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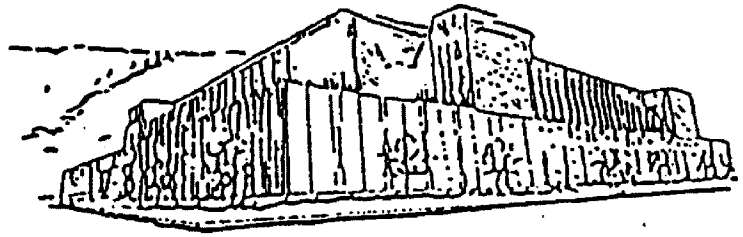
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LICKING THE BEATERS

By

Shereeliz E. Caldwell

B.A., University of Montana, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1998

Approved by:



Chairman, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School

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Representative Excerpts From a Trilogy of Creative Non-Fiction Manuscripts Collectively Entitled "Licking The Beaters"

Chairperson: Debra Magpie Earling *DE*

The earliest portion of this semi-autobiographical reminisce, "Licking The Beaters" re-creates from childhood diaries, middle-aged memories and the author's imagination one horizon-lifting party her family gave in the 1950s in Savannah, Georgia.

The purpose of the piece is to recall a sense of the mundane events in the life of families in that Southern semi-rural segregated neighborhood through animating remembered events on the page. To that end, the author has attempted to imitate the voices and happenings of one pivotal weekend, as experienced while she was still a child, albeit "born thirty years old and with the memory of a vice-grip," according to her mother.

The latter part of this work deals with her and her sister as Air Force "brats." The phrase "licking the beaters" alludes both to her Dad's military career in the years of the Cold War and to her Mom's homemaking career in the halcyon years (for children) of stay-at-home mothers, who should have been called domestic engineers, performing multi-faceted roles, 48 hours a day.

The novel focuses on these two sisters trying to adjust to their family's constantly uprooted military lifestyle. While frequently being the new kids on the block, they had been expected to prepare themselves, in the marriage-centered focus of those times, to settle down and become good wives, for better or worse.

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Rule #1. Grin & bear it: all are fair game in love and war.

The sun glinting off of my sister Bonnie's walky-talky antenna had darted like lightening bug streaks. It had been enough to make me see stars, except luckily I had been wearing my Minnie Mouse infrared polka-dotted aviator shades so I could track her Air Force reconnaissance mission despite interference.

I hadn't known how they'd tricked a sissy like me, a bona fide bookworm, into playing in these on-going neighborhood wars. The experience, however, has remained an indelible part of what I still recall as the most important weekend of my early-bird years. I had been in a hurry to grow up, there on Nine Pine Valley Road in Savannah, Georgia. I'd always been grouching and snooping, sure that I was missing out on all the good stuff, by staying a kid for so long.

For most of our grade school life, this neighborhood where we'd owned our first home, with its idyllic potholed, muddy roads and pine tree forests, had been a cozy haven for my sister, Bonnie and me. It hadn't, however, been all that peaceful, as we'd usually been waging wars with all the kids within shouting distance. These battles had started with quarrels over the true identity of Santa Claus, and had

escalated through hair-pulling fights over who'd had first dibs on some boy. After we had received a few history lessons, from grandpas, teachers and parents we'd gotten more organized and had divided into armies, fighting specific battles, with makeshift uniforms, and all the requisite paraphenalia like squirt guns and water balloons to lob from our tree forts back in the woods.

During this particular Easter vacation we'd fought our way in daily skirmishes from Attila the Hun's invasion to World War III which had been fought on Mars against an invisible enemy. War had been almost everybody's favorite ongoing game, with so many of our pals' dads being in the Armed Services, including our own. Our father's Air Force squadron had been sent to Guam six months earlier, during some national emergency, and we kids had become a self-proclaimed Neighborhood Watch, protecting the home front in their absence.

Not being a tomboy like my sister, these games had been a tad hard on me, but I'd played along to be one of the gang. Luckily Dad's squadron had been due to return home that weekend and I'd intended to resign from active duty in the neighborhood. While Bonnie and I had tried to fit in wherever our Dad, a Captain in the Air Force, had been stationed and had learned to get along or go along with everybody else, nevertheless I'd been suffering from battle

fatigue. In our family's fly-by-night lifestyle being literally "here today and gone tomorrow" we sisters had learned to make frequent chameleon-like changes to adjust to any new town's peculiarities. We couldn't spend time dwelling on analyzing the differences very much, always hurrying to catch up and be accepted in new schools, by new groups of strangers. The important thing had been to make at least one new friend muy pronto in order to have someone to give you the low down of your new setting, or at least a couple of cues. Like the Lone Ranger, we had to find a savvy Tonto wherever we went, to teach us the ropes and save us from loneliness and danger, by giving us a crash course in survival and the social lay of the land.

Savannah had been a first, as we'd almost remained here long enough to feel as if we belonged, which had given us twinges of anxiety, knowing that on only a few days notice, our family could be given orders and be expected to pick up and leave, following Dad wherever he'd been ordered to go. The thought of leaving Savannah had made us have our first regrets about Dad's leaving architecture to join the service and see the world. As Dad's "dependents," we'd needed to be able to travel well, adjust easily, and never breathe a negative word about any place where we'd lived, being temporary visitors, or almost their paid guests.

Before Savannah, nowhere had felt like home to us

except being with each other, or maybe in our family's car, a three-holed, smiley-grilled green Buick, which had so often housed our family traveling through nights, sometimes through weeks, driving from shore to shore, always going toward some new destination which, to my sister and me had only meant a name: Plainsfield, Laguna Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Tucson, Albuquerque, Biloxi, or Savannah.

Some of the locals everywhere we'd gone had called us kids "Air Force brats." I'd always tried to believe they'd only meant the out-of-control hooligan boys who'd had fathers stationed at the same Air Force bases as us. These posts had usually been located on the outskirts of town--airplanes needing wide parking spaces. Air Force families' had also commonly been thought of by the natives as perennial outsiders, no more than well-heeled transients.

We'd thought surely nobody had been meaning to be calling us girls "brats," not there in Savannah, anyway, for Mom had done her best to turn Bonnie and me into regular little Southern belles, with manners so sweet, as if butter wouldn't melt in our mouths, or on our clean white Sunday-best, go-to-meeting gloves. It had been lucky that Mom hadn't known what had gone on in the neighborhood games on Pine Valley Road, which had been far from tea-party proper or "ladylike."

Nevertheless, it had been during that pivotal weekend

that despite being a late bloomer--too small to even be able to imagine myself needing to wear the training bra Mom had left deflatedly waiting for me in my top drawer, (a size 28 A cup); that I'd discovered for myself, from looking under ordinary events, the main truths of the whole grown-ups' world, including all I'd ever need to know about the secrets of love.

Maybe it had been because of being raised in such an ambivalent world: part hard-core military discipline but also a bit vagabond gypsy--that I'd developed such a tenacious memory, harboring impressions as a survival tool, my security blanket, of sorts; I'd developed this trait of hanging onto images of people and places and latching onto words to stow them away as if to make them into something tangible I could anchor myself with, building a sense of continuity in my life despite being an Air Force brat. Perhaps it had also been true, as Mom had always said, that I had been born thirty years old with the mind of a vise grip. Or maybe my memories have held fast because I'd developed the habit early-on of writing down every speck of my life in girlhood diaries, trying to keep track of myself, on paper at least, while continually uprooted by these travels.

After having done this for years, ordinary events had seemed to arrange themselves naturally into a storybook

form, at least in my mind, compressing the lag times. Any or all of the above, fueled by a lifetime spent at the matinees, may be, at least, maybe, why this weekend I'm about to tell you about still feels as warm as my pulse and the flashbacks just as vivid, as if they had happened only yesterday. It had truly been such a turning point, that the happenings in the decades which have flown by since, I now see, retrospectively, as all having been foreshadowed by the metaphorical significance of the events of those early days, deep in the heart of Dixie and me, at our most vulnerable and naive, which is not to say, altogether innocent.

Lesson #2. " ...you've got to have a dream, if you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream to come true?"

I'd loved those lyrics from The King and I. Musicals like Carousel and Oklahoma! had fed my imagination in my grade school years. Before that, I had gotten my best earliest advice on life from my storybook role models: Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty and Wendy, with her Tribe of Lost Boys from Never-Never Land, who'd been my personal favorite, topped only by Tinkerbelle.

Back on the battlefield, however, it had surely been good that the higher-ups in the command chain in our WWII game, couldn't have read my peaceful fairy tale thoughts, sung as if in a musical. Yes, I'd lapsed into non-regulation types of daydreams, (cupids with bows and arrows instead of soldiers with grenades) when we weren't actively engaged in combat. Usually, as the mapmaker for these field skirmishes, I'd been allowed off-sides, slightly out of harm's way, to protect my top secret papers from mud balls, fire brigade hosemen, ice cube missiles, sandstorms and food fights.

On that particular Friday, however, no matter where I'd gone, I'd come under so-called friendly fire, and had gotten catsup squirted down the back of my shirt. Someone had snuck up on me from behind when I'd let down my guard,

failing to protect my rear, forgetting that our enemy was supposed to act like an invisible foe.

It had been further along in the lull in the combat action, when I'd been given a Pass to go change my clothes, that I'd been surprised to find myself more intent upon trying to wash that red stain off my best Roadrunner tee shirt, than in worrying about which side had been winning World War III.

I must have had a sudden growth spurt or a change of heart as I'd stood at the bathroom sink, frowning at the freckles on my nose. Despite seeing such a Plain Jane staring back at me from the mirror, I'd known that I was becoming somewhat more suited to playing the part of the sweetheart of some soldier, rather than playing G.I. Jo, herself. To that end, I'd dabbed a little of Mom's Chanel No. 9 under my armpits before returning to our backyard battlefield, now dressed more appropriately in splotchy camous to please my fellow troops, but with that perfume wafting my true intentions which had gone AWOL.

During official time-outs in the artillery barrages, my mind had tended to go meandering down the primrose path. Although I'd been told I was far too young for these kinds of lovey-dovey thoughts, they had kept swimming in that goldfish bowl of my head, like little minnows, bothering me with expectations that maybe some romantic encounter was

waiting for me just around the next corner, or lying beside me there in our trenches, shooting off his cap gun and "powing" aloud for added clout.

I'd been raised on movies, until my own life had seemed to be scenes from one, complete with the strains of violins, and high expectations of a happily-ever-after ending. I'd had to dream up my own unexpected plot twists to these ordinary events, lying in my bed at night, writing in my diary or reinventing any day, more to my liking, having become so precociously love-struck that I'd already become preoccupied looking for my better half.

I couldn't help myself; I'd become obsessed with trying to imagine the boy whom I'd one day marry. My most captivating thought, which could buoy me out of any homework doldrums or battlefield slumps, had been: "At this very same moment, somewhere in the world, my future husband is alive!"

I'd wondered what he'd looked like and how he'd liked his breakfast cereal fixed. Was he a Rice Krispies' man or a Cheerios' kid? I had been pretty sure that any boy who'd preferred oatmeal, if he'd been given a choice, would be far too serious-minded for me to cook breakfast for, every morning in my future scrub-a-dub-dub, oven-hugging, hubby-loving life, which I'd been eagerly looking forward to. I'd figured anything had to be better than these war games I'd

been forced to play, in what the adults had assured me, I'd one day remember as, "the best years of my life."

From my early storybook years and the scenes in our neighborhood, I'd known there was only one fated destination for girls in this world. Therefore, being a little precocious, I had tried to prepare myself, in advance, to meet my destiny, as somebody's wife.

When I'd been younger, I had felt I was growing up like Rapunzel in her tower spinning her yarn and humming, "Some day my prince will come...", which was Snow White's famous work tune.

My favorite early storybook heroines had worked hard; looked good in their raggedy clothes; and had kept smiling and humming, throughout their menial chores. Their good attitudes had eventually enchanted some prince and in their happily-ever-after years they'd lived adorning castles, where they'd fared better, freed forevermore from dishpan hands.

I'd discovered the unknown secret to these girls' castledom successes, by reading over and over the entire life histories of these princesses of storybook fame. My revelation was that every single one of these rags-to-riches stories had hinged upon the girls in their garrets being befriended by barnyard animals, forest beasts, or strange-looking gnomes.

This had given me angst in my awkward grasshopper stage, seeing as how I had been sorely lacking in every single one of the talents needed to enter this enchanted world. I couldn't carry a tune; spin gold; bleach catsup stains out of my snowy whites; nor understand what my dog, Shad, had been trying to tell me when I'd commanded him to "Speak!" All of his woofs had sounded alike to me, whether he'd barked only once or had repeated himself. My failure to understand him, had frequently caused him such frustration, he'd rolled over in disgust and played dead: end of conversation. I'd fared even more poorly trying to understand the secret language of our taciturn guinea pigs, Burt and Ernie, who had wiggled their noses, but held their tongues.

Aware of my shortcomings, I'd decided that I'd better start early to look around for my future love match, from amongst the ranks of the unnoticed or naughty boys who would never grow up to be any kind of a prince. I'd known from the start I'd have to content myself with finding a long-shot of a honey, who, like myself, might blossom on the home stretch, against all odds, if given enough warm fuzzies.

Back in the fantasy land of magic swine turning into knights, I'd still had to wonder whether I would have had the right stuff to be a heroine, anyhow. Would I have been fearless enough to kiss a frog or caress a horny toad?

Could I have kept a decent boarding house for seven small dwarves coated with coal dust and testy from working all day down in the Heigh Ho mines? Being love-struck early, I'd often still pondered when or where my prince and I might finally meet in the future.

Meanwhile I'd done my best to be prepared for my first unprincely, ordinary real world boyfriend by practicing on a kid from the neighborhood. My best substitute for the real thing had been Gordon Goner, as he'd been so conveniently located. He'd lived a mere two houses over from us on Pine Valley Road, on the same side of the street.

We had also shared: a trench in WWII; daily rides on the #2 school bus, and similar backgrounds, as Gordon's dad had been in the Air Force too and his Mom was a housewife like mine. That goes without saying, as growing up, I'd never known any married woman who had worked outside of her home, as they'd faced more than a mountain of chores just to feed, clean, and clothe their husbands and kids. They hadn't the time to take on a second job.

Since my dad had been up for a promotion to major, Mom had volunteered to hostess the neighborhood's Welcome Home from Guam Luau at our house, to help Dad's chances. To prepare for this luau, Mom had invented a new recipe--her Mile High Strawberry Surprise Cake; sewed us clothes of a tropical design, and for months had been doing landscaping

and decorating around the islander theme. She'd called this event the "horizon-lifting" party of our family's history. Dad had stiff competition for his next promotion from Captain Ullstrom, who was the other candidate due to rise up in the ranks to major. Capt. Ullstrom had been regular Air Force, while Dad had only been signed up for a twenty-year hitch as a reserve, which had given him a slight disadvantage. Mom, too, had to casserole herself over the competition from Mizrus Inez Ullstrom, who had created the most amazing cherry pies which she'd dubbed "husband pleasers," and which no other wife in our squadron had been able to duplicate from her recipe, not even our Mom.

Cooking amazing dinners and desserts had been a big plus at this base, as Dad's squadron commander had bragged that he had a sweet tooth as big as the Texas panhandle, and likewise a keen appreciation for ladies who had known their way around a kitchen, frosting their cakes "big-time, like we do it in Texas." Bonnie and I had wished Mom would have let us cook for this commander. We'd known the correct measurements for the frosting layer versus the cake layer was to make them exactly equal, inch-wise, with lots of extra fluffy stuff left over to lick off the beaters.

Although our family had been a party-giving clan, Mom had said, that this upcoming one had an importance and

significance for our family beyond supporting Dad's promotion, or having lots of fun. She'd said it "might even save us." Neither Bonnie nor I could get mother to explain what she'd meant by this statement which had sounded rather foreboding. We had been as if on pins and needles, anxious for everything at this luau to go precisely the way our Mom had so meticulously planned it.

I'd returned and waited in my clean camou shirt that day, writing in both my War Notes, and in my personal diary. The other WWII troops hadn't come back from our time-out truce, except, of course, for tiny Rita Mae from next door, who had practically lived in our yard. I had been knock-on-wood glad that her mother, Betty Tyson, hadn't told our Mom any more gossip to get my sister and me in hot water again.

That previous week the tendrils of the neighborhood grapevine had climbed up to nearly strangle the reputation of my sister and me on our Mom's score card. After what Betty had reported to her, in my mind's eye, I'd seen Mom looking suspiciously at us as if we were those little stick figures in the Hangman's Noose game, poised precariously, with only one decisive misstep left, to seal our fates.

As I'd watched Rita Mae looking so innocently cute, I couldn't stop myself from reliving those guilty moments from the previous week, like it or not.

Rule #3: Loose Lips Sink Ships.

I'd hated it when the adults told each other rumors about us kids, to get us in hot water. Earlier that week Betty had called Mom over to the back fence to come over to put their heads together for a private moment. They hadn't known that Bonnie and I and Gordon had been laced up inside the tent playing doctor and could hear them clear as day.

"Lee? Lee, come over to the fence for a sec. Do I ever have a good one to tell you!" Betty had lured Mom away from picking ferns from our flowerbeds. Mom had traipsed right over, loving to keep up with the Jones' on the grapevine. Out of the Tysons' kitchen window we could hear our neighbor's husband hollering, "Betty? Hon, where are you off to? There's no butter on these grits. Betty?"

Betty had looked frazzled and had been wearing her homemade house dress, which had matched her kitchen curtains. She had bought excess yardage of that peaches and cherry patterned cotton at Woolworth's Spring Cleaning sale. Mom had reassured her that nobody had been going to notice that she'd matched her curtains. Besides, Mom had said, it must be nice not to clash with your kitchen's color scheme like her own house dresses had often done.

Betty had Ricky Jr. riding on her hip, although his legs had dangled almost to her knees. He had just been

staunchly refusing to walk on his own. Betty, I had seen, because I had been lying on my belly looking out from the open bottom edge of our tent. I could only see half of the ladies, but all of Rita Mae, who had always clung to her Mom's left leg everywhere she'd gone. Betty had been shaking her leg, trying to extract this barnacle of a child. She had lost one of her pink terrycloth slippers in the process.

"See what you did, girl? Rita Mae you get yourself back in the house and show your Daddy where the Oleo is. You know--that butter compartment on the fridge door with the picture of the cow on it? Go fetch for your Dad. Scat. This is grown-up talk."

I had watched as Rita Mae had reluctantly gone towards their house, after receiving an encouraging shove on her fanny from her Mom. Somehow, we had been able to tell that whatever Betty had been about to report had something to do with us. Forewarned, Bonnie had started unlacing the tent so we could go hide. We had both stood there quietly contrite and expecting the worst, unnoticed about twenty feet behind the Moms. Bonnie had hurriedly relaced the tent, hiding Gordon inside. I had idly scooped sand into a mound in our sandbox which we had been too old to play in anymore, except when we had been pretending like we had been little enough kids to belong in sandboxes.

Betty and Mom hadn't said much until Rita Mae had gotten all the way inside of their house. This had taken a short while as every three or four steps, Rita Mae had turned around to see if she couldn't slip back to the comfort of her MaMa's big warm thigh. But no, Betty had flagged her away, and stamped her bare foot twice each time to keep Rita moving right along, though dawdling twice as slow as cold molasses.

Bonnie and I had slipped sight unseen around the side of the house to try to hear or read their minds and deduce what the big corker of a problem was that Betty had been going to reveal. If we could have guessed it, we could have aligned ourselves behind airtight alibis, as we'd already known it had probably concerned us. I had figured with the way Betty had shooed her girl away, that Rita Mae had been involved in this conniving intrigue as well. Bonnie and I had rolled our eyes, knowing that child must be telling white lies on us again.

I had truly thought that Rita Mae had been cuter than a fuzzy bumblebee and sweeter than orange-yellow-white striped candy corn, but she could also be an all-day jawbreaker of a brat sometimes too. Rita had been the worst fibber when asked by grown-ups about what we kids had done in our Top Secret Spy Club, telling her own jilted version of the truth.

We'd only reluctantly been persuaded to allow Rita Mae, against Club rules, to come into our clubhouse in the woods after she'd nagged us into it against our better judgment.

"I'll promise to be good as gold," she'd begged.

Uh huh, but we should have trusted our intuition and our past experience with her. But we'd been under pressure to give in to her demands to make her quit whining. She'd made us forget that kids can't be trusted at her age. We'd been forced to let her tag along, so she'd hush up and stop giving away our best hide-and-seek positions.

Since she had been too young to even earn any weekly allowance for membership dues, we'd had let her be our mascot and go-fer, for free.

There had also been her undeniable other problem. Little Rita Mae had been all of four and a half years old, but had been still wetting her ruffled pink nylon panties right-regular. I had never been able to figure out why Betty hadn't just let Rita run around outside bare-bottomed under her sundresses like all the other pee-sized kids in our neighborhood had done.

Maybe that had been because of Betty's Mr. Papa Bear, which had been the nickname Betty had called her hubby, Rick, whom we'd suspected had a streak of rattlesnake venom mixed in his family's bloodlines. Maybe Rita Mae couldn't wear a bare butt under her skirt because snarly Mr. Papa

Bear had most likely said it wouldn't have been lady-like.

To tell you the truth, though, a sun-dried naked fanny would have been acres more polite, than Rita Mae always wearing wet pink panties, with the fancy-dancey rows of lace up her behind, with the bottom lace so many degrees yellower than those higher up.

Yet this moist cherub of a neighborhood child, had been forever begging me, pretty please, wanting to sit in my lap, all squirmy and anchovy smelling. She'd always won me over by saying she had wanted to grow up to one day be the neighborhood's sweetheart just like me. What other choice did I have after receiving such a blusher of an unearned compliment as that?

The week this had happened had been the one in which our troops had fought the Normandy invasion, so Bonnie and I had been kept very busy in our hospital tent. We had read about Clara Barton nursing people during these wars and starting the whole Red Cross during one of them.

So Bonnie and I had both decided to dress up to look heroic like Clara, with beach towels for our capes, and taping red crosses on our Yankee Doodle Dandy style newspaper hats. We'd already painted them with white tempera which we'd pre-mixed in a Gerber baby food jar, along with batches of all six of the other major paintbox colors.

Since our hats had still been damp from the first coat of wet paint when we'd gone on-duty, the newsprint underneath had been visible. Our first patient, Gordon, had said we had looked like two crazy garbage-can looters in soggy rain hats. Seeing as how he had been entirely wrong about how we'd looked in our new uniforms, we had told him that our Field Doctor had commanded us that very day that Gordon, as Corporal Gobstopper, would be needing the Triple Whammy Cure: to be tied up and blindfolded and given lockjaw shots. We'd thought that this treatment was necessary since Gordon's vision had clearly gone all cockeyed, as evidenced by his talking so ridiculously about us, not even recognizing that his own nurses hadn't been some old back-alley bums.

He had obviously been shell-shocked and we'd thought he might need his mouth to be taped shut for his own protection as well. We had to make sure he wouldn't be disturbing any of our other patients needing our nursing services in our tent that day with our big sign pinned to the flap announcing free medicine inside.

As nurses under Hercules' medical oath to help anyone maimed, injured, or germy, regardless of their ignorant views, we had been forced to take care of him. So Bonnie had crammed his mouth full of Red Hots, candy made with cinnamon and enough cloves to burn your tongue off. That

cure had sure enough worked, making Gordon's eyes get red and water, almost real tears, which had also made him shut up.

We had then taken the long hemp rope to try tying him on top of the operating table. It had been too bad that Dad had refused to ever let us cut his good rope. It had been about twenty-five feet too long to knot tightly enough so that Gordon couldn't always be getting free from us faster than Houdini. That day, outside, we had heard Mom humming, pinning tablecloths and hand towels on the clothesline, by reeling them out without even leaving our back porch. She had bought a new-fangled pulley-style clothesline.

Anyway, that had been when Betty had interrupted her own watering to call Mom over to the fence. We had been invisible to them, inside the tent. It had been Bonnie's turn to tie our patient down, while I had just sat there at the table, feeding Gordon more medicine when he'd stuck out his tongue to prove he'd swallowed his last pill. My job had been to hold his wrists fast together, until Bonnie had finished roping him.

After hearing Betty, we had hurried up and left the tent, abandoning Gordon lying there almost asleep with a gobstopper stuck in his mouth, drowsy from it being so hot inside there. He hadn't moved when we'd whispered to him that we'd all better vanish like Caspar and his Herd of

Invisible Ghosts.

Rita must have reappeared as I'd heard Betty tell her to go back inside help her daddy again, this time to find some toilet paper before he'd blown a fuse.

"There's always a roll or two on the tank's cover behind the seat. Just go to the door and tell him to turn around and see where it's been hiding behind him for the past ten years. You understand me, trot!"

We'd seated ourselves on the ground along the side of the house, braiding daisy chains and dandelion necklaces and pine needle haloes, feeling like angels waiting for the axe to fall.

Whenever our neighbor's husband, Ricky Tyson, had been home, Betty had gotten no peace. I'd thought, he had been the reason she had always dreamed up these dire emergencies. According to the grapevine, Betty had drummed up crises to divert herself from knowing that Ricky, like a guide dog, had always been keeping an eye on her from the screen window in the kitchen while she'd done her gardening and garbage and laundering chores, with him always yelling out useful suggestions.

Ricky had been gone on the road most week days, as a traveling salesman selling locks and security safes. He'd said he didn't trust a soul, being in the theft prevention business, finally on the right side of the law. He'd told

us, he'd known from personal experience, there wasn't a soul left on earth who wouldn't rob you blind, if he had known he wouldn't get caught.

Betty, by then, had been so used to Ricky's ornery ways, their gossip this day across the back fence hadn't been worth my full attention until I'd heard Betty lower her voice while chatting with Mom. When the Moms had lowered their voices, it had been almost impossible for me to hear what they were saying.

I'd discovered, however, that if I'd listened patiently to a lady's quiet mumbling for long enough, finally whomever they'd be talking to would just explode and ask, "Come again? Am I hearing this right?"

Sometimes the listening lady would then repeat the whole thing in a regular voice, in a short-cut version, to verify that her ears hadn't been playing tricks on her.

Once these rumors had been brought out in the open, everybody had seemed to talk even louder than usual about what surprise they'd just uncovered and brought to the surface to air out.

If some lady hadn't raised her voice and talked loudly when privileged to be sharing in her friend's very secret revelation, that might have been taken to be impolite, meaning she had misunderstood its importance or hadn't appreciated the honor of becoming her friend's confidante.

The break in their private sharing today, had been from Mom, when she had said, "My girls? You've got to be kidding!"

Well, Mom hadn't said out loud just what had been the trouble. Instead she had started yelling and hunting for us. She had spied the tent wiggling and had walked right up to it and had asked if we were hiding inside. Gordon must have been either asleep, scared stiff or still tied and gagged, as he hadn't made a peep.

There being no way that day for us sisters to escape this interrogation, we had obeyed Mom and had come around the corner and as ordered to do, had stood right out in the light of day, that very instant.

"Listen to this girls," Mom had lined us both up facing Betty. She hadn't seemed to care if I had been Clara Barton or that Bonnie had been Clara's littler sister, Phoebe Barton. No, she had treated us just like chain-gang convicts, so I'd immediately thrown away the wet-paint hat since it hadn't worked right.

Later, however, I had been quite pleased to see in the bathroom mirror that some of the paint had leaked and turned the middle of my hair stiffer than a board in white and red. My head had become a nurse's flag to signal helicopters overhead where my emergency services were located.

"Go ahead, Betty, tell them what you've just told me," Mom had sighed, shaking her head in disbelief. I had

tried to prepare myself to remain poker-faced and innocent-looking despite hearing a real whopper.

"Rita Mae says the reason she pees herself all the time is because she's scared to death of our toilet. And the reason she's afraid of it, she confessed after I tanned her hide for ruining her very last pair of clean ruffled britches, was because of what you girls have told her."

Betty and Lee, our Mom, had both stared at us hard, like they had wanted to bore holes in our heads to let the truth escape. Since I had no earthly idea what Betty had been talking about, their third degree hadn't been working on me.

I had looked over at Bonnie and predictably she hadn't even been paying attention, entranced in trying to make a butterfly land on her finger. She had always been good at that, especially the orange and black Monarchs.

We'd all paused and stared as she had tried to attract one to stay put. Usually when she'd done this she had twirled her arm around with the butterfly fluttering its wings like an angel. This day she'd been out of luck as the two butterflies she had kept offering her finger to had been into piggy-back riding each other and hadn't paid any mind to the chubby little dirty fingers she had kept messing up their games with.

Even Shad, our English bulldog, had been sitting there,

staring at us, looking as if he, too, had been waiting for us to offer up a good boner. As a dog, he had seemed to know that answers coming from humans after long silences, had usually caused people to erupt and move erratically around, willy nilly, with ever-rising voices. He had seemed to admire this human trait which had given him the opportunity to bark and run in circles as if he had been the center of the whole commotion, which he had often become, after the fact.

"I didn't say anything to Rita Mae," I had pleaded my case with a clear conscience, having nothing to confess.

"I haven't even talked to her since she popped her Bazooka bubble gum bubble all over one side of my hair. I'm staying away from her or soon all my hair will have to be chopped off."

I had tried to turn the tables on the tattletaler, pointedly fingering the short place in my haircut. I had been trying to draw their attention to the spot where the week before Mom had to cut Rita's sticky gum out of my side hair. I had cast my eyes down, like Joan of Arc had done before her accusers in the illustrated version of her trial, which had graced the front of my Sunday School handout and given me much to ponder.

"Me neither. Haven't said a word to her," Bonnie had joined in. "Last time I saw Rita Mae was when she was lined

up for the Simon Says game. I had said, 'Simon says put your hands on your head.' Rita did that right. But I got her out when I'd said, 'Stick your tongue on your nose.' I hadn't said 'Simon says' first but she had been standing there stretching her tongue up.

We couldn't help but laugh at her, but later we'd felt bad when she started crying and went on home. Was that our bad thing? We were just playing by game rules."

"No, what you did wrong was something else, if you really said it. I still can't believe my own ears," when Mom had inhaled this deeply her waist had grown even tinier, maybe only 22" inches around when she had lifted her ribs and had forgotten to exhale again. She had then done this as Betty had continued, turning our lives into a regular Perry Mason courtroom drama.

"My little four-year-old daughter says you big girls, who should know better, told her that a crocodile lives down in the sewer under her house," Betty had licked her lips and had rolled her big head slowly from side to side.

"Rita Mae confessed that you told her that when this sewer crocodile down below sees a light from this potty porthole, when anyone raises a toilet seat, he wades over and waits for the water to flush.

She said you'd explained how he's hoping to get washed back to the Florida Everglades where he'd belonged before a

tornado blew him down in the sewer, ending up here. She said that you said that if someone doesn't flush right away, he gets angry and bites her bottom to make her hurry up."

Rita had come back by now and baby-talked, "I don't want no sewer croc biting my butt. I'll pee his face if he tries to snatch me."

"Rita, honey, there aren't any crocodiles in our whole neighborhood," Mom had begun, "Where do you think she picked up this ridiculous tall tale?"

Mom's question had been pointed at me. I had been batting zero on Mom's honesty score card after I'd blabbed earlier that day about how our neighbor Freida's Grandma Purvise had returned home the night before, during a family séance. Freida had said their Gramma had come to ask her family to start leaving her a little bourbon instead of plastic flowers, next time they'd come to pay their respects at her final resting place. I'd reported it rightly, but that hadn't helped my story any, as far as Mom had been concerned.

"We didn't, double-didn't say anything about a croc," I had protested. "Rita must have overheard Bonnie when she was telling us a joke. Bonnie was just teasing, Rita, honest. You shouldn't have been snooping around listening to big kids' private talk like that, anyway."

Inspector Mom that day had been searching for answers

or clues in this Case of the Butt-biting Rumor.

"Bonnie so you are the instigator of this ridiculous lie?" she'd inquired sternly, as if she were at work on clues.

Bonnie had a big moth caught and fluttering in her Blue Bonnet mayonnaise jar with holes punched in the lid. She had been adding grass and nasturtiums to make the moth feel at home. As usual, she hadn't been paying attention. Her mind had hopped to and cleared itself quickly, nevertheless, judging from her reply, "It ain't me, who was the one."

"'Ain't' ain't a word, so don't use it," I'd scowled at Bonnie, who was trying to pass the buck.

"I know it ain't. Hrrrrmp. If you please, it was Gordon who said it, not I," Bonnie had replied in the King's English with a curtsy at the Moms and a roll of her eyes at me.

Just then from inside of the now obviously wiggling tent, came the voice of our hospital patient, Gordon, loudly mumbling, as if he'd only just managed to squiggle the bandanna half-way down off his mouth. Finally he must have gotten a grip on himself as he'd hoarsely rasped.

"You lie! You lie like a rug! Our whole deal's off!"

"Gordon? Mom had looked amazed, "What are you doing hiding in a hot tent in this sweltering sun? You'll give yourself heat prostration.

Have you been spying on my girls? Come on out this instant or you are going to suffocate in there. If you're not careful, young man, you won't be going with us to the girls' upcoming dance recital. You'd live to regret missing the debut of the century!"

Gordon had then come out all straggly looking, hot-faced, flushed and sweaty. He must have tried to right his dishevelled self, but that had been a lost cause from what I had seen.

Gordon had continued his buttoning and fastening and zippering while starting to tell his own version of the story. He hadn't gotten his chance, however, beyond clearing his throat, as Ricky had then started hollering at Betty from the screen window.

"Honey? Get in here!" Ricky had yelled like a maniac, before he'd seen this large audience staring back at him. With our seeing, what we'd usually only been hearing from him, across the back fence, he had apparently decided to tone himself down. Ricky had tried to use a more civil tone with Betty. He'd smiled, sashaying his butt and rocking his head like an uptown lady asking questions in a high falsetto voice, laced with sarcasm.

"Betty, can't you hear that? Am I interrupting your garden party? Come mon! Your darling daughter baby girl needs you," he'd said this more quietly, almost mincing his

words, before losing his patience and raising his voice again.

"She's bawling her head off like a Banshee. Can't you hear her? It's your job. Hurry on up!"

Betty had obeyed Ricky almost immediately, hopping off on her one house slipper. She had little Ricky, Jr., in tow, riding her hipbone, wearing his usual tee-shirt that had read, "The South will rise again." Ricky Junior had seemed to wear that same shirt every single day--the one with the Confederate flag on the back which his Daddy had stood up and saluted in mixed company, whenever his big little Junior had crawled by. I'd thought he could have impressed the fairer sex more, if he'd crawled after his son and attended to his grooming needs instead.

I think Betty had always stuck that Confederate shirt on her first-born son, anxious for him to get the hint. She'd wanted him rise up on his sturdy little legs and start walking on his own so she wouldn't have to keep toting him everywhere. This had gotten harder on her, once baby Anita had started to become such a big handful too. Betty's Papa Bear had never once been willing to take turns diapering this new girl baby, Anita, like he'd sometimes pitched in and done for his own little Ricky, Jr.

Mom had nodded at us, as we'd watched Betty hopscotching away on one leg with the two kids dangling off

her as well. Bonnie and I had scrambled at Mom's cue and had gone to retrieve Betty's other shoe and had helped Rita get up the porch stairs before they all had collapsed like the nose off the Sphinx.

Daddy Bear Rick had watched the whole motley family parade. He had his grits' spoon stuck in his mouth which he'd wiggled up and down with his teeth while he'd grinned in amusement and wondered aloud whom he should yell at next, after the baby had quieted down enough so that Betty could hear him and pay him some mind.

"What's a man got to do to get some respect around here?" he'd huffed, raising the roll of toilet paper and the sports page over his head as he had retreated to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Bonnie and I had only dared to open our mouths when Ricky had safely shut himself up behind a closed door. We had known to say we were sincerely sorry to both Betty and Rita Mae whom I'd thought had been growing up to be quite the little brat storyteller.

It had been too bad we couldn't have escaped Rita, but that had been impossible as our two back yards had shared a chainlink dividing fence, for all the good that hadn't done us, as far as Rita Mae had been concerned. Even Mr. Tyson's triple locks on their back gate had never kept her at home. Every day Rita Mae had either crawled over or shimmied under

the gate like a pesky caterpillar to bother us. She'd always escaped when she was supposed to have been taking a nap.

Nothing, however, could have roused Betty from her own afternoon snoozes. MaMa Bear had gone out like a light, during her own long Mommy-sized naps. We'd found it had been useless to go dragging Betty's wandering child back home while she had slumbered in her hibernations, impossible to rouse. Rita had always boomeranged back to where we'd just hauled her away from so quickly, it had been as if she'd never been gone.

Rule #4: Hot cookies are worth a thousand words.

Mom had later redirected her problem-solving to Gordon. Though he hadn't expired from his shenanigans in the tent, he had looked just as limp. Mom had told him to tuck his shirt back in his britches and to come inside for some raspberry Kool Aid, chocolate chip icebox cookies and left-over colored Easter eggs, if he had been brave enough and had wanted some.

Mom had said we girls had only been avoiding those perfectly good boiled Easter eggs because they had looked like bald Rest Home anemics with varicose veins after our red and green food dye had leaked into the white insides through the cracks. Further proof, she'd said, that they were safe, had been that Shad, our bulldog, had been eating any he'd found in our yard, shell and all, and he'd remained as healthy as an ox. Shad had wagged his corkscrew tail at hearing his name, and had licked his big kisser, proud to be our fearless bulldog, ridding our home-on-the-range of renegade Easter eggs still lurking about on our lawn.

Gordon should have just quietly followed us in, but he had always latched onto every word from our Mom's mouth, as if it had come straight from a prophet of the Bible.

"I can't put my shirt in," he had looked as if he had been about ready to cry. Bonnie and I had noticed this and

had been stifling our nervous giggles of guilt.

"Why not?" Mom had hardly been paying him any mind, while walking along feeling how dry her laundry had gotten from flapping on the line all morning. She had also been wondering aloud why her whites had kept disappearing like ghosts.

"I can't tuck my shirt in, because your girls broke my zipper," Gordon had pointed at us when he'd called us Mom's girls, as if she wouldn't have recognized us otherwise. Our being Mom's only children, I'd thought Gordon had obviously been just blathering to hear himself think.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Bonnie had hummed out loud to herself.

Mom had then lifted his shirt, to inspect this damaged zipper, which had caused both Bonnie and I to get the same idea, at the same time. We'd crossed our fingers and had tried to sidetrack Mom's attention by both talking at once.

"Did you leave your percolator on, Mom?" "Is our Shad barking at the mailman? Do you think he's treed a skunk, Mom?" "Do I smell tires or burnt coffee grounds?"

Mom had just perfunctorily said "no" four times in asides to our roundelay of questions, as she had continued to give Gordon a piece of her mind.

"A little broken zipper, that's all? Well, you almost deserve it after telling scary bathroom jokes to littler

kids. Betty might not get Rita Mae induced to be potty-trained for another month of diapers after all that balderdash. What ever could have induced you to concoct such a scary story to feed to an innocent, trusting child?"

"But it wasn't--" Gordon had still seemed to be hellbent on setting the record straight about who had said what-when. As if it had mattered now, with the damage already done, I had thought. I had been relieved, however, that Mom hadn't been taking Gordon's side, and in fact, wouldn't let him get a word in edgewise to defend himself with.

"Don't argue. Arguing never settles anything," Mom had put a silencing finger near to her lips and had smiled. She'd never liked to extend unpleasant disagreements, so she'd shushed him, after already hearing all she had wanted to say on this unpleasant subject on such a busy, overworked day for herself.

Gordon either hadn't listened to reason, or hadn't read her intentions correctly and had continued to try to polish his tarnished reputation in our Mom's eyes.

"It was the girls who told Rita about the stranded Everglades crocodile," he had kept prattling away, above the sounds of snacks being prepared.

"They'd wanted to teach Rita to remember to flush the toilet and put down the seat cover after she goes. They

were giving Rita marriagehood lessons, in toiletry, to prevent her from getting divorced for bad manners."

That he'd kept defending himself, when nobody had cared to listen anymore, had made me about to boil over. On the other hand, I'd thought, Mom could hear from all this whinnying that boyfriend had been doing, just how well trained we sisters were growing up to be--with Mom's same heart and house rules. Bathroom manners; remembering to say, "please, thank you, and I'm sorry;" and the "always doing unto others--" Biblical law had been Mom's big three guideposts ingrained in us as Happy Home Beatitudes for fail-safe marriages.

"I should just clamp a big clothespin on your zipper and send you home to your MaMa like that," Mom had seemed to want to warn Gordon to button his lip, as all his excuses had been falling on deaf ears on this subject.

"Maybe I should pin a note there too telling your Mom how naughty you've been."

Mom had left to find something to fasten Gordon together with.

"I see London, I see France, I see someone's--," it was lucky for Bonnie that Mom had returned just then as Gordon had started giving Bonnie the evil eye which had usually preceded some regrettable crime of passion.

Mom had saved the day when she'd shown us that she'd

found just the thing Gordon needed--a super-huge knitter's kilt-sized stitch-saving safety pin from her sewing basket. With a few giggles and false starts, they had finally been able to use it to attach the two gaping halves of Gordon's jean's fly together, at least in the middle. I'd wished she could find something to shut his mouth with too. He had seemed to me to be getting too bug-eyed big for his own britches around this time, so that broken zipper, I'd suspected, wouldn't be any great loss to his Mom or to the eternal fate of Dixie, despite his protests otherwise.

That afternoon, he couldn't have hung out in our kitchen, not with his jeans just barely pinned together like that. He had hardly been able to sit down with that kilt pin poking him in the belly like a giant brass fist pressing against his gut. He had smiled slyly on his way out of the back door, raising an eyebrow at us sisters, proud to have two cookies to our one each.

We had been jealous that day that our rumor-mongering playmate had gotten more treats than us sorely-maligned kin on the home front. As he'd reluctantly left the kitchen, he'd had boiled pastel-colored eggs pouching out all his pants' pockets, and cookies in either hand. He had seemed pacified, although I had wondered if he'd meant to be giving Bonnie and me the finger under that cookie he had been munching.

Back on the battlefield, after writing this regrettable bit of neighborhood kid history in my diary, we'd seen that we only had three troops left. With our dwindling troop numbers, anyone dying would have ended our game. Bonnie, as Commander Red Rover, had solved this problem by declaring that Gordon and I, as her last living troops, had to fight to the death with our enemy, who had far outnumbered us which luckily wouldn't be crushing our morale, as they were all invisible.

With this new foe, that day I had been relieved of the usual torture threats. On most days, these warnings had been taken seriously. Even the memory of what our enemies, had threatened me with the last time I'd been captured, had made me jump at shadows and wince for days.

--We'll stake you over the fire-ant hill and drip honey on you, if you don't confess.

--I'll force feed you canned spinach and doodle bugs if you don't tell us where your troops are located.

--I'll pull out your littlest toenails with my Dad's channel-locks and pliers.

--I'll whittle your teeth down to the nubs with my manicuring set's metal cuticle file.

--Say Uncle or we'll put you deep down in the dark snake-pit bulging with slithering jungle cobras and a pile

of boa constrictors hungry to squeeze out your guts like toothpaste. Gulp!

"This first war with an invisible enemy," Bonnie as Cmdr. Red Rover had declared, "might prevent World War IV. Look sharp, this will be your last chance to earn a Purple Heart. Might I inform you troops that I just swiped two big wads of raw liver from the fridge to do the honors?"

Gordon, who had returned in decent pants, eager to resume playing as Corporal Gobstopper and myself as Private Hopscotch, had both asked to see proof that Bonnie had these Purple Hearts made from raw liver, before we'd died for these favored rewards for dead soldiers to receive in our games, allowing them the means to plot their future revenge. It had been the best weapon of retaliation to sling from close-range or to sneak in and leave on an unsuspecting enemy's night-time pillow. Bonnie had left without revealing the whereabouts of her stash, afraid Gordon or Shad might steal it.

Peeved at not being able to outfox Cmdr. Red Rover, Cprl. Gobbstopper had pelted me with all of his marshmallow grenades too sticky and grimey with gravel and pine needles for even him to swallow.

"Gottcha! I'm a double-agent and you're dead. Got you in the heart." He had blown me a farewell kiss as he'd run
...

away to safety.

I was dead? I'd felt in a double-bind, no longer having Gordon as a backup unit. Who was going to report this deadly double-cross to my commander? I'd decided I'd better give a brave dying statement, like a hero from a war movie.

"Come in Red Rover? I'm sorry, Sir, but I seem to have gotten killed and I'm nearly dead. Corporal Gobstopper, that dirty double agent, just grenaded me in three different spots. I'm losing consciousness. Tell my folks about my winning the Purple Heart. Please give it to them instead of placing it in the trench with me."

"Remain on duty, Private Hopscotch. Do not go dead on me. That's an order, Private Hopscotch. Hold on until I get you a medic, okay?" Bonnie had shouted into her walky talky.

I'd grasped my grenaded heart with one hand, and with my other had continued drawing, following Gordon's traitorous getaway route.

I'd been forced to stay alive, although mortally wounded and in a vulnerable position, in my condition.

Commander Red Rover, had always warned me that I must eat written evidence immediately if I'd ever gotten caught. It had been important that our maps hadn't gotten into the wrong hands. Even in this lonely battle, I had to be

mindful, as every day's skirmishes had ended with someone shouting, "To be continued..."

The last time the enemy had gotten me, I had chewed up the map corner with the vital X on it, showing where we'd buried our chocolate cupcakes in a pile of pine cones for later. I'd pretended to swallow, but had really kept the wad with the X on it to the rear of my mouth. Even when they had asked me to open wide and prove my mouth was empty, I had just tightened my teeth into lockjaw position and let them pry away. I hadn't budged despite being under the threat of unbearable torture.

I had known that I had been fail-safe from final pain. As Air Force brats, we had already learned it was military orders for all combatants in a war zone to carry two cyanide capsules to save them from being tortured by enemies into revealing troop secrets or positions.

Death before dishonor had been a military regulation every kid of a uniformed man in our neighborhood had known all too well. I'd lost sleep many nights worrying about Dad's safety, even in peace time, with him probably cozily asleep in the next room down. I'd remembered to pray every single night that God wouldn't ever be needing any of Georgia's troops for another war.

Every Air Force brat in the neighborhood had bragged that we had these lethal capsules. We'd pretended that we

had our suicide caps stowed in some private place or hidden discretely on our bodies. In war games, this boast had often led to strip-searches in our captors' hideouts.

Eating two black jelly beans had usually stopped the enemies' invasion of our private parts, as it had meant that we'd instantly become deader than doornails. To eat or not to eat those deadly capsules had always been a hard choice for prisoners-of-war in our games. If any soldier had gone D.O.A. by jelly-beaning out, they'd been carried off by their arms and legs. Their bottoms had usually dragged along the ground if they'd been heavy, or if the burial detail had been the small fries of the neighborhood. The dead had been buried in Arlington's Southern Cemetery back in our piney woods, behind all our houses, or barracks as we had called them.

Our burial trough and mound had a Dirty Traitors' Ravine used to heap enemy corpses into. The captors had gotten to throw dirt on any enemy's body, intoning, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, die forever you dirty cuss."

