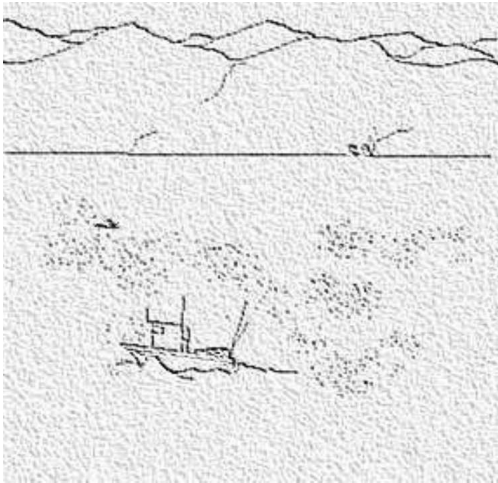


SUSIE

By Susannah Anderson

SUSIE



This is a picture I used to draw for myself when it was the view outside my bedroom window.

For my grandkids, as I promised. I hope you enjoy these stories and memories of the time when I was a little girl and they called me “Susie”.

With all my love.

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Candied Peel

My memories of Christmas long past are mostly bleak; the cold and damp, the tension, the bustle, the interminable practicing, the scolding of "angels" with drooping halos, the cold, always the cold. The practical presents, sweaters and socks. The dutiful letters afterwards; "Dear Aunt Allie, Thank you for the sweater. I like the colour." Even when I didn't.

The relief when it was all over for another year.

Against the greyness, a few sparkles of colour: fruit cake, for example, dark brown, moist, and chock full of yellow raisins and peel and red maraschino cherry pieces. Grandma made a batch every year, and mailed us one, to be rationed out, one tiny slice at a time, to all our visitors.

Once we got to spend Christmas at Grandma's house. Fruit cake, no limit. Pumpkin pie. Apple pie, still steaming from the oven, with a slice of yellow cheese on the side. We visited her friends; more pie,

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fireplaces with the fire burning, hot chocolate for the kids. Warm houses. No pageant. No letters.

I went skating with my uncle that year. He spent the whole afternoon with me, holding onto me so that I didn't fall, not once. We stayed out so long that my toes got chilled, and my aunt had to thaw them out in a basin of warm water. How that hurt! But she was warm and motherly; she made a fuss over me, setting me down in the softest chair by the fire, rubbing my feet gently with a fluffy towel.

A couple of years, the times I was sick, we had Christmas dinner in the hospital, with the staff. The old scratched tables from downstairs were set up in the lounge, and disguised with thick white tablecloths. There were fresh cedar branches and dishes of ribbon candy for decorations. Turkeys: we could smell them down in the kitchen long before the men brought them up. And mashed potatoes and gravy, and apple pie.

A week before Christmas, the men would go up the mountain and bring back the biggest, greenest, swishiest tree that would fit in the lounge. Twelve feet high, so wide that I couldn't reach the trunk without burying myself in the branches; smelling of sap and clean air and ancient moss; a tree to dream under. The nurses decorated it with armloads of tinsel and fragile red and silver balls. Someone strung lights through and around and over. I loved to sit and look at the blue lights deep in the branches; they made me think of misty summer nights.

A fragment from even farther back: I was sitting on a wooden bench in a cold auditorium, crowded in with all the other children. In the front corner of the room, a tall Christmas tree was decorated with paper chains and tubes wrapped in shiny cellophane, red and green and yellow. The program was finished. A fake Santa Claus came in; I could see right away that it was really one of the Sunday School teachers. He had a big pillowcase full of stuff, which turned out to be brown paper bags tied with twine, each with a tangerine and a handful of peanuts inside. Besides, I got one of the tubes off the tree, a booklet rolled up in cellophane that squeaked when I unwrapped it. I don't remember what my book was about, but my cellophane was red and glistening and I held it up and looked at the light. It made everything look warm.

Cow's Tail

"Who will help me knead the bread?" said the Little Red Hen.

'Not I,' said the Cow.

'Not I,' said the Duck.

'Not I,' said the Frog."

I yawned and turned the page, although I already knew what came next; "Then I will knead it all by myself," said the Little Red Hen."

"Knead" was a funny word. The "k" didn't say anything; you pronounced it "need". As in, "I need some new books." But I couldn't have any; I was being punished.

I had stolen four dollars from Mom's purse and walked down to the company store when I was supposed to be playing in the back yard.

There was a book in the window, a big one; "Mother Goose Stories and Poems". I had seen it when I went with Mom to get canned milk and stuff. The price was on the cover - only one dollar! But Mom wouldn't buy it for me.

The man at the store had wanted to know why I was there by myself, but I had my answer ready. It was Mom's birthday, I told him. I looked around and found a flowery cup and saucer, under three dollars. "That," I said. "Mom will like that." He took it off the shelf and wrapped it for me. I counted out the three dollars, then looked at my change.

"I still have a dollar," I said. "Can I have that book, too?"

I shouldn't have given the cup to Mom on her birthday. As soon as she unwrapped it, she frowned. "Where did you get the money for this?" she asked. No thanks, no smiles, just questions and more questions until I had to confess.

I got the belt for that. Worse, I had to take the cup and the book back to the store and tell the man I lied. And I didn't have time to read more than a few of the stories in the book!

It was a good thing, as Mom and Dad said, that my birthday was in the summer. I could go to school as soon as I was six, and not have to wait until next year like the kids who had their birthdays after Christmas. There would be books to read at school. But until then, I would have to make do with what I had. I wouldn't even get a book for my birthday.

So I read "The Little Red Hen" again. And "The Sky is Falling!" with Chicken Little and all the farmyard creatures. And the oatmeal box,

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even the French part. And sometimes my Bible, the one with the pictures in it; Moses in the Bulrushes, Daniel in the Lion's Den, Jesus Knocking at the Door. It was hard to read, though, almost as hard as French. The stories made more sense the way they told them in Sunday School.

September came, finally. School. Two rooms, one for grades one to three, one for the big kids. My room had small desks, all lined up in rows, and a blackboard with the letters of the alphabet printed at the top. At the side, under the window, there was a two-shelf bookcase, half-full of books. When I looked closer, I saw that most of them were the same one, over and over; "Dick and Jane". But there were a few different ones. I wanted to start reading them right away.

There were rules. The teacher spent most of the first morning telling us about them. We had to sit quietly in our desks. No talking. No whispering. No looking around. No getting up from the desks without permission from the teacher. No reading, except at lunch hour. Except for the textbooks, of course, but only when we were told to. "Dick and Jane" was one of the textbooks, and we got to take it home, so I read it all the first week. The teacher moved me up to Grade Two.

At lunch hour, the other kids ate quickly and ran out to play. I sat alone in the warmth and the quiet, reading. I didn't mind not being out in the rain with the others; I was never any good at their games, anyway. I got tired too easily. Playing tag, I was always "it", and never managed to tag anybody until they got bored and waited for me. Reading was better.

All the books on the shelf were easy; baby books. There was even another copy of "The Little Red Hen". I read the rest over a few lunches, then the Grade Three textbook. The arithmetic books had story problems; I read those, too, when the teacher wasn't looking. We weren't supposed to read ahead, she said. Another rule.

