

1957 - 1972: Girl Scouts

After some mysterious advocate from my past petitioned the Scouting program to make an exception for me, I became a Brownie at age six rather than the required age of seven. It seems that someone was always challenging the system on my behalf. My mother started it when we moved to Denver and got me into kindergarten before I turned five. What followed was an avalanche of problems set off by my never being old enough for the things available to my classmates. But I had already been to preschool in Ohio before the move, and my mother was eager to have me out of her hair. I don't recall being a contrary child, but my mother was not a patient woman at that point in her life. Why she ever had a second child, I'll never know, and when the third one came along, it was probably just as well Ellen's birth defects discouraged any further offspring.

My mother was not one to be held back by mere rules and regulations. According to his birth date, my brother was not eligible for second grade, but he had finished first grade before we moved, and there was simply no way the school system could keep him back, bright boy that he was. Using the same tactic with me, she managed to push their cutoff date back by a month and a day so they would admit me as well. I suspect it was probably she who bucked the system two years later when my being in second grade should have automatically made me eligible to join Brownies, but the great wisdom of Scouting Headquarters insisted girls must be both second graders *and* seven years of age. I celebrated my seventh birthday during my third month in Scouting, proudly wearing my uniform and Brownie pin for the first time, as I shared cupcakes with my troop.

Mom was not successful in her third attempt to bend the rules of the Denver Public Schools, and Ellen spent her formative years in expensive, private institutions of limited learning. Although she was determined to be "trainable" but not "educable," they continued trying to teach Ellen to read and write until she turned 16, when she was transferred to a sheltered workshop.

Brownies met in the basement of Sheri Evans' house. Sheri was my best friend, my first friend in Denver — since she lived just around the corner — and her mother was one of our leaders. Margot's mother, Liz, was the other leader; thus began my relationship with the LaBrash family. If I could have looked forward into the future from the circle of uniformed girls in Sheri's basement, I would have run back to Ohio any way I could, run from any association with Liz and Margot and Henri, her younger brother who introduced me to marijuana. But the future does not stand open for us to view, and Margot became my second best friend. When Sheri moved to the suburbs in fifth grade, Margot took over first place and became my first conscious replacement for the defective sister Nature and my parents had saddled me with.

By the time we were in high school, Margot and I were inseparable. When she wasn't sleeping over at my house, I was sleeping over at hers. Only one of our fellow Brownies stayed with us all the way through high school; the three of us were frequent companions, but neither Margot nor I considered Babs to be a special friend. The only time I ever crossed Margot was when she decided to take Babs down a few notches from her nauseating good-girl pedestal. It seems Margot was just as jealous of Babs as I was. Even though I hated the "why can't you be more like Babs Boston" admonishments from my mother, I could not bear the injustice of

Margot's plan, and I warned Babs about the coming confrontation. My righteous indignation earned me the rank of "too moral to be trusted," and my relationship with Margot was never quite the same. But we still went everywhere together — scout meetings and scout camp, high school and Sunday School, church services, youth fellowship meetings, and even a revival where we both experienced being "saved."

Liz had become our leader by then, taking over when we moved from Brownies to Juniors at the beginning of 4th grade. Once Liz was in charge, we began meeting in the gym of the our church, which was right next door to our elementary school. Our troop was big in those days, probably 40 girls divided into groups of 10, each in their own corner of the gym. I don't remember all the moms who were our assistant leaders. My group was assigned to Liz, so of course she's the one I remember best. We worked on badges, made plans for summer day camp when school got out, and generally had a fun time.

There were songs to learn and games to play and craft projects with practical purpose: a juice can with a glued-on clothespin became a drinking cup; two dishrags sewn together with string became a ditty bag to hold our mess kits; woven newspapers covered with oilcloth became sit-upons to keep our dainty butts dry as we sat cross-legged on the grass. All of these practical projects prepared us for going to Girl Scout Camp.

There were two camps in the Colorado Rockies where I experienced Conference camping with girls from other troops. Flying G Ranch and Camp Tomahawk were both in Pike National Forest, but Flying G was very isolated. The only summer I went there was 1963, the year one of the counselors was raped and killed in her tent, presumably by the resident handyman. (They arrested the wrong man, though. In 2020, the cold case was solved through DNA, but the man who committed the crime has not been seen or heard of since the 1970s.)

It came as no surprise that I wasn't allowed to go back. Camp Tomahawk, on the other hand, was on the same road as Camp Rosalie, our church's private camp, so I went there more often, both for Conference camping and troop camping. We also went troop camping at a National Forest campground between Tomahawk and Rosalie, and at Rosalie itself, since Liz was an active member of our church.

Though I hated sleeping on the ground — trying to sleep, that is — I loved going to camp because it removed me from my family, if only temporarily. There was no brother to fight with, no sister to take care of, no mother to yell at me, and no father to "tuck me in" at night with his roving hands. In fact, I went to scouts every chance I got. I went to all the troop meetings and stayed with the group even when other girls began to drift away. I wanted to belong, to *be* something special, because I wasn't special at home like Ellen or Tom. I didn't have her limitations or his brilliance, so I needed to excel somewhere else.

My mother wouldn't let me join any other organizations for girls in spite of my wheedling. I tried to talk her into Rainbow Girls, Job's Daughters, even Campfire Girls. But she refused to consider the Masonic organizations, in spite of the fact that her father had been a Mason. I thought it was because the formal gowns were too expensive, but it was more likely her awareness that I would never be one of the popular girls and she want to protect me from that heartbreak. When I brought up Campfire Girls, she just rolled her eyes and said, "There's plenty of camping in Girl Scouts; you don't have time for two different clubs." I suspect she meant *she*

didn't have time for me being in two different clubs, and I know now that my parents didn't have the money for two sets of uniforms.

In Junior High our troop met at a church closer to the junior high school, and we acquired a whole new batch of girls. Most of them didn't last long, but the core group from elementary school continued on. We were fortunate to live in the neighborhood which funneled us all to the same school. Those who left for other junior high schools eventually came back when we all arrived at the same high school three years later, but by then there were only 12 of us. We were once again meeting in the basement of our church — this time a whole block from the high school — and Good Old Liz, as we now called Margot's mom, was still our diehard leader. She tried to quit several times, but we girls refused to let her; we were Senior scouts, serious about the scouting program, so serious that we led ourselves, and Liz merely became the official name and signature on the paperwork we sent to Headquarters every year. Whenever the troop threatened to dwindle, we recruited new members to keep up the ranks, and we remained 12 strong until we finally parted company at graduation in 1968.

