

Maria Kat: A Trilogy
by Carolyn Marie Mamchur

Part One: Crow Girl

Chapter One: The Strap

I held out my hand and waited. I looked away not wanting her to see the fear as the strap fell towards my hand.

It would be one slap, that's all. Just you and the nun and the strap. That's all there ever was if you were a girl. If you were male, the strap fell in direct relationship to the enormity of the crime. If you were a male, it was always delivered publicly.

But it didn't matter if a girl chewed gum, said a swear word, wore a sleeveless blouse, missed mass, the punishment was exactly the same.

The strap was hard and shaped like a large black tongue. In actuality, it was a tail, a beaver's tail.

The strap fascinated and horrified me. But worse, it made me sad. I couldn't help but imagining the live beaver once attached to that tail. I couldn't help imagining him young and playful helping his mother and father and uncle and aunts build a dam. I couldn't help but give him a name. Henry. Henry, the beaver.

I could smell the dampness in the moist earth, the fresh pine of the forest. I could imagine being that young beaver and growing up safe and happy and trustful.

And then she enters the woods, Sister Stanislaus. She is as she is now, almost six feet tall, with small folding-in-on-themselves shoulders and wide hips. The full heavy skirt of her nun's habit accentuates those hips and they have a life of their own as they thrust past you as the nun makes her way along the small aisle, desks and students on either side, those huge hips hitting elbows, knocking over inkwells, spilling slippery scribbles to the floor.

In my mind, those hips forge their way into the forest, taking down shrub, bumping into the trunks of white birch trees, peeling the bark, bruising the flesh of both tree and woman. The bruising gets her angry and as her anger mounts her determination to get a beaver's tail to use as a strap on her grade six/seven class of misbehaviors grows more fierce.

She carries huge scissors in her hand. She finds Henry sleeping on a dry log. He is lying on his back, his four paws sticking out and up, as animals do when in total comfort. His

long strong nails are a deep chocolate brown and gleam as though they have been polished.

She reaches out and grabs his belly, soft and warm in the afternoon sun. He opens his eyes, surprised, and goes to slap his black tail used as a warning signal to all other beavers when snip, she slices through that tail with those kitchen scissors strong and sharp enough to snap a chicken's bone, a lobster's back, a beaver's tail.

As I see the scissors reach for the tail, as I imagine the fear in Henry's eyes, I scream, "Stop!" I scream it so loud she does. She stops.

I was back in the room then, the little closet where she strapped the bad ones. I was all alone with her, my hand in hers, the strap poised and she stopped.

I realized I was looking straight into her eyes and I realized, too, I was staring at her with an awful anger for the misery, the cruelty of a young beaver having to live forever without a tail, forever off balance, forever with no warning signal, forever different and forever afraid.

For a moment I wanted to kill her.

"Why?" I began to ask, meaning, "Why did you do such a thing?"

"Why?" she snarled back. I became afraid of the snarl. I began to falter.

"How could you?" meaning of course, "How could you be so cruel to that defenseless beaver?" but she thought it was all about me. Me and her strapping me.

She crashed the strap down onto the small table where we were allowed to sit until our scalding tears were swallowed and the quivering pain in our hands began to change to a scalding swell of soreness and bruising.

She grabbed me by the ear, another punishing technique for which the nuns in the convent I attended were famous, and pulled me towards the office of Mother Superior.

I was more terrified of Mother Superior than I was of Sister Stanislaus. Mother Superior and I had had many a chat. Mostly about my mother whom Mother Superior considered to be a wicked woman, a grievous sinner, bound straight for hell.

The sin which had damned my mother to burn forever without the possibility of escape is that she had divorced my father and was dating other men. For this she cannot be forgiven. Unless of course, she stopped dating. This, my mother was unlikely to do.

She is very beautiful and a fantastic dancer. She owned fourteen pairs of high heel shoes and went dancing every Friday night, always wearing one pair of those high heel shoes, always with a handsome partner to move her around the dance hall floor.

To imagine my mother sitting alone all weekend, those shoes sitting unused in the closet was so ridiculous I knew it would never happen.

Mother Superior was convinced those shoes were a sure sign of my mother's wickedness and so I no longer even tried to explain about the shoes, and how she loved to dance. About how hard she worked, on her feet in the hospital all day, and soaked the feet at night in Epson salts, and changed her work shoes in mid shift. She has beautiful legs and beautiful feet and she takes good care of them.

Only once did my mother come to the school. It was a special day when all the parents were invited to see us perform various hymns we had been practicing for Easter Sunday. Because my mother was a day nurse, she arranged to have the day off to come to the school to hear me sing. She traded with a night nurse and it was quite a big deal. Schedules are very important in a hospital.

The class had been practicing and going to church a lot. It was Lent, a time of mourning and sacrifice. All the plaster sculptures of Jesus called the Stations of the Cross, which depicted his crucifixion, were covered in a beautiful purple velvet. You could see some of the outlines of the figurines and I used to imagine them moving about, alive. It kind of spooked me.

I dreaded Lent. Lots of kneeling and praying arms outstretched. And so much talk of death, of torture, of nails going into Jesus' hand, thorns into his forehead. Stories of his begging for water and being given vinegar.

I wept all through Lent. It was just too sad. I didn't mind giving up candy and Saturday matinees. I couldn't do enough to pay Jesus back for having died for me. I even tried drinking vinegar for three days, but it made me throw up so badly we had to call the doctor. It seems I have a very acidic stomach and drinking vinegar was not the brightest thing to do. I had made a small hole in the lining of my stomach. I have to eat Tums all the time.

Mom and the doctor wanted to know why I had done it, but how do you explain such a thing. Mom watched my eating habits for a while, but she eventually forgot about it. She didn't have to worry, I wasn't about to substitute vinegar for water ever again.

It was during Lent, not long after the vinegar incident that Mom arrived to watch me and my classmates sing. Mother Superior had a remarkable soprano voice and she loved to teach music. It gave her a chance to sing her mean old heart out. It was the only time her

face looks peaceful. She taught music in all the grades. And when we performed, she would come to conduct and take the credit due her. It was probably her one sin of pride. That beautiful voice and her ability to teach others to sing.

So, in trotted Mom. She was alone, of course, no dad, and thank God, no boyfriend, which you'd better believe, would be worse than no dad.

She was wearing a red suit with a tight black patent leather belt, matching patent leather shoes and a pillbox hat. The shoes were so shiny you could see your reflection in them and I knew Mom had bought them for this occasion.

She looked smashing. I looked over at Sister Stanislaus to see if she noticed how great my Mom looked.

She noticed all right and she was not pleased. She was staring right at Mom and Sister Stanislaus was scowling. Her jaws were clamped tight and her cheeks were making that small motion that happens when she is biting down on the skin inside her cheek.

I know she does it because I do it too. I do it when I'm worried. I have a little ridge on either side of the inside of my cheeks from doing it so often. I imagine Sister Stanislaus has those ridges, too.

Mother Superior was staring, too. The softness had left her face. She glanced at Sister Stanislaus.

Mom noticed the nuns glaring at her. She shifted her weight from one shoe to the next. She sat on one of the seats set out for the parents. I knew she'd intended to go over and speak to my teacher and I knew, too, the glare has unnerved my mother so much that she would not go over.

I knew that my mother would leave before the concert is over. And she did.

I saw her empty chair and I knew my mother has left feeling full of shame. Sister Stanislaus said in a loud voice, in front of all my classmates, in front of many of the parents, "Who was that woman who came wearing red during Lent? Does anyone know who that woman was?"

I was afraid to say it is my mother. I wanted to, but my throat was dry and the words got stuck. Sister Stanislaus was looking right at me. She knew it was my mother, the sinner, the divorcee who dances at night with strange men and who comes to her daughter's school during Lent wearing red.

"Mine, she was my mother."

Sister Stanislaus turned her head with a jerk. She clenched her teeth hard down onto the soft ridge of skin inside her cheek.

The words had not come from me. The voice was not mine. It belonged to my friend's brother, Dickey La Fleure. His mother would never come to such an event. She worked all day at Kresge's selling sewing notions and stays up most of the night sewing suits and wedding gowns to be sold in Aaron's Clothing Store.

She works hard. She has to. Dickey whose real name is Roger, is the youngest of seven brothers and sisters. His dad was shell shocked in the war and can't keep a job. He works the odd day here and there but mostly he worries and cries and talks to himself. He also drinks a lot of beer. He gives sips to Dickey and to me whenever we want. We love him.

Everyone looked at Dickey. Sister Stanislaus knew the woman in the red suit wasn't his mother. We all knew it. And we all knew she had known whose mother the red suit belonged to.

But she had asked the question and now she was caught in the lie.

"Well, well, she shouldn't have," Sister Stanislaus mumbled, no longer looking at Dickey or anyone.

"I'll be sure to tell her, Sister," Dickey said with that sincerely impish grin he couldn't resist wearing. "I'll be sure to tell her." He had to repeat it.

I cringed. I knew Dickey would pay dearly for that lie. It was not one this nun could overlook. And I knew from that day on I would love Dickey La Fleure forever.

I was remembering all this as Sister Stanislaus dragged me toward Mother Superior's office. Sister Stanislaus knocked on the door which bore, in big black block letters that had been painted on permanently, the words, 'Mother Superior'.

"In," said the voice. A soft voice, not crisp and clear, as one would expect from the school's most powerful and feared woman. This voice almost always whispered. It never repeated itself. It didn't have to. Everyone listened.

In we went, the aggrieved nun and the damned child.

"Maria wants to know why I have to strap her. I thought I should tell you."

Mother Superior smiled, she nodded her head, just a little, the headpiece hardly moving. It was her signal to continue.

“Maria fainted in church this morning,” Sister Stanislaus began. For a moment Mother Superior looked almost puzzled.

I always faint in church. Any time I receive Holy Communion. It had actually endeared me to most of the nuns. It was proof that God was more powerful than the devil. I fainted because I was so excited over receiving the Holy Sacrament.

Well, also, I was born with very low blood pressure and can faint fairly easily. It’s not such a good thing. You can bust your head wide open if you aren’t careful.

In church, it’s almost impossible for me to not faint. Just think about it. Off to mass, first thing in the morning with no food in your stomach. Or water. None after midnight. It’s like going for an operation. Only it isn’t, it’s church.

Actually, I love church. I love almost everything about it. I love the mass in Latin; I love the priest in golden robes, the mosaic tiles on the walls, the painted vaulted ceilings, the statues of Mary and Joseph and my patron saint, Saint Teresa. I love the smell of the incense as the priest lifts the silver vessels dangling on long links of silver chain, clanking out the sound and smell of incense. I love the choir and the organ swelling the church with sacred song. I love the stained glass windows telling stories of biblical times, the altar boys in white starched tunics. I love it all, but most of all, I love the host, the papery wafer that once blessed and dipped in the Holy Wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ.

The incense signals the time for Holy Communion. The priest goes to the altar, enters the tabernacle, removes the golden chalice and turns, holding a host for us to see and one by one we come to the communion rail to receive.

When it is my turn, I tremble. My hands become clammy. I kneel, I open my mouth, close my eyes, my tongue accepts the host.

I close my mouth. I return to the pew, not swallowing, keeping the host whole and safe on my warm tongue. My mouth is too dry to swallow. I kneel. I summon juice into my mouth, enough, only enough to swallow. I curl the host with my tongue.

And He is in me, in my body, his Body and Blood, is in me and I faint.

The Stations of the Cross whirl past me, the dark oak pew reaches up to meet my sweaty forehead and I am out.

It's been happening for years. Ever since my First Communion. In grade one, Sister Loretta always sat next to me, to catch me as my face hit the heavy wood.

Sister Loretta was everything a nun should be. She loved God, she loved life, she loved teaching young children, and she loved me.

She'd haul me down the aisle, past curious eyes, out into the rectory if it were winter, or out to the back lawn if weather permitted.

I preferred the lawn. It was really the back yard of the Bishop's Palace and it was home to twelve crabapple trees. In spring it smelled like my mother's best perfume, Sweetpea.

Sister Loretta would wait until I opened my eyes. She would help me to slowly sit up, not too fast and she would hand me one saltine cracker and a paper-thin slice of cheddar cheese.

"Just nibble," she would say and she'd leave me alone with my cracker and paper thin cheese and she'd go back to the mass.

It was such a ritual. Sister Loretta became the one who hauled me out in grade two and three. By this time, no one really noticed. It was expected.

Grade Five/Six was a little different. I was bigger and heavier and Sister Loretta needed help hauling me. Sister Stanislaus, of course, being my teacher, was the natural person to help her.

No more cracker and razor thin cheese, no more pale white hand holding me back from the unforgiving pew. Sister Stanislaus resented my nuisance fainting. She didn't like the way Sister Loretta described the intensity of my experience with Holy Communion.

But no one would have guessed she'd strap me for it. Not even Mother Superior. In fact, I know Sister Loretta had mentioned the fact that Sister Stanislaus let my head hit the pew, and Mother Superior had reprimanded her because for a few times, I felt her hand move toward me, but never, never, in time.

And now Sister Stanislaus was going to strap me for fainting when I received the Body and Blood of Christ in me.

"And?" said Mother Superior, her voice still the softness of silk.

"And so did the boy, Dickey La Fleure!" Sister Stanislaus's tongue stuck out a bit in emphasis as she waited. Mother Superior rose from her desk. She nodded that barely there nod which gave Sister Stanislaus permission to continue.

“We’d just dragged this one out and down he went.”

“Trickster!” whispered Mother Superior.

“I took him outside, next to this one, to find out what she’d say. To find out if she was in on it.”

The nod again.

“Nothing.” Sister Stanislaus said. “I pushed him down, pretending to go along with it. He fell, pretended to fall and then I saw it. Saw what she had done.”

What had I done? What were they talking about? I remember Dickey brushing against me as he fell. I remember the nun dragging him away. I knew she was slapping him from the yelps and grunts and hand hitting head. But what? What else?

Sister Stanislaus reached over and pulled up my pleated navy skirt. Mother Superior gasped in horror. She slapped me hard.

“Get her out of here.” She said.

I wanted to die. I wanted to disappear. I was not wearing any underpants. My mother had washed the clothes and hung them on the clothesline and it had rained before they had time to dry.

I had slipped the wet underpants on before school hoping they would dry as I walked the six blocks down Fifteenth Street to the Sacred Heart Cathedral adjacent to the convent, where church and school met.

But they hadn’t. I was sure if I sat down in them, they would dampen my skirt. It would look as though I had wet myself. In the bathroom, I’d rolled them in three paper towels and thrown them in the wastebasket.

Somehow, she had seen. Somehow, in the fainting, in the dragging, in Dickey’s falling, somehow, my skirt had lifted and she had seen.

And perhaps Dickey had seen. I had made him sin.

All of the girls knew it was our fault if boys sinned. Our skirts could never show a knee; our blouses never an elbow or a collar bone. Knees and elbows and collarbones could throw boys into great bouts of sinning.

Even dancing could do it. Especially dancing. The kind my mother did. And now I had proven to be my mother's daughter.

"She'll call your mother in," Sister Stanislaus promised.

Once again the beaver's tail rose. But this time it wasn't just Sister Stanislaus who was going to witness my shame. I was to be struck publicly, in front of the class, three times. No girl had ever been struck publicly and never more than once.

She held my hand loosely in place. I was afraid I might wet myself. I was afraid she might lift my skirt, expose me to everyone. I was afraid of what horrid things Mother Superior might right now be saying to my mother.

I could imagine my mother's embarrassment, her discomfort at having to come in, to accept the blame for my disgrace. I imagined the trouble she'd encounter trying to get time off to come and not wanting to and being shamed. I could imagine her getting angry and defending me and taking me out of school.

I needed to think of something else. I decided to remember the lawn. I could hear the sounds of spring. I could almost smell the blossoms on the crab apples and the fresh cut grass where I had lain just hours before. Bees buzzed in the Crab apple blossoms.

I imagined so hard I could no longer feel Sister Stanislaus, I could no longer see the strap or sense the class.

I heard the bee buzz. It buzzed loudly, near my ear. I opened my eyes. It was a bee. A real bee. A huge bumblebee. It hovered over my small hand and stung Sister Stanislaus on the thumb.

The sting made her flinch. Just as the big strap came down with all its might, the thumb flinched, knocking my hand aside.

The beaver tail struck the nun a vicious blow on the thumb and fingers. She screamed in surprised pain. She threw the strap across the room as if it were the thing that had stung her, a live thing that had hit her. As if she had not hit herself.

"Sit down," she screamed at me. When I passed Dickey's chair he gave me a little wink. I blushed. And unexplainably, I felt like lifting my skirt and giving him a flash. I can't believe I felt like that. But I did.

That was long ago. In a time when you hung wash out on a line, when you listened to the radio instead of watched television and the milkman brought milk to the door.

I had just turned twelve, but I remember the day, every moment of it. It was the first time I experienced the power that imagination and concentration can give you.

I didn't realize it that day. I had to have several experiences with such power before I recognized it for what it was.

That year, just before my thirteenth birthday, was the year the power became mine.

Chapter Two: The War

Once you know you have something, you're very aware of it. I guess I've had this ability to make things happen for a long time. I simply didn't know it.

When I think back, perhaps the first time it happened, I was about four years old. My mother and I had come to the farm to help my Grandmother die. My mother was a good nurse and had a way of taking care of you when you were sick that made you feel safe no matter what was happening to you.

My grandmother loved having us around her. It was a special time for all of us, sad of course, but also wonderful. My grandmother had the magic ability to speak with animals. She loved animals and always had them near her. She had, at that time, a crow, black bear, a large tortoise, a canary named Billy who could dance, and a young Moose. All moved freely from the barn to the yard to the kitchen and her bedroom.

The only room in which they were not allowed was the living room which was home to a beautiful hand tied rug from China. The rug was a gift from the cook who had lived with and worked for my Grandfather before he lost all his money in the crash of 1930. My Grandfather was so upset he left Saskatchewan to remake his fortune in Brazil and never returned.

Grandmother always believed he would return rich and as handsome as he had been the day he left her sitting alone in her kitchen. No one else believed it. Some said he had remarried. Others said he died in a fire. It was all speculation.

I knew he was dead. I had seen him in a knife fight. It was a dream, but I knew it to be true. I never told my Grandmother. I never told anyone. My dreams were not for anyone but me. Who would believe them anyway?

Besides surrounding herself with hope and animals, my grandmother also surrounded herself with flowers. Her favorite was the lily, especially Liliun Madonna. The lily was pure white and because it liked to be planted deeply, it survived Saskatchewan's bleak winter.

I spent most of my time in my grandmother's huge bed which smelled of the baby powder that my mother sprinkled on the sheets. Under the sheet, she had put a large blanket made of real sheepskin. My mother was a genius at preventing bedsores and though my grandmother had been confined to her bed for months, her skin was smooth and soft and healthy.

On my grandmother's bed was a large soft quilt made of what looked like large cloth buttons. Grandmother had made the quilt out of the dresses worn by her children when

they were in grade six. She called the quilt “grade six” and pointed out who’d worn what. As she pointed out the various buttons, she told me what she called the “unusual” stories about my aunts and uncles and about my mother.

She told me that in grade six, my mother did three things that were unusual. She played the Star Spangled Banner on the violin, she decorated the wedding cake for my aunt’s wedding and she developed a lifelong affection for smoking cigars.

Grandmother had twelve of those quilts, one for each year. My Uncle Joe was not in “grade twelve”. Though he was thought to be the smartest of her children, he never graduated high school. He’d fallen in love with a trapezist when he was in grade eleven. She taught him to catch her when she swung like an angel from swing to swing. Had my Uncle Joe graduated, I think that would have been the unusual thing for that year that marked my Uncle Joe’s individuality. We were a family that celebrated individuality.

One day my grandmother was too tired to continue with the storytelling. She looked out the window and sighed. Her favorite Madonna lily was in bud. “I’d love to see that lily bloom,” she said. Then she laughed. “And I’d like to eat a dill pickle.”

My grandmother was on a diet of thin porridge or clear soup. “A pickle is out of the question,” Mother said when I told her about Grandmother’s wish for one.

I was only four at the time, but I knew where the pickles were kept in a huge crock in the basement. I was a bit afraid of the basement. It was dark and smelled of earth. It also smelled of death, of parsnips, and it housed creatures that moved quickly when you came near. Creatures that I never quite saw, just sensed, or caught a quick glimpse of. There were beetles and spiders, mice and lizards. Grandmother said they were afraid of me and not to mind them. But I had never ever gone down there without the protective presence of Grandmother or Mother.

That day, I would have to do it alone. I held my breath and walked as quietly as I could down the stairs. I saw the big crock in a dark sunless corner. I knew there would be creatures near by. I tried a little prayer to the creatures. I promised not to hurt them. Promised just to take this one pickle for my grandmother who loved them and loved me too and would not want me to be hurt. I think I told them my grandmother would come down and scold them if they frightened me. But it wasn’t a fervent prayer, not one that would stop any lizard or any beetle, not any spider or mouse, because I knew my grandmother would never walk down those stairs again.

I prayed anyway as I snuck down the stairs, walked across the dark, damp earthen floor, pushed off the heavy wooden lid and lifted out one fat pickle.

Then I marched to the garden, picked the lily with its bud tightly closed like the eyes of a newborn kitten and put it in the water jug next to her bed. Grandmother ate the pickle. The whole thing.

Mother was furious with what I had done. She wept in frustration. She was sure Grandmother would have a terribly upset stomach and worse, would never see that lily bloom. It was the only lily in bud in the garden.

I said nothing. I stared at the lily bud and imagined it blooming. I fell asleep next to Grandmother cuddled under the quilt named “grade six”. Grandmother fell asleep, too. She snored lightly. We both woke as the sun began to warm the room. Light played on the rose petal wallpaper my grandmother loved.

We both turned toward the window, and we both noticed it at the same time. The lily was blooming. The tight bud had opened in the night. My grandmother died a few hours later. I knew she wanted to be alone for a while as her spirit circled the house and chose the moment to leave.

I stood by the door and opened my arms and legs. I was going to be a gate, a gate protecting my grandmother from any visitors, and there were many, who had been coming each day to pay their respects.

“My grandmother is sleeping,” I said. She looked as though she were sleeping. Finally I felt her leave and I called my mother. “Grandmother is gone,” I said, because she was.

How do you remember something that happened almost ten years ago, when you were such a young kid? I don’t know. But I do. I remember every moment of it. I can even smell the room, the lily blooming, the baby powder my grandmother dusted her soft warm body with.

That might have been the first time I willed something to be. A lily blooming before its time. But I didn’t think about it. It happened often, but the first time I really noticed it was when I locked Betty Lou Moker into a locker.

I was still feeling deeply in love with Dickey LaFleur. He was my secret love. I worshipped him from the back row where the nun put me since I was so tall. I loved him ever since he told Sister Stanislaus that it had been his mother who had worn the red dress during Lent.

Dickey, she had put right in front of her because he rarely behaved.

It was close to the end of the school year and we had just had our school pictures taken. We all received our packages containing ten small snapshots, two middle sized 4x6

photos and one 8x11. That 8x11 we always gave to our mother for birthday, Mother's Day, or Christmas, depending upon what holiday fell when. The 4x6s were for special friends. There were envelopes for all the photos, all in the respective sizes.

We opened our packages and peered at the photos and grimaced and mocked and proclaimed them awful. We stuffed them back into the package and pretended they were no big deal.

The bell rang for recess. I walked past Dickey's desk slowly. My heart always raced when I walked by his desk. I tried not to bump into his desk. I was so aware of my gawky long ungainly body when I was near him.

He reached up and tugged at my sweater. I froze. He tugged again. I looked down. He gave me a great grin and handed me an envelope. The envelope had my name printed on it.

I took the envelope and walked out of the classroom barely able to breathe.

I went straight to the bathroom and locked myself in the stall. I sat on the toilet seat and stared at the envelope. I was almost afraid to open it.

The bell rang. I hadn't opened it in time. I returned to the classroom and opened it during science period.

When I did, Dickey's mischievous grin stared up at me. He had signed it, "Love, Dickey".

"Love, Dickey." "Love, Dickey."

I didn't hear a word Sister Stanislaus said about how acids digest food in your stomach. I don't remember walking home. I don't remember eating supper. I showed no one the picture. I hid it in my sweater drawer. I didn't sleep all night. I was so excited my heart raced. "Love, Dickey", Love, love, love."

My euphoria lasted for three days. And then it was Friday. On Friday, we always had an hour of "performance!" Performance meant we had to do something. It could be singing a song, or reciting a poem, any public performance. We always had performance with our drama teacher, Sister Agnes. We weren't afraid to perform for her. She never criticized us. She enjoyed being with us and we could tell. Once she even told us her real name, Marie. Can you believe that, Marie, the same as mine.

Dickey got up. He sang a song, a love song. "I met my little brown eyed gal, down by the riverside," he sang. He looked right at me as he sang. Sister Agnes looked as if she

might want to run out of the room. Sister Agnes was very shy, and very kind. She knew anything to do with sex was a sin and she was supposed to prevent anything sinful from happening in her class. But she would rather have ignored it. She didn't want to even think about it. Her face was red. I blushed, too. When Dickey was finished, he sat down with a flourish.

At recess, I overheard Betty Lou bragging. "He was singing to me," she insisted.

I was astonished. How could she think that?

"How do you know?" challenged Betty Lou's friend Magdalene. Magdalene had a crush on Dickey, too.

Betty Lou pulled out a photograph. It was 4x6. It had a signature. "Love, Dickey".

"Love, Dickey."

I waited for Betty Lou after school. She was getting her sweater and lunch pail out of her locker. I came up behind her. I didn't say a word. I just pushed her in, slammed shut the door and turned the combination lock. Without thinking, I turned the lock. I hesitated then. Only then, did I think, "what might the combination be?" I had no idea. I didn't want to ask Betty Lou. I was sure she hadn't been aware of who had shoved her in. It had all happened so fast.

I walked home. On the way, I passed Dickey's house as I always did. It was a three-bedroom bungalow, ordinary as could be, in the middle of the street, only all the windows were boarded up. It looked like an abandoned warehouse with those old 2x4s nailed across every window in the place. It was Mr. La Fleure's idea of protecting the family. The war had made him feel that the family needed protecting.

I wanted to walk right past the house. The last person I wanted to see was Dickey and his grinning mug.

Mr. La Fleure was sitting on the front step, smoking a pack of camels his brother in the States sent him on a regular basis. Camels were his favorite things to smoke. He was also drinking beer, Bohemian. Bohemian was his favorite beer just as Camels were his favorite smokes. And baloney and white bread and ketchup was his favorite sandwich.

I knew all these things because I used to hang out with Dickey's older sister Florence. We had spent a lot of time together trying to make fudge that wasn't hard as a rock or runny as molasses. We had tasted the perfect fudge at the fair and we wanted to make some ourselves.

We never succeeded, but we tried for almost a year. Mr. La Fleure was one of our chief taster and chief adviser. “A bit runny, ladies,” he’d say. Or “A bit hard, a bit sugary.” “But sure tastes like fudge.” We’d spoon it out or chip it out and eat it all anyway.

Then Florence got her period and I became much too young to play with. But Mr. La Fleure still liked me. I was sad about not being there to make fudge with Florence. I liked Florence, and it gave me a chance to be around Dickey.

That day, the day I was so furious about Dickey’s giving that picture to Betty Lou and her thinking that he had sung to her, that day that I had pushed her in the locker, I was glad Florence and I were no longer trying to make fudge that looked and felt like the fudge at the fair.

But when I walked by, my cheeks burning, thinking so hard about what I had done, Mr. Fleure waved at me, motioned for me to join him.

We sat together just watching the kids go home from school until all had passed by and darkness began to fill the sky. From time to time I took a swig of his beer. Quite a few swigs. Actually, I got quite drunk.

I was a bit worried that Dickey might show up, but he didn’t. I was a bit worried about something else, too. What in the world was happening to Betty-Lou? Was she still in the locker? Had anyone found her?

I could imagine her in there with her stinky gym clothes. I could imagine how small and dark the space was.

Mr. La Fleure looked down at me. It was as if he were reading my mind. “I been in a tight spot,” he said. “In the trenches.”

I’d heard him talk of the war before. Bits and pieces of it, guns, blood, bones, the sounds of men who were angry or afraid. Of young men who were dying.

“I’d been in there all night. Freezing cold. My feet hadn’t been dry for weeks. I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up, I wasn’t alone. Another soldier was in the foxhole with me.

I pictured a trench as he’d talked. I pictured a long ditch full of muddy water, cold and smelling like the lizard cages at the zoo. Now suddenly he was describing a foxhole. I couldn’t follow the story. I was frightened.

Mr. La Fleure took hold of my skinny shoulder. He gripped me hard as the soldier had gripped him.

The soldier was German, about the same age as Mr. La Fleure had been back then, about eighteen years old.

“He was just a boy,” Mr. La Fleure said. He let go of my shoulder. His eyes filled with tears.

We sat in silence for a long while, Mr. La Fleure remembering, me thinking about Betty Lou.

“What did you do?” I finally asked. Mr. La Fleure reached over into his case of beer and opened one bottle with another bottle, using the cap as an opener. I loved the way he could do that without spilling a drop.

“I don’t remember,” he said. “I just can’t seem to remember.”

“Deciding is hard”, I said.

Then he looked down at me. “What are you going to do?”

“About what?” He surprised me. I had been thinking about Betty Lou pretty hard. Maybe I’d been thinking out loud. I wasn’t sure.

“Whatever you’re so worried about,” he said. “You should see your face.”

I loved that Mr. LaFleur could tell I was worried by looking at my face. My mom was like that, too. So was sister Agnes. I hoped I was like that myself. It was a good thing to be like.

“I guess I’d better do something,” I said.

“I think so.”

He drained the beer in one long swallow, just opening his throat and letting the liquid flow. He stopped just before the bottle was empty, saving the last sip for me.

“A dark place is a bad place to be.” I wasn’t sure which one of us said that. We both had dark places to think about.

He turned and walked into the house leaving me with my decision. I wanted to cry.

Chapter Three: The Fair

I didn't go back to the school. I went home. Home wasn't all that much fun that year. My Mom's latest boyfriend, Dan, had moved in with us.

Dan was an all right guy. He was a great dancer, though his foot had been crushed in a mining accident and all that was left was a heel, really. But he wore strong leather lace up boots and packed the toe with cotton. He danced up a storm with my mother every Friday night.

No, Dan wasn't the problem. The problem was his son, my new "step-brother", Arnold.

Arnold was fifteen, tall, blonde and mean. He scared me to death.

I went straight to my room and lay on my bed. I wanted to avoid Arnold. I needed to concentrate. I remembered with sudden and breath-taking clarity how I had imagined the bee biting Sister Stanislaus and how I had saved myself from the strap.

I knew what I had to do.

I pictured Betty Lou in the locker. I pictured the locker door. I tried to imagine the dials on the padlock moving, moving to ten, fifteen, then back down to ten.

But since I didn't know the combination of the locker, it didn't help much to imagine the dial moving.

Then I imagined the janitor forgetting something in the gym, going in there to fetch it, hearing Betty Lou yelling and pounding her bruised fists against the metal frame.

I imagined him telling her not to worry he'd get her out. He kept all the combinations to all the lockers in his supply room.

I imagined him walking away, getting the combination, shuffling back to the gym, wheezing a bit as he hurried back to Betty Lou somehow trapped inside that locker.

I imagined him turning the dial, opening the door, helping her out. She'd be all stiff and frightened. She'd have been crying. Her eyes would be puffy, her clothes sweaty. Her bangs would be plastered to her forehead.

And that's pretty well how it happened. I heard about it over and over again at school for weeks after that. Who was the awful mystery person who had pushed her in? Who would do such a thing and why? Wasn't it lucky the janitor had come along?

Imagining the janitor getting Betty Lou out of the locker made me so tired I fell asleep. I didn't hear Arnold come into my room. He'd been sent to see why I'd missed supper, to see if I wanted a snack.

Mom had made some ham sandwiches. Arnold had one on a plate, with a cup of herbal tea and honey. I didn't like herbal tea. It always reminded me of medicine, but Mom insisted it was good for the digestion. And my digestion was always a thing to worry about.

Arnold put the plate and tea on the bedstead. Then he snuck behind the head rest and reached down, his hands over my head. He gave the bed a hard kick.

I jumped and he grabbed my hair giving me such a start, I began to choke. I'm a border line asthmatic and tend to choke very easily.

This tickled Arnold no end. "Brought you a sandwich, Crow Girl," he said. He rarely called me by my name when we were away from Mom or Dan.

It was always "Crow Girl", or "Caw Caw". There were a lot of crows around Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. They would sometimes come to our yard, or follow me to school. I liked to chat with them. I had learned to imitate the sound of a crow and if I cawed up a storm, lots would come to see what all the fuss was about. I loved that.

Arnold knew this about me. Thus the name, "Crow Girl". I rather liked the name. I just didn't like the way Arnold said it. He also called me Cat Girl, because our last name was Kat, and of course, Cat, Kitten, Kitty, were all names he could use. Those weren't too effective, either. Lots of people called me Kat for short. I thought it was a great name. I started signing my name Kat, for short.

Arnold knew all this, but he hadn't come up with a better name yet. He tried. He had once called me "Chickie", or "Chicken", or "Cluck Cluck". My grandmother's last name was Hackle and Arnold loved to taunt me by saying, "Hackle, Hackle can you cackle?" I guess he figured chickens cackle and that's how he got those names he used for me.

He didn't use them around my mom though. Making fun of her mother's name would have been something Mom would not have tolerated. Not for a moment.

I hated the chicken names. Like my mother, I couldn't stand anything that mocked my grandmother. Also, I was terrified of chickens. My uncle Henry had chickens on the farm. They'd be scratching about the yard whenever we'd go to visit. I didn't want to get out of the car. I didn't want to step into their world.

It was an awful world, I thought. A world of picking the dirt, foraging for bugs or seeds, flying up in a surprise of noisy feathers and squawking. Not cackling. I'd never heard a chicken cackle.

The worst part was that there was always one chicken who skirted the edges of the yard, staying just a bit away from the other chickens. That chicken was always bedraggled, with feathers missing, and sometimes even an eye. And always, always, that chicken seemed fearful.

She had a right to be. The other chickens picked on her, chased her away from the food, sensed her vulnerability, her weakness. They would fly at her, attacking with beak and claw, eventually killing her.

"It's just the way with chickens," my uncle explained. But why? Why not protect, help her if she were weak?

My Uncle Henry would just roll his eyes at the silliness of a chicken protecting another chicken and he'd go out to the yard, select a good fat one with white fluffy feathers and haul her by the feet to the chopping block.

His small handled axe would slice through the air and the head would be severed, leaving much less blood than you'd imagine.

The head would roll into the dust and the other chickens would watch the head, waiting for the eye to close, waiting for all sign of life to be gone. Then they'd begin to peck at it, to steal up to it and take a peck and run away.

I'd be filled with such revulsion and pity and wonder. What were they thinking? Did they know the sacrifice of that bird had saved them, at least for today? Did they understand death? I knew they experienced fear.

"Birds don't think," Uncle Henry insisted. "Got brains the size of a dime."

But I knew they did. My grandmother's crow could think, her canary could think, and the crows I talked to on the way to school could think. When you looked into the eye of the frightened bird, you knew that chickens, too, could think.

Grandmother's crow could even say words, could find and steal and collect treasures. He had them hidden everywhere. Sometimes he'd leave me a present on my pillow. A dime, or a fountain pen. One time he left me a silver beret with the initial "M" on it.

That bird played checkers with my grandmother and he won almost as often as she did. Don't tell me birds can't think. Just look in their eyes. Look at the way they cock their heads and size up a situation.

Look at how they devour the head of one of their kind, destroying all evidence and reminder that death is just waiting for them.

I felt like a chicken when I was around Arnold, the kind of chicken other chickens picked on. So when he called me "Chicken," or "Cluck Cluck" it sent shivers in the back of my neck and between my shoulder blades, which Mom always called my wings.

It was little wonder I was afraid around Arnold. Besides calling me names and scaring me every chance he got, he would try to mess with my mind.

He'd go through my things when I wasn't there, touching them, examining them. I could sense his presence on them. I knew they'd been touched, violated. And it felt as if he'd been touching me. It felt as if I were trapped and couldn't say anything.

Sometimes he'd move my things, hide them or throw them away. He really liked to play tricks on you, confuse you, make you think you were a bit nuts. Because back then it was hard for me to tell the difference between things that were real and things I imagined, I was an easy target for Arnold.

The worst thing he ever did was to hide my gold fish bowl. I had two goldfish named Dale Evans and Roy Rogers. They were so smart. They knew exactly when I would feed them.

They'd see me coming toward them in the morning, just before I left for school. I'd be carrying their little jar of fish food. It's important not to over feed them. They don't quit eating when they're full.

"They could explode," the man at the pet store warned. I rather doubted they would actually explode, but they might feel sick.

I never took any chances. I fed them a bit in the morning and a bit at supertime.

They liked music, too. Cowboy songs. I'd put them close to the record player and put on their favorite, "Happy Trails to You" by Roy Rogers and they'd swim around the bowl as if they were dancing. That's why I named them Dale Evans and Roy Rogers.

They enjoyed a lot of things actually. They would watch the rain, for example. I'd put them right on the windowsill whenever it rained. The rain would wash down the window

and they'd be so happy. It makes sense, when you think of it. Fish do like water. It probably made them feel as if they were where they belonged. In the ocean.

One Sunday I came home from music classes and popped in to say hello to them and they weren't in their usual spot on my dresser.

I asked Mom if she'd moved them. Sometimes she'd change the water if she were in a house-cleaning mood. I liked to do that myself. I'd hold out my hand and they'd swim into my palm and I'd transfer them one by one to a bowl so that I could clean their round bowl, a crystal rose bowl that had once belonged to Grandmother.

I loved the feel of their soft silky orange bodies on my skin. And I loved how much they knew and trusted me.

If anyone else went near them, they swam away. They hated being caught in a net. Maybe it reminded them that they were in captivity. They had probably been captured in a net from some wonderful and tropical ocean.

Mom said she hadn't seen them. I checked by the record player and I checked the windowsill. Arnold was watching me. The way he was watching, so pleased, made me afraid. I felt like the chicken about to be attacked.

"Where did you hide them?" I asked.

"You're nuts," he said and went out to practice his throw. He was a star basketball player.

I searched everywhere. I was growing frantic. I could hear the basketball bouncing on the pavement, hitting the rim of the hoop, bouncing again. Over and over.

He never came in for supper. He just kept practicing. It was a hot day, in July. The evenings were warm.

I knew he had hidden my fish. I begged Mom to make him tell her where they were. They'd be hungry and scared.

Mom went out to where Arnold was practicing. I could hear mumbles of what was being said. I could hear Arnold insist he had no idea where they were. I was always moving them around, he said, as if fish listen to music or watch rain.

He never stopped practicing as he and Mom talked. "Maybe she flushed them down the toilet," he said loud enough for me to hear. Loud enough for me to worry he had.

Mom was worried he had, too. I could tell from the way she held her mouth, and from how hard she dragged on her cigarette.

She helped me look. No fish. All that night. All the next day. I was so upset I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I wouldn't go outside.

Finally, Dan came home from a business trip. He was a salesman and had to travel a lot. I heard him and Mom talking in low whispers. I heard Dan go into Arnold's bedroom. I heard shouting and one hard slap. Another one. I heard Dan drag Arnold out of bed and shove him towards my room.

Arnold stood there, in his pajamas, his face red where Dan had slapped him. Dan was standing behind him.

"I'll help you look," Arnold said. His words were tight and sharp and the look in his eyes terrified me.

Arnold went straight to a small alcove that was part of where we stored our boots in the winter. We never used it in the summer. It had one small window, high above the shoes, about eight feet from the floor.

I looked up. There they were.

"She must have put them there to get some sunshine," Arnold said. He turned and went back to his room. He didn't wait to see if they were alive.

They weren't. Dale Evans and Roy Rogers were floating with their little bellies bloated. The water smelled awful.

We didn't know if they had starved to death or died from heat exhaustion. Goldfish like to be cool. Sitting up there for three days in a South-facing window in July would have made them very warm.

I imagined their discomfort, their confusion as they were taken by Arnold, placed in a strange place, getting hungrier and hungrier, hotter and hotter.

Just thinking about it upset me so much I fainted. When I woke up, I was in my bed. Mom had already buried my fish in the garden.

That day, we planted a miniature rose to mark the grave. We said a prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep." That day, too, we drove out to the country and took home one of the pups recently born on my Uncle Henry's farm. A black cocker spaniel we named Pal.

Pal was about the size of a cat. He had long ears that tripped him when he ran. His balance was way off and he would scoot and fall and slide on the hard wood floors. His black fur was so soft, it felt more like feathers than fur. I held him in my arms all the way home and he curled up and sucked at the small soft piece of skin between my thumb and second finger. He fell asleep with his mouth on that skin.

I hoped the drive home would take a long, long time, I didn't want to ever move, to ever have his small warm body move from the crook of my arm, his warm wet mouth holding onto the little flap of skin between my thumb and finger.

I felt like a young mother. By the time we arrived home, Pal and I were a unit. We would stay a unit for my whole childhood. As I held Pal I learned that even out of bad things, sad and horrible things, can come something good and wonderful. Life has a way of doing that, and moments like this with this little puppy were teaching me that.

Nothing more was said about how my fish got on the windowsill. No one mentioned that I would never have put them in the sun, that I could never have reached up that high. Everyone knew Arnold had murdered my fish. Had left them to suffer and to die.

Things were different in our house from then on. We were all a little afraid of Arnold. No one was sure what else he might do. I avoided Arnold like the plague.

Dan had a lock installed on my bedroom door and only Mom and I had a key.

A few weeks after we brought Pal home, when I was throwing a ball for him out in the back yard, Arnold nabbed me. He took hold of my arm and twisted. "You ever squeal on me again, and your dog is dead!"

I knew he'd do it. And I knew that no one would be able to stop him.

I began to have terrible dreams. Two dreams kept returning over and over again. The first dream was about me looking after my pets. In this dream, I had many pets. I had a white Australian rabbit, a canary, a guinea pig and a large Labrador dog. All were kept in cages in the basement of our house. It was my job to keep the cages clean, to make sure the animals had food and water and were exercised.

But in the dream, I'd have forgotten about them. For weeks, they'd been caged, helpless, starving, filthy.

I'd remember just in time. I'd clean the cages, give them food, water, exercise. But they were weak, fragile. I'd feel so terrible. I'd beg their forgiveness.

And then I'd forget again. When I'd remember them the second time, they'd all be dead.

My second dream was about Arnold, about his having a terrible accident. Different things would happen to him, but always he would end up badly hurt. Or dead.

The nightmares began to creep into my daydreams. I'd be practicing my piano, or reading a book and all of a sudden Arnold would be hit by a car in my mind, or I'd be running down the stairs searching for my abandoned pets. It was awful. I couldn't tell dreams from real life. My dreams would begin to happen during the day.

Mom tried to cheer me up. She reminded me that summer always meant three things that I really loved; music classes, softball and the fair.

It was August. Baseball was in full swing. Music classes were over, but the fair had come to town.

It would be a family adventure. Arnold and I would go on the rides and we would all eat hot dogs and candy floss and candy apples and fudge and the fresh bread the Dookabors baked in clay ovens and sold by the slice. The bread was lathered with home made butter and jam. I could easily eat three thick slices.

Arnold and I headed for the house of mirrors. Our mouths were full of bread, our fingers sticky with strawberry jam, our chins smeared with freshly churned butter. We felt good.

The house of mirrors was a trick house. You were never sure what was pretend and what was real. It distorted your image, sometimes stretching you tall and skinny, sometimes pushing you short and square. The way the mirrors were arranged, your image could repeat itself at strange angles, making ten, fifteen of you.

It was kind of spooky, you'd turn around and there you were, all distorted staring at yourself and behind you were ten more of you, also staring as if you had reproduced yourself and those other pretend yous, not real yous, were sneaking up on you.

Arnold seemed not to notice. He was a bit bored by the house of mirrors. It was kid stuff and he was only there because Mom and Dan insisted we stick together.

He wasn't paying much attention to anything, just walking around, not even looking at himself when he came up behind me and I jumped. He had startled me and he knew it. I tried to pretend he hadn't. But it was too late. The little jump and the sudden opening of my eyes wide and fearful for just a second had given me away.

New interest showed on his face. The side of his lips made that little half grin that I'd learned to fear.

He chased me all over the House of Mirrors, leaping, dodging, darting, raising his arms in gestures of attack.

I grew so confused I kept bashing into the mirrors, thinking they were exits, hallways of escape.

“Where, where is out?” I cried. Arnold laughed a fake loud frightening laugh.

I worked my way further and further into the labyrinth. I grew more agitated, more helpless. I banged myself so hard into the glass my nose began to bleed.

Arnold stopped tormenting me when he saw I was bleeding. He knew I fainted easily and the last thing he wanted was to have to explain anything to Dan.

“For Christ’s sake,” he said, and pulled me out to the exit which was one turn away. He glared at me and I knew what the glare meant. I would never tell.

“She banged her nose thinking a mirror was a hallway,” he explained before anyone had a chance to ask. I nodded and blood dripped between my fingers onto my sweater.

Mom took me to the washroom and leaned my head back, putting wet paper towels behind my neck. I hated the feel of the blood trickling down my throat.

Once the bleeding stopped, Mom began to drill me. “Did Arnold hurt you?” she asked.

“No.” A muffled bloody, stuffed nose, ‘no’.

“He didn’t push you?”

“Uh, uh.”

“You’re sure?”

I nodded.

“You can tell me,” she assured. “He won’t hurt you.”

But we both knew he would.

“I’m sorry, kitten,” she said. Other people often called me Kat, but my mother, when she was feeling especially dear, called me ‘Kitten’.

Mom and I went to the agricultural exhibits. She knew I loved to see the prize pumpkins and green beans, the Dahlias and the Roses. But most of all, the animals. There were goats and sheep, there were cows and calves and the province's largest bull.

And there were the horses! I was insane for horses. They were the most beautiful creatures on earth, much more beautiful than people. Their strong bodies, sleek legs. Their shape and structure thrilled me, made me tremble.

But best of all were their eyes. You can look into the eyes of a horse and the horse will talk to you with those big brown eyes. He will tell you if he's happy or sad, tired or restless. He will tell you if he's proud or ashamed. And he will check into your eyes, to see if you understand. If he senses that you do, he will acknowledge that and there will be a connection made that is like no connection I have ever felt in any other way.

I could have stayed all the rest of the day just talking to the horses, but Dan wanted to get to the showroom to purchase a ticket. There was going to be a big draw, three major prizes, the biggest prize, first prize, was a home situated on a 3 acre lot on the outskirts of town. Second prize was a car, a black Buick. Third prize was a trip to Banff. The prizes were to be drawn at three separate times during the year.

Dan said that was stupid, a big gimmick just to drag out the advertising. But he admitted it was pretty smart. It did keep you thinking about the prizes and therefore the sponsors.

There were 100 3rd prizes. Then all the 3rd prize tickets were put into a big vat for drawing of the second prize. There were ten second prizes. And then those winners had their tickets put into the pot for the big win, the house and acreage.

Mom and I had no car. We used the bus. I liked to use the bus. You could get anywhere you wanted and you could always count on meeting someone. But I knew she'd enjoy that black Buick. I imagined Mom driving that Buick. I imagined me beside her. And for some reason we were eating ice cream cones. French vanilla. We had to eat fast so we wouldn't get melted ice cream on the new leather seats.

