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Healing springs.

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HEALING SPRINGS

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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HEALING SPRINGS

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Who are we, apart and independent of the labels attached to us? How does our past, our history, shape us into the people we are? Just as many writers of memoir grapple with questions of self, nineteenth-century pioneer writer, Caroline Kirkland, struggled to find her own identity throughout her book, *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* As I read Kirkland's autobiographical account of her attempts to settle in the American frontier, I felt a kindred spirit with Kirkland. She attempts to create a new home and new identity simultaneously. The labels of wife, mother, and homemaker do little to relate who she really was, just as the same labels fail to describe any woman fully and completely.

As a woman who has lived through the tumultuous years of adolescence in the 1960s and 70s, marriage, motherhood and divorce in the 1980s, and come out marginally unscathed in the 21st century, labels have always defined who I am: daughter, sister, wife, mother. These questions of identity struggle to be answered in the pages of *Healing Springs*, a collection of nonfiction essays, weaving together memoir, personal essays and

travel narratives. In the first half of this two-part collection, I tell the story of my grandmother's secrets as I realize I have many of my own, from the humorous story of applying to be a playboy bunny to troublesome reflections on infidelity. The second section includes journeys that take me around the world and back home, from Versailles, France, Bastogne, Belgium, and finally home to Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. Through each of these journeys, I begin to discover who I am without the burdensome labels of the past, laboring to uncover the secrets of a family who hold their own lives close to the chest.

Although I cannot compare my journeys in the twenty-first century to those of a pioneer woman, there is still a thread that links us. Our journeys are part of a larger American literary journey – the act of writing autobiography. In writing this autobiographical thesis, I have discovered new identities, sometimes through the lens of nature or spirituality, often through humor, and always through meditation and reflection on a life fully lived.

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INTRODUCTION

The first snow of winter is falling outside my window as I leaf through the pages of Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* Published under the pseudonym of Mrs. Mary Clavers in 1839, *A New Home* is the account of early American pioneer Kirkland as she and her family attempt to settle an eight-hundred-acre village in Pinckney, Michigan. In the spring of 1836, Caroline Kirkland, with her husband and four young children, left their home in the East and headed west to unknown territory. The Kirklands were among the hopeful pioneers to go in search of a new home after reading the glamorized – and often fabricated – male adventure tales coming out of the West. Kirkland sarcastically joked of "penetrating the interior," an expression often used in the male-dominated literature of the era. As Kirkland settled into her new home, she corresponded with friends and family back East. Enthusiasm for her letters, which retold stories from her pioneer experiences, turned into the novel, *A New Home.* Within three years, Kirkland's book went into three editions, and by 1855 twelve editions had been published in England and America. Caroline Kirkland went from struggling pioneer to acclaimed author. Although during her lifetime Kirkland enjoyed critical and popular success (Edgar Allen Poe described Kirkland as "an undoubted sensation"), by the early part of the twentieth century, she had largely been left out of American literary histories. Only recently have scholars begun to revisit her timeless writings.

As I compile my own collection of life writing, I attempt to construct, and reconstruct, my life from memory, however flawed and filled with blanks. Though at the time it was first published Kirkland's book was labeled fiction, it is a mixture of diary

entries, journaling and short autobiographical sketches – a memoir. Memoir, from the root, "memory" – the experience of life and reflection on that life. Patricia Hampl says all memoir is, in a way, travel writing, "notes taken along the way, telling how things looked and what thoughts occurred." I have no diary, as Kirkland did, to reference for snippets of history or specific conversations; no journals to transcribe. I only have memory. I have had to fill in holes, re-create dialogue and the thoughts of a child. Kirkland said the genesis of *A New Home* was simply the need to describe this new life she was experiencing: "I little thought of becoming an author before I lived in the wilderness – There, the strange things I saw and heard every day prompted me to description . . .". I, too, had little thought of writing my own stories as they were happening. With some, it has taken time, distance and reflection to be able to write my life. Now, from the perspective of an adult, I see the value of this history – my history – and the need to describe and convey these events that stand out in my memory grows stronger with time.

As I scan the pages of this woman's life long ago buried and forgotten by most, I wonder what drove Kirkland towards the journey she writes about. Perhaps she was searching for some kind of Eden, as we all search for some kind of perfection, though often becoming lost in the search. Perhaps she was simply searching for what every woman yearns for – a place to call her own. Not necessarily a physical space, but a place where she could plant herself in firm ground just to see what could grow.

The same motivations that drove Kirkland compel me to write now. As I read Kirkland's struggles to find an identity in an unwelcoming environment, I feel a sense of connection, even though we are over a century apart. Who are we, as women, outside

and apart from the labels attached to us – mother, wife, daughter? How can we seek out and articulate "a new home" for ourselves?

In my writing, I strive to record my own history as accurately as memory allows, though with time and perspective, recollections become fuzzy and new conclusions are formed. Kirkland herself was a careful realist; she was faithful to the pioneer life she described with humor and sympathy. For Kirkland, life on the frontier needed no embellishments: "A portrait, however showily painted, is worth nothing, if it be not a resemblance." She continues: "A painter would show his skill but poorly, who, in his zeal for beautifying his subject, should leave out a wart, even though it grew on the tip of one's nose. Equally unwise is he who exaggerates a wrinkle, or throws too heavy a shade over a complexion that needs no deepening." Kirkland believed that in the act of favoring imagination over realism, in fictionalizing what is real and true, we run the risk of tainting our past and dishonoring our history.

Kirkland, however, as the recorder of her history, at once discovers and creates herself, as I have done in my own writing. I am never static, but ever changing. I construct and deconstruct my "self" as I maneuver through life, inching my way along the path often blind but always hopeful. Mark Allister, in *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow*, says, "the self is not something there, finished and set in place, ready merely to be described, but something the writer is shaping." This is what drew readers to Kirkland's writing, just as readers are drawn to life writing today. Readers choose nonfiction, and personal essays in particular, for the bond it can create – the personal relationship between the writer and audience. It is often intimate and always genuine. James Olney, author of *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment*, says that "behind every work of

literature there is an 'I' informing the whole and making its presence felt at every critical point, and without the 'I' stated or implied, the work would collapse into mere insignificance." The significance of Kirkland's – or any – life writing is the connection it makes with the reader. The audience acts as evaluators and judges, not just of the writing, but of the life. Writers of memoir risk exposure, embarrassment, and worse still, rejection. But for those who succeed in making that connection, the price is well worth it. Who hasn't, at one time or another, picked up and read a book, someone's story, and had the "ah-ha" moment; the moment that, in our loneliness or solitude or isolation, we make a connection to the writer or community or text. In this moment we realize we are not so stupid or crazy or isolated after all; there is someone out there who thinks or feels the same way we do. What a relief.

These same internal struggles rise to the surface as I construct my own collection of essays, attempting to transform my experience into some form of readable literature. Memoir's ultimate purpose is to fix the self, to put forth the idea that the writer matters and that the individual life is significant in the supposed order of things. But I still wonder what *is* the significance of this text I strive to write? According to James Olney in *Memory and Narrative*, the etymological origin of *text* in *texere* is "to weave": it is "never fixed or single: it is ever rewoven, constantly renewed or reconstructed, constantly evolving, a story and a work in progress." In each essay, every version of my "self" is altered with circumstance. I am simultaneously moving toward and away from something. Inside every story seems to be a journey; either a journey in search of a physical place, or a journey to some kind of inner clarity. During the physical journey, we sometimes stumble upon something we weren't expecting or even looking for. It is

not something we can touch or see, but our senses intuitively know it exists. It is the journey *towards* something that drives us, but what we find is often unexpected: ourselves.

Although I cannot compare my journeys in the twenty-first century to that of a pioneer woman in the early 1800s, there is still a thread that links us. Our journeys are part of a larger American literary journey. Robert Sayre, author of "Autobiography and the Making of America," believes that "Autobiography may be the preeminent kind of American expression . . . . America and autobiography have been peculiarly linked." American "life" writers, such as Annie Dillard, David Sedaris, Kathleen Norris, Kyra Salek, among countless others, each have contributed to the melting pot of contemporary expression linked to the autobiographical form of the essay. Though each writes in his or her own style and genre – humor, nature, spiritual, adventure – all write from the perspective of the "I," and through this perspective, their memories, their biographies, are intimately shared with the reader. In studying each of these writers and their unique sense of "American expression," I have borrowed bits and pieces of techniques and methods to discover my own expression, sometimes through the lens of nature or spirituality, often through humor, and always through meditation and reflection.

The only poem I have ever had the mental capacity to memorize is "The Road Not Taken," Robert Frost's well-known work about life's decisions and choices, and how they affect our lives, told through the guise of a traveler. Frost's traveler stopped, studied, considered, and took off down the road less traveled and as the final line states, "*And that has made all the difference.*" But the traveler sees the "difference" only in retrospect. At the time, the roads look the same. The act of writing memoir – reflecting

back on memory and recreating it on paper – is the same as the journey of Frost's narrator. In these essays, I take each experience and, through the focused act of remembrance and imagination along with the passage of time, make connections and create a history that may not have been apparent or possible at the time. As we look back on our past, we oftentimes judge ourselves through a corrective lens. There is no perception that is not altered by memory. The distance is necessary to understand and create each event's significance and meaning to our lives. What may have appeared at the time to be miniscule may come to be understood as life altering. Inconsequential decisions of our youth have the ability to change the scope of our lives.

The road less traveled for both Kirkland and myself, leads home, or at least to my perception of home. As Kirkland recites the story of her journey west, I can see my journeys' significance in my own life. Perhaps all we are really searching for is "home," or what we consider to be the ultimate version of home. For some it is a building with four walls and a fireplace; for some it is a person or people to share our memories. Still for others it is merely the knowledge that we have the power to create any journey we want – not a tangible object, but an idea. In the never-ending desire to define who and what we are, it soon becomes apparent that the roads we take or don't take make us into the people we are, and it is ever-changing. What I was at twenty has little if any resemblance to what I am at forty. What I'll be at sixty will take on a new identity – another incarnation born of the successes and failures, choices and experiences of my earlier years. We are not just one person, but a collage created, layer by layer of memories and years, way leading on to way. The longest journey is often the journey inward, the one journey that has no end.

The explorations in these essays are those of passionate youth, of failed relationships, and of reconnection with something or someone I thought I had lost. They follow my life from my earliest memories to a more recent struggle to define myself and the relationships in my life. The collection is organized into two parts, weaving together memoir, personal essays and travel narratives. The first section recalls my adolescence and young adulthood as I struggled to define myself in ways that – in retrospect – seem mindless, moving into an adult search for meaning, as I begin to seek a deeper understanding of my past. The second section includes journeys that take me around Europe and back home again as I seek out connections to people and places, both real and imagined, places that lead me to my emotional self. As I recorded my past, the memories formed through the physical places I've been led me to places I never expected to go. At times, I travel half way around the world to find what was home all along.

Caroline Kirkland, like myself, was not writing the memoirs of a famous historical figure. Like most women writing at the time, Kirkland was unknown, writing privately about the events of her everyday life. I, too, write from the perspective of an ordinary woman, a woman who studies a life in retrospect, searching to make meaning out of the chaos of a life fully lived. I will not know until much later if I have engaged the reader as I'd hoped – if I have any readers at all. Inside of my own essays, I suppose I am a pioneer of sorts; life pushing me in unforeseen directions, choosing the best road to travel, and living with the consequences. Perhaps I, too, have been searching for some kind of Eden, though I suppose I won't know until the end of the journey if I have found it.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Grandma's Secrets

My grandmother lay in her coffin, a smirk on her face. I'm sure the embalmer was going for something more delicate, peaceful, but Grandma's smiles often crossed the line into smugness, so he had his work cut out for him. And of course her mail order Eva Gabor wig, which she would never go without in public, took a good fifteen years off her eighty-two. The embalmer's pancake makeup made her gracefully creviced face look no different than any other day, although Grandma usually went a little heavier on the powder. The high-neck ruffle of her blouse's collar, buttoned tight around her thick neck, worked well to hide her jowls, as she would have insisted. She wore her good pink polyester suit, the same one she wore to my wedding four years earlier, reserved only for very special occasions. She looked smaller in the coffin than in person – in life – though she was only five-foot-one. My mother said I got my height from her, my father's mother, the "other side," from where I was told I inherited most of my inferior traits.

Grandma, or Audrey as my brother would call her when she was exceptionally ornery, lived with us as long as I could remember. When her second husband, Carl, died in the early sixties, he made my father promise to take care of her, and left him a small amount of money to purchase our first home so she could live with us. Nothing like a little bribe amongst family. I was nineteen when she died, unhappily married with a child, looking for a way out – out of marriage, out of poverty, out of town. I knew if I

didn't do something to get out of this poor excuse for a marriage, away from a future of working in chicken-plants or Wal-marts, my life was basically over before I hit twenty.

As I stood looking down at my dead grandmother in her unadorned maple, economy-priced coffin, I wondered what she would have told me to do. Although she had every opportunity while she was alive, I somehow wanted to channel her now for advice she never offered when she could have. I realize now, some twenty years later, I didn't need her advice; I just needed to remember how she lived.

As a child I would spend my days in Grandma's attic bedroom, watching and learning what it would be like to be a grownup woman, learning lessons about my body I would never learn from my inhibited mother. It was my mother I was bound to out of duty, and I learned young I should ask her for the occasional obligatory advice, but it was Grandma whom I went to for the nuts and bolts of breasts, penises and pubic hair. And of course I played them against each other when the mood struck me. "Mom won't let me cut my hair. Can you believe it?" Grandma would then cut my hair over her bathroom sink, in a boxy Dutch-boy just like on the paint can. I paraded past my mother as she read the evening paper, swinging my hair back and forth, failing to raise a reaction.

In the privacy of her bathroom, I would scrub my grandmother's back as she soaked in the tub, long past modest, watching the foamy water run down the front of her breasts that hung loosely from her aging body. I showed her my own ten-year-old chest as she dried from her bath. "When will mine be floppy like yours?" I'd ask, pointing to my pre-pubescent bumps. As she powdered her naked body, I ran my hand along the curve of her breasts, long and soft, the breasts of a sixty-five-year-old woman. "Just wait," she said, "your time will come." Grandma took me on the city bus to the Jones

Store in downtown Kansas City and fitted me with my first bra: "This is my granddaughter's first bra!" I thought I saw her wink as the saleslady wrapped a tape measure around my pancake chest. "Congratulations," the woman said to me, and I just smiled, wearing my training bra from the store.

When my first pubic hair sprouted it was Grandma I went to first. "Look!" I said as I showed her what I had found. "That's very nice, honey," she said, "but don't go around showing everyone you know. Now you'll have to learn how to keep secrets." I didn't understand what she meant, but I would soon learn the difference between delicate female secrets, secrets that are soft around the edges and smooth to the touch, like breasts and periods and stretch marks, and those secrets that are rough and tangled, bitter-tasting secrets like cheating husbands and bill collectors. And I would learn that the older we get, the more secrets there are to keep, different kinds of secrets – those a girl needs to be restrained about, and those secrets that women share between each other – the ones we keep from men.

It was my grandma who taught me at a young age how to work a man. One particular day I badly wanted a Calamity Jane outfit, with full side arms and spurs, but my father refused. My grandmother comforted me, and let me in on her secret. "When I was married to your Grandpa," she said, "if I didn't get something I really wanted, all I would have to do is cry, and he would buckle."

"You mean you weren't really crying?"

"No, of course not, sweetie. Just fake it, they don't know the difference." Within the week I was outdrawing my brother and lassoing the neighbor's dog.

I would sit for hours in Grandma's bedroom, flipping through old black and white photographs of people I'd never known. "Who's this?" I'd ask, time after time, because I knew I'd get a dramatic response of a lost love or secret affair. One yellowed photograph showed Grandma between two mustached men. "That's my husband, Carl, and his brother, Bill." Carl had long since died. She took the photograph in one hand, her other placed over her chest as if to stifle any sudden heart attack. "Bill and me were just like this." With her hand on her chest, she crossed her two fingers tightly together, shaking her head. This got my adolescent mind racing. "Was he your boyfriend? Did you kiss him? Did Grandpa Carl know you were sweet on his brother?" Grandma just patted her chest, never answering.

In another picture, I recognized Grandma at six or seven with her older sister, my Aunt Jesse, and younger brother, Uncle Ben. They were standing with their mother on their Missouri farm, a woman I never knew and heard little about. "She whipped us with a belt if we didn't get our chores done," she said. I could tell by the grim expressions on their young faces, though creased and faded, none of them was particularly happy, including their mother, all with the same thin lips and full cheeks. I wondered what her life was like on the farm. Did she want to leave this home in the picture as much as I would later want to leave mine? The dark paneled trailer walls were suffocating to a teenaged girl looking for adventure. My father nailed the screens of my bedroom window shut after catching me sneaking out one night. I was a caged tiger, pacing back and forth, waiting for my escape. Later, during my sophomore year of high school, I would run away with my older boyfriend. Upon my inevitable return, my father avoided me and my mother simply shook her head, conceding defeat. No words, only silent looks

of disgust traded between family. Later the next year I would quit school, marry my boyfriend and have a baby. A dropout, a teenage bride and mother, and a disappointment. It was my grandmother, my teacher and ally, who gently took charge; me, the baby with the baby and my grandmother showing me how to mother without saying the words. My grandmother wasn't much older than I was when she had my father at seventeen. Perhaps I inherited more than her physical traits.