In college I joined Campus Gold, a new organization formed to keep young women involved in the scouting program and prepare us to become leaders. I accepted the leader role of that group for a short time. Unfortunately, my organizational skills weren't very strong, and once I became involved with Dan, our future together was my only priority. I was ill prepared to lead a club with goals different from my own, in spite of how much I loved scouting, a program which had saved me from many pitfalls when I was growing up.

I maintained my Girl Scout membership after Dan and I were married, and even took on the roll of assistant leader for a troop of 4th graders, but I failed miserably. I thought the girls were more mature than they were and couldn't understand why they'd rather play around than follow my lead. They just weren't interested in earning the same badges I had earned, and I lacked the expertise to help them with the ones they did want to work on. When our son was born, it gave me an easy excuse to walk away after 15 years in the scouting program. Surely I was destined to be a Den Mother instead (though this never actually happened—our boy was simply not interested in Boy Scouts after experiencing a few meetings with a Berkeley troop).

I still have Girl Scouting in my heart. I continue to fantasize about being a troop leader, though realistically I know better. Every year when my DAR chapter prepares to give a scholarship to the top Gold Award Girl Scout in Spokane County, I try to attend the event where we learn about our honoree and her special project. It stirs up my desire to return to the program, to mentor a group of young women, to share what I learned from my beloved experiences as a Scout. As I limp away from such stimulating experiences, I consol myself with the fact that I can still buy the cookies and donate to the program.

When I look back on my years in Scouting, I realize that in 1968, Margot and I thought we were invincible. Girl Scouting had taught us to be superwomen long before the term was coined.

So I shouldn't have been surprised five years later that Margot was woman enough to step in and take my mother's place when my dad was going through mid-life crisis and looking for a younger woman to feather his bed. It was tough having my best friend for a step-mother, and tougher still when she cracked under the pressure and told me I was dead to her — it was the

only way she could deal with her divided loyalties and all the memories crashing around in her head.

2000: The Flames of Me Unbraiding

“The flames of me unbraiding.” This is the image left in my mind, the words that remain from two poems just read aloud. I shiver thinking about the first poem, describing ammonia in a goldfish bowl and crawling into some horrid dark hole under a house. These are the kinds of images that make me shudder with displeasure and distaste. I want to slap the person in the poem who was so thoughtlessly unkind to her sister. Like me. Unkind to my sister. I was mean as could be to Ellen, but never to her pets, not that she ever had goldfish. Never to innocent bystanders. As if Ellen herself were not innocent.

I am going to see Ellen on Thursday. I’ve stopped telling people that I’m going home or that I’m going to see my family. I say, “I’m going to see my sister.” My father thinks I’m crazy, but I don’t care. He doesn’t understand how I really feel about Ellen, how I’ve spent years defending her right to have a life separate from him, separate from our mother. It’s not fair what they’ve done to Ellen all these years, keeping her a child, keeping her dependent upon them.

At least now she is finally dependent on others, on aides and nurses, on hospice workers. But even the hospice workers will not speak to Ellen of her pending death. I asked the social worker when she called me last time. “Have you talked to Ellen about the fact that she is going to die?” No, I was told. They don’t know how much she understands, how much she can hear, how much she can take in, since she cannot give anything back. But I know. I know that she has always understood. It is part of her curse that she can understand but cannot reply. I wonder what she did in her last life to deserve what she got in this one.

“She might have really enjoyed her life,” Dan said the other night when we were talking about my fears, my real reason for going now, before the end of the year. I cannot conceive of my sister enjoying the life she led, cooped up in the house with our mother all those years, no real life of her own beyond what Mom would allow, her primary companion a television, limited social interaction even though Ellen loved other people. What would my mother have done, I wonder, if Ellen had been allowed a life of her own? But there was no way. Mom could not cope with the idea that Ellen might have a boyfriend, might want to date.

“Why don’t you get her a hysterectomy?” I asked once when Mom was ruminating over the possibility that Ellen might be raped, might get pregnant. But our mother could not make such a decision, just as now she cannot decide to let Ellen go.

“Let her go, Mom,” I want to shout at her. “Let her die. She has no life to speak of. She cannot be happy now, wasting away in a nursing home.” But I will not say such things to my mother. Instead I will say them to the hospice workers when I meet with them on Friday. I will tell them that I need my sister to die, because I cannot go on with all this unfinished business any longer. No, I won’t tell them that, even though it is true. If I were given the power and authority to do it, I would put ammonia in Ellen’s fishbowl and make her die. But I cannot. All I can do is play along, leave gentle hints at home and at the nursing home to enable them to help my parents

let Ellen die.

This is why I must go see her now. On January 3rd I have to get my toe fixed, which means a month in a cast, and there is no way I am going to Denver with my foot in a cast. I am afraid, in my deepest place of worrying, that in their subconscious minds, our parents will not let go, will not let the hospice workers do their work, will demand that Ellen continue to be fed, even though she can hardly swallow, that they will do all they can to keep Ellen alive for me, so I can see her again.

So I will go now and get it over with, put in my appearance as the good and loving sister, the dutiful daughter, so that they cannot use the idea of keeping Ellen alive for me. Perhaps I do have such a need, though I cannot imagine how I might. I have been waiting for Ellen to die ever since my dad told me all those years ago that I just needed to be patient because she was going to die before she turned 18. And long ago I stopped being patient.

My sister has outlived her life expectancy by more than 30 years. And I cannot help but think she's done it just to spite me, just to make me miserable and keep me from usurping her place as the youngest child. It surprises me that these old feelings come back after all these years of thinking I was done with it. But the real Ellen was only there for a spark of time, only a moment in my life. Yet my sister is the reason for nearly everything I write.

What was that line that captured me at the beginning? Something about a flame unbraiding? Surely my sister is a flame unbraiding — has unbraided, for it's merely a matter of time until she becomes a flame that has gone out. Perhaps I have to write about her now so she will live on, burning in my stories in all her myriad ways, always the victim who victimized me, my brother, my dad, my mom — even herself. Always the star pushing me out of the spotlight. Even in death — I'm sure of it. Even in death.