But you'd have to win the trip to Banff in order to win the car. I had no idea what Banff even looked like. Imagining us there was impossible.

Arnold wanted to go to the fun house again. I said no, but he grabbed my arm and away we went.

We entered the glass house, a lot like the house of mirrors, only no reflection, only glass walls that fooled you, let you bump into them, lose your balance, get all disoriented. I hated the feeling those glass rooms gave me.

He'd run in front of me, turn abrupt, as if to attack me, but there was glass between us. He'd face me, smashing his nose against the glass, distorting his face, trying to frighten me. I'd close my eyes and stand stock-still. I wouldn't look. I'd open my eyes and there he'd be in a new position, his face all angular and distorted, his nose flat, his lips pushed up revealing his teeth which looked too big for his mouth.

Arnold got bored with me standing there with my eyes closed. Finally he came up to me, gave me a push right in my stomach and I threw up.

That was the end of the fair for us. We went home before Arnold even had a chance to ride the Tilt-a-whirl. I knew I'd pay for that.

But when? How? I was nervous as I undressed, afraid he'd rush into my room, something dead or strange in his hand, something to scare or hurt me with.

I locked my door. Pal was on the bed, his tail wagging. He had been left alone while we had gone to the fair. He was telling me how glad he was that we were home. He was trying to tell me that he would protect me but I couldn't really hear what Pal was trying to tell me. I was too scared.

I slipped my nightgown over my T shirt and jeans. I was wriggling out of my shirt, getting my arms all stuck, scaring myself, panicking, afraid Arnold might break in while I was trapped in my clothes when Pal began to bark.

Chapter Four: The Dream

He was pressed against my window, there in the dark, his face all ghostly and mask-like pressed against the pane as it had been in the glass house.

His nose was pressed flat, his lip curled and teeth and gums exposed. I screamed and screamed. Mom came running. I pointed to the window, but Arnold was gone.

That night I dreamed of Arnold, of his distorted face, his flat nose. In my dream his nose had no bone in it. He could flatten it, push it from side to side. It was as if his nose were made of rubber and that was the name I called him, “rubber nose”.

When I awoke I was sweating. I hadn’t managed to get my T-shirt off under my nightgown. I could remember my dream and it was so real it was almost as if it had really happened.

At breakfast, I looked at Arnold closely, trying to detect any strangeness in his facial features. He had a bit of a bruise on his cheek where he had pressed too hard against the window, but all else appeared normal.

He was excited. There was a big baseball game happening that afternoon and Arnold was the star batter. We were all going to watch him play. It was a big game, with hard balls. Girls weren’t allowed to play.

I liked playing ball. But, softball. I tried to get the boys to use the softball instead of the hard ball. I was hoping they would let the girls play. But, no way. It was a serious game. No big soft balls. No sissy balls. And, no girls.

I had a bad feeling about the game. I was sure if we played softball it would all be ok. But how can you explain that? I didn’t try.

The sky was clear and blue as only a prairie sky can be. Arnold was up to bat. He looked taller and bigger holding that bat, the grass and sky behind him. He looked like John Wayne.

Arnold was actually taller and bigger than most kids his age. And smarter. And more handsome. He was also the strongest kid on the team. Though many feared Arnold, just as many envied him. He was good at just about everything he did. He was good at every sport he played.

Lots of the kids had been hurt by him, teased or tormented by him at some time or other. Many of them would have liked to hurt him back.

But how do you get pay back to someone stronger and smarter and bigger and meaner than you?

You don't. You just learn to take it.

Bobby Lee was the pitcher facing Arnold. Bobby Lee was a good six inches shorter than Arnold. But he had a great arm. He was a great pitcher. Some said maybe even big league material someday.

Arnold looked down at him and smiled. The smile made Bobby Lee nervous and Arnold knew that.

Bobby Lee took a deep breath and tried to steady his nerves. He cupped the ball in his hand, moved it back and forth from the glove to the hand. He shook his shoulder trying to ease the tension away.

He pulled his short, strong arm back and the ball flew away from Bobby Lee toward Arnold. It flew fast and hard and seemed to be going straight for Arnold's face.

Arnold jumped back as the ball hissed by him just missing his chin. Arnold cursed and Bobby Lee looked as though he were either going to laugh or to cry.

But, he did neither. No one was sure if it was on purpose or not. Bobby Lee was a good pitcher. Good pitchers don't usually hit their batters. I felt uneasy about the whole thing.

But Bobby Lee pitched a good game for the rest of the inning and then it was Arnold's turn to pitch. It was Bobby Lee's turn at bat. Arnold was a good pitcher, but not as good as Bobby Lee, just stronger. And a lot bigger.

Arnold held the ball loosely and like a spring the ball leapt from his hand toward Bobby Lee. Bobby Lee's mother screamed.

Bobby Lee moved forward, as if to meet the ball. He swung hard and as the bat hit the ball, Bobby Lee let go of the bat, or the bat let go of him.

The bat sailed through the air, almost slow motion and hit Arnold hard in the face.

Crack!

Arnold's face split like a coconut. Blood was everywhere, on his face, in his hair, on his shirt, his pants, on the sawdust beneath his feet.

Arnold stood still for a moment and then he fell. His legs just seemed to buckle beneath him and crumpled like an air balloon, like a huge rubber doll with a hole punched behind its knees.

Arnold stayed in hospital for three months. When he came out he had a huge scar on his forehead where the bat had struck.

And the bone in his nose had been removed. It was as if his nose were made of rubber.

Arnold wasn't mean after his accident with the bat. He was quiet, rarely talked. He spent most of his time in his room and he was afraid of the dark. He had terrible headaches and terrible dreams.

We all felt badly for Arnold, badly and relieved, which made us all feel worse, full of guilt. I felt the most guilt. I knew I had dreamed what had happened to Arnold. I knew it was not Bobby Lee who had made Arnold weak and frightened. I was the one who had made Bobby Lee throw that bat.

There were nights when I would sit on Arnold's bed until he'd fall asleep. I had the feeling on those nights that he was almost as afraid of me as he was of his night terrors.

Almost, but not quite. I was careful not to look him in the eye, careful not to move too slowly or too quickly. All these things seemed to terrorize him.

A lot of things terrorize you when you are young. I know.

I became my own worst form of terror. What if I dreamed something bad about my mother? Or Dan? I was afraid to go to sleep at night.

I wanted to do something nice for Arnold. I got it into my head that if we won the trip to Banff, Arnold would enjoy that. I went to the library and looked up Banff in the big Atlas. I followed the red line in the map that moved from Saskatchewan to Alberta.

I took home books full of pictures of Banff, pictures of mountains, of mountain sheep, of beautiful hotels, of hot springs.

And then I imagined us riding in a bus, out and past the prairies, leaving the flat brown earth, the endless blue sky behind. I imagined the mountains, passing white sheep, seeing other tourists feeding the animals. I imagined a black bear watching us. That made me remember my grandmother and the time I had picked the lily and I began to cry. I sobbed

and sobbed until I fell asleep and in the morning I awoke to Mom's excited voice announcing that we had been drawn for the trip to Banff.

We would be going during the Christmas holidays. It seems the idea of winning something was so thrilling to Dan, who had tried to win prizes by selling the most pots and pans in his area for over five years, that he actually proposed marriage to Mom and the trip to Banff would be a family honeymoon.

The marriage was quiet, not in a church or anything, just Mom and Dan and Arnold and me and a few friends at the courthouse. Mom looked beautiful in a grey suit. She looked like a model. When Dan kissed her I thought my heart would break with the sheer romance of it all. Mom had a little bouquet of sweet peas, her favorite flower, and she threw them at me as he kissed her.

I pressed each sweet pea into a book and then I painted a picture for Mom. I wet a piece of soft drawing paper with water and then used a soft green which ran into the wet paper. I tried to make the green appear as a background of soft and slurred leaves.

When the paper dried, I glued the pressed sweet peas onto the paper. Arnold made a frame and we gave it to Mom and Dan as a wedding present. They put it in the dining room.

You would have thought with Arnold no longer a threat and Mom and Dan actually no longer living in sin my troubles would be over. Think again!

It was fall and fall meant school and school meant nuns. In particular, Sister Stanislaus. Because we had a six/seven split I was lucky enough to have her as my room teacher yet again. Home-room meant catechism and catechism meant torment to me.

It meant lots of private talks and public talks. It meant threats and warnings and promises of everlasting hell.

According to the Catholic Church's teachings, divorce is bad enough, but a second marriage is totally forbidden. The nuns turned wicked in their need to convince me that my mother was doomed to burn in hell forever for marrying after being divorced and unless I acknowledged her wickedness and prayed for her to come back to the church, I, too, was doomed.

What did they expect her to do? Divorce Dan? Live alone? Go to confession each day and promise not to love him? It was an impossible situation. I had no words to respond to their queries and accusations and demands.

Between the nuns harassing me about my mother and my being afraid to dream, I developed a few nervous habits.

I began to chew my nails. I chewed them so close to the quick, the tips of my fingers bled a lot. I was ashamed and hid them. But I couldn't stop chewing. In the privacy of my bedroom, in the bathroom, and in public when I forgot myself.

I also began 'heavy duty talking' to the crows that visited the yard. Pal and I would sit out on the back step and the crows would join us and talk to us.

The crows were never afraid of Pal. He was always at my side, a silent friend who sensed that the crows were a part of my life, and if they were a part of my life, Pal accepted it. He had that kind of a spirit, that kind of wisdom.

We never discussed things, Pal and I, we just knew things about one another. He knew when I was sad, I knew when he was hungry or scared or thirsty. And we looked after one another. We did everything together.

And together we talked to crows.

I would look into the black eyes of the crows and stare at their pointed black tongues and they would begin to tell me tales of life as a crow.

I felt calm when the crows talked to us. Their stories were funny. Crows have a great sense of humor. And they are very curious. They loved talking about the neighbors and the silly things they saw as they circled the city. Crows are a bit gossipy and they have funny names for everyone. Crows certainly aren't stupid. And like me, they were afraid of the nuns.

The funniest thing the crows ever told me was about grumpy old Mr. Thompson when he was sleeping in a hammock in his back yard. Old Mr. Thompson was stingy and disliked kids, birds, and dogs. He disliked things that might steal his corn, pick his sweet peas, get some of his wife's cookies. He hated things that moved, that made any noise. He would yell and scream about being quiet. He was always yelling. He yelled at the crows. He yelled at the kids. He yelled at his wife.

This one day, as the crows flew by, Mr. Thompson was sleeping soundly, snoring loudly, his mouth open. And just then, just at that precise moment, a Blue Jay flew by and pooped right in Mr. Thompson's mouth.

He woke up with a start, started spitting and swearing and fell right out of the hammock. That tickled the crows no end. "We just laughed and laughed," said the crows. "We couldn't stop laughing. One of us would start, and then the other would start and we'd all

be laughing again, until we were crying and exhausted. We'd just about be laughed out and then one would start and off we'd go again."

I started to laugh just thinking about that kind of laughter and my laughter got the crows laughing again. Pretty soon we were all laughing. We must have looked pretty silly. A skinny girl sitting on a step next to her cocker spaniel, surrounded by a whole flock of crows, all of us laughing our heads off. Except Pal. Pal smiled, but he never laughed. Not out loud anyway.

It was fun to see the crows swoop like one giant bird made up of many little birds as they left their roosts in the big Pine trees that flanked the park. They would head straight for our place, ready for the wieners, bits of toast, bacon, dinner scraps Pal and I would offer them. They didn't like to share treats with Pal, but that was the deal.

Sometimes they'd play tricks on us, stealing trinkets, marbles, spoons, anything shiny. It was something they learned long ago when they lived in the wild, not in the city, but near a beach. Did you know that crows are so smart that they pick clams and hide them behind rocks and in twigs so that when the tide comes in, they still have a food supply? And they drop them on rocks to crack them open?

They'd tell us all about it, about the "good old days". I guess we all have good old days.

You might think the crows talk by making that cawing sound, but they don't. They make a soft clicking sound when in small groups. I call it their conversation voice. It was those sounds that made sense to me. Those clicking sounds told the stories I loved to hear.

I began to rely more and more on the crows to comfort me, to calm me down. The crows and Pal.

Because Pal wasn't allowed to follow me to school, I would invite the crows to follow me. I'd see them sitting outside the window, watching me, and I'd feel safe.

One day, in class, we watched a film about Saint Bernadette. She is the saint of poverty and of penance and as a 14 year old she was visited by the Holy Virgin Mary in France. Though many of her neighbors in Lourdes did not believe Bernadette had had a visitation, her religious family supported her. The nuns loved that. The importance of the family and every member following the doctrines of Christ.

As I watched the film, I had such mixed feelings. The pictures of this beautiful young girl and the miracle of her body staying beautiful even after death filled me with awe. But the potential for a public lecture on the dangers of a non-religious family coming my way filled me with dread.

I was right in my dreading. Sister Superior was in the room. She was all excited about the sacrifices young girls should make for Christ. She started talking about sin and temptation and setting good examples. Her voice, still soft, trembled with excitement.

I was biting my nails. Blood was dripping on my desk, but I didn't notice.

Mother Superior noticed. She turned toward me, whispered my name, my mother's name.

"Maria, Maria and her mother," she said, "teach us a lesson." She paused. Everyone stared at me. I slid my bleeding fingers under my skirt. I glanced out the window. The blinds were pulled shut. I could not see my crows. I felt alone.

"Maria's mother has sinned against man and God, and now Maria suffers."

Mother Superior pulled my hand out from under my skirt. She held it tight. She dragged me from my seat, thrusting my ragged torn fingers toward each member of the class.

"Look, look for yourself at the devil's work," Mother Superior hissed, soft like a snake. "She disfigures herself, she cannot sleep. She talks to crows. Maria will begin to wet the bed soon," Mother Superior promised. "Everyone knows that those who bite their nails, wet their beds."

I wanted to die.

Sister Superior reached the end of the row where Dickey sat. His cheeks were blotched red and white with anger. His freckles looked orange. His eyes danced with fire.

When she shoved my fingers toward Dickey, I began to cry. Having this shame in front of this friend, this boy I secretly loved was more than I could bear. I broke down, tried to pull myself away.

Mother Superior's grip was like steel. I couldn't escape.

Dickey leapt out of his seat. He pushed Mother Superior, grabbing her hand, freeing me. Somehow, I slid away.

She reached up and yanked Dickey hard by the ear. I heard the ear rip. I heard his strangled cry of pain. I saw the blood trickle down his cheek.

A strange clicking sound came from Mother Superior. I looked up at her mouth and it was beak-like, her tongue black and pointed, a crow beak making crow sounds.

It was as if Mother Superior were pleading with me, "Please, please." She was making soft clucking crow sounds, her pinched face a crow face in her black wimple. I expected her to fly away.

"Crow, black crow," I screamed over and over. I don't know what I meant or why I was screaming those words. I was filled with such a mixture of fear and hatred and sudden overwhelming compassion for this woman who had turned into a crow and was crying for my help, that I fainted.

Sister Loretta escorted me home. An ambulance came for Dickey.

That event took place on Sept. 27th. Dickey never regained hearing in that ear and Mother Superior never returned to the classroom.

Sister Agnes explained that she was ill.

Oct. 15th we all filed into the convent, each forced to approach the bedside to look into the pinched face of Mother Superior, saying our last good-bye.

I was afraid to look at her. I was afraid her mouth would open and that crow tongue I had imagined would reveal itself and prove me to be a dangerous person to torment.

Arnold had tormented me and he had lost all of his power when a baseball bat sailed across the blue prairie sky and hit him in the forehead. Mother Superior had tormented me and now she lay with her tongue drying up in her head.

Truly, drying up. We were told that Mother Superior had contracted a rare and deadly form of cancer. Her tongue had blackened in her throat. The songbird would sing no more. Nor would she pull any more ears nor call anyone's mother a sinner.

It seemed impossible to everyone. But within a week, Mother Superior was dead.

We all attended the funeral. Again, we all filed in, this time to gaze at the coffin, to kiss the cold lips.

I refused and Sister Stanislaus didn't force me. All the nuns, even Father Tremblay, the priest, had heard about the incident at the film of Saint Bernadette. They had heard about my screaming, "Crow, crow." and fainting. And for the first time, I read fear in the eyes of the nuns. And for the last time, I heard about my mother, the sinner, burning forever and ever in hell.

Chapter Five: Tom

It was strange, but after the death of Mother Superior, I quit biting my nails. I talked to crows less frequently and I began to fall asleep more easily.

I still didn't sleep as long as I had once slept. I'd awaken about five am.

Usually I'd read. But sometimes I'd get up and Pal and I would look out of the window. We'd look down on the street and we could view the whole street.

That's how I came to know him, Tom, the milkman's horse. He was a big Clydesdale, black with a white diamond on his forehead and white hairy feet and eyes the color of chestnuts. Tom and his milk wagon would show up any time between six and seven. I began to love the fact that I woke up early, maybe as early as Tom, certainly early enough to see him coming down the street.

He was so beautiful I loved to watch him as he slowly made his way up and down the street, stopping at each house as Leo Spitz, the milk man, ran in to pick up empty bottles and replace them with bottles full of milk or cream.

Sometimes Leo would stop to chat, to flirt with the young wives, to learn the latest gossip, to complain about the heat, the cold, the rain. He loved to complain about the weather, about his arthritis, about his son's needing money to go to college. He was proud of his son. Proud that he had to give him tuition. Leo wasn't a bad man, but he wasn't a nice man, either. I couldn't really say what wasn't nice about him. But something wasn't. Pal avoided him like the plague.

Mom said he was harmless. She felt sorry for him, having to work outside in all sorts of weather. Mom always saw the good in things. I think she got that from Grandmother. Grandmother was famous for seeing the good in things. She had an optimism that wouldn't quit.

Leo and Tom came to deliver milk every third day. I could barely stand the two days when he wasn't there. I'd wake up early and listen for the clops, even though I knew they wouldn't come. I knew the sounds of that horse, I could hear them five blocks away. His sound would be faint and then bit by bit it would become clearer and clearer and he would be closer and closer, until he was close enough to see.

Then one day, I did it. Pal and I came down the steps and up to Tom and I offered him an apple.

Tom looked at Pal. Pal looked back, promising to present no problem. Then Tom looked at me. He sniffed the apple. He sniffed my hand. He sniffed my face, touching me ever so softly with his lovely velvet nose.

And then he took the apple, gently, his eyes never leaving mine.

He ate it slowly, his strong teeth slicing through the soft flesh, the juice running down his long throat.

It was the beginning of three of the most wonderful months of my life.

Every third morning we waited for Tom, every third morning offering a treat, an apple, a pear, some white sugar, or rolled oats. And every third morning we did our ritual exchange, he sniffing the offering, sniffing my hand, my face, touching me softly, then delicately taking the treat, and always, always looking into my eyes as he ate.

I understood that he was bored with the repetitious job he had to do. I understood that the stiff wooden bars hurt his sides, that the blinkers annoyed him, the bit was cold and hard and made eating difficult. I understood that he longed to be a real horse again, a horse that could prance in the morning light, could stand tall and strong in the moonlight.

He was a work horse, he loved to work, but he longed for a farm, and freedom. He longed for movement, the movement that his strong body needed.

But he was a good horse, an obedient horse. And he tried to serve his master well.

His eyes told me that our friendship gave him great joy.

I told him he had no idea how much it gave me.

Our appreciation was mutual. Our affection grew.

Sometimes he would get playful and blow a gust of warm air from his pink nostrils. The rolled oats would fly and I'd have to cup my hands carefully as his warm breath scattered the dry oats.

Tom would look amused when he scattered the oats. It was a game. Sometimes he'd push the apple a bit with his nose.

And sometimes I'd reach up and touch the soft velvet of his nose. I'd press my face into his. I'd feel his hot breathe on my cheek.

"You're ruining my horse," Leo Spitz would say. "All those damn treats."

It was true that Tom moved on with some reluctance, often looking back, turning his head as much as he good, not really seeing, blinded by the blinders, but moving all the same, as if to say good-bye, as if to let me know he wanted to stay if only he could. If only he didn't have all this milk to deliver.

But he did move on. And the milk did get delivered. All that fall and into winter, when the ground froze and Tom's breath was like a cloud of white fog in the cold air.

People began decorating their homes with Christmas lights and ordered extra cream for the making of rich cakes and cookies.

I liked that. It took longer for Leo to make his rounds. Often he stopped for a quick drink of hot coffee, sometimes laced with rum. It gave me more time to be with Tom.

And then the package arrived containing the bus and hotel tickets for our trip to Banff. How had I forgotten?

I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave Tom. I didn't want to leave Pal.

Why had I ever looked up that stupid place in the map book in the Prince Albert Public Library? Why had I imagined us driving past the sheep, the black bear?

"Only for eight days," Mom coaxed. It is a great Christmas present. We never win anything. This is so lucky.

I knew it was more than luck.

I tried to say I could stay with Arnold. I tried to say a honeymoon is best with just the honeymooners. But Dan and Mom had been living together for over a year and what's more, they really didn't want to leave me with Arnold. Even now, they weren't sure what he might do.

Mom knew it was because of Tom I hated to leave. That worried me. I tried to make sure that Pal knew that I didn't want to leave him, either. I didn't want Pal to think that I loved Tom and missed him more.

But Pal didn't seem worried about whom I missed most. He knew I missed him and that's all that mattered. He knew I'd rather be with him than without him. That was enough for Pal.

Mom reminded me Tom only came every three days. But the way the days fell, I was to miss three whole visits. It felt like a lifetime.

I knew I had to tell Tom. I knew he'd understand. I prepared a special treat for him. I would tell him that I would be gone for just over a week. I would tell him how much I'd miss him, and how wonderful it would be to see him again.

But the day I was going to tell him didn't happen. The day before we were to leave, Mom told Arnold and I to get everything packed, we would be leaving early the next day, about six am. We had to go to the farm.

I protested.

“What did you think we were going to do with Pal?” Mom was surprised at my anxious complaints.

“But I have to see Tom first.”

“There won't be time.” The last thing Dan wanted to do was miss that bus and the chance to enjoy the only thing he'd ever won.

“We could put Pal in a kennel?” Dan was feeling generous. We all knew we couldn't afford a kennel. And we all knew that we weren't a family who believed in such things.

But those were the choices. A kennel for Pal and being able to explain to Tom, or take Pal to the farm and miss talking to Tom.

I looked at Pal, my eyes worried. He looked away. For a moment I think he was afraid that I would choose Tom. For a moment he might have been afraid that I was going to say to put him in a kennel.

I threw my arms about his neck. I kissed him and whispered how sorry I was. Of course we'd go to the farm.

Even leaving Pal at Uncle Henry's farm bothered me. Leaving him at all bothered me. He promised me he didn't mind. He said he would be with his mother and his brothers and sisters. He promised me he would avoid the chickens. We snuggled all night before we left. I tried not to think of Tom. I tried not to sleep. I didn't want to waste any of my last night with Pal before we had to go.

The next morning, I wrote a note for Mr. Spitz and taped it to the door. I left a package for Tom in the corner of the porch.

We all piled into the car and drove off before the night had lifted. It felt strange, as if we were in a different space and time. The trip to the farm seemed unreal. Even the bare birches looked foreign, almost frightening.

When we dropped Pal off, the chickens were in the yard. I was afraid, but I went out because I couldn't leave Pal and just go, like that, not taking him in, not telling my Aunt Madge how he liked his water cold, and how he was used to sleeping inside. I knew dogs slept outside at the farm and I was so worried that Pal would be scared. I brought his blanket.

Aunt Madge took the blanket and promised she would let him sleep in the porch. When we drove away, Pal ran along with us all the way to the gate, jumping up and yelping good-bye. Then he stopped and watched us drive out of sight. Mom knew I wanted to cry so she sang my favorite song, "You are my sunshine." She's sung that song to me for as long as I could remember. I did feel like her sunshine. I wanted to make her happy when skies were blue, but right now she was the one trying to make me happy.

It was a real challenge.

We drove straight from the farm to the bus depot and piled into the Greyhound heading for Banff. It all came to be as I'd imagined it. The sheep, the fine hotel, the hot springs.

Mom loved the hot springs. She had done her nurse's training in Humbolt and her first nursing job had been in Watrous next to a salt lake that was used as a spa. People came to steam and soak and heal. Mom had fallen in love for the first time at Watrous. She'd even become engaged to be married. He was a young doctor, tall and handsome and in love with every good looking woman who adored him. There were lots, before and after his engagement. More than my Mom could stand. She left Watrous and him.

It was weird, but I knew all about him. Everyone knew all about Mom's life. She was an open book. We all heard wonderful things about him. My Mom wouldn't live with him cheating on her, but she never stopped loving him. Just thinking about him always made her blush. They exchanged Christmas cards every year.

I was worried that Dan might not like it that Mom still loved her first boyfriend. He said it was healthy. He preferred a woman who loved her X-fiancee to one who hated him.

"Smart man," Mom said. I never really understood it. I mean, I am the kind of girl who pushed Betty Lou into a locker because she got a picture, so I'm not really that open. But I did like it that my Mom was such a romantic. And that Dan understood. That felt good.

The hot springs made Mom feel young and beautiful. Even Arnold seemed to enjoy himself.

I pretended to, but all I could think of was Tom. To help myself bear the loneliness, I began to write to him.

Dec. 27, 1953.

Dear Tom,

I know you won't get this letter, but I'm writing it in my diary to you. It makes me feel like I'm there, talking to you. So, I hope you won't mind. I'll probably read it to you when I get home. I feel a little silly doing this, but I do miss you so.

*Your best friend,
Kat*

Dec. 28, 1953.

Dear Tom,

Does Leo Spitz tell you where I am? Does he give you any of the treats I left out on the porch for you? I left two full boxes of oatmeal. I hope he gives some to you.

I am so sorry I did not get to tell you that I was leaving. I should have told you. I should have told you as soon as I found out. I left it too late.

I can't wait to come home and see you again.

*Your best friend,
Kat*

Dec.29, 1953.

Dearest Tom,

Oh Tom, I can't believe it's only Wednesday. It seems forever since I've seen you.

It's not just not seeing you, it's being so far away from you, being in another part of the country. What if something bad were happening to you, I wouldn't know.

Dan says nothing bad could be happening. But what if there were a storm or something? Of a tree fell on you? Or your wagon upset? Or you got a cold? Oh please, Tom, be all right. I just have such an awful feeling. I hope we go home soon. I must see you.

*Love,
Kat*

Dec. 30, 1953.

Dearest Tom,

We will be on our way home day after tomorrow. Banff is pretty. There are mountains and a lake covered with snow, flat and pure. It's called Lake Louise. It's like nothing I've ever seen before.

When I see it, I imagine you with me, riding around the lake, diving right into it in the summer time. They say it is the bluest water. We could swim in that lake. You could eat the sweet grass. We could sleep under the stars. Oh, dear Tom, I miss you so.

*Love,
Kat*

Dec. 31, 1953.

Dearest Tom,

I try to pretend you are here with me. There are Mounties here. They wear red suits and brown hats and they ride big beautiful horses. None are as beautiful as you though.

Dan thought I'd feel better if I pet one of the Mounties' horses, but I didn't want to. Somehow, I thought it wouldn't be fair to you, me petting a strange horse when you are there, all alone, with no one to pet you.

I hope Leo Spitz has given you the oats, and the bag of apples. I hope you are all right. I am so sorry Dan bought those stupid tickets. I know it's all my fault that we are apart.

Tom, I promise you, I promise, hope to die if I break this promise, but I will never wish for anything again. Wishing can be a dangerous thing. It can make things happen that you don't really want. I promise you, Tom, I will never wish for things again. I will, I will, just let things happen.

Love,
Kat

Jan. 1, 1954.

Dearest Tom,

Oh Tom, we are on our way home. I'm so excited, I can hardly sit still. What a wonderful way to celebrate the New Year. Coming home to you and to Pal. We will never be separated again.

I stayed awake almost all night watching the stars. They are the best of all. We boarded the bus late at night and I was so glad, I just couldn't sleep. I looked out that big window and watched and imagined you running beside the bus.

I could almost hear you breathing. You were breathing hard, and I wanted you to slow down, but you wouldn't. You wanted to keep up with the bus, to be near me.

Tuesday I see you. I don't think I can wait. I might die before then. I love you so.

*Love,
Kat*

We arrived home on a Monday. On Tuesday, I would see him. Tom.

Monday was a good day. We went to pick up Pal and have supper with Uncle Henry and Aunt Madge. Because dogs were not allowed in the house, Mom let me take my supper to the porch so I could be with Pal. Uncle Henry said it was a lot of nonsense. But he knew better than to argue with Mom. She was his kid sister and he adored her. All she had to do was flirt with him and he would melt.

Pal and I ate fried chicken and biscuits. We sat really close to one another. It felt so good to have his warm body next to mine.

I told him that we would see Tom tomorrow, yet even as I said it, we both felt a tug of worry.

It was still dark when I heard the clop of Tom's feet coming toward our street. I was ready with a batch of oatmeal cookies I had made for him. I had put in chunks of apple. I had a handful of sugar cubes I had saved up when we were eating in restaurants. Tom loved sugar and he would be able to take the cubes in his teeth, and not blow the fine sugar all over the place with his hot breath.

Pal cocked his head and listened. Something was wrong. It wasn't the usual clop. It was lighter, a bit faster, more nervous.

"He's excited to see us," I said and raced down to meet him.

A huge white mare with dappled gray spots on her back faced me. Her eyes were blue. They looked frightened.

"Tom? Tom? Where is he?" I begged.

Leo Spitz did not look at me when he talked. "Gone," he said in a harsh monotone. "Sold. Just like this one'll be if you go near her." Then he grabbed hold of my arm and looked hard into my face. "I warn you Maria Kat, don't go near this horse, ever."

Tom had been sold because I had ruined him. I had trained him to expect me to come and without me he wouldn't move. He wouldn't finish his rounds. It didn't matter how much Leo Spitz urged him to go forward, it didn't matter how he hit Tom with his whip, Tom waited for me. But I never came.

Winning that trip had been the biggest mistake of my life. I wanted to beg Tom's forgiveness. I wanted to die.

I lay in bed for five days. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I could almost feel Leo hitting Tom with that whip. I went over it in my mind over and over again, Tom waiting for me, Tom turning his head, looking for me. I could feel his pain, his longing, his confusion.

Whenever I saw pictures in my head of Leo Spitz hitting Tom, whenever I saw him taking Tom away to be sold to God know's whom, for God know's what, I saw terrible things happening to Leo.

I would hear the clip clop of the new mare, the frightened, easily startled mare and my mind would leap to the mare turning on Leo. I would imagine her trampling him into the ground. I would stop myself. I didn't dare imagine it.

I swore I would never wish for anything again. I would never imagine or dream. I would never make anything happen again. Nothing good or bad. I knew how awful imagining bad things was. Arnold and Mother Superior had taught me that. But good things, things like imagining trips for your family, even that was bad. That imagining had lost me Tom. Tom might be someplace cold and awful now, doing work too hard for him, with people who might be whipping him, not feeding him.

I had promised Tom that I would no longer wish for anything. I would no longer imagine anything, good or bad happening. Somehow, I believed if I kept that promise, Tom might miraculously come back to me.

Dan and Mom worried about my anguish over Tom. They weren't sure how to console me. There was no way, really. They thought it was all about my feeding Tom, ruining him. They didn't know it was worse than that. They didn't know I had caused the whole thing.

In February, the draw for the big black Buick was made. It was made on February 14th, St. Valentine's Day.

I knew we'd win. I'd imagined us driving that car even before I'd imagined us going to Banff. By then I was pretty confident about my ability to make things happen. I had promised never to do it again. But I had imagined this before the trip to Banff, and I guess there was no going back on a promise.

The Buick was big and black and Mom loved it. She even let Arnold drive. He was a good driver. We went out to the fox farm and bought two baby rabbits. They were a Valentine's present for me. They were big Australian giants and we called them Jack and Willie. We had to keep them in separate cages because they were both male and we were told they would fight if they lived together.

Of course, we never kept them in their cages. We let them run around the yard. Pal loved to chase them. They teased him mercilessly. But as they became friends, it was neat to see Pal guard them, barking if another animal, a dog, a cat, even a squirrel came near. The rabbits slept in their cages at night. They were delightful, like big cats, really, just as tame and just as smart.

They loved dried dog food, the kind with lots of grain in it. Can you believe it? They also roamed the neighborhood. That made Pal nuts, he was sure they'd get eaten. Maybe that was because he secretly wanted to eat them himself. I knew he wouldn't, but I knew he thought about it.

Actually, they were pretty safe on their own. They were huge, four feet tall standing. And could they fight! They got in a scrap themselves one day and the red fur flew. Even I was afraid to get in there to stop them. Mom threw a pail of water on them to get them to stop. It didn't phase them. They fought until they were tired. They had lots of fur missing. They panted like old fighters. And then they just got up and starting eating grass as if nothing had happened.

They loved to do tricks, jump through a hula-hoop, bounce a ball, roll over, sit up and beg. They were popular with everyone. They became the neighborhood mascots.

We went for long rides in our new Buick. Sometimes we'd pick up Dickey and go out to the Pines for chicken-in-a-basket. The chicken was deep fried, served with chips in red plastic baskets. Dickey and Pal and I would sit in the back seat and eat like little pigs. Arnold would drive, a basket on his lap and Mom and Dan would cuddle in the front seat next to him, sharing one basket between them.

We saved the red baskets. We had twenty-three of them. Think how many times we went out for that lovely drive through the pines. Think of all the chicken we ate. Sometimes we'd play games, like stringing off all the names of places that started with A or S or whatever letter we wanted. Sometimes we'd go through the whole alphabet.

Lots of times we sang songs. Dan had a beautiful voice. But for some reason whenever he sang, Pal would howl. We weren't sure if he howled because he liked the song or because he didn't. Even Pal wasn't sure. We decided he liked it and he was just joining in. It added a special touch to the singing. We'd open the windows and sing into the night as we sped by the bare white birch and poplar trees dotted among the deep green pines.

February turned to March. Queenie, Leo's mare was used to the route. She was trained as Tom had been trained. I never went near her. I wouldn't have ruined another horse for anything in the world. And I didn't want another horse. The pain I felt over losing Tom

never left, but the joy I had with Pal and Mom and Dan and Dickey and Jack and Willie was real. I did love life, and I was almost feeling normal again.

One day Leo and Queenie were extra late. Queenie had been acting up and Leo was in a foul mood. I knew that Queenie was never as good a horse as Tom had been and Leo blamed me for that. Of course, he was right.

I was on my way out when he came up the stairs. Perhaps he thought I was going to see Queenie. Perhaps he was just so mad at me he couldn't help himself, but he snarled something at me as we passed. He said something to me that was more awful than anything anyone had ever said to me in my life before.

“Glue factory,” he said. “We took Tom to the glue factory.”

My eyes filled with tears. My face burned. I walked away and the vision of Queenie racing down the hill, the wagon overturning, Leo being crushed by the wheel flashed into my mind before I could stop it.

I never turned around. I knew she would race away. I knew the wagon would overturn. I knew he would be crushed. I knew he wouldn't die, but he would lose a leg and all his teeth. I knew he would never deliver milk again.

And I wasn't sorry.

Chapter Six: Rabbits for Sale

That winter, Dickey and I had chummed around a lot together. His family was having a real hard time of it. His mom had lost her job at Kresge's and they had to rely on her sewing for old man Aaron.

Mrs. La Fleure tried to expand her sewing to include making clothes for other people. But there weren't a lot of people in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan who really wanted to have clothes made for them. And those who did, weren't the kind who wanted to put up with the likes of Mr. La Fleure.

She tried putting a dressmaking sign in the window, but that didn't work too well, either. Because Mr. La Fleure was so unpredictable, not too many folks wanted to knock at the door. Their house looked as if it were abandoned with those windows all boarded up. And the sign looked more than out of place tacked on the outside of 2 by 4s.

Dickey and I would take down the boards, but the next day, up they'd go again. We burned them all one night, in the back yard, but the next day Mr. La Fleure stole the grocery money from the kitchen drawer where his wife saved it, and he bought new boards.

"Barricading against gunfire," Mr. La Fleure would say and who could argue with a man wanting to protect his family?

When Mr. La Fleure took all the grocery money, his wife got the bright idea to raise rabbits. The truth was that she wanted to eat the rabbits. She was French and the idea of eating rabbit meat did not offend her.

Dickey didn't tell me for a long time. He tried to hide it from me because he knew I'd have a fit.

It was a Sunday. Months before Easter Sunday. But for some reason, Mr. La Fleure was sure it was Easter Sunday. He was so insistent on it, we all pretended it was.

Mr. La Fleure had stayed up all night hiding the eggs throughout the house and the yard. We were a bit old for an Easter egg hunt, and it wasn't even Easter, but it tickled him so much to watch us hunt for them that we did it just to see him happy. It was kind of weird. And almost scary. You see, Mr. La Fleure always carried a gun. It was one of the things about Mr. La Fleure that really worried my mom.

I tried to convince Mom that the gun was never loaded, but the whole neighborhood knew it was. On several occasions the police had been called when shots were heard coming from the La Fleure home. No one was ever hit, but several windows had been

shot out. Mr. La Fleure had even spent the odd night in jail for disturbing the peace and for unlawful mischief.

Call it what you want. It was really Mr. La Fleure fighting with the ghosts that haunted his mind and those ghosts came from his trying to defend his country in an awful war. No one really wanted to punish him for that.

On Memorial day, Mr. La Fleure always cried like a baby. Everyone shook his hand and patted his back and thanked him. And all the while he cried and cried until he got too drunk to cry any more. Everyone brought him drinks. Everyone knew he had suffered for them. Mr. La Fleure was kind of like Jesus. Only he was still alive, here with us. At least, that's how I saw it.

We were searching behind the big coal furnace in the basement when Dickey gave me my first kiss. It was about the last place one would expect a first kiss.

I must admit I had imagined a first kiss, and I had imagined it with Dickey. I thought of it happening in my room, maybe at a time when we'd gone in to study. I had lovely lighting in my room. I had made some lampshades beautiful by gluing different pressed petals and leaves onto the sides of the shades, just for romantic appeal. I was sure my first kiss would be under the warm glow of one of those garden lamps.

I'd imagined Harold being away, not anywhere near us, not anywhere near enough to spoil my first kiss.

I'd imagined Pal getting jealous and jumping up on Dickey and all of us laughing and feeling silly, but nice, close, excited and innocent. I wanted my first kiss to be one I would remember forever.

Dickey and I were on our hands and knees. Mr. La Fleure was on the other side of the basement near where the dill pickles were stored. He knew we were close to a whole nest of eggs. He was laughing with excitement.

Dickey looked at me. I knew what he was thinking. He was wondering if I was finding this too ridiculous, to be twelve years old and searching for eggs while a man who carried a gun was urging us on, thrilled with the game.

I looked up at Dickey and I saw his pain, his embarrassment and his love for his father and I said, "It's Okay. I like your Dad."

That's when he did it. He reached over and took my face in his hands the way we'd seen in a movie and he kissed me. His lips were warm and soft. Our lips met as if they were

made to meet. There was no shyness, no sticking out of tongues or awkward pausing and faces not fitting. It was not quick, it was not slow.

It was just what it was. My first kiss.

We found the rest of the eggs. We went into the house for supper. And that's when I learned that we weren't eating chicken. We were eating rabbit.

When Mrs. La Fleure made some kind of self-conscious comment about eating the Easter bunny, I thought Dickey would run out of the house. He looked at me, his eyes full of panic.

I didn't know what to do. My mouth was full. I swallowed. "Tastes like chicken," I said in a weak voice.

"That's my girl," said Mr. La Fleure. I think by this time he had remembered that it wasn't really Easter and he knew his wife was feeling foolish. No one was sure who he meant by "that's my girl", me for eating the rabbit and pretending it was chicken or his wife for having Easter supper when it wasn't even Easter.

I think he meant both things. He usually meant more than one thing at a time.

That evening, Dickey and I hatched our plan. We would sell the rabbits as pets and give the money to his mom for groceries. That way we could save the rabbits from being eaten.

Did you know that baby bunnies are born hairless? Actually they look more like miniature baby pigs than rabbits. They are hairless, with tiny ears, flat against their heads, their skin all pink and gray and they huddle together like Easter eggs in a basket. The mothers clean them and don't want you near.

By three weeks, they look like bunnies. They have soft fur, their ears stand up and they are ready to romp and play in the furniture. Of course, we can handle them by three weeks, and we do, carefully, as they can throw up in a minute.

A two-month-old bunny can leave his mother. And boys and girls have to be separated, because a two month old feels like a teen-ager and gets pretty romantic.

By the time the bunnies were ready for selling, we had fallen totally in love with them.

We decided that it would be necessary for prospective buyers to pass the good adoptive parent's test. We insisted on knowing where the bunnies would live. How often would they be attended to? Who was responsible? Would they be safe? Warm? Properly fed

and cleaned? And most of all, loved? We insisted on the right to visit the pets without notice for up to three months.

If anyone failed or resisted the “test”, we simply would not sell them a rabbit. Our rabbits were so beautiful and so well behaved we didn’t have much trouble finding good parents.

Our rabbit selling expedition was becoming so popular that we were in the local newspaper and folks starting phoning in orders. It was spring and rabbit births and sales were growing. Folks wanted baby rabbits for Easter. “Not for eating!” we insisted. We made people sign a contract promising never to eat our rabbits, or breed them for eating. No one refused.

To ensure the birth of even more bunnies to provide grocery money, we brought Jack and Willie over to be super breeders. They did a good job. Little bunnies were soon running around the cages, growing stronger and more beautiful each day.

We would take the rabbits in the wagon Dickey had built for us to transport them in. It was green and wide and permitted them to feel good on their way to their new homes. We didn’t want to traumatize them in any way. Pal always accompanied us. The rabbits were used to him and felt safe when he was around. It was his job to protect them and he did a good job. No other dog came near his charges. Not even Rottweilers. They knew this black cocker spaniel meant business.

As orders came in, we walked further and further away from our neighborhood. Pretty soon we were miles from home, on the outskirts of town, even in the fancy areas where the doctors and lawyers and store owners lived in the big houses.

It was early on a Monday morning. I was carrying one of the rabbits, giving her a little ear rub as Dickey pulled the wagon. This rabbit looked so much like Jack that I was seriously considering not selling her. The rabbit felt like a member of the family.

A vehicle was speeding our way. We all stopped and waited for it to pass. We began to move forward again. We moved slowly. We didn’t like to hurry the rabbits, to pull them roughly or too quickly.

Clop. Clop. Clop. Clop. I think Pal heard it before I did. He cocked his ear, gave an excited short bark. A puff of air bark.

I felt the hair on my arms go stiff, raising, leaving cold goose flesh up to my elbows. I shivered, almost afraid to look up. It couldn’t be.

He was dark, with a white diamond and white hairy feet. He was pulling a wagon down the road, on a cross street, away from us. We would never had seen him if the car hadn't come racing down the street, forcing us to wait.

The horse stopped patiently at a house. A young blonde milkman jumped out, dropped off two bottles of milk, walked on to the next house. The dark horse moved on.

He turned slightly, as if to see what was behind, as if he had heard or smelled something that made him turn. He was tethered quite tightly, his blinders prevented him from seeing anything behind him.

I didn't know what to do. I turned to Dickey. He was staring at me. "Is it?" he whispered.

I nodded.

It was. It was him. Tom. Not dead. Alive. Not in a glue factory. Here, miles away, on a new route.

Alive. Alive.

The horse waited for the milkman. He saw some grass growing on the curb. He snorted and tried to nibble a bit of the grass. Heavy reins prevented him from reaching. He strained. Still, he could not get the grass. He reached out his lips, searching for the sweet, green treat, still wet with dew.

I began to sob, silent wrenching sobs. The front of my sweater was wet with tears. Dickey reached down and pulled out some grass.

"We could . . ." he said.

"No. Not this time."

We walked home. We didn't sell any rabbits that week. We didn't leave the back yard again.

I was obsessed with the thought of him, of Tom there. I knew he knew that I had been near by. I had to go to him.

I couldn't.

My head hurt. I developed an acid stomach, the hole made by the vinegar I had drunk for Lent two years ago haunted me. I couldn't eat. I was losing weight.

How could I go to him? How could I leave him? How could I resist ruining him again?

The radio was on. It was a big time in Prince Albert. It was the draw for the home and the acreage. The draw always took place in March. March, the month of my birth.

I knew what I wanted to do. But I had promised. Would something even worse happen this time? Might Tom really die?

I was terrified. I didn't have much time to decide. The draw was happening in three days.

I was in the bath tub. I had been in there for hours, sitting and soaking and thinking. Mom knocked at the door. "You okay, kitten?" she asked.

"Can I come in?"

I couldn't answer, I was crying so hard. We are not a family who usually locks doors, so I hadn't. Mom came in.

She helped me out of the tub. She helped to dry me. She sat down with me on my bed and we talked. We talked about Grandmother and the lily, we talked about Betty Lou Moker and the locker. We talked about Mother Superior and her tongue drying up and we talked about Arnold and the bat hitting his head. We talked about the trip and the Buick. We talked about Leo and his accident with Queenie.

Well, really, I talked and talked and talked and she listened. She listened and listened and nodded and her eyes were wide and blue and from time to time misted over. She waited until I was all talked out. She waited until I had confessed it all.

I confessed, too, how I wanted to do it again. I wanted to win that house. I wanted a place for Tom to live. I wanted him to be free of reins and blinders. To be free of a milk wagon and a boring route.

I wanted him to be able to run, to swim in a lake, to stand in the moonlight. But most of all, I wanted him to be mine.

She stood up. Her face was soft and kind. She didn't look surprised or scared. She didn't say one word about not believing me or saying I was wrong or crazy.

"You are a lot like your grandmother," she said. "How lucky for me." And with that she walked out of the room.

She just walked out. She didn't tell me what to do.

She didn't have to. I knew what I would do. I knew I had promised not to, but this was a good thing to do. I felt it in my bones.

I pictured the ticket with our name on it. I pictured the big round drum that housed the tickets. I pictured the handle that churned the tickets being turned. I imagined the ticket with our name on it settling on the top. I imagined the hand of the manager of the fair moving into the drum and selecting our ticket. I imagined him phoning our number. I imagined Mom answering the phone. I imagined her scream of excitement.

And then I imagined us selling the Buick to purchase Tom. I knew it would be a sacrifice, but Mom wouldn't even think twice. She would offer. I wouldn't even have to imagine that for it to happen. If we needed money to buy Tom from the milk company, we would sell something to do it. And the thing we had was the Buick.

I imagined Dan and Arnold and Dickey build a wide paddock. They would build a warm barn.

Everything about having Tom as my own would be wonderful. I imagined every moment. I lingered over the thought of brushing his black coat. I could feel the heat of his body. I imagined feeding him oats and alfalfa. I felt his warm breath on my hand, I smelled the sweetness of green grass as he chewed. I let myself lie next to him in the sweet hay, Pal at my side, and it was wonderful.

But best of all were the intimate moments of touching. Of touching the velvet of his nose. The strength of his legs. The movement of his body as we glided about the acreage, under the milk white of birch trees, under the dappled light of morning sun, in the evening light of the rising moon .

