

CHAPTER TWO

The Void by Judith Ingram

Suddenly my life was changed and no longer were my surroundings crowded apartment buildings, rows of houses, street traffic and the fear that lived among us. No longer did I open the window or go outside and hear cars roaring and swooshing, or children laughing and screaming or dogs barking or sirens blaring. No longer was I scared to walk among strangers or even all alone. I'd been taken to the country and country living consumed me for life.

When we arrived at grandma and grandpas farm, my mom and dad stayed a few days to get us kids settled in. I was sad during those last days, knowing she was leaving. I made her promise she would call once a week and she did, exactly each Sunday at 3:00 pm. My brothers didn't seem to have any emotional issue ... I think they were happy to live there. The morning mom and dad were getting ready to leave, I cried, clinging to my mom, not wanting to let go, feeling scared, panicked, and frightfully abandoned.

On that day when they drove away, I knew not any date of when I would see them again. I stood at the top of the driveway and stared into the dusty trail that lingered behind the car as they slowly drove down the dirt road ... watching the murky brown cloud settle to the ground as they disappeared in the distance.

My mom had shown us a map of where they were going to be living, somewhere in St. Louis, Missouri where my dad was to be the Chief Inspector of Locomotives. She told us that we would only be there a year, perhaps just a little longer. That seemed like forever in my mind, but dad said to just be good and tough it out, and they'd be back in no time. He was all about us kids being tough. He'd say many times, "If it doesn't need stitches, it's just a scratch." He had little sympathy for crying or whining, and lesser still for true compassion – at least that's how I saw him then.

Grandma took no haste in reciting the rules as soon as they had left. She sat all three of us down on the sofa while she sat across from us in her rocking chair. Obviously, she was prepared for the predictable handful she knew us to be. Her precise list of our chores were then assigned, and mine consisted of helping grandpa feed the chickens, gather eggs, scrub the bathroom, and keep the kitchen floor swept clean.

Grandma taught me the fundamental basics of cooking, cleaning, mending, and personal hygiene – among numerous other grown-up responsibilities. Grandma's pioneering traits were stitched into her every fiber. Her routines were consistent, right down to the three timely meals a day, beginning with a hearty nutritious breakfast, which seemed to always start with half a slice of grapefruit, in which I submerged with sugar on top to bear the bitterness.

Our plates were dished up by her hand and we could always ask for more, but whatever she put on that plate we weren't allowed to leave a single morsel. We became cleverly skillful in our courageous attempts to evade that rule, most especially whenever she

served sauerkraut. My brothers seemed to like sauerkraut but it made me ill just smelling it, so I figured out how to put it in my milk glass then go to the bathroom and dump it down the toilet. None of us were fond of lima beans, which were easily slipped into our socks and disposed of in several ways. We kind of had a pact not to tell on each other - and we would lie if we had to - if ever questioned - so as to not get in trouble. Though much, much later in life, while telling my mom this story, I learned we hadn't fooled her at all. My mom said grandma had told her back then, and she thought it was quite funny.

Grandma enjoyed canning and there were many times when I helped her fill the jars with different shades of meat, varieties of colorful vegetables and fruits. We would then carry all the jars to the cellar which was right under the kitchen floor. The cellar was built by my grandpa and it went deep underground where it was dark, musky and chilly cold. We weren't allowed to go down there by ourselves, only when grandma asked us to fetch something, but if we ever left the light on, we'd get yelled at. Grandma was always yelling at us to turn the lights off, an echo of my dad from years past. A habit I inquired for a lifetime, and found myself yelling at my own girls.

There were lots of times my brothers and I helped grandpa with the walnut orchard. Grandpa paid us 25 cents a gunny sack. I enjoyed riding on the tracker and whacking nuts from the high branches with a long wooden pole. My brothers and I tried to compete on how many sacks we could fill. But I didn't spend much time with them other than that, nor did Johnny spend much time with Rusty. Somehow, we all found our own interests.

My grandmother had a ceramic shop that grandpa had built right behind the house. It was a small building and yet enormously grand to my eyes. With shelves lined from floor to ceiling there were rows and rows of clay molds ready to go into the kiln, or just having been taken out, while others were beautifully painted and glazed, ready for market. There were all kinds of things from very small items to very large statues. There were all kinds of animals, tea sets, salt and pepper shakers, vases, flower pots, lots of knick knacks ... and so much more. I enjoyed helping grandma in the shop and sometimes she would let me create things out of the clay, but I really was only in her way ... and I was in her way a lot.

Life was spotty during that time, times of loneliness and times of not. I sadly missed my mother every day and waited each week for her precisely timed call - it was the most impatient moments of every week as I would sit excitedly waiting for the phone to ring - at least for many months, and less often after that. As I tried to embrace my new environment, I began to find things to tickle my interest ... besides stalking my brothers all the time, which usually was the cause our bickering fights, and in which grandma was wearing thin in her patience. Grandpa was spared a lot from us kids since he spent most of his days outside doing chores and whatnot. I do think the boys spent more time with grandpa than I ever did. He was a very quiet man, kept to his own business. His nickname was Shorty because he was short. Most of the time he wore blue jean overalls and rubber boots, and straw a hat. Grandma was much taller, fuller, and dominate.

