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Catholics, Curses, and Cousins in a Cracker Box

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CATHOLICS, CURSES, AND COUSINS IN A CRACKER BOX

Kathryn Wallace Iffrig, B. A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

2006

ABSTRACT

In a small sitting room of a mortuary in a rural Missouri town, the author considers the life of her recently departed cousin. Having shared a family home early in their childhood, and despite similar upbringing, their lives had ultimately diverged, with him choosing a path that many would consider self-destructive and bound to lead to an early death.

Contemplating the circumstances of her cousin's death, the author falls into ruminations on their childhood, family, and common experiences they shared during those early years. Considering the disparate paths their lives ultimately took, the author questions the influence of nature *versus* nurture in determining their life choices. She questions common thinking that the life lived most productively is the most successful. The memoir provides no decisive answer to either question; makes no attempt to do so. But the occasion of the memorial service opens a wellspring of memories of her cousin and his brother and sisters, and the early life they shared with the author and her sister in their most formative years.

In this personal memoir, the author recounts experiences of her childhood in a South St. Louis neighborhood where she, her mother, father, and sister shared a two-family flat with her dad's brother and his family. Their home was a bastion of fundamental Protestant Christianity in a neighborhood of Catholic characters who provided social education for the cousins beyond anything they ever learned in Sunday school.

The memoir offers the reader a slice-of-life taste of a more innocent time: an age when children still played outdoors instead of in front of video games; when families – moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the children – all gathered on porches with cool, sweet lemonade on hot summer nights, and passed down stories with language more colorful and entertaining than any television program could have offered. And, remembering these years, the author identifies influences contributing to her love of writing and the role it has played in her life

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE GRIM REAPER

Life is melting away, drip by drip, like icicles off a roof on a warm winter afternoon. This year I turn fifty. This year I will have been married to the same man for thirty years. Our eldest son will graduate from college and will take a job at the company where I've worked for 22 years. Our younger sons will begin to drive. These are facts. Are they also what constitute the measure of a life? Or are they just milestones? By what standard is a life determined to have been well lived? By whose earthly judgment is one's existence found to have been a blatant waste of air and space?

These are the ruminations as I sit among family and friends gathered to pay one final tribute to this one whom we loved, who could always make us laugh, who was gifted in so many ways, but whose life choices none of us really understood and which finally were, literally, the death of him.

The realities of advancing age and the certainty of death hit home after the phone call in which I learned that Dale had died. Of the four cousins who shared childhood with my sister and me, Dale is the first to pass away.

Sitting in the small viewing room at the mortuary, long-forgotten memories of Dale and the times of our youth washed over me like a warm breeze across a still pond in summer – at once welcome and sweet, yet slightly stagnant and sad. The memories were welcome for the emotions

of love and comfort they stirred. But, there was sadness, too, in the irretrievability of those times we shared all those years ago. Though I tried to stay in the moment, to listen to the words of the minister and friends eulogizing Dale's life, my thoughts were stubbornly drawn backward to a place and time so many years ago...

LIFE IN THE CRACKER BOX

Ten of us lived in South St. Louis, in a brick two-family flat that resembled a Saltine cracker box set on end. Our family of four — Dad, Mom, Donna and I — had the second floor. Dad's brother and his family had the first.

The house's old ductwork carried sound between the floors like an intercom. Privacy was impossible. We kids missed nothing, and we repeated everything we heard.

As an adult now, with kids of my own, I wonder how our parents tolerated that arrangement for as long as they did. But the set-up was great for us kids. Having the cousins around meant reliable back-up for dicey social situations like the first day of school or a girl-fight in the park. And it meant that there was always someone around to hang with.

In those days before videogames and satellite TV, children actually spent time outdoors. Television as recreation ran a poor second to any activity which involved neighborhood kids anywhere outside the house. Television was for weeknights when Mom called us in after dark and for Saturday mornings before breakfast. We couldn't get outside fast enough in the mornings and couldn't stay out late enough at night. Group TV events, such as Saturday night episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* were the exception — and, then, only because the fun of scaring one another silly with a scream or grab at the most terrifying moment made the sitting still tolerable for as long as the show was on.

Chores were accomplished in record time when noises from the street indicated the gang was out there. And woe to the third-grader stuck inside in a pitiful attempt to memorize her multiplication tables with a game of touch football going on in the backyard.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

There were days when the public schools were on holiday but the parochial schools weren't. On those days our neighborhood turned into a ghost town with no one but us on the streets. With the exception of our staunchly fundamentalist-Christian family, everyone in the neighborhood was Catholic. At least, that's how it seemed. Grottos and Blessed Mother statues in every yard sent the message loud and clear -- like a billboard announcing: "This here's Catholic Country!"

In reality, our neighborhood was more diverse than we recognized. But it never occurred to us to inquire about each others' roots or extraction. Our friends' great-grandparents could have been Venetian for all we knew. Or cared.

Our clan shared what we considered a respectable, if somewhat nondescript, family name: Wallace. Many of those around us carried robust, richly ethnic surnames that required several practice runs before attempting a pronunciation. Forget about trying to spell them: Maszodanski, Daengkenbrink, Belobrajdic. The Rakes were an anomaly. They were Catholic, too, but their monosyllabic name set them apart. That and the fact that they didn't have a statue in their yard.

We Protestants held to the straight-forward naming convention of first name, middle, and last. The Catholic kids had more names than Crayola had colors. Our friend Gina provides a fine example: Her full name was (inhale) Gina Vononina Rosalia Gracia Marianna Corollo. And,

at five years old, she could recount every saint or saintly relative for whom she'd been named and for what specific attribute they were known.

Fascinating stuff when you're five. But, I imagine a conversation in which we wondered, with kindergarten in the offing, how she'd scrawl all that across a piece of paper and have room for anything else on the page.

Beyond these superficial distinctions, what differentiated Catholics from any other group I could not have said. I don't remember ever hearing our grown-ups remark on any particular Catholic characteristic, no special pro or con to that state of being. We knew only that the universe, as it existed in that particular block of our little world, was Catholic. And we weren't.

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

We kids did notice the propensity of some of the Catholic parents to curse and swear – something our own parents never did. I, for one, found this intriguing and soon developed a fine ear and an artistic appreciation for those whose swearing skills were especially well refined. And it wasn't long before I could hold my own with the best of them. Dad tells a story, shaking his head as if it's incomprehensible, of the time Mother told me, "Now, Kathy, it's time for you to stop playing with your food and eat." He says I looked her straight in the eye and told her to give me a god-damned fork. I was three. Granny and Pa Pa, Dad's folks and upstanding members of the Mill Spring Assembly of God congregation, were staying with us at the time. According to Dad, the scene at the dinner table went into freeze-frame. Pa Pa, spoon suspended midway between his beloved bowl of fruit cocktail and his mouth, looked at Granny:

"Artie, what did she say?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Noey! Are you plumb deaf? She said give me a G-D fork!"

"Yep, that's what I thought she said," Pa Pa replied solemnly, and resumed slurping the heavy syrup.

To hear Dad tell it, poor Mother was doubly mortified – first with the offensive language emanating from her precious darling, and then, worse, from the fact of the grandparents having observed it.

So, there were warning signs early on. And as I got older I tried very hard to restrain myself. Both Donna and I trod the straight and narrow path our parents blazed for us. Being good Baptist girls on Mother's side, with a heavy influence from the Assemblies of God on Dad's, we never considered taking up smoking. Drinking was unthinkable. We were known to dance a little, but only with the cousins, in the privacy of the basement where we'd spin forty-five's of the Supremes or the Temptations, and when we were sure none of the grown-ups would be the wiser.