Of course, my grandmother always had plenty to say and didn't hesitate to say it, she who could pee standing up over a toilet and gave my brother and me our first taste of beer in grade school. She kept a secret drawer in her bedroom stuffed with chocolate bars and tootsie pops for us. "Don't tell your mother." *Your* mother – the nemesis, the woman my grandmother would fight with throughout her life for the affections of my father. A household with two widely contradictory personalities at the helm isn't exactly a picture of serenity, but it was always entertaining.

It was my father who would tell me about his graduation picture: his mother, Grandma, and two other women smiling and waving into the camera, and my dad, looking sullen. "She was drunk. She came to my high school graduation with her girlfriends drunk," the animosity still seeping from his voice. He threw the picture back in the shoebox. I was old enough to know what this meant to my father, but didn't understand the implications for my grandmother. She was a burden, a woman he had given his word to take care of, to whom he felt no real devotion or loyalty. At the funeral, he avoided her coffin. I overheard him later telling my mother it was as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Fifteen years later, after my father died, I went

back to look for the box of pictures but they were gone, burned, my mother said. He wanted nothing of the memories hiding in the shoebox.

How can we see things so differently – those who we love and those who supposedly love us? Did my grandmother's misdeeds in her youth banish her from the acceptance of those she loved the most? I could never make the leap the rest of my family has easily made. I knew what she had done to my father, what she had said to my mother, but was this enough to punish her for eternity? A simple burning of pictures cannot exorcise the memories they hold. Perhaps I was holding onto the woman I felt closest to, the woman who taught me about my body and men and self-confidence in a way my own mother never could. As a pre-teen, when I asked my mother to describe my looks she replied, "Plain." When I asked my grandmother the same question, I knew she would say what I wanted – needed – to hear. "You're a livin' doll," she said, without a beat, as we danced to Englebert Humperdink.

"Really? You really think so?"

"Why, sure. You'll have so many boys after you you'll have to beat them off with a stick." She was partially right. Later I would learn that some men needed beating with a stick.

Grandma set her hair every Sunday, and I would sit on the bathroom sink and hand her bobby pins as she wrapped her severely thin hair in pin curls, her scalp shown through the sparse hairs from a bout of scarlet fever as a child. Only when she was in her seventies did her vanity overcome her values, and she finally purchased a wig. It was an ill-fitting catalog wig she complained of wearing throughout the heat of Arkansas summers. Still, she refused to go without it in public. We lived in a mobile home with

an aluminum roof and no air conditioner in 110-degree summers. She painted her face ghostly white with loose powder and smoothed red rouge onto her plump cheeks, matching the shade on her thin red lips. My dad called it her "war paint." After a summer trip to the grocery store, her painted face would melt under the cap of her top-heavy, frosted wig. "You never know when the right man might come along," she would say as she dabbed at the sweat dripping into her eyes, and smile the same haughty smile she wore in her coffin.

A man did finally come along, a year or two before she died. Ken, a widower in his eighties, asked my grandmother to marry him after just a few months. "He just wants a maid and a cook," she said to me, proud in her principles. But a few short months later another woman accepted Ken's proposal. I overheard the phone call from Grandma to Ken, attempting to withdraw her refusal. "I changed my mind," she said, still proud, but appealing for a reprieve. "Why can't I change my mind?" she asked. She didn't know I was there, listening, and I stayed in the next room, hidden, long after the conversation ended. She hung up and went back to the kitchen, rewashing the same dishes.

I stayed quiet in the next room, feigning ignorance of her presence when she finally discovered me. I was only seventeen, but I was married by then with a baby, learning what heartache was and keeping my own secrets. My husband was an abusive alcoholic, a fact I was too ashamed to tell even my grandmother. I was in such a hurry to get out from under my parents' thumb that I rushed into the first opportunity that came along. I know how you feel, I wanted to say to her. Of course you want a way out. I wanted out of here, too, but look how it turned out for me. You'll have other chances, I wanted to say, but never did. I left her with her secret, and kept mine to myself.

It wasn't long after this that her health began to falter. At night in the quiet of the house, I could hear my grandmother's voice from behind her closed door. I knew there was no one there, and I cracked the door just wide enough to see my grandmother reading aloud from a Bible. I never knew she owned a Bible, let alone read from one. We never went to church. My family was full of "armchair Christians," never attending church but listening intently every Sunday morning to Oral Roberts and Jim Whittington as they prayed through the TV for the souls of their flock. Perhaps my grandmother knew her time was short; or maybe she was hoping it was, and just looking for some kind of guarantee she would go to the good place. After growing up listening to my parents' complaints of Grandma, I wasn't sure what would happen to her when she died, though I still wasn't convinced she *would* die. She was immortal to me – an indestructible presence I wasn't sure I could survive without. Most grandmothers meander in and out of their grandchildren's lives, becoming barely a memory when they're gone, but mine had been there from the beginning, under the same roof, the same thumbs.

I could see her feisty spirit drain away as if she was tired of the fight. A stroke finally took her, sudden and without warning. One week later I left my husband, quietly, without the battle I imagined, just the solemn acceptance of something inevitable. For years I stayed with him, afraid, but more afraid to leave, afraid of a future alone, of being a single mother. Afraid of the boogieman that was never there.

As I looked down at her small form lying motionless, I felt keenly aware of my own body. I studied her face, trying to project how I would look at eighty. I was sure I'd have my hair, and worried I'd have her jowls. I wondered how many people would come

to my funeral. Only one child for both of us, small families, so I'd have to make a lot of friends to have a good turnout.

A handful of visitors came and went, leaving condolences and taking my grandmother's death brochure. The funeral was small and quick, quite painless, with the mandatory Amazing Grace and Lord's Prayer. A short trip to the cemetery and back home for ham and homemade cinnamon rolls.

Once grandma was gone, a switch seemed to click inside me. The fears I'd lived with for so long weren't important anymore. It's funny how in death the people closest to us finally seem to come alive. Not literally, of course, but as a call to action, a kind of license to renovate, remodel and transform our own lives into something less common, more exceptional, more extraordinary – more worth living. Perhaps we do it to honor the dead, or maybe to just acknowledge the place we will hold for them, if only in our memories.

CHAPTER TWO

Bang the Drum Slowly - Please

Each year on New Year's Day, I turn on the Rose Parade[1] from Pasadena and watch as the rose-covered floats and giant Disney characters parade across my TV screen, interspersed with the occasional up-and-coming or has-been entertainers. I was now at the age, treading lightly into my forties, to only be acquainted with the has-beens. But watching the Rose Parade always opens up a symphony of memories.

"Who's that?" I asked my daughter, Christine, as we watched a black-haired girl lip sync atop a float on the Rose Bowl Parade.

"Ashlee Simpson."

"Who's Ashlee Simpson?" I asked.

"Jessica Simpson's little sister."

"Who's Jessica Simpson?"

I could tell Christine was growing impatient. "Nick Lachey's ex."

"Who's Nick . . ."

"Would you shut up already?"

I had dreamed of being in a marching band in the Rose Parade ever since fourth grade. That was the year I began my musical career – I was finally old enough to play an instrument. I had watched my older sister Linda move from the clarinet (too many buttons) to the violin (it hurt her chin) and on, finally, to the cello (too big). Nothing lasted with her more than a semester. I was determined to pick the perfect instrument,

[1] Annual parade, always held on New Years Day in Pasadena. All floats made from real flowers, purportedly by slave labor, though this hasn't been confirmed.

and become a virtuoso by the time I was twelve. Of course my family had plenty of suggestions. My mother, practical and frugal, suggested I try my sister's clarinet.

"I'm tired of always getting her hand-me-downs!" Of course, this wasn't entirely true. She was two whole people bigger than me, so I seldom inherited her clothes. Grandma referred to my sister as "pleasantly plump." It was Grandma who tried to dump the violin on me. "Don't you like Lawrence Welk?[2] They have a whole violin section! You could go places! And if that doesn't work out, there's always Hee-Haw[3] and the fiddle. Same thing, you know."

It was my father who suggested the drums. "Remember all those cute girls in the Rose Parade with their little white marching boots with tassels?" he asked. "You can't march with a violin, now can you?" Visions of matching uniforms and shako hats[4] with chinstraps that covered my mouth swirled in my head. But that wasn't the selling point for me. Nope, it was The Carpenters[5]– Karen Carpenter to be exact – a girl drummer and lead singer. I wanted to be Karen Carpenter. If I took up the drums, I could play an instrument *and* sing. I could be a pop superstar. I had bought their number one single[6] "Top of the World" with my birthday money and sang along as I beat out the rhythm with butter knives on my brother's Hippity-Hop.[7] Drums it would be. I signed up for music on Monday morning and that night Dad took me to Belson's Music Store to pick out my

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[2] Popular orchestra named for their maestro. Became famous when they moved to a Shangri-La called Branson.
[3] Country variety show where people lived in cornfields with dancing chickens.
[4] Kick-ass military-type hats for marching bands; could get you beat up if worn off the football field.
[5] A brother/sister musical group from the seventies. Richard played piano; Karen played the drums and sang lead. Donny and Marie only much more hip *(*see below)*.
[6] At one time you could actually buy only the number one song from an album *(**see below)* on a vinyl 45. The practice was stopped when record companies realized there was only one good song on most albums.
[7] A big red rubber bouncy ball that you could sit on and, well, bounce. Could cause severe head trauma if used as a dodge ball, but a successful substitute for drums when needed.
** Part of the once-famous, non-polygamous sect of Mormons in Utah called the Osmond Family. Marie was a little bit country, Donny a little bit rock-and-roll.*
*** Album: Large vinyl CD that played music with a turntable and needle.*

drums. Mr. Belson looked at his supply list from the school. "Yes, yes. Fourth grade." He went to the backroom and came out with drumsticks and what looked to be a piece of wood about half the size of a shoe box with a piece of red rubber glued to the top. "Here are your sticks and practice pad," he said as he slid them into a sack.

I could feel a knot welling in my throat. My father asked Mr. Belson, "What about a drum?"

Mr. Belson smiled, "Oh no, drummers always start off on the practice pad first. Real drums come in seventh grade."

My dad and I looked at each other, then at the sack. "You have to start somewhere," he said reassuringly. "Louis Armstrong[8] probably started on a whistle."

At home in the privacy of my bedroom, I got out my practice pad and sticks and began to beat out the rhythm to The Partridge's[9] "I Think I Love You."[10] My first music lesson was the next Tuesday morning at school with Mr. Leslie, a soft-spoken, gray-haired man who seemed to actually enjoy teaching music in inner-Kansas City to pre-pubescents. In elementary school, each musical section has their own thirty-minute class, and only two of us signed up for percussion – Jamal and myself. Jamal never associated with me in class (I was the geeky, book-smart white girl and he was the afro-haired cool dude with a metal pick in one back pocket and drumsticks in the other) but we bonded over our practice pads. That year Jamal and I learned about whole-beats and half-beats, paradiddles and double paradiddles; we beat out the rhythm on our wood and rubber pads to such classics as "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "When the Saints Go Marchin'

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[8] Raspy voiced trumpet player, popular in the fifties.
[9] The Partridge Family: a fictional musical group that toured the country in a psychedelic bus with David Cassidy (see below) as lead singer. Several real #1 hits.
[10] Number one Partridge Family song sung by David Cassidy (a.k.a. Keith Partridge).

In." A whole new world opened up to me, and I was on my way to drumming immortality. Unfortunately, for the next three years –fourth, fifth, and sixth grade – I was stuck drumming on a rubber pad. The following Christmas my grandma felt so bad for me she got me a set of bongos. Although I became pretty adept with the bongos, performing "Babalu"[11] on demand, it just wasn't the same. But finally it was on to the big-time – Junior High.

In seventh grade I finally got my drum – a *Pearl* snare complete with stand and carrying case. The first day of music my dad dropped me off at school. I climbed from the family van with my drum in its large black, hard-sided carrying-case. But the case weighed in at three-quarters of my own body weight and was half as tall. Dad watched me struggle, "You need some help?"

"Nope," I said as I wrestled the drum case out of the van. "Piece of cake." I finally made my way to the music room, passing girls with their little piccolo and oboe cases. I envisioned one day having roadies haul my drums around like they do for Karen Carpenter. But I didn't care – I had my snare drum, and visions of "Wipeout"[12] began to dance in my head. I left my drum in the instrument closet and read my schedule: "ORCH" was under sixth hour. I was in the orchestra! Sixth hour couldn't come soon enough. I raced to the music room, retrieved my snare from the closet and climbed to the top level of the music room. There on the top platform, spread out before my eyes, was everything any seventh grade drummer could ever hope for – percussion heaven! There were bass drums, cymbals, triangles, maracas, a xylophone – and the granddaddy of them all – timpani. The rest of the percussion team arrived with their snares: Doug, who at

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[11] Desi Arnez's (the original Mambo King – aka Ricky Ricardo) signature song, made popular on "I Love Lucy."

[12] You need a footnote for Wipeout? Best-known drum instrumental and surfing anthem of all time.

thirteen was already six foot and could probably play linebacker for the Steelers, became the bass drum aficionado; Joe, a small, sickly looking boy, gravitated toward the xylophone and triangle; and Charles, who was to the snare drum what Jimi Hendrix[13] was to electric guitar. Charles took me under his wing and tried to get me out of my practice pad mentality. "Don't worry about the paradiddles, babe – just go with the rhythm," he said as he picked at his well-groomed afro. The rest of the orchestra took their positions and the music teacher, Mr. Kyle, a Richard Nixon[14] look-alike with a sour personality, lifted his wand and, in semi-unison, we played the scales. Of course, all we could do in the percussion section was a constant drum roll, but between the four of us, we came out okay. Directly in front of our section one level down was the trombone and trumpet section. As the semester and puberty wore on, I became increasingly infatuated with Peter, the first trombone player. Peter had wavy brown hair and beautifully chapped, slightly swollen lips. I became mesmerized by the sensual back and forth slide of his trombone and the way his chubby fingers barely reached the far-end low notes. During an exceptionally off-key rendition of "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing,"[15] I lost my beat on the timpani, being too transfixed on Peter's trombone, and Mr. Kyle waved his baton down in frustration. Section by section the orchestra surrendered their impersonation of musicians.

"I'm not sure what music you're reading," Mr. Kyle said to the class, "but it isn't 'I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing.' And Miss Timpani, if you could please keep the

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[13] Rocker from the late sixties. THE MAN on electric guitar, played with his teeth, set guitar on fire. They just don't make 'em like that anymore.

[14] Widely imitated 37th President of the United States, resigned amid Watergate scandal and allegations of overuse of hair oil.

[15] Theme sung by The New Seekers for Coca-Cola commercials in seventies.

beat I would be immensely grateful." I could feel my face redden, but I didn't care. Thanks to Mr. Kyle, for the first time ever, Peter was looking directly at me. Over break, I fantasized practicing together, Peter's trombone melody to my snare rhythm. Puberty was in full tilt, and drums took a back seat to my Peter obsession. But to my horror, I came back after Christmas break to find myself in "ORCH" once again, and Peter, along with my percussion mentor Charles, had been moved to "BAND." I approached Mr. Kyle before class as he was at his podium polishing his baton and asked if I could switch from "ORCH" to "BAND."

"Why?" he asked as he cracked his knuckles over his sheet music.

"Well, I have to walk Tony, the blind saxophone player, to his classes, so we sort of have to be in the same classes." Everyone wanted to walk Blind Tony to his classes, because we could be as late as we wanted and wouldn't get in trouble. Fights broke out in the halls over him. Without hesitating, Kyle quickly signed off on my schedule change.

I had made the big time, seventh hour band, with Peter and his trombone right in front of my snare. I started off the next semester with a bang-up job on the timpani to "Stars and Stripes Forever." But my world fell apart when Kelly, a redheaded flute player, moved in on Peter. Mr. Kyle rearranged the wind section, and the flutes ended up right beside Peter and the trombones. I watched from above as Kelly started flirting with Peter, tilting her elbow just high enough to brush across Peter's shoulder as she played. Soon Peter was sliding his trombone across her knees. Before mid-semester Peter had "Kelly" spelled in black magic marker across the back of his Fruit-of-the-Loom t-shirt. Charles saw what was happening and tried to break the fall.

"You be my girl-friend now," he told me as we put our snares away for the day, but his Billy Dee Williams[16] smile wasn't enough to take my mind off Peter.

