Frozen Dinners

A MEMOIR OF A FRACTURED FAMILY

BY

Elaine Ambrose

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Dedication

Dedicated to the memories of my parents
Neal and Leona Ambrose
and to my younger brother
George Ambrose.

Please save me a place at the table.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

The Quilt

Irritated clouds of old gray dust swirl behind my car and settle back onto the patches of scruffy sagebrush as I drive a back road into the village of Wendell, Idaho. I turn down 4th Avenue and stop in front of an insignificant old house where my family lived before my father became rich. Decades of decay and neglect are exposed as cheap vinyl siding sags on the outside walls and dead vines hang on crooked trellises over weathered boards thirsty for paint. I stare at the window of my former bedroom and wonder if it's still nailed shut.

I drive two blocks to the Wendell Manor and Nursing Home. Before I get out of the car to visit my mother, I follow a familiar routine: I pull the jar of mentholated cream from my purse, unscrew the cap, and dab the pungent ointment into both nostrils to mask the odors inside the nursing home. Despite the best efforts of the

janitors who continually clean the facility and open the old windows on frigid winter days to exchange stale air for fresh, regular visitors anticipate the pervasive smells of bleach and urine and take necessary precautions. The analgesic rub originally was designed for temporary relief of aches and pains, but the ritual of using it in my nose enables me to enter and greet my mother with compassion. Sometimes she doesn't recognize me, and that leaves an ache that no balm or medication can soothe.

The building is 100 years old and so are many of the residents. My father was born there in 1928 when the building was a hospital. After it became a nursing home, my grandmother died there, curled into a fetal position after several strokes. My 87-year-old mother occupies a tiny room down the hall. On good days when she can concentrate, she turns on her CD player and listens to her favorite artists: Lawrence Welk's orchestra, Tennessee Ernie Ford, several religious selections, and her collection of big band music from the 1940s. She can't remember how to use the remote control for the television, so the music is her daily companion.

Her room is simple. Furniture consists of a single medical bed, two antique nightstands from a home my parents once owned in Butte, Montana, her music table, and a wardrobe closet. Beside the unused TV sits a life-sized, wood carving of praying hands, a gift from my father after she "lost that one baby" seven years after I was born. Family pictures line the walls, and after she forgot our names I added colorful name tags to each photograph. There is a pendulum wall clock, perpetually tilted and five minutes slow. Two bookcases support

scrapbooks, large-print novels, assorted knickknacks, and her Bible. A stained-glass dove hangs in the one window, and a smiling cloth doll in a frilly dress perches on the bed. A calendar on a small table notes that she is scheduled for a shower twice a week and her hair is curled on Wednesdays. My mother once lived in a mansion on a hill. Now she has one room with a private bathroom.

The room is tidy except for the scars on the corners of the wall where her wheelchair has rubbed as she maneuvers to get into the bathroom. She is completely incontinent, even after several failed surgeries to correct the problem, but she still attempts to get to the bathroom, often with disastrous results. If she falls, she pushes the call button hanging from her neck and the staff comes running to help and then lifts her back into her chair. They tried attaching an alarm to her chair so they would know when she moved out of it, but she stubbornly continues to attempt to stand. It's that feisty spirit that keeps her alive. Though her body and mind are weak, her heart and motivation remain strong.

The rules at the nursing home are strict but understandable. No hot plate, no candles, no refrigerator. Her scissors were taken after she accidentally stabbed herself and needed stitches. Her three moments of daily adventure come when she wheels herself to the dining room for meals. She usually declines the games of checkers or Bingo after lunch and returns to her solitary room after finishing a typical meal of meatloaf, warm vegetables, and soft potatoes with creamy gravy. She has been a widow for 25 years and is well-accustomed to living alone. I visit at least twice a month, and she has a

regular group of friends from her church and from her women's association who stop by with cards and small gifts.

I enter her room with a cheery "Hello, Mom" and place a vase of flowers and a new air freshener on her table. She sits in her wheelchair, too weak to walk after breaking her back and her hip in separate falls. She looks sweet. Today's outfit is a comfortable sweatshirt covered with appliquéd flowers, black knit pants, and sturdy black shoes. And imitation pearls. Always the pearls. She has a strand of real ones but hides them in a drawer because she says they are "too nice to use." She glances up, focuses on my face, cocks her head, and then her eyes widen with a look of anticipation.

"You're finally here," she said. "I keep watching for you."

"Yes, Mom," I say as I kiss her cheek. "I'm here."

"Did you bring soup?" she asks, her face hopeful.

"No soup today. It's too hot outside. I promise to bring you some potato soup in the fall."

She loves my potato soup, made with new spuds, fresh cream, browned sausage, celery, onions, spices, and mustard seeds. One of her favorite Bible verses describes how virtuous people can move mountains if they just have faith as small as a mustard seed. Her mountains haven't budged despite a lifetime of adding countless seeds into every recipe.

I smile into the weathered face, take her eyeglasses and clean off the smudges, gently reshape the bent frames, and ease them over her ears again. She often falls asleep in bed wearing her glasses so they become

contorted in various angles on her face. Today, her mood is agitated, and my filial offering of fresh flowers and clean, straightened glasses does not soothe her.

She leans forward and whispers, "They took my quilt!"

"Your grandmother's quilt?" I ask, looking quickly around the room. At almost every visit she rues the loss of one thing or another and every time the item is never really gone, just moved from its usual place.

"Yes! It was on my bed. And they took it."

I know this expertly-crafted quilt, hand-stitched by my great-grandmother in the 1930s. She used one-inch scraps of my mother's baby dresses to patiently sew each section and bind and pad the cover onto white cotton material. The quilt remained in my mother's cedar chest for decades until I took it out and placed it on her bed in the nursing home. I thought it would make her feel more at home but she had been alarmed about using it.

"No, Elaine, put it back in the chest. I don't want it out because it's too good to use."

"But it was made for you," I said. "Why not enjoy it?"

"Because," she said with an unexpected tone of firmness, "someone will take it."

The quilt looked at home on the bed, a colorful and familiar splash in a drab environment. I didn't fold and store it as she requested. I wrapped her bed with the quilt, smoothed the center, and tucked in the edges. But now it was gone, just as she predicted.

Rather than acknowledge the possible theft of an old, hand-stitched heirloom, I comfort my mother and suggest that maybe the staff lost it. More than fifty

residents live in the nursing home and the beleaguered workers do their best to feed and care for them as well as wash their laundry. I could only hope this was the case here, and that my great-grandmother's handiwork remains somewhere inside this old building.

Gently rubbing her stooped shoulders, I try to sound reassuring. "I'll go look. Be right back." As a precaution, I slip the jar of mentholated cream into my sweater pocket.

I find the head attendant pushing a portable shower chair on her way to the shower room. For bathing purposes, the invalid residents are undressed, lifted onto the chair, and sprayed with warm water before being dried, dressed, and returned to their rooms. The staff attempts to treat each person with kindness, but the orderly system doesn't provide attention to the resident's dignity or personal needs. My mother hates shower day.

"Excuse me," I interrupt the attendant. "Can I talk to you about my mother's missing quilt?"

"Gotta go, Hon," she replies. "You should talk to the Director."

The attendant disappears into a room and I hear her cajoling a woman named Mildred to get ready. Mildred doesn't want to go. The attendant closes the door and I assume the shower will soon take place. I turn to find the director's office. We've never met because she's new at the job, and my first impression is that she's in her late twenties. My mother was the town's matriarch before this woman was born.

"Hello, I'm Elaine, Leona's daughter," I say, stretching out my hand.

Miss Evans looks up from behind the piles of

paperwork on her desk and sighs as if to acknowledge another family member with yet another complaint. She nods but doesn't shake my hand or ask me to sit.

"My mom's quilt is missing, and I need to find it. Do you know where I can look?"

The director is young and has no idea why this quilt is so important. She also has no clue that my mother, the feeble old woman in Room 17, was once the matriarch of the town, or that a gentle pioneer woman patiently weaved tiny stitches through bits of cloth by light of a kerosene lantern.

"A quilt? Well, is her name on it?"

"No," I reply. I'd thought about that when I placed it on her bed but hated the idea of marking the delicate fabric. "I didn't want to write on the quilt."

Miss Evans shakes her head and sighs again. "I can take you down to the laundry room," she says. "You can go through all the nameless stuff."

Nameless stuff. I wince.

Heels clicking on worn linoleum, I follow her through several hallways, down two steep staircases, and then down a ramp into the basement. Carved into the ground a century ago, the dark and dank room would never pass any official inspection today. Electrical wires hang exposed overhead, an old boiler sits useless in the corner, too big to extract, and several industrial washing and drying machines hum and rattle in another corner amid waiting lines of burdened baskets. Several bare bulbs hang overhead, casting low shadows in the corners of the windowless room.

"There," she says, pointing to six long tables burdened

with mounds of limp clothing and blankets. "This is where the nameless things go. It might be in there. Let me know if you have any trouble."

And with that she leaves me alone in the basement surrounded by rejected artifacts. I don't know if these items belong to someone still living or not. Most of the residents are incontinent, and despite regular changing and showers, many sit around in soaked adult diapers. The smell remains in the rooms, the hallways, and in the walls. I pat the cream into my nostrils and go to work. As I sort the garments, I practice Kegel exercises to strengthen my pelvic floor muscles and vow to visit the gym after I return. One pair of sweatpants equals five Kegels, a camp t-shirt requires ten. I regret not asking for gloves as I rummage through the dark pants with elastic waistbands and well-worn sweatshirts. I know these outfits; my mother wears this uniform, too. A few brightly colored, lacy blouses interrupt the mundane garments, and I imagine they were worn by spirited women who refused to wear more sensible clothes.

As I move from table to table, I consider the sights and sounds as well as the smells that had permeated the building through its various incarnations. From the hospital, I hear cries from newborn babies, and from the nursing home, sighs from of the dying as they take their last breaths. The industrial kitchen somewhere overhead echoes through the vents with the clattering of pans, dishes, and non-threatening silverware. Every Christmas local church groups visit and choirs sing to residents huddled in wheelchairs and leaning on walkers. People bring little sacks of donated socks and hand lotion, the

most requested gifts. Many of the decorations remain up all year.

I grew up in Wendell and attended the same schools as my parents before me. We even had some of the same teachers, and several of them ended their days at the Manor. At age 11, I had a newspaper route and rode my bicycle every day to deliver papers to 70 customers. The Manor was on my route. I remember dashing in with the paper and seeing the elderly people sleeping in their chairs. The ones who were awake begged me to stay and talk.

"Hey, Missy," said a man everyone called Shorty. "Why don't you stop and chat. Did I tell you about the farm I had?"

"I can't stop today, Shorty. I need to finish my route. Some day you can tell me about it."

"Are you coming tomorrow?" asked a toothless woman with wispy patches of hair on her head. "Can you bring me some milk?"

I stopped and placed the newspaper in her lap. "Sorry, June, I can't carry milk on my bike."

I always hurried out the door and continued my route. Now, I've returned, forty years later, and my mother lives here, and the sights, sounds, and smells remain the same.

By the fourth table, I have the uneasy feeling that someone is watching me. I turn to study the room. Perhaps it's just the century of spirits that return to see the place of their birth and death. Mysterious shadows caused by the hanging lights move over the walls in the far corner, cold and damp beneath a canopy of cobwebs. A faded, illegible chart is nailed onto a dusty bulletin

board, and a stiff mop tilts from an empty bucket. One of the dryers stops and the loud buzzer makes me gasp. No one comes to empty it, and I don't need another task. I move to the fifth table, laden with blankets and towels.

This one? No. This one? No. I find a few quilts, but not the right one. As I search, I consider taking one of the quilts just to convince her I had found it. But she would know. She can't remember what day it is, but she knows that quilt. No, it's not on this table either. One more table, it has to be here. With the determination of an explorer seeking lost treasure, I plunge my hands into the stack and begin to sort.

Why am I so driven to find the quilt? This fragile, patchwork fabric is a symbol of my family's tattered, traditional history. After so much time and neglect, I can't afford to allow any more reminders be lost.

I find it.

Beneath the last lump of discarded remnants of strangers, I see the rumpled edge surrounding the cherished quilt made from dresses my mother wore as a toddler. I see patches of green and blue, red and yellow, black and red, and orange and white secured by a checked binding. The colors of the past are faded but familiar. I pull out the quilt and wrap it around my shoulders like a religious shroud. Cocooned in that dark, dank basement, I am a good daughter. My mother will be happy. I say goodbye to the room and to whatever spirits surround me and find my way back up to the light.

"Mom." She is asleep in her wheelchair. I lean in closer. "I found it, Mom. I found the quilt."

I pile it into her lap and guide her hands to the fabric.

She arouses, smiles, and presses her face into the old quilt and mumbles something about my great-grandmother.

Then she notices me. "Oh, it's you. Could you go get Elaine?" she says. "It's time for school to be out."

I leave the Manor and emerge into the sunshine. During the two-hour drive home, my mind is a patchwork of memories: lost wealth, calamity, a family fractured, with no chance of redemption. Once at home, I go to my storage closet and pull out several old photograph albums and my mother's hand-written journals. I want to piece together all the unorganized scraps from my past and create something meaningful. I pour a glass of red wine, sit at the large table in my fresh-smelling kitchen, and open the oldest book dated 1950, the year before I was born.

CHAPTER TWO

The Trucking Company

During the harvest of 1950, disaster came to potato farmers in southern Idaho. Bad weather, bad luck, and bad timing resulted in a poor yield, and after the meager harvest the farmers were paid less than what it cost them to grow the crops. The local bank managers demanded that loans be paid or else farms that had been bartered for collateral would be seized.

My father clenched his teeth as he watched the local banker, who was now his former friend, pound No Trespassing signs on the farm he was renting. For nine months, he had worked to plant, weed, and harvest a worthless field of potatoes. Now, the bank owned the farm, and he owned nothing but debt.

These circumstances prompted my dad to distrust banks and vow to make it on his own. By the spring of 1951, his biggest regret, after losing the farm, was that

my mother was pregnant. They already had a one-year-old boy, and Dad, only age 23, didn't know how he could support his growing family. My mother did her best to conceal her pregnancy to minimize his distress, but the charade became more difficult because she carried twins. I was one of them.

Dad's older brother lived in Hawthorne, Nevada near the US Army Depot. The brother wrote that there was a job for a mechanic at a local truck stop, so my father packed his family and their few possessions into a battered Ford station wagon and left Wendell for Hawthorne. Mom was sick during the ordeal, but concentrated on supporting her husband and caring for her baby boy. She left behind her parents, her sister, her friends, and her church.

Dad quickly learned how to service the 18-wheel diesel trucks that rolled day and night between Montana and California. Through the grease, the clamor, and the meager pay, he focused on ideas that could improve his life. Something in his gut told him there was opportunity beyond the noise of the pneumatic torque wrenches he used to change hundreds of dirty tires. He just had to find it.

My mother sweltered in the Nevada heat. They had rented a cramped, one-bedroom, half of a duplex without air conditioning in the village of Babbitt. The town was a World War II housing project, later abandoned in the 1980s. On the morning of September 8, my father drove her to the hospital and then paced the floor in the waiting room, wondering how his life had turned so stressful. Three babies in 20 months. Losing his farm. Working manual labor in a sweat-filled shop with grease under his

fingernails, in his nostrils, and matted through his black hair. Living in a government housing project. This wasn't the life he wanted.

When the doctor emerged, Dad sensed something was wrong. "We lost one," the doctor said slowly. "But, one survived and she is one healthy baby! She came out hollering!"

Dad suppressed a smile. He didn't know if his relief was because there was one less mouth to feed or because his daughter seemed to be boisterous. "Let me see her," he said as he passed the doctor and marched through the door.

My mother was still in recovery, but Dad noticed two bassinets in my room. One was empty. "That was for the other baby," he said to the nurse. He looked at the healthy, 8-pound baby in the next bassinet. "Should have been a boy," he said. Then he went back to work.

Christmas of 1951 was bleak. My parents missed their own parents and siblings back in southern Idaho, but no one had any money to travel. It didn't feel like the holidays anyway because the weather was warm. They entered the New Year with a determination to return to Idaho. Dad worked overtime at the shop, and Mom took in a little boy to babysit. She cared for three children in cloth diapers, washed clothes in the sink, and hung them to dry on a line in the backyard. Back in that hot, temporary home in Nevada, Mom took life one day at a time to do the best she could for her children. One day she found that someone had left a new high chair on the front step. She never knew who gave such a wonderful gift, but she promised to return the favor someday to

another woman in need.

Dad watched and learned as the big trucks continued to pull into and out of the shop. He worked on the refrigerated units on the trailers going south, added propane to the cooling units and diesel to the trucks. These same rigs came back through with empty trailers, and he realized that if the trucking company could still make a profit with empty trailers, it could make a much larger profit if the trailers were loaded. He tabulated how much diesel it would take at 14.9 cents a gallon to drive 1,100 miles. He talked with drivers as he serviced their trucks and asked them about their wages and expenses. He learned how payments were made for deliveries and which loads were more profitable.

He was a visionary and studied the opportunities of the time. The 1950s brought economic advantages and posterity for many people living in post-World War II America. The automobile industry successfully produced cars and trucks, and new industries capitalized on consumer demand for more electronics and household conveniences. Most homes had one black-and-white television set, and families often ate dinner while watching TV.

For the next two years, he read newspapers and business magazines during his work breaks. He was interested in the latest innovation in the food industry: frozen food that was inexpensive and easy to cook. The public craved these products, but couldn't always get them because of distribution problems. My father had the answer. He would haul them in refrigerated trucks.

One day one of the drivers who came through on a

regular basis told him that a small trucking company in Montana was looking for drivers. Dad decided he would become a truck driver. He quit his job as a mechanic, left Mom with three small children, and hitched a ride in a truck going to Montana. On the way, he learned how to drive an 18-wheeler.

When my father walked into the office of Hansen Packing Company in Butte, Montana, Alvin Williamson, the owner, eyed him with suspicion. Dad wore wrinkled clothes, he was unshaven, and he had grease around his fingernails. But he was impressive, a big man; he stood 6'2", ruggedly handsome, with black hair and intense green eyes.

"I'm here for a job," he said.

"Can you drive?" Alvin asked.

"Yes, sir," he replied, not admitting that he had just learned how to maneuver a truck by hitchhiking with a Montana Express driver. "And I have an idea that will make you more money."

Alvin leaned forward in his chair. He wanted to hear what this skinny 24-year-old stranger had to say. Within two hours, Neal Ambrose and his dream of making money had convinced Alvin to give him a job. Ambrose saw his future fortune packed tightly and conveniently into a refrigerated trailer on the back of a diesel truck.

"You'll need a co-driver this time out," Alvin said. "Driving in Los Angeles ain't easy." Dad nodded and stuck out a grease-stained hand. They shook. "There are showers and a cot upstairs," said Alvin. "Be ready to go by six in the morning."

My father hardly slept that night. Three other drivers

shared the dormitory, and they all seemed to compete for who could snore the loudest. He wished he could talk with my mother to tell her about the job. He made another promise to himself: someday they would have a telephone.

Three days later, Mom was hanging diapers on the line when she heard a diesel truck pull up in front of the house. She laughed as Dad jumped out of the cab and ran toward her. "I got the job!" he yelled as she ran to him.

"Are you driving that?" Mom was amazed.

"Yes, I am," he answered as he kissed her. "And I'm on my way to California. See you in a few days."

"Do you want to see the kids?"

"Don't have time," he hollered and climbed back into the cab. "But I'll have a paycheck in two weeks."

As the truck rumbled out of sight, my mother wondered what she should do. She had five dollars to her name, the rent was due, and the babies needed food. That night, someone left a bag of groceries and an envelope with 100 dollars on her front step, and she had never been so grateful in her entire life. Before going to bed, she prayed for her husband somewhere on the road, she prayed for her children, and she prayed for her mysterious angel. Then she dried her tears and, mentally and physically exhausted, fell asleep.

"This here is L.A.," said Marvin Titus, Dad's co-driver. Dad's eyes widened as he sat in the passenger seat. He had never seen so many cars and buildings. Three lanes of traffic moved in each direction, and there wasn't any lane separating the oncoming traffic. "These roads can't handle big rigs," Marvin said as he maneuvered the truck.

"I've read that a new Interstate System will be built soon," said Dad. "It will connect the country from coast to coast, and there will be north-south freeways that connect to the Interstate. We'll be able to drive from Butte to Los Angeles in two days."

"That's impossible," Marvin muttered. "They can't do that."

"Interstate I-5 will be built soon, and I'll drive on it."

Dad and Marvin had shared the cab for five days and 1,100 miles. One of them slept on a crude bed behind the seats while the other drove. They cleaned up at truck stops along the route and shared the ten dollars a day that Alvin gave them for food. Through the trip, my father learned a lot from Marvin and he admired the driver's knowledge of trucking, but the confined quarters went against his need for space. He knew that he had to have his own truck.

Marvin turned into the warehouse district and found the Safeway Store's loading dock. "I'll take it in this time," he said. "You can pull 'er out." He backed the 40-foot trailer down the ramp and shut off the engine. The two drivers got out to watch as the dock workers unloaded the trailer. They logged every pallet of frozen groceries and then exchanged paperwork with the workers. There were no shortages, no broken cartons, and no thawed food. Any one of those possibilities could have resulted in the load being declined. A declined load meant no paycheck.

"Okay, your turn," said Marvin as he climbed into the passenger seat.

Dad adjusted the mirrors and put the truck into

gear. He slowly eased the rig up the ramp and into the truck yard. Then he noticed that no other trucks were waiting to unload. He stopped the truck, shoved the gear in reverse, and moved the trailer backward.

"What the hell you doing?" shouted Marvin.

"I need to know how to do this," Dad said as he watched the mirrors and backed down the ramp. It took ten tries until he got the trailer lined up and the dock workers stopped to watch. When he finally got the trailer safely down to the loading dock, they all clapped and cheered. Dad saluted and drove back into the yard.

"Show off," muttered Marvin.

The two drivers cleaned up in the driver's lounge of the main trucking center. Then my father scanned the message board until he found the notice he needed. A broker had a load of frozen Morton chicken pot pies that needed to go north. Consumers were demanding the new innovation of frozen food, and Neal Ambrose was ready and willing to bring them their dinners.

"Bingo," he said and wrote down the number.

It took several calls and all of his spare change, but Dad finally contacted the broker and secured a deal between the broker and Hansen Packing. Five hours later, Marvin and my father were hauling 40,000 pounds of Morton frozen chicken pies to Montana. Night fell as Dad drove the truck away from the city, and he was relieved to see the lights of Los Angeles in his rear-view mirrors. Marvin climbed into the sleeper and was snoring before the rig turned north.

Dad drove through the desert and noticed that the stars were extraordinarily brilliant. He felt more alive

than ever, and his heart beat in rhythm with the rumbling engine of the truck. He was a trucker, and people needed the pies, soup, detergent, and toilet paper that he would deliver. He was intoxicated with the open road. When he crossed the state line into Nevada, he began to think about his family. For the first time in two weeks, he wondered how his kids were doing.

It was daylight when my father pulled into Hawthorne and stopped at the shop where he used to work. He jumped out of the cab and called for the attendant to fill the tanks. The boy looked at Dad with surprise and envy. Marvin crawled out of the truck, sleepy and disheveled.

"We have to make one quick stop," Dad said. "Then you'll drive."

After the rig was serviced and the men had grabbed some food, my father drove the truck to his rented home. Mom hustled the children out to the lawn and they waited until he stopped.

"Can't stay long," he said as he hugged his wife and patted his children and the other little boy. "But I'll be back in a week with my paycheck."

He gave my mother a bag of groceries from the truck stop and all of his extra food allowance. "It's going to be okay. I promise." Then he climbed into the sleeper and Marvin drove away. Mom counted twenty dollars and waved good-bye. With the money she made from babysitting, she had just enough for groceries until he returned.

A week later, she heard the familiar rumble in front of the house. She ran out and met her husband with another driver. He lifted her in the air and twirled her around.

"Hey, Sweetheart," he said. "Look here!" He handed her an envelope with his paycheck for $300 plus a bonus of $50 for instigating the frozen dinner loads. They had never seen so much money at one time.

"Can you get to the bank?" he asked. "Keep some for yourself! Maybe get a new dress!" He searched for the kids, gave them a quick hug, and hurried to the truck. "Be back in two days. Hustle. Hustle. Time is money," he called, fired up the diesel engine and drove away.

Mom couldn't think. A new dress? The kids needed shoes. And, how was she supposed to get to the bank with three small children? She waited until her sister-in-law stopped for a visit later that afternoon and begged her to watch the kids for an hour. The woman agreed and Mom hurried to the bank to make the deposit. She reserved enough money to pay for rent, groceries, and essentials. Then she stopped at the dime store with the intention of buying new shoes for her son. That's when she saw the rocking chair.

Forgoing the dress, my mother eagerly bought the shoes and the chair and drove home, the chair tied with ropes into the open trunk of the old car. That night, after the working mother picked up her son, and my brother was in bed with his story books, Mom rocked her daughter and smiled. "It's going to be better," she said.

By the spring of 1952, my parents had saved enough money to move back to their hometown of Wendell, Idaho. They rented a two-bedroom house across the street from the Presbyterian Church, and Mom found a young widowed woman who needed babysitting for her two kids while she worked. Mom took care of four

children during the day and then typed for the church in the evening. When money was lean, she added a third job and typed for Bradshaw's Honey Plant late at night. I often fell asleep listening to the clacking of the typewriter keys.

Dad was gone on the truck most of the time and Mom found companionship in the church women's group. When she could get a babysitter, she would wear her best dress and attend the church luncheons. She carried her porcelain platter piled with homemade cookies, sure to write LA on the bottom in fingernail polish to make sure the platter was returned.

Dad leased a truck in 1953 and became an independent owner/operator. His nonstop truck driving and Mom's three part-time jobs paid the bills with enough money left to buy a few Christmas gifts that December. The New Year promised prosperity, even if Mom still didn't own a car.

Dad was an avid reader, and during the fall of 1954 he noticed news articles about a new invention: frozen TV dinners. A national food company named Swanson misjudged how much turkey would be sold for Thanksgiving that year and after the holiday the company had 260 tons of leftover turkey. A clever salesman noticed how meals were served in compartmentalized aluminum trays on Pan American Airways planes. The salesman convinced Swanson to develop a convenient meal, served in trays, that could be frozen and delivered across the country. Swanson gambled on the concept and packaged turkey, corn bread stuffing, peas, and sweet potatoes and initiated a nationwide advertising

campaign. The company sold more than 25 million TV dinners to Americans who demanded the convenience and low cost of frozen dinners. The meals cost 98 cents per package, and people enjoyed eating them in front of their television sets.

Dad continued to develop relationships with key contacts in the Los Angeles area. Soon, he had brokered regular shipments of Swanson TV dinners. He continued to haul meat from Montana to southern California and return with pallets of frozen food to distribute to warehouses and stores in Idaho and Montana. He knew the route by heart and drove from daybreak to late at night.

Every time my father drove through town, he left a box of frozen TV dinners. Mom didn't have enough freezer space, so ate the dinners for every meal. Salisbury steak, little trays of corn, cherry cobbler, meat loaf and potatoes. We sat around the table scraping the bland food from the tin trays. Sometimes, to be fancy, Mom would spoon the food onto real plates. She said we were lucky that daddy could bring home food for the family.

I remember my father bringing random surprises from his travels, and we eagerly waited at the door when we heard his truck rumble to a stop in front of the house. One time he maneuvered a large wooden crate into the living room, and my mother seemed excited as she tore open the box. Her expression changed from hopeful to confused as she uncovered four life-sized busts of Aborigine Indians. The two men and two women were carved from dark wood and each had a hole at the side of the mouth to hold a wooden pipe. The women were

bare-chested.

"Aren't these great?" my father asked, enthusiastic as a school boy. "I got them at an Indian Trade Market on the California border. They'll look perfect in the living room. Gotta go. See you next week."

Those four busts remained in Mom's living room for the next forty years. At Christmas, I would add red bras on the women, much to the chagrin of my mother and the laughter of my brothers. Other "rare" gifts included a large metal shield with five swords, an adult-sized metal breast plate, an Indian shield made from painted buckskin supported by two iron arrows, a wooden Indian throwing an arrow, and a wooden Indian sitting on the ground smoking a peace pipe. He complimented the theme with several framed prints from western artist Charles Marion Russel. Mom tried to balance the cowboy and Indian theme with watercolors of flowers and pastoral landscapes. She added candles and crosses arranged on hand-crocheted doilies. As a result, our home resembled a pawn shop in a truck stop.

Life changed dramatically again in the spring of 1955. Dad borrowed money to lease seven diesel trucks and named his company Montana Express. Mom was pregnant with their third child.

CHAPTER THREE

Lullabies and Work Songs

The song *You'll Never Walk Alone* was a popular 1955 show tune from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*. We didn't yet own a piano, but my mother used to keep sheet music so she could sing her favorite songs in her soft, off-key voice as she went about her daily activities. I vaguely remember as an active three-year-old that I didn't understand the song because my mom was usually alone except for her two children and the two kids she babysat.

