

## More praise for *The Exact Place*

"Most of the time when I am reading I feel like an outsider, as if I am merely watching a program on television. With Margie's writing I feel like I am a participant, I'm eating the Cream of Wheat; I'm peering through the trap door; I'm pulling in the fish; I'm lying on the cold linoleum; I'm smelling the triple batch of chocolate chip cookies. Which is all lovely and affirming. She weaves life and Faith together so seamlessly that I can see Creation glowing with the light of Heaven. Margie has such a gift of making you feel like you are a part of things . . . and that is what I hate about Margie's writing. As I am swept up in the glory of the ordinary, and seeing the shimmer of the spiritual—she cuts me with the ragged shards of life in a fallen world. Then I want to be merely watching again. But there is blood on my hands."

### **Ned Bustard**

Editor, *It Was Good: marking art to the glory of God*;  
Author, *Squalls Before War: His Majesty's Schooner Sultana*;  
Creative Director, Square Halo Books

"Gratitude is my primary response to Margie's memoir, gratitude for refusing to be mawkish about childhood and growing up. Margie's early years, rife with earthy mischief, spiritual lucidity, fear and joy are side-splittingly hilarious and heart-rending. She tells these stories with the understanding of a very wise woman, but it's as though the scrape-kneed little girl she was sat beside her and whispered them in her ear."

### **Katy Bowser**

Singer-Songwriter & Recording Artist

"I've spent many good hours around Margie and her husband's open table, but here is a different sort of hospitality, one no less welcoming for being in print: an open life, displayed in stories that are full of sharp wit and graceful intelligence."

### **Wesley Hill**

Author, *Washed & Waiting: reflections on  
Christian faithfulness and homosexuality*

Margie Haack is a great storyteller and this book collects some fabulously entertaining bits from her childhood on a small Minnesota farm — nicely told, sometimes tragic, filled with deep pathos, still with an eye to beauty, but also good humor and a considerable passel of shenanigans (she brought her horse into the kitchen to eat pickles? She caught fish bigger than herself? She used

bag balm? Don't ask.) Yet, with a sense of God's redemptive purposes played out over a lifetime of rural poverty and a harsh upbringing, these tales form a memoir of note, ruminating on an unusually vivid life in what for some will feel like another world. It is not a cliché to say that this book is written with grit and grace.

**Byron Berger**

Hearts & Minds Books / BookNotes

"The most interesting people I've met all seem to have a couple things in common. One, they've all lived very hard, challenging lives. As Garrison Keillor once put it, "It's a shallow life that doesn't give a person a few scars." Well, Margie and her family have had more than their share, but mere scars are easy to come by. It's the second factor that is rare and makes her and her writing so extraordinary: the ability to see and rejoice in God's grace amidst the scars."

**Greg Grooms**

Director, Hill House (Austin, TX)

"In her beautiful and honest new book, *The Exact Place*, Margie Haack allows us to look over-her-shoulder and through-her-heart, learning the possibility of love in a world that is often very unlovely. Like generations before her, she was born into the grand land of lakes and woods in northern Minnesota, and that place and its people have formed her, heart and mind, body and soul. Readers of her much-loved essays already know that she is a remarkably-gifted writer able to see into the ordinariness of the everyday, and finding unusual grace for all of us; for years we have longed for those tender, truthful windows on life to become a book — and a very good book it is."

**Steven Garber**

Author, *Faith & Faithfulness*

Principal, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, & Culture

One of the highest compliments you can give an author is to feel a kind of sadness upon reaching the end of their book. If the story has become important to you and its reading a delightful part of your day, sometimes the only remedy is to flip back to the first page and start all over again. This is the way I felt upon coming to the end of Margie Haack's deeply moving, wise, and masterfully told memoir of her childhood, *The Exact Place*. I will read it again. Margie and I have been dear friends for years. We've written letters, shared meals and overnights, and talked of our lives, families, and work. I already love her. But now I also love the spunky, spirited, full-of-pain and full-of-hope young girl

that she was. And I'm a little bit in awe. I have long considered Margie to be one of my favorite writers, devouring her essays and the quarterly *Notes from Toad Hall*. But after reading *The Exact Place*, she has moved onto my list of most beloved authors. You will see, feel, and think, laugh out loud and want to cry, sometimes all on the same page. When a book of such excellence is birthed into the world, it is cause for much rejoicing. In honor of *The Exact Place* and its release, I'm raising a glass, dancing under the disco ball, and rushing to order multiple copies for the fortunate people in my life!

***Andi Ashworth***

Author, *Real Love for Real Life*

Co-Director, The Art House America

"I've never lived in a place like the wild remoteness of Northern Minnesota. I can't imagine the cold, or the isolation, or the swamps. But Margie Haack has invited me to test those waters with a visit to her childhood. In *The Exact Place*, she locates the first memories of her faith, shaped by farm life and a difficult father, and by playful moments of grace, like the time she and her little brother brought horses into the kitchen for pickles. *The Exact Place* is full of surprises."

***Sam Van Eman***

Author, *On Earth as It Is in Advertising?:*

*moving from commercial hype to Gospel Hope*

Culture Editor, The High Calling

Staff Specialist, CCO Campus Ministry

"Since my early twenties when I discovered Madeline L'Engle's spiritual autobiographies, I have been drawn to memoir writing. My curiosity in how people make sense of their lives mixed with the love of a well-written sentence has kept my interest in this genre alive. Reading Margie Haack's seasonal writings, confessions, and deliberations on grace in *Notes from Toad Hall* for over a decade has been more than just a curiosity fulfillment. Her life and writings have been friends along the path of my life. Every time I have read her writings, I have fallen more in love with God, my husband, my children, my home, and the story God is writing in our lives. *Notes from Toad Hall* and now this lovely book, *The Exact Place*, makes ordinary life just what it is — redeemed, beautiful, and full of grace. I look forward to sharing this book with friends in hopes that it will affirm them in the stories of their lives.

***Leslie Bustard***

Author, Teacher



*The Exact  
Place*

A Memoir

Margie L. Haack

*The Exact Place*

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*FOR DENIS*



**"**It is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and a new world."

~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer





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# Introduction

**M**y mother, who was witness to much of this book, read an early draft. I waited anxiously for her to be finished, trying not to hover, and felt tremendous relief when she gave a positive response saying she laughed and cried, and thought it was very good. But, there was a “but.” There was one thing she disagreed with and I stiffened waiting, reminding myself that after all, memoir is personal narrative from a particular person’s point of view, which is obviously not omniscient. I tell my stories, not the stories of other family members. Referring to the details of a particular event Mom said, “The military jets that flew over our farm came from the south, not the north.” I replied, “That’s IT? They came from the south? From the *south*?” I fell back to the chair laughing. I will stick with my version. At the time, Randy and I were outside picking beans, she was inside canning. They came from the north.

One day as I listened to Terry Gross interview a memoirist on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, the author made an interesting remark: she said a writer should never let the truth get in the way of a good story. I knew I couldn’t agree. If I couldn’t make a good story out of what actually happened as I remembered it, then I shouldn’t be writing. Although it

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is tempting, I avoid fictionalizing for the sake of cleverness, a humorous moment, or satisfying closure.

In the end, confronting possible disparity between what we each remembered about the years we lived in the shotgun house was a valuable process. I was encouraged and amused to hear that when Frank McCourt's brother read his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Angela's Ashes* and announced, "That's not how it happened," McCourt's response was: "Then write your own damned memoir."

So, these are stories of personal landscapes and spiritual geography. Kathleen Norris describes "spiritual geography" as "the way a place shapes people's attitudes, beliefs and myths." She writes that "the spiritual geography of the Plains is complex. But the stark beauty of the land — its strength — also inspires strength in people, in part because it reminds us of human limits." There was a stark, even frightening beauty to the land just north of the Plains where I grew up; it was a constant reminder of the paradox of human strength and its inherent limits. These are stories about place and family, and are firmly rooted in the stark beauty of the northern Minnesota landscape. The people, the animals, and the physical nature of the land shaped my personal landscape. No matter how far I move from them, I cannot shed them. Nor do I want to. They are powerful reminders of both the strengths and the limits of human love, they have become part of the history of my spiritual geography.

We lived on a small farm in the northernmost part of Minnesota, a place barely reclaimed from the wilderness. A winter blizzard could swallow a herd of cattle. Temperatures that fell below minus forty could freeze a chicken house full of hens. Summer rains could drown fields of hay and in minutes a hailstorm could flatten acres of grain. You never knew. Farming was the practice of faith, the hope that waves of blue flax blooming in June would be golden-brown seed-pods in September, that the wet new-born calf would survive to replace her mother giving gallons of high-fat milk every day, that the hours of spreading manure and plowing straight lines would become your children's and grandchildren's inheritance.

It was remote — remote enough to not have telephone service

down our road until 1962, the year before Kennedy was assassinated. Polio was still killing and crippling people in our county; one of our neighbors, a young mother, felt so ill one day, she drove herself to the doctor with her children in the backseat. None of us went to the doctor for something as minor as an ear infection or the Asian influenza. It had to be major, like when Paul Olson amputated his finger. That day my stepfather and Paul were lassoing calves to brand, dehorn and castrate as my brother, Randy, and I sat on the rail fence watching. When a particularly large calf hit the end of Paul's rope and flipped in the air, his finger was accidentally caught in the coils that unreeled faster than our eye could see. The force of the calf hitting the rope's limit was enough to take the finger off. Dad rushed him to the doctor with the finger wrapped in a dirty handkerchief.

So, by the time Charlotte drove eighteen miles to the clinic in Baudette, she couldn't get out of the car because she could no longer walk and never did again.

We didn't have money for pretty furniture and fancy clothes — or even the plain kind. But we always had food, plenty of the sort that is still lodged in my genes; I can't seem to repress mashed potatoes and fried chicken, even though I can make Thai chicken in lettuce wraps. We were always entertained by life, and even survived to tell about it. Entertainment wasn't just contests of firing rifles at highway signs or climbing the highest tree on the farm — Randy won by climbing so high the swaying tip broke off, and by strange providence, I saved his life by grabbing his shirt as he bounced past — entertainment was also neighbors, who were endlessly amusing. Some must have had personality disorders. I'm sure they thought the same of us.

