



The Gift of
an
Unjealous Heart

By

Freda Farmer

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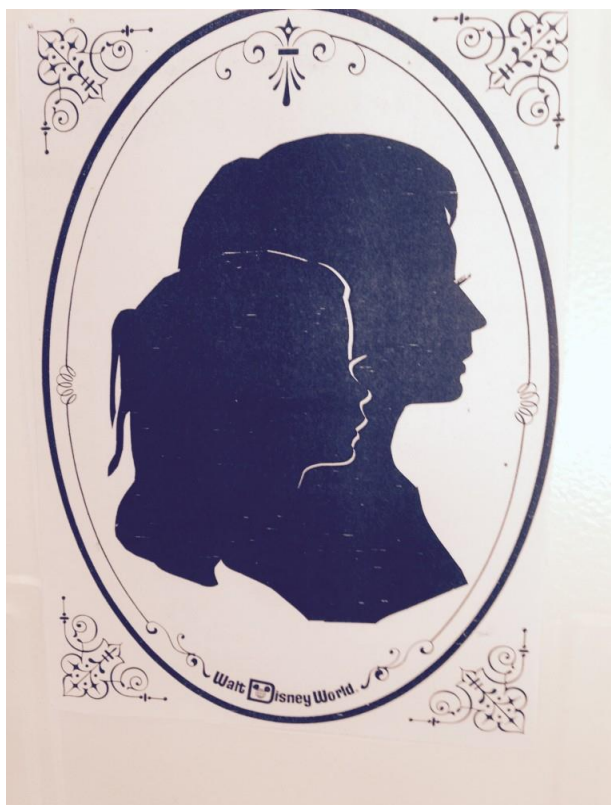
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DEDICATION

This book is lovingly dedicated to my daughter, who taught me how
to love and be loved.



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Chapter One

Fear

"My Mom found it at Goodwill. Then we bought these streamers. You can ride it, if you want to."

As my daughter ended her sentence, her voice went up in childish innocence. Sharon twisted the red and blue plastic strips that resembled pom-poms as she sat, left foot on the pedal, right foot on the ground.

"The bike is too short," I thought. "and so are her jeans."

The heel of one white sock extended above the shoe, the ground-in black of barefoot playtimes now gray. Two inches of bare leg showed above the sock. She was in the driveway, talking with the ten-year-old neighbor of the Wexels. We were house-sitting.

The two girls, the bike, and the mailbox by the road all spelled neighborhood. The sky seemed bigger here than at our apartment, where multistory structures created an unnaturally close horizon. Here, sky merged with earth a great, soothing distance away. It was quieter, too. Trees and open space muted the sounds of dogs barking and the occasional sputtering chug of a go-cart.

Sharon and I visited the Wexels often. The friendship between our little family of two and their family of four gave her a yard and a neighborhood. I was company for Dorothy during her husband's business trips, and Sharon was a playmate for her girls.

I looked at my beloved ten-year-old astride her second-hand bike silhouetted

against the neighbors' two-story house. Brenda turned and walked away without a word.

Sharon looked at me, eyebrows raised.

"Don't worry, sweetie." I walked over and patted the wobbly back fender of the bike.

"She must not feel well. Ride to the corner, and I'll watch."

"Okay, Mommy! I'm steady now." Off she went, waving backwards.

Love too deep for words . . . hurt too deep for words. Love for Sharon had blossomed the first time I traced her infant, rosebud mouth with my fingertip and saw myself reflected in her facial structure and length of limb. As she wobbled to the corner on the scratched bike, the longing to protect her was fiercer than ever. How long before she would recognize put-downs like that?

A breeze carried the scent of fresh-cut grass and stirred the strands of Spanish moss hanging from the gnarled old oak in the front yard. Higher up in its branches, two squirrels chattered noisily before bursting into a fevered game of chase around the trunk's thick circumference, their flying feet scrabbling across the brittle gray of the corrugated surface for toeholds.

I leaned against our car as I watched her, feeling I should pat its hood for being the faithful beast of burden it had been for us. With silent eloquence, it spoke of my struggle to provide for Sharon and myself since the divorce. Its predecessor, a pale blue Maverick, had stranded us once too often, so with the \$400 cash six months of typing at home at night had earned, the heady promise of continuing to be paid, per

page, for all the medical dictation I could handle, and the self-serving generosity and mendacity of a new car salesman, I'd incurred my first big debt in my own name.

"The peace of mind about being stuck somewhere dangerous and no repair bills are worth it," I told myself.

Of course, I should have purchased a used car. Of course, I should have read the document I signed to ensure the 12 percent interest the salesman quoted me was written in the appropriate blank instead of the 16 percent I discovered three months later. Of course, I should have looked over the papers before I signed. But, I had no one to advise me as I began learning how to take care of things like cars all by myself. Like many newly divorced people, I had no time to make new friends. Working eight hours at the office, taking care of Sharon and then typing at night used it all. Adding to that particular problem was debilitating shyness. So, my lack of financial savvy had deepened our financial strain.

We were lucky, though. The car payments had been hard but not impossible to make. For the first few years after the divorce, Sharon received child support payments and I regularly lugged that typewriter, transcribing machine, and medical dictionary home so I could type at nights and weekends, when Sharon was asleep and did not need my attention. Had I known what lay ahead, I would have worked even more overtime, and somehow been even more frugal. In a couple of years, the child support grew irregular, then stopped. My supply of work, which regulated the size of my paycheck, followed a similar, though more prolonged, downward spiral.

The other parties to a fender-bender and a side collision had no insurance, so

rather than increase my monthly insurance payments, I opted for the dented door, crumpled rear quarter panel and crooked bumper. After the accidents, the Mustang's appearance was more appropriate for our circumstances. It looked like it was barely getting by, too.

Now, as I looked at its faded surface, complete with rust spots on the accident sites as well as my clumsy attempts to apply primer, I smiled. It had encountered few mechanical difficulties, in spite of its prematurely-aged appearance, and had only recently required the major repairs that foretold the victory of planned obsolescence over just plain luck.

How much will she understand and when? I frowned as I kicked at the acorns dotting the driveway. If our car told an accurate story of just getting by by doing without, so did certain aspects of my appearance. There, in all their boney glory, were my ankles, visible, en toto, below the hem of my pants. I hadn't outgrown them, of course, like Sharon had outgrown hers. But one pair of pants in a size fourteen tall equaled one week of groceries. The choice was simple. So was the choice to buy my clothes from a consignment shop and to do without a nice watch and expensive haircut, and etc. and etc..

As I watched Sharon and kicked more acorns, my mind compared and contrasted our life with that of the Wexels and the other families in Delwood Estates, as if I were composing an essay for my beloved seventh grade English teacher. The homes in this neighborhood, many of which were two-story, were spacious, new houses on large lots. Sharon and I had a one bedroom apartment facing a parking lot on two

sides and the back of another apartment building on the other two. These residents here in the neighborhood had upscale family sedans or vans; we had our faded silver Mustang. Their children had fathers who came home every night; we had a father whose only influence after the divorce had ceased years ago when the infrequent child support checks stopped completely. These children had vacations at theme parks and designer jeans; Sharon had stay-at-home vacations and clothes purchased whenever we received money for birthdays.

Sharon had reached the end of the street, and I held my breath as she traversed the cul-de-sac. The sidewalks in our apartment complex afforded no turning practice. From a block and a half way, I could see the smile on her face as she finished the semicircle with barely a wobble. A look of concentration immediately replaced the smile but it reappeared as she drew near. I walked towards her, clapping my hands.

"That was wonderful, baby!" If we were in a bicycle class, I'd give you an A plus and a one hundred and a smiley face!"

"Oh, Mommy." Sharon tucked her chin in, lowered her eyes, and gave a tight-lipped little smile as she braked to a stop at the foot of the driveway.

I patted the back of her hand as she gripped the handle-bars. It was still so much a young child's hand. Soft flesh concealed the exact location of all bones, save wrist and knuckles, and there remained a certain charming hint of plumpness that would disappear only after years of use had thickened and elevated the underlying muscles, tendons, and ligaments.

"That'll happen soon enough," I thought to myself. "all too soon." I resisted the

impulse to lift her hand and kiss the back of it. Instead, I reached out and twisted the streamers around my finger.

"These look really great when you ride, baby. I think we had a good idea to buy these instead of the basket, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Mommy," was her fervent reply.

"You did a good job making that turn way down there, too. I was watching the whole time. Go one more time then we need to go inside and eat. It's getting dark."

Fifteen minutes later, Sharon played Pacman and Frogger while I fixed supper. Shouts of "Oh, no!" mingled with the arcade-like tinkles, bells, and explosions and one pacman ate another and that poor frog lurp-lurped across the freeway.

Using grilled cheese sandwiches for walls, carrot sticks for a roof, and dill pickle strips for grass, I made two houses on our plates. Carefully placed raisins became two eyes, a nose, and a mouth in two bowls of warmed, cinnamon applesauce.

I walked into the living room and knelt down by Sharon, watching a few moments until another frog ended his short career crossing the video screen freeway.

"Are you ready to eat, baby?"

"Oh, Mommy! Can I finish this one game? Puh-lease." Sharon's eyes never left the screen as she crouched in that intense, forward-focused lean of the obsessed video gamer.

I decided the temperature of her food that night was less important than the chance to catch up, a little, with the Wexel girls. They had already grown bored with such games like Frogger and Pacman that came in the Atari package their parents had

purchased long before joystick became a household word.

Such a different lifestyle! "It's always the same with the Wexels," I thought as I watched Sharon maneuver froggy successful across the road.

"They bought the first word processor, home computer, and automatic pool cleaner that were made. One more point of comparison and contrast for my essay."

Splat! Froggy's luck ran out. Sharon's shoulders slumped as she frowned.

"Don't be upset, baby. You can play again just as soon as we eat. Besides, you got over 500 points this time."

"Yeah, but Carla and Karen always get at least 800."

"Well, we have two more days, you know, before they come home. I bet you can make it to 800 by then. Come on, now, let's eat and you can get back to practicing. Being hungry probably interfered with your concentration. You know you rode that bicycle a long time today. I bet you're starved."

One supper, two hours, and 18 games of Froggy later, Sharon and I were finally in bed, reading a Beverly Cleary book. She was our most recently discovered children's author.

"Okay, sweetie. Time to go to sleep."

"Oh, Mommy!"

Sharon put her book down on her chest and turned to look at me.

"Remember when Henry forgot to take out the garbage for a week and he had to jump on the garbage can to pack it in and he fell on top of Ribs and Ribs howled so loud the neighbors complained and Henry's dad got really mad?"

"Of course, I remember," I replied. "I read that one three weeks ago that time you couldn't finish all the books we got from the downtown library. But I still remember that. Did you already reach the place where Ribsy goes fishing?"

"Not yet."

"Well, then, I won't tell you about it so I don't spoil it. You can read that tomorrow. Right now, let's both close our books. I promise I won't read any more tonight either. Here, let me tuck you in."

"Okay," she said. "But will you lay down with me?"

"Sure, baby. Sleeping in a different bed in a different house feels strange, doesn't it?"

Only ten minutes and two sleepy-voiced questions later, Sharon was snoring. The exertion of her unusual swimming, biking, and running suddenly exacted their price on her energy level.

I slipped out of bed and walked to the kitchen. Lolly, the Wexel's pedigree beagle, followed me. We went, parade fashion, down the long lushly carpeted hall, across the wide foyer with the 50 gallon saltwater aquarium, through the formal dining room, then the family room, and finally the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, Lolly plopped her furry belly on the cool tiled floor at the edge of the bar and watched as I put water on to boil.

"Are you lonely, Lolly girl?" I knelt down to pat her small, noble head.

Lolly looked at me with the trademark soulful eyes of her breed and wagged her tail.

"Your family will be back soon, girl." I tried to make my voice comforting. Since the Wexels had left that morning, Lolly had shadowed me around the house, and not just to tell me she needed to go potty in the fenced-in back yard.

The tea kettle whistled. I fixed my tea, opened the sliding glass door for Lolly's last potty trip of the day. Then I sat down in the living room. The overstuffed goose-down sofa conformed itself to my hips and back as I snuggled into its contours and looked around the living room. I was amazed, as I always was during the Wexel's home Bible study each Friday night, by the ambiance of affluence afforded by indirect lighting, rare ferns and ficus trees, cobalt blue carpet and sky blue walls, crystal chandeliers, gilt-framed mirrors, and most of all, simply by the abundance of uncluttered space.

Startled, I looked up. Lolly zipped by the sliding glass doors in hot pursuit, I surmised, of some squirrel sufficiently emboldened by previous success avoiding Lolly's frenzied chases to set paw on the pool deck while she was outside.

The lights in the pool shimmered through the water, illuminating the sides and bottom of the pool, painted yet another hue of soft blue. The extended pool deck, white resin inlaid with river rock, covered the entire back yard right up to the wood fence, except for the picnic table area under the oak tree and a small grassy run for Lolly on the far right. During the day, the oak provided shade for the palms growing in huge Grecianesque urns. At night, the oak's branches obscured most of the view of the night-time sky. A handful of stars alternately twinkled then disappeared as a soft breeze shook the smallest branches and rippled the surface of the water in the pool.

I just cannot understand! closed my eyes, then opened them, seeing not the

tastefully appointed room or the spacious back yard but rather the look of innocence on Sharon's face as she'd offered to share her second-hand bike with Deborah. Deborah, like the Wexel girls, had the best three-speed bike, just their size, money could buy.

"Why did that hurt so much?" I asked myself.

"Because," I concluded after a moment's reflection, "I understood the disdain in Brenda's face and the stinging insult her silent walking away from Sharon implied. I understood she thought Sharon's bike and Sharon herself weren't good enough for her to play with."

I understood, and I knew Sharon would too, some day soon. All too soon she would know the embarrassment I had felt as a child over things like durable saddle oxfords, fit for a clown in my size, and home-made clothes when other kids had store-bought. Too soon she would perceive the differences between our car and those unmarred by unrepaired damage. She would understand the wide gulf between being treated at a fast-food restaurant and regularly dining at the best steakhouse in Tampa Bay. She, to, would surely come to despise the statement, "We can't afford it" and the ubiquitous questions, "How much does it cost?" She would know the same of pang of feeling less than and inferior to everyone else and of feeling rejected by friends.

Tears ran down my cheeks.

"I can't stand for her to feel that way," I thought. "Everyone is not as wealthy as the Wexels and the rest of the families in this development but just about everybody is better off than we are or than we're likely to be – ever!

"I can't get a better job, and I'm lucky already to be transcribing because it pays

more than normal secretarial work. There's no way for me to go to school and even if I did, I'd have to neglect Sharon to attend night classes and study. Child support payments have probably stopped forever and there's no one else to help us. I can barely afford a safe apartment and nutritious food for her. She'll never have expensive clothes or trips or music lessons and all the other advantages most children do, even if they're not rich like the Wexels."

I slid off the sofa and knelt on the floor next to it, frowning as two tears made tiny spots of dark on the blue and gold velour. The faded pink cotton of my robe felt rough as I wiped my eyes on the sleeve.

"Dear Father," I prayed with a quivering voice. "Please help me take good care of Sharon, and please, please, show me how to protect her feelings."

I blew my nose, let Lolly inside, checked all the doors, turned out the lights, and walked back down the hall. I turned back the covers on my side of the king-size bed, and slowly wiggled my way over next to Sharon. I patted the bump of blanket that covered a slender hip, took a deep breath, and smiled. Her hair smelled of sunshine, with just a hint of chlorine.

"I'll find a way," I told myself. "I have to find a way."

I paused. "No, God will help me find a way."

Chapter Two

Understanding

A good provider, like Daddy. In the dark, Sharon and I could have been in an average-sized three-bedroom house like the one I grew up in rather than the one bedroom apartment Sharon and I called home.

I lay still a moment in the thick silence and darkness, listening to Sharon's slow, regular breathing five inches from my face, remembering how my father always rose at five and left the house at five-thirty for the rock mine. When I was older and needed extra time to study, he woke me up, too. On those cherished mornings, I shuffled between sink and stove, making toast and the one cup of instant coffee I was allowed, while Daddy sat at the table, skimming headlines and perusing the sports page.

We turned on just the stove light on those mornings. The bedrooms were at the other end of the hall, but the hall was short so the overhead light would have shone under closed doors and awakened my Mom and my two brothers. Alone in the dimly-lit kitchen, it was like Daddy and I were spotlighted on a stage, the rest of the house hidden in the uniform anonymity of darkness, like a darkened theater, present but possessing no possibility of affecting the actors on the stage.

For those few minutes, I had Daddy all to myself, and we two, who were more alike than I would realize for many years, sat in a silence as companionable as it was absolute, the only sounds an occasional gentle snap as Daddy straightened the newspaper or a quiet slurp as I took a prolonged sip of my precious one cup of coffee.

All too soon on those mornings, he kissed my cheek then was at the door where

he'd left his work boots, coated with lime rock, the night before. Then he was gone, leaving me in the spotlighted kitchen, alone but feeling special and somehow right with the world, having already achieved an early start to my day, just like him.

All that and more flooded warmly over me as I slid out of bed, slowly, so as not to wake Sharon, and shut the door behind myself. The two long fluorescent lights in the kitchen hummed a few seconds before they flickered, then fluttered to full illumination. I smiled as I filled the dented yellow tea kettle.

"Now I'm the provider, rising every morning while it's still dark."

Pleasure in giving. After my devotions, I started the oatmeal. In less than ten minutes, the card table was set with two big bowls of oatmeal and a small plate of buttered toast, sliced on the diagonal and stacked straight.

"Just like in a restaurant," I always told Sharon.

It took four kisses on the top of her head and three long, slow rubs down her back before she could be persuaded to leave the soft warmth of the bed, but I didn't worry. The oatmeal would be almost cool on top but warm in the middle, just the way she liked it, by the time we sat down at the table.

While I waited for her to go to the bathroom, I sat at my place, leaning on my elbow. The card table gave slightly and I sat up straight. I tugged at the brown and white gingham tablecloth until the checks were parallel with the table edges and adjusted the paper napkin folded into a triangle under Sharon's spoon. Everything was as perfect as I could make it for her.

Breakfast was just as it had been for the past two months I'd been transcribing

medical dictation at home. Sharon plodded into the kitchen, flopped into the chair, and scooted herself up to the table. The hollow legs of the metal folding chair, and the chair itself, magnified the reverberations of the scooting, with a grating, harumping echo. She leaned over to take a long swallow of milk, just enough so she could lift the glass without spilling. Then, as if the effort had exhausted all the energy stored up with nine hours of sound sleep, she rested her head on her hand.

I stared, imperceptibly at her, out of the corner of my eye. Having the time to watch her slow ascent to alertness brought back other early morning hours we had spent together in a darkened house. In her first three years, before the divorce, her Dad had been asleep in the next room. There had been the sweet smell of baby powder, the incredible softness of the wispy curls at the nape of her neck, and the unaccountable secure feeling it gave me to snuggle her into the curve of my shoulder. It still, paradoxically, made *me* feel good to take care of *her*.

If she was okay, then I was okay, too. That magic had happened since those predawn moments in the hospital when I had first held my baby girl in my arms.

Too soon, breakfast was over, and there remained only the flurry of getting her dressed and off to school before I'd be alone, with nine hours of transcribing. It wasn't much of a flurry, though, and none at all compared to what it would have been had the two of us simultaneously been getting ready for the day with one bathroom. These past two months there had been time to nurture her budding sense of femininity by making a grand show of putting a worried, then questioning, then satisfied look on my face as I took time to consider the question, "Which socks look best with this skirt?"

with the same solemnity with which she had asked it. There was also time to laugh together when I discovered, as we were leaving the apartment, that my T-shirt was on backwards.

Her school was less than a mile away, but I couldn't bear to let her day begin with a sweaty walk in the humidity of our Florida mornings. Neither could I pass up the chance to show her, by my actions, that caring for her was more important than anything else.

Somewhere in my ever-growing stack of parenting books I had read that if a child has at least one adult who cares very deeply about him or her and shows it consistently through what they do for that child, then that caring would compensate for many other problems the child might face. Watching Sharon get out of the car, happy, well-fed, and fresh-feeling and walk toward her friends, with a smile, gave me a palpable pleasure. The radiance of that pleasure illuminated the hours of typing that stretched before me.

Grateful for the job. Even though a quiet, personality predisposed me better than most to endure the long hours of solitude that transcribing required, some days sitting down to type felt like sitting down in a prison cell. The desk, decidedly swaybacked from years of a commercial typewriter sitting in the middle, had that worn, institutional look that accented the feeling of being imprisoned in dreary surroundings, engaged in a dreary activity.

The dry cracked area on the right of the wood veneer desktop said that the transcriptionist who had preceded me kept her transcribing machine in a different spot than I preferred, while the long, linear gouges at the left said that she, or someone, had

been careless about dragging a metal letter tray across the surface. The black metal sides of the desk, also scratched, pinged a cheap, tinny echo when I closed a drawer too hard or whenever I flopped half the pages of my huge Dorland's medical dictionary back and forth in search of an obscure medical term.