I was deemed the pestering sister ... the little trouble maker ... and there is much truth to that. I was, perhaps, a tomboy at heart and wanted to hang out with my brothers, but in my brother's eyes, I was still a girl. Lots of times grandma took us to her bingo games that were held in a large auditorium with rows of long folding tables and chairs. She belonged to a couple of ladies groups, and she even held officer positions. She also crocheted and sold her wares at various fundraiser events. But bingo was fun night and she took all three of us, most of the time. Grandpa had never attended, and my brothers came so they could hang out with some other boys they got to know there. There were no little girls that ever came, so I always sat right next to grandma and played bingo, but I never won.

I felt envious at times that brothers had each other and I wished I had a sister to share life with too. I turned to the affection of the kittens and cats that roamed the farm. I found comfort in them, but at times some of them would disappear and I would wander aimlessly trying to find them. Grandpa told me the wild animals got them, and I believed him because I had seen large birds swooping around, as if they were looking for prey, and grandpa told me there were wolves in the area. I was always afraid to go outside at night, there were lots of scary sounds. I stopped searching for the missing kittens after grandpa told me that. I wanted to bring them inside to protect them, but grandma would never allow me to bring them into the house, warning me not to get attached, but I did get attached.

It was many months later when one morning I was under the grape arbor on the back porch, eating a tasty ripened handful of juicy grapes, when I saw grandpa walking toward the pond with a gunny sack in his hand. I ran to join him but he tried to chase me away, imploring me to go back to the house. I saw something inside the sack squirming as he dropped the sack to the ground next to the pond. I asked him what it was, but his insistence that I leave him to his business remained firm. Then I heard soft meows and my heart felt pierced with horror at what I realized grandpa was about to do.

I begged and pleaded with him not to, but then he told me that he was doing what had to be done. While the kittens cried and clawed inside trying to get out, he attempted to educate me on life in the country. He explained me, in a matter-of-fact manner, that when animals over populate then the farmers have to take care of it.

"No Grandpa, no," I cried with blurry eyes. Grandpa stared seriously into my weeping tears and ordered me to go inside. I pretended to go back to the house but I hid behind a tree and watched. I saw grandpa go into the barn and he returned with a handful of bricks. He opened the sack and dropped them inside and retied it in a knot. As I watched him swing the sack and toss it into the pond, I swiftly came out wailing, "No Grandpa No," dashing toward the pond in a state of fright. Grandpa nabbed me before I could rescue them and I squirmed like crazy to get free from his grasp, but he made me stand there while I watched and wept. The kitten's meows became bubbles of air as the sack sank and disappeared to the bottom of the pond. When grandpa let go, I ran into the house sobbing right into grandma's arms. The harsh reality of country life kindled a lifetime compassion for wildlife.

Later that afternoon I saw grandpa fishing the sack out of the pond and he walked off behind the barn. When grandpa returned, I asked him what he did with the sack and he flatly answered he disposed of it, while holding a shovel in his hand. I realized in time that grandpa wasn't being cruel, and perhaps he was being merciful. All the cats that were running around were wild and lived off the rodents and birds, though grandma would throw out scraps once in a while. Not one ever let me get close. It was always the kittens that captured my heart, and I tried not to get attached to any of them, but they were fun to play with until they were no more, and then the next batch would come.

My aunt and uncle and two cousins lived in town. Aunt Gracie was my mother's older sister. She had an older brother too, but he died in the war when she was a little girl. My cousins, Bea and Robby, were several years older than me, but Robby was closer to Rusty's age. He always got a long better with Robby than Johnny and I ever did. Since it was summer break, not yet football season, which Robby was a big sports buff, he started coming to the farm quite a bit. One day when my aunt had brought Robby to the farm, he was carrying two BB rifles, one each hand. Grandma immediately expressed concern. My aunt assured grandma they were just for target practice, but grandma seemed deeply resistant all the same, yet she allowed Rusty and Robby to use them with a strict warning ... and had she known they weren't just shooting targets she would have been more than tremendously distressed with her decision. I didn't tell her because both Robby and Rusty threatened me if I did, knowing grandma would take the guns away. But in time grandma discovered this all on her own, and after that I never saw a BB gun again.

It was a horrible fright that day when grandma discovered the boys weren't just shooting targets. I was hiding behind the fenced flower garden while the boys were popping in and out of the nearby trees, shooting at each other. I kept hearing a yelp whenever a BB hit them, but then I heard a brutal scream and suddenly I felt a shrill of horror raise the hair on my arms. Immediately I saw Rusty running towards the house like a madman. His hand was cupped over his one eye as he screamed something fierce, waving his other hand crazily. As he approached the yard grandma came flying out the front door and was running toward him. When she realized the BB had gone into his eye she shouted for grandpa. When grandpa saw, he ran to get the truck. I stood there watching - frozen - as grandpa swept Rusty up and carried him to the truck and quickly drove away.