1968: House of Cards

I graduated from high school in 1968 at 17. I would not turn 18 until mid-November, but much would still happen between June and Thanksgiving. I already knew, before I began my final round of volunteer work that summer, that I would be heading for Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, come fall.

When my father told me I could go no farther than 600 miles from home to attend college, I dutifully sat down with a map and compass and drew a circle around Denver to mark the boundaries of my limitation. Much later we would discover I had chosen 600 miles as the bird flies, not as the roads lie.

Sioux City lay squarely on that line, and thinking I wanted to get as far from home as possible, I studied it with interest. It was clear to me that I wanted to go to college in a city, that being a big city girl I would not be happy in a small town. This understanding had to do with such wonders as public transportation (for even though I had a driver's license, I had no car nor any hope of one), fast food, and anonymity.

When I learned Pastor Rick, my idol and mentor, had graduated from Morningside, there was no dissuading me. The man I respected and trusted above all others had recommended it to

me. He had met his lovely wife Janice there, and I was nearly as much in awe of her as I was of him. I could not, after all, go to one of the other Methodist Colleges, for Rick had been busy recommending Methodist colleges to all of us in the youth group, and I was determined to go where no one knew me.

Suzie Stockton was going to Dakota Wesleyan, which had been my first choice, and Margot was going to Kansas Wesleyan, which was my second choice. She and I had mutually agreed that we should not go to the same college — we were already inseparable, and even then we recognized that we had to grow up apart if we were to grow up whole. So I applied and was accepted to Morningside, where our youth leader, the assistant minister of our church had gone.

But first there was the summer to get through, and it was not enough that I would have two different weeks at Camp Rosalie. I needed more, so I rounded out my camping experience with two weeks as a junior counselor and two more as assistant cook to make a total of six. I would spend half the summer there, away from my parents, away from forced responsibility for my sister. At last I was breaking away.

The first five weeks at camp were astoundingly ordinary. There were the usual hikes and Bible studies; games of volleyball and capture-the-flag; snipe hunts and tug-of-wars over the mud pond in the meadow. There were crafts to make and songs to sing and nightly campfires around the meadow cross. The weather was superb; it rained every afternoon at 2:47 like clockwork, and by 2:59 the sun was back out and the kiss of moisture was already fading away. Our lives revolved around schedules and meals and trips to the outhouse, with a soft bed and warm sleeping bag waiting each night. The weeks I was cooking were hard, but the work was rewarding as I watched kids snarf down the food we prepared.

The final week I spent at Camp Rosalie remains emblazoned on my mind. This was not an innocent senior high church camp, but something new and mysterious called Sensitivity Training, and I was one of the few handpicked to go. Margot and I were both honored to have been chosen, eager for one last wonderful week at our favorite spot in Colorado before we headed off to our respective colleges and our new lives as freshman women ready to face the world.

My parents had tried to talk me out of going to this elite camp where eight young women and eight young men were going to experience the wonders of a new kind of interactive psychology which would eventually evolve into such programs as Est in 1971, to Mindspring in 1974, and the Life Training through the Kairos Foundation where I nearly ended up working in the 1990s, but after attending their training, I realized that I was unwilling to work for such an organization, however they couched their intentions. Est's stated purpose is "to transform one's ability to experience living so that the situations one had been trying to change or had been putting up with, clear up just in the process of life itself" — a noble ideal, but problematic in its naivete. A lifetime of problems do not simply transform when challenged by unthinking trauma and intimidation; instead they grow worse, unless one is made of such inner steel that the transformation was going to happen anyway.

Of the women who attended, Margot is the only one I remember by name, but that is because we had known each other for nearly our entire short lifetimes, and the others were neither in our church nor our school. They had been hand-picked by another minister with good

intentions. Of the men, I remember the two Johns, John H and John M, both of whom I had crushes on. John H was also a newly graduated senior, and though I knew him better, I loved him less, for he was more like a comfortable old friend which whom I'd grown up, just like Margot.

John M was a different story. He had been the camp director all summer, and I suspect he was recruited at the last minute to balance the ranks of male to female. He too was just entering college in the fall, but he had previously spent four years in the army and was enough older and mature to become the camp heartthrob. For the five previous weeks, I had swooned at being allowed to do his laundry and fold his boxer shorts. Normally the youth minister was the camp heartthrob, but this time the minister was married, so John was the prime target for Cupid's arrows, with his lean, tall frame and his blonde crewcut.

Sensitivity Training was a deadly experience. I worshiped the ground upon which Pastor Rick walked, and he had *chosen* me. Peter had not turned down Jesus — how could I turn down Rick? I did not know that Rick had never been trained to teach these methods to others. Rather, he had attended a session himself, had become enamored of the techniques, and had talked another leader into doing this camp with him. Rick's plan was to straighten out those of us who were particularly trying to him. But how was I to know? He was my minister, my shepherd, my Jesus-in-the-flesh. How was I to know how fallible he was?

To fully understand the impact of my Sensitivity Training experience, I must explain the setting. I had practically grown up at Camp Rosalie. The camp was owned by my local Methodist Church, which I had attended since we moved to Denver when I was 4 and which I had joined by confession of faith at age 11. I began to attend Camp Rosalie as a camper the summer before fifth grade. Prior to that I had been at the facilities a number of times, for family events, for Girl Scout outings, and to ferry my brother back and forth to the camps he attended in those jealous years when he was old enough to go to camp but I was not. I knew the grounds like the back of my hand before I ever attended as an official camper. Once I was in junior high, there were also weekend camps with the youth group in addition to the week-long summer camps.

Located in Pike National Forest in the Rocky Mountains near Bailey, Colorado, Camp Rosalie was a truly unique experience. All other Methodist camps in the Rocky Mountain Conference were owned by the Conference, which is to say by all the churches in the Conference, though none had exclusive privileges. Rosalie was owned exclusively by my local church, which meant in the church-active 50s and 60s when I was growing up, our church had so many programs of its own going on at the camp, there were no opportunities for other churches or outside groups to use it. Camp Rosalie was like an extension of church, a wonderful, exciting extension 60 miles away. I can still feel the thrill of excitement that came with getting into the car to head up familiar US 285 for another taste of Camp Rosalie.