Tom, mine to love, to take care of, to ride. Tom, alive, well, free.

My birthday came and went. I turned thirteen. Mom wanted to know what I wanted for my birthday.

What could I tell her? I wanted what I had. The parents I had. The friend I had. Her. Dan. Dickey. Pal. Jack and Willie. Even Arnold. And Tom.

“Well, you must be able to think of something you'd like”.

I only smiled. I already had everything.

The Chocolate Bar: Part Two: Life before Crow Girl

Chapter One: Pajama Party

“You shouldn’t be looking at that girl with binoculars all the time.”

‘I’m not, I’m waiting to see if a taxi is coming. I like to count how many taxis come and go.’”

I was lying of course, and Mom knew it, but she let me have the lie. Mom never embarrassed me with the truth when the truth didn’t really matter. She was just a bit worried about my fascination with Margaret.

Mom worried a lot about me that year. I was a bit of a mess. It was hard to really describe what was wrong. I was overly imaginative. That’s how teachers described it. But Mom and I knew it was more than that. There was an edge of worry and desperation to me that didn’t feel right.

When I was older, I figured out that my imagination was not quite what you might call normal. I could imagine something so hard that it would happen. But I've told you about that. Now I want to tell you what it was like before that time.

You might think that having an imagination that make things happen would be a nifty thing. But it really has its dark side. And before I had figured it out, it was spooky. My brain would just go to thinking about something without my wanting it to. And too often, I couldn't stop. It didn't always think of good things. Sometimes it was hard to tell real things from imagined things. Now, just try to live with that! Especially when you're seven years old.

I figured that Margaret was a bit older than me, but not too old. Maybe ten. She dressed kind of old. I imagined that she had sisters and that she borrowed their clothes. Sometimes she wore eye shadow. I'd heard a story about her. That she'd worn nail polish to school and Mother Superior, who ruled all the Catholic Schools in Prince Albert, had made her take it off.

Margaret had scraped at the nails so hard she'd made them bleed. Right in front of the nun she scratched and scraped 'till there was no polish left. But the next day, there it was again, bright red, painted on each finger nail.

I looked at her hands with the binoculars. There was evidence of nail polish. Red and chipped. No blood.

Margaret came each day to help her mother who was a dispatcher for Prince Albert Taxi Cabs. It was a fleet of six cars which served the city and went even as far north as Lac La Ronge. Mostly, natives and guys from the government took those taxis.

I had noticed Margaret right away, as soon as we moved into the 'L'. The 'L' was what people called our house because it was shaped just like an 'L'. I liked that about it. Imagine living in a long skinny house that if you were a crow and looked down on it, you would see a big 'L'.

And inside the 'L' lived three people, my mom, my grandfather and me, Marie Kat.

Our 'L' was squished in between two rows of poplar trees that shone white in the moonlight. To the right of the poplars was a taxi stand and to the left was a boarding house that Grandfather said was a whorehouse and we should call it a whorehouse, as I'd have to know about such things sooner or later.

"Good God!" mother had said. But she hadn't corrected him. And from that time on we called it the whorehouse. I had no idea what that meant, but I knew somehow it was

forbidden so I said it as often as I could. But not so often that Mom would get mad, just often enough to get a charge out of it.

I went back to watching Margaret.

She had just come into the taxi stand. She did what she always did. She fetched a little chair without a back – not a stool, but a chair that had no back, and pushed it right next to the wheel chair her mother occupied.

They would sit there waiting. I would wait too. Wait for the phone to ring. It only had to ring once.

Mrs. Simpson would pick up the phone and she would hold it so that both she and Margaret could hear. Then Margaret would write the words down on a paper and Mrs. Simpson would pin the paper on a board right next to her wheelchair. The taxi drivers would come in and grab one of the notes off the board and rush to their cabs to collect the people who needed a ride to places all over the city, even places like Lac La Ronge.

I couldn't imagine why Margaret and her mother listened to the phone together. I had my theories. Perhaps Mrs. Simpson's hand was paralyzed and she couldn't write down the addresses. Maybe Margaret's Mom was blind and she couldn't see the paper or write down the words. Her eyes were open. I could tell that. But sometimes, blind people have open eyes.

The thought of it spooked me so much I quit thinking about it. I tried to think of new theories. To make myself feel brave, I started to say my theories out loud.

I was actually glad that there was such mystery around the duties that Margaret performed for her Mom. It gave me a real excuse to watch her. Just so long as I didn't think about blind eyes staring at me.

“What's she doing now?” Mom wanted to know.

“Nothing. Just sitting there.”

“Why not go over and introduce yourself?”

“Oh, my God!” How I wanted to, but how, how could I?

“She will when she's ready.” Grandfather had faith that someday I'd be ready. We'd been living in this house for a month already and I wasn't anywhere near ready.

I was seven years old and would be going to a new school in the fall and I didn't know one person in this part of town. Not one. Well, not one that wasn't a mom or a grandpa or relative or grown up. I didn't even know many of those. Somehow, I blamed my mom. Somehow I felt all decisions came from her.

"We'll have to move when Dad comes," I said.

"What are you talking about?"

I was always thinking about when Dad would come home from the war. He had gone to war to fight the bad Germans. We were related to good Germans. But Dad went to kill the bad ones. I wondered how he would know which were good and which were bad.

"Uniforms," Grandfather had explained. "They wear different uniforms."

I wasn't convinced.

"We'll have to move," I repeated.

"We'll see," Mom said.

I had been watching Margaret for so long that my eyes were getting sore from trying to focus into my grandfather's big heavy binoculars. I imagined my dad having binoculars like that to check out the bad Germans.

Then I had an idea. "I think I'm ready," I said and put the binoculars into their case. I headed for the taxi stand. I walked right in and made my announcement. "I need a taxi," I said to Mrs. Simpson. I didn't look at her eyes.

"You're the weird kid who watches everything with those binoculars, aren't you?"

Margaret looked at the floor when her mother said that to me. I looked at the floor, too. Well, she sure wasn't blind. I hadn't thought of anyone watching me. The thought of it scared me. I felt like getting mad. But that seemed ridiculous. I mean, she was watching me watching her. I guess she had a right.

"I like taxis," I said as if that explained everything.

"So you want me to put you on the board?" Mrs. Simpson asked. I felt trapped. I walked over to the board and began to examine it carefully.

"Where you want to go?" Margaret's mom asked me. She stared right at me as she spoke. She stared right at my face. I stopped looking at the board and stared back. I felt

glued to her. Then I noticed her lips were thin and pale. She had a shadow of a moustache.

That shadow of a moustache made me think about her legs, that she shaved her legs. My mom who had perfect almost hairless legs and full red lips told me that shaving your legs was a big mistake. Once you shaved them, the hair grew thicker and was awful. It made rough whiskers that were not pleasant to the touch.

I actually didn't think it much of a problem. I mean, how often does someone touch your legs? Yet, when I looked at Mrs. Simpson's moustache and thought of her legs, I had to agree with my mom. It felt like a mistake.

I almost said it out loud, it's being a mistake. I almost warned Mrs. Simpson not to shave her legs. I couldn't believe I was there asking for a stupid taxi and thinking about Mrs. Simpson's whiskery legs. What was the matter with me?

Mrs. Simpson repeated her question. Her voice sounded like cinnamon, hot red cinnamon candies that burned your tongue. Margaret glared at her mother. Her mother smiled. Her smile didn't look like a smile. It looked like a growl might sound. Her lip curled a bit and made her face look mean.

And suddenly I was glad Mrs. Simpson didn't own a cat. For some strange reason I knew that if she owned a cat, she would hurt it. I don't know how I knew she didn't own a cat, but I was sure of it. And I was relieved.

It felt weird sometimes, how thoughts just popped into my mind out of nowhere. "You're not quite connected," my Aunt Beryle would often say. Aunt Beryle was my godmother. If something happened to my mom, she was supposed to take care of me, especially my spiritual well being. I didn't like that fact. My mother's youngest sister, Beryle, was not my favorite aunt.

"Connected to what?" I'd wanted to know.

"Life," she'd answered and that made no sense at all. It made no sense at all. How could you not be connected to life? Was I a ghost? The thought appealed to me.

"Want to go for a coke?"

I didn't quite understand the words as Margaret said them. Was she asking me to go with her to get a coke? I was lost for a moment in that ghost world I seemed to be connected to.

"What?"

“Let’s go.” And we were off. Away from the board, away from Mrs. Simpson, away from the embarrassing questions about the taxi I had asked for.

“What if I get a call?” Mrs. Simpson said, her voice not nearly so full of spice now.

“Answer it,” Margaret said without even looking at her mother. I stood stock-still. I knew that Margaret was punishing her mother. I had never punished my mother for anything. I wouldn’t dream of it. Part of me wanted to tell Margaret it was ok, I had to go home.

But, going for a coke with Margaret!

We sat at the back of Mr. McConnell’s store on red stools that swirled. Margaret swirled and swirled as she drank her coke. She made a game of it – swirling and sipping her coke through the straw, swirl, dip, sip, swirl. I really wanted to try that swirl dip sip trick, but I knew I would knock the straw out of the bottle and splash the counter and maybe even fall off the stool. I could see the whole thing happening, so I just stayed in one spot, my lips almost glued to the straw as I sipped. I watched her out of the corner of my eye.

We never spoke. I wanted to say something. I had imagined all the things we would talk about, but I just couldn’t make myself say anything.

When we were done, I paid for the cokes. Both of them. I usually had a bit of money on me. Mom called it mad money. “Never leave the house without mad money,” she often cautioned. Mad money was the money you needed if you got in trouble. Mad money could save you.

Twice after that, I casually wandered over towards the taxi stand and when she saw me, Margaret would get off her little stool and join me. We’d walk over to McConnell’s and I’d buy us a coke.

On the third outing, I tried Margaret’s trick. I swirled around and dipped my head towards the straw and took a sip. I’d been practicing in my head before I went to bed. I knew I’d be able to do it. And I did it.

Margaret laughed when I did it. She patted me on the back and laughed. I was in.

“Can I see the ‘L’?” she asked.

We walked through the tall thin poplars that lined our house on both sides. We entered through the only real door in the house. That was one of the strangest things about the ‘L’ – it had only one door. “Damn fire trap,” Grandfather often reminded everyone.

“Oh God,” Mom would reply, meaning as if we didn’t have enough to worry about without thinking about fires. Mom didn’t like to be reminded of bad things. When Mom was young she had had a lot of fun, dancing and figure skating. She had gorgeous legs. And gorgeous eyes. And red full lips that reminded me of Maureen O’Hara.

But now she didn’t get to dance much, and not to figure skate at all. She had been looking after people lately. She had been looking after her mom and my grandfather and, I guess, me.

The ‘L’ had originally had one long corridor with a door at each end. The leg part was attached later and when that had been done, the door disappeared. The leg of the ‘L’ was where Grandfather slept in a hospital bed Mom had rented from the Holy Family Hospital where she worked as a special duty nurse on week-ends.

She slept in that room most of the time too, near Grandfather, where she could keep an eye on him, where she could change his dressings, empty the smelly bag attached by a tube to his dying bowel, where she could comfort him as he wept into the night. And where she could nurse him.

Mom had trained as a nurse in Humbolt, Saskatchewan. But she’d stopped nursing strangers when her own mother took sick. Now it seemed she was limiting her nursing mostly to loved ones. It was a good, and a very sad thing to do.

My grandfather was dying and we all knew it. But no one would say it, never, never would we say it. Grandfather didn’t want to die. He wasn’t ready to die. He wasn’t ready to say good-bye to all the things about being alive that he loved so much.

I was one of those things. So was my mom. That’s why we were spending as much time with Grandfather as we could. That was why we had moved here to be with him and live in the ‘L’. Grandfather was my Dad’s dad. But Mom loved him as if he were her own father. More, perhaps. Afterall, her own father had left them all to go to make his fortune in Brazil. That had broken my grandmother’s heart.

My mom and dad had grown up together in the little town of Cudworth, Saskatchewan. They were almost like brothers and sisters. Then, Mom came home from Humbolt broken hearted and bang, she and my dad fell in love. But now he was gone and my mom was looking after his dad. We were still a family. “And a damn good one,” Grandfather would say.

I showed Margaret the porch with its little couch and small dresser. It was the space which served as both the front entrance to the house and as my bedroom.

Margaret plunked down on my couch bed and swung her feet back and forth. I just loved the way Margaret took charge of everything. I looked at her face carefully. I was concluding that she must have been at least two years older than I was. I was sure she was wearing eyeliner.

Would I be like that in two years? Would I be able to walk into someone's bedroom, a bedroom I had never been in before and plunk right down on the person's bed and swing my legs back and forth as if I had sat on that bed a million times?

"You have this bed all to yourself?" Margaret wanted to know.

I did. It wasn't very big. It was only wide enough for one person and maybe a dog. If you had one. I wanted one, but we didn't have one. I thought about having a dog a lot.

"Mom mostly sleeps in Grandfather's room, to look after him."

"Yeah, I heard he was dying."

I looked anxiously towards the kitchen. Was Grandfather up? Might he have heard? We never said that out loud. It was the unspoken truth we all lived with, but would never say. Some lies were ok to say out loud, but not ones that counted. But truths, at least some truths, had to be kept secret. That was a sacred rule.

"He's got cancer," I whispered.

Margaret raised her eyes, nodded her head in understanding. "My mom's deaf," she said. "We never say so. She'd be fired. But she's deaf as a post."

Margaret was a surprising person. She understood things. She was really smart. You didn't have to say much to her. She just understood. She didn't discuss things, didn't ask a lot of questions. She listened, and she got it. Margaret felt like quite an old person in a young person's body. Sometimes I felt like that. Sometimes I felt like an old person. But I never wore eyeliner.

There was another big difference between Margaret and me. Her old person was smarter and tougher than I was. Her old person didn't seem to be worried or scared. It just seemed to take things as they were. I wondered if Margaret could teach me how to do that.

My mom was like Margaret in that she acted as if she didn't have a care in the world. But if you looked into her eyes when she didn't know you were looking at her, you could see that she worried about everything. You could tell when her hand shook a little when she was thinking hard and smoking. She smoked a lot. But not in front of Grandfather.

Grandfather had to give up cigars. He loved them so much, he still snuck a few. But Mom didn't want to tempt him. So, she mostly smoked outside. And she never smoked cigars, though she loved them.

I was a bit like my Mom. Oh, not that I smoked cigars. Not that. I was like my mom in that I worried about everything, too.

"You're too young to worry," Mom would say. "What have you got to worry about?" That was a dumb thing to say. I had so much to worry about. I had everything to worry about. Just like she did. And even worse, I didn't have control over anything in my life. I was at the mercy of the world.

Margaret wanted to see the kitchen. We walked through the living room, the dining room, to the kitchen. There weren't any rooms really. It was all one long room with different furniture that indicated what the room was used for. There was a couch and big chair and a record player in the living room, and lots of pictures on the wall. There was a picture of me and my dad. He was wearing black pants and a white shirt and seemed to be seven feet tall.

"Whose that?" Margaret wanted to know. It was the picture of me and my dad. "My dad!" I said. "That's my dad."

"He's cute."

I'd never thought of my dad as cute before. It felt like a strange thing to say. For a moment I was a bit afraid of Margaret. For a moment I didn't want her in our house looking at my dad and saying he was cute.

"He's at war," I told her.

"The war's over."

I stared at Margaret. Was it true? Could the war be over?

Margaret stayed for about an hour. We listened to three records. I wanted Margaret to go home. I had to talk to my mom.

"I got to go now," Margaret said, right in the middle of *Home on the Range* by Gene Autrey. Normally that was one of my favorite songs. Right now, I could hardly hear the words of the song. "The war is over," were the words I was thinking about.

"Mom'll be getting a lot of calls. She'll be going nuts." Margaret laughed when she said that.

I walked Margaret to the door. She shook my hand when she left. No kid had ever shaken my hand before. “Don’t worry about your dad,” she said. “Having a dad in the house isn’t always the best thing in the world.” And with that, she left.

I marched up to my grandfather’s room. It was the only room in the house with a door on it. I knocked, softly, in case he were sleeping. I wanted to walk right in, but I didn’t want to disturb him either. It was my mom I wanted to disturb.

Mom was lying on the cot next to grandfather’s hospital bed. She was reading one of the magazines she bought from Mr. McConnell’s store, the same store where Margaret and I drank cokes and swirled on the red chrome stools. It was the only general store in town.

I always got the magazines when she was done. She liked to be the first to open the magazine and read the new never read before pages. It bothered her if someone else looked at the magazine before she did. It wasn’t that they tore out a page or did a puzzle or anything. She just wanted to be first. My aunt had visited once from Nipawin and had read one of Mom’s magazines before Mom had.

What’s the big deal? Aunt Beryle wanted to know, hurt that Mom had glared at her over a stupid thing like a damn magazine.

“For Gods’ sake give Rose something,” Grandfather told my aunt. That explained it all. Mom didn’t have a lot. Just Beryle me and Grandfather, I guess.

She didn’t have a full time job and she for sure didn’t have a husband. He was “at war”. A war that I had just been told was over.

“I have to talk to you,” I announced.

“I’m reading.”

“It’s important.”

“Marie, I’m reading.”

“Rose, I need to talk.” I never called her Rose. I scared myself.

I think I scared her, too.

Maybe she knew what I was going to ask her. Maybe she had heard Margaret tell me the war was over. Maybe she was trying to avoid this conversation.

She wasn't busy at all. Reading a magazine with pictures of women in pretty clothes, reading a magazine with advertisements for perfume and lipstick and jewelry you couldn't afford, was not busy.

She was lying back against the pillows, her one arm holding the magazine, the other arm resting on the quilt. She looked as if she might be ready for a nap. Often she stayed up all night with Grandfather if he needed her to. She would do anything for him. If she could have taken away his cancer and given it to herself she would have. You could tell. That was my mom. When she liked someone, she really liked him.

I climbed onto the bed beside her and reached over and put my arms on both sides of her shoulders. The magazine dropped. Her eyes flashed anger for a moment.

I didn't flinch. I had something I needed to do.

"Is the war over?" I looked into her eyes when I asked the question. Mom had a theory that if you told an outright lie your eyes would turn red. She always knew when I was lying, and that was how she knew. My eyes turned red.

She didn't answer me. She sat up. That made me sit up, too.

"He's not coming back," she said. "He's gone."

"You said he was in the war," I insisted.

"He was. But now he isn't."

"Uncle Joe is still in the war."

Uncle Joe was my mom's favorite brother. He spoke perfect German. I guess he must have looked like a bad German because he was a spy. He'd spied against the Nazis and he'd disappeared. No one knew where he was. My grandmother died thinking he had been captured and tortured and killed. But no one knew for sure.

I had a feeling he was alive, but not well. I had a feeling he was in some kind of a hospital. I had a feeling he was afraid. But I couldn't have told you why. I hadn't told anyone. Everyone had her own theory about my Uncle Joe, the brave spy.

My mom thought my uncle was coming back. So, why not my dad, too? Maybe they were together. Maybe they had been captured by the bad Germans, but had escaped and were hiding out. Maybe they didn't know the war was over. Maybe there were hiding in a barn where a beautiful young woman brought them home-made bread and fresh milk

every day. Maybe my uncle had fallen in love with her. I was making this up. I didn't believe a word of it.

"The war's over," Grandfather said. His voice was heavy with medicine. It slurred.

"You lied," I couldn't believe my mother had let me believe that the war was still on and that was why my dad was away.

"Not telling is not lying."

What could I say? It was a rule we all lived by. And her eyes were not red.

I just sat there trying to make sense of it all, trying to understand what it meant. Was my dad coming back or not? When would he be coming? Who knew? Did my mother know something else she wasn't telling me?

"When Dad comes home we'll have to move," I said, ready to cry.

"You're right," she said.

I had nothing more to say. She picked up her magazine. She had read about half the articles, looked at about half the pictures. She handed the magazine to me. "What to read it?"

It was her way of saying sorry, so how could I say no. I took the magazine and lay down beside her. I wanted to read it with her, to be with her the way Margaret was with her Mom. I wished for a moment, just a tiny moment that my Mom might go blind and I could read the magazine for her. But that was an awful thought and I almost threw up thinking it.

Sometimes my own thoughts scared me to death.

I busied myself with the page advertising purses and shoes. The purses and shoes were positioned around three alligators. The purses and shoes were made of alligator skins. That upset me so much I dropped the magazine. It landed on the floor and that's when I saw it.

The magazine opened to a picture of a group of girls in pretty nylon pjs. Pink, blue, pale cream. They had their hair in braids and curlers. They were drinking mugs of hot chocolate. Some girls were on the floor; some were on the bed. They were talking and laughing. They were telling secrets. They were all best friends.

My breath went away and my voice went squeaky and high the way it does when I get excited. I jumped off the bed, out of the bedroom, through the bathroom, kitchen, dining room, living, porch and out to the path I'd made between the poplars. I ran straight to the taxi stand and made the announcement.

“We’re having a pajama party!”

Margaret laughed. She laughed at almost everything I said. “You want to sleep over at my house?”

I nodded.

“Ok, on Friday?”

Friday. In three days. Would three days be enough time to get ready? I thought I'd better say yes to Friday just in case she changed her mind.

I nodded again. I was about to leave when she stopped me.

“Don’t you want to know where I live?”

Margaret wrote her address down on a piece of paper. “Come right after supper. Don’t come too late,” she warned.

I nodded again. My throat was too dry to let words come out. My tongue felt like something big and strange that didn’t belong in my mouth.

That night, I made a mental list of all the things I had to do. PJs were first on the list. Pink nylon PJs. And snacks. Snacks that traveled well. Maybe some magazines, and records. The girls in the pictures were listening to records. I had looked at the pictures and the article so often I had it memorized.

I showed it to Mom and she agreed to get me the pink nylon PJs. She was excited for me. Margaret was my first real girl friend and this was my first pajama party.

Finally. Friday. Suppertime. I wolfed down my food. Mom was going to drive me. She seemed to be eating unusually slowly, chewing her food so thoroughly. I couldn’t stand it.

“I can walk.”

“Don’t be silly.”

She was still eating. I picked up my plate and licked it. I put it down with a bit of a bang. She shook her head a little and smiled. She knew I was excited.

"Let's go, let's go." My black plastic suitcase was waiting by the door, the only door in the house, the door leading from my porch/ bedroom.

"I'll just check on your grandfather." Three hours later, I stood knocking at Margaret's door.

"I thought you weren't coming." Margaret was standing in her underwear and an old T-shirt. That old T-shirt was nothing like the pink nylon PJs I had imagined. It was nothing like the ones I had carefully packed in my black plastic overnight bag. It was certainly nothing like the ones I had seen in my mother's magazine.

The T-shirt was too big for her. It had a small tear under the arm. She didn't say anything else. We just stood there for a minute and then we went in.

I had to get undressed in the dark. I opened my little black suitcase and pulled out the nylon pjs. I didn't feel like putting them on. They looked ridiculous. I stuffed them back in the suitcase. I could barely see what I was doing. I closed the lid and caught a piece of pink frill. I could see it sticking out. I was afraid to open it, but I was afraid I'd tear the PJs too. I just stared at the suitcase with its little piece of nylon sticking out.

It wasn't exactly pitch dark because there were white plastic curtains over the windows and the light from the street lamp in front of the house shone through the pale thinness of those curtains.

"I brought some records," I started to tell Margaret. I'd spent hours picking them out. All the favorites that Mom and I liked to listen to. Big band stuff, Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey. Mom said it was silly, that kids didn't listen to that.

"I'm a kid," I'd said. Mom had only laughed. A lot of people laughed at things I said. That was strange. I never felt funny. I can't remember, once in all the time we lived in the 'L' or anytime in my childhood, can I remember thinking that I was funny. A comedian, I was not.

I had selected six records. I had the records carefully packed with the night snacks and the pink nylon PJs.

"Ssh," Margaret whispered, "You'll wake my sisters. We're sleeping with them."

I looked at the bed. Two young women in dirty slips lay on the bed. I'd known she'd had sisters.

"Where?"

"Ssh," Margaret warned again. "I usually sleep in the middle. You get the outside."

Margaret crawled over one sleeping sister. She crawled in upside down, putting her head next to the sister's feet.

"More room," she said and turned her back to me. My stomach felt funny.

I shivered. I was still wearing my underwear. I felt too naked to be lying next to a stranger. I tried to squeeze myself up tight, making myself as small as possible, so as not to disturb Margaret's sisters, so as not to touch them or have them touch me.

I could tell they were awake, just not saying anything. One of the sisters shifted and her bare legs rubbed against my arm. She must have shaved her legs because they felt like wire brushes.

I remembered Mrs. Simpson's moustache. I remembered thinking of the possibility of her having bristly whiskery legs. I looked around for any signs of a cat. There were none.

The sister's leg whiskers scratched me every time the sister stirred. I would have moved closer to the edge but I was already as close as I could get. My arms and legs were half on and half off. The only thing that kept me from falling off was a dresser pushed up against the bed. My face was touching the cold wood. There was an order coming off the wood. A sour, almost rancid smell of oil and bubble gum. I saw some old wads of gum pushed into the side of the dresser, just a bit below where it met the bed, just about, but not quite out of sight.

At that moment, I knew I was going to be sick to my stomach. I had already felt a bit queasy, lying there in the dark, not saying anything, getting touched by that cold wood, those rough legs. The gum put me right over the edge.

I tried to whisper to Margaret but a pair of feet separated us. The toe nails on those so close to my face feet were long and not very clean. They had been polished red, months ago. Somehow those feet seemed to stop my voice from reaching Margaret who lay with her back to me. Margaret's other sister's face must have been almost touching the wall. I sure didn't want that sister to hear me.

"Margaret," I choked. No answer.

"Marg, Margaret." Somehow my voice gained a little control, then almost burst out of its strangle hold.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I sort of yelped.

"Oh shit!" The sister whose face was almost touching the wall sat up in bed and reached for the metal chain attached to a bare light bulb dangling over the bed. The light glared right into our faces. It was like a war movie. It scared me worse than the old gum made me feel sick.

"No, it's okay. I'm alright."

The chain was pulled again, the light vanished, and then, without warning, the bed became a jangle of arms and legs and curses as I rushed for the toilet. The pajama party was over.

Chapter Two: Invited

Neither Margaret nor I ever mentioned that pajama party again. I knew there would be no more invitations to sleep over at her house.

I was too shy to go over to the taxi stand after that. I had to contend myself with scanning the place with my binoculars, looking for Margaret. I was busy scanning but saw no sign of her. So I focused on Mrs. Simpson. I had to adjust the lens to see her face clearly. She was looking right at me. I almost dropped the binoculars.

The way she looked at me, just staring, with a smirk on her face, I knew the sisters are told her everything. I decided not to watch the taxi stand anymore. I put the binoculars in a drawer.

I couldn't risk another one of those looks from Margaret's mother. I couldn't stand that she knew I was watching. I couldn't stand that she knew I had thrown up, that I had brought those stupid pink pajamas.

I felt rotten. I was mad at my mom. I hated the smell of grandfather. I wanted a dog. I wanted the summer to be over. I wanted to move back to the farm where my grandmother and all her animals lived. I wanted my dad to come home. I spent two weeks moping, wanting to go over to see Margaret, but afraid to.

I felt so lonesome one Friday night I poked my way down towards the taxi stand hoping Margaret might be hanging around. I couldn't see her, but I didn't want to go too close. I didn't want Mrs. Simpson to catch me. I imagined her wheeling out of that little box of a room with her wheel chair. I imagined her chasing me down the street laughing at me.

I was ready to head back to the 'L' when Margaret and her dad pulled up to the taxi cab station in an old brown Chevy pick-up. I felt so jealous when I saw them drive over I started to cry.

I continued to walk away, pretending not to care that she was all alone with her dad. I tried to stop the tears. I had my head down. That was stupid. Since I cry easily Mom had taught me a trick. If you feel like crying, look up. The brain thinks it's sad when you look down and it thinks you're happy when you look up. It really works. But it would be stupid to be walking looking up when you are pretending not to see someone. What could I look at?

Maybe if a crow flew by. I liked crows. My grandmother had a pet crow. But there were no crows in sight, even though the poplars would have been a good place for them to make a nest.

"Hi," Margaret yelled from the truck. "Hey, it's me." She said it in such a welcoming way, I turned around, and then I spoke, unable to stop myself.

"Where you going?" I blurted, imagining all sorts of wonderful places, like going out for shoe-strings at Woo Ling's, or to the movies at the Orpheum theatre behind the hotel.

"The drive-in."

The drive-in, that was the best yet. The drive-in was across the river, out in the pines. The drive-in was popcorn and hot dogs and real greasy chips from the concession stand. The drive-in was the tall swings and the twister slide just as it was getting dark, just as the fire-flies were coming out and music played on the speakers. The drive-in was pure heaven.

Mr. Simpson leaned over Margaret and pushed open the door. "Wanna come, Marie?"

I was surprised he knew my name, he'd hardly ever really seen me. Not up close any way. He didn't always live with Margaret and her mom and the sisters. I figured he traveled a lot. Grandfather had heard he was a Watkins salesman. I could imagine him selling spices. I thought spices would be a nice thing to sell. Things to make food smell nice, taste good. It would be great to have a dad who sold spices.

"Wanna?" he asked again. I couldn't believe it.

"I... I'll ask my mom." For sure I wanted to go. Was he kidding?

"Macey'll call her and let her know." Macey was Margaret's mother. I looked her way, she nodded that she would and sort of motioned us away with her hand.

"I'd better check..."

"Hurry up, we'll be late...never mind." Mr. Simpson sounded impatient. He wanted to get going to that drive-in.

"Be sure to call my mom," I yelled as I hopped in. Somehow leaving like that without telling Mom, or without bringing a sweater made it even more exciting. I knew Mom'd be mad. But Mrs. Simpson was going to tell her. And I had never been at the drive-in with anyone but Mom before. It was the most grown-up thing I had ever done. And maybe the most wicked.

"Isn't this exciting?" Mr. Simpson asked. I didn't know what to say. How could he know what I was thinking? I looked at Margaret. She looked away, out the window, not at her dad, not at me. And suddenly I wished I had asked my mom. I couldn't explain why.

"It's your night girls, your night on the town," he said again.

"Could we play on the swings?" I said when we got there.

Playing on the swings was the best part. There was a big clock that was on the screen. It told you the time. Fifteen minutes. Fourteen minutes. Thirteen minutes. I loved that clock. I loved the race to the concession stand just before the clock said ten minutes to show-time. In between the big hands telling you what time it was, pictures of food would appear on the screen. Pictures of hot dogs, of popcorn, of potato chips.

"Swings are for kids," Margaret said. She still wasn't looking at me. I almost felt the way I did the day I had gone to her house for the pajama party. The idea in my head of a drive in and what was happening weren't the same. I didn't know what to do.

"Go ahead," Margaret's dad said. And we jumped out of the truck. I landed with a thud. The truck was a lot higher than a car. I wasn't used to getting in and out of it. It made me feel small and graceless.

I glanced at the truck as we raced towards the big screen and the swings. I had a hard time finding our car sometimes, had a hard time remembering where it was parked.

That's why Mom always parked near the concession stand. But Margaret's dad had parked way over in the back, almost under the pines.

I forgot about the truck. I forgot about everything when I got under that big clock ticking away the minutes, making every minute precious, exciting, as if we were racing against time. I felt like counting the times the swing went in and out, in and out in a minute. I felt that life was being governed by that big clock.

Five minutes to go. I looked at Margaret. She was twirling round and round, twisting the rope then letting herself go in crazy out of control circles. I wanted to try, but just watching her made me dizzy.

When she stopped, I was standing close to her. She jumped when she saw me.

I felt stupid. I was wanting to ask her if we shouldn't hurry and go to the concession stand. But I didn't have any money. How could I say it was time to buy stuff? If I had asked Mom, she would have given me money. Mad money. Money to get home with. But I hadn't asked. I had just gone without asking. And now it was three minutes to show time and we had no stuff to eat.

"Let's go back." Margaret didn't mention the concession stand. We looked towards the spot where the truck was parked. It looked far away, almost by itself, without many cars parked around it, and no other trucks.

Margaret's dad leaned out of the truck's window and waved. "You guys want some popcorn?"

"Sure," Margaret answered for us. She didn't say anything about hot dogs or French fries so neither did I. He went for the popcorn without us. We scrambled back into the truck. Margaret had to help me get in. I haven't got the strongest arms. And I'm as graceful as a camel.

I don't know why I said that. I mean, I've never seen a camel. They may be like horses. But you can't imagine them being very graceful with those big humps, and those big lips. They just don't look graceful. But I may be misjudging them.

Mr. Simpson came back with a big cone of popcorn. Butter had dribbled down the side. "Here, you sit in the middle and hold the popcorn, Marie," Margaret's dad said, "that way Margaret and I won't get it all." Margaret gave her dad a real scowl. He just smiled and she crawled over me, giving me a bit of a poke as she did. Her dad handed me the cone. I felt funny in the middle. I could tell Margaret wanted to sit next to her dad, she didn't get to see him all that often. But I was glad to be away from the speaker. I didn't like it so close to my ears. Mom always put it in the back when we went to the drive-in, which wasn't really that often.

The cone was awful slippery from the butter, and it was a bit wobbly because the paper wasn't really thick enough. I needed two hands to hold it.

"Here, stick it between your knees," Mr. Simpson said. "Isn't that better?"

It was. Well, I could hold it and still get some. The cone felt warm and a bit wet and I worried I'd get butter on my skirt. I tried to hold my legs really still and not squeeze the paper cone too hard. It didn't feel natural. Mom always bought me my own popcorn.

We all sat there eating popcorn and watching the movie. Margaret's hand would reach over and fill itself up with white buttery popcorn. Her dad's would come slowly back and forth from the popcorn to his mouth, hand to mouth, one kernel at a time. I became terribly aware of each of his movements. They seemed so careful, so planned. Margaret didn't seem to notice. She munched away like a little maniac, her eyes glued to the big screen.

I hardly took any. I was afraid my hand would bump into his as he moved slowly back and forth. I sat very still.

"You girls like it here?" her dad said out of the blue.

We nodded that we did. I stuffed some popcorn in my mouth so I couldn't say anything. I wasn't liking it but I had no idea why.

"Look at those two." He leaned over me and pointed to the car next to us. Their car windows were all steamy. We could see inside because we were so high. We could see that the girl's blouse was unbuttoned. I stared at the blouse. Her boyfriend's hand was exploring her brassiere, the top of her exposed breast.

I wished the girl would sit up. I felt embarrassed for her. I looked away.

"He sure is having fun," Mr. Simpson insisted. "Lucky guy."

"Dad." Margaret said it in such a way that it made me think she had heard this before and didn't want him to get started on something, this kind of talk, or something. I was pretty sure dads didn't usually talk about this. I know my mom would have said something like, "God, why don't they just stay home," or "Kathleen Marie don't you stare. They're being silly." Instead, Margaret's dad said something that made me go purple.

"You'd ever had anyone touch you there?"

I knew he was asking me. I just stared at the screen the way Margaret was and pretended not to hear. I felt Mr. Simpson's hand move towards the popcorn. Some fell onto my lap. His hand searched, found, lifted the kernels to his mouth. I felt the car fill up with something hard to describe, a heavy silence. People breathing. Not us.

"I remember the first time I touched a woman." Margaret and I strained to watch the movie. "This stuff embarrass you guys?" he laughed. I heard myself laugh, too. I hated that strangled silence. So I laughed again. He continued, "It is pretty scary, but it's exciting, too." He reached over and touched Margaret's shoulder. "Hey Margie, your old dad embarrassing you?"

"Naw," Margaret shrugged his arm off.

"Want hot dogs?" The father opened the door to the truck. If I'd been with Mom, I would have yelled "and French fries" after him, but I didn't. I didn't say a word. Neither did Margaret.

We didn't talk when he was gone. We pretended to watch the movie.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I said. I crawled out of the truck on Mr. Simpson's side. As I crawled over where he had sat I felt frightened and I said the stupidest thing.

"Do you think your mom called my mom? Do you think she knows I'm here. Maybe I should go home. Maybe she doesn't know where I am."

"Shut up!" Margaret said.

"I could call a taxi," I told her.

“You’re nuts.”

I didn’t feel nuts. I felt as if I were in another person’s body. I wasn’t sure what to do. I crawled out of the truck and once again fell to the ground with a thud.

“Jesus!” Margaret said.

“I’m all right,” I promised, gathering myself up and scurrying off to the bathroom. But when I got there I couldn’t pee. I just didn’t have to any more. I felt badly about coming to the drive-in. I felt so bad about not telling my mom. I wanted to go home. I wanted to be in my own bed.

Mr. Simpson was waiting with hot dogs when I got back. He jumped out and lifted me up and in. I tried to get in without his touching me but it was impossible.

When I got in, Margaret crawled over me. Her dad didn’t say anything. I leaned against the door. My heart was racing. I felt cold. I didn’t eat the hot dog. It smelled awful. Sweet and rich. It smelled like the Burns meat packing plant smelled.

That plant was situated right next door to the hotel where we’d lived. I’d smelled that smell before. I’d heard the pigs squealing when they knew they were going to die.

I squeezed the hotdog tight into a ball and shoved it in my pocket. We sat there watching the movie, Margaret and her dad eating and me trying not to smell the hot dog or think of the squealing pigs when suddenly I felt as if I might pee in my pants. What if I peed in my pants and it got the seat wet? Sometimes I wet the bed. What if I peed in Mr. Simpson’s truck?

That was nuts. I wouldn’t pee in the truck if I were awake. I never really peed my pants when I was awake and there was no way I was going to fall asleep in Mr. Simpson’s truck.

But I did. I did fall asleep. I don’t know how it happened. But it did.

I must have rested my head against the door. And I guess I did fall asleep. I can’t quite believe I did, the way I was feeling and all, but Margaret’s dad was carrying me into the porch of the ‘L’ and Mom was thanking him for being so kind when I woke up.

I went frantic to get away from him and almost knocked him on his kiester in my struggles. "It's okay baby, you're home." I think my mom thought I didn't know where I was. Sometimes when I would wake up at night that would happen to me, especially after a bad dream.

I stomped into our house confused, embarrassed, frightened for having fallen so deeply asleep. I could hear my mother's stupid voice laughingly explain away my outburst in terms of my being "so self conscious about those long gangly legs".

Margaret said something, but I don't remember what. She was standing beside her dad when he was carrying me. That made his carrying me even worse. She wasn't sleeping. She didn't fall asleep in the stupid movie.

"See you again sometime," I heard Mr. Simpson call out. I didn't answer. I knew I wouldn't. I never wanted to see him again.

I had a hard time falling asleep. I kept remembering the feeling in the truck, the heavy silence. I had never really been around a dad. It wasn't the way I thought it would be.

I had always imagined being with a dad would make you feel safe. It would make you feel proud and safe. I couldn't say for sure how Margaret felt. But proud and safe weren't the words that seemed to fit. The trouble was, no words seemed to fit.

I liked words. I liked imagining them, playing with them in my mind. I even liked making up words. But for the life of me, I could not think of a word that described what it was like to be with Margaret and her dad.

Finally one came to me. Hollow. It felt hollow.

That surprised me. Hollow was a word that I thought you would feel when you were alone. Or when you were feeling badly because you didn't have a dad. But hollow was the word for being with Margaret's dad.

A great big awful hollow. If I could have given the word a color, it would have been gray.

That night, I woke up dreaming that I was in a big bath-tub filled with bubbles that smelled like apricots and almonds. And my bed was wet. My pajamas were wet.

And more than anything in the world I wanted my dad. I wanted my dad to be living in our house. I wanted him to be home from the war, strong and smart and home every night.

I knew if my dad were here I would never wet the bed again. I was sure of it.

In the morning Mom sat on the edge of my bed. I was so uncomfortable. The sheet and mattress under me were damp and cold. My pajamas were damp and cold. I could smell myself. I didn't want Mom to know.

She didn't seem to notice. She told me that she was surprised when Mrs. Simpson phoned her. It wasn't like me to go off without asking permission. She didn't want me to do it again.

I nodded, promising I wouldn't.

I told her I was sorry.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked indicating all was forgiven.

"It was great. Mr. Simpson bought us popcorn and hot dogs. We went on the swings. We had a great time. Margaret's dad is so much fun."

"Are you okay?"

"Jim Dandy!"

"Did you pee the bed?"

"No. No."

Mom looked sad when I said that. I was sure she could smell the pee even though I kept the covers pulled tight. My fingers hurt I was clutching the blanket so tightly, crushing the blanket against my chest.

And then I had the strangest feeling. I can't explain it. But I wished my mom would call me a liar. I wished she would slap me and call me a liar.

My mom never slapped me. Never spanked me. Not once in my life. But that day, I wished she would. That day I wished I could get the worst spanking of my life.

Chapter Three: The Forsay Gang

“Who are you watching now?”

I’d turned my attention from one side of the ‘L’ to the other. I had given up watching Margaret. Every time I looked in the direction of the taxi stand that old hollow gray feeling would come back.

“She’s watching the whorehouse,” Grandfather said.

“Katherine Marie!”

“Oh for God’s sake Rose, there are a bunch of kids living over there.”

Grandfather, as usual, was right. There were a bunch of kids over there, twelve of them to be exact.

“What happened to Margaret?” Mom had hoped that friendship would pan out for me.

“She’s too old,” I mumbled not wanting to go into detail.

“I didn’t think anyone was too old or too young for you,” Mom said, unwilling to be shut out of my mind. “I never thought that would be an issue.” She just loved getting inside my head.

“I want some kid friends,” I told her. “Something normal.”

“Good luck,” she said and laughed. I wanted to punch her in the nose.

“I’m going to find some.” My voice faltered a bit and I could tell Mom was sorry she had said the “Good Luck” the way she had. I knew she meant there was nothing normal about us. And I suppose she was right. But I just didn’t want to start a new school without knowing even one person, normal or not.

I was determined. It was time I took things into my own hands. It was time I made things turn out the way I wanted them to. I knew the path to my success lay across the poplars. I knew it lay in the blonde girl they called Annie and her eleven brothers. I knew my success depended upon my becoming a member of the Forsay gang.

That gang stood out like a sore thumb. Not that a sore thumb really sticks out. You just feel it a lot, are aware of it. Maybe that’s why folks say “sticks out”. That gang stuck out all right. They were hard to miss. Two set of twins were part of the whole gang of boys all with pale faces, thin blonde hair and one girl so frail-looking you worried about her the minute you saw her.

At least, I did. But I should have, I mean, she had lots of back up. Lots. Twelve back ups.

Every day I scanned the street for signs of them. I watched them come and go, always the twelve of them, always one in a wagon pulled by a beautiful golden retriever.

They had everything, a big family, a dog, a dad. Everything I wanted.

“Go outside,

Kitten,” Mom said. “It’s so darn hot in here.” She was right. It was only 8 am and it was already that kind of day on the prairies that makes you long for ice cubes and fans and loose clothes and cold water from almost anywhere. The day was going to be hot. Hot, hot, hot. “A scorcher,” Grandfather said.

I watched those kids doing what every kid wants to do on a hot day. They were getting cool under the garden hose. At least, Annie was getting cool. She was wearing a skimpy little bathing suit a pale yellow color. She wore her shoes and socks. The shoes squished with water when she ran.

The boys were laughing, horsing around, taking turns spraying her. As I watched, I had a wonderful urge to join in, to let the cool water spray me, take away the heat, let me be part of the fun. I tried to imagine the cool water spraying my legs, my arms. I tried to hear my own laughter. I wanted to be there with them.

But how could I? Who had invited me? They were a gang, a gang of brothers with one blonde sister.

I put down the binoculars and opened the door to the ‘L’. I leaned against the door and watched and listened. I was partly hidden by the row of Poplars that separated the ‘L’ from their huge house with more rooms than you could imagine.

Annie was laughing wild screams of excitement. I thought she was having the time of her life. The time I could never have, without brothers and at least one sister.

There was something in Annie's laughter that made me look closer, listen harder. The laughter was too shrill, too insistent of fun. I went back in and looked with the binoculars again.

And then I saw that her thin body was becoming covered with huge red blotches where the water stung. Her eyes were wide with fear.

The brothers weren't spraying Annie the way Mom had sometimes sprayed me, on the farm, when I was just a kid. Not the soft, filmy spray you can dance to.

These brothers were spraying hard. The hose was rigid with water, screaming with the hard riveting pulse of the water hammering onto Annie. A fireman's hose of water. And for one second I thought of my Uncle Joe, the one tortured by the bad Germans. Did they spray him with water, throw him helpless into a corner? Had he'd been brave, not told the secrets they wanted?

Only one brother did not spray. One brother sat in a wagon while the others sprayed. A golden retriever attached to the wagon by a harness sat and watched. The boy in the wagon wasn't paying much attention to what was going on. He was concentrating on a piece of wood that he was carving into perfect replica of his own dog.

I learned later that he was a genius at carving. He had a house full of carvings made out of anything he could get his hands on. He had turned the whorehouse into an art gallery. I don't think anyone ever went there to see the art, but they could have.

I walked out of the house and through the Poplars towards them. I had on all my clothes. "Spray me," I said. I wasn't sure where the words came from. "Spray me," I repeated. "Looks like fun."

The Forsay brother holding the hose glanced at his brother who seemed to be tied inside that wagon. I wasn't sure why. The boy in the wagon stopped carving. He glanced up. He didn't smile. His dog stood silent beside him.

The water hit hard. It would have knocked me down if I hadn't braced myself. It pounded like a sharp, small fist.

Annie and I endured the torture, laughing, running, screaming under the merciless pressure of the hose until the brothers tired of the game. I couldn't imagine why Annie was letting the water hurt her. But I knew why I was. I knew it was a way in. I knew it was part of the rites of passage.

I knew about rites of passage. Grandfather had taught me about them. "Everyone has them," he'd told me. In gangs in LA, the rites of passage were brutal. Sometimes you had to kill someone.

In Africa, you had to have your face scarred in beautiful but painful patterns. We'd seen pictures of the scarring in *National Geographic*.

I was so fascinated by the pictures. I could feel the knife cut the flesh. I could feel my own hot blood come to the surface. I could feel the Chief wipe it away, again, again, until it stopped and the colored ash could be put in my wounds. The ash would burn. And it would heal and I would be apart of my tribe. I could be identified. I would wear my scars proudly.

Getting hit with the water was part of my rite of passage. I prayed I wouldn't be expected to kill anyone. I hoped I wouldn't be asked to run a knife across my face. None of the Forsays had scars and they certainly didn't look like Africans.

In fact, they were as un-African as you can get. Tall, pale, with lips so fine they would have disappeared in their faces except that they were dark pink. And they were perfectly shaped, as if those lips had been stenciled on each of the Forsays and painted in with a fine pink brush. The lips were beautiful, perfect in the thin faces. Only their ears were big. All of them had big ears. But I would never have said so, even under torture.

When the water stopped, Annie and I stood, steaming in the hot sun, our bodies burning with our wounds. We walked away, away from the brothers, away from the hose, lying as if dead where the brother had dropped it.

Like two old soldiers, we walked towards main street and away from the battlefield. My clothes were already beginning to dry.

"My name's Kathleen Marie," I told her. "But my friends call me Maria." It was a lie. No one had ever called me Maria. But somehow, this ritual, this possible entrance into the gang called for a new name. So I gave myself one. I was sure it would bring good luck. I was sure it would make me belong.

