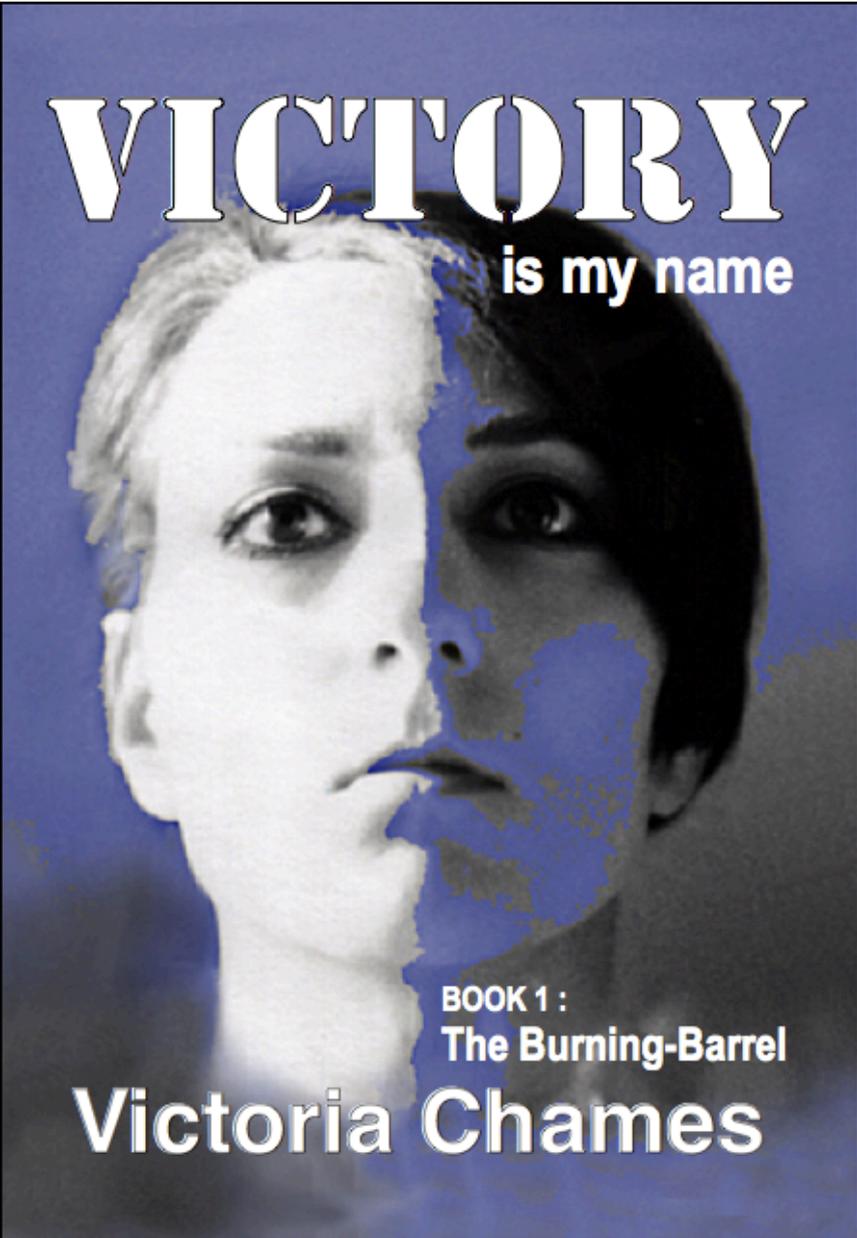


VICTORY



is my name

BOOK 1 :

The Burning-Barrel

Victoria Chames

Girls can.

More than just another story of overcoming, *Victory* is about unlearning the untruths we are taught as children "for our own good" that forbid us to be who we are and hold us hostage for life unless we find our own way to the truth.

Once you know the truth, it really can make you free.

"Victory is bitter and sweet, tragic and joyful, sometimes brutally real, but always stubbornly hopeful. Like a Huckleberry Finn born female, Vickie gets a rough start and grows up complicated, but never quite loses her "maybe I can" spirit. She achieves some unlikely and extraordinary things, not by luck, but by grit and heart and a remarkably different kind of courage. It's not about being a hero, it's about taking the life you get, and making it count."

*Book One of
a trilogy series.*



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VICTORY

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BOOK ONE: The Burning Barrel

Victoria Chames

Other books by this author:

Inchworms: Poems, Sketches, and Stories

More About This: Metaphysical Thoughts & Questions of the Heart

A Space Between Rains: Love Poems About Endings and Beginnings

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*For Jessie Baine Blakeman Long Vaughn,
the most cantankerous woman on earth,
who saved my life by loving me
when nobody else had the time.*

*My Kentucky grandmother,
1876-1952.*

Introduction

Victory Is My Name is about unlearning the untruths we're taught as children "for our own good" that forbid us to be who we are, and hold us hostage for life unless we find our own way to the truth.

The stories here are not about my life-history as much as they are about the things I learned, rightly or wrongly from living it, and the people who taught me. I needed most to write about my birthmother Ann, not her life, of which I know very little, but who this woman was whose body gave birth to mine, whom I never really knew and who never knew me.

Whatever happens later in anyone's life, it is our earliest learnings that set the deepest roots and become our core beliefs about how life works, and who we are supposed to be. I was taught, one way or another, that I was not good enough, not pretty enough, that I could never have what I wanted and I shouldn't even want that, because I was a girl. I knew it was unfair, and yet, for much of my life I would judge myself, or feel judged, as "not as good." But inside me, stubbornly, defiantly, there was a rebellious spirit that would not believe it.

The primary work of childhood is learning, but it turns out to be a lifelong work, and because human beings create the life we have, as best we can, based on our core beliefs, we often unknowingly create a life we don't want. So the deepest task of adulthood may be to uncover these untruths that we accepted without question when we were very young, and to discover what we are still believing, unaware. When we can look at it, we can determine what is true. We can begin to replace what's not true with truths that *fit us*, and stop the struggle to fit ourselves into someone else's template of what we ought to be. We can claim the

full right to change, to heal, and to become who and what we genuinely are.

My birthmother Ann was never able to rise above the damaged sense of self she learned in her early life, never learned to value herself or to trust and respect her own wants, needs, and feelings. She deserved much more in life than she got, but like so many of us she didn't believe she had the right. And so her life seemed to prove that. Again and again she received what she believed life would send: never enough, never safety, never a lasting love. She unknowingly taught that to me, and I would make some of the same mistakes she made.

It took decades of mistakes and denials, adventures, and hard lessons, but the time did come when I was forced to confront my inherited untruths in real-time, and somehow scabble up enough ragged courage to stand my ground and claim my Self. My birthmother never did.

Life would take us in different directions beyond our own will or understanding. I would receive an act of grace that gave me chances she never had, but the events of both our lives would echo a silent history of abandonments of mothers and daughters going back three generations that I never knew of until just before she died.

We left each other's lives when I was thirteen, and I spent most of my youth believing I had safely forgotten her, and denying my woundedness. Still, so much personal "unfinished business" remained. This book insisted on returning to it, facing it, and finishing it. This is the story of my grandmother, my birth-mother, my true Mother, and myself. I know more about my part of the story than theirs, and memory must always be imperfect and incomplete, but what I remember, I will share with you honestly, and hope to do justice to us all.

*"What matters is not what's in the book,
but what unfolds in your mind as you read the book."
– from Celebrate Yourself, Eric Butterworth*



Chapter 1: Killing Doves

Before he got the gun, my brother could only torment me and other small creatures with rocks and slingshots and spit-wads, he couldn't really kill anything. Nothing big, anyway. Tommy liked to squish fat green caterpillars between two bricks, but that didn't need any skill. With the gun he figured he was some kind of big deal. It was a Daisy Special, pump-action BB rifle. I don't know where he got it from, if he stole it or what. Mama sure didn't have any money for stuff like that.

I was eleven going on twelve and Tommy was nearly fourteen and we'd just moved to East Side Avenue. That was when Mama and Daddy sort of stopped talking to each other. Mama got a new waitress job at the Diamond Horseshoe Bar and Grill. I don't think she liked it half as much as her old job at Mr. Joe Yee's Chinese and American Restaurant, but she said it paid more tips.

Tommy loved that BB-gun. He practiced shooting it every day and pretty soon he was a dead-eye shot. He shot at whiskey bottles and beer cans in the alley, and when he got pretty good, he started shooting birds. Not sparrows, they were too small to hit, but red cardinals, bluejays, and mockingbirds. I hated that he killed the pretty ones, but the mockingbirds even more, because they were my favorites. Mockingbirds are not beautiful, they're plain brownish-gray, but they're smart. They know how to imitate the songs of other birds, and they're the state bird of Texas.

Whenever Tommy shot one he would bring its little limp body and show it to me and try to make me cry. I would steel myself and pretend I didn't care, determined not to flinch. I held out for as long as I could, but at some point he would suddenly thrust the thing in my face and I would jump back and shriek. Then he busted out laughing and swaggered off, snickering over

his shoulder about what a big sissy I was.

One time Tommy and his buddies shot a whole bunch of doves. Mourning doves. There were lots of them, all over the city of Dallas, like pigeons in New York I guess. Grownups thought they were a nuisance, but I thought they were sweet and I loved them. Every evening at twilight they would sit all in a row along the edges of the rooftops, cooing softly while the sun was going down.

The boys killed them with their BB guns. They must have just picked them off from the roofs like a shooting gallery. Tommy was so proud of himself, like he was a Great White Hunter in a Tarzan movie. He brought home his share of the kill, the poor little things, for Granny to cook, and she did, too.

My Granny had lived a long time. She grew up in Kentucky back in the days when people killed things to eat. When I was little and we lived in North Carolina, it was Granny that wrung the neck of every Sunday-dinner rooster. Nobody else had the nerve to do it. She knew how to skin rabbits too, and cook possum. I don't think I ever ate any possum but I'm not sure. My brother didn't usually kill things to eat though. Mostly he did it for target practice.

Granny made Tommy pluck all the feathers off the little doves, leaving their sad pale bodies all naked and ashamed. Then she slit them open and cleaned out their tiny insides and washed and prepared them for the oven, just like all of this was okay. I watched from a distance. I used to watch Daddy clean the Sunday-dinner chickens when I was little, but now that I was eleven, I knew too much. I knew that the pretty little doves had got their innocent life taken from them for no reason. To eat them was so awful I couldn't even think of it.

Granny roasted them in the oven. It didn't take very long.

When she brought them to the table, the dozen or so of them didn't even fill up the plate. They looked like a heap of tiny corpses, tossed into a pile like in the movies about World War II, the big war that was going on when I was born. There was no way on earth I was going to eat them, and all of a sudden I felt so sad for them. My face got hot and my eyes filled up with tears and I couldn't even say anything. I stood there for a minute and then I turned around and walked out of the kitchen, and out of the house.

Granny didn't try to stop me. She knew I was different from my brother, and how things that made me cry made him laugh. As I went down the stairs, he jeered and laughed louder to make sure I'd hear him all the way to the bottom.

Outside, I kept on walking. I needed to get away from there until it was over. That meant I probably wouldn't get any dinner. There was a hungry ache in my stomach and a sad ache in my chest and another ache in my throat where it was clenched to keep from crying. The tears came anyway and flooded down my cheeks. I wiped my face with both hands and kept on walking. I didn't care if anybody saw me.

The tears made the blue of sky and the green of summer blur together at the edges like watercolors. It didn't matter, I didn't need to see, I knew the way. I walked the ten blocks to Randall park and climbed up my favorite easy tree.

I lay down on my stomach on a smooth broad branch. For a long long time I watched the twilight drop down into the tops of the trees along the park's dark horizon, and I just let the tears flow as much as they wanted to. Nobody could see me now. Nobody could laugh at me.

When the sky was completely dark and the first stars began to come out, there was nothing to do but go back home. To tell the truth, I felt more at home, more safe and sheltered in my tree. But

I was practical; I knew there was peanut butter and soft white bread in the pantry, and I knew I needed to eat.

Tommy was two years older and bigger than me and he had always picked on me for as long as I could remember. Since I was born, I guess. He would punch me, poke me, stick me with pins, burn me with matches, give me the one-knuckle shoulder-punch or the wrist indian-burn, or shoot me with his slingshot or rubber bands or whatever was handy, any time he felt like it. He thought that was really funny. Usually he favored injuries that wouldn't show a bruise until the next day, so if I told Mama, he would just say, "She's crazy! I never even touched her!" And when he got caught with the weapon in his hand, he would say it was an accident. That was a lie, but he would smile his special smile for Mama with his face like an angel, and look so earnest with his dark Greek eyes like Daddy's, and she fell for it every time.

"He didn't mean to, honey, and he's sorry."

She always said that. I tried to tell her, "Yes he did! He did mean to!" But she always believed him instead of me, and there he was. right behind her, sticking his tongue out at me, grinning because he got away with it again.

Most of the time he did it when nobody was near by, and when I yelled, "STOP IT!" Mama or Daddy would say,

"Tommy, quit picking on your sister." Like that was gonna do any good. He kept right on doing it, and I kept on saying "Stop it!" and pretty soon Daddy would holler:

"If I hear one more peep out of either one of you, I'm gonna come back there and whip the tar out of the both of you." He never did, but that left me at Tommy's mercy, and he didn't have any mercy.

I made myself a promise: *I will never be like him, no matter what! Boys are mean, and being stronger than somebody else makes mean people even meaner. I will never be like that.*

Sometimes he made me go with him to the freight-train gravel yards late at night, mostly for somebody to show off to. We hid in the shadows near the access road and he chucked small pebbles at passing cars. With a quick whip of his arm, he could crack a windshield with the tiniest stone, so the driver would think it had been kicked up from the road. They never saw us hiding there in the dark. I had to stand there and wait until he decided to go home. I could outrun him, but I couldn't outrun his pitching arm, which was deadly-accurate, especially with small stones or bits of broken glass, and when they hit, they stung. The times I got in trouble were usually times like that, when he made me go along with him on something I knew we shouldn't do.

I think my brother had a natural instinct for hunting. In Dallas where we lived, there wasn't much to hunt, but still he constantly practiced his skills. One day he was doing a jungle-warrior thing. He made himself a javelin-spear by sharpening the end of an old rake-handle. He was throwing it at made-up targets around the yard, and he decided to see how close he could come to the little blanket on the grass where I was playing. His first throw spiked the spear right through a corner of the blanket, pinning it to the ground.

I hollered "STOP it!" He laughed at me.

He threw it a few more times, and it dug up little chunks of dirt and grass around me. He was getting pretty cocky. The next time he threw it, it stabbed right into my barefoot big toe. The spear balanced there, sticking up in the air for a long second or two, then it fell over with a clunk and a lot of dark blood gushed

out of my toe. I screamed.

Tommy grabbed my arm and yanked me through the yard, up the stairs and through the kitchen to the bathroom, leaving a trail of little blood drops all along the way. He put my foot into the bathroom sink and ran the hot water on it. That hurt like heck, and I screamed again. The hole in my toe was bleeding all over the place and the hot water made it hurt worse and bleed more. I was yelling and Mama heard it and came to see what was going on. When she looked in through the bathroom door, the sink was almost overflowing with the blood and water mixed together and it looked just like a sinkfull of blood. Mama's face went white as candle-wax and she staggered back for a second. I thought she was going to faint, but she didn't. Tommy started right in, talking fast:

"It was an accident! I didn't mean to do it... it was just... I was just practicing... It was an accident."

This time the "accident" required a trip to the emergency room and stitches, something Mama couldn't afford. But since it was an accident, as usual he didn't get punished. Maybe it *was* an accident this time; it could have been, I guess. Tommy always loved to take chances, push his luck. That's just the way he was.

My toe hurt something horrible. The ache went all the way up my leg and it lasted for a week. I had to keep my foot propped up so the throbbing wouldn't be so bad, but I got to stay home from school for two weeks. The rake-handle spear had cut through the tendon to the bone, and they had to sew some inside-things back together too. It healed up eventually with a diamond-shaped scar. After that, the toe was a little bit crooked, but that didn't slow me down for long.

At eleven I had legs like a grasshopper but I could run like a racehorse. When I ran, I pretended I was beautiful like Man O'

War, the magnificent thoroughbred racehorse. In my ordinary self I was small and weak and picked-on, but when I ran, I was fast and bold and splendid. Every time I ran, I went to that place in my mind where I was swift and strong, *and I became swift and strong*. And then absolutely nothing in the world could catch me. I was blazing and brilliant when I ran. That was my strength; that was my glory: *I could run*.

I ran through the neighborhood like a steeplechase horse in a British fox hunt, leaping gracefully over the fences and hedges in people's yards. I never felt so alive as I did when I was running, and I ran everywhere, barefoot, all summer long.

One time when I was playing at the park, a storm came up. All of a sudden it started getting dark, and thick woolly grey clouds came rolling across the sky, just like pulling up the blankets over your head. A storm was coming. I figured I'd better go home.

In a few minutes the wind was whipping up really fierce and the trees were tossing and thrashing and there was a strange wonderful feeling in the air, like it was crackling with electricity. As I headed home, the raindrops started. Just a few at first, but big ones, plopped onto my forehead. It was a long way, so I decided to run.

The rain came down harder, and soon there were torrents of it, thumping on the top of my head, splattering down my face and pelting my shoulders. I just kept on running. Pretty soon streams of water were rushing through the gutters. I went splashing through them pretending like I was a wild Mustang crossing raging rivers. The water felt cool and delicious on my bare feet.

Running in the rain was so joyful I could hardly stand it! It was like I didn't weigh anything, like I could almost fly. All around me the thunder boomed and rumbled, and bright threads of lightning streaked across the sky. The rain kept pouring down and

spilling all of itself onto the earth like a huge gift. Everything smelled fresh and clean and the air was so alive. I ran through it all, and I felt so beautiful and wild.

I am the storm! I am the wind! And nothing in the world can catch me!

And I ran all the way home without stopping.

Chapter 2: Greensboro

I got born in the ugliest month of the year on a Tuesday in the dark before dawn, and I nearly died doing it.

“You were what they called a blue-baby,” Mama said. I asked her, “How could I be blue?” and she told me.

“Well, when you were born, you came sooner than we expected. With Granny’s stroke and all, I guess I lost track of the due date. I felt the baby coming, just like when your brother was born. It was the dead of winter and bitter cold, and the time came.”

“I called the doctor’s office and the nurse told me to go to the hospital and he would meet me there, but something happened and he didn’t get there. You started being born and he wasn’t there yet.”

I was seven when she told me the story. I didn’t understand much of it, but I never forgot. One thing I learned was: being born blue is not a good thing.

“The doctor was late,” Mama said, “so he called the hospital and told the nurses to hold my legs together so the baby wouldn’t come, because if the baby was born before he got there, he wouldn’t get the fee. So the two nurses did as they were told.”

What? I was baffled at this.

“I fought ‘em,” Mama told me. “I wasn’t going to let them do that – I knew it was time.” She said the nurses tied her wrists to the table with leather straps and then they tried to strap her legs together.

“I’m not a mean person,” she said, “but I fought that time. I was able to yank one leg free, and I kicked one of the nurses in the head.”

I couldn't even imagine that.

"They both backed up then, and you were born," she said. "When your little body came out, it was all splotchy and it was an unnatural grayish-blue color."

I tried to picture that. It was ugly.

"The baby didn't cry, and it didn't seem to be moving at all. I knew something was wrong. I remembered how much Tommy had kicked and hollered when he was born. The nurses snatched the baby and took it away to another room. I didn't even get to see if it was a boy or a girl. All I saw was that it was not pink and wiggling, and it was not making any sound. The nurses snatched it up and took it away, they just rushed out and left me there. I was so scared. I was afraid the baby was dead."

What? I was this ugly splotchy blue-color thing. I was not right. I was not like a I should be, and she was calling me It.

She said when the doctor finally got there he was mad. He snapped at the nurses. "Clean her up!"

"I could smell the whiskey on his breath," Mama said, "even over the smell of blood and disinfectant in the delivery room. Then he just walked out," she said, "and the nurses went too. They all left me there. I was still bleeding from the birth, and the afterbirth was on the delivery table."

I didn't understand. I didn't know having a baby made you bleed, but before I could ask, she went on with the story.

"When the nurses came back, they were rough with me when they washed up the birth blood. They took me in a wheelchair to a room down the hall and put me in a bed."

She said she kept asking everybody, "Where is my baby? Is it okay?" And the nurses just answered, "The doctor will be in shortly" and then they left again.

“I could hear the voices of the nurses and the doctor down the hallway, but it sounded like they were miles away. I felt so weak, like I was floating underwater. I tried to get up, but I couldn’t. Finally the nurses came back. They pumped my breasts, and they gave me a shot to make me sleep.”

I thought, *She must have been really scared, because she was bleeding, and because of the ugly blue thing that came instead of the baby she expected.*

“I was knocked out,” she said, “so I don’t know how long it was before they finally brought the baby to me. You were pink, and you were crying. I thanked God when I heard the baby crying.”

I might have been a pale pink, Mama didn’t say. But I was no longer blue, and I was alive. I was born a darkhorse she said, I came into this world against the odds right from the start, but I made it.

If I was a boy, they were going to name me Peter after Daddy’s younger brother, or Jessie after Granny if I was a girl. Then Granny had the stroke, and I guess they thought her name might be bad luck, so I got the name of Daddy’s father’s sister who died at age eighteen from a broken heart because her father, my Daddy’s grandfather, would not let her marry the young army officer she fell in love with. That was way back, in Greece. Ever since then, her big-brother (my Daddy's father) wanted to name one of his children after the sister he loved, but he never did.

He left Greece and ran away to the Merchant Marine, and came to America and married Sophia, my Yaiya. She gave him four sons including my Daddy, but no daughters. I was the first female grandchild, so the name at last chosen for me was the name that had been waiting for two generations: Victoria.

When I got old enough to understand, Yaya told me, "There is a power in names." She said, "Your name is Victoria, this is a strong name. It means one who conquers. Your great aunt, you're named after her, she was beautiful but she was not strong. You must be strong." Yaiya's name was Sophia. It means wisdom.

My first weeks in the world, a colored lady named Hattie took care of me. I saw a picture of her once. She was very old and skinny and wrinkled as a prune, but she had the face of a saint. In the picture she is sitting in a rocking chair, holding a tiny bundle of me in her arms. Mama said she always had to scold her for spoiling me.

Later there were babysitters to watch me and Tommy during the day, mostly young girls who would work for very low wages because there were so few jobs for colored girls except in the tobacco processing plants down by Winston-Salem.

"Tommy was a good baby," Mama said. "He was always happy and he hardly ever cried."

"I was a good baby too, wasn't I?"

"Well, you were a nervous baby" she said, "You cried a lot. You threw your bottle out of the crib, so we used a Coca Cola bottle instead of a baby bottle so it wouldn't break."

Tommy was two years old when I was born, and he didn't like me one bit. I was a stranger in his space and I was not welcome at all in his world.

I had been born fighting for my life from the first minute I hit light and air, and then four days later, my brother tried to kill me. He dumped a whole can of talcum powder into my face, my eyes, and down my throat. Somebody heard me choking and came just in time. They never scolded him for that. Years later Mama would still laugh and tell about it for a cute little story:

"He must have seen me powdering her bottom when I changed her diaper, and he was just trying to help," she'd say, all proudly, like he was such a good boy. But he was not trying to help. I learned early that the world was a dangerous place where I was an unwelcome intruder.

When we were toddlers, my brother was the pretty one, Daddy's "chip off the old block" and Mama's precious angel. He was rambunctious and he had dark eyes and dark hair like Daddy. I was different, quiet and shy. I had Daddy's brown eyes, but I had blonde hair. I wasn't as pretty as Tommy and I didn't look much like Daddy. I looked like Mama.

Granny's stroke had made her blind and deaf and crippled. At first she couldn't even talk, but I was a little baby so I didn't know it. By the time I was two years old, she had got her eyesight back and she could talk, but she was deaf for the rest of her life. She could walk again, not as good, but she was still the first one that got up in the morning and started the fire in the little pot-bellied stove in the corner of the kitchen. Then she came up and got me and brought me downstairs. When the rest of the family came down too, Daddy sat at the kitchen table and read the newspaper. Mama and Tommy were somewhere nearby; usually Tommy was making a lot of noise. I ate my Cream of Wheat. Granny put butter and milk and sugar in it for me.

I remember a lot about Greensboro. Our house was at the top of the hill near the courthouse. Our street had a half-dozen houses on both sides of it, then it ended at Mr. Jones's turnip field. Becky and Jasper Jones were the same ages as Tommy and me.

I remember the summer evenings, and lightning bugs blinking in the dark, and the uneven wooden boards of our front porch that creaked with the rhythm of granny's rocking chair

while she rocked me to sleep. From Granny's lap I looked up at the stars and the pale mysterious moon, and I felt so safe and happy. Then the next thing I knew, I woke up in my crib and it was morning.

I didn't know how to be afraid of anything. I had Granny and Mama and Daddy. They were always there, and I thought they always would be. The sun shone down so lovely and warm on the dust and crabgrass of the chicken yard and the smooth worn boards of the back porch, and that was beautiful enough for me.

I remember my sweet little dog Gingersnaps. I loved her so much. She was a Manchester terrier, brown and black. She was very shy, and she had the prettiest brown eyes. She followed me everywhere I went. Sometimes Tommy hit her in the face and pulled her ears and made her cry, so she always ran away from him and tried to hide behind the kitchen door. She was my little friend and she was always right there next to me every minute.

Then one day when I woke up she was gone. I looked all over for her. Mama saw me looking and she knew she had to tell me.

"I'm sorry Vickie, but Gingersnaps had to go away. She growled at Tommy, and we were afraid she might bite him."

"No! She wouldn't! She never would do that!" But it was no use. I asked Mama, "Where did she go? When is she coming back?" and my eyes were filling up with tears.

Mama said "She's not coming back, honey. She went to live on a farm where there are other dogs and cats she can play with, and she'll be happier there."

"No!" I said, "*No she won't!*" But I could feel that little ache in my chest that told me it was too late.



Daddy worked for the Greensboro Police Department on the night patrol. In the day he was always working at his drafting table in the living room. He was studying something called Aeronautical Engineering.

“It’s the future for America,” he said.

I wandered around the living room behaving myself. I liked to play with the telephone. It had a round flat wheel on the front of it with holes so you could put your finger into them and spin the dial around. I did this over and over because it made a nice little clickety noise I liked.

Sometimes the radio was on. I learned the songs and sang along. There was one that went “Round and round Hitler’s grave, round and round we go... Gonna lay that fella down so he don’t get up no more.” I didn’t know what that meant, but it had a cheerful tune, so I sang it sometimes when I was playing out back in the chicken yard.

It was wartime and the president was Mr. FDR. Daddy said it was hard-times, and that's why people like us had chickens in their backyards, so they could sell the eggs and some of the chickens for money. That winter Daddy had built a chicken coop out of scrap lumber and tar-paper and finally one day when it was almost summer, he brought home a big cardboard box full of sweet fuzzy yellow baby chicks. He put them into the chicken coop in the part where some light bulbs were, to keep them warm he said. They crowded together, all “cheep, cheep, cheeping.” I think they were scared. They liked it though, and before too long they grew and started to look like real chickens, only smaller. When they got their grownup feathers, some of them were brown and some of them were white. Tommy chased them around the yard, yelling and poking a stick at them to make them flap and flutter like crazy.

Sunday was absolutely my favorite day. Everybody was

there: Mama and Daddy and me and Tommy and Granny. Everything was happy and the house was full of us.

About the middle of the morning, Granny went out to the back yard and sat on the porch stoop until a likely-looking young chicken came scratching and pecking nearby. Most times a rooster, because she said, “You don’t need that many roosters.” Then she grabbed him quick by the neck. If I was outside, I knew it was time for me to come in. From the kitchen I could hear a squawk and then a clunk. She had wrung the neck of the unlucky rooster to kill it, and then chopped its head off with a cleaver, Tommy said. Nobody else had the gumption to do that part, only Granny. Each time the deed was done, Tommy looked at her with a mixture of fear and awe.

Then she hung the rooster upside down from the porch rail so the blood could drain into a bucket while she pulled off all the feathers. After that she cleaned up everything, washed the bucket and the cleaver with the garden hose, and then she brought the chicken inside.

I never saw that first part, or the chicken either until it was featherless, so my mind didn’t make the connection that the chickens in the yard were the same ones on the table for which we gave thanks at Sunday dinner.

Daddy's part was next. I watched it all from my perch on the windowsill next to the sink drainboard. First he took all the innards out. He put his hand up the chicken’s bottom like a magician and pulled out all kinds of stuff. It had never occurred to me before that there might be *things inside of things*.

After the chicken was cleaned and cut up in pieces, Mama powdered it with lots of flour and salt and pepper and then fried it up crisp and brown in crackling spattering hot grease in the big black iron skillet. Then with all the rest of it: mashed potatoes with

lots of giblet gravy, baby carrots, collard greens, buttermilk biscuits, and iced tea, Sunday dinner was a master piece, Daddy said.

The rest of the week sometimes Granny cooked and sometimes Louise did. She was a colored girl, fifteen years old. She did the washing and ironing and took care of Tommy and me during the day. She seemed like a grown-up to us, only more fun. We loved her; she read us comic books and secretly gave us potato chips and chewing gum and other treats we were not supposed to have.

She was a chubby girl and she had big buzooms. One time when Mama and Daddy were gone, Tommy asked her if she would show him one of her titties. She laughed, and when Louise laughed, every bit of her bounced up and down. It made you laugh too. She reached inside of her dress and pulled out one of her big brown buzooms so Tommy could see it. He squealed and laughed and jumped up and down. Louise was laughing at him, and pretty soon I was laughing too, and then we all were laughing. It was so silly. We never did tell Mama and Daddy about that.

Louise made wonderful desserts for us, molasses pecan pies, lemon meringue pies that made your lips curl just to think about it, and wild blackberry pies with basket-weave crust on top. Then while we all ate them, she went outside and sat on the back porch in the chicken yard. She couldn't eat any of that kind of food because she had the sugar-diabeet-tees. She sat there all by herself on the porch every time and cried. It made me sad. I wondered what this thing was, the sugar-diabeet-tees. It seemed so not-fair.

My Daddy was a policeman and I was proud because policemen help little kids who are lost and bring them home again, and they also catch bad people and put them in jail. Every evening

before I went to bed, Daddy put on his uniform and his badge. My Daddy was a hero, and I wanted to be just like him. I had seen cowboy movies where the sheriff had a silver badge and he brought justice to the small town where he lived. My Daddy had a badge too.

Daddy had a pair of beautiful cowboy boots. They were black leather with white eagles on the front. He never wore them; they were in the back of the closet. When I found them one day, I stuck my legs into them and clomped around the house pretending I was a cowboy. I kept that up for a week.

Then one day Daddy brought home a pair of cowboy boots for Tommy, just his size. They didn't have eagles on them, but they were *cowboy boots!* I was so excited, and I said, "Ohhhh - Do I get to have cowboy boots too?"

"No, sweetheart," and Daddy chuckled. "Cowboy boots are for boys."

Mama must have seen the puzzlement on my face because she said, "Vickie honey, you can have ballet slippers. Wouldn't you like to have some pretty ballet slippers?"

I stared at her. *What?* I looked at Daddy, and then I looked back at Mama again.

"No!" I said. "I don't want that! I want cowboy boots!"

Nobody seemed to notice what a mean thing that was, to make me have ballet slippers instead of wonderful cowboy boots! Tommy didn't even care about cowboy boots, except because it made him specialer than me, because he got to have what I wanted and I couldn't have it.

I begged for cowboy boots too, but it was no use. I was so disappointed I started to cry, but that didn't do any good either. I said, "Please, please!" and I kept asking them why Tommy got to

have something I wanted so much, but I couldn't have it too. The only answer I ever got was "Because, honey, cowboy boots are for boys."

Up until then, I didn't know I was somebody less than my brother. I didn't know I couldn't have what I wanted. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to want what I wanted, because I was a girl.

August came. It was a Sunday. I was wearing my green-and-white-checked dress that had a white ruffled pinafore to go with it. It was my best dress-up dress. I felt like the prettiest little girl in the world. I knew I wasn't, but that didn't matter, *I felt like I was*.

It was hot and the front door was open for the breeze. All of a sudden there was a big commotion outside. I went to the screen door to look out and I could see people coming out of their houses across the street, shouting and looking toward our house and the vacant lot next door. Mama came hurrying into the living room and rushed right past me, out the door. I wanted to go too, but Granny grabbed my arm and pulled me back. She sat me down on the couch and brought me my crayons and a coloring book, so I did that. I could hear people yelling outside and cars on the street. Granny kept going to look out the front door, but every time I got up to look too, she sat me right back down again. I got curiouser and curiouser, especially when all the sirens came.

After a long time, Mama came back. She picked me up and carried me outside. When I saw it, I started to cry.

The big empty field next door where I loved to play was all burnt black. The weeds and sunflowers and blackberries that had crowded up against the fence were gone. The tall summer grass with all the secret tunnels and paths we kids had made, gone too. All of it was burnt black, flat to the ground. Daddy was with some more policemen, and the fire engine was going back up the hill.

Mama carried me and she walked all through the field, back and forth and back and forth. Little puffs of smoke swirled around her shoes as they crunched the stubble of the burnt grass. I could see she was upset, so I tried not to cry.

I loved that vacant lot, and all the bright sunny days we played there, and the fat juicy sweet blackberries on the bramble-bushes that grew through the chicken-wire fence. All summer long, me and Tommy and Jasper and Becky Jones picked the berries right off the fence and ate them. They were so good, sour and sweet, dusty and hot from the sun, and they made our lips and our fingers purple.

There was a hole in the fence, way in the back of the lot where we always sneaked in to play. Nobody grown up ever went there. The dry grass was taller than we were and we had made secret trails like tunnels through it, just big enough for us. We pretended it was the jungle and at any minute a tiger might jump out. Now it was all gone.

Mama was carrying me and walking all around the field – where it used to be. The sharp smell of burnt grass stung my nose. There was nothing left, just some tiny flames making little crackling sounds on the last stems of burning blackberry brambles on the chickenwire fence.

I had seen Jasper’s daddy burn off crop stubble in the winter to clear his field for the next year’s planting, but it was summer, and this was not a crop field. It wasn’t anything; it was just where we played. It was *our field*.

I asked Mama “Why did they burn the field?”

She didn’t answer, she just kept on walking and looking at the ground and into the piles of burnt bramble-bushes in all the corners of the field. I started to cry, but it was too late anyway, my favorite place to play was gone. Mama just kept walking back and

forth across every inch of the burnt-out field, like she was looking for something. But there was nothing there, not anymore. I wondered where Tommy was. It was getting dark.

Tommy was five years old then, and I was three. We always slept in a long narrow little bed, with him at one end and me at the other and toe-to-toe in the middle. That night when Granny put me to bed, Tommy wasn't there.

I didn't see him until the next day. He was very quiet. I'd never seen him that quiet before. Daddy took both of us to the courthouse with him early in the morning. It was a big serious-looking building made out of gray stones with a whole lot of steps going up to it from the street. Behind the courthouse was the police station, and that was where we went.

Other policemen were there in the Squad Room, and they all had uniforms and badges like Daddy's. They looked at us but they didn't smile. Daddy took me to an office where there was a nice lady who was the secretary. She let me sit in a big chair that you could spin all the way around like a merry-go-round. Daddy took Tommy somewhere else, and they were gone for a long time.

"Where did Daddy and Tommy go?" I asked politely.

"Your daddy is showing your brother what the jail is like," the nice lady answered.

"Why?"

"Because he's showing him what happens to people who are bad," she said.

"What happens to them?"

"They have to stay in a small room for a long time, and they can't go out and play."

“Why not?”

“They’re being punished because they violated the law.”

“Oh.” I said. “Did Tommy violate the law?”

The nice secretary didn’t say. She smiled, and then she said, “How would you like to play with my typewriter?”

When Daddy and Tommy came back, we went home. Tommy was still very quiet and he looked scared. I didn’t know what was going on, but I think Tommy was in a lot of trouble, and I think it had something to do with the fire.

Chapter 3: Mama Hill's House

My parents were young then, barely thirty, and they dreamed of a better life, a new place and a new start. It was going to be an epic adventure they thought, across a continent. So they took a giant leap of faith, and all of us began the journey to California.

I think I was four when all of a sudden one day Daddy and Mama decided to leave North Carolina and go West, “where there are more opportunities,” Daddy said. Mama had a girlfriend from High School who lived in Dallas now, so that was going to be the first leg of the journey, almost half way.

Daddy bought a used car and then he put Mama and Tommy and me on a train to Dallas. He stayed behind to sell the house and quit his job at the police department and then he was going to drive to Texas to join us.

I remember the Pullman train. All day we had to sit still on a hard scratchy seat and be quiet. At night the three of us, Mama and Tommy and me, slept in the upper berth. It had thick velvet curtains around it. It was hot and cramped and all it had was a narrow little window where you could look outside at the darkness.

I could see the shapes of strange long buildings that had tall chimneys with trails of smoke coming out of them and little blue lights blinking on the tops of the smokestacks, and all of this was slowly passing by. That's all I remember. When we finally got to Dallas, we stayed with Mama's friend Linda and her husband Ed.

After Daddy got things settled in Greensboro, he drove the little one-seater Ford to Texas and got there about three weeks after us. Granny wasn't there yet. Then something happened at Linda's house, I don't know what, and we had to leave there at

night in the rain. It was chilly and we were wet in the car. The next thing I remember, we were in a small room in a log-cabin motel. We had doughnuts and water for dinner.

The lady that ran the motel must have felt sorry for us, because the next day she rented us a room in her own house at 1521 North Peak Street. Daddy made me memorize the address in case I ever got lost. The first night there was only one bed, so Tommy and I slept on a wicker love-seat thing. We shivered all night with no covers, just our coats over us. The lady's name was Lillian Hill, and the very next day she got us a bed and a little table and a couch. We had one room and a bathroom.

Mrs. Hill's house was on the corner with a huge yard to play in, and rose bushes all around the front. In back was a garden patch with zinnias of every color, and green hedges with tiny white flowers. Mrs. Hill was a sweet old lady and she didn't have any children. She told us to call her Mama Hill, and that's what I always called her.

We ate salami sandwiches and sometimes Daddy cooked kidney stew with carrots and onions in a tin pie-pan on top of the little gas heater in the bathroom. It was fun.

Mama Hill let me and Tommy come downstairs and visit with her any time we wanted to. One time when I was in her kitchen, I told her about how we kept our food in a Coca-Cola cooler in the bathroom and we ate our dinners off of the ironing board. I didn't know it was supposed to be a secret. When she told Daddy and Mama what I'd said, they thought for sure we were going to get kicked out. But instead Mama Hill gave us the whole rest of the upstairs. Then we had another big room with a kitchen set up at the other end of it, and a small room under the eaves that would be Granny's room later when she came.

In the evenings after dinner we would take the couch

cushions and lie on the floor and listen to the radio shows, the Jack Benny show, and mysteries like *The Shadow Knows*. Mama made banana custard pudding with vanilla wafers on top of it. I fell asleep on the floor with my face snuggled into my Daddy's big warm hand because it always smelled like fresh garlic from the cooking. I loved the smell of garlic and my Daddy's hands.

Daddy applied for a job at the Dallas Police Department but he didn't get it. When he came home that day, we could tell he was disappointed and he was mad. He told Mama he didn't want to work for "that kind of a police department." That was all he said. I guess Dallas was a lot different from Greensboro. Maybe he didn't want to be a big-city cop and have to shoot people. Anyway, he wasn't a policeman any more, and he never talked about it again.

Mama got a waitress job in a little coffee shop down the street, called the Colette Cafe. Then the war ended and the servicemen came home and got all the jobs, so Daddy did house-painting and carpenter work when he could get it. He was a sailor when he met Mama, after he was done I guess he didn't have to go back to the war because he was a policeman and they needed him here. Living at Mama Hill's house was happy for me, so I didn't know it was not as much fun for Mama and Daddy.

When Granny came to live with us again, I was glad. She sewed quilts and I threaded the needle for her on the sewing machine. Mama and Daddy were busy with grown-up stuff, but Granny always had time for me. If she was cooking, she let me stir the bowl. If she was ironing, she taught me how. She stood me on a kitchen chair to reach the ironing board and she let me iron her pretty handkerchiefs. I made each one perfectly flat and smooth and beautiful, then folded it just so. I was very proud of myself.

Spring came and it rained a lot. The tree branches had buds on them but they were still bare-naked with no leaves. One day Mama got it into her head that she wanted to go horseback riding. I think she was homesick for Kentucky where she grew up, and Texas had turned out to be kind of a disappointment.

We waited and waited for Tommy to come home from school. You never knew what he was going to do. It was late afternoon and Mama really wanted to go. So just this once, the three of us got into the car and went without him. Mama knew he would be okay because Granny would be there whenever he got home.

Daddy drove us out of town to a place that rented saddle horses by the hour. They were slow and old, nothing fancy, but Mama had grown up in Lexington and she loved horses. I guess she needed something to lift her spirits, even just the littlest bit.

We rented three horses; Mama picked them out. She put me up on one of them all by myself. My horse's name was Joe. He was a very big horse. My legs were too short for the saddle, but Mama stuck my feet under the stirrup straps so I wouldn't fall off. Then she taught me how to say "giddy up" to make him go, and "whoa" and pull back on the reins to make him stop. I tried it and it worked.

The weather was wet and blustery. We rode around on muddy trails under dripping branches of bare trees, but I was ecstatic, absolutely swimming in happiness. I fell in love with horses, right then and there, forever.

I rode my horse like an old cowhand wrangler. I shook the reins and shouted "Giddy up!" and Joe walked faster, up and down rutted hillsides and muddy creek-beds. I pulled back on the reins and told him "Whoa!" and he stopped. Once he did a trot that bounced me up and down and made my teeth rattle, but I said "Whoa" quietly and pulled the reins just a little bit to make him

walk nicer, and he obeyed me. I was thrilled. *I am a horse-rider!*

Mama praised me for doing such a good job, and Daddy even smiled too, a real grin, because I rode my horse so proud, with no trace of fear. When we finally rode the horses back to the barn, the horse-renter man was smiling too. He said I was very brave. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I knew it was something good. That day I learned: *I am brave, and I can do brave things all by myself!*

Just that once, I didn't have to be second-best to Tommy, I got to be somebody. It was a great day for me, I rode a horse! It was the best thing I had ever done in my whole life, a pure joy I would never forget, and I would never get over it.

Most parents would have carried such a young child on their lap, but not Mama. She gave me the chance for the thrill of mastery; she let me ride my own horse.

