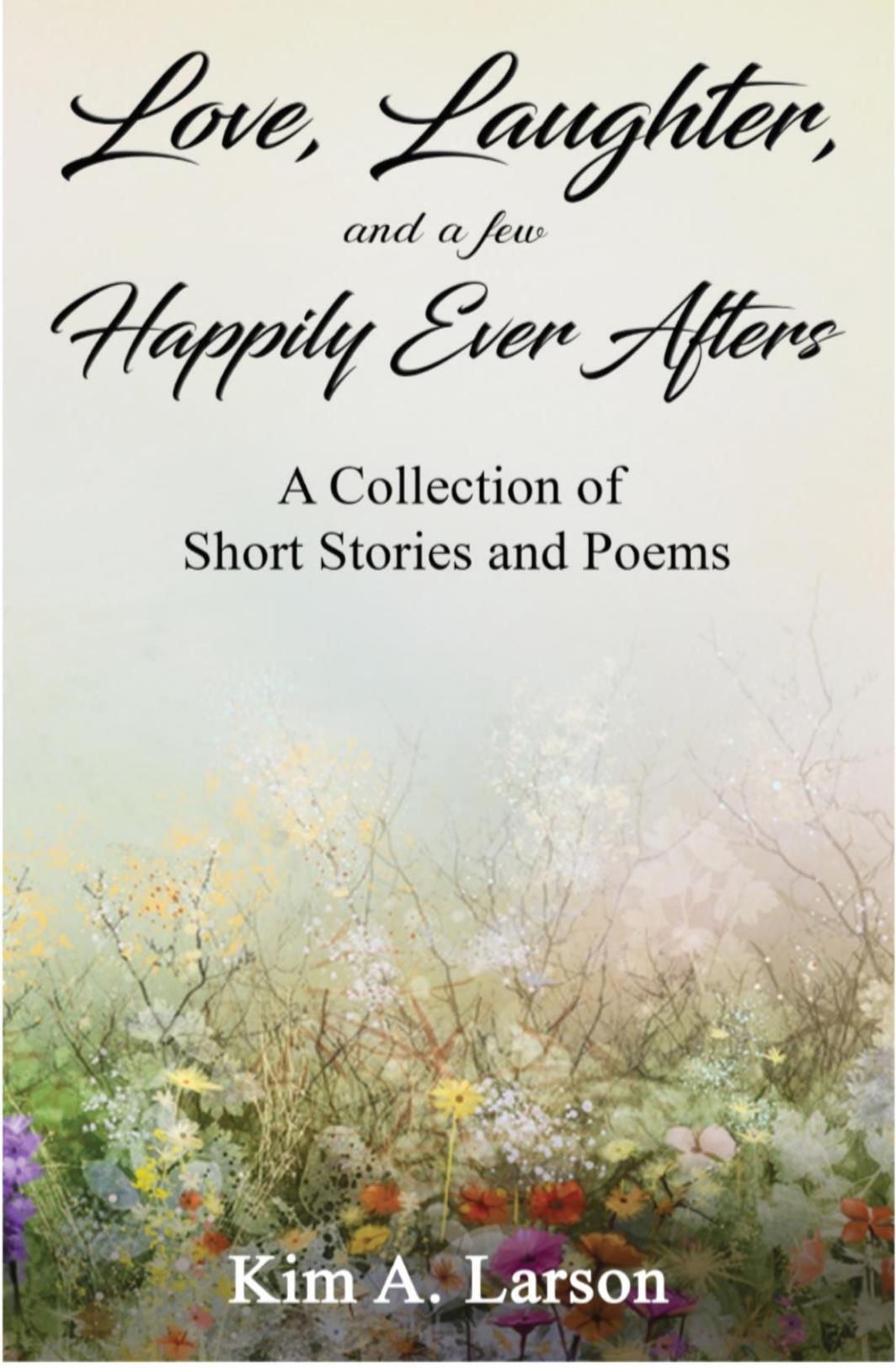


Love, Laughter,
and a few
Happily Ever Afters

A Collection of
Short Stories and Poems

Kim A. Larson



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In loving memory of my grandparents: Oscar and Eva Jensen; Donald and Peggy Bruno. You forged a trail that made my path easier. I'm grateful for your loving support and encouragement. I miss you and wish you were here to watch me follow in your footsteps.

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NONFICTION

NORWEGIAN LOVE

When my parents married in 1962, they moved to the old farmhouse where my dad had grown up. Actually, he'd never left home and, at eighteen, wasn't fully grown either. My grandparents had upgraded to a used Liberty single-wide trailer and relocated within walking distance of the home place. True love could be the only reason my mother began this new chapter of life in this antiquated house.

Mom had been raised in town with social amenities, such as running water and an inside bath. This decrepit house lacked both. Its four walls and roof also provided shelter to spiders, mice, bats, and an occasional farm animal with temporary special needs. After lugging soiled cloth diapers in to town to be washed week after week, they finally got running water inside.

I was born nine months to the day after my parents married. My brother followed a year and nine days later and my sister the following year; three under the age of three. But it wasn't because we were a good Catholic family. We were Norwegian Lutheran. It was then that my parents must have discovered birth control, or were too exhausted or angry to

touch each other, since there is a six-year gap between us three older siblings and the two youngest girls.

The two-story farmhouse had two bedrooms upstairs; one for Mom and Dad and the other for us kids. The enclosed narrow stairway was steep, and the distance between steps caused us to climb them on all fours, like climbing the ladder propped against the oak tree we used to jump off and onto the swing. Once upstairs, falling asleep was never an easy task. The walls lacked insulation, and on a typical winter night each exhale released a little puff of smoke into the frigid air.

The only heat source was a wall furnace in the living room below. A hole had been cut in the floor of our bedroom to allow the heat to reach us. If heat really did rise, it was escaping elsewhere. The three of us huddled together in a metal-framed twin bed with a painted wiener dog on it, combining our blankets for added warmth and shared body heat.

In the summer it wasn't any easier to fall asleep. We were sent to bed before sunset and nightly complained of this injustice. There was no window covering to trick us into darkness, since none was needed so far from the road. The window would be open anyway in hopes of a breeze, and if the wind wasn't blowing, or more often than not, if from the wrong direction, our sweaty skin would stick to our dingy sheets, adding to them another day's play.

The eighty acres Dad farmed never yielded enough to provide for his family so he also worked a rotating shift at Tube Co., a metal tubing manufacturer in town. It was there that he acquired his stub finger, but as children, we loved to hear him tell of how it was bitten off while fighting a ferocious tiger in Africa.

When he worked the night shift it was even more difficult than usual to fall asleep. Not seeing him for days on end added to our list of grievances. Crying only made us hotter and our bed a bath of sweat and tears. Eventually we gave in to sleep, having worn ourselves out and been calmed by the serenading night songs of crickets.

One of our favorite sounds was the rhythmic puttering of the John Deere tractor coming in from the field. The *put, put, put* growing louder and faster the closer it got until Dad shifted gears as he turned into the driveway.

If we'd been quick enough to meet him, he'd stop and lift us onto his lap. We'd take hold of the steering wheel and pretend to drive; our tightly gripped hands jerking right and then left, pulled by the wheel, and our bodies lurching from side to side with the back and forth tilting of the tractor as its tires dipped into one pothole after another. But whether we got to ride the tractor or not, we were most excited that Dad was home.

One sweltering afternoon Dad came in from the field early, his overexposed skin hard to distinguish from the black

film of topsoil sticking to his sweat. Mom had a church-ladies meeting at the neighbor's and put him in charge of us kids. As she drove off in the Chevy, Dad hopped into the bathtub.

We were relieved it wasn't Saturday when we all took turns in the tub sharing the same water, all except Dad who always got his own. Curiously afterwards, we'd inspect with pride his accomplishment of transforming clean water into the resemblance of weak coffee.

Elicia, the older of the two youngest sisters, was a toddler just learning to walk. Clad in only a diaper because of the heat, she waddled back and forth between the kitchen and bathroom while Dad was in the tub. He splashed at her playfully as if chasing her out. The bathroom door was never locked; the latch at the top, higher than the reach of little arms, was of no use since the door was warped and wouldn't close.

Elicia waddled in one last time and slipped in a puddle of water. The thud of her head hitting the floor resounded throughout the house and we all ran to see what had happened. That's when we saw Dad—bare-naked—running through the kitchen with Elicia unconscious in his arms. His eyes screamed panic as he bolted out the front door, heading for the trailer, hollering, "*Maaaa! Maaaa!*"

We stood frozen in the kitchen, wanting to chase after but didn't, for fear that when we caught up to him we'd see him naked again. It wasn't long before he and Elicia returned home, both conscious, Dad wearing a pair of Fruit of the

Loom briefs that he must have borrowed from Grandpa. No one dared ask.

Dad, Mom, and Elicia got to stay up all night—doctor’s orders. Although feeling slighted, we didn’t view this as another injustice. We lay quietly in bed, reflecting on the day, remembering the look on Dad’s face and the emotion that had sent him running naked.

Even though he had never said the words, we had somehow suspected that we were loved. The events of that day gave us one more reason to believe we were right.

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SHIFTING PRIORITIES

Mom flung open the front door, having left only minutes earlier. “The tires on the Chevy are frozen to the ground,” she said. “I’m taking the pickup. If anything happens and you need a vehicle, call Pearson’s.” She rushed off to drive my dad to the emergency room. Congestion from a lingering cold was making it difficult for him to breathe.