"Annie," she said. She stuck out her hand. I shook it. It was surprisingly strong. Not weak and limp like the way she looked. It was more like the handshake that belonged to a man. A small thin man.

She was the second young person who had shaken my hand. I couldn't believe it. Is that what kids did? Shake hands? I realized I had no idea. I had no idea what kids did. I was an only child raised on a farm with no kids. I hadn't had a lot of kid experience.

We walked in silence for a moment. "Want a shake?" she said. I looked confused. I had no money on me, not even any mad money. Besides, she wasn't even dressed, just the skimpy yellow bathing suit. It had a tear in the back, maybe where the water had caught and pushed. I would notice, as we got to know one another, that a lot of her clothes had tears in them.

Annie reached down into her sock. She pulled out a quarter. "Let's go," she screamed, full of wild and forbidden pleasure. I raced after her.

We sat on the very stools where Margaret and I had sat and shared cokes before the pajama party, before the drive-in. I tried not to think of Margaret.

We ordered one huge strawberry malt with two straws. I was careful not to suck too fast, not to get more than my share. I was so excited sitting on the booth, next to this girl, my new friend, sharing a strawberry shake. The cool rich creamy fluid slid slowly to our

stomachs, soothing, making us well and whole and strong again. I could imagine the liquid healing the places on my arms, my legs, my back where the water had hit.

“Ain’t this good?” she said. Her lips smiled. They were perfect. They were even pinker from the strawberry stain. They didn’t look real. You could imagine her taking off those lips as one would take off ear-rings at the end of a party.

I nodded.

“We should tell a secret,” she suggested.

“A secret?” I loved the idea. The idea made me think that Annie really wanted to be my friend. Maybe she was as desperate for friends as I was. Maybe brothers didn’t count as much as I thought. I was sure telling secrets sealed a friendship.

“You first.” I wasn’t sure what level of secret Annie was thinking about. There were secrets and then there were secrets.

“My oldest brother has red hair,” she said, “he dyes it to be like us.”

Now that was a secret. I wondered how to match it.

“But if you let on you know, or if you tell anyone, he’ll kill you.”

“I won’t tell.” And I wouldn’t. I was wishing Annie had not told me such a big secret.

“I crave chocolate,” I said.

“That’s not a secret.” She looked disgusted.

“I mean I want chocolate all the time. I even pray for chocolate and my Aunt Beryle says that we can’t pray for such things. But I do. I may be praying my way to hell but I can’t seem to help myself. I pray for it every day.”

Annie looked at me hard, to see if I were telling the truth. She decided I was.

“Chocolate? Why chocolate?”

I didn’t know why. I wasn’t even sure when it started. There’d been a lot of chocolate before the war, then it had just sort of disappeared. It was as if the war had eaten up all the chocolate. It was as if people had almost forgotten all about it.

But I hadn’t. I thought about it all the time. I ended my prayers with it each night. “And God, please, please, get me some chocolate.”

“I’ll bet we could find some,” Annie said. She jumped off the bench. She looked determined. I liked her. I liked her a lot. My hopes soared.

“Maybe your brothers could help.” I figured thirteen people looking for chocolate would be a lot better than two, even if one of them was strapped in a wagon.

“Naw, they only do what they want. They wouldn’t help us.”

“Maybe if we found enough for them, too.”

“Naw, we’re girls. They have a boys’ gang. No girls allowed.”

“They let you in.” I’d watched them with the binoculars and I’d seen Annie and her brothers roam around the neighborhood. All of them together. The Forsay gang. Why was she lying?

They let me follow them, sometimes,” Annie said. “But that doesn’t mean that I’m really in.”

I realized that getting hit by a stream of water was no right of passage. I started worrying about what it would take to get those boys to let us in the gang.

We had reached the ‘L’ when Annie looked at me as if she had the most important thing in the world to say. She looked at me with squinty eyes. It made her look a bit like a mouse or a gerbil.

“I got something to ask you,” she said. “Do you like to swim?”

“I love it,” I lied. Actually I had never been swimming. Well, unless dog paddling in a paddling pool counts. But I could imagine loving it. I had seen pictures of Ester Williams swimming. I had seen clips in the movies of famous swimmers making flowers out of their legs and arms. I imagined it would be wonderful to be a fish flower.

“Let’s go.” She paused. “Let’s go to the river.” It was like casually saying let’s climb Mount Everest. The river ran through our town. It froze in the winter and you could ice fish on it. Someone had once caught a 100 pound Sturgeon in that river. Sturgeon are so old you have to skin them like a snake. The man and the fish had been in the newspaper. I was sure other big fish with skins like snakes lived in that water.

“Just us?”

“Who else?”

“Us is great. Us is fine.”

“I’m not always with my brothers she said, almost in defiance. Almost with anger. I hadn’t ever seen her without them. But then, I didn’t really know everything they did. I hardly knew anything about them, except that I wanted to be with them.

I grabbed my bathing suit and yelled out to my Mom, “We’re going to play in the water,” I sort of lied. I knew Mom would think we were going to jump in the sprinklers. I knew she’d never let me go swimming in a river. Not in the mighty Saskatchewan River!

We stood on the bank. There was no beach. I had often imagined swimming in a lake. I had seen pictures of lakes, blue as my mother’s eyes. I had seen the beaches, white with warm sand.

But this river wasn’t anything like that. This river was even better than that. This river flowed fast, making a beautiful sound like music. Tall grasses and cat-tails edged the river. I knew they were called cat-tails because Mom decorated the house with them for Thanksgiving. I had no idea why they called them cat-tails. They didn’t look anything like cat-tails.

The long brown oval tail part looked like a velvet pop-sickle. I imagined it to feel like a deer’s nose might feel, though I had never really felt either.

I could have sat all day just watching the grass move in a slight breeze. I could have stolen up to the cat-tails and stroked the velvet noses.

Annie told me to get into the water. She was watching me. She was saying it in a way that made me feel afraid. I looked around for her brothers. Was this a trick? Was it a new rite of passage?

I stuck my toe in the cold dark water.

“I can’t swim,” I confessed.

“Then why’d you come swimming? That’s stupid.”

She grabbed hold of her nose and jumped in. She disappeared for a moment, then came up. She waved. She spit water in my direction.

I watched her swim for what seemed like hours. I loved sitting there watching her move about in the water. She was like a blonde mermaid. She was such a good swimmer, she moved with such grace and ease, twisting, turning.

Annie got out. Her lips were blue with cold. Even in the heat of summer that river was ice cold. It never warmed up. It moved too fast for that. It didn’t even thaw until May.

We hadn't brought towels. We hadn't thought of towels. I unbuttoned my blouse and handed it to her. She dried herself off. She gave it back to me. "Thanks, Maria," she said.

It startled me. It was the first time I had ever heard anyone call me Maria. I had almost forgotten I had made up a new name.

"I won't tell my brothers that you didn't go in."

"They knew we were going swimming?"

"They were hoping you'd get a blood sucker. They love to burn them off."

A blood sucker! There are blood suckers in the river? I got so scared I started to burp.

"Guess they'll have to come up with something else."

What did that mean? Were they still considering letting me into the gang?

I burped again. I often burp when I get nervous. Annie stopped walking ahead of me.

"I think it's time for another secret," she said. She was one who liked secrets. "You first."

I knew I was in for it. I had to tell a big secret this time. I had two secrets. One about my dad. One about my grandfather. Neither secret did I want to say out loud. Saying something out loud made it happen. That's what my grandmother used to say. "Be careful what you say out loud."

If I told her my dad was not really at war, it would be true. If I told her my grandfather was dying, he might die. I burped again.

"I pee the bed," I blurted. I didn't even know where that secret came from. It seemed to satisfy her.

"I have a baby brother," she told me. "You burp like him."

That didn't seem like a very big secret. We moved on, her ahead of me, then she added the really secret part.

"He's in a hospital," she said. "He has water on the brain. It gives him a big head."

I had never heard of such a thing. I couldn't even imagine it. I had a morbid urge to go and see the baby with the water on his brain.

"Do you visit him?" I asked.

“Naw, why would I?” she wanted to know. She looked at me as if I were really stupid. “He don’t even know you’re there.”

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Then, without even looking at me, she said, “Maybe if we steal them some money.”

What she said confused me. We could see the baby if we stole money? For whom? The nurses? My mother was a nurse. I couldn’t imagine her letting you in to see your brother only if you gave her money. Now it was my turn to look at Annie as if she were stupid.

Then she explained. She and her brothers stole money from the guests who came to their boarding house for the day, or for a few hours even. I was going to ask her if the boarding house was really a whore house, but I wasn’t that dumb. Even though I didn’t exactly know what a whore house was, I knew Annie wouldn’t want me calling it that. It would cook my goose for sure.

Annie went on explaining while I tried to pick up clues to see if I could figure out what a whore house was. All I knew is that there were guests and they didn’t stay too long. The guests would hang their coats in a room and the brothers and Annie would sneak into that room and search their pockets for change.

So this was going to be my rite of passage. It wasn’t great, but it wasn’t as bad as murder or scarring.

The brothers made Annie and me go in alone. We moved our fingers through the pockets.

Someone banged a door down the hall. I jumped and when I did I peed my pants just a little. Not enough for anyone to notice. But me, of course. I noticed.

We got three quarters and a dime. Was it enough? Was it enough to get us to be part of the gang.

It wasn’t. The brothers just took the money and told us to get lost. Marcel, the one who was always pulled in the wagon by his dog, whose name was Mufflow, looked as if he were willing to let us in. But Frank, the oldest, the leader, said “Nope.” And that was that.

“Told you,” said Annie.

I waved good-bye. I began to make my way through the poplars. It had been a lousy day. I’d been too afraid to swim and I’d stolen money from strangers and I still wasn’t in the gang.

I felt Annie touch me before I heard her say, "I know where there might be chocolate. Mrs. Lily's garbage."

Annie was right behind me. She had followed me. All right!

Mrs. Lily was the prettiest widow in town, and the richest. Annie told me that she and her brother's had found good things in her garbage. A necklace of green beads, a silk blouse, even a silver jug. So why not chocolate?

But you had to be very careful. Mrs. Lily was known to be a really nervous Nellie and if she thought you were up to no good, she might shoot you. She called the police all the time. She always thought folks were trying to break in, to steal her precious things. She was afraid of more than robbers. She was afraid of germs, too. She even worried about floods. Now, there are not a lot of floods on the prairies, I can tell you that.

We found her garbage cans easy enough. We were careful not to make any noise. The garbage didn't look good. It had cigarette butts and slimy lettuce in it. There were empty wine bottles and several boxes of Quaker oatmeal.

"Could be she makes oatmeal cookies, oatmeal and chocolate," I said, rummaging through a particularly dirty can. Mrs. Lily had cooked a chicken, but she hadn't eaten much. The chicken was sitting, half rotten, on its uneaten breast. Only the drumsticks were gone. I guessed Mrs. Lily only liked drumsticks.

I couldn't pick up the stinking chicken. I couldn't search any more. My hands felt dirty from the lettuce and cigarette butts. And the chicken I hadn't even touched. The thought of that chicken was enough to get to me. It's weird, but thinking upsets me as much as actually doing a thing. I wish it didn't, but it does.

"I think she bathes in it," I said, feeling the need to be clean. "I think she fills her bathtub with warm water and oatmeal and she soaks her whole body in it."

"That's why she's so beautiful." Annie seemed to be agreeing with me. We were both ready to give up. We were both ready to call it a day.

I had saved Annie by joining in the hosing. I had taken some of the brunt of the water jets. She had searched in garbage for chocolate. We were even. And neither of us were in the gang.

That night, I asked Mom if I could put some oatmeal in the bathwater. She wanted to know if I had a rash. I told her no, I just wanted to soak and get real clean.

She sat on the toilet and talked to me while I soaked. Mom was good at knowing when I had something to tell her. Often I told her things while I soaked. I was born in March

and Mom said that was why I like water so much. She's right. I do like it, in a bathtub that is.

I told her about the brothers and the water and the garbage. I told her about wanting to join the gang.

"Is that all?" she wanted to know. "Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

"I stole a quarter."

"And?"

And then I told her the worst part. You might think the worst part is that we went to the river. But that wasn't the worst part. Anyway, I didn't go in, so I didn't have to confess. Those were her rules, after all. Well, sort of.

No, it wasn't that. I told her about Annie's baby brother who had water on the brain. I told her how I wanted to see him. I was curious and I wanted to see him. I felt bad because of the awful sense of curiosity I had experienced. I should have felt sorry for him. But I wanted to see him, like you want to see a circus freak.

Mom listened as I talked. She didn't get mad. She bathed my back with a sponge. It felt so good. I didn't want her to ever stop. I closed my eyes as she dipped the sponge in the hot water, squeezed it on my back, moved the warm sponge softly down my back, dipped into the hot water, squeezed, rubbed.

As she bathed me, she talked in her lovely soothing voice. It was deep, and even. It rarely went shrill or loud. It was a strong voice, a voice that you could imagine singing. But actually my mother was not a good singer. When she sang, her voice wavered and went off key. But I loved it. I loved it even more than I would had it been perfect. It made her vulnerable and even more beautiful than she already was.

"I know him," Mom told me. She wasn't mad. She didn't tell me I was awful to want to see him. She talked in her almost dreamy story telling voice. Mom could have been an actress. She had an actress's voice and body.

"He's on the ward where I do special duty at the hospital. I sing to him." That was strange, her singing to him. I felt a twinge of jealousy. Did he love her singing the way I did?

"He doesn't know if anyone is there." The jealousy showed a little in my voice. My mom didn't pay any attention to it.

"He knows," Mom said. "He knows."

Mom helped me dry off. She came to my room. She sat on my bed. “Tomorrow, we’ll go and see him. I know the Head Nurse, she’ll let us. She’s a prince.”

Together we walked over to the hospital. Mom brought me to the room where the baby with the big head lay sleeping.

His head was suspended with special bands of gauzy cotton. Mom told me it was so that he wouldn’t hurt himself. His head was so heavy he could actually break his own neck.

“Where’s the water?” I had imagined the brain would be exposed and somehow water would be sitting in some kind of pool or running like a little river.

“Inside his head,” Mom said. “It makes his head swell up with fluid.”

The head was big and doughy. I could imagine my hands in the dough head. The thought frightened me. I wanted to leave.

Mom pulled up a chair for each of us. We sat next to the baby’s crib. She reached over and took his hand. She began to sing a song I knew so well. “Hush little baby don’t you cry, Mamma’s going to sing you a lullaby”. When she sang the baby opened his eyes. He looked at my Mom while she sang. He had to pull at the bands that held his head. He turned as much as the bands allowed and listened and looked right at her. His eyes were big and blue.

That night I dreamed that he was my brother. That I was part of the Forsay gang and that we would pull the baby in the wagon. I dreamed about feeding him chocolate which he would lick from my finger. I imagined him laughing and feeling good. I dreamed that his head was shrinking.

And I was sure that if I ever did become part of the gang, I could talk them into taking the baby out of the hospital. I was sure the baby was too lonely in that hospital. I knew that baby needed to be part of the family.

The next day I told Annie that Mathew liked my mother. That my mother sang to him.

“Who’s Mathew?” she wanted to know.

“He’s your brother.”

“I don’t have a brother named Mathew.

“In the hospital. Your brother who’s in the hospital.”

“He doesn’t have a name.”

“I saw it. I saw it on his chart. His name is Mathew.”

“You never seen that baby. Boy you make stuff up. If you don’t shut up, I’ll tell my brothers. They’d beat you up for that. They could beat you up easy.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’d better be.”

With that Annie left me. She left me standing in the middle of the street. I was afraid it was the end of things. That baby and I would never be part of the gang. Never!

Chapter Four: Worms

Two weeks later, Annie and her brothers marched past my house. Annie saw me at my usual perch watching, hopeful face pressed against the window. She waved for me to come out and join them.

“Annie!” I said to Mom as way of explanation as I rushed to catch up.

“Don’t be late,” Mom called, giving me permission to go. She knew how I felt about the Forsays. It was actually already late in the afternoon. By her standards it was too late. But Mom believed rules were meant to be broken for a good cause. Me finding a friend was a good cause in her books.

We headed for the downtown area. We passed a store where my dad used to go to buy tools. The store was being turned into a warehouse. Somehow that made me mad. When my dad came home, he’d need that store.

I counted on my dad coming back from the war or where ever he was – in the arms of some person who was nursing him back to health and sanity. He would hate to leave her, but he would, once his memory returned, once he knew who he was and remembered all he had left behind.

I had heard Grandfather say to Mom once, “You’re too much for him, Rose. He was never enough for you. You married on the rebound.” What a thing to say. I wasn’t totally sure what it meant- rebound- but I didn’t think it was a compliment to my dad. If my grandfather had to take sides, it was pretty clear whose side he’d be on.

The Forsays and I marched right past the hotel. I didn’t tell them about my having lived there. I’m not big on giving information unless you have to. Mom says I get that from my dad. I wouldn’t know.

“Destination - Burns Meat Packing Plant!” Frank said, pointing to the big brick structure as he spoke. It usually sounded like an order when he spoke.

I hated the place. Of course I’d seen in often, it being located adjacent to the shop where Dad worked when I was a little kid. Adjacent. I loved that word even though it meant my dad had been working next to the place where they killed pigs and cows and chickens. It was where they made bologna and wieners and hams. As a child I had heard the animals protest as they were led to slaughter. The sound still haunted my dreams.

And now I was heading right for it as if it were the best place in all the world.

Annie and the brothers insisted it was their favorite place to go. They said this because of the boxcars. The boxcars sat on a single set of railway tracks that came from the meatpacking plant. The tracks didn't go anywhere. They just stopped in the weeds. Maybe the tracks got torn up when the city got built around the meatpacking plant. I knew that at one time those boxcars had carried chickens and pork chops all over the prairies.

Now there were no tracks left to lead the boxcars and no engines to pull them. The boxcars simply sat motionless and empty with grass and weeds growing on all sides. It looked almost as if they were old or lost or trying to hide. I couldn't help but think that the boxcars were glad they didn't have to do their nasty job anymore, carrying dead bodies, all carved up.

Whatever their former use, Annie's brothers found those boxcars irresistible. They wanted to build them into a large fort but they couldn't figure out a way to move them, of course.

I was glad. I wanted to leave them the way they were, a reminder of a time past. They were full of mystery and secrets and the sad longing of animals transformed from living things to lumps of meat wrapped in waxed brown paper. Being near them was like being near a church.

We ate meat in our house. We weren't vegetarians or Quakers or anything. We were Catholics and Catholics eat meat except on Fridays and during Lent. Then they eat fish. One more thing about Catholics is that they aren't big on saying grace. They prefer acts of contrition and Stations of the Cross. At least, so it seemed to me.

But there was the one prayer we always said before we ate meat. We thanked the animals for giving their lives for our supper. It was my dad who had started that ritual. I thought it was a lovely one. I had heard that Indians did that, too. Maybe we were part Indian and part German. I wasn't sure. In the 40s you didn't talk much about ancestry. Not if you were German, or even part German. Even if you were the good kind.

I hoped the boys wouldn't actually go inside the boxcars. I knew I wouldn't be able to, not actually enter one. It would be like entering a graveyard. The voices of pigs and chickens and small calves would call out to us, and what would be really spooky, is that only I would be able to hear their cries. The thought of it made my stomach bloat up. I began to burp. Burping made me think of Mathew, the baby brother with the big head.

I glanced at Annie. She knew what I was thinking. She may have been skinny, but she wasn't dumb. She gave me a look that said, "Don't you dare say a word." I tried to give her a nod, but she looked away. Maybe a nod would have been too obvious. Henri, one of the twins, watched everyone like a hawk.

It was getting quite late, the boxcars were casting strange thin shadows into the grass.

"Let's climb them," said Marcel, the brother in the wagon always pulled by the beautiful golden retriever named Mufflow. The other brothers looked at each other in amazement. Henri snickered. It was a nervous kind of sound.

"You can't climb," Henri's twin said. Several of the brothers nodded in agreement.

"We ain't carrin' you up there." A statement of fact, from Frank.

"I know, you climb," Marcel said.

The brothers hesitated. I couldn't believe it. They were afraid.

Marcel looked at me. And suddenly I got it. He wanted me, all of us to climb the boxcars for him. He couldn't, so he wanted us to. He wanted to watch us and pretend he was the one climbing to the top.

I made a move towards the end boxcar, the one nearest us. I reached up. I couldn't reach the ladder. Marcel bumped his wagon up and down. He didn't say a word but his wagon spoke of the urgency of his need. Mufflow, the golden retriever whined.

Mufflow moved the wagon forward. If I stood on the wagon, I could reach the bottom of the ladder. I could pull myself up and climb to the top. Mufflow was amazing.

Frank saw what I was about to do.

"I lead," he said as he pushed past me.

One by one the boys and I climbed the rusty ladder which clung to the side of the box car. Annie stood by her brother who was tied to the wagon. Mufflow whined.

Marcel was the kind of kid who didn't like to talk much. He preferred to use his wagon for walking and talking. Now the wagon was still. Like an old man, it watched along with the boy and his dog and his sister. Marcel was still as we climbed. He wasn't even carving. He was imagining. He was imagining himself climbing and running along the boxcar, the soft wind blowing against his face and arms and bare legs.

Crouching low, our weight low, we edged our way to a central position, our hands clutching the roof. Slowly, slowly, we let go of the safety of the rough texture.

Holding our breath, we stood straight up. Risking all, we walked slowly across the length of the boxcar, our faces pinched with fear, our hearts racing. We reached the end of the boxcar, turned and returned to our starting place. We crouched again to a sitting position, twisting our bodies around, our legs searching for that first perilous ladder rung. Step by step we eased our way to safety.

Worn out from the excitement, we threw ourselves in the tall weeds that grew between the plant building and the tracks. We'd done it!

Sharing our triumph, Marcel jumped his wagon up and down, he and that wagon talking fast. Mufflow barked.

Just as our breathing was returning to normal and we lay hidden in the sweet clover and wild oats, feeling as though we had cheated death, we heard some guy shout, "I see you kids. Just let me catch you on that train. You'll kill yourselves. Damn brats. Just let me catch you." He turned and lurched towards the meat packing plant.

I was sure I could smell blood on him. Cold blood, blood from the place where they hang the bodies of huge animals.

None of us liked him. The boys did not appreciate being threatened. We looked at one another. And we knew.

Silent as soldiers on a secret mission we moved in single file towards the boxcars. No one spoke. No one led. We simply moved in unison towards our mission. One by one we climbed the ladder. One by one we stood and ran the length of the car. And then suddenly, without warning, Frank sailed through the air and landed safely to the next box car three feet away. Beneath Frank lay the ugly steel of connection rods.

Jump, jump, jump, each one of us followed suit. If anyone would have been watching as night closed in, they would have seen the shadows of ten small children sailing from box car to box car. Each of us knew if any one of us fell, we all would. As we jumped it was as if we were standing back in the tall grass watching ourselves.

It was the first time I can remember being able to do something and see myself do it at the same time. Without warning, I had an awful thought. I wondered if I would be able to see myself fall. And could I see myself feeling pain, or fainting?

I imagined a silver thread connecting me to each of those brothers. I imagined us falling in unison, fainting one after another. In my mind, we became silver shapes of smoke in the night, ghosts of our former selves.

And then I knew, without question, I knew it wouldn't happen. We wouldn't fall.

Held together by the silver thread we would move, safe and sure, one long chain of life. And I was part of that chain. I belonged. I would do anything for those boys. Anything.

It was dark by the time we got home. Mom and Grandfather were waiting. They hadn't eaten yet. The supper was waiting, warm, in the oven.

I had the urge to tell them about the boys, about climbing the box cars, running along them, jumping from one to the other, miles up in the air, like ghosts, ghosts with silver threads joining us. But I knew it wasn't a thing to tell.

I knew, too, that I didn't want to. It was a secret. My secret. I had a secret all my own. I fell asleep right at the kitchen table. It was a thing that happened to me. I'd get excited about something, really scared or really happy, and all of a sudden, I'd be asleep. I couldn't understand it. When sleep was the last thing I could imagine myself doing, that's when it would happen. Out I'd go.

I remember Mom carrying me to the little cot in the porch. Her arms were strong. I felt light in those arms. I felt as if I were made of air. It was like the feeling I'd had on the boxcars, that light as air feeling. It was wonderful. I fell asleep knowing I was the luckiest person alive.

Two days later we headed back. I was so excited I could hardly breathe. Could we do it again? Why not? We were the Forsay gang.

"You've got to climb up. You've got to come with us," I whispered to Annie.

"I have to stay with Marcel."

I let her have it. She hadn't made me swim. I wouldn't make her climb. We were switching deals. Friends do that.

We marched past the furniture making shop where my dad used to work. I almost told them about his working there. I almost told them my whole damn life story I was feeling so cocky. I was feeling so good.

We were heading towards the back of the meat packing plant when we saw it. It must have escaped from the plant. It ran in wild darting bursts. It made an awful noise. It was more like a low screaming than anything I had ever heard. I didn't think a chicken could make a noise like that.

Mufflow began to whine when he saw it. Mufflow wanted to chase that chicken, but he was too well trained to do that. He knew his job was to haul Marcel around, to keep Marcel safe. It wasn't his job to chase a chicken who was running for its life.

But for some reason the boys were sure it was their job. We all began to chase after the terrified chicken.

My stomach went into a tight knot at the sight of that chicken running in frantic circles seeking a way out, a way away, seeking safety, seeking life.

My memory flipped to the farm, to my grandmother and the baby chicks in boxes under warm lights, chicks that would be raised to lay eggs, chicks who would grow to have names and live with my grandmother and her pet crow and her pet bear on the farm.

I couldn't somehow imagine this thing, this dirty, tortured, terrified thing as having ever lived in a warm box next to dozens of other newborn chicks.

One of the brothers had found a stick, he'd broken the end with a snap to make it sharp. "Let's get it," he shouted.

The chase excited us. We began to scream, a blood lust urging us on. We picked up sticks, any weapon we could find. I felt in fierce competition to be first, to get to the chicken first, to be the one who captured it.

I could imagine myself handing the chicken to Frank. I could imagine his smile.

I felt myself tug at Annie's skirt and heard it rip in my hands. I pushed her aside, out of the way. I was a good foot taller than she was. I pushed my way through the boys, fighting my way to the bird. It flew in a sort of arc and landed on a parked truck. I pounded the truck with my fist, the chicken leaped down.

It ran frantically towards a small crate. It was making dreadful sounds. It jumped in the crate to escape us. We had it trapped. I reached in and grabbed. I pulled out a handful of feathers. There was blood on my arm.

Annie and the brothers surrounded the cage. The chicken faced us. Its eyes were bright, its beak open. Its chest heaved. I could see its tongue in its beak. The tongue was bright red. I stopped. I couldn't move.

"Kill it!" from Frank, the oldest, the leader of the gang, the one with all the power, the one who dyed his red hair blonde.

Annie had a stick in her hand. She poked it into the cage. It hit the bird. The chicken jumped back, hurt. It had nowhere to go.

“Kill it!” The order, again. I couldn’t move. “Marie!” Frank handed me a piece of broken board. The end was jagged. There was a nail on the board.

I pushed the board into the crate, toward the chicken. The other brothers joined me. We threw rocks, we poked sticks, we screamed. And finally it was dead.

I looked at Frank. He took the stick from my hand. He raised it high and gave a war whoop. All the others gave a war whoop. Even Annie. Even Marcel who so rarely spoke.

I started to scream. I just stood there, my mouth open and screams coming out of me.

Frank reached down and took my face in his hands. He pushed my face against his jacket. He held me there, with a strange tenderness. The screams turned to sobs.

They let me ride in the wagon with Marcel. No one mocked me because I had screamed. No one had told me to shut up. I had killed the chicken. It had been my rite of passage. As Grandfather had predicted, it had demanded the spilling of blood.

From that day on, Annie and the brothers joined me in the great and secret pursuit of chocolate. It became our obsession.

Why we decided to make it secret I don’t know. But adults, that is adults familiar to us, like uncles, aunts, parents, were not privy to our obsession. We owned it. It was ours.

We looked everywhere. We tried Mrs. Lily’s garbage again, but there was no chocolate, just more oatmeal and discarded clothing. Annie found a sequined blouse, red, gorgeous. She decided to wear it over her clothes. She wore it everywhere. We were sure it would bring us luck.

We tried requesting chocolate from people who lived in other cities, cities like San Francisco, or Toronto, cities where stores had rows of shelves full of chocolate. Cities where there was more than one store, one hotel. We wrote to a Forsay cousin in Winnipeg, but she never answered us. We wrote to the mayor, but he didn’t answer, either. I don’t remember whose idea that was. Marcel’s I think. Mrs. Forsay had written about getting financial aid for an operation to fix what was wrong with Marcel’s heart, and the mayor had answered. He hadn’t provided the assistance, but he had written how sorry he was about Marcel’s heart.

Henri came up with the plan to casually suggest to Mr. McConnel that he order chocolate bars and sell them at the counter.

Mr. Mc Connel wasn't a man you could easily convince of anything. He was pretty set in his ways. Mom said he was a disappointed man, a man who had wanted to be a dancer and had to run the family store instead.

I believed the story. Mr. Mc Connel never smiled and he always wore shiny black patent leather shoes.

He and my mother had something in common, they both loved dancing and they both loved shoes. And though they both had nice shoes, they rarely got to dance.

The brothers didn't like Mr. McConnel. They resented the way he always watched them when they came into his store. They felt he didn't trust them.

He was right. They weren't to be trusted. I knew that. They didn't mind stealing things if they had the chance. I was sure they'd steal us some chocolate if we had the chance. But we didn't have the chance.

"Why not order some damn chocolate bars," Frank suggested one day. "Why not sell them?"

"I don't buy or sell chocolate bars," Mr. McConnel said. "I sell ice cream and sodas. I sell canned goods and nails. Not chocolate. And I don't like little boys telling me what to do. And I don't like them to swear in my store."

Frank hated being called a little boy. He knocked over a whole box of nails on his way out. "So sorry," he said. But we all knew he had meant to do it.

One day Annie and I were in the store buying ten cans of soup for her mom when a salesman came in with a sample box. A sample box of chocolate bars.

"Chocolate bars. Chocolate bars," I screamed.

Five cents a piece," the salesman said. "They'll sell like hotcakes!" I recognized the voice. I looked up. It was Margaret's dad. It was Mr. Simpson.

He handed one out towards me. He was going to give it to me. I moved away. I couldn't take it. I was so afraid his hand would touch mine. He smiled. But the smile wasn't real. It was full of something I might have called resentment, but the word wouldn't have been quite right. When I turned seven, Grandpa gave me the most wonderful book, a combination of a dictionary and quotations, *Roget's Thesaurus*. It made me fall in love

with words. It made me almost fanatical about words. I became obsessed with the idea of finding the right word for the situation. But I couldn't find the right word for that smile.

He left the chocolate bars with Mr. McConnel.

“Give back the soup,” I shouted. “Give back the soup.”

We'd had just enough money for soup. Not a penny more. No mad money. Nothing.

“We want to give back one can of soup,” Annie said, taking the can out of the bag.

“The note said ten tins,” Mr. McConnell said. He didn't say it mean or anything. Just matter-of-fact. Mrs. Forsay always wrote notes. She didn't trust her children any more than Mr. McConnell did.

“Give us the damn chocolate,” Annie threatened. All her brothers swore. I had never heard her swear before.

I grabbed the sack and pulled Annie away. “Hurry, I said, spit flying out of my mouth. “We have to hurry.”

“Well be back,” I shouted.

We ran home like little maniacs. We ran so fast we ripped the sack holding the tomato soup. One can fell out. We left it.

I began to scream. I began to feel happy, wild. Annie felt it. She began to scream, too. Wild, happy, almost out of our minds.

I took the money out of Mom's purse. I didn't take time to ask. I knew it would be ok. I knew there wasn't much time. There were only six chocolate bars. Six.

We raced back to Mr. McConnel's. We threw our nickels on the counter. We waited. There were no chocolate bars on the counter.

Mr. McConnel approached us. I noticed his apron was very clean. His patent leather shoes shone. I couldn't have cared less about those things, but I noticed them and I remember vividly noticing them. I was in a state of high alert. I was close to having my ,obsession realized.

“Chocolate,” we said in unison. “We came for our chocolate.”

“I don’t sell chocolate,” he said. “I told you.”

“But the sample. The sample Mr. Simpson left. The chocolate bars, six of them, five cents each.”

“I don’t sell chocolate,” he repeated and we knew that was that. We had no idea what he had done or would do with the chocolate. We didn’t know if he would take them home to his mother, or if he would eat them all himself. All we knew for sure is that he wasn’t going to sell us any to us.

The day ended badly. No chocolate. That night I said my prayer for chocolate. I repeated it night after night. But the prayers were never answered.

Just when the brothers were wanting to abandon the search for chocolate, it happened.

Mr. McConnell in his clean apron and polished patent leather shoes walked out of the back door of his store carrying a box. He tossed it on the ground near, but not in his garbage container.

A box full of O Henry chocolate bars.

Was he out of his mind? Did he get another sample and just got so mad he threw them out? Mr. McConnell was a stubborn man, a disappointed man. Was he stubborn and disappointed enough to throw away chocolate bars?

I’m still not sure which one of us really saw the box of O Henry’s first. I think I did. Annie said she had. We watched him go back into the store.

We lowered our voices, diverted our eyes. We even started to walk away.

And then, I darted. Before Marcel, the sickly brother in the wagon had time to warn me to be careful.

I threw the box of chocolate into the wagon and we raced down the alley, on fire, alive with our daring. Our luck. Our victory! We were warriors again.

We didn’t stop running until we reached the gopher fields near the oldest house on the edge of Main Street.

We giggled. We chirped. We sorted out the chocolate bars.

I was so excited my ears were ringing. I began to burp. For a fleeting moment I wondered if baby Mathew had ever tasted chocolate? For a fleeting moment I thought of saving some for him.

"Maybe they dropped off a truck."

"It's not stealing."

"They weren't in the store."

"How many are there?"

There were enough for all of us to have three whole O'Henry bars apiece. And still have three left over. We decided to share those equally. One third each.

I began to argue. I had taken all the risk. I had raced into McConnel's yard. I had grabbed the box, thrown it into the wagon. I had noticed them first. I should get more.

Annie protested that she had seen them first. But Frank was holding the box. He gave each of us our three bars. Three whole bars of chocolate. Three.

Marcel counted them out. I quit arguing. No one was listening anyway.

I unwrapped my first O'Henry. I ate it in two bites. I'm not sure I tasted it.

The second, I munched with my front teeth, trying not to stop. I was trying to get as much in my mouth as I could. I was trying to get all that chocolate and nuts and caramel into my mouth at once.

My cheeks were full. I almost choked. The taste was perfect. Wonderful. Better than I'd remembered.

The third one, I ate more slowly. Sucking the chocolate. Nibbling the nuts. Eating those nuts one at a time. I was down to the slick, sweet nougat. I began to move it in and out of my mouth, wanting to savour until it disappeared.

Frank, the oldest brother, in charge of the box, in charge of the dividing, took out his knife. He carefully measured, carefully began to cut.

The nougat was sweet and wonderful melting on my tongue, making my mouth ache with its deep, delicious sweetness.

Frank let out a sharp yelp. He threw the chocolate bar in the ditch.

Worms!

I stopped sucking. I pulled the candy out of my mouth. I looked down at the smooth finger of nougat, of what was left. Worms all right. One actually moved. I threw it down, a thing alive and awful, a thing part of which was inside of me.

No one spoke on the way home. I was agonizing over the fact I had made such a big deal about my being the one who had seen Mr. McConnel throw out the wormy chocolate bars.

When Annie and the brothers headed down the street towards their boarding house I said in as loud a voice as I dared, "You saw them first. Annie, you said you saw them first."

They walked away in single file, Frank leading, Marcel being pulled in the wagon, Annie at the tail end as always. No one said goodbye.

"You hugged me," I screamed at Frank.

"Are you crazy?" he said in a cold tone, not bothering to turn around, not bothering to look at me. His tone denied the acceptance in the moment he had pulled me to his chest to stop my sobs.

"She's crazy," one of them repeated.

No one turned around. They talked about me as if I weren't there. I watched them go. I waited for Annie to turn around, to wave, to say I wasn't crazy.

She never did. I wanted to yell, "You live in a whore house." I did say it, three or four times, but so softly I could barely hear myself.

I knew absolutely it was the end of me and the Forsay gang. And I knew I was being punished. I knew I had done terrible things to get into this gang and now I was being punished.

Aunt Beryle had told me about punishment. You were always punished. Always. And I deserved it. I deserved all the punishment that might come my way.

I was convinced those worms were alive in my stomach. I could feel them growing bigger, more numerous. And I knew why. The vivid memory of the open beak and red tongue of the tormented, helpless chicken was why.

I became obsessed. I'd open my mouth wide and peer into the bathroom mirror, checking for worms. I'd heard stomach worms liked warm, bright light. I had heard, too, that if you held a piece of meat in your mouth the worms would crawl up out to get the meat, out into the warm bright light.

I had heard that they preferred raw meat to cooked. The thought of it made me feel so sick I had to sit down.

It took me four days to get up the courage to actually try it. I waited for a day when Mom would be making hamburgers. I took a big hunk of raw ground beef from the fridge. I

carried it to the bathroom. I was only wearing my underwear. I was sweating. My underarms felt slippery.

I locked the bathroom door. I opened my mouth wide. I climbed on the ledge of the vanity positioning myself so I could see into the mirror. I pointed my grandfather's heavy-duty flashlight into the mirror so that it reflected into my mouth. I held the raw meat loosely between my teeth. I turned on the flashlight.

I fainted.

When I woke up, Grandfather was standing over me. His face was grey. He was pulling at me, weakly, as he leaned against the sink. The door was open behind him, it hung at an angle where Grandfather had broken in.

My mouth was still full of raw meat. I threw up into the toilet. Grandfather patted my back.

Grandfather and I sat together on the bathroom floor, too exhausted to move.

I wiped my mouth with the good towel with gold lettering stitched right into the hem. It was the one Mom saved for guests. Grandfather said it was okay because we never got guests anyway.

Besides, it was the only one I could reach without getting up and I didn't feel like getting up. Neither did Grandfather.

I told Grandfather about the worms, about God's punishing me. Grandfather told me not to worry, worms didn't work that way. Neither did God. And what would God have to punish me for?

I couldn't tell him. I couldn't tell him the things I had done to get into the gang.

When Mom came home from nursing Mathew and other sick babies, she found us fast asleep on the bathroom floor.

Chapter Five: Mufflow

Those worms haunted me all summer. I was right, they had driven the brothers away. Nobody said anything, but they never came around any more. I didn't dare go over to their house, not after being so stupid and shouting to Frank about his hugging me.

Annie still hung out with me, sometimes, not often, only when the brothers dumped her. I noticed that they didn't take her with them as often as they had before. I was sure she blamed me. Why not? It was my fault.

We had a weird sort of ritual about getting together. She'd go out on her step when the brothers weren't there and I'd wander over. "Waiting for somebody?" I'd ask, hoping each time she'd say she was waiting for me.

"Nope," was always her reply. So I'd stand there for a minute, start to leave and she'd come along in a bored, almost mad at me way. We'd go off together, pretending not to have planned it, pretending it was an accident and we might as well be together since we were going in the same direction at the same time.

Something strange happened, that I didn't really notice at first. Annie became careful not to touch me. Not even accidentally. At first I thought it was my imagination. Could it really be true that she didn't want to touch me? That she couldn't stand to?

However she felt, it became a strict rule between us. No touching. It was a rule we both obeyed.

Mid August. A day not unlike the day I had first met Annie and her brothers, earlier that summer.

As was happening so often, Annie was sitting alone on the step. No brothers in sight. When I came near her, she made the same suggestion she had made that day which now seemed so long ago. She suggested we go swimming. She didn't say it with words, she just headed towards the river and I followed as though I had also planned to go to the river.

I sat on the bank watching her as I had before. But this time I had the urge to be in the water. I forgot all about the threat of leeches, of huge ancient fish with skin like the skin of sharks. This time I jumped right into the Saskatchewan River.

I had a brief moment of fear that it had been a trick, that the brothers had instructed her to lure me to the river with the thought of drowning me. Or worse yet, she wanted to do it herself. She was so mad at me for messing up the summer that she wanted me dead.

I could almost imagine her pushing my head under. I could imagine my struggling to get away. But she would taunt me, force me deeper, deeper into the river, into the treacherous current that would sweep me away. I struggled to keep the stupid thoughts away. I tried to think of candy floss and pumpkins at the fair. I loved the fair.

And of course, she made no move to harm me and somehow I learned to swim. Somehow, I moved my arms and legs the way Annie was moving hers, and I managed to keep myself afloat.

The August sun was hot and for days on end the river was perfect for swimming. Corn grew as tall as a man, green, full of thick leaves, heavy with foot long ears of yellow cobs.

Tomatoes ripened red and sweet until they burst. Men prepared for harvest, prepared to work their tractors and threshers into the night. The women prepared to feed the men, to rub their tired shoulders.

We decided to swim what was left of the summer away. Mom even gave me permission to swim in the river. She realized all the kids did it and she had learned that Annie was an excellent swimmer. Annie had a natural gift for it. Mom felt I would be safe so long as I was swimming with Annie.

We found an old log. We jumped off that old log a hundred times, landing in the cool clean water of the Saskatchewan River. We didn't touch one another as we scrambled on and off like puppies.

We swam and jumped each day for hours. Then Annie had what Mom would call a turn of heart. Annie decided, somehow, that she could touch me provided it was underwater. Underwater touching was not taboo.

Neither of us said these things. But the rules of our relationship were very clear. And it was as if they were written in stone. Annie was doing all the writing.

She also decided it would be a good idea to teach me to float on my back. It was the one thing I simply could not make myself do. I could not let myself relax. I could not let go of the idea that my head would sink, pulling the rest of me down.

On my stomach, I could dog paddle. On my stomach, I could stay afloat. On my stomach I could see where I was going.

That was the other terrible danger in floating on your back. You had no idea where you were going. You could be heading for a rock, a tree fallen into the river, a bunch of bugs floating in a moving circle.

You could be heading into deeper water. Troubled water. Currents.

Annie assured me that none of these things would happen. She would be watching. She would be standing under me, holding me, guiding me, protecting me.

She also insisted that until I mastered the art of getting my face wet, I would never be a swimmer. No swimmer ever swam with her face out of the water all the time. It was ridiculous.

She taught me to puff out my stomach, hold air in my lungs, make myself a floating balloon.

At first I was afraid to try, afraid to lie back into the water, let myself sink a little. But with Annie's skinny arms under me, her voice coaxing, explaining, assuring, I finally managed to do it.

Just for a moment, I let go, I puffed out my stomach, I relaxed. I floated.

My eyes were pinched closed, afraid of the wash of water that might rush over my face, scaring me, making me jerk my head upright, bring my body sinking to the bottom.

But as time went on and I relaxed more, held the air in my stomach longer, I began to really float. I opened my eyes.

It was wonderful. The blue sky, the enormous puffs of cloud.

I loved it. I floated all that day. I became the Queen of floating. Annie even laughed. She hadn't laughed with me or about me for a long time. I laughed, too. Floating on my back, I laughed and my head dipped a bit and I took in a big gulp of water. But I managed to stay afloat. I gained my composure and puffed up my stomach and my vision cleared and I was the Queen of floating once again.

I imagined myself a dragon, ancient, with silver scales and green wings. I imagined myself capable of magic. I imagined that I could swim and fly. I imagined that I could make things happen. Wonderful things. I could help people. I could heal them if they were sick. As I floated, the sun sunk into the sea and the day began to end in perfect harmony.

Finally, it was time for the long walk home. I was reluctant to leave. I didn't want to leave my dragon body; the perfect place I'd been. But Annie was in charge, and off we went, Annie walking ahead of me on the old river road. She found the odd blue berry and popped it into her mouth.

She looked so small in her thin yellow bathing suit, Miss Sophie's red sequenced blouse over it, her hair still sticking to her head. Wavy bits of air moved up beside her. Wavy bits of hot air from the soft black tar-based road. The moving air made Annie look like someone from another place, a place far away from me.

She turned and looked at me, gave me a half smile, walked on. Her lips were stained from some of the berries she had picked. It only added to her strangeness. All the sense of dragoness drained away. I was just a girl again.

I wondered if Annie would ever really be my friend again. I felt alone, behind her. I thought of stopping, letting her walk away, far away from me. I wondered if she'd notice.

How much I wanted to rush up to her, to take her hand, her hand in mine, outside of the water. Away from the rules, her rules. I began to walk faster, to catch up to her.

I decided to reach out and touch her, to tap her a little hard, on the shoulder. I started to do it. I reached out, almost, almost touching her, when I almost tripped on something. I looked down.

There on the road lay a big Jersey Milk chocolate bar in white wrapping, the letters gold and full of promise. It was impossible. Were chocolate bars dropping out of the sky? Was I imagining it? How could someone have dropped it? Here, for us to see? Maybe it was a trick. Maybe the brothers had planted it. I had to quit thinking everything was a trick. I was going to drive myself crazy.

I picked it up, slowly, almost in slow motion. I handed it to Annie, still pale and steamy in the heat waves coming off the hot pavement.

I moved as if caught in a dream.

She turned her head. Her hair was beginning to dry in the sun. A piece of hair fell forward, across her cheek. She brushed the hair away. She moved her hand towards the giant Jersey Milk. She opened the silver paper. She smelled it. She handed it back to me.

"What should we do?" Annie said in a voice that sounded far, far away, from somewhere in an old-fashioned movie, black and white, with static, crackling sound.

"Eat it," I whispered. My voice was soft, low, serious. "I think we should eat it," I repeated.

"No." Annie took the chocolate away from me.

I stared at the rich chocolate melting on its silvery tray, melting in Annie's hands.

I could smell it. I imagined its taste. My mouth was all wet with the smell of it. I opened my mouth.

Annie moved the melting chocolate a bit closer for me to inspect.

It lay there, rich, dark, delicious, soft and flat enough to guarantee the absence of worms. I sniffed deep. I stared hard. All I could see and smell was chocolate. Warm. Rich. Melting in the sun.

And I wanted it. All my old hope came back. All my old memory and need of chocolate.

Mouth open, I reached my face towards the silver paper. My tongue sought the warm sticky bitter sweet perfect taste of chocolate. I closed my eyes.

I felt the soft warm creamy chocolate touch my tongue, move up past my lips, across my cheek.

I opened my eyes, pulled back, startled, as Annie drew the chocolate away. She had brushed it against me as she'd moved.

She hurled my piece of heaven into the cool clear waters of the Saskatchewan River.

Annie looked at me. She smiled. "There," she said, as if she'd saved me. She put her arm around my waist. I put my arm over her shoulder. I was still a good foot taller than she was.

We walked home that way.

When we got home Mom was talking to Mrs. Forsay. What could be wrong? They never talked to one another. Never that we knew anyway. I imagined all sorts of things.

Maybe Mom was telling Mrs. Forsay something about the worms. Or about Mathew. Maybe she was trying to talk Mrs. Forsay into visiting Mathew, telling her that he loved visitors, that we visited him all the time, that we read poetry and sang to him.

In fact, all the hospital now knew that Mathew heard and understood a lot more than they had suspected. Mathew was not a vegetable with a huge head. Mathew had feelings just like people with small heads, just like people with necks strong enough to hold up their own heads.