It was this place and these people who shaped me. But perhaps my greatest shape-maker was the one Yeats had in mind when he wrote:

*But love has pitched her mansion in  
the place of excrement;  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent.*

Many times I have considered my life and complained how contrary it is to what I want or think I need, only to find, in the end, that

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although I've been rent, I've also been loved. No matter how far into the wilderness we wander — no matter how powerful the stench — it will be a place where God can touch us. So I follow his trace through this book, not in chronological years, but in themes and stories that wove through my childhood. And I see I was in the exact place I needed to be.

*The Dogs Of Our  
Lives*

## *The Marsh*

*In May of 1998, John Johnson got lost in the woodland and marsh near his summer home on Lake of the Woods in northern Minnesota. He was looking for logs to build a deck. When he didn't return, a search party was formed. Days went by, he was still missing, and his friends from North Dakota felt the authorities weren't putting enough effort into the search. They organized their own party, rented a bus, and drove to the area where he was last seen. When they got off the coach and saw the tangled impenetrable land of forest and marshes, "Oh," was all they said. That evening they returned to the prairies of North Dakota.*

*A marsh is an area of soft, wet, low-lying land dominated by grasses and reeds that forms the ecosystem between land and water. Entering a marsh can cause a disorienting loss of direction. Tall grasses loom high, cutting off the horizon. A misstep can plunge you into a waist-deep hole. The Tuberous White Water Lily (*Nymphaea tuberosa*) often grows in the shallow waters next to a marsh. Its large single leaf floats on the water and is called a pad. The blossom, pure white petals with bright yellow stamen, is a cup as large as your hands.*

*Eight days later Johnson emerged on a gravel road five miles from where he entered. He had survived by sleeping in hollow logs, drinking marsh water, and eating the tubers of twelve White Water Lily pads.*

*Not all emerge unscathed from their wanderings, and some never find their way home.*



## Chapter One

# *The Dogs Of Our Lives*

**T**he December after my step-father, Mom, Randy, and I moved to the farm in Lake of the Woods County on the border between Minnesota and Canada, I turned four. That was the winter of my first spiritual awakening. It was Bing's fault.

The day was bitter with millions of frost diamonds glittering in the air, but my mother did not consider twenty below zero an excuse to stay indoors sulking underfoot the entire day, so I was stuffed into a padded snowsuit and sent out to play. Bing, whom I loved almost as much as my mother, was turned out behind me, and we sat on the steps blinking and breathless in the crackling air.

All around us, the snow lay in brilliant waves and deep drifts. The wood stack in the middle of the yard was a round mound with a black cave in the side where Dad had dug through to the firewood that heated our house. The fence posts were capped with snow. The farm machinery lined up along the edge of the woods was softened and half buried like driftwood on a beach. Sunken paths led in three directions like an English hedge maze from our back door to the milk house, to the outhouse, to the barn.

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Bing was the most cheerful and brave of all the dogs we ever owned. He was a white rat terrier with half a brown patch on one ear, a spot on his side, and a tail that curled tightly over his back and wagged to a blur when he was having fun, which was most of the time. Just then he was trying to get up a game of chase. He posed before me, his head on his paws, his rear end wiggling cat-like in the air, ready to pounce. As I rolled awkwardly to my feet he grabbed my hand. Tugging and growling, he pulled off my mitten. He flew through the snow, carrying his prize, disappearing and reappearing like a white dolphin in the surf. I floundered after him, falling down and burying my hands in the drifts. I came out shaking my naked, reddened hand, yelling for him to stop.

“Bring that here!” I wailed. But he ran on, viciously growling and shaking the mitten as if to break its neck. He wouldn’t stop, I couldn’t catch him, so I screamed every God-will-damn-you curse I could think of. I don’t remember my exact words, but Bing’s reaction still blazes in my memory: He drops my mitten and looks at me with horror.

In the bright light, I waded through the snow, picked up my mitten, shook it off, and pulled it on. Bing was not one to give up a thing once he had hold of it. So why did he? My small size, my angry swearing didn’t seem reason enough. I had seen my step-father use his big voice to call Bing away from a hole he was digging. Dad could crush walnuts in his fist, throw calves with one arm, and yet, Bing ignored him, a fountain of dirt flying up behind his tail, until he felt Dad’s foot coming. Then he dodged, grinning as Dad recovered his balance.

Bing’s sudden obedience frightened me. I struggled back to the steps, sat down, sniffled, and began a loud bawling. At that moment, my mother opened the door, the dog raced inside, and she asked me to explain what was going on.

I told her Bing stole my mitten and wouldn’t bring it back until I said a lot of very bad words. “Did you swear at God?” she asked. “Yes.” And I began a fresh howling. I don’t know what my mother really thought. At that time she only had residual spiritual knowledge left over from her own childhood. I had none at all. But she did not find my confession insignificant, nor did she laugh. Kneeling in front of me,

her arms about me, and her face in mine, “Go,” she instructed, “into the next room. Get on your knees and ask God to forgive you for swearing and He will.” Her confidence relieved me.

Isolated details litter my earliest memories — refusing to resolve into completed pictures. I don’t remember what happened after Mom told me to pray. I only know that from that time there was a presence of love that lingered near me. I believed it was God, though I knew nothing about Him except that I shouldn’t swear using His name no matter how enraged I was.



**I**n the early years on our farm, Dad discovered rats in the broken-down granary. They lodged in the walls and under the foundation and came out at night with their skinny tails and red eyes to eat oats by the bushel. I worried that it was only a matter of time before they took over our farm in seething, squeaking masses.

It was Bing who saved us. He joyfully killed them, refusing to give up on even the biggest, meanest old rat until it was dug out and shaken till its brains fell out. When the job was done, his face and ears were bloodied with rat bites and scratches, and I would sit in the hay stack cradling him on my lap, kissing his head and tracing his scars.

Because he was so brave and loved chasing anything no matter how big, Dad repeatedly warned us not to “sic” Bing on the horses when we were in the pasture.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they’ll kick him!” he replied in a tone reserved for idiots.

It didn’t matter that Bing chased the cows and snapped at their heels. Although cows can kick, they aren’t athletic like horses. Cows are clumsy and oafish and run with an awkward gait, whereas any old nag of a horse can accurately land a powerful kick while running at a full gallop.

On a spring day four years later when I was eight, I walked to the marsh and through the soggy pasture looking for buttercups for Mom. Bing was with me sniffing out ground hog holes and digging at their

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burrows. The horses, being curious, snorted and came over to see what I was doing and if I was worth a sugar cube or two. I wasn't. I picked up a stick and threatened them. They flagged their black and blonde tails and trotted a short way off, and then minced toward me again.

Knowing that Bing only needed the slightest encouragement to chase anything, and loving that power, I knew I could make the horses run away. I weighed the temptation, then pointed to the horses and shouted, "sic-em!" Bing happily tore after them yapping and snapping at their heels.

Some horses love an excuse to panic. They can fake a heart attack over a little piece of white paper on the ground. We had several of that kind. One of them was Duke, a two-year-old bay colt, tall and rangy. With a flying kick, he sent Bing somersaulting through the air until he rested quietly on the floor of the woods among decaying leaves and tiny blue violets. In the distance he looked like a still life, a bouquet of small white flowers pushing through the chilled earth.

My face flushed with heat and my eyes began to burn. I ran toward him and stood a way off hoping it was a dream and I would soon wake up. He didn't move. My throat ached. I called softly. Bing? Bing? I couldn't breathe. I knelt on the damp ground among the decaying leaves and saw a tiny marsh of blood forming beside his head.



**Y**ou can't use me to support the belief that children are born innocent: That if you provide them with the basics — physical protection, intellectual stimulation, and emotional love — they'll do what is right, will listen to their parents and be kind and good. I had all I needed. I had most of what I wanted. Still there was some corruption in me that loved the risk of doing what Dad had forbidden. If I sicced Bing on the horses, no one would ever know.

I stood up and stared at him for a long time. It was the first time I experienced that hopeless desire — the wish to re-call words, to undo an act. At last I turned away, leaving him alone in the dim woods, and stumbled home. My lungs hurt. My stomach churned and I hoped this

meant I was going to die, too. I made it to the outhouse where I threw up. Slowly I walked to the house and went to bed where Mom found me a little later. “I think I’m sick,” I said. I was sick — with grief and the failure to be a more honorable child.

I decided not to tell anyone what had happened because if I did, I would immediately be turned out of the family. I would be forced to wander and make my own way in the world. Or more likely, the family would keep me, but they would hate me and never speak to me again because I had done something so dreadful there was nothing that could ever, ever make up for it. I thought of leaving before anyone found out.

I pushed my face into the pillow, sobbing. As I cried, I became aware of my brother’s voice outside. Loud and alarmed. He was yelling for Mom to come quick. Something was wrong with Bing. My heart leaped. Could God actually bring a dog back from the dead? Would he? I peeked out the window and saw him. He was weaving his way across the pasture, dragging himself home, bloodied, and bobbing like a man with a club-foot.

Some deep instinct residing in his heart must have brought him home. It couldn’t have been his brain — that was damaged beyond repair. Mom helped Randy and me fix a cardboard box for him, and even though we lined it with our softest, raggedy old towel, he couldn’t lie down. We tried to feed him the most treasured of treats, a fried chicken gizzard, but he couldn’t eat. Leaning against the kitchen stove, his injured brain made him go round and round in a circle all night, softly whining.

When Dad got home he took one look and declared, “He’s been kicked by a horse,” and turned his eye on us. “Did any of you sic him on the horses?” We all said no. The next morning Dad gently carried him out, and we never saw him again.



**A** lot of things died on our farm. In fact, death was the fate of most farm animals. At a certain point of growth — fatness, maturity — they were harvested, butchered, or sold to keep us alive. It was

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the expected destination for pigs, chickens, steers, old milk cows, and sometimes sheep. We didn't need to learn to live with it. It was simply the way life was.