We did not hear profanity at home, and knew it would not be tolerated there. Mother was a model of verbal restraint. And we never heard Dad swear, but with him we always sensed the potential was there. I mean, he'd been in the *Army!* And, we'd heard stories of his carousing and carrying on like a backslidden choir boy back in the day. But, he must have cleaned up his act in a big hurry when he met Mom; and, to his credit, I can't say I ever heard him use a four-letter word in my presence. I do remember him calling out a young clerk in a music store once because he'd said to Dad in front of Mom, Donna and me, "Sorry, Mister, but we don't have that string. Looks like you're screwed 'til we get the order in next week." Dad calmly leaned over the counter and went nose to nose with the guy. "Buddy, you and me are gonna have to take it outside if you can't watch that mouth of yours in front of these ladies." We girls had no

idea what the fuss was about, but we were impressed as all get-out with our dad for sticking up for us like that.

With this kind of upbringing, one can see how a propensity for profanity would be considered a particularly troublesome character flaw, and one best kept hidden.

Of course, the dialog downstairs was equally sanitized and, so, altogether acceptable to our parents. This is not to suggest a lack of stylistic color or intensity that might raise an eyebrow in some circles today. The strongest language there came from Uncle Frank who, when he'd had enough of one of the kids, would utter something like, "If I have to [hear that/see that/tell you] again, I'll slap a half a dollar in your mouth." Or, "Boy, I will knock you into the middle of the next week." Aunt Betty's language was less threatening. She often seemed surprised by the goings-on around her. "Well, I'll swan," she'd say when some troubling information was reported on the news or by a neighbor. And, she frequently referred to us girls as "Haw-un," drawing out into two syllables the word, Hon, short for Honey. "Now, Haw-un, you'd better run on up and see if your mom's waitin' dinner for you."

AUNT BETTY

Aunt Betty was the first of our family group to leave us. She complained of back pain for some time before having it checked out, only to learn that "female" cancer (which was as descriptive as discussions of these things got back then) had run rampant through her body. We were long gone from Tennessee Street when we learned that Aunt Betty was sick and might not recover. We couldn't know, but soon would learn, the depths of emotional pain, white-hot anger, and desperate feelings of loss this kind of news brings to the children of a mother taken so young in life. Donna and I experienced these same emotions not many years later, when our mother was diagnosed with, and died of, ovarian cancer at the age of 54.

Donna and I stayed with Aunt Betty during the days when Mom and Dad worked. Aunt Betty was stout and sturdy, with wavy shoulder-length hair once reddish, now fading to brown and beginning to show the faintest signs of gray. She wore no make-up in deference to her religious beliefs and, for the same reason, refused to wear any style of pants or shorts. Never having learned to drive, she was truly a stay-at-home mom.

Aunt Betty had a kind heart, and she treated Donna and me no differently than the two boys and two girls of her own. Lindell was her eldest, two years older than Myra and me, who were about equal in age. Donna was a year younger, then Dale a year or so after her, and Tracy was the baby.

EXPLORING THE TERRITORY

That neighborhood was our whole world. Street signs remembered proud Indian tribes: Gravois, Cherokee, Potomac, Miami. Constant exposure to such history might be expected to spark a sense of adventure or an urge to scout new territories, explore new lands. But, we were content to occupy our own little settlement and observe the comfortable rituals of our day-to-day existence there.

Should the wanderlust strike, we had only to change direction, take the cross streets. Chasing across Tennessee, Louisiana, Michigan, Kentucky, Wyoming, we'd cover a good portion of the continent on the way to the park. We were the natives in this concrete wilderness, and we knew it better than any Indian brave or map-making explorer ever knew his little piece of the world.

Wherever we needed to be, we could get to on foot. With only one among the six of us, the old bicycle served purely a recreational function. It was not really a viable means of transport, especially if group travel was anticipated. And, so, it was with much confidence and a basic lack of options that we traipsed contentedly among the sidewalks, alleys, and gangways that were our territory.

How it happened, this notion of a bus ride to parts unknown, is still a mystery. Myra, Donna, and I had just killed the afternoon down on Cherokee Street.

In those days Cherokee was a thriving retail and dining thoroughfare. A kid could spend enormous amounts of time on precious little money. And money in sufficient amounts to meet our rather modest wants could be had without too much effort.

We'd been on just such an outing. Striding three-abreast in a homeward direction, the conversation took an ominous turn. Street traffic was loud. And the squealing and groaning of the bus pulling to the curb alongside made it difficult to know for sure; but, between Donna and Myra I thought I heard: "We've got enough. We can do it. Let's take a ride." We walked right into the crowd waiting at the stop. Sucked along in the tide of bodies, I soon found myself on a city bus, surrounded by people I didn't know, many of them looking like they'd stopped caring where they were headed a long time ago.

Myra was older, but not by much. Not enough older that you could just let yourself go, figuring she knew what was what. And, Donna was younger by a year and a half. Sure, everybody knew she wound up with the brains in the family. And she actually paid attention when Dad would remark about this, that, or another point of interest on our little jaunts about town. But, *this* was a whole other deal; and – off-the-charts IQ or no – I wasn't relying on *any* fourth grader in this kind of life-or-death situation. As I saw it, her getting moved into the gifted program proved she was superior at lots of stuff that might come in handy on a New-Math quiz or maybe a spelling bee. But, I doubted they studied advanced urban-

survival skills there. And, we were on a moving bus, for crying out loud, headed for who-knows-where!

To this day I am a navigational cripple. But, I was much worse then. No sense of direction, no comprehension of the logic of street grids. No intellectual tools to provide even the remotest possibility of finding my way back home from whatever godforsaken hole where the bus would eventually dump us. Point is, my angst was not entirely unfounded.

It doesn't take a panicked fifth-grader with well developed reading skills long to find the pull-this-cord-to-stop-this-bus sign. I'm sure it happened before we'd traversed city block. Stammering some lame excuse about forgetting I was supposed to meet my mother, I was off that bus in a heartbeat. But Myra and Donna stood firm. They weren't wimps, and they weren't panty-waists, and they were going for a thunder of a good ride (as our granny would say) despite my heart-felt pleading and threats and bribes to the contrary.

And, so, with that sickening sucking sound of the bus door closing, they were gone, and I was convinced they'd not be seen again.

Upon arriving back home, I began to relate the catastrophe from which I had barely escaped and which would be the undoing of our happy extended family. Such was the state of my hysteria that Aunt Betty began to wail and to wring her hands and to entreat God in Heaven as to what should be the next action. This was for her not an unusual reaction. She was a loving mother and devoted wife; but, she was not what you could

call good in a crisis. And, there is no small irony in the fact that hardly a week went by without one of her kids – almost always one of the boys – requiring an emergency trip to the hospital. Accidents were commonplace. She was forever dealing with some emergency or another: a fall to concrete from a deck, a small forehead connecting at high speed with the sharp corner of a low-hanging window air conditioner, the communal bike colliding first with the mail carrier and then the mail box to which the carrier was attending. Not to mention a mother's worst nightmare – one of her kids being hit by a car. (This happened to Aunt Betty more than once.) And we're not even counting here the time Tracy's foot got into the bike spokes. That time, the neighbor lady seemed to know what she was talking about when she said the foot wasn't broken; and, so, no hospital trip then. Or, Tracy's convulsions. She was taken to the hospital for that one. But, you can't really call it an accident.

Whereas, one might expect the sheer number of these incidents to have toughened Aunt Betty's skin a bit; it had, in fact, just the opposite effect. She had come to expect the absolute worst disaster to befall her children at any moment.

