

## The Neighborhood

Daddy would have been a better provider were it not for our family's plethora of medical problems. Doctor bills ate up extras not already budgeted. Of course, Ellen's very pricy private school was budgeted. It was one of the things that had lured our family to Colorado: Denver's excellent resources for families of children with disabilities were not yet available in Ohio. That, and the dry climate intended to cure Daddy's asthma, were the reasons we left extended family behind and relocated to the Mile High City.

Daddy got a job with a local engineering firm and bought a house nestled near one end of a long residential block. There were 12 houses on each side of the block, separated by a narrow paved alley. This alley was the access to garages and backyards, a conduit through the tiny neighborhood at our end of the block. Our house was four doors from the corner, and across the street was the high school Daddy had always hoped he would attend. At the other end of the block, catacorner across the street, was the large community church in which we grew up. Next door to the church was our elementary school.

Education was all around. Next door on each side of our house lived a high school teacher, both of whom were my instructors. Miss Fisher lived to the north and taught Art. I took her senior art class in my sophomore year by special permission because she was retiring at the end of the year. A year later she died and bequeathed me her art supplies. I still have her calligraphy pen with her name carved into the wooden handle.

Mrs. Keul lived to the south, and I had classes from her all three years of high school. She taught sewing, and from her I learned how to alter patterns to design my own clothes. Mrs. Keul was an excellent teacher, but I was not a great babysitter to her wayward daughter who was five years younger than me. I gave her permission to act like a brat because I didn't want to argue with her, and I didn't really understand my own authority as her temporary parental replacement. There were no classes in those days to teach teens how to be good babysitters. As soon as I went off to college, my charge, a worldly 13-year-old, ran away from home.

Across the street and down at the corner lived Miss Troute, the math teacher, with her ferocious little pugs who barked frantically at the hoards of teenagers walking by. I managed to avoid Miss Troute, whose reputation as a homework taskmaster preceded her. Math was not my strong suite, so I put off geometry 'til my senior year, after she retired.

I don't recall the long road trip west from Ohio, but I do remember the huge truck and big yellow trailer with the green sailing ship on its side. Fifty years later, when we moved to Spokane, I was thrilled when an identical trailer, emblazoned with the name *Mayflower*, pulled up in front of our new house. It was a *déjà vu* moment that took me back to the front yard at 1265, where I watched the big moving van park on our narrow street. The whole neighborhood knew we were moving in because the street was blocked all day.

My dad had found a great house for us. It was in a really nice middle class neighborhood of brick craftsman-style homes, with an occasional two-story thrown in. Built in the late 1910s, the neighborhood was filled with mature trees and manicured lawns, neatly swept sidewalks and happily playing children. The home Daddy chose was less than half a mile from each of the four houses he himself had lived in as a boy in 1933 and 34; Daddy remembered each of the addresses but not the reason they moved four times in a single school year. The Washington Park neighborhood held fond memories for Daddy, and he wanted his own children to love what he had loved.

We all grew up in the house Daddy chose for us, unique in many ways because the contractor who had built the rest of the houses around it built this one for his own family. A foot larger in each direction, our yard was smaller but our rooms were bigger than the same rooms in other houses. We also had two staircases to the basement, one from the livingroom in the front of the house, and one from the kitchen in back. There were beautiful mahogany-beamed ceilings, mahogany bookcases flanking the fireplace, and french doors — stashed in the furnace room while we were young — into the diningroom which sported a built-in china cabinet with mirrored walls and glass doors. The entire upstairs was wall-papered rather than painted, which added to its charm. My sister and I each had a bedroom upstairs, and Tom had his own domain in the basement.

For several years we walked north down the long block and across the street to Washington Park Elementary School, where I started Kindergarten and Tom started second grade. Next we attended Byers Junior High, two miles away, and for three years we each rode the city bus to school. For some reason, the school buses only picked up the rich kids from the Country Club neighborhood northeast of our junior high. Daddy had also gone to Byers, but his parents moved to San Francisco before he started high school. After the Byers years, we headed south to the opposite corner and walked across the street to South High School.

It was a wonderful place to grow up in the 1950s and 60s. I had no less than three regular playmates right there on our end of the block, and across the street was one more. My very odd brother had to go a little farther afield to find friends, but two were only three blocks away, and a third was across the park.

Elaine, who lived directly across the alley, was a year older than me, but our mothers were good friends, so we played together frequently. I borrowed all of her books over the years, devouring her Nancy Drew and Oz books. I also read her *Lives of the Saints* and toyed with becoming a Catholic, much to my father's horror.

Sheri lived in the corner house on Elaine's side of the block, and we were in the same grade. We were best friends until she moved away in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Sometimes our Brownie troop met in her basement, and we'd catch a glimpse of her ancient older brother, a Big Band musician, who was already in college.

In the middle of the block on our side of the street lived Cookie, who was two years younger than me. Cookie's dad had built a huge playhouse in their backyard, with Dutch doors and gingerbread shingles; I was delighted to be her friend so I could play in the sweet little house. Across the street was Gayla-May, also my age, whose older brothers ran wild in the streets with their toy guns and tried frequently to pull down our pants. My mother was quite relieved when that family moved away after a couple of years.

In the fall, along the parkway, Cookie and I raked the leaves into floor plans and played house in the imaginary rooms. In the summer, afternoon rains filled depressions in the vast lawns at Washington Park, two blocks west, creating temporary shallow pools to splash in. I gave up that activity only after I cut my foot badly on broken glass the summer after I graduated high school. In winter the Park's two lakes froze; the three-foot deep lake closest to our house was invitingly dangerous; once I fell through the ice into foot-numbing water up to my knees.

The deep lake on the north end of the park was carefully monitored so when the ice was thick enough, the Zamboni rolled out of the warming house garage and scraped the away the snow for skaters. The only cost was for hot chocolate and the rental of skates, if you weren't lucky enough to have your own. I was lucky my feet stopped growing at size 10 when I was

nine, and I had my own skates ever after.

Not far from the skating lake was the small house once owned by the renowned poet and journalist Eugene Field. The cottage housed our local branch of the public library, and we spent many an afternoon ensconced in its shelves. I think I read every book in the children's section twice before the librarians finally consented to let me explore the rest of the library.

Two blocks north and three short blocks east was the neighborhood shopping area known as Gaylord. Only one block long, shops filled both sides of Gaylord Street. Here we could buy almost anything we needed. Mom would give me a dollar, and I would walk to Anderson's Market and come home with a quart of milk, a loaf of bread and a pound of hamburger, sucking on the piece of hard candy I'd gotten with the penny change.

The market was on the corner east of Nordlund's Conoco where Daddy filled the car for 29 cents a gallon. Down the street from the market were numerous stores. The small shops changed ownership from time to time, but there was always a beauty shop, a barber shop, a bookstore, a five and dime. The big hardware store and the drug store where we had our photos developed never changed. Across the street was the theater where Tom and I spent Saturday mornings watching the things of which nightmares are made. *A Dog Named Buddy* and *The Time Machine* haunted my dreams for years. Eventually the theater closed and reopened as a playhouse where I fell in love with Harvey, the invisible 6-foot-tall rabbit.

