Sister, Sister — A Memoir

I've been working on my memoir for the better part of 30 years,
always unpublished to protect the "innocent" who starred in my life.
The principals are all dead, so it's time to begin . . .

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Chapter 1 — 2015: The Last Bloom

"I've been reading your memoir over your shoulder as you write it," Ellen says as she sits down beside me on the bench overlooking the ocean. It is cold up here, but neither of us thinks of going inside. We are bundled up, me wearing the warm woolen hat of creamy lavender knitted by Noela. Ellen wears the dark blue polar fleece Nordic cap I inherited from her, one of the few precious pieces of her past I still treasure. Usually it hangs on the post of the chevelle mirror beside my bed — on cold winter nights I wear it to sleep, though it always ends up on the floor after I begin to overheat.

"At least," Ellen continues, "the parts you've written since I died. I couldn't read before I died, but now I can. I read as you write. I love it when you read aloud to your writing groups. I love hearing your voice, hearing you tell your side of the story, feeling your pain and your shame and your love. I wish we could have been sisters like that when I was alive."

I look wistfully over at my dead sister, so radiant in her afterlife. "It wasn't possible then," I tell her. "I was too broken inside, and you were too broken outside." She nods and gazes out to the sea.

"How's Mom?" I ask.

"Oh, she's still over the moon about her book. Jumping for joy. Happy as a clam. All those euphemisms she used when we were growing up. She loves showing it to the ancestors whenever a member of the living picks it up and reads it. You really haven't been fair to her in this memoir, you know. She really was some kind of saint for all the crap she put up with from you and Tom, especially when she was trying to make up for being guilty of bearing the faulty gene that made me retarded.

"There, I said it. Are you happy now? Yes, that is what I was called then, and no, developmentally disabled is not poetic in the least. But you know you're going to get all kinds of flack for using that big bad R-word in your book."

"I know," I respond. "I get all bent out of shape when others take poetic license, but that's exactly what I'm doing. I know not everyone will understand. But to me it would be an anachronism to use current language to talk about what life was like in the 50s and 60s. We thought it was okay to use aberrant language then. We weren't so into avoiding hurting people's feelings by being so pathetically politically correct."

"But you know," Ellen tells me, a curious excitement in her voice, "you never called me a 're-tard', and you stood up for me when others used that awful word. I always appreciated that."

"I guess in some ways I wasn't such a bad sister."

"No, you weren't. You did your duty. You loved me before you learned to hate me, and that's worth a lot. You loved me enough to grow your heart bigger, and that early love prevented you from being as terrible as you might have been. And you only tried to kill me that one time."

"And I was unsuccessful, wasn't I? I'm just so glad I got over it in time to be able to love you again before you died. And I'd give anything to remember that early love, that first bloom of new sister."

"No you wouldn't. Never say you're willing to give anything. You never know what might be asked of you. You will remember what you need when the time is right, if not in this life, in the next. All is revealed in its own time. Neither you nor I have any control."

I look over at my sister and see she is wearing my multi-colored patchwork jacket, the one still languishing in the mending closet. All these things I know how to do, know I must do, visualize myself doing — but my hands have forgotten how, and my feet refuse to move me from the TV chair to the sewing chair where the tasks that await me never seem to begin.

Ellen interrupts my self-admonishing contemplations.

"You have no idea how I struggled to learn to say that word. It was such a big word, three syllables when it was hard for me say more than one. Your name was so hard. I was thrilled when you changed it to May. Do you remember I used to call you 'May Anne' because I couldn't say 'Mary'? It wasn't that I didn't know I was saying it wrong. I knew so much more than I could ever convey. I would have given anything — yes, I said it, even though I told you not to — I would have given anything to have gotten the surgery to release my tongue. It was so hard being tongue tied, not being able to move my tongue like a normal person. It was really difficult to keep my mouth closed. It was hard to eat; it was hard to speak.

"Some sounds, like the R in Mary were nearly impossible. And 'retarded' has two Rs! Then there was that third syllable. I struggled so hard with which syllable to emphasize, preventing myself from emphasizing the first to avoid that awful R-word. It took me years to learn to pronounce that bungled sentence you heard as 'I not retarded.' I knew what it meant many years before I could actually say it.

"I hope you understand I wasn't stupid. It's true I couldn't master reading and language, and I learned most everything at a slow pace, but I understood things, saw things, knew things you can't begin to understand. I chose to focus on the simple things, the fun stuff like bowling and football, so I could enjoy my life as much as possible. TV was easy, as you have discovered, because it told me stories. I just had to listen. It didn't matter much I couldn't read as long as the TV talked to me.