One of my first memories is of her being sick. She was throwing up in the kitchen sink and could barely stand. Finally, she gathered up the four children–all under the age of six–and told us to hold hands and walk with her. We were nervous because of her desperate voice and her hunched posture, but we grabbed hands and marched several blocks across town to the local doctor's office. As

we walked in silence, I heard my mother whispering the words from the song about never walking alone. I walked on with her, with hope in my heart.

My mother, eight months pregnant, was having an appendicitis attack. She was rushed to the hospital and we waited in the doctor's office for Grandma to drive from Jerome to get us. Grandma took all four of us home and told us to take a nap. I remember burying my head under my pillow so no one could hear me cry. My fourth birthday that week passed without notice. I have a black-and-white photograph of me during that time with my arm in a sling. Years later when I asked my mother what happened to my arm, she couldn't remember.

My mother stayed in the hospital for several days after her appendix was removed. My dad was hauling loads to and from California and stopped briefly at the house once a week. My brother was born in October and wasn't named for four days until Dad came home.

"We'll call him George," he said. "George Patrick is a solid name."

To celebrate my brother's birth, my dad said my older brother and I could ride in the 18-wheeler parked in front of the house. I remember climbing up into the cab and sharing the passenger seat with my brother. The truck rumbled to a start and Dad drove around town pulling on the air horn. My most vivid memory of that ride was to see my thighs jiggling as the diesel engine rattled the cab.

Then he was gone again. He was making payments on seven trucks for Montana Express, and he had to keep them running all the time. He didn't want to move his

growing family to Montana because he needed us to stay in Wendell so my mom's parents could help when he was gone. He hired his friends and former Army buddies to be drivers and learned on the road how to manage a business. The fleet grew and he continued to buy more trucks. On his trips home, he would bring damaged goods that his customers refused to accept: broken cases of frozen TV dinners, dented cans of soup, and unlabeled jugs of bleach. For years, my mother kept gallon jars of capers that we eventually threw away.

Frozen TV dinners continued to be popular as Americans gathered around their television sets to watch the pioneer shows and programs. Our black-and-white set only could reach one station: CBS. We didn't watch when Dad was home but when he was gone driving, I sat with my dinner and watched "I Love Lucy" and "The Jackie Gleason Show." Dad resembled Gleason in appearance, and the show made me laugh.

Money was tight, and my mother kept detailed records of every penny spent. Her ledgers were neatly written in pen and included expenses such as 25 cents for 4 root beer drinks, $25 for rent, and $8.61 for groceries. Donations for church ranged from 20 cents to a dollar. She also included refunds on pop bottles in the income column. She paid $15 a month to Sears for a wringer washer and hung the clothes to dry outside on a line. She also paid $10 a month on a set of Childcraft books to read to her children.

Our family of five had outgrown the tiny two-bedroom rented house. In 1956 my dad purchased the house on 4th Avenue with two bedrooms, one bathroom,

a screened back porch, and a huge backyard. I remember walking into my own room and falling in love with the knotty-pine walls, hardwood floor, and built-in bookshelves. It would be my private sanctuary for the next eight years.

Wendell Public Schools didn't offer kindergarten in 1956 so I started first grade at age five. My brother was a year ahead in school even though he was 20 months older. My mother ordered a 15-book set of Childcraft books for children, and we eagerly ran home after school each day to look through the pages. I kept the books and read them to my children and grandchildren, even though now they can quickly look up animated stories on the Internet.

By the start of 1959, my mother's songs had improved in spirit and voice. Her favorite artists were Doris Day, Bing Crosby, and the McGuire Sisters. By then, the success of the trucking company meant that she no longer babysat other children and she reduced the amount of nightly typing jobs. After my brothers and I were in bed and my father was still gone, she would play Tennessee Ernie Ford records. Many times, I fell asleep to the slow and comforting crooning of Ford's spirituals. My favorite song was *His Eye is on the Sparrow*.

This brief time of happiness ended during that summer. One morning when Dad was out of town, my brothers and I woke to find my mother unconscious on the floor. We dialed my aunt's telephone number and she came quickly to offer assistance. I remember looking at my mother's white face and being too afraid to touch it.

My mother was seven-months pregnant and we

learned later the baby had turned several times so that the umbilical cord was twisted around her neck. Mom was confined to bed rest for two months and an older woman came to stay with us. In August, Grandma drove Mom to the hospital to give birth. The baby was kicking and emerged feet first, but the cord was wrapped too tightly around the neck. They didn't do emergency caesarian sections then, so the doctor was helpless to save the baby and she strangled to death. I never again heard my mother sing.

I remember seeing the dead baby wrapped in a pink blanket and lying in a tiny white casket at the funeral home. On August 15, 1959, I attended the quiet, small service at the cemetery and then she was buried. I sat next to my father and brothers and stared at the tiny white casket, fighting the urge to run away. My mother remained in the hospital, lamenting the fact that she had never seen the baby and couldn't attend the service. The following month my mother gave me a big doll for my 8th birthday and added all the unused baby clothes for the doll to wear. No one ever spoke again about the baby. Her name was Carol.

In December of 1959, my parents incorporated a company called Wendell Gas and Oil. Their partner Nolan Cooper operated the existing gas station located on the north end of Wendell. The company secured a contract to distribute Union Oil products for the county and supplied home heating oil. They hired mechanics to work on trucking and farming equipment and offered loans to ranchers and farmers.

The building was expanded to include truck bays and

a parking lots for trucks. One of the lots was across the street from the Mormon Church. Refrigerated trailers, called reefers, needed the diesel engines to be running constantly to maintain the cooling system, and church members complained about the noise interrupting their Sunday services. My dad responded by adding more running refers to the lot.

Dad's office was on the second floor of what we called "The Shop." The walls were covered in walnut paneling and adored with prints from noted western artist Charles M. Russell. Uncle Muncie built him a massive desk of solid walnut with a large letter "A" fixed to the front. A low leather couch sat across from the desk, and guests, sales people, and drivers sitting on the couch had to look up to see Dad. He kept a cardboard box on his desk to collect bills and receipts. He studied every invoice and often would quarrel over a dollar before the bill was paid or adjusted.

As the fleet of trucks increased, salesmen from Kenworth and Peterbilt came from Boise to convince Dad to buy their trucks. Kenworth featured him in an advertisement with its Model 923 that was used to haul grain and groceries. Montana Express expanded its territory from Montana throughout the Northwest and Southwest.

The 1960s brought a new prosperity for my family. My father remodeled the terminals in Wendell and in Butte, Montana. His fleet grew to thirty 18-wheel trucks and trailers. From the playground at the elementary school, I stood with the other children and watched as the trucks rolled through town to delivery locations

throughout the northwest. We pulled our arms in the air and the truckers blasted their horns. I felt a strange proudness to be connected with the big rigs.

During 1961, Montana Express trucks covered almost two million miles throughout 11 western states and Canada. The driver's payroll exceeded $210,000 – a sizeable amount for the time. Dad's company, Wendell Gas and Oil, continued to supply fuel for his trucks and for agriculture customers in the area. The business provided home heating oil and offered discounts for farmers and ranchers during harvest season. The mechanics at the shop kept the trucks running and worked on local vehicles. To show appreciation for the community support, my parents sponsored a free open house with dancing at the American Legion Hall. After the Christmas of 1961, my mother wrote in her journal that Dad gave her an electric skillet. She added several exclamation points for joyful emphasis.

As my dad's business grew, so did his temper. He was under a lot of stress with so many trucks on the road. We were not allowed to use the one telephone at home because a driver might call with a problem. Or it could be the dispatcher or an upset customer or bad weather on the mountains passes. Any small quarrel between siblings could result in my dad's rage coming down on us. He used the wooden board to spank all of us, regardless of guilt or innocence. His key employees remained loyal, and they understood and respected his moods. However, employees who didn't perform suffered the consequences. Once he found a male and female worker kissing in the parts room and he fired them on the spot.

I envied Dad's relationship with his longtime employees who helped him grow and maintain his businesses. He rewarded them with large cash bonuses at Christmas, a butchered hog, and a case of apples. Every summer, he organized a company picnic and prizes included camping gear and a car. Employees received one raffle ticket for every year of service and the winner claimed a trip to Hawaii or the monetary equivalent. Most of them had no desire to travel across the ocean, so they took the cash. Dad also offered and contributed annually to employee Individual Retirement Accounts, but most of them cashed the accounts and paid the penalty.

When he conducted business in Montana, Dad stayed at the Butte Hotel. Then he bought a big furnished home that we visited during the summers. I never questioned why he lived there so much, and it always amazed me when I visited my friends' homes and both parents were there. In my home, the children lived with the familiar adage, "Just wait until your father gets home!"

I know my mother was frustrated with all the responsibilities of raising children and keeping the household while my father was gone. But the only way she could get his undivided attention was to exaggerate our misdeeds. He would come through the door, she would grab his arm and relate the transgressions of the nearest child–usually me–and he would listen to her for a brief moment before the spankings would commence.

The family routine changed in 1963 when my father stopped living in Montana and came home every night. Mom's food selections moved beyond TV dinners, and after our silent meals, she washed the dishes as my

brothers disappeared to do whatever boys did back then. We owned one black-and-white television but were only allowed to watch a few programs including Gunsmoke and the Friday Night Fights. If we had the television on when my father came home from work, he would turn it off and instruct everyone to do chores.

Dad completed the purchase of Montana Express and continued to add trucks, trailers, drivers, and prestige. By 1966, the fleet grew to 21 trucks and trailers. Many of the fathers of my classmates were employed by my father. Sometimes they would make comments about me being rich, and I didn't know how to respond. I wore the same type of clothes they did and owned one pair of black shoes and one pair of boots. To me, the rich families existed only in the movies.

I became friends with many of the drivers and admired their dedication to their jobs. I often listened to their conversations as they relaxed at the shop between assignments.

"I can't believe all the new government regulations on trucking," muttered a driver known as Hohnhorst. "Now I need to show my log books at every port of entry."

"Just keep that sweet smile," replied Preston Hughes, the main truck mechanic. "You can charm your way across the country."

"We're hauling more Campbells soup and Clorox now," Hohnhorst replied. "Who knew there were so many clean soup-eaters?"

"We've hauled some exciting cargo," Hughes replied. "I remember we once rigged a trailer to haul a helicopter down the freeway. No one ever caught us."

They laughed and continued their stories. I maintained my respect for the long-haul road warriors who transported products to warehouses and pantries from the southern border to Canada. They were gone from their homes most of the week, but Dad rewarded them with good salaries and benefits. His drivers were non-union so Dad paid them the same rate as union drivers.

Montana Express trucks and trailers were painted in Dad's favorite colors of red and black. He took pride in his rigs and traded cabs and trailers every few years. By 1969, Montana Express had rotated through 72 trucks.

With the trucking company running smoothly, my father decided to return to his farming roots and hired some friends and relatives to help him establish Ambrose Farms. He started buying sagebrush for $25 an acre, which made him the laughing stock of the county. But he had an idea to dig wells, add pumps, and bring in sprinkler pipe irrigation to turn the worthless land in fertile acres of crops. Within a decade, the land was worth more than $2,000 an acre.

September of 1963 was dry. The wind blew constantly, turning green fields into ragged clumps of struggling potato vines. A growing concern among the farmers soon became a collective fear shared by all the residents of Wendell. When the farmers lost crops, the entire town suffered. Farmers bought supplies and groceries from local stores. Farmers put money in the banks, provided jobs, and shared their extra crops. This fall harvest would be critical, and there was no rain in sight.

I could tell that my father was agitated with worry.

I went with him one day as he drove his pickup truck around his farms, plowing through the mounds of dirt and topsoil that blanketed the country roads.

"Six months of work is about to blow away," he muttered to himself. "These potatoes are just too small. I need water!"

I knew it was best to keep quiet. I pressed my nose against the window and studied the fields as we drove.

"I'll have to sell them for less money than I've already spent on seed and labor." Dad pounded the dashboard. "Somehow, I have to find a better way!"

October blew into southern Idaho with a fury. Local farmers huddled over coffee every morning at The Little Pig Cafe, lamenting their woes. Each one owed money to the bank, and they were deciding whether to let the crops rot in the field or try to salvage what was left so they could make a payment on their loans. Together, they decided to go for the harvest, and each man promised to help the other.

By the second week of October, the mammoth potato harvesters were lined up in the fields. Empty trucks would travel alongside the harvesters to collect the small potatoes that rolled off the harvesters. The potatoes would then be taken to the dirt cellars located around the valley. Buyers from major grocery and food processing plants would assess the quality and, if acceptable, would offer a price that the farmers had to accept.

The month-long harvest was half over when the rain came. It started as a drizzle and increased to a downpour that lasted for two weeks. The thirsty fields became seas of mud. To save the crops, farmers began to work through

the night. The soggy harvesters churned angrily through the muddy fields, guided only by the weak lights on the trucks. The rusty wipers slapped at the windows as the drivers struggled to see through the solid sheet of water. The mornings brought only more rain and the potatoes started to rot in the mud. School was canceled so all the farm children could help salvage the crops. Even the teachers came out in the storms to help. Women brought baskets of food, jugs of hot coffee, and dry clothes to the fields. When the weary workers took a short break, no one spoke as they huddled in the rain, gobbled a sandwich, and then returned to the machines.

I stood in the mud on the platform at the end of the lurching harvester, barely able to see through the rain as I fought to pull wet weeds off the potatoes. My back ached and I was hungry. The harvester had been groaning through the mud for nine hours, halting only for fuel that was brought to the fields in tanker trucks. Suddenly the huge machine stopped dead, mired in mud. It could go no further.

My brothers and I trudged, dirty and exhausted, to our father's pickup truck waiting at the end of the field. We avoided his eyes, climbed in the back, and rode quietly to the house. We hosed off the mud from their clothes and I turned the hose on my head for several minutes, trying to wash away the grime. I left my muddy clothes in a heap and washed up at the kitchen sink. Rejecting my mother's offer of some warm potato soup, I escaped to my room, pulled on a clean nightshirt, and fell into bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rebel Daughter

My roots are in Wendell, Idaho. My father was born there in 1928 and met my mother in Wendell High School before they married in 1948. My brothers and I also graduated from the same high school. A hanging sign straddled Main Street and proclaimed that Wendell was "The Hub City of Magic Valley." In the tiny farming community, population around 1,000, hard work and men were valued above all else. Next in priority came the hired help, the crops and livestock, and the paying customers. And, in terms of real value, a bumper yield of hogs would leap ahead of the hired help. The women were necessary to keep the household, tend the children, and pleasure the men, and the boys were appreciated as potential workers. Girls were insignificant. They were an expense item on a profit and loss statement that included assets of pigs, potatoes, and property.

During the first 12 years of my childhood, I rarely saw my father. He worked all the time, and when he came home, my mother and brothers became apprehensive. The stresses of his business caused him to become more detached from the family, and his health began to deteriorate. He developed an appetite for Crown Royal whiskey and a spontaneous reaction to punish his children. He used a wooden board and I remember the blows. I refused to cry, which greatly irritated him, and if I asked what I had done wrong, the blows only increased in intensity. My only escape was to crumple onto the floor and pretend to be dead. Even he wouldn't hit a dead girl. Then he would stomp from my room and slam the door. I laid there, my cheek against the cool wooden floor, and pretended to fly away. My mother? She never interfered as her children were beaten.

At the beginning of seventh grade, I was a gangly, goofy girl with eyeglasses and weird clothes. My mother sewed many of my dresses, and I never was too concerned about fashion. That's why I was amazed when Debbie and Sylvia, the most popular girls in my class, asked me to join them for cheerleader tryouts. At the time, girls didn't play sports so being a cheerleader was the prize for the ultimate popularity contest. Leah and Sylvia knew I had a lot of friends and we needed their votes.

We practiced during our lunch breaks and learned energetic routines. I wanted to be a cheerleader and knew I could do it. At our school, the cheerleaders chosen in seventh grade usually were the cheerleaders throughout junior high and high school. It was my only chance.

Two nights before tryouts, my father announced at

the dinner table that I wasn't allowed to try out.

"Why?" I asked. "We already have our routines."

"Cheerleaders only jump around to show off their legs," he answered. "You're not doing it."

I fumbled for the right words. "But I have good legs!" I pleaded. "And I love to cheer."

"The answer is no. No more discussion."

The next day I told Debbie and Sylvia I couldn't join them. They asked Leah, and the three of them were cheerleaders until our senior year.

Family life at home consisted of moments of tension interrupted by bursts of confusion. My father would arrive for dinner at any time and my mother would scurry around fixing him something to eat. Her great creative culinary abilities included cooking some frozen dinners, removing the food from the packages, and hiding the empty boxes. Or she would mix two cans of different soup and serve it with potato chips. We would sit stoically like monks at the table, silently hoping to make it through the meal without drama.

One evening my father sat down and happened to look at me. He noticed that my bangs were almost long enough to touch my eyebrows. That was the style of the time, made popular by the new and sensational singing group, The Beatles. My father had warned me about growing my bangs too long because he didn't like the "long-haired hippies" in the band from England, and my bangs were an insult to clean-cut Americans. I grew my bangs, anyway, and attempted to clip them to the side when I was home. But, that one evening I forgot.

He glared and dropped his fork, and I could see his

mouth trembling as he scrambled for words. The air was electric with tension as if I had committed the ultimate sin against my family and all of our ancestors. My heart raced as I moved mashed potatoes around my plate. My breath came in shallow puffs, and I closed my eyes in preparation.

I tried to distract my fear by concentrating on some of my favorite Beatles' songs. I focused on "I Want to Hold Your Hand" because I could visualize the singers tossing their shaggy heads in exaggerated desire for the thrill of touching a lover's hand. I really needed someone to sing about feeling happy, inside, with a feeling I couldn't hide. But no, there was no secret lover coming to save me, and I couldn't escape the pending consequence.

My father jumped from his chair, stomped to the kitchen, grabbed the kitchen scissors, turned my chair around, and told me to sit still. Then with swift and deliberate cuts from the blades he slashed off my bangs until there was only a half-inch jagged fringe of hair sticking straight out around my forehead.

Nobody spoke. I remember my mother disappeared into the kitchen and returned with dessert with extra whipped cream topping. My brothers refused to look at me, secure with their cropped crew-cuts. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window and felt the death of my inner fire. I knew the other students would laugh at me at school the next day, but going to school would be better than staying home. As instructed, I swept up the hair from the floor and dumped it into the garbage.

After the humiliation with the haircut, there came a worse incident a few months later. I dressed for school

in a cute plaid dress with a white collar. I had grown several inches and was one of the tallest girls in my class, but I liked the dress and was eager to wear it again. My father sat at the table reading the morning newspaper and glanced at me as I walked toward the door. He threw down the paper, and I froze.

"Get back to you room and change your clothes," he ordered. "That dress is too short!"

Instead of obeying, I grabbed my books and ran out the door. I was running down the alley when I heard him start his pickup truck and squeal out of the driveway. I felt like a desperate fugitive as I ran down a side road and ran four more blocks. I glanced back and saw him coming so I ran faster.

A carload of high school kids drove past me and I stared at them with a look of desperation. I knew them because they lived in my neighborhood, so I waved to see if they would stop and give me a ride. They drove on, laughing at the silly 7th grader running to school.

His red and black pickup was getting closer. I ran into the playground of the elementary school near the junior high and stood in the middle of the field, my breath coming in gasps of fear. My dad continued to drive around the block, and I turned to watch him circling past my two escape routes. The bell rang from the junior high, and I knew I was late. I looked for someone to help me, but the streets were quiet. School had started, and I was alone in the playground wearing my cute, but short, plaid dress.

Finally, I gave up and dutifully walked to his truck. He took me home, spanked me fiercely with a wooden

board, and then left for work. I changed my clothes and walked to school where I refused to undress for gym class. I stood alone with my hideous bangs and long skirt while the other girls exercised and ignored me. Mrs. Trounson, the PE teacher asked if I was okay, and I nodded yes. The bruised but defiant girl didn't want any pity. When I returned home after school, the dress was gone.

I felt completely worthless and irrelevant. No one valued me for my uniqueness. I had developed a passion for music, reading, and writing but those attributes became more difficult while living in a home that prohibited emotions and rewarded constant work without play. I wanted to sing and dance and laugh and tell stories, but such frivolity wasn't allowed in our strict household. No one cried in my family, and I don't remember any times of boisterous laughter. Alone in my room, I wrote short stories and poetry, reread *Little Women*, listened to my music, and longed to be free.

My angst consumed me, and I believed there was something wrong with me. A few days after the dress incident, I was home alone when I took a bottle of aspirin and a glass of water into my bedroom and shut the door. I used a red plastic cup because I didn't want to accidentally break one of the good ones. I poured the white tablets onto the top of my brown dresser and counted 83 pills. Wanting even numbers, I lined up eight rows of 10 aspirin and then dropped three tablets back into the bottle and replaced the lid. I started swallowing two at a time with a sip of water until they were gone.

I took a last glance at the sad reflection in the mirror. My ragged bangs stuck out straight and taunting. Then I

laid on my bed and closed my eyes.

I felt the warmth of Idaho sunshine spilling through my window onto the yellow chenille bedspread. I heard the ticking of a clock from the hallway and the muffled, lonely coo of a mourning dove outside my window. Then I imagined my bedroom detaching from the rest of the house and floating away. I was happy because I still had my books, my record player, and my collection of records. Gerry and the Pacemakers were singing "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying" as everything faded to black.

I don't remember much of what happened next. I woke vomiting all over the floor, and my mother demanded that I put on a dress so I would look nice to go to the doctor. It was a blue dress with white polka dots and a ribbon for a belt. It was the outfit I wore to church and to family gatherings, and apparently now it was appropriate to wear when seeking medical attention after attempting suicide.

After much confusion, stomach pumping, and low mutterings from the doctor, my mother silently drove us home in the Ford station wagon. I was lying on the green fabric couch in the living room when my father burst into the house, his face red, his eyes wide.

"What have you done now?" he stood above me, his arms flailing in the air. He paced across the floor, then stopped. "Don't you ever tell anyone about this!" he demanded, and then added for extra impact, "You're grounded for a month, young lady!" With that, he stomped out of the house, slammed the door, and returned to his office at the truck stop. My mother looked at me with pity and disgust until I closed my eyes.

"Your father works so hard, and he gives us so much," she said. I knew she was shaking her head. "There are plenty of poor children in the world who would gladly trade places with you." She retreated to the kitchen to make dinner.

I was too weak to dig out my well-worn copies of National Geographic so I could see photographs of all the children who wanted to swap homes with me. I was rather partial to that smiling girl in Ireland. I thought I would enjoy living in a thatched-roof cottage and walking beside the sea. Or the places in Austria and Italy looked inviting. I had read about those locations and looked at the pictures until the pages were all loose in the magazines. I promised myself that if I lived through this horrible day, that someday I would travel the world and do whatever I wanted. I would follow the winding Snake River and find joy. Someday.

When I finally had the strength to stand up, I went to my room and noticed the aspirin bottle and glass were gone and a Holy Bible was strategically placed on my dresser. My mother had removed the evidence of my shameful act and substituted what would surely cure me, once and for all. I slipped out of the dress, hung it in the closet, and never wore it again. I took a marking pen and drew a picture of my favorite dodo bird caricature on the inside wall of my closet. The caption said, "Why?" as the silly cartoon questioned everything about my life.

I didn't mind being grounded. It wasn't much different from being ungrounded. I sat in my room, listened to my records, and wrote short stories about girls who could fly. On this particular afternoon, with

my stomach churning and my head pounding, I stopped writing and stared out the window at the huge willow tree in the yard. For years, I had escaped out the window to climb up into the tree house, but my father had nailed shut my window so I couldn't open it. I remembered the pounding: bang, bang, bang, as he drove the nails into the wood.

"Silly man," I thought at the time. "If I wanted to get out I would just break the glass."

Sitting in my room, grounded for swallowing 80 aspirin, I wondered why my life was so strange. My two brothers never seemed to have any problems. They were spanked and hit occasionally but they never talked back or got into as much trouble as I did. They were good boys. I was the bad girl, and I carried the heavy burden of being the family's failure. My father often threatened to send me away to boarding school, but I didn't know what that meant. Every time I asked, he would turn red and grumble, "Don't get smart with me." I concluded that I should remain stupid in his presence.

On the evening of my bad deed that could never be discussed, my father was late for dinner. My mother stood in the kitchen, adding milk to the gravy and arranging tin foil over the roast because she wanted the meal to be more than just another TV dinner. The siblings waited in their rooms. When he finally arrived, we gathered around the table and ate in silence. My brothers stirred lumps of butter into the mashed potatoes, took extra helpings of the bland meat to please my mother, and focused on their plates. Finally, near the end of the meal, my father spoke.

"It's time for you kids to do more work," he declared.

"Besides your regular duties, you are to find jobs to earn money. The boys can work in the shop, and Elaine can get a newspaper route." He stood, poured himself a tall glass of Crown Royal, and walked outside to sit on the patio. The intermittent glow of his cigarette penetrated the darkness, and the ice clinked in the glass with every long draw. We all knew he'd rather be just about anywhere else instead of dealing with the burden of a family.

"Know how to work?" I said. "I finish my chores every day. Doesn't that count?"

"Elaine, please," whispered my mother. "Don't irritate your father any more today."

To teach me how to work, and obviously how to earn my keep, my parents had found a daily newspaper route for me. I was 12 years old. Most of my friends were trading in their jump ropes for lipstick and hugging boys instead of their fathers. Not me. I was Faithful Paper Girl, ever ready to deliver the *Twin Falls Times-News* on my shiny red, one-speed, Schwinn to hungry customers. Not the heat of summer nor the chill of winter nor the teeth of vicious dogs kept me from my appointed routes.

My route was three miles long, mostly uphill, through the twilight zones of Wendell. The speed of my route ranged from two hours on easy days to four hours in the winter. If an emergency occurred, sometimes the papers didn't get delivered at all. I made $30 a month, if every customer paid.

Weather was the chief obstacle of my paper route. Summer afternoons provided opportunities for leisurely sidetracks–a stop at the candy store or a meander through the city park. Some of my school friends lived along my

route, and I would often stop to visit. Once I stopped at Cindy Brown's house and we created a fun trick to play on her older brother. We took some cat poop from the litter box, covered it with frosting, and gave it to him. The resulting commotion resulted in Mrs. Brown calling my parents and forbidding me to ever come inside her home again. I was to leave the newspaper at the door and go away. Another time I stopped at my friend Leah Geisler's home, and we practiced our drill team maneuvers until we broke a lamp. I was banned from another home.

I hated winter. Pedaling a bike up an ice-covered hill with 70 soggy newspapers was no thrill. Sometimes, if I shivered a lot, the nicer ladies would offer me hot chocolate. My pants would freeze stiff, my nostrils filled with ice, and I often had to take the route on foot and push my bike through the deep snow. In the spring, I could anticipate a sudden cloudburst that would drench my newspapers, despite the heavy canvas bags.

Besides the weather, the worst part of my route was dealing with dogs. To this day, my legs sport an assortment of various scars inflicted by the savage beasts. I quickly learned that the cutest poodle could tear into a leg as efficiently as any bulldog.

An experienced paper girl can anticipate a ferocious dog. The big ones that lie and growl are considered dangerous. Dogs that run around yelping are annoying but harmless if ignored. Any house with a high barbed-wire fence covered with shredded bits of clothing was to be avoided. Far too many times, I would cram the newspaper in the can and ride away as if my life were in danger, because it was. Angry, barking dogs would

chase me down the street, biting my legs. A casual yell by their owners rarely stopped the attack. I started to carry a bottle of ammonia, and when a snarling beast came after me, I gave it a squirt right in the eyes. The attacks ended and I felt powerful, even though some friends and dog owners referred to me as a barbarian. I threatened to squirt them in the eyes.

Collecting money at the end of each month provided my first experience into the cruel world of entrepreneurship. I heard excuses from the older lady who hadn't received her Social Security check, or the couple with ten children who couldn't find the necessary $1.50, or the grinning old man who wanted me to come inside and have some tea. I learned that people try to take advantage of others, especially a 12-year-old girl on a bicycle.

After a year of the paper route, I had mastered the art of delivery. I could ride by a newspaper can, reach into the bag for a paper, slap it on my knee to fold it twice, shove it in the can, and never slow down. Or I could throw a newspaper 50 feet with 80 percent accuracy. My biggest stunt was to pedal my bike, steer without using my hands, and read one of the newspapers. It was classic, and I owned that route.

I was 13 when my mother noticed that I was a girl. My parents called a family meeting and decided I should give my route to my cousin, a good boy who would never cover cat poop with frosting. I was sad. After all, I knew 70 families and all their strange kids. I had heard their fights, eaten their cookies, and been invited inside to get warm. We shared stories as I traded the news for their

quarters. I could outride the meanest dogs, and I had the best legs in class. I reluctantly handed over the collection book and canvas bags to my cousin. On the first snowy day, his mother drove him on the route, and I wanted to chase them and bite his leg.

