

*Crossing
Burning
Bridges*

One Woman's Amazing Journey

Cyndie M. Styles

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by Cyndie M. Styles

Published by:

CMS Enterprises

P.O. Box 8039

Van Nuys, CA 91409-8039 U.S.A.

Orders at <http://www.cyndiemstyles.com>

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2005905677

ISBN, print ed. 0-9768170-0-4

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing 2005

This book is a work of fiction; names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Many thanks to my friends, my niece, and my aunt for proofreading. Many thanks to Doris and Nadine for being in my life. And many thanks to Doug for your continual support in all of the crazy things that I do.

Cover Designer: Robert Aulicino, Pro-Art Graphic Design
<http://www.aulicinodesign.com>

Chapter I

The Godsend

Dear Journal: I was ushered down the endless empty corridor while searching for the thoughts that would surround the night's events. As we turned a corner, I saw additional medical personnel waiting. They then guided me into a room that was dreary, sterile, emotionless, not at all like my everyday surroundings. I changed into drab hospital garb. They escorted me to a gurney, where I was lying while they strapped me to it. Shortly thereafter, a nurse came in and inserted an I.V. into my arm. The orderlies began wheeling me toward that room. The room of death, or the room of pardonable life.

There was never a question. I always knew this would be a possibility ever since the day I discovered the truth. But who knew I would be so calm about it? Goodnight Journal.

“Don’t I at least get a cigarette or a blindfold?” I razzed as I felt the medication starting to take effect. The orderlies said nothing as they wheeled me closer and closer, with their stoical faces.

A million questions sprouted in my mind as I was lying there. What were they thinking about me? Did they think that I was the enemy? Was I too ruthless for them? Did I feel hatred for her because of my abandonment issues? Would they have forgiven me if I had rejected their request? Why did she...?

My thoughts were interrupted by him, a man I had seen earlier, who was now partially masked and peering over me. “Hello, Jordan. We’re about to begin.”

I nodded and everything faded.

As I awoke some time later, I looked around the room. I couldn't see much from my angle, but I could hear nurses buzzing about.

"What time is it?" I asked, wondering if I'd actually said it out loud. No one answered. "Excuse me. What time is it?" I reiterated.

"It's okay, just lie back down. Someone will be in shortly," claimed a nurse, not listening to my question.

"What time is it?" I repeated. No one answered me.

I was lying there for what seemed like hours before that man reappeared and stood over me, smiling. "How are you feeling, Jordan?"

"Okay, I guess. What time is it?"

"It's late. You should get some rest now."

"What happened? How many pieces am I in?" I asked, trying to hide my anxiety. "And what about...?"

"Yes, everything is fine. You need to rest now," the man answered as he cut in, then disappeared.

When I awoke again, I was in a hospital patient room on the fourth floor. This room was rosy, with bright green curtains hanging alongside a window that looked out onto the hospital garden. It was daytime now. Because of the angle, I could barely see out the window but I was able to see people walking around, mostly people smoking.

As I spanned the room, I could see greeting cards on a side table, opened and standing erect. There were a few dozen lavender roses in a vase next to my bed with a card attached. I reached over and pulled the card from its holder. It read: "You are a Godsend. You saved our lives." There was no signature. I was so weak and groggy that the card slipped out of my hand and floated to the floor. I then noticed beeping and buzzing behind me but didn't have the strength to turn to see what was generating the noise.

The door was closed but I could see some activity in the hallway through a small window toward the top of the door. Someone was out there. I heard whispering. My hearing seemed distorted and echoey, and I couldn't quite make out what they were saying. "Who is that?" I thought as I slowly

sat up in order to get a better look out the window of the door. I could hear people whispering something in disagreement, but I couldn't see who was out there.

Suddenly the door flew open, and the male angelic face walking toward me said, "Hellllo, JoJo." However, before I could return a greeting to him, everything faded.

