

CHAPTER ONE

Breath of Life by Judith Ingram

There came the time when all I could see was my last and final love departing back from where he had come ... marriage number four dissolved. It was so clear then, that long dusty trail of broken shackles, hopes and promises strewn along the wayside in coffins... on down that enduringly harsh passageway we call life. After so many relationships in and between marriages I was numb for a while ... a long while ... and it took a while longer to settle into me, just me. I was amazed I had made it through the maze of love's fantasy ... drained by reality ... to finally arrive at my destination of calmness and unburdened space. It was a breath of life I was in great need, and for the first time in 39 years I was a free woman ... free from the ruse of bondage that ensnared me time and time again.

During the years 2003 to 2005, number four and I were living in a semi-remote community in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. I had bought a two-story cabin, which was situated on a slightly sloping half acre hillside, after having lived 2002 to 2003 on Maui with my newly wedded husband in 2001. I sold my home in Oregon thinking I'd live on Island forever, but a year later I wanted ... needed ... to get back to the mainland. Life in the land of paradise was not paradise.

My life has been a road map of many travels, and no matter how far I wandered I had always returned home to Oregon, and yet, when we decided to leave Maui, his desire was focused on the Ozarks. After searching for months for the perfect place to begin anew, the cabin we both had imagined became available ... a place we both fell in love with. It was a long hard relocation journey but at the time it seemed worth it. When we left Hawaii in 2003 our marriage was already starting to show decline. Though I would have loved to return home, I surrendered to the hope that the new surroundings would give us a place to grow closer rather than farther apart. In my optimistic mind, it was a new dream to build on ... and the intention felt good.

After we got settled into our remote cabin nestled in a forest of towering white oaks and maples and overgrown foliage, two years later in the fall of 2005 we parted ways. He returned to Maui and I stayed on alone for another four years with my two dogs before finally returning home. Buddy was a big, beautiful rescue dog ... a Border Collie people would say, though I could not be sure, but he always got all the attention from strangers with his big loving brown eyes and happy face. Lillie May was my sweet, spoiled little girl. She was my soul animal in this life, a beautiful pure bred red miniature doxie. They both were my companions for 6 years and I enjoyed them so much. Both have passed on to doggy heaven long ago, and emotionally I have not been able to get another dog – Lillie's passing was too painful to ever experience again.

After the second year alone into my well-needed solitude, something greater than anyone could ever imagine appeared ... and that encounter would be with me for the rest of my life. Oddly enough I felt prepared for what had arrived, as if I had timelessly waited for it. What appeared on the evening of Saturday, July 14, 2007 and reappeared for a total of three brilliant nights, came from out of nowhere sparkling under the darkness of a New Moon - which had blackened my entire surroundings - making the twinkle extra bright among the majestic trees that had aroused much curiosity. The tiny star-like glow appeared to be stationary among the outer branches of the towering 100+ foot trees. It was the oddest thing I had ever seen during the entire time I had lived

there, or anywhere. When it suddenly lit up so mysteriously, I couldn't take my eyes off of it while staring out from my second story bedroom slider.

It appeared while I was preparing for bed. Immediately I went out to the deck to get a better look. It was about half way up in the trees, a little higher than where I stood peering at it in awe. The distance was less than 75 or so feet away at the edge of the clearing that encircled the cabin. The evening was warm and peaceful, and until then I could hear the multi-tones of the night critters resonating outside ... a song of nature I had become pleasurably accustomed to. It seemed like just another serene evening until the sudden arrival of that miraculous twinkle. While standing at the edge of the deck staring up in wonder, the moment my eyes locked onto the radiance of the light I felt a strange stillness, as if time itself had ceased, and everything around me waned into a void.

There was such a powerful sense of kindness pulsating within its energy flow ... and suddenly I felt like a fearless child drawn to its allure. In amazement it began to expand, growing larger and larger while becoming brighter and brighter. Its presence was most strikingly acknowledged ... and in a state of fixed awe I found myself enraptured and mystified. Then a large white beam extended from the light, encapsulating my entire body in what felt like an illuminated bubble. My eyes were wide open, my senses summoned to its ever-present magnetism, drawing focus to the warmth of its touch. After a few moments the night darkness returned as the light retreated back to a tiny sparkle. I glanced around in wonder of what had happened, unafraid, prepared, and patient for I felt was still to come.

I stood and stared at its mysterious presence for the longest time before taking a seat in my lounge chair where I continued to stare with questions racing through my mind. "What is it?" kept repeating over and over as I sat there pondering that question for a while. I could not help wonder what it might do next when suddenly I felt a calm and relaxing sensation wash over me, causing my eyes to gently close. No longer did I see the light in the darkness of the night, for the darkness of my mind was fully illuminated ... the light was inside my head and I felt awakened. There was a strong sense that I unmistakably recognized as an invitation to communicate.

I felt no force to continue as if I knew, just knew I could open my eyes and it would be gone, yet it felt completely natural. The moment I mentally accepted the invitation, an instant connection fused us into a single consciousness. Immediately I was within its vision, and its vision was radiantly alive within me.

The whole experience was likened unto a revelation, and truer still, apparently, it was the fulfillment of a promise I had waited 53 years for, with only a 12 day stretch to my 54th birthday. July 14th, 2007 was a time in my history which marked a turning point in my life. I was profoundly enriched by this unforgettable presence which opened the depth of my soul and gifted me with signs and wonders ... so much so, that I carried it with me for over a decade waiting to unseal the vision in as much detail as allowed.

It's not a unique experience, this I am wholly aware. I have heard that countless others have experienced and shared their own awakening ... and I believe many others shall follow. I am also aware of the fake and the phony which makes discernment a vital factor. Visions have always been a rare gift to me, and I have sparingly shared them with others throughout my life ... many

whom have been touched by them. Most of my visions have materialized in time, some are yet to be fulfilled. I was excited at the thought of sharing this amazing experience, until the voice - within the light - firmly instructed me to wait until its time. I never felt I needed to conceal my visions before, as they were more like a testimony of my faith, so that was part of what made this experience so much different than the others – to hold it within for so long.

The extent of it was surely unlike any I had ever encountered, more divine than ever. I suppose I can best describe it as a visit from wise and ancient souls from long ago, ancestors whom had returned to deliver a message, and that message was not to be revealed until its time. When the time to unseal what had been hidden for so long, the words finally began to flow in 2017. That's when I was filled with inspiration to write and write and write, and to re-read the manuscript over and over for detail and precision, preparing for its release. From out of the depths of my soul the words poured out like the unveiling of a rolled-out scroll. Although it was a quiet time, it was also a mental challenge to complete, having taken many months, and when I finished, it was a great relief.

I had first attempted to write it down immediately after the visit, but was blocked, as one would refer to as writer's block, indeed it was so. I had attempted another time or two over the decade without one letter typed. I was excited when the inspiration enlivened my spirit, and I didn't stop until most of it had been poured out. However, that was as far as I was able to go. It sat in the dark waiting again as I came to understand that it was only time to unseal it, but not time to reveal it. The revealing came near the end of 2019 ... with mere weeks from entering into a new decade in 2020. I find it odd that it has been something perfectly timed, yet, I still do not know why ... but I have honoured my promise and commitment all the same ... knowing that blind faith is true faith.

The vision, as I perceived, was a vision within a vision ... having many different parts ... all extraordinary. The part that touched me deeper than most was the gift of seeing the beginning of new life, when the spark of inhaling my first breath awakened the miraculous creation of life ... when life became aware of life. The gift I was given was more than observation, it was witnessing the amazing splendor of creation. The entire inner and outer process of the vision was mingled in emotions that felt real and raw ... deeply rooted in the heart of enlightenment.