The millinery shop, which also featured large in my nightmares — possibly because I had to walk past it to get to and from the theater — was eventually replaced by a pet store. After Mr. Anderson died, Mrs. Anderson gave up the grocery store and took over the five and dime next to the theater. I loved to peruse the aisles and explore all the marvelous miniature rubber toys newly arrived from Occupied Japan. My allowance went so much farther when I was young. When JR's Malt Shop opened next to the pet shop, I lost interest in the five and dime. I had discovered the immense pleasure of enjoying a fountain Coke while watching the cute boys strutting outside.

Daddy clearly knew what a marvelous neighborhood he had chosen for us. We were not disappointed.

### **The Summer Our World Turned Upside Down**

It was the summer of 1973. Dan and I had celebrated our first wedding anniversary and were settled into our little house on the wrong side of town. Both of us were working part time, he in the genetics laboratory where he'd started two years before in a work study job as a lab tech. I was working as a clerk at the public library. Together we were able to scrape by with our \$50 a month house payment and a few groceries to supplement the wild meat his family had given us. My dad was letting me use his Exxon gas card to keep our car filled up and running, and in general we were living the happy life of newlyweds.

Then came the phone call from my mother. She wanted me to come home immediately. My father had walked out on her, telling her he wanted a divorce. I was stunned by the news. The previous November, Margot and I had thrown a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary party for them. Now, except for my new marriage, it seemed like my whole world was falling apart. I made arrangements with my coworkers to take my next few shifts, jumped in the truck Dan's mother had bought us as a wedding present, and drove the 125 miles from Laramie to Denver.

Mom was devastated, shell shocked. I had never seen her so traumatized. But as always, her main concern was Ellen.

“What can I tell her?” she asked me. “*How* can I tell her? She adores her daddy.”

“I’ll handle it, Mom,” I assured her. For some reason I knew better than my parents how to talk to my sister.

I went into Ellen’s bedroom where she was sitting on the edge of her bed watching TV. I sat down beside her and casually asked what she was watching. She pointed to the television and mumbled something indistinct, but I knew she was trying to tell me the name of the soap opera that was playing. *Dark Shadows*. I had never watched it myself, but I knew Ellen loved it, even though she frequently held a scarf in front of the TV when one of the scary characters was on the screen.

Personally, I was disgusted with the whole concept of soap operas. It seemed to me that they tried to emulate real life but failed miserably, drawing ludicrous connections between evil actions and people’s reactions. In my family, no one said outright what they thought about each other. Oh, we undermined each other’s decisions and desires, but we didn’t speak openly about how we felt or what we thought. In the soap operas, it seemed like someone was always blasting someone else. It just seemed so unreal. Plus, their bad behavior couldn’t hold a candle to the nasty things my father did. In my opinion, soaps were just trash.

But an idea came to me as I sat there with my sister, mean nattering from the TV in the background. I turned to my sister and put my hand on her leg to get her attention. She looked over at me, and I started the short conversation which has never left my mind.

“Ellen, do you know what divorce is?”

“Yes.”

“Mamma and Daddy are getting a divorce.”

“Oh.”

“Daddy has moved out. He lives in an apartment by himself now.”

“I visit him?” she queried.

“Sure. We can arrange that.”

“Okay.”

Then she shifted her attention back to her program like I had asked her what she wanted for dinner.

That was my sister. She was so used to going along with what others wanted, she didn’t seem phased by it. Later she would only get to see our dad once a week, but she seemed okay with it. Every Saturday he picked her up and took her to her “Saturday Club” where she went bowling with other young people with intellectual disabilities. Daddy didn’t stay while she bowled, but she didn’t seem to miss him. After bowling he would pick her up and they would head to McDonald’s for lunch. Bowling and hamburgers with her dad. That was thrilling to Ellen after her week in the sheltered workshop, where she did mindless activities like putting beer bottles in paper cartons or stuffing net bags with grapes. At home there was only supper with Mom and a little TV before she went to bed. How she endured years of this drudgery, I can’t even imagine. But I have a very active mind and a restless body, so such a life would be pure torture for me.

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A few weekends later, I went home again. This time I went to see my dad at his new apartment, a furnished one-bedroom in a two-story building not far from where we'd gone to junior high. My brother was there too, sleeping on Daddy's couch so he didn't have to go home and see our sister.

During that visit, we sat with our father at the dining table and discussed the changes he was planning to make to his will. He wanted to make sure we understood that he was committed to helping our mother and sister financially, but when we quizzed him about why he had left, he replied, "I was tired of living with a grown child."

Even though it was his fault for not telling Mom 20 years earlier that Ellen was retarded, allowing her to bond with what he deemed a perpetual baby, he was angry that she still refused to put Ellen in an institution. I'm not sure who he thought he was fooling. Not only did he bear the responsibility for making all of our lives miserable, he failed to take into consideration that in our mother's zealous belief that retarded citizens did not belong in institutions, she was now working for one of several Associations for Retarded Children in the Denver area. Over the next few years she would work for the Denver ARC, the Metropolitan ARC and the Colorado ARC. Eventually she would finish her AA degree and get a better job, as the non-profits did not pay very well.

Beyond blaming our mother, Daddy was not interested in discussing his failed marriage. Instead he wanted to see if he could pit his two "normal" children against each other as we argued over his possessions. Tom and I both wanted the cartoon books. We both wanted the dictionary collection. In the future we would both want the race cars, especially the yellow Tri-Hawk and the red Berkley. Tom got a few of the Engineering books, but in the end he lost out, and I got what was left after Daddy sold the rest of the books, gave away the Berkley, and lost the Tri-Hawk to another museum owner. But that's only because I outlived everyone. I was thrilled when it turned out Mom had packed up the cartoon books and hidden them away, but by the time they came into my possession, there was no place to put them, and they remain in storage to this day — all six cartons of them.

Daddy also goaded us into accepting not only his decision to marry Margot but our need to stand up with him in the wedding ceremony. Even though it was only a few weeks after he had left our mother, he was already planning to marry my best friend. It turned out he couldn't bear to be alone, but he no longer wanted to be with our mother.

Margot explained it by saying she had made a terrible mistake when she went to see our dad first. She too was devastated by our parents' split, because we were like sisters, and she loved my parents as much as — or maybe more than — her own parents. She admitted she'd always had a bit of a crush on my dad, but when she went to comfort him from the failure of his marriage, he seduced her with affection and praise. After that, one thing led to another, and she never had the courage to go visit Mom.

The divorce was final in October, and they were married in December. Our unfortunate summer turned into 17 years of emotional battery and awkward relationships.

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By the time they set the wedding date for December 27<sup>th</sup>, I was pregnant. Margot sent me a package shortly thereafter, containing a vast yardage of royal blue velveteen and a highly inappropriate pattern. I got on the phone and tried to talk her out of it, but she was determined

that this was the dress I was to make and wear.

I had taken numerous sewing classes in high school, so I set about altering the pattern to fit my growing midriff. There was just no way I would be able to comfortably wear a fitted alaine dress without a long-line bra and panty girdle, and I was not going to squish my baby into something like that for a wedding, no matter whose wedding it was. Margot and I may have been best friends for most of our young lives, but the relationship was rapidly deteriorating.

### **Meeting Ellen Through Astrology**

Reading through Ellen's horoscope, I am reminded of all the ways I might have come to know her better, but chose this obscure method instead. I had done quite a bit of typing and editing for a client who was less able to pay than others, and so I accepted a series of Astrological readings from her instead. She provided mine and my husband's and our son's, and she also gave me a detailed horoscope for Ellen.

