

*Girl
Growing
Up In
Middletown
New York*

By Helen Swindells Stevens

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The best and most beautiful things in the world

Cannot be seen or even touched.

They must be felt with the heart.

--Helen Keller

Lifescapes

Answered Prayers

My mother felt we needed a lot of prayers. She not only prayed herself, but enlisted the help of her two sisters, who were nuns in the convent and who my mother reluctantly sent chocolate and warm scarves too, saying as she mailed them off, “They should be able to keep it all and not have to share with the likes of everyone in the convent.” I prayed too, but felt our prayers were like pierced balloons falling from the sky and never getting to the right people. It was not until I was older that I found out all our prayers had been answered.

It was the summer of 1952. My sister, Mary, and I had infuriated my father two days in a row. First, by going to an old chicken yard where the fence had been stamped down like the heel of an old shoe. We dug a hole, laid a canvas swing in it, and filled the whole thing with water. Then we floated the dead fish that had been wrapped in white paper in our refrigerator, hoping they would come back to life. The day before we had climbed out of our second story window to sit with our dog, Jip, and throw acorns down onto people driving by in their cars. On this, our third day of summer vacation, we decided to walk up to town and say hello to our mom at her work in the five and dime store.

We took the short cut through mechanics town where cars sat in the front lawns. I would never take this route alone because of the third house on the left with the boarded window where a fat dog like a pig would appear from nowhere and chase me into the road, yelping like the sound of a machine gun. But there were no dogs that day and my sister kept repeating the word we had heard for the first time, a word that my father had screamed at us the day before,

“Assholes.” It seemed so funny that by the time we reached the brown statue of the soldier holding a flag, we fell laughing, cooling ourselves on the moist grass.

At the center of town the sunlight hit the dentist office window above Whalen’s drug store, giving it an eerie gold-purple glow. We had yet to go to the dentist, and only knew there was pain being performed somewhere inside.

I was watching the warm breeze make the stop sign sway in a pleasant, mesmerizing way, when I glanced below it and saw a dowdy plump woman in a thin faded green dress, her hair stiff and dyed auburn and flapping at me like a loose sail. In a second, I realized it was my Mom. It was my first objective glance, and I felt ashamed of my feelings of wishing she looked better. Until then I had never really thought about her looks, or compared her to anyone else. She was just my Mom.

She saw my sister and me in our jeans we had worn all week, standing on the main street across from her, and I could tell by the way she stopped laughing and looked at us that she was embarrassed.

She was the youngest of eight children growing up in Manhattan, were you wore starched dresses even to play in the street. Train to be a secretary, buy clothes at Macy’s, and never, never, drink from a bottle. At the age of forty she moved to a country town where evenings were spent squatting mosquitoes and watching your children chase fireflies. I never saw my mom in pants, but now, as she came closer, I wished she were thinner and wore slim pants that would cover up her varicose veins that showed through her stockings.

“And what in God’s name are the likes of you two doing uptown, dressed like two refugees?” she said brushing at my hair. I saw the chipped nails with the ragged patches of red polish. “When you go some place you wear a dress,” she said, and her green eyes looked at me with love and sadness and weariness. I lowered my head, my blond hair hanging straight as water from a faucet. “We wanted to light candles at the church, and go to the library,” my sister said with a lot of enthusiasm, her hand held over her eyes to block the sun, making a little patch of shade that covered her green eyes and crunched up the freckles on her nose, which she called a curse and my mother said was angel dust.

My mom looked at the huge round clock on the square. “Here I am, late getting back from the lunch.” She snapped open her white purse, and finding her change beside her

rosaries, she dolled out two nickels. “You light the candles, then the library, and then home...obey your sister.” We both nodded our heads.

When my mother was out of sight, my sister put her hand on my shoulder and said, “We can steal a lipstick.” My mouth dropped open, but before I could say anything, she was pulling my bib pocket open to show me how I could drop it in there, “When the lady isn’t looking.” I opened my mouth to speak, fear already creeping over me. ”What if we get caught?” I said. “No one ever catches you!” She said in disgust.

Inside, the white hairdo woman followed us down the counter past the music box with the ballerina that seemed to be looking right at me, past cameras facing up to take my picture stealing, until all three of us stood at the glass counter where the lip stick sat in their notches like tiny torpedoes. I was paralyzed with fear. But my sister, Mary, had no fear, and when Mrs. Weinstein turned her head to say something to the pharmacist, Mary flipped the tube of lipstick into my pocket.

“Let’s go see our horse and come back later,” my sister said, walking toward the wooden door, me behind her waiting for someone to grab my neck and scream for the police. My sister did not flinch; she felt she deserved a lipstick like everyone else. We were outside in the warm air that fanned me with relief, my sister talking like nothing had happened about an imaginary horse that had become as real to us as the two and three store 1800’s buildings of our town.