As I looked around the room, I could see it was nighttime again. I waited for a moment while I examined my body to figure out if they had performed the operation on me. They had not, and knowing that, I lifted myself up and slid out of bed. I was hooked up to several tubes and probes. I started pulling them out and off, all except the I.V. in my arm. Then, when I noticed a slight chill toward the back of my gown, I slipped on the robe that was hanging from a hook on the bathroom door. "Yeah, that would make a good picture splashed all over the covers of tabloids," I thought. I grabbed my journal out of the nightstand drawer and a large glass of water from the table next to the bed, then shuffled my way toward the nurse's station with my I.V. stand trailing behind me. I paused around the corner until the nurses all had vacated the station. As I again moved forward, I looked around for paparazzi waiting to jump out at me. With the nurses absent now, I sifted through the charts piled on the counter until I found the one I wanted. I located her room number from the chart. I then shuffled my way down the corridor toward her room.

My mind was jumbled with questions. What would I say to her? What should I tell her? What would I want her to know? What would they not want me to tell her? I stood outside her room for a moment assessing possible nurse's movements to make sure no one else was in there, then entered. I didn't want any interference because we needed privacy. I dragged a chair from the corner of the room toward her bed, then reached for a spare pillow along the way. I placed the pillow on the seat of the chair and then just sat there watching her motionless body with all of those machines beeping, buzzing and flashing around her. Her room was cold, much more than mine. She didn't have a window,

nor bright curtains. There were no flowers. There were slightly deflated balloons in the corner of the room including one with a cheery greeting. Not really knowing what to say, I nevertheless slowly began speaking in a whisper...

“Hi Zoë. You don’t really know me; I’m your sister, Jordan. We are a part of each other now. We have an unbreakable bond. We have the same blood... well, more now than before. I knew it was risky, but there was never a question; I always knew I would do this for you, because you are *my* Godsend.”

I took a deep breath before continuing. “I hope you can hear me because we have a lot of catching up to do. I know I should have told you of these things long ago; I make no excuses. If after you hear my story, you wish to banish me as well, then I will happily go away - just to have known you for this short time, and to have given you life. No one else need know about all of this, if you don’t want them to know it. I guess I should start with the basics. I’m six years older than you, twenty-eight now, but you probably already know that. If you were older or I was a younger age, I’ll bet we could pass as twins. And look there, we have the same red hair.” I began to wonder if I was just rambling without a purpose.

“I suppose I’ll give you some family history first. It may make it easier to understand the events that follow, knowing a little about my background.” I leaned back as I searched for what to say next.

“Mom, Katia, was from a Russian father and a British mother. By the time Mom was in junior high, her father had retired. He was a carpenter and architect by trade, but I think he made most of his money investing in stocks and bonds. His name is Anton, but we all call him Gampy. My grandmother’s name is Elizabeth, whose friends all call her Annie, and has always been a housewife. We call her Gamma. I’ve seen pictures of Gamma when she was my age, and she was beautiful. She has always had a lot of friends, and likes to play cards and give parties. She even enjoys volunteering down at the senior center. Gamma was raised in London until her family moved to America when she was around ten.

She grew up with wealth, old money, you know - just like you, I suppose. It was mandatory for her to have an education and Gamma chose a degree in Art History. She and Gampy only had one child. Mom grew up to be a very stunning woman, never smiled though - not in any of her pictures did she smile. She always had a wounded look about her."

I took a sip of water and another deep breath before continuing. "Dad, Ethan, was from a Chippewa father and a Scottish mother, if you can believe that combination. His grandfather's great-grandfather changed their surname from Waw-goosh, meaning Fox, to Walsh to fit in with their white settler neighbors. Dad, along with his younger brother, Uncle Red, had a middle-class upbringing - nothing really to write home about, I suppose. Their parents didn't practice the Native American ways, but I think that's why Uncle Red did, to be his own person. Dad has dark skin like his grandfather's great-grandfather, high cheekbones, black hair - the whole works. He calls himself a traveling *businessman*, which was laughable to those who knew him."

I briefly paused in order to decide what to tell Zoë next. "Neither Mom nor Dad attended college. They were high-school sweethearts from the same class and the same age, and it was no secret that she was pregnant when they were married. Their life together in Houston was a turbulent one, to say the least. She's an Aries and he - an Aquarius. She was controlling and he wasn't going to be controlled. Their wedding was no wedding. She had no formal wedding dress, no wedding cake or reception, no bridesmaids, no flowers and no friends were there. There was only one wedding photo taken, which Gamma snapped before they left for the courthouse. My grandparents were the only ones there - his parents, not Gamma and Gampy. The ceremony was treated as a technicality, like a missed detail from last week's schedule. I guess that's why I insisted on a big wedding, not that I really wanted all of the hoopla, but I didn't want my wedding to be like theirs. His parents died in an automobile accident two months after the wedding so I never knew them. Which brings me to me."