Fortunately, Uncle Frank arrived home shortly after I did; and, he, being much less prone to drama, wanted just the facts. He also wanted, no doubt, to settle himself into the hot bath Aunt Betty had drawn for him as she did every day, but that would have to wait. I recounted to him as best I could the fateful decision to board the bus, my highly responsible

decision to disembark in the nick of time and my resolute conviction that they would not be found alive or, at best, without some life-altering disfigurement. To Uncle Frank, all of that was background noise: static on the radio. What he wanted to hear was whether I had a clue as to where the bus was headed. Luckily I remembered that the flip-sign on the bus's windshield had read, "Carondelet."

As Uncle Frank prepared to fire up the car and head out in the general direction of the rush-hour Carondelet run, Myra and Donna strolled in. Nonchalantly they scanned the scene in the living room and knew immediately there would be Hell to pay. No tales of travel to exotic places, no stories of the wonders of the hinterlands, not even miraculous intervention by the Lord Himself would get them out of this one.

Later, they would give us the full report in all its glorious detail. Smug and self-satisfied, they'd recount the adventure for the boy cousins and me. But, for now, they'd be dealing with Uncle Frank. A fate to be aggressively avoided if one had even a clue as to what was good for her. They had it coming, and they were going to get it.

But, they were home and looked none the worse for their transgression. Our world was right again. But, it felt smaller somehow.

LIFE ON THE STREETS

For the most part, Lindell kept to himself or hung out with the Maszodanski brothers who lived up the street. He was big for his age, with thick, coarse, dark-red hair and freckles everywhere. Occasionally, when Lenny and Jerry weren't around to keep him occupied, Lindell would resort to hanging with us out of sheer boredom. Sometimes he treated us like regular human beings. He'd help us get a backyard baseball game together or fire up a round of swinging statues. But, this usually didn't last long and regularly ended badly, with one or the other of us younger kids squalling to Aunt Betty about how he'd flung us into the fence or pounded us with the ball we were using to play four-square. Never anything truly vicious or torturous; just enough violence to keep us all in mind of who was the big dog in our pack.

Tennessee Street near the intersection of Gravois and Cherokee was our territory. An aerial view would show a grid of two-family flats flanked by small, square patches of lawn abutting concrete sidewalks running a line parallel to the rows of houses and the aged-brick streets.

Stoop-sitting was a recreational pass-time back then. Stoop-sitting could be a solitary activity or a group event. It could be done *sans* beverage, or could be accompanied by a tall, opaque-plastic Tupperware tumbler of tea tinkling with ice. Kids often stoop-sat with Kool-Aid or a Popsicle. (In those days, soda was not kept by the case in cans chilled in the garage fridge for access at any time of the day or night. Soda was a

treat for special occasions. And, so, we did not often occupy a stoop with a Coca-Cola or Pepsi in hand.) In the case of stoop-sitting dads other than ours, a sweat-dripping, deep-amber-colored bottle of beer was often the accompaniment of choice, an image which intrigued us mightily. We often heard Sunday sermons on the damnation to come to those who imbibed. Given our knowledge of the grave judgment awaiting these obstinate souls, one might have expected a certain level of concern or compassion from us kids. Mostly, though, we were curious and noted that, for the most part, these guys seemed pretty much like our own dads. Only with a little better disposition, at least until the bottle was emptied.

One memorable stoop-sitter, Mr. Tharp, lived two doors down toward Potomac. He was an elderly man with sparse, spiky white hair that, along with his constant barking and swearing at us, made us think he might have once been a Marine. Overprotective of his weedy patch of lawn, he came out to yell toothlessly at us whenever he heard voices out on the street. Tall and wiry, he had to collapse himself like one of those old jointed rulers to situate his body on the stoop. With knees doubled up under his chin, this position offered a bird's-eye view of a rip in the crotch of his pants which exposed his most private parts to anyone unlucky enough to look in his direction. There he'd sit, day after day, and watch us like a hawk circling a field full of mice. Only occasionally did he have a beer in hand, but he somehow always sounded a little tipsy. Let one of us come within six inches of his grass, and he'd holler, "Thtay on the damn

thidewalk!" Should a sneaker make contact with a blade of grass or a dandelion, we'd hear, "Get yer li'l ath offa my grath!" With the benefit of age, I try now to see things from Mr. Tharp's perspective: to consider whether it is possible that we made Mr. Tharp's life more stressful than was altogether necessary. And I come again to the conclusion that crotchety, crotchless, and without a tooth in his head, he really left us no choice.

Not all our neighbors were as disagreeable as Mr. Tharp. In stark contrast, Mr. and Mrs. Six, the elderly couple between our house and Mr. Tharp's, were kind and generous. They had no children that we knew of, but they had a little dog whom they loved and on whom they doted as if he were their flesh and blood. To us kids, Tiny represented the pet we had never had.

As a young girl, I longed for a small pet to snuggle with and care for. A cat would have been heavenly. In our bedroom hung pale-pastel prints of young girls: one a beauty with long, dark, flowing curls and a cherubic face that made one wonder if Donna might have posed for the artist. The other, with mousy-brown hair and rather plain features could easily have been me. Both girls held kittens with long, fluffy coats of silky strands that would surely undulate and stir from the canvas if one puffed a little breath their way. All – children and kittens – had round, starlit eyes that spoke silent volumes about the wonders of life with a pet of one's very own. Staring up at these images each night, I imagined the wonderful

bonding of girl and kitten as the puss's long, silky hair brushed warmly against the lucky girl's pink cheek and tickled her chubby nose.

A dog would have been fine, too. But we knew in our hearts it wasn't to be. Even so, Donna and I asked for a pet from time to time: the kind of lame appeal that comes with knowing there's a better chance of a blizzard in Arizona in July than of our getting our way. But we tried. (It occurs to me now that the irony of this situation uncharacteristically avoided Donna's [and not so uncharacteristically, my] detection: The fact of those pictures could have been an effective stance from which to debate the parents on the value of animal husbandry. If the parents found those images so charming and appealing as to hang them in the very room in which their own daughters slept, did this action, then, not implicitly acknowledge the value of the relationship between the girls and their cats? Maybe I've just worked too many years with lawyers.)

Still, knowing our parents' opinions about the keeping of animals (having been raised on a farm, they believed animals should serve some practical function – and it should always be served outdoors), we continued to make half-hearted pleas for a pet until Mom finally relented. Sort of. She came home from Woolworth's one Saturday with a fish bowl and two tiny goldfish swimming in a plastic bag.

Donna and I were delighted and took great joy in watching the little swimmers go 'round and 'round their bowl for the eighteen hours or so they were with us. By Sunday evening, one of them was belly-up, and

before school on Monday morning we were flushing his lifeless companion into the watery oblivion of the goldfish hereafter.

Mother, bless her heart, was now committed to this cause. She bought more fish, with pretty much the same result. We tried twice more to establish a healthy home for two or three goldfish, but were never successful. They would live a few days and then inexplicably expire.

Not too long after the last goldfish departed, Mother declared that we would kill no more fish. She cleaned the bowl, washed and dried the gravel and other paraphernalia and put it all away for good as far as we knew. Imagine our surprise, then, when not too much later, we came home and found a tiny turtle in that bowl, lazily lounging in the colorful gravel. From day one, our turtle was the image of reptilian health and vitality. He thrived under our care. His leathery skin wasn't conducive to a nuzzle, and it was obvious that bedtime snuggling wouldn't be wise. But we were content to balance him on our index fingers and stroke his cool, smooth shell. (We were blissfully ignorant then of the fact that their little green bellies are prone to carry salmonella, which has caused them to be banned from pet shops today.)