We veered left down the little hill past the shoe factory, were the Puerto Ricans from New York worked and the buses stopped. We placed the biggest maple leaf we could find on our heads to make up for the hat we were supposed to wear, and even my sister bowed her head slightly as we walked slowly up the four cement steps leading up to the huge wooden doors of Mount Carmel Church. As we knelt on the hard benches, I imagined us being the two young girls at Fatima that witnessed vision of Mary coming and talking to them.

I prayed for my dead brother and for God to bring us a horse, to win the Irish sweepstakes so we would have lots of money, for my Mom to fix her teeth and not have toothaches, and for a blue bike. My sister was crawling on the floor by the tin box of coins and found two dimes covered with the yellow drippings of the wax. And I felt hope that maybe God was looking out for us and maybe he would get us a horse.

We walked up into Hoffman Street where the porches grew around the house and around them grew lawns attended to by skinny men in plain gray clothes with beat up straw hats and a perpetual rake or shovel in their hands.

We were like vacuum cleaners sucking up anything that would make the walk in the hot sun worthwhile. I watched as a woman my mothers age moved gracefully with her daughter to her black car. She had white shorts and slender tanned legs and a thin gold chain that reflected the sunlight intermittently, as if giving off a code of energy, happiness and prosperity. Thus started a vision of what I wanted in my life when I grew up. Someday I would have a car and jump in it and take my Mom with me and go were ever we wanted to go. The woman waited with her tennis racket till we were directly in front of her.

“Girls, girls, my daughter has a box of nice clothes you could have. I could even drop it off at your house.” People were always trying to give us stuff. “We have lots of clothes,” my sister said. “We’re going to see our horse and we’re training him for the Madison Square Garden Horse Show. We wear are old clothes so we don’t get our new stuff dirty.” She kept walking, leaving the woman to shake her head after us. I moved along behind my sister, the loose sole of my tennis shoe flapping, wondering if the box had shorts like the girl was wearing. We stopped at Winfred Park beside the water fountain with its placard saying it was built by someone with so much money he built the park for the children of Middletown. I wished he had just given me the money.

“We’ll go to Goshen were the horseracing is, bet they’ll be lots of horses there,” my sister said, as we drank from the water fountain and I ate the peanut butter sandwich wrapped in a bandana like I had seen in a cowboy movie, and which my sister refused to carry. We wet our faces against the hot sun and I walked on the painted white stones that lined the exit to the park and lead out to a paved road out of town.

On our right was a cow pasture and off in the distance was Highway Seventeen that could take you to New York City in sixty minutes, according to my Dad. My sister walked to the place where the bottom string of barbed wire had broken and lay coiled like a thorny snake. “Put that red bandana in your pocket in case there are bulls, they see red and run toward it.” My sister knew everything.

There were cow plops to avoid and wet swampy areas that look so green from the road, but that sucked at our feet. All I could think of was the quicksand I had seen in the Tarzan

movie. Crossing under another set of barbwire we made it to the freeway, were we laughed as trucks and cars whizzing by so fast they pushed us backward so we had to keep regaining our position like two sparrows flapping in a breeze. My sister put her thumb up and I did too. The cars whizzed by us. People stared.

A semi truck toots and sprays gravel as he came to a hissing halt. "I can't believe our luck!" My sister said, already running to the front of the truck. The driver with his tattooed arms and rolled up sleeves sat with his hand on the wheel. "Where are you going?" "Goshen," my sister says, and we climbed in and I settle back, sure that we would find a black stallion and before the day was out I would be riding bareback, just like in the book The Black Stallion that my sister read over and over to me.

"I have two girls, and I wouldn't want them hitchhiking. I don't think your mother knows you're out here. Do you know what can happen to you?"

I felt a sickness as this man ground gears and tuned the truck around, his lecture seemed to have nothing to do with us, who knew exactly where we were going. My sister's arms crossed over her chest as she stared straight ahead and I played with the stick I had picked up in the field.

The driver dropped us off at exit 15 near the Dixie dinner not far from our house with instructions that, "he would be riding up and down the highway everyday looking for us and if we ever, ever do that again, he would take us to the police station."

We had many more adventures, and always stayed alive and fairly safe, and that's how I know my mom's prayers were answered.

I will go to New York next week to see my sixty three-year-old sister, and I know she is going to drag me to some fiddler show in a barn in Pinhill, or a penny auction in Mitsville, and she will pick up strangers and help them take groceries home, and give them money she can not spare. And somewhere in heaven my Mom will be shaking her head saying "Lord in heaven, will I ever get to stop praying for the likes of them."

My Aunt Margaret

My mother slouched further down into the bed, unable to tell my sister another time that, “if she didn’t stop her heathen ways, she was going straight to Hell.” She spit clear phlegm into her crouched hankie, clutching at her rosary beads and chest in a futile effort to hold back her pain. My dad was nowhere to be found. My brother was calling on the black phone to Dr. Lipshits who dispatched an ambulance.