Just then, a nurse stormed in and interrupted me by saying, “*What* are you doing here? You should be back in your own room, in your own bed!” As the nurse finished scolding me, a loud beep from a monitor down the hall sounded and she ran from the room.

I turned back around and shrugged. “I’ll bet she’s a Capricorn,” I said to Zoë before continuing. “I, Jordan Melanie Walsh, was born on the twentieth day of March. I don’t love my name, but I don’t hate it either. For a long time, I thought it was kind of masculine and I wanted a more girly name. Some had said that I had a great-great grandmother by the name of Melanie so that’s how I got that part. Having my birthday on the first day of Spring, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought back and was thrilled my parents hadn’t named me Refresh, Floral, Spring, Warmth, Blossom or Bonnet. Rumor had it - some were actually discussed. I resemble Mom in many ways, as you may already know, and my hair is straight like hers. Only mine is red and hers is dark-brown like her Russian ancestors. I guess we both know why it isn’t black like Dad’s; I suppose that’s just the mystery of DNA. I just wish I had gotten some of the height of my father, since I’m only five foot five inches tall.”

I paused to reconstruct my thinking pattern. I wanted Zoë to learn about *me* first and not focus on our connection. “My toddler years seem to have been normal, from what I can remember of them. I was a little ignored, but my adolescence appeared normal for the most part. Except for one thing... I have no memories of Mom ever hugging me. There were no pictures portraying motherly affection, none where she was even pretending to show a closeness. In photographs, she’d always stand beside me with a blank stare on her face like you see in old Western photographs.”

I was so immersed in telling my story, I hardly noticed when other monitors down the hall would screech out their deadly blare.

I started to drift back in time as if I were reliving my life prior to knowing Zoë. My consciousness was that of actually being in the past. While watching the rhythm from the lights flashing on her monitors, I was led into a hypnotic

trance, and was sent back in time to retrieve my memories...

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I guess I was around eight when I started to remember the events in the world, and in my world. We lived in Houston in a small house that had three bedrooms. When we moved there, I had heard Mom tell the realtor that my bedroom was a little small but I thought it was just right. The house was plain, but it was clean for the most part. Mom made curtains for my room that were bright yellow with pink roses on them. She made most of the curtains in the house because we didn't have much money. My dresser was small, but it had legs that raised it off the floor to a point where I could hide things under it. I could hide all of my worldly treasures and no one would know. We had an average-size family room with a small color television set in it that Gampy bought for us. That's where Mom spent most of her time when Dad was away working. I so wanted a television set in my room, but that was completely out of the question unless "I could afford to buy it." And that was the basic theme of the house. I could never get anything extra when we visited the department stores because Mom said, "It wasn't in the budget."

One day as I was watching television, a commercial appeared on the screen for child models to do runway work. They paraded children down this red velvety walkway, twirling and pirouetting. Mom was on the couch sipping her *magic juice* (concocted with a little something she'd mix into her morning orange juice) when I swung around and peered at her in amazement, realizing that she had just uncharacteristically chuckled. I continued watching the commercial intensely and knew that's what I wanted to do. That's what I wanted to feel. I wanted to entertain. I wanted to make people laugh. I wanted to make *her* laugh. I wanted to *shine*. It made perfect sense; I am, after all - a Pisces.

After relentlessly pestering Mom to drive me to their talent agency for an audition, not only did I *not* get the job, they refused to sign me as a client. I was "not what they

were looking for.” I was seriously crushed. Devastated. Mom was seething from wasting her time on such useless nonsense and made sure I knew it.

