



ME THE YEAR MY FATHER CAME OUT TO ME,
AGE TWENTY-FOUR

PROLOGUE



“I knew I was different,” he said. “I was also aware of the fact I should conceal it, that it was an affliction.”



It wasn't like any other Father's Day, though it started out that way. A wrapped gift sat next to me in our yellow Volkswagen Bug. I don't remember what was inside, but it might have been a macramé wall hanging I made or a collage of shells and twigs I glued onto a piece of driftwood. My father admired the crafts of that era, especially if they were created by one of his four children.

The year was 1975. Jody, my five-year-old daughter, slept soundly in the back seat of our car. The trip was a ninety-minute drive from Sonoma County to San Carlos, the small city on the San Francisco Peninsula where I grew up.

My mother greeted us at the front door of the family house before we even rang the bell. A fresh summer pie, either peach or apricot, would have been cooling on the kitchen island next to a stack of linen cocktail napkins and an open can of See's Fancy Nuts. The dining room table was always set the night

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before with the fancy pink linen tablecloth and napkins, sterling silver flatware, blue Wedgwood china with white trim, and amethyst-colored crystal stemware. My father would have assembled the centerpiece that morning out of purple statice he had dried in the garage, and long shiny brown seed pods he collected from city sidewalks, a single lavender iris from the front yard, and maybe a fern frond or two.

Caroline, my older sister by eighteen months, home from college, was cloistered at the back of the house in the bedroom she still claimed as her own. Tim, our younger brother, would have been downstairs singing and strumming the music of the Beatles and Neil Young on his guitar. Susan, twenty-one, and the youngest of the four of us, might have been on the phone with her tall and tan surfer boyfriend.

Jody and her grandmother got down to business in the kitchen. I grabbed a handful of salted nuts from the counter. At the sound of yapping and the rustle of a dog leash, I peeked out from the kitchen doorway and saw my father and the family dog.

“Laurie, would you like to come walk Daisy with me?”

Mom waved me on, assuring me she had everything covered, certain to cherish the rare one-on-one time she could spend in the kitchen with her only grandchild. It had been a few months since we’d been down to the Peninsula, and Mom was prepared. A sugar bowl and cinnamon shakers were within Jody’s easy reach. She was well-versed in the art of placing the finishing touches on her grandmother’s leftover pie dough that had already been cut into narrow strips for her. Mam, as she called her, would soon be sliding them into a *very hot* oven. “Don’t touch,” she’d warn Jody.

My father and I, and Daisy the yappy terrier, took off up the hills behind the family house. I remember the sky as being a light blue, but the summer haze lower on the horizon partially obscured our view of the San Francisco Bay. Dad and I bantered about not much at all, as I recall, perhaps the long

hot summer that year, the dry vegetation surrounding us, and the unnatural-looking pinkish-orange color of the Leslie Salt evaporation ponds in the bay below us.

Behind the small talk, though, my mind churned. I hadn't planned it, but now seemed like as good a time as ever to ask the question that had pressed on me since I was little. I was desperate for the truth, though I already had my suspicions. Still, I hoped hearing it out loud would help me make sense of the mess I'd made of my own life.

At twenty-four, I'd already been through a teen pregnancy, two marriages, multiple extramarital affairs, and was now working on my second divorce. I hoped to finally point the finger at someone other than myself. I'd spent at least two decades following the clues my father left behind. After weighing the evidence and knitting together a story that would hopefully explain away my own shortcomings, I readied myself for the final proof. When we reached the ridgeline and Dad unleashed Daisy, I made my move.

"Have you ever been unfaithful to Mom?"

Looking back now, I am shocked by my boldness. But as soon as the words left my mouth, I could feel my heart pounding against my snug, powder-blue poor-boy top. I regretted saying them. I already knew the answer.

Daisy by then had disappeared into the scrubby manzanitas, her scruffy brown head bobbing up and down like a free-range jackrabbit. I wished I could disappear with her, but it was too late. There was no retracting my question.