Besides the tedium of transcribing itself, there was the discomfort of aching back muscles and tired eyes, as well as the gnat-like irritation of wearing a headset plugged into my ears, with the cord dangling from the vicinity of my right cheek, down the side of my neck, and over my right arm. The content of the dictation I heard on the tapes was as unchanging as the white sheets of continuous flow paper that rolled into the back of the Selectric typewriter. I'd pounded on that same faithful machine at the office before the company had changed from in-office to independent contracting.

However, the boredom and aching muscles, plus typing a couple more hours after Sharon was sleeping, meant a few more dollars than the typical secretary's paycheck. Best of all, I was, in effect, a stay-at-home Mommy for Sharon.

I dropped her off at school at eight-thirty, not at day care at seven fifteen. I picked her up, myself, at school at three-fifteen, instead of her being picked up, en masse, by the daycare van and then later by me at five forty-five. I had that gloriously long stretch of six straight hours between school and bedtime in which I could devote my entire attention to her. Before, it had been three hours of rushed time between six and nine p.m. into which we had to sandwich errands, making, eating, and cleaning up after supper, doing homework, and getting ready for the next day of school and work.

After-school afternoons. Picking Sharon up from school every afternoon was

as much a pleasure for me as taking her to school in the mornings. Our short ride home was filled with happy chatter, from both of us, as was our after school snack time.

She came home to our own little house and sat down at our own little table, with me, for milk and cookies, often home-made. She no longer sat down to a small paper cup of overly sweet Kool-Aid and two cookies hardened to granite by preservatives. She also received 100 percent of my attention and encouragement, not a harried smile and a pat on the head before she was dispatched, along with 20 others, to the daycare playground

"Mommy, I got an A in spelling and I traded Garfield stickers for a Matchbox car."

"Was it a model you don't have?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. It's a yellow Mustang, and it's brand new!"

She was not rushed, assembly-line fashion, through her snack by a daycare worker with good intentions but a short temper and a view of children as accidents to be prevented or possible misbehaviors to be controlled.

Some days after our snack time, we went shopping or ran other errands but most afternoons, while Sharon was busy with homework or playing, I squeezed in a couple of hours of transcribing. Her occasional need of my assistance with long division or world geography were welcome relief from the medical terms ringing in my ears. When I stood up at six-thirty and rubbed my aching back, I felt like Pa Ingalls in Little House on the Prairie when he quit plowing for the day and put the team in the barn.

Our evenings together passed pretty much as our mornings and afternoons: in close physical and emotional proximity. We fixed and ate supper, then watched

television or played a board game or two or read together. Then it was bath and bedtime for Sharon and one or two more hours of typing for me. Finally, it was my bedtime, too.

Tonight, I checked the door, turned out the lights in the front room and slowly opened the door to the bedroom. The drapes filtered the streetlight just outside our window. Fortunately, the angle was such that the panel of light it provided fell only partway up the bed. At the head of the bed, out of reach of the filtered illumination of the streetlight, Sharon's head on the pillow was only a shadowed, indeterminate shape. I saw one bare foot sticking out of the blanket. She had taken her socks off again. I gently pulled the rebellious foot inside the covers and slid in close to her. It was a bit cold. In the diffused light, I could see her face clearly, just a few inches from mine.

"Just like Laura and her sister Mary in the Little House stories," I thought.

Lessons from Little House. Sharon and I had read most of the Little House series, and I had watched most of the television series when Sharon was little. In those stories, Ma and Pa Ingalls and their three daughters showed incredible courage, self-sacrifice, and devotion to one another as they faced the hardships of life on the midwest prairie. The hardships included strenuous daily labor, cramped and uncomfortable living quarters, extreme cold in winter and extreme heat in summer, the ever-present danger of hunger if the crops failed, and not one item more than necessary of food, clothing, and furniture.

I remember countless scenes from the television scenes as well as the more vivid ones constructed in my imagination as I had read the series of books. My favorite

was of the two older girls sharing a bed up in the attic. Like the small bedroom Sharon and I shared, that tiny attic room had also been illuminated indirectly, although by the moon rather than a streetlight. Its occupants, too, had laid their heads down to sleep within inches of each other. The dim light outlined the soft, childish contours of each face so resembled Sharon's face, relaxed in sleep.

Another regularly recurring scene from the Little House stories was the family supper, with Laura setting out one bowl, one spoon, and one cup at each place. Over by the potbelly stove, Pa patty-caked with baby sister on his knee, while Ma brushed her hair from her face and wiped her hands on her apron of coarse brown cloth. The flickering light of the oil lamp in the center of the table provided the only light for the whole house, which was indeed a little house.

The weak light illuminated only the strongest features of each face at the table: older sister Mary's rounded forehead and wide-set, serious eyes; Ma's compressed lips as she tried to persuade baby sister to open her even more tightly compressed lips for a spoonful of stew; Pa's wide smile and spontaneous laugh; and Laura's freckles and braids as she gazed, with intense admiration, at her beloved father.

The stores, told from Laura's viewpoint, glowed with the love and pride she felt for her family, especially for her father. The ostentatious display of the Olsons, the town snobs who owned the hardware store, aroused in Laura not envy but fierce pride in her parents' hard work and ingenuity in providing for their family.

I flipped onto my back, stared up at the dark ceiling, and turned to look at Sharon's face in the semidarkness. I kept thinking about Laura.

"Her family had definitely been working class, but even being truly poor hadn't hurt her. So, why was I so worried about Sharon?"

Feeling poor, not being poor, had hurt. The answer came almost immediately, with tears.

"Because being poor as a child was painful for me."

I turned back the covers, fumbled for the old flannel shirt I used as a housecoat on winter nights, and felt my way to the front room. I sat on the good end of the love seat, the one that didn't sag so much, turned on the lamp, and picked up my slate board and pencil. I unclipped and straightened the stack of notebook paper so the three holes lined up, then stared straight ahead for a moment while I blinked away the tears. By the time the tears were dry, questions and answers began coming so fast I could scarcely keep up.

"Why had feeling poor hurt so much when I was a child?"

Part of it was those ugly saddle oxfords and homemade clothes. Details flooded back, far too many details, details that would have been better forgotten but which were instead so deeply embedded in mind and feelings that they played automatically, a continuous loop of hurt, disappointment, and embarrassment.

"The first memory I have of feeling poor was having to wear those ugly shoes." That memory felt like a fresh bee sting. Growth spurts had begun in fourth grade. The only girls shoes in my size that stood up to my tomboy habits were thick-soled saddle oxfords. Other girls my age wore trim little Mary Janes or skimmers that at least partially retained a new appearance. The white surface of my saddle oxfords, however,

gleamed in glaring white uniformity for half the first day of wear. Thereafter the scuffed inner edges of the heels and scraped outer edges of the toes bore evidence of my high impact contact with desk legs, graveled roads, and bicycle pedals.

With time, the broad expanse of the toe box acquired two sets of wrinkles running from side to side. Those dirty brown parallel lines remained, no matter how many coats of liquid Kiwi polish I inexpertly applied. The black saddle of the shoe had more luck at retaining its original condition although it, too, assumed a pathetic appearance as progressive layers of the liquid white shoe polish left smudges at the edges.

Looking down at those big ugly shoes, being the tallest person in class, not just the tallest girl, and wearing homemade clothes had hurt. I remember looking at my shoes, kicking through leaves while walking to school and thinking, "It's because we're poor, it's because we're poor. . . "

I thought about Sharon. Her clothes were purchased with birthday money or when relatives helped out with a shopping trip.

"Could she be feeling the same way I did? No, not yet," I decided.

I knew what was going on in Sharon's heart. We had a daily habit of sitting together on the couch reading, and before I opened the Dr. Seuss book for the week, I tapped her chest lightly and said, "Tell me what's on your heart, sweetie. How was your day?"

Sharon and I were close, but I would have to renew my vigilance. She was growing and her feelings would be changing as her awareness expanded. I

straightened the papers in my clip board and returned to analyzing why feeling poor had hurt so much in my own childhood.

"It wasn't only the shoes that made me feel so ugly and inferior to my classmates. Unfortunately, Donna Bates had a precocious sense of style in clothing, cultivated, no doubt, by a mother who dressed her in lace and crinolines every day in first grade and later, as we advanced together through eight more grades, kept her in the most ostentatiously stylish shoes, dresses, hairstyles, and lunch boxes of any child in school.

I remembered standing in the fourth grade lunch line one day. I proudly showed my girlfriend Shirley the red rickrack my mother had sewn on the hem of the matching top and skirt she had made for me. I heard loud laughter, whispering, then even louder laughter as Donna pointed at the hem of her own skirt, batted her eyes, and curtsied. I didn't need to hear the words. I got the message.

I remembered feeling even more inferior in sixth grade when I learned that rich kids not only had better clothes but they also got more attention from teachers and other important adults. The nucleus of the in-crowd, in which Barbara and Betty were key members, was forming that year. I watched all year long, from my assigned seat at the back of the classroom, as they chatted with Mrs. Scalding, from their assigned seats up front next to her desk.

The three of them talked before class began each day and in other odd moments like waiting for everyone to take their seats after lunch. I heard them talk about riding horses at Mrs. Scaldings' house and her son swimming in Barbara's pool, which was

still, in those days, a rarity.

When Betty's mother brought cookies and punch for the Halloween party, she talked to Barbara and Nathan and George, two other members of the sixth grade in-crowd. She refilled their paper cups and piled more jack-o-lantern cookies on their napkins when only crumbs remained. In the back of the room, Shirley and I received one smile even we could tell was phoney and the required three-quarters of a cup of drink and three cookies. I was still hungry, but too intimidated to ask for more. Betty's mother had the highest high heels and more jewelry on her person than anyone I had ever seen.

Then came junior high and high school. Ah, the pain that was high school! That, I decided, was where the real damage began. I was old enough by then to discern the true differences between my home-made dresses and my family's old sedan and uncarpeted floors and the Villager skirts and sweaters, shiny new station wagons, and two-story houses the parents of the in-crowd kids had.

"Why," I asked myself again, "Why did it hurt so much?"

Jealousy and inferiority—deadly toxins. I recalled having everything I had needed as a child and teen, and quite a bit more. Both my parents had worked hard to buy our three bedroom house in a new subdivision. Buying clothes, shoes, and food for three very active and fast-growing children could not have been cheap, but they managed. So, we hadn't really been poor.

"Why had I felt so poor then?"

I stared at the wall a long time before the answer to that question came into

consciousness.

"It was jealousy that hurt, pure, simple jealousy, not the actual facts. My family had just been working class, and I had not been happy with that. I had wanted what I saw children of wealthier parents had."

I shifted my position on the love seat, away from the sagging side. It was uncomfortable to admit I had been jealous.

"And for what?" I asked myself harshly. Hadn't I found out years later that the plumber and hardware store owner my parents knew had gone out of business because some people in our small town had stayed delinquent on their bills for so long. And hadn't I overheard them say three of the largest bills had been run up by the in-crowd's parents who drove the new cars, built the biggest houses, and regularly gave parties that were written up in our weekly newspaper's society section?

My parents had been working class all right, but they paid their bills. Furthermore, their hard work and careful budgeting had elevated their standard of living considerably compared with that of their own parents, just like the Ingalls' family.

"And what," I asked myself, "had prevented Laura from being jealous of the rich Olson family?"

After only a moment's thought, I decided she had absorbed four principles she saw in her parents' lives, ones I should have copied from my own parents. Laura's parents, and my own parents, had taken the attitude of: *don't complain; don't compare; be patient with difficult circumstances; and enjoy what you have.*

I looked at the four principles I had written and drew four smiley faces beside

them. There were many material things I would likely never be able to give Sharon, but I could, with God's help, give her the gift of an unjealous heart.

Chapter Three

Changing Attitudes

Genuine challenges. I took a deep breath, brushed the damp hair back from my forehead, and frowned as I looked upward at a glob of wet breadcrumbs clinging to my bangs. I sighed, removed the offending particles from my hair, and looked at the two notes taped to the door of the kitchen cabinet: Don't complain. Be patient with difficult circumstances.

Sweat trickled down my back and the asynchronous chugging of the little fan on the floor in the corner reminded me of an episode in the biography of Pappy Boyington, a World War II flying ace. A Japanese pilot had tinkered with the carburetor of his plane's engine so it ran with an irregular rhythm, almost stalling out, then revving up, whirring steadily for a while, then nearly stalling out again. By flying his specially adapted plane with its irritating carburetor over the camp at intervals through the night, he had successfully kept the Americans on the South Pacific island where Boyington was stationed from obtaining a good night's sleep for three weeks.

"That plane couldn't have been more infuriating than this fan," I thought as I turned back to molding hamburger patties.

When you make up your mind to change an entrenched behavior, common wisdom says the hardest part of the battle is over. Reality says, with roaring authority, that an even harder part awaits, slinking stealthily along, two days ahead of your good intentions. There, behind a rock it crouches, fangs bared and claws unsheathed, ready

to pounce when you're tired and discouraged, hungry and hurried, or whatever combination of circumstances and feelings has previously conquered your will. In my fight to stop my entrenched behavior of complaining, dealing with cramped living quarters was the hardest battle of the war.

Our apartment was small, consisting of one bedroom and one bath, a tiny laundry area, and a front room that, with the demarcating aid of a floor-to-ceiling room divider, served as living room and kitchen. Up to waist height, the room divider was solid on the kitchen side, with bookshelves on the living room side. From waist height up, it held open, etagere style shelves, with the center completely open. Behind the room divider, the kitchen area, or what was actually a kitchenette, to be architecturally correct, occupied the back third of the front room; it measured seven by 11 feet. Along the back wall of the kitchen stood our eggshell-white refrigerator, countertop, and range, with an oven underneath the range. Even though it could have been otherwise by virtue of being so far away from windows, the kitchen was a bright area of our little house. The white refrigerator and cabinets and those two long banks of fluorescent lights in the ceiling added and enhanced the available light.

Here in the kitchen area, as in the living area of the front room, furniture devoured what scant breathing room existed. The seven by 11 feet of floor space in the middle of the kitchen shrank to a mere five by eight feet in the presence of our card table, the fan, and the alarm clock, all of which were on the floor. That card table, as our ersatz dining table, had permanent, undisputed rights to a corner of the kitchen area. It was pushed next to the wall and the bottom of the room divider, which left only

two usable sides. Sol, if Sharon sat on the side next to the refrigerator when I was cooking, I could not open the door until she scooted her chair, and most of herself, underneath the table. Even then, the refrigerator door would only open partway and when I leaned into it to retrieve milk or eggs or whatever, I bumped myself in the head and bumped my glasses as often as not.

That loud-mouthed fan had also staked permanent claim to part of the kitchen; its spot was on the floor opposite the room divider. It's characteristic asynchronous clatter jangled my nerves nearly as much as the stifling hot summer air it moved in half-hearted fashion. It was unsightly there, with its cord in an untidy heap beside it, but it had to stay there; it served both kitchen and front room. A little alarm clock, its cord also in a heap, was the fan's permanent companion. It, too, had to remain where it was; there were no empty plugs elsewhere, and it served front room and kitchen, just like the fan.

After deducting the space demanded by the card table and access thereto and the fan and alarm clock corner of the floor, I had an oval approximately four by six feet in which to carry out my kitchen duties. That in itself was no great hardship; there was only one counter, its span a mere five by two feet, and the drainer and sink compressed four feet of that space, leaving a miniscule working area two by two feet. These Lilliputian dimensions were further encroached upon by the toaster, which was used daily so could not be put in the cabinets (had there been any room anyway!)

Of course, with space so limited, I never started a meal with even a few dishes standing on the counter or in the sink. That trained me to keep the dishes and the kitchen clean after every meal, and I pointed out to Sharon this was the way a house

was supposed to be kept, anyway. However, I was not so sure the way I washed dishes was a good example.

With only a single sink and a small one at that, I mixed up soapy dishwater in an old large mixing bowl, washed the dishes in that, and rinsed them in the sink. After , I dried the bowl and set it back in the oven, its usual resting place due to, again, space limitations. Our cookie sheets and broiling rack also stayed in the oven.

I reminded Sharon from time to time that most people did not employ such unorthodox washing methods and storage techniques and that one day we would have a large kitchen with everything in its proper place. Although I worried sometimes that we might have to stay in that small apartment until she was grown and I would never have the opportunity to show her what I meant by that, I tried to concentrate on the fact that she was receiving good training of another sort as she observed my inventive ways of coping.

Operating in that small kitchen proved excellent training for not only Sharon but for me as well -- even before my current emphasis on not complaining. I found the experience fertile ground in which to grow the good fruit of patience, especially when preparing a meal.

We both liked simple foods, a fact which should have prevented having to spread ingredients all over the counter. Like so many single parents, though, I leaned toward short-order cooking of two separate meals, one of traditional children's foods and another with foods more appealing to my adult taste and adult need for lower calorie intake. So the end result, preparation-wise, was identical. I may as well have been preparing an involved, complex meal.

Cooking a typical evening meal might begin with hauling out a bag of carrots, cutting board, knife, and scraper. The carrots had to be done first, because their preparation took up

the sink and two-thirds of the counter space. With the carrots scraped and chopped and back in the refrigerator to chill in their yellow plastic container (a former economy-size margarine container), I cleaned the counter, cutting board, and sink. Next, I hauled out ground beef, salt and pepper, eggs, milk, and bread to mix up hamburger patties. There was not one inch to spare, and quite a few inches too few, by the time all that was sitting on the miniature counter.

I used the ever-faithful, ever-useful large mixing bowl to mix the patties. With two hamburgers sizzling in the frying pan, I packaged up the rest of the patties in aluminum foil, put them in the freezer, cleaned the counter, and started a can of green beans heating on the back burner. Next, I took the cookie sheets and broiling rack out of the oven, put them on the floor by the card table, a further impingement on floor space, then arranged tater tots on a small pan and put them into the oven to heat.

I tried hard to see the humor in all the necessarily careful planning and timing and patient rearranging of bowls, food, pots, and pans. At times, though, like tonight, the best I could manage was a caricature of a grin, a resigned slow shaking of my head, and a tight-lipped silence as I fought hard not to complain out loud.

"It's so unfair," I thought as I turned the burgers over and put the ketchup squirter and mustard bottle on the table.

"The Wexels and people like them have so much and we have so little and..."

The blessings of obedience. As I closed the refrigerator door I saw the words, written in red, I had taped above Sharon's first grade picture and her latest example of penmanship.

"Be patient with difficult circumstances."

I smiled, not much, but a little, and with that, the tension began to ease. I shook my head and laughed, this time a real laugh, as I turned down the heat under the burgers.

"If I hurry," I thought, "I can get one of our special cheesecakes in the refrigerator before

Sharon finishes her shower."

I put the aluminum brownie pan on the burner, on low, and dropped in three tablespoons of margarine. By lifting the edges of the pan every few seconds, I managed not to burn the pan or the margarine and also not to mess up a pot, and consume more space, in which to heat it. When only a slender sliver of yellow remained in the glistening gold, I dropped in the package of graham cracker crumbs, tossed till damp, then pressed the moistened crumbs into the bottom and sides of the cleverly-pre-greased pan to make the crust. When I put the completed cheesecake into the fridge to chill, I had added only four more utensils to be washed: The fork for the crust, the small mixing bowl (brother to the larger bowl), the wire whisk, and the measuring cup with its translucent film of white milk.

As I washed the dishes and wiped the counter, I pictured how Sharon would smile when I brought out dessert. Her smile always engaged her whole face, beginning with expressive eyes containing a full and spilling over measure of the genuine goodwill that graces childhood, and ending with a hint of dimples and a mouth and chin shaped like my own.

I frowned. I could create many opportunities to see that smile I loved so much or I could make it seldom and only fleetingly seen. I could let her think about the many good things in our life, like cheesecake when she didn't expect it and picking her up after school. Or. . . I could make her listen to me complain every night about how hot the kitchen was and how sick I was of living in a crowded apartment. I could let her childish heart be utterly and completely enthralled with staying up late on Friday night to watch a movie with me . . . or I could complain that we couldn't watch movies whenever we wanted because we didn't have cable or a videocassette recorder, like "everyone else" did. I could let her savor each bite of tater tots and ground beef hamburger or . . . I could make it turn to sawdust in her mouth because it wasn't steak and hearts of palm salad like the Wexel girls had already learned to enjoy.

I could give her a happy childhood or . . . I could weigh her exceptionally tender heart down with adult-size worries until her sweet little face assumed that haunted look of despair seen on posters for Feed the Children. *My attitude, not the actual circumstances of our life, would determine the emotional atmosphere that molded her heart and set the course of her future.*

The sound of the shower stopped. Quickly, I stepped to the front door and picked four of the lazy susans growing by the fence bordering our apartment complex. By the time Sharon sat down, the flowers were in a juice glass, in the center of the table, the lights were out, and candles flickered next to the flowers.