One of the exceptions to this pattern was dogs. Dogs were purely for pleasure. Our dogs didn't herd, guard, or hunt, as some might expect. They were simply companions for children. They followed us to the pasture, to the woods, to the fields, and to the ditch to play in the water and catch frogs. They ran beside us and playfully pulled at our clothes and wrists. They licked us with their soft tongues and loved us with their fetid breath. However, Dad required them to keep a few rules just like everyone else.

By the time I was nine, I had five brothers and sisters and Dad had distilled laws for children into one basic rule: "Don't do as I do, do as I say." In other words, obey me. There wasn't any arguing or defense when you were confronted. Forgetting to feed the chickens, leaving a gate open so the livestock escaped, going to bed when told — those weren't unreasonable expectations for children. It was the sudden enforcement of a rule and a temper that could melt iron that kept me jumpy, a little afraid and anxious. I was always vigilant trying to discern unspoken rules conveyed by a look or a sudden movement of his hand. Did he want me to move that chair? Pass the salt?

At the supper table I was especially alert, ducking my head, averting my eyes and making sure I held my fork properly, not using the fingers of my other hand to push food onto my fork. He taught me not to do that by hitting me with the flat blade of a dinner knife. The first time I didn't see it coming, and when it hit, a flaming ball formed in my throat and hot tears dripped to my lap. I quickly placed my hand under the table hiding the red welt, too ashamed to continue eating. It didn't take long to break me of that habit. I watched warily as he ate. He had his own way of hunkering over his plate holding his fork in his palm like one might hold a small scoop shovel while his other forearm rested on the table encircling his plate, a relaxed fist holding it in place. He never had to ask for anything to be passed, he merely stared at it until someone noticed.

The rules for dogs made sense and anyone could see that keeping

them would certainly prolong their lives and happiness.

Dog's Rules were:

Stay home.

Don't chase vehicles.

Don't bite humans.

Don't eat chickens or their eggs.

Don't chase deer.

Especially, don't chase deer. That was a crime so felonious, a dog caught chasing deer or even known to have once chased a deer could be shot by anyone on sight. Anyone. That wasn't just Dad's rule, it was upheld by everyone in our county. Deer were loved and protected by all. For despite their shyness and graceful beauty, which were truly appreciated, venison was considered one of the major food groups along with dairy products, vegetables, and dessert. Deer were never resented for crop damage as they daintily stepped through fields of alfalfa and wheat, fattening themselves for the fall hunt.

My husband and a friend from Texas once witnessed this last rule in action, and marveled at the casual nature of the enforcement. During deer hunting season, they were with my brother, Rex, who stopped his pickup in the middle of the road and got out to talk with Jerry Khrone, who was going the other direction. Jerry had also stopped his pickup in the middle of the road and got out to talk. They stood beside their pickups and spoke of this and that: The effects of weather on the buck rut, some fool who was arrested by the game warden for firing at a deer decoy the night before the season opened. As they visited, Jerry spotted a white dog loping across the far field. He paused a moment: "There's that damn Bjork dog. Been chasin' deer. That's it then." He reached into his pickup, pulled out his rifle, fired once, and the dog flipped into the air and died in the plowed field 250 yards away. Rex and Jerry continued to talk about doe permits as though he had merely paused mid-sentence to hawk one.

There were no rules for dogs about eating horse biscuits, rolling in ripe manure, or chasing skunks. That was expected and left plenty of room for amusement.

We owned a series of dogs each memorable in his own way, but the

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death of one still stands out. This dog broke a lot of rules, and we kids worried. Corky was part Dalmatian and part black Lab and was born with the temper of an old crank and the resolve of a terrorist. For one, as soon as he could walk, he had gone to the neighbors to check out the local females. For another, he declared war on any vehicle that drove by our farm. He'd lay in wait in the tall grass along the edge of the road, and as a car neared, he would jump out snarling and running after the tires, his teeth bared and his hair standing on end. Any kid within hearing distance would run toward the road screaming "Corky! Get back here!" Not that he ever paid us any mind. He'd come back with defiance in his eye, tongue hanging out, and his tail up — no remorse at all. He was an addict who couldn't help himself. Dad warned again and again that Corky was going to get himself killed.

This had already happened to one of our dogs — getting herself killed by a car. She was a sweet Dalmatian named Spotty, and we tried desperately to stop her from chasing cars. We begged and reasoned with her. We beat her. We tied her up, but there was always someone who couldn't bear the sad look on her face and who would set her free. Nothing worked. The next thing she'd be hiding in the tall grass along the road and jumping out after anything that dared to drive by. Then one day a fisherman from the Twin Cities whizzed by in a big Buick, and as she chased his tires, he swerved and got her, a dull popping sound. She lifted her head from the gravel, looked at us with sad, apologetic eyes, and tried to drag herself toward us on her front legs.

We ran to her and Randy picked her up, a heavy load for a seven-year-old. He staggered down the drive. Our younger sister, Jan, and I trailed along beside him crying, "Don't die, Spotty, please don't die." As we laid her on the back steps, blood trickled out her nose and ears. She gazed at us with her dark blue eyes that slowly turned a milky gauze. Her body stayed warm and limp for a while, as though she were just napping and could still wake if she chose.

So even though Corky was not going to win any personality prizes, we still didn't want him to die that way. Certainly not that way.

His fatal infraction was the violation of a more serious rule: biting people. He was always short tempered about his food and bones. If you



happened near him while he was eating, he would stop and hang over his bowl in a protective stance. His body would rumble, his lips lifting in a snarl.

I guess it was the danger or the challenge that drew my five-year-old brother, Rex, into teasing him. It was like playing roulette in a way. Grab Corky's bone, dangle it in the air above him, and Corky would go ravening, leaping and snapping for it. The trick was to let go of the bone at just the right moment without making contact with Corky's teeth. One day Rex misjudged and got bit. He went crying to Mom. It was probably the second or third time Corky had bit someone, so Dad made a pronouncement: "I'm telling you, if he bites anybody again, I'm going to shoot him." We hoped he didn't mean it.

Not long after our uncle, aunt, and four of their children came for supper on a warm summer evening. Our kitchen was too small for everyone, so the children ate in the yard. Supper that night included my mother's fried chicken, the best in the world. Platters of breasts, wings, and legs came out of the cast-iron skillets browned and crisp — especially on the side that touched the bottom of the pan the longest, where it had time to absorb greasy juices and cure to a salty, spicy perfection. We sat in the grass and on the steps with the other children, our plates loaded with the foods that always accompanied fried chicken: creamy mashed potatoes with milk gravy made from the drippings in the frying pans, biscuits, green beans fresh from the garden, sliced ripe tomatoes, and the contrast of tangy coleslaw.

As we ate, Corky watched, looking grimmer by the second, waiting for someone to give him a chicken leg before he had to take it by force. Rex sucked the last of the meat off his piece and offered it to Corky, who lunged, and Rex lifted his hand, ready to play their game. Infuriated, Corky leaped, grabbing bone and hand in his jaw, he wrenched it away. Rex drew his hand back and this time blood was oozing out of three canine puncture wounds. Howling with pain and anger, shaking his hand and squeezing more blood out of the holes, he tried to run to the house, but Randy and I cut him off, yelling, "Aw, c'mon. You asked for it. Corky didn't mean to."

It may have looked like Rex was too young to understand that Dad

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meant what he said, but I doubt it. He was just stubborn. When he was hardly more than a baby, he proved to be so resolute when it came to his own ideas he could have made a mule weep.

He learned how to climb out of his crib when he was barely fifteen months old, and the success of the act was so exquisitely powerful he'd gone out to the kitchen to show Mom and Dad. Since he was the fourth child, and Dallas, the fifth baby, was sleeping in the bassinet beside him, with a sixth on the way, they weren't impressed. They valued what little privacy they could get in the evening after we were all sent to bed at a "decent hour." Mom picked him up, carried him back to the single bedroom where all of us slept, laid him down, kissed him, and said, "Stay there." Her back was barely out of the room before he had his foot over the rail again.

Controlling one's destiny is a heady thing, and he was going to go back to the kitchen. Hoisting himself down, he followed her out. She turned around, surprised, and said, "I thought I told you to stay in bed." He looked at her silently, sucking his thumb as she brought him back. This time she warned him, "If you do this again, you'll get a spanking."

From our beds, we watched him climb out again. "Wow!" we thought, "is he ever stupid." But he wasn't. He was just declaring war. He did get a spanking that time. And he wasn't quiet about crying, even though we were all supposed to be sleeping. He roared and howled. And, while he was still hiccupping and sighing, he climbed out again. We rose on our elbows from the bunk beds and thought we should at least point out that he would get it again. Randy whispered, "Rex, you moron, don't do it!" But he was already on his way to the kitchen. This time Dad brought him back and really let him have it. He lay for a moment, screaming, and then climbed out again and went to the kitchen. I mean, if he wanted to simply get up, why didn't he just sneak into the living room and quietly sit on the couch? But no.

This dedication to autonomy was way beyond us. We begged him to stay in bed. It was the screaming and crying we could no longer tolerate, and we all began to wail. I don't remember how much longer this went on. I don't know how my parents won, but they must have, because it never happened again that I remember.

Perhaps this battle helped prepare him for his own spiritual awakening, which began when he, too, was four years old. It involved nothing unusual, just our family's normal stampede to the table at supper-time. On this particular evening Mom called us in, and Rex was the last to arrive. From the disadvantage of his height, the table looked crowded and full. He'd been forgotten. There was nowhere to sit. With as much withering sarcasm a four-year-old can muster, he shouted at Mom, "And WHERE am I supposed to sit? On your HEAD?!" The words were barely out of his mouth, when just like that, our mother whacked him hard on top of his head and sent him to the living room until he could come back and speak properly to her.

