

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Amy L. Dietz for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, English, and Speech Communication, presented on July 18, 2002.

Title: Mother's Choices.

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| Marjorie J. Sandor

A memoir is variously defined as an abbreviated autobiography; a record of events based on the writer's personal observation or knowledge; and the written story of one's own life. I set out to do those things. But when I sat back to read the first of many drafts, I discovered my story was her story—my mother's.

At some level, I have always known this. But I was unprepared to see the evidence writ large. But more than that, I was dismayed that the wisdom I imagined my calendar years had conferred, was not reflected in my writing. There was still the primal wail of a weeping child. Quieter, of course. Wailing is not seemly for occasions other than childbirth, great loss, or sudden death. And railing against the past is utterly futile. Foolish.

I found great comfort in the words of C. S. Lewis. They mirrored my experience. As the telling of my story deepened, the writing became, successively, an incision, a probe, and as Lewis says, a surgery of the gods.

Like surgery, there was first of all fear, followed by pain, discovery, excision, loss, repair and restoration, and finally, healing and a different outlook altogether.

I found great value in revisiting these memories and seeing that the giants of my young years are only human, after all, not the ogres I imagined. Like the shadow in a darkened room, the house cat stretched on the window sill looms like a great inscrutable Sphinx. A tree branch, benign by day, morphs into a grotesque claw, scratching and scraping at the window pane. Memories rear up at first like ghosts in a graveyard. But under a steady beam of light, the apparitions subside.

Writing this memoir has been a window into the past, perhaps an icon, a way of seeing beyond the surface and into the soul. My own certainly, and perhaps glimpses of the others I've written about as well.

Two central truths have emerged from writing my memoir. The first is the power of forgiveness in healing relationships. Forgiveness is not our natural bent; it goes completely against our natural state. But we can choose to change. Just as learning to swim is counter to our earthbound existence, but possible, learning to embrace the freedom of forgiveness is also possible.

The second is something I've always sensed, but now know: the innate power of a mother to shape the soul of her child.

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Mother's Choices

by
Amy L. Dietz

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Amy L. Dietz, Author

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The author expresses sincere appreciation to. . .

My parents, for giving me the gift of life and the tools to survive.

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My son, Derek, for challenging me to get honest, grow in new ways, and see with new eyes.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Foreword	1
Mother's Choices	5
Afterword	100
Bibliography	104

PREFACE

What began the change was the very writing itself. Let no one lightly set about such a work. Memory, once waked, will play the tyrant. I found I must set down passions and thoughts of my own which I had clean forgotten. The past which I wrote down was not the past I thought I had (all these years) been remembering. I did not, even when I had finished . . . see clearly many things I see now. The change which the writing wrought in me was only a beginning—only to prepare me for the gods' surgery. They used my own pen to probe my wound.

– C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*

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FOREWORD

The first thing I packed to take to her funeral was a studio portrait taken of Mother in 1948. Photographers of that era used a colorizing process to make women look doll-like and perfect. Mother was neither. She was strong, volatile, and very human. She was pretty enough to merit a second look, though she never appeared to care much. What she did care about was thinking and thinkers. In a long-ago letter to me she described herself as a thinker and philosopher, someone, she said, who needed four lifetimes to learn all she wanted to learn.

In the portrait, her dark brown hair falls loose to her shoulders. Her dark eyes are framed by glasses that follow the graceful arch of her eyebrows. She's smiling, which in itself is surprising. Mother, as I remember her, seldom smiled. And I, perhaps better than anyone, know why. She shared her life with me in a surprisingly frank way when I was a young woman growing up.

Ours was a fitful relationship. After I left home at sixteen, we were either estranged – or the harsher alternative – indifferent to each other for much of my life. Why? We were too close in the early years – a child who served as her mother's closest confidant. Too distant in later years – decades of distrust as each of us grieved alone the consequences of our life choices.

During one of her brief visits, twenty years into my marriage, and twenty years into her search for God, we offered each other advice.

"Keep an eye on your husband and that woman you call your best friend," she said.

"Your Silva Mind Control thing was wierd, but Rosicrucianism is even stranger," I retorted.

Neither of us was able to receive any counsel from the other, especially in matters of marriage from her, and judgments on religion from me.

Several times she reared up over my ramparts wielding the harsh club of criticism. I retaliated with the cruel weapon of silence. Eventually we were both armored against attack and pretended not to notice the pain. But it hurt, I can say that. And I knew near the end of her life that she suffered as well.

Late on the eve of one granddaughter's wedding, she called from the local Travelodge. "I got an invitation so I'm here for the wedding tomorrow. Is that okay?"

When I returned to the festivities in the living room, my daughters looked concerned.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said, "Just a surprise. My mother flew up for the wedding."

They exchanged puzzled looks, shrugged, and turned back to the party. I ordered an extra corsage in the morning. In the hustle-bustle of the ceremony and reception, there was little time to visit, but I noticed her several times, beaming with pride as she revealed her grandma status to other guests.

The next day when everyone else was gone and the cab driver honked out front, she suddenly turned teary.

"Could we try again?" she asked. I nodded, taking in her shrinking size, the toll of the years. I complimented her on her still youthful looks, her secret vanity.

"Yes, why not?" I answered. A brief hug, an air kiss, and she was gone.

Six years later I carried her portrait to the front of the funeral chapel so the mourners—rows of leather-skinned snowbirds who came to fry and die in the Arizona desert—could see her when she was in full bloom. She would have liked that. The crone made estrous again. I sensed her approval. We had exchanged newsy letters recently and I was searching for a hair product she couldn't find locally. But instead of sending it off, I found myself writing her eulogy. The writing went smoothly and I had no qualms about reading it during her memorial service.

But as we sat there on the front pew reserved for family, my body turned traitor. My hands trembled and went icy. When my daughter reached over to hold my hand, two tears slid down my face and dissolved into the lap of my navy blue dress. In a wordless exchange, she reached for the paper I was holding and I nodded in agreement. She has never looked more beautiful to me than when she slipped from the pew and stood behind the lectern to speak my words of tribute.

The reception afterward was awkward. Apparently few knew that Mother had three children or a grandchild, but there we were, the four dark-haired strangers standing stiffly in a cotton field of snow white heads, enduring the curious looks from hooded eyes. Her widower, operating fitfully under the influence of Alzheimers,' kept fumbling introductions. But he was forgiven, absolved of guilt for not getting things right. I suspected we were not.

"I saw your mother at Safeway last week. You look just like her," rasped a wispy old woman, missing the irony in her message. My brother, Hal, nudged me and smirked.

A day later, after a whirlwind of sorting, packing the contents of her four drawer file, and dropping off donations, my daughter and I flew home to opposite ends of the continent. When the boxes came a week later I stacked them in the guest room closet and promised myself to go through them during spring cleaning.

Within hours, I sliced a sharp knife through the duct tape and dipped into the smallest box. The one with her diary. I should have known better.

The rest stayed sealed for five years. The Gordian knot was this: how was I to purge myself of the twin torments of shame and blame?

It's taken almost ten years to come to a place where I'm ready to resurrect our relationship and to record my own thoughts and feelings. The solution was this: if I was ever to breathe the fresh air of forgiveness, I saw that I needed to tell her truth, as well my own. But even that insight dawned slowly. As a mother of three grown children myself, I began to wonder who would compose my eulogy and what they would say. And how they will feel when they do so. The thought chilled me, sending me in search of my several journals, tucked around the house.

That same day, I scissored out several pages to prune any words that might wound beyond my passing. I'm grateful to Mother for the posthumous reminder. Her sudden death ruled out that opportunity for her.

I see now that it was silly to search for a Peccavi, (I have sinned), or an Ego te Absolvo, (I you absolve), as foolish as looking for lilacs in a landfill. I found

neither apology nor forgiveness. Her words were catharsis, not confession. But I was her child once more, skimming the pages, searching desperately, craving some final proof of her sorrow at our separate ways. Instead, I quickly built a small bonfire to cremate her curses. I was hoping to heal, not open an artery.

I've recorded the past as truly and faithfully as I could, even knowing that if ten people witness an accident, there will be ten different stories, all of them true. I am acutely aware that in writing a memoir reaching back into childhood, I am telling my own version of the story. I tremble to imagine how many people in these pages could dispute my recollections of the events, who would want to be recast in a kinder, less harsh light. But what I have written is what stuck in my sieve after the rest washed away.

MOTHER'S CHOICES

My strongest memories of Mother reach back to the early 1950s, a time when the four cornerstones of society were family, church, community, and country. Consequently, my three brothers and I were raised to be loyal to family, regular churchgoers, contributors to our community, and patriotic citizens. Because our parents survived the Depression, we, too, developed habits of thrift, self-reliance, and socking away savings.

"We only got an orange once a year," Dad liked to remind us, "in our Christmas stockings. And they weren't like the oranges you're eating now. Ours were pulpy and tasteless."

"You're fortunate to have a paper route. It's a job. We were desperate for work—any kind of work. I stood for hours in unemployment lines. They stretched for blocks outside the Oldsmobile plant in Detroit."

"Don't complain. Eat what's on your plate and be thankful. During the Depression, hoboes did odd jobs just to earn an evening meal. Be grateful for what you have. Compared to us, you have it good."

An evening stroll in our small Indiana town would have revealed a reassuring vignette of families gathered in "front" rooms. Many were Mennonites affiliated with the local church college. Our neighbors were apt to be reading books, or clustered around a radio for favorite programs, perhaps playing a board game, pursuing a hobby, or singing hymns or pop tunes around a piano. People seldom had draperies that closed or concealed. Our lives were open to the community, to the gaze of our friends and neighbors. Drawn down window shades, or the flat slats of Venetian blinds, meant sickness or death, or the hot side of the house on a sticky summer day.

We were a family of six, crammed into an old house on the south side of town. Although poor people lived "across the tracks" on the north side, we were poor too, even with both parents working full time. Most mothers were

homemakers. Mine was not. From her college graduation to her retirement, Mother worked tirelessly as a teacher. She fought for the freedom that modern feminists have finally achieved.

I remember the day that I realized my mother's approach to family life was, for her time, counter-culture. I was a fifth-grader, and our annual May Day celebration had just passed. The week before, grade-schoolers fashioned construction paper cones with handles, to hold a small bouquet of spring flowers. On May Day morning, parents pretended not to notice excited children creeping from their beds early and dressing quickly. We hurried to empty our shoe boxes of love offerings, hanging the cones on doorknobs up and down our streets. The neighbors were on to us. Doors opened as we scampered away. "Oh my, how sweet!" they called after us. "Thank you so much!"

At school that day, my teacher, Mr. Miller, told us the holiday was America's way to honor labor organizations. He added a sobering counterpoint by explaining why children in the Soviet Union could have no flower basket tradition like ours. "No one is at home. In Russia," he explained, "mothers and fathers are forced to leave their children at cooperative nurseries and spend long workdays in factories or fields."

At first I felt shock at such a foreign notion, and swamped with pity for the Russian children. But then I thought about my own mother leaving early every morning and getting home just before supper time. I thought about coming home each day to an empty house. I was secretly envious of all my classmates. When I went home with them, there was a mother with snacks and Kool-Aid. She had time to listen to how bad Margie got hurt when she got smacked during the dodgeball game, and how good Margie felt when the teacher put a star on her spelling test.

My own steps slowed as I headed down our street. The house was always just as we left it—a sink full of dirty breakfast dishes, the messy bathroom, and stale sweet rolls from the day-old bakery left out on the crumb-covered kitchen table. The

only sounds were the drip of the faucet and the hum and sigh of the Norge refrigerator.

If there are pivotal moments when life choices are cemented into place, my decision to be a mother, always at home with my children, happened then. Someday, I vowed, when I become a mother, I'll fix my children a hot breakfast, pack their lunch with homemade food, do the laundry, and clean the house while they're at school.

But best of all, I'll be home when they get home, serving them homemade snacks while I listen to stories of their school day. In short, I wanted to do everything my mother was unable to do.

* * * * *

My mother was an independent woman, one who challenged the prevailing norms of patriarchy, and the passive role of women. Much of my mother's independent thinking was probably a predictable revolt against the religious tyranny that permeated her formative years. Her background, like my father's, was rooted in the Mennonite church.

This band of early believers left Europe to escape severe religious persecution. When my maternal ancestor, Jacob Hartzler and his family, landed in America in 1749, he came commissioned as the first minister and bishop for the Amish Mennonite settlers in Pennsylvania. One hundred and sixty years later, one of the descendants of that group, my grandmother, Mae Hartzler, made her home in northern Indiana. By then, the Amish and Mennonites had split into two groups, forming their own communities, separate from the settlers around them. Their mandate was the Biblical command: "Come apart and be ye separate."

Many of their strict religious practices were still evident in the rural Indiana farming community where my maternal grandmother grew up. Their uniform clothing and similar hair styles made them stand out from others around them, just

as the Amish still do to this day. But Mae, a tiny woman just under five feet tall, would be the first in her family to flee from the rigid roles and peculiar appearance of her Mennonite upbringing.

The circumstances of her romance and marriage are shrouded by the fog of time, but the facts are clear. In 1909 at the age of twenty-five, she ran off with a tall, handsome traveling salesman fifteen years her senior. Shocking enough, but a man who was also divorced, with another family left behind in Missouri. Will Risdon, the man who captured her heart, was a worldly man, an adventurer, and a world traveler.

When I study the old snapshots of Will Risdon, I see a square-jawed man with deep-set dark eyes. He faces the camera confidently, with the self-assured bearing of a man who turns the heads of women. In one picture he is the epitome of suave elegance, dressed for a party in a ruffled shirt, black top hat and tails. In another snapshot, he stands tall and proud in his military uniform, an army corporal in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. In a tender pose, he and my grandmother sit for a snapshot, she perched on the arm of his chair, tilting her head to touch his. Another picture, dated 1929, shows the mayor of Opon, in the Philippines, standing beneath a street sign that reads "W. N. Risdon." The street was named to honor him as the first English teacher on the island. He was also a gifted musician, proficient on a variety of stringed instruments.

In today's world, the story of Will and Mae might hold a romantic aura, prompting smiles and nods of understanding from those who have felt--and responded to--the intoxicating lure of instant attraction. But in the time when my grandmother lived, propriety reigned supreme. In her small town, whisperers and gossips spread the story, meting out their merciless judgement, and invoking the censure of society on the guilty sinner. For Mae Hartzler to run off with a stranger she barely knew was scandalous, simply not done. His divorce alone made him a marked man.

Eventually I learned that after their elopement, Mae and Will struck out for Arizona, still a territory at that time. Their first child, a son, died while Mother was a toddler. A sister was born when she was six, then another sister four years later.

The name of my grandfather was rarely mentioned in our home, never in my Grandma's presence. Mother seldom spoke about the years they spent with her father. The little I knew indicated that the marriage ended badly. I was curious. What was he like? Where was he now?

Many years later, I learned that before Grandma finally petitioned her mother back in Indiana for train fare, she had been forced to take in washing and ironing, in addition to working at a grocery store to earn food for her family. Running off with a salesman she scarcely knew had ended in disgrace. She alone would have to find a way to raise and support her three young daughters.

By the time I was old enough to know her, she had spent most of her adult life working on the assembly line in a local factory. I remember her most by her smell, a faint aroma of hot rubber, and her loyalty to the St. Louis Cardinals, her favorite baseball team.

As a sinner who flouted church doctrine, Mae was shamed, especially painful in a community as segregated from society as the Mennonites were. Before long, Mae fled with her three daughters to the more tolerant sanctuary of a small Congregational church nearby.

The diminutive old woman I called Grandma, three decades later, bore no resemblance to the dainty figure wearing a wasp-waisted dress in the faded velvet photo album. Mae Risdon, as I knew her, was a spunky old woman, shriveled and stooped with age, who wore her wide gold wedding band until the day she died.

When I was growing up, no trace of Grandma's conservative upbringing remained, only her deep-seated animosity for all things Mennonite. She built her life around dealing with the financial burdens of single parenting, and the heartaches of two of the three daughters she raised during the Depression years. The oldest,

Mildred, my mother, was brilliant, but unable to afford college; the prettiest, Roxy, was pregnant at fifteen.

With Mae working long shifts at the rubber factory, and Mother contributing her wages from a waitressing job, the task of parenting the two younger girls became a shared burden. Both Mae and Mother had a love of learning which neither could afford to satisfy, though Mae had two years of high school at a time when few young women went beyond the eighth grade. Yet both longed to find a way for Mother to continue her education.

At last there was good luck to ease the burden of the bad. Someone took notice of the attractive young waitress who dreamed of going to college. A well-to-do patron of the restaurant became her benefactor, offering to loan her the needed funds. But the blessing brought with it a bitter irony. Her family poverty allowed only one option for her choice of a college--the local one--a Mennonite institution.

So the curse of censure and moral condemnation that marked Mae would now find a target in my mother. Small town religious people never forget, and seldom forgive, the sins of others. A childhood and adolescence lived in penance for her mother's choices created a fierce pride and iron-willed independence in my mother. People she considered shallow, narrow-minded, bigoted, or worse--the smug, self-satisfied, and willfully ignorant --were frequent targets of her scorn.

But for one category in particular, she reserved her harshest epithets. Above all else, she despised hypocrisy in religious people. More than once, she reminded us that a Mennonite bishop died of syphilis. "The funeral text," she said, "was one he chose himself. "Oh, what a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

When I was a seventh grader, a telegram was hand delivered to our home: a rare event in our small town of 10,000. I remember it well. The War Department in Washington, D. C., requested confirmation that Corporal William Nathan Risdon, three months deceased, was our next of kin. Mother, in her take-charge role as the

oldest child, took the Greyhound bus to Los Angeles to pick up his musical instruments and several small personal effects, including a family Bible.

During the two weeks she was gone, no one volunteered any information to satisfy my curiosity. The trip and the purpose were closed subjects. What few bits of information I eventually gleaned were far outside my small-town experience. Our sheltered enclave of Mennonite culture was as different from Will Risdon's free-wheeling life as spicy salsa is from boiled potatoes, as foreign to us as the odd-looking zither, lute, banjo, guitar, and ukelele, that Mother brought back from California.

* * * * *

In sharp contrast to Will Risdon's vivid, charismatic personality, my paternal grandfather, Jacob Brubaker Smith, was a solemn, studious scholar, an exemplary Mennonite widely respected throughout his denomination and beyond. He raised his family, my father's, as devout members of the Mennonite sect that started in Germany. Menno Simons, their leader, along with other Catholic priests, had broken with the Church over issues of infant baptism, the swearing of oaths, and the requirement of performing military service in violation of their pacifist principles. As a consequence, persecution of the dissidents resulted in torture and martyrdom. Some were burned at the stake. The prospect of freedom of worship in America drew them in grateful numbers. They fled for their lives and the right to practice their beliefs instead of dying for them.

The portrait of J. B. Smith, propped on my desk, shows an unsmiling man with a deeply furrowed brow, holding an open Bible. What hair he has left is pure white, clipped close to his head. He wears a stiffly starched clerical collar under his plain black collarless suit; in those days, the standard uniform of Mennonite ministers and devout laymen as well. As late as the 1950s, neckties were still relegated to the long list of "worldly" prohibitions. His bony index finger points at a line of scripture,

but his penetrating gaze through round spectacles is directed at some distant object out of camera range.

In a journal article titled "J. B. Smith—Man Of God," the writer describes him as a Bible scholar, a minister, a Greek, Latin, and Hebrew scholar, a college president, an educator, and author. His biographer says he married a curly-haired, brown-eyed student from one of the classes he taught. She gave birth to eight children. My father, J. Harold, was in the middle of the large brood.

Books for his mind were as necessary to J. B. Smith as food for his body. During the many years of financial hardship in their long marriage, Lena, his gentle-natured wife, made many sacrifices to accommodate his thirst for knowledge and love of books. He was often gone for weeks at a time, preaching or teaching, leaving the child-rearing and domestic chores to her.

A college degree in those days did not confer much job security or income, but it did provide the credentials to qualify for white collar jobs instead of dulling blue-collar drudgery. The pay spread between the two was often negligible. Sometimes church-connected college professors earned less than skilled laborers or successful farmers. No matter. J. B. Smith's compulsive book-buying had little to do with money and much to do with his relentless pursuit of the written word. Stories circulated among church members that he acquired books like a lush buys booze, furtively, smuggling them in, perhaps recalling a brief skirmish between guilt and groceries.

His personal library of some 3500 books, in four languages, is now in a memorial room dedicated to the presidents who served the first of the Mennonite colleges, located in Virginia. He wrote numerous books on theological topics, but his seminal work was completed in 1955, a Greek-English Concordance of the 1611 version of the New Testament.