"Oh, Mommy!" she exclaimed. "It's just like the movies!"

Thirty minutes later, supper was eaten and the dishes were done. I smiled as a genuine housewifely type of pride welled up at the appearance of our tiny kitchen.

The dishes were resting in the drainer, the mixing bowl had been returned to the oven, and the tiny counter was cleared. With the overhead lights out, the entire back wall that was the kitchen was dark. The silver toaster, its cord carefully tucked out of sight behind itself, glowed softly in the dim light from the range hood as it sat upon the circular cutting board Sharon had bought for me last Mother's Day. The counter looked larger with nothing on it. The yellow sponge rested in its proper place, just so, to the right of the sink. Over on the card table, the place mats were perfectly lined up on the edge of the brown and white gingham tablecloth and the fan, for once, was perfectly quiet, its near-futile attempts at cooling the air unnecessary as nighttime coolness descended upon our little house.

"How long before the movie, Mommy?"

"Oh, after I take my shower it'll be almost time. Why don't you read a little bit until then. That'll make the time go by faster."

Don't compare. In the bathroom, the two notes taped to the bathroom mirror---"Don't compare" and "Enjoy what you have"---fulfilled the purposes for which I'd taped them there two weeks before. Like lines securing a ship in safe harbor, they kept my mind from drifting into negative thoughts again as I dealt with another of the daily difficulties economics created in our life.

Our toy-size bathroom had its own peculiarities that required constant adjustments and coping. Like the kitchen, the principal peculiarity was its dimensions. It's four by three feet of space contained a sink so shallow you could not fill an eight-ounce glass of water under its faucet. The cabinet under the sink extended exactly one inch beyond the sink's overall perimeter, leaving four isosceles triangles of countertop, measuring a mere two by two inches, at each corner. The toilet stood less than a foot away from an almost child-size combination bathtub and shower, a tiny linen closet with a bi-fold door that could be opened only with the outer door closed, and one towel rack, which meant one damp towel always hung over the shower rod.

Getting two people, even though one was only nine years old, ready to leave the house at the same time required organization and advance planning, much like preparing a meal in the kitchen.

As I buttoned my nightgown and combed my hair, I stared hard at the two notes. The edges had already become wrinkled from repeated exposure to steam. The letters, written in felt-tip pen, had begun losing their distinctness as the red ink ran. The messages, however, remained clear and piercing.

"Don't compare. Enjoy what you have. Don't compare. Enjoy what you have."

I repeated the words over and over.

"That means don't think about the Wexel's three bathrooms. Be grateful you and Sharon

have an apartment all to yourselves and that you don't have to share it with four other people."

As I opened the door and stepped into the laundry room, a voice came from the bedroom.

"Is it time yet?"

"No, but in five minutes it will be. Come on and you can help me fix the blankets."

The apartment manager's brochure had called the tiny room leading off the kitchen a laundry room by virtue, I supposed, of its possessing a washer and dryer hookup. I have seen larger walk-in closets, but I cherished each inch of that five and a half by nine foot space. Functionally, it gave us another room.

I ignored the fact that the yellow and white striped wallpaper on two of its walls clashed with the gold and white paisley on its other two. I also ignored the fact that the water heater sat against the back wall, copper tubing meandering out of its top like two oversized chromosomes escaping out of its head. Jutting out of the wall beside the water heater were the red and blue-painted steel spigots for hot and cold water for the washer. Next to the water heater stood my beloved old bookcase; its presence alone would have made that tiny room special. That bookcase was an ancient relic that had long ago outlived its sturdiness but by no means its usefulness.

Only two of the bookcase's five original shelves remained affixed to its pasteboard interior. The other three stacked behind it bore silent testimony to my lack of carpentry skills. However, I made good use of the top. It held two jewelry boxes Sharon made for me in daycare by gluing elbow macaroni to cigar boxes and spray painting them gold. I

treasured those two boxes as much as the bookcase, of course, but for different reasons. The hand-made boxes were mementos of Sharon's childhood; the bookcase was a memento of my own.

When I was thirteen, I had saved allowance money to buy that bookcase, unassembled and unfinished, from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. When it arrived, I spent the whole of one cool autumn Saturday on the carport, putting it together and antiquing it, all by myself. It had remained in my bedroom for all the years of junior and senior high school, holding my small library of reading books, my school books, and the big red dictionary I used when I began writing and studying seriously, sometime in tenth grade.

That battered old bookcase reminded me I could do things I didn't know how to do and hadn't been taught how to do, like assembling and finishing a bookcase, and that I could do them by myself. Besides that, it brought back memories of long winter afternoons and evenings in junior high school when I first discovered there was pleasure in learning.

I came straight home from school and spent hours in my room, doing studying and reading beyond what was required for class. I read about Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theater so that I could understand *Much Ado About Nothing*, which our class was reading. I even learned to like parts of history and trigonometry.

I discovered the joy of writing about the same time, finding pleasure in using my mind creatively. I read all 712 pages of *The Web and the Rock* by Thomas Wolfe. And, although only one of Thomas Wolfe's novels was required for my English lit paper, read

the 743 pages of *You Can't Go Home Again* late at night, with a blanket stuffed under the door.

Throughout my junior and senior high school years, that bookcase stood next to my desk, holding my big red dictionary, my *Complete Works of Shakespeare in Two Volumes*, and well-thumbed copies of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *You Can't Go Home Again*, *O Pioneers!*, and classic works of other novelists whom I dreamed of someday emulating. As a mere hint of wind transforms an ember into a strong orange flame, just looking at that bookcase made me feel my dreams might just come true someday.

Enjoy what you have. Besides pleasant memories of my childhood, that laundry room held more recent memories, memories forged during times Sharon and I watched movies together, lying on old thick blankets and quilts, snuggled together like two little kids, like tonight.

As Sharon snuggled into my shoulder and we waited for the "coming on part" to end, I breathed a deep, contented sigh. In a few minutes, I was answering questions.

"Mommy, why are all those little tiny planes flying next to the big one?"

"Well, sweetie, the little ones are called fighter planes, which is what this movie is all about. Remember the title? The fighter planes stay close to the big cargo planes because the big planes are too big to turn around fast. When enemy planes come near, the fighter planes turn around and fight to keep them away."

"Oh, I see."

I was grateful for the chance to look wise in her eyes and grateful I could help her build a basic understanding of some aspects of the adult world she would soon enter.

"Just like Daddy," I thought, "and how he used to explain things to us kids on family

vacation trips, things like how truck drivers blinked their lights on high beam for a few seconds to let cars following them know it was okay to pass on a two-lane highway, and how, once the car passed, the driver blinked his lights, too, to say thank you to the truck driver. "

I smiled as I thought about my dad and realized how much he and my mom had lived by the principles I'd discovered so recently. I had rarely heard them complain. They had lived with a family of five, in a tiny house, for five years before buying the three-bedroom home I remembered moving to at the end of third grade. They had never spoken with envy of families with bigger houses and yards and the so-called finer things.

Best of all, we had fun when we were together, whether it was Saturday night hamburgers Daddy fixed on the grill or playing slap jacks and Monopoly around the rickety table in the beach-side cottage we rented one summer vacation.

I pulled Sharon closer to me and craned my head to kiss the top of her head. Accustomed to such spontaneous displays of affection, Sharon responded with an absent-minded kissing sound.

"Love you, too, Mommy." She never took her eyes off the dog fight between the Americans and the enemy.

"Why do they call them dog fights, Mommy?"

I smiled. I had so much to be grateful for. How could I complain?

Chapter Four

Changing Actions

Changing actions. The air was cool on my face as I stepped outside and locked the door behind myself. I took a deep breath and zipped my jacket up to the neck. My twenty-minute walk might be fifteen tonight.

Dusk had already seized the edges of the horizon and dimmed the bright blue of the sky. By the time I finished walking, full darkness would have descended, street lights would be illuminating my steps, and there would be complete silence. There would be no sounds of agitated parents, returning from a long day, lugging groceries inside all the while yelling at their sulky teenager to come help and then take out the garbage, and no TV so loud you could hear it through a partially open window. Such as apartment living.

I squinted, then smiled, as wind gusted through the row of apartment buildings. It was only mid October, and this was the second night during which the temperature was forecast to drop to the fifties. With luck, this could be a real winter, like the ones I had known growing up. Although my small hometown was less than a hundred miles north, the difference in latitude meant that as a child I wore sweaters for weeks on end, rather than a day here and a day there as I had done since moving to Tampa. As a child, I remember some freezes hard enough to make the grass crunch under your feet and the frost linger til mid morning in shaded and low-lying areas. That rarely happened in Tampa!

I shivered a little as the wind penetrated my worn out thrift store sweatpants.

"Yes, it might be a real winter this year."

Again, I thought of the Little House books, the leit motif of our lives. Being outside in the cold, all bundled up while Sharon was inside, safe and warm, I thought about Pa Ingalls trudging through the snow to return to his family. As I walked, my hands and feet grew colder while my back, as well as my mind, grew more relaxed.

Why, why, why? No, wait! I will pray! "Why" I asked myself, "Why do some people have it so easy and others have it so hard? Why were some people born with the proverbial silver spoon in their mouth and silk clothes on their back when Sharon and I had to struggle so. . ."

I abruptly stopped my thoughts. I knew why we had to struggle so much financially. We were little different from other single-parent families except perhaps, for those at higher income levels. Being without child support payments, except for the first few years after the divorce, didn't make us unique either, and neither did being in what I came to call functional poverty.

My income exceeded the official government guideline for receiving aid but our standard of living--by virtue of receiving no help from any source--was lower than that of families earning less and therefore receiving government aid.

I knew I thought about finances too much; it was hard not to worry. I frowned and shook my head.

"Help me, Father, please help me not to worry. I know You love children living in difficult circumstances just as much as you love little girls and boys living in affluence. I

know You want them to have the same things children in wealthy families do, Father, like a nice home to grow up in and a happy daily life filled with all the little pleasures that delight a child's heart. As Sharon walks, in all her precious innocence, through the weeks and months and years ahead that will end in adulthood, help me give her the life You want her to have."

With all that said, I felt better and occupied myself with enjoying my walk, noting out of habit but with genuine pleasure, the sights and sounds of being outdoors, sensual treasures like the brief glimpse of the river, the long arms of the grandfather oak tree, the crunch of acorns under my feet, and the occasional comforting coo of a mourning dove. As I walked, I kept thinking about what children growing up in wealthy homes had that I wanted to give to Sharon. It was still hard to be grateful sometimes when our lives were ones of unceasing thrift and hard times.

One by one, I listed in my head the advantages having plenty of money could provide, assuming priorities were right. Bit by bit, thought by thought, I began forming a plan.

As I predicted, it was, indeed, dark as I rounded the farthest apartment building and headed home. Once again, I shook my head and smiled. God had already helped me implement step one of my grand plan to give Sharon the same advantages children in wealthier families enjoyed---no fear of being provided for---when He helped me stop complaining. Trusting God with my most treasured earthly possession – my Sharon – was hard but I was getting better as I saw her respond to my efforts to respond to God.

Six weeks later, I was ready to implement step two: beautiful surroundings in

which to live. I'd pinched and stretched forty-five dollars out of the weekly grocery money. I'd flipped through back issues of Better Homes and Gardens at the library. I'd identified three decorating principles I felt certain would transform our tiny apartment into a less expensive version of the homes I saw on those pages. The three principles were: the absence of clutter; the presence of items of beauty; and the coordination of color.

The absence of clutter. Making the first of those principles, the absence of clutter, real for Sharon and me required two weeks of intense effort, using every spare minute I could squeeze out of the day. I had all but given up on making our home attractive, accepting that being poor meant our home could not be beautiful. That habit of mind had become a habit of living with clutter.

"No matter what I do," I remembered thinking, "we're still going to have that swaybacked old loveseat and that rickety end table with the huge scratch down the middle. It would not even make it in a thrift store."

Well, that was true. It was also true that we would likely never have a goose-down sofa, covered in blue and gold-striped velour, or real china, or plush carpet. But we could have a clean and tidy home, without a stack of bills on the coffee table, no withered potted plant and no skyscraper stack of books in the corner.

With all surfaces cleared and cleaned or polished, with all damaged items discarded, and with no stacks of anything on the floor or elsewhere, our front room suddenly looked larger, much larger.

"Now it doesn't look so sad," Sharon astutely observed.

I winced. "Yes, you're right, baby. It looks much cheerier, doesn't it?"

The presence of items of beauty and coordination of color. I could have stopped with simply cleaning up. Cleaning up alone was a dramatic improvement and spending money on decorating felt like throwing it away. But I had too many scenes stored in memory of the Wexel's home and its ambiance of comfort, ease, and beauty that seemed to fill the very air, and all the senses, with peace.

"How wonderful if Sharon could grow up in a home like that! And what if she loved her own home as much as she loved that second-hand bicycle?"

One Thursday afternoon, with forty-five dollars in five-dollar bills in my purse, I picked Sharon up after school.

"Mommy, are we still going shopping today?"

"We sure are, baby, right now. And we're even going to stop and buy a snack if we get hungry."

The department store at the corner of 56th Street and Busch Boulevard was *our* store when we had to purchase a necessity not in the weekly grocery money, like an alarm clock for \$3.99 or a new teapot for \$4.59.

"Here, Sharon. Put your purse next to mine in the baby seat. You can hold the list and mark off what we buy. I'll push the buggy. But first, we have to walk around the whole store. "

"The whole store?"

"Yes, sweetie, the whole store. We're going to buy a lot, you know, so first we have to reconnoiter. That's a French word for scouting out a situation. We need to see

what's available in this store for the items on our list, starting with tablecloths and place mats. And if we see something else that looks good and we like it, we'll buy that, too, just because it's pretty to look at. So, let's go reconnoiter."

We did, indeed, reconnoiter that entire store. Then we retraced our steps, picking up items on our list as well as some we hadn't thought about, like blue cushions with peach-colored flowers for the folding chairs, a predominantly blue picture of ducks for that kitchen wall between the table and refrigerator, and a few other things that were simply pretty to look at.

"Tell me, baby, do you think this lamp would look good for the kitchen table? We don't really have to have a lamp there but this shade of French blue would contrast with the dark blue tablecloth."

"Oh, yes!" was Sharon's excited reply.

"And what about these big blue candles? Do you think we could find a place for them?"

"Oh, yes, Mommy." Sharon answered with a serious nod and a deep squinting of her eyes that showed she was visualizing our kitchen.

"They could stay right on the room divider when we're not having a candlelit dinner."

The buggy was already full when I stopped in front of a stack of plastic Parsons tables.

"Pick out two in the color you want, Sharon. They are going on either side of your bed."

Sharon's eyes got rounder and larger, and her eyebrows disappeared under her bangs as she looked over the contents of our buggy, back at the tables, and then at me.

"Are you sure we can afford all this?" she asked.

"Why sure," I replied. "I've been saving up. And a lot of what we picked is on sale, you know. That stretches our money even more." The gratitude I saw was its own reward.

At home, we put the Parson's tables up first. With great pleasure, I unpinned the old brown tablecloth covering the cardboard box that had faithfully served as our night stand and helped Sharon put the four plastic legs of the Parsons tables in the holes underneath the square top. She smiled, a prim, little-womanly smile, as she aligned the box of tissues, just so, with the edges of the one-foot square surface of one table. Then she turned around and smiled, ear to ear.

"Looks better, doesn't it, Mommy?"

"Yes it does. Tons better!"

We didn't do much to the living room part of the front room. Just cleaning up the clutter had transformed its former unkempt appearance into clean and simple utilitarianism. The piano and television stand lined one wall while the swayback love seat, end table, and recliner lined up in close formation along the other. It was crowded, but all surfaces were clear, except for one item of beauty, another principle I'd gleaned from those magazines.

On the piano, a gilt-edged frame held Sharon's most recent school picture; an orange, brown, and gold candy tin sat on top of the television; and on the end table we

put the vase of artificial roses we'd just bought.

We turned our attention next to the kitchen. Off came the cracked gingham vinyl tablecloth that had covered the card table; on went the new, unstained blue. On went the chair cushions, place mats, candles, picture, and everything else we'd bought, all in a happy flurry of laughter and oohs and aahs. The last thing we did in the kitchen was plug in the tiny blue ginger jar lamp. Though it was only five o'clock, the kitchen was in semidarkness. Since it was the back half of that rectangular front room, it received little light from the front windows.

"Why don't you turn the switch on the lamp, sweetie, so we can see how it'll look at night."

"Okay." There was silence, the sound of fumbling, and a soft click.

"Oooh, Mommy! Look!"

I did look, and so did Sharon. The beige shade of the little lamp diffused the light and focused the eye on that corner of the front room. The French blue of the lamp did, indeed, contrast well with the darker blue tablecloth. The tall salmon-colored vase on one end of the room divider matched the place mats and the peach flowers in the medium blue chair cushions. On the wall, between the table and the refrigerator the silver frame glinted around the blue sky and the trio of mallard ducks gliding on widespread wings down to a pond. That was my own personal comforting touch that reminded me of Daddy. I'd put it where I'd see it every time I entered the kitchen area. He and my Mom had been thrifty through years of hard times, and I was determined to be grateful for the important things such as family, like they had been.

"Ooooh, Mommy!" Sharon repeated. "Now our house looks just like the Wexel's house!"

I blinked fast to stop the tears as I pulled her close to me and kissed the top of her head as I looked around our kitchen. An incongruous paisley pattern meandered over the vinyl kitchen floor and on both exposed sides of the table those folding chairs had gouged permanent scoot marks. A threadbare green kitchen towel hung on the refrigerator door, and the faded avocado dish drainer sat a mere two feet away from our carefully crafted island of blue and coordinated beautiful things; the money had run out too soon. But Sharon thought our home was just like the Wexels; I set my mind to feel the same way.

The luxury of regular, daily pleasures. I gave her a little squeeze and asked, "Do you want to have hot dogs and corn by candlelight tonight?"

Hot dogs and corn, whether by candlelight or plain old incandescence, were two of Sharon's favorite foods. We had them often as part of step two in my plan to simulate for Sharon what children in wealthier families enjoyed: regular daily pleasures.

I had always been vigilant about nutrition, but now I spent more time and money ensuring mealtimes were especially pleasant. Although fish in other forms was cheaper, I forsook being thrifty in this arena and instead bought fish sticks, the good, brand-name kind not the ones as brittle and tasteless as little beams of wood. I used toothpicks to turn tater tots into airplanes on the night I required her to eat four Girl Scout bites of string beans or something else equally green and equally detested.

I took as much care to ensure she wore clothes she liked every day as I did to

ensure she liked the food she ate each day. I was grateful to be doing all I could to protect her feelings, at least for a few more years while innocence reigned.

"Mommy, we're going on a field trip tomorrow. Can you wash my blue top with the red stripes?"

Mommy gladly hand-washed the blouse, rolled it in a towel to get most of the moisture out before hanging it up to dry overnight, then rose 15 minutes early the next morning to iron it.

"Mommy, Karla asked me to spend the night with her tomorrow and go visit her grandparents on Saturday and my good jeans are dirty."

Mommy did an extra load of clothes that night and walked to the laundry room in the middle of the complex to use the dryer for the jeans so they would be packed Friday morning and taken to school. Karla's family was far from hard times, but Karla's Mom had a beautiful humility of spirit that made me feel totally accepted. I had prayed for friends like that for Sharon, and God had answered.

Working together on such little details of her daily life made us coconspirators, of course. Like two kids in a playhouse, we plotted and planned all her grand adventures, and mutual anticipation imparted its sunny warmth to our preparations.

Another regular pleasure for my child. Another happy thing I determined would be present in the daily ebb and flow of my daughter's childhood was the pleasure of reading. The hard times had started since the marriage, and even before, but I had always found immeasurable, priceless pleasure in reading. Before she was even born, I determined my daughter would have that gift as well.

And, Sharon had indeed loved books from infancy. As soon as she could sit in my lap we had read the Original Mother Goose so many times I can still quote passages of Wee Willie Winkie, Jack Sprat, and Curly Locks. Ditto for our mutually beloved Dr. Seuss. Thinking of green eggs and ham or Horton and Whoville or poor Ollie Sard, who had to mow grass in his uncle's back yard, still brings back dusty little toes in brown sandals and long skinny legs, knobby at the knees and ankles like a little foal, and blonde hair, still baby-fine, on skinny little arms. The clean scent of sunshine always haloed her hair as we sat together on the couch after I picked her up from daycare.

The pleasure of reading was already our mutual delight. Now, with my new determination to protect my daughter from feeling poor, even if we were, I resolved to make reading even more of a delight, for both of us. I made a consistent effort to read most of the same books Sharon checked out from the library. And we went as she wanted to.

"Mommy, are we going to go to the library again on Saturday? I'm almost through with everything we got last week."

"Did you already read *Henry and Beezus*?"