“Not what they were looking for?” I was a kid and I could twirl; what were they looking for - Anna Pavlova? I spent the next few weeks sulking about it, trying to figure out what I did wrong, plotting how I was going to do better the next time, and how to prevail without upsetting Mom. I *wanted* this. All I knew was that it frustrated me, and I was not going to take “no” for an answer. I was actually grateful for that rejection. It gave me the motivation I needed to move forward and persevere.

Two months later, I got my first assignment from their competitor. It was a smaller agency, but at least I got my foot into someone’s door. That’s when I met Larry Wozowski, my agent. He’s a short man, bald, and his office always smelled of cigar smoke, but he was nice and loved to make jokes. Dad wasn’t there to sign the contract so I got Mom to do it. I caught her in a good mood when she was drinking her *magic juice* with her friends.

My assignment was to hold a sign with a store’s name on it while walking around an outdoor mall and wearing the store’s new children’s fashions - from skirts to coats, anything they could resell after I wore it. They didn’t pay me much, but Larry said it would pay off for me to get experience.

Mom never came into the store with me; she’d always just drop me off out front. She’d usually return four or five hours later to pick me up, after her girlfriends departed the cocktail lounge. For the times she hadn’t returned at all, I’d have to ask the manager of the store to call Uncle Red to come get me.

Uncle Red is similar in physical build as Dad, yet he always tried to look different. Uncle Red was the only person who called me Joey. I liked it because it made the name special.

Anyway, I did that job until I got my next assignment working as one of Santa’s elves at the department store during the holidays. Gamma came down and made such a

fuss about it. She was taking pictures and pressuring Santa to vacate his chair so she could snap pictures of me in it. Old Saint Nick got ticked and that was the last day I wore the pointy ears. I never told Gamma.

Larry was ticked too. He didn't give me another assignment until three months later, the day of my ninth birthday. It was a job in the high school auditorium, returning props to the prop room after performances. I'd ride my bike over at lunchtime the following day to do the job because the performances would go on to nearly midnight. It was an unofficial job because the person actually in charge of the props approached Larry to hire someone to cover his position. That guy was a member of the drama club, and was much too distracted and involved with his *social* life to be bothered. So Larry had arranged for me to do it. The guy said they weren't paying him much to do this job so the pay would be low. We figured the truth was that my pay was low because of his *social* expenses. I did receive occasional tips from the crew, though. It was an excellent learning experience, getting to know my way around a theater. And even though the theater was old and musty, I was thrilled to be working there. When no one was around, I would go out on stage to bow and curtsy. I would imagine being a big star and holding roses while waving to the crowd that was gathering around the stage from the audience. It only took the embarrassment of being caught once, and I stopped doing that.

I also remember my ninth birthday vividly because that was the day I came home and saw Mom sporting a black eye and cuts around her mouth. I hadn't ever seen her like that before and didn't know what to say or think. Before I could comment, Mom gave me an explanation of how she fell down the stairs to the basement. That was odd, she never did that before no matter how many *magic juices* she would have.

During that year, was when I also found out mom would be having a baby.

That assignment continued for the remainder of the year, along with a handful of other temporary jobs, until it ended just before they began their Christmas production. The guy that hired Larry said his little sister wanted the job, so

he'd have to fire me. No matter, I was ready to move on anyway.

Then on December 25th, my little brother was born. Thomas Ethan Walsh entered our lives as our *little Christmas miracle*, as Mom would call him. I was hoping for a sister. Dad wasn't there the day we brought Tommy home. Actually Dad was hardly there at all anymore, but the house seemed to run smoother when he wasn't around so it wasn't mentioned much. I began to see a transformation in Mom. Even though she still never smiled, I could see that she was happier - happy enough to actually hug Tommy.

And just around that time, amazingly, Mom realized that if I was old enough to work, I was old enough to do *her* work. She would make me clean stuff. Clean the bathroom, clean the kitchen, clean the basement, clean Tommy's stinkin' dirty diapers. I accommodated her demands, but felt like Cinderella in soot-covered clothes. And instead of the wicked stepsisters, it was a brother - *the crowned prince*. I daily witnessed Mom reclining with a *magic juice*, cooing at Tommy, and watching television while I was doing all of the work. Why did she choose this life as a housewife only to relinquish her duties onto me?! She and I began to have heated battles over all of it. Dad was no help, and didn't want to hear about it, but I'd had enough.