Since I was born in the middle of the school year, I wouldn't start school till six and a half, so when I was six, Daddy taught me to read a little bit so I wouldn't fall behind. He bought me a Little Golden Book and started teaching me how to sound-out the letters to read it. I did pretty well, and I liked the attention. I started reading everything, books and magazines, even wrappers and labels of things. I nearly drove Daddy crazy asking What does this word mean? How do you say this one? Why is the k silent?

I loved how words could tell stories and make pictures, sometimes even more real than real life. What a great thing! I got excited about new words I learned. I copied them down carefully and saved them in a little notebook. I cherished them; they were mine. I said them out loud to myself and memorized how to spell them and what they meant. I hoarded them the way any child collects sea shells or other precious things.

I read Granny's old poetry books and Winnie the Pooh and a big book called Grimm's Fairy Tales that must have been Mama's when she was a little girl. I read dusty books from the shelf behind Daddy's desk, the plays of William Shakespeare and the short stories of Guy de Maupassant. There was a lot of it I didn't understand, but that made it more mysterious, and I was eager to read some more.

By the time I started school I had also read poems by William Wordsworth Longfellow and the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám from the Lakewood Public Library. All of this seemed wonderful to me, so I was excited to start school. When I finally got to first grade and we read *The Adventures of Dick and Jane*, I thought, These are the dumbest stories...

In third grade I wasn't very interested in the books my classmates read, like Nancy Drew Mysteries and Little Women. I read horse stories and histories of the American Plains Indians and the wild mustangs. The Indians were wonderful horsemen; they talked to their horses and they never used a saddle. That's what I would have done too. I loved books because when you read books you can go anywhere and do anything and see it with your mind's eye.

Tommy was the rebel of the family and I was the good kid. It wasn't my choice, but it was the job that was available so I was stuck with it. I wasn't perfect, but I did try to be good, and I was, mostly.

In my family, discipline didn't always make sense, as far as I could tell. The punishment for being bad could mean different things. When my brother and I were little, it was mostly a talking-to or a swat on the bottom. When we got bigger, if the crime was serious, that meant the belt. It seemed like Tommy got away with almost anything, and I didn't get punished much either, because I wasn't very interested in doing the things I wasn't supposed to.

My father was a quiet man. He didn't talk much, and never raised his voice in anger. He told us, "Greeks have a dangerous temper." He said if he ever lost his temper, it would be really, really awful, and that was why he never did. My father was not the kind of man who would ever get mad and hurt anyone.

But since he was the head of the family, it was his job to do the spankings. He always seemed uncomfortable about it. I usually didn't do anything wrong on purpose, and I can't recall ever getting a whipping for anything I did by myself, it was always something Tommy thought up and made me do it with him, and we both got a whipping together, usually a half-dozen sharp licks of the belt.

Every time we got a spanking, Daddy would say, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." Or "I'm doing this for your own good." and then he would say, "You should be glad I'm not like my father," and then always the story:

"When I was a kid, whenever one of us got out of line, Pops would round up all four of us (him and his brothers) and whip the tar out of *all of us*." Then Daddy would pause, for the emphasis, and then, "If one of us got out of line, all of us got the belt, just to make sure the rest of us didn't think about trying it too." He hardly ever spoke of his father, but when he did, it was very respectfully.

"He taught us the difference between right and wrong" Daddy said. "He made men out of us." I don't think Tommy and I took the story very seriously at the time.

When I was about seven, I stumbled upon a discovery. Really stumbled. Going up the stairs, I slipped and my shin came crashing down on the sharp edge of the step and the pain was so terrible I couldn't breathe. I started to cry, but it hurt so much I held my breath and clutched my shin. When I stopped crying, it seemed like the pain was not quite as bad. When I caught my breath and started to cry again, the pain got worse. I stopped again,

held my breath, and that seemed to help. Suddenly I had a brilliant idea: *Crying makes things hurt more!*

So the next time Tommy and I got spanked, I decided to test my idea. Usually we would holler as much as possible, like we were in terrible suffering, so that maybe we might get less whipping. But this time was different– I didn't cry. I held my breath and I kept my body rigid and stood still. As the stinging belt licks came, I endured them in silence. After just a few whacks, Daddy stopped. He looked surprised. Suddenly it was over. After that, Daddy never spanked me again. Ever.

When you're a little kid, your imagination is so much bigger than you are, and your faith knows no bounds. Every wonderful new thing you see, you want to DO that, or you want to BE that. I wanted to be a cowboy; I wanted to be a firefighter; I wanted to write books, I wanted to fly airplanes like Amelia Earhart, but more than anything else in the world, I wanted to be a jockey and ride thoroughbred horses very fast in races like the Kentucky Derby.

One day that summer when the grownups were talking, Daddy's friend Jack asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I spoke right up all proud and said, "I want to be a jockey and ride race horses!" Everybody busted out laughing, especially Daddy and Jack, like that was the funniest joke they ever heard. I was surprised and hurt. I didn't understand why they were all laughing at me. Mama saw the look on my face.

"Vickie, honey, you can't be a jockey..."

"Why not?" I demanded, and I forced back angry tears.

"Because that's for boys, honey. You can't be a jockey. You could be a nurse, or a secretary, or maybe a teacher. Wouldn't you like to be a teacher? It's just..." she paused, "Girls can't be

jockeys...”

My pride was shattered. *Why are they laughing at me? They don't know, I MIGHT do it. I've still got my whole life.*

It was not the first time I'd been told I couldn't have what I wanted just because I was a girl, and there would be many more to come, but I remember that time the most. I remember my hurt and my anger. *It's not my fault! It's not fair! I didn't get to choose.*

I was mad at life for making me a girl. I believed I should get the same rights as my brother, but everybody laughed. I could just about hear them thinking it, "Isn't that precious! She wants to be a jockey! But not Granny. She understood. She said I was "headstrong," because I didn't give up easy. She thought that was good, and I did too.

Jessie Vaughn was a strong woman ahead of her time. From early on, she had paid a price for her independence, as all strong women do, and so would I.

The ones who laughed at me were people who loved me. They thought they were helping me learn how to live in the world, but they were not. They were teaching me how to live in their world, but my world would be different, and by the time I was grown, their world would be gone. That was one of many times when people would tell me, “you can't do that, because...” But they were wrong.

When winter came again, it was like Dallas winters always were, gray and drizzly every day, until one morning when I walked outside to go to school, all of a sudden the whole world had changed.

Everything was white. It was so bright it hurt my eyes. A fine mist of tiny ice-specks was drifting down, freezing as it fell. It

wasn't snow, it was freezing rain, and it was as pretty as a fairy tale. I looked up at the blank white sky, and there was another surprise. Above our street in front of Mama Hill's house, there were blackbirds, hundreds of them, all in a row, all along the telephone lines.

They were hanging upside down, bobbling in the wind. They looked like clothespins on a laundry line, and they were swinging back and forth like tiny trapeze artists with their little feet clenched around the wire. When I first saw them dangling there, they looked so comical I started to laugh, but in an instant I realized that the poor little things were dead, frozen to death, and in the middle of the laugh, I started to cry.

The radio said it was the worst winter in Dallas in forty years. When I saw my brother's new argyle plaid socks in so many colors, I got all excited. I asked Mama, "Do I get some too?"

"Oh no, honey, they're boy's socks," was all she said. The rules said girls had to wear dresses with bare legs while boys got to wear warm pants and knee socks. It didn't seem fair, and it didn't make any sense to me, but the more I learned about things, the more I knew you have to get used to a lot of stuff that doesn't make sense if you were born a girl.

The cold came all at once that year on the tail of a Blue-Norther that blew in without warning, bringing with it two weeks of sleet and freezing rain. When a Norther hits, the temperature can drop as much as fifteen degrees in an hour, and that was what it did.

Everything that was wet, froze. The grass, the roses, the water pipes, the birdbath, and Mama Hill's goldfish pond. I was astonished. It must have snowed in North Carolina, but back then I was too little to go outside, so I had never seen anything like this.

Everything was sparkling white and icy. The air was so cold

it smacked me in the face and made me catch my breath, which hurt my lungs like tiny sharp icicles were in there. And every time I breathed out, it made little white clouds in the air, just for a second, and then they disappeared. The ground was all white and the sky was white and the tree branches were all shiny and black. Everything looked so strange and pretty.

The cold was awful but it was beautiful to see. The rain coated every leaf with a thick crystal shell of hard ice. All along the slippery sidewalk, every bush looked like a glittering chandelier, and their leaves made little tinkling sounds in the wind as if they were made out of glass.

The freezing rain kept coming, adding more layers of ice until the weight of it broke branches off the trees and they came crashing down all around. Whole trees broke apart, one of them split in two. Branches fell onto the street taking electric lines down with them. Power went out all over the city and schools shut down at noon. Parents came to pick up their kids by car, but nobody knew how to drive on ice. Cars went slipping and sliding sideways all over the streets. Some of them ended up in people's front yards and others crashed into parked cars with a loud WHUMP! For us kids, it was as funny as a circus.

There was no school for three days until the worst of it was over. I had to stay indoors for the rest of that first day, but the next day I got to go outside and play. I was allowed to bundle up in pants and sweaters. Since nobody would notice me, it didn't matter if I looked like a boy.

I ran and slid for miles and miles on the perfectly-iced flat sidewalk in front of Mama Hill's house. I did it again and again and again.

I am SO FAST! I am wonderful! I can fly! I am faster than the wind! I am a great ice-racer in some faraway foreign place, like

Norway where they have the fjords!

Chapter 4: Beacon and Columbia

We lived at Mama Hill's house for about three years before we got a place of our own. Mama found it, a duplex for rent at the corner of Beacon Street and Columbia Avenue, and we moved in right away. School was starting and I would be in third grade. I had a new house and a new school and everything was great. I went skipping around the house singing songs while Mama and Daddy were unpacking..

Our new place was big. It had a real kitchen and a long narrow bathroom that had two doors to it. All the rooms were in a row: a living room in the front, then a room for Mama and Daddy, then came the kitchen, then a middle room that was for Tommy and me, with bunk-beds. Tommy got the top. And then Granny's room in the very back and then the back door.

Daddy still didn't have a regular job yet, but he was working part-time as a waiter. Mama had a good waitress job at Mr. Joe Yee's Chinese and American Restaurant and the first month's rent was paid. I helped unpack the dishes out of the newspapers they were wrapped in to keep them from breaking when they were coming from North Carolina. We had not unpacked most of the boxes from Greensboro until now.

Daddy was moving stuff in, putting up curtain rods and light bulbs and fixing things. It was hot summertime, 103° outside and even hotter in the kitchen where Mama was working all morning, cooking a special dinner for us. Then she set up the table with all the wonderful food was spread out on it, in the middle room where it was a little cooler. Mama's crispy fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, baby green peas, and a big salad with lots of tomatoes, feta cheese, and Greek olives in it, tall jelly-jar glasses of iced tea, and buttery homemade biscuits and honey. It smelled

so delicious and I was so happy I couldn't stop singing to myself.

Then we all sat down at the table and bowed our heads as Granny asked the blessing. That was something we didn't usually do, so this was a special occasion. With quiet dignity, Granny softly said a very nice prayer.

As soon as the Amen was said, I was bouncing in my chair and clapping my hands. I was so excited about the wonderful dinner.

All of a sudden, Mama reached across the table and slapped my face, hard.

“Don't be disrespectful!” she snapped.

I gasped in shock. My face went red and hot. Stunned, I jumped up from my chair embarrassed and confused. Tommy was laughing and everybody was looking at me. I stood there and then in shame I ran for a place to hide myself. I rushed into the bathroom and locked the door.

What happened? What did I do wrong?

I had never been punished like that before. Without any warning, Mama had slapped me in the face! Right in front of everybody! All I knew was that I must have done something really bad. A minute ago I was so happy, and now I was shocked, confused, and ashamed, hiding in the bathroom.

They tried to get me to come out. First Daddy knocked on the door and said sternly, “Come out of there and sit down and eat.”

I didn't answer, and I would not open the door. He rattled the door handle. “Open this door!” he said again, louder this time. “Right this minute!” I was scared.

I moved away from the door and sat down on the hard cool floor and leaned against the wall.

What just happened? What did I do? Why did Mama slap me? And in front of everybody?

Then Mama came to the door. In a quieter voice, she said “Vickie, come on out and eat.”

But how could I?

Daddy tried one more time too, but I didn’t answer. I held my breath so I wouldn’t cry. I sat silent as a stone. Outside the door they were silent too, except for Tommy snickering. Then Daddy said something I couldn’t quite hear and they all went back to the meal.

I could hear the tinkling of the ice cubes in the delicious iced tea. My mouth felt dry as dust. I heard some muffled conversation, but nobody was talking much. I could smell the tantalizing fried chicken and hear the silverware clinking on the good china plates as they all ate. I sat there on the floor, looking at the claw-foot bathtub and the cracked seams of the faded linoleum floor.

I sat there for a long time. Finally I heard the chairs scrape back from the table as everybody got up and carried the plates into the kitchen. Then there was nothing. They all went into the living room and I was left there in the bathroom by myself.

I felt utterly shamed. My cheek still stung from the slap. Tears ran down my chin and dripped onto my cotton summer dress. I blew my runny nose on the toilet paper. My hurt turned into anger. *Mama has never slapped Tommy like that.*

All of the beautiful food had been right there in front of me, all the delicious smells and the steam from it, right under my nose. We had a new house and everything was wonderful, and then in an instant, it was all gone, and I was all alone in the bathroom, too ashamed to even be alive. A new wave of misery swept over me. I buried my face in a stack of towels so nobody could hear me cry.

I sat there on the cool linoleum, locked away in the solitary confinement of my own making. There was nothing to do but think. Through tears of rage I swore a solemn oath to the bathroom walls: *I hate this house! I will never be happy here!* I vowed I would refuse to be happy, no matter what.

Time dragged by. As the light from the small bathroom window dimmed, I knew twilight was coming. I tried and tried to figure out what I had done wrong. Somehow I had been “disrespectful.” I decided to look it up in the dictionary when I got out. *Whatever it is, I swear I didn’t mean to be that.*

It wasn’t fair, but there was nothing I could do about it. All the wonderful feast was gone and I didn’t get a single bite. My belly growled and ached. I felt righteously wronged, and I vowed to stay locked in the bathroom all night. *I’ll show them!* I thought, in an eight-year-old martyr’s sort of way.

By the time it was almost dark, my face didn’t burn from the slap anymore and the salty tears on my cheeks were crusty and dry. I knew I had to let it go. That was hard. Mama had slapped me without any reason that I could figure out. *Tommy does bad things all the time, and Mama never slaps him.*

After I wallowed in self-pity for a while, I felt a little bit better and I began to get my practical-self back. I knew I had to accept that this was just another one of those things adults do that don’t make any sense. I got tired of staring at the walls and bored with counting the little blue squares on the bathroom linoleum, so eventually, sheepishly, I came out.

I went straight to my bottom bunk and crawled into it with my dress on. I was hungry, but I didn’t dare go into the kitchen. The light was on in there, and I didn’t want them to see me. Tommy would laugh at me, I knew it. This must have been great fun for him, seeing his shy little sister, the one who hardly ever

does anything bad, get punished. I pulled the covers over my head even though it was a warm night. I wanted to disappear. Even more than that, I wanted to not exist.

After a while when everybody went to bed, Mama came and brought me a glass of milk and some graham crackers. I couldn't say anything. I pulled my tangly hair across my eyes so she couldn't know in the dark if there were tears in there. She dragged a chair over from the table and sat down next to my bed, and while I ate the graham crackers she began to tell me a story. She had never told me stories before. It was a story about her, when she was ten years old, back in Kentucky. I've forgotten some of it now, but the story went like this.

Somebody, maybe her stepfather or a friend of her mother's, told her she could have a horse of her own, if she could catch one. All she had to do was go out to the paddock and catch one. They must have meant it for a joke, because the paddock was full of yearling colts and fillies, and all of them were completely untamed. The grownups thought there was no chance in the world she could catch one singlehanded. But she didn't know that.

I had loved horses since I was five. My wildest dream was to have a horse of my own someday. As she told the story and it was just Mama and me in the dark, I could *see it* happening.

“At first I tried to catch the big ones,” she said, “the stallion colts, but they were too smart. They took off and never let me get anywhere near them. They wheeled around on their hind legs and bounded away, easy as pie.

I decided to trick them and lure them over to the fence with apples. Every time a good one came close enough, I held out the apple, and then real quick I threw the halter rope over its neck. That didn't bother them at all. They just took the apple and then bolted away, dragging me until I had

to let go to keep from getting crushed against the fence rails.

I tried and tried. I wanted a horse so much. I was getting so discouraged, and I was covered with dirt from all the times I fell down and got dragged through the dirt and manure of the paddock. After a while I gave up on the big ones and tried to catch one of the younger ones. But they were even wilder, and afraid of me besides. There was a bay mare with them who was gentler; I guess they had put her there to keep the colts quiet. I tried to catch her. She was a brood mare, so it should have been easy...

Mama's voice got softer as she was remembering it. I could see it too, I swear I could, so clear and so real. I could feel the tiredness, and the sad discouragement. I was hoping for her to catch one, hoping so hard, just like it was me...

"...but the mare wanted nothing to do with me either. I went back to the smaller ones, but it seemed hopeless. All I had was a piece of rope and a halter, and even if I got the rope around one of the horses' necks, it just bolted and dragged me with it. All of them were this year's new foals, less than a year old and wild as weeds. They had no intention to get caught.

I kept on trying all day long till after the sun went down. It was getting dark and I had to go home. I was so tired and dirty I wanted to cry. I was covered with sweat and dirt and cuts and bruises. My fingers were blistered from the rope, but I still would not give up. Finally after it got full dark, maybe the horses got tired too, or they just got bored with it all, but I finally caught one – the smallest one, a runty little colt, but it was mine, and I got to keep it."

I don't know why she told me that story. She didn't say she was sorry for slapping me, but I think she was. There were only a few times when she had ever talked to me like that, just her and me. I think that time was the closest we ever came to knowing each other. I didn't keep my vow to hate the house at Beacon and Columbia forever, I came to love it. The years we lived there were the best we ever had as a family. Nobody ever told me what I had done wrong but I learned a hard lesson: *It's dangerous to be too happy. And the punishment is quick and terrible.*

For me, self-expression was not allowed. Tommy had already claimed the spot of attention-getter and troublemaker, so my position, whether I liked it or not, was the-good-child, the quiet well-behaved one. My assignment was to be invisible, be good and be quiet, and if I stepped out of the shadows for even a second, I would surely pay for it. Inwardly I rebelled against this, but in my world, the cost was too high.

I learned to survive by hiding myself in plain sight, by being always wary and vigilant. I knew that even though the rules could not be understood, they had to be learned urgently, and followed carefully. I was just beginning to figure out the code of rules and learn the laws of survival.

It looked like boys could do just about anything they wanted. They got all the best stuff too. Tommy got a wonderful leathery-smelling baseball glove for Christmas one time, and one year an electric train. I got dolls and plastic toy dishes.

Boys could get cowboy boots, but girls could only have stupid ballet slippers, it was the rules. I was quick and strong, and I could run faster and climb trees better than most of the boys, but girls were not supposed to do those things. Girls were not supposed to do anything that was brave or fun. I kept on asking Why not? But nobody ever said. I think they didn't know either.

The next three years from third grade to sixth grade were happy anyway. My best friend Vivian and her little sister Dimi lived right up the street and the three of us walked home from school together every day, dawdling along the way. One time we stopped and sat down on somebody's lawn and braided each other's hair.

Tommy was not as mean to me then, at least not all the time. He built model airplanes out of balsa-wood kits from the Hobby Shop and painted them with sweet-smelling paint called "dope." When the paint was dry, he stuck on the decals: RAF or USAF or Flying Tiger teeth, or swastikas for the Luftwaffe. He knew all the names of all the fighter planes.

Daddy got a better waiter job at the Greater Dallas Club. Mama's waitress job at Mr. Joe Yee's restaurant was steady and they liked her there. All of the Yee family, grandmothers to granddaughters, worked at the restaurant, and they respected Mama for the cheerful hard-worker she was. They welcomed Tommy and me on her shift every Sunday afternoon for dinner, just like we were part of their family. At work Mama wore a flower-print handkerchief in the breast pocket of her clean white uniform, folded just-so, spread out like a flower, with one corner pointed down on the outside of the pocket in a pretty way, where she pinned her name tag. "Welcome. My name is Ann."

Another summer came. The lazy days flowed along like an easy river and carried me with them. There was plenty of time. That was when I first started to look at the world around me, and to notice things beyond the end of my own nose.

I climbed up into the little pear tree, and I sat and thought about things like life, and God. I'd be wondering what God was, but then I'd notice a perfect green pear I could pick, so I did, and I ate the pear and it was warm from the sun and crunchy and sour and sweet at the same time and the juice ran down my chin and I

forgot all about God. I just knew that he's around and he always watches out for me and keeps me safe. Even if I wake up in the middle of the night, he's there and I can just go back to sleep.

I never thought anything would ever change. I was sure I would always be me, and Daddy and Mama would always be them. But something was changing between Mama and Daddy and I didn't know what it was. It was like there were things they needed to say to each other, but they didn't.

The days were blissfully long and at bedtime it wasn't even dark. I lay in my bed and looked out the window at the twilight sky and thought long thoughts. The roofs and chimneys looked like cardboard cutouts, but the sky above them was so deep. It seemed to go on forever and ever, all the way to where God lives.

In the perfect warm evening, everything was sweet and drowsy. I listened to the twittering birds gradually quieting down for the night, while the sky turned the color of lilacs. Granny said heaven is up there, and that's where we go when we die. I gazed up at it and wondered what it would be like to die and go up there. The sky was so huge, so deep and so peaceful. I felt a sadness that I didn't understand, but it dissolved into the soft summer night, and the very next thing I knew, it was morning.

Sometimes Tommy took me downtown with him on the streetcar. A few times we tried to sneak into a movie theater from the iron fire escape in the back. We got in once, but the security guard put us out and said he was going to call the police if we ever did that again. Tommy just laughed.

"They're so stupid," Tommy said after we left. "I could get back in again if I wanted to." It wasn't to see the movie, it was just to sneak in. He loved to break the rules and get away with it.

Afterward he would buy us each a chili dog and an orange

drink at the Orange Julius, and maybe we would visit some sporting goods stores and look at guns and Bowie knives. I followed after him, careful to never let him out of my sight, because sometimes he slipped away and left me. Then I had to find my own way through downtown Dallas and figure out how to get home.

Most days I played at Vivian and Dimi's house or else I hung out in Granny's room. Once when Granny was in the kitchen I rummaged around in her dresser drawer. Underneath her funny old undies I found a pretty little china-porcelain box. Inside of it, wrapped in tissue paper and tied with a tiny pale blue silk ribbon there was a lock of light-auburn hair, one perfect curl. It was hidden, so I knew, *This is a special thing that somebody treasures*. I felt a little shiver of guilt, like I'd found a secret.

The pretty little curl was the wrong color to be Mama's or mine. My hair was dishwater brown by then, as a toddler I'd had yellow-blond hair like Mama's too, not a match to the little curl either. Daddy's and Tommy's hair was dark. The lock of hair tied with a silk ribbon was a sort of bronze color. Whose could it be? I wondered if maybe it was Granny's hair when she was young, and immediately my imagination leapt into fantasy-time:

A beautiful young southern belle sits before a dresser mirror in her Scarlet O'Hara corset, in the canopied bedroom of a grand old Kentucky mansion, brushing her waist-length light-auburn hair that has been bound up properly and gracefully on the top of her head all day...

Granny's hair was gray now, and I had never seen a picture of her when she was young. I touched the little golden reddish-brown curl, held it in my palm for a second, gazing, wondering, then I carefully put it back. I still remember the color of it, like bright-polished copper.

Sometimes Tommy got bored with his airplanes and came looking for somebody to torment. It was usually me. I was playing with my dolls in Granny's room, and Tommy came over to aggravate me. He started snapping my arm with a rubber-band. He did it just to get me to holler, and then he laughed and walked away. In a minute he came back and did it again. Each snap really stung, and it made me madder and madder. When he came back the third time, I don't know what got into me, but that time when he walked away, I tossed a little wicker doll-chair at him. It landed smack in the middle of his back and bounced off.

“Good for you!” Granny said cheeringly. The little chair only weighed about two ounces, it couldn't possibly hurt him one bit, but it was an act of rebellion, and that was my big mistake. He turned around with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Okay, NOW you're gonna get it!” he said, and he charged straight towards me.

I ran for the bathroom, slammed the door barely in time, and locked it. But the bathroom had two doors and I knew he would run to the back door next, so I ran there faster. It was an old house and the door didn't fit the frame anymore, it just closed-to, with a screen door hook instead of a lock. I hooked it, but I knew he could reach through the crack with a pencil and lift the hook, so I put my finger on the hook to hold it down. But he didn't try the pencil trick, instead he threw his whole weight against the door.

I screamed. My finger was crushed between the hook and the door. When I looked at it, the flesh of my fingertip was gone, scraped back into a bloody crumpled blob at the base of the first bend. The space where that flesh used to be was slick bright red raw meat and dripping blood. When I saw it, I screamed again.

By the time Mama got me to the sink to wash it, I was crying full-out. When the water touched it, I jerked it back screaming, splattering pink watery blood across the wall. All the nerves in my

finger tip were bare, and the water made it hurt a thousand times worse. Granny tried her best to put some Vaseline on the open flesh to make it stop bleeding, but I shrieked in pain when it was touched, and even when it wasn't touched, it hurt so terrible I was gasping to breathe.

I had to spend the rest of the day on my bed with my hand hanging over the headboard while the slow drips of blood plopped onto a towel on the floor.

I couldn't cry anymore, it hurt too much. I could just barely breathe. That same old familiar awful angry feeling in my stomach was back again, for about the millionth time. *It's not fair! I didn't even hurt him!*

The whole finger was throbbing. I held my breath trying to make it hurt less. It didn't help. As usual, Tommy said it was an accident, but this time he was actually "punished," sort-of. He had to sit on his bed for an hour, that's all. As soon as Mama went back to the kitchen, he snickered at me.

"That'll teach you." he said, in a loud whisper.

And it did. My first and only act of rebellion had backfired horribly and I had paid a terrible price. Now he sat there, grinning at me with his smug I-told-you-so grin.

The smiles my brother smiles at me are mean smiles. He smiles a different smile for Mama. For Mama he always does his "Everybody-cherish-me-I'm-so-cute-and-adorable" smile. My brother is the only person I know who can smile and still be mean.

It took about a week for the first thin pink skin with no fingerprint on it to grow back. The scraped-back part dried up and got hard and finally crumbled off. After a few months, most of the finger came back, but because I had "an open sore" the park counselor said I couldn't go into the swimming pool for the whole rest of the summer.

The lesson was crystal clear: *It's better to just let people hurt you, because if you fight back, that gives them an excuse to hurt you a whole lot more.*

Sometimes I felt trapped in a world where there was no justice and no defense. It seemed to me like meanness has all the power, and the mean people always win. Granny tried to protect me from Tommy as much as she could, and she always took my side, but Mama and Daddy never listened to her either, they always believed Tommy.

Maybe little sisters always get picked on by brothers. It's supposed to be okay because they're boys. But Tommy loved bullying me. It was like he was cruel for the pleasure of it. He made sure I always knew I was less than him. He kept calling me a sissy, like that meant something bad, but I knew all it meant was, I was smaller than him and not as strong. I couldn't help that. If I could have been bigger, I would have. But right now, I knew I just had to take it, and wait.

I don't want to be a sissy, but I'm supposed to be, because I'm a girl. Girls are not supposed to ever get mad, or stand up for ourself. We're not supposed to be strong, because it's not ladylike. Just like most of the other good stuff, being strong is only for boys.

That went against the very blood in my veins, my Granny's stubborn Kentucky blood. I was stronger than him in some ways, and smarter for sure. I could run faster than him, or anybody. I didn't want to be a lady; I wanted to be *me*. If I had to hide it forever, then I would. But I would not give it up.

Daddy and Granny never did get along, and Mama was forever trying to make peace between the two of them. After a while, Granny went back to North Carolina again. Then sometime later she came back to Texas. Altogether she went back and forth between Texas and North Carolina three times.

In between, Daddy's mother, my Greek yaiya, came to stay with us for a visit. She had her own apartment in Washington D.C. and another son, Daddy's brother Nick, lived there too. Compared to Jessie Vaughn, Yaiya Sophia was a very refined and proper lady. She was small, barely five feet tall, but she was strong enough to raise four sons and run a small restaurant in New Jersey all by herself when her husband, Daddy's father, died at a young age, about 40, and Sophia was only twenty-six. The youngest son Pete was four years old then, my father George was five or six, and Vick and Nick were each a year or two older. By the time we moved to Beacon and Columbia, the four brothers were scattered all across the country, from New Jersey to Washington D.C. to Arizona, and then us, in Texas.

Yaiya could speak English pretty good but she talked mostly to Daddy and always in Greek. It was a pretty language but I didn't understand a word of it. She was very religious. She took Tommy and me to the Greek church, a very mysterious place, with dark paintings on the walls of Saint George killing the dragon and other saints and martyrs with gold halos. The air was hazy with smoke from candles, and at the very front of the sanctuary there was a big statue of poor Jesus hanging on the cross, with the crown of thorns on his head and little drops of blood painted on his carved wooden face. It looked like he was hurting really bad. It scared me, but it didn't seem to bother Yaiya, so I figured it must be okay.

Yaiya was a devout Greek-Orthodox Catholic, but she also believed in dreams and signs, and she had psychic powers. She told me about how, when she was a young woman, one night she woke up in the middle of the night and she saw her father standing at the foot of her bed.

"He didn't say anything," she told me. "He stood there long enough for me to know for sure I was awake, and then he

disappeared. It wasn't a dream, I saw him." She was living in New Jersey and her father was in Greece. The next morning she told her husband, "my Papou is dead," and she cried. He told her she was crazy, but she wasn't.

It was three weeks before the letter came because there was no airmail then, mail came by boat. The news from the relatives in Greece said that Sophia's father had passed away on that very same night. "He came to say goodbye to me," she said, "and I knew that he was gone."

Many years after that, when Mama was pregnant with Tommy, she and Daddy were living with Yaiya in Washington DC. One night Yaiya had a dream about her grandchild. She woke up to the noise of dogs outside in the street, fighting and snarling at each other. She was very upset and she told her son and daughter-in-law, "This is a sign. The baby will be a boy, and he will look like a wolf," she said. "The baby will have pointed ears and he will look like a wolf." They thought she was just being a superstitious old-country grandmother.

When Tommy was born, sure enough, he did have pointed ears, a little bit, and that was not all. When I was about eight I think, Yaiya told me, "The baby was born with thick black hair on his head and shoulders and all the way down his back." *He did look like a wolf!* I asked Mama if it was true. All she said was, "The hair rubbed off in a week or so." All I know is, if an old Greek woman tells you something, you should believe her.

My brother grew up and became a handsome man, but he never did really look like anyone else in the family. He had arched eyebrows and small deep-set eyes, not brown, but black like olives. He had a broad forehead, wide lips and a nose that were not like Daddy's and not like Mama's, and pointed teeth that made him look wolfish when he smiled, and his smile was not like anybody else's either. I figured maybe he must take after the

grandfather that neither of us ever met, or else it was just a mystery.

The streetcar ran past our house down Beacon Street, and in the summer I rode it to the Lakewood Public Library, my magic escape from the heat and from my ordinary world. In the library it was deliciously cool and dim. Anybody could go there and stay all day if you wanted to, so I did. In the back was a kids' section that had a window-seat with a faded red velvet cushion. That was my spot. I sat with my back to the window and read for hours. Outside the window, sycamore trees fluttered their leaves and scattered little spots of sunlight and shadows dancing across my pages.

At age ten I believed that horses were the most brave and intelligent creatures on earth. I read horse stories like *The Black Stallion*, and true books about the History of the Wild Mustangs, descended from horses that Spanish explorers brought here on boats a long time ago before there were states, and America was wild. There was a book called *The Godolphin Arabian*, which was partly true, like a movie. Through his descendants, this one horse made thoroughbreds the way they are now. He was small, but he was strong and swift. He was born in the hardships of the desert, so he had great endurance, like me.

In the evening when the library closed, I checked out some books and took the streetcar back home to the house on Columbia Avenue. Mama and Daddy were there, dinner was on the table, and even my brother, who never tired of tormenting me, didn't seem so bad. The radio was saying "I like Ike" and I guess they did because he got voted to be the new president.

At ten-going-on-eleven, I was skinny and long-legged and I loved to run. I pretended I was a glorious sleek thoroughbred, and I tossed my mouse-brown hair like a horse's mane. Mama said I

was gawky. It was true; I was mostly arms and legs like a yearling colt, awkward when I was standing still, but when I ran, I was magically transformed. I was agile, graceful, and strong. I was Man O' War, the greatest racehorse that ever lived. I was Seabiscuit, the first darkhorse, who came from anonymity into greatness and lifted the spirits of a whole nation.

When I run, my heart flies over the ground as easily as a bird in flight, and my body simply follows. No one else knows, but in my secret heart, I think it's my destiny to someday do wonderful things.

The time at Beacon and Columbia was the best we'd had since we left North Carolina. Daddy and Mama were both working regular and Tommy wasn't always so mean to me. We did things, all of us together. Daddy traded in the little Ford for a big green Desoto with a back seat. We would all climb into it and Daddy drove us out into the country. Tommy and I counted spotted cows and Coca-Cola billboards and shouted out the rhymes on the Burma-Shave signs.

Sometimes we went to White Rock Lake and brought a picnic lunch that Mama made, cold fried chicken and potato salad. We swam all day in the lake and then Daddy drove us home in the Desoto, and it swayed and rumbled along so pleasantly with Tommy and me in the back seat, tired and sunburned, and the car radio playing *I-rene good night, I-rene good night, Good night Irene, Good night Irene, I'll see you in my dreams.*" I was damp and itchy with sand in the bottom of my bathing suit, but even before the orange sun was all the way down, I fell asleep.

My best friends Vivian and Dimi lived a few blocks from us at the corner of Beacon and Tremont. Summer days we played together and sometimes I spent the night at their house. The three of us girls spent many groggy summer nights on that creaky old Murphy bed. In the hot steamy darkness, the humidity was thick as

mud. It lay upon us heavy as a blanket and the heat drugged us into sleep. All through the night we would be waked up again and again by the noise of the streetcars straining at the sharp turn at the corner of Tremont, the shriek and squeal of wheels on track, steel against steel. We would wake up and groan and then turn over to allow the hottest part of our bodies more air, even the sweltering air of the summer night in Dallas.

We were leggy, lighthearted, flat-chested and innocent, not even remotely aware of what our lives would someday be. The present was good enough, the future stretched out to infinity, and absolutely everything was possible.

Chapter 5: East Side Avenue, Part 1

All of a sudden one day we got the news that somebody bought the duplex and we had to move out. Moving wasn't fun this time. I didn't want to leave my back yard and my fig tree. I didn't want to leave Randall Park and my climbing trees. I would miss browsing comic books at the drugstore on the corner, and my best friends Vivian and Dimi, and most of all I would miss the feeling of being settled and safe and happy.

The new place was much smaller, plain and ugly, a square gray box with a tar-paper roof. It was with two apartments, one upstairs and one downstairs. Daddy lived downstairs, and Mama and Tommy and Granny and I lived upstairs. Mama said she and Daddy were "separated." She tried to talk to me about it once, and she told me, "When people get married, they're supposed to hug and kiss each other in ways they're not supposed to do if they're not married." She said Daddy wasn't doing like he should as a husband. I had no idea what that meant.

In fact I didn't know what any of this stuff meant, but I knew not to question anything grownups did. They were the rule-makers, and I tried to follow the rules, including the ones I didn't understand, which were most of them. My brother did just the opposite; he liked to break rules to see how much he could get away with. I don't think he liked it there either, because he started picking on me more.

The house on East Side Avenue sat way at the very back of a large lot, right up against the alley. Instead of a front yard, it had a concrete foundation for a big house, all laid out with sections where the rooms were going to be, and a little sidewalk and three stair-steps to where the front door of the house would have been, but it wasn't. The place never got built. The people who poured

the concrete foundation had also built his little cracker-box house at the back of the lot so they could live in it while they were building the real house in front, but Daddy said the city building codes didn't allow more than one residence on a property, so they would've had to tear down the little house before they could put up the big one. So they gave up the whole idea and went someplace else and just rented the little house to people like us.

It was plain and drab on the outside, but on the inside it was interesting. They must have built it out of whatever scrap linoleum and wallpapers they could get cheap. The kitchen wallpaper had huge pink roses like should have been in a bedroom. The wallpaper in Granny's room had wide maroon and white stripes with a silver acanthus-leaf border, like you'd see in the foyer of some grand mansion in a movie. Mama's room had yellow and green bamboo, where I slept too until Granny left again, then I got to have her room. I don't remember Tommy's room; I stayed away from him as much as possible.

The downstairs where Daddy lived was smaller and darker. The front room was knotty pine and the floor was concrete with black linoleum tiles. The TV was down there, and the phone. It was always cool and dark, even in the daytime. That was pleasant in the blistering summer heat, but clammy and cold in the winter. There was one small window, that was how Tommy and I always went in and out to watch TV when Daddy was gone.

Daddy's bathroom was just a little closet with a toilet and a sink, but there was a plastic shower-stall in the kitchen. The kitchen was warmer anyway, brighter and more cheerful. It also had a noisy old refrigerator, a stove, two rusty chrome-dinette chairs and a dinette table with cigarette burns at the edges of its stained pearl-formica top. Daddy's bedroom had just enough space for the bed, one wooden straight chair, and a tall chest of drawers.

The new place felt strange and sort of sad. Mama and Daddy

were different too. By that time, Daddy was working the evening shift as head waiter at the Country Club. He was home in the afternoons and he let me hang around downstairs if I wanted to. I sat at his big desk and drew pictures of horses while he was in the kitchen with books and papers spread out all over the dinette table, studying a correspondence-course. He didn't mind if I looked over his shoulder. It was boring though, mostly words and no pictures. There were pages of diagrams with squiggly lines, circles and boxes, all labeled with letters and numbers.

“What are those things?” I asked him.

“Circus.” he said.

“Where? I don't see any circus.”

“No,” he said, “circuits.” He was studying about how to do electronics repair.

I didn't know what was going on with Mama and Daddy, but I knew something was. I could feel it, like something you can't see but you still know it's there, and it scares you even though you don't know why. They didn't fight, and there was no big thing that you could see. Daddy finally had a steady job working at the Country Club, but we still never had enough money. He never had talked as much as most people, but now he seemed quieter than before.

In the movies when families are falling apart, this is where the father gets frustrated and angry at everything, drinks too much, and beats his wife and kids. Our next-door neighbor did that, but Daddy didn't. He just got more quiet, more distant, going inside of himself. He was there, but sort of not-there, and it was Mama who began to drink. Both of them were always gone at night, so Tommy and I could do whatever we wanted. Or anyway, whatever *he* wanted.

One night, I think it was October, it was nearly ten o'clock, and Tommy was taking me somewhere. a pitch-dark night with no moon, and the yellow streetlights didn't help much, they just made everything look all shadowy and scary. It had been hot all day, so I was wearing just a cotton T-shirt and shorts. But now it was cold and I wanted to go home.

"Where are we going?" I asked him even though I knew he wouldn't tell me.

"You'll find out when we get there," he said from up ahead of me. I had to hurry to keep up.

Tommy did this a lot, made me go someplace with him without telling me where it was, or why. This was a strange neighborhood I'd never seen before, with a wide street and perfect lawns and really nice houses. It was a long way from East Side Avenue.

"How much further is it?" He didn't answer.

He took a sudden sharp turn from the sidewalk and I followed after him up a driveway into the deep shadows where the street lights couldn't reach. We went around to the back of the house to where there was a little tool-shed. The door had a big padlock on it. There was one small high window; it was open but it had steel bars across it, about ten inches apart. As soon as I saw that, I knew what he had brought me for.

"This guy has a candy counter in McClintock's grocery store" he whispered, "and he keeps his stock in here." Then he said, "I'll boost you up."

He wanted me to shimmy through the bars and hand the goods out to him. I started backing up.

"No!" I said, "I can't!" But we both knew I would do it.

"Come on," he said, "and be quiet."

I was small for my age, and skinny. Anything I could get my head through, I could get my body through too. He clasped his hands together to make a step, I put my bare foot into it and he boosted me up high enough to reach the window. I poked my head between the bars and then slipped my arms and my chest through.

Inside the shed it was pitch dark and it had a thick oily smell of chocolate. Holding onto one of the bars behind me, I squeezed my hip-bones through and swung my legs to the floor. I was inside.

“Grab some stuff and hand it out,” he said in a sharp whisper. Inside the shed I groped around in total darkness. My fingers found boxes of candy bars, but I couldn’t see a thing so I didn’t know what kind they were. I grabbed a whole bunch of them with both hands and lifted them up through the bars to Tommy standing outside the window. I could feel my heart beating really fast.

“Good,” he said. “Get some more. Hurry up.” He had brought a big grocery bag to put the loot in. I could hear the paper bag rustle as the candy bars went into it. I wasn’t really scared, but I had that familiar knot in my stomach, the one I always got whenever he talked me into something I knew we shouldn’t do.

Somewhere far off in the night a dog barked. Except for that, everything was totally eerie quiet. I handed out another big handful from another box of some kind of candy, and again I heard the rattle of the paper bag.

“Wait!” he said. “Somebody’s coming! Don’t make a sound.”

A streak of fear ran up my back like fingers dipped in ice water. I squatted down quick, and crawled over to the window-wall of the shed, hoping maybe whoever it was might just look in through the window and sweep a flashlight around, but not unlock the door. Then they wouldn’t see me.

I forced myself to barely breathe so I wouldn’t make any

sound. I could hear the faint rustling of the tree leaves above the shed, and the smallest sounds of the night.

Then the loud crunch of footsteps in the gravel driveway, and they were coming closer. Beside the driveway right next to the shed there was a patch of soft lawn, where the sound of the footsteps stopped. Terror clutched my chest like a fist. I held my breath. My heart was beating so hard I could feel it banging against my ribs. I waited.

A sharp WHACK! loud as a gunshot.

I crouched in the pitch-black space, shaking, hugging the wall. *That must be the padlock.* It banged against the door hasp again, rattled a couple of times, and then there was silence.

I waited. It seemed like a long time. Then I waited some more, just in case. Then I stood up, slowly and carefully, and looked out the window. There was nothing.

I started to climb back through the bars. It was harder because there was nobody to boost me up. My hip-bones got stuck halfway, I had to kick and grunt to push myself through. I tried not to make any noise but I did anyway, which scared me some more. I got my legs free and managed to drop to the ground, more or less head-first, and still land on my hands and knees. I scrambled to my feet with a loud shower of loose gravel and darted out the back way through the alley to another street.