If any dead persons had dared to open their mouths to protest these death rites, they'd either have ended up eating the wormy dirt, or have faced further torture for being a proven spy who had just lied about being dead.

Since our neighborhood's store hadn't sold black jelly beans, we'd used indelible ink on the vanilla white ones.

Often the girl soldiers, hating black tongues, had asked as a last request to be allowed to eat even four pink jellys. We'd wanted strawberry cyanide capsules instead of the two inky black ones. We'd claimed that it shouldn't make any difference, as eating four pinks would make us twice as dead. Our final requests, however, had always been denied. The inky black ones had branded us, they'd retorted, proving if we'd really swallowed them or not. Those playing our enemies had usually argued that all dead people's tongues had turned black in the sweet hereafter.

All we sisters had known was that the ink had left tread marks in our mouths, like the burnt rubber tracks fast race cars leave behind on the speedway as they peel around corners. We'd had a Speed Demon track in town, and every weekend we'd heard the announcer on the echoing p.a. above the monster-mosquito whines of drivers gunning for a flash finish. On Demolition Derby nights, stock cars had collided with each other like dueling mountain goats.

Though the black tongue of suicide in our wars had only remained visible for about an hour, the effect of swallowing those instant death pills had lasted longer in my head, cropping up again when Mom had turned off all the lights at bedtime, while the Destructo Derbys had continued to whine, in the distance, like my thoughts.

Rule #5: Heed Your Mother's Warnings About Clean Underwear.

Bonnie had relieved me of my thoughts of gory threats when she'd then buddied-up, not four feet from me, both of us belly deep in the spiky torture-cut grass, flat down, in push-up position, but close enough for our S-words to spray spit on each other. Cmdr. Red Rover, my little sister, had still kept her walky talky activated in the On position, wasting batteries. Bonnie had then whispered into it to me, despite us lying so closely together that the pocked O-rings of our vaccination scars had kept brushing each other, as if our shoulders were smooching. Bonnie had stubbornly ignored how close we were that day, never wanting her turn to be game commander to end.

She had been so pumped up, she had even ignored my fatal wounds. "I see you've recovered, soldier. Good work," she'd said.

She had continued to command me as if I were still alive or the living ghost of Private Hopscotch, appropriately diaphanous, in order to fight the invisible hoards who had supposedly threatened us. She'd also continued to talk into her mike as if we were miles apart in a Guamanian water-moccasin infested jungle instead of being chummy close, the sole remaining survivors of today's World War III maneuvers, now that Gordon had pulled a Benedict Arnold on us.

It had been just before the time Mom had scheduled for our perms, on that special horizon-lifting weekend when my sister had radioed me, "Private Hopscotch, the enemy is now deployed on the back porch. I see surrender flags being hoisted on the line."

In disbelief I had wondered whether Red Rover had really been ready to quit our game. It had been her call. Only any day's Commander-on-duty had been allowed to stop a war.

That day I had crossed my fingers and replied, "Red Rover, I've got your reading here on my compass. I verify one, two, three, four bras being pulleyed into view in our direction by the enemy. The three white bras are seeming to be used as surrender flags, Sir, but I also see one pink brassiere. Could the pink one mean a mutiny among their ranks?"

"Maybe the pink one is a boobie trap, Private Hopscotch!" Bonnie had giggled.

"Good one, sir. But seriously I think the pink bra must belong to a female in their unit, maybe a WAC, who has found herself improperly attired for a war and is being forced to surrender, using the wrong color. You should issue an undesirable underwear warning to all your non-coms, Sir, to save them from this kind of code violation."

"I remember my Mother's warnings about the dangers of

possibly getting myself injured in a car crash or a war while wearing dirty underwear," Bonnie had sounded wise, but about a hundred years old.

"My MaMa warned me that if my injury didn't kill me, I'd be dying of embarrassment anyhow from knowing I hadn't put on clean underwear that day, before being ambulated to the emergency room, sirens blaring with me wearing yesterday's panties for the whole world to see."

"Wise lady, your mother," I'd played along with Bonnie's seriousness, "Reminds me of my own Mom's Wash Day sayings, 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness,' and 'A dirty mind is the Devil's playground.' You jerk, I hate it when you pretend we're not sisters. Sir."

This day, Cmdr. Red Rover hadn't been too worried about the one pinko, she'd said, as the rule of thumb, in military uniform regs had been: if it doesn't show, they won't know.

"It's the official Undress Code for the military, a nude law!" Bonnie had been on a roll, screwing up words and rules. I could tell this game must finally be over, when she'd started laughing in a manner unbecoming to an officer. I'd been happy that my sister had finally regained her sense of humor. Whoever had played the commander of a day's war game, had never cracked a smile, imitating the brass we'd seen in movies like James Cagney, George C. Scott and Humphrey Bogart.

Corporal Gobstopper, our former orderly, had then tried to sneak up on us from behind, with no signs of regret for disobeying my order for him to requisition Hershey Kisses for K-rations from the NCO's mess hall or for wounding me in the heart.

That day Mom, as an innocent civilian, surrounded by the Invisibles, whom we'd been keeping under protective surveillance had also seen Gordon. He'd forgotten to crouch when coming back into spy territory. She'd cocked her head to one side with a sigh and had re-pulleyed a length of her clothesline back to the concrete porch and unpinned the bra-part of her washing. She had probably decided to dry it inside on her bathroom racks where it wouldn't pollute Gordon's young curious mind. I'd heard her say such reasons before, when I wasn't supposed to be listening.

"You missed the end of the war," I had announced as Gordon had started collecting his guns which I'd protected for him.

"Good. I was nearly running out of ammo," Gordon had said as he tossed and caught his raisin bullets in his mouth, catching the first four, but licking the fifth off the ground, down on all fours. He wasn't proud, and as he'd crouched doggie style, it had looked to me like he'd forgotten again to wear any underwear, using the weekend as an excuse for being lazy.

"Don't sweat it. I'll be ready when World War IV begins tomorrow," loaded down with his weapons, he had looked like the caddy on the cover of a Soldier of Fortune magazine.

"I'm not going to play War anymore," I'd taken a deep breath and gotten this out, after thinking about it all that anxious morning long.

"Yeah, that's right. Sure. I'll believe it when I see it. You're as gung-ho as me. You love shooting guys. You'll be back."

Maybe peeved at my threat, or at my not playing dead, Gordon had squirt-gunned me in the back. This time I had slowly fallen down, as if swooning to my death, my previous heart-rending wounds finally bleeding me dry. I had given Corporal Gobstopper a dirty look before I had let them haul me into the house by my wrists. They'd bumped me up the concrete porch steps backwards, probably bruising my bottom. I'd known I could stand the sweet pain, on this, my last day on the front lines, as it had felt as if they were spanking some sense into me. Little had they known that they were actually carrying a swooning southern belle to her drawingroom revival where assuming a new persona, she'd intended to prove, like her teacher had often said, that the pen is mightier than the sword.

I'd thought that during the next war, I'd volunteer

only as the troops' war correspondent or love letter writer, specializing in both the mushy and Dear John style letters.

It had been lucky for Gordon that the war had ended before we'd had to court martial him. I'd hoped Gordon had been wrong about me having a grudge against guys. Mostly I'd only killed the ones who had deserved it, by not playing fair. Now my sweetheart, Gordon, had zoomed to the top of my list, which had put me in a quandary. I'd even wondered if I could trust him for long enough to marry him once-upon-some-distant-date. I'd been coming to the conclusion that marriage must be as tricky for grown up ladies, as war games had been for girl kids. The boys were always shooting us in the back, or switching sides. I'd wondered if Gordon would eventually grow out of this two-faced behavior, or whether it was hereditary. I could end up honeymooning with a double-agent whom I could never afford to turn my back on.

By the time they'd carelessly dumped me on the porch, I'd reconsidered my options and decided I should play in WWII at least one more time, just to even up the odds with Gordon and give him a fair warning that I was no push-over cream puff of a girl.

I sure had wished we'd had some other role-playing games except killing each other in War or dressing up and playing House which the even girls hadn't liked after the first fifteen minutes. It had only been an excuse for us to

borrow Mom's lipstick and waddle around on her cast-off high heels. We had always gotten all dressed up before discovering that this was the entire purpose of our game. We had kept wanting to invent a better game, which had combined the better parts of the other two. Our best try had been playing war on rollerskates with squirt guns; with the losers, girls or boys, having to skate the next game wearing ballet tutus and lipstick. My family had been great fans of the Roller Derbys which had played weekly on t.v. with both men's and women's teams. We'd also watched a lot of wrestling matches. Both sports had staged fights which all the fans knew were sheer showmanship. I'd wished wars would become obsolete and we could have international roller derbys and wrestling matches between countries having a judge, with legal wagering, and everyone getting the thrill of a contest, winning or losing, without lots of innocent somebodies getting hurt. Amen. I'd often thought that if kids ruled the world they could make everything more fair. Grown-ups always had so many "extenuating circumstances" while kids knew plain right from wrong. So said I, many a time, long ago, although nobody, of course, paid me the least bit of attention.

"Life isn't so easy, as one day you'll find out," I'd kept being told by adults.

I'd kept wanting to reply, "But it could be!"

Rule #6. "It's smart to ask your 'dumbest' questions."

As soon as they'd hauled me up in the back, we'd heard the front screen door bang on the other porch. I'd known right-as-rain that Mom had been taking a breather, trying to revive her spirits from hours of hovering over the hot stove. Bonnie and I had gone straight through the house and out the other side to sit with Mom. Gordon had circled the house to meet us there too. He'd often shadowed our movements from a distance--not wanting to be accused of playing with girls.

In the days just before Dad had gotten transferred back home from Guam, the only time Mom hadn't looked chipper was when one of her party recipes wasn't working according to the directions. Then she'd looked so perplexed, staring off, as if the patterns of the clouds were as readable as tea leaves, and might reveal what she'd done wrong. Mom had tended to remain blue with her kitchen griefs, except when we girls had diverted her from recipe fretting by getting her upset with us instead. This had often happened when we'd brought up something she'd call truly stupid or from beyond the reaches of any normal person's intelligence. Bonnie, as if she known this about our Mom too, had been right on cue.

"I sure hope there won't be a full moon tonight," Bonnie had said squinting her face right into the sun, which any idiot should have known often caused people to either go crazy or become blind as a bat in daylight.

"You say you don't want a full moon tonight? Why not, Sugar?" Mom had stopped staring off, maybe shifting her search for answers from the unfathomable skies, to my beclouded sister instead.

"Why when I was a tyke of your age I used to love seeing that the Man in the Moon's face all lit up, with all the stars winking at him," Mom seemed to be subtly trying to get Bonnie to reveal what was really on her mind.

Mom had been lifting the sweat-matted hair off of Bonnie's forehead, and fluffing it out to make it dry faster. Bonnie's hair had been like spun-gold, and nobody could resist touching it, glinting like a halo against the sun.

"Well, Mom, what if--," here Bonnie had paused, perhaps garnering courage. "What if--you look at a full moon tonight and the Man in the Moon gives you a new baby before Dad gets home tomorrow?"

"What if--you tell me where you heard such a lunatic, unfounded rumor as that?"

Surprised by Connie's question, I had tried to protect our source for this secret, "Kids in the neighborhood," I'd

quickly injected, trying to push the rumor into further vagueness.

"Freida Purvise says so," Bonnie had then gestured with her shoulder in the direction of our girl neighbor's house. Gordon hadn't come up on the porch, after he'd heard us start what he had called lolly-gaggy, mince-meeky, girlie-pooey dame talk. He'd been tossing gravel which he'd called scatterbrained bombs.

"Don't tell on Freida, please Mom," I had pleaded. "She said mum's the word on this. When Freida's stories get tattletaled on, her Dad blames the Devil. He takes out his razor strap to scare some sense into her. Her Mom makes her wash her tongue off with Lavo mechanics' soap too! Scouts' honor."

"You know I've told you that I don't want you tagging along with the big girls of the neighborhood," Mom had sighed.

"They haven't got a lick of sense. They are always telling you dubious gossip or superstitions as gospel truth. I'd have more children than the 'Old Lady who Lived in a Shoe' if a full moon was all the monkeyshine it took to bring a child into this world."

"How does babies happen to Moms then?" Bonnie, the brave one, had asked all wide-eyed and innocent sounding.

"How do--" I had corrected my sister's grammar, as if

the question itself wasn't the source of my angst.

"I guess I'll be moseying along if y'all are going to yak the best part of the day away and not fixing to eat, " Gordon had paused, expecting a reaction.

"Guess I'd better 'gait while the gotten is good,' like my Pa always says," Gordon had looked at his feet but hadn't moved an inch when no one had replied, twiddling his double-jointed thumbs.

"Can't just sit here starving and let the petunias grow between my toes saying, 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.' 'So long, it's been good to know you,'" he'd finally sung out, leaving slowly.

After he was out of earshot, Mom had shaken her head, "Boy, Gordon sure doesn't leave a cliché unturned, does he?" At our puzzled looks, Mom had explained that clichés were overworked expressions or words.

Gordon must have started to panic that afternoon in his usual laconic way, backwards from the usual. Whenever he'd gotten nervous, he had slowed down, looking almost frozen in place, as if he'd been caught by a camera. Anticipating that not a free lunch but a lecture was oncoming, Gordon had lumbered away with a sigh. Mom's feeding our curious minds and not his gurgling belly had caused him to part company with us, heavily dropping his words of farewell like a grave digger heaving boulderous stones ahead of himself.

Gordon had giant-stepped over the buckets and mud-pie cooking gear, and sprinklers as he had gone out of the yard whistling "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah" as he hailed his Mom. Her cranky old Ford had tended to backfire, giving all the kids in the neighborhood a thrill. When it had done that just now, backing out of their driveway, I'd seen four small boys keel over instantly, playing dead.

I'd followed Gordon's head which had seemed to be waning like a dark moon, going down to be tucked between the hillocks of his shoulders. I'd wondered whether he'd left because he'd feared Mom would answer Bonnie's question in front of him.

"Remember the girls' recital, tonight, Gordon! We'll drop by for you before we pick up Gramma Anne at the depot of the Greyhound station," Mom had called out after Gobbie's seemingly headless retreating back. We had no earthly way of knowing whether he'd "10-4ed" us or not, without his walky-talky.

"Are we going to eat now or wait until we starve?" I had tried to change the subject too. I had been both wanting to know the answer to Bonnie's private baby-making question, but also dreading it at the very same time. It would have seemed strange to learn anything this momentous straight from any grown-up's mouth.

I'd always thought the only way I'd get a cross-your-heart and hope-to-die honest answer on this subject was by accident or eavesdropping. I had never trusted explanations tailor-made for kids, according to measuring our inches or tallying our years. I'd wished, adults had gauged, instead, how much our brains might grow if seeded with some new info on the facts of life, instead letting us waste our time sorting out rumors, itching to get it all straight.

I'd wished I could have known the unfathomable answer to this baby-making question which Mom, and all the grownups, had kept tucked away between themselves. This mystery had intrigued me for far too long, but I'd wished I could learn it somehow by osmosis. It had been hard not to blush or to openly state my curiosity and ignorance to anyone who might actually know anything about it, which they would be willing to share with me. The grown-ups had all feared the domino effect, after revealing any secret information. It hadn't been the kids they'd been worried about, but somebody's mother on God's downline who'd thought the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent would hold us just fine until we'd taken our final, permanent loyalty vows.

Bonnie, like most kids, couldn't keep straight-faced when inquiring about this hushed-up subject which most kids we'd known had always whispered about, even amongst ourselves.

On the other hand, that weekend I already had enough worries, each taking cuts in line, vying to be the best at bothering me the most. Some of the frets jostling around in my head that day were: my dread of getting hit by the cyclone of another one of Mom's failed home-perms leaving me a walking joke to be pointed at by total strangers; my dance recital jitters causing the same reaction; and distress over the likelihood that I'd somehow be the one who'd ruin our family's party, and prevent the bright future for the family it had been planned to vouchsafe.

I hadn't needed to be one of the first girls in our neighborhood to solve the birds and bees puzzle, even with Mom's help. It would cause the usual tug-of-war in my head. Secrets had always left me with the age-old, to tell or not to tell conundrum.

"Gordon is a scairdy cat," Bonnie had mocked Gordon's getaway, in the words impossible to say without dividing them into syllables.

When I'd ignored this slur, she'd baited me further,

"He scatted because he thought we were going to talk about the birds and bees," she'd chortled.

"No, he is not too chicken to hear it. He just knows everything about it already," I'd blurted out.

"How could you be such an expert about what your little boyfriend knows about private matters, young lady?" Mom had

raised her eyebrows.

"Because he said so--" I had replied blithely, with my fingers crossed that neither of them were going to call my bluff by asking me for proof.

Bonnie hadn't foiled my ruse by asking for evidence, but on the other hand she hadn't just let this slip by her.

"Just because Gordon knows the secret that grown-up boys have extra brains in their privates, doesn't mean he's an expert on all of the stork's business."

Bonnie had reeled this off and then gone into the yard to do cartwheels and splits.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute now," Mom had checked her watch while patting the air to indicate that we all should calm down, as she'd often intoned in a soothing voice and mime. With words and gestures familiar to us, she'd gentled us into imagining ourselves becoming as quiet as: falling feathers; midnight snowflakes; drifting leaves in a misting fog; or gentle raindrops kissing a parched earth. These had been her oft-repeated images to quell our sisterly hair-pulling arguments.

I had been expecting Mom to reveal something from beyond the beyond, and had held my breath and listened closely. Mom had noticed this unusual hush coming from both of her daughters at once. Bonnie had paused in her marathon cartwheeling circle, arms raised and poised. I had quit

2enclosing my whole self in hearts drawn with hopscotch chalk on the concrete porch. I'd add arrows to these going in all the four major directions.

Mom had opened her mouth as if to speak, but then had stopped short as if she'd just been startled by the ding of the kitchen timer.

"...Wait a minute. Now I remember what hit me like a bolt of lightening only moments ago. Gordon didn't really say that big people have two brains did he?"

"No, he says that only the boy-people grow a second one. He says it to us girls all the time. Ol' Mr. Smarty pants is always boy-bragging, saying they're better than us, having two brains to girls' only one," Bonnie had now hung inverted from a low tree limb, but had still been able to add her two cents while upside down.

"I can't believe he'd think you girls would be so gullible as to believe that," Mom had looked amazed.

"What does he think? That you two don't know a thing about anatomy? Two brains? Why with some men acting like they've lost the original one they were born with! How did he make you swallow that fisherman's line? Just imagine Gordon hearing that knee-slapper and passing it along like it was a fact of life."

Mom's estimation of Gordon had seemed to drop a few decimal points after hearing this, despite often declaring

him cuter than a homemade doughnut.

"Well, Gordon said he's learned what he's learned from listening to his folks. It seemed they were having one of their big arguments one night," I had begun explaining.

"Gordon said his Mom was just fumigating, over catching his Dad making eyes at Mrs. Purvise. He then heard his Dad say, 'Don't blame me for flirtating, honey. I didn't wanna, but it is just my peanuts acting up again. Sometimes a man's true higher nature wants to act right. But dang burn-it if his peanuts doesn't have a mind of its own. There's nothing a poor sucker can do about his God-given biology. Forgive me, Edna?'

God's truth, Gordon told us. He says what his Dad's words mean is that when boys grow up, they grow a second brain, with a mind of its own, just for working the bottom half of their bodies. Down in their privates are their do-dads which are their gear-shifters. Their second brains are their testaments, which are the menfolks' motors."

I'd recited this story, like Gordon always had, in a hurry, as if a high tide were rushing in. After I'd gotten started with this whale of a tale, I'd felt as if it were me who'd gotten tangled in his riptide of words. Gordon had repeated this boy-brag so often, I hadn't even worried about the retelling of it. But mid-way through, my Mom's expression had been one of extended shock. Realizing I'd

gone too far, beyond her standards of decency, I'd rushed towards the finish line. Whenever I'd paused, however, to keep myself from getting buried alive by the words, that in present company, had seemed highly irregular; Bonnie had jumped right in, without missing a beat, filling in the missing bits of Gordon's story.

"..Matter of fact, he says that's why the men have to make all the important decisions of the world," she'd finished her spiel quoting Gordon's boast of boys' brains out-weighting girls' 2-for-1 in undertakers' autopsies.

"I declare. So I suppose he told you that men don't have any control over these second, spare brains, right? Sounds to me like his Dad might be a sweet-talking back-door man who makes up foolish alibis to cover up his philandering," Mom had looked perturbed, and far from happy with Gordon or us.

After she'd rearranged the watering hose, she'd continued to ruminate, almost to herself, "I only wish women had a spare womb, one just for a Mom to use for her nine baby-making months. Talk about complicated bodies? Men don't know the half of it.

But, we're wasting time out here talking about worse than nothing. Don't repeat nonsense, you hear? I have to get back to the real world and work on my finicky jello mold!"

"Mom, won't you tell us more about this mysterious baby-making business? Is it really the stork who brings Moms the babies, or is that only a tall tale like Santa Claus bringing kids' toys guided by Rudolph with his nose so bright?" Bonnie had persisted.

"Well, Bonnie, what jaw-droppers to be asking me in the middle, the middle of--"

Mom had interrupted herself to glance at our neighbor's windows and lower her voice with deep undertones.

"You should harness your tongue when it wants to take you on a hayride. Bad news spreads like a wildfire, and nothing flies faster than a false rumor. Would you want every lady who owns a party line to know our business?"

"No ma'am," Bonnie had said regretfully.

"Ask me about this stork business some night, in private, after your bedtime stories. Remember there is a time and a place for everything," Mom had tsk-ed away, shaking her head.

Bonnie had gone and started pumping herself on the tire swing so that she could leap to a high branch.

Any time she'd become frustrated, she'd worked it off doing some stunt. This time she'd swung back and forth until she'd worked herself up so her heels could hook onto a low branch. After hoisting herself up, she had walked along it heel-to-toe, arms outstretched like a trapeze artist.

She had looked so confident--as if she'd felt God himself had held a special trampoline just for her.

Mom had gone indoors to see if she now had a solid jello trout resting in her design mold or whether she'd be needing to dissolve more Knox gelatin powder and add it to boiling water to set the rest of her uncoagulated homemade lime gelatin trout-shaped centerpiece.

The answers I'd wanted but feared to hear that weekend, had been left to float, like the loose fruit cocktail in Mom's liquid jello. Similar to Mom's trout-settling predicament, I had all the right ingredients, but the facts of life hadn't yet gelled into place and molded.

"See, Bonnie?" I had tried to get the attention of my sister.

"What?"

"See? She always makes up a new question from our old questions. It ends up being like a patchwork quilt. Asking questions just multiplies my confusion, trying to understand their answers."

Saying that, I had thought I was deciphering some amazing parenting theory.

"Even at school, I can't ask my teachers any questions unless I stay on their subjects. They never talk about what I'm most curious about," Bonnie had groused with me.

"I've heard the adults say they are worried that if too

many grown-up facts leak out to kids, too soon, we might get funny ideas."

We had suspected that grownups had withheld information as a tactic to get us to read. I'd thought I'd have to comb the entire Encyclopedia Britannica to find any of the good parts about this funny business. I'd suspected it would take an entire lifetime to read from A to Z. If only I'd known the right words and how to spell them, I still might have made an attempt. With so much kid slang, and adult code words, even those of us in the advanced reading groups couldn't look up any answers. I had concluded my spiel to myself, feeling ancient for my age and exhausted from the confusion inside my own head.

Circling the house on her bike, Bonnie had called out to me, "Any old way, if boys are so duo-brained smart, how come they've never won a single spelling bee in the whole history of Central School?"

"Gordon says it's because the teachers favor the girls. He says boys don't have a chance because they are given all of the harder words," I'd answered.

"Sore losers. Did you ever look up 'stork business' in our Childcraft books?" Bonnie had continued a ride-by conversation, occasionally signaling with her bell, hoping for one of our playmates to come out of their foxholes and respond back in the bike-bell version of Morse Code.

"Yes, I checked on storks," I'd reported, being the library sleuth in our circle of friends, "but, I only found charts of birds' family trees and their migratory travel maps.

In Savannah, maybe, seagulls or flamingos deliver the babies," I had answered hopeful of cracking this mystery of how babies arrive.

I had surely stowed up a slew of questions for Mom to answer or hedge on after our Uncle Wiggly or Uncle Remus or Aesop's Fables one coming-up evening. I couldn't wait. If only I could trick her into slipping me some key words.

"All I know, for sure, is that if Gordon has a second lower brain down you-know-where, it sure-enough is too small for him to do any thinking with," Bonnie had concluded.

I had warned her with my eyes that Mom might be standing inside but with her ears still turned on for hearing us outside. I'd known for a fact that Mom wouldn't want us gabbing about this double-freaky brain business. I'd wondered if Gordon's double-header body had been one of a kind? Was he like a circus attraction or a marvel of biology? Would he go down in scientific history as a freak of nature or an evolutionary step up the ladder?

I'd decided that this second brain, or thinking-peanuts must run in his family tree, and not be lethal. Both he and his Dad had seemed to have this same peculiarity. Unless,

of course, they had both been natural born prevaricators or people who talk out of both sides of their hats with forked tongues. These had been three ways polite people in the South avoided calling anyone a liar, which was the most fight-provoking of all words.

Real low and under her breath, Bonnie had said accusingly, "You think his peanuts is so cute, like a little pink hamster which does tricks."

"Shush!" I'd said, becoming more serious-minded then. Bonnie should have known better than to tell our private opinions or patients' hospital tent secrets.

Gordon had always been our patient for nurse games. He would do anything for a candy pill.

"Boys' thinga-ma-jiggies are suppose to be embarrassing for girls to look at," I'd explained to my sister with the superiority of being older, "until girls get married and can handle natural but gruesome sights."

God must have made some parts of the creatures from all his species odd-looking for some good honest Godly reason. Maybe so none of us get too swell-headed."

"Well then how come girls don't have funny-looking parts on their bodies? Nothing about a girl looks embarrassing," Bonnie had smoothed her hands down the sides of her body and did a spin, as if showing me proof.

"Well, boys sure enough do giggle whenever they see a

naked lady in a picture. Maybe we've just grown used to the way girls look, since we see us every day. It might be the same way for boys."

"Or, maybe, God made girls normal looking," Bonnie had furled her brow like she'd always done when explaining science to me, "because if and when the stork pays us a visit, in our grown-up years, we're going to look like we swallowed watermelon seeds and grew a whole patch in our bellies," she'd sighed.

The thought of us looking like B.F. Goodrich blimps on a stroll had always made Bonnie and I gag.

"Not me. No siree. I'll adopt all of mine," Bonnie had puffed out her belly, standing sway-backed looking down at herself in wonderment.

"Me, neither. I'm never getting married. I'll only be an old maid librarian, or a nun, who is a kind-hearted Mother Superior for orphans," I'd sucked in my own belly and cheeks and tried to assume a holy benign smile, patting my littler sister on the head.

"Maybe you could become Sister Francis of Assisi and just be a bird flock's mother instead. Kids are more trouble than we're worth," Bonnie and I had watched robins land near our sprinkler, where the wet dirt was making worm-picking easy for them. Our soil had been so inundated by long fat inchworms, it had been a miracle that our house

didn't sink down into their network of subway tunnels.

"That reminds me, I've got more pilgrims to add to my Ant Farm," Bonnie took an aspirin jar of worker ants she'd been collecting out of her pocket and inspected them.

"I hope the red ants won't fight the black ants in my ant farm," Bonnie had looked exasperated at that thought.

"Ants aren't stupid like people, besides they're probably color-blind. They'll just see how much faster the work goes with everyone working together," I'd kept up my Pollyanna prattle, hoping for the best.

Watching Bonnie's ants mingle, I'd wished I'd been more normal. Girls weren't even suppose to think the grown-up thoughts that I'd had, but to have a clear worry-free mind, pure as honey, sweet as magnolias. So when Bonnie had finished integrating her new additions to Ellis Island, I'd added one more disclaimer to dismiss my having any further curiosity about the birds and bees unless they were the kinds who fly.

"I'm bored with boys and all their Big Man-i-o competitions. I think their "who can pee the farthest" contests or "stretch his the longest" are just ways of proving they are braver than us. They love it in the woods when all the girls run away and hide, as if we're scared-- instead of just being grossed-out or tired of seeing the same old things," I'd tried to sound blase'.

"I swear I'll never look at another naked boy again. I'll just avert my eyes, like Scarlett O'Hara must have done on her wedding night even with Rhett Butler," I'd concluded.

"You mean not peek at their do-dads, or slingshots or pole-vaulters? Not even for the rest of your life? Not even if one was walking down the street right now like Adam himself?" Sister had stopped me in my tracks by teasing me. We'd giggled, wiggling our eyebrows in Groucho Marx's way, a combination of funny-lasciviousness and naive innocence.

"Well, I'll only look if it's for scientific reasons. Not because some boy is playing Lady Godiva's husband, without any hair to hide his modesty with," we had both been incorrigible romantics, always pairing odd sorts of strangers together as pretend spouses, whom we'd secretly matchmake on buses and such.

I had turned level-headed again to warn my sister about spilling the beans about playing doctor with the neighborhood girls and boys. If some of the grown-ups had known about this, it would have caused punishments beyond just getting our own Mom riled up madder than an overturned hornets' nest.

All the kids had tried to get Brownie Points by having the best boy-girl type gossip, but it could backfire on us something fierce, if it had ever reached the wrong grown-ups' ears. I had been especially worried about big people

like Freida's Dad, who had believed the Devil could get under a kid's skin. I hadn't trusted Dads who had whipped their kids with belts, saying they were punishing the Devil who had wormed his way inside them, making them behave naughtily.

I had flipped through my file of strange grown-up words and phrases the Moms and Dads had used for private matters which I hadn't a clue about.

"Girls' bury-poes? Something in the oven? Before I was born I was just a gleam in my Dad's eye? The postman left a special delivery? Daddy forgot to wear his little raincoat and nine months later--? The curse? A mousie bed? A back-door man? Knockers? Peanut motors? Closet wombs?"

We hadn't been trying to be bad kids, or vulgar, but had just been attempting, by hook or by crook, to learn more about the hidden side of the adults' world, which had attracted children like filings to a magnet. Nonetheless, there were a lot of Moms on our block's grapevine who might have gotten piqued if our hospital tent or battlefield secrets had been revealed to them.

I'd then heard Mom on the phone talking to our other neighbor, Betty Tyson, about what we'd been telling her.

"...Gordon's connived to make them think testicles are men's lower brains. Penis and peanuts must sound alike to a kid's ears."

I had only been privy to Mom's half of the conversation, Betty's window being closed. Finally Mom had been allowed to talk again, and had joined in, "Well, I don't know how we can prevent them from hearing things ... I know but ..."

Anyway, last month's Ladies Home Journal or Women's Day had an article that said you shouldn't tell your children the facts of life until they've proven they're ready for the answers by asking an adult intelligent questions.

That advice doesn't help my situation because my girls overhear nonsense from the older, faster kids. Freida Purvise is always fertilizing their imaginations with you-know-what."

I had been happy we had gotten rid of Mom's sad jello face that afternoon. I'd pondered whether I'd come any closer to the major nagging mystery about myself: where did I come from and how?

Trying to U-turn on the subject, I'd then concentrated on hoping our debut at our dance recital scheduled for that evening would, at least, give me some idea of where I might be headed. Would I have any chance of becoming a dancing star?

Rule #7. Learning from mistakes is a fine art.

Every child in Savannah who had learned how to dance had been to Iris Nomano's Dance Institute, according to Mom, adding--"...at least the ones who have serious dance careers in mind, like my daughters."

Mrs. Nomano, our dance mistress, had taken our Mom aside and had warned her that we sisters had theatrical potential which had to be developed early, or lost forever. Teacher Nomano had advised Mom that she should leap-frog us over our competition on the road to success by giving us plenty of dance training in our premature years. Mom had needed to do this, our instructor had said in her low voice, before we girls had gotten our natural abilities diverted by that public school.

Mrs. Nomano had always murmured these words with regret, as if Mom had been sending us away to the public jailhouse every school-day morning. Her oft-repeated prejudice against public education had come, she'd said, from watching generations of top-notch dancers channel their talent into becoming mediocre students. Mrs. Nomano had sighed that she had hoped she'd caught us in time with her warning.

"...Many future Isadora Duncans have entered public school, but few have danced out, " Iris, in her broken

English would admonish, she'd been born in Belfast and had married a Sicilian. She'd finish her pep talks with her Motto for Moms: Don't Think Posteriorly About Posterity.

Once we'd begun lessons, for the next six months we had been rehearsing twice weekly. The timing of our recital had been poorly planned, however, since our Dad would miss our premier revue by a single day. I'd planned to console him when he had gotten back by saying the best part was our costumes anyway.

I had schemed that I would wear mine one morning, as proof, bringing my folks their breakfast toast in bed, all spiffied up. Bonnie and I could perform our number as a duet, a command engagement to liven up one of their dull nothing-to-do-but-catch-up-on-sleep ho-hum weekends.

The real thrill in the world of dance had come for me when we'd gone for our costume fittings. The costume makers had homes which had been just about the most exhilarating places I'd ever seen, nudging me towards becoming starstruck. Iris's seamstresses had a queen's ransom in bolts of taffeta, satin, crinoline, crepe and chiffon. Their homes had been decorated better than a birthday party, with reams of rhinestones and feathers, fake fur, velvets, and maroon brocade and ribbons, ribbons, ribbons. There had been yards of multicolored and plaid ones hanging from every

corner of their fitting rooms, making their homes look like Arabian tents, with the poof of hanging flounces from hundreds of billowy costumes strung near the rafters.

Being there had been, for me, like travelling to Ali Baba's exotic bazaars. With the yards of sequins catching the lights, there were truly enough magical costumes, to make 1001 exciting "star light, star bright first star I see tonight" hopeful dancers' wishes come true. I'd felt I even had a future as a tap dancer when I'd been in there, despite seeming to have two left feet and no sense of direction.

Whole walls of these costume-makers' dens had been encrusted with what had looked like colorful barnacles, but which had really been thousands of slender silver tacks holding wooden spools of different tones of colored threads. The bound threads had swirled on the wall making rainbows. Whenever I'd seen them, I'd felt like bursting into song, like they do in musicals. In these rooms, of course, I'd would have had sung Judy Garland's blue birds' fly song from Oz.

Those circular hues, wove a mirage of colors more inspiring than my treasured 64-pack of Crayolas, which I'd never used, keeping them beautiful in their gradient rows. Pin cushions and scissors had been attached in the four corners of the room by long strands of elastic which had bounced like silver daggers as the sewers had reached for

them hanging from the ceiling from the network of cord paths which had run from the edges to the center of the rooms.

No matter where a costume maker had stood, these sewing tools had been within her easy upward reach as the dancing girls had stood on stumpy three-legged wood stools in front of three-way mirrors.

The women sewers, each with several yellow cotton tape measures strung around their necks, had adjusted our hems with wooden-ruler standing pin-attachers. Everywhere we'd looked in their rooms costumes had been hanging: majorettes' white satin ones with golden braided epaulets; long net rhumba skirts with every ruffle trimmed with a contrasting color of satin ribbon and split open up the front like two frilly curtains tied back to show a conchita's bare legs.

We had seen cardboard top hats which had looked real Puttin' on the Ritzy and tiny sugar plum fairy dresses so dainty and elf-like they'd looked like only a leprechaun could fit inside them. Arabian princess veils had hung seductively above nylon slit-peekaboo pantaloons in a conspiracy of colors. Hanging matador castanets had occasionally clicked on their own in the gust of all the starry-eyed hope bustling around. Little red pompoms had dangled on elastic cords ready to festoon gypsy veils. Sheik of Araby capes and ruffled flamenco skirts had hung in rows waiting to promenade in squares countries apart, but

both having the same purpose--fanning the heat from off someone's heels in a no-nonsense dance of courtship demands.

In my ears I could almost hear mariachi bands play to tantalize viewers whenever a fiery dancer had made drum-like music with their stamping heels and clapping hands. Dancers, to me, had been like playground monitors in a more perfect world--where nobody did anything without music and lots of rehearsal time.

Whenever Bonnie and I had gone to the costume-makers', we had been like Alice and her younger sister, Frances, in Wonderland and never-ever had wanted to leave. We had always been hoping for a long wait in the hall, so we could marvel at the little taste of Broadway down by the old Tybee River. The seamstresses, who had been mostly huge ladies with rollicking laughs to match, had fitted the costumes on the dancers, long hat pins with pearl ends often stuck in their mouths like toothpicks, directing the girls and encouraging us to be show-offs.

"Can you raise your arms? Twirl for us. Bow and let us see the bottom line. No, its not the hem I'm looking for, I know that's perfect, it's your cute little oven-door buns I need to inspect. Don't be shy.

Bottoms up, bottoms up. Boy Howdy, now don't you look like you just stepped backwards out of Cinderella's carriage? After all the work I've put into your costume,

you'd better strut your stuff proud to show off all of my handiwork. 'Costume made with pride by Eloise.' Yes Lord, you'll do your MaMa and me proud, won't you, sassy girl?"

Bonnie and I had only been in a chorus-line dance, not any solos. Iris had always taken her time setting kids up for stardom, our readiness depending upon her hidden sixth sense. Timing had been all-important, according to Iris, to know when a girl was ready to step out into the spotlight from back in the rows and rows of chorus lines. These back-up rows of girls, it had seemed, to me, had merely been moving backdrops for the main stars to cleverly out-dance, as the choreography had demanded. Being beginners, no star had yet distinguished herself and come forward in our group, so we'd all been given the same steps and chances that night to show our potential. Anyway, that had been the way Iris had inspired us to try to show-off more than the rest of the bunch.

When Iris had seen potential ready to blossom into solo directions, she'd insured it by whispering in a mother's ears while they'd watched her daughter's rehearsals. Any time Iris had whispered to a Mom, all the others' Moms had grown green with envy.

Sure enough, soon the Mom who'd heard Iris's private predictions would be taking out her checkbook and paying for her daughter to take even more costly lessons per week.

Iris had always said mothers and daughters were a team in the dance world. Iris had worked as hard on the mothers as she had on their daughters saying, "Think beyond your budget. Think of the rewards of your daughter's stardom."

I had seen Iris do star-talking to Mom a lot, but Mom had never revealed to us what Iris had said. We'd always asked her later if our teacher had premonitions that we might one day become Broadway dancing stars. Mom had said Iris couldn't entice her to spend any more money until after she'd seen our first recital. This had made me very nervous about our upcoming premier performance.

Iris's own mother-in-law had spent most days at the studio which was a big old-style Southern mansion. The Dance Institute had a wrap-around veranda surrounded by a pungent overhang of magnolia trees.

Iris's very short mother-in-law had never said a word, being foreign to English. But Iris had talked all the time, in both English and Italian, translating what we'd said for her. Mom had said that most of the money for these expensive recitals of The Institute's had been funded partially by this mother-in-law and Iris's Sicilian husband.

We'd never seen Iris's Tony, as it was rumored that he'd gotten tired of all the commotion in the house. Some ladies had told Mom confidentially that Iris's Tony could no longer be with us, as he now was gone and rests in peace.

Our number had been slated to be first on that recital night, since we had been the youngest class. Iris had said the littlest had to go first to warm up the hearts and hands of an audience because the youngest could make even a cadaver sit up and take notice. Iris had said children's mistakes were art, if they'd been weaned on her stage.

Though this production had given me an all-day scary kind of feeling, it had still been fun to look forward to, because I'd known this awfulness would end with that final bow. No other terrible feeling I'd ever known had been so predictable. I'd reasoned that after I was done, at least my stagefright would be over, no matter how badly the preceding moments had been.

If I had been a total disaster in front of the stage lights, I could throw in the towel, feeling relieved about being bad enough to quit, without anyone's quibbling about it. I'd figured I couldn't lose either way. I could become a dancing star or retreat happily-ever-after to the balcony. That afternoon, in retrospect, it had seemed infinitely better to be a carefree member of the audience than to be performing for them. The lucky audience got to sit comfortably eating chocolate-covered raisins, expected only to clap. I'd wondered what had possessed me to want to trade places with the jitter-bound performers?

Rule #8. Nothing that hurts brings true beauty or health.

Our Toni home permanent waves had needed precise timing. We had wanted Gordon to return for a few minutes as seeing Gordon might make us forget how much we had always dreaded Mom's perming-us days.

Bonnie had been going to ask Gordon to come and play in our hospital tent. She was going to tell him that he could just lie there and pretend-sleep while sucking on the dill pickle she had in her pocket to bribe him with. Kids were suppose to rest after eating lunch. The doctors from the women's magazines had given the warning that a person was to do no swimming for an hour and nor any bouncing around before their lunches had settled down and gotten good and digested.

I had hoped Gordon would come again that day. He had been our best patient to practice being real nurses on. We could try anything at all on him, if we'd had enough money to pay him to be our pretend patient. Our experiments had taken enough of our spare pennies from Bonnie's piggy bank to make her complain. But we couldn't have used mine, as we had been saving all my money up for a pony.

In our tent, if we nurses had needed to use a blindfold on Gordon, for our cure to work right, Gordon would ask us for a nickel first. Then he'd let us cover up his eyes with

the makeshift bandages of a war zone. We used either cheesecloth snatched from the clothesline or a red bandanna if it had been one of our luckier laundry-line days.

Sometimes he had needed to be tied down, to keep him from injuring someone else because of the possible pain from our nursing hypodermics, cleverly homemade from bunched-together pine needles, fastened with rubber bands, pointy ends out. Practicing giving him shots with these multi-headed needlers had always cost us six cents.

If we'd needed a urine sample from Gordon to use to diagnose his symptoms under our microscope, like the so-called specimens we'd had to pee in a jar in our real-life embarrassing doctor visits, Gordon had wanted at least nine cents, depending on the amount.

We had done it exactly like the real nurses had done, except we had made him squirt his into our doll's tin teapot, out in our little green army field hospital tent in the back yard.

We nurses had been forced to watch him, so he wouldn't fool us again by using the garden hose, instead of the real thing. He'd retaliated by asking us for a dime for what our patient had called "the living mortification" that our watching had supposedly caused him. We hadn't actually looked, just stood guard over him in the tent, slit-eyed.

Pricking his finger with broken coke bottle glass for

blood samples had cost us a whole quarter. He had been getting rich off of us, but I had thought that was okay, since I'd figured that I was going to get it all back once I married him when we'd grown up.

Gordon had been valuable both as a patient and as my possible future dream hubby, if he had shaped up by then. Bonnie had no pretend-boyfriend yet, being eleven months younger than me. I had volunteered to share Gordon with her and had promised to pass him down for second-hand dibs if I'd ever outgrown him. She'd said "Don't bother," as she'd never seen the use, at our age, of giving ourselves boy-barnacles to worry about. I'd told her boyfriends were suppose to get better, after they'd been trained to give us half of their candy; send us notes along the rows during class; and protect us against threats from the bigger bullies in the neighborhood.

Anyway, we'd needed Gordon as he had been the only kid who would eat any medicine we'd give him. It had usually been our leftovers from our last year's trick-or-treating bags. Often it had been peppermint hard candy which I'd hated, or butterscotch balls which had often made Bonnie gag and see stars if she had sucked on them too hard or swallowed one by accident.

There had been, however, moments when this pretend patient and boyfriend had gone too far, "beyond the beyond"

as we'd often called the unthinkable. This had happened one week near Valentine's day, when Mom had been refilling her washer, with the noisy dryer going full-bore throttling away, worse than an angry poltergeist. Over the ominous sounds coming from the laundry room, Gordon had done some role-playing on his own, which we sisters hadn't instigated.

He'd said he'd discovered that he was almost like Aladdin's genie. Since he hadn't owned a magic lamp, he'd said he'd discovered that if some ordinary person had touched what he'd called his magic wand, held on tight and made a wish, it would come true.

He'd promised it was 99.9% guaranteed, but he wouldn't give any time limit on when a wished-for miracle might happen or where he'd gotten his wand. We'd suspected his magic wand might be exactly the boy-thingy any girls like us would least like to touch of all the whole Magic Genie's body. He had said we had to trust the genie, believe in his magic, be brave and wear a blindfold. He'd also warned that our peeking at the magic wand would kill our chances for our wish to come true, and might even cause the opposite of good luck to happen to us.

Gordon had said you'd know if your wish would come true, if you wished real hard and his magic wish-stick or divining rod had pointed at you. He'd said the longer you squeezed it, saying "Ali Baba Bayou" and the harder you

wished for what you'd wanted, the better your luck at making it point, granting you almost anything that was humanly possible.

Only by doing the unthinkable, he'd reminded us, like befriending a dragon, had any magic in storybook history ever happened, He had predicted he could almost make a girl Queen for a Day, just like those grown up weepy ladies on t.v.

Weekly on t.v., that contest's ladies had told their pitifully sad stories about their misfortunes. The lady on "Queen for a Day," who'd had the worst true-life unfortunate event happen to her, judging by the audience's applauded response, had won her wish which would make her future look brighter. Washing machines had been the prize usually awarded on the show to make these women's wishes come true. Mom had always watched this show in the afternoons, if it had managed to suck her in before she'd remembered to call out to me, sometimes almost sobbing, "Turn that silly tearjerker off!"

Bonnie had said Gordon's promise was full of hogwash. She had thought Gordon was playing tricks on us and might be into mischief as well. Could he possibly be daring girls to touch his privates by saying it would make our wishes come true? We hadn't been sure whether our suspicions about what he'd called his magic wand were right or wrong.

At first neither of us had thought it would be worth taking the chance. But even my no-nonsense sister had changed her mind, after Darleen, the bravest girl on our block, had finally taken his challenge with a double money-back guarantee.

Darleen had bravely done it and lo and behold she had gotten the two-wheeler she had wanted for her birthday. When this miracle had come true, even my doubting show-me sister had said she was becoming halfway convinced. We'd known Darleen's parents had repeatedly told her to forget about getting a new bike, them not having a bit of money for one. Crestfallen Darleen, thinking that the Magic Genie had been her last chance, had snuck a quarter from her Dad's change jar to pay the Magic Genie.

He had performed his miracles out in our tent. The Genie had been wearing that stupid diaper pinned on top of his head like a swami, with the empty fish bowl turned upside down in front of him as his magic crystal ball.

Alakazam! Two days later, Darleen's impossible wish had come true, right before our doubting eyes, when her folks had wheeled the new bike into the living room right through the middle of Pin the Tail on the Donkey! It had been a pink one with streamers just like the one Darleen had imagined, she'd told us, to keep her mind off of what she had been doing out in the tent with Swami Gordon. She'd

said she'd kept her shut eyes slammed tight, under the loose blindfold, trying to keep herself from throwing up on that old magic wand or even dying from fright or disgust. But she'd said she had no idea where Gordon had gotten his wand nor whether it was animal, vegetable or mineral. All she'd known, she'd told us, was that it had only taken a quarter and two minutes and it had worked as all the world could plainly see before them. Darleen had attached Ace playing cards to the spokes of her bike wheels with clothespins, making its every revolution sound like the fast shuffling done by a Las Vegas roulette wheel. The sound of Darleen riding by on her bike, had given Bonnie and I conniption fits. Should we tempt the dragon or continue poo-pooing it as possibly bogus, without any proof yay or nay?