They found this out about Mathew when Mom's special duty responsibilities switched from the baby ward to maternity. Mrs. Forsay's baby became so agitated that they were afraid he would break his own neck, even with the restraints.

Mom knew why. There was no one to sing to him. No one to read him stories. She transferred back and he calmed right down.

That baby whose brain was drowning wasn't supposed to be able to see or hear and know if anyone was in the room. He couldn't eat. Tubes fed him. But he missed my mom. He

missed her singing to him when she came into his room. He missed her touching his hand.

Maybe I wasn't part of the Forsay gang. But I was falling in love with the Forsay baby. My mom and I were closer to that baby than anyone in the family. Not one person in the family ever came to see that baby. Not one.

That had made me so sad and it made me mad, too. Mom said not to judge them. It was easier for us. He wasn't our baby. But that just made me sadder.

I wondered, could that be what they were talking about? Had something happened to Mathew? Had he broken his neck?

They looked serious, but not mad, not upset. No one was crying.

Mom was giving Mrs. Forsay a pamphlet she had picked up at work. A doctor was coming from a famous hospital in Boston. He was coming here to open a new hospital in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan where the university was located.

This doctor was a heart specialist. Maybe he could help Marcel. Just maybe he could.

We all went to the lecture. Mufflow pulled Marcel in the wagon as usual. Normally a dog would not be allowed into the Orpheum Theatre which is where the lecture was being given. But Mufflow was a working dog. Mufflow was always with Marcel. The boy couldn't go anywhere without him. And wouldn't want to. Marcel loved Mufflow more than anything in the world.

I could understand that. Mufflow was marvelous. He was so strong and so smart and so beautiful. He could do almost anything. He could even fetch things for Marcel. Not things like other dogs, sticks or balls.

No, Mufflow would bring Marcel clothes and books, things he needed, things he couldn't get up and get for himself.

Everyone knew that the boy and the dog were a unit. No one would have dreamed of separating them. Certainly not the ushers to the theatre where a doctor was going to talk about the disease that kept Marcel weak and vulnerable, that made Mufflow a necessary part of his life.

The doctor talked about the wonders of modern medicine. He talked about good diet and exercise. He told people not to smoke. He was trying to teach people how to take care of their hearts by living healthy lives.

I looked around. Almost all the men in the theatre were smoking. Even a few of the women were smoking. I couldn't imagine they appreciated what the doctor was saying. I couldn't imagine they were taking him too seriously.

After the talk, he opened up the floor for questions. What a weird thing to announce, that he was opening up the floor.

I pictured the floor opening up and all of us sliding into the basement, but that felt too much like the pictures of Hell and damnation that I saw in Catechism, so I closed the floor up right away and decided to ask Grandfather what the phrase meant. After the lecture I would do just that. I was sure Grandfather would agree it was a ridiculous turn of phrase.

Mrs. Forsay stood up. An usher handed her a microphone. Her hands shook as she took it. "Can you help my son?" she asked.

The doctor peered into the audience. He could see Marcel in the wagon. He could see Mufflow by his side.

"Is that your boy?" he asked.

Mrs. Forsay couldn't really answer. She had begun to cry. She was so nervous and so hopeful that the tears just started to come.

The doctor hesitated. In that hesitation I knew he didn't want to deal with this tired looking woman with a son who had to be pulled in a wagon. He wanted to talk about his pet project – healthy living. But what could he do? He invited the mother and son onto the stage.

Mrs. Forsay shook her head, she didn't want to go. She didn't want to stand up in front of all these people. Mom helped her. My mom took her arm and up they went, Mufflow and Marcel following them.

The wagon couldn't go up the stairs, so two ushers had to carry Marcel up. This worried Mufflow who whined and fussed, keeping very close to Marcel, almost touching him, carefully watching what the ushers were doing to his boy and his wagon.

Everyone clapped. And somehow Mrs. Forsay told her son's story. He had been born with a hole in his heart. He couldn't do things other boys could do. He was weak and fragile. He couldn't even exert himself enough to run and play. He had to be pulled in a wagon and his legs had become too weak to carry him. Soon his legs wouldn't work at all. And every day, they worried that the hole in his heart would cause his chest cavity to fill up with blood, would cause him to die.

Marcel coughed nervously. Mufflow shifted his weight from one foot to the other when Marcel coughed. Mufflow could feel Marcel's discomfort. He could feel his pain.

The doctor listened carefully. He nodded as Mrs. Forsay talked, he looked at Marcel seriously. He spoke about how physiotherapy and exercise were necessary to keeping Marcel's legs and back strong. Then he explained to the audience that what Marcel most likely had was a congenital heart disease called a septal defect which was a hole in the wall that separates either the upper or lower chambers of the heart causing blood to leak from one atrium or ventricle to the other.

Because Marcel sometimes had a hard time breathing, he probably also suffered from pulmonary valve stenosis which prevents the lungs from getting enough oxygen.

Marcel looked scared. He wasn't used to people looking at him, talking about his heart, about his blood leaking. He began to cry. You could tell he didn't want to, you could tell it was absolutely the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

Mufflow began to cry to, first a low whine and then a howl. It made the doctor laugh.

I was in the audience with Mom and Grandfather and Annie and the brothers. Annie wasn't wearing the sequenced blouse. Her mother said not to at this important event. I had to agree.

The fact that it was an important event didn't seem to stop the doctor from laughing at Mufflow. I didn't think it was the best thing for the doctor to do. There was no humor in this situation that I could see. Even if the doctor did see some humor, he shouldn't have laughed. I didn't like this doctor. Neither did Mufflow. When the doctor began to laugh, Mufflow growled at him. That just made the doctor laugh more.

When he laughed, several people in the audience laughed to. I couldn't believe it. Here was this poor kid bawling because people were using big words to describe what was wrong with his heart, a heart with a hole or two and they were laughing.

The doctor must have sensed that it wasn't really a good idea to get the audience laughing. He might also have been afraid that Mufflow was going to bite him, which I was secretly wishing he would do. Normally Golden Retrievers aren't biting kinds of dogs. But when it came to protecting his master, Mufflow was a Rottweiler. A Rottweiler with a machine gun.

The doctor began to talk about what could be done. He told Mrs. Forsay that Marcel probably needed open-heart surgery if the defect could not be repaired using a catheter-based procedure. Some surgeries would repair the defect completely. Other surgeries

would improve her child's health but might not completely repair the defect. Open-heart surgeries that might correct the defect included closing the holes with sutures or with a patch. He added that a good surgeon might decrease blood flow to the lungs by placing a band around the pulmonary artery.

I couldn't believe what the doctor was doing. He was talking about Marcel as if he weren't there. He was talking about surgery and what it might or might not do. He was talking as if he liked the sound of the words, the importance of the words. Words most people didn't use or understand.

He puffed his chest out as he talked.

And then he invited his wife and daughter to the stage. He thanked Mrs. Forsay for coming up as if to dismiss her.

The doctor's wife and daughter walked on the stage. They were wearing beautiful clothes. The daughter was about twelve. She was big boned and dark haired. Her hair was braided and crossed over the crown of her head. It made her look bold and sophisticated.

The doctor announced that his own daughter had been born with a congenital heart defect. And here she was, proof of the success of open heart surgery and healthy living. She exercised every day for one hour. She ate fresh fruit and vegetables. The daughter looked out into the audience. She looked at Marcel. He was still crying. She looked away.

"Can you do it? Can you do it to my Marcel?" Mrs. Forsay repeated as they left the stage. The ushers escorted her out. They carried Marcel out. Mufflow and the wagon followed. The wagon bumped as Mufflow hurried down the stairs.

We all thought it was the last we would hear from the famous doctor from Boston who could cure Marcel if he wanted to. The doctor who could perform the surgery Marcel needed, if only Mrs. Forsay could save up enough money.

"How is she going to do that?" Mom asked Grandfather. "In that two bit joint of hers?"

Two bit joint? I wasn't sure what that meant. I went outside and looked at the Forsay house. For the first time I noticed that it needed paint badly. The window sashes were broken and the steps leading to the main door were rotting. Two boards had been nailed across the original steps to prevent folks from falling through.

How was it I had never noticed this before? How was it that I had always thought the place so fine?

No, it was clear open heart surgery was out of the question.

Out of the question until Mrs. Lily carefully made her way up those patched up steps.

Mrs. Lily had been in the audience. Mrs. Lily had heard what the doctor had to say. She had seen Marcel, had seen him cry. She had seen something else too. She had seen Mufflow.

And she wanted him.

Everyone knew that Mrs. Lily was the prettiest and the richest widow in town. What only a few knew was that she was also one of the most frightened.

Mrs. Lily was frightened of most everything. I hated to admit it, but I could understand that. I was afraid of a few things myself. Things would flash into my head and make me afraid. It was why I worried so much.

But I wasn't as afraid as Mrs. Lily. Mrs. Lily rarely left her house. She was afraid of being run over. She was afraid of catching germs. She was afraid of drowning. And she was afraid of burglars.

She had alarm systems installed all over the house. She had phoned the police so many times requesting that a squad car come by to investigate a strange noise or a mysterious passer-by that they had to install a special line for her. Mrs. Lily donated a lot of money to the police charity raffle, so they didn't mind.

Mrs. Lily had a proposition for Mrs. Forsay. It was simple. It was an easy request to honor. Mrs. Lily wanted just one thing in exchange for the money to send Marcel to the hospital in Saskatoon where the doctor could put a patch on his heart.

What she wanted was Mufflow, Marcel's dog.

Mrs. Forsay made the deal right there on their broken step.

She didn't tell Marcel the deal. She only told him what he needed to know. She only told him that a miracle had happened and he was going to go to Saskatoon for the operation. He was going to get well.

Of course Marcel was excited and terrified. Mrs. Forsay accompanied him to the hospital. She stayed in a motel not far away. All was paid for by the generosity of Mrs. Lily.

After the surgery, which the famous doctor deemed a huge success, Marcel's picture was in the Prince Albert Daily Herald. Mom saved it for Mrs. Forsay. In the picture the doctor stood by Marcel's bed. So did a physiotherapist. The article was more about healthy living than the miracle of Marcel's new lease on life. There were a few words about Marcel, how he had a wonderful gift. He could carve anything. He could bring life to a stick, a stone, a piece of wax. Marcel may have had a hole in his heart, but he had magic fingers.

They stayed for two weeks. Each day Marcel grew stronger. And then, it was time to come home.

Mrs. Forsay had confided in Mom about Mrs. Lily and the bargain. I guess she had to tell someone. She had to ask someone if she had done the right thing. Mom was a nurse, she had told Mrs. Forsay about the doctor. Mom would know that Mrs. Forsay had done the only thing she could do.

Mom agreed. "There was no real choice," Mom had assured her.

I could imagine their trip home in the train. I could imagine how Marcel would be looking forward to seeing Mufflow. I was sure he was picturing how he and Mufflow would be able to run and play together, free, free of the wagon, free of the fear of death. And somehow I felt that Marcel would not want to be part of the gang so much anymore. I knew that things would change for him in many ways. He and Mufflow would want to be together. They would be their own gang.

I imagined, too, what Mrs. Forsay would be thinking. I imagined that she might try to tell Marcel about the bargain. I imagined she would try to find a way, but no way would come.

I had been right.

We could hear Marcel calling Mufflow. We could hear him right through the open windows and the thin walls of the 'L', the 'L' that was too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer.

And then we heard the cries, the cries of agony and sorrow. Those cries told me the truth, the truth that I had known. The truth that neither Mrs. Forsay nor my mom had known. That Marcel would rather be pulled forever in his wagon, that he would rather die young, before his time, than be separated from Mufflow.

I cried with him. I sobbed with him, for him. I went to see Mathew as was becoming my custom when I was troubled. I told Mathew all about it. I knew Mathew would feel sorrow for the brother he had never met.

Mom took a strange tact to try to comfort me. “Mufflow wouldn’t live forever,” she reasoned. “He is already four years old. Dogs don’t live as long as little boys.”

“He would have lived as long as that little boy,” I said. “He would have.”

“Not now, not now,” mother said. “And that’s a good thing. Marie, that’s a good thing.”

But she was wrong. It wasn’t a good thing. Marcel was wearing himself out. He was crying and pining so much that his little heart wasn’t healing. He was having trouble breathing. He was coughing a lot. There was blood in his spit. He stopped eating. He stopped carving. He couldn’t stand being alive without Mufflow.

That’s when Grandfather and I hatched the plan. Now all we had to do was convince Mom.

It wasn’t hard. She had heard the sounds of sorrow coming from the Forsay house. I think she was even beginning to doubt her decision to bring the Forsays to the Orpheum Theatre to hear the famous doctor from Boston in the first place.

We phoned Mrs. Lily and made an appointment. Mom said she had something important to tell her. Something she had just learned at the hospital.

Mrs. Lily received us in her parlour at five o’clock. The closest I had ever been to Mrs. Lily’s was the garbage in her back lane. The garbage hadn’t prepared me for this. The parlour was magnificent.

Velvet couches sat on polished hard wood floors. The floors had patterns in them, made of different colors of wood. Thick rugs lay in areas over the polished hard wood floors.

A huge marble fire-place dominated a corner of the room. No fire roared in that beautiful fire-place. It was summer. But then, it wouldn’t have been lit in the winter-time either. Mrs. Lily was afraid of fire. That came as no surprise.

Mufflow sat obediently at Mrs. Lily’s feet. I thought he might be thin and ragged. I thought he would have been suffering as much as Marcel. He seemed fine. I looked more closely, frowning.

Mrs. Lily saw me look at the dog. Maybe she thought I was surprised that he didn’t move, didn’t get up to greet us. “He’s on medication,” she explained. “He couldn’t settle down. He kept trying to run away. I had a run for him built in the basement. He never leaves the house.”

I couldn't imagine him being much of a guard dog on medication, but I didn't say anything. Mrs. Lily wasn't exactly reasonable about the things she was afraid of or how she protected herself from them.

I looked closer at Mufflow. His eyes were dull. He reminded me of monkeys in cages at the zoo. I hated the zoo. I hated to see the deadness in the eyes of the monkeys.

Grandfather's oldest friend had had a pet monkey named Art. That monkey was so playful, so full of fun. His eyes were mischievous. His eyes laughed even though he could not.

Only humans can do that. I had read somewhere that only humans can laugh. It is a sure sign of their superiority.

When Grandfather's friend died, his children put his monkey in the zoo. Grandfather and I had visited that monkey. It was the first time and the last time I ever went to a zoo. When I looked into the eyes of that monkey, the dull, dead eyes, I just wanted to go home.

On the way home I thought about humans being the only ones able to laugh. How did we know? Maybe animals had another way to laugh, a way we weren't smart enough to recognize. Or maybe they didn't laugh around us.

They cried though. They cried around us. Maybe it was because we were so good at that. We were so good at making them cry, but not so good at making them laugh.

Looking at Mufflow, at his eyes, made me want to cry. Mom realized I was about to start. She gave my hand a jerk.

"I thought we should tell you," she said to Mrs. Lily in a serious tone. "I thought you should know."

Mrs. Lily leaned forward. She was paying attention to what my mom was saying. She wanted to know what she should know.

I was looking at Mufflow. I was holding my breath.

"There has been an outbreak of rabies. And Mufflow has never been vaccinated." Mom paused. "He may be a carrier."

"A carrier?"

“It could irrupt at any time,” Mom warned. “He could go rabid. He could bite you and if he did, nothing could save you. Nothing.”

Mrs. Lily stared at the dog. Her face was red.

“Save me?” she said in a small voice. “Save me from what?”

“Madness,” I said. “You go stark raving mad!”

Mom nodded in agreement.

“But there’s no guarantee it will happen,” Mom added. “He might be fine.” She paused with what Grandfather would call a very pregnant pause. “Or he might not.”

It was suppertime when we arrived at the Forsay doorstep. Mufflow ran ahead of us. He wasn’t as co-ordinated as usual, with the medication still in him, but he managed to reach up and open the door with his teeth. Marcel had trained him to do that. Mufflow was the smartest dog in the world. Even on medication, he was still the smartest dog in the world.

As he bounded in the house and up the stairs towards Marcel’s room, Mom and I turned to go. There was no need for anyone to know what had brought Mufflow back to his young master. Mrs. Lily would never venture out and up the Forsay’s rickety steps. She would never bother about it again. She might install another alarm system, or even hire a human guard. But one thing for sure, it wouldn’t be a dog. One thing for darn sure, it wouldn’t be Mufflow.

When we entered the ‘L’ we smelled pancakes. Grandfather had made us pancakes. He was having a good spell. It might even be in remission. His cancer was sleeping. Every night I prayed that it would sleep for a very long time, a Rip van Winkle amount of time. God would listen to this prayer, I was sure.

Grandfather made wonderful pancakes, with beaten egg whites. They tasted like angel food cake.

We ate the pancakes with maple syrup, real maple syrup from Maple trees in Montreal. And bacon. Before we ate, we held hands and Grandfather said grace. “We give thanks to the animal who . . .” Our prayer was cut off by the sound of an animal howling. The medication had worn off. Mufflow was howling, crying, and I’m sure, I’m absolutely sure, he was laughing. Laughing with joy.

Chapter Six: Mathew

“We’ll have to move! I told you we’d have to move”. It was my response to the news that my father was coming home. It was proof that I had been right all along. It was proof that he had been in the war and now was returning to us. It was proof that he had been kept alive on milk and bread by the beautiful French maiden. And now he had remembered, and he was returning to us.

“We’ll see,” Mom said.

‘We’ll see.’ What was she saying? Three people could barely live in the ‘L’. Four people were out of the question. And my father made four.

I had a great surprise for him. Actually, the surprise came as a result of my episode with the flashlight and the worms. Grandfather told Mom about my craving for chocolate and between the two of them, they got me over a dozen different varieties, and a whole box of chocolates, Cadbury’s. It had dozens of different kinds of chocolates in it and a map which described and named each chocolate and told you what was inside, caramel, Turkish delight, cherries, creamy fudge. There was a picture of a kitten on the box’s cover.

I had read that Cadbury himself had painted some of the original pictures on the original boxes of chocolate. Imagine! And he had built places for his workers to exercise, way back in Victorian times. I figured that doctor from Boston would have really liked Mr. Cadbury. He would have liked his focus on healthy living. I doubted that Mr. Cadbury would have liked him, but you never know about these things.

Now you would have imagined that I would have gobbled up those chocolate bars and chocolates just as soon as I got them. But I didn’t. I put them in my dresser drawer along with my underwear and socks and those silly nylon pajamas I got for the pajama party where I threw up and went home.

I was saving those chocolates and chocolate bars. I was saving them for when my dad came home. I hadn’t had to wait long.

Labor day, the first Monday in September right after school started, my dad arrived in a taxi.

He came to tell us he was alive and well and had been living in Edmonton. Not France, Edmonton. He came for another reason. Mom and Grandfather suspected the other reason. I did not.

I was so glad to see my dad I wouldn’t allow any worry or doubt to get in the way. I didn’t ask him any questions, nothing about the war, about where he’d been and why he hadn’t come home sooner. I didn’t ask how could it have been Edmonton.

I ran to my room and brought them out, the dozen chocolate bars, the box of chocolates. I handed them to my dad. He looked surprised. He looked at Mom.

“She’s been saving them, waiting,” she said. She couldn’t say much more. She looked sad and mad and ready to cry and hit him in the head with a hammer.

My dad’s face went red when she said I’d been saving them.

“I, I really wanted chocolate,” I confessed. “For us.” He gathered them up in his big beautiful hands. He wore a white shirt and black slacks. He was dangerously handsome. He took my hand and walked me outside.

We didn’t have much of a yard. He seemed to be looking for a place to sit, a place where we could eat our chocolate. We settled for a spot between the poplars where the Forsay gang and I had worn a bit of a path when we were still a gang, before the worms.

Mom brought us a blanket and two mugs of coffee. Coffee for me, too, and not all milk either. “Coffee goes good with chocolate,” she explained. I wouldn’t know. Dad looked at her as if he were asking her to join us, but she walked back to the ‘L’.

“You two need some time,” she threw over her shoulder.

We ate the box of chocolates. Dad said it would make us sick to eat the chocolate bars, too. “Save some, honey.”

I said we could eat more tomorrow. He didn’t agree or disagree. I so wanted him to say, “Ok, and then we can get more chocolates. We can eat and eat for days and weeks and months and years. We will become the chocolate eaters.” But he didn’t say that at all.

It took us over an hour to eat the chocolates. We didn’t eat them all at once. We didn’t say much. We just ate and munched and chewed and looked at one another. It was as if we were studying one another, memorizing each other, attentive to each detail, each movement. I saw how one side of his mouth moved a bit higher than the other when he smiled. I saw how his eyebrows could move when the rest of his face stayed still. I could do that. I could raise one eyebrow at a time, too.

He was looking right at me when I decided to try it. I raised my right eyebrow. The rest of my face was still. He raised his eyebrow. The right one. Just like me.

Then he stuck out his tongue. It was rolled like a leaf. I stuck out my tongue. Mine rolled like a leaf, too.

We laughed. We ate a few more chocolates. I told him my new name was Maria. I had given it to myself and I rather liked it. I told him I was going to use it when I went to school. I hadn’t really gone to school yet. Not real school, school out at the farm,

schools as moved about taking care of my grandmother, and then his father, my grandfather. But never in one place, never in a real city school, with strange kids. I told him I didn't know much about kids. I hadn't had a lot of kid experience.

He just listened. The listening seemed to make him sad. "I'm sorry," he said, as if it were his fault.

We stayed outside until almost dusk. It was warm. My dad wasn't a big talker. He had a small note pad and short yellow pencil. He told me the pencil was a number 2. That meant the lead in the pencil was soft and it was good to draw with. He asked me if I would like him to draw me a picture.

"I would," I said. It seemed to be an important decision.

"Anything special?" he asked.

"Me," I said. "And you. I would like a picture of us."

He sighed. He sat for a while longer, saying nothing. Then he began to sketch. He looked at me as he drew. He kept looking and drawing. He asked me to tilt my head to the side as though I were resting on someone's shoulder. I tilted until my neck ached.

He handed me the yellow paper with his sketch on it. It was a picture of me in his arms. He was carrying me. You couldn't see his face, just the back of his head, his tall back and strong shoulders. My arms were around his neck. My head was leaning on his shoulder. You could see my face and hands. My eyes were open. I didn't look sleepy. I didn't look sad. I didn't look scared. I looked like a girl a bit too big to be carried who was happy to be in the arms of her father. The child in the picture was at peace.

The child in the picture felt the way I had felt that day floating on my back in the Saskatchewan River feeling like an ancient dragon with silver scales.

My father stood up. He opened up his arms and he carried me into the house. I was seven years old and for the first and only time in my life I was being carried by my father. My own, real, true father. I wanted the yard to be bigger. I wanted us to be in a meadow. I wanted the walk to the house to last forever.

When we got into the 'L', I slipped out of his arms and reached up and gave him a kiss on the lips. They were soft and warm and a bit startled. They almost withdrew, and then they yielded and he hugged me and I hugged him and he said the strangest thing.

He said, "Good-bye my beautiful little Maria. Don't forget me."

My mother was there, in the kitchen. She was wearing a soft cotton print dress, with small blue butterflies on a pale yellow background. Her hair was a light reddish blonde and she wore it in soft curls around her face. She had on her favorite sweetpea perfume.

My father was wearing black slacks and a white perfectly pressed shirt just as I saw him wear in all the pictures of him.

“Bye, Rose. Good luck, hon.” he said to my mom. He took his hat off the kitchen table and headed for the door.

“Bye, Eddie.” My mom’s voice was resigned. She stood there and didn’t do a thing. She didn’t run after him, beg him to come back. She didn’t scream at him or throw things. She just stood there.

Grandfather was sitting on a kitchen chair. My father bent down and kissed his cheek. My grandfather’s skin was as thin as rose petals. I knew my father would notice that. I knew it would make him sad to see his father grow so old and frail.

If he felt those things, he didn’t mention them. He just continued to walk away from us. He walked out of the yard and down the lane.

He looked so tall and handsome, just the back of him, walking away. The night was full of stars. The poplar trees cast shadows the sky was so bright with stars and a full moon.

He was heading for the bus station. He wasn’t carrying a suitcase or anything. He didn’t have a coat.

I learned later that he sat all night in the bus station. The bus arrived at 7 am and took him back to Edmonton and the woman who was waiting for him.

Grandfather tried to soothe my mother about his son’s leaving, this time, for good. My dad had been gone for a long time, over three years. Yet, there had always remained the mystery of his return. Now the mystery was over and hope was gone. It seemed to shock my mother.

When the shock wore off, she was furious.

For weeks after that I would spend hours trying to make up what it would be like to see him again. I would try to imagine myself going to Edmonton to find him. I could imagine myself as a young woman, dressed in a smart red suit.

I would try to imagine what he would be like. I would picture his face badly scarred from some injury I couldn’t name, maybe a burn or bad acne. He would be living in an awful apartment.

I'd imagine myself going up to the apartment and knocking. I'd knock and knock and finally a woman would answer. She would be old and sloppy, nothing like my mother. I would ask to see my father.

But before she could call him, he would appear. He'd take me in his arms and we'd leave. We'd leave together and come back to my mother.

But the stories I imagined never felt right. They never felt as though they'd happen, and so I'd try again. Whatever I imagined, it never felt true. He'd had to go to this woman, out of duty or love or something I didn't understand, and it had ruined him in all my daydreams.

Mom cautioned me about daydreaming about him. She reminded me of the fact that he had abandoned us. That he'd left us sitting and worrying for three years. Mom seemed to have a lot of bad pictures of Dad in her head. I think she thought it would be better for me if I had bad pictures too. I think she thought I could forget him easier. That I wouldn't hope for something that could never happen.

It was the one thing they did not agree upon. Grandfather worked hard to change the bad pictures of Dad that Mom and I began carrying around in our heads. He didn't think bad pictures were good for us.

He knew that I had heard about Dad's stealing money from his own store before I was born. He knew I'd heard about his drinking and his loose wandering ways. My father had a reputation for being many things, a musician, a poet, and an irresponsible husband.

"Remember the time he brought you all the roses?" Grandfather asked Mom.

"It was the hottest day in July, our second anniversary." Mom said as matter-of-factly as she could.

"He went all the way to Saskatoon to get them. Ninety-seven miles on a day that was so dry and hot you could fry an egg on the sidewalk," Grandfather reminded her. But she didn't need reminding.

"So he hitched himself a ride on an ice truck and sat back there with the ice, his arms full of roses," Mom said, her voice getting thick and syrupy with the memory of it. "His legs were blue with cold by the time they got here."

"He was in bed with a cold for two days." Grandfather said this as if he would scold father if he could, but you could tell he was just a little proud of his son's romantic ways. Proud and sad. It was one of those kind of traits. You loved it, but it was what ruined everything.

"The whole house smelled of roses."

"The whole house."

They told the story with such feeling I was sure I could remember that smell, too, and the coldness of my father's legs, cold that you could feel right through the black slacks.

The story melted my mom's anger at my father. But when the anger left, a sadness that was much worse took its place.

Grandfather and I had been playing cards as they told the story of the roses delivered on ice. We continued to play. Mom went to the room she and Grandfather shared. We knew she wanted to be alone. She had no place that was hers, not in the 'L'. So Grandfather and I sat up while she "composed herself".

Grandfather and I could hear Mom move quietly about the room. We heard the closet door open and close. We heard her turn on the radio, find Benny Goodman and his band. We heard the stool in front of the dressing table move out, ever so softly.

"Is Mom going out?"

"I don't think so."

"It sounds as if she's getting dressed to go out," I said.

"I don't think so. Let her be. Maybe I'll lie down a bit in your room, if you don't mind," he said.

I sat listening to the music float to the kitchen from the bed-room. I could hear her moving about.

And then somehow, at that moment, I knew what Mom was doing. I knew she was dancing. I knew she had put on her best dress. I knew she had fixed her hair up, put on makeup.

I knew my Mom was all dressed up, all alone, in her and Grandfather's room, dancing.

I couldn't stand it. I crept up to the door, opened it a crack, standing outside, watching this private moment, one she wanted to share with a man who wasn't there. There she was, in her best red dress, with her best pair of high heels, her hair all piled up, held in place with her ebony combs.

She wore ruby earrings.

I walked into the room. I walked into her arms. I had never danced before.

As if we had been doing it all our lives, my mom and I danced about that tiny room. When Benny Goodman and his dance band had played its last song, my mom reached

over and turned off the radio. We didn't stop dancing. She hummed softly. We kept moving to the memory of the music. We did that for quite a while. Finally, my mom spoke. "It's okay now," she said. I kissed her cheek and went to bed.

I cried myself to sleep and that night I dreamed of being a family, a big family, a family with lots of kids and a dad.

When I awoke, it was almost noon.

Mom was home, she'd had a call from the hospital that Mathew wasn't doing too well.

"I think we should go and see him," I said.

He was quite feverish when we got there. They feared pneumonia. It was hard to keep his lungs clear when he was so unable to move about.

I sat with him for a few hours. I'm not sure if he knew I was there or not. Then I left and marched over to Annie's house.

Annie was sitting on the porch steps. Her brothers were nowhere in sight. "Annie," I told her. "I have some bad news."

Annie looked at me as if I were from Mars. "I've had enough bad news for a life time," she said. She looked old. She looked as if someone had given her a black eye.

Someone had given her a black eye. It was her brother, Frank. She had told a girl in school that Frank had red hair; that he died it blonde so that he could be like the rest of the family. Frank had been so furious, he'd hit Annie right in the eye with his fist. He could have blinded her.

She looked so sad. She looked sad and mad and hurt. I hated to give her more bad news. But I felt I had to.

"Mathew is very sick," I said.

"I know that. He was born sick."

"More than that," I tried to explain. "I think you should visit him. I think you should say good-bye."

Annie got up and walked toward the front door. I followed her. She opened the door and tried to shut it in my face. "Go home," she insisted. "No one asked you here." She was acting really angry. She was acting afraid.

“You have to see him.” I wasn’t going to let it go.

“I can’t,” Annie said and she started to cry. She sobbed loud and hard the way someone does who has kept a sorrow inside herself for a very long time.

“I’m the one made him sick.”

It was so untrue. Mathew was born with water on his brain. It had nothing to do with Annie. “It’s not true,” I told her. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

But she didn’t believe me. She explained through her hysterical sobbing how she had gone up to see the baby when he was brought home. She had looked at the baby with the big floppy head. She had poked her finger at the head. She didn’t know why. She just poked it because it looked as if, as if she could.

I understood what she meant. When I first saw Mathew his head reminded me of dough.

“I poked my finger into his head,” Annie cried, her voice growing even more hysterical. And I made a dent. It went right into his brain. And now he has brain damage. Now he can’t eat or sit or anything.

Mrs. Forsay came out. She wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

“Annie thinks she made Mathew sick,” I explained.

Mrs. Forsay looked sad and troubled. She took Annie inside. “We’ll see you later,” she said to me.

The next day they all came over to see me. The whole family, Mrs. Forsay, Mr. Forsay the brothers.

“We’d like to visit Mathew,” they said.

Mom and I took them to the hospital. We were all a bit nervous.

I wanted Mathew to recognize them. I wanted him to know that his was his mom and dad and brothers and sister. But how could he?

The nurses had prepared Mathew for the visit. They had him dressed in a nice clean nightie, with soft blankets. They had the lights low, to soften the look.

But nothing had really prepared them to see the big baby, so helpless, his head braced with two large bandages to prevent him from moving and breaking his own neck with the weight of that head

Mrs. Forsay began to weep. Her husband had to leave. He wasn't the kind of man who would cry in front of his children. The situation was just too emotional for him.

Annie was the only one who came forward. She took Mathew's hand. She began to speak to him.

"Maria tells me you like people to sing to you, Mathew," she whispered. "She tells me that she and her mom sing to you all the time."

Annie began to sing in her tiny voice, a voice as blond as her hair. A voice the color of straw and the sound of wind, a voice at once old and almost as yet unborn.

Mathew's big head swayed a bit toward the sound of Annie's voice. The whole family crowded around him. His eyes opened wide. I watched his eyes fill with fear. His head lurched wickedly to the side. And then he fell back, still, his eyes closed.

"He's fallen asleep," Mrs. Forsay whispered. I didn't say anything. I knew Mathew was not asleep.

"I'm sorry, Mathew," Annie whispered. "I'm sorry I never came."

They stayed for over an hour, the whole family, just sitting there. Finally Mr. Forsay joined them. They stayed until Mom told the it was time for her to feed Mathew. But she knew. She just didn't want the Forsays to know.

They held a funeral in the Catholic Church. Mom and Grandpa and I were invited to sit with the family. The priest said a prayer about innocence and being with God and then he said what a sweet child Mathew was and how sad it was that he was taken so young, but now he was an little angel. It didn't feel right. The priest hadn't even met Mathew. How could he talk about him?

Mr. Forsay got up and thanked everyone for coming and he invited them to the Legion Hall for tea after the burial ceremony. He said he wanted to thank two people especially. He wanted to thank his neighbor Rose Hackle and her daughter Maria who had taken such good care of his son. His voice caught and he almost cried when he said that. But he controlled himself.

"Maria was his friend. And I want to thank her for that."

And then he made the strangest request. He asked my mother to come up and sing the song that Mathew loved. My mom wasn't a professional singer. In fact, her voice was often off key. It was soft and had a slight quiver when she sang.

But that day, in the church, with the Forsay family watching and everyone listening, my mother got up from the pew, leaned over the coffin of baby Mathew and sang in her quavering voice as if she had been doing it all her life.

"It's jus a little street where old friends meet. I'd like to wander back some day." It was one of her favorite songs. She had sung it to Mathew often.

At the reception, the family stood to greet the people who had never met Mathew but had come to pay their respects none-the-less. Most were church going folks.

Mr. and Mrs. Forsay stood next to the children. There was a chair for Marcel with his bad leg. And next to Annie, standing beside her, as if a real member of the family, as if a sister to Annie and to the brothers, I stood. Invited to be there. As a family member.

I shook hands, and said "thank-you," just as they did. I wiped away tears and told people how much I loved Mathew. Everyone had heard the story.

"God bless you and your mother, Maria," they said.

At the burial site, they lowered Mathew into the ground. I had never seen a person going into the ground before. I couldn't watch. It was horrible.

I almost fainted. The rest of the day was a bit of a blur. Mom let me sleep with her that night. I think she was afraid I'd have bad dreams. I did. But it wasn't a dream. It was a memory. I had pushed it out of my mind. Somehow I had pushed it out of my mind. Somehow I had pretended, along with the Forsays, that Mathew had not broken his own neck. I kept going over it again and again in my mind, that awful moment. The sound of Annie's straw voice, the family forming a dark circle, closing in on the frightened baby who had no idea these people were his mother and father, his brothers and sister.

Now all I could think of was that it was my fault. Everything was all my fault. I had wished for chocolate and got worms. I had wished for my Dad and he 'd come to say good-bye. I worst of all, I had wished for the Forsays to love Mathew and now he was dead.

When I woke up, I had the deepest need to visit the grave. Mom agreed to come with me. She knew I was feeling horrible. She thought it was because Mathew was gone. It was true, but it was more than that. So much more. I brought a bouquet of white lilies. Lilies

reminded me of Grandmother. I was sure Mathew would like them. And maybe the lilies could say how sorry I was.

It wasn't easy finding the grave. There were so many graves. We had just been there, but following the procession. Now it was so different. Neither my mom nor I could remember where it was. There was a grave map. Can you imagine, a map where all the graves were and all the people's names. But even with the grave map it was hard to find Mathew.

When we did, we saw his tombstone. It was an angel child with Mathew's name carved into the stone. Under his name were the words, 'Beloved son, beloved brother, beloved friend.'

Beloved friend. The words should have brought me the greatest joy. But they didn't. I began to sob. I wanted to scratch my face. I wanted to make myself bleed. "What's wrong with me?" I needed to know. "What's wrong with me, Mama?"

My God, Marie, nothing, nothing. You're my angel.

"Sometimes I think part of me is missing.

Mom held me close and I confessed the worst fear of all. "I think, when he saw them, all around him, all those strangers, he was afraid. He was confused and afraid. That's why he raised his head that way, the way we thought he never could. And that's how his neck got broken."

"It was just a matter of time, Marie. He was living on borrowed time. He had pneumonia."

"Am I, Mom? Am I living on borrowed time?"

"Marie, why would you say that?"

"Sometimes I have dreams. Dreams about dying, about jumping out of a car and dying".

"You were his friend, Marie, and you gave his family a great gift."

"But it killed him."

"Maybe, maybe it did. But it doesn't change the truth. He was dying. His family got to say good-bye. And mostly, sweet Marie, you were his friend. Nothing can change that. Nothing.

“Do you think Mathew would still want me as a friend, if he’d had a choice?”

Mom thought for a while. It scared me. Usually she jumped at answers, assuring me even before my worry left my mouth. Maybe she was trying to find the right words to tell me that Mathew would not have wanted me as a friend.

“I know Mathew had a little bit of real life, as short as it was, because of us, Marie, and because of you, he got to give a gift to his family. There wasn’t much that Mathew could do, but you let him do that. I think that if Mathew had been able to think that out, to plan that, he would have made things happen exactly as they did.

“He’d kill himself, to let them feel better?”

“I’d do it for you.” My mom said and I knew it was true. “And you, you’d do it for me.” And I knew that was true, too. I would.

“I hope you won’t have to,” I said and leaned heavily into her arms.

“Ssh, ssh,” she cooed. “You need to stop thinking. Just accept, accept life. It will be a lot easier.”

“Accept what?”

“The way things are.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. And you know, I don’t think I ever did.

The Prairie Bride **Part 3: Life After Crow Girl**

Chapter One: The Black Dress

I had no idea how I was going to support myself. But supporting myself wasn’t the thing I was worried about. It was Rose. Rose was the one on my mind as I packed the old leather trunk which would always smell like Grandfather and which would be a reminder of him for the whole of my life.

The old trunk wasn't a good choice. It was heavy and awkward and vulnerable. I knew it was not the trunk it had once been. I knew it was not a trunk to be dragged or thrown about. It was a trunk to be carried on a cart pulled by a young man who would receive a generous tip when the trunk and its owner arrived at their destination.

However, I was well aware that there would be no cart and no young man and no generous tip as I carefully selected what would go into the trunk of my escape. Escape might seem like too dramatic a word, and maybe it was. But a need to escape was what I was feeling.

When Mom married Roy there was just no space for me. Not space, actually, but air. Not enough air to breathe. The air seemed pregnant with too much of us when the three of us were together and so I knew I had no choice but to leave.

I chose a night when they were out hunting houses for Roy to snatch up, as he'd say, snapping his fingers as he did, for effect. Roy considered himself quite a dandy. Mom and I both thought he permed his hair, but we weren't sure, even though they were married. Roy was a secretive kind of guy. He talked loud and open, but it didn't seem real, at least not to me, it didn't.

Roy had an eye for finding a house that he could buy cheap, fix up and sell at a good profit. It made me sad. Folks who could no longer afford their houses had bought them when they were filled with hope and plans for the future but had been unable to pay the mortgage. Those folks would sell the houses and then months later they might walk by and see their old homes filled with new lights and fresh paint, made beautiful with new shutters and a once straight path that now curved around newly planted shrubs.

Mom didn't seem to think of how sad it would be to see your dreams turn into someone else's realities. I guess love does that to you. She just saw how good Roy was at all the things needed to fix up an "old beater". He could do the plumbing, the electrical work. He could build anything.

Mom was in charge of decoration. She would collect paint samples and wall paper and swatches of cloth the way she had collected shoes when I was in grade school.

Sometimes I longed for those days. The days when Mom dressed up like a movie star and made the nuns crazy. As hard as it was to take their harsh judgment at the time, now it seemed almost comical. And a blessing. Their cruelty about my mother's "wicked ways" had led me to my best friend, Dickey. Dickey'd been there, thrusting his small brave spirit between me and the nuns. He'd been there when I'd lost Tom, the horse I loved like a brother, and he'd been there when we sold over a hundred rabbits as pets to save them from becoming Sunday dinner.

Thinking of Dickey was making me feel sad. He had moved out on his own, had left town and now I was moving out of Rose's home. Nothing ever seemed to stay the way you wished it would. And even when you wished them sometime the wishes themselves went wonky. I've had a few wonky wishes in my sixteen years. More than you can imagine.

Leaving home wasn't a wish. I wasn't like, "oh, I wish I could live on my own, have my own place", imagining friends and sleeping late and having all the pets you wanted. And never having to leave them behind. Never having to love them and then leave them because you couldn't live with them any more. That had happened to me. It was the worst thing that had happened to me in my whole life. It was so awful, I can't even talk about it. Not yet, anyway. Maybe one day. Not today.

It wasn't the wishing of far away places and strange adventures. It wasn't like imagining yourself in a country cottage raising wild flowers and roses and selling them at a local grocers. No, this leaving wasn't a wish. It was a reality. I had to go. I knew it deep in my heart. I knew things would go wonky if I stayed. They would go wrong. Terribly wrong.

The first thing I put in the trunk was my grandmother's quilt. It was like packing my Mom's whole family, all her brothers and sisters. Grandmother had made that quilt out of remnants of clothing from each one of her eight children. All of my aunts and uncles were in that quilt. Even the baby who had been still born and wrapped in the blanket made of soft flannelette.

Grandmother had been alone at the farm when that baby was born still and silent. She had been in labor for five days, when the sound of her cow forced her outside into the cold Saskatchewan night, had her bring that cow into her own kitchen.

And she milked the cow, hers and the cow's eyes wide with pain. Already the baby was dying inside her. The baby was named Marie. Marie is the name on her little gravestone. Marie Hoffman, born Nov. 7, 1929. I'd seen the gravestone. It was strange to see a grave stone with only one date on it as if the spirit inside were floating somewhere, looking for someone, something, searching for a life she'd never had.

Somehow as I stared at the date with my name, Maria, on it, I felt overwhelmed. I'd fainted. I hadn't known before that day that I'd been named after a dead baby. I hadn't known I'd be living a life for someone else.

The day changed me. It gave me a special purpose, an awful responsibility and sometimes, when I least expected it, it gave me an unknown and very special power.

It was the power of knowing when something was going to happen; the power of sometimes even making it happen.

Today the power wasn't working very well. Today I was packing to leave and I didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do once I got there.

I put in my most essential clothes, my picture album, my five favorite books and my life savings, three hundreds dollars and seventy-five cents. And for some reason, I put in my mother 's portable sewing machine.

It was a Singer. She never used it. She hated sewing. Her sister had given the sewing machine to her in a bit of a hostile attempt to make my mother more domesticated.

Domestic was not a word that came to mind when anyone thought of Rose. Lilacs, music at midnight, patent leather high heeled shoes and bracelets that jingled as she walked. And taking wonderful care of others. Those are the words you thought of at the mention of my mother. Canned soup, wash machines, ironed table clothes, alarm clocks, none of those words suited her and I don't think I'd ever heard her even say one of those words.

So, in went the sewing machine. There wasn't room for another thing.

I didn't want to explain my leaving to Mom and Roy and I knew they wouldn't want to hear me try. The reason was one of those unspeakable invisible things that haunts like a ghost no one believes in but everyone is afraid of.

I wrote a note. "I took Grandma's quilt. P.S. And the sewing machine. All my love, Marie". I had given myself a "Maria" name, once, when I was seven. But Mom didn't like me to change my name. I was, after all, named after my grandmother's stillborn baby. I didn't really have a right to change my name. So back to Marie, I went.

I stared at the note. It was awful. What would my mother think when she read that note? I started to cry. I pushed the trunk under my bed. I was still crying when I heard Mom and Roy come into the house. I heard them fix drinks, eat sandwiches. I heard Roy ask where I was. I heard my mother say nothing. I imagined her pointing upstairs. I heard them walk up the stairs, go into the shower.

I knew they were making love. I knew Roy was the one who wanted to make love in the shower because he didn't want me to hear. I wondered what my mother thought about that. I fell asleep wondering.

I didn't move the trunk or myself the next day or the next. It was the imagined look on my mother's face as she read the note that stopped me. My mother couldn't stand anyone being sad, including herself.

But I didn't unpack the trunk, either. Having it ready gave me a strange feeling of reassurance. I knew I could go at anytime. I tried to imagine what circumstances might make it easy to go. I couldn't imagine any. But I wished for something, whatever it would be, and I wished it would come soon.

Roy was having a buying/selling frenzy. Lots of city folks were moving out of the crowded towns in the East Coast to be closer to the earth. The prairies were perfect. The prairies were all about earth, about farming, and old-fashioned ways. Uranium was being mined, jobs were plentiful. The sixties were about to explode on the world, and Saskatchewan was ready for it.

Roy came home grumbling. He had bought a fixer-upper and the people who sold it to him refused to remove a small camping trailer that sat on the property. He was going to have to pay to have it hauled to the dump.

"Can I see it?" The words popped out of my mouth bypassing my brain.

"What for?"

"Maybe we can fix it up." Those words from my mother's mouth.

"I doubt it. It's in pretty rough shape". Roy looked at me, added, almost casually, the words clearly passing through his brain before he said them. "I'm going out there this afternoon. Marie can come with me, take a look."

"I'll come, too." A bit too quickly. From Mom.

"No need." Still too casual.

Mom's face reddened. "I'd like to come."

"Come, then." Roy threw the words across the room. They hit my mom in the chest. I could hear the words hit.

"You two go," I stammered.

"Oh for Christ's sake, forget the whole thing." Roy was putting on his coat. He was about to leave. Mom and I stood staring stupidly after him.

"You go," Mom said.

The trip to the property took us twenty miles out of town. Roy's mood had cheered considerably. He suggested we stop for a snack along the way. The best snacks were at Bell's Beach. The Bells were locals who were teachers by day and musicians by weekend. Their place was a combination cafe, gas station, dance hall.

It felt kind of creepy to be there in the middle of the afternoon. The space was so big, tables along one side so that folks could eat as they watched the dancers. Roy ordered chips and gravy and a rye whiskey. "Want a beer?" he asked me. Was he nuts? I didn't drink beer. My high school teacher owned the place. He wasn't making any sense. I just shook my head a short, 'no'.

"You're almost old enough. Almost a woman."

"You have to be twenty-one," I reminded Roy. "I just turned sixteen."

"Sweet Sixteen and never been kissed," Roy said cocking his head as he looked at me. He looked like some kind of bird. For the first time I noticed his neck was too long for his body.

"I've been kissed," I said, sorry I had the minute the words raced across the table towards Roy's skinny neck.

He looked shocked, then interested. "Tell me," he coaxed.

"Let's go," I said.

"Not 'till you tell me."

I would have my tongue out before I'd tell Roy about the mystery and promised beauty of my first kiss with my best friend, Dickey LaFleur.

Roy jumped up and dropped a quarter into the jukebox. We were the only ones in the dance hall. The attendant was out pumping gas into a huge logging truck. Roy grabbed my arm, held firm. "Tell me or dance with me." He pulled me to the floor, knowing as I did that I'd never tell.

He pulled me onto the floor and began to twirl me around. There was sawdust on the floor. I had no idea why. Roy had been a dance instructor and knew at least ten different dances. That's how he had met Mom. At a dance. She loved to dance. All the men in her life were good dancers. Even Dan, who had only one foot was a good dancer.

