

Best Friends

I don't know exactly when Margot and I became best friends, but by the end of 6th grade, we were pretty much inseparable. It might have been in elementary school, or maybe at church camp or in Girl Scouts.

After my 4th grade love affair with our teacher, Miss Bevaresco, 5th grade was hell. That was the year the adults in charge realized there were just too many of us, and 15 of the 45 in one class were combined with the same number from the other class, creating three 5th grade classes instead of the usual two. Not keen on having a male teacher, I volunteered to be one of the 15 and found myself in Mrs. Jackson's class, though I ended up in Mr. Andrew's class the following year. To make matters worse, my best friend Sheri, who lived around the corner and had been my bosom buddy since kindergarten, moved to suburb so far away, it might as well have been in another state.

Mrs. Jackson had been slated for retirement, but with two classrooms bursting at the seams, she was called back to take the newly created 3rd class. A real taskmaster, she terrified me much of the time, but never more so than when we took tests. I remember a geography test in which we were handed a blank map of the United States and expected to fill in the names of all the states and their capitals. I knew Denver, Colorado, because we lived there, and I knew Columbus, Ohio, because we'd moved from Ohio and most of our relatives were there. I knew the names of the western states, but not their capitals. Florida was the only state east of the Mississippi I was sure of. Needless to say, I failed that test.

Then there were spelling tests. Spelling was not my forte, and I failed miserably on every one of them. Trying to make an impression on me to study harder, Mrs. Jackson kept me after school to write each of the words four times. First I copied them in one column and then had to write them again in three more columns. That was especially difficult because my paper was folded lengthwise, and I kept having to turn back to the first side to see how the words were spelled as I wrote them on the back of the page. Yet for some reason, writing the words each week after school was enough for Mrs. Jackson, and she never tested me on them again.

I hated this task because it caused me to get out of school late, and I almost missed going to horseback riding lessons with my Girl Scout troop. Not that the horseback lessons were any better. It was pretty much a nightmare, since I'd been afraid of the horses to begin with. The first time we went out on the trail and the horses began to trot, I fell off. I don't ride anymore because I've been falling off horses ever since.

I was so happy when 5th grade was over and Mrs. Jackson really did retire. But when I advanced to 6th grade, there was Mr. Andrews again, the only male teacher in our school. Margot assured me I had nothing to worry about. She'd been in his 5th grade class and loved him. As it turned out, he wasn't scary at all once I got to know him. His silver hair belied his age; I'm sure he wasn't more than 40. Of course that's really old when you're only 10. I turned 11 during the first semester and was surprised to learn that I was no longer the youngest in the class. Twins Jimmy and Jenny Collier, who were new that year, were two days younger than me.

I still failed the spelling tests, but Mr. Andrews didn't make me write the words over and over. He just encouraged me to keep trying. I did try, but I couldn't seem to master it. I was

good at the little words—like to, too, and two—but longer words eluded me. At the end of 6th grade I was stunned when Mr. Andrews gave me a C in spelling, even though I hadn't passed a single spelling test all year. Margot encouraged to go talk to him after school on the last day. She went with me so I wouldn't back out at the last minute, insisting I needed to know why I had been passed to 7th grade and moved on to Junior High. I remember this kind, gentle man was sitting down when he talked to me, probably to make sure I wasn't intimidated. I still remember his words.

“You're a very bright girl. You don't need to be held back for this one small thing. I promise you'll learn it eventually.”

I didn't understand it then, but now I do. It turns out I have a memory dysfunction which prevents me from memorizing with the same ease as others. By the time I was in my 30s, I had learned how to spell most of the important words, but first I learned to recognize misspelled words. I learned to find correct spelling in the dictionary, but when I look back on papers I wrote in senior high, I see I was still being marked down for misspellings. These days I am grateful for spell check!

Most of my earliest memories of Margot take place in classrooms or at Girl Scout meetings. It seemed like she was always there, and in Junior High she introduced me to Claire and Betsy, her fellow flautists in the school band. In turn, Claire introduced me to The Beatles, and Betsy introduced me to *The Black Stallion* novels, which I gorged on in her bedroom after school while she did her chores. I can still hear her mother's high pitched voice yelling down the stairs—“Bet-SY!”

It was marvelous having three special friends, and I still think of each of them as my best friends from that time in my life. We went through some interesting times together, most of which I cannot retell without their approval. I can talk about Margot, though, because after college she became my stepmother, and today—if she's still alive—she is in a care center for people with memory loss. Claire lives in the northeast, has more grandkids than I can keep track of, and still hopes to move back to Colorado someday. Betsy still lives in Colorado but had been widowed for several years after a horrific fire took her husband's life; she shares a home with her son's family.

It was awkward going to class reunions because everyone knew how tight Margot and I were. I still got asked about her, but I didn't have any answers. I lost track of her after she sold her house and moved to memory care. Up until that time, she called me periodically, but I worried about how she kept asking me the same questions, like where was I living now, and how old was my son. She didn't seem to recall that I was a grandmother or that I had retired.

When a fellow classmate found a possible lead for where Margot might be living, I was reluctant to make the phone call. I had recently lost another close friend whose death I learned about when I called to talk to him at the nursing home where he had been living. Sometimes I think it's just easier not to know, especially after everything Margot and I went through in the years during and after she was married to my dad.

1992: The Hiding Place

Perhaps it is because there was no place to hide that as a child I learned to hide inside my mind. The child lurks there still, hiding from the present as well as the past.

Why is this part of myself broken? I always ask, even though I know the answer. I am broken because what I grew up with was too terrible to remember. And yet sometimes I do remember. Every now and then some small fragment comes back, and if I share the memory with my dad, he seems threatened, as though he's worried about what I'll remember next. Wicked, wicked man, who taught me that I was a wicked little girl. My last therapist said children do not have the capacity to be wicked.

So where was I to hide? There was no place to hide where I couldn't be found, by my mother when she wanted my help, by my brother when he wanted to torment me, by my father when he wanted — what? I was always frightened of him, big gruff man with a roaring voice. I remember hiding in my bedroom closet, under my mother's dresses, which were too numerous for her own closet. How she must have hated it when I grew old enough to need my own closet space and she had to move her precious seasonal wardrobe to the basement furnace room.

Those bags in the furnace room! I remember tall plastic garment bags, each one big enough to hold half a dozen of my mother's two-piece outfits, hanging from a pipe in a long row, across from the many-armed monster that ratted at night in the radiators upstairs. I doubt that I ever hid in there! That dingy, dark furnace room with the hideous stain on the ceiling was much too terrifying a place for a little girl with so many fears.

And the fruit cellar directly across the wide hallway, where the Christmas ornaments lived in boxes under the stairs — I would never have hidden there either. It too was dank and dreary, and the string on the single bulb in the middle of the room was much too far from the door for this frightened child to dare the darkness long enough to grab the string. Once as a teen, I braved my way to the string, fearing for my bare feet, and then began shrieking hysterically when I encountered a large millipede.