I still hold the memory of the commotion the two men brought, strangers, coming into that bedroom and my Mom so sick, not caring that the green robe had a red spot in the back and the opening in the front showed parts of two flat breasts, hanging like pancakes. They couldn’t manage the turn on our stairs with a stretcher and would have to carry her and the green oxygen tank down the five wooden steps to the landing that turned to eleven more steps. All I could think of was how clean their blanket was, and the sheet so ironed and white against the ragged blankets and sheets that had been on this four poster bed since before the time of even my father’s birth and my mom, so weak, for the first time not giving any directions to anyone.

Two days later my mom came home in a taxi. We helped her back in the bed and got ready for the coming of Aunt Margaret, who always brought the tin of homemade butter cookies that you were suppose to eat just two of each day.

My sister Mary and I had put the rubber stopper with its silver chain into the bathroom sink and sponge bathed in cold water. We draped ourselves in our cotton dresses and my sister stuck her finger in the rip where the tie on the left side had pulled away from my dress.

“Keep your arm down and no one will notice,” my sister said and reluctantly, we went out to wait for my Aunt Margaret to come from New York City.

We kicked at the leaves under the huge maple trees whose huge branches hung over the street in front of our house like giant wings. All the buses and cars passed by on the way to the Catskills from the city. In the summer we sold baskets of raspberries to the people in their cars who would constantly ask in awe, “You just picked these yourself?” They thought finding the tiny yellow worm or a beetle was just a plus. On these hot days, we would pass the time making fun of “city people,” throwing berries into our mouths and going inside our house, begging for pennies to run to the gas station two doors down to buy candy.

The hissing sound of brakes and the smell of exhaust fumes from the bus announced Aunt Margaret's arrival. We held our breath as the accordion doors opened and a weary bus driver clattered out and looked back at my aunt as she stood poised on the bottom step. Her extended arms held a white box by its strings and a Macys's shopping bag. Her ample body was wrapped in an ice blue suit, her piano legs stuffed into safe black shoes.

“Make sure you don't scratch them on the sidewalk,” she said as the driver opened the mouth of the bus and dragged out two stiff bags. Her voice was a high and clicky like the sound dogs nails make on the linoleum. We ran to help her with the suitcases. “And how is your poor mother,” she asked. When we replied she began the ritual of setting whatever she had down and reaching inside her breast to pull out the silver box that was her hearing aid that hung around her neck and the white wires that climbed to the plastic in her ears, manipulating everything till they squeaked like a flock of disturbed chickens. Her hearing aid never worked well and so she talked a lot, and if you started to say something, she just kept on talking like a plow in a field and you knew to either get out of the way, or lay there mesmerized for another round of “blessed be God and the Holy Ghost, and the communists are taking over the world, and I'm writing to my congressman.”

After talking to my mom up in her room, Aunt Margaret came down to the kitchen. Like a magician with his magic cloth, she shook out her apron and wrapped it around her ample stomach and chest. The salt shaker with its stains of butter was whisked off the table and salt free rice and fish was made for, “your poor mother.”

It was Friday, so she made spaghetti for us, but my mom wasn't at the table to give me plain noodles with no sauce, so I ate them with the sauce, it didn't really matter. I liked

them both ways, I just liked standing beside my Mom while she covered the others dishes with sauce and then patted me on the head, saying, “And Helen likes it with butter, and so be it.” And I felt special and honored and loved.

If my Aunt Margaret had a limitless ability to clean, she also had a limitless hate for my dad. As I passed my mom’s bedroom I would hear the whispering as my mom sat in her bed with the pillows behind her, staring sadly toward the window and Aunt Margaret like a priest in confession waiting and talking and telling the penance. When she saw me she would say, “You leave your poor mother to rest and go outside and play.” My mom, smiling, would hold out her hands and I would rush to her side of the bed and sit down. She would tell me about her and Aunt Margaret’s piano lessons when they were my age, and how the teacher would line her long scoop of a dress with newspapers to keep out the cold and wind and the ruffling sound it made and how they would try not to laugh. And I could see the brown stone house and the teacher, but I could never imagine Aunt Margaret being a little girl.

There was energy in my Aunt Margaret’s hate for my dad that kept him in the cellar or bar. And it was while she was still there that he lost his job at the box factory, sold the new car for 200 dollars cash to pay the taxes, and now we were once again reciting “temporarily unemployed” when the teacher asked about him. I had no idea what it meant, but the words stopped the teacher dead and allowed me to wander off with Dolores onto the side of the playground where we pretended to have fun, while Mary Hafly and her circle of friends, flipped their long hair, giving us occasional glances of contempt.

We did not mess with my Aunt Margaret. We may have laughed behind her back and groaned as we lay in bed, but we washed the dishes and moved with her about the house. She straightened the shelves of the pantry, dusted the china closet like anyone cared, or had nothing else to do. Her black shoes and nylons and pale skin that betrayed her years inside the bank, our tanned skin and bare feet following after her like wild reluctant peasants.