Tommy was nowhere to be found. The street sign said Montgomery Court. I didn't know where that was, but he had left me in strange places lots of times, and I always found my way home. This time it took a while. When I got home, the house was all dark. Tommy wasn't there. I went to bed.

In the morning, Tommy gave me three Mr. Goodbars and he said "Next time we'll get more."

I didn't look at him and I didn't say anything, I just thought it to myself.

Nuh-uh, there's not gonna be any next time.

When winter came it was cold and rainy every day. All the trees in the yard went bare-naked and looked sad. The winter dragged on and on and the house was always shivery, so I took a lot of hot showers and stayed near the stove. It took forever for Spring to come, but when it finally did, I told myself *Okay, now everything will get better.*

But it didn't. Mama told Tommy and me that she and Daddy might get a divorce, but they were trying to stay together for us kids' sake. That made me feel guilty, like maybe if Tommy and I were not there, they could have been happy. I felt ashamed, and worst of all, I felt helpless.

I can't help it, I thought. I didn't ask to be born here. What can I do? I wanted to tell her, Please don't be unhappy for us, we don't want that. I wanted to tell her, This isn't happy for us either. But I didn't say anything.

Tommy was getting meaner. Any time he could make me holler or run from him, he did. He loved to make me shriek with pain or fear. I think he enjoyed my fear the most, because it was like making a puppet dance. It was even better than a puppet, because I was alive. Something he could control that was alive.

By then Tommy was almost fourteen and in Junior High, and he had his own thing going. He walked with a swagger and wore his jeans way down on his hips, and he had a perfect "ducktail" haircut like James Dean. He was running with some other teenage punks and getting in trouble at school. He had already failed in grade school and got put back a year, now he got put back again. He wasn't dumb, in fact he was very smart. He just wasn't

interested in school. He was a rebel and that was what he wanted to be. He wanted to stand out, he had to be special. Even when they made him go to summer school, he didn't care; he just didn't go. Mama couldn't make him. I guess she just tried not to think about it.

When we had first moved to East Side, Mama got a new job working nights at the Diamond Horseshoe bar and grill, so I didn't see her much after that. She was asleep when I left in the morning, and already gone to work when I came home from school. At first Granny made supper for Tommy and me, biscuits and gravy and boiled chicken wings with collard greens. But after a while she went back to North Carolina again, and then I came home from school to an empty house. But there was bread and peanut butter in the cupboard, and every morning Mama left two little stacks of quarters on the kitchen table, lunch money for Tommy and me so we got a hot meal at school.

At night I went downstairs to Daddy's apartment and watched Ozzie and Harriet on the black and white TV by myself. Harriet was the Mom, and she was always baking cookies. Their family had two kids too, Dave and Ricky. I had a crush on Ricky. They all sat down at a table to eat dinner every day, all of them together. I wondered where they lived. They sure didn't live on East Side.

It was lonely. We were not the same family anymore. After we left Beacon and Columbia, we were not really a family at all, but I didn't know that was not the way other people lived, except on TV. We didn't do things, all of us together anymore. Daddy and Mama didn't see each other or talk to each other much, and when they did, they didn't smile. Something was wrong, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. Then one day Mama told me she and Daddy were getting a divorce.

All of it was confusing. I didn't know what was going to happen. I felt sort of scared in the pit of my stomach and I didn't know why. My friend Kathy at school told me "It means your Daddy is going to go away, and you might not see him anymore." Tommy and I had both sort of learned how to manage on our own. He was running around with some kind of gang or something, and I played at my friend Patricia's house. Her grandmother wouldn't let Pat come over to my house anymore after Tommy accidentally shot her in the eye with his BB gun.

So I was free to go to Pat's house whenever Tommy was gone, but when he was home, I was trapped. I had to pass the doorway of his room to get to the stairs, and he could easily catch me in the hall and keep me prisoner. So instead, very quietly, I climbed out my bedroom window. It was the second floor, so I carefully went out backwards on my belly, feet-first. I held onto the windowsill and slid my toes down the outside of the house until I could feel the narrow wooden ledge at the seam where the first floor and the second floor came together. I braced my feet there for a minute, then I took a deep breath, pushed off, and dropped to the ground. It stung my feet, but even if Tommy heard me and came running out, I could dash down the alley and he could never catch me.

Then I could play at Patricia's house, or maybe we'd go to the park, or go looking for good roofs to climb. We got up onto people's roofs from their fences or garage roofs or sometimes a telephone pole. I loved being up high, and Pat did too. With our bare toes securely gripping the grit-surface of the roofing, we scampered around as happy and fearless as squirrels.

We liked to roam the run-down parts of the city where there were old Victorian houses with turret towers and gabled roofs like mansions in Dracula movies. They were crumbling and ready to fall down, and boarded up, but we would find a spider-webby

broken window where we could get in. Then we would creep all through the empty house, peering into spooky rooms and dark musty-smelling halls, where every footstep, every whisper, echoed loud and strange.

We wandered overgrown gardens of tangled rosebushes and thick jasmine vines pulling down their trellis. We discovered secret mossy-green fish-ponds with broken angel statues. All the abandoned places belonged to us. We were explorers like Lewis and Clark, and whatever we found, we claimed it as our own.

Patricia lived two blocks down the street with her little brother Mike, her grandmother Ruth, and her mother Maxine. Both of the women were nurses in the Emergency Room at Parkland Hospital, the big County Hospital of Dallas. They were so kind to me. They took me along with Pat and Mike to the movies or the lake, and lots of times they fed me. They didn't know anything about my family except that there was nobody home where I lived, and no lunch waiting for me there.

Patricia was eleven and I was twelve, but she was much more daring than I was. My granny would've called her "bold as brass" and would not have approved of her. Pat taught me how to snatch things from the dime-store. Little toys, natural-pink lipstick, nail polish, and those tiny bottles of cheap perfume. There was a certain thrill to it, and we were both old enough to know better. Then one day we got caught.

A strange man, the owner I guess, took us to the back of the store to a dark gloomy storage room and told us very seriously, "I'm going to have to tell your parents."

We begged and pleaded. "Please don't tell them! Please! We'll never do it again, honest." We knew we would both get a whipping for sure. Then he said if we took our panties off and let him touch us down there, he wouldn't tell on us.

“No, I can’t...” I said, and I looked around for someplace to run. “Mama told me not to do that.” Pat didn’t look scared at all. She looked like maybe she was thinking about it.

“Come on!” I said. I grabbed her arm and yanked her with me and we both ran past him, back out into the store as fast as we could, through the store and out to the street. We never looked back and we never stopped running till we got all the way to her grandmother’s house.

On Sundays Patricia and I would scrub our faces, comb our hair neatly and pin it back with bobby pins, get dressed up as nice as we could, and go to church. We went to a different church every week, The Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, I think every denomination except Catholic. We were a little bit afraid of the Catholic, because it was all so sacred and holy, and the nuns were kind of scary. They had those black capes on their heads and they didn’t have any hair. They wore black dresses no matter how hot it was, and their long black skirts reached all the way to the toes of their lace-up old-lady shoes. And they had those big crosses with poor Jesus suffering on them that hung down the front of their blouse.

But the Methodist and Presbyterian, Church of Christ, and Baptist were not scary at all. The church ladies wore pretty hats and little white gloves and flowered silk dresses, and they smelled really nice. They would say to each other, "Isn't that adorable? Two sweet little girls, all on their own, coming to church?" We were always welcomed wherever we went. We were *adorable*.

Our favorite churches were, hands-down, the Baptist. They had the happiest hymns and everybody sang them real loud. We got to know the words, like “Rock of ages cliffed for me” and “Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?” My favorite one was

“Leaning on the everlasting arms.” They all had a good rhythm and the words were easy.

One time there was a Baptism. The blessed person had to walk with the preacher right into this huge glass fish-tank full of water behind the altar, up high where everybody could see. They waded out into the water and then with a whole set of special words, the preacher dunked their head under the water! In their best Sunday clothes and everything! All the people in the pews shouted Praise-the-Lord! and Thank-you-Jesus! and it was a wonderful show.

The blessed person almost got drowned, but then they popped back up again from the water, splashing and sputtering, with their hair all plastered down like a wet cat. But they had received the Holy Ghost, and then everybody in the whole congregation shouted out, Hallelujah! and we did too.

When I turned twelve, Mama took me aside to give me The Talking-To. In Texas, boys got the talking-to about sex, and girls got the talking-to about “being a lady.” She sat down next to me on the bed and she said in her most serious voice,

“Vickie Honey, You’re gonna have to stop running through the neighborhood, jumping over the hedges and all that. It’s time for you to start acting like a young lady.”

I remember that day, clear as glass. That was the day she told me that all the things I liked best, “nice girls don’t do that.” She said I would have to give up climbing trees (she didn’t know about the roofs) and I would have to stop galloping through all the vacant lots, parks, and people’s yards, leaping over the fences and hedges like a steeplechase racehorse. I would have to stop running.

How could I stop running? Running was the thing I loved. It was my pride and my glory. I could run faster than anybody, faster

than Tommy so he couldn't hurt me. Running made me feel good, made me feel special. I tossed my hair like a horse's mane, and imagined myself to be a beautiful sleek thoroughbred racehorse, and whenever I ran, I felt so strong and free.

And I thought with despair, *Act like a lady? What does that even mean?* But I understood one thing clear enough: it was not okay to be me anymore. It was time to "act like" something else, and somehow that meant I was supposed to give up everything I was good at, including the one thing that made me really happy. I was not allowed to run any more.

It was the same old rule again. Just because I was born a girl, I was supposed to give up things I loved. I was supposed to "behave like a young lady," but I had no clue how to do that, and I didn't even want to know.

But I tried. I said I would, and I did. I learned how to hide who I really was, and tried my earnest best to be whatever everyone else expected me to be. Tommy had taught me to be a victim, and now Mama taught me to be a martyr. That was my inheritance.

It's not fair! Why should I have to give up the things where I'm strong, the things I'm proud of about myself?

Or else hide them forever. Okay, I would hide. And maybe I would lie and pretend, but I would not give up. Rebellion was in the Kentucky blood of my unconquerable Granny Vaughn, and her blood was in me too.

East Side Avenue was lonelier than the old place and it didn't have a grapevine or a fig tree, but it had something else. An overgrown wild garden of flowers that somebody must have planted a long time ago in the empty compartments of the concrete foundation, and the flowers had come back, year after year.

There were tall blue Columbines sticking up from the grass, and bright yellow brown-eyed Susans barely peeping out. But best of all were the poppies. They were my favorites, a waving ocean of colors, with silky fluttery scarlet petals and purple centers. A swaying carpet of red and green. All day long the hot wind pushed at them, but they rose up again, and again. They were like brave soldiers, not for war, but just to be beautiful, and nothing could stop them. There's something glorious about poppies. They are so elegant, and they have a weedy wild smell that's not like anything else in the world. All summer long, my poppies danced in the sun and wind, and my garden was like a place in a fairy tale, and all of this was mine.

Sometimes at night I would sit on the cool concrete steps at the front of the foundation-house that was never going to be built, all by myself, and look up at the sacred dark sky. In Dallas there weren't many stars, not like Greensboro where the stars came out every night, bright milky-white with little halos around each one like they were melting into the sky. But I looked up anyway, because I knew they were still up there, somewhere, just behind the dark.

That summer, Daddy set out all by himself in the car for a three-week trip to see his brother Pete in Arizona. Maybe he needed somebody to talk to. Uncle Pete already had a divorce, so maybe he could help Daddy understand what was happening to him, and to us. Daddy drove the old DeSoto through the huge empty deserts of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. I guess it gave him a lot of time to think, because when he came back he was different.

When did it start? The empty space between them, that gradually grew. I think Mama felt it, but there was nothing she could do to stop it. It came so silently. It was like the sea-tide that

comes with the cycles of the moon.

She never said anything mean about him. That was not the way she was. I think she loved him but she never knew how to ask for what she needed, for herself. I guess he didn't give her what she needed, and so the need grew, and she started to become that to him – needy. He was not strong enough for that. He knew it, and I think it must have made him feel like a failure.

I didn't know then, and I wouldn't until I grew up, but now I think coming to Texas was a breaking-off point between two different lives. Small town, big town. Proud job, no job. Maybe leaving the police department was harder for him than any of us knew. He kept his badge for the rest of his life, in a small wooden box of his personal treasures,. When he died, it was given to me.

Men need to feel like heroes. The more Mama needed him and the more he failed her, the more he pulled away inside of himself, where no one could reach him.

Chapter 6: My Granny Vaughn

Jessie Vaughn was a remarkable woman for her time, or any time. She was independent, self-possessed, and dominant in both of her marriages. Some would say domineering. She was practical and unsentimental, a realist, a strong woman. With what little I know about her, it seems like she was someone who never was willing to settle for less than full ownership of her life. She was called headstrong, stubborn, willful and other things that a proper Kentucky lady should not be.

When I knew her, Granny was old and slow and nearly crippled, but she still stood her ground. She had the soul of a warrior. She went her way quietly and she didn't say much, but everybody knew she was a force to be reckoned with.

For me, Granny was a large soft sheltering presence. She was sixty-five when I was born, and had suffered a stroke that made her deaf and disabled. By the time I was two, she was recovered enough to "get around," and she became my refuge and my fortress. Tommy could easily manipulate Mama, and through her he had some control over Daddy. And me, he could terrorize freely, but not Granny. She would not be manipulated, fooled, or intimidated by anyone. She feared nothing, except being put into the County Home, which was the place old folks were put by their grown children when they got too weak to fight anymore.

Daddy called her "a mean disagreeable old woman," but for me, she was quiet and kind. He said she was "headstrong," but that sounded like a good thing to me. In her old age she was still an iron spirit, but for me she was the soul of infinite patience. Whatever she had been before, whatever the sins of her past, she loved me. It was Granny and me, partners. If nobody else had the time for us, it was still okay; we had each other.

She had time for me. She listened to my endless baby chatter and said, "Do tell!" and "My, my!" and I knew she was deaf, but that was okay, because she always listened and she always knew what I meant.

Daddy and Granny never did get along. When he got mad at her, he called her "a bossy, willful woman" and other things which she always pretended not to hear. She had a hearing aid but she hated the thing and refused to wear it. She claimed to be "deaf as a post," but I was not so sure. Anyway, she never said anything about him, and I think that drove him crazier than anything she could have said.

Daddy said Jessie Vaughn had four husbands. "She either divorced 'em, or just "ran 'em off," he said. "She even shot one of them, and claimed it was self-defense." I didn't know if that was true or not. It could have been. But anyway, nobody died.

Granny wasn't awfully fond of her son-in-law either. Maybe she disapproved of him because he was out of work so much. Well, to be fair, the year we came to Texas, the war ended and all the soldiers came home and got all the jobs.

"You don't want to spend your best years on a man that can't carry his own weight," Granny told her daughter, "You'd just as well get shed of him and go on about your business." Jessie Vaughn was not shy to speak her mind, but whether it was good advice or not, we'll never know, because Mama didn't take it.

Sometimes when Daddy got upset with me he would say to Mama, "She gets that from her Granny Vaughn... she's got that hardheaded-streak, just like Jessie Vaughn." He said it every time I tried to I stand up for myself (which did me no good anyhow). There may have been a grain of truth to it, but I said, *No, I'm not just like Granny Vaughn*, because from the very start, I knew I was not just-like anybody. I was always and only just like me.

Tommy loved to torment Granny almost as much as he loved to torment me. He would hide her teeth or her glasses or one of her shoes and then laugh while she searched for them. She knew he had done it. “He does these things just to vex me,” she said. But Mama said “You must have misplaced them.” She didn’t believe Granny and she didn’t believe me. She suspected we were in cahoots against Tommy. Well, maybe we were.

When I was little, Granny was my sidekick, my partner and my guardian protector from any hurtful or scary things in my small world. I could run to her and hide behind her skirt when Tommy was chasing me. She would put one arm out and catch him with the palm of her hand on the top of his head and hold him at arm’s length so he couldn’t hurt me. He kept right on charging, swinging his little fists wildly, trying to punch her in the stomach and kick her poor arthur-itus knees, but he couldn’t reach her because her arm was longer than his arms and legs were. He looked like he was doing a silly little dance, flailing his arms like a windmill. Then he would stomp off, calling her names. She told him, “Your sister is not your personal punching bag.” I didn’t know what a punching bag was, but I knew that I was safe when she was around.

Mama got upset with Granny then because Tommy went and told her that Granny had pulled his hair. She never did, but I think she would have, if necessary, to protect me from him. Mama always believed him, no matter what. Again and again I wondered, *Why can’t she see?*

After I got bigger I played in Granny’s room with my dolls and my books. I threaded the needle of her old Singer sewing machine and changed the bobbins for her, while she made quilts or sewed doll clothes for me. The sewing machine was run by a foot-treadle, a flat ironwork plate at the bottom of it near the floor. When she rocked that foot-treadle back and forth with her feet, the

machine went humming along and the needle went up and down, stitching seams and making pleasant little whirring and clicking sounds.

I turned the radio on and sang the old-fashioned love-songs on the FM station, about lost loves and broken hearts. I knew all the words. I sang to myself and played with my dolls. Sometimes Granny gave me scraps of bright colors and I would fashion some sort of garments for my dolls, anchoring them with my own needle and thread and a tiny silver thimble, all of which she kept in a small drawer of the sewing machine's wooden cabinet just for me. Any sort of thing I made, whether it was a doll dress or a drawing or a little song, Granny praised me to the very skies for it.

The stroke must have taken some of the starch out of her sails. She was slow and shuffling, but that was just the right speed for me to keep up with. And neither age nor illness ever took the stubborn strength out of her character. Daddy called his mother-in-law "the most cantankerous woman on earth" and he said that when she was younger she'd had "a will of iron, the determination of Job, and the combustible temper of kerosene." To hear Daddy tell it, she still did. And yet she never was anything but gentle to me. I loved my Granny more than anything. She was the safe harbor from which I could venture out on my tricycle unafraid, and know she would be there every time I came back up the hill.

I never knew much about Granny's early life or about my maternal grandfather, just that they lived in Lexington Kentucky where the famous Kentucky Derby race was run, every year. As a child I had fantasized that my grandmother Jessie was an aristocrat, a southern belle, beautiful and proud like Scarlett O'Hara. I imagined her with long auburn hair that reached all the way down to her waist when it wasn't pinned up high on her head in that elegant way women wore their hair back then.

In my vivid imagination, she was one of those society ladies

at the racetrack, with a fancy hat, drinking mint juleps among pure-blooded racehorses ridden by lean young jockeys in bright-colored racing silks, and everything was elegant and wonderful. Well, for all I knew, it *could* be true.

Mama had never told me about her mother or her childhood until one of her last letters to me before she died. That was the first time I learned what it was like for her, to be Jessie Vaughn's child. She wrote:

"Dearest Vickie,

In your letter you asked about your grandmother Jessie Vaughn, what her life and mine was like long ago. I will tell you as much as I can about your ancestors, from scraps of information my mother told me about her life.

Her father's name was George Blakeman and her mother's name was Amanda. They lived on a large farm inherited from his father. They were not well-off but lived comfortably, farming the land with the help of several Negro families living on their land. The slaves had been freed, but with no education or money, many chose to stay on with white families that had been good to them even when they were enslaved. Kentucky was neutral during the Civil War and was sympathetic towards runaway slaves and often helped them on their way to the north. George and Amanda Blakeman had four children: Robert the eldest, Belle who died when she was 16, the younger son Ben, and then 14 years later, Jessie, my mother, was born.

When Jessie was very young, her father went blind and her mother had to take over the management of the farm. Money was scarce and the Negroes were given a share of the money earned from the crops, so there was very little cash, but their parents managed to send Robert to college. Before he was able to finish, the Spanish-American war broke out so

he joined up. He became a lieutenant and received many decorations. Then there was enough money for the younger son Ben (Benjamin Franklin Blakeman) to go to college. He got a masters degree and taught Latin and Greek at Center College in Danville Kentucky for twenty years. After the Spanish-American war was over, Robert took up his studies again and became a lawyer. In his later years he wrote a book on Kentucky law.

On the farm Jessie, my mother, was growing up. She was raised mostly by an old colored Nanny because her mother was running the farm, keeping the books, and taking care of a blind husband. I think my mother got about the same as a high school education while living on the farm to help with the work, as girls were often home-schooled in those days. When her father died, her two older brothers Robert and Ben were gone from home and making a living on their own.

So now the widow (my mother's mother, your great-grandmother) decided to sell the farm. She signed over enough land and the homes of the Negro families living on the place for them to do quite well on their own. She gave them livestock – cows and mules etc. and farm equipment. Then she bought a house in Lexington for herself and my mother Jessie, where they took in boarders.

Mother began training to be a nurse at Garfield Hospital in Washington DC, but she never did graduate because her mother became ill, so she went back to Lexington to take care of her and the boarding house.

That was when my father, Robert Fletcher Long, came on the scene. He was from Peoria Illinois. He was broke and out of work, but his mother sent a note saying he was a

distant relative and if they would put him up for a while, he would repay them. His mother was a third cousin of my mother's mother, so they took him in. He looked for a job, and paid his way with them by doing odd jobs and repairs to the house, like painting, and patching the roof.

He was young and handsome, with blue eyes and curly light auburn hair, and people said he had a charming personality. I think Mother hadn't had much opportunity for romance when she was young, and now an old maid of about 35, she was swept off her feet by his attentions. He got a job as an auto repair man but still stayed on with them. He had lived with them about a year when Jessie's mother died, and then he asked her to marry him.

He was 11 years younger than her, but he said that didn't matter – that he really loved her. Being a drifter and not too fond of work, he figured that the house and money she had in the bank would be a good thing for him. My mother was 36 when they married. He was my natural father and I was legitimate.

He couldn't hold a job very long, and soon she had to take up nursing to support them. He worked at odd jobs, carpenter I think at the time of my birth. But he drank so much that she ran him off, got a divorce and sold the home in Lexington and then she took me, at two years old, and went to San Francisco California. She found work nursing and I was boarded out with a German woman and her 12-year-old daughter. People didn't go to the hospital as much in those days, but had nurses stay in their home and care for them. Mother said she couldn't keep me with her.

The woman who kept me was Mrs. Searle. She was good to me and I loved her and called her Mama Searle. I was just

learning to talk, and she and her daughter spoke German to each other so I picked it up. I couldn't speak much English until I was almost 5 years old. Mother said she visited me when she could, but often she would be on cases where the patient had a disease I might catch from Mother visiting me – anyhow that's the story I was told later. I only saw her about once a month. When I was about three and a half, she decided to go back to Kentucky. I was brokenhearted to be taken away from Mama Searle.

We went by train and had a berth on a sleeping car. Mother said I woke up during the night crying and talking baby-talk in German. She was almost a stranger and English was still a strange language for me. She was a forty-four-year-old woman with a young child she couldn't understand and no husband or close relatives to turn to for help or advice.

Back in Lexington Kentucky she took a room in a boarding house and made arrangements for the landlady to take care of me while she looked for work. I was left with strangers again, lonely and scared. But Mother must have had a little money saved and she didn't go out so much on nursing cases for a while. I guess my mother tried to understand me and show me some affection, but she wasn't used to children and became angry and frustrated trying to make me talk English and behave. I remember getting slapped and my hair pulled a lot and being afraid of her. I was glad when she went out, because the old landlady didn't keep close watch over me and I could roam the house and play outside when mother was gone.

Then the landlady's widowed brother came to visit, and he met mother. Next weekend he asked mother out to a movie. So the courtship began. I liked him from the start

because he always noticed me. Most grown-ups ignored me like I wasn't there. He brought me candy and patted me on the head and said I was a pretty little girl. No one had ever said that to me! Of course he was mostly trying to get mother to like him. He had been a widower for several years and was living alone except for his 17- year-old son Howard. I don't know how long the courtship lasted, but then they got married.

You asked if your Granny was a southern belle. No not really, she was more what in those days was considered "a handsome woman." Dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Rather domineering, strong and healthy. Just what Daddy needed to keep house for him and his son. It wasn't exactly a love match, but advantageous for them both. It was a home for me and her. She wouldn't have to go out to work and leave me with someone. I guess it was an ideal arrangement, it was for me at least. I adored my stepfather, and always called him Daddy. I had never known my real father.

He had a library of books for me to read, and there was the Kentucky River at our front door, horses to ride, and fourteen acres of beautiful country to play on. We had chickens, cows, pigs and kittens. Things I'd never seen before. This lasted eight years, the happiest years of my childhood. I was twelve or thirteen when she left him and nearly broke my heart. From there she took me to Greensboro North Carolina.

I guess I better stop here or I'll never get this mailed to you. Later I'll tell you about the events that occurred from then on till I met your father and we got married, and about the time there was a fire in the vacant lot, right next to our house in Greensboro.

—Love, Mama

She never did write the part about how she and Daddy met.

I think my Granny always had a wanderlust, and as she got old she had a longing to leave Texas and go back to Greensboro. She had made the trip twice before, and she came back to Texas. I guess she wasn't very happy living with us, even at Beacon and Columbia. Then when we moved to East Side Avenue and things got worse between Daddy and Mama, she must have known it, even though Mama tried to hide it from us kids.

By then Granny was seventy-something. She had lived a hardworking life, and she was in constant pain from her arthritis. She couldn't manage the stairs anymore, so she could only sit in her room all day and sew, or read with a big magnifying glass. I had gotten older and was in school, so even I didn't need her as much as before. Things must have been lonely for her. She wanted to go back to North Carolina to spend her last years with her old friends.

We couldn't afford the train fare, but Daddy finally gave in, only on one condition. He told Mama, "If she goes back out there this time, she's not coming back here. She's got to choose one place or the other!"

The night we put Granny on the train was the strangest and saddest time for me. I knew somehow that a part of my life was ending, I could feel it, and I think Mama knew it too. I don't remember much about that night, just the images of the train station, because I have seen it again and again in my dreams.

There are two large heavy wooden doors, side by side. They have thick glass windows through them so you can see inside. Both doors have long shiny brass handles to open them with, that look very serious and important like the handles on a casket.

Inside the station it is noisy and smoky and dim, full of people

walking around in a hurry and talking and carrying bags and dragging trunks like Granny's, and Negro porters pushing little carts full of more bags and trunks. A whole lot of people are going someplace on the trains. A scratchy loudspeaker voice overhead calls out the names and numbers of the trains that are coming and going and which track they are on.

We all said goodbye. Granny bent down to kiss me on the cheek, and she patted Tommy gently on the head. Mama and the porter walked with her to the boarding platform while Daddy and Tommy and I waited near the big doors. When Mama came back we all went out to the car and Daddy drove us home.

They didn't talk. It was getting dark. I looked out the car window and my stomach was shaking, sort of trembling. I felt sick in a strange way, and I didn't know why. I knew my Granny was leaving us again, and she had left before, but it seemed different this time. I didn't know that I would never see her again.

With one less mouth to feed, things would be a little easier for Mama, but the night we took Granny to the train, she cried. It was the only time I ever saw her cry, but I bet it wasn't the only time she did. She probably always hid someplace to cry, like me.

I remember Granny's tired old eyes; they were kind and watery blue. She listened to me with her eyes, because she couldn't hear. I knew she was deaf, but it didn't matter, because she always listened, and praised my childish doings as if I were smart and special. I never knew it then, but she loved me in ways that she had not been able to love her own child. She was old when I was born. Maybe living so long had changed her. For me she was always the same, completely patient and kind.

The very best thing about my Granny was that she was always there, never very far away. When I was small she was my

rock, my mooring place, and my shelter in any storm. In Greensboro, winter evenings before I went to bed, she would call me into the kitchen where it was warm, and have me sit on a little stool at her feet. She put a tiny speck of butter on the top of my head, and as it melted she brushed and brushed it all through my baby-fine blonde hair. Mama scolded her for that, and told her not to do it, but she did it anyway.

The memory I treasure most was just the warm comforting softness of her. In my first few years on earth I rested cozy and safe in her lap on the front porch. Her rayon-silk dresses smelled of lilac dusting powder and a whiff of spirits of camphor for her arthritis. I clung to her bosom while she rocked me to sleep in the porch swing or her rocking chair. All my world revolved slowly and calmly around the quiet summer night and the squeak of the swing or the rhythm of the rockers on the creaky boards of the front porch.

Out in the night a thousand crickets sang and their music traced patterns on the darkness like lace. A big round cookie moon came up and slowly climbed the evening sky, and the little white stars began to peep out, one by one by one, until the dark sky was sprinkled with thousands of them. The whole starry universe flowed over us, and with everything in my world warm and safe, blissfully sweet and perfectly perfect, I fell asleep.

My grandmother was not a saint. She had never been beautiful or aristocratic the way I imagined. She may not have been a very good mother, and as a mother-in-law must have been very challenging. Tommy was Mama's and Daddy's favorite, somehow I just wasn't as good. I knew I was just "the other child." But to Granny, I was somebody special.

I was her favorite and I knew it. That changed how I felt about myself, and built a bedrock of faith on the inside of me that would hold firm through a lifetime of storms. Her respect gave me

an assurance that I counted for something. She taught me, not with words, but with a steady, quiet love, that no matter what anybody said, *I was good enough*.

Chapter 7: East Side Avenue, Part Two

Through some of the worst times, when Daddy couldn't find any work, Mama supported all of us on her waitress pay and tips. It was a job that didn't pay much, but without a high school diploma it was the best she could get. She was a good waitress too, and she did all she could for us, but when we moved to East Side Avenue, things got harder. Sometimes there was nobody home and there was no food in the house.

So I went to the big Safeway store, strolled around to look casual, and then stole something. Twinkies or cupcakes mostly, or a can of chili. Anything like a loaf of bread was too big. It had to be something small enough to hide, so I could walk out with it. One time I stole a package of pork chops. It was the strangest feeling, the package of cold meat tucked up under my dress against my belly. But after I got those pork chops home and fried them up with lots of pepper and salt, *oh they were so good.*

My playmate Patricia had a big collie dog named Lady. Pat knew how to go through the big swinging doors of the butcher's area in the back of the store and ask for dog bones. They had boxes and bins full of the "ends" of the chops and steaks, where it wasn't as nice, or it had too much fat or too much bone. If you asked for dog bones, they would let you take all you wanted. It was perfectly good meat. Pat took some for her dog, and I took some for myself.

If they asked me what kind of dog I had, I would say, "A big dog." If they asked me what my dog's name was. I said "Skipper." I did have a dog once, a stray I named Skipper. He wasn't big, and after a few days he ran off, but anyway there actually was a dog named Skipper once, so it wasn't really a lie. Well, not completely anyway. Well, okay, it was a lie. I was not afraid to lie and steal. I

was a survivor. Ashamed, but not afraid.

Out by the loading dock in back of the store, they set out boxes and baskets of stuff for the trash pick-up. All sorts of good food, and they were just throwing it away! If you got there before the garbage truck came, you could get potatoes and turnips and beets and greens, even tomatoes and peaches and freckled bananas that were clean and perfectly good. Well not perfect, but good. Some of them were bruised or overripe or maybe they had some moldy spots, that's all. For me it was fantastic; I could just help myself to all that food and it wasn't even stealing – it was okay to just take it.

Maybe I didn't have everything some other kids had, but I didn't feel poor. I didn't really think about it. I had a huge front yard with a rope swing on the big pecan tree and my own wild garden of gorgeous poppies. I knew where the best climbing trees were, and the best roofs too. I knew where the biggest blackberries grew, and a mulberry tree in a vacant lot that nobody else knew about. I could run, really fast, through the park and the neighborhoods, and even though I wasn't supposed to anymore (because it wasn't ladylike) I did it anyway. It made me happy, and it didn't cost anything. I, summer I went barefoot every day, free to wander anywhere I wanted, and life was full of interesting things to discover, new adventures, and my friend Patricia to do things with.

There was an old lady, Pat and I used to play in the back yard behind her house. She seemed nice, and she didn't seem to mind us there. She had a canary in a cage and sometimes we would look in through her back parlor window at it, and listen to it singing. One day we were doing that, and maybe she thought we were snooping or something, anyway this time she came running outside waving a broom and hollering at us and chased us out of the yard.

She yelled “Get offa my property! Y’all po’ white trash!”

What was she so mad about? We weren’t doing anything.

“And don’t come around here no more!” She hollered after us even as we took off in a sprint down the alley.

“Or I’m gonna call the Po-lice.” She was all upset and kind of like, crazy, so we just got out of there as quick as we could.

That surprised me. I’d never thought that I was poor white trash. I’d heard of that, but I didn’t know exactly what it was, and it never occurred to me that maybe I was that. I was poor, and I was white. Was I white-trash?

But I didn’t believe that, not for one minute, because I secretly believed that I had the blood of aristocracy in my veins, but just nobody knew it. It came down to me from my Kentucky grandmother. And even if it was mostly fantasy, I believed that my great-grandparents were somebody. And even if *that* wasn’t true, maybe *I could be*. Someday.

When summer ended and school started, I got chosen for sixth grade chorus. There were thirty of us, boys and girls. I sang the high harmony part called soprano. Mrs. Campbell, the Music teacher, taught the chorus after school. She directed us like a symphony conductor, waving her arms in the air as if she was stirring up a cloud full of angels, only it was us.

“*Lo, how a rose is blooming...*” we sang so earnestly, in beautiful four-part harmony. “*To show God’s love aright... she bore to men a savior, when half-spent was ... the... night.*”

Sometimes we sang in auditorium programs at school and even at other schools or churches. Once at Christmas vacation we were asked to sing on the radio! But I got the flu, and I was so sick.

I begged Mama, “Please, please, PLEASE let me go! I’ve GOT to go. We’re going to be on the RADIO!”

“I know, honey,” she said. She always called me honey when she was going to say No to something. “But you’re sick and it’s all the way across town on the bus.”

“Daddy said he could take me in the car.” I pleaded, and even though my head was pounding and spinning in a fog, I said, “I feel much better today,” and I tried to sound convincing. It didn’t fool her one bit.

“We’ll see.” she said.

I lay in my bed barely conscious for three more days. I wasn’t getting any better. I gazed through the blur of headache and half-sleep at my sparkling white choir robe, all crisply-starched and ironed, hanging on the outside of the closet door to keep it from crushing. *I’ve got to go. I’ve just GOT to!*

When the day came, I got up and took a shower. I washed my hair and the steam opened up my nose a little. That helped. By a miracle Mama let me go, and she even stayed and sat with the other parents. I don’t remember very much about the concert. I was in the back row on the highest riser and I had to concentrate on not falling off. I was dizzy and a little bit nauseous, but once the program started, I forgot about that. I don’t think I sang very well, but I was there! I was on the radio! Afterward I actually did feel better.

I loved singing. It was like floating on sheer joy. It was magical. We were just a bunch of kids, but our voices were sincere and clear and true, tender and beautiful. Mrs. Campbell taught us to sing the word “God” with a round, full, deep “O” instead of “Gahd.” She received our sweet Texas-twangy child-voices with love and respect, and shaped them into the sounds of her choir of angels.

Nothing else I had ever done had lifted me up like that, from what I thought I was, to a place where I experienced what I could be. Sixth grade chorus gave me a feeling I didn't get at home. It made me One Of Us, and I mattered. Singing gave me the joyful experience of lifting my voice in a glorious way with all the others, and together we became more than ourselves, we became music.

I was living in a troubled and confused time then, with a brother who hated me and a mother whose life was crumbling into divorce, alcoholism, and loss of faith. There was no closeness in what was left of our family. We were living in poverty which I was secretly ashamed of, and I didn't have much more to hope for. But when I sang, I became a different me. I was somebody that had a real worth somehow. Mrs. Campbell smiled at us. We were special. For that little while, the possible-me flowed out and joined the voices of other kids like me, and that changed us.

It was a hot weekend in May when Mama got the letter in the mail. Not much fuss was made over the news. Mama and Daddy were still separated upstairs and downstairs and not talking to each other. In a way, all of us were separated but nobody knew what to do. When she called me in from the yard to tell me, she was very quiet. Her eyes looked red like she'd been crying, but her voice was calm when she told me that her mother, my Granny Vaughn, had died. That was all she said.

I took the news in silence too. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to feel either, except kind of sad and empty. It meant Granny wasn't coming back anymore. I stood there for a long awkward time, and finally Mama said, almost in a whisper, "Go back out and play now."

I went back outside and sat down by myself in the middle of

the yard in the lush green grass. I tried to imagine how to feel about the news that my Granny had died. That *anyone* had died. *What does that mean?* I felt sad, but the sadness was sort of a floating thing; it didn't have anything to hold on to.

I was twelve and I had not seen Granny since I was nine or ten, when she left to go back to North Carolina, and Daddy said she couldn't come back here anymore. I think that tore away a part of me, and now the news, that she had died, fell onto old scars that didn't know how to feel any new pain. I just knew that she was gone, and I hoped she was up there in the sky with God, like she told me. I comforted myself with knowing that now her poor old knees wouldn't hurt her every night anymore.

I had no real concept of God or heaven. Most of what I'd heard seemed like a fairy tale. Now all I felt was a deep sense of loneliness and peacefulness. I didn't know how to feel anything else.

There in the yard, everything looked so beautiful. It was almost summer, and my poppies were blooming in the wild foundation-garden, scarlet red, with their petals all fluttering, and dancing in the hot breeze. The grass was thick and lush and green; brilliant light was everywhere, sparkling, hurting my eyes, and everything was colors. I sat in the shade of the big pecan tree feeling sober and very silent for a long time, but I didn't know how to feel sorrow. There was an achy little empty place in me, but that was not new. It came the night she left on the train. Sitting there in the middle of all this beauty and this glorious sunshine, I wondered and wondered, *How should I feel?* The idea of death seemed so far away, I could almost believe it wasn't true.

My mind wandered to thoughts of the brave and wonderful thoroughbred horses that soon, this very day, would run the biggest race of the year, in Lexington where Mama was born. I was in love with racehorses, and my favorite one that year was

Native Dancer. He was called “The Grey Ghost” and he had won every race he ran. It was 1953, the day of the Kentucky Derby, and he was the “favorite,” the sure bet to win. I climbed through the window of Daddy’s apartment and I turned on the TV set just as the race was starting.

A bell clanged and the gates flew open and the whole row of horses sprang forth at once as if they were shot from slingshots. They charged down the track, thundering along with their legs thrashing fiercely like the devil himself was right behind them.

The horses were clumped together in a pack, bumping each other and fighting hard for positions near the rail. Somehow Native Dancer got cut off, he was bumped and fouled twice by other horses and slammed against the rail on the first turn. He stumbled, almost knocked off his feet. He lost ground and fell behind, but he didn’t give up, he just ran harder.

From the rear of the pack he came pounding his way back up toward the front, around the outside, coming from way, way back, lunging forward with all his heart and fierce determination, gaining and gaining with incredible strength and speed...

In front of the black and white TV set I held my breath. I felt as if my heart would explode. It was pounding so hard I could feel it shaking my whole body.

The great horse ran as hard as he could, astonishingly gaining, gaining, pulling closer and closer to the front of the pack, and the crowd of thousands were on their feet, screaming...

Native Dancer came thundering across the finish line an unbelievable, spectacular, heroic, heartbreaking, close second-place. It was the first and only race he ever lost in his career.

After the race I went back out to the yard. I sat in the grass again and thought about my Granny. I wondered what it was like to leave the earth forever and go to live with God. I didn't know much about God, but I hoped He would let her travel if she wanted to, and He would fix it so she was young and strong with good legs that didn't hurt.

Then my mind drifted back to thoughts about the courage and beauty of the great gray horse who ran with all his heart, and still didn't win the race. Both of those things made me sad. So I let my Granny from Kentucky, out there somewhere, slip away and be free. I knew she wanted me to.

After that, things went on the same old way, except quieter. Fall came again and I went back to school. Then one morning something happened. It was a Monday and I was just beginning to wake up, still drowsy and warm in my bed. I heard a sound, like a big THUMP in the bathroom hallway, then a little moan or something. I leaned out from my bed and looked around the doorway.

It was Mama. She was in the hall, so all I could see was just the top of her head and her hands as she bobbed and struggled to get up from the floor. In a minute I heard Tommy there too; he must have been trying to help her get up.

"I'm not drunk" she mumbled. "Charlene must have given me some goofballs. I'm not drunk." Charlene was her girlfriend; they both worked the cocktail shift at the Diamond Horseshoe Bar and Grill.

"I took some pills." she said. "Charlene gave me some pills.

They must have been goofballs. I'm not drunk."

It was always awful to see how she got when she drank too much. I never used to see her like that when we lived at Beacon and Columbia, and it scared me. It was like she was not herself, and it gave me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I turned away. I wasn't sure what was happening, and for a minute I thought maybe I was dreaming. I slid back under the covers. I could hear her talking to Tommy. Her voice was blurry. I listened and tried to figure it out. It was something like, "I spent the night at Charlene's to make Daddy jealous..." Then she and Tommy went and sat on the edge of her bed in plain sight, so I knew I must be awake. It was 7:15. I had to get up and go to school.

Tommy had a funny look on his face like he was angry but sad at the same time. Mama kept on saying "I'm not drunk" in that mumbly voice, and the expression on her face was like somebody who just got caught doing something they shouldn't. I had a bad feeling, the kind I always got when something was happening and everybody else knew what it was, and I didn't.

I got up and started to get dressed. Mama looked at me for a second and then she turned back to Tommy. He looked like he was going to cry for a minute, but he didn't. Tommy never cried in his whole life. He scrunched his eyebrows together in a very serious look, like he was a grown-up, and he said "I believe you Mama."

All of it was a puzzle to me. Tommy knew a lot of things I didn't know about, because he was two years older than me. He knew dirty words and other grown-up stuff, and I think he knew what Mama meant. Later I asked him what goofballs were.

"They're pills that make you goofy," he said "like you're drunk. And if you drink beer with them too, you get double-drunk and you can't walk good." So I figured that was why she fell. She

broke her wrist in the fall, and then she couldn't work, so she lost her job.

There were so many things I didn't understand then, but nobody I could ask. Tommy might have known, but he was a teenage punk, he wanted nothing to do with a kid sister, so we were no help to each other. We were farther apart than ever. If he knew anything, he wasn't going to tell me. I think we both felt like the floor was falling out from under us, and we didn't know what to do. Whatever was happening between Mama and Daddy, it must have been going on longer than I thought, even before we moved to East Side.

The divorce came, and all of us moved out of the little house. Daddy moved first. I helped him carry things out to the car from his place downstairs. Mama was upstairs and she was upset. When I went back upstairs she told me the divorce was final, and she asked me whether I wanted to go with her or go with Daddy.