My single memory of meeting J. B. Smith was in our home when he came to bring Mother the manuscript of a book to type. For a moment, the same gaze captured in his formal portrait was fixed on me. "What is this child's name?" he

inquired. I was ten years old, one of his numerous grandchildren. My reaction to his looking at me with such cold dispassion was a shrinking, fearful feeling, as though I was deeply flawed or invisible. Was I unworthy of notice, or simply an interruption of his deep thinking?

An anecdote told to me by a former neighbor reaffirms his preoccupation with the world of books to the exclusion of people. She recalls the neighbors commenting on how J. B. could often be seen reading a book, oblivious to the squalling infant he held on his lap.

Ten years ago, when I first walked into the Memorial Library that houses his collection, I browsed row upon row of his books. My blurry childhood memory of meeting him snapped into sharp focus. My question now is: How could a man outside a monastery ever manage to read all those volumes?

* * * * *

The grandfather I never met, Will Risdon, and J. B. Smith, the grandfather I met but never knew, represented the two powerful forces that would ultimately tear our family apart. The contrast between each man's temperament, their values and their beliefs, could hardly have been more opposite. The battlefield where those beliefs collided was our home. Will Risdon represented an unfettered, free-spirited approach to life—my Mother's. The avid pursuit of adventure and exploration were paramount values for both father and daughter.

In contrast, the Mennonite way of life was won by the blood of martyrs, resulting in a rigid iron faith, the kind forged from persecution—my Father's. The polarity between the two men is evident by how each chose to use the Good Book. Will Risdon made his life as a salesman, peddling many kinds of merchandise, including Bibles. Jacob Brubaker Smith devoted his life to an exhaustive study of the Bible, to an interpretation of its contents, and a pulpit ministry, admonishing his audiences to adhere to a lifestyle conforming to his conclusions. He passed over the

poetry of the Psalms, and the pithy truths in Proverbs. His preference was to preach on the coming judgement. He taught, lectured, and wrote a book on the topic.

Despite the wide divergence in their backgrounds, my parents were attracted to each other, but it was Mother who made the sacrifice by submitting to Mennonite ideology. "I had to choose between the two men who pursued me at Goshen," she said. "Sam was a butterfly to fly with, full of fun and laughter. Your Dad was a rock to tie to. He was serious and academically oriented. The son of J. B. Smith. His goal was to become a professor. I admired that."

Though she dropped out her senior year to boost the family finances, she still managed to graduate at the age of twenty-three, debt free. "I was proud of that," Mother said, "my legs often ached from the hours of waitressing, but I gave good service and earned good tips."

Her marriage to Dad, almost thirty years old, came with misgivings, well-founded, as it turned out. "What your Dad failed to mention before our marriage, was his large college debt. I felt betrayed. But it was too late."

Even apart from shaky finances at the start of their marriage, the prognosis for marital success was not good. The disparity in their backgrounds was significant. At the Mennonite college, she stood out as a "worldly town girl." In early pictures, her wavy dark hair flows free to her shoulders. Predictably, in photographs taken soon after their marriage, she appears almost old enough to be her own mother, hair corralled tightly into a bun, rimless granny glasses diminishing the beauty of her dark brown eyes, and wearing a drab dress, buttoned to her chin.

Several times, while I was still in grade school, Mother took me on weekend trips and told me stories about those early years. Just the two of us spending time together made me feel very special. Other girls had ordinary mothers—I had a best friend who shared her secrets with me.

"After our graduation and June marriage, we worked on a farm in Kansas. Hired girl and farm hand. At least that got us room and board for the summer. We had to go somewhere. Your father didn't start teaching at Hesston College 'til fall.

Even then, his salary wasn't enough. It didn't cover the cost of our food, rent, and clothes. I made a little money teaching piano lessons. But not enough. And none of my June job applications got me a job offer either."

It was sad to think of my parents being so poor—though we were far from well-off when she told me their story. We were driving through the lush green pastures of Kentucky horse country. She sighed deeply after looking out both directions at the white fences, the rolling emerald lawns, and the pillared southern mansions at the end of tree-lined drives.

"Things got much worse," she said quietly.

I glanced over quickly when she stopped talking. She sniffed hard, bit her lip, and continued. "I shouldn't be telling you this. You're too young."

I knew how to handle this mood. "It's okay," I said. "I won't let on that I know if anyone ever asks."

She tensed a bit and moved her hands up the steering wheel to the ten and two position. "By some miracle," she continued, "I landed a teaching job to fill a sudden vacancy—" She stopped in mid-sentence, and shook her head, "only to discover a month later that I was pregnant. Pregnant. I *hated* that word."

I made a sympathetic noise and waited, careful to keep my eyes on the road and not on her. She preferred it that way when we had talks like this.

"So they said I wasn't eligible. Because I couldn't finish out the year."

She was very still. I glanced sideways to see why. She was staring straight ahead, gripping the steering wheel, her knuckles white.

When she spoke, her voice trembled.

"By winter, we were living on soda crackers at the end of every month. How could we possibly afford a baby?"

She loosened her grip and sighed. "I know it was wrong, but it seemed like the best thing to do was die."

I sat perfectly still, uncertain of what to say. I waited, making myself study the trees and the telephone poles, the horses grazing peacefully. I acted like what she said didn't faze me. I knew I'd think it all through later, but now wasn't the time.

"That probably shocks you," she said, glancing my way. "Let's hope you never get to that place in your life. The things they do to you to save your life are awful. Awful."

"Hm-m-m," I said.

She was quiet again, then lowered her hands to seven and five, so I knew we were past the worst of the story.

"I've always wondered if Hal is like he is--because of what I did. I wonder if babies know when they're not wanted."

"They might," I said. I needed to think about that. I was born eighteen months after my brother, while Dad was away at summer school in Lawrence, Kansas. The night I was born, Mother drove herself to the hospital. I already knew that story. But did she wish I was never born, too? I glanced over at her.

She smiled as she continued her story. "I was relieved when you were born. I was hoping for a daughter. I helped raise Roxy and Pat, so I knew how to handle a girl."

Another time, Mother and I went on a weekend trip to Kokomo to see her sister. While we were driving, she described her social situation at Hesston, the place where Hal and I were born. We were traveling on a country road because Mother enjoyed the slower pace. She draped her body against her door. She was smiling a faint smile and her eyes looked dreamy. I loved to see her looking happy. It didn't happen very often.

"Porgy and Bess was thrilling! I loved the gilded theater, the mohair velvet seats, the moment when they swished open the maroon curtains. You can't imagine the wonderful songs, the acting! Someday before I die, I want to see it again."

She sang a few bars of "Summertime, when the livin' is easy," then grew very still. I sensed something was coming. With Mother, there were ways of knowing,

like the little breeze that kicks up before a storm, just before the first roll of thunder and the loud crack of lightning. Her fingers drummed the steering wheel and her dark eyes blazed black. Then she exploded.

"Of all the narrow-minded, bigoted, ignorant men! Hesston College had the worst! We had to confess that going to the play was a sin --to the whole church!"

She grabbed the steering wheel with both hands, three o'clock and nine o'clock. "You can't imagine the humiliation of public confession! And Harold just stood there and accepted it. Agreed with it!" She pounded the wheel with her fist, something that always made me wince. Then she calmed down. "Sorry," she said, glancing over at me. She lowered her voice and looked out at the peaceful fields for a few minutes. But she was still breathing heavily. I figured she wasn't through yet.

"The college president, for crying out loud!"

"And get this! While he had us there, he bawled me out for sleeves that didn't reach my wrists. Criticized me for leaving my legs bare! Did you ever *hear* of such ignorance? "Immodest!" the man said. "Worldly!"

Whenever she vented like this, it was best just to be quiet. So I was. I knew there was more to the story.

"They sent us back to Goshen. More liberal there," they said. " Hah! Mennonite and liberal don't belong in the same sentence." She stayed quiet for so long, I looked over to see why. Her nose turned red. She pushed up her glasses and brushed at her eyes.

"What's wrong, Mother?"

She was crying now, and having trouble fishing a hanky out of her purse while keeping the car on our side of the road. I reached over. "Let me get it," I said, pulling out her hanky and handing it to her. I still didn't know what she was crying about. She hardly ever cried.

She surprised me by braking and pulling over on the side of the road. She grabbed off her glasses, and sobbed into her hanky. I patted her heaving shoulder,

feeling awkward. I didn't know what to think. Or do. I knew how to deal with her temper, but not her tears.

Minutes later her sobs subsided to sniffles. As quickly as it began, it was over. She blew her nose several times, tipped down the rear view mirror, glanced at her face, put her glasses back on, and readjusted the mirror for driving. She looked over at me with a weak smile.

"Sorry," she said. "I shouldn't be dredging up this old junk. I've just never again found a friend like Verle."

I remembered Mother mentioning the name before, always with a sad look on her face. Verle was a friend from her Hesston College days in Kansas.

"Let me tell you," she said, "leaving behind the dearest woman who ever walked on two legs was very, very hard. Her name was Verle Vogt. She was the one woman who loved me. Without reservation, without conditions. She said she admired my restless, seeking spirit." She shook her head with a kind of wonder. "Isn't that sweet? She was the only one who understood the decisions I made, and why I made them."

"Is she still your friend?" I asked.

"We went our separate ways," she said sadly. "I haven't heard from her in ages."

* * * * *

Our first year back in Indiana, we lived on Kreider's Poultry Farm. It was wartime and jobs were scarce, so Dad was a farmer for that year. Mother was pregnant, but she seemed happier than ever before. But not with me. I was starting first grade and I was terrified. I don't know why. I only know that outside that oak door to the larger world, there were terrors I couldn't name. I was dressed for school, but sobbing, begging not to go. Feet planted, fists clenched.

"I WON'T GO!"

Over-ruled, forced outside. I flung myself against the heavy door, begging to be let back in.

"The bus is coming. Stop crying!" The muffled voice of Mother yelling.

"They'll see you crying!" Dad's deep voice. I tugged on the door knob, held fast on the inside. The bus chugged to a stop, faces staring from every window. Hal shoved me ahead, "Baby, baby," he gloated.

Fortunately, Mrs. Stemen, my first grade teacher, knew how to handle the tears of reluctant students. She made me her helper. School became a place where I found a measure of peace. Which was good, because there would be nine new schools in the next ten years.

Back at home, things went better. Maybe because of the house. It had nice yard with big trees and flower beds. Inside, there was a large kitchen and a separate dining room. Mother got a new oak dining table and chairs. We even had company for dinner. But she had to sell the set at the auction the following spring. We were moving again. Dad was going back to college for a Doctor's Degree. The year that went so badly for me was the last time I ever remember mother being happy.

Lynn was five months old when we moved to Madison, Wisconsin in 1946. We left him behind with Grandma in Indiana. Many years later, on a visit to Dad in North Carolina, someone thought to ask why. After a long silence, Dad finally answered, "There wasn't room in the trailer."

In addition to working on his Doctor's Degree, Dad also taught at the University. Mother worked graveyard at the Oscar Mayer Meat Company. For those two years, we alternated winter and summer between two living situations, both lakefront cottages about fifteen miles from Madison. Summers we lived at the Swalheim Place. The tiny kitchen had an icebox and a hand pump at the sink. The humid nights made sleeping sweaty and miserable. All of us six of us slept in the two-sided screened-in sleeping porch.

"Don't drink water after seven o'clock," Dad cautioned. For those who forgot, there were flashlights to pick our way across the dark yard to the privy in the garage.

Mother made a joke about waking up to find a mouse at close range—on her pillow. “He had the cutest little face,” she said. Mother had no patience with women who screamed at the sight of a mouse. However, the plentiful snakes were a different story. My brother, Hal, liked to catch them and put their tails under the big rocks lining the driveway.

When the city folks left their lakeside cabins at the end of the summer, we got to move to a place with a sign that read “EasyLife,” a real house, though Hal had to sleep out on the unheated porch all winter. We had only two bedrooms for five people—six after the new baby. Sometimes Hal woke us up when he kept calling out for more covers. On frigid winter mornings, the windows were frosted over. We all crowded around the old oil stove trying to get warm, spreading our clothes on the top and leaving our hands on just long enough to say, “ouch.”

The second winter we lived there, Mother got pregnant. “I don’t care if I’m big as a house,” she declared, “I’m going to the Christmas Eve Caroling Service in the Capitol rotunda.” Soon after, our happy baby, Sheldon, was born. Dad got his degree. We moved back to Indiana, to Grandma’s old house on West Jackson Street, and to the Mennonite college where Dad had taught before.

“Looks like he swallowed a banana sideways,” Grandma said, cooing back at the laughing baby. For a short while, Sheldon’s sunny disposition brightened the mood of our increasingly unhappy family.

* * * * *

Mother never stopped chafing under the rules imposed by Mennonite ministers. Mother and Dad argued on the way to church, and again on the way home, leaching away what love had existed during their long courtship .

“The rules,” she said, “are *ludicrous* when seen through the eyes of someone who hasn’t been brainwashed by the leaders.”

She laughed at their efforts to stifle sexual temptation. In some congregations, men sat on one side, women on the other.

“As if that would discourage lustful thoughts,” she hooted.

Women wore their hair braided in coils or up in a bun, concealed under a net head covering. The use of make-up was out of the question. Jewelry, including wedding bands, was forbidden. Any entertainment outside the home, unless church-sponsored or “wholesome,” was frowned upon. Attending movies, plays, and later, watching television, was not allowed. Divorce was never an option. Public confession was required for certain sins, depending upon the discretion of local church leaders. Mother vented her disgust at these practices, frequently and loudly.

“This church is run like a police state. People watch and weigh and judge each other. Jesus didn’t judge people by how they looked! The Bible says not to judge people! And pray tell, Harold, what gives men the right to decide what women should wear?”

“Mildred, let’s discuss this later.”

“The problem,” she continued, “is people who grow up under such belief systems. They don’t question the rules. Right and wrong are dictated by the hierarchy. Who are they to claim that right? Why should they define the requirements for appeasing and pleasing God? Harold, is that how you want your children to be raised? Meek, dumb, sheep?”

“Lower your voice, Mildred. Let’s have some peace and quiet when we’re all together in the car.”

“How can you love a God whose spokesmen use fear, censure, and the threat of excommunication? All to compel compliance to their rules? Why don’t they preach love and mercy? Jesus did! Explain that to me!”

While Mother fulminated, Dad rarely responded to her questions. Peace at any price permeated his silence. “I don’t hear you defending your beliefs, Harold. Ask yourself why.”

* * * * *

One fall, during the week before she started back to teaching school, Mother cut her hair and bought her own wedding band.

"I'm a married woman," Mother huffed, "and married women wear wedding rings. Besides, the Bible isn't talking about jewelry being sinful. It's talking about women having a beautiful spirit. As usual," she pointed out, "Mennonites get stuck on the letter of the law and miss the real message. They're Pharisees!"

"Mildred," Dad admonished, "you're always finding fault."

She ignored him. "And the foolishness of calling short hair sinful is absurd. That verse about long hair was written to women who lived *two thousand years ago*. Judging a woman's heart by her hairstyle is ridiculous!"

Word of her rebellion reached the president of the college. Dad's job was in jeopardy. Mother stormed into the house after their "interview."

"That wasn't an interview—that was an Inquisition! How's this for an ultimatum?" She mimicked the man's words: "Your weekday appearance is not our concern. However, on those occasions when you come to the campus for church services, or other college functions, you will be required to remove the wedding band and affix a chignon hairpiece to the back of your head."

Dad retreated to his study, leaving a small, but rapt audience of her children. She complied with the demand, but not without severe damage to our fragile family structure. Their heated arguments on matters of women's appearance were a staple, served with many meals.

For Dad, a Latin and Literature professor, the incidents were an embarrassment. He was unable or unwilling to grasp the importance of the issue to Mother. She was unable or unwilling to conform without protest, or to compromise her own beliefs. Neither could avoid the subject as long as Dad remained at a Mennonite college.

But life as a Mennonite was not all bleak. We lived in a rich environment where education was held in high esteem. And the great value placed on music and literature accounts for some of the richest moments of my life. These took place in the college auditorium during the annual Lecture/Music Series.

Though children were confined to the bleacher seats at the rear of the room, the poetry readings by Robert Frost and Carl Sandberg were unforgettable. The pure bell-like sounds of the Vienna Boys Choir, and the virtuoso voice of Marian Anderson singing "Ole Man River" and "Amazing Grace" transported us into the halls of heaven. I was standing in the crowded hallway shortly before her performance. The decolletage of her magenta satin evening gown, her glossy black hair and eyes, and her chocolate skin, were wonders to behold as she navigated her way among our drab dresses and pale, pious faces, her proud head held high, a great ship passing through a channel of dazzled onlookers.

In contrast to Anderson's exposed cleavage, generously endowed Mennonite women worked hard to conceal their breasts, especially more conservative ones who wore cape dresses. But even four layers of fabric could not hide the obvious. On one occasion after a church service, Dad referred to the matter obliquely on the drive home. "She certainly has an ample shelf."

The strife over external appearance was in curious juxtaposition to the exquisite harmony achieved in one of the most mundane and unremarked of Mennonite customs. It is that tradition, the soaring sound of the acappella congregational singing, that resides persistently, permanently, in my memory.

The song leader, somber in his black suit, slipped a pitch pipe from his pocket, placed it between his lips, and sounded the key for the song. Nothing since my childhood church experiences has ever surpassed that great welling up of hundreds of acappella voices of all ages, from the very young to the very old, as they blended to sing the great hymns of the church. The four part harmony created by the quavery tenor of old Sylvanus Yoder, the rich contralto of young Esther Musselman, the buttery richness of Dale Brubaker's baritone, and the birdlike sweetness of Sarah

Schrock's soprano, was thrilling. I once overheard a visitor say, *sotto voce*, at the close of a service, "That music makes my teeth itch!"

One cold, snowy Christmas Eve, near midnight, I awakened to the sound of glorious music. Is this the Second Coming, I wondered? Or am I in heaven? Rubbing sleepy eyes, pulling on my chenille robe, and shuffling into my slippers, I hurried to raise the window. Down below, in the narrow yard surrounding our shabby brown house, bundled-up Goshen College choral students stood ankle deep in white snow, pouring out their faith in song, "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem . . ." As the caroling continued, the windows of our neighbors rose too, all of us awed by the beauty of the sound. As they left, voices called out in antiphonal style, "Merry Christmas," from us, "Peace on Earth", from them.

* * * * *

Despite their respect for the arts, non-conformity to the ways of the world was the cornerstone of Mennonite belief, with a scripture in the New Testament book of Romans, memorized by many, and frequently sourced for sermons: "And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

There was one conspicuous exception to the nonconformity rule: Automobiles. Luxury cars were highly favored by the more prosperous Mennonite farmers—in conservative colors of course, preferably black. Apparently no scripture could be found to forbid this practice—much to Mother's disgust. Not because she disliked nice cars, but because Dad's main obsession was buying new cars in spite of his minuscule Mennonite professor's salary. Mother handled all the finances in the family so she fought with facts.

September was a volatile month in our home. That's when the new car models came out every year. Though Dad didn't attend his sons' sporting events, a brief bond was forged for a two week period of time each fall. Colorful brochures

surfaced in our home like contraband from the underground. Surreptitious trips were made to dealerships. Old accusations were resurrected from earlier arguments. Mother, guardian of the checkbook, weighed in forcefully.

"We're still making payments on the Nash! We're not taking out another loan! Absolutely not!" Harsh words and sullen silences hung in the air like a foul plume of smoke. Especially when a postcard came from the dealership: "The new car you ordered has arrived. Come at your earliest convenience."

* * * * *

Although buffeted by religious imperatives delivered by her church, her husband, and her peers, Mother was far from a meek victim who bowed to her fate. Dad's addiction to new cars had its counterpart in Mother. Mother's passion took a much different form, but hers was equally entrenched and non-negotiable. Her unwavering declaration of independence, several times every year, was a ritual that bookended my entire childhood. For as long as I can remember, even before the two little boys were born, Mother took us places in the new cars. Often.

On weekends, Mother took Hal and me to Chicago. We spent memorable hours wandering the echoing, marble halls of the Museum of Natural History, The Shedd Aquarium, and The Art Institute. Mother never tired of telling us stories of the painters' lives—Van Gogh and his lopped off ear was especially well-received—or standing beside us to read labels of the exhibits, though sometimes she had to retrieve me from the cafeteria. I sneaked off to stare at the art students, beatniks dressed in black, who sculpted their hair in asymmetrical styles, hiding one eye like faces in a Picasso painting, smoking their endless cigarettes.