My final week at Camp Rosalie before heading off to college did not hold the kind of thrill for me camp has always held. Instead of hours alone in my own private mountains, we were restricted from spending time alone during Sensitivity Training. When we had to go to the bathroom — or rather the latrine, since to this day there are still only primitive toilets there — we had to take a partner. The women's latrine was a four-seater, three seats in one stall, one seat in

the other. The single stall was reserved for staff. Aside from the demeaning experience of being treated like grade schoolers, it was dreadful never to be alone — not at the toilet, not in the showers, not at meals, not even for prayer and reflection. But Sensitivity Training was not about prayer and reflection; it was about crucifying the ego.

Nor was there any opportunity to roam about in the many wooded areas of camp, not even with a partner. Every moment of our time was regimented. We ate, drank, slept, walked, talked, even urinated at the whim of our leaders. Those of us who went had been chosen because we needed improvement in the eyes of our captors.

This was my first experience with strangers at Camp Rosalie. Previously, my whole camping experience had been with my peers, the kids with whom I attended Sunday School, church and youth group. We had gotten to know each other well during our years together, as many of the original 50 kindergartners were in my graduating class. We knew who we were in relation to each other. I was not popular, but I was accepted. I was not pretty, but I was bright, and my ideas were appreciated. Margot, who was also neither pretty nor popular, was my best friend. She would stand beside me no matter what. We both had been chosen for this charade of group counseling. Why? Did Rick want to drive a wedge between us, or did he want to test the mettle of our friendship? He could not drive us apart. We were more inseparable at Sensitivity Training than we had been previously. It was the only thread which held us to our sanity. We wept in each other's arms when the strain became too great to bear.

Our first terrible lesson was when we were sitting with the group for the first time, going over the rules for the week ahead of us. For some reason, Margot brought up an incident from earlier in the summer in which several whole chickens had been left out of the cooler overnight and had gotten so rank with salmonella that they all had to be thrown into the garbage pit and immediately covered with lye. Rick demanded to know how Margot knew about this, and she replied that I'd written to her about it in a letter. I wrote to Margot every week, since I missed her a lot more than my parents. As I recall, I'd mentioned in my letter what a terrible temper Rick had, a temper I had not seen before. That temper was before me now.

Rick exploded in my face and pointed out to everyone that this was exactly the kind of thing we were not allowed to do during this special week. We could not tell a soul about what we were doing or what anyone else was doing, for that matter. It was going to be one big secret experience between the 18 of us, the 16 participants and the two leaders. There were to be no letters written or sent home; there was to be no journal writing. Everything we processed had to be processed verbally, within the group. That was the first and biggest rule, and I was humiliated by having been made the scapegoat to instruct everyone else.

The second rule was no cameras. Even though we were in God's greatest paradise, we could take no pictures, record no activities or participants. Anyone artistic enough to care was prohibited from sketching the other people, including the wives of the leaders, who were there to feed us. We weren't even allowed to talk to those two ladies, who must have been terribly lonely by the end of the week.

The worst trauma I experience from Sensitivity Training centers around the lock-in, a 24-hour marathon session in which we were forced to remain together as a group in a single cabin, no furniture but wall-to-wall mattresses on the floor, from one morning after breakfast to the

next. Our shoes sat outside the door on the stone porch. Inside we lounged about on the mattresses, each in our own group, until the games began. We were called into a circle and told to choose the person in the group whom we trusted the least. I chose Kelly, one of the strangers invading my sacred space.

I can see her still, short; dark, curly hair to just past the shoulder; perky, rosy face with a perpetual look of shy innocence; slender, perfect figure; in short, she was disgustingly cute. I don't think I mistrusted her so much as I just plain hated her — for being there and for being everything that I was not.

So together we went on a trust walk, taking turns leading our partner who was blindfolded. We walked, first with me leading her and then with her leading me. I took her down the dirt path to the campground just beyond the perimeter of the camp. She exhibited either fear or excitement, I was sure which, as I led her across the narrow bridge over the creek. On the other side she stumbled over roots and stones, but I always caught her. She wasn't so lucky with me. When I stumbled on the path, I caught myself so she would believe that I was really following her lead, that she would not suspect me of what was really going on. Although the bandana was across my eyes, I kept them open the whole time, spying beneath the cloth the clear path I knew as well as I knew my own bedroom at home. Though I was supposed to close my eyes and let her lead me, to trust that she would lead me carefully, I could not close my eyes. I don't think I wanted to trust her.

I had taken Kelly to the campground on the narrow, rutted path along the river, but because she did not know the area like I did, she led me back along the well-worn dirt road. Later in the group, during the debriefing, I learned that not closing my eyes was my failure, not hers. The rest of the group would not allow me to lay blame where I thought the blame belonged — on this invader to my sacred space.

The group was very hard on me. Their judgment penetrated the careful shell I had built around myself over the years and scathed my very being. But this was only the beginning. Locked in a twenty-five by forty-foot cabin, we were made to interact with each other non-verbally. We slow-danced around the room, approaching and retreating, touching, making and holding eye contact. Then the lights were shut off and we groped for each other in the dark, all of us feeling the deep humiliation of potential sexual contact being forced upon us by our inability to see each other.

It is hard to recall this experience without remembering the plethora of confusing emotions that accompanied this unnatural, forced behavior. I was obedient in those days, so I participated even though I was painfully shy, even though I harbored the most frightening sexual secrets and lived in acute terror of someone else finding out. I was still too young to realize that I was a victim, not a perpetrator, of incest. Fear was foremost in my mind during that entire week, that they would somehow plumb the depths of my being and my dirty, sinful past would be laid out for all of them to see and judge. I had already been victimized by their judgment over the trust walk, and I lived in fear of experiencing it again.

I was confused, when, in the next exercise, I was given accolades I didn't think I deserved. We were assigned the task of choosing trees to define ourselves and each other. Then in the circle we debated who was really represented by each type of tree.

“I am a weeping willow,” I declared when it was my turn, “and Margot is an oak tree.”