“What?” I stood there dumbfounded.

“Your father and I are not going to be together anymore,” she said, “and you and Tommy will have to say if you want to live with me or live with Daddy.” That was unimaginable, to have to choose.

Then she said, “If you went to live with Daddy, he could do more for you than I could. He could buy you nice things.” And she said some more stuff I can't remember now, but I got the message that she was hoping I'd go and live with Daddy, and sort of trying to talk me into it. I wasn't too surprised, because she had always liked Tommy the most, so I answered what I thought she wanted me to say.

Quietly and shyly I said, “I think I would like to live with Daddy.” The look on her face told me instantly: That was the

wrong answer. She was hurt, and I was very confused.

I thought, *Why do grown-ups say things backwards instead of what they really mean? If they would just say the truth to begin with, everything would be so much easier! I wouldn't always have to guess what they meant, and get it wrong!*

Really, she made me get it wrong. I said what I thought she wanted. I didn't mean to hurt her, honest I didn't. But the truth was, I really did want to go with Daddy. He was there during the day studying his correspondence course at the kitchen table, and he let me hang around downstairs with him and draw pictures at his desk. He said my horse drawings were really good. And back when we lived at Beacon and Columbia, he used to take all of us for drives out into the country, then we would stop at the Dairy Queen and have ice cream. I loved that. Then after they were "separated" and Daddy lived downstairs, he took me to see Vivian and Dimi, and sometimes other places with his friends Tut and Dottie, like swimming, and the State Fair.

I felt closer to Daddy than to Mama because he was around more, and because he liked me. But in the end, it didn't matter anyway. The court awarded custody of my brother and me to Mama, because in Texas, that was what they usually always did.

Chapter 8: The Red Brick Apartment Building

After that, Mama never laughed anymore. She just went to work every night. The heels were worn-down on her waitress shoes, but she painted them with the chalky white stuff in a bottle so they would look neat and clean. Her waitress uniforms went to the Chinese laundry to get washed and starched and ironed nice, because the laundromat made everything gray.

I had known something was different as soon as Daddy came back from his trip to see his brother in Arizona. He was quieter than before. He didn't smile much either, and after we all moved away from East Side Avenue, I could only see him sometimes on the weekends.

Mama found us a new place, a red brick apartment building. There wasn't any yard, just the street in front and a gravel parking lot in the back. The apartment was small, just one real room. The couch was right inside the door and then Mama's bed. There was an open space toward the back of the apartment, like a hall-space but wider, next to the kitchen. I guess it was supposed to be a dinette area. In the middle of that, one bare lightbulb dangled from the ceiling by a twisted electric cord. You pulled a little chain to turn it on, and it gave off a gloomy yellow light, just enough to find your way to the bathroom further down at the end of the hall. Tommy slept on the rollaway bed in that hall space by the kitchen, and Mama and I slept in her bed, until that guy came.

Then I slept on the couch and they slept in the bed. He was good-looking I guess, anyway he sure thought he was. He was mean to Mama, always telling her what to do. He told Tommy and me they were married, but I don't think it was true. Tommy didn't like him. I didn't like him either. He smiled at me a lot but it was a weird smile, it made me feel uncomfortable.

After he came and I had to sleep on the couch, I didn't mind that, except it was near the bed and I was embarrassed to get undressed in front of him. I had just turned thirteen and I was beginning to get very small buds of breasts. He always looked at me when I got ready to go to bed. I slept in my cotton panties and one of Tommy's old T-shirts, and the way he stared at me made me feel funny, like he shouldn't do that. I couldn't exactly say why; but it felt strange when he looked at me and grinned at me in that creepy way. I think Mama noticed it too. About four days later, he was gone. After that, nobody ever said anything more about it. I don't remember his name. That was about the time I started finding whiskey bottles in odd places around the apartment, those flat ones like the bums on East Side used to carry in their coat pockets. I found one in the freezer of the fridge once, and another time behind the couch, and one in the bathroom linen cabinet underneath the towels.

The apartment building had eight apartments on two floors., and the long hallways were dark and spooky even in the daytime. Our place was on the second floor, all the way in the back. I didn't know where Daddy lived then, but he came and got me sometimes on weekends and took me to see Vivian and Dimi while he talked with Pete and Julia, their dad and mom. We would have dinner there and watch TV, then I would spend the night at their house and Daddy would come back for me in the morning. Dr. Pete was Daddy's best friend ever since we came to Texas. Vivian and Dimi called my dad Uncle George and we called their dad Uncle Pete. He was a chiropractor, and while he was going to school for it, they had all lived in a trailer in San Antonio. Now they had a really nice house of their own and it was a really happy place to be. Tommy didn't come. He didn't want to see Daddy. I don't know why.

Vivian and Dimi's Mom and Dad both worked hard, but they

were together, and Vivian and her sister Dimi liked each other. Nobody picked on anybody. They always treated me like I was okay too, sort of like a cousin. Pete and Julia had squabbles once in a while, but they loved each other, they loved their girls, and loved my Dad like a brother.

After a while, Daddy met Helen, and then he took me to meet her. We all went to a movie. It was “Funny Face” starring Audrey Hepburn. Helen said she looked like me! I was thirteen, all dark eyes and awkwardness, skinny as a toothpick, and she said Audrey Hepburn looked like me! I liked Helen right away.

Summer was ending and I was going to start junior high school in the Fall. I had no idea how to act in that new world. I was thin and gangly and I didn’t have any good clothes. Helen took me shopping and bought me some new skirts and blouses, I was amazed at that. She did it for no reason, just to be nice.

By now, Tommy was fifteen. He was running around with a bunch of teenage boys that smoked cigarettes and talked dirty, all trying to BE somebody. They were not a real gang, just a bunch of kids. They broke into warehouses and people’s garages at night and stole things. One of the boys taught Tommy how to hot-wire ignitions to start cars without the key; he really bragged about that. Sometimes they would steal a car and drive around until it ran out of gas, then they left it there.

My brother was smart, but he didn’t like school. He left school at lunch period and just didn’t come back, looking for something more interesting to do. When we lived at the red brick apartment he was gone most of the time, so he didn’t hurt me as much, but the silent threat was always there. I didn’t hate my brother, but I feared and dreaded him. I hid my feelings about the way he treated me and the way Mama let him do it. I made my pledge to myself every single day, that I would always be as different from him as possible.

That meant I couldn't get mad, and I could never try to defend myself, because that would bring more punishment. I couldn't lie – especially that – because Tommy was a such a liar and I didn't want to be like him. He was really a genius liar. He was so clever and charming that people believed him just because they wanted to. No matter how obvious the lie was, he got away with it. The ones I heard the most were: “She’s crazy! I never even touched her.” or if he got caught, he’d say “It was an accident. I didn’t mean to.”

I was his pet victim. The injuries were mostly not too bad, but he made me have to be afraid all the time. He taught me that this was my share in life, to be treated like a punching bag for his entertainment, and our family rules said it was okay because he was a boy.

But there was one time– just once, ever, that my brother broke his own rules. I never expected that.

I was waiting for Patricia to come out to play, sitting by myself in a little rope swing we had made in the car-port behind the apartment building. It was a stupid swing, made out of some scraggly old jute rope we’d found. It wasn't strong at all. I was sitting in it, swaying a little, not even swinging, when all of a sudden the rope broke. It just snapped – and I hit the ground really hard.

The next thing I knew I was on my back on the gravel in horrible pain and I couldn't breathe. My chest felt like a car ran over it and squashed all the air out. When I tried to suck air in, I couldn't. I struggled desperately to draw a breath, but no matter how hard I tried, no air came in! Instead it was making a strange ugly honking sound. *Honk... honk...*

I couldn't breathe, I couldn't scream, I was terrified, and I was lying there, crazy-wild with panic. Then up the driveway, of

all the people in the world, came Tommy.

The first thing he did was kick me in the shoulder with the toe of his sneaker. Not very hard, more like you would nudge a dead squirrel on the pavement to see if it's really dead. All I could do was keep on desperately trying to breathe. *Honk... honk... honk...* with a frantic look on my face.

He said, "Stop that! What's the matter with you?"

I looked up at him with terror in my eyes. *Honk... honk...* I couldn't speak, I could only make the honking noises. *Honk...* I tried so hard to get air, even the littlest bit, into my lungs, *honk...* but I couldn't. He kicked me again.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Stop that! Get up!"

It took several horribly long minutes *honk... honk...* before the honking subsided enough and there was a tiny bit of air in me so I could squeak out the words, "I can't." *Honk... honk...*

The jarring fall had knocked all the wind out of me and it had done something bad to my spine. All I remember was being terrified and desperate to breathe. The kicks didn't matter. I didn't expect him to help me; he was simply irrelevant and it didn't even matter that he was standing there, *honk...* looking down at me, and *honk...* watching me die.

He must have figured out I wasn't fooling, something was really wrong. Then, incredibly, he picked me up and lugged me back to the house, and somehow he got me up the stairs.

I had injured my spine. For days, the agony in my lower back continued at full fury without any relief. I lay in my bed whimpering in pain all day and all night for four days, and finally Mama called Daddy and he took me to see Dr. Pete, at his chiropractor office.

He put me on a hard black table and then with his huge strong

hands, he did a sort of hip-twist movement of me that played my spine like a xylophone, and with a musical series of pops and clicks, my bones obeyed, and the pain stopped.

Later I would always wonder, *Did Tommy really do that to help me?* I always thought so. There must have been a little bit of compassion in him. Not love maybe, but something, some kind of concern. He could have just walked away in disgust, like he usually would have done, but that time he didn't. He didn't walk away.

Daddy had met Helen at the Greater Dallas Club where he worked. She worked part-time on the switchboard there for two weekends a month, the times when her ex-husband took her little girls to visit his parents in Conroe Texas. I think it was like how Daddy took me on the weekend sometimes, Sam took Mary and Martha. Helen worked full time at State Farm Insurance Company and extra part time at the Country Club to support herself and her girls. By then, Daddy had worked his way up to Maître d' at the club.

My Daddy was handsome. He had thick black hair and deep dark brown eyes, Greek eyes, where his soul showed through. He knew how to be dignified. He didn't own the tuxedo he wore at work, but he looked very elegant in it. He looked like Gregory Peck in a movie.

Helen liked him, and he liked her too. She had sparkling blue eyes, as bright as his were dark, and I think she was enchanted by his polite refined manner. (Enchanted was one of my favorite new words. It means you think somebody is so wonderful that it's almost like magic.) I didn't know it then, and maybe they didn't know it either, but they were falling in love.

Daddy started bringing me to Helen's house for the weekends.

She taught me to make baking-powder biscuits from scratch. I got dusty clouds of flour all over her kitchen floor, but she didn't mind, and the biscuits were fabulous. Her girls were eight and ten and I was thirteen, just about right for playmates.

It was one of those Sunday nights, when I came back from a weekend visit with Daddy. I had stayed at Helen's house, and her girls and I played together like sisters all day long till dinnertime. Then Daddy came and we all had dinner together, and that was the best part. It was a perfect day.

I was feeling tired and happy when Daddy dropped me off in front of the red brick apartment building at ten o'clock, and watched until I was safely inside before he drove away.

As I started down the first-floor hallway, I flipped the light-switch on. It's the kind that only stays on for a quick minute and then goes out all by itself, and you have to walk the rest of the way in the dark. It went out.

In pitch black I climbed the stairs to the second floor to our apartment. I fished in my pocket for my key and I noticed the door was not quite closed. I pushed it open and went in.

Tommy was standing right inside the door. He must have just got home a minute before me. The instant I stepped through the door, he grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me around toward the window.

"Don't look!" he said.

The window blinds were closed; there was nothing to look at. I wondered, *What in the world is he doing?*

"Don't look at what?" and I turned to look over my shoulder, and then I saw it.

A strange ugly man, an old guy, is coming out of the bathroom at the other end of the hallway, walking toward us. The

space behind him is flooded with the yellow light from the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. Even in the shadows of it, I can see that he is naked, and I can see his thing.

Behind him a second later, Mama came out of the bathroom and she was naked too. When she saw Tommy and me standing there, she stopped suddenly and dashed back into the bathroom.

Then the man saw us. He muttered some cuss-words. He grabbed his clothes off the bed and hurried to put them on. Then with his shoes in his hand and still cursing at us, he shoved me and Tommy out of his way and went out the door.

We both stood there frozen to the spot. Mama came back out, wearing her bathrobe. The apartment was dark except for the dull yellow light from the hallway bulb. I had walked into something that I couldn't understand.

“Who was that man? What was he doing here?”

Mama dropped herself into the chair and started to cry.

“Please forgive me!” she said. “I didn’t do anything. Please forgive me!”

My mind reeled. *What is happening? I don’t understand...*

It was like one of those nightmares where things that can’t really happen are happening.

Like you’re falling off a cliff into the ocean, and you know it’s a dream but you can’t wake up, so you can’t stop yourself from falling and falling and falling.

She had been drinking. She looked awful. I'd seen her like that before, but it was worse this time. She looked like somebody I didn't even know.

... like when there’s a car crashed on the highway. You stare at it. You really don’t want to see it, but you can’t look away.

Mama kept saying the same thing, “Please forgive me... I didn’t do anything... please forgive me.” But that didn’t make any sense. I tried to figure it out, but I couldn’t. If she didn’t do anything, why was she saying please forgive me? What was it that she didn’t do? And what was that awful man doing here? Why were they walking around in the dark, naked?

I was shocked and confused. I was mad at her for being drunk, and yet I was sad for her too. Sad that she was like this, and I knew she couldn’t help it, and I couldn’t help her either. She was helpless and I was helpless and Tommy was helpless and there we all were, and she just kept on saying it, over and over: “Please forgive me... I didn’t do anything... please forgive me.” And then, all of a sudden, there was a sort of ringing in my ears, and then, everything went still.

Like the film broke and the movie stopped.

I felt completely calm.

All of a sudden it didn’t matter anymore.

The bulb in the hall-space swinging gently on its cord made the shadows sway slowly back and forth across the walls, and everything started to fade away into the dirty yellow light.

I sat down in the living room on one of the dinette chairs. Tommy was sitting on the couch in the dark at the edge of the pool of dim light from the hall-space, I couldn’t see his face. Long shadows flooded like muddy water across the floor. I sat looking at the floor under the chair where Mama sat leaning toward us, half in shadow, half in light. She was saying something to us, trying to explain, but her voice seemed very faint and far away.

I’m dreaming this. I will wake up, and this will go away.

I felt my mind and my body come apart, and then they were two things, standing side by side, silently watching us, watching

everything. They were both me, but not me.

I am not here, and this is not my life.

The apartment door was still open and the cold draft from the hallway outside seeped in. Mama pulled her bathrobe tighter around her. She was still saying it. “Please forgive me... I didn’t do anything... Please forgive me.” Her eyes were puffy and her hair was all frowsy and tangled. She didn't look pretty. I hated to see her like that. She was different when she drank. She changed, and it scared me.

Beneath Mama’s chair there was a trail of ants, winding silently across the floor. I sat perfectly still, staring at them. They were crossing over the stripes of shadows on the floor, yellow and black, yellow and black.

The long column of ants was moving steadily from the kitchen behind the refrigerator, under Mama's chair where the dirty yellow light slanted across the floor, and then into the darkness of the front room. I watched them marching all in a line like a tiny army.

I didn’t say anything. I don’t think Tommy said anything either. If he did, I didn’t hear. I sat absolutely still.

Mama was still saying it, “Please forgive me,” but it didn’t matter anymore, and everywhere beyond the circle of sickly yellow light, there was darkness.

I’m not really here, I am far away.

I gazed at the little dotted-line of ants under Mama’s chair. The yellow light made the cracks between the floor-boards look like black ink lines from a pen. Everything else went away. I could hear her voice, but she was somewhere far off in the distance. It was very late. I was so tired. I just wanted to sleep, to go away, and forget.

I'm not here. Only my body is here, but I'm not. I'm just watching. If I wanted to, I could fly away and never come back.

The caravan of ants were hurrying in both directions, passing each other all along a crawling crooked black line, in their own tiny world, unaware of us. Mama was still saying it. Nothing made any sense. I couldn't understand. I wondered if Tommy did. He was sitting there in the shadows, looking down at the floor too.

She was drowning. I knew this, but I was a child, I had no way to comprehend it. Her life was pulling her down and I knew it, but I didn't know what to do. I thought somehow it must be my fault. I wanted to help her but I couldn't. I was not enough, and I knew that I could never be.

Soon after that night, we had to move again. This time it was to a falling-down old place I called the haunted house. Moving didn't take very long, there wasn't as much to move this time. Mama had sold the cedar chest and the twin beds, back when we left East Side Avenue. I don't remember moving day, or carrying things from one place to another. That year there were gaps of time that I can't remember at all.

Memory has its own rules. Time expands or contracts illogically. We selectively forget, or some protective function in us forgets. It files some things away in a dusty steel file-drawer locked with a key, and then hides the key.

Of the worst times, we remember only the chalk outlines, the fact that they happened. If there is something too painful there, the mind walls-off that part. The most damaging events, especially in childhood, may be mercifully hidden for decades, or forever.

There are some spaces in my remembering where the chronology is broken with a dotted line. The haunted house was one of those. I have very little memory of it. I only know that it was

the darkest, loneliest time for all of us. This is what I remember:

It was a boarded-up abandoned old house, it might have been condemned. I called it the haunted house because it was so desolate and forlorn, and it looked like it had been empty for a long time. Part of it was overgrown with weeds and vines that were slowly dragging it down. The front door and all the windows were boarded-over with plywood, but we could still get in through the back door where tall weeds and brambles kept it hidden from the street. The house was set back behind a bleak windblown vacant lot. It was early winter, the dead grass was grey and the house was grey, so if you didn't know it was there, you would never notice it from the street.

The back door was the only opening, we sneaked in and out as secretly as possible. You had to slip through a gap in the dense mat of creeper grass and dead morning-glory vines that covered the falling-down wooden back porch, then past a crooked screen-door that was stuck halfway open so it couldn't either open or close. Then there was a deadbolt door into the kitchen.

An elderly woman friend of Mama's was letting us stay there for very cheap rent because we had no place to live and it was winter. Somehow she had got the water, gas, and electricity turned on, but it was still cold. Some of the windows were broken and there were holes in the roof that dripped rain. There was a little gas heater in one room, so I stayed right next to it as much as possible. That was where I slept, on the squeaky old rusty roll-away bed. Then there was Mama's room. It had a closet. All of our clothes were there. They didn't take up much room. I can't remember where Tommy slept. I don't remember seeing him or Mama during that time, though they lived there too. I didn't know if Daddy knew where we were.

Inside the house it was dark even in daytime. A little bit of

pale sunlight filtered through the dust-caked windowpanes at the upper part where the boards didn't reach. At night the wind moaned through the broken glass and the cold seeped and bled through the walls and window casings, even with the plywood over them. My bed was only a few feet from the little gas stove, but still the mattress was like a slab of ice every night. I plugged in the iron and ran it back and forth over the sheet. The heat didn't last, but it helped with the first icy plunge under the covers.

We must not have been there very long, a few weeks, or a few months. When I try to remember, there are only blank spaces. I didn't know where Tommy was, or Mama either. When she broke her wrist before we left East Side Avenue, she had lost her waitress job at the bar, so she was probably out looking for another job. Those were desolate times for all of us; they must have been terrible times for Mama.

I started junior high school that Fall, very timid and mostly bewildered. I didn't know what to do or how to be. It was a big step of growing up, and I knew I was not ready for it. I needed a mother and a full-time father, but I didn't have that, and I didn't know why. That was just the way it was. It might have helped to have a brother I could talk to, at least we would have been in it together, but I didn't have that either. For Mama, I guess the drinking helped her to keep going, but really it was making everything worse. She was sinking deeper and deeper.

Daddy had never much liked to drink, except egg-nog at Christmas, though he knew all kinds of fancy drinks from being a bartender. That was how he got that good waiter-job at the country club, a want-ad for a part-time bartender, so he got a library book and taught himself how to mix fancy drinks. It wasn't what he wanted, but it was better than what he'd had. Over the last few years he had studied and earned a GED high school equivalency diploma and finished the electronics repair correspondence course.

He wanted a new kind of job and a different kind of life.

Mama was still trying to hang on to the life that was gone. The alcohol was dragging her down, and there was nothing any of us could do about it. Tommy was out roaming around at night with his gang of boys, getting in trouble with the law. I never saw any of them, he never brought any friend home. For me it was very lonely, but it probably was easier for me than it was for Mama and Tommy. Of the three of us, I was the least lost. I was used to being alone, so I knew how.

One morning in the middle of October I left the house to go to school. A freezing rain had fallen and there was frost and ice on the ground. My shoes crunched across the frozen grass of the vacant lot and when I reached the sidewalk it was a sheet of ice. I skittered carefully down the walk toward the street, and then I saw Daddy's car parked there. He and Helen were in it. Daddy had never come there before; I hadn't seen him since we moved from the red brick apartment. He called to me, so I walked over.

Daddy said "Get in the car, Vickie." So I did. It was nice and warm in there. Helen smiled kindly, though she looked worried. She was looking at the boarded-up house. Daddy asked me if Tommy had left for school yet, and if Ann, Mama, was inside the house. I told him no, she wasn't, and Tommy wasn't either.

"Would it be all right if we came in the house?" Helen asked me hesitantly and very politely.

I said "I guess so." I had no idea what was happening, but something was. Both of them looked kind of serious.

I led them back to the house and the three of us went crunching through the frozen grass again to the matted canopy of weeds over the back porch and the hidden kitchen door.

Nobody said anything.

We went inside. Helen and Daddy walked through the rooms, Helen first. Daddy seemed nervous, but Helen was not afraid. In the kitchen she opened the fridge. The rusty racks were empty except for the ketchup, one beer, and half a case of stolen Cola from Tommy's last warehouse raid. She stood there a minute. A small sound escaped her. Was it a sigh? Or a word? I couldn't tell.

In the front room where I had slept, it was still dark. The flames in the little gas heater sputtered and murmured but the room was still cold. We could see our breath. My bed was there next to the heater, rumpled and unmade. I was embarrassed. I had never thought anyone would see it. We went into Mama's room where the closet was. Neatly hung in the closet were the blouses and skirts Helen had bought for me, and not much else.

"Oh, George," she said softly. He touched her arm gently. She pulled a small handkerchief out of her coat-pocket and dabbed her eyes. They looked at each other in silence for a moment, a long moment.

They sent me out to the car so they could talk, and then they came back out a few minutes later. The decision must have been made in those few minutes. I think when Helen saw the way we lived, she couldn't leave me there. Not another day, not another minute. Her mind was made up, and as I would come to know, once her mind was made up, God was at her elbow, and her cause could not be defeated by anything on earth.

Back outside in the car we sat together. They asked me, "Where is your brother?"

"I don't know" I said. "I haven't seen him for a while."

"Do you know where he might be?"

"No."

With that, Daddy and Helen looked at each other again. There was something happening, a communication between them that wasn't in words. Helen had tears in her eyes, but she was strong; she held them there. I felt very awkward. I didn't know what to say.

"I'm going to miss the bus" I said. "I'm going to be late for school."

"Don't worry," Helen said. "We'll take you to school."

We went back into the house again and gathered my things and came back out carrying my clothes and belongings in two paper grocery bags, and then we drove to the junior high school.

I sat on the hard straight-back wooden chair outside the principal's office waiting, wondering if I was in trouble. They talked to the principal and filled out some paperwork. In less than an hour they had signed me out of school, and then they took me to Helen's house while they made arrangements to enroll me in a new school, T.J. Rusk Junior High.

Technically, they had kidnapped me. They had taken me with not much more than the clothes on my back. I would never see that place again. In the space of one day, my old life was over, forever, and my new life began.

I barely remember the rest of the day. At Helen's house the hours flew by with a whirlwind of wonders. When Helen said I was going to live there, I was dizzy with amazement. Evening came, and dinner. So much food! Hot and steamy, and so good! Meatloaf and lima beans and mashed potatoes and gravy. I ate a whole plate full and even had seconds.

That night I lay blissfully warm under clean sheets and soft blankets on Helen's couch, so cozy next to the big heater in the living room. I loved the warm, I soaked it up all the way to my bones. I was tired but excited too, and still completely astonished.

I gazed at the lovely red glow of the fire and drifted into sleep, feeling so safe, and happier than I had ever been in my life.



Chapter 9: Stigall Street

In the morning when my eyes opened, a pale light was pouring through a window with flowered drapes. I gazed around the room. There was the big old console Motorola TV with its crocheted doily on top, and the comfy upholstered green chair next to the heater.

I am in Helen's house. I closed my eyes, squeezed them shut tight, and then opened them again to see if all of it would still be there. It was.

It's not a dream. I'm really here.

From the kitchen came the small sounds of clinking and clatter and the smell of biscuits baking. Helen's cheerful voice chirped from the doorway, "Wake up girls, breakfast in five minutes!" And then I heard the chattering voices of my new sisters Mary Beth and Martha from their room just a few steps away, the room that would soon be mine too, after the addition of another bunk-bed to expand its occupancy to three.

It would be a few days before they found my brother, and then two weeks to get him released from Juvenile Hall, the County lockup for adolescent offenders. He'd been caught with a stolen car and arrested again.

I didn't know it then, but Tommy and I were a big part of the reason why Daddy and Helen decided to get married. She never told me until long after I was grown how scared she was when they made the decision. I'm sure Daddy was too. They had known each other for less than a year. But she couldn't leave me and Tommy like that, in that boarded-up house, and she did love my handsome quiet Dad very much. They took a chance and started a new life together. It was a heroic act for them both.

After the divorce, when we had all left East Side Avenue, Daddy had moved someplace else and I didn't know where. Mama and Tommy and I had moved to the red brick apartment building, and then in a few months we had to move again, this time to the haunted house. I hardly ever saw either Mama or Tommy after that. We were pretty much alone and lost, all three of us.

Only Daddy had been still hopeful, still seeking a better life. When he found it, the woman he loved brought me and my brother into that new life too, because she loved my father that much, and because she was an extraordinary woman. She brought two teenagers into her home and into her life, one she'd never met, and both, she knew, were emotionally troubled and scarred. She took an enormous risk that there could be enough love for this courageous venture to work.

At three months short of fourteen, I was not fully aware of what a momentous thing this was. I just did what I was told, blissfully happy to do it. If I'd had all the wishes of Aladdin, I couldn't have chosen a more wonderful thing. The loneliness was over, God's grace like a thunderbolt had given me a home and a full-time mother and father and two new sisters in the bargain! There would be adjustments to make for all of us over the next few years, but for the first time in a very long time, *I was wanted*. I was in a place that was my place to be, and I had been given the right to be there.

There was more good news: the bullying and intimidation from my brother would now come to an abrupt halt. Helen did not allow any of that in her house. Suddenly I was safe. I didn't have to be afraid anymore.

Helen must have had a thousand things to do before the wedding, working full-time on the switchboard at State Farm Insurance and raising her two daughters. Now she had three, and soon, a son too. Still she managed to squeeze in enough time for

me. I didn't have anything nice to wear to the wedding, so the two of us went on a shopping trip. That was one of her many practical talents, finding bargains. It was a sport of skill and ingenuity, and Helen was a world-class pro.

She had me trying on dresses at J.C. Penney's department store. I put on one pretty dress after another in the tiny dressing room and then came out to show her. I felt like a fashion model.

"Turn around" she said, "let me see how you look." I whirled, and she adjusted sleeves and straightened shoulder seams. Most things that were small enough to fit me, the sleeves were too short and my awkward wrists dangled out. Finally the perfect dress was found. Dusty pink with a princess waistline, a simple scoop neckline and cap sleeves. I was flushed with happiness; all of this was new and unbelievable, it made my head spin. Next, the shoe department. She picked some styles for me to try on, and finally chose a pretty pair of simple pumps with tiny high heels like Audrey Hepburn wore in *Funny Face*. I had never felt so elegant in my life.

I didn't have a coat, just a corduroy jacket, and it was a boy's jacket. Helen's close friend Hazel gave her a soft three-quarter length cream-colored wool coat for me, handed down from her daughter Jenny, and it fit me perfectly.

Things fell into place, and when the wedding day came, we all looked lovely, all of Daddy's women: Mary Beth age ten, Martha age eight, me nearly fourteen, and Helen, his radiantly beautiful bride. Truly there was a light shining around her. She wore a simple full-skirted day-length dress that flowed gracefully over her full hips and gently hugged her small waist. It was periwinkle blue, the color of her eyes. Daddy wore his best suit. MaryBeth and Martha and I were in our Sunday clothes, and the whole lot of us trooped off to the University Park Methodist Church. On Saturday, November 13, 1954 we became officially a

family, for life.

It was a small wedding, just Helen's closest friends Hazel and Charles Moore, who stood up with them as Best Man and Matron of Honor. Reverend Alsie H. Carleton was the minister. Only Tommy was missing, but he would be out of jail by Thanksgiving and then he too would be brought home.

In the first picture Helen ever took of us, Tommy and I are standing where she has posed us near the rosebushes in the yard of the house on Stigall Street. It's a bright Sunday morning in winter and we are dressed up to go to church. I remember her saying to Tommy encouragingly in her sweet cheerful voice,

"Tom, put your arm around your sister – show her you love her." She called him Tom, not Tommy. He was nearly sixteen, and this was an expression of respect for him as a young man.

In the snapshot I look relaxed and happy, smiling shyly but beamingly. Tommy's hand on my shoulder is as stiff as a lobster claw. He is not looking at either Helen or me. He is looking away sternly, with a slightly frowning face that is neither a boy's nor a man's, but something uncomfortably in-between. The sleeves of his jacket are a little too short; it was borrowed. He stands tense, rigid, and ramrod straight. He is tall, and already handsome.

In this picture we both stood at the threshold of our new life, and I was happy as a lark. Tommy was not. He had lost a lot: his gang, his unrestricted freedom, and his "personal punching bag." My brother's former position of superiority and power had vanished almost overnight, and to make matters worse, he was now outnumbered by females. His glory days had ended and there was not much he could do about it.

In the first few years of our new life there would be some turbulent moments adjusting to the new experiences, but we

survived them and we became a solid family. Helen was a strong and dedicated woman, and that was what Daddy needed. That was what we all needed. I can't recall exactly when I first began to call her Mother instead of Helen, but it came soon, and lasted forever.

On Stigall Street, the days were full and busy and happy. Mother was teaching me so many new things. She was a brilliant organizer, planning, coaxing, and reminding. She made sure all our homework was done, baths were taken, and school clothes were laid out for the next day before we went to bed. After school my sisters and I rushed home to watch Mickey Mouse Club and American Bandstand. Every Sunday morning Mother managed to get us all up, fed, washed and dressed, and off to Church together.

Mother and Daddy loved and cherished each other. They were working-partners, and they believed that anything was possible with hard work and a lot of faith, and I came to believe it too. Like most American families in the 1950's, we were cheerfully and persistently optimistic. We took a positive outlook, hopeful that the future would only get better. That winter I turned fourteen.

At the new junior high school my first new friend was Mary Frances. We took Home Economics classes together, studied together, went to the library together and puzzled over the Dewey Decimal System. Weekends we sprawled on our bellies on her family's living room carpet with "Seventeen" magazine, searching every page for clues and Social Dos and Don'ts, like how to dress and how to sit, (cross your ankles, not your knees) and how to be popular and pretty. We were neither, but we were not the least bit worried about it yet.

Weekdays after school, Mary Beth and I started dinner with assistance from Mother at the switchboard, her job at State Farm Insurance Company. By the time she and Daddy got home, dinner was almost done and the table was set.

The dining room, like the rest of the house, was small. When all six of us sat down at the table with both the drop-leaf sections opened up, we filled the room to the walls and the sideboard where Mother kept her treasured few pieces of her grandmother's genuine Havilland china, which would be used only at Christmas and Thanksgiving. The rest of the year we used indestructible plastic Melamine-ware.

After dinner MaryBeth and I washed the dishes, taking turns at washing or drying. Martha helped clear the table and swept the floor. In spite of laughing and messing around, we eventually got everything clean and put away, and then we could go into the living room and watch Ed Sullivan or I Love Lucy with Mother and Daddy.

On Sundays, Daddy always cooked. In summer, it was barbecue chickens roasted on a spit, or maybe his special burgers, and we ate at the picnic table in the back yard. In winter, it was Greek family recipes he learned from his parents in the little restaurant in New Jersey when he was a child. My father was a fantastic cook. That might have bothered some wives, but not Mother. She took pride in her man's talent, and bragged about it.

Mother was always a lady, but she was as strong as she was graceful. If there was anything on earth she feared, it didn't show. Once she set her mind on something, she never let anything stop her, no matter how impossible it seemed at first. She had the courage of her convictions, and was never afraid to face a challenge. From her I learned a quiet, rock-solid faith, not from any one lesson, but by seeing her life and her character expressed every day. She walked the walk.

She cared about appearances, style and tradition, but she said, "Don't just look good, *be* good. When you do something, do your best." That meant integrity and honesty in thought, word, and

deed. "But it doesn't hurt to look nice while you're doing it."

My brother had never liked me, and nothing was going to change that. He had never had any interest in me except for somebody to hold captive with constant fear and dread. When Helen disallowed all of that, I was delighted, I was a soul set free! I didn't even notice my brother's sullen silence. I was totally happy to have a family, wonderful food, and a safe warm place to sleep. In the old life, Tommy had been a tough guy, a rebel, a high and mighty somebody. Now he'd lost all that, lost his source of pride and power, and worst of all, he'd lost what was left of Mama. She had loved him more than anything, and believed in him no matter what. Decades later in a letter to me, she spoke touchingly about the last time she saw him:

"He wanted to quit school and stay with me and get a job." she wrote. "I was so proud of him for that, but I couldn't let him make that sacrifice for me."

The truth was, he had been expelled from school repeatedly and when the law caught up with him and his buddies stealing cars, he landed in juvenile jail a few times. For him, leaving school probably looked like the best way out of a bad situation. He was nearly sixteen, able-bodied and strong; maybe he could have gotten some kind of a job. Keeping it though, would have been in some doubt. But there was no doubt about one thing: Helen had saved his life just as surely as she had saved mine.

In Mother's house, Tom's acting-out had to go, but it didn't go willingly. As a troubled teenager on the edge of manhood, he was carrying a load of unspoken and unresolved resentment and rage against any form of authority.

His first year in the new high school, he still cut classes and played pranks. He loved to show off and get attention. At lunch

period when most of the kids were outside on the school grounds, he did a spectacular trick: he was a fire-eater. He filled his mouth with lighter fluid, lit a match, then he spewed out the fuel in a fine misting spray. The instant the fuel met the match flame, it burst into a big cloud of fire. It was very impressive, always drew a crowd, and everybody applauded. Then one day somebody made him laugh at exactly the wrong moment. The lighter fluid dribbled down his chin and onto his shirt. When the flame-cloud exploded, his shirt caught fire and his face was burned. When the principal found out about the trick, Tom got expelled.

This was not the first time Mother had gone to his defense at the Principal's office, and it would not be the last, but she believed he deserved another chance. Mother always stood up for all of us. All of us were her own, there were no "step" children in my mother's house.

Mother bailed him out. She didn't condone his behavior, but she stood by him. She went directly to principal Richard Stroud, who turned out to be an unusual man. She argued that her son had a troubled past, and she convinced him not only to reprieve Tom for his violations, but to help and mentor him.

Principal Stroud sponsored Tom to get into the Civil Air Patrol, an organization for teens and young adults, a civilian volunteer auxiliary of the US Air Force where they learned about airplanes and military careers. It was called the C.A.P. and the teens were called cadets. Tom had loved airplanes ever since he was ten or eleven when he built models of his favorite planes. He knew the names and could recognize the profiles of every German, British, and American fighter plane in world war II.

The C.A.P. had training meetings one night a week, and field trips one Saturday a month. Mr. Stroud thought this group might help Tom develop pride and self-discipline. Mother and Daddy somehow found the money for his uniform.

The first field trip was to search for a man who had jumped out of an airplane and his parachute didn't open. Tom said "We found him lying face down. He was kind of flat, and imbedded about six inches into the ground." I didn't know if he was telling the truth, but it made the C.A.P. sound like a very interesting thing.

Not interesting enough for him though, because after a few months, he and another cadet stole a small single-engine plane from there and flew it around over Grapevine and Carrollton and some other small towns and then landed it in a mowed field. The sheriff's deputies were waiting for them when they came down. Both of them got kicked out, and that was the end of Tom's Civil Air Patrol career.

He knew he would get caught. He was never really afraid of that, it was almost like he wanted to. It got him attention from adults and admiration from other boys. Mother and Daddy were able to keep him out of jail that time, but he was in the doghouse with Mother. She really laid down the law that these foolish pranks were over. He cleaned up his act after that, and didn't get into any more trouble at school. He skipped class occasionally, or failed a test once in a while, but mostly he applied himself to the new role of not-a-rebel. His grades came up and he got more popular too. Eventually we both graduated, the same year. Nobody in the senior class knew he was two years older, they just thought we were twins.

Girls growing up in Texas had to be pretty, a certain kind of pretty: blue eyes, curly blonde or light-brown hair, full pouty lips, and a cute small turned-up nose. By then my hair was chocolate brown, which was only okay if the rest of you was perfect. I wasn't. My eyes were dark brown like Daddy's. People said I was "attractive." I hated that. It was the nice way to say not-hopeless but also not-pretty. And even though Audrey Hepburn had made

my thin body acceptable and my hair okay, my “Greek” nose, which Mother said was elegant, would not be in style until years later when Cher Bono came along.

If you didn’t match the standard, you had a lot less chance in life. My friend Vivian was pretty. I wasn’t entirely a hopeless case, but I had Daddy's thin lips and my nose was definitely wrong. In a Texas high school, if you were not a beauty, your options were limited. You had to accept a lower rank in life, or else you had to have something extra to compensate for your lack.

Except for cheerleader and high-kick drill team, sports for girls were discouraged as (whispered) queer. Running was not a sport for girls at all. The only choices left for girls like me were either to become a "brain" or else have a talent. That was how I became The Artist of my school.

My Junior year I was the set-designer for the senior play, in charge of a crew of students to build and paint the stage sets. The sponsor was our art teacher Marion Cole. I doubt that I was any better at this than anybody else, but I was the one that had the moxie to volunteer. Miss Cole was a wonderful mentor, and mostly because of her, I got through it all looking like a winner. The opportunity gave me what every high school kid needs most: an identity. I was president of the Art Service Club, staff artist on the yearbook, and incredibly, in senior year I was voted “Most Creative“ by the student body.

In Helen’s loving care we all grew, but Daddy grew the most. He had quit school to join the Navy at seventeen, but as an adult he had always believed in education. The time he had invested in getting his GED and all those afternoons studying the electronics correspondence course at the kitchen table on East Side Avenue, now served him well. He got a job in the technical field of

electronics repair, and he left bartender and waiter jobs behind him for good.

Money was always tight, but Mother knew how to stretch a dollar till it cried for mercy. Daddy had never made much money but he was always conscientious with what he had, and maintained a perfect credit record. They both worked hard, and we kids helped at home. Together we all managed to survive and even thrive.

For the senior prom I designed my own dress, inspired by the artist Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of the Moulin Rouge. It was floor-length white satin, with a short black lace jacket that had a scalloped-edged neckline in front that dipped very low in the back. Mother and Vivian's mother Julia constructed it for me. Julia was a master seamstress who had worked on everything from women's business suits to ball gowns and wedding dresses in the alterations department of Neiman-Marcus, the very pricey department store, and she was brilliant at her craft.

The other girls wore fairy-dresses of fluffy nylon net in pastel colors with long white gloves. For my Montmartre look, I wore white satin and black lace, with long black gloves, with my dark hair upswept into a stunning formal coiffure created by Mother. I looked as if I had just stepped out of the pages of Paris Vogue magazine.

At the prom my date, a blind date set up by my brother, was a terrible dancer. He even stepped on the hem of my dress in the Grand March. It was ballroom dancing, and he had absolutely no idea what to do. He'd been drinking, and the night seemed dismally doomed, but then...

I danced one dance with Roland. He was the son of Mother's best friend who lived at the other end of the block on Stigall Street. Roland was older than me, good-looking and way out of

my league. My best friend Mary Frances didn't have a date for the prom, so Mother suggested that I should ask Roland to take her. It felt very awkward and I was embarrassed, but I did it. He was a really sweet guy, and he most kindly did take her to the prom.

As I sat at a table looking glum with my non-dancing date, Roland, as the gentleman that he was, must have felt sorry for me, and asked me very politely, to dance.

We flowed across the floor as gracefully as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Even though ballroom dancing was an old-fashioned thing that not many young men knew how to do, he was really good at it. He was tall and handsome too, and I was wishing I could have asked him to the prom for myself, but of course, that would have been unthinkable.

In the end, my good deed was rewarded. Roland asked me out, and took me to the rest of the senior graduation parties and events. He and I danced all summer long, and everybody thought we would get married, it was just a matter of time. But then he got drafted and had to go to Vietnam, and I went off to college to study art, and everything changed.

Chapter 10: Ann

Until I was thirteen years old I called her Mama. It's hard to call her that now. I can't say it. I can write it, but even then I flinch. It hurts to remember her now, but I do, even after decades of trying to forget. What I remember about her now is broken into bits and pieces. Some of it I have hidden from myself, and some of what there should have been, there just never was.

When I was thirteen my life was altered completely, as if an unexplainable act of God had turned everything around, upside down, and inside out. From that winter day forward, nearly everything in my life was changed miraculously and permanently. Suddenly I had a new mother, one who wanted me, one who was willing and able to earnestly love me. She was a more wonderful mother than I ever could have imagined in my wildest dreams, even if I were capable of such dreams, which I utterly, absolutely, was not. Ann was the woman who gave birth to me, we had the same blood, but there can be no shadow of a doubt that my real Mother, who would love and nurture me from that day forward for as long as she lived, who taught me the best about life and inspired me to seek it, was Helen.

Most of what I know now about Ann's life, I never learned until the letters she wrote to me in the last years before she died. I never knew till then that from early in her childhood, she had been left behind, repeatedly abandoned both physically and emotionally by virtually all the family she ever knew. She didn't complain about it; she didn't talk about it. I don't think anyone ever knew, until I asked, and she confessed, in those last letters.

Ann was a kind and gentle person, that's all she was. As a young girl she'd had dreams like any young girl does, but no real opportunities to seek them. She married a handsome sailor, then

when my brother and I were born, her life was set and sealed.

She was a good and decent woman who lost herself in a life she didn't know she chose, because she never knew she had a choice. She took whatever came to her in life, and tried to make the best of it. She did what a good woman did in those days, she gave her life to her man. She never learned how to ask for anything for herself. That wasn't her fault, it was just what life had taught her when she was very young.