But what set our lives apart from anyone else we knew was the road trips to nearly every state in the union. Almost every school vacation—Christmas, Spring, and Summer, was the occasion of a major trip. It was a chance to leave home and its problems behind. And to return from the respite, ready to try again.

* * * * *

We always had names for the houses where we lived, like the Swalheim Cottage or the Hershberger House, but Grandma's house was just "118," the house number. Maybe because it felt like a prison cell. Our family was unhappy everywhere, but at "118" everything was much worse. When our financial picture was especially bleak and our family ran up against hard times, our family of six went back to live at Grandma's shabby brown house with the creaky front porch. She moved out when we moved in, and back in when we moved out. Living there felt like wearing hand-me-down clothes—nothing fit right, it was ugly, and whoever used it already wore it out.

Each time we returned to "118", the crooked old house at the bottom end of block, the surface of the sidewalk out front was more pocked and the slabs of concrete tilted up at a sharper angle. It felt as if the whole street conspired to bloody our knees and elbows, tripping our roller skates and wrenching our bike tires. Inside the house, we got in trouble for rolling marbles on the Masonite floor from the high side of the house to the low. The house itself seemed hostile, as sorry to see us as we were to be back.

On cold mornings, Dad woke us all when he rattled the grate and shook down the ashes before building a new fire in the cranky old coal furnace. It crouched in the cobwebby space next to the coal bin. The fat round ducts were like volcano vents funneling heat and fumes up to the main floor. Periodically the cast iron beast belched great puffs of black soot up through the registers, coating the furniture and curtains and making us cough.

Doors stuck, drawers jammed. During the humid summers, the window sashes had to be forced up, inch by inch, then propped open with a stick. But perversely, they slammed back down if we forgot the stick. The old iron water heater in the basement was a constant worry. It had no thermostat. The gas was turned on only for bath nights.

I dreaded being assigned the chore of lighting and monitoring the hissing tank. The basement was dimly-lighted, with cobwebs creating a haze around the lone light bulb. I crept down the stairs, clutching my flashlight, hanging gingerly to the splintery handrail. My wrist flicked like a fencers' as I aimed the beam of light, peering into corners, circling the coal bin, under the stairs, up on the ledge, searching out the spots where baited rat-traps were hidden away, primed for dealing sudden death. The musty smell of the airless room and the damp soil of the root cellar made my skin prickle. I sniffed the air like a wary animal, listening for the faint scamper of insects or rodents, trying to anticipate what direction held danger. The slightest sound sent me scurrying up the steps, my heart hammering in my chest. But twice when I ran back upstairs and forgot to keep checking the heater, it exploded with the fury of a giant firecracker.

Three times the fire truck rumbled up to our porch, siren screaming, after someone in our family forgot to stand vigil. Mother was always mortified—and mad. “What will the neighbors think!” When I peeked out the window at the crowd of our curious neighbors, I was more afraid of them hearing Mother when she exploded.

No outsider could imagine what happened when the six of us were crammed into the mean-spirited old house. Our time as a family at home was always marked by tension. Quarrels often escalated into full-blown crises. One particular episode looms large in my memory.

* * * * *

Dad starts dinner because he's through at the college before Mother gets home from Chamberlain Grade School across town. He's a small man, neat and dapper, with a formality that fits his occupation as a professor of English Literature. Before he starts to prepare the food, he removes his necktie, hangs it on the rack in his closet, and turns back the cuffs of his white dress shirt as he heads for the kitchen. He lifts a bibbed apron from the nail on the back of the door and settles it over his

neck and torso, reaching behind to tie the ties. He sings snatches of songs while he peels the potatoes and clamps the can opener on the rim of A & P applesauce. "Come Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy praise" --sometimes in a tenor falsetto, more often in his deep bass voice. He whistles and hums while he works, then adds the words to another favorite. "Brighten the corner where you are, Someone far from harbor you may guide across the bar, Brighten the corner where you are."

The little boys and I watch for Mother out the front window, or listen for the crunch of loose gravel when our Nash coasts to a stop by the sagging front porch. I'm twelve years old, and feeling a big sister's responsibility for my younger brothers, Lynn at five and Sheldon at three.

When she turns the engine off, Lynn throws open the front door. We all want her to listen to something important. She heaves out an armful of books and papers and trudges up the creaky steps.

"Now remember, don't mob her," I remind them, "It upsets her when you do."

As she comes through the doorway, I search her face for a clue to her mood. Just tired today? Or maybe mad? Which is much worse. She drops her armload on the desk just inside the door.

"Dad's fixing dinner. The table's set," I say.

"I can see that," she answers. The little boys grab her legs for a low hug.

"I've had a hard day," she sighs. "Just let me rest a little. Wake me up in fifteen minutes." She stretches out on the daybed, flat on her back, dark hair fanning away from her face. She reaches behind her head to put her glasses on the end table, and closes her eyes.

"Don't stand there watching me," she says, "It gives me the heebie-jeebies." I shoo the boys away, reassuring them we'll have supper soon, and walk away. I tiptoe back in a few minutes to stare at her as she lies there, still as a corpse in a casket. I creep close to make sure she hasn't stopped breathing.

The supper table is covered with dingy gray oilcloth, six places set with mismatched silverware and the old maroon Melmac dishes, faded from years of use and scored with cuts from knife marks. All the good glasses got broken so we drink from recycled Skippy Peanut Butter jars. There are raised numbers marking the increments of 1/4, 1/2, 3/4, and 1 cup. I fill them all with water to the one cup line. Dad's rule. No milk until we first drink the water. Milk, he says, is not for quenching thirst. Water is. The pressure cooker jiggles and hisses in short bursts as it cooks quartered white potatoes.

Mother comes into the kitchen, yawning, picking up a stained hot pad to check the pans on the stove. The tiny room smells of pork steak frying, spattering grease on the stove as the fatty chunks of meat turn scorched brown. A speckled navy saucepan, the enamel chipped from years of service, holds #2 peas, mixed sizes, simmering on the back burner. The hand-size white timer with notched red numbers, buzzes loudly. Mother snaps it off and rushes the pressure cooker to the sink, putting it under the cold running water until the hissing stops and the rubber gasket drops down. She removes the jiggle and wrenches open the lid, tipping the pan to drain the water into a glass. The kitchen fills with steam, clouding the window. "That's where the vitamins are," she says, saving the liquid in a jar to drink later.

My brothers and I circle the table, shoving and jockeying for chairs--the loser gets the piano bench. Dad puts the bowl of steaming potatoes on the table, then goes back for the meat and peas while Mother heaves a sigh and sits down. "Hurry up and read," she says, "they're hungry and the food's getting cold."

Dad picks up a small devotional book, *The Upper Room*, clears his throat, and starts reading in his stiff professor voice--the Bible verse, the Bible lesson, the Thought for the Day, the Prayer. There is kicking under the table, and pinches and digs to settle some old score. When the prayer finally ends, plates of food are passed hand to hand. Bickering breaks out, then a tug of war over who gets the best piece of meat.

Mother scowls and yells, "STOP IT!" Nobody pays attention. "HAROLD! DO SOMETHING!" There's a blur of flying fists, grabbing, overturned glasses, water running across the table, spilling over the edge. The crack of a slap, a cry, chairs tipping, crashing to the floor.

Mother shocks us silent by shouting, "HELL'S BELLS!" as she rams back her chair and rushes to the desk by the front door. She snatches up her purse, scoops up the car keys, and wrenches the door open so hard that it smashes the knob against the wall. BANG! CRACK! The window pane in the door shatters, spraying shards of glass in jagged spears.

She rushes outside without looking back. We stare frozen-faced as she yanks open the door of the Nash, climbs in and slams the door shut. The engine roars to life. She jerks the gearshift. The tires spit loose gravel as the car lurches forward.

She's gone, sucking away our power of speech, leaving us mute, staring at the back of the car as it crests the hill and the tail lights wink from sight. As if on cue, the little boys stop staring and start wailing.

Dad's face jerks back to the boys. To me. "Keep them away from the broken glass. Take them upstairs. Read to them. Get them started on a puzzle."

When I come back downstairs, Dad and I work like chastened servants, stiff and silent, sopping up the spilled water, gingerly gathering up the shards of sharp glass and dropping them into a bucket.

There is no singing, no whistling or humming, nothing but the clank of the dustpan, the soft swish of the broom, and from upstairs, the muffled sobbing of two little boys. When we finish, Dad goes to his study, sits down at his wicker desk, turns on the gooseneck lamp, arranges the dictionary sideways for a prop, and opens a volume of Shakespeare. Hours drag by. Waiting. Listening. Still on Chapter One of my Nancy Drew book. Finally, the clock creeps around to bedtime.

"Pajama time," Dad calls, his deep bass voice strong and hearty, like he's speaking a line from Shakespeare. More tears from Sheldon, the youngest. "I want

Mommy," he wails. "I'll read you a story," I say, patting the couch cushion beside me, "come sit down."

I read quietly so if there's a crunch of gravel out front we'll be sure to hear it. Sometimes she comes when we're still downstairs, but other times, I sit up dozing against my headboard, listening, jerking awake at intervals, straining to hear the sound of her voice or the rattle of the car keys as she drops them on the desk downstairs, right below my bedroom.

* * * * *

Many of our family crises centered around things that happened to my oldest brother, Hal, and things he did in our home. His problems began in early childhood, in the post-depression years. Poor parents, even educated ones like ours, were stuck on the bottom level of the Maslow hierarchy of needs, struggling to secure food, shelter, and clothing. Not until the legendary Dr. Spock revolutionized child-rearing in the 1950s, did it occur to parents that the old way of "spare the rod-spoil the child" might not be the best way. Before that time in the United States, superstition and tradition were often stronger than common sense.

Unfortunately for all of us, Hal was also born in a time when genius was seldom recognized and rarely rewarded. The first official notice of his brilliance came when he was a fifth grader, already a deeply troubled child. We were attending a country school near Madison, Wisconsin when the teacher noticed his unusual abilities. He was advanced to the sixth grade level, a fairly easy transition in a large room with all eight grades. By that time he was reading his way through our entire set of encyclopedias and developing a voracious appetite for model-building, drawing futuristic cars, and learning to play the piano.

Hal's behavior problems reached crisis level when he began junior high at another school. His small, prepubescent size was against him. He was younger and far shorter than all his classmates, and consequently the butt of jokes and beatings

from bullies. Many times he trudged home with blood on his clothes, cuts, a black eye, and bruises on his body. I was still in sixth grade, and junior high was looking like a scary place to be.

Like his pet dog, Smokey, chained to the clothesline in our back yard, Hal's behavior toward me was hostile and aggressive. Smokey's doghouse stood between me and the tall pear tree, my secret refuge. Each time I inched open the back screen door, Smokey snapped to attention, his shaggy wolf body trembling with menace. His warning growl and bared teeth signaled a sudden lunge, restrained at the last second by the choke of his collar. Living with Hal was like trying to tiptoe past Smokey. When Hal shoved me off the piano bench while I was practicing, or hid my roller skates, I tattled, and he got punished. I sensed he was watching me, waiting for my vulnerable moment, his chance to strike back.

I tried to avoid Hal as much as possible, but the cramped old house resisted any such effort. In all the house, there were only three doors. The back bedroom upstairs, and two doors into the tiny bathroom, one from the side of the house that once was an apartment, and one that opened from the kitchen.

In desperation, Mother sought the help of a psychiatrist. She tried to trick Hal into meeting with the man by saying he was a family friend. By that time, Hal was wary of any adult and saw through the ruse. In their ignorance and frustration, our parents added to his misery by using corporal punishment for his acting out at home. All of us lived in fear of the consequences. No one knew what to do.

One summer he killed a snake and wound it inside a canning jar filled with formaldehyde to preserve it. When Mother went to the dimly-lighted fruit cellar to get a jar of green beans, she grabbed the jar with the snake. She screamed so loudly we thought she was getting murdered.

No one dared to ask if Hal's motive was to study the snake or to scare us silly. Anytime there was trouble, our parents assumed it was Hal's fault, and acted accordingly. After every beating, administered jointly by Mother and Dad, he always got sent to sit in the coal bin.

Sometimes I felt sorry for him, but more often I was terrified of what he might do when he got mad at me instead of Mother. But most of the time, the two of them were locked in a private war, for reasons none of us understood.

* * * * *

As the conflict between Hal and Mother, the hot-tempered ones, grew more intense, the family sorted itself into two distinct camps. After an incident during one of our summer trips--this one in Illinois--Hal and Mother had a blowup. She vowed never to take him on a trip again. So Dad and Hal ended up being the "stay-at-homes." Mother, the two small boys and I, became the "roadies." I felt sorry for Dad, but I couldn't think what to do to make things better. Dad had to make do without his prize possession. No car for him to wash and wax and Windex, nothing for him to sweep out with his whiskbroom, no whistling or humming while he chammied the wax to a mirror shine.

Much time was spent in preparation for each upcoming trip. There were no freeways in those days, just red roads and blue roads, often not well marked. Maps were consulted for weeks, plotting the route for going and the route for returning. Mother called me her navigator. It was my job to read the map so I could tell her which highway to take and the mileage between towns.

Before each trip, we sent away for brochures describing the state capitols, and National Monuments and Parks we planned to visit. Traveling on the cheap meant no restaurant meals and sleeping only at tourist camps or state park campgrounds. Supplies were collected on the back porch and stockpiled for weeks.

The essentials were our small Sterno stove with magenta-colored fuel cakes, matches, canvas army cots for all, blankets, pillows, several flashlights, extra batteries, a compass and an altimeter, an alarm clock, a first-aid kit, a thermometer, toilet paper, three battered suitcases stuffed with our carefully chosen clothes, thermos bottles--the tall silver one and the two short red and tan ones, a can opener,

the little tin set of dishes and mugs, dish soap, laundry soap, towels and washcloths—old ones so if we lost one it would be okay, lots of Little Golden Books to read to the boys, Nancy Drew for me, favorite toys that didn't make too much noise, Old Maid and Authors card games, plain paper, lined paper, pencils, coloring books and crayons.

Finally, just before we left, we packed the food. Four things served as our diet staples: Spam, Campbell's Tomato Soup, Ritz Crackers, and Skippy Peanut Butter. For snacks we took Mackintosh apples, small, hard, and tasteless, and bananas that quickly grew speckled, mushy, and brown. We took Sunsweet Prunes, three apiece for each day, to keep us regular. Finally, Mother hid Campfire marshmallows and Butter Rum Life Savers under the bedding for treats or emergencies, like when someone was crying or quarreling, and wouldn't stop.

Before freeways were built, travelers went through every hamlet, city and town. We craned our necks dutifully as Mother called our attention to indigenous architecture: southern plantations, adobe haciendas, and the sturdy two-story boxes built by northern European immigrants. We snickered at local accents, sampled prawns in Louisiana, grits in Georgia, and fiery chili in El Paso. We savored the unfamiliar sounds and smells of oceans, deserts, mountains, big cities and tiny towns.

Travel in those days was an unfolding adventure. On our best days, we had sunny skies, no detours, no car trouble, and lots of Burma Shave signs. "Around the curve--Lickety split--It's a beautiful car--Wasn't it?" or "Cattle Crossing means go slow--That old bull is some cows' beau," or "Free, free--A trip to Mars--For ten thousand empty jars--of Burma Shave." We competed to call out the state names of license plates, identify the make, model, and year of cars, guess how many red cars we would see--anything that relieved the boredom of the endless miles.

Car troubles like flat tires, a boiling radiator, a broken fan belt, and dead battery problems, were commonplace in those years. Mother could fix a lot of things, but we learned to depend on the friendly truck drivers that rolled to a stop and ran

back when Mother stood by our car waving her hanky for help. Often, we had long waits by the side of the road while traffic whizzed by, rocking the car, while we waited for a good Samaritan to pull off on the shoulder and stop.

Sometimes the boys or I got carsick on hilly roads, and once, in Georgia, both boys sagged in the back seat, flushed and listless. Mother tipped the rearview mirror down and rotated it sided to side so she could see them both.

"Let Amy take your temperature," she said. They submitted meekly.

"One hundred three," I said, "and one hundred four."

I looked out at those red dirt hills and wondered what was going to happen to us.

"Give them each an aspirin. We're going back home."

I stared at her.

"What's the point of stopping," she said, "when what they need is to be in their own beds? We'll drive straight through."

So she made a U-turn and drove most of the night and all the next day.

By late afternoon the boys sprouted chicken pox. Besides my usual responsibility of keeping the boys quiet and entertained, I had two more jobs on that trip--keeping their fever down and keeping Mother awake.

Each time the alarm clock buzzed her awake after an hour or two of sleep, she poured a cup of water from the thermos and splashed it on her face. "Keep talking to me," she begged, "Help me stay awake."

Late into the next night we finally turned down the familiar streets of Goshen and rolled to a stop at "118."

"Go wake your Dad and tell him I need help getting the boys to their beds."

* * * * *

When school started again, the teacher always asked for volunteers to tell what they did on vacation. I dreaded my turn because I was shy and because no one

else traveled to places like we did. It was hard to describe the Gulf of Mexico, the Grand Canyon, Isle Royal in Lake Superior, and the French Quarter in New Orleans. By the time I was twelve, I had been in 36 states, and read all the fine print on markers at every state capitol, national park, or monument we visited.

As we toured the southern tier of states, Mother vented her outrage at racial injustice and bigotry. She horrified us with the story of slavery and called our attention to the shacks and schoolhouse shanties of the Negroes. She drove slowly so the boys could read the cruel signs that segregated the races. "No niggers."

"Look," she reminded us sternly, "but don't point! And don't stare!"

We pulled into a Conoco Gas Station. "You boys behave now," she warned. "The good 'ole boys who run these filling stations don't approve of northern white women."

A pot-bellied man in a sweat-stained shirt shot a stream of tobacco juice at Mother's feet and leered at her.

"What's uh purty lady lak you doin' down here 'steda home where yuh belong? Ain't you got no husbin to keep yuh in line?"

Two young men lounging nearby fell silent, looking back and forth from challenger to challenged. Mother bristled, her eyes black and hard as marbles. She snapped her fingers and shooed us to the car, waiting until we slammed both doors shut. She motioned us to crank the windows closed. The boys shoved for the best spot to watch.

"Sic 'em, Mother!" Lynn said, mimicking Hal with Smokey.

"Don't point and don't stare," I reminded them. "You'll make Mother mad."

Mother was breathing hard when she climbed into the car a few minutes later. She slammed the door shut, and started the car.

"Mommy, what did . . . ?

"SHHHHH!"

She didn't say a word until we were well down the road and around a curve.

"That felt good," she said, grinning, and we all laughed.

I often cringed at having such an outspoken mother, and secretly, felt ashamed when she did what Dad called, "blowing her stack." But this time it felt good to me, too. This time the bully wasn't Hal.

* * * * *

Each time as we returned from a trip, closing in on the familiar landmarks leading to our small town, the time away made it seem possible that we could be a family that didn't fight. If the trip had gone well, with no big problems, and she was in a good mood, we'd both talk about trying to do better. Once, when I was feeling bold, I offered advice.

"When Hal acts bad, don't hit him and send him to the basement. He's always meaner when he comes up."

She jerked her eyes from the road to glare at me. "So Miss Know It All, if you were the parent, what would you do when he hits you? I don't notice you ever stop tattling on him."

I had no answer.

The best part of every trip was the brief honeymoon our family had when we finally got back home. Mother and Dad always had the bedroom with the door for a while. I don't remember how long it was before the fighting got bad again, but when Mother crawled into bed with me, I knew the trouble was back.

I never knew why the fighting started--was it Hal, or Mother, or Dad, or me for tattling, or maybe the Mennonites, or just living at "118"?

But I was scared--the honeymoons were getting shorter every time. The shoves and the spying and the meanness and the name-calling seemed like a script we all knew by heart. And the ending never got better, no matter how hard we tried.

The very next week, after the chicken pox trip, Mother was silenced in mid-sentence, as though choked by invisible hands. Instead of the last word in the argument, all she managed was-- "Of all the *asinine*. . ."

We stared saucer-eyed as Mother slumped into a chair, gasping for breath, her eyes frantic with fear. Dad rushed to the desk, grabbed up the big black receiver, and ordered the operator to get the doctor to our house immediately.

Dr. Bender rolled up in his big maroon Packard an eternity later. He hefted a large black leather bag from the trunk of his car. I was the one watching out the window who hurried to let him in. Dad motioned my three brothers and I out of the room.