There was the laundry room, but this was my mother's domain, even though there was plenty of tempting space under the built-in counter tops along two walls. My brother's room, right there off the laundry, was a similar problem — no point in hiding out in enemy territory. And the den was inaccessible except through my brother's bedroom closet. We spent much of our time playing together in the den, always getting in trouble for closing the door, which kept in the fumes from the furnace on the other side of the partial wall. From this side the ceiling stain above the furnace looked like a mournful woman's face, still scary, but less overwhelming.

The recreation room had several hiding places, but they were soon too well known to be used for true hiding. I wonder if the contractor who built this house for his own family knew what great hiding places he created when he built the corner storage cubbies on either side of the basement fireplace? How long was I able to squeeze through those narrow doors, surely not more than 8 or 10 inches wide, one on either side of the built-ins, leading to the empty triangular spaces behind and below the bookcase to the left or the TV to the right?

I know my brother and I played frequently in these cubby holes, the one behind the TV being our favorite. I suspect I liked it better because the spaces around the TV let a little light in.

Our mother kept folding tables and chairs in the ones surrounding the built-in bookcase. That was, after all, what the built-in storage was designed for, and our mother hated to use things for other than their intended purposes. I wonder if she went out and bought those folding tables and chairs we grew up with just to be able to use the special storage spaces properly.

There was another great built-in across the room, a three-section bench under the front stairs, which formed a sort of square horseshoe. The seats of the benches lifted up, offering a tempting spot to climb in and hide. But my brother sat on the bench once after I crawled in, and thereafter I was terrified of being trapped. We used the benches mostly for our toys and games, claiming it the biggest built-in toy box on the block. But two of the walls were formed by the poorly sealed outside corners of the house, and water seeped in, making a musty mess of our favorite board games. I can smell them still.

There was more space in that huge basement of my parents' house than in the three-bedroom apartment where I live today. It is no wonder that every place I live seems much too small. Yet every home I live in these days is a hiding place in its entirety, a precious escape from the outside world, only rarely violated by visits from my family.

Cousin Conundrum

I'm sitting on the bench overlooking the ocean, wondering if my sister will join me. I lose track of time on occasion, and it's been a while since I've been up here to see her. The wind is cold and the waves are frothy. The gray of the sky merges with the gray water at the horizon, and I shiver. I think about where I'd really like this bench to be, and I find myself sitting in the sun overlooking Bear Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park. We've been here together before, my sister and I, some time in the distant past. It must have been before I turned nine, because third grade is when I was restricted from PE. Prior to that, I'd been allowed to play like a normal kid, running and jumping and being active. Then the doctor warned my mother that it was dangerous for me to run and play at high altitude because of my enlarged heart, so future trips to Bear Lake found me sitting in the car instead of on a bench overlooking the lake next to the trail.

I realize I'm swinging my legs, and I hear laughter. I turn to see my sister, a thin wisp of a thing, small and gangly, like me. She is swinging her legs as well, mimicking me. She is wearing a red and white sunsuit, and her white Keds® are scuffed and dirty. She points down the hill to her left, and I see the rest of the family occupying a picnic table. Who is with us this time?

Ohio families came one after another to visit after we moved to Colorado. Our mother must have raved in her letters about the cool weather in the mountains when Denver sweltered. Looking closely at the scene below, I see our brother, our mother, a smattering of cousins, only one old enough to drive and old enough to shepherd the younger ones on a trip to the Rockies. They all managed to visit at least once during our childhood, though I was in high school before the youngest was brought by an older sister who brought a 4-year-old of her own. The 10-year-old was there to keep an eye on her 4-year-old niece while the older cousin kept an eye on my father. These two young girls were the only ones who escaped his roving fingers, and my older

cousin was going to make sure it stayed that way.

Ellen silently reminds me we hiked up here together. We had stayed on the path, and only agreed to sit together on the bench because it was right next to the path. If anyone came looking for us, they would see us right there, behaving. Behaving was hugely important when I was in charge of Ellen. There were already so many ways to get in trouble, I couldn't risk making a mistake where Ellen was concerned. Even though I didn't understand why she had to be guarded so closely, I did my job. When she began to climb down from the bench, I reached out and took her hand lest she slip and fall before I climbed down too. I looked longingly at the trail beyond us, wishing it was okay to drop my sister's hand and skip down the path encircling the lake. But Mom had said "no." It was a whole mile around, and the rest of the group didn't want to go. So I led my sister back the way we had come, back to the picnic table laden with cold fried chicken, potato salad, and Kool-Aid®. After lunch I joined my cousins in games while Mom watched Ellen.

The cousins were always a source of comparison in our family. Those seven sisters were stuck together with some kind of invincible glue which continues to keep them close. I became something of a curiosity to them, their only remaining cousin, once Ellen died and my brother walked away. He freaked out when one of them planned a road trip years ago which included a stop at his house with her three youngsters in tow. Tom was appalled anyone would bring children into his life, and he declared the visit would not occur. If she tried to come, he would not open his door. This was after he'd already written off our parents, so now the "cousin door" was closed as well. After Ellen died, there was only me, and I took so completely after my father, there was no obvious connection between us after our parents died. I seemed to lack the traits from that side of the family.

My cousins include me in emails that fly back and forth within the family, so I am informed of birth after birth as their children and grandchildren continue to multiply. It is so hard not to think of them as breeders and rail against their rejection of the planet-killing reality in which I spend my time. I've raged against overpopulation since my youth, certain it is the primary cause of climate change. I've lost track of how many cousins I have. The seven have 17 children between them and, so far as I know, only one of the 17 has yet to reproduce. Although we all started out in the same denomination, their current Christian values don't always coincide with mine. I was taught that we are to be stewards of creation, and that doesn't leave room for the millions of hungry mouths ravaging our planet. I respect the military careers of my cousins' offspring, but that does not alleviate my desire to see swords turned into plowshares.

Thankfully, no gifts were exchanged between us over the years. There were too many of them and too few of us to make it equitable, so I am relieved from coming up with baby presents every time an email announces another baby. Even my mother, who hand-made beaded Christmas stockings for each of the seven, their spouses, and later for each of the 17, put her foot down when the third generation began having babies.

Ellen has not said a word to me this time on the bench, probably a reflection of how old she was when we first shared this bench, as she hadn't yet learned to talk. But the reflections on cousins makes me realize that one or more of those seven girls might have become my best friend had we stayed in Ohio and I'd grown up around them. In that environment, I might have

been more like them and probably would have wanted to have more children myself. As it turned out, my only child was unexpected and unplanned, the result of failed birth control.

The few times we visited Ohio, my mom was always with us. So was Ellen, until she died in 2001. Then it was just me and Mom until I sent her ashes to the cemetery and flew alone for a second memorial service in the old home town. When it was time for the Spokane funeral, I was informed that only a couple of them could attend, since the cost of flying was too high. So I offered to go there instead, and with the help of the cousin closest to me in age, we planned a service at the church our families had belonged to before my folks moved us to Denver. This cousin and her husband are still active in that church.

My memories of the Ohio service are disconcerting. We sang a version of “Amazing Grace” I had never heard before, but which I now know is a modern remake popular on Christian radio. That huge old building held few memories for me, and I did not know any of the older folks who known my mother 50 years before, though some had familiar names. I remember one doddering old lady who stank of urine as her son hurried her out of the chapel. It was such a small audience, the service was held in the chapel instead of the sanctuary, something I had not anticipated. I was also unprepared for the amount the pastor was expected to be given, and since I had not brought my checkbook, I had to borrow cash to be repaid as soon as I could get to an ATM.