My Aunt did not try to hide her hearing loss or the large pink mole on her neck. She was so sure of her opinions that I believed everything she said. So when she whispered to me, “You smart little thing, you know you’re named after St. Teresa, she will always help you with anything,” I lapped up her words like dog laps water on a hot day. When I sat down to learn spelling words that were always beyond me like someone colorblind trying to see red in a color that would always be green, she sighed and told me to bring the words to her on the couch

where she was writing another letter to her congressman about things she would read about in the New York Times. She wrote each word with her fountain pen, leaving a splash of ink like an explosion, then cut them with little scissors she had in her purse. “Just remember one letter then add another letter and when you remember the whole word you let me know and I’ll ask you it. You’re a smart girl,” she said, and she didn’t say it was easy; and she didn’t close her eyes and look up into the heavens, wondering “how in Gods name this child would get along in life.” She just went back to her writing and turned the knobs of her hearing aid, and never complained that anything was too much trouble, or that she was to be felt sorry for. And thus began my silent campaign against no learning, seeing that I seemed to learn in a different way from others, but that I could learn. So on the Friday of the next week, for the first time in my three years of school, I raced home with all ten words perfect on my paper.

My mom was able to walk down the three front steps on our porch and hug my aunt as she got on the bus headed back to the city. We all felt relieved, sad and grateful. The same feelings I would always have as she continued to visit, healing our souls, hating my dad and making me believe in myself.

How to make Welsh Rarebit

This is how you make Welsh Rabbit on a snowy day in February 1949, in Middletown, New York when your Dad and brother Walt are home and your mom is working at the Five and Dime and you are a tomboy in first grade.

I part the white lace curtains and watch as my mom trudges across the wide lick of snow the plow has just made in front of my house on 126 Academy Ave. She has lowered her red-scarved head into her faded wool coat so she looks like a toy top with stocking legs that disappear into her white plastic boots that have a rip on the left side so snow will melt and get in, to touch her swollen ankles. An orange bus stops and, like a magic trick, moves on and my mother is gone. I sit on the couch in our living room where my mother has crouched a huge white doily, dipped it in “bluing” to make it whiter, and starched it so it is a giant stiff snowflake with the hint of a blue winter sky as it lays on our coffee table. The yellow walls of this parlor, with its upright piano, echo with her Irish Catholic words, “Tell the truth and shame the Devil” and “May the grace of God be with you,” and “Be grateful for what you have.”

So I bounce from the couch holding my yellow wool blanket tight around me, a pin holding the satin lining that has long ago ripped loose from the bottom. I quickly open and close the kitchen door, trapping in the heat from the coal stove and the smells of last night’s cabbage and the bacon grease that sits in a tomato can on the shelf above the stove.

Tossing my blanket on a chair, I sit beside my older brother Walt, our hands resting on our chins staring at the radio, like two pilots waiting for a message as to which way our day will go. Static sizzles out of the wooden box. “Hold this”, he says. I grasp the hanger

that has been straightened out and now like a strange road pointing toward the single light bulb that hangs from the ceiling. My brother's soft baby face, that he will keep even when he is older, leans into the radio. The words, "Girls don't do that," or "Stop being so shy," will never come from him. These words rain on me at school so that I can not remember which way the b and d go, I cannot read out loud, or concentrate on the spelling words or lift my eyes to the teacher, so that school is for me, a stew of confusion and fear and hopelessness.

My brother turns the radio over and we stare into the little city of tubes.

"See, there are no black tubes," he smiles at me. He has explained about sound waves and how you can't see them and how they come from a radio station, and how if the tubes blow out and become black you replace them. He has our father's curiosity and ability to tinker and make things better. My father was once an electrical engineer, but that was when we lived in New York City and he worked steady and when my Mom didn't cry so much. Now my Dad tries to fix things but he seems to make them worse.

My brother always makes me feel like an equal. He answers my questions and tells me things, like why we must use oil to clean our bikes and not water, because that would make them rust. Or not to argue with my father but to place the half raw fish that he has cooked into my napkin and eat more bread and butter. "You gotta just move it around your dish a little first," he had instructed me. My brother is attaching the hanger to the radio and moves it so it touches the metal canister. Then a deep mellow voice sings from the radio, "The following schools closed today because of snow; Pinbush, Middletown..." I wanted to leap into the air, dance around the sink that holds last night's dishes and the dried mashed potatoes like little hills of sand, but I mimic my brother and stand up placing my hands in the back of my blue jeans. He is twelve and I am six. He is a God and I am safe beside him.

At nine-thirty we put on two pairs of socks and tuck our jeans into the black boots with their ugly metal snaps. They are not the white boots with round snowballs of ties that my cousins in the city wear. Walt has pulled two pairs of socks on each of my hands up over my coat sleeve so the crystals of snow will not go up my sleeve onto my thin arms. We laugh as we leap from the second step of the porch into the innocent white snow. This is a house built by my grandfather in 1909, its Victorian structure solid, quite strong, just like the little I saw of him before he died.