That was it. There was nothing more to read. And I had to read the textbook along with my grade, with the book open to the right page, following along as the other kids struggled to read in their turn. "Dick and Jane are go-ing to the farm. They are go-ing to vi-sit Gra-nd-father and Grand-mother."

Outside our windows, the sunshine faded. It was going to rain again; the seagulls were flying high, soaring along almost without moving their wings. I wondered what it felt like to be up there in the wind and the quiet.

"Susie! Stop daydreaming! Pay attention!"

I looked back at my book. The girl in front of me was stumbling over an easy word. Jane was feeding the chickens. Always chickens!

At the end of the blackboard behind the teacher's desk, there was a connecting door from our classroom to the next. It was usually closed. One morning our teacher ran out of chalk and went next door to borrow some. She left the door open -- "Don't talk, children. I will hear you." -- and I had a good view of the window wall. There were two bookcases, crammed full of books!

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I was careful not to let my attention wander for the rest of the morning; I didn't want the teacher mad at me. At lunch time, I stood quietly by her desk until she gave me permission to speak. "Miss Hansen, may I go next door and borrow a book to read?" I remembered to say "please", too.

I expected a bored "Okay", plus a few more rules to remember. I got two; I was not allowed in the next room. And I was not allowed to read those books; they were for Grade Four and up.

Wishing doesn't make things happen. You have to act if you want results; so they told me. But I did nothing to get at those books, I swear it. I did sit staring at that shut door as if my eyes could burn a hole through it, as if I could really see those forbidden books just beyond. What magical stories did they hold? What singing poems? What new riddles? I got in trouble for daydreaming again; I didn't care.

One Saturday morning just after the first frost, a man came running up our hill, shouting for Dad. The school was on fire! Behind him, smoke billowed up, a darker grey than the drizzly sky.

Everyone went to help; our family from the top of the hill, mill-workers and their wives from the river road, men down from the bunkhouses on the mountain-side. Someone got the fire hose unrolled and hooked it up. They took it around the back, where the chimney was. In front, men were bringing the desks and tables to the school door; women piled them higgledy-piggledy in the yard. We kids hung around, as close as we dared, getting yelled at when we got underfoot.

Someone came out of the school carrying a pile of books and dumped them on a handy table. More books followed, armloads of books, whole boxes of books! When the school was empty, everyone went around back where the fire was. I could hear it crackling back there, but I ignored it and went over to investigate the stacks of books. I found one that looked interesting, grabbed a chair and sat down to read, my back to the empty school.

It was a story about a mouse who couldn't run as fast as the other mice. He was always last in every race. He was always late to dinner. The other mice called him "Cow's Tail". In the end, of course, he proved to be smarter than the others, and they were sorry they had laughed at him.

The fire was getting bigger. The roof of the school caved in. I chose another book. And another.

Everyone came back to move the desks farther away from the building. They shooed me away; I grabbed another book and sat on a rock across the road, reading.

The school burned down. The teacher left town. We held classes after that in the church, with Mom as the teacher. I got to read anything I wanted.

Wishing didn't make it so. I swear it. It just happened.

Take Away

I was eight years old and having trouble with arithmetic.

Addition was fine, even multiplication. It was subtraction that bothered me. The concept didn't make sense: if you made 20 egg-salad sandwiches, you had to make 16 more if Mom had asked for three dozen. Addition. And then Mom took them to the Ladies' Aid and they were eaten. All of them. Mom didn't come back with, say, 23 sandwiches; that would mean failure, the sandwiches were no good. 36 egg-salad sandwiches take away 23; the ladies only ate 13. Unthinkable!

Even the words the teacher used (Miss Morton, her name was, but we kids didn't pronounce the "t" if she was out of the room.)-- even the words she used made it harder. "Take away!" Dad had always taught me using the proper words: "subtract, minus, difference." "Take away" made my soul rebel, made me want to clutch that number, resist that robbery.

And now I had a whole page of subtraction problems to do and Miss Morton mad at me. It was her fault, too. Staying after school was a normal punishment; 15 minutes for minor sins like whispering, half an hour for passing notes. Sometimes we had lines to write, too: "I will not chew gum in school, I will not chew gum in school, I will not...etc."

But the verdict today had been, "You will stay here until you finish that page!" Didn't she know I couldn't do subtraction fast? So why was she glowering at me from behind her desk, tapping her pencil like a metronome?

I was trying. 56 "take away" 27. 7 from 6? Can't be done. Add 3 to 7, get 10. Take away 10. 46. Add the 3 again. 49. Write down the 9. But it was 27, not 7. Take away -- subtract -- the 10 from 50. 40. Subtract the 20. 20. Write down the 2. 29. Did that make sense? 29 plus 27 equals 56. Yes!

On to the next: 31 take away 17. Why are they always so hard? 7 plus 3 is 10. 7 plus 4 is 11.

"Stop daydreaming!" Miss Morton was really angry now. "You're looking out the window instead of working!" Was I? I was thinking. I didn't have to look at the numbers to shuffle them around. I found my place again. 31 minus 17.

I had done a few more and was pondering the intricacies of 42 minus 28 -- 7 times 6 minus 7 times 4; wouldn't that give me 7 times 2, and I could skip all that bother of 2 minus 8 -- when Miss Morton distracted me again. She had come out from behind the desk and was

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almost running down the aisle to my seat. "You're looking out the window again!" she yelled. Her face was red. "Show me what you've done," she said.

I handed her the page, cringing. She would be mad. She was. "Not even half done! And just look at the time!" She flapped the page down on my desk. "Now get to it! And don't let me catch you daydreaming again!"

14. 60 minus 36. 2 dozen. 24. 93 minus 87. Miss Morton was tapping her pencil again. Somewhere a door slammed; the last teachers going home. Mom had always said that if we got into trouble at school, we would get double at home. It was late; she would know I'd been kept in, hadn't just been dawdling on the way home. What would she do to me? A tear dropped onto the page and I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. 93 minus 87. 6.

"Stop your bawling!" Miss Morton was at my elbow again. "What, only two problems in all that time? Hurry up!" She stood there, tapping her pencil on my desk now. I couldn't think this way. 104 minus 47. No. 49. I wiped away tears, trying to see better. 4 minus 9. The numbers meant nothing any more; a triangular flag above a round one.

And now Miss Morton grabbed my arm. "I'll teach you to hurry!" she said. "Hold out your hand." Her fingernails dug into my flesh. Long, red-painted fingernails, biting my upper arm; they hurt. I held out my palm obediently but kept watching those red nails. The ruler came down on my palm, once, twice, three times. A trickle of red started down my

arm; was it blood on her nails or polish on my skin? Miss Morton went back to her desk, took out a tissue and dabbed at her fingers. "Get out of here, I'm sick of you," she said.

I ran all the way home.

And Mom was leading a Women's Bible Study and I interrupted them and she looked at me and said, "Where have you been?"

And I blurted out, "Miss Morton kept me in to do arithmetic and she hit me and cut my arm." I stopped, appalled. I hadn't meant to tell about the hitting; now I was in real trouble. And I was crying again. I ran to my room and hid my face in my pillow.

A minute later, Mom came to me. She heard my story, washed the dried blood off my arm and replaced it with mercurochrome. She didn't scold.

Over supper, Mom reminded Dad that he was a trustee on the school board, whatever that was. He ate quickly and went out right away, even though it was his night for studying.

The next morning we had a substitute teacher. Miss Morton never came back.