Something about that incident melted his heart and caused him to pray and ask God to forgive him. He remembers leaning into the wall and crying with the certain revelation that he was a selfish, impatient boy who had just insulted the best thing in his life. He should have had a faith in his mother built solidly on past experience: even though he was number four out of six children, not once in all his four years of life had she forgotten to feed him. That is roughly 4,260 times. At least.

But this revelation did not mean he minded risking some flesh in order to have a little fun with Corky.

By this time we were making such a racket over Rex and the dog, Dad came to the top of the steps and boomed his usual inquiry, "WHAT THE SAM HELL IS GOING ON OUT HERE!?" Actually, it wasn't "Sam Hell." It was "Sam Hill," though I didn't learn that until many years later. Still, it amounted to the same thing.

Rex ran up and showed his hand, which had a couple of scarlet drips falling off the ends of his fingers.

"Corky bit me," he bawled.

Jan was crying. She was six years old and the most tender-hearted and gentle of all of us. Our cousins were standing a little way off. They had stopped eating. Only Dallas, our youngest brother, sat on the ground contentedly shoveling mashed potatoes into his mouth, oblivious and a little too young for the drama that was shaping up around him. Randy and I stood at the bottom of the steps pleading for Corky, pointing out that Rex had been teasing him.

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It was useless. Corky was standing over his chicken bone a few feet away. It was between his front paws; he had cracked the shank and was swallowing the splinters whole. His last memory must have been a pleasant one as Dad shot him point blank between the eyes. He simply dropped.



For dessert, Mom had made chocolate cake with chocolate fudge icing. She always spread it just before the cake cooled, which gave it a shiny, satiny skin — a thin, glass-like surface that broke into miniature panes revealing the creamy underside of the icing and the moist cake beneath. Randy and I had no appetite for about ten minutes. We carefully set our plates on the porch and went around to the backside of the haystack and sat on a bale.

Remembering what I had done to Bing, I knew I couldn't stay mad at Rex for getting Corky into trouble. Bing was the dog that began my spiritual journey. He planted an awareness of the transcendent within me — there were realities in life that couldn't be touched by the hand or seen by the eye. This presence, shimmering just beyond our senses, appraised the weight of not only our words, but our actions. For me, Bing was a purveyor of love and grace, and I had killed him. Someone needed to forgive me.

Randy wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt and said, "They're starting to play ball."

We got up to join the rest of the kids. But first, we ate a piece of chocolate cake.

### *Randy's Favorite Chocolate Cake*

1 c boiling water  
2 sq. unsweetened chocolate  
½ c butter  
1 t vanilla  
1¾ c brown sugar  
2 eggs  
1¾ cup flour  
1 t soda  
¼ t salt  
½ c sour cream

In a small bowl pour boiling water over chocolate. Stir to mix. Set aside. Cream butter and vanilla. Add brown sugar, blend well. Add eggs one at a time and beat. Combine dry ingredients and add to mixture. Beat until smooth. Stir in sour cream and chocolate. Place in 9x13 greased cake pan. Bake at 325° for 1 hour 15 min. or until a toothpick comes out clean.

### *Chocolate Fudge Icing*

1 stick butter  
3 T cocoa  
6 T milk  
1 t vanilla  
3½ c powdered sugar  
½ c chopped walnuts (optional)

Melt butter in a saucepan along with cocoa. Add milk and bring to boil. Remove from heat and beat in the powdered sugar and vanilla. Beat until smooth, adding more sugar as needed to make a spreading consistency. Stir in nuts. Spread on cake while slightly warm.



# *Crash Course*

## *Balm of Gilead Tree*

*In areas of Lake of the Woods County where virgin tamaracks and cedars were cut and where fires burned across the land, species of the poplar family grew and spread in their place. Quaking aspen and balsam poplar known as “fire-chasers” tolerated wet ground and grew in groves by the thousands. The balsam poplar, a cottonwood, was locally known by an old name, the Balm of Gilead. In spring, the tree blooms with sticky aromatic buds called catkins. My grandfather, Percy Sorenson, gathered them, and using an old American Indian recipe, extracted the resin to make a healing ointment. It soothed everything from cuts to poison ivy, but there are times when wounds need a stronger, deeper magic. Jeremiah, an ancient Hebrew prophet, referred to the deep wounds of the soul when he asked, “Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician?” Centuries later, Jesus answered, “I have come to heal the broken-hearted.”*



## Chapter Two

### *Crash Course*

I arrived in this world on a cold and snowy day. And I was fatherless besides. My family tree is a series of lost branches and strained grafts. I knew this from the beginning. I knew it like geese fly south, like suckers swim up creeks to spawn. It was my mother, Marjorie Lou Darbyshire Frolander Sorenson Block, who supplied the memories and tried to fill the broken spaces.

On the day I was born, my mother was living in Warroad, Minnesota, with her foster parents, the Frolanders. No one was home when her labor began. Her mother was at a Ladies Aid luncheon. Her father was working at a carpentry job for a local business. Her husband, Keith Sorenson, was gone — dead four months. My seventeen-year-old mother belted her wool coat over her tight belly, tied a scarf over her auburn hair, pulled on her woolen mittens, and began the mile-long walk to the hospital.



It was the same hospital where she had been born. In December of 1929, her own mother, Vadna Darbyshire, lay awake in the middle of the night. Vadna's training as a nurse helped her finally make a difficult assessment, one she didn't want to believe. She was suffering from more than just a normal pregnancy — she needed to see a doctor because she was seriously ill. Worried that she didn't have long to live, her husband, Lester Darbyshire, known simply as Darby, dressed in his parka and boots and trudged through the snow to wake Jake Colson, the only neighbor in the near-by settlement who owned a car. With the temperature far below zero, Darby knew it would be a risky trip across the lake if Jake agreed to drive her into Warroad. Jake did agree; but first he drove across the ice to a nearby island and roused Pete Frolander, another neighbor who could accompany him. (Pete would eventually become the foster-father of Vadna's unborn child, and my favorite grandfather.) Jake and Pete packed the car with blankets and thermoses of hot coffee, and together they drove Vadna across fifty miles of lake ice from Minnesota's Northwest Angle to the hospital in Warroad. Darby stayed behind to care for his two small sons, Steven and Ivan.



The Northwest Angle of Minnesota where my mother's parents, the Darbyshires, lived is the northernmost part of the forty-eight states. On the map where Minnesota's northern border bumps up, it looks like a mistake. There is a legend that in the early 1800's the surveyors got lost among the thousands of islands on Lake of the Woods and accidentally gave the U.S. a small piece of Canada. The area was a surveyor's nightmare. Surrounded by Canadian wilderness and lakes on all sides, it was an area so isolated the only access was by boat in summer or across the ice in winter. This was until the early 1970s, when the United States government sought permission from the province of Manitoba to build a gravel road through seventy-five miles of uninhabited cedar swamp up to the Northwest Angle's tiny settlement called Angle Inlet. Living along the shores and on the islands of Lake

of the Woods during the 1920s and 30s, the few inhabitants of the area made their living by commercial fishing. Before the populations collapsed, millions of pounds of highly-prized game fish — walleye, sauger, and northern pike — were netted and shipped by rail to markets in New York and Chicago.

My mother's parents, Darby and Vadna Darbyshire, had moved from Oklahoma to a small homestead on Lake of the Woods. It was set back a little way from the shore in a small clearing behind the ruins of Fort St. Charles, a sixteenth-century French fort established by fur traders. Here they survived on what Darby earned from fishing in the summer and odd jobs throughout the year. Their two-room log cabin (without electricity or running water) could have fit in a corner of Vadna's childhood home in Enid, Oklahoma. She had been born into a prosperous family and was the oldest of nine children — Mom never knew why they were called prosperous. Maybe the size of the house and the little scraps of detail left with Mom's brothers gave her that impression. While Vadna was in nursing school she met and fell in love with Darby. His parents had emigrated from England and settled near the oil fields of Oklahoma where, as a young man, he found work. That was all Mom knew about her parents early history, and she often wondered why they left Oklahoma for northern Minnesota after their marriage.

When Jake and Pete arrived in Warroad with Vadna on that cold December night, they took her straight to the hospital where she was kept for several days. The doctor did not know what was wrong with her, but suggested that since she was in her seventh month of pregnancy she stay in town until the birth of the baby. So Vadna remained with friends until February 12, 1930, the day my mother, Marjorie Lou Darbyshire, was born.

Mom was in perfect health. However, Vadna continued running a fever with flu-like symptoms and suffered from overwhelming exhaustion. Her gums bled. Her stomach ached. Her arms hurt when she lifted her children. At last the doctor suggested she be taken to the Mayo Clinic to see if they knew what was wrong. So that summer, Darby drove Vadna 500 miles south to Rochester, Minnesota, where

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tests revealed that she had leukemia. There was no cure.

A friend advised Darby to take Vadna to California to see the flamboyant preacher and faith healer, Aimee Semple McPherson. Many people reported they had been cured of their diseases when she laid her hands on them and prayed. It was worth a shot. So, in desperation, Darby left baby Marjorie and her two brothers with neighbors and set out on the long journey to California. Miss McPherson prayed for Vadna and told her she was healed but needed to stay at the Foursquare Gospel Temple in Los Angeles to be certain of the cure. Darby felt that if indeed she was healed, then God could sustain that healing anywhere. So he took her home to the Northwest Angle.

For a while she did seem a little better, but gradually her life seeped away. A few days before Vadna died, Zella Frolander made a neighborly visit to the Darbyshires. Zella found Vadna in bed, feverish, her eyes dark and sunken. She was unable to get up even for visitors, and her baby laid beside her crying. Knowing Vadna would never recover, Zella kindly offered to take Margie home to keep her until Vadna was well again. Vadna kissed her baby, my mother, good-bye and sank back on the bed.

Several days later Vadna was taken by boat back to the Warroad hospital where she lingered for another ten days and then sank for the last time. An old sepia photo of her sits on my buffet — she is a healthy young woman in her late teens. Her head is demurely bent toward the camera, and she wears the slightest smile, but her eyes are dark and wistful.

My mother was nine months old when Zella took her home. Zella had always wanted a daughter and Pete didn't know he'd wanted one until Mom arrived in their household. Their three school-age boys were amused and delighted to have a little girl in the house.

