



**2009
Valley Voices
Writing Contest Winners**

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Poetry Winner -- Youth

TAKEN

by Sara Copeland

A little girl's innocence was taken,
She wasn't aware, don't be mistaken.
She thought he was cool; he was an older boy.
Fully unaware, that she was about to become his personal toy.
Her arms were pinned, slightly stunned,
He was laughing, but she wasn't having fun.
Why is he doing this to her?
He is her friend's brother.
She said no, fought, and tried to turn away.
He was bigger and stronger, leaving her vulnerable that day.
He took advantage of her, young and naive.
She was scared and confused, wanting to leave.
She didn't know what was happening to her.
From that moment on, the day was a blur.
Her trust instantly dwindled towards men.
How could this be? She was only seven.
A secret kept for so many years,
Hidden behind blame, denial, and countless tears.
Fourteen years old, seven years older,
Her secret revealed on her mother's shoulder.
Ashamed, avoiding her mother's eyes,
The girl hates it when she breaks down and cries.
Her mother was silent, holding her tight,
Revealing she, too, had fought a similar fight.
Her mother told her it will be okay,
And that she didn't deserve what happened that day.
The girl says she doesn't want a sympathetic face,
She has taken it in stride, and at her own pace.
She is still affected, but no longer ashamed today.
When she feels the anger and pain, she gets on her knees to pray.
Although it is hard to see,
This happened me.
The challenges one faces, makes you who you are.
Mine, good and bad, have driven me to go far.
Although my self-esteem has been shaken,
Who I am today, can never be taken.

Poetry Winner -- Adult

THE SONNETEER

by LORA K. REITER

Chickens at roost,
Entrails from the supper hen
Fed to the pigs.
Children in bed.
Husband in bed.
Dishes in dishpan.
Paper and pencils replacing them on the table.
Shadows from the glowing mantles
Flickering on the wall, part of the ceiling.
Orange from a Pall Mall cigarette
Burnishing the jar lid where it rests.
Sweat on her lip although the room is cool.
How to say it?
How to speak of ice on trees?
Bells in the ice?
Sun on the ice?
Who would believe it?
Who would even read it?
Who would care to see her phoenix
Rise from ice on fire with sun?
Who would know a capriole
She has watched a crystal unicorn perform?
Who would hear a filigree of sound?
He sees mud where ice will melt,
Cattle deep in it; hoof rot.
She sees children to their waists in drifts,
Roads impassable except for horses.
But she sees as well the sculptured marble ocean
Around their house,
The burning bird rising with the pigeons.
So she takes a puff,
Frowns at the blank page,
And starts her poem,
Shifting in the cold
As she arranges words against darkness

Fiction Winner -- Adult

THE BATTLE OF DRUNKEN GOAT SPRINGS

by Keith Sclaegel

Dust billowed behind the twenty-year-old Lincoln Continental as it floated down the county road, seeming to ride on a cloud of white.

The boy looked at the man sitting next to him.

"That corn looks pretty good, don't it grandpa?"

The big man with a shock of snow white hair and deep lines in his face, looked at the boy and smiled.

"It looks good," he said, the white hair shaking as he nodded his head.

The car swung wide, rounding a curve, plowing through the chalky powder.

"What's that?" The boy pointed at a field as they careened past.

"Beans...soy beans."

The boy nodded...quiet for awhile.

"How big were you when you was my age? Was you as little as me, grandpa?"

The old man looked at the boy, skinny legs sticking out of shorts that came to his knees. His blond hair, bleached by the summer sun showing glints of red, ears that seemed to have grown faster than the head to which they were attached.

"You take after your mom. She wasn't very big when she was your age, but she turned out to be regular size...whatever regular is."

The boy tilted his head, thinking about the answer, then nodded.

"How come they call our county Crabbe County, grandpa?"

The white hair shook again as the old man chuckled and turned toward the boy. "That's a long story, son. Has something to do with the ocean ...crabs...you know they have pincers."