We never spoke as we moved like silhouettes in a shadow play. Roy guided me so that somehow I followed his moves, skating smoothly, twirling, dipping as if we had done this a thousand times.

I don't think I breathed through the whole dance. My heart was beating and my fingers were cold with frightened sweat. I kept my eyes glued to the walls desperate never to let him catch my gaze.

The attendant came in just as we were finishing. Roy almost pushed me away from him. "That's all the lesson I'm giving." He said it more to the attendant than to me. "Boy, once anyone knows you've given lessons." He made a sort of "oh god" face. He headed for the door. We hadn't even paid for our chips and gravy and his rye.

"You coming?" he almost shouted at me.

Then he must have remembered the bill and he hurried back and threw twice as much money on the table as the stuff cost.

The attendant watched, he didn't say anything. He didn't move. He just watched us leave. We drove for the next ten miles in silence.

The trailer was a mess, but it wasn't really ruined. The people had used it as a sort of storage and had left all their useless junk behind. You know, the kind of stuff we all save and never use, but just can't bear to throw away. Until we move, that is. Then we are all too eager to leave it behind.

The trailer had a tiny red arborite table at one end and a fake leather couch that pulled out into a bed at the other. It was a miniature house, kitchen, bedroom, living room, all in one. There was a sink and miniature fridge and a propane stove. There was even a tiny bathroom with a shower the size of a fat banana. Honestly, it was skinnier than a person.

"It's beautiful," I said. I smiled at Ray forgetting the awful loneliness of the dance, the silent angry drive to the property. Roy softened. "Women," he said as if that explained everything.

On the way home Roy only said one thing. "I wouldn't tell Rose about your wanting a dance lesson. She'd probably get jealous. You know how she likes to dance."

I didn't bother to answer him. I concentrated on the trailer. On where we could move it. I knew there was a trailer park the other side of town. It was the Pines Trailer Park. It was in the Pines. Saskatchewan is famous for them. If you have never seen them, it's hard to imagine. Rows and rows of Christmas trees. Can you imagine living right in the

middle of that? Can you imagine the smell? I concentrated really hard on imagining that smell all the way home.

Mom and I worked on the trailer. We cleaned and painted and added checkered curtains. We never discussed why. We never suggested it would be sold. We both knew it was for me. Roy was the only one who had no idea.

“Wow!” he said when we were done. “We’ll make a bundle on this.” From the looks on our faces he got it. It wasn’t for sale. His face reddened. That night he and Mom argued.

“She’s too young.”

“Too young for what?” Mom’s tone was harsh.

Roy knew he would not win. “It’s a fool thing to do.”

“She can always move back.”

How about school?” Roy asked. It was a raw question. It was one I had wondered about myself. I loved school.

“There’s always correspondence. Kat’s smart. She can do it a million ways.”

And that was that. I began life on my own in the Pines Trailer Park, living in a shroud of Christmas trees, a smart school drop out.

Mom and Roy paid for six months rent and filled my little fridge with food. But I knew that I had to figure out some way to make it on my own.

“On my own”. The words suddenly sounded so cold, so lonely. Scary. Stupid. What had I done? I had completed only one month of grade ten. I was an uneducated moron. I was living in the middle of a forest.

I pulled open my trunk and began to unpack. I pulled my grandmother’s quilt over me and fell asleep. And in the morning I knew what I was going to do. I was going to be a dressmaker!

I made a bunch of posters and put them up all over town. I told the world I could make baby clothes and men’s shirts and women’s dresses. I told them all sorts of lies. But Mom always said that if you had to, you’d rise to the occasion. I had the sewing machine. I knew I could do it.

I started out by ripping up some of my favorite blouses and making patterns out of them and then sewing them together again. It wasn't bad. I had three patterns and the blouses didn't look much different after I sewed them back together. A little pucker here and there, but nothing serious.

I know it sounds nuts, but I felt my grandmother guiding me as I sewed. It was as if my fingers knew how to cut the newspaper I was using to make the patterns, that my fingers knew how to fit the pieces of cloth together. The sewing machine sang as I fed the cotton into its little silver feeder. We were a unit, the three of us, grandmother, the sewing machine and me.

I started to get brave. I began to invent patterns of my own. I made a baby jacket out of a big beach towel. A full circle skirt out of some black felt. I even cut out a black poodle and stitched it to the skirt. I loved sewing. I loved to imagine the clothes, what they would look like and how people would feel wearing them.

As I worked, I would talk aloud to myself. I would say, "Now the collar goes here, this way. Now that sleeve. Ease in the sleeve, don't let it pucker. Lots of pins." And I'd make gathering stitches and ease the sleeve in until it was perfect. I had no idea how I knew how to make a gathering stitch. I just did. It all seemed to make so much sense to me. It all felt so natural.

People began to buy my things. Soon I had money to purchase real material. I made a blouse of yellow silk. Yellow tassels adorned each sleeve, pearl buttons wound their way from the waist to the throat. It was a glamorous cowgirl shirt. It sold for thirty dollars. I was going to be rich. I was going to be famous. I began to imagine myself in Toronto, in Montreal. I began to buy fashion magazines.

On Sundays, I'd go home for a visit and to have what Mom called a home cooked meal. That was quite funny because Mom wasn't really a home cooked meal kind of person. She was good at three things; stew, soup and apple pie. Now that sounds really home-cooked and it was. And they were all delicious. I have never tasted any better. She grated the apples and added just a hint of cinnamon and nutmeg and the pie just melted in your mouth. The stew and soup she made in an old pressure cooker that threatened to blow up the house each time she used it. She put root vegetables in both the stew and the soup. Potatoes, carrots, a bit of parsnip, a bit of turnip, lots of potato. As long as her frozen peas lasted, we had those too. Everything came from the garden.

But that was it! Nothing else. She never ventured beyond those three. All else was bacon and eggs, in all kinds of combinations, by favorite being Denver sandwiches, bit of fried bacon and onions, fried up, with eggs poured over and stirred, served in toasted bread with ketchup. We usually ate what most would consider to be either breakfast or picnic. It didn't matter if it were hot or cold, summer or winter, breakfast or supper.

What matter was how Rose felt. "It's a picnic kind of day," she'd say and we'd know that meat slices were on the list - ham slices, salami slices, pickles, bread, cheese. Of course, we loved the home cooked days the best. Rose tried to make Sundays when I visited a home cooked day.

I could smell the pie that she'd cool in the little cupboard Roy had built for the milkman. The cupboard had two doors in it, one for the outside, where the milkman could open it and put in the milk and cream. Then Mom could open the little door on her side and take it out. It kept the milk cool and Mom didn't have to answer the door or go outside to get the milk. Mom liked to sleep in. She hated getting up to the ring of a doorbell. So Roy created the little milk door and that's where Mom cooled her pie.

Things went pretty well the first two Sundays. We were all glad to see one another and we all loved the stew and pie. Then I made the great announcement about wanting to go to the big city of Saskatoon. I was sure there were more opportunities in the city. Mom was encouraging of course, her lovely red mouth in a smile of pride and joy for me. Not Roy. No smile there. A snarl almost. Angry. Mocking. I felt stupid. How could I think I could do such a thing. Why had I opened my big mouth.

"Just once I get myself set up. I mean, people really like my stuff. It could take awhile. Not right away, I didn't mean."

"A man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?" Mom was always quoting. She usually got one or two words a bit mixed up.

"Grasp, Rose," Roy said as if he were angry with her. "Exceed his grasp".

"You know what I mean." Mom hated details.

"I know it's damn stupid business," Roy said. "Damn stupid."

"Pie?" Mom liked to change the topic. She hated fighting. I was glad the dinner was almost over. That old feeling of being trapped was coming back.

"It's bad enough she stays out there, that God forsaken place with all those losers." Roy didn't want to let it go. He hated trailer parks. He hated my being there.

"Lucky she hasn't been, been..."

"What?" Mom didn't like his prejudice. She liked the people in the trailer park. Most were old, grew roses. "They grow roses for god's sake," she said, thinking of the roses at the same time as I did.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Roy wasn’t on our roses wavelength. He was thinking of the families on unemployment, the young guys who had the odd job here and there, who drank beer and played guitars in their trucks. He glared at them whenever he was out there.

“I’m fine. I lock my door.”

“Oh that makes me feel better,” Roy said with a look of total exasperation. If one of those guys decided to...” He couldn’t finish the sentence. I had an image of one of them huffing and puffing and blowing my door down. It made me laugh.

“So now it’s funny?” Roy was getting really mad.

“Who wants pie?” Mom was handing a piece of her wonderful grated apples in a perfect crust pie when Roy grabbed it so violently it actually slid across the table and landed upside down on the floor.

“Roy!”

“It’s bad enough that she’s out there. Why does she want to leave? We’ll never, we’ll never.....” Roy couldn’t seem to finish the sentence. He started to pick the pie up with his fingers and put it back on the plate. He started to cry. “No more, no more pie,” he said, stupidly. “If she goes you’ll never...”

Mom put her arm around him. “I’ll make you pie,” she said, softly. “I’ll still make you pie.”

I drove home in Mom’s old Chevy, my piece of pie wrapped in waxed paper. I told them I had a shirt to make for the next day. I had to leave early. No one argued. No one wanted to talk. No one knew what to say about a man who started to cry because his wife wouldn’t make pie anymore if his step-daughter left town.

I didn’t go back the next Sunday and no one came out to get the Chevy. I stayed home all day that Sunday, just in case, but nothing. I guess we all needed a little space. The next Sunday I didn’t feel as if I wanted that much space. I was feeling lonesome, almost scared. I didn’t feel so much like someone who was going to get rich and famous. I felt like a sixteen year old who had left home and dropped out of school and lived in a dumb old trailer park.

I was listening to some music on the radio when there was a knock at the door. I opened it, hoping it might be Mom when I saw him standing there. He wore a green sweater, the sleeves not quite long enough. The sweater stopped at his waist. He wore a belt with the letter “E” in gold. He had long legs, Charlton Heston shoulders. His eyes were green, as

green as olives growing on a tree in the Mediterranean. He was so tall he couldn't get in without ducking his head. He put his arm up against the wall and smiled down at me. His hair was a sandy blond. It fell in wisps about his forehead.

I fell in love with him before he got in the door. I fell in love with him and knew I wanted to marry him. The thought scared me so much I slipped under his arm and went outside. God, what did I do that for? Now he was in and I was out. He laughed. He stepped outside with me.

"You must be Marie," he said. "My name's 'E'." He held out his hand. It was big and strong. His nails were broad and clean. They looked polished. I shook his hand. It was warm and dry.

"Marie," I said.

"I heard you make shirts."

I nodded.

"I need one." He held out his long arms, the sleeves of the green sweater crawled up. The hairs on his arms were light, sandy, a bit curly. I imagined them to be soft.

"Long arms," I said.

"Well, will you?"

"Yes," I said. "Oh yes." I imagined a white veil.

"Well, good." He laughed again. "What do we do?"

"Measurements," I stuttered. "We take measurements."

"Out here?"

I was so nervous measuring his chest, his neck, his arms, his wrist in the hallway of that small trailer. I had to do everything twice. I'd measure and by the time I'd go to write it down, sliding away from his body so close to mine, I'd forget what the measurement was. Then I'd have to take it again and say it over and over so that I could get it right.

"How's your short term memory?" he said.

"Good. It's good."

"Right."

Finally I was done. He headed for the door. I had to stop him.

“Wait,” I said. He turned and faced me. “When...when are you coming back?”

“When should I?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You’ll be done tomorrow?”

Oh god. It was five o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. How could I get it ready by tomorrow. I couldn’t even buy any fabric until tomorrow.

“The pattern,” I said. “The pattern will be ready tomorrow. To make sure it fits.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” He got into a Ford Fairlane. It was shiny and pink. The chrome shone. You could tell from its perfect shape that he loved this car and that he didn’t always drive it. It was special.

He showed up about the same time the next day. He got out of his beautiful pink car. He had some beautiful white cotton with him. I took the material and placed it on the table. I had the paper pattern ready. I pinned it on his body. He smelled like a mild vanilla. I had never noticed anyone ever smelling like anything before, unless it was cologne. I could barely breathe. My fingers trembled, burned with embarrassment. If he noticed, he didn’t say anything. But I sensed he was aware, aware and amused.

When he left he said, “I need the shirt for Friday – there’s a fish fry and dance at the Fish and Game League. I’m sort of in charge. Wanta’ come?”

“Friday,” I said. “Sure.”

I sewed like a maniac. His shirt was perfect. I hand stitched the collar and cuffs. I made French cuffs, I made French button holes. It would be a shirt to end all shirts. And for myself, I had to have the perfect dress. I poured over my fashion magazines. There was one dress I just couldn’t resist. It was just a drawing. A tight fitting dress, hugging the waist and hips all the way down to the knees. There was a flare at the back of the knee that trailed to the ground. The bodice was almost strapless, except for a ribbon like piece that went under the bust and around the neck. It was the sexiest dress I’d ever seen.

I made it out of a heavy brocade that had iridescent green and pink and gold threads running through it. Today it would be considered garish. I guess back then it was even garish. But not to me. Garish was not part of my vocabulary just the way canned soup

wasn't part of my Mom's. I loved things that sparkled and shone. I was in love with shimmer.

If it wasn't garish for the time, it certainly wasn't appropriate. A black evening gown for a Fish and Game League dance. But appropriate didn't occur to me, either. Common sense was just not something I had a lot of.

E showed up a bit early to change into his shirt. I couldn't believe it. He stood in the hall of my trailer and took off his T shirt and put on the white shirt. He grinned. I knew he was pleased. He gave me twenty bucks. I felt shy taking it.

"Let's go."

"I, I have to change," I said. He looked surprised.

"You look good to me."

I was wearing slacks and a sweater. "I, I made a dress," I explained.

"I'll wait outside."

I struggled into the long gown. I almost caught my skin in the long zipper the dress fit so tight. I slipped into my high heels. At 5'6" I could wear heels as high as I wanted and E would still be so much taller than I.

I piled my hair into an upsweep, sprayed like crazy, smeared on lipstick, and I was ready. It was the most grown up I'd ever felt. I sized myself up in the mirror. I thought I looked about twenty. I always looked old for my age. As I stared in the mirror, I felt that a woman was staring back.

I stepped out of the trailer. E was waiting. He actually gasped when he saw me.

Oh god. What had I done? I felt like a four year old in her Mom's dress up clothes.

"Let's go," he said. He headed for the car. I tried to walk down the step onto the ground. I couldn't get down. I couldn't take anything but little mincing steps. The dress was so tight to my knees that I couldn't walk in the damn thing.

E turned around and saw exactly what was happening to me. He picked me up and placed me softly to the ground. "Quite a dress," he said.

I wiggled and minced over to the truck. Now there was a worse problem. I couldn't get into the truck. I couldn't pull my dress up to give me enough room to move. I had made

it just like the girl in the magazine. I guess models never sit down. I just hadn't thought about moving. Even when I had tried it on, I hadn't thought about moving. I hadn't sewn all the pieces together for a last try on. And now I was trapped in a dress that made me out to be a first class nut.

"Want to change?" E asked me. The look on my face must have suggested that I didn't. I had made this dress, imagining E dancing me across the floor, imagining everyone looking at us, wondering who that date was, and where she got that beautiful dress.

"Can we walk?"

E didn't answer that.

He looked at his car. He picked me up again and carried me back into my trailer.

"You stay put." And he was gone.

He returned ten minutes later driving a pick up. He simply picked me up and put me in the back of his truck. I road back there, wind whipping my hair, flecks of dust settling on my make up. E drove slowly, trying to protect me from the wind, the dust. I wondered what he was thinking.

When we got there, I must have looked a mess. My hair was askew and my face felt dirty. I think I had smeared my lipstick when I'd tried to brush some hair out of my face. A few couples were getting out of their cars. They stared at me standing in the back of the truck like a horse or pig or some farm animal.

E jumped out of the truck as if fetching his date out of the back of a truck was something he did every day. He opened the tail gate, I stepped forward and he lifted me down as though I were made of feathers. He half carried me as we glided into the hall.

All eyes were on us. "This is Marie," he announced as if that explained everything. The music began to play. "Step on my shoes," he whispered. "We'll do small steps, I'll lift you when we have to turn. I kicked my heels into the corner and did as he ordered. We began to move across the floor as if we were one.

As if we were one.

Chapter Two: The Red Dress

Roy jumped out his Oldsmobile and pounded on the door of my little trailer. It was early. I wasn't even dressed. I was having a leisurely breakfast of my favorite snack – boiled wheat and apples and pecans and poured cream from the farmer. It felt so wholesome. It tasted so delicious. It was earth itself. Nuts from trees in Florida. Apples from trees in the Okanogan, cream from the woman next door whose son owned a milk farm and the wheat from my uncle Henry who grew the stuff. You had to simmer the wheat for a long time, cooking like porridge, but taking hours.

Mom wasn't with him. I threw on my siwash sweater over my PJs. I opened the door. "Where's Mom?" "What happened?" I was sure something bad had happened to my mother.

"What were you thinking?" Roy was furious.

What had I done? "Mom," I repeated, scared now, "Where's Mom?" What had happened to Mom?

"Home. Shut up," he said. He grabbed my arm. I had never seen Roy so mad. He'd scared me before, but not this way.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he repeated.

I stared at him stupidly. What was he talking about? "What?" "What?" I said, getting mad myself.

"Going to that dance dressed like a whore?" He let go of my arm as if I were something dirty, soiled, not to be touched. "You couldn't even walk in it? Had to be driven in the back of a truck like somebody's garbage." He glared at me. "That's what he thinks of you. That you are a piece of garbage."

Roy jumped in his car and drove away spitting gravel and dust as he did. Several people had come out of their trailers to hear him tell me I was a piece of garbage. I didn't know what to do. I shrugged as if I didn't understand what was happening and went inside feeling sick.

I got dressed and went to the main office where there were big showers and a coin laundry and a pay phone. I called Mom. When she answered she sounded as if she had been crying.

"Is Roy there?" I asked.

“No.”

“He came to see me.” I waited, wondering what she would say if I told her what he’d done. Questions raced. Did she know? Why had he come alone, was she mad, too?

“Did he tell you?” she said, her voice breaking down.

My god, she was upset about the dress too? I couldn’t believe it. “Yes. He was upset. Uh, who told you?”

“Henry. He still has friends in Cudworth.”

My Uncle Henry found out from someone who lived 50 miles away? This was stupid.

“What the hell business is it of Uncle Henry’s?”

Now it was Mom’s turned to have a surprised silence. “Marie. He knew your Uncle Ted, too.”

“Who?”

“Didn’t Roy tell you? He said he was going to tell you.”

“What. What Mom?” But I knew. My voice went empty. I was talking to Mom but my mouth was so dry no words came out. Something awful had happened, but no one was telling me. I hung up the phone. I had to see Mom. I had to talk to her. I hated phones. I hated the way you couldn’t see anyone’s eyes. You couldn’t really tell what was happening on a phone. A phone was no way to communicate.

I called a taxi.

Mom was in a dither. My father’s brother was dead. I had never met any of my father’s brothers. We kept far away from the family. Except for Grandfather. Grandfather had lived with us. But he had passed. And now there was no connection, really. Why was Mom so upset?

I was sure Mom had known all the brothers and sisters. They had grown up together. They had gone to school and church together. I guessed she wanted to go to the funeral. But no. She said she didn’t want to go. I couldn’t believe it.

“Dad might be there,” I said. “We could see Dad.”

Saying that sure helped. Mom began to cry in big gulps. Her face was a pinched and white. She was afraid. She looked at me, and I saw something I had never seen before. Shame. It startled me. My mom was never ashamed of anything. She held her head high. She was her own person. She wasn't the kind you thought of as carrying secrets of shame.

"What?" I put my arms around her. She felt like a frightened child, soft and yielding and hoping for forgiveness."

"I'm just not going," she sobbed and I could tell it was useless.

I wanted to know more about my uncle, the one I had never met who was now dead. Mom wouldn't talk about him. "Don't go, Marie," she said. "Please, just don't go." The more she told me not to go, the more I wanted to. I felt strongly that I needed to go.

Mom took out a bottle of rye and began to drink, no mix, from a water glass. I'd seen her do it before. She was going to drink until she passed out, there on the kitchen table.

Roy walked in. He saw the two of us sitting there, Mom drinking, me watching her. "Nice!" he said and went to the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

That night, alone in my trailer I thought that I partly understood her being afraid. I was afraid, too. I didn't want to go alone. I didn't want to face all my relatives. I didn't want everyone staring at the weird kid Eddie had left behind. The weird kid who lived in a trailer, who didn't even finish high school.

Yet, yet, I had to go.

I searched my trunk for material. It had become the storage for my material now that I was becoming the dress maker. I found some soft red wool with mohair running through the fiber. There was enough fake leopard to make a jacket and purse and belt. If I had to go to this funeral alone, I would go the way my mother would have gone. I would go looking my best. I would go wearing red. Not floozy red. Classy red, Audrey Hepburn red, with a smart short jacket, a sophisticated clutch. They'd notice me, but they'd be talking about my outfit. They'd ask me where I got it. And I'd tell them I designed it. I'd tell them I was a dressmaker.

I pulled out the red wool. That's when I saw it, stuffed in behind some other material. Black material, shiny, with threads of gold and green and pink running through it. My black dress, cut in pieces. Someone had come into my trailer and cut up my dress. The dress that was my showpiece. The dress that E had told everyone about at the dance as he twirled me around.

“If you want to look like this, get Marie to make you a dress. She made this dress.” And everyone had looked, and everyone had clapped. Several people asked for orders. I was on my way. The black dress that fit like a glove and wouldn’t let me sit down was going to make me a real dressmaker. And all because of E.

And now it was in shreds. I had planned to put that dress on a manikin when I had my own shop. That was going to be the dress that would have greeted people as they came in to order dresses for their weddings and graduations.

Who would have done this? Before I even answered the question, I knew who and I almost knew why. Roy. Roy had done it. He knew I’d know it had been him. And he knew I’d never tell. Not Mom. Not him. Not anyone. Ever.

I put the bits of black dress in a bag and carried it to the garbage. I didn’t want to think about it any more. Thinking about it just made me sad. I went to sleep listening to my favorite music, Mozart for the piano. I wished I had a dog. I wished I had a horse. I wished I had a farm. I wished I wasn’t all alone in my little make over trailer. But what option did I have? None that I could see.

I woke up early, before light and began to work on the red dress. I wanted it to hang, not cling. I lined it so that it would hold its shape. I had to make it fit perfectly. I lined the jacket with the dress material. I was sure I could make the right impression with this outfit.

Truth was I was scared to death. I had often imagined myself visiting my father. I had imagined him the way my mother had described him, living in Edmonton, alone with a woman and her seven kids. My father had never had children of his own. Except me, of course, and I’d only seen him once, when we were living at the L. It seemed so long ago. It seemed to me that the one afternoon spent with my father, the father I had lied about to everyone, the father I had insisted was at a war that had ended two years before he came home.

In my imagination, I’d go to Edmonton to find my father. He would be living in a shanty part of town. He’d be wearing overalls, the kind men who run trains wear. But one button would be undone and the bib part would partly reveal gray hairs in a chest gone flabby and unhealthy looking from too much drink.

His wife would answer the door. She’d slam it in my face, saying, “We don’t need nothin’.”

But I’d knock again, and say before she had a chance to close the door, that I was here to see my father.

“Eddie,” she’d scream in an awful voice, a voice you’d hope never to have to hear more than once, a voice my father had to listen to all the time. A voice I knew I’d never hear again. “Eddie, someone here to see you.”

My dad would come out and he would look annoyed. “Why are you bothering me would be written all over his face?” He’d look at me, but with not enough interest to really see me.

It wouldn’t be what I expected. It wouldn’t be what I had hoped for. I’d hoped for some sudden recognition, some falling into one another’s arms, some moment of hope and love.

“You told me not to forget you, and I haven’t,” I’d say.

But he’d forgotten me.

I’d seen pictures, sent by my Aunt, the one full of Catholic righteousness, full of the determination to stress my mother over the great sin of divorce. I would know my father anywhere. Wouldn’t it be reasonable he’d know me?

But if he didn’t; I’d tell him and when I’d tell him who I was he would begin to cry. He wouldn’t say anything, he would just stand there, tears running into the crags of his ravaged face. “It’s too late,” he’d say, “too late for anything.”

And then he’d walk away, leaving me standing there. I’d go home alone on the train. I’d never tell anyone what I had done. I’d continue to lie to anyone who asked. I’d tell them that my father was living in Edmonton with his new family. He was a carpenter and a musician. He played in a Jazz band every Saturday night. He’d invited me to come to hear him, and soon I would. That’s how I imagined myself lying. I’d be convincing as I told everyone that it wouldn’t be too long before I’d go to visit my father and hear him play his saxophone.

But now I wasn’t going to see my father. I was going to see his dead brother. I was going to see his family. I was doing it to honor my grandfather who’d died when we still lived at the L. My grandfather, such a sweet man. He’d tell me stories about my father, stories that made me yearn for a time to be with him, stories that made me know there was a lot of good stuff flowing in my father. A lot of good stuff that was only hiding under all the drinking and wayward ways.

I’d try to remember his stories but they would vanish in the fantasy of my visiting my father. In my fantasy, the reality of his absence, the reality of his never contacting me, the reality of my mother’s sadness would take over and I would be left standing at the door alone.

When things got bad between Roy and me and Mom, I'd wish for a dad so hard that I thought my back would break. If a dad had stayed with us, there would be no Roy. If a dad had stayed I would be going to school and living at home. If a dad had stayed, I wouldn't be going alone to pay respects to an Uncle I'd never met and who had died.

I tried to explain to E why I wanted to go. He had asked me to a movie, but I had to say no. It was strange, but I almost didn't say no. I almost gave up going to the funeral to go to the movie with him. That sounds so stupid. What was wrong with me? It was my uncle's funeral and I had only been out with E once and I was ready to abandon my family to go to a stupid movie. Well, not the movie. To be with E. I would have gone to anything, whatever he would have suggested would have been ok with me.

"I'm going to a funeral," I explained.

"I'm sorry. A relative?"

"My dad's brother, uh, my uncle."

"Were you close?"

"I never met him."

E looked confused. I had no way to explain it to him. I couldn't really explain it myself.

"My father," I tried to tell him that it was a way of being close to my father. Even though there was no way of knowing if my father was even going to be there. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't go."

"Of course you should." He sounded so certain it made me feel more certain, too.

"Going with your mom?"

"She won't go."

"Want me to take you?"

No wonder I loved him. No wonder I would rather be with him than anywhere in the world.

We drove slowly. We didn't talk much. E knew how to get to Cudworth. It wasn't far from Wakaw, the little town where E had been born. Imagine, my father and this man driving me to my uncle's funeral had been born about twenty miles apart.

That shouldn't have been such a big deal. We were all born within twenty, forty miles of one another in the little towns of Saskatchewan. But to me, it was something like an omen, a sign. It was a sign that E and I were meant to be together.

"You make that dress?" E asked.

"I did."

"It's red." He didn't say anything else.

"Think I shouldn't be wearing a red dress?"

"It's a funeral," E said, simply, in a matter of fact voice. And suddenly I realized that it wasn't right to wear a red dress to a funeral. Why hadn't I thought of that before? Black. People wear black to a funeral.

"I didn't know my uncle." As if that explained everything.

"You look nice in that dress."

We stopped talking for a while again. I was worried about the red dress. I thought he might say he was sorry for mentioning the red dress, but he didn't. He just let it go.

We could see the church up ahead. My mouth was dry. I tried to say something, but no words came out.

"You nervous?"

I nodded my head.

"Want me to go in with you?"

I shook my head. I had to do this myself. I didn't want to explain E. I didn't want to be noticed. And I wanted to be noticed. It was so confusing.

"Phone me when you want me to pick you up. I'll be at my Mom's. Here's the number. It won't take me long. Half an hour."

He handed me a piece of paper. I stared at it. I stuck it in my purse. I knew I had to get out of the car. But I didn't really want to. And I did. Yes, no. In, out. Go, stay. What a mess I felt. A big mess in a red dress.

E kissed me softly on the cheek and half pushed me out the door.

I sat at the back of the church, in the place designated for people not close to the relatives. Would I have been considered close had I been a part of this family? Would I be up there next to the woman in the black dress weeping, the tall thin man supporting her? Was that my uncle's wife? Or was he her son? Brother? I could see no faces, only backs, heads bowed, arms supported. But even if I could see faces, I wouldn't know them. All of them were strangers. None of them cared about me, who I was. What had brought me here? What stupid need had brought me here?

After the service, the priest announced that the Lady's Catholic League was holding a reception at St. Mary's school. He was inviting everyone over there. People began to mill out. I knelt down, buried my head in hands folded in prayer. I did not want to be recognized. I did not want to be seen. It had been a mistake to come.

Once the church was emptied I went up to the front where the Body and Blood of Jesus sat in a tabernacle on the altar. There had been a time in my life that I would faint when I received Holy Communion. The thought of Jesus actually being inside of me so excited and overwhelmed me so much that I lost consciousness. But those days were gone. At least, I thought they were.

Approaching the altar gave me a weird feeling of otherworldliness. I became a little girl in a Communion dress. I was approaching the priest, all in black and white and gold, all huge and shining and holding up the host, in his hands, over the chalice, the host, the Body of Jesus over the Blood of Jesus. I almost fainted just remembering. The floor began to lurch towards me. I grabbed onto the altar to keep myself from falling. I stood still, regaining my balance. And I stared into the casket. I stared at the beautiful and dead body of my father.

I fainted.

When I came to I was in the arms of my father. I must be dreaming, I thought. An awful dream where I went to my uncle's funeral and saw my father in his place. But now, now, I felt so awake. I felt as if I really was in my father's arms. I felt as if he were walking me out of the church. I felt as if he were walking me to his car, holding the door open, helping me in.

But it wasn't a dream. It was real. My father was driving a car. And I was sitting next to him. He was alive. He was alive?

"You deserve an explanation," he said, his voice soft and full of that determination when something isn't going to be easy, but it must be done anyway. I wanted to put my hand over his mouth. I didn't want him to speak. I didn't want to know.

We drove through the little town of Cudworth. “Your mother and I ran that butcher shop.” He pointed out a small corner store. “Until I stole \$2,000.00 from the grocer. We shared the shop, shared the till. I guess I thought it was my money, too. I guess I thought I could just put it back when we sold enough steaks. But he charged me. And I went to jail.”

Jail? I didn’t know that. Why was he telling me that?

“Why did you need the money?” It seemed important.

“I didn’t,” he said. “Your uncle did, and I didn’t want to make the family mad. So I gave it to him.”

“And you went to jail for some money you didn’t even keep?”

“It was money I took. It wasn’t mine.”

“This is where we got married. We were married four years before you were born.”

“Why did you wait so long?” I knew I’d want a baby right away. I felt stupid after I’d said it. What right had I to question when my parents decided to have a baby. Maybe he was in jail. I hardly heard what he was saying when he answered me. I was so busy bawling myself out.

“We couldn’t, I, I wasn’t able to produce babies. An old injury. From a horse. A damn horse kicked me in the balls when I was a kid. And. . . no babies. Or maybe it was the mumps,” he added. He laughed. “I prefer the horse story. More interesting.”

“Until me.”

He didn’t answer. We just drove silently through the little town as the day left us and night fell slowly over the prairies, dusting the land, the sky in tones of lavender.

He took a turn off the main road. We traveled through the fields of grain that were not yet harvested. I could hear the grain swish swish against the bottom of the car.

We stopped in the middle of the field. A field that had once belonged to my grandfather. It felt like a sacred place. It felt like a sacred time. My father got out of the car. He came around to my side and almost lifted me out. His arm around me, helping me out, was like the touch of a lover, shy, hesitant, hopeful, respectful. A touch so delicate it was almost not a touch. I felt as if I were made of air. I felt as if I were made of light.

He reached into the backseat and took out a Saxophone. Standing tall and handsome in the moonlight, my father played, the saddest song. It was a song of a man begging for forgiveness.

I wanted to throw myself into his arms. I wanted to tell him I forgave him. I just stood in awe. He was so beautiful. And I was part of him.

On the way back he did not say a word until we reached the little church. “We have to go in,” he said in a tone I could not dispute.

“I, I thought it was you,” I explained. “In the coffin. I thought it was you.”

I didn’t want to go in.

“We have to,” he repeated.

He held me by the hand. This time it was not a lover’s touch. It was a man on a mission. It was the touch of a man who was determined to go through with something he should have dealt with a long time ago.

We stood, his hand firm on my arm and stared into the coffin. We were staring at the spitting image of my father.

“We’re twins,” my father explained.

It was a shock. No one had mentioned twins. No one had ever told me that my father’s dead brother was his dead twin brother. In my whole sixteen years of life, and all the hundreds of questions I had asked about my father, no one had ever told me he had a twin brother. Not even Grandfather. I was stunned. Why had this been such a secret?

“I didn’t . . . no one told me.”

“We were always messing around,” my father was telling me, ignoring everything, just staring at his brother, holding me tight, and telling me what he was determined I should know. “We were identical. Even our voices. No one could ever tell us apart, so we just got used to doing it.” His voice went soft when he said that. I thought that might be the end of the story.

“What? Used to doing what?”

“Tricking folks. Pretending we were each other.”

“I’d love that.” I thought it would be fabulous to have a twin. It would feel like never being alone. It would give you such a power, such a sense of being more than you were.

“One night we were all out, drinking and we decided to play a trick on your mother. Would she be able to tell? Could she know her husband from her brother-in-law?”

“Did she?”

“No.”

“Was she mad when you told her?”

“We didn’t tell her. Not for a while. And then we had to.”

I was confused. Eddie put his arm around me and led me to a pew. It was as if he had to sit down to finish the story. The story of how they’d tricked my mother. How things had gotten out of hand. Of how my father’s brother had made love to my mother. Of how they’d had to tell her when it was discovered that she was pregnant.

And suddenly I knew what he was telling me. He was telling me that he was not my father. He had never really been my father. The man lying in the coffin was my father. The man I never knew. Would never know.

“Things were never the same after that. Your father was so ashamed. He didn’t want you to know. We all agreed to live the lie. But Rose just couldn’t forgive the trick, the lie. We all sort of fell apart. We all went our separate ways.

I went back to the coffin. I touched his face. It felt like cloth. I had never touched my father. I had never heard his voice. All the lies I had told about my father were nothing compared to this lie. This was the biggest lie of all. And everyone, Mother, Grandfather, everyone had been in on it. I felt empty.

I turned and saw him standing in the doorway. Light was shining on him from the cross above the church entrance. He seemed bathed in light. I ran into his arms.

“Take me, take me away,” I sobbed.

“You didn’t phone, so I came.”

“Take me away,” I repeated.

We got in the truck. “Want to talk?” he asked me.

I crawled into his lap. He almost drove off the road. I began to unbuckle his belt. I was unbuttoning his shirt.

“Ssh, wait, stop, Marie,” he tried to calm me.

“Please,” I sobbed.

“Let’s go someplace.” He pulled the car off the side of the road. We drove across the field of grain. I heard it whish, whish, against the truck. He stopped, pulled on the brake. He turned on the radio.

Chapter Three: The Wedding Dress

I knew I was pregnant even before I missed my period. There was no such thing as pregnancy tests at the local drug store back then. It wouldn't have made any difference if there had been. I would have been way too shy to go and purchase one.

Telling Mom was going to be tough. I knew she believed in abortion. I knew she'd had one when I was in grade school. But I wanted this baby. I'd wanted a baby all my life. There was no way in the world I was going to kill it.

Telling Roy was going to be worse. I could just imagine the things he'd say to me. I could have taken the easy way out. I could have told Mom. Mom would have told him and then he'd go nuts on her first.

Why shouldn't I? She'd lied to me. She'd lied to me all my life.

I stayed away for almost a week. Mom would phone and ask me about the funeral and I'd say it was sad.

"Well, it was a funeral."

"I know."

"Did you talk to anyone?"

"Yeah, I did."

"And?"

"And what?" I wasn't going to make it easy for her. I knew she was afraid I'd found out something. Actually, I didn't know how to tell her what I'd found out.

"I have to go now. Someone's at the door."

I kept up like that for as long as I could. Then I guess she knew I'd found out, or someone had told her. Maybe it was Eddie, the man I thought was my father. Maybe he had phoned her and told her the whole story. Anyway, there she was, those blue eyes all full of sadness, old rye and recent rye whiskey on her breath. That happened more and more often.

She was wearing a pair of blue slacks and a white angora sweater. She looked like a teenager. My mom was such a knock out. She had the most vulnerable look about her. You wanted to put your arms around her and protect her.

“You know?”

“He told me.”

“Let’s walk.”

We walked around the trailer park. We left the main area and went into the woods. The pines smelled so fresh with a hint of spice. I could see why people made imitation pine things to hang on their car mirrors and in their toilets. Pine is the most fabulous smell. But no one can make that smell, except the pine trees. They do it best.

“It was no one’s fault,” Mom was saying.

“It was.” I wasn’t going to let it go. It was all of you. All of you were part of it. And all of you lied to me.”

“We, we thought it best. It was such a stupid, such an awful thing.”

“You didn’t know?”

“I honestly didn’t. But I should have. Maybe if I hadn’t been drinking, I would have. But we were both drunk.”

“Him, my father. He couldn’t have been that drunk.”

“He was always a little jealous of Eddie.” My mom stopped talking. She wasn’t sure what to say. She waved her hands about as if they might say the words for her. A branch hit her in the face, grazed her eye. She just pushed the branch away. A bright red mark began to appear above her eye. I knew it must have hurt. But she didn’t say anything.

“Things just got out of hand. Nobody planned, I mean, I’m sure Eddie never dreamed. . . . but he should have . . .” Mom was struggling with her thoughts. “I think he was mad at me. It was all so stupid. We were all so stupid.”

“Were you mad at him?”

“Of course. At first I just felt guilty. I kept it a secret. But then, when I was pregnant. I felt so awful. He confessed he had set it up. They had set it up together. A game.”

“No, I mean, before. Were you mad at him before? Was that why, maybe, you didn’t know, didn’t want to know. Maybe you knew.”

I couldn't believe my mother could make love to her husband's twin brother and not know. If E had a twin brother, I'd know. I'd for sure know.

"It was all such bad business. We were all so stupid. And then.... Then...we all just couldn't stand ourselves or each other."

Mom threw herself on the floor of the forest. She just half fell, half plopped down. The ground was soft, littered with pine needles. Mom was crying. She sat there, looking more like a puppet than a person, her arms loose at her sides, her head straight, her mouth open, harsh sobs coming out of that perfect red mouth.

She rubbed the tears away, smearing her mascara, smearing her lipstick. It made her look wild, out of control. I wanted her to stop, stop crying, stop telling me. Nothing she was saying was making it any better. All of them were so stupid. How could they have done such a thing.

I suddenly got so mad at my mom I began to kick dirt and pine needles on her white angora sweater. "He's dead. I never ever saw him. I never ever said one word to him. Not one goddamn son of a bitchin' word." I never swore, but I needed swear words. I needed to hurt her. I think if I would have had a gun, I would have shot her. At that one moment, I think I would have shot her. I felt so completely helpless and betrayed.

Now there were bits of dirt in her hair, on her face. It made me even madder. She hung her head. I wanted to chop it off. I wanted to take a big sword and decapitate her right there in the woods. The worse she looked, the worse she felt, the madder I got. There was a rage in me I couldn't understand, couldn't control. I just screamed at her, "You, you, you."

And then I was done, too. I was emptied out. I plunked down beside her. We sat there until, you won't believe this, until we both fell asleep. We were leaning against one another, asleep in all our rush of sadness and anger. That used to happen to me a lot, I'd fall asleep at the worst times, the most unlikely times. Here we'd both done it.

We helped each other up. We brushed each other off. We began to walk back.

"Can you ever forgive me?" she asked as we approached the trailer.

"I don't know." I didn't know. How could I know? "I don't think you should be asking me that right now."

"You're right. I shouldn't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry sorry sorry sorry." She'd had enough. We'd both had enough.

“You’d better go, Roy’ll be waiting.” The way I said it, the tone in my voice, the bitter sarcastic tone shocked her. It shocked me, too. I think it was the worst thing I’d ever said to my mother. I think she would have preferred a shot in the back or a sword to the head.

“Don’t,” she pleaded. “Don’t start hating me.”

I just went into the trailer and closed the door. I was shaking. I wanted a bath. A long hot, hot bath. A bath like the kind I used to have when we lived at the Ranch. A bath where you could leave the water drip, drip, hot for hours, until you were red and wrinkled. But I couldn’t. I lived in a trailer that barely had a shower. The shower was a trickle in a cubicle. The water was barely warm. I crawled into bed and fell asleep under Grandmother’s quilt. I tried to imagine my grandmother’s arms around me. I tried to smell the baby powder she always wore. But I couldn’t make it happen. All I could think of as I fell asleep was, “Did she know? Did my grandmother know, too?”

Mom kept inviting me over for supper and I kept refusing, until, of course, you know who had to come over to give me shit. I was in no mood to deal with Roy.

He banged on the door. “Get out here, Missy,” he yelled up at my window. I opened the door and tried to look casual. “What is the matter with you?” he said.

And out of nowhere, the words popped, slapped him right in the face. “I’m pregnant,” I said.

That was a shocker. Even Roy didn’t know what to say. He stepped back, half staggering down the steps, got into his car and pulled out so fast he drove over my garden hose, flattening the nozzle.

That solved the problem of how to tell Mom. I could imagine the scene. I wanted to hide. I wanted to hook my little trailer up to a big truck and get the hell as far away from there as I could. Except for, except for E. I didn’t want to leave him. But I didn’t want to tell him I was pregnant either. God, what a mess.

The phone rang. Mom. Of course. All secrets were out. It was like Pandora’s box. It was like a poison in the air. Everyone was getting sick. Everyone was turning blue.

“You’re pregnant? You’re really pregnant?” Was she hoping I was or wasn’t? I couldn’t really tell from her voice. Her voice didn’t even sound like her voice. It was a stranger calling me trying to imitate my mom’s voice.

“I’m, well, I think so. I haven’t gone to the doctor.”

And then the question came. The question that made her voice so strange, almost not her voice. “Whose? Whose baby is it?” I knew, I knew what she might be thinking. I knew how the question was killing her. I wanted to go back into the woods. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to protect her. I wanted to love her again.

“The boy. The boy at the dance.”

I could almost hear the release in her body. I could feel the fear and pain drain away. I think it was the nicest thing I had ever said to her. In the course of a few days, I had said the worst and the nicest things to my mother. Life was moving around us like a cold wind. We were blowing in the cold, uncertain wind. Anything was possible. We had no idea what would come next.

I could hear her telling Roy. “It’s the boy, the boy at the dance,” she was saying, half crying, half laughing. “The boy who liked her black dress.” My mother was acting like a crazy person. It was suddenly a big joke. She was really laughing now. I heard Roy slap her, hard. I heard her drop the phone.

“Stupid bitch,” Roy said to someone. Her? Me? And the phone went dead.

I expected a furious visit from one of them, both of them. What a week. Excuse me, I’m not your father. This is your father. He’s my twin brother. But he’s dead. Excuse me, your pregnant. Mother finds this hilariously funny and step-father goes nuts. What next?

Next was my Mom on a motorbike going like a bat out of hell. “Roy’s got a gun. He’s going to shoot that boy. He’s got the keys to my car. Get on”.

This was my family? Roy was going after E with a gun? E didn’t even know I was pregnant. We’d dated twice. I got on the little motorbike and promptly threw up all over my mother’s hair and jacket. She just kept riding. Neither of us wore helmets. I prayed we wouldn’t fall off. I prayed that nothing would hurt my baby. I prayed that Roy hadn’t shot E.

When we got to the highway, we heard a police car. E lived just across the river in the real part of town. The siren was heading in that direction. We followed the sound. “Oh my God!” I heard my mother say over and over again.

What if he had shot E? What if my baby was going to suffer the same fate as I had. What if she would never see her father, never hear his voice? I imagined E lying there, in the dirt, blood coming from his chest. I imagined myself holding him as he died in my arms.

The police car beat us to the house. Mom pulled up on the sidewalk. We ran towards E’s place. He rented a back room in the house. The landlady did his washing and let him

make his own breakfast in the room. The landlady was standing on her porch. She had her arms crossed. She was not pleased. E was standing in the yard. He was holding a gun. I figured it was Roy's gun. It might have been E's. They could have both had guns. A shoot out.

Where was Roy? Was Roy the dead one?

E came over to me when he saw me. He put his arm around me. "You should have told me," he said. I wanted to melt in his arms. "You should have told me." Oh God. Someone sane. Someone who cares.

The policeman came up to us. He took the gun from E. "Want to press charges Mr. Torchinski?" E looked at me. He looked toward the police car. Roy sat in the back seat. His face was red.

"No, no one was really hurt," E said.

"I think his arm's broke," the cop said.

"I had to take the gun away. He was a little crazy." E explained.

"You could press charges."

"No. Just get him out of here."

Roy was driven home in the police car. Mom followed on the little motorbike. She looked awful. She smelled awful. She had tried to wipe the vomit away, but the smell remained. She was getting a black eye where Roy had hit her. There was that red mark over her eye where the branch had hit her. Where I had let the branch go just a bit too early, letting it hit my mother in the face as she followed me through the woods, trying to explain why she had lied to me about my father.

I should have felt sorry for her. Normally, I would have felt sorry for her. Normally, I would have run after her and done anything to make her feel better. But too much had happened. Too much had happened too fast. I was too tired to do anything but stand next to this young man who had just learned he was the father of my baby.

He took me to a Paul Anka concert in Saskatoon. It was such a big deal. Paul Anka sang "Put your head on my shoulder". E held me throughout the whole song. At the break, he went and got hot dogs and cokes. He handed me a hot dog. "Want mustard?" he asked. I nodded, he handed me the one with mustard. Then he added. "Wanta' marry me?"

“Yes, yes, of yes, I do.” We ate the hot dogs, drank the cokes and listened to Paul Anka sing “Lonely Boy”. It was a perfect day.

I wasn't nervous about meeting his parents. Nothing could compare with the fiasco we had over meeting mine. It was his dad I was especially looking forward to meeting. A real dad. A dad who stayed at home.

Except he didn't. He and Mrs. Torchinski hadn't talked in ten years. Not one word. E's dad would leave for work around ten, after the mother had gotten up, put breakfast in the warming oven and left the house; usually to work in her garden. I don't know where she went in the winter. Maybe she hid in the shed. And then he'd come home around midnight, after she'd gone to bed. He'd sit alone at the table eating the meal she had left for him in the oven.

Mrs. Torchinski was a big woman, short but more than chubby. Her hair was permed and her eyes round and bright like a bird's. There was nothing soft or yielding about her, though there should have been from the size of her. There was something suspicious about the way she talked. Suspicious and critical. I hadn't been in her house for more than twenty minutes and I was dreading the day she and my mom would get together. Oil and water.

She had prepared a large meal of borscht and perogies and garlic sausage. She questioned me about my cooking skills. “I have a small trailer,” I said, trying to explain why I had none.

“Hmpfh.” she said. Clearly a statement of disgust. “What can you cook?”

“Fudge.” I could make fudge. So long as I had a candy thermometer. That was about it. Fudge. Chocolate fudge. She wasn't impressed.