One day after having our little four-legged buddy outside for some time in the sun, we found him impaled on a rusty nail. We suspected who the murderer was, and we were inconsolable as mother tried to comfort us. "Little boys fry ants with magnifying glasses. They pull wings off of flies. It is what they do until they learn better."

We didn't ask for a pet again, but we loved playing with that little dog next door. And the Sixes loved the companionship for Tiny. So, unlike many of the neighbors, the Sixes often allowed us to play in their back yard.

That backyard garden produced the best rhubarb my mother ever tasted. Or so she told Mrs. Six whenever the opportunity arose. Which wasn't all that often because, unlike most women of her day, Mother worked full-time outside our home and did not have much time to spend *kaffee klatsching* with the neighbors. In fact, she spent hardly any time outside at all. There were so few outdoor activities, I suppose, in which a real lady would have engaged. And a lady our mother definitely was. She did not set foot out of our house without full makeup tastefully applied and her hair handsomely coiffed. She was a beauty, and we often heard her compared to Jackie Kenney in looks. She carried herself with a grace and a sense of style that could have seemed haughty and proud. (She was fiercely proud of her appearance, but not out of vanity – out of a belief that a slovenly appearance indicated a weak or questionable character.) But, one only had to speak to her to sense the kindness and generosity that were as genuine and pure as Ivory soap.

Mother grocery shopped in dresses and high heels. Only occasionally would she venture into the backyard when carrying the trash to the alley or looking for us girls. But when she did, she always made time to stop and talk to Mrs. Six who was almost always tending her

garden. Tomatoes and peppers were staples; but they seemed to be the domain of Mr. Six. In mid-summer, we'd see him gather several of each most evenings and carry them into their house. But, the crop on which his wife seemed to dote was her rhubarb.

Mrs. Six was a petite grandmotherly type with fine, gray hair caught up behind her head in a tidy bun. She wore loosely fitting cotton dresses the hems of which hit well below her knees. As much as Mr. and Mrs. Six loved their little dog, they clearly loved each other more. Mr. Six never failed to hold the door for his wife to enter or exit the DeSoto curbed in front of their house. They were not stoop-sitters, but they enjoyed sitting for hours on their back porch, Mrs. Six patting her husband's hand from time to time, and smiling as sweetly as a blushing teenager on a first date.

Mrs. Six obviously enjoyed visiting with Mother, and never failed to send over a bagful of rhubarb to my mother at harvest time. Convinced we hated rhubarb, Donna and I vowed we'd never touch the stuff. And, it was a mystery to us what Mom did with those reddish-green stalks until one time, many years later, it occurred to one of us to ask. "Remember those strawberry pies you girls loved so much?" was Mother's matter-of-fact reply.

We learned later that there was plenty Mom would have been doing outside had we more space and fewer kids around to trample her efforts. When we moved out of the city and into the suburbs, Mother would spend hours planting and tending bright-red geraniums, getting them arranged

just-so around the well-pump she and Dad painted up. Occasionally, she'd come out and pitch a whiffle ball to us. Even then, she looked always fashionably put together. I remember white pedal-pushers that, even when she wore them ***gardening***, always appeared crisp and clean, without a smudge or a wrinkle on them. Tailored blouses and the coordinating triangular scarf tied around her hair gave her the appearance of an heiress coming in from an afternoon on the yacht, just in time to bathe and dress for dinner.

MOM'S CHILDHOOD HOME

I wonder how city life with its office work, child-rearing, and keeping house with in-laws constantly underfoot measured up to Mother. Did she ever think about life back in the country? Long for the quiet and calm of her rural childhood home? I know that place, at least the geography of it. Having spent many happy hours there, I can flip backward through the pages of my memory and see it all as if nothing had changed...

Just over the hill a busy highway snakes through emerald countryside. Cars, trucks, and big rigs ply the two-lane route through Missouri, Arkansas, and beyond. But, here in the valley, all is quiet and still. From where we sit looking out across the lawn, beyond the front pasture, and past the fence that separates the pasture from the old country road, one can just barely make out the roofline of the old log church, nearly hidden in that stand of trees. Behind us, the sturdy white farmhouse; and, off to the left as you face the road, the big red barn sprawls in the far corner of the front pasture. Aside from these few structures, only fields, trees, and rolling green hills are in view. Only the keenest ear will hear the creek bubbling in the distance, back behind the house.

It's dusk on the farm where my sister and I are spending part of another summer vacation. How could we know it would be our last? The sun is slipping behind the hill, putting the church and trees in a shadow that will soon stretch the length of the county.

The evening ritual of gathering under the old oak tree has begun. Grandma and Poppy are already settled and rocking rhythmically in their chairs. Poppy cuts a striking figure – tall and lean – never without his pipe, and always with a bright-red can of Prince Albert peeking out of the center pocket of his overalls. Walking tall and with a purpose, he wears overalls like most men wear a five-hundred-dollar suit. One wouldn't be surprised to see a tie at the neck of the white Oxford shirt – short-sleeved in summer, long-sleeved in colder weather – that finishes the functional uniform. Thick, graying hair suggests his age and handsomely frames a face craggy and lined from years of work in the sun and wind, summer's steam and winter's freezing cold. He built this spread with his own two hands and raised four sons and three daughters to appreciate the value of a hard day's work.

I love the spicy-sweet aroma he brings with him everywhere. It's years now since he has passed, but I can still see the flame dancing on the matchstick just beyond his nose -- Won't his moustache catch afire?! -- and hear the quiet pop/pip/pop of his lips as he takes short, quick drags of air to stoke tobacco freshly tamped into the pipe-bowl. Giggling, we girls would put hand to mouth and whisper that this must be why Grandma calls him "Poppy."

His motions are slow and easy; never hurried, never rushed. What a handsome man he must have been in his day. As Grandma watches him (and she always watches him) is she remembering those days?

She was a beauty in her youth, we've heard. And old photographs confirm. But time has not treated her kindly. No semblance now of the board-straight spine which once proudly carried her slight frame. Shriveled and bent from the crippling disease and from the cruel drugs, she must fight every day to avoid a permanent stiffening that would leave her bed-ridden. Her smile and good-natured banter want to convey that all is well. But facial lines betray her. Through them one senses the constant pain which she manages, but never really controls, with handfuls of pills and sheer determination.

A crisp gingham apron covers her lightweight cotton dress; the apron's neck-strap neatly hidden under the dress-collar. The hem of each short sleeve is cut into an inverted "V" detail, with a tiny shirt-button adorning the point. Matching buttons, of slightly larger size, march down the dress-front from collar to hem, and one wonders how in the world she manages all those buttons with fingers gnarled and stiff as grapevines. She reaches for a bowl on that next-to-top shelf, and her dress hitches up just a smidge at the waist, letting the lacey hem of her slip peek out bashfully. Peek-a-boo-I-see-you, she plays with grandbabies. Did she play that with me? House shoes worn night and day, indoors and out, have holes cut at the place where the big toe joins each foot, to free the large bunions there from any pressure the slippers might otherwise apply. This is her only accommodation, the only leeway she's willing to give the pain that stalks her, seeks to do her in. But, accommodation only when

closest family is about. Come Sunday morning, or any time that neighbors or strangers may be about, she will be decked out in full church-worthy regalia – feisty hat, patent-leather purse, bunion-persecuting pumps and all.