All morning we stamp down the snow in the dirt road beside our house. Tommy Bussy and the Libolt kids join us to slide down the road on boards and pieces of cardboard. Our yelling combines with the clicking of car chains on the main road and the barking dog that has come to chase us down the increasingly slippery road. The work makes us sweat and keeps us warm. The snow is falling so lightly we can not make it out against the gray sky. We lay still in the snow with our mouths open and the truth settles on our tongue.

We trudge back up the porch steps, laughing as we knock off the three inches of white snow that has collected on the rail. We take off our boots on the little porch where the garbage has collected and a piece of frozen cabbage, the apple-green color of my mother's eyes, lies on the boarded floor.

In the kitchen, my brother lifts the round cover on the coal stove with the iron handle that we are always loosing and there it is, the red coals and heat that the priests have said Hell is made of and where I do not want to go. He shoves black coal over them and I can see people lifting up their arms out of the heat, trying to get away.

It is noon on the old clock over the refrigerator when my dad wakes up. He was at a new job, working nights, putting together boxes in a factory in Newburg. His hair is combed straight back from his receding hairline like a neat lawn. He is big, like the statue of the veteran holding a flag that stands in our park. He smiles and lifts the brown bottle of Ringold beer to his lips. He smells of rolled cigarettes, clean flannel shirts, beer, and shaving cream. I lower my shoulders and continue on into the kitchen. There is no smell of vomit and my father has not slicked off down into the cellar. It will be a good afternoon.

"I'll teach you, Katie girl, how to make the Welsh Rarebit." His words are slightly slurred and I hear rabbit and will always thought it was rabbit until I see a cooking show many years later and realized it was "Welsh Rarebit."

"Did you bring in the milk?" I had forgotten and raced to the front door and from the gray wooden box take the glass bottle of milk. The cream on top has frozen and expanded pushing up out of the top like an elephant's nose.

"Water expands when it freezes," my father said and his laughs are deep and fill the room like the sun coming out from a cloud. I smile, putting the milk on the small pine table. He swipes two huge golden blobs of butter off the square that has sat out all night in its white dish. He lifts the yellow can of dry mustard like a priest raising the chalice. "Hot mustard, a

teaspoon of this and you got the taste locked in as good as Patty's pet pig." And then there is his wink that flows down on me like the warmth of the sun coming out from a cloud.

"You're my grater," he said, coughing and nodding his head to a block of cheddar he had somehow picked up at a bar on the way home from work. I sat with one leg tucked under the left, pushing the cheese over the circle of tin with its raised holes. We had long ago lost the box the cheese was to fall into and so I made a hill of cheese on the pine table and picked up the flakes that fell on my chair and stuffed them into my mouth. My father was lifting the pot from the coal stove. "You don't want to be burning this," he said as he opened the white canister where it had chipped on the picture of a strawberry and, withdrawing a cup of white flour, fed it into the mixture like a an old farmer throwing feed to chickens. At the same time he twirled the wooden spoon, adding the white milk, taking a long drink of the beer and then pouring it into the golden mixture. "You gotta do this quick or you'll get lumps." I smiled and danced around the linoleum to get a better view of the mixture that turned to twirls of sunflower yellow, then mustard brown. My heart raced, wanting nothing better then to try to use the wooden spoon myself, but afraid to ask, that I might cause a lump to come and cause words of anger to come from my father's mouth. No, it was safer to keep my body stiff, just in case it all changed and I would need to retreat.

I watched as the mixture thickened and then turned back to the table where I opened the little door on the sides of the toaster. I laid the white bread inside, where they fit neatly, just as my older brothers body had fit into a white silk coffin a year before, the time before my mother cried so much and my father spent less time in the cellar.

The sound of sizzling from the coils in the toaster blended with my father's tenor voice, "OOOOOOO, THE BELLS GO CLANGING THE DRUMS GO BANGING AND ALL IS HAPPY AND GAY, OVER IN KELARNEY, IN MACTAMARRAY'S BAND!" I peaked into the thin crack of the toaster doors, making sure the bread did not blacken. I did not want to have to scrape the blackness off AND leave a hill of crumbs like black ants in the garbage pail.

The wooden spoon whipped harder in my fathers hand and the straw colored mixture splattered on the stove and my feet shuffled around the green and orange linoleum, trying to stay out of the way. My father shakily ladled out the smooth mixture on to our toast and the snow piled up on the windowsill, sealing in that afternoon of cooking lessons when all three of us smiled down into our creamy mixture of Welsh rarebit.

God's Breath

The grapevine, thick with leaves like tiny hands, and alive with the sweet smell of purple grapes allowed patches of warm sun to come through, flickering and playing against our tan skin. We had been up at five a.m. to help pick the raspberries and now at nine my brother Walt was teaching me bike maintenance.