We sat down to eat when a young woman joined us. She looked a bit oriental, her eyes were almond shaped. Her face was round and when she smiled she was shy and open like a flower who had never bloomed in front of people before. She looked at me and patted my head. “Good girl,” she said in a husky gravelly voice.

“Maybe you'd like to eat in your room, Sandy,” Mrs. Torchinski said. E threw his mother a harsh look. I assumed it meant that she shouldn't have said that.

Sandy responded with a loud, “No,” as she plunked herself down beside me, looked up at me and smiled that endearing smile. A sideways smile. A smile that melted my heart.

Sandy's presence seemed to make everyone uncomfortable. When she ate her tongue moved in and out as if she needed it to push the food down. Her mother shook her head,

trying to get Sandy to stop. But Sandy couldn't stop. That's how the food was forced down her throat. Sandy put her hand up to her mouth as if to hide what she was doing. It only drew more attention to it. It didn't bother me a bit. I reached over and took Sandy's hand away from her mouth. I let it rest in her lap. "It's okay," I said and that was the last word spoken for the rest of the meal.

Wedding plans proceeded in a flurry. E's older sisters were to act as bridesmaids. I was to make all the gowns. I wanted long gowns, soft pink satin for the girls, white satin covered with layers of tulle for me and a long veil. I knew exactly which one. I wanted to wear the veil my mother had worn at her wedding.

Mrs. Torchinski was sweet enough to tell me that pregnant brides should not wear white and I was tough enough to ignore her. She also insisted that the girls should wear their old graduation gowns. Why waste the money? I ignored that suggestion, too.

We were all doing a fitting in the Torchinski living room when Sandy came over and tried on my veil. Her mother snatched it out of her hands. "Not for you," she snapped. "For the bridal party." The sadness that saturated Sandy's body was painful to watch. It was as if in that moment she realized all that was denied her and all that would forever be denied her.

"I'll make you one," I said. Sandy looked at me, not quite comprehending. "A dress," I said. "You can be the flower girl. You can carry the basket and throw the flowers." E was Greek Orthodox and they had a lovely tradition of throwing a path of flowers for the bride and groom. And gold crowns. Crowns for them to wear. It was very regal. Gorgeous.

"Of course not," my mother-in-law-to-be snapped. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I always thought it was up to the bride to choose her bridesmaids," I said in a voice much more casual than I felt. I knew I was beginning a war with a woman who kept a grudge, with a woman who hadn't talked to her own husband for ten years. But I couldn't help myself. I couldn't push my new almost sister-in-law out. I just couldn't do it. It was that simple. The look E's mother gave me when I challenged her frightened me. And in that moment I decided I would never let my child alone with this woman. Never.

I had to make Sandy's dress in a hurry. There was no time for try ons. I felt pretty confident. It was a short dress, a pink taffeta, stiffer than satin, to hide any bulges, with loose elasticized waist that would fit her comfortably. There was enough material for her to feel feminine. It would swish when she walked. She would be able to feel the lovely taffeta against her hands as she carried the basket of flowers. I made some matching flowers for her hair.

I hadn't actually faced Roy since I'd watched him being taken away in a police car. Mom thought it best to let him cool down a bit. I worried that the longer we waited the worse it would be. Things would build. Mom and I were in the kitchen discussing the wedding and of course, the day of the shooting came up. "Why don't we just forget it happened," I suggested. "Why not act as if he didn't go nuts."

Roy walked in just as I said that. Mom and I both worried he had heard me. If he had, Roy didn't comment on my saying he had gone nuts. Instead he suggested we go into the living room. He had something to say.

Explanations, more like speeches were in order. Roy had one all prepared, I could tell. I was forced to listen, on the couch, him standing, pacing as he talked. "I was just so disappointed in you, what about your schooling, how are you going to support yourself, you didn't even know that boy." Not one word of truth in it. Not one word about how he really felt. But I was beginning to understand that we were becoming a family good at lying.

"It wasn't the right thing to do, we all know that." Mom said in as matter of factly way she could.

"What wasn't?" From Roy.

"Getting pregnant?" From me.

"No, I, uh, meant you going after the boy with a gun." Mom tried to save the day, only digging herself in deeper. "But it was just because he cares so much about you, honey. It's so nice that Roy cares so much."

Who was this person? What had happened to my mother? Where had she gone? It scared me when she talked so stupid. My mother wasn't stupid. She was dead smart. She got things. She was smart and brave and beautiful. And here she was saying something so stupid that even Roy blushed.

It was as if this marriage, her third, had to work. She was out of trying. She either stayed with Roy, or she lived alone. My mother was not the kind of woman who did well alone.

"I think Marie's right," he said. "I think we should pretend it never happened."

"Ok. Ok. It never happened." Mom was eager to agree with anything he said. He had heard me say he was nuts. He recognized it was the truth.

When it was time to go home, Roy followed me to the door. “You don’t have to go through with this, you know. We’d help you. You could move back home.”

“Thanks, no.” I hurried down the steps.

“Marie, please,” he said. He was begging me not to marry E.

“I’ve already made the dresses.” It was a stupid thing to say. But it was all I could think of.

“Oh. Oh of course.” He walked back into the house and softly closed the door.

Roy was a model of the perfect step-father at the wedding. He stood ready and proud to walk me down the aisle. Mom sat in the front pew, all by herself. She wore the pink suit I had made for her. She looked as if she had just stepped out of a movie magazine. God, she could make herself look good. Her hair, that shade of red that is so rare, so rich. She did look like Mareen O’Hara. All eyes were on her as she walked down the aisle to take her place at the front.

Opposite were my mother and father-in-law. Nini, that was her name. It must have stood for something else, but I have no idea what. Nini wore an ugly brown dress. It was too short and too tight. It had a fake fur collar. Brown. To her son’s wedding. She had refused to waste money on a new dress. She had refused to let me make her one. Boris, her husband, looked tall and very much like a Russian warrior, dark and swarthy. He looked the way I knew E would some look some day.

I watched from the back of the church in the little area set aside for brides and bride’s maids. The girls were late. Where were they? Finally the taxi arrived and E’s sisters tumbled out of the car. They had to pull Sandy out. She didn’t want to come.

I went to the rescue, went to tell her it was okay, that I so much wanted her to be my flower girl. I went to tell her not to be shy, not to be afraid. But it wasn’t fear or shyness that held her in the car. It was fury. It was disappointment. Sandy did not like her dress. She did not like the flowers I had crafted for her. She had been promised a veil. She had been promised that she would be a bride.

I coaxed her into the back of the church, into the little area set aside for us. I knew everyone was waiting. I knew Mrs. Torchinski was furious. Her daughters were late. I could imagine her victory when she saw the fuss that was going on.

I didn’t know what to do. Sandy was unwilling to settle down. “Veil,” she sobbed. “You promised me a veil.”

My mother's lovely hand woven lace veil hung from my head. It trailed down to the floor and spread out creating a train of the most elegant, delicate fabric. I had designed my dress around that veil. I carefully loosened the veil from my hair. I asked for a scissors. The nun who looked after the priest's clothes brought a huge scissors for cutting the felt that went under the lace cloths on the altar. The scissors looked like something out of a horror show.

As I snipped into the fine Italian lace the nun gasped. One third of the veil fell to the floor. I pinned the veil to Sandy's hair with bobby pins, arranging the flowers into the netting. Sandy beamed. "Nice, nice," she said.

"Very nice," I said.

Sandy led the way down the aisle. She scattered the flower petals. She made happy noises. "Nice, nice," she'd say to the guests along the pews.

Roy and I followed. Roy had been a bit shocked when I cut into my mother's veil. But he was pleased as I pinned it to my little sister-in-law's thin hair. "You're something, Marie," he said and I knew it to be the sweetest compliment. "Don't worry. When I tell your Mom, she'll agree," he added.

I hoped he was right. I wasn't able to see her face when she saw the veil half way down my back, not falling in perfect grace over the gown designed to showcase the veil my mother had saved all these years, a veil that had come from Italy before she was even born. I thought I heard her gasp. Maybe I made it up.

I didn't really understand one word of the marriage ceremony which was in Russian. I was told afterward that the priest was praying for fertility. Right. It wasn't the romantic moment I had dreamed about. No vows that we repeated. No perfect words. A foreign language that sounded rough and almost angry. Finally, in English, he asked me if I, Marie Hoffman, would take this man, Ihor Torchinski to have and to hold, to honour and obey, till death do you part.

"What? What did he say?" In his broken English I found it hard to understand him. Ihor? Who was that? Did he mean E? To obey?

The priest was looking at me. The whole church was quiet. Es face was getting red.

"I guess," I stammered. "I mean, yes, yes, I will." I was still confused. "Marry you. I will." I looked up at E. "That's what he asked, didn't he?" Someone in the church broke out into a laugh. Then the whole crowd started to laugh and giggle. God what had I done? E's face was really red.

The priest started to ask E if he would take me as his lawfully wedded wife. But folks were not really paying attention. There was some commotion going on in the corner. Sandy was doing a little dance for some of her cousins. She was lifting her skirts and showing her bum. Then she'd turn around and see the look of surprised pleasure on their faces. She'd lift her skirt again, show them her bum again. Then she'd clap her hands. She loved being the bride.

Mrs. Torchinski surged out of the aisle, almost knocking me over as she grabbed Sandy by the arm and pulled her hard onto the seat beside her. Sandy screamed her outrage, but didn't move.

E said, "I do," but I'm not sure anyone heard him. All eyes were on Sandy and her mother. E's sister and his best friend, Mike, came with us to sign the registry. To sign as man and wife. I thought it would be one of those moments you never forget.

I stared at the sheet and saw E's name. Ihor Torchinski. Ihor? My god, I was marrying a man and I didn't even know his name. I thought I was going to faint. I could hear Sandy and her mother scrapping behind us.

"Sign it for God's sake," E said. I signed. He signed. His sister signed. His friend signed. We had all signed. It was done. I hadn't even had the "kiss the bride" moment. Didn't these guys say, "Kiss the bride." I wanted that moment. I had wanted the church to go silent in anticipation. I had wanted Paul Anka's voice to ring in our ears.

We turned to walk back down the aisle. We could see Sandy and Mrs. Torchinski fighting in the pew. E bent down and hissed into my ear. "See the mess you made? Why the hell did you have to include that goddamn kid. She's an imbecile. Can't you tell?"

I walked down the aisle beside my new husband. I walked down the aisle a married woman. The words rang in my ears, "till death do us part," and I hoped I'd last out the day. I'd married a man and there was more than his name that I didn't know about him. A lot more. And I knew deep in my heart, that I would be learning all about it, and not all of it would be good.

Sandy escaped her mom's grip and ran toward us. I pulled her into my arms and gave her a big kiss. "You were so pretty," I told her.

"Go see Mamma," E told Sandy and almost pushed her away from us. Obey? Obey? Had the priest told him to obey me? From the look in Es eye, I kind of doubted it.

People snapped pictures. They threw confetti. I threw my bouquet. I threw it right at Sandy. And she caught it. The look on her face as she caught it.

Chapter Four: No Dress at All

“These would be dangerous around a baby.” He grabbed my hand with its long painted nails. He took out a strange looking scissors. It had a hooked handle and a bit of a hump at one end. I found out later it was a nurse’s scissors, the hump protecting the skin, if one were cutting off a bandage, for example.

Snip. Snip. Snip. Red rounded pieces of nail flew about my hands. I had lovely nails, strong, rounded. I always polished them. I never cut them with a scissors, only filed them carefully in the same moon shape as my lunula. I knew the names of things. I loved words. I loved how they looked and sounded. I loved the exactness of them. I loved to study their origins. So the name lunula was one that came easy to my mind, even now, even in this office.

Here was this stranger, this doctor, cutting my nails. I should have drawn my hand away. I should have left. But I didn’t know how. I didn’t know what else to do but submit. I didn’t know anyone in Shellbrook. I needed a doctor. And this one, this tall blond with the steely blue eyes, with the almost golden hairs on his arms, who had a grip on my hand and was butchering my nails was the only one in town. “You won’t need these anymore anyway,” he said. “You’ve snared your man.”

I was used to the doctors at the Community Clinic. Prince Albert was the home of socialism and Medicare. Doctors there didn’t talk to you like that. Doctors there wouldn’t assume you would stab your child. I’d had long nails for four years. Ever since I had become a teenager. I had never once stabbed anybody.

I returned to the trailer feeling frightened, naked, abused. Not my trailer. Not my little fixer-upper. God no, this was a rectangle made of grey wood, with brown linoleum and make-shift furniture. It was designed for men who worked hard all day, played hard all evening, fell into a bunk for a few hours sleep, then off to work again.

This trailer was designed for four men to sleep in and that was about it.

I could have stayed by myself in my own little trailer. But a wife should be with her husband and if her husband gets called to build roads near a gravel pit just outside of Shellbrook, well, that’s where she goes.

When we set sail in E’s truck, I really had no idea what I was getting myself into. I had no idea the rugged living conditions the Department of Highways expected their men to endure. But more, I had no idea of the culture of a group of men living and working hard, living together in a semi-isolated state. I had no idea of the competition, the sparring, the cruel joking, the comradre, the drinking, the hunting, the gambling, the late nights, early

mornings. I had no idea of the way they talked about, treated women. There, in their world, their man's world. It was no place for me.

But I hadn't understood that. I had no idea of that way of being. I thought my place was next to my husband. We were married. Where he went; I went. Where he went, I wanted to be.

And this time, it was in a man's camp just out side of Shellbrooke, Saskatchewan in the end of the summer of 1961.

E and I slept on bunk beds. Each bunk bed had a thin mattress and a flat pillow. The walls of the trailer were cold to the touch, it was almost September and evenings were already getting cool. I've always been a poor sleeper. But this was the worst I'd ever slept. It was almost impossible to relax.

There was a smell of diesel that lingered in the trailer from the many machines that the men started in the morning as they went out to build roads. That smell made me sick way beyond morning sickness. I felt sick all the time. I've always been pretty skinny, but pregnancy in a trailer that smelled like diesel was making me skinnier. The smell never went away. It was always there.

Because I didn't sleep, I tossed and turned during the night. Tossing and turning in that bunk bed was not a good idea. If you tossed one way, you hit a cold wall, a wall made of some kind of plastic wood that often had beads of sweat that made it clammy, cold. Almost like a ghost or someone dead might feel. If you tossed the other way, you would fall on the floor. I slept on a bottom bunk. So did E. He slept on the bunk opposite me.

At first, I thought that might be kind of nice. I could imagine him reaching across, offering me his hand. I could imagine me taking it, crawling out of the bunk, curling up next to him, his strong body protecting me from the ghostly walls; his strong arms protecting me from the cold floor.

But he didn't do that. He usually crawled into the bunk, late, tired, half drunk, smelling of cigarette smoke and rye whisky or beer.

After work, the boys went to one of the trailers and played poker and drank and smoked until at least 2 in the morning. Because they usually started work at 6 am, that didn't give them much time for sleeping.

My husband was home for about 6 hours in the middle of the night. The rest of the time, I was alone. I begged him to bring the boys over to our trailer to play cards.

“You’re the only woman here.” It was a statement that somehow was supposed to explain why it was out of the question.

“I know,” I said. I was starting to cry.

“I’ll stay home,” he offered.

“You don’t have to, that’s not. .”

“It’s okay, I’ll stay.”

“You can teach me to play cards.”

“Tonight,” he promised.

I couldn’t wait for five o’clock to come. E would come home and we would have supper together and then we’d play cards. I got ready for the evening as though it were a date. I listened to all the channels on the radio, trying to find one that might play romantic music. I walked to the store in the little town and bought some candles, scented candles that might disguise the smell of diesel and would cast warm shadows on the walls. There was a pull down table at one end of the trailer. I used one of my scarves as a tablecloth. I tried to make the trailer look like a home.

It was only noon. Five hours to go. There was so little to do in the trailer. There was no running water. And no bathroom. I would have loved to have had a shower. I would have loved to have sat in a bath-tub. Oh to sit in a hot bath, the water drip drip dripping.

There was a little gas oven and a two burner stove in the trailer. I warmed some water on the burners and carefully washed my whole body. I started with the hair. When the water got cold, I would put the little basin of water on the burner and warm it up again. The last thing I did was soak my feet in the water. I closed my eyes and imagined that the little basin was a big bath tub and I was soaking in it. I imagined the water covering my legs, my swollen belly. I imagined slipping down into the water, letting it soothe my back. I had never had pain in my back before. The pain worried me. Did it mean something was wrong with the baby? I was afraid to ask anyone. There was no one to ask. We had no phone. My mother was miles away. And the doctor in town terrified me.

I dreamed away a good hour imagining myself soaking in that hot tub. By the time I came back to reality, the water in the basin was cold and my feet were wrinkly. I dried myself off and sat out on the step of the trailer. I wouldn’t look at the clock. Looking just made time go slower. I’d wait until I heard his truck turning into the big driveway. Then I’d go into the trailer and put on a can of soup. It would be ready by the time he

washed up. I had a basin of clean water on the hot plate. I'd have hot water and hot soup and me, smelling like lilacs. He'd be glad he had come home. He'd want to come home all the time.

I heard the truck turning into the big driveway. I dove into the trailer, turned both burners to high. The smell of Campell's Chicken Noodle Soup filled the trailer. I tried not to let it make me nauseas. I heard footsteps come up the wooden platform in front of our trailer. But something was wrong. They weren't the footsteps I was used to. They were the footsteps of some one who, who didn't walk the way E walked.

E was a big man. Three inches over six feet. He had broad shoulders and long legs. Strong legs. Legs that let him walk the way an animal might walk. Almost silent. Never noisy. Sure footed. When E sat beside you on the couch, he never fell into the cushions. He let himself down slowly, weight on his legs. The couch never moved. E was the most graceful man I'd ever known. The man running up the steps was not graceful. He did not move like an animal in the forest. The man knocking tentatively at my door was not my husband.

It was Byron. "Ihor has to work," he explained. "He sent me." Byron grinned at me. I couldn't be mad. Byron was a sweetheart. He cooked for the men and did errands. He was like a big brother. He wore an ear-ring in his left ear and he drove an old pink Cadillac. The men called him a poof. But it wasn't mean the way you'd think. It was a strange term of affection, and from these card-playing, beer-drinking guys who thought Elvis Presley was a pervert and Tommy Douglas was a communist.

I didn't really understand it back then. I'd never heard the word gay before and if you'd asked me if I'd ever met a homosexual, I would have probably said, "No."

Byron stayed to eat the soup. We didn't play cards. Byron didn't like cards and actually, neither did I. He was just staying to be nice, to cheer me up. He and I went through this book of names, looking at all the names we liked for boys and girls and then making fun of some of the names that seemed weird to us. Laura was a really popular name, but E had dated a Laura once and I sure wasn't going to name our baby after someone he'd gone out with. I wouldn't want him thinking of her every time he looked at our baby. It would have spooked me.

I didn't want to name the baby Ihor if he were a boy. Ihor wasn't really a name I liked. It sounded brutal and loud. I confessed to Byron that I'd really like to name our baby after my grandfather. My grandfather, Joe. Joe was a nice name, short, honest. Joey if you were feeling sentimental.

Byron left and I went to bed thinking about naming the baby Joe.

When E came home, almost at dawn, he threw a hundred dollar bill on the table. “A hundred bucks,” he said, proud, and excited. “I skunked those guys.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t mention that he had promised to come home and teach me how to play cards. I didn’t ask him how he could have won that money working late. I just lay there and pulled myself into the middle of the bunk, not wanting to touch the wall, the cold air.

E took off his clothes with the silent stealth he usually did. Drunk or sober, it didn’t matter, he was always graceful and noiseless. And then he carefully crawled into my bunk bed. His body was warm. I could smell the cigarette smoke in his hair. It was not the smoke of one man, it was the smoke of many men puffing on different brands in one small enclosed space. It was the smell of sweat and excitement and sex. That smell men have when they are interested in you. I knew that smell. Dogs know it, too.

Honestly, they recognize that smell. And they act strange around it. They try to protect you, they growl, and scratch. Sometimes they will actually try to urinate on the man. You may not believe it, but I’ve seen it.

The first time I met Roy I was with Willey. Willey is the neighbor’s cocker spaniel. The neighbor has to work long hours and Willey would sit hour after hour in a quiet room waiting for his master to come home. So, I sort of baby-sat him. I’d take him for walks; I’d make him his favorite food; I’d massage his sore neck. He’d been a rescue dog. Someone had hurt Willey when he was very young. And now he had aching shoulders, a sore neck. I don’t know how I knew that, but I did. And so I massaged and he almost moaned in pleasure. He’d push against my hand, getting just the right pressure.

It was such a gift having Willey in my life. I missed my own dog so much. I missed my horse and the time we had on the property. But that was gone, and that whole part of my life seemed over forever. That part was like a wound that would never heal, or an amputation. So when Willey became part of how I lived each day, I felt healed. I felt worthwhile and protected all at once. Holding his little chest in my arms, against my body was the best feeling. We loved it. We could sit leaning into one another, saying nothing, for hours.

“What are you doing?” Mom would say.

“Holding Willey.”

I don’t think Mom understood, not how holding him was doing something, something almost extraordinary. But she understood my feeling of loss. She understood about my missing our old life. She felt guilty sometimes, as if it were her fault. But it wasn’t. Things happen. People can do terrible things. People can come and go. Homes can

come and go. God knows, mine did. I'd lived on a farm with my Grandmother, in a house shaped like an L with my dad's grandfather. And best of all, I'd lived on a property with my horse and dog and Mom and her second husband, Dan.

And then we moved to the apartment in town, back to Prince Albert, where I baby sat Willey and where Mom met Roy. Mom and Roy were sitting in the living room, having drinks and listening to the radio when Willey and I came in from a walk. Mom introduced us and Roy stood up. He stared at me and the way he did it, that very first time I met him, made me blush. It was as if my blouse were undone. As if he saw something he shouldn't be seeing. It felt as if I were doing something bad. He reached out and shook my hand.

His hand was warm. It enveloped mine. He held it rather than shook it really. That's when Willey did his thing. He growled a little, and scratched the floor the way dogs do sometimes when they are making a bed in a rug. Mom calls it nesting. She says it's a throwback from when they made beds in the grass, when dogs ran wild and lived outdoors.

Willey moved in a circle, scratching and growling and then he did it. He ran over to Roy and peed right on his shoe. Roy pulled his foot back as if it were set of fire. "Jesus Christ?" he said, as shocked as all of us.

"You scared him," I said. It was a stupid thing to say. But the word scared jumped out of my mouth. It was how I was feeling.

"Take him out," Mom said. She was embarrassed. I was afraid Roy would make a big fuss. But he didn't. He just laughed it off.

"I have that affect on dogs," he said. "They just don't like me, I guess."

I took Willey outside. And I somehow forgot how Roy's hand had made me feel.

Until the first time we were alone in a room. Mom was whipping up a snack. Roy was pacing around the room. He had a nervous energy. Mom poked her head into the room. "I need some fresh bread," she announced. "This is moldy." And with that she was out the door, leaving us alone.

It shouldn't have been a big deal. But the way Roy responded made it huge. He stopped pacing. He looked at me, as if he had a question to ask.

"Your mom's something," he said. "Leaving us like that."

Like what? I wanted to say. "Bread," I said instead.

Roy sat on the couch. "I guess we'll just have to wait," he said.

Saying that made me so aware of time and space I could hardly breathe. We sat in the room, waiting, not speaking, Roy, usually so active, so nervous, just sitting and me, just sitting too. I tried to think of something to say, but nothing would come.

Then the doorbell rang. I wanted to kiss the person at the door. It was the neighbor, Dyonna, with Willey. I did kiss her. I took Willey in my arms. He was too heavy and it was a silly thing to do. I almost dropped him. And he almost lurched out of my arms towards Roy. He growled. And sure enough, he headed right for Roy's foot. We both knew he was going to pee on him. Roy leaped to his feet.

"Willey, come," I said as I opened the door, inviting him to follow me. Willey hesitated for a moment. I think Willey actually wanted to pee on Roy. He wanted to make a statement. He wanted to tell Roy that he knew that the room was filled with the smell of desire. And he wanted to tell Roy to stop.

Willey and I didn't come back until Mom had been home for a few minutes.

"Leaving Roy all alone like that, Marie, shame on you!"

"Sorry." Willey looked at Roy. He didn't growl. He didn't head for his feet. The smell was gone.

That same smell, full of tension, was mixed in with all the other smells that were in E's hair. I was surprised. Men, only men, in a room, playing cards, drinking, smoking, laughing, swearing, competing. Was this sexy to them? Did it in some way arouse them?

I felt confused. Almost frightened. The world of men was a mystery to me. I'd never really had a father, not for any period of time. No brothers, except a step-brother, again, for a short period. And he had tortured me. He had killed my horse. My dog. Would I ever really understand men? How would I ever know what to expect? How would I ever know how to act?

E circled me with his arms and pulled me into him. And suddenly I didn't care about anything else. I didn't care about his lying to me. I didn't care about the mystery. I let myself dissolve into the warmth and strength and comfort of his body and I fell asleep almost instantly. It was heaven.

The next day E didn't get up early to go hunting. He must have felt guilty about lying to me because he said, "We'll be meeting here tonight, right after work. Make some sandwiches."

Here? Our place. I was having company. I was so excited. I would make something special. Something wonderful. I imagined canned lobster on mayonnaise and white bread cut into circles with a water glass. Mom made those on really special occasions.

I checked my purse. Eighty cents. No way I could make lobster sandwiches with that. Not even cheese. Maybe bologna. I didn't want to serve bologna to my first guests. I wanted something really nice. I took my purse and went to the market. September, the end of the gardening season. There were beets and parsnips. Not much use to me. Potatoes. I actually loved potato sandwiches. Mashed potatoes on bread with butter and ketchup. But probably not everyone liked that.

Then I saw them. Dark green. Darker than leaves. Shiny, almost like wax. With prickles on the skins. Cucumbers. Why hadn't I thought of it before? Grandma always made cucumber sandwiches for me when we played party together. I say always, but it couldn't have been too many times. My grandmother died when I was very young. But we did it often enough for me to remember. The sandwiches on home made white bread, cut thin. The cucumbers almost shaved, soaked in salt water to make them crisp and tangy. Soft butter smeared on the bread, crusts removed. Each sandwich cut into six perfect pieces.

I was so excited I could hardly wait to get home. It took me over an hour to slice the cucumbers. I cut each sandwich into six perfect pieces. I stacked them carefully on two plates. Then I had an even better idea. Radishes. I had fifty cents left. I raced back to the store and I sliced the radishes the way I had the cucumbers. I used a razor blade. The radish sandwiches were my idea. I could imagine their spicy taste, the crunch, the salt. They'd be perfect with the cucumber. I placed them amongst the cucumber sandwiches.

And then I waited.

The men came in, one, two at a time. Pretty soon seven of them were hard at it. The little trailer heated with their presence. They were nice men. Strong. Mostly unmarried. They were respectful of me. Of my being pregnant. They didn't swear. They opened a window to let out the smoke. They called me Mrs. Torchinski.

God, I wanted them to have a good time. I wanted them to relax. I wanted them to want to come again. I tried to join in. I tried to make the odd comment about the cards, ask a question. They answered, but I could sense it was not what they wanted. Then a stupid thought flashed into my head. It happened to me a lot, when I got nervous, or felt judged, I'd get stupid, stupider, and inappropriate. The thought I had was that from time to time E would tell me a joke that someone had told him, so that's what I'd do. I'd tell a joke.

It was a horrible joke about this man with a wooden eye who went to a dance and asked a woman with a cleft palate if she wanted to dance. She replied, “Would I? Would I?” and he, feeling insulted yelled, “Hairlip, Hairlip”.

The men stared at me for a moment as if they hadn’t quite heard. Then they broke out into laughter. They laughed and laughed and they turned to a man who sat at the end of the bench. I hadn’t really noticed him before. He was a bit smaller than the others, and blonde. The men patted the littler man on the back. “Wanna dance?” they laughed. The man tried to laugh too, but I could tell he was embarrassed. That’s when I noticed. The man had a cleft palate.

I looked at him, my face red. My eyes trying to say I was sorry. He tried to continue the joke. “Would I? Would I?” he said. I didn’t know what to do. I was so embarrassed. I was so ashamed. How could I have not noticed? Whatever possessed me to tell that awful joke? How did I think that would make me “fit in”? Whatever possessed me to tell a joke at all. I was afraid to look at E. I could feel his eyes on me.

I would have done anything to change it. I took out the sandwiches carefully stacked on two plates. I placed them on the table in front of the men. “Sandwiches?” I asked as I carefully lifted the wax paper from the plates.

The men reached over for the sandwiches. They hesitated. Tiny little sandwiches. No crusts. The big hands took two, three, put some back. They didn’t know what to make of the sandwiches I had made. E took one, opened it. “Cucumbers?” he said. He stared at me as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Cucumbers?” he repeated. He looked as though he were going to hit me.

“It’s ok,” the blonde man with the hair lip said, trying to save the awful situation. “It’s ok.” He took one and bit in. The other men followed suit. No one said anything.

“Let’s go.” E said. “Let’s go get something to eat.” He headed for the door. The men followed him, thanking me as they left. Some had a small sandwich still in hand. “On me,” E promised.

After all the men were out, E came back in. He closed the door behind him. I didn’t move. “Are you really that goddamn stupid?” he said to me. And then he was gone.

He didn’t come back for two days. I thought perhaps he had left me for good. I thought I’d die. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to go home. I ate all the cucumber sandwiches. I ate all the radish sandwiches. I got horrible heartburn. I really wanted some milk, but I had no money. I had spent it all on cucumbers and radishes.

I considered trying to find Bryon, but I didn't know which trailer he stayed in and I knew that if E found out I went about knocking at trailer doors, he'd be furious. Then something quite amazing happened. A woman moved in with what could have been a grandchild, but turned out to be a nephew. A woman and a kid! They moved right into one of the empty trailers. I watched from the window. I was thrilled. Neighbors.

The woman must have been in her late sixties, maybe even early seventies. The boy about seven, or maybe even eleven, but he was awfully small for eleven. But then he looked old for seven. They spoke French most of the time and because I had attended a Catholic school, I could understand what they said. We'd always had Catechism class and French class in French.

"We can live here," I'd heard the woman explaining to the boy. He wanted to know if it was safe and she assured him it was. I wondered, "Safe from what or whom?"

I wouldn't have said it was safe. There was something about living there that I haven't told you. It's kind of hard to talk about. It's important though. In fact, it is so important it almost cost me my marriage.

It was the fact that there was no running water in the trailer. No toilet. We had to use an outdoor toilet that was located quite far from the body of trailers. It was located in the woods. It was dark in the woods. The toilet stunk. It had two big holes. You could look down into the holes and see the poop and paper. It was revolting.

You might wonder why someone would look down there. Well, I was looking for snakes. I had myself convinced that there were snakes in the toilet. I just couldn't make myself go out there and sit on the toilet seat that was nailed to the boards that protected you from falling into the pit of poop. I would crawl up on the boards and sort of crouch over the hole. Still I would peer down, afraid that the snake would leap up.

I told E about the snake, but he said, "Garter snakes don't live in shit, for Christ's sake."

I didn't know how to tell him it wasn't a garter snake. I couldn't tell him it was a python or a cobra. Something deadly. Something foreign. Something that normally does not live in Saskatchewan.

It sounds crazy, but years later, I read in a newspaper that a python was actually found in an outdoor toilet in Saskatchewan. It had escaped from someone's house. It had found its way to the toilet and it had died in there.

But my snake was not dead. And it was waiting. For me. I knew it. The snake terrified me. I wouldn't go unless I had to. I'd hold it all night long. I'd only go in the daytime

when it felt safest. I'd go when no one was around, so I could hold the door open, so I could escape easily.

Peeing, I did in the woods. I would never risk the snake over a pee.

I doubted the new neighbors knew about the snake. They must have been afraid of something else. I learned later that it was her brother, the boy's father they were running from. I learned he beat the boy. So his aunt stole him and together they escaped to Saskatchewan. The father still lived in Quebec. He had no idea his sister whom he would have considered way too old to raise a boy, had taken his son. He was sure it was the boy's mother. But the boy's mother had already run off with her new boyfriend. She hadn't it in her to get the boy. The aunt was the one with all the moxy.

I was still watching them move in when I must have fallen asleep at the window. It was morning. E came home just in time to tell me he was going hunting. He would be going hunting every morning from now on. It was duck season. He said it as if it were a punishment for the cucumber sandwiches.

"That's good," was about all I could muster. I almost didn't care. Things were just not working out for us, and I was prepared to just let it go. What was happening was happening and I didn't seem to have much say in it. Hunting, not hunting. It was all the same. It was all lonely.

But, not as lonely as it had been. My neighbors became my obsession.

I loved the old woman. She was big and loud. She sang in a huge voice. She sang the songs of Edith Piaf. She taught me how to knit. And to crochet. I couldn't sew out in the trailer. I couldn't make anything, not even a baby dress. But now I was learning to knit sweaters and crochet hats. It was fabulous.

Her name was Manon. That means beloved. And she was, my beloved. She told me so much about babies, and how to feed them and hold them and burp them. She touched my stomach and said I was going to have a girl. She told me the baby would be born late, and that might frighten me, but not to be scared. She told me women had to be brave to raise children.

It worried me that she said, "to raise children". I wished she had said, "to have a baby." I sensed that the raising would be harder than the birthing, and I wondered why. But I didn't ask. I was too afraid she'd tell me and I didn't want to know.

Her nephew was very shy. It took a whole week before he would even come out of the trailer. One of his arms was twisted. His father had injured him as a baby, and the arm

had never grown straight or strong. The boy's name was Armand, which means bold. But bold he wasn't. He was such a nervous little thing that he burped a lot.

I could really identify with that. I burped when I got nervous. Not as much as I used to, but I still did it. Once Armand got to know me he would crawl into my lap and rest against my growing breasts. I would pat his back and he would burp. Every time he did, he would lift his head and say in a soft voice, "Excuse, me, honey, I'm a pig."

I would laugh and say, "No, no," and kiss the top of his head. I don't know if he said the "Excuse me, honey, I'm a pig," because someone had called him a pig, or because he felt it was the right thing to say, or because he knew I'd say no and kiss the top of his head. Whatever the reason, he said it every time. We got so used to it that we hardly noticed. It was almost a ritual. A sweet ritual. I was practicing motherhood.

I'm not sure E really noticed that things had changed for me. He kept up his hunting for the whole fall. It was getting colder. Soon it would be time to leave. I hated the thought. I didn't want to leave Manon and Armand. I wanted her to be there when I had my baby. I wanted her to take me in the way she had Armand.

"Perhaps I could stay here with you," I told her.

"Ma petite, pauvre little petite," she said and shook her head, no, because she knew it wasn't possible. I knew it, too. I wasn't a child. I was a woman, a wife, almost a mother.

As if to prove the point, fate had E come home from hunting on a Monday morning carrying three ducks which he tossed down on the porch. "I'd like those for supper," he said. "Roasted would be great, but fried will have to do." It was a clear order. He left giving me a kiss on the cheek.

I looked at the ducks. There was blood spattered on the brown feathers. One had blood coming from its flat peak. I touched the head, green, shining. The eyes were closed. I touched the webbed feet. The skin was soft, like human skin. Touching those feet, so real, soft, affected me so I began to weep. I had never seen a duck up close before. I had never touched one. They were beings, beings who could fly and walk and talk their own language. And now three of them lay at my feet, killed. And I was supposed to cook them.

I went inside, leaving the ducks. Time passed. I checked the propane tank, hoping there would not be enough gas to fry a duck. But the tank was almost full. My little hot plate stared at me. It looked almost human. It felt sad about the ducks. Jesus, I was feeling a kinship with a hotplate.

I went out and looked at the ducks again. I had seen my aunt clean a chicken on the farm. I knew the feathers had to come off. I knew the intestines had to come out. I pulled a feather. It didn't come out easily. I grabbed a handful and pulled harder. A huge bug crawled out of the duck. A huge water flea. I screamed and dropped the duck.

I went back inside and came out armed with a soup ladle. I would use it to get out the guts. I wore a pair of oven mitts. I could not bear to touch the duck with my hands again. Manon came over. She was laughing so hard she was holding her sides. Armond was with her. He was laughing, too.

“Mon dui, mon dui,” she said and took the ducks out to the field. Feathers and guts flew. Armond and I watched. She rinsed the ducks with the water from the communal tap. And she roasted them in her oven. The smell filled the whole trailer. It smelled delicious. I had never tasted duck before, but I wanted to now. I even forgot about the duck feet that reminded me of human skin.

Five o'clock. No sign of E. Six, seven o'clock. He had ordered the duck and now he hadn't bothered to come home. Manon was getting mad. She insisted we eat. We ate two of the ducks. She had roasted potatoes and parsnips around the duck. I had never tasted anything as good. I ate like a pig. I stuffed in the last bite of parsnip, rubbed my tummy and burped. “Excuse me, honey, I'm a pig,” I said and we all laughed as if it were the funniest joke in the world.

I was so full I went to sleep without worrying about where E was. Out with the boys. In another trailer. Gambling, drinking, talking about the hunt. Sometimes he was so tired, he just fell asleep. They all did, not undressing, not really going to bed, just falling asleep sitting up, then going to work at day-break. The life of men working together. Men who were proud and stubborn. Men who didn't eat cucumber sandwiches or bring their young pregnant wives with them to live in a camp.

I woke at about midnight with terrible pains in my stomach. I really had to go to the bathroom. But the snake. I tried to go out. I walked about three feet toward the woods, toward the outdoor toilet. I couldn't do it. I thought of asking Manon to escort me. But it was late. I walked up to her trailer. I could hear her snoring. I went back to our trailer. Surely E would be home soon.

It was cold outside. The short walk had got me to shivering so hard I just couldn't get warm enough to relax. I was going to poop in my pants. I jumped out of the bunk and pooped right into a paper sack. I put the sack into another sack. I rolled the opening up tight and stuck it outside the door. I'd throw it into the toilet in the morning. I went back to sleep.

What happened next is too funny to tell. And too awful. E came home early in the morning. Too late to go to bed. He must have seen me lying there, asleep. He must have seen the paper sack on the porch.

He must have, because when I woke up, it was gone. He must have thrown it in the toilet for me. I spent the rest of the day feeling pretty good. It was nice of him to do that. Maybe things might get back to the way they had been before we 'd come here. Maybe it would be like when he brought me to the dance in my too tight black dress. Maybe it would be like when he understood about my dad.

When E's truck drove up into the yard, I almost ran out to meet him, to open the door of the truck and give him a kiss right in front of everyone. He jumped out of the truck before I had a chance to open the door. Maybe he was as excited to see me as I was to see him.

He grabbed me by the arm. "You little bitch," he snarled. I cried out in pain. "I'll teach you." He started to push/pull me towards our trailer. I screamed in fear and protest.

"What? What did I do?"

"Fuck you," he said.

I was terrified. I cried for help. And help came in the form of a huge French woman named Manon.

"Let go of her, you son-of-beech," Manon said in her best English.

It startled E so much he stopped in his tracks. "Who the hell are you?" He hadn't noticed that we had neighbors?

"I'm the woman what damn well stop you from hurting that fille." She slipped into French. "She do notin' to you, but wait."

"She fed me shit," he said. And suddenly I understood. The bag outside the door. He thought it was lunch. He must have taken it to work. He must have reached into the bag. He must have gotten a big surprise.

I started to laugh. I started to cry. They both stood there. Neither could understand.

"You want to come wit me, you can," Manon said. "I'll take you. It is rien. Noting. Just like dat. We go."

E looked at me. He looked at the woman. He dropped my arm. "Please," he said.
"Stay."

And I did.

Chapter Five: The Baby Dress

I woke in a sweat. “Gills,” I sobbed. “Fish gills. And a donkey’s tail.”

“Ssh, honey, quiet, it’s only a dream”.

It was a dream I’d been having a lot. That our baby would be born with something akin to gills on the side of her neck, and a tail, a donkey’s tail. E tried to console me. He insisted that young mother’s often had bad dreams. It was a hormonal thing.

I didn’t believe him. I knew something would be wrong with our baby. I knew that Manon had known it, too.

I went into labor on November 11, Remembrance day, as the doctor’s ordered. But I didn’t actually deliver the baby until December 1st, also as Manon had predicted. I wasn’t in labor all that time. I just kept going into false labor. It was as if the baby just didn’t have enough nerve to enter the world. She’d start to, then change her mind.

The moment she was born, I examined her. I hated to do it in front of the nurses, but I couldn’t help myself. I was sure there would be gills, a tail, webbed fingers. I checked. None of these things were there. Ten fingers. Ten toes. There were no gills where the ears should be, just tiny ears, small, perfect. She was perfect. Perfect.

As soon as I checked her I fell into a deep sleep until they woke me to feed our daughter. They placed her in my arms. I put my breast to her mouth. And I waited. I expected a flood of love. It was that motherly love thing I had read about. Surely, I would feel it. Surely it would be warm and sweet, like syrup and butter on hot angel food pancakes. I waited. She sucked at my swollen breast, eager for the milk. It hurt. I tried to relax. The milk began to flow.

The baby finished and I gave her back to the nurse. I was a failure. I wasn’t fit to be a mother. I had felt nothing. No warm buttery sweetness. No warm flush to my face. No fast beating of the heart. I began to cry. I cried myself back to sleep.

When I awoke, the doctor was there with E. They looked serious. How could they know? How could they know I didn’t feel the love this small bundle of nerves and bones and soft pink skin deserved? How could they tell?

The doctor’s voice interrupted my thoughts. We think she has some auto-immune deficiency the doctor was saying. I didn’t understand. “She has no immune system,” E was trying to help me to understand. They kept saying the same words, immune, no defense, germs, infection, but I couldn’t make sense of it. She was normal. I’d seen her.

“She’s not alright?” I finally managed to ask. They stared at me. “No, no she’s not,” the doctor said. “I’m so sorry.”

Mom came to visit. Roy came too. They brought flowers. They tried to console me. But I couldn’t be consoled. It was my fault. It was because I had no love in me. Babies die without love. I knew that. Everyone knows that. Even rats die without love. And now my baby was going to die.

But she didn’t. Everyone said it was a miracle, but she didn’t die.

We couldn’t name what was wrong, but we could see it, feel it, and we had to find a way to live with it. All we really knew was that we had a sick little girl who was fragile, vulnerable to any kind of contagion that came her way. For sure we knew that living in a trailer in the woods with no running water was out of the question.

Roy, surprisingly enough, came to the rescue. He was doing an apartment sale for a client. He gave up his commission for a six-month low rent deal in one of the furnished basement bachelor units.

We moved in and I began a war against germs. Germs were the enemy. I boiled everything that touched her. Her nighties, her blankets, her diapers, the can opener that opened the baby food, her spoon, whatever might touch her. I rubbed my breasts with alcohol until they were raw. I asked visitors to wear masks and gowns. I never took her out. And slowly, slowly, she began to gain weight. By three months, she had had pneumonia and bronchitis, had chronic cough, and every mucous membrane had been infected, but she was alive. She was alive! The doctor’s had predicted she would never survive her first month. But each time she got sick, she got stronger. Each time a germ attacked her, she began to develop an immune system.

As I bathed and boiled and rocked and wept and worried, I fell in love. Deeply, totally, passionately in love. With this child, this fragile small pink baby whose life depended upon my being able to keep her alive. I didn’t actually realize I had, not consciously. I was too busy.

I became devoted to the life of Sarah. Everything else paled in comparison to the enormity of this task. I began to make clothes for her, to knit and crochet and sew gowns of the softest, most comfortable flannel. I couldn’t do enough for her. Some might say I became a little obsessed.

Mom said it was a natural reaction, to be so focused on your first born, especially when she was sick. She told me how as a child I had twenty dolls and I’d line them up on my small bed at the farm and I’d sleep on the floor so they could be comfortable. I actually

remembered doing that. I was the nurse. I had to make sure they survived. They had been wounded in the war.

Actually, my situation was a bit like that. Sarah had been hurt in the war of life and it was my job to make sure she survived. Only, Sarah was not a doll; she was my daughter, my own flesh and blood daughter. And suddenly I realized it had happened. The warm butter of motherly love; the sweet syrup of a passion more fiery than anything I could have imagined.

I was so happy. It was an omen. For sure Sarah would live now. For sure she would be all right. My love would guarantee that. When E came home from his week in Shellbrooke, I told him. He hardly had his coat off when I blurted out the great news. “I love her,” I told him. “I love her so much I could die. I love her more than anything in the world.”

I knew it was the wrong thing to say. I knew it before I saw the flash of anger in E’s face. I knew it before a hint of sadness was replaced with a smirk and a “Good for you.”

“I don’t mean. I mean, I love...”

“Yeah, yeah,” he waved off my apology, my clumsy attempt to tell him I didn’t mean that I loved her more. Not more than I loved him. Different. Way way more than I loved life. How could I explain it? Didn’t he feel it?

But I knew. I knew like you would know a knife stabbed to the foot or hand. A knife you could see go in, could feel enter the flesh, the sinews, the bones. I knew it like a knife that could pin you to the spot, force you to stay put, imprisoned by the blade and your fear of more pain. That’s what the realization was like. No, he didn’t feel it.

I knew it the way he looked at her, sighed when she cried. I knew it from his resistance to holding her, saying her name. I don’t think I had actually ever heard E call Sarah by name as she became part of our family. Why? Did saying her name make her more real? Would it make losing her more painful?

Or was it jealousy? All the attention I gave to her?

Was it shame, that Roy had to find us a place, that my young husband couldn’t really take care of his own baby girl, find her a home that was safe and secure. That he had to rely on a man who obviously disliked him, who could hardly stay in the same room with him.

Yes, it was. It was all of those things. But more. It was one thing more. It was that she was not perfect. He liked things that worked. He was tall and handsome and could hunt and fish like a native. Everything he did, he did well.

He told me once that there was no real word for “handicapped” in Russian. That in Russia there were no handicapped signs, no special places to park or sit. The way he told me, I knew he thought it was the right thing to do. The way he told me I knew he thought it was as it should be.

He was fascinated with perfection. He knew the scores for the man who hit the most base balls, who had the lowest score in golf, who ran the fastest, swam the longest, endured the most.

But bums, war veterans with missing limbs, the sick, the aged, the infirm, these made E uncomfortable. It wasn't that he would ever be cruel to them. It wasn't like that. It was that he didn't ever want to be around them.

He avoided his sister. And now, his own daughter had become one of them. One who was ‘other’. One who was not perfect.

The knife thrust of that realization happened so fast it caught me off guard. I stumbled to the couch and fell asleep. It was something that happened to me when I was really upset. My body would just shut down.

When I awoke, E was gone. Sarah had been crying for God knows how long. And for one moment, I hated him. I hated the man I had married. I hated him for his inability to love her. I hated him for his ability to leave her. It was as if he were a threat to her. Something in me felt I had to protect her from him. It was an awful feeling and overwhelmingly powerful.

There was no one I could talk to about this feeling. It was confusing and filled me with shame and sorrow and worry. I wanted to tell Mom. But how could I talk about protecting your child. How could I bring up a subject that neither of us dared to mention since she'd married Roy.

Mom had been awful fragile after Dan had left us. Dan had been a good man. I missed him. But he just couldn't stand living with what his son, my step-brother Arnold, had done to us. I couldn't even talk about it. The fire. The fire set by Arnold. We'd lost everything. Our home. Our barn. Tom. I'd gone a bit crazy after that. There were months I couldn't remember. I don't want to remember. Even now. The worst and best time of my life.