After the service, I stayed a few days before driving back to Dayton in a car borrowed from the cousin who lived there. I had flow to Dayton because it was cheaper, and she and I had driven together to the memorial service, after which she had returned home with her husband who was on a different arrival schedule. On my way back to Dayton, I stopped at a monument company to order markers for my parents’ and siblings’ graves. The saleswoman talked me into upright monuments, which I later discovered had been buried in the ground to lie flat, as required in that section of the cemetery.

When I tried to contact the monument company after the discovery, they ignored my letters and failed to return my phone calls. I was miffed because I had originally requested bronze plaques like the ones of my grandparents who where buried in the adjoining plots, but the woman talked me out of them. I have since let that go, but I have never been back to see the markers in person. I probably never will, though I need to arrange to have my brother’s death date added to his side of the stone. I always knew he would be horrified if he knew he would share a marker with our sister, so I never told him. Nor did I tell him he would share a grave with our mother, since our father and sister had already been buried together in the next grave over. At the time of Daddy and Ellen’s burial, it was too costly to open two graves, and the cemetery allowed two urns in each plot, so my mom chose to put them together.

After returning my cousin’s car, she took me to the Dayton airport, where I boarded the flight back to Spokane. Apparently, the whole experience of the disappointing service and leaving my mother’s ashes in Ohio where I could not visit her grave was too much for me. As soon as I was in my seat on the airplane, I began having a panic attack. I hadn’t flown much since 9/11, so I was unprepared for my water bottle being confiscated at the gate. When I asked the flight attendant for a glass of water so I could take an anxiety pill, I was denied. “Not until the flight is in the air and the seatbelt sign has been turned off,” I was told. When I burst into

tears and began raving incoherently, she invited me to get off the plane. I was 2,000 miles from home and had no other means of transportation, so I declined, but I was told I'd better calm down, or else I'd be ejected before we took off.

I was frantic and didn't know what to do. Suddenly there was a hand from behind, offering me a pack of tissues. Then the person next to me began rubbing my arm. Finally, I calmed enough to ask the flight attendant for an ice pack. When she said there were none, I suggested some cubes in a bag. She brought me a leaking barf bag of ice, and I plastered it to my face and neck. The sudden cold shocked me out of my panic, just in time for the flight to take off. I didn't even care about all the melted ice dripping on my shirt.

That was the last time I ever flew. I had a premonition that if I ever tried to fly again, I'd be on the news as a crazy lady who was tackled in the aisle. This was before there were any such stories being reported, which have become increasingly common these days.

I think now about how my sister loved to fly. Just to be going somewhere away from her boring daily routine thrilled her. Even the Christmas after we moved to California, when I selfishly commandeered my mom for a week without my sister, turned out to be an exciting trip for Ellen. With my dad's financial help, she flew to Ohio alone and spent Christmas with our cousins, who loved her far more than I thought possible. They were happy to have her there with them, happy to share their holiday with their youngest cousin, whom they barely knew. Of course, there were several of them to share the load, a relief I never had. And at this point in their lives, they would not have been faced with the childhood resentment of being required to include a dysfunctional sibling in so many events.

I have often thought about how it was possible that they accepted Ellen so readily when Tom and I could not, but I suspect it had to do with those old adages, "absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "familiarity breeds contempt."

Eight years later, I had the opportunity to attend the annual family reunion in Ohio. I still don't fly, but Dan and I took Amtrak to Pittsburgh, where we rented a car and drove to Ohio. It was such a fun and interesting trip, and I delight in reuniting with my cousins after so many years. I was overwhelmed by the size of the family, there being more than 75 people there, all but 4 of us directly descended from my mom's brother. It was an opportunity to realize I'm not so different from the rest of the family after all. Over the years I have become more like my mother than I thought possible, and I found myself grateful for the memories of her shared by my cousins. We would have gone the following year for the next reunion, but the Covid-19 pandemic canceled so many events in 2020 and 2021, and by 2022, the cost had become prohibitive.

Now I enjoy joining my cousins vicariously through the photos of their trips shared on social media, and thanks to finding the right medications to offset my anxiety, I may someday fly again.

The Grands

After we moved to Denver in the summer of '55, our grandparents' Kansas City home was even closer to us than our Ohio home had been. After their first visit to our new house though, they stayed ever after at the home of one of their rich friends in the exclusive Montclair neighborhood. I imagine neither the decor nor my mother's slovenly housekeeping fazed my stoic grandfather, but Grammy was another story. In a few short years we would be old enough to travel to Kansas City, where she could whip us into shape like our mother seemed unable to do. As soon as we each turned eight, we began our annual flights from Denver to spend two weeks with our grandparents.

The summer I was eight marked my first airplane ride. At home I was too excited to eat breakfast, and my mother worried I'd throw up on the plane. The trip to the airport was familiar. We'd gone that way so many times before: north on Colorado Blvd to 32nd, where we turned east toward the airport. But before 32nd we passed the entire length of City Park with its lush lawns and stately trees surrounding the Denver Zoo and the Museum of Natural History, two of my favorite places. Beyond the park was a golf course and then at last came the wide boulevard that crossed Monaco Parkway, where I would stare longingly at the stately two-story brick Victorians along that beautiful tree-lined street. Sometimes, when we were picking up someone who didn't need to see the sights on Colorado Blvd, Daddy would drive down Monaco Parkway so I could drool in earnest.

My mother walked me to the gate and gave me a final reminder to be on my best behavior before turning me over to the stewardess. This pretty lady pinned an official set of Frontier wings on my dress and took me aboard the plane, up the tall movable staircase from the tarmac below. She sat me down next to a handsome young soldier in the window seat. A consummate gentleman, he offered to switch seats with me so I could look out the window. I watched in fascination as the propellers started to turn and the plane began to move. It pulled away from the terminal and moved toward the grid of runways, then revved its engines and streaked down the concrete to launch itself into the sky.

Over the houses we flew, past the mountains receding in the distance as the plane banked away toward the east, toward the land of cornfields and miniature forests and grasshopper-oil wells. I had hoped to see those familiar landmarks from our frequent road trips, but we were much too high. Up in the clouds there was only the soldier and the deck of cards provided by the stewardess and the many glasses of 7-Up she'd supplied me with in case I was queasy. I was happy to drink them all, since I wasn't allowed sodas at home. There followed, of course, the disastrous result of wetting both myself and the upholstered seat because I was too embarrassed to ask the young man to let me out even though the stewardess had told me where the bathroom was.

Although I made the trip every summer, I only remember that first airplane ride and one other trip four years later. That was the year our grandparents told us we could choose our own modes of transportation, and we could keep any money left over from the price of a plane ticket. My brother, aiming for as much spending money as possible, chose the bus. Our parents would not hear of me taking the bus alone at the tender age of 12, but they consented to the train. That

trip sealed my love for train travel, and I regretted that I'd been talked into returning home by car so I could have even more spending money. I huddled in the back of Uncle Byron's Cadillac while he flew down the highway at 80 miles per hour, even in the sections that had not yet been replaced with Interstate. Aunt Nan sat calmly next to him, knitting away as though we weren't hurtling toward death's door. As usual, my imagination was running away from me as I watched the speedometer over my great uncle's shoulder. My parents were more than a little stunned when we showed up two hours earlier than expected.