I reach over and pat my sister's hand. She is wearing Alice Walker's purple gloves from my 1987 trip to Big Mountain in Arizona, where I stood hand-in-hand with my then-favorite author as we

protested the Federal government allowing strip-mining on sacred Navajo lands. "But you can read now," I remind Ellen. "I see you've been reading my old journals. Otherwise how would you know about Alice Walker's gloves?"

"Oh I hang around you more than you realize," Ellen says. "I can only read when you are reading or writing or what you leave open on the counters. But I hear you tell others your stories. You love your Alice Walker story, your connection to other writers who are famous now."

"At least Alice Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston were decent people," I blurt, "unlike that boob Bob Silverberg!"

Ellen chuckles at my indignation at this long-ago discovery that an author I idolized was nothing more than a crass man. I realize now that meeting male authors has always been a disappointment to me. The women are just so much more humble, more human maybe.

More human like Ellen is now, in her afterlife. I am glad she has come to sit with me on this bench overlooking the ocean. We will sit here together again, I think, and perhaps she will tell me more of her view of our sisterhood, then and now.

Chapter 2 — 1996: My Mother's Shoes

I am hiding in my mother's shoes. We move gingerly from her small office, where she is writing and organizing a vast family history, to the kitchen, hands out in anticipation of a potential fall. On her way through the living room, she rolls her eyes at the hideous multi-colored carpet she has had to learn to live with, the garish black, red and orange a constant reminder that she lives in the house my father bought for his second wife. All these years later it still galls my mother that she is both my father's first wife and his third. If she'd had more backbone in those days, she would never have granted him the divorce. But the intervening 17 years have given her the strength she needs not just to take him back, but to stand up to him as well.

She putters about the kitchen, sorting through packages in the freezer, containers in the refrigerator, cans in the cupboard. Making a decision she turns to my father, who takes his pen from his chest pocket. I watch them enact this daily ritual of meal planning, my father no longer seeming to care about the lack of precision with which my mother cooks. He once regaled me with smugly-told stories of teaching her how to cook. Years later I would regale him with the story of my college friends, who, following a weekend of my mother's cooking, commented that they now understood why I liked the dorm food so much. My father roared with laughter, not realizing that the joke was on him. At this point in their lives, my father eats my mother's food with relish, no longer tasting much beyond the vast amounts of salt he adds. It was my mother who taught me that salting before tasting is an insult to the

cook, yet still she puts up with my father's heaping-on of salt before the food ever touches his tongue.

I am hiding in my father's pen, black felt tip drawing the words of the grocery list on a 3x5 card. He takes the list and leaves on his daily excursion to the box store, where he will push a cart up and down the aisles, shuffling along in what he considers his daily exercise routine. After 30 minutes of patiently plodding through the massive store, he will take his two or three items to the checkout and banter with the clerks who all know him by name.

My father believes he has no friends, but everyone thinks that he is theirs. He does not realize that his gregarious personality draws people to him like moths to a flame, that he is the life of the party, the storyteller everyone wants to hear. On his 80th birthday he will be astonished at the number of people who were in on the surprise.

Carrying his purchases in plastic bags that will be trashed after they are emptied, my father climbs into his minivan and drives the six blocks home. He will find my mother back in her office typing furiously away on that strange device that everyone is using these days. He bought the machine for her at no small expense, yet another token of his appreciation that she took him back after all the awful things he did to her. He is in awe of her now, the curious way she put 17 years behind her and went back to being his comfortable companion, forgiving him for the foolhardy act of marrying their daughter's best friend, abandoning his responsibilities as father to their one child still at home, throwing my mother's dreams in her face by traveling with his new wife. He does not understand how my mother could have possibly forgiven him, but he is grateful. He lavishes her with dinners out, compliments her intelligence, sends her off to travel with her friends, and even takes her to Europe himself.

My mother enjoys this new life, once again financially secure, back with the one that she loves, spoiled by his apologetic indulgences. She misses her old neighborhood where she was closer to her cronies, but she digs right in, makes new friends, joins new clubs. My mother is not one to be held back by inconvenience; she simply pushes on and takes care of whatever needs to be done.

I see my father, a doddering old man by his account, trying so hard to make up for the past. I felt vindicated once when he criticized me loudly in front of my mother-in-law; I imagined that she could see at last that I had not merely told tall tales about him through the years. She saw the wounds still left from this man who had spent a lifetime destroying my self-esteem. As a child he only punished me in front of strangers, as though the humiliation of that experience would reinforce his lessons. Now he lavishes me with love, praises what a good daughter I am.