I followed Peter down the halls of Jr. High, and sat behind him at football games; I even begged my dad to drive by Peter's house on our way home from school, which we did on several occasions. Of course, Dad misinterpreted my feelings as mere "puppy love," and played along, giving me all the "when I was your age..." mumbo jumbo. I spent weekends writing 'Peter' poetry, professing my undying love and my hopes for our future together. Alas, it wasn't to be. My family moved to Arkansas in the summer of my eighth-grade year. I would never get the chance to go to high school with Peter, to play drums behind his trombone section, to breathe the same rhythmic air.

Now that I was away from Peter I could begin to concentrate on my percussion career again. Perhaps it was for the best. The first cymbal crash of love was over and now nothing would interfere with me and my art again. But it wasn't to be that easy. Peter's face haunted me, the wavy hair, the swollen lips. I had too much time on my hands that summer. It started with the phone calls. I was now three hundred miles away, but I called his house in Kansas City just to hear the sound of his cracking voice. In the beginning, as soon as he would answer I would hang up, but, eventually, I became braver. The next time he answered I said "Hello, this is Elizabeth from band, remember me?" A pause fell over the line, but I continued. "I played drums in band. I moved away so I just thought I'd call and say 'Hi'."

Another pause. "Are you the girl who always dropped your sticks under my chair?" He remembered me! It was fate! We would be entwined for eternity! The conversation ended abruptly when he said his mother was calling. But I finally talked to

[16] Hottie actor, best known for his role as Lando Calrissian in "Star Wars."

him, voice to voice, though I was three hundred miles away. Destiny would bring us together again; I knew it.

I settled into my new home and was pretty upbeat when the notice for tryouts for marching band was posted. Two weeks before classes started I went to my new school with my snare drum. I met the rest of the percussionists, a group of four others that included Ginger, along with Kurt, Ron, and Levi. As I set up my snare I noticed Ginger was hanging in the back with the cymbals and other B grade percussion paraphernalia such as the wood block and tambourine. She smiled faintly as the guys set up and took their places behind the bass and snares.

"Hi, I'm Elizabeth," I said as I adjusted the tension on my drum. The guys just nodded hello, so I went back to talk to Ginger.

"I play the cymbals," she said meekly.

"Don't you play the other instruments too?"

Ginger quietly stated that the guys usually play the drums. Even though I moved from a large city to this small rural town, I figured even here they had heard of Karen Carpenter. Mr. Roberts, the band conductor took the podium and I defiantly took my place behind my snare drum, shoulder to shoulder with Kurt and Levi. I got through the first rehearsal without embarrassing myself, as Ginger stood behind me tapping her cymbals to "Fly, Robin, Fly."[17]

It was now time to head to the football field. Today we would learn to march in formation without our instruments. It was early August in Arkansas and the football field was around 120°. We started marching from the five-yard line, and gradually fanned out,

[17] Disco hit from the seventies about a bird that would fly, up, up to the sky; seemed to transfer for marching bands quite well. Also good skate rink number.

section by section, to the fifty. We tried to keep up as Mr. Roberts clapped his hands and barked orders from a ladder on the sidelines, "Head back! Chin up! Knees high!" but it was no use. The overweight French horn section started dropping like flies at the twenty. "Let's call it a day. We'll try tomorrow with your instruments."

The next day I attached the shoulder strap to my snare, something I had never done before. I was now going to march in a band! It was everything my dad and I envisioned all those years ago. First it would be sideline fight songs, football halftimes, then the local Hog Festival parade, and maybe, someday, the Rose Parade! Peter would see me New Years morning on TV, marching along a route of rose petals and towering helium balloons of Daffy Duck and Micky, in my short little skirt and white boots with tassels and rue the day he ever chose little miss flautist over me.

We took our places on the five-yard line; Mr. Roberts raised his baton and "Fly, Robin, Fly" soon echoed across the football field. As I began beating to the rhythm of the song and marching in place, I realized as I read the music that the two beats – the drumbeat and the marching beat – were not the same. My line was moving forward and I had to think fast. I spit out my gum and tried to keep up: drum, drum, drum roll; march, march, now double-time! Shit! Ginger and Levi were seven yards ahead of me. I ran to keep up. Now I just pretended to drum, I had to concentrate on marching. March, march, march in place. Oh, good. Maybe if I can march in one place I can keep the beat. I knew this song like the back of my hand, "Fly, Robin, Fly... ♪♪♪♪♪... Up, up to the sky... ♪♪♪♪♪...." Mr. Roberts' voice bellowed through the bullhorn, "Now march!"

I couldn't do it. I could march when I wasn't drumming and drum when I wasn't marching, but I could never master the art of marching and drumming in unison. If I

wanted to play drums in high school, I had to be in the marching band. And if I couldn't do this, how could I ever coordinate my four limbs to play a set of drums in a pop band? It was over. I feigned sick the next couple of days, but finally withdrew my name from the marching band. The next year I sold my snare drum to a freshman, giving up all hope of one day sitting in with The Carpenters. I would never have marching boots with tassels and Peter[18] would never be overcome with regret at the sight of his lost love marching in the Rose Parade.

I moved on, though, and managed to find other interests, boys mainly, but I could never bring myself to pick up the sticks again. Peter is a distant memory, and the Rose Parade has lost its appeal for me, with new singers I've never heard of and interviews with soap opera stars in favor of marching bands. But now, in the solitude of my kitchen on New Years Day, I turn on the Rose Parade, turn down the sound, and sing the band rendition of "Fly, Robin, Fly," peeling potatoes to the beat.

[18] Peter still lives in Kansas City, has lost his hair, waistline and looks; also lost flautist Kelly senior year of high school to a girl in the Pep squad.

CHAPTER THREE

Adventures of a Rejected Playboy Bunny

The ad in the classifieds read:

> Now hiring for the Playboy Club
> in Omaha. Hold one of the most
> prestigious jobs in waitressing.
> Apply at Sheraton Inn.
> EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

It was the mid-eighties and Omaha, Nebraska, had one of the few remaining Playboy Clubs in the nation. I had been looking for a second job since moving from a small town in Arkansas. Apart from the connection to the men's magazine, the only knowledge I had of the Playboy Clubs came from reading an article on famous ex-bunnies Barbara Walters and Gloria Steinem, who both held only temporary waitress jobs in order to write about their life as a bunny. My motivations were much less glamorous – I wanted to eat. I had been working as a hair stylist in a large salon, struggling to support my young daughter and myself. Newly divorced from the president of the control freaks club, I was ready to explore new territory, to test the waters of my independence. Working at the Playboy Club seemed just the kind of exotic adventure I was looking for. My friend, Pat, who worked with me at the salon, was single and looking for a second job too.

"I'll go if you go," Pat said through a haze of exhaled smoke. Her voice was low and throaty in a pre-cancerous sort of way. Pat wasn't afraid of anything, least of all wearing a bunny suit to work. Her hair was blue black, an unnatural shade you can only achieve through chemicals and months of over-processing. Pat's eyes were always fully lined in black charcoal, with a Cleopatra-ish upsweep from the outside corner of her eyes

to her temple. Her complexion was china-white, and cracks appeared in the layers of her makeup if her expressions changed too dramatically. When her clients came into the salon they would refer to Pat as "that girl that looks like Elvira."

I wasn't quite sure I had the body to be a Playboy Bunny; at only five foot one and three quarters inches, I was a tad petite. My legs were more like a quarter horses' than a woman's, and my chest more like an actual bunny – but I was game. Pat helped me dress for the interview. I was a small-town girl, and Pat said I needed to "slut" myself up a little. We did my hair and makeup, and painted me into a little black number from the *5-7-9* store. Pat didn't need as much preparation. She just wore her everyday clothes – a black leather mini-skirt, low-cut sweater and stiletto heels. I'm not sure if I was trying to compete (I would have lost) or trying to prove something. I didn't want to be an innocent small-town hick anymore – it was time to expand my Daisy Mae horizons. I suppose I was starting my own private sexual revolution, and what better place to begin the battle than the bastion of female sexuality. If it was good enough for Gloria Steinem . . . .

Pat and I walked into The Playboy Club together. The entrance was just off the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel. The location of the club inside a hotel was a little unsettling, but I reasoned it was to take advantage of the foot traffic. The entrance was so dimly lit I could barely make out what appeared to be some kind of large animal coming toward us. A bunny hostess with pointed white ears that looked as if they grew out from the top of her teased, bleached-blonde head greeted us at the entrance.

"We're here to apply for the waitress position," Pat said in a confidant tone. I stayed close beside her and smiled as the hostess admired my outfit.

"I'm Candy," she said. I wondered if that was her real name or a bunny moniker. Candy handed Pat an application and invited her to sit down and fill it out.

"Can I have one too?" I asked.

Candy smiled politely and handed me the application. "Of course you can."

When we were finished filling it out, the bunny hostess came back to ask us a few questions, though mainly they were directed at Pat – probably because she was the outgoing one, I rationalized. I interrupted to explain that although I had no experience as a waitress, I thought I might make a good hostess. I could tell by her expression that Brer Rabbit didn't think so.

"Thanks, we'll be calling." The next day Pat got a phone call and a job offer.

As I waited for my call back, I tried on my daughter's rabbit ears from last year's Halloween costume, trying different hairstyles that would compliment the eight-inch ears protruding from the top of my head. But my phone never rang.

"I'm not taking it unless they hire you too," Pat said. She never took the job.

It wasn't long before Pat became a stay-at-home mom with a mini-van, and the last of the Playboy Clubs closed.

"Who would have thought?" Pat laughed that throaty, dying chain-saw laugh as we reminisced a few years later. I laughed too, but more out of envy. Pat had a nice husband and kids, and I was still divorced and struggling to get by. But I was finally coming out of my *man*-made shell, though still a small-town girl at heart. My friend Jeannie took care of that. Jeannie was newly divorced with three kids and a field full of wild oats to sow, and she took me along for the ride.

"I think I want to be a dancer," Jeannie said over a red beer and nachos one night.

"What kind of dancer? Ballet? Tap? I didn't know you had any training . . ."

"No, idiot, a *dancer*. You know, an *exotic* dancer." When Jeannie talked she never looked you directly in the eye. She always gazed towards the ceiling with her head cocked to one side, as if contemplating the complexity of it all. In her early-thirties, Jeannie was a decade past the age of most exotic dancers, and had the figure of the average mother of *three*. But she did have that rough-around-the-edge quality that I suppose lends itself to the occupation of strip-club dancer.

"You want to dance at a strip club? Full of men? But you hate men." Jeannie had a history of bad relationships and didn't hide her disdain for the entire species. When Jeannie was without a man it was her full time job to find one, just to prove in the end how horrible they really are. I wondered, if she hated men so totally, so fully, without exception, how would she ever tolerate their grimy hands slipping dollar bills into her g-string?

"How could you ever tolerate their grimy hands slipping dollar bills into your g-string?"

Jeannie took a long drag on her Virginia Slims Light and cocked her head higher, squinting in the darkness of the bar. "I need the money. And I don't want to get a real job."

I wasn't about to let my friend fall into this sinkhole of filth. "A strip club? What will your family think? What about your kids? Have you lost your mind?" I imagined Jeannie spinning on a pole surrounded by sexual perverts, convicted felons on parole and tattooed bikers at Hell's Angels initiation parties. I imagined watching late night cable and seeing my friend on *Pornucopia* and *G-String Divas*, or starting her own independent

film business: *Mother's Over Thirty Gone Wild.* I imagined seeing her sad, aged face on *America's Most Wanted.*

Jeannie finally looked at me. "I'm going tomorrow at 3:00 to apply. You want to come?"

"Sure." If she was really going to go through with this, the least I could do was give her moral support.

Jeannie and I arrived at Sunny Side Up a half hour early. "I just want to check it out first," Jeannie had said. We were supposed to ask for Dave, the owner. The large club was empty except for a slightly chubby blonde playing pool in a g-string, gun holster, and white cowgirl hat.

"She must be a dancer," I whispered as Jeannie and I took a seat in the back of the room.

"No shit." Jeannie lit a cigarette as a forty-ish, sandy-haired man approached our table.

"What can I do for you ladies?" I suppose he didn't generally see many women come in just to have a cocktail. Two men in business suits entered and sat by the dance floor. The cowgirl playing pool stopped and took the stage.

"I called yesterday. I'm here to apply for a job," Jeannie answered while exhaling cigarette smoke, gazing toward the ceiling.

"Sure. I'm the owner, Dave. It's kind of slow today. When you're ready to dance, go on up." Dave seemed like a nice enough guy – not the sharpest tool in the shed, but a likeable sort of fellow

Jeannie couldn't hide her nervousness. "I might need a drink first. I'll just fill out the application for now." I could tell by Dave's subdued reaction he was either disappointed in his job applicant, or high. He looked a little disgruntled – like a lion who, on the hunt for fresh meat, found only a rotting carcass. "There is no application, honey. I just want to see if you can dance."

"Oh – sure. I'll let you know when I'm ready."

We ordered drinks and I waited patiently for Jeannie to come to her senses. We watched as husky Calamity Jane performed onstage, shooting her cap gun at the men, bending down just low enough so they could place a dollar bill inside her g-string. She was young, maybe twenty-two, hair bleached a pale white and framing her full baby face. She kissed each man on the cheek after they tipped her, and went back to the center of the stage, slowly spinning 'round and 'round on the metal pole in the center. For a chubby girl she was unusually limber.

I began to imagine myself onstage: what if I had a gimmick, like Calamity? I could do Daisy Duke. Or maybe Wonder Woman. I was a whiz on the parallel bars in junior high, one long vertical bar couldn't be that difficult. Although I never took dance as a child, this wasn't exactly dancing. Calamity wasn't showing me anything too exceptional, though I admired the strength required to hold herself horizontally on the pole for as long as she did. I knew I could never – would never – do it, but I was still intrigued.

We only got down two drinks before Jeannie decided this wasn't the place for her. "It's too light inside. And too big. I don't like the owner." I assumed Jeannie was

bailing on her dream of exotic dancing, but she said she just needed to find the right venue, she said.

Sherri's Cherry Patch was much more intimate, with private booths and soft lighting, just the kind of place Jeannie was looking for. The stage was u-shaped with a pole in the center like the one at Sunny-Side Up, but it was much smaller, what I would describe as more 'dancer-friendly.' The leather booths were a deep shade of marbled red; the walls in the dimly lit room were red; the stage curtains, carpet, ceiling and tables were all red. It was truly like being inside a giant cherry.

"This is much nicer," Jeannie sipped a red beer as she perused the surroundings. Sherri was a nice, older woman with a kind smile and a throaty, masculine voice. "There's no one here except for a couple of employees. You just go dance when you feel like it, honey."

Jeannie was happy to be dealing with a woman, and I could tell she was serious this time. The two drinks at Sunny Side Up had her primed. "You don't have to do this, you know." I didn't want to see my friend make a fool out of herself, but she had no such qualms.

"Don't be such a prude," she said. Jeannie said this to me many times during our friendship. I hated that label – prude. I was always the good girl who for some reason felt the need to be everyone's conscience. I was tired of being the moral gatekeeper. I didn't want to be an outcast, an outsider looking in with my nose pressed against the window of everyone else's fun times. I was a mother when I should have been going to prom and taking driver's ed. I had to be the responsible one, and for some reason it just

stuck. At one time I *was* going to wear bunny ears and a cottontail to work, so was this that much of a leap?

"Yes, I like this place." Jeannie had a couple more drinks to loosen up before she took the stage. I had seen Jeannie dance before, mostly in clubs that played pulsating disco-dance mixes. I always felt a little embarrassed for her, as she seemed to struggle with the concept of rhythm, flailing all limbs in opposition to music as though she were part of a wild flock of diseased chickens. I wasn't quite sure how this dancing idea would work out, but of course, this music was a little more mellow, something more to work a pole by.

Sherri let her keep her clothes on as she began the application process. The place was empty except for Sherri, the bartender, a bouncer, and the occasional homeless man that crept in the back door. Jeannie put her heart and soul into that performance, but the further she got into it, the more I noticed a look of puzzlement on the faces of the onlookers. Occasionally they would glance at each other, and look back at Jeannie – up there, God bless her – in full gyration. Far from seductive (I suppose I would describe her dancing as a cross between a Hula and mashing grapes) and she just never got the hang of that pole. Jeannie came off the stage, excited, and lit another Virginia Slims.

"Well, how'd I do?" Jeannie asked as she inhaled deeply and gazed toward the red ceiling.

I smiled, "Fine. Just fine." What I wanted to say, and truly believed was – *I could've done better.*

What I also wanted to say was: Jeannie do us all a favor and don't ever dance in public again. But I didn't have to. Sherri said she would call, but never did. Jeannie

thankfully gave up on her dream of exotic dancing and I soon lost touch with her. Last I heard she was writing romance novels in Montana and doing astrology charts on the side.

