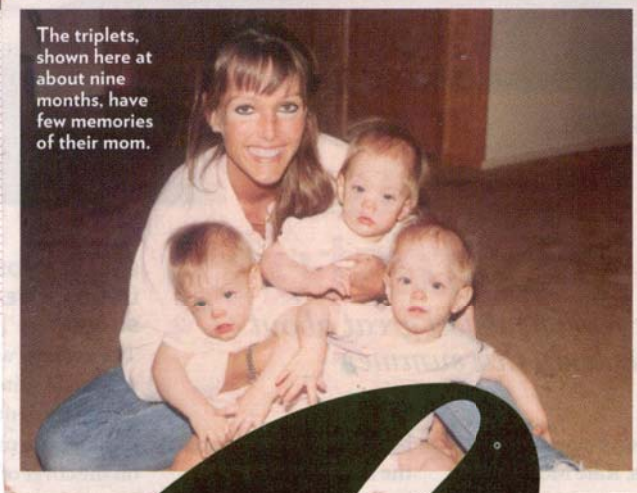


From left:
Jordan, Trae
and Chandra,
last August



SISTERS SCARRED BY FIRE, HEALED BY LOVE

The triplets,
shown here at
about nine
months, have
few memories
of their mom.



When triplets Chandra, Jordan and Trae Berns were toddlers, they barely survived the blaze that killed their mother. Now they're telling the story of how they coped—and of the sister bond that saved them. BY SUSAN DOMINUS

HANDRA, JORDAN AND TRAE BERNs turn heads pretty much every time they walk into a room. It could be because they're three beautiful 22-year-old college students, all of them tall and sporty. Or, OK, it could be because they're identical triplets. But they believe there's a third reason they draw people's attention. Says Jordan, "Us being self-conscious, our first thought is always that they're staring at us because of our burns."

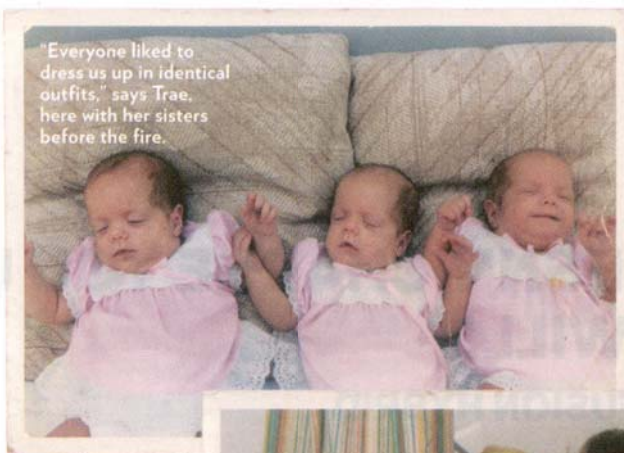
On September 21, 1988, when the triplets were just 17 months old, a suspicious fire destroyed not only their home in North Richland Hills, Texas, but also their family as they knew it. It was a little after 6 P.M., and the girls were already sleeping in their crib, all three together, the way they always did, when a neighbor saw flames shooting out of the house. Their father later said he'd been dozing on the couch and had awakened to the suffocating smell of smoke; he ran out of the house and broke the girls' bedroom windows to pull his *Continued on page 149* ♦♦

daughters to safety before firefighters arrived. News reports do little justice to what must have been an excruciating scene: Chandra, who was the most severely injured, suffered third-degree burns on 30 percent of her body, leading doctors to marvel that she survived at all. Jordan experienced third-degree burns on her left arm and parts of her face, and Trae, who was most likely nestled in between her sisters, had second- and third-degree burns across her chest and her face. Firefighters rescued the toddlers' mother, Patti, a beautiful 27-year-old, from the back of the house, but she was already unconscious and died two and a half days after the fire as a result of smoke inhalation.

