

Chapter 12 — Daffodil Dance

1957 was a changing point for me. It was the last year that I lived in the body of an elf-like being, a tiny child, pretty with blonde curls and shining eyes. Near the end of that year, I would begin to grow. And every year the box of hand-me-downs from the Ohio cousins would contain fewer things suitable for the strapping big girl I was becoming. And so began the yearly summer shopping trip with my grandmother. When I went to Kansas City to visit her, the usual trip to The Plaza ended with me going home with new school clothes. Some years there were summer visits from her in Denver when we would go to Madelyn's Shop for Children's Clothes.

1962 brought an even bigger change. In June of that year we made our last visit to Madelyn's, from which Easter and Christmas and school dresses had come for 7 years. I see the interior of that store so clearly, dressing rooms against the back wall with bright green wooden doors under which naked legs could often be seen, short little dresses on racks big enough to play under, mossy green carpet swooping up to greet us as we walked into the store. Off to the left the cash register lounged over the display of women's jewelry, an enticement for those who could not buy for their daughters only.

There we stood in the doorway, my Grandmother and I, my hand in hers, my head nearly even with the neat gray french roll pinned securely to the back of her head. I was a big girl in a little girls' dress shop; the frilly pinafores in the window would not even dress my arm, let alone the rest of me. We were now shopping for size 14, the highest number to which girls' clothing could go. If I grew again, I would wear women's clothing ever after. Never again could I claim that I was a little girl. Never again would I be able to shop in this wonderful store of lacy full skirts and ruffled sleeves, princess pearls and sassy sashes to adorn the child who inside was still too young for the body that was becoming an Amazon. I was not yet ready to be condemned to the women's department of the big dry goods store in the mall, where the grays and navys and browns that would become the mainstay of my adolescent wardrobe awaited me.

That fine June day Grammy and I came home with three lovely little-girl dresses that we'd miraculously found in size 14: a purple treat with white eyelet trim, puffy sleeves, full skirted with lacy petticoat peeking out below. I remember wearing this one on the second day of junior high, after the bus driver had charged me full fare the previous day because he did not believe that I was not yet 12. The stout little green number was my favorite, at Scottish kilt with blue plaid stripes modifying the green to rich pine and spruce, a gay sash draped from left shoulder to right hip, a gold buckle clasp the ends neatly at the waist – where I would tear my wrist on the sharp pin the single time I wore that dress.

Probably just as well I outgrew it too quickly to wear to school more than the one time, when my clumsiness took me to the nurse's office for strategically applied pressure to stop the bleeding and a giant band-aid with blue stars to match my smart plaid. That was enough to convince my mother that

if she did not immediately set the dress aside for my smaller sister, my clumsy antics would send me to ER to stitch up the suicidal seeming cuts inside my right wrist. The third dress was daffodil yellow, reminiscent of that sweet little number I'd modeled a few years back, my frugal grandmother relenting to my whimpering only because the voile and net number was marked down by seventy percent.

I twirled about in that yellow dress all summer long, now that Sunday School met in the big room with the stage. I would twirl about on the stage and remember that awful day in 1957 when I'd lapsed into dance, electrifying the fashion show with my spontaneity. The adults were charmed, but my mother misunderstood the commotion, knowing only that I was at the center it, in the spotlight of some new embarrassment I'd thrust upon her. I was just like my father – my behavior in public nearly always humiliated my mother, who shamed me in return for making a spectacle of us both. That day she didn't seem to appreciate the fact that all the others had thought me charming, stealing the show, making me a momentary star. What my mother saw was that I'd disobeyed the rules set forth for me, acting on spontaneity in preference to decorum.

My mother did not manage to break my spirit, hard though she seemed to try. And as I twirled about on stage, summer Sundays in '62, the yellow daffodil dress whirling around me, I danced away the unhappy memories of my mother's reprimand. Perhaps she thought that she could wrestle down my indomitable spirit by not apologizing. But if she knew that she was in the wrong for lashing out at me when I was in the right, she would not admit it. Perhaps she could not.