I never knew my birthmother's name until after she died. She had been called Annabelle until she started high school, and then for the rest of her life, she called herself Ann. Her real name, unknown to almost everyone who ever knew her, I learned from the birth certificate the County Clerk Recorder's office sent to me along with some other old papers when she died. It was Amanda.

She'd had one close childhood friend, Millie, whose mother ran a boarding house in Greensboro. Annabelle was left there for weeks or months at a time while her mother, my Granny, was on a case as a traveling home healthcare nurse, what in those days was called a "Practical-Nurse." It was homecare nursing and light cooking and housekeeping. On Ann's birth certificate, her mother's occupation is listed as "housekeeper."

Annabelle and Millie were playmates and best friends. They both loved books and dreamed of becoming writers someday. They lost touch with each other when Millie went on to college. They ran into each other again years later in Washington D.C. as young women in their twenties. I saw an old black and white photo of them and I still remember it, the two of them striding down a city sidewalk together, swinging along, arm in arm. In the snapshot they are bold and confident, very good-looking young women with bright carefree smiles. Ann is slender but very nicely endowed, a "sweater girl," with billowing, bouncing, shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair. They're both wearing slim skirts

and snug sweaters. Blonde and brunette, classic American girls, looking for life, both wanted to be writers, and they both fell in love with sailors.

When Ann met George, my father, they were in their early or mid twenties. He was quiet, modest, and shy. He was in the Navy then, and he must have looked very dashing in his dress-whites: classic bell-bottom pants, wide-collared Midshipman's blouse and jaunty sailor-cap that was the U.S. Navy's uniform in 1938. In another tiny black and white snapshot, he is young and lean, with intense dark Greek eyes and black hair, "the strong silent type" that was the style of leading-men in movies of the time. For him, it was not an affectation, it was a shyness and reserve that was his true nature.

Ann fell hard for him, and he fell in love with her too. He wrote a poem about her that called her "a knockout," and spoke of how amazing it was that "a girl like that" could love him. What Ann did next, someday I would do also. She handed over her life, all of it, to the man she loved.

There's no wedding picture. Maybe they got married at City Hall like so many servicemen did, long on passion and short on money. Then after his tour of duty ended, in a year or so they had a son, and those must have been happy years for them. Then two years later, things got more complicated. Her mother had a stroke, and I was born, and both events happened within a few weeks of each other. But we were happy in North Carolina, where we lived till I was four and Tommy was six. Then all of a sudden, Mama and Daddy decided to go West to look for a better life. We all left North Carolina headed for California. We got as far as Texas.

More than once in my life, Mama had said "Whatever you do with your life, don't be a waitress," and she said it with a barely-

concealed regret.

“You’re on your feet all day; it’s hard work, and you’ve gotta keep on smiling and be nice to people no matter how ugly they treat you. They act like they own you. Don’t let people own you, Vickie. Do something else; do something you want to do, if you can, but don’t be a waitress.”

Ann was a waitress all her life, right up to the day she died. As far as I know, she never was anything else. She did all she could to keep food on the table at home for us, until a chain of events began the slow-motion collapse of her life that would finally leave her at rock bottom, alone.

I know almost nothing about her life after I left the haunted house. I only know that she did finally pull herself up out of alcoholism, without family or help, a thing that very few people are able to do. It took years, but she did it, and she led a clean and sober life from then on. I didn't know then, how heroic that achievement was.

There must have been good times when she and Daddy were young and in love. There were happy times for all of us in Greensboro, and in Texas when we lived at Colombia Avenue and Beacon Street. I remember those times and cherish them. The other times, the times that were not good, I shoved them away into a deep dark place in the most remote corner of my mind, and made myself forget them on purpose, for decades.

What I remember about her in the first years of my life is mostly foggy at the edges, but some things are clear and sharp. There was one day I remember perfectly. I was very small, maybe three or four years old in Greensboro. She had gotten a job as a part-time writer-reporter at the small local newspaper. I remember how happy she was; I think it was her dream-job and she was really thrilled. I can still see her, even now.

She is twirling around in the living-room, wearing a special outfit, a tailored dark-gray pinstriped suit. It has a flared skirt and a matching jacket that fits her slim waist. She has a shoulder-strap briefcase bag. Her hair is flowing down, golden, and bouncing off the suit's wide shoulders that were the style back then. She looks beautiful; she is so happy, like a girl in a magazine picture.

But she had to give it up to stay at home with my brother and me, or maybe Granny got sick again, I don't know. All I know is, she had that one wonderful day, and that was the end of her writing career.

My memories of her are faded like old photographs. She was there, but never very close. Mostly across the table, across the room, over there somewhere, with Tommy, and I was with Granny, and we were happy enough with each other for company.

What little I know about Ann's life before she married my father is mostly second-hand. Some of it I learned from her girlhood friend Millie. When I began to write my book, I tracked her down by email, then talked with her on the phone. Millie did become a writer, still is one, and at 92 years old is still razor-sharp and working on a new book.

Millie told me what she remembered about her best friend when they were little girls, and when they met again briefly at twenty-something. After a lifetime, she wanted to know the rest of Ann's story, what had happened after they both had married their sailors and lost touch with each other. I couldn't tell her anything happy, so I didn't say. I asked her what Ann was like, back then. What she remembered most about Ann was "She was very understanding."

When she was young, my birthmother was beautiful and brave. As a kid she was a tomboy who loved horses and books. I learned what I know about her youth only in the last years of her life, from the letters we wrote to each other. Our relationship was

poignant and incomplete, but in those letters she answered some of the questions I had wondered about all my life.

Neither of my parents finished high school. Ann dropped out to help at home just as her mother and grandmother had done. George dropped out and lied about his age to join the Navy when he was seventeen, and went to sea as his father had done. But as an adult, he studied at night to earn a GED high school equivalency diploma when he was almost forty. Ann never did.

More than anything else, she was kind. I never saw her be anything else, except once, and that, she believed, was done in defense of her mother. At heart, she was gentle, she was soft, and she was vulnerable. She worked hard. She carried the weight for other people. She didn't want to, but it just seemed to fall on her shoulders and so she just carried it the best she could, until she couldn't anymore.

She was loyal to her mother, her employers and friends, and I believe she was well-respected and loved by most people who knew her. In her life she had made the classic mistakes that most women of her era made, and in my life, I would make some of the same mistakes too.

There are parts of my childhood that I have pushed into darkness and can't remember even glimpses of. Months or years that are simply blank spaces. Maybe it's because for children sometimes there are things that are so painful that the mind in its mercy simply wipes them from the slate.

And yet, even now, decades later, once in a while for no reason at all, old ghosts still rise up, and suddenly they're here in the room with me. They appear uncalled, especially in the morning just after I wake up and I'm not quite conscious. Today, unexpectedly, I thought of her, and *she was here*.

As I stumbled to the kitchen to start the coffee, I heard the

word inside my head, the way Mama used to say it in her soft Southern Kentucky voice: “Cawfey.” I heard her clearly, as if she were in the room, and my thoughts flew away to Beacon and Columbia Street.

It's an ordinary Saturday morning and I am nine years old. When I wake up, I can smell the thick rich aroma of the coffee, and hear it burbling-up into the little glass thing in the top of the percolator pot. Mama and Daddy are talking quietly at the kitchen table with coffee and cigarettes.

Those were the good times. Mama and Daddy were happy and they smiled at each other at breakfast. She had a day job at Mr. Joe Yee’s Chinese and American Restaurant. We lived at the corner of Columbia Avenue and Beacon Street and I was in third grade, and I went to school and walked home again every day with my best friend Vivian and her spunky little sister Dimi.

And then I remembered the light silvery sound of Mama’s laughter...

It's a breathy kind of laugh, soft and fluttery like her hair, which is fine and golden with a touch of strawberry color. She is pretty, young and happy, laughing, drinking up life, cup after cup.

The memory seeps back like water from a hidden well, and I can see her. It hurts me to see her. For a splinter of a moment I remember her, and then I quickly close the remembering.

Decades ago I buried my pain deep and determined, so that it couldn’t hurt me anymore, so that it couldn't reopen the torn places in my life that were left by the mother I never really had, who in so many ways never had a mother either. I regret that I didn’t know her when I was a child, and I was unable to share myself with her as a daughter after I was grown. If we’d ever had a chance, we didn’t know how to take it. When I separated from her at age thirteen, that life ended, and it would never come back.

When Daddy and Helen got married and went to court to get custody of my brother and me, a whole new life began for us all. It was a Godsend for Tommy and me; unquestionably it saved our lives, and it was a beautiful new beginning for Daddy. But it left Ann tragically alone, unable to work, with a broken wrist from the fall that happened when she was drunk or drugged, coming home from spending the night with a girlfriend “to make Daddy jealous.”

When my father filed for custody, a case was made that Ann was an alcoholic and an unfit mother, that she had neglected and abandoned her children. It was true, but it was also true that we all had abandoned her too, even more than she had abandoned us, more than her mother, my beloved Granny, had abandoned her when she was so young. There was plenty of guilt to go around.

Ann had never asked for much, so she got even less. She never knew how to ask for what she wanted in life, so I didn't either. She couldn't teach me what she never knew, and it would take me half a lifetime to learn it on my own.

Sometimes now I wake up in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep, so I get up and have a glass of milk. When I was very small in North Carolina, some nights I was fussy and wouldn't go to sleep. Mama would bring me a glass of milk with chunks of white bread broken up into it. I ate the milky bread with a spoon and then I drank the milk. She did care for me then, even with everything else. Granny's strokes and Tommy's demands. She had to take care of two small children, a bedridden mother, and a husband. She did all she could for me; I know she did.

When I was twelve and Tommy was fourteen, her life and her marriage were falling apart. Then the haunted house, and the drinking was so bad she couldn't even take care of herself, that's why she couldn't take care of us. She needed somebody to take care of her too, and she didn't have that. Tommy and I had no way

to help her, except just to take care of ourselves so things wouldn't be so hard for her, and we did that. I think we both felt helpless and sad for her because we knew she was unhappy, but we couldn't change it.

By then, all of us were drowning. Each of us did whatever we could to stay afloat, to survive. Not knowing where the tide was taking us and afraid to know, we lost each other. In dreams I still return to East Side Avenue where everything began to end.

I walk through the silent empty rooms again, and they seem perfectly real. The same peculiar wallpapers and lumpy linoleum floors. The same loneliness that seeps through the walls and invisibly into the heart.

In my memories, the places and the people are like scenes in a film, with close-ups and wide shots.

I see the hot tar sheen of city streets glaring in sunlight, the blazing heat of noonday that burns your skin and you can smell it burning. The surprising patches of joy, like the orange tiger-lilies growing wild and absurdly beautiful in the alley behind the garbage cans.

Inside the house, once again I am drifting through the dim airless rooms and the quietness of the small close personal spaces, like Mama's bedroom. Her old vanity dresser is still here, with its streaked and cloudy mirror, and the little pile of quarters on the corner of it, her tips from the night before, where she has dumped out her pockets, shucked off her soiled waitress uniform and stumbled into bed without turning on the light, so tired that she didn't want to have to speak or force a smile for another living soul. She just wanted desperately to sleep.

Now in the stillness and hazy golden light of late afternoon, I see the old pink chenille bedspread and the cluttered dresser top and I can feel her presence here, as real as if she has just left the

room a moment ago, and there is a lingering sense of her still in it. As if she has just stepped out to the drugstore down the street to get a pack of cigarettes, and she will be right back.

Chapter 11: Austin

“These are the best years of your lives,” Professor Lester said at our college orientation at the University of Texas. He was right. Except for the sniper in the bell tower on the Quad and the shock of the assassination of JFK, these would be my happiest years ever.

College was the first giant-step of growing up. We all left our childhood and its limitations behind us and stepped out, free. We took the leap into a wide new world that was utterly unlike anything we had known and we threw ourselves right into the tides of it.

We believed in everything. We celebrated our days, the sad ones as much as the happy ones. We were artists and poets and scientists and journalists, brilliant yet-to-become geniuses, and there was hardly any doubt in our minds. Best of all, we had an unlimited supply of tomorrows. We all put on the face of confidence, made new friends, and gathered together in flocks and clans like the unsure fledglings we really were. I joined the kinship of one of the most passionate of clans. I was an art student.

In those days, we were immortal. We were explorers, fearlessly naïve and foolishly bold, swept along together toward our unseen destinies, ready or not. When things went wrong, we wept our lovely young tears, and when things went right, we reveled in the rightness of life itself. Whatever appeared in front of us, blind to the outcome we jumped right in. We were the Beautiful People of the 1960s.

I lived in Scottish Rite Dormitory, an elegant old four-story mansion of a building with a legacy of blooming magnolia trees all across its broad green lawn. The other dorms had cafeterias, but we had formal sit-down meals served by handsome young waiters.

Their jobs didn't pay much and changed hands every semester, but to be an SRD waiter was a coveted bragging point for fraternity men. They and most other college men were eager to date SRD girls; we were considered prime catches. To live there, you had to be the daughter of a Mason, and so it was assumed that our Daddies were rich. Some weren't of course; some just worked hard, like mine did.

Through the first year and a half, college life was carefree, until I ran out of money. I had worked for a year to save up for college, but even though Mother sneaked a little more into my checking account whenever she could, at mid-term of my sophomore year I had to move out of the dorm.

I was incredibly lucky to get a room to rent off-campus in an old Victorian house at 1609 Colorado Street, living on the second floor with three other girl students. My room at the corner of the house had two tall windows that opened onto lush pecan trees. I made magenta-purple curtains by dyeing some old cotton bedsheets Mother sent to me for that purpose. (Mother never wasted anything). They were always swept open, even at night, because nobody was going to look in, and even if they did, they could only see me at my desk, studying. My windows and my world were wide open, my life was benign and safe.

Renee, my ex-roommate at the dorm, helped me get a summer job where she worked at the Kodak film-processing plant in Dallas where both our families lived. Kodak used college students for extra help summers and Christmas seasons when people took the most color pictures and home movies. Everything was on film then, and had to be developed, printed, and packaged by hand. It was production-line work, skilled and repetitious but it paid well for kids like us. The graveyard shift paid most, but only the best workers could get on that shift. Renee was one of them. That first summer my friend Peggy worked there too, and all three

of us would work the rest of our way through college Christmas vacations and summers on the night shift.

The surge and flow of college life soon dissolved my high school shyness. At the University of Texas, the boy-to-girl ratio was four to one, and I had droves of boyfriends at my heels like puppies. I could choose the ones I would allow to take me to dinner or a concert or a movie. At fraternity parties we danced to the Beach Boys and Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison, Bo Diddley and Fats Domino.

In my memory the Austin days are bright and simple. Like overexposed photographs where the light obliterates the details, seasons blurred together. September was still summer, and the tall sun-bleached grass in the vacant lot next to our house rustled like newspapers in the hot breeze.

In winter, Austin was brown and gray, occasionally rainy, and mostly mild. We all went out to the football games and cheered for our team, the U.T. Longhorns. I screamed, "Hook 'em horns!" though I had no idea what was happening down there on the field.

At midterm exams, art majors had few written tests, just Art History and a few Liberal Arts Degree required courses. For the art courses, a jury of instructors reviewed our paintings and drawings to determine our grades for the semester. Then almost before we knew it, the campus exploded again with bluebonnets, blooming acacias, and billowy cottonwood trees. By May, summer was back, and the leaves of the trees were dusty gray-green leather things that clapped together like cardboard in the dry wind. Afternoons were too sultry to do much except take naps or go to the lake. Finally twilight cooled down a little and the air came alive with insects. All through the night, mosquitos whined in the darkness and we slapped ourselves awake trying to kill them. Outside open windows, feeble breezes wandered, and crickets and cicadas kept up their relentless madrigals that sang us back into a

fretful sleep.

The first time I met Neil and Jim, we were all in the same art history class. One day in the courtyard of the Architecture building at class break, the two of them were having a spirited debate about contemporary abstract artists. I was not really listening. I was watching them, observing how both of them played this game.

Neil seemed a quiet, pensive young man, probably a little bit introverted. Interesting. Jim was just the opposite. Impulsive and agitated, he paced back and forth as he spoke, and gestured frenetically with his hands. He was almost theatrically intense. I was amused by that. Neil remained soft-spoken, serious and thoughtful as he responded, which I found attractive. Neil was good-looking in a brooding Teutonic sort of way. I liked that too. He was an artist, but he was also a varsity tennis player.

Their conversation turned to abstract expressionist painters on the West Coast, the stars of the new style called Action Painting. As Jim spoke, he was constantly moving, never still, and there was fire in his eyes. Each time he raised his voice, his arms flew up as well. I remember what he was saying because at the time, it sounded shocking to me.

“Anybody can just masturbate a canvas and call it art!” he said, with far too much passion for a lovely autumn afternoon.

I wanted to get to know Neil, and though I didn’t have any particular interest in Jim, I knew he was a friend of Neil’s, so a few days later when Jim asked me to a party at Neil’s place, I went.

They both lived off-campus, Neil in a tiny odd house on the edge of a parking lot by small clump of scraggly mesquite trees. Jim lived in the basement of the house where his friends Tony Bell and Gilbert Shelton lived upstairs. That winter, Tony and Gilbert’s

kitchen was a hangout for a small cadre of art students. Warmed by the open burners of the kitchen stove, we drank beer and talked about art while Gilbert doodled exquisite little pen and ink drawings of imaginary cities with a Rapid-o-graph pen. Sometimes Neil was there, and since Jim lived downstairs, he usually was too.

I was dating mostly fraternity boys then. I didn't have any intentions about Jim, though he seemed mildly interested in me. There was nothing said, we were just friends. I was dating a half-dozen guys casually, but I had set my sights on Neil. I didn't tell anyone, but I was holding a special space for him.

Jim made me laugh. He was known for his witty sense of humor, even though at times he could be moody and distant. The angry scrapper I'd seen outside Art History class that day was one part of him, but there was a different part of him that was more hidden and vulnerable, even fragile. Most of all, Jim was passionately committed to his art.

In my plan to get closer to Neil, I was spending time around Jim too. There were day-trips into the country to sketch the flat Texas farmlands, old weathered-wood barns, and fields of grazing cows, and field trips with other artists to paint landscapes. Before I was aware of it, Jim had slipped into my heart by the back door.

Nothing was declared, or seemed to be needed by the social norms. We were art-friends. I had no interest in "going steady" with anybody. I liked dating fraternity boys, being independent and sought-after.

Need I say, I was a virgin, and that was probably true of all the girls I knew. I was becoming fond of Jim, had even spent some affectionate evenings with him, but I had not awakened yet to the sense of physical desire, and I wasn't even very curious about it. I

loved my classes, my art, and my tribe of friends. There was an infinite road in front of me, and so much life all around me. I was in no hurry to fall in love or any such thing.

Art students spent long afternoons in the heat and charcoal dust of life-drawing classes, straining our eyes to capture the realness of the model's body, the livingness of it, and translate that into art. Standing before our large manilla drawing pads with aching arms we carved the charcoal marks we hoped would miraculously make art. After three hours of this, we were more than ready for a cold beer.

Our favorite place was Scholtz's Beer Garden, where we relaxed away lazy afternoons under the trees at tables sticky with spilled beer, talked about art, and downed frosted mugs of draft ale. Above us, strings of light bulbs crisscrossed between the trees. After sundown they were lit, and there was music from a juke box.

For generations Scholz's Beer Garden had been the place where legislators from the State Capitol a few blocks away took breaks from all that arduous legislating, and unofficially where the real deals and alliances were made. It was also the place where the in-crowd of artists hung out.

The legislators wore their suits and ties, and we wore the uniform that marked us as The Artists: light blue cotton chambray work shirts and wheat jeans, boys and girls alike. No serious artist wore slacks or a skirt. Blue jeans were acceptable, but wheat-jeans, an off-white, lighter-than-beige color, were the style.

Then on weekends, I became a coed again. There were Frat parties, and small bars and clubs outside the Austin city limits where we would go. By an old law, it was illegal to sell hard liquor within one mile of the University campus, so college men took their dates to the roadside clubs just outside of town on the Austin

Highway for drinking and dancing to jukeboxes or sometimes a live band.

One of the favorite places was an out-of-the-way semi-forbidden black nightclub called Charlie's Playhouse. It had a small crowded dance floor and live music and IDs were not checked very carefully. On Saturday nights the place was full of college kids. Charlie, a large amiable black man, greeted us at the door with a gleaming smile. A smart businessman, he must have made a fairly good income on cover charges and beer from the silly young white kids, most of them out for the thrill of doing something their parents would have disapproved of. A few black couples came, mostly to set the atmosphere I think. Actually, Saturday nights the place was as white as Wonder Bread, but on weeknights it came alive with the locals, the real people from the neighborhood. The music rocked a whole lot hotter, and it was a different place entirely. We usually went on week nights.

A popular night-spot out on the Austin Highway was an old gas station converted into a bar called Threadgill's. Old man Threadgill was always there, wearing his Roy Rogers cowboy shirt and bolo tie. Every night was open-mike. There was no sign-up, just every so often the Juke box got turned off and anybody that wanted to sing or play could climb up on the bar and take the mike.

One night when my Theta Xi date and I were leaving Threadgill's to go to the New Orleans Club, I heard a voice that stopped me in my tracks and made all the hair on my arms stand up. It was Janice Joplin. That was before her career as a rock singer, she was a folksinger then. Joan Baez was the new big-name who was about to discover Bob Dylan. Back then, Janice had a voice that was very pure, clear, and spine-chillingly unforgettable. It was styled after Joan Baez, but about two octaves higher. I had never heard anything like it before, and I never would again. Later

Janice would burn out her throat with Jack Daniels and singing too loud in cheap noisy bars. It would be that crippled raspy voice that would make her famous.

I enjoyed the boyfriends and other such foolishness, but I was an earnestly dedicated student, working toward a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting and printmaking. The old wooden barracks art building was left unlocked during the day and early evening after classes, and anyone could come in and work. I spent countless contented hours in the graphics lab, printing my lithographs from local stones quarried up on the hill above the art building. I loved copperplate etching best. The lab had a beautiful old hand-cranked etching press with a solid steel plate press-bed and a five foot high cast-iron wheel that you turned to move the press-bed with the etching plate through the press. This printed the etching onto heavy watercolor paper pre-soaked to soften it to receive the impression and the ink from the etching plate.

Most students used zinc plates, much cheaper than copper, but for drypoint, the most sensitive and subtle of etchings, I used pure copper plates, polished to a perfect sheen. The carbon-steel scribing tool cut cleanly into the yielding flesh of the soft metal in the most sensual way, and made each line complex and expressive. No acid-etched line could approach the grace and subtlety of the drypoint line in copper. It was like something alive. And while you could pull a large number of prints from an acid-etched plate, the number of prints from a drypoint was limited because the surface was vulnerable. The burred edges that made the lines so soft and dark, wore down and gradually flattened from the pressure of each pass through the printing press, so that the later prints lost some of the detail and freshness. Only the first few prints had the full beauty and subtlety of the line. *And oh, the sweet thrill of pulling the first print from the plate, peeling back the thick damp paper*

and seeing the image for the first time, crisp black and white, seeing it born.

In the evenings I walked home from the art building through humid air that felt like wading waist-deep through warm water. After a long day's work, I was peaceful and happy. I loved my life and hardly knew it; I took it all for granted. I lived it as if there could never be anything else but this— creating, discovering. I was an artist, and that was a wonderful thing to be.

Although I could choose among boyfriends like seashells on the beach, I was in no hurry to do so. I was only interested in eventually finding someone really exceptional. He had to be someone stronger than me, and he had to be smarter and finer. The Knight in Shining Armor was still the social standard of the time. Men were assumed to be superior to women, even though reality often conflicted with that. But we knew that if we had to be owned by one, every girl wanted the best one she could get. For now of course, I was only window-shopping.

Jim was intelligent, talented, and dedicated to his art. He had a charismatic personality. He was brash and outspoken, which I interpreted as strength. Sometimes he tried to look serious and brooding like Neil, but his features were too fine-boned and soft. At twenty-one he could have passed for sixteen.

When I'd only known him a little while, he grew a mustache. A lot of the male art students were doing it. But after the fad faded, he kept his. He must have thought it made him look older. I thought it made him look like a used-car salesman, but it was part of his “image” so I didn't mention it.

Jim had never said much about his family, I only knew that his father had been a lovable alcoholic and his mother a loyal and loving wife. His father had committed suicide when Jim was sixteen years old.

“I was just getting to know him...” Jim said once, and he never spoke of it again. It was enough for me to know that this must have been an abandonment he could not bear, a wound that had never healed. Years later, when he got drunk enough, his agony would come back again, fresh and raw as open flesh.

Jim was a double Aries, the fire sign, both sun and moon. There was an explosive intensity about him, I’d known it the first time I saw him. On the outside he was full of energy and action, absurdly brave like a Bantam rooster. On the inside though, he was kindhearted, sensitive and vulnerable. He knew this, so he covered it up with flair and pride, humor and bravado. That’s what a Texas man does.

It never occurred to me that I loved Jim. He was not a serious consideration. I was busy with my art, my friends, and the Thanksgiving holiday break coming up. There was a party at Neil’s place, Jim told me about it, so I asked him for a ride.

I had never been a good drinker. After a few beers I usually quietly fell asleep. We were drinking cheap Chianti wine, which was trickier, less predictable. I wasn’t into drinking anyway, but it was what my crowd did. I don't remember much about that night, it was like so many others. I remember all of us sitting around...

Music is playing and we are drinking and the guys are talking about art. I'm sitting next to Neil on the couch, and I'm already nodding off, feeling very relaxed and drowsy. As I sink deeper into the couch cushions, I am bold enough to run my fingers playfully up the smooth skin of Neil's lower back, where no one can see... I rest my head on Neil's shoulder and fall asleep.

The next thing I remember, I woke up and everyone was gone except Neil and me. At first I thought I was dreaming – but no, it was real.

Here I am, I thought, right where I wanted to be. It must be

very late. The room is chilly and his body is warm. My head is foggy, but one thing is clear, everyone else has left. Jim has left without me, and left me here with Neil.

We lay down on the couch together. We kissed, and kissed again. He was gentle, close and warm. His shirt was open and his skin was like silk. Except for that, we were fully dressed. I dozed in his arms. He was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of anything more, and so, wrapped up together and holding each other, we both fell asleep.

In the morning when Neil's phone rang I woke up with a shock. It was the first day of Thanksgiving break and my ride to Dallas had come to my house to pick me up. When I wasn't there, my housemates had called Jim, and Jim called Neil and told him they were looking for me. I rushed home, and managed to connect with my ride. There was no time to talk with either Neil or Jim. I rode all the way from Austin to Dallas lying down in the back seat, hung-over and sick as a dog.

After the four-day holiday I came back to school. Jim didn't call for nearly a week. When he did, I met with him at his place, to talk. I told him the truth, that Neil and I just held each other and fell asleep. I wasn't sure what this would mean to him or to our undefined relationship. We sat together in the dark in silence. I felt so much guilt and remorse that I could hardly speak.

My thoughts stumbled in circles... I should not have to feel guilty; I haven't done anything wrong. I had come to the party with Jim, and Jim had left me there. He could have waked me up, but he didn't; he left me there alone with Neil, and I wanted to be.

Confused and conflicted, the workings of my mind shifted gears with the question: *Did Jim think I was "his girl?"*

It wasn't clear. Nothing had been said.

If he did, then I would have been a terrible person to flirt with

Neil. If not, I should have had the right to be with anyone I wanted, and from the beginning, it was Neil I wanted.

Up until then, I didn't know that I had begun to care for Jim more than I intended to. He was a good person and a good friend. I wanted him to take me back.

Neil was the reason I'd gone out with Jim in the first place, but neither of them knew that. To further complicate things, I hadn't known how close their friendship was, I didn't know they grew up together since grade-school in Nebraska.

I'd spent one night alone with Neil, and now Jim was sullen, hurt and withdrawn. Even though it could be argued that it was not a date, and *he left me there* that night, Jim held it over me as an unforgivable debt to him. And so did I.

I shouldn't have. And he shouldn't have.

I had not committed any sin or crime to be punished for. He should not have blamed me, and I should not have blamed myself, but I did. I had awakened that morning feeling alarmed and guilty, as if I had done something wrong, even though I had not. When Jim reacted as if I had, I fell right back into the role I had hated so much as a child: the quiet, compliant, obedient, good little girl.

As we sat there together in the dark of Jim's room, tears poured silently down my face. I promised him that if only he would take me back, I would do anything to make it up to him.

I didn't know then what I was promising.



Chapter 12: Port Arthur

The art building was at the far end of campus at the edge of a wooded area. A wandering stream called Waller Creek ran through it, bordered by small trees, just enough for shade. It was quiet and dim there. You could sit by the creek between classes and imagine you were in a forest instead of a crowded college campus.

Just outside the back door of the graphics lab, a grassy hillside rose steeply like a living wall till it ended at a paved parking lot. Starting early in spring and lasting into the fall, it was covered with lush wild oriental poppies. Completely unattended, they grew abundantly in colors from blood-red to scarlet, and their silken petals fluttered in the breeze like the whirling skirts of gypsy-girl dancers. The very wantonness of them seemed to shout for joy. Every time I walked past, they were so beautiful that my heart beat faster and a tight little ache gripped my throat, as if my soul might escape from my body and rush to dance with the poppies in their outrageous outburst of glorious life.

Drawing and painting instructors used bunches of them for still-life subjects, and sadly, as we worked, the poppies began to wilt. Within an hour or so, they would die.

Out on the hillside, the others still danced in freedom and warm winds, celebrating life and joy. The poppies came to be a symbol for me, of a special kind of courage. The courage to be free, for when they were cut and taken, they refused to live.

Jim was one of the MTs (Major Talents). Everybody liked him. His energy was magnetic, and he was always surrounded by bright creative people, and so when I was with him, I was too. He had friends on the staff of the University humor magazine The

Texas Ranger. One of them, Gilbert Shelton, would someday be internationally known as a comic artist for the characters he created for the Ranger at his kitchen table in Austin: Wonder Warthog, Fat Freddie's Cat, and the Furry Freak Brothers. But the one person Jim called his best friend, looked up to like an older brother and spoke of almost reverently, was Steve Hodges. By the time I knew Jim, Steve had graduated and was pursuing his painting career and living with a girlfriend in Port Arthur. One weekend we drove down to visit him.

Port Arthur Texas was a grim little town. There was not much to do there. All afternoon, Jim and Steve drank beer and talked endlessly about the good old days and smoked pack after pack of cigarettes. Steve's girlfriend Linda just drank and smoked. I sipped lukewarm beer and waited for the trip to be over.

Finally it got very late. The Jack Paar show was over, the TV screen was a test pattern, and there was nothing left to say. Everybody went to bed. Steve and Linda slept in the back bedroom, Jim bedded down in a big overstuffed armchair in another room, and I slept in the living room on the couch.

Falling asleep groggy with alcohol, I could hear foghorns far off in the sultry darkness. At first I thought, *What a strange dream*. Port Arthur was just a name to me. Like Fort Worth isn't a real fort, I hadn't realized that Port Arthur was a real port, with ships, until I heard the foghorns in the thick heat of the night, calling mournfully to each other like lost souls.

A shipping port on the Gulf of Mexico with a population of about 40,000, Port Arthur would have been a completely forgettable experience, except that it was where I lost my virginity, in the middle of the night with the foghorns moaning somewhere out there in the dark.

It must have been three or four in the morning. I was asleep

when Jim crept into my bed. When I felt the pain and woke up, it was too late to stop him. It wasn't romantic or passionate. By the time I came awake, it was almost over.

I don't think he said anything at all. He got up and went back to his chair and back to sleep. I lay there shocked. There was nothing I could do about it, it was done. With no magic moment, no words of love from prince charming, I was no longer a virgin.

The next day there was only the strange ache in the torn place. Jim said he had heard Steve and Linda having sex in the back room and that was why, extremely drunk, he had come stumbling into the room where I was sound asleep, and into my bed. This was apparently intended as some sort of apology.

I hadn't known what was happening until it happened. I didn't want it to happen, but whatever my excuses, it had happened, and it changed me in some way that I didn't understand. Somehow it had branded me, and after that, I belonged to him. Nothing was really said, but from that time on, I felt somehow bound to him.

For the rest of my life, I never drank that much again. I never went back to Port Arthur Texas, but I never forgot it either. I made a mistake there.

By the end of May, Austin was as hot as August. It was the week of final exams and artwork juries for classes. When those were finished, the school year would be over. Jim would be leaving for New Haven Connecticut where his first semester at Yale graduate school of Art and Architecture would begin in the fall. The time that was left, Jim and I spent together. We stayed close. Evenings we sat on a blanket in the back yard of the house on Colorado Street where I lived, trying to catch whatever breeze there might be.

When the school year ended, he left, and even though I hadn't meant to fall in love with him, I felt the loss as if a part of myself had been borrowed and not returned. We wrote letters to each other every week and made lots of long-distance calls. There was really nothing to say, but we missed each other.

Jim was not exactly a prize. His thin angular body was not athletic, his face was too young-looking and too soft. But what he may have lacked in looks, he made up for in wit. He was a lightning-rod of personality, charming and articulate. He was a clever comic and a great storyteller. Even when he was serious, then too he seemed to stand out in a crowd, quietly intense, always so intense.

He was tall and lanky but he had gotten his height late, not until he was twenty. I think even after he was six-foot-one, he never really felt big enough. He had been an only child raised by a single mother after his father's suicide. Maybe that was why he needed people around him, like outriggers on a canoe, to help him balance himself.

When he came back to Texas at semester break, I agreed to marry him. There was no engagement ring, just the mutual decision to get married. Neither of us was ready for marriage, but we couldn't bear being apart and we thought that this was the only way we could be together.

I reasoned, logically enough, that with him I would have an exciting life among creative people. I never thought I might be left out of that circle, and it never occurred to me that I might have found an exciting life anyway, on my own. I was living on the outside of myself in those days, directed by what other people wanted me to be. I hadn't realized yet that I mattered too – that I myself was a legitimate factor in my own life. How could I not know that? Nobody had ever told me.

I never really wanted to get married. I don't think Jim did either, but when he started graduate school at Yale, he was on the East Coast and I was still in Texas. We missed each other so much and our long-distance phone bills were so expensive, marriage seemed to make some sort of sense. Then I could move to Connecticut and we would be together. Just "living together" would have been more practical, but it was 1963, we were good kids, and good kids like us didn't do things like that.

So the wedding would be at Christmas vacation. I would come home to Dallas and Jim would come back from New Haven. After the wedding we would have a few days together, then each of us would go back to our separate schools in separate cities 1,600 miles apart. I would finish the rest of the semester, then I would leave school one semester short of graduating and move to New Haven Connecticut.

Meanwhile Mother and Julia, Vivian's mother who had crafted my prom dress, were busy fitting my wedding dress, planning the flowers and the reception, reserving the church, and all the multitude of details for the wedding. Everything seemed to be rushing forward very fast. I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, I was ambivalent and apprehensive, but I struggled to ignore it and plunged ahead anyway. I didn't want all this. Jim and I both had wanted a very small wedding, but Mother wanted to make it wonderful for me.

When the wedding day came, even with Mother's perfect plans in place, everything that possibly could go wrong, did. For one thing, it snowed. It never snows in Dallas, except about once every 30 years, but it did on my wedding day. The guests were coming by car and nobody was accustomed to driving in snow. They had to drive slowly, slipping and sliding on the ice on the streets and freeways. The wedding guests were late, and so was the wedding.

The wedding had been scheduled for the afternoon at three o'clock. My dress was street-length with a fingertip-length veil. But since the ceremony was delayed by traffic, it was after five, an evening wedding, so it properly should have been a long dress. No matter, we went ahead.

I barely remember the wedding, except Daddy walking me down the aisle. I looked over at him and there were tears in his beautiful brown eyes. I panicked. I knew I would fall apart if I saw my Daddy cry, so I started saying something silly to cheer him up. I had planned to look graceful walking down the aisle with a swanlike elegance. Instead I went nervously laughing with a silly look on my face. As Jim and I stood before the minister to say our vows, Jim's voice failed and faded to barely a squeak, so I lowered mine too. Nobody in the church heard either of us say "I do."

After the ceremony, Jim and I were the first ones to arrive back at my family's house for the reception. Jim got out of the car. The driver-side door was closest to the house, so instead of opening my passenger door and walking all the way around the car in the snow, I reached over and grasped the driver's side doorframe to help myself slide across the car seat. You could do that in Jim's old pre-bucket-seat Ford. Jim was reaching into the rear door to get our coats from the back seat. He saw me slide over, and in his hurry to help me out of the car in a gentlemanly way, he quickly slammed the rear door, smashing my finger in it.

I uttered a small squeak of a shout, and froze there like a stop-action frame in a movie. With a look of horror, Jim realized what he had done, reopened the car door to free my finger, and stood there helplessly with a stricken look on his suddenly ashen face. As I stepped out of the car, my finger dripped a few bright red drops of blood onto the flawless white of the new snow. I held the hand out in front of me so it wouldn't bleed onto my pretty little white satin shoes. A gust of wind caught my veil and swept it

suddenly forward in a tangle over my face, tearing my hair where it was pinned. No one else had arrived at the house yet except us. In that moment I realized I didn't have a house key.

We both stood there. Jim looked desperate and completely unnerved. I was trying to comprehend it. Struck dumb with disbelief, I thought, *This can't be happening*.

A car pulled up behind us, the first people to arrive for the reception. It wasn't Mother and Daddy or anyone with a key to the door. Of all the people it might have been, it was Mr. and Mrs. Murphy and their son Roland, the young man everybody thought I would marry but I didn't.

At that point my memory screen goes blank. We must have stood there together very awkwardly until Mother and Daddy came and opened the house door.

The reception flew by in a haze. As soon as we got inside, somebody gave me some pills for pain. Daddy devised a bandage that stopped the bleeding and drew the two sides of the split fingertip together and secured them. He chipped some ice and wrapped it in a dishtowel to make an ice pack for me. Mother brought me some other pills, I think they were her tranquilizer. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, so the combination of stress, an empty stomach, and the medications, took effect, and I don't remember much pain after that.

I only remember smiling at all those people in our living room milling around, smiling at me. I had to walk carefully in a sort of shuffle, because I couldn't feel my feet. I remember smiling for a long time at one pretty girl in a red velvet dress who was talking to me. In my drugged haze I wondered who she was, and then I realized it was my sister Mary. I don't remember anything else except what I saw later in the wedding pictures. In every picture of the reception, I'm holding the dishtowel of ice in my

hand.

Somehow Mother got me changed into my going-away suit. People threw rice in tiny sheer-net bundles tied with ribbons as Jim and I came out the front door. We drove off to the Marriott hotel where Jim's mom had reserved a lavish room for our one-night honeymoon.

In the lobby we were dazzled by a two-story open foyer with an enormous cut-crystal chandelier hung in the center of its vast space and a curved stairway sweeping majestically up one side of it. Everything was bright, glittering, splendid.

The room was decorated in plum-purple and beige with a wall of mirrors near the bed. Later a lot of sex happened there which, drugged and oblivious, I was only vaguely aware of.

At 4:00 a.m. we both woke up severely hungry. Neither of us had eaten anything all day except the wedding cake, which I didn't remember either. Jim went out into the hallway and found a Coke machine. We shared a can of Coca-Cola and finally went back to sleep. My smashed finger was throbbing urgently. I fell asleep anyway. And that was my honeymoon.

Whatever her shortfalls in life may have been, my birth-mother Ann was a brave woman in some ways, braver than I knew. I had seen her only twice since leaving her life when I was thirteen. Now, after all she had been through – addiction, loss, abandonment and shame, she came to my wedding.

Mother had sent her an invitation out of respect, and of course, no one expected her to come. But she came. That must have taken unimaginable courage.

The last time I'd seen her I was sixteen and she was a recovering alcoholic. I had no idea what that meant at the time.

Mother had arranged for me to visit her and urged me to go, so I spent one day with her and overnight. She had been sober, going to AA meetings. She was acutely nervous seeing me, and the experience was painfully awkward for us both.

Now, after all those vacant years, here she was. She was wearing a royal blue dress, with white gloves, and a little fur shawl, all very tasteful. She may have borrowed it all, but she looked better than I had ever seen her. Her hair was nicely done, with a little blue hat, and she wore a scant bit of makeup. She probably couldn't afford it, but she had come by taxi to North Dallas where I lived, me and my new family.

I hadn't seen her at the wedding, everything was moving so fast and I was swept along with it. But she came to the reception at our house. Regrettably I didn't give her much attention. Even under the best of circumstances I wouldn't have known what to say to her. The wedding, the crowd, the pain of my smashed finger, plus the effect of several medications different people had given me, all had my head spinning. I couldn't focus my vision very well.

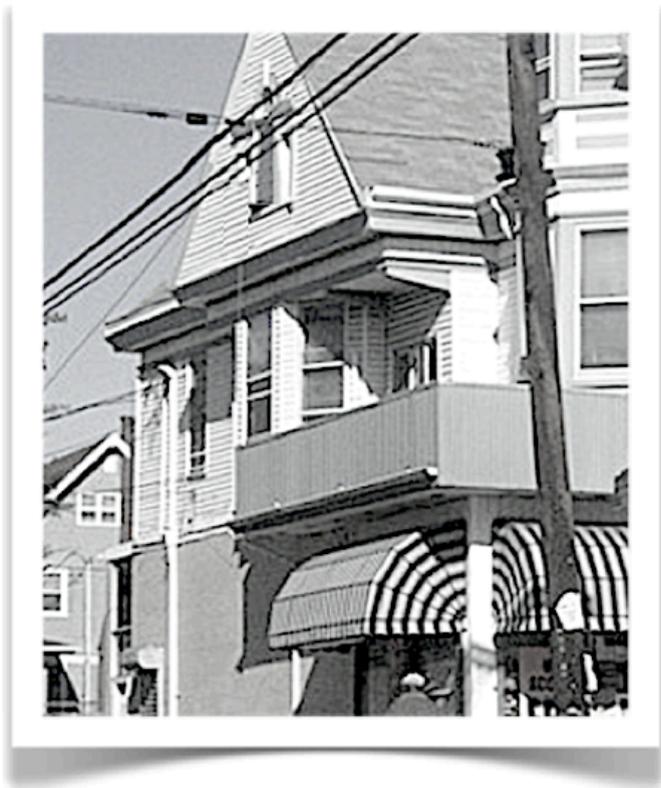
Mother insisted that we take a picture of Jim and me and Ann together. What that must have meant to Ann, I cannot imagine. All of this – to see Daddy again, to see his new wife, to see me in my wedding dress, and to see her grown son after

nearly ten years. Yet she looked completely composed, and prettier than I had remembered her. She seemed a rock of strength and courage, as far as I could tell through my Darvon blur.

