

Losing Lavinia  
by May Cotton © 1998, 2022

Lavinia was nine the last time I saw her. She was chubby in that awful awkward way most girls are before they suddenly shoot up and blossom. The yellow and brown dress she wore was unbearably ugly, accentuating her round little tummy and thick thighs, and clashing with her straw-colored hair.

We were all sitting in a row along the end of the living room when the social worker came in. I was in a chair at the end of the sofa, and the younger girls sat to my left, lining the davenport in their eyelet-trimmed dresses. Our mother sat in a chair at the other end of the sofa, facing the front door, baby Lucas in her lap. We did not look like a family which was too poor to keep all of our children, but for the past two years Lavinia had been elsewhere, living with this other family who now wanted to adopt her. And they were bringing her back to visit one last time so Mother could finally make her decision and sign the papers.

The social worker did not wait for an answer to his knock before walking in the door and closing it behind him. He looked around at all of us, waiting there with obvious anxiety, and then walked toward me.

"Let's make this a little easier," he said, reaching for the drapery pull of the window beside me. As he leaned toward me and pulled the rod, the room darkened significantly. I watched the dirt under his fingernails vanish as the curtain closed.

A moment later the door opened again, and Lavinia stepped through, followed by the somber woman and laughing man she now called Mom and Dad. They moved quickly to the side of the room opposite us, sitting down with the social worker as Lavinia came towards me. Grabbing the pull stick, I thrust the drape back open so I could see her in full light.

I never questioned that it was me she came to instead of Mother. Perhaps she saw there was yet another baby in Mother's lap, leaving no room for her. But as she came toward me, I pulled her down into my own lap, ignoring her saucy look and the stink of Bourbon on her breath.

Was it my grabbing her or the Bourbon which caused her to suddenly tip over onto the sofa, scattering the little girls off the couch, sending them to crouch on the floor around Mother's chair? Whatever the cause, I took advantage of the couch now empty except for Lavinia and sat beside her, pulling her into my arms. She giggled and announced, "I'm drunk."

The man across the room laughed too, bragging that he had taken Lavinia to the race track and was pleased that she could pick the winning horses as well as the best Bourbon. All eyes turned to the social worker, but his were glued to a spot on the floor in front of his dusty loafers. Despite all I now know about the gravity of our situation, it still astonishes me that the one person who had the most responsibility for Lavinia's future turned a blind eye to the truth.

It seemed like only minutes passed as the full drama unfolded before our eyes. As Lavinia leaned her curly blonde head against my shoulder, and the little girls cowered in the corner beside her chair, Mother signed away Lavinia's life to the somber little woman in the stark gray suit and the tall, laughing gambler. If she ever knew their names, Mother would not say.

As I watched this drama repeat itself three more times over the next six months, I held each of the other little girls in my arms, whispering to them the same words I had whispered to Lavinia before the social worker pulled each one from me and marched her out the front door.

"You will always be my sister," I said. Somehow I knew better than to promise I would find them. I was too old to be adopted myself, too old to believe my sisters would ever be returned to me.

In the end there was only Mother, Lucas, and me. They let me stay because I was old enough to care for Lucas while Mother worked, and then, in a couple of years, old enough to work myself to help support us. Mother would not give Lucas up, the only son of our dead father, and so in the end she was left with only the eldest and youngest of her brood.

The little girls have become a blur in my memory, a collection of little dark heads always huddling near the floor. It is Lavinia whom I remember best, maybe because she was my first sister, the first laughing baby to be laid in my own baby arms.