Where was this praise when I was a child? Wasn't I a good daughter then, learning what not to do, what upset him the most? I never told, just like he said. In searching for answers, I find more questions, reflections in the genetic mirror, my father standing silent under the stormy reprimand of his own father's second wife, learning the voice with which he will later chastise me. Though he honors me as Good Daughter just now, he will lash out at me again. He always does.

I am hiding in the sugar bowl on the kitchen table, listening to the mindless banter my parent's exchange at their meal. They talk about the weather, the bird feeders that need to be refilled, the folks at church who are getting old and dying. My mother dares to share with him her biggest frustration of having had her knees replaced; all those shoes she loves, the blue pumps, the red heels, the bone and black and brown dress shoes that match her many outfits and handbags.

I hide there in their minds, waiting for them to discuss the topic about which they have so long kept silent — my father has had a second accident, similar to the first, in which he collided with a semi and totaled his mini-van. Two semis. Two mini-vans. I pray the judge will take away his license next week at court, while my mother prays the judge will let him keep it. Discomforted by her stark sorrow for her shoes, he changes the subject, tells her about the new replacement van he has found. But he will not tell her why he is having trouble getting a settlement from the insurance company.

We have set her to wondering, my husband and I, with our careful explanations of how insurance settlements work and why my father's excuses are unacceptable. I ask her once again if she will promise to discuss with him the need to move to a retirement community. Their previous conversation, I have learned, is 10 years old.

"He will not talk to me," she says. "I learn more from overhearing what he says to others than from what he says to me." In my mind, I hear my father's booming voice, shouting at me that my mother is "too Goddamn deaf to talk to." This from the man who refuses to get his hearing tested, who believes that too much wax in his ears is a sufficient excuse for shouting all the time and ignoring what my mother's says. When he is not raging, he coos at her in their secret language of "woofs" and "mews."

I watch my parents from behind the many pill bottles marching across their kitchen table, watch their second marriage eroding away, just like the first one, wondering if they will live miserably ever after or if death will free them from this travesty they have wrought.

I see the reflection of myself in my parents, the reflection of my mother in me, my father in me, sharing the genes that dictate who we are, who we have been, and who we will become. We connect like a woman leaning her shoulder against a mirror, her image pressed into itself, my father's genes pressed into me, my mother's as well.

It is this frightening familiarity that enables me to forgive them, to love who they are rather than who I wish they'd been. When did I arrive at this place in time where I finally fear the loss of them, where I am no longer content with my anger, simmering so long that it's been boiled dry?

Chapter 3 — 1950: Beginnings

It is the dreams I most clearly recall. Twice I dreamed I died, once by a close range pistol shot to the chest, and once by a bomb which exploded when I opened my dresser drawer. In one particularly troubling dream, I learned I was already dead, and that of the living, only my brother could hear and see me. I also remember my mother wrapping my brother's broken arm in yards and yards of white fabric, and I remember flying down the basement stairs. But these are also dreams, my mother tells me. Tom never broke his arm, and it was Ellen who went down the basement stairs in her walker.

It's probable I was conceived on Valentine's Day, my birthday being nine months and two days after that romantic festival. But the story is that my conception was the result of a celebration my parents were having to enjoy the success of one of my brother's surgeries. He had seven surgeries when he was a baby, having been born with a cleft pallet, but this latest surgery was the important one — at least for me.

It is hard to imagine my mother celebrating with sex, but very easy to imagine my dad coercing her, teasing her into believing that it was a good way to celebrate.

"Just think," I can hear him saying, "now that Tommy is out of the woods, it's safe to think about having another baby." If they had been drinkers, he might have plied her with wine. Thirty years later, he would have gotten her stoned. Surely she would not have seduced him under such circumstances. I seriously doubt that happened. I cannot conceive of my mother suggesting to my father that they celebrate in bed, that they try for a second baby. No, he was the one who wanted more children, still feeling sorry for himself for being an only child. He wanted to know what he had missed. My mother knew better. Although I've never heard her say it aloud, I'm sure she never really wanted to have children, even though the time in which she grew up would not have supported that option. And I see in my mother a strong resolution to live like everyone else, even though her own desires do not coincide with society's wishes on the matter; I also see her silent support of my own decision to stop after one. But if she had made the decision I made, there would have been no celebration that night, and I would not have been the result.

Chapter 4 — 1952: A Child is Born

I am not-quite-two, and I am very angry. My mother is gone. She has left me with a woman I do not like, who demands that I be a good girl and take a nap. But I have been left behind, and I will never be a good girl again. I rage at this woman, who has been given charge of me while my mother goes to the hospital to give birth to the monster that will ruin my life. The sitter threatens me with

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being sent back to the crib if I will not behave.