And now, it felt as if it were happening again. The worst and best thing. How many best and worst things can happen to a person? I guess only one real worst. One real best. But, I'm telling you, at the time, they sure feel like the absolute best; or the worst of all times.

Sarah. She was the best and the worst. The most wonderful thing in the world was holding her in my arms. The worst was seeing her face twist in pain, a pain we couldn't cure, because we couldn't name it.

Those few months, and for years afterward, doctors tried to name it. Called it all sorts of things. Tested and retested. . Cystic Fibrosis, Leukemia, Celiac Disease, Kawasaki's Disease. Words we didn't understand, words we feared, words that chased E away from the small bundle of child that cried in fever and pain for her first three months of life.

As Sarah gained strength and weight and my love, E moved further and further away. At first he had made a real attempt to be the dutiful father. He was gone during the week; but on week-ends, he tried to stick around. But he was restless, bored. The baby's crying made him nervous. He began to drink more and more. He began to bite his nails.

I knew, deep in my heart, if he began to take care of her he would fall in love as I had. But he just couldn't bring himself to do it. "You do it better." And he'd just watch, or read the paper. And eventually, he'd go out for cigarettes, drop in at the beer parlor. And then he'd go away for the whole week-end.

I had longed for the coldness of winter, the end of the hunting, the fishing, the lonely days and nights. But I had been wrong. Duck season gave way to deer season. Beautiful animals lay in a pool of blood, their throats cut for better eating, brought home in the back of the truck that once had carried me proud and excited to the fish and game league in my too tight black dress.

I couldn't bear the sight of them, eyes still open, staring, pools of brown, the light gone out. I could imagine the doe walking in the woods, tentative, stepping lightly, reaching up to nibble a leaf. I could imagine her hearing the break of a branch, sense danger, run through the woods, heart beating. I could imagine the hot sting of the bullet, the tearing of flesh, the panic in the eyes, the scream of pain, the last fierce rush to escape, the drop.

Was she still alive when he pulled his knife across her throat?

I never ate the sausage he made, the steaks he fried himself with onions and bacon. The smell sickened me. I could not get the moment of death out of my mind. I could almost feel the pain of the bullet, the hot flush of blood and the life leaving with the flash of the knife.

But I couldn't tell him. I couldn't say how awful it was. How awful it made me feel. It seemed that there was less and less that I could tell him. He wouldn't understand. He would feel awful. He would stay away even more.

I couldn't tell him, either of my worry over Sarah. My fear for the future. My needing to hang on to each day as if it were our only day. And when I couldn't talk about these things, the things that mattered most, it seemed impossible to talk about anything else. Simple things, things young couples might talk about weren't there for us. Words felt false, fake, forced. And in time, in very little time, we grew silent.

I thought of his parents, of how they hadn't spoken to one another for so many years. They'd even had a child without speaking. I remember thinking what an awful life that would be. But here I was living it.

She was almost six months old when doctors decided they needed to do a new test on Sarah. She needed to be in hospital for four days. I was terrified. Hospitals are not good places for people who have weak immune systems. Even I knew that. I tried to discuss it with E. "For Christ's sake Marie, you can't attach her to yourself. She needs to go for the test. Don't you want to find out what's wrong with her?"

The question was like a slap. I lashed out. "I know you don't. You couldn't care less. I don't think you even like her." It was that day that I learned that E was not one who liked to lose. I was no match for my husband. He could outwit and out hurt me in a heartbeat.

"Sometimes I think you like her sick. Makes you important, doesn't it?"

We didn't discuss it any more. Sarah went to the hospital. I was allowed to visit for two small hours a day, not on the week-end at all. E went fishing. Ice fishing. Crouching under a small tent, in the cold, over a hole in the ice, smoking his cigarette, waiting to see the Pickeral circle the bait, grab the hook.

I had gone with him once, trying to find a way into his life. We'd left Sarah with Mom. On the way, I'd imagine how things would be. I'd imagined we'd be huddled together under a small tent, cuddling against the cold, laughing at how silly it was to cut a hole in the ice. I had imagined my being afraid the ice would crack; E would assure me, tease me, protect me.

But when we got there, E made one small make shift tent for each of us. They were smelly tarps over two poles really, to keep out the sun, to permit peering into the cold lake.

When the pickeral came near, when it took the hook, I was supposed to reel the fish in. A fish swam by, took the bait. I began to reel and then it seemed as if the fish were charging out of the water, charging for me, its mouth open, its rows of sharp teeth ready to slash my arms, my face.

I leaped to my feet, tearing the tent from its stakes as I ran screaming across the ice, the fish trailing in tow behind me. Once I stopped, I could hear E and his buddy Frank Zeller laughing their stupid guts out at me.

I don't know if you've ever seen a fish in water, or if you've ever seen a pickeral's open mouth. But the sight is pretty terrifying. The water magnifies the fish and the mouth is open and full of rows of sharp teeth. It is worse than any horror movie. And you feel, deep in your heart, that the fish has the perfect right to rip your arm off. You are, after all, trying to kill it.

I never went ice fishing again. It just wasn't for me. I know E was glad. I was a bit of a nuisance and certainly an embarrassment when I wept over the fish, flipping its tail on the ice, its gills moving slowly, its mouth open gasping for breath, until finally, it froze to death, or suffocated, I wasn't sure which. I wanted to put them all back. But that would have been stupid. They were dead.

"You should take her to a slaughter house," Frank Zeller had said.

"God, no, I'd never get spare ribs again." They'd laughed about that. They did like my spare-ribs. But I knew about slaughter houses. My dad had worked next to one when I was a kid, before he left me and my mom. I don't know why I wasn't a vegetarian. I felt like a hypocrite. I guess I could eat something if I hadn't seen it die. It wasn't right. God, the whole thing just made me feel awful.

So, anyway, here I was all alone in our little apartment, with Sarah in the hospital and E off fishing. I busied myself making her a welcome home dress. She had so many clothes I thought I might be ready to actually take some of the clothes to a shop that sold home made sweaters and stuff. Maybe I would get into the baby clothes making business.

I could imagine myself making clothes for Sarah as she grew older. Each age, I would focus my sewing on that particular kind of clothes, baby clothes, clothes for toddlers, school clothes, clothes for graduation, for dating. I could see Sarah going through the stages of growing up. I could see it so clearly and as I did, I felt with a certainty that it would happen. That Sarah would grow up. That we would find what was wrong with her and that she would not die as the doctors had predicted.

Imagining things had worked for me before; it was going to work for me now.

It was the second time I had felt that Sarah would live. The first time was when I knew I loved her. But this was even stronger, more specific. The clothes were so real. When I knew that I loved her, the feeling was that she would not die. But this was a feeling that she would live, live for a long time. Long enough to fall in love.

You may not think my feelings about the future always worked. I mean, I did think she was going to have gills and a tail. When Sarah was twelve, the doctors discovered what had made her so ill all her life. Turner's Syndrome, a missing chromosome. But Sarah was a mosaic Turner. She had a little piece of her missing chromosome. She had enough to keep her from some of the tell tail signs of the syndrome. She did not have the flap of skin that grew at the neck and had to be surgically removed; she did not have the webbed fingers or the hair that grew like soft down on her back.

When I finally learned all this, I remembered my dream. But that was yet to come. That was part of my future. At the present, I had just had the best feeling of security. I would make a dress for my daughter's graduation.

I wanted to tell someone. I wanted to rush to the hospital and tell Sarah. "You'll be all right, my little darling," I wanted to assure her. "Don't be afraid. You'll be all right." I wanted to tell the doctors. I wanted to tell the world.

I was so filled with my vision of a future for us that I barely heard the knock at the door. It came louder, more insistent, the second time.

"Come in," I said, not looking up from my sewing machine. I figured it must be Mom, knowing I was alone, knowing how I hated being alone.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" It was a man's voice. Strangely familiar.

Dickey Lafleure was standing in my doorway, a vacuum cleaner in tow. Dickey Lafleure, my childhood hero, the boy who had given me my first kiss, the boy who had helped me to find my beloved Tom. Dickey, Dickey, Dickey.

"Marie?" He dropped his bag, his upright Hoover. He held out his arms and I went into them with a gratitude I hadn't experienced in a long time. It was as if I were eleven again. I had once again found the friend of my childhood just when I needed him most.

"You're not living with your mom anymore?" he asked.

"I live here. For awhile." I looked around at the sewing machine, the pile of baby clothes. "I'm a seamstress."

"Like my mom." He smiled. Actually it was Dickey's mom who had taught me to sew. She had sewn things to make ends meet.

"How is she, your mom? How are you? Your dad? Tell me everything."

Our conversation moved so fast, with Dickey doing most of the talking, that somehow I didn't get a chance to tell him that I was married, that my husband was ice-fishing and my daughter in the hospital. I don't think I consciously concealed those things, but somehow the truth of my life never came out.

Dickey's life seemed to be in a mess. His dad had gone completely bonkers. Dickey had quit school to help out his mom. But he couldn't get a decent job. Now he was selling vacuum cleaners.

"I'll buy one." I said and we both laughed knowing full well I had no more money to buy one than the man in the moon.

We went out for a walk. We walked and talked and laughed. The day flew by. I almost forgot about E murdering fish in the ice; I almost forgot about Sarah lying in a hospital bed. I didn't want to think of them. I wanted to be here, now, a teenage girl with the boy who had been her best friend, with the boy who had been the first to touch his lips to hers.

I remembered that kiss when I looked at Dickey, when his lips moved. He must have known what I was thinking because he reached over and pulled me to him and kissed me again. Again, the soft kiss of innocence and uncomplicated desire.

I spent the night in his house. I didn't sleep with him. I slept in the spare room, the one which housed the washing machine. Dickey's mom was so glad to see me. She made her spare ribs. It was the only recipe I really knew. She had taught me how to make them, with canned pineapple and tomatoes and hot chili peppers. They melted in your mouth.

His dad recognized me, which made everyone happy. We all stayed up until 3 am talking about the olden days, the day I pushed Betty Lou into a locker; the day I won the house at the fair, the day we sold all the rabbits and found Tom. We had such history together. This was my family. This felt so much like home.

We avoided how that story had ended. No one wanted to go where I could not bear to be.

I slept like a person without a care in the world. In the morning, Mrs. Lafleure made pancakes that tasted like angel food cake. She separated the eggs and whipped the whites and folded them into the batter. They were my favorites. They are a prairie thing. My grandfather could make them, too. Mrs. LaFleure had strawberries from her garden that she had frozen and these she thawed and served with the pancakes. We drank hot black coffee. I felt old and young all at the same time. I felt like a grown up because she served me black coffee.

Can you imagine that? Here I was a married woman, a mother of a 6 month old baby and I felt grown up because someone served me black coffee? God, I was a lunatic.

Mr. Lafleure was watching me all through breakfast. He wasn't saying anything, just watching me. It made Dickey and his mom a bit uneasy because they figured he was losing touch with reality again.

It made me uneasy because I thought he was very much in touch with reality. More in touch than anyone. I had always found him to be that way. He may have been shell shocked. He may have been paranoid and nailed his windows shut with two by fours, but he had a sixth sense that was uncanny.

I had just stuffed a huge hunk of pancake, wet and warm with hot sweet strawberries into my mouth when Mr. Lafleure, still looking at me, said in a quite matter-of- fact way, "When you have a baby?"

I spit out my pancake. Bits of strawberry spattered. "Six months ago." I said, wiping my mouth, my sweater, mopping up bits of pancake and strawberry with my napkin.

There it was out. All of the truth followed. Leaving home, the trailer, my father dying, E, living in Shellbrooke, the baby. It all poured out in a big jumble, not in the right order, probably not making much sense, but letting them know I was the married mother of a sick baby and a husband I was sure didn't want to be with me anymore.

When I was done, Mrs. Lafleure put her arms around me, "My poor little Marie," and she rocked me as if I were the baby.

Mr. LaFleure was agitated. He didn't like it that the baby was in the hospital. He didn't trust hospitals. He wanted us to go and get her. He was acting as if Sarah were his own grand-child. Dickey had to promise we'd leave to get the baby. Mr. LaFleure almost pushed us out the door.

We left with our false promise. Dickey hadn't yet said anything. We walked around, not talking. He broke a branch off a tree and cracked it into smaller and smaller pieces. "The baby clothes? They were hers?"

He was remembering my lie of omission. I was remembering it, too. How did it happen? How did I let it happen? Was I just going to go on with the lie until when? The week-end was over?

"I was so glad to see you." I said as if that explained everything. And yet it seemed to. He seemed satisfied.

“Come away with me,” he said. What was he thinking? Come away with him?

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Away. We’ll get Sarah. We’ll find a place. The three of us.”

What he was saying was ridiculous. It was impossible. And yet. Oh, my god, and yet.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Yes.”

We had a plan. E would come home on Sunday. And on Monday, he’d be gone again. I’d act natural, and tell him Mom would come with me to pick up Sarah. But it wouldn’t be Mom. It would be Dickey. We’d pick up the baby and then we’d go. We’d have to take E’s car. I felt badly. E’s pride and joy was that pink Fairlane Ford. He covered it with a tarp when he wasn’t using it.

“When we get to where we’re going, we’ll send him a note. He can come and get the car.” Dickey agreed that that would be a good idea.

But things didn’t quite work out. E didn’t go back to Shellbrooke on Monday. He had decided to take a few days off and help me with the baby. He was worried that the news might be bad and I might be in a state.

His doing that threw me into a state all right. It was the kindest thing he had done since we’d married. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he did love the baby. Maybe he did love me.

When someone knocked at the door, I knew it was Dickey. E answered before I could get there.

Dickey figured it out right away. He pulled a great cover-up, asking if I were still interested in the vacuum cleaner. I said no and he left.

“I know that guy,” E said. “I’ve seen him before.”

My heart was pounding. I had so many pictures of Dickey in my scrap-book. Dickey and the rabbits. Dickey and Tom. Dickey at the church. Dickey and me when we tried cooking some clams we’d gathered at the river’s edge. They’d tasted like mud and were tough as rubber. His dad had taken a picture of us pulling the clams from away from our mouths, the little gray masses tight in our teeth. The gray shells open and gritty. We’d looked like aliens. I remember that Dickey had pulled so hard the clam had snapped back, leaving a sharp cut across his nose. His dad and I had laughed. It seemed such a funny thing. We’d just laughed and laughed. It didn’t seem funny now as I remembered it. But at the time we were in stitches.

“I knew him when I was a kid,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “There’s pictures.”

E and I both went to pick up Sarah. The doctor sat with us and explained that the test had proved inconclusive. They did not know what caused her immune deficiency. They had discovered her blood pressure was terribly high. They didn’t know why that was happening either. Her heart seemed normal. There would be more tests.

“I think she’ll be fine,” I said to E. He looked surprised. I couldn’t explain about my premonitions. I couldn’t explain how that if I imagined something, wanting it really badly, it often came true. I couldn’t explain that when I pictured myself making her clothes as she grew older, I was living a bit of my own future, and so many of my fears had vanished.

I’d still worry. I’d still be the mother of a sick child. But a child who would get better. A child who would live, at least to graduation.

Dickey phoned the next day. E was still home. He answered the phone. I don’t know what Dickey said, but E invited him over for a drink. “I invited him over for a drink,” E said to me. “I know you’ve been lonesome.”

Dickey came over and we looked at the pictures. We told E the stories of our childhood. E watched and listened. I chatted like a magpie. Sarah slept, exhausted from her stay at the hospital. Dickey was charming as always. He seemed so at ease.

The next day E left for Shellbrooke. He seemed in a good mood. Dickey must have been waiting. He came in just minutes after E left. “I’ll need to get some stuff,” he said. “Some supplies.” He seemed anxious, nervous. I was, too. And I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do now. Why was this happening? Why was it playing out the way it was?

I felt that I was just going along with something I had no control over. Dickey had come into my life and now we were leaving together. Two days ago, I was so sure of that. Today, today, I didn’t know.

“Where are the keys?” he asked. The keys to the car. To E’s pink Ford Fairlane. To the car he covered with a tarp when he wasn’t using it. I got the keys from the cupboard where all our keys were located. I placed them in Dickey’s hand.

“I won’t be long,” Dickey said.

But he was. He was long. One hour went by, then two, three, four. I panicked. I called Mrs. LaFleure. “Was Dickey there?” I asked her.

“Why? Why? Did the police call?”

Police? Why was she talking about the police? Had E guessed what we were thinking of doing? Had he called the police?

But it wasn't E. E had nothing to do with it. Dickey had robbed a gas station. He had robbed it the day he'd come over to sell me the vacuum cleaner. He'd been selling vacuums to get enough money to get out of town.

And now he was gone and he was driving E's car. He was driving E's Ford because I had given him the keys so he could get the supplies that would take us away.

I had to tell E. I had to confess everything. But, how? I couldn't go to him. I couldn't phone. He was out in the middle of the bush in a trailer peeing in an outdoor toilet infested by snakes. I decided to tell Mom.

Mom wasn't home, so Roy was the one I told. I hated telling him. He didn't like E. Yet, in this case, in this particular bizarre case, it was as if he felt sorry for E, as if suddenly both he and E were on the same side. I was on the other side. “I'll drive you out there,” he said.

“What made you do it?” he asked in the car.

“I just felt happy for the first time in a long time,” I tried to explain. And I wanted to feel happy.”

“That's all we all want, kid,”

Roy waited in the car while I went in to give E the news that my old friend had stolen his car. Roy was watching Sarah who had fallen asleep in her car seat. It was the one place where she fell asleep, in a moving vehicle. She had yet to sleep through the night.

“You gave him my car?” E cried, his voice high and shrill and out of control. It was a way I had not heard it before. His face was very red. He was standing over me. He looked enormous.

I couldn't explain. I just started to cry. I was acting like a person who had murdered someone. I felt as if I had murdered someone. “I'm so sorry,” I kept mumbling between sobs. My nose was running. My mouth was running. My hair was even getting wet.

“He stole my car?” E repeated, a bit calmer now. “Your friend stole my car?”

“It was all my fault. I was, I was. . . .” E put his hand over my mouth.

“I don’t want to know,” he said. “Don’t tell me.”

“The car,” I said. “I, I don’t want you to call the police.”

E looked at me, so sad. His eyes filled with tears. I thought my heart would break. “I’m so sorry,” I begged.

“I knew you two had something going,” he said. “I could tell.”

“Are you going to call the police?” I asked. But what I really wanted to say was, “Are you going to leave me? Are you ever going to forgive me?”

“If that’s all it takes to get rid of him is a Ford Fairlaine E said, “He can have it.”

And once again, I fell in love with my husband.

Chapter Six: The White Dress

“This is worse than the trailer in Shellbrooke,” E was shouting into the phone.

“I don’t care.”

“You’ll hate it.”

“I promise, I won’t”.

“Do what you want. I know you will anyway.”

“Do you want me, do you want me to come, “ I whispered. But he had already hung up.

Mom and Roy had been listening. Roy looked uncomfortable. I guess it was obvious to him that my husband had told me to stay home. But I had no home. The lease had run out. I had moved in with Mom and Roy. It was for sure the last thing I wanted to do. But it was winter, the project in Shellbrooke was over and E, basically unemployed, was attending Department of Highways School in Regina, Saskatchewan.

What could be worse than the trailer park and the cobra filled outhouse? I wanted to be with my husband. I belonged with my husband. Separation had not been good for us. And so, I begged Roy to drive me to Regina on a cold Sunday morning, and he did.

The road was like glass. I’ll never forget it. The sky was clear and glaring with white light. The highway from Prince Albert to Regina was almost a straight flat line of prairie. Roy was wearing sunglasses against the glare. He kept on testing the breaks to see how fast he could stop in an emergency.

He was driving about thirty miles an hour. I had never seen him drive that way. It was making me crazy. It would take us two days to get there. What if we had to spend the night? I was starting to panic.

“Slow and easy does it,” Roy insisted. “Can’t risk an accident.” He nodded towards Sarah. It was as if her presence made the thought of an accident even more horrific.

“I’d like to get there before he goes to bed.”

“Don’t worry about it.’ Roy just clenched his teeth and continued to drive slowly. Sarah woke up and began to fuss. She cried and I rocked her. It seemed silly, but the car itself didn’t seem to have the rhythm to put her to sleep. That’s how damn slow we were going.

As if the ice weren't bad enough, it began to snow. We could see about two feet in front of us.

"I can't see a fucking thing," Roy said. He glanced at Sarah. "Sorry," he added as if she would be offended by his swearing.

It was ten o'clock when he pulled into a motel.

"We can't stare here," I said it, my voice high with emotion.

"This place is good as any other. I'm tired."

"We have to go on."

"In the morning. He doesn't know you're coming."

"No!" I was becoming frantic. I wouldn't get out of the car.

"Get out, Marie."

"I won't go in there. I won't go with you."

Roy's face got very red. He left me and headed for the office. He came out with two keys and threw one into the car. "Stupid girl," he said. "What makes you think..." He didn't finish the sentence.

I waited until he was inside his room before I carried Sarah into the room next to Roy's. I felt like an idiot. Had he meant to get us two rooms all along? Why had I made such a fuss?

I lay on the bed, Sarah lying beside me and watched the TV until the test pattern came on. I watched it go off and the screen fill up with snow and the sound of ghostly electricity. I didn't want to get up out of bed to turn it off. I preferred the sound of the TV to the silence that would have to fill the room. I opened my purse and ate a candy bar. It made me feel nauseous. I looked at the letter E had sent.

*Hi Marie. It's damn cold here. I wish I could send you some money. School is easy, but I don't like it much. I'll come to see you and Sarah as soon as I can. Hope you are ok.
Luv, E.*

I read the letter over and over convincing myself that the letter was a secret invitation to come and stay with him. He wanted to be with me. He didn't have bus money. So I was coming to him. He'd be happy once I got there. He was telling me not to come because

he didn't think I would be comfortable staying in a motel. He was wrong. I had spent part of my childhood in a house shaped like an "L". I wouldn't mind at all. I would be near him. We would be a family. I fell asleep with the letter in my hand.

When I heard Roy start up the car, I jumped up. The TV was back on. It had come up at 6 am. Roy honked twice. That honk told me he was still mad at me. I rushed to get ready, not stopping to pee or comb my hair or anything. I wrapped Sarah in her bunny bag. I had made it out of an old fake fur coat. You could lay her in and zip her up and she was warm and roomy. I didn't put in arms because I wanted to be able to get her ready without waking her up if she were sleeping. It worked like a charm.

I could have used a real fur coat. There are tons of them in Saskatchewan. But I hated fur coats. I hated the thought of an animal being trapped in iron jaws, bleeding, starving, afraid, in pain. I didn't want to place my baby into the dead skins of animals who had suffered like that.

We didn't speak all the way to Regina. It was about 10 am when we pulled into the city limits.

"Where do I drop you?" Roy asked. It was the first thing he had said since he'd called me stupid.

I searched around for the envelope I had in my purse. Oh no! I had left it in the hotel room. Along with E's letter. When I had rushed out of the room. I stared at Roy. I started to cry.

"Oh for Christ's sake," he said. "Now what?"

"I left the address in the hotel room."

Roy almost hit me. He roared the engine and headed for a pay phone. He wasn't afraid of the ice any more. He just wanted to get rid of me. He phoned the hotel and stood in the phone booth waiting for the manager to go and look for the envelop with E's address on it. I could tell he was cold. He was moving from one foot to another. It was easily 40 below. He started talking again. He didn't look pleased. He put more money into the machine. He waited some more.

What was happening? Finally he took out a piece of paper and scribbled something on it. He walked out of the booth and glared at me as he headed toward the car. His head was white with snow.

"The maid had to look through the garbage for this. Thanks to you. It's time you grew up, Marie. You're a mother now."

We drove to the address. A motel on the outskirts of town. It was painted white. There was a neon light with a horse riding, riding, riding, never really getting anywhere. The motel was called the Horseman. Seeing that horse made me so sad. I couldn't tell you why.

Roy pulled up to Number 7, a room right in the middle of the unit. He didn't turn off the car. "I have to get back," he said. He meant for me to get out. I left Sarah in the front seat as I gathered up all our stuff from the back seat and the trunk of the car. I had brought her carriage and her clothes. I had a suitcase for myself and some books. Roy didn't make a move to help me. It was a real struggle getting the carriage out. It doubled as a bed. The bed was in once piece, the wheels and gear collapsed. But it was still awkward and hard to maneuver.

I piled the stuff in the driveway. It was covered with fresh snow. I reached in and gathered Sarah into my arms. She was crying from the cold that had blown into the car while the door was open.

"Thanks," I started to say.

"Right," he said and left me standing there in the drive-way, my baby in my arms and all our stuff piled around me.

I wasn't sure what to do. I went to number seven and knocked. There was no answer. I hadn't expected there to be. I was pretty sure E would be at school. I went to the office and asked to be let into Mr. Torchinski's room.

The manager told me he couldn't do that.

"I'm his wife," I explained. I was holding Sarah in her big bulky bunny bag. "We came to live with him."

"Nobody told me that."

"I'm going to surprise him."

The manager only smirked. He nodded. He went to the back. I was sure he was getting me an extra key. He came back with a newspaper and sat on a stool behind the desk and began to read the cartoons. He laughed as he read them.

"I need to get in," I said. I hadn't peed since the night before. I had to pee really badly. Coming into the warm room wasn't helping. Feeling so nervous wasn't helping.

“He stays here doesn’t he?”

“Can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

He just stared at me then went back to reading the newspaper. He was following some rules. He was sticking to those rules.

My stuff was still piled out in front of room 7. “My stuff.” I pointed to the pile of stuff.

“Nobody’ll steal it,” he said. “No babies around here.” He went back to reading. He snorted when he laughed.

“Is there a bathroom in here?” I was feeling so desperate.

“Not for public consumption,” he glanced my way and laughed at his own joke. “But you can use it. In the back.” He handed me a key.

I ran to the washroom. I had to put Sarah down in her fake fur bunny to pee. I had to lay her right on the floor. It wasn’t very clean. But I had no choice. There was nowhere else to put her. I peed a little in my pants as I tried to pull them down real fast. It felt so good to pee.

I pulled up my pants. They felt yecky, wet with pee. I was afraid I’d smell, so I took off my jeans and panties and ran the panties under the hot water tap and tried to dry them on the paper towels. Then I put them back on and slipped back into my jeans. It felt even worse, but maybe at least I wouldn’t smell like pee. I took Sarah’s bottle out of my bag and gathered her up in my arms.

I fed her sitting on the toilet. I didn’t know what else to do. I had no place else to go. There was no rotunda in the motel. No place to sit and chat with your neighbor and have morning coffee the way folks do in a hotel lobby.

I looked around the bathroom. It was painted a mustard yellow. The floor was cement. The garbage pail, huge, industrial gray was actually overflowing with paper. I figured it hadn’t been emptied in months. Weren’t there some rules about that? Didn’t that manager have rules about emptying the garbage? He had rules about everything else. I wanted to go into the office and tell him about the garbage. But, of course, I’d never do that. I was a big talker, in my own head.

Sarah had just drifted off to sleep when I heard a knock on the door.

“You ok in there?” It was the manager.

“Fine.”

“Thought you must a died.” He waited for me to say something. “What you doin’?”

“Waiting,” I said. He found that funny. He laughed the way he had when he had been reading the cartoon, making snorting sounds with his nose.

“You can wait in the office,” he said.

When Sarah and I followed him to the office, he pulled out a chair from the back and offered it to us. I sat down, grateful for the warmth and comfort of the offer. I watched the clock. It was only noon. What time did E usually get home? Five? Six?

The Manager who told me his name was Ronald, turned on a black and white TV. It flickered and every few minutes he would bang it. It would startle Sarah, but thank God, she didn't cry. It was a miracle, but she didn't cry. I think the oddity of our situation had dawned on her. She looked more amazed than anything.

At one o'clock the manager opened up a bag and took out two egg sandwiches. The eggs weren't hard boiled and chopped with onion and celery and made into a spread with mayonnaise. No, they had been fried over easy and slipped between two slices of brown bread.

He offered me one. I tried to tell him no, but he just pushed it my way as if he were offering the gift of the century. He was trying to be nice. But the truth was I hated eggs like that. I didn't like the white unless it was all mixed up with the yolk. And I didn't like the yolk unless I could dip hot buttered toast into it. Cold fried egg on a slice of rye bread made me almost gag.

But I took it and bit in. The cold runny yolk filled my mouth. I closed my eyes and swallowed. Somehow I managed to eat the whole thing without throwing up.

It was seven o'clock before E got home. I had been watching out the window and saw him get off a city bus and walk quickly towards the hotel. I loved to watch the way he moved. So graceful, so unaware of his body, yet so careful with it, too. So careful not to jar or make noise. He stepped like the animals he loved to shoot. He moved like an elk. He moved like a panther.

I rushed out of the motel office with Sarah and almost fell on my keister. Unlike E, I did not walk with the grace of a wild animal. I was clumsy and fell a lot. I bumped into things and made too much noise. I almost skidded into E's arms. Luckily, he caught me.

You should have seen his face! I was right. He wanted me to come. He broke out into the most wonderful smile. He laughed and twirled us around in his big strong arms. He kissed my face, my lips and nose and chin and forehead, the top of my head. “You little monkey! You sweet silly little monkey.”

We gathered all my stuff and headed for the room. The manager apologized like crazy, but those were the rules.

“You made her wait in there all day?” I saw E’s face go red. The manager stepped back. “The rules,” he mumbled. “You let a kid and a baby sit in there all damn day?”

“You should have told me,” the manager countered. “What if she stole your stuff.”

“What stuff? Jesus.” And with that and a shake of his head, E ushered us into his room.

I changed Sarah, E fed her some squashed bananas, she fell asleep and we made love.

Afterwards, E got up and rolled himself a cigarette. I had never seen him do that. It gave me an uneasy feeling, but I wasn’t sure why.

“You hungry?” I wanted to know.

“God, you haven’t eaten.”

It was late but there was an all night diner not five blocks away. Five blocks may not seem like much. But when it is as cold and windy as it is in Regina, Saskatchewan in the middle of winter, five blocks feels like the other side of the world. By the time we got there I was shaking.

E ordered me a cheese burger and a coffee for himself. “I already ate,” he said. “At the school. Meals included.” Another uneasy feeling swept over me. How much were they paying him, I wondered.

I cut my hamburger in half and put it on a napkin. “Please.” He ate it in two bites.

“Where is Roy?” E wanted to know.

“Home. Well, on the way home. The way he drives. It might be tomorrow before he gets there.”

“He went all the way home?”

“Where, but,” I didn’t quite know what E was asking.

“How long are you staying?” he asked.

“Six weeks, I guess.” The question confused me.

E’s face went white.

I don’t think that sense of dread ever left him. The whole time, we struggled. Me, pretending that I just loved staying in a motel room in the most desolate part of a windy cold city, surrounded by trucks that came and went all times of the night; by the odd industrial building where something or other was manufactured.

I pretended I loved the part of his meal E brought home for us. I pretended cold pork chops and mashed potatoes and canned peas and carrots were just as good as a meal in a restaurant or, better yet, a home.

I could imagine E’s embarrassment as he saved part of his meal, wrapped it in a paper napkin, put it in his pocket for the wife he couldn’t afford to feed. When I’d come to stay with him, I hadn’t realized E was not being paid a salary, that while he was going to school, they fed him in the barracks where the classes were held; they housed him in the motel. No money for a wife; for a baby girl. For himself.

Any money we did have came from E’s bartending at the Friday night dances. That amazed me. Not that he bartended. But that the Department of Highways didn’t pay the men who went to school; but put on Friday night dances.

Many of the men attending the school lived in or around Regina. Most were single. But not E. E, proud, Russian, six foot four, handsome, with a body to die for was married with a baby and had to stuff bits of food in his pocket to feed his family.

I could understand his resentment. And I tried in every way to make up for it. I developed a nervous, fake laugh that kept escaping from my mouth. It was a startling sound, too loud, too unexpected. I made love to E when I didn’t feel like it. I faked my pleasure. I hid my loneliness. I talked all day with Sarah. I played all day with Sarah. But when E came home, I tried to ignore her. I tried to lavish my attention on him. It confused her. I grew frantic trying to move my attention between them.

I’d walk E out to the bus stop in the morning, trailing behind him through the crusty, dirty snow banks. The wind blew cold and relentless down the street. The bus stop had no form of shelter. There was a sign, indicating the times the bus came and went. Four times a day. One to take him to school; one to take him home. He had to leave a good

hour early to catch that bus. I wondered if the school was open when he got there. I was afraid to ask.

“For God sake, Marie, stay in the room.”

“I like waiting with you, for the bus.”

“Don’t be nuts.”

The fierce sudden laugh burst from my lips. “I do.”

“Go back. I want you to go back.”

But I didn’t. I stayed. Just before he got on the bus, he bent and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. E was shy about affection. He wasn’t the type to kiss in public. I knew he did it for me. I watched him get on the bus. I waved good-bye. I stood until the bus was out of sight. And then I’d turn and go back to the room.

Fridays were the worst. I’d see him off and know he’d be home late, after the last bus. Sometimes he’d get a ride with one of the boys; sometimes he’d have to walk.

His having to walk in the cold was awful, I was sure. But that wasn’t what made it so bad for me. What made it so bad was that I was jealous. I didn’t want to be. But I was. The thought of E at the dances, with couples, with single women, women who would like his broad shoulders, his green eyes, his easy smile, made me crazy.

I imagined him serving drinks, laughing, being asked to dance. I imagined him holding a stranger close, pressing her into his strong firm body as they moved about the dance floor. I imagined a stranger resting her head on his shoulder. I imagined her laughing and looking up into his face. I wanted to die.

I was so lonely and so jealous and so confused. I couldn’t ask him to stop bartending; it was the only money we had. It was bus money. It was food for Sarah.

But more. It was the only fun he had. I knew it. I could tell from the way he prepared for school on Fridays. He’d shower and shave and put on Brut cologne on the soft blondish hairs of his arms and chest. When I watched him do that, I’d almost run up to him and slap and kiss him and beg him not to go. I felt so sad and angry and lonely all at the same time. He’d wear his good black slacks, a white shirt and a green knitted vest. The green made you think he’d been born in the waters of the deepest sea in a land where the sun shone all day and the moon all night. I imagined him a God of the Sea. I even thought of cutting that vest up. Snipping it with scissors so he could never wear it again, could never show off his sea green eyes.

But I didn't. Instead, I washed it by hand in the small sink in the bathroom of the motel room. I hung it to dry in a small clothes line E had fashioned over the bath tub. I washed out all the stale cigarette smoke from the week before. Two weeks, two Friday nights. Four more to endure. I hated myself for thinking about it. But I just couldn't stop. It just added to my desperate loneliness.

When Lindsay took lodging in the room next to us, I was so excited. I watched her and her husband move in with their young son. He was about nine months old. Fat and strong; not weak and pale and diminutive like Sarah. A healthy, robust baby. I was amazed at the carefree way she slung him on her hip, not worrying that his head was bare, that the wind was blowing bits of snow into his face. She held him on one hip and lugged a big suitcase with the other.

A cigarette hung out of the side of her mouth. Her lips were red with a bright lipstick; her hair, dyed blond, was pulled up into a fancy pony-tail held in place with a pearl comb. She looked tough, she looked sweet, she looked like someone I could really like. In a way, she reminded me of how I imagined my mom might have been as a young woman.

I waited for a chance to meet her. It came that same afternoon. She made her way to the coin laundry situated at the back of the motel. Women with babies always have washing to do. I threw on a sweater, wrapped Sarah in her fake fur bunny bag, grabbed some of Sarah's diapers and nighties and rushed to the laundry. I slowed down just before I went in, trying to act casual, calm.

What if she didn't want to talk to me? What if she didn't want to make friends?

"Hey, I saw you watching me move in. You were so cute, hiding behind that plastic curtain. My name's Lindsay." Blushing at what she'd said, I stuck out my hand to shake hers. She just waved my way, and talked, the cigarette still hanging out of her mouth.

"Don't worry, kid," she said. "I've been in a few rough spots myself."

I couldn't believe it. It was as if she had known me all her life. We hit it off like gang busters. And we made a deal. She would go to the Friday night dance one week, and I'd baby-sit; I'd go the next week and she'd baby-sit.

Oh my god. I would be there. I would show everyone I was his. His wife. It would be me in his arms, it would be me resting my head on his massive chest, laughing up into his face.

I was dying to go first. I was dying to show everyone that he was married; that he was mine.

“I’ll go first. Get a lay of the land,” Lindsay said so casual that I just agreed. Sarah seemed to like having another baby in the room. They played and touched one another’s hands and gooped and fell asleep. Somehow, knowing that Lindsay and her husband would be at the dance made me feel a bit more at ease. Somehow, I told myself Lindsay would be a reminder to E that I was at home. Somehow, I believed it would stop E from dancing with a stranger, or worse, with the woman I had created in my mind who had danced with him each of the three nights he had been there.

The next week was mine. I prepared like a lunatic. Lindsay came over about four o’clock. She and her husband had had a big blow out. She couldn’t baby-sit. She had to go with him. “He’ll kill me if I don’t. He don’t like to go alone. He’s kinda’ shy. Next week, I’ll get him prepared. But he needs the money too, kid.”

What could I do? Lindsay had a way of saying things that made them sound so final. Made them sound as if you had already agreed.

Two weeks left. Just two.

E knew I was disappointed. He knew I wanted to go. “She’s no good, Marie. She’s using you.” I wouldn’t hear of it. All week, E tried to act more cheerful. We played solitaire and watched the flickering black and white TV and held hands. We made love and I didn’t have to pretend. I honestly felt like making love. Even Sarah seemed to settle down. She hadn’t had a cold in weeks.

We were all lying on the bed together, talking the way I imagined families do, when E announced that there was the big final dance in two weeks. “It’s a sort of graduation party”, he told me. Four of us are bartending. I’ll have lots of free time.”

A graduation. Oh my god! I hadn’t graduated from high school. I’d never been to a graduation. My first graduation. E smiled at my excitement. “You’re such a kid,” he said, but he said it in a nice way. A loving way.

Then my mind went to counting. Two weeks! If I went to the dance this Friday; it would be Lindsay’s turn next week. It would be Lindsay’s turn for the final dance, the graduation dance. My heart raced and I began to scheme. I practiced in my head what I might say to Lindsay.

But I didn’t have to say anything. She was putting streaks in my hair. She had taken a hairdressing course after high school. She was pulling strands of hair through a bathing cap that she had punctured with about thirty holes. She was using a crochet hook to pull the hair. It hurt like the dickens. My eyes were tearing up.

“Beauty must suffer.” She laughed and pulled another long strand through. “And you need to be extra beautiful for the graduation dance.”

I thought I’d made it up. I thought I must be imagining it. I gasped.

“Don’t have a bird,” Lindsay said. “You watch the kids this Friday and you can go to the graduation.”

“I love you,” I said and hugged Lindsay coming dangerously close to getting bleach on her black sweater.

“Love hurts,” she said and pushed me back down into the chair for more torture.

I had to have something to wear. Something nice. Something special. Lindsay rummaged around in what she called her tickle trunk and brought out scarves and a skirt with yards and yards of fabric and fringes. I felt like a kid dressed up like a gypsy. It wasn’t the feeling I wanted to create. I wanted elegance. I wanted to be sexy. I wanted to be a woman.

“I’ll make a dress. I’ll take apart the skirt and I’ll make a dress.”

“You got a machine?” Lindsay wasn’t sure.

“I’ll sew it by hand. I’ll make tiny stitches. I’ll make it look like a million bucks. Oh, Lindsay, thank you.”

It was a sunny day. It felt warm. The snow was actually melting on the sidewalk. Sarah and I set out to walk to town. I was going to try on dresses in fancy shops on Hamilton Street.

I walked in trying to behave as though I could afford anything the store had to offer.

The lady behind the desk rushed over as I headed for the special evening gowns, the ones wrapped in bags to protect them from dust and dirty fingers.

“May I help you,” she asked, her voice alive with disdain. She could smell poverty all over me.

“Perhaps,” I said. “If I can find what I want.”

I didn’t know I had it in me. I was acting like someone with more money than manners. I was trying to push her away. I was trying to buy time to study the dresses, to memorize the lines, to imagine myself making the dress out of Lindsay’s gypsy skirt.

I zipped open several of the protective bags making the clerk crazy. An elderly woman came into the store and took some of the attention away from me. I unzipped like crazy.

Sarah started to fuss and the woman came over to coo coo her. I didn't want the attention. I wanted her to be over at the other end of the store, keeping the clerk away from me.

"Little baby," she said in a loud voice. I noticed her hair was dyed a silver that looked more blue than silver or gray. She was a big woman, at least two hundred pounds. Her fingers were adorned with heavy rings. Her fingernails were curved and painted a hot pink. I almost choked on her perfume.

"I'll try this one," I said to the clerk. I pushed Sarah toward the change room.

"I'll watch Baby while Mommy tries on the dress," the blue haired woman said.

I wanted to protest, but I also wanted to try on the dress. I left the curtain a bit open so I could keep an eye on the woman. Something about her made me uneasy. I sensed her attraction to us. What was it? Did she want to steal Sarah?

The dress was stunning. White, with a tight inset midrift, a slight gathering in the front of the skirt and strapless. When I stepped out into the light of the tall mirror I couldn't believe a dress could look that good.

The older woman whistled. My mom was a great whistler, so hearing a woman whistle shouldn't have surprised me. But it did. Then she laughed. "You know when you look like that in a dress you can't afford it; and when you can, you look like me."

I wanted to choke her. Of course she was right. The dress cost almost a hundred bucks. But I could make it. Not of chiffon. Not pure white. Not with imbedded rhinestones. But the style would be the same.

I went inside to change.

"I suppose you want me to wrap it up?" the clerk said to me.

"I, I don't think it quite fits," I said, not nearly as cocky and sure of myself as I had been when I'd come in the door. I wanted that dress so badly. I knew she knew. The wind was out of my sails, as my mom would have said. Flat out.

When I came out, back in my jacket and jeans, the blue haired lady was gone. The clerk was tying a string around a huge grey dress box. She looked up at me and said, not

pleased, but not angry, either. More surprised. “For you,” she said and shoved the box my way.

The lady had bought the dress for me. She did not know my name, and she would never see me again. But she had bought me this beautiful dress. She was the most generous person in the world.

Lindsay couldn't believe my luck. She acted kind of weird about it. Maybe she was mad that I wouldn't need to use her skirt. I hadn't meant to hurt her feelings. “Admit it, kid,” she teased. “You stole the damn dress.”

“She gave it to me.” But when she accused me of stealing, I did blush. I had to admit I'd thought of stealing it. I think I would have if I could have thought of a way to get it out of the store without getting caught.

The day of the dance I set my hair in rollers as soon as E left for work. Lindsay promised to backcomb it into big curls. She was going to lend me her pearl combs. I bathed Sarah and I painted my nails. I hung my dress in the bathroom when E had his shower so that any wrinkles would fall out.

By noon, I was ready for the dance. Lindsay came over and wondered if I would babysit for a few hours. “Why not?”

I decided to read one of the library books E had brought home for me. They had a big library at the school. It was all about rocks. I wasn't crazy about rocks, but I thought it was a good idea to know something about the work E did.

Sarah and Buddy were playing on the couch beside me. When I picked up the book, Buddy looked scared. He started to cry. I put the book down and rocked him. Then I reached over to read to him and Sarah. I often read out loud to her. I'd read poetry mostly, when I had poetry books. I thought it would make her love books.

But it sure didn't make Buddy love books. When I picked up the book he began to cry again. So I just sat and rocked, waiting for Lindsay to come back.

Two o'clock. Three o'clock. Five o'clock. No sign of Lindsay. I was getting frantic. E came home to pick me up. He wanted to take me to the dance himself. A real date.

I was in my housecoat. My hair was still in rollers. I was really nervous. Lindsay was late. Buddy had been crying all afternoon and now Sarah was fussing. She sensed his upset. And god knows I was upset. Where was Lindsay? I could tell from the look on E's face that he didn't think Lindsay would come back in time. He didn't trust her. He didn't like her.

“She’s sure to show up,” he lied. “You sat for her every damn week since she got here.”

“Don’t go.” I begged. “Don’t go until she gets here.”

“I’m up first,” E said. “I took first turn, so’s we could have the rest of the night.”

“They’ll know. Someone else will take your place. Stay, please. Wait.”

What I meant was, “Don’t go if Lindsay doesn’t come. Stay here, with me. Don’t go.”

But he did go. He combed his hair and put on his Brut and his white shirt. And I walked him to the bus stop, my hair still in curlers, my white dress still hanging in the shower.

I made up my face. I combed my own hair. I put on my beautiful white dress, the dress that made me look like a million bucks.

It was seven o’clock by the time Lindsay got to the motel. I’d been crying. My make-up was a mess. Lindsay knocked at the door with her little rat a tat. She popped her head in, cigarette hanging as usual. “You did your hair!” she said.

No mention of being late. No mention of my worrying myself sick.

“I’ll take the kids,” she said. “You fix up a bit. Doug’ll drive you.

All fears vanished. I began to pack up Sarah. As I did, I told her about Buddy’s not feeling well. “I was going to read,” I told her, “but when I did, he started to cry. I didn’t mean to scare him.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You didn’t. He hates books. I always give him a wrap with a book when he’s bad. He just knows what’s coming.”

I stopped putting Sarah’s things into the bag. “You hit him with a book?” I asked, not believing.

“When he deserves it,” she said, getting her back up right away. “He isn’t the easiest kid.”

She had Buddy in one arm. “Here, I’ll take the bag. You bring Sarah when you’re ready.”

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t hand her the bag. She tried to take it. I just hung on. She gave the bag a yank. “Marie!”

“I, I don’t feel well,” I lied. “I don’t think I’ll go.”

Lindsay just glared at me. She knew what was going through my mind.

“Suit yourself,” she said and left without closing the door.

Sarah and I sat into the night, listening to the radio. I think Sarah knew I was sad. She held my finger and put it to her mouth. Did she have any idea how much I loved her? I thought of Buddy and Lindsay’s hitting him with a book. It made me want to cry. I held Sarah close and rocked her and I was filled with a feeling of wanting to protect her from the world.

I heard a knock at the door. Oh no. Lindsay had come back. What was I going to say?

But, it wasn’t Lindsay. It was E. His turn at bartending was over. When Doug arrived and told him I wasn’t coming, E had come home. He had come home to be with me.

The Platters were singing “Only You” on the radio. E turned off the lights. He took me in his strong arms. I rested against his chest. We danced and without warning the most horrible thought flashed into my brain.

I should have been the happiest girl in the world. E had come back. I was in my beautiful white dress and I was dancing to the Platters in a darkened room, bits of moonlight visible through the window and instead of feeling safe, I felt the worst pang of fear.

“Only you can make my dreams come true,” crooned on the radio and this thought ran through my stupid head: “Is there only one person in the world you can love? Is there one person in the world just right for you and for no one else? And what if, what if you marry the wrong one?”

‘Am I,’ I whispered, looking up into E’s face. “Am I the only one?”

He held me close. “I love you, girl. Don’t you know, I love you.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard him say it. Actually say it out loud. I needed to hear it again.

“Do you, do you?” I pleaded.

Ssh,” E whispered into my hair and we danced even after the song had stopped playing.

The End.