Snow

Sometime in the fall, when every day was grey and wet, when the coal-oil lamps were lit as soon as supper was over and the eaves dripped all through the long night, the weekly boat delivered a spark of colour; the Christmas catalogue from Sears-Roebuck, one per household. Two inches thick, smelling of fresh ink, glossy and bright. The Wish Book, Dad called it.

The first half of the book was the clothes section. Women's clothes first, starting with the cover; the most elegant lady in a long coat. Gloves and hat and jewelry; city clothes, Sunday morning clothes. Inside, more of the same, then housedresses, jackets, shoes, purses. Underwear, pages and pages of it. Corsets with whalebones, with hooks and eyes, with laces. Stockings and garter belts. I studied it all carefully. Someday I would be a woman and wear things like that. It all looked very uncomfortable, though.

Men's clothes came next; I flipped the pages quickly. Children's clothes; little girls in perfect ringlets wearing birthday-party dresses. On to the tools, the washing machines, the dishes.

And finally, the toys. A dozen or so pages near the back of the catalogue. Dolls and looms for the girls. And the important part, the purpose of it all: the boys' section. Trucks. Black metal trains that shot real sparks. Meccano. Tinkertoy. Microscopes. Ah!

In these pages I would find Christmas presents for my brothers. And wish. I knew I would get doll clothes or a loom or a sweater, as usual. But just look at that chemistry set! Just read the list of items in that box! What I could do with that!

I read every word of that toy section, even to the descriptions of the extras: "XY94357 – Batteries for the XY94356, set of four. \$0.99."

Eventually the order form was filled out, with the code numbers double-checked, the totals added up. I passed the catalogue on to Dave, reluctantly.

When the 1951 catalogue came, Mom told us to just look at it, but not to order anything; we would be getting money for Christmas, and we would go to the city – to the States! – to buy our own presents. She gave me \$5.00, all for myself. I folded the bill into an inch-wide square and put it into the coin purse I used for my candy money at camp. But what would I buy with it? There was nothing in the girls' section of the catalogue that appealed to me. I had my doll. She was old and half-bald, but I didn't need another. What for? I had two looms already. And I

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couldn't buy boy stuff; people would laugh. I checked the prices of Meccano sets, though.

In December, we took the boat down to Vancouver. We did the normal things: ate in Chinatown, visited some people in stuffy houses, waited for Mom and Dad in church offices. At a lot where a row of pointy flags flapped in the drizzle, Dad bought a car.

And then it was Christmas Day, and there was no more business to be attended to, and we had eaten pie and pickles and cranberry sauce in a brown house with a monkey tree in the yard, and we were free at last. We crossed the border with the last shred of daylight.

It was snowing when we drove into Seattle. I rolled down my window and caught some on my sleeve until Mom made me shut the window again. Dad was driving slowly, looking for a motel.

It's Christmas," he said. "We're going to find a place with television."

I thought he was joking at first, until he passed several motels without stopping. And then, there it was; "Television in all the rooms," the sign said. And below, in blinking blue neon, the magic word, "Vacancy". Dad pulled into the driveway.

We sat on the beds in the semi-dark, watching. I had never seen a television before; it was like seeing a filmstrip without the projector. Except that the picture was much smaller. Greyer, too. And there was something wrong; the voices were staticky and snowflakes blurred the

image. “It’s the weather,” Dad said. “Can’t be fixed. I’m sorry; should I turn it off?”

Mom said yes; we kids said no. The television stayed on.

The movie was a story about toys who had come alive. Tin soldiers marched and saluted, stuffed animals rushed about, a ballerina doll got off her pedestal and danced down the street. There were doll-house castles with towers and drawbridges, prancing wooden horses, a marching band. And around it all the snow swirled. At times, a deep fog would sweep over the screen, a fog that permitted only glimpses of moving figures, a flash of bare arm here, a carriage wheel there.

The voices were no clearer. A soldier talked excitedly with the ballerina; I could hear his tone but not his words. Trumpets blared, then faded in mid-note. A town crier shouted – I couldn’t make out what.

I couldn’t follow the story. But it didn’t matter; it was still wonderful, magical. Just right, really; why should mere mortals expect to see clearly into this other world?

The weather worsened, outside our window and on the screen. Just before the blizzard struck, I got a final glimpse of the ballerina back on her stand, on the tip of her left toe, arms over her head, the right foot pointing at the horizon. She was spinning slowly.

She danced through my dreams that night.

The next morning, Boxing Day, we went shopping. “Everything’s on sale,” Mom said. “We’ll get really nice things this year.”

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In a store where the boys bought trucks, I found a new wig for my doll, marked down to four dollars. Back at home, Mom helped me glue it onto her head. I combed the hair back and tied it in a bouncy pony-tail just like the one the ballerina wore.

Heat waves and other Illusions

We were driving through Arizona in the summertime. It was hot. You couldn't sit back on your seat in the car; you would get stuck to it. Where the sunshine fell on the upholstery, it burned your skin. Dad was driving in his underwear, the red shorts with the fire-engines on them. Dave and Mark, in the back seat with me, wore shorts, too, but Mom and I were properly dressed. I lifted my skirt occasionally and fanned my legs, but it didn't help much. It was hot, hot, hot.

Ahead of us, the highway looked as if it were underwater, cool, clear water rippling and splashing. As we raced towards it, it disappeared, leaving empty grey highway. Mom explained about optical illusions and mirages. I began looking out the side window, hoping to see a real mirage; and oasis, perhaps, with a palm tree or two, a pool, maybe a donkey resting in the shade. But I saw nothing out there but desert. Parched brown dust, rocks, half-dead shrubs, a few cacti. Nothing green,

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not even the leaves. Not a real green, anyway, not a live green; just a greyish, dusty, dreary pretense.

At noon, Dad pulled over on the side of the road. We unstuck ourselves from the seats and piled out of the car.

“Out of the frying pan...” Mom said.

She handed out sandwiches and we sat on the running board in the shadow of the car and ate. Dad wandered around, stretching. A little way off, he stopped, then waved and shouted, “Hey, look! Water!”

We caught up to Dad and passed him, running. Ahead, sunlight glinted off a smooth surface; no waves, no heat ripples here! I didn’t notice until later that there was no green fringe around this pond, just the everlasting grey shrubs. We slowed as we came near. Something was wrong; the water was too dark, too still. Deep and muddy, maybe. No good for wading.

And we came to the edge and stood staring.

“What is it, Dad?” Dave asked.

“Tar. Melted tar. It’s a tar pit.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Out of the rocks. Don’t fall in!” This last sharply, to Mark, who was poking at the surface with a dead stick.

It was Dave that found the second pool, just beyond a clump of shrubs. It was a smaller pit, but with an interesting addition. Shoulder-deep in the tar, struggling, was a skunk, furry black in the smooth black

of the entrapping tar. We stood and watched as the tar crept up its back. The more it fought, the faster it sank.

“How did he get there, Dad?”

“Fell in. Probably thought it was water and tried to get a drink.”

“He’s going to drown. We’ve got to help him!”

Dad found a sturdy pole and poked at the tar. It was up to the skunk’s muzzle now, lapping at the white stripe in the centre of its back. With the pole, Dad managed to pry up the chin – just a bit. “I’ll try under its belly,” he said. Sweat ran down his face; he brushed it away with the back of his hand and buried the end of his stick deep in the tar. He grunted, then; “It’s coming!” he said. The stick brought something black and sticky out of the tar; the skunk’s tail. Progress!