When grandpa returned many hours later, he told us that Rusty had been flown to San Francisco for a special operation. While he was gone, I felt shamefully sad for him. I made him a get-well card and laid upon his pillow. When he finally returned home a week later, he had a patch over his eye ... and he had a big smile as he walked through the door ... happy to be back home.

He couldn't wait to share all of his brave and gory details with Johnny and me. Hearing how they had taken his whole eye out of his head, to remove the lodged BB, had engulfed me in emotional cringes. We were all thankful his eye was spared any permanent damage, for which I felt less guilty. I did feel guilty for keeping their secret, I felt responsible and confused for trying to be a good sister. I wanted to show that I could be a

trustworthy sister, but I only proved to be a foolish sister. I should have tattled. I should have protected him from Robby. Johnny and I both felt Robby was not right in the head.

When Robby came to the farm again the boys all disappeared. I snuck around quietly in search of their whereabouts. When I peeked through the dirty barn window, I saw them huddled together and I wondered what they were up to. When Robby glanced over and saw me, I started to run in fear, then I heard him holler to come back, saying it was okay, actually inviting me in an encouraging way.

My heart stopped racing as I slowly walked back to the barn and entered inside. Rusty and Johnny were standing there, silent, as if they just got caught doing something bad. I asked what they were doing and Robby said, "Here let me show you." He took my hand and walked me to the door of the wash-up room. Inside was a big sink and a chair. Grandpa used it to wash the chicken eggs and I myself had done the same. I began to feel a bit scared as he pulled me inside and shut the door.

Robby stood firmly blocking me as I tried to get out. Panic began to flood my veins. I felt nearly crippled, physically and emotionally, when I realize he had me cornered. He told me to sit down because he wanted to show me something, so I nervously sat down. He then began to unzip his pants and I gasped, "What are you doing!" He smirked "You'll see." When I realized what he was doing I begged him to let me out, but he wouldn't, so I started to yell, "Rusty, Rusty, let me out." I could hear Johnny telling him to let me out but the door remained closed.

Robby took his penis out and began to flop it around in his hand. I quickly clamped my eyes shut at the disgusting sight and cried out "Johnny, Johnny, help me, let me out." I felt Robby touch me and my eyes popped open to see him standing in front of my face, stroking his stiffened rod of total gross. My eyes clamped tightly again as I tried to push him away, but the harder I fought the more excited he had become. I finally managed to leap from the chair in my attempt to get to the door, but Robby quickly blocked it.

I continued to scream for help while Robby tried to cuff my mouth. Then I heard Johnny yelling at Robby to open up, pounding boldly on the old wooden door. It was then that Robby quickly zipped his pants up and opened the door, whispering in my ear, "If you tell, you'll be sorry!" When he let me out, I fled fast back to the house. I ran inside and down the hallway and into the bedroom. I fell into my bed and smashed my face into the pillow crying, feeling angry, frightened, and ill-minded.

I didn't tell grandma in fear of what he would do to me, but Rusty and Johnny knew what happened – and they had their own secrets to bear. Although we didn't talk about it, I sensed they both were disturbed over the ordeal, or guilt ridden for not coming to my rescue sooner ... or at all. It did bother me deeply that Rusty allowed that to happen, when he surely had it in his power to prevent it.

Following that horribly bitter experience, I was panic-stricken every time Robby came to visit. I tried to stay away from him, but he'd often try to find a way to corner me, in

which I would manage to escape ... until one day at a family gathering, he nearly caught me. My great-grandmother lived in town and had only come to visit us few times. We also went to her home a few times as well, mainly for holiday dinners. I was told later in life that her home was a historical landmark, as it was built to board travelers on the old wagon trail. Lakeport, California was a goldrush hot spot in its day. Robby told us stories that the old house was haunted, but grandma said that was just silly rumors, saying great-grandma had never seen a ghost. I never got close with my great-grandmother, or her husband. whom was not my true great-grandpa. He had passed away many years before.

It was a huge, spooky two-story house with lots of rooms, and it felt creepy to me. I had only wandered around the upstairs once where most of the rooms were empty. The wooden floors creaked as people walked around, and most of the rooms were plastered in wallpaper with towering high ceilings. In the backyard it was very overgrown with a massive garden and an old greenhouse ... old and consumed by nature. Some plants were taller than me. It was obvious no one had tended the yard in years. The greenhouse was so filled with vegetation it was hard to walk through, but I enjoyed being in there than in the house with the large gathering. And that's where Robby nearly trapped me.