“Oh, no,” the younger of the Johns broke in. “You have that backwards. You are the oak and Margot is the weeping willow.” Others nodded in agreement. The oak tree was strong and withstood the winds of change, they explained. It was the willow that shaded the lost and tired. I was the strong one, they were telling me. Margot was the compassionate one. I mulled this over as we used crayons and construction paper to draw our trees. I did not see myself as an oak tree until many years later.

It seemed that others did not see the same awful girl I saw when I looked at myself. I was so self-critical, steeped in Old Testament rules and real-life judgment. I saw how others reacted when they saw my sister, how there clearly was something wrong with my family for keeping her. I knew my mother’s mind on every small infraction, both mine and those of others. I was a lost soul, already condemned by the loss of my virginity. My mother’s judgment condemned me daily, but now there was the slightest hint that I might not be as tainted as thought, and I was encouraged by it.

That positivity did not last. Rick asked us to get out our money, but I didn’t have any. Everyone needed to have money to participate in the next exercise, so Rick brought out a 2-pound coffee can which I immediately recognized as the money from the canteen we had run all summer. There was a lot of money in that can, and I challenged Rick’s decision to use the camp’s money for this next exercise. But Rick was very slick. He convinced me not only that it was permissible to use the camp’s money, but it was imperative that we do so.

“You’ve worked hard all summer, Mary Anne,” he told me. “You *deserve* to have this money so you can participate fully in the exercise.” As I succumbed to his logic, he went on to seduce me further. “This is your money. You don’t have to give it back. Whatever money you end up with when we’ve finished the exercise will be yours to keep.” So I dipped into the can for a generous handful.

The exercise was simple. We were instructed to give money to each other. We walked around the room in silence giving and receiving. I gave a little here, a little there, and received much. I noted especially that the two Johns were eager to give and reluctant to receive. I was just the opposite. Now that I had some money of my own, I was loathe to give it up. When time was called, we returned to the circle and counted our money. I don’t remember figures—only generalities—but the results were clear: I had most of the money and the two Johns had none.

We were not allowed to talk about the experience yet. There were two more parts, also conducted in silence. It was not until after the third round that we would sit down and discuss this experience. All we were allowed to say between rounds was how much money we had.

The second round was the opposite of the first. We were not to give money but to take it. And I believe we may have been instructed not to resist when our money was taken. I remember the others holding out their open hands, their money free to be taken, even though they could not give it. At the beginning of the round the others quickly grabbed all my money, as if to tell me, even though they weren’t permitted to comment yet, that I was a bad person for having so much money. But I wanted that money! I had no source of income other than the pathetic \$2 allowance my father gave me. And so I grabbed it back and hid it in my pockets where they couldn’t take it away again. When time was called and the money was counted, the pattern

presented itself once more: I had most of the money and the two Johns had none.

In the third round, our options were not limited—we could either give or take, and once again the outcome was the same. But now we could talk about the experience, and I was verbally assaulted for my greediness. I was not given a chance to explain my family situation—that in spite of our apparent affluence, the opposite was really true. Though we lived in middle class neighborhood, our family was riddled with monetary issues, stemming from the many medical problems plaguing all five of us, and from the outrageous tuition my parents paid for my sister’s private schools. I did not know at the time that my mother was also a compulsive shopper, it being a time when parental problems were hidden from the children. Having lived in this situation for as long as I could remember, I hungered for money of my own the way a starving child hungers for bread.

I knew my behavior was inappropriate, that I was going against the norm and against my Christian teachings by taking and hoarding the money. I was willing to do it, even in the face of extreme criticism, because I wanted my own money so badly. I had worked for that money, I thought, allowing myself to be shamed and ridiculed. I had earned it.

Then came the final blow. Rick held out the empty coffee can and insisted I give the money back. “But you told me I could keep it,” I argued.

“You would not have given yourself fully to the exercise if you had not believed it was your own money,” he told me calmly.

“You lied to me,” I told him. “I shamed myself in front of everyone because you lied to me!” I felt betrayed, broken, angry, hurt, humiliated. Even now the memory of it fills me with pain. In my rage I stood and threw my fistfuls of coins at this man who had betrayed me. I brought down his rage on me because I hit and hurt him. He reared up and roared at me and I backed down, returning the piles of coins to the coffee can, but my relationship with Rick was never again what it had been. Once I had trusted him implicitly, but now I trusted him no more. I lost all respect for him that day as surely as if he had broken my heart. I had been holding on to the money like I was holding on to my own identity. His deception had so misled me that I became the scapegoat for the rest of the week, not just because I was perceived to be so greedy, but because I had responded to betrayal with violence.

It was a week of hell in an environment I considered heavenly. When we came to the end of the week, we were reminded that we could not talk about what we had experienced, that there was a sacred covenant between us and no one outside our group was allowed to breach that wall. Two weeks later I would head off to college, driving across the country with my mother.

I would not last long at college. Fear and failure to fit in pushed me over the edge into a breakdown, recovery from which involved leaving school until the following summer. I entered therapy once again, this time with a far more astute counselor. After six weeks of counseling, I had a full-time job and a goal to get back to school, closer this time at the University of Wyoming, where the real healing finally began as I defied the sacred covenant and told both friends and counselors about the emotional abuse I had suffered in Sensitivity Training.

1995: Chameleon

On a lark I took Ellen out of her day program where she worked at Ingram Book Distributors. Off we went to Ann's house in Fort Collins, where we played cards for hours, ate pizza and wings, and spent the night. The next day we headed up to Laramie where Ann and I had met some twenty-five years before. We hunted out our old haunts at the University before heading up to Vedauwoo where Ann took the best picture ever of Ellen and me. We had ducked under a granite overhang to keep the raindrops off of the camera. We stood there grinning, my arm around Ellen, she in her blue parka and me in my multicolored, quilted coat. I loved that picture so much. I gave copies to all of my cousins for Christmas that year, and to my parents I gave the framed enlargement that now hangs on my living room wall and graces the cover of this book.

That trip to Vedauwoo was the highlight of my week with Ellen. I'd been enlisted to care for her while our parents went off to Germany for a 10-day conference of automobile museum curators, of which my father was one. While he attended meetings and our mother took tours with the other spouses, my sister and I really got to know each other for the first time. I felt a pang of regret for not giving her a chance when we were younger, but here we were now, two women in our early 40s enjoying being sisters, being together and having fun.