And then the skunk sprayed.

We were lucky, Mom said later, that the rest of us were standing on the opposite side of the pit. Dad used up all our drinking water trying to wash the skunk smell off. Behind the car, he changed into a clean shirt and his old stripy underwear. Mom threw his shoes and the fire-engine shorts into the ditch.

We drove away from there. It was hot and the car smelled, even with all the windows down, and the desert was dry and dusty. I didn’t look for mirages any more.

“I’m sorry, little skunk,” I thought. “We tried. That was all we could do. I’m sorry.”

The Finger

My brother Dave was tough. He could hold a lighted match under his hand until I smelled the burnt flesh. He caught bumblebees and let them sting him. He never winced, not once. I thought he was crazy. Mom said he was just like her brothers—accident prone.

Danger held a strange fascination for him. If he fell out of a tree, he climbed higher the next time. He played with knives and hatchets. He rode his bike over impossible hills.

We did everything together, he and I. He pranced over creeks on slippery, mossy logs; I crawled, protesting. He waited for me, across the creek, at the bottom of the hill, in the rafters of the old cannery. I followed everywhere he went, slowly, cautiously.

The summer I turned ten and Dave nine, we were in Toronto, staying with my “Nana”, Grandma Anderson. Mom and Dad were busy with grown-up stuff; I remember seeing our old Dodge from the window of the Yonge Street bus. License number U9O64; yes, that was ours. It

was parked by the curb, a squarish black car among all the bright mid-50's models. I didn't see my parents.

Nana had a big, sunny back yard, surrounded by deep beds of flowers, daisies and hollyhocks and snapdragons. High fences, a tidy shed; not much trouble there to get into. We spent too many quiet hours there, catching bees and wishing we were home again. We had to be good in Nana's house.

Grandma Whitelaw took us some days. Her house was more fun, inside and out. She had a messy, crowded basement where I found stacks of moldy-smelling magazines with romantic love stories continued from one to the other. On the main floor, Grandpa had his study. I remember bookshelves and a huge roll-top desk and the crokinole board, always waiting for us on the footstool. Dave was good; his aim was deadly. I always lost to him, but somehow I beat Grandpa most of the time.

We didn't see much of Grandma. She didn't talk to children; she fed us and left us to our own devices. We weren't allowed in her kitchen, except to eat.

We didn't go upstairs. Grandma rented out the front bedroom, at the top of the stairs. We had to be quiet in the house so as not to disturb the roomer.

It didn't matter; there was another big back yard here, a better one than Nana's from our point of view. Apple trees to climb and harvest. A tumble-down shed with long-unused gardening tools. Long grass and dandelions, mud to dig in.

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Dave found an old push lawnmower, and we cut a few paths across the grass. It was heavy work. We gave up. Dave flipped the lawnmower upside down and examined the blades. “Watch out, they’re sharp,” I said. He ignored me and spun one of the wheels. The knives flashed.

“Come here, turn the wheel for me,” he said. He picked a dandelion and watched as the head was lopped off. Another. A blade of grass.

“Faster!” He held a whole handful of grass up to the blades. Tiny green flakes flew up into our faces. “Faster!” I started to use two hands. Dave fed in more dandelions.

“There’s blood on your finger,” Dave said. I stopped spinning the wheel and looked. He was right. My finger tip was dangling at a strange angle, and now the blood was dripping onto my dress. It didn’t hurt, though.

Dave jumped up and ran into the house, yelling. I followed him, holding up my hand—the nail portion flopped back, held on by a tiny scrap of skin. Dave ran through the kitchen, down the dark hall, up the stairs to where the sun shone unexpectedly from the roomer’s flung-open door. He was screaming, though I don’t remember the words, only Grandma holding him by the shoulders and asking what was wrong. The roomer, an old, old lady with white hair, stood in her doorway. Behind her, a bright afghan slipped off her still-moving rocker.

Two steps down from the landing, I waited, repeating quietly, “My finger’s off, my finger’s off.” The blood ran down my arm. It still didn’t hurt.

Eventually Dave calmed down enough to point at me, and I was taken care of. A doctor sewed my finger-tip back on. It took 15 stitches, a fact I was inordinately proud of.

I wore a big bandage and a sling for what seemed like months. Now it did hurt- bad, and all the way to my elbow. I hated to get dressed and undressed; I had to lower my hand to put it through the sleeves and then my finger throbbed for a long time. I didn’t dare complain; Dave wouldn’t.

Back at Nana’s, I was spoiled. I got to sleep in Aunt Connie’s bedroom, with the big cedar right up against the window, so the curtains never had to be pulled. The room had a slightly sweet smell; an odour of well-worn blankets, old wood, wicker and ancient varnish. Aunt Connie had a silver dressing-table set, two brushes, a hand mirror and a funny little tool I didn’t recognize. She didn’t clean the hair out of her brush like I had been taught to, and I made a little rope out of my gleanings and compared it to my hair colour. In the scant light from the window, it looked almost the same.

Eventually the bandages came off and I was demoted to my previous status. I wore the sling for another week until it became a nuisance.

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The pain faded, but never completely vanished. For years, on rainy days my whole hand ached. The finger-tip was extremely sensitive; just picking up a book the wrong way sent stabs of fire down the bones. Today, fifty-plus years later, it hurts to clip that nail.

Every time I see Dave now, he has a new story to tell of his visits to Emergency wards. He doesn't seem to mind. I think he could still hold a candle to his hand until it cooked.

Set of One

You have to understand; I wasn't like the other girls. Growing up in the forties, I was expected to play with dolls, keep my clothes clean, and scream at the sight of a snake. Instead, I worked on my brother's Meccano set and ripped my dresses climbing trees. I went frog-catching with my brothers and filled my pockets with snakes.

My curiosity was unfeminine. I wanted to know things. I took clocks apart. I read about engines and dissected sea cucumbers. I came home smelling of fish. Not a proper girl, at all.

When I was in grade six, we moved to WhiteRock. We bought a house on Thrift Street, close to the centre of town; a house on a regular street, with neighbours on both sides and cars going by. Except for Christmas visits to the family in Toronto, I had never lived in town before.

It was hard to make friends in school that year. At recess and lunch hour, the boys played rough-and-tumble games; I often saw my

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brother Dave in the scrum, racing after a ball, muddy and scruffy-looking, with his jacket askew and his hair tousled. We girls stood around on the edges of the schoolyard, talking, sometimes taking turns skipping while the others chanted skipping rhymes. "'One, Two, Three, Out goes You.'" I was no good at skipping; my feet wouldn't behave. I was always "out".

Girls and boys in town generally ignored each other. Outside the classroom, we had no activities in common. Boys wouldn't skip, and girls couldn't kick a ball. I watched the boys at play; the other girls turned their backs.

One lunch hour early in the school year, a football rolled into the tall grass near our skipping place. The boy that came after it found a garter snake, besides. He held it up, yelling, "Look what I caught!" The snake curled around his arm, and he shook it off, holding it away from his body. Even writhing in its attempts to escape, it reached almost to the ground. I wished I had found it.