The biggest lesson of having a daily newspaper route is I learned how to meet and talk with people. I came to their house every day, so I decided I might as well get to know them. I remembered the lonely ones who wanted to chat, the busy ones who only read one or two of the newspapers each week, and the struggling ones who begged me to give them another week to get the money. Some of them still owe me.

My paper route days were ones of independence and youthful energy. Decades later, I couldn't ride a bicycle laden with heavy newspaper three miles through gravel and over hills, but I continued to enjoy meeting people. And I continued to read the daily newspaper long after everyone else read the news online. Some habits were hard to break.

After I quit the newspaper route, my father decided to move into the country. In addition to the trucking company, he was starting a farming operation. He bought land on top of a hill overlooking rolling acres of pasture and decided to build a castle.

In May of 1965, the family moved to a new home two miles outside of Wendell. The unique design of the house attracted attention from curious people who drove for hours just to see it. For many years after that, strangers would think nothing of driving up to the house and asking if they could look inside. My father got a

mean watchdog and often left his shotgun near the door as a warning to unwanted guests.

The house was built by Muncie Mink, my mother's brother-in-law. He was a talented local carpenter, but this became his largest project. Because the kitchen was round, the plans called for curved doors on the kitchen cabinets. Uncle Muncie learned how to construct and create the elaborate doors and install a huge skylight on the roof over the kitchen. He hired a crew to lay the massive stones for the walls and spread the concrete for the floors. At my request, he added a secret compartment in my closet for me to store gossip magazines and a pack of cigarettes that were never smoked.

According to my father, the house was designed by a student of the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright. I don't remember the name of the original architect. From a distance, it looked like a massive ship marooned on a rock. Surrounded by 180 acres of farm land, the structure was designed of rock and cement and became both palace and prison. The house was built in a semi-circle with two main towers in the center. The floors were polished cement, and the ceilings were sprayed with glitter. The round kitchen had a huge bubble skylight and curved cabinet doors. The kitchen countertops were white marble, the two bathrooms had purple toilets, and my father's bathtub had red and black tiles. Padded doors covered with orange leather lined the hallway.

The outside walls were constructed of white stone with a slash of green glass on the wall of the living room. A screened porch circled around the back. The four bedrooms opened onto the porch and overlooked the

countryside. We could walk up a jagged stone wall to get on top of the flat roof.

An upper clerestory of windows circled the entrance, and on the inside rock tower, my father hung the huge silver shield with four steel swords that he brought from one of his long-haul road trips. Over the fireplace, he hung his favored metal breast plate. The rest of his trucking treasures were stationed around the living room. An attractive but unused pool table took center stage in the living room as a repository for magazines, books, coats, and various knickknacks. I guessed that the original architect would have been dismayed at the altered house plans.

The house was the first in the county to have music and speakers wired into every room. In the evening, Dad would play his favorite records that included an eclectic variety from Strauss Waltzes to *The Six Fat Dutchmen*. Every morning at 6:00 a.m. my father would blare John Philip Sousa marches into our rooms, bang on the doors and holler, "Hustle, hustle. Time is money!" Then my brothers and I would hurry out of bed, pull on work clothes, and get outside to do our assigned farm chores. As I moved sprinkler pipe or hoed beets or pulled weeds in the potato fields, I often reflected on my friends who were gathered at their breakfast tables, smiling over plates of pancakes and bacon. I knew at a young age that my home life was not normal.

I remember the first time I entered my friend's home and gasped out loud at the sight of matching furniture, floral wallpaper, delicate vases full of fresh flowers, and walls plastered with family photographs,

pastoral scenes, and framed Normal Rockwell prints. On the rare occasions that I was allowed to sleep over at a friend's house, I couldn't believe that the family woke up calmly and gathered together to have a leisurely, pleasant breakfast. Obviously, they didn't know time was money.

The variety of crops around the house rotated through the years and included potatoes, corn, wheat, or sugar beets. Black Angus cattle grazed in the pasture, and my horse, Star, had a stall in the barn at the west end of the property. The pastoral scene was quite ideal until my father discovered that agricultural entrepreneur J.R. Simplot was selling his hogs. My father knew that sows would have up to 13 babies at a time, a considerable economic advantage over cows that only produced one calf a year. So he went into the hog business and within a few years there were over 4,000 hogs grunting, squealing, and pooping just a half mile from the front door. My mother would sit at the table in our custom house and swat flies during dinner. The odor was horrific, but my father said it was the smell of money.

I have no idea why my father paid to build that house. Even though he was becoming the major employer and the most successful businessman in the county, he always kept a low profile. He wore polyester work shirts, faded workpants, and old boots. He was so frugal that he would wait in airports that had pay toilets until someone came out and he'd grab the door so he didn't have to pay a quarter to use the bathroom. Yet here it was–this dazzling stone estate on a country hill. And in that house, I wrote poems and stories, my brothers loaded shotgun shells to shoot rockchucks from the porch, and my father suffered

from various illnesses until he died. After Dad's death, my mother lived alone in the house for sixteen years. At age 79, she was manipulated by an unscrupulous realtor from Twin Falls to sell the house and surrounding acreage for one-fourth of the value and to carry the mortgage contract. The shameful real estate transaction caused the inglorious demise of the Ambrose castle on the hill.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bringing Water to the Dessert

By the spring of 1965, I noticed that my father was captured and motivated by his vision of bringing water to his crops. Some farmers bought sprinkler pipe on a trial basis, but Dad gambled on thousands of dollars of pipe and then introduced lines suspended on huge wheels that ran on motors to move the pipes in a circular pivot. It consumed him, and he talked of nothing else. It provided him with an answer to the challenge of competing with nature for his crops. He had analyzed the situation, spent hours working with a pencil and paper, and consulted agriculture experts and magazines. Now, he was ready to fulfill his dream to bring sprinkler pipe irrigation on moving pivots to southern Idaho.

Farmers usually watered their fields by subscribing to a series of canals and ditches running through their land. Landowners bought water rights to a certain

amount of water and could take no more than their share. In a drought year, water allotments were limited to the meager portion released from upstream reservoirs.

Dad gathered his best employees for meetings around the Ambrose kitchen table. I remember them well: Keith Wert, Preston Hughes, and Dad's brother-in-law, my Uncle Henry Winterholler. I quietly supplied plates of fresh pie and mugs of hot coffee as I listened to their plans.

"If we can guarantee water, we'll always have crops to sell," Dad said, frustrated that his vision took months to implement. "The only way to guarantee water is to pump it from underground, use sprinklers to cover the crops. Someday we'll have sprinklers that rotate on giant pivots."

"It's a gamble, and it's risky," cautioned Keith. He took his role seriously of managing the farm's books and providing the necessary skepticism. "Sprinkler pipe and pumps cost thousands of dollars. And we'll need more employees to move the pipe and maintain the pumps."

"Listen to the facts," Dad persisted. "We'll install pumps throughout the fields and then we'll lay permanent main line pipe. The moveable sprinkler pipes will hook into the mainline and be rotated every twelve hours." He pointed to a series of charts and graphs he had drawn. The men leaned forward to study the graphs.

"This system is designed to provide the most efficient balance between the cost of the pipe and the cost of the power to run the pumps. We can even adjust the nozzles on the sprinkler heads to reduce the pressure on windy days. We also can adjust the pump to avoid soil erosion." He looked each man in the eye and then continued.

"Yes, we'll have to hire labor to move the pipe, but the increased yield will cover that cost. And what's wrong with providing more jobs'?"

The men nodded their approval.

"How much water will be used?" Keith asked.

"Sprinklers result in better water conservation," Dad declared, resembling a preacher in a revival tent. "The lines will be fifty feet apart and each sprinkler will spray five gallons per minute. That's one-fourth inch of water an hour. The consistent coverage eliminates the stress and low yield caused by drought and reduces the soil erosion and wasted water caused by irrigating the rows from the canal."

The mood in the room lifted as the men caught Dad's vision.

"I can't ignore this opportunity," he said intently. "I promise you it will work and in two years, we'll own 5,000 acres of land! But we must hurry. Time is money."

The men were speechless at the thought of such an incredible goal. They returned to their figures and notes and waited for the final word.

"Let's do it," Dad whispered. They nodded in agreement and attacked their pie.

The group met again the following evening and, again, I remained within hearing distance as they studied financial figures and discussed their strategy.

"I can get a fair price for the cattle," said Keith. "With that money we can purchase the pipe and pumps. I still think we should borrow from the bank to get more land."

"No!" Dad stood up, knocking some papers to the floor. "We will never borrow from the bank. We can do

this. Besides, I already bought 500 more acres."

The men gasped. "Where? How?" they said in unison.

Dad sat down, enjoying their surprise. He relished the risk he had just taken.

"I bought 500 acres of sagebrush along the canyon rim south of town. It's the old Scott farm."

"You what?" cried Keith. "That's nothing but sagebrush and sand! It's worthless. Three different farmers have gone broke on that barren wasteland."

Dad smiled. "I paid twenty-five dollars an acre for it," he bragged. "In a couple years, it will be worth five hundred an acre."

Keith shook his head and scribbled frantically on his paper. "I sure hope you know what you're doing."

News of the land purchase spread quickly at school.

"Hey, Elaine!" shouted Warren Block, a stocky farmer's son who was the leader of a pack of gregarious seventh-grade boys. "I hear your dad bought a bunch of sand and sagebrush. My dad said that's the dumbest thing he's ever heard of!"

A chorus of boys joined in. They had heard their parents joking about the land purchase. What was Neal Ambrose going to do with 500 acres of sand? Did he have that much money to waste?

I burned at the criticism of my father. For the first time in my life, I defended him.

"You just wait and see," I said. "Someday he'll own all your farms!"

At the end of March, several loads of sprinkler pipe were delivered to Dad's new property south of town. Each pipe was forty feet long, three inches in diameter,

with a sprinkler stand in the middle and metal hooks on each end that could be hooked into the main line or onto another pipe.

Dad hired men to dig wells and install pumps. Machines worked from dawn until dusk to clear the sagebrush and level the ground to prepare for miles of twelve-inch main line pipe that stretched from the pumps across the new fields. Each half mile of main line had thirty-two joints, or valves, that connected to the pipe. The valves were spaced fifty feet apart along the line. It would take two weeks, with crews of men moving several lines of pipe twice a day, to reach the end of the field, and then start over and move back.

My brothers, some cousins, and I joined the workers as they practiced carrying the pipe. The trick was to grab the sprinkler stand with one hand and support the pipe with the other and then carry the bobbing pipe to the next hookup along the main line. When the pipes were full of water, they were too heavy to carry so each one had to be tilted to empty it. My older brother Tom could carry a pipe by himself but it took both George and me to balance another one. The pipes were to be changed at 6:00 a.m. and again at 6:00 p.m.

At first, there were problems with the pumps. To save money, the first pumps installed were diesel-powered. The noise could be heard for miles around and the equipment couldn't handle the constant use. Dad decided to bring in electric generators to power the pumps. Often, the generators would quit or a part would break. Preston Hughes, the main worker on the pumps, lived in the fields that spring, his hands and overalls black

with grease and his heavy work boots caked with mud. Despite the hard work, Preston always had a contagious grin and his eyes sparkled beneath the dust and the sooty bill of his cap that touted a crusty fertilizer logo. He knew he was part of some great experiment and it was the highlight of his life. He often went out in the middle of the night, flashlight in hand, to repair the pumps and anticipate any trouble.

Other problems were created when one pipe came loose from the next one and the water washed a gully in the land. Several times, the sprinkler heads blew off; creating a geyser that could be seen for miles around. The high school Future Farmers of America took a field trip to the site and the teacher explained what a folly it was to install sprinkler pipe on land that was only sand and sagebrush.

Dad drove around the fields making regular inspections as the pipes were installed and flushed. My brothers and I rode in the back of the pickup truck, and at each stop we listened as the men discussed the day's gains and failures. I knew that each new problem only made my father more determined. It was time to plant the crops, and the sprinkler pipes had to be ready. Finally, the system worked for three days without a problem, and my father was elated.

"It's time to plant!" he said. And they did.

Farmers usually started planting potatoes on Good Friday, and huge tractors crisscrossed the fields turning and cultivating the land. Several trucks loaded with seed potatoes arrived from Montana and eastern Idaho, and the budding chunks of russet potatoes were dropped in

the rows and covered with loose topsoil. The crew finished the planting two weeks later and laid the sprinkler pipe in long rows stretching from the main line.

My brothers and I stood beside our father as the valve were twisted to turn on the sprinklers. A gushing sound came from the main line, the sprinkler heads sputtered and turned aimlessly on their stands, and then water burst from the nozzles onto the waiting ground. The spring sunlight danced in the drops of manmade rain, creating thousands of temporary rainbows across the field. A rhythmic pattern of squirts rotated the sprinkler heads as the water sprayed forty feet in overlapping circles. It was music to our ears, and the surrounding workers hollered their approval. Only six months to wait for the harvest.

Two months later the potato plants were only a few inches high but still bigger than any other crops in the area. My brothers and I left early each morning, responsible for the 40 acres around our house. Tom turned off the main line, unhooked the valve on the first pipe and carried it forty feet to the next valve on the main line. Then he walked back to the line, lifted the next pipe, emptied the water, and carried it to the new line, hooking it into the first pipe. It was a trick to balance the end of the pipe and make the connection to the other pipe from twenty feet away.

The wet, muddy ground made walking over the rows difficult, but Tom moved quickly, carrying the awkward pipes. George and I tried to maneuver a pipe, but I kept slipping in the mud and finally fell, much to the delight of my brothers.

Tom lifted a pipe at the end of the line and then

threw it down in disgust. A drowned muskrat was stuck in the pipe, waterlogged and eyes bulging. It must have crawled into the pipe before it was hooked, and then it was trapped inside.

"Hey, George," Tom called. "Come and get this out."

Dropping the ends of pipe, George ran over to stare at the dead animal. He kicked it with his rubber boot and jumped back as the muskrat oozed from the pipe.

"What should we do with it?" asked George asked. Just then our father stopped his pickup truck at the end of the field, walked over, picked up the soggy muskrat, and threw it into the canal. Then he told us to get back to work. The job moved a bit slower as we cautiously checked the end of the pipes for drowned varmints.

Several vehicles drove slowly past the fields south of Wendell, the drivers checking to see how the crops were doing on the sandy soil. No one was laughing at Neal Ambrose anymore. Especially those who wanted a job. Dad had hired several men to help with the pipe during the week and word was out that more jobs were available.

One day we finished moving the pipe and were returning to the pickup truck when an old Chevy truck stopped by the field. It was Warren Block, the boy who had teased me at school, and his father.

"Good morning, Mr. Ambrose," said Chester Block as he stepped out of his truck and stuck out his hand.

"Morning," said Dad, quickly shaking the hand. "What can I do for you?"

"That's a fine crop of potatoes you have there. I guess they will grow in sand," Chester said, shaking his head and grinning too much.

Dad was busy and had no time for small talk. He started to leave, so Chester Block quickly said what was on his mind.

"My boy, Warren, is a strong worker. He'd like a job moving those pipes. He can do it before and after school."

Dad looked at Warren. "Is that right, Warren?"

"A fine worker," said Chester.

"I'm asking Warren."

"Yeah, I can move the pipe," the boy said, avoiding my smug look.

"Be here Monday at 6:00 a.m.," my father said. "You'll get done in time for school, and then come back at 6:00 in the evening. We pay $1 an hour."

"Thank you, Mr. Ambrose," Warren and his father said in unison. Then they hurried back into their truck and drove off.

"Do I have to work with that bully?" I asked.

"No," my father replied as he surveyed the field. "From now on, you will have other chores. The weather's getting warmer and we'll have to move the pipe faster. It's too hard for you, and we've got plenty of hired help now."

Dad got in the pickup and Tom quickly jumped in the front seat with him, eager to demonstrate that he was now with the working men. George and I climbed in the back and sat quietly during the ride home. I was sad because my father didn't want me moving any more sprinkler pipe, and I felt as if I had just flunked a test.

By late May, it was time to begin the preparations for Memorial Day. Mom and I cleaned the house, polished the good silverware, washed the good dishes, and ironed the table linens. The day before the holiday, Mom was up

at 5:00 to start on the pies. The fruit on the trees wasn't ripe yet, so she had purchased apples and cherries at Simerly's Grocery Store. She worked the pie dough and then started on the bread dough. A twenty-pound ham was soaking in the sink and would be cooked overnight. I retrieved jars of home-canned beans, red beets, jam, and relishes from the cellar.

The Ambrose family celebrated Memorial Day for two reasons: to honor the deceased relatives and to clean out the pantry to make room for the garden produce and the fall harvest. Even in drought years, the pantry was emptied. It was bad luck to anticipate a meager harvest.

On Monday morning, my mother and I cut purple and white irises from the garden and arranged the flowers in jars covered with tin foil. The family piled into the car and drove to cemeteries in Twin Falls, Jerome, and Wendell, where at each stop, flowers were placed beside the grave of some relative who had gone on to his or her final reward. At the Wendell Cemetery, I found a clump of dandelions to put on the unmarked spot that held the coffin of my baby sister.

At 11:00, the American Legion Army volunteers conducted a program at the cemetery that concluded with rifles being fired into the air. The shots echoed in the breeze and the small American flags waved against the headstones. After paying our respects, we hurried home to prepare for company.

The relatives started arriving at the Ambrose house at 1:00 p.m., bringing salads and desserts. Aunt Billie brought her famous chocolate pie and Dad tried to hide it in the cupboard. Aunt Buff presented her sweet potato

salad, bringing raves from everyone in the kitchen. At last count, there were twenty children and fifteen adults. The house soon resounded with the sounds and smells of family and food.

It was time to eat when Dad carried the heavy platter of ham into the dining room and placed it in the center of the massive wood table. When the other dishes were arranged around the ham, the adults gathered around the table to admire the feast. After a brief blessing by Uncle Jesse, the adults lined up to select their portions and sit at card tables scattered throughout the house. The children were last, scooping up mammoth servings before sitting down at big tables in the kitchen and on the porch.

I hadn't sat at the children's' table for several years because I took care of Grandma Ambrose. I filled a plate for my grandmother and then sat beside her. The room buzzed with animated discussions and I knew the conversation would soon turn to the crops. As the only child in the room, I sat quietly and listened.

Uncle Mac was the first to ask. "How are those sprinklers doing, Neal? You sure know how to get the gossip going for miles around."

All eyes were on my father. They waited for his answer.

"Soon, every farm in the county will have sprinkler pipes on pivots," he predicted.

"Impossible!" gasped Uncle Mac. "Who can afford that?"

"Those who want to stay farming," came the reply.

"I heard that if everyone gets sprinklers, the underground water will dry up forever," Aunt Ruth said.

Ruth ran a beauty shop in Jerome and had accumulated the wisdom and opinions of her faithful customers.

"The Snake River aquifer is the largest natural underground reservoir in the world," Dad said. The others looked at him with admiration and amazement. "It stretches 250 miles from Eastern Idaho to Hagerman. I've read studies that say the aquifer is between 3,000 and 6,000 feet deep and can hold about two billion acre-feet of water."

Two of the uncles let out a low whistle. Aunt Ruth grabbed her purse and dug for a pen so she could write down this fact to tell her customers.

"Is there any danger that the water would decrease if, say, we had several more years of drought?" asked Uncle Cleo.

"Actually, sprinklers use less water than canal irrigation and we can irrigate more land with the same amount of water," Dad responded. "And it's more flexible and less wasteful. On cool or cloudy days, we can cut back and not pump so much water."

"What's the biggest concern now?" asked Ruth, pretending to be a journalist.

Dad looked out the window at the surrounding fields in the distance. "Our biggest goal is to keep our water rights," he said. "Make sure no one ever takes your water rights."

"Is that possible?" Uncle Henry was concerned.

"It's possible because water rights are more valuable than gold," replied Dad. "Most of us bought our water rights years ago and staked a legal claim to the water we take for our crops. Now more farmers are coming into the area, and they will want water rights. Don't allow

them to get yours."

The adults nodded in agreement, and I was proud that my father knew so much. He was tired of the conversation, however, and stood to go find Aunt Billie's chocolate pie. That signaled the beginning of the last course, and the crowd headed for the dessert table.

Aunt Billie stopped to hug me. "Are you still writing?" she asked.

"Yes, Aunt Billie," I replied, pleased that my aunt appreciated my short stories and poems. "I'll bring you some more poems this summer."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Aunt Billie said. "I do enjoy reading your whimsical poems."

After dinner, the children ran outside to play and the women and older girls went quickly into the kitchen to hand-wash the dishes. The men gathered in the living room for a smoke and a cup of coffee, duplicating a familiar routine practiced by their own fathers.

I dried the dishes with my cousin Macie, a tiny and delicate girl I thought looked like an angel because her short blonde hair framed her face like a halo. Macie's skin was milky white and her blue eyes seemed on the verge of tears as she moved quietly, almost invisible in the room.

"After we're done with the dishes, do you want to go see my horse?" I asked.

"No," Macie replied softly. "I would like to go swing in the big willow tree in the back yard."

I thought that would be pretty boring but I knew Macie could spend hours in a swing, riding down and pushing up, singing an unknown song. After we finished our chores and ran to the yard, I pushed Macie, watching

the back of the beautiful, mysterious child swing away from me. Macie seemed too perfect for such a confusing world. Later that year she was diagnosed with leukemia and died within two months. The family had another grave to visit the following Memorial Day.

When the last group of relatives left at 6:00 that evening, my father and brothers left to drive around the farms, and Mom and I sat on the front porch.

"I'm still stuffed," I moaned, rubbing my stomach.

"It was a great meal, wasn't it," said Mom. "It's such an honor to feed so many fine people."

I knew then that my mother was crazy.

"An honor!" I gasped. "It took two days of work. I don't consider that an honor."

Mom laughed and patted my knee. "Someday you will," she said.

By the end of June, the potato fields needed to be weeded, so I set out every morning on the Honda 50 motorcycle. I felt a fierce joy that our crops were healthy, and I couldn't help noticing the sparse plants on neighboring fields. Although the entire valley continued to suffer drought conditions, the sprinkler pipe on the Ambrose farms provided consistent moisture for the thirsty crops. By August, the workers were struggling to carry the pipe through the wet thicket of knee-high potato plants.

After my chores were done, I saddled my horse and rode through the pastures. Singing in time to the cadence of Star's hooves on the road, I completed several verses of "We'll Sing in the Sunshine." The cadence increased as the horse approached the barn. When Star broke into a trot, I

abandoned the jaunty song and clung to the saddle horn. My head barely cleared the barn door as the horse raced inside, eager to be free of the sweaty saddle and singing girl.

I brushed the white mare, fed her grain, and turned her loose. The horse rolled in the dirt, shook and snorted, then loped off for the green grass in the pasture. I headed for the house, hoping I wasn't late for dinner again. As I neared, I saw two figures in front of the house, so I quietly walked around to the edge of the porch to see who was there.

My father stood with his back to me talking to what looked at first like an old man. It was Chester Block, but his appearance startled me. His shoulders stooped, his rumpled clothes hung on his back, and one hand gripped the railing. His face revealed a haggard man on the verge of collapse. I crept closer to hear what he was saying.

"I need your help, Mr. Ambrose. I got nowhere to go." My father stood silently, waiting for the man to continue. "You know I lost the crop last year," Chester spoke as if concentrating on every word. "I owed everything to the bank. This year, I had to mortgage my farm to get my operating loan."

Dad remained silent.

"This damned drought," Chester's voice was so low that I strained to hear. "I had a contract with Simplot. They were going to buy all my potatoes. But they sent a guy out last week to check my crop. He says," Chester's voice changed to a wail. "He says my potatoes aren't good enough. They won't honor the contract."

Dad took a long drag from his cigarette, the red glow piercing the twilight. He turned his head and blew out

the smoke.

"Please, Mr. Ambrose, you got to help me. I don't have enough money to even dig the spuds out of the ground. The bank will foreclose on my property. I've got a wife and kids. Farming is all I know. Where will I go? What will I do?" The man broke into sobs that shook his entire body. He clutched the porch rail with both hands and bent his head.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Chester muttered between sobs. "I haven't slept in a week."

When my father spoke, it was as a father addressing a troubled child.

"Get hold of yourself, Chester. I can help you."

Chester looked up, his eyes brimming. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, sniffed and leaned forward.

"I know how you feel, Chester. I lost everything once to the bank. But only once," he said. "They're in business to make money, just like we are. The trick is never let them have too much."

Chester stood still, waiting to learn how Neal Ambrose could help him.

"I'll buy your farm, Chester. I'll pay you a fair price."

I thought Chester would fall onto his knees in gratitude but he managed to hang onto the railing.

"You and your family can stay in the house, but you'll work for me. You can manage the property. We'll put sprinkler pipe on it next spring."

Chester grabbed my father's hand and clutched it with both hands. "Thank you, Mr. Ambrose," he whispered. "Thank you."

"We'll get my accountant Bill Cooper to draw up the

papers in the morning," Dad said.

Chester backed away and hurried to his truck. As Dad turned to watch the truck disappear down the lane, his face revealed a small smile instead of his usual stern expression. I studied my father, realizing that his visionary plan was now underway. There were more desperate farmers out there just like Chester Block who owed their farms to the bank, and Neal Ambrose would help them out of their distressful situations. In the process, the poor boy from Gooding County soon owned land in three counties in Idaho and property in three other states. Within a few years, the former sagebrush land produced a county record of 350 sacks of potatoes per acre with 83% "number one" quality. Ambrose Farms had doubled the potato production in the region.

Dad's empire continued to grow with the addition of a terminal in Troutdale, Oregon, and a truck yard near Sacramento, California. He remodeled the shop in Butte, Montana to include sleeping quarters for the drivers, and purchased a furnished home in Butte.

While managing the trucking operation, he also controlled Ambrose Farms, a huge farming operation that included 30,000 acres of land, 1,000 head of cattle, and more than 4,000 pigs. There was equipment to maintain, contracts to sign, and employees to motivate. During this time, I attended school, worked on chores around the farm, and then stayed in my bedroom writing poetry and short stories and playing my records. In hindsight, I wish I had joined him on his nightly rounds driving around the farms. We could have learned a lot from each other.

CHAPTER SIX

Waiting for the Harvest

It was late August, the day before school started, and I decided to enjoy one last chance to be alone in my favorite place. I rode the Honda 50 down a winding canyon road to Thousand Island State Park, a pristine public retreat located next to the Snake River. Hundreds of waterfalls leaked, fell, and sprayed from sheer canyon walls 350 feet above the river. The water came from the Snake River Aquifer, a pool of water that traveled underground more than 100 miles and emptied into the river.

From there, I rode into Sand Springs Ranch, a famous 1,600-acre ranch that was the showplace of southern Idaho. My maternal grandmother had told me grand stories about the ranch.

"Your father used to hike through the ranch when he was a boy," she said. "He always said he would own it

someday."

"Tell me more about the ranch," I asked.

"During the mid-1800s, ferry boats were used to cross the Snake River in the territory that would become Idaho. Long before the town of Wendell was established in 1909, ferry boars transported passengers and mail to a landing that would become part of Sand Springs Ranch," she said. "Your grandfather drove for the Overland Stage Company, and he heard stories of how the ferries were used to move the stage coaches. The ruins of the old stage stop remain on the property down by the river."

"What made Sand Springs Ranch so unique?"

My grandmother smiled, pushed back her wispy gray hair, and crossed her bare feet. She had always been a large woman, and during the summer she didn't wear shoes because of large bunions on her feet. I have inherited those from her. She knew the history of the area and had her own pioneer story. My grandfather Arthur Ambrose was a farmer and operated the Star Stage Line in southern Idaho. His wife died in the influenza epidemic of 1917, leaving him with five young children. He remembered the daughter of a friend back in Missouri, so he wrote and asked her to come to Idaho and take care of the family. She was a single school teacher, twenty years younger, and wrote back to say she wouldn't come unless he married her. He agreed and met her at the train station at Shoshone, Idaho. They married at the justice of the peace, and he took her to the farm near Wendell to meet her new family of four boys and one girl. They had three more children; Mac, Billie, and my father Arthur Neal.

My grandfather became an alcoholic, and back in the 1950s alcoholics were sent to State Hospital, formerly known as the Idaho Insane Asylum, in Blackfoot where he died. My grandmother never learned to drive and was a widow for more than forty years. A quiet, pious woman, she became the family historian and respected matriarch.

Grandma continued to share her memories about Sand Springs Ranch. "It was the dream of every poor farm boy and every rich visitor to own that ranch. From the banks of the river, it stretches over the rock walls to overlook the hundreds of natural springs that erupt from the canyon. The ranch includes almost two miles of a privately-owned natural spring creek that meanders through the property. It became a dude ranch for rich people from back east who wanted to play cowboy for a week. They were given cowboy boots and hats and gentle horses to ride. The duck hunters received full hunting gear and private blinds. They even have blinds for the hunting dogs."

"Who were the owners?"

"Well, Indians used to live near the fresh springs. You can still find some arrow heads around there. The first documented owner was H.B. "Hy" Berkowitz, the treasurer of the Old Mr. Boston distilleries. One of the most famous guests was Former President Herbert Hoover. One documented news report revealed that the president was telling an animated story while fishing and fell into the creek. You were a little girl when the ranch was sold to C. P. Clare, a manufacturer from Chicago and an executive from New York City. I kept many newspaper clippings about the ranch."