The trip by train was far more fun than the whole two weeks in Kansas City, even though I'd made fast friends with the girl across the street from my grandparents and always looked forward to seeing her. On the train, I was treated like a magnificent lady by the conductor and the kindly waiters. After 12 hours on the train, I was thrilled to dine alone at a white cloth-covered table where the server laid a linen napkin in my lap before serving an elegant pair of lamb chops with little paper chef-hats on the bones. He inquired if my ice tea was too strong and then brought me another to enjoy while the ice melted in the first. I drank that one too. I knew where all the bathrooms were on the train, and I got a kick out of watching the tracks rush by below whenever I flushed.

Later the waiter sat with me while I ate pie and ice cream and regaled me with stories of his own little girl. I was envisioning her with pale skin and blonde hair like me until I looked again at his dark hands against the white table cloth; suddenly I realized that dark people had dark children, and I was at a loss to know why this had never occurred to me before.

Back in my seat, I journeyed alone for the last two hours. Before dinner I had shared the double seat with a boy my age who had gotten off back at Salinas. I like to pretend he was Margot's good friend Myron, whom she met several years later at Kansas Wesleyan, because I no longer remember the boy's name. We'd spent several hours playing games and talking about our lives. We were both in junior high, learning so much about the world, and beginning to have opinions. I was already heavily steeped in Christianity and was used to lively discussions with my peers. Over a blending of our sack lunches, we solved the problems of our world. Little did we know how much bigger and more complicated our worlds would become. The train station in Kansas City was far less grand than Union Station in Denver, but I was aglow with my wonderful day on the train and failed to notice.

Bits and pieces of the various visits blend together in my mind, but there were regular rituals. We ate breakfast on the patio before it got too hot, and in the evenings, after it cooled a bit, there were fireflies to chase in the yard. One year we shot Roman candles from the patio wall into the tree-lined sky. There were trips to the zoo and trips to The Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, where my grandmother always tried to talk me into sensible school clothes. We visited their wealthy friends, the Joslyns and Edna Coch and others whose names I have forgotten.

Much of this visiting was intended to provide me with the opportunity to practice good manners, to sit at the fancy table with the adults and prove I knew which piece of silverware to use and when to keep my mouth shut. I embarrassed myself terribly once by accepting the offer of a cup of coffee, countering my grandmother's suggestion I was too young to drink coffee with the lie that my mother let me drink it all the time. Some minutes later the lie became apparent when I could not tolerate the bitter taste, no matter how much milk and sugar I added.

In my mind's eye, I can still see nearly every detail of the immaculate four-bedroom house our grandparents had built on the farm they'd owned. They moved from The Big House, as they called the farmhouse they'd lived in before moving to the prime spot in the development the farm was going to become. In the Big House I remember playing with my Slinky, starting in the third floor attic and ending up in the wide entryway as it slunk down the flights of stairs.

Their new home was much less quaint, but the air conditioning was a huge plus. I slept in the Pink Room with its twin beds on opposite walls, its pink and white striped wallpaper and matching striped bedspreads, and the sculptured pink towels in the pink bathroom. Across the hall was the Blue Room, similarly appointed, but the blue had a more mature look, graying, like our grandparents who slept there in their twin beds on opposite sides of the room.

Over on the other side of the house, separated from the front bedrooms by a large living room, formal dining room and country kitchen, were the other two bedrooms. One opened out to a small porch on the side of the house and was my grandmother's sewing room. The other, clothed in mystery because of the constantly closed door, was the room my parents used. My sister slept there too, until she was older, and then she slept on the sofa in the sewing room. Not only was the door to the mystery room closed, the room itself was off limits. I could do as I pleased in the sewing room — within limits, of course — but the door to the other room stayed closed.

One summer when we visited at the same time, my brother and I shared the pink bedroom — until our grandparents realized teenagers of the opposite sex were too old to share a room. Now it was Tom who slept in the mystery room if our parents weren't there, but he reported there was nothing mysterious about it. Grammy kept the door closed to keep it cool, because it wasn't air conditioned like the rest of the house. Tom reported it was just an ordinary bedroom with burgundy drapes and spread. The dark paneling made it seem like a tomb, and Tom liked it just fine.

The last time we were there as a family, Tom slept in the sewing room, and Ellen was sent to the Pink Room to bunk with me. It was the first time I realized our grandparents were more aware of my sensibilities around my sister than our parents were. When I look back now I see our grandparents never favored our sister in any way. In fact, they barely acknowledged her. Grammy's will excluded Ellen as well as me, though Ellen was not at fault like I was. Grammy thought Ellen was proof she'd been right all along about her daughter-in-law. Not only was our mother not good enough for our dad, but she'd produced three perfectly hideous children.

I have no doubt Grammy thought we were hideous. Tom had the cleft palate scars that surgery corrected but could not completely erase, and he was completely socially inept. One look at Ellen said everything — she could have been a poster child for Down Syndrome. And I, who started out a perfect little lithe elf, had turned into an Amazon with a mouth. More than once I listened to the humiliating tale of sticking my tongue out at Grammy when I was three. When she dared to correct me, I told her she couldn't tell me what to do because she wasn't my mother. This was likely the beginning of taking my mother's side against her. I'm not at all surprised she disinherited me.

Sometimes it seems I remember my grandparents' house better than my own childhood home. Except for the two-car garage and our grandfather's office, the entire basement was a

huge single room with a furnace, water heater, and air conditioner partitioned off in the middle, creating a continuous circuit around the basement. The outside walls bore cabinets, cupboards and closets; the east side was devoted to storage, the west to our grandfather's tools and workbench. The concrete floor sweeping around the circle of clean organization was an ideal place to play when it was too hot to go outside. Downstairs laughter could not be heard over the roar of the air conditioner, so the adults visited above while we carried on below, running, laughing, playing jacks or marbles or hopscotch — having fun out from under watchful eyes. When we were older, summoned together as teenagers, we found more dangerous games to play.

In addition to our annual summer trips, there were family trips every time Grampy decided to buy a new car. We would all pile into the car he'd given us last time, and Mom and Daddy took turns driving us the 600 miles east. Once there Daddy would give the car back to Grampy, who turned it over to the dealership when he picked up his new car. Then Grampy would give Daddy his most recent car, and that's the one we drove back home. It was a great deal for Daddy. It was years before he had to buy a car on his own.

The earliest car I remember was the 1948 black Citroën coup we had in Mount Vernon. It sticks in my mind because my brother slammed my hand in the door there in the backyard of our house on Upper Fredricktown Road, where the car was parked facing the peaked-roof garage. Fortunately, the hands of 3-year-olds are flexible and little people heal quickly, in spite of lingering memories of painful details.