We had just finished supper that Saturday in January, 1980. I remember the year because I had turned sixteen the previous fall and could officially date. To my shame, my main concern wasn’t my dad’s health but whether or not I’d get to go out with my boyfriend, having been left in charge of my siblings. My brother was a year younger and my sisters were thirteen, seven, and three. They were watching television in the basement of our bi-level home when I went upstairs to take a bath.

Waiting for the tub to fill, I squeezed bath oil beads into the running water to release their fragrance. The scent of apple blossoms transformed the tiny room into my personal spa. As I lay soaking in the warm, silky water, I heard a horrific scream—the shrill pitch of one of my two youngest sisters.

I sprang out of the tub and threw on my clothes as a crescendo of voices and stampeding footsteps drew near. Opening the door, I found my seven-year-old sister, clutching

her hand wrapped in a blood-soaked cloth and my siblings huddled around her.

I removed the makeshift bandage and assessed Elicia's wound. A deep gash ran across the knuckle of her middle finger, exposing flesh amid gushing blood. It was obvious she needed stitches.

“What happened?” I tried to remain calm.

My brother started to explain, “I was chopping firewood—”

“In the basement?” I interrupted. “With an axe?”

I later learned that Elicia had been holding a chunk of firewood for my brother while he attempted to chop it into kindling—until he missed.

Chopping wood inside the house shouldn't have surprised me. We were allowed to run freely around the farm—to be kids. And we often took advantage of having few restrictions. We started outdoor fires to cook acorn mush and bake mud pies. We used jackknives to whittle giant ragweed into sharp-tipped spears. We hunted ferocious animals with our BB guns and occasionally turned our weapons on each other. We hollered like Tarzan while swinging in the hayloft, then dropped into piles of loose straw covering the hole-ridden floor.

None of these adventures seemed too dangerous to us, or to our dad, who had grown up safely on this land. Only

crossing streets in town or running with hard candy in our mouths caused him to fear for our safety.

I remembered the frozen tires on the Chevy and Mom telling me to call our closest neighbor in an emergency. I called the Pearson's, who lived on the farm across the tarred road. Soon Elicia and I were huddled together in the stiff back seat of their cold vehicle, preparing ourselves for the ten-mile trek into town. I held her hand, applying pressure, praying, and remembering how much I loved her.

Elicia was born three days after my ninth birthday. I got called down to the principal's office to receive the good news. When I returned to Mrs. Gulbranson's third-grade classroom, my peers stared at me with gleeful expectancy.

"It's a girl," I mumbled, embarrassed by their attention, and quickly took my seat. A cousin who was in my class that year started a rumor that I was disappointed I hadn't gotten another brother. That wasn't true. I was thrilled to have any baby join our family.

Born beautiful, Elicia had a clear, rosy complexion, perfectly shaped head with wisps of golden hair, delicate facial features, and long, slender fingers. I had managed to save four dollars, which back then was a big deal, and used it to buy Elicia a white dress with ruffles and pink pinafore. I held and cared for her constantly, pretending she was my own.

Traveling to the hospital was slow and arduous on roads iced with the previous rain. With each agonizing mile the cloth

wrapped around Elicia's hand seeped blood into the towel resting on her lap. Since I was barely sixteen, I didn't know what to fear other than she may lose the use of her finger.

Mr. Pearson stopped at the emergency-room entrance to drop us off just as my parents were walking out. At the sight of Elicia's crimson-wrapped hand, Dad's face drained of its color.

A nurse wheeled a chair toward Dad, but he directed the nurse to Elicia. Mom handed me the keys to the truck and Dad's prescription, instructing me to pick up his medicine at Cedar Mall Drug before they closed. Then the three of them disappeared behind a white curtain.

As I waited for the pharmacist to fill Dad's prescription, I scanned the aisle of toys and found a stuffed bunny with long floppy ears to buy for Elicia. Then I noticed the time. My boyfriend would be arriving at the farm any minute. At least I had been spared the wait at home with both date *and* siblings. Experience had taught me how embarrassing little sisters could be around boys.

Two summers prior, an older boy had ridden his motorcycle to our house to see me, though my sisters had acted as if he were there to pick between one of them. Cartwheels and summersaults rolled across the lawn as their opening act. Next was the bike parade.

"Watch me!" one would say—countered by the other, "Look what I can do!" Knock-knock jokes and random bits of

comedy followed. What I didn't anticipate was the grand finale.

Vying for the limelight, Elicia placed one hand on her hip and exclaimed, "I had a worm come out my butt." She grinned as if to say, "Top that!" But who could—or wanted to? It was true.

The frightening event harkened a scream that now rivaled what I heard when her hand had met the ax. Evidently, she'd recovered well enough from her worm experience to share. The boy, however, may not have, as he never visited the farm again.

When I returned from the drugstore, my boyfriend was waiting at the hospital with my parents. My brother had told him where to find me. Elicia was in surgery to have the severed tendon of her middle finger repaired. My parents assured me that she'd be fine and encouraged me to go on my date.

My boyfriend and I "cruised Main" for some time before I reached into my coat pocket and felt two jagged pieces of metal: keys for the truck. My parents had no way to reach me, so we rushed back to the hospital, imagining them furious and unable to leave. But the pickup was gone.

I should have guessed Mom would have an extra set of keys in her duffle-bag purse that held Kleenexes, cough drops, Band Aids, and on rare occasions to the theatre, enough popcorn and pop to feed our family of seven.

Though the night was still young, I felt years older and could no longer pretend to be enjoying this boy's company. I asked to be taken home—my priorities and thoughts about love, shifting. Elicia needed me, I convinced myself. Yet, in reality, it was I who needed her.

When I finally arrived home and our eyes met, I knew we would both be all right.

Several boyfriends came and went, as did Elicia's repertoire of stories. But one thing remained constant: She would always be my little sister and the baby I first loved, as my own.

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FULL CIRCLE

Family was important to Eva Carlson, my grandmother, because she was robbed of hers at age seven. In 1922, Grandma, her mother, and five younger siblings were taken from their two-room log cabin home nestled in the woods near Deer River, Minnesota. Her mother had become mentally ill from a high fever, and the children were fending for themselves, eating mayonnaise from the jar and wild berries growing in the woods.

Hearing stories about Grandma's father makes me wonder if that truly was how her mother became mentally ill. Grandma's dad, a Swedish immigrant, logged by day and bootlegged by night. Drunk from his own moonshine, he often bit and beat his wife in fits of rage. When Grandma heard her mom's screams, she would run to their bedside in hopes that his seeing her would cause him to stop. He never did.

Grandma told how one day a nice lady in a black shiny car took her whole family, except her father, to the depot for a train ride. When the train stopped, the conductor instructed those whose names would be read to get off.

Because Grandma and her two brothers were the only siblings of school age, only their names were called. They obeyed orders and Grandma watched for the rest of her family to depart, but the doors closed and the train took off with them still on board. It wasn't until fifty-six years later that she

learned they had traveled on for nineteen more miles to Faribault, Minnesota and had resided at an institution for the mentally handicapped. Unfortunately, this knowledge came too late for reconciliation.

In the mid-1880s, a social experiment began in America with children, like my grandma, whose home lives were abusive or who were homeless, orphaned, or abandoned. These at-risk children were taken by train to be cared for by state-run government schools until homes with other families could be found for them. It's estimated that over two-hundred thousand children were relocated by "orphan trains" between 1854 and 1929.

Grandma, Alfred, and Andrew had arrived at The State School, formally known as The State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children, in Owatonna, Minnesota. She only saw her two brothers a few more times standing huddled together on the playground holding hands. In her search for them in later years, she learned they had soon after been transferred to the institute for the mentally handicapped, where her mother and youngest siblings had resided.

When children arrived at the State School they were thoroughly inspected naked, for lice or disease, and then quarantined long enough to ensure the other children's safety. Grandma was then transferred to Cottage Five—a three-story brick building that housed girls. The main level was a

beautiful sitting room for visitors. The children were only allowed in this showroom to polish the glossy hardwood floor.

The second floor held twin-size metal beds arranged so one could barely walk between them. Each girl had her own bed and a chair, which they used to drape their clothing across after undressing for bed.

Misbehavior was not tolerated at the State School, nor was crying. Grandma wrote in her self-published memoir, *No Tears Allowed*, that after being slapped across the face enough times, she eventually learned to keep her emotions inside.

Other punishments included kneeling on broom sticks, soap in the mouth, or missing meals. Boys were beaten with leather reins or a radiator brush as they got into more serious trouble because of their need to establish a pecking order. Generally, the older girls took care of the younger ones and each other.

All the children were forced to work, and many of Grandma's chores were in the dining center. Her task during breakfast was to give a teaspoon of sugar to each child on some sort of hot cereal. Afterwards she would mop the floors and set the tables for lunch.

The matrons and staff weren't fed the same mush as the children. In a separate dining room, they enjoyed pancakes and gave their leftovers to Grandma. She took the cold, plain pancakes—yet a feast—back to Cottage Five to share. She learned quickly how to make friends and influence people.

The main meal for the children was usually some type of hotdish, beans or soup, served on plates. As a treat they were served plain Jell-O made in big galvanized wash tubs in the basement. The bathrooms were also in the basement; and occasionally they'd see a mouse had fallen into the Jell-O during the night and drowned, but the staff would just scoop it out and feed it to them anyway.

Grandma never understood why they weren't fed any better than they were. The State School was self-sufficient with its own butcher shop, orchard, a huge garden, and herd of dairy cows.

After four years at the State School, at age eleven, Grandma and five other girls were brought to the main office. A young married couple—my grandpa's brother and his wife—were there to choose one of the six girls to take home with them to help where needed.