Darby meant for the arrangement to be temporary, until he got back on his feet, but my mother continued to live with the Frolanders for the next four years until it was natural to call them Mom and Dad and the three boys, her brothers. She made occasional visits to her father's cabin, but the Darbyshire family tree grew more convoluted when Darby took a new wife who was also Marjorie's aunt — Vadna's

sister, Beulah. I don't know how they got together unless she made it up to Minnesota to help care for her sister's children and husband. It didn't take long for the family to grow larger after they married: in addition to Mom's two older brothers, four half-sisters were born into that small log cabin.

When Mom was five years old she began first grade in the one-room schoolhouse on Penasee, the same island on which the Frolanders lived. That fall an incident occurred that cemented the bond to her adoptive family. It happened during one of her short visits to the Darbyshires. She awakened on a school morning to the smell of breakfast cooking on the wood stove. It was a chilly day and Beulah had prepared oatmeal for the children. Darby had already gone out to work. Mom has never been able to eat oatmeal. To her, the word "mush," as they called it then, was entirely descriptive. Who would want to eat something called mush? The sliminess of oatmeal reminded her of an old man who sometimes visited the Frolanders and noisily coughed up large quantities of phlegm and spit it — in front of everyone — into an old coffee can, or worse, onto the woodstove where it sizzled and fried.

Mom knew her step-mother thought she was spoiled rotten by the Frolanders, but her hatred of oatmeal sent her past caring. With a rising dread she dared to mention she didn't like oatmeal, but was willing to go without breakfast. "You eat that," Beulah responded, "and be thankful for every bite." Mom sat silent and staring, wishing she were home. "Fine," Beulah told her, "you can sit here all day if necessary until you've finished your breakfast." Ivan and Steven were sent off to school without Mom and her younger half-sisters settled in to watch the outcome of such defiance.

At last Mom held her nose and gulped large spoonfuls as fast as she could. Visions of the old man kept returning to her mind, and she began to gag. Suddenly everything rushed to her throat and erupted in one mighty heave. The mess on the table and floor so infuriated Beulah she grabbed a switch and beat Mom up and down her back, her butt, her thighs. When it was over, Beulah sent her to school. She remembers walking down the long path through the woods, then into the tall brush and reeds near the shore, weeping as she went.

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The island where the Darbyshires lived was just north of Penasee, and the two small islands almost touched, being connected by a shallow marsh with a little patch of open water between them. The path from the cabin led down to the edge where an old rowboat was kept for crossing the water, then the path continued on the other side. Mom wondered how she would get to school since the boys would have taken the boat to the other side. However, by the time she arrived at the water's edge the temperature, which had been steadily falling had caused a thin coat of ice to form over the open water. She hesitated, glancing back up the path toward the cabin. She wiped her eyes and nose on the rough sleeves of her coat, and gingerly advanced, step by step across the ice, until she reached the opposite shore.

At noon she went to the Frolanders for lunch since they lived so near the school. When she opened the door that day, the comforting smell of crispy, fried walleye and creamed potatoes drifted from the kitchen. As the family sat down to eat, Zella noticed that Mom's eyes, normally a clear deep blue, were red and swollen. Mom felt she needed to confess: "I didn't want oatmeal for breakfast, so I got a spanking." Pete pulled her gently onto his lap and lifted her dress. Her entire backside was bruised. That evening, Pete and Zella visited Darby and Beulah. Whatever went on between them, all Mom knew was that she didn't see the Darbyshires again for the rest of the school year. Before Pete tucked the blanket under her chin that night, he counted her ribs "OOOOONE. TWOOOOO. THREEEEEE. FOURFIVESIXSEVENEIGHT" just to make sure they were all there and until she screamed with laughter and had to be rescued by Zella.

From then on Mom only spent a few weeks each summer with Darby and Beulah. When she was dropped off at the Darbyshires' dock, before she climbed out of the outboard boat with her little canvas bag, Pete always slipped her a pack of Juicy Fruit gum to share with her brothers and half-sisters. Gum was rare for children of the depression so they rationed the sticks to one a day. According to strict guidelines, oldest to youngest, a stick was chewed for several hours and then passed one by one to the next in line.

When Mom arrived she carried her bag up the ladder nailed to

the wall and joined the older children who slept in the loft. Beside her cot she took off her shoes and carefully hid them in the bottom of her bag so she could go barefoot like her brothers who had no shoes, and because her canvas sneakers might offend her step-mother, proving, once again, how the Frolanders indulged her. Darby and Beulah slept on the screened porch until it was too cold in the fall. There was a kitchen/living area and one small bedroom where the younger children slept. Furniture was sparse, the only luxury being an old wooden rocker where Darby sat in the evenings.

Sometimes there was not quite enough to eat at the Darbyshire home. Breakfasts were mostly toast and sweetened tea. Beulah baked fresh bread every day, spread it with lard and sprinkled it with salt for their midday meal. Butter was not affordable — though they had a few cows, the cream had to be sold for the money. At suppertime, Beulah warmed milk, added chunks of bread, and sprinkled it with salt and pepper for the evening meal. But even hungry children must play, so after chores were done, they fished or swam off the dock, dug in the ancient sixteenth-century dump behind the fort and found old apothecary jars, pieces of glass, and brass buttons, and they pretended to be the French explorers who were killed in a bloody massacre by a Dakota war party in 1736.

When Mom became a mother there were a few rare mornings when she faced hungry children wondering what to feed us. I remember her apologizing and telling us she needed to go to town that day and stock up. Those must have been times when our chickens weren't laying or between butcherings so we didn't have salt pork or head-cheese on hand. On those mornings she made what became my favorite breakfast: coffee loaded with sugar and cream and a large platter of toasted homemade bread, dripping with butter and cinnamon-sugar. Whatever we had for breakfast, whether it was bacon and eggs or hot cereal, she often called us to the table singing the *Cream of Wheat* commercial we heard on the radio: "it's *Cream of Wheat* weather, we repeat, so treat your family to hot *Cream of Wheat*." Then she laughed at her mimicry and filled our bowls with cereal, sprinkled it with brown sugar, and poured milk and cream across the steaming top. No matter

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how little there was in the house, we were never forced to eat oatmeal.

When Mom stayed with the Darbyshires her favorite time of the day was dusk, when all the children washed their feet, put on pajamas, and wrapped themselves in blankets against the evening chill. Darby brought out a Bible, lit the kerosene lamp, and read stories while Beulah mended clothes in the soft light. The book fascinated Mom and filled her with questions: where did Adam live? Can we go to the Garden of Eden? Who made God? Who did Adam's children marry? Does Jesus love bad men? But she did not like it when Darby questioned her about her soul. "Do you want to be saved?" he would ask. "Don't you want to go to heaven?" Mom would wiggle and squirm, annoyed at being pressed. She refused to answer her father, but inside she said: "yes, someday I want to be saved, but I'm going to wait until I am an old woman, because I want to have a lot of fun first."

It's odd how as a child she'd already gained an impression of her father's faith, that if she accepted it as her own, it would mean giving up things that were fun, things that maybe a holy person wouldn't be allowed to do. She wasn't even certain what those things might be. Leather shoes? No lipstick? No dancing? Perhaps her hesitation was a prescient knowledge that turning to God, any god, grants Him a claim on your soul, or at least parts of it.

There was no church on the Northwest Angle, but each summer Darby organized travel, room, and board for several young women who came from a mission in central Minnesota to teach a summer Bible School for the children. For my mother, the two most memorable things about this annual event were the chocolate cake Beulah always made for supper when it was her turn to have the women as guests, and the program for parents on the final night. That was when Mom was always asked to sing a solo. It made her nervous, but when she opened her mouth to sing a hymn, she loved the way the room grew quiet, and when she was done, the little pause of wonder just before people began to applaud.

Then one fall another change occurred that placed Mom permanently in the Frolander family and eventually made them the grandparents I loved best. The one-room school at Penasee only went



through eighth grade and the Frolanders' oldest son, Carl, was ready to enter high school; Don and Peter, Jr., weren't far behind. Many people believed that eight grades of education were good enough for anybody, but Pete wanted more for his boys. He decided they should close up their house at Penasee and move into Warroad for the winter so the boys could go to school in town. The boys could finish high school, while he found work as a carpenter.

When Darby heard the Frolanders were moving to Warroad, he sent Mom's brother, Steve, to bring her back in the rowboat. But the Frolanders refused to let her go with him because now she was like their own daughter. A meeting was held and Darby agreed they could be her permanent foster parents, under two conditions: That she keep Darbyshire as her name, and that she be sent to church every Sunday. The Frolanders kept this verbal agreement, and that winter Mom went to school in town, and every Sunday Zella sent her to the Swedish Covenant church just down the block.

As the depression wore on, the Darbyshires began to think that life might be better back in Oklahoma. So in 1940 they moved, leaving Mom behind for good. She never saw her father again. Three years later she received a letter; Darby had died of stomach cancer. Attending the funeral was out of the question — it was wartime and the buses and trains were filled with soldiers going to and fro. Meanwhile, at school it was complicated to constantly explain her last name. Classmates asked, "How come your name is Darbyshire if the Frolanders are your parents?" At last, she let it go, and her school records began to show her name as Marjorie Frolander. Not many years later, I would have a similar experience. No adoption, nothing official — just little by little Sorenson slipped away, replaced by Block.



**E**ach summer Pete and Zella left Warroad for an island on the Canadian side of Lake of the Woods. With their three sons and Marjorie, they built a resort that became more successful each year. It began with two wooden houseboats, anchored in the shelter of

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Monument Bay and a few contacts from Kansas — wealthy dentists and doctors looking for the kind of fishing experience found in the wilderness but with good home cooking and comfortable beds.

My mother's last full summer at the resort was the year she was sixteen. Late the following summer when it was nearly over, Mom, who was still seventeen years old, wrote asking Pete if he would please come get her. The very next day Grandpa took his launch across the Lake to Warroad, drove thirty-six miles to a farm north of Williams, and brought her back home for three weeks before the season closed.