Good. Put me in my familiar crib. Let me be the baby of the family a moment longer, because I do not want this new baby who is going to take my place.

There was no retreat for me; they brought home an eternal baby who usurped my place, who stole all their affection and attention from me. Ellen. With Down's Syndrome and her damned Mongoloid eyes.

Chapter 5 — 1954: The Basement Stairs

I pushed her down the stairs when we were very young. I must have been four and Ellen was two. We still lived in the house on Upper Fredericktown Road where most of my earliest memories live. It was a white house with a doorway exactly in the center, out of which one stepped onto a straight concrete walk surrounded by an emerald lawn. Directly inside the front door were the stairs leading up to the second story, where my bedroom with the leaky ceiling was on the left side.

At the back of the house, on the main floor, behind the tall staircase, was a big kitchen. There were four doors in the kitchen, one coming in from the living room and one going out the other side into the dining room. The only windowed door in the kitchen led to the big backyard, and it was opposite the door to the basement stairs. The basement stairs were directly below the stairs to the second floor bedrooms; when I stood at the top of the basement stairs I was surrounded by stairs. I remember the picture in my mind of stairs over stairs, stairs above and stairs below, of flying down those stairs.

But it wasn't me who flew. It was Ellen. I flew only in my dreams, because for weeks afterwards I dreamed of flying down the stairs. Many years later I mentioned this dream to my mother. That was before I remembered the actual event, and my mother said, "no, it wasn't a dream." It was a memory, but it wasn't a memory of flying down the stairs myself — it was Ellen who flew down the stairs in her walker. But it *was* a dream. It was a dream that grew in power and substance until there were many dreams of flying, for though I lost the power to kill my sister that day, I gained the power to fly in my dreams.

When the memory finally came back to me, my mother refused to believe that Ellen had gone down the basement stairs in her walker all those years ago because I pushed her. But I remember. I remember standing there in the doorway, my six-year-old brother to my right, guarding the living room door. Beyond him loomed the big white stove our mother often stood before. I recall the look of horror on my brother's face as Ellen flew down the stairs. I remember being surprised by his reaction, because until the moment I actually pushed her, we had been in cahoots over the attempted murder of

our little sister, whom we both hated. If Tom had been jealous of me when I was born, it was nothing compared to what we both felt about Ellen. I doubt that either of us had much understanding of why her disabilities made her *special* (a word I hate to this day) and why our parents treated her with so much more deference than they treated us. Tom might have understood, since he was six and already in school. But I was four and knew only that I hated Ellen with every ounce of strength I could muster.

I remember the thrill of power that surged through me as I gave my sister a mighty push. I stood in the open doorway and watched as Ellen in her walker flew down the stairs. She laughed and cooed and waved her arms, and landed with a mighty thump at the bottom — landed on all wheels, to gasp and squeal and laugh again before she put down her feet and wheeled around to explore a part of the house where she had never been, the new world to which her flying adventure had just taken her.

And so my jealousy, which had turned first to rage and then to invincibility for that moment when I believed I had destroyed her, had removed her from my life, turned to jealously once again. And in my dreams I flew down the stairs, to share the adventure, to arrive in a new place for me to explore. My failure to kill the sister I hated had backfired in more ways than one: although I traded the power over Ellen for the power to fly in my dreams, that too was lost as I got older, and all that remained was the jealous hatred of my imperfect sister.

After a time the amazing story of Ellen's flight down the stairs in her walker, with the mystery of how she managed to open the basement door, and the landing on all wheels without a single scrape or bruise, ceased to be told at family gatherings. And so it slipped out of my mind as well, tucked away, locked up with the knowledge of the true story of how it came to pass that Ellen had taken flight. All I remembered were the dreams, dreams in which the sister I hated was not there — only the joy and exhilaration of flying down the basement stairs.

Chapter 6 —
1997: Recovered Memories

In this one you are younger than I am now, standing there, one hand in your pocket, the other holding the bottle that feeds my eager upturned face. You are wearing the same brown pants and white shirt you wore every day of my growing up years, pants and shirts I ironed when I got old enough. I remember Mamma grumbling about how you would wear nothing else but brown slacks and white shirts. I remember

shopping with her for those shirts and how hard it was to find white dress shirts to your specifications—two pockets, short sleeves. John Henry was the only brand; the May Company the only store that carried your size. Now she grumbles because the unlimited source of short-sleeved two-pocket shirts you found—during those years away when you had to solve your own domestic problems—is an industrial supply company. The only difference I can see is that now the shirts have a snap instead of a top button. But of course, since you no longer wear ties, Mamma has to look at that snap every day.