The bike chain coated with mud and dirt made a tinkling sound as my brother dropped it in the white enamel basin. We sat on the warm earth, the gasoline mingling with the smell of grapes. The sound of bees, the distant murmur of cars from the street, and a dog barking, these were our background noise for the summer days. Out here you could not hear my mom cry or see the anxiety in her blue eyes when my Dad told her once again he was fired from his job, and we did not have to see the brown bag hidden beside the couch with the bottle protruding.

My brother wasn't just letting me help maintain his bike that summer, he was cleaning my soul. Like a farmer cleans a field of stumps, he was pulling out my shyness and planting the seeds that I could do anything. I put the last of my toast with homemade jam in my mouth and wiped my sticky hand on my jeans. "You don't use water to wash chains or bikes it, will make them rust," he said, smiling.

It was 1947 and I was seven years old, my brother Walt was twelve going on twenty.

Taking the bike chain from the pan he held it up where it glistened in the sun like an exotic silver necklace. "Pretty good, hey," and we smiled in satisfaction.

We each held an end of the chain as it was lapped over the crankcase, my brother turning the peddle with his hand and letting the chain click into place like birds coming to rest in little nests. “Good thing you’re here to help me,” he said. Then, as we wiped down the spokes with an oil rag we turned to see our dog digging furiously in the garden, dirt flying in every direction as he maneuvered his way around the hole. We laughed and yelled encouragement, “Get it boy,” as he attacked the earth. “Must have smelled a rabbit,” my brother said. We knew the rabbit had nothing to worry about. Tired of this useless game, Jip returned to lie beside us, his pink tongue dangling and moving up and down with each breath, his nose and paws covered in dirt. We got up and drank deep of the hose water and filled a pail for Jip.

It was my brother that had showed me the encyclopedias in the library and the dogs tongue, and explained about the cooling effects of the dogs painting. He showed me the R encyclopedia with its section on rabbits that explained where they had burrowed under the earth in homes that seemed so safe. He had answered my endless questions on how they stayed warm, how they communicated without making sounds.

My brother let me hold the oil can and together we squirted the oil into the area below the handlebars and in the middle of the wheels. When we had finished he turned the bike upright saying, “I have to go and sweep Mr. Varcelli’s store, if you don’t fight with our sister and stay out of the way of Pop, I’ll bring you back something. AND ASK MOM AGAIN ABOUT YOUR BIKE.”

He ran, pushing his bike and leaping on to it like the Lone Ranger, pumping hard as he speeds up the dirt road to the street. I sat there petting my dog and wishing I could go with him to smell the bread coming from the oven, the salamis hanging like long balloons, huge glass bottles of olives and the hard cookies that Mr. Varcelli dipped in tin cups of coffee. I would be happy to sweep the narrow wood isles and run my hands over the white dollies that lay in a pile like giant snow flakes.

I leaned over and whispered in the soft velvet of my dog’s ears, “I wish I was a boy.” Boys seemed to have all the adventures, while my mom, my sister and I were left to wash and clean. In the old “National Geographic” magazines that had been tumbled into a box in the attic, the people standing next to majestic falls, or climbing a mountain, or even hacking thru a jungle were all men.

Two bees smelled the jam on my fingers. I waved my hand in the air and ran to the back stairs, my feet skipping two at a time, emerging onto the back porch pretending I had been chased by giant insects in some exotic jungle.

The porch floor was vibrating from our ringer washer that was stuffed with sheets, its motor groaning like a man with an awful stomachache. “You can run those sheets through the ringer, Helen,” my Mom yelled from the kitchen. This was my Mom’s day off. She had awakened at five a.m. to pick the two acres of raspberries, sorted them, and now was busy making jam. Earlier she had boiled water and poured it into the electric washer. We would use the same water all morning. When all the clothes were washed we would empty the water through a hose on the bottom of the washer and then fill it with new water and begin rinsing the clothes. We would then hang them on the line that extended all the way to out the window of the porch to the apple tree. I turned on the ringer and began feeding the sheets, putting it in reverse when they became jammed.

My Mom was busy ladling hot raspberry jam into pint glasses and heating the wax that would be placed on the top to seal them. Her blue eyes were tired and gray streaks ran through her auburn hair that was pinned in a mass atop her head, and covered with a white dish towel so no hairs would get into the jam.

“If I had a bike,” I began, “I could go to the store for you.” My voice was steady, my eyes looking at her, just as my brother had told me to do.

My mom’s smile stopped and she looked at me as I moved beside her. There was the quiet where we heard the lone fly buzz around the fly paper that dangled down from the ceiling like a New Years Eve decoration.

Then the reply came, the one she used when I asked for roller skates and ice skates and the colored pencils that looked so enticing in the dime store window. “When we get some money,” she said as she wiped her red hands on the stained apron. I was seven and it seemed like “the time to get money” would never come. I just wanted a bike so I could ride off like my brother. I knew that the nickels I made weeding a neighbor’s garden or picking beetles off the roses would never add up to a bike.