The man held his hands up, tapping his thumb and index fingers together, mimicking crab claws. The boy laughed and looked out the window again. Shades of green and yellow, shimmering waves of heat passed as the boy watched. The car paused at a stop sign, then accelerated, sending a plume of dust into the air...ascending...then settling...dropping a shower of talcum powder toward earth.

A puff of wind, moving across wheat stubble, slid into the deserted intersection, spinning dust devils in its wake.

Crabbe County, Kansas, a county originally populated by God-fearing, plow-pushing protestants was named after a habitually drunken, ill-tempered sergeant in the United States Army who had never set foot in the Kansas Territory. He had gained notoriety during the Mexican War for his bad moods, which he took out on soldiers under his care, his odor, which came from his refusal to take baths, and the fact he often went into battle inebriated.

Sergeant Zachariah Crabbe's superior officers didn't seem to care if he marched into battle in a drunken state as he was a mean drunk and mean is good when one is being paid to kill other men. There was also the problem of what to do with him if he wasn't fighting. The obvious solution was to lock him in the stockade, but because of his notoriously foul odor the jailer, who was a fastidious man, did not want him in his cell.

So Sergeant Crabbe continued to berate his lessers, stink similar to cat urine, and fight like a man who was too drunk to know fear...which he was.

A legend in his own unit, in all likelihood he would never have had a county named after him if it hadn't been for two reasons: his uncle was a well-known congressman and the obscure Battle of Drunken Goat Springs.

Drunken Goat Springs, a skirmish in the Mexican War, was named by the men on the winning side. The town, which was actually called Green Springs, was located in a no-man's-land which was either in Texas or Mexico; the residents didn't care.

The battle started when a small contingent of Mexican Army came up against an even smaller group of United States Army. Neither side was really in the mood to fight. The Mexicans were on retreat from a distant battle, and the United States regulars were wandering aimlessly, trying to find the rest of their detachment. They met at Green Springs and after a

half day of firing indifferent volleys at each other, both sides agreed informally to withdraw. The disengagement began and by late afternoon the Mexicans were moving south on the road out of town. The Americans, who occupied the town square, were preparing to travel north. The mutual adjournment of battle was uneventful until a goat wandered into the square, attracted by the springs for which the town was named.

Unfortunately, for the men who would die that day, Sergeant Crabbe noticed that the goat was drunk.

Before he discerned the intoxicated state of the goat, Sergeant Crabbe had ordered a Private Willingham to shoot the animal so they could have goat stew that evening. The private took aim, the goat collapsed, and Sergeant Crabbe called a halt to the execution.

"Don't be shooting that goat, private. It could have some disease that would bespoil the meat," the sergeant said. He then walked over to the goat for closer examination. The goat was still alive, the sergeant decided, however it was in a state of half stupor, a condition with which Sergeant Crabbe was familiar.

"By God, I do believe this goat is drunk," the sergeant proclaimed. "There must be some Mexicali tequila around here."

This fact was of great import to Sergeant Crabbe. He had been out of whiskey for the past few days and was hoping to return to civilization and restock his supplies. Immediately the sergeant turned to the few soldiers lying around the square and drafted a detail to investigate from where the goat had come.

"If an officer shows up inquiring of our whereabouts," Sergeant Crabbe told Private Willingham, "tell him we are trying to find a Mexican sniper who has been a bother all day...and private, shoot that goat before he sobers up and runs away."

Sergeant Crabbe's small force left the square and moved into a part of town still occupied by Mexican army. Wandering through a series of side streets, they came upon four Mexican soldiers sitting under a short juniper tree. The sergeant had one of his men who spoke Spanish inquire if they were the soldiers who had been giving tequila to a goat. They laughed and said they had been. Sergeant Crabbe said to tell them that he didn't hold with treating animals cruelly and besides, it was a waste of distilled spirits, which he had found to be a rarity in this country. He then had his interpreter ask them if there was any more tequila as he would buy it from them and then they could all go their separate ways.