The carefully rounded printing tells a multitude of stories, but the ones that I find especially interesting are the repetitions of certain words, like 'athletic' and 'competitive,' 'optimistic' and 'insecure,' 'energetic' and 'sincere.' The keyword in my sister's chart is 'acquiescence' and acquiesce she did. She really didn't want to go along with our parents, but she did, though reluctantly. On some level she knew she had no real choice.

Just as the Moon Phase states, she was disseminating. She had a passion for sharing what she found meaningful with others: birthdays, Jesus, her exuberance for football. Money was important to her, but only in coin form, and only if it could be used in a vending machine. She wanted to be a cheerleader more than anything, unless she was distracted by bowling, and then cheerleading was all but forgotten.

She certainly had compassion for animals and any hurt humans, and if the proper task could be found to occupy her, she was industrious to a fault. Her modesty was amusing, as it was so Victorian in the Age of Aquarius.

Ellen had a very strong need to feel self important, and she regularly called attention to herself to foster that feeling. She was overly generous with her money, spending all she had to buy treats for her friends from the vending machines at work.

I'm especially struck by the idea that she would have a hard time letting others see her true personality. Because it was so difficult for her to speak clearly, and also because she was such a chameleon, it was near impossible for others to see what was deeper inside.

The interpretation said she would need to overcome feelings of aloneness to become less dependent on others by developing her own feelings of self worth. I imagine she felt alone much of the time when she was not at her sheltered workshop or Saturday club. She spent hours alone in her bedroom, communing with the TV. Unable to read or converse like the rest of the family, she must have been terribly lonely.

Perhaps the most interesting statement in this horoscope expresses my sister's "willingness to atone for bad Karma," that she had "been destructive to people in former lifetimes and will attract similar people in order . . . to work out this Karma." My brother and I were so bad to Ellen. We treated her shamefully, and she ultimately forgave us.

The list goes on to include several statements about anger, that she was learning to realize it is a waste of time, that she was learning to express it more slowly and gradually, that she

needed to develop patience and find some outlet for emotional outbursts.

And then there is this: she had the opportunity to have an unusual life, that she hated routine. Ellen did have an unusual life, because of her mental limitations, but she became stagnant in the dreary routine our father created for her. I can't imagine how she tolerated the daily cold hot dogs in catsup, the daily canned pears, the constant fights about wearing her coat and gloves when nobody understood she was having intolerable hot flashes. And yet it also said that she had "the self discipline to endure hard times." I think her whole life must have been a series of hard times.

Lastly, the paper says "there is an opportunity for" Ellen "to use her psychic abilities to heal humankind." And in a sense she did. Except for me and my brother, everyone around her loved her for her joyful countenance and her eager hugs. She spread a kind of light in the world that I didn't understand. And although she didn't heal my brother's hard heart, she managed to heal mine in the end.

### **2000: Dreaming Ellen Whole**

November 28, 2000. Today is our parents' original wedding anniversary; they were married the first time 53 years ago, and even though they were divorced for 17 years, they are married again. Ellen's dream came true as she delights in living with two parents once again.

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Last night I met my sister in a dream. She was not as I had seen her 10 days ago, wasting away in the nursing home, so many years younger than the other residents. She was not cloaked in the shroud of Down Syndrome through which I've seen her all these years. She was her true self, free of retardation and physical handicaps, free of the prison in which she has spent her life. She was young and strong, lithe and athletic, her yellow hair cropped short around her long slender face. I sensed that she was not the least bit unhappy about her lack of formal education or about the 47 years she spent living in the body of the sister I hated for so long. She had a quick laugh, as well as a sharp tongue to match her wit. She knew she could use her body to do things other people couldn't, and this pleased her. She was wearing shorts and a sleeveless blouse revealing her muscular limbs and bronze skin. She was pretty, in a boyish sort of way. And she was pleasant to be with, giving me such a feeling of security that I didn't realize how precious it was until we parted.

Something miraculous had happened that was not revealed to me. I saw only the results — my sister had been healed of a terrible life-long condition, and she was now taking care of me. Something had been done to me so that Ellen might be changed, leaving me weak, easily exhausted, frequenting any available bed or sofa or chair to rest at the slightest exertion. I knew only that I had played a major role in her rebirthing.

When I was well enough to leave her care, I held her tightly, my hands wrapped intently about her upper arms, offering emphasis to my words. I was glad that she had broken free at last, I told her, glad that she had been rebirthed into this near-perfect form. I apologized for all the grief I had given her over the years while her true self was hidden behind the veil of retardation. And I said that, in spite of everything, I thought the journey together had been worth it. Her

response did not come to me in words, but I knew she agreed.

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Perhaps this was a prophetic dream. In 2017, I had open heart surgery. I do not remember any encounters with my sister during those months preceding and following the surgery, though I did stop working on my memoir for quite some time afterwards. In that surgery, my pulmonary artery was replaced with a plastic tube, and a collar was put around my pulmonary valve to stem the leaking which has gone on for my entire life. The reason for replacing the artery had been a big deal — thanks to stress and my advancing age, I had created an aneurism for myself which measured 7 centimeters. It was so large my cardiologist couldn't keep the panic out of her voice when she phoned to tell me the results of the tests.

"Your pulmonary artery measures 7 cm!" she said, though I have no idea what that meant. "The biggest one I've ever seen is 6," the doctor continued. "Normal is 3 cm. Six is way too big. Seven is just huge."

I was still trying to map this out in my mind, visualizing the heart I saw on a chart in her office when she said, "I don't want to wait and see if repeating the tests in six months will show any changes. I want you to see a surgeon now." Funny, I thought she was a surgeon. There was an article about her just last month in *The Spokesman-Review*, explaining the new dissolving stents she now prefers to use.

She told me the name of the surgeon, but I was too stunned to write it down or even repeat it back to her. "How does this work?" I asked, unable to come up with a more coherent question.

"His office will call you to schedule the appointment," she replied. When his scheduler called me an hour later, I was both horrified that I had to wait nine days to see him, and terrified that he wanted to see me that soon.

"Shit, shit, shit," I exclaimed to the friend I was talking to when the cardiologist called. "That was my cardiologist. She wants me to see a surgeon." Then I once again dissolved into tears. My inner 3-year-old was terrified, and now, it seemed, I was too.

Every time I set foot in a medical environment as a patient, I fell back into my inner 3-year-old: *I am laying a table in the dark. I was already really scared, but now I am terrified. There had been a lot of noise before the lights went out; now there is silence.*

*I hear a voice and a single light comes on, illuminating the upside down masked face above me. Now I am no longer whimpering — I am crying hysterically. The hands that have been holding me down have not moved. I can still feel them, on my arms and legs, on my shoulders. I cannot move because of all these hands, but I can cry, and my wails grow louder.*

*The man in the mask begins to speak. He is calling for more flashlights. He is telling the hands to hold me still so he can finish. And then he is sweet-talking me, looking into my eyes, trying to quiet me down. At last he cajoles me with the words, "Stop crying and we'll let your mother come in."*

*That doesn't happen. Instead the lights come back on and the machines whirr up to their previous din. The doctor proceeds with his tests, and I am forever destroyed by a hospital power failure and a doctor whom I perceived as lying to me.*

Nineteen years later I was on another operating table in a different hospital with a new doctor, having my second cardiac catheterization. This time the cut was made in my other arm. I



was old enough, mature enough, educated enough to understand exactly what is happening, but I could not control my inner 3-year-old. I went directly to that place of fear and began crying hysterically. Eventually the doctor expressed his disgust at my crying and ended the procedure. Six hours later, when he came to check on me in my hospital room, I was still crying, unable to quiet myself in spite of good news and wracking exhaustion. I couldn't even take it in when he said it was safe for me to have a baby.