After winning musical chairs at Darleen's birthday, Bonnie had enviously run her hand over that bike and had changed her mind about Gordon's magical powers. So we ourselves had taken a chance on fate, and had done the double-wish at the Magic Genie's in the tent for fifty cents.

This gypsy tent, had been our same green one, changed from hospital duty by us decking it out using crepe paper, jingle bell ribbons and a new sign over the entrance. The sign had said: "Beware! Magic Wishes Granted. 25 cents or else, no dice!"

The whole event had taken place in a rush with many arguments and tests to see whether or not we could see anything under our blindfolds. Bonnie had agreed to let her hand be placed first on the wand by the genie. We'd worn our white Sunday school gloves, just in case, and I'd cupped mine over the top of hers. We'd finally gotten a grip, held on, squeezed and chanted "Ali Baba Bayou" ten times. Then we'd fled in a panic, stumbling out of the tent, ripping off our blindfolds outside, scared out of our wits.

"What do you think it was, Bonnie?" I'd asked gingerly later.

"Well if his magic wand was the gear-shifter of his boy brain, it was wrapped in something. I think we're safe, because when I squeezed it, it nearly came off it my hand. If the wand was his wee-wee, I think he would have said 'Ouch!'" Bonnie had reassured me.

But, nevertheless, we'd gone inside and washed our hands with Lavo mechanics' soap until they had turned bright red and felt raw and sore. When we'd gone to bed, we'd declared that it had been worth it, hardly able to sleep for peeking out the window, thinking we'd heard our new pony neighing for us.

Later, after a week of sleepless, expectant waiting, however, Bonnie and I had gotten impatient for our dappled pony to appear in our front yard. It hadn't seemed fair for

us to remain so unlucky, after our expensive investment.

After a third uneventful week had still found us ponyless, Bonnie had re-reversed her decision. With no pony arriving, she'd believed we'd been hoodwinked and had wasted our money on a fakir. Gordon had chided us for our doubting, saying maybe we'd have to wait a little longer since we weren't Catholics. Thinking he might be right, we'd borrowed a little Virgin Mary statue from Darleen, and each night had counted the beads of our long plastic junk jewelry necklaces in front of the tiny Glow-In-The-Dark statue saying both "Hail Mary, Full of Grace," as Darleen had taught us and "Ali Baba Bayou," which had been Gordon's genie chant.

When all this religious fervor hadn't worked, even after we'd added a Nativity Scene to our wishing altar, with three dolls playing the wise men atop a stuffed donkey, we'd almost lost faith in magic. This failure of Gordon's powers was probably why Bonnie had later kept letting the cat out of the bag to the grown-ups about Gordon being the guilty culprit who'd told us private secrets.

Gordon's magical powers might have been just luck with Darleen, as Bonnie and I had done that double dibs, wishing for a pony, and miles of time had gone by without one appearing in our back yard. The Genie's wand had pointed straight up, he'd said, but our pony had never arrived at

Nine Pine Valley Road and our future pony's apples and sugar cubes had either gotten spoiled or been eaten by the Magic Genie himself.

When Bonnie had asked for our money-back refund, Gordon had turned around and requested another quarter from us to wish for our pony to hurry up and come faster.

We'd never had any more spare silver money to throw away on taking a second chance, however. Bonnie and I had kept spending all Dad's quarters on the Dixie Cup ice cream musical truck man instead. Ice cream was more trustworthy Bonnie had told me, when I had wanted to re-test the genie's wish powers. I had been hoping a second try might finish the trick, despite us just being Methodists speaking English, while Gordon had said Latin worked better, like in "The Miracles of Lourdes," a film he'd seen in Catechism.

Then to add insult to injury, some of Gordon's G-Men boys on the back of the school bus had bragged that Gordon had been getting rich talking the silliest girls in Georgia into giving him money for closing their eyes, making a wish and squeezing a baby dill pickle because he'd guaranteed it had been a magical wand. (!)

Neither Bonnie nor I had peeked from under our blindfold at his wand, during our visit to the genie, for fear of ruining our chances. We hadn't known whether he had been fudging about what had made his wand magic. He'd said

it was one of a kind, while anyone knows pickles come in bunches--none better than the next, except for being bigger.

Bonnie had said she had been relieved, as she'd thought she'd wished so hard on the magic wand, that she'd nearly unsnapped it from its socket.

"Who would pay a quarter to squeeze a pickle? Nobody could be that trickable," we'd expressed our disbelief to the boys at the back of the bus. Gordon hadn't told on us, at least.

"Yucky poo!" When we'd felt safe from a finger of guilt pointing towards us, we'd feigned disgust although we'd known full well that we'd almost thought we'd touched something even more unbelievable. It had seemed better to us on that bus ride to think of ourselves as wasting our money on something silly rather than perhaps blindly committing some "sin." Nothing had changed in the world of magic to boost our equestrian hopes in the months following that tent episode. Bonnie and I had wished we could become like the three little monkeys who could speak no evil, hear no evil, and see no evil. Almost every house on our block had one of those tiny imported wooden statues on their mantelpieces, as reminders to the kids who'd lived there, for all the good it hadn't done us. We'd been more like the cats that curiosity had almost killed, and ended up needing to knock on wood--often those monkeys.

Rule #9. Speak up for those in dire straits.

Bonnie and I had confided to each other that we had more butterflies causing havoc in our stomachs, than Bonnie had flapping around in the jars of her Blue Ribbon Zoo of Living Insects. While Bonnie's stummy had always been sensitive, my loss of appetite that day had come from working myself into a tizzy about whether my dancing feet might freeze up on me or misbehave on that stage in our recital.

From my anxiety I'd realized that it had probably been stagefright that kept prima ballerinas willow thin and gracefully swaying, as if to faint. All these years I hadn't known it wasn't discipline but fear that had kept professional dancers ballerina-skinny, judging from myself.

We'd recently been over to the Oglethorpe Auditorium and it had seemed as huge as Buckingham Palace to me. We had only done one quick rehearsal there, but the stage at the back of the auditorium had seemed cavernous. From the rear of the auditorium, I had blanched. It had been studded with hundreds of corpuscle-red velvet seats from the ground floor to the balcony. The stage had been an arched platform which, to me, had resembled a giant's wide-opened mouth, caught in a yawn.

I had thought of Jonah getting swallowed in the whale,

and felt as if I too had fallen into a trap. In this auditorium, my dancing would be more of a scramble to get myself freed, than doing anything requiring more grace than guts. The worst part had been that all of the soft shoulders I could go to cry on for comfort post-performance tonight would already know what I was going to say; my running the dancer's gauntlet unsuccessfully. I couldn't even exaggerate and have someone say, "Oh, you couldn't have been that awful."

Instead, any of my comfort people would be saying, "I know! I was there! You embarrassed me to tears ..."

There had been a Grand Canyon of an echo in Oglethorpe Auditorium, and Bonnie had enjoyed herself telling the story of Jack and the Beanstalk loud enough to get reverberations from "Fee, fie, foe, fum, I smell the blood of an American."

Gordon had called out, "Fire! Fire! Everyone please proceed to your nearest Dairy Queen for banana splits."

At my turn to make a statement which could be heard from the stage clear to the last row of the balcony where my companions had listened, I'd been stumped at first, with a total loss of words.

"Read from your diary if you can't think of anything. Hurry, try it!" Bonnie had egged me on.

"Thank you for your concern. But after tonight's performance I'm giving up dancing, after forty years!"

My self-centered fear had been rudely deflected, arrested back at home, when I'd glanced over to check out the cause of the persistent scratching noise I'd heard beside the stove. I would later wonder how I could have been so scared and self-absorbed as to have missed this unbelievable sight in my own kitchen. For at that time a more macabre vision than me making a fiasco of one puny dance, had been going on inside of our very own home. No wonder Mom had kept us outside. She must have brought in that bucket of live crabs that day, after keeping these creatures hidden from us, probably out in the tool shed or the car's trunk. I'd figured she must have bought them at the seafood market the day before, when we'd stopped there on our rounds of pre-party errands.

Bonnie and I must have missed this purchase when we had been told to go hunt up the ripest watermelon of the pile. That day Bonnie and I had thumb-plunked hundreds of melons, hefting some up to the scale to watch the dial spin around.

I had been glad that I hadn't been around for the buying of the live crabs which I'd had sympathy for, despite them reminding me of the prehistoric animals which had roamed the earth for centuries on hot molten lava beds. During some Crustacean Age, in the days before the Human Ape Age, crabs had probably been the size of dinosaurs.

Even these smaller versions had shells which had

looked to me like living bits of the hot crusted earth which surrounds an erupting volcano. I had felt unprotected watching their little black beady eyes. Despite resting in cool water, their shells had looked sizzling, and too hot to touch.

They had looked reminiscent to me of fire-encrusted marshmallows flaming on roasting sticks over a Brownie campfire. With their pinchers sharp and menacing, these little armored monsters, at close range seemed to have small spring-loaded forklifts for mouths. I'd suspected, however, that under all that protective facade, they had been just soft, meek little uglies, trying to stay alive on the crab-hostile shores of the seafood-craving beaches of the saltwater world.

The crabs had been sitting beside the stove which had a deep canning vat of boiling water steaming up to slightly rattle the pan's lid and threaten that an imminent scalding geyser was being brewed deep inside.

The crabs, all ten of them, had been stacked on top of each other, and had seemed to be trying to form a pyramid so they could tumble out back to their former beach bum lives.

Then I'd understood.

"Mom, you aren't going to boil those crabs alive?" I had winced, hating the possibility.

"That's the only way to keep them fresh. They don't

feel anything. The boiling water kills them on the spot. It's a quick, painless death." Mom had never been sentimental about eating animals. Her answer had bolted us upright.

"Please, Mom, no. It will haunt me and cause me get car sick on the way to our recital," Bonnie had joined in on my crab-saving crusade, not wanting us to eat these primordial curiosities either.

Sister had pleaded with Mom that she could use them for a science project, keeping them in her room or our sandbox. Mom had tried to calm us down, at first unsuccessfully, but she'd finally hit the jackpot, "I don't know if I should let you girls lick these beaters. I think they have too much strawberry frosting still on them. Perhaps it would be too much of a good thing.

What do you think? Should I still give them to you after all that crocodile hullabaloo we just went through?"

Both of us had moved our heads affirmatively, mesmerized by the fluffy beaters looking as fat as cotton candy.

"Okay, I hope you've learned your lesson. Have you each made a resolution to do better from now on out?"

We had shaken our heads in agreement.

"What must we remember?" she'd asked us.

"To always say thank you?" I'd ventured, but she hadn't

meant that.

"From the Bible?" she'd prodded us.

"Lord, teach me to accept what I can't change, and change what I cannot accept?" Bonnie had asked, almost pressing her palms together prayerfully.

"Good girl," Mom had smiled.

She had held one frosting-laden beater in each hand, as enticing bribes for our promises. We had spoken the syllables in unison, smiling into each other's eyes and repeating the Biblical quote together, and ending with, "Ab-so-lute-ly."

"Yes, Your Highness." Bonnie had taken her beater from Mom with a bow, as if a diva receiving a pink diadem.

"I think my brain just had a growth spurt. I can't imagine what a brat I've been all my life before this minute!" I'd stretched out the truth, and my hand.

"Well, let us hope so. No fingers crossed I hope?" Mom had shook her head as if wondering why she'd ever had kids.

She had handed each of us an unscraped beater and she had picked up her big pan of red fruit cocktail jello. It had still been steaming, but she had needed to hurry and get it into the fridge to speed up its cooling off and setting up time.

"Barri Lyn," she'd called to me as I hadn't been noticing her needing help, preoccupied with winding my

tongue around the curved tines with the frosting.

"Barri Lyn!" Mom had repeated exasperated as if our promises had already been forgotten, "Please open up the refrigerator door and stand back. Scoot your chair out of the way Bonnie, this is hot. Gangway!"

I had put down my beater and scurried on the cold slick tile floor to open the fridge.

Just then, from the corner of my eye I had seen the top crab of the pyramid had made it nearly over the side. He had been grappling with his pinchers at the pot's rim. All of his cohorts who had been bunched on that same side of the bucket had scrambled too in what had appeared to be a group heave-ho leaning effort toward that same direction.

With Mom's foot weighted beside the bottom of the bucket, perhaps acting as fulcrum, in one inauspicious moment of imbalance, the whole crowded bucket with the crabs on board had toppled over. I'd watched it all in silent amazement as it had rocked and then crashed with a muffled swooch and gawash of the water followed by rolling sound of the thin aluminum bucket, now emptied, and the skedaddle-hopping noises of all ten of those hard-shelled guys making their bid for freedom.

With what had seemed an anywhere-but-there desperation, they'd gotten away from the stove as quickly as possible. Maybe they'd sensed how closely they'd come to "kicking the

bucket" by being scalded to death on the stove.

I would always remember that escape scene in slow motion, although the event had actually happened in the blink of an eye and had only decelerated when we'd tried to reinvent the scene for others in order to recount how it could have occurred. Our fiasco of an explanation had taken piecing, with each of us collaging our impressions and remembering details to turn the event into an implausible but true family kitchen disaster, with a big party looming on the morrow.

All over Mom's immaculate floor there had afterwards been this watery spill, plus the ten crabs who had made a real run for their lives, although not getting very far at first as the waxed floors hadn't given them any tread to use for traction.

We had then heard the dreaded scritchings sounds of each of their eight primordial feet, four on either side of each, for a grand exponential total of eighty crustacean feet! The worst of their features had been their opened pinchers rigidly held aloft, their top appendages poised on high as their legs went skidding on the waxed tile.

It had been like hearing the clicking of a speed-knitting contest at the state fair. The thought of twenty snapping pinchers had been enough to make me feel lightheaded, a definite softie. Their pinchers had seemed

to have moved determinedly, seeming to be prowling, searching for our raw vulnerable toes by some secret sense known only to crabs.

Mom had stood there almost stone-still, agog, holding the huge blue roast pan brimming full of hot jello cocktail. There in the middle of this onslaught, she had moved cautiously forward, oven mitts steadying her oblong pan with the hot jello meant to be sandwiched between cake layers when gelled, becoming the in-between layers of the Mile High Strawberry Surprise Cakes which were to cinch our party's fate and loft our family away from some lurking danger, still known only by Mom.

I had recovered my wits enough to have flung the refrigerator door wide open, before leaping back out of harm's way on my bare feet.

Mom had been wearing her open-toed wedgies so that her feet had been slightly elevated above this sludge and mayhem. To make the situation worse, if that had even been possible, Shad, who had been lazing under the table gnawing on a bone, had started slurping water off of the floor and woofing to challenge these scattering stick-legged, tentacle-eyed carapaced clackers.

"Jehosaphats crabbies!" We'd whooped and lifted our feet.

Just then as Mom had stooped to slide her pan into the

clearing she'd already prepared on a rack of our party-food stuffed refrigerator, something must have startled her. She'd flung up her hands suddenly like Little Miss Moffat, and down had come the barrage of hot fruited cocktail jello, erupting like the first belch of a roiling volcano. Jello, like a red tide, had splashed upon every surface.

Mom's beige linen shorts outfit now had been imprinted with pink splatter marks down the front, like hot candle drippings which had clung there. Her Old English lemon-oiled cabinets, her Windexed windows and vinegar-sparkled glass ornaments, her Bon Ami polished stove and Spic n Spanned new fridge had all been splashed from this scented sticky deluge smelling like strawberry-cordials.

Bonnie had climbed to higher elevations, and had ended up standing up on a chair, watching all this, but still slowly licking her beater, as if engrossed in a monster movie. I had found myself, after an initial rush of panic, standing on the tips of my toes protectively holding the back screen door in front of me, like a knight with her shield, holding this barrier between me and the kitchen's moving contents, teeth now clamped down on my beater.

Mom, as if the twirling ballerina in the middle of her musical jewelry box, had spun in a small circle, surveying the damage surrounding her.

"Out! Out!" she'd said when she'd taken in the entire

panorama and had recovered from her shock enough to speak words instead of making undecipherable sounds of shock. She'd started batting at the air with her oven mitts and had finally explained why she'd been swatting at nothing.

"Did you see that? A huge bumblebee nearly flew straight into my mouth!" she'd finally explained, looking around to see if he had still menaced us. He must have been looking for strawberry flowers, tricked by the pungent jello. Bonnie, who like me, had already been bee stung one too many times, had leaped onto a second chair seat upon hearing about this angry carousing bee, and on her third bounding vault had landed next to me on the porch.

We'd then seen a large Mr. Bumblebee land on a pink glacial spot and start fiddling with his feet in this goop. He had been buzzing like a miniature chainsaw, going around in circles. He'd seemed, to me, a lesser threat, now grounded, compared to the other displaced rovers.

Mom had then edged her way out toward the back porch too, wading through sticky slosh, avoiding stepping on the little dices of pears and peaches, green grapes rolling away as she'd slalomed along without raising her feet. She'd scooped up the bumblebee by scooting a cardboard recipe card under him and cupping a glass to dome him in safely as she'd carried him out in his protest, buzzing against the edge of the glass. On the safe side of the screen door, she'd flung

him away into the great outdoors where he'd belonged, making me feel vulnerable as if there was no safe haven in our home anymore, either indoors or out.

"I read about a lady who got stung on the tongue once when drinking out of a coke bottle at a picnic," Mom had kept licking her lips, seeming relieved that she wouldn't have a similar incident to need to write a letter of caution about, to warn fellow subscribers of the Readers' Digest or House Beautiful.

Shad had continued to bark in the kitchen, not about to be shooed away from his guard-dog duties. If not for his having a bulldog's flat, smushed-in nose, he would by then have had a crab attached to his nostril like a hood ornament. His curiosity had made him seemingly dauntless in accosting the testy invaders of our formerly dry, homey kitchen in our party-perfect abode.

"Wouldn't you just know it?" Mom had asked when our phone had begun to jangle just as we'd managed our hasty getaway. Mom had first cracked the door to check the floor for critters before returning back inside. She'd cautiously seated herself down half on/half off the table to try answering it without letting her dangling feet get close to where the crabs could conceivably have been roaming. Most of them were no longer to be seen; their disappearance more foreboding than actually knowing where most of the ten were,

as grotesque as they'd been to watch freed at such a close range.

"They've all vanished like a mirage. I can't even hear them, maybe they're on our rugs," I'd whispered for no good reason, except fear.

"I'll bet they are crawling into our beds for a long winter's nap," Bonnie had teased me.

I had been already been imagining scenes of primordial carnage involving skyscraper-sized crabs, before Bonnie had added this nocturnal dread with her suggestion of where they'd decided to lie in wait for our pinkies. I had often been a victim of nightmares, never understanding how I could have had such a scary dream life, living in such a previously secure home.

The phone had then rung, and far from being saved by the bell, it had made Mom return again inside.

"Hello? Hi, Mom. Kids, it's your Gramma Anne on her way! Where are you calling from now, Lady Anne, in your pleasure tour of America by Greyhound? ..."

Mom had sounded cool and collected, as if everything had been still going on schedule, and had even seemed to be cheerful on the phone to Dad's Mom. Our Gramma Anne had always taken two bus journeys a year from Florida to

California, visiting each of her four children along her itinerary. This hadn't been one of her inviolable-as-clockwork visits, which had heightened our excitement about the importance of this horizon-lifting party for celebrating Dad's return from Guam.

While Mom had listened and talked, coyly lifting things with her fingers or pushing things with her toes, peeking under this or that, inspecting improbable places, searching for crabs while she'd sat there. Bonnie and I, stranded outside on the porch, had started pushing each other competitively. This had quickly escalated into a shoving match, each of us wanting to be the first one to say Hi! to Gramma on the phone and have the honor of reporting our version of our recent kitchen drama.

Mom had again pushed the screen door shut on our eager-beaver sparring match. We had quieted down and listened, silently butt-bumping each other, while waiting to hear Mom's official interpretation on the recent events of that day. I had been anxious to hear how damaging to our party preparations and timing Mom had thought this unexpected spillage had been.

I had always been too much of a blabbermouth, while Mom had been a good listener. I had wanted to become one too, but at this time had wanted Mom to really spill the beans.

"Are you having a good trip?" Mom had asked Gramma solicitously, letting her mother-in-law do most of the talking, despite Gramma probably being squeezed into a boring phone booth at a Greyhound rest stop halfway here.

"Don't listen to every person who sits next to you, Mom ... Well, what does your seat mate eat? ... Oh no ..."

Mom had now sounded alarmed, "But, you'll starve to death! Well he's young, but it's not safe for you to be switching at your age. ... Yes, we are all fine.

... Some minor mishaps but I don't want to tell you over the phone, and have you using up your emergency phone dimes. We'll tell you all about it when you get here," with her farewell statement Mom had crushed our hopes of either besting each other or hearing Mom's rendition of our life.

"Home, home on the range, where the crabs and the bumblebees play. Where seldom is heard, a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day," Connie had sung out loudly, trying to get an encoded message through to Gramma. After shushing Bonnie, Mom had again tried to sign off on the phone call, while craning to watch one crab head back towards the bedrooms, down the slippery wooden-floored hallway.

"Well--you tell your nice Greyhound driver, that Wally from Chattanooga, that you need to arrive on time in

Savannah for your granddaughters' big Coming Out Dancing debut! Don't let him get his bus hung up in any traffic jams, you hear me now?"

"Mom!" "Mom!" We sisters had implored her not to hang up yet. Both of us had one arm stuck through a narrow crack in the screen door that we'd managed to wedge open, despite Mom's leg extended stalwartly to keep it closed. We'd probably looked like beggars beseeching for alms, but she'd given us an exasperated look while shaking her head no and moving towards hanging up the phone.

"The girls say Hi, they are both so anxious to talk with you, but I'll let you hurry or you'll never get to the front of ladies' room line before the bus leaves. What? Mom--all bus stations have broken toilets--so fly next time! See you soon. Bye."

"What's up with Gramma?" I had asked after she'd signed off. I had been sorely disappointed that Gramma Anne had remained in the dark about the turn of events here at home. Our crab adventure would have given her an exciting adventure to enthrall her seatmates with, on the last leg of her bus journey to Savannah.

Free crabs had looked so alarmingly dangerous running around on a floor in our house, albeit no match, even so well armored, for a boiling vat of water. Alas, their freedom had been won only by imprisoning me in thoughts of

my own vulnerability.

Mom had eventually gotten around to answering my question about Gramma's news which had surprised even our usually unflappable Mom.

"Some Seventh Day Adventist who sat with your Gramma between St. Pete and Tallahassee has talked Gramma into becoming a vegetarian, at her age! Can you believe it?"

Mom had apparently found this report of Gramma's more stunning than anything recently unleashed in our own kitchen.

"Yes!" Bonnie and I had squealed with delight at Gramma's continuing to make strange, open-minded choices despite being a tiny proper lady waltzing through her golden years with a bevy of admirers in St. Petersburg, where you are still a teenager at 70. We'd loved how unpredictable our granny had always been; turning vegetarian at her age? I, myself had been in sympathy with her choice.

I'd had a hard time reconciling the fact that the cuddlesome animals off the pages of our first storybooks were also being cooked and served to us on platters or paper plates. Henny Penny's sky certainly had been falling! Under no luckier skies than the storybook chicken had been Tweetie Bird of cartoon fame. I'd often thought about the real animals behind the stars representing their world who had spoken like humans: Elsie Cow, of Borden's

advertisements; Porky and Petunia Pig; Donald Duck and his nephews Huey, Dewy and Louey Duck.

Humans' appetites had been whetted by these loveable creatures when they'd been called by their dinner-food names. Later when she'd arrived Gramma would tally with me these cuddly animals' edible pseudonyms: Elsie T-Bone Steak; Porky and Petunia Tenderloin; Peking Donald and his Roasted Ducklings or Mother Foie de Gras Goose. While I would never have been allowed to swear off meat at my age, in our household, I'd found myself becoming more of a picky-eater after our discussion.

Gramma's decision had made my sister and me realize that Old MacDonald's Farm hadn't truly been a paradise for barnyard creatures after all. Likewise, while these crabs certainly hadn't been squeezey-cute, we'd thought that they, too, had deserved our Good Samaritan consideration, if only for being too ugly to eat.

Rule #10: Every person has a silver lining.

Mom had called over to Betty's, asking for advice or helpful hints on the daunting chore of removing all the sticky jello spill. Mom had concluded with querying Betty if her Papa Bear might be in the den and if he were skilled in crab catching. Mom had told Betty that any free-roaming crabs in our house were both free for Ricky's nabbing services and would earn him our eternal gratitude.

Ricky, Sr., had arrived at our door in no time flat dressed in rubber waders and Betty's pink rubber floor-scrubbing gloves. He certainly had been a sight for sore eyes, as Mom had aptly called him. He had been wearing a polka-dotted shower cap, for the Lord knows what unearthly reason, and tangling with a deep-sea fishing net with his catcher's mitt on. With his other hand he'd held his wife's lard-drippings' bucket.

Mr. Tyson had been banging on our door before Mom had even altogether finished chatting with Betty. Ricky must have monitored his wife's phone conversations, along with all of her other habits.

"Who can that be? I hope it's not Herbert, the Fuller-brush man," Mom had said, removing her sticky shoes. She had slipped out of her straw wedgies before treading on the newly-cleaned beige living room carpet.

"You rang?" Ricky had asked, bowing like an undertaker.

After she'd let him in, and seen his weird attire, Mom had quickly remembered that we girls had just been on our way out the door, that very minute. She had added that we should leave Ricky the run of our house, so he could work in peace, without our interference. She had slipped a shift over her splattered shorts and had found her car key ring with the St. Christopher's medallion and Libra sun-sign symbol. Like a wrangler she had rounded us up and herded us out of the chute, just as Ricky had untangled his net and set to work.

We had closed the door on Ricky, Senior, not a moment too soon, as Ricky had already started clucking and calling, "Here kitty, kitty. I mean, here crabbie, crabbie. Come out, come out, wherever you are. Daddy's heating your bath water for you right next door on Betty's stove."

"I'm sure there is some last-minute something we need from the store, isn't there, girls?" Mom had asked conspiratorially as we had made our brisk exit. Sister and I had trailed her, barefooted, to the car, protesting all the way.

We hadn't been too happy to be going to the store without any shoes, an easy excuse for her to use to keep us from tagging along inside the supermarket to slow her down. The worst words in the world to a kid are, "You can just

wait in the car."

"This is just a short-short trip to the A. and P.," Mom had kept reminding us on the way, after telling us to try to think of something we had needed from there. Her shopping list had been left pinned to the fridge door, probably englossed in a patina of sugary pink.

"Remember okra," she'd already told us when hurriedly searching for her change purse in our rush to evade complicity in Ricky's crab-nabbing and avoid our inevitable questions about the future fate of these animals.

"Promise not to forget okra in case I do, in all this confusion. Now tell me what I said?"

"Okra, okra, okra," Bonnie and I had intoned like a caboose all the way to the store, including what other additions she'd added along the route. Later our grocery store mantra had grown longer, and we'd sing-songed it.

"Okra, goldfish food, toothpicks and Parker House rolls, as you'd suppose; that's what we're going to the grocery store for."

"Okra, goldfisss--" as we'd repeated it, our mnemonic verses had added ingredient stanzas along with the miles. Sometimes a billboard would flash us another buying message: "Elsie Borden, is proud of her milk and Borden's thinks you'll be too. It's Udderly Delicious. Try some ice cream

tonight from Borden's Dairy."

"Mom can we buy some Borden's Rocky Road or Candy Cane Swirl to ala mode your Mile High Strawberry Surprise cakes with? You know how Dad's been missing his Rocky Road," Bonnie had been inspired by that billboard.

"Over in Guam he's probably has been forced to eat pineapple, coconut oiled, curried stingray, macadamian nut ice cream made from cobra venom, stuck on that faraway island so far from Borden's," I'd picked up on Bonnie's wavelength, and had started pleading for alms, of the delectable variety.

"Our poor Mackie Man, six months of living as deprived as Robinson Crusoe," Bonnie had made her final picturesque bargaining plea.

"I think the opposite has been the case. From what I've gathered the men have been stuffing themselves, eating at luaus. I don't think this has been such a hardship tour for the Air Force boys.

Mac wrote that they've been eating with hula girl waitresses to serve them, and ukelele serenaders," Mom had retorted, almost sounding envious.

"On some islands they eat chocolate covered ants for sprinkles, and batter-fried grasshoppers," I'd countered.

I'd felt sorry for Dad being without his stateside pleasures. I had feared the worst for him after tasting

2some Japanese wasabi powder from our kitchen, not knowing the writing on the label had said it was dried horseradish.

"If I have enough money left over from the essential things I'll pick up more ice cream. But there are more important necessities for us to get, like toothpicks. And tabasco sauce!" Mom had bumped her palm on her head, as if to get her brain unstuck, as we had neared our destination.

"If I forget the tabasco again, you'll have to engrave it on my tombstone, girls," she had sighed, seemingly aggravated with the upsetting omens of this day.

Her last words upon turning into the parking lot had again clued me in that parties had been some serious do-or-die kind of no-nonsense business, in the life of a military wife and mother. This had obviously been true, I'd thought, despite these affairs being given short-shrift by the squadrons' wives as only fun social events in the Air Force families' after-hours lives. I had thought about Mom's last words for awhile.

On her tombstone? "And here lies Lee, the Captain's wife, whose fatal flaw had been forgetting to buy tabasco sauce for her husband's Welcome Home Luau. RIP.."

We had also been fortunate that day that Mom had remembered she'd still had our beach shoes stowed in the car's trunk. We still hadn't shaken out all the sand from inside our tennies after our last beach party trek. Seeing

our blow-up dinosaur floats back in the opened trunk, had made me wish we'd been on our way to Tybee Beach instead. But the trunk had hammered shut, closing off those carefree memories of summer and we'd poured out our little pyramids of sand from our white shoes onto the black tar Sahara-hot surface of the parking lot.

Earlier in our Air Force life, I had thought Mom had been overly anxious and finicky in preparing for her parties, but that assessment had been quenched after experiencing a couple of these social occasions. I'd learned about strange pitfalls which had befallen the women of her generation, despite being called merely "housewives."

Who would have guessed, for instance, that party guests or even the boss's wife might snoop through your closet, and for sure, your medicine cabinet and likewise inspect the whole premises of your life from tip to sternum at these affairs? Some of those invited had behaved as if they had been inspecting a decorated model home at some fancy new subdivision's Open House celebrations. Many newly-zoned subdivisions had been springing up all over town around this time in Savannah.

Riding along, we'd often noticed a big flat place where there had used to be piney woods. Instead of the forests, all that had now stood had been a billboard sign announcing a new modern housing complex would be coming soon. These

housing communities always had tantalizing names like Fox Forest Glen or Mulberry Lane, although the land had been stripped of every single tree or shrub. The forests had become flatlands, with concrete streets with names, but no houses yet built. The builders had left only areas staked off by strings with plastic flags, dividing the earth into future homes. I'd always wondered where the displaced birds and jackrabbits had moved when the bulldozers had razed everything in sight and put up a sign selling future homes in Forest Burrow Meadows or Woodland's Deer Heights.

At first these subdivisions had seemed awkward and out of place, like a sore thumb, but after awhile, I'd even forgotten where there had used to be forests and wild raspberry bushes and wildflower fields which we'd often stopped the car to raid. Free roadside food had been such a treat, and there had once been so much of it. We all had to adjust to change, Mom had advised us when we'd complained that our foraging spots had disappeared or been ruined.

Dad hadn't been the only one in the military, supposed to keep a stiff upper lip, keep personal opinions to himself while in public and liable for inspection appraisals. As an Air Force family, we were supposed to be squeaky-clean and above-board, just as if we had been a preacherman's family parading on Easter Sunday.

Many of Dad's superior officers had lived off-base too,

only blocks away from our home, in their slightly bigger boss houses. We'd always had the biggest garden of anybody though, since Dad's family had owned a big Indiana dairy farm and he had inherited a green thumb, especially for tomatoes, cukes, corn, roses and probably cows.

"You can take a farm kid out of the country but you can't take the sodbuster out of the kid," people had often said about him, after admiring his methodically laid-out gardening plots.

"Almost a work of art," one Captain's wife had sighed, while munching on a newly pulled-up carrot stick, and staring at Dad's handiwork, as precisely crafted as a maze. It had so mesmerized her that she'd eaten her unwashed carrot including the greenery on the top.

"We're tough enough in Kentucky, to eat a little decent dirt," she'd bragged taking another bite, while refusing the washed one offered by Mom. The big brasses' wives had always been coming to raid our garden. Mom had always given them the biggest and best of everything in season. Mom had wanted to help Dad's climb through the ranks like Jack and his magic beanstalk. Our pot of gold at the top, at this momentous time, had been Dad's getting his next promotion to the rank of Major, which would give him a wider array of duty assignments. The higher-ranked officers' travel options had included transfers overseas, at stations

with three-year tours of duty.

Inside the A and P Supermarket on that first big recital day, we had gotten waylaid on our plan to do this trip in a jiffy. Mrs. Albright, the Colonel's wife, had been standing in the aisle with the cleaning products and she had also been bound for our upcoming party.

"What do you think the story is on Inez Ullstrom's cherry pie recipe?" had been her first question for Mom after effusively complimenting us girls on getting bigger and having on spotlessly clean play clothes, for it being late in the afternoon.

Mom hadn't even bothered to get a shopping cart because of not wanting to dawdle. But dawdle she had and gabbled she had too, without seeming to give it a second thought, as recipe sharing had been a highly valued aspect of being a good military wife. Creating or finding (or discrediting) a prize recipe in some magazine, cookbook or personal recipe file had given military wives friendship points as they'd moved from base to base. Another key to making new friends fast at a new post had been sharing your cooking secrets.

Some selfish cooks hadn't been very good sports and had refused to even share hints, hoarding the recipes for their shrimp cocktail dips or butterscotch Rice Krispies treats almost as if "old family heirlooms." Hmmpf! That selfish attitude had certainly been frowned upon by the other wives.

Worst than hoarding, however, had been the ladies who had intentionally given out fake recipes, missing one key ingredient or step in the whole cooking process. This had led to gossipy quagmires wherein the second lady on a new recipe (maybe our own Mom), had a dramatic and public culinary denouement, when she had attempted to duplicate her friend's, the first cook's, no-fail cherry pie recipe (perhaps Mrs. Ullstrom's) which everybody at some party had just raved about like it had been the cat's meow. This previously winsome dish unexpectedly flopping when tried by some innocent recipe borrower, unofficial cooking contestant #2, had certainly fueled the squadron's gossip mills.

A botched version of somebody's rave recipe had left the wives concerned by many questions. Had an error by the second cook been to blame, or had been it the recipe itself? Had the flaw in the recipe been intentional or an accident? The second lady might only have been trying to please her guests at some bridge party when it had been her turn to hostess. A dramatic pie failure could cast querulous aspersions on this second lady's culinary skills.

"I was so upset and surprised when those cherry pies I'd made to the letter, according to Mrs. Ullstrom's recipe card, started to puddle and spread out just when I'd cut into them," Mom had confessed to Mrs. Albright in front of the Bon Ami display.

"It was impossible for me to serve my pie wedges in decently equal slices, what with cherry goop running like corpuscles all over the plates." Mom had looked mystified.

"Well, we sure had needed something sweet and pleasing to the eye at that point," agreed Mrs. Albright.

"The bidding at the bridge game had been getting out of control. Mizrus you-know-who-I-mean had been getting downright nasty about her partner's last hand," Mrs Albright had agreed, tidily rearranging the items in her cart in the precise order which she'd wanted them bagged.

"Don't blame me. I had tried to remind her that it was only a game. She stabbed me with such an icicle-cold look, it froze my mouth open on the spot. Bridge players have no sense of humor, that's why I play canasta instead, the card game for ladies who would rather talk than swear," Mom had confided to her friend.

Mom had plenty of personal experience on this score as she had been raised by a couple of serious Life Master bridge players. She'd never gone near the game after she'd grown up and left the family nest with its nightly bridge game rehashes.

To her, the game had meant remembering her folks' post-game blaming matches which had raged throughout entire weeks. "But you bid two no-trump after I laid down that flush--" her folks had remembered every hand played and had

relived every mistake of an evening as if they had been mortal sins.

"Well, it is so strange, when Mrs. Ullstrom baked what she calls her husband-pleaser pies for her card party they stood up straighter than Fort Knox or the trees that grew those bing cherries. What could be the big difference when you'd tried that same recipe?" Mrs. Albright had asked, also seeming to be stumped trying to figure this out.

"Well, Betty Tyson has said she is going to experiment using the same recipe card Inez Ullstrom gave to me, to get to the bottom of this mystery," Mom had herded us away towards the Mexican food section after Bonnie had interjected that her teacher must be a bridge player too. Sister had deduced this, she'd said, because her teacher could freeze a kid's brain with her stares which could make it impossible for her to think straight. Bonnie had told us that her teacher had once threatened to put every child of the classroom into her deep-freezer with her husband's roadkills if they hadn't settled down, shut up, and remembered their manners. Bonnie had said she'd felt certain from our ladies' talk in the cleaning products aisle that her teacher's temper tantrums must have come from bad bids by her bridge-playing doubles' partner, Snooks, who was also her husband.

Mrs. Albright and Mom had then made the sign of

zippering their lips and had tra-la-la-ed off on their merry supermarket circuits, looking like ladies from a t.v. commercial with their big smiles and friendly waves to each other.

Betty had promised to try the suspicious cherry pie recipe for Mom's party the next night and let the public see for themselves proof of whether it had been the cook or the recipe that had been the true villain in The Case of The Runaway Cherries? They had been wondering if they would even be able to call Inez their friend anymore, if she'd intentionally given out a family recipe with a big flaw in the middle of it. "Something is rotten in Denmark," they'd agreed pinching their noses about this double-faced friend. Mother had another inkling of what Mrs. Ullstrom might be up to. Mom had kept her suspicions mostly to herself, but Inez's husband, Donald, was eligible for the same promotion which our Dad had also hoped for. Donald was a lifer in the military, while our Dad had just signed on for a twenty-year hitch, after tiring of his sedentary life as an architectural draftsman. Career military men had usually gotten promoted sooner in the military's pecking order. Donald should have gotten the nod over Dad, but the Commander had hinted that Dad and Donald had been neck to neck as contenders for the Major's spot.

The squadron commander, however, had been known to have

an eye for the ladies and a sweet tooth wider than the Texas panhandle where he'd hailed from. Would Mrs. Ullstrom deliberately sabotage the recipe she'd loaned to Mom, her friend, just to boost her husband's promotion chances above Mom and Dad's? There had been some ugly rumors floating about on this score, but Mom had just held her tongue and planned this upcoming party to beat all parties, on the eve of the promotion decision. Her new cake had big Texas icing.

Our ten-minute gossip-break at the store, though important, had left us off-schedule on our countdown to zero hour. With such a tight time-budget, Mom had hurried us to the cash register while Bonnie and I had foraged amongst our heap of purchases chanting our grocery list. I had just kept an eye out to make sure the tabasco sauce had gotten safely into our grocery sacks.

When we had gotten home Mom had immediately started mixing up the ammonia-smelling brew of Toni home perm ingredients. True friend that she had been, it had looked like Betty had already come over and mopped up the jello spills for us.

When she'd seen our car in the drive, she'd hurried back over. She said she'd done this when she'd been called by Ricky to come over to help him catch the ninth crab who had been pesky. She'd said she'd hung around after cleaning

sampling the fridge-food for Mom's "edification."

With her mouth full of chocolate-rum covered Brazil nuts, Betty had demurred about her contribution in giving us a much-needed helping hand to insure our party's success and our Mom's good humor.

"It was nothing, Lee. Don't thank me. The cleaning-up was so easy after the strawberry goop started to jell everywhere," Betty had kindly dismissed her efforts. Betty had called most of Mom's food trays "too pretty to eat" as she'd nibbled on the foods arranged in rings with colorful dips soon to go in the middle with delicate flowers on the edges.

"Herbert and I just scraped the jello up or peeled it off, like I do my own nail polish--in strips and then disposed of it down Shad's gullet. Shad could have made an ace police dog if he didn't look so funny.

Betty rearranged the food trays which now had lopsided symmetry after her sampling binge, adding, "Shad sniffed out all the missing crabs for Ricky. Well, all except for one. Are you sure there were ten?"

After Betty had asked that, making my heart sink, my feet had started feeling antsy again.

I'd tried to ask her about the whereabouts of Crab Number Ten, but Betty had been on automatic pilot and had been revving up to return home by talking double-time. She

had been known for her non-stop hilarious monologue, which is how she'd had to talk to get her points across to Ricky, Sr., without him challenging and overriding her opinions after every breath she'd taken.

Before she had headed out the door, Betty had warned Mom that Herbert, our Fuller Brush door-to-door salesman had been canvasing in our neighborhood and had asked Betty where that "cuter-than-a-buttercup Mizrus Lee is hiding her pulchritudinous self today."

"I escaped him with only buying refills on my liquids," Betty had added. "I learned my lesson big time, after my last episode with Mr. Charm-the-Flowers-off-the-Wallpaper, Herbert the Heartstring Tugger. The moral is to never open up your pocketbook or let on that you've got a checkbook near a door-to-door salesman."

"Never listen to his sob story or allow him to 'help you out' with your worst household problem," Mom had added. We already had two full shelves of Fuller brushes and cleaning goods from Herbert. Mom had blamed Herb's wife's purported need for an emergency appendectomy for him being able to con her into buying doubles on some items.

"They hadn't a shred of health insurance, " Mom had sighed. It's best not to even let him through the door." Mom had a harder time than Betty saying "no" to door-to-door salesmen. Nevertheless she had declared that

this particular day was going to be different if he had shown up with her current priorities.

"He's the last person I need sniffing around with all I've got going on at once: the girls' recital being tonight; my mother-in-law's arriving all newly vegetarianized by her seatmate on the Greyhound; my center-piece de resistance, for the big party, a lime jello trout, still refusing to set; and my Mackie-man (my nickname for the kids' Dad) getting home tomorrow," Mom had given herself a pep-talk of invulnerability.

"But, Lee, weren't you listening to me? I already told you that Herbert and I cleaned up that jello," Betty had her hands on her hips smiling at Mom.

"You didn't? You didn't let Herb in here to see this big mess? I'll never live this down," Mom now reappraised the state of her kitchen shaking her head.

"Well, at least I wasn't at home to hear him explain every product he used in here. Besides, he owes me, I've got a cupboard full of furniture oils and enough brushes to spit shine every shoe in the Air Force," Mom had hated to owe anybody anything, as it had seemed to weigh on her mind like a lodestone until she could pay them back doublefold.

"Just in case you haven't seen their new line, Herbert left a few samples for you to examine," Betty pointed to a cardboard box under the table.

"Herbert said to take your time examining them. He'll be back for any you don't need," Betty had known this "samples" ploy of inveterate salesmen, but Mom knew she couldn't have fended him off any better.

"Well, he did a good job on the kitchen. He must have seen this as a bonanza. Thanks, Betty. You may have let the fox into the hen house, but at least he makes feather dusters with their remains. It sure is good my sweet Macky Man is getting home soon. He'd better get that promotion now or I'll have to hire out as a maid," Mom watched as Bonnie and I explored the contents of the bulging box.

"Hey a green toilet bowl brush!" Bonnie tried it out on the floor.

"Now we've got one in every color he sells. We've got one with a pink handle, a blue, a yellow, a white, and now we've got the whole collection."

"Yes, but now they are making a new line that have colored bristles too," Betty laughed as she left us to our perms.

"Hey, it's a great idea, everyone ought to have one, they hide the dirt they're cleaning, making them last all that much longer, without looking shoddy," was her parting shot.

"Maybe I'll give out my full collection for door prizes at my next card party. Just kidding, gifts aren't supposed

to be useful, but maybe as booby prizes?"

"Mom, did Ricky save us from all ten of the crabs? Why did Betty say nine were caught?" I'd worried.

"A missing crab? Don't worry she even loses count of the days of the month, or she wouldn't have so many children, believe you me," Mom had said, confusing me more.

While I had been asking about crabs when Mom had thrown in the fact that the Rhythm Method doesn't work unless you mark off days on your calendar. I hadn't known what the rhythm method was, beyond being a timing method. I'd figured maybe it could be some kind of method for learning romantic dancing. I'd heard rumors about this method, and had overheard it being cussed out by Betty in regards to what she'd called "unmentionable subjects."

Betty had also frequently referred to The Curse when talking about her grown-up problems. I'd decided that had been her girls-only nickname for Ricky. She'd regularly lamented that she'd felt discombobulated lately because The Curse must be coming on, again. I'd scratched my head and had decided the Rhythm Method must be her newest diet or exercise plan. I'd mentally jotted these down, however, to ask Freida to explain them to me later in detail. Freida had nearly been approaching her out-of-control teenage years she'd bragged. She'd often reminded me that being a teenager was as smart as anyone ever gets, because

their brains were full-grown but not yet over-crowded.

The curse of a missing crab loose in our house had loomed as a much larger problem to me than those which Betty had with her diet or her crab of a husband. He'd been cranky as a rusty ice cream churn, but at least predictable. On the other hand, I hadn't had a prayer of finding out the number of crabs Ricky had or had not recaptured at this point in time, as our home's own rhythm method had now been speeded up to become more than staccato.

Rule #11. Leave well-enough alone.

Let's start on your perms, girls," Mom had let us take our banana dream popsicle bars into the bathroom with us and had helped to prop us up on towel-covered pillows with our reading. She had tossed a coin. I had called heads, Bonnie had called tails, both of us had been wanting to go last. I had lost and had to go first. It hadn't been fair. I had discovered that she'd tossed a Canadian coin, and the head side had Queen Lizzie's face instead of Abraham Lincoln's.

Mom had said "What's done is done. No use crying over spilled milk."

Far away had seemed my happy memories of our beautifying days down on the floor with Mom on our exercise mats. For six weeks we had faithfully followed the daily instructions of Dubarry's Home Beauty Course which Mom had mail-ordered from Ladies Home Journal when Dad was gone to Guam. After we'd done our floor exercises in Mom's room we'd come into the bathroom before putting on our messy facial masques we'd made from oatmeal and herbs. Mom, my sister and I had a gay old time booing each other, looking like mummies who'd been in a food fight.

A home perming day like this one, on the other hand, had made my mood turn to gray, doldrum-tinged not only with

my dislike of the whole drippy-cold stinking perming process, but also hating the overly-curly results of all this discomfort. A facial masque could be washed away, but a bad perm could cause stares and rude comments for weeks.

Even under this dark cloud of apprehension, the rosy-hued hideaway had cheered me, being my favorite room in the whole house. Our over-sized flamingo pink bathroom had exuded childhood warmth. So many of the toiletries were held in glass or rubber replicas of fairy tale characters.

Dad had said our primping parlor had been decorated in sweetheart-swish motif. Sometimes when he'd gone inside this John he'd said he'd almost done a doubletake, feeling as if he'd mistakenly gone into the Jane by mistake.