I had not been so scared as that moment Robby found me in the greenhouse, knowing I was utterly alone. As he spoke the words, "I found you," my heart began to beat harder. As he drew closer, and I had nowhere to escape, something inside me turned on my animalistic protective and I began to scream. He didn't expect that, and my wails scared him to run, and he fled fast. I hoped someone would have heard me, but no one came. I quickly got out of there and back into the house, where I tried to tell my grandma what happened. Grandma simply said, boys will be boys, they like to scare little girls. And that was that ... I dared not to tell her anymore about Robby.

Just before school was about to start, Robby's football took all his time and attention, so I didn't have to see him that much after that. I was just entering the fourth grade and had never been on a school bus before. We had to walk quite a way down that long road to the bus stop. I always took interest in the cattails that lined the gutters, hoping to catch a frog to take home. The ride to school and back was adventurous at first, gazing upon the miles of landscape surrounding the farm, sighting green fields with cows and barns and barbwire fences. After a while it got to be a tiresome long and winding bore. I always sat alone. Johnny was too embarrassed to sit with his sister, and Rusty sat with his friends. No one on the bus ever came to sit by me, and I was too shy to sit by them – or perhaps too embarrassed after the first days I had an accident on the way home ... I peed all over the seat, which also ran on the floor. That never happened again. I never confessed it to the driver and he never confronted me about it.

Even at school I found it difficult to connect with the other kids who clung to their little clusters ... and not a one had ever invited me to join them. For the longest time I had been disconnected from the voice within, but one day I heard the voice softly whisper and my attention was upon its words. It came to me while I sat alone at recess staring far out into the field, beyond the fenced school yard into empty space. It reminded me that I could create any world of my desire, if I wanted to, and in that moment, I yearned to.

I grew bored being alone on the playground, swinging from the monkey bars ... a mind empty of imagination. Then on that day, while I sat watching the other kids play, the voice asked me if I wanted to be a horse, and I thought to myself how wonderful that would be. The voice said if I went out to the far end of the school yard and closed my eyes, then I would become a horse. So, I walked all the way out there and stood, closing my eyes, waiting for that magical moment to happen. I waited and waited and the voice proclaimed, "Open the door." Suddenly I saw a spot of light in the darkness of my mind and my attention was drawn to it. As the light came closer, growing brighter, a beautiful stunning white horse appear as vivid as if it were real.

I felt the horse within rear up and claw its hoof into the ground, and the sound of its breath heaved heavily. It wanted to run and when I opened my eyes, I ran faster and faster into a full gallop. It felt as if my legs were lifted off the ground, the wind breezed across my face, it felt breathtaking ... exhilarating. Nearly every day after that the horse would be waiting for me to return. The light within was waiting to take me through the door.

Some of the kids laughed at me but I wasn't affected by their mocking, and after a while they had just become part of the background noise. One day a girl ran out to meet me as I was walking toward my spot. First, she asked if she could join me and when I said yes, she smiled. As we walked together she said her name was Kathy, and I said mine was Judy. She told me she was in Mrs. Jackson's room, which was a grade above me. She expressed how she had been watching me, saying how much fun it looked to pretend I was a horse, and she shared her own desire to pretend too. When we arrived at my spot, I told her what to do. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and then opened them saying she couldn't see anything, so I took her hands and told her to close them again and look for the light.

I waited and waited as she stood there with her eyes closed, then her eyes bolted open and I let go of her hands as she took off down the path along the fence. By then I didn't need to close my eyes ... the horse and I had become one. The moment I arrived at my spot, the horse appeared within and it always seemed content to be with me, as I felt its contentment within me. Once Kathy had taken off, I raced behind her and together we galloped all around the playground, neighing back and forth in horse talk. She thought it was the most amazing thing she'd ever felt.

The only time Kathy and I got to see each other was at school, mostly during recess and lunch. She had only lived in Lakeport a few months before my arrival and hadn't acquired any friends herself. She lived alone with her mother in town who worked long days. In a short amount of time we became the best of friends, and she would often say how she wished I lived in town. I felt her loneliness upon many occasions as she felt mine. We talked about such things like that, deep conversations of childhood dreams and unfulfilled hopes. Sometimes she talked about her dad most fondly, but rarely was able to see him. Our lives were not perfect and that made us perfect for each other.

My home life was getting direr and it would only become further grim. Grandma announced that they needed extra money and that's when we discovered two old ladies were coming to live with us. I was moved into Rusty and Johnny's room – it was the largest bedroom – and the two old ladies moved into mine. Grandma set up twin beds for them and there wasn't much room to walk around, but the old ladies spent most of their time in the living room watching TV.

It was dreadful, gross, and undeniably creepy to observe them - and it was cruelly comical at times. My brother's and I would make jokes behind their backs. We wondered what Natty did with all the buggers she picked from her nose. All we ever saw was her picking and rolling her fingers together. We figured she ate them but one day we decided to hide and find out. She wouldn't do anything if she saw someone watching. That's when we saw her picking and rolling and then she reached under her blouse and smeared them in her armpit. Well, it was quite strenuous for us not to gag and laugh aloud, and I even had to cup my mouth to remain silent.