You aren't wearing a tie in the picture. Your shirt collar is unbuttoned, so it must have been taken in the evening after work or on the weekend. And how old was I, standing there in that playpen in my ruffled dress, looking up at you in rapture as I suck down the milk in the bottle you hold? I must have been old enough to walk, otherwise I wouldn't have been confined to the playpen. That would make me—what—9, 10 months old?

My therapists have taught me to be suspicious of this picture, to hold it up as representative of the way in which I was nurtured as a young child. They have taught me to believe that you failed me from a very early age, represented by the fact that you hold my bottle rather than holding me, feeding me as if I were a baby animal who needed only a teat, rather than a baby human who needed a lap.

I have a copy of that photograph in one of my old journals, put there to mark the page where I drew the Black Cloud God beating me into submission. All these issues that I have been processing these past few years, Daddy, and you the focus of so many of them.

Today I read an article in *The Sun,* called "Daughters Lost," which was about recovered memories.

I felt so bad for the man who wrote the piece, who remembered only good and wonderful things about his daughters and his relationship with them as they were growing up. As a result of therapy after they grew up and left home, they turned against him and accused him of unspeakable things, turning him into a monstrous pedophile rather than the loving father he thought he had been. He knew that he had never touched his daughters, but their therapists had convinced them otherwise.

For years others have told me that I must have been sexually abused—it is the only explanation for the lack of memories from my childhood. And indeed, I was sexually abused, but by my brother, not by you. You would have killed him if you had known. And yet what I do remember indicates that it was from you that we learned to exaggerate our sexual play until it grew into such a huge monster that both he and I are scarred by it. I am learning to reduce the size of the scars through writing. I only wish that I had the faith to share it with you.

When I think about that photo now, when I see it in my mind, I see, along with everything I've seen before, the joy in your face as you look down with love on your little daughter.

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Chapter 7 — 1999: Eeyore

As I was walking to the bank yesterday afternoon, I bent to pick up what I thought was a postage stamp lying on the sidewalk. It turned out to be two stickers, one stuck mostly over the other, probably dropped by a child from the school across the street. Looking at what lay in my hand, I remembered with a jolt *that thing* for which I could not seem to forgive my parents. These two Disney stickers were a metaphor for my childhood. Here was Eeyore, my favorite of all the Winnie-the-Pooh characters stuck right over the top of Piglet. Only a telltale ear and shoulder were visible on the lower sticker, but it was clearly Piglet who was nearly obliterated by Eeyore's sheepish grin. The complete shadow of Piglet could be seen on the other side.

When we were children, our parents gave each of us a nickname from the Pooh stories. My father shared his date of birth with Christopher Robin Milne, and Daddy prided himself in being in the very first generation to grow up with Winnie-the-Pooh. His love for the stories was evident in the fact that while our mother read to us from all sorts of books, Daddy read only from *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*. Years later as I read these same books to my own son, I could hear my father's voice echoing in my mind as I recited the familiar words.

It was natural for them to give us pet names from the stories. And it was natural that my brother, who was the oldest, should be called Pooh. And it surely made sense to them that as the second child, I should be called Piglet, after Pooh's best friend and sidekick. But that was the problem. I did not like Piglet. I didn’t like his timid personality, and I especially didn’t like how silly he looked next to the dear old bear who was just cute as could be. I was furious in my two-year-old way when my sister, the youngest, began being called Eeyore. Eeyore was my favorite of all the Pooh characters.

Poor morose, mistreated Eeyore was just like me. I loved Eeyore because I knew exactly how he felt. The grumpy gray donkey was forced to eat thistles and live way off by himself in the boggy, sad corner of the Hundred Acre Wood known as Eeyore's Gloomy Place.

I lived in my own gloomy place, populated by monsters and mysteries that I struggled to understand. But nobody believed in the creatures I saw and the sounds I heard all around me. My brother laughed and teased, my father chastised, my mother lectured. *It's all in your imagination*, I was told time and again as I tried to verbalize exactly what lived in my closet mirror; what the monster looked like when it crept out from under my bed; what flittered and shimmered and danced through the air whenever someone dared to turn off the lights. I knew it wasn't my imagination. I knew it was just as real as these words flowing from my fingers. It just wasn't something my pragmatic parents and bullying brother were willing to accept.