This place, which I came to know as Frolander's Camp, was on a small island shaped like the letter C. The middle was low and narrow, so when a boat pulled up to the main dock in the harbor you could see across the neck of the island to the back bay where chains of uninhabited islands stretched shimmering to the horizon and fell off the edge of the world. On both sides, the island rose and thickened in protective arms around a little cove. Tall evergreens flanked by white paper birch grew up the rocky hillsides. Among them Grandpa built log cabins that overlooked the water. They were rich in natural color and filled with the scent of cedar and pine. He plumbed, wired, and even made the furniture — beds, tables, chairs, and chests. The beds were made up with crisp white linens and woolen Hudson bay blankets spread tightly across them. If he were alive today, he would laugh to see malls selling replicas of his furniture as Americans try to recapture authentic log cabin style.

He raised a water tower at the top of the hill so each cabin had running water and indoor toilets. He generated electricity for the island by using a gas-powered airplane engine. It was used sparingly, mainly to run the pump that filled the water tower and for Grandma's wringer washing machine. The generator was shut down by ten in the evening when, according to Grandpa, all people everywhere, even the devil, ought to be in bed. Quiet enveloped the island with only an occasional voice echoing across the water and lemon-yellow squares of

light appearing here and there as guests switched to kerosene lamps.

In the narrow midsection of the island where its arms cupped the harbor, Grandpa built the main log lodge. It included their bedroom, the kitchen, a dining room with pine tables and chairs seating up to thirty guests, and a living room with a massive stone fireplace. The walls were hung with the mounted heads of bear, antlered bucks, moose, and enormous muskies. The hide of a timber wolf was tacked to one wall, and in front of the fireplace a bearskin rug with the head attached stared at me with marble eyes, its teeth bared. I stayed out of that room because I saw him watching me on many occasions. Out of an oak buffet in the dining room Grandpa sold a bit of tackle, colorful lures, preserved salmon eggs and leeches, maps of Lake of the Woods, and best of all, Cadbury chocolate bars. Even as a child, I thought Hershey was no match for this hazelnut-flavored milk chocolate from England.

Grandpa's energy and skill combined with Grandma's cooking and hospitality drew the same guests year after year. It was a strange partnership because in contrast to his good cheer, Grandma was often sad and anxious, humming tunelessly as she went about her work; and her work was hard. Cabins needed to be cleaned. Boatloads of laundry were washed in a wringer-washing machine and hung out to dry. To this day I can't believe the punishing standards she kept for ironing: everything got pressed, even sheets and dishtowels with a heavy, hissing, kerosene-fired iron. The more stressed she became the more she hummed. Many things worried her. The weather was unpredictable; a violent storm could blow up without warning and anyone caught out on the lake in a boat could capsize. I could fall off the dock and drown, she warned me again and again. In all the years she lived on the lake she never learned to swim, and she hated the water passionately. She never knew if her helper would stay the season, sometimes they left in the middle of the night, slipping away to join lovers who made summer camp with the rest of their tribe off somewhere to the north. Sometimes supplies ran low and it was a challenge to maintain the quality of meals guests expected on that wild island so far from civilization.

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Grandma cooked family-style, feeding up to thirty guests and ten guides. Three times a day, seven days a week, fishermen (and the few wives who accompanied them) filled the tables, expectantly waiting for what came out of her kitchen. I watched guests come to the kitchen door and rave in accents foreign to my ears: “Miz Frolander, ah have nevah tasted fraud walleye this fawn!” “Miz Frolander, that blueberry pah juss about made me think ah died and gone to heaven.” They talked strange, like they’d never eaten buttermilk pancakes crisp on the edges, swimming in pats of butter and Karo syrup. Finding meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and great fishing besides, was miraculous to some, I guess. To me, the food was common, everyday stuff. It was what I got at home, because right here was where Grandma had taught Mom to cook when she was a girl.

Every summer when I visited, I slept with her, and Grandpa moved out to the bunkhouse with the fishing guides. I thought nothing of this as a child, but it must not have been ideal for them. I don’t remember being a constant nuisance, but I do remember the time I found a chocolate cake cooling on the wide, kitchen window-sill, and I fed it to the orphan fawn that had become a pet that summer. I opened the swing-out screen and Bambi (what else could its name be?) put his delicate nose in my hand nibbling the piece I offered. I dug it out bit by bit and together we ate it all. What was I thinking? I don’t know; it seemed the right thing to do for a deer who loved cake. When Grandma saw what I’d done, her hands flew to her mouth and she grabbed the pan. She sent me outside for the rest of the morning and opened canned peaches for lunch dessert.

At night I often heard her crying and whispering in the darkened kitchen just outside the bedroom, and it filled me with dread as I waited for her to come to bed. I didn’t know what made her cry. I didn’t get the sense that it was me even though I must have been extra work for her. I was relieved when at last she slipped into bed, and lightly ran her fingers up and down my arm, her softness against my back, until we fell asleep together.

It seems like every morning I rose slowly through the grog of sleep to the thwop-thwop sound of her beating pancake batter and

the scrape of the turner as she flipped cakes on the other side of the curtained-off doorway. I'd scootch under the covers trying to stay in that delicious state of semi-consciousness until the smell of bacon and pancakes made my stomach ache so bad, I'd rush into my clothes and out to the porch so I could eat next to Grandpa and the Indian guides.

The back porch of the lodge was where Grandpa and the Indian guides ate their meals around a large pine table with benches. When I visited — which was every summer from the time I was six months old — I sat as close to Grandpa as possible. Although I hoped to marry one of the handsome Indians when I grew up, they made me so nervous and shy, I often choked on my food. They laughed as Grandpa slapped me on the back and shouted above my coughing, "Breathe the air. Drink the milk." Then he would stir his hot coffee and try to lay the back of the spoon on my hand, or he would reach for me under the table grasping my knee. My shrieks would bring Grandma to the porch door saying, "Pete, leave her ALONE, for pity sake." He called me his shadow because I followed him everywhere, but then he never went anywhere without asking me to come. "Motty-oo," he'd call, using my baby-name, "get your shoes on, I'm leaving." Whether it was in Spanky, his fast little outboard, or the big launch on a forty-five mile run to Kenora, Ontario, and back for supplies, I went with him. He took me blueberry picking on nearby islands, to Penasee to pick up the mail, and to Angle Inlet to visit friends.

Each day the waterfront drew me like a seagull to fish bait. The smells of gasoline, tar, fish, and fresh-sawn lumber hung in the air. The bay echoed with hollow thumps as fishermen stowed gear in the boats. Evinrude and Johnson motors roared to life, pulled away from the docks, and faded into the morning mist. Grandpa's band saw whined as he built another boat. Seagulls circled and creeled overhead. A stone wall ran in a semicircle around the cove and reinforced the shoreline. I could lie down on the wall, and by hanging over the edge, catch minnows with the little dip net and put them in the minnow bucket Grandpa gave me. I moved rocks under the water and grabbed crayfish with my thumb and forefinger as they shot backwards from their hiding places. They splayed their claws when held just behind the head,

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reaching back, back, trying to pinch what held them.

Along the shore there was a cluster of buildings, the main dock, and five smaller docks that ran out from the stone wall. The fish house held fuel barrels, outboard motors, and boating equipment: cushions, life jackets, and oars hung in neat rows. Next door was the icehouse where, by poking around with a shovel, I could unearth large chunks of ice buried under mountains of sawdust. They had been stored there the previous January when the lake ice was three to four feet thick. Blocks were cut out and packed in wood shavings where they kept all summer long. The guides carried out forty-pound blocks, straining to grip them in the tongs as they dipped them in the lake to rinse off the sawdust, and dropped them into the ice-chipping box at the edge of the stone wall. There, the clear-as-glass ice was pounded into shards. Most of it was used to fill the pine boxes made for shipping fish back home with the tourists, but some of it was carried up to the lodge and placed in the special cooler Grandpa made to refrigerate perishables and to cool our drinks on hot summer days. There was also the dusty shop where Grandpa moved in a suspension of sunlight and sawdust with a pencil tucked behind his one good ear — the other ear was oddly deformed like someone had folded it over and stapled it to the side of his head. Until I was old enough to pretend physical differences weren't noticed, I often asked about it, "What's wrong with your ear?" He always told a different story. It'd been shot off by a bank robber, it fell off and had to be screwed back on, a dog bit it off. He never told Mom either; she thinks he was born that way. While he sang, drew plans, and planed lumber for a new boat, I randomly pounded a staggering number of nails into scrap lumber. He propped finished pieces against the wall like they were works of art, just as years later I would tape my children's scribbled drawings to the refrigerator. "Damn! Look at that, would you?" he'd ask.

Grandpa Frolander loved me. I was sure of this. It was like he removed a stick from my spine — a stick that poked it straight and made me alert, always ready to run. Around him an inner-tightness let loose. I didn't need to do anything to delight him, didn't even think about it, I just did. He never sent me away or made fun of me, though I know

I amused him. He never told me how smart I was, or how pretty, or how great my cartwheels. There were two things that really settled the proof of his love.

When I was a kid I could not have explained the first proof. As an adult, it's still not easy because it could be mistaken for a kind of misty-eyed nostalgia. On the surface my proof is pretty simple: if someone who is powerful and strong also loves you, they can keep you safe in a storm, even one as terrifying as the one we encountered on a trip back from Kenora. It was just an ordinary trip — Grandpa loaded cardboard cartons of canned vegetables and fruit into the boat and other supplies, I don't remember. He went to the bank. We stopped at a clothing store and he picked out a pink and gray dress for me. I remember how beautiful it was, and how he had a special knack for picking the perfect colors. Leslie Sandy, one of the Indian guides, met us back at the dock and we started home with the launch weighed down, just the three of us.