They had their adorable, one-year-old daughter with them, who had lots of dark curly hair. She couldn't sit still and was getting into everything. She waddled back and forth in front of the girls with a grin on her face and then climbed up on Grandma's lap. That was the last day Grandma spent at the State School. She had been indentured to this couple.

The indentured program allowed families to take an older State School child for labor in exchange for room and board. Girls were expected to do farm work as well as take care of the children and do housework. The State School's

only requirement for the family was that they send the children to school and release them at age eighteen with two full sets of clothing and one hundred dollars.

The State School had been negligent, and in many ways abusive, but life didn't get any easier at my grandpa's brother's home.

Grandma woke early each day to start a fire in the cook stove and put the teakettle on before going out to the pasture to bring the cows in for milking. She went barefoot because she didn't want her only pair of shoes to smell at school, which was okay until it got cold outside. Then she'd warm her feet by standing in a fresh cow pie. By first snowfall she was given a pair of rubber boots to wear.

Grandma worked from sun-up until she plopped into bed every night, except for her break to attend the one-room schoolhouse a half mile away. Four additional children were born to this couple; and when the children were being weaned, had a bad dream, or were sick, it was Grandma's job to get up with them in the middle of the night. The labor inside and out of the home was physically exhausting.

Grandpa, still single, and fifteen years Grandma's senior, lived down the hill from his brother at the home place. When Grandma turned fourteen he began to visit his older brother more often, expressing an interest in her with kind smiles. He patiently waited for his bride to turn eighteen and, until then, found opportunities for them to be together.

Grandpa would drive by when school let out and offer Grandma a ride home, occasionally giving her a candy bar or stick of Juicy Fruit gum. He'd also bring the cows in at night when she was in the neighboring field bringing in his brother's cows. Eventually, they kissed over the barbed-wire fence and were married on November 17, 1934.

Grandma embraced the Norwegian heritage initially to survive but continued to do so out of love for her husband. When I was a child, she taught me how to count to ten in Norwegian and let me roll krumkakes and lefse, although I've yet to acquire a taste—or smell—for lutefisk. She also taught me how to play pinochle and allowed me to take her spot when playing cards with Grandpa's siblings.

Food always accompanied any gathering, often open-faced meat and cheese sandwiches with store-bought Windmill cookies.

Grandpa and Grandma had been married forty years when they moved from their single-wide trailer back into the old farmhouse where they had raised their family. They had moved out when my parents had married, allowing my father to raise his family there.

I was eleven years old when we moved from the old farmhouse into a modular home, delivered in two pieces; a stick-built *Dynamic Home*, placed on a poured foundation a hundred yards in front of the old farmhouse. Grandpa spent

the last year of his life in the home where they had raised their three children.

After he died, Grandma began having anxiety attacks and asked me to sleep at her house, since I was the oldest granddaughter and within walking distance. Sleeping at the house I had grown up in shouldn't have been an unreasonable request, except that I was still a child and the creepy old house had always spooked me. The wind howled through the thin walls. Even on still nights the house moaned, clanked, creaked, and rattled. I was told the house was settling, which I found hard to believe since it was already over a hundred years old.

Besides the incessant noise, I feared the bats, mice, and spiders that at times had cohabitated the old house, and the strange creatures from my imagination. Initially I resisted, fearing Grandpa's ghost may be hanging around, but reluctantly agreed to stay, thankful that Grandpa had died on the couch and not in the twin bed I was to sleep in.

To encourage my return, Grandma treated me to bedtime feasts. My favorite was a grilled cheese sandwich that dripped with grease from being buttered on both sides—inside and out of each slice of bread—and then piled high with cheese. It was toasted golden brown in an old, black cast-iron frying pan on an equally as old, white gas stove. I washed it down with a bottle of Mountain Dew, a treat saved only for special occasions at my house. And for dessert I had my

choice of Little Debbie snacks. I still think of Grandma whenever I eat an Oatmeal Crème Pie. I don't remember her eating with me, but no one would suspect she had ever missed a meal.

Grandma had a round full face and strong jaw line. When she smiled, her dimples and sparkling blue eyes hinted she was up to something. She was slightly shorter than average, five feet tall, plus a couple inches, and broad, not dainty. Her robust, full figure was plump around her middle, yet she looked small when compared with Grandpa's family.

Grandpa was over six feet tall and hefty. His six brothers and three sisters were all large, tall people. They were one hundred percent Norwegian and became Grandma's family even before she married Grandpa.

Grandma's search for her childhood family began after Grandpa died. He was the love of her life and the first person she remembers loving her back. She always said, "I was never in motion pictures but I won an Oscar." Oscar was my grandpa's name. And although Grandma wasn't an actress, she loved performing at family gatherings, dressing up in homemade costumes, and posing for the camera.

After forty-one years of marriage, Grandma found herself alone, and adjusting to life without Grandpa was difficult. Abandonment issues surfaced, triggering spells of anxiety. That's when I first heard many of the stories about her life at the State School and as an indentured servant.

Seeing a psychologist wasn't as acceptable as it is now, but telling her story began the healing process for her. One of her daughters thought finding Grandma's lost family might help ease her loneliness or possibly bring healing, and so the search began.

The court records of the State School children were still sealed in 1976. Grandma had been told previously when inquiring about her family that she'd be better off not knowing where they were. She may find a relative who would then become a burden to her. But with perseverance and through connections with other children from the State School, Grandma located her father, two brothers, and numerous cousins on her mother's side, all still living in Deer River, Minnesota.

In July 1979, Grandma, my dad, two aunts, two cousins, an uncle, and I drove to Deer River for a family reunion. Over twenty relatives from my great-grandmother's family attended. The resemblance of many of them to my grandma was undeniable. Her brother Alfred, with his round face, full head of graying hair, and thick mustache, looked like an older version of my dad. Great-grandma was German, and pictures of Grandma in her younger years reminded me of the German women I'd seen from World War II pictures.

Finding part of her lost family was bittersweet. She learned that her mother had died two years prior and that her four youngest siblings had died very young. And her

relationship with her two brothers would not be as she imagined. Alfred and Andrew had been beaten in their younger years and were mentally handicapped.

Grandma's relatives had found them years earlier and made sure they were now well cared for. They lived together in a foster home and in many ways were still like the two little boys Grandma last saw holding hands on the playground.

Great-grandpa was another story. He lived in a two-room clapboard house on the edge of town with an outhouse in the back. We had barely gotten into the dingy, dimly-lit shack when he told us up front that all of his money and property was willed to his stepdaughter for taking care of him. He then proceeded to bring out from under his bed, several tin coffee cans full of coins along with wads of paper bills bound by rubber bands.

We didn't stay long, but Grandma visited him once a year for six years until he died at the age of ninety-six. The only thing she was given after his death was the bill for his tombstone from his stepdaughter. Grandma politely told the coffee-can heiress that she wasn't interested in paying for it.

Grandma may not have received an inheritance, but she saw her life as rich. With a positive outlook, she focused on the possibilities, not the problems. She embraced life as a victor and rose above her circumstances. The love she was denied as a child she freely gave in abundance, not only to her

family, but also to others. Modeling the importance of family, she touched all our lives.

She was the last living relative from her generation on both sides of the family when she died at ninety-five. Her once sizeable arms, which lifted hay bales and did men's work, became weak and unable to lift her out of a chair. Her face was longer, not as full, and her smile not as bright—although the dimples were still there.

Through the many transitions in her life, this last one to the nursing home may have been her hardest.

She always loved to give and do for others. Her world had been narrowed to a shared room with a curtain between two beds and one chair. She had nothing to talk about except the past and nothing tangible left to give of any worth.

She saved her coffee creamers and sugar to have something to give visitors. Her leftovers were stuffed in her milk carton and saved for the dog my parents no longer had. She tucked plastic spoons with lipstick on them in the pocket of her chair to give to the youngest great-grandchildren for their sand box. The tinfoil that once covered her meals was replaced by a plastic cover after she had saved the foil and made figurines.

Her daily activity was to cut out coupons for others' use. Yet her scissors disappeared, along with her watch, and the few personal belongings she had left. She feared someone was stealing from her so she hid things and then forgot. Her watch

was replaced, and when the lost one was found she wore both on the same wrist.

Her life had come full circle—once again being cared for by the State of Minnesota.

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BUS NUMBER SEVEN

A freezing rain pelted the exterior of the bus that now rested in a field where clumps of black dirt peeked out amid patches of melting snow. We'd been tossed into each other's laps, but no one was injured—yet. On most days we'd come to expect worse jostling than this. We were like prisoners exiled to a primitive island in a test of survival of the fittest while riding Bus Number Seven.

Our driver staggered to the back of the school bus in search of injuries, instead of the usual contraband. “Is everyone all right?” He was a young man not much older than the high school seniors among us, which contributed to his inability to keep the older boys in line—and our bus on icy roads that spring afternoon.

After ensuring everyone's safety, the driver plodded back to his seat and attempted to drive us out. The engine revved and thick tires spun black dirt beneath us. Mud spewed everywhere as a blue-black smoke shrouded the stationary bus and increased the fear building in my heart. Would we ever get unstuck? How would I get home? As a third grader these seemed valid questions.

Accepting his fate, the driver ambled to the back, where the cocks on the highest rungs of the pecking order roosted—the coveted back seats. I suspect even he trembled around this motley crew.

He addressed the boys in whose field we were stuck. “Your dad got a tractor?”

Of course, he did. Their dad farmed like most of ours. Yet this foolish question wasn’t met with the usual sarcasm, and the two boys followed the driver to the front. “Everybody, stay put,” he said. “We’re going for help. We’ll be right back.” He closed the door behind them.

Be right back? How could they? This immensely long driveway privileged those boys to front-door delivery. Panic set in. It could be hours or days before they returned, and I knew what these restless natives were capable of.