Dad alternated his gaze from my eyes to the view of Mount Diablo behind me. When his cheeks turned a reddish-purple and he drew in a large breath, letting it out slowly, I assumed he was stunned by my courage. I'd stunned myself.

He broke out in the same guilty-looking grin he had on his face that scandalous evening on Birch Avenue when I was about six. In the afterhours of a dinner party my parents hosted, I

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caught him red-handed in the living room with one of the other wives, her bright red, lipsticked mouth pressed conspiratorially up to his left cheek.

“Honey, I’m gay,” Dad said, jolting me back to the present. His voice was disturbingly cheery. When I didn’t immediately respond, he repeated himself, this time with emphasis. “I’ve *always* been gay.”

My stomach clutched. Behind him stood a glaring sun, but oddly his face wasn’t in shadow. Rather, it glowed a shiny bronze, a phenomenon that to this day I can’t explain. His big blue eyes sparkled more than usual, and his breath came out in short, staccato bursts. After keeping his secret from nearly everyone for more than five decades, a fact I’d soon glean, he appeared gleeful to unburden himself to me. Even in my state of shock, it was clear to me that the weight of his secret had shifted from his shoulders to mine.

CHAPTER 1: USO DANCE



“As you know, Laurie, it almost didn’t happen.” Yes, I knew that. My mother told the story of the night they first met so often I could recite it word for word from memory.

I was a teenager at the time, with boys and romance on my mind. I was eager to hear my parents’ love story again. My siblings were long gone from the dinner table. Mom’s rubber-gloved hands in the soapy dishwater stilled when I asked the question. Dad sat in front of his near-finished dinner, as usual the last one in the family to finish. After wiping his plate clean with what remained of his slice of bread, he brought his dishes over to the sink. He reached for the mug Mom left for him near the coffee pot and filled it to the brim with coffee, cream, and a spoonful of sugar. It was their evening ritual. She didn’t even seem to notice him rustling behind her.

Mom’s gaze moved to the window and the hills beyond. Feeling his shirt pocket, Dad slipped out the sliding glass door onto the deck to have a smoke while sipping his sweet, steaming coffee. I stood at the kitchen island, facing my mother and relishing the retelling of my favorite story.

My father at the time was a twenty-four-year-old private first-class soldier in the US Army. Four months earlier, he had been stationed at Fort Ord in Monterey County when, on December 7, 1941, he and his fellow soldiers were informed that Japanese forces had bombed Pearl Harbor. The following day, December 8, 1941, President Roosevelt declared war against Japan, and the United States officially entered World War II. Dad's orders over the next four months took him first to guard Northern California railway bridges against possible attack. Afterward his unit caravanned to the San Francisco Presidio for staging before deployment overseas. But the Presidio was full. An abandoned country club in Belmont, a city located a few miles from where my mother lived, temporarily housed the soldiers.

It was April 1942. Mom, a high school senior at the time, was a month shy of her eighteenth birthday. She and her best friend, Enid, looked forward to the upcoming USO dance at the San Carlos City Hall. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, most of the local young men had left to join the armed services. An invitation had gone out to girls in local high schools encouraging their attendance before the "brave soldiers" shipped out to battlefronts and parts unknown.

"Oh, Laurie, we were so excited to meet the soldiers," Mom said, glancing over at me. "I was dancing with Pete, the company cook. Then your dad and a fellow soldier walked in."

I knew what was coming and held my breath.

"The soldiers outnumbered the girls," she said matter-of-factly. "Your dad's buddy shouted, 'Hey, Hall, let's get outta here. There aren't any girls to dance with.'"

At that moment, I heard the front door close with a click. Dad must have finished his cigarette and walked around to the front of the house. He was probably switching into the moccasins he kept at the front entry. Mom peeled back her rubber gloves, draped them over the pots and pans that were dripping onto the plastic drying rack, and turned back toward me.

“I looked over and that’s when I first saw your father,” she said in a singsong voice. Her whole face was smiling now. “He had the most beautiful blue eyes. He looked like a movie star to me.” She added, “And his teeth were so white.” That last part always made me laugh. Then Dad chimed in.