I discovered that Ellen was a Chameleon, inspired to participate in whatever was going on around her. Without the example of our parents, who acted as old and decrepit as they were, Ellen became instantly younger and more vibrant, joining me in singing along with the radio in her off-key mumbling voice, echoing my hearty laugh — then teasing me in her limited speech, imitating Mom reprimanding me for having such an uncontrollable, unladylike laugh.

When we went out to eat, I read Ellen the whole menu, letting her make her own decisions. It always angered me that Daddy would order for her, telling her what she was going to eat. Often Ellen would choose the very thing Daddy would have ordered after I read her the menu at those meals out when we were all together, but I think she did it because Daddy was there. Never once on our adventures did she order her usual hamburger and fries or deep fried shrimp with catsup to dunk it in. At Little America in Cheyenne, she wanted strawberry yogurt but was disappointed to find it was fresh, not frozen yogurt. I let her abandon it on the table, something Mom would never have done, and bought her ice cream on the way out. After all those years, Little America still had its 25-cent ice cream cones. I bought one for myself as well, but Ann missed out — she was outside in the parking lot, smoking.

As we walked to the car, I thought about how Mom practically had to beg me to come stay with Ellen so they could take this trip to Germany. One of the sore points in our parents' past was that Daddy had taken Margot on a number of overseas trips during the time he was with her, and he had never been willing to travel with her except for the yearly car trips to visit his parents. It was hard for me to say yes; I insisted I could come only for a week, and she'd have to find someone else to take the first three days.

That week with Ellen was a turning point. Spending quality time with my sister enabled me to let go of my anger towards her, and for the first time in my life I came to understand Ellen was not to blame. It was our parents who had created the circumstances in which Ellen became

the thorn in my side she had been all through our childhood, through all the years after, when Daddy first divorced and then later remarried our mother. Right up until that week with Ellen, she had been a terrible burden to me. Now I was free; my heart opened up and released the forgiveness I had not even know was there.

I thought back on the many times Mom had come to visit us in Laramie and later California, always bringing Ellen with her, because there was no one else to care for her; our father had relinquished that responsibility in favor of his marriage to Margot. When Ellen and Mom were visiting, Ellen always acted like Mom — or else Mom acted like Ellen. I could never decide, but I wanted my intelligent mother, not the one who seemed to become retarded herself when Ellen was around.

Who was the Chameleon? When Daddy was present, Ellen acted like him, bossing everyone around, being arrogant in her delivery of the garbled statements she proclaimed. And now here we were traipsing around eastern Wyoming, having great fun together because she was imitating me instead of one of our parents. I knew, now, if I wanted to spend time with my sister, I had to have her alone.

I thought about my sister's finer qualities, her love of bowling, her exuberance for professional football, and buying treats from the vending machine for her friends at work. She kept her money in ziplock bags, quarters in one, dimes in another, nickels in a third. She had no interest in pennies because they couldn't be used in the vending machines. She was obsessed with her weight and remembered the birthdays of everyone she ever met. But most of all she loved her job at Ingram's, where she pasted labels over the bar codes. It thrilled her to work with books even though she could not read; it connected her to her family of readers.

Two years later when Mom asked me to stay with Ellen again while they went to another curators' conference, this time in England, I jumped at the chance. I couldn't wait to spend another fun week with my sister. Not long after Daddy picked me up at the airport, we all made a second trip to DIA, this time to send our parents off. We dropped them at the door where two wheelchairs awaited to ferry them to their gate.

As we pulled away from the airport, heading west toward the mountains, Ellen's bubbly joy at seeing me suddenly vanished. When I suggested we go bowling, her favorite activity, she didn't respond. It was as though she had fallen into a blank pit in her mind. She responded to commands but was not communicative. She was not motionless, but clearly emotionless. She ate when I put food in her hands but had no initiative to pick it up on her own. When we arrived in Fort Collins, she sat quietly at the table, watching Ann and me talk and play cards. She seemed uninterested in participating in either our games or our laughter. Ellen was no longer a Chameleon, laughing when I laughed, teasing when she could, asking for a Diet Coke or some other treat. She was empty, almost like the fire had gone out and only a spark remained.

Three days later, Ellen came back as suddenly as she'd left, completely unaware she had been gone. Two days after that, she left again and came back only when our parents arrived home. But while they had been gone, I'd done some research at the library and in my mother's files, where I discovered what they had failed to tell me before they left. Ellen was no longer in the early stages of Alzheimer's, which they had also failed to tell me; she had progressed to the place where she no longer knew her memory was gone. When they returned, I railed at my

parents for not telling me what I'd discovered in the course of my research, that Alzheimer's disease is the final stage of Down Syndrome. The research was still new, but clear; every person with Down Syndrome who lived long enough would develop Alzheimer's.¹ In a few short years, my sister would die in a nursing home where she was cared for by people strong enough to lift her and patient enough to spoon pureed food into her mouth and smack her on the back when she choked on it.

I treasure the memories of that first week I spent with Ellen, when she came to life and became the sister I'd always dreamed of having. Though still imperfect, because there was no hope for her tangled tongue and our conversations were very one sided, Ellen was fun to be with. It was the only time in my life I was ever comfortable with her, a gift that clearly stands apart from the rest. The memory of that gift is all that remains, a reminder to treasure all the moments before they are snatched away.

1966: Sex Education

Somewhere along the road to becoming an adolescent, my brother began to buy *Playboy* magazines. He hid them under the bottom shelf of the built-in bookcase in his bedroom, where there was a two-inch space between the shelf and the floor. He kept only a few books on top of the left side of the shelf and a pile of *Boy's Life* magazines on the right. It was easy to slide that stack of magazines off onto the floor, left the edge of the self and slip a *Playboy* in or out.

I had been reading my brother's *Boy's Life* magazines for several years. I especially liked the "Scouts in Action" column, which was drawn in comic book style and featured a dramatic scene in which a quick-thinking Scout saved the day. I still remember clearly the story of the boy who saved his younger sister from bleeding to death when she severed the artery in her wrist as a glass broke while she was washing dishes. I knew that my brother would never do that for me, even though he, too, was a fully trained and qualified Eagle Scout.