The other lady, Helen, stared endlessly at the TV without even a blink. She was always rattling on to the people on the screen. Sometimes it appeared as if she was talking to the air ... perhaps having conversations with ghosts. Grandma told us to pretend they weren't there and not to bother them, so we tried not to pay much attention. Grandma had put a TV in our bedroom shortly after their arrival, but that only caused further discord between us fighting on who gets to watch what.

When the boys were out playing one day, I snuck into the bedroom to search for Johnny's keepsake box. He kept things hidden there and for the longest time I knew he had taken my leather coin pouch that grandma had given to me. And though he denied it I was determined to find it. For days I had been looking everywhere for it. On that day I found Johnny's box and when I opened it, I saw my coin pouch and got very angry. He lied to me, but I wasn't going to tell him I took it back.

A few days later he noticed his box had been moved and immediately looked inside. When he saw the pouch was missing, he accused me of stealing it. We got into a huge screaming match and he got so mad he grabbed a sharply pointed pencil and stabbed me in the kneecap. When grandma heard my screams of torment she dashed into the bedroom and saw the pencil stuck in my leg.

Grandma was furious and she pulled the pencil out waving it in my face while ordering me to take it and stab him back. I didn't want to do it but grandma kept insisting. Finally, she stuck the pencil in my hand, clasped her fingers over mine and jabbed the pencil into Johnny's knee. He didn't make a sound. The matter had been settled. I still remember her quote of the 'Golden Rule' she roared in a stern tone before she left the room: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, she said. The tiny black dot of lead left its lifetime mark and memory, I can still see the dot in my kneecap.

Early one evening the phone rang. It was an unexpected call from my mother with exciting news. Dad had a week vacation coming up over the Christmas holidays ... and

so they were coming to see us. Mom said they would be there in two weeks. When they had arrived tears of joy overflowed ... but their visit brought tears of another kind as well.

Grandma's apparent aggravation over the constant fighting between us kids had deepened every day. Her face began to scowl, her patience more frazzled, her kindness was hardened. When my mother got me alone, she had to explain to me that grandma needed a relief, and after talking it over with my aunt, they all decided it would be best if I lived in town. Removing me from the situation was to ease grandma's stress, but I begged, pleaded and whined for her not to send me there. I promised I would be good, but they had made their decision and there was no recourse for me.

I was alarmed at the thought of having to live in the same house with Robby, yet I could not bring myself to tell. By then I sensed Robby felt safe that I'd kept his horrible secret, believing that his threats held power over me, but as long as I hid that secret, I too felt a sense of power over him. Ever since school had started, I hadn't seen Robby much, though I had just seen him at our Thanksgiving dinner at aunt Gracie's house, but he was there to eat and then he was off to see friends. I was relieved at the short amount contact. I was hopeful he would not bother me anymore. The only highpoint of living at my aunt and uncle's, was knowing that Kathy didn't live too far ... and that made me less unhappy about the decision.

While my mom and dad were visiting that week, I heard dad making plans with the boys to go fishing. I asked if I could go but he said it was a boy's day out. I begged, hoping he would change his mind ... and that didn't work. The next morning, as I saw dad and the boys getting ready to leave, my mom was busy helping grandma and I thought it was a perfect time to sneak off unnoticed. I decided to follow them - lagging in the distance being very sneaky. The crazy notion that if I followed them far enough away from the house, then dad would have to take me with them. Certainly, he wouldn't send me off alone ... but that's exactly what he did. My wishful plan failed miserably in the worst of ways.

Down the path I saw them cross over a barb wired fence, and I waited until they were farther down the path before I crept up to cross it. Just as I had watched them pull the wire apart and slip through, I tried to do the same. I managed to get the first leg through but when I tried to pull the other, a spike caught the inside of my knee and ripped a deep tear – the same knee my brother stabbed me with a pencil, and which I also still have a very faded scar. The pain was so excruciating that for a few moments I was frozen in a loud shrilling scream. I fell to the ground and continued to wail and cry, while my leg bled profusely. I knew my screams were heard when I saw my dad running towards me.

I thought he'd swoop me up in his arms and rush me to the house. Instead, he fiercely yelled at me, harshly scolded me, and then pulled me up from the ground with no sympathy whatsoever. Sadly, he ordered me to go back to the house as he lifted me over the fence, and I hobbled away in silent tears. He didn't take a good look at my leg or watch to see if I was going to be alright, I knew because I kept looking back watching

him walk into the distance. It hurt deeper inside than out and it angered me, deepening my resentment towards him.

I managed to make it back to the house just close enough to where my mom would hear me hollow for help. By the time I reached there, enough blood had run down my leg and soaked my white sock. My mother came running in a state of fright at the sound of my voice, and when she saw my injury she swooped me up and carried me inside. Mom and grandma patched me up. My mother didn't show much sympathy either when she saw my leg wasn't as bad as it looked, and said I should have obeyed my father ... but all the same, my lifetime scar bears the memory of that ill-fated lesson.