The girls in the skipping line-up saw the snake next. They screamed and scattered. The snake catcher turned in our direction. "Hey, girls!" he taunted, "Look at my nice snake!" The girls ran, squealing, leaving the skipping rope abandoned in the dust like a second, longer snake. I stood my ground, but the boy ignored me and chased the other girls, waving the snake.

He couldn't run as fast as the girls because the snake kept getting tangled around his legs, so finally he stopped, wound up his arm like a

baseball pitcher, and tossed the snake high into the air. The girls zigged and zagged, pushing each other out of the way, still shrieking. The snake fell short.

I saw my opportunity. I ran and grabbed the snake before it slithered under the fence. It was the fattest one I had ever caught; it was a pity to lose it, but I spun it around my head and threw it back at the boys.

A snake on the ground or in the hand is a different matter than a flying snake. The boys ran out from under it. Some of them even yelled.

"Sissies!" I shouted. "Babies!" I turned to join the rest of the girls.

Daydreams develop fast. I was already relishing my rôle as brave heroine, recipient of the other girls' admiration and gratitude. Now they would be friends with me. I admit that I swaggered a bit as I walked towards them. They all spoke at once.

"You touched the snake!"

"Ick!"

"Go away!"

"Don't touch us!"

"Scram!"

So it was that the students were divided into three sets: girls, boys, and me, a set of one. For a long time, I wandered alone, collecting chestnuts under the trees, enticing squirrels with crumbs from my lunch, listening for seagulls. Oh, to be at home – my old home – watching the gulls squabble on the beach, the empty beach!

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The football season ended, and the boys turned to other pursuits. One noon hour, I found Dave and a few other boys kneeling in the dirt, shooting marbles. I stood and watched. No-one noticed me until, when a fresh circle was drawn for a new game, I said, "Can I play?"

Most of the boys looked at me strangely, but Dave just moved over to let me kneel beside him. He didn't think of me as an outsider nor, probably, even as a girl. One of the others started to protest, then thought better of it. Dave lent me a handful of marbles from his bag, to start with. "The cats-eye is a good shooter," he told me.

It was, and so was I. I won, over and over. "Beginner's luck," the boys called it that day, but after that I played every day and won a fair share of the games. It probably helped that I practiced obsessively at home, playing against Dave with the agreement that any marbles I won, I would give back. Any he won, he kept. Still, my bag was always full.

So I won a grudging respect from those few boys. On our knees in the mud, we were equals. Otherwise, they ignored me, like everyone else did.

The one other positive thing about that school year was my teacher. A man, young, brown-eyed, casual. He laughed easily and often. He sat on his desk. Once, wandering about the classroom, he got talking to the kid next to me and sat on my desk. He was wearing a brown tweed jacket, unbuttoned, and smelled of wool and tobacco. I pictured him at home with a pipe and a mournful hound, relaxing by the fireplace,

reading Sherlock Holmes. I don't know if he was a good teacher; I do know I did my best work to earn his approval.

One afternoon, Mr. Donaldson assigned us an exercise in our spelling books, then said, "I have to be out of the classroom for a few minutes. You are to stay in your seats and work. No talking. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" In unison.

"And anyone I find out of their seat when I come back, will stay after school for half an hour. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

He left, and I set to work on my spelling, writing sentences out in my best handwriting, careful to keep my lines straight and my hands off the page until the ink dried. I could hear smothered giggles behind me. A desk scraped on the floor. I didn't turn around.

Then a hand clamped on my ankle, and someone yanked at my shoe. I kicked, but the shoe was gone. I turned around in my seat. The shoe was skittering down the aisle. One of the boys in back fielded it and waved it over his head.

"Susie, come get your shoe!"

"Give it back!"

"Come get it!"

"We're not allowed; give it back!"

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Of course he wouldn't send the shoe back. I argued and pleaded. All the boys laughed. The girls looked uncomfortable, but kept quiet. I begged. Big joke.

I finally had to go down the aisle to get my shoe, but then the kids started to play catch with it, with me in the middle trying to snag it as it flew past. When Mr. Donaldson walked in, the last catcher kicked the shoe my way, leaving me standing there with no excuse.

The teacher was nice about it; I had to stay after school, since that was what he had said, but he didn't scold. At three thirty, he let me go. It didn't seem that long. I had spent the time looking at the map behind the desk, wondering how they had picked those colours for those countries. Why were the commonwealth countries pink?

The walk home was peaceful. No brothers to watch out for, no other kids to avoid. I had the streets to myself. I stopped on the way to look at flowers and to pet a cat. There was a dog in one house behind a sturdy fence. He always barked at the kids. Today, since no-one was watching, I stood and barked back at him until he was so mad there was white froth around the edges of his mouth. I detoured a block out of my route to look at a big house half-hidden behind ragged broom hedges. I wondered, again, who lived there; I never saw any movement around the house. Maybe it was haunted.

When I got home, Mom was waiting in the kitchen. "Why did you have to stay after school?" she asked.

"I don't know." I was still thinking about that haunted house; school wasn't important any more.

"You don't know? You don't *know*? What are you hiding?" Oops.

"I mean, nothing, I got in trouble for nothing."

Too late. Mom didn't believe me, even when I tried to explain. She accused me of lying and gave me three good whacks on the hand with the kindling. When I still insisted that all I had done was try to get my shoe back, she increased the punishment. I was sent to my room until suppertime. No reading, not even school books. No cat for company.

I lay on my bed under the eaves. I permitted myself to cry a little; it wasn't fair! Outside, the boys were shouting in the maple trees. I had to stay here, looking at the boring white ceiling and the plain white walls and my empty bookshelf. A tiny window, too high to see more than grey sky. Cracked and worn linoleum over warped floorboards -- hmm. It would be a challenge to try and shoot a marble straight over that surface. Good practice. I dug the bag out of my jacket pocket and chose a shooter and a target. I had a whole hour before suppertime.

Fish Story

This is a true story, insofar as I am reporting what I saw and what was told to me. For the part that is hearsay, you will have to judge for yourself.

I was thirteen or thereabouts. We were living in one of the two houses belonging to a long-abandoned cannery, on our own island across the channel from Nootka Island. Our only neighbours were the Randalls next door, with their two little boys, and the Augusts in a floathouse moored on the beach; they had three girls. Total population: 14.

The “town” was crammed into a dimple in the coastline: a small flat area between two creeks, the cannery on pilings over the water, the dock enclosing a harbour barely big enough for our pair of boats. A rocky cliff shielded the bay from the north; beyond was a smaller inlet with its own few yards of beach and a mossy bank. We children sometimes scrambled through the bush to picnic there.

To the south there was nothing. Mountainsides plunging into the sea. Douglas fir cut off abruptly at the high-tide line. Spray hissing over black rocks. Perilous waters, impassible forests. No place for humans.

One Saturday afternoon Mom took the canoe out alone and went south. I didn't see her go, but I remember how I looked up from catching crabs on the beach and saw her coming home. First, the prow of the canoe appearing from beyond the promontory, a green triangle with a tiny bow wave, then Mom kneeling amidships, back straight, paddling fast. When she rounded the end of the wharf and saw me watching, she raised her paddle high in the air. I waved back, and she dipped the paddle again and spun in to her landing. I went back to my rock-turning.