We watched from the kitchen while Dr. Bender gave Mother a shot and spoke to Dad in a low voice. He stayed until she stopped wheezing and opened her eyes. Then he put his stethoscope back into his bag, and leaned down to talk to Mother. He patted her hand. Picking up his black bag, he walked to the door and stood talking quietly to Dad. With his hand on the knob, he glanced back at Mother, shook his head and left.

The little boys started to whimper and wouldn't stop, even when Dad gave them the warning look. Mother turned sideways and said softly, "Let them come." They started to run to her but Dad held them away. "Not so fast," he warned, "Mother is very sick." They wept loudly.

Dad said it was bedtime. But it wasn't. We all wanted to stay and watch Mother, but Dad hurried us upstairs to bed. The bed wetters wet their beds that night. Somebody forgot the rubber pads, so the next morning we had to air the mattresses, hook up the old Maytag wringer on the back porch, wash the sheets, and hang them out on the clothesline in the back yard.

For a while—I don't remember how long, the arguments stopped. We saw that fighting in our family could kill Mother. She might die. It would be our fault. The fear of triggering another asthma attack was way worse than watching out for cracks in the sidewalk. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." I looked down and stepped carefully. But I couldn't stop fights. Who would we blame if Mother died?

* * * * *

During a fight the following month, there was yelling like usual, getting louder, until Lynn, now six years old, began wheezing and gasping. Just like Mother. We were shocked into silence, for a moment frozen stiff as statues, all of us staring while his little chest heaved for air and his skinny fingers clawed at his throat. Dr. Bender came again, grim-faced this time, his low voice a growl as he talked to Mother while she rocked Lynn and held him close. I had two questions--Could asthma be contagious? If so, who was next? Who could I ask ?

Several months later, right before supper, Hal and Mother got into a loud argument, their angry words like an urgent alarm, warning us all of danger. Mother was in the kitchen, Hal was on the sofa, and I was scurrying to grab the little boys--always my job--and get them into Dad's study so they couldn't see or hear what was happening. I heard Hal swearing at Mother and glanced out at him through a crack where the sliding door hung crooked. He was mocking her.

To my right, there was a sudden whooshing sound, and the flash of a silver dagger as it streaked across the room. The blade thudded, quivering, into the wall beside Hal's head. The knife was a souvenir Mother and Hal brought back from a trip to Mexico. The anesthesia of time has removed the memory of what happened next. But I remember that after the dagger day, I had nightmares. The same one, over and over. A record kept dropping down on the turntable and I couldn't get it to stop jumping back to the first groove. The starting words were always the same--"What If," and "Help Us." It was loud, but I was the only one who heard it. And I could never find the "Off" switch.

I remember thinking maybe the asthma attacks were better. At least they stopped the fights for a while.

* * * * *

At "118," the only bedroom with a door was usually mine. But if Mother and Dad were getting along, I got ousted, and spent several hours emptying out the dresser drawers, taking down and packing away my Storybook doll collection, and cleaning out the cubbyholes in the old oak secretary. I was sent back to sleep with the boys. I hated the nights. They had fart and belching contests and tried to shove each other off the top bunk.

Mother hung blankets on wires to divide the space under the sloped ceilings where the boys slept. I had the first space at the top of the stairs where everyone walked by. "Hide anything that matters," Mother warned, "because boys will be boys." She was right. The violation of my first diary stole away any desire to ever detail my sorrows or describe my dreams on paper.

Having the bedroom back to myself was heaven, even though it meant my parents weren't getting along. That felt scary. But I craved the privacy as much as I hated being exposed to the mercy of my brothers in the big room. But I worried constantly. What went on downstairs after we kids had all gone to bed? Could parents get mad enough to hurt each other? What happens to orphans that nobody wants? Should I run away? I saved enough money to buy a rope ladder and hid it in the crawl space under the eaves. But when desperation drove me to sneak it out after dark, I sat stroking the round wooden rungs, staring out at the street light, unable to think of a place to go.

My more urgent concern was what was happening downstairs after "lights out." I was desperate to know what my parents were saying to each other.

Late one night I discovered a secret way to snoop. My unheated bedroom had a small floor register the size of a piece of notebook paper. It was supposed to stay shut to conserve coal, but when I heard fighting, I dragged my quilt onto the icy linoleum floor and inched open the metal slats. Mother and Dad were arguing at the table right below me, their words smacking back and forth like volleys in a hard-fought tennis match.

Night after night I strained to listen. Most of the arguments were about money problems, Mennonites, and Hal stuff. Some mornings the side of my face bore the imprint of the grill because I fell asleep. There were other nights when Mother tapped on my door and crawled into bed with me .

She flopped around restlessly, then turned on her side, facing me. She punched her pillow flat to fit her face. "What in the Sam Hill are we going to do with another car loan on top of the doctor bills? How can one man be so stubborn? And why can't he see that as long as we stay here, we'll never get ahead? Never. He could make twice as much at a public university. Twice as much!" She flipped over on her back. In the light from the street light, I could see her staring at the ceiling. "That," she said, "is why I have to teach school to help support this family. It just isn't fair!" Always, after she fell asleep, I tried to think of a way to fix things. I thought about money, and moving away, and what to do about Hal.

Sometimes when I was back in the bedroom with the door, after the mournful hoot of the 10 pm freight train rumbled nearby, I crawled from my bed to watch the next-door neighbors. I wanted to see if they quarreled. Their gray stucco house was so close I could almost reach out and touch it. Not much happened over there. The floors were stacked waist high with boxes and books, leaving only a few paths for them to navigate to other rooms. The white-haired old man was a retired minister who made and repaired violins. He lived with his soft-spoken housekeeper. She looked like the picture of Whistler's Mother, a little brown wren of a woman, with glasses perched halfway down her nose, and gray hair tucked into a small round knob on the back of her head. She sat in her rocker and mended or crocheted every night while he sanded wood on the violins or read his big leather Bible. They hardly spoke at all. A still life animated only by breathing. An utter lack of activity or emotion. Their peacefulness seemed like a promise of another way to live.

* * * * *

Except for our next-door neighbors, I had little sense of other religions outside our small Mennonite community. That all changed the day Mrs. Shepherd entered our lives and exposed me to a world unlike anything I had known. Mrs. Shepherd knew about me because I helped out her mildly retarded son in school. She invited me to attend a revival meeting . That first experience with another religion felt as delicious and wicked as the time I sneaked four chunks of fudge from my brothers' hidden stash. I was twelve.

The reason I got to go was because Mrs. Shepherd did all the asking. Everybody in town knew the Shepherd car and why it came. Mrs. Shepherd was a fervent Baptist, devoted to collecting stray children and chauffeuring them to revival meetings at Winona Lake Campgrounds. Her goal was to get them saved.

What I remember about Mrs. Shepherd was her fluffy blond hair, the way she cocked her head, and the pleading look of her round brown eyes, like a puppy begging for treats. You couldn't look away. But what stays strongest with me all these years are her tears. At first I was frightened because she cried so often. "Don't mind me," she reassured all of us, "I cry when I'm happy and I cry when I'm sad. I'm just a big crybaby." She was prepared for tears, even if I wasn't. She kept a large, lace-edged hanky tucked into her generous bosom.

She came to call on us, I suppose, so my parents would see she wasn't some kidnapper or bad person, as if anyone would ever look at her kind pink face without smiling. On the day of the visit, Mrs. Shepherd's shiny black Buick braked to a stop in front of our old house on West Jackson Street. I knew that one old busybody was standing just inside her frayed lace curtain, smudged and gray at the place she moved it aside a fraction to watch who came, what they drove, and which of us might be climbing into the car.

The Buick was big and imposing, rich-looking, as out of place in our neighborhood of shabby houses and crumbling, cock-eyed cement sidewalks as her genteel manners and soft voice. There were four chrome portholes on each side of the hood and curved bumpers that shone like mirrors. The door handles were cool

and heavy, and when the doors slammed shut there was a solid sound that went "thunk". Dad came out to admire the car and invite her in. But as soon as she left, the arguing between Mother and Dad began.

Usually Dad's standard response to any request from us children was a very long silence before he finally looked up from Chaucer or Shakespeare. He placed a bookmark on his page before lifting his chin high, rotating his head, and rubbing the back of his neck. Then he stared off into space before finally connecting with our presence – reluctantly, it always seemed. Perhaps he was chafing at his wrench from the pathos of the ancient world to the trivia of today. The ritual rarely varied. The impatient petitioner, one of his four children, would plead for a response.

"Dad. Dad, did you hear me? Dad, I have to have an answer! Say yes!" A long silence would pass while we rolled our eyes and waited–after which "Ask your Mother" always followed.

But today was different. So far I hadn't really asked because I didn't want the arguing to get worse. But it already was. So I tip-toed close enough in the next room to hear what was bad about Baptists. I wasn't even sure I wanted to go until I heard Dad's deep bass voice saying "No. She's not going." Then I did want to go –definitely. I grabbed a dust rag for my alibi, in case I got caught and accused of eavesdropping.

"Twelve is a very impressionable age. Revival meetings are the worst sort of place for a girl her age."

Mother, always in favor of expanding my world, disagreed. "You're wrong, Harold. This would be a good learning experience. She's been too sheltered."

The talk veered to doctrine, a hot button for Dad. He launched a critique.

"Baptist beliefs of 'Once saved, always saved,' indicate a flawed approach to scripture. Think what that teaches a child about sinning with impunity and getting off scot free."

I heard Mother snort in disgust.

"So Martin Luther was wrong. It isn't by grace that we're saved. We have to earn it. That's what you're saying." Her voice was rising with irritation. "Are you advocating the perpetual penance of Catholics? Is that what you want your daughter to believe?"

"Certainly not! But it's a superior response to the silliness of 'Once saved, always saved.' And no, of course I reject Catholicism. Deifying Mary is absurd. And the Virgin statues are a sacrilege. People certainly shouldn't be worshipping a woman," he said.

Mother's voice grew edgy. "Let's stay on the topic--which is Amy's age. Amy should be exposed to a much broader view of religion than the beliefs of narrow-minded Mennonites. It's high time."

Dad countered with disdain. "I hear the popular young evangelist is drawing huge crowds in California. A sure sign he's appealing to emotion, instead of reason."

"She'll never learn to think if she doesn't have a basis for comparison. Besides," she said, "there'll be a carload of other children whose parents seem to think it's safe. After all, it's a church service, not a movie. Would you prefer she ask to go to a *movie*? You should be glad she wants to go to *church*," she said, emphasizing the words.

Evidently that clinched her case. This time the room fell silent as Dad's footsteps retreated and the back screen door slammed shut. It was a sure bet that Dad went out to wash his car. A minute later, Mother stuck her head around the door.

"Caughtcha!" she said, smiling.

It didn't matter that I got caught because Mother and I already had a secret from Dad -- several secrets -- reading adult books, sneaking out to the movies, and going on dates.

A year earlier when Mother wanted me to read *Grapes of Wrath* and *Fountainhead*, I couldn't find them on the library shelves, so I went to ask the

librarian. She peered at me over the top of her glasses, disapproval deepening the furrows in her forehead.

“Does your Mother know you’re asking for these books, young lady?” I nodded. “I’ll need a note from her.”

Mother was indignant. I returned with a handwritten note in Mother’s neat penmanship: My daughter, Amy Louise Smith, is allowed to check out any book in your library. Signed, Mildred R. Smith. The librarian held it up to the light and examined the note carefully before reaching under her tall oak counter.

“One week only,” she said, as she slowly rocked the rubber stamp on the checkout slip, closed the books carefully, and shoved them toward me.

But my coup at the Carnegie Library was minor compared to my big secret. I’d been getting permission and money from Mother for over a year to go to the movies. The movies were like a magic carpet, transporting me a world away from what was happening at home. I was hooked from the very first film, *Old Yeller*.

I felt guilty about deceiving Dad, and afraid of being seen by a Mennonite while I lurked in the ticket line, turning my face away from the street. One night I spotted Paul Hershberger scurrying through the lobby. Another Mennonite. We exchanged furtive looks of recognition, sealing an unspoken pact of silence.

Once inside the darkened room, I formed a habit of never sitting in or under the balcony. It seemed safer to be in a less vulnerable spot in case divine judgment fell. I fantasized myself fleeing through an exit just before the police and firemen descended on the disaster. I’d be showing shock and horror just like the other bystanders on the sidewalk.

In our small town, the uniformed ushers ruled the darkened room. They showed us to our seats, beaming their flashlights down the row to light the way.

Ushers also served as proxy parents. Any disturbance or unseemly necking was apt to result in a looming presence in the aisle at the end of the row, and a sudden beam of light illuminating the offenders.

On that night, just as the movie was getting to the scary part, an usher flicked a beam from his flashlight down every row while Paul's dad, close behind, searched for his son. When they got to my row, I ducked down like I dropped something on the floor. Paul wasn't so lucky, he was staring up at Frankenstein on the screen. But he had his head down when he got towed out.

About this same time, my body was rapidly changing from a little girl shape to a young woman's. So I went to Woolworth's and bought my first real bra. Mother had looked at my chest the day before. "It's high time," she said. I was almost as tall as she was and I desperately needed new clothes. "Here's some of my stuff you can try," she said, offering me an armful of her discards. They looked awful on me. Too old. I wanted new clothes, no more baby doll dresses or second hand castoffs. For the first time ever, buying a bike, roller skates, or Nancy Drew books had lost their appeal.

So the Saturday before the revival meetings I made my pitch. "Couldn't I use my babysitting and paper route money? I need at least two new outfits for school this fall."

"Ask your Dad, maybe he'll give you some money."

"Mother! You know he won't. He'll tell me to ask you. Please, please?"

She eyed me up and down, sighing. "Okay, but don't get anything too flamboyant. You know how your Dad is." I nodded.

Shopping for junior sizes was a heady experience. I spent so long in the dressing room, looking at myself from all angles, that the clerk tapped on the door.

"Could I bring you another size, Miss?"

I left with two sheath skirts, black and navy blue, a half slip and two sweaters. My favorite was the pink angora, the other was white orlon with blue trim. I could hardly wait to model my new outfits for my parents. But I had to hide them so Hal wouldn't make fun.

I think my mistake was combining the new outfit with going to the revival meeting. I spent a long time getting ready. I shampooed my hair, dried it, and

brushed it until it shone. Then I put on my new bra and slip, the black sheath skirt, and the pink angora sweater. I also added a whiff of Mother's "Evening in Paris" perfume. I was staring at my new grownup self in the mirror when I heard the deep horn honk of Mrs. Shepherd's Buick.

I started down the stairs just as Dad came to call me. He usually acted cheery, but this time his eyes widened, then quickly narrowed in disapproval as he looked me up and down. Just then, Mother came around the corner.

"Didn't you hear Mrs. Shep. . ."

She, too, stared at me top to bottom with a surprised look on her face. My face felt hot and I crossed my arms across my front. I was desperate to leave them and the looks on their faces, but my way was blocked by Dad. The short distance to the front door stretched out like a long prison sentence.

"She's not leaving this house in that outfit!" Dad declared.

Mother snapped back, "Don't be absurd, Harold. You're just upset that your little girl is growing up."

"She looks like a streetwalker!"

Mother's face turned dark and fierce. "Harold, I'm going to leave you if this is how you treat your own daughter. Let her grow up. She's not a child any more." She motioned me to go.

I walked gingerly to the front door, stepped outside, and carefully closed it behind me, shutting the sounds of their argument behind me. Mrs. Shepherd beamed at me and beckoned to a space on the back seat behind her. She introduced me to the five other teenagers and off we went, humming down the highway in her big, black Buick. As I looked out at the scenery flashing by, the thoughts of what was happening at home slipped away, as though I was leaving a bad dream behind.

An hour later, we pulled into a grassy field filled with rows and rows of cars. Men as old as white-haired grandpas and as young as teenage boys, were swinging their arms in an arc, waving their red batons, pointing us to park at the far end of the field. Crowds of chattering people were streaming toward the big outdoor tent.

Inside, spotlights shone down on the platform, illuminating a half dozen men with slicked-back hair, navy suits, white shirts, and colorful neckties. The men squinted out at us while workers tested the sound system. "Testing, testing, one, two, three." Minutes later the lush, throaty sound of a Wurlitzer theater organ filled the tent, swelling with rich chords and a barely suppressed dance rhythm. I could feel a thump in my chest as the bass notes reverberated throughout the auditorium. Everywhere I looked I saw ladies in bright colors and flowered dresses, a feast of color to my eyes, so accustomed to the muted clothing of Mennonites. I turned sideways as far as I could stretch in each direction, staring at the women with lipstick, jewelry, and short hair. These must be the unsaved, I decided. They were too worldly for church people.

A young man who reminded me of Tony Curtis, my movie star idol, walked to the podium and nodded to the woman at the organ. As he began waving his arms in time to the music, our voices were caught up into one mighty chorus. "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, Oh what a foretaste of glory divine." As the throb of the organ died away, a big man with a kind face strolled to the pulpit and began to sing a solo. His deep baritone voice felt as rich as hot fudge pooling over ice-cream. I shivered involuntarily and looked down at my arms. The soft hair stood up from goose bumps.

As the handsome young preacher strode to the pulpit, mothers shushed their children and men sat up straighter. Their upturned faces shone in the light and a hush settled over the audience. A child next to me looked up at his mother and asked out loud, "Is that him, Mom? Is that Billy Graham?" People nearby turned to look disapproval at the mother and child. She clapped her hand over the boys' mouth and whispered something in his ear. The boy sat back pouty against the wooden bench and swung his feet.

The man's voice sounded strange to my ears. A slow southern drawl warmed his words like sun softens butter. I felt my toes curl under. He preached about the

Prodigal Son and Sin. He told us how the rich young rebel demanded his inheritance and marched off down the road to the big city and bright lights.

"The younger son took his fortune and went on a journey to a far country and wasted it all in riotous living. Soon there was a severe famine in the land and all his money was gone. The only work he could find was feeding pigs. He was so hungry, he longed to eat the husks he was feeding to the pigs. He remembered how in his father's house, even the hired men had food to spare. So he decided to go back to his father and confess that he had sinned, and ask to be taken back as a servant instead of a son. And while he was still a long way off, his Father saw him, and ran to him, filled with compassion. Then he called to his servants to bring the best robe, sandals, and a ring, and to prepare a great feast to celebrate the homecoming of his son." I forced down a sob that was forming at the back of my throat. I absolutely was not going to cry.

But Billy Graham's deep-set eyes swept the audience like a relentless searchlight. No one escaped. The room grew very still and many people began to cry, women first, and finally the men, tears trickling down the folds of their faces. Snow white hankies, like flags of surrender on a battlefield, popped out from patent leather purses and mens' hip pockets. He asked people to come forward and accept Christ as their Saviour. The altar call was punctuated by the loud snuffles of women and the snorts of men blowing their noses. The organist started to play softly, and the Tony Curtis song leader came back to lead the audience in singing, "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, Oh Lamb of God, I come, I come." Billy Graham folded an arm across his waist, cupping his elbow in his hand, rubbing his hand across his chin, as he watched the crowds of weeping people stumbling and hesitant, a few hurrying, as they flowed to the front of the platform.

I felt sure he was looking right at me. I had to hold tightly to the back of the bench in front of me so I wouldn't step out and go down front with the sinners streaming down the aisles. I also had to look straight ahead because Mrs. Shepherd was sure to be surveying her whole group of invitees to see who might need a nudge.

I wanted to see her pleading puppy eyes happy, but not enough to embarrass myself by admitting I was a sinner. Anyway, I was already a church person. A Mennonite. I could hear her blowing her nose, lady-like, and knew she was crying into her lace-edged hanky.

I was glad to get home that night, but I watched wistfully as Mrs. Shepherd's black Buick disappeared up the street and around the corner. I thought about how kind she was to her retarded son. I wondered what their home was like. Peaceful, I guessed.

The next time she invited me I made up an excuse not to go. It wasn't worth triggering another fight. But I always remembered the excitement of the evening revival meeting, and the evangelist, Billy Graham, telling us to come get saved. At the time, the only prayer I ever prayed was for someone to fix what was wrong with our family. But no one knew our secrets, so how could they help us? And I couldn't figure out whether God was a Baptist or a Mennonite or even some other religion like Catholic. How could they all be right?

* * * * *

Just when it seemed that things at home couldn't get worse between Mother and Hal, the situation suddenly changed. It was late July, several weeks after my fourteenth birthday. Dad was due back from Ohio, where he went every summer as soon as school was out. Educators in those years received a salary only during the nine months of school, so he always worked summers as a painter for his brother-in-law. Mother crooked her finger at me, motioning me to her desk in the living room. She looked around to make sure Hal wasn't within earshot, then asked if I would like to live in Arizona.