When dad and the boys had returned, they came with a Christmas tree in hand, and a handful of fish. It was fun decorating and ringing in the spirit. The entire family gathering filled the house to the brim, and there was lots of food and tasty treats ... and Christmas presents for all.

It wasn't as emotional when mom and dad left the second time, and right after they had gone back to St. Louis, I was quickly packing and being shipped off to town. My aunt and uncle had come to get me, and on the long drive to their house they had a serious talk about what they would provide and what they expected of me. They were nice and pleasant, but direct in expressing their rules of conduct. They welcomed me with one request ... no trouble!

My cousin Bea was forced into sharing her bedroom with me, which was right across from Robby's room. Bea's room was small but they managed to fit a twin bed in there, and I only had a few clothes. She tried to make the best of it but the situation certainly made her feel invaded, and I wasn't comfortable there myself. She did ask me nicely not to touch any of her things ... in which I honoured. She had a lot of pretty things, and pink was her favorite color. She did warm up to me as time went on.

Bea was very popular at her High School. I was envious of her in so many ways. Besides how pretty she was, all of her activities stirred my interests. One of them was marching in her school band, twirling her baton in parades. She was so good at twirling her baton, and I was awe-struck when she would toss it high into the sky and catch it with her hand under her leg, then twirl it up again. She did try to teach me but my awkwardness wore her patience. Her bright colorful glimmering outfits sparkled when she moved and I found myself wishing I could be like her.

Bea had a huge stack of vinyl records and she played them all the time. This is when I discovered how much I love music. Her music was nothing like what my mom and dad listened to, which I dreaded to hear. Her music was moving, thrilling, emotional, and energizing. Though I adored the dreamy love songs that touched deep inside my soul, I really got crazy with rock and roll. Bea and I would dance all over the house when we were alone. She would crank up the volume and we would have a blast. Sometimes Kathy could come over and we'd all laugh and dance together.

My aunt wouldn't allow me to go see Kathy until I had been there a while, after she got to know her better. Then I would spend most weekends hanging out at her house. We would walk to school and back on week days, and occasionally talked on the phone after school. Bea seemed to like Kathy and had remarked how fit she was ... and she did have a slender build. I, however, always had a potbelly, and had been teased for it too. I learned to become numb and deaf toward the hurtful remarks' others commented and poked at me... but really, I always felt the resentment. Bea awakened that painful part hidden inside when she decided to make it her mission to fix me. She just couldn't stand my potbelly. At first, I fought with her to stop pushing me, until I finally surrendered.

She started out by trying to teach me to stand up straight with my back against the wall, and she made me suck in my tummy as hard as I could, and then try to hold it for a minute ... which I could not do. It was hard to breath, so I would start to whine that it hurt me, but she'd insist I hold it. If she ever caught me slouched over, she would say, "Stand Up!" Posture was very important to her, and it seemed to disturb her to the extreme of taking on the challenge. And it was a challenge, indeed.

I was cooperative for a while and I tried for as long as I could, but each time she'd make me hold it in a little longer, stand a little taller, and breathe a little deeper and after several days of attempts, I begged her to stop. She tried to convince me to stick with it saying things like, "You want people to tease you all your life?" or "You want to be a tubby all your life?" The more forceful she got the more I got extremely upset and red-faced mad. One day I yelled, "I can't do it!" Then I ran away sobbing, repeating in a shrill, "I can't do it! ... I can't do it!" At that point, she finally gave up on me and I was relieved.

My aunt and uncle both worked for the Highway Patrol. My uncle was a sheriff and aunt was a Dispatch Operator. Lakeport was a quiet little town so there wasn't much activity. I don't recall them being around much, except for nightly dinners. Bea watched over me the most, but took no haste in relinquishing her responsibly the moment my aunt arrived home. Robby was consumed mostly with his sports, and his Jr. High school friends. For the longest time he left me alone.

Having been lured into a false security, I came home from school one day and it appeared no one was there. I was in the kitchen getting something to eat when I heard a noise downstairs in the entertainment room. The house sat on a hill and the garage was on the lower side. It had been converted into a pool room with a TV, some chairs and a couch. I had rarely ever been down there. The noise startled me at first, until I heard Robby holler, "Hey, bring me a coke." I suddenly felt that familiar fear rush upon me and I didn't want to go down there. I pretended to not hear him and tried to sneak away quietly, hoping he'd think I'd left.

He kept yelling at me, saying he knew I was there. I weighed the risk of should I or shouldn't I. I decided to trust him and so I headed down the stairs with his coke. I could see he was sitting on the couch, the TV was turned off, and only his head and shoulders were visible, at first. Then I saw his naked lower body, his hands stroking his erection

with lustful pleasure, and I saw the deviousness in his eyes when he turned his head to catch my reaction uttering, “Remember this?” With cowardly repulsion I threw the can of coke toward him and ran back up the stairs, haunted by his hideous laughter trailing behind me. I fled into the bathroom and locked the door ... where I remained until my aunt got home.