One of the top-rung roosters crowed, “That was far out, man!” Laughter broke out, releasing some of our tension. Then several boys tore up and down the aisle like sailors released on furlough. An older boy jumped behind the driver’s seat and started the bus. He probably thought he had more driving experience than our wet-behind-the-ears driver, and he very well may have. He floored the accelerator, and the bus rocked back and forth as he ground the gears.

After giving up, he relinquished control to the mob of boys ravaging the front, pulling and pushing knobs and buttons. At the hands of these trigger-happy hijackers, the rubber wipers screeched across the opaque windshield covered with ice. In the flurry of commotion, one of the boys toppled down the steps. Unscathed, he opened the now-at-eye-

level cubbyhole and pulled out a dark green candle the size of a baseball.

The scent of pine wafted through the air near the front, where I sat fighting off tears. That same aroma had filled our kitchen months earlier when I had crafted candles to give as Christmas presents. For their mold I had used disposable inserts that fit snugly into plastic reusable Solo Cozy Cup holders. The makeshift mold narrowed like an upside-down Christmas tree but had a flat, circular bottom the size of a half-dollar. The wick, tied around the middle of a pencil, had dangled like a fishing line in the center as the pencil rested on the lip of the disposable liner until the wax had cooled.

In the hands of these hoodlums, my gift was about to be used to play catch.

“Go for a bomb!” the boy up front shouted. He threw the scented candle at a boy running down the aisle to receive the pass. It hit him in the back of the head and he fell to his knees, moaning and holding his head. Another boy snatched it up as if it were a live grenade.

The boy up front yelled, “Throw it back you douche bag!”

The wannabe rifled the candle to the front. Not as brave as he made himself out to be, the boy dodged the spiraling candle. It whizzed past his head and smacked the windshield, creating a spider web of cracks before dropping to the floor.

Everyone froze. The bus stopped rocking. A fearful silence infused the air—as did the scent of retreat—and the stench of body odor. The boys scurried back to the rear of the bus, from where they exerted power and control.

One of the older boys hollered, “Nobody rats anybody out.”

Was it this threat that blurred the names and faces of those that day? Or the forty-plus years that have since passed? I do remember, though, that a tractor finally pulled us back on the road and the bus driver delivered us home safely—for his last time.

Come to think of it, none of our drivers ever lasted more than one school year, if that. Who could blame them when the bus’s faux leather seats would mysteriously start on fire? Or the emergency door alarm buzzed incessantly from tampering? I wonder how many pairs of underwear they’d heard ripping from the administration of snuggies. Or cries for help from those caught in headlocks receiving noogies. How many times had they cleaned bloody-nose splatters off the floor, seats, and windows at the end of the day?

No, I don’t blame any of our drivers for not returning another year.

Unlike us, they’d had a choice.

CODE JORDAN

Seconds. That's all it took—and he was gone.

While waiting in a check-out lane at Walmart, my three-year-old son Jordan begged for a treat. Who could blame him, tempted by rows of eye-level candy? Ignoring his pleas, I unloaded my cart. At the next glance, he was missing.

My stomach dropped as I fought off full-fledged panic. Surely he was nearby, the candy always sweeter in another lane. I raced through the check-out area calling his name, my knees threatening to give out. Where could he be? Had he been abducted?

It was a parent's worst nightmare, and the missing-child protocol, Code Adam, wasn't yet in place. It wouldn't be activated until a year later, in 1994. Created by Walmart, the protocol was named in honor of Adam Walsh, the abducted and murdered son of John Walsh—who later hosted the television series *America's Most Wanted*.

Near tears, I implored a store clerk for help. She paged the store manager, and within minutes I was describing my energetic, adorable, blonde-haired, blue-eyed son. She radioed his description to her employees and asked their help. How could I live if anything happened to him? Why hadn't I been watching him better?

Adrenaline short-circuited my ability to think. What should I do? I called Jordan's name, wandering. The manager

reined me in. Someone would find him, she reassured me, and Jordan would need me when they did.

Several minutes later she received a call from a clerk in the women's department. Someone had found him hiding in the middle of a circular clothing rack. I ran to his location, and we both burst into tears upon being reunited.

That wasn't the first time Jordan went missing, nor would it be the last.

Like most children, Jordan loved to play outside. Our house was at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac, and our fenced backyard adjoined other neighbors. It should have been a safe haven for him.

One summer evening, I let him loose in the backyard while I cleaned up after supper. This was before the Walmart scare, so he wasn't yet three at the time. Every few minutes I glanced out the kitchen window or patio door to check on him. The last time I did, I couldn't see him anywhere.

I ran outside calling his name and searched every inch of ground. How could a two-year-old disappear from inside a fenced yard? He wasn't tall enough to reach the latch, which I had secured earlier. I raced to the front yard. My husband was visiting with several neighbors, and they hadn't seen Jordan either.

We formed a search party and began knocking on doors, yet no one had seen him. We were about to call the police when our next-door neighbor, who'd been helping with the

search, came rushing out of his house. He had gone inside for a minute and found Jordan in their family room.

Jordan told us he had climbed over the fence and let himself in. All that time he had been watching cartoons with a boy his age.

Though the police weren't called that time, they would be the next.

It happened two summers later at the home of our wonderful daycare provider, Julie. Jordan and the other children were playing outside when she asked them to pick up their toys before lunch. Busy in the kitchen, she kept an eye on them from her window. When routinely counting heads, she came up short—one boy short.

With her ability to search impeded by a houseful of children, she called the police. Armed with his physical description and our home address, the officers set out to find him. It wasn't long before they located him eight blocks away, playing in his sandbox at home.

Spared the drama until I picked him up, I heard the whole story, often told in first person, as Jordan proudly displayed the police-badge sticker stuck to his shirt. "They gave me this, too." He grinned, handing me a coupon for free french fries at Hardees. What kind of deterrent was that? The police should have handcuffed him. Roughed him up a bit. Though he probably would have enjoyed that too.

French fries? Give me a break. No, he deserved to be grounded—indefinitely. Or at least until he could start hockey. His exuberant energy needed a full-throttle-sport outlet.

That fall he began his hockey career. Besides the enrollment fees, each family was required to raise additional funds by selling Christmas wreaths. Our little rookie could hardly wait to hit up our neighbors to support his new venture.

The next morning when it was time to leave home, Jordan didn't answer my calls. Finding his coat missing, I assumed he was outside playing in the snow. A quick glance around our yard proved me wrong.

The streetlights were dimming on our sleepy street, the sun peeking over the horizon. A house light flickered at the end of the block, and an outline of two figures could be seen inside the front entry. As I approached the house, Jordan bounced outside, beaming. He had made his first sale.

I scolded him for worrying me.

“I told you I was going to sell wreaths,” he said. “You must not have been listening.” How many times had I said that to him? He hopped into the car excited to make his next sale with Julie.

As Jordan got older, I continued to struggle with losing him. Like when he left home for college, or traveled to Sweden, or got his first real job. Now, at twenty-five, he's

applied for a job transfer to London—England! To him, life is still an adventure.

To me, motherhood has happily been adventure enough.

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CHANGE, ANYONE?

I don't like change. As a matter of fact, the only change I like is the kind found at the bottom of the washing machine on laundry day. The blanket I sleep with was given to me over forty years ago at age eleven, and the T-shirt I sleep in is only slightly newer. At one time it had the picture of my high school mascot on the front, an Indian, but it's been worn so thin you can't make it out anymore. Which is probably for the best since it's been changed—the mascot, to be politically correct—not my T-shirt. Now we're the Huskies. Even if I did like change, I know I wouldn't like being called husky.

Which leads me to my biggest gripe—aging.

Why do our bodies have to change? My belly is bigger, my feet flatter. My hair is turning gray, the ones that aren't falling out at least. Worse yet, last month my hairdresser retired. Talk about traumatic. I'm still seeing a therapist.

I once thought I would like change if it was *my* idea, so I decided to change hairstyles. I brought in a picture of Carrie Underwood, to have my hair cut like hers. Have you ever done that? Bring in a picture? After my hair was cut, I realized it was her face I really wanted, and I went back to doing my hair the same old way.

Now I'm not complaining, just explaining. It was my choice, after all. Many of life's changes aren't our choice. However, I'm learning we're still given a choice. Chuck

Swindoll said the longer he lives, the more he's convinced that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we react to it. How we react to change is our choice.

So, I'm choosing to accept change by looking for the positives, no matter how difficult. And the most difficult change I've ever gone through is the change of life. I know, I don't think I'm old enough either. But it's true. I've been menopausal for over eleven—long—years. The first year of hot flashes made me think the alternative to growing older would be better. I was already being burned at the stake.

Yet with some hard searching I've even found a redeeming quality in hot flashes. You see, I've never liked getting out of bed in the morning when it's cold. Or hopping into a shower or changing my clothes when it's cold—and it's cold nine months out of the year here in northern Minnesota. So now, I just wait for a hot flash before doing those things.

However, it's not practical to change soggy clothes ten times a day after perspiring like a sprinkler. So, I went shopping, and I bought myself a *positively* wonderful new wardrobe. I needed clothes that could be layered—and rapidly removed. Not all of them, of course, or I might end up in jail for a different kind of flashing.

I'm also learning that sometimes the sooner we embrace change, the better. After having makeup melt off my face one too many times from hot flashes, I finally quit wearing any. Not wearing makeup saves me time and money. And I rather

enjoy not having to shave my legs as often, since the hair on them grows slower now. Never mind that I've quit wearing shorts since a neighbor boy asked why my legs had so many cracks in them. My varicose veins *do* look a little like a road map. The time saved not shaving my legs I now use to pluck the wildly-growing facial hairs.