Ann's presence was quiet and unobtrusive. Only our family and closest friends knew who she was, and Mother welcomed her warmly as any other guest. Nobody else knew what a heroic act it was for her to come there, into a crowd of strangers. It was something I recognized as uncommonly brave. I don't think I could have done such a thing myself, not the person I was then. And yet this was very like some intrepid and improbable things I too would do later on in my life. There must have been a streak of bravery in both of us, and I still believe it came from Granny's Kentucky blood.

Mother, as always, was beautiful and gracious and kind. No corsage had been ordered for Ann, since no one had expected her to come. Mother took off her white orchid corsage, gave it to Ann, and pinned it on for her.

Mother was the classiest woman I have ever known.



Chapter 13: New Haven

After the Christmas wedding we spent a few days at Jim's mom's apartment in San Antonio, then Jim went back to New Haven and I went back to Austin to finish the rest of the semester.

Every week he wrote me sweet letters about school and the new friends he met. In one of them he sent me a tiny sycamore leaf that blew in his window as he wrote. I counted the days, and as soon as the semester ended I went home to Dallas, packed my bags, and left for Connecticut. I got on the train wearing a nice little traveling suit and my warmest Texas coat, which wasn't nearly warm enough. The ticket was coach, an old Burlington train with seats that were hard and cold. I shivered the whole two days, and when I finally arrived in New Haven, the charming old city greeted me with more bone-chilling cold. It was after midnight when Jim picked me up at the New Haven Station.

The first night of our new life together was not the romantic love-story I had imagined. In fact it was awkward and almost depressing. There was some rather uninspired sex, and then he hogged all the covers and I shivered through the rest of the night. My first winter on the East Coast would be cold and wet, hostile and mean. It was like living on the moon, and I didn't know how. I had to learn.

Jim's aunt Norma lived in Manhattan. She was terrific, warm and fun and very cosmopolitan. She had found the apartment at 55 Norton Street for Jim when he first came out that summer to prepare for graduate school in the fall. It was a small third-floor walk-up in an old wood-frame house on the corner of Chapel and Norton streets. The first floor was a Public Accountant's office. The entrance from the street had a business glass door, a small

foyer with the accountant's door on one side, and a stair of four or five steps on the other. At the turn of the stairs where they went out of sight, the hallway narrowed abruptly to only about 30 inches wide and the steps climbed steeply to apartments on the second and third floors. At the top of the last flight of stairs were two small apartments built into the dormers of the roof. The one on the right was ours. The one on the left was occupied by two women, nurses, Jim said. The rent was \$90 a month, which seems incredibly cheap now, but it was hard for us to manage.

That first week, Jim got a postcard from Neil. He had joined the Marines! Nobody would ever have expected that. Neil had been the quiet one, the most introverted of us. He had been athletic but his art was sensitive and subtle. He was also a musician. Now he was a Marine? Maybe he wanted to prove something to himself, or maybe he was just trying to find himself among all the different selves he had inside him.

I needed to find a job as soon as possible but I was just out of school with no degree and no experience except a file-girl job at State Farm Insurance and the summer job at Kodak. Wives of Jim's new friends helped me find leads, but weeks of job-hunting passed without success. The more I slogged through the slushy streets, the lower my hopes descended. On the radio, the Mamas and the Papas were singing *California Dreamin'* and I could not even imagine that dream. Paul Simon sang: *I am a rock; I am an Island*.

I was willing to take almost anything, and finally there was a want-ad for a clerical job at Southern New England Telephone Company. I applied. They gave me a battery of tests with long strings of numbers to look at for a few seconds, memorize, and then write down. I passed the tests and got the job. After that, I was bringing home \$52 a week, and as far as I knew, that was what we had to live on.

Jim kept the checkbook. That was the one piece of advice my mother-in law had given me, one day when I'd said, "I guess we'll open a joint checking account." She said "No, Jim should take charge of financial matters; he needs to learn to be more responsible with money." That was a mistake. He never did learn to be responsible with money.

The telephone company job was mechanical and deadly dull. I collected the five-layer service repair orders endlessly rolling off the teleprinters, separated them, alphabetized them, collated the five copies of each service order into their five stacks, sorted and delivered them to the proper departments, desks, and file drawers in the sprawling floor of offices. I worked in the Directory division, which filled the entire fourth floor of the telephone company building on George Street. Four managers and about forty girls compiled, produced, and maintained both the White Pages and the Yellow Pages, sitting all day hunched over desks, shuffling papers. By mid-morning my neck and back and shoulders ached and burned.

The other girls were nice enough, but I was an oddity there. Behind my back they called me "the beatnik." I wore my dark hair long with Cher bangs. They all had cute short stylish hairdos and trendy Carnaby Street clothes that were way out of my clothes budget, which was zero.

Eventually a few of them had the courage or the kindness to befriend me. My best friends, the ones I could talk to were Carol Lawson and Sylvia Vaughn. Carol was my age, a great person with a lively bright open mind. She was undecided between two boyfriends and she had a pet iguana in her apartment. I liked her right away, she was different from the rest. Sylvia was the one who trained me as a new employee. She was 40-something, really my closest friend, the oldest of "the girls" and the only black woman in the department. Sylvia was a gift. She had a genuine

warmth about her, a wisdom about life, and a great sense of humor. That was what got me through. I don't know what she ever saw in me. Maybe she saw something that called out to be befriended, like a woebegone stray puppy.

The first East Coast winter was a test of survival. North Carolina had been cold and Texas could have its ice storms, but Connecticut had a wet, penetrating cold that found its way into your shoes, inside your coat collar and down the back of your neck, and then seeped all the way through to your bones.

Our apartment was an attic, directly under the roof, so whatever the weather was, snow or ice or rain, we were right next to it. By the time the feeble heat came all the way up from the furnace in the basement, the vents had already given out what little warmth they had to the first two floors and brought us only a slight cool draft next to the bedroom wall. Thick wads of ice formed on the inside of the window pane and stayed for months. When it finally melted in spring, water dripped onto the ugly brown carpet beside the bed.

Spring was cold and wet, but when the first summer finally came, it wasn't so bad. The days were sunny and sometimes even hot. I loved being warm; it reminded me of home. Outside the bedroom window was a Sycamore tree almost as tall as the house. From the tiny window I could look down onto its lush canopy of leaves, each one tender green and flawless. They fluttered and waved to me like a sea of little hands.

I went to work every day at the Telephone Company, and like most of the other married students' wives, I came home to another full day's work of cooking, housework, and laundry. Jim went to New York on as many weekends as he could, and in the beginning, sometimes he took me with him. Jim's friend Brice lived in New York, and took us to uptown galleries like the Leo Castelli Gallery where I saw paintings by pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy

Lichtenstein, and sculptures by John Marin. I saw wonderful art in great museums, paintings by the masters of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Modern art, magnificent works I had only seen pictures of in art books, acts of genius and magic by Matisse, Monet, Van Gogh, Giacometti, and Picasso. I marveled at it all.

But the best thing about New York was Jim's fabulous aunt Norma. She was a fashion model and lived in a big apartment building at 30 East 9th Street, between Cooper Union and Greenwich Village. She was not the pretzel-stick haute couture type of model, she modeled tasteful clothes for Town and Country and other upscale magazines. She was petite for a high-fashion model, only five-foot-eight, with short brown hair and beautiful hazel eyes that smiled. Norma always put us up at her apartment whenever we came to New York. Without her the city would have been utterly bewildering. She was a real New Yorker, cheerfully at ease in the middle of the busy flow and flurry of it all.

Jim and I walked from her apartment to the Village to some of the small clubs like the Purple Onion and the 9th Circle. We saw legendary performers like Nina Simone, Dizzy Gillespie and other jazz musicians. We could only have one beer for the whole evening because we were so broke, so after Jim drank his, he drank the rest of mine, and then we had the bottles in our hands to keep the waiters at bay. We didn't fool them, they gave us haughty looks, but they let us stay.

We were shocked at the cost of everything, compared to Texas. When we were out and about, we survived mostly on Nedick's hot dogs and orange-drinks. Evenings, Norma and one of her boyfriends took us to restaurants. If it hadn't been for Norma, we might have starved in Manhattan.

Everything turned into an adventure. Once, we went to Chinatown and stood in line for more than an hour just to get into a special restaurant. The place was gloriously alive, every inch of

it swarming, elbow to elbow. Everybody was happy and talking loud, and everything around us was constantly moving like a pot boiling over. People and noise and frenetic activity. Everything was brightly colored, spinning, sparkling with strange exotic life, and the food was delicious beyond description.

Norma's boyfriend Barney took us in his Lincoln Town Car through a tunnel to a fabulous restaurant in New Jersey. We ate and ate, and every table had bottles of seltzer so you could burp and eat more. I had my first experience of chopped liver with schmaltz. Incredible.

At heart, Jim's aunt Norma was still a farm girl from Nebraska, she didn't believe in wasting food. When she went to fancy uptown restaurants she always got doggie bags and brought home steak and lobster for her little poodle, Bijou. When we were in New York, she brought it home for us.

Jim's Mom Wilma, still in Texas, was a daughter-in-law's dream. She kept in close touch with us and she was thoughtful and considerate of our pride when we were so broke. She and I were about the same size, so she bought cute "Villager" skirts and tops for herself, washed them a few times so they wouldn't look too new, and sent them to me pretending they were hand-me-downs she was tired of.

Jim's friend Brice was in love with the City, the way other artists might be in love with Paris or Rome. He worked as a guard at the Jewish Museum and knew all the galleries and museums in New York. He took Jim and me to places not on most art gallery tourist maps, like The Cloisters. To get there we took a subway and then the 5th Avenue bus all the way to 193rd Street, a long ride. I nodded in and out of consciousness with a blazing headache and a terrible case of the flu.

The Cloisters was a magnificent museum of Medieval art,

with ceilings supported by stone arches and columns from the Abbey of Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert, built in the year 804 A.D. It was called The Cloisters because it was made out of rebuilt monastery abbeys and cloister walkways brought from Europe, stone by stone, and reassembled here.

Beneath the vaulted ceilings were paintings and wood-carvings, tapestries, stained-glass windows, and illuminated manuscripts, most of them dated from 1000 A.D. to about 1500. The sacredness of this place felt strangely but hauntingly present, as if the souls who once walked these halls might still be watching from overhead. Our voices echoed off stone walls as if the words were passing through some other ancient space and time. It was marvelous to realize that *because of art*, some of the far distant past was still living, here in the present, even though all of this was created by hands that now had been dust for hundreds of years.

Like Brice, Jim had been an abstract painter when I first met him. Willem DeKooning, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline were some of the most successful artists of the abstract genres of the time. Some were geometric images like Brice's work, many were a non-figurative style called action-painting, built up with wild strokes and splashes. By 1963, one of the early action-painters, Richard Diebenkorn, had developed another kind of abstraction with figures, and later a flat, color-rich and tactile-surfaced style which he called "color-field landscapes."

In the art program at the university of Texas, Jim had been an action painter. A recognized talent, he had been awarded a summer scholarship at Yale that was a life-changing experience for him. Then in his senior year of college he applied for admission to the Yale graduate School of Art and Architecture, and he was accepted. The application required students to submit photo slides

of their work, and at that time, most of the slides Jim sent probably were abstract paintings.

I didn't know when the change had come for Jim, or why, but by the time he got to New Haven that fall, his interest had made a complete turn-around from action-painting to figure painting and still-life. He was painting in a style that was figurative, personal, and seen by some as neo-traditional. It was very different from the East-Coast-abstract trend at Yale.

Jim studied the works of the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, an artist who experimented with space in a paradoxical way no one else had done. Cézanne was a favorite of mine too. Jim also liked an obscure painter named Giorgio Morandi who had been popular in the 1930's for moody minimalist still-lives that had an odd sense of mystery.

Jim admired another painter of that period called Balthus, who by the 1960s was also relatively obscure. Balthus painted pre-teen girls in sexually tantalizing poses in dimly-lit interiors, which often included a lurking cat. The effect was dreamlike, enigmatic, sensual, and a bit disturbing. In the Modern period of art, Balthus had been called by art critics an "anti-modernist," but a decade after his death he would be called "a figurative master in an age of abstraction."

Like these three artists, Jim too was a rebel mutineer. He began to paint figures, portraits, and stark still-lives of unusual objects. My friend Sylvia told me about a neighborhood flea market on Legion Avenue. We went there on Sunday and found all sorts of treasures for Jim to paint: beautiful old wooden hand-tools, ceramic jars and vases, and metal utensils with functions that were unknown now, but whose shapes were poetic and mysterious.

Yale graduate school was a highly competitive, extremely

demanding environment. Jim was just as talented in his new style as he had been in abstract painting, but it was not the popular mode of the other students. His vision was different, and although he was well-liked by his fellow students, there was a subtle undercurrent of reserve for this style of painting. For him it was frustrating and discouraging. He raged every day. I tried to be totally supportive.

My new life was not as happy as I had hoped it would be, and I think Jim's wasn't either. For him the challenges were formidable. He was seen as a bit of an outsider because he was different. At the telephone company, I was too.

For me there was joyless work and no hope of any pursuit of my art. After my workdays, I came home to more work. For Jim there were days in art classes and most evenings were spent with other art students at a little pub near school. I was always profoundly tired. I longed for rest and sleep, but I had signed-on for this life, I had taken a vow and made a promise without knowing what I was promising myself to.

I came to dread the nights most of all. Every night I was expected to surrender to "my wifely duties," no matter how tired I was, no matter how late it was when he came home from drinking with his friends. He woke me up for it. Whether I was sick or well, he collected his dues. It wasn't romantic; it was a habit for him. Maybe not even so much for pleasure as simply a way to appease his frustrations over the struggles to succeed at school. Maybe that was a way he could feel in control of something. All I knew was, it was not anything about love.

I had never experienced lovemaking, never had the pleasure of that with the man I married. In the beginning there were glimmers of it, and basic biology made my body want something it could not know. But in marriage I got only the mechanics of the act, without the good feelings, and without the love.

By law, sex without consent is rape, but rape is too strong a word. Rape is an act of violence. This was neither violent nor passionate, it was mechanical and impersonal.

There were times I pleaded for just one night off, but he would not let it go. He kept on coaxing, and then when the lights went out, he took what he needed, and that was the way it was. I asked myself so many times, *How could someone who is otherwise a gentle and kind person be so unfeeling and unaware?*

Each time it happened, I felt used and ashamed. Every time, I held my breath and strained to not cry out in pain. When he was done, I turned my face to the wall and began the work of forgetting again. I was not a person to him, and I knew it. I was a thing that he owned, that he had the right to use however he wished. I accepted it because, foolish or not, I had committed my life to him. I had left my old life to come 1,500 miles to this hostile place, and now he was all I had.

I'd been taught that a good and decent wife never says no to her husband's needs. I was a fool, but I was a good and decent wife. I had friends at work, but women didn't talk about things like that. We all smiled and pretended everything was fine. My family was half a continent away and I would never have told them anyhow, for the shame of it. I never did tell them. I never told anyone until now.

It would be easy to cast him as a villain. He was not. He was thoughtless, but never intentionally cruel. He was a talented artist, of that there was no question. He had a brilliant sense of humor that when he was sober was warm and heartfelt. He could make me laugh, and I had not laughed a lot in my life. On a good day, he could make me love him just for that. He had heartbreaking flaws, but like the old song from the fifties, he was "my Funny Valentine." He had a wide-eyed honest faith in life and art like a child, and he had been wounded by both. I understood that.

I was deeply disappointed, but I followed the rules I had learned in childhood: Be good and be quiet. At twenty-one I was not a smart woman. I'd been taught not to stand up for myself, so I didn't. It was an honest mistake. I didn't know I had the right to matter in the marriage. Nobody had ever told me that.

I couldn't blame Jim for his ignorance or my own. It was what it was. It was a hard lesson, but there was nothing else for me to do but learn it, and it had to be learned before I could move on. So I learned it, and learned it, and learned it.

Jim loved New York, but for me, the crush and hurry of the city overwhelmed me with a diffuse anxiety. In the daytime it swarmed like an anthill on amphetamines, every street an endless surge of pushing, bustling bodies. After the rush hour, nothing really stopped rushing. The population density thinned out in some places later into the night, but not Downtown. There the city became a carnival of bright lights and neon colors, and Jim's friend Brice loved to go out into the party-spirit of Manhattan at night. He went around humming and half-singing the song by Petula Clark, "*I know a place, where the music is fine and the lights are always low. I know a place where we can go.*" That wasn't where we went this night though. I can't tell you where we went, because I didn't know.

It was late. The streets were dark and empty except for a few slow-moving creatures that must have once been people, but who now seemed to be wandering souls, drifting, waiting around to be released from whatever it was they had – not a life, but something dreadfully else. I had never seen anyplace like this before. There was a profound loneliness in the streets.

I remember the cold, the ache and sting of it, and how the

jagged-edged winds tore at my hair and flung ice needles in my face. Late at night the streets were barren except for dark figures hunched in doorways. Crumpled newspapers shoved by gusts of wind, stumbled along the sidewalks like crippled old ghosts with nowhere to go, but no place to stay either.

Brice was taking Jim and me to see some friends. It was supposed to be a party. Brice knew lots of people; he was a New Yorker. We knew nobody but Brice, we were fresh from another world: college and Austin Texas.

He took us on a subway, then a bus, then we walked several long blocks through gray canyons of concrete and cinderblock. When we reached the destination, it was a bleak building like all the others we had passed. At the door, Brice rang the apartment number. There was no answer. He rang a second time and we waited, blowing white clouds of breath in the freezing dark air. He rang a third time, and once again we waited. A muffled answer blurred through the voice tube:

“Who is it?”

“It’s Brice,” he said. There was a long silence.

A loud buzzer sounded and a steel click deep in the heavy brass door signaled the momentary release of the lock. Brice pushed open the door quickly and we went in.

We climbed several flights of stairs. I was thankful that there was no elevator to jerk and shudder with frightening uncertainty like they do in these old buildings. There were no bums sleeping in the stairwell, only a faint smell of urine. Brice found the apartment, 327, and knocked. It was 2:15 AM.

The door opened and a pale woman stood there in a flannel nightgown with pink flowers on it that were barely distinguishable from the coffee stains. She looked to be about 40, not pretty, but handsome in a gaunt Medieval-saint sort of way. Later I learned she was twenty-something, like us.

With a limp gesture, she motioned for us to come in. She seemed unsteady on her feet, which were bare. With effort she raised her heavy eyelids to speak. I couldn't quite make out the words.

"This is Sheila" Brice said to us. We smiled awkwardly. She didn't smile back.

"How're you?" she asked Brice. "Good?" She glanced at Jim and me.

"I'm good." He said. "Where's Dan?"

"I dunno. He split. Couple-a weeks ago, maybe a month. He'll come back. He always does."

She offered us some wine, Fior de California, a popular vintage for always-broke musicians and artists like us. It tasted like vinegar but it was only two-fifty a liter.

Conversation was minimal. We sat on a dusty Goodwill Store braided rug. There was no furniture except some couch cushions on the floor and a colorless balding wall-to-wall carpet. The apartment was cold; we didn't take off our coats. Sheila didn't seem to notice the cold, even though she was wearing only the nightgown.

"Were you asleep?" Brice asked apologetically.

"No. I was working on a song. Wanna hear it?"

"Sure." he said.

She disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a scarred and battered old Harmony guitar. She sat down cross-legged on the rug and began to play. As she sang, her body rocked gently back and forth. Her voice was pleasant, with a folksinger style that was rather haunting. She finished the song.

Brice said, "That's nice. Really." She mumbled a reply. We sat in silence for what seemed like a long time, then Brice got up. We got up too. We thanked her for the wine and shuffled to the door.

“Take it easy” she said to him. She still had said nothing to us. We went back down the stairs without talking and out onto the street again. “She wasn’t feeling so good,” Brice said, “but they’re really great people.”

Outside a cold misting rain drifted down on us, with fine droplets swimming in the halos of the streetlights. We walked back to the bus stop. We waited a long time for the bus.

I liked going to New York, some of it anyway. Jim went as often as he could and I could have gone, but after a few months of the job, the housework, and the other demands on me and never enough sleep, my health and spirit both began to slow down like an unwound clock. I was too tired to enjoy the trips. The toll was too high. There are fewer happy memories than there might have been, but those few weekends in the City were all I had of “the artist’s life” that Jim and I had both dreamed of in college. I was a wife, not an artist. Now Jim had grad school at Yale and other artists to talk to, and I had the Telephone Company.

For the rest of my life, those times in the galleries and museums would be unforgettable. There were times when I stood before some of the greatest artworks in the world. Like the Van Gogh exhibition at the Guggenheim. The stroll down the spiral was a diary of his life, the paintings and the order of them, from oldest to newest, first to last. The first ones are dark and depressed, but the last ones pure rapture, brilliant and glorious orgasmic ecstasies of color. They said that Vincent was losing his mind, and he was never very happy, but his soul must have been *soaring*.

At the Metropolitan I loved the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists best. Seeing them was absolutely transcendent. I had seen them in art history books, they were as familiar as old friends, but now they were not photographs, they were the real

thing, right in front of me.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art there was one huge panel of Monet's Water Lilies, on loan from its permanent home in Giverny, France, where the artist had lived and worked in the last years of his life. What was most unique about his work was that he didn't paint pictures of things; instead he sought to paint the light that fell upon them.

He didn't paint in the traditional style of the academics or recognized artists of his time; he was doing something else. The critics were outraged. "These are just sketches!" they said. "This is not art!" That was in the late 1890's, but today his paintings are in museums all over the world and reproductions of them are in tens of thousands of Art History books.

The Waterlilies panel was part of an immense series of paintings designed to fit together creating a continuous scene of the glittering summer-lit pond of water lilies in his garden at Giverny. The panel filled the entire opposite wall, and the moment I entered the room, I stopped, stunned. I stood there astonished, like Alice when she stepped through the looking-glass.

I was swept at once into a living garden, transfixed, and overwhelmed by the intense *realness of it*. The depth and liquidness of the water, the weight and floatingness of the lily-pads, like islands on the reflective surface of it. The sunlight, hypnotic, flooding everything. For a moment I almost heard the buzzing of dragonflies.

The painting seemed to completely draw into itself all of the light and air of the immense room in some miraculous, numinous, magical, impossible way. I stood there numb, thunderstruck with awe. Nothing I'd ever seen was anything like this. It seemed to be moving, shimmering with light; *it was alive*.

I had to see, up close, how the hands of a human being could

have worked this miracle. But as I walked closer, it all began to disassemble and change, transforming itself into a vast expanse of beautiful, wildly random patches of rich colors, dabs and streaks and splashes of paint-strokes. As I came very near, the water lilies, the sunlit garden pond, and the whole world as we know it, *disappeared*.

I stood there open-mouthed, shocked and bewildered. I walked back to the other end of the room, and when I turned around to look again, *it had all returned*. A chill started at the crown of my head and flowed down through my body like a slow electric current all the way to my feet.

In that instant, I realized something. *You have to look at the whole of a thing*, to see the order of it, the truth of it, the real picture. The parts and pieces of things – like strokes and lines and colors – can be beautiful in themselves, but if they are true, they create a larger image, a larger truth, and more than that, a living entity that seems to move and breathe, and give off a light of its own.

As my consciousness returned to the room I felt, more than saw, another student artist standing to my left. His focus on the painting was as intense as mine; he was completely unaware of me. Unembarrassed tears trailed down his smooth young face. Both of us stood there without a word, without a sound, for a long time, looking at the painting, drowning in it, soaking up as much of it as we could. Both of us knew we might never be in the presence of anything like this again.

In the foyer of the Modern, Matisse's Dancers romped gaily across a large canvas, a vision of joy that I could see, but I had no way to feel. I loved the colors and the movement of it, and I thought, *I'd like to paint something like that*. And maybe I could have, if things had been different.

I remember the museum's small courtyard, the outdoor cafe on a rainy afternoon, and sitting beneath the fragile sapling trees with bare branches as delicate as a silverpoint drawing, each one glistening with diamonds of rain. The chilly hope of spring in the air, the little white ironwork tables, and raindrops in my coffee.

Chapter 14: Us

He had his share of personal faults, but as an artist Jim was a beautiful spirit. He was viscerally passionate about his art, and I was artist enough myself to see that he was truly gifted. His work was deeply earnest, but it was no longer flashy and stylish the way it had been when he was a brash young abstract action-painter, and now there would be dues to pay.

There was only one of his abstract paintings I remember, painted before I met him. One semester break I went with him to San Antonio to meet his mom, and he also took me to meet his high school art teacher. That was where I saw it.

It was large, about five feet square, and it dramatically dominated her living room wall. The painting was alive with energy and movement, boldly splashed and spattered with many unexpected shades of white, small patches of browns, subtle dashes of green, and glimmers of other colors. The brush-strokes were tempestuous, exciting. There was no recognizable object or image, and yet there was the clear unmistakable impression of a thawing winter landscape at the very edge of spring.

The painting was titled “The First Warm Day.” In it I could see and feel and almost smell the spring mud, the melting snow, and the first fragile green shoots of life renewing itself. It was a splendid painting. I understood in an instant why the prestigious Yale graduate art school had given him the summer scholarship that would bring him to New Haven a year later and ultimately change my life as well.

Jim never told me why he changed his style. I only knew that the decision was true to some inner directive, and he had followed his heart instead of his ego or practical mind. Honestly, I don’t think Jim ever owned “a practical mind.” He had the soul of an

artist and the hidden tenderness, fervor, vulnerability, and rage of a latter-day Vincent Van Gogh. He obeyed his inner imperatives, and that was his downfall.

In my mind I can still see that painting, and the title of it is embedded in my heart forever. Every year when the first signs of spring begin to emerge again, I take notice, and quietly celebrate the first warm day.

I married an alcoholic and didn't realize it. We all drank in college. Hot nights in Austin we drank cold beer and the boys got roaring drunk; that was normal. It never occurred to me that Jim might have an alcohol problem, and yet there were clues I should have seen and somehow I didn't.

Jim didn't drink during the day, and he didn't hide bottles in odd places like my birthmother Ann had done, but when we went to events where there was alcohol, he drank until his whole personality changed. He became uncharacteristically loud, and even verbally abusive. Jim had seen his father's alcoholism shatter his family, he knew what it could do, and yet he fell into the same trap himself. I married a man I thought I knew, but there was more of him beneath the surface that no one could see. I hadn't really known him at all, and he had not known me.

With the pressures of grad school, Jim was prone to outbreaks of explosive anger and frustration. He raged a lot, that was his primary coping skill. But he also had a brilliant wit, an innate talent that he must have developed when he was very young to camouflage his fears and his feelings. Without it, he was naked. When things got too painful to fend off with humor, he covered his vulnerability on the inside with rage on the outside. Tender feelings like sorrow, disappointment, love – those were difficult for him to show, and impossible for him to speak. So instead he

raged. Sometimes he hit a wall with his fist, but even in the worst of his rages, he never hit me.

When he was hurt, he raged. When he was sad, he raged. When something happened that he could neither express nor contain, he raged. In the three years we were in New Haven, he raged almost every day. There was so much going on inside of him that it had to get out of him somehow, so he shouted and broke things, and when it was over, he retreated silently inside himself. Later he made jokes about it, or simply forgot.

While Jim had graduate school and intelligent creative friends, I had the telephone company. I was not an artist anymore and I had never been a star like them. At the rare school parties when we met other couples, Jim introduced me as “the wife.” One of those times, another student’s wife blurted out, “Does she have a name?”

“Oh... yeah,” he stammered, “It’s Vic.” And he laughed, slightly embarrassed for a moment. He didn’t like Vickie, the name I was called when we met, and Victoria was too formal for him, so he called me Vic, a name that would stay with me for seven years before I remembered, *that was not my name*.

When I married Jim and went so far away from home chasing someone else’s dream, I gave up my own goals for his. I took a chance, I drew a card. I didn’t get what I wanted, but I believed I had to take whatever I got. I accepted it because I had always been taught to “just take it.” I couldn’t think of going home to Texas, not after my parents had spent their savings to give me a wonderful wedding, and then Daddy and Mother with tearful smiles had sent me off to my new life. What could I tell them?

"He doesn't care about me as a person. I am a thing that he owns. Nobody told me it would be like this. Before we were married, I was someone special to him, now I am nothing to him. I

am so much less to him than his worn-out favorite old jeans that I keep on mending for him, and he goes "Thanks babe" and never even looks up when he says it."

How could I tell them that? I could not.

Because of Yale, New Haven was a focal point of creative genius. It was the beginning of the era of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, but before I was even aware of them, I had the great privilege to hear the magnificently gifted musician of the sitar who soon would so profoundly influence the Beatles that they would introduce his music to a whole new audience in the Western World.

Sri Ravi Shankar was in the U.S. for a college concert tour and someone on the Art School faculty had invited him to stay at their home during his New England series of concerts. A party was given for him and some of the Professors and students were invited. The large elegant old Connecticut home was crowded with distinguished people and talented students talking together about important things that I knew nothing of. I felt anonymous among the intelligentsia of Yale and the bright sub-swarm of art and music students. I hardly spoke two sentences all evening.

The hosts served a chicken curry so hot that it was almost inedible, and yet so delicious that I kept trying to eat it even though it burned every inch of my mouth, my throat, and my stomach like a lava flow. It was authentic Indian curry, not at all like an American curry. A thin broth over rice with a few recognizable chicken neck-bones, but most of the ingredients had dissolved entirely into deliciousness in slow simmering, all day long, stirred and attended by a flurry of lovely caramel-skinned dark-eyed ladies in bright colored saris printed with flowers and bordered with streaks of silver or gold.

Sri Ravi and two of his students sat down in a cushioned area at one end of the living room. The lights were dimmed, and a hush of respectful quiet fell over the whole throng of celebrants. Then, in absolute pin-drop silence, the miracle occurred. They began to play.

With the first notes of the sitar, I was stunned. My eyes were locked on the circle of warm light where the musicians sat, and the rest of the darkened room blurred away. This music was like no sound I had ever heard, an unearthly wail of beauty so tender, so exquisite, that I was immediately engulfed in it and everything else around me faded, dissolved, and disappeared.

Language has no words to convey the beauty and mystery of the sounds of the sitar. “Transcendent, spiritual, numinous,” even these fall weak and shallow. This throbbing, weeping, rejoicing music utterly overflows the senses and the mind falls back in awe. The serpentine lines of melody and deep resonant humming of the strings swept and murmured and pulsed through every cell of my body. I stood transfixed, submerged in the music.

Sri Ravi was a quiet, kind, gentle and generous presence, who shared his art which he passed on to his many students, often teaching one-to-one. A profoundly modest man, he spoke few words that night, but he left me with a legacy and a lesson:

“Whatever the gifts we are given, we must use them with honesty and gratefulness, as best our human failings and strengths will allow.”

In that moment, a thought came to me. *I’ve been given some gifts, but I have failed to use them.* And I was ashamed.

In college I had discovered myself, found out that I was a strong person with a good mind and some talent. I decided that whoever would share my life would have to be a strong man. He had to be stronger than me; that was the Texas tradition. Jim’s

assertive personality had seemed strong in the beginning, but it was not. It was only his armor.

The rules of chivalry required women, especially wives, to be inferior— no exceptions. I tried and I succeeded, but I lost myself doing it. Like an awkwardly tall girl slouching to look shorter than her date, I found my spirit always inwardly slumping down.

Very little of what I got married for turned out to be there for me. An article in Time magazine stated it perfectly when it said: “The primary reason most marriages fail is that the institution of marriage has been designed for one and one-half persons.”

The exciting creative artist’s life, the companionship and friendship that Jim and I had in school, or I thought we did, had disappeared. I had made a choice and a commitment, and now I was trapped in it. Marriage was not what I had expected and it was far from what I wanted.

In my role as half a person, I was at times a perfunctory showpiece, "the wife," but more often, a useful adjunct. I was the ideal personal servant. I took care of all domestic duties, cooking, dishwashing, laundry, ironing, and picking up all the small messes he made, as he dropped things everywhere like a teenager littering a park with candy wrappers,.

I had wanted a partnership. I didn’t get that. Instead I had taken on most of the responsibility with none of the authority and no access to any of the money. There was no closeness, little or no communication, and I was obligated to surrender my body for sex on demand 365 days a year with no options and no exceptions. After we got married, it was as if we became strangers, both of us taking on roles that didn’t fit. He didn’t know how to be a husband, and I didn’t know how to be a wife.

I had not made a very good bargain for myself. I had given up my art and gone to work to support his, assuming it would be only

temporary. That was not a smart assumption. I had spent my days at a telephone company desk, sorting and filing service orders for installations and repairs. My world was an ocean of gray steel desks, row on row, like sad moored battleships with nowhere to go. I envied Jim's challenging classes, and afterward, cheerful friends and frosty mugs of beer. Things I used to have too, only a year ago in Austin.

When I got off work and Jim picked me up, sometimes he forgot and he was late. It was a small thing. He always said "Sorry, babe." and gave me one of those heart-melting boyish grins that were supposed to make it all okay. It wasn't okay, but I didn't say it.

At home I cooked dinner and managed to stretch six chicken wings into enough for two people. It wasn't enough, but I made sure he got enough, and I took what was left. I was as much a mother as a wife, and he was like a child in so many ways. I could not hate him for that. I could not blame him for that.

While I cooked, Jim watched Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoons on the little portable TV in the living room. When I called him to dinner, he brought the TV with him, put it on the kitchen table and watched it while he ate. If I asked about his day, he'd say "I've really got a lot on my mind tonight babe, I just need to relax." So I let him.

In the Cinderella story, a young girl becomes a princess in the arms of her adoring prince, he takes care of her, and they are happy ever-after. I knew it wouldn't be like that, but I wanted a little bit of that. I didn't want to have to tell Jim that I mattered, I wanted him to notice. And as foolish as this probably sounds now, I wanted him to cherish me.

After dinner he went back to the school studio to paint some more, then afterwards to the pub with his friends. I knew he would

drink too much. I went to bed and couldn't sleep, afraid he would get into a fight or a car crash. I was a miserable little housewife with a miserable little life that was completely predicated by my husband. He was the center of my existence. I had no center for myself, and so I had no self.

Out there in the world, life rolled on. Disco came and went, Motown music emerged, then the Beatles. John was my favorite, the poet, the thinker. They were being shaped by a psychedelic period of discovery that would bring a worldwide opening of minds, for better or for worse, and a creative outrushing of music and art. The Beatles rather blithely and innocently fell into the vanguard of all that. Swept along with it, they went from Liverpool to fame, to drugs, and finally to meditation.

I never went anywhere. Just the Telephone Company and the grocery store and the laundromat. If the soul of me was still alive, it was somewhere else, abandoned and alone.

My soul is an astronaut, space-walking outside the ship, floating at the end of that thin little lifeline which might break at any moment, and if it does, my spirit will drift helplessly into black endless space.

That was how it felt – like my soul was a thing apart from me, connected only by the frailest slender thread, at risk every moment of being irretrievably lost. I was seriously depressed and I knew it. I could no longer deny it to myself, though I still hid it from everyone else. There was so much about myself and my life that I could not understand, and I could not face.

One night I left the house without asking, without even telling Jim. I don't know why I did it. Maybe it was something he said, or something he should have done that he didn't do, or didn't

see, or just forgot, again. I don't know what possessed me to do it; maybe I was trying to make him notice that I existed.

I just walked. It was long after dark and the wind was blustery and cold, gusting suddenly, blowing the first thin snowfall off the sidewalks. The night sky was moonless indigo blue, with pale yellow halos around the street lamps like the ones in a Van Gogh painting. I wandered the streets with no destination, feeling vaguely sad. My mind felt inert and empty. I watched the little white clouds of my breath in the cold air, appearing and fading away, appearing and fading away, as I felt the cold begin to seep through my clothes. It was all pointless of course; there was no place for me to go, and I knew it.

In the yard of an apartment building, I saw a long-dead hydrangea flower that was still on the bush. I broke it off by its brittle stem and looked at it in the lamplight. It was pale beige, perfectly preserved by the cold dry air. Its tiny petals were crisp and fragile as insect wings, and yet completely, flawlessly intact.

I walked on, all the way to the laundromat. It was empty. I stood outside and looked in through the sooty windows. Inside, the fluorescent light was greenish and surreal, like always.

Jim brings me here once a week. He piles the bags of dirty laundry into his car, drives me to the laundromat and drops me off. I do the washing, then I watch hypnotized while the dryers tumble it dry. I fold it while I wait for Jim to come back for me. Sometimes I wait a long time because he has gone to the tavern with the guys and forgotten me until he gets home and notices I'm not there. Then he remembers. He always apologizes and gives me that sheepish little-boy grin, and sometimes I mumble, "It's okay." But it isn't okay and there isn't any smile at my end of it. The first months in New Haven, he came with me a few times and helped fold the clothes like other couples did. Then I guess he decided there was no point in both of us sitting here as the washing

machines sloshed back and forth, so he left, promising to come back to fold. But he never did, and the custom became the drop-off and pickup only.

A big truck rumbled down the narrow street behind me, stirring up a gust of wind that whipped the tail of my coat. I turned away from the laundromat window. It was getting colder. The night air stung my face. There was nothing more for me to do but go back to the apartment where at least it was warmer.

When I came back, Jim looked at me but he didn't say anything. I put the frail skeletal dried flower into an empty vase; it needed nothing but air. It had a delicate beauty about it, even though it was only the shell of what it had once been. It carried a message for me that I didn't see yet, that my life was like that flower; it had form but no color. I existed but I was not alive.

Jim was impulsive with money. He didn't seem to have any sense of economy. He had access to the checking account, and I didn't. I had no knowledge or control of our finances. I had no voice in how he spent the money even though I was the sole financial provider of our income, except for, I suspect, some help from his mom.

When spring came again, he brought home a bicycle for me, a shiny brand new standard black Royce-Union 3-speed. He expected me to be thrilled with the gift, but the specialness was overcast by knowing that it had cost my whole paycheck, and we could not afford it.

Jim had brought his bike from Texas, so that evening we went for a ride together with some friends, Ron and Maureen. It would have been fun if I had not been so dead-tired. There was just that one ride, then never again. Later I realized the reason for the gift was so that I could ride it to work every morning when the

weather allowed, so he could sleep late and not have to get up and take me to work.

When the second summer finally came it was beautiful and warm and when Jim was gone to New York I had time to rest. Evenings were long and the twilight lingered sweet and calm. I often sat at the little third-floor window, looking down onto the leaves of the lush green Sycamore tree, and my thoughts wandered...

The leaves are so perfect, each one. They look like a crowded throng of little children's hands, reaching up, making a lovely canopy. I could just step out the window and walk there, and the little hands would hold me up, and they would feel so cool and gentle on my bare feet...

I jolted out of my reverie with the realization that to do that, to step out onto the little hands, would be certain death. The little hands would not hold me up, and I would plummet three floors to hard concrete. My skull and most of my bones would be shattered. When I caught myself having thoughts like these, brief escapes into semi-hallucination, it scared me.

There were other moments too when I wondered if maybe I actually did not exist. I wasn't sure. I was uncertain enough that when I walked down the sidewalk, I took care not to walk too close to anyone, for fear that they might pass right through me *and then I would know* that I didn't exist. These and other moments of ambivalence made me secretly fear that I might be very quietly, very privately, losing my mind. I began to be aware that my soul wanted desperately to escape, and I feared it might even be willing to leave my body behind, to do it.

Another winter came, colder and wetter than the last. It didn't

even matter. All my days were the same on the outside, and whatever of myself I had left, I hid on the inside. That must have been when I started to write poetry in secret.

I turned to the empty page when there was nowhere else to go. There I could tell the truth, and that was a help somehow. I knew that no one else would ever see it, but still I had to tell it. Telling it released the pain a little, it rose and diffused and let me live another day. Those first poems were not literature, but they were a window into some truths I had hidden from myself and hadn't wanted to know. And did not know, until I saw them for the first time, on the page.

When it was almost the end of the second year, all the other students were sending out resumes and applications for teaching jobs or making arrangements to move to New York or the West Coast to begin careers as professional artists. The Yale School of Art and Architecture, like all the East Coast Ivy League schools, guarded their University's reputation for excellence. Graduation standards for a Master's Degree were high and stringent. If any student's final jury of artwork was not deemed good enough to compete successfully in the Art World, he or she would not graduate, but would be allowed a third year to demonstrate the ability to have a career as a professional artist. If the works of the probational third year were still judged not good enough by the faculty jury, the student could be released from the program without a degree. Without anything.

Jim was one of two students whose talents the professors felt unsure of, and so at the end of our second year in New Haven, He did not graduate. It was still not over.

Jim's friends graduated and went to New York or teaching jobs scattered across the country. Chuck Close got a Fulbright

Scholarship to study in Bavaria. Always the joker, Chuck claimed he applied because he wanted to ski. He was serious about his art, but he also had a unique and quirky sense of humor. For his passport picture, he shaved off his thick full head of hair and traded his horn-rimmed glasses for a pair of vintage wire-rims. With this and his trademark bushy beard, he looked quite remarkably like Sigmund Freud, which we all thought was hilariously funny.

But for Jim there would be the embarrassment of a third year, more expense, more pressure, and the stigma of being left behind. That year he was quieter. He didn't go out drinking as much, and he got a part time job two days a week at the art school library. Jim made it through the third year, and so did I. At the end of his sixth semester, he graduated. He sent out resumes and got an offer for a teaching job at the Minneapolis Art Institute's College of Art and Design. We were moving to Minnesota, even though we weren't sure exactly where it was. We had to look it up on a map.

Jim's New Haven years had been hard, but mine had been hard too. Our life had been *his life*, and the colorful life I had imagined for myself had turned out as gray as the old city and the frozen salt-slush in its narrow streets. We would be leaving New Haven when summer came, and my life might change.

It was the raw cold wet edge of our third spring, our last one in New Haven. Two blocks down on Chapel Street there was a little park, and one day I left the apartment, walked out and went there by myself without telling Jim. It was late afternoon and everything was washed with a pale watery sunlight so weak that it barely cast a thin shadow. The ground was frozen mud, bare of snow, and the first bitter-green needles of grass had begun to pierce upward eagerly from the dark earth toward the light.

I can't remember why I went. I couldn't have known that this brief hour would wake the first stirring of something in me that I

couldn't yet name, that something was beginning in me, and something was ending.

That evening after Jim went back to school, a poem came. I titled it "Forsythia" after the ones in the park. The forsythia is a common spindly shrub that blooms earliest in spring, and can survive almost any climate. There was something about seeing it there in the park, blooming in spite of everything, all by itself in a sea of mud.