Over twenty years, Clare remodeled and restored the property. The ranch featured elaborate landscaping details including long rows of huge rose bushes, a grape arbor with a waterfall spouting from a cement lion's head, and a working replica of the Mannekin Pis statue that sprayed water into the trout-filled creek that ran alongside the main house. The large house showed the latest in interior design: silk wallpaper from France, a granite fireplace from Italy, and hand-rubbed oak paneling. A working crew of employees ran the ranch and cared for the horses and cattle.

I rode the motorcycle through the property, and the old caretaker waved me through. I parked the bike and hiked down to the river, carrying a bag with my lunch, a notebook, and a pen. I stopped at the old grape arbor and picked some fresh green grapes, but the tart fruit puckered my mouth and I ate only a handful before spitting out the seeds. Hiking across the pasture to a meadow just above the river, I could see for miles down the canyon where the spray from the waterfalls created double rainbows in the sunlight.

I turned towards the remains of an old fruit orchard and several sagging, abandoned buildings clumped together at the corner of the pasture near the old stage stop. I picked through the briars to pull out plump, red raspberries and groaned happily at the sweet taste. The birds had eaten most of the fruit on the old cherry trees and there weren't many berries left on the bushes, but I managed to fill a small sack to tuck in my bag.

I always felt as if I were walking right into history as I neared the four deserted buildings that marked

the site of a former ferry crossing. I knew the story so well that I could almost see how pioneers coming west on the Oregon Trail often took this alternate route that crossed the Snake River near Hagerman. After several wagons were lost in the wide, swirling river, one pioneer decided to stay and build a ferry where he spent many years taking wagons and settlers across the river. He claimed the pasture as his own and built a wooden house and a large barn. Many of his passengers had no money so they paid him with seeds and plants. As a result, his fruit orchard became famous throughout the region and sustained him long after the ferry was no longer needed.

Now the weathered sides of the old buildings swayed under the weight of rotting roofs. Grass and weeds grew in the dirt floors, and the old barn sheltered a family of foxes and several owls. An overgrown orchard yielded only damaged fruit for the birds, and a fortress of briars smothered the berry thicket. My father used the land to graze cattle, and four cows rested in the coolness of the rock stage stop.

Climbing the fence, I left the meadow and hiked back up a narrow path through the sagebrush on the south side of the property. I crossed over a rock plateau to the edge of the canyon and started back down, my tennis shoes gripping the lava rock as I made my way down the steep trail. A bald eagle and several hawks flew overhead, providing a private escort to the river. My descent ended at a pool known as Blue Heart Springs where the ice-cold water bubbled from an underground spring into a heart-shaped cove. Nestled in my favorite private retreat next to the pool I ate lunch, saving the fresh berries for last.

Beyond the sheltered springs, the river tumbled over several small rapids. I rested in the grass and watched as the water flowed past. Pulling out my notebook, I re-read my latest story. It was about a girl who rides a magic bicycle up to the clouds to find a city of enchanted children who need her to take care of them. I studied the story, shook my head, and turned to a clean page. I wrote a poem for the river and titled it "Endless River."

Endless River

Beautiful river, where do you go?
That, perhaps, is for no one to know.
Endlessly you amble along
Quietly bathed in your gurgling song.
Day after day, you never sleep,
Passing valleys and mountains so steep.
Oh, river, why don't you cease?
Is going onward your only peace?
Venturing into worlds anew,
I guess that is exciting, too.
Cool, refreshing, and oh, so wise.
What do you see with your traveling eyes?
Faraway places with peaceful shores,
Each opening to you their doors.
Oh, river, going past to the sea,
Please, wait–wait for me.

Then I closed my notebook and lay back in the grass. I felt safe here, in a place no one could reach without considerable trouble. A flock of ducks flew overhead

in perfect formation like sky-writers pointing toward the coming autumn. Soon the leaves on the aspen and scrub oak would turn the canyon into a patchwork quilt of red, orange, and yellow. The cattle and horses would grow bulky with winter hair as hundreds of noisy ducks arrived to take up winter residence on the ponds above the meadow. In town, the farmer's market already offered tempting displays loaded with fresh produce from surrounding gardens and farms. The constant rumble of machinery in the fields matched the heartbeat of the community. Autumn was an awesome time in the country.

A sudden breeze interrupted my daydream, so I got up and started to climb out of the canyon, stopping for a few more berries, and then rode the motorcycle over to my grandmother's house. Grandma Ambrose wanted news about the harvest, so I amused her with stories of awkward sprinkler pipe, drowned varmints, and the biggest potato plants in the county. My grandmother responded with stories of her youth. She remembered how she had to haul water from the well every morning for the family's cooking and bathing needs.

"I sure could have used a sprinkler pipe next to the kitchen!" she laughed.

"I think Dad can arrange that," I said.

"Oh, no. I was only kidding. I like plumbing in the house. What a luxury."

As twilight approached, I hugged her and rode home, savoring the last of summer and anticipating the excitement of tomorrow when another new chapter in my life would begin. I knew eighth grade was going to be

my best year ever.

Wendell junior high bustled with the noise of students fighting the urge to run outside and capture some fun in the sun yet eager to be with their friends again. For my friends and me, eighth grade meant being older and wiser than the seventh graders and almost big enough to go to high school. The new eight-room junior high building sat next to the high school, an old brick fortress built in 1940. Junior high students weren't allowed in the high school, and it loomed as a mysterious attraction full of teenagers who could drive, earn money, and hold hands.

I loved the first day of school. I wore new saddle shoes with white socks, a green jumper, and a long-sleeved white blouse. At lunch, Sandra, Jeneal, Sally, and I met to make plans for the coming school activities. The fathers of several of my friends now worked for my dad, but such private matters weren't discussed.

The second day of school brought an interesting assignment. Mrs. Coffman, the eighth grade English teacher, rapped her pencil on her desk and asked for attention. Cleo Callen responded by belching loudly and the class dissolved into snickers.

"Now children," Mrs. Coffman said as she walked over and stood beside Cleo. "I have a project for you. I want you to write a poem."

The class groaned.

"Now listen," she continued. "The National High School Poetry Anthology is publishing a book next spring. They want to select some poems to be included. We are not just country hicks out here and I know some of you

can write quite well." She walked over and patted Annie Thompson on the head. Annie, the banker's daughter, responded with mock surprise.

"The assignment is due Monday morning," the teacher stated, tucking her red pencil behind her ear. "The best poems will be read to the class and then sent for consideration in the anthology."

Mrs. Coffman was known for her incredible use of red pencils. She had taught in Wendell for twenty years, and students estimated that she had gone through a million red pencils. Every returned assignment featured red circles, underlining, question marks, and scribbled notes in the corner. It became a contest to see who could get the most red marks.

The assignment pleased me. I wondered if Mrs. Coffman would like my poem about the singing frog or the one about the evil monster who bites the heads off live gingerbread men. My current collection depended a great deal on what mood I was in at the time I wrote each poem.

The next Monday, I handed in my poem about the endless river. I felt it would pass inspection. Jeneal's poem described her mother making the famous Jones' Candy; Sandra wrote about how sad a balloon looked as it slowly deflated. Cleo bragged that he didn't have to write poetry and no one could make him, so Mrs. Coffman kept him after class.

A few days later, Mrs. Coffman called the class to attention. She looked particularly pleased with herself.

"Good morning, class," she began, standing beside Cleo so he would stop hanging pencils from his nostrils.

"Today we're going to hear the poem that will be submitted to the anthology. Annie, will you read for us?"

Annie tossed her long curls and strutted to the front of the class. She waited for silence then began reading.

"Every hour, I see the flower. The morning shower brought such power. I can't be sour when I see the flower. Oh, pretty flower."

I looked at Cleo and stuck my finger in her mouth. Cleo burst out laughing and Mrs. Coffman marched over and rapped him on the head with her pencil. Annie straightened her shoulders and continued.

"I take a chance and like the flower I dance. Like a wild horse I prance. Will there be romance?"

The students twisted uncomfortably in their seats. I studied the calluses on my hands and dared not look at my friends. I heard Sandy smothering a giggle, and I bit my tongue.

Annie finished and floated to her seat. Mrs. Coffman clapped alone.

"Many of you wrote interesting poems," she said. "I encourage you to continue writing."

Then she looked at me. "I'd like to see you after class," she said. I nodded as Cleo hit me with a spitball.

After the bell rang, I picked up my book and walked to Mrs. Coffman's desk. The teacher had my poem, "The Endless River." It was covered with red pencil marks.

"Elaine, this is a good start," the teacher said. "But you didn't capture the right tone or the mood I wanted."

"Was I supposed to capture your mood?" I asked, unsure of the criticism.

"You need to work on setting the tone. I can't explain

it, just rewrite it for tomorrow."

I walked out the door, wadded up the poem, and threw it on the floor.

"Elaine," I heard someone call from down the hall. I turned to see Mrs. Petersen, my science teacher and, according to most of the students, the best teacher in the school district.

"What did you throw down?" Mrs. Petersen said as she reached for the paper.

"It's nothing. I'll throw it away in the garbage can," I said and reached for the paper.

Mrs. Petersen unfolded the crumpled paper and read the poem. I stood quietly as the teacher read the poem a second time.

"This is very good, Elaine," she said.

"Old Coffman doesn't think so," I responded, frustrated and sorry that I was so sensitive about my poetry.

"The teachers talked about the poetry anthology," said Mrs. Petersen. "I think you should enter this one."

"I don't want to," I said. The bell rang and I turned to go to class. I didn't care that Mrs. Petersen kept the poem. It wasn't important anymore.

I sat through my next class staring out the window. I watched the cars going back and forth, wondering what it would be like to drive away. Seven years of near-perfect attendance proved my love of school, but on this day I hated everything about it.

That Friday night, the entire town turned out for the high school football game. Tom played on the team, so George claimed a spot near the players' bench, eager to

carry drinks to the team or run for end zone footballs. My mother saved a place on the bleachers for Dad who had promised to make it there by half time. I joined my friends in the pep section, cheering for the team and singing the Wendell Fight Song.

Wendell lost the game, but the loyal fans had a good time anyway. High school sports events drew more people than any other activity in the community. When the Twin Falls newspaper featured a Wendell player, the article remained taped in store windows for weeks.

Dad left after the game, taking George with him while my mother and I waited in the family car for Tom. It usually took twenty minutes for the team to shower and receive a pep talk from the coach. Many of the players drove their own cars but Tom had the shame of being driven home by his mother. He had saved most of the money he earned for moving sprinkler pipe and his goal was to buy a car before his senior year.

I grew impatient waiting in the car so I got out and walked over to a group of students standing around the gymnasium waiting for the football players. Most of them were in high school, but they welcomed me anyway. The first player to come out and greet the crowd was a junior named Les. Years earlier, we had been in the same 4-H clubs.

"Hi," he said, winking at me.

I couldn't remember how to talk.

He moved closer and gave me a hug. I suddenly felt uncomfortable because he was a junior, and he was hugging an eighth grader in front of God and everyone else. I wanted him to keep on hugging me.

He stepped back and smiled at me.

"You've changed a bit this year," he said softly. "I think you're pretty."

Pretty! I prayed that my feet would stay flat on the ground and not go cavorting around the parking lot. No one had ever told me I was pretty. I still didn't believe it, but it was sure a nice thing to hear.

Just then a junior girl came over and pulled on Les's arm. "Come on," she said. "You promised we'd all go for a ride in the van."

Les winked again at me and left with half the crowd. They clamored into pickup trucks and drove off, ready to raise a mighty ruckus in the limited streets of Wendell. I stood in the moon-light, totally transfixed by the power of a few spoken words. One voice in my mind told me to ignore a silly remark from an older flirt. Another voice told me it felt great to be alive and I was the prettiest girl in the entire universe.

Tom came out of the gym, hot and tired, and we drove home in silence. I decided that night to stop wearing my hair in a ponytail every day.

By the end of September, the mood around the Ambrose house grew from eager anticipation to sheer joy. The abundant harvest surpassed expectations, and the word was out that Neal Ambrose was a genius. His potato plants were forty inches high and most of the potatoes weighed over two pounds each. A buyer came from Simplot's in Boise to inspect the crop and immediately bought the entire field. The potatoes would be hauled to Caldwell, near Boise, to be processed into French fries for a small but expanding hamburger chain known as

McDonald's.

In turn, Dad used the advance on the crop to buy more land, and there was plenty of land available as other farmers struggled to settle their debts. Newcomb Irrigation in Twin Falls drew up plans to remodel its office as Dad tripled his orders for sprinkler pipe. The abundant harvest had been worth the wait.

On the Friday before the potato harvest started, I sat in class, eager for the bell to ring. My father wanted me to work at the weigh station taking the tickets from each potato truck after it left the field. This was an exciting responsibility, I liked talking to the drivers, and, best of all, I didn't have to ride on the back of the harvester.

Just before class ended, the principal's voice came over the speaker.

"Attention students," the principal said, sounding like a general addressing his troops. "We know that harvest is underway and the faculty reminds all students to be careful when working in the field. School will be released early next week so you can help."

A collective cheer went up from the students in the room, especially from those who had no intention of working in the harvest.

"One more announcement," the principal continued. "A special congratulations to Elaine Ambrose. Her poem "The Endless River" was selected for publication in the National High School Poetry Anthology next April. This is a real honor for Wendell Schools, particularly since Elaine is only in the eighth grade. Congratulations, Elaine."

The speaker on the wall went silent, and all eyes were

on me. I stared at my hands and wanted to disappear. Finally, Jeneal spoke.

"That's neat, Elaine. I can't wait to tell my mom."

"Hey, how much did you have to pay them?" snorted Cleo.

"That's not fair," Sandy defended me. "She writes good poetry."

"They must have lost my poem," sniffed Annie.

The bell rang and I bolted for the door. I brushed passed Mrs. Coffman who glared at me from her classroom door. I headed outside for freedom only to bump into Mrs. Petersen.

"Congratulations, Elaine," she said, resting her hands on my shoulders." I hope you don't mind that I submitted your poem. It is well-written."

I relaxed. "I wish he hadn't said it over the speaker," I mumbled. "But, thanks, anyway. I'm glad it will be published."

We exchanged smiles and I rushed to the school bus. I wanted to be alone to steep in the warm feelings of my accomplishment.

The next morning, I hurried to get ready for work. Dad took me to the weigh station where I remained until nightfall, watching as trucks loaded with potatoes rolled onto the scales to be weighed and recorded. Tom, almost fifteen, drove one of the trucks. He waved at me, proud to be in control of something. I worked at the station all month long as the heavy trucks lumbered out of the field, taking their precious cargo to be weighed and then transported either into cellars or directly to the processing plant.

The weeks flew by, and I enjoyed the commotion of the harvest activities. On the counter at the weigh station, I kept several odd-shaped potatoes that the drivers had given me. One had four knobs and resembled a turtle; another looked just like a duck. During slow times, I drew faces on the potatoes or made characters for a potato family play.

Each evening, I took a bag home for my mother. Mom had at least one hundred recipes for potatoes; a thick, hearty soup was one of the family favorites. She used fresh onions, mustard seeds, and sweet cream.

Our family ate mashed potatoes at least four times every week. The huge bowl of mashed potatoes always featured a slowly melting lump of butter that was a prize for the one lucky enough to claim it. Mom's homemade potato chips made a hearty snack. She cut potatoes, with the skin still on, into thin slices, brushed them with oil, salted them lightly, and then baked them for twenty minutes. My brothers usually burned their fingers in their eagerness to eat the chips.

The potato harvest motivated the community as men, women, and equipment worked day and night to gather the crops. All were on the verge of exhaustion when the harvest was finally completed at the end of October. My job ended on a sunny Saturday afternoon, and I went home to clean up and grab a snack.

After eating some fresh fruit and crackers, I took a long walk around the property and stopped on the hill that overlooked the fields. What had been lush green landscape was now barren dirt covered with tangled, dead potato vines. The crops were gone and the land

emerged scarred and plundered.

Other crops, planted in a rotation so there was always at least one crop in the ground, surrounded the empty potato fields. It was time for the third cutting of hay, and then the winter wheat would be planted. It was a continuous cycle, working the ground, planting the crop, waiting for the harvest. I watched as a crew in the distance loaded the sprinkler pipe on a long wagon that would carry it to the shed to be stored for the winter.

My father's truck came down the road; he had begun his ritual of inspecting the land. The truck turned into the empty field and stopped. He noticed me and walked over. We stood there silently, looking over the land together.

"It's been a good harvest," he said finally.

"It sure beats last year," I answered.

"We've already received orders for next year's crop. And it's not in the ground yet."

"Are you going to buy more land?"

My father looked at me. "Of course," he said. "We'll soon have 5,000 more acres."

I stepped back. 'You're kidding!" I exclaimed. "Why?"

"Because it's there," came the reply.

We gazed at the fields, and for a brief moment I wanted to talk to him about the land but changed my mind. After the overwhelming enterprise of the harvest, this quiet interlude seemed a rare luxury. Finally, Dad turned to leave. "Don't be late for dinner," he said.

"Don't be early," I retorted.

He stopped and looked at me. I shrugged my shoulders and grinned sheepishly.

He laughed. "See you later, Kid." He walked to his

truck and drove off to view the rest of his property.

I stayed and surveyed the countryside. The lifeless potato fields stretched to the distant canyon, ready for a winter's rest. Clumps of lazy white clouds dotted the vast blue sky, nudged along by an autumn breeze. A v-shaped flock of geese honked farewell on its way south. Cattle dozed in the pasture, taking advantage of a warm Indian Summer afternoon.

For a brief moment, I forgot my youthful anxiety and marveled at my abundant life. So much had happened. I was changing, I wasn't so awkward anymore, and a boy had said I was pretty. My poem would be published, and I had completed several notebooks full of short stories. Just as the water had nourished the thirsty crops, I was thriving because of my good fortune. I felt glorious.

Here, on the hill near the potato field, I rejoiced in the splendor of my existence. That's when I felt it. A calm sensation poured over me, stirred my very soul, and quietly released through unrestricted tears flowing down my cheeks. Through my blurred vision, I knew that this warm feeling was the peace I had read about in my grandmother's Bible. And it was a peace that passed all understanding.

My father continued to buy land. He allocated a third of the land to crops, including potatoes, sugar beets, and hay, and the rest for grazing. He bought 1,000 head of black Angus beef cattle and continued to install pumps and sprinklers on the various properties. He still also managed the trucking company. With the proceeds from the crops, he had enough money to purchase a Bonanza four-seat airplane so he could fly back and forth to Butte,

Montana.

The closest airport to Wendell was 20 miles away in Gooding. When Dad flew back to Idaho, he would fly over our house and circle several times as a message to my mother. Then she ran to her car and drove to Gooding to get him. Sometimes she took a kid or two, and our job was to set the blocks under the wheels as Dad secured the airplane. On lucky days, we would stop at the Gooding Tastee-Freeze and get an ice cream cone. It At the time, the experience seemed like a normal family outing.

The regular flying trips were curtailed after one serious event. My dad was 30 minutes outside of Butte, Montana, when he experienced an appendicitis attack. He radioed for help and in the course of landing, his appendix burst. He was rushed to the hospital and stayed in serious condition for several days. True to form, he survived to fly again. I didn't know how he was able to be so strong.

I was in awe of him, as well as being afraid of him. He never attended college but possessed extraordinary vision for successful businesses. My respect was tempered by the harsh reality of his strict punishments. I kept my eyes down when we were together. Once I heard my grandmother mention that my father had been bankrupt in 1951 and was a multi-millionaire 14 years later. Through the trucking company and the farms, he hired more than 200 employees and one fourth of the town's adults called him Sir. It was 1965, and he was only 37 years old.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Potatoes and Poetry

I felt free when riding my horse Star. On her back, I reached my arms straight out and screamed with joy at the exhilarating feeling as she thundered over the ground, pounding the uncharted flight into wisps of frantic dust. Welded to the saddle by experience, my blue-jeaned knees hugging the sides of the big, white mare, I rode the 100-acre pasture in triumphant conquest. With the reins looped securely over the saddle horn, we rode as one, the half-ton horse and the 80-pound girl, relishing the last hot days of summer.

I loved the feeling of riding free and unrestricted as the horse jumped ditches and raced along the wooden fences. I felt the powerful muscles propel the horse in a steady rhythm that grew with intensity as the horse broke from a gallop into a full-blown runaway. I hollered with delight, twisted my fingers through the horse's coarse

mane, put my head down near its neck, and surrendered all control to the massive animal as she jumped the fence into the next pasture. The thrill was worth the terror.

Quivering and snorting, the horse finally stopped at the edge of the pasture. Foamy sweat covered its neck and legs, and the eyes were wide, the nostrils flared. I let go of the mane and adjusted my long brown ponytail. I sat in the saddle and breathed in unison with the mare, enjoying a race well run. It was a ritual the two of us shared many times during that summer of 1963.

Before heading back to the barn, I rode my horse to a hill and surveyed the surrounding countryside. In silent appreciation, I gazed at the patchwork of rolling pastures and abundant fields that stretched to the uncluttered horizon. The land produced the crops, supported the homes, and cradled the coffins of the dead. It was a part of my heritage, and I felt a kinship with my great-grandparents who came west in 1890, destitute and driven, to claim forty acres of free homestead land in southern Idaho. I knew I would have done the same.

The white mare tossed her head impatiently, so I quit daydreaming. "O.K., Star. Let's go home. We can't be late again tonight." I picked up the reins and turned the animal towards home. It would take a long time to brush the sweat out of the horse and I dreaded being late for dinner. I kicked the horse to a trot and left the pasture.

As usual, dinnertime at the Ambrose house was not pleasant. Each member of the family approached the table with an apprehension that only hunger could subdue. My father had grown weary of the frozen dinners, and he requested meat and potatoes. The warm

food did little to remove the chill around the table. On evenings when we didn't have frozen TV dinners, my mother scurried about with heaping plates of pork chops, mashed potatoes, gravy, bread and various bowls of vegetables. She believed that quantity made up for quality. Dinner was especially difficult because she never really knew when my dad would be home. But when he did arrive, dinner had to be ready.

The usual scenario occurred when my father arrived and sat at the head of the table. He would scan a magazine about agriculture, aviation, or news, and wait.

Mom, a foot shorter than her husband, wore her short brown hair done in the latest permanent. Her pride and joy was her flawless skin, still supple despite years of hard work in the fields when she was younger. Neither her appearance nor her wisdom and dedication to work were noticed or appreciated by her family. To her friends, she was charming, witty, and funny. But at home, especially when Dad appeared, Mom became quiet and on guard.

She would frantically bring in the dishes, admonishing her children to hurry to the table. Tom, the oldest, sat next to our father. George, the youngest, always tumbled in breathless and noisy and to find his chair and then be quiet.

I would rush through the kitchen door, puffing after running from the barn with my messy hair falling out of the ponytail and my clothes covered with dirt and horse sweat. I splashed my face and hands with water from the kitchen faucet and plopped in my chair. My brothers stared at me in the silent room.

"You're late," Dad said without looking up.

"You're early," I mumbled and reached for the pork chops. Sometimes the remark amused him, but not this time.

"What did you say?" My father had stopped eating. The room froze.

I closed my eyes. Don't talk back now, I told myself. It's been a good day. I knew my mother and brothers were silently pleading for the same thing. I opened my eyes, knowing I had the power to make this a good meal or a bad meal. I opted for a good one.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'll try to be on time."

The apology worked and the tension broke. My mother remained nervous because she didn't want another ruined evening. Her mind scrambled to think of a topic. Then she said, "Tom, how do the spuds look?"

Tom knew the routine. He obliged because he pitied his mother. "The spuds on the south field are looking better," he said. "They're small but still the best in the county."

"They need more water," said my father. He could control everything but the weather. Idaho's warm days and cool nights provided optimum potato growing conditions, but the dry land ached for water.

It was late August; the harvest would begin in a month and continue through October. Harvest was always a time of hope and sweat. The corn and beets were dug first and then the potatoes. Farmers in Idaho worked with pride, knowing they produced twenty-five percent of the nation's potatoes.

A successful potato harvest required exact timing, hard work, and help from Mother Nature since the

potatoes could be dug only after the vines died and before the first hard freeze. Farmers prayed for the weather to remain between 50 and 70 degrees. Hot weather meant soggy potatoes that bruised easily, and freezing weather damaged the skin and ruined the taste. When the right moment finally came, gigantic harvesters were driven methodically through the fields, gathering mounds of potatoes and carrying them on rattling conveyor belts into the trucks that drove along-side. The dead vines were discarded out the back of the harvester, a rough dressing for the wounded earth.

Everyone in the Ambrose family participated in the potato harvest. Tom drove one of the spud trucks, and George picked up the potatoes that were left by the harvesters at the ends of the rows. I worked with the hired women and migrant workers riding on the back of the harvesters picking out rocks and dirt clods. Mom prepared huge meals for breakfast and dinner and sent loaded boxes of sandwiches to the field. She also worked at the spud storage cellar, keeping track of each load brought in. One missed tally could mean the difference between profit and loss for the season. Dad orchestrated each day's activities like a military general responsible for bringing in the bounty for a starving world. He had a tireless energy in the autumn and seemed to thrive on the sounds and smells of the work.

Dinner was over when the last plate was clean and Dad stood up. "Elaine, we need those sunflowers out of the south 40-acre field," he said without looking at me. "They're almost six feet high."

"I'm weeding there in the morning," I replied. "I'll be

done in a few weeks."

Dad patted George on the head as he went outside to climb into his pickup truck. Every evening he drove around each field, inspecting the crops, checking fences, watching the livestock. Sometimes he was gone for hours, and he preferred to go alone.

I helped my mother clear the table and wash the dishes as my brothers left to finish various chores. It bothered me that the males in the family never helped with dishes, but she I learned the hard way not to complain. I remembered last Thanksgiving, when the women began to clean after an exhausting meal for forty relatives. I had loudly refused to help unless my boy cousins also volunteered. For my impudence, I was taken to my room, spanked with The Board, and made to finish the dishes by myself.

Punishment was something to be avoided and never discussed at the Ambrose house. Respect for authority was enforced with The Board, a foot-long, two-inch-thick piece of wood kept in the kitchen and used adeptly by either parent. Tom, the oldest, had learned not to anger our parents and had avoided The Board for several years. He quietly kept to himself and when not doing chores, retreated behind a book. George was more gregarious and often in trouble, but could usually reduce the number of strikes through clever negotiating.

I, though, was a regular candidate for a session with The Board. My instant retorts and stubborn independence created an ongoing clash of wills that brought out the ugliness in all of us. I defiantly refused to fear The Board or submit to its power. I never cried during spankings,

and as the blows fell harder, the more resolved I became not to cry out. It was my only victory.

I received my last spanking when I was 13-year-old. I had said something sarcastic to my father so he dragged me into my bedroom and spanked me a few times on my rear. The rage and humiliation caused me to start a five-year-calendar to mark off the months until I was 18. Being hit by my father distorted my concept of a healthy relationship. A few years after I left home, the man I was with hit me hard enough to split my lip and knock me to the ground. My father was only 30 minutes away, but I didn't call him because I didn't want him to know.

After the dishes were done, I went to my room to play my records. I shared my father's love of orchestral music and often lay in the dark, imagining great dramatic scenes while listening to Henry Mancini's orchestra. My favorite, "Exodus," would play again and again, each time to a different passion play in my mind.

My room, a haven of simple pleasures, was also the guest room, so I had a double bed covered by a bright yellow and orange quilt made by my grandmother. Huge orange and white pillows were stacked in one corner under a bright floor lamp. A bookcase held a wealth of adventure with titles such as *National Velvet*, *Treasure Island*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *Little Women*. In the other corner of the room stood a small vanity table, mirror, and seat that my mother had purchased with coupons known as Gold Strike Stamps. I never sat at the vanity but I liked the way it looked.

My closet held a disheveled array of jeans, T-shirts, boots, tennis shoes, and jackets. Skirts and dresses, most

of them made by my mother or grandmother, filled half of the closet. Girls were not allowed to wear pants at school, a ruling that particularly annoyed me.

Hidden in the back corner of the closet, buried under stacks of clothes, a large boot box bulged with my original short stories and simple poems. I wrote my first story in the fourth grade about a girl named Nan who lived in an attic and watched the world from her tiny window. Since then, I had created other characters but Nan was always there, nagging me for a new story.

My poetry touched on ordinary objects that turned into fantasy characters: jelly beans became dancing soldiers, a weather vane came to life at midnight and bemoaned its lofty perch, an old woman fell asleep in the meadow and emerged as a butterfly. My writing was my escape and I revered a new tablet of paper as a special treasure. Aunt Billie, my father's sister, the only family member who read my poetry, would send back the poems with handwritten notes that ranged from "Nice work. I like this one" to "Come now, it can't be that bad!"