"Are we moving?" I asked, incredulous.

"I am," she said. "I'm taking the two little boys, and you, if you want to come with us."

"Have you told Dad?"

"Not yet."

"How would we get money?"

"I have a contract to teach in Tucson."

"Where you were born?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Lynn and I are getting sicker. You know that. Dr. Bender says our asthma will get better in the desert."

"Won't Dad and Hal want to come with us?"

"Your father will not leave the Mennonites."

I hesitated briefly, trying to absorb the idea of leaving.

"Okay, I'll go."

The few weeks before we left are a blur in my memory, except for the argument about taking Dad's prized new Dodge Meadowbrook.

"The car is brand new, Mildred. It needs a breaking-in period. You can't just take off cross country. There might be problems."

"You're way too fussy about cars. They're meant to be driven."

"You yourself criticized me for buying this car. Now you want to take it."

"You couldn't have gotten a loan without my income. If you want to drive a nicer car, get a job that pays for it. You can, you know."

Mother and I started sorting and packing clothes for the four of us. She had the old man next door make a folding tray table that fit snugly into the space between the front and back seat. The little boys would use it as a place to play games and eat snacks on the long trip cross-country.

On the move to Arizona, we stayed at campgrounds, as we always did, and I had my usual job of entertaining the two boys, Lynn, now seven, and Sheldon, who was five. Everything went fine until we got to southern Utah on the sixth day. We had driven late the night before because we'd missed the turnoff to the campground

and had to find a tourist home, the low budget alternative to motels. Mother said I wasn't watching the map closely enough.

The road was wet from rain during the night, but I remember the morning was bright and sunny. I was hanging backwards over the front seat--common enough in the era before seat belts--peeling some tangerines for the boys to eat. Mother was talking about the red rock bluffs coming up on our right. I was startled when she yelled, "What's that guy doing?" I whirled around and looked out the windshield. A car way down the road was in our lane. Heading right for us. Mother leaned on the horn and flashed her lights several times.

"Damn Fool! GET OVER!"

He kept coming closer.

"WHAT'S HE DOING?" she shouted.

She wrenched the steering wheel and swerved left into his lane. He followed her like we were toy cars playing crash on my brothers' tabletop.

"OH GOD! NOW WHAT?"

She wrenched the wheel back to the right. He followed with the precision of a shadow, nearly upon us now.

"NO-O-O!"

The tires screamed as she jerked the wheel sharply to the left and skidded back across his lane. Our car went sailing off the road, airborne.

The only witness said we went end-over-end three times before landing at the bottom of a deep ditch, upside down. I remember crawling out a window and looking up at a growing knot of people staring over the embankment at us. Several men scrambled down, spraying gravel as they came. The little boys were dazed and crying. The men reached inside to get them out. Another man with leather gloves, brushed aside broken glass and held out his hands to help Mother. Somebody wrapped me in a blanket, got me up to the road, and boosted me into a semi-truck. Cars were stopped and people were everywhere, pointing talking, and staring. I started shaking badly and couldn't stop. My feet were ice-cold. I looked down.

Socks. No shoes. A big, burly man who smelled of sweat and cigarettes climbed in and looked over at me, his blue eyes probing under the bill of his baseball cap.

"You'll be okay, girlie," he said, shaking his head. "Lucky lady, your Mom. Solid doorposts on those Dodges."

He turned the heater on high and looked back over his shoulder before pulling out onto the road. He pumped the clutch and wrenched the floor gearshift in several directions as the truck gradually gained speed.

"Eighteen miles to town," he said loudly, above the roar of the engine. "Quicker for us to haul you guys. Ambulance takes too long." I was shivering, sick with fear, afraid I was going to throw up. "Miracle no one got killed," he muttered.

There was a big sticker on his side of the windshield, down at the bottom. The writing was backwards from the inside, but I finally figured out what it said. "NO RIDERS."

They took us to a small hospital in Panguitch, Utah. The doctor put Ace bandages on both my wrists for the sprains, then sent me to the waiting room to wait for Mother and the two boys. I sat down gingerly and flexed my fingers to see if they still worked. My body felt dull and achy, like the day before I came down with the mumps. I turned my head slowly from side to side, leaned back against the wall, and closed my eyes.

The sound of a rheumy hacking cough startled me from my stupor. An old man with bloodshot bloodhound eyes stood staring down at me. The woman beside him had skin that looked like a used paper bag. She reminded me of an angry teacher, waiting for her pupil to confess his crime. I wanted to close my eyes again, to shut out her beady little snake eyes boring into his face. Angry people made me feel sick.

His voice was quavery, "I'm sorry, so sorry," he said, mopping his watery eyes with a wadded-up hanky, and wiping the mucous dripping from his nose.

As he shuffled back to a chair, the woman spoke up in a crabby voice. "I was sleeping when it happened. Should've insisted he stop last night. I tried. Pays no

attention to what I say. Always wants to drive straight through. This'll teach him." She shot him a dirty look as he slumped into a chair. "If I have my way, he'll never get behind the wheel of a car again. Almost killed us! I'm driving from now on!"

She heaved a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes up. She looked like a statue we saw in a Catholic Church in New Orleans. Mary, the Mother of God.

But she didn't keep that face for very long. She looked down at my feet and frowned. "You lost your shoes! Wait right here. I'll get you a pair of mine."

She went out the swinging door and marched back in a few minutes later, carrying a pair of scuffed brown shoes with round toes and crepe soles. She crouched down like a shoe salesman, and put them on me, pushing and tugging while I watched.

"You're not Cinderella," she said with a short laugh. When she finished, my feet no longer looked like mine. The shoes looked like old lady shoes that grandmas wear when they work in the garden.

The State Farm Insurance man rented us a motel room so we could rest while he found us a car. Two days later we had a blue Plymouth, smaller, and not as new or nice as the Dodge Meadowbrook, but none of us were cut or broken. Just very, very sore.

"We needed to get going," Mother said, "We have to find a place to live before school starts."

"Should we call Dad or send him a telegram?" I asked.

"Maybe later," she answered.

* * * * *

We drove into Tucson at sunset, just as the huge orange sun was slipping behind the jagged teeth of the mountains, and the lights in the valley were springing to life like a million fireflies turned loose. The colors of the sky were shades of crimson, so vivid and strong, so unlike anything we had ever seen, that the boys and

I craned our necks in every direction. We were speechless. We didn't have words in our word banks to describe what we saw.

"God's paintbrush," Mother said softly. "I'm home."

Being in Arizona felt like waking up from a bad dream. All the anger and unhappiness we lived with so long seemed far away, back in Indiana where the leaves would soon be turning red and orange and yellow. In Tucson, there were no trees, just the curious sculpture of the ancient Saguaro cactus. The air felt light and soft instead of sticky and humid or clammy and cold. In Tucson, rain hurried in and out like it had lots of places to go and was short on time. Sometimes the wind gusted hard enough to kick up the sand so it stung my legs. But the rest of the time the weather was perfect.

Maybe it was the bright sunshine every day, and the blue, blue sky, or that Mother hardly ever got mad anymore. I felt like a completely different person. For the first time in my life, there were no Mennonites anywhere. Back in Indiana, I never put on lipstick until I was a block from the house, and I always rubbed it off at the same place on the way home. In Tucson, Mother and I both put on lipstick before we left for school.

Mother seemed more like a big sister than a mother. We discussed the boys who started to drive up to our house looking for me, wanting to take me for a drive or to the movies. For the first time I could remember, Mother was mostly happy and didn't seem to mind what I did as long as I took care of the little boys when she needed me to. She bought us both some pretty new short-sleeved dresses, with earrings to match. The earrings pinched.

"You'll get used to it," Mother said, "like wearing a bra."

I got my first ever pair of pants—western style, royal blue with pearl snaps on the pockets. She signed up for dance lessons at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio and on weekends, she went square-dancing and hiking in the mountains with new friends from her school.

At first, I didn't mind staying home to babysit. But that changed. At St. Andrew's Methodist Church, I met the pastor's son, Eddie. He was nineteen, and a musician playing in a band on local television. At first, I was thrilled when he wanted to take me out because I was only fourteen. But the longer we dated, the more I wanted to push him away. I didn't like his busy hands. And I didn't like his sloppy kisses either. Around Easter time, he begged me to go across the border to Nogales, Mexico and get married. I was definitely not interested in marriage to him, but I wanted to see what the place looked like. So we went.

By this time, Mother and I were arguing about who had to stay home on Saturday and Sunday to babysit the boys. I decided to scare her by teasing that Eddie and I got married on the day we spent across the border --just to see what she'd say. She spun around with a shocked look on her face.

"YOU WHAT?"

"Just kidding," I said lamely.

The next Saturday she was gone all day and Eddie got bored helping me with the boys and left. When she drove in after dark, her car braked to a quick stop. The car door slammed hard. Her footsteps clicked on the concrete, and the screen door jerked open.

"I spent all day in Nogales, checking to see if you got married," she said, her eyes hard and black as obsidian. "What would your father say? Just think about that."

* * * * *

When I look back on the delicious freedom of that school year with adult eyes, I see how desperate and courageous Mother must have been to pull it off. There were problems. For one thing, we moved three times. The first month the four of us lived in a small cottage on an alley in a seedy neighborhood. Several older boys brought phonograph records over so they could teach me to dance in the tiny living

room. I got in trouble for that. Then Mother caught my brothers trying to smoke with a gang of bigger boys.

The next place we moved was the guest house on a ranch at the edge of town. Mother and I slept in the bed and the boys slept on the fold down daveno. It was much better than the first place, but we moved again right after Christmas. Mother didn't say why, but I think it was because the landlord noticed the handsome Mexican who came to visit. He was the janitor at her school. We never saw him again, and she never mentioned his name.

The third place had a small kitchen, a tiny bedroom where the boys slept, and a sleeping porch with two daybeds where Mother and I slept. In March, Grandma flew out for a visit. I had to give up my bed and crowd in with the boys. I was mad. And she tried to boss us. One night when I eavesdropped, I heard her tell Mother I was spoiled and had too much freedom.

"Mildred, do you know what time Amy's getting in? She needs a curfew. And why don't you make her bring her young man in? Parking on dates leads to trouble."

Lucky for me, she went back home after a month, so I got my bed--and my freedom--back. I was sure she wouldn't tattle to Dad because she didn't like him.

* * * * *

I don't remember ever giving a thought to going back home. Dad wrote letters regularly, but Indiana seemed like a place on another planet. Why would we ever want to leave Arizona? We even forgot about asthma. Nobody wheezed or needed medicine anymore. Even though Mother and I argued sometimes about who got to go out and who had to babysit, I thought we would stay there forever. I wanted to forget about Indiana and all the Mennonite problems.

So one day in May when Mother said we were moving back to Indiana, I thought she must be joking. I whirled around to look at her. She shook her head

firmly, no. There was never any use arguing with Mother because she always won. Our white cat, Lady, had her kittens in the closet the day before we left. Mother said I had to find someone who would take all of them—and to stop bawling because things were bad enough as they were.

The memory of leaving, of the long trip back home, getting close to Goshen, turning right on West Jackson, driving down the bumpy street, and coasting to a stop by the porch of “118”, is missing in my memory. The only part I remember of going back to be a family again was what happened the first night after everyone went to bed. I refused to go up to the big open room with the boys, so Mother said, just for tonight, I could sleep on the sofa downstairs by myself.

All the talking upstairs finally stopped and the bed springs were quiet. I guessed everyone must be asleep, so now it was safe to cry. First it was just about saying goodbye to Eddie and leaving Lady. But then I started remembering all the other things I loved about Arizona. It was the nicest, warmest, prettiest place in the world. The small houses didn’t matter because we were outdoors most of the time anyway. There was wearing lipstick and the blue western pants and earrings and going to movies, and Eddie coming over all the time. He said he’d come see me but I doubted it. I really didn’t want to see him anymore anyway.

I cried about the memory of the only perfect day in my life. The time when I sat under the ramada during lunch hour at Amphi High School. I was talking to three guys from my Algebra class and we all burst out laughing. That made other people turn around to see why. Pretty soon words were sailing back and forth through the air like perfect volleys in a tennis game. No matter what I said, everything came out funny or clever or witty. When the bell rang for the next class, two guys reached out to carry my books and walk me to my next class. I looked over at the stuck-up girl who was in homecoming court. She looked jealous. I smiled at her the way a queen smiles at a princess.

I tried to freeze those moments and save them forever but I felt them fading away. Now I would never be popular again. Nobody in Indiana likes me. I can’t

have friends come to the house because it's too risky. I tried it once and begged Mother not to start a fight. I might as well have asked for the moon. So people say I'm stuck-up. Only one girl asks me over. Margie Brooks. When I ask Dad if I can go, he always says the same thing: Don't overstay your welcome. The Eleventh Commandment. What does that mean? What does it matter?

Every time I thought about leaving Tucson, I cried harder. I thought about how my life would be now. There was Hal smirking at me and glad we had to come back. He would get even. I knew Mother and Dad would start fighting any minute and I'd have to read loud to the little boys again. I should have eloped when I had the chance. Too late. When I started wishing I was dead, I must have been bawling loudly because Dad appeared in his pajamas, kneeling beside me on the floor. I don't remember Dad ever coming to my bedside before. But no matter what he said or how he patted my cover, I could no more stop sobbing than I could walk back to Arizona. Finally Mother came downstairs.

"Stop carrying on. You'll wake the whole neighborhood."

She sent Dad back upstairs, watching him leave the room before looking down at me. She picked up the wastebasket by Dad's desk and brought it to my makeshift bed, scooping up my pile of soggy Kleenex and dropping them inside. I made room for her to sit.

"We're all moving to Wisconsin," she said. "I only came back because your Dad promised to leave the College and move where there are no Mennonite schools or Mennonite churches. This won't be easy, but we have to try."

"What about Hal? I'm scared of him."

"Don't worry. Your Dad and I promise never to leave the two of you alone. Now get some sleep. Things look better in the daylight."

I was too exhausted to think about the news. My feelings had worn me out. My eyes were big and puffy all the next day and everybody left me alone for a change—even Hal. He was angry, too. He had to leave his friends behind and start his senior year with strangers.

* * * * *

Sheboygan, Wisconsin sits on the windswept western shore of Lake Michigan. The city owes its sturdy character to the ethnic majority of the residents. Ninety-eight percent of the population was German when we moved there. I could walk down Main Street and hear the guttural sounds of German spoken on the street corners, where people stopped to visit. As I saw it, beer and bratwurst and polkas pretty well summed up the place. The harsh winter weather stormed in early, with biting wind and bitter cold.

It seemed to suit the sturdy constitutions of the Germans. They stood around in sheepskin coats and puffy hats with ear flaps, talking and stomping their booted feet, and blowing white steam through their lips in short bursts. Great slabs and chunks of ice heaped up along the shoreline of Lake Michigan. The sharp sting of icy wind howled off the lake with the force of a freight train. Snow hung around until Easter, reluctant to relinquish even the ditches. Spring was red-cheeked, windy, and brief. Summer was stubborn, slow in coming, yielding at last to the equinox. That season turned out to be owned by monster mosquitoes, sucking blood from sunburned bodies, hot and sticky from the high humidity.

Ten miles away, the Kohler Company, manufacturer of bathroom fixtures, has its headquarters and factory. The year we moved there, the Union and the Kohler Company were embroiled in a long, bitter strike. Picket lines pitted friend against friend, brother against brother-in-law, even father against son. Hecklers got into fist fights, and people cursed each other long and fervently in their native tongue. Everyone seemed to be related – and reeking of beer.

The decision about what church to attend was easy. The name of one man was spoken with deep respect and reverence by everyone. Dr. Thomas Parry Jones, pastor of the First Methodist Church, was a ruddy-faced Irishman with bright blue eyes, snow white hair, and a flowing black robe with a colorful satin stole. His booming voice, with a burr and a brogue, sounded like a modern day Moses, railing

at sin as he strode down the mountain. His simple sermons were dynamite compared to the boring doctrinal messages of the Mennonite ministers I knew so well. He thundered the wrath of God from his high Gothic pulpit every Sunday morning. He scolded his parishioners, reminding them that followers of Christ must stop fighting their brothers. Scores of people crowded into the majestic stained glass sanctuary week after week. They filed out quietly, chastised and meek. Their wives blamed the beer for what happened the rest of the week.

Whispers of "Scab" were hissed in the halls of the high school where I was a sophomore and Hal was a senior. I dreaded the crowds of students milling around during lunch hour, the rumble of voices off in a corner, and the ring of shouting students that quickly formed around the fight. "Schweinehund! Arschloch!" Sporting events sometimes had to be suspended when football or basketball games ignited a violent free-for-all fight. Anger simmered in the knots of people at street corners. Brawlers spilled out of taverns and into the snowy parking lots. It felt to me like the war at home was now everywhere, all around me. Violence might erupt at any moment.

Maybe it was the meanness all around us, the gritty snow-packed streets and frozen windshield wipers, the scream of spinning tires, the chains that snapped and whapped the inside of the fender five times before the driver could stop. It could have been the ruh-ruh-ruh of motors refusing to start unless they got put to bed the night before with a headbolt heater tucked under the hood. Or the nauseous belly lurch when a car humming along at 25 mph suddenly twirled around like a weightless ballerina before jack-knifing into the nearest, deepest ditch. We fought the winter. We fought each other. The beatings of Hal in the next room were now delivered with boards from the fireplace wood bucket. I couldn't read stories loud enough in the next room to drown out the sounds of our sick family. People who had lost all sense of what they were fighting. Or fighting about.

The circumstance that finally kindled our crisis was as simple as a sentence: The guards had left their post, and the villain struck swiftly.

* * * * *

I'm in my upstairs bedroom, absorbed in *Anna Karenina*. I hear our overhead garage door rumble open, the car engine throb to life, and the car backing out and onto the driveway. The garage door rumbles again and thunks shut. An ominous sound. The house was preternaturally still. Which parent was leaving? Where are the little boys? *Where is Hal?*

I wrench open my door and run to the living room window overlooking the driveway. I see the car with Dad, Mother, and Lynn and Shell in the back seat. I rap sharply on the pane, gesticulating wildly to them from the second floor window, willing them to notice me. I see them conversing, oblivious to my plight. They've breached their promise never to leave me alone in the house with Hal. The car carries them down the driveway, pauses, then turns left onto the county road, heading for town.

My mouth feels dry. My scalp prickles. Every hair an antenna. Listening, straining to hear the slightest sound. Waiting. Raw fear roils the pit of my stomach. My legs go rubbery as I hear him creaking up the stairs from his makeshift bedroom in the basement. My heartbeat is a snare drum, beating a ragged rhythm on the inside of my rib cage. Heat roars upward from a furnace in my bowels, igniting my sensory receptors. Fight or flight. I whirl around. Too late.

Hal's eyes glitter at his prize so helpless, so close at hand. No escape. I fall to my knees, all fight flushed out of me.

He shoves me to the floor, gripping my wrists tight together with one hand while he grabs a pillow with the other. He straddles my torso, kneeling first on one arm, then the other. My lungs heave for air as he covers my face with the pillow. I flail around on the hardwood floor, struggling to break free. It's been a long time. But I remember how it feels when there's no air left to breathe, when fighting is futile. White shots of light. Blackness behind my eyes. It feels like dying.

From somewhere far off, I hear Dad yelling. Mother screaming. Dad, who prides himself on staying in control, is out of control. He lunges at Hal.

“LEAVE THE HOUSE OR I’LL CALL THE SHERIFF TO COME GET YOU!”

Hal scrambles to his feet and makes a dash for the stairs, his footsteps thudding as he runs down. Freed now, Mother helps me totter to my feet and stumble to my room, disoriented and dizzy, jerking, shivering. My teeth chatter. But no words come out.

Mother throws back my covers and helps me crawl in. I’m lying in my bed now, fully clothed, buried under a quilt. From this angle, Mother’s face looks strange, like someone I know, but don’t. She’s tender with me, saying words to soothe me.

“Both of us forgot, Honey. I’m so, so sorry.” She smooths my bangs off my face. “This will never, never happen again.” She shakes her head. Tears chase down the sides of her nose and drip off her chin onto my face. Plop. Plop. They tickle. I brush them away. She squeezes my hand and stares off into the distance, away somewhere from where we are and what’s going on. My body twitches involuntarily. I will it to stay still, trying to reinstate my meager sense of control, to reclaim ownership of my body.