Personal pride is a fortifier. Better than any drug, it enables her to stay in the fray, one battle at a time. But, the fight leaves scars that cannot be hidden: arms and legs perpetually black and blue because the drugs have thinned her skin so that the tiniest jostle or bump leaves a dark, blotchy bruise in the flesh or a purple-black scab on the bonier parts of shins and forearms. Her bones are weakened, too, leaving her to walk in a permanent hunch that compresses her lungs and causes her to seem winded with the slightest activity.

A woman of lesser character would have given up long ago – would have succumbed to her tormentor and retreated to the relative comfort of her bed. But not Hazel Margaret. She is a spit-fire and won't go down without a fight. "Now, girls, if I'm not around tomorrow when you wake, you come and find me, d' ya hear? And, if I'm in bed, you don't let me lay there. You tell me, 'Get up, Grandma! You've got to get up!' It may seem like it hurts me an awful lot to do it, but you've got to help me get going. And, once I'm up and about, I'll be doin' better before long." But, not once have we ever found her in bed. Every morning we wake to hear her shuffling around the kitchen – usually humming or singing a hymn or some silly ditty. She has a beautiful voice. Folks say she was once the best alto

in all of Wayne County. One charm untouched by the ravages of time or disease.

One year the stork left Grandma and Poppy a late-in-life surprise – a daughter, Vicky, who is just about our age. Tonight Vicky and Donna, invigorated by the cooler evening air, dart 'round in circles, hands outstretched, grasping at the fireflies just becoming visible. Vicky is a country girl, used to playing in the hayloft, chasing (and catching) all kinds of critters; and she can climb a tree surer and quicker than any city boy we know. With reflexes quick as a cat's, she's already bagged more than her share of fireflies; and, every other one she happily offers to plop into Donna's jar.

Uncle Oscar is here, too – a walking contradiction of physical attributes. Silver-gray hair suggests a man of considerable age; but meticulously combed, it is thick and full enough to beget envy in a much younger man. Straight and tall as a soldier at attention, his posture is the image of youth and vigor. But, his cane says otherwise. "Coke" is his nickname, though we never heard the story there. He is Grandma's brother. He never married. And now, in his old age, he doesn't talk much, maybe never did. But he's here in the evenings, immaculately ironed shirt tidily tucked into neatly-belted pants. Hands always busy with a twig, whittling, shavings falling all around.

In former years, teen-aged aunts and uncles would have been here, too. But, one by one, over the years, they've married and moved to

the city. Last year was the summer before the second daughter, Cheryl Beth, was married. She was just the coolest aunt; and, though she had friends her own age and was even engaged to be married (which certainly would have excused any lack of attention toward us in favor of the all-important matters of wedding-planning), she always had time for Vicky, Donna and me. One night that last summer, she fixed up the wash-house like a diner, with a couple of little round tables covered with red-checked dish towels for tablecloths. She made menus and let us order up a meal. A hamburger order got us two graham crackers with chocolate icing between. Red licorice sticks were fries. Coca-Cola was the real deal, but milk with chocolate syrup had to do for a shake. We played 45's, used Grandma's wash-stick as a microphone to sing along with the Supremes, and had a regular pajama party there. (The wash-stick was a sturdy one-inch-by-one-inch stick about three feet long which Grandma used to poke the white clothes down into the tub of scalding bleach water and stir them around for soaking; and, Grandma would have scolded us for sure if she'd caught us playing with that thing.) Sacked out on a pallet of quilts and feather pillows, we told Aunt Beth how it just wouldn't be the same, coming to the country for visits when she wasn't here. "We're all of us getting older, that's all. It happens, and there's just nothing to be done about it. Look at you girls, nearly all grown up now. Before long, you'll think you have way more important things to do than come here for a week or two every summer"

But, I am not feeling grown up tonight. I'm getting "that feeling" again. Despite the familiar surroundings and the comforting banter of family, waning daylight brings a sadness, a dread as unwelcome as it is unrelenting. The whining of 18-wheelers in the distance has again become the most mournful sound in the world. And, it brings on a feeling of lonesomeness that is nearly too much to bear. Hours before, wading the creek or pestering Poppy for a horse to ride, home and the city had not entered my mind. And, back in the house, with the family gathered 'round "Gunsmoke," I will be happy and content again to be here. But, these few moments between daylight and dark make me ache for my mother and dad. Right this minute, I want more than anything to be home.

"Where's your jar, Sweetie? There's enough lightnin' bugs out tonight to put the stars to shame. Don't you want to catch some?" A silent shake of my head turns the offer down flat. No intention to be rude; could never be mean to Grandma. I simply cannot trust my voice not to crack if I try to use it. Don't let anyone see I'm homesick; don't wanna be a crybaby. Donna sings, "I do! I do! Look, Poppy, five already!" Watching her whirl around the yard on plump and dimpled legs, Poppy's moustache curls up into a fuzzy smile around the pipe stem. Grandma rises from her chair and proclaims, "Well, Poppy, I think it's time to get these children in the house. The sweat bees and mosquitoes are just eating me alive. Oscar, come along. There's a blackberry cobbler that should be just about cool enough to eat." She takes my hand. "Come

along, Dumplin'." Donna pouts, thinking she'll now have to set her fireflies free. "You just bring them right on in with you, Punkin'." Vicky bolts for the door at the promise of pie. The rest of us form a slow parade to the porch, through the front door, and into the cool comfort of the living room. Donna, Vicky, and I sprawl on the smooth hardwood. The men settle into the furniture, and Grandma shuffles to the kitchen and returns a short time later to serve up warm cobbler and iced tea all around.

Tonight, both of Poppy's favorites are on TV. We watch "Gunsmoke" and wrestling, oblivious to the slightly fuzzy quality of the black-and-white images in the walnut console with the brass-tipped legs which is state-of-the-art for the times and the envy of not a few of the neighbors. We finish the pie, and put our dishes in the sink after a gentle prompt from Poppy. Grandma has retired early, claiming she's "... just too pooped to party." As she departed, we'd heard, "Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite." She'd giggled again like this was the first time she'd offered this silly little rhyme. And, we'd giggled again like it was the first time we'd heard it. At bedtime, we retrieve our 'jammies from the stately white dresser with the dainty, pink scrollwork in Vicky's bedroom. The three of us climb into the canopied bed with scrollwork matching the dresser, and we fuss and fidget until the covers are just right. The firefly jar sits on the dresser, and we watch the glow through the glass fade slowly as we giggle and chatter ourselves to sleep.

Grandma didn't make us breakfast that next morning. We were awakened by Aunt Charlene who lived down the road. She had three sons, younger than we girls, but still fun to play with. So, we were delighted with the surprise that we'd be going home with Aunt Charlene. There we had donuts and chocolate milk for breakfast and played cowboys and other boy-games for the rest of the morning. And, we never wondered why the phone kept ringing; Aunt Charlene taking one call after another, seeming so sad to talk to whomever was on the other end. By afternoon, we were back at the farm. Mother and Dad and all of the aunts and uncles had arrived, and the funeral was held the next day.

The log church-house was packed from the pulpit past the last pew and out onto the concrete steps of the new porch that was added just last year. (No fancy banisters or spindles. Just a sturdy handrail fashioned from steel tubing and held solidly in the concrete to give the feeble among the congregation a surer step as they ventured into and out of the Lord's house each week.) Folks peered in all four windows, trying to catch even one or two of the many kind words Brother Page would remark about Mizz Allen. And, not an eye remained dry as the quartet sang, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

Then, strangers hugging Mother, "So sorry, Emma Kathryn, for your loss. Hazel was a wonderful woman." Anyone, knowing Mother was Hazel's daughter, would guess that Hazel must have been exceptional. Everything about Mother's presence reflected the handsome familial

features. Every gesture and word radiated the grace, generosity of spirit, and refinement with which all Hazel's children had been raised.