In later years, when I found myself apologizing to my son for injustices I had perpetrated on him, it was hard to be specific, hard to say "for this particular thing" instead of saying "all these things in general." All these years later, my mother and I have never talked about the daffodil dress incident, though she has given me an apology of sorts, an "all those things in general" apology that comes out not as, "I'm sorry," but as, "We did the best we could with the knowledge we had at the time." Another might hear those words and argue that my mother was not apologizing, but justifying her actions. Yes, I know she was. But I am willing to accept it as an apology, because an explanation is better than nothing at all.

Chapter 13 — The Marble Mine

My father was a conundrum. At the same time he terrified me, he was also sweet and cuddly and, in some ways, a very good dad. Daddy tried to interest Tom in his own love of cars by building a front wheel drive go-cart they named The Chug. Our house was only four doors from the corner, and right across the street from the alley was the entrance to the high school teachers' parking lot. My brother would get all in a dither as he followed Daddy down the alley and across the street, Daddy

driving The Chug, a long narrow contraption made of 2 x 4s with small wheels and a low black lawnmower seat and a steering wheel from an old tractor. Tom could hardly contain himself until they were in the parking lot and Daddy let him drive. As I got bigger, I began to beg for my turn to drive, and when I was 7, I ruined their fun by crashing The Chug into one of the enormous logs marking the outer edges of the lot. It took them months to get the poor thing running again, and Tom never forgave me.

Another of Daddy's hobbies was muzzle loading guns. On his workbench in the garage was a blow torch and a small black cauldron in which he melted lead. I loved to watch the lead melt as he held the flaming torch against the cauldron. Then he'd pour the molten lead into a special mold to make the round slugs he shot at the gun club. Trips to the gun club were a family affair. There were shooting contests for all ages and picnics with loads of food. We were given lessons in gun safety and then allowed to try our hands at shooting. It was a hug thrill to pull the trigger on the long gun and watch the slug tear through the paper target pinned to the hay bale. Daddy always looked grand in his coonskin cap with the tail hanging down his back over his fringed brown leather coat, an authentic powder horn over his shoulder.

I wore the coonskin cap at home when we played in the basement, but we never took any of the long guns down from the wall where they were mounted over the ornamental gas stove in the recreation room. The gun safety classes had put the fear of God in us, and the fear of Daddy was just as real. We avoided the guns all together after my brother shot himself in the foot one day in the driveway, right there under Daddy's supervision. The following summer, one of the men in the gun club lost his eye when his muzzle loader backfired. There were no more trips to the range after than, and Daddy never touched the guns again. He was like a man born again — he was blind in one eye from birth, and he'd suddenly realized what would happen if his own gun were to backfire into his only good eye.

It was Mom who taught us to play cards and board games. With only each other to play when after dinner, my brother and I usually settled into a series of competitive games. The one game Daddy encouraged us to play was Marbles. Every year our Christmas socks would contain a new bag of 25 Cat's eye marbles. To each of us he had given a distinctive larger marble called a shooter, which he told us came from The Marble Mine.

We laid out our string circle on the carpet and lost our marbles to each other until one of us ran out. It was usually Tom. He was a lefty, and he hadn't mastered the art of aiming as well as I had. When all that was left was his shooter, we would go to Daddy and ask him to visit The Marble Mine for us. He would disappear out into the garage while we waited anxiously in the livingroom. When he returned, he would give Tom a handful of marbles. Then we'd play some more, and Tom would gradually win back a share of what I had taken from him.

When spring came, the marbles game moved to the school yard where only the boys were

allowed to play. I was forced to humiliate myself with jacks — scraping my hands raw on the blacktop when we weren't allowed to play indoors in the gym — while Tom lost his marbles time after time. At home he would beg for more, and Daddy would provide them. We repeated this pattern over and over, Tom winning more marbles from me after he'd been re-supplied from The Marble Mine, and then losing the whole bunch to the boys at school. Daddy warned us that The Marble Mine was going to run dry, but it never did.