Again, the Mexicans laughed and said there were only three bottles left and since they had stolen them, it didn't seem right that they should sell them to anyone. They told the soldier to tell the big soldier who stunk so badly to leave before they all got sick from his stench.

Sergeant Crabbe told his interpreter to tell the men he didn't take offense to personal attacks on his hygiene, but he never could abide a thief. He instructed his men to commandeer the remaining bottles and at that point one of the Mexican soldiers made the mistake of reaching for his rifle which lay on the ground. The Mexican soldiers were outnumbered 13-4, and in the ensuing gun battle two American soldiers were wounded, all four Mexicans were killed, and two bottles of tequila were broken.

The final two casualties depressed the sergeant.

The last bottle was taken into U.S. custody and the small force began retreating toward the town square. Unfortunately, the gunshots had been heard by both sides and though a U.S. officer named Vanlandingham was happy to ignore the gunfire and continue his retreat, a young, overzealous Mexican lieutenant formed a detail and led a charge into the center of town.

Sergeant Crabbe's men were now outnumbered 2 to 1. They were first pinned down, then overrun. In the hand-to-hand combat that followed, Sergeant Crabbe was forced to break the last bottle of tequila over the head of the Mexican lieutenant.

At the sound of increased gunfire, Captain Vanlandingham reluctantly gathered his remaining soldiers and joined the fight, turning the tide of battle back to the American's favor. With the overzealous Mexican lieutenant out of action nursing a head wound, the leaderless Mexican troops retreated and the Battle of Drunken Goat Springs was over.

As Sergeant Crabbe limped back into the square the goat staggered past him, which peeved the sergeant to a high degree. "I thought I told you to shoot that drunken Billy goat," he bellowed at Private Willingham, before he collapsed into the shade of a manzanita bush.

During the skirmish, Sergeant Crabbe had sustained a serious injury when a musket ball hit him in the elbow. Before the surgeon amputated his arm, he said, "if I'd had a snort to

steady my aim before the fight had started, I'd have hit that Mexican son-of-a-bitch who shot me."

Three weeks later, Sergeant Crabbe's uncle, asking for funding for the controversial war, gave an impassioned speech on the floor of Congress. The portion of his speech which ultimately swayed votes was his description of the battle that resulted when his nephew led his outnumbered troops into enemy territory seeking provisions.

He finished with a somber recital of the amputation. The only painkiller available, he explained, was a sip of whiskey, because of a lack of medical supplies.

Men on both sides of the aisle wept.

Later, when a name was needed for a county in north central Kansas, a distant relative remembered the hero of Drunken Goat Springs and Sergeant Crabbe and his last name took a place in history.

The fate of the goat is unknown to this day.

The Lincoln docked into the parking space, brakes emitting a dying shriek.

"Want a soda?" The old man looked at the boy.

"Sure." The boy reached for the door handle.

"If you want, after that I can tell you the real story about how this county got its name. Would you like that?"

"Okay," the boy said pulling on the handle.

"It doesn't have anything to do with crabs, but you knew that, didn't you?"

The boy nodded, opened the door, then..."Thanks grandpa...for buying me a pop and other stuff."

"You're welcome. You must have gotten your manners from your mother. Being polite was always important to her."

The boy shrugged, then jumped out of the car and headed for the front door of the drug store. The old man climbed out of the driver's side, emitting soft groans, making himself erect, a joint at a time, then started toward the door with the rusty awning hanging over it.

A slow shamble toward relief. Following a summer promise whispered by the hum of the air conditioner in the store window.

Essay Winner -- Adult

VICE AND VIRTUE CAN BE CONFUSED IN EDUCATION

by LORA K. REITER

In an essay comparing different views of humans, Professor Arvid Shulenberg suggests that the modern individual is an insecure creature who seeks happiness through adjustment. An important part of this thought is that modern people, having suffered serious blows to their various faiths, seek to adapt themselves to social patterns in an effort to avoid aloneness. Their conformity to those patterns and the acceptance they then seem to gain give them a feeling of belonging, a sense of security which they must have and which they may call happiness.