The police suspected arson and, after a nearly two-year-long investigation, indicted a suspect: the girls' father. News reports cited testimony that revealed he had been abusing prescription pills and cocaine, and that he'd fired shots at Patti's car as she drove away earlier that afternoon. But in the end, the jury, persuaded that one of three strangers seen outside the home around the time of the fire also could have started the blaze, acquitted Scott Berns. He took full custody of his daughters, then four years old, who'd been living with their maternal grandparents.

Chandra, Jordan and Trae remember almost none of this. They have no memory of the fire or the trial or the compression suits and facial masks they had to wear for several hours a day to minimize scarring, strictures so uncomfortable that the girls cried at the sight of them. They know from family stories that their father, who was out on bail during the trial, went with them to the agonizing physical therapy they endured to keep their bodies from stiffening in the aftermath of the burns. "I couldn't have done it," says Vicki Berns, Scott's sister, who became a surrogate mother to her nieces. "I remember going in one afternoon to pick them up, and he's crying and they're crying. And as he's helping with each exercise, he's telling them it's all right, they're going to get through it. It broke my heart. It was very painful for him."

Having survived the ordeal physically, the girls and their family sealed off the past, rarely talking about what happened



that day. The girls accepted their father's theory, that someone he knew had set the fire. And though their maternal grandparents spoke out against Scott after the trial, they made peace with him for the sake of the triplets. "We didn't want to traumatize them by talking about such difficult things," says their grandmother Sue Dusek.

The silence around the subject of their mother's death, well-intended though it was, only added confusion to the pain Chandra, Jordan and Trae already felt. They were left to grapple with the story behind their excruciating injuries on their own. But they were never truly alone; they always had each other. The story of the girls' lives is a story of the closest sisterhood imaginable—a bond that finally helped them begin to heal.

fOR MOST of their lives, the girls didn't think about the past; they had enough to manage in the present. Their father, the hero who had helped them through hours of therapy and who taught them to believe in underdogs, was still struggling with his drug addiction.

His behavior became so erratic that by the time the girls were eight, they'd moved in with their aunt Vicki. Scott drifted in

and out of their lives, and each time they wondered which man had come to see them: the "fun, kind, supportive one" who was a source of strength, or the one who was sleepy, confused and unfocused. When the girls needed consolation through all the ups and downs, says Jordan, "we went to each other and talked about it."

Even before the fire, the family marveled at the girls' closeness. The physical therapists who treated them called them "the ducklings," because they came to therapy in a line, holding hands. Often they cried when they had to separate—Chandra going to physical therapy, and Jordan and Trae to occupational therapy, to regain full use of their hands.

"It's an extremely difficult story, but they relied on each other for strength," says

Beth Ellsworth, a physical therapist who worked with the girls. "I know it sounds weird, but in some ways it's lucky that all three were together in the fire—because I think it made them even closer."

Their aunt Vicki, with the help of their grandparents, worked hard to give them a normal childhood: birthday parties at Six Flags, soccer games, days at the pool (where they wore T-shirts over their bathing suits to protect their scars from sun damage). Every summer they attended a camp for children who'd suffered severe burns, a place where they felt unusually free. Even in these happy times, the girls turned to each other: They not only shared a room at home, but until they were 13, they often shared a bed. Scrunched together under the covers, they would fall asleep as a late-night conversation about their lives trailed off.

High school was less sheltered, and more cruel. "There was all this whispering and pointing," says Jordan. "Sometimes kids acted like we couldn't hear or something—'Did you see her arm?'" Says Trae, "It was humiliating." Friends told them about boys at school who thought the triplets were pretty and would have considered dating one of them—if it weren't for their scars. The girls started wearing long sleeves all the time, even in the Texas heat. Pools, lakes, Six Flags were suddenly off-limits, as other people's stares became too uncomfortable. *Continued on page 208* ➤

Sisters *continued from page 149*

Their father's and mother's absence from their lives added to the isolation they felt. "Your parents are a huge part of your life, and when they're not around, it raises questions for your friends," says Jordan. Their father's struggle with addiction also made it impossible for them to open up. "We felt embarrassed," says Jordan. They dated boys casually but were too closed off to share what was really happening in their lives.