“And that’s when I heard this sweet voice say, ‘*I’ll* dance with you.’” Dad must have been eavesdropping from out in the hallway. His voice was sweet and high like Mom’s when he spoke those words, as if that scene in the dance hall were the most wonderful moment of his life. Now standing equidistant from both of my parents, I was filled with a warm rush.

“What I first noticed about your mother was her hair,” Dad said, his voice now taking on an almost professorial tone. “Even though her nickname was Rusty at the time, her hair wasn’t red. It was Titian blond.” For some reason, this clarification was of utmost importance to my father. Perhaps red seemed too common or unsophisticated a term. “And it looked like spun gold,” he added.

It was Mom’s turn again.

“And then he smiled and walked toward me,” she said. “We danced the rest of the night.” In that moment my mother looked like a smitten teenager.

“I don’t think Pete was very happy with me,” Mom added with a giggle. I couldn’t tell if she felt bad over her quick dismissal of the company cook or was priding herself for so boldly going after what she wanted.

The story followed the trajectory I knew well. After the dance, Dad walked her the six blocks home. She invited him in for banana cake. This particular layer cake, frosted in vanilla buttercream icing and covered in chopped walnuts, was long a staple in our household. I wondered if she had made her favorite cake that afternoon just in case some handsome soldier offered to walk her home.

“And I pretended to like it!” Dad said with a hearty laugh.

Mom shot him a look. I hadn't heard this part before. This cruel crack seemed out of character for him. I wished he'd stopped with his Titian blond comment. He hustled over to the kitchen sink to rinse his mug out and exit, but Mom had already readied her return taunt.

"Then your father did the strangest thing, Laurie," she said. "He pulled out his wallet and slid out baby pictures of Marsha."

Marsha was Dad's niece, his brother's oldest child. I didn't know where all this was headed, but I sensed it wasn't good. Mom continued.

"And then he laid them all out in front of me on Nana's tiny kitchen table!"

I looked over toward Dad, but he was already out the door and headed down the hallway to their bedroom.

"Your dad thought she was the most *beautiful* baby in *all* the world."

This time her voice was louder than normal. I assumed she wanted Dad to hear her. But her sudden change rankled me.

"I had never known a young man to go on and on like that over babies," she said.

I found it endearing that my father loved children before I was born. I would have expected my mother to feel the same way. After all, it was obvious she'd met a bright, well-spoken, and handsome man with perfect teeth who wanted to settle down and have a family. Strangely, though, she kept up with her taunts.

"There was something else your father did that night," she said.

I sighed.

"When he took out his wallet, I noticed he'd rubbed out the first of three initials engraved on it. Only two remained, *RH*. I couldn't make out the first one. I thought there might be some record of mental illness in his family."

I wondered what a rubbed-out initial on a wallet had to do with mental illness. But Mom seemed delighted to share



MOM, AGE EIGHTEEN, HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR, 1942



DAD, AGE TWENTY-FOUR, FORT ORD, 1942

this detail. It was out of character with her normally generous nature. Even though my grandparents called my father Duane, not Ralph, I hadn't heard this part of the story before, that the *D* in his initials on his wallet had been erased. Just then the master bedroom door closed with a click.

My mother's suspicions about Dad's character seem to have been aroused early on. Whenever I asked my father why he switched his first and middle names, he gave me a different answer every time. He either said that the Army made a mistake or that he didn't like the name Duane, or he simply hemmed and hawed.

Mom changed the subject.

"You know, Laurie, your father had so many girlfriends before we met," she said. "And he was engaged to a lot of them."

I don't know about the "a lot" part, but, yes, I knew this, too. She'd brought it up before. Dad would blush and roll his eyes at this telling. But I couldn't get a read on why she brought it up now. Did his popularity with girls before they were married unsettle her? Or did she take it as a badge of honor? After all, he picked her over all the others.