Because I have an insatiable curiosity, and because I have always needed to know everything there is to know about everything there is to know, I eventually found The Marble Mine. Hidden in a wooden box in the back of a drawer on a high shelf above his workbench, I uncovered the precious stash of marbles tucked carefully into a goldenrod-colored linen bag, its drawstring tightly corralling the ancient marbles from Daddy's childhood. These were the marbles that were brought out on rare occasions in small handfuls for us to admire, but we were never allowed to play with them outside the house — they were far too valuable. On top of the closed fabric bag was a pile of plastic bags sealed shut with thin stapled cardboard labels; here was bag after bag of 25 Cat's eye marbles, just like the ones we found in our socks every Christmas, not in the mine itself, but burying the mine in future planned loses. Our dad, who fussed about the cost of everything else, evidently thought marbles were a good investment.

Chapter 14 — 1963: Silence

Only once before I left home for good did I break the silence, and that once was enough to teach me to hold my tongue. A burgeoning friendship was building with Cheryl from 8th grade English class. We had exchanged telephone numbers and were now experimenting with phoning each other after school. My mother had begun working the year before, so by now I was used to the pervasive silence of the big house on High Street, where I spent lonely afternoons waiting for the return of my parents and siblings and the turmoil they brought with them. My brother, now in high school, had found other ways to fill his time.

But for me, there was no Chess Club, no best friend just down the street, no homework that required hours after school at the library. There was only television and the telephone. Telephone calls were a novelty, so different from the mindless TV programming of early 1960s afternoons. The soaps couldn't hold a candle to what went on in our household. So the conversations with Cheryl brought new and interesting topics to the dinner table. It was such a relief not to have to talk about myself.

Gradually, we'd gotten beyond gossiping about our classmates, beyond Cheryl's fascination with Richard Chamberlain and my crush on Neil, a ninth grader with the lead in *Brigadoon*. Our tongues had

tiptoed into treacherous terrain, and I admitted to stealing a movie magazine from Woolworth's the previous fall.

"Is that the worst thing you ever did?" Cheryl wanted to know.

I, who was still learning to think before speaking, responded quickly. "No."

"What's the worst thing you ever did?" Cheryl asked.

"I can't tell you," I whispered, horrified that I'd already let a slip of the tongue carry me into territory I knew should never be shared.

"Come on. I'll tell you the worst thing I ever did, if you'll tell me."

"No, I can't." I felt my face go hot with shame as I thought about my big secret.

"Why not?"

"Because it's too terrible."

"It can't be that bad," Cheryl argued. "I'm sure the worst thing I ever did is much worse than anything you could ever even think of."

Could that possibly be true? I wondered. Could someone else actually have committed a bigger sin than my own? What could possibly be worse than what I had done, what I continued to do, even though I knew that I was going to go to hell for it. I had to know.

"All right," I told Cheryl. "I'll tell you, but you have to tell me your terrible thing first."

"Okay." Cheryl launched into her story. "Once I found a telephone number for Richard Chamberlain in a movie magazine, and I called him. When he answered the phone, I panicked and couldn't say anything. So I hung up on him. I was so ashamed. And then, when my parents asked about the call to California on their phone bill, I lied to them and said I wasn't home that day, so the phone company must have made a mistake."

I felt my stomach clench as I realized Cheryl was the one who couldn't think of a worse sin than a silly phone call to a movie star.

"That wasn't so bad," I told Cheryl.

"Well, it's the worst thing *I've* ever done."

There was a long pause as I considered what would happen to my reputation if I told Cheryl about my terrible sin.

"Come on," Cheryl prompted, "it's your turn."

"I can't say it," I replied quietly.

"You said you would," Cheryl accused.

I was trapped. I knew I had to keep my word, or the sin might become magnified.

"I'll tell you," I said at last. "I just can't say the word."

"What word?"

I took a deep breath. "It's a four-letter word. It begins with F."

“Fuck?!” Cheryl shouted into the phone. “You fucked somebody? Are you crazy? Who did you fuck?”

“My brother.”

Chapter 15 — 1969: Silence Revisited

After what seemed like an eternity, I finally received a response from the stunned silence. There was a loud click as Cheryl hung up the phone.