I decided I wasn't going to do it anymore, no matter what the consequences were. I knew she would threaten to terminate my contract with Larry so I had to figure out a way to circumvent that. I decided to offer a trade. She hated to cook, and she was terrible at it too. So I made an offer to perform all of the cooking from then on so I wouldn't have to clean anymore. And it worked. Mom didn't care so long as she didn't have to make the meals anymore.

Not only did I succeed, but I now knew how to work out a plan for negotiating. Dad, the schmoozer, was so impressed with my bargaining skills that he confidentially offered to send me to culinary classes. I told him to save that money for my acting classes because cooking was not my destiny. I was thrilled with how things had worked out; it was a great deal for me. Dad was rarely there, Mom only had

toast with her *magic juice* for breakfast, and Tommy didn't eat our food yet. I frequently made my own meals anyway so it wasn't much different.

I asked Gamma to teach me more recipes and she was thrilled to show me. She and Mom never got along long enough for Mom to learn anything from her. I suppose it's true that the teachings come easier with one generation removed. Even Gampy helped out; he made me a step stool so that I could reach the stove easier.

Dad was away more and more; he would find anything to do that didn't include us. He wasn't even there for my tenth birthday. Occasionally, he returned for fresh clothes. He always had a deal going on somewhere, somewhere other than where we were. I'd watch him clicking his fingers, saying stuff like "I gotta go make things happen, get things done, wheel and deal." And off he went. Seems Mom tripped down the stairs less often when he was gone so she'd never complain about his departures.

I guess there's a reason I don't talk much about my friends. I didn't have many. None really, just the kids in my classroom. I tried making new friends in school, but I was working so frequently that it made it difficult to keep the friends I'd already made. I also felt that they would probably just leave me anyway the way Dad was doing again and again so most of the time I didn't bother. No matter, I preferred working over playing anyway.

I did small modeling jobs, presentations, or whatever was available. Only when rarely requested, did I have Mom or Larry with me at my jobs; otherwise, most of my bosses did not ask for an adult to be present. Larry coached me and said that I would be offered profitable acting parts if I knew how to sing because there were more musical productions produced than anything else.

Meanwhile, Larry sent me to an audition at the local community theater for my first real acting part. Well, almost real. I was auditioning to be an extra, one of the looney patients in *Harvey*. I was so short, that I could barely see the woman in the theatre's ticket booth. "Hi, I'm here to audition

for the role as a patient in the play, *Harvey*,” I announced to the ticket teller on my tiptoes.

“Take a seat,” the woman replied as she continuously read her newspaper, as if she wished to be somewhere else, anywhere else but there.

I sat and waited in that theatre for what seemed like an eternity. I kept getting looks of annoyance from others in the room before realizing that I should probably stop fidgeting in my seat. It was taking forever and I had to get home. Mom was going to be worried.

After the audition, I sped my bike home in the dark, then ran into the house screaming, “I got the part! I got the part! Mom, I got the part!”

“Shhhh, don’t you know your brother is sleeping?”

I whispered, “I got the part.”

“What part?” Mom asked as she poured a glass of her *magic juice*.

“The part in the play, *Harvey*. You know, that guy with the rabbit. You’re going to come see me, right?”

“Sure sweetie, whatever you want,” Mom murmured, as she slumped down onto the couch and drifted off.

I skipped toward my room and when I reached Tommy’s room, I stepped in to check on him. He was awake and playing in his crib. I leaned over him and whispered, “Guess what, your big sister is going to be a star. It’s her time to shine.” He gurgled and tried reaching for my hair. The smile on Tommy’s face told me that he was proud of me. I tucked his binky around him before going off to my room to get ready for bed, but I couldn’t sleep. I never wanted to forget this feeling. I wanted it etched in my memory forever.

I practiced the part over and over until I was actually doing it in my sleep so I was told. It was harder than I first imagined and that frustrated me. Just when I mastered the movements flawlessly, the director would whimper, “Oh, why don’t we change this around?”