It had been several years since my failed Playboy Club interview. The intrigue such a job once held for me mellowed with age, as did the allure of the wild side. My quest for adventure was replaced by the day to day stresses of motherhood, though my worries dissipated as my daughter graduated high school and was dating more acceptable boys, not the bad-boy party-types she had been drawn to earlier. I finally settled down with a nice sensible husband, with a nice sensible name (John) who had a nice sensible family and a circle of nice sensible friends. I met him through friends; he came highly recommended with solid references and a clean background. Finding my husband was much like finding a well-bred dog with papers; you just have to know where to look and who to ask. I met Beth through our husbands. Beth was the poster girl for innocence and naïveté. Her sister, the more well-rounded Angela, was turning thirty and her friends were throwing her a birthday party at The Love Handle, a wanna-be Chippendale's strip club. Beth's husband refused to let his wife go unescorted.

"Will you come with me? I promise we won't stay long," Beth begged. "I have to go for my sister."

Once again I felt qualified to chaperone, though I was now well into my thirties, with a grown daughter, a husband and a mortgage. "Of course we'll go to your sister's birthday party. You tell your husband not to worry about a thing."

Beth had no idea about my history with adult entertainment clubs. I didn't think my tawdry past was something I needed to share, but I have to admit I was looking

forward to seeing what I had been missing the last few years. I suppose I did occasionally wonder what my life would have been like had I got that Playboy Club job. Weekends at Hefner's mansion in LA? Hobnobbing with Tony Danza and Drew Carey? Hugh giving me a nickname, like Bambi or Barbi or Brandi? But that was all in the past now, and I was content with my sensible husband and conventional life.

Beth and I were the first ones to arrive. "This isn't so bad," Beth said as she sipped on a Mai Tai. As the room began to fill with women, I noticed eyes peeking out from behind the curtain that covered the pole-less stage, checking out the crowd. Angela and her friends were well on their way to intoxication as I kept my place stoically beside Beth. The music started and stage lights came up. The curtains opened first to Superman, then a cowboy, and in succession, a policeman, fireman and utility worker in various stages of undress.

I had only seen male dancers one other time. I had attended a bachelorette party for a girl at work, but I was still married and tried to act respectable, or as respectable as one can in the presence of Chippendale dancers clad in g-strings. Now, watching these scantily clad men, I felt the pangs of regret of a misspent youth. I watched the all-female crowd, a good ten to fifteen years my juniors, as they screamed and danced with an abandon I can't say I had ever experienced. As the hard-bodied male dancers left the stage and approached each table for private dances, I hoped they would come to mine.

Beth did too, as she emptied her purse onto the table. I was glad to see Beth loosening up a little. I held onto her chair as she stood atop it, waving dollar bills in the air. One by one, the g-stringed men came to our table to dance for the birthday girl. I noticed the next dancer coming onstage to perform in a top hat and breakaway tails. He

looked strangely familiar, though I couldn't place him – like running into your gynecologist at the supermarket without his lab coat and rubber gloves. I watched the young man – who couldn't be more than twenty – as he worked the other side of the room, his shoulder-length hair and muscle-less form seemed like that of a child next to the developed physiques of the other dancers, but he was attractive in a lanky, Fred Astaire kind of way.

Soon he was stripped down to only a g-string. Women took turns caressing his slender, hairless body while slipping dollar bills over a barely detectable strand of elastic, which soon turned into a belt of ones and fives hanging from his thin, naked hips. The screams and whistles from the all-female crowd were deafening. Then the young man turned towards me, and I felt my skin go clammy and my stomach rise into my throat. I headed for the ladies' room as Beth followed behind.

As I sat on the toilet with my head between my knees, I explained that the dancer – the stripper – across the bar with the hairless body and smallish g-string was my daughter's old high school boyfriend, Kevin. Beth looked perplexed, but tried to be supportive. Beth was the kind of mother that had "*Proud parent of an honor roll student*" bumper sticker on her minivan. I suppose I was now eligible to have a bumper sticker that read: "*My daughter dates strippers.*" Kevin stayed safely away from my table, though I hid in the ladies' room, perched in a toilet stall for the rest of the show. A supportive Beth brought shots of Bailey's and Butterscotch Schnapps, and I sat on the toilet contemplating how I got to this place – this terribly awkward, embarrassing, degrading place.

My husband's sensible friends will question why I let my daughter date boys destined for strip clubs. My family will question why I was even in a strip club. Within less than twenty-four hours word got back to my daughter, and she questioned me as to why I felt the *need* to go to an all-male strip club at this *stage* of my life. This stage. I wasn't even sure what this stage was, or who I was. I was measuring myself with an impossible yardstick. I was never going to be an apron-wearing wife or bumper-sticker mother, just like I was never going to be a Playboy bunny. But that was fine by me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mating Dance

For a few weeks each spring, one of the world's greatest migrations occurs not far from where I live on the Plains of central Nebraska, where tall grass and short grass prairies intermingle and slowly begin to merge into the Sand Hills. Over half a million Sand Hill cranes return, following their migratory path they have flown for upwards of nine million years as they return north to their Arctic breeding grounds. To the cranes, Nebraska is not a "flyover" state. A land official wrote in 1868 that the Plains were "an obstacle to the progress of the nation's growth," but to Sand Hill cranes, this land is essential to their very existence. For reasons unknown, Sand Hill cranes return here season after season, year after year, returning at the same time to the same expanse of Platte River valley, even before there was a river valley. Even though I had lived for over twenty years just two hours east of the cranes' Midwest stopover, I never had so much as a passing interest in the cranes until recently. I have never been a birdwatcher, as many of the thousands of people who travel to Nebraska from all over the world each spring are. I would not label myself an ecologist or naturalist, although I have a passing interest in both. My curiosity was more selfish. I wanted to see for myself if what I had read and heard about these Sand Hill cranes was true. I wanted to know if they were monogamous.

Although this might seem like a trivial motivation to most crane enthusiasts, I reasoned that if there was a truly monogamous creature in the animal kingdom, maybe we humans had a chance too. I was searching for the principles and truths of my own

existence in the next closest thing: nature. From my (mostly unfortunate) personal experiences with the opposite sex, I saw little to convince me that monogamy was achievable or even possible. I began to wonder why it was even necessary. Nevertheless, I continued to buy into the idea of monogamy, as any good Midwestern girl should. Occasionally, though, I tested the hypothesis.

So after ten years of marriage and a good while since dallying in the nightclub scene, my husband and I stopped in the newest Omaha hot spot. Of course to test the hypothesis of monogamy from the vantage point of a singles bar may seem a bit ludicrous, I reasoned that a nightclub was the best place to observe our species' mating rituals. As the shadow of forty loomed closer and years of marriage began to pile one on top of the other like weathered leaves, I suppose I wanted to see what I had been missing. Stir nightclub was advertised widely as a dance club/singles bar, in the vein of the famous Studio 54. Since I was old enough to actually remember the seventies, I felt quite at home. As we entered, the club was dimly lit with a long bar across the front where the dance floor ran, complete with choreographed bartender who never spilled a drop of alcohol as he threw the fifth of rum over his shoulder, behind his back, and up again to the deafening beat of seventies disco music.

We found a table across the room and away from the crowd. Beside our leopard print chairs and table was a round platform, maybe three feet high, and about as wide, inside which a neon light pulsated to the beat of Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff." The dance floor quickly filled with gyrating twenty-to-thirty-somethings. We soon realized the platform beside our table was an individual stage for dancers. One by one the young

women took turns climbing onto the small, glowing spotlight to perform. The girls were less than twenty-four inches from our seats, and our vantage point beside and just below gave us an intimate view of their panties. The women were attractive, all dressed in a way I would describe as "seduction appropriate." I tried to be considerate and watch something – anything – else, but my husband had no such qualms.

After several annoyed requests to avert his gaze, my husband confessed he could not *not* look. It was just not genetically possible, he said. As a male, he had an inherent compulsion to do stupid things, one being to gawk at other women. "Besides, they want me to look," he said, "or they wouldn't be dancing in mini skirts right above my face."

I had to admit he was right.

Even though my husband remained a passive observer, I felt my territorial rights invaded by the younger, sexually charged communal dancers. Were the females' actions in the bar that night – flipping hair, painted faces, erotic dancing, somehow – either consciously or unconsciously – solely a means to attract a mate? Though obviously with his partner, I wondered if my husband was the intended target. Is this mating dance I witnessed at the nightclub truly part of an animalistic mating ritual?

The Sand Hill cranes are known the world over for their unique mating dance. Other Plains species, sage grouse, prairie chickens and bald eagles also perform their own kind of mating dance. Of course, to compare animal with human behavior can be problematic, but perhaps it is from the animal kingdom that we have inherited the ritual of dancing. I can watch for hours frolicking dolphins as they perform their mating dance, diving and springing into and out of the water, turning and weaving back and forth like a well-timed waltz. Ostriches, manikin birds, and zebras each have their own style of

dance; giraffes are known to prance in a kind of fox trot, and certain female spiders demand a male tap dance before they will mate. Perhaps dancing is a kind of mating ritual for humans as well – a chance to show off our merchandise and attract a lifetime partner. If this is true, what is a committed man to do when faced with these sexual temptations? Were men – or women for that matter – biologically wired to be monogamous?

Among animals, few mammals, reptiles, amphibian or otherwise, actually mate for life. Unlike the Sand Hill cranes, most animals take several mates throughout their reproductive lives, and many males are polygamous. Male lions, tigers, elephants, and alligators all enjoy numerous female partners. The porpoise will often participate in group sex (those little devils). Female promiscuity does have its biological benefits – in the animal kingdom anyway. Ants with promiscuous mothers tend to survive better than those with monogamous mothers. Their colonies are more disease-resistant by being genetically diverse. Female bonobo apes, who some scientists believe to be more closely related to humans than any other species, are notoriously promiscuous, on record as having copulated with eight different males in a time span of fifteen minutes. However, these apes not only mate to continue their lineage, scientists believe they mate to maintain peace, to barter, or simply to relieve stress. With so much un-monogamous mating going on in the animal kingdom, perhaps we are fighting against our pre-rational instinct to remain faithful. Scientific evidence is overwhelmingly against the idea of monogamy. It's just not natural.

Humans do have one distinct practice that is not available to animals: the ritual of marriage and divorce. Animals don't divorce, they just move on. No lawyers, no

divvying up of property – just a nice, clean unemotional break. Despite this, divorce provides us with the excuse to acquire multiple mates throughout our lifetime without being labeled polygamous. Technically, are we being monogamous if we divorce and attach ourselves to a new mate – often multiple mates? I can only answer for myself. In hindsight, my own rationale for changing partners was to extricate myself from bad relationships, but perhaps on some kind of primordial level, I wanted to trade up.

One of our close cousins, the gorilla, is often thought to be monogamous, but actually only the females are. While the male gorilla keeps a harem for his pleasure, the female stands by her man for life. Other primates live together in social pairs, but still enjoy sexual dalliances. Beavers, swans, coyotes, and wolves are all monogamous until they get the urge – or chance – to cheat. Although they keep the same mate for life, they rarely stay entirely faithful. Not that there isn't jealousy, but research suggests the green-eyed monster doesn't seem to play a role in the coupling and re-coupling of such un-monogamous animals. Monogamous animals exhibit behavior that resembles jealousy (following their mate, aggression towards rivals) while animals that favor multiple partners do not exhibit the same jealous behavior. The instinct of keeping genes in the same gene pool and the expectation that sexual partners care for their offspring seems to play a role in their behavior. However, most female animals just don't show the same jealous behavior that males do. Or they are just used to male promiscuity.

Occasionally, females do get their revenge. It's well known the female praying mantis bites off the head of the male during sex. Even so, the male can still complete copulation (I have often suspected as much with the human male). Black vultures

discourage infidelity by attacking other vultures caught philandering in public – a good practice, in my opinion.

The majority of the men I have been with were unfaithful. As the type of person to overanalyze everything, I have turned this over in my mind more than occasionally. Is the temptation to cheat just too great for some men? Perhaps there is evolutionary pressure on the human male to spread his genes. Even if this is so, don't we have, as humans, the ability to make choices, the free will to overcome our biological urgings, if that is what it indeed is? If monogamy is unnatural, is it still impossible?

I do know that as I have become more "mature" (over forty), my taste in men has changed. In my early twenties, I was attracted to the bad-boy types that I should have known would never commit. My choices of mate has transformed over the years to men who can provide stability and security. I have gone from the drag racers, tennis instructors and bartenders to the bankers, lawyers and business owners. My current partner could easily be labeled one of the "nice" guys many women seem to avoid. I'm not alone in this assessment either. The immature female bowerbird picks her mate based on his looks and swanky bachelor nest. As she gets older and more experienced, the female isn't so easily seduced, and will base her decision on more substantial qualities – like the male's ability to dance, to strut, feathers fluffing and wings flipping.

I was drawn to my current husband for similar reasons. When we first began dating, we spent the majority of our time in dance clubs. Our dances were fervent and passionate. There was something about the act of dancing that made him desirable. The rhythm of his thrusting hips and swinging arms against the flush of his reddened face combined to create the perfect seduction. Now, though, after ten years of marriage,

dancing has become rare at best. Still, when we are somewhere there is dancing, it's not uncommon to have other women ask my husband to dance, because they see that he can. It is an unspoken secret between women that if you find a man who likes to dance, you've hit the mating jackpot. My grandmother often warned me to never marry a man who couldn't dance. She said my grandfather would never take her dancing, and even as she grew older, she missed this courtship ritual. Just like the crane, a man who proves himself to be a good dancer is never in want of a partner.

We girls have to be careful. Among many animals, including humans, females have the greater investment in copulation. Pregnancy takes a greater percentage of the females' time and energy. The males' role in conception is over almost immediately (as some of us know all too well). The female's egg is far more valuable to the female than the individual sperm to the male, so he's more willing to share – with his mate, her friends, whoever. Except for the black vulture, no one seems to care who cheats on whom.

For every rule there is the exception. Every time I travel south along Interstate 29, for the past several years, I have observed what I assume is the same red-tailed hawk in the same area, perched high atop a branch of a decaying tree. Never far away is his mate. The red-tailed hawk – like the crane – is monogamous for life; only if the female dies does the male search for a new mate. The male hawk will leave his perch, circling and soaring in wide circles to great heights, lower his wings, plummeting down, only to shoot up again. The male repeats this several times, finally approaching his partner, interlocking his talons with hers, spinning and spiraling toward the ground in an intimate, thrilling, dangerous dance. The dance of commitment.

So. When spring and the Sand Hill cranes returned to Nebraska, my husband and I made the pilgrimage west. I rented a blind at a bird sanctuary and watched as hundreds of thousands of mottled grey cranes came in at sunset from the surrounding cornfields to bed down for the night. As their reverberating bugling calls settled with the sun, I returned to the warmth of the main building. The crane watchers compared stories, sharing sights and experiences. Keanna, the director of education at the sanctuary, answered excited questions from the crowd of "craniacs."

"Tell me about the crane's monogamy," I asked.

Keanna smiled the comforting smile of someone who is about to pull the rug out from under a blind man. "Well, they really aren't monogamous."

Keanna explained a Florida researcher has evidence of male cranes mating outside of marriage. Some returned to their partners, some did not, but they did, indeed, have affairs.

But all the literature, I argued, all the research – *National Geographic for godssakes* – says the Sand Hill cranes are monogamous.

"But what is monogamy, really?"

Keanna asked me a question for which I had no answer. She gave me the scientific reasoning, most of which I didn't hear. I was waiting for the answer I wanted – needed – but it didn't exist. I was holding on tight to an idea that wasn't founded in reality or science. What did this revelation mean for me?

Everything. And Nothing.

All I knew then, all I know, is myself, and even though I've been in relationships with men who cheat, I've never really felt the desire to do the same. Maybe I have

inherited the same monogamous traits most other females in the animal kingdom possess. I know I cannot live in fear of another's infidelity, and cannot stop it if it happens. For now, I believe I have a loyal mate, and hope that we continue to fly on the same side of the evolutionary fence.

Like the cranes. During their Midwest stopover, the cranes pair off, jumping and swaying for their intended. Since (most) Sand Hill cranes mate for life, why the need for such an elaborate mating dance? Many believe cranes dance for each other to preserve familial bonds and maintain the lines of communication. Perhaps the cranes know that it is not enough to win a partner – they need to work just as hard to keep that partner. As they rest along Nebraska's Platte River each March and early April, the cranes engage in an extravagant courtship "dance" – heads bowing and thrusting, jumping up to twenty feet into the air as they spread their expansive wings. At times they can be seen tossing a corncob or stick into the air, like a ritualistic tango.

I envy them. To the Sand Hill crane, dancing is the most important element in the bonding between male and female, a bond that, for most, lasts a lifetime. After several weeks, they continue their northern migration, and from mating until death, with their partner by their side, continue their intimate dance.