After listening to my records and taking a quick bath, I slipped on a clean nightshirt and retrieved some clean sheets from the hall closet. One of my favorite pleasures was to sleep on sheets that had been dried outside on the clothesline. Smoothing the white sheets over my mattress and covering them with the quilt, I called "Good night" to my mother who was reading to George and turned off the light. Then I snuggled up in the sheets, savoring the clean, sweet feel and smell of the cool cotton. The summer breeze rustled the curtains at my open window, and I fell asleep to the sounds of crickets and distant cattle.

The next day I packed an extra-large lunch because I intended to ride my horse, an activity that sustained me during summer days on the farm. After my chores were done, I usually raced to the barn to get the hackamore and reins to catch Star. She was a big white horse, over 14 hands high (almost 58 inches from the ground), and had been trained as a prize-winning barrel racer. My father had acquired the horse from a man who owed him money, and the horse was all he had to give. At ten years old, she was past her prime for the rodeo, but I didn't care. She was my passport to liberty, and I loved her.

I would catch her in the pasture, bring her to the barn, and put on her bridle and saddle. I would be gone all day, and no one ever checked on me. Probably, they were just as eager to have me out of the house as I was to leave. After every ride, I brushed Star's hide and fed her oats. Sometimes I brought her an apple or some sugar cubes. My brothers referred to her as an old gray mare, but to me, she was a gorgeous white horse who could run like the wind. And she was my best friend.

In junior high school, I joined a 4-H Club for horseback riders and practiced how to ride my horse as she raced around three barrels set in a dirt arena. She knew what to do, and all I did was hang on for dear life. She loved the full gallop after rounding the third barrel, and within weeks we were the fastest team in the Club.

"You should ride her at the barrel race at the Gooding County Fair and Rodeo," my 4-H leaders encouraged me. "She should do well, even though she's not so young anymore." Again, I resorted to theatrical pleading to receive my parents' permission. I also needed silver

cowboy boots, a purple saddle blanket, and a purple vest to ride with the 4-H Club. That required extra days of working in the field at $1 an hour to hoe beets and weed potatoes. Soon I had enough money, and I was ready for the Fair and Rodeo at the end of August.

Two weeks before the Fair and Rodeo, I used bleach and water in a bucket to comb through Star's long mane and tail to make them gleaming white. Then I saddled her for a solo practice in the pasture. Just as we were riding toward the first barrel, a flock of pheasants suddenly flew up in front of us. Star jumped to the side and I lost my grip. I flew through the air and landed on my right foot. I screamed as it broke.

Star trotted back to me and lowered her head. I knew there would be no "Lassie moment" because I couldn't tell her to go get help. My only choice was to get to the three-rail fence and try to climb back on the horse. I grabbed the loose reins and told her to back up. She understood my command and slowly backed to the fence, pulling me through the dirt. We finally reached the fence and I managed to pull myself up on my good foot. Then I climbed up and straddled the top rail.

"Come here, Star," I said. "Easy now." She pressed against the fence so I could fall across the saddle. Then I sat up, secured my left boot into the stirrup and reached for the reins. That's when I noticed her mouth was bleeding because the bit had rubbed it raw while she was pulling me. That's the only time I cried.

We rode back to the barn and found one of the hired hands, a gnarly old guy named Smitty. He helped me off the horse and into his pickup truck. "I'll get you home

and then take care of the horse," he said. "I have some ointment for her mouth." I was grateful.

Going to the doctor was an inconvenience for many farm families. It just wasn't done without considerable effort and reason. "Are you sure it hurts?" my father asked. "Maybe it's just sprained?" I went to bed and moaned most of the night. When I couldn't walk the next morning and the foot was swollen and purple, my mother decided to take me to town to see Dr. Scheel. The x-rays confirmed a broken bone, but I needed to wait for the swelling to subside before receiving a cast. I hobbled home on crutches until we could return the following day for the cold, messy cast to be applied from my foot to my knee.

"Stay off of it for six weeks," the doctor said, and the words echoed like a prison sentence.

"But I'm competing in the barrel race at the rodeo in two weeks," I said. My mother and the doctor laughed. I did not see any humor in the situation. "I'm riding," I said with all the conviction I could muster. The doctor handed me the crutches and patted my head. "Go home now, dearie, and get some rest," he said. That's when I knew I would ride.

The following day, I called Todd Webb, my 4-H leader, and explained the situation. He seemed reluctant to talk with my parents about the barrel racing competition. "I just need help getting on Star," I said. "She knows what to do. Please let me try."

Todd Webb approached my father that night and, after a few shots of Crown Royal, convinced him that all I had to do was sit on the horse. And basically, that was

true. Somehow, my father agreed, and I was thrilled.

The day before the race, Todd Webb and several 4-H Club members came around with horse trailers to get the horses. By then, I only used one crutch and could maneuver quite well with my clunky cast. We drove to the stables at the fair grounds and unloaded the horses, our gear, and extra bales of hay. Star seemed nervous, so I brushed her hide and sang my favorite songs from our lazy riding days. She stopped quivering.

The next day, we all arrived early to prepare for the race. The right leg of my jeans was split to cover the cast. The Club members assisted in hoisting the saddle onto Star, joking that I would need to split any prize money with them. Star's mouth had healed, but I decided to pull a hackamore without a bit over her head. I struggled onto the horse and took the reins. I felt comfortable, except the cast caused my leg to stick straight out and I knew it would hit the first barrel as Star galloped around it.

"Tie me down," I said to Todd Webb. He hesitated but then agreed. He used a small rope to secure my right leg to the stirrup. "Don't fall," he said. "Or, we're both in trouble."

We trotted to the arena and joined the other riders. I supported my weight on my thighs and left boot as we rode in a slow lope around the arena. I could feel Star getting tense. She had owned this competition many years ago, and I knew she was eager to return. "Easy, Star," I murmured. "We can do it."

There were seven riders ahead of us in the race, and we were last. They all posted times between 20 and 15 seconds. Star's ears were rigid as we eased into the chute.

I matched her breathing as we waited for the countdown. Suddenly the gate flew open and Star shot out in a fury of speed. She leaned around the first barrel and my cast rubbed the side, then she ran toward the second barrel and circled it so sharply than I could touch the ground. She sped toward the third barrel. We rounded it and headed toward home. Dirt flew, the crowd cheered, and my cast banged against the rope as I rode the relentless force of pure energy. I knew my magnificent horse was running to win. We crossed the finish line in 14 seconds and the crowd went wild. The clumsy, problem child and the old horse were the improbable winners.

I don't remember all the details after that. I know I looked into the stands and saw my mother cheering for me. The $500 prize money, a fortune back then, was added to my savings account. Star and I never raced again. After that day, she became slower and less eager to run free. We still took regular rides, and she would pick up the pace as I sang, but we had nothing else to prove.

My foot healed, I entered high school, and I didn't have much time to ride. Star spent her last days roaming the fields, and every now and then she would raise her head, point her ears, and break into a full gallop. The last time I saw her she was jumping a ditch on the far side of the pasture.

My older brother Tom and I competed throughout high school. He was student body president and I became student body secretary. He was elected a state officer in Future Farmers America, and I was elected a state officer in Future Homemakers of America. He was chosen for the American Legion Boy's State training and I went

to the Girls' State week-long session and was elected Speaker of the House. Finally, I couldn't compete when he was accepted to Harvard University because females in my family didn't attend college. I also knew my father wouldn't pay such a high tuition and expenses for me.

I enjoyed high school, and my favorite classes were English, choir, band, and speech. I played alto saxophone in the pep band and sang soprano in choir. I continued to write poetry and short stories and was excited to write for the school newspaper. During my senior year, an English teacher named Miss Luke introduced me rhythm, meter, and rhyme. My poem about the endless river didn't have exact meter, so I concentrated on writing future poetry in iambic tetrameter: the accent is on every other syllable and the line contains four accented beats. I used a rhyme scheme of ABCB – the last word of the second line rhymed with the last word of the forth rhyme.

In the spring of my senior year, my 15-minute poem titled "Revenge" won superior ratings in regional and statewide declamation contests. I still recall the first two stanzas:

Revenge is repetition done
of unjust acts that slowly burn.
The soul but seeks one thing alone –
An act of vengeance in return.
The tongue is whetted with reprisal,
raging hot with maddening thirst
Until the cup of vengeance quenched and
proudly wronged who wrong her first.

I balanced the darkness of the poetry by writing humorous essays and short stories. After being named editor of the school newspaper and editor of the year book, I was invited to a high school journalism conference at the University of Idaho. That adventure left a huge impact, and I begged for the chance to go to the University of Idaho. Women in my family were expected to get married and find contentment at home, down on the farm. My father was skeptical, even thought he was paying for my brother's expensive tuition at Harvard. The conversation was not positive.

"Dad, here's a brochure about the University of Idaho. I want to go."

"Why?"

"I want to study journalism and be a writer."

"Why?"

"Because it's a job I can do."

"You write for a high school newspaper. Big deal."

"Dad, I'll work to earn money during the summer and on Christmas and Spring Breaks."

"Go paint the fence down at the pig barns and you can use the profit from the next sale of pigs. That will help cover a semester."

"Thanks, I'll do that," I answered. "And it will be a lot cheaper than what you're paying for Harvard."

"Your brother is male."

"Big deal."

"You're grounded."

"Big deal."

That went well. But after I received a small scholarship for leadership, my parents couldn't say no. I packed my

best flannel jumpers, white blouses, and wire curlers into a blue metal trunk and marked the days until the eight-hour drive to the university.

No one talked as my parents drove me to college. I sat in the back seat of the sensible, reliable Buick Riviera and stared out the window as we left Wendell and passed lush fields of potatoes, corn, and sugar beets. Harvest would begin in two months, and for the first time, I wouldn't participate. The landscape turned to high desert and the only green vegetation fringed the Snake River as it cupped southern Idaho on its way to the Pacific Ocean. We traveled through Boise, the capital city, and I stretched my neck to see the tall buildings and the capitol. In 1969, the population of Boise, the state's largest city, was only 75,000. We followed Highway 55 north of Boise, and the two-lane road entered a scenic panorama through the Payette National Forest, a vast expansion of rugged timberland that spanned 2.3 million acres. The land was bordered by two of the deepest canyons in North America–the Salmon River Canyon and Hells Canyon. Our journey continued north as the road hugged the mountains along the tumbling Payette River and we climbed to 5,000 feet above sea level. I felt as if I were being born.

After five hours of driving, we stopped in the resort town of McCall and found a quaint restaurant. We were only three hours from our destination, and my anticipation was palpable. We sat in silence. I wanted to talk about moving away, but I didn't know what to say. Part of me wanted to jump up in the restaurant and holler "I'm free!" but I didn't want to blow my chances. Any

disruption in proper protocol could cause my father to change his mind and take me back home where I would remain grounded forever. Deviating from my normal behavior, I kept quiet.

We left McCall and passed a pristine alpine lake. I made a mental note to live on the lake someday. The late afternoon sun danced on the golden grain fields of the region known as The Palouse as we neared Moscow, the home of the University of Idaho. We found the new student dormitory and some cheerful students rushed out to greet us. They took my blue trunk and I eagerly followed them into the building. I never looked back, and my parents drove away. My grand adventure had just begun.

I arrived at college prepared to experience life beyond my hometown of 1,000 people. I was naive in thinking everything would be perfect because finally I was away from home. For the first time, I was responsible for myself, and the freedom came with a smorgasbord of choices. My first taste of freedom involved Budweiser beer and a clumsy frat boy. I still blush with the memory. College during the 1970s introduced this farm girl to hippies, anti-war protestors, demonstrators, musicians, poets, and wide-eyed friends who were just as eager as I was to test our wings. We studied, partied, gained and lost lovers, and attended a few classes. I played the guitar, sang in the college jazz choir, wore my hair long and parted, and bought flower dresses from consignment shops.

This first experience with freedom changed my life, and I focused on one main goal: getting a job and

supporting myself. The University of Idaho provided opportunities to learn and explore. I majored in Journalism because I enjoyed writing and in high school had been the editor of the school newspaper and year book.

I was encouraged to go through Sorority Rush, even though I didn't know anything about it. As the first female in my family to graduate from college, I didn't have any sorority legacies to shepherd me through the week-long popularity contest. In the fall of 1969, the University had nine sororities, all located on campus. I attended the selection parties wearing my best wool jumper, even though the temperatures were still warm.

I didn't know anyone at any of the sororities, so I tried to behave myself and observe the procedures. The members in each house presented daily skits and routines to attract the favorite new pledges. Each evening, the house members would discuss each potential pledge and remove those who didn't make the cut. Back at the dormitory, I joined the other applicants in following the same process of elimination to decide which houses we preferred and the ones we didn't like.

By the third day, I was weary of the game. The most popular houses were Gamma Phi Beta and Kappa Kappa Gamma. I endured their perfect, polished programs and made small talk until both houses dropped me. We were all relieved. I enjoyed laughing with the members of the Delta Gamma house and decided that was the one I wanted. On "Squeal Day" I received a bid from Delta Gamma and moved into the house where I would live during all four years of college. I met young women

in my pledge class who became lifelong friends. Over the years, we shared important events that included weddings, births of children, and trips with and without families. Now we share news of grandchildren and various ailments as we endure divorces, remarriages, and the deaths of parents.

I've always loved to sing and tried out for the Vandaleers, the prestigious concert choir, even though I'd never had any formal voice training. I was delighted to be accepted in my freshman year, and the group changed my life. During my sophomore year, the choir toured Europe and sang in cathedrals throughout England, Germany, Luxembourg, France, and Holland.

Most of the choir members had never traveled far and some had never left Idaho. We sang in cathedrals more than 500 years old, and the acoustics created such harmonic sounds that many of us cried through the performances. When the airplane took off from Heathrow Airport in London, I sobbed for an hour. I knew my life would never be the same and I vowed to see more of the world.

My first writing classes prompted me to write more poems and try short stories. One professor expressed a tolerance for my emphasis on metered rhymes but encouraged me to try free verse. One assignment was to write without stopping and the subject was, "What Haunts You?" I submitted this poem and received an A.

Beggar Madonna

She haunts me still.
The beggar woman,
with outstretched hand,
huddled in the shadow
of the Spanish Cathedral,
a ragged baby at her breast.
Inside, pure in cool and splendor,
the white Madonna on a pedestal
with outstretched hand
received my offering.
Lo siento, Madre.
I'm sorry, Mother.

The professor challenged me to write more free verse. Our next assignment was to write about our earliest memory or feeling. I wrote about the twin sister who never breathed.

Solitary Sibling

In the mysterious void of initial creation
I shared my mother's womb
with a growing mass of defective development.
She came first and was promptly discarded.
I emerged yelling
and the doctor was elated
at my ten fingers and ten toes.
I was worth keeping.
Now free and independent

I avoid darkness and cramped quarters.
Still, I acknowledge my first companion
and wonder
if the heartbeat I remember was my mother's
or hers.
Did I feel my sister's soul evaporate
as she lost her humanity?
Or did I absorb her essence?
That would explain my ambivalent beliefs
and excuse my sporadic loneliness.

My creative enlightenment was interrupted every summer when I returned home to work for my father. Sometimes I worked in the office as a bookkeeper to track the sale of gasoline for the Texaco station. Other times I worked in the potato or beet fields. In June between my sophomore and junior year in college, I announced that I didn't want to work at home anymore. I wanted my freedom. I packed my plastic blue Samsonite suitcase and hiked to the bus station in town. I had saved enough money to travel 100 miles to Boise. From there, I hitchhiked to my friend's house in Caldwell. Her parents allowed me to stay as long as we both had paying jobs.

The only job we could find was at the Simplot potato processing plant working the night shift from midnight to 8:00 am. I wore a white smock and hairnet and stood in an assembly line cutting spots off of the potatoes as they moved along the conveyor belt. During lunch break, I chatted with older women who worked the night shift so they could care for their families during the day. The experience taught me to empathize with them and make

good decisions about my future. One early morning on the line, I realized that the potatoes were coming from my father's farm in Wendell. I quit the job and moved back home, duly humbled. I often think of those women, knowing how hard they worked day and night for their families. I'll never forget them.

During the month I was away, my family never contacted or visited me. I think they were allowing me to experience important lessons I didn't learn in college.

I majored in journalism, and my favorite courses included writing, speech, and music. In one creative writing class, the professor posted a winter scene on the board and instructed us to write without stopping. I wrote a poem about a vivid memory from my childhood, and didn't know the poem would become the metaphor for a memoir I would finish almost 50 years later.

1964 Town Crier

Ragged, rhythmic clouds of breath escape
from my mouth
as I push my burdened bicycle over the
patches of frozen snow.
Frost fills my nostrils and hardens
wayward hair
poking beneath my knit hat like spikes of rigid
spider legs.
The only sounds on this dark
moonless morning
come from the rustle of my frozen pant legs
and my boots squeaking and crunching

through the crusty layers.
I know every house on my paper route,
so I keep my head down
in a futile attempt to ignore the bitter winds
that slice through my coat.
Take a newspaper from the bag, slap it into
a roll, stick it into the can, keep going.
I'm 12 years old, and I'm outside in the brutal
Idaho winter
at 5:30 am to deliver 70 newspapers.
Every day. By myself.
My fingers hurt. Snot freezes on my lip.
A dog growls but doesn't leave its shelter.
Crunch. Breathe. My bag becomes lighter as
a sliver of daylight emerges through the dark.
I arrive home, and my father sits to read the
newspaper while my mother hands me
hot cocoa with marshmallows happily
bobbing and melting on top.
My aching hands circle the mug, and I lean
over so the steam can warm my face.
Silent tears roll down red cheeks.
I am the Messenger. I am the Town Crier.

During the winter of my junior year, harsh storms dumped a record amount of snow on northern Idaho. My parents bought me an airplane ticket to fly from Lewiston to Twin Falls for the holidays, but I arrived in Lewiston and the airport was closed due to bad weather. I called Dad and he said to call back in thirty minutes. I called back and he said he had rerouted an 18-wheel truck from

Missoula, Montana to get me. A few hours later, a snow-covered Montana Express truck arrived at the airport. I hopped in and expressed my gratitude, but the two drivers were not in a jolly mood. The diversion added eight hours to their journey and the roads included the old Whitebird Hill, a switchblade, two-lane, dangerous route in a snowstorm at night in the middle of nowhere.

"This will be some adventure!" I said, trying to stay positive.

"We just drove through a blizzard on LoLo Pass," said Dub Brownlee, a driver I had known for 15 years. "We could be home now, but we'll get you home in about 12 hours."

"I hope Dad rewards you," I said.

"Oh, he will!" came a voice from the sleeper. Because I was a passenger, the second driver needed to stay in the sleeper.

We drove through the snowstorm and finally reached the treacherous Whitebird Hill. At an elevation of 4,400 feet, the snow was thick and blinding. The windshield wipers barely kept the top layer of snow off the windshield. There were no other drivers on the road. As the big rig creeped along the switchblade turns, I could look out the window and occasionally see the edge of the road that disappeared over the sides into steep canyons. One slip of a back wheel, and we would be over the edge and not found until the spring thaw. Brownlee kept both hands on the wheel and leaned forward to keep the truck on the road. I didn't dare tell him I had to go to the bathroom. I held that urge for another hour.

We approached the bottom of the grade as the wind

blew the snow sideways across the windshield. My hands ached from holding onto the seat.

"I'm getting too tired," moaned Brownlee. "If I fall asleep, just grab the wheel and ease onto the brake pedal."

I looked at him, eyes wide and mind terrified. Then he winked. He enjoyed a good ten minutes of laughter after that joke. I couldn't laugh because I would wet my pants.

We arrived in Wendell the next morning. Driving the 390-mile journey in a car on dry roads took eight hours, but this journey was unique. My dad handed the drivers a thick envelope I assumed was full of cash. Over the years, Brownlee would remind me of his valiant sacrifice to get me home. I replied that I enjoyed being his favorite cargo.

Dad continued to run Montana Express and Ambrose Farms, even though his health deteriorated. He was diagnosed with several illnesses, including liver disease, gout, diabetes, and heart disease. He almost died in 1973 and was in and out of hospitals for the next 16 years. He often conducted businesses from his bedroom with only a telephone and a legal pad.

In the spring of 1973, I was the only senior living in the house. My friends were married and living in tiny apartments. A few had moved into apartments as single women, going against the rules of the sorority. One had dropped out of school. I was feeling restless with only a few months remaining until graduation. I posted the lyrics from "Wand'rin' Star" in my room. The song came from the 1969 western musical *Paint Your Wagon*, and was sung by Lee Marvin. A favorite verse was, *Heaven is goodbye forever, it's time for me to go*. My dream was to

find a rewarding job and to travel the world.

When I graduated in 1973, my father, mother, and younger brother drove eight hours to the University of Idaho, sat through the two-hour ceremony, and then drove back. They didn't take me to lunch or have a celebration. As they drove away, I knew I was on my own. The reality was exhilarating.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unfinished Eulogy

I fumbled in the darkness of an unfamiliar room. Where was that ringing phone? I finally found the receiver and muttered in sleepy irritation, "What?"

"Your father died."

The telephone call came on June 15, 1989 at while I was on a business trip to Chicago. I was a 37-year-old manager for Boise Cascade Corporation and scheduled to conduct an all-day training seminar for employees. I thanked my husband for calling with the message, and then went back to sleep.

Several hours later, I woke, showered, dressed in my dark suit, white shirt, and silk bow tie and took a taxi to the office to complete the training. That evening I attended the musical production of *Les Misérables*. The following morning, I changed my airline ticket and flew home. Ten years later, I finally shed tears about my

father's death.

The conflicting feelings emerged the first time I heard a popular song titled *In the Living Years*. After I listened to the phrase "I wasn't there that morning when my father passed away," I burst into tears and sobbed until I couldn't breathe. I cried for all the emotional and physical pain, the guilt, and the regret for the lost opportunities to salvage any kind of relationship. Maybe, if he and I had just tried harder, we could have tolerated and even liked each other. But it was too late and reconciliation would never happen.

Peace finally came when I visualized picking up a battered little girl and staring into my own eyes. I rocked her and sang a lullaby that imitated the soft cooing sounds of the mourning doves I used to hear outside my bedroom window. She clung to me and then asked if we had lived a good life. I held her closer and whispered, "Yes. Beyond your most vivid imagination!"

The relationship with my father evolved as I established my own independence and had children of my own. I no longer felt anger because of the harsh punishment during my childhood but attempted to see him as an intense man who rose from poverty to create several successful businesses. I was grateful that I had benefited from his ability to provide me a better life.

My father was a genius, cut from the same cloth as two other successful men from Idaho, J.R. Simplot and Joe Albertson, born in 1906 and 1909. They lived to be 99 and 87. Simplot was an 8th grade dropout who built a $3.6 billion global agriculture business, and Albertson started a grocery chain that grew to 600 stores across the

nation. My father was born in 1928 but died at age 60, and I wonder what more he could have done if he had lived longer.

He shared the same humble beginnings, tenacity, and vision for success as the other two men. My dad worked his way from poverty to owning a multi-million-dollar estate because he saw a need and found solutions. His various businesses included trucking, agriculture, and fuel. He did all this before the introduction of computers, keeping the facts and figures in his mind.

He also shared their desire to make charitable contributions to the community. In 1970, Dad donated eight acres of land for a recreation park for Wendell. He named it McGinnis Park in honor of a favorite high school teacher, Gertrude F. McGinnis. He also contributed funds and labor to help build the town's first swimming pool. The park received additional funding from a government grant and local fundraising events to construct baseball fields, a picnic area, a basketball court, and a parking lot.

In 1978, my father realized a lifelong dream when he sold enough land to purchase Sand Springs Ranch. He never lived on the ranch but used the main house for an office and personal retreat. His crews repaired sagging fences, repainted barns, and restored elaborate landscaping. Sand Springs Ranch became a showplace again. He donated use of the ranch for hunting groups and for Easter sunrise services for the local churches.

After dad's death, we learned of other donations he made without wanting recognition. He paid for people's homes, medical surgeries, college tuitions, and emergency expenses. He donated to all local school activities and

hired people who begged for employment. He gave them an opportunity to improve their lives. He also started a scholarship at the local high school in honor of Gertrude McGinnis.

I was in college in the early 1970s when he began to get sick. Heavy smoking led to several heart attacks, and a taste for Crown Royal whiskey played havoc with his liver. He developed gout, eczema, and adult diabetes. The stress of owning and running several businesses meant he never took a vacation. He worked every day, including Christmas. Finally realizing he needed more help, he surrounded himself with smart, hard-working people who helped grow the company.

When he came home from work, we respected his privacy and weren't allowed to use the telephone in case a driver called and needed assistance. There were round-the-clock emergency messages about wrecks, damaged pallets, stolen loads, or mechanical problems. His drivers were not unionized, and several times they were intimidated and threatened by union thugs in California. I remember the telephone calls about slashed tires and drivers who were beaten. On one occasion, my father took some union officials to court and won.

I was grateful to have some of his tenacity. After graduating from college, I drove to KMVT-TV in Twin Falls and convinced them to hire me as the first female television news reporter and talk show hostess in Idaho. They didn't have a job opening, but I was brash enough to convince them to give me a chance. I loved the job, and also loved the guy who worked there. Against my parents' wishes, we were married less than three months after

we met. My family refused to attend the wedding, and I announced my new name live on the air. Later I realized I should have waited to plan a proper wedding because we didn't own the necessary household items, such as sheets, towels, or dishes. Being impetuous and impudent isn't always admirable.

Seven years later, my broken relationship with my father resulted in the most painful experience of my life. December 1980 somberly arrived in a gray cloud of disappointment as I became the involuntary star in my own soap opera, a hapless heroine who faced the camera at the end of each day and asked, "Why?" as the scene faded to black. Short of being tied to a railroad track within the sound of an oncoming train, I found myself in a dire situation, wondering how my life turned into such a calamity of sorry events. I was unemployed and had a two-year-old daughter, a six-week-old son, an unemployed husband who left the state looking for work, and a broken furnace with no money to fix it. To compound the issues, I lived in the same small Idaho town as my wealthy parents, and they refused to help. This scenario was more like *The Grapes of Wrath* than *The Sound of Music*.

After getting the children to bed, I would sit alone in my rocking chair and wonder what went wrong. I thought I had followed the correct path by having a college degree before marriage and then working four years before having children. My plan was to stay home with two children for five years and then return to a satisfying, lucrative career. But no, suddenly I was poor and didn't have money to feed the kids or buy them presents. I

didn't even have enough money for a cheap bottle of wine. At least I was breast-feeding the baby, so that cut down on grocery bills. And my daughter thought macaroni and cheese was what everyone had every night for dinner. Sometimes I would add a wiggly gelatin concoction, and she would squeal with delight. Toddlers don't know or care if mommy earned Phi Beta Kappa scholastic honors in college. They just want to squish Jell-o through their teeth.

The course of events that lead to that December unfolded like a fateful temptation. I was 26 years old in 1978 and energetically working as an assistant director for the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. My husband had a professional job in an advertising agency, and we owned a modest but new home. After our daughter was born, we decided to move to my hometown of Wendell, Idaho, population 1,200, to help my father with his businesses. He owned thousands of acres of land, 1,000 head of cattle, and more than fifty 18-wheel diesel trucks. He had earned his vast fortune on his own, and his philosophy of life was to work hard and die, a goal he achieved at the young age of 60.

Dad had been sick for years, and he wanted help with the businesses. I had quit working fulltime to stay home with Emily. My husband wanted a chance to help run a business, so we sold our home in Salt Lake and moved to Wendell. In hindsight, by moving back home I probably was trying to establish the warm relationship with my father that I had always wanted. I should have known better. My father was not into relationships, and even though he was incredibly successful in business, life at home was painfully cold. His rock house on the hill

was his castle.

After moving back to the village of Wendell, life went from an adventure to tolerable and then tumbled into a scene out of *On the Waterfront*. As I watched my career hopes fade away under the stressful burden of survival, I often thought of my single, childless friends who were blazing trails and breaking glass ceilings as women earned better professional jobs. Adopting my favorite Marlon Brando accent, I would raise my fists and declare, "I coulda been a contender! I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am."

There were momentary lapses in sanity when I wondered if I should have been more like my mother. I grew up watching her dutifully scurry around as she desperately tried to serve and obey. My father demanded a hot dinner on the table every night, even though the time could vary as much as three hours. My mother would add milk to the gravy, cover the meat with tin foil (which she later washed and reused), and admonish her children to be patient. "Your father works so hard," she would say. "We will wait for him." I opted not to emulate most of her habits. She fit the role of her time, and I still admire her goodness.

My husband worked for my father six days a week, and we lived out in the country on the prestigious Sand Springs Ranch in one of my father's houses. Every morning for 18 months, Emily and I would stand at the picture windows and watch the waterfalls that tumbled into the river below us. In warm weather, I carried her in a backpack up and down the paths around the property. We were best buddies, and we loved the ranch.

Unfortunately, the relationship between my father and my husband was contentious. One afternoon in August of 1980, they got into a verbal fight and my dad fired my husband. My brothers and mother defended my dad's decision, and there weren't any reconciliations offered from either side.

