

The Moving Finger

Part One – Father of the Man

Chapter 2. Family - Extended and Immediate

Mr. and Mrs. Kelly - a.k.a. Father and Mother; a.k.a. Dad and Mom; a.k.a. Kelly and Frances respectively - met during the final years of World War II, while he worked at the shipyard where she was a nurse. For years afterwards he would point to the defunct site of Marinship and say, “ I saved a woman's life there.” I eventually realized that the woman he was referring to was Mom, and that he'd saved her from the living death of spinsterhood by marrying her, as if at 23, she would have entertained no further offers. I found out when in high school that Dad had married previously, though never did his own lips reveal this interesting episode.

Mom, an apple-cheeked blonde with a voluptuous figure and long curly hair, married shortly after she graduated from nursing training; she lived in Marin while working her second nursing job. Throughout my upbringing she wore her long hair in a tightly repressed bun, though she did let it down for sleep. Dad must have really liked her tresses, because it became a point of contention between them when she'd had quite enough of long hair and chopped it into the bob she wears yet today, albeit grey. Older than she and emotionally linked to a previous generation, he appeared to resent for years her willful affront to his preference. His own dark, curly hair had succumbed to pattern baldness by the time I knew him. Fortunately for me, the genes for luxuriant hair are dominant and maternally sex-linked.¹

¹ **Edith:** *Mother cut her hair and wore it relatively short for awhile when we were young, probably in the early fifties. I think she had worn it in braids wrapped around her head before then. Dad complained continuously about it being short when she cut it then, so she let it grow again and wore it in the bun for years after that.*

By the time my understanding begins, both my maternal and paternal grandmothers had remarried from prior unhappy attempts, so I grew up knowing step-grandfathers. Due to abusive and alcoholic fathering, Mom and Dad had each led a deprived and repressed childhood but the structures of their respective families could not have been more different: Dad survived as the last and youngest among a few urban and elderly relations; while Mother's family had enjoyed a couple generations of rural fecundity. Visits to these different sets of grandparents might have been to different planets: stale, sedentary and infirm, versus dusty, hardworking and hearty. In an odd coincidence, both maternal and paternal step-grandfathers died on the same day.

On my father's side the Overbecks, frail Richard and Frieda, dwelt exclusively indoors: Grandma Overbeck bore the air of lavender and talcum powder typical of her turn-of-the-century generation; Grandpa smelled of tobacco, dentures, and something acrid and un-hygienic. For me, these taken together constitute the smell of oldness, borne in the perennially stale atmosphere in their home, stuffy and hermetic even when doors stood open. Because the Overbecks led sedentary lives, dust settled, only to be exhaled by the furniture when agitated by active grandchildren. These grandparents paid scant attention to the Kelly children, save occasional fawning, and they seemed to wish us seen but not heard.

When I knew them, they lived in the Los Angeles area, at first in a bungalow, but later in a comfortable mobile home. We visited them whenever we came to Los Angeles, but never stayed at their house because Dad held an aversion to being a guest in anybody's home; he preferred to pay for his own lodging. Grandma's brother, Uncle Charlie Hilf, lived at the now-defunct residential Hotel St. Paul, near downtown Los Angeles, and it was to this crumbling relic that we regularly repaired when visiting Dad's elders. The moribund residential hotel held little interest to a child; it smelled of cigars, newspapers and dust, and the lobby, chiefly populated by elderly men with nothing to do, boasted furniture and rugs that had all faded to the same sad yellowish beige. Despite his inauspicious domicile, Charlie Hilf represented the most financially successful of my Grandmother's siblings, for he owned a marble-carving workshop responsible for many grand edifices built in Los Angeles during the thirties: public buildings; homes in Hancock Park; and businesses in the Wilshire district, which my father later in life continued

to point out with pride as examples of his work. Dad had once worked for Charlie, and the employer/employee relationship strained the blood ties; when referring to this era, Dad always concluded the subject with “never work for a relative;” only occasionally alluded to, this had taken place many years earlier. They seemed on good terms by the time I knew him.