CHAPTER 2: THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR



I'm perhaps eighteen months old. My vantage point is low to the ground. The house is dark except for a thin line of light under the kitchen door, a sign my father hasn't yet left. I toddle down the hallway toward the light. A few feet shy of the kitchen door, I tuck myself under one of the dining room chairs, keeping my eye focused on the bright yellow line.

The gurgling of the percolator and the tick-tick-ticking of the toaster calm me, but my stomach clutches at the sounds of running water and dishes clanking in the sink that follow. The light switch clicks. The light goes out, the back door latches close. He's gone.

I don't know how often I make this trip in the predawn hours before my father leaves for work. But the scene is always the same. Each time I hope the light won't go out. Each time it does.



"It's time for Easter baskets, kids!" Dad calls out from the open front door, three small jackets draped over his elbow.

I drop my Gerber baby doll's pink-and-white scalloped bib, which my tiny fingers had been struggling to snap, and run to my father. He takes his time fastening each metal button on my jean jacket, finishing with a strong tug on the bottom hem. Mom ties red paisley bandanas around Caroline's head and mine. She fits Tim with a snug leather cap complete with earflaps.

After seven years of marriage and four miscarriages, my parents finally became parents in 1949, four years after my father returned from the war. They made up for lost time by having four babies in five years. Caroline was now five. I was four, having arrived eighteen months afterward in 1951. Our younger brother, Tim, was three. Susan, now a toddler, was born a year after him.

I was born in this cottage my parents built at the rural edge of San Carlos. The double Dutch door at the front and the cedar shake roof were of my mother's choosing. My father designed the garden and patio. Though modest, the simple gabled roof and beveled glass windows reminded me of the cottages in storybooks Dad read to us at bedtime. Behind the house, fields of oat grasses grew tall in the spring. By Easter they were above our heads.

Like little ducklings, the three of us older children followed our father in single file through the back gate and onto a path he'd flatten in the grasses before us. I couldn't keep up. At one point, the tall oats enveloped me. I panicked.

"Over here, Laurie," he said. "Come on, sweetie. I'll wait for you."

Breathless from worry, I followed his voice, elbowing my way through the grasses until I saw him. Caroline and Tim stood at his side.

"Okay, kids, stay right where you are and watch."

With this pronouncement, Dad lowered himself down onto the moist grasses and curled up in a big ball, tucking his knees

tightly to his chest. He rolled around in one spot until a gigantic basket-shaped space formed, flat in the middle and edged in tall blades of grass. The three of us observers stood by as our baskets, one by one, were readied for occupation. No colored eggs, chocolate bunnies, or speckled jellybeans would inhabit these Easter baskets. Only small, delighted children.

As soon as Dad dropped us down into our giant baskets, making sure not to flatten the basket edges, our pre-occupation voices turned to whispers and then to silence, hushed by the cozy, womb-like chambers. I glimpsed the top half of my father floating above the edges of my basket. His tall slender figure and slow movements reminded me of the lanky sunflowers that grew along our side fence and swayed slowly in the breezes. Secure with him in view, I envisioned pretty little fairies stealing looks at me from behind the blades of tall grasses. My mother's voice from the back stoop of the house jolted me out of my fantasy.

"Ralph! Kids! It's dinner time!"

I rose to my feet. In due time, my father scooped me up and out of my basket. He brushed off the wet grasses that clung to my overalls and dropped me down onto the path leading home. I glanced back and wondered what would become of our fantastic baskets now camouflaged by the tall grasses. Dad led us back up to the rear steps of the cottage where he pulled off our muddy, grass-stained shoes. He lifted me onto a stool at the concrete sink.

"It's warm now, Laurie," he said. "Give me your hands."

Standing on tiptoes, I leaned over the sink as far as I could. From behind, Dad's chest braced me from falling backwards off the wobbly stool.

"Go on now, your hands are all clean," he said. "Your mother is waiting. I'll be right in."

The screen door snapped shut. I turned to see him walk toward the patio edge where he pulled his silver lighter out of his pants pocket. Flipping the top back, he flicked the spark-wheel which emitted a flinty smell I could detect from ten feet

away. The tip of his cigarette glowed a bright orange-red as he took a long draw on it.