The next car I remember was also black, an enormous 1954 Pontiac. Our mother drove us to Ohio and back in that behemoth in the summer of '61. We planned to spend an entire month back on the farm where Mom had grown up. This was after she'd grown tired of the hulking black Citroën rusting in the driveway behind the house. She followed through on her threat and had it unceremoniously towed away. Daddy was furious, and that was as close as we came to ever seeing them fight.

Our Ohio trip was their cooling off time. The best part of the trip was riding on the canvas cot that fitted into the back seat, creating storage underneath and a higher surface for us kids to sit on so we could see out. It was a huge playpen of sorts where we could nap or read or dream as suited our moods. We took turns riding in the front seat with Mom, pouring over the maps and reporting what town was coming up next.

The Pontiac was replaced the following year by a two-tone 1954 Oldsmobile 98. My father and I argued about it regularly. He was certain the car was gray, lighter gray on top, darker on the bottom. But I *knew* it was two-tone green. I had an artist's eye and could see colors my father refused to believe existed.

The last car our grandfather gave us was a red 1963 Pontiac Tempest station wagon. It was low to the ground, narrower than our previous giant coups. We liked it so much Daddy bought a second one, identical except for two things: it was black, and it had a standard transmission. Once my brother was out of the house, I managed to convince my parents to let me borrow the black Pontiac wagon and take it up to Laramie for a week, where I impressed my friends with my cool wheels and wild driving.

Being in Kansas City with the whole family wasn't nearly as fun as being there alone where I was the center of attention. Sometimes the two weeks just dragged by, and it was painful

to listen to my grandmother chastise me, but I loved eating all the candy out of the numerous candy bowls she kept around the house. When the candy was gone I went after the sugar cubes in the diningroom china cupboard, then eavesdropped on her phone conversations as she complained to her friends about what a trial I was.

Grammy criticized me constantly, but I adored Grampy. He was so much more fun than our dad, and he never put his hands on me. He taught me how to make a squirrel trap, but wouldn't let me see him kill the pesky squirrels. He took endless photos of me as I posed in my grandmother's clothes — too dowdy for a prepubescent girl, but they went home in my suitcase anyway. Grampy even taught me how to scramble eggs with a fork, using half-and-half to "sweeten" them.

Every summer trip to Kansas City included a night to Swope Park where we saw live musicals. I remember *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, and *The Music Man*. In spite of the outdoor venue, we dressed up in fancy dresses and our best shoes. Grammy always looked elegant in her gold jewelry and mink wrap — worn even in the heat of summer — her faintly graying blond hair neatly done up in a French roll.

Despite my grandmother's harsh personality, I loved those summer trips. Two weeks away from my sister was heaven. So was two weeks away from my dad. The first time I went, I missed my mom to the point of homesickness, weeping quietly on the extension phone when I heard her voice. Aside from that, I was so grateful to be free from family and indulged by the Grands. I knew how lucky I was to take this trip every year. In fact, in fifth grade, when I for a moment considered running away from home, it was to my grandparents that I planned to go — never mind it was 600 miles away and my only transportation was my bike.

At home with Grammy and Grampy, between the planned activities and the meals, I was free to entertain myself. I poured over the genealogy books on the livingroom shelf, learning about my ancestors who were English before they were American. Rifling through my grandmother's scraps and sewing notions, I chose prime pieces to make into doll clothes. I sat in my grandfather's big wooden office chair, swivelling back and forth while swinging my feet. When I grew too tall for this activity, I took to sitting cross-legged on my bed in the Pink Room, stabbing my pillow with a hat pin as I imagined some horrid punishment designed for a person held naked in the stocks. This was the first of several twisted daydreams I would struggle for years to understand.

I shared that little tidbit about the pillow with my brother that week we started out sharing the Pink Room. We had already invented The Game, in which we dared each other to do certain provocative and inappropriate things to our bodies. Playing doctor had evolved disastrously over the years and we went well beyond boundaries that should have been firmly established. I've often wondered what it was our grandmother discovered that made her move him to the room on the other side of the house. Perhaps she overheard us talking. Or maybe she saw something we didn't intend to be seen. Where was she when we were hanging out in the basement and my crazy brother decided to thread a flexible wire he'd found into his urethra to see how far in it would go?

That was the summer our visits were staggered, instead of each of us going separately, giving our grandmother a break between us. Tom went first, and a week later I followed. We

were there together for a week, and then Tom went home. When I arrived home a week later, my brother was in the hospital with a kidney infection. Years later I put it all together, but at the time it didn't occur to either of us to mention the wire that had gone in such a long way. For two years after his month-long hospital stay, Tom took massive doses of antibiotics and Vitamin C to counteract the damage to his kidney.

The weird thing about playing in the basement was we weren't allowed to use the bathroom in the righthand corner at the entrance to the big storage area. That bathroom was reserved for the "help." The help was "Colored John," a sweet old black man who cleaned the house for Grammy and helped Grampy keep up the yard. I was horrified when I learned he was called "Colored" to distinguish him from my father, even though Daddy was always known as "Johnny" to his parents. This basement bathroom was spotlessly clean, but I learned the hard way it wasn't clean enough for a white girl to place her bottom on the same seat used by a colored man.

At the time, I'd thought it was better than soiling myself trying to get back upstairs, but I was loudly reprimanded. Now I knew the source of Daddy's strange insistence that we not swim in the pool at Cheesman Park where the colored kids supposedly left a residue in the water from their skin that was bad for white skin. It should not have surprised me Grammy refused to speak to my nicely tanned Italian mother-in-law at our wedding; she'd been fooled by Dan's English surname.

Grammy did her best to teach me the proper manners she thought I lacked, not realizing I was just being recalcitrant. I knew perfectly well which forks were used for which dishes, and that under no circumstances was I to put my elbows on the table, put the soup spoon in my mouth instead of sipping from the side, or tuck my napkin into my collar. I was well versed in the rules because my mother was terrified Grammy would disapprove of me; it did no good.

I liked the little girl across the street, but I couldn't understand why Grammy thought so much more highly of her than she did of me. The more Grammy tried to cut me down, the more I pushed back. I stood up to her in the girls' department of Hartzfeld's, there in the exclusive Plaza shopping center, and demanded a miniskirt instead of the pink cashmere sweater she insisted on. I went home with the pricey sweater and purple bruises on my upper arms where she pinched me into silence.

In spite of the harsh lessons, there were also practical lessons that have stuck with me. I learned from Grammy to wash my face with a hot washcloth. Not only does it dissolve the sleep in my eyes, it has done wonders for my complexion over the years. And she taught me a number of little sewing and crafting tricks I would not have learned until years later, because they were things my mother did not know. Grammy taught me to take pride in my gifts, especially my precision in the arts. It was from her I learned not to be afraid of ripping out stitches, as long as I have patience and the right tools.

I visited my grandparents twice as a young adult. I went for my last summer visit when I was 19. I'd graduated two years earlier and hadn't seen my grandparents in a year and a half. As a now more enlightened college student with the big family secret in my back pocket, I was bored out of my mind and even more disgusted with Grammy's religious and political views, now I knew she was an imposter. She took a dim view of a new neighbor who was a Christian

Scientist, and I was incensed on behalf of my new best friend with whom I'd attended church and explored the very bizarre but intriguing *Science and Health* that was a Christian Science mainstay.