When I went into the house later, Dad was in the kitchen gutting a large salmon, and Mom was leaning over the counter, talking excitedly. This is her tale:

She had gone out for a quiet paddle, heading straight out across the channel, but once she was beyond the shelter of the bay, she saw a pod of seals just off the coast to the south. She turned and went towards them. As she approached, she saw that they were playing; climbing onto the rocks and diving off, leaping and cavorting in the water. They didn't seem to notice Mom in the canoe.

She drew closer, paddling as quietly as she was able. The seals ignored her. They were throwing something repeatedly into the air; it looked like a kids' game of catch. Mom held her paddle still, just steering

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as she drifted closer. Occasionally, she took a small stroke, a slow, gentle push in the right direction.

The game went on. Now Mom could see that the seals were throwing fish, flipping the live salmon out of the water, snatching them before they escaped, tossing them into the air again. Mom eased in closer, almost holding her breath. The seals made way for the canoe until she was right in the centre of the pod. And the game went on.

How long she floated there, she wasn't sure. The seals barked and splashed, dove under the canoe and came up on the other side, curved and danced around her. Salmon flew.

And then – thud! – a fish landed in the canoe and writhed between the ribs. The seals stopped their play. They looked at Mom; she looked back at them. Nobody moved. After a while, Mom said, “Thank you,” turned and paddled out of the circle. When she glanced back, the water was empty; the seals were gone.

Mom told us – she swore it – that the salmon was a gift. It didn't land in her canoe by accident, she said; she was convinced that the seals knew what they were doing. It was a good salmon, too; firm, pink meat, shiny scales. And not a tooth mark on it.

Fishermen are notorious for stretching the truth. But Mom was no fisherman; as far as I know, she had never even baited a hook. You may believe her story or not, as you like. I know what I know: I ate my share of the salmon.

Lizzie

Each boat has her own voice. Waiting at dockside, the Bruce purred; the two exhaust pipes were just at water level and emitted a gentle steam sparkling with tiny bubbles, like the upside-down rain we made with baking soda and Kool Aid. Coming across the bay, she talked to herself and to the waves, the words always just beyond the edge of comprehensibility.

Old Mr. Hungerford's putt-putt did just that. Putt-putt-putt-putt: a steady beat underway, slowing to a near-stall as she coasted in to tie up. Putt-pause-putt-pause, then when you thought she's stopped, putt-putt.

The Lizzie roared. Inside the cabin, talking was impossible. Sometimes we shouted; "Where's Georgina?" "What?" "Home!" "Okay!" This last to the pilot, forward beyond the engine block. He pushed on the throttle and the engine bellowed. We sat immersed in our own thoughts, tolerating the noise, the stink of hot oil and bilgewater, the steamy damp.

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There were no lights aboard the *Lizzie*, except for the one headlight. Inside, morning and evening, it was pitch dark, except for the occasional beam from a flashlight. The night a rat bit me, I pulled the flash from my pocket and turned it on, but it was too late; I didn't see the rat, just the two tiny holes in my hand, almost half an inch apart. I didn't tell the adults because I knew what they would do: give me a series of injections, one a day for twelve days, all of them in my belly. I'd rather get rabies. I was relieved, though, when a month had gone by and I could still drink a glass of water without choking.

When it wasn't raining, I liked to sit outside in the stern. It was always cold, but if I huddled close to the cabin wall, out of the wind, and crammed my hands up into my jacket sleeves, I was fine. At least it was quiet. Quieter, anyhow. And the spray smelled of salt and seaweed and silver-grey mist.

In the daytimes, going to Tahsis, we cut in close to the land, out of the chopiness at mid-channel. The rocks and trees slipped by, half a stone's throw away, silent except for the slap of the waves at their feet. I liked to imagine myself scrambling over the shore, picking huckleberries in season -- so big and red they were, hanging there over the banks, unharvested, unseen by anyone but me. Sometimes the sun shone on the cliffs, making the moss look dry and warm, a place to climb to, to sit in a cushiony hollow -- there! that one! -- and examine the tiny moss-flowers and the yellow lichens.

Behind and over it all, the Douglas firs and the cedars made an impenetrable wall. Never has man set foot under those branches; no

voices have disturbed their silence. We don't belong there, we are too young; we couldn't bear the heaviness of the slow centuries, of the secret musings and long watchings. And yet I wished: if the boat would only stop, I would go ashore and dare the hidden paths. Maybe.

Most of the year it was too cold and wet to sit outside at night. But in the summer, when the wash glowed green with fluorescence, and tiny sparkling stars broke away from the prow and rushed off into the blackness, when the Big Dipper hung overhead and the lights of the houses behind us made dancing dotted lines on the crests of the waves, I leaned on the side of the boat and sang. No-one inside the *Lizzie* would hear me over the racket of the engine; I could shout to the stars. Stormy weather songs; "Jesus, Saviour, Pilot Me", "Throw out the Lifeline," "Peace, Be Still". Or my night-time favourite: "Could we with ink the ocean fill,..". The sea and the sky and the mountains were already inky.

In the winter storms, a derelict fishing boat washed ashore, half sunken, and came to ground between the pier and my bedroom window. I watched her through the early spring, as the waves nudged her one way and another until she was tightly wedged on some unseen gap in the rocks. At low tide the cabin and the front deck were exposed, slanting towards me, beckoning. As soon as the weather was warm enough, I swam out and clambered aboard.

The cabin was tiny and dark, more from ancient grease than from paint. My hands stuck to the doorjamb. I picked my way to the wheel,

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slushing through knee-deep water across broken floorboards, and stood there, pretending to steer. Straight ahead, a forest of tarry pilings underneath the old cannery barred the way. I imagined backing, turning to miss the pier, and heading out to open water. I would go north, just to see what was there; hills and trees I have never seen, islets with no name, lonely cliffs.

There was a smear of pitch on my right arm; my hands, when I turned them palms up, were black. I backed gingerly out of the cabin, careful not to touch anything more. The prow deck was clean enough; for the rest of the summer, I use it as my private sun-bathing place.

In October, my little harbour was empty again. Whether the tide broke the wreck up, or she just floated out to sea, I don't know. I never saw her go.

Occasionally we took a trip down the island on the Messenger III, the Shantyman's Mission boat. Down the outside; a stop in Friendly Cove or Ahousat, and a rolling and nose-diving haul around Estevan Point, where all the adults took to their bunks and I went to join the pilot in his cabin. He made himself onion sandwiches for lunch; "Settles the stomach," he said. My stomach was fine, but I didn't try his sandwiches.

Aboard the Messenger, I mostly stayed inside. She was faster than the Lizzie, or even the Bruce; the wind in the stern caught your breath away. But she was bigger, and cleaner, and quieter than any of the other boats I knew. Even in the cabin below decks, the bunks were dry. And

we could talk, even play games; the engine thrummed along in the next room, sounding like someone practicing his bass part for the church choir.

The wall must have been well insulated, because when I went through the engine room to the head, the pounding and howling and squealing of the big machine deafened me. Close beside the monster was a narrow walkway, just a metal grid over open bilge and a rail made of lead pipes, too hot to hold onto comfortably. A sizzling water pipe jutted out overhead, close enough for me to feel its heat as I pass. Over the rail, massive wheels spun, pistons leaped and slammed back down, belts whined. A finger in one of those, a stray shoelace; I shied away from the rest of the thought. It was a relief to hide away in the tiny head, to lock down the handle. "Occupied", the label would say on the outside. I stayed longer than I need to, putting off the trip back over that trembling bridge.