Our powder room had wafted feminine mystery to me--bottles of bath salts, rows of brown perfumes in collectible antique bottles, powder puffs, and delicious smelling lotions had festooned its mock-marble, gold-veined counters. Since he'd been gone, the only masculine touch had been Dad's palm-cupping red rubber spiny scalp massager and some Old Spice. Sometimes being lonesome for him, we sisters had massaged our own heads and perfumed our own chins with these mementos of Dad's. Then we'd gotten those packs of candy cigarettes they'd sold at all the stores which had looked just like the real ones--Pall Malls, Chesterfields, Lucky Strikes or Camels. We'd play being dads for awhile in front

of the mirror, but the candy cigs were only sticks of sugar with pink dyed on one end to make them look lit. They'd tasted too bad to even suck on them to pretend to smoke. We'd usually given them to Gordon in my tent, to cure his sore throats.

After I had rearranged Dad's things, displaying them prominently on the counter, I'd looked enviously at Bonnie, sprawled, lounging on the closed fuzzy pink toilet cover sucking on her popsicle and kicking one leg up and down, looking highly inconvenienced. I had then been positioned down on my knees, with my head hung over the bathtub as Mom had used the rubber spray hose to wash my hair.

Kneeling like a penitance paying homage to beauty, had been the pleasant part, because I'd loved having my hair washed. It had been a short hiatus from the rigors of the process, for soon afterwards Mom had rolled small squarely divided portions of my hair around pernicious pink perm curlers which had been fastened with tight rubberbands clamping my scalp with sharp, unforgiving rows of teeth.

The scalp-stretching pain had worsened when she had poured on the ice-cold stinky curling solution to saturate the rollers and assault my innocent head.

"Keep your eyes shut. Be brave, here it comes. It will be icy, I'm afraid. I'd warm this solution, but then it might lose its bite," Mom had poured the bowlful, slowly

dribbling it over my head, a couple of drops rolling down my spine, chilling my vertebrae, one by one. It had smelled so nasty that Mom had to keep reminding me in a soothing tone, how pretty it was going to make my hair, which now felt like plaid pockets of pain.

"Phew, it smells just like a skunk fart," Bonnie had slipped off her perch and had skipped out of the room. Mom had then called out to warn her that she'd better not go far as she'd be needed soon, lickety-split, without Mom having to search her down, hither and yon.

My teeth chattering, covered with goosebumps, Mom had then bundled me in several towels, rubbing the circulation back into my purplish cold areas. She'd put the plastic cap on my head and had propped me on pillows under the huge gray dryer hood and turned it on to the high setting.

The dryer had roared so loudly, that in the next hour everything communicated to me had to be done by pantomimes. Mom had placed Uncle Remus on my lap and had gone off after her second victim, the tails caller, Bonnie. After the ice cold torture of the setting solution, the second degree follow-up had been the dryer's heat-stinging retort, shocking me over to the opposite end of a thermometer's extremes in very short order. My ears had always grown beet red by the time I had been divested of this gray metal heating pod which had helmeted my head in a roar of hot air.

Sister could never have sat still even if you'd paid her. Therefore, our bi-yearly perm times had always been a torture for both Mom and for her too. I had tried this day to ignore all the bellyaching they'd both been doing by concentrating on "De Tar Baby," my favorite of all of the picture stories in the Uncle Remus collection. Though I had been well into reading chapter books, these kiddy books, being large and findable, had often been thrust into my hands by an adult at quiet times instead of the Nancy Drews' under my pillow.

It had been true, like they'd said, that I'd often needed a dictionary to decode the vocabulary of the junior high books. I'd persevered reading books deemed too old for my age, hoping to eventually learn the true facts of life and love. Nancy Drew, being a paragon of virtue, had never had the same perverse curiosities that my friends and I had.

I had read Uncle Remus aloud to avoid all the yammering in the bathroom between Sis and Mom.

"'And Brer Rabbit sez to Brer Fox. 'Do whatever you want to do with me, but please pullease don't throw me in dat der Briar Patch...' Mom, am I done yet? Maaa, I'm about to melt like de Tar Baby."

"Just a little bit longer. When the long hand of the clock reaches twelve, remember?" Mom had pointed to the wall. The clock had been Art Deco and had ceramic mermaids

holding the face of the timepiece which had been shaped like a cornucopia or maybe a large seashell. The long hand had seemed to have broken down on the nine as I had sat willing it to move to the next dot.

"I swear," I had complained as the dryer had encouraged my popsicle to melt too fast, so that it had dripped on the storybook page, "I'm dissolving into protoplasm like a jellyfish. Then two hundred dollars of Dad's hard-earned cash to teach me to dance will have been flushed down the commode. All this torture just for frizzy hair, which is bound to misbehave, it isn't fair!"

I had protested but nobody had seemed to notice my gradually dissolving threats, for I'd then felt something worthy of their attention happening under my tongue which had diverted my attention. I had announced it loudly. Although still unable to hear myself talk, I'd shouted to my home beauty parlor inmates.

"Hey, Sis and Mom! Guess what? My tooth is nearly out, the other front one! I can wiggle it, it's only holding on by one measly thread. The tooth fairy might be paying me a visit tonight," I had boasted to Bonnie.

Our finding cash under our pillows for discarded baby teeth we'd left in our Sweet Sue note-sized kitten envelopes had been one of the true bonanzas of our early economic lives. Bonnie had playfully stuck her tongue out at me in

reply. My going first through the sisterly bi-yearly perm-wave torture chamber had one advantage. After I had endured all the dribbly bother and wide range of nuisances bordering on pain, I had been free to sit smugly and watch while Bonnie's ordeal had just begun. She who had initially gotten off the hook, after receiving the initial reprieve, had to remain in the hot seat long after I'd received my release.

As the world turned, it had then been Bonnie's turn to whine, "Ma, I am going to vomit if I don't get out from this dryer soon. I can feel my stomach agitating like a washer."

Mom had been pulling out the last of my curlers, while Bonnie had sat re-propped on pillows watching our mouths, but not hearing a thing we'd uttered. I'd try to provoke her sometimes, by saying something and pointing at her and giggling. She had to scrunch down to rear her head out of the heat helmet, to demand to know what awfully funny thing I'd just been saying about her. Mom had noticed and forced her to go back under the dryer, her test-curl deemed still a little damp. She'd gone back under the purgatorial hood of Mad Hatter heat none the wiser about what I'd just pretended to say about her. Every time I'd happened to glance and see her behind me in the mirror, I'd see her still fuming and giving the old evil-eye to the back of my head.

Mom had noticed her scowl and had placed a restraining

hand on Sis and winked good-naturedly to try and bring her out of her mood.

She couldn't be mollified, not having wanted a second dose of sitting under what she'd called "the electric chair."

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me," Connie had recited with arms folded.

I'd stuck my head under her dryer to reply, "I said 'I see London, I see France, I see someone's underpants.' Look over there," I'd pointed.

Looking in the mirror, Bonnie had seen what had really made me giggle. A line of panties had been drying pinned to a line strung near the sunny upper window above her. They had the days of the week embroidered on them, three Wednesdays, two Thursdays but one forlorn Sunday. Someone hadn't been keeping track of her panties, and they had looked too tiny to indict me.

Connie had tried to nab the guilty day of the week with a Fuller back brush, but couldn't knock it loose.

"You stay put little one," Mom had shouted over the roar of the dryer. "Don't you want to look gorgeous like your sister does with her new curly hair? I know her hair might look a little frizzy now but gravity will weight it down presently. Do let us keep our fingers crossed."

After the long hand, a wavy tendril of seaweed, on the

mermaids' clock had reached Bonnie's magic countdown number too, we three had all cheered and cloistered, facing the long horizontal mirror which had covered one wall of the bathroom. We had been prepared to view the end results of all of Toni Home Perm's promises and render our own personally-biased opinions.

I had felt blessed with relief when my curlers had first been removed. One or two of them had usually felt as if half of my scalp had been wound around the curler too. The setting lotion, had always irritated those strained roller sections, already stretched to the nth degree. I had liked it, though, when the curls had just been released and had bobbed up and down jauntily, showing no trace of their strained origins. They'd looked like Civil War ladies' ringlets when I'd moved my head. At rest, they'd reminded me of the ancient brown rusty bedsprings which had poked through old discarded mattresses in the neighborhood's alley ways. It had seemed to me what Gordon would have called a mortal sin that this vision of perky hair hadn't been allowed to rest on my shoulders permanently, like anything "permanent" must have been meant to do.

But, as if a naughty grand-daughter of Norman Rockwell's had taken fingerpaints to one of her Granddad's perfectly rendered portraits of American small town simplicity, the same sort of mess had always occurred before

my very eyes when Mom had taken her stiff, boar-bristled hairbrush to all of my old-timey Colonial ringlets which had looked so coquettish in the mirror.

With Mom's first swipe of the stern hairbrush, I'd seen myself transformed by Mom's vigorous brushing of my curls, from one of Rockwell's wonderfully plain but perky people from the covers of The Saturday Evening Post, into someone obliterated by her tangle of scribbly hair, rising in waves, defying gravity, levitating on its own even without the brush's damaging strokes. Yes, my hair had floated up without a trace of static cling, as if it had been caught in the current of an electric fan. My curls' individuality had been demolished, and the strands had coalesced and puffed up to resemble a runaway desert tumbleweed or a double-spiked roll of barbed wire.

This first brushing had always reminded me of metal filings moving under the power of an unseen magnet. The combination of electricity and the baked-in, hard-to-wave perm solution had conspired to make me look like the epicenter of a cataclysmic explosion.

"Me? Look like her? Uh nuh. Let me down. I don't want to look like a lobster-red faced girl with electrocuted hair all standing up at wit's end," Bonnie's frank comments had always made me feel worse. She had always told the truth, at the wrongest times.

Chagrined, I had gotten my revenge very quickly, as I'd clamped my jaw down hard and "There!" My tongue had done its magic and I'd proudly popped out my other front tooth from my mouth and had given my family audience behind me in the mirror a big old unfamiliar holey smile. I had looked like a poor sharecropper with missing teeth. The absence of my two front teeth had also given me a lisp, turning my Rs and Ys into Ls. My new blank spaces had interjected spittoon-like 'S' sssounds into every simple sentence I'd try to enunciate clearly.

Mom had nearly swatted me when she'd seen the unsightly bloody tooth which I'd popped out into my palm, proudly displaying it as if I'd just snagged a tadpole.

"No! Why on earth would anyone do that just before a recital? Now how are you going to look in your dance costume picture? You'll just have to learn to smile with your mouth shut on the stage until those front teeth grow back in," Mom had almost acted as if I'd done this on purpose to ruin my future dance career and her starry plans for me.

"Sorry, Mom," I had said, chastised by her stern reaction.

I'd added more contritely, "Maybe I'll just have to stay home from the recital, now that I've ruined myself. I wouldn't want you to die of embarrassment, having one of

your daughters looking like a wicked witch, who's toothlessly dancing in Bonnie's sister's tap shoes," I had exaggerated, hoping for sympathy which I'd felt I'd deserved.

"Only the front auditorium rows will be able see your teeth anyway, so don't worry about it. Smile your heart out, sweetheart. It's your positive outlook which will shine, so open your mouth with joy."

Mom had been re-reading the Toni Home Perm's box.

"Maybe you don't have 'Hard to Wave' hair after all. Live and learn. Your head surely has gotten energetically curly. Never mind. Let's concentrate on putting our best face forward. It's how you act, regardless of how you look, that matters."

I had smiled openly with her in agreement but that had made her shake her head again in despair at our misspent efforts.

"Best to leave well-enough alone," I'd quoted somebody wise, probably from the days before perms had even been invented. I could have been a living example of that adage, if we'd had Before and After photographs of me.

"The best-laid plans of mice and mothers often go astray," Bonnie had quoted Mom to herself.

"Remember I loved you before you had a single tooth in

your head. To me you'll always be one of my two bright stars," Mom's words of consolation had made me feel even worse than I'd looked.

I'd found it rather unsettling, however, how small parts of my anatomy, previously unnoticed, or unappreciated, had made such a big difference when they'd disappeared or gone haywire on me. I, too, had wished I still had that loose tooth wiggling in its row for a few more hours.

Bonnie had then slid down from her seat and had landed on her bottom on the bare floor as if the sight of me had knocked her for a loop.

"You go lie down and rest," Mom had called after me, "Get yourself some beauty sleep. We're all going to need some of that after all we'll be going through today."

"Can't I please listen to the radio?" I had asked as I'd departed. I'd always detested trying to rest quietly with no distractions. Lying down during the day had often left me with a blank space in my head for all my distressing thoughts to fly into like drone bees cramming into the hive, buzzing annoyingly, bothering their queen. I hadn't ever liked to lie down in the afternoon, waiting to become a stationary target for all my worries to pester.

"Lands sakes! Why didn't I think of it before? Happy Dan's!" Mom had exclaimed from the bathroom.

Rule #12. Be careful what you learn--you'll use it.

"Happy Dan, the Storyman's Radio Show?" Bonnie had her eyes squeezed tightly shut, afraid to even peek at whether her own hair had gotten as excited on her head as mine had.

"Remember when Happy Dan's had that little boy violin virtuoso play on his show when we listened last week?"

"I'm not taking any violin lessons," Bonnie said.

"No, silly. You girls are tap dancers. The producers always tape his shows the day ahead. So? What if we go down there and you girls dance on the radio? Wouldn't that be `quite the dish to sit before the king?'"

"Come again?"

"Your dad! He could hear you dance on the radio tomorrow after he comes home! That is, if I can get you down there today and convince Happy Dan to record you two tap dancing."

I had returned to the bathroom balancing the Daniel Webster's dictionary on top of my head. I'd then tried tying two scarves, wrapping them like bandages over my TNT hair-do. Maybe it should have been called a hair-don't instead. I'd blanched thinking of Gordon getting a load of me, looking my worst tonight.

This would probably be the first time he'd been forced

to sit still and look in my direction for over a minute in his whole girl-shunning G-man life. I couldn't imagine a worse time to be focused on by the boy to whom I might one day bequeath all of my Dearly Missed Fuzzybun love letter collection. Already feeling poised to get over-exposed, Mom now had made plans to send the sounds of my feet over the airwaves on the radio. Half of the kids in Central School were in front of their radios listening to Happy Dan's each evening. I'd felt weak-kneed.

"Mom, audiences want to watch dancers, they don't want to listen to them," I hadn't believed she had been seriously considering us, as dancers, doing our routine on a radio show. But later I'd known for certain that she had been steamrolling ahead with her plan. To accommodate this, Bonnie and I'd had to get all dressed for our performance four hours too early. This had felt awkwardly premature, albeit that our costumes had been nice and this had been the first time they had been removed from their cellophane wrappers since we'd picked them up.

Our costumes were satin mock tuxedos: black jackets with long tails and white lapels; black bow ties and crotch-high pleated demi-skirts. Our patent-leather tap shoes had been tied with large white satin bows, making our feet look like they had been gift-wrapped for a wedding. We

had carried white tipped canes and black top hats made from shiny cardboard, which had looked authentic enough from a distance with their white hat bands slashed at a rakish angle.

All the beauty of these costumes hadn't, however, made their jagged hastily pinked seams feel any less irritating on my bare skin and the new fabrics had made me itch all over like I'd a bad case of poison-ivy. My sister and I had felt body-miserable in these luscious get-ups. Besides being uncomfortable, they'd had to be kept in mint condition pre-performance. Mom had warned us that we'd better not spill on them, wrinkle them, or accidentally wipe our hands on them. We had needed to become as stationary as the Statue of Liberty's stone lady to obey her. Our get-ups we'd been warned had to stay new-looking until first the radio show and then the live auditorium performances had been survived by us and these perishable clothes.

I had crossed off a show-biz career in my future after about five minutes of this torture. In my costume, I'd felt threatened for the first time by dirt. I'd recognized it all around me--Shad's muddy paws; Bonnie's tickling fingers; flying water splatters from the faucet; sneezes; my habit of wiping my hands on my playclothes without thinking. Being touched by any person, place or thing had become instantly hazardous. The fun of show-biz

had become enshrouded in finicky self awareness to keep myself cloistered from bearing traces of the real world. The people of the stage had to elevate their audiences away from reminders of the mundane world into fantasy. Of course, at that time, the way I'd thought of it was simpler: don't dare get dirty for the next four hours!

While it had been amusing to gawk at my unfamiliar self in the mirror and recognize another me under this disguise; mostly what performers do, I'd now realized, was to WAIT for the show to go on. Wait and try to look fresh, which you couldn't after waiting so long. Minutes went by both too slowly because of sitting still and too fast because of knowing your number was coming up.

I couldn't have imagined enduring this discomfort more than once a year. The agony of sitting around for hours waiting to perform, for me, had clearly not been going to be worth a few moments of praise. I'd decided after only a few minutes that it would take a lot more than five minutes in the limelight on the stage to make me starstruck enough to endure this sacrifice of my freedom. Mom had said I probably hadn't a big enough ego to make me a good performer.

That day the show still had to go on, whether we dancing girls had itchy scratchy feelings or not. We couldn't leave a hole in the chorus line which had been

choreographed according to our heights to form a rainbow shaped arc from the audience's point of view.

Arriving at the local radio studio, some thirty minutes later, Happy Dan had looked harried. Earlier on the phone, he had reservedly said "Yes, maybe" to mother, about her proposal that we dance that evening on his radio show. She hadn't given him much notice. He'd had some qualms about the timing of the idea, and had ended up giving Mom the equivocal answer which Mom had felt was almost a green light from such a hem-n-hawer.

I had listened to Mom on the phone and had gotten only her half of their conversation. It had seemed that Happy Dan the Storyman had wanted to schedule us for some date in the future but Mom had told him why this had been impossible and she had prevailed. She'd said since the only live performance of the recital had been occurring that night, Happy Dan could support the talented local children, plus give listeners who couldn't afford to go to the show, the treat of a listen to a smidgeon of what they'd missed from the previous night's show.

He had been still hedging until Mom had thrown in the clincher--the patriotic twist. Her girls' father, she'd said, had been over in Guam protecting this great country of ours and now was going to miss what he'd been protecting it for--children, like his own daughters, living with the

freedom to dance and wear tuxedos. Some military men had made this sacrifice for others and now were going to be deprived of even seeing their own kids' debut. She had asked Happy Dan a riveting question.

" Wouldn't it have to make our brave soldiers wonder whether it was worth it?"

While he'd considered this, Mom had chimed in that luckily Happy Dan and the power of radio could show that the soldiers' hardship had been recognized. She had explained that she could have Happy Dan's show turned on tomorrow night when one Air Force squadron would be newly returned stateside and gathered at her Welcome Home from Guam party.

Happy Dan had melted, probably personally pleased with the prospect that his show would be heard, for once, by someone over the age of ten, and by military men to boot!

Mom hadn't been a pushy woman, but she had always been quite persuasive. Later that afternoon, when Happy Dan had seen Mom in person, I'd wager that he'd had wondered why he had ever faltered in granting her request in the first place. She had been, as they'd said in those days, a real looker. She'd worn her grey suit over her sunshine yellow and white polka dotted silk shirt, with her corn-colored blond hair puffed in front and pulled up and looped under at the bottom, modern Gibson-girlish. She had Scarlett O'Hara red lipstick and perfectly manicured fingernails painted to

match. Before our performance had been over, she'd said, Happy Dan had invited her, I mean us, back to dance on the air before our next winter's performance as well. I'd thought Mom had then looked like Lauren Bacall's younger sister, though the Betty Grable WWII enlistment poster had come to the minds of many people who'd seen her, especially when she'd worn her white shorts. This kid show host hadn't seemed to me to too have much in common with us, despite his job, but he certainly seemed to have a keen appreciation for good mothers.

Sisterly when scared, Bonnie and I, as dancers, had stood closely together on the studio's small tile floor surrounded by boxes and with one microphone trained low, about knee height to catch the sound of our tapping shoes. Mom hadn't a recording of the familiar song we had been going to dance to that night as performed live by an orchestra.

She had helped Happy Dan's assistant scout up another rendition of "Old Man River, that old man river...they don't plant cotton..." The radio station's version of Old Man River, as it had turned out, had been much slower and sadder than the jazzed-up version, without a singer, that we had normally danced to on the stage. Bonnie and I had been too primed from half a year of rehearsals at that jazzed-up tempo, to slow ourselves down enough to really segue easily

into this slower non-instrumental version of the music. With no other alternative, we had danced, as best we could, to the end of the song and had arrived there about the same time that the record's needle had. It had felt like a military victory to me, readjusting our timing to slow down and finally coming to the final note with no more steps to execute. Whew!

Driving away from the station with Mother, she had confided to us that this little radio perk had been "just what the doctor ordered" to make her party tomorrow night a big success. She had been so effusively excited that she had gone straight through a red light and had never even noticed except for wondering why all the cars at that last intersection had started to honk.

"Somebody must have just gotten married. How nice, " had been all she could figure out.

Bonnie and I had held our tongues, both probably thinking that if Mom had known she'd just done something illegal, she might have lost her happy mood. We had agreed our first good omen had been that our car hadn't gotten stopped by a motorcycle cop or hit by cross traffic.

We hadn't gone back to our house, though it had looked to me like that's where we had been heading. We had been driven two doors down, instead, to pick up Gordon from his house. He had indeed looked like a million dollar babe,

just like a popular song from Mother's days. We'd watched him kiss his Mom goodbye on his doorstep, and I'd almost been jealous of her.

Gordon, to me, had resembled the boy cupie dolls dressed as grooms they'd sold at the state fair with his dark velvet skin, maybe Italian-colored, and enormous brown eyes with long lashes. He had worn a black suit and red vest with little yellow paisley tear-drop shaped curly-cues and keys on it. He had always looked hefty in jeans, but these suit pants had been loose and had made him look substantial and suave. If hearts could have fluttered mine would have gone airborne.

As Lady Luck would have had it, the spell had been broken with his first words. He had snuffed out his romantic aura when he had clamored into the back seat of the car with us. Gordon would have been so perfect if not for opening his mouth--speaking before thinking, with a lack of good manners.

"Holy Bemoley! Jehosaphats! What in creation has happened to you--scared stiff? How did your hair get ruined?"

Those had been Gordon's opening questions to me, after I'd been expecting, perhaps a good luck kiss like his mother had given him.

Gordon had followed up his unflattering comments on my

appearance, by saying there were so many frilly smells in the car, that he'd expected to suffocate and die before we'd arrived.

"Call the mortician!" he'd kept calling out the closed window to passers-by, pretending he had gotten into a hearse by mistake, instead of his driver's limousine.

That night we had been as if hermetically sealed in our green Buick, closed away from the relief of the subtle breezes gentling this warm balmy night. Mom hadn't wanted to lower the windows, as she'd said it would muss up our hair-dos and blow her programs, street maps and other papers around the car. Besides, she'd claimed she'd liked all the perfumey smells.

"They take my breath away. It's like Saks Fifth Avenue's cosmetology salon."

I'd dismissed Mom's worries about any winds bothering my hair. I hadn't thought that I'd had anything left attached to my head free enough to be mussed up by even a gale-force guster. It would have taken a blowtorch to have lifted a single strand on my head. In fact, there hadn't been any singles left up there, as they'd all been clumped together by the hairspray I'd over-used. My hair had become as occluded as the cells of a honeycomb. I hadn't dared to open my mouth to vote for an open window. I had been unable to utter a sound but had opened my mouth to fake a yawn of

nonchalance. Forgetting even how to do that four times in row, I must have looked like a guppie gasping for air.

I don't think I'd ever before sat so close to Gordon. I had been awkwardly aware of every time any part of him had touched any part of me, with the three of us sitting there uncomfortably close, side by side.

Bonnie and I had both claimed dibs on a window seat, before Gordon had climbed on board. Slim victory as he'd immediately acted as the conductor on this mock "Train bound for glory" or "Stairway to heaven"--terms frequently used in Ziegfield Follies' films about ingenues or understudies stealing the spotlight in some big extravaganza production.

Gordon, in the middle, had pulled down the armrest between the seats and had straddled its padded vinyl arm. It had boosted him up to five inches higher than the rest of us. Occasionally with the car hitting a pothole or road bump, his head had banged the ceiling. Mother wouldn't have let us sit there while the car had been moving. It surely had been true, as she'd often joked, that she would have been clueless if she'd become the mother of a son and had to handle one of those "difficult boys."

During the entire circuitous swing we'd made from the Greyhound station to Oglethorpe Auditorium nobody had said anything except Gramma. Even she had seemed to be unusually restrained. Instead of asking us all the usual personal

questions, she'd merely commented on the things she'd seen as we'd driven past them.

"This surely is a long traffic light" had been the only opinion she'd ventured. No one had broached recent events at home, probably because the crab tale would be so much grander told face-to-face at the scene of the fiasco. This had been especially true that night, after Betty's confession that one crab had still not been accounted for-- lucky number ten.

The combination of stagefright and the scents in the car had been indeed become more heady the longer we'd sat locked inside together. None of nose-pleasers had blended, and I had detected the clashing aromas of our twin-sisterly Toni home perms' still redolent with that ammoniac ambiance, subtled slightly by the overlay of the Prell shampoo we'd used, with its overly familiar, clinging odor which had hung heavily like its unctuous green blobiness itself had done when extruded slowly and generously from the squeeze tube. Bonnie and I had always coated ourselves with the shampoo in our Minerva's Court Ladies bathtub games. Its cloying scent had seemed to be arrested on either side of Gordon's Old Spice and Doublemint which had been overpowering to me, having become again love-struck with Gobbie in his sophisticated suit, despite his overbearing kingpin ways.

Effusive from the front had been the Victorian sweet

drift of Gramma Anne's lavender dusting powder not quite quelling the inevitable road stop ambience left over from the terminally long day she had spent entombed in a crowded bus, with its air conditioning system on the fritz. Her fellow passengers' back seat nicotine habits had still coated her with their exhaust fumes.

Mom had been wafting seductive scents from her Chanel No. 9 dabbed with dusting-powder subtlety behind her ear lobes, the back of her calves and at the pulses of her wrists. She had known the fine art of only insinuating her perfume, which I hadn't yet mastered, being a heavy-handed dabber.

Whenever Mom had spoken I had sniffed her cinnamon Lavoris, which had competed for my top prize, for being the smell which had best defined the person who'd worn it. I'd liked Bonnie's childish aroma too--a mixture of Johnson's baby powder and the gooey smell from the large ball of softened gray clay she had kept rolling into worm shapes between her fingers.

She'd later palmed them into king-sized worry beads and had lined them up along the head-rest edge of the front seat. They'd kept rolling off, and Gordon, forever the bully-boy, even when dressed-to-kill, had continued to smash her evenly-sized clay beads under his heel when he couldn't just snatch them for his own pleasure-rolling, making from

his many snatches one lumpy amorphous ball he'd called Mars.

Not wholly without creative imagination he'd rectangled this planet into a Mars candy bar, and had sunk his teeth into his sculpture once or twice. This had made us grimace in the back seat and had stopped us from asking him to give it back to us. As he'd known, it had no longer been so desirable after it had been glistened with the patina of someone else's saliva.

The whiffs of left-on traces of turtle wax had lingered along with the dashboard cleanser, as positive proof of our previous day's efforts, despite what had turned out to be an incompetent interior car cleaning job. We'd hastily tried to fit the car into our schedule of last minute To Do things, to prepare it for welcoming our Daddy home again.

We had done it, not so much to do it, as to let Dad know how much we'd needed and missed Our Macky Man and how the Buick had also suffered in his absence.

I had already known where Dad would be spending a lot of his first weekend back once he'd spotted Gordon's smushed-in clay on all the rear seat's carpets.

Bonnie had lifted her shoulders and shrugged when I'd raised my eyebrows at one of these smooth gray splotches. Messes like this one had been so simple to make yet we'd known Dad would soon be getting out his pocket knife to pry and pick at it for hours. The car would never again seem

entirely free of clay stains to a car maintenance fanatic like Dad. Both Bonnie and I had diverted our eyes from the flattened clay worry beads and had leaned forward to drape ourselves over the seat in front to change our perspective.

Our costumes had seemed to smell of never-before-worn new satin and our new patent leather tap shoes had the odor of not being broken in. In an olfactory grande finale, all of these antiphonal strains had been overpowered by the layers upon layers of cheap Aquanet hair spray I'd used to try and tame the cacophony of my hair. My brunette tresses had felt to my palm like the mesh of a metallic Brillo soap pad which, although cemented by the sprayed-on hair glue, had still refused to settle down and behave like anyone's else's hair, outside of Medusa's, would have done.

From the narrow crack of Mom's windows, we had sometimes inhaled pungent reprieves. The blessing of magnolia blossoms or the assaulting smell of some drive-in's bubbling grease vats had in rapid succession, given me visions as if flipping through a photo album of bygone family celebrations. Gordon had worked the window down several inches without protests from the adults in front, guest's prerogative winning over the car hostess's preference. He'd accomplished this by stretching across me, seemingly oblivious to how sensitive I had been to every brush of his body.

Gordon had groaned in envy whenever we'd passed another outdoor neighborhood barbecue, with grills smoking with charcoal and manzanita-burning cajun-sauced greasy hunks of whatevers' carcasses scented with the tang of tabasco-seasoned happy chefs, mostly presiding over fish fries. Savannah would always seem catfish and hushpuppie craving country to me. Only watermelons and corn-on-the-cob, black-eyed peas and collard greens had been more pervasively enjoyed, at least judging by the scents wafting through our neighborhood around five most evenings.

The aromas of these favored repasts had billowed invitingly from open kitchen windows or porch picnics. Southerners jumping the gun on summer had eaten outdoors in this late spring heat, and we'd inhaled the scented airwaves, pungent with memories of food, fun, and freedom as we'd sped along incarcerated.

Our car hadn't been going toward any of those fine three Fs. If I'd had to name the three F sensations which had knotted my own gut that night, I'd have laid claim to feeling frantic, frozen, and frail all at the same time.

I'd heard the clinks of horseshoes being methodically tossed into the local sand pits and radios trained on major league baseball games played in stadiums far distant with the crowds sounding like swarms of human mosquitoes. The boisterous casual gatherings we'd driven past had made me

feel as if I had been in a time warp. It had been as if I had been catapulted forward from a classical time, back when people had travelled by horse and buggies. Conservative. Maybe the feeling had evolved from my wearing this mock tuxedo. I'm sure all of us in that car had felt a bit stoic cloaked in our awkward silence and formal clothes. Our dull respite had been about to end.

"I swear I'm only going to give y'all the scenic tour of this square one more time looking for a place to park. Then I'm going to give up and let everybody out to go call yourselves a taxi to get you to the stage on time.

I know there has to be a spot in this whole downtown area where I don't have to parallel park," Mom had used her company-friendly tone, though I'd known her exasperation, before she'd voiced it. I'd felt like we had been enclosed in a toy top, ceaselessly spinning in ever wider circles. Mom, with each rotation around the periphery of the auditorium had been making me ever more giddy and anxious. I'd the sensation of being in water being sucked down a drain, and had almost wished it had been true.

I'd held the far-fetched hope that Mom would seriously call it a lost cause and we could all just go to a movie instead. Lili had been on the lit theatre marquee we had kept passing. I had loved that story of circus performers and puppets who had come to life in Leslie Caron's

imagination. Meanwhile none of the five of us had animated there in that Buick except when shouting to point out one more possibility of a parking slot to Mom, as she had again let one slip by. All of our suggested sightings, it had seemed, hadn't been spotted with enough advanced notice for her to maneuver our bulky pale green Buick, nicknamed Mr. Toad, into them.

It had been hard for her, she'd apologized, to think about changing lanes while behind the wheel, in moving traffic. Her first thought, she'd added, when being given a direction by us, had been to project herself into what unthinkable unnatural roadside disasters our directions could be urging her into.

This evening whenever she had let one parking place go, circling the block to get a better shot at it, we'd returned to find it now filled by the car who had been directly behind us. Her slowing down but then hesitating too long had made her almost a highway usher directing all the other cars toward spaces to angle themselves into. We had gotten plenty of goodwill waves from passengers in other vehicles as they had turned off their engines in our intended ports.

"This is exactly why I love the Greyhound. 'Take the bus and leave the parking to us,'" Gramma had chuckled affably.

"Mom," her daughter-in-law had retorted, self-

defensively, "I've never suggested that you learn to drive at your age. But if you'd try flying on airplanes, I'm sure you'd find that it is much more convenient than buses. Airports even have their own private streets, called runways. They also have parking barns called hangars.

I still say, travelling on buses surely ends up getting you in a pack of trouble. You never park your body in a Greyhound seat next to anybody but crazies."

Mom had always thought it had been almost unpatriotic for Grandmother Anne not to fly, with her youngest son being in the Air Force.

"I like having enough travelling time to meet new people. I like see where I'm going," Gramma had countered, proving it by looking out her side window. She had been the only one of us who hadn't been rabidly looking for a resting place where we could tuck our Buick.

"Well there's one thing I know for sure, airline food is far superior to bus terminal food, and you can eat it in a lot safer company too," Mom had finished her spiel when she'd finally seen someone's rear lights turn on. She had stopped talking to center her concentration on this one possibly exiting vehicle. She had planned, it had seemed, to idle where we'd paused on the street until this one spot had become empty, come hell, high water, the traffic patrol or a symphony of irate drivers leaning on their horns

wanting to break Mom's driverly resolve to stop at this imaginary 'X' and drive no further unless into this one self-designated "okay" parking spot.

Luckily, this tail-lit car's driver really had intended to leave after idling for awhile. Mom had still nearly lost the place however, by rolling down her window to thank the kind gentlemen for leaving us this convenient slot. When he'd seen her head stuck out her window, he'd paused to roll his window down too.

"I am so grateful to you, sir. No impossible parallel parking shenanigans, for us, huh?" She'd asked. He'd looked a little confused, with all of our strangely garbed crowd almost applauding him. Mom had been satisfied to get us safely landed, albeit a good two feet from the curb.

"Whew, we could have waltzed across Texas in the time that this simple parking job has taken us," she had resumed being in an upbeat mood again, after accomplishing this feat, I'd now thought of as a group endeavor.

Our parked car really hadn't really been that close to our destination. After walking a couple of blocks, I had realized how bizarre our costumes must appear to people not involved in the children's dance world of Savannah. Bonnie on the other hand, had said she craved for us to be stared at, after our going through so much trouble to disguise our ordinary selves.

Sister had her top hat on and had been walking along cracking her gum and flipping her cane or using it like a drum majorette, when not trying to goose my future pretend husband. Gordon had dodged and tried to walk three feet behind the rest of us, whistling at squirrels and acting as if he'd never lain his eyes on a one of us before.

Arriving at long last, Gramma had still insisted on pausing for snapping our pictures on the auditorium's concrete stairs. Even though the lighting had been too dim, and she had gotten down to the last two photos on her roll, this had been one of those moments she just had to capture. I had thought she should have saved one shot for Dad's new crew-cut he'd written us about, plus one for the finished Mile High Strawberry Surprise Angel Food Cakes Mom had left half-assembled in the fridge back home.

Gramma Anne, however, had always known exactly who, what, when, why, and how she had wanted each of her camera shots. Despite her only having this puny Brownie camera, she had once again proven that she could pose and repose us until, as she often had teased us slowpokes, "the cows came home (to roost)."

We'd only had five minutes to spare before the curtain had been due to rise on our number. Gramma had used up every last second trying for the right angle of the departing sun on what she'd decided was a fortuitous arrangement of us.

Rule #13. Advice comes only to those who need it.

All of us had finally been captured in a simultaneous smile, despite the delay in time it had taken for Gramma to snap down on that button, a serious shutterbug for history. As if Cecil Beaton's sister, Gramma had forged an alliance with her photography, "Now Gordon, you move closer to the girls. Wait a minute, Barri Lyn, don't be too shy to put your arms around the other two. Hey, what if you two girls stand on either side of your young man friend?

What did you call this pose, Bonnie? The Oreo effect? Well, anyway, try that anyway, in your black and white costumes I think you are as sweet as cookies...Hurry, hurry. You'll be late for your performance."

It had been just as well for us to have been stalled outside there, I'd realized once we hadn't been. Outside of the auditorium's doors or mingling amongst the waiting spectators in the audience, life had seemed to go along so predictably--in an expected manner at a normal pace. In other times I would have called it boring, but this night I'd longed to feel ho-hum instead of excited, but couldn't.

Once we had gone backstage, everybody had seemed to be moving comically fast and talking with exaggerated urgency. They had all traversed the hallowed backstage in mock sprints with eyes averted heavenward instead of walking and

watching where they had been headed. Likewise, nobody had spoken to anybody else in a normal tone of voice behind those closed curtains, but at emergency pitch and speed. People backstage hadn't bothered to finish a single one of their sentences, it had seemed, but had left them dangling from the rafters like missed cues. After a time I'd felt as if all these interrupted words had hung in mid-air, invisibly colliding and causing this human tornado of pre-curtain agitation.

It had seemed to me as if controlled panic had run rampant with a feverish contagion leaving everyone as a stair-stepped sized collection of stage-struck or frightened dancers from toddlers to prima-donnas. All of whom, it had seemed to me, had the lofty attitude that the whole success of the show had hinged on some regrettable aspect of their own dance numbers which had needed someone else's immediate attention ASAP, if not before.

Dancers had vied to be heard by the crew or their instructors, their pitches overlapping in sopranic octaves to rise above the occasion. Others had clung around the backstage seamstresses with pieces of costumes which had migrated: torn rows of sequins; red satin roses which had slipped off of shoulder straps; missing 'diamond' buttons; rips and split seams. Bonnie and I had remained intact.

Sounds from the orchestra's pit had oddly matched the drama taking place behind the drawn curtains. As if the various instruments had been having interrupted conversations, nothing conclusive had been played, all the instruments sounding like they'd been abruptly sidetracked mid-note, except for the steady violin strains, which stringed flourishes had nearly made their notes rise visibly, so one's ear could read from the lines of their sheet music, so precisely had they enunciated. Bonnie and I had stood offstage, able to see both the audience and the other performers. I'd felt like we'd belonged there, vaguely sandwiched between the two groups.

Iris Nomano had seemed, to me, at first, to be absent, nowhere in sight. She had always been such an integral part of our number, always dancing along with us, that I had expected that she had been going to join us up on stage. I'd thought: why not? Who else would be able to tap out all the beats with her heel, while singing along with the melody?

"Where's teacher?" Bonnie had been biting her lip until she had grooved a red half-circle below her mouth from her teeth boring into her skin imprinting the trace of unfamiliar lipstick she'd been nervously chewing off her lower lip. Bonnie had cued me in when she'd said that she'd

thought this had been a little like being in the junior soccer league tournaments. At both places the only way to find where you'd belonged in the crowds of similarly-sized people, was to be on the lookout for others wearing your same colors.

Following her intuition, we'd spied our group, the black and whites, all so tiny compared to everyone else, that they'd resembled kittens gathered to nurse around a large MaMa cat. The exception to the feline similarity, had been the MaMa in this case, who had been a big woman who had dark face-paint covering every inch of her exposed parts except for her mouth, which had been painted as an exaggeratedly huge white circle. Teacher? Iris Nomano had been dressed to resemble Uncle Sam. Though Iris had certainly been a shorter, wider, darker feminine version of the standard-issue poster of him, she had the same commanding presence.

Iris had worn satin red and white barbershop-pole striped pants and a blue satin tuxedo with long tails. Her white lapels had been all encrusted in sequins. The red rhinestones had vertically spelled DIXIE. It hadn't been until I had heard her voice that I had been sure that Uncle Sam was Iris Nomano and not someone impersonating our teacher instead. What a relief?

"There you are, Little Sisters' Twinkletoes. Find your places in line. Fanny won't be with us, as her Mom went into labor. Such a pity, the stork's timing has ruined Fanny's chances to be in a solo next winter. I'll trust no dancer to solo without line experience first. Bad break for Fanny, huh?" All of the novice dancers had stood mutely, most not even listening. Iris had seemed not to notice this lack of attention from her dancers, as her eyes too had been tracking many scenes at once.

"But there is only one thing for you luckier girls to remember if you want your chance to solo next winter-- 'Don't be invisible.' And, of course, to 'Smile if you love Dixie!'"

Mrs. Nomano had told us that our number had a very special surprise technical effect which she'd integrated into it just for tonight. She had said her own dance studio hadn't the equipment to prepare us for this, so tonight would be the first time it would be tried out. Whatever weird had happened with the lighting, she had insisted we must just continue dancing along, doing our memorized routine as practiced.

"You're so well-rehearsed, you should be able to do it blindfolded, so don't panic, my cherubs!"

There had been a lot of announcing going on out on the stage which had looked as big as our school lunchroom to me.

I'd peeked out at the audience and concluded that there must not have been one soul left in Savannah who hadn't been in those padded seats. Their applause had rolled like thunder, coming from miles away and moving stageward as the curtain had risen.

I had stood in line, thinking I'd forgotten even the first step of our number. It had been chilling to know there had been no backing out of this with Gramma and Gobbie and Mommie all seated at the edge of the balcony expecting something wonderful from me, like fitting in perfectly with the others. I had feared that they had been going to see me forget how to move. Gordon had said he'd wolf whistle so we could wave at him when we had gotten finished "showing off." I'd already thought I'd heard someone rasping an undertowed wolf whistle up in the balcony, which perhaps could have been my Gordon either practicing or growing impatient with waiting.

Iris had finally bowed from the microphone which she had been talking into, placed in front the long velvet curtains. She had been applauding the dancers' parents in the audience as she had walked off stage, after her welcoming speech. Her personal stagehand trailed her, carrying the mike off too. She had ended up by saying something in Italian and had then headed towards us.

The two men next to me with earphones on had asked each

other, "Our cue is 'Break a leg' was that what that lady just said in Spanish or something?"

Whatever she'd said must have been it, as through Iris's big white painted lips she had hissed to our line, "Smile, smile, smile.." She had pulled the first girl onto the stage and then had done the same with the rest of our rows, as she'd swatted the behinds of each of us, as if pounding out stubborn catsup from a bottle. Then she'd followed our tuxed penguin-like herd on stage to rearrange us in an even straighter line, according to white markings on the stage's wooden floor.

As our teacher had known and told us, an audience appreciates the smallest ones most, and will clap even for little people's mistakes. Stephanie, the baby of our class, who had only been four, had stood on stage with her back to the audience, staring at the huge painted backdrop of a river boat with parrots and fish dancing on board. When Iris had come out on the stage and had turned Steffie around to face the huge audience, Mrs. Nomano had made the little girl jump, with her weird costume and face paint.

Stephanie's startled jump alone had nearly brought down the house with howls of appreciation and clapping. Hearing this, Steffie had bowed primly, as if our dance number had been over, and she had started to strut off stage in our usual fashion, kicking her legs and waving her top hat.

When Iris had grabbed the small girl by her tuxedo's collar, the child had continued to go through the motions of leaving, though now, a couple of inches off the ground, and going nowhere.

For this unplanned vaudevillian moment, the audience had again appreciatively roared and stamped their feet in approval, which had sounded not like many seated people but like one gargantuan beastly giant being hugely entertained by us mini-mortals in our misadventure. Finally we had heard the opening bars of our old familiar song.

Iris had stood just slightly behind the curtain and had mimed the steps with us. The first thing that we were supposed to do to begin our number was to straighten our collars and then flip and catch our canes. In the half year that we'd practiced this, using majorette batons, we'd never done it before without at least one baton flying off askance. Tonight with Iris saying "Get on your mark, get set, flip!" somehow a miracle of gravity had brought every single one of our twirling canes back to land in our hands as we'd always meant for them to do.

This had been such an opening night coup, and a surprise to the expectations of the group, that we had nearly forgotten to continue dancing, with everybody looking at each other in amazement. What? No need to wait for cane retrievals? No crash landings? What do we do now?

"That old man river..." the music had reminded us with its opening bars and our feet and smiles had obeyed the melody as if we'd been wind-up toys. Being near the curtain edge, I'd seen Iris looking at her logistics sheet with one arm and finger raised. She had been looking to the lighting engineer's assistant who had been up on the scaffolding.

When she had brought down her arm, he had brought down his lever and the whole world up on this stage had been suddenly cloaked in this eerie purple hue, which had come from the stage lights shutting off while black lights had been turned on. These black lights or strivolites, when beamed on stage, had illuminated only the white portions of our costumes and had left everything else, including ourselves, invisible, or so darkly purple, that we'd had seemed not to exist anymore except as vague ethereal outlines. From the audience's perspective, we'd learned later, we'd truly appeared to have almost vanished, leaving only our dancing costumes behind.

Our headbands, lapels, short skirts, shoe bows and cane tips had become stingingly bright and animated. The dark portions of our costumes and we dancers beneath them had disappeared. It had been as of we had become purple ghosts dancing along. If any of us had smiled, then our teeth had lit up too. Mrs. Nomano's big painted-on mouth, from where she'd stood, just barely offstage where we could still see

her, had looked cavernously huge, and the white half her pant's stripes had shown. The rows of her teeth had been accentuated as she'd sung "Old Man River" with Ethel Mermanesque grand flourishes while facing us. Her prompting had taken place like we had been used to seeing her do, but never before without lights.

I'd felt like we'd been phantoms in a row dancing in the dark, as if in the negative of a photograph. I had been both amazed and crestfallen. If Stephanie hadn't clowned around on stage for a few minutes after our initial entrance, in our pre-performance moments with the regular lighting, it would have seemed to me as if I hadn't been in this show at all. At the end of the dance we had raised our top hats and had strutted off, shimmying them in time with our leg kicks. The regular lights had been put on again, so this had been an awake part of our dance for me.

The rest of this experience had been like imagining myself in a dream or like my fear of being alone in a dark room and searching blindly for a night light, and tracing the walls with my fingers endlessly reaching for that switch of illumination which I'd never found except by waking up.

Right offstage, like a beacon light, there had been our Mom waiting for us, with twin red rose and baby's breath corsages. She had carefully pinned them on our lapels, to the side of the stage. Some of the girls had sighed in envy

and had stood watching her pin them on us.

"You were wonderful, girls, just perfect. You should have seen the symmetry of your line. Nobody missed a single step. I'm so proud. You should be so pleased with yourselves. Hello? That isn't you, Mrs. Nomano? Oh, yes it is! Mrs. Nomano, great job!"

"Mom, the lights were out," I had grouched. "How could you tell we didn't miss a step?"

"I had memorized your places in the line, and had looked at the program," Mom had been collecting removable bits and pieces from our costumes and stashing them into her outsized stage-mother's carry-all with scenes of Tin Pan Alley embossed on it.

"What a waste of time to practice every day, just to dance like an invisible shadow wearing a cute costume," I'd confessed my disappointment as we had headed up the red padded carpet to the balcony.

Other performers had been in motion on the stairs swarming in ethnic garb. I'd felt like we'd been in an international airport, or maybe at the Mardi Gras, as everyone had looked larger than life and as if wearing disguises. The effect on the stairs had been as if we had been all moving on escalators, young dancers elevated by the euphoria of actually belonging in these glamorous gowns and get-ups tonight, and buoyed by giving and receiving

applause, despite us being only amateur kids, far from ever reaching the bright lights of Broadway.