Humans are not believed to be one of the naturally monogamous animals. Then again, we may never be more human than when we act contrary to our impulses. Though the act of dancing had long since waned from our marriage, recently my husband and I have renewed our earlier enthusiasm for the ritual. It has evolved from a mating dance to a more subdued, yet still thrilling, act of commitment. We haven't been back to the nightclub since the night of the miniskirts. Still, occasionally in the privacy of our home

and for no one else to see, we listen to vintage Bee Gees or Neil Diamond and, interlocking our arms and spiraling around the kitchen, we dance.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FIVE

Lost in Versailles

We set out, my husband and I, on the thirty-minute train ride to Versailles, France, from Paris. The last stop would be *The Chateau of Versailles* – Versailles Palace. Built as a hunting lodge in brick and slate in 1624 by Louis XIII, Versailles' Baroque-style architecture and ornate palace rooms that number over seven hundred became the residence of France's monarchy, the seat of the royal court and center of the French government under King Louis XIV. Versailles was called home by France's royalty, most famously, King Louis XVI and his teenage bride, Marie Antoinette.

"She was beheaded at thirty seven," I read to my husband out of my *Rick Steves Does Europe* tour book.

"What?"

"Marie Antoinette. Beheaded at thirty-seven. Can you believe it?" I stopped reading and looked at my napping husband for an answer.

"Yes. I can."

I was nearly the same age Marie Antoinette was when she lost her head during the French Revolution. As my fortieth birthday loomed, a sense of urgency grew with each gray hair I plucked from my thinning temples. I was approaching what some referred to as "middle aged." The older I became, the further away I pushed the "middle age" label, 40, 50, 60, which, by my figures, means I should live to be one hundred and thirty. My

life was taking on a new sense or urgency – hence, the trip to Europe. For once I had thrown caution – and my credit cards – to the wind.

The train came to a stop and we filtered off with the crowd. Looking for a sign to lead us to the palace, we found none. My husband studied his map from the train station. Soon the crowd disappeared. The last woman off the train, a frail, elderly woman, with ink black hair noticed our uncertainty. She spoke something in French, trying to help, I assumed. I responded in my well-practiced French "*Par le vous English?*"

"*No.*" Her thin, red lips hardly moved as she spoke the words again and waited for a reply.

I wasn't going to give up. *"Donde esta Versailles?"*

My husband, still reading the map, said, "You just asked where Versailles was – in Spanish."

The frowning woman responded, "*No Versailles.*" She held up her thumb and index finger, as if to make an "L" with her fingers, then pointed to the train station.

"*Oui,*" I nodded as I fumbled for my phrasebook. "*Oui, Oui.*"

She must have been seventy, seventy-five, looked to be hard-of-hearing. I've always had a sixth sense when it came to strangers, an uncanny ability to form amazingly accurate first impressions. I was certain she had lived in the same apartment for most of her adult life. Obviously a widow. Her only child seldom visited. Probably a seamstress in her working years, she now did occasional mending on the side for extra money, as it was always short, but kept herself dressed well in mended clothes. Her accessories were second hand, and clashed with her clothes; she always wore a headscarf (as most mature

French women did). I thumbed through my phrasebook, trying find the French word for "where."

"*No Versailles*," she raised her thumb and finger, arthritic (I was sure) from years of sewing, in the direction of the train, "*Two more stop*."

"*Oui.*" I kept nodding, smiling.

"Europeans count with their thumb first," John stated as if I were deaf. "She's telling us to get back on the train and go two more stops."

"*Merci, beau coup*." I held out my delicate hand with a down-turned wrist, waiting for her stiff hand to greet mine. She gestured as if swatting at a fly, turning away. I heard the word "*Americans . . .*"

"*Merci, beau coup, Mademoiselle . . . Bonjour . . .*" I called as my husband pulled me back toward the train.

Two more stops and we were finally at Versailles Palace. We entered the Great Courtyard at the entrance of the palace grounds. The palace itself is over fifty-nine thousand square feet, with Versailles Gardens laid out over two hundred and fifty acres – about the size of two hundred football fields. This was a far cry from Omaha, Nebraska, which we called home now, and an even farther stretch from my humble roots in the hills of the Ozarks, living in a tin-roof trailer home with a windmill and birdbath in the front yard. We entered the Palace and strolled through the Apartments of the Planets, each chamber inside the apartments being named for a planet. Next to the Apartments was the gothic and baroque styled Chapel Royal, with elaborate ceiling paintings representing the Trinity. On we went into the famous Hall of Mirrors, over seventy-three feet long; the King's Suite and Bedchamber of King Louis XIV; and where all of the queen's troubles

were rumored to have started, Marie Antoinette's Bedchamber. During her time in the palace, rumors swirled of secret liaisons and clandestine affairs with Europe's most eligible bachelors. Living a fantasy life in this sumptuous palace probably became tedious for poor Marie, what with hundreds of chambermaids and ladies in waiting to do everything from bathe and dress her to cook and clean her palace. She had to entertain herself somehow, and besides, it's a known fact King Louis XVI didn't put out for years after they were married. What's a girl to do?

Marie Antoinette came here as a 15-year-old bride, almost the same age I was at my first, ill-conceived marriage. Of course, it was common in the eighteenth century to marry young, although it wasn't that uncommon to marry young thirty years ago in the south either. But I'm sure it was still an adjustment for Marie, leaving everything she knew behind. Embarrassed and humiliated, Marie was stripped of her Austrian nationality – along with her clothes and possessions – before the entire Austrian delegation as a show of her loyalty to her new country. Upon my teenage marriage, I also left all I knew behind: my bridesmaids inherited my David Cassidy and Rick Springfield posters and my entire 45 record collection, as I was sure I would be too busy as a new bride to listen to teenybopper music as I had in my "youth."

The more time I spent in the luxurious palace once occupied by Marie Antoinette, the more I began to feel a kinship with the Queen. "I have French ancestry, you know," I informed my husband as I retouched my lipstick in the Hall of Mirrors.

"Is that so?" John said as he snapped a picture of his reflection in an arched mirror.

"On my mother's side. A great-great-grandmother came over on the boats from Nice," I said.

John fiddled with the focus. "Is that so?"

"I could be related to Marie Antoinette. You never know." I watched as he reared back to take a picture of the crystal chandelier hanging above his head. "We're both misunderstood. Marie Antoinette and me. Sure, she made some bad choices, but who hasn't? People were jealous. That's why they beheaded her."

"I see," John said as he snapped my picture.

After touring the palace we went to the gardens. I wanted to find Marie Antoinette's beloved rustic retreat, her hamlet. To escape the palace and the monotonous life of a queen, Marie built her own private retreat within the gates of Versailles. Marie was not popular with the citizens and was scorned by many in the King's court. But when she finally removed herself from the court and spent more of her time at the hamlet, she was then perceived as uninvolved, remote and aloof. While trying to please everyone, she pleased no one, least of all herself.

The hamlet, on the grounds of Petit Trianon, was a country retreat inside the lavish formal gardens of Versailles. At Marie's hamlet lay a village with thatched roof cottages, a farmhouse, dairy, poultry yard and water mill where Marie and her attendants played shepherdesses and milkmaids. Marie organized country dances and plays for her closest friends, acting in them herself in a simple costume of white muslin and straw hat, quite pastoral, as opposed to her lavish queen's regalia. Her private, secluded village was a vision of a simpler, happier world. Perhaps her little hamlet in the woods was an attempt at finding reality inside an unreal world.

Though as a young bride my life lacked the opulence and affluence of Marie Antoinette's, I often yearned for an escape into some kind of invisible retreat; a place where I could go where I could be a different person of my own choosing, instead of the too-young bride and mother who turned out to be a disappointment. Now forty, I saw myself as just another Midwestern wife with a husband, a mortgage, and not much excitement on the horizon. Who doesn't want to escape occasionally, to exchange, if only temporarily, one life for another? Often the reality of our lives that others see is as fabricated as the made-up world we long to escape to.

We strolled onto the two hundred and fifty acre gardens of Versailles, organized around the Grand Canal, a body of water covering one hundred and five acres and measuring over four miles around its edges. Acres of thickly wooded trees sat beyond the palace; topiary hedges, lawns, flowerbeds, orange and lemon groves, and smaller, artificial lakes decorated the lavishly landscaped grounds. We passed fountains, marble statues and bronze sculptures. As we strolled through the gardens, we came upon side paths leading to more side paths. We had meandered well off the main road.

"It's getting late and I'm hungry. We need to get out of here." John had no patience on an empty stomach. "How do we get out of here? The sun is setting – it's going to be dark in an hour."

"Don't panic. We're fine." I found another path. "Let's go this way." Reluctantly, John followed me down the gravel path.

I was in no hurry to leave the gardens. I had come all this way, and I wanted somehow to re-live the world Marie Antoinette had experienced. This was such a far cry from my world. No lavish dinner parties to look forward to, no visits from royalty or

coronation balls in my future. I wanted to experience what life was like outside my Mid-west kitchen window. I spent my life trying to fix mistakes I'd made, to prove I wasn't a disappointment. I had tried to run away from a past as teen mother and high school dropout that seemed to keep finding me. Wherever I was, I felt like I didn't fit in. Maybe Marie Antoinette's hamlet was, on a much grander scale, her attempt at escaping a world where she didn't fit.

At the end of the gravel path, we found ourselves back where we started. John looked around in disgust. "You've got to be kidding."

We started down another path, but it too finally wound back to the start.

Voices were coming from the path we had just come from. American voices. A young couple appeared, leisurely enjoying an ice cream cone in the setting sun.

"This must be the way out," the young woman said to the man. I noticed their white Nikes. Any well-traveled American knows Europeans wouldn't be caught dead in white tennis shoes outside of the gym. I smiled, nodding hello, not wanting to let on that I, too, was an American.

Unfortunately, my husband had no such qualms. "We're lost. Do you know the way out?"

The American couple laughed and said they, too, were lost. But they had ice cream.

"I'm sure it's this way," I said to my husband as I started ahead.

"We just came from that way," the American woman answered in a haughty Boston accent. They turned and disappeared into another row of trees.

I stayed my course, and waited for John to follow. He stood at the crossroads of the garden paths, looking to the American couple, and then back at me.

"I'm following them," he said, and disappeared.

I could find my way out, I thought, they will just hit a dead end and be right back where they began. "Foolish Americans . . ." I turned and started down the dirt path. The late day sun began to set behind the sculpted trees. The gardens took on a hue of soft orange as the sun set lower in the autumn sky. As the light settled over the trees, it was as if the gardens took on a tone of polished gold. The noise of the crowds was replaced by a soft rustling of leaves as I walked through the grove. Winding paths gave way to ornate iron settees. I stopped at each bench to enjoy the lavish view. Meticulously pruned trees of unusual shapes dotted the path, each turn on the path leading to more splendor. I enjoyed my solitary stroll through the gardens once walked by Marie Antoinette. "Oh, Marie, people just don't understand us . . ." Here I was, alone and abandoned, but for some reason, content, just how I imagined Marie might have felt wandering alone in her gardens. Near the time of the revolution, the people of France saw her as extravagant and flamboyant, labeling her "Madame Deficit." I only saw her as a woman trying to find her place in a crazy, artificial world. Or was her entire life only an illusion? Finally the path opened into a round sitting area, the same as where I began.

Any hint of sun was now fading from the sky. It was early October and the days were growing shorter by the minute. I calmly quickened my pace as I followed the path into which my husband had disappeared. It had been at least twenty minutes with no sign of John or the Americans, so perhaps they found their way out. This path seemed longer, winding around trees and neatly trimmed shrubbery. The dirt from the path covered my

brown leather shoes in a dusty powder. This was taking much longer than I had anticipated. I was losing daylight, I was thirsty, my feet were getting sore, and I could really use an ice cream cone. As the sun set lower, my extremities began to feel the burn of the cold night air. Although the day temperatures were comfortable as the sun was high, the temperatures would plummet into the thirties after dark. Was I experiencing the onset of hypothermia? I began to picture my fingers snapping off and my nose turning black from frostbite. John would find my stiff body, frozen in a grove of out-of-season orange trees.

This path was leading nowhere, only to more junctions leading back to the same place. I looked to the sky to gauge the direction of the sun, of which there was no sign. I had nothing to tell me which direction I was heading. I was lost, alone in the gardens of Versailles, lost a foreign country, with no phone, no food or adequate clothing. I looked to the trees – surely the gardens would be monitored by video surveillance, like any sane business in the States. I would signal for help. Then again, why would there be surveillance cameras in Versailles Garden? What could someone do? Stuff a three-ton marble statue of Apollo into a purse?

Surely my husband would be frantic by now. It had been almost an hour since I had last seen him. He would come for me. Yes. He would rescue me from this evil queen's garden before it was too late. Who was I fooling? My husband was probably standing in line at the ice cream stand, with his new American friends, complimenting them on their white tennis shoes. It would be up to me. *What would Marie do?*

I gathered my composure and started down the path. I had a hint of daylight left, just enough to see the trail before me. I would rescue myself from this intolerable

situation. As I fought my way out of the gardens, my thoughts went to Marie Antoinette. I wondered if forty hung in front of her like a noose as it was hanging in front of me, or was it something she faced with dignified indifference? What was she searching for, as she abandoned the palace for the more humble Petite Trianon? Was she running from something, or perhaps *to* something more meaningful? Isn't that what we all are striving for? My mind was beginning to wander aimlessly. I needed to keep my bearings. Marie had lost her head at thirty-seven, and I fought to keep mine. I was cold, exhausted and starving. I couldn't remember which paths I had taken. I had no idea which direction I came from or which to direction to go. It was getting darker; I could barely see down the tree-covered paths. The over-pruned trees seemed to reach down with their twisted limbs, luring me deeper into the woods. The sense of unity I had felt for Marie Antoinette was beginning to turn to disdain. What idiot would create such an unusable, overly lavish, two hundred and some odd acre garden with no direction signs? Maybe someone in a mid-life crisis? The immensity of the situation became almost intolerable. I wondered if Marie had cried on the way to the guillotine.

I heard laughing ahead. I quickened my pace as I came to an opening in the garden that emptied onto the Grand Canal. Bikers passed in front of me on the main road beside the canal. To my right, the palace gleamed in the setting sun. I glanced up and saw John leaning against a marble statue near the main road, licking an ice cream cone, totally oblivious to my desperate situation.

I stumbled, weary, from the garden. Slowly, I made my way to where he was standing. "Want an ice cream cone?" he asked.

We walked back up the hill toward the palace, past the Fountain of the Frogs; past the buildings of Little Venice; past Apollo's chariot rising from the sea of water in the Grand Canal; past the statues of nymphs and gods – mythical people in a mythical world.

I left Versailles and Marie Antoinette behind. Soon I would return to my life in the Midwest, but first I would lunch at a sidewalk café in Paris and have croissants for breakfast; I would ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower and walk down the Champs Elysées; I would take the Metro to Notre Dame Cathedral and stroll through the Louvre. Outside the Louvre in a sidewalk tourist store, a velvet picture of Marie Antoinette hung among Napoleon coffee mugs and Mona Lisa t-shirts. I smiled as my husband, while no one was watching, took my picture beside the queen.

CHAPTER SIX

Junk Jaunt

Democracy, with its semi-civilization, sincerely cherishes junk.

Paul Klee

As I make my way past truckstops, industrial parks and cornfields just outside of Grand Island, Nebraska, I cross the railroad tracks and head north out of town and into the middle of nowhere Nebraska. A few miles off Interstate 80, I take the exit leading me to State Highway 281, toward the first stops on the Junk Jaunt. The fluorescent pink flyer I picked up in Omaha promised arts, crafts, collectibles, antiques, cowboy tack, car salvage yards, old farm machinery, tractors and food: *"In Nebraska's heartland, where two Nebraska scenic byways converge in a beautiful loop between the Loup Rivers (Hwy. 11 and 91) and the Sandhills Journey (Hwy. 2) Scenic Byways. A 220-mile perpetual yard sale. Fun and Treasures Galore!"* Usually, the only time someone from Omaha – or anywhere – would need to come to central Nebraska is to pass through on their way to skiing Colorado. The state is land locked with a dead bolt. People are leaving rural Nebraska in droves; country schools closing for lack of students, farmers throwing in the towel. Forty rural Nebraska counties are in a depopulation trend. In 2000, 14 of every 100 Nebraskans lived in those counties. As of 2005, the numbers dropped to 10 out of every 100. People want to live in the cities, to move where there is more opportunity and appeal.

I had never been to central Nebraska, except on my way to skiing in Colorado, and once on my way to the Black Hills in South Dakota. I always stayed on Interstate 80,

never wandered off the beaten path and into the country, so the Junk Jaunt was a good opportunity, I thought. I wanted time to slow my mind and body down, to stop and smell the roses – or cornfields – in this case. I have to admit I would have preferred to go somewhere a little more exciting and exotic than central Nebraska, but this would have to do. I had heard rumors about this never-ending yard sale back home in Omaha, 150 miles east. I admit I occasionally wander into a flea market now and again, and sometimes hit a weekend garage sale or two, so the lure of one perpetual flea/garage/craft/antique sale was too good to pass up.