During those three nights, just before each vision began, there was an inner stillness of my being. No feeling. No movement. Not an image, nor a thought, not even a sound. My first vision took me within my body where it was utterly dark and void when suddenly a tiny spark began to flicker far in the distance of my mind. My thoughts then began to flow with a feeling of wonder as I could then see a multitude of tiny sparkles appearing everywhere within my being, until their glow was so bright it illuminated the inner walls of the dark passageway winding through my mind. It felt as if I were peering into a tunnel watching the mass of flickers beginning to swarm. They seemed to cluster together like fireflies as they danced their way into a distinctive form of unity. There was a rhythm and order to what was happening, which gave me a sense of intelligence at work. I then sensed an invisible magnetic energy that seemed to capture the swarm of flickers as they all flowed closer to their source of life. My inner eye followed the mass through the tunnel where I saw many flickers had lost their light ... their laborious task completed. The remainder of the swarm continued to swim onward toward their journey.

With captivated focus I noticed one of the sparks was flickering much brighter than the rest. I wondered if it were signals, or some kind of communication between them, then I realized by the way of formation that the surrounding flickers were guarding and guiding it along as if it were being protected. That's when I realized what was happening because until then it seemed a total mystery. I became aware that it was the beginning of my creation and I suddenly felt a deeper anticipation as the brighter glow approached what looked like a small opening of a chamber door. As this single brightest sparkle floated away from the others it appeared to be embraced by the life force within. When the door had closed everything in my mind became dark and silent.

For a few moments the stillness pursued and then my vision reappeared within the chamber - radiant in a fluorescence of glory. I saw the male and the female life energy enclosed together within a protective womb as they swam like two fishes in a bowl. As I watched the two flickers, they began to mysteriously change multi-colors until both had a bright sparkled of white. Once the flickers stopped, they began to float toward each other, and then they were fully emerged into a single pulsating light. I felt the first breath of conception - the realization of life was initiated - activated - which set into motion the beginning of a new birth. As I continued to gaze upon the masterful handiwork of creation, in an all-consuming awe, everything went dark again.

It was a miraculous vision that continued to unveil much more, and in between moments of infinite space I was alone in the dark pondering my thoughts. When the inner light was switched on my focus was clearly fixed upon the one flickering seed as I watched it divide into two, both perfectly identical. It was absolutely extraordinary to see twins swimming about, flickering back and forth a rainbow of glows. Somehow, I knowingly sensed they were both females. It was at this point I began to wonder and ponder the question to something I felt I already knew, yet, strangely, as if I had never known.

As I timelessly watched the two flicker back and forth - which again I wondered if it was communication - they surprisingly began to merge into one beautiful multicolor sparkle. At that moment I physically felt the life energy of the twins being absorb into my inner soul and suddenly all that was in her was within me. The feeling was and still is utterly indescribable. The chamber gradually began to dim to a soft white glow, but within the protective womb it continued to radiate.

As the vision vanished, I was once again within the pondering thoughts of wonder ... bewildered thoughts of seeing twins. My thoughts soon quieted when it felt as if I were drifting along a gentle stream being carried away into the depth of the sea - where I could not see - where I could only hear the voice of wisdom resonating. The soft-spoken words held a powerful message to seek the deep well of understanding, and I no more than heard those words when suddenly my wonder was no more ... everything became clear to me. In that moment of remembering the purpose and necessity of such a process, a great inward and outward pouring of tears gushed with joy and sorrow. My grateful heart embraced the gift as a powerful affirmative confirmation to what I had felt my entire life. From my earliest days I had always felt that I was a twin, perhaps in another life I wondered later in life, but certainly one of my childhood fantasies. I knew it I knew it I knew it, I could hear my own voice rejoicing.

Twins have always captivated me with a joyful fascination and a genuine sense of connection, but they also ushered in a mournful yearning I could never explain. In the knowing, I found our

oneness and the awareness gave me wholeness. Through my vision I came to understand my left handedness, remembering how my teachers tried to force me to write with my right hand, during those first years of schooling. I tried to conform without success and went on to endure being the odd one - deemed defective, teased and laughed at. A fight against such forces was won, and I continue to write lefthanded. The odd thing is, though, that I can use my left hand to write and to eat, but it is the weaker of the two. The left hand, and entire arm has less strength than my right, which I can throw a ball much farther than my left with better accuracy. And the right arm usually reaches out first to grab something. I've always been balanced that way. I hold a baseball bat right-handed as well, which is very awkward to do left-handed, just as it's awkward to write or eat with the right. I suppose I am duel-handed.

As I remained in my vision pondering my thoughts, there was a warm comfort as the darkness came in like a cloud slowly drifting past, and when it had cleared there was light once again. What appeared all along as a live feed, with the feeling as if I were present to witness the events, was replaced with something like a slideshow. Countless still images appeared like black and white snapshots across a dimly visible backdrop suspended in midair. At first the images were not clear but they became more visible when I realized they were screenshots of different stages of fetal development. As time drew nearer to the dawning of birth, I knew the time had arrived when I heard a sudden burst shatter – like a water balloon popping – and the live feed reappeared just as I saw my body drop down and slip into a stronghold where my whole being was squeezed inside the tunnel. There was no feeling I sensed, not even my mother's presence, as I had felt before.

As my uncoiled body inched deeper into the tunnel where time seemed non-existent, I was in awe of the all-powerful forces - inward and outward - harmoniously doing their work. The moment my head plunged through the passage into the outer world, there was a moment of shock. In that moment the life-giving source was severed and I was separated from my mother. For a flash of a second, I felt death, then suddenly a gasp of air filled my lungs activating all my senses, in which caused great wailing. When my eyes opened there was light and its brightness lit up inside my whole being, awakening everything to fullness. A new life for an old soul had arrived.

When the vision was finished and I was alone again in my thoughts. I realized how the womb places us in a restrained state where we become aware of our confinement, where we learn to adapt to our restrictions with total dependency. It was amazing to watch life emerge from that capsuled space and inhale the long-awaited breath that confirms our new life in this world ... a feeling of complete wholeness and infinite space of freedom follows. We're born with the need to seek freedom, independence, and self-survival. These are things I learned in the womb: the womb prepares us for the outer world and the outer world itself is a womb, preparing us for what comes next in what we know as life.

My name had already been chosen as Judith Ann ... and it seems few were even aware (including my mother) that on the evening of July 26th, 1953 there was a rare celestial event occurring on my birthing date. Perhaps only slightly rare by seconds, but those seconds hold recorded merit that holds a mysterious force I've sensed my entire life.

My mother had told me I was born on a full moon and I'd heard many stories all my life that more babies are born on a full moon. It didn't seem that amazing to me but years after my vision I

discovered there had been a total lunar eclipse on that evening – a Blood Moon - and it was recorded in history as one of the longest eclipses of the twentieth century. Discovering this knowledge seemed to undeniably electrify me. One rare heavenly moment ushered countless souls into the world and I was among them. It absolutely was an amazing realization that has helped me understand the many experiences in my lifetime.

I have never really known what has been deemed “a normal life.” What is normal? Is there a normal? Was there ever a normal? Well, whatever it was or is I have never fit there. This I knew from the beginning of my days.

Passion was a great teacher, a strong motivator, a powerful force. I discovered this inward gift when I took my very first step. It was scary and frightful, it was exciting and exhilarating, and the longer I hesitated and procrastinated, it was passion that motivated and inspired me to walk, to run, to climb, to ride a bike ... to roller skate and to dance ... it was all passion.

Reflecting back to where my first steps in life had taken me it's clear that passion brought my greatest challenges and accomplishments, yet, it also brought me to the depth of insufferable heartache ... the depth in which nearly destroyed me many times and very well could have crushed me had I not the endurance to survive. Over the course of life, endurance pushed me to the edge and the edge kept moving further away increasing my strength, testing my limit.

California is my birthing ground, in a small town located within driving distance to the Bay Area. My dad was born and raised in and around San Francisco, and at the time of my birth my family was living in Oakland. The small town of Lakeport is where my mother was born and her folks lived way out of town on a walnut orchard. She had taken my two brothers to grandma and grandpa's while she stayed there waiting for my birth. She told me she went to stay with her folks because she needed help in caring for my two brothers, but my dad remained in the city to work.

He was a Southern Pacific Railroad man nearly his entire life.