"Don't worry. Your work was appreciated. When you finally smiled, with those two front teeth missing, half the audience laughed. Some even applauded," Mom had tried to be reassuring.

"Are you sure that was me?"

"I'd know my daughter anywhere, even dancing in the dark," Mom had declared, and had sworn that at the next recital she'd have both of us sisters in solos with no funny business about the lights. Mom hadn't been sure at all that she'd liked the Al Jolson effect, except for it being technically clever. I hadn't known who Al Jolson was, so she'd explained to me that he had been a man who had danced in black face, imitating the darker-skinned Southerners of another race.

I had first thought about being dark-skinned and about feeling invisible that night, after she'd said this, on our way home. Our recital had been called "A Trip Around the World." Every dance had spotlighted a different nationality or part of the world. We had been imitating and appreciating all these different cultural groups, while having none of them among us. I'd realized for the first time that our family hadn't had any contact with the Negroes of our town. I'd felt isolated from them, but realized that

they must feel even worse, excluded, since the white folks had seemed to run just about everything in our town. They must have felt invisible being treated this way, as I had on the stage--part of an interchangeable group, necessary for the show to go on, but not appreciated for our individuality.

I had wondered if the dark people in this town had dance institutes too. If they had, did they ever dance in white-face? Did they ever put white face paint on and imitate us whiteys? Maybe they'd be dancing in pale face paint to Nola or The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies and making the other brown people in the audiences laugh at us. I'd noticed how mincing some fair-skinned people can be when trying to move around. In other cultures I'd seen in National Geographic, everybody, even the elders, dance for all of their lives at celebrations. That was rare in the white world I was familiar with, outside of staid token ballroom dancing. I'd felt it was strange to celebrate other cultures, like the black culture in our town, without inviting them to join us.

But, really, there had been no one for me to ask whether the dark people did the same things in Savannah as we had done. Our family had lived in Savannah for five years but I'd never talked to a black person or even been around any at school. Finally Bonnie had started getting

bused to a newly integrated school, on the other side of town. She'd said that each racial clique had stayed with their own. Bonnie hadn't liked the school as it had been run down and the plumbing had never worked for more than two days in a row. Friendships forged there had ended abruptly each day with the ringing of the bell, with the white students all exiting for the long ride back to their segregated neighborhoods.

Nobody had mentioned racial issues around me, until the busing had started. The comments made around me that had been negative had centered on the inconvenience of busing for us, for which the blame had tended to be placed on the wrong, but most obvious cause. That night I'd felt like I'd lived here, spared embarrassing scenes lying just underneath the surface, invisible to the untrained eye.

I'd been privileged by the accident of birth and race. The subtle disarray of being for a few moments a performer for others' frivolous entertainment, had left me with a racial awareness which would grow. I had hoped, at least for this one night, that the usual color separations had held, in the racial composition of our audience, for I'd thought otherwise our dance might have caused some ill feelings, unintended by me, to people celebrated only by our imitating and appreciating them from a distance. As for myself, being unkind had been the last thing on my mind.

After the dance, we hadn't left the auditorium until the first intermission. It would have been rude to just have left after we'd done our own little bit. However, I had hardly been able to keep my sleepy eyes open. The only way I could stay awake was to pretend to myself that it had been me doing all the solos.

I hadn't received any accolades from Gordon, who'd asked whether I'd bribed the lighting crew to dim me out. He'd said if he'd had to vote, I'd have become Queen for a Day of Danceland because of my holey smile. I'd thought that maybe Gordon had paid me a compliment in his way, and had said thanks. But then he'd slipped ice pellets from his coke down my back, and I'd vowed to myself to play War one more time with him, just to get revenge before trying to be more of a neighborhood sweetheart instead.

When we'd gotten home, the tenth crab, had been sitting looking lonesome in the middle of the rug, one leg caught in some hooked yarn. He had been trapped, like I had felt I'd just been too. Bonnie had freed him, a swipe at a time and had then wrapped him in a towel and taken him out to our sandbox. Gordon had helped her make a quick lagoon for him in the sandbox, protected under the clothes hamper.

Everyone had been relieved that the crab had finally been located and that we were now safe. We'd sworn we were taking "Ernest Crabapple" back to the Tybee Beach to let him

float away that following weekend. As it had later turned out, we had actually done this, but not before having had lots of fun playing with him in the sandbox before bidding him Bon Voyage.

Ernest had taught me that crabs are actually quite nice as pets--they'll snap at most everything, and walk sideways, and are always alert. Gordon's G-Men all had taken turns letting Ernie Crabapple snap at their fingers and crackers. Although there had been dares and bets, no G-Man had let Ernie Crabapple test their fingers between his pinchers or challenge their pain tolerance.

Later that recital night Sister and I had coiled together in our flannel p.j.s, Mom still working in the kitchen with Gramma. I had tried to stay awake for the tooth fairy but my eyes had seen too much that night, and my eyelids had reluctantly closed like heavy curtains. The day had been so wonderfully awful, that I'd known I would remember it forever, while predictably good days would float away as gauzy memories, fading like forgotten laughter.

Rule #14. Every dog has his day (or D-day!)

While Bonnie and I had slept-in late the next morning, Mom had said that she had gotten up with the birds. She had been banging pans in the kitchen early and I'd had to put my head under the pillow to resume sleeping, grasping my newly-found dollar bill in my fist, left for me by the tooth fairy to pay me for my lost baby tooth.

Bonnie had managed to save some of her ex-teeth as trinkets, and had been scheming to try to drill holes in them and make a baby tooth necklace for Mom for Mother's Day. I'd heard from Freida that these outgrown teeth, if they were still in good shape, had been given to the next child on the tooth fairy's waiting list.

Some kids had claimed they'd heard The Tooth Fairy was like Robin Hood, stealing back baby teeth from kids who had new bigger-sized ones and giving their cast-offs to those who had none at all.

This late morning, we'd looked for Mom who had been in her bedroom inspecting herself in the oval full-length mirror. She had looked good to me but had said she'd felt shop-worn after days of working for the success of this party. Now that it had been D-day or D for Dad day, she said she almost felt too tired to really enjoy it. She'd wished she could sleep for twenty-four hours straight first.

Mom had pulled off her red and white checkerboard cotton cooking apron to check out her party clothes underneath, which she had already been wearing this early in the day. Unsure of when to expect Dad's arrival she had wanted to be sure to look her best for him, no matter when he'd arrived. Mom had told us she'd almost dressed up for bed the night before, just in case.

For the past six months Bonnie and I had slept in our Mom's bed, so she wouldn't have to sleep alone. She hadn't been able to get to sleep, after living with Dad for so many years, unless she'd had someone to make a spoon with. Bonnie and I had been happy to oblige, and the three of us had curved together like the curved sections of an orange. Bonnie had to sleep behind Mom as she had such sharp pointy skinny little elbows that she had been a hazard to other sleepers in the same bed. I had caused trouble too as Mom's titties had kept tickling my back, making us all giggle every night until we'd finally laughed so much it had tired us out enough to settle down and get to sleep. After we'd started doing the Dubarry's Home Beauty Exercising program before bedtime, we'd gotten to sleep much earlier, exhausted from re-exerting our sore muscles night after night.

On D-day, Mom had stood there and had kept sucking in her flat tummy, running her palm down it and looking at her right, left and behind sides. She'd told us she had to see

if "I'm still here, after losing myself in cooking."

Sister and I had crowded ourselves into the mirror's frame too, in front of Mom. We had all squeezed together and stood there trying our best to admire ourselves, and wondering aloud whether Dad would think we'd changed for the better or gotten worse.

Mom, talking to us while facing the mirror, had reminded us, "It's not the food that counts when you give a party. Its your positive attitude that decides the outcome."

"Even if they don't like it?" Connie had sounded skeptical.

"If anybody says something rude or catty about one of the dishes, we must give them one of our most sincere smiles and tell them, "Why, thank you! That's exactly how we meant for it to taste! We made it especially for good friends like you."

Being nice in exchange for someone else's hurtfulness is always the best way to win, she'd said.

She had been smiling bravely, as she'd returned to do battle with what she had called a baffling recipe. She'd called it a little foggy-brained, leaving her completely at a loss according to the cookbook's "ill-conceived, crazy quilt, cockeyed, goonybird directions."

This had been her Christian way of cussing, equal to a

Dad's dammits, darns and hells bells, which naughty words, she'd said had been a little over-used by the menfolks. She'd counseled us that cursing was only excusable when it couldn't be helped. When pressed for an example she'd said it had to be something pretty drastic, perhaps hammering one's own thumb good and hard or maybe for letting off steam after running out of gas, past midnight, when all the filling stations were closed, out on a dark, lonely highway under a full moon in a strange place you've never seen before. Mom had said cursing should never be done by choice, but only by accident and never by a lady. We'd been advised to try to train ourselves to say something more creative than generic cursing which had besmirched a person's good reputation. Bonnie had remembered the old standby, "Oh tarnation!" I had promised to try to substitute for my character-tarnishing expletives--"Oh sheep dip!" or "Oh Frankstein's funny fanny!"

"How about 'shucks'?" I'd asked.

"A little hackneyed, but okay," Mom had replied.

"How about 'just darn it all?'" Connie had inquired.

"Okay," Mom had agreed.

"How about 'fee, fie, foe, fum'?" I'd been wracking my brain for some kind of inventive curse.

"If you don't get tongue-twisted and make it sound like bad F-words," she'd concurred.

Her recipe mishaps being minor troubles she'd often reeled off her funny strings of almost silly cusswords. She look like she was spanking whatever it was that she'd had under her rubber spatula. Unless she'd beat some sense into her ingredients and made them shape up, she'd shown them the trash can where they'd belonged after going wayward on her.

We had been dying to help her cook, but she had said with Gramma Anne already in the kitchen, she had more helpful hands than she could put to good use already. It had been no family secret that neither of our grammas had been partial to the fine art of cooking and that both had avoided the kitchen for most of their entire lives. Gramma Anne had, however, been a good kitchen companion with all her Greyhound seatmates' stories, so Mom had kept asking leading questions of us girls, which had been meant as hints for us to leave them alone with their grown-up gossip. My sister and I would shake our heads yes or no after each suggestion, looking at each other for one to spark our mutual interest.

"Have you played with your jacks today? Or pick-up stix? Have you practiced with your new sparkle batons or double-dutch jump rope?

I'm not going to be buying you any more toys if you never play with the ones you already have. What about

blowing soap bubbles with the big double-bubble wands?"

This last suggestion had sounded the best to us so far. Mom and Gramma had promised to watch for our iridescent bubbles to float past the kitchen window.

Bonnie and I had tried blowing bubbles for them while doing somersaults where they could see us through the back window, which hadn't worked very well. We'd had to keep coming inside to make more bubble juice from liquid Ivory and glycerin drops.

Each time I'd come back inside, I'd hoped to linger long enough to hear about that one bad apple who had been on one of Gramma's buses. It had seemed he'd pretend to fall asleep, with his head falling onto Gramma's bosom each time.

There had been more to this story, but so far I'd been out of luck at getting any more juicy details. Every time I'd gone back inside, they'd switched to food talk.

Meal preparation by Mom, in our Air Force family, had been one way for her to make wherever we'd moved feel and smell home-sweet-homey and family-familiar more quickly. Our family had menu plans which had travelled with us from place to place. We'd always known whether in Tucson or Timbucktu, we could expect to have Cheddared Macaroni Mondays, Salmon Croquette Tuesdays, Shepherd Pie with Bisquick Topping Wednesdays, roast beef or fried chicken

Sundays, Barbecued Saturdays, Chili Thursdays and Free for all Fridays when everybody had gotten a choice. I had been allowed to add my two cents' arguing for Dagwood Sandwich Saturdays, but had been over-ruled and sent back to play.

Outside Bonnie and I had been revved like motorboats on that day in expectation that our Dad would be getting home soon. But the truth had been that despite all the build up and excitement about this event, it had come at the wrong time for me, a too-tired day.

I had really felt less like a speedboat and more like little Tootle the Tugboat who'd had to use all of her strength to keep up with everyone else, "Yes I can, yes I can..."

For weeks Mom had kept feeling my forehead and looking concerned and later had been giving Gramma pointed looks like exclamation marks every time she'd done this. To assuage their concern about my health, and not wanting to be forced to go to bed with the big party coming up, I had tried to run around and act peppier than I really had been feeling.

When finally Mom had said I had been drooping, instead of sitting upright, on the kitchen stool, on my third expedition indoors to get more somersaulting bubble water, Mom had told me to stay put. I'd said "Shucks!" but I'd really thought "Hallelujah!"

Bonnie had come in too, and we'd been allowed to help Gramma make more tollhouse cookies. Although Mom had warned us that eating raw dough was unwise, who could resist in their grade school experimental eating days? Likewise we'd used dry spaghetti strands, eating them down to play cigarette size, strutting around acting like the boss men.

Thinking of cigarettes and cigars that day had led me to thoughts of dancing and tricks which had been paired to smoking on television in a show called "Ted Mack's Amateur Hour." Every week on Ted Mack's, talented performers who hadn't made the big-time yet had competed against other amateurs in front of the t.v.'s call-in voting audience and the people in the auditorium. All of the performers had hopes of winning the grand prize trip to Hollywood.

The weird part of this t.v. show had been the live advertisement performed in the auditorium for the show's sponsor which was Lucky Strikes cigarettes. Two girls had always come on stage wearing these people-sized cigarette packs for costumes, which had covered the girls except for their bare legs sticking out the bottoms of the packs. The two would dance beside each other like two packs of Lucky Strikes which had sprouted legs.

I had thought those anonymous dancing girls probably had felt every week like I had on my recital night, dancing

with the lights out and all my talent hidden, being just a human part of some special effects number with audience appeal.

Those two girls had probably been tricked into doing this, maybe for lots of money, or perhaps promised that one day they would be able to rip open their boxes and show their true faces.

Mom had been cleaning the big kitchen table getting ready for us to help Gramma spear pieces from all the big bowls onto the wooden shish kebab sticks. Bonnie and I had already hidden a couple of these sticks back in our room to use as hospital equipment later in our tent, to upgrade our selection of hypodermic needles.

These shish kebabs were going to be barbecued out on the grill during the party. At first we had been thinking this task was going to be fun. As soon as we had started, however, we'd found it had been incredibly hard to get all the different foods skewered onto the sticks tightly enough for the pieces not to always falling off. Everything had been pre-cooked and only had to be warmed in the oven later.

"Listen up, girls," seeing our failures, Mom had then given us a live demonstration of the fine art of shish kebab preparation, just like Herbert, the travelling salesman, had done with the Mr. Magic Potato Slicer in the supermarket.

"First cut your pineapple rings into triangles. Then

assemble it like thus--," Mom had skewered a pineapple. That slippery triangle had been followed with a slice of water chestnut, then a marinated ham wedge, then a cherry tomato, a green pepper slice, followed by a Swedish meatball, parboiled new potato, pepper cheese wedge, coconut ball, cajun-sauced steak cube, mushroom, jicama, and ending with a seasoned cocktail wiener to cork it all into place.

"Voila! Got that? I'll leave this one on the platter as an example, and you copy it to make yours just like mine," Mom had then returned to her Mile High Strawberry Surprise cakes.

Rule #15. Best are followed by worsts--try for okays.

When I'd been eavesdropping during naptime I had finally learned the details about the fate of our family's future horizon being tied to these cakes and important occasion. I had also discovered why mother had been so reticent about talking to us about it. Mom had been talking confidentially to Gramma over a coffee break while I had supposedly slept.

She had put us down and then had alerted Gramma to listen carefully for the ding of the kitchen timer, which if missed could have meant, according to Mom on that day, a minor family tragedy.

It had seemed, from the drift of their conversation that Mom's plan had been for Dad to get a promotion so we could move away, as soon as possible, from Savannah.

Staying in our neighborhood, from what I'd overheard, could mean that we sisters might end up getting polio. I'd listened and to their friendly voices bearing bad news. My curiosity had been piqued to be followed by dread. It had seemed, according to the newspapers that the sources of the polio epidemic were unknown, but hot spots of cases were located here in Savannah. Rumors on what had caused the epidemic had abounded, including swallowing contaminated water from the possibly peed-in public pool. For whatever

reason, several of our playmates from the neighborhood had already ended up in hospital wards after being infected. This scourge had seemed to favor some pockets of the deep South--like us. Our neighborhood's area had been officially labelled as a hot spot in the state and was being investigated by disease control experts. We'd had five confirmed cases in a four block radius.

Our block's mothers had been fearful for their children and families had felt vulnerable. Mom's own concern for us, I'd only heard that afternoon, making me feel pinpointed for the first time.

I hadn't thought about Mom's interest in nutrition being linked to this bigger paralyzing threat. I'd only thought it was quirky when she'd told us that fresh orange juice was for vitamin C; coldslaw for roughage to prevent constipation; and liver for iron to make our blood strong. She'd also found a health food store which had carried a wide array of vitamins and mineral supplements. After Mom had discovered the books of Adele Davis, the first nutrition advisor, particularly Eat Right to Stay Fit, this nutritional credo had joined Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking as bedrock insurance policies for our family's physical and spiritual health.

Bonnie and I'd had to practice to learn how to swallow gargantuan-sized pills which had rivalled those giant

capsules given to us by doctors. Staying healthy had become just as hard on us, in the pill-swallowing department, as getting sick had been. Not fair!

Bonnie and I had protested these precautions at first, but with the looming specter of the children who had disappeared after being polio victims, we'd shut up. Thinking of our pals who could no longer fight with us in our WWII games, had encouraged us to throw those Super Plenamin Multi-vitamins down those strange--looking pink holes in the back of our throats with our uvulas hanging down.

That afternoon, with a knot in my stomach, I had been listening to Mom and Gramma talking together quietly, but not so quietly that I couldn't overhear them. They'd let down their guard after they'd made sure that Bonnie and I had been asleep. Grownups had been so easy to fool. The very first lesson in trickery almost every savvy child learns is how to pretend-sleep. After all, if you couldn't do that, you would never have any clues to add to the arguments about how Santa Claus got inside of homes without chimney chutes or whether Rudolph's nose had shone with a steady beam or had flashed on and off. But those had been happier memories, in our current serious situation, polio's invasion of Dixie, I had been glad I'd learned undercover sleuthing in my Santa Claus fact-hunting years.

I'd deduced the significance of the threat of polio even before listening in to that afternoon's kitchen table talk and to my mind it had seemed a fate worse than death. The March of Dimes people had played out polio's deadly effect on the lives of innocent bystanders nightly on television so that healthy citizens would be scared into funding our national war against this dreaded disease.

It had seemed to me that we'd had two undeclared wars going on within our own country--the battle against these germs and the one against those no-goodnik communists. This human threat, the Communists, it had seemed to me as a child, had been ordinary-looking people who had such unsavory ideas that many politicians of those years had considered their thoughts both dangerous and contagious.

Without my knowing diddley-ca-ca about medicine or politics, it had been obvious to me that our country had then wanted to wipe out both these paralyzing germs and those dangerously contagious communist thoughts, and would use whatever means necessary.

It had been hard for me to figure out what communism itself had meant, as anyone I'd ask would say pure communism hadn't ever existed in this world and never would work. I'd guessed I would understand all this adult beeswax later. I'd also had a hard time understanding why holy religious groups had kept fighting with each other about beliefs, using

bullets in the name of God. Our Father Who Art in Heaven must have had a hard time choosing between any two armies of his Godly warriors, each side praying to be protected for His sake.

Polio had been easier for me to understand, though how a heavy human being could get toppled by an invisible germ, too small to see, had baffled my credulity.

The only way I'd been able to settle those unanswerable questions was for me to believe that maybe people got reborn in Heaven after death. I'd thought perhaps people had many lifetimes.

If this had been God's masterplan, people could be given turns being sick in one lifetime and healthy in the next or trading off the victor/victim roles. This had been the most benevolent scheme I could devise for understanding the inequity of different peoples' fates and lives. I'd hoped for something like that to be true. But I'd also worried that it had been my own fate to contract polio in this lifetime.

Bonnie and I had often talked about death and the unfairness in life, but always as something far away. Those distant worries had been superseded when this immediate threat had felled our own playmates, who weren't national statistics to us, but kids with real names and faces. Roy and Benita, and the little girl down the block

who wore the red swimsuit that had looked like a plump strawberry and others I'd heard about had gone into hospitals and hadn't ever returned.

I'd never seen them again, but a March of Dimes commercial on television had let me know more about the fate of polio victims after they'd gone away.

Right after the t.v. series, "I Love Lucy," which had always made us half roll on the floor laughing until tears ran down our cheeks--the March of Dimes campaign had interjected their daunting t.v. advertisement which had stanchd our good humor. One segment had been so scary, it will probably cling forever in the backroads of my memory.

This episode had shown a local swimming pool, maybe our town's, I hadn't been able to check that location out for sure anymore, as Bonnie and I had no longer been allowed to swim there. Mom had decided around this time that more chlorine was used out at the base pool, which had also had less people, so Mom had started taking us there.

I'd been glad about going to the safer base pool, because on the polio ad they had shown this typical public pool full of kids like us. Suddenly from the side of the t.v. screen there had appeared this dark shadow. It had been the shadow of the little girl in leg braces on crutches that The March of Dimes campaign had used all the time on the polio donation jars.

In the televised ad, this polio-crippled shadow had moved around the t.v. screen over this big pool filled up with kids. There had been background music, maybe a barbershop quartet, singing "In the Good Old Summertime," which had been overlaid with the sounds of children enjoying themselves splashing water into each others' faces, and squealing gleefully, which had all stopped with loudest of sudden clinks. CLINK!

The ad had been like an evil version of the party-game, Musical Chairs, because whenever the music had ended, whomever that crippling shadow had landed on had been IT, and had been taken out of his or her previous walking-style life. In the immediate next scene that boy or girl had been pictured in leg braces, or on crutches, or paralyzed, possibly forever.

The ad hadn't stopped there, for the next shadow had been shaped like an iron lung. It had gone to a big birthday party, with adults and kids celebrating together. The iron lung shadow, had followed the wheelchair shadow, which had followed the kid on crutches shadow. The iron lung image had been the scariest of them all--which is probably why they had saved it for last. This iron lung had kept moving first over one person then over another while in the background as we viewers had heard the people at the party singing, "Happy Birthday to youuuu..." CLINK!

The music had then died and been replaced with a scene of the previously happy-go-lucky Dad now shown lying sadly in the hospital in this big iron lung with only his head sticking out of the people-sized metal cylinder. He'd had this loud machine mechanically breathing for him. Only his head had been visible, with the rest of his body encased in this canister. From the ad we'd seen he'd only had this little rear bicycle mirror to look backwards into to see any people, and that had been all. For life? This particular March of Dimes father had to be hand-fed, while just lying there without even a t.v. This fate, to my mind, had been worse than death, which my sister and I had still thought of in terms of dying and going away to fly with the angels, as we'd been to the church's Sunday School by then. Bonnie and I had murmured at night about how glad we'd be after our Dad had come home to rescue us, after I'd told her of Mom's plan to leave town.

Mom had hinged her plan for our escape from this epidemic on Dad's getting promoted fast, with the help of her party and the mile-high cakes. The squadron's commander had a big sweet tooth and had always teased the wives, that feeding it wasn't going to hurt their husband's careers one little whit. The women had always been vying to get rave reviews from him on their desserts. Mrs. Ullstrom, whose husband was also up to be promoted to major, along with Dad,

had tipped the commander's scales with her Husband Pleasing Cherry Pies. No one else could duplicate her success with those pies, not even following every iota of her written recipe. Mom hadn't fared any better using Inez's recipe. Mom had thrown her hat back in the ring however, by inventing this original cake recipe while Dad was in Guam. Bonnie and I would keep tip-toeing back into the kitchen to pull down on that long silver handle of what we'd now called Pandora's Icebox. The light in back would light up and so would our faces as we'd surveyed what new had been happening in there since our last peek. Mom's cakes were still safe, and quite majestic-looking. We'd pray, "Please make Mom's cakes a major Major-making success!"

I'd lived in fear since I'd heard Mom stage-whispering to Gramma last nap time.

"Barri Lyn is a prime candidate for polio, because she is so book-wormy. She doesn't use her muscles enough.

Bonnie is another likely victim as she plays with so many different kids; bites her fingernails after playing in the dirt; and is always sharing her cokes with anybody who comes along. One street over, two of our little neighborhood kids are now in the polio ward. If we don't leave soon, the girls being exposed, might be next."

Ever since I'd heard that my sister and I had been targeted for polio, I'd been feeling sick.

Rule #16. Grammas are the best magic.

While I'd become serious about helping Mom make this party work I'd snagged a splinter in my foot. Gramma had gestured conspiratorially for me to come into our flamingo pink bathroom with her. Mom had already put in the stopper and the tub had been filling up with hottish water to which had been added a couple cups of rock salt. Now all the kitchen crowd had crammed themselves into the bathroom with us to watch me soak my foot. They had acted as if by magic the splinter I just gotten, when soaked in water, was just going to jettison itself right back out, the way it had come in. I had known that it wouldn't, so there really hadn't been any reason for me to have all this company.

Fortunately, Mom had asked Gordon to come help her put the rest of the tollhouse cookies onto plates now that they'd cooled. She had said, "Let's see what kind of a surgeon you'd make. Don't break any of these cookies, if you can help it, okay? Pretend they're somebody's heart or liver or something else vital."

Gordon had whispered to us sisters, under his breath, "I'll pretend they're some forklifter's goonads."

Bonnie and I hadn't known what he had meant. Goonads? Half of what he'd said might as well have been Latin to us, though his code-words had usually been naughty we'd guessed.

Gramma had opened up her pink bag after shutting the door and after calling for Bonnie to come back in. Sister had dawdled, but had reluctantly returned after pointing out "hers" to Gordon on the cookie sheet, which nobody else was supposed to even think of touching.

"Yes, girls, on this last lap of my lifelong Greyhound journey I sat next to the smartest entrepreneur, a Mr. Cordelius Maxwell, who deals in paper products," Gramma had begun.

The sound of the water cascading into the tub, with me trying the knobs to make it get cooler, had diverted my attention. I hadn't understood Gramma's whole last sentence. But I'd known, her second one would tell me whether I had needed to ask "Beg your pardon?" for a repeat or not. Often I could back-paddle to catch up with her drift without needing to interrupt the procession of her stories.

"Anyway, it had been just my good luck, as always, to sit next to someone who had a lot to teach me."

"Excuse me please, Grandmother, dearest, but I have to help Gordon," Bonnie had curtsied and gone towards the door. "Don't be rude. We don't get to hear Gramma's stories every day while mean old Gordon never gives us a minute's peace," I had told my sister to stay put.

"Yes, but Gordon might be ruining The World's Largest Chocolate Chip Cookie which I've made especially for Dad! Gramma we should weigh it and take a snapshot and send it to "The Guinness Book of World Records," Bonnie had been hugging Gramma and talking over her head to my back as I had sat with my feet poised just above the too-hot tub water.

"Let Gramma finish first. She's trying to tell us about our presents," I had slipped a hint to Bonnie.

"Ooooh," Bonnie had changed her tone and her tune, always loving surprises.

"Barri Lyn if you don't put your feet into the water, it will never loosen your splinter." Bonnie had advised me as she'd launched a flotilla of rubber toys into the water.

"I know, Knucklebrain. I'm waiting for the steam to go away. We're ready Gramma. As you were saying madam?" I had loved American moments when I could sneak in a polite phrase from one of my British junior detective novels.

"Well, Mr. Maxwell wasn't your average salesman. Cordelius has a vision and by sheer luck I had the good fortune to meet him on a day when he had been overstocked in his most popular product--magic diaries!"

"Those books that have locks and keys?" Bonnie had loved cloak and dagger spy materials.

"That's right. But these aren't ordinary diaries just for writing down your everyday private thoughts. These are

magic wish books," Gramma had again refused our offer of a seat. She just wouldn't even consider sitting down on the closed toilet in front of us, even with its lid shut and looking all proper with its fuzzy seatcover with the chenille flamingos woven on it.

"Beg your pardon, Gramma," Bonnie had interrupted, "but, I apologize but I don't believe in investing in magic, Gramma. Barri Lyn and I have already been tricked by Gordon, the Magic Genie, and it cost us fifty cents for nothing. We paid up and where's our dappled pony named Chickenpox that was suppose to arrive on our front yard?"

"Bonnie you sound world-weary and cynical for your young age. You must keep on hoping," Gramma counseled my sister to continue to believe in magic, in spite of Gordon.

"We aren't going to name our pony something as jinxed as a pocky disease," I'd countered to Bonnie.

"Our pony's name should be Chickadee. If you could get that straight, our pony might decide to appear as promised. No pony wants to be called Chickenpox, dappled or not," I had argued, trying to change the subject before Bonnie had spilled the beans on Gordon the Genie, and what we'd done in the tent, hoping for magic. I had been praying my sister wasn't getting us into even more hot water than that which had been rising in my foot-soaking tub.

My fears had been realized when Bonnie had told our

Gramma the whole story, in lurid detail, of us visiting the Magic Genie. During her frank rendition I had tried to interrupt her a number of times.

"Gordon said if you told about him being a Genie and about his magic wand, the whole dealie would fail," I had pleaded with Bonnie to shut up before Gramma had repeated this to MaMa "for our own protection" or MaMa had overheard our tub talk.

I'd felt myself blush, and had hoped the rivulet rolling down my forehead had just been from the steam and not the sweat of guilt written all over my face.

"Mr. Maxwell's wish books are diaries of a different order. You write down your three most important goals in life in them. Then every day you record what steps you've taken to make those wishes into realities. It only takes a decent while to see your dream world become an actuality," Gramma had now started rustling to extract these special books.

Ceremoniously, she had then given Bonnie the book with the unicorn on the front and me the one with a calico cat. I already known my first wish would be to try to talk Bonnie into trading books with me.

"If I were you," Gramma had said, "I'd take that sturdy boars' hair tub brush under the vanity sink and scrub your splinter free, Barri Lyn."

Gramma had begun that afternoon to advise me on more practical matters. Gramma seemed to have felt that her other mission had been accomplished. She'd delivered to us, her youngest son's daughters, the means to achieve our future. The magic diaries now in our hands, she'd seemed to have felt relieved of her duties to bring us a real means of magic.

Mom had then been knocking on the bathroom door, or maybe it had been Gordon banging a protest instead. He'd hated being shut out. It had been hard to hear anything that hadn't been going on inside the bathroom itself. As Bonnie had been taking a tinkle, we had called for whomever to wait a second, please. I had the water turned on again, drizzling from the cold spigot, trying to balance the water's temperature. I'd felt this must be like Goldilock's with her porridge problem, at the Three Bears' residence. Both of us had tried unsatisfactory either/ors, temperature-wise, before finally reaching just right.

The long mirror, as usual, had distracted us in this room. Kids had always been being told by their elders how they'd thought we were growing up. These adults' evaluations had always made me want to run and look at myself in a mirror to see for myself whether or not what they'd seen or predicted, had truly happened to me since the last time I'd checked.

From adults I'd heard, "You're getting: to be taller; smart as a button; longer hair; more freckles; strong biceps; a pretty smile; more graceful; old for your age." I'd carried all these words to the mirror and pondered them there, flexing muscles or scowling like a scholar.

The bath had been a good room, being the only truly private place in the whole house, having a lock and chain on the door. Mom's room also had a slide lock, but only used for when she and Dad had to discuss private matters.

I had heard Gordon pounding on the door again over the babbling water and Bonnie's prattling on about bogus genies. We had all yelled in unison for Gordon to run along home to use his own facilities as our own bathroom was occupied. I'd already seen that he could even do it, before he'd gotten there, running along.

Then it was all Show and Tell. Bonnie had stood in the middle of the tub, fully dressed, but lifting this or that part of her clothing, to show Gramma every single scar she'd ever gotten in her entire life, and blaming most of them on me. She'd even faulted me for having the chickenpox first and "giving" them to her. This spotty illness had left her with one little indented cheek scar on her otherwise flawless cheek skin. Nevertheless she'd pointed it out saying, "Here's where Barri Lyn ruined my career as a model, her chickenpox nearly killed me. I'm lucky to have survived

with only this disfiguring mark."

All of this guilt-heaping, of course, had made me need to set the record straight, to rescue my mature reputation in Gramma Anne's eyes.

She had also given us another useful rule for life: always leave every place nicer than you'd found it. Gramma had said a lady's presence should leave a good impression and linger, like a remembered smile. I'd decided I might start carrying a perfume atomizer.

The house at Nine Pine Valley Road had seemed so beautiful when we'd re-entered it and the party world out of the damp primping room. I had wished everything could have stayed festively decorated for everyday life. There had been a big Welcome Home sign, which had been strung across the dining area. Most of the fragile food had been replaced in the refrigerator after we'd arranged it once on the tables to check on spacing.

If I could get over my shyness, I'd would have liked to have a career as a professional party-giver. We had paper flower garlands strung from one end of the house to the other, like the Garden of Eden.

Rule #17: Take notes to preserve family traditions.

The punch would be served from large watermelons which had been cored-out. The lime jello trout had been made to be the centerpiece of the table, surrounded by platters of party sandwiches which had been cut from card-party cookie cutters--hearts, spades, diamonds, clubs, clovers and circles.

The sandwiches had been made from checkerboarding whole wheat and white breads alternately for a Good Housekeeping seal-of-approval kind of party-plus touch. They had been filled with guacamole, tuna salad, ham salad, deviled egg spread, pimento and olive cheese spread, and chunky chicken salad--and I'd sampled them all.

I'd still considered basic peanut butter and jelly as fit for a party, but though I'd suggested it, Mom had said she'd never live it down. So I'd made some for the kids' party table. I'd seen grown-ups who been in our pre-party kitchen test my p.b. & j. creations. Most had complimented me as the sandwich chef saying, "It has been years!" ,

There had also been cheese balls decorated with nuts, which had been made to look like Easter Island's giant stone heads. I'd thought we had trays of every kind of mouth-watering hors d'oeuvres to walk off a magazine page.

One day I'd been hoping and scheming and learning and

planning to have a party just like this one, maybe on my wedding day. So I'd made magic diary notes on it all.

Most tidbits had been impaled on party toothpicks with colorful frilled cellophane do-dads at their tops. That evening there would be hot apple chutney brie in a scooped out sourdough bread container and "pigs in their blankets," which were cocktail sausages wrapped in tiny baked dough bedrolls with green relish and hot yellow mustard for decoration and flavors. I'd thought they were cute until I'd remembered I wanted to grow up to be a vegetarian. I'd scratched out the word "cute" on my food comment page. I'd inserted instead that these hors d'ouerves should be renamed "pigs in their coffins." Before I'd gone any further on my wedding day feast reminder list, I'd written for myself the goal of discovering how to make unlethal meat. I'd have to do that before getting married. I wrote a note to make Bonnie start experimenting on making hotdogs from nuts, wheat or beans. That resolution made, I'd noted that the Swedish meatballs had been heated and remained warm, with some of the other food in chaffing pans over votive candles.

Casaba and cantaloupe balls and the other perishable food had rested chilling on crushed ice in the fridge. There had been white and wild rices with curried chicken and raisins and nuts and diced celery. Big piles of chips had been surrounded by revolving pots of various dips. All of

this had been only our hostessing food.

To bolster this, each guest family would arrive with mounds of chicken wings and potato salad and boston baked beans and more chips, dips and nuts. Mom had the reputation of always cooking enough for an entire Air Force command post, probably because she hadn't wanted to trust the fate of her parties to the guests, who'd often brought nothing but bottles from their home bars.

Betty was supposed to bring the cherry pies, which she had baked using Mrs. Ullstrom's suspicious recipe which had only worked for the recipe-maker and nobody else.

The kids' table had fixings for hot dogs and hamburgers which were to be grilled by Papa Bear, Ricky Tyson, Senior, out in our backyard.

Ricky had already started taking charge of the huge buckets full of the men's favorite brands of beer--Bud, Schlitz, and Pabst Blue Ribbon and had commandeered the grill. He had been an early-bird arrival, scooting back and forth between our back yards. He'd wanted the coals to settle down to a low steady but hot glow.

Mom had worried about Ricky's being in charge of both the fire and the booze, but we had a fire extinguisher and she had thought, she'd said, "His act will probably go over better in the great outdoors."

Anyway, he'd never been willing to take a "no" from any

woman and it had been six months since any of the squadron's men had been home for Mom to discuss these possibly volatile arrangements with.

Inside there was Dad's rattan home bar which had always smelled medicinal to me, maybe because rubbing alcohol is also part of the intoxicating-beverage food family. The bar had lighter touches for this affair like the bowls of maraschino cherries, cocktail umbrellas, martini olives and onions. The colorful aluminum glasses had been filled with straws and swizzle sticks which had been festive enough to disguise how bitter these cocktails were, that some adults had liked to challenge themselves to swallow in one long swoop, saying: "down the hatch" or "bottoms up" or "calling all crocodiles" or "here's looking at you, Bud," or "cheers!" Fresh lemon slices and lime wedges and salt-encrusted glasses for tequila sunrises had made my list, but only if I marry in the warm months, otherwise its hot chocolate toddies and spiked warm lemonade with whiskey. Too bad everything but Shirley Temples tasted like medicine, I might end up a teetotaler like Mom. Maybe drinking wasn't bred into our social genes.

Writing my way back on my calico cat's wedding wish page, I'd finally wandered to tables of food I could understand. Mom had used the okra to make gumbo, in honor of the local Savannah natives who had been going to join us.

She had wanted to make them feel welcome and at home amongst all these Air Force people, mostly hailing from other locales, many Yankees.

The okra and hushpuppies would give the civilian guests a conversational opener she'd said, as they could be telling the non-natives, how they had used this unusual gelatinous vegetable. So that the gumbo wouldn't seem a token home-state gratuity, Mom had also prepared hot hushpuppies smelling pungently of garlic and minced scallions. These little deep-fried cornbread balls had looked like wet marbles which had gotten buried in our sandbox but they surely had filled you up. They had sat heavily in your stomach like the metal sinkers on fishing pole lines. They'd served them at most bars in Georgia, the same way Yankee drinkers eat salted potato chips or goobers. Salty food makes people thirsty and is an antidote for light headedness.

Mom also had vats of black-eyed peas and collard greens in crockpots, another pot had held chili so spicy it would tame even a martini, according to Mom. Some of the men in the squadron had belonged to a Fire-Devil club and each had vied to be the one who had the strongest stomach. They had all indulged in trying to down the most tabasco-drenched, hottest jalapeno chili peppered concoctions of anyone. I'd watched the men open bottles of hot peppers

found in the Louisiana bayou country, and visibly sweat while gorging on these so-called hot mamas, which had been lip-blistering arrowhead shaped mouth-scorchers.

Before the party, I'd had a great sense of expectation with all the food prepared and either waiting under the heat of chaffing dishes, or kept cool on ice or still in insulated containers.

Yet just before the party, despite the celebratory touches, the house had been as quiet as a mouse's burrow or the silence which falls on children's homes late on the Night Before Christmas. Mom had been nowhere to be seen, her door tightly shut, which had been unusual during the day. After Bonnie and I had rondoed a few quiet rounds calling for "Mom?" we'd decided she might be napping and hadn't searched for her any further.

We had gone outside and had taken out our makeshift binoculars as watchmen, looking for a familiar Air Force Captain with a crewcut to pull up to our house. We talked about how we'd most like for him to arrive. Bonnie said she'd like for him to drive up in a camouflage-colored tank, which we'd get to keep. I'd said I'd like him to arrive in a chauffeured convertible limo with the little flag of a Four Star General waving on the front, which we'd get to keep. Gramma had first said it hadn't mattered what "conveyance" he'd arrived in, as long as he were all in one

piece. After some prodding, she'd looked towards the cloudbank and had pointed saying she'd like to see him climb down off of a rope ladder from that blimp up in the sky advertising B.F. Goodrich tires which had proclaimed their rubbers the choice of the Cardinal baseball team.

Betty Tyson had come over with a big wooden tray with two pies covered in tinfoil resting on it.

"Just wanted to feather her own cap," Betty had sniffed glancing at her pies made by using Mizrus Ullstrom's recipe cards direction.

"Your MaMa to home?" Betty had looked incomplete standing in our doorway without any of her chilluns, as she'd called them, hanging off of her, using her tits and hips or arms or legs like they had been playground monkey bars.

"I think our poor Lee has collapsed in sheer exhaustion," Gramma Anne had answered Betty, adding, "She is asleep in her room."

After hearing Gramma confide that our Mom must have been paid a visit by Mr. Sandman, Betty had promised us in a loud raspy whisper, "I'll just sneak in the back door and leave these on Lee's table. I'll be subtle as a toad."

"Ribet, ribet," Bonnie had chimed in with the wooden tab between her clenched jaws. She had been binging the tab and humming away trying and make it behave like a kazoo.

Gramma had extracted her crocheting yarn from her needlepoint bag which stitchery had read: "A stitch in time saves nine." Gramma hadn't started crocheting with the ball of yarn she'd taken out but had let us play Cat's Cradle. We'd been inserting our palms after she'd fashioned the yarn into a stretched spider web between her fingers. The web had vamoosed when she'd flicked her wrist, leaving our hands in mid-air minus the convoluted webbing. Gramma had been good at this, as she'd passed many miles of Greyhound travel beside young fellow passengers letting them try to discover over and over how she'd done it. She'd never revealed the secret of her trick, not wanting to violate the confederacy of true magicians.

Just then, to my great surprise, I'd heard something so familiar, that my ears had at first accepted it as if it were only a memory--my Dad's voice in the house. But, yes! My ears hadn't been playing tricks on me, I had heard the best voice in the entire universe to my Daddy-starved ears! The other two Dixie-cup girls had also pricked up their ears.

Dad's voice had arrested their spidery antics in mid-motion. We had then all listened again, expectancy dancing

in our eyes, all startled and in partial disbelief, peering deeply at one another silently looking for expressions of mutual confirmation. Yes! We'd heard him again.

"Are these measurement marks on the door right? I can't believe Bonnie has grown two inches since I've been gone. Was she standing on her tiptoes?"

Our be-on-the-look-out crew had then poured through the door, knowing our Dad must have evaded our stake-out.

"Daddy-pie!" "Mackie Man!" "My wandering soldier boy is home? Son?!" We porch-girls had burst through the door and swarmed him all at once. How had he arrived? How had he escaped our surveillance team and dragnet?

Bonnie had shimmied up his back and lifted off his hat and put it on her own head. His captain's hat had immediately sunk to cover almost her entire face, down to her chin, as if her head had been the knob on a wooden hatrack. She had been curling her legs around Dad's shoulders. Gramma, who had been very short had kissed her son on both cheeks and then the lips by stretching up like a toe dancer.

"What a sight for sore eyes!" she'd declared. Then she had just hung her arms around his neck, and he had put an arm around her, a real featherweight, and had spun her around and around.

Bonnie had gotten a free ride clinging to Dad's back

like a hobo hitching a ride on a bumper. She had leaped onto the back of his shoulders while Gramma had been flying in front like Mary Poppins with her little legs lifted off the ground.

All three of them had gotten dizzy, weighing Dad down, until they'd spilled off onto the couch and rug. I had hopped up and down with Shad holding his front paws, as we'd danced with glee. When Gramma had touched down on solid earth again, she had presented me, the shy daughter, to Dad for my turn around the spin-cycle. I hadn't hung on right, and on our second encircling we too had tumbled onto the pile-up with the rest of this joy-scrambled crew.

Bonnie had slipped back off Dad's shoulders to sit on the back ridge of the couch; I had sat self-consciously in Daddy's lap and Gramma had nestled beside him, with her arm strung around his shoulders. She had started dabbing at her eyes, but from laughing, not weeping, or maybe a little of both. We had all been a bit bashful, giggling at not knowing what to say after this long separation.

Mom had broken the ice by popping Dad a Schlitz which had bubbled up and over the edge. Dad had taken it gingerly and held it away from himself and let it drip on the carpet before slurping the puddle surrounding the triangular hole Mom had punched into it. She must have jiggled the can in all her excitement, although its frothing over had seemed

appropo--even our home's contents had been enthusiastic.

"What do you think, kiddos? Do I look like a brat? What do you think of me with this crewcut? Do I look goofy enough to belong playing Red Rover on your playground?"

Dad had known we'd never let him live down his new haircut, so he'd made the first volley. He'd usually had thick dark hair which had reminded me of a strolling cabaret singer only lacking a guitar and a singing voice. I wouldn't have told the truth, but was relieved that at least Dad's ears hadn't been the stick-out saucer-handle kind.

He had looked as brown as an acorn, so at least no pale skull had beamed through his prickly scalp making his spiky hair look like porcupine quills stuck in a peeled boiled egg.

"Welcome home PaPa! I missed you. Hey, what did you bring us from the islands?" Bonnie hadn't ever been slow in moving from one moment to the next, the same way she'd unwrapped her Christmas gifts.

"Aw, Bonnie," Dad had answered, "all the loot from the islands is stowed back in the bedroom in my flight bags and footlocker. You'll have to wait for me to unpack to get your souvenirs, kiddo," Dad hadn't wanted to deal with his possessions from Guam yet.

"Wait?" Connie had whined. "But, Daddy-O I've been waiting for you for six months already!"

"I'm hoping you haven't already outgrown most of it. What happened? How did you manage to grow two inches? Were you standing on a dictionary when you were measured?"

"Nope. And I didn't put any Kleenex in my shoes like Barri Lyn does when she experiments with her training bra, either," Bonnie had jabbed my flat chest with her sharp elbow.

I'd blushed.

"Your sister is growing into quite the young lady, filling out," Dad had tried to help me through that awkward pause.

"I will not ever need to wear one of those harnesses on my chest. I'll stay skinny," I had avoided Dad's eyes.

"Anyway, you sure didn't put on any pounds either, little twig. You both look like fairy princesses to me," Dad had paid us the highest compliment in a girl's world.

Mom had disappeared back into the kitchen. Her party people were due to start arriving in fifteen minutes. She had told them not to be late for our cocktail hour with the special radio entertainment planned for their kids from Happy Dan the Storyman's Radio Roundup. She had reminded us not to tell Dad about our radio tap dancing surprise. She hadn't needed to worry on that score, spreading that news would be the last thing we'd broadcast.

"So when did your bus get in? How long were you on the

road?" Gramma had seemed to me perpetually more interested in the minor details than in any event itself.

She had often asked what time something past had happened; what order certain things had happened in; and for what reason something had happened--almost forgetting to enjoy the present moment.

"On the road, Ma? I didn't cross the Pacific by Greyhound, Mom. I'm not in the Bus Force, I'm in the Air Force. Have you checked up on Guam lately in your Atlas or on the globe?" Dad had teased his Mom.

My folks must have been happy to have a little smooching time alone before becoming a roisterous family again. I'd felt like an experienced woman of the world now, after Gordon had bumped me once by accident or intention, giving me a secret shoulder kiss, unknown to him.

"Can we open up your footlocker, Daddy-man?" Bonnie had been combing Dad's flattop with her soft nylon doll's hairbrush. She had been good at pestering until she'd gotten her way.