I only remember the forsythia
in Edgewood Park,
yellow stars on a dark brown stalk,
the only color
at the muddy end of winter.
I went out for a walk and didn't come back
for nearly an hour,
went without reason, went alone.
I sat on the hillside
numb with cold, and thought
absolutely nothing, and felt
absolutely nothing,
except the faintest stirring.
Of what? Of hope?
Or just the forsythia?
When I came back, your face was white
as if in fear,
as if you knew something broke in me,
and we could not pretend
that I didn't matter,
any longer.
But I said nothing; your color returned.
You kept your pride

and the private fears you could not show me;
you dared not show me.
You kept your secrets and I kept mine,
and you never tried
to know me.

What are we, Jim? Say something. Say anything. Before it's too late, look at me just once. Look me in the face and see me. I'm right here; I've been right here for you, all this time. I have loved you and followed you to this barren place.

Something shifted in me today, and something changed. I'm beginning to let us end, like you have let us end. I'm beginning to give up on us. There isn't any us. There's just you over there in your life, and me over here in the shadows, clinging to the edge of it. That's not enough. It never was enough, and the chance for any kind of Us is running out.

Chapter 15: Minneapolis

I had wanted a partnership, closeness, and a loving kind of sex. I didn't get any of that. Instead I got soul-numbing hard work and loneliness, and three years of my life had passed by. But when Jim got the teaching job, suddenly I had *time*.

I spent most of the first days drifting around the nice new apartment. It was a modest place, but clean, bigger than the attic in New Haven, the upstairs of a small duplex rented from the family that lived below. It was on a pretty tree-lined street in an old Jewish neighborhood on Russell Avenue North,

After Jim left for work I sat in his big chair for hours, looking out the window. I tried to think, but my mind wouldn't focus on anything. By four o'clock in the afternoon I was still sitting there with a half-empty cup of cold coffee in my lap. Then when I realized that Jim would be home from school soon, I jumped up and scrambled to get dressed and start dinner.

I began reading Zen books. My mind was open but blank. Like a new blotter, it absorbed the writings of Suzuki and Watts. Someone had given Jim *Zen and the Art of the Archer* and I read it while he was gone to his life at the Art Institute. I burned incense and drank tea and did other things that seemed Zen-like. I sat in the Lotus position, closed my eyes and tried to meditate. I wandered through the first weeks in a fog, but with a profound attitude of peace and rest.

As my head began to clear, I found myself in a different place of mind. I began to take an objective look at my life, like a seagull flying over a landfill. Marriage, for Jim, was a pretty good deal. For me, not so good. I had left a happy creative life in college and handed over my future to Jim's care and ownership. He had wasted the best of me, and I had let him.

Getting out of New Haven and the Telephone Company felt like a window had opened and light was pouring in. At first it was blinding, but a sense of my self was beginning to stir, returning like a ghost. Gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, it began to take on substance and life.

“You just need to find *your thing*.” Jim said, and walked away. “You don’t have a *thing*.” Like he had his art and his teaching, his students, other instructors and friends.

“All you gotta do is find your thing.”

I hadn’t had a “thing” for more than 3 years, and didn’t even know where to look for one.

Our first summer in Minneapolis, warm and welcoming, was so different from the East Coast. Minnesotans were kind and outgoing. Jim’s teaching job didn’t officially start till September, but summer classes were open, so I took a drawing class. Tuition was free for wives and families of faculty, and now Jim was Faculty. *Faculty! What a beautiful word!*

In class I met Susan who was also an artist, and we became friends. I introduced her to Jim and to Jim’s new best-friend Joe, another just-graduated new teacher. Susan liked Joe, and before long we became a natural foursome.

Joe was a city-boy from Chicago and he was eager to go fishing in Minnesota’s legendary 10,000 lakes. There were many small ones near Minneapolis, and they were abundantly populated with crappie, (pronounced “croppy,”) a smallish flat fish, easy to catch and devilishly delicious when battered and fried up crisp and brown, skin and all. Minnesota also had other, more challenging legendary game-fish that Joe had read about in *Field & Stream* magazine. Jim, even though not a fisherman, immediately got swept up in Joe’s enthusiasm. They went out together and bought fishing gear: rods and reels, lures, tackle-boxes and tents, and Jim

ran up a large credit card debt.

Since I had worked to support us for three years in New Haven, when Jim completed his Master's degree and got his first job, the unspoken agreement was that he would finally be the breadwinner. Somehow he didn't realize, or else he forgot, that his first paycheck from the school would not be coming until September, and now he had splurged a whole lot of money that we didn't have. I would have to go back to work.

With regret bordering on despair, I put in my application at the Minneapolis Telephone Company. I was experienced in their special codes and systems, so that was my best chance for getting a job quickly. When I went to the job interview, I felt like I was surrendering to some unjust cosmic law enforcement and going back to jail. I cried a little bit on the bus. At the door of the personnel office, I wiped my face and went in.

I got a job, Customer Service Rep. There was a paid two-week training class that met in the old Kresge Building on the Nicollet Mall downtown. Erected in the 1920's it had been an elaborately art-deco showcase, with a fancy lobby of pink-veined marble floors and a sweeping curved staircase, roped off now with a small chain and placard: "closed, please use elevator." It must have been magnificent in its prime, but now it housed only the Kresge dime-store and lunch counter at street level and four floors of pigeon-hole offices and small businesses that included a Timex watch repair, an Electrolysis hair removal, a shoe repair shop, Nellie's Alterations, an optometrist, two dentists, and a chiropractor. Most of the rest of the building had stood empty for years, or maybe decades.

It was less than a week into the training when Jim got a phone call from his mom.

"Norma is in the hospital," she told him. I couldn't hear what

she was saying, but I saw Jim's face collapse as he listened.

"What hospital? What happened?" he demanded.

"She's here with me, in Dallas," Wilma said. Jim's mom was Norma's older sister and they were very close.

"...and she won't be going back to New York."

When Jim hung up the phone, I waited for him to speak. His face was white as plaster.

"Norma has lymph cancer."

In shock and disbelief, I felt my knees go weak. I sat down at the kitchen table.

"It can't be true," I said in a whisper. "It can't be true!" *No, no please God, not Norma! Not beautiful, joyful Aunt Norma. It can't be true. Please God don't let it be true.*

But it was true.

The doctors said her prognosis was "grave," the term they use when it's the worst possible. The cancer was rapid-spreading and terminal. "She might have as long as a few months, or at best, less than a year." The news abruptly crumpled the scaffolding of everything I had ever believed in about life. This was not fair.

I couldn't comprehend it, and yet I couldn't force it out of my thoughts. I loved her so much. She had been the one bright light through my lonely bleak years in New Haven. She was our fabulous "Auntie Mame," as young at heart as we were in years. If anyone should have had the longest, happiest life ever, it should have been Norma. She was only thirty-nine.

The next day when I went back to the small airless room of the Telephone Company class, I couldn't keep my mind on the training material. The instructor's voice blurred away, and I couldn't stop thinking about Norma. In the middle of the class I

don't know what happened to me, but something welled-up from inside of me and suddenly I lost control and started to cry.

Surprised and embarrassed, I tried to hide it, but everyone saw. Tears were pouring down my face. The instructor, a very sweet older man, looked helplessly distraught and didn't know what to do. He took me outside to the hallway and asked me gently if I was all right. I think I said "I need to go home." Or something like that. I didn't know what was happening to me; all I knew was, I could not face another day, or even another hour, at the telephone company. Then I did the bravest thing I had ever done as a wife.

I quit the job.

I told the instructor, "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... but I've got to drop out of the class. I've got to give up the job."

When I left the building, my insides were trembling. I had committed an inexcusable act. How would I explain to Jim what I had done?

The heavy brass doors of the Kresge building swung open onto the Nicollet Avenue Mall and a gust of fresh air caught me full in the face and filled my starving lungs.

Jim will be crazy upset when he finds out. We need the money. What will I tell him? What can I say?

I walked up the street. Now outside of the trapped stagnant air of the old building, the open air flowed across my face and I took huge gulps of it. I realized with a thrill of both fear and elation, *I'm not at the Telephone Company any more!*

I came to the corner, Dayton's department store. I had worked nights at Malley's in New Haven, so I knew the salesgirl job. I fumbled in my purse for a crumpled Kleenex and wiped any tear-smudged mascara off my face, then I walked into the store

and asked for directions to the employment office. I went to the elevators, straight upstairs, and filled out an application. Within an hour, I got the job.

I didn't know what I would do next, or how I could face Jim. I had taken a wild leap on instinct, but my instincts were very clear, and getting clearer day by day. With the assurance of the new job, I felt a rush of near-euphoria and a strange sort of strength, and yet I felt very calm. It was a new feeling, and I liked it.

There was no hurry to go home. Jim would still be at school. I had a little money he had given me for bus-fares and such, so I went into a sandwich shop. I sat at the counter and had a hot pastrami and pepper cheese on rye, and I celebrated. I didn't know, at the time, exactly what I was celebrating, but it was a first brave step toward reclaiming my right to a life. For the first time in a very long time, I felt like a person again, and it was a good, good feeling.

In the afternoon when I got home, Jim was there. My insides started shaking again. With a quaver in my voice, I told him what I had done. We both knew that the department store job would pay a lot less money than the Telephone Company.

The look on his face was one I'd never seen before. But something even more shocking was still to come. I had made my plan, and emboldened by the pastrami and pepper cheese, I had gathered the courage to speak it. I told him with the steadiest voice I could muster,

“When I give you my paychecks, I want the stubs, for receipts, so I can keep track of the money. When the fishing equipment is paid off, I'm going to quit the job.”

I felt my cheeks flush, but I stood firm, facing him. He looked startled, as if I'd thrown a bucket of ice-water on him. He was at a

loss for words. There was a long moment of silence, and then, he agreed to the deal.

In the grim fluorescent lights of the telephone company training room, something had changed. When I broke down, something broke through, and I had blundered upon a truth far beyond its surface worth: *I have a choice.*

The salesgirl job was pleasant and even fun. Just before we left New Haven I had cut my long hair and given myself a chic Sassoon-like style, and now, because I looked young and trendy, they put me in the "Out of Sight" shop," a little section tucked into a corner of the first floor. One wall of it was the street-side display window, so that anyone walking by on the sidewalk could see in. The shop was filled with flower-child paraphernalia and gifts, Carnaby-Street-styled clothes, and posters of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The Beatles had discovered Indian music and meditation, and the shop cashed in on the trend by selling all sorts of cheap treasures from India. Tambourines, little boxes in bright colored lacquers, dresses and blouses embroidered with tiny mirrors. There were sticks of sealing-wax and seals, hash pipes and rolling papers, and all things psychedelic. There were massive colored-glass vases as big as umbrella stands filled with peacock feathers or giant fantasy-like paper flowers. In the background the music played the Beatles' song "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds."

Now with some money of my own, I could design and sew some new clothes for myself. I began to enjoy life again. An identity was beginning to quietly grow back, just as my fingerprint had grown back, even after being crushed-off in the bathroom door by my brother when I was 10. The sense of *myself* was growing back too. Maybe a life, for me, could be possible again. I had begun to make decisions for myself, to dare to. The day I had

refused to return to the soul-murdering gloom of the telephone company, I had walked out of the Kresge Building into a new attitude, a different take on life.

After Jim's fishing gear was paid off and I didn't have to go to the job anymore, once again I spent whole days at home, reading books. While Jim was teaching at the Art Institute I invested my time in studying, thinking, and healing myself. The long depression was lifting. My mind was returning to me again. My self and my soul slowly were coming back together and back to life.

The more awake my mind became, the more I began to realize the truth of our relationship, and philosophically at least, to accept it. The more I accepted it, the less dependent I felt on Jim and the less I felt indebted to him. I had done a lot for him; I had gotten him through a very hard time in his life. I had not owed him all that, and now I owed myself a lot. Now he didn't need me as much as before; he had a good job and good friends. My burden of responsibility was lifting.

Things seemed to be better between us. Jim was teaching Painting, Life-Drawing, and Design at the College. He was happy. He didn't rage very often now, he was okay. He was well-liked and at ease. He and Joe became great friends and my friend Susan was seriously dating Joe, so the four of us did things together, art show openings at the Walker Art Center, and music performances at the Guthrie Theatre. We went fishing, and even camping.

When winter came, it too was different from the ugly East Coast winters. Here the snow was clean and dry. Just outside the city, the rural landscape transformed itself magically into perfect pristine counterpanes of white, and sometimes we took day-trips and drove out to the farmlands, where small family homesteads

dotted the countryside with little wood-frame houses set way back from the road. I loved these trips because they reminded me of rides in the country when I was a kid in Texas, in Daddy's old green DeSoto. And just like then, we weren't going anywhere special.

We went simply for the visual delight of them. We were sightseers escaping the city, like wandering vagrants with no destination. We were landscape painters mentally measuring up our canvases and making sketches in our minds.

Each year after harvest, farmers burned off the dry dead cornstalks to clear their fields for next year's crop. All winter the stumps were left to rot in place; they would not be plowed under until spring when the soil was thawed soft enough to be turned and replanted. Until then, this left rows and rows of little black stalks.

When winter snows covered the fields and laid them out flat and white as a sheet of paper, the short black stalks stood out like dotted lines, and the landscape looked like a Rembrandt etching, meticulously drawn in black-and-white with a pale gray aquatint sky. The vast fields of stark white were etched in perfection from horizon to horizon with dark strokes of fence-posts, thin black ink-lines of barbwire, and short black hatch-marks of corn stubble.

We're on a one-lane farm road. Fields surround us in an uninterrupted expanse of immaculate unbroken snow. In front of us is a flawless smooth white blanket of emptiness that's cut through by this one straight road we navigate slowly, the only one for miles, rutted with frozen mud.

Sometimes we see tracks of foxes or cougars in the snow; there are some of them out here, and wolves too. Further north where the human population thins out, there are bears. This land belonged to them first.

We drive mostly in silence. There's nothing that needs to be

said. The beauty of the land is eloquent and complete. The cleanness and loveliness of its pure white innocence soaks into my soul. There is a sacredness about it, and a vast feeling of peace. We are moving as if on an infinite sheet of paper, writing out our lives upon it.

Through the dark years in New Haven, the empty page had been my therapy and my confidante. I had confessed my feelings in secret poems that I showed to no one. After we moved to Minneapolis, I continued to write, encouraged by letters from my friend and mentor, Peggy, the first person ever to see my poems. We had remained friends ever since college, even though we were several states apart.

When it was Spring and nearly a year had passed, I was coming out of my darkness. I decided to gather up my courage and try to share some of my poetry with Jim. Nothing too deep or heavy, just ones like the poem about the poppies on the hillside. Even so, sharing any of my writing, showing Jim this deeper part of myself was a risk for me and a brave step.

Jim had an old reel-to-reel, pre-cassette tape recorder. It had only one tape, reused each time. He and his friend Steve in Port Arthur sent each other voice-letters on it, mailing the tape reel back and forth. At breakfast I asked Jim if I could use it to record some of my poems for him to listen to. "I'd really like you to listen to them," I said.

He answered, "Sure," or some other one-word response.

After he left for the day, I started to record a tape for him. I worked on it almost all day, redoing each poem till I felt it sounded as good as I could make it. I finished as the sun was going down. That evening when Jim came home and I was making dinner, I told him, "Today I made a tape of some poems I wrote.

Would you like to listen to them?"

"Okay," he said, "Maybe later. After dinner." And he sorted through the bills and junk mail without looking up.

"I really want to know what you think of them, Jim. This is kind of important to me." I tried to say it very earnestly, but without sounding needy.

"Okay," he said.

After dinner while I started the dishes, he went into the living room and turned on the tape recorder. I could hear his voice over the splashing and clinking as I washed the plates. I stopped and listened, and froze in shock.

He was recording a tape-letter to his friend Steve in Texas. Chatting, making small talk, and taping-over the poetry.

I had worked all day to get the words just right without a tremble in my voice that might give away how much this sharing really meant to me. Now it was all being erased, while he recorded a casual rambling letter to his buddy. I sat down at the kitchen table, paralyzed. He had forgotten about the poetry, forgotten me. He just forgot.

I had told him "This is really kind of important to me."

"Okay." he'd said, then immediately he had put it out of his mind.

When I realized what he was doing, I could have rushed into the living room and stopped him, at least from erasing all of it. Instead I remained at the kitchen table numb, profoundly hurt and shamed. Only a few tears trickled down my face, then stopped. Like the fool I was, I just sat there.

When he got through with the tape-letter to his friend, he came back into the kitchen and found me sitting withdrawn and

silent. I don't remember the encounter, except that it was brief. He was totally unaware of what he had done until I told him. Then he apologized in the usual "I didn't mean to" way, more frustrated than sorry. Whether he was annoyed at himself for making the mistake, or annoyed at me for not stopping him, I don't know. Nothing more was said.

When things like this happened, I knew he never really intended to hurt me. It was always some sort of accident, or he just forgot. But too many times, they kept on happening.

Another summer had come and gone, and another winter came. I was getting stronger. I had made friends that summer when I'd worked at the department store to pay off Jim's fishing gear, and now as Christmas was approaching, I applied for a job as extra sales help again, and was re-hired. This time it would be my own money.

All the streets and bus-stops were mired in salty slush-ice, so I asked Jim for transportation. In the afternoon he dropped me off at the department store, promising to pick me up after my shift, when the store closed at 10:00 p.m. As we drove past the corner of Hennepin Avenue and 4th Street, he pointed to a music store called "B-Sharp Music" on the driver-side, the east side of the street. B-Sharp Music was a large company and it had two stores at this intersection. There was a big one for music tapes, records, electric guitars and amps on the west side of the intersection, and on the east side of the same intersection there was a smaller store for acoustic, sheet music, and wind instruments. The smaller one was where, reaching his arm out the car-window, Jim pointed out for me to wait for him when I got off work. So I did, unquestioningly, as always.

At the end of my shift I walked to the music store at the

corner. It was only two blocks, but it was mid-December and the temperature was below zero. I was wearing a light coat, a short skirt and sweater and indoor shoes with nylon stockings which did nothing to protect my legs and feet from the cold. I watched for him and waited inside the glass door of the music store until it closed at 10:30. Then I had to wait outside. It was terribly cold.

The big store, diagonally across the intersection, was brightly lit and still open, where I could have waited inside, but I didn't dare leave where Jim told me to wait, so I shivered and waited. The streets were emptying now, and the cold was getting intensely painful. My feet in those little indoor shoes hurt the worst.

More than an hour went by. As I waited, I began to feel the old fear again, that he had forgotten me. There was no pay-phone near me, and it wouldn't have helped anyway, since I didn't know where he would be. I didn't dare leave, for fear he would come and I'd miss him.

He never came.

I don't know how long I waited. I was fighting back my hurt and rage, getting angrier as the agonizing minutes went by. *How could he do this to me?*

The pain from the cold was fierce. My feet and legs went numb, and yet they still ached horribly. I reached the point where I could not stand it any longer.

I left the corner. I stumbled four blocks to the bus stop that would take me to my neighborhood, and waited for the bus to come. When it came, I climbed aboard grateful for the weak drafty warmth on the long ride home to Northside. When I got off, I walked unsteadily two more blocks of rutted icy sidewalks to our house and shakily climbed the stairs. My shoes were wet, my feet were nearly crippled with pain, and my whole body was cold to the marrow of my bones.

When I came through the door, Jim jumped up with a look on his face that I cannot describe. His first words were not “I’m so sorry” or anything like that. I remember exactly what they were:

“Where were you?” he blurted out. “I thought you were dead!”

I was angry and tired, shaking from the cold, and I couldn’t feel my feet, my face, or my hands. I didn’t even look at him. I kept on walking, shuffling to the bathroom down the hall.

“I was standing on the corner, right where you told me to wait.” My voice was flat and emotionless. “Where were you?”

That was all I said, but he could see that I was angry. I didn’t even ask him why he hadn’t come. I was beyond that. I was so tired, so cold, and I didn’t know it yet, but my feet were damaged from frostbite.

I drew a tubful of hot water and with fumbling fingers I stripped off my clothes, dropped them on the floor, and immersed myself into the blessed warmth of the water. As my toes began to thaw, the pain became amazingly worse.

I stayed there a long time, and he let me. I stayed in the tub until I was finally warm again. I came out, still sullen and unspeaking. He stammered some sort of justification:

“I drove past the corner a whole lot of times,” he said. He knew that this downtown area after dark was a pick-up strip for prostitutes. Apparently after “a whole lot of times” and not finding me, he had panicked and called the police.

“A whole bunch of people and the police were looking for you” he said, “we were looking in all the back streets and alleys...” He sounded remorseful, as if he had really feared I might have been abducted and maybe assaulted or murdered.

“We looked all over.” he insisted.

“WHEN?” I said, openly angry now. “WHERE? I was standing right there! Outside on the sidewalk in plain view!”

And I wondered in bitter silence, How could "a whole bunch of people and the police" not see me? Did they not look till 2 hours later? After I had finally left the corner? Or was that whole story not even true? Did he just forget? Again?

“I was standing right there on the corner where you told me to wait," I said. "For an hour and a half I was watching for you. I never left the corner, right in front of the store. How could you not see me?”

No answer. He looked baffled. I turned away.

At 10:00 there had been a lot of traffic, Christmas shoppers going home. I had watched the street for his white Ford very attentively in front of the store where he had told me to wait. There was no way he could have driven down Hennepin Avenue without me seeing him or him seeing me, if he had looked at all. There was no way he could have failed to see me standing there, especially after 11:00 when the traffic thinned out to nearly none. The truth was perfectly clear: he had not looked at all.

I went to bed and went to sleep. That night he didn't rape me. He didn't touch me. He didn't dare.

I don't remember how it played out in the next few days, but neither of us ever spoke of it again. Unlike the other times, that night I had complained. He knew I was angry, and it was unusual for me to show it. He knew he had seriously messed up this time, and he was clearly feeling uncomfortable about it.

He didn't apologize. He didn't say “I'm sorry.” He obviously was sorry it had happened, but he didn't take any responsibility for it. If he made any gestures of regret or concern, I didn't hear them. Nothing could make this okay. There was a monumental empty space between us.

The story about the police looking for me "in all the back streets and alleys" was bizarre, but Jim was not a liar. The only explanation I could imagine was: He forgot where he told me to wait, and all the times he drove by looking for me, he never looked at that corner where he had stretched his lanky arm out the driver's side window to point it out so clearly. He only looked at the other store, the big brightly-lit one that was still open, where I would have loved to be, warm and safe inside.

Four of my toes were frostbitten. They ached horribly at first and hurt a lot for weeks. The toenails turned black and fell off. The new nails grew back slowly, rough and corrugated, and would never fully reconnect to the nail-beds because of the scar-tissue.

That night was a breaking-point that could not be fixed, forgotten, forgiven, or explained-away. Something between us had splintered-through, broken like the center-beam of a building, the one that holds the whole thing up. This time, that part had been damaged more than it could ever be repaired.

It wasn't the frostbite that damaged me the most, it was that same old injury-by-default-thing. He forgot. He didn't care enough to do a small thing for me, and once again, I had found myself in the victim-martyr's role that I hated. That was what I could not forgive.

Chapter 16: Jim and Joe

Jim's new best friend Joe was a colorful character with a great, loud, large personality and a sense of humor to match. Everything about him was big, including his six-foot-three ample body and his cheerful kindhearted nature. He was the first person who ever called me Victoria. He said it was "charming." Joe was a great storyteller, and even a folksy philosopher, though I don't think he knew it. He loved to observe life and people. He told us tales about how he used to hang out in pool halls when he was in high school, playing 8-ball with "the old guys" at a gritty SouthSide Chicago bar called the Blue Star.

"Those old geezers could tell you some stories," he said. "Some of 'em worked in shipyards or served in the army duckin' bullets in W-W-2." Joe respected the "old geezers" and I think in a way, he loved them. "They were really wise, those guys."

They probably enjoyed telling him their stories as much as he enjoyed hearing them. "They know they ain't goin' anywheres," Joe said. They must have appreciated his respect and his youthful enthusiasm, because they taught him the inside-tricks and skills of 8-ball and snooker that only the old guys know.

When he came to Minneapolis, as soon as he found an apartment, even before he got furniture, Joe bought himself a pool table. There wasn't really enough space for it. When he and Jim played pool, as they called their shots, they gave nicknames to the tricky ones, like "the venetian-blinds shot" because the end of the pool cue hit the window. Lots of laughter mixed with the clacking of pool balls. Susan knew how to play too, and played pretty well, but mostly she and I just "let the boys do their thing."

Joe loved life. He celebrated every experience like a theme-park ride. He made a habit of enjoying things. He regaled us with

jokes and improvisations about Midwestern fishing and farmers, and a variety of Wisconsin cheese-jokes and cow-jokes. He enjoyed the customs and culture of the rural Midwesterners. After a life in the big city of Chicago, he was completely charmed by it all, especially the fishing, and his enthusiasm reeled Jim into it too.

Susan and I usually went along on their local fishing trips to lakes around Minneapolis. We rented a rowboat and bought some bait at the edge of any lake, and off we went. Susan and I didn't care so much about fishing, sometimes we just dawdled on the lake in the rowboat getting a tan. The boys always caught a good mess of croppies and at the end of the day we came back to Susan's place and fried up huge platters of the tasty little fish all crisp in brown-crusty beer-batter. We made boiled baby potatoes with butter and parsley and a big bowl of coleslaw, stocked up plenty of cold beer, and invited more friends over. Those were great times.

Susan was an outdoors girl, born and raised. She got us out of the city, and once out of the country on a formidable wilderness trip of camping and fishing on the breathtaking Canadian border lakes. The area where we went was so pristine and remote that it could only be reached by traversing three lakes and two overland portages where you had to carry the canoes, the tents, the food and gear - everything - on your back down barely-visible narrow paths through underbrush to the next lake, then canoe it all across to the next landing, pack up again and portage again to the next lake.

Three lakes into the wilderness was where we set up our camp, at the edge of Rose Lake. Susan had grown up spending summers at her grandfather's fishing lodge in Grand Marais Minnesota, a town of less than 1,000 residents, not counting summer sportsmen, on the North Shore of Lake Superior. He was a guide for sports fishing trips into the two-million-acre wilderness

of the Canadian National Forest that connected to Minnesota by the border lakes of Ontario.

One famous resident of these lakes was the most celebrated of fighter-gamefish, the Muskie. The Minnesota Department of Fish and Game pamphlet said:

“The Muskellunge is one of the largest and most elusive fish that swim in Minnesota. A muskie will eat fish and sometimes ducklings and even small muskrats. It waits in weed beds and then lunges forward, clamping its large, tooth-lined jaws onto the prey. The muskie then gulps down the stunned or dead victim head first.”

It went on to say that they’re bottom feeders and not very good to eat, but they have a relative that tastes better and is less scary, the Great Northern Pike:

“This voracious predator is one of the easiest fish to catch because it so willingly bites lures or bait. Northerns produce chunky white fillets that many anglers say taste as good as walleyes. Most Northerns caught by fishing run 2 to 3 pounds, though trophies over 20 pounds are caught each year.”

Joe was eager to catch “some of those big guys” and on that trip to Canada, to his absolute delight, they were practically jumping right into the canoe. And the skillet. Joe cleaned and gutted them on a rock at the edge of the water. We made a campfire and cooked them up immediately right on the spot, and ate them. Even with the little bits of sticks and dirt still on them where Joe occasionally dropped them in the grass, they were incredibly delicious. We had fresh air, fresh-caught food, and dizzying beauty all around us.

The Ontario Border Lakes Region was like nowhere else on earth. Sunlight sparkled on waters as clear and clean as tap-water, and the air was rich with pure fresh oxygen, generated by virgin

forests of delicious greenness and dozens of small waterfalls. The trip was often hard work, but beautiful beyond words, and altogether magnificent.

Susan was a master camper and guide. She taught the rest of us how to canoe, and I was an apt student. We started out as couples in the two canoes, but the men soon proved inept and nearly useless, so at the first portage Susan and I made eye-contact, and with very few words, swapped teams. It became girl-girl and boy-boy instead. Susan and I glided along in an easy smooth rhythm as Jim and Joe, trying to “muscle it” floundered awkwardly sideways. Our canoe streaked past them effortlessly wherever there were open smooth waters. At the landing we took a break and rested while we waited for them to catch up.

There were also rough places with rip-currents and rapids. Even with the best technique they were still treacherous. That was when Susan taught me one of the most valuable lessons I would ever learn in my life, maybe the secret of victory in life itself. She said:

When the current catches you, stroke like hell, and just don't stop no matter what, no matter how much it hurts; don't stop.

I was thrilled and astonished to discover how much pain I could actually endure and how much strength my skinny arms could put out, when they had to. The intense pain transcended into something else, a sort of ecstasy of agony. But we made it. We didn't stop. No matter what.

That first year in Minneapolis, Jim and Joe must have had hundreds of colorful, often whimsical art-talk conversations. “Ya gotta have a gimmick.” Joe would say, chuckling his big Chicago laugh, “Look at Warhol. Look at Christo. Look at Sera. It's not what they're doing, it's that nobody else is doing that.” And Jim

and Joe would both laugh. “Once you’ve got your gimmick,” Joe said, “you got it made.”

Joe had an infectious sense of humor and a perpetually optimistic attitude. I remembered one time when he said, “It’s just the gimmick. You could probably soak cotton balls with paint and stick ‘em on a board and somebody would buy it.” But he was not entirely joking. Later he did just that— he made a series of collage paintings out of cotton balls soaked in paint and then stuck onto a canvas. As it turned out, he would break into the inner circle of the East Coast art world with that technique, and they were wowed by it. A whole lot further down the road in 2004, there would be an article in *Art in America* by Stephen Westfall that said:

“Perhaps best known for his paint-soaked cotton-ball works, Joe Zucker continues to invent new ways of "building" a painting. Recent gallery shows revealed him at his most spirited.”

“The homespun quality of his materials and processes reveals, rather than masks, a keen formal and historical sensibility, while also serving his devastating wit and cold eye for high-art academicism.”

It was written in art-talk. I wondered, *What the heck does any of that mean?*

The idea had come to Joe at the kitchen table over a couple of beers, laughing and joking with Jim about modern art. That’s the way it goes. I’m absolutely sure that many of art and music’s great revelations and brilliant ideas were hatched at kitchen tables.

One of Joe’s favorite Midwestern cultural outings was to take “roadhouse-trips” into Wisconsin. Basically a roadhouse trip was: stopping at every rural roadhouse-bar along the farmland backroads, drinking a beer or two and enjoying the locals and the

polka music on the juke box, then getting back into the car and driving to the next one. We went on quite a few of those roadhouse trips, Joe and Susan and Jim and me. In the beginning they were fun.

The downside was, I saw Jim drunk more often. He could be a marvelous clown, but when he drank way too much, his personality chaged.

Nights when the four of us were out on the Wisconsin backroads, Jim and Joe would crack jokes or tell stories or lampoon contemporary art trends. The more they drank, the wilder the stories got. All of the stories were completely extemporaneous, and though probably not entirely authentic, were outrageously funny. They yammered and joked about anything that came into their heads.

One night Jim got off onto a tangent about how he didn't like his mother-in-law. My mother. It wasn't funny. He went way over the line, nearly abusive. The rest of us fell into awkward silence as he rambled on.

Mother was a wonderful person, kind and caring. Jim had only met her twice, he didn't even know her. Hearing him talk about her like that, I was baffled. I don't remember what he said, except that it was surprisingly unkind. He went on and on, even after everyone else in the car knew that it was embarrassing me. It didn't make any sense, but he kept it up until finally Joe rescued me by drowning him out and changing the subject with a joke or another story.

On another trip, again for no reason at all, Jim started making fun of my grandmother. My Granny Vaughn had died when I was eleven; he had never met her. Why was he saying all these crazy cruel things that really hurt me?

He was very drunk. As we drove through dark backroads, he

rattled on. I guess he thought it was funny. At first he got a chuckle or two from Joe, but it went on for too long, and it went too far.

Hurt and embarrassed, finally I said to Jim “I loved my grandmother very much; please don’t talk about her like that.” But he kept on pushing it. He made a generic joke about false teeth, and suddenly he reminded me of my brother, and how he had taunted Granny.

“Please don’t...” I said in a very small voice, “I loved her, and she’s gone now. Please stop.” I had been drinking too of course, and now I was close to tears. *Why does he do this?*

When his comedy-act got mean, Jim became like a little boy teasing a small animal. It was stupid and it was cruel, and there we all were, in the car in the dark on some nameless country road in Wisconsin, and I just wanted to crawl away and hide. There was an uncomfortable silence from Joe and Susan in the front seat. It wasn’t funny anymore.

Then Joe’s big voice boomed, loud enough to get Jim's attention, “Hey Jim give it a rest, okay? That’s enough, okay?”

We drove without talking for a while, till we reached the next roadhouse. When we got out of the car to go in, Joe and Susan smiled, but the fun had fizzled out. We went inside and had one round of draft beer. Joe and Jim were joking again, but the mood was not the same. We decided to call it a night, and we left the bar. I was tired, and I didn’t really enjoy these road trips very much anyway. I think Susan was getting tired of them too, but we were good sports about it, and Susan always stayed sober enough to drive us all home. Joe was a sweet guy, and Susan liked him a lot. She was falling in love with the big guy from Chicago.

Jim and Joe went out to the parking lot stumbling ahead of us, holding each other up. Jim was still ranting about something, and he was angry. First he was shouting, raging, then he was

mumbling, then shouting again. Then he stopped.

Everything went quiet. I could hear the faint polka music from the jukebox in the bar, and no other sounds except the loud crunch of our footsteps in the gravel of the parking lot. Jim and Joe had stopped. Susan and I stopped too.

The cold crisp night air felt good. A pitch-black sky was spread out above us, sparkling with crystal-cold stars, the way you can only see them outside of town in the winter skies of the Midwest. As Joe was trying to put him into the car, Jim shouted out,

“I don’t know who Jesus was, but I’m not him! I’m not f---ing Jesus! I’m not f---ing perfect like him, I’m just a man!”

Stark silence again. Even the jukebox had stopped. And then, in a cry of unguarded agony, Jim said,

“My father fell down... but I will not fall down!” Then sobbing, then some mumbled words I couldn’t make out. All of this could not have made any sense to Joe and Susan, but I knew what it meant. “My father fell down...” His dad’s suicide.

Joe helped Jim into the back seat and I got in beside him. Susan took the driver’s seat, and Joe got into the other side. Without a word, we pulled out onto the single-lane blacktop road. All the way home, nobody spoke.

As always, for me a little alcohol was a lot, so I must have fallen asleep, relieved that it was over. Somehow Susan got all of us back to her place. She put Jim and me to bed on couches with blankets and pillows and kissed each of us goodnight on the forehead. I remember that; it was so very sweet. That was the last one of the Wisconsin roadhouse trips.

Susan loved to go out and do things, like shows and concerts.

We heard Tom Waits and Jim Croce and Randy Newman before they got so famous. One of the concerts was Arlo Guthrie, who had recently hit the charts with his cheerfully nonsensical “Motor-sickle” song. Jim and Joe were not very interested, but Susan coaxed Joe into it, and whatever Joe was doing, Jim was always up for too, so we all went.

Susan and Joe were always fun, and that evening we were all in high spirits. The music was great, happy and full of lively energy and Arlo’s wry humor. At the intermission, Susan and I decided to try to sneak backstage and meet him. It was awkward; we were as giddy as schoolgirls. Surprisingly, when we met him he seemed to be almost as shy about it as we were. It was silly, lighthearted mischief, and it was fun.

When the concert started again, I surrendered to the sheer simple happiness of the music. I let my spirit float on it. I let go of everything else, and let it fade away completely.

Suddenly I realized *I feel alive*. A nameless shapeless joy that I barely remembered, that I had not felt in a long long time, *a surge* of life like a breaking wave, swept through me. In that moment I realized: *There is more— there is life out there*. And something woke up in me that I thought had died, something I thought I didn’t deserve to have anymore. *But I did deserve it, and I wanted it*. Something inside me suddenly woke up, as if from a coma, and there I was – *awake. Alive*.

When summer came again, I made a trip back to Texas to finally finish that last semester and get my B.A. degree. My best friend Peggy and her husband Howard were living in Austin, not far from the UT campus. They found a studio-apartment for me, and fed me several times a week at their place. It was good to see Peggy again; we had not seen each other since we’d both gotten

married. That summer we talked and talked, woman to woman and sometimes, soul to soul.

Going back to school again felt foreign now. The old wooden barracks art building was gone, replaced with a modern concrete one. Roaming the halls of the first floor, looking at the student artworks and sculptures, I was startled to discover a life-size bronze figure done by an artist who had been my contemporary. The sculpture professor then, already nationally known, was Charles Umlauf. Each year he chose one or two of his students' best works to be cast in bronze in Italy, where his own works were cast. That year he had chosen this one. The statue was a standing female nude, and it was me.

I had posed for it when I was an art student, not nude, but in a bikini. When I was in school and so broke, the art department gave me a part-time job modeling for the Life Drawing classes. This statue was done by a student artist, Dan Hawkins. The statue was still there; it belongs to the university's collection. There I was, in bronze, with my unmistakable trademark Italian hairstyle, pulled back on the sides and long in the back the way I wore my hair when I first met Jim.

That seemed like a lifetime ago, when I was an innocent, and Jim was a man of barely twenty-one with a fine-boned face that hid a stormy personality. He looked very young then, and he hated that. He had grown a mustache when it was a fad among his artist-friends, thinking it made him look older. I hated the thing, but I hadn't dared to tell him. I'd hoped it was temporary, but he kept the damn thing for all the New Haven Years, and now even in his new job as a teacher, he still had it.

At the end of the summer-school semester, Jim flew out from Minneapolis to visit his mom in Dallas, and to pick me up at my folks house. We would fly back to Minneapolis together. When I saw him, I was shocked. The mustache was gone! The nasty

straggly thing I'd hated for so many years was gone, and the sweet face of the man I fell in love with was back. I found myself feeling newly attracted to him, almost as if I would fall in love with him again.

The good news wouldn't last, it was just a mistake. He hadn't done it for me, it was a shaving accident. The razor had slipped and messed up one side, so he had to shave off the rest. I told him so very earnestly how handsome he looked, and how much more I liked him without it. It didn't matter. He would start to regrow it immediately. But with the mustache gone, and after I had not seen him for three months, I felt affectionate toward him in a way I hadn't felt since before we got married. Seeing the face I had fallen in love with when life was beautiful, somehow sparked an old feeling in me and I thought, *Maybe there's still a chance for us*. Things were different now. I didn't have to work, and he didn't have the stress of grad school anymore. Maybe we could start over again, and get to know each other this time. I wanted to try.

Our first night back in Minneapolis, for the first time in years, I felt some real desire for him. Without the mustache, his face was clean-shaven and his sensitive mouth was soft and tempting. After being apart from him for three months, when I kissed him, I wanted to. When it was time to go to bed I was not dreading it this time. I was feeling sensually close to him. In the bedroom we got undressed. When I put my arms around him and he smiled, he looked like the young man I used to know once.

He went to turn out the rest of the lights in the house. Just before he could switch off the last light, the phone rang in the kitchen. I heard him answer, It was long distance and he sounded happy at first. He stayed on the phone for a while but he wasn't talking much. I waited. I wanted him to come to bed.

I came back out to see what was taking so long. He stood there naked, still on the phone, but not saying anything. I wrapped

my arms and my naked body around him. He didn't respond; he just stood there listening to the person on the other end of the phone line. Whoever it was had quite a bit to say. Jim's face looked serious, even distressed. When he hung up the phone, he still stood there with his back to me. He seemed stunned.

"Who was it?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"It was Steve," he answered, in a daze. His demeanor didn't match up with the kind of conversations he usually had with his longtime best buddy.

"What did he want?" I waited impatiently for a long minute before he answered.

Still looking away, he said, "He told me he doesn't want to be my friend anymore." Jim's voice faded as if someone had turned the volume down.

Did I hear him right? That made no sense. Jim had called Steve his best friend for a decade.

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"Steve said he doesn't want to know me anymore."

I was more annoyed than surprised. The sensual mood was gone for me; Jim was totally involved in something else. I tried not to sound angry as I asked, "What are you talking about?"

"The slides. I forgot to send back the slides. I really meant to, but I forgot. Steve just told me he is no longer my friend."

Jim walked into the dark bedroom. I followed him. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at the floor.

"I don't understand. What slides?" I was impatient. I wanted to go to bed with him, actually wanted to this time, and his mind was somewhere else, with Steve.

"He sent me some slides last year." he spoke almost in a

whisper and he didn't look at me. "To show me some new paintings he was working on. A couple of months ago he told me he needed the slides back, and I meant to send them. He asked me a couple of times; he said it was really important. I meant to send them, and I looked around for them. I couldn't find them, and then I guess I must have forgot. He had a chance for a one-man show and he needed the slides to submit to the gallery curator. I didn't send back the slides, so he didn't get the show."

The opportunity, the moment, and the mood were gone. We went to bed and he went to sleep. I lay awake. The one time I had wanted him, he didn't want me. He hadn't even noticed the difference.

Chapter 17: The Storefront

It was three weeks before Christmas when Jim's mother called us from Dallas. She told us very quietly and gently, "You should come now."

Jim's aunt Norma's oncologists believed she might not have much time left, and they said the family should come soon if we wanted to see her one more time "as you have known her." The cancer was progressing rapidly, and her dying was beginning to show.

Jim's mom bought plane tickets for us. She would make up some excuse to tell her sister why "the kids" were coming out to visit now instead of at Christmas. Norma's family had decided it was best not to tell her how bad it really was, and the doctors had respected their wishes.

The news was crushing. Norma was young, only thirty-nine, full of life, and such a loving, joyful person. She was always looking for all the joy and fun she could find, and sharing it. She had been my one spot of warmth in the desolate New Haven years.

We flew to Dallas. In her hospital room, all of us sat there trying to be cheerful, pretending she might get better in the spring. Even in her hospital bed, Norma looked beautiful, haute-mode as always, in a caterpillar-green silk crepe jumpsuit with a matching feather boa. She had lost a lot of weight but she was still our irrepressible Norma. To cheer us up she told us cute little risqué jokes that tore my heart.

Nobody had told her and nobody gave it away, but I think she knew. I could feel it, and it felt awful. I wanted to throw my arms around her and hold her and tell her I loved her so much, but I didn't dare, or she would surely suspect the truth. So we all sat

together there, playing our brave sad charade, pretending there was still hope.

I sat silent, smiling, overwhelmed with a terrible sadness. I had never told her I loved her, or that she was such a light in my life, and now I couldn't, or she would know that something was terribly wrong, something we had promised each other not to tell her yet. We thought we were pretending for her sake, and God, it was so hard. But I knew as well as I know anything, that in truth she was pretending for us. We were all pretending for each other.