My parents were both quite young when they married and they married because she had conceived my oldest brother. My mother was 17 years of age when he was born on March 17th - Saint Patrick's Day. My dad wasn't much older, only 18 months and 8 days. How they ever came to cross paths is another story, but I believe their purpose played out. They surely were not soul mates, as time unveiled and left its lasting effect. I never really knew my dad, and after his passing in 1999 at 68 years old, I will never really know, and yet, I know enough. Time has shown me, taught me, given me understanding, and perhaps that's all we can really ever know of anyone.

Growing up in Oakland, California during the 1950's was often a scary place, and as time went on it grew more frightful. My family wasn't rich and we didn't have much but I didn't know any better because those around us were the same. I lived in a time when history was being written and everything was changing ... around my life and around the world. It was a time in history when the old ways were giving way to the new. By the time I was 5 or 6 we got our first black and white television. It was given to us by someone at my dad's work, though it was broken a lot, it was a portal that entered into our lives ... and a mind-expanding world exploded.

I remember whenever my dad had to work on the television, he would pull everything out and we kids would get inside pretending to be on TV. One or two of us would play out an act while the other watched ... sometimes we had friends join us. We laughed a lot then. Even though at first it was exciting for a while, it became no longer as interesting to me. Television didn't really become an important part of my home life until I was about 10 or 11 when we got our first colour television. I never cared much for black and white - and that has never changed - however, when colour arrived it brought a depth of reality that captivated me then and still continues to do so.

I remember just about all the shows I watched while growing up and I have contemplated on what influence they had in shaping my life. It's clear for me to see how I was drawn to certain programs more than others, and how these programs controlled the shaping of the way I thought and felt ... and how to live and love and to hate and judge in my personal life, in which a lot of it still lingers ... shows like:

Lassie (whom I fell in love with) / Father Knows Best / My Three Sons / Wyatt Earp / Bonanza / The Real McCoy's / Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet / The Beverly Hillbillies / Bewitched / The Andy Griffith Show / Ed Sullivan / Mister Ed (my most favorite show) to name a few.

Then there were the cartoons:

The Flintstone's / Yogi Bear / Tom and Jerry / Smokey the Bear / Bugs Bunny / Felix the Cat / The Jetsons (my favorite) just to mention some of my more memorable ones. I wasn't and never have been a cartoon fan.

TV didn't consume much of my time, either as a child or teen ... not even as an adult. As a child I would rather be outside climbing trees, running barefoot through the grass, or reading a book. I also liked to draw pictures and play with my dolls. I was fascinated by nature and spent time watching how insects live - I even had an ant farm. I was enthralled with butterflies after witnessing the first caterpillars' transition - which was so miraculous to me. And I was overjoyed when I got my first pair of roller skates - that brought me much pain and joy.

I remember how hard it was to learn how to skate but I refused to give up. My mom was at her wits end with all my injuries that she feared I would break a leg or something. But she couldn't get me to quit so she decided to take matters into her own hands ... she found a way to protect me. Her clever idea was to belt a pillow around my waist to protect my butt, and tied pads to my knees and elbows. I had to argue with her not to make me wear that stuff because I couldn't skate and feel free ... which made it much less joyful. She finally gave up and gave in and no matter how many times I fell down and cried my eyes out, I got back up. Every scrape, cut, or bruise did not diminish my self determination to master balance and grace, and I succeeded very well on those skates. When I was a little older, I went to a lot of skating rinks. Later still, I also learned skate boarding. I took a lot of knocks and cuts and bruises along the way but it was worth it. I was really good because I was addicted to that feeling ... that wonderful sense of freedom and independence flying through the air. And that is how it always felt to me whether it was skates, bikes, or horses - which all have caused physical injury - yet, I loved that feeling so much that the pain was always worth it.

As I grew older, I became closer to my brother Johnny, who came after Rusty, and before me. I was the youngest of three – and the only girl. I recall Rusty was more attentive to me when I was a baby through my toddler years, but as we all grew older, he didn't seem to take much interest in me as much as he did, and spent more time with other kids – as most siblings do, I suppose. Johnny and I found ourselves doing more things together by then, but we also fought a lot, a lot. Usually, I was the one who got in trouble most ... and perhaps rightly so. I don't remember my dad being around much back then ... a few camping trips and legions of belt whips. He seemed to be working all the time, as I was told, and I really didn't mind him not being around ... truth is, I felt more of a sense of relief.

Whenever my dad was present it felt dark and gloomy. He didn't radiate with much positive energy. I didn't realize until later in life just how unhappy he was. My mom on other hand found things to keep her busy and happy apart from him. She was very active in social things like the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, PTA and other activities such as Church events. She made me join the Brownies against my resistance, until I was too old to remain there, and then I had to argue again not to join the Girls Scouts ... in which I won. She was dedicatedly buried in her Church doctrine and ingrained in us kids the fear of God. She was, after all, our Sunday School Teacher at the local Presbyterian Church. I do remember how she loved the holidays, and what I remember most is Halloween. She got such a thrill scaring the kids at our front door with all the sound effects and hanging ghost and goblins. She tried to bring fun and adventure into our lives.

What I remember most fondly, though, are the long walks to school and back. As I entered kindergarten, through my first grade, our mom walked us kids back and forth. When I entered the second grade it became my brother's responsibility. Then Rusty got sent to a special school and took a bus. By the third grade Johnny found a friend to walk with and I had to walk with a neighbor girl that never even played with me. Eventually her family moved under horrible circumstances and by then my mom let me walk alone.

It wasn't until I was walking alone that sometimes I would hear words in my head, like thoughts but not my thoughts. I would hear things like "look over here" and my head would turn to see a frog sitting on a fence post staring at me with intense beady little eyes, slightly hidden in the landscape of someone's front yard. My thought would respond in excitement, "Hi little froggy, I won't hurt you," streamed from my mind with the wonderment of joy as I gazed upon it. Other times I might suddenly hear in my head, "Pick me, pick me," as I would stop to admire the flowers, thinking to myself to take a few pretty one's home to my mom. The more I opened up to this communication the more it opened up to me.

By then, I already knew that some kids had an imagery friend, and I often wondered if that is what it was. As time went on, however, the voice became a natural communication within as I saw the others out grow their imaginations. They became conformed to the shaping and molding they were taught. They learned to close that door to what they were told was not reality. I did not close that door, and it remained my reality throughout my life.

The trip to school began to take on a whole new adventure when my growing relationship with Jesus took hold ... at least this is what I came to eventually refer to as the voice within. My mom had always taught me that Jesus is always with us, and the Holy Spirit shall guide us and protect

us. I was firmly grounded in her religious beliefs, and it is due to this that my path has walked in and out of the Lord's chamber. My dad, having a Catholic upbringing, refused to go to church, and from my earliest memories he had a very negative outlook on church ... any church, but particularly he had a deep resentment toward the Roman Catholic Church.

Over the course of my life Jesus has had a powerful impact. My challenges in life seemed to always be a conflict between this powerful force and the darkness that lingered in and around my presence. If there was an imaginary friend it was Jesus and we spent a lot of time exploring life together. It was easier to say it was Jesus, although I really didn't know, but the voice taught me memorable lessons, showed me amazing realities, and brought me a deeper awareness to the world in a way that most could not perceive. Imaginary or not - and I believe not - my life was guided and protected.

The voice was both a friend and a teacher and sometimes I argued with it when I wanted something and didn't get it. That was one of the hardest things to learn ... we don't get everything we want in this life ... and for good reason. When I would feel something was not fair, or I couldn't understand the terrible acts in the world, the voice would reveal the power of compassion and faith. I had a deeper communication in my childhood days but I have not totally lost the gift to listen and communicate with nature. I live daily in the presence of its wisdom, among the chaos and harmony.

I can still peer upward into the sky and watch the native crows glide overhead, feeling their sense of freedom from fear as they become the predator and not the prey ... but they can't stay in the air forever.

There is joy and sorrow in nature ... in all of life ... and when I began to communicate with trees, I discovered old ones behold many secrets. Things seemed so much simpler as a child, and it is the child within that still yearns to touch and feel nature's voice and vibes.