I was in touch with a world they could not understand; what existed for me did not exist for them, and therefore they did not believe me. They took my tail and used it as a bell pull, just like stuffy

old Owl did when he took Eeyore's tail. I was just like poor abused Eeyore. I knew all about prickly food — overcooked peas, yucky jello with carrots and raisins, and mystery meat hidden in casseroles. I lived in a household where I was completely misunderstood and largely ignored — unless I managed to call attention to myself by fighting with my brother or walking and talking in my sleep. By the time I finally realized my tail was missing, I no longer believed in myself. I couldn't quite figure out what had been done to me, and so I focused on the obvious — the anger and frustration I felt was directed toward my sister, who I was sure was at fault for the miserable way I felt.

She had usurped my place in the family. She was labeled special, which made me ordinary. She had needs that were greater than mine, which thrust me to the bottom of the list. I was bigger, smarter, prettier, and stronger, but I was always in her shadow. She was Eeyore, pasted over my face so that only an outrageous pink pig's ear could give a clue to my identity. I blamed her for everything that went wrong in my life, and like Eeyore, I became so miserably morose that no one wanted to be around me. *Poor me* became my mantra. It took leaving home for me to find my tail; it took many years to begin to understand my complicated childhood, and more years still to regain my sunny disposition.

Recently I found myself face to face with an attitude reminiscent of my brother's angry responses to my views. As I spoke with positive reassurance to a friend about her job situation, she waved away my confidence that things would work out for her. "That's too Pollyanna-ish for me," she declared, and in that moment of being labeled again with the very words that my brother had thrown in my face on many occasions, I found myself with a new response — not one of anger and resentment for being ridiculed, but one of compassion for this woman who didn't know where to look to find that positive side of her life.

My tail came back to me, and every now and then I am able to leap and prance in the Hundred Acre Woods.

Chapter 8 — 1956: Red Feather Lakes

My parents probably didn't think it was exotic, but my brother and I sure did. After living in the city for two years, away from our cousins and the family farm, the little cabin at Red Feather Lakes was a dream come true. I was 6, my brother was 8, and Ellen, now 4, had finally learned to walk. At last we were someplace where our mother's paranoia was in check. She understood small communities and the out of doors, so the boundaries that tied us close to home in the big city were loosened here in the mountains. Oh, she was still paranoid about the lake, worried that we'd fall in and drown, but for the most part we ignored her, climbing on the rocks away from the shore, soaking in the warm sun, and enjoying the freedom to play as much as we wanted.

In my present reality I remember little of the actual vacation other than the throne I claimed at the top of a fine granite boulder. What looms largest in my mind is the hideous reality of the trip back home. That week at Red Feather Lakes was one of only two family vacations during my childhood in which my entire family — mother, father, sister, brother — went away someplace together. That is, someplace other than my grandparents' house for Christmas, which was no vacation at all. I had just finished first grade before we took this trip, our first family vacation, to our neighbor Mrs. Dunn's cabin less than two hours away from home. The second vacation, to the Badlands of South Dakota and Minneapolis, Minnesota, happened the summer I was 14. Both trips were memorable for different reasons, but I do not regret that there were no others. My father has always been an abominable traveler, and I am grateful that I haven't many memories of his beastly behavior.

That trip to South Dakota was a nightmare of it's own kind. We left Denver the morning after the South Platte River flooded, destroying homes and businesses along the way. The waters had receded enough for us to head northeast toward Rapid City. On the way we passed what was left of Deer Trail, a tiny town in eastern Colorado that was now nothing more than a wide expanse of washed-out fields, spotted with an occasional demolished house or an upended car. The town of 200 that we had previously driven through on our trips to Kansas City to visit our grandparents was nowhere to be seen. Those troubling thoughts were with us all as we unloaded our gear in the two-story chalet set on the banks of a roaring river. We stayed only one very sleepless night in this odd motel, because the AAA Trip-Tik required that we press on to Mount Rushmore, The Badlands, and Wall Drug before heading east to Minneapolis. There we stayed several days with friends of our parents whose children may have been our playmates years before, but now they were strangers to us.

I barely remember the cabin at Red Feather Lakes, but the rock I spent so much time sitting on is emblazoned on my mind. Twenty years later, after passing the turn off dozens of times on trips between Denver and Laramie, I exited on a whim and drove back to Red Feather Lakes. I was saddened to see that it had become a resort community with colorless condos swarming the hillsides. And I was disappointed not to remember a thing about the place where a fun and peaceful week had preceded the one dramatic memory that haunts me to this day, the event that in all probability was what finally turned me irrevocably against my sister.

On the trip home my mother casually turned around and addressed me where I sat in the back seat. Midnight, my black cat, would not be there when we got home, my mother informed me. Mrs. Lenhart had taken her back to the pound while we were away.