I stared at the dead phone for a long time before I laid it gently in its cradle. Then I went to the cupboard, took out the box of Sugar Smacks, and carried it with me to the television.

At the dinner table that night there were questions about why I was so quiet. Did I have a fight with Cheryl? My father grilled me, demanding to know what the fight was about, but I refused to tell him. There were some things that were not to be said aloud, I had learned that day, some people who could not be trusted with the truth. Cheryl never spoke to me again, and it would be six more years before I could trust someone enough to tell the truth about what my brother and I had done.

Three years later my brother left home, leaving an emptiness behind him. Now that Tom was gone, I thought it would be safe, but Daddy seemed to take over where Tom had left off. Though he never actually touch me, he gave me shocking books to read, told me illicit jokes and stories, and grilled me about my sex life. With Tom away at college, there were no more lies to tell. It was easy to tell the truth, to honestly say that no one was touching me. It was also easy to be shocked by the books and stories. More than once Mom had reprimanded Daddy for telling nasty jokes in front of me, but she didn't have a clue about the novels full of dirty words and shocking descriptions of what people did in bed, and on the floor, and in the car, and in the swimming pool. My mind reeled with what I was learning; it was so much juicier than anything I'd learned at church camp.

Freedom came at last when it was my turn to go away to college. There I found the secure relationships I had craved all my life. Here were other girls who were oddly mature like me, girls who had experienced a darker side of life that made them grow up too quickly. There was Jo, whose father had died one afternoon while she was out feeding her horse, Jo whose guilt at not being at her father's death bed visibly ate at her. And there was Ann, whose Christian Science upbringing was even stranger than my conservative religious training. And yet it was also oddly familiar, calling to mind an early childhood friend with whom I'd once attended Sunday School. Ann's parents had sent their intractable daughter away to a private religious boarding school, where she'd become a master of philosophy and sarcasm.

As a threesome, we became inseparable, scandalizing the quiet college with shocking pranks for

which we were never caught. There was the afternoon we tossed a whole watermelon off the roof of the eight-story dormitory after hearing it would sound the same as a human body hitting the ground. We were scandalized by how long the broken pieces lay around the courtyard after the disappointingly disgusting splat we'd heard. It took days for someone to alert the groundskeepers that clean up was needed. Were they waiting for us to clean it up ourselves?

Then there was the night we filled the dorm elevators with the furniture from the lobby and innocently listened to the cursing maids the next morning. There were adventurous trips to the hills with Jo's notorious older boyfriend, and even a trip home to my house in Denver, where my two best friends learned why I like dorm food. There were long talks and heavy soul searching and deep shared moments that gave each of us tremendous peace of mind. I actually began to hope what my brother and I had done would not condemn me to lifelong ridicule as I'd feared.

Finally there came the moment of truth, the moment I dared tell the secret a second time, not on the phone, but face-to-face with these two women I knew I could trust.

We were sitting out in Prexy's Pasture, enjoying the sunny afternoon. It was the summer of 1969. News of the sexual revolution had finally reached the University of Wyoming. It had been the lecture topic in Ann's sociology class that morning, and now we were debating the pros and cons of virginity. Jo admitted what we'd already suspected, that her boyfriend had relieved her of that decision some time ago. She seemed unconcerned about the issue. Ann, though her virginity remained intact, expressed the desire to be rid of it. I felt myself go cold in the hot sun as I realized that I too would be expected to share the state of my own virginity.

"What's wrong, May?" Ann asked. "Don't you agree that life would be easier if you didn't have to worry about whether or not you're a virgin?"

"It's not that simple," I replied. My friends looked at me with unasked questions on their faces and I pressed on. "Once you give up your virginity, you can't take it back."

"Why would you want it back?" Jo asked, puzzled.

"Because then you're labeled. Branded, like the woman in that *Scarlet Letter* book we were supposed to read in high school. Everyone looks down on you, despises you, laughs at you, judges you, condemns you . . ." I ran out of verbs and burst into tears.