Later that night, after Mother has left my room, I hear the staccato sound of angry voices in the next room. It reminds me of a war movie. I struggle to stay vigilant, reluctant to risk the coma of unconsciousness. I finally yield, too weary any longer to hold off the heavy hand of sleep.

The next morning the house is eerily quiet. I find Dad in the kitchen, wiping crumbs from the table.

“Your Mother has gone to make arrangements for Hal to live elsewhere,” he says.

I feel relieved--then instantly wet and clammy with fear. *Where is Hal?* Where is elsewhere? Is it better to have him gone? Or worse?

* * * * *

Over the next few weeks, I started to think again that eloping with Eddie, when I had the chance, might have been a good idea. He was still writing every week. But I realized I wasn't in love with him, maybe never had been. I considered my other options. I had two new boyfriends in Sheboygan, Stuart and Brian.

I met Stuart at the Methodist Church when he offered rides home from our youth group meetings. A big part of his appeal was his forest green Oldsmobile 88 convertible, and that he was a man, a soldier in uniform stationed at a nearby army base. I was fifteen and he was twenty-three. What I also liked about him was that he was a gentleman who treated me like a lady, opening my car door, and taking me to nice restaurants. Fairly soon, I sensed he was getting serious about me, but he seemed dull, too grownup for my tastes.

Brian was our landlady's son, home on leave from the Navy, waiting for orders to ship to Korea. He claimed to love me desperately and begged me to write to him. We spent hours parked with the motor idling on snowy rural roads in his new Nash.

"I bought it," he says, grinning at me, "because the front seat has this lever that turns it into a bed." He offers to demonstrate. I shake my head "no" and edge closer to the door on my side, closing my fingers tightly around the armrest.

I never wished more fervently for a curfew. I had asked once.

"You're very mature for your age," Mother said, "you don't need one."

Eddie was now in Chicago studying music, sharing an apartment with a brother who was there in medical school. When Eddie invited me for an overnight visit, I was worried about his roving hands. In his letter, there was a P. S. to Mother: "We will be chaperoned by my older brother." I wasn't so sure, but I couldn't think how to say no to him if Mother didn't. She liked him. The visit was set for March.

As things turned out, Eddie's brother was scheduled to work at the hospital all weekend. He smiled at my look of alarm.

"Don't worry. I won't take advantage of you."

After supper, we sat on the sofa and watched television for a couple of hours.

"This is what it would be like if we got married," he said, as he yawned and stretched.

He smiled like he had a secret. "I have a gift for you." He reached behind the sofa, pulled up a big package and handed it to me. I untied the bow and slipped open the wrapping paper. Our eyes met over the top of a gold satin comforter. A few minutes later, he led me to the bedroom where my suitcase sat.

"I'm giving you my bed for tonight. I'll be on the couch." He kept hanging around until I finally pushed him out. Playfully. I felt afraid. What if he got mad at me?

Eddie's middle of the night visit to my bedside, and the wrestling match that ensued, was terrifying. In fact, it was all the incentive I needed to shift my sights to Stuart. I could barely stand the sight of Eddie the next morning, though I didn't have the courage or maturity to tell him to go away for good.

Decades later, in an angry burst of blame-fixing, I lashed out at Mother for putting me in harm's way. She seemed genuinely surprised. She didn't want to believe Eddie acted that way. Now, of course, later still, I realize my blame was misplaced. The misery of Mother's daily life made her inattentive to my teenage missteps. She was struggling for her very soul. In my storm of self-righteousness, I also failed to factor in what else happened on that long ago day.

* * * * *

On the same weekend of my Chicago visit, Mother had gone to attend a two day state teachers' conference in Milwaukee. Our plan was to meet for some shopping in Milwaukee and then drive on home together.

But there was no shopping—only talking and listening. I knew when I stepped off the train and saw her smiling and waving wildly that something big had happened.

She shared the entire story as we drove back to Sheboygan. As she began, it seemed our lives hadn't changed at all—me listening, her talking to me like I was her best friend. But this time was different.

For years to come, I concocted endless “if only” stories, trying to rewrite the script of our family story. But always, there was the memory of Mother, glowing with happiness, as she relived her moment of meeting Bob. As she talked on and on, I couldn't stop staring. I was looking at a Mother I had never seen, didn't know existed. Her face was radiant with excitement, her story sprinkled with smiles and sighs.

As they would tell it for the rest of their lives, Mother and Bob were in an auditorium that held three thousand people, listening to a series of speakers. Midway through the morning, they were given a fifteen minute break to stand and stretch. Mother was on the main floor, near the platform. Bob was looking down from his seat in the balcony when he noticed an attractive woman, who happened to be looking up at him. Their eyes wandered away, reconnected, wandered briefly again, reconnected. Then locked. Both decided to look for the other in the crush of the lobby crowd at the noon recess. Both felt the moment was fated, meant to be. They stayed up all night, talking until dawn. Each was married to someone else, both were lonely and unhappy. He was a principal in a large city three hours away, a father of one son.

After the conference, Mother and Bob began a clandestine correspondence. She created business envelopes from a fictitious company to send to his office. They were stamped “Personal,” to bypass his secretary. She was careful to collect the mail at home each day. I was kept current on the developments as the romance ripened into love. But still, I was surprised when Mother said she needed me to take care of

my two brothers all summer, while she was gone. Both Mother and Bob got jobs at *The Chicago Tribune* and arranged to spend the summer living there.

At the end of that miserable winter and soggy spring in Sheboygan, Dad, as usual, left for Ohio to earn money over the summer, painting with his brother-in-law. The crisis with Hal had ended our contact with him. Mother said he was living with an old couple. So it would be just the three of us, my two little brothers and I, staying alone in Sheboygan.

The carrot Mother offered for being her summer stand-in was a train ticket to Colorado at the end of the summer. Stuart wanted me to come spend a week in his parent's home so they could get to know the person he hoped would be his future wife. Mother said if I accepted his offer of a ticket it would obligate me to marry him, something she considered unwise at my age. I would turn sixteen in July. So the deal was struck. She would pay my train fare in exchange for a summer of babysitting my brothers. Our lease was up on the other house so she rented a small furnished place for the summer. It was within walking distance of a grocery, the Dairy Queen, and the bus stop. Before she left, she bought us our first television set.

The summer went badly. For one thing, the middle-aged neighbors on both sides kept wanting to know where our parents were. I got to know one of the men because he kept showing up over the back fence when I was lying out on a blanket sunbathing. I suspect his wife put a stop to his visits. The next time I hung sheets on the line, her head appeared above the fence. "Isn't your Mother here yet? I thought you said she'd be back any day now."

I quickly discovered that being the full time mother was tough, demanding work. I scorched and warped three of the owners' copper-bottomed pans, got behind on the laundry, forgot to water the lawn, developed an addiction to watching the Tonight show, and slept late, leaving the boys unsupervised early in the morning. I spanked them with a flyswatter when they got sassy, and overlooked their impetigo so long that Mother had to rush home one weekend to scour the bathroom and sterilize their clothes.

At bedtime that night, as Mother was setting her alarm clock, she picked up the book on my night stand—The Book of Mormon— and frowned.

"What's this doing here? Where did it come from?"

"Two guys who came to the house want me to read it."

Mother's eyebrows shot up. "You let two strangers into this house! I told you never, never to let *anyone* in when I'm not here!"

"Mother, wait! I didn't let them in!"

Her face softened. "You didn't?"

"We talked outside. Out in the yard."

"Front or back?"

"Front."

She sighed and crawled between the sheets. "You can't be too careful. What will the neighbors think?"

She left very early the next morning, while it was still dark. "I have to get back to my job," she whispered. "Bye."

A small package came in the mail three days later. It was a pamphlet, *Exposing the Myths of Mormon Doctrine*. "Read this," Mother wrote on the attached note.

* * * * *

As the summer wound down, I started thinking hard about getting out, even if I had to elope with Stuart. Mother came back for a week in early August so I could go to Colorado. Stuart was the soul of courtesy and respect and his parents were gracious and kind to me. After a week in the Rocky Mountains, which reminded me of Tucson, I knew I loved the city, but I didn't know how to respond to people whose lives were so placid and peaceful. I wondered how they'd feel about me if they knew our family secrets. On the last night of my visit, Stuart and I were sitting in his convertible at a lookout above the city. He held me close after a chaste kiss.

"You'll make a wonderful mother someday."

I flushed with pride. He reached for a gift-wrapped box behind his seat and handed it to me.

The box held an expensive watch--the '50s equivalent of a promise ring.

"You're too young for a proposal, so I'll wait until you're eighteen before I buy you a diamond and propose officially."

On the long train ride back to Wisconsin, I fell into a day-long conversation with a young man on leave from the Air Force, which temporarily took my mind off the confusion about Stuart and the problems at home.

When I got back, Mother told me we were moving across town as soon as she got home. While she went back to squeeze in two more weeks in Chicago, I was supposed to clean the rental house and start packing.

Maybe it was the humid, sticky summer taking care of the little boys, or the press of too many boyfriends--Eddie refused to quit calling and mailed me a watch on my birthday. Brian had shipped out to the Orient, months ago, begging for at least a letter a week. Two weeks later, a third watch arrived, this one airmail from Japan. Mother laughed at my "loot" and teased me about being a "scalp-collector."

The real problem was that I didn't really love any of the three men who professed to love me. And I was terrified of what I feared lay ahead for our family. Earlier in the summer, Mother drove home and got the three of us, then took us back to Chicago to meet Bob. He was taller than Dad, had slicked-down black hair, and a habit of shifting a toothpick around his mouth. He smiled a lot, but he wasn't friendly. I didn't like him. Somehow all my baby-sitting and being Mother's best friend and confidant hadn't made things better. She now loved a stranger more than any of us. That was obvious when she looked at him. I never saw her look that way at Dad. Even when he patted her bottom and called her "Lovey."

Mother was mum about a future with Bob, but as bad as things were between she and Dad, I still wanted my parents to stay married. I didn't know anyone who was divorced except Hollywood movie stars. The thought was scary. What would

become of us? We were just in the way. A bother. I wanted to run away, but if I did, who would babysit the boys?

I began to feel sorry for Dad because of how Mother was tricking him. I hated her lies and how she pretended with the neighbors. I hated all the work of moving again. I dreaded their arguments starting again. I hated the school where people had fist-fights and danced polkas and drank beer. And another frigid winter was too terrible to even think about.

* * * * *

The answer to my unspoken prayers appeared in the mailbox a week before Mother was due, and the day before Dad got back from Ohio. An alumni newsletter caught my eye. It came from the Mennonite college in Kansas where we lived when I was born, Hesston College. I glanced through the pages and noted that enrollment was down for the high school academy connected with the college. The Junior and Senior classes had only forty-five and sixty students each. Small. I thought about going back to the Sheboygan high school I hated. Big. I thought about seeing the little town where I was born. What would Kansas be like, I wondered, and living in a dorm?

I thought about no more babysitting my brothers and no more fights to listen to. And I knew what I was going to do, even though there was only the slimmest of chances that I'd get to go. I hardly slept at all the night before Dad got home. Just before lunch the next day, Dad knocked at the screen door and called out the same greeting he always used to start his letters. "Cheerio!"

I had to hurry him through his getting reacquainted time with the boys so I could pitch my plan to him. When he finally finished with the boys and going through the box with the summer's mail, I pulled out the newsletter and showed him the low enrollment for the fall term. He looked puzzled.

"I didn't know you ever read this."

"Dad, I've been thinking. How would you like me to go a Mennonite school?"

He stared at me in surprise. "Why would you want to do that?"

"I thought you always wanted us to be with Mennonites. Don't you want me to go?"

He sat down at the table and looked hard at me. "Did you mention this to your mother?"

"No."

He frowned, running his hand over his head, smoothing the strands of hair over his bald spot. "She'd be very upset."

"Why can't I get to do what I want for a change? Why do I always have to do what she says? Why can't you tell her I should get to choose? It's not fair that I have to keep going places I hate. I want to go to Hesston. Would you just ask her?"

He looked more closely at the brochure, then back at me. He glanced at his watch, then walked to the telephone and picked it up.

"Operator, would you get Hesston College in Hesston, Kansas, on the line, please?"

Soon Dad was talking to someone that sounded like an old friend.

"Merle, is that you? Harold Smith here. Wisconsin. Sheboygan. The University extension here. How are you doing? How are things going at Hesston?"

"So Roy Roth is the new president? That's good. A fine man."

"Say, Merle, my daughter Amy-remember her-four year old when we left-she decided she wants to go to Hesston this fall."

"No. *This* fall. Would that be a possibility at this late date?"

When Dad smiled, I knew my chances were growing better by the minute. They talked about the train service between Wisconsin and Kansas. He said I'd be coming and he'd call back when he got the train ticket to let them know the time I'd arrive. Then he very carefully laid the receiver back in its cradle and looked over at me.

It's hard to say which of us was more surprised. We stared at each other. Then we had an awkward hug, me still sitting and him walking over and bending down. We don't do hugs in our family so it felt strange. Then Dad sat back down at the table across from me. We both knew what came next. I wasn't sure who was going to bring it up. But I thought I'd better ask before she got home.

"Are you going to tell her? Or am I?"

His brisk answer surprised me. "I will. Start packing."

In my memory, the four days before I left are all compressed into one horrifying tantrum. I see her dark eyes staring at me in shock, disbelief, then narrowing in fury, as she searches for words and a croak comes out first. Then the words rain down on me like scalding water.

"You're ungrateful, spoiled, foolish, an immature child, you have no idea what you're getting into, you'll regret this to your dying day, how can possibly know what it's like to be in that terrible place, you don't know the first thing about rules, you don't love me, after all I've done for you, you're not getting any new clothes, you're not going to take any of the clothes I let you borrow, you aren't allowed to wear make-up there, you'll be miserable, you'll be home before the month is out, Harold we can't afford this, this is a dreadful mistake, are you trying to get even, you'll regret this day, I promise you that!"

Long after I went to my room, the sound of their voices rising and falling, short bursts, long monologues, the bark of an interruption, sobbing, on and on until I finally fell asleep. When I got up the morning of the trip, I remember feeling better about the future than I'd ever felt before. I had no idea what Kansas would be like, but I knew it had to be better than what I was leaving behind.

* * * * *

The train trip from Wisconsin to Kansas took almost two days. I was supposed to eat the bologna sandwiches and bananas in my brown bag, but after I

explored the train from front to back, I couldn't resist the dining car. I loved the snowy white linens, the patina on heavy silverware, the Negro man in a starched white jacket, his black pants with a shiny stripe down the side, standing like a statue with a linen towel folded over his arm.

"Table for one, Miss?" I felt like a princess as the waiter showed me to a seat by the window, snapped open a cloth napkin and dropped it onto my lap. I glanced up just as a handsome, black-haired man in a navy suit and maroon striped tie was coming my way. He smiled and asked politely if he might be allowed to join me for breakfast. I was glad I'd spent time in the Women's Lounge, freshening my lipstick and brushing my long wavy hair. I smiled up at him. "Yes, fine with me."

"I bet you're going back to college, too," he said. "I'm headed for the University of Kansas. What's your school?" I mumbled something about a small private girl's college and changed the subject to what he did last summer. The dining car was like a movie set with scenery rolling by on both sides. As we talked across the table I knew without a doubt that this train was taking me to a wonderful new life. I felt like an actress playing a part in a movie.

When we finished our food, and the dishes were whisked away, he reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes. He tipped the pack and tapped one halfway out and offered it to me. I slid it out, watching closely as he took one for himself and put it between his lips, and returned the pack to his pocket. Fortunately, I'd made Stuart show me how to smoke once when we were on a date. He thought it was a bad idea, but finally agreed to help me. After a spell of coughing and watery eyes, I'd finally gotten the hang of how to light it. But I hadn't tried it since that time a year ago, so I wasn't sure if I even remembered how to smoke it. All I had to go on was that one time and what I'd seen in the movies.

He cupped his hand around the flame just right, but I coughed as I tried to inhale.

"Are you sure you've smoked before?"

"Not much," I admitted lamely.

"Don't inhale so hard," he suggested.

I nodded gratefully as I admired the graceful look of my hand, and the smoke curling out of the cigarette.

He lit his, blew out a stream of smoke, and grinned at me .

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Old enough to smoke," I said.

As he thanked me for sharing breakfast and walked away, I felt good about attracting a handsome older man, but I also decided never to smoke again. Cigarettes made me feel sick.

* * * * *

The train pulled into Wichita at five thirty the second morning. I spent some time in the women's lounge, primping for the occasion. I went easy on the lipstick but I had no intention of giving an inch on make-up, how I fixed my hair, or what I wore. Dad may want me to be sweet and submissive, I thought, but no one is going to tell me I can't wear lipstick.

The young man who picked me up at the station seemed mild-mannered and polite as he picked up my suitcases and hoisted my trunk into the back of his pickup. It would be months before I heard what he told his buddies at the boys' dorm after he dropped me off: "I just picked up the new girl. She's worldly. Lipstick, loose hair, and a flowered dress. And she smokes! I could smell it."

I was assigned a room and a roommate in an old three story dormitory that housed the high school girls. The dorm mother was a woman so old and tottery, I thought she must have been there since before I was born. She looked me over with a sharp eye and said the Dean of Women would talk to me later. She rang a loud buzzer with two shorts and a long. A young woman appeared in the doorway. She looked plainer than most of the Mennonites back in Indiana, almost Amish. She smiled shyly, "Hi, I'm Ruth Graber." If she disapproved of my appearance, I saw no sign of it. I smiled back. "I'm Amy Smith, and I'm glad to meet you."

"If you'll come with me, I'll take you to your room and show you around." The broad wooden stairway creaked comfortably as we walked up one flight. Girls were coming and going in the hallway. All smiled and said "Hi." Several stopped to introduce themselves and ask where I was from. Most of the girls had their long hair braided or pulled back and put up. Some wore head coverings. I had remembered to bring mine from the Indiana days when I was twelve. I wore my wavy hair in a shoulder length page boy, loose around my face. I was relieved to see some other girls did too.

The first week was a whirl of get-acquainted activities, attending classes, and getting to know the teachers. In the dining hall where we all ate, students were assigned to tables of six, guys and girls mixed. The table assignments changed every week so it wasn't long until I felt I had more friends than I imagined possible. For once, I wasn't the only new girl—many others were also new. Even the rules seemed easy to obey. Attendance at daily chapel was mandatory, girls sitting on one side, guys on the other. The loneliness of the previous year made my blossoming social life a welcome change. And the words of the college motto, "The Truth shall set you free," seemed full of hope.

The highlight of my first week was finding an old friend, Rebecca, that I'd buddied with during a week long summer camp in Michigan, when we were twelve. We squealed with delight during our introduction after chapel. The change in our appearance between twelve and sixteen hadn't kept us from eyeing each other with a "don't I know you from somewhere" look. From that moment on, we became fast friends, whispering far into the night about what happened since we last saw each other. I felt like I found a long-lost sister, something I'd always wished for. Within weeks, we included three other friends, forming a clique of five girls, all with a more worldly look, skirting the rules but still not violating them, except for my lipstick.

The school had a rule that no one could date for the first month. The rationale, they said, was to give us time to get acquainted as we took part in activities. During that first month, I seemed to be a magnet for the few "wild" guys. There

weren't many, but two of them managed to intercept me at various times on my way to somewhere. When the month was up, I went on a double-date and soon discovered that smoking was on their agenda, with elaborate measures to get rid of the smell. The cigarette I had smoked on the train proved to be a lifetime cure. I hated the smell and the taste in my mouth. I wanted nothing to do with them or the rebels on this campus who smoked them. My date was most unhappy to have a dud for a date—and so was I. When he walked me to my dorm, he mumbled something about hearing I was a wild girl who smoked. I was dumbfounded. Was it the lipstick? "Who told you that?" I demanded. The student sent to pick me up at the station. Of course.

The other guy hung around one Saturday evening to see how I felt about sneaking out to a show in a nearby town. I wasn't about to jeopardize my enrollment by such a flagrant violation of the rules. Wearing lipstick was not a secret, seeing a show was. Wiser now, I asked him if he smoked.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"No, but some people have the wrong idea. I don't smoke." It took a while for word to get around. A scant week later, my reputation suddenly became very important. The Indian summer sun was slanting low through the trees where a dozen of us were goofing around in a parking lot on the campus.

A guy who owned a motor scooter was letting all of his friends pick one of us to take for a short ride. While we were waiting for the first couple to get back, I started talking to an athletic-looking guy with a dark tan and sun-streaked hair. I noticed how popular he was, and how nicely he treated everyone, even a homely girl who stood off to the side. When it came his turn to choose, I was desperately hoping he'd choose me.