Full plates of food awaited the three of us kids at the kitchen table. Susan pushed Cheerios around on her highchair tray. Dad soon came in, singing “Catch a Falling Star.” Once Mom seated us at our assigned places, she joined him. She had a sweet shy look on her face as she turned toward him and sang the melody. Dad switched to harmony. The effect on me was immediate, my throat tightening so much that it hurt. I never wanted the harmony to end.

“Don’t forget to drink your milk,” Mom reminded us when the song was over.

This was important to her, along with sturdy lace-up shoes, scarves in the sun, and soft, warm jackets buttoned up to our chins on breezy days. And vegetables. We only got dessert if we finished them. I’d already nudged my mushy, foul-tasting carrots to the edge of my plate with my fork. Then out of nowhere, my father’s hand appeared over mine, guiding it. Together we smashed the offensive carrots into the mashed potatoes. Once this more palatable mixture was a uniform light orange, Dad helped me form it into a dome-like shape.

“See, honey,” he said. “It’s an igloo!”

“It is!”

He wasn’t finished, though. Using the fork’s tines, together we imprinted dozens of thin ridges all over the outside of the mashed potato-and-carrot igloo.

“Now poke your finger in here to make the front door,” he said, positioning my thumb in the correct location.

“Why, look at that!” he boasted.

Retracting his arm, he returned to his own dinner. The bland-tasting mélange in the shape of an Eskimo’s shelter was now something I could countenance. I was certain Mom would treat me to one of her chocolate-frosted graham crackers she’d laid out on racks earlier to allow the frosting to harden.

Long before Dad finished his dinner, Mom was out of her chair and standing at the kitchen sink. Long, pink rubber gloves enveloped her hands and arms while steam from the hot water rose and swirled around her flushed face. Caroline and I were now tall enough to bus our own dishes. Mom whisked them out of our hands before they even landed on the countertop and dropped them, *plop*, into the sudsy water.

“That is very good of you girls,” she said. “Now go ahead and play until your father finishes his dinner.”

Dad always washed his own dishes, afterward running a bath for the three of us older kids. Sometimes he treated us to a bubble bath. After pouring the soapy liquid under running water, he let the large suds float up until they reached the rim of the bathtub. Only three tiny heads were then visible above the thick foam. When the suds dissolved, we begged for more. He obliged us up to a point.

After rinsing us and drying us off, Dad snapped on our pajamas, combed our hair, and had us ready for bedtime stories by seven o’clock, the time Mom set for us to be in bed. Dad struggled to arrange two pillows behind his back on one of our tiny twin beds before all four of his children piled on. He read us fairytales like *Snow-White and Rose-Red*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, though the dark threats inherent in them frightened me, but the sing-song rhymes of *Madeline* and the cute drawings in *The Little House* calmed me. As he clapped a book shut and began to disentangle himself from his children, one of us inevitably begged him not to stop.

“Just one more page, Daddy.”

“Okay, fine,” he smiled, removing the bookmark he’d inserted. “But just one.” I had a feeling he’d planned ahead for this.

One evening before our nighttime routine, Dad let me join him outside in the twilight. I was maybe five or six. I stared at the vapors of his cigarette smoke swirling high above us and at the stars beyond. Our rural neighborhood didn’t have

streetlights, and the stars lit up the night sky. In my first-grade class, the nuns were already teaching us about a heavenly after-life for those who were good. I wondered if heaven was out there mixed in with the twinkling stars.

“Where do we go when we die, Daddy?”

He scrunched up his face a little. I could tell he was thinking about my question.

“Well, honey,” he said after a long pause. “Try this. Think about a time before you were born.”

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. I felt myself floating in space in a sort of light-filled ether. I couldn’t feel my body. There was no sound. I sensed people all around me although I couldn’t make out who they were. It was like watching a movie, but one in which I was the lead.

“Okay, I did it.”

“All right now,” he said, squinting, as if he were carefully considering his next words. I loved that about him.