There have been other surgeries over the years, but for those I was sedated — less complicated in some ways, except for the part where I'm nearly impossible to wake up afterwards. For some reason the nurses think if I'm talking I'm awake, but it is actually hours later that I finally come back to self-awareness. I usually do not know where I am or what has transpired. It is disconcerting to wake up remembering only the instruction to count backward, not realizing hours or even days have passed.

When my knee was replaced in 2011, I learned that I'd been written up as an uncooperative patient. From my perspective, I didn't even know I was in the hospital until four hours before I was sent home, even though I'd been there for five days. Apparently I came back to myself only after the morphine drip was shut off and the IV removed from my arm. Three days later I was back in the ER, screaming in pain. The painkillers they had given me were useless. The codeine derivatives made me terribly ill, but they didn't even begin to touch my pain. I lost 25 pounds in three weeks and required physical therapy until long after my medical benefits ran out. Ultimately, it took me four-and-a-half years to recover from that brutal surgery.

Now comes this new complication in my life. The twin scars in the bends of my elbows have not told these modern doctors enough about my enlarged heart, so I am forced to endure a series of tests, scans which involve shooting me full of drugs while photographing the workings of my heart. For two days I endure being placed in noisy, claustrophobic machines while a good friend holds my hand.

Finally the tests are over and I think I can get back to my regular life. I peruse the course catalog and map out the classes I will take over the summer. I get brave enough to endure weekly finger pricks without my friend along.

That was the point at which the cardiologist called me and gave me the news.

Following the initial tests and after my third cardiac catheterization, this time in the groin instead of an arm, my doctor told me if I did not calm down, I would not live more than a year or two past the upcoming surgery. What we didn't know at the time was that I have Medical Trauma PTSD, caused by that first cardiac cath when I was three.

Six weeks later, I survived the two-hour surgery though it did not cure my A-fib. The surgeon removed the seven centimeter aneurysm when he replaced my artery. I later learned if the aneurysm had burst, I would have died within five seconds. A week after the surgery I was transferred to the rehab unit of a nursing home where I spent two and a half weeks learning to appreciate the freedom of being bored. I worked jigsaw puzzles, read books I might not otherwise have had time for, and got to know some of the other patients. I marveled at the realities of strokes and amputations and the difficulties of recovering from such traumas. Being forced to slow down gave me the opportunity to reevaluate my life, which became an ongoing process.

When I finally went home, I made a concerted effort not to stress over the chaos around me as our carpets were replaced with bamboo floors and the outside of our house was painted. Both were supposed to be finished while I was in the hospital, but planning construction around

hospitalizations does not work out well.

In less than a year my brother would die, Dan would retire, we would sell our house and downsize, moving from our 3,200-square-foot “mansion” on 1/3 acre to a two-bedroom mobile home on a tiny lot. In the years since, I have come to appreciate the slower pace of life with fewer possessions to care for and a different set of priorities.

Most important to me is my writing group, where I surround myself with other writers who support me while I support them. With their encouragement I have begun putting my work out into the world, not so I can become rich and famous, but because I have stories to tell. I understand at last that life is terminal and my greatest need is to finish the stories I’ve been working on over the years.

When I look back at how I’ve changed in the six years since Open Heart, I see that most of my fears are unfounded, and I have great hope for a future in which I will meet my sister at last on the other side, and the relationship I’ve cultivated with her in my writing will come to fruition when we meet again face to face.

### **2015: Benching Jasmine**

When I head back to the bench the next time, the sky is yellow and the sea has turned to blood. Coming towards me I see my sister, dressed in white, gliding across the water. She rises into the air and stands before me, 10 feet out from the cliff’s edge, hovering.

I recognize the dress. It is the Gunny Sax gown I made for my wedding in 1972 — high waist, pouffe sleeves, white lace daisies covering all. This pretty gown is far more becoming on Ellen than it was on me. I gesture beside me and invite her to sit.

“I don’t want to talk about Jasmine,” I say, before she has a chance to begin. She knows the reason but asks me why anyway. “I don’t want to have to read it to her. I mean, what if you tell me something she doesn’t want to hear?”

Ellen chuckles. “You always assume the worst, don’t you?”

I nod and she goes on. “Well, first you should know that Mom is really happy about your friendship. She always hoped you might become good friends with one of her friends, and now that has finally happened.”

I relax a tiny bit and notice that the sky has changed from lemon to lime.

“What’s wrong with the landscape?” I ask.

“The colors reflect your mood,” Ellen tells me. “The sooner you calm down, the sooner the sky and water will go back to blue.”

I focus on my breathing and watch the blood-red water fade to purple. I consider my anxiety. I want to be open and honest with all my friends, but I fear what Ellen is going to say. I think about my recent trip with Jasmine, remember the little prickly things I chose not to mention, the disappointments that left me with second thoughts. I struggled through it in my journal and was satisfied that much of my frustration was due to my own poor planning, and I accepted blame. But there was something still bothering me, and I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“I really liked Jasmine,” Ellen tells me. “When she lived with us was my favorite time. There was lots of good conversation to listen to while she and Mom got to know all about each other. I learned a lot about Mom’s life before she married Daddy, and about the kinds of things she did when she went to work. I understood that Jasmine worked with money, which I thought

was really exciting, but I couldn't figure out what she did with it. It's funny when I think about it now. She worked with millions, and my whole world was quarters, nickels and dimes. It's no wonder I couldn't follow their money talk. But *really* I liked that they talked without fighting and laughed about silly things, and Mom was so relaxed and comfortable when Jasmine was around. We were a great little three-some. I was really sad when Jasmine moved away.

"It was almost like when Daddy left, but when Daddy left it hurt so much more, because he went to Margot and I was confused by that. She was *your* friend. It wasn't right for him to make her his wife.

"It was awful for me and Mom when he married her. Especially Mom. I don't know how she kept going at first, but maybe that's why I was there, to need her so she would keep going until she healed and moved on. Jasmine made it all better during the rough spots."

"I'm glad she was there for you," I respond, as I watch the sky transform into a gorgeous sunset while the water shifts to a deepening blue.

"There's one more thing," Ellen says.

"What's that?" I ask, as the water suddenly turns black and becomes choppy.

"Ask Jasmine to stop teasing you. You get so upset when she does it because you can't tell when she's joking. You don't realize it until later, when you write or talk about it. Just ask her not to joke with you so you won't be so on edge when you're talking. You've gotten better at telling others. You need to tell Jasmine too. Really. It will make a big difference."

I expel a heavy sigh, laden with angst.

"Come on," Ellen says. "You're the one who's always preaching honesty in relationships. Just be honest."

"It doesn't always go over well when I'm completely honest."