Eager to get away from the prejudice and boredom, I strode through the neighborhood, contemplating my grandmother in light of my new knowledge. Her mean personality had taken on a new twist the last time I'd been here. I knew how mean she was to me when my dad wasn't around, but now I saw that when we came as a family, she coddled Daddy like a spoiled child, embarrassing me with, what I now understood, was a twisted relationship.

Mom had been forced to tell me the truth when a telegram had come one Saturday morning after Tom had left home for college. My father slammed around the house in such dangerous ravings, Mom hurried me into my room and warned me to stay there with the door closed until she said it was safe to come out. After what seemed like hours, the front door slammed and Mom came to tell me the coast was clear. I demanded to know what set my father off to the point that he'd left the house in a taxi, suitcase in hand, as I'd seen from my window.

"He's gone back to Ohio to settle his grandfather's affairs."

"What grandfather?" I practically shouted. I knew from all those genealogy books I'd read at Grammy and Grampy's house that all his grandparents were dead. What I didn't know was what had been withheld, and my mother sat me down and told me the story of his real mother, dead just three years after his birth. It was *this* woman's father who had died, actually several years back, but things were settled now, and Daddy was faced with going to Ohio to claim his inheritance and put this nasty matter of forgotten family behind him.

My mother swore me to secrecy as she shared the sordid details of his maternal grandmother kidnaping him and taking him halfway across the country, where it took his father six months to find him. I'm sure I narrowed my eyes when she said, "Daddy was seven when Grampy married Grammy. She was his secretary, and they both agreed that to keep Daddy safe from Amelia's mother kidnaping him again, he needed to have a woman raising him." This was in 1923, when men were deemed incapable of raising children. The scandal both delighted and appalled me. I was thrilled to think this might be another reason to hate my grandmother and horrified at the reality of my father's awful existence as a little boy.

As my anger cooled, I walked the neighborhood, looking at the houses that had grown up in the valley between my grandparents' modern ranch home built into the side of one hill and the old Big House at the top of the opposite hill. The Big House didn't look quite so grand anymore, but the recently installed outdoor pool in the yard was inviting. I further humiliated my grandmother by making friends with the folks who lived in their old house and getting invited to swim in the pool. Apparently these commoners who now owned her old home weren't good enough either.

Six years after that disastrous visit, I returned to Kansas City with my father and my 2-year-old son. By this time, Grampy was in a wheelchair, a helpless old man cut down by sun stroke at a 4th of July picnic two years before. My grandmother approved of my son, mostly because he was well-behaved as well as cute, and she approved of my decision to be sterilized to the point of telling my dad. She allowed me to recite Grampy's famous grace when we sat down to dinner one last time in the formal diningroom, the day nurse hovering behind Grampy like a

valet. A few months later, Daddy put them both in a nursing home, unable to keep up with the ongoing thefts by the “professional” nursing staff.

Two months after that, my grandfather rallied and then died, and Daddy asked me to return to Kansas City one more time. On that trip I ravaged my grandmother’s sewing room, removing every pair of scissors I could stuff into my luggage. I also took all of her buttons and the most interesting of the sewing tools. I wanted the fabric too, but Daddy insisted I concentrate on the silver. I pulled out the pieces he indicated, wrapped them in the pink towels from the pink bathroom and stuffed them into my grandfather’s old leather travel case. That fat bag, emblazoned with his initials, CHMB, held an amazing haul. I brought home an ornate silver pitcher engraved with Aunt Anna’s “McC,” a pair of goblets, several small serving trays, a large punch ladle, and a plethora of small spoons from around the world. The price of silver was climbing rapidly in the fall of 1979, and my dad wanted to make sure we got our money’s worth. The nurses had already taken all of her except for the pieces Daddy had stashed in the attic — accessible only through the well-disguised door in the ceiling above Grammy’s dressing table — so there wasn’t much else left.

Ten months later my grandmother died, and the following summer, Mom and I took a road trip back to Ohio. We stopped in the Mechanicsberg, Ohio, cemetery where my father had buried his parents in the family plot. I was not surprised to see corrosion on the bronze stone bearing my grandmother’s name. It seemed so appropriate after all the years of experiencing her caustic personality. I noticed my dad had not given her any identity other than her name, even though her husband’s marker points out he was a Chemical Engineer. When I ordered stones for my parents and my sister, who are buried in the next graves over, I made sure to give them all identities. My father’s marker followed the lead of his father’s: it reads “Mechanical Engineer.” I identified my mother as “Family Historian.” Ellen’s marker reads “Angel Unawares,” which is my way of telling anyone who might care she had Down Syndrome. I let my brother know I was buying markers and asked if he wanted to be buried there too. Tom chose “Boomer Geek” for his posterity.

My mother chose to be buried with my father’s family rather than 69 miles east with her own parents’ and grandparents. Though she relived her family story in numerous retellings, she’d been without them for so long, she didn’t need the physical closeness. Mom outlived her father by 73 years; she was 19 when he died and 34 at her mother’s passing. We had only known our maternal grandparents through Mom’s stories, and neither of them seemed very real to me.

For myself, I also choose not to be buried with my family of origin. My ashes, which I hope will be mixed together with Dan’s, will go where our son decides. I hope it will be far from Ohio, far from the seat of our family’s history. I like to think I started a new chapter, and Karma won’t keep me chained to the family I’ve left behind.

2014: The Red Chair

I'm sitting in my big gold arm chair listening to my brother rant in stereo. Dan bought me a wireless headset for my phone. I can't decide which is worse — not hearing my brother well enough to make out all the words, or hearing him clearly shouting at me in both ears. Ironically, I'm sitting in the exact spot I was last time he launched into his tirade over our angry father who spent every evening with his newspapers in what Tom refers to as “that goddamn pink chair.”

I am less afraid of my brother than I used to be, so I dare to correct him. “You know,” I tell him, “that chair is sitting exactly two feet to my right. It's Dan's chair now. And it's actually red, not pink.”

“It faded to pink,” he shouts, needing to be right. Just like our father. Just like me.

Although unlike both of them, I've learned to choose my battles. All three of us were cursed with Asberger's syndrome, though thankfully I have a very mild case. Tom, on the other hand, has lived his entire life lacking the very important component of compassion. The only emotion he feels is anger, and he wields it freely. I stare at the red chair and let his words fall away.

When I think of red, I think of my siblings — my brother Tom, our sister Ellen. Red was probably the only thing they had in common — it was their favorite color. I see my brother, essentially a highly functioning autistic who must have been forced at some point to choose.

“These are the colors we can choose from,” his preschool teacher must have told him. “Which one do you like best?”

Tom would have waffled, attempted to get out of having to make this choice which depended on feelings rather than logic. Perhaps she forced him to choose, her early 1950s training directing her decisions. So Tom would have chosen red. Red was more interesting; it had more intense energy. Tom liked intense energy because it reminded him to feel things; he really had to concentrate hard to feel things, and often he didn't remember he was even supposed to feel things. But red was *it*. Red had the most energy of all the colors he'd been shown to choose from, and for some reason it *felt* right. Like it understood him. Like it knew how hot his ideas were, how hard it was to regulate the temperature of his ideas in this world in which he was expected to live. Red really understood.