“When you imagined it, did you feel as if you *didn’t* exist?”

I didn’t even have to think about my answer. “No. I was still me.”

The slightest of smiles broke out on his face.

“Well, I think that is what happens after we die. I think we still exist.”



THE COTTAGE WHERE I WAS BORN



ME, AGE EIGHTEEN MONTHS,
FACING THE KITCHEN DOOR



HOUSE ON BIRCH AVENUE, 1957



BACKYARD POOL, 1957

CHAPTER 3: BIRCH AVENUE



In 1957, we moved from the small country cottage where I was born to a larger fixer-upper on Birch Avenue in town. I was six. Caroline was seven, Tim was four, and Susan three.

At first, I didn't realize that the musty old house with the shabby swimming pool was ours. If I thought about it at all, I probably saw it as a remodeling project we visited on weekends. It didn't seem like someone's home, certainly not ours. Dirty wallpaper, yellowed at the edges, was peeling off the living room walls. Spongy white stuffing poked out of the ripped seats of the red, built-in, Naugahyde dinette set in the kitchen. It looked as if someone had taken a knife to them.

Behind the house was a chaotic grouping of backyard elements in various stages of decay: a decrepit swing set; a rusty incinerator, something I didn't know even existed until then; uneven concrete pavement with large patches of sour grass and wild dandelions poking through its cracks; and a large rectangular swimming pool with decaying leaves floating on yellowish-brown water.

A slatted fence around the pool yard swayed so much that when you opened the gate, it seemed certain to collapse at any

moment. The front yard was no better. A dry, weedy lawn ran the length of it. Nothing about this new place was like our sweet country cottage with the tall oat fields behind it that swayed in the breeze and became baskets for us every spring.

A few months after we moved in, sharp stomach pains woke me in the middle of the night. The house was still and dark. My little sister in the twin bed next to mine was sound asleep. When the pain wouldn't stop, I panicked and yelled for my parents. Soon my father was at my bedside, lifting me gently out of bed. He carried me in his arms down the hall to the master bedroom where he settled me in between himself and my mother. My pain temporarily subsided. When it returned, I stretched out my arms and legs in my parents' bed in the pitch-black room to confirm that both of them were still beside me. The pain dissipated again.

These nighttime episodes probably only lasted a few weeks, but they felt interminable to me. I couldn't stop the pain, and I didn't understand how my siblings were able to sleep so soundly. I was certain there was something wrong with me.

Mom kept a close eye on me now. When I started sleepwalking during this same period, she was there to comfort me. I'd wake up in the living room not knowing how I got there. There she and my father would be, reading the nightly newspaper under the light of the mustard-colored floor lamp. I can still recall the startled, quizzical look on my mother's face when I suddenly appeared by her side. I was perplexed, too. She'd jump out of her chair and take my hand tightly in hers.

"Oh, Laurie, honey, let's get you back to bed," she said.

Even in my dazed state, I understood her tone of voice to be one of concern. She walked me back to my room and tucked me in tightly. I wonder if she thought that would do the trick. In the morning, I didn't have any memory of my nocturnal walkabouts unless she reminded me, and then only in vague images.

One day I overheard my mother on the phone sharing her worries with Nana. What if I managed to leave the house one

night, clamber over our rickety side-yard fence, and drown in the pool, she posited to her own mother. She may have been worried, but I wasn't. I didn't want to leave our house. My goal was only to be in the comforting presence of both of my parents.

Instead of letting the four of us kids randomly pick a seat at mealtime, my mother now seated me between her and Dad, a position I kept until I left home at seventeen. While Mom kept a close eye on me, I kept an eye on my father. Though on Sundays the six of us attended Mass at our Catholic parish church, Saturdays were for Dad and me. We gardened, cleaned the pool, and hosed down the sidewalk together. I got to see the landscape through his eyes and to use adult-sized garden tools, hoses, and brooms. My siblings weren't excluded in this; they just didn't seem interested.