Whether or not we agree with this analysis of the reasons for our conforming tendencies, we probably agree that we do in some degree want the security of social acceptance and that we often adapt our behavior so as to get it. We're often tolerant when we want to be critical; we frequently smile when we'd rather glare; we occasionally listen when we want to talk. In brief, the social habits most of us practice are respect for others' privileges and weaknesses, modesty, and courtesy. We are trained to regard these habits as virtues and to expect the security of social acceptance as our reward for being so virtuous.

Well and good.

But what happens when we enter a university community of learners? How should we act in situations whose educational purpose is to promote our mental growth; whose method is often to confront convictions with new ideas and to present values with alternative systems; whose demands on us require that we be intellectually aggressive, that we test the security of

one meaning by exploring others, that we be constantly analytical, and that we be intolerant of intellectual sloppiness or laziness?

If we confuse social virtues with intellectual ones, if in this special role we equate self-expression and disagreement with selfishness and discourtesy, we will undoubtedly practice intellectual restraint. The result will be mental passivity-and only a second rate educational experience.

The point is, I think, that an intellectual situation is a very unusual one in which security is not a primary value and "courtesy" not a means to an end. It's a situation in which mental fitness is the end and in which intellectual calisthenics are the means. It takes mental coordination to do the calisthenics. It takes mental energy to gain the coordination. In such circumstances, therefore, mental passivity (intellectual courtesy) is a vice, a debilitating habit which handicaps an otherwise capable student.

Thinkers must criticize values and tempt virtues to see if the values and virtues are capable of standing the testing, of serving as abstractions to believe in and live by. Thinkers may have to experiment with subtle, distorting arguments in order to test the logic of a conviction or the intellectual horsepower of one who purports to know or to lead. They experiment very courteously, of course, as social persons, but they may have quite selfish intellectual motives. And they have to make such tests. These are necessary because humans are not mental equals. Their strengths and weaknesses must be known so that one can find intellectual power, be energized by it and brought to production or understanding.

The intellectual community is one in which a genuine caste system exists, where the plebs gather round and are inspired by the aristocrats (and this is not necessarily a gathering of students around a professor). It is one in which dialogues and disagreements are more common than silences and agreements. It is one in which intellectual risks are taken; people go out on ideational limbs just to see if they'll hold up or if someone else is tall enough to saw them off.

It is a world where ideational subversion and intrigue are always possible, where people's only defense of their most cherished beliefs may be their own mental agility and discipline. To gain that intellectual prowess, humans must carefully distinguish good social from good mental habits and engage themselves with great selfishness in thinking bouts with anyone who will accept the challenge.

The insecure social human may seek happiness through adjustment. But the insecure intellectual human uses his/her insecurity as creative energy to seek truth wherever s/he can find it. Conformity to an unexamined idea is not an intellectual virtue.

Autobiography Winner – Youth

MY LITTLE SISTER

by ERIN HERMESCH

Each Tuesday morning, my alarm clock goes off at 6:30 AM. It is never a wake-up call that I look forward to. However, after slowly awakening, I start to remember why my alarm clock is going off 15 minutes earlier than usual. I roll out of bed and quickly start to get ready. In approximately 45 minutes, I will be diving head first into a game of Candyland or Go Fish. I will be coloring and reading. I will be searching for items on the pages of an I Spy book. It's my favorite way to start the day.

I have been a member of BIGS in Schools since the end of my sophomore year. I originally decided to become a "Big" because I needed to have volunteer hours for National Honor Society. Over the past year and a half of waking up early and playing games with my "little," it has become more than just volunteer hours—much, much more.

When I walked into my first morning of BIGS, I really had no idea what to expect. All I knew about the program was that it was designed to help less fortunate kids who didn't have the best home life. I began to fill out the required paper work when the adult supervisor introduced me to my new little sister. Her name was Ashley, and she was a first grader. She was very small, and I could tell that she was very shy. I told Ashley my name and that I was

going to be her big sister. She gave me a worried look before she ran to the computer to play games.