"It's not like you're attacking her," Ellen points out. "You're just being clear that you don't like to be joked with. The way your brain works isn't likely to change, so you need to be clear with people not to tease you. You know it's not anyone's fault that you're so obtuse, that you're so very literal. You just are. So make the best of it, be honest, and let your relationship flourish. It would make Mom and me really happy if you got as close to Jasmine as we did."

I look closely at my sister, once retarded, now beyond wise, and realize she's right. The hardest part of getting to know someone is learning to read their own subtle signs of seriousness — or lack thereof.

I watch my white wedding dress shift into the orange granny dress I nearly wore to bare threads during my freshman year of college, another handmade creation from my sewing machine. I realize that Ellen is teasing me.

"You'll get used to it," she laughs. Then she vanishes, leaving a pile of my old clothes on the bench.

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The following week I told Jasmine about my conversation with Ellen and read to her the essay I wrote about it. I was shocked by how angry Jasmine was, how she insisted she has never teased me, how offended she was that I had even dared to tell her such a thing. She railed at me, demanded the I delete this section from my memoir. I backed off and let it ride for a while.

Finally I told Jasmine I needed a break from our weekly calls, that my health issues were getting in the way of my time to workshop my writing with her. We had already reserved two

hours, one for each of us to read and get feedback from the other. Unfortunately, Jasmine always spend the bulk of her time describing in great detail how she had arrived at what she had written down to share. Then she would read a very short poem, sometimes three or four versions of the poem, or perhaps a paragraph or two. Each time, I realized it would have been unintelligible if she had not set the scene.

The break went on and on, until my health deteriorated even more, and I ended up having open heart surgery. Ellen couldn't predict the future, but I doubt she was surprised when I turned out to have a seven-centimeter aneurism in my pulmonary artery, which I had created for myself with all my stress. I was forced to slow down, and leaving Jasmine out in the cold was part of my solution. I could handle two writing workshops a week, but I didn't have the energy for three.

I think about Jasmine sometimes, wonder how she's doing, what she's writing, whether her marriage has survived. We had become pretty intimate over the time we'd worked together on our writing, perhaps sharing far more than was appropriate. Mom had wanted us to have a relationship, and Jasmine had wanted it too. But I just couldn't carry it on. I've called her once after my open heart surgery, but her tone of voice was so cold, I knew she was finished with me.

### Aftermath

After my sister died, I had my parents all to myself — sort of. My brother was still in the picture, but he was just on the edge of the frame, waiting expectantly for our father to send the monthly check that kept him fed and housed. Whenever our father said anything to me about Tom, Daddy called him “your rotten brother.”

Mom didn't say anything, but she clearly wasn't happy with our father's language. After all, this misfit was her son, her firstborn, and a mother's love trumps all. In later years, as I winced at photos in magazines of babies with cleft palates, she finally told me about how hard it had been to care for him, how every feeding took 45 minutes because it was so hard for him to nurse; and he was such a huge baby — having been nearly 13 pounds at birth — it was hard to hold him for such long periods.

I tried explaining those details to Tom, but people who have never had children just don't seem to get it. He died thinking she never loved him, but in truth it was Tom who never loved her. The seven cleft palate surgeries which separated them so often during his first two years prevented him from bonding properly, and his raging Aspergers complicated things even more. Of all the traits attributed to Aspergers Syndrome<sup>1</sup>, lack of compassion was his strongest.

During those years between 2001, when Ellen died three weeks after 9/11, and 2006 when Daddy finally died too, I got to enjoy my parents without the constant presence of my sister. She had distracted them from paying attention to me, and 50 years later, I was still starving for parental attention. What should have been a bonus was more of a burden, since my father was nearly as needy as Ellen had been. Now that I no longer had to battle my sister for Mom's

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<sup>1</sup>Recently the diagnosis 'Aspergers' was changed to Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD. It is a condition which runs in our family, from my father down through my grandson, but, like the term 'retarded,' I prefer to use the familiar term which I have used for decades instead of whitewashing my writing with political correctness.

attention, I had to battle my father.

A year before Ellen died, Daddy had a head-on collision with a semi in his minivan, and he was never quite the same. When I visited them in Colorado, making the 36-hour trip on Amtrak in order to spend a weekend, he would lie in bed moaning about not being able to sleep at night. For all his logic and education, he couldn't seem to grasp the fact that if he slept during the day, he wasn't going to sleep at night. I sent him articles about sleep remedies and commiserated when I could, but I really had no sympathy for the man. After he said, "I made my bed and now I have to sleep in it," I sympathized even less, knowing he was referring to his bad behavior rather than his inability to sleep. At least he finally regretted what he had done to so many little girls.

I had told my mother what Margot told me, how he bragged to her about what he had done to me. If Mom confronted him about his transgressions, I never knew. But it was clearly not the thing to have said to his second wife, who happened to be his daughter's best friend. I wonder now if that was the beginning of the end of their marriage. My father blamed the divorce on erectile dysfunction and Margot's craziness, just as he had blamed divorcing Mom on her refusal to let Ellen live somewhere besides at home, but I suspect there was a lot more to it in both cases.

Margot wasn't crazy. I knew her too well to believe that. Yet my father insisted that because her uncle had been institutionalized with schizophrenia, Margot was next in line. But then, Daddy was always right, even when he wasn't. Dan quickly learned to back off rather than correct him when his arrogant father-in-law spouted nonsense.

In 2006, my father died. I had gone to Colorado to visit my mom for her 87<sup>th</sup> birthday. By then Daddy was in the nursing home across the street from the cottage where she now lived. Never having fully recovered from his injuries in the accident, he was later diagnosed with Parkinson's. Then, after seeing a different specialist, we learned he actually had Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP) often called 'Parkinsons-not-Parkinsons.' He had the tremors and the instability, but there was much more to this devastating diagnosis.<sup>2</sup>

Now he really did have to sleep in the bed he had made. After falling at home and cracking his hip, Mom couldn't take care of him, big man that he was. He was transferred from the hospital to the nursing home, never to return to the high rise apartment where they had been living. PSP robbed him of his ability to read, the only activity that had ever given him enjoyment, so instead of moaning in his king-size bed at home, he was lying in a small single bed lowered to just above the floor with a thick mat alongside it. This was in case he rolled out of bed, but it also prevented him from getting up. If a person is tall due to long legs, when the knees go it becomes impossible to stand from a low seat without something to push up against. That low bed was practically on the floor, so my father became dependent on the staff to get him to meals and the bathroom.

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<sup>2</sup>According to the Mayo Clinic website, "Progressive supranuclear palsy is an uncommon brain disorder that causes serious problems with walking, balance and eye movements, and later with swallowing. The disorder results from deterioration of cells in areas of your brain that control body movement, coordination, thinking and other important functions. . . . It worsens over time and can lead to life-threatening complications, such as pneumonia and swallowing problems. There's no cure for progressive supranuclear palsy, so treatment focuses on managing the signs and symptoms." (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/progressive-supranuclear-palsy/symptoms-causes/syc-20355659> accessed 04/29/2023)

Four days after Mom's birthday, my father died. I had been talking to my brother on the phone the previous day; Tom told me our dad had said he had to stick around to take care of our mother, that it was his only purpose now that Ellen was gone. So the last time I saw my dad alive, I said to him, "Don't worry about Mamma. I'll take care of her." It turns out that was all he needed to hear so he could let go, and less than 24 hours later he was gone. At his funeral I told stories about him, giving a eulogy that never mentioned his sexual perversions, because my mom was sitting there in the front row, and I didn't want to hurt her further. She had taken him back after his 17-year marriage to Margot, still in love with him and more than willing to forgive his transgressions.