Just outside of Grand Island, I see the first neon pink sign, no bigger than twelve inches square, that alerts drivers of a Junk Jaunt stop. First stop, Helgoth's Roadside Market. A couple of trucks are off to the side of the gravel parking lot with hand-painted cardboard "for sale" signs; the owners standing by their truck beds as customers rummage through various velour pictures of Elvis and poker-playing dogs, rusted bicycles and mismatched plastic dishes. Inside Helgoth's, couples mill around bin after bin of pumpkins, every kind of squash you can (and can't) imagine, and homemade choke cherry jam and fresh honey. Outside the entrance, a wooden bin running at least thirty feet along the front of the building holds the biggest watermelons I have ever seen in my life. I asked the owner if I could take a picture of her watermelons as two women paid for their jams, pumpkins, and Sandhills Clover Honey.

"Sure?" she responded, her answer more of a question than response. I sensed no one had ever asked to take a picture of her watermelons before.

Mrs. Helgoth and the two women in line watch as I take my picture and head down the road. Back on the highway, I continue north, passing a sign that reads "Adoption – Not Abortion" as I drive deeper into the countryside.

St. Libory: Population 963

Lining the unpaved streets of St. Libory, Nebraska, are pink "*Junk Jaunt*" destination signs. Dirt from the heavily trafficked streets settles over the hood of my car. Everyone seems to be gathered at St. Libory Catholic Church on Spruce Street. Inside I find handcrafted furniture, homemade jams and jellies, and what seems to be an unusually large selection of religious paraphernalia. In the back of the small community room, I pass by the hand-crocheted crosses and Saint Christopher coins and head straight for the homemade breakfast rolls and coffee.

Around the corner from the church at the Julesgard house, I stop at another pink sign and find one 1926 Model T – all original – sitting on the front lawn. "It's been in my family for years." With a hint of pride, Barb Julesgard smiles as she recalls the local parades and festivals the car had been a part of. "We'll probably keep it forever." Barb reminds me to sign the guest book. "That's so we can keep track of visitors. Where you from?" I tell her Omaha, and notice the three previous entries on the guest book are also from Omaha. "We get a lot of folks from Omaha out here. I guess we got better junk." Also on the guestbook are Kansas and South Dakota junkers. Filling the Julesgard garage are row after row of sports cards, heavy on Michael Jordan.

Barb reminds me not to miss the junk in Worms, Nebraska. "They accidentally got left out of our brochure, so we're just tellin' folks to go." I wondered aloud how they

came up with a name of "Worms," but didn't get a reply. I assume they'd been asked that before. Barb gave me directions and I headed out without a purchase. At the edge of town I find a sign that reads "Worms Nebraska 5 Miles." Lying ahead is a dirt and gravel road heading into the vanishing cornfields. I decide Worms' junk will have to stay in Worms, and keep due north on highway 281. Purchase: one pumpkin-face satchel for ten cents.

St. Paul: Population 2218

Coming into St. Paul, Nebraska, the land starts to roll and undulate under the browning cornstalks that line each side of the highway. As I cross over the Middle Loup Bridge coming into St. Paul, I slow as I begin to see fluorescent pink signs dotting the roadside. I turn toward downtown. My car slowly rumbles over the brick-paved streets, and up to the four-way stop in the center of downtown that will become a familiar sight in most of these rural towns. I cross the railroad tracks and pass towering grain silos that run through most towns along the loop. I look in my Junk Jaunt Book that lists all of the participants and vendors and find listings for over forty stops just in and around St. Paul. I stop in the House of Memories where covering the folding tables inside the large garage are brand new arts, crafts and gift items from inside the store. I hover beside several new Christmas gifts tins as a rather large woman deliberates their purchase. I think she senses I am coming in for the take-away. "I'll just take them all," she tells the owner. I am too timid and let her steal the lot. I know I'll have to toughen up if I am going to make it to the end of the loop. Purchase: homemade salsa spread for $3.50.

Farwell: Population 130

I head west out of town on highway 92, towards Loup City. On 47A Spur coming into Farwell, I turn onto the main (and only) street, stopping at a row of dilapidated storefronts where several people mill about. The sign on one of the stores reads "Lukasiewicz's Furniture, Floors and Appliances." Arranging flea market tables on the sidewalk is Lynn, a fifth-generation Farwell resident and the great-granddaughter of one of the founders of Farwell. "I've lived around here all my life. My brother is in Omaha, but most of us stayed here." I ask her about the St. Anthony's Catholic Church, said to be the oldest Polish Catholic Church west of the Mississippi: "It was out in the country. They cut the church in half and brought it into town, pulled by teams of horses," she explains. Apart from the Lukasiewicz Furniture store, there was little else. I promised to drive by St. Anthony's, and as I turn the corner, a "Lukasiewicz Farms" sign rests at the edge of dying farmland on the south end of town. I stop and take a picture of St. Anthony's and head back to the main road empty-handed.

As I drive away, I try to imagine what it would be like to live an entire life in a town with less population than the city block I live on now. Your life choices would certainly be simpler: who to marry, where to work, what to do on a Saturday night. I spent my teenage years in a town of 600, and gritted my teeth until the day I moved away. That was a metropolis compared to Farwell. But the Lukasiewiczs seem to like it fine.

Ashton: Population 237

The highway rolls like ribbon candy out of Farwell and into Sherman County, as I come into Ashton, Nebraska. I find a goldmine of antique furniture in this tiny town that I immediately realize won't fit into my four-door car. At the antique store, *A Deal for You*, antiques spill out of the storefront. The proprietors suggest I go two doors down for coffee and a snack. At the Legion/Community Club, tables overflow with cookies, candies, cakes, and breads.

"Marg at the antique shop made all the desserts," Helen, a stout woman in her early sixties, proudly states. I pay for coffee and a cinnamon roll, and sit at an empty table in the large hall. "Where you from?" After taking my money, Helen sits down beside me to get my story. When I tell her I'm from Omaha, her eyes light up. "I lived in Omaha for a while. Those people are crazy," she laughs as she shakes her head at the memories. "I moved to Omaha from California. All they did was complain about the traffic – the commutes – in Omaha! What a joke. We sit in traffic for two hours in California, and they think fifteen or twenty minutes is bad." I continue to eat while Helen talks about California, Omaha, traffic and junk. I thank Helen for the snack and head back to the antique store. As people wander around the overfilled store, an intricate dance of weaving and bobbing is performed as we pass each other down the narrow, cluttered aisles. Many seem to know each other and their likes and dislikes. "Sally should come look at this tea cup," an older woman tells another as she examines a porcelain cup. The other woman agrees that is just what Sally would like. Marg, the owner, helps another woman look through antique jewelry. Everyone seems to know

Marg, so I pretend I do too as I compliment her desserts from next door as I pay for my purchase: one antique smoked glass Hershey's Chocolate candy jar for $3.00.

Loup City: Population 996

West of Ashton, coming into Loup City, the rolling land becomes foothills that break the expansive view of sky and cornfields in two. On my left are fields as green as Irish clover, and to my right the crops have died and taken on a shade of creamy sand. A *"Loup City FFA Welcomes You"* sign greets me as I come into town. I follow a side road with a fluorescent pink *Junk Jaunt* sign that seem to be heading into the white city water tower. Four-door pick-ups with horse trailers wander the side streets of the small river town. I follow one truck and trailer to the corner of North 2nd and O Street, where a carved wooden sign reads "Mrogzek" and a pink *Junk Jaunt* sign sits at the curb. Pulled up to the front of the nineteenth-century Victorian home is another truck and horse trailer with Colorado plates, loading up antique chairs, butter urns and buggy wheels.

"If I can help you with anything, just let me know." A sixty-something man, large and burly with a John Deere cap and overalls, smiles as I admire an eight-tiered spiral plant stand adorned with ivy and pumpkins.

I ask the same question I've asked at least a dozen times already this morning, "How much?"

He turns to a silver-haired woman at a folding table who stops counting change to answer: "$15 – now that includes the ivy and all the pumpkins." I hear her perfectly but he repeats her answer nonetheless. I study the plant stand, trying to decide if I should try to bargain. The man notices my hesitation. "Now if this is too big, there are two smaller

ones over here for $12." He turns to walk toward the corner of the house and the smaller plant stands.

I notice a couple hovering at the next table, eying my plant stand. They slowly begin to make their way over, and I realize there is no time for dickering. "I'll take this one." The man is pleased, and though I refuse his offer of help twice, he loads the stand into the trunk of my car.

I head towards the small city's downtown, passing signs that read, *"Home of the Red Raiders,"* and *"Polish Capital of Nebraska."* At the center of downtown at the four-way stop is a sign advertising lunch in the VFW at the fairgrounds. I stop and get directions at an unmarked yard sale and head across the highway to the fairgrounds. I spot a white, cinderblock building with a full parking lot, and pull in.

I find my place at the end of the long line. I am conspicuously the stranger as everyone visits with each other, some yelling from table to table in the large hall. In Omaha, I never met my neighbor for two years, and still have never met the rest of the families on my block. I admired this familiarity. The line moves quickly, and I get to the order window where a hand-written sign reads:

$7.00 Dinner.
Polish Sausage
Sauerkraut & Dumplings
Meatballs with potatoes and sour cream sauce
Pierogies-w cheese sauce – Mushroom/Sweet &
Sour/Kraut/Potatoes and Cheese - choice of 2:
Kolaches 50¢ extra

At the window, a middle-aged woman was taking orders, and a girl of three or four was serving drinks. I asked if I should choose two things from the menu. "No. You get *everything* on the menu. Plus your drink. We have coffee, tea, lemonade. You get your

choice of two of the four flavors of pierogies. But the kolaches are 50¢ extra. We're out of peach." She was in a hurry as the line was growing behind me. I didn't want to embarrass myself further by asking what a pierogie was, but I went with mushroom and potatoes with cheese, and told the toddler iced tea. The large paper plate overflowed with more food than I could eat in a week. I sat in the middle of a long row of folding tables, and began my initiation into Polish food. The server came over to my table with a small cup. "I forgot your cheese sauce!" Although I wasn't sure what it was for, I didn't argue. At the end of my table sat an elderly man and a woman I assumed was his daughter. The elderly man visited with the people in line and across the room. As I ate, I noticed him staring, as if he thought he knew me but couldn't quite place me. I smiled and nodded as I finished my pierogies.

I wish I knew him, I thought. I wish I knew someone – anyone – because they all knew each other. I felt like the nameless stranger riding through town that Clint Eastwood played so well. But I wasn't so tough. On my way out I got a cherry kolache to go and headed north on Highway 58. Purchase: one spiral plant stand with ivy and eight small pumpkins for $15.00.

Arcadia: Population 359

Windmills dot the landscape on a rare still day as I enter Valley County. The tops of the harvested cornstalks, rows of still-green trees, and the swelling hills of the Nebraska countryside create a three-dimensional portrait as I head north towards Arcadia. Six miles outside of town, where Highway 58 ends and 70 begins, a painted sign reads "*Turn here for Junk Jaunt.*" Another sign across the street says "*Kate – Turn Here!*" A

water tower the shape of Tin Man's head rests atop a hillside as I come into Arcadia. On the main street through town, I stop at a large antique sale and find the Colorado horse trailers from Loup City. The two couples, driving separate trucks, drove in from Colorado Springs. I asked them what brings them to the Junk Jaunt: "We have antique stores in Colorado Springs, and we read about it in a local sale bill." The two women, mother and daughter, carefully study an antique folding bed frame as their husbands stretch out on the sidewalk bench.

"So why come to the middle of nowhere Nebraska?" I assumed Colorado had more or better junk than little old Nebraska.

"Well," she said, "we always need new stuff." She decided against the folding bed and headed toward a seat-less chair, "We might as well buy the old junk because the new junk is just – well – junk."

On the way out of town, I pass a "Rally for Jesus" banner at the entrance of the city park, but keep going. A blue historical marker road sign is just at the edge of town, so I pull over to read the engraved, concrete stone. The last paragraph reads: *"The residents of Arcadia have experienced setbacks and natural disasters: Indian scares and locust attacks in 1874; the blizzards of 1888 and 1948-1949; major fires 1890, 1904, 1937; tornadoes in 1904, 1959, 1974. Despite the setbacks, Arcadia simply and contentedly anticipates tomorrow."* This is one tough town. Purchase: baby bath toy for 50 cents.

Westerville: Population 77

I cross the Middle Loup River and head out of town and into Custer County. Cell phone service and radio stations are non-existent. I blink and find myself coming into Westerville, Nebraska. I don't see any Junk Jaunt signs, but I do see another blue historical marker sign. I pull off the road as an old farmer in a beat-up Ford watches suspiciously. I learned that Westerville was not only the first town in Custer County, they also had the first newspaper (*The Custer Leader*) the first doctor, lawyer, banker, monument cutter, and general store in the county. Although they had junk, it didn't look like the junk was actually for sale, so I kept on Highway 70, and headed west towards Broken Bow.

Broken Bow: Population 3491

This was the biggest town since Grand Island, and, according to my book, had 43 Junk Jaunt stops. I headed into the first neighborhood to Vendor # 27. Two 60ish men, both with flattops and creased faces, reclined in lawn chairs by the garage door as I studied an upright contraption, made of white plastic PVC pipe.

"That there is the funnest game you're ever going to play," the man leaned forward in his chair, as if he were a wolf sensing prey.

I resisted the urge to touch it, knowing that was the sign he was waiting for. "Is that right?"

Two ropes with golf balls attached to each end hung over the plastic pipe, along with a black canvas bag. "$37 and you can take it home. That'll just barely cover my cost."

His friend shook his head, "No. Won't find it any cheaper than that."

I felt like I was on a Mexican beach. Stacked just inside the garage were at least ten others. I wouldn't mention that St. Libory had the same homemade game for $22.

I started to walk away. "You'll kick yourself if you don't buy one," the man called from his chair. "That's almost cost."

That was a chance I was willing to take. I waved goodbye behind my head and headed to the next pink sign.

Four women were inside the overstuffed garage adjacent to a bed and breakfast. The women stood side by side, wearing matching "I Survived the Junk Jaunt" t-shirts.

"The garage out back is full of more stuff." Two double garages were packed with clothes, games, Tupperware, and new Christmas themed gifts, collectibles, arts and crafts. In the corner of the back garage I found a grocery sack-size Christmas gift bag filled with over twenty smaller gift bags.

I took my bounty back to the women in the first garage. "How much for the whole thing"

"Oh . . . how about $2.00?"

Back in the car, I ate my last cherry kolache from lunch as I headed to the town square. It was getting late in the afternoon and I know I wouldn't be able to make all 43 junk stops. I headed to the town square to hit as many in one location as I could. The city park, complete with flag-draped gazebo and playground, made up the center of the town square. Tables with pink signs sat side by side around the sidewalk that lined the city square. Pickup that held pumpkins, squash, tomatoes and melons dotted the square. The Cosmos Swim Team sold Sloppy Joes and super nachos at the corner. In a wire

kennel in the shade of a tree were two red spaniel pups. As I approached to get a better look, I saw a cardboard sign that read "$200 each." I backed away and headed to my car. Purchase: twenty-four new Christmas gift bags for $2.00.

Mason City: Population 178

A Burlington Northern coal train heads west as I head south and east on Highway 92. Merle Haggard plays on the radio as a pink sign flies by at 60 miles per hour and I miss the turn into tiny Berwyn. I continue on, parallel to the train tracks. A new coal train seems to appear with every other country song on the radio. It's getting late and I pass up Ansley, Nebraska, at the intersection of highways 2, 92 and 183, and work my way toward Mason City. Ahead I see cars lined on the side of the highway. As I slow, I see a field to the right where a red barn with white trim and "Ya-Ya Sisters Antiques" on the front. The parking is full along the road, so I circle the block and come back around to park. Folding tables are full with knickknacks: naked Barbie dolls; porcelain figurines; ladies antique hats; Cornhusker paraphernalia. Tanya Tucker seems to be quite popular in Mason City, as one table holds what must be her entire collection, and several "Greatest Hits" cassettes. Lined against the side of the red barn are rusted tractor tire rims, tractor seats and wagon wheels. An old man sits in the sun in front of a collection of Cornhusker collectibles that include a wooden cutout in the shape of Nebraska, with a red "N" in the center, a cloth Cornhusker purse, and a scratched, white football helmet. Two women in straw hats and matching sunglasses sit at the end of the last table eating watermelon and taking money – the Ya-Ya sisters, I presume.

"How's business?" I ask as I pay for my find.

"Not very busy today," number one Ya-Ya says.

"No, not very busy," number two Ya-Ya repeats.

Number one hands me my change, "Sure is hot," number one says.

"Yeah, sure is hot," number two repeats as she wraps my purchase in a sack.