Whether Mother pined for those carefree days in the country, I can't say. If she did, she certainly never let on. Anyone looking on would have thought Mother was as happy as could be, standing in that little city space, with her kids at her knees, talking rhubarb with Mrs. Six.

THAT WHICH YOU SOW, SO SHALL SHE REAP

I don't recall much about the lady who lived next door on the Cherokee side except for the colorful Irises she planted along the fence that separated her backyard from ours. Over time, the flowers migrated through the chain link. Aunt Betty kept the trespassing plants dutifully watered and groomed; and, over a matter of years, cultivated an admirable stand of Irises of her own of which she was obviously and justifiably proud. Her satisfaction, I think, was not so much with the flowers as with herself for having the spiritual awareness to recognize a gift from above when she saw it and the gumption to follow through and see the fruits of her labor bountifully multiplied unto her. Never mind that she was reaping that which her neighbor had actually sown.

The neighbor took this all very much in stride – and, in fact, would comment appreciatively on my aunt's green thumb on the rare occasions they'd meet on the sidewalk or share a polite word from stoop to stoop.

MOM'S COOL LITTLE SISTER

In those days Cherokee Street was The Place To Be for a kid with a few coins in her pocket: a place where you could spend enormous amounts of time on precious little money. And money in sufficient amounts to meet our rather modest wants could be had without too much effort. Soda bottles were a key contributor to the currency stream. Find enough bottles, cash them in, and a visit to the Woolworth's soda counter became wholly within the realm of possibility.

Budgetarily speaking, things really looked up for us when Mom's sister moved in and her boyfriend began to visit regularly. Aunt Beth was not long out of high school. She had moved from the country to the big city to take a job with Bell Telephone. She was "An Operator" – a job we girls thought was just too cool and glamorous for words. As she zipped away from the curb each morning in her brand-new white '64 Mustang with the black convertible top, we wanted to be her. We imagined her perched demurely on a steno chair, her back straight and ankles crossed in a ladylike manner amidst its wheels. We envied the headset tiara she wore and the fascinating conversations she doubtless enjoyed with each elegantly efficient gesture of phone cable being plugged into the switchboard. We envisioned our Aunt Beth gracefully poised in front of that board, and it all lit up like a make-up mirror in the dressing room of a movie star.

Sometimes on her days off, she would hang out with us and listen to Johnny Rabbitt spin records on KXOK and try to teach us some new dance moves. One day we came in for lunch to find her in an apron. She seated us at the table like a waitress in a diner. She handed us menus listing the specials of the day. We could choose a grilled-cheese sandwich, peanut butter and jelly, or bologna. Drink choices were Coke (grape Kool-Aid) or a chocolate shake (milk with Hershey's syrup). Dessert was graham crackers with icing. For Donna and me, hanging out with Aunt Beth like that was better than a whole day at Holiday Hill. She just made everything so much fun.

Aunt Beth was engaged to her high school sweetheart. He was tall and handsome, with thick, wavy dark hair combed back like Elvis's. All us girls had crushes on him and pestered him so much he should have avoided us like The Plague. But, he always made us think he was glad to see us when he came around.

Russ also had a job in the city and would come by the house often to be with his girl. He soon figured out that getting any private time with her would come at a price. We'd spot his car parked in front of the house and tear out to find them at whatever spot they'd picked to hang out. We'd join them on the back steps or the landing or the stairwell – him and his sweetie all cozied up and holding hands. Within minutes, he'd be handing out cash like a Rockefeller. "Here, go buy a coloring book. How about an ice cream? Have a Hershey Bar on me." The rules of this game, though

never spoken, were well understood: He'd hand over the loot; we'd make ourselves scarce. In fifth grade, we didn't do coloring books. And, we knew our parents would spring for an ice cream when the Mr. Frosty truck came that night. So, we'd pocket the coins, thank him (no doubt, feigning great surprise and profuse gratitude), and take off to the park or to the basement – anywhere out of earshot of their courting and carrying on. A deal is a deal, after all. And, if the soda-bottle pickings had been particularly good, and when we'd saved enough of the swag to make the trip worthwhile, we'd head off to the Sears record rack and pool our change for the latest forty-five. If we weren't so flush, we'd walk around the corner to Walter's Market on the corner of Cherokee and Louisiana. There we'd stock up on all the Pixie Sticks and Milk Duds our coins would buy and come back to the stoop to suck sugar and enjoy the buzz.

THOSE @\$% WORDS AGAIN!

Evenings and weekends the grown-ups owned the stoops. At all other times, the stoops and sidewalks were ours. On many a steamy weekday afternoon, when it was too hot to do much else, we kids would loll on the concrete steps in front of the house, and watch cars go by. "That one's mine. Look't it — a new Ford Fairlane. I'll take it!" " Here's yours — a puke-green Rambler. That's about your speed."

The houses were separated by gangways that led to the backyards and the alley behind. The space seemed vast to us then. But in reality we could stand in the gangway and, facing the street, put our right hand and foot on our own building and our left hand and foot on the one next door and, spread-eagled, shinny a good five feet or so up the buildings before gravity yanked us back down.

Aunt Betty didn't allow running into and out of the house. Once we were outside, we were pretty much out for the day. And, sitting on the stoop one sweltering afternoon, with energy for nothing but watching cars go by, tempers were volatile as dry kindling in a lightning storm. Earlier that day, I'd gone into the gangway to get a drink of water out of the garden hose. The wall around the spigot and the concrete under the coiled hose were always crawling with fat, shiny water bugs that resembled oversized black-licorice-flavored jelly beans and were a constant source of terror for me. Knowing this, Lindell and Dale took every opportunity to chase me with a handful, as Lindell had done again

just a little earlier. He had been in an ornery mood all day; who knows why. Maybe because Lenny and Jerry were nowhere to be found which meant Lindell was reduced to hanging with us peons. Or, maybe just because of the hateful weather.

Out of sheer boredom, and knowing the vantage point for car-calling was better at the higher elevation, I decided to shinny up the wall. My Keds seemed to get better traction on the hot-brick surface, and I'd made it up a good three and a half feet or so and was focused on the climb when I heard Lindell ask Dale if he knew what was worse than a hurricane. Next thing I know, Lindell's sneering, sweat-streaked face is in front of mine, both his hands are on my undeveloped chest, and he's twisting hard. "A titty-twister!" He and Dale fell all over themselves laughing.

I dropped from the wall but knew better than to try anything physical with him. He'd have squashed me like one of those bugs. But I wanted to kill him. So I laid into him with the only weapon I had. Curses gushed from me like muck from a ruptured septic tank. The longer I went, the louder and more obscene the flow. I was clueless as to what most of it meant, but I knew it was verbal sewage and spewed it in torrents right at his face, wishing it were caustic, wanting it to melt that smirk clean off his skull.

My back was to the stoop where Donna and the others sat, now silent as death. Lindell was facing their direction, and the longer I went

with my profane tirade, the bigger he grinned until suddenly I heard, "Young lady, get yourself and your filthy mouth in here this minute." Aunt Betty, standing in her doorway at the top of the stoop, had heard every word.

