egg (because on Sundays we could have our egg fried or scrambled if we didn't want clucked); where to put my laundry in the basement. I learned about Mom's miscarriages, because all the rest of us resemble a line of ducks and outsiders sometimes asked about the three-year gap between Rita and Jane. The bigger kids told me about our religion, our relatives, our nationality. When bath night was and how often to change my underwear. (No one, however, had an answer as to why all the girls had the same middle name: Marie.)

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