Here's one story from that era that still enjoyed currency during my youth: Uncle Charlie owned residential property in the vicinity of his marble yard, and a Mexican family that spoke almost no English numbered among his tenants. One day, a frantic young man interrupted Dad, but all he could get out of him was, "Boom, chimney gone, nothing!" My father went to investigate and when he arrived, the chimney was indeed completely gone from the house, ripped off and disappeared but there had been no earthquake and no other way to explain it. Upon closer inspection, he realized that the chimney wasn't completely gone, but had dropped into a deep hole. The house had been built near the site of an abandoned well; the well had long since been covered with planks, and the chimney built on top. Over the years, vegetation grew in and the well was completely forgotten. On the day of our story, the planks had finally rotted enough to allow the brick chimney to collapse into the well; vegetation then closed over, and the hole disappeared - "Boom, chimney gone, nothing!"

Uncle Charlie's good friend Irene McCarthy owned a decaying dude ranch in the Mojave Desert where he defrayed our family's annual stay, affording him a visit in a congenial setting while supporting a friend's sagging business. His largesse also informed many of our finest childhood clothes and luxuries. Edith had an expensive violin and lessons foisted upon her (when what she really wanted was to dance); she also received a fancy doll which, she was not allowed to play with; real pearls; and a typewriter. She was his princess. The boys were not ignored, though I suspect Mother strictly monitored fairness. Uncle Charlie possessed an old-world, traveling salesman sense of humor, which rendered him socially adept; I found him funny, though I'm sure I often didn't get his jokes. There was also something vaguely simian about his physiognomy, which he artfully employed to humorous effect. He had been friends with, had corresponded with Albert Einstein, and I saw photos of them playing chess together. By the time we knew him, he had retired, though he still owned the idle business premises where we three children whiled away long hot, boring afternoons while adults conducted their inscrutable

business. In spite of his advanced years, he possessed a childlike and elfin charm, which rendered visits to him a potentially interesting adventure. He took us to visit odd Hollywood movie ancients.

Aunt Lily lived in a tiny cottage behind the Overbecks. A fey widow and yes, she smelled of toilet water, but there burned a fun-loving corner of her soul which rendered her agreeable company even for small children; she always seemed to be having a good time, for which she doubtless suffered disapprobation from the dour, dank and sour relations in the front bungalow. She must have possessed quite a spark when young, for she possessed it still, albeit dampened by dotage. Lily was kin to my childhood; I remember the welcoming smile with which she invited us into her home, though I remember little of what we did there, save play card games; she appeared genuinely interested in us. ² Small, green tree-frogs lived in her moist garden, small frogs we longed to capture and to possess, but we were on vacation, and there existed no possibility of adding them to our luggage, so we left them in the tender, quiet care of Aunt Lily.

A fourth Hilf sibling, Albert, possessed a modicum of personal fortune, from whence I do not know, as well as his share of Hilf humor. Uncle Al married a short, stocky, squeaky-voiced ditz, Aunt Alpha. In later years after he'd died, we had to cease social intercourse with Alpha and her epic thoughtlessness. Once, after we'd gone to considerable effort to attend dinner at her home as invited, we learned that she'd gone out dancing, and had not instructed her timorous houseguest to invite us inside, so we glowered and growled on the stoop. This and other social omissions eventually drove us from her low, but ample bosom. She frequently found God, and changed sects serially. I liked Al, although his courtly ways were mayhap overshadowed by his chattering nitwit of a wife. He smelt of cigars and brown liquor, a pleasant and manly aroma.³

² **Charlie:** *She was a fan of early TV "rasslin'." I saw "Gorgeous George," a fifties precursor of the overbuilt, long haired and overdressed "pro rasslers" of today, on her TV, and she was a big fan of his.*

³ **Edith:** *Uncle Al and Aunt Alpha, mostly her, used to keep foster children and they brought a couple of them to the ranch. The only one I remember was a girl named Cheryl who lived with them a couple of years, I think. She seems to have been hyperactive.*

Therein lie the sum total of Dad's living relations, as he had no siblings and I remember no cousins.⁴ Legend had it that an early Hilf had died on the Ohio River, when globe lightning streaked down the watercourse to break his neck as he shepherded children to the safety of shore.⁵