With eyes still adjusting from the hellish sunlight to the tomb-like cool of the living room, I saw above me freckled arms crossed over an ample bosom. Aunt Betty clucked her tongue and shook her head in dismay as she lectured me. "What will your poor mother say when she finds out? Don't you know this will just break her heart?" Of course I knew, and Aunt Betty knew I knew. My feet, dangling off the sofa where I'd been ordered to park until told I could move, wanted to drop to the floor and bolt. I think I sat through nearly an entire episode of *The Edge of Night* before hearing, "Go on back out now and just think about what you'll say to your mother when we tell her about this tonight." She might as well have told me to get ready for the electric chair.

Lindell and Dale were long gone, and Myra and Donna knew better than to pump me just then for information about the detention. We spent the rest of that day in somber cogitation in the cool of the basement, listening to Petula Clark and Bobby Vinton on the record player. The girls shared my mood of despondency and gloom, and it was understood, though unspoken, that our Motown stuff would simply have been wasted on us that day.

Six o'clock came. Mom came home, and Aunt Betty was nowhere to be seen. I spent the evening waiting for the phone to ring or to hear her heavy footsteps on the staircase that led from their kitchen door to ours. We had dinner and were put to bed with no word from her. We didn't hear from Aunt Betty that night. As best I know, she never did tell Mom.

Thanks, Aunt Betty. And now that Dale's up there with you, will you let him know I forgive him for that turtle thing?

THE SLY SEAMSTRESS

Mom worked in an office during the day and stayed up 'til the wee hours sewing clothes for us or doing the ironing. Many a night we'd awaken from our bed out in the sunroom and hear the steady hum of the sewing machine motor and the chunk-a-CHUNK-a-chunk-a-CHUNK of the needle flying up and down under Mother's broad, well-manicured hands. Sometimes, mostly right around Easter or Christmas time, she'd gently pull one or the other of us from our bed with, "Come here for just a minute, Sweetie, I need you to try this on. It's a surprise for your sister, now, so don't you tell her." Groggy with sleep, we'd wobble and yawn as she'd measure and pin, spin us around, and pin some more. Then, she'd tuck us back snugly under the covers. If we had been more alert, we might have recognized that she was measuring each of us for the very item we ourselves had asked for – the red wool skirt with the sassy pleats for Donna, a blue-satin bolero jacket for me – whatever particular item we'd have most recently pointed out to her in the McCall's or Simplicity pattern book. To this day Donna and I marvel that we never once caught on to that game.

UNHOLY BAPTISM

Mother and Aunt Betty – though friends, sisters-in-law and close neighbors — weren't inclined to sit over iced tea and gossip or chat. With Mom working all week, and her weekends filled with housework, trips to the Laundromat or visits to the grandparents in Wayne County, there wasn't much girl-time for our mothers. But they shared a common cause — the battle for our behavioral and spiritual well-being. Toward this end they maintained a solidarity of purpose, a unified front that remained impenetrable. Strategically, their approach was to lead their troops by example. And when that failed, to achieve the objective by whatever tactical means necessary and proportional to the egregiousness of the offense. Usually, strong direction or a threat would suffice. Only occasionally was disciplinary action required; but, when called for, it was administered surely, swiftly, and with a startling degree of vigor.

We made the four-hour drive to Wayne County one weekend and had spent Friday night, Saturday, and the early part of Sunday there, visiting Granny and Pa Pa at their home in Mill Spring. Usually, these visits included only our immediate family. This weekend, though, Aunt Betty, Uncle Frank, and the kids were there, too.

The air in the country always seems to hang heavy with humidity no matter the season. This being a weekend in late summer, the temperature was stifling, and the air inside and out was steamier than usual. By Sunday we kids had grown bored and miserable. Someone

mentioned the cool water of Brushy Creek; and, *en masse*, we approached the fathers and asked permission to go there. We received the anticipated response, delivered in unison, from our dads: "Go ask your mother." The mothers, as expected, refused. Also as expected, our granny intervened, but not overtly. If it had been Pa Pa putting that crimp in our plans, she'd have decreed, "Go, child, and pay him no mind," her hands shooing the requestor on her way like a queen dismissing a serf. But, some subtlety was called for when the mothers were involved. With us pitifully moping around Granny's skirt tails, she'd mutter, "Don't know what would be wrong with them children doin' a little wadin'," as she'd shuffle by within earshot of the moms. "It's hotter'n blue blazes. Nothin' like stickin' a toe in the creek to cool a body down." Mom and Aunt Betty never had a chance. All that was required then was a solemn promise from us to keep ourselves dry. After having so solemnly sworn, we were allowed to make the trek down the gravel lane to the two-lane black-topped road and the mile-or-so hike from there to Brushy Creek.

As to why we were forbidden to get into the water, I can offer only that times were different then. Children were expected to be seen and not heard. Their activities deferred to the conveniences and preferences of their parents – not the other way around as is the case today. And, as we were about to make the nearly four-hour drive back home; and knowing that we might stop at a restaurant or another relative's house on the way back, we needed to be neatly dressed for the trip. That's the best

explanation I can give as to why the last words we heard as we traipsed off toward the lane were, "Come back here wet, and you'll be cuttin' yourself a switch!" We knew these were not hollow words. And we had every intention of heeding them. We girls, at least, were so well intended. As to the boys, I can think now only that we should have known better.

And, so knowing, it would have come as much less a surprise when, upon arriving at the creek and having prudently removed our snappy white Keds into which we had tucked our dainty white anklets and waded thigh-deep into the clear, cool stream as it swirled and sped refreshingly past our spindly legs, Lindell immediately pushed Myra face-down into the water. Flailing and gasping, she eventually righted herself and stood soaked to the bone. Her little seersucker shorts and dotted-Swiss top, even her faded cotton underwear with the tiny blue-and-yellow flowers, all clung to her like cooling gravy sticks to the back of a spoon. The fiery red of her hair was completely quenched, now a dark, dripping mop plastered flat to her head as she dragged her sopping self onto the gravelly creek bank.

For a brief moment Dale stood stunned, his sky-blue eyes wide with wonder. Then, those eyes glinted mischief like sun off a darting fish, and Dale was beside Donna, under the water, yanking her plump, bowed little legs from under her. Not that she hadn't anticipated it. She'd tried to high-tail it to dry land, but he was just too quick for her. By the time I recovered from the shock of watching my cousin and then my sister meet

their watery doom, both Lindell and Dale had me shoulder-deep in the current. I struggled to salvage at least the hair, keep it dry and presentable, but it was hopeless.

At just that moment, our attention is drawn downstream, toward the bridge, from which direction blasts of a car-horn send ripples through the deadly-calm, stifling air. Leaning against the steel bridge-rails are Mom and Aunt Betty, waving their arms, calling us in. Idling ominously behind them is Uncle Frank's jet-black beast of a car – a '60-model Mercury station wagon – and from its engine a slow, steady growl. Through a watery blur I see it, long and low-slung with smooth, sleek lines and sun glinting off polished chrome like a gleam in Satan's eye. *It's waiting there,* I thought, *like a hearse awaiting its corpse.*

We were, none of us, allowed to speak on the short yet interminable ride back to Granny's. Upon arriving at the house, we were divided, each unto his or her own mother. Aunt Betty took her brood out past the outhouse. Mother marshaled Donna and me into the back bedroom. But, only after Lindell and I were given a paring knife and sent to the woods to cut a switch apiece. Oh, the injustice! We girls tried to explain: begged Mother to believe that we would have done as we were told if only the boys hadn't ruined us. But there were promises to be kept and important lessons to be taught that day. And so it was that a passel of sniveling children departed their beloved Granny's house with red eyes and red bottoms, having learned the painful lesson that not all in life is fair.