"Stay cool," I say, and thank them as I take my sack.

"Thanks," the Ya-Ya sisters answer in unison, and I muffle my laughter as I walk back to my car. Purchase: one glass jar poker chip holder for $3.00.

Hazard: Population 66.

I head southeast on Scenic Byway 2 out of Mason City and head back into Sherman County. The rolling countryside I have come from is now slowly transforming back into smooth farmland as I near the end of the inner loop. The tiny town of Litchfield – population 280 – passes by quickly on my left and soon I slow for Hazard, Nebraska. My guidebook says that Hazard gained it's name "following a conversation in which someone noticed the town site encompassed a dangerous hole.... That's a hazard, is the legendary comment." That's as good an explanation as any. Better than living in Toad Suck, Arkansas, or Two Egg, Florida, I suppose.

Across the railroad tracks and down an unpaved street I find a pink Junk Jaunt sign at the United Methodist Church. The grass lawn around the front and side of the small church is filled with dozens of birdhouses. Facing the road, just off the front door of the church is an extremely large, wood structure that appeared to be a small gazebo. The wooden structure is approximately six feet high, topped off with a shingled, pitched

roof that covered a metal tub that looked to be the size of a child's swimming pool. Inside the metal tub is a case of Great Value brand grape jelly.

"That there is the world's largest oriole bird feeder in the world – to scale" a forty-ish man with an infectious smile approached as I studied the structure.

"Is that so?"

"Now, there's no Guinness Book of World Records for oriole bird feeders, but we're working on that." The man held up a normal sized bird feeder that had been sitting on the edge of the monster feeder.

"Made exactly to scale from this one," he smiled proudly. "You empty all this grape jelly into the tub, and pretty soon you'll have more oriole than you know what to do with. You might get some other critters too, but you'll have orioles."

I asked if I could take a picture of the world's largest oriole bird feeder, and he reached for my camera. "You get in the picture and I'll take it."

"No, no." just the bird feeder – thanks." He smiled broadly as I snapped the picture.

His talent didn't stop with oriole feeders. There was bluebird houses, wren birdhouses, swallow, kestrel, flicker, and owl houses. He even had a bat house.

"Why would anyone want a bat house?" I asked naively.

"Bats have to live somewhere, don't they?" I suppose they did, I said. "If bats have their own house, maybe they won't come into your house."

He had a point. "That makes a lot of sense," I laughed.

Although they were all fine birdhouses, I had plenty of my own and went inside the church basement where more junk waited. A sign on the entrance door advertised

AA meetings at 8:15 every Wednesdays. It was nearing the end of the day, and the church basement had little junk left. As I came outside, the birdman of Hazard pointed me toward the Faith Lutheran Church around the corner. A flagpole stood in the four-way intersection at the center of the dirt road where I turned the corner.

The Lutheran church had handmade quilts, tables of paperback romance novels, and an unusually wide variety of antique metal bedpans. Perhaps the bedpans were a vision of their future, and although they were intriguing, I wasn't quite sure what a person would do with a bedpan once he bought one. It wasn't like a whatnot you could display on your curio cabinet. And would you really want to hang a bedpan on the wall of your family room? I passed on the bedpan, but found some other, more useful junk. Purchase: Hunchback of Notre Dame Children's Book for $1.

Ravenna: Population 1341

"Nebraska's Hometown Hideaway" sign marks the entrance to Ravenna. Heading into town, I cross railroad tracks that have run parallel to the highway since Broken Bow. It's getting late in the afternoon, and the junk stops will be closing down soon. A flashing yellow caution light marked the center of town that led me to my next junk stop in downtown Revenna. I pass Ravenna's *Blue Jay's* football stadium and find my neon pink sign. One quick look and I'd be on my way. As I entered the doors of the city auditorium, I felt like Dorothy who had been in black and white Kansas and was now in Technicolor Oz. The auditorium bustled with vendors and shoppers, people excitedly coming and going with their purchases. Tables lined the wooden floors of the large auditorium that held brand *new* junk – my favorite kind: John Deere Tractor collectibles;

Watkins home products; jewelry; handbags; women's accessories; restored antique trunks; oil paintings; scrap booking supplies; quilts; and, of course, your run-of-the-mill junk too. I had hit the junk jackpot. It was Rodeo Drive – Nebraska style. I reigned in my excitement and kept to my meager budget of $35 for the day; I was already at $28.10 with one town to go. Purchase: new scarf belt for $4 and child's construction worker themed birthday plates, napkins and hats for $1. Score.

Cairo: Population 790

As I leave Ravenna and head back to Grand Island, I pass a yellow pickup with South Dakota plates and a bed full of antiques and collectibles. John Deere combines dot the fall landscape as I head south. An American flag waves in the front yard of a white nineteenth-century farmhouse. As I enter Cairo, a white water tower competes in size against the backdrop of a steel grain silo. The sun is setting so I pull off at the first Junk Jaunt sign I see. I find several vendors at a flea market in the parking lot of a ball field. The first vendor I stop at is a nice, older woman with an array of books and seventies-era albums. "You from Cairo?" I ask as I thumb through the albums.

"They pronounce it CARE-OH – like the syrup," she says. "I live in Grand Island now." She rearranged her collectibles as she talked. "Don't know why they pronounce it care-oh, when they named it after the town in Egypt, but they do."

"Really? Why would they name it after a city in Egypt?" I was genuinely intrigued.

"They say when they founded the town that it looked just like a desert, so they named it Cairo. All the streets are Egyptian names: Thebes; Nubia; Nile."

As I thumbed through the albums, I noticed a "FREE" sign in front of the box. "These records are free?" I asked.

"Sure. Take as many as you want." Since I actually remembered the seventies music, I was sincerely thrilled.

I paid for my purchases that weren't free, and headed into town. I had to see Cairo for myself. I had never been to Egypt but I always wanted to go. Egypt had always held a fascination for me. It was exotic and mysterious, everything I thought my life in the Midwest was not. As a child, I was Cleopatra for Halloween more than once, and now I was in Cairo, driving the streets named for the ancient country: Mecca; Medina; Suez; Nile, all sites of ancient civilizations and current-day pilgrimages. Nebraska didn't have much in the way of pilgrimages, unless you count the Men's College World Series of Baseball or summers in the panhandle on Lake McConaughy. And Cairo, Nebraska didn't look anything like what I assumed the city in Egypt looked like. It wasn't a desert, though it was isolated. The countryside wasn't sand, but rolling hills of fading green. The land wasn't barren, but rich and fertile with crops that fed a nation. It was its own Cairo – *Care*-oh – not a shadow of something foreign a half a world away, but its own town with its own personality that came from the people; the Poles, Germans, Czechs and Danes that crossed an ocean to settle the small villages of Nebraska that grew to make up our *heart* land. I didn't need to travel a half a world away to see something special, something unique – it was right here in Nebraska.

Purchase: one Duke Ellington album; 2 Kris Kristofferson and Rita Coolidge albums; one Stardust Memories Reader's Digest album; 5 bestseller novels for 1 dollar.

I take a right at Ray's Used Cars on Alexandria Street and head home. Outside of Cairo, I pass another four-door truck with horse trailer heading toward the loop. A pink *Junk Jaunt* sign sits at the edge of the state highway. I look down the unpaved road that leads to another sale. The long dirt road seems to cut a slice between identical cornfields as it stretches into nowhere, beyond the horizon and out of view. A grain bin stands off to the right. A red SUV slows to a stop before entering the highway from the dirt road. Pulled behind the SUV is a trailer with tall, white sideboards. As it carefully turns onto the highway, I see the gate on the back of the trailer and the painted red letters – "Junk Jaunt." I turn down the road.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Memorial Day

I wanted to go for my father. The few war stories he had told of D-Day and Battle of the Bulge – landing on Utah Beach; liberating POW camps; finding grateful French villagers – bored me as a child, but as I grew older they fascinated me, and I always wanted to know more. He was stingy with this part of his life, the years before I was (as he would put it) "not even a tickle in his spine." My father would tease me with bits and pieces of his experiences during World War II, but when faced with questions, he withdrew and turned silent. Much has been documented on Vietnam vets returning home only to plunge into a freefall, grappling with depression and nightmares and worse, but little has been noted about the aftermath of 'victorious' war vets. Victory has its perks. Parades of ticker tape, flag-waving citizens, and traffic-stopping kisses were the norm for World War II vets. But after the victory celebrations and homecomings, any war vet must soon reconcile the horrid tasks they were asked to perform with a life they find vaguely familiar.

It wasn't until five years after his death that I decided to make the trip to the battlefields. We flew into Brussels Belgium, my husband and I, on a rainy September day. The baroque buildings in the city took on the same gray as the sky. Cathedrals and palaces we passed were like an antique photograph, differing shades of dirty brown and charcoal. The clouds sat heavy over the city, trapping the stale smell below. We filled ourselves with waffles and chocolates and warm Belgian beer. This would be our resting place before the journey to Bastogne, the site of Battle of the Bulge where my father had

fought when he was barely old enough to drive. Of all the battles he fought in during the war – Africa, Normandy, Rhineland – he talked of Bastogne and The Battle of the Ardennes the most. For some reason, Bastogne had held a special place in the catalogue of his war remembrances. As a medic in the Third Army under General Patton (whom he caustically referred to as "the son-of-a-bitch") it was his job to go into the battlefields to recover and treat the wounded – quite a leap from his civilian occupation as a seventeen-year-old messenger boy. I suppose his experiences as a WWII medic made him less than sympathetic when I sledded into a car and broke my collarbone at thirteen.

I had always said I was close to my father, but as the end came nearer, I had no tangible proof – no private stories shared only with me, no secrets from his past only I would know. He had lived a lifetime before marrying at thirty-six and having three children. By his mid-forties he had a disabling heart attack and was forced to retire from his job at the fire department. He had been ill since I was nine years old – over three fourths of my life. The man I knew was weak, frail, not the young war hero of World War II I had seen only in pictures. Maybe, I thought, if I could learn what he was before, when he was young and healthy, when he was, as my grandma used to say – "full of piss and vinegar" – I would know the *real* him, not the ailing middle-aged man too feeble to wash his car. It all began just wanting – needing – to know his story. I knew his health was failing in the years before his death, and I felt a sense of urgency to know this part of my father's life, this living history. He wasn't alone. America's World War II veterans were dying at the rate of over a thousand a day. *A day*. Patience and tact flew out the window with time. As he grew more feeble, my inquiries became more frequent. I

waited, as I always did, until my brother and sister left for the day and my mother was out of the room.

"What did you do in the war, Daddy?" My playful question was met with an equally blithe response, masked in gruffness. "I learned how to march." Never looking up from his newspaper, he sipped at his coffee. His smug grin was too cute to be irritating; an expert at avoiding this line of questioning.

"Really, I want to know what you did in the war. Tell me."

Too much. Too far. The smug grin vanished and was replaced with the blank stare, an expression I had become familiar with. His face never left the protection of the newspaper, but his eyes stopped reading. I was embarrassed I had crossed the line I knew was there. The war and his memories wasn't something I would ever be able to steal out of him.

"Your father doesn't like to talk about it," my mother used to warn me after a round of my interrogations, "it's too depressing for him." War anniversaries would come and other veterans would reunite, commemorating their victories and remembering the dead, but he withdrew into his own private microcosm. The TV was turned off; no news bites, no veteran interviews; no D-Day or even V-Day remembrances of any kind in his house. As I grew into my teens I began to connect the dots of the war and Dad's moods. His jovial, happy-go-lucky temperament suddenly veered into a morose darkness. We tiptoed around each war anniversary like broken glass. He was invited year after year to his Army unit's reunions, but he refused to reminisce.

I secretly rummaged through old war photographs: Dad in his dress uniform right out of boot camp; Dad on the German and French border standing under a hand-painted

road sign that read, "You are now leaving Germany 'THANK GOD'"; Dad's battalion liberating a POW camp – bodies upon bodies of skeletons, their charred remains burnt and hastily buried in mass graves where the soldiers found them. Is this what haunted my father? Living in a world of routine carnage peppered with the occasional poker game? Finding lime-sprinkled piles of emaciated bodies, followed by a dinner of pork-and-beans? He wrote to his mother – my grandmother – on the back of the black and white photos. He described the gruesome scenes with his teenage misspellings; *"This shows what the Germans did to the ones who where sick or couldn't do any work,"* describing a pile of bodies. Another picture of gunned down prisoners, with American GIs standing, weary, in the background, "*We where just 20 minutes too late.*" On the back of every picture, the "h" in *where* crossed out and corrected to *were*, obviously by his mother. On one of the dozens of pictures, my grandmother replied, *"Good for you! You spelled it right. You win the gold medal!"*

I had to go for my father. I wanted to see where he had fought, where he'd slept, where he learned to smoke. Why did he roll his cigarette between his index finger and thumb, slowly and purposefully, as if it were his last? Why had he chastised my brother for calling his rifle a "gun"? Why had he hated so much to remember? I could learn all the history I wanted from a book, but I wanted the details, craving a piece of my father's life that I knew nothing about. Perhaps I wanted a part of my father that no one else would have. He was well into his sixties but still a few years from death when I tried one last time to get some answers. We were at the kitchen table where most important issues were dealt with. The memories were fogging over but still within reach. "I killed Germans." His tone was deliberate. "One was so close I saw the blue of his eyes." He

came out from behind the morning paper, surrendering with a matter-of-fact expression that seemed suspicious, but I listened, mesmerized. "I saw he was young – no more than a teenager, like me. And I shot him dead." His aged face was blank of expression as he purposefully looked into my eyes. "Is this what you want to know?"

Yes, this is what I wanted to know – details – but I was ashamed I had pried too far. It was the last time we spoke of the war, now almost ten years ago.

We left for Bastogne, Belgium, at daybreak. The train station was empty except for a few early commuters. After a two-hour train ride from Brussels, we boarded a bus in the small town of Libromont, a thirty-minute ride through the countryside to Bastogne. The bus was full except for the very back seat where two dread-locked girls lay across. As we worked our way to the back of the bus, the French-speaking girls moved to one side, and we sat beside them. I said "*Merci*" in bad French and they forced a smile.

The scenery was a sharp contrast from Brussels; classical buildings and ornate palaces were replaced with steepled churches and simple farmhouses. The sky cleared as we made our way slowly through the Belgian countryside. We passed rolling hills with autumn colored trees that still held their leaves; deep emerald fields of grazing sheep dotted the landscape. Small cottages decorated the roadside, with thatched roofs and picket fences I had only seen in Thomas Kincaid paintings. Wildflowers scattered the countryside; it was as if I were looking through the bus window at a mural. The driver left us off on the north edge of town. We walked several more blocks to reach the center of Bastogne and the town square.

Bastogne was a small but bustling town of thirteen thousand. It was – and still is– a road and rail junction in the heart of the Ardennes Forest. In the center of the town square we found the crowded tourist office. Thankfully, we met a friendly English-speaking worker. "You'll find historical points of interest all over town," she said. "The Mardasson Memorial is about a mile out of town, an easy walk from here." Her English was as good as my own. *'Mardasson'* is the local name of the memorial. We left the tourist office with points of interest in hand and started on our way.

By this time the clouds had broke. Warm sun filtered down and felt good against my skin. I remember my father's stories about the weather when he was trapped here with his company – the Army's 84th division – a hodgepodge of snow, blizzards, fog and rain. It would have been later, December and January – days he and his division were trapped here with no sign of the sun that would have made airdrops possible. The riflemen exhausted themselves wading through drifts of snow. Soldiers lined their clothes with newspaper for added insulation. The story has been made famous by "Band of Brothers." "We called ourselves 'The Battling Bastards of Bastogne'," he had said with much pride (I never remember hearing *that* reference in any movies), one of the few times he shared his war secrets. He would have only turned twenty the spring before. This life I imagined him living seemed make believe – a sharp contrast to the man I knew who couldn't shoot a deer, the man who made his children cry out in mock pain as he pretended to spank us with "the strap" (never used) to convince my unknowing mother he was punishing us for our frequent misbehavior.

Outside the tourist office on the opposite corner of the square was a large, bronze bust of the American general who refused to surrender Bastogne to the Germans, Brig.

General 'Nuts' McAuliffe (and who the town square is named for). The story goes that German officers under the flag of truce delivered a message from the German commander demanding the surrender of Bastogne. After receiving the message, Brig. General McAuliffe replied, "Nuts!" which was his official reply to the request of surrender. When the one word message was delivered to the German general, the message had to be interpreted. Apparently he didn't like the response, and the siege continued. Beside General McAuliffe's bust sat a Sherman tank that protected the main road into town.