I was a fearless girl always finding a new challenge. One summer day between Kindergarten and First Grade I had a lot time to play, and while sitting in the backyard I saw a black and grey cat walking along the fence. A few days later the cat walked by again and in my mind, I thought to myself "that looks like fun". So, like a cat I learned to walk along the rows of fences that overlooked others' backyards, balancing my weight on a two by four board. I fell a few times and got yelled at from neighbors a few times too, and then I finally got caught. My mom put an end to that.

I then turned to climbing trees. I loved to climb trees. I also hated wearing shoes and my mom was always yelling at me to put on my shoes. Whenever I could get away with it, I took those shoes off. My feet were pretty tough and it didn't hurt to climb a tree barefoot or run across the graveled driveway that weaved around the apartment complex where we lived. I just loved to feel the ground with my own skin and I still go barefoot as often as I can.

The complex where we lived was situated at the end of a block-long cul-de-sac. There were rows of two-story 4plex units lined both sides of the street where cars parked along the sidewalk. Our 4plex was at the end in the circle where cars turned around, right next to the narrow-graveled driveway leading to the backyards and storage buildings. We lived in the lower unit where the cars

drove by our bedroom window. The upper units had concrete stairs in the front and back going up to tiny patios. The upper units had a garbage shoot in the back that dropped down into an underground container that on some days stunk very bad. The lower units had a back door that went out to the sidewalk that traveled along the backside of the apartments. There was wood fencing separating the homes and businesses on the other side.

Each 4plex had a small backyard, some with green grass and flowers and others with brown weeds and dead bushes. Some areas in the complex were not very clean or kept up but a few had large foliage and big shade trees ... and there was one spot that had an arbor with dangling grape vines ... and many times I filled my pockets.

The back sidewalk had a pathway between each building leading to the front sidewalk along the street-lined parked cars. The complex was encased by older homes with personality in some parts and newer homes that lacked character in others, and there was one side where businesses were off the business main street. If I walked far enough, I could hear the hustle and bustle of traffic noise. Sometimes it was fun to peek through and watch the people buzzing about. Those sidewalks are where I learned to roller skate, to play hopscotch, ride my bicycle, and explore nature - it's also where I would take long walks through the neighborhood to arrive at my favorite hiding places, where I played alone with my dolls.

We lived in a small two-bedroom unit with one tiny bathroom, but we seemed to have all managed okay ... 'managed' being the key word. There are countless memories of not-so-great times, as with most kids growing up, I suppose. It didn't help matters that my two brothers and I had to share a small bedroom, with the boys sleeping in a bunkbed and I on a twin mattress laying on the floor ... with a narrow path between them. Memories of that place still hold vivid images of my dad and his whipping belt. I remember that leather whip up to the age of 13, upon lesser occasions.

My dad was a hardworking, old school, railroad man, with a strict Catholic upbringing. His lifestyle was city living, and as a young boy he was raised mostly by the Nuns. His father died soon after his birth so he never knew him, but his mother remarried - and as the story be told - her new husband wasn't the daddy type. In the days of his youth, he was streetwise, having spent much of his life in San Francisco and Oakland, CA. Having lived in the same environment I too learned to be streetwise ... for survival's sake. His mother also died young, when I was too young to remember her.

My mom had never worked a day until us kids were grown up and out of the house. It was a great disadvantage that she had little education or responsibilities when the divorce came ... and she crumbled into pieces. It shouldn't have been a surprise ... they were never truly ever happy together and as I got older, I wondered why they accepted a fate of an unloving relationship for 22 years. After the divorce my dad remarried and one day, much later, I asked the question of 'why' he stayed so long. He told me it was for the sake of us children. He confessed his commitment that until the last of us kids left home, he would honour his responsibility. He kept his 'self-made' promise and he did exactly as he had intended ... leaving without guilt, but he didn't just leave my mom, he left my brothers and I too. It wasn't a big disappointment for us kids but I remember my mom was extremely devastated, nearly suicidal. I suppose my fear of him at that point had turned to hate and blame - especially seeing how it affected my mom - in which later him and I had

cleared the air before his passing. He suffered years from COPD after smoking two packs of cigarettes a day practically his entire life, and continued to puff on them while hooked up to an oxygen tank.

Looking back on my mother's life - her entire life - I can truly understand what she must have given up to start motherhood and marriage so young. I know because it happened to me. She made the best of what she could from that part of her life, but her life was much better after he was no longer around. The emotional weight she carried to raise us and to survive the aftermath ended up the best thing that ever happened to her. I know she loved us despite it all ... and although my dad had nearly disappeared from my life in the latter days, my mom was always there.

My mother knew my dad had a temper and she tried to protect us from that. Perhaps that's why my dad went straight for the belt ... he knew her soft tactics just didn't work. It was easy to manipulate mom, she had a compassionate heart, but she also just wasn't paying enough attention at times. It was easy to get away with things when she was busy with a project like sewing or crafts or school events ... which made it all the more tempting for us to slip away for hours without being missed. There was, nonetheless, one rule we paid attention to because we all found out the painful consequences of disobeying that one. My dad had a thing about a sit-down family dinner that for half my life I never fully understood, until one day him and I talked about that ... among many other things.

I was stunned to realize that he really was a product of the Roman Catholic Church, and whenever he referred to 'old school' he was referring to his days having been raised by the Nuns. The Nuns made him a rules man with a firm rod and that's how he raised us. And even though he despised the religion and never stepped a foot into a Cathedral during my life (the rare exception was attending his mother's funeral), still, that seed had been deeply rooted in him.

He had a lot of those old school ways and he was quite firm about issuing warnings, that if ignored, would be cause for punishment. None of us ever wanted that belt, so we'd better be sitting at the kitchen table, all washed up by 5:30pm or someone was going to get it. That was our daily program ... and we lived by that just about every night ... until I left home at 15 years old. He didn't like us to chatter at the table either so we weren't to speak. Mom and dad spoke to each other and we listened. Sometimes they would ask a question and we would answer. We were taught to be well mannered, one might say, and when dinner was done, we all got up and went our way. Usually, mom to clean up the dishes while us kids went to do homework or read a book and dad to rest or watch a little television.

My dad was the punisher and we all knew that. We also knew that mom could not protect us and for a while she kept our troubles at home from him, to spare us the belt. But somehow those secrets had a way of coming out and she paid the price for us. Eventually she refused to keep our secrets and reported every misbehaved act we committed. I could see she felt bad for us but all the same we'd feel mad at for her telling. You could see in her aching eyes that she hurt for us, even pleaded for us, but eventually her pleading ceased and her words only reflected support for him and his authority. But if she got the chance, she would try to comfort us in private, and if not, we'd suffer alone.

It's very clear now that she found an escape in her life by being active in projects that gave her some sense of worthiness and inner pride, because she never seemed good enough for my dad. He constantly degraded her as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother. She cried a lot. When we got our first television she sat and watched it all day; her addiction to Soap Operas became an obsession ... an escape for her over the long years ahead.

She also started to take long afternoon naps and that also gave us kid's time to roam about and get into trouble ... although the older we got the wiser we became ... and sneakier. I know now that her bouts of long naps were from depression but I never realized that then, not even when I was in High School. I didn't come to fully understand this until I was much older ... after their marriage had dissolved. But it wasn't just my mom that I came to see the way things were, it also was my dad. I realized why he wasn't around much ... he never did want a family ... at least not ours. He didn't seem to have a choice, as he saw it, and lived for the day he'd be free.

If one were to ask me what I remember most between those four walls in which we all managed to dwell, it would be all the bickering and fighting ... and not only between my brothers and myself but between my mom and dad. He was angry a lot and he cussed a lot. His verbal abuse toward her was ear piercing, followed by slamming doors. It was usually my mother crying behind one door and my dad disappearing out the other. Sometimes he would take us with him and we'd go somewhere clean, somewhere to eat a good meal, as he put it. She certainly wasn't the best cook, and cleaning was undeniably not her thing ... as it wasn't her thing her entire life. If I had to count how many times my dad complained disgustedly about her inedible cooking and ghastly lack of cleaning skills, I don't think I could.