I heard him come to the door several times trying to coax me out, saying he wasn't going to hurt me, saying it was just a joke, laughing hideously. I screamed at him to go away, threatening to tell. He chuckled saying no one would believe me. When my aunt arrived home, I came out shaking and crying and I told her what happened. Her reaction was not what I expected, but it was surely one Robby did. After she had talked with him, she became furious at me for making up stories ... she even went as far as to say grandma was right, I was just a trouble-maker.

When my mother had called soon after, my aunt reported my behavior. When I tried to tell my mother it was really true, and that it wasn't the first time, she scolded me, insisting I was making up these stories because I didn't want to live there. It felt more than awful to discover no one would protect me. I sadly realized I had no one to turn to, except my friend Kathy, who always made me laugh and brought joy back when I was feeling down ... and I felt down a lot.

After that, the first time Bea wasn't home when I arrived from school, I walked to Kathy's house – taking the risk of getting in trouble for not asking permission. When I returned home my aunt was waiting to scold me. When I told her I was afraid to be alone with Robby she said I was being ridiculous, however she did say I could go to Kathy's if Bea wasn't home ... only because she didn't want me left alone – though I did have to leave a note.

Kathy and I became much closer when I had moved into town. Her mother seemed to always be at work, so when I would go to her house we would walk around town, go down to the lake, or just hang out in her room and talk. We did lots of things together and I grew to trust her ... I even shared my shameful secret about Robby. She felt as grossed out as I did and told me if he ever tried that again to tell him I'd cut his dick off. We giggled, in a serious way, and one day I was brave enough to stand up to him.

While getting a drink in the kitchen one evening, those words raged from my mouth when he tried to corner me against the counter, even while his family was in the living room watching TV. He thought he'd make me squirm a little for a moment of thrill. His face turned pale with shock when he looked into my scorching eyes, lashing out those words that only he could hear. He then slipped away to his bedroom, without even a snicker. From then on, I wasn't afraid of Robby anymore, and for him the thrill was gone. I've never spoken a word to him since leaving that house, nor spoken within the family of the hauntingly deplorable way he treated me – because after all, no one would believe me anyway.

Winter brought a surprising snow storm that year and just about everything had closed down, including school. Kathy and I were like little children rolling around in it, throwing snowballs at each other, giggling with radiance, and having fun making a snow man. When we got bored with that so we decided to throw snowballs at cars. As they splattered across windshields and blasted hoods and window doors, we'd laugh and would run behind a huge tree. It was funny watching people's reactions, though some yelled at us angrily. The snow was so fluffy we weren't causing any damage, other than perhaps a possible accident, in which had never crossed our minds because the road was nearly barren.

Sometimes my snowball missed, and sometimes did hers, but when we both leaped from behind the tree and tossed our snowballs, both hitting the target ... it was too late for us. Our giggling and laughter came to a sudden halt when the car we both had plastered was the police. When we saw the red light start flashing, we both gulped in fear. The police car came to an immediate stop, and one officer jumped out yelling at us to come over. We approached with guilty faces. When I told the officer that my uncle was a Sheriff, he called him. We sat in the back seat of the car until he showed up. Of course, he was not very happy, and took us home not speaking a word. I got in so much trouble after arriving home and was grounded for two weeks. I couldn't even watch TV. It was the first time he had ever been so angry with me. It not only embarrassed my aunt and uncle, but he had to work out a way to keep the policeman from making a report. After that, they had forbidden me to see Kathy, saying she was a bad influence. However, we found ways to sneak around ... although things just weren't the same.

Finally, summer vacation had arrived! My aunt sent me to grandmas for two weeks, and then I had to go back to their house for two weeks, then to grandmas for two weeks. Before that, I was only able to visit grandmas on an occasional weekend. I was happy with the schedule they made, knowing it wasn't for my joy but more of a break away from me for them. Aunt Gracie didn't want to put too much stress on grandma since after I left, sometime later, grandma had a third old lady living there. Between the old ladies and the boys, after a year's time, grandma was getting tired.

I knew I really had to behaved myself so they wouldn't take my visits away. I didn't even fight with my brothers, who paid little attention to me anyway. I spent most of my time helping grandma with chores, and preparing meals. I felt more grown up, and I think she saw that. Our relationship was a little different from when I lived there before.

While there, during my two-week visit, I heard grandma talking on the phone about the construction going on to build a dam at the end of their county road. When I asked about it, she said it was going to provide water for the farmers. A big project, she said. I was curious to see what they were doing down there, so one afternoon I took a walk. I walked and walked and walked, and I thought to myself how it seemed much farther than I remembered in years past. There were a few times my brothers had taken me there when we came to visit from Oakland. It had been years since I'd been there. The first thing I noticed was a huge cement wall being built. I started climbing up the hill to get a better look behind it. As I wandered through the brush and trees, something lured me away

from my destination. I saw a rickety two-story house that was very aged and long deserted hidden in the overgrown foliage. I had never seen that house before in the times I had been around that area.