"I'd never find anything again. Have you girls learned to put away your toys yet?"

"Yep, mostly," Bonnie had admitted, "Just watch out for roller skates. We remember but our friends always forget. Rita got tumbled by stepping on one of mine," Bonnie had told the truth, even if it had been to her own

detriment.

"Toys left out are worse than not hanging up wet washcloths. Watch your marbles, trucks, skates and bikes or I'll be reading you the Riot Act regardless of how much I've missed you," Dad had said and I'd remembered how he'd always been King of the Neatniks. We'd gotten a little lax in his absence, although Mom had taken up the slack.

I had noticed two different types of Dads in the Air Force. One kind liked being in the Armed Services because they'd liked everything orderly and done well. A place for everything and everything in its place had been their credo. That group of officers had included our Dad. Even his doodles had looked like they'd been drawn by a calligrapher.

The other kind of Dad who had joined the Air Force, according to me, had been the ones who'd liked war games. I'd suspected these men had been the uncontrollable, bouncing-off-the-walls kind of kids when they'd been younger. They had been so restless they had lived diving head first off of balconies just for something to do. Most of them grew up wearing perennial casts, never listening to their own bones. Those AF officers had once been the kind of boys who had scribbled monsters and bombers on all of their spelling and geography tests while still, maybe, writing Central "Skool" atop their papers.

Betty, living so close, had been our first guest to arrive, if you didn't count Ricky playing with fire at the grill in the backyard. She'd delivered her pies an hour before she'd come herself. After returning to stay for what she'd call "the duration," she had immediately shed Rita Mae and Ricky Junior, sending them off to the sandbox while she had helped our Mom empty the refrigerator and arrange all the food. Baby Anita had been asleep in her carrying bed, bundled like a papoose and sleep-smiling in her cocoon.

Betty had worked fast while she'd had the chance to use both her hands, without a kid occupying at least one of them. She had lit the chaffing candles under the fondue pot, and had found plugs for the two electric skillets, and had lit the coral colored, long-stemmed candles on the table. Her Ricky Senior had also been making his own flame-colored contributions, by pouring charcoal lighter on the red-hot smoldering coals outside on the barbecue grill.

"Ricky's route pretty steady, Betty?" Dad had asked after offering her a cheek after she'd bent over wanting to kiss something of his.

"Papa Bear doesn't stay put to let any grout set between his toes to slow him down," Betty had then clicked her tongue and shook her head as she'd heard the flames roar up from Ricky's overdoing it at the grill.

"I hope your home insurance has fire coverage.

Papa Bear is nothing if not a pyromaniac. Just a big kid. You'd better watch him tonight!

I'm afraid he might be bringing over his stash of firecrackers and his pre-Fourth of July armada before this night is over, Mac."

Betty had stood back with her hands on her hips and looked at our Dad, saying, "You grew even younger over in the Tropics. You discover the Lost Fountain of Youth?"

"You betcha. Several. Here's the main one right here." Dad gestured towards Mom as she'd passed and had pinched her derriere as he had grabbed for something to help him roust himself off the rattan couch's cushions to go lend a hand. His effort had been had wasted as both of us daughters and his MaMa had held him down with restraining hands.

We had known that as soon as the men from his squadron had arrived, we wouldn't see or hear from him until the next afternoon, if this party had been like our usuals.

Looking like a rag-tag impromptu neighborhood parade passing by in front of our front window, we'd then seen a whole slew of Air Force men from the neighborhood who had been walking down our street, kids on their shoulders and wives holding casseroles and dogs circling the whole motley road-hogging gang. It had been a colorful entourage, as all the men had worn straw New Orleans' detective hats, baseball

caps or straw calypso drummers' hats. They had also, as if in new regulation uniforms, all worn loud rayon Hawaiian floral shirts. Their shirt tails had been billowing in the breeze, some unbuttoned, showing off their islander tans, over their pale khaki shorts or pants.

Many had flip flopped along in woven straw sandals instead of their regular spit-shined shoes. At least one had been barefoot with flowers around one of his ankles. He'd worn some kind of men's sarong; "gone native," everyone had kept teasing Harvey about mistakenly joining the WACs after one too many Mai Tais over there.

From some of the wives' necks, flower leis had hung; a few had big orchids or Birds of Paradise behind their ears, personally delivered by their islander honeys. One guy had a bongo drum slung from a strap and he'd been banging away on it in front of the scattered parade, using two of his wife's wooden salad spoons.

"Kum Bai Yaaa, Lord, Kuum Bai Yaa. Someone's coming Lord, kum bai ahhh...open the door Captain Mac, and let us in, Here we come, Lord knows why, We didn't die,..Kuum Bai Yaa.."

They hadn't come in the front door but had circled the house twice, finally settling down in the back yard. The squadron commander had driven behind the strollers in his big black Buick, as if an MP riding herd. Coming into the

grill area, he'd balanced four t-bone steaks in styrofoam wrappers on his head which he had unwrapped and pitched to Ricky Senior, "Take care of my wraps for me, will you son?" He had ordered Ricky who had saluted as if he'd been in the service too. The Commander had then headed indoors, with his island courtiers dispersing, flopping, or following him in, three steps behind.

Dad had risen to his feet to greet his boss.

"Mac, what are you doing wearing non-reg weekend apparel son? Hop to and put on your party uniform, man!"

Dad had laughed and gone back to forage in his flight bag, after all, to find one his selection of new Hawaiian shirts. He had come back out, wearing red, white and blue to match us. Bonnie had buried herself selectively unpacking for Dad, promising to hang everything up neatly while actually pillaging for anything which had looked like hidden treasures for us.

Mom had started out in her blue sheath, but somewhere along the line had slipped herself into a strapless sarong of red cotton with tropical frogs and lily pads in whites and grays. Our whole family had now matched one another looking tropically patriotic.

The record player with our stack of 45s had been playing Les Paul and Mary Ford's famous, "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise," which had seemed, along with the

Fords' "Tiger Rag," had been this squadron's theme songs. Les Paul, as I'd heard frequently touted on the radio, had invented the steel guitar. He'd played and sang with his wife, Mary Ford, who'd had a voice which sounded like crushed velvet, according to Mom. Mary Ford had managed to blend with her husband, Les, in closer harmonies than I'd ever heard before or since. She'd had a mellower delivery, when solo, than Patsy Cline, who had to sing those high pitched notes stretched to break your heart.

Mary Ford, maybe happier in love than dear Patsy, had usually sung upbeat cheerful songs, except for "The Tennessee Waltz" which I'd then thought was the saddest song about broken friendships I'd ever heard. I hated to reflect on those lyrics; the shame of a woman's best friend stealing her sweetheart away at a dance!

Whenever that song had come on during this party's time, I had always clicked the automatic record changer button on our record player if no one could catch me. There had been a thick pile of 45s lined up on the fat spindle, single tunes on black vinyl with the large doughnut hole hole centers.

I had doubted that there had been a single woman at our party who hadn't personally welcomed home every officer in the squadron with pecks, hugs, or pinches. Most had done their welcoming rounds all night long. Men had been

embossed with red lipstick prints on their foreheads, necks and someone must have missed their target by a long shot as one guy's had red kiss marks on the rear of his white bermuda shorts. The bathroom had always been crowded with ladies cooing in front of the long mirror reapplying Kismet Red, Heartbreaker Hot, or Kiss 'n Tell to their lips, blotting them and then shining their teeth to erase all traces of what they'd been doing with their valentine-bright mouths.

The men had related how they had spent their free time while in Guam playing beach volleyball and body surfing. They had all looked tan and fit, probably from sweating non-stop around the clock in the sun, with Guam's humidity. In the glare of the bathroom make-up lights, most of the wives, with the exception of Mom and Mrs. Rosdrum, had looked a little pale. Grouped around the mirror, they had resembled high school seniors at a prom. They had acted so giddy, as if primping for their first serious dates. The couples had all seemed more reticent with each other than I'd remembered them. The husbands had been gone for a long time living a life unknown to their wives and vice versa. Maybe married couples in the service, with these extended separations, have to get reacquainted by stages. I'd noticed more warmth and familiarity between the marrieds as the night had worn on.

The other wife who had changed quite a bit had been Mrs. Rosdrum, called Flo, which had been a more pronounceable short-cut version of her real name which had been Florenzia or something even more melodious, maybe Florenrisima. Flo had been married to my favorite of all of Dad's friends, whom everybody had called by his nickname of Roscoe. Roscoe Rosdrum had a reputation for being wildman, a true grown-up juvenile delinquent who had been sent to the Air Force Academy in his young years by his rich, well-connected father who had pulled strings to get him in the academy, a last-ditch effort to either straighten him out or disown him. This last try had been a failure as the rigid military school had been such a challenge for Roscoe to circumvent, that he had become an ace con-man and escape artist on his way to graduation.

Roscoe and Flo, before Guam days, had been the squadron's trendsetters of the party crowd. They had been about the only couple without any children of their own, so they had been freer to be daredevils, taking wild chances and spending all of their own money on themselves. Everyone else, with the financial burdens of families, had all their spendable money earmarked for at least one child's many necessities, unto college. The Rosdrums had been much admired in the squadron for extending their freewheeling days.

What had first impressed me about Roscoe had been that he had owned a baby alligator, about a foot long that he had taken with him to most places, outside of his workplace where he'd gone. The leash which had restrained the gator had also looped around Alley Oops jaws so that he couldn't snap with his long snout until out of this harness. The Rosdrums had owned a convertible and Alley Oops often rode in their trunk or sometimes wrapped around the top of Roscoe's shoulder on a gold chain. Roscoe, Flo and Alley Oops had made quite the dashing trio speeding along in their little white M.G. I'm sure they'd caused a few jaws to drop at intersection red lights.

The second thing I had remembered about Roscoe upon seeing him again was how he had been just about the only one of Dad's friends who had treated Bonnie and I like regular-sized people. Most of the other grownup men would say, "Hi Mac! Hi Lee! Hi girls!" Some hadn't even bothered to greet kids at all. Many male adults would stand right in front of children and ask their parents questions about how their kids had been doing instead of querying the children, themselves.

They'd often asked my Mom, questions like, "Has Barri Lyn had the mumps yet?" While I'd stood along side of Mom, knowing most of the answers about myself better than even she had. Other grownups had talked directly to us but in a

strange voice, higher pitched, as if acutely aware they were paying their respects to a young person. I'd often wondered if they'd hadn't known how well I could talk? Maybe I'd carried the good children should be seen and not heard dinnertime guest rule too far.

But Roscoe hadn't avoided or talked over the heads of us like that. He had used our names and would sit right down wherever we'd been and hold regular question-and-answer conversations with us. Sometimes he had even joined in our games, choosing our activities over the adult ones. He had loved checkers, jumping into swimming holes from ropes, lassoing dogs, and penny-ante poker games.

Roscoe had been an athlete too, winning at horseshoes, diving contests, and marksmanship.

Men, like Roscoe, who could do card tricks and magic stunts, had seemed to appreciate the company of small fries more than the men who hadn't known any sleight of hand tricks. Likewise, fellows who'd liked to hear and tell jokes, (Roscoe knew a million) had a rapport with kids, because at our age we'd liked to laugh more than anything. Sometimes failed jokes had seemed even funnier to our peanut gallery than the ones which had punchlines which had worked.

Roscoe had been better than most people as either a prankster or a magician. He could even pull flowers out

from under our hair and make Alley Oops disappear inside the fold-down top hat he had kept in his car. He'd always had a new answer for why the chicken crossed the road. Roscoe had even asked for our "knock, knock?" replies before he'd asked us, "Have you been being good?"

He'd always frown if we'd answered his question with anything but what he'd taught us were the only replies which were correct: "Getting by," "Good enough," "What's it to you, Buster?" or "Heck no."

Newcomers to his fan club had sometimes told him how good they'd been, expecting the usual praise. Instead he'd rear up and coach them with a lecture against kids conforming too much, becoming almost goody-two shoes.

"What's wrong? Get busy! Cause some mischief. You are wasting your childhood. Don't you want to train your folks so they'll be ready when you give them some real trouble when you're bigger? Don't you want to give your parents something to worry about? Being young dare devils which adults can't understand is, after all, what kids were put here on earth for. It's your job to shake up the old fogies!"

I'm not so sure he used this tactic with everybody, but he was trying to bring out the daring in some of the shyer or younger kids like me. I had been extroverted around people once I'd gotten to know them, but quiet as a

wallpaper flower around strangers. I suspected he liked tomboys best, but there was no way for me to catch up in that division--I'd already missed out on learning too many of the basic skills, not having brothers but a Dad who was allergic to noise, and disliked rough stuff or kids who'd challenged the standard rules. I'd known this about Roscoe because he'd married Flo, who was beautiful but also cussing and smoking and playing cards like one of the guys.

During this night, however, I'd kept an eye on Roscoe, as I had developed a secret crush on him, despite not being his type. I'd wanted to watch for the things he'd done, so I might find someone my own age similar to him, to be my own boyfriend. Maybe I should have been observing Flo, instead, but at nine months pregnant she'd clipped her own wings and seemed to want nothing so much as to learn how to become settled down like the women whom she used to challenge to be wild like her. Nobody else had wanted to stand up in a sports car going seventy miles an hour along the edge of the surf. She had no takers, but now she was the one asking for hints.

Bonnie had been getting good at grasping things using her mechanical hand on a pole which she'd gotten last summer at the Fair. She had walked around the party extracting objects from bowls with the hand-stick, keeping the stick-part hidden up her sleeve. She'd used that hand once

tonight to offer the commander a row of unstuffed olives stuck to its plastic fingernail. The colonel had nibbled them right off the finger and then had thanked Connie as if he'd believed it was her finger and this was a proper way to eat.

I had been giggling at her and at Roscoe, who had occasionally stolen the stick and used it to tease the ladies, slyly lifting their skirts from behind. The women would smooth down their dresses, feeling a little breeze from behind, and looking annoyed, but never seeing anyone near enough to be the culprit. When he'd tried this to Inez Ullstrom she'd cursed her dryer for shrinking her skirt which had kept riding up on her, since she'd claimed she hadn't gained an ounce since her pre-honeymoon diet which had worked so well she'd thrown away her bathroom scales.

My convivial mood had changed when my only favorite sad song had started playing on our record changer--"Cry" by Johnnie Ray. I'd had always felt the depth of this singer's voice as he'd stressed every single syllable. I had been swallowed alive by his escalating lyrics even though I'd never received a Dear John (or Jane) letter. "...if your sweetheart sends a letter of goodbye. You'll feel better if you go on babe and cry." The song had always made me a little misty-eyed, more for the singer's sincerity than for the lyrics.

I had mouthed Johnny Ray's lyrics as the men from Dad's squadron had started drifting in and out, mostly going between the bathroom and the beers, and making the circuit from the barbecue to their wives from whom they'd been sent to check on their tots on the jungle gym.

Roscoe had been the one friend of Dad's who, before he'd left, had been such a cut-up I'd now be expecting him to either be miming Johnny Ray, the singer, using a breadstick as a mock microphone or dipping his wife, Flo, on the dance floor to those lyrics.

This affable husband had been able to bend Flo backwards until the tip of her head had nearly dusted the floor. But now Flo had been "too far gone" as the ladies had called a woman who had been very, very big and pregnant.

In fact, Flo had said she'd had to plug herself with a tub stopper to even be coming to the party. She had been trying to prevent herself from breaking her waters before her Old Salty had returned from Guam to catch his son. At the party she'd said she had only needed another twenty-four free hours to finish knitting her baby booties and to stop smoking so much and then she'd be ready for labor and what she'd labelled "mommie-dom or -doom."

I'd memorized or copied down later every peculiar code word or phrase I'd ever heard Flo say, to ask my older neighborhood friends, especially Frieda Purvise, to explain

them for me. Frieda had later told me she hadn't any clues to Flo's words as "all women talk crazy when they're ready for the stork to come and pop another one," according to Freida's Mom who'd had more than she could count.

Roscoe had said he'd hoped he'd get to deliver his son, "Roscoe, Junior," himself. He'd sworn that was what he was going to name him--Roscoe Rosdrum, Jr. I tried to imagine Roscoe delivering his son, I'd pictured him flying stork-like above his house with a diaper sling in his mouth, a delivery-hammock for his new-born. It had been difficult for me to substitute this lieutenant, for the standard feathery stork, which was pictured on most birth announcements. I'd decided that prospective Dads, too, must use double-talk--there being no way he could "deliver" his son.

Flo who had usually been the first woman to break ranks and join the men's circles at these parties had hardly even joined the women's groups this night. She had just kept herself in a corner frenetically knitting little blue booties, with the pattern directions propped up by her glass of what she'd called orange jus a capella which she'd said was her name for juice without the kick of vodka or gin. She said her innards had been getting enough kicks from her little ice hockey goalie already.

Flo had curtailed her cocktail habit in the homestretch, but had still chain-smoked Camels or Lucky Strikes. Now and then during her pregnancy, she'd lamented she'd have to get a toxic gas mask from Supply for little Roscoe Rosdrum, Jr., or a pint-sized oxygen tent to place over her baby's crib, or perhaps get Old Salty to rig up a pulleyed hammock to hoist Junior outdoors for whenever she'd gotten her nicotine cravings postpartum.

She'd also declared if Roscoe Junior had turned out to be as much of a hellacious night-owl as his Daddy was, she had been planning to divorce both father and son and go join a nunnery--The Lucky Strikes' Sisterhood.

The party had already divided into circles, each surrounding a food table. The men had stood as if ice fishing around a hole, which had actually been the vat full of brewskys. The officers had tended to look down at the beer floating in the cold melting ice as they had talked.

Every empty can had been accordianed by its drinker either between his palms or stamped under his heels and fast-pitched. The flying missiles had eventually formed an aluminum pyramid next to the back fence as the evening had worn on.

Later one guy had gotten a large U-shaped car magnet, attached it to plastic fishing line, and had sucked cans out of the icy waters like a fly fisherman, with everyone

ducking. The brew tubs had become hostile hypothermic waters for warm human hands to dunk into without getting frostbitten. Many men had carried their drinking gloves with them to parties--often purloined from their other sporting interests, perhaps golf or archery.

Most of the more active men had stayed outdoors, kicking a soccer ball around, throwing footballs to a lineup of future quarterbacks or forming a cadre to protect the tubs of cold-ones from the still fading rays of the sun. A horseshow game had started with the familiar metallic clinks and the Ohhs and Ahhhs and predictions and wagers of the onlookers.

Many women had clung around the kitchen, saying they'd felt more comfortable there. In this familiar place, they could pick at food being prepared or at plates with edible leftovers. They had often used their fingers for foraging and had seemed to have had fun ruining their appetites and figures by snacking.

The ladies said they'd liked cloistering together munching without having the men making rude jokes about their waistlines or weight or uncouth eating habits. Some other tightly-wound women had felt better in the kitchen because they'd claimed they couldn't relax and enjoy themselves, while being waited upon. One had even said, "I'm not used to have anybody doing for me--it feels

sinful." These ladies who had felt antsy just sitting still without helping, had endlessly been asking to be allowed to lend a hand. Mom had said directing someone else was more work than doing things herself, so she didn't have to explain where everything was.

Some others had easily relaxed to marvel at all the food which had kept appearing like magic. Even those relaxed ladies had said they'd expected that at final clean-up time, one and all in the kitchen klatsch would only be too glad not to have to decide whether to the dishes tonight, dead on their feet, or wake up to them in the morning.

"Lee you've got enough food and booze here for a yacht cruise. If I move into your kids' tent, can I ring my bicycle bell and get you to give me curb service?" the squadron commander had been complimenting Mom in his usual mischievous kind of non-leering way.

He had been so homely and innocent that this mild kind of flirtaciousness had been permitted him by all the women. Any man, like him, who had a reputation amongst the ladies as being either harmless, homely or hopelessly tied to the apron-strings of his wife could have lots of fun and freedom with all the kitchen-comfortable party ladies. This commander had been tamed by early failures in love but had still liked to play the playboy every now and again.

One lady I hadn't recognized in a sombrero and pedal pushers had asked if she could rent our MaMa's girls as we had been so helpful and good. Bonnie and I had beamed as usually nobody had noticed kids' behavior at adults' parties unless they'd run wild like living holy terrors.

Bonnie, however, had said, "I'll even feed you breakfast in your bedroll in my tent if you'll leave me a tip under the pillow like the tent fairy."

Bonnie had darted here and there amongst the circles looking to drum up some kind of kid money-making deal from some guest. She had wanted to rig up a lemonade stand but Mom wouldn't hear of her trying to charge money to guests at a party. Bonnie had already tried carrying Dad's wooden shoe-shining kit around, but everyone this evening had worn either thongs or fabric shoes to beat the heat.

Bonnie had looked seriously incredulous when I'd refused to help her pin a diaper on her head. She'd wanted to try her hand at Gordon's gig as a Magic Genie.

"I could give reports to the men on what has been going on here while they have been overseas. 'When the cat's away the mice will play.' I could tell better bogus fortunes than Gordon, minus his pickle. I could tell them how to raise their kids, after all I'm an expert, being one myself," Bonnie had argued.

"Genies are suppose to predict the future not reveal

private secrets about the past." I had informed her.

"'If we don't study the mistakes of our history, we're doomed to repeat them,'" the man in the sarong standing nearby had said cryptically to no one in particular. I'd wondered if he'd overheard us or was just talking to himself.

"Do you suppose that man in the dress heard us?" I'd asked my sister.

"No. He might be practicing his lines for a play. He studied shadow plays when he went overseas. There are plays where the actors stand behind sheets, and you can only see their shadows," Bonnie had informed me, hearing all the news first.

She'd gotten the diaper pinned to her head without my help and sat in front of the tent, legs folded with the overturned goldfish bowl, her crystal ball resting on the lawn. Under it she had some crickets from her Living Insect Blue Bonnet Jar Zoo. Already I'd seen Roscoe's interest perk up and he'd drifted towards her. After a few minutes conference with him, they'd both gone in the tent. Later I'd seen she'd put a piece of dry ice under her crystal ball. If someone's fortune hadn't been auspicious, she'd given them a little good luck cricket which she'd directed them to free after letting him chirp in his shoe box all night in their bedrooms.

I'd secretly believed all along that she might do quite the lucrative fortunetelling business. As the night had grown longer, her Kindly Contribution jar had been stuffed with greenbacks as well as quarters. Roscoe had become her carny barker, directing business her way. He'd said he'd wanted a cut, but never had asked to collect his share. Roscoe had told her to share with her sister. She'd given me all of her small change later.

The fast pitching team had started crushing their empties by accordioneing them their foreheads. Some had forgotten to empty their cans first, making quite a splash.

I had filtered my way through the crowd back to Gramma. Freida and I had kept Gramma Anne company as the party had swelled in size like bread rising in the oven. Gramma, Freida and I had taken turns playing Chinese checkers near the radio, although our game had constantly been interrupted by someone making introductions to Gramma. She had always politely stood up for this ritual, regardless of people always saying, "Please don't--"

Many guests had asked to challenge the winner of our king game's lightning round. I'd told them they might have to wait a spell as we had been playing the Best of Three for high stakes. Not an entrepreneur like my sister, I could never bring myself to accept my winnings. I'd even given back money to the losers in our Lightning Rounds who had

stuffed it in my pockets. I'd figured I was building up Bonus Points on God's score card of my life, like the Baptist preacher from one church we'd visited had talked about in his sermon. "Think not of raiment or food for your table--just live righteously and God will take care of your needs which He knows before we do," the preacher had said and I'd clung to his words as I'd watched my sister become the richest kid in our neighborhood overnight.

She, however, had been following the same rules. Obviously she hadn't worried about her raiment, wearing Ricky Junior's diaper on her head. She hadn't asked for money, just like that church, but had accepted willingly given contributions, again like that church which had practiced tithing ten percent to the Lord every month. If Bonnie had started receiving tithes in the mail, I was going to suggest we try a religious talent show next time we put on one of our impromptu neighborhood productions outside in our converted Big Top tent.

Rule #18. Dreams are nice, but masterplans work.

I had thought in all the hullabaloo, Mom would perhaps have forgotten all about Happy Dan's. True, she might have let it skip her mind if it hadn't been for her making a plan. I had then seen the first part of her structured masterplan as it had unfolded, prompted by Betty. Mom and Betty had brought in the Mile High Strawberry Surprise cakes, each of which had a lit sparkler on top. Behind Betty had been Mrs. Albright with a cherry pie in either hand which Betty had made using Mrs. Ullstrom's recipe which had backfired on Mom at her last bridge party.

On cue, the chorus of women from the kitchen had started singing, "Happy homecoming to you--" to the tune of the birthday candle blow-out song. They'd brought the two enormous cakes right up the middle of the room and had stopped in front of three top-ranking officers of the squadron, who had been standing together smiling, as if on cue and almost looking like triplets.

All three of the big brass trio had been wearing aviator shades, Hawaiian tans, those loose rayon Hawaiian shirts and khaki walking shorts. They'd had similar super-short haircuts and had still worn the authentic flower leis placed on them by hula dancers just before their flight out of Hawaii a little worse for the miles of jet lag.

The head honcho of the squadron had said, "How can I blow out a sparkler? You should have decorated these cakes with bottle rockets, Lee!" He had then pitched the sparklers out of an open window and had been such a good shot that they had each landed upright in the middle of Pine Valley Road, still giving off sparks until they had done face-plants and faded.

"You want bottle rockets? I'll show you an entire armada, which will make bottle rockets seem as dull as license plates," Ricky Senior had then said, catching the tail-end of the commander's comment.

Ricky had come forward with barbecued chickens, skewered on long double-pronged grilling forks, held up in either hand, The barbecue sauce had oozed down either side of his bare arms and with the chickens still giving off sizzling spit noises. With his face reddened by the sun and hot grill, and charcoal blackened above the oven mitts up to his elbows with smudges on his cheeks, he looked as if he'd been wearing the Celtic war-paint of an ancient Viking.

Ricky's cooking apron had carried an advertising promo imprinted with a large St. Bernard, who had worn a keg and an I.D. necklace around his neck which had read: In case of emergency resuscitate with 100 proof Jim Beam.

"See this," Ricky had pointed to the tag line on his apron, "Just pour the Beamer into any of my openings and

I'll give you explosions all night."

"Lay out a doilie, girlie-poos," Ricky, Sr., had been chewing on the stub of a cigar.

When I had put down a couple of piles of napkins, Ricky, Sr., had laid down a hot chicken on each, and had yanked them off the forks with his mitts. He had then handed in his greasy cooking apron and forks and saucy mitts to his neighborhood buddy, Freddy, who had also been into security lock salesmanship.

"Take over, Freddy. You folks know Freddy the Fingers? Best security man in the business. I've got my orders from the Air Force Commandante. He wants to see some lively fireworks.

I'm flying away home on a mission of mercy, to liven up this party and make these Air Force men feel war-zone friendly," he had saluted the three top officers, each of whom had then held enormous wedges of Mom's cake in dainty dishes.

The military trio had stood stone-still, looking incongruous, as if frat brothers who'd accidentally crashed a ladies tea party. They'd stood so immobile, as if someone had shouted, "Freeze!"

Betty had trailed behind Mom, and had inserted a chocolate covered strawberry into each man's mouth. The chocolate had been fudge-strength mixed with slivered salted

almonds to take the edge off the chocky sweetness.

Gramma had gotten off a flash bulbed shot of the three who had looked, with the chocolate strawberries stuck between their teeth like the three monkeys who: see no evil; hear no evil; and speak no evil. Their mouths had been stuffed with chocolate strawberries, in three stages of disappearance.

These on their lips had seemed to be inducement enough to make all of them activate their forks, at first held frozen in their hands, while calling for barbecued thighs or breasts to help them get through this "frilly ladyfinger food." One had asked for a meat-chaser with tabasco to make this cake sit easier in his guts with the rest of the libations he had intended to cap off this evening with.

Dad had popped some champagne and the three men had been graciously seated at the long main hors d'oeuvres table as Dad had served them as if an elegant, obsequious maitre d'.

The second in command, with his sweet tooth, had eaten his cake by scooping it up using a large potato chip as his fork. The third ranking officer had poured champagne on his, souping it up, before slurping it down. The commander-in-chief of the squadron with the reputation for having an insatiable sweet tooth had his daughter straddling his lap, feeding him spoonfuls of the cake Choo-choo style.

I'd watched him anxiously, waiting for his appraisal.

"Open up here comes the big caboose, Daddy, chug alug chug, now here come the engineer, open the tunnel wide."

This little girl had continued feeding her Dad with her dainty fingers which he had obviously enjoyed enormously, with her Shirley Temple voice and ringlets,

"Here's one little bite for the baby piglet, who is me, Yum! And here's one giant bite for you, Granddaddy Pig," Susie had played every choo-chew food game with her Dad that I could remember from my own food bribery years.

"Why are you are calling your PaPa a Granddaddy? Susie Que tell me it isn't so! You've had a baby at only four and a half?" The Commander had feigned choking on his words.

"Get used to it Daddy. Plus I own a zoo and furthermore I'm never leaving home," Susie Que had said as her Dad had feigned horror, reeling as she'd continued adding to her retinue of shockers.

"I'm going to grow up to be a shoe-shine tomboy at the train station with my parrot who'll take the money for me and my monkey who'll play organ-grinder music and my grand Daddy-O, who is you, who will have to do all the work!"

"Oh no! You're my boss now?"

"You are now my shoe-shine boy. Open wide."

"Your wish is my command, my darling. By the way, Lee, this is the best damn cake I've ever eaten in my life.

Angel food, is that what this is? Well, you are an angel to bake this for me. A cook like you is one in a million. Keep these rolling out of the oven for parties and you'll be leading me around by a ring in my nose before you know it, " he'd effusively praised Mom's handiwork.

"Aw, you say that to all the girls," Mom had teased him, planting a tiny peck on his cheek while leaning over the back of his chair.

"Ummm, that felt even better than this cake in my belly," Suzie Que had now fed him double portions.

"What about my cherry pies, you ol' two-timer," Mrs. Ullstrom had asked, brushing her large bosom up against the commander's neck as she'd leaned over and pointed to her pies, domed like twin peaks.

"I haven't forgotten you, Inez. I'll get to those later. Why don't you save me some to take home, honey?"

"I'll save a big one all for yourself, " she'd cooed.

Until I'd heard this, I had thought maybe Mom had won fair and square. But this was cheating, as the commander, being a little tipsy might forget this cake, nursing his hangover the next morning, while Inez's big pie would be taking up half the space in his refrigerator. No fair!

"Shall we try cutting the pies?" Betty, like me, was hoping they might have the same fatal flaw they'd had when Mom had tried the recipe at her bridge party--runaway cherry

filling inside. We couldn't know until they'd been cut.

"Save them, save them for later," the commander having had his dessert, was now into eating his entre--one of Ricky's barbecued chickens. Suzie Que was feeding him bites from a drumstick, like a MaMa feeding her baby spoonfuls of Gerber's.

Betty and Mom had looked at one another and had sighed. The winner of the wives' cooking contest hadn't been decided yet. Would Mrs. Ulstrom become the wife of a major with this next promotion or would Mom? It had felt like Queen for a Day and I had wanted to add my two cents in my Mom's behalf.

I could imagine myself up on "Queen for a Day," giving my tearjerking story, "But I had known that if the commander didn't choose Dad to give the promotion to, I would become another polio statistic, and might never dance again.

My sister, to pay our medical expenses might end up forced into child labor as a fortune telling genie."

Here the camera should pan to Bonnie outside our tent, looking pitiful in that swami garb. The camera should not pan on the contents of her contribution teapot, where she'd been plainly making a killing this night.

At previous parties I'd thought the commanders had been rather strait-laced. But tonight they had seemed to be really defrosting, and letting down their hair (if such a

thing were possible with men sporting crewcuts.)

Even tonight when the three head honchos had come in, by their expressions I'd thought maybe they had not been liking our party. Later I had heard Flo whisper to Lee, our Mom, that all three of the big britches had such bad hangovers when they had arrived that they should have been carried to this party on stretchers. She'd said in her low undertone, standing just behind me, that the big wigs would surely have to be carried out of here tonight, unless they had passed out first and spent the night snoring it off on Mom's bed.

None of them had drinking problems, but had just been over-feted with farewell parties from all the friends they'd made in Guam. Flo's aside had explained the commanders' evening sunglasses and why their movements had seemed to be in slow motion.

Each of the three had looked heavenward occasionally, lowering their shades an inch or two down their noses and squirting drops into their burning red eyes. These eyedrops had then run down their cheeks looking like tears. The sentimental image had been spoiled by their craggy Mt. Rushmore countenances. A drop of sweat might have seemed natural on their hollow cheekbones but not tears.

During that night I had heard different stories from each to explain why he was wearing sunglasses at night.

Rule #19. Hide and seek is a life-long survival skill.

One had said he was sentimentally touched by arriving home safely and had tended to get weepy-eyed. Another had pleaded an allergy to springtime and flowers. The third had said "I'm just incognito. I don't actually know anybody here, but I saw what looked like a freeloaders' paradise and bluffed my way in, slipping in with the brass."

Around six that night I noticed that the tune, Nola, hadn't been coming from the record player, but the radio. In alarm, I'd realized that Happy Sam, the Storyman had come on the radio with that as his familiar theme song and it was being beamed by Mom stereophonically. The echoing effect had come from her having turned on all the radios in three rooms, plus one she'd placed on the porch, with all dials tuned to Happy Sam's spot, at the highest acceptable listening volume.

I had found my sister, "Let's scram. We're coming on the radio," I had given her advance warning.

"Feets don't fail me now," Bonnie had looked as panicked as I had felt. I had found her outside feeding pistachio nuts to Ernie and pickles to Brat Rat while fanning her "spy" who had been taking a light snooze near in a lawn chair near the rodents' two-story house.

"Quick let's split!" Bonnie had become Commander Red

Rover again and had been bent double as we'd run, me holding onto her binocular strap which had held real binoculars for once, albeit with the close-up lens missing.

She'd gestured to the large dining room table which had been draped with a coral plastic cloth over which had been draped the cotton Queen Anne lace dinner tablecloth. Even with the extension eaves added, the tablecloth had been ample and nothing underneath that drape had shown. There had been plenty of space under there for two shy but squirmy tap dancers in hiding.

"I'll need our reconnaissance bag," Bonnie had told me as she'd sprinted out to our tent, leaving me alone there while I'd tried to avoid answering Mom who had been calling for us.

I hadn't wanted Mom to find me, as earlier she had suggested that it would be such fun, and just the crowning touch, if we girls had danced along with the radio show. when our number had come on.

"If you don't use it you'll lose it," Mom had given another little maxim to me which had me taking leaps off the high dive of possibilities trying to apply it to something in my world.

Under the table with a corner raised I'd seen Dad whisper to Mom and pinch her behind, just as Betty had made a flurry of noises like trumpets.

"Listen up, everyone! The First-Class-passenger guests have had their fill. And Mizrus Lee's Mile High Strawberry Surprise cakes can no longer fit in the refrigerator with all the liquid hors d'oeuvres and chaser bottles you've stuffed in there, so everybody have some of this scrumptious dillicious cake as an appetizer with some fruit salad, okay dokey?"

As Betty had announced, a crowd of children had immediately formed a beeline towards the cake slices which Flo had been dishing it up, while sitting down, one hand covering her navel area which had now extended horizontally a good ten inches straight out from her hipbones. Flo had asked to serve ice cream to the kids to work on her motherly act. She said she'd wanted to see if she could pull this new gig off or if some little kid would notice that the empress wasn't wearing any clothes: not a for-real mother but only a funny lady dressed up in maternity clothes!

Flo had always been appealing to me, because she was such a daredevil. I'd liked her saying in her deep voice that, "the only kids I'm naturally partial to, are the big ones who have started to shave. Like the kid I've married." I hadn't been able to picture either Flo or Rosdrum as

regular parents, except in a comedy series.

As Flo had served the small fries, she'd kept saying, "I'm playing Mommie."

After the third kid, she'd beamed, "No one's discovered the imposter." However, later an older kid had asked her where she'd kept her kid, and she'd patted her huge tummy. This had led to many little heads leaning on that swollen orb, ears pressed, as if listening for the ticking of a clock.

"Cuckoo, cuckoo," Roscoe had said after observing this. He'd wanted to sneak Alley Oops under her smock to surprise the kids as if he'd hatched out of Flo's shell. He'd wanted to tease them that Flo had given birth to Alley Oops the alligator. Flo however, had tried to fling a scooper of Rocky Road on the maker of that suggestion. Luckily Roscoe had caught her frozen missile and had deposited it in his champagne glass and proclaimed that his new drink creation should be called "The Rocky Road to Champagne," and could become one of the Ten Wonders of the Cooking World Unknown to Betty Crocker. Then Roscoe said he could get his own t.v. show called Roscoe's After-hours Hungover World.

"Another announcement," Betty had garnered most everybody's attention again by banging on Mom's brass dinner gong.

"And listen up now--this one is for you--Air Force buds," Betty had beamed at the menfolks present who had gone to Guam.

She had continued, "This squadron's homecoming has even gotten radio coverage, so keep your ears perked to listen in to Happy Sam's after these ads," she had come down off the bottom rung of her footstool and those just interrupted in conversations had tried to remember whether they'd been saying anything worth repeating.

Gramma had been sporting her Brownie camera around her neck as if she had been on location for National Geographic.

Dad had also given her the good German camera he'd gotten in Guam's P.X. to use to commemorate this party. So she'd had a second camera with a large flash attachment also slung over one shoulder. With the several leis men had given to her around her neck, she might have been the deck photographer on a Seniors' Caribbean Cruiseline.

With Gramma Anne capturing the high points of our party on film, I'd known we'd have plenty of good shots of the cakes, both before and after they'd been served; the grill, and guest ensembles, carefully posed in unlikely stilted poses.

I'd hoped Gramma could manage to stay awake until the wee small hours of the next morning when the men were going to perform for their wives.

"Everybody listen. Attennn-shun!" Mom had pointed to the radio and a gradual listening hush had fallen across the living room. The radio show had started.

"This is Happy Sam the Storyman and I'm going to tug on your heartstrings a bit before we resume our reading of Bob, Son of Battle, Ollivant's amazing Scottish tale of every lucky girl or boy's best friend--their loyal dog companions. I hope you treat yours well.

But, my listening audience here in the studio and gathered around radios throughout Georgia, may I ask a question? How many of you in the vicinity of my voice went over to Oglethorpe Auditorium last night for the All-City Children's Dance Festival from Around the World?

Most of you did, I'd expect. But there was one group of proud Dads who had to miss that whole show. Know why boys and girls? Because those Dads had been away from home, across an ocean, protecting Savannah from the bad guys. Six months ago they had to leave the U.S. of A. because our country needed them to keep America strong across the ocean.

But tonight, we are lucky they are home safe and sound, and I know a lot of them are celebrating over at a Welcome Home from Guam party--getting reacquainted with their children and lovely wives. Let me just give our brave fighting forces of the United States Air Force a big hello. Welcome Back Boys! We love you! And we're proud to have

you back in Dixie.

To commemorate their safe return yesterday I've asked two of the proud daughters of one of this squadron's fathers to come here to the studio to dance here for their Daddy whom they've been pining for, and who has missed by one day his daughters' first dance recital.

Come here sweetheart. What is your name? Speak into the mike, darling. Give our listeners your name, your school and your father's name?

"Bonnie. Central. Mackie-man or Daddy is his name."

"Well, Bonnie have you got something you want to say?"

"I miss you Daddy, come home fast."

"Thatta girl. Big sister, what's your name?"

"I'm Barri Lyn-- I hope you're home to hear this, Dad!"

"And by the way," Happy Dad had added, "if I were in charge of this man's Air Force I'd promote Mackie Man's sweet wife to Commander in Chief of all Air Force Mothers. She is a real fighting force herself, and a tribute to all military families!"

Mother had looked dumbfounded. Happy Dad must have dubbed this speech onto his tape later.

The squadron commander had said, "Here, here, I second that motion, except I'd call her Queen of the Party Givers, and cake bakers," he'd said, standing up and applauding Mom, with the rest of the guests following suit and giving our

flustered Mom a standing ovation until the music on the radio had abruptly started, "That old man river--"

Hearing our first shufflestep in our tap shoes, Bonnie had ducked under the tablecloth with me now, both of us covering our ears. We had Shad corralled under there with us too. Bonnie and I had tried to ignore the sounds of our feet dancing on the radio.

I'd winced as I'd heard my taps echoing Bonnie's. We should have been more consistent with our beats. Bonnie, on the other hand, couldn't have cared less about our resonating steps lacking synchronicity, ignoring the broadcast while preoccupied with opening her stash bag.

She had our bathtub scuba gear cached in there. She had extended the rubber submarine periscope up and had started training it over the hors d'oeuvres table to give us a better view of the food. She'd slyly let it rise. As it had appeared subtly over the table, I'd hoped it might be mistakable by the guests as just part of the party's tropical motif, fanning up over the salmon-shaped dip and lime green jello trout.

We had then taken turns surveying the contents of the serving plates. Bonnie had extracted from the bag the big plastic mechanical squeeze hand on a stick that we'd gotten from a carny at last year's State Fair. Bonnie had let the manually operable hand pillage for snacks as directed by me

on the periscope. The plastic hand operated on a spring device, suspended from a pole. It's fingers grasped shut when she'd squeezed the lever to try to pilfer goodies from off that table up above. It really hadn't worked all that well, as this third hand hadn't a tight-enough grip. However, she'd discovered she could use its sharply pointed plastic fingernails to stab cocktail sandwiches, or at least pieces of them.

With hit or miss success, we had obtained nibblesome amounts from debatably familiar flavors undecipherable in the mix or mash, exciting if not perfectly edible, after being secretly snatched by us in this ingenious manner.

One end of tablecloth had been lifted up just as the assemblage in the living room had finished shouting "bravo." They'd applauded our feet on the radio. They had been enthusiastic after hearing their squadron's name repeatedly being welcomed back home by effusive old Happy Dan. Mom had started calling us again to take a bow.

"Sisters? Come out wherever you are. Don't be shy. You didn't miss a step. Weren't they just like the little Rockettes? Did you hear those girls dance? Where are they? Girls? Don't be shy. Where have they run off to?"

Mom had spoken randomly with whomever she had seen along the path of her search for us. She had cleaned her way through the house, picking up stray plates, Brazil nuts

and abandoned cigarettes still burning in ashtrays. Finally she'd hauled the pyramid of trash off to the kitchen to be sorted. One of Mom's housekeeping techniques was to clean as you go, so you don't leave yourself with a mountain of dread at the end of any project.

The tablecloth had been lifted up at the far end, exposing us, and we'd expected our gig had been up and that we'd be hauled out to be handshaked and hugged. But we had been relieved to see it had been Gramma peeking at us from under the other end of the long table, instead of our Mama.

Gramma Anne hadn't been going to ask for us to come out, but had been ducking under the table herself. She had balanced her platter of party food in one hand and her camera cords. She had duck-walked on bent knees under the table to where we sister had rested, scavenging food from above.

"I'll get you a couch cushion, Gramma Anne," Bonnie had said as she'd crawled out, exiting after she'd checked with her periscope to make sure that the coast had been clear.

"I don't blame you girls a whit," Gramma Anne had settled in, leaning on the back wall and sitting on her needlepoint knitting and crocheting bag which had been plump, and probably quite adequately comfortable if no needles had nudged through to poke her on her bottom.

"Do you know when this party gets over, Barri Lyn?"

she'd asked me, while examining the various items on her plate. She'd been lifting finger food with two dainty pinkies or her tiny condiment fork, which had been the only one she could find that had been still clean and available.

The regular forks had disappeared when some men had started a quasi-javelin throwing contest using them as projectiles at one early point in the evening. After it had gotten dark, those forks had been only found when someone had stepped on one with a bare foot.

"This shindig halts when the brass say its time to call it a night and not a minute before," I had answered Gramma Anne, busily writing in my Calico Cat diary I had with me under the table. I had been revising my original magical wish list.

"It will end not a minute too soon, I'd say. I think it's unwise not to be more specific on your invitations." Gramma hadn't been used to social functions outside of St. Petersburg where she lived in a city where the median age must have been around 75.

"In my day guests were expected to pay their regards and leave at the appointed hour or when the hostess started to yawn, whichever came first," Gramma, herself, had been stifling a yawn.

Peeking with the periscope I'd gotten its window backwards and realized what I'd thought of as interesting

food was actually the orange sun out of the picture window which had nestled deep and was barely visible through an overlay of white clouds. It had reminded me of a poached egg. I had written these impressions in my calico cat book, often with little sketches. The sun's last hurrah had been still visible on the horizon, which I had known in my heart had been shining on our family, and would bring "nothing but blue skies from now on."

Songs lyrics had kept cropping up in my head. Some days Bonnie and I had tried the game of trying to talk to each other entirely in song titles or refrains. We'd only done that during nap times, as we still hadn't been familiar enough with songs to carry on a good conversation. The effort of trying to remember lyrics, however, had quickly put us to sleep. We had been building a repertoire between us but had kept arguing about whether or not each other's titles had been authentic songs or just clever inventions.

We had mostly listened to music in the car, driving across the country on our frequent moves. But with Mom recently behind the wheel on local jaunts, she had felt safer driving with God as her co-pilot, so she'd always listened to the church stations when she'd driven us hither and yon.

The one show, which had been her favorite broadcast, had come from a Hard-boiled Southern Baptist church where

they had preached the gospel and sung spirituals almost around the clock, waiting for the Judgement Day. The dark skinned church people of Georgia whom we'd heard on that station had sung the most uplifting songs I'd ever heard. They had often called out their agreement during the preacher's sermons too.

This car-radio reverend hadn't liked "Sunday go to meeting" dress-up Christians and had said people should testify and praise the Lord seven days a week. Most of the Christians I'd known, only went to church on Easter and around Christmas. They'd bought new clothes for both occasions. Listening to this preacher, I had been glad that Bonnie and I had gone to Sunday School every week and had just worn our regular every-day party clothes.

Our own Methodist church's music had sounded mournfully sad, like a funeral, compared to this radio church's hymns. That station had been where our car dial had been set since Dad had left. Mom had often said "Praise the Lord!" too. Especially she'd praised him out loud when she'd turned off the ignition without any fender benders or traffic tickets or when we'd found an easy parking spot.

I had been sure we'd be getting back to popular music now that Dad had safely returned and would be taking over the wheel again so Mom could relax. He had needed to listen to stations which gave frequent weather reports, as so much

of his munitions work in the Air Force had depended upon the conditions of the skies.

Bonnie had returned to us under the table wearing her green bunny rabbit p.j.s with the rubberized foot pads for traction and the head-hugging hood with bendable rabbit ears, and a union-suit's barn door opening snapped in the rear, sporting a little white fuzzy cottontail made out of gathered wool. I had a pink pair of p.j.s to match my sister's. We'd bought them one year, thinking they could double as Halloween costumes. We'd later chickened out of wearing them for going door-to-door "treat or tricking" after we'd slept in them.

Every month of the year we had worked on coming up with the accessories for another Halloween costume idea, but had always ended up putting aside our spaceman or red devil getups on that big day in October. For us, just putting on lipstick, rouge and junk jewelry, to dress like gypsies or princesses, had seemed daring-enough disguises for candy gathering.