Oh, why don’t we indeed? At that point, I wanted to change his face around. That aside, I loved being there. That’s where I was christened JoJo. I used to hang around the elderly man (Isaac) who cared for the props. He stuttered and

would call me Jo-Jo-Jordan. With everyone in a hurry and rushing around backstage, no one stuck around long enough to hear Isaac finish so everyone thought my name was JoJo. He's also the one who opened pandora's wonderful box of practical jokes for me.

Isaac and I would run-a-muck in the theatre with so many of our practical jokes, that it was a wonder we got any work done at all. One in particular was entertaining for me because I got to see the effects first hand. Isaac put black grease paint in the actor's cold cream jars, just beneath the top layer of cold cream. This joke didn't affect the show because the actors only used the cold cream at the end of the night's performances.

Opening night was exhilarating. What was I thinking? The dress rehearsal was exhilarating, but opening night was bigger than life, bigger than my dreams! I stepped through the looking glass that night. I'll never forget my first laugh. I did it. I got them to laugh! I now knew I had it in me and I could do it; I could make *her* laugh.

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"Her? Don't you mean them?" asked Gladis, a nurse of African American descent standing in the doorway behind me. I was startled by the interruption, not knowing how long she'd been standing there. Gladis gave me a disapproving side glance, I assumed for being out of bed and in Zoë's room. Nonetheless, she put a blanket around me and headed for the door.

"Oh, um, sure," I answered, as I regained my composure and returned to my story for Zoë.

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The curtain call was everything I imagined it would be, except it was for someone else. But that was okay; while I watched them bow and curtsy from stage left, I imagined myself being out there. I imagined them standing and applauding for *me*. The flowers were mine and the reviews

were going to be great. I practiced my princess wave - of course, when someone saw me, I covered by saying I was just mocking them.

I sped all the way home on my bike that night, never sitting down on the seat. I was so excited about the evening, yet I was also worried wondering why Mom had never made it there. I was relieved when I found her in bed asleep and not on the basement floor. I glanced at her nightstand and discovered a half-empty glass of *magic juice*.

I sat up until the early hours of the morning with adrenaline still pumping through me. I couldn't wait to tell her of the night's events. From that night on, I was an actress.

About a month later during breakfast, Dad came into the kitchen and asked, "Hey Kitten, why didn't you tell your dear ole Dad you were a big stage actress?"

"I told you about the play last month when you were fixing the car, remember?"

"Oh, you know not to tell me things when I'm working on your mom's car. You know how it annoys me when she breaks things. I can't think about anything else at that moment."

I thought to myself, "No matter, the production closed last night." I finished up washing the breakfast dishes and skipped to my room to get my savings account book. I rode my bike to the bank to deposit my last paycheck from the production. I looked at my balance to make sure all of the money was listed and slipped the book back into my pocket.

During the next few days, I tried every way possible to persuade Dad to give me the money I needed for singing lessons, but he always muddled out some excuse - mostly blaming it on Mom's inability to budget. I knew I would have to forfeit my own money, even though it was earmarked for Christmas gifts. I had hoped this would be the first time ever that I was able to buy the gifts with my own money. I asked Larry for the name of a suitable singing coach, and he gave me the best he knew. I was excited to get started. I'd always wanted to learn to sing. I rode my bike to the bank, withdrew

most of my money, and after returning home, I hid it under my dresser.

“Hey Kitten, what’re you doing under there?” Dad asked as he popped his head into my room. I was startled by his interruption and didn’t really hear his question.

“Hi Dad. I’m going to start singing lessons next week, any requests?” I hummed as I grabbed my hair brush and held it up to my mouth like a microphone. I acted as if I were already a singing sensation.

“I’ve always been partial to *Daddy’s Little Girl*,” he said teasing me.

We sat down to dinner that night and it was actually quite nice. Everyone was getting along and Dad was in a good mood for a change. Tommy was even cheery and not fussing like his usual self.

Monday morning came and I got ready for school. It wasn’t until I was a little more awake and brushing my teeth that I remembered today was the day I would be starting my singing lessons. I hurried through making breakfast and rode off to school. The day seemed so long because of my excitement. I sprinted into the house with just enough time to grab the money, have a quick snack, and then ride on my bike to Mrs. Wesson’s house for my first lesson. I reached under the dresser, swirled my hand around, but came out empty. I tried it again - *nothing*. I arched my head down and saw that the money was gone. A panic came over me and I trotted into the family room to ask Mom if she’d seen it.