I was pregnant with our second child. We were instructed to move, and so we found a tiny house in town and then my husband left to look for work because jobs weren't all that plentiful in Wendell. Our son was born in October, weighing in at a healthy 11 pounds. The next month, we scraped together enough money to buy a turkey breast for Thanksgiving. By December, our meager savings were gone, and we had no income.

I was determined to celebrate Christmas. We found a scraggly tree and decorated it with handmade ornaments. My daughter and I made cookies and sang songs. I copied photographs of the kids in their pajamas and made calendars as gifts. This was before personal computers, so I drew the calendar pages, stapled them to cardboard covered with fabric, and glued red rickrack around the edges. It was all I have to give to my family and friends.

Just as my personal soap opera was about to be renewed for another season, my life started to change. One afternoon, about a week before Christmas, I received a call from one of my father's employees. He was "in the neighborhood" and heard that my furnace was broken. He fixed it for free and wished me a Merry Christmas. I handed him a calendar and he pretended to be overjoyed. The next day the mother of a childhood friend arrived at

my door with two of her chickens, plucked and packaged. She said they had extras to give away. Again, I humbly handed her a calendar. More little miracles occurred. A friend brought a box of baby clothes that her boy had outgrown and teased me about my infant son wearing his sister's hand-me-down, pink pajamas. Then another friend of my mother's arrived with wrapped toys to put under the tree. The doorbell continued to ring, and I received casseroles, offers to babysit, more presents, and a bouquet of fresh flowers. I ran out of calendars to give in return.

To this day, I weep every time I think of these simple but loving gestures. Christmas of 1980 was a pivotal time in my life, and I am grateful that I received the true gifts of the season. My precious daughter, so eager to be happy, was amazed at the wonderful sights around our tree. My infant son, a blessing of hope, smiled at me every morning and gave me the determination to switch off the melodrama in my mind. The day before Christmas my husband was offered a professional job at an advertising agency in Boise, and we leaped from despair to profound joy. On Christmas Eve, I rocked both babies in my lap and sang them to sleep in heavenly peace. They never noticed my tears falling upon their sweet cheeks.

We moved to Boise and I found a job at Boise Cascade Corporation. I was promoted to manager and enjoyed a hectic life managing my career, caring for two children, and trying to keep my marriage together. I existed on less than five hours of sleep each night, and there wasn't any time for romance. While working full-time, I only earned two weeks of vacation each year. This was during the

1980s, flex-time wasn't available, and working mothers needed to prove they could do it all.

The relationship improved between my parents and my husband and me. We lived 100 miles away so visited several times a year. Our children enjoyed visiting the farms, and we never discussed the traumatic events of 1980. When we visited for one Thanksgiving meal, my father sat in surprised amazement as my uncle asked about my corporate job. I felt vindicated, even though we never discussed the fight or the eviction. "Talk about it" never happened in our family.

My father's health continued to deteriorate. Doctors determined he needed a liver and kidney transplant, so he was scheduled for tests at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. He was admitted and my mother stayed at a nearby apartment. Boise Cascade had an office in Minneapolis, so in March of 1988 I scheduled a business trip to see them. After my meetings, I drove a rental car to Rochester and found my parents. We took a slow walk outside and discussed small talk. Suddenly an alarm sounded on my father's beeper meaning organs were on the way.

Our eyes met, and that's the only time I detected fear. They rushed back into the hospital and I drove away to catch a plane back to Boise. That night he received a new liver and kidney from the victim of a motorcycle accident in California. Tragically, the doctors didn't detect a small cancer growing in the liver.

After the transplant, my father suffered for 15 months. My dutiful mother measured his daily medications, keeping regular charts and notes.

In the morning, he had Quinaglute, cyclosporine, prednisone, a multivitamin, Lasix, zyloprim, micronase, Tylenol and dolophine. At noon he took another antacid and quinaglute. Antacid, cyclosporine, Imuran, zyloprim, and iron. Additional drugs included amphojel, aldactone. fambocor, septra, lonoxin, and synkayvite. Their house resembled a pharmacy. Once a robust eater, he had no appetite. Often, he would wake in the middle of the night, ring the buzzer to my old bedroom where my mom slept, and request a casserole. She would make the food, take it to him, and he could only eat one bite. I don't know why they didn't hire a nurse to assist them. He never indicated how sick he was, and I regret not spending more time with him.

The medications weren't working because the cancer was undetected. He was weak, but determined to work, so he pulled himself upstairs to his office by holding onto the bannister. After suffering for 14 years from heart attacks, gout, liver damage, and other ailments, the final indignity was to buy organs for transplant and have one organ cause his death. The Mayo Clinic denied any responsibility because the cancer was too small to be detected before the transplant.

His death certificate lists the causes of death as ventricular standstill, hyperkalemia, renal failure, allograph rejection, cyclosporin toxicity, and adenocarcinoma metastatic to hepatic allograph. Ultimately, he died a painful death from liver cancer.

There was standing room only at his funeral. I wore a red and black dress, the colors he chose for his trucks and trailers. I gave the eulogy and recited the following poem:

To My Dad

I took a walk the other day,
Alone, about a mile or so;
That's when I heard the mourning dove,
And thought of home and long ago.
I saw a diesel truck you bought
Just over thirty years ago.
You drove the truck both day and night,
You swore you'd make the business go.
You added trucks and hired teams
And sent them out against the best.

Soon red and black and silver trucks
Rolled day and night throughout the West.
I saw a patch of sandy ground.
You added sprinklers, time, and sweat.
They said it couldn't grow a crop.
You shrugged and said, "Let's make a bet!"
And then I saw the thriving farms,
The endless crops, the healthy fields.
I knew the heavy harvest trucks
Would work all night to get their yields.

And next I saw the Sand Springs Ranch –
A haven owned by only two,
A refuge from the hectic pace,
A poor boy's dream at last come true.
I tasted water from the spring
And smelled the roses in the breeze
As cattle grazed on rolling hills

And hawks perched high on poplar trees.
I saw you talking in a field
Just gazing over barren land.

You had a plan, just one more time,
To grow a crop from sage and sand.
But then I heard the mourning dove,
Its melancholy sound was low.
It seemed to say it's time to rest,
The work is done, and you must go.
You turned and slowly disappeared.
You never saw me standing there.
And then I saw a single bird
Just soaring freely in the air,

Just like a spirit flying strong,
No limits on where it could go,
So full of warmth and free from pain,
Inspecting all its world below.
And as it mastered wind and sky,
I heard great music fill the air.
"Blue Danube Waltz" was loud and clear;
Then came a peace, beyond compare.
And then the bird began to leave
Toward the warm and rising sun

And all of heaven opened wide
And God Himself declared, "Well Done!"
Though I was left with memories,
There came a vision clear and true:
A lot was left to carry on,

Another day, with work to do.
Now when I hear a mourning dove
Or see a bird up in the sky,
I'll think of you, so far away.
Until we meet again–Good Bye.

CHAPTER NINE

How to Steal an Estate

My father thought he had secured the future of his complicated multi-million-dollar estate through an extensive plan that designated how his assets would be managed and distributed. He named my mother as Personal Representative with the admonishment that his wishes should be followed under the supervision of his estate attorney and certified professional accountant. Unfortunately, none of his plans were followed because my older brother, an attorney, thought he knew better and was smarter than anyone else. His duplicitous actions threatened to tear the family apart.

The first meetings began a month after dad's funeral. There were four of us to manage the companies: my mother, my older brother Tom, my younger brother George, and me. We met in the office of Norman Cooper, CPA, in Twin Falls. After wading through piles

of files and listening to confusing terms about Trust C and management agreements, Cooper proceeded to describe a Qualified Terminable Interest Property Trust, or Q-TIP. I scribbled notes to study later about how the Q-TIP provided a legal method for the surviving spouse to transfer funds and other assets into the trust and when the surviving spouse dies, the trust would then be distributed to any heirs.

Then Cooper distributed a thick packet of financial figures. The final amount left me speechless. The value of assets in my father's estate, including property, livestock, equipment, and money, had an approximate fair market value between $15 to $20 million dollars. After he became successful, my father purposely avoided any show of wealth. He wore inexpensive, baggy pants and owned a few favorite shirts that rotated weekly. His boots were well-worn and usually had flecks of mud and dust. He disliked a suit and tie and rarely dressed up for any occasion. But I'm convinced his humble demeanor and conservative spending contributed to his prosperity.

My mother wasn't aware of the total assets even though she signed the yearly tax statements. I suspect my brothers knew. George had worked for the companies since graduating from college, and after dad's death he managed both the farming operation and the trucking company. He was only 33 but proved his ability to make wise decisions. Over the years, my father kept him on a short leash and George often rebelled. Once, George left and said he wasn't coming back. My father convinced him to return, and he did. Even though he was proficient at his job, George never completely escaped the label of

"the boss' son."

Tom seemed acutely interested in Cooper's information and asked questions I didn't understand. I knew I had a lot to learn to keep pace with my brothers. Ironically, the three of us brought unique talents that could have helped the family business: George excelled at operations, Tom knew the legal and governmental regulations, and I was a professional with marketing and communications abilities. Yet those attributes weren't enough for us to cooperate; each one feared the other ones would receive a better deal. I agree with the statement that a person doesn't know another person until they share an inheritance.

During the summer of 1989, I drove 100 miles from Boise to southern Idaho several times for various meetings. I continued to work fulltime for Boise Cascade and balance the busy lives of my 11-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son. My husband was the vice president of a major advertising firm in Boise, and we often passed each other coming and going. I tried to keep up with the family business and monitor the well-being of my mother. She continued to live in the house in the country, but she had a wide network of friends.

Tom was employed at a law firm in Boise, but we never were close and rarely saw each other. His studious demeanor clashed with my extrovert commotion, and neither of us wanted to change. Younger brother George was affable, easy-going, and talented. Clearly, he was my parents' favorite child, and he deserved that designation. Tom and I had moved away and started careers while George moved home after college graduation and worked

for Dad.

The family meetings continued in Wendell with just the four of us. Many times, the conversation turned rancorous as Tom and I disagreed on management decisions. George usually kept quiet while Mom cried. She often remarked that "Neal was the lucky one." Tom continued to impose his opinions and began to make changes to the management agreements. He decided the company would pay for us to have new vehicles. How could I resist? Soon I was driving a new Jeep Wagoneer. The seduction was underway.

Tom became more bitter and combative with every meeting. One day he announced that he was quitting his job with the law firm in Boise and "sacrificing his profession" to move back to Wendell to manage the farms. In December of 1991, he finagled a legal quit-claim deed from Mom giving him 40 acres of land in a prime location overlooking the rolling fields and $350,000 in company funds to build a house. My younger brother and I didn't see the agreement until after it was signed. Tom also included an agreement that the company would pay his expenses and property taxes. No lawyers or accountants were involved in these documents.

Tom proceeded to build a mini-mansion: a two-story house with more than 5,200 square feet featuring a twisting staircase, dark walnut cabinetry, an ornate formal dining room, and a cavernous entryway with a grand piano no one knew how to play. Their master bathroom even had a bidet. It was the first bidet in Wendell, Idaho!

A reporter came from the *Twin Falls Times-News* to publish a feature about the elaborate landscaping around

the mini-mansion. The Japanese gardens featured iris, maples, ferns, Austrian pines, azaleas, rhododendrons, peonies, and flowering cherry trees. The gardens stretched to a tennis court no one used. I was never invited inside the house, but I read about the details from the newspaper article.

In 1989, we decided to buy a diner near the freeway exit ramp. The plain metal building didn't have windows nor design and was called Gerry's Diner. Mom wanted to own a restaurant, so the company purchased the property and we changed the name to FarmHouse Restaurant. A massive remodeling project added windows, a salad bar, new furniture, and a larger kitchen. Mom hired excellent employees and talented cooks. The chicken-fried steak became well-known, and FarmHouse was named Best Restaurant in the Country by a vote of long-haul truck drivers. The award was mentioned by news anchor Tom Brocaw on the NBC Nightly News from New York. The restaurant became a favorite attraction for travelers and local residents, and continued to be popular after Mom sold it.

I continued to drive to Wendell for family business meetings. I continued marketing and communications responsibilities through writing and publishing an employee newsletter, writing and producing a company brochure, and participating in financial dealings for the farms and distributing company. The tension between the four of us became unbearable.

"Stop coming," Tom said to me after one stressful meeting over finances. "You only cause trouble."

"I want to hire an outside accountant for the farms," I

replied. "I don't know where all the money is going."

"You wouldn't understand," he retorted.

"Tom, please," Mom said. "Why are you so mean to her?"

"This meeting is over," Tom announced. He gathered his papers and walked out. Mom cried.

We managed to keep the businesses going, despite the acrimony. By 1990, Montana Express and Ambrose Farms had more than 100 vehicles on the roads on any given day. George was managing Montana Express and supervised the fleet as the 55 trucks covered 600,000 miles each month. The trucks averaged about five miles per gallon, and the high cost of fuel cut into the profit margin. George ordered new Cummins engines that were 700 pounds lighter and increased the fuel efficiency. Twenty new trucks were ordered to comply with strict new emission standards that reduced air pollution. The older drivers were impressed with the new cabs.

"The dashboards look like control panels of a small aircraft," said Jack Packer. "I remember when we didn't have heaters or sleepers!"

"Now we can stand up in the sleeper compartment," exclaimed Ray Eberhard. "I don't need to go home!"

"I'll take the soft upholstery and adjustable seats," said Bessie Bowman, the female of the husband and wife team. "No more spilling my coffee on these gentle rides."

Montana Express established a terminal in Troutdale, Oregon, and purchased land near Sacramento, California, to install a 10,000-gallon diesel tank and truck stop, scale, and shower facilities for the drivers.

I continued to live in Boise but helped with

marketing activities for the companies. In 1991, I served on the entertainment committee for the annual Boise River Festival. I arranged for Montana Express to haul 20,000 pounds of giant rabbits, bears, and butterflies from a float company in California. The drivers enjoyed the assignment because animated bunnies were easier to unload than 100-pound sacks of sugar. Montana Express hauled the floats every summer for several years. I recorded their adventures in the monthly employee newsletter I wrote and published titled "Ambrose Action."

George and his wife Marti lived in the main house on Sand Springs Ranch. He wanted to move the trucking operation 30 miles closer to Twin Falls for better access to roads going south.

The four of us continued to meet and attempt a business atmosphere, but the discussions always became hostile. In an attempt to stop the fighting, we signed an agreement in April of 1993 that named Tom as Managing Partner, transferred $1.8 million in Montana Express stock to George, and distributed the shares of the farms, known as Sand Springs Ranch, equally to Tom, George, and me. Mom remained the Personal Representative of the estate. My mother agreed to everything my brothers said because they were the men.

Tom was only beginning to control the business and its finances. He hired his father-in-law to run the gas station, his mother-in-law to do bookkeeping for the farms, and gave his in-laws land from Ambrose Farms for a new house. Tom acquired 20 acres of land next to the gas station and opened a mobile home business. Soon the in-laws had a new home in the country and

high-paying jobs. Tom hired his stepson and gave him a company house. I was the only one who complained about the abuse of assets, but no one listened to me. In our family meetings, Tom's financial statements became more confusing, and I questioned several unauthorized expenditures.

"I'd like to see an accounting for how you received money to build your house," I said. "I think all four of us should have voted on that use of company funds."

"Mom agreed to the disbursement, so that makes two out of four. George isn't complaining," Tom said. "That puts you in the minority."

"What would Dad say to that?" I asked.

He reacted with anger and slammed his fist on the table.

"You didn't care about Dad," he retorted. "You always made him mad."

"Right now, I think he'd be in my minority corner," I countered.

George remained silent. Mom cried. This scene was repeated countless times for more than a year.

George grew discouraged with the scene in Wendell and decided to move Montana Express to Twin Falls. By 1994, the trucking company was operating 65 trucks traveling almost nine million miles each year through 11 western states. The annual payroll exceeded $3.3 million. George and Marti built a house in the country near Filer and moved away. He successfully operated the company and didn't participate in the operation of Ambrose Farms. For five consecutive years, his drivers won safety awards from the Idaho Motor Transport Association for driving

millions of miles without a major accident.

During the summer of 1995, only six years after dad's death, the financial statements were a mess. Tom had signed a multi-million-dollar contract for a company to build a state-of-the-art potato cellar south of town. The building could hold 280,000 sacks of potatoes and incorporated the latest technology with large pipes running beneath the potatoes and large fans to push air through the pipes to keep the spuds at a controlled temperature. I mentioned that the farms had done just fine with old-fashioned, in-ground cellars, but he wouldn't listen. Tom also ordered expensive new farm equipment and built a new scale house. My dad used to keep old equipment held together with wires and salvaged parts, but Tom was easily swayed by every equipment salesman who came through the door.

I discovered he had collateralized Sand Springs Ranch for more than two million dollars in personal loans. I hired an independent certified public accountant from Boise to go through the financial records, but Tom wouldn't allow him into the office, so the CPA returned to Boise. Tom knew I would not be quiet and allow him to continue to take all the money from the company. In desperation, he devised a plan to manipulate our mother into giving him control and ownership over Ambrose Farms and Sand Springs Ranch. I never anticipated the immense power or tragic consequences of his unethical behavior.

He wrote documents that allowed Mom, through her official role as Personal Representative of the A. Neal Ambrose Estate, to break and destroy Dad's will and trust

agreements. Tom gave her the documents when she was alone and she didn't have legal counsel or time to consult with anyone, including me.

In return for the deceitful acquisition of Ambrose Farms and Sand Springs Ranch, my brother offered two promissory notes. One note pledged to pay her $1.8 million dollars at 8% interest with the final payment ten years later in 2005. The note was collateralized by two mortgages of land my father had owned in Elmore County.

The second promissory note offered $3 million dollars, bearing no interest, that would be paid over 360 months beginning in 1997. This note allowed my brother to gain ownership of a multi-million-dollar estate in exchange for a promise to pay Mom $3 million, interest-free, for 30 years. The final payment would be due when she was 100 years old. Tom assumed she wouldn't live that long so the debt would be erased. Mom signed the agreement.

My younger brother George signed a similar buy-out agreement that removed his ownership of the farms in exchange for ownership of Montana Express. Obviously, my brothers had formed the agreements without my knowledge or participation. I was not informed of the agreements until several days later, after it was too late to contest the transactions.

Tom then sent me a certified letter informing me that I was a minority partner in Ambrose Farms and that Mom and George had sold their ownership rights. Tom wrote that as an owner I would be partially responsible for the million-dollar debts on the farms unless I also

sold out to him. I believed I had no choice. I accepted his offer to sell my interests in the family business in exchange for an interest-free annuity that paid monthly. Tom borrowed one million dollars against Sand Springs Ranch and bought my annuity.

In breaking my father's trust and estate agreements, my older brother also voided the Management Agreement for Sand Springs Ranch and Company. In that document, my father had named my younger brother George to be the managing partner. Also, a percentage of ownership and proceeds was designated for my cousin, Ron Ambrose, and a loyal employee, Ed Gulliford. These two men had helped my father maintain the farm's profitable operations. Once Tom took over, George, Ron, and Ed were no longer part of the agreement.

My children had loved Sand Springs Ranch; Emily lived there as a baby and Adam was conceived there. We returned often to tour the property, fish, ride horses, and feed the fish. As a young teenager, Adam loved to bring his friends to camp near the fresh water spring at the back of the property. One evening, he arrived with friends and set up camp. Tom appeared and began screaming at them to get off his property. The boys packed up and drove 100 miles home to Boise. Tom sent a scathing letter to my attorney demanding that my son (his only nephew) never set foot on the property again or he would be charged with criminal trespassing.

Tom's mismanagement of assets propelled the companies into bankruptcy. He had mortgaged our beautiful Sand Springs Ranch for more than four million dollars, and in desperation to acquire money, he listed the

ranch for sale. Sand Springs Ranch sold for $4.5 million plus realtor's fees. Tom profited only $100,000 after the transactions were settled. Several years later, the ranch sold again for almost nine million dollars.

Tom's next move was to sell the company's valuable water rights that my father had purchased during the 1960s. Still desperate for money, he sold farm equipment. According to one reliable source, he traded $100,000 worth of equipment on the Mayfield property in Elmore County to settle a $20,000 debt. The hired help hadn't been paid, so they quit. Other ranchers stepped in to save 750 cattle that were stranded in the snow. The multi-million-dollar potato cellar sold for a tiny fraction of the original cost and loan. Tom then sold the rest of the fertile farm ground to large dairy operations. Ambrose Farms and Sand Springs Ranch were systematically destroyed. He also stopped paying on the $4.8 million in promissory notes he had given our mother. He begged her to allow him to have a year's reprieve on his regular payments to her, saying my annuity was in jeopardy. That was a lie to sway her because my annuity was insured.

The community turned on him as employees lost jobs and assets were sold to pay off debts. He sold his mansion to a dairy man, moved his family to Oregon, and purchased a million-dollar, 6,000-square-foot home in an exclusive area near Portland. His wife insisted on opening a restaurant in the resort town of Seaside, so he bought another home there and established a high-end steak house. The Ambrosia Restaurant went out of business in less than a year.

With the companies in ruins, Tom sought part-time

work and found a position teaching two courses at Lewis and Clark Law School in Portland. Ironically, the courses were in family law. On his biography, he listed his experience in owning and operating a multi-million-dollar family agriculture business. The irony is bittersweet. He taught there only a few years.

The turmoil of the family business claimed another victim: my marriage. I had been consumed with the angst and stress of what was happening to my mother and the assets, and I tried to remove all the friction from my life. I filed for divorce in August of 1996 and my husband did not contest the divorce so we settled out of court. Our children were 18 and 15.

In September of 1996, I turned 45. My daughter moved away to another state to begin her freshman year of college. My divorce was final. I was forced out of the family business but gained a regular income. My 15-year-old son lived with me and kept me laughing. I bought land next to an alpine lake in McCall, Idaho and began to build a house to be my escape from family and personal drama. I had dreamed of such a place on the lake ever since my parents drove me to college in 1969.

In December 1996, Tom planned an elaborate Christmas celebration for all the employees of Ambrose Farms and Sand Springs Ranch. Some had known and adored my mother for more than 40 years, and many had helped my father establish and work for his businesses. Mom and I were not invited to the party.

Mom realized that she had been swindled by her own son. In June of 1997, she typed a letter stating that the contract between Tom and her had been "signed under

duress and that the facts were not explained." She wrote that he had threatened her if she didn't sign it. She added, "The only agreement I will ever sign with Tom will be in the presence of my attorney." She had the letter notarized and wanted to meet with our attorneys in Boise.

I took her to the offices of David McAnaney and we met with his assistant Janice Lawson. We explained the details for almost an hour, and Lawson decided to call Tom and ask him a few questions. She informed him at the beginning of the conversation that he was on speaker phone. Mom and I listened as Janice and my brother reviewed legal terms in the documents, promissory notes, and various agreements. At one point, Lawson questioned why Tom didn't insist on legal representation for his mother during the process. Tom was exasperated and irritated.

"She's a stupid old woman!" he snarled and ended the call.

I watched as my mother slumped in her chair. Lawson was speechless and tried to regain her composure. The anger that had boiled inside me for years burst forth in a string of expletives. I put my arms around my mother and held her as she sobbed on my shoulder. This woman had given away millions of dollars in assets to her firstborn son, and he only had contempt for her in return.

After the meeting in Boise, Mom drove 100 miles back to her home in Wendell. She turned at Mountain Home to drive through Camus Prairie to see the lilies in bloom. She got distracted and drove off the road, overcorrected, and plummeted into the sagebrush. Her car rolled several times, landing on its top and plowing

through the dirt and brush until stopping in the rocks.

I received a telephone call about the wreck, grabbed the files that contained details about her health insurance, medical instructions, and Do Not Resuscitate form, and drove south on Interstate 84. At one point, I was driving 100 miles per hour. I didn't have a mobile telephone, so I pulled over at a gas station near Mountain Home and called my brother George for the latest information. He said Mom was being flown by Life Flight helicopter to St. Alphonsus Hospital in Boise. I sped back on the north-bound lane to Boise and arrived as the helicopter was landing on the roof. In the first of multiple hospital scenes that would repeat over the following 17 years, I showed the files to the emergency room attendants and was ushered inside.

"Oh, God," was all I could say when I saw my mother on a bloody gurney in the emergency room. Her face was swollen and turning black and blue. The top of her head was a mess of blood, sagebrush, and cut glass. Though unconscious, she uttered a moan from the depth of her gut. She was taken away for x-rays, a cat scan, and surgery. I sat and waited.

I knew the attending minister at the hospital and called him for help. George arrived from southern Idaho, and we shared a brief reunion. The minister escorted us into a private room where we held hands and prayed. That was the only time I ever held my brother's hand and prayed with him. The doctors prepared us for the worst scenario: she was gravely injured and if she survived, she would probably suffer brain damage.

My older brother was notified but never called.

The next few days became a blur as I cared for my two teenagers, Emily was home from college for the summer, and stayed at the hospital with my mother. On one visit, I assured my mother as a nurse gently clean broken glass from her scalp. She was in and out of consciousness and restless. I talked with her, reassuring her she needed to slow down and take less drastic measures to get a new car. Doctors and nurses visited regularly, checking her progress and updating the diagnosis. She resented the constant noises and intrusions.

"Concentrate, Leona," one doctor said. "If you can move your fingers together, we'll move you from the intensive care to your own room."

I watched as my mother struggled for an hour to will her fingers to meet together. She did it and was moved to a semi-private room. The swelling in her face diminished and she could open her eyes. She asked for a mirror. I lied and said I didn't have one. She looked horrible, but she was alive. Tom visited briefly, stared at her, and left. He probably was hoping she would die so he didn't need to pay the millions he owed her. She lived anyway.

After Mom was discharged, George brought a medical bed to my house in Boise and she moved in with me. I tried to keep a positive routine as I monitored the kids, took care of her, and arranged for physical therapists and nurses to come to the house. After a month, I moved her to the house I had finished building in McCall. The first night in the new home on the lake, Mom slept in my bed and I slept on a sleeper sofa. She continued to gain strength, and the view of the lake inspired her. We sat on the deck every evening, and the kids joined us. It was

August 1997, a time to live again. By September she was well enough to move back to Wendell. I drove her home and a week later drove my daughter to college in Oregon. My son was a junior in high school, and his football games provided a welcome distraction.

By 2002, Tom had fallen $500,000 behind on payments owed on the $4.8 million promissory notes. My mother was hesitant, but I convinced her to take action to pursue what she was owed. Because of the complicated legal issues, our attorney recommended a larger legal firm and we obtained a new attorney named Richard Boardman of Perkins Coie. We began a two-year ordeal that included paperwork, investigations, claims and counterclaims, and depositions. Finally, our attorney called for a Summary Judgment and our case ended in an old courtroom in Mountain Home, Idaho.

The judge approved the motion for summary judgment after my mother wrote and signed the following statement:

AFFIDAVIT OF LEONA AMBROSE
IN SUPPORT OF MOTION
FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

7/28/2004

My late husband, Neal Ambrose, and I created, owned, operated and developed Ambrose Farms. At the time of Neal's untimely death in 1989, Ambrose Farms owned approximately 30,000 acres of land, owned over 1,000 head of cattle,

employed 100 people, and made a net profit of over one million dollars a year. In 1995 and 1996, my older son, Tom Ambrose, gave me documents to sign. These documents known as promissory notes were dated January 1, 1995 and July 5, 1996. When I signed these documents, I regret that I had no attorney present and my other two children were not present. Now Ambrose Farms no longer exists. Tom sold most of the land, equipment and cattle. Our faithful employees lost their jobs. There is nothing left but unpaid promissory notes.

CHAPTER TEN

Judgment Day

Leaves were falling on October 5, 2004 as my mother and I walked toward the old, imposing court house. Autumn always had been a favorite time for us; it was the season of harvest when farmers realized the fruits of their labors. Decades earlier, my grandmothers had gathered and gleaned the final bounties from their massive garden to prepare assembly lines over boiling pots as they canned vegetables and fruits for the winter. Residents in the village of Wendell planned activities and parades for the high school homecoming football game, one of the biggest events of the year. Geese squawked overhead as they pointed their way south. Thick coats appeared on cattle and horses and their breath was visible during the chilly mornings. Farm equipment and machinery was cleaned, inspected, and greased and moved into sheds and barns until spring planting. Of all the seasons, we

valued the fall most of all.

My mother believed the Biblical scripture that there was a time for everything, but she never anticipated going to court at age 77 because of a lawsuit with her first-born child. Her shoulders sagged as we approached the door, and I moved my arm around her. She seemed fragile and frightened, and I feared she would float away.

The court house smelled of old wood and wax. We noted the schedule of trials, and Mom cringed when she read the notice: Plaintiff, Leona Ambrose. Defendant, Tom Ambrose, Sand Springs Ranch. The lawyer for the Plaintiff, Leona Ambrose, was Richard C. Boardman from Perkins Coie in Boise. I was listed as the counterdefendant because my brother sued me in response to my mother's suit against him.

We found the waiting area outside the court room of District Court Judge Mike Wetherell as our attorney Richard Boardman joined us. He was tall and impressive in a tailored suit, and his presence brought comfort to my mother. He provided the male authority and assurance I could not give her.