That protective shell earned them a devastating nickname: the "burn bitches." Chandra, and sometimes Jordan, countered the chatter with a levelheaded, Zen attitude: "Just rise above it." When they needed a feisty defense, Trae shot back with, "They're just ignorant." It helped that all three have a strong religious faith and share a sense of humor. "My sisters are all the therapy I've ever needed," says Jordan.

The girls worked on each other's makeup, mixing foundation and base until the scars were almost invisible, and encouraged each other during shopping trips, pushing Trae, for example, to try a V-neck, even if it meant exposing some scarring on her chest. If Chandra was irritable, Jordan and Trae knew, before she apologized, that she was probably suffering from recurring pain in her back, where her scarring was so severe that she later needed another skin graft. Most of all they talked, sharing every detail of what was hurting them and trying to make sense of their overwhelming worries about their dad.

When the girls were 16, they got the news they'd dreaded. They came home one day to find their aunt Vicki surrounded by many of their father's friends. "We knew something was wrong," says Jordan. "We knew it was about our dad, because he wasn't there." Their aunt broke the news: Their father had died from an overdose of pills.

The girls grieved. But they also felt they'd been given, as Jordan says, "a fresh slate." For the first time, they started to heal.

Now students in San Antonio—Jordan and Trae are studying occupational therapy at the University of Texas, and Chandra, who hopes to start a nonprofit to help burn victims, will transfer there in the fall—the triplets are beginning to open new doors. Chandra, who in her early teens used to weep to her grandmother that she'd never have a boyfriend, had her first serious relationship. After a month of dating, she was ready to show him the extensive scars on her back. "Afterward, he told me he only



The triplets, here the day before their treatment, often turned to long sleeves and makeup to cover their scars.

cared for me more," says Chandra. "I can be very private, and I think it made him feel closer to me, that I let him see that."

The girls also began to feel closer to their mother. Looking through their grandmother's photographs, they found a letter from their mom to their grandparents. Seeing her handwriting for the first time somehow made her feel real, made her someone they might have known and loved. "Her letter seemed really carefree and loving," says Jordan. The sisters had always been struck by how much they looked like their mother; now Jordan noticed the similarities in their curly handwriting. "I felt like I finally had a piece of her," says Trae. "I understood a part of who she was."

Not long after that, the girls started asking their grandmother about what happened the night of the fire. "For my whole life, I just brushed off what had happened in our past," says Trae. "But once I saw my mother's letter, I wanted to know more about what happened to her and the mystery behind that night. So we started asking questions. We heard contradicting things, and it was scary to hear what was said, but I didn't want it to stop." They have confronted the possibility that their father might have been responsible for their mother's death and their injuries, a scenario they'd rarely contemplated before. "I haven't come to any one conclusion," says Jordan. "But we've been forced to ask questions and try to find our own answers. We might not all have the same answers. And there have been days when we've all cried together and talked about

the fire. It's been painful." Whatever happened, she says, they still love their father. "We're old enough now to be able to see the different shades of gray, how complicated things can be," she says. "People go through horrible times."

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HIS PAST SUMMER, the three sisters took another step in their healing process. Chandra had stumbled on a Web video of a doctor who had used new laser treatments to dramatically improve the facial scarring of a woman

who'd been burned in a grease fire. She shared the video with her sisters, and, in the middle of the night, Trae left a message for the doctor asking for help. A few weeks later, the girls drove, along with their grandmother, for two days straight, to make their appointment in West Palm Beach, Florida.