My mom pulled me to her and she pushed back my blonde hair and offered me a label to decorate. Under the words Raspberry Jam I drew a bike. With my mom’s hand guiding

me, we filled the jar with rich purple-red jam and sealed the top with melted wax. “This is your very own jar” she said, and she printed on another label, “made by Helen.”

It was two weeks later, on a Saturday, when my mom put on her cotton dress, the flowers faded much like her beauty, as if she and the flowers had endured too much. Holding her white purse, we marched up Hoffman Street down past the small railroad houses that people of color lived in, up past the shoe factory, all the time me asking “where are we going?” and my sister Mary complaining on having to walk, “forever” and “why couldn’t we take the bus?” My mom kept repeating, “We’re going shopping. God gave us legs to walk with, you should use them and be thankful.”

We didn’t go to the main street where Sears and Penny’s sat in three brick buildings, waiting patiently and smugly knowing they were the only stores our town offered to shop in. We went two streets behind them, where the railroad track snaked between warehouses. We crossed the street when we came to the police station where “your parents could take you if you swore too much or disobeyed them.” We passed the Waldorf Restaurant and Hotel that we had never been in, and only the hoity-toity rich people went. The street became narrower and darker. I held my brother’s hand as we turned into a cobblestone alleyway where cigarette butts mixed with garbage and dirt hovered in corners. We stopped beside an open door, staring in at a huge room that looked like a graveyard for used clothes, stacks of baskets, and washers with one leg missing. We went in, the bell clanging like it could wake up even the rocking horse whose rocker had been chewed into a mangled piece of wood.

My mom turned to us announcing, “We’re getting you a bike. Your brother is paying for a little and we have a little.” She took a deep breath and we went inside past boxes of books and mattresses layered like slices of dirty bread, and there, with both tires flat and blue fenders bent and rusted, sat a girl’s bike. On the front fender was a large silver light resting like a flower on a grave. And then he was there, the man big and round like a giant ball with feet sticking out, he puffed a cigar and smoke came around his huge gray teeth. “You want this, I’ll give it to you for 15 dollars, and she can ride it out. It’s a good one alright.”

With the mention of that much money my brother sighed deeply and looked down at the floor. But my mom stood up straight and walked right up to the counter where the man and his salami and onion sandwich rested. She took out something from her pocket. They talked back and forth, the man looking at me and back at my mom.

I closed my eyes and prayed, and when they were opened my mom and the man were there smiling, "Take it girly, you got a tough Mom."

On our way home we stopped at Whalen's Soda Fountain for ice cream sodas. Sitting on the spinning stools, I looked at our reflections in the mirror behind the counter. We were all smiling and my mom was sitting straight and tall like a lily as she said, "Oh, on this day, God has been breathing on us all."

I am in my sixties and I still love riding my bike. Each time I start my ride and the breeze touches my face, I think of my mom and know she is saying, "Here's a little of God's breath, for ye Helen."

The Potato Adventure

Autumn had arrived, thinning the grape vine until only gnarly branches twisted up from the earth across the lattice that hugged Helen's house. The pears from the tree beside the detached garage had long ago fallen and the white and pink bushy flowers that were like soft scented snowballs had blown away in the wind. Helen saw all this as she pressed her face against the glass door, challenging the wave after wave of wind that made a whining sound as if crying like a spoiled child, unable to enter this Victorian house her grandfathered had built.

Saturday night and her mother's two sisters were here on their bi-annual visit from the sophisticated areas of the Bronx. They had driven up highway seventeen, past cows and mini mixed forests of oak and birch, passing the silver dinners to land in Middletown. They parked their shiny black Oldsmobile in the dirt drive, distressed at the way their high heels sank into the earth. Helen did not like her aunts, who seemed like big dolls that had been taken from a trunk to play at being "country people" for a weekend.

Her Aunt Madeline was tiny and had white teeth that protruded, stretching her lips like the end of a football, and a fox fur wrap that clung to her like the upper part of a life jacket. Aunt Katherine had a large frame held in with corsets like a well groomed water tower. Helen's mom looked like she had been pumped out in different directions, her stomach lumpy from four children and her arms chubby on top and narrow and firm on the bottom, her eye brows painted too heavy, making her sad eyes bigger.

But her mother's joy at having her sisters here was as tangible as the white filmy steam on the kitchen windows. They poured hot water from the kettle into the cracked tea pot as

her aunts crossed and uncrossed their nylon legs and puffed at their cigarettes. “Nora Mullin...” her Aunt started, sitting straight up. Helen had heard these stories many times. The piano teacher that came with her skirts lined with newspapers.

“Crackle, crackle, crackle,” her aunt said moving back and fourth in her chair, “and you were supposed to count the beat of the music, its like dripping water on your head when you are trying to sleep.” The kitchen filled with their laughter until even Helen smiled.