"You should get your p.j.s on too, sweetheart," Gramma had advised me as she'd always thought planning ahead relieved you of the stress of unnecessary worrying so you could live a longer life. She had planned to reach 100 years old. She had kept getting miffed at all her friends in St. Petersburg for dying off too soon. She'd had to keep

widening her social circle to have anybody still alive for dinner company.

I had taken the periscope and scooted to the edge of the table to peek out and see whether the coast had been clear. I had seen Mom's legs and had paused hoping for them to meander elsewhere. I had known, if she'd seen me, she'd be nabbing us to send us off to bed. I hadn't wanted to remind her to admonish us, "It's way past your bedtime."

Behind me, Bonnie had been helping Gramma decide which morsels had been safe for her to eat while experimenting with her new vegetarian diet. They were picking pieces apart and searching for verboten carnivorous snacks.

We girls had originally thought that veggies had only eaten what they had been named for. Gramma had explained that vegetarians could eat anything that wouldn't run away from you when you had been looking for dinner. Another rule of thumb she'd taught us was that any food which didn't have parents had probably been edible on this diet.

"Those muffins have egg whites in them, can you eat eggs?" Bonnie had asked Gramma Anne.

"Let me think. I think I can, if the egg wasn't fertilized by a rooster it could be okay, as that egg has no possibility of growing to be a chicken. What do you think?"

Bonnie had put on her scientific thinking cap (a studied scowl) and had replied, "Though eating an egg would

be eating an embryo, if it hadn't been fertilized, it would never become an animal, whether eaten or not. I'd say the deviled egg salad triangles won't violate your diet."

"Animals come from both a he and a she, as it takes two to tango," Gramma had replied trying to figure it all out.

I'd notated "tango" in my Calico Wish Book as a hidden-meaning word to ask Frieda about. Gramma Anne had been another adult, like Mom, who had frequently answered questions in a way which had necessitated my asking more questions to understand her answer, which usually had made me forget my original question and why I'd had even asked it in the first place.

At least I'd gotten some key words or weird phrases to do further investigative work on from these conversations: tango, labor, water breaking, Daddy's little raincoats, rhythm method and inbreds had been on my check-on list.

"Well, you're allowed to eat that muffin, and I think the olives and pickles are safe, as well as the bread and the carrots," Bonnie had been testing a bite of each of these things off of Gramma's plate as if tasting each for any hidden animal products lurking in them.

After we'd identified lard as belonging in the forbidden zone, we'd wanted to go survey all the cooks present that night, to ask them what grease they'd used for frying their hush puppies or onion rings or how they'd made

their pie crusts.

Needing to dress for bed to quell Gramma's fretting about me not being ready, I had scurried to my room. My rosebud print nightie had been under my pillow but it had been buried under a lot of guests' jackets and pocketbooks. I had ended up wearing my bunny suit too. This get-up had been safely un-embarrassing for me after Gordon had been shuttled home to bed. He had earned over six quarters, he'd bragged, before he'd left, by fetching tabasco or finding lost keys for the men guests and for punching holes in their beer cans.

He had stayed outside assisting Ricky Sr. and being in charge of the hot dog grilling patrol. Every time I'd passed him, he'd called out like a vendor at a ball park, "Hot dogs, hot dogs, read all about it, come and get your red hot-hot Ricky dogs with jalapeno sauce here. Step right up."

Once this night I had seen him sitting with Betty Tyson and Rita Mae and I had known that Betty had been making him retract the sewer croc report, which had been inadvertently attributed to him. I'd seen him gesturing in my direction several times, and had avoided him for my safety's sake.

Blaming Gordon for the sewer croc rumor hadn't been a lie, as we would rather have died than do that, most times, but none of us had remembered where we had first heard

anything. We had all tended to say exactly the same things, in different words, often one on top of one another. All of our big "secrets" had usually just been ordinary news which hadn't hit one of our talk-circles yet. Everything done in our school life and friendships had been geared to being first to know or do or get something.

"Barri Lyn! Look what a get-up you've gotten up!" some adult had said as I'd passed them, almost hopping like a bunny to try to look natural in this rabbit-eared suit and avoid being seen, like Jimmy Stewart's invisible friend, "Harvey."

My pausing to grab some carrot sticks in my bunny suit had caused Mrs. Ulstrom to notice me and she told the whole room to look at my outfit. Mom had come in expecting the compliments she'd heard had been for the luau dress she'd made me, but then had seen me standing there looking bedtime-ordinary in my store-bought, funny-bunny jammies.

"There you are. Why didn't you come out when everyone was looking for you? Where were you?"

I had felt Bonnie's hand tugging at my leg from under the table during this barrage of maternal questions. I had known my sister had been trying to remind me not to give away the location of our hiding spot. Looking down I'd seen she was using the fake hand to pull at me.

"I didn't know you were looking for us. I must have

been taking Rita Mae to show her where our toilet is," I had chosen the excuse, which I'd thought had been the most praise-worthy. I had no way of recounting all the running around I'd done that evening, like a chicken with her head chopped off.

"Well, most of the kids have gone home. I want you and Bonnie back in your beds when I say so. And I am going to be saying so directly. I don't want you around when the men begin their show. I'm afraid this might be X-rated adult entertainment, from the rumors I've heard."

I had listened patiently while Bonnie had kept yanking on my p.j. pants so hard that the snaps around my middle had been coming undone and the whole bottom of my outfit, along with my modesty, might have fallen around my ankles at any moment as these p.j. get-ups didn't have any elastic band at their waists, as that's where a real rabbit's widest part was suppose to be.

"I understand, Mom," I had eaten an entire celery stick filled with whipped pimento cheese spread as she had talked. I had been debating whether to swallow the celery strings or spit them out.

"Did you get yourself a decent dinner?" Mom had asked.

"I had a little of this and a little of that. Do you think our party is working?"

"Shhh," Mom had looked nervously around and I had shut

up.

"I see everybody stuffed to the gills with big grins on their faces, what more could any hostess want?"

Pretending that all of us had believed that Mom had been serious about her ultimate plan for the outcome of this party had been part of our ruse. We had all known Dad hadn't really needed any boost from us or a party to be promoted. But, nevertheless it had made us all feel more a part of each others' world and glued together as a family, with interconnected fates to pretend our party efforts had uplifted the coattails of the impending promotion decision. It had been early in Dad's career for another promotion and men who, like Dad, had only signed on for a set period (twenty years) instead of being regular lifers had a harder time climbing up the ranks. By hyping the importance of a cake or a party, the little women of our household had become in our own eyes and feelings more a part of the success paradigm. Then, if and when, Dad had gotten promoted we could all feel like we'd helped a bit and feel even prouder.

When Mom had gone to gather some gear for the adult party games, I had lowered myself with a ballerina's plié and had crawled safely under the table. At my opening of our draped hideaway, Shad had tried to take this exit out but I'd held him fast by a hind leg.

Though our tussle had wiggled the table I hadn't wanted him to go foraging again for the sloppiest eater he could find to try lying under that person's chair hoping for the canine version of receiving pennies from heaven to fall in his mouth. Twice, already, I'd had to save him from eating spent chicken wings, with all those tiny choke bones.

"Your father said that he and Lee banged on the bathroom door for hours. Then, having jet-lag and a lot of catching up to do, he and your Mom had gone to the back bedroom for a hug. That's why we'd missed his arrival.

I said to Mack, that was you banging on the door? We thought it was the neighborhood boy wanting to irritate the girls," Gramma had been so surprised that Dad had arrived and been home for over an hour without any of us, besides Mom, even knowing it. She just had to keep explaining how her son had managed to put one over on her.

"Well, I've already gotten my first wish," Bonnie had been X-ing some scribbles off the first page of her unicorn diary/wish tracking book.

"Dad got home safe and sound and I don't hate his crewcut." Bonnie had tossed the book into a corner as if its mission had been over. Just when I had been about ready to read my three new wishes to Gramma Anne from my wish book we'd been discovered.

Someone who hadn't been paying attention and had

stepped on Shad's tail. He had yelped his disapproval. When Mr. Bigfoot had lifted the tablecloth to figure out what he'd stepped on, Mom had been right behind him, peeking under there too.

"There you are! We've been looking all over hill and dell trying to find you girls. At least you are ready for bed, except you Mom, who need to come out and join the big peoples' party. How did the girls trick you into sitting under the table with them?"

"Temperature-wise it was pretty cool under there, must be from all the iced foods sitting up on top of the table. Just a minute and I'll get my things gathered up," Gramma, had seemed to be disappointed to be forced to rejoin the noisy party crowd.

"Girls, it's off the bed with you! You should have been asleep hours ago, if I could have found you. Brush your teeth, use the bathroom, and remember to say your prayers. Dad and I will come back and tuck you in."

Bonnie and I had searched in vain for somebody as young as us still up and about at the party so we could point a finger and say, "...but so and so is still up." We had pleaded to be allowed to sleep in the tent, but Mom had said the mosquitoes would eat us alive. I'd grouched some more, as obviously I had been going to have no luck trundling off to Noddyland with our house busier than Grand Central

Station on New Year's Eve.

Mom had made the bathroom line give us cuts. Bonnie and I had gone into the bathroom together and had locked the door. Bonnie had thought we should crawl out the window, but that had no longer been safe. Ricky Senior had brought back the best of his Fourth of July fireworks cache and had been lighting up the night with explosions of noises and colors. We had heard all the crowd's approving choruses of "Awww" except when he had gotten too wild and thrown firecrackers into the quietly smoldering hot coals of the grill which had gotten Betty ticked off and saying so even louder than his explosions.

Betty had been madder at her hubby after she'd heard the protests from her baby, who should have slept for hours in our folks' room nestled amongst the guests' belongings. Betty had hugged her youngest while shouting for Ricky to stop his "childishness at this ungodly hour."

We had tried to ignore a loud knock on our bathroom door. The ladies had been polite waiting their turns, but this had sounded like a Dad.

"Just a minute," we had called and squirted Colgate on our brushes. I hadn't had much left to brush with all my missing baby teeth. Bonnie couldn't abide the taste of toothpaste, so had used baking soda and salt from the baby food jar on her teeth. We had both gargled songs to each

other with Listerine until the impatient line protested. They had tried to roust us out again, pounding and pleading.

"If anyone has a potty emergency, you are welcome to pop next door to my house," Betty had given another of her announcements.

"Our bathroom is off the kitchen. But careful to flush fast! Lee's girls have spied a sewer crocodile down in my drainpipes. He may be gone by now. Maybe he enlisted in the armed services, as a Draino-guzzling croc."

Betty had been a little tipsy. She had always uncorked one her jugs of homemade rhubarb cordial to share at any night time parties. She had been the only one who had liked its unctuous sweetness, which she'd dubbed, Mommy's Picker-Upper. She'd claimed that it had worked like a charm to make Anita sleep like Rip Van Winkle after she'd tumbled and then nursed her babies.

Betty had confided to any and all that this night, to her, Ricky had seemed again to be the rebel without a cause she'd fallen head-over-heels in love with as a Macon teenage babysitter. He'd been a motorcycle maniac who given her an occasional thrill ride, and one day had just kept on going.

After a few more sips, she'd murmured to Mom (with me listening in under the table) that she'd hoped nursing Anita around the clock would protect her tonight from getting again in the family way, as there was no room for any more.

Their house couldn't fit in another crib, she'd said. Mom had advised Betty that she should refuse to even smooch with her hubby, if he wasn't wearing a little raincoat.

Their discussion had piqued my curiosity but they'd been interrupted as another barrage of firecrackers coming off the grill had made Betty go to "throw a wet blanket" on her rebel's one-man celebration.

Bonnie and I had been listening at the door and had taken this as our cue to go crawl under our own bed covers. We shouldn't have even tried to hide out and feign sleep. The whole house had seemed to be lurching like the men who had kept banging against walls. All the uproarious noises and bursts of laughter erupting from one corner of the house or another had been firing our imaginations which hadn't lain dormant, even on do-nothing evenings.

Fueled by curiosity, we'd taken turns creeping out of bed, to crack our door open and try to peek at what had been going on beyond our bedroom's borders.

After Les Paul and Mary Ford's The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise had come on the record player for the umpteenth time, we'd heard the squadron commander say, "Let the Games begin," like the torchbearer of the Olympics. Champagne corks had popped and I'd heard Grandmother say she'd decided to turn in early too, "...like those smart granddaughters of mine." None of us should have bothered as the party crowd

had been wound too tightly to uncoil without being feisty.

The party had lasted so long that the unprecedented event, in our family's experience, which had first happened then, had been repeated three more times in one night. Through our bedroom's curtains we had seen the revolving red lights of a patrol car, which had been rare in our neighborhood, and never before had stopped at our house.

Upon listening, we'd heard the loud knocking by the patrol men. Their arrival on the scene had finally subdued the decibel level of the revelers. According to the lawmen, it had seemed that the neighbors, the few who hadn't been invited, had called the police to complain about all the commotion and noise coming from Nine Pine Valley Road. Apparently Ricky's firecrackers had been the last straw.

My folks hadn't been the illegal kinds in the least. But neither of them had much control over the likes of Ricky Senior or many of the guests, as Dad's bosses had been party-hardy animals and their squadron's having all gotten home in one piece had been "one real cause to kick out the jams and let the good times roll."

The senior officer answering the complaint had seemed to have agreed, having been in the military once himself. But he had asked whether the party couldn't wind itself down, and remain inside, it being near midnight. Dad had assented to the officer's suggestion.

Once the policeman had left, however, Dad couldn't actually do much about the roisterous guests, as you couldn't pull rank on guys higher up the totem pole. With the house bursting at the seams filled with so many people, they had been bound to make a little noise even if only playing Tiddly Winks.

I'd heard Mom going around and shutting windows and trying to herd the men indoors, some of whom had been roaming around outside in her garden claiming they'd lost their way, looking for the bathroom or a tree steady enough to pee on. These same men had kept pushing our door open, and pawing around in the dark looking for a light switch, causing us to hurry back from our spying posts and pretend-snore from under our covers. This had tricked most of the guys into whispering apologies for bothering our sleep by turning on the light.

Roscoe, however, hadn't been fooled by our pretend sleeping. He had tickled us through our heavy covers and had pretended he'd lost Alley Oops the alligator somewhere in our room without his muzzle on. After Roscoe had left, we'd started worrying that Alley Oops really had escaped and gone on the prowl. That image had made us start writhing and throwing off our covers for any little grain of sand excuse, just to check again. We hadn't been knowing whether to believe Roscoe or not. The power of suggestion had left

us to imagine we'd felt all sorts of vermin crawling around under our covers including Alley Oops and that crab missed earlier by Ricky, whom we'd dubbed "Old Firecracker Head" after he'd made so much racket.

At least we'd known the crab had been safely re-bucketed and left out in the shed, unless Ricky or somebody had found him and was playing pranks on us. Our conjured fears that sleepless night had included suspecting invasions of the traditional loathsome bed crawlers--spiders, snakes, and snoopers--of the boy ilk, remembered from our mixed company sleepovers at Scouting Jubilees.

We'd had kept turning the lights back on and searching the entire room again every time a car's headlight had reflected on our ceiling, startling us. Later we'd heard Roscoe's voice echoing, as he'd had his head stuck down the toilet, with the bathroom door open, yelling, "Hey, calling all crocodiles!"

He had gotten himself a little pickled, according to Flo, who had joined him in the bathroom. He had kept saying, "It was Betty's alfalfa homebrew that ambushed me. That one isn't a mixer. It wasn't my fault, that stuff packs a sucker-punch. It must be 1000-proof."

"Maybe I should make amends for getting Roscoe drunk with my homemade rhubarb cordial," Betty had soothed Flo who had parked her bulky self at the bathroom door.

"Maybe I should serve Roscoe some of that gorgeous cherry pie I made following Mizrus Ullstrom's rave-winning recipe card. That would go well with Lee's industrial-strength coffee. What do you think?" Betty had her head stuck in the bathroom door.

When Flo had said it couldn't hurt, Betty had gone to get some dessert plates. Rosdrum had stuck his finger down his throat, to make room for the corpuscle pie, he'd said. He had been funny to me, even when barfing.

"Take this, Mr. Sewer Croc," he'd say as he'd heave-ho'ed with plenty of sound effects.

"This is Alligator Country, Alley Oops and I want all you guys to return to the Everglades at once, that's an order," he'd made short-work of making room in his tummy for pie. He'd then sprayed himself with Aquanet for no good reason, maybe thinking it was men's cologne. To top off his clean-up, he'd gargled with the rest of his "tequila sunrise breath freshener" from his glass, and had stuck a whole pack of Dentyne into his mouth, paper and all, and had let his pregnant sweetie be his compass back to shave some "hair off the dog that first bit me." That last had sounded like a voodoo cure to me, and I'd wondered where he'd find any hair on our bulldog Shad long enough to pull out.

Flo and Roscoe hadn't found any men in the living room as they'd all assembled back in my folks bedroom to prepare

for their grande finale--their "Show of Show-offs." The men had cooked up a little entertainment surprise for their wives, they'd said, to prove they hadn't been had been wasting their time when they'd gone on R and R in Hawaii. They'd gotten their act together on the big island they'd announced and now were considering second careers.

This night was going to be their trial run, their first show. From the previous evening, I'd had sympathy pangs for the performers. Some gruff-voiced officer had said he'd hoped that Mom would consider representing them in Hollywood as their agent and talent scout. Mom had walked by just then, upon hearing her name, and had seen our light on and us peeking out of our door. She had re-tucked us into bed and had turned on our night light, telling us "Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite!" which hadn't helped at all. Her comment had made Bonnie and I argue over whether there was really such a thing as bedbugs. Bonnie had said we were the bedbugs and we'd tussled trying to gnaw on each other's bellies.

Mom had also had warned us, "Stay put!" before closing our door, shutting it this time with so much force that it almost qualified as a slam. But Bonnie hadn't taken her admonition seriously, and had bravely stuck her little golden head out the door to call Mom.

"Can't we see Dad in his next job, Mom?"

"No, that was only a joke kids wouldn't understand and so is this. This is not for children's viewing pleasure. I'm sure if you just keep your eyes and ears closed the sandman will visit and you'll have pleasant dreams instead,"

Mom hadn't lingered as all the men in the big bedroom at the end of the hall had been bumping around like jumping beans, percussing like bongo drums.

We had watched as Mom had then gone to check on Gramma Anne, whom she'd told us the next morning, had disappeared into such a tiny lump under her covers, that Mom had searched for her under the bedspread to assure herself Gramma hadn't vanished into thin air.

Mom had been a good sport, but I think she would have preferred even bridge parties to this hoopla. She had said hours earlier that this party had grown too big and too risqué for our private premises. She and Betty and Mrs. Albright had "conflabbed" and had agreed that after the entertainers' dance they would get the soberest man left standing to lead a flotilla of the sods out to the officers' club where there was more room. This crowd of revelers had needed mooring and, perhaps, hefty MPs to ride herd on those who'd strayed.

With me confined to my bedroom, nobody had taken over the deejay duties. Whenever someone had, they'd put on a stack of records of big band dance tunes like Glenn Miller

and his Band of Renown which I hadn't cared for, since it had lacked love lyrics. This music had lent itself well to foxtrots and two-stepping but hadn't inspired me to write any letters to my Dearly Missed Heartthrob, Fuzzybun.

All of this crowd had been big on ballroom dancing and most of the officers' wives had wardrobes of long strapless gowns which had been a necessity, almost the ladies' uniforms for formal affairs. These gowns had been worn over elastic bustieres which had cinched their waists and had little underwired, reinforced ledges for the ladies to rest their bosoms upon to lift them up precariously threatening to brim softly over the ledge of their stiff trussed dresses, exposing their nipples.

Even though I wasn't a boy, my eyes too had tended to drift towards these ladies' proffered breasts whenever they'd bent over, had laughed or even raised their arms in these daring strapless affairs. It had seemed to me that these ladies' exposed bosoms had preceded their owners, and had given them the same kind of ranking as an officer's rows of medals on their chests had given. I had always been transfixed with watching breasts jiggle or watching them being admired. I couldn't imagine myself ever having any of my own or wanting to display them like this.

I had suffered through the droning of dance tunes, both sleepy and wide awake at the same time. When not sneaking

peeks, I had been using my flashlight to write notes to myself under my pink flannel blankie. Sometimes, like a roving reporter, Bonnie had flashed me some update on the progress of the happenings beyond the crack in the door.

But now there had been such an assortment of men cloistered outside of our door that she couldn't even get our door open in the crush of male bodies lining up in preparation for their big extravaganza road show, dedicated to their wives, whom the announcer had called, "the girls we left behind for better or worse."

Bonnie and I had sometimes leaned together as a wedge and we'd managed now and then to prop the door open. The men had been getting dressed. On my parents' queen-sized bed we'd seen two large pyramids of strewn clothes. One stack had a pile of discarded Hawaiian shirts, thrown helter-skelter, like our church's grab-bag table at their bargain-basement bazaars. The other pile had been more subdued, khaki pants with legs entwined in various lengths from swimsuit short to string-bean long which had been hurled into a chaotic beige heap of discarded pants. I'd imagined these men were going to have, as Dad would have said, "one hell of a time" later sorting out who belonged in which pants and might go home wondering why their pants felt funny.

It had also looked like they'd played underwear-toss as

there had been men's underdrawers hanging from the overhead light, the curtain rods, and there had been so many strewn across the floor that they had looked like an advertisement for Fruit of the Loom skivvies--"Always keep a spare pair of briefs underfoot." At first I couldn't see anything but these dishevelled piles of castaway clothes.

It had sounded like all the men had gone out into the back yard again, and I'd thought that our Mom, as a teetotaler, must be having conniption fits. Bonnie and I had run over to the bathroom to look out the window.

As we had passed by the living room on our trek, we had seen all the women poised like an audience. They had formed groups in three crescent moon shapes, shading each other. One row had lined up around back wall, a seated group up front sat on cushions on the floor, the middle row seated on wooden or metal folding chairs. They had pie plates and clean forks in their laps or hands except for Betty who had been doing the honors with her knife and spatula and Mizrus Ullstrom's recipe's dome crusted, sugar-dusted pies.

"Now don't you be complimenting me. All credit for these miracles belong to Inez, who wrote this recipe for Lee, who has kindly passed it along to me."

"Oh, lovely to look at. This could be on the cover of a Women's Day," Mrs. Albright had said with a wink at Betty.

"Oh I just have to have this recipe, Inez. Can I get

it from Betty, pretty please?" Lynn, the Commander's wife had put her hands together prayerfully looking at the two domed crusts.

"I have it right here," Betty had held up the 3.5 by 5 index card and had wagged it enticingly overhead, "What do I hear to start the recipe bidding war? Give me a five? Come on ladies--it is an investment in your family's future, Inez has guaranteed that these are husband pleasing pies. "

Betty had then tucked the card back into the pocket of her gingham maternity smock, which clothes she'd said new mothers should be allowed to wear for nine months after. She'd thought the women should bond together on this realistic goal for losing the residual after-birth weight it had just taken them that long to gain.

Most of the military wives had groaned in envy of the lassitude permitted civilian wives. They'd often commiserated by topping each other with their weight-gain statistics from their past pregnancies, which had ranged from thirty-seven to fifty-five pounds. The base ladies had concurred that their husbands had expected to be back down to normal in three months-max.

"Three months!" Flo had moaned, "You slaggards aren't tethered to a former Air Force Academy cadet. I'm under orders from my chief inspector to leave the hospital in my honeymoon suit, or else!"

"How much have you gained, Flo?" Betty looked her up and down. "You hardly look pregnant to me."

"My doctor had warned me 'No more than sixty,' (my being tall.) Well I'd topped that in my first trimester."

"What did he do? Put you on a diet?--They can be so nasty," Inez had joined in.

"No. I switched obstetricians. Told the new one I'd always been heavy and had only gained four pounds since getting pregnant. He'd said I'd better put on some weight; to eat for two. Ho! Fooled him," Flo had puffed smoke rings from her cig while tying off her crocheting yarn.

"So did you hide that honeymoon dress?" Mom had asked. "Or do you want me to sew you some discrete stretch panels in the seams?"

"Naw. Roscoe's forgotten I wore a sweater and jeans on our honeymoon. We eloped on his motorcycle. Once my Big Daddy gets a load of his new son, I will be his goddess, no prob. If he gives me any lip I'll stick one of these new double D cups in his fool mouth."

"Nurse a lot so they don't sag. I wish I'd started out flat-chested, with those enormous knockers being p.g. has bequeathed on me. They'd be fine--if only they hadn't migrated south," Betty had cupped her breasts lifting them upwards, had sighed and let gravity haul them down again.

"Don't nurse, Flo, or you'll never recover lost ground."

You'll get stretch marks like me. I'll never forgive little Markie for how he ruined my figure," Inez had advised.

"Roscoe, jr., can't do anything to these titties that my big boy doesn't already do every night. I'll bet Daddy will have junior on bottled formula his first night out of his cubbyhole. My man's not into sharing," Flo pointed to where her smock moved with protest kicks from somewhere deep inside.

"This baby's a real kick-boxer and a lush; he hiccups all the time," Flo had then knocked on her extended belly and said, "Hey, settle down in there. You'll be the only he-boy on the block with an alligator resting on your layette in your birth announcement photos. Roscoe insists."

Betty had then knocked gently on the tops of the pies.

"Hey, in there, she-pie, ready to be served prettily to Flo and her karate kid? Might be his last gratis supper, before he has to slip out and start fending for himself."

"I remember when you served these family-favorites at your bridge party, Inez Ullstrom. You ought to have been ashamed!" said Mrs. Albright. "Not only did every slice hold together like it had been glued, but it was as juicy as a sauce. How did you do it?"

"My cherry pies made from Inez's recipe ran like bank robbers," Mom had chimed in from the kitchen. "I must be the world's unluckiest baker, as I'd tried to follow your

recipe to the letter."

"Lee? You'd used Inez's recipe too? What happened to ruin your MaMa's Little Helpers--isn't that what you call your creations Inez?"

"If my marriage had been hinged to those pies, I'd be in divorce court," Mom had answered. "I guess I just don't have Inez's touch with berry pies. Luckily my Macky-man won't touch anything but coconut cream."

"Well, I dotted the i's and crossed the t's according to Inez's instructions this time," Betty announced pointedly, "You must have gotten diverted baking with Inez's recipe."

The ladies were all lined up holding forks, looking like a Grandma Moses painting. The group in their curved rows, expectantly leaning forward, might have been posing for a high school reunion photo.

"Please pass these slices of Mizrus Ullstrom's pie as I cut them. Clear to the ends of the rows, if you please, little piggies," Betty had serrated each pie into ten equal, but generous slices. These had been large, deep-dish pies which had been baked in cast-iron skillets.

"Here's the ala mode part, and I've bought myself a professional scooper. I'm tired of breaking those plastic ones," Mom had displayed her new ice cream scooper. It had been silver metal with a lever which had moved a metal strip

back and forth along the back curve of the scoop to expel perfect dairy orbs. Everyone had wanted to examine this soda-jerk's professional tool but it had to be put into immediate action.

"Everybody can use it for themselves for getting out their own ice cream from the box. We've got Neapolitan, Butter Brickle, and French Vanilla left. We might just have a tad of Flo's homemade lime daiquiri sherbet still in the fridge too, if you're really adventurous," Mom had set down the three ice cream boxes and new-fangled scooper.

The drugstore ice cream counters had already used these scoopers for years, but they'd not been sold for home use until more families had picked up on ice cream as a daily habit. Everybody used to lay open the boxes and make rectangled cuts using the wire thread of cheese slicers. I'd loved slicing ice cream with the metal wire meant for cheese, strung between the slingshot shaped handles. I'd also liked it in those old timey days that the entire opened box had been eaten at a sitting so nothing would go to waste.

"Here, we go, first piece goes to our recipe sharer with thanks," Betty had held up her knife and followed the dividing lines she'd just marked.

All the ladies' heads had been craned or bowed to the center attraction, there having been quite the set-up by

Betty for this event. Her knife had started at the perfectly crimped rim of the lightly browned mountain-top shaped crust. The cut had looked easy. Had it been too easy? One could never tell from the top crust what kind of consistency might be hidden in the middle. Only Betty could have known from its feel under her knife. I'd watched the arch of her eyebrows, which had stayed raised and hadn't furrowed together. This pie had seemed to have obeyed the recipe's instructions and clung together nicely.

Betty had then lifted the large Scoutmaster camp-cook pancake turner she had inserted behind the balcony of the crust while hoisting it up, saying "We ought to take a picture of this. This would win the Thousand Dollar Betty Crocker Cook-Off Competition. Too bad no judges are here."

She'd moved her spatula to deposit this tidy package onto the dessert plate held by Augie in nearby right-receiver position like the star quarterback ready to make a brilliant connect and have the sideline fans applaud.

I had pulled my sister forward, both of us dragging our Teddy Bear sisters, Little Flo and Lil Lee, along behind us. The men had gone outside to the back porch to receive some last minute choreography instructions. There had been a strange silence coming from that quarter except for the fellow making all the men experiment with our hula hoops to get their hips into the swing of this dance.

As Betty had raised her spatula aloft, like the umpire lifting the boxing-gloved hand of the bout's victor, a Mizrus Mary Quite Contrary last-minute upset had happened. Four and twenty blackbirds hadn't flown out of the pie, but all that many cherries and more had plopped off of Betty's splatula.

A sigh had gone up as if the quarterback had dropped the ball at the goal line. The perky top-crust had deflated and folded down, now unsupported by cherries. It had collapsed, as if in shame to arch above the empty center space. Like prayerful brown hands, that top crust had folded over the wet bottom crust.

"Kerplunk! Another reversal at the finish line. What's our next disappointment? Bring on the dancing boys and save the celebration," Augie, the second main boss man's wife had cleared the slate of one anticipation and added another.

"Did you spill coffee and smear my recipe card or something?" Mizrus Ullstrom, clearly annoyed, had snatched at Betty's pink gingham smock pocket. Her apron had been embroidered with the Pied Piper playing his flute to lure all the talented dancing rats of the village on their exodus from the inhospitable village. Likewise the disappointed women had followed other lines of interest, now training their eyes and imaginations towards the men coming in from

the back yard.

"Oooh, look at that!" Mizrus Ullstrom had expectorated in seeming amazement, almost choking on her surprise.

"I see your problem. I accidentally put lower case ts next to the cornstarch meaning teaspoons instead of upper case Ts meaning tablespoonfuls.

I'm surprised you two, as experienced cooks, didn't catch such an obvious mistake! How long have you been baking?"

A murmur of disapproval had circled the room, as Inez's excuse hadn't held any water. She'd double-checked her recipe the last time it had failed, that time for Mom. Inez had declared Mom's lackadaisical measuring technique might have ruined Mom's attempts with the recipe. Inez had then said her directions were meant to be followed precisely.

"Ladies doesn't this make you wonder why we've been thinking that Inez was so smart about numbers? Here we've been trusting her for all of these years to do all of our bridge club's score tallying!" Betty chortled.

"You should hang your head and walk backwards on your knees to Home Ec 101. I swear!" said the boss's wife.

"Don't you remember old Mrs. Peacetree?" she'd asked her high school friend. "She would turn over in her grave to give you an F for this!"

"I know," Inez had looked meek, "Gertie would have

tried to whip me with fifty strokes from a wet noodle. To say nothing of making me wash all the home ec. classes' burnt-on pans."

Betty had just tsk'ed and wagged a finger at Mrs. Ulstrom, before she'd pointedly asked for some bowls to replace the shallow dessert plates. The plates would certainly have been allowing cherries to dribble all over everybody, she'd said protectively. Betty had asked why Inez hadn't just called her creation a cobbler instead of pie.

There had been some murmurs and words exchanged in confidence in the background, all around the room. When the bowls had arrived, every single lady had claimed to be too full to try Mizrus Ullstrom's cobbler. One voice in the back had even ventured to suggest that this dish should be redubbed the Double Whammy Disaster since it had failed two good cooks in a row. Flo had snidely remarked that the best name for it was the Green-eyed Monster's Mistake.

Betty had looked like the Cheshire cat who'd swallowed the canary. When Mom had brought back out the rest of her own Mile High Strawberry Surprise Cakes, all the women had collectively seemed to have regained their previously insatiable sweet teeth. They had voted with their forks and spoons for Mom and against Inez, whose husband was also up for promotion.

This had caused Bonnie and I to agree that now we'd felt our family's victory was more than a pie-in-the-sky fantasy. Whether or not Mom's cakes had any promotion significance beyond their delicious selves had been more of a family joke than anything else, however "do mean a lot," like the song's refrain had reminded us every time we'd turned on the radio.

All My Rules Went Down the Tubes: "The Show of Showoffs."

It hadn't been long after this that all of the men had come out of their huddle in the back yard and had returned to the hall and my parents' bedroom. Bonnie and I had retreated, unseen, back into our enclave before this onslaught. If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, from the looks of this crew, I'd thought someone had been stuffing the ballot boxes. The hearty, big-bellied dancing flotilla, had been slogging out now in all their humble immodesty. All of which, my sister and I had seen and heard, only in snatches, except for their Buddha bellies. By corroborating our impressions with each other, whispering and peeking through a crack in the door, we had patchworked together what had been going outside our room.

Brazenly, Bonnie had kept pretending to be needing to leave our room for one last glass of water for her parched throat. I'd started doing it too--in/out, in/out. When "in," for awhile we hadn't seen a thing, as too many men had been bunched together like dill pickles bottlenecked in our hall. Some had been lounging against our door as they'd primped with their wives' powder compacts. One man had a tube of scarlet lipstick and had been making all of the other men open wide and say "testicles" telling them to hold their corny expressions while he'd outlined their lips.

Another had a smudge box of blue mascara that he dabbed over everyone's eyes, like punching them in on a time clock to act as women until some whistle blew.

We'd been squeezed out of our birds' eye view of the backstage until we'd finally gotten a voyeur's reprieve when the chorus line had moved forward, freeing their pressure on our door. The men had started chugging along, each grasping the waist of the dancer in front of him. They had done a bunny hopping, hip swiveling rhumba on their way out. Well, a little ways out, as those in the front had abruptly balked at the other hall door which had led to the makeshift stage and their wives. This had caused a pile up effect. Someone must have gotten an attack of cold feet, or a cold draught between his bare legs, Bonnie had giggled. Maybe this had been planned, as the men had to take turns at the entrance, first appearing one-by-one as the Master of Ceremonies had introduced each by his stage name.

As if in a pro football starting lineup, each hula boy had jogged forward and taken his bows, fore and aft. Not athletic-looking in those grass skirts, most had been smoking Big Stogie Havana cigars.

This had clashed with their coy flowers. I'd thought about Inez Nomano's warning, "No one can dance and chew gum at the same time."

With these men, perhaps, grace hadn't been the goal. A

couple of them had fashioned together ridiculous-looking pointy hard bras made from coconut shells and fishing line. They had called these their Mae West Treasure Chests. The others had run out with their bare hairy chests exposed, covered only by wilted leis and shell beads.

This initial hula dancers' introduction, had been announced by one fellow over at the side. He had been wearing that popular dime store Groucho Marx disguise: a fake plastic out-sized nose with a real hair mustache and bushy eyebrows attached to the eye glasses. This Groucho look-alike had been, of course, tapping the comedian's signature cigar, and wiggling his bug-eyes suggestively. All the while he had kept saying Groucho's familiar line from his popular t.v. game show, "Name That Tune."

"Say the secret word, and one of you ladies might win an extra hundred dollars. It's a common household item, something you'd see lying around your house."

The ladies had kept shouting out their guesses hoping to be the winner. "Toilet paper!" "Vodka!" "Unpaid bills!" "The hot water bottle?" The funniest try had been Mom's, "Herbert, the Fuller Brush salesman!"

Groucho had wagged his head negatively at each guess. Lt. Groucho had finally revealed that the secret word-- "...an everyday household item, some you would see lying around the house had been "...you wives! While your husbands

were away in Guam."

Groucho had also made the women howl when they'd heard the names he'd given their hubbies in their grass skirts and lipstick. Hank had been called "Hannah the Big Banana;" our Dad, Mack, had been called "Our Big Mac-adamian Nut;" and Roscoe had been called "Ronda, that Romper-Room Rascal."

After their solo introductions, with Groucho messing around with everybody's names, the men had vamoosed to regroup, and to regain their courage to reappear as mock-serious dancers, swaying seductively with the music.

Their second time out, the men had proceeded out in a wiggling Conga line, throwing kisses demurely from their rouged lips. The Master of Ceremonies had said this performance had been staged to show proof-positive to the wives that their men hadn't been had wasting their time while on R and R in Hawaii, on their breaks from Guam. Instead, he'd said, tongue in cheek, that they'd taken strenuous hands-on lessons in native culture from experts in the fine art of shaking a tail feather and finger-walking, er, talking.

The mock-testy wives had shouted out their protests, but had been willing to be convinced of their husbands' new talent, and they'd whistled and cat-called.

"Send in those fly-boys. Let's see some skin! "Expose those pecs, gluts, biceps and abs--and anything else worth

noticing!" No performer could have wanted a more enthusiastic audience. Several of these wives had been now chewing on or smoking cigars too and they had seemed to have been enjoyed imitating the manly-man habits of their husbands at what Flo had called a "quasi-or queasy Las Vegas-or Los Alamos UFO show."

She had been right about this show, the men had seemed almost aliens when dressed as women. And, jeeppers, those hula skirts the men had worn, had made Bonnie and I say "Oh, oh" instead of "Oooh Lah Lah." They had been packed all wrong, so that the raffia strands had bunched to clump together here or there, and they certainly hadn't hidden all these men's confidential areas, best not left uncovered. With their exposables rudely poking through the raffia strands of those mispacked hula skirts, I'd felt sympathy for the performers. Given their druthers I'm sure they would rather have kept themselves to themselves. If these hula guys had only been able to see their own bodies, especially their hinder sides, hairy legs, and what one guy had called his castanets, in a full-length mirror; they surely would have voted to keep their underwear on, under those bunchy hula skirts, which should have been ironed.

Maybe it was lucky they couldn't see how they'd been embarrassing themselves, behind their very own backs, without even knowing it, every time they'd turned around.

These skirts had been brought back as souvenirs for their daughters and wives. These bigger man-sized bottoms hadn't quite fit all the way into the yardage of these wraparound skirts. It must have been a stretch, even to get them tied behind. One or two of the men had worn suspenders and hadn't bothered with the ties at all. These guys had looked like they'd been wearing grass loin cloths, except from behind where we'd stood, ga-ga and mute at the wonder of it all.

From where we had snooped, we'd seen a row of white exposed fannies, from their open barn doors. This had been the first time my sister and I had ever seen snatches of any naked man, let alone maybe twelve of them. We'd only gotten itsy bitsy peeks of Gordon Goner and the other bologna boys of the neighborhood while we'd been absorbed in the serious business of our nursing games.

During our hospital strip-downs, Bonnie and I had usually kept our eyes squeezed tight, as junior nurses-in-training. We had tried not to spy although it had been hard to avoid the occasional side glance while going about our duties, preparing the operating table. However, anything we'd seen prior to this had only been through the thinnest slits of our eyelids. This wide-open Wild Hawaiian Peephole Show had left nothing quite private, except what had gone on that night in our imaginations.

Ourselves, we'd always said soothing things to our patients similar to what real base hospital personnel had said to us, when they had to remove our shirts for a shot or something. We'd been calm with our patients and had reassured them, "Don't be shy, to us, your naked body, is just a broken down pile of symptoms." Or, "A nurse looks at a body like a mechanic looks at an engine--only as something needing a quick tune-up and a long overhaul." Or, "Don't feel bad. Nurses come to work everyday with sick-looking people. The sicker you look, the better we feel working on you."

The doctors we'd visited had all said something corny, to that effect, to Bonnie and me, when we'd wanted to leave our exposed bodies covered with something besides our jewelry, before some stranger's prying eyes, with probes, rubber gloves and a miner's flashlight strapped to his forehead.

Truth had been, we hadn't seen much of human anatomy, male or female, beyond each other in a sudsy tub together. Glimpses of others had been as quick as a wink. So this night had been a real eye-opener with everybody seeming so carefree about the men's almost naked bodies. Nobody was worry-browed, like hospital staff persons had always been when looking at us. These party people had acted as if sneaky-peeking bodies had been innocent good fun, exactly as

it had been in our own hospital tent, for us as the nurses.

The men's first dance had been to "Lovely Hula Hands" which had been an authentic Hawaiian ukelele song. The men had done okay wiggling their hips and storytelling with their fingers like the real islanders must do. But the next 45 on the automatic turntable of the record-player had been a bit more difficult. It had been a "Walking on Burning Hot Volcanic Coals and Fire-eating" drumming number. One of the young guys had squirted some ignitable fluid on his tongue which he'd used his zippo lighter to torch his tongue to make it flame up, as if he had been a fire-breathing Voodoo God. He had become a human dragon. He must have known the same trick they'd used in restaurants to light up ordinary ice cream to turn it into expensive Baked Alaska. Nobody had ever been able or willing to explain this trick to us, as if we'd have been stupid enough to try it on ourselves.

Then the record changer must have been monkeyed with, for a medley from the film Moulin Rouge, about the sad life of the Parisian artist, Toulouse Latrece, had started mournfully playing. I had thought that this had ruined the mood of the show, after the men's happy-go-lucky amateur shimmying contests.

To have the hula dancers finale by waltzing sadly and then fast-forwarded into the hairy-legged French can-can had left the men looking a bit discombobulated and confused

until they'd clamped onto each other's shoulders, hoisted their skirts and given it the old college-boy try, kicking their hairy legs. I can't imagine the frontal view of this chorus line, but judging from the wives' expressions, the ones who hadn't covered their eyes with their palms--well, it must have been cartoon-like, because the women had laughed and cheered and fallen into each other's arms for support during their giggling fits.

By ones or by twos the men had exited, with the ends of the lines leaving first. The final five, who had been the bolder dancers of the group had thrown their grass skirts up over their hairy behinders. This had been planned, as the gesture had carried a written message, a letter had been written on each bottom spelling the Hawaiian word, A-l-o-h-a

After these curtsies, my sister and I supposed to be fast asleep, well, had thought we'd have to glue our eyeballs back into their sockets. We had tucked ourselves back into our beds while visions of strange ladies' in paradise had hula danced through our heads.

"It's sure good that God invented real girls to be the belly dancers," Bonnie had giggled as she went straight to sleep, over my protests.

I'd continued to toss and turn. The grown-ups had always said that if we, as growing kids, had stayed up past our bedtimes we wouldn't be able to think straight for lack

of sleep. That night, I'd felt the rocky reef of not listening to good advice. Overly tired, I'd pulled the covers over my head wondering whether my eyes had played tricks on me. Maybe I had been hallucinating from lack of sleep.

There had been one guy during the performance who had been in charge of the lights and another who had been the spotlihter, with a couple of flashlights he had shone on the wrongest possible parts of the chorus line. It had cast a voodoo spell when paired with conga drummers, whose pounding had been matching my heartbeats.

The next morning I'd tried to talk to Bonnie about what we'd seen but she said I must have been dreaming, or should have been, and if I hadn't been, I'd better said I'd been, if I'd known what was good for me. So I had taken out my diary, to record my impressions of what I'd seen.

I'd been stymied writing about it too, as I hadn't trusted the snoopers in the world not to excavate it one day, and have me sent away to the funny farm. So I had tucked that night's memories away, whether dream, visual illusion, or fact--truth often being stranger than fiction, as Paul Harvey had said reporting, "the rest of the news."

It hadn't been the hula boys that had disturbed me the most about that weekend. It had been the big scare had come the next morning at a late Sunday breakfast. Mom had said

breakfast wasn't late, brunch had been early. Since Bonnie and I had already played with the leftover Cheez-whiz cans all morning squirting it into each other's mouths, we hadn't needed to eat another bite. We'd played Grand Canyon, tossing - leftover - party - food - at one another for points and then diving to try to catch it on our outstretched tongues. We'd tried our trained seal act eating almost a balanced diet, starting with Brazil nuts and popcorn for the main dish and progressing to dessert--maraschino cherries and M and Ms.

I had been blindfolded on Bonnie's final turn as tosser, seated on our Blind Man Bluff's seat and also losing to her by four-to-one. Bonnie had figured out this ultimate game challenge, trying to catch something tossed straight, but with no looking. I had thought this was impossible but she'd told me there were higher stakes as she'd be tossing me chocolate puffball candies she'd found hidden in a low cupboard. I'd never eaten one of these, so I'd really worked hard maneuvering to catch one of these new candies, she'd claimed had been left by one of our party's guests more than likely. Lured on by her saying there was only one chocolate puffball left, I'd beat the odds and caught it in my mouth. It had been easy for me to track, with its strong scent. After I'd bitten down on my prize, I'd understood quite soon that I wasn't a winner after all;

what Bonnie had tossed was one of Shad's Choco Doggie Cookies. Yuck unto the nth degree, I'd had to relive that bite over and over in my mind, and had kept reading the ingredient list on the box to see if they were lethal if swallowed by a human.

The verbal feedback had even been worse, as for the rest of our time in Georgia, I'd had to listen to friends on the bus giggling about my eating doggie treats. I'd find myself trying to salvage my reputation by calling out, not so very truthfully, "But I didn't swallow!" Now and then one of Gordon's G-men would call me Dog Breath, but usually he'd poked them in the ribs to make them quit teasing me. He was finally protecting me from bullies like I'd thought boyfriends should, just when it wouldn't do me any good as I was moving away. I'd taken all his guff, just to train him up to be a good honey for his next sweetheart.

Once we'd learned that we would be transferred out of Georgia, I'd discovered I could take jokes on myself better, which was good if I'd ever wanted to make a friend of some boy for life and end up getting married to him. I'd thought life sure would be easier up ahead for me, if I could only marry another girl. Those friendships had come so easily, and we always had the same interests and vices.

The morning after the party neither Bonnie nor I could hardly wait for our teenaged years, to play some of the new

games we'd seen the night before. They had played grown-up versions of many of our silly kids' games. The men had even played musical chairs in their grass skirts, though most of them had put their knickers back on.

In the first round the wives had remained in the chairs while the men had marched to the music. The wives were sitting ducks as the human padding on the seats these funny-looking lounge-lizards were planning to sprawl on, with their bare butts or funny underwear, when the music had stopped. I'd seen every variety of underdrawers from tropical string bikinis to flannel boxer shorts with pink candy kisses on them under those skirts.

It had only taken a couple of rounds for the ladies to decide that this game hadn't been so very much fun for them, as the men had been too heavy and keen on winning to land on their laps lightly, while leaping to secure a chair. The ladies' turn marching to the music had worked better, but after one round, they'd given up the game, as none of them had felt that any of the men's laps were safe for them to sit on.

The men had gone alone outside, to play horseshoes tossing all sorts of projectiles, making outrageous bets and using as their target one man sleeping peacefully, snoring with his mouth ajar.