Grandpa was watching the sky as we threaded our way through Devil's Gap and past some islands into more open water. I was always glad to be past the rocky cliffs with ancient petroglyphs painted by the Ojibway to curse enemies who passed that way. Clouds were boiling up out of the southwest, it was getting dark, and the water had turned slate gray with curls of white on the mounting waves. When the storm hit, rollers began pounding over the bow of the launch. Each slam flooded the deck with more water as Grandpa tried to make it to the lee of the next island. Above the howling wind and screaming engine I heard Grandpa shout to Leslie, "If we go under you take her, you're a better swimmer than me, and we'll head for that shore over there," then he turned back to the helm whistling a bar tune. I sat calmly on the high swivel seat beside him and thought nothing of what he said. That's how I know he loved me. That I thought nothing. That the possibility of capsizing in a storm with him meant no more than taking a dive off the end of the dock on a sunny day.

The second proof of his love was that he taught me to fish and allowed me to wreck his very best open spinning reel, and he never mentioned it. Grandma did not approve of my learning to fish off

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the dock. Besides the fact that fishing was a questionable pursuit for a girl, there was the danger of my falling into twelve feet of water and drowning. Or, I might put my eye out with a hook, she said. The latter was probably the most realistic of her worries since it took me a long time to get the hang of casting an orange Lazy Ike across the bay. I often forgot to release the line and ended a full-armed swing by slamming the tip of the rod into the water right at my feet. The danger was not so much to myself as to anyone fool enough to come within fifty feet of me. Which is probably why Grandpa always called out instructions from the screened-in porch where he sat drinking a Molson's Canadian on his afternoon break. Only once did I manage to hook my finger on the point of a lure. As for drowning, someone else, perhaps. But not I. I had perfected, not falling, but flying off the dock in the running broad jump and the cannonball. And when I did fall off the dock, it was backwards, and only because I had been fatally wounded by an arrow shot from the top of the ridge opposite the dock.

To question the suitability of fishing for a girl seemed absurd. I loved everything about it: the smells of fish and water, the sun glancing off the surface, the lap of waves against the dock, the array of sinkers, leads, and lures in the tackle box. The zing of the line, the whir of the reel, and a distant plop as the lure landed precisely in front of cattails along the far shore. The alchemy of fishing is only partly explained by the setting: islands, shoreline, sand, rock, sky, and water. There are other elements of mystery and danger. What exists beneath the surface and what happens when you intentionally lure it? There is the paradox between the longing to know what this creature is and the fear of what happens if you can't escape once you've caught it because you're stuck in a boat and the possibility of walking away doesn't exist. I now think of Jesus mounting the crests, coming up hills of water, crossing the waves to save his disciples, some of them seasoned fishermen, who were scared witless. As a child, I knew that story well. Now I can look back and see that just as our dog, Bing, had led me toward God, fishing awakened another spiritual landscape in me — something about creation that was both heart-break beautiful and frightening, but layered over it was the hope that Jesus could, and perhaps would, come along



to control and rescue when needed.

During those first fishing lessons it's a wonder Grandpa didn't despair over my witless, crude technique. If I did remember to release the line, I often forgot to look down at the reel to make sure the line wasn't knotted before I reeled in. I'd begin winding with the drag on: click, click, click. Solid stop. I cranked hard, my rod bouncing up and down with the effort. Nothing. Only then would I look down and discover an enormous bird's nest of fishing line had grown over my entire wrist and hand.

Then one day I caught my first legend. I had made a perfect cast across the bay when something hit my line hard and stopped it cold. At first I thought the shallow-runner had caught on a snag, but suddenly the line began to run out on its own. I couldn't stop the crank from turning. The reel was squealing, and the line kept going out. At last it entered the marrow of my bones, through my artless fingers — I had caught a big one and it was going to get away unless I figured out what to do. I was making little sobbing noises as I turned one revolution on the reel only to have it counter with three in the opposite direction. Then, whatever was out there turned and took off across the lake, running away with my orange shallow-runner. Not knowing what else to do, I threw the rod on the dock, began to pull in the line hand over hand screaming for Grandpa. From his post on the porch he had to first run to the fish house for a net, and then down onto the dock, slap, slap, slap as the boards hit the water from his weight. He arrived laughing and hollering, "Don't let 'er go!" My hands stung from the wet line, and my eyes were full of tears from joy and hyperventilating, but I had finally pulled something up to the dock that was violently pitching and jerking my arms about. When Grandpa knelt down and grabbed it with the net, he landed a northern walleyed pike, or "jack-fish," as he called them. It was a fearful, slimy — looking creature with a jaw full of sharp teeth and a long lean body, but he was so beautiful. I have never since caught his equal, but I was hooked for life by my grandfather's patient love and the magic of fishing. An old photo shows me struggling to hold the fish up to my chin, and still, his tail dragged the ground. Later that day I heard Grandpa telling the

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tourists and guides who came back from fishing, “Why don’t you take a look at what my granddaughter caught off the dock today. It’s as big as she is.” My catch was lying in state in a pine fish box on a bed of ice chips right on the waterfront. His round eye stilled glared back at anyone who dared peek into his coffin.

There is another paradox I have pondered over the years. Grandpa was a man who so despised religion he would not allow you to mention the word God or Jesus Christ in his presence unless it was a curse. And yet, he was the only man who thoroughly loved me through the summers, the birthdays, and all the Christmases of my childhood. Even when I married, had children of my own, and moved to New Mexico, he and Grandma came to me and loved me. So how was it possible that God could use him to create some deep knowing and a premonition that this is how God relates to his children? Years after childhood when I understood the connection — it was a sudden revelation that took out my knees — that from my birth Grandpa prepared and preserved in me an unconscious recognition of *this* is how God *is*. Inscrutable and mysterious in his ways, God chooses his own instruments of healing and they aren’t always saints. I simply bowed. By the time I understood this link from Grandfather to my early Christian trust in God as Father, it was too late to thank him.

The smell of fresh-cut lumber still channels him, and for a moment I think, could he be just around the corner squaring the door of a cabinet and laughing at the crooked nails I hammered into my pine board? The tinkle of ice in a glass of Coke and the tiny hissing mist of bubbles bursting on the surface sometimes catches me by surprise — the vivid memory of my grandmother, resting for a moment as we sat on the porch drinking RC Cola in the afternoon sun.



**T**he first week of August 1947 was hot and humid. Pregnancy made the heat feel unbearable, so one afternoon Mom went back to the house, took off all her clothes and lay down to rest on the bed. Keith was working in the fields, it’s likely that he and his dad were putting up

hay at that time of the year. Though it was her first summer away from the resort on the Lake, she had no doubts about being with Keith. She was drifting into sleep when she heard a knock at the door. A friend or a member of her husband's family would have called out to her, so it couldn't be one of them. Their small house couldn't be seen from the road, hidden as it was at the back of a field at the end of a long drive. No stranger would just happen by. It had to be her husband, Keith, playing another joke on her. "Come in," she yelled. When he didn't enter, she decided to play a trick on him. She threw open the door and the Fuller Brush man took a step back and fell off the steps. Beautiful teenage women, pregnant, but obviously deranged, were not part of his sales training. He turned and ran down the drive, his brushes and brooms clacking against his case. Mom screamed and slammed the door.

The next day was Sunday, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, their last morning together; they lay in bed, my father and my mother, his hand resting on her stomach, tracking my movements. Mom had begun to feel flutter kicks across her midsection. With an eerie kind of prescience, Mom told him a dream: Keith had climbed the stairs in his parents' home. He climbed higher and higher until at last he disappeared from sight. Mom stood at the bottom waiting, and then finally, weeping and calling for him. But he never returned. Keith also had a dream that night; he had gone to visit some buddies. Oddly, they were all friends who had been killed in the war.

Mom and my father had met the previous fall at a dance club called the Nite Hawk. He was just back from World War II, and Mom was a sixteen year-old senior in high school determined to have fun even if Grandpa and Grandma didn't approve of what she did. She was singing with a dance band the first time Keith saw her. As he watched her toss her auburn hair over her shoulder and bend toward the microphone, he announced to his friends, "I'm going to marry that girl."

Pictures of their courtship show them sunning on the beach, his head resting on her stomach. Kissing beside an enormous snow bank. Posing on the hood of his car. Her high school graduation picture gives no hint that she is already carrying me. Her figure is slender in a white

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linen dress. In June their marriage ceremony was quiet and earlier than planned. She wore the same white dress. Their faces still shine from faded wedding photos.

After the honeymoon they returned to make their home in a small house about half a mile from Keith's parents. It was nestled against the woods with a yard full of purple lilacs as tall as trees. Miles of forest stretched out behind, and in front were the fields where Keith and his father raised potatoes, wheat, and alfalfa. Each day after an early breakfast together they went to the Sorenson place, where Keith worked the farm with his father. Mom could have stayed home, but it was lonely spending long days by herself. She was accustomed to summers at the Frolanders' resort surrounded by family, guests, and hard work. There was always plenty to be done at her mother-in-law's, whose household was full of extended family and farm help. There were piles of laundry and ironing to be done. The house always needed cleaning. Grandma Sorenson took no interest in arranging her home, but she welcomed my mother's urge to order furniture and rugs in a more pleasing way. In the kitchen, years of experience under her own mother made cooking effortless, and being married gave it a surprising joy and a purpose she hadn't known before.

Keith had joined the Army Air Force in 1943 to become a tail gunner of the biggest bombers that flew — the B29 Flying Superfortress. He was sent to the Pacific theater where the bombers's mission was to fly to Japan, drop the bombs, and head back to base on the tiny Pacific Island of Tinian.

Tailgunners reached their position in the globe at the end of the tail section by crawling through a long metal tube from the mid-section of the plane. There the gunner sat alone at the gun turret in his glass bubble, scanning the heavens for enemy fighter planes, hoping to shoot them down before they blew him out of the sky. The gunner could not move from his cramped position during the entire eighteen-hour flight to Japan and back. Worse than not moving was the stress of isolation. Radio silence was maintained, so there was no contact, not even with the crew up front unless absolutely necessary.