Each Tuesday morning for the next three weeks, I would attempt to talk to Ashley and get her to play a game with me. She never would, but I kept coming back, hoping the next meeting I would make some progress. Finally, just one meeting away from the end of the school year, Ashley talked to me. I remember that I walked in and sat down at the table. The next thing I knew, someone was tapping on my shoulder. I turned around to see Ashley. I remember her first words to me.

"Erin, will you play this game with me?"

I, of course, excitedly proclaimed that I would, and we played Candyland until the time was up. I told her good-bye and that I would see her next week. She didn't say good-bye back though.

The next Tuesday, which was our final meeting before summer, I walked in hoping Ashley would be waiting for me ready to play another game. To my dismay, she wasn't. I searched for her everywhere, finally finding her hidden in a row of library bookshelves. I smiled to her and started talking to her about summer and the end of school. After a couple of minutes of silence, Ashley looked at me.

"Erin, will you be back next year?" she asked.

"Of course I will, and we can spend the whole year together." She smiled at me and ran off to eat breakfast.

Summer passed quickly, and the first couple weeks of school flew by. After learning about our first scheduled BIGS meeting, I began to get anxious to see Ashley. I wondered if she would remember me or if she would be more shy than before.

I was, again, awakened by my alarm clock the next Tuesday. I could barely get out of bed. After remembering Ashley, however, I quickly arose and rushed to the school. She is still the only reason I can get out of bed on Tuesday mornings. I walked into the room and saw a little girl flash by me. It had to have been Ashley, as she was the smallest girl in the program. I looked in the direction she ran and saw her hiding under a folded up lunch table. I went to the table, hoping she would run to me. She didn't. After waiting until the meeting was almost over, I went over to her hideout and asked what was wrong. She ran from me again, and by that time, our meeting time was up. I told her good-bye, and she looked away.

I left disappointed at the fact that she didn't even seem to recognize me or want to be with me. This process continued for the next three or four months. I would walk in, and she would run to the tables. I didn't let her hide out for long though. I always got her out of hiding and had the Candyland board set up. Even though she began to play with me, she rarely talked and still would never say good-bye to me when I left, but I kept going back.

Finally, she began to come around and would cuddle up close to me while I read her a book or when we would do a group activity. I could tell she was starting to get comfortable around me. My thoughts were verified when one of the other "littles" in the program asked Ashley who I was. Ashley responded saying, "She is my big sister Erin, and I love her."

That was what I had been waiting to hear. All of my early mornings and battles with her trying to get her out of hiding had paid off. The year continued, and we grew closer and closer. She would still never tell me good-bye when I left; it always bothered me. At our last meeting of the year, just like the previous year, she asked me if I would be back next year. I said yes and started to walk towards the door. I heard her running up behind me, so I turned around and was surprised that her arms were spread open.

"Why didn't you say good-bye?" she asked as she gave me a hug.

"Good-bye," I said with a smile on my face, hoping she would return the gesture.

"Good-bye!" she finally said.

The summer months began, and I would be lying if I said I continuously thought about Ashley. I rarely did and didn't think much of it. One day, I took my three-year-old cousin that I was babysitting to the pool. While swimming her out to touch the rope, someone grabbed my leg underwater. I looked down to see Ashley emerging from the water with her hair in her eyes and a big smile on her face. I was so surprised. Ashley followed me and my cousin around the pool until it was time for us to go. I told her good-bye, and she swam off before returning the gesture. I watched her go, wondering why she hadn't said anything back. However, I moved on and didn't think much of it.

Another day, I was in the local grocery store with my mom. Mom had stopped to talk to one of her friends, and I was listening in on the conversation. The next thing I heard was a voice behind me telling someone to go tell me hi. I turned around to see Ashley looking up at me while hiding behind her dad. I smiled at her, and she ran to me, threw her arms around my legs, and ran back to her dad. I was so surprised.