I still see him in my mind's eye, straddling the scooter, rocking side-to-side for the time it took him to decide. I recall the low throb of the engine, the heat of the hot Kansas sun shimmering off the asphalt, watching his eyes as they flicked across

the group of girls, settling finally on me, his slow grin, the nod of his head, the crook of his finger signaling me to come.

I felt like I was floating as I pulled in my circle skirt and crinoline and settled in behind him, riding side-saddle because the dress code did not allow girls to wear pants. Putting my arms around his waist and hanging on tight made me tingle with excitement. When I slipped off a few minutes later, I felt dizzy and dreamy. What in the world was happening to me? No guy had ever had such a powerful effect on me—certainly not at first sight. He wowed me from the moment we met. Compared to the crushes and romantic interludes of recent years, my feelings for this man felt like the real thing, substantial and solid.

Two weeks later, (he told me later he had to check out the wild girl smoker story) he asked me on a double date, the first of many. He was always the center of activity, the one who made everybody laugh when he did imitations of cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck. With him, my shy self was magically melting away.

One night I provided the entertainment for all four of us. I was afraid to drive—because of the accident in Utah—so I'd never been in the driver's seat. The guys decided to find a quiet back street in the little town nearby where they would teach me. Using a stick shift proved tough. The more I messed up the clutch-accelerator coordination, the funnier the three of them found it.

I didn't learn how to drive that night, but I did have the most fun I ever remember having. This, I knew beyond doubt, was how real love feels. But beyond the fun and the heady thrill of dating the most popular guy on campus, a far deeper bond existed between us. The real magnet, the gravitational force that attracted us to each other was a secret we shared with no one else. Both of us came from families where violence was a way of life. We were shocked at first, then relieved to learn of our common bond. For the first time, someone understood from experience how a home can be hell on earth. The stories we shared in our private time built a high

wall of safety for me. The loneliness that dogged me all my life was finally starting to lift.

Now that my status had segued from a newcomer to the girlfriend of a popular campus leader, my “worldly” appearance drew more attention.

The Dean of Women requested a meeting with me. My first infraction was wearing jeans to go horseback riding on a nearby farm. The fact that they were barely visible under my crinoline petticoats and shin-length circular skirt was not relevant.

“According to scripture,” she said, smiling pleasantly, “women are forbidden to wear mens’ clothing. There is a penalty for violating the rules. You’re not allowed to leave the campus for one week.”

But what she intended as punishment fell far short of her goal. I had a group of friends for the first time in my life. Being confined to the campus was fun!

Later, some of us who got to spend significant time in her small office called her Smiley, because she smiled like a Cheshire cat, even when meting out consequences.

She began our second meeting with her Bible open to the book of I Peter. She pointed to a verse on the page and read it aloud, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes, but from the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.”

She looked across her desk and smiled. “The use of lipstick makes you a painted woman—the same category as a prostitutes. They were painted women.”

I was shocked at her statement, but recovered quickly by recalling the lessons of a lifetime.

“The Bible was written nearly two thousand years ago. Times and styles have changed,” I said, a quote directly from the mouth of Mother.

“Prostitutes today are still painted women,” she said.

I smiled at the silliness. “No one would mistake me for a prostitute! Besides, I wear a head covering.”

I toyed with the idea of firing a favorite stone from Mother's slingshot. She liked to point out that Mary Magdalene, the former prostitute, was one of Jesus' closest friends. But a little voice in my head whispered, "save it for next time."

I dared to challenge her authority because of one huge factor in my favor—my Mennonite pedigree. I made sure that this Dean, my teachers, in fact anyone I met there, knew that J.B. Smith was my grandfather, and J. Harold Smith was my father. It worked. When the Dean of Women recalled being a student in Dad's Literature class back in Indiana, the equation of power shifted subtly, but slightly in my favor.

Before long, the visits to the Dean dwindled. Our last duel had ended in a draw. Her job was to uphold the rules—and I promised to study my Bible and see what God showed me about lipstick and loose hair. This time, as I headed out the door, I turned back and looked at her sitting in the pool of yellow light shed by her gooseneck lamp. Why not try to appease her?

"I haven't cut my hair in years," I said.

She smiled the Cheshire smile and purred a reply, "You have bangs. Which is cut hair."

I wanted the last word. Pausing for what I hoped was dramatic effect, I fired one last missile—another from Mother.

"If a woman's hair is her glory, as the scripture says, why is it supposed to be bound up and hidden under a head covering?"

"The glory is only for her husband to enjoy," she said, patting her tightly coiled braids.

By early December, I was feeling secure enough to risk a return visit. The challenge took place during the solemn foot-washing ritual of communion. The congregation had just finished singing four stanzas of a deeply moving hymn in a minor key. "Go to dark Gethsemane, ye that feel the Tempter's power . . ."

The women and men separated to different rooms, then paired off to wash each other's feet in a re-creation of Christ's example at the Last Supper. On a dare, I had painted my toenails a color called "Red Riot." Unfortunately, whether by

design or default, Dean Miller and her partner chose the chairs right next to ours. A “gotcha” moment. Now what?

After a week went by, I began wondering why she didn’t call me to her office for a reprimand. Was it possible she had lost interest in our debates? Didn’t she care anymore? Or was she smiling the Cheshire smile because she figured out how much I loved to challenge her authority, and wisely let me win a minor skirmish? Perhaps the point was moot. The fact was, the college needed my tuition, and I badly needed a place to be that wasn’t home.

* * * * *

When I returned home for Christmas, I carried snapshots of my new boyfriend, to show to the family. With all the clarity of a love-struck teenager, I knew absolutely that this was the man I was meant to marry. I was eager to tell my parents in person. Clearly, my letters just weren’t communicating how wonderful he was. Their response was less than enthusiastic. Dad promoted his values.

“I’ve always admired women who choose a career in nursing or teaching. They have a spirit of selflessness, an inner beauty.”

Mother studied the photo briefly, then made a droll remark, “Your boyfriend might be God’s gift to women on a Mennonite campus, but Hesston is a *very* small pond.”

Hal, who stopped by for a visit, made fun of me for mooning around. I counted the days until I could return to my new life. Living at home was a constant reminder of what my life was like before Hesston. The tension between Mother and Dad was still an undercurrent in every room, the little boys were at the ornery-boy stage of late grade school, and the weather in Wisconsin was as bad as ever. But most of all, I missed my friends. I was already making plans to get a job in Kansas for the summer, so I wouldn’t have to go home again.

The summer in Kansas, working as a nanny, was followed by a Christmas trip to Montana to meet my boyfriend's family. Then in March, an opportunity for a family visit was too good to pass up. Dad had taken a better-paying position at a university in Michigan, so my family had moved there while I was away at Hesston. I jumped at the idea of a Hesston employee from Michigan who wanted to go home and back for a long weekend. He asked around for riders who were willing to pay ten bucks for gas in exchange for a straight-through round-trip ride. It sounded like a fun idea, the sort of goofy thing that I'd never done before. I was taking life less seriously now.

Five of us wedged into a VW Bug, with the three girls in the back seat hipbone to hipbone. During the long night as we dozed or slept, the space was so cramped that when one person turned, we all turned, spoon-fashion. But the fun part was anticipating what a surprise it would be to our parents.

Mine were definitely surprised. I walked in the front door Saturday afternoon, expecting to see both parents, only to find Dad by himself, Mother missing, and my little brothers off with friends.

"Your Mother is in Indiana for the weekend, visiting Grandma," he said. "How long are you staying?"

"We have to start back early Monday morning."

"She'll want to see you, I'm sure. I'll call down and tell her you're here. She won't mind cutting her visit short. She goes so often."

In the time it took me to carry my overnight bag upstairs and freshen up, Dad came back with a pained, sick look on his face.

"She isn't there and isn't expected."

We stared at each other briefly, then looked away. The moment triggered a flood of bad memories, times I didn't want to remember, feelings I hated to feel. I wanted to be gone, to leave the place and never come back, ever again. I wanted to revel in my new life and the happiness and love I'd found. And now there was no way to avoid Mother's anger when she returned. She'd be furious at me for exposing

her lie. When I leave, I promised myself, I don't ever have to come back. I'll figure something out. Maybe get married. Other girls in my graduating class got married at eighteen. Why not me?

Sunday dragged by. Dad still tied on his apron, still whistled and sang little tunes while he prepared the meal, still reminded me to fill all the glasses with water, still read the Upper Room devotional while the food grew cold. But there was no fighting because Hal and Mother weren't there.

Toward evening we clustered in the living room where we could watch the street out front. The boys were whiny and restless and asking for Mother. I went to the kitchen for a glass of water and just then I heard her drive in and tap on the horn. Then she appeared, filling the doorway, leaning down to hug the boys. She looked startled as I walked into the room.

"What are YOU doing here?" she demanded.

I explained the trip.

"When did you get here?"

"Yesterday."

"Why didn't you call ahead? Let us know in advance?"

"It was supposed to be a surprise."

"I don't like this kind of surprise."

I apologized for not calling ahead. For the last time. My decision was firm. There would be no next time. I was never coming back.

After that visit, my relationship with Mother was strained. In any case, as I realized then, she had shifted her focus from me and my brothers to her relationship with Bob.

I held to my vow never to return home by marrying the young man I so loved. The marriage began badly because of a child on the way—a source of shock and shame to us and our parents. Back in the 1950s, people felt those feelings deeply. Girls whose boyfriends refused to marry them were often sent away to bear their child and give it up for adoption.

* * * * *

My new husband and I settled in Montana, near his home, and a thousand miles from the home I never wanted to see again. Letters from Michigan came in separate envelopes now, each parent accusing the other of heinous actions, though in the stilted prose of academia.

From Mother: "Your father is being obstinate, intractable."

From Dad: "An unthinkable event occurred today, which I am not at liberty to disclose..."

The tug of guilt for leaving sometimes roused me in the middle of the night. I crept to the bathroom to sob into a bath towel. My rumpled, sleepy husband appeared in the doorway. "What's the point of crying?" he asked. "There's nothing you can do." I cried harder. The love I hoped to find in my marriage wasn't soothing the hurt in my heart.

When I slip away the shroud and look deep into the past, guilt looms over me like a giant shadow. The part that pains me most is that while I made good my escape from our home, my two little brothers were left behind. Even now, I wander back over the events, and wonder if my staying would have changed the consequences.

* * * * *

In the divorce that inevitably came, the stakes were high – the future of four lives-- that of my mother and father, and of my two brothers, Lynn and Sheldon, twelve and nine. Before 1969, all fifty states required proof of fault--commission of a major marital offense by a guilty spouse--before granting a divorce. Custody of the children was granted to the injured party, visitation to the guilty. Mother, as the guilty party, was fighting to prove herself the better parent, in spite of the adultery. It was very rare in those years for a woman to lose her children, and Mother fought fiercely to portray Dad as an unfit parent.

The fallout of the facts was this: the judge awarded one boy to each parent, an alternative almost unheard of in the 1950s. He gave Mother "Sophie's Choice," the title of William Stryon's novel about a mother faced with an agonizing decision. In the story, Sophie has but a moment to choose which of her two children she will save from death. As it turned out, Mother had to make a choice not unlike Sophie's. Every divorcing couple with children must stand at a crossroads and make such a choice. In the division of sheets and sons and daughters and dishes, much depends upon who is doing the leaving, and who remains behind. But the consequences are borne forever. This is especially true in divorce because the choice is voluntary, unlike Sophie's, which was forced upon her by the edict of a depraved dictator. The choice for child and parent alike is a small death that foreshadows the final one waiting down the road.

If the judge's solution of breaking the boys apart was to punish Mother or persuade her to change her mind, he misjudged her. It did not deter her in the slightest. She left for Wisconsin with almost all of the furniture and her youngest son, Sheldon, a third grader. Perhaps it is the protective nature of mothers to give preference to the younger child. Lynn came home from school that day to an almost bare house and a furious father.

Mother would say later that Lynn, a sixth grader, could have come with her but he preferred to stay with his friends. Both boys and both parents detailed the events of the moving day differently to me. Can truth ever be known—except as experienced subjectively?

For several years, Lynn made the trip to Wisconsin each summer to visit Mother and Bob and Sheldon. Bob forfeited his active father role. His former wife took their son and moved back to the small, insular community where she was born. When Bob drove up for Friday night football or basketball games, the coaches left his son sitting on the bench. Community censure for the adulterous husband.

Soon the day came when Lynn refused to go for the court-ordered summer visit. He was active in sports and Scouts, and had many friends he didn't want to leave.

From that day until the day she died, many decades later, no one and nothing ever persuaded Lynn to see Mother again, though he came to her funeral.

Lynn and I talked several times about their relationship—especially during a time when Mother asked if I would intervene, one of the few favors she ever asked of me. In addition to her longing to see Lynn, he had two children – grandchildren she wanted to meet.

His decision, he insisted, was not the vindictive vow of a wounded child, at least not any more as an adult. He told me she was simply not the sort of person he cared to be around. And he also said, at the end of both of his marriages, that it was eerie to realize that living with the woman he was leaving often reminded him of living with Mother.

For five years after the first divorce, he devoted much of his free time to his children, keeping his residence close by so they could spend part of every week with him. Once again, he has resumed the same role; a challenge while running a successful business in commercial real estate.

If I were to describe him today, though I seldom see him, the words I would use are—kind, generous, caring, and deeply devoted to his two children, his church, his volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity, his visits to nursing homes, and staying the night to prepare bag lunches for the overnight guests in a homeless shelter. But I cannot speak for the people who share his daily life. I met his first wife once, his children twice, his second wife once.

* * * * *

For Sheldon, the happy boy with the banana smile, the story turned tragic. He put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger, leaving behind his wife and a year old son.

Though Mother always abhorred the idea of viewing a corpse, scorning the practice as morbid and pagan, she surprised me by asking that I go see Sheldon's remains before his memorial service. She had requested his body be dressed in his climbing clothes with a rope, a piton, and a carabiner alongside. I declined, having so fully absorbed her convictions that they became my own. I wanted to remember him as alive, smiling the Banana Boy smile.

Besides the funeral director who conducted the service, seven of us sat scattered widely among the hard oak pews. The narrow wood casket stood like a silent rebuke, on a pedestal at the front the small chapel. Dad sat alone, next to the aisle, nearest the front. Mother and Bob chose the opposite side. Midway, two young men, climbing buddies from Wisconsin, were two rows ahead of the newly minted widow and myself, on the back row.

February 1994: An essay from Mother's writing class:

Memories of every description crowd the corridors of my mind. Their recall runs the gamut of emotions from angry or bemused, through remorseful or titillating. But there are some so painful that I consigned them to a far dark corner to shield them from any possibility of sharing them with another, or desecrating holy memories that I've set apart like a sacred icon.

There are some too sore to be touched by recollection's fumbling fingers. Still, we are told by some therapists that bringing them into the open for examination may be therapeutic. On such a possibility I am basing this day's thoughts for my journal.

A novel our instructor is writing dredges up bitter memories from the years when one closet in our home overflowed with the rock climbing gear of my youngest son, who died at the age of twenty-one.

He and I were very close, particularly so in our love of mountain climbing, so that in his early years before he became a dedicated rock climber, we were drawn like magnets to scaling the

nearest hill or height. In one of his last years, the two of us went to Europe.

Our first conquest was Carrantuohill, highest in Ireland. It was like climbing a wet sponge compared to its sequel, Ben Nevis, highest in Scotland, which we descended on solid footing but in a fog. It was near midnight—which was late dusk in that far northern latitude at that time of year. From there we went to Austria.

It was soon after our return to America, in his early high school years, that he discovered rock climbing. It became the obsession of his life. Eventually he wrote several booklets for climbers which indicated various alternate ascents of many of the more spectacular climbs at Baraboo, Wisconsin. Each move was labeled with its corresponding degree of difficulty.

Shortly before he died, he and his buddy, together with a guide, scaled the north face of the Grand, which is the most difficult ascent in the Tetons of Wyoming. For this they were awarded certificates for being the youngest ever to do so.

Against such a background, he produced a secular memento of his anti-war sentiments. He was an honors student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. One dark night an unknown individual spray-painted the word PEACE on the most visible outside wall of one of the boys' dorms, at an almost inaccessible point well down from the top, but nine stories from the ground.

The culprit was never discovered, but before it was laboriously removed, he confided in me. I was totally in accord with his sentiments, though seldom his methods. We drove to Madison to see his handiwork and found that we were both appalled, but impressed.

The last time I heard from him was in connection with the man who was stranded on El Capitan for several days, refusing to be rescued. When Sheldon phoned me, he was en route to Yosemite to be on hand when the goal was achieved.

"Don't worry, Mom. He'll make it for sure."

The man did in fact make it, but my son did not. A short time later, enmeshed in an intricate web of drugs, and confused by a world scene he could not condone nor escape, he had a bad trip and opted for the ultimate escape."

In her diary Mother wrote:

The only one of my children who got to know the real me was Sheldon. Also, he was the only one of my children who truly loved me, or so it seemed to me. In the end, because he was unwilling to

share me with Bob, he destroyed himself, first by marrying Donna, and then with drugs, and then by suicide.

* * * * *

Hal, after his eviction from our home, lived in the skid row section of Sheboygan, alone in a room above a restaurant called Smilings. He took his meals below for several months. Eventually a church member heard of his situation and found an old couple who offered to take him in. Arrangements were made the following day for him to live with them.

None of us doubts today that leaving our house saved his sanity and probably his life. God gently dropped what was left of the broken boy on the warm welcome mat of those two angels, disguised as an elderly couple. They tended his bruised body and nurtured his shriveled spirit. He left their love nest a year later, mended, and able to fly.

He found schooling that challenged his mind and came out eventually, holding a doctorate. He used the degree for the following forty years, rising through the ranks to become director of his local chapter of Big Brothers, helping boys whose families couldn't cope, didn't care, or threw them away for lost.

It took three marriages for Hal to stop wooing women who sounded sweet for span of the courtship, but turned into screamers after the honeymoon. "It was like living with Mother," he said in bewilderment, after the second divorce.

The one constant in Hal's life has been dogs. He has always found a loyal friend in his dogs. Even after he joined the Navy, he continued to send money to Dad for Smokey's care. After Smokey died, Hal raised two difficult dogs. The first one was a mongrel he named Quedo. The name means easy, gentle, although in fifteen years he lived, the dog was neither. Hal's last dog was Jacques, a black Belgian sheep dog. He was a "rescue" dog, an animal who has been abused and requires a person with sufficient love and patience to override years of abuse.

Jacques, who had separation anxiety, tore things to pieces when left alone in the house. But leaving him outdoors proved to be fatal. Three years into his new life at Hal's home, he hung himself on his own chain.

The bitter rift between Mother and Hal continued for decades, with him, like Lynn, refusing to have any contact with her. Then, perhaps thirty years after he and Mother had last spoken, Hal surprised me by calling late one night. He and I kept scant touch over the years, an occasional phone call on holidays and birthdays, his three visits to my home in twenty-five years. No return visits from me. This particular night, he was calling to report a radical change in his outlook.

Hal said the remote, uncaring God he had rejected all his adult life was not who God really was. He said it took decades to efface his image of God as someone who morphed from a daytime Dr. Jekyll to the brute beast, Hyde, at night.

The God whom he found only recently was a loving, caring, forgiving God, who wanted to heal his hard core of bitterness. Hal said he'd been on his journey of discovery for only a short time when he realized he had unfinished business from childhood. With both parents. He was now pondering how to sweat through his furnace of pain and forgive both his parents. He wondered what I thought about approaching Mother to see how he might attempt to reconcile with her.

He reached me six months after a marital crisis, prompted by years of long-standing betrayal, had finally ended my marriage of twenty-five years. I was forced to face a similar need to forgive.

Hal wanted an explanation. "Why would you, the wronged, the wounded one, have to forgive the guilty parties?" he asked.

Anyone who has lived for long with the corrosive effects of anger knows the answer. I saw that the alternative of a bitter, self-pitying spirit would spoil my remaining years. Who can afford to watch endless replays of adulterous spouses and faithless friends?

I shared my experience of resisting every instinct for revenge and retribution, and instead following the wise words of Jesus: "For if you forgive men when they sin

against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." The Ann Landers version says it this way: "He who refuses to forgive, destroys the bridge he must one day cross."