It was a hastily replaced *Playboy* that led me to their discovery. One afternoon while digging through the stack of *Boy's Lifes* to look for my favorite issue, I noticed a corner of paper sticking out under the bottom of the shelf. A gentle tug told me that I would have to remove the shelf to discover what it was. Once I'd stacked the Science Fiction paperbacks carefully on the floor and slid the pile of magazines off as well, I raised the wooden shelf. There on the cement floor lay my brother's carefully concealed cache of naughty magazines.

Every possible moment that my brother was away over the next few weeks, I spent reading on the floor of his bedroom. I devoured the nasty cartoons and dirty jokes, staring wide-eyed at the unnaturally endowed young women whose exposed breasts graced the pages. Eventually I discovered the "Playboy Advisor" and read with titillated shock the fantasies and expectations of men who wrote in to brag and ask for advice.

¹This statement is based on the knowledge at the time. It is no longer considered to be true, though many with Down Syndrome do get Alzheimer's at the end of their lives.

Eventually my brother discovered my discovery, and the magazines disappeared from their hiding place. It took a while for me to find them again, stashed between his mattress and box springs, but in the meantime I had found something else.

Our parents were both voracious readers, and we grew up surrounded by books. With the exception of our sister's bedroom, there were books in every room of the house. Having found my brother's special hiding place for *Playboys* was a bookcase, I began to scour the other bookcases. I was mesmerized by the game of seeking the forbidden, and for the first time I began to open my eyes to what stood on the family shelves beside my favorite books.

My first discovery of note was a thick tome of mythology, liberally illustrated with famous paintings of voluptuous nudes with shocking titles like "The Rape of the Loch." I was particularly fascinated by "Leda and the Swan" and even struggled through the strangely worded story in an attempt to understand why the swan in the picture looked at the woman so lecherously and whether the large eggs at her feet had actually come out of her body.

My next discovery almost made me forget about *Playboy*. On the top shelf of the tall bookcase that housed my father's cartoon book collection, I discovered a volume that had its spine turned toward the wall. It was hidden from obvious view by being strategically placed behind the shade of the floor lamp which stood in front of the bookcase. When I carefully extracted the hidden volume, I found that I held an amazing treasure in my hands — *A History of Sex in the Comics, Volume 3, the '30s and '40s*. A large yellow book nearly an inch thick, this gem held more shocking material than I had ever imagined. Every page had short vignettes in black and white line drawings of popular newspaper comics, the characters of which were madly pawing and groping each other. The women had enormous breasts, the men unnaturally large penises. And in nearly every story board, the man's passion was exhaustingly required. It was shocking to see Dagwood using his enormous weapon on Blondie, and Whimpie eating hamburgers while he assaulted the old maid who was cooking them. But none of the characters could compare in size to Popeye, whose rescue of Olive Oil included raping her himself because he was certain that Bluto had not satisfied her. I nearly wore this book out before my father finally caught me putting it away one day. His response was to chuckle lecherously at me. By then I had found the new hiding place for the *Playboys* but they no longer held my interest the way *History of the Comics* did.

The year my brother went away to college, the *Playboys* went into the trash. My father took me along when he drove my brother to Ames, where we left him in front of a towering dormitory. It shocks me now when I realize my father included me in what should have been his final opportunity to have time alone with his only son. But for some reason I was included, ostensibly to keep my dad company on the long trip home, but more likely because the relationship between father and son was too strained for either of them to bear the 700 mile trip alone together.

Instead it was I who had to bear time alone with my father, who took the opportunity to lecture me about the importance of never telling the man I married if I was not a virgin. I squirmed at the thought that my father might know my own sexual secrets, but it seems he was more intent on reliving his own fantasies than discovering mine. At one point he asked me bluntly the question that still makes me cringe when I remember it. As we cruised west through

Kansas on Interstate 70, he glanced over at me and said, “When you were four I caught you playing with yourself, but you had your finger in the wrong hole. Did you ever find the right one?”

I turned every shade of purple imaginable as I tried to shrink into the seat beside him. I stared straight ahead and closed my ears, praying that ignoring his question was a sufficient answer. But he would have none of it.

“Well, did you?” he demanded in that booming voice of his that grabbed me by the heart and shook me with panic until I finally opened my mouth and mewed out the answer he was looking for.

“Yes,” I whispered. Again he responded with that knowing, lecherous chuckle. After that he left me alone. But that night in the motel room I was afraid to fall asleep, my father snoring a few feet away in the other bed. I was afraid of him in a way I had either never realized or long since forgotten. I was a 15-year-old woman, and I shrank with fear that somehow my father knew that I had been sexually active, and because of that imagined knowledge, he would force himself on me. But he did not.

The second day of the trip we encountered a litter of kittens at a garage where we stopped to talk with a mechanic who had a chassis for sale, and for the rest of the trip I was once again Daddy’s darling little girl who could imitate the mews of the kittens and demonstrate their stubby tails with a carefully straightened little finger.

Back home that fall, life without my brother gave me the freedom to use his bedroom whenever I wanted, which meant that I could have girl friends spend the night with me in his big double bed. And that was where my dad found Margot and me the night he handed us a paperback book. Its white and yellow cover with simple black lettering seemed more foreboding than inviting. Unlike most novels, the back was blank; there was no clue to what kind of story a reader might find beneath the cover.

“Read this,” he said gruffly. “You’ll learn something.” Then he slipped away, chuckling in that way that made my skin crawl. That night Margot and I read into the wee hours, shoulder to shoulder in my brother’s big bed, eyes wide with shock, but unable to put the book down as we learned a new vocabulary, words, never to be spoken aloud, that described impossible things that could be done to a woman by a man. We learned that a woman was supposed to love all these shocking things and beg for more.

A few weeks later, I dressed up in green velvet and lace minidress so my father could take me to the Playboy Club to celebrate my 16th birthday. My mother objected but I did not understand why until much later. After dinner I was both thrilled and repulsed by the comedian whose ludicrous stories included much of my newly acquired vocabulary. I remember feeling so proud, that November night in 1966, as the men at the Playboy Club fawned over me, such a tall, pretty young thing with a large bosom and long legs. My father showed me off proudly and turned a deaf ear to my mother’s wrath when we got home.