Instantly my friends were holding me, stroking my arms and back tenderly as I cried.

"You never read *The Scarlet Letter*, did you?" Ann teased gently as my tears began to subside.

I looked up, startled. "No. I managed to avoid that class somehow."

"Hester was a real heroine," Jo put in. "She overcame the ridicule and won over the people who had judged her."

"I didn't know that," I replied.

"But you do know how she felt, don't you?"

I nodded, uncertain that I could speak without crying again.

“Who did this to you?” Ann asked.

I look at my friend and felt the weight of the long silence lifting. “My brother,” I said softly. My voice grew stronger as I began to tell my friends the story of sexual encounters that began before I was old enough to remember, and continued until my brother left home.”

“Why do you think it’s your fault?” Jo asked when the story was finally out.

“Because he told me it was. Because it’s always the woman’s fault. Because I’m stupid. I don’t know why. It never occurred to me that it might *not* be my fault.” I sighed heavily. After a long pause, I returned to the earlier discussion. “You see, Ann, *not* being a virgin is much harder than being one. With Jo it’s different because she has a guy who cares about her, but that’s not the way it has been for me. I live in fear that the first man who cares for me will end up hating me because I’m not a virgin.”

A few months later my fear came true. I dared to tell the man I was dating my own brother had taken my virginity, and it became a nightmare. He ridiculed me and called me vile names and expected me to perform unthinkable acts because I was somehow “experienced.” I got as far away from him as I could. And when I did, I met the man who became my husband, who loved me deeply, who held me through all the terrors of therapy and re-education as I learned that my brother’s sin was not my own. My only sin was keeping silent.

Chapter 16 — 1971: Saint Ellen

I contemplate the label on the jar of preserves amidst the dirty dishes. Saint Somebody from France made these raspberry preserves I’d enjoyed so much on my toast these past few mornings when I was paying attention to my sugar intake — though according to statistics, my diet doesn’t matter much — I learned that long ago in a statistics class at the University of Wyoming. There were many classes at that splendid college where I met so many of my still closest friends. But Saint Ellen puts me in mind of a particular class taught by the priest — whose name I have forgotten — at Newman Center, the Catholic headquarters for all college related programs.

Dan and I had progressed to the stage of rings and a wedding date, but we had not yet scored the Dispensation he felt would enable his mother to forgive him for following my lead and getting married in the Methodist Church. The one inflexible requirement for the ominous Dispensation required my attendance at an 18-week class which would shepherd me through all the ins and outs of Roman Catholic doctrine; only then could I ask for the revered written document blessing our marriage in the Methodist Church; only then could I officially decline to join the Catholic church. They would not take my word for it that I already knew my own mind. It did not matter that even before I met my

husband, my first semester at the University had found me taking Comparative Christian Religions of the United States, even though the credits I earned for it did not count toward my degree. I had much to glean and compare with what I already thought I understood from my years of growing up immersed in Methodism.

I spent my first 18 years in a household of Catholic prejudice and Protestant posturing. I grew up going as often as twice daily to the Methodist church down the block, right next door to the elementary school. There was Sunday School and weekly worship, there were women's meetings in the big social hall, youth meetings in the gymnasium, Girl Scouts in the back room behind the boilers. There were Easter egg hunts in the courtyard garden and Poppa up on stage in the red velvet Santa suit, ho-ho-ho-ing in his booming growly bear voice, reveling in the awe of a sea of upturned young faces. There was me up on that same stage in a pretty, full-skirted dress, modeling for the spring fashion show.

I see a little girl of 6 in shiny black-patten Mary Janes, arms thrust stiffly at her sides, struggling to stand still, not to squirm, to wiggle, to burst into dance on the enticingly enormous stage. Did I misbehave? Indeed I did, whirling and twirling in the yellow Easter dress, blonde curls flying out behind. Then the tantrum backstage when I was forced to take off the pretty daffodil dress I thought I would get to keep. On Easter morn I dressed in a pathetic pink hand-me-down dress from friends of my grandmother, whose generous box arrived each year until I finally surpassed them in girth. After that, all the frilly gowns went to Ellen, who never seemed to gain weight like the rest of us.