Finding the positives in change is easier than I imagined. It's all in how you look at things, which is a choice we get to make. Who knows, one day I may even *embrace* change. Just so long as long as it doesn't involve my blanket. Or my old T-shirt. Or my hairstyle. Or...

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FICTION

A DO-OVER

“I’m so proud of you, Jordyn.” Mom wriggled next to me in the front seat of Old Betty. “I knew you could pass your driver’s test. You’re such a talented young lady.”

“Thanks.” I buckled Mom’s seatbelt, wishing she had been this excited for me ten years ago when it had actually happened.

Though I hadn’t seen Mom in years, Abby, my sister, had insisted I take Mom home at precisely eight p.m. I asked if Mom would turn into a pumpkin, and Abby said a pumpkin would be far more pleasant. This tempted me to drive around until I conjured up a feisty Mom instead of the depressed one I knew growing up. But I didn’t.

A few minutes later, I pulled into the garage and parked next to Mom’s red Mustang convertible. Its purchase two years ago alerted Abby to Mom’s failing mental health. I whistled, admiring the car. “Nice wheels.”

She shrugged. “It was your father’s idea, not mine.” Mom seldom remembered their divorce, among other things. Abby had encouraged me to play along with whatever Mom said. I let the time warp slide, but I couldn’t commit to living with her in La-La Land.

Once inside, Mom made a beeline for the living room. I followed and froze in the doorway. Hordes of little bodies had overtaken the room. Mom busied herself tending to the baby dolls lining the floor and furniture.

I retreated to the dining room and called Abby. “Hey, what’s going on? Did you forget to tell me about the additions to our family?”

Abby broke into laughter.

I gritted my teeth. “Where’d she get them? I thought you took away her checkbook after the car fiasco?”

“Come on, Jordyn, laugh.” Abby still was, and so hard I could hardly understand her. “If you don’t, you’ll cry.”

No. I won’t. “Seriously, Abbs, where did she get them?”

“QVC. Aren’t they adorable? They look so real.”

“Holy crap. They scared me half to death. It was like stepping into *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.” I managed a weak laugh. “How’d she buy them?”

“I missed a credit card somewhere. But I have it now.”

I blew out a long breath. “You could’ve sent them back.”

“I didn’t have the heart to. She had them all unpacked, bundled in dishtowels and hand towels, and was hovering over them like a mother hen. I hadn’t seen her that happy in years. Granted, I freaked out at first too. But when I even suggested sending a few back, she cried inconsolably.” Abby sighed.

“It’s only money, right? If it makes Mom happy caring for them, who are we to deprive her?”

“A little warning would have been nice.”

“What fun would that have been?” Abby snickered. “Now you know why Mom needed to get home. She has a meltdown if she can’t hold her babies before bed. Or at least I assume she goes to bed. I’ve read she may soon be up at night wandering around.”

“Oh, great, something more to scare me: a night stalker.”

“See why I need your help? She’s more than I can handle alone.”

“I’ll support whatever you decide about her care, but I’m not moving home. I’ve got leads on another job.”

After ending the conversation, I tiptoed back to the living room. Mom was talking baby gibberish to a curly-haired brunette doll cradled in her arms. “I love you so much, Jordyn.” She pulled the baby to her chest. “You’re the joy of my life, and I will never let anything bad happen to you.”

If only she’d have been that loving and protective of the *real* me. My heart ached. Why couldn’t Dad have stuck around? At least until I’d finished grade school. Maybe Mom wouldn’t have been so depressed.

She began singing a sweet lullaby. Where had I heard that before? My eyes stung as I remembered. She’d sung this to me every night before bed—until their divorce.

I drew near to Mom and rested my head on her shoulder.
If she could attempt a do-over, shouldn't I at least try?

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ANNA'S MISTAKE

I kiss Dad's forehead and slump into the chair beside his hospital bed. He opens yellowing eyes, managing a weak smile. "School out already?" His words slur from morphine and resurrect memories of his drinking.

I brush them aside. "It's Saturday."

"Did you check on Liam?"

I nod, lower my head. "Same." My four-year-old cousin has been here in an induced coma for over a week.

Dad's legs rustle as if wanting to escape. If only we both could. He squeezes my hand and draws me closer. His cracked lips stick together. "It's not your fault, Anna."

Guilt sloshes in the pit of my stomach. He's wrong. It is my fault. I left the bottle of vitamins on the table. I was texting friends instead of playing with Liam.

"Have faith, honey. He'll be okay."

How can I believe God will fix my mistake when he hasn't fixed any of Dad's? It's hard to look at him. He's supposed to be praying for the sick not in need of healing himself.

He gropes the bed, finds his morphine pump, and gives it a squeeze. A beep sounds and his shoulders relax. "Mom tells me you've been hanging out with Jesse."

I shrug as heat rises up my neck. Technically, I'm not allowed to date for another month, not until I'm sixteen.

“His grandfather Simeon and I go way back. We traveled the circuit when—”

He stops, and I know why. I’ve asked him not to talk about his glory days in front of me. It reminds me of how badly things ended. How he let God down. Let those who need healing down. Let me down when he moved away.

“Praise the Lord!” Simeon lumbers into the room. “God is up to something great today.”

“Amen.” Dad raises the incline of his bed.

“Gotta run.” I kiss Dad’s forehead.

“Don’t let me chase you off,” Simeon says, “however, my grandson’s waiting for you in the family area.”

Jesse’s here? My cheeks instantly warm. “Okay, thanks.”

A few minutes later, I stroll into the family area where the smell of burnt coffee lingers. Jesse glances at me. “Hey. How’s your cousin?”

“Same, I guess.” I sit next to him.

He pats my knee. “Don’t worry. Gramps says he’ll get better. He and your dad pray together every day for him.”

“Really?”

He nods. “They wish they could pray in Liam’s room, but... Well, you know. Gramps isn’t on your uncle’s party list.”

“Neither is my dad. Uncle Dave thinks *those* types of people are wacked. So, your grandfather really healed people too? Does he still?”

“He did, but—” He wrinkles his nose. “Let’s just say his game was off for a season and he benched himself. Now he’s back, but more as a coach. There are too many people like your uncle who can’t forget about his past.”

This stops me from telling him my dad’s sorry story. Maybe someday I’ll forget it myself, or at least not hold it against him.

“Hey, let’s go pray in Liam’s room.”

“Out loud?” I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“However you want to. Come on.” He stands and offers his hand to help me up. When he doesn’t let it go, my pulse quickens. His grip is strong and comforting. I can do this. I can face Aunt Cindy one more time.

Nearing the door to Liam’s room, my legs go weak. Jesse’s stride pulls me onward and we enter. I introduce him to my aunt and say “I’m so sorry” for the hundredth time. “Any change?”

She shakes her head. “They’re running more tests.” She speaks softly, as if not to wake Liam. “His vitals are still all over the board.”

Jesse squeezes my hand and closes his eyes. I close mine, too, and pray. A commotion breaks into the room and sidelines my concentration.

It's Simeon, pushing my dad in a wheelchair. "Praise the Lord!" he says. "God wants to heal Liam today."

Dad glances at Aunt Cindy, as if to ask permission. She nods, tears rimming her bloodshot eyes. Struggling to get out of his wheelchair, he braces himself along the guardrail of Liam's bed. When firmly planted, he gazes at me. "Is God in a good mood today, Angel Girl?"

Suddenly I become the little girl in pigtails who thinks her daddy can do anything. "Every day," I say, praying he will redeem us both.

© 2018 Faith Radio Writing Contest Fiction Finalist

THE FUNERAL DRESS

“I got the job!” A gust of autumn wind accompanied Kat’s entrance, whipping the Macy’s bag draped across her arm. Her husband, Gary, took the garment bag and hung it over the nearest door.

“That’s my girl.” He whirled her around their kitchen and backed her into the pantry’s frosted glass door. With his arms around her waist, he gazed into her green eyes. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

Kat swallowed hard. “Mm-hmm.”

He relaxed his stance. “So, when do you start?”

“Soon, I imagine.” She slipped from his embrace and grabbed the garment bag. “They want someone to start right away.”

“What do you mean *someone*? Did you get the job or not?”

“I’m ninety-nine percent sure.” She scurried to their bedroom, Gary trailing behind. “Sharon and I really hit it off.” Kat hung the bag over the master bath’s door. “She’s the V.P. of Marketing, filling in for H.R. until they hire—me.”

Gary stared at the bag. “That better not be another suit. You promised not to buy any more until you got a job.”

“But it’s been six months. Do you know how hard that’s been?”

“You’ve bought plenty of other things.” He glanced around their bedroom. Since her unemployment, she’d redecorated all but one bedroom of their three-thousand-square-foot rambler. He shook his head at their new Laura Ashley comforter set. The smell of fresh paint—buttercup yellow—permeated their bedroom.

“You’ll see,” Kat said, “only one more interview.” She unzipped the garment bag.

Gary glanced at the row of designer suits, organized first by color then by skirt length, hanging in their closet. The names Alfani, Lauren, and both Kleins—Anne and Calvin—once foreign to Gary, were now part of his family, too. “Another interview?”

“With the owners, James and Vivian Nystrom.” She took off her blouse. “And some bald guy, V.P. of Sales. Sharon calls them the Trio. She asked my take on guys who shave and wax their heads.” Kat clicked her tongue, mimicking Sharon, as she slipped into the simple black dress she’d purchased. “I’m sure she has a crush on him.”