Why, I demanded to know, outraged that my soft, cuddly friend was being taken away from me only weeks after I'd gotten her. In my mother's mind it was simple — Midnight scratched my sister. Even at my young age, I knew my parents were wrong. Of course Ellen was getting scratched — she kept pulling Midnight's tail. It did not make sense that Ellen was not being taught not to hurt the cat.

My outrage grew bigger as I grew older, and I began to understand that my parents seemed to think it was the job of her special school to teach Ellen the skills she needed, that it was not something they were supposed to do at home.

Chapter 9 — 2000: 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. She was so frustrated when I grew old enough to need my own closet space and she had to move her seasonal wardrobe to the basement furnace room. I listened to her heavy sighs as she dragged her winter wear down and her spring suits back upstairs.

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 it. Once as a teen, I braved my way, fearing for my bare feet, and then began shrieking hysterically when I encountered a large millipede inches from my toes.

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 downstairs 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 those spaces let in a little light. We usually couldn't get into the other side. 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 Mom 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 corner 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.

Chapter 10 — 1957: Pattern Book

My mother had a pattern book that I loved to look at as a child. It was a pattern book of costumes: Little Bo Peep and Cinderella, the flower faeries Tulip and Daffodil and Rose; delicious little characters from history, like Dorothy Gale and Esmerelda, Pinky and the Blue Boy, Little Lord Faldaroy; and best of all, the native costumes of the world, with lovely aprons and full skirts, laderhosen and charming hats. This book was printed in the 1940s, so naturally the drawings were not in color. This

was no ordinary pattern book. These costumes were not to be made of fabric, but of crepe paper. Careful instruction in fine print appeared on the back of each page, but there were no pattern pieces. Whoever used this book had to be well versed in the mathematical calculations that must be done to translate the written words into the ruffles and gayly flowered full skirts and laced bodices.

I adored this book, not for its equations, of which I understood nothing, but for its pictures, for the wonderful stories that leaped into my mind as I imagined myself wearing the various costumes, even if they were only made of paper. But the true wonder was that my mother, who did understand the mathematical formulas and intricate instructions, could turn these wonderful pictures into fabric dresses. She could make these costumes for me, if only I could choose which one it was that I most wanted, for she would only make me one.

I spent hours pouring over those pictures, trying to decide. Hours stretched into weeks, stretched into years; stretched into a future where mothers change and daughters change, and my mother never did make the marvelous costume that she'd promised. Little girls grow up to want other things from momma's sewing machine. Dress-up costumes give way to party dresses and dreaming of the prom.

But in the early years, when costumes were still paramount, I remember leaning against my mother's warm thigh as she sat at her Featherweight Singer, making curtains for the bedrooms, ruffles to dress up a hand-me-down Easter dress, a red-and-white polka dot clown suit for Halloween. The automatic front loading washer churns in the background, behind me to my left; my sister coos from the playpen across the room under the built-in cabinet. As I consider this memory, I wonder why it was that my mother chose to keep Ellen's playpen under the counter where she could not escape, caged in by the counter top. Was she into everything at this point? Was she scampering about the laundryroom floor on her bottom, getting into everything even though she hadn't yet learned to walk. Was my mother so overwhelmed by carrying for this huge house that it was easier to put Ellen into the playpen under the counter than to constantly take the things out of her mouth that she'd picked up off the floor? Or was my mother protecting her disabled daughter from her other older daughter, whose merciless teasing was indication enough of the lack of love between them?

What was my mother thinking, as she sat at the old featherweight Singer, talking me through the steps of pinning, basting, gathering, taking tucks, darts, and seams to ultimately create ruffly pinafores and delicate petticoats to dress me up for Sunday School. Did my mother have any inkling of how much hatred I harbored for her other daughter? Did she know that I would just as soon have lit that playpen on fire and watched my sister burn? Did she realize that it was when she picked up Ellen's pinafore to stitch that I slipped away into my brother's room to play, to enact in my mind the murderous things I would do to my sister's body when our mother stopped watching me so closely. Until then, there were roads to build in the garden for the small cars my brother had discarded. There were stories

to write in my mind about the Indians who had lived here before me, about the strangeness of my ability in dreams to fly around the high school, up and down and all around Louisiana Avenue in my sleep.

I see the laundry room in my mind's eye, the brick red painted concrete floor, the walls of pale institutional green, the counter built around two walls, west and north, papered in oil cloth patterned with the hunt. Later there would be a deep wash tub built in behind where I stand at my mother's knee, but for now, her sewing machine lives here, in this corner from which she can watch the comings and goings of her three offspring as we scamper about, raising hell, raising Cain, as she like to say, raising the gray in her dark brown hair, so troublesome where we three.