I've tried to retain as many good memories of childhood as possible, not blocking the reality of how life wasn't always wonderful ... the lows probably outweigh the highs but there were highs and it is these I enjoy to ponder. Occasionally I have images flash by of times I laughed and loved at birthday parties, holidays, stuff like that, and other fascinating things life shared. One of those times was when mom took us to Playland in San Francisco. I don't remember how many times we went but I remember it was 'The Fun House' where I spent most of my time while there. I loved to go down that high as a mountain wooden slide, with waves of dips hanging tightly to a gunny sack. It seemed the walk to reach the top was like steps to heaven. I really enjoyed Playland and it was an experience I wanted to share with my own children, but it closed in 1972 and they never got to see it ... but it shall forever remain in my memories.

There was a lot of funny stuff at Playland and it was quite an entertaining experience. I remember the first time I entered the 'The Fun House.' I was wearing a pretty dress that day, with ribbons in my hair. No one had warned me what to expect and I found myself caught in the most embarrassing moment. My face must have turned beet red after I walked through the door and took a few steps in, then instantly froze at the sound a loud swoosh beneath me. A huge gush of air blew my dress up like a balloon over my head and I remember I grabbed the hems of my dress and quickly pulled it down ... then ran until I was over the vent below. I heard bursts of laughter and turned to see some boys staring at me, like they had been waiting for that moment to happen. Even my brothers were giggling, and mom had a grin. How could I ever forget my very first embarrassment? That would be like forgetting your very first kiss!

Such was life with its scattered memories of times past. What I remember most is the times I escaped from within those four walls and ventured to the outside world. Every new discovery enthralled me. When I was about five or six, one day I was playing with my dolls under the grove of trees in the backyard, where a huge rock sat among some wild flowers and patches of dirt. I'd taken a blanket and spread it out, then sat my dolls next to me and where I would read my books to them. I had played there countless times, but on that day something extraordinary happened.

I was leaning against the trunk of the largest tree and humming a happy tune, as I loved to do, and my dolls were dancing to the movement of my swaying arms, as they loved to do, when a deep voice entered my thoughts and the words, "Come up and sway with me," and suddenly my humming froze. For a moment I sat thinking about it, and I began to visualize climbing up, but I heard my mother's warning echoing inside my head and I was scared. My mom let me climb trees if they weren't too tall. She had, however, pointed to that tree several times, cementing the fear that I could break my neck – or at the least get a good belt whipping – if I attempted it.

After all the thoughts ran through my head, I mumbled, "Are you talking to me tree?"

It spoke again inside my head, "Yes, you little girl".

Instantly I thought, "I can't!" It didn't speak back as if it knew I was scared. I waited awhile, staring high up its trunk, thinking what it might feel like to swing and sway on its limbs. Then I gathered my dolls and things and ran into the apartment. I didn't tell anyone because they would have just laughed at me, or called me crazy. These things were my secrets ... secrets I have mostly lived alone with for much of my life. Some I have shared with others upon occasion.

The next day I wandered back out to that tree and I sat up against its trunk and closed my eyes. I felt a gentle breeze wafted up as I heard the rattling of its leaves, some came drifting to the ground around me. I didn't hear it speak then but I felt its presence, as I had never felt it before. Day after day I went to sit with the tree and upon another day it spoke to me again.

"I'll keep you safe," it kindly said, "I'll teach you things," it went on. "Come up, come up and see what I see," it kept resounding its tempting invitation within. On that day my mom was napping and brothers were in school, and my ever-growing desire had consumed me ... so I attempted to climb up. I had to get something to stand on to reach the lower limb and found a metal bucket. I stretched my arms as high as I could and managed to grab a hold of a lower limb. Like monkey bars I swung my legs around the limb and then there I was perched in that tree. It wasn't far enough off the ground to get too hurt even if I did fall, and I felt safe bouncing up and down on that limb, humming and singing and feeling part of its life force ... and the tree felt happy too.

Whenever I could sneak out when mom was napping, and my brothers weren't around to tell, I went to the tree and each time the tree would encourage me to climb higher. Every now and then I got a little braver and climb a little higher until I could see down the long stretch of endless homes behind our complex. My favorite thing to do was bounce on the limbs like I was riding a horse, galloping through the sky, singing songs. I had to climb out farther away from the trunk to where the limbs would be flexible enough to sway.

One day the tree said “It wasn’t always this way,” as I gazed from high at the massive population spread before my eyes. “It used to be groves of trees that went for miles, my family spreading their roots,” I heard it say. As it spoke, I closed my eyes and I could see the vision of it in my mind. I felt its sadness as it got squished in among the buildings, but then it said, “At least they didn’t chop me down like the others ... a few of us were spared.” The tree then explained to me that when the roots die their energy is absorbed into the soil, and it is through the soil that connects all life as one. I didn’t completely comprehend then but what I remember receiving from that conversation is the awareness that there is an indestructible spirit of unity - Not only trees but all of nature - according to their kind.

These words, “according to their kind,” are an amazing seed of wisdom.

As I got over my fear of going higher, I began to creep up to the top where I could almost see over the two-story roofs. I had become quite content on the higher branches, self-assured, as I scooted out farther and farther to obtain a better bounce of limberness. When the limbs would lift me higher it felt as if I could touch the clouds in the sky. “Higher, Higher,” I would gasp with thrilling passion.

There was a true bond developing between us and I came to trust the tree with my life. Every time I felt scared - and it was both scary and adventurous - it comforted me with assurance that I would not be harmed. The more trusting I became the more the tree seemed happy ... and I felt it hadn’t been happy in a very long time. One day I was way up high and I began to crawl out a limb that I hadn’t been on and I heard the tree urging me, “Not that one,” but I kept going anyway. It was the only limb that didn’t have branches blocking most of my view and I really wanted to see farther. “Not that one!” it continued to repeat with urgency, and I thought to myself “Yes, this one.” The farther I crawled out on that limb the louder the tree got inside my head nearly screaming, “NOT THAT ONE!!!” I kept going until I reached the point where I could bounce upward to a clearer view and I got very excited to have done it ... done what I wanted to do for so long. “See!” I said “I can do it!!” The tree was silent as I slipped into my imaginary world bouncing up and down, flying through the sky. There were a flock of birds flying by and it felt as if I were beside them flapping my wings, as I watched them disappear into a big fluffy white cloud.

The feeling had captivated me to where I didn’t heed the trees warning, even when I heard the first sound of a crack. As I swung upward once again, the limb came down with a loud snap and in an instant, I felt my body in a freefall. I remember taking a big gasp of air and tightly closing my eyes ... frozen in time. It happened so fast yet it felt so slow as if arms had caught me in midair, gently lowered me to the ground. When I opened my eyes, I was sitting upright at the base of the tree trunk and there were broken twigs and leaves sprawled about. I was dazed and petrified and bewildered but I wasn’t hurt ... not even a scratch. I sat there a few moments in a fog and when I realized what had happened, I ran madly toward our apartment in a near state of tearful shock.

My mom had just woken up as I came dashing through the back door, breathless and pale. She responded with concern, seeing I was on verge of tears. I confessed to her what I had done and told her what had happened. Immediately she began to look me over for evidence that my story was true, yet she could find none ... not even a scratch. She then insisted I must have been dreaming. I begged her to go look, and she agreed to my pleas. We went out to the tree and she looked all around, she looked up, and she looked at me asking, “What am I supposed to see?” I

tried to convince her it was real, pointing out the freshly broken twigs and leaves scattered about, but the limb did not snap completely off, therefore she could not see it hanging way up high. She insisted it was the wind that had scattered the debris, saying it was impossible that I fell.

I got in double-trouble for admitting I climbed the tree and in trouble for being accused of lying. That was the last time I climbed that tree, but I spent many hours thereafter in its company. I knew then that the tree was warning me of its limb being weak, but as it had promised it kept me safe – but it also did much more. It gave me the courage all through my life to have absolute faith. I'm not sure one could ever forget such a powerful faith as that.