We waited on a hard, wooden bench in the hall, and I fingered the ornate, curbed armrests worn smooth after decades of rubbing from the hands of anxious plaintiffs. Boardman sat next to Mom, speaking with a positive opinion that the case would go smoothly. My mother and I had never been to court before, and the experience was intimidating. I felt her hesitation; she seemed weak and tiny. For a moment, I considered taking her home to end the emotional pain, but I wanted justice for her. I was focused but reminded myself to behave in the court room

and refrain from interrupting the Defense Attorney.

When our case was called, I held Mom's arm and maneuvered us inside the courtroom. The judge's bench occupied the entire corner of the room and loomed about two feet higher than the rest of the furnishings. In front of the judge's platform were two wooden tables, one for the plaintiff and one for the defense. The clerk and court reporter sat to the side of the podium and a few people I didn't know sat in the gallery. The Defense Attorney took a chair at his table and that's when we realized my brother wasn't going to attend. I scoffed aloud and received a warning look from Boardman. A side door opened, an armed bailiff in uniform entered, and someone said, "All rise." I had to help my mother stand as the judge entered and took his seat. We dutifully sat, also. After preliminary remarks, he asked for our attorney to speak.

Boardman addressed the court and described how Tom had presented two promissory notes to his mother Leona Ambrose a few years after the death of our father Neal Ambrose. One dated January 1, 1995, was for $1,875,000 and required interest-only payments with a balloon settlement in ten years. The second promissory note was dated September 27, 1996, for $3 million and did not require payment of interest but involved monthly payments for 30 years. I smiled when I remembered that I once told my brother he clearly missed his calling as a consigliere for the mafia.

Boardman addressed the Judge and explained the reason for the Motion for Summary Judgment. By 2002 Tom Ambrose had been unable to maintain the payment schedule on the notes and the outstanding debt owed was

approximately $500,000. For collateral on the notes, he had promised mortgages on land in Elmore County once owned by my father, so my mother wanted to foreclose on those mortgages and receive the balance promised in the notes.

I bit my tongue to keep from muttering as Boardman explained how my brother had filed a counterclaim against me and presented unsubstantiated allegations that I had illegally acquired funds and stolen property from the estate. He did not provide any signed documents to prove his false accusations. In my opinion, he sued me to punish and intimidate me for helping our mother. I didn't have his legal knowledge, but I had the conviction and tenacity to challenge him in court. He didn't appear for the summary judgment but left the frantic mud-slinging to his attorney.

The Defense Attorney then addressed the Court and gave a rambling oratory that filled 30 pages of the 53-page transcript of the proceedings. Clearly unprepared but determined to throw miscellaneous and unrelated case studies at the Judge, he vacillated between contrite defendant and animated advocate for his client. At one point, he gave the ridiculous excuse that the statute of limitations had passed, so the debt wasn't real anymore. Then he seriously debated the different between a promise and an agreement.

"That doesn't say promissory note, that says agreement," he said. "And that's going to become important in our argument, Your Honor."

Then he said mom told Tom he didn't need to pay and could have a year's reprieve. The Defense Attorney

admitted he didn't have any signed documents to prove Mom had agreed to waive the payments.

That's when my mother started to react. Boardman had told us before going to court that we should remain silent, but Oberrecht's lies were too much for my mother. She started shaking her head, mouthing "No!" and then she started to weep. The Defense Attorney continued to throw out contrived excuses. When he plowed into a question about the wording of "even date hereof," the judge interrupted.

"Who prepared the documents?" the judge asked.

The Defense Attorney stammered, "I don't know the answer to that, Your Honor. I think that–well, I just don't know the answer to the question."

Obviously, Judge Wetherell realized my brother, an attorney, had prepared the documents, so it was silly to now claim the promissory notes had been misworded.

The judge then asked, "Do we know whether the documents were prepared at the instruction of Mr. Ambrose or at the instruction of Ms. Ambrose?" The judge was making it clear that he suspected my mother did not ask to be robbed by her first-born son.

The Defense Attorney again mumbled and replied: "I don't know the answer to that question." His starched white collar seemed too tight as his face reddened under an array of erupting splotches. With an ounce of pity, I assumed he didn't want to be known as the ruthless lawyer who wasn't prepared to defeat a weeping widow.

I thought about my older brother and pictured him during out childhood. He was almost two years older than I was but just a year ahead of me in school. We both

were student body officers and members of the Honor Society. He was intelligent, studious, and constantly shocked at my independent behavior. Once I ran out of the house after a fight with my father. Tom had a cast on his leg from a recent ACL surgery, but he hobbled and followed me as I marched two miles into town. He caught up to me and convinced me to return home.

Another time, my father gave me a ride home from school after a game. As we neared the country road out of town, I glanced over and thought I saw my brother walking home. He waved at us but I was too afraid to be wrong so I didn't say anything to my father and we drove past him. Tom walked the two miles home, and when he arrived he wasn't too happy with me.

"Why didn't you stop?" he asked.

"I didn't see you," I lied. The fear of making a mistake in front of my father was stronger than my compassion to give a ride to my brother.

Somehow over the next few years, my older brother lost that passion to make everything right. He was accepted into Harvard University and moved into an apartment with students who lived on trust funds. After graduating from Harvard with a degree in economics, he obtained a law degree from Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, Oregon. He married and had a son, and later divorced his wife to marry his secretary. Once a respected lawyer in Boise, after dad's death he drastically changed to became a person who could manipulate millions of dollars from his mother and sue his sister.

The Defense Attorney was getting desperate and began to toss out random, unrelated court cases. He said

there was an insufficient address on the document, and my mother's address was incorrect on the promissory notes. At that point, several people in the court room stifled laughs. My parents had been well-known throughout the area, and Leona Ambrose could be easily found and identified.

The judge raised his eyebrows but motioned for the defense to proceed. The Defense Attorney continued his weak case by taking a new tactic. My brother had given my mother a promissory note for $3 million, but he promised to pay it back in 30 years, so the current value, obviously, was not $3 million. I laughed out loud at that ridiculous remark but quickly recovered my composure so I wouldn't cause trouble.

The judge seemed irritated. "Did Mr. Ambrose file any tax returns in which there was imputed interest declared as income?"

"Don't know. Don't know that, Your Honor." The Defense Attorney looked deflated.

As a last-chance defense, the Defense Attorney stated that Tom attempted to make a payment of $49,999 on the past-due loans, but the check bounced. Tom claimed he didn't know money was not in his account. Again, I stifled a laugh. Boardman shot me another warning look.

The Defense Attorney noticed my scorn and decided to go after me. He mentioned that I had signed a "tolling agreement" admitting to my liability on an outdated financial document. The problem was, he could only produce an agreement that Tom had signed but I hadn't. In the transcripts, he asks the court to believe his client that there had been an agreement but it couldn't be

found. Not even a first-year lawyer would attempt that implausible defense.

The judge looked frustrated. "Ms. Ambrose took a three-million dollar note with no interest to be paid over time, and we are supposed to discount the amount that Ms. Ambrose has given to a current value from 30 years? Not a very good deal for her compared to everybody else, was it?"

At that point, the Defense Attorney made a motion to strike a paragraph from his client's affidavit. Apparently, the great legal mind had made a mistake when calculating discount interest payments. With that, the Defense Attorney sat down. I glared at him as my mother slumped beside me and quietly twisted the mother's ring on her finger. Years previously, my two brothers and I had pooled our money to buy it for her. She wore the ring until she died.

The ordeal had taken 90 minutes by the time Richard Boardman, our attorney, stood to speak to the judge. The Defense Attorney had fumbled for 90 minutes. Boardman methodically refuted his arguments in less than 20.

"In terms of the alleged agreement by my client to forbear for one year on the payments under the 1995 and 1996 note, there is no written agreement to that effect; number one major point."

The judge took notes. Several people in the audience leaned forward, eager to hear from our counsel. Mom nervously fingered her pearls. She had worn her favorite blue-and-white polka dot blouse and black knit pants because she wanted to make a good impression. Her eyes stopped watering as Boardman proceeded in dismantling

Tom's affidavit in response to the summary judgment.

On the Idaho statue of frauds allegation, Boardman was precise. "Tom is an experienced attorney, has been out of law school a lot longer than me. He knows what a statute of frauds is. He failed to comply with it."

I enjoyed watching the Defense Attorney squirm. They never anticipated Mom's suit would proceed and the judge would hear the Motion for Summary Judgment. Tom had wrongly assumed she would acquiesce to him because she never disagreed with the men in the family. He forgot I refused to adopt that discriminating family tradition.

Boardman then addressed the bounced check for almost $50,000, and the fact that he claimed he didn't know there were insufficient funds.

"Come on. I mean, above and beyond the man being an educated person, being an attorney, how many of us have accounts and float $50,000 on them and don't know that, oh, there might not be enough in that account to make good on that tender? Not unless you are a criminal you don't do that."

I suppressed the instant desire to jump and hug Boardman by the neck. I felt my blood pressure begin to drop, and I stopped clenching my fists. I patted Mom's knee. She was trembling. Boardman's next words shot like lasers.

"On the mutual mistake issue, this is truly an area where I believe Mr. Ambrose and the Defendants have manufactured facts."

What an elegant way to declare my brother and his attorney were liars. I momentarily considered becoming

a lawyer, but quickly decided I'd rather hire a good one such as Boardman.

Boardman criticized the defense's confusion about interest payments on a loan given without interest. "They want you to believe, Judge, that there was a mutual mistake on this $3 million note that specifically says there was no interest. The Defense Attorney argues: 'Well, we don't know whether it was principal.' Well, I don't know what else it could be if it isn't interest."

Boardman continued to address the judge with measured points to prove the case.

"The Defendants are trying to convince you to go outside of this note. In due respect, Judge, you can't do that. The note is not ambiguous. It is for $3 million. It is for the principal amount only. My client was nice enough to her son to not charge interest." The murmur from people in the gallery indicated others wondered how they could get $3 million dollars interest-free from a sweet widow.

With efficient articulation, Boardman continued. He called the statute of limitations claim a red herring. He was incredulous that the defense claimed they couldn't find the correct address for Leona Ambrose, the defendant's own mother. And he adamantly questioned the unproven claim against me.

"Mr. Ambrose can't come up with a written tolling agreement. The Defense Attorney makes the argument that: 'Well, he attests to the fact that there was an agreement.' To my mind, that simply ignores Idaho law."

Boardman concluded his comments with a direct plea to the Judge. "They have done a commendable job

of throwing everything, shooting every arrow they can at us. But when you finally do roll up your sleeves and work through all these agreements and the mortgages and the factual circumstances, you will come to one conclusion, that is, the defendants are in default, the promissory notes are valid, the mortgages are valid, and it's time to foreclose. It's that simple, Judge."

At that moment, I expected the ghost of Perry Mason to burst into the court room with a film crew and declare victory for the plaintiff. But the Defense Attorney wanted the last word and asked to be heard. Boardman objected. The judge said he had heard a significant amount of argument and that any further information was contained in the briefing material. The Defense Attorney didn't agree and demanded to add comments that weren't argument.

"It's manufactured evidence … it's extremely serious."

We all leaned forward for this new revelation. It turned out he was making another claim against me, probably at my brother's instructions. The Defense Attorney adamantly said that just because I never signed a tolling agreement with Tom didn't mean I really didn't sign it, so "there is no countervailing affidavit that she didn't sign one." The argument wouldn't pass a high school debate quiz.

At this point, after two hours of legal wrestling, it came down to my brother's attempt to blame me for everything. My mother started to cry again. She had taken the lies against her, but she couldn't stand the continued assault on me. I grabbed her hand and whispered, "It's okay." That's when she trembled and looked horrified. I

could tell by her expression and the faint odor she had wet her pants. My 77-year-old mother buried her face in her frail hands, and the sudden intensity of my rage frightened me. I scribbled a frantic note to our attorney, "Stop this!" He nodded, and when it was his turn to address the judge, he shortened his closing remarks to a brief but brilliant petition for justice. I watched as Judge Wetherell listened intently and glanced at my mother's anguished face. At that point, I knew the case could go either way, and I momentarily regretted convincing my mother to proceed with the lawsuit. What if we lost?

I closed my eyes and remembered an old black-and-white photograph of Tom and me sitting on the running board of our father's first 18-wheel truck. I was a toddler, and we were so cute. The truck had a refrigerated trailer full of frozen TV dinners. My dad had paused briefly to join us in the photograph and then shooed us into the yard so he could drive away. My father assumed his sacrifices and hard work would be rewarded with a better life for his family. I remembered the low rumble of the diesel engine as the truck drove away on another journey.

I opened my eyes when I heard the judge say there was no proof of manufactured evidence. Boardman motioned for dismissal, and the judge concluded the proceedings, saying he would respond with a ruling within a few days. I was emotionally drained and frustrated that I wasn't allowed to speak. I may not have had the intellect of my older brother, but I had words and the fearless power to use them.

I ushered my mother out of the court room to the restrooms. To add further indignity, the women's

restroom was occupied and locked, so I took her into the men's room. At first, she objected, but I looked and convinced her no one was inside the restroom. She gasped at the row of urinals but escaped into the one stall. I stood at the door, ready to prevent anyone from entering. She cleaned up as best she could and washed her hands in the old sink. The unbearable pain of the moment was broken when she insisted on applying lipstick. This brave, good woman had just been attacked in district court by her son's attorney but she wanted her lipstick. So right there in the men's room, she smeared the ruby-red color on her lips, adjusted her smile and walked out, carrying the courage and strength of all the warrior women who place on foot in front of the other in order to survive. I remain in awe of her resilience.

A few days later, Richard Boardman called with the verdict: We won the summary judgment. My mother was awarded $2 million plus our attorney fees of $60,000. The victory was bittersweet because the amount of my brother's promissory notes to her totaled more than $4.8 million. She would never receive the remaining $2.8 million, but at least she wasn't insolvent as he had left her. In my opinion, the entire experience exacerbated her declining health and ultimately led to her heartbreaking slide into dementia.

Tom eventually paid the money required but never again communicated with Mom or me. He never paid the remaining $2.8 million he owed her.

The summer after the courtroom drama, I convinced Mom to move away from the farm and buy a new home in Twin Falls. She had lived in the house east of

Wendell for 42 years, the last 16 as a widow by herself. We had a dumpster moved to the property as we sifted through items to keep, donate, or toss. She shed tears as we convinced her to part with unnecessary items: old magazines, my father's outdated medications, broken ornaments, half-finished craft projects, and dozens of cookbooks. By then, she was 78 and hadn't cooked a large meal for several years.

She refused to part with her Bibles. There were more than a dozen books, from embossed leather-bound editions with gold-leaf pages to large-print paperbacks. She had read each several times and underlined favorite passages in red or black ink. Several of her favorite scriptures were highlighted with bold markers and scattered stickers. She had been a good and faithful witness.

The process took weeks, but we moved her into her new home as we continued to clear the old one. She paid cash for the house and felt a new energy as we decided on drapes, landscaping, and cabinets in the garage. My daughter and I decorated the interior with new furniture and planned an open house. Guests came from miles away, and her new home was full of laughter. I hadn't seen her that happy in years. She looked radiant in a new purple jacket, black pants, and sensible shoes.

Unfortunately, she was manipulated into one final unscrupulous real estate transaction, and she didn't consult an attorney or tell my younger brother or me. At age 79, she sold the unique castle and 10 acres of land for $125,000, one-fourth of its value. To make it worse, the buyer's realtor talked her into carrying the contract. She

was almost 80 years old and would never live to see the final payment. After she named me her designated power of attorney over health care and finances, I wrote a stern letter to the buyers and suggested they pay off the note. I added that my father would not have been happy with their real estate coup against my mother. They finally paid, and the money was allocated for her future living expenses.

She lived alone in her new house for four years before the accidents started to happen. I noticed several new dents on her car and knew it was time to take away the keys. I finally had the opportunity after she drove her car into the back wall of her garage, slammed the car into reverse and hit the closing garage door behind her. The car was damaged on both ends, so I had it taken to the shop for repairs. That was the last time she drove. I kept telling her we were still "waiting for parts."

In 2009, we moved her to an assisted living facility in Boise to be closer to my grown children, her grandchildren, and me. She became frail, often falling in her room, and there were numerous ambulance trips to the hospital. A broken hip resulted in six weeks in a rehabilitation facility. She returned to rehab the following year with a broken back. Other falls resulted in staples in her head, bruises, and cuts. We made the decision to bring a wheelchair, and she reluctantly agreed to use it. She began a slow descent into dementia, and soon she couldn't remember our names. Her older son never visited, and eventually she stopped asking about him.

I hoped to jog her memory by surrounding her with familiar friends and sights. I moved her back to

the Wendell Manor in 2013. She seemed happy for a few months, but then became withdrawn. That's when she lost the quilt. I was 100 miles away and couldn't check on her every day, so I moved her, with the quilt, back to Boise.

My mother never fully recovered from the humiliating, excruciating experience in the court room. Ten years after the summary judgment, as her health deteriorated, she finally stopped eating and fell into a coma. As her designated power of attorney for health care, I consulted with Hospice staff and we decided to withhold artificial measures but to keep her comfortable in her transition. On November 1, 2014, my mother died at 87; frail, broken, and lost in dementia. The only fact that keeps me from screaming for vengeance is I believe she is laughing, dancing, and singing with angels in the glorious light of her Lord.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Book of Leona

My mother was dying. Her breathing had changed over the past few days; irregular, pausing only to alarm us, then continuing with a raspy rattle. My daughter and I sat beside her bed and held her hand, limp and translucent, as Tennessee Ernie Ford sang about peace in the valley. Gentle hospice workers came silently during her last week to shift her body and dab a damp sponge on her lips. Though they didn't know her, they treated her with the dignity and grace she deserved.

Outside her room at the assisted living facility, other residents shuffled by, some with walkers, as silent sentinels in the last act of the drama of life. After 87 years, my mother's body and mind were gone, except for her strong heart. We could do nothing but wait.

I met many wonderful people who worked at Mom's various homes and rehabilitation centers. They did

the jobs others don't want to do: showered old people, changed adult diapers, fed the feeble ones. They became the family when the real family stopped visiting. Most of the facilities had regular activities and the residents enjoyed group outings, visits from entertainers and craft projects. But many of them lived their last years in quiet and lonely resignation.

It's often easier to show compassion and charity to worthy causes that include children, pets, and natural disasters. It's not as appealing to help elderly people, but they are the old souls, the ones who worked to build our country, fought in World War II, and faced a steep learning curve as technology during their lifetimes introduced airplane flight, Interstate highways, television, computers, and cell phones. In simpler times, they danced to jazz, Sinatra, and Glenn Miller. Now, they leave the light on in hopes their adult children will visit.

During my mother's last years, before she slipped into dementia, her once-busy calendar was reduced to simple entries: shower on Tuesday and Friday, hair appointment on Thursday and church on Sunday. I watched the spark grow dim in her eyes, and I wept for the proud woman who once worked in the fields, held several jobs as she raised her children, and dutifully supported my father's ambitious businesses. When she no longer remembered my name, I added more family photographs on her tiny dresser. "Don't forget us," I whispered. But it was too late.

She stopped eating during the third week of October 2014. After decades of physical and mental suffering, she used her last bit of control to decide her destiny. She wanted to go home and find peace in the valley. After she

refused to eat and became too weak to get out of bed, I consulted with the gentle people from Hospice. As her designated power of attorney over health care, I followed Mom's wishes to withhold life-saving measures. She rested beneath her hand-stitched quilt as kind people swabbed her mouth with damp cloth, and we played her favorite spiritual music.

After several days, her breathing became raspy but she heart was too strong to stop. One afternoon my daughter Emily and I were sitting with her when we were visited by the senior minister from the Center for Spiritual Living, the church my daughter attended. She asked if we could pray together, and we agreed.

"She's refusing to go because she's still waiting for my older brother to come," I said. "He's not coming. He hasn't visited her in twenty years."

The minister motioned for me to follow her into the hall.

"Your mother senses your moods," she said. "She doesn't want you to remain angry."

At first, I resented her remark. She didn't know Mom or me, and our story was too complicated and painful to explain in the hallway as she was dying. But, I was struck by her words: "She doesn't want you to remain angry." Of course, my mother would want me to be happy. So, I decided to lie to her.

We returned to her bedside, and I knelt to hold her. I said clearly, "This is Elaine. Everyone is happy. Tom is fine. George is doing well. Your grandkids and I are happy, and we love you so much. Now it's time to be with Dad. It's time to let go."

She passed away a few hours later, leaving a wound in my heart that will never heal. Someday I hope to see her presence again. I suspect she'll say, "I knew you were lying, but that's okay. Now, please get your hair out of your face." Then we'll laugh.

As mom's designated power of attorney, I had the duty to make the final arrangements for her funeral. Her passing brought a wide range of feelings, from relief to sorrow, but I knew she would want to look her best for the last viewing.

"What do you want her to wear?" the gentle woman from Hospice asked as she took notes.

"The nice robe," I answered. "With the pearl necklace." The woman stopped writing and peered at me, unsure of what I had suggested. "You want her buried in a robe?"

So, I told her why. In 1969, my father traveled to Japan on a business trip and brought back an elegant silk robe as a gift for my mother. They had been high school sweethearts; he was the gregarious student body president and she was the timid valedictorian. He wasn't one for giving gifts, and she wasn't comfortable accepting them.

Over the past 45 years, I have asked her why she never wore the robe, and her answer always was the same: "It's too nice."

That's how she lived, protecting special objects in her life that she never felt worthy enough to enjoy. She never burned the fancy candles so they melted in storage. The good china dishes and silverware only came out at Thanksgiving and Christmas. And she saved and reread every birthday and holiday card she ever received. (I have

inherited this trait, and it's a tough one to break.)

To arrange for her service, my to-do list was filled with complicated assignments. How do I get the headstone engraved? It's been waiting at my father's grave since 1989. How do I condense her amazing life into a 300-word obituary? Should I request that in lieu of flowers, people can contribute to the scholarship she established at the University of Idaho? The donation would be nice, but she also would love the flowers. She'd say she didn't deserve them and they were too nice, but she would love flowers. The only easy decision I had to make was what she would wear for her final outfit. I had the robe professionally cleaned and ready.

She wore the nice robe for the first time at her funeral service. And she wore pearls. She always wore pearls, even with her favorite cozy sweatshirts ordered from the Country Living catalog. She was beautiful. At the end of the service, bright sunlight broke through the clouds and shined through stained glass windows she had commissioned for the church years earlier. Light filled the sanctuary, and we felt at peace.

My mother passed away on a cool but clear November morning. My children, her legacy, delivered her eulogy at the funeral. I continued to sort through all the articles she left behind, including several well-worn Bibles full of underlined passages and colorful stickers. Even in death, she made me smile.

After the funeral, the mortician handed me a small velvet pouch that contained my mother's jewelry: her favorite poinsettia earrings, a pearl necklace, and two rings. The first ring was a wedding ring my father gave

her after she lost the original while working on the potato harvester. The second ring was her mother's ring, which she wore for 50 years. She often fingered it with tears in her eyes.

My brothers and I gave her the ring decades ago when we were young, all lived at home, and still spoke to each other. I still have trouble breathing when I remember the years of strife and the painful courtroom scene. The judge ruled in her favor, but the damage was done. Our family was shattered beyond repair.

My older brother never visited our mother after losing the lawsuit, and he didn't attend her funeral. His birthday was in January, the first birthstone in the Mother's Ring. It's a cold month.

The velvet pouch sat on the buffet table in my kitchen for two months and remained there when 24 people joyfully arrived for Christmas Eve dinner. No one moved it, not even the children. The bag held the last personal belongings of our mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, and it seemed almost irreverent to examine the only tangible things of value that remained after 87 years of life.

After the new year, I finally opened the velvet bag and placed the rings in a container of jewelry cleaner. I left the necklace and earrings inside, tied the pouch, and placed it in a donation box. I hope someone will be pleased to wear the items.

The two rings have been professionally cleaned and are stored in jewelry boxes. I'm saving her wedding ring for my daughter and her daughter. As for the Mother's Ring, I hope to meet a woman who had babies in January,

September, and October, and I'll give it to her. This ring deserves and needs to be celebrated.

Mom was conservative, and chose to support her church instead of buying lavish gifts for herself. Several years ago, she commissioned and helped design a two-story wall of stained glass windows for the new Living Waters Presbyterian Church in Wendell. A prominent member of the church objected to her chosen design because it included a rainbow and, as everyone knows, that could endorse the "gay rights agenda." My mother remarked, "The rainbow was good enough for Noah, so it's good enough for me."

The rainbow design was enlarged and the magnificent windows were carefully installed in the sanctuary. On certain hours of the morning, the sun shined through so brilliantly that some people in the congregation needed to wear sunglasses. The person who objected to the design moved away, but we hoped someday she could witness a spectacular rainbow and be humbled and thankful. No agenda would be necessary.

Mom didn't want or need to support or condemn the gay lifestyle or any lifestyle, for that matter. Instead, she chose to follow the teaching of Jesus and endorsed his commandment to "Love one another." Her worn-out Bibles were covered with underlined verses, mostly about love and grace. A favorite passage came from the book of Hebrews in the Old Testament: "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters." She followed that advice, often to her own peril as people took advantage of her generosity.

Holidays continued to be the most difficult times

without my mother. To make Thanksgiving less painful, I decided to think of funny things she used to do before dementia took her away. Turkey pudding came to mind. My mother overcooked the Thanksgiving turkey for two days. For some reason, she thought she was a pilgrim doing a slow-roast over a pit behind the covered wagon so she set the bird in the oven before midnight on low heat and basted it every hour. As a result, she was tired by dinner the next day and the turkey had lost all its shape as the butterball morphed into turkey pudding hanging off the carcass.

I often accused Mom of sinking the gravy boat. Because the turkey took all the space in the oven, she cooked the green bean casserole, the potatoes, the gravy, and the stuffing on the stove–all at the same time. She wrapped bread rolls in tin foil and stuffed them around the turkey until they hardened into crusty dough balls. When the gravy was thick enough to stand on its own without a pan, it was time to eat.

Mom thought there should be a dessert per person, and death by sugar was an unfortunate side effect. If a dozen guests were coming for dinner, there would be at least four pies, four cakes, and four platters of fudge. Pants and belts were adjusted accordingly.

She required real whipped cream on the pies, so she would aggressively operate her trusty hand mixer like a frantic high-speed drill until the cream was two seconds shy of becoming real butter. She wore a festive, handmade apron over her best appliqued sweatshirt, so she resembled a jolly, plump elf scurrying about the kitchen.

My mom loved my aunt's sweet potato pie and assumed it was a healthy dish because it used a vegetable, despite the butter, brown sugar, pecans, and marshmallow sauce. She would sneak a bowl for herself and hide it behind the pickles in the back of the refrigerator. She later grinned with delight about her sneaky accomplishment.

Like a dutiful drill sergeant, she organized the girls and women-folk to hand-wash all the dishes after the meal while the men meandered to the living room to pat their bellies and watch football. She took great pride in dividing leftovers into equal portions and filling Tupperware containers and Corningware dishes for guests to take home. To ensure her items were returned, she used fingernail polish to paint her initials on all the containers. I now have stacks of dishes sporting faded red initials "LA."

That first Thanksgiving without her, the family came together to toast the holiday and give thanks for our abundant blessings. Some things remained the same: commotion came from the children's table, the men wrestled for the last turkey leg, and I declared that red wine goes with turkey–and everything else. The most noticeable difference was the empty chair at the table. I toasted a Happy Thanksgiving to Mom and promised to sneak a bowl of sweet potatoes for her.

We managed to survive the first year of other holidays without her. I deliberately walked past the festive displays of Mother's Day cards and ignored the advertisements for flowers, and I tuned out the hype and the obligatory admonishments to do something, anything, for Mother. Because she died.

Experience taught me that time erases the sadness. Sometimes I forget my father's birthday. After almost three decades, I don't remember the sound of his voice. On Father's Day, I send cards to my son and son-in-law and give a small present to my husband, and I'm grateful for my honored role as mother and grandmother. Now I have the new title of matriarch. The cycle of life isn't new; babies are born and people die. I accept that. But I don't know why some people suffer so much and others get to die peacefully in their sleep. Both my parents spent their last years in physical and mental pain, and I couldn't do anything to ease their transition. Because of the visions of my parents lying ashen and twisted in their beds, when I'm too feeble to live with dignity, I intend to have a grand party before I exit this life and explore what is beyond.

After a parent dies, there are the usual regrets from those still living. I should have visited Mom more often. Every time I got up to leave, she would clutch my hand and beg me to stay. I should have played her favorite music, opened her scrapbooks, and patiently listened as she attempted to say words she couldn't remember. I should have combed her hair again and brought her costume jewelry. I should have stayed longer.

The guilt consumes me every time I drive past her former assisted living facility. She lived in three rooms, progressing from resident to assisted living to terminal. Instead of a child passing onward to higher grades in school, she was going backwards with every physical and mental collapse. I used to cry in my car before and after every visit. I should have stayed longer.