"Yes, ma'm. I finished that last week while you were typing, don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes. I remember now. You were laughing so hard I stopped typing and asked you what it was and you had just gotten to the part where Ribsy made Henry lose the fish."

She was at the middle reader level and one of the first series of books we discovered together was the Little House on the Prairie. Little did I know, when I read that first book, what a rich and unending source of inspiration and strength those stories were to become for me. How like our heavenly Father to put guidance and strength in the path that my love for Sharon created! How wonderful, how wise, and how kind!

Chapter Five

Feeling Cherished

Thinking of others. I remember the winter of that year I typed at home with special fondness. Relief and hope run deep when a burden has been lifted and sunshine and birdsong have transformed a gloomy path. During that year, after the changes in my attitude and in the appearance of our home, I began to feel confident that being working class wouldn't darken Sharon's growing up years as it had mine.

The worse the hardships became, the more I spent the conscious, waking moments of each day thinking about Sharon instead of myself, channeling all my energy into making her feel loved, secure, and cherished. I knew she could remain undamaged by the difficult circumstances of our life if she felt I loved her, if I took care of her daily needs, and if some of her fondest dreams came true. With God's help, her simple child-like dreams about Christmas came true that year, as always.

Preparations for her Christmas, of course, had begun months in advance. Ever the list maker, I kept a list of the things she stopped to look at in stores as well as the near necessities she was doing without. When I noticed her pencil case was blackened from smudges and its cover was cracked so badly it would not stay shut, I bought her a new one out of grocery money one week and hid it in my desk.

"Mommy, my hair keeps falling out of the shower cap."

We had shared one for quite some time, and she was adorable with the out-size cap framing her angelic little girl's face. I bought a shower cap for her very own, with

elastic that worked for her smaller head.

The following week, I saw her wistfully fingering a tray of pencils and pens at the checkout counter.

"Mommy, can I have just one? Everybody else is using these now instead of the sharpening kind."

"No, not now, dear. We'll get you one later." I went back the next morning after I took her to school and bought two, one burgundy and one green.

The next little gift was two matchbox cars to fill the empty slots in her little blue plastic carrying case. The orange Corvette and blue Trans-Am would be the most prized in her collection, I knew.

Week by week, the tiny stockpile of gifts grew, but I stopped adding to their number only after my shopping spree at the discount Hallmark store. Located in one of the older shopping malls, it carried slightly shop-worn and discontinued items at bargain basement prices. In the past year I had found inexpensive but like-new candleholders, picture frames, and bud vases for gifts.

When I judged my little nest egg, gleaned again from grocery money, had grown sufficiently, I stopped typing early one rainy November afternoon and spent two hours looking at every item on every shelf in that little store. One corner shelf held tiny dog, bunny, and kitten ceramics on sale for \$1.50 each. These would be treasured additions to Sharon's modest collection of miniature ceramics. So would the commemorative birthday year numbers standing next to the menagerie of tiny animals.

The birthday year numbers were four two-inch tall bone china figures, with blue

and pink roses, like wedding cake decorations, sprinkled all over, and a different baby animal at the base of each number. A yellow puppy with droopy ears, wide eyes, and a pert little nose peeked out from behind the number nine. A wise-looking baby owl used the zero in the number ten as an oval doorway, and a mother and baby chipmunk paused to rest beneath the towering numerals of age eleven. With a deep cinnamon body, pale yellow face and tummy, the baby robin flapping its wings at the foot of the age twelve numerals would have to wait 18 months in my desk drawer for Sharon's twelfth birthday, but keeping him hidden would be no problem. And it would give me pleasure every time I opened that drawer.

Thinking less about myself. Once I had purchased the little ceramics, the birthday numbers, two felt ornaments, and two six-inch paper mache icicles, I considered Sharon would have enough little presents to open, and all for less than ten dollars! These gifts, along with the ones already in the desk drawer, meant that she would be busy opening presents for a good long while on Christmas morning.

The only gifts she would have to open, before we visited relatives later in the day, would be these that I gave her. No brothers or sisters would scurry around opening up their own presents, teasing each other and laughing together over the huge mess they were making of discarded wrapping paper and ribbons. That had been my experience at Christmas with two brothers and two parents. Hers would be a dull Christmas morning if I didn't provide some excitement. How grateful I was that I understood this and that God had always helped me find many little items that she would truly treasure!.

I took as much care in wrapping the gifts as I had in purchasing them, perfectly

aligning the edges of the paper with the edges of the boxes, making the ends fit as neatly as a hospital corner on a sheet. I carefully constructed elaborate bows with long corkscrew streamers dangling from each gift. I could be lavish because I had a huge assortment of curling ribbon purchased, of course, on sale.

Still not satisfied that she would have enough excitement on Christmas morning, I numbered the presents in pencil on the back in the order in which she could open them, beginning with the smallest, most inconsequential things, which this year would be the paper mache icicles and shower cap. Last to be opened would be the big presents. Of course, I found these ("miraculously") on sale, too.

One cool and windy December Monday, I stopped typing at one o'clock and put on my one nice errand-running/shopping outfit, which consisted of red pants, a red and white striped top and good shoes. I would have to stay up late typing to make up the two hours, but I had seen mirrors on sale at Zayre's. Sharon had no mirror in her bedroom, there was none in the front room, and she could only see down to her neck in the bathroom mirror.

A mirror in which she could see her whole self seemed the perfect big gift for her that Christmas. It would help nurture her growing femininity.

For fifteen minutes, I examined each mirror on sale, debating carefully.

"Can our budget stand the shock of this one for \$11.95? It has beveled edges, and the frame around it is real fake wood."

I leaned over and inspected the one next to it.

"The frame around this one for \$8.95 is only painted plastic, but the mirror itself

has unbeveled edges. Well, the image is fairly good."

I stepped back and forth in front of the two mirrors, comparing my reflection and trying to remember what benefit beveled edges gave a mirror. I took two more steps to the left and found myself in front of still another stack of mirrors; these were \$5.95, but the reflecting surface was so thin and the image it reflected so distorted I could not bear thinking of Sharon trying to use it.

"This one for \$8.95 will be perfect." I nodded to myself and looked through the five mirrors in that row until I found one with no bent edges on the cardboard triangles around each corner. I carefully balanced the mirror in the buggy, leaning it against the side with the edge protruding from the front.

Then I began walking slowly toward the front of the store, passing by a row of straw baskets and wicker ware. We had used a brown paper bag, its top edge neatly folded, as a bedroom wastebasket for years.

"This medium sized brown one with three dark stripes will do just fine for her second big gift."

Feeling pleased with myself, I loaded my purchases into the car, unloaded them, carried them into the house, and opened the attic door. (Our tiny laundry room had a pull-down ladder leading up to a small attic that greatly expanded the limited storage space.)

As I carried the mirror up the pull-down stairs, I noticed that the frame had pulled away from the glass for greater than one half the length of one side. With my mother's well-worn phrase, "You get what you pay for" ringing in my ears, I closed the attic stairs,

lugged the mirror back to the car, drove back to the store, and exchanged it for an \$11.95 one. I had to rush to pick up Sharon from school, and I gladly stayed up late for two nights of typing to make up for the shopping trip time. No matter. Self concern, on this day as other days, was decreasing.

Delighting in her delight. We did have a wonderful Christmas that year, and it included decking our little house, with its one little all, and trimming our tree. The tree trimming was a most festive occasion, of course, and little effort was required to make it seem so. That year, decided to decorate the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. On Monday afternoon, I tidied up the front room and swept it. Right before bedtime, we both cleared everything off the maple end table, the designated spot for our three-foot Christmas tree.

"Come on, sweetie, it's bedtime. We'll start decorating tomorrow."

I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the blankets up over her chest, folding back the top two inches or so as we talked about how much fun it would be to trim our tree.

"Mommy, can I do the lights all by myself?"

"Of course you can, sweetie. You have a good eye for where they need to go. I remember that from last year."

"And someday can we buy another Alpine village to go with the little one we have already?"

"Sure we will."

The next night, when the tree trimming and hall decking began, I put on a

Christmas tape, made two cups of hot chocolate, and climbed up in the attic to fetch the Christmas decoration boxes, handing them down to Sharon one at a time. When all five boxes were in the front room, we each took a sip of our now-cool (like Sharon liked it) hot chocolate. While Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole sang of white Christmases and winter wonderlands, we turned our little house into a Christmas land perfect for the two of us.

We assembled the red and green plastic tree stand, then the tree itself. As Sharon unfolded the tree's thinning branches, she carefully arranged them, just so, to hide the bare spots and crooked limbs caused by years of packing and unpacking.

"Mommy, does this branch look better up or down?"

I came over to stand next to her, then inspected the tree from all sides before I answered. Her little face was intensely serious. Although I could see only a miniscule difference, I rendered my opinion in a suitably grave tone of voice.

"I think its better slightly to the right, where you have it now."

After two similar conferences on branch placement, the little tree silhouette was deemed satisfactory.

Next, we untangled the cords for the lights and I assisted Sharon as she put them on--"All by myself, Mommy!" Then came my favorite, the beads, chains of red, blue, gold and silver glitter purchased one strand at a time over the last four years.

"What color beads do you think we should buy this year?"

"How about green? We don't have any green ones yet?"

"Should we leave a space for them?"

"No, I don't think so. We'll buy them a little later, when the stores have their really good sales on Christmas decorations, and we'll use them next year."

After the beads came the ornaments. Sharon loved the tiny foil presents and bells and stars while I loved the construction paper and glitter creations she had brought home since first grade, the Dutch girl in her red dress, the gold oval with her second grade picture in its center, the blue spire encircled with gold braid from third grade, and the green bell from last year.

Again, she was all seriousness as she asked my opinion about placement of the ornaments and, again, I responded in kind.

"Can we do the icicles now, Mommy? And can we throw them, like we did last year?"

Finally, we were ready for the finishing touch. Our little angel had cost three dollars at the Eagle Army-Navy store five years ago. Although her cardboard and lace skirt has lost most of its shape, and her angelic head had lost patches of its hair, she topped our tree perfectly. What her appearance might have lacked in fact, we made up for in fancy. Likewise with the Alpine village we assembled at the foot of the tree. The steep pointed roofs, frozen lake, plastic evergreens, and miniature ice-skaters used only half the circle of the fluffy white tree skirt, a mere eighteen inches or so, but to appreciative eyes, it was as beautiful as the elegant, elaborate displays of Hummel figures we say in store windows.

On the doorknob, we hung a string of jingle bells. The walls we festooned with our Twelve Days of Christmas and Noel! Banner, and we draped a four-foot spray of

plastic holly over the top of the room divider. Then, we turned out the lights and stood side by side, arms around each other, giving new depth to the phrase "beaming with joy."

"Ooooooooo!" was all Sharon said for a few moments.

Then, "Ooooooooo!" again. Those "Oooooos!" and those moments of silence told me she would be happy, and feel proud, every night in the five weeks to come before Christmas when we plugged in the tree each night.

Rejoicing in giving. . . together. Another part of our Christmas each year was making gifts to give family and friends. This, too, I managed to have Sharon perceive as fun. One year, we made latch hook wall hangings for everyone. That was the year she completed a twelve by fourteen latch hook kit herself and was still enamored with what later proved to be too easy a craft for her high degree of manual dexterity and creativity. Another year, we wove variegated yarn into plastic squares and gave each person a set of coasters. For several years, we made cookies. That first year in the apartment was a cookie year.

Although I had to type during Christmas Eve day, I stopped early in the evening to fix supper so we could begin our baking project. Although baking six batches of cookies would be quite an undertaking with our limited space, Sharon enjoyed the hubbub and commotion our baking project entailed. It sharpened her already keen sense of excitement about Christmas in general to turn our kitchen into a bona-fide, functioning cookie factory.

"Okay, baby, supper dishes are done. Can you help me lay things out for

packaging up the cookies?"

"Oh, yes, Mommy! I know where everything is. The tins are under the tree and I know where the ribbon and name tags are, too."

In less than five minutes, my eager, beaming helper had the six cookie tins, which had cost only \$1.29 each, on the card table next to our list of names, the name tags, curling ribbon, and tape. Meanwhile, I had been assembling what we needed for making the cookies and, of course, clearing that tiny countertop. The contents of the oven (extra cookie sheet, broiler rack, and small mixing bowl) sat on the floor in the corner next to the fan. The big mixing bowl sat in the left half of the counter surrounded by white sugar, brown sugar, measuring cup, butter, vanilla, and eggs. The other half of the counter was cleared of everything but a fine dusting of flour, the flour bin with sifter inside, and the rolling pin.

"Are we ready, baby? Let's start with the sugar cookies first. They take a bit of concentration, you know and you might get tired by the time we mix up all these batches of cookies."

"Okay, Mommy, but I won't get tired. I promise."

The two batches of sugar cookie dough I had made earlier in the day were thoroughly chilled, so rolling them out went quickly, at least as quickly as it could with Bran doing most of it. We had been baking sugar cookies together for years, for Christmas and for no good reason but fun at other times. We had our method down pat, but it was less than speedy.

I mixed the dough, chilled it, and laid out the rolling pin, flour bin, and sifter. I

sifted the countertop with a thin layer of flour. It was also my job to knead the dough and roll it part way out. Then, when it was a manageable size, Sharon took over, with me, of course, offering appropriate compliments on her technique.

Sharon also cut out the cookies, while the task of getting them onto the cookie sheet in one piece fell to me. I gathered up the scraps from the first cutting, kneading the scraps into a ball and rolling them out for Sharon to cut into more cookies. After a cookie sheet was filled, I put the cookies into the oven and took them out, but when they were partly cool, Sharon slid the spatula underneath each one and carefully put them on the table, a platter, or whatever clean surface was available so they could finish cooling.

This was the method we followed now, and we soon had the card table covered with cookies to decorate. The decorating Sharon usually managed by herself, unless she needed an opinion from me, which was understandable as she had an overwhelming assortment of decorating supplies.

In the matter of buying those supplies, I took advantage of the opportunity to be extravagant with several small, inexpensive items. She had a pack of green-colored sugar, red-colored sugar, chocolate sprinkles, candy crinkles, and a small tube of blue icing. Each cookie received her special attention. She put red sugar on the clapper of one bell, green sugar across the top of another, and a blue stripe around the middle of another. Another bell she covered with chocolate crinkles and white sugar.

"Mommy, do you think the Christmas stars should all have green sugar or could they be other colors, too?"

"Well, let me think. You know, in the mall they have those big blue and silver

trees at the entrance. And when I was your age, the grocery store always sold little Christmas trees painted white and blue and red. I think a blue star would be just fine."

"I agree," she replied, as she applied candy crinkles as miniature ornaments to the green tree she was working on. "I'll make the stars blue."

While she was doing the fancy decorating, I mixed up dough for the second kind of cookies we made that year, rolled peanut butter crackles. These were great to take for kid's parties and PTA functions because they always turned out just right, with a perfect crack across the top. They were a homemade cookie that looked like it came from a bakery. However, making them meant a lot of rolling out as they were a shaped cookie and had to be rolled between the palms of your hands. This rolling out was Sharon claimed as her job.

"Hey, Mommy! Don't you have that peanut butter cookie dough ready yet? Rolling out is my job, you know, and I'm almost done with these sugar cookies."

"Hey, yourself, and don't rush me, please. I'm almost done and the cookie factory foreman will dock my pay if he finds out you're ahead of me."

In spite of her good intentions, by the time she had decorated and packed all those cookies into the right tins and then rolled out one a half batches of peanut butter crackles, Sharon's pace was visibly slowing.

"Why don't you lie down in the viewing room while I finish up the cookies. There isn't much more to do, and *The Black Stallion* starts at eight o'clock."

"Okay, but did you really read the book four times when you were in school?"

"Why, I certainly did! I loved horses almost as much as you do, sweetie. I read a

lot of other horse books, too. The library in our town had more of those than any other kind of story. It wasn't as big as our libraries in Tampa."

In five minutes, I had almost finished the peanut butter crackles "Come on, Mommy! It's starting!"

I slid the last sheet of peanut butter crackles into the oven and gratefully flopped onto the blue blanket beside a very excited Sharon. After the shipwreck, while Alec and the Black were busy surviving on the island, I mixed the third kind of cookie dough--- chocolate chip. Fortunately, this was Sharon's favorite kind of cookie and I made it often enough so I could mix them on automatic pilot. From where I stood between the counter and the oven, I was as close to the television anyway as if I were in the room. Once I had a batch in the oven, I laid down for ten minutes while they baked. I hardly missed a word as Henry Daily, played by Mickey Rooney, showed Alec how to "throw him away" when he gave the Black his head on the stretch. By the time the Black had won his race and he and Alec were back home, our six batches of cookies were baked, cooled, and packed up in those tins.

Our cookie backing project over, Sharon and I still had more of a wonderful Christmas Eve to enjoy. As soon as the credits rolled for "The Black Stallion" but before the old Bing Crosby movie started, I mixed an apple and cinnamon snacking cake. In that pre-microwave era, a wide variety of quick-bake desserts were marketed. Snacking cakes consisted of one bag of ingredients, to which only water had to be added, a disposable baking pan, and a foil bag of icing to be applied after slight cooling.

By the time the next movie began, the little cake was in the oven, and I was

again snuggled next to Sharon on the old blue blanket on the floor. "The Bells of Saint Mary's" was a particularly fine example of good things about old movies. The story was sweet, the mood sentimental, and the ending happy. By the second commercial, our perfect little cake for two was ready. I put two pieces on our small real china plates, and put the plates, paper napkins, forks, and two glasses of milk on top of our green and orange serving tray.

"Oh, Mommy! That's so pretty!" Sharon scooted over and made room on the blanket for me and the tray. That movie and that little snacking cake were the perfect ending for our Christmas Eve doings. Then, we read the Christmas story from the Bible, and I sat on the edge of her bed, speculating with her about the presents might be."

"Now, Sharon. How late are you going to let me sleep tomorrow?"

"Oh, maybe until six."

"What! You can't get up that early, you know, if you do. . ."

Finally, though, it really was time for one last good-night kiss. I stood up and walked to the door.

"I'll leave the door open just a crack. I'm going to have one more cup of cocoa, then I'll come to bed, too."

"Don't stay up too late, Mommy. Santa Claus won't come if anyone's awake, you know." she said with exaggerated seriousness.

The best gift ever. In the kitchen, I turned off the overhead light, turned on the stove light, and put one cup of water on to boil. As I stood by the stove, I inhaled

deeply. The air was rich with the distinctive smells of baking: sweetened dough, chocolate, and peanut butter. I used the sponge to scoot a stray cookie crumb into the sink, then put the sponge in its assigned resting place, just so, to the right of the faucet. The smooth surface of the toaster gleamed in the soft light from the stove, and the counter looked strangely empty without cookies and mixing bowl and spoons and spatulas.

"Count your blessings, count your blessings," I repeated to myself as the hot water made the instant cocoa foam to the top edge of the mug. But my mental discipline failed me.

I sat on the good end of the love seat, put the cup of cocoa on the floor and turned to look at our tiny tree, twinkling in the semidarkness.

"It is a charming little tree," I told myself, "and lots of people have tabletop trees because they prefer them." But that's as far as my rationalizing went. The tears came then, the tears as well as all the feelings and fears that had been bottled up for all the weeks before Christmas.

"Surely," I thought, "she will soon see all this as it really is. She'll understand how really needy we are. She'll see how small our homemade gifts and cookies were compared to what other people give us. She'll figure out that she did not really have much for Christmas, but that I had just made it appear so. She'll find out that her friends' mothers don't buy clothes from Goodwill. She'll be ashamed of how I look and how our house looks, too. She'll see past the department store improvements and start thinking about our threadbare love seat and that wobbly old rocker, and..." On and on

went my negative spiral of woe-is-me thoughts.

Gratitude overcomes again! The pity party, fortunately, didn't last long. All the months trying to be grateful and to stop worrying and focus on the positive had, indeed, become a habit. I blew my nose and picked up one of the cookie tins we had just made that night. Sharon had made big curling ribbon bows for each one, and the name tags were carefully lettered in her childish scrawl. She had added a smiley face to each one.

I sighed and took a cup of the now lukewarm cocoa. There really was no cause for worry. For Sharon, making the cookies was an exciting project, and she was sure people would like them. She had decorated each cookie with a particular person in mind: cats for Uncle Ted, dogs for Uncle Larry, the old-fashioned rocking horse for Grandmommy, and dogs for Granddaddy. While mixing the other batches of cookie dough, I had watched as she carefully, lovingly put the finished cookies into the tins, making sure each person's tin had their specially decorated cookies and that Uncle Larry and Uncle Ted got plenty of their mutual favorite - chocolate chip cookies. She thought the cookies made fine gifts. I was the one looking at them with critical eyes.

When Christmas morning finally came and Sharon finally opened the presents, I reminded myself that the same principle applied to the gifts I gave her. I alone found fault with their price, their quality, and their quantity. She thought them charming and beautiful, from the one present I always let her open on Christmas Eve (the shower cap this year) down to the last big package she opened, the red and green wrapped mirror lying on its side behind the tree.