Our church celebrated several holidays, not the least of which was Halloween with its scary spook house and its candy and costume contests, but there were not nearly as many holy days in Methodism as in my playmate Elaine's Catholic faith. Perhaps it was my love of celebrations that drew me to her "Feasts of the Saints" and "Stories of the Christ Child in Galilee." I devoured every book on Elaine's shelf, almost literally, for I dog-eared the pages, breaking off the brittle corners of the oldest books, nibbling them with my sharp front teeth, leaving little empty triangles behind. Now I bite my fingernails as I read, still ingesting stories through the memory of my gut.

My Protestant upbringing pooh-pooed the foolishness of Popes and Saints, of miracles and made-up legends, Baby Jesus going about the countryside with his saintly mom, healing and amazing everyone. But I was hungry in my soul, and I filled my emptiness with fabulous stories of the famous family and the folks that followed in their wake, down through the centuries to Julia and Theresa and Francis and Clair. I liked the concept of someone special looking out for me, and I nearly strayed over the line into going to Mass with Elaine as I contemplated — ever so briefly — joining the Catholic Church; but my father stepped in and roared as he put his foot down. I abandoned my search for Catholic truths and gave myself over to the stories of the founders of Methodism, John Wesley and his brother Charles; Susanna, their saintly mother, who became known as the Mother of Methodism. My lessons insisted she raised all 19 of her children to adulthood and taught each one of them to read and

write, but I find this to be a myth — only nine actually survived. She was the closest thing the Methodists had to a saint.

Saints, I learned from Father Forgotten at the Newman Center, were the mainstay of every Catholic household, and I was misinformed if I believed otherwise. But I did believe otherwise. For though I purported to know my own mind in these matters, in truth, I was only certain about what I did *not* believe. And for all his attempts to indoctrinate me, Father Forgotten only succeeded in alienating me from his fold.

We had come at last to the final interview, to the time when I sat facing Father across his desk, Dan to my left, explaining why I could not promise the Holy See I would raise my children in the Catholic Church. There were not going to be any children. I did not intend to bear children and therefore thought it foolish to sign a paper stating otherwise.

“I believe it is wrong to bring children like my sister into the world,” I explained, rubbing my hands back and forth on my denim knees. I had already told him the results of the genetic testing my parents had undergone, dooming me to a 25% chance of bearing a child with Down Syndrome. “Besides,” I added, forcing my point, “It was such hell growing up with her, I couldn’t bear to have a retarded child of my own.”

“Ah,” said the thoughtful Father, his hands steeped together under the tip of his nose, fingers tap-taping lightly back and forth. “But you forget, my dear, the lessons from the scripture that we went over in class last week. Children like your sister are the true saints, the ones who are with us in the flesh right here in this day and age.”

My hands paused in their rubbing, and I felt my heart turn dark within. Whatever other foolish beliefs I rejected in the Catholic Church, most particularly the nonsense of Mary being the Mother of God, the idea that my sister might be a saint was absolutely the most foolish — it meant the twisted thing that was my sister was without sin. In my mind, her very existence was a sin, one of those Old Testament diatribes suggesting my parents were at fault. If the sins of the father were to be visited upon the sons for seven generations, then surely my seemingly cursed existence was the fault of my ancestors.

Rather than wondering what marvelous things my sainted sister might achieve, instead I contemplated what hideous crimes might have been committed generations back to cause Ellen’s unfortunate state of being.

Chapter 17 — 1999: I Love You Anyway

How can I write about Ellen now, now that she is dying? “The psychologist told us last week she is in the final stage,” my mother said on the phone on Thursday. Thursday. I will always remember

this day, this last conversation with Ellen. I came home late to the message that Ellen had had an unusually bad day, that they had taken her to the emergency room. But my mother's speaking to a machine was not sufficient to prompt her to tell the tale coherently, and I had to call back to find out what had actually happened.