I felt drawn to it and began to walk toward it when I saw a little girl, younger than myself, sitting on a swing that hung by a tattered rope strung to a large old oak tree. I watched her swinging back and forth, her long golden locks floating in the air. She did not notice me at first. As I drew nearer, she turned her head and stared deeply into my eyes. Her intense dark energy was momentarily paralyzing.

When I approached closer, the swing paused and she walked quietly toward me until we were face to face. Neither one of us had spoken a word, not even a hint of facial expression. It felt as if I was in a dream state. Her piercing stare into my eyes felt like a tunnel between us, and in my mind, I heard her voice began to speak. I felt the depth of her despair and sorrow. She told me she was left there and couldn't leave. She said her family was gone, and soon her home would be gone too. She kept repeating the word "Water, water, water," and I thought she was referring to the dam construction. In the tone of her voice inside my mind, I sensed a heavy spirit. I felt compelled to give her comfort, emotional as it was.

As she walked barefoot back to the swing, her old worn clothes ruffled in the wind. As I began to walk away in a dazed fog, a little way down the path my head cleared. When I glanced back, I suddenly felt an eerie chill ripple throughout my body – I saw no house, no swing hanging from a tree, no little girl, and my mind felt bewildered and confused, as if I had just awakened from a strange encounter.

The mysterious experience dumbfounded me as I wandered back to grandma's house. Later that evening I asked grandma about the dam, and if there was an old house at the end of the road. She told me there had been a family that lived there over 50 years ago, but she only knew from the local stories. The house was nearly 100 years old when it collapsed and was removed. That was all before grandma and grandpa had arrived. I then asked her if she knew about a girl who used to live there. Grandma said she heard stories about of a little girl who had fallen down a well and drowned, but that it was so long ago she couldn't remember much. When grandma asked why I wanted to know, I just told her I had heard stories too and was curious. It took a long time for me to ponder what happened, and I could only conclude that I had seen a ghost.

I shared my experience with Kathy and she got very excited, telling me she had also seen ghosts before. I listened to her stories with heightened interest. I didn't feel scared, I felt a relief knowing I wasn't alone, or crazy. I also felt a stronger connection with her and I was saddened when her mother sent her to spend the remainder of the summer with her dad ... but she was thrilled. The sneaking around to spend time with her always felt scary, afraid of getting caught, so in a way it was probably best the way things turned out.

When she returned, I was entering the fifth grade and she the sixth, which meant she was going to Middle School. It was quite lonely without her at recess. The only thing that

remains vivid of that time is when my class went on a field trip. We had taken the school bus to a place on other side of the lake where we all sat and ate our lunch. Some of the boys wandered down to the dock and soon thereafter I heard a lot of commotion going on. Some of the other kids started to run toward the dock and I followed. When I got there a group of kids were standing in a circle watching a big fish flop about on the ground. I heard one of them say it was a salmon. The teacher came to see what was going on and when he saw it, he said it would make a good meal.

As I watched, the teacher pulled a pocket knife from his pants and sliced the fish open. He was explaining how to gut it when suddenly a pile of shiny goop oozed out with little pinkish red balls. My stomach turned ill at the sight. Mr. Whitman exclaimed, "Look kids, salmon eggs!" Some of the girls gaged and shouted "Gross!" The boys thought it was cool. The teacher then went on to tell us that they were a real tasty treat, but the only thing I could think of was trying not to vomit. I never did desire to eat what others consider a delicacy because some memories leave a far-reaching effect.

It had been several months into the school year when we were informed that my mom and dad were at last coming to fetch us. It felt like the most exciting day of my life ... a day I waited for every day since my arrival. I had absorbed all that was given, learned all I could contain, endured as much as was possible, and the blessing of it all was Kathy. She was a rare gift, a great teacher, and despite what my aunt and uncle thought, she was indeed a wonderful influence in my life – worth the risk of every moment I captured, disobeying them.

Kathy was there when I needed someone the most, and I believe she needed me as well. She showed me that being a loner wasn't so bad, pointing out things like girls fighting over stupid stuff, gossiping about others, acting special and all, while explaining why she didn't like to hang with groups – childish behavior, she would say. I realized that this was how I felt as well. It was reassuring to realize I was not alone ... I was a loner. She made it out to be something unique, something of a wholeness, and I never lost sight of that reality. Eventually, I learned to socialize and I love to socialize, but that came later in life. Until then I continued to be a loner. Being popular was never my thing. Having one special friend was everything. And that is how it was most of my early life, one special friend at a time.

The day we said goodbye, we both knew we would never see each other again. It was a sadness that was long forgotten, but the feeling of that connection served its purpose, pushing me to the next level. And her ... well, I have no idea what our relationship did for her. I have wondered from time to time if she even remembers me.

The void that had begun the journey the day I was dropped off, feeling abandoned, was in the end a soul truly fulfilled.