The Messenger. The Lizzie. My wreck. The Bruce. And I shouldn't forget our school boat, the Donna Dene. Except that she was so forgettable; serviceable and boring. White paint, a boxy cabin, engine, benches, wheel. That's it. A boat to get to school in, to forget your homework in, to sit inside through the rainy months in.

Even the name was a plodder. Donna. No romance. The Messenger, now; the name meant something, told you its mission, to carry the Gospel. The Bruce was named after the Doctor's son, the one

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that drowned when his boat went down in a storm. And the Lizzie: an ugly-sounding name, but it spoke of so many things! Elizabeth, like the queen in her blue dress and fat ankles on the front wall of our classroom. Elizabeth II Regina; very elegant. Or the Tin Lizzie, the Model T Ford, probably about as old as our Lizzie, but black instead of streaky white. Or just plain Elizabeth, with a whole list of nicknames to choose from. Betty. Lisa. Beth, like Jo's sister that died in "Little Women". Eliza. Ella. Lisbeth. I decided that when I grew up, if I did, if I had a daughter, I would name her Elizabeth. But I wouldn't call her Lizzie, ever.

Cosy-Toes

That's what we kids called her. To her back, of course. Her real name was Miss Cosey. Miss. If she had a first name, I never heard it mentioned; all the adults called her Miss Cosey.

From our perspective, she was old; grey-haired, not white-haired like Miss Carlisle, but older than her nevertheless. Tiny and neat and fussy. Prim. An old-fashioned word, not much used nowadays, but it describes Miss Cosey perfectly.

On Wednesday nights after prayer meeting, the doctor's wife served tea and cookies. Miss Cosey held her tea cup and saucer dead centre in front of her, well above her knees, with the thumb and three fingers supporting the cup. The little finger stuck straight ahead, separate from the rest. We children imitated her; I suppose she took this as a compliment.

Mr. Lambert always poured some of his tea into the saucer and blew on it to cool it. He timed this action for a moment when Miss

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Cosey was looking in his direction. "Oh, Mr. Lambert!" Miss Cosey said every time, sighing. Mr. Lambert was most uncouth.

Miss Cosey lived in the nurses' residence, but I'm sure she wasn't a nurse. I have no memory of her in white, or walking the halls in rubber-soled shoes. Her shoes were black and sensible, with sturdy one-inch heels. I never saw her in the hospital offices, or in the kitchen. She didn't do lowly work like washing floors or scrubbing toilets; that was left for Mrs. Plummer. But she was always present. She even went to camp with us every summer, although she never went on a hike or down to the beach or joined in any sports.

She did teach the morning Bible Study at camp, though. And Sunday School at home the rest of the year. And here was the first of her two crimes. She talked down to us. We were innocent babies, she clearly believed; we could understand only short words and simple sentences. We needed to be shielded from the more unpleasant parts of the Bible stories she told; it would be most improper to mention pain and loss and danger. We, whose mothers were nurses, who listened to talk about surgeries and deaths over the supper table! We, whose fathers were preachers and missionaries, who made space at that same table for loggers and native fishermen, some of whom arrived at our dock on the beer boat!

Cosy-Toes told us about David the Psalmist, about his kingly glory and his love of God. She skipped all the good stories; the story of Absalom being caught in a tree by his hair and being speared there, or the one about David dancing so wildly that his private parts were exposed.

I'm sure she thought we hadn't read them ourselves. We were just children.

She would never discover how wrong she was; she didn't allow questions or comments. She expected us to listen to her, recite the memory verses, and not to giggle or squirm. Nothing else.

One summer, Miss Cosey took it upon herself to improve our health, as well as our manners. Every morning that summer, all the mission children lined up according to our ages on the boardwalk outside the nurses' residence. Miss Cosey stood on the porch with a spoon and a large brown bottle of cod liver oil. I was second to the last in the line, that year, and the dosing of the little ones took a long time, not least because of Miss Cosey's preliminary speech about how good cod liver oil was for us, and how it didn't taste too bad, "in fact, not bad at all!" Surprisingly, to her, the youngest children didn't believe this and had to be persuaded individually.

While we waited one day, my brothers saw a big garter snake under the rose bushes, and we three left the line and caught it. When my turn came, I had the snake wrapped around my forearm. "Oh, Susan!" Miss Cosey sighed.

And this was her second crime, and the unforgiveable one. She called me Susan. Everyone else called me Susie. And if she thought that was too informal, not proper enough, my real name was Susannah. Not Susan. Never Susan; I hated the heavy, dead sound of it. It was a stiff name, proper and controlled. Prim, like Miss Cosey.

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I was kinder than she; to her face, I never called her Cosy-Toes.

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Foolscap. Pigtails. Mimeographs. Lines. Pen nibs and inkwells. And what was that green stuff we threw on the floor at the end of the day?

The language is a leaky bucket; we keep putting new words in at the top, but the old ones are escaping. Sometimes we catch them and throw them in on top again, but their expedition has changed them and they no longer carry the old threat..

Drill: to repeat, in chorus, the times table. Or a snappy question-and-answer session on the randomized times table. "*2 times 6? 12. 7 times 5? 35. 8 times 3? Quickly! 24.*"

Lines: False promises; sentences the teacher has assigned as punishment for a minor dismeanor. "*I will not talk in class. I will not talk in class. I will not talk in class....*" You wrote them up at home, until the teacher discovered you were writing with three pencils at a time. Then

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you had to stay after school and write. *"I will not chew gum in school. I will not..."*

Penmanship: (1.) The ability to write smoothly and elegantly or, at the very least, legibly. (2.) The half-hour of school time devoted to drawing 6-inch spirals across your page. Performed with a scratchy nib inserted into an ink-stained handle and dipped in the inkwell at the top right corner of your desk. You wrote from the elbow, not the wrist. The teacher patrolled the room, watching.

All around the top of the blackboard, the letters of the alphabet were painted. Upper case, lower case. Printing, script. Just in case we forgot. Which we could do, with some of the script capitals. G or W, for example: loops and curves and peaks. The first dip in the script W was curved at the bottom, the second changed direction in a sharp point, and the final curve was inverted. A mistake would elicit sharp words from the teacher; "Erase that and do it again, properly this time!" Except that you couldn't erase anything written in pen until the ink had dried, and then the eraser made holes in your paper. "Your work is messy. Do it over!"

History: The memorization of the names of the Kings of England and the dates of their battles. The Declaration of Independence, and Abraham Lincoln. The Ides of March.

Geography: "A thousand miles of mountain, a thousand miles of plain. A thousand miles of mountain, and then the sea again." Paris is the capital of France, and the U.S.S.R. is the biggest country in the world. Trivia committed to memory.

At the front of our classroom, above the blackboard (black, not green) was a framed picture of Queen Elizabeth in a blue dress. She had thick ankles, worse than the teacher's.

Below her were the rolled up maps: Canada, the world. Mercator projection, with all the British properties done in pink. Hong Kong, India, Canada, British Guyana, Australia. "The sun never sets on the British Empire."

Daydreaming: Looking out the window. Thinking. Trying to remember by staring at the blank blackboard, where the information was yesterday. Strictly prohibited.

Pigtails: A torture device imposed by mothers, who did them up tightly so they looked "neat". Exacerbated by the boy behind you, who persisted in dipping the end of yours into his inkwell. Inkstains on the back of your dress do not come out.