“No sweetie, did you take it out and put it somewhere else and forget?”

“NO, I know it was there! I was all ready to go to Mrs. Wesson’s. Is Dad home? Maybe he knows where it is,” I questioned, then returned to my room to investigate further.

I could hear Mom’s voice from a distance answering me. “No, he had to go on an unexpected business trip right after you left for school this morning. I don’t know when he’ll be back. You should call Mrs. Wesson if you’re not going; it would be rude to leave her hanging.”

After calling Mrs. Wesson, I felt humiliated. She must

have thought I was so irresponsible, so unprofessional. She was the best singing coach in town, and I was worried that she thought I'd just blown her off. I figure she'd never trust me enough again to ever agree to tutor me. And what about Larry? He said this training was necessary for me to get the prime acting roles.

As I sat there, I kept trying to figure out what had happened. I felt like calling the cops to report a robbery. "I know I left it there, didn't I? Now what am I gonna do?" I thought out loud.

The next morning, I got up and somberly rode my bike toward school, falling down and skinning my knee along the way. The scrape was bad enough that I had to go to the nurse's office and get it cleaned up. I couldn't believe what a klutz I was. I also couldn't help thinking about the great dresser robbery; the situation was still perplexing me. Were we really robbed after all? Did Tommy crawl into my room and eat it? He eats everything else that falls on the floor. I supposed that a big gust of wind blowing through my room was out of the question.

"Miss Walsh? Miss Walsh, I'd like an answer to my question," my teacher demanded as giggles from around the room drew me out of my thoughts.

"What?"

"No, *whooo*, Miss Walsh. Who was the first Indian to communicate with the Pilgrims?"

All of a sudden I realized that I was in class and my teacher was grilling me about history, and not about anything I knew. Since I had been too busy pouting over the lost money the night before, I forgot to study for the pass or fail oral quiz we were having that day. "Crap, and an Indian question too," I thought, "Dad's gonna kill me!"

"Any thoughts, Miss Walsh?" the teacher interrogated, tapping her pencil on my desk as if it were a ticking bomb. She turned away and posed the question elsewhere. "Okay Mr. Roberts, what's the answer?"

He stood and broadcasted, "Samoset was the first representative of the Indians that went to speak *in broken*

English to the Pilgrims, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Brown-noser,” I thought.

“Thank you, Mr. Roberts,” our teacher vented as she scowled at me.

Needless to say, I got an F on the quiz and Mom grounded me for a week. She said that if I ever flunked another exam again I’d be grounded for the rest of my life. I spent the rest of the week with my nose in my school books. I’m not sure I was actually studying, but I wanted Mom to think so. It wasn’t like I had anywhere else to go, not being able to afford my singing lessons. Now what? I figured I’d start over and just be more careful of what I did with my money. I guess, in a way, I got my singing lesson after all... I was sure singing the blues that week.

I had been set back to square one. Not only did I not have the money for singing lessons, I didn’t have Christmas money either. I was forced to make gifts for everyone again that year, as I always had. Almost everyone said they liked those kind the best, but I still wished I had the money to buy them something. The only silver lining to that Christmas, was Gampy buying Gamma and I matching hairbrushes. They were *beautiful*. They were *magnificent*. The handles were scented with a lilac fragrance; hers was pink, and mine was powder blue. I knew I would cherish my brush forever.

I began begging Larry to put me to work doing anything so I could build up my savings account again. I continued to work, and by my eleventh birthday, I won my first primary-stage speaking role in *Little Women*. I did have to fight for the part though, since the casting director felt I might not be right for this play. She said my Southern accent made me sound like a hick - whatever that meant. No matter, I got it! I wanted the role of Beth because I felt I could show the depths of my work when she died at the end. But instead I won the role of Amy because of my age. Being in *Little Women* was the first time I was around a cast that treated me as an equal. I was one of them, not the extra who was bothersome and wasn’t allowed to eat the food from the catering table. When I called Larry to tell him I got the part,

I asked what a hick was. He advised me not to listen to prejudiced people and just to focus on work - so I did.