It was a monumental experience - A gift of the Spirit. Having had this experience instilled within me – at a very young age – the knowing of an all-powerful force which sealed my faith. Miracles are real - undeniable acts of God beyond any doubt. What I experienced during that time is something I would recall throughout my life. It has been a strong reminder of the ever-present force. I didn't always listen to the voice, and many a time that '*symbolic*' limb has snapped and my life felt it was in freefall. Many a time those invisible arms have caught me in midair, taking me to safety.

It seemed, thereafter, the voice became quiet when winter set in. Most of my time was spent indoors. There was school and church and growing up, and a couple of years later, during summer vacation, my brother Rusty had invited me a time or two to play hide and seek with him and his friends. They'd all gather together behind the complex where the storage buildings were. Rusty was really good at the game. I remember him holding my hand and when the other kid began to count, all the kids would scatter. We'd run hand in hand so fast I could hardly keep up with him and he'd always find a good place to hide. Sometimes we hid in the bushes or behind a tree but on this one particular day he didn't grab my hand ... he just took off running. I took off running behind him but he was much faster than I and he ran toward one of the storage buildings. I saw the door fling open as he disappeared inside, and just as I approached the doorway, he was running back out, pushing me away, closing the door quickly behind him.

The look on his face was one of horror as he screamed, "Go get mom!!" I kept asking why but he just kept screaming, "Go get mom!!" Finally, I ran as fast as I could down the gravel driveway. When I reached our apartment, I ran inside screaming that Rusty needed her, pointing down to the storage building, gasping for air. Thinking he was hurt, she yelled "Stay here," and then dashed out running. She soon returned with Rusty and then I knew what happened ... a man had hung himself in there.

As I watched out the window of our bedroom - stretched across the top bunk to get a clearer view outside – I saw folks running toward the building. Not long after I heard sirens coming. My mother dashed out to point them in the right direction. It felt very frightening and quite disturbing to me. Rusty didn't say a word. He went back outside to watch. When Johnny got home things had pretty much cleared out, and he was rather disappointed that he missed all the excitement.

Later that night I heard Rusty whispering to Johnny in the bedroom as to what he'd seen. I heard him detailing how the man's neck was stretched like a chicken and his body was a creepy blue, describing how his feet dangled only inches to the floor ... and then I heard him say the smell was

so gross it made him gag to vomit. Listening to his horrifying story conjured up all kinds of disturbing images that consumed my mind the entire night. The next day we learned the man was the father of the little girl who had once walked to school with me. Then the story appeared in the newspaper, which said her dad had left a suicide note stating why he took his own life – he had lost his job.

The neighbors gossiped about him saying it was just a shame. A short while later the girl's family moved away. It was a sad reality of the times and a disturbing reality I have never forgotten. I believe it is because of this experience that in my darkest times I am reminded of it, because at times I needed something at that level of inner strength to rise up and reawaken my senses to just how precious life is. The darkness that overshadowed that unforgettable day was a future lamppost that help guide my way - as odd that may be.

It was right after this tragedy when my mother began to really hammer away with her warnings of safety. Over and over she had ingrained in me to never talk to strangers, saying they prey on little girls like me. I felt a sense of fear in her words and I firmly obeyed them, except one day, for some strange reason, I ignored them. She had always told me to run if anyone tried to get close to me, and I should have listened.

I just don't know why I didn't listen on that day, other than perhaps I was trying to be a showoff. It began as just another day that I would meet up with different girl along the way to school, and we'd skip together sharing funny stories. By then I was in the second grade, and as we were walking to school early that morning, chatting and laughing, a car pulled alongside the curb. We kept walking on our way as the car slowly eased beside us. We began to walk faster. I sensed my friends fear, and then I heard a soft-spoken man holler, "Can you help me please?" We both turned around to look at him and he was leaning over the passenger's seat speaking out the window. "I won't hurt you," he said, "I'm lost." His gentle eyes were as soft as his voice.

My friend took my hand and whispered "Let's run," and I tugged her to stop.

"He's lost," I said.

She tugged at my arm again, warning me, "We're not supposed to talk to strangers." Her eyes were squinted with that pinch of panic darting at me.

I told her to stay there and I'd see if I could help him, whispering, "If he tries to grab me, start screaming." Slowly walking toward the car, I kept my distance, noticing he had a map spread open across the passenger's seat. He was pointing to it as if to show me where he was trying to go. I took a few more steps a little closer to see, and that's when he pulled the map away to expose his nakedness. When I saw his hand stroking himself between his legs, I screamed loudly and shot off like an arrow. I grabbed my friends' hand and we both flew like the wind ... screaming and screaming ... as the man swiftly raced away.

That one brief moment was seared into my memory. For many years thereafter it disturbed me. I had to bury that image deep within, by never talking about it. I never told anyone, not even the girl who walked with me. I could not tell anyone, out of fear that I would get in trouble and face my

dad's leather belt. However, this was not my last creepy encounter with such a dreadful sight, and under much more frightening circumstances.

Anyhow, I decided at that point to take up with a group of kids that Johnny walked with, but they went a different way than I had, and I enjoyed so much the path I took down through the older neighborhood, where it was more peaceful (or rather had been). I did feel much safer among the group, along the wider streets, spacious walkways and busier activity. It gave me a sense that others were watching over me ... although I did not enjoy the scenery at all. It did, however, heighten my awareness to the existence of real-life fears. And fear was beginning to abound in those days.

School was not, and never was a fun place for me. From the first to the third grade it was rather scary, actually, because there were always fire drills and bomb drills going off. The fire drills sent everyone rushing out onto the playground, class by class, row by row, counting every head. The bomb drills taught us to jump under our desks and roll into a ball. The sirens were frightening, chilling to the core. The world platform was at an unsteady time with the cold war brewing. We watched countless black and white films that horrified me with depictions of nuclear destruction, leaving everything in its wake dead, deformed and suffering. The films were to teach us how to protect ourselves from such horror ... as if 'Duck and Cover' under our desk possibly could. It seemed to me to be a false security, as it must have been for others as well. The only thing it taught me was the depth of a fear I had not known and each time I ducked and covered, my faith leapt into the arms of my protector ... the only protector I knew.

Many of those school day memories are total blanks, but those drills were riveted into me ... penetrated into every fiber. It's a fear that once activated stays alive forever. But it didn't seem to activate with all. Most kids went on without a care. I, on the other hand, took life more seriously. Serious taught me the value of life.

Another thorn from those days was my dislike for the teachers ... all three of them. I have long forgotten their names and faces, but what they planted took strong root. I discovered my first year of school that all the other kids wrote with their right hand. I didn't know the difference until then. That was one of my first great challenges out in the world. Starting school was very much frightening for me, even if there were no sirens.

I was different than the other kids in my classes because I was left-handed. My teachers told me it wasn't normal and they all tried very diligently to force me into writing with my right hand. Feeling intimidated and embarrassed of my abnormality, I tried so hard to please them, but I could not convert. Frustrated at times, they pushed me to tears before deeming me hopeless. It left me with a feeling that maybe something was wrong with me – I certainly never felt like I fit in with other kids, and even less so when some teased me about it.

I felt scared that I too would be sent to the special school where Rusty had to go. It made me all the more determined to show them I was just as normal and smart as anyone else. Eventually they let me be, and though I disliked them for their meanness, I believe their pressure actually forced me into proving I was normal too. As I grew older, left-hand issues became less of an issue ... although I've heard all the jokes and nicknames, such as south paw. I later discovered that both

my brothers were left-handed, but by the same force as myself, they both were able to convert to their right hand, in which I didn't learn until many decades later.

Rusty had deeper issues with his learning disability and was transferred to a Special Education school. After that it seemed he wasn't around much anymore. It wasn't until much later in life that he became aware he suffered from dyslexia. Had they known back then what his issue was they may have better helped him, but as it was, he was presumed to be mentally disabled. It was at this point that Rusty developed a world of his own. He had found new friends at his new school that did not judge him and ridicule him as the other kids had. He soon spent most of his time with them, and it was then that Johnny and I began to grow closer. Like me, he didn't really enjoy hanging with the neighborhood kids. We all walked to school and back, but other than that we stayed pretty much to ourselves. At school we both had some friends, but they lived too far away.