She was so excited that she came over and hugged me after opening each one. Later that morning, before we left to eat Christmas dinner with the relatives, I helped her decide where to keep her shower cap, how to set up a ramp for her matchbox cars out of books and a yard stick, and how to rearrange her what-not shelves to make room for her new ceramics.

As I observed her during those blessed two weeks we had the whole day together for Christmas holidays, I began to understand that she felt, to the bottom of her heart, that she was well cared for. She knew she was dearly loved, and she thought we had a good life together. And that understanding was the best gift ever for me.

Chapter Six

Feeling Content

The rhythm of family life. When I think of our life together in the years of Sharon's childhood, when the series of thunderstorms that was adolescence was a barely perceptible and muffled rumbling a great distance away, I often see us together in the car.

It is the repeated and regular comings and goings, to school, to work, or the home of a friend that establish the rhythm of a life. That rhythm is the framework within which special events and especially memorable adventures occur, much as rhythm is the framework within which grace notes flutter and syncopation charms. For some families, it is the coming and going to and from work and school that establishes this rhythm. For others, it is the presence or absence of a father whose work frequently takes him away from home. The rhythm of life for Sharon and me consisted of being home together, being away from home, or being in the car together.

Grateful for little things. . . that were really big. A trip in the car together meant we were leaving our precious little home and setting forth, together, into the big, wide world. The physical proximity of being in the car together enhanced the camaraderie and our sense of adventure. So did the fact that Sharon was a fully-informed, and involved participant. She was my partner, in every outing. It had been so since the divorce, when she was three.

Then, her skinny little legs were so short they had to stick straight out in front of her as she sat on the front seat beside me and held the eggs when we bought groceries. I called her "the best egg holder in Florida" every time. Now, when she sat beside me, her feet rested on the floor and she often had a pad and pencil in her lap, making a list of our errands in endearing irregular and large childish print as I spelled slowly.

"L - i - b - r - a - r - y, g - a - s,..."

"Wait a minute, Mommy."

"Sorry. I'll go slower. Are you ready? S-----t-----a-----m-----p-----s..."

Making much of little. Thursday was our grocery shopping and errand running day, and, as with other things, I worked hard to make the little I had to give her seem much. During the week, I asked her to add items to the list we kept on the fridge

"Please add ketchup to the list, baby. K – e – t – c – h – u – p.

I also purposely involved her in decision making.

"What flavor of jelly do you prefer, sweetie, and what kind of snack cake do you want for after school this week?"

And, of course, I talked about our weekly shopping trip both before and after it happened. When I took her to school on Thursday morning it was, "Don't forget, we get to get groceries tonight!" and on Saturday morning, "I'm glad you wanted to try a different kind of jelly this week. You picked out a good one. This sure tastes good! "

Adventures in true thrift. Our monthly trek to the u-pack-it bulk grocery, however, truly was an adventure. I didn't have to work at making it seem so.

Jewel-T was on the other side of town and any trip beyond the sphere of our little suburb was unusual enough to feel special with a capital S by virtue of that fact alone. But not only that, for our monthly grocery stock-up trip we left early on Saturday afternoon with an empty car and we returned home with our car interior as well as the trunk stuffed with enough canned and boxed imperishables to feed us both for the next month.

It is truly hard to say who enjoyed the whole process more, Sharon or me. In childhood innocence, her smiling face and the twinkle in her eyes told me she felt we were rich to be buying so much food. As for me, having that much food stored up comforted me in a way so fundamental that I nearly cried each and every time, simply out of gratitude. And that gratitude

has remained to this day. Although some days I do start out wishing I could avoid the work of shopping for groceries, usually sooner than later I come to my senses and start thanking God for His loving and faithful provision. As I come home and see the shelves and refrigerator filling up with food for the week, I remember the sweet years when Sharon and I set out for our monthly expedition.

Treasuring our family time. "Are we ready to go, Mommy?"

"No, not just yet, sweetie. I have to put some Kool-Aid in your lunchbox thermos for you and some water in last year's thermos for me. You know we'll be thirsty by the time we get there and do all that shopping. We'll be hungry, too. But, you know what? We'll just eat some of whatever cookies we decide to buy. "

"Or Little Ann oatmeal cakes?"

"Sure, baby. We can get some of them, too. We'll have a nice snack while we shop. You know we are going to buy a lot of food today!"

Five minutes later, we were in the car and on the big road, as Sharon called the interstate. I smiled as I looked at her. She was obviously in an expansive, the-world-is-my-oyster mood. The smile on her face was as big as Christmas.

The wind zipped through the open car windows (yes, even in Florida we had no air conditioning in the car) and swirled her strawberry blonde hair in semicircles around her face. By hiking her right shoulder up, she managed to rest the entire length of one skinny little arm on the edge of the window, affectionately and possessively. The gesture reminded me of young boys stretching to put a soon-to-be-manly arm around their mother's shoulders at church and PTA meetings.

Always mindful that she would all too soon be a young adult, I used every outing to explain a bit about driving skills or to practice navigation.

"See if you can tell me whether to go left or right at this next fork in the road."

"Look up ahead. See that car pulled off to the side? When you see a car stopped like that, change lanes if you can, so you won't go by them so close. It's safer that way.

At the store, we each got a buggy and two or three of the empty cardboard boxes tossed in a wire cage at the front of the store. At this store, you "bagged" your groceries yourself, in those boxes, which was another way they kept prices low.

"You can be in charge of your own buggy, sweetie. You decide where the heavy stuff has to go and where to put the bread and cookies so they won't get smashed.

"Okay! And I think I'll put the big box of laundry soap on the bottom rack, with the toilet paper."

Grateful for food. Off we went, to load our buggies with canned corn, green beans, spinach, fruit cocktail, tuna, spaghetti sauce, cookies, crackers, flour, sugar, and rice. Sharon's eyebrows disappeared under her bangs when I put an entire case---24 cans---of whole kernel corn in the bottom of her buggy.

"Mommy! Are you sure we can afford that much?"

She smiled so big I thought surely it must hurt when I put three boxes of strawberry pop tarts and four packages of individually wrapped oatmeal cake snacks in her buggy.

"Wow! That's enough for lunch every day and for after school!"

Jewel-T offered near wholesale prices by handling only generic brands and offering no frills, not even shelves. The fronts of boxes in which food was shipped cut out and the boxes were stacked, beside each other, making ersatz shelves similar to the shelves and aisles in typical grocery stores.

Getting our month's worth of groceries, and Sharon and me, wedged into the old silver Mustang was a challenge, especially since much of the food was in those cardboard boxes with

the fronts cut out. Things just wouldn't stay inside or stack very well. We managed, though, with much repacking, rearranging, and as always, much laughter and mutual teasing.

"Why didn't you tell me that box wouldn't fit in the trunk?"

"You know if we eat three bags of cookies and two boxes of cereal, right now, everything would fit in the back seat just fine."

Finally, everything in those two buggies was in the car, and so were we. In the front seat, Sharon rested her feet on that case of corn and held the thermos of Kool-aid between her knees. She bit into a chocolate chip cookie.

"Mmmmmm..."

I leaned back against the headrest and closed my eyes. The car, parked in the shade while we were shopping, was cool and a light breeze dried the sweat on my forehead. I bit into a cookie. Sharon was right. The cookies were good. But even better was my anticipation of a month's worth of plenty of everything Sharon could possibly want, or need, to eat.

Limitless free luxuries. Twenty minutes later, we were turning into the library parking lot.

"Don't we have to go home and put the groceries up first?"

"No, baby. Remember, Jewel-T doesn't sell food that has to be refrigerated."

Sharon spent the next half hour or so in the middle reader section, in a delicious state of indecision. Should she pick one of the few Beverly Cleary books on the shelf we hadn't read or save some for the next time? And which book in the Bannicula series did she want next?

Meanwhile, I had found two more books, one on philosophy and another on creative thinking, and had copied the Encyclopedia Britannica's 15-page article on aesthetics. How I loved studying whatever interested me!

I was about to meander over to Middle Readers to select my own books to be reading

with Sharon when the incongruity of a bright orange binding among all the black, gray, and dull green, stopped me. The title of the volume, "The Gift of the Deer", and the author, Helen Hoover, both were unfamiliar. Being a library edition, the book, of course, had no jacket to describe its contents. Per force of habit, I flipped it open about one-quarter of the way from the front, intending to sample a few paragraphs here and there every few pages or so, my usual method of getting a feel for a strange author. This time, it took only two samples before I sat down on the nearest footstool and just read. That's where I was, five minutes and ten pages later.

"Mommy!" Sharon's stage whisper sounded slightly accusatorial.

"Where were you? I've been looking all over for you!"

"I'm sorry, baby, but I started reading this book about this couple who both quit their jobs in Chicago and went to live in a log cabin, just like *Little House*, only this is in Minnesota instead of the midwest, and . . .

With difficulty, for the next hour, I turned my attention to the tasks of getting our books checked out and lugged to the car and of getting us, our books, and our groceries home and lugged into the house.

Comforted by a shared story. That evening, with Sharon all tucked into bed for the night, I poured some of the taco-flavored cheese crackers we had just bought into an old cracked ceramic bowl, Then I wrapped myself up in our old blue blanket, and curled up on the good end of the loveseat with *The Gift of the Deer*.

During that year I typed at home, reading any book for pleasure was a true luxury. With so much transcribing to be done I dared not strain my eyes during non-typing hours. This book, though, turned out to be special treasure. It provided

inspiration and strength for many years to come, just as *The Little House* series had already done. Somehow, I knew all that while reading those first ten pages in the library.

Helen Hoover's clear recounting of the same type of problems I'd faced clarified my own thoughts about living in difficult circumstances, things like making do and doing without, stretching each nickle, and inconveniences like small living space. Also, Helen and her husband had made deliberate decisions to shape their lives around the things they valued, no matter the cost to other conveniences or luxuries.

The story was of a couple, Helen and Ade Hoover, and their decision to leave the Chicago suburbs and live in a log cabin in the Minnesota woods. They both were kept busy just trying to survive and had only a few precious hours each day on their writing and drawing, hobbies they hoped to make profitable. The long, severe Minnesota winters were themselves challenging as was getting supplies like food and heating oil.

Every little task required great effort and planning. For Ade to make the trek to the general store to mail Helen's stories and his drawings required careful planning ahead so that, for example, he could chop enough wood for the entire day the trip would take and Helen would be alone in the cabin all day.

Paring life to the bone, though, gave them keen appreciation of the blessings usually they had taken for granted back in the city--- food, shelter, warmth, and companionship. Their simple life and their struggle with the elements taught them to cherish nature and the wild creatures they discovered lived in the same ten acres of wooded forest they owned. Chipmunks, birds of all kinds, otters, beavers, badgers,

and bobcats and were common sights. And of course, the deer.

Way beyond mere thrift. That first winter, though, the Hoovers nearly starved. (As they pointed out later, folks in that area helped each other out and would gladly have helped them that winter. However, the Hoovers were city-folk and had no idea that potential friends, eager to help, were close by.

Helen and Ade had miscalculated how much food they'd need that first winter, a fact discovered after the only general store in driving distance had closed for the season. As a blizzard kept all roads impassable for weeks longer than normal, the Hoovers faced true danger.

Miraculously, it was caring for the forest animals, who were also near starving that winter, that provided for the Hoovers. True animal lovers, they shared their corn with the deer and squirrels, and Helen dipped into the flour bin each morning to bake two huge pancakes for the birds. The squirrels stayed close to the cabin all day, and, gradually so did the deer. The birds grew so accustomed to their breakfast provider they would land on Helen's hand and gobble up the two pancakes she held, pancakes that would have given her and her husband extra nourishment they needed.

However, such close contact provided Helen with keen insights about animal behavior for her stories and it let Ade observe the tiny details that made his line drawings so realistic. Because of their love and care for their forest friends and the lessons they thus intentionally learned, Helen's animal stories began selling, as did Ade's drawings.

Courageously facing lack. Throughout their life in the big woods, the Hoovers

faced many of the same dangers the Ingalls family did, like the struggle to keep warm in below freezing weather and the necessity of stretching, beyond reasonableness, a scanty food supply. Helen ordered the food, that is, canned goods and staples for the entire winter, via mail order.

When the shipment arrived on day in late fall, they had to store it in the middle of what little floor space they had left in the little cabin.

I laughed out loud when I read that part. I had only to look around me to know just how they felt. I hadn't finished putting away all the groceries from the monthly shopping trip Sharon and I had made that day for our own big grocery order for the month.

Over by the window stood that case of corn and another case of assorted canned goods as well as boxes and bags of cereal, pasta, oatmeal, cookies, and pop tarts. Other boxes and bags stood on the floor by the door and even on top of the television.

I smiled. Lack of space, buying in bulk to save money and counting every penny twice were all things I understood. I also understood the struggle the Hoovers had to remain hopeful despite the odds, that their dreams of making Helen's writing and Ade's drawing profitable provide an income so they could stay in their beloved forest cabin, and keep on writing and sketching

Content with little things. Reading that book with the peculiar orange cover that winter night was like talking with an old friend, one who knows you well enough to finish your sentences. I felt like Helen Hoover had covered many miles by my side, if not physically at least emotionally.

Fortunately, I had learned that books can provide friends when I was still a very young child, although I would not have phrased my appreciation of books quite that way. As a shy young girl, I had found friends in books and had gratefully escaped into the pages of “Black Beauty”, virtually every book in the “Black Stallion” series, “White Fang”, “Call of the Wild”, “Beautiful Joe”, “Little Women”, and dozens of others.

As an even shyer adolescent, books grew in importance in my life. While I did have some friends and did participate in some activities, my greatest pleasure was always the safe solitude of reading a good book.

Making much of little, gratefully. This passion for reading helped, of course, with grades but most of all, it soothed the loneliness that accompanies painful shyness. And it did, indeed, provide friends, especially as I began to identify favorite authors, topics, and genres.

As a newly divorced single parent, this love of reading led me to self-help books that started the healing of damaged emotions, a healing that began to be completed when I finally went to counseling. But my favorite book of all, after I gave my heart to Jesus, was the Bible. Here, I found true friendship, comfort and all the love I could absorb.

Yes, love of reading was a priceless gift that had served me well for all my life. On that chilly Florida night, so long ago now, reading gave me as much pleasure as Cinderella must have felt at the ball.

. I walked the five steps to the kitchen, refilled my chipped brown bowl of crackers, and snuggled back under the scraggy blue blanket.

The winter wind whooshed between the long row of apartment buildings, paused, then whooshed again. Each rushing gust tapered off to a low, eerie moan. The top of the kitchen vent pipe clanked as it fell back in place after each onslaught abated. Florida was rarely that cold, and the weather helped me identify even more with the Hoovers in their Minnesotta cabin. I smiled and started another chapter, as content as I could possibly be.

Blessed in giving, out of our own need. Besides benefiting Sharon and me, the new depth of contentment attained that night helped other people our lives touched. Sharon and I both had a long-time friend, Darla, whom I had known before the divorce and whom Sharon had known since Darla worked in Sharon's daycare. Darla's husband left and overnight made her a single mom with a five -year-old and a new baby.

One Saturday, Sharon and I bought a big ham and cooked it. We also bought enough sweet potatoes, green beans, cornbread, and fruit salad for four meals. Then we went home and spent about three hours making sweet potato casserole, green bean salad, cornbread, and fruit salad. We packaged all but one meal's portion in freezer bags.

"Mommy," Sharon asked as we tucked newspaper carefully into the floor of the car and then added the bowls and bags, "I think Miss Darla is going to be real happy."

"Me, too, baby," I said, "She does not have much money at all right now and we have some extra so we should help her. She will be happy, I am sure. And she will be glad to see you, too!"

Miss Darla was indeed delighted. As Sharon and I lugged the food, plus the three bags of groceries, inside, Darla's eyes brimmed with tears. She hugged us both several times.

As Sharon and I headed back across town toward home, I was exhausted, thinking of all the Saturday chores of our own still ahead of me. I also would be up really late that night to make up for the three hours I usually transcribed on Saturday mornings while Sharon watched cartoons. But the blissful smile on Sharon's face told me she had experienced, personally, the blessing of giving to others. What a priceless gift to me!

Generosity, a valuable legacy. Sharon and I had many chances to work together to help others the next few years while she lived at home. On another occasion, a few weeks later, a girl in her late teens, a recent immigrant from the Caribbean islands, also benefitted from the generosity Sharon and I were learning together.

Sharon was at school when I met Keesha at the tiny laundry room in our apartment complex.

Keesha looked like the teenager I later found out she was. She lacked the maturity necessary to be on her own at 18, and that deficiency was further complicated by having to cope with a new culture.

In the laundry room, I was waiting for a load of blankets to dry. Keesha kept putting quarters in the slot for the washing machine and opening and closing the lid on the washer.

"Excuse me, but you need to turn the handle on the coin tray."

Keesha looked at me blankly, so I put my book down and walked over to her washer.

"Here. You just do this." I turned the crank, and immediately water cascaded into the machine.

"Oh, thank you!" Keesha said. "We don't have these at home."

"You're welcome." I said and went back to my book, but only for a few moments because she kept staring at me. When I looked up, she smiled.

"Can you tell me where the free telephones are, please?"

"Well, there aren't any free telephones. Local calls cost a quarter."

I invited her home with me to use the telephone. Over a cup of tea and a plate I heaped high with cookies, we talked some more.

"Keesha" I said "Do you want me to take you to the grocery store this afternoon after I pick up my daughter from school?"

"Oh!, that would be wonderful!"

Keesha's inability to care for herself was even more painfully obvious in the grocery store .

"My brother gave me this..." Keesha held out thirty dollars in ten dollar bills. "He said this will be food for one week."

"Okay, I said. Why don't you and Sharon start getting what you need in your buggy and I'll work on my list."

Sharon was all smiles, excited to be treated like a grown-up and, I knew, excited

to be helping someone again.

We met at the end of the second aisle. In Keesha's buggy was a six-pack of soda, a giant bag of candy bars, two magazines, and three bags of cookies. Sharon's resigned look at me and shrugging shoulders told me she had likely tried to encourage more sensible purchases but had failed. The years of grocery shopping alongside me had obviously taught my child how to stretch the dollars to buy healthy food and how to ignore pricey junk food.

Sharing God's practical wisdom. "You know, Keesha," I began. "Let me explain how you can buy more with your thirty dollars. I know you want treats but they are expensive. Your thirty dollars will not even pay for everything in your buggy already. Let's put everything back and start over.

I know some especially tasty things that don't cost so much. Let me show you. You know I'm on a tight budget, too."

Together, the three of us put the luxuries back on the shelves. The three of us huddled out of the way of other shoppers near the service desk as I explained to Carla the benefits of each item I wrote on her list: oatmeal in the huge economy box would be better than individual packets and would be a good winter breakfast; store-brand wheat bread was just as good as bread from the deli. Store-brand tuna, macaroni and cheese, and English peas would be a good dinner or lunch. Orange juice from concentrate, rather than fresh-squeezed; was better as was ground beef, rather than the steak she mentioned.

Our little car was packed for the trip home, just like when Sharon and I did our

monthly you-pack-it-grocery-store shopping. Sharon's smiling face was framed in the rear-view window.

Back at the apartments, Sharon and I helped Keesha carry her three bags of groceries inside her tiny studio apartment. As I put the bag I carried on the only counter space, a 12 by 20 rectangle next to a refrigerator half the size of mine in a kitchenette the size of a closet, a fresh surge of compassion washed over me.

Keesha truly didn't know how to take care of herself, she was alone in a strange country, and her only family contact was a brother who apparently had minimal contact with her.

"Do you want us to stay a while and help you put away the groceries," I asked.

"Oh, yes," was Keesha's enthusiastic reply.

Twenty minutes later, as Sharon and I walked back to our own apartment, which now seemed spacious, Sharon gave me a conspiratorial wink.

"You gave Carla some of our food when you first met her this morning, Mommy. I know, because I saw Jewel-T tuna and canned milk and nacho-flavored cheese crackers!"

Chapter Seven

Adolescent Agitation

Hard Times. Change, broad, sweeping, life-altering change, most often comes suddenly and when least expected. It is no accident that such change is often compared to a storm. Depending on geographic location, the most apt analogy might be a tornado, a blizzard, or a hurricane. Regardless, the sequence of events in life-altering change and storms are similar.

First, there's a frenzy of violent, intense activity followed by a calm requiring one to assess what was destroyed, damaged, and rearranged. One has to plan how to proceed with life in the new surroundings when the comforting, familiar landmarks of daily life have been forever altered.

These landmarks upon which we all depend include the hour of sleeping and waking, place of employment, manner of dress, days designated for certain activities. Perhaps, most of all it's just the feel of a typical workday that waits for you Monday morning, like a laid-out suit of clothes you can gratefully, if a little resentfully, slip into without picking up the burden of conscious thought or the irritation of unfamiliarity.