I saved a wreath from her funeral. The flowers were

dried and brittle, but I took it to her grave on Mother's Day. I returned again a week later on her birthday. I won't forget the date. It's May 20.

The mail box continued to bring memories of Mom years after she died as I tried to cancel her 53 magazine subscriptions. A few years before she died, I visited my mother in her assisted living facility. She was sitting in her wheelchair looking at a copy of *ESPN* magazine.

"Studying for the Super Bowl?" I asked.

"No," she responded. "I don't like sports."

I noticed the stack of magazines on her table. *Forbes*. *Men's Health*. *Ebony*. *Jet*. *Yoga Today*. *Elle*.

"Have you been taking your medications, Mom?" I asked, wondering about her sudden interest in all things young and masculine.

"I don't like those magazines," she answered. "I'm waiting for my prize."

She wheeled over to her dresser and pulled out a large envelope stuffed with "official" letters and postcards from the Office of the Senior Vice President of a well-known clearing house announcing that she was in the Winners Circle! Yes, she only had a limited time to return the card with the Official Authorization Code to be eligible to collect her millions in prizes! But the time-sensitive message was urgent!

"The next step is up to you!" screamed the bold text highlighted in bright yellow. "You could be just days away from winning! Respond today!" And, of course, Mom thought that it wouldn't hurt to subscribe to some of these magazines.

She had dutifully written notes on each and every

letter: day received, amount of check enclosed, day check mailed. She already had subscribed to most of the women's magazines, including *Cooking* (she didn't have a kitchen) and *Oprah* (empowerment had never been part of her lifestyle). I tallied up the orders, and she had paid for 53 magazine subscriptions, some of them until 2016. And there was no Prize Patrol pounding on her door.

My mother wasn't stupid, just frail. She was a Depression-era woman who knew the value of a penny, and 30 years ago she helped my father manage several large businesses. In her defense, I know that she grew up in a time when women took oaths to "obey," and they believed every official-looking document they received. The evil hucksters disguised as clever marketers know how to manipulate these innocent people, but the fraud they're committing against the elderly should be labeled a criminal offense.

Canceling the subscriptions became almost as difficult as winning anything. Before she passed away, I considered staging an event to have some people show up at her door with balloons and a big (worthless) check. I really wanted her to get a prize.

Through my online blogs and speeches, I advised my middle-aged friends and associates who were acting as care givers for their aging parents. I told them to monitor any spending on subscriptions, and gently suggest that it's O.K. to have a few magazines. If the parent was intent on submitting an entry in any contest, I reminded them to show the small print that says it's not necessary to buy more in order to qualify for any prizes. As a last resort, I suggested to mention how many trees are being wasted

to make the publications.

Magazines continued to come long after my mother had passed away. The tractor catalog is still addressed to my mother in care of my parents' farming company that went out of business 20 years ago. Obviously, no one in my family needs any agriculture equipment to use for spring planting. I could have purchased a trowel to set some petunias, but that's all.

After Mom died, I spent years going though boxes of her possessions. She kept thousands of photographs, and I wanted to look at each one. I was intrigued by the grainy, black-and-white photographs from 1946, free from decades of bondage among hundreds of photos in my mother's leather albums. I picked up the images and stared at my parents and strained to imagine the young couple in love.

My father stood in his Army fatigues in front of a row of tanks in Japan. While he served overseas after World War II, his wallet contained the photo of my mother in a swimming suit. My earliest images of her are quite different. I remember her in a large flowered dress, waving to me with plump arms while admonishing me to "be good" because my father was coming home from work. I'm amazed that she once was a charming young woman, smiling to her fiancé, wearing a bathing suit in front of a flower garden. I wish I had known her then.

Another photo from 1948 was a self-portrait, taken long before instant selfies were available on cellular telephones. Their young innocence intrigues me. I imagine my mother sewing linens for her hope chest while listening to the Glenn Miller Orchestra on the

radio. I see my father coaxing an old tractor to complete one more row in the field before dark. They married on a cool day in late November 1948 with nothing but determination and grit. The years brought prosperity and heartache.

I never saw them hug and kiss. I guess the stress of several businesses and bad health depleted their romantic energy. For several years, my father lived in another state during the week, where he operated a trucking business. Every year, Dad would give me money to buy Mom presents for Christmas and other special occasions. She would always buy him a patio lounge chair for Father's Day. The fabric rotted, unused, in the sun.

Of all the faded photos I've examined, none were as profound as the ones of the young couple in love. That's how I chose to remember them. They were beautiful, before the trauma and drama of life cheated them out of growing old together. I wanted them to know their legacy was strong, and lived on through their amazing grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

My mother is never far from my thoughts. In the silent expectation of dawn, just before the first slice of silver reveals the horizon of a new day, a slight breeze moves through the pine trees in my yard. The brief rustle of branches releases a faint smell of long-past adventures in summer mountains and stirs the chimes that hang in the arbor. I look upward and smile at the memory of my mother Leona Ambrose.

Her morning ritual remained the same for twenty years. She woke early, and slowly walked down the lane to retrieve the newspaper. Her breath came in puffs as she

tugged her sweater closer against the chill and gazed at the stars before they faded behind the emerging sunlight. Back inside, she turned on her radio, sometimes she listened to the farm report or else to gentle sounds from the 1940s. She fixed some toast, sipped coffee, read the paper. She did this every morning by herself.

Widowed for two decades, she forgot how it sounded to be greeted every day, to feel the touch of someone else in the house, to hear her husband ask for more coffee. Even though her schedule was full of volunteer activities and various appointments, she never got used to the loneliness. Her regular companions were the ticking clock over the mantel, the cooing mourning doves outside the window, and the pleasant voice on the radio telling her to have a nice day.

I finally convinced her to move into an assisted living facility because she had endured too many serious falls, too many minor car accidents, and a growing number of health issues. On the last morning before the move, she lingered outside on her morning walk and noticed a warm breeze meandering through the trees, as if to say farewell. She nodded and went inside.

Years later, after moving six times to various assisted living facilities in Wendell and Boise and two rehabilitation hospitals in Meridian, she was too tired to get out of bed. Not even her favorite sweatshirts and pearls could tempt her to get dressed. Finally, she knew it was time to go and she stopped eating. She died in her bed beneath her favorite quilt. Outside her window, a sudden wind tossed the tree limbs, and the leaves floated to the ground.

Two weeks later, I woke earlier than usual, dressed, and stepped outside. The stars were still bright as I walked to get the newspaper. I turned to go back and a fresh gust of wind tickled the chimes. "Good morning, Mom," I said, beginning my own ritual of greeting her in the morning. "Let's have a nice day."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Finding Warmth

My first family consisted of parents and three siblings living together in Wendell. During my childhood, I knew we didn't qualify for the perfect home as described in my Sunday School classes, but I never imagined the family would be forever fractured through the suicidal destruction and demise of Ambrose Farms, Sand Springs Ranch, Ambrose Distributing, and Montana Express. The legacy and name of that family is one of loss and squandered inheritance, and what remains is useless as the mystery ingredients of those old TV dinners - cold, unwanted, and without value.

With my family in shambles and divorced, I charted a course for survival in 2008 and focused on writing. I sold my lake house for a substantial profit and moved back to Eagle, Idaho. I received a publishing contract from Adams Media to write *Menopause Sucks* and formed my

own publishing company called Mill Park Publishing. I continued to write books and publish books for other women, producing 14 books in five years.

Using proceeds from the sale of my McCall house, I built a cabin in Garden Valley, Idaho and organized writers' retreats with faculty that included Pulitzer Prize Winner Anthony Doerr and New York Times bestselling authors A.K. Turner and Jennifer Basye Sander. I immersed myself in the Boise writing community and became a founding member of the Idaho Writers Guild.

I fulfilled my childhood dream to travel and succeeded in finding myself. As a girl reading my grandparents' National Geographic magazines, I promised myself I would travel the world. I kept that promise and enjoyed the good fortune to visit 32 countries. The various travel adventures included the most splendid, inspirational, and heartbreaking experiences: I saw the Jade Buddha in Thailand, hiked across the Haleakala Crater in Maui, Hawaii, and cried at Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany.

I dined on the second floor of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, bought wooden shoes in Holland, cruised the Caribbean, watched a leopard drag a deer up a tree while on safari in South Africa, and climbed to the top of the dome at the Vatican in Rome. I wrote a poem in Ireland, ate bird's nest soup in Hong Kong, snorkeled at night off the British Virgin Islands, floundered on chocolate in Switzerland, photographed the ruins at Pompei, and drove with my daughter through Spain to the Mediterranean Coast. Favorite memories include standing in Mass at the Duomo in Florence, riding a zip

line through the jungle in Costa Rica, and golfing at a remote resort overlooking the Sea of Cortez. Throughout the long and winding roads, I relished the journey but always returned home to Idaho.

My dreams of travel were interrupted as I worked fulltime, married, and had children. Finally, I jumped at the chance to return to Europe in 1995 as a chaperone for my daughter's high school trip to Europe. In my school days, a class trip meant we were going in an old school bus to Boise, the state capitol. The following generation improved upon that goal as raised funds to travel overseas. Much to my daughter's chagrin, I went, too. We enjoyed adventures in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, England, and France. I received a reduced rate because I was a chaperone, and that planted an idea for how to continue to travel. I would find a way to help pay for each trip. After my children were grown and had moved away from home, I had more time to travel.

More traveling opportunities came when I served on the volunteer board of the University of Idaho Alumni Association. After being elected national president, I qualified to host alumni trips. I was more than pleased to entertain jolly groups of alums on excursions to Ireland and Spain. My transportation and accommodations were paid for by the educational group in charge of the tours.

Another less expensive way to travel was to join an organized tour. In the year 2000, I found an opportunity to join a tour that was circling the world and included a visit to the Taj Mahal in India. We flew out of Los Angeles, California, and landed 18 hours later in Bangkok, Thailand. From there, we toured Hong Kong

and Nepal, staying in a tented camp at Tiger Tops. On that trip, I sat cramped in a tiny, old airplane beside the Himalayan Mountains, rode in an ox cart across a river full of crocodiles, travelled on a camel in a street market, and rode on the back of a bull elephant and watched a tiger kill a water buffalo in Nepal. The trip continued to India where I saw the Taj Mahal in Agra. We ended the round-the-world trip in a pub in London before flying back to the USA.

It was a childhood dream to see the pyramids so in the spring of 2001, I signed up to go on a Vantage Tour of Egypt. It wasn't 5-star, but I enjoyed the incredible experience of walking into tombs in the Valley of the Kings, floating on a barge down the Nile River to Abu Simbal, and touching the Great Pyramids of Giza. As we floated past the countryside, I remembered the poem I wrote decades before about the endless river. Never in my wildest dreams did I consider someday I would be on the Nile. The group toured the Luxor Temple, and I marveled at the carvings on walls that were more than 4,000 years old. For souvenirs, I brought home scrolls of artwork painted on parchment.

I also discovered a joy for cooking, much to the frustration of my children who grew up eating hamburgers and chicken nuggets. I found a company out of Washington State called A Cook's Tour, and signed up for a cooking tour of Tuscany. That trip remains one of the highlights of my life. The group stayed in an ancient villa near Verona and toured Cinque Terra, Sam Gimignano, Sienna, and Modena. We took classes from expert chefs and ate our meals outside on long tables set

up in orchards. We found hidden wineries and sampled delicious wines served with crusty bread and cheese. We only spoke a few words of Italian, but we shared a universal love for good food and wine.

The second Cook's Tour excursion was to South Africa. We saw the cell on Robben Island, a rock quarry off the coast of Cape Town, where Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for 27 years. We enjoyed cooking classes with local chefs who taught us how to use spices to enhance a cuisine influenced by early traders traveling around the cape. We visited a shanty town where local women were making candle holders out of cut glass. Then we journeyed inland to a safari camp and stayed in a tent as armed guards patrolled the grounds.

A return trip to Italy took our tour group to Rome, Florence, and north to Bolzano and the Dolomites. We were in Portofino on September 11, 2001, and terrified by the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. I purchased a carved statue of St. Christopher in Bolzano and carried it home two weeks later.

My mother had a dream to travel Canada by railcar, so she took her friend, my daughter, and me on a 12-day excursion from Toronto to Vancouver. The views and camaraderie were wonderful, but my daughter and I agreed that a 3-day trip would have been fine. She was 22 years old and loved her grandmother but was eager to see Vancouver come into view on the last day of the trip.

Mexico was another favorite destination, but I never stayed in dangerous areas and preferred the resorts in Cabo and Loreto. My daughter lived in Guanajuato on a student exchange in college, and I visited her once to

enjoy the sights, the flower market, the Cathedral, and worry about her apartment because she didn't have a stove or refrigerator. We all survived.

My home state of Idaho offered abundant adventures. I've enjoyed a week-long float trip down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, riding a snowmobile to the top of Scott Mountain near Garden Valley, waterskiing at Twin Lakes in Northern Idaho, and hiking in Harriman State Park in Eastern Idaho. As I neared my sixth decade of life, I was getting slower and preferred the comforts of home, but I continued to look through the next travel catalog. Freedom came with the next excursion.

By age 57, I was resolved to remain alone. I didn't consider dating until February 2009 when my neighbor asked me to go to dinner with her husband and their friend who was visiting from Texas. I liked to eat, so I agreed. I was introduced to Ken McKay, and the four of us drove to Chandlers, a high-end steak house in downtown Boise. Ken and I were immediately attracted to each other and were holding hands by dessert. The first time he visited my home, I dashed inside to remove a picture hanging on the wall. It was a copy of my "Endless River" poem with my age and the date it was published. He didn't know how old I was, and the information would have told him I was five years older. I had imagined him seeing the poem and muttering that it was time for him to go. We laughed about it later because it didn't matter.

We enjoyed a nine-month, long-distance relationship before he found a job and moved to Idaho that November. He became my rock, the yin to my yang, the one who understood me and still adored me

anyway. We were married on the Greek Island of Paros and enjoyed an authentic ancient Greek wedding and reception, complete with a one-eyed musician playing a goat bladder. I remember laughing out loud with a joyful noise to celebrate a splendid new chance at happiness.

Ken and I were born in September, so I organized fun birthday celebrations every year on the patio. One party featured a karaoke disc jockey with all the equipment necessary for raucous renditions of songs that never will never be included on a nationwide talent show. At the end of the party, my children Emily and Adam took the microphone and sang my favorite tunes from Broadway musicals. I had never received a better birthday gift.

After the guests had gone home, Ken and I sat outside with our grown children to share a bottle of wine and talk about life.

"Did you hear from your older brother?" Emily asked.

"No, I haven't seen or talked with him for more than twenty years," I responded. "I mentally divorced him long ago."

"I felt so sorry for Grandma Sweetie," Emily said. "She still waited for him to visit."

"I'll never forget when he screamed at my friends and me for camping at Sand Springs Ranch," Adam said.

"Then he sent a formal letter to my attorney threatening to sue you for trespassing," I said. "Not exactly Uncle of the Year."

We laughed and moved to other, more important topics. After all the rancor and stress of my childhood family relationships, I was grateful my children were close. One, a liberal, and the other, a conservative, chose

to set political differences aside to respect and love each other. Their families often planned activities together and traveled on summer vacations. I felt a need to pick up the little girl with her broken arm in a sling and tell her, "See. Your life was glorious beyond your wildest imagination."

Flashbacks of emotional pain occasionally intruded into my new and improved life when insecurities interrupted my positive attitude. In 2015, I traveled to a conference in Nashville to speak to a national gathering of women bloggers. I smiled with assurance and prepared to meet, greet, and tweet. Then I noticed the conference sponsor — a frozen food company introducing a new product — and my self-confidence disappeared. A small child stood in my place.

As this little girl, I felt the business clothes hang loosely on my youthful frame and my small feet wobble in the heeled shoes. I stared at the compact packages of frozen meals as the stage and podium turned into the cold dining room from my past. I fingered my hair to check for ragged bangs and tugged on my skirt so it wouldn't be too short. Again, I was a sad child in need of comfort food that never came.

I envisioned my childhood while eating frozen dinners on disposable aluminum trays that provided exact portions of mixed vegetables, a meat concoction, manufactured potatoes, and bland apple crisp or a meek cherry cobbler. I saw my father, the stern, successful workaholic who built a trucking empire hauling frozen food and TV dinners throughout the Northwest.

My mother dutifully heated and handed the aluminum trays to her children, and we ate in silence.

As a stubborn girl, I defied the orderly presentation and pushed the wrinkled peas into the potatoes and plopped the dessert onto the meat. It all tasted the same, anyway. As we consumed our meal, I wondered how it would be to live in a place of warmth, peace, and laughter. I longed for a hearty homemade meal shared with a happy family, so I made it my mission to have that scenario.

My story began as a child sitting silently around a table in a cold room, chilled from within, following a predictable pattern that would repeat for years. As a young girl, I vowed to someday come in from the cold when I had a family of my own. Decades later, I finally realized my childhood dream of living in a warm, loving home full of laughter. Challenges remained, as in all situations, but my table was covered with home-cooked food and surrounded by contented grown children and giggling grandkids.

After more than 60 years of growing up, falling down, and getting up, I finally learned some important life lessons that helped navigate beyond the cold childhood. I was not disposable. Just as the trays from frozen dinners were tossed into the garbage, I often felt unwanted during my childhood. After I left home and financially supported myself, I felt the first taste of freedom. I finally mattered, and my skills were worthy of a paycheck.

I started to create my own path. My adult journey often was treacherous as I took risks to find a better life. I stumbled, took several wrong turns, was financially cheated more than once by unscrupulous scoundrels, and had to start over many times. But I always stood, brushed off the dirt, and kept going because I knew what

I didn't want and what I wanted. I worked at several jobs and found better ones. I attended cooking classes and registered for cooking tours to visit other cultures and learn how to make special dishes. I earned enough money to purchase quality plates, silverware, and glasses that weren't tossed into the garbage after every meal. I married, divorced, and finally found my forever love. My children survived many meager meals while they were young, but we survived together. After many years of trial and error, we finally got to enjoy dessert. And it was delicious.

My desire to provide and enjoy a warm home was fueled by the vision of a festive holiday table. Over the past few years, I've dined at such a table and thankfully watched my adult children and grandchildren laugh, tell stories, and barter for the last piece of pie. Then my husband would offer a toast, and we raised our glasses in celebration. This spontaneous merriment often led to multiple toasts. Through it all, we remembered to acknowledge the empty chairs at the table, and I wished our four parents could join us.

I finally gained a respect for my father. During my youth, I didn't get along with either of my parents, and we all rejoiced when I finally went away to college. Decades later, after I researched their history and read Mom's journals, I developed a new empathy for them. They did the best they could as they battled health, economic, and relationships issues. I regret not trying one more time to kindle a small spark that would have bonded us together. As their legacy, I will honor them with positive thoughts, not dwell on sad memories, and do the best I can.

While sorting my mother's possessions, I found my father's wallet. The wrinkled leather folder held his driver's license, medical cards, and other identification. In a back pocket there was an old photograph of me on my white horse. For some reason, he carried that image with him, and I never knew.

I discovered that acceptance is liberating. I had the maturity to appreciate the work my father did to advance his business success and support the family. But the wealth came with a price. Every mile he drove, he purposely placed distance between himself and his family. Even after he stopped driving and had accumulated the resources to buy more trucks and hire other drivers, the house remained cold. I used this experience to motivate my own search for emotional and physical nourishment.

Family mealtime is an important ritual that forms the basis of childhood memories. Successful dinners don't need to be cooked from scratch from original recipes. Frozen entrees are a handy substitute after a hectic day, and the family needs to eat before midnight. A home-cooked meal or a microwaved dinner can be the centerpiece of an abundant family feast; it all depends upon the warmth in the room, not just from the dish.

Back at the conference in Nashville, my wounded inner child held out my hands and accepted the offering of warm macaroni and cheese cups from the representative. The adult me smiled and said, "Thank you." After all, macaroni and cheese were the proven comfort foods. "Frozen Dinners" became a metaphor, my birthright, but not my legacy.

I became determined to avoid the health issues that

plagued my family. My parents both suffered for years from physical ailments. My brother George developed a 10-pound tumor in 2010 and was forced to immediately close Montana Express and sell the trucks and trailers at auction. His health continued to decline, and his wife and he stopped visiting us for holiday meals. One of my bigger regrets is that I didn't visit him in southern Idaho and insist we get together more than once a year.

George was a gentle giant. Considered chubby throughout his childhood, he had a large frame and a larger zest for life. During high school, he drove a dune buggy around town while wearing an enormous cowboy hat and everyone called him Hoss. His friends elected him to leadership positions in high school and college, and he also sang with the University of Idaho Vandaleer Concert Choir. He married a kind woman named Marti and they were married almost thirty years. Every December for her birthday, he filled the house with dozens of bright poinsettia plants and then gave the flowers as Christmas gifts to his employees at Montana Express. He was humble, funny, dedicated, a talented artist, and irreplaceable.

On May 28, 2017, Ken and I traveled to Wendell to place flowers on my parents' graves for Memorial Day and drove to Twin Falls to see George. We met on the patio of Elevation 486, an upscale restaurant and bistro located on the edge of the Snake River canyon. The panoramic view focused on the Perrine Bridge to the east, 1,500-feet long and 486 feet above the Snake River. The winding river flowed to the west, past Sand Spring Ranch. We could see the steep Blue Lakes Grade, the road our

paternal grandfather traversed while driving rickety stagecoaches 80 years earlier for the Star Stage Line.

Ken and I were seated and had ordered drinks. I heard George walk up behind me and stood to hug him. I caught my breath at the shock of his appearance. His hair was completely white, and his clothes were baggy on his diminished frame. I will never forget his eyes. They looked beyond me, across the canyon, as he reached out for a brief hug. His eyes were iridescent and luminous, and I couldn't stop staring as he sat across from us.

We stammered pleasantries and asked about his health. He took a labored breath and talked in short phrases about a failed chemotherapy treatment that had formed a sack around his heart that needed to be drained. The damage couldn't be repaired.

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"In January. I didn't want to tell anyone."

"That was four months ago!" I said, shaking my head. "I would have been here. I could have brought you meals and told stories and made you laugh."

I never understood why we were so distant. George and I had similar personalities and a robust sense of humor. He was more reserved than I was, but so was everyone else. The waitress appeared and George ordered a glass of the house Merlot.

"You can order premium wine," I joked, trying to lighten the mood. I had no idea that would be his last glass of wine.

"Let's plan a family reunion this summer," I said, knowing he hadn't seen my children or grandchildren for more than a year. We only lived 100 miles away, but I

couldn't remember the last time I saw him.

"That would be fun," he said. "Maybe in July."

He sipped the wine and started to tell stories and jokes. He told a tall tale about an Italian man riding on a train. The joke took several minutes, and he paused often to catch his breath. His eyes continued to shine. He told a few shorter stories and mentioned that his friend had taken him on an airplane ride that morning. George was an accomplished pilot and had owned his own small airplane.

"Wasn't that hard on your health?" I asked.

"It was worth it," he answered. He seemed at peace.

He was getting tired and said he had to go home. He didn't have any more stories to make me laugh. We took one last look at the Snake River flowing below us, and I wiped tears from my eyes. We begged to drive him but he refused so Ken took his keys and went to bring his pickup truck to the front of the restaurant. I walked with George down the sidewalk. He stopped several times, once to rest his head on his arms on a ledge on the wall. I was screaming inside and didn't know what to do. Why didn't I support him? Why didn't I put my arms around him? Why were we so damn afraid to show affection? I will regret that moment the rest of my life.

We helped him into the truck and he drove off. I don't know how he drove ten miles to his home. We drove back to Eagle and Marti called later with the tragic news that he died in his chair, only four hours after leaving us. I believed by the aura of the light in his eyes that he was transitioning at the restaurant, and I was humbled and honored that he wanted to see me before he died. At his

request, there was no funeral or memorial service. He was gone.

FarmHouse Restaurant, the national-acclaimed truck stop restaurant that my mother had owned for several years in Wendell, burned down a few months later. My family history was dying.

The Ambrose line from my paternal relatives ended for my immediate first family. My older brother had one son, but that son doesn't have any children. My younger brother chose to not have children. I retained my maiden name and have a son and a daughter, but their last names are Nielsen. The legacy of my father's success lives on through my children and grandchildren, but the Ambrose name for this lineage only will be preserved on the covers of my books.

My adult children Emily, and her husband John, and Adam, and his wife Danielle, are happily married, live nearby, and have their own adorable children and step-children. Ken's older son Malcolm also lives in Boise, and his younger son Cameron lives in Texas. We often come together for boisterous family celebrations, and brother George and his wife Marti used to join us before he got sick. I've helped my children own their own homes, and that goal alleviates most of the pain of being kicked off Sand Springs Ranch when I was seven-months pregnant. As much as I've come to grips with the traumas of childhood and gained a strong respect for my parents, the hurt remains from August 1980 when we were forced to leave the ranch.

The past five decades have been as if I were living in a constantly revolving kaleidoscope of drama, trauma,

glory, and adventure. The tragic times have been offset by the splendid opportunities and victories that continue to bloom in my path. My children are happy and healthy. I'm sharing my home and my life with an amazing man, and apparently, he enjoys it, too. I look forward to the journeys ahead.

On weekends, we escape to our cabin in the mountains of Idaho, and from our deck, we watch elk, deer, wolves, foxes, and wild turkeys. Several eagles perch in the trees in the back yard, and I affectionately refer to one as my Emotional Support Eagle. We watch the turbulent south fork of the Payette River tumble through the valley, and plan summer float trips through the canyon.

The river provides two of the most famous whitewater rafting locations in the country and features a 40-foot waterfall, a narrow gorge filled with natural hot springs, and the famous Staircase Rapids, a challenging Class IV run, before dumping into the mighty Snake River on a journey to the Pacific Ocean. My endless river came full circle and brought me home.

I continue to seek adventures. In the spring of 2018, at age 66, I traveled to Ireland to lead a journal-writing class with a group of women on an excursion through an organization called Wayfinding Women. The title of my workshop was, "Your Journey is Your Story." I also returned to the University of Idaho to help inaugurate the Ambrose Storytelling Endowment, a program I funded in honor of my brother George. The endowment provided an annual workshop, a faculty award, and a student scholarship. I told students that storytelling was

one of the first and most important forms of human communication and to embrace and write about their own unique experiences.

In my travels, I often pass 18-wheel trucks. I recognize the refrigerated trailers and wonder what groceries and products are being hauled to warehouses throughout the region. Maybe one of the drivers is an ambitious young man who grew up in poverty and dreams of riches and success. If that driver has a daughter, I hope he'll call her and say he misses her. He should remind her they'll spend time together. They'll enjoy a warm meal and celebrate life before she leaves on her own journey. My dad used to say, "Time is money," and maybe he was correct all along. Time is valuable, and can be spent on important treasures: family, friends, feasts, and adventures.

I finally understand why my mother, even in dementia, was so desperate to find her quilt. The patchwork pieces of our past are reminders of the frayed, personal fabric of our lives but they also offer comforting, familiar proof of the happiness that occurred and the enduring strength necessary to hold it all together. Now the heirloom quilt is my shield against the cold, contaminated legacy of frozen dinners.

Acknowledgments

This memoir first percolated in my mind more than twenty years ago, and I adjusted the intensity of my writing for several years, often jumping into the mess of words only to quit and relinquish everything to the back burner. How do I, as a humor writer, rip open the scars to inspect the painful drama of the past? I couldn't finish it, so I sporadically wrote additional chapters for the manuscript while working on humorous books, including *Menopause Sucks*, *Midlife Cabernet*, and *Midlife Happy Hour*.

My mother's death in 2014, followed three years later by the death of my younger brother George, convinced me to complete the book.

I want to thank my husband Ken McKay for editing advice and moral support, and I thank my children Emily Nielsen and Adam Nielsen for surviving the chaos during

their childhood and encouraging my writing. They were my motivation to be a better parent.

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I am grateful for the hundreds of employees of Montana Express, Ambrose Distributing, Ambrose Farms, and FarmHouse Restaurant for helping my parents establish and operate several successful businesses. Many people are mentioned in the book, but I want to add another note of gratitude for my Uncle Muncie Mink, Uncle Henry Winterholler, my cousin Ron Ambrose, and our agriculture expert Keith Wert for their contributions to the businesses and loyalty to my parents.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my father Neal Ambrose. Writing the memoir has softened my resentment toward him and introduced a profound level of admiration and respect. I acknowledge my mother Leona Ambrose as the person who suffered enormous physical and emotional pain but continued to leave smiley-face stickers in her Bibles. And to my younger brother George, I regret that we didn't laugh together more. My childhood family is gone, but I recognize the best traits of my parents and George in my children and grandchildren. The long-haul journey isn't over yet.

Photos

Ambrose Trucking Service, 1952

Dad, Tom and me
with Dad's first truck, 1952

Tom and me
with Dad's truck, 1955.

George and me, 1957.

Me on my horse, 1965.

Montana Express brochure (above) and truck lot (below), 1980.

Sprinklers on pivots in front of the house, 1970.

Dad and me, 1972.

Mom, 2000.

My parents' headstone, Wendell Cemetery.

Our wedding on the Greek island of Paros, 2011.