As senior year approached quickly, I, again, signed up to continue to be in BIGS in Schools. I struggled the first morning to get out of bed, but made it to the meeting. Ashley was excited to see me, and we talked the full time of the 45 minutes.

Now, as the year continues, I have found myself, once again, looking forward to Tuesdays. I have come to enjoy playing with a third-grade girl whom I never would have met otherwise. She looks up to me and that's what I wanted to gain from the program. Ashley has changed my perspective on so many levels. Attending all of our meetings has become a priority. If I would not show up, I know she would be heartbroken, and I may be the only consistent thing in her life.

I am not looking forward to the end of the year when I am greeted with the same question she asks at the end of every year. It will be hard to tell her that I won't be returning next year. Ashley has become the little sister that I always wanted. The National Honor Society volunteer hours are not what keep me going back. Knowing that Ashley will be greeting me with a hug when I walk in the door and that she will say good-bye to me when I leave are signs of progress and that I have made a difference; that is the real reason why I keep going back.

Autobiography Winner – Adult

A LITTLE GIRL'S MORAL EDIFICATION

by LORA K. REITER

Mother's father came to help us when Dad broke his back. He had just bought a small herd of cattle, and he fell from the haystack on Thanksgiving morning, I think it was. A string broke on the bale he was trying to pull loose. He crawled to the house, forbade mother to call a doctor, then gave in to her tears. Good thing he did, too. They drove him to Hays in an ambulance, and before Dr. Thompson even spoke to him, he ran his car keys up Dad's right foot. He kicked. "Not paralyzed," the doctor said. Dad got out of his last cast in May.

So Granddad and Grandma came to help us out, and I helped Granddad out. We had a little Case tractor, orange, wheels Vd in front, kind of delicate for a tractor, I thought. Even had a foot-feed, as we called accelerators, along with a hand throttle. I liked that tractor. It's the one I ran into the old Pontiac one day when everyone else was gone. I was probably nine, and I decided to drive it over to the mailbox. But I'd not noticed dad had set the rear wheels in, leaving the axle protruding about a foot. That's all it took. I went by the car and transported the rear fender with me.

Little kids think funny. What I did was back the tractor up precisely in its tracks, turn it off, run to the house for a banana and my BB gun, and head to the haymow. I remember figuring they'd be sorry they were mad at me when they found my bones. I remember, too, that pigeons sounded spooky when the barn was darkening.

I watched everyone come home, saw dad see the car, walk to the tractor, scratch his head, and start calling for me. "I'm not mad, Horsie," he yelled. "Come on to the house."

Forgiven but not confessed, I stayed put. Peg finally found me and led me down the ladder and to the supper table.

But I never blamed the tractor, not even in later years when I was raking hay and drove too fast over a ditch Dad had warned me about. Broke the worm gear. I'd turn the wheel right. The tractor would turn left. I couldn't conceal it, and I had to confess that truth, too.

The bent mower sickle, another day, another hay field, another tractor with the mower mounted to the frame and the rake attached behind that—the bent mower sickle was yet another story. The field had one tree, one tree with one pretty low branch. I figured I could duck in, catch the hay and turn back out before the exhaust pipe hit the branch. I did, too. But I forgot the mower blade. It looked like a vertical circumflex.

"Hit that branch with the sickle, Horsie?" Dad asked conversationally when we stopped for lunch.

"Yep," I answered equally conversationally.

That was that.

He never raised his voice about any of my depredations on his machinery. He even let me plow with him the summer after I graduated from college. My wages permitted me to travel around Europe before I settled in France for the next year. Needless to say, Dad paid me far more than my work was worth. But for once he had no repair bills for my services.

So I was comfortable on the little orange Case, and I got to maneuvering it pretty handily, it and the ensilage trailer which Granddad or I had to back into the long trench silo. It wasn't easy, but I figured out the tricks. (I said plenty of thanks for that skill in later years when I was pulling a little two-wheeler across country from one university to another and able to back around or into nearly any parking spot.)