There was something my father said to me that night that set me on the search for more illicit books to read, some hint he gave that the book he’d handed over that night a few weeks earlier was only one of many. I made short work of finding the barely concealed pornography in his bedside table.

Over the next year and a half, until I too left home for college, I rifled through his drawer on a regular basis when I was home alone, reading Penthouse and Hustler and countless badly written novels. I was jaded at 16, soiled as surely as if I'd been selling my body. Spoiled. Ruined. Certain that I was unworthy of any man. And terrified that someone would find out how thoroughly filthy I was inside.

1971: Betrayal

I loved my father fiercely, and then he betrayed me.

I'd gone off to college twice, the first time coming home with my tail between my legs, half way through my very expensive first semester at Morningside. I was horrifically homesick, struggling with panic attacks brought on by a psychiatrist who promised to dig all the skeletons out of my closet. I felt friendless and alone, having made only two friends in the dorm; one was a brain-case loser like my brother; the other was so emotionally retentive she could only move her bowels once a month during her menstrual cycle.

I'd gone out for Rush with the sororities, but felt so intimidated by the gorgeous, tiny women who were looking at us freshmen as potential pledges. The other freshmen women were far prettier than I was, better dressed; my velvet dress was made with my own hands, but the lace collar refused to stand up as designed, causing me to feel embarrassed and ashamed. They all looked like the girls in *Seventeen* magazine, and though I was from the big city of Denver, I felt like a hick in the sticks. I bailed before I could be blackballed and broken hearted.

I managed to get "in" with Mrs. Maynard, the House Mother, who tried to help me with my sadness by having me drive her from Sioux City to Minnesota to close up her lake house. First she got in trouble with the rental car agency because they had to move heaven and earth to rent her a car that was going to be driven by a 17-year-old, particularly when Mrs. M had no drivers license of her own. When we returned three days later, she got in trouble with the Dean of Women for taking me off campus without her permission, and for making my situation of friendlessness even worse by making me her pet.

Two months earlier, it was Mom who had driven me to Morningside, 800 miles by car when I was only supposed to go 600, but my father hadn't bothered to specify "by road" or "by air," so it was already going to cost more just for the gas for those extra 200 miles, which turned into 800 when Mom went on to Ames with Tom and then turned around and went back. My brother had also chosen Iowa, but he very likely had scholarships, since he actually started college in high school, having taken every math class available. And, being male, he had always been given fewer restrictions.

When I arrived back home at Thanksgiving with nearly all my possessions with me on the bus, Margot met me at the bus station. I hadn't told a soul I was leaving Morningside, only my roommate the brain-case and my anally-retentive friend. They were sworn to secrecy and promised to get Mrs. Maynard to help them ship my trunk back home. Later I had to write Mrs. M a letter of apology for leaving without saying goodbye, but I knew she'd talk me out of it, and I wanted so badly to go home.

Margot was the first person I told. Then we lugged my bags to my father's car, where I was forced to tell him I wasn't going back. He didn't say a word, not then, not ever. Not a word about the lost tuition money, the fees, or the unused room-and-board money he had forked over. It was like, in his mind, Morningside had never happened, and his little girl was back home again.

A few months later I tried again, this time choosing the University of Wyoming, only 125 miles from home, but still somewhat expensive with its out-of-state tuition rates. I picked UW because it was close enough to come home for the weekend and far enough away my mother couldn't call me all the time, thanks to interstate long distance rates. And just to be safe, I started in summer school, where I had a chance to try again without the thousands of students around who would show up in the fall.

I could write volumes about UW, the people I met there, the things I learned, both academic and otherwise. Suffice it to say I had my first serious relationship there, and re-lost my virginity, so to speak. A year later I was on to a new relationship, the right one this time, and we were engaged to be married.

That summer I had moved out of the dorm with my new bestie Ann, where we found ourselves in the thick of a destructive relationship with our overbearing landlady. She believed her role was overseer of the all young women to whom she rented, and she constantly came into our apartment unannounced, telling us what we should and should not be doing. We didn't know what our rights were, and we didn't have the resources to change the locks to keep her out, so we trashed the place and moved out in the middle of the night.

The next day my father and my fiancé Dan arrived to take me back to Denver. Shortly after that, Dan's mother decided he needed to come home for the rest of the summer, because she knew once we married, he wasn't ever going to live with her again. He was her baby, and she wasn't ready to let him go. I was devastated he wasn't going to be just across town at his sister's house, but I dutifully put him on the bus and sent him back to Sheridan for his mother's last hurrah.

The next afternoon I was in the kitchen, talking to my father about Dan's and my upcoming plans. Suddenly he pushed me up against the refrigerator, planted his lips on mine, and forced his tongue into my mouth. I fought him back as much as I could, but I couldn't move his terrible weight off of me. Finally he pulled back and grinned.

"What was that about," I demanded to know, as I wiped my hand across my mouth.

"I just wanted to see what I was going to miss," he oozed, obviously congratulating himself for having caught me off guard one more time.

Not since sixth grade had he come to me unbidden, to massage my back and other parts of me to help me get to sleep. Only in my parents' house did I have insomnia, and it was a revelation to me that as long as I didn't sleep in the same house as my father, I fell asleep blissfully and easily.

Many years later my dad bragged to Margot about this kiss, gloating he'd gotten me when I was too old to report him. But she was already familiar with the many little girls he had violated, including her own cousins, one of whom later committed suicide, so she passed his hateful words on to me.

It was Margot who confirmed for me what I had long suspected and feared, that it was my dashing handsome, generous father who had put the first ideas in my head that sexual play was good and fun, and it was a big secret between us. So I never told my brother about our dad. I simply taught him the things Daddy had taught me, and we went forward from there with our own dark secret.

It was also from Margot I learned about my father's own abuse at the age of three, which he vehemently denied, even though all the evidence was there. His 19-year-old uncle had molested him during a traumatic 6-month kidnaping ordeal before he was finally rescued by his father.

But ultimately, that kiss destroyed everything. I began to hate my father, not just for violating me, but for causing me to abhor kissing. I cannot bear to watch the ever-present scenes on TV or in movies where couples engage in what looks like eating each others' mouths. Even after a half century of marriage, my husband rarely gets to kiss me. This is the curse my father gave me, which I still hope to someday put behind me.