After *Little Women*, I landed more theater roles effortlessly. I told Larry that all I wanted to do was work and make money. And that's what I did steadily for the rest of the year.

On my twelfth birthday, Ella came into my life. That was the first time I ever had something that was completely mine. I think of her as my first "puppy" love. Ah, *elephant* actually. She was the most beautiful elephant, well stuffed elephant, I'd ever seen. She was grey with pink ears and feet. She had a funny little tail and a pink bow around her neck. Her trunk was posed upward for good luck. Gamma gave her to me. Ella wasn't very big so I took her everywhere, inconspicuously hidden, of course. I didn't want anyone to think I was a baby. Ella seemed to be my lucky charm and I would prevail at everything when she was with me.

At that point, Gamma said she thought it was time I learned about good deeds. She said that since I had a lucky charm, I should share my newfound wealth with others by doing good deeds. I should do at least one good deed per day. It wouldn't have to be something like donating a kidney or anything, but a nice deed that I wouldn't normally think to do. Whenever I'd see Gamma, she'd want me to report my deeds to her.

I received so many more paying acting roles, that I finally got to take the singing lessons. It was hard work, but it was amazing. Larry even scheduled time in a recording studio for me, during the midnight shift, and I recorded various pop songs. They were far from reaching the top forties, but I was proud of them. That's okay, singing was secondary to what I really wanted to do anyway - that was, to be an actress.

I also continued to get grounded at home by Mom, primarily because I was spending so much more time studying lines than homework. Even during my worst semester in school, I managed to pull off a B-.

By the time my thirteenth birthday arrived, I guess Mom was tired of having me around so much because of

being grounded, that she agreed to let me stay with Uncle Red for the weekend. More like *insisted*, actually. I loved going over there. During my stays, Uncle Red would divulge tons of details about the family. In fact, he was my strongest source of family information. Uncle Red would unleash many family skeletons from their proverbial closets. Richard was actually his given name, but he preferred others to call him what he considered to be a more earthy name like his Native American ancestors had. Uncle Red had a free spirit, and he was tired of living in Dad's shadow, being constantly compared to him. I always felt a little sorry for Uncle Red. He always seemed to be treated as an outcast, even though he was more educated, being an attorney, and more worldly. I'd heard others in the family say that their parents didn't acknowledge his achievements as much as their eldest son. So I suppose to compensate for it, he was more outgoing, charismatic, and friendly, which Dad wasn't. In short - a Leo.

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After I returned to the present momentarily, I reached over and touched Zoë's hand to see if she was awake yet. She wasn't. I knew it was going to take more stories to awaken her so I continued.

"That was the time when I think I developed the first of my many idiosyncrasies. One of which was having to brush my long hair one hundred strokes before going to bed no matter how tired I was. That was also going to be a birthday that I would never forget. That was the first time I fell in love. Well, real love, and this loved one wasn't stuffed. Uncle Red introduced me to someone I would love deeply for the rest of my life."

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Chapter II

Up in Smoke

As the end of our time together neared, Uncle Red wished me a happy thirteenth birthday once more and then drove me back home. That day had been my most perfect one thus far. It was the first time I'd fallen in love and she was beautiful.

When I returned home, Dad was in the family room reading his newspaper. I went in to greet him and tell him about Uncle Red's birthday present, but all he seemed to have time for was a grunt here and there.

"She's all I can think about, Dad. Perky personality, fluffy reddish-blond hair, piercing white teeth, and a frisky energetic tail."

Dad looked up oddly at me from reading his newspaper and asked, "She? She who, Kitten?"

"My new puppy, Dad. Who did you think I was talking about? See here," I said as the furry fluff-ball danced around in a circle. "Uncle Red gave her to me. I named her Foxy Lady. She only weighs twenty-seven pounds, but she has a hardy bark."

"I don't like small dogs; they yap too much. Why didn't you ask your uncle for a German Shepard so it could at least protect the house?" Dad grumbled, as he sat back in his recliner and continued reading the newspaper.

"What do we have to protect?" I sniped, defending Foxy.

As I made my way to my bedroom with Foxy in tow trotting behind me, I heard Dad muttering something about insubordinate teenagers. He sort of brought me down by not