It came as some surprise to dermatologist Jill Waibel, M.D., that the appointment turned out to be for three identical triplets, not just the young woman who'd left the message. She started by asking how they got their burn scars. "And then all three of them started telling their story—we were all crying," she recalls. "You couldn't not cry. With burn patients, every day they look in the mirror, they think of that fire. It's a daily reminder. People aren't always kind, and the survivors have to explain over and over in their life" *Continued on page 210* ◆◆

PATRIC SHAW; STYLIST: BOBETTE COHN; HAIR: KYRA DORMAN FOR ARTISTBYTIMOTHYPRIANO.COM; MAKEUP: SUSAN GIORDANO FOR GIORDANBEAUTY.COM; CLOTHING: FROM LEFT, TWINKLE BY WENLAN TOP, PRADA SHIRT, OLD NAVY; TANK: NEWPORT NEWS TOP

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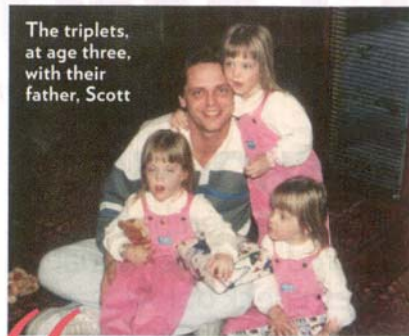
Sisters *continued from page 208*

where that burn came from. It's an extra burden for them to carry around."

February 28, the day of the treatment, was intense, and the girls' emotions were close to the surface. Chandra had undergone dermabrasion two years earlier, which had been painful and had yielded little result. And though this laser treatment promised to possibly lessen their scarring by 80 percent (see "The New Treatment the Triplets Are Trying" below), they would have to wait up to three months to see how much it really helped; Dr. Waibel also warned them they'd probably have to have the procedure several times.

As they had so many other times in their lives, the girls got each other through the day: They laughed at one another's jokes, they held Chandra's hands when she cried, they were in and out of the three treatment rooms checking up on one another constantly. Because they were undergoing, once again, the same experience, each one knew how her sisters felt: nervous, uncomfortable, hopeful, giddy.

Dr. Waibel was touched by how close the girls were. She noticed that when Chandra's boyfriend called during the treatment, she passed the phone around so he could talk to all of the sisters. "If you take care of one, you take care of all of them,"



The triplets, at age three, with their father, Scott

“There have been days when we’ve all cried together and talked about the fire. It’s been painful.”

Dr. Waibel observed. The triplets have had the procedure a second time, and while their scars have improved somewhat, they will again turn to each other to get through the months of waiting ahead.

Having opened the lockbox of their past, the girls are ready to start the long road to full recovery, both inside and out. "It's still hard to talk about it sometimes," says Jordan. "Sometimes I won't even be expecting it and I'll be emotional. But as the years have gone by, I've been able to deal with it more. We realized we have nothing to be ashamed of. We're proud of who we are." ■

Susan Dominus writes the Big City column for The New York Times.

The New Treatment the Triplets Are Trying

Burns are particularly intractable scars, and doctors have struggled with the limited treatments available to minimize their visibility. Some therapies, like silicone sheeting and cortisone shots, are aimed at flattening the scar and evening out the collagen; "pulsed dye lasers" may also lighten the red coloring of scars, says Anjali Dahiya, M.D., an assistant professor in dermatology at the New York Presbyterian Hospital-Weill Cornell Medical Center. The

Lumenis laser, which Dr. Jill Waibel used on Chandra, Jordan and Trae, is a relatively new treatment option, and works by creating millions of microscopic tunnels in the scarred area to stimulate deep collagen growth and tighten the skin in the hope of more dramatic healing. "It was a little painful on my face, and afterward it looked like a really bad sunburn," says Jordan. "Now the scars are smoother, and we hope we'll see more results in

time." Pat Wexler, M.D., a top cosmetic dermatologist in New York, says the treatment could be a real breakthrough: "It allows you to do deeper resurfacing, and it targets not just texture, but pigmentation as well, in one treatment, all with easier recovery and fewer complications." As Dr. Waibel points out, "There are thousands of third-degree-burn patients every year. Hopefully, with this treatment, we can help more of them."