Our mother fostered Tom's decision by buying a red spread for his bed; she hung matching red drapes in his room. She added assorted red plaid shirts to his closet as he got older. I remember he liked the red covers of our Big Chief tablets and the red scarf on his Scout uniform. His favorite science fiction books all seemed to have red covers. Maybe those were the only ones he liked well enough to keep. In high school he worked sporadically at Bell, Book, and Candle, an occult bookstore that specialized in used books. I think my brother kept them in business.

Now Ellen was also fascinated with the color red. It was big and bold and smacked of laughter. Ellen hadn't heard red laugh yet, but she knew it could. Red was titillating, exciting, unlike anything she remembered from before. It had energy, and it seemed like maybe energy was the thing she lacked. So she sought out red everywhere and pulled it into her secret self. From there the energy filled her until she was able to use it. But something was seriously amiss

in Ellen's world — the messages she got from her mind didn't seem to translate. Her mind said act, but her body said no. Her mind said speak, but her tongue was fused to the sides of her mouth. Her mind told her to use the red energy to find her way, and she found a brother, four years older and infinitely smarter, who also loved the color red. Was it not far more wonderful to love something when your only brother loved it too?

They were as different as night and day, these two lovers of red; so very different that Tom never even realized Ellen also loved red. But both of them noticed all things red, and it strikes me Tom no longer considers the chair to be red, especially since he hasn't seen it in nearly 10 years.

The red chair is especially important, my brother tells me again, because our father exuded rage and frustration as he sat in that chair every evening after dinner. Because Tom was the oldest and male, Daddy lashed out at him more harshly than he did at me. We were both terrified of our father, but Tom often took the brunt of it. Until one day, all of a sudden, according to Tom's version of events, our dad suddenly calmed down and became a new man.

When he told me the story the first time, I took the opportunity to share my version of the events. I don't remember this sudden calm, but I do remember what led up to it. Tom was a senior in high school and I was a sophomore. Two major events happened that fall, but I only told Tom about one of them. I've felt him out about any possible love for our pets he might have had, but it turns out his lack of compassion extends to animals. So I focused on our father's job.

Daddy hated his job. From as early as I can remember, he ranted on and on to Mom about the morons he worked with, the inane assignments, the hateful bosses. He was clearly in the wrong career, but when he started college in the late 1930s, he was more concerned about money than having a job he loved. So he gave up his dream of being an English teacher and studied Mechanical Engineering instead. More than once he shared the story of choosing engineering over English because it paid \$10 a week more. Ten dollars was a lot of money back then, but he paid dearly for his choice with his health and happiness.

The first major event of the year Daddy changed was when he almost died. He had been taking allergy shots for years to counteract the dander of our two cats and one big dog. Finally his doctor said "no more." One more allergy shot would kill him, and so would spending one more night in our house. He moved into a hotel, the animals were all taken to the pound and destroyed, and the house was professionally cleaned. I remember the extreme grief that coincided with this event, but I was the one hit hardest by it. They had been my pets, my only friends — Butterball and Dusty, the 9-year-old yellow tabbies, and Madchen, our 13-year-old boxer — since I was 6 years old. I was devastated.

Perhaps that grief is what kept me from noticing the transformation in our father. But my brother, who lacked compassion for both the animals and the rest of the family, was the one who noticed the change Daddy went through. At long last he was no longer sick every day and every night, struggling to breathe. Instead he could sit comfortably in his red chair, reading his papers and gloating over his new job assignment. It was the job I told my brother about. Tom no longer remembers the weeks our dad spent away from home that year. He spent his weeks high up in the Rockies, heading off to Frisco on Monday mornings, coming home from Rifle on Friday afternoons. Daddy was ecstatic about his work designing a molybdenum separator. Finally he

was using his creativity, inventing an ingenious machine instead of supervising a bunch of daft draftsmen. He even stopped saying his two favorite adages — “If my kid wants to be an engineer, I’ll buy him a train,” and “If my kid wants to be a draftsman, I’ll break all his fingers.” He never broke our fingers, but he prohibited us both from taking drafting in high school; and although I desperately wanted one of my own, he only bought my brother a train. When I went through my dad’s things after he died, I found a handmade book illustrated with original photos documenting the building of the molybdenum separator, and a copy of the patent for the design.

I remember when Daddy retired the minute he was eligible to collect his annuity. He had something new to rant about. He had finally proven himself to his worthless bosses on this hateful job, and now that he was walking away, NOW they were offering him more money to stay — a big raise, a bigger raise, a huge consulting fee. He turned them down; if they wouldn’t pay what he was worth while he’d worked for them all those years, he wasn’t going to take their dirty money now. He was going to indulge in his hobbies and enjoy the money he’d recently inherited from his father. He was going to spend a whole lot more time in the red chair, reading not just the news, but his history books and car magazines and his foreign language dictionaries.

Ultimately, though, I ended up with the red chair, still faded, its seat sprung, but otherwise intact. My cat Pixel is making a valiant effort to destroy that old chair, but things were well-made back in the 40s, so Pixel hasn’t damaged it too badly yet. Before he came to live with us, I thought, “if Tom ever comes to visit, I will be relegated to the red chair. My brother’s legs are even longer than mine, so he will take over my gold throne. Besides, he has too many bad memories to ever want to sit in the red chair himself. He’ll leave that task to me.”

2015: Wicked, Wicked Little Girl

When Ellen was born, everything changed. Our mother was distracted and our father was oddly restless, but eventually things settled into a routine. New babies sleep a lot, and Ellen did, but babies also develop rapidly and Ellen did not. She did not roll over or reach for things as readily as Tom and I had, and eventually Mom got worried. When Daddy revealed what the doctor had said when Ellen was born, which neither of them had bothered to tell her until now, six months later, she became even more distracted. When she wasn’t feeding and changing the perpetual baby, she was on the phone making calls and learning more about Down Syndrome.

Initially Tom was tolerant. He had already had one baby sister dropped in his lap. A second one couldn’t be much worse. But that’s where his thinking first went astray. He wasn’t prepared for the reaction of the first sister to the second one, and his logic couldn’t protect him from my tiny rage. Tom had practice accepting a new sibling, but I did not, and I was not happy about having my place usurped by the new baby. First I was kicked out of my crib. Then, as time passed, I was expected to help. Tom wasn’t expected to help with Ellen like I was, but he was expected to keep me out of our mother’s hair while she fussed with this unchanging baby.

So I learned how to exact revenge. It was probably an accident the first time it happened, but I quickly learned that I could get my brother in trouble for things I did. I would smack my

brother until he hit me back. Then I'd start crying, "Tommy hit me," and he'd get smacked again by one of our parents. This went on until I was in third grade. I finally learned my lesson when my mother came after me with the wooden spoon, punishing us both this time, because I'd ruined my new saddle shoes when I convinced Tom we should walk through the muddy field on the way home from school. I remember being down in the basement, taking off my muddy shoes, laughing out loud as I listened to Mom whaling on my brother up in the kitchen before she came after me. That day Tom finally had his own revenge, but I brought it on myself.