“That looks like a dress for a funeral.” Gary raked his thick chestnut hair with his fingers.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Kat squealed. “You don’t think it’s too sexy, do you? It’s very fitted.” She ran her hands over her curvy, petite figure. “I don’t want others to think I’m flaunting my body at a funeral. It looks great on me, right?” She admired herself in the dresser mirror.

“Funeral? I thought you needed something for an interview.”

“I do. I mean, I did.” She pulled a periwinkle double-breasted blazer from the same bag. “Now don’t get mad. The next interview is crucial. I needed a suit that says conservative yet powerful, with a splash of pizzazz. Like this Giorgio Armani.”

Gary left for the family room. He sank into his La-Z-Boy, arms folded across his chest. Kat scurried behind in her tight-fitting funeral dress, the Armani flapping over one shoulder.

“It was half price, honest.” She held the periwinkle suit in front of her briefly then tossed it aside. “And this one was on clearance.” She turned and pivoted. “I couldn’t resist such a good deal.”

“Since when are you concerned with price? And how many funerals have we ever gone to?” He made a goose egg with one hand.

Kat chewed on her bottom lip. “I hadn’t wanted to tell you this, but the dress pulled at me. You know. I got that feeling. The one you don’t like me to tell you about. Mark my word, there’s a funeral in our near future.”

“Yeah, yours.” Gary chuckled and pushed back in the recliner.

“Don’t you dare bury me in black.” She fell into his lap. “Promise me it’ll be red.” She snuggled against his broad chest, breathing in his cologne.

“As long as it’s something red you already own.” He rested his head against hers and sighed. “So, which do you want to tell me about first? Your interview and why you are ninety-nine percent sure you’ve got this job, or whose funeral we *won’t* be attending?”

Kat shared a little about the interview but kept returning to Sharon’s appearance. Both women had worn knee-length navy suits with classic white blouses. Sharon’s flaxen hair was similar to Kat’s, though Kat referred to hers as champagne. “And we’re both barely five feet—”

“Wait a minute,” Gary interrupted, “you’re getting this job because you two look alike?”

“It helps, but let me finish.” She snuggled closer. “I asked her my favorite interview question.”

Gary nearly choked on his laugh. “The one if your house was on fire?”

Kat playfully socked him in the arm. “Yes.”

“So, what three items would she save?” He almost sounded interested.

“You know I’m not concerned with the answers. I watch what they do while they think, read their body language. This paints a more accurate picture.”

“So what picture did Sharon paint?”

“She swung her chair toward the row of continuous windows overlooking the city.” Kat sat up. “What an incredible view. From the thirty-fourth floor, I could see for miles. The streets and buildings looked like a grid. I hope my office has windows.” She sank back into his arms with a smirk. “Sharon stared out the window as if lost somewhere in that maze. Like I always say, some people can’t make decisions. Others lie about their answers. And very few have the confidence to tell the truth, whatever that is to them.”

“You turned the tables on her and you think you’ll get the job? From someone who can’t make decisions?”

“I apologized.” She snickered. “Then I told her she needn’t answer the question since I was the one being interviewed.”

“Good, good for you.” Gary chuckled. “Did you give her your spiel about people giving off vibes and you being like a tuning fork? How you know who’s sharp, flat, or playing off key.” He waved his hand as if conducting an orchestra.

“Stop that.” She hit him playfully again. “Sharon and I are having lunch on Monday, after my interview with the Trio.”

“Finally, a real sign,” he said. “Which reminds me, your mother called *me* because you weren’t answering—”

“Has someone died?”

“*Bzzzz.*” Gary pushed on the arm of his chair. “Guess again, Madame Gypsy. This shouldn’t be that tough. What does she always call about lately?”

Kat knew it was about her finding a job. Her mother didn’t want their mutual gift of “reading people” going to waste.

“I’ll call her later,” Kat said, with no intention of doing so. “Sharon loved me. She may even be girlfriend material.”

“What’s not to love?” Gary’s hands meandered like a gentle stream over the curves of Kat’s body. He pushed back her hair and kissed the nape of her neck. “You definitely can’t wear this dress to a funeral.” He nibbled her ear. “Let’s start a family. You can still work if you want to. And you’d have a blast buying a new maternity wardrobe.”

The grandfather’s clock chimed, and Kat sprung from his lap. “I promised Lily I’d meet her and her co-workers after they got off work.”

Gary closed his eyes and counted the five long chimes.

“I can’t wear this.” She hurried to their bedroom and reappeared wearing the navy suit from earlier. “You don’t mind, do you, honey?”

“What’s to mind?” He stood, his chest deflated. “It’s great you’re going out. Honest.” It had been months since she’d spent time with anyone besides Gary. “Who knows, you may even like one of these women. So, try and behave.” He kissed her goodbye.

Gary was always the optimist, she thought. A funeral would be more fun than the trivialities she'd soon endure.

If only Lily hadn't been so insistent. She didn't dare risk losing her lone friend. They had met at a human resources seminar last June. Both were married and in their early thirties, but that's where all similarities stopped. Yet, a magnetic pull of opposites had connected them.

Kat thought about their last conversation. Had Lily succeeded in getting pregnant? She gripped the leather steering wheel tighter. Was that why they were meeting?

Lily was too nice for her own good. Children would destroy her and wreak havoc on her marriage. Children always produced disharmony in relationships. Kat's parents had taught her that.

They had quarreled over everything about her: what she would wear, how she should act, who she could play with. She'd rarely brought friends home, hating her mother's droning critique of their imperfections and insistence Kat could do better. Her father had packed his bags when she'd packed hers for college, disappearing from both their lives.

Gary came from a large family, the youngest of six children. She loved watching him play with their nieces and nephews. He'd be a great dad, she thought. But she couldn't risk having children and passing along her gift. Thankfully, he had been preoccupied with his law practice and hadn't

discussed having children until recently. She intended to delay their decision until her biological clock ran out.

The matron opened the door and Kat stepped into the Avar D'loj Lounge. On every table, a flickering red candle in the shape of a rose floated in a glass bowl with water. The shiny gold wallpaper looked like something from the '70s. Rowdy country music overhead completed the eclectic atmosphere. Kat noticed Lily waving at the back of the room. She ambled toward her, intuitively nodding approval of Lily's pink chenille pantsuit as she approached.

Lily introduced Kat to her co-workers. Tonya, a stout, middle-aged woman with short graying hair quickly monopolized the conversation. Upper-management, Kat assessed of Tonya, noting her masculine-cut suit.

Four protruding hairs from a mole on Tonya's neck mesmerized Kat. They curled like a blooming tiger lily and tussled with the chain affixed to the reading glasses hanging around her neck. If only Kat had a pair of scissors and could operate. She dismissed the thought, realizing it would be like amputating a little toe when the whole foot was gangrene.

Tonya's husky voice jerked Kat in and out of her thoughts as the others droned on about their work at 4-U Advertising.

"Kat and I met at a human resource seminar," Lily said, attempting to draw her in. "She's very talented and gifted at reading what people are like."

“You don’t say.” Tonya placed her forearm on the table and leaned toward Kat.

“I’d guess you’re the boss,” Kat said. “You have a take-charge personality.”

Tonya nodded and took a drink of her whiskey sour. “I’m easy. Tell me about Kathy, here.” She pointed to the woman at her left, wearing a tweed suit with elbow patches. Kathy lowered her gaze. Kat had watched her recount the change left by the waiter, time and again, with her eyes.

“You’re in accounting, correct?”

“Amazing.” Tonya slapped the table and took another drink. “How about Rhonda? What’s her position?” The woman in a clingy red dress sat up straighter.

Kat wanted to say homewrecker, as she’d noticed her coy winks at their waiter wearing a wedding band, but she decided to have some fun. “Are you in compliance?”

Tonya nearly choked on her drink.

Lily giggled. “Rhonda’s rarely in compliance.”

Kat smirked and turned to Tonya. “Clearly, I was joking. Rhonda’s your top sales person and very good at what she does. Am I right?”

“Incredible!” Tonya waived for their waiter. “Let’s have another round and hear more.”

“Thank you, but—” Kat feigned a yawn. “I’d better get home.” She stood to leave, and Lily excused herself to walk

with her. At the front door, Kat raised her eyebrows. “Thanks for an interesting evening.”

“It was good to see you,” Lily said. “Gosh, has it been over a month since we’ve talked? How’s the job search—”

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I just got hired.”

“That’s great.” Lily hugged her. “Congratulations. Where will you be working?”

“Nystrom Advertising. We’ll be competitors again.” Kat laughed.

“Really.” She glanced away. “Good to see you, Kat. Keep in touch.”

While driving home, Kat replayed their awkward parting, fixated on the word really. Was it Lily’s tone or lack of tone that bothered her most? Had she heard an inflection, as if questioning her answer? Lily couldn’t have known she had lied. Besides, she’d have the job soon enough.

The image of Tonya’s blooming mole poked at her mind. Even a vampire would avoid that neck, she thought. Too bad Tonya didn’t have a friend close enough to suggest she have the mole surgically removed. But neither did Kat have such a friend, only good old Mom who never minced words. Someday she wouldn’t care what her mother thought. Someday she’d succeed at having a close friendship. Perhaps, with Sharon. Lily didn’t seem to be an option any longer.

Monday morning came, and Kat’s interview with the Trio went as well as she’d imagined. Sharon had obviously

primed them about her gift, as they'd come equipped with questions about mannerisms and body language. Kat was sure they had referenced their own employees, asking what tongue clicking meant, an unfortunate habit of Sharon's. To protect her new friend, Kat told them it occurred in highly intelligent people who found it difficult to express their vast amount of knowledge. In reality, Kat knew insecurity caused Sharon's nervous tick.