I could drive the tractor better than Granddad, so he was willing for me to do it most of the time. That was good for me because, once we'd forked the ensilage on, we had to haul it out to feed bunks and fork it off, and I'd be so tired then I was grateful to stay on the Case—though I'd never have admitted that.

I wish I could say something about how it was to work with Granddad, but I can't. I remember only one moment during that whole winter. I'm not sure when it was or what it was. I know we were coming from the barn, and I'd crawled through a fence he was just poking his leg through. I asked him if he'd done something—fed a calf, maybe—and he looked at me with such anger. He said he had. And I turned away from his eyes.

Maybe I sounded accusing, or maybe I had hurried and abrupt. Maybe he was tired. Maybe I was tired. Maybe we'd discussed it before, and I aggravated him by mentioning it again. Maybe he didn't like working with an eleven year old girl. I just don't know. But that's the only vision I have of Granddad's face or our time together during all those weeks.

I was too little to understand what bothered him, I guess. In ways, I was a young eleven. We were a fairly isolated family, and I hadn't had much practice interpreting human behavior, adolescent or intergenerational.

Two other memories of the winter help me feel my youth.

Dad was taken to a Catholic hospital in Hays, and he was there a long time. Children under fourteen were not allowed in his wing, but I wanted to see him. My brother told me the rules, but he determined to try to help me, anyway. What he said was, "Now if anyone asks you how old you are, you tell them you're fourteen." I would have followed Max's instructions to hell and back. He was twenty-five!

We had just got on dad's hospital wing when it happened. Down the hall advanced a nun, black robe flowing behind, given her speed.

Like most children from "mixed" families who don't know anything about Catholicism except that it's a bone of contention, I had a healthy fear of that woman who was, I figured, more spirit than flesh. She didn't mince words:

"How old are you, child?"

Eyes focused straight forward on what I assumed was her waist, I lied as directed: "I'm fourteen."

She immediately took my hand and started leading me down the hall. "We'll have to talk with Mother Superior," she announced.

Max relinquished me far too easily, I thought, but when I looked back over my shoulder, he was staring right at me, nodding his head, and I was pretty sure that meant I should stick to our plan.

Into this huge room the nun and I went. Now I know I must then have felt like Stephen Daedalus marching into the prefect's office: fine wood, big desk, crucifixes. But unlike Stephen, I was not to be honorable and tell the truth. I was to lie.

I discovered that Mother Superior was a woman, which probably helped me some. She also had a low, gentle voice. After the nun leading me told her I was in the adults only wing and saying I was fourteen, Mother Superior asked,

"Are you fourteen, my child?"

I found the courage to look into her face, what part of it I could see, anyway. And I answered, "Yes, I am. I am fourteen years old, and I want to see my daddie."

Without an instant's hesitation, she said to the one who'd confiscated me: "Take her back." Calm and straight, she looked at me and concluded, without smiling: "She needs to see her daddie."

I wish I had been able to say thank-you. On second thought, I know she didn't need me to.

The other moment that helps me sense my eleven-year-old self was Uncle Jim's telling me I should stop by the office after school one night. I was staying with my sister and her husband while Mom and Dad were in Hays. How I got between Beloit and Asherville to go to school, I don't recall, but I was to go see my dad's brother before going to my sister's apartment.

Uncle Jim was, himself, a mystery to me. He didn't pay any attention to any of us. I know, now, that children, especially girls, made no sense to him. He was one of five sons; he had no children at that time; he was a good businessman who drove big cars, had fine clothes, including Stetson hats and western boots. He also had horses which he rode in parades. I never asked him to ride one. I suppose that's how remote he was to me. Little girls didn't seem to inhabit his universe. Anyway, when he asked me to come into the office—which had been my father's father's land office—it was a little like a command performance, and I was frankly scared.

I sat out front for a while, then he came out of his rear office and told his secretary we were going for a ride. I thought of horses, but he and I got in his car. We drove two blocks to Perkins' Shoe Store, the finest in town, and together in we went.