As a blizzard or hurricane or tornado changes the visible landmarks by which we navigate through the roads, so financial storms change those comforting and familiar landmarks by which we navigate our daily life.

Trusting God. In late spring of the year Sharon was in fifth grade, we endured that kind of storm-like change. My income taxes confirmed the nagging suspicion I had

ignored that being a private subcontractor was not the financial dream come true I had been led to believe by, not surprisingly, the owner of the company profiting from my labor. Imagine my horror when I discovered I owed \$800 in income taxes. It might as well have been \$8,000.

As I sat at our little rickety card table that morning, with papers and forms covering every inch, I knew this was another occasion to learn how to trust God more. There literally was no way to solve this problem that I could see. Over the years, I had told many other single moms that "God will make a way where there is now way." It was my turn now to walk that faith out in my own life.

Single parenting and "functional poverty": The year before, Dorothy Wexel had blithely encouraged me to start typing at home, saying, "Oh, you'll be able to write off all your expenses and part of your rent and other expenses and . . ." That might have been good advice for someone at a higher income level, someone who owned a home and other big-ticket tangibles that could be itemized. It was less than sound advice for a renter, with a low income.

That is one of the devastating effects of poverty and also of single parenting. We often have no one to help us make financial decisions, or at least ones that fit our situation. Dorothy was trying to be helpful but she was thinking from a non-poor perspective.

Dorothy's well-intentioned advice was particularly devastating because I had no savings out of which to pay an entire year's worth of suddenly due tax. Even if I had known taxes would have to be paid, it's doubtful I could have saved anything.

Lemonade out of lemons! Grateful that I at least had enjoyed an entire year of being a stay-at-home Mommy for Sharon, I began reading the classifieds. I also began reviewing my shorthand, still required for higher level secretarial jobs in those days.

Night after night, after Sharon was asleep and I had finished the day's transcribing, I sat at that rickety card table. I filled page after page after page practicing the basic strokes, short forms, and abbreviations I'd learned for Gregg shorthand in secretarial school ten years earlier.

For twenty dollars, I purchased one interview outfit, a gray and white striped top and skirt on a double mark-down. I scheduled interviews while Sharon was at school, came home, hand-washed my outfit and had it hanging on our patio clothesline by two o'clock. It would dry in the afternoon sun and I ironed it that night for the next day's interview.

Setting My Heart to Trust God. After several weeks, I was interviewed for a civil service position. Because the duties and the benefits looked good, I was hopeful; however, being hired by the Sheriff's Office, even for a secretarial position, was a long and tedious process that included several interviews, background checks, and so forth. While I waited, I kept looking, desperately and consistently. But I found nothing that would pay our bills. So I kept transcribing, hoping something would turn up before the extension for last year's taxes was over and before I had accumulated yet another eight hundred dollars of unpaid taxes.

I began working as an executive secretary in early December that year. That's when the maelstrom hit Sharon and me both with equal force and effect.

I woke up one Monday morning, like a person on the evening news revisiting a home reconfigured by a tornado or burned to the foundation by a fire, with only the chimney standing as a reminder of the former way of life.

Gone was my cherished half hour of a leisurely breakfast with Sharon and giving her the privacy of the bedroom and bathroom to dress as well as the presence of an attentive mom with time to locate a missing belt and disentangle a stubborn shoestring. Gone were the afternoons of picking her up from school, myself, and giving her a snack, myself, and talking about things in her little world before she went outside to play. Gone, too, the evening hours when I'd had a relatively untired body and mind available to rough house, help with fractions, explain grammar rules, and serve as an evening playmate for my cherished only child.

Replacing all those joys, overnight, was the need to wake at five-thirty to shower and dress myself; the pain of waking Sharon up at six fifteen; the scramble to get out the door at six forty for a dash to daycare at six forty-five and my bus stop at six fifty. The bus deposited me downtown, in one of my three work outfits, feeling country bumpkin awkward, for an eight-block walk to the office in one of the coldest winters we'd had for years.

I quickly learned that the old trench coat I'd had since high school did not keep out the chill of the morning when the wind picked up speed as it swept across empty parking lots and streets.

Working in an office in itself was a jolting change. I had worked at home, completely alone, for a year and a half and before that in a three-girl office for seven

years. Worst of all, though, was the fact that I could not stop thinking about Sharon. Every day was as wrenching as the first day of first grade. I knew I was losing something I could never recapture—the hours and minutes of her childhood. My hours and minutes with her now were, perforce, rushed. For the first few weeks, they were also often agitated, no matter how hard I tried to stay calm.

Soon though, like relocated houseplants, Sharon and I acclimated and I learned how to stretch the amount and improve the quality of what time I had with her. It required consistent effort but we did it. We both laid out our clothes and lunch boxes the night before, which eliminated much of the harried sense of the morning; we instituted a fifteen-minute relax-together-time when we arrived home; and I taught her to share in some household chores appropriate for her age and which I had previously done. These included making the bed, sweeping the floor, and taking out the garbage

I also took back some of our together time the new job had stolen by giving her as much of the evening hours as possible. After our relax-together-time when we first arrived home, between six-thirty and seven-thirty, we watched the news, cooked, ate, and cleaned up after supper. With the kitchen and living area both being in the 10 by 18 foot front room, we could talk, without having to raise our voices in the slightest.

She sat enthroned in the recliner, "Like a little princess, I often thought", while I cooked a mere four feet away. She reminded me to look me when the news story I was interested in came on, and we discussed what we heard. I wanted her to develop the habit of being well-informed.

I relished answering her questions about endangered pelicans and why bears hibernate and why the gross national product was so-called. At that time, one network gave the news at 6:30, followed by the other two at 7:00, so we had a chance to talk about how different networks

handled the same stories. The one hour of news, and cooking, eating, and clean-up became one of our best times together each day.

After baths and next-day preparations, we had our hour that was iron-clad fun time for board games, reading together, or watching something special on television. I actually stopped all my chores and gratefully flopped down on the floor on that old blue blanket to watch television or else sat at the card table, playing Battleship, Sorry, or Old Maid. Only homework Sharon hadn't finished in the afternoon at daycare interfered with that fun hour. After Sharon was tucked in to bed, I had about an hour, usually less, for odds and ends before a piercing need for rest overtook me and I tucked myself into bed next to her, always grateful for the time I'd had with her.

For the next two years, those sweet, sweet years before the door of her childhood closed forever, this was the pattern of our days and the comforting, predictable rhythm of our life together. Yet, even in the midst of that open, smiling innocence that I so cherished, pre-adolescent qualities and capabilities appeared. Sharon's new qualities and capabilities appeared to sprout, overnight, one after the other, like so many tender sprouts in a newly-sown plot of rich, fertile soil. The first of those tender sprouts of beginning adolescence was a growing independence coupled with a desire for and pride in assuming adult responsibilities.

She began walking the mile and a quarter home from school, and called me every afternoon as soon as she arrived. Then she got her own after-school snack and did her homework. Violence had not yet become a daily menace back in the 1980s, and although I didn't like her being a latchkey child, she was one of many.

She also began doing odd jobs on Saturdays for my boss who, fortuitously, lived

in the neighborhood abutting our apartment complex. My boss, equally fortuitously, had an endless list of home improvements and home maintenance projects that went much faster with another pair of hands, hands like Sharon's that, although small and not too strong, were eager to help.

"Mommy! Today I helped build shelves, sort nails and screws, and sort and stack some paint cans. Most of them were sort of empty, so they weren't heavy. Next week we're going to weed, water, and prune. Pruning is when you trim a tree so it'll grow in thicker.

Major Boon has a lot of shrubs and trees that need pruning, and you have to use sharp shears, so he's going to do that part. But he's going to show me how and while he does that, I'm going to pull weeds, all by myself, and..."

My kind boss, Major Boon gave me a glowing report every Monday morning of how smart and helpful and responsible Sharon was, a report that, coupled with her enthusiastic briefings to me on Saturday afternoons, drew a clear picture for me of Sharon's entire morning of work. Gratefully, I saw that besides the chance to exercise her maturity and independence in having a part-time job, and the blessing of regular, friendly interaction with a good father figure, she was being provided opportunities I could not give her.

"Mommy! I helped Major Boon start building a table and next week we're going to finish it and then we're going to replace the back door where the dog scratched it up and then. . ."

"Mommy! We worked outside half the morning, and I learned how to fertilize, and

then I helped him repot some of Mrs. Boon's house plants. It's really neat to repot a plant because you have to mix up some crunched up styrofoam like stuff with the dirt and then you have to measure, or guess, how much room the plant will take up and if you guess wrong, you have to take some out or add some more in. After Major Boon showed me what to do, I was better at getting the plant to fit in the new pot than he was, so I got to finish the rest of the house plants all by myself!"

Little by little, week by week, Major Boon showed her everything about taking care of a house and a yard that a father would have. Not only did I not have a house to tinker on and a yard to putter in, I lacked the knowledge of what to do, as well.

Besides the initiative of having a part-time job, another indicator of Sharon's approaching adolescent independence was her consistent and spontaneous initiative in pursuing her own personal interests. Not long after she began helping Major Boon with odd jobs, she spent two hours one Sunday afternoon sprawled on the floor, with an advertisement from the Sunday supplement of the newspaper, planning which flower seeds and what bulbs to order for the 12 dollars she had saved. Two weeks later, they arrived.

"Come on, Mom. You can watch while I plant the seeds and bulbs."

"Wait a minute, let me get my cup of coffee."

For the next hour, I sat on the stoop and listened to my child teach me some basics about plants.

"Now, the first thing you do is pull the weeds and break up the soil. I did that last week, remember, so all I have to do now is just turn it over a little."

I was careful to ask good questions and to smile only when she wasn't looking. She sounded so much like a parent teaching a child. I imagined she was using many of the very words Major Boon had used in explaining the care and nurture of plants to her.

"You want to find a good big stick, or use the edge of the hoe, like this, to make a furrow for the little seeds. . . and then you drop them in, like this. . . and put some dirt on top. . . and pat it down, but not too hard because. . .

All that summer and well into the fall the few square feet of earth in front of our apartment door and patio fence bore green and blooming evidence of the rightness of her selection and the gardening skill she had learned from my boss on all those Saturdays. Tall, slender gladiolas grew between the shrubs lining our portion of the sidewalk, pink and white impatiens flourished on both sides of the stoop, and petunias nodded their graceful heads all in a row along the edge of the patio. My little girl was blooming as beautifully as those flowers and just as fast!

More good qualities blooming. . . Another interest Sharon pursued on her own without any urging or subsequent help from me due to my own lack of skill, was cross-stitching. A school friend, whose mother had taught her, helped her get started with counted cross-stitch and she was soon better at it, and more persistent, than her friend. She completed a large canvas of trees in browns, golds, and yellows and took it to the craft store down the street from the apartment three different times, for the owner to show her how to knit tabs to attach the completed canvas to a dowel rod. It graced the wall over the television for all the years we lived in that little apartment.

Besides her independence, acceptance of responsibility and development of

individual interests, what would eventually be her adult personality and habits of heart were budding as well. How I cherished those signs of sensitivity and depth of feeling and capacity to love! She had a truly kind, gentle, and generous heart, which she demonstrated on my birthday in late August that year.

A birthday too sweet for words. She was waiting for me in the recliner when I came home from work and was on her feet before I'd completely opened the door.

"Here, Mommy" she said, taking my purse, my lunch bag, and my tote.

"Come sit here in the recliner. I've got something for you."

She stepped into the bedroom and came back, holding a big, irregularly-shaped present and singing, "Happy Birthday to you.: Her eyes danced more than they did when she was the recipient of gifts.

"Thank you, baby. What a big present and what lovely singing!"

"Oh, don't open it yet, Mommy. There's more."

She returned with a box wrapped in blue paper and a bag. The bag was obviously heavy. Its two ends were taped-together and topped with a big blue bow, the kind that cost \$1.99 each and that hang by a hook, individually, above matching packages of wrapping paper, enclosed in cellophane.

"What a beautiful present! But you shouldn't have spent your money. .

Overwhelmed beyond words. By the time I finished unwrapping, I was losing the battle to hold back tears. Sharon had bought so many presents for my birthday. I was overwhelmed beyond words

The blue teakettle, to replace the one that had long ago lost its whistle and had

long ago acquired its own distinct pattern of mineral deposits, had cost at least 10 dollars. The dish drainer, its predecessor equally as old but showing its age even more than the teakettle, had cost about the same and so had the ten packs of notebook paper I used for my writing.

It was not only the cost, that had come from three long Saturdays of toil in my boss' garage and yard, that made the presents unbearably special. Sharon had lugged everything home on foot. From our apartment, it was well over a mile to the department store.

"I had to make two trips, because the paper was heavy, but I didn't mind, and the lady in the store was real nice. She kept the drainer and teakettle under her counter until I got back, and now you have paper for a whole year."

I bit my lip so hard it hurt as I smiled through wet eyes.

"Now, Mommy. Come sit at the table. We have to have cake and ice-cream, you know."

"The individual Sara Lee cheesecakes and the gourmet vanilla ice-cream cost her another Saturday," I thought as I leaned over and patted her hand, no longer the dimpled hand of my little girl and not all that much smaller than mine.

"Thank you again, baby, so so much. You made this day very, very special. I appreciate all your hard work and how much you must have thought about everything. It's all just totally, absolutely perfect!"

She didn't blush, but she lowered her head, pressed her lips together tightly, and turned her head to one side.

Nothing ever tasted sweeter, or was harder to swallow, than that strawberry cheesecake and vanilla ice-cream. I struggled to get it past the lump in my throat and smile at the same time. I just wanted to hug her forever. How could she be so loving? And so generous? She was so very, very young still.

“The Gift of the Magi” dejavu. Sharon’s generosity reminded me of the timeless tale “The Gift of the Magi.” In this classic tender picture of a young couple in love, they each sell their most treasured possessions in order to buy the Christmas gift the other is longing for but has not mentioned.

Jim, the husband, sells his beloved watch to buy combs for Della’s beautiful hair. Della cuts her hair so she can buy her husband Jim a watch chain.

Loving, totally selfless sacrifice, given from a heart bursting with love – that was my Sharon. I was so proud of the beauty of her heart!

When I told a friend at work about it, she smiled her grandmotherly smile.

"It's going to be hard, for both of you, when she gets to be a teenager," Betty had said. "The two of you are unusually close."

I'd politely thanked Betty for her concern and promptly disregarded her warning. She had never been a single mom and she had raised three boys. What could she possibly know about Sharon and me?

Chapter Eight

Torment

I knew it was coming but. . . Anger is like . . . Well, how can you really describe anger? It comes in so many forms, from mild irritation to agitated frustration to towering, all-consuming rage. Each person experiences, and expresses, each of those forms in a manner consistent with personality, role in the situation, and, in the case of a teenage girl and her mother, state of hormone imbalance and reserve of parental patience respectively.

Irrespective of how it's defined or individually experienced, anger involves change, change that has happened, soon will happen, or that needs to happen.

One night early that winter, what had become a typical shouting match between teen and parent ended, just as typically, with a slammed bedroom door and Sharon's angst-soothing loud music. I stood in our little front room, the air still bristling with tension, and thought, with no small amount of irritation, at the natural order of things, the way growing up had to be, how adolescence had changed Sharon, and, of course, changed our relationship.

The physical changes, of course, were coming one after another, as were the mental and emotional changes, exactly as they were supposed to.

However, my cherished little girl was also becoming sensitive to the pressure to conform, to dress, talk, look, and act like her peers and to do and have the same things. That's where the friction was.

That summer, she'd starting working in a bookstore, 20 hours a week. She had completed all the work my boss had for her to do on Saturdays about that time. And she wanted more money.

Fortunately, her new job had increased her weekly earnings at the same time her new adolescent status had increased her desire for what those earnings could buy. Of course, she wanted things like mascara and eye shadow, magazines to read, movies to see, and pizza to eat with friends, all of which I could not buy for her.

When school started, though, her paychecks had taken a nosedive. Now she wanted to work three afternoons a week as well as Saturdays in a fast food franchise. We'd had several quite warm discussions, but none so intense or loud as tonight. Our positions were entrenched. It was all-out war.

"I am old enough to have a regular job now! I can still get my homework done and get enough sleep. IF I don't start working now, I'll never be able to save for a car. You can't buy me one. What else am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know," I'd replied, my voice thick with threatening tears. "But you are not old enough to work like an adult, and you're not going to!"

How could I have gotten so angry and yelled so loudly when I loved her so much? I slumped on the sagging blue plaid love seat, elbows on my knees, head in my hands, and closed my eyes. I prayed and cried at the same time, quietly so she would not hear.

Investing energy in changing ME. The next day after work, I went to the library and then a bookstore. At home, I hid the stack of books about teenagers as carefully as

I hid her Christmas presents. Over the next few days after she was in bed or otherwise absent from the house, I pulled them out and studied them as if I had an eighth grade final in algebra. Skimming two or three of them helped me see that adolescence had simply snuck up on us. It made me feel better to know that what we had been experiencing was at least normal, even if a little frightening. It was hard to believe my little girl, my precious little baby, was a full-blown teenager but the descriptions in those books were as clear as the advice they gave.

I had to give her more freedom, in all areas of her life in general, in line with her maturity level. I had to radically change how I was communicating with her with respect to what I said, how I said it, and why I said it. [“How to Talk So Your Teenager Will Listen” by Paul Swets saved our relationship. Here is a link to that precious, precious book.

I frowned so hard it hurt when I read the list of communication errors parents of teens typically make. I saw myself in every item.

"And I was so proud of having a close relationship with her, of being sure I knew what was going on, daily, in her little world and her little heart!"

There it was again. I had to stop thinking of her as a little child, as my child. I had to start thinking of her as a soon-to-be adult. If I didn't, it would show in my words, my tone of voice, and my face. Over and over again I read the lists of right attitudes and comments expressing those attitudes. I made a cheat sheet and tucked it inside a kitchen cabinet out of sight.

And, of course, I prayed, long and earnestly, for self-control and wisdom,

especially wisdom, about the job issue and how to help her cope with our finances. My efforts paid off, almost immediately.

The next Friday, when Sharon asked to stay out late after the basketball game, instead of immediately saying "No", I said, "Well, let's talk about that." We did talk, and we reached a compromise. That Saturday morning, she was tired from staying out with her friends and I was tired from sitting up writing until she got home. We were equally irritable.

"I told you I don't want anything but juice and toast for breakfast!"

"Well, excuse me! I guess I got your order mixed up with someone else's!"

"And why do we have to have such a small, wobbly table to eat on?"

Suddenly, I remembered the little speech I'd prepared for the next time we both got snippy.

"Sharon, we're both a little tired right now, so let's just be quiet, including me, until we feel better. Remember our problem is the problem, not each other. And our problem right now is this little kitchen and little, wobbly table."

This little speech I repeated countless times in the ensuing teen years, sometimes out loud, many times silently, with one or the other of our problems plugged as the subject: the lack of money, the lack of a car for Sharon, or the lack of privacy and space in the apartment.

Investing in little luxuries. Besides investing my emotional energy in maintaining our relationship, I determined to invest monetarily as well. I made it an irregularly regular habit to surprise her with a pizza date or a trip to the mall for the

stone-washed jeans, hemp sandals, or silver anklet I knew her friends had but that she hadn't even mentioned.

She would be a teenager only once, and she had already spent so much of that tumultuous time of her life working too hard and doing without too much. I knew she cherished each little unexpected pleasure as much as she had those two unexpected mechanical pencils the Christmas she was ten.

The return on my monetary investment in our relationship was her smiling face and hours and hours and hours of conversation, sometimes deep, often silly, and frequently emotional.

Just like the parenting books promised, there was something about being in a restaurant or a store, anywhere but home, that made talking easier. In those different settings, away from home and the worries and cares of routine, we both relaxed and assumed different roles. In those few precious moments, she became more adult, and I became at least a passing resemblance to a young adult again. We talked together like friends.

Making much of little. I had another priceless opportunity to show my love and support when she began working in fast food. (Yes, she eventually won that argument.) Three afternoons a week, I drove straight home from work, picked her up, and took her to her work, drove home, and then returned for her at 9:30 p.m.

We then went home, for her supper. Covered and still warm on the stove stood the hamburger and corn I cooked just before leaving for the five-minute drive to her work. I quickly put these on a plate in front of the television. While we watched her

favorite rerunning sitcom I had taped, she ate supper and completed any homework she hadn't finished earlier.

If she needed something from the bedroom, I jumped out of my chair immediately, clapped my hands and said, "Wonderful! Another chance to serve you my queen!"

This behavior, which I did often throughout the week, always brought a smile, even if a little one sometimes, to her face. And she always said a sincere "Thank you" when I handed her the bookbag or marker or whatever she needed.

I understood she was simply worn-out after her long day, and that having someone else help, even a little, made a huge difference.

On Saturdays, I took her to and from work. Her schedule and her needs determined my schedule.