This memory of laughing about getting my brother beaten is one of the few I have in which I am the perpetrator of trouble, but for years both my father and brother accused me of being a wicked child because I'd gotten Tom beaten so many times. I may not remember, but it doesn't surprise me that I was so intrepid early on. I was trying to find my way in the midst of two hopelessly weird siblings. My brother was older and smarter, but he was just stupid when it came to knowing how to get along. Our sister, on the other hand, was stupid on all counts, yet our parents were wrapped around her little fingers. I was lost and confused. It seemed that the only way to call attention to myself was to pretend I was the good girl while my brother took the blame — until I had those red welts on the backs of my own thighs and our previously clueless father finally learned the truth.

Once he caught on to what had been going on — that he'd been punishing my brother for my bad behavior — Daddy drummed it into my head that I was wicked, which I soon learned to equate with evil and worthless. There was no hope for me because I was worse than a sinner. Sinners failed because they missed the target; I failed because I was evil; the devil wasn't just inside of me — I *was* the devil, and my family was condemned to live with me.

When I look back on this now, I realize the source of my sense of worthlessness. It was years before I understood the difference between self-worth and self-esteem. Self-esteem is about the ego, but self-worth is about the soul. My ego had remained intact, but my spirit was broken. I knew I needed to be saved, but plain old Christian salvation wasn't enough. The devil had me by the throat and wouldn't let go.

My brother and I are all that's left now. Our family of origin has departed for another plane of existence, where I suspect our father is doing penance for his own bad behavior, and our mother and sister are cavorting and carrying on while they enjoy unfettered communication.

Thinking back on our childhood, I see Tom was every bit as much a victim as I was. I no longer see him as a cold, calculating wiz kid, but as a helpless little boy who, though his mind was filled up with facts and figures, struggled to understand not just his own feelings but the actions and emotions of those around him. Now we know he had and has Asberger Syndrome, a form of autism in which emotional growth is stunted, and in Tom's case, empathy was a mystery. It must have been very frustrating for him not to understand the language of compassion when he so readily understood everything else.

He still struggles with this inability to read others, gage responses, interpret feelings. This is partly because Tom never learned to identify his own. The only thing he seems to feel is anger, which sometimes manifests as hatred, but more often as rage. Tom sees red when he is angry. The color he loved most as a child haunts him now as he tries to work out his inner demons.

1967: The Denver Drumstick

During my senior year of high school our mother took Ellen and me to dinner at our favorite restaurant, The Denver Drumstick. It was the only place we went out to eat as a family, a cheap place that catered to families with kids. Like most popular food in the 50s and 60s, it was deep fried and served with a flair. Deep fried shrimp, big as the ball of your thumb. Deep fried chicken, as much as you could eat. Deep fried potato strings, the only real potatoes we ever got. At home there were instant mashed potatoes designed to soothe our deep desire for the starchy treat. But the nasty chemical flavors were too much for our sensitive palates; we wanted the real thing, that sugary starchy root, a craving likely linked to our smidgeon of Irish ancestry. Potatoes had been banished from our kitchen by our father's famous allergies.

The Denver Drumstick's delicious deep fried food was served in cardboard boxcars, just like the cars on the O-gage train that ran around the walls of the restaurant on the overhead track just below the ceiling. I loved watching the big black engine pull the colorful red and yellow cars up to the tunnel where it whisked the cars away into another room of the restaurant — the kitchen, the entry, the other two dining rooms. Soon it would reappear from another tunnel in another part of our dining room, quietly click-clacking along until it departed once again. My brother and I debated passionately about whether or not there was more than one train; I was convinced there was only one; Tom, the brainiac, was certain there were two. How he solved this mathematical mystery, he would never say. The Drumstick was the perfect dinner place in our juvenile minds — we were entranced by the train and the food was a far cry from what we ate at home. One of the few things all three of us kids agreed on was we loved The Denver Drumstick, in all its greasy glory.

The chain went out of business sometime in the 70s, but by then our parents had discovered Furr's Cafeteria, their new favorite place. Without my brother and me along to protest it was just like eating in the dorm cafeteria, they enjoyed their frequent outings to indulge in food served on individual-portion sized plates with saran wrap covers. I suppose they deemed this a solution to all their food allergies, but I sometimes wonder if my last memory of The Denver Drumstick was the reason for switching to Furr's.

Ellen and I were both thrilled to be going to The Drumstick. Ellen had loved the deep fried shrimp from her very first bite, and she never failed to announce her intention to order it as soon as we were in the car. Mom liked the shrimp too, but I was partial to the drumsticks. And at the restaurant, there was an endless supply. At home there were only two legs on a chicken, and Ellen got both of them. Tom and I each got a wing and a thigh, while our parents shared the breasts and backs. Even though Tom and I each got a share of the best piece, we were jealous Ellen got what we thought of as our favorite piece. Before Ellen was old enough to eat real food like the rest of us, Tom and I had each gotten a drumstick. Now we got none. Unless we went to The Denver Drumstick, where as strapping teenagers we were allowed four legs apiece. I can't fathom eating four legs now, but in those days, I relished the pleasure of all that wonderful crispy-on-the-outside dark meat.

I think my dad must have been on a business trip that night, or surely he would have been there with us, to make a far bigger scene than my mother dared. He had been working in Frisco

lately, coming home on the weekends to spin tales about the progress of the construction of the enormous molybdenum separator he had designed.

As always when we ate out, I was sitting next to my sister, where I could help her if needed. I had decided long ago that this job was preferable to sitting across from her, watching the food fall back onto her plate. I wish I'd known back then how much trouble she had eating because of her fused tongue. I would have loved her sooner, I think, if she'd had better control of her tongue. But the fact was she ate like a pig because the food just wouldn't stay in her mouth. I justified my adolescent indignation at my sister's behavior by deciding it was right that Mom had to watch Ellen eat for a change.

What was not right was the little girl in the blue dress who had gotten up from a table one row over and one row back, and had come to stand at my sister's elbow to watch her eat. I had overheard the adults at that table criticising my mother for bringing Ellen out in public. The child had merely followed her natural curiosity to learn what the adults were talking about.

I watched my mother as she took in this new humiliation. Ellen turned to the child and grinned, a whole mouthful of shrimp and catsup falling into her lap. The girl took one step back and continued to stare.

"It's not polite to stare," my mother told the child tersely.

"Didn't your parent teach you any manners?" she asked, raising her voice.

"Go back to your table," she told the child in an icy voice, "or I shall call the manager."

It was the little girl's family who called the manager instead, outraged my mother had spoken sharply to their poor sweet child. The manager quietly suggested to Mom that we might be more comfortable sitting at a corner table in the future, out of view of the rest of the offended diners. I'm proud to say we finished our dinner, right through to dessert, which we never ordered, before Mom gathered us up to leave. We never went back, much to my mouth's disappointment, but I like to think that was the beginning of the end for the once hugely popular restaurant chain that folded completely in the 70s. I can still taste the chicken, but it's not nearly as sweet as the thought that the failure of The Denver Drumstick was somehow my mother's revenge.