On the weekends Johnny and I hung out together, we'd wander around the neighborhood and took long strolls downtown slipping in and out of shops, filled with wishes of things we could never have. And we were kind of mischief at times, playing tricks on people. My favorite trick was fooling people into thinking Johnny and I were twins. We looked so much alike that a lot of people asked if we were twins. There was a year and half age difference between all of us kids but Rusty didn't look anything like us. We all had mom's blond hair, but Rusty had super curly/kinky hair, like the black boy's afro. He also had mom's blue eyes, whereas Johnny and I had dad's dark brown. It's odd that none of us inherited dad's black hair.

It was interesting how people reacted when they thought Johnny and I were twins. I got such a delight from it, but Johnny just got a laugh at how stupid people are. He'd play along just for me but for me it was much deeper. To Johnny it was a game, but it gave me a sense of wholeness, like something just felt natural about being a twin. After a while Johnny grew tired of pretending and wanted to stop playing the game. I begged him to continue but he firmly refused. When the twin's game was over, I felt a part of me had died. I could never understand why I felt such a strong bond as that, yet it was a bond I carried with me as if it had always been a part of me. And whenever I had contact with twins, I got both an excitement stirred within, that also brought a strange remorse.

It wasn't all fun on the downtown streets of Oakland, California in the early 1950's. We knew it was a dangerous place and we watched out for each other. You learn to become more aware of the people around you and what they're doing. You don't stand too close to the curb, especially at corners ... or ever walk alone ... and you don't talk to strangers. I learned to keep from having eye contact while being alert all around me – like a smart little mouse. I was a quick learner to become street smart.

I remember one day Johnny and I were standing on the corner at an intersection with a small group of strangers waiting for the light to turn green. I was glancing around at the people, holding Johnny's hand, when I saw two other kids standing at the edge of the curb behind us. The little girl had blond hair and was taller than the boy who also had blond hair, but he was wearing a hat. The girl looked to be about my age, about 8 or so, and the boy a little younger. They didn't look like they were with anyone and I wondered if they were waiting for someone, though I sensed a feeling of nervousness about them as they huddled together. The longer I watched them they noticed me staring and although no smiles were exchanged, for a few seconds our eyes locked and it was like

our souls touched, then the light turned green and everyone scattered across the street. People were pushing forward and Johnny was moving swiftly with me in tow. I quickly looked back only to see them disappear into a car. In my thoughts I figured they were their waiting to be picked up and I didn't give it another thought.

A few days later their faces were flashing across the television news as having been missing. When I told my mom that I saw them on the corner downtown with Johnny a few days earlier, she replied "You're lucky it wasn't you." After that she restricted us from going downtown by ourselves anymore. Then a few days later she told us those two children were found dead but she did not reveal the gory details. I remember the fear she tried to instill in me, saying how the devil was lurking everywhere and how he preys on little children. But I remember what I felt most was an awful sadness, not fear, and that night I cried in my prayers for them.

All my life my mother has expressed the devil and demons but no matter how much she expressed the evil of Satan, I never really was scared, and less so as I grew older. It wasn't so much the unseen forces that scared me as it was the things seen, and the things seen in my life have been a challenge to confront, to endure, and to conquer, which is what I have had to do and done.

Why I had seen the boy and girl that day has always disturbed me. We exchanged a fleeting glance which created a lifetime memory that has felt like our souls connected somehow. After that I became evermore Street-Wise, as well as Spirit-Wise.

Indeed, I was no stranger to the word 'demons' as my mother had made it all too real that 'they' most assuredly live among us. She taught me that they can whisper in your ear and tell you to do bad things like lie and be naughty. I was aware of many things from a very early age, and when I would hear those whispers, I would order them to leave, and they would leave. But it was much later in life when the hauntings of my childhood teachings proved to be my future pillars of strength.

As time wore on by the time and I was 10ish, everything thing in the neighborhood began to change. Crime was escalating and parents feared for their children. White folks were fleeing the neighborhood as fast as the black folks started moving in. I suppose the reality hadn't been fully grasped until one frightful evening. My mom would always take us once a month to the Church Potluck. She seemed to enjoy preparing different dishes and socializing. Most always we walked to the potluck dinner as dad worked the nightshift at the railyard and had the car. My brothers seemed to be able to escape these trips from time to time but I could never get out of one. Our walks came to a sudden halt after the fear of that night of terror which left us both scared breathless.

The trip to the Church that evening was not just another Potluck night. I was a little bit jittery because mom and I were doing a song and dance routine to promote starting a talent show. The idea was received with great excitement. Afterward, on our way home, I was chatting up a storm about how fun it was and wanting to do it again. As I skipped along holding her hand, she kept tugging my hand to stop pulling her arm. Then I felt a sharp jerk that startled me and she suddenly made the hush sound several times. In an instant, I became quietly scared. I could see from her expression that we were in danger as her pace stepped up. I whispered, "What's wrong mommy," and she hushed me again. Then she whispered, "Listen", and my ears could hear footsteps drawing

closer behind us. She started walking faster and the footsteps started walking faster. She quickly turned her head to look back and in a moment of frantic terror, we began to run. My little legs were going so fast as she held my hand tightly that it felt like my heart was beating madly.

I began to scream and scream until I was breathless, and by the time we were almost home we didn't hear or see the man any longer, assuming he'd been scared off. Our pace slowed down a block away from home and we swiftly dashed inside. My mom bolted the door and frantically checked all the window locks. My brothers were asking what was wrong while I shook in tears, then my dad came out of the bedroom yelling, "What the hell is going on?" My mom was shaking too, and in her breathlessness, she tried to tell him a black man had chased us home. He became very upset and began to curse angrily, ready to chase this man down. She told him we scared the man off.

My dad's dislike for black folks was never concealed, and it ran deeper than that, yet I never knew why. After everything seemed to settle down, we all retired for the night. The next morning my mom noticed through the kitchen window that half the clothes on the backyard clothesline were missing – she had forgotten to remove them before we had left for the Potluck. In her dismay she hurried out back to discover someone had taken all dad's clothes. My father was furious at her. We all believed it must have been that man. The thought that he knew where we lived chilled me, as it did my mother, but I think my dad's reaction left her emotionally frozen ... it was a costly loss. Potluck night was never the same after that. If dad had the car, we just didn't go ... although occasionally one of the other members would take us.

My mom helped organize the daytime Talent Show that ran through the summer break. It became a family fun event. Church members would show their talents on a small stage in the room where the potluck dinners took place. At first a small group of Church members attended to watch, then in time more folks began to come. Many participated by doing standup comedy, and some danced, played music or sang, but my mom loved monologs. She taught me how to do monologs and we spent countless hours practicing our skits. She always made costumes for us to wear for each show. I think she enjoyed being on stage entertaining.

This was a very bonding period for us and I really enjoyed doing them. My brothers weren't that interested and I haven't a single memory of them being present to even watch the shows. Not a one – though I may just not remember. It was never a disappointment to me that my dad took absolutely zero interest in anything to do with our Church. I understood that at a very early age. My mother accepted it without question and I can't recall one argument they may have had regarding religion. She was free to raise us as she saw fit in this department and she raised us a Presbyterian.

When school started back up, the Talent Show came to an end. It wasn't long after that when the neighborhood had taken on an entirely different feeling, when scarcely any white folks remained. It became clear that our family was one among only a few still left in the neighborhood. What once was an all-white community slowly faded, first it became a mixed community and then mostly it was an all-black community. It wasn't too bad during the mixed stage. There were some kids that had negative attitudes and some not, with both white and blacks. I tried to get along with everyone but found it wasn't much different than how the white kids acted. I discovered people are people

no matter the color. Rusty seemed to get along pretty good with the black kids – better than Johnny or myself.