The atmosphere in our home didn't return to the peaceful bliss of her childhood, but it did stabilize, and none too quickly. Other unavoidable rites of passage, like the first boyfriend, friends whose opinions---horrors!---differed from mine, and a growing dislike of school assaulted us, one by one, with scarcely one deep breath between.

Investing in memories. Soon it was Christmas and this year, her Christmas gifts required careful thought.

"What would she most like? What would be a true luxury for her, something she wanted to buy but couldn't afford because she was saving for a car?"

With the same conspiratorial glee of four years ago, I spent a couple of hours in that same department store we'd shopped in six years ago, going from linens to

housewares to linens and back.

'Let's see. . . If I stay focused on making her bedroom look good, maybe that will make the biggest difference in how she feels every day when she comes home.

"This striped bedspread, in mocha and black, with this wicker wastebasket, these two gilt-edged mirrors, one over the hutch and the other over the chest of drawers, and this wood veneer tape holder, and I think, yeah, I'm sure she can put this night stand together, just like she did with the hutch. And it's on sale, too!"

Late Christmas morning, surrounded by torn wrapping paper, boxes, ribbons, and bows, as she opened the last gift, she looked at me and smiled, then got up and gave me more kisses and hugs.

"Thanks, Mommy. You got me everything I wanted to get but couldn't buy myself."

Chapter Nine

Sacrifice

Nearly grown . . . already! When the child you once cradled in your arms stands eye to eye with you, instinct helps parents cut mental apron strings kept tied by sentiment. And if nature's natural process of maturation doesn't achieve that necessary loosening of control for parents in modern times, the unnatural phenomenon of seeing your child drive off in the family car, alone, delivers a jolt sufficiently bone-shaking for even the most sentimental of souls.

One day in June, the summer before her junior year, I stood in a parking lot, squinting into the midmorning sun as Sharon took the driving portion of the test for her operator's license. In the middle of the nearly empty mall parking lot, our faithful little red hatchback seemed small as Sharon expertly made left and right turns, stopped, started, and backed up. With the examiner in the passenger seat, I saw how Sharon and I must have looked all those years as we went to work and school and ran our errands, but my smile quickly faded. It felt like a great weight was pressing down on my chest.

"They say divorce hurts because it is the tearing asunder of one flesh," I reflected. "Surely, letting a child be a grown-up hurts for the same reason."

That Saturday, Sharon took the car to work, alone, leaving me at home, unable to concentrate enough to write. It took a couple of weeks, with her taking the car, alone, to work on weeknights before the disoriented feeling of being home, car-less, and the

worry for her safety, faded.

The process of overcoming obstacles. It helped to focus on how much relief driving herself to work and other places gave her. It also helped to be grateful for the process I was to see repeated in her young life as she found her own way to cope with the difficulties being working class created. The process consisted of three stages: increasing agitation, understandable anger, then amazing adaptability. It was easy to see this process as I reviewed all the problems our car situation had created for my teenager. She'd been mildly agitated at first with problems associated with not having a car, like riding that undependable bus to work that summer and having to rely on friends for rides when I had the car. Understandably, that agitation changed to smoldering anger as time went on, our hatchback began showing its age, and her friends kept getting their own cars.

"I'm sick and tired of this beat-up old oven on wheels! And who else has a car without a radio?"

I didn't blame her; it was an inferno for all but a few weeks of our short Florida winter. And what teen can be away from music for long stretches of time unless they're in a classroom or with friends?

That first Saturday after she got her operator's license, though, she came home from work at 6:15, full of energy.

"Come on, Mom. If you help me, we can wash and wax the car before it gets dark."

Well, I did help and we did get little red Fred washed and waxed and buffed

before the last swathe of orange in the sky had turned deep blue then black. Long after the first stars were visible, she kept working on what she knew would be her only car for a long time in the future. She shook the worn-out floor mats, cleaned the windows, and laced up the leather steering wheel cover she had bought on the way home.

"The steering wheel gets hot, you know, Mom, when the car's been sitting in the sun."

It was raining, a slow, gentle rain, that night when she finally came inside, and it was raining again, two weeks later, when we sewed the seat covers. We had purchased terry velour beach towels at sixty percent off, to conceal the ripped gray vinyl and exposed mustard yellow padding.

"Come on, Mom. It's not raining that hard. If we measure one more time, we can finish tonight. Let's go. We can run between the drops!"

Off we went, carrying the cut-out and partly assembled beach towel seat covers, elastic, pins, notepad, and pencil, leaping off the stoop, running down the sidewalk, around our patio and the corner of our building, down the steps, down another sidewalk between two buildings, and finally flinging ourselves, panting, into the front seats.

"Well, it's a bit damp today at the family seat cover factory, here in Van Nuys, but the workers aren't complaining. They're dotting their Ts and crossing their Is."

Through rain-spattered glasses, I gave Sharon a mock frown, then took the useless glasses off and squinted at her.

"Okay, Mrs. Seuss. Quit showing off your memory from ten years ago and help me figure out how we're going to make all this extra fabric snug up around the bottom

and back."

With more good-natured teasing ("Hey! What's the matter, Mom! Can't get your bifocals focused?") she climbed into the back seat and did exactly that.

Those seat covers gave little red Fred quite a bit of personality and finished the transformation of his image in Sharon's mind. I never heard another complaint about his appearance, and she thanked me often for letting her use the little red hatchback.

This agitation-anger-adaptability process helped Sharon cope with other unavoidable consequences of our financial lack. She learned to buy clothes only when they were on sale and to develop her own style rather than copying current high-priced trends. She went to movies with her friends but only occasionally and she went out for pizza but only ordered a coke, unless I had managed to squeeze a five or ten dollar bill from some previously untrimmed corner of our budget.

Helping her find her own way. Although she was coping exceedingly well with everything, including the difficulties of being working class, the inevitable finally happened. Maybe it was one too many cokes when all her friends had pizza. Maybe it was too many times flipping hangars on the sale rack. Most likely it was those and similar things combined with the fatigue of school and two part-time jobs that caused the sudden school burnout. She went from As and talking about college to Cs and talking about dropping out.

Too late, I realized what was going on. Too late I saw I should have said no to the Saturday job at the bookstore. (Mom, what am I supposed to do on Saturday, anyway? I may as well work.") No doubt, my own tendency to push myself too hard

blinded me to the same trait in my daughter. That made me feel even more responsible for her frustration and apathy.

Her struggle took me back to my own teenage years, to that long walk home every day along the access road to our high school while most of my classmates drove by in their own cars or friends' cars. I remembered tears of rage as my height compounded the problem of finding affordable versions of Villager skirts and Campus jackets, which were the unofficial uniform, and the necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for acceptance in the in crowd.

Again, I asked myself, "Where have I failed? What did I do wrong? I got over feeling bad about our being working class when she was ten years old. She hasn't grown up with all the resentments and hurt and anger I had. She was happy with our little life and the things we had! What did I do wrong?"

That question was never far from my mind those next few months, three nights each week when I sat in the parking lot, watching her take a couple more orders before the clock reached nine o'clock. It hurt to see her have to work, to know she'd been on her feet since five o'clock, walking on a concrete floor between fryer, shake machine, and counter when her friends were home doing homework or napping or out roaming the mall for one more purse or necklace or pair of pants they didn't need but that Sharon would have to work two evenings to pay for.

"No wonder she's disgusted with everything," I thought as I watched her walk through the door.

She yanked the despised hat off her head before she closed the car door and

slid the scrunchie off her ponytail and shook out her shoulder-length auburn hair. Her shoulders slumped and she dropped her overfilled book bag onto the floor of the passenger seat.

My, "How was it tonight, baby?" elicited a typical recitation about rude customers, balky equipment, and unfair managers. AS we drove home through the darkened streets, each time the little red hatchback flashed under a streetlight, I glanced at her face, eager for some sign she was relaxing.

I diligently kept the conversation focused on her and her day, using the reflective listening techniques I'd learned in one of those parenting books to help her experience, and thereby diffuse, the tension she'd had to bottle up all day.

Ten minutes after we walked through the front door, she was sitting on the floor, in boxer shorts and white cotton T-shirt, watching the sitcom I'd videotaped while she was working and eating the hamburger and whole kernel corn I'd cooked right before I left and put in the oven to keep warm.

Little, but big, free comforts. Every night, I made sure she came home to a tidy front room and the comfort of an orderly bedroom. The three of four tops and pants she'd tried on that morning, trying to create a new outfit for school, were back in their places in the closet as were the three belts and two pairs of shoes. Another pair of boxer shorts and T-shirt, her at home garb and ersatz pajamas, were off the floor and in the laundry basket; her favorite Teddy bear was on the pillow of her turned-down bed; and those two mirrors I'd given her at Christmas reflected the soft glow of lamplight.

As was typical for most families with teens, we had little time together each

weekday, but I determined to use each moment of it to demonstrate my support and love. Just as long ago I'd made our penny-for-your-thoughts chat an informal, daily habit, I now made opportunities-to-serve-you an informal formality.

I first got the idea one night after she'd finished that hamburger and corn and that sitcom. She propped herself sideways against the couch and half smiled, half frowned at me.

"I need to do a little homework, and my book bag is in the bedroom."

I literally jumped to my feet, clapped my hands, and said, "Oh, goody! Another chance to serve you, my queen!"

That first time this happened, admittedly, it didn't have the desired effect. I got a quizzical look, then a patronizing, "Oh, Mom. Get real!" Soon, though, she began using my energy and my hands and feet, just as I intended, to supplement and ease her own efforts.

"Okay, Mom. You can go get my jacket out of the back seat. I forgot it when we came home" or "Here's another chance to serve, Mom. You can pack my book bag for tomorrow. I need my Algebra and English books from the front room and my work uniform from the closet."

She never failed to give a sincere "Thank You, Mom" and a sheepish grin, but just knowing I'd saved her tired back and feet a few steps and amused her in the process was thanks enough.

Gradually, the slight reduction in her work hours I insisted upon and my little efforts helped relieve some of the burnout behavior and feelings. However, the intense

loathing of school remained as did her desire for independence and for the bigger paycheck full-time work would bring. Reluctantly, I accepted three facts: one, she apparently didn't want to go to college and would likely flunk or drop out if I tried to force her; two, she would probably move into an apartment with her two best friends as soon as she graduated from high school; and three, I could do little else at this point in her life to help her accept the difficulties of being working class, at least those parts that one can't change. I could only help and wait for her to find her own way and hope what I had told her and what she had seen in my life would speak to her.

A requisite indulgence. Having accepted all that, I decided we both needed a vacation—a real, seven-days-off-no-work-at-all vacation, not the scattered day off here and there I'd taken to coincide with school holidays and on which lack of money had kept us home. I needed the rest, but Sharon needed it more. With her part-time jobs and school, not to mention the stress of growing up, she'd been running at full steam for two years.

We decided we would both take time off late in the summer. That would give me time to save a few extra dollars. It would also, I hoped, help her begin her senior year in a more relaxed and happier frame of mind.

"But what can we do?" I fretted. "Going anywhere requiring a motel stay is impossibly expensive". By the second week in August, though, I had a plan.

Late Monday morning, we were loading a cooler, towels, sandals, and beach bag in the car. It was only a 45-minute drive to any number of beaches in Central Florida and only an extra 15 minutes to Fort De Soto where I could sit under one of the many

picnic shelters under the trees bordering the natural beach while Sharon swam.

However, it was a drive we hadn't made in years. Typical native Floridians, we took the availability of fresh citrus, beaches, year-round sunshine, and world-renowned theme parks for granted. That plus my skin's bad reaction to the sun and our mutually busy schedules made going to the beach as special for us as it was for visiting northerners.

With all the windows down and traveling at interstate speed, the car wasn't too hot, even at eleven in the morning. Sharon had the passenger seat at full recline, a baseball cap on her head, big sunshades covering her eyes, and her bare feet propped on the ledge of the open window.

"How long can we stay, Mom?"

"until you get tired or your skin turns too pink, whichever comes first, baby." I'll be in the shade watching you, just like when you were little..."

"And we used to use that little cooler with the Coppertone girl on it, and you put diet soda and hard-boiled eggs in it for you and grape juice and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for me."

We both smiled at the pleasant memories. I gave her skinny bare knee an affectionate pat.

Indeed, that Monday and the next Thursday at Fort DeSoto were like those carefree Saturdays at the beach for us so long ago, long before I ever thought about her working. The rhythmic, rolling lull of the waves, the clean smell of the air, and the broad span of blue sky worked their magic on our senses, loosening the muscles tensed in unnatural postures, soothing ears fretted by the noise of traffic and neighbors, and

calming nerves frazzled by too much to do in too little time.

We went home, showered, and took a nap, and still had a long, leisurely evening ahead of us. Until our mutually-agreed upon early bedtime, the feeling of being cocooned in soft cotton remained. The noise, the rush, and the stress of the world seemed a whole wide world away.

Each day of that vacation brought its own pleasures, made nonetheless genuine by virtue of being thrifty.

"Let's go to the downtown library, Mom, so we can reread the Beverly Cleary and Bannicula books."

"Let's play some board games tonight. We haven't played Sorry or Monopoly or Battleship since the last time I had a really long flu. You remember. I had to stay home the entire homecoming weekend and the next Monday as well."

"Say, Sharon. Do you want to buy one of those tiny hibachis we always see in the drug store, you know the ones big enough for only two hamburgers" I bet we can figure out how to do the charcoal."

"Mom, are you sure we can afford to rent four videos? We've already spent a lot of money on this vacation."

"Yes, we can, sweetie. I saved up! And anyway, this is a vacation, and it's supposed to be special. "

And it was.

I saw the tension lines fade from her face. I heard her laugh and giggle like a little girl. I got to be silly with her, and we spent relaxed, unhurried time together at

home, making pancakes in the mornings and monster salads and brownies in the evenings.

Who could ask for more?

Chapter Ten

Victory

Signs of maturity. The summer Sharon had been eight, the only daughter of a favorite aunt of mine came home after a year away at school. Standing in her daughter's bedroom, surrounded by suitcases, a menagerie of stuffed animals, packing boxes, and sequined formals enveloped in see-through plastic, my aunt finished folding a stack of sweaters and putting them on a closet shelf. She smiled as she opened another box and found yet one more tangle of sweaters, T-shirts, and socks.

"You and Sharon will have some hard times when she's a teenager, but you hang on, and do everything you can to keep in touch with her. You'll be close again, when she's ready." How glad I was when time, once again, proved my aunt wise.

By the start of Sharon's senior year, that closeness I'd cherished had returned, even deeper and richer than in the years before adolescence. Besides that, she was showing the maturity I'd set as a goal when she was in the primary grades, a maturity that gave me the courage to let her make all her own decisions---how late she stayed up, how many hours she worked each week, and even whether she attended college or not---all of that while she was still at home, with my emotional and maternal support, to rejoice in her successes and help pick up the pieces of her mistakes and problems. She did not have to make her first few mistakes when living alone or with another young adult who would, naturally, be self-focused and who would have little time and energy to

spare for listening and helping.

Likes stars glimmering through wind-blown clouds at night, signs of her maturity gleamed unmistakably through the events of daily life.

"No, John, I can't go to the game tonight. I haven't finished my report and I have to work late tomorrow so I can't afford to be tired from staying up tonight."

"No, Mom. I don't need another jacket this winter. Thank you, but the one I have is fine. I only worn it a few times last year because it didn't get that cold, and I want to get the good out of it."

Valuing the truly important things. Another thing I learned about her during our heart-to-heart talks and by observing her actions was that somehow she'd learned what I longed so much to tell her, that clothes and cars and houses and the things money can buy, as well as status, power, and popularity, are of little true worth. She was focusing on making the most of her life and on what she, not others, thought her life should consist of. I learned one Saturday morning, to my great delight, she was also including helping others less fortunate.

"Come on, Mom. You can sit on the bed and talk to me while I change for work. I have to be there at ten, but I want to tell you what Debbie and I did with her apartment yesterday."

Debbie was an unwed teen, a classmate of Sharon's since fifth grade who had been told, "Move out and get a job" when it was learned she was pregnant. Naturally, her fast food job barely covered food and a run-down duplex in an unsafe neighborhood. Sharon and two other classmates had helped Debbie since then.

"First" Sharon said as she poked long, skinny arms through the sleeves of her shirt, "I plugged that big hole under the sink. Then I went to the hardware store and bought a plywood scrap that the guys at the store cut to size. I also got her some drawer pulls for the baby's chest of drawers so she won't have to leave the drawers half open all the time. We're going to refinish it a pretty French blue next week.

Sharon continued. "I helped her get all the floors really clean. You know its hard to do the mopping when you've just had a baby, and they didn't look too bad after all, except for some missing tiles in the baby's corner of the bedroom. After work tonight, I'm going to see if I can find a throw rug to cover that space. Oh! And she needs a shower curtain. The really cheap one she bought when she left home ripped and she patched it with masking tape, but the tape keeps coming off and the floor keeps getting wet. She doesn't have money for anything, Mom, not anything, even though WIC buys most of her food and the formula and stuff for the baby. That makes me so sad, Mom."

I looked at her and smiled. "I know, baby. It is sad to see people doing without things and living in hard circumstances."

Sharon's frown turned to a smile. "But Debbie was so happy with everything, and the baby was really good the whole time we were working. And this afternoon Mary's going to bring over an old floral print bedspread that still looks nice to cover that sofa with and her mom might let her have a floor lamp from their spare bedroom. With those things and the brown plastic Parsons tables we bought her and that tall beige vase, she'll have a pretty spot to sit while she feeds the baby."

I continued listening and nodding, needing only to add an occasional "Really?" or

"How nice!" to keep Sharon's conversational fire stoked. She took an apple and a banana out of the blue plastic bowl on the counter and gave me a hug as she left.

"I won't be back until late tonight, probably eleven or so. Remember. I need to go pick out a rug after work."

Giving a hand to others in need. She was off, leaving me to marvel, as I often, did how a child who had grown up in an apartment, with nothing but Goodwill and department store furniture, no yard to work in, and no father present to teach her about tools and household repair, had developed such a flair for interior decorating, home repairs, and gardening. Those Saturdays working for my boss accounted for part, but only a part, of the talents and skills she had developed.

I also marveled that year at what a good and nurturing friend she was, not only to Debbie and her other girlfriends but for her boyfriend John, as well. He was having his own difficult year with school and parents. With the apartment so small, I could not help but hear her half of some telephone conversations.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I know you studied hard for that test. I'll help you work on quadratic equations this weekend, and you'll do okay on the final, I know. Just wait and keep on studying."

Another night it was "And how much will it cost? Well, I know it'll take a lot of work but the last time your Dad helped and you get the car going again. You can figure it out together, like you did before."

In addition to emotional support, she also gave extremely useful practical help to her friends. At the request of her friend Donna, who lived with her grandfather and

grandmother, Sharon master-minded a frugal, but dramatic, makeover of Donna's bedroom, replacing a ballerina bedspread, pink heart-shaped rugs, and lace lamp shades with a leopard print bedspread, one big hemp rug, and a rattan lamp shade.

The “Fun Money Fund.” As much as I delighted in seeing her help others, I delighted equally in what I thought might be my last few chances to help her. Our own finances had been steadily improving, even with the extras necessitated by adolescence, and my deliberate indulgences. Without too much squeezing, I instituted what I thought might be our last new family tradition---a fun money fund. Every payday, I put a 20- dollar bill in an old jelly jar we kept in the kitchen cabinet next to the oatmeal.

"The only rule," I told Sharon that first Friday, "is that you have to spend the money on something fun for you. You can let it accumulate or you can spend it all every other Friday, as soon as it goes in the jar, just so long as it's for your pleasure."

Skeptical at first, Sharon objected.

"You know, Mom, that's not a very wise use of your paycheck. You need that money to help pay the electricity and the rent and..."

Soon, though, she came to appreciate that little jar and to eagerly anticipate spending its contents. I watched gratefully as it purchased trendy aqua shoes for her and John

"Thanks, Mom. You know we would not have bought these with our own money!"

The twenties also bought a purse, a skirt, and three compact discs. Much of the fun money fund, though, purchased fun times for Sharon and John. They went to

movies.

"Thanks for the money," John said. "We went to a movie and got drinks and a huge tub of popcorn and still had some left over."

They went window shopping at a new mall filled with high brow stores.

"Oh, Mom! We had such a good time looking at everything, and look! We each got a monogrammed mug and a bag of gourmet jelly beans."

They went to senior night at Walt Disney World, too, although that required supplementation with non-fun money funds.

It could be argued, quite convincingly, that besides the fun money fund that I also was less than frugal with Christmas that year.

A less than frugal Christmas. "After all, I rationalized, "this might be her last Christmas at home. We've had that tiny tabletop tree for years, and we haven't spent any money on any new decorations since I can remember."

Late one Saturday morning, after a pleasantly long sleep-in and leisurely French toast, we were standing in a store aisle, agonizing between red, green, blue, and gold or all gold or all blue bulbs.