Ellen had gone to the emergency room after a morning of shakes and stumbles and falls followed by a four-hour nap from which she woke no better than before. I was surprised that my parents elected to take her to the emergency room, given her terrific fear of doctors and needles. At the hospital they drew blood for more tests, but there was little else to be done other than comfort my parents, comfort my sister. There is so much these small town hospitals do not know, but the doctor was nice at least, according to my mother. Finally they brought her home, and when I called, I was surprised to learn that Ellen was still awake, since it was after 10 at night.

"Do you want to talk to your sister?" I heard my mother say. And before I could respond, I heard Ellen's voice on the phone, clear and bright, like it had not been for months.

"Hi," she said tentatively, as though she was unsure what to expect from me.

"Hi!" I responded excitedly, "How are you?" I could not keep the thrill out of my voice, she sounded so like her true self.

She mumbled something in response which I could not understand, and then, in a moment of absolute lucidity, she said, "I love you."

I was stunned. What I heard in those three simple words was the lifetime of messages she had been trying to convey to me over the years. She did not say, "I love you anyway," the charming verbal slap she had been giving me for the past 10 years, ever since our parents remarried. I suspect it was something she picked up from my dad, who probably asked her or Mom at some point if he was loved *anyway*, even though he abandoned them for a 17-year frolic in a younger woman's bed. Thankfully, I was already married.

He goaded me with it, whenever they called and Ellen was around to talk to me. "I love you anyway," she'd say to me, and then he'd echo it, demanding to know if I'd heard what she had said. "Yes, Daddy," I'd say, "I heard her." And then he'd laugh, in that way he had that told me I'd better hear her, I'd better feel guilty, and I'd better appreciate him for rubbing it in.

But we are beyond that now. Somewhere in the turning of the years, between the counseling and the unavoidable reality of growing up enough to realize that at 40-something I was too old to be intimidated by my father, Ellen began to deteriorate. There were fewer phone calls in which she listened in and interjected excitedly that she wanted to visit me in San Francisco, home of *her* 49ers. Initially the decrease was due to my studied attempt to call only after she was in bed. This particular ploy spared me from my father's telling laugh that said, "you'd better feel guilty that she loves you in spite of how you've always treated her." Later it was because the Alzheimers had begun to take its toll, and she no

longer remembered how to talk on the telephone.

But now, in this odd moment, at a time when she should have been asleep and wasn't, she was giving me this wondrous gift. The clarity of her voice, the purity of her emotion, the depth of her forgiveness pierced my heart with those three words: "I love you."

I responded in kind, but I'm not sure she heard, for the next thing I knew, my mother was speaking again. "I'm sorry she didn't say anything," Mom said. I was stunned. My mother had been sitting right next to her while Ellen was on the phone, but she had not heard a single word.

"It's a *Guideposts* story," my friend Jessie said, when I relayed the experience to her; but it is more than that.

I want to believe that this small miracle will work another miracle in me. I want to believe when I step off the plane next week and go to see her for what will likely be the last time, I will sit beside her bed and hold her hand and tell her all the things I've never been able to say. I will tell her I'm sorry, that I didn't understand. I should never have directed my anger at *her*, when it was our parents who I was really mad at. I will tell her I do not blame her for the problems we grew up with, that I know it is not her fault she was born with Down Syndrome. (Dare I say "retarded"? Or will that enrage her next time she comes back to lucidity?) I will talk to her about the hereafter, reminding her she is loved by people who have already passed over to the next life, people like Uncle Dick and Grampy, who will come to meet her when it is time for her to go. (Dare I say "death" or "die"? Or will I only frighten her even more?)

I will tell her in my search for a "real" sister to take her place, that I finally discovered she *was* my real sister. For all that Margot and Ann and Noela have been sisters to me, none of them will ever truly take her place. I will say the words she has said so often to me, "I love you anyway," but there will be no intention of guilt attached to them, only forgiveness for not being the perfect sister I thought I deserved. But most of all, I will tell her goodbye, because I know now even if she lingers for another year or more, the sister I knew so briefly and loved almost too late has already died. She told me in the words "I love you" when I last talked to her on the phone.