I don't even want to tell you what makeshift goal post

some of the men outside in the dark under our window had been trying to toss pineapples rings onto, but Roscoe had been known as a wild man, and had a big bet riding on it, so I guess he hadn't minded his thingy being used as a propped-up target like that, except once when a cold pineapple ring had ringed the target. Of course, maybe Bonnie had been fibbing about what she'd thought she'd seen with her binoculars out there.

Inside, every one had played polite team sports, like passing the oranges along without using any hands. They had lined up in two rows; boy, girl, boy, girl. They had looked like human escalators, rolling together like undulating heat waves, trying to keep those fruits up and passed along to their team mates with their hands tied behind their backs. I couldn't wait to get married and throw wild parties where anything goes because nobody will remember anything the next day, while nursing their morning-after hangovers.

Since Mom had probably been the only person at our party who had been a life-long teetotaler, the next day everybody had to call upon her, as the only reliable witness, to find out what had really gone on the night before. Half a dozen people had called to ask how badly they'd behaved, whether she was still talking with them, and whether they'd destroyed anything needing replacing. As the

phone at started jangling us out of our sleep, and we'd heard Mom's side of these conversations, Bonnie had lamented how she could have made millions of dollars in blackmail bribes responding to those hungover people's questions.

As for Mom, however, she had been the perfect morning-after hostess, holding her tongue and pretending she hadn't seen a thing out of the ordinary. Truth was, she probably had been concentrating more on protecting her coffee tables from lit cigarettes and sparklers and her beige carpets from hot sauce than on the people running around outside naked as jaybirds. I had taken Bonnie's advice and had stayed quiet.

I had been forever hearing Mom say on the phone, "Really? You'd think I'd remember something like that..." If they'd asked me, I could have told them the true scoop of what had been happening on the edges of the party. But, of course, I had probably only been dreaming or sleep walking or under the undue influence of my "rich imagination" again, like Bonnie had warned me to think.

Meanwhile, back at the unnecessary breakfast, on the Day After, we had gotten this big scare. First off, there had been the shock that since the last time we'd seen her, just before bedtime, our very own grandmother had gone stone deaf in the night! Unless facing you, Gramma couldn't seem to hear or decipher what you had been trying to say to her. We sisters had discovered it, and had tested it, not

believing deafness could happen that quickly. Our experiments had proven our dreaded suspicion, however and we'd reported it to Mom at the stove arranging poached eggs and parsley and rye toast and buttered grits on our plates.

At first Mom hadn't believed us, but then she had seen it for herself when our very polite grandmother hadn't been passing anything she had been asked for at the breakfast table while she'd poked at her food. Mom had been silently arguing with Dad in their kind of sign language to force him to take his mother to the hospital for a check-up. Mom had been making all sorts of gestures to her ears and then saying words real loud to show Dad how his mother really had lost her hearing in the night.

Mom had said to Gramma Anne repeatedly, "Are you deaf as a doornail, Mom?" And it had seemed that she had been, because Gramma hadn't noticed Mom's screaming. Gramma Anne had continued telling us girls about the paper salesman. She had many success stories to relate to us about the Greyhound man who had sold her those magic diaries and his clients who had used them to achieve their dreams. Gramma had repeated that if we had wanted to please her, we'd better continue writing in them every day. She'd told us our writing should be concerning our three biggest wishes and include our daily progress reports on how we had been working to achieve them.

My first wish had begun to happen, although I hadn't known it then, for unbeknownst to me our party had tipped the scales and the wheels had been put into motion for us to escape polio by moving to a land faraway.

I had been glad that Gramma couldn't have heard Bonnie that morning telling me at the table her own three silly wishes. First, she'd said she had wanted to tar and feather Gordon, the Magic Genie, for pulling a hoax on us. Secondly, she'd said she had wanted to own her own twin spotted ponies to be named Chickenpox and Measles. Lastly, she'd said she wanted to multiply her first two big wishes times a thousand and one equaling = 2,002 littler wishes to be granted on a daily basis. So as not to seem selfish, she'd also described her last wish as trading her other two huge bonanza wishes for 2,002 smaller bonus points, many of which she'd share with the less fortunate, like me.

Gramma had talked right on top of Bonnie's muttering and still hadn't answered any of our doubting questions about whether our wish book writing would bring us a pony and how soon.

We'd wondered aloud, since Gramma hadn't been able to tune in to us anymore in the ear department, how many pages of diary would equal two small ponies. Bonnie and I had looked at each other forlornly, because we might never receive the answers we'd asked for since Gramma had gone

deaf and couldn't hear our questions anymore.

Finally Mom had gone to get the butter which Gramma hadn't passed to her, after having been asked three different times, each time louder. When Mom had stood at the end of the breakfast table beside Gramma, she had patted Gramma's head consolingly and had smoothed back the curls on the sides of her face. Mom had always done all the beautifying of our family's hair in her home beauty parlor, except for Dad's. That head count had also included one or two of our nearby neighbor ladies. They'd come over so often, when Dad had been gone, we'd almost felt as if they were a part of our hair family too. Betty and Augie had claimed to be hopeless with hair, and had said they'd be looking so scary they'd even frightened scarecrows without the do-s Mom had done on them from the kindness of her heart.

Since Anne's fine-textured hair had gotten too curly on this visit's recent home perm, Mom had been relaxing each of Gramma's major curls with her own finger and thumb. She'd done this by pressuring the curls flat with some warmed corn oil and recoiling them so they'd look less likely to sprout wings and fly away to Hong Kong.

In the midst of this tender scene of us around the breakfast table, sad about Gramma getting old enough to need a hearing aid, Mom had suddenly looked provoked. She'd

raised twice this one curl she had been relaxing on the side of Gramma's face, and then had just grabbed Gramma's head with both hands and had forced her surprised face to the one side without a word of apology, since Gramma could no longer be expected to hear it anyway.

Mom had acted as if she had been Shad hassling our Raggedly Annie or Andy. We'd always hated for Mom to get peeved at anyone or anything, because then she'd could stare down any offender so intensely that it had made my head feel like a wedge of Swiss cheese. She had been doing this now to Gramma we'd thought, as she'd grabbed Gramma's face like she had been a pesky stuck lid. Then Mom had crammed her little finger into Gramma's ear, and had started to extract this big old long roll of cotton out of it, like a magician, as this cotton had seemed to keep stretching out forever. But as she had done this, Gramma too had looked real surprised, but pleased, and had then shook her own head from side to side as if someone had just pulled the stopper to unplug up her plumbing.

After Mom had done the same cotton extraction trick from the other ear of her dear mother-in-law's head, Gramma had started smiling so big, she'd almost forgotten to swallow first, so she'd choked a bit.

But she had been so gratified with relief that she'd started talking non-stop, like a radio news report, saying,

"Thank you dear, I had been hearing a little fuzzy this morning. You won't believe your own ears about this, but I had thought I had gone stone deaf from that loud music last night.

I hadn't been meaning to mention it to you for awhile, so you all wouldn't feel so bad about not only keeping me up all night, but also costing me my hearing.

You see, I'd used the cotton bunting to cushion my hair net for sleeping on my new hair-do, but when your party had never ended last night, I'd decided to try stuffing some of it into my ears to use for do-it-yourself ear-plugs too.

I'm glad that scare is over. You know, my biggest regret about going deaf would have been not hearing the stories of all the other Greyhound passengers on the way down to Tallahassee this afternoon. That leg of the journey has just the most interesting people. You know, they have a prison in Tallahassee, so a lot of visitors going there ride with me. You wouldn't believe the escape schemes and the cops and robbers stories they tell me."

Alas, despite our relief at Gramma's recovering her hearing, no matter how much we'd pleaded and pried, Gramma adamantly refused to be telling us any of her Greyhound crime tales. She'd claimed that these wouldn't interest us, anyway, while she'd continued instead to tell us about the future of paper products and fletcherizing. She had also

told us that our wishes would probably come true when we'd least expected them, and when we'd needed most for them to happen.

In the long run, as it had turned out, Mom's wild party and cakes, as predicted, had seemed to be the icing on the promotion, and Dad had won the day. Inez's husband would have to wait another six months, or until his wife had learned to play fair.

In a few months Dad had gotten his promotion to Major, which had given us more options of future bases for him request an assignment from. The follow-up paperwork, or red tape, however, with our next move had been extensive and taken longer than usual as he'd requested and procured an assignment to go clear to England! Maybe the delay of couple of months had been good, because it had given me time to read English history and travel books and travel in my imagination to this fairy tale destination, filling me with visions of new adventures every night.

I had found myself changing already after getting my Wish Progress Book. I had gotten so much braver from needing to make something happen good enough to write about in it. Knowing about that upcoming move had also made so much of a difference in my attitude that I'd hardly recognized myself. Nothing being permanent in life had hit home for me, as evidenced by us being on the brink of

leaving: our friends, grammas, school, house, neighborhood, city, state and country. Therefore, I had stopped worrying so much about the long-term consequences of my every single action or word, I'd had likewise quit being too shy to speak up.

With a calendar marked with our trip's departure date, I'd kept daring myself to talk at times, and to people, when and with whom, I'd normally I'd have held my tongue. I'd kept reminding myself that it was now or never, instead of worrying about my life here bulking up toward some substantial future, further down the road.

I'd finally been able to understand that there hadn't been going to be endless tomorrows for me in the South. Someone else would be saying Nine Pine Valley Road was her address. Somebody new would be calling Gobbie "Dumbo." She'd be experimenting on him as her practice-pretend fiance. It had seemed to me as if everything in this familiar life had an expiration date and was going to die. I had tried to prepare myself for ending up like this before, but then my future had just been a looming question mark and, like death, I couldn't quite imagine it. It had been incredible to me that moving had meant that Everything familiar could suddenly be gone in a day? All vanishing around a corner never to return, nothing lasting beyond that date except me, my family and some memories which I could

recall but never touch again. I had been so glad for my Wish Diary, as I'd captured moments I couldn't be sure I'd have remembered otherwise. I'd wondered if peoples' brains finally get full, with the older memories getting discarded? Writing had seemed like the only permanence in my life.

my eyes and Bonnie's had too. We'd sat there staring at nothing.

We'd then ventured to look into each other's eyes, stunned and trying to hold back the tears. The man who had pulled his car, in front of ours, off the highway had begun flagging the row of stalled cars on by. As we'd waited to move he'd stuck his head in our Buick's window, saying, "No big deal, just one less stray Nigger dog from those shacks back in the woods. Move along, all clear. No further problem."

The cars on the two lane had slowly crept forward as some men had hoisted the puppy' brown body and flung it towards the ditch lining the woods, which had muddy roads trailing off into the dark recesses. Some dark-skinned children had stared into the ditch. Standing back at the edge of the trees, looking at the ditch-lined road, one little boy had been crying, two others had their arms wrapped around each other looking scared.

I'd had goosebumps in the hot afternoon, and hadn't been able to quit shivering while sweating and staring beyond the ditch to the children who must live somewhere back in the dark foliage beyond the mud road. I'd never heard anyone use mean-fisted words like that before. Neither Mom nor Dad had said anything for a time until finally Mom had said, "Try to put this out of your minds."

Rule #0: Times come when no rules make any sense.

Before we'd left, a few incidents had occurred which had helped to staunch the blow. Before we'd gotten our transfer orders it had seemed we'd always looked at the brighter side of our life in Savannah. Once we'd known our days in Savannah were numbered, some dark shadows had seemed to fall over our previous perceptions of this almost-perfect place.

One day after Dad's transfer had been official, a speeding car, two ahead of us, on the highway had hit a dog. Though Mom had told us to stay put and cover our eyes, we'd heard the impact and the dog's cry of pain.

Cars in both directions had stopped and Mom had told us to sit back in our seats and cover our eyes and "Don't look!"

I'd obediently and gratefully covered my eyes with my palms while the poor dog had continued to howl. Then after only a few painful moments of listening to the dog's agony, I'd seen motorists running around outside. Everyone had wanted relief for this poor animal, but not as it had come. A shot had rung out, followed by silence. The man whose car had hit the puppy had used a bullet instead of bothering to take it to an animal hospital. "Oh no," Mom had said, voicing our common sadness. My hands had fallen away from

my eyes and Bonnie's had too. We'd sat there staring at nothing.

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At least we're leaving here. The puppy is out of this misery, at least."

From then on, this highway which had always meant nearness to home, had seemed tainted with echoes of misery. I'd never before then imagined anyone had lived back in those thick, dark woods. For the rest of my time in Savannah when on that road, I'd have to block out the sound of that puppy, that gun, and that man's evil words.

The second jolt had come one day when Dad had arrived home and announced that Flo had given birth her long overdue baby. He'd reported that the baby had been so big, they'd had to give Flo a C-section. I hadn't known what that had meant but was relieved when Dad had said, "Both mother and child are doing well, or at least trying to adjust."

I had been excited and anxious to see this new child. Flo had been the first pregnant lady of my experience. After Flo had gone into labor Mom had her little bedtime discussion with us about the birds and bees. It had seemed a man and a woman in love and kissing in their bed could create a child. Mom had promised to find a good biology book on reproduction for us, once we'd gotten over to England. She'd said this book would fill in the details better than she could. I had been very excited that Flo and Roscoe had finally had kissed enough to make a baby, which would make them a family forever.

"So Roscoe Rosdrum Junior was as big as his Dad's expectations, huh?" Mom had asked Dad.

"Whoa. Wait a minute. It wasn't a junior, they had a ten pound GIRL baby. Roscoe is having a hard time adjusting to that."

"What did he say? Did you talk to him?" Mom had looked concerned.

"Nobody has talked to him. Flo hasn't even seen him yet. She had a forty-eight hour labor, followed by the operation," Dad had looked tired just thinking about it.

My parents hadn't talked about the birth in front of me anymore that day. I'd been glad that they had a girl baby. The next day after work Mom, who had given Flo a baby shower, had asked about it again, "What do you hear about the new baby?"

"It's the darrest thing. Oh, the baby is fine. But nobody knows where Roscoe is. Nobody's seen hide nor hair of him. It seems after their baby was born, Roscoe got in his Jag with Alley Oops riding shotgun and took to the highway," Dad hadn't seemed to know what to think of Roscoe's reaction.

"What does that mean?" Mom had stopped ironing, realizing his behavior had been more than the usual new Daddy jitters.

"After the doctor said, "It's a girl," Roscoe threw a

fist full of cigars on the Waiting Room table and bee-lined it out of the infirmary. He was seen to climb into his car, peel out of the parking lot, but nobody has seen him since. He didn't even go to the nursery to get a peek. His car isn't at home." Dad had filled Mom in on the details while I'd listened quietly from the open door to my room.

I had one section of my diary reserved for unusual events concerning others than myself and my wishes for them. This baby business with Flo and Roscoe had been mentioned in many of my entries along with my wishes for them to live forever in a happily-ever-after family way.

I'd known Dad's job had meant he had to deal with problems like this among his men. Luckily their baby had been born just before a weekend, as during the work week Roscoe's disappearance might have been considered AWOL, since he hadn't taken any leave time.

It had been a relief when Monday morning had rolled around, and Roscoe had shown up back at work, per usual. He had made no mention of the baby and he had waved off anyone's questions. Around the supper table Dad said he'd thought Roscoe must have adjusted to the idea of having a girl baby. We'd known she'd be wearing exclusively blue, and mostly tiny sports uniforms, as that had been Roscoe's standing order for the baby shower gifts, according to Flo.

But Mom had then reported to us that when she had

visited Flo that day to bring her the layette, Flo had said she still hadn't seen her hubby.

Mom and Dad had then quit talking about the incident again for a few days, at least in front of us, leaving my mind buzzing. Roscoe had always been the nicest of all the men in Dad's squadron to me and Bonnie. He'd always said he had wanted to have children of his own one day.

He'd told us sisters, he wasn't sure that becoming a father was in the cards for him, as the deck had been stacked against him. He's said he'd want a doctor's guarantee that he'd have cutie pies like Bonnie and me. He'd said the men in his family however had been "plagued" and had only fathered boy baby brats. I'd thought when he had said this, he been truly sorry that there had only been brothers in his family, for generations. Nothing but baby soldiers born to his clan, he'd sighed, and not a single young sweetheart born to a one of his four older Rosdrum brothers.

We hadn't known he'd been teasing us, or flirting to get on our good sides. But he had been or why had Roscoe split when he'd found out that he had gotten himself a beautiful girl baby? When Flo had gotten home from the hospital, Roscoe had recovered from his disappointment enough to say to his wife that baby "Sydney" had been welcome to stay, as long as she would be a good big sister

to her younger brother, Roscoe, Junior, whom he had expected from Flo ASAP, right on his baby sister's heels.

As soon as Flo had caught her breath she had claimed that one baby had been more than plenty for her. Since then, the couple reportedly hadn't even been speaking, according to the squadron's sources. Our neighbor, Betty, had said that her Papa Bear had been the same kind of male animal. She said he'd kept her barefoot and pregnant until he'd gotten his son, whom he'd then treated as an only child, totally ignoring his daughters, on days when they were lucky.

From then on, I hadn't trusted Roscoe anymore, he'd started to seem to me to have been a fake friend to girls, like the Aesop's fox was to the crow with a grape in her beak. I had been glad I wouldn't have to be seeing Roscoe for the rest of my life, with our impending move on the horizon.

I hadn't been happy, however, that in shedding Roscoe and his fake compliments, I'd be losing Gordon Goner, who hadn't said anything nice to me, like Roscoe had done, but at least was sincere with his jibes.

I'd told my almost-boyfriend right away that we were leaving. He'd said, "Too bad. When are you coming back?"

"Never, I think," I'd said.

I'd expected him to reply sadly to this news or at

least say it was awful or too bad. Instead, after his silence he'd said, "Then, do you think I can have your hospital tent?"

I had been so surprised to have him respond to our parting with a case of the gimmes. Because of his bad attitude, I hadn't wanted to give our tent to him. But since England was going to be too cold and rocky for doing much camping, Mom had ended up giving it to Gordon, over my protests. When I'd handed it, all neatly folded up, to him on his doorstep, he'd pretended to me that this tent wouldn't ever be half as good inside anymore without us nurses to go along with it.

But then, when he'd set it up in his yard, he'd put a big sign on the flap saying "G-Men Clubhouse: Boys Only!!" Underneath the painted words, had been his scribbling which I'd recognized, "This means you, if you are a girl. The end." He wouldn't even let us visit in our very own tent? I hadn't had time before the move to challenge this. I hadn't wanted to go inside his old G-men clubhouse anyway, it was probably messy and booby-trapped like his bedroom had been, dirty as a crawl space, as if he were cultivating spider webs as his hobby.

"So you'll miss me?" I'd asked him the last day of school, even sitting next to him in the very same seat, against all the regular G-men rules.

"Sure I will, though I'm getting too big to play with girls anymore. So can you give me the rest of the candy pills before you leave? Something to remember you by?"

This comment had made me think that he, himself, had turned out to be a pill. I had almost told him so, but instead had moved to the only other vacant seat on the bus that day, even if it had been next to Freida's yucky-nosed brother, Orin.

Gordon hadn't apologized but had called out, "Any one new want to be my new girlfriend?"

I had given him a look, and he'd backed down, "Just kidding."

Bonnie had said later that I should be thankful, at least, that I wouldn't have to be marrying him in my future. She had thought I'd be better suited for a British boy. Mom had warned us that boys actions, or what they say, can't be trusted at this stage of the game. She'd informed us that boys are all taught to hide their true feelings so they won't be called sissies. So the more they care, Mom had said, the harder they have to try not to show it. We were told to trust our womanly intuition in matters of the heart, and believe whatever we'd felt the truth to be.

Bonnie had cracked my hopeful facade, built on those words of faith, when she'd said, "According to my intuition, Gordon only wanted you as a girlfriend for your candy ...and

our tent."

As our date for departure had drawn near, I'd steeled myself like a boy against getting mushy by focusing on the bad parts of Georgia, such as how mercenary my boyfriend had been. As we'd packed up all of our belongings, ready to pull out of town, I'd also taken a box of discarded toys across that tainted highway and had left them near the woods. The next time we'd driven by the dirt road leading back into the woods I'd seen the box was gone. I'd wished I could have left a puppy instead, or could have changed their fate in Georgia, and could have helped to pave more than that dirt road, but people's murky dislike of differences among God's people.

If we hadn't been going to England, I might have cried like a baby. Since we had been headed for an entirely different country, it had seemed as if we weren't going to move to a new place, as much as to a new life.

I still hadn't been able to forget entirely about the good things we were about to be forced to leave behind. Shad, had been by far the hardest of everything to give up. Dad had said he couldn't come because he would have to be quarantined in England at the Port of Entrance in a cage for six months before they'd let him enter their country.

Brat Rat and Ernie, had been second-hardest to say goodbye to in my regret column. The rats, like Shad, had

been a part of our family. Before we'd left we'd discovered they had burrowed a tunnel into the bottom of Bonnie's mattress where they had been stowing things they'd pilfered, deep inside that mattress, for most of the two years we'd known them. Far inside their storage tunnel, which they'd eaten or dug through to the center bottom of Bonnie's mattress we'd found our missing hair ribbons, cheese as hard as stones, party nuts, shredded homework and even half a tube of toothpaste that they'd bitten dozen of holes through, to suck out the Colgate inside. No wonder they had such white teeth.

I regretted that I'd also be leaving my hopes and plans for a dancing career behind with Mrs. Nomano. I hadn't thought she could be replaced. Other teachers we'd studied with had merely taught dance, while Iris had taught us to think of posterity.

Our future food was bound to be different, I'd doubted that the British blokes had been friendly-familiar with hush puppies, collard greens, or our daily popsicle man treats. On my final tally sheet, at the top of my column labelled Good Reasons To Leave list, I'd written--escaping the polio scare. Since Dad's overseas assignment had been for over three years, I'd figured that the March of Dimes would surely have collected enough money to win their war on that disease by the time we'd be returning.

On the last day of school, Gordon had written me a note on the bus, after I'd changed seats.

Dear Barri Lyn, Come back soon. Send postcard of castles and weapons. Gordon the Glad-e-ater. XXX

It had taken him the whole ride home to write it. At our bus stop, all the kids had gathered around, pushing me forward to where Gordon had stood and encouraging me, "Aren't you even going to kiss your true love goodbye? Scared of his cooties?"

The younger kids had all challenged me, although I'd cleaved to the idea, that in kissing, the first move had to be the boy's. Gordon and I had stood there looking at our feet, and one kid had taken a big stick and drawn a big valentine heart shape around us.

One of the G-Men, however, had said, "No mushy mouthing for our leader!"

After hearing his buddy who had pushed on his friend, in the direction away from me, Gordon had finally stuck out his hand to me, after looking back towards them. A handshake? Disappointed, I'd done it anyway, and he'd kissed the back of my hand, and then blushing had run away saying, "Ugh! Aren't you glad that's over with, Barri Lyn?" as he'd wiped his mouth, heading for the tent.

He'd called over his shoulder as he'd made his getaway, "I didn't mean to ugh you, Barri Lyn. But your hand tasted

like Crayola. Bye. Remember my postcards--15 Pine Valley Road, okay? Savannah, GA.! And remember my pills..."

Walking home, I'd re-read his note. He'd spelled gladiator wrong. As Bonnie had said earlier, no boys had ever won the Spelling Bee in the whole history of Central School and their spelling future hadn't looked bright, judging from Gobbie.

I'd known for sure, at that moment, that he sure enough hadn't gotten two brains, unless he'd kept one in hibernation. I had liked that he'd written me three kisses--XXX. I had gone home and had started writing more love letters, one of which had been so well-written that it had almost made me cry. I'd written to him, that if not for polio closing in on me and my little sister, he and I might have been together for always, happily ever after.

I would continue writing these letters to add them to my Dear Heartthrob Fuzzybun's pile, wondering if I'd pack them up and bring them to England with me or leave them with a big pile of candy pills outside of the G-men's tent; or burn them at our Goodbye barbecue. Each had gotten a little more touching, until Dear Corporal Gobstopper had become almost a romantic gladiator in my imagination. After liking him since first grade, it surely had been hard for me to accept that I'd soon have to find myself a new boyfriend or become a nun. I'd decided to check out monasteries while

we were abroad. That surely had sounded grandly snooty--I was going "abroad," and might just join a convent over on the continent, take a vow of silence and spend my time writing letters in French and cultivating roses and befriending robins.

Rosdrum had declared at our final barbecue, that his baby girl, Syd, had even been more fun than Alley Oops! He'd said that she was even tougher than Flo, and he'd expected her to blacken the eyes of all her nephews.

His pride must have run in their family, as Roscoe's father had mailed Sydney twice the amount of savings bonds and stock as he'd sent to his grandsons as a birth present, along with a note to Roscoe to "Keep breaking our old worn-out family traditions, son."

Syd had looked funny propped up and riding beside him in his Jaguar. He'd dressed her to be the frilliest girl baby I'd ever seen.

"If you can't beat them, join 'em," had been his disclaimer, after his original reticence about having a daughter. Regardless of this tardy apology, Syd hadn't forgiven him, and was forever slapping him in the face, or throwing up on his uniform.

On the Road Again, Free of the Four Rs, Including "Rules"

The memory of those look-alike miles of our trip from Georgia to L.A., inside the yellow cars of the Southern Pacific Railroad have remained vivid to me, window-framed in a moving-along kind of head trip. Dad had flown to England ahead of us, straight from the base in Savannah. He had been shipped out, following by a month, all of our earthly treasures worth saving, at least those which had been within regulation weight for our family's household goods allotment.

After our pick-and-choose pared-down stash had been packed up and mailed, we ladies of the family had the problem of deciding where to wait out the two months before we could fly to New York and to get on the boat to go over and join Dad.

Mom, with Bonnie and I, had decided to go to say goodbye to her mother, our Gramma Flossie, who had lived in Hollywood. This had been our first long train trip. Once on board, we had gone all the way from Savannah to L.A. on the same train, with the same porter, Sam, who had loved us and we'd loved him back. Aboard the train we'd always had the same table near the kitchen nook in the dining car, where our waiter Rowe had also loved us and we had loved him right back. Roscoe, who had driven us to the station, had

given all of them extra big tips, from our Dad, to take especially good care of us.

After locking up our house for the last time, Roscoe had asked Gordon, whom he'd called "that brown-eyed handsome man" to pile in the Jag with us. Gordon had been only too eager to squeeze in and we been crowded in the wind with the top down, so that we all could fit. Roscoe had hugged and kissed all of us in the nicest way and then told Gordon to go ahead and "be a man" and Gordon had done a shorter version of hugging and kissing even me, imitating Roscoe. I'd been kissed goodbye! I'd felt weak in the knees and out of breath, just like a girl in a Nancy Drew mystery. Roscoe and Gordon had waved and run along the platform until the train had gone out of sight. I'd even seen two men waving hankies from far away on the platform, as our train had pulled away, out of sight. I'd felt like a beloved Southern belle for the first time, pulling away from the South. I'd known we wouldn't ever be forgotten, as Dad had given Shad to Gordon and his family. Roscoe had given Sydney both Brat Rat and Ernie in their two story house, and had promised not to let Alley Oops visit them.

Inside the train, we'd been treated as if we were special people entrusted to the staff by someone who had loved and missed us. I'd weeped for a little awhile, over nothing special, except a sense of loss.

sides," Bonnie had expressed shock that Gordon had kissed me right on the lips, almost tipping me over. "Of course, he was just copycatting so Roscoe would like him."

"Most boys are softer-hearted than most girls. They have to act tough, if don't want to be found out," Mom had said.

"The boy back there?" the porter had asked me and I'd affirmed that Gordon had been the one we had been talking about.

"I saw his eyes. You broke his heart. I hope you help him mend, that boy will never be the same," Sam had deposited our luggage.

"How help him? I'll never see him again," I'd pouted.

"Drop him a line, send him some sugar," Sam had then given me a Southern Pacific postcard and a ballpoint pen. I'd stared at the blank side for a long time. Then I'd started a travelogue to Dearly Missed Fuzzybun which had covered ten similar cards in tiny writing before we'd arrived in Los Angeles.

My postcards to Gordon had blossomed into such a project, that I hadn't wanted to part with my collection of meaningful picture cards, with their pithy little commentaries. I'd decided the fact that I'd wanted to keep them for myself was an indication that I'd buried the torch for Gordon and was ready to start a new life. Now that I'd

had my first real kiss, which had looked to Bonnie like a scene from a movie, I'd felt maybe I could retire from boyfriend hunting for a few years. If only I had some direction for my future, outside of getting married, maybe I could have prepared for it.

I'd decided I'd buy Gordon a postcard of the Hollywood Hills when we'd arrived in L.A. and just write Hi! and lots of XXXs. I'd follow through on my plan, but don't know if it had ever reached a postbox or not.

The truth had been, however, although traveling, we had hardly ever left the dining room after we'd eaten our first meat at "our" table, number 14. In this travelling diner, we'd been so content with our waiter and our cook and his friends who had become our good buddies. After they had cleared the dishes away after each meal, we had all played cards with us or they had watched us play Solitaire while Mom had written letters to Dad, Betty and our grammas, which Sam had even mailed for us along the way.

The dining car workers had spent all their off-duty time still busily shining the silver or the wine glasses to get rid of every spot. "There's no work for the weary," one of them had said. Train passengers had always kept the crew doing special favors and errands. They'd lamented that they'd forgotten the last time they'd had a real break while on board. To Connie and I, allowed to help shine a little,

this had seemed like fun work, with such good company.

Mom had written a letter a day to Dad as she had so much to tell him. He had always been her best friend, as well as her husband. They'd been one of the few couples I'd known who were married, yet still in love. Only wars or national emergencies had separated them. Mom had warned me never to marry a sailor, as the Navy was even harder on wives. I'd wondered if I was so love-struck because of how close my parents were.

I'd probably just been "in love with love," and since I hadn't liked boys as much as Mom had, I thought a sailor who was gone all the time might be just perfect for me. I had never known any women who weren't married, except for some widows. I'd felt sorry for those, but I'd heard busy wives envy their free time. Women who had worked after their high school or college years had been rare. I'd wondered about them too, but had mostly known military wives whose special duties were almost a career.

I had written faithfully in Gramma Ann's wish book. Mostly I'd written about wondering about what I might be good at doing. All I'd ever liked was shopping, getting dressed up, baking cookies and having good friends. I guessed those interests had qualified me for being a wife, which I'd felt was lucky, with no other choices, except being a nun or a widow. Both of those other options had

problems for me--I wasn't born Catholic, and the church probably wouldn't want me, now that Gordon had kissed me, according to Freida, since I wasn't pure enough. That was too bad, as I hadn't liked what she'd told me that married people did.

As for becoming a widow, I couldn't graduate into spinsterhood, until I'd gone through the prelude, the same old marriage go-around. All girls had seemed to end up married, sooner or later, despite their resistance or plans to be some kind of star instead. Maybe I could just be a diary writer, except probably nobody made a living from doing that. I'd figured if I'd wanted to invent this as my new career, I'd have to try to have many experiences in my life to write about, or maybe just prove ordinary life wasn't all that bad.

For instance, I'd felt like we'd been on a grand adventure just sitting where we'd been. The three of us must have gained twenty pounds between us after sitting on that train in the dining car for four days, hardly moving, except for going to the drinking fountain. We hadn't lacked excitement, as the train had wiggled a lot, so that even brushing our teeth, or walking between cars had felt like a new experience. Once the train had taken a sharp turn when I'd been squeezing out toothpaste, and ended up giving a Pepsodent shine to all the sinks in the bathroom, trying to

wipe up a string of toothpaste, half as long as our train car.

We had mostly stayed put, with the porters, waiters and an occasional conductor surrounding us. This had started that first afternoon when Mom had told Rowe she'd seen some unsavory characters back near our regular seats. The crewmen had wanted to help us avoid them, and had advised that we never go alone anywhere. Instead we'd set up camp in our tiny travelling world, just two cars long, but full of friendship and jokes and changing scenery.

Early on, Mom and Sam, followed by Bonnie and I, had walked through all of the cars so she could point out these nefarious mugger-types to our protective porter. When Sam had seen the bunch Mom was concerned about, he'd said they were most likely men who had "worked" the trains as con men. He'd said he'd known them to be tipplers, (secret all-day drinkers); rummies; hucksters and card sharks. He had promised he'd see to it that we wouldn't be bothered and they wouldn't be making any moves on a respectable woman like Mom, travelling alone with girls, with a lot of pocket change. The only way he could keep his eye on us, had been if we had tarried close-by to where he'd worked, so we had, volunteering to help. Most of his work hadn't been so different from what Mom had done at home, except he'd done it for carloads of strangers.

At night, however, we'd turned in early, as there had been nothing much to see and little to do that we hadn't already been doing for hours. I'd never been able to sleep when moving, so I'd had some long nights on the train. Out my berth window I'd watched as we'd clipped along making bumpy turns, passing lights at railroad crossings with cars lined up behind the railroad barriers, red light swinging. The crossing bell would go crazy dinging its warning above the low deep moan of the engine's whistle. This had been the first time I'd been riding on one of these trains which I'd heard announcing themselves for all of my life.

At bedtime the crew had folded down our private sleeping compartments, surrounded by curtains. It had always felt inside that private upper berth as if my sister and I had been twin princesses with a canopy bed like I'd always wanted. Dad had built two of those beds for our Toni dolls--Pocahontas and Annie Oakley. Mom had sewn blue taffeta curtains for the bed, with pink ribbons which had crocheted bouquets stitched to the ties. I had so wanted a bed to match my doll's but big bolstered beds had been impractical to a Air Force brat's lifestyle. Fold-up Army cots on rollers had been the military command's beds of choice, if the truth be known. However, our twin beds had dissembled with a screwdriver, so we hadn't been forced to live the spare, mobile life like the barracks' recruits had

done.

Content in our berth, with its privacy curtains, living a fairy tale life, perhaps similar to the Princess bothered by the Pea under her mattress. I'd been uncomfortable only in bed, racing toward the west coast feet first, lying down. My peace had been disturbed when Rowe had told us that it had taken one or two miles for a train to stop after the engineer had applied his brakes.

"You mean anything which gets in front of a train on the tracks gets crinkled, even if the engineer sees it first?" Bonnie had gulped too.

"That's right darling. The engineer can see it up ahead but wild horses couldn't stop a train running at sixty miles an hour. Anything on a track up ahead that an engineer has time to see, is dead meat. Fact of life," Sam smiled as the men started remembering all the things they'd seen hit by trains. The animals they'd seen demolished by trains every year would have filled a small zoo.

During this trip, living in a style, which to me had felt as if I'd been royalty, I'd wished the world had more monarchies so I could set my three hopeful wishes upon a castle protected by my own horsebacked cavalry with horses for me to ride bareback. Then I could have my whole family living in the palace with me, as I'd thought the worst part of marrying, even a prince, would have been moving out and

leaving my own family behind.

In the dining car we had been served what Mom had called the best food she'd ever eaten in her life. It had been truly very good, but I think she had been partial to it partly because it had appeared in front of us, almost as if by magic, three or four times a day without her having to lift so much as a little finger. She had been used to cooking, had done it all her life, which hadn't meant she couldn't use a change. Maybe she was learning new ways--the fun of the Eat-Out lifestyle.

On this train I'd had fears that Mom might give up cooking altogether. I'd hoped Mom had only been teasing about that. My worries had been assuaged when she'd gotten kitchen hints from the railroad crew, which she'd said she couldn't wait to try for herself. Some of their cooking hints had after our raving about dishes we'd been served.

They'd shared their secret of adding rhubarb and lemon zest to their berry cobblers to give them a sting; and adding corn flakes, rice crispies, garlic and dried parsley to chicken batter and then double-frying it. She'd also discovered from them tricky ways to disguise squash, okra and onions by frying it in garlic oil, covered with spiced batter so that even kids will eat their vegetables.

The crew men had proven to us that singing at the stove makes everything taste better. Singing gospels or

spirituals, they'd said, had been a cook's way of blessing the food, and the best seasoning for any meal, but they'd warned not to cook humming the sad and blue ones.

I'd liked their lively song that went, "I'm going to jump down, turn around, pick a bale of cotton. Jump down, turn around, pick a bale a day..Oh, Lordy, pick a bale of cotton. Oh, Lordy, pick a bale a day."

That song must have fueled the cotton-pickers of the old slavery days. This had been the first time I'd thought deeply about slavery beyond it being a regrettable part of our past history.

When we'd sung that we'd all clapped and they'd tapped on pans with their wooden spoons when we'd all sung that song together. One man could make wonderful tap dancing music just clapping his hands on his thighs and anything else nearby. They'd had harmonicas and jew's harps and one guy showed us that even a comb can make music. If not for music which had linked people in their trials, I couldn't imagine how any of the South's slaves could have survived.

Actually Sam had said that the slaves owed part of their survival to the songs they'd sung in the fields. They'd had code words, and had sung messages to each other and had even developed a fast colloquial way of talking full of elisions that the whites couldn't understand. I'd wondered if I could have survived. It wouldn't have been

the exhaustion as much as the sorrow that would have bothered me. What if my baby had been sold? Or my sister or father? What if I'd seen my friends whipped for trying to escape? I'd thought about these things a lot, not because we'd talked about them a lot, but because of how much I'd liked being around Sam and Rowe. They had given me the same kind of contented warm feeling that my Mom had when she hadn't been too busy.

These men had often injected, "Yes, Jesus!" into our conversations. They had helped me realize that they had been living on two planes at once. On a heavenly spiritual plane, the men had said they had believed that the evil masters of this world would be getting a taste of their own medicine when the day of the Resurrection had arrived.

I had learned more about religion and about slavery during those four days with them than I had from five years of driving past those cotton fields. Although Sam had said things had gotten better for the coloreds, he had admitted it still hadn't been made right enough or fair.

We all had gotten teary-eyed now and then, but they hadn't used anything but happy-talk when the other white folks or their white boss had been around or within hearing distance. I had never thought much about slavery before that trip, and had wondered how I'd missed all the prejudice I'd been living amidst. Now and then I'd been embarrassed

for the first time to be white.

I'd only remembered one incident from my early-bird years which I'd felt was strange. One time our family had gone to the Dairy Queen in the evening after dinner. There had been a long line, and it had been Dad who had been fetching our cones for us.

He had left the long line and had gone to the side of the building to get a drink from the fountain. As he'd bent over to take a swallow, one old dark-skinned fellow had tapped him on the shoulder. The old man in his dignified gray suit and hat had shook his head and had pointed with his cane to the sign over the fountain. The sign had read: COLORED. Dad had been drinking out of the coloreds' fountain. The one with WHITES on it, had been on the other side of the building. As Dad had walked to the other side to use that fountain, he had looked all embarrassed. All the dark-skinned people in the line had howled with laughter, pointing at him good-naturedly. They'd seemed to think Dad's mistake was so funny, that they'd told about the incident to any newcomers who had joined them at the DQ. How many lines of deception had these old fellows had to swallow in their lives to be able to find humor in such an entrenched, but irrational dichotomy? Their laughing about Dad almost drinking all wrong, color-wise, must have shown me the folly of humanity, with this unnatural segregation of

people by false criteria, because the incident has stuck in my mind and might have been the origin of the scrawl on my diary's page: "Why can't we all just be friends?"

In the backroads of my mind, one other jolt still resides--remembering myself going alone in one of the main department stores of Savannah, back to find the bathroom. I'd never had a good sense of direction, so had become confused when I'd discovered there had been four bathrooms at the rear of the store. There had been four signs two with logos for women beside the writing and two with logos for men. As I'd never gone into a public bathroom unless it had been a dire emergency, I'd gratefully ducked into the first one which had the little stick drawing with a skirt on it, as opposed to pants. Inside, however, a lady had shooed me away saying, "Child, you can't go in here. You picked the wrong bathroom." Nearly wetting my britches, the kind lady had shown me into the hall where there had been four similar doors and had pointed, as she'd had read the signs to me.

"See that says Whites, next to the picture of the lady, next to the one which says Whites with the drawing of the man. Back here we've got the ones for the Colored Men and Colored Ladies. You are white, you don't belong back here. You go in the nice one, over there."

I'd followed her directions, and sure enough the second one I'd gone into, for White Ladies had been so much bigger

and nicer than the one I'd just left labeled Colored Ladies. If we'd been around more black people, my awareness of racial issues might have been stronger, even as a child. But it had been as if all the doors of the city had those signs on them, declaring who was welcome and who was not. I'd known that many white people would have been scared stiff to walk in many of the places, which invisible signs declared off-limits zones for one race or the other. It hadn't seemed awkward to me at the time, as one race of people went about their business mostly without running into the other race. It had been, as if there had been a town within a town, and we had gotten around, like prairie dogs, by tunneling past each other.

Unlike me in my sheltered world, Mom had always been aware of inequality. In her case the prejudice had come from being poor after her Dad had died in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Since she'd been ten-years-old she'd had to take care of herself, as her Mom had been busy teaching school on the reservations in Oklahoma and playing bridge all night. Mom's Mom, Gramma Flossie, had stuck a dollar bill on the mantle each night with a note to tell Mom to go buy herself something to eat for dinner.

As a girl Mom had mostly just bought herself a can of corn for dinner and had saved the change. She had done all the housework and her own washing and ironing too. She'd

only had about four dresses, so that must have been a lot of work.

Remembering her own deprived childhood must have been why Mom had spoiled us, wanting her kids to have a real childhood without grown-up worries and toil. She'd said that her childhood hadn't been sad, because she learned to cope with life's work early on. It had taught her to do everything for herself. She'd had some fun too, as she'd loved dancing for days at a time at Pow Wows and sleeping in tepees or under the stars during tribal celebrations out where her teacher-mom had worked. Those all-night dances with the tribes had seemed to be the happiest of her childhood memories. She had let us know that there were many other cultures other than our own in this country which had still maintained their ceremonies and faith, protected by enclaving themselves off on the back roads, away from the main highways where anything known as sacred might become another sullied tourist attraction.

Mom had also grown up in expectation of having a good marriage. She'd always wanted to be a homemaker and had majored in Home Ec even in high school, preparing for what she had known she had wanted to do. That's the way they had done things in her day, as not everybody could have afforded or had wanted to go off to college.

When her high school teachers had taught her cooking

they had divided it into food preparations which had been appropriate for four economically-different household levels. The lessons for each economic level had been quite varied.

Level One had been aimed at homemakers who had married somebody from a real poor money situation. Level Four addressed households where you'd married or had been working for a very rich man. The dinners they'd been taught to prepare for a poor household would be pork and beans to stretch the budget. These meals had been served on old brown heavy plates which wouldn't break easily. The dinners they'd learned to make for a splendidly-appointed household had ice carvings and six forks at every place setting. As a girl I had been jealous that I hadn't ever gotten to play house like that in my school. It would have been more practical than me fighting with algebraic equations, which I have never yet learned to need in my real life.

But, anyway, almost all the people who had worked on our train had been dark-skinned and after living in Georgia and Mississippi for seven years, these had been the first dark-skinned people I'd ever gotten to talk with at all. The dark-skinned kids I'd tried to friendly up to in Savannah hadn't talked back to me, the few I'd seen and had ventured a "How do you do?" to. Mom had often said no dark-skinned man she'd ever talked to in the South had ever,

not even once, looked at her in the eyes. Well, there had been the one exception, but he had been eighty years old, and perhaps blind. The darker-skinned people had always looked down at their feet when talking to whites who had been strangers to them in Georgia, back then, probably because of all the bad race relations. The dark people had always gotten blamed for any little wrong thing that had happened. It had seemed to me that both races had been a little scared of each other, and this fear was one of the big reasons people had stayed apart.

I'd known that, although we hadn't talked about any kind of politics at home. Mom and Dad had both said it had been sorry, the prejudicial way things had been. But they'd said, that this had been the sad truth of the world, and there wasn't anything we were going to be able to change after all these years. Our family had learned to quietly tolerate the different attitudes we'd sometimes found ourselves amongst, without accepting them. Air Force people had been trained to follow the policy of non-confrontation and trying to adjust to a place, without causing too many waves, being short-term at any given location, and needing the goodwill of the hometown people--we had been expected to live as if invited guests.

The military's hiring practices had been helping change racism a little for the better. Dad had said he'd thought

more men who'd lacked opportunity should join up because the Air Force is one career which is color-blind. They had promoted in the service for ability and skill, not by society's prejudicial acceptance standards.

But since these train crew men had been with us, moving between locations, all of us coming from the same town in Georgia, we had felt more or less like family. So, for those three or four days, we had been allowed to just be people, not dark or light, but just all of us Georgians, and loving alike fried chicken and cornbread made with gospels.

We had spent our time teasing, telling jokes, and playing cards all day long. Sometimes they'd even hummed Bonnie and I to sleep at night, after pulling down our bed. Trying to break the metallic sounds on the tracks, often they'd chosen, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," because they had been church people like Mom. I had decided on that trip that people who have held, in common, great sorrows in their history, become more religious, and have a bigger view of life than whatever is seemingly happening at any given moment.

The men on the crew could be telling us about slave auctions, but if somebody white had walked by, they'd stopped talking about this to say something to the passers-by which had been friendly or offering of help or often they'd made some joke about themselves. They'd be smiling

when I could still see the moisture of sadness in the corners of their eyes. They had learned to live beyond the visible world.

I had come to know, more of the underside of our history on that train, than I'd ever thought of in my young life before. I had felt I never could forget these men and because of them I should always speak up against unfairness. If everyone had just done this--just told the truth: how could slavery in Georgia or removals of tribes from their rich lands to starving reservations in Oklahoma have ever gotten started or ever have lasted so long?

I hadn't then been even half a grown up, or particularly smart, like some people I'd known, and I could see that these circumstances had been wrong, so what had been the smart governing leaders' excuses? And what about the apology and recompense?

I'd then guessed that the cause of this injustice had come from people breaking some of the Ten Commandments. People had coveted their neighbor's property; they'd gotten greedy and had also forgotten, "Thou shall not kill." Maybe if dark-skinned and fair-skinned peoples had gone to the same churches, lived in the same neighborhoods, shared the same drinking fountains, music and dances...maybe then, we'd remember that God had made both us and everybody else because we all belong here.

This country had been supposedly settled by persecuted religious groups, I'd learned about in school--the Quakers, Calvinists, Amish, Friends, Mormons, Irish Catholics, Lutherans. So? What had happened to their ideals of live and let live or freedom for all? Despite only owning a double fist full of years of experience then, that train ride had changed me forever, because of the power of kindness and seeing life through other peoples' perspectives. After that train ride, I had visions of myself growing up to cook on a train in the South, or maybe that train of Agatha Christie's mystery novel--The Orient Express.

I'd thought it might be pleasant earning my living serving people on the move, as most people seemed to become more open-minded when travelling. I had also liked the idea of feeding people. Sometimes good things happen when people are temporarily without their possessions and comfortable situations: just themselves on the road, eating, like we had been, and depending on the kindness of strangers. Though I was only young, I had pondered matters on that train which hadn't ever occurred to me in familiar surroundings. I wanted to try to be more awake on ordinary days like I'd been while traveling; curious about whatever was before me; accepting of people and places without judging them; welcoming both good and bad times for what I'd learn from

both; and always knowing wherever and with whomever I'd found myself, I should cherish it as the best, and perhaps last moment of my life.

End of Part I