"You know whatever we buy needs to go with the tinsel and beads we used on the little tree."

"And Mom, we're only buying ornaments and lights. The tree itself is more than we should spend."

However, when the tree was toted home, hanging out the back of little red Fred, and put up in a corner and decorated, the five-foot Scotch pine filled our little front room

with its pungent aroma and reminded me of the Christmas she was eight, the last year we had a real tree. With the smell of the real tree in the air, the snowmen on the place mats giving their cheery smiles, and the tall white tapers and red votives standing in silent, elegant symmetry on the room divider, our little house looked and smelled just grand. Bows and ribbons on picture frames and table corners, and banners on the wall completed the yuletide décor.

"Wow!," exclaimed John when he came over for a visit. "Do you all do this every year?"

"It depends," Sharon answered as she first narrowed her eyes then winked at me. "it depends on how much like the Grinch my Mom is feeling each year."

Later, while they were off looking at Christmas lights, I moved the snowmen place mats to one side of the wobbly card table so I could spread out my papers.

Giving to her . . . giving to me. Two hours and one thinking-hard headache later, I had sketched my master plan for writing and studying, carefully depicting, on a timeline, just like the books on managing your writing said, all the short stories and books and Bible studies I hoped to write in my lifetime. I also included a guesstimate of when I could return to school and when I would graduate, as well as other goals. Most of the other goals I considered too ephemeral to even guess at a timeline, like helping Sharon get a car and moving into a house so I could stop paying apartment rent.

Taking two sheets of greenbar computer paper turned sideways, the dozen or so big writing and research projects of my master plan lined across the paper like so many kites, with tails of varying lengths consisting of , in the case of book projects, chapter

titles, and in the case of research projects, key questions and main points already identified. The plan was sufficiently complex and intricate to satisfy even my obsessive/compulsive tendencies.

". . . and terribly interconnected, too," I mused as my eyes went from one book project to another, then to a research project and back, and then to a Bible study. My eyes opened wide and I smiled.

". . . and it all started from that first story I wrote about Sharon and me."

I jumped when I heard Sharon's key in the door, and I had little time to think for the next half hour as I fixed hot cocoa and cookies for her and John.

"Oh, Mom! You should have come with us. You wouldn't believe what they do on Elm Street."

"Yeah," John added. "It's crazy. They close off both ends of the street to through traffic, and you have to go real slow, with your lights off, one car after another, while one of the neighbors walks alongside your car, telling you to stop or go or whatever."

One happy hour later, I turned out the lights and laid down. My mind again returned to the truth my master plan had revealed, that trying to take good care of Sharon had provided the shape and substance of my own personal goals and dreams. Over the next few months, as winter and spring passed and graduation drew near, I reflected often and gratefully on that precious fact.

That June, though, brought the fulfillment of a dream that began long before I ever dreamed of being a writer. As I sat in a darkened auditorium and watched Sharon cross the stage to receive her high school diploma, I breathed a sigh of relief that truly

was years deep. We had made it. She was a mature young adult, equipped to begin life on her own, independent of me.

"But," I thought, with misty eyes, as I watched that gorgeous auburn hair and the fullness of her white gown float behind her as she walked down the steps of the platform. "Will she get an apartment with Mary or will she keep living at home? And will she go to college. Ever?"

Chapter Eleven

Adult Responsibilities, Adult Decisions

Her first car salesman. Generally, people use the phrase "When it rains, it pours" to speak of trouble. However, for the next few years that phrase aptly applied to the good things that began to happen to our little family of two. All that summer after her high school graduation, Sharon worked two jobs and saved enough to buy a used car, or so we thought until we began following up on some of the advertisements she carefully circled in the Sunday paper each week.

We had both spent time at the library, reading articles in *Consumer Reports* about buying used cars. Armed with that knowledge, we thought it would be easy to spot, for example, a sedan with a bent frame, the klunker whose ripped headliner and rust spots testified to an age exceeding the suspiciously low odometer reading, and the poor paint job on the hood and front quarter panel that likely was an attempt to conceal evidence of a previous wreck. Although it would involve overhead costs we wanted to avoid, we decided to try a used car dealer instead of individual owners. With Sharon's savings and perhaps a little bit to be financed, we thought we could get a car worth its price. We visited three used car lots, but the salesmen were so slick and so pushy they made us both uneasy. Besides that, the vehicles retrieved from the distant back rows of the lots looked little better than the ones with oak leaves and acorns lying on the hood that we'd seen parked in back yards. The tired old compact at the third dealership

was the final straw.

"You ladies stay here, and I'll bring the car up front for you. It's been raining and there's a lot of puddles in the back," said Mr. Slick and he left Sharon and me standing in the front of the car lot.

"A likely story," I muttered silently to myself.

I heard a car door slam, then the sound everyone remembers after hearing only once from a driver's seat, the hopeful but disappointing "click-putta-putter . . . click-putta-putter . . . " then silence. After four choruses of the of "click-putter" came a roar, then the gunning of an engine up and down, up and down.

"What's he trying to do?" I asked Sharon, "make the thing take off?"

Sharon shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. Her resigned frown expressed how I felt, too.

"Something's not right," I said. "That salesman is going to say it was a little hard to start because someone forgot to crank up the cars in the back the last couple of days and then he'll start talking about something else before we can ask any questions when the thing has really sat for weeks without being cranked up. And even I know that's bad when . . . "

I stopped talking when I saw Sharon's eyebrows go up. Then I turned around and saw why. Coming toward us, a smiling Mr. Slick at the wheel, was a sleek-looking little compact, with racing mirrors, what surely was a nonfunctional spoiler, a double racing stripe, and white side-walled tires.

The car stalled twenty feet away from us, obviously a good distance short of

where Mr. Slick had intended to stop. Undaunted and smiling bigger than ever, he coasted until he was beside us, then "click-putta puttered"--this time only twice—and gunned the engine so hard the car vibrated, then seemed to swell up and down as the momentum of the rising and falling rpms thrust the car upward to the limit of its axles then let it fall back, with the give of the tires accenting the bouncing.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked Sharon.

I shook my head slowly from side to side and frowned.

"Why was it so hard to crank?" I interrupted, before she could answer. "We heard your try three or four times."

"Well," our Mr. Slick began, "Well, you see what happened is we had a man out sick and . . .

I listened to his explanation, which went generally along the lines of what I had predicted.

Mr. Slick stepped to one side, waved his hand, with an almost vaudevillian flourish, over the length of the car, and again asked Sharon her opinion.

Sharon fixed Mr. Slick with a composed look.

"I think we're not interested in a car that's obviously not running right. Thank you for your time."

I marveled at Sharon's poise and her assertiveness as we walked away, with Mr. Slick's mouth opening and closing like a guppy on a rug. No way could I have done that when I was her age.

Working through one more obstacle. Twenty minutes later, we were sitting in

the parking lot at Dunkin Doughnuts, sharing one cup of coffee and one bagel.

I tossed the page of classifies I was reading on the dash, took a sip of coffee, and looked out the window. The slight drizzle was making tiny raindrops that clung to the window instead of sheeting off as in a heavy rain. The dense pattern of raindrops and the fog from our breath clouded the windows, and the sky seemed to be growing dark.

"I hope it doesn't rain," I thought glumly. "This is the only Saturday Sharon has left for the rest of the month. We need to get a car today. She had saved so long and worked so hard."

I leaned back against the head rest and looked over at Sharon, who was staring out the window, too, absent-mindedly finishing her part of the bagel and my part, too. I patted the hand that rested on her knee and, as if the touch had ignited something explosive inside, she started talking, but began in the middle of a sentence. As happened so often when we were together, and which frustrated our friends, the starting point of her sentence was anchored somewhere in our distant mutual past or in a reaction to a present circumstance that was idiosyncratic to and sufficiently understood by Sharon and me so as to not warrant stating out loud.

"...and you know what really made me mad was he thought he could get me with that sporty looking clunker? I bet he catches a lot of kids that way."

"Well, sweetie, he probably does. I am so glad he didn't take you in, tough. I wish I knew more about engines, so I could help you, but even I could tell something was not right what that one."

Sharon held out the last bite of bagel and the nearly empty styrofoam cup.

"Yawnsome?" she said through a mouthful of bagel as she raised her eyebrows.

"Thanks, but I'm fine. You finish it."

I looked at the window at the drizzle that had turned into rain and waited for her to finish.

"I'm so sorry I don't know enough to say for sure that a used car would be okay, sweetie, and I wish I had at least a few hundred dollars to help you out."

"Oh, don't worry, Mom." She replied. "You've helped me tons already. Look at that clunker we didn't buy!"

"And you know what else," she said after the final swig of coffee. "I'm thinking that we ought to be thinking about a new car."

Her first negotiation. Our eyes met, and mine must have been filled with the incredulity I felt.

"No, really, Mom. While we were reading consumer reports about used cars I scanned a couple of articles about new cars. With a new car, we wouldn't have to worry about its condition, I think my savings would be enough of a down payment to make the monthly payments low, and I read that if I keep it for eight years, it will be a good investment because the four years of no car payments will offset the depreciation on a new car."

For a few moments, there was only the sound of silence and the gentle summer rain on the roof of the car.

"Come on, Mom. What do you think?"

"I think you are a lot smarter than I was at your age. You know more about money management than I did just ten years after I graduated from high school.

"Oh, come on, Mom. Stop the mush and tell me what you think?"

"Well, I guess that makes sense, since we both are so worried about getting a bad deal on a used car. I would feel really awful if it needed repairs every month. It was good that you were looking at all the options when we were reading Consumer Reports but we need to do a little more homework on new cars.

And that is just what we did and how we ended up at a new car dealership on Dale Mabry Highway the next Friday afternoon. We parked at the side of the lot and managed to look at two rows of models we were interested in, in peace, before a salesman saw us.

After the requisite exchange of pleasantries came the sales pitch.

"I have some good rebates on a shipment we just received yesterday," he said as he pointed to a row of upscale models.

I shook my head.

"No, we're only interested in basic transportation, something like this model here maybe. But" I said firmly as I pointed to the windshield sticker on the little green sedan we had been looking at, "We don't want the sport wheels or the luxury interior package or the deluxe sound system and especially not that." I pointed to what Consumer Reports had said were add-on charges that went, en toto, to the dealer.

Mr. Cardino rubbed his chin a minute, then half closed his eyes.

"I can tell you mean business. Let's go look in the back. We have a few stripped down models that came in on a shipment this afternoon. They haven't been cleaned up yet, though, so they're still dusty.

Thirty minutes and one test drive later, we were sitting in the office, using yet another of *Consumer Report's* car buying tips: the walk-out. The article had cautioned about stalling techniques car salesman often used to whittle away the customer's determination to get a low price, techniques like stating "I have to check with my supervisor about that price."

Twice I said, "We're not interested then" and Sharon and I started for the door. Finally, Mr. Cardino quit playing the game and within an hour the paperwork was completed and we had only to wait until tomorrow to hear from the credit union .

Chapter Twelve

Safety

Gratitude for groceries. I smiled as I shifted bags of groceries to one side to make room for the last one. In the two years we'd been in the townhome, the Shop 'N Save on my route home from work had run specials on the produce, canned and paper goods, and the brand of frozen foods I liked. That saved twenty dollars or so every two weeks plus what had been the fun money fund but which had, at Sharon's insistence become the mortgage assistance fund, made up most of the difference between the apartment rent and the mortgage and maintenance fee payments.

I closed little red Fred's hatchback and walked around to get in. A gust of wind blew my hair across my face, and I took a deep breath of the cool air. Clusters of dry, brown leaves and acorns tumbled over one another before coming to rest, temporarily, in little piles up against the edge of the curb and the wire pen holding the shopping carts. Dove gray strands of Spanish moss undulated in the wind, so many trailing chiffon scarfs in the hands of skillful dancers. Even here in the commercial area bordering Green Meadows, only three blocks from the interstate, dense stands of oak and pine and cypress hinted of that neighborhood, homey feeling I had come to anticipate as I neared home each evening.

I glanced quickly at the western sky and assessed the length of the shadows cast by the grocery and the bank next to it.

"If I hurry, I'll have time to get the groceries inside the make a cup of coffee before the sunset's over."

The sprint down Fletcher Avenue took less than a minute, and as I turned right onto Bell Glade, I wondered if I had miscalculated. The shadow from the buildings in the town home complex and its dense clusters of old oaks and maples stretched all the way across the road. Turning onto Bell Glade was like stepping into a darkened room. In front of our own building, the effect was even more pronounced. A narrow courtyard opening to the east and west, ran between two rows of five townhomes each. The trees growing beyond the wall at the westward opening of the courtyard must have already been towering oaks 12 years ago when the complex was built. Now, they were positively majestic in height which, along with the thickness of their foliage, concealed the sun and its light as effectively as if the concrete block wall at the end of the courtyard extended 40 feet into the air. The dull green of the leaves was even more subdued in the dim light as was the kelly green of the ivy meandering up and over the wall and into someone's yard in the exclusive subdivision abutting the wall. Here, on our side of the dividing wall, those towering trees that put the courtyard into a premature and prolonged dusk during the fall and winter months.

Throughout the courtyard, the grass had that look it always assumes in older, well-established neighborhoods, with bare patches of dirt blackened and enriched by years of accumulated leaves attesting to the fact that grass resolutely refuses to grow in locations denied sunlight year-round. The paint was chipping on two of the front doors and occasionally cracks turned the sidewalk into an accidental mosaic where the

builders had come too close to a then undetected root.

My neighbor two doors down had an almost untidy collection of potted plants huddling en masse around both sides of her front door and extending out to where other plants hung off the lower branches of the young chinaberry on her half of the courtyard. Ferns, philodendrons, and other shade-loving foliage plants flourished at the foot of the wall and the homes lining the sidewalk running down the center. Lizards of several species abandoned their carefully chosen spot of dappled sunlight and sought refuge in these ferns when human feet passed too near.

By the time I had passed through this idyllic scene six times, carrying bags of groceries, its peace and tranquility had washed away the cares of the week. I felt safe, altogether safe and secure. That feeling lingered while I put away the groceries. As the six brown bags were emptied, one by one, of their contents, ample kitchen counter space emerged.

"What a difference," I thought to myself, "between this kitchen and the one in our apartment. Thank You so much, Father, for all this space."

I paused a moment and looked out the kitchen window at the squirrel sitting on the fence, eating an acorn. I jumped as a blue-jay landed on the fence, less than two feet from the window. He jumped, too, one instant after he saw me, and was gone as suddenly as he had appeared.

I laughed as I turned to the sink to fill the blue tea kettle with water.

Five minutes later, I was sitting upstairs in the recliner in the bedroom, sipping French vanilla decaf, eating a manager's special chocolate doughnut and looking out

the window. A great grandfather oak grew in the middle of my little back yard and looking out the upstairs window was like looking out from a tree house. The light was softened, even in the glare of midday, and the long sturdy branches reaching up and out on all sides induced a feeling of being hidden and protected.

"What could be better?" I asked myself, "than this house, being able to buy groceries each week, and extras, without counting the money first, I can pay all the bills, and Sharon is still at home."

Well, she was at home as much as any young adult is at home, and that was good. I had continued working hard to let her be her own person and we were establishing a new relationship, one more closely resembling a friendship rather than that of a parent and teenager. In the hours she was at home, we frequently had long heart-to-hearts and living together created many opportunities to continue teaching her, unobtrusively, about things like filling out income tax returns, getting a termite inspection.

Celebrating - together! Most evenings and weekends, though, she was not home, and I faithfully spent that time writing. Finally, after what had amounted to several years of patience persistence and paying my dues, my first acceptance letter arrived in the mail. I was so excited I was, literally, speechless. I got down on my knees to thank my heavenly Father but instead of words, only happy tears came.

Sharon was almost as happy as I was. The next Tuesday, her day off, I was downstairs writing when I heard the click of her key in the door.

"Hey Mom! Are you ready to celebrate?"

"Celebrate what, baby?"

"Oh, come on! Your writing, of course."

I put down my slate board, followed her into the kitchen, and watched her take out a bag of frozen waffles, gourmet vanilla ice cream, and butterscotch syrup.

"We're going to have Belgian waffles," she said. Five minutes later, we were seated side by side at the bar. I watched as the heated waffle began to melt the ice cream.

Sharon handed me an envelope. Inside was a card with a picture of Dumbo, the baby elephant who, in the magical world of Walt Disney, had done what everyone said was impossible. Inside, the card said simply, "Congratulations! I knew you could do it!" Underneath, Sharon had written, "I am so proud of you!"

I looked at her and smiled, then stood up to give her a big hug.

"Thank you so much, baby. This is really a sweet thing to do."

Sharon patted me on the back then said, "Come on now, enough sappiness. The ice cream's melting."

The love and support of my daughter remains a gift so touching it brings sweet tears. Seeing good things happen in her life does the same thing. Each time she chose to spend time with me, rather than the dozens of things a young adult could do, was a fresh gift, another treasure to be stored up in my heart, the gift I would have chosen over, literally, anything in the world. When our schedule allowed, we grocery shopped together ("Come on, Mom! Don't cave on the Oreos! You just lost two pounds you know."), had coffee and scones at the bookstore and, of course, stacked up on books at

the library.

A few weeks later, during one of the times I had the gift of her presence, God showed me clearly that He had answered my long-ago prayer for Sharon. One Thursday evening as I was returning from my walk, heading into the complex shadows from oaks across the road lengthened over the entry way. I saw her on the sidewalk by the pool, long slender legs moving fast. She waved and smiled as she broke into the distinctive bouncy trot I had found so endearing when she began jogging with me at age ten, of her own accord, and we had discovered, to our mutual delight, that it greatly helped the asthma.

“Hey Mom! I got off work early so I thought I’d walk with you.”

I hugged her and kissed her cheek when she came near.

“I’m a bit sweaty, but if you stay downwind you should be fine,” I responded. She made a silly face and laughed.

So I gladly reversed direction and we walked, side by side, through the grass along the wall of the complex where there was no sidewalk, then through the convenience store parking lot, turned onto the sidewalk that bordered Fletcher Avenue and, finally, into the neighborhood abutting our townhome complex.

A big financial gap separated the families who lived here and the families living in our townhome complex. Fletcher’s Mill Townhomes stood on the fringe of the neighborhood, a line of demarcation between the affluent homes in the neighborhood and the businesses that were replacing all but a few residences along booming Fletcher Avenue. Our 40-unit complex was well-maintained and kept clean but the neighborhood

houses and yards next door were spacious, big gleaming SUVs stood in driveways, and even I could tell the landscaping and perpetually manicured lawns were costly.

“Hey Momma,” Sharon touched my arm as she pointed. “See those two short palm trees at the end of that driveway with the silver Suburban? They are sago palms, a bit pricey but not if we get little ones and let ‘em grow. I’m going to put one in the center of our planter in the front.”

“Oh yes!” I enthused. “I’ve seen a lot of those in yards over here. I love how symmetrical the fronds are and how deep the green is.”

“And see those tall bushes bordering that gate? They are rubber plants. I’ll put four of them in front of the window. When they get tall enough, you can still see out when you sit at the table downstairs to study but people won’t be looking in at you when they walk by on the way to their units.”

In the year we’d been in our townhome, Sharon had replaced the patches of dead grass and bare ground that had been the tiny front yard with a meandering oval flower bed, filled with mulch and bordered with brick pavers. What had been an eyesore was now a thing of beauty, with bromeliads dotted here and there and, as she was telling me, many more plants to come.

She had performed a similar miracle, using her own money to buy supplies, in our small back yard. From the annual plant sale at the University of South Florida Horticultural Center, she purchased two four-foot palm trees that now bordered the back gate and a collection of ferns to put in one corner of the yard. We called it our fern gulley after the movie we had recently seen together.

I nodded and smiled as Sharon continued for the next half hour pointing out tropical plants that would flourish in our central Florida climate, like rabbit's foot ferns, yucca, and shefflera, and dracaenas. Excitement twinkled in her eyes and eagerness kept her smiling as she talked, just like Christmas morning.

I pondered silently, "How had God honed such a deep talent for landscaping, when she had had no real yard of her own to learn about plants and gardening? Well, I reflected, I had encouraged her when she bought seedlings and planted flowers between the three bushes in front of our apartment, and then God had provided that part-time job helping Major Boon with his big yard and garage. And God had obviously given her an innate love of growing things, gifts I had seen in both my father and mother."

Sharon interrupted her listing and pointed out the yard we were passing.

"See! Those are full-grown rubber trees. And over there, see how they have sculpted that stand of yucca in the corner? We can do the same thing in the corner of the fence.

I nodded, smiled, and said "That will be beautiful like that."

Sharon looked at me and winked. "What are we doing living in such a ritzy neighborhood?"

I winked back and smiled. "I don't know, baby, but isn't it great?" Then I turned my head away so she would not see the tears of gratitude. *Being poor* had not hurt my beloved child and *feeling poor* never would.



The End