After the interview, Kat met Sharon at a restaurant across the street.

"So, how'd it go?" Sharon greeted. "Were they as wowed as I was?"

Kat sat at her table. "It's safe to say we'll be having many more lunches together."

Sharon beamed. "It's going to be such fun having you around."

The women visited about their favorite boutiques, exchanged beauty secrets, and chatted like old friends. Sharon was single and eager to marry Mr. Right, who Kat surmised was bald Brian even though Sharon and he had dated only once.

When finished, Sharon placed her napkin on her plate. "The Trio has one last interview at four. They'd be crazy not to hire you. But then again . . ." She rolled her eyes. "What did you make of them? Could you tell they're secretive? Something's going on I'm not privy to."

“Vivian definitively has an air of entitlement,” Kat said. “Is this her family’s business?”

“Daddy’s still on the payroll,” Sharon whispered.

“James is a proud man. No wonder it’s not public knowledge. I’m surprised Daddy let James change the name.” Kat stroked her neck with one hand. “It’s too bad he’s been so consumed with creating a name for himself that he’s neglected his wife.” She raised her eyebrows.

“An affair?” Sharon leaned across the table. “When would Vivian find the time? She’s busier than James.”

“Busy with what? Or, should I say *whom*?” Kat smirked. “Who does she spend the most time with?”

Sharon tilted her head. “I don’t know.”

“When Vivian dropped her pen, who do you suppose picked it up?”

“Brian?”

Kat nodded.

Sharon’s eyebrows knit together. “She and Brian are—” With a tongue click, she stopped mid-sentence. Her neck turned a blotchy pink. “That sleazeball!” she said. “Right under my nose. And to think I almost—” She shook her head and composed herself. “Poor, James.”

“I’m sure he’s grateful someone keeps Vivian occupied. Daddy’s shadow eclipsed any hope of their ever having a happy marriage.” The news was difficult for Kat to share, but

it was better Sharon learn the truth about Brian sooner than later. What were friends for?

After paying the bill, Sharon stood to leave. “Thank you for your honesty. I’m sure I’ll be calling soon to offer you the job.” They parted company.

Not until two days later did Sharon call with the regretful news the Trio had hired someone else. She apologized without detail, other than giving an excuse for the delay that she’d been sick. Kat eked out a few syllables before saying goodbye. Why hadn’t Sharon offered an explanation? Wouldn’t a friend owe her that much? She could have suggested they have lunch at least.

When Gary came home, Kat was lying on the couch in her funeral dress with an empty box of animal crackers on her chest. “Hey, sweetie,” he said. “How’s my girl?” Kat stared into the empty box that once held the animals she had decapitated and devoured.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I keep going over and over,” she mumbled, “what happened. Who I read wrong. Why no one’s died yet—besides me.”

“But you’re not wearing red.” Gary’s smile went unreturned as he knelt beside the couch. “You didn’t get the job?” He brushed cracker crumbs off Kat’s chin. “Maybe you’re losing your powers.” His chuckling incited a glare from Kat. “Or maybe you can’t read people. Is it even right to try?”

Nobody's perfect." He cupped her face in his hands. "You aren't your mother, and that's a good thing—a wonderful thing. Stop looking for telltale signs and notice the obvious ones in front of you."

"What do you mean?"

"Not getting the job could be a sign for us to start a family."

She placed the empty box over her face. "Please, Gary, I'm too depressed to argue about having children."

Gary lifted the box from her face. "I'd love a little girl who's just like her mommy." He kissed her forehead. "You'll be a great mom someday."

If only someone could guarantee their children would be like Gary. The possibility of having a child like her was too great a risk to take. Her gift was a curse she'd vowed never to pass along.

Sunday morning Kat awoke before Gary and tiptoed to the kitchen. After starting the coffee maker, she retrieved the newspaper. She checked the obituaries first. Still, no one she knew had died. Was she losing her powers?

She laid the classified section on the countertop and sat on a bar stool. Sipping coffee, she scanned the help-wanted section under professional. "Yes." She tapped her finger on the ad for a human resource director. She drew the page closer and mouthed each word in a slow, deliberate manner.

She paused at the employer, 4-U Advertising, then tossed the paper aside.

How could that be? Lily would have called to let her know. Maybe she wanted to tell Kat last week but something had stopped her. Could Lily have gotten fired? No, that seemed too unlikely. Maybe she quit because she was pregnant. She hadn't looked pregnant. The scenarios wouldn't stop coming. She drew the paper close again and read it over and over as if it held the answer.

Perhaps they were hiring another human resource person. But then why hadn't Lily called to tell her? She replayed their last evening together, searching for clues in Lily's posture, expressions, mannerisms, and words. Had Lily always been so hard to read? Or was Gary's right?

Kat squealed, remembering she had told Lily she'd just been hired. She picked up the phone and called Lily.

"Kat?" Lily sounded surprised. "I've been meaning to call you."

"About the opening where you work?"

"Where I used to work," she corrected. "It's been crazy with this new job and all. The owners are leaving on a month-long cruise next week to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They're so in love." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I meant to call. That's why I invited you for drinks with my boss. To give you an inside edge if I got the job."

“Oh, thanks.” Kat paused to process the information. “Did I make a good first impression?”

“You were great,” Lily said. “They need someone who can start immediately. I was shown the door on Tuesday when I told them I was going to work for a competitor.”

“Who’s your new employer?”

Lily cleared her throat. “Nystrom Advertising.”

Kat couldn’t speak.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Lily continued, “the other night, I mean. When you said . . . Well, I’d already interviewed, too. I was shocked when they offered me the job, but I couldn’t turn down the opportunity.”

“Congratulations,” Kat said. “I’m happy for you.”

After ending the call, Kat thrust her forearm across the countertop in a wide sweep. Sheets of newspaper whirled through the air and scattered to the floor. She leaned her back against the wall and her body slipped downward until her butt hit the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest and covered them with her nightshirt. With her head bowed, she closed her eyes.

How could she have been so wrong about everything: the black dress, Sharon, bald Brian, and the Nystroms? She truly couldn’t read people. Then there was no curse to pass on! But could she be a good mother? She bombed as a friend. Perhaps even as a wife. How had Gary put up with her? Drifting to sleep, she vowed to become a better person.

Gary walked into the kitchen. “What happened here?”

Kat opened her grateful eyes and stretched her arms toward him. He reached down and pulled her to her feet. She leaned into him, her arms draped around his neck. “How did I marry such a wonderful man like you?” she asked. “You’re the kindest, sweetest, gentlest, most loving person I’ve ever met.”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he said, “but I like it.”

Kat took Gary’s hand, kissing him intermittently as she led him to their bedroom. “Tell me again I’m not like my mom.”

“You’re definitely not like your mom.” He pulled off his T-shirt.

“Then I don’t have any special abilities?” She threw back the ruffled comforter.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He fell into bed with her.

“You really think I’d be a good mother?”

“Mm-hmm.” He kissed her passionately as the morning sun impregnated their room with hope.

Tomorrow, Kat thought, she’d call Lily and Sharon to apologize. Maybe she could learn to become a good friend before becoming a mother.

ESSAY

DOES INCOME INEQUALITY THREATEN
DEMOCRACY?

In 2009, my husband and I built a home in which we hoped to retire. That November, the residents of our fair city voted to approve a school levy that increased our home's property tax by \$800 annually. When contemplating whether or not to build a new home, an increase in our property tax was a concern we weighed heavily. But we were unaware of the impending vote. Six years later, in 2015, our school board called for another vote. This time its residents passed a 78 million-dollar bond, which once again increased our property tax. This time only \$400. Of our property tax, nearly \$1700 goes to our school district, of which we have no children attending.

That is an example of democracy in action. Each person is given an equal vote whether they are rich, poor, own real estate or not. Was it fair that those without children could pay more than those with children? A democratic society places no restrictions on who can vote regardless of who will benefit or be negatively impacted by the outcome. The majority rules! A democracy gives the power to the people in the form of a vote regardless of income or lack of income, and we freely

elect representatives to vote on our behalf at local, state, and national levels.

Income inequality does not threaten democracy. The real threat is selfishness and complacency. In regard to the school referendum, I didn't want my property taxes to increase. The question then became, "Do I vote for what is best for me or what is best for my community?" We often vote for what is best for our pocketbooks, which includes both rich and poor. Selfishness is indiscriminating. The Bible doesn't say money is the root of all evil, it's the *love* of money.

The inequality of income would never be considered a threat if we loved, or even cared about, our neighbors as ourselves. Regardless of our income, we would be concerned about the greater good of our community. Disparity in income isn't the issue, it is selfishness. Inequalities will always exist, and democracy works because each person is given a vote.

One might argue that those with money buy votes, they lobby and influence people's decisions. The rich have more money to campaign and therefore sway voters their way. However, each person is responsible for their own choice. A smart campaign learns what people want or are willing to give up, as in the case of our school referendum. The school board did its homework and learned that people would accept an increase in property taxes if it was less than \$10 a month. So that is what they proposed—for homes valued at \$150,000. The rest of their campaign addressed the problem of our

overcrowded schools, making it seem like their answer was the only solution.

Here's where complacency comes in. Who knew if we were being told the truth? Each voter should become educated on an issue or a candidate in order to cast their ballot wisely. Instead of attending a school board meeting, I emailed the board members my concerns and questions.

A few days later I received a phone call from one of the school's superintendents, who answered questions to my satisfaction. In this age of information and technology, there is no excuse for not being informed—and especially for not voting.