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After my father died, it became pretty obvious that Mom wasn't going to be able to stay in that expensive retirement facility where they had been living. I'd been helping her pay the bills ever since Daddy had gone into the nursing home, and even though she would now get his Social Security instead of her own, we both realized it wasn't nearly enough. The money they had invested from the sale of their house three years earlier had been rapidly depleted by nursing home costs, and soon there would be nothing left. I fretted about what she would do, where she would go. Dan and I looked into getting her a small apartment in the building where we lived, but the only one-bedroom main floor apartment was already occupied. Everything else in our area was outrageously over priced.

Then a job transfer became available to Dan, and we made plans to move to Spokane. When we looked for a house to buy, we did so with the knowledge that my mother was going to live with us, and we needed a place big enough for three independent adults. Mom chipped in the last of her savings to help us come up with a 20% down payment so we could avoid the added expense of mortgage insurance, and 4 weeks after we moved to Spokane, I flew to Denver to hire a moving company and drive Mom to Spokane in her car.

It was easy to fill up our big 4-bedroom house with all the furniture from our 3-bedroom apartment and Mom's 2-bedroom cottage. We hardly had to buy anything. We gave Mom the master bedroom and slept downstairs in the basement mini-master. It was a good arrangement for the four years she lived with us, but her health issues were a constant problem, and her mind was beginning to fail. The morning after my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, I took her to the ER where she died of a massive heart attack. Three minutes later, as I sat weeping beside her, one hand on her shoulder and the other holding her hand, she jerked back to life. I had just uttered the words, "I'm so sorry Mamma. It wasn't supposed to be this way." Sometimes I wonder if I brought her back.

X-rays revealed so much heart damage that there was no way she should be alive, and yet she was. She was given 2 weeks to live and moved into hospice care, first in the hospital and later at Hospice House, where she lived for 2 months, slowly getting better. Finally, they decided to kick her out. I scrambled to find a place for her. I was unwilling to bring her back home, partly due to my irrational fear that if she died in my house, she would haunt me. I found an Adult Family Home out in the country, thinking she would love getting back to her farm roots; but she missed being able to go to church, and it was too far out for her friends to visit.

The other ladies who also lived there were a mixed bag. One was senile, one was autistic, one was paralyzed, and one was crazy. Mom was pleased there were cats, but she was horrified

by all the dogs. The home was run by a family of five, and each family member had their own dog. I hadn't know about all the dogs when I visited initially. On that day only 2 dogs were at home — the rest of the pack was away with their various people.

I visited Mom as often as I could, making the 35-mile round trip several times a week. Each time I was disappointed by her lack of progress after recovering so well at Hospice House. Gradually I began to pull away, and finally gave myself permission to take a trip. On the train on the way to Oregon I got the call that Mom had been hospitalized with pneumonia. I fretted over whether I could continue with my trip, but decided I'd paid enough dues over the last few years to have a little fun and see some of my friends. She was out of the hospital by the time I got home, but soon after was readmitted from another bout of pneumonia. Then, after going back to the adult family home for a mere two weeks, she was back in the hospital a third time.

This time she died. I was both devastated and grateful. I was free at last. I had done my duty as the good daughter and thought I was now truly free to live my own life. It lasted just over 4 years.

\* \* \*

After Mom died, I felt like I could finally get on with my life. I was nearing 61 and, because of my own health issues, had been forced into early retirement from a job I loved. After grieving the loss of my job, I got more involved in DAR and volunteered more at the church Mom and I had joined. I took writing classes through the community college and eventually started my own writing group. I traveled some and went to workshops and creative classes. I was enjoying myself so much, I convinced my doctor to take me off the anti-depressants my therapist had recommended. Then I quit going to therapy.

In 2015, I began getting phone calls from Milo, my brother's best friend. Milo had contracted Tom, a math whiz, to proof check the answer key for each of the economics textbooks he'd written in his publish-or-parish professorship. Unable to contact Tom for several months, and alarmed by uncashed payment checks, Milo finally tracked me down. Because I was Tom's only living blood relative, I was able to get more information from the various agencies in San Antonio than Milo, and eventually I learned my brother was in the rehab unit of a nursing home. He'd been there twice before, and each time he was sent home, he failed to thrive. Each time, after a few months, he ended up back in the hospital, delirious and wasting away.

In January of 2016, just as Dan was starting yet another new job so we could keep making payments on our huge house, Milo handed my brother over to me at the Spokane airport. We put Tom in the master bedroom since we were still sleeping downstairs, and I began another stint of caregiving.

That summer I signed up for a water exercise class at an outdoor pool in west Spokane. The pool was in a friendly retirement community of well-kept mobile homes. I had never seen a place quite like it, having been indoctrinated with the stereotype of "trailer trash." When one of the residents told me several homes in the park were for sale, I realized I had found a possible solution to having my brother live in our home. It had been an endless nightmare of trying to train him how to live with other people — I got after him for not wearing pants, for interrupting conversations, for denying his deafness and a myriad of other issues. He ended up taking meals in his bedroom because he was no good at table manners.

Tom had previously lived in a mobile home in Texas, so the concept was familiar to him.

After checking the listings of homes for sale in the park, I asked Tom what he could afford. Unbeknownst to me, he had not been paying his bills in Texas and had \$35,000 in the bank from unspent Social Security. He thought he could spare ten grand because he believed he really did need to pay those bills. I drove Tom over to Sans Souci where we met with a realtor and looked at a few of the homes, including one listed at \$20,000. I told my brother I'd talk to Dan about whether we could afford to split the cost with him. I knew that with his bad credit, Tom wouldn't be able to get a loan.

"Do you think we could come up with \$10,000 to help my brother buy a mobile home?" I asked at dinner that night.

Dan looked dumbfounded for only a moment before blurting, "I'd pay \$10,000 to get your brother out of my house!"

A month later I moved Tom into the empty 2-bedroom mobile home I'd spent several days cleaning with the help of a friend.

He lasted a year and a half. Now I was driving a 20-mile round trip to take my brother to various medical appointments and try to keep him on track with taking his medications. I couldn't get him to unpack his boxes, even after I moved several of them into the livingroom where he would see them. He lived in his recliner, poised between the livingroom and dining room where he could look out at the nearby trees and the hills across the river. When it got too dark to see out, he went to the small bedroom where we'd set up his bed. This big strapping man slept with the lights on because he was afraid of the dark.

Nine months after getting Tom settled in his own place, I ended up in the hospital myself. Open heart surgery, caused by primarily by stress, resulted in my own stay in rehab, and I had to hire caregivers to keep track of my brother. They were supposed to clean his house and make sure he ate, but the cost quickly grew too high. The bath aid he'd cooperated with previously could no longer convince Tom to get into the shower. Finally, after I'd been out of the hospital for nine months, the agency called to say Tom was not answering the door for the caregiver, and they couldn't reach him by phone.