Enemy fighters often targeted the tail gunner first, taking him

out and attacking directly from behind. If their plane was hit, the tail gunner's chances of survival were a little slimmer than the rest of the crew — he had to crawl back through the long tube to the plane's mid-section before he could bail out. Years later my father's closest friend in the crew, Kenneth Hamilton, the left gunner, told me of one escape. Their B29 had been attacked by Japanese fighter pilots, who shot out the tail gun. One fighter continued to pursue them — a couple hundred yards behind and closing. It was a path that kept the wing gunners of the B29 from firing at him. My father sat uninjured, amidst shattered glass, his pressurized flight suit keeping him alive at high altitude, his hands on a useless gun, watching the fighter get closer. He radioed the pilot to tell him his gun was out, a Zero was directly behind and closing, what should we do? The pilot yelled, "I don't know! Waggle your gun at him!" Listening to the exchange, Kenneth interrupted the pilot to scream, "turn two degrees left! Turn! Turn!" The pilot turned and that instantly brought the fighter into Kenneth's gun sights.

He had to have been in his late seventies when he told me this story; his voice wavered, and I waited for him to say what happened to the fighter. To end it with something like, "and I blew that baby right out of the sky." But there was only a trailing-off sadness and silence as he remembered the scene. All he said was, "we made it back to base."

On each run to Japan at least one bomber didn't make it back. Some were shot down. Some experienced mechanical failure. But most were lost when they ditched in the ocean because they ran short of fuel. It wasn't that they couldn't carry enough to get there and back; it was because no one yet knew about the jet stream. Sometimes the force of flying against it burned up all the reserves and there was nothing left to do but put the "Flying Superfortress" into the sea, hope to survive the landing, and if lucky, get picked up by an American destroyer.

There was a superstition among the men who flew: the more missions you survived the more likely your number was up. Keith's crew had made enough bombing runs to make them think they wouldn't return again. Each time his B29 left the base, Keith prepared to die. When the atom bombs were dropped on Japan, the war was over for my father. He had survived twenty-four missions.

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Still, Army Air Force soldiers faced another nightmare: drug addiction. The bombing runs were eighteen to twenty-four hours long, and just one moment of inattention by any member of the crew could be deadly. So the military issued amphetamines to keep men awake and alert. When the men who flew to Japan and back completed their tour of duty, they could not simply be discharged, given a medal, and told to go home and have a good day. They had to be detoxified. Quietly, the military sent them to recover at Rest Camps in the U.S. My father was one of the soldiers sent to “rest.” It sounds nice. Like a little vacation before hitting civilian life.

As soon as Keith’s feet hit solid ground in the United States, he swore he would never fly again. When he was finally released from the Camp, he took the train home. To many of the soldiers who made it safely back from war, being back home was both a miracle and a burden of sadness and guilt for having survived. Keith had come back to his land, his family, and partnership in the farm; and he also found what Adam, the first man, called “flesh of my flesh” — my mother. He felt more than lucky. He felt blessed. But all he told Mom about the war was that old soldier’s saying, “there are no atheists in the fox-holes.”

On that day in August of 1947, Mom and my father dismissed bad dreams and savored a slow Sunday morning. Mom dressed and made them Swedish pancakes from one of Grandma Frolander’s recipes. They talked about what to name me if I was a girl. A small plane flew over their clearing and dipped its wings when they ran outside to watch. The pilot circled close enough for them to recognize Stanley Gifford, a friend of Keith’s from the war. He landed in a primitive airfield several miles away and a few minutes later, showed up at their door. “I’m heading back to Fargo this morning,” he told them, “but I wanted to give Marge a ride first.” He was a student pilot doing some solo practicing and not legally allowed to take passengers yet. He invited Mom to go with him because he knew of my father’s resolve never to fly again. She was willing, but Keith said, “no. You’re not taking her up until I find out what kind of pilot you are.”

Together the three of them drove back to the airfield. Keith put on his red baseball cap, turned up the brim, and climbed into the cockpit.

“We’ll be right back,” he yelled. The plane taxied past Mom and roared into the sky. She watched it gradually fade into the distance, a tiny humming insect. Then it was gone.

There was no shelter at the field — just a refueling tank and a storage shed. My mother waited by the car. Then she sat in the grass and looked for four-leaf clovers. Hours went by. She scanned the sky, listening for the engine to return. The sun moved to noon and past. It was getting hotter.

Finally, a car drove down the lane to the airfield and strangers got out. They were talking about an accident. They heard that a plane had crashed and that the pilot was okay, but the passenger was in pretty bad shape. He’d been taken to the hospital in Warroad.

Mom stood nearby, sickened by the rush of adrenaline, wondering what to do. A few moments later, one of Keith’s brothers drove up to take her home and give her a message: “there’s been an accident. Stanley’s plane went down and Keith is on his way to the hospital. Bill Nordine took him in the school bus so they could lay him out flat. Nothing serious. Stanley’s okay.” Mom felt almost violent. She needed to be with Keith, but back at the house no one would take her to the hospital. It was thirty-six miles away. Everyone wished her to stay home. To wait. To be calm. When she ran outside to drive something, anything to the hospital, someone finally agreed to take her. She doesn’t remember who.

Witnesses who saw the accident said the plane flew in low over the Fuller farm. Barely above the tree-tops. There was a hot wind blowing, perhaps a down-draft caught it, they said. They watched a wing hit a guy cable on their hay shed and glance off the roof. The impact tore off a wing and a wheel. The plane continued on about four hundred feet over a small grove of ash trees, where it finally sank into the trees and plowed to the ground. The pilot escaped and began frantically trying to pull my father out. The gas tank above him had ruptured and fuel was pouring over his body. My father was still alert and talking when they laid him on the ground nearby. Before he lost consciousness he had begun a journey back in time and was recounting boyhood memories as if they’d just happened.

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By the time Mom arrived at the hospital Keith was in a deep coma. He had head injuries and internal injuries. His face was swollen beyond recognition. His hands were limp in hers and he could not respond to her voice. The doctor was unavailable. He had taken the day off with his family — his first in many weeks. The nurse felt sorry about this, but assured her they would try to make her husband comfortable. Mom sat with him, holding his hand, willing him to stay alive. At seven p.m. my father died. He was twenty-two. Mom was seventeen.

The memory of that first night is blacked out. Mom only remembers that someone watched her through the night to keep her safe. The next morning as she walked out of the house, her throat constricted as if squeezed by a choke ring, and she fell on the step. Someone had left Keith's clothes, reeking of gasoline and stained with blood, in a pile beside the back porch.

The local newspaper in Williams, Minnesota, reported:

*Funeral services for Keith Sorenson, who served in the Army Air Force the greater part of the war and who returned unscathed after many missions as a tail gunner on a B29 Superfortress operating out of Tinian over Japan, will be held at the Williams school auditorium at two o'clock this Thursday afternoon. Keith was, in fact, one of the clean, personable and outstanding young men of the entire community and his tragic death comes as a great shock and an occasion for mourning by a multitude of friends. The sermon will be read by Rev. Fred Field of Baudette, who only last June 13 officiated at the wedding of Keith and Miss Margie L. Frolander of Warroad.*

My mother attended the funeral in the white linen wedding dress with the wide-brimmed hat that shadowed her face. The dress was tight across her middle. On December 15, 1947, four and a half months later, I was born.

I still have a little jewel box — a reminder that my mother could have left me the day after I was born.

In the town of Warroad there lived a jeweler and his wife who were unable to have children. Knowing about the events in my mother's life,



they visited her in the hospital, bringing a tiny gold ring and a heart-shaped locket with a diamond set in the center. They proposed to take me as their own, and offered my mother a chance to begin a new life. She was only seventeen. She had no job and only a high school education. How would she support me, they asked. Who would be my father? They could offer me everything she could not.

Mom looked at me. I was all she had left of her husband. She had already given me a name — her own. It was an unusual thing for a girl to be named after her mother, but my father had made her promise on that last morning they were together: If I was a girl, I, too, would be named Marjorie Lou. The jeweler and his wife could not have me.

### *Balm of Gilead Ointment*

1 c catkins (the swollen buds of the poplar tree)

1 c petroleum jelly

Wear gloves and pick buds in the spring on a cold day. Place catkins and jelly in a large heavy kettle and heat until the mixture begins to foam up. Turn heat down and simmer until it stops foaming and begins to thicken. Strain through cheese cloth and pour into small jars.

# About Margie L. Haack

**M**argie Haack grew up in Minnesota, a stone's throw from the Canadian border. While she was a pre-med student at the University of Minnesota, she met her husband, Denis, who changed the course of her life. Their years together have seen many turns, including living in a commune in New Mexico. Their move to Rochester, Minnesota included a search for meaningful Christian community, and it was there they came to know and be mentored by Francis and Edith Schaeffer.

Margie's life has been one of glad collaboration with Denis as they have shared a love for home and hospitality, for art and culture, and for the prodigal, unpredicted nature of God at work in ordinary life. They are Co-Directors of Ransom Fellowship, a ministry devoted to helping Christians thoughtfully love and engage the world with integrity. For many years, Margie's calling has included writing a quarterly publication of personal essay and ministry news called *Notes from Toad Hall*. Her work appears in *Art House America*, *Comment* magazine, *The*

High Calling Blog, and Washington Institute for Faith. She also keeps her own blog at Toad Drinks Coffee.

Margie and Denis have three adult children and 8 grandchildren she wishes were underfoot more often.

Learn more about Margie (and find many of her essays and lectures) at her website, Margie's Stuff ([margie.ransomfellowship.org](http://margie.ransomfellowship.org)).

# About Kalos Press

**K**alos Press was established to give a voice to literary fiction, memoir, devotional writing, and Christian Reflection, of excellent quality, outside of the mainstream Christian publishing industry.

We believe that good writing is beautiful in form and in function, and is capable of being an instrument of transformation. It is our hope and ambition that every title produced by Kalos Press will live up to this belief.

For more information about Kalos Press, *The Exact Place*, and/or our other titles, or for ordering information, visit us on our website: [www.kalospress.org](http://www.kalospress.org), or contact us by e-mail at [info@kalospress.org](mailto:info@kalospress.org).