Forty percent of Americans did not vote during the last presidential election, an example of complacency, not democracy, in action. This year I was tempted to vote in the primaries for the first time. But I didn't. Add laziness to the list of reasons for complacency. However, my penniless son in college voted. A young man who barely scrapes by each month took the initiative to attend his first primary election.

Minnesotans can be proud of their 75% turnout rate in the last presidential election, the highest of all the states. Was the higher voter turnout because our citizens are wealthier? More educated?

Statistics show that people with higher income and education are more prone to vote. And how do they vote? The great state of Minnesota is known for providing quality

education to its children and benevolent services to its less fortunate. If democracy could ever be threatened, it would be from complacent citizens not exercising their right to vote or voting for what best benefits themselves.

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POETRY

THE TREADMILL

Like a displaced conveyer belt from
some archaic assembly line, he stands,
incomplete. Dreaded beast, lacking enjoyment
and stirring up remorse. A monstrosity
of guilt. A reminder of resolutions—
failed and futile. Like a hard-to-swallow
pill, an act of prevention. Monotonous
as an endless road.

We met out of need: I to use, and he
to be used. We were fast, furious, and frequent.
But repetition breeds boredom, and I tired
of our random rendezvous leading
nowhere. Spring sprang. I roamed.
The world outside inviting. The grass
quivered, the sky floated, the air
exhaled, and the sun exploded. No more
black tread, odor of supper past, white
ceiling overhead, and forced-air gas.
I was going places. He, stationary,
collecting discarded clothing at home.

The grass browned, the sky melted, the air bit, the sun retreated. My path led back to my less-traveled friend, where need supersedes desire. I welcomed familiarity like a warm bath on a cold winter night, and savored predictability as if it were the last sip of hot chocolate. He posed no questions, passed no judgments, portrayed no disappointment. He was content. For when used—
he was complete.

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ONLY JIF

Is there any other? he would say
and order dry, which meant no butter,
and dark, which meant burnt—toast.
None of this warm bread, he'd say
every morning at the restaurant
that didn't serve Jif. He brought
his own jar, the large economy size,
smooth not crunchy, spread on so thick
it wouldn't melt. Each slice cut into thirds.
He wasn't as fussy about his jelly, yet
he preferred strawberry to grape.
A teaspoon of jelly preceded each bite,
not smeared but mounded on top
in the shape of the spoon. In sync with
his mouth his eyes opened wide, a soul
patch of hair squishing into his beard.
Three bites per row, nine bites per slice,
seven days a week Jif peanut butter toast
with jelly. Over seventy-eight years of life,
more than half a million bites.

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SOILED

You sit as though helpless,
your hand reaching, holding
a glass marble, bright blue
like her angelic eyes. She
trusts you, her grandfather
on her mother's side. Yet
you lure her with trinkets,
not to give, but to take.

She fights to wash away
your stench of Brylcreem,
cigar smoke on your breath,
your clothes, your grimy
touch that sears her like
a branding iron, imbedding
your image forever.

Her marriage, short-lived,
much like her childhood
a nightmare of remembrance.
Your touch she feels as he
reaches for her, groping
the darkness for his buried
jewel. But she a mere

illusion long gone.

A handful of pills she pops,
medicating, her prescription
to numbing the pain. Trapped
by your memory, she utters
no sound, drowning in
an abyss of shame.

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FAMILY TRADITION

If you can drive a tractor
you're old enough to drink
beer, despite your young eight
years. You acquire the taste
sipping from your daddy's can,
sitting on his lap, barely out of
diapers, wearing a DEKALB[®] cap,
steering his John Deere.

Your tolerance develops while in
grade school, at family gatherings,
graduations, and wedding dances
where kegs flow freely and no one
cares what's sloshing in your red Solo
cup. Your family laughs while you
stagger about, your words slurring
as you carry on tradition.

Though the keg is missing at
your cousin's funeral, six packs
and stronger tonics appear where
the family gathers afterward to mourn
his untimely death. No one mentions
his cirrhosis. Instead, you toast

the man who once favored beer
over taking his next breath.

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THE CHRISTMAS PANTSUIT

The slide show began of our Christmases past
With family together we'd all have a blast.
But how had three decades flown by oh-so fast?

Slide after slide we watched everyone change.
From youngest to oldest we all did arrange
To find something different and often quite strange.

Big hair with slim bodies and clothes that were sewn
By our mother the seamstress, yet no one had known.
Now we were grown and had kids of our own.

The clothing, the hairstyles, even the color—
From brunette to blonde—yes, that was our mother,
A beautiful woman, unmatched by another.

Yet one thing stayed constant, and to our surprise
It wasn't the men's suits or even their ties.
It was our mom's pantsuit that gave us a rise.

A red and orange top in an Indian print.
The pants, they were black; the top, too, had a hint.
But pure polyester, it gathered some lint.

A belt that had fringes accented her waist,
Revealing her figure, our dad had good taste.
But buying new clothes she considered a waste.

Year after year this same suit kept appearing.
Then laughter broke out until all eyes were tearing.
Not a word could be heard amidst all the jeering.

For the outfit most worn, Mom took the grand prize.
But how had she managed to stay the same size?
The secret was found by the look in her eyes.

They beamed with the love that she had for her young.
Not having much money when they had begun
To have their five children—still praises she sung.

We posed for our Christmas-card photos with cheer,
Styled hair, matching outfits, and just the right gear.
She'd go without glamour and not shed a tear.

A fashion-queen title she'd never acquire.
Nor have earthly riches on which to retire.
To give of herself was her only desire.

Speed Queen was the nickname that she did receive
From our dad in the Chevy, anxious to leave.

Him honking the horn was her biggest pet peeve.

I'll tell you her secret to staying so slim:
She never held onto but gave from within,
Working endless hours with eyes that grew dim.

Her strength was spent on the caring of others.
She'd not change a thing if given her druthers.
What could be grander than being our mother?

A selfless act, the suit worn year after year.
Now all laughter's silenced, and so did you hear?
Her pantsuit speaks volumes to the listening ear.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider spreading the word and leaving a REVIEW on Amazon, where it is available for purchase.

If you'd like to read more from Kim, visit her website at **KimALarson.com** and subscribe to her newsletter.

AND check out Kim's Bible study book:

Unraveling Fairy Tales

Learning to Live Happily Ever After

Living happily ever after isn't reserved for fairy tales or the afterlife. It's for us—today!

God wants us to live abundant, productive, and happy lives. Yet, it's not always easy when we live in an imperfect, sin-ravaged world. How is happily ever after possible?

In this 10-session study, you'll learn God's how-to answers. Each story highlights a common problem hindering our happiness. Through Bible stories, spiritual principles and insights, and personal examples, *Unraveling Fairy Tales* will guide you down the path to everlasting happiness.

A few examples include:

- Cinderella—learn to embrace your identity as God’s beloved daughter
- Rapunzel—allow God to rescue you from loneliness and feeling trapped
- Princess and the PEA—gain godly **P**erspective, **E**xpectations, and **A**ttitude
- Chicken Little—become better at discerning truth so you’re not led astray

Each chapter provides five daily readings to use as a weekly devotional or group study. At the end of each day, you’ll find questions or truths to ponder to help you connect with God intimately. Also, each chapter contains questions at the end for reflection or group discussion.

Unraveling Fairy Tales invites you on a journey to experience God’s audacious, indescribable, irresistible, and unconditional love. Once you do, you’ll fall madly in love and give yourself completely to him. Isn’t that what happily ever after is all about: spending your life with the One you love? The One who completes you?

Get ready to be swept off your feet!

Praise for Unraveling Fairy Tales

“*Unraveling Fairy Tales* invites its readers on a journey to personal transformation through an intimate relationship with God. The book is well-written and offers opportunity for personal or group study. Each chapter provides five daily readings with prompts for personal reflection. Every day I found a something I could ponder, reflect on, or a truth I could apply to my life. I recommend this book for new believers in Jesus as well as those who have walked in a relationship with Him for years. There are treasures hidden within for any reader.”

—Kristie Fredrickson, The Olive Branch Ministries

“I loved the Chicken Little chapter in *Unraveling Fairy Tales*, and I found value in every chapter. I appreciated Kim’s willingness to be vulnerable in sharing her life experiences, which were believable and engaging. As a group leader, I enjoyed the questions at the end of each chapter and the page numbers provided to find the answers. The chapters promoted great authentic discussions. The group, many who didn’t know each other very well, grew close because of it, which was fun to see. Now they light up when they see each other!”

—Pam Haglund, Living Well Women’s Coaching

“Kim’s conversational writing style is engaging and encouraging. She points readers to God’s love in a non-judgmental manner. She recognizes we are all in different places and shows us God meets us where we’re at. I enjoyed

her personal stories and appreciated her honest transparency. Anyone who truly wants to experience a new closeness to God would benefit from reading *Unraveling Fairy Tales*.”

—Pam Lagomarsino, Above The Pages Editorial Service

“I would recommend *Unraveling Fairy Tales* to any of my female friends who want to grow spiritually. Kim does an excellent job at intertwining fairy tales into our relationship with God—this book deserves your attention. A person should take her time with it, so that she can get the most from it. It really provided me more meaningful talks with God.”

—Judy Balluff, executive board member for Releasing Destiny World Wide

“I loved Kim’s sense of humor and how her personal stories showed God at work in her life. She was real and transparent. Not at all preachy, but powerful. I found the fairy-tale elements engaging. They did not detract from God’s Word but helped illustrate biblical principles. I would recommend *Unraveling Fairy Tales* to any woman who wants to grow in her faith.”

—Nancy Bradley

“For a closer relationship with Jesus, let the Spirit work through this carefully researched, creative, authentic Bible study.”

—Helen Allenson