I dropped everything and hit the road. I found my brother unresponsive in his bed. Back to the hospital he went, despite arguing incoherently with the ambulance attendants. From there it was back to rehab, the same facility where I'd spent after my surgery. Just as he was about to be released, Tom relapsed suddenly and was moved from the rehab unit to the nursing home wing. Two days later, he was dead. He'd probably had a couple of heart attacks, they told me. I donated his body to research, but they never told me his cause of death.

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After my brother died, I decided against having a funeral. *Nobody in Spokane knew him, so who was going to come?* I asked myself. *Why make the effort?* I certainly wasn't going to write a eulogy for him as I had for each of our parents. Some of the church members might have attended for my sake, but the pastor, who had been there for 17 years, announced in the morning service that he was leaving the ministry; my brother died that afternoon. The congregation was lost in its own grief, and I was left to face my grief alone.

The amount of grief I experienced was so surprising. I hadn't been all that fond of my brother. He was, in fact, a big pain in the ass. I was so relieved to not have to be responsible for him any longer.



By now I was in a water exercise class at a different pool where I had made some new friends. One of them happened to be a retired psychologist. I wasn't aware of her profession until I told her about my brother's death.

"I don't understand why I'm so upset by it," I revealed.

"It's because he was the last of your nuclear family," she told me. "You are grieving your whole family, not just your brother. You no longer have anyone with whom you shared your childhood."

Somehow, knowing that helped me get through the surprising tears that came at the oddest moments. That knowledge also gave me permission to write my story more openly. There is no one left to judge me beyond the cousins of my extended family. That's still a big hurdle, because I have to be careful what I say about my mother. Apparently she was a saint in their eyes, but I know better. My brother and I used to call her a martyr, thinking it was a derogatory term. Mom was a good person, but she was just as fallible as the rest of us, and she made her share of mistakes. I know, because she apologized to me for the ones which affected me.

So that's where it stands. I am the last of my family. I'm the only one left to deal with all the paper the rest of them left behind. I could do without that task, but in spite of everything that happened, in spite of all the grief and pain and hurt of being the good daughter — the only fully functional child my parents had — in some ways it's an honor to be left with all this history to curate.

### **"Who is My Sister?"**

*I preached this sermon at Sycamore Congregational Church UCC  
El Cerrito, California on August 29, 1993*

C.T. asked me to tell a joke in my sermon today. I wrestled and wrestled with how I could add a funny side to my story. But this topic is no laughing matter for me. In fact, it is so serious, I hope it will not distress or depress you as I share it. I believe sharing my personal testimony is an integral part of preaching. I have had many experiences in my life in which God has stepped out of the oblivion and touched me. I have many stories to tell which would awe you or excite you about the reality of God in my life and in the world around me. Some are humorous and some are touching. But this is the story of my deepest struggle. This story is at the heart of who I am. This is about the struggle I have not yet won.

I am the middle child and the eldest daughter. When my sister was born nine days before my second birthday, everything in my life changed. The world as I knew it was turned upside down. It wasn't just a matter of my no longer being the baby in the family. My sister Ellen was born with Downs Syndrome. Into my life came a sister who, because of her mental retardation, was viewed as a perpetual child. My sister was an abomination to me.

Who is my sister? I have asked myself this question for so many years, I've forgotten how long ago it got started. But now that we are 40 and 42, I realized I do not know my sister very well. I spent too many years hating her, blaming her for the absence of a normal family life. You see, I grew up in what today is called a "dysfunctional family." And even though I spent many years in therapy with several different therapists, only recently have I come to a place

where I no longer hate my sister, no longer blame her for the difficult circumstances of our childhood.

How did that happen? How did I come to stop hating my sister and move to a place of wanting to get to know her better, wanting to know who she is? Ah! I see I have to give away the punchline again! It was through prayer. When therapy didn't help, when all the ranting and raving and rituals of purging failed, I finally gave up and asked God for help. "Take this hatred from me," I prayed. I asked in mortal fear, because I was afraid that if the hatred was lifted, it would be replaced by love, and I wasn't sure I wanted that. But God is gracious and answers prayer gently. Now that the hatred is gone, I am in the place of *learning* to love.

You probably noticed the Scripture readings today were all about brothers. That's because there aren't too many sister stories in the Bible, it having been written at a time when women were not recognized as being as important as we now know they are.

I have a brother too, so when I was growing up, it was easy for me to pretend the Bible stories about brothers didn't apply to relationships between sisters. I didn't hate my brother. In fact, we joined into a pact of mutual hatred against our sister which he maintains to this day. I am fortunate I saw the need to move beyond that damaging experience of being consumed by hatred.

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After the creation story, the story of Cain and Abel<sup>3</sup> is the second major story in the chronology of the Bible. Even though I learned the story as a child, it never dawned on me until just this week, when I was preparing to give this sermon, how much it applies to me. God was playing favorites with his beloved children, just as my parents played favorites with us. Cain was angry and jealous that his brother was the favored child, and in a fit of rage, Cain killed Abel.

When I was four years old, my anger and jealousy of Ellen and the special attention she received from our parents drove me into fits of rage. Mom and Dad thought they were just bids for attention. But I know what they really were. In a fit of rage one day I pushed my 2-year-old

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 4:1-16: 1 Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." 2 Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." 8 Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to (Genesis 4:1-6 continued) me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." 13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! 14 Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." 15 Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

sister down the basement stairs. To this day, my parents marvel at the time Ellen went down the basement stairs in her walker. And they flatly deny that I had anything at all to do with the event. But I remember, now that my childhood memories are coming back to me. I remember the feeling of power, the pleasure of satisfaction as I watched her flying down the stairs. I remember the expression of horror on my 6-year-old brother's face as he watched me give her a mighty shove. And I remember the vast disappointment of her landing on her wheels, laughing delightedly at her moment of flight.

I probably hadn't heard the story of Cain and Abel by that time in my life. It was not until I thought about the story in the context of trying to kill my own sister that I realized how clearly I understand what was going on in Cain's mind. There is no rage like the rage of jealousy. There is no hatred like the hatred one sibling can hold for another.

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I have long thought I understood Jesus' teaching<sup>4</sup> that you must make peace with your brother before offering your gift to God. It was easy and straight forward, I thought. If I'm mad at someone, how can my offering to God be from my heart? My heart is black with anger, green with jealousy, not pure with love. What kind of offering is that to give to God?

But again, my sermon preparations let me in for a surprise. The scripture<sup>5</sup> does not say, if *you* are angry at your brother. It says, "if your brother has something against *you!*" Boy, does that ever open a can of worms! I know my own angers. I know who *I'm* mad at, who *I'm* reluctant to forgive. But what about someone who is angry with *me*? What if I need to go to someone and ask *them* to forgive *me*, even if I think *they* are in the wrong? How can I do that? How can I possibly say "I'm sorry" for whatever slight I might have unintentionally made against someone? How can I even know if I've caused someone else grief?

I have to be aware of how *my* actions and *my* words affect others. Dan frequently lets me know when I have said something insensitive. The reminder often comes on the way home from a Council meeting. I know I am not the most tactful person in the world. My gift of storytelling comes with added baggage — I am also blunt and tactless at times, telling the truth as I see it. But how I see the truth may not be the way others see it, and my biting words can seem mean and hateful — even when I don't intend them to be seen that way. I don't always know when I've hurt someone, and when Dan or one of my other voices of conscience isn't around, I have to trust God to let me know. And when I *do* know, I also have to trust God will convict me to make the

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:21-24: 21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 14:10-13: 10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God. 13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

first move, to ask for forgiveness. To say, "I'm sorry," to accept responsibility for the results of my words and my actions.