Mr. Perkins came out to wait on us personally. He had really black hair, really black glasses, and a really black mustache. He had on a sports coat, like what I always secretly hoped my dad would wear—but Dad didn't have one.

Uncle Jim and I sat in the leather chairs, and he said directly to Mr. Perkins, "This girl wants a pair of cowboy boots."

He was right. Next to a horse, I wanted cowboy boots more than anything else in the world. But how could he have known? And why was he doing this?

I was a very reticent little girl. Never once, when dad had taken me to town with him, had I asked for anything. He would always start, "Want a bottle of pop, Horsie?" And I'd sidle around his over-alls leg saying, "No." And he'd buy me a Royal Crown Cola and a Mars bar—which was very special because they cost a dime while the Snickers I really wanted cost a nickel. But I wouldn't say which I preferred, and I wouldn't say I wanted anything.

So, to have Uncle Jim, Uncle Jim, take me into this shoe store—we'd always bought our shoes at J. C. Penney's—and tell the manager what I wanted—and it really was what I wanted—was beyond credulity.

I remember walking around looking up at those boots and thinking, first, that it was happening; I was going to get a pair. Then I wondered how I would ever choose. Each was the most beautiful. Mr. Perkins and Uncle Jim stood back watching.

I finally selected boots which had a maroon shoe, a brown top with a yellow sunflower, and a green stem stitched all round with yellow. They were perfect.

I wore those boots for years—until I couldn't pull them on any more. I polished them every night and stuffed them with paper while I was at school. I loved them, and I still have them. They are cracked and faded, but they are pristine reminders of a joy I never expected. I was pretty sure they had something to do with how I helped Granddad, therefore Dad, that miserable winter, but Uncle Jim never said that. He never said thanks. He just said I wanted a pair of boots.

Motives are often obscure, especially to children. I suppose I do know why dad and my uncle acted as they did, gifting me when I had no sense of merit. But I don't know why my granddad acted as he did, rebuffing me, equally wordlessly, when I had no sense of guilt.

A lot happened that winter. Mother somehow drove safely back and forth to Hays on icy roads, pulling herself up by the steering wheel to see over instead of under it. Henrietta Boogaart, in whose home Mother stayed while Dad was in Hays, gave her a wondrous crucifix which opened up and had bottles of holy water and oil in it. (I imagine it is one of the reasons Mother and I drove for instructions a couple years later.) Granddad began to fall and discovered he was stroke-prone; Grandma's little dog died whelping; Uncle Harry brought her a Chihuahua puppy which we kept in the kitchen by placing a table-board at the dining room door. While Dad was still in his back-cast and unable to see down, he fell over that and broke

his wrist. The neighbors tilled Dad's ground, helped with the cattle, and planted his spring crops. Dad healed and came home for good.

But now, most of all, I remember driving that tractor and Dad's forgiving my abuse of it and the other machinery, the nun's forgiving my lie, Uncle Jim's oblique thanks, and Granddad's disapproval. Three to one—goods to bads—but Granddad's eyes challenge me still.

I was recently looking at a dear and departed aunt's personal address book—she put all sorts of things in it, carefully alphabetized, things such as, in the Ms, "The North American meadowlark's call is the closest to a chromatic scale found in nature"—and I found this in the Fs: "Forgiveness: our greatest need and our highest achievement."

I suppose that's what I didn't get from Granddad. Of course, I didn't know that. I didn't know I needed it. But then, I didn't know I needed cowboy boots, either. Love got loose between Dad and me, Uncle Jim and me, that mother superior and me, so that my mistakes or incompetence or outright lying were all ameliorated—maybe even transmogrified into little moments of grace. But somehow it got squelched between Granddad and me so that what might have been one of the finest experiences in either of our lives—those long months of a little girl and her grandfather working so hard together—got concentrated forever—in my mind, anyway—into one moment of anger for him and perplexity for me.

I can't interpret the moment any more than I ever could. I don't even want to now. It's just there—like the mulberry tree, the rattlesnake skeleton, and the north pasture hills.