We left the square and headed south out of town towards the monument. I wondered how the city had changed over the last fifty odd years since my father was here. I was thankful the road was empty except for us; the tinny clank of cowbells kept the silence from becoming overwhelming. Open fields that surrounded each side of the road seemed undisturbed. The beauty of the Ardennes Forest encircled us, the dark green of the forest in sharp contrast to the blue of the cloudless sky. Photographs I had seen from the war showed the same open fields and countryside, only in black and white images, snapshots of a decimated battlefield dotted with ragged soldiers caught in still life, trees split in two from bombs or machine guns, void of the color and vibrancy that were evident now. My father had experienced it at its worst – I knew I was seeing it at its best.

I was walking the same road my father marched some fifty years before. My mind was swarming with questions: Was he afraid he would die? How was he able to write home? Could he see past the war to notice the beauty of this place? As I began the long walk up to the monument, I stopped at each statue, each plaque – every memento I

could find I meditated over like a medium trying to channel the dead. The sights and smells of the town were familiar to me, the people friendly – our languages continents apart, though it was as if we'd been acquainted in some other time. The wind of the road, the line of the trees, the shape of the landscape – it was as if I had been here before. Could I be experiencing what Carl Jung referred to as "the collective unconscious"? Did I inherit, as some believe possible, the "codes of life" from my father – subconscious data that links us to the past of our ancestors, like eye color or freckles? Were thoughts and experiences from my father permeating my reality? The further I traveled into the details of my father's young life, the less I was anchored in the reality of the present. History was lulling me into a distant abyss as I carried my father's war wounds with me. Is this what my father fought against? A daily struggle to hold reality tight while the past creeps up from behind? The magnetic pull of memories so thick you can't hold them back until finally you let go and freefall into an unknown?

After my father died my mother talked of his depression and anxiety when recalling his life in the war. "He had terrible nightmares," my mother said. She described to me the many times when they were both asleep in bed, he would bolt upright and pounce on top of her, gripping her by the hair with one hand as he held her down, choking her with his forearm. He would scream something sounding like German, over and over. Finally he would relax his grip and she could slowly push him off, never awakening him from this suspended consciousness. Nights like this weren't infrequent during their forty-year marriage. Memories of the war hovered over him like a ghost, and though he had been gone over five years when I made this pilgrimage, I still felt the need

to release him from his demons. Perhaps he had needed forgiveness, to make peace with the war and what he had done – and what it had done – to him.

As we made our way over the crest of the first hill, I could see the Battle of the Bulge Memorial in the distance. Huge cement columns decorated the top of Mardasson Hill. We made our way up to the monument on top of the sloping hill, the view spanning miles. An American M10 tank sat outside the entrance to a small museum that held relics of the battle. Inside, WWII era uniforms were displayed on mannequins, their chests limp with medals. Polished rifles were displayed alongside the fake soldiers; German and American stood side by side. Faded pictures of GIs and Nazis in and around Bastogne were displayed along the walls. Playing inside a small theater was a continuously running movie of the battle for Bastogne. I had seen almost every war movie that had been filmed, every documentary on the Bulge but this footage was some I had never seen before. I was transfixed by the black and white images. American soldiers in and around Bastogne – dirty faces with forced smiles propped up on their rifles. I studied the footage intently as I listened to the French commentary. I analyzed each face on the screen, dissecting each set of eyes, every nose, each smile – desperately hoping to find the young face of my father, a face I wasn't sure I would recognize.

The movie ended and I went back outside where the towering monument stood. The memorial was in the shape of a five-point star with each state's name engraved around the top of the adjoining walls. I stood in the center of the open star. Ten granite columns loomed over me, each engraved with a recounting of the famous battle. The first column read:

...For the people of Belgium, it was the final

stand against an enemy who for nearly five

years had violated their soil and vainly tried

to crush their national spirit.

As I moved around to read each column, I began to understand the enormity of what I was witnessing. The battle lasted just over one month. The Americans lost nineteen thousand soldiers in and around where I was standing. More than forty six thousand Americans were wounded. Over one hundred thousand Germans were killed, injured or captured. Two thousand plus civilians were killed in the bombings. *How did my father survive this? Why?*

Along the inner walls were the names of each military unit who fought here. My husband took a picture of me under my father's Third Army insignia. In the center of the star's marble floor was a beautiful spray of live flowers over which was a large bronze plaque with French engraving. From my poor French I could make out, "*IN MEMORY OF THE AMERICAN LIBERATORS OF BELGIUM,*" along with the dates in Roman numerals. Looking around, making sure no one was watching, I removed a red carnation from the spray of flowers, carefully enclosing it in a tissue, tucking it away in my purse. I would later return home to Arkansas and lay it under my father's military headstone in the country cemetery where his ashes were buried.

I climbed the stairs to the top of the memorial. All I could see for miles was rolling pasture surrounded by the dense green of the Ardennes Forest. Was this where my father saw the German's blue eyes just before he shot him? Could this be the place that came alive in his nightmares? My father fought against the pull of these memories for over fifty years. Just before he died, he cried to my mother that he was afraid he

wouldn't be forgiven for all he had done in the war. As I stood on the same soil where his nightmares were born, I said a silent prayer appealing for my father's peace.

Back to the north, Bastogne sat isolated and tranquil, the sun glinting off the church's aged tower. I reluctantly left the memorial and we made our way back to town. On the road back to Bastogne was what looked to be a concrete road marker. Painted on the four-foot tall concrete post were blue stars encircling the rounded top, with a bright red flame coming out of the blue ocean bottom. Painted in white letters were the words *"VOIE DE LA LEBERTE 1944,"* 1944 Liberty Way. This was the final marker of a series of kilometer stones that followed a route from Utah Beach on the coast of France – the first point where the allies landed – to Bastogne, Belgium, the sight of Hitler's last major offensive and the largest land battle of World War II that would soon bring an end to the war. It seemed fitting to be standing at the end of the long road.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Healing Springs

In the summer of 1975 my parents uprooted my older brother, sister and me from the only home we had known and moved us, three teenagers kicking and screaming, to the hills of Arkansas. We had been there before to visit an uncle, but we had no inkling we would be moving there. I would be leaving my beloved Peter and all that I knew. At thirteen I had made up my mind I would hate it. Compared to the metropolis of Kansas City we were fleeing after my father lost his job, this Arkansas boarder town had less people than our city block. To say Sulphur Springs, the town where we landed, was small would be a gross understatement. It wasn't on any map I could find. Sulphur Springs hovered right around five hundred, and with our move we pushed the population up one whole percent. Sulphur had one small grocery, a pool hall, a mechanic, two gas stations and four churches. The only redeeming feature Sulphur Springs had for three teenagers was the creek, or "crick" as the locals called it. As a city child, I had never swum in lake or river water, only the occasional over-chlorinated pool. The water that filled the natural lake from underground springs was as clear as crystal; I could stand in the water and watch as tiny minnows nipped my toes. The city dammed the creek at its widest point, creating a small natural lake in the city park, our "swimmin' hole." The spring water that flowed into the lake kept the temperature of the water cool even as summer temperatures hovered over 100°.

It is the summer of 1972 and I am nine. My father is trying to teach me to swim. We are in a small lake in Arkansas where we have come to visit relatives. I wade into the shallow edge of the lake and follow my father deeper into the water, reaching for his outstretched hands. He lifts my spindly body into his arms, holding me up flat on the surface of the water, my arms and legs splayed out like a spider. "Relax," he says, "you have no power over the water. The water will hold you." I try to float but my body keeps sinking as I fight against its gravity. My father is a fireman and he knows the power of the elements. He knows the destruction they could cause, as well as the creation they can generate. "Water is the most powerful force in the world," he says as I float nervously in his hands. "Water can cut holes through rock and level a city. It can take the strongest man under in its currents, and the pressure from water can crush you if you go too deep." I try to relax. He continues, "You can never fight against water. You must always go with it." He gently moves me back and forth in the water, and my muscles begin to soften. I slowly glide my palms over the top of the lake's surface, my bobbed hair following with the motion of my head. I squint, trying to find the rocky shore, but it is far away. I know my father holds my life in his hands. If he lets go, I will surely drown, but he never does. I am floating weightless on the surface of the water. "Just remember, if you are ever being carried away by water, relax and go with it. Don't fight against it; let it take you where it wants you to go."

Overlooking the creek are rolling mountains – foothills to the natives – covered in a thick forest of trees and natural rock formations rich with fossils. This is the heart of the Ozark Mountain region, with the Boston and Ouachita Mountain ranges to the south

of this Arkansas River valley. To the north, south, east and west are Table Rock Lake, Grand Lake of the Cherokees, Beaver Lake, and the Missouri and Arkansas Rivers, with a smattering of smaller rivers in between. Water is everywhere. Rock formations jut out from above the highway as you head south, forming an overhang. A road sign warns motorists, *"Watch for Falling Rock."* Sometimes we would cross the dam in the lake and climb the rocks, perching like birds on one outcrop where we could jump into the lake, just deep enough not to kill us. Across the only road that ran through the park were three underground natural springs where we could hand-pump spring water from the ground below – the "sulphur" springs. One pump gave White Sulphur, thought to be good for healing liver problems, one Black Sulphur, for malaria, and one Alkaline Magnesium, which was thought to be good for intestinal problems. The first two are named (as legend goes) from the color they will turn a silver coin when immersed in the water. All were believed to have healing benefits. People brought rinsed out milk jugs to carry home water from the springs, hoping to cure anything from an ailing heart to gall stones. In the basement of the brick building that houses City Hall there once ran artesian spring water. Another natural spring, Lithia, was just across the gravel road at the north end of the park. A flat roof covered the spring that flowed down from the cavernous mountainside. This was my grandmother's favorite spring water, as it carried a small amount of Lithium mineral to calm her nerves, and it had no pungent taste as the other springs did.

It is the summer of 1973 and I am ten. We are visiting my Uncle Joe in Arkansas. I am wading in the creek with my grandma. We are on the far side of the dam, by Lithia Springs, and we are waiting while my uncle fills his milk jugs with the spring's water.

The air is hot and sticky but the water is cold. I am walking barefoot on the rocks that cover the creek bottom. I stand still and watch as dragonflies bounce off the surface of the gently flowing creek. I search the shallow water hoping to catch a glimpse of a sunfish. Across the dam, I watch the older boys swing from a rope that overhangs the lake, falling into the water below. My grandma smiles and wades toward me, taking deliberate steps across the jagged rock bed. I bend down, searching the waterbed for a rock that would do for skipping. I find a small, flat rock, and bounce it across the surface of the water. Three skips. Not bad. I see something moving out of the corner of my eye. I look down in time to see something slowly swimming over the top of my feet. It is burnt orange and brown; a mosaic design runs along its slender body. A snake. I can feel it pass across the top of my feet. I stand paralyzed in the water. I cannot call out to my grandmother and cannot scream. Something is holding me silent and still. My grandma approaches in time to see the snake slip away down the creek. "Did you see that?" she asked. "That was a water moccasin." She lets the hem of her dress fall out of her hands as she comes toward me. "Let's go back to the car." She pulls me by the hand from the water. It is five years before I go back into that end of the creek.

At one time this small village of five hundred was a bustling spa town. At the turn of the twentieth century, trains brought vacationers looking for rest and healing. By the time we moved there in the mid-seventies, the train depot was gone, most of the spas were converted to private homes, and the only people who visited were either lost or on their way to somewhere else. All that remained were its springs. And caves. This Ozark Mountain region is unique in that they are the result of a series of uplifts which started

over a billion years ago. Due to age and limestone content, they have eroded into hills. These hills have a network of underground channels that form the numerous caves and natural springs. Just to the north, cut into the hills, is Bluff Dwellers Cave, and to the south, Old Spanish Treasure Cave. According to locals, Spanish conquistador soldiers buried their treasure in the cave over three hundred years ago. The treasure is now estimated to be worth over 40 million dollars. Many locals and travelers have attempted to find it, but only helmets, pieces of armor, weapons and a few gold coins have been recovered, or at least that's what they say.

It is summer vacation before I start junior high. I am in the Ozarks with my mother, father, brother, sister and grandmother. We are entering a cave, up the road from my uncle's house. The sign above the entrance reads "Welcome to Bluff Dwellers Cave." Inside the dimly lit cavern I can see shades of browns, reds and gold that make up the ceiling and walls. As we enter, a young man, our tour guide, explains the underground formations: "Different minerals deposited by the surface seepage yield different colorings. There are many types of limestone, each formed during a different geological time. Some of the formations you'll see are thought to be from the Paleozoic era – 346,000,000 years ago." Further in, a ten-ton stratum rock, no more than twelve inches thick, rests on the crest of another formation. Our guide moves it with one finger. The strata of the cave walls vary from two to sixteen inches in thickness, each formed during different spans of time under water pressure. "The temperature is a constant 58°. This cool temperature discourages snakes." I'm glad to hear this. Horizontal lines mark the cavern walls, created from different water levels over the span of hundreds of thousands of years. We stop to look at a stalactite and stalagmite, which appear to be

growing together. One stalactite, formed by the slow seepage of water, which over the centuries created a curtain of minerals, is gently tapped by our guide, and a delicate chiming melody echoes through the cave. Near the exit of the cave there is a lake. Collections of minerals form a perfect dam, less than an inch thick and twelve inches high. The lake trails off, extending more than two hundred feet into another channel of the cave. "Can we go there?" I ask no one in particular. "No, that part of the cave is closed to the public," the tour guide says. "It will have to stay a mystery."

We spent our first summer in Sulphur Springs mostly in the swimming hole, and our city slicker relatives came to visit their hillbilly kin. We took them to the springs to stock up on the healing water. They filled their milk jugs and told us how lucky we were to live in the country. I grew up and moved away, thinking little of the town of Sulphur Springs I had left behind. But a few years later, and almost a century after travelers sought healing at the springs, an old woman pumping water into milk jugs from the springs smelled a funny odor. It wasn't the usual odor of rotten eggs or burnt coal from the natural minerals; it was something foreign. She went from one spring to the next, cupping the water she had pumped from the ground in the palm of her hand, analyzing the pungent odor. It was the smell of gasoline.

An underground storage tank from one of the town's gas stations had leaked into Sulphur Springs's ground water. EPA took over and dug up the tanks, and tons of earth was removed to stop the contamination, but the damage was already done. They shut down the springs. The EPA tested the water from Lithia Springs and the lake but there was no trace of gasoline. Even so, a sign was placed on Lithia Springs directing folks

with empty milk jugs not to drink the unfiltered water, deeming it "unsafe" because it didn't come out of a faucet. The spring water was lost.

I am eleven and in seventh grade science class. Mrs. Randolph, my science teacher, reads from her book: 'The human body is made up of seventy five percent water. Eighty percent of blood is water; seventy three percent of lean muscle is water; twenty five percent of fat and twenty two percent of bone is made up of water.' I wonder, if we are mostly water why is it so hard to float? Mrs. Randolph continues, 'We can last for days on end without food, but cannot last but a few days without water.'

I raise my hand. "If we are mostly water why are we solid?" My classmates laugh. I persist. "I mean, we don't look like water or move like water, so how can we be mostly water?"

My teacher smiles, "Just because you cannot see it, doesn't mean it isn't there."

Thirty years have passed since my family moved to Arkansas. I am now in Nebraska, four hundred miles away from that home, my home, or what I describe to friends as home. In the Plains of eastern Nebraska where I now live there are few lakes or creeks and a rare natural spring. In the heat of the summers the earth cracks from the dryness. My family is still in Arkansas, but after traveling eight hundred miles two and three times a year for twenty years, I am beginning to doubt that family is why I return. For me it is the place – the land and all it holds. The dry concrete of the city can drain the life from some of us accustomed to a lush, rambling countryside instead of square city lots, and I am one. I need to wet my toes in the streams and drive the mountains, if only

for a day. On the long drive from Omaha, where I live now, to the Ozarks, a thirst grows in my throat that is only quenched when I get "home." I still miss the springs. On my last visit home, I visited the two-room city hall and asked about the future of the springs that were once the lifeblood of this small town. "It's sad," the woman behind the desk lamented. "No one seems to care about the springs anymore."

It is 2002 and I have just turned forty. To mark this birthday I return to Sulphur Springs. My father has passed, my brother and sister have moved away, though not far, and my mother is still there. I pass the road sign on Highway 59 that reads, "Welcome to Arkansas – The Natural State," followed by a sign, "Sulphur Springs – Population 672." I can see my mother's home nestled in the trees in the valley below. I drive past and circle through town. I pass a restaurant, a convenience store, flea market, mechanic shop, quilt store, a bakery and four churches. I turn into the city park and drive to the springs. A sign on the roof over the springs states "WATER NOT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION." I cross to the lake. It is empty and abandoned in the chill of late winter. I sit on the rock bank, taking off my shoes and rolling my pant legs before I wade into the water. It is cold and transparent. I stand still, watching as the minnows nibble at my feet. I look across the lake and see a rope hanging from a tree. To my left the water from the lake gently spills over the low dam, toward Lithia Springs. To my right I watch a turtle creep across the rocks and under the surface of the frigid water. I look down toward my feet, searching my reflection in the water. I see a young girl, laughing, as she turns and swims away.