DAD'S CHILDHOOD HOME

Most visits to Granny and Pa Pa's house were much less eventful. Life was lived at a slower pace in that rural setting than what we experienced at home. The house and its few acres of grass and hilly woods might as well have been a cabin on a thousand acres, for the illusion of space and freedom it gave us kids.

Our visits usually began on Friday night. No matter how late we arrived, Granny would rouse herself and Pa Pa from their bed and would bustle around the kitchen to feed us. They had a refrigerator, but anything not immediately perishable was left on the kitchen table, with a cotton tablecloth thrown over it to keep off the flies. Throw back the cloth and you might find a freshly baked blackberry cobbler. In the simple white baking dish with the red flowers on each handle, the concoction looked lumpy and crude. But, a forkful of that pie delivered layers of delicate pastry alternated among layers of the sweetest blackberry filling you ever tasted. Rarely there'd be Half & Half or cream. More likely it was Pet Milk, the canned, evaporated stuff that required the sharp point of a heavy knife to poke two holes in the top to get a good flow. We'd pour the thick milk straight from the can and watch it flow over the mounded pie like snow-melt off a mountain and settle in sweet, dense pools against the rim of the saucer. Or, we might discover a hunk of cornbread left from that day's supper, alongside a big black pot full of pinto beans with a ham hock still floating there.

Granny wasn't big on baking cakes. She thought they were too fussy and bothersome with the icing that never went on as smoothly for her as she'd seen others manage it. But Pa Pa loved a good pound cake and, more often than not, a left-over hunk of the golden treat would be waiting for us there. Topped with canned peaches, pears, or pineapple ("frut" as Pa Pa called it), and a creamy drizzle of the canned milk, that dessert beat anything the best Paris bakery could offer.

"Gabe, them girls'r healthy as a cup'la young sows. They eat good, don't they," Pa Pa would announce to Dad as we all sat around the table for a late-night snack. In later years, Donna and I would recognize the reference to our round, pudgy cheeks and bellies, and we'd wish Pa Pa would develop some mealtime interest other than our eating habits. But in these early years, we'd sit blissfully ignorant under the dotting gaze of our grandparents, and guiltlessly put away whatever sweet treats they placed in front of us.

So, Friday nights were all about the food, and then the late-night ordeal of sleeping arrangements. Old iron beds heaped high with handmade quilts and feather pillows were inviting, but we had once seen a snake in the room where we were usually put. The snake had been swiftly killed, but ever after we girls would not be put to bed without a thorough and elaborate room-check by Mom or Dad, under our watchful eyes, to make sure no such monsters lurked there.

Saturday evenings were the best. On Saturday nights, neighbors – family and friends – would drop by to visit. In warm weather, Granny and the ladies would make lemonade and before long we'd all be on the porch watching lightnin' bugs dance out in the yard.

The porch was screened on three sides. A window in the front wall of the house allowed that, even if the hour got late and we kids were sent to bed, we could still lie there and listen to the banter and the yarns the men would spin well into the night.

Usually we were allowed to stay up, and our favorite seat was the wooden swing that hung on one end of the porch. Various rockers and chairs littered with throw pillows outfitted the porch and caused the weathered floorboards to creak and groan as their occupants rocked or rearranged themselves from time to time.

The only decoration, an old bull's horn, hung from a leather strap on the wall next to the window. The horn's insides had been carved out to form a cone-shaped instrument that could be blown like a trumpet. In bygone days, before telephones and with no other means of long-distance communication, this horn was the method by which neighbors sounded an alarm in an emergency. The sound carried for miles over the hills and through the valleys, and would call neighbors to attend to whatever emergency needed assistance. We all eventually learned to coax out its eerie, mournful wail.

We kids liked nothing better on these lazy summer nights than to tuck ourselves into a corner and listen as the old men told stories about how things used to be. I'd like to retell some of the stories here, try to recreate the richness and vividness of the images. I remember snippets: Buss or Jake, one of the great-uncles, bragging about his matched pair of mules, Kit and Sam, and the feats they accomplished that proved they were the best durn team in Wayne County and very likely the entire Great State of Missouri, which was sayin' somethin', let me tell you. Stories about Pa Pa's three-legged 'coon dog, Clay, who'd take on any raccoon, 'possum, or bobcat and fight 'til one of them was too stove-up to fight or just too tuckered out. Fact is, I remember the telling much more intensely than the stories themselves -- the language so different from what we heard in the city: unsophisticated and peppered with slang, yet so colorful and expressive.

Listening to the old men swap hunting stories, you soon found yourself out there in the woods on those fall evenings, crunching leaves and twigs under your feet, listening to ol' Clay and Red and Bones bay and howl as they chased their prey across the valley. You would hear their cries fading into echoes bouncing from hill to hill and back to you as you trailed behind. Soon you'd be taking a seat under an oak nearly naked now from the shedding of its leaves, and you'd smell the musty, musky moss growing on its bark and feel the chill in the air that tells you the first snow is nearer than you want to know. Hearing renewed

excitement in the dogs' yelps and snarls, you'd move out again and catch up to the pack. Finishing the job the dogs started, you'd bag the critter then take a knee to congratulate ol' Clay on a job well done. Through the skills of the storyteller, you would experience all this, even if you didn't know a hound from a poodle and had never toted a gun into the woods in your life.

It was here on this ramshackle porch fronting a dilapidated old house in rural Missouri that I first felt the impact of words and began to appreciate their significance and worth. Used in as skillful and compelling a manner as I have ever heard, the words in the stories told by the old-timers there ignited the imagination, created scenes and images the listener could almost touch.

These are treasured memories. My love for words was born here, I believe, with a desire to hand down stories like the elders did back then, but with a permanence not afforded by the spoken word. Blame the television, telephones, radio. Whatever the reason, we are of a generation whose entertainment was not derived from the exchange of experiences on the front porch. And we are all the poorer for it.

A FINAL FAREWELL

Remembering some of these stories – and especially in the context of Dale's passing -- it is brought home to me that so much of what we are is wrapped up in where we came from. Dale was a rebel and a rounder, but it seems that to a large degree, he came by that naturally. So, I'm inclined to cut him some slack and send him off to the hereafter grateful in the knowledge that, in the end, any pain he caused was visited mainly upon himself.

At his memorial, they said Dale found Jesus there toward the end. And I was very glad to hear it because, for the Dale I knew, it could easily have gone the other way. Dale knew exactly who he was and what he was about, and he never tried to make you think he was anything else. The thing about Dale was that he could look you right in the eye and lie to you as convincingly as a child. And, no matter how many times he'd burned you before, you'd more than likely buy whatever he was selling, lot, stock, and barrel. He could charm and disarm even the wariest old codger, and it surprises me now how I miss that big barrel-chested laugh of his and the twinkle in those blue eyes.

We cousins are far flung now. With families of our own, in distant places, we rarely get to visit. Though no one spoke it, the thought hung heavy in the air at Dale's wake that we might not ever again be together in one place.

Dale's passing leaves an emptiness I can't explain. Just one more time, I'd like to snuggle down into bed on the sunroom of that old flat and listen with Donna to the unceremonious routine of our cousins' bedtime below us:

"You kids quieten down now and go to sleep! I do NOT want to tell you again." Aunt Betty would yell from her bed.

"OK. I'm sleeping. Goodnight, Mom!"

"Goodnight, Myra."

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, *Haw-un*. Now, go to sleep!

Boys, do you think I'm playin' with you?"

A husky, "No," from Lindell, and a cocky, "No, Ma'am!!" from Dale.

Then, their snickering.

"Then, shut it up and get to sleep before I get the belt!"

A subdued, "Yes, Ma'am!" from both. No snickering now. Just silence, still as a tomb.