I also told Hal of a life-altering moment after listening to Corrie ten Boom, the sole surviving member of a Dutch family who hid Jews from the Gestapo. She related her horrifying experience in a Nazi prison camp, and the mind-bending story of her former prison guard asking her forgiveness, after hearing her speak on the topic. As I listened, I recognized how forgiveness is not granted only for the benefit of the culprit, but also for the victim of injustice. Holding onto hate, Corrie explained, means the torment of the memory binds you to the person permanently. The way to forget is to forgive.

As I stood at the edge of the crowd, clustered around her after the service, she motioned me forward. The crowd parted to let me through.

Speaking in the strong accent of her native tongue, she held out her large hand and folded my small one inside. "You need to forgive, dear one."

I grasped the truth of it. It is we, the wronged, who are freed by the act of forgiveness—not our tormentors. To refuse to forgive is to rent mind space to Revenge and all her ugly cousins.

"In time, God will take away the pain," she assured me. "But you must first forgive."

Hal and I spoke several times more in the weeks that followed that late night phone conversation. We shared book titles and words of encouragement.

Eventually, Hal decided to send Mother a brief card acknowledging his desire to be forgiven for the hate he harbored against her. She responded in kind and asked if he might be willing to come visit her in Arizona. His reluctance was overcome when my oldest daughter, Laura, suggested accompanying him to be present as a support and buffer. This was not to Mother's liking, but she was willing to accept

any terms offered. Laura reported that the visit was awkward and sometimes tense, about what one might expect under the circumstance.

Hal never visited Mother again, but he did remember her with cards and flowers on her birthday, Mother's Day, and Christmas. She was always proud to report his gifts and correspondence.

* * * * *

After my parent's divorce, I was never certain if Dad fared better or worse than the rest of us. Except for an occasional letter, we didn't have much contact. When my husband and I moved to Wisconsin in 1960, he came to see us once. We were living in a small log cabin on a chicken farm while my husband finished college on a scholarship.

I had cleaned the house from top to bottom, baked fresh rolls and Shoofly Pie, his favorite. I put a pot roast in the oven, bathed and dressed the children in clean clothes, and waited. Late that afternoon, about the time I was starting to worry if he was lost, I heard water running in the pipes. Curious, I went out the back door and walked around to the shady side of the house where the outside faucet was located. There was Dad, cheerfully hosing down his car and running a chamois over his latest--a Pontiac Tempest he dubbed "Tempy." He always named his cars.

For a time, I had fond hopes that he might take to being a Grandpa, but instead, he had a lady friend who took all his time and attention. After much painful soul and scripture searching, he wrote identical letters to each of his children, laying out his conclusions about the scriptural prohibitions regarding divorce. He quoted a passage which he felt allowed him to consider remarriage without incurring divine condemnation. He closed the letter with a promise to jettison any plan to remarry if even one of his children should object. Apparently, none of us did. As things turned out, it might have been a kindness to do so.

Years later, shortly after he died, Dad's widow and I were going through his dresser drawers to dispose of his clothes. I lifted up a strange-looking, stark white shirt and shook it out. I stared, confused by the odd garment. Numerous straps of cloth dangled from the seams and the sleeves trailed two feet past the bottom hem.

"Your father acted crazy that night. Locked himself in the bathroom. Wouldn't let me in. Kept flushing, flushing, flushing the toilet. Wouldn't answer me either. Razor blades in the medicine cabinet, you know. God knows what he had in mind. I had to call the police. Get him committed."

She reached for the strait jacket, folded it neatly, and placed it on the donation pile for Goodwill. I was appalled by her story.

For the last six years of Dad's life, he wore an alarm on his ankle so that when he tried to escape, the nurses would rush to bar his way.

"Dr. Smith! Dr. Smith, you don't want to leave us. You're our favorite. Everybody loves you. Come on back, now, you come with me, let's get you a treat, take you down to the lounge, see if the Cubs are playing, let you visit with all your friends. There now, that's better."

From his room on the third floor of an exclusive retirement complex, he could see the house he proudly purchased for their final years, nestled in the wooded area of the circular drive.

He chafed at losing his lifelong habit of donning his smart fedora and heading out for a brisk morning walk. He paced the halls for a time, child-like now in his Chicago Cubs baseball cap. In time, he was heavily medicated, making him unsteady on his feet. Eventually, he was confined to a wheelchair and the escape attempts became moot.

He complained of being with people who were mentally ill. His involuntary confinement roused Hal to fury. He demanded a discussion with the doctor. This was denied. Only his wife had that right and she and Hal were no longer speaking.

Dad had several small strokes which affected his mind, though it's hard to say how since he had always seemed preoccupied with his inner world. He simply sat.

His only pleasure came in singing hymns at Sunday services, watching baseball, and complimenting his favorite attendants, the ones who showed him extra attention. His wife put a stop to one attractive young woman she suspected was a gold digger. "You never know," she said, "They get paid minimum wage here."

On one of my rare visits to see Dad, now on the opposite side of the country, his wife sat me down on the sofa and launched into her complaints.

"He used to just sit there, right where you're sitting. Watched TV all day. Or read, read, read. I asked him questions. Talked to him about things going on. The Sunday sermon. He refused to answer me! Not a word! He'd look up from his book. Rub the back of his neck. Rotate his head. Stare off into space! Like he didn't even hear me! You can't imagine how that makes a person feel!"

After the first year or two, there didn't seem to be any point in expressing an opinion. The time came when I could no longer tolerate her harangues, her wiping down the shower walls as soon as I left the bathroom, and brushing crumbs from the kitchen counter after I buttered my toast. I wrote her a letter and told her the date I was coming, and where I would be staying, "so as not to cause you extra work". She shot back a reply. "Harold would want you to stay here. I'll expect you."

When I stepped to the counter of the motel late that night, the manager said my room reservation had been cancelled and Mrs. Smith was waiting up for me. My day had started on the west coast at 5 A. M., the manager had no more rooms, and it was tourist season in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. I made a vow--never again--and then I caved for the last time.

The part that irritated me most was her insistence that Dad had Alzheimer's. Not because the disease is shameful--I just didn't interpret his symptoms as fitting the articles I read. Three days before his death at age 89, we went through the pages of his old yearbooks from all three Mennonite colleges. I pointed to people and he provided the names, and sometimes a brief commentary. The day before he died was Father's Day. Hal joined me there for the weekend. Lynn, who visited often, phoned. The morning after Hal left, Dad had a final stroke.

"Doc Smith waited until you came. He's been asking for you," the male attendant said. "It happens that way a lot."

I sat vigil most of the night, and then again until mid-morning when his retired minister and a close friend came to say goodbye. As the minister finished praying The Lord's Prayer, Dad drew his last breath with the "Amen."

Though my connection with Dad during all my growing years was tenuous at best, I kept making those trips across the country for two reasons. First, I felt sorry for him after I moved through some of my own pain and understood that his failures were not intended to make my life miserable.

I came to that insight while reading the exchange between Yossarian and Clevinger in the war novel, *Catch 22*. Yossarian, who hides out from the war by fleeing to the hospital, states calmly that the enemy is trying to kill him. When Clevinger yells that the enemy is trying to kill everyone, Yossarian persists, asking what difference that makes. Battles on the home front can feel that way to children. A war is underway for no discernable reason, but because they're often casualties in the war between their parents, it feels like the hostilities are directed at them. Case in point: on the day of my wedding, Mother and Dad were not speaking and would not pose for a family picture, making for awkwardness all around. I took it personally.

The second reason I kept coming back was for the Daddy-daughter stuff. By some fluke of shorted-out synapses in his aging brain, he was accessing a dusty vault holding a tarnished lock box. It had my name written all over it. In the words of Shakespeare, the results for me were "wondrous strange."

In a small leather notebook, tucked in a drawer in my bedroom, there is a page dated September 1986, with the first startling announcement:

"You are my most darling sweetheart. I love you." He was 85 years old.

A few pages later, another one reads:

"Are you married yet?"

"No, Dad."

He shakes his head in disbelief. "Impossible!"

Still another, from when we were walking down the hall greeting nurses and other residents:

"This is my daughter, Amy, from Oregon. Isn't she beautiful?"

These sudden statements were often issued with eye contact and a smile of approval, like he was seeing me for the first time. I was astounded. When I returned home after his first declaration of love, I went directly to my bedroom and the wooden treasure box, tucked under my sweaters in the tall dresser. The box holds a long time accumulation of thank-you notes and letters that especially warmed my heart. The only one from a family member was a paragraph which I had scissored from one of Dad's old letters. It stayed on my bulletin board for years, until it grew brittle and yellow. His affirmation meant a lot to me because I knew he was disappointed that I never went to college. I was self-taught. His words were:

Your interior decorating developments seem to be progressing nicely. This doubtless is in part a manifestation of your own interest and cultural concern, but also an outcropping of an artistic vein, an hereditary factor recessive in most of us but apparently dominant in you.

* * * * *

For years I concealed a major event in my life from Dad. I couldn't bear to tell him about my divorce, knowing how badly he would feel, and fearing that he would think less of me. Yet I knew he had to be told in case someone else let the fact slip in a conversation. My oldest daughter, Laura, who lived a day's drive away, offered to help him write his autobiography. He'd been struggling with the process for years. In the atmosphere of camaraderie they developed, she was able to break the news gently, five years after the fact.

* * * * *

In the last years of Mother's life, after she surprised us all with her impromptu appearance at my daughter's wedding, I saw her only one more time. I knew from her occasional letters that her husband's Alzheimers' had brought a halt to her lifelong love of travel. He refused to leave home. Several years earlier I found her a condo in a retirement community near me, after she complained the Arizona heat was becoming unbearable. She was excited when I called to tell her, but a day later, I was sorry to hear again that Bob wouldn't leave Arizona, even for the summer.

Our last visit took place while I was spending a long weekend in Las Vegas. I decided to phone Mother and see if they would like to drive up. I knew Bob loved to gamble and go to the shows, and used to do so several times a year. She said he didn't want to go, but suggested a compromise—each of us would drive two hours and meet halfway at a casino in Laughlin, Nevada.

The chilly December wind whipped tumbleweeds and litter across the barren parking lot. Mother stood just outside the west entrance, her head tucked into the collar of her teal windbreaker. I saw her continually turning in both directions, vigilant as a sentry, as she watched for my car. She hailed me with a high wave. After we exchanged a hug and hurried inside, Bob nodded a vague hello and tugged at Mother's arm. She handed him a roll of nickels, as though he was a small child being rewarded for good behavior. Mother's face looked troubled as she monitored his amble toward a slot machine.

"We'll have to watch him," she said. For the next few hours, that's mostly what we did. While we sat in a booth trying to catch up on each other's lives, Bob kept interrupting at shorter and shorter intervals. Mother gradually emptied her pockets of dozens of rolls of nickels. It was difficult not to show sadness for her plight, but it was clear that she wanted no pity—nor did she want to discuss his condition, saying only, "He hardly lets me out of his sight. He can't manage without me for more than fifteen minutes."

As I drove slowly north after what was to be our last visit, I realized how our relationship had changed. The old animosity was gone, and a feeling of warmth and reconciliation sweetened our time together.

Like my brother, Hal, I took to heart the message of forgiveness, and determined to maintain whatever relationship with Mother that I could. The best we achieved, as it turned out, was a breezy, distant sort of friendship. Letters, an occasional phone conversation. Perhaps that was miracle enough.

* * * * *

As I neared the end of my long post-funeral journey back through Mother's life, I searched her papers one more time, resurrecting more old memories and raising one troubling, unanswered question. I felt a chill as I read and reread a small sentence fragment in a letter from her youngest sister. The words were: "the unforgivable things our father did to you and Roxy." What did they refer to? Pat was the baby of the family, only a year old when her mother, Mae, returned with her daughters to Indiana. What, exactly, did she know? I found her phone number and called her, tiptoeing in cautiously, testing the waters.

"In a letter you wrote to Mother, I found a phrase that made me curious. What did you mean by "the unforgivable things our father did to you and Roxy."

She was pleased to hear from me and willing to answer my question.

"Mae," she said, "was trapped by the desperate need to support her three children. Will wouldn't. So she left the girls with him while she went out to find work. Imagine her horror when she discovered what happened when she left the house with Will in charge. I, because I was a baby, escaped our father's deviant sexual appetites.

"Your Mother suffered most" she said. "Mildred must have been nine or ten when our father rejected her in favor of Roxy. Roxy has always been a charmer. But then, she was a three year old."

"Will Risdon had mental problems." Pat said. "He was in and out of institutions after Mother and the three of us left."

"I believe your Mother survived by striving to rise above her past. But she always felt insecure, like she never measured up. She poured her heart into her students. They, in turn, idolized and adored her. And Mildred always chose to work with troublemakers, the children who showed signs of neglect or abuse."

"She tried to put the past behind her. But the burdens and scars crippled her and Roxy for life. I was more fortunate. I had the best years of our mother. I've used the good part of the past as building material for who I want to be. I left the rest in the dumpster. Slammed the lid on it. You can't change it. You just go on, looking for a way to play the hand you're dealt."

Pat's words illuminated an entry in Mother's journal:

Those 20-some years I spent with Harold, I was like a sleep-walker, existing day to day, doing what had to be done as far as the children and housework were concerned. But the real me was always encased in a cocoon, held in tightly. Now I know the real woman I am and always was, with all my imperfections, it is true, but still ME. I finally emerged inch by inch from the chrysalis, with much struggling and wrenching and labor to be free, like a butterfly in its excruciating efforts to free itself. The woman I am now is the real me who always was there, but hidden from the world, except for rare moments.

The only people during all those years who ever saw the real me were, of course, my mother, and strangely enough, the children in my classrooms. There, I was the one in control, so I could be myself. I could come vitally alive and be creative in a thousand ways...which I did. But that self was almost invisible at home, stifled by circumstances beyond my control.

* * * * *

If to know all is to forgive all, there's not much hope for any of us. We all have secrets, though perhaps far fewer than people of previous generations. I think back to the rows of white-haired mourners who came to Mother's funeral and

wonder what their secrets were, what they carry to their graves. More than we might imagine, I believe.

An old Spanish proverb says, "Take what you want, God said, and pay for it." The melancholy message holds no hope of grace or redemption, only judgment. The proverb might be used to describe the life of Mae Risdon after she married Will, and perhaps many people in the America of ninety years ago. Consequences of poor choices were not salved with welfare, therapy, medication, or no-fault divorce decrees. In those years, the onus, the stigma, the privation, and often disease, was borne stoically by the victims, often while inwardly groaning under the heavy burden of guilt.

We might consider too, that were we to read the case histories of men such as Hitler, or Lee Harvey Oswald, or Will Risdon, our eyes would widen with horror and our mouths "O" in understanding. It is only when the abused turn abuser that we recoil in horror at the evil among us.

Most of all, I'm thankful that the message of forgiveness reached me in time to mend fences with Mother, however fragile. But I will always wish I could have known the darkest secrets she never revealed to anyone, except perhaps to Bob. I judged her by the secrets I knew, never knowing the one she silently shouldered alone. In the beginning of this memoir, I boasted that I knew her better than anyone. I was wrong. The more I read of her letters, and finally learned from her sister, the more my ignorance was revealed. How little I really knew of the remarkable woman I called Mother.

All I knew was what it felt like to be her daughter, and to experience the power she had to shape our lives. But I never imagined that all the while she was fighting to free herself from the effects of a unspeakable secret that none of us knew.

AFTERWORD

The phone rang. Hal was calling from Michigan.

"I just got a call from Eastern Mennonite University. They want the Smith family to show up for their 75th anniversary celebration. They're honoring the families of all five former presidents. Wanna go?"

"Hm-m-m, I'll have to think on it. You?"

"Might be interesting. Lynn's up for it."

Three months later on a warm Virginia spring day, my brothers, two of my children, and I, filed into the back of an auditorium where the convocation was about to begin. Heads turned as the five families headed down front to our reserved seats. In the weeks before, I had tried to visualize what it would feel like to return to my roots, to be among Mennonites again after thirty-eight years. So much in my life had changed. I reflected on my last contact with the Mennonite Church.

I was a bride of eighteen, desperately fighting for our right to wear wedding bands. I was the one who insisted. After all, I *was* a married woman, and married women wear wedding rings. My husband didn't care either way. On that occasion, the turf was my husband's home church, a stark white meeting house on the wind-scoured prairie of eastern Montana. The ruddy-faced farmer, who put on the preacher plain coat for church business and Sunday sermons, was adamant. If we refused to remove the rings, we could still attend, but there would be no taking part in music, teaching, or youth work. He cleared his throat and intoned the familiar scripture: "Let not yours be the adorning of gold. . ."

We stopped attending the church my husband had gone to his entire childhood. I stood on my principles—alone as it turned out. Forfeiting his lifelong friendships was the painful part. He was now estranged from the people who undergirded his whole life. Such relationships, we discovered, are irreplaceable. We were rootless, cut off from our community of Mennonite friends. From that point on,

our road forked toward another failure of family ties, repeating the same mistakes, reaping the same results. My win, as the years revealed, was a Pyrrhic victory.

In the three days the Smith family spent reconnecting with our roots, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. In no time at all, I realized these people were my people, and I had missed them terribly. But I had changed. In the intervening years, my marriage had ended, and I hadn't been to any church for the last ten years.

The Mennonite church had changed, too. Dramatically. I noticed it immediately as we walked down the aisle to the front row. Of the hundreds of female heads, only a few white-haired women wore coverings. Most looked like mainstream America. Many had hair as short as men. Then it hit me. How would one fasten a head covering when there's not enough hair to hold pins? Radical change was clearly afoot. I decided to look up my local congregation when I got back to Oregon.

I was stunned to discover that Mennonites had long since abandoned clothing and worldliness concerns, and exchanged them for spirited debates on gender issues, divorce and remarriage, and women in the pulpit, much like mainline denominations. In a curious role reversal, I discovered my life experiences had led me to lean toward traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, my warm welcome was one of the most affirming experiences of my life. Word spread quickly, and people who remembered my parents, and even me as a baby, were eager to welcome the prodigal home.

A wonderful warm-hearted woman, eleven years my senior, became a cherished friend. On a warm summer night, after a small group meeting in their home, Mae walked me out to my car. Her tender hug released a flood of dammed-up tears. I laid my head on her ample shelf and began to cry. Her murmuring sounds were the salve that soothed my hurting heart. I wept until the reservoir went dry, and not a drop remained. Nothing was left but swollen eyes, a stuffy nose—and love.

A year into our relationship, Mae called to say that her sister from Hesston, Kansas was coming to visit, and was eager to meet me. Her sister, she said, had known my parents 50 years before.

A week later, I walked into the outstretched arms of Verle Vogt, Mother's long ago friend. She held me close, patting me as she exclaimed, "My precious little Amy, all grown up." I could have snuggled there forever, but Verle wanted to restore connections. She had lost touch with Mother and wondered where she was living.

"Arizona?" she exclaimed, "How perfect! We go to Phoenix every winter. I'll call her right away to tell her we'll be down in the fall." She chuckled, "Boy, have we got some catching up to do! If I'm 80, she must be 78. Imagine!"

I hinted that Mother's life had not been easy. Her face radiated empathy and concern. She took me out to their Fifth Wheel and brought out some scrapbooks. I was drawn to her hands as she spoke, as she pointed at pictures, as she stroked my shoulder and patted my arm. I felt like a cat arching her back in pleasure and leaning close for more.

When I left, several hours later, I knew for certain that angels walk among us. Verle Vogt bears deep scars. Her loving hands ministered tirelessly to her daughter, my age, as Lou Gerig's disease crept ever higher up her body, like an insane electrician snapping off circuits and shutting down vital functions. For two years, she also cared for her too soon-too old grandchildren, and the numbed husband. Her hands also traced the angry red scar where her own cancerous breast was severed. And like Mother, her trembling hands also stroked the lifeless marble of a beloved son's body after his death. Yes, I realized, she will touch Mother, too, heal her in a way that no one else can.

She did. I could hear the change in Mother's voice when she phoned to tell me of Verle's visit. She sounded soft, loved.

When I called Verle to tell her of Mother's sudden death, she promised meet us at the memorial service. In that bobbing sea of white heads, hers was the one I searched for.

I needn't have bothered. She found me. I felt her warm hand on my back, stroking. At the luncheon afterward, Verle and her husband, my two brothers, and my daughter and I, sat at a table by ourselves. They told Hal and me stories of when we and our parents were young. They talked about the happy times our parents had, their fine qualities, the legacy they left behind. They seeded our landfill with lilacs.

As we got up to leave, Verle drew me aside. "I'm glad you brought your Mother's portrait to her Memorial service," she said. "She was a pretty woman. I think she would have liked that." Then she patted my arm and hugged me good-bye.

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