To be excused: A euphemism for going to the washroom. Which is a euphemism itself. "Miss Penner, may I be excused?" "Wait." There were rules: only one person out of the classroom at a time, only one visit to the washroom per morning or afternoon, no excuses too close to recess, lunch, or 3 o'clock. "Too close" to be defined by the teacher. "Miss Penner? I can't wait!" "Sorry."

Of course, there were good reasons for the rules. You might be tempted to waste time, dawdling outside the bathroom door, waiting for the kid before you to finish. You might even *talk* to him or her. And you would certainly disrupt the classroom with your coming and going.

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The giggles: A malady that struck entire schoolrooms on summer afternoons. Extremely catching, worse even than measles. One girl -- it was always a girl -- realized that the last pronouncement from the teacher was actually funny. She snickered, then snorted. The girl beside her giggled.

If the teacher responded quickly enough with a sharp word and a threat, the danger could possibly be averted. But often (oh, but not often enough!) someone on the other side of the classroom suddenly saw the joke and slapped her hand over her mouth to hold back the laugh. The contagion rebounded, reproduced itself, became virulent. In a moment, all but the teacher were lying helpless on their desks, snorting and weeping. A few even fell to the floor.

Teachers were immune. And the sickness was short-lived; a few minutes at best, and most of the children wiped their eyes and looked guilty. A few suffered a relapse; their symptoms subsided at a glare from the teacher. One or two were affected for the rest of the afternoon with involuntary spasms.

And what *was* that green stuff we got to shake all over the floor before we swept? It smelled so good; like the piney woods we would soon escape to.

The Trophy

To begin with, the Martins were old. Not fortyish, like my parents; really old, older even than my grandma.

She -- Mrs. Martin -- was shaped like an engine block; almost as wide as she was long, and giving the impression of squareness, even though there were no right angles about her. A small engine; she was no taller than I, a mere five feet. Her steel-grey hair was always pinned firmly into a bun at the nape of her neck, her sober skirts fell almost to her ankles, her shoes were black and sturdy. No nonsense about Mrs. Martin.

The mister was larger and rounder and softer. Just barely, though. He always wore a workman's shirt and baggy wool trousers, held up by suspenders. Sometimes a hat; a city hat, but much oil-stained and sat upon.

I have a picture of them, standing side by side in the hospital gardens, holding hands and smiling identical smiles. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, without the battle.

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I first saw them in the staff dining room. We kids came down to lunch early that day and found the room empty, except for the Martins. He was already sitting at the table, she was on his lap, and they were kissing. Energetically. This was nothing like the hello-goodbye peck Mom and Dad indulged in, twice a day; they were kissing like young people in a romantic story from the magazines my grandma hid in her basement. Long, breathless, face-crushing kisses, both his arms around her ample waist, her hand on the back of his head, fingers parting his grey hair. They didn't seem to notice us in spite of the racket we had made, pounding down the stairs, the boys shouting.

We kids were struck dumb; we slid into our places on the long bench under the window silently, without any of our usual jostling. I tried, unsuccessfully, not to look.

The grown-ups, when they arrived, were less circumspect. There was a slight pause as each of them came through the door at the bottom of the stairs, a quick grin, and then a jocular comment.

"Making up for lost time, Walter?"

"What's this, dessert first?"

Chairs scraped, silverware clattered. Doc MacLean came in through the back door from his office. "Okay, that's enough, you two love-birds," he called out. "Behave!"

I was embarrassed for them. For Mrs. Martin, especially. Caught like that, between pleasing her husband and maintaining proper decorum! How she must feel!

Or not. She stood up, laughing, and deposited a kiss on Mr. Martin's bald spot. And he, playing to his audience, pulled her back down again for an encore. One final, slobbery, noisy buss. "Mmmm--wah!" he said.

Doc MacLean said grace, and the cook brought in the meal. Mrs. Martin had to cut up her husband's meat for him. He had no teeth. From the jokes people made, I gathered that he had lost them in a honeymoon mishap.

Mom told us the rest of the story after work that evening.

Mr. Martin was a recent widower. In the last months of his wife's illness, they had sold the farm and moved into Vancouver. He found a good church there, and attended as regularly as he could, given his wife's condition.

After she died, he cast about for something to do, something useful. He heard about the mission hospital and sent in an application.

If he were to go out to the wilds to serve God, he decided, he would need a wife. He started examining the women in the church. Most were married, some of the single ones were too flighty. Some came only Sunday morning, dressed in their showiest hats, carrying Bibles that looked as if they were rarely opened.

SUSIE

He concentrated on the few women who came to the Wednesday evening prayer meetings, the very few. One, a Miss Peters, was there regularly. Her Bible was worn and stuffed with notes, her dress was modest. She looked a sensible woman.

He asked around. "Miss Peters? Oh, yes. A good woman. A willing worker," he was told.

He had never spoken to her, but he wrote a note and handed it to her at the door, after prayer meeting. "Miss Peters," it said, "Please excuse my writing to you like this. I have been accepted by the Nootka Mission Association to work in their hospital on Vancouver Island. However, I believe the Lord wants me to go accompanied by a wife. Will you marry me?"

He saw her Sunday morning and evening, but apart from a cautious smile in his direction, she gave no response. It did seem, also, as if the pastor's wife were looking at him strangely. And the organist. He refused to worry, though; Miss Peters was a good woman. God would tell her what to do.

Wednesday evening she passed him a folded slip of paper. "Yes," it said. Nothing more.

So here they were, wed less than a week, smooching in our dining room. Miss Peters -- now Mrs. Martin -- would be working in the hospital laundry; her husband was our new handyman.

Mom would have ended the story there. It was an instructive little tale, a good example for a daughter just beginning to think about womanhood: be good, go to church, read your Bible, be patient, and you'll be assured of a nice husband. But Dad was prodding her to go on.

"Tell the kids about his teeth," he said.

At dawn on the morning after the wedding, the Martins boarded the Princess Maquinna for the trip north. It would be a beautiful honeymoon cruise; the weather was balmy, the cabin comfortable, the scenery postcard-perfect. They ate a hearty breakfast in the dining room and went out to the deck to watch the tip of Vancouver Island glide by.

On the "outside", the water open to the wide Pacific, the boat began to roll, just a little. And it soon became apparent that Mr. Martin was not a sailor. Before lunch, the couple had retired to the cabin; she went up to the dining room alone. He wasn't interested in food.

Further north, the swell increased; there was a slight breeze. The Maquinna plowed through the water, climbing and diving, rising and falling, always twisting on a slight angle from the direction of travel. They rounded Esteban Point; West-Coast seamen call it "The Graveyard of the Pacific". Up, down, roll, climb, drop. Roll, and up again. Mr. Martin's breakfast left its moorings. Mrs. Martin held the basin.

When it was over, Mr. Martin lay back on the bunk, groaning. Mrs. Martin opened the porthole. She reached out and dumped the contents of the basin into the salt chuck.

SUSIE

"My false teeth!" her new husband shouted. Too late. They rest, still, just off Esteban Point.

Dad loved this part of the story. He kept supplying the details Mom wanted to leave out. And he ruined her lesson. "Be patient, dress modestly, go to church" and all the rest, and what do you get? A lousy sailor, in suspenders, with no teeth.

There had to be a better plan.