There came a time when Rusty had a falling out with his new founded black friends when he finally saw for himself how they harassed me. I tried to tell him but he said they were harmless and just to ignore them. I didn't think he really believed me. I had already become very scared of two boys he ran with, not only because they looked mean, but they called me names like white patty and white trash. I did try to avoid them as much as possible, but there were times I screamed at them to shut up. Rusty had warned me I shouldn't say anything to rouse them but that didn't work.

I certainly would never have called them niggers like my dad spoke of the blacks because I was told they'd beat me up. I didn't even like referring to them as negros. I had a difficult time back then because I didn't know what term to use. I started referring to blacks as colored people. I suppose the colored boys didn't like me ignoring their insults, and they decided to take things to the next level. The most horrible images have remained with me ever since, the sight of them flipping their eyelids back while making boogie sounds to scare me, which indeed I was terrified. They'd laugh so hard their heckling echoed through the street as they ran behind me while I screamed insanely, running as fast as I could. The sound of their voices yelling, "We're gonna get you," filled me with fear ... but I never was caught. They did it over and over when no one was around to see but one day Rusty saw. He ran to my defense and told me go home. Perhaps he realized then just how cruel and mean these friends of his really were.

I had seen several colored boys around but hadn't seen a colored girl in the neighborhood. Then one day I was walking down the sidewalk and I saw a family moving in down the street, just where the complex entrance started and the older homes lined the main road. I used to walk around the cul-de-sac all the way down to that road and then back around again, which was as far as my mother would let me go. On that afternoon I saw a huge moving truck parked at the house right at the end of our street. I sat down on the curb and watched several colored men unload the huge truck, but I didn't see any kids or anyone else.

My curiosity had got the best of me, and this house was close enough that I could keep an eye on it, but I had not ever seen anyone come or go. Then one day I saw two new colored boys with a colored girl walking down our street, but they were on the other side of the cul-de-sac. The girl looked at me and our eyes briefly met. I saw her again when I was out walking. She was sitting on the front steps of her house and I got a bit excited, and a little nervous.

I disobeyed my mom that day and instead of turning around and walking back around the cul-de-sac, I decided to take a chance. I casually walked across the street toward her house, pretending that I was just passing by. I paused for moment next to the picket fence and admired the rose vines overgrowing. I glanced at her but she had her head hanging down so I walked a little more along the fence to where I was standing at the gate.

When I looked up at her sitting alone, she noticed me and smiled. I smiled back and said "Hi," then continued to walk on. She leaped from the stairs and dashed to the gate and said hi back. I turned to look at her and she blurted out, "My name is Mary, what's yours?" We got to talking a

bit when she invited me to come in ... saying no one else was home. She must have sensed my apprehension to accept her invitation and assured me it was ok.

I felt eerie as we wandered through the living room and up the stairs to her bedroom. The hallway was dark and it felt kind of spooky. We sat on the floor and shared stories of where they came from and stuff like that. We both admitted our fathers were prejudice, and she confessed that most of her family was too, but she didn't feel that way, like me. She was 11 years old, a year or so older than me. Though she did seem a bit nervous that I was there, she also seemed quite happy too and I could certainly relate to her fear.

A little while later she heard her brothers come in and then she really got nervous. As they crept up the stairs approaching her door, she said I better go. Before I was even out the bedroom door they saw me, rudely asking what I was doing in their house, shouting at me to get out. The girl hollered for them to stop being mean but they continued on slurring their words to the effect that no white patty girl was welcome in their home.

As I hurried away, I could hear them scolding their sister, threatening her with fears of getting in trouble with her parents. I fled through the front door and down the front steps and I didn't stop until I was home. I never went back there again, but I did see her again ... when she snuck over to see me. That's when we made a plan to meet on certain days and times at my hiding places, and we got away with for a long time.

Mary was a beautiful soul and our special time together will always be remembered. She helped me to understand the black and white conflict, instilling within a deeper compassion for the situation others, like her and I, were facing. I never felt prejudice against the black people, despite my dad's utter hatefulness ... which in his latter days he bore no judgement. Time has a way of changing us. Mary was another secret I had to live with. My life held many secrets but they cannot remain so forever.

Mary and I got caught by her brothers while we were standing together on the sidewalk, parting ways, after having just spent the past hour together. When they saw us, they rushed over and became very mean toward both of us. First, they got all up in their sister's face, and she didn't back down ... even though they were older than her. She tried to defend me saying we were just passing each other and stopped to say hi. They didn't believe her and pressed for the truth. I just stood there frozen, afraid to say anything. Mary kept denying the truth they accused her of, so they threatened to tell on her unless she proved that I wasn't her friend. They ordered her to hit me and she told them no but they kept trying to force her, and the more they put the fear in her of getting into trouble the more she became scared.

Mary finally did hit me, softly punching my arm, but it wasn't enough to satisfy them. They insisted she knock me down, yelling at her to do so. I wanted to run but I was afraid they would catch me so I just stood there, frozen. I couldn't even look at the boys and kept my eyes focused to the ground. I hoped they take their sister and leave, but they had no intentions of doing that.

Mary kept refusing to knock me down and finally one of her brothers called her a sissy while the other gave me a hard shove as I fell to my knees. Mary suddenly turned away and ran home. Her

brothers, on the other hand, stayed to continue their torment. Besides the mean-spirited name calling, they warned me with kicks to my back to stay away from their sister. I just laid on the sidewalk in a duck and cover position. When they were done having their fun, they both pulled my shoes off and ran away laughing. I watched them running down the sidewalk and I saw them toss my shoes over a fence.

I sat there on the ground crying, hurting and scared, knowing I had to get my shoes. I knew I would get in so much trouble if I lost my shoes. I waited until they were gone and then I walked down to the house where my shoes laid in the backyard. I stopped at the fence contemplating jumping over it until I heard the barking of a dog. I knocked and knocked on the front door and then I heard the voice of an old woman asking, "Who is it?" When she heard my cries that my shoes were in her backyard, and how they got there, she quickly opened the door and ushered me in. After giving me a little comfort, she admitted that the negros scared her too, saying she wished she could move like so many others. I felt her compassion as she put her arms around my shoulders and said, "Well, let's go get your shoes." I never told my mother what happened, and after that I only saw Mary or her brothers in passing.

When summer vacation had arrived, and toward the end of that summer, everything changed.

Times were getting harder and harder to feel safe outside. Not just the colored people moving in, or the black boys being mean, but crime was on the rise and children were being snatched up ... it seemed every time I saw the news, they were reporting a missing child. I spent more of my time inside reading, playing, and watching the television. Then one day my dad announced he got a promotion and we were going to move.

My parents sat us down and explained that dad's new position meant he had to travel and wanted mom to be with him, but it was no life for children. They told us they wanted us to have a stable home until dad got resettled, and that might take a year or more. Then they told us we were going to go live with grandma and grandpa until dad's job was up. Excitement bubbled inside me, at first, despite the sadness I harbored that my mom was leaving us. By the time we finally drove out of there I felt a sense of relief. It actually felt like any other time we took trip to grandma and grandpas, except that time we were never coming back, and I could sense we all felt happy about that. The trunk of the car was loaded with everything we would need to start a new life in Lakeport, California.

For that short time in my life, dwelling in the place where I was born, I felt its roots take hold. Ever since then I have desired the country life ... the life of nature's domain. Having been raised in the city, I have never desired to go back. In all my travels I tried to find small communities like that of my grandparents ... and I have them to thank for such a treasured gift ... though it was not an easy undertaking for them. The three of us ... we were more than a handful! And for the three of us, we learned a lot from them, lessons and skills that we may have never known.

Everything changed when we left Oakland. My brother's and I had entered into a new world of adventure – where the three of us began to separate and build our own worlds. That was the place

and time where our childhood bonds were reshaped, and we all developed into our own individual self's, which was much more difficult for me than my two brothers. I was pushed into finding my own sense of being, and I did that by creating more fantasies.

Looking back, it really was the fantasies that helped me survive, it was my way in seeking contentment in what many times felt like a lonely world.