“And do you remember mom telling us to rub a wart with a potato and bury the potato in the yard, like you wouldn’t look like an “idget” trying to find dirt on Amsterdam Avenue in the middle of Manhattan.”

“Oh, we have to get the dinner started, Helen, get me the potatoes,” her mother called, bouncing the tea bags in and out of the tea pot, changing the water to rusty brown. Helen pressed harder against the glass. “You’ll be making me crazy, come on, the potatoes,” her mother said, setting a pot on the yellow cheese cloth where ketchup stains had set up permanent residence.

Helen tried to slide between the table and the sink to the cellar door but her aunt’s hand reached for her blonde dry hair that fell like a waterfall across her long face. Taking a hair pin from her own brown hair, she opened it like the mouth of an alligators and gobbled up Helen’s hair, exposing her high forehead and blue eyes.

They all looked at this tomboy in ragged jeans and a purple sweater, whose long sleeves were stretched to cover her hands, their eyebrows lifted as she continued to the cellar door and opening it, started down the steep narrow steps. Her hands felt the cement wall on the left side for a few steps and then lifted to avoid the tiny window where spider webs and dirt lived. She hated the fruit cellar. To her it was like a grave for dead fruit and vegetables dressed up by her mom into jams and pickles, but still dead. Three fourths of the way down she grabbed with both hands the pole that went from ceiling to stairs, and swinging off the last four steps, landed in the wide space between the staircase and furnace.

Crackling laughter came from the huge belly of the furnace as coal burned red and dissipated up the pipes to feed the house with warmth. She glanced at the two mysterious trunks that were off limits and stood like centennials on either side of the fruit cellar door. Her little hands reached up to twirl the handle of the corn grinder nailed high on the door and watched the corn kernels spray out into a glass bottle. Then, there was nothing else left but to open the door.

She breathed deeply, pulling at the thick metal handle to reveal the darkness and the smells of earth dampness, potatoes, onions, and sauerkraut. Bubbling sounds came from the kegs of raspberry wine her father was brewing, filling Helen with images of bees, hornets and snakes that lived in their vast raspberry acres. Her body chilled in the cooler air.

Jumping, she grabbed the chain attached to the single bulb, and pulled down frantically. The light, however, did not turn on; it only bounced in the air and mocked her in the dark. She felt the jars of raspberries and tomatoes laughing behind their screened shelves and she flew back out to the door, up the stairs and into the light of the kitchen where the three women all turned to see her.

They had moved the tea cups and were bringing out flour and sugar for the cake. “And the potatoes?” “The lights out again,” Helen said, her voice low.

“We don’t have time for this, just go get the potatoes. Prop the door, you don’t have to see much, just grab them up,” her mother said, wiping her hands on the apron. She felt her face redden, heat rising as her mother turned, gone to her sisters in some loving dance of meal preparation and jokes.

With new resolve, Helen turned back to the cellar door. She would close her eyes, go to the right of the onions, and fill up the pail and not think.

She started down again, past the cement wall, its gray mortar that held it together like layers of huge sandwiches. Back to the door of the fruit cellar that was open slightly like a panting dog ready to leap up and rip her apart. Pulling hard she opened the wooden door as wide as possible, but the light in the cellar seemed afraid to enter and stopped at her feet. Gurgling came from the pipe on the wall that sucked out everything from the house, exiting to some mysterious place. She shuffled in her socks, feeling the cold cement on her feet, her hands at her side, careful not to touch the part of the wall that seeped moisture like a sweaty cold snake.

Closing her eyes, she moved forward, past the whispering sound of the wine as it bubbled through coils from one barrel to the next. The wiry end of a garden basket brushed her leg and she closed her eyes tighter, becoming still and quiet like the rabbits she had seen in the snow, hoping she would seem a part of all of this, and thus be let alone. Then she made her move, dashing the four steps and reaching down to feel the burlap bag. She held her breath as she struggled with the tie and reached in. She was almost done. Her hands recoiled as she felt the soft tentacles of the sprouts on the potatoes grabbling at her, and like a river in a flood, her

fear burst out of her and she bolted once more back up the stairs to find herself in the silence of the kitchen as the laughter stopped. The women, first looking at her, turned to her mother. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, can’t you do anything child?” her mother said, lowering the wooden spoon in her hand and saying with resignation, “Go get your brother.”

It was her brother who came to fetch the potatoes while she followed him and watched him bend down in the dark and come through the fruit cellar door, making it look so easy, smiling at her.

She peeled all of the potatoes onto the Middletown newspaper’s funeral section so the pictures of Mr. Ed Gerhardt and Emma Smith lay looking up at her, all of their good deeds listed until she covered them in one inch brown peels. She rinsed the potatoes and lifted the heavy pot onto the gas stove. She set the table and wiped the kitchen linoleum with the old mop, hoping to make up for her fear defect, but it was as if all these things were inefficient band aids that could not erase her lack of courage that was like a lost building block inside her soul.