Chapter 11 — 1996: My Father's Moustache

I have the clearest memory of walking through a plaza between Swope Park and the Kansas City Zoo, hand-in-hand with my father and grandfather. It is one of those rare memories which I remember from inside my body rather than as an observer watching the scene from a distance. I am certain this is a true memory.

We are walking there, the three of us, my tall father towering over me on my left, my shorter grandfather on my right, only a little taller than me, now that I am nine and growing into the big bones that will eventually label me Amazon. *I am wearing a blue coat and Poppa and Grampy are both wearing gray overcoats. As we walk across the plaza and up the steps into Swope Park, I notice that everyone is staring at us.* Even then I knew why, and I was not hurt by it as I would be later when the stares of strangers condemned my sister's presence.

We were unusual in an endearing way, my father, my grandfather, and me. I was the spitting image of my father, as he was of his own father, so that the three of us walking together in the park were obviously three generations, three people who were so recognizable as grandfather, father and daughter, that all strangers could do was stop and stare. Perhaps the only thing that might have been more remarkable was if I had been a boy.

This incident was before my father grew his moustache, because once he had that wooly caterpillar under his nose, I had to put my finger across my upper lip to reveal how very much I looked like him. When I was 12 I began hiding my wide forehead with the bangs of a Beatle haircut, and so our similarity in appearance diminished a bit more.

Twice it roared back unexpectedly when my father shaved off his moustache. The first time was pre-bangs; I was 11 and he had spent six weeks in England on a business trip. When we first saw him without his wonderful bushy moustache, my mother and I both burst into tears, for we loved being tickled by it when he kissed us. My sorrow quickly turned to anger when it was revealed that his mother had made him shave it off when he stopped to visit his parents on his way home from England.

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I already had a tenuous relationship with my grandmother — two years later she would disinherit me — but I was mature enough that summer before seventh grade to realize that something was dreadfully wrong; a 42-year-old man should not be letting his mother force him to do something that hurt his family's and his own feelings. And in the midst of it all, there at the airport, strangers were once again staring at us. Now I not only looked just like him, but I had grown so tall that it was clear to everyone that I was this tall man's daughter.

I would like to say that my father never shaved his woolly caterpiller again, but at least he never let his mother force the issue a second time. It was 26 years before he took a razor to his moustache once more, the summer before he and my mother remarried. I was completely unprepared to see him without the moustache in the presence of my entire extended family.

It was the only time we managed to get the whole family together in Colorado. My mother's brother, her only sibling, raised seven daughters before he died, and all of them had brought their families to the church camp in the Rockies which we had rented for a week-long reunion. Four families came from Ohio, bringing their mother, my aunt, with them, and there was one family each from Kentucky, Arizona and Mexico. My husband, son and I drove from California to join them. And there, in the midst of the chaos of meeting some of the husbands and most of the children for the first time, in popped my father.

We hadn't known he was coming, just as we didn't yet know his separation from his second wife was final, and he and my mother were planning to remarry. Divorce was such a shameful thing in my mother's family that my cousins had made no attempt to contact my dad during the 17 years my parents were apart. They had grown up with the shame of their mother's brother who had been divorced. Later he was excluded from family events when, in his late 50s, he took a teenage bride. When my dad also married a woman 30 years his junior, though not a teenager, he too became an outsider.

So there we all were in the mountains, renewing relationships and catching up on family news when up drove my father, making the dramatic entrance he so loved, and I was doubly shocked because he was without his moustache. My older cousins remembered him that way, since he was bare faced when we moved away from Ohio in 1955.

It turned out that Daddy had just come from a classic car race where the safety rules demanded no facial hair. But what this lack of moustache and my lack of bangs (given up when I grew my hair long at 19) revealed to my cousins was that my father and I looked remarkably alike — and remark on it they did. One afternoon about 20 of us sat around a big table in the lodge, playing cards, working puzzles, and talking. My cousin Carole turned to my mom and said, "Aunt Becky, isn't there someone in the family besides Uncle John that May is like?"

"No," my mother replied. "She is 100 percent Burnham." And so at 37 it was revealed to me that I am so much my father's daughter that my mother failed to see herself in me. Thus I find myself

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making an inventory of all the ways in which I am like my father — which is probably where I should look to see why now, ten years later, I am so at odds with him.

Now, in 2021, my father is long dead. I made peace with him, forgave him, moved on. In my anger after we moved to Spokane, and I participated in a Sex Abuse Survivors Recovery group, I threw away many of the artifacts my father left behind. All I have left is his writing, hidden in the pages of the magazine he edited, and photos still waiting to be discovered, both with and without his famous moustache.