Paul takes this a step further in his letter to the Romans. "Why do you pass judgment on your brother?" he asks. "Or you, why do you despise your brother? We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God . . . and each of us shall give account of ourselves to God . . . Let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decided never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of a brother." How can we do that? Are we to stop being human, stop judging our brothers, our fellow human beings, because they are different from us, because they don't experience life the same way we do? Paul says, "let God do the judging." Why? Because we probably don't have enough information to go on. We can't read what is in our brother's heart the way God can. How can I know the basis for your actions? How can you know the basis for mine? Only if I go to you when I know you are angry with me, as Jesus directed, can we sit down together and figure out why we see things differently.

That is what we tried to do five years ago when our church was falling apart from rumors and lies. But we were so anxious to tell our own sides of the story that we forgot to listen to each other. We lacked the patience to sit through all the long meetings and translations and accusations. We never made peace with our brothers and sisters who left our church family, and they never made peace with us. We went our separate ways and became two families who continually try to forget what happened, to forget how much we hated each other in those final moments before we split apart.

Who is my sister? My sister is J.E., with whom I still do not see eye-to-eye about running a church.

My sister is M.O., who taught me much more than I wanted to learn about prejudice.

My sister is R.U., whose departure from our church family broke my heart. She was the best friend I ever had a Sycamore, and we betrayed her.

My sister is D.T., with whom I don't see eye-to-eye about rummage sales.

My sister is T.K., who calls me up and reminds me what my duties are when I don't follow through with the things I've volunteered for. Thank you T.K.

My sister is D.C., who needs my friendship and understanding, because I know so very well what it means to be a minister's wife.

My sister is every woman sitting in this sanctuary today, every woman whose name appears in our church directory, even if I do not know them well.

My sister is the homeless woman waiting outside of Safeway for someone to care enough about her plight to give her a handout or a hand up.

Everywhere I turn, my sisters are around me. And my brothers too. We are all so different, every one of us a child of God, every one of us a unique being made in the image of our Creator. And for many of us, there are siblings of the flesh, those sisters and brothers born into our earthly families, whose very presence in our lives helped form what we became and are still becoming.

My sister is Ellen Burnham, a 40-year-old retarded woman who lives with our parents in Brighton, Colorado. I am learning to honor her for what she has helped me become. In two weeks I am going to spend some time with her. My parents think it is because I am being a good daughter, offering to take care of my sister while they go to Germany. But I am going to Colorado because I want to know who my sister is.

I asked God to remove the blackness from my heart which prevented me from seeing my

sister as a human being. And God answered that prayer. At long last I know the sister Ellen helped me become. I do not yet know the sister I in turn taught her to be. Thankfully, God was teaching her too, because she never acquired the black heart of hatred that I offered to her. With our father's help, she sent me a laboriously hand-printed letter after she was here at Easter. It contained only one line: "I love you anyway."

We cannot sit down and talk about past events, past angers and past hurts, because she does not exist on that level. She exists on a level of unquestioning forgiveness and undying love. She is one of what the Catholics call "the true saints."

She is my sister. And I pray God will teach me to love her as she has loved me, with unquestioning forgiveness and undying love.

### Epilogue

I'm headed back up the hill to the bench overlooking the ocean. I'm wearing my black velvet quilted jacket, the one littered with gold stars, to stay warm against the wind. As I approach the bench, I see that Ellen is already here, wrapped in our dad's old threadbare red and brown Indian blanket.

"I've been waiting for a long time," she tells me as I sit beside her.

"I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't even sure you'd be here, it's been so long."

"We need to talk about Margot."

"Yes, I know." I think about how it first came to me that Ellen wanted to talk about Margot. I realized that she'd been listening in on our last phone call.

"I called my friend May Cotton to yak yak," Margot laughed into my voice mail. And when I finally called her back, I greeted her with "yakety yak!" But she didn't know who I was until I said my name.

"What do you want to tell me about Margot?" I ask Ellen.

"I'm not sure if I was actually jealous," Ellen tells me. "But I was terribly sad. Margot was always nice to me, but she was your friend. Your special friend. And you chose her over me."

"Yes. I chose all my friends over you," I admit, "and some are still like sisters to me."

"Margot. Ann. Noela. Betsy and Claire. Sheri, back when we were too young to know that best friends are almost like sisters, only better than sisters, because there isn't all that negative history in the way."

"I was really sad when Sheri moved away in 5<sup>th</sup> grade," I lament. "But in 6<sup>th</sup> grade I began to get close to Margot."

"Imagine how I felt, not having any friends. I didn't have a best friend until my 30s when I met Lolly. And then some idiot went and murdered her!"

"You know about that?!"

"Well I do now. Who do you think met me when I crossed over? Lolly and Uncle Dick."

"Wow. I would have thought it would have been our grandparents. Or Grampy, at least, since he was blood."

"I ran into him later. Grammy was already back repaying Karma."

"Oh my! I always thought of her as Daddy's evil step-mother, but I didn't realize she'd done anything that bad." I look at Ellen thoughtfully and realize she has the dirt on all the dead

in our family, and probably a few more.

“Our grandmother made some poor choices in her life, and her bitterness eventually eroded her values. She needs more practice forgiving.”

I think about our grandmother, how unloving she was, how she disdained our mother because she thought Mom wasn’t good enough for our dad. Even worse, Grammy barely tolerated Ellen, using her disabilities as further proof that our mother was no good. Grammy tried hard to change me, but eventually gave up and disinherited me instead. She had a small change of heart regarding my son, but the lawyer told me she responded with a harsh “Good!” when he told her leaving money outright to a minor would cause a world of hurt for his parents. Legal grief aside, at least our son had a college fund.

Ellen laughs as though she knows what I’m thinking. Like me, she didn’t get a penny.

“It would have been nice,” I tell her, “if we could have communicated. But I’m no good at talking to someone who can’t readily respond.”

“You do it with Margot,” Ellen points out.

“What do you mean? Margot responds to me.”

“Yes, but how many times does she tell you the same joke, tell you how much she loves hearing your voice? I counted seven times in your last conversation. How often has she mentioned her memory problems?”

I let that thought settle for a moment before I realize what Ellen is going to say, and I say it for her.

“She’s becoming retarded, in a sense, isn’t she? Like you were, only more intelligible.”

Ellen nods.

“But I was always at ease talking to her, so it’s not the same. I just never felt at ease talking to you.”

“Because I couldn’t answer back,” Ellen replies. “Because we couldn’t have a conversation. Because I couldn’t say the words fast enough when I struggled to pronounce them, and you didn’t have the patience to wait. You’re so full-speed-ahead, I wonder if you’ll ever slow down.”

“Patience was never my strong suit. So you wanted to tell me that Margot is slowing down mentally, becoming more like you used to be.” She nods again, then turns her eyes away from mine and gazes out to sea. I follow her gaze and see a host of beings coming slowly toward us.

“Time for you to go,” Ellen says. “You can’t be here to see these folks. You’re not evolved enough yet.”

She turns back to me and I see the twinkle in her eye that clues me in to her little joke. We lean toward each other for a brief hug; I rise and turn away.

As I head back down the hill, I wonder what my sister will tell me next time we meet.