The nurses let us stay past visiting hours. About midnight we left the hospital and walked together down the slippery sidewalk in a dark cold rain. So far I had managed not to cry. I turned back for a moment to look up at the hospital, at the window of her room. I could see the tiny lights of her little Christmas tree blinking there, and something inside me broke and bled.

Back in Minneapolis I was deeply torn and desolately sad. I couldn't express my feelings of grief and loss, and I couldn't resolve it in my mind. It was so wrong. I couldn't accept the reality of her dying, I could not comprehend it, and I could not bear it. I struggled inwardly with my sorrow. Jim was silent too; we couldn't talk about it, either of us. Weeks went by and still I labored to understand and could not, until finally a realization came through to me that gave me some small fraction of peace, if not acceptance. *Even though she is dying, she has been the most alive person I've ever known.*

Against all odds, she held onto life until March. Wilma her sister, and Grammy her mother, were there with her when she passed. Jim and I didn't return to Dallas for the funeral. We didn't want to remember her that way. Jim's mom understood.

Norma had gotten a short-shift in life. It wasn't fair. But while

she was here, she had been extraordinarily here. extravagantly here, and exuberantly here. Norma had been a joyful spirit no matter what life threw at her. She had made some mistakes, especially in love, but she was all about love and joy, and she shared herself as generously and innocently as a child. And that was when I saw it. The simplest truth:

Even a short life, lived fully and honestly, is not wasted, is a life lived well. A life lived here and now, not tomorrow or next year. We will all pass from this place someday; it's one of The Rules of The Game. The greatest tragedy would be to have died without ever having really lived, and Norma had really lived. Every minute she was alive, she was whole-heartedly, totally alive.

My next thought slammed into my head like a bullet:

I am not.

For years I'd been collecting excuses to not be. Now in one flash of insight, the hidden shackles of my own making became unmistakable. I could not deny them anymore, or deny my part in them. *I chose this.*

In that instant, like the quick precise catching of steel gear-teeth, my mind turned, and began its long and difficult ascent.

I've heard it said: "There is a gift in everything. In every ending there is a beginning." Norma's death ended something precious and irreplaceable for me. It was a beginning too. It was the thing that forced me to look again at my own life.

Joe and Susan got married. They were moving to New York at the end of the teaching semester and he had gotten a terrific deal on a loft to rent for a studio and living space. Until then, they would live at Susan's place, and Joe bequeathed his old storefront apartment and painting studio to Jim. We moved out of our cozy little apartment on Russell Avenue North and into Joe's storefront place in a semi-industrial area at the upper end of Nicollet Avenue.

The store space was Jim's studio, one enormous open room with a high ceiling and oceans of light from narrow clerestory windows on one side and two large store-windows that filled the whole front wall. Outside above them was a tattered canvas awning that blocked the brightest sunlight, shifting it onto the concrete pavement where it was refined and reflected as clear daylight through the windows. The huge space was flooded with indirect light, perfect for a painter's studio.

The living space in the back of the store was one small room with a low window looking out onto the brick wall of the building next door. The other three walls had only a door to the front room, a door to the kitchen, and a sliding door to a shallow closet space. A tiny bathroom was next to the kitchen. The walls, painted a sickly yellow-beige, enclosed me with a dizzying wave of claustrophobia.

The kitchen though even smaller, was not so bad. A stove, an old refrigerator, and the massive round table and chairs from our old apartment were crammed snugly into it, but it had a fair-size window that offered a precious bit of sky. It faced another commercial building with a gravel parking lot that flooded every time it rained. Mornings when Jim left to teach his early classes, I sat down at the table with my coffee and my thoughts in the cramped space next to the kitchen window.

On this day, like all the others, I sat silent, still, and empty. The air was chilly and wet. I looked out onto the blank skies and shallow grey puddles pricked by needles of falling rain.

The rain is relentless. I am drowning in emptiness. There is something clandestine about this day, this silence, this life I have. Despite the laws of the universe, time has simply stopped, or worse, it has gone on without me.

Rain spattered the glass and tapped on the windowsill like nervous fingertips. The sounds of the rain were beautiful. and

everything else was silence.

My soul floats above me like a vapor, and I am sitting here below it. It casts no shadow upon me.

As I looked out at the gravel parking lot and dense skies heavy as slate, a desolate loneliness flooded over me and soaked all the way through me. I saw the truth that my life was as empty and featureless as the bleak skies reflected in the rain pools, and something inside me *turned*.

The truth came into my mind very quietly. It appeared unexpectedly like a deer stepping into a clearing from out of a deep forest, a momentary encounter, then disappearing back into the dark woods just as silently as it had come. When it vanished, I was left with a strange feeling of both gift and loss, and I knew.

It's time. In that moment I knew, *I cannot be alive in this emptiness.* I realized that I must leave. As quietly as the rainfall, the time had come, and I knew it.

I can't say I hadn't thought about it before. I had, but only in a vague way, like a daydream. I hadn't made any plan, only the thought that someday, somehow, I would escape and disappear. Jim had needed me in the beginning, maybe even loved me, but most of our years together were not about love, only need. I fell into the well of his need, and I couldn't get out. I must have needed him too, but it was not in a way that was good for me.

I'd always known I could never leave Jim until I was sure he could make it without me, and even then, I still hesitated. I didn't want to hurt Jim, I just wanted to disappear, to escape the confines of this life that always held me just at the edge of depression. I wanted to escape this landscape of ugly brown-brick buildings and the treeless semi-industrial neighborhood where we now lived. I saw my life reflected in the puddles of cold rain, and I knew that this part of my life was already ending.

I began in secret to look for some way out. I couldn't just

walk away, I had no money and nowhere to go. It had never felt like an option to go back home to my family as a failure in life. That would have made me a quitter, and I was not a quitter. Now if I left, I would have to do it on my own.

I had given a hundred percent of myself to support the life of another person. He had used about sixty percent of me; the rest he tossed-out with the coffee grounds. The parts he threw away might have been the most valuable parts, and that was what finally released me: the realization that God had given me a life too, and a soul, and a talent, and I was wasting them. Something in me wanted to declare it, to shout it out— *I am a person too*.

When I recognized that wasting my own life was a sin of omission, something internal simply let go, and released me. I felt the chains fall away, unlocked from the inside. My decision to leave came from both a desire for freedom and a profound sense of guilt for having abandoned my life. I took that as my justification to stop living his life, and to begin to look for my own.

From the moment my mind changed, I began to change too. Maybe Jim felt it, but he didn't ask. We had never talked, and now I stopped trying to. I started working as much as I could to make as much money as I could, so that someday I could leave.

I had been designing and sewing stage costumes for a few of the local rock-bands, and custom-made shirts and jackets for men that I sold in small boutiques and a men's specialty shop in Dayton's department store. Susan's friend Carolyn was a creative artist in her own right, talented at design and masterfully skilled at sewing, and she needed money too, so she worked with me to make the shirts and we split the small income from sales. I applied for a state sales tax Resale Permit and opened a checking account.

One morning Carolyn and I were in the little back room of the storefront, bent over my portable sewing machine working to develop the construction for a new design. Jim was painting in the big front room studio. About ten o'clock he took a break and came back to where we were working. Stretching out his long lanky arms over his head to relax the tightness from painting, he announced cheerfully,

“A cup of coffee sure would taste good.” and he looked directly at us, smiling a big smile. I glanced up at him but I continued working. He stood there for a long moment.

It would have been obvious to anyone else that we were focused and involved with the work we were doing. My annoyance began to rise. *Can't he see that? I don't want to get up, interrupt my work, and waste Carolyn's time just to make coffee for him.*

He was still standing there, waiting for me to drop everything like I usually did, and attend to him.

Finally I said, “We're in the middle of this, Jim. Could you make it this time?”

He was surprised. He stood there another second or two until the realization hit him— that he could have made it himself in the first place. He went into the kitchen and started the coffee pot. When he came back out, he asked politely,

“Would you like some too?” It was a breakthrough for him, a moment of thoughtfulness.

“No. Thank you,” I said, and kept on working.

I didn't know how long it was going to take to make enough money to leave, but once the decision was made, I had a choice, a hope, a way out. I kept all of this hidden inside me. Just as I had always kept my disappointments and my loneliness inside me, I

kept my hope there too, and my determination.

We had been living in the storefront place maybe a year, maybe less, when it happened. It was not a part of the plan. I wasn't ready, but it happened anyway, at the end of an ordinary day exactly like any other day.

That night we went to bed and Jim began his customary casual rape of my body, the same way he had been doing for four and a half years. And then without a glimmer of warning of any kind, suddenly I was overcome with an immense sorrow. Unexpectedly, uncontrollably, I started to cry, and I could not stop. I didn't know what was happening. My armor had failed me completely, all at once. Feelings that I didn't understand, startlingly exploded out of me like a thunderstorm, and the downpour came immediately.

Jim, shocked and perplexed, stammered, "Is something wrong?"

I thought, *What an ironic question!* I could not begin to tell him how many things were wrong, and that I was trapped in them, and that I had been trapped in them for so long that there had become no chance for any other way.

I couldn't speak and I couldn't stop crying. I struggled to control myself. To my horror, I could not. Long, unbearable minutes passed before the sobs began to subside, then fade, finally, into silence. Total silence. A vast, empty silence.

I don't remember anything else.

The next day we didn't talk. He wasn't as cheerful and enthusiastic about his painting as he normally would have been. At mid-morning he came back from the front room studio to the small living-space where I was ironing his shirts.

All he said was “Are you going to leave?”

That caught me off guard. I didn’t want to say it. I didn’t want to tell him. I hesitated as long as I dared. I didn’t look at him, I couldn’t. I kept on ironing while my mind raced in circles, searching for a safe answer. There was none.

“I don’t know.” I said. But I lied. I did know.

He went back into the studio.

Our friends had known, long before either of us did, especially our best friends Susan and Joe. When Jim drank too much, his personality changed, and he could be surprisingly cruel, especially toward me. From my obvious embarrassment and hurt, our friends could see that something was wrong, and my unsmiling silences had confirmed it.

I can’t remember how the next few days played out. Susan was supportive and kind. Carolyn offered to share her apartment for a while until I could figure out what to do. I remained awkwardly in the storefront apartment during the day for another week, because our sweet little cat was pregnant and about to give birth. It was her first time, Jim was gone all day at his teaching job, and I didn’t want her to be alone when her babies came.

Two days after the kittens were born, I moved out. Jim loaded what little I took with me into the back of his car and drove me to Carolyn’s place. The day I took my life back was unconsciously symbolic: July 14th, Bastille day.

I didn’t know where I would go from there, I only knew I had been too long without a life. I knew I could never get all of it back, and leaving the old way of life required one more sacrifice—tearing away a part of myself and leaving it behind, as an animal will sometimes gnaw off its own leg to escape a steel trap. I took flight blindly, and with no supporting evidence whatsoever, I dared myself to hope I might find a new life that would be better.

At twenty-one I had traded away my life as an artist for the career of wife and caregiver. Now, that too had crumbled into ashes. At twenty-six, once again life as I had known it was gone, this time traded for nothing but free air. Cut loose from whatever foundation I'd had, I stood at the brink of a great void. And then, I stepped off.

Fading twilight. I long for peace but there doesn't seem to be that for me. Silence, yes, and emptiness, but not peace. Solitude so deep that it seems sacred. Aloneness is my natural habitat; it's where I started from, in infancy. Alone in the dark is what I know how to be.

In the world of people, now, I can't collect my senses. I feel lost even in familiar places. I drift around the apartment till Carolyn gets home, or I go downtown to the public library. Mostly I wander around always feeling a vague apprehension, a disconnected vigilance, and an undercurrent of fear. Fear of what? Then I come home again and I sit in the dark. Who am I now?

I was drawn back again into the feelings I had refused to feel in New Haven. I couldn't avoid them anymore. I couldn't not-feel, I had lost control of that. When the feelings came now, many times I found myself suddenly flooded with the sadness of them, and the rage. I surrendered to the flow of burning tears that seared my face; I let them pour. I let myself sink beneath dark waves, and die for a while.

Beneath the waves there is a kind of peace, a place I know. A place of refuge. I spent many hours of childhood here. When I sit alone in the darkness and cry my heart out to no one at all, somehow there is a great release in that. A weight is lifted. A calm that is beyond emotion, beyond circumstance, and beyond anything my mind can understand flows out of it. I dissolve into my

own soul, and there at last, I rest.

Leaving Jim had meant I had to give up Susan and Joe and most of our other friends too. He got all the friends and he also had all the credit. Even though we had lived on my earnings for more than three years, all of the money had been in his name. The little business with Carolyn was my first checking account since college. I didn't have a credit card.

Carolyn and I continued working hard at our designing and sales. This passage was hard for both of us. For Carolyn, it was harder than I knew. She too had deep wounds that I didn't know of. Like mine, her sorrows were hidden and slow to heal, but I was too wrapped up in my own pain to realize hers.

For me this was a time of selective numbness. I was unfeeling of any joy, but intensely sensitive to any kind of pain. Tearing myself away from the old life was like cutting my own heart out with a garden spade. The old life had ended before I was ready, and now there was a gaping empty space in front of me: the unknown. Freedom was terrifying.

I saw myself as an absolute failure. The old life was over, and yet I was still here, physically embodied in the same world and the same city. I stumbled through the days.

When the old life ended, I had ended too. Now, whoever I was before, true or false, had ceased to exist. Stripped of my best self-defense: denial, I fell apart and submerged into depression. I had crashed my life, and now I was stumbling through the debris of it.

Carolyn worked at the Art Center gallery during the day, I had no job and no prospects for one. I sat in the apartment in a near-catatonic state, drifting through days as if sleepwalking, or else I took the bus downtown and roamed aimlessly through

department stores, just looking at things. I didn't buy anything; I didn't want anything. I had no money anyway, Carolyn and I together barely made the rent and food.

The Minneapolis Public Library became my sanctuary and my hiding place. I had a favorite corner in the poetry section where hardly anyone ever came. When I was a child, the library had been a natural refuge where I was happy and safe. Now again I found solace there. I read mostly poetry. I looked at magazines like *The Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* and tried to imagine the lives I saw in the pictures. I could not.

Sometimes without warning I would be overcome with an intense sorrow that surged up suddenly, and when it did, I burst into ragged sobs. When I felt one of those times coming, I had to run and hide. In the library I rushed to reach the restroom before I disintegrated into paroxysms of sobbing. In my shame I hid in one of the stalls and smothered my face in my hands to suffocate the sounds. I held my breath, and held onto myself until it passed, until I could regain myself. Then I washed my face, and slipped invisibly back into the world again. It was one of those times that I realized something, and all of a sudden there it was, and it was so simple: he raged. I wept. *It was the same thing.*

"Express" means "to force out." When I looked it up in the dictionary, it said: "to proclaim, make public, reveal, give vent to." Jim's surrender to rage, and my surrender to despair— each was a way that relieved the pain without revealing the cause. A way to cope with the shame of being unable to succeed. It was a way to express what could not be expressed, without exposing its secrets. It had a purpose and a benefit. *That was how it had to be for him, and this is how it's got to be for me, to unload my messed-up-ness, like he did.*

We were not as different as I thought. We were both human. With that, I decided to accept this in myself and try to be at least

as understanding of it in myself as I had been of it in him. With a perfectly clear head I decided, *Okay, Victoria, you can have this. Go ahead and express whatever emotion still works. It's a start. Maybe it's a safety-valve thing, to blow off some of the pressure from the inside to the outside. Maybe when you get better, you won't need it.*

I did get better. The crying jags stopped, and a sense of calm replaced it. I was not happy, not sad, just accepting. Like they say in 12-steps, one day at a time.

Months went by like blank pages. I continued to feel very lost, disconnected and unstable emotionally, but I didn't know what to do. I considered the possibility that I might be losing my mind.

I wrote to my closest friend Peggy. I knew I could confide in her, even my worst weaknesses, and she would not condemn anything honest in me. I told her what I was going through. She quickly wrote back:

“There are people who will help, but you have to ask. Look up County Mental Health or something like that in the phone book, and go there.” She said “Anyone can go there, and if you have no money, they will help you anyway.” I found the number and phoned; they said I could come.

I presented myself at the reception desk of a dingy office building downtown, an annex of the County Hospital. The stagnant air in the waiting room smelled of rain-wet clothes and stale cigarette smoke. I felt dizzy and sick to my stomach. The woman at the desk gave me some forms to fill out. I sat down and read them carefully, trying to make some sense out of them. I filled out what I could, left the rest blank, and returned to the desk.

“Do you ever have thoughts of suicide?” she asked, as calmly as if the question was routine. I hesitated. I wasn't capable of

thinking clearly enough to have a plan for anything. I stood there blank-faced and emotionless. “No.” I said.

The Hennepin County Mental Health Services signed me up for an appointment in a few days with a psychiatrist. My need was considered “acute,” but not serious enough for the locked ward. The ward was the last resort for those who might harm themselves or others. I would be seeing the shrink at the clinic twice a week.

I had never smoked. I started smoking. I smoked until my throat was raw, then I smoked some more. Maybe it distracted me from my greater pain, or maybe I just wanted to hurt myself, I don’t know. I got through the days and weeks, surviving, nothing more.

I filed for divorce. The County Legal-Aid Service told me what to do. I didn’t ask for alimony or support. I should have – after all, I had supported him. But I wanted it to be over, so I asked for a single sum that I thought I could live on for a year. It was absurdly little, not nearly enough, but I didn’t know any better. I hadn’t had access to any money for four and a half years. When Jim got the divorce papers, he called me, angry. He said he wanted to see me. I felt my stomach wrench with anxiety.

“Please don’t come over here,” I pleaded. “there’s nothing to talk about now.” I don’t remember what else we said. He called again a few days later and this time he was more calm. He said he wanted to contest the divorce. I begged him not to.

“Please don’t, Jim,” and I said with a practiced voice that I hoped would sound unafraid, “Please don’t make it harder.” He was vague about it. I don’t think he wanted me; it was just his pride telling him he ought to put up some sort of a fight.

Carolyn offered to be my witness at the divorce hearing, the standard procedure in Minnesota law for any uncontested divorce. If the spouse did not appear at the hearing, the divorce was usually

granted automatically.

We went to the courtroom together. The docket was full and we had to wait through several other women's cases. Each testimony was obviously the tip of the iceberg of the real story. One woman's witness described how the husband spent most of his time with his Ford Mustang instead of his wife.

I waited anxiously, worrying that Jim might show up to complicate things, even though I had begged him to let me go and had sworn that there could be no return. If he came to the hearing, that would mean that it would not be over. I sat in the courtroom, shaking a little, and taking rapid shallow breaths.

Carolyn was going to testify to "mental cruelty," which seemed to be the most common reason women in Minneapolis sued for divorce. I didn't know what she was going to say, but she told me, "Don't worry. It'll be okay."

She testified that I had been psychologically mistreated by my husband, and she described an incident I had entirely forgotten. It was one night when we had been working together all day and she had stayed for dinner.

"Her husband ridiculed her cooking," she stated. "He found a hair in the fried chicken crust, and he stood up, waving the chicken around and laughing." As she told the story, it sounded even more superficial than the Mustang story, but I'm sure the Judge knew it was not. Then I remembered it, and the night it happened. Jim had done a whole comedy routine. I think Carolyn had said, "Well, it sure tastes delicious!" in an attempt to rescue me, but Jim went on and on, and she had sat squirming in her chair with embarrassment.

As Carolyn talked, I even remembered the piece of chicken Jim had held up to show everybody, a chicken thigh. I could see it again clearly, even the offending hair itself— it was a tiny light-

brown hair, about a quarter of an inch long. My hair was longer, dark bitter-chocolate brown. *It was his hair.*

Thankfully, this time Jim kept his promise and didn't show up. My divorce was final on December 8, five years after the wedding day.

I stopped smoking.

I took back my maiden name. I did it because it was *my name*, and I didn't want anybody else's name. I took back my own name as a badge of taking back my own life. I had stayed with my marriage until there was absolutely nothing left for me, and then I stayed years more. I stayed until he got through school, and then I stayed until he got his first teaching job, and then I stayed and worked until I had paid off his credit card debt. I stayed until I was sure he could make it without me.

When I left, I had left blind, but with a total resolve, driven by an inner imperative that I did not fully understand. It was my own choice and my soul's necessity, and yet, when I broke away I was shattered at losing the life I had known, because I had nothing to replace it with.

I didn't take much with me. A sleeping bag, and the old Framus guitar Bob and Dotty had given me that first week we were in Minneapolis, when they were moving out and we were moving in to "the teacher's-life." And the old Aries camera that Jim's friend and mentor Joe Zimbroidt had given him, and Jim later handed-down to me. The passing on of the camera was a genuine gift on Jim's part. It was the only thing he ever gave me that I didn't pay for, except a little Mexican pottery owl that he had given to me a few days after we were married. He'd said its hand-painted dark eyes made it look like me, and once in a tender moment when I woke up all disheveled one morning, he called me "Raggedy Owl." Somehow, through all my travels and the

multitude of possessions that have come and gone in my life since then, I still have the little pottery owl.

When Carolyn and I got back to the apartment it was late afternoon. She gave me the gift of private silence, a kindness I was grateful for.

I went to my room and stared at the cardboard boxes that contained my possessions, the remnants of my old life. It seems incredible now, but somehow I still had my wedding album and a packet of letters tied with a blue silk ribbon, the ones Jim had sent to me in Austin when he first went to New Haven, when we were longing to be together.

In Minneapolis there were no air pollution ordinances and most people had a burning-barrel in the backyard to burn leaves or paper trash. Ours was a 55-gallon steel drum. There was a smoldering fire in the bottom of it, and when I stirred it with a dry stick, it burst into life. I untied the ribbons, and one by one I dropped each letter into the eager flames of the burning barrel. Hypnotized by the fire, I watched them burn.

Then the album. I removed the happy pictures of what had become such a sad story. I burned them too, all except for two small photos. One of my birthmother Ann in her pretty blue dress with the mother-of-the-bride corsage that Mother had so kindly and graciously given to her. The other one was of Daddy and me together just moments before the ceremony.

On my father's beautiful face is the tenderest look I have ever seen on any man I've ever known. He is about to "give me away" and I am about to make the first great mistake of my life.

When I went back inside, the sun was going down. I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror and asked the face that stared back at me, *Who am I?*

The last deep-gold of sunset poured through the bathroom window and dramatically flooded one side of my face with light that was almost blinding, while the other side was in darkness. It was one of those singularly rare images photographers call “grab-shots.” The opportunity only lasts for a moment. I went for my little viewfinder camera and came back again. Bracing it against my chest, I pointed it at the mirror, and clicked the shutter.

And the face in the mirror said to me, *This is who I am now. I am not who I was.*

In my therapy sessions, the County psychiatrist asked if I took drugs or smoked marijuana. I told him no, I never had, which was true. He wore horn-rim glasses and one of those grandfather cardigan sweaters, striped brown and gray, buttoned down the front. I called it his psychiatrist sweater. He smoked a pipe, and I thought he tried very hard to look like a psychiatrist.

He didn't seem to be much help. My clinical depression was deeply entrenched, it would be slow-moving and reluctant to let go. He never took notes. I thought shrinks took notes like on TV. I don't remember what I said in these sessions. Most of the time I felt like he wasn't listening anyway. Psychoanalysis, or whatever that was, did not feel profound or productive for me, but it may have saved my life. Not that it glued together any of the shattered pieces. It didn't. But it gave me someplace to go twice a week. Eventually I came to realize that other people can't really help you; they can only try, and their contribution is simply to be there for you, and want to help. Ultimately, you have to do the healing yourself, and it takes time.

I resented that truth. And I resented this dour gloomy man, though I shouldn't have. I still don't know for sure if he helped or not, but I do know that for things like this, in the beginning the

increments of growth and healing are almost imperceptibly small. People like me who are stumbling through a painful and uncertain life-situation usually want some all-powerful Dr. Wizard to tell us the secret of how to make our life work. Nobody knows that secret.

The failure of my first love and its magnificent idealistic commitment had shattered my faith in almost everything I had believed in until then. I had been a good wife. I had stopped living my own life and invested everything into his, because I believed that I should do that. Now in leaving his life, I had leapt blindly back into my own, which now had no ground beneath it. I had reclaimed the right to a life of my own, but I had no idea how to live it.

I hadn't made the choice rationally, could not have, based on the rules I'd been taught. The choice, the imperative, had evolved underground, and then one day, it was time. I might never have found the courage to leave my old life, but I had been exploded out of it by an instinctive blind urgency.

Out there in the universe when a star explodes, it becomes nothing but shapeless energy. So am I. I have become nothing. I feel like nothing. My self-esteem is zero, because I don't even have a self that I can recognize or reach. Everything I thought I knew has fallen away at once.

Recovery would be painful, because as I became more well, I also became less numb. I wrote more poetry. When I emptied out my woundedness onto the page, I felt a little bit cleaner, a little stronger. I was able to write in the times when it was impossible to speak. I could sit down alone and words would pour onto the paper, I could read them and find out what I was feeling and try to make sense out of it. In those lines, I could see that there were two

of me. An outside one, and an invisible inner one. The outside one had learned how to survive, but that one was a lie. Only the inside one knew how to live, how to feel, and how to express. I wanted to reach this inner part of myself, and the poetry seemed to hold a key. Even in my bewilderment, another truth was dawning, and I saw it clearly:

It takes more courage to let go than to hold on. While you're holding on, at least you know where you are, and there's a kind of safety in that. When you let go, you are free-falling into darkness and the unknown. This is terrifying, but this is the way everything begins.

As I stumbled into my new life, Peggy's letters continued to encourage me, praise my poetry and writing, and support me in every way she could. By then, she and Howard had moved to Michigan and he was in art school in Ann Arbor.

Peggy had been my gentle and generous mentor when I wrote my first poems. She was the one person on earth I could tell the whole truth to, and feel safe. Even after our lives had gone separate ways to different states, we had kept our close friendship through long letters. Her letters were literature—vivid, expressive, insightful observations of life and love.

Peggy and her husband Howard, like myself, were now very far from Texas where we all began. They were living in a small rented lakehouse in the tiny resort town of Keego Harbor. They had lovingly redecorated it and made a cozy home for themselves and their new baby Rachel. Howard was working part time and going to school in Ann Arbor, studying art. Peggy wrote to me about their idyllic life and the peaceful charm of the place, and I wrote to her about my fragmented life, my unstable emotions and my shaky state of mind. She wrote back, "You should come to Keego Harbor,"

By a stroke of luck or providence, a new friend I'd met was going to Ann Arbor, and offered to drive me there. I had no plan, but things fell into place. By this and nothing more, I knew this was the next step for me.

No matter how love ends, when it ends we are shattered. We think in terms of gathering up the fragments of our lives and somehow putting them back together again. But those who have experienced this, know that things are never so simple. Some of the broken parts are gone for good. There is not just "getting over" the hurt and the loss, there is the necessity of re-growing the missing parts, and that takes time.

I told the psychiatrist "I won't be seeing you anymore."

He said, "Well, I think your house is in better order." That was all he said.

I packed up my belongings once again, and I moved to Michigan. There was going to be more than a new life for me, there would be many.

Chapter 18: Keego Harbor

The county psychiatrist said,
“Your house
is in better order.”
Better than what,
he didn’t say.
Better than when I first shambled in,
I presume.
And so I have come
without so much as a cup and a spoon
to bang together,
to Keego Harbor,
to hope and to heal,
to spend the winter
with this somber lake,
these colorless skies.
No keys on my keychain
and few possessions,
I cast no reflection
on the water.

In Keego Harbor, time slowed down. It moved gently in an effortless pattern like the little ripples on the calm gray lake. The town was less than half a square mile in area. There was not much to it: a gas station, a burger place, and a post office. Most of the lake cottages were empty for the winter, so Peggy found one I could rent, four doors down from theirs. And so I came, a soul adrift, to live at the edge of a winter lake, and except for these

friends, entirely unmoored and ungrounded.

Here my life became profoundly simple. In the mornings I took a solitary walk along the edge of the lake. I passed through the perimeters of empty lakefront properties, past thickets populated only by squirrels and birds and the occasional raccoon. Every afternoon I went to the post office to see if there might be a letter from my family in Texas or some poems from Robin, the hippie poet friend I'd met at a poetry reading a few days before I left Minneapolis.

Here there was a feeling of no-time. An open-endedness lay out before me. My future was as flat and featureless as the sullen lake and limitless span of colorless empty sky. Plenty of room to think, and not-think.

For most of my life I had tried my best to please people, to be what they needed me to be, so they would love me, so they wouldn't hurt me. They hurt me anyway.

I kept on doing that until I was twenty-six years old, and then I couldn't do it anymore.

When I left Jim, I took my life back, accepted the sole responsibility for the living of it, and began again alone. It would take time for the sadness to relent, but when it finally did, I knew it, because I felt a groundswell of anger that surprised me with its intensity. It was not some old anger, it was new anger. I was not just angry at him; I was angry about what had happened to me, angry that I had let it happen, and angry that I couldn't stop it from happening because I didn't realize I could have.

The anger came not as a memory, but like a delayed shock-wave from an explosion miles away, and I felt the invisible force-field of it slam into me, still powerful from a distance. I felt the detonation of the outrage I had not allowed myself to feel back then, and just like Jim used to do, *I raged*.

I raged for days, consumed with it. When finally it subsided, there was a release, a calm, and I felt nothing else but forgiveness, for him and for myself, because we had both failed so badly.

I had married Jim not only because I loved him (though I believed I did love him) but because I thought that being a part of his life would inspire and expand my own. He was creative, talented, and intelligent, and I was too. I thought that we would be partners in life and have adventures together. That was my tragic error. It never happened. It was not a part of his plan, and I didn't have a plan of my own. If I didn't see that coming, I couldn't blame him, it was my mistake.

The 1960's were a wonderful time to be alive, those years should have been glorious and exciting for me, but instead I had spent them in the lonely shadow of someone else's life.

How could I have been so stupid? So docile, so obedient and uncomplaining? I had defaulted back to the victim-martyr role that my childhood had trapped me in, the one I hated so much, the one I thought I had left behind me.

And now in the end, I had escaped back into my own life the only way I yet knew how to, by running away,

When the lake froze over, Peggy and Howard borrowed ice skates for me and one night the three of us skated out across the lake in the dark. In luminous deep blue moonlight, there were no markings and no boundaries. The blue glow of the ice and vast blackness of the sky seemed to go on forever. Every so often there was a frightening BOOM! as the ice-layer shifted itself, cracked and groaned alarmingly beneath us, but held firm. Then silence again, and only the scrape of skates.

When spring came the lake turned liquid and blue again. Everything else turned ecstatically green, fed by tempestuous

rainfalls, magnificent storms with dark foreboding clouds, loud rumblings of thunder, and sky-splitting flashes of lightning that lit up the night like noonday. Powerful forces were gathered up and then thrown down in torrents of sudden hard rain. The storms, thrilling to watch from the safe indoors, were terrifying if you were caught out on the lake in a light canoe, racing the storm to shore.

On sunny afternoons while Howard was at school, Peggy and I took the baby Rachel and Basset hound Lily canoeing along the shallow waters. Sometimes I took the canoe out alone, exploring a half-mile or so out from the shore. I watched the sailboat races far away on the other side of the lake, like tiny toy boats with white handkerchief sails. Once I picked an armload of cattails along our shoreline and made a "flower arrangement" for my bare little house that was otherwise unfurnished except for a kitchen table, two chairs, and the floor-pallet I slept on.

Journal: Yesterday the sky was blue but today it's the color of pewter. Everything is absolutely still, not a breath of air. A low rolling thunder is mumbling someplace far off, and the clouds have been dark and saturated for days. The storm is still northeast of us, a massive front off Lake Superior. When the winds come, they will come swift and powerful, appear out of nowhere, and whip our little lake into white-caps. For now the lake is flat as glass, but I won't go out on the water today. At any minute the deluge could start, and when it does, it will come down hard and pound the earth for days.

Keego Harbor was a refuge. It gave me the space I needed to bind up my wounds and an open span of time for my mind to begin to put itself back together again. In this profound solitude there was a deep well of strength that could be drawn upon, and a gift of undeserved grace that soothed the way for my healing. In some unexplainable way I knew I was made more whole by having been

broken and scattered, then gathered and sequestered in the heart of the silent winter and the promise of a different spring.

In the evenings before I went to bed I walked along the edge of the shore alone with my thoughts. The air was so clean and the stars so clear and bright in the quiet sky that the damaged parts of me somehow seemed to melt into it all. I released everything that I had been before, and I became this beautiful silence. I became sacred.

Solitude is different from loneliness. Enclosed by this cocoon of time, even the simplest things I thought or felt were intensified by a pureness of clarity. I called it “my Thoreau experience.” I wrote poetry and kept a journal. Keego Harbor gave me what I needed: sanctuary.

Eventually the time came to look for work. There were no jobs in Keego Harbor, I would have to commute to Ann Arbor, Detroit, or Pontiac. I didn’t have a car or much money, and my future was uncertain. Then abruptly Peggy and Howard’s blissful life took a lurching turn.

Howard’s stepfather, Martin Mayrath, was a very wealthy and powerful man, but he gave no special advantage to his stepson. Howard and Peggy were struggling to pay their rent. Mayrath was the iconic “self-made-man” and had made his fortune by being the first person to design, patent, and market the auger in the 1940s. Now he was the CEO of an enormous farm implement corporation.

“Basically, it’s a screw in a tube,” Peggy aptly described it. An auger is a device for efficient movement of grain and other things, from a principle invented by an ancient Greek, Archimedes. Martin Mayrath had recognized its value for agriculture, and he had designed and built the first commercial

augers which could move huge amounts of grain and other products to trucks, silos, railroad cars. It saved farmers and transporters time, labor, and cost, and revolutionized farming in the United States and then the world. Martin Mayrath was a self-made-man, hardworking, tough, and brilliant. His business empire, centered in Dallas Texas, was worth millions.

Howard had worked summers in the company's fields and barns as a teenager. He had learned the Mayrath business inside and out, and become skilled at managing tasks and machinery. Martin had mentored him and then legally adopted him, but the business was not Howard's dream; he wanted to be an artist.

It was almost May when Howard and Peggy got the news: Martin was seriously ill, and Howard must come at once to Dallas. Martin intended to bequeath the business to Howard, and if he did, Howard and Peggy would have to leave their life on the lake and give up his pursuit of an education and an art career.

Howard tried to decline his stepfather's offer. He had no desire for an empire. Martin had a natural son also, but he believed Howard had the mind and spirit to be the best leader for the business he had spent his lifetime building.

Martin's illness was terminal. In the next weeks, Howard had to make several trips to Dallas. He pleaded his case for the life he and Peggy had chosen, but Martin remained resolute. He told Howard that if he didn't accept the responsibilities of running the Mayrath Corporation, he would be cut out of Martin's will entirely.

Howard didn't want the money, he only wanted the life he and Peggy had made together. He implored his stepfather to let him decline this life-shattering demand. Mayrath refused. Howard could not in good conscience reject his stepfather's dying wish, so he gave in.

But as Martin's medical condition was worsening, he had become progressively less lucid. When Howard first declined the business, Martin had told his lawyers to write Howard out of any inheritance. By the time Howard had agreed to take on the corporation and give up his own life for it, Martin was losing his ability to think clearly and was deemed mentally incompetent to change the will back again.

Like a bad soap-opera, Howard lost both his freedom and his inheritance. He would have to move his wife and baby to Compton Illinois, a farming community whose primary source of employment was the Mayrath factory. As the CEO, Howard would be managing hundreds of workers who were more experienced and decades older than himself. As the top executive in a multi-million-dollar business, he paid himself a starting salary of \$100 a week.

Martin N. Mayrath, JR., 60, formerly of Dodge City, KS. died Sunday, June 15, 1969 at Dallas, Texas. Born May 13, 1909 at Dodge City lived here till 1950 when he moved to Dallas, Tex. He was president and CEO of Mayrath Machinery, founded by Martin Mayrath. He was a pioneer in the development of portable grain augers. Survivors include wife Ruth, sons Nicholas, Timothy and William of Dallas, and Howard McGinnis, Compton, Ill.

Without Peggy and Howard, Keego Harbor would hold little for me. My sanctuary now would end. I knew I could probably get a job in Minneapolis, so I packed my belongings once again into cardboard boxes and Daddy's old Navy footlocker and on the last day of May, Peggy drove me to the Greyhound depot in Pontiac. I felt bereft, losing her, but I knew this was just Life playing its game, and we were all in it.

The station agent threw my trunk and boxes into the underbelly of the bus, and I got on. The bus started up with a hiss

and a groan, pulled out into a spattering rain and was quickly swallowed up by the falling darkness. Through the rain-streaked dirty window, cheap neon colors reflected brokenly on the wet black streets, as the bus rumbled and swayed along. On the road to Detroit I dozed off, but woke again with every lurching traffic stop. Sleep would have to wait for open farmland.

Detroit was noisy and crowded, the streets were dirty and full of people hurrying around under the illusion that it mattered. A midnight-cowboy dressed in a wrinkled faded western shirt boarded the bus with nothing but a small duffel bag and a tambourine. He sat in the very back and every time the bus hit a bump, the tambourine jingled, all night long.

At brief stops along the route, shadowy figures shuffled on or off like sleepwalkers. Smells of stale urine and cheap wine hung like a pall over the fetid interior. I slumped down into my seat to endure the restless rocking and the fitful, half-sleeping night.

The old ladies are the saddest, the old dears who travel hundreds of miles for no apparent reason. They sip gin from cough medicine bottles and chat together with absurd cheerfulness. "You know, I have traveled from coast to coast," says one frail lady to her gently quivering friend.

Crowded into this suffocating atmosphere with my fellow vagrants, I am utterly alone now. Everybody is. There are brutal encounters with reality here. Philosophy writes itself inscrutably on fogged windows and I can see in the gloomy darkness that everything I ever thought I knew, was not the answer. The answer is out there someplace, running always ahead of me like my shadow on the ground.

The other passengers grunt and snore. We are a collection of stories by Kafka, except you never get to read how they end. We are all running away in slow-motion from the unhappy truths of our lives to the emptiness of strange streets, the loneliness of the

flat prairie lands, and the hopelessness of the cracker-box stacks of houses in shabby clusters along the bus routes and railroad tracks.

As the bus droned on through the night, I allowed myself to grieve. I mourned the fact that I had let five irreplaceable years be deleted out of my life by a joyless marriage. It felt like an amputation. I had made mistakes before, but I didn't know yet that there are some wounds that never heal, some that ache for a lifetime like old folks' bones every time it rains. I didn't know that I would feel them again whenever an especially tender and melancholy twilight falls, or when the warm summer winds come up from the south and the evenings are lavender and long and sensual. The mistake I'd made this time, I would remember, and the wounds would ache for a long, long time.

In the darkest years in New Haven, some part of me had escaped inward, so deep that it could not be reached, and I had secretly feared that it had deserted me. I wasn't even sure what it was – *the spirit? the soul?* Whatever it was, it was the alive part of me, the part that once had laughed and loved and discovered. Maybe its retreat had somehow allowed it to persevere, and now it might stir again.

This return to Minneapolis, the city of my recent past, was not a step backward. There was no “back” in my life or my vocabulary now. I'd learned I could survive, and I believed that what had been broken in me might still heal. My spirit had been shattered but was still alive, and more alive than before.

Most of the friends from my old life in Minneapolis had been Jim's friends, so I lost them in the divorce. There was no one who would want to see me, except maybe Robin and Michael, two young poets from the Wednesday night poetry readings I had stumbled onto just before I left. Robin and I had become literary colleagues, and through the quiet winter in Michigan, we had

continued to write to each other and share poems. I wrote to him that I was coming back to Minneapolis. He wrote back that he would meet me at the station.

The bus pulled into downtown Minneapolis on the first day of June in the midst of a tornado warning. The air was hot and tense and the sky was dark at noon. Fierce winds blasted the city, tearing at flapping street signs, and traffic lights swung back and forth precariously above the streets. Everything was closed for Memorial Day weekend, and people had taken shelter from the storm. The Nicollet Mall was empty.

Robin and Michael showed up at the Greyhound station in a borrowed pickup truck to collect and transport me and my belongings to wherever I was going. I didn't know where.

"The YWCA I guess." Instead they took me to Robin's place. Robin's ramshackle little house was across the street from the Triangle Bar at the corner of Cedar and Riverside, the starting-point of the thriving enclave of alternative lifestyle counterculture, called by outsiders "the hippie ghetto."

I camped in my sleeping bag on Robin's living room floor for a week while he and his friends helped me find an apartment. I had returned to a city I'd never known before. I landed on the West Bank of the Mississippi River, a place where people were extraordinarily happy discovering life in unconventional ways. In 1969 it was an enclave of artists and poets and musicians, a glorious place to be, and I fell, innocent and ignorant, right into the pulsing teeming midst of it. Like a child in her first experience of the ocean, astonished but fearless, I waded right in, and it felt good.

For the first time in my life I could *own myself* entirely, and never mind that I had gotten here because somebody threw me away. *That girl was somebody else, not me. This was Me being*

Me. This was new, and it was intoxicating.

It was the time of the love-not-war revolution. Free love and flower children populated the West coast, and middle-America was barely a half-step behind. The people of the West Bank welcomed me, and that was the beginning.

In a couple of weeks my new friends had found a place for me, a little house at 606 19th Avenue South. The place was meant to be mine, an old wood-frame farmhouse that the city had grown up around without noticing, run-down and derelict with peeling paint and loose nails. Not valuable enough to merit repairs, but it was clean and dry and I could paint the inside any way I wanted. It was perfect. There was an upstairs apartment, but its floors were sagging so badly that it was unsafe to rent, so I had the whole house to myself. I paid \$60 a month. It was *my place*. *Mine*. I liked the sound of that word. It was one I had not used for so many years.

The tornado had not touched down in Minneapolis after all, it went out to the suburbs and subsided, as they usually do. This was just life's little show to welcome me back, to mark my leap-without-a-net from the past into the future.

Starting again fresh and rested, I fell effortlessly into an unexpected and unimagined way of life that would be a daily wide-eyed adventure. I was about to discover a new world.

The First of June

Yesterday was May
and I was in Michigan.
The sun remembers
the day-shape of me,
laid out on the lakeshore

flattening the grass,
and the white heat
still holds the imprint
of my slow passing
through heavy air.
Perhaps pin-hole stars
will peer out tonight
to look for my silent
shadow walking,
but will not find it
there.

I had an innocence that protected me and a new faith in life that had showed up all on its own. The future was wide open with no endings in sight, it was all beginnings. Each new day, life was full of surprise and uncertainty. It flowed out ahead of me like a river, and I was willing to go wherever it would take me.

Your thoughts are welcomed. [Comments](#)

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