One Saturday when I skipped over to the pool yard, my father was nowhere to be found. In a panic, I rushed through the screened door into the kitchen. Mom was at the sink, her face pink from the steam of the hot dishwater.

"Where's Daddy?"

"Your father's at work, Laurie," she said.

Her quick response and lifeless tone told me she didn't appreciate my question. I could tell from the way she bit her lower lip that there was more to say and also that she wouldn't be saying it to me. Still, I pressed on. I asked her why he was at work. It was *our* day, I reminded her. I'd searched in vain for him in the front yard, where I would stoop down next to him while he pruned junipers. He'd snip a little off one of the shrubs and place the trimmings in a neat pile. Before snipping again, he'd lean back to eye his work. His movements in the garden mesmerized me.

"See, Laurie, it's not yet in balance," he'd say.

Even at age six, my eyes could see the imbalance, too. Eventually the shape would be just right. Only then would Dad move on to the next juniper. He also taught me how to pull

out the sour-tasting oxalis pushing through the fence along our back property line.

“Don’t pull on the roots too hard or they’ll break right off,” Dad said. “And then you will have to start all over again next weekend.”

He guided my hand as it dug deep into the moist soil, and together we slowly retrieved a complete set of roots.

“There you go, sweetie. Now they won’t grow back.”

Once the plants in the front yard were neatly trimmed, we’d move to the pool yard. Using a metal mesh basket attached to one end of a long pole, something I couldn’t yet manage myself, Dad skimmed off the yellow leaves and other debris floating in the pool. He told me the trick to capturing everything was to move the skimmer *very* slowly. I stared at him and his silent back and forth movements, feeling at once calmed and bewitched by his impressive skills. Few if any ripples appeared in the water. I didn’t know how anyone could do that.

During his smoking breaks, he’d squat down next to a planting bed and flicked his ashes onto the gravel. This act seemed out of character with his tidy nature. He must have noticed the look of surprise on my face.

“Don’t worry, Laurie. The ashes turn into dirt.”

While he squatted to smoke, I’d sit on the concrete next to him and made paper chains out of the brightly colored wrappers of his empty cigarette packs. He never wanted to throw anything out and often had a creative use for discards.

To make the paper chains, he schooled me, we had to first smooth out the wrinkled wrappers on the hot concrete. Once flattened, we folded them in thirds, making sure each segment was precisely the same size.

“Watch me first, honey,” Dad said. “You have to do it slowly to get it perfect.”

Doing things slowly was a theme for him. But over time, we accumulated a pile of paper loops that we’d then use to connect

one to the other. I considered the colorful, geometric design of the chains and their thick, chunky feel cute and clever. But the final product bewildered me.

“Now what do we do with them, Daddy?”

“It doesn’t matter, honey,” he said. “They’re pretty. That is reason enough to make them.”

I loved that answer, perhaps because it sounded like an adult response, but one I could understand too. That was the thing about conversations with my father. He spoke to me as an equal. I missed him and our playful, creative work on that first Saturday he wasn’t there, and on subsequent ones.

“Go out and play now, Laurie,” Mom said.

She leaned down to put a shiny, copper-bottomed saucepan in the lower cabinet and glanced back at me. Her face looked pale. She turned away and went back to her housework. I closed the screen door behind me.

I wondered why Dad had to work *that* day. I kicked pebbles around and played tetherball by myself on our small patio but kept one eye on the driveway. Dad eventually pulled up in his car, but only after Mom had called us into dinner.

A few weeks or maybe months later, Dad and I were back to spending Saturdays together. We weeded and watered and performed our artistic endeavors as a team again. I stopped being on the lookout for him, and Mom stopped biting her lower lip, at least for a time. Her volunteer duties at St. Charles School Mother’s Club, where she helped plan the school’s carnival, kept her busy in the evenings while Dad bathed us, got us into our pajamas, and read us bedtime stories. I never asked him where he was on those Saturdays when he went missing. But the homemade layer cakes and chocolate-frosted angel food cakes Mom baked for the carnival that year seemed an optimistic sign.