My father, Charles Edward Kelly, was the only child born to immigrant parents in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the first decade of the twentieth century; his father had emigrated from Ireland, and his mother from Germany.⁶ He grew up in an Irish ghetto and suffered from the childhood curse of an un-athletic physique, coupled with an intellectual nature, making of him prime fodder for bullies. He remembered living trees planted by Johnny Appleseed and his eyes witnessed the escape magic of Houdini. His father worked as a drayman, hiring his wagon and mules - Whalebone, Flopear, Toodle-oo and Betty - to transport luggage for travelers and he enjoyed a steady client in the local vaudeville theater. Consequently, young Charles saw many of the biggest vaudeville stars in their prime. My paternal grandfather boasted small stature but he could carry heavy trunks up many flights of stairs. He was also, alas, a lush; Dad remembered seeing him fall asleep, drunk, on the ironing board, taking it for a bed. He died of cancer of the throat and tongue contracted by smoking a pipe, a particularly gruesome demise. This

⁴ **Frances:** *Daddy had lots of Kelly cousins, but since Tom had married a non-Catholic (with a drop of Jewish blood, yet!!) only aunt Annie Potts kept very close connections.*

⁵ **Edith:** *There was another Hilf brother whose name escapes me right now; he died long before we were born. I remember stories about his parrot. The parrot was so mean that he would leave the house key in the parrot's cage which sat on the front porch, and no one ever succeeded in getting the key and getting into the house. The parrot used to feed with the chickens and one time a chicken hawk espied the lovely green chicken and thought it would make a yummy meal. A ferocious mid-air battle took place with the result that a very angry parrot returned victorious, or at least alive, and walked determinedly back to the house.* **Jim:** *The fourth uncle's name was Jake.* **Frances:** *The uncle who was killed in the Ohio River was a Kelly.*

⁶ **Frances:** *Thomas Kelly and his siblings, or at least most of them, were born in Ohio. Thomas' parents were immigrants, the father went to Liverpool to find work in the terrible Irish depression (repression?) times. He married a Liverpudlian woman.*

occurred before young Charles had finished high school, thereby forcing him to quit school and to start to work in order to support himself and his newly widowed mother. They barely scraped by during The Great Depression, and Dad possessed ample stock of piteous tales dating from that era - like the time he ate stale, 5-cent doughnuts every day for a week because that was all he could afford.⁷

Two of his favorite war stories concerned birds. He'd recount how he'd been given the boyhood task of caring for neighbors' chickens while the neighbors were away from home. He took this job seriously, so when he found a pile of wet grain in the basement, he thought it would be perfect feed for his charges. He fed them the grain, which they greedily consumed, and then one by one, they began to fall over, to make strange sounds, and to wave their feet in the air. Young Charles was terrified; had he killed them? Frantically he scurried from bird to bird, standing them up, only to see them melt again and lay in a clucking puddle at his feet. He thought he was going to be punished, and at the very least not paid for his labors. The next day, the chickens were subdued, but otherwise none the worse for wear, except perhaps for avian hangovers. He'd got them drunk on the grain by-product from his father's basement still.

I'm not certain when this other story took place, but he was a young man on the road looking for work. While thus employed, or rather unemployed, he observed the following phenomenon. The local church boasted a large cherry tree spreading over the slope of its front yard. In spring, when these cherries ripened, they fell off the tree and rolled down the hill. Robins would eventually come and feed on them, thus spelling their downfall, for a phenomenon observed by my father had also been seen by neighborhood cats. When cherries lay in the sun, they ferment slightly, but birds aren't heavy drinkers and it didn't take much for these lightweights to get thoroughly tipsy. They would stagger and weave around, singing silly songs and talking loudly, only to lose the drunkest of them, nabbed by some watchful tabby. Nonetheless, the cherries continued to attract a flock.

⁷ **Charlie:** *I remember hearing how he lived for three days on a dollar. At a restaurant in Portland you could get pancakes and coffee for ten cents, so he had that three times a day, and on the last day splurged on something with the extra dime. This was also the time he and Jim Brekhus became pals, and I'm sure we missed most of the good stories of that era.*

Dad, decidedly an urban creature, had soft hands and skin and consequently deplored manual labor for the havoc it wrought upon them; he didn't enjoy camping out or roughing it in any way, relishing rather creature comforts and a soft life. What little hair he sported when I knew him grew dark and curly. His bald pate bore freckles, as did his back, and much of his soft, pale, flabby body. He sported little body hair, save a few dark wisps at the nipple - a pattern I have inherited. When we would ask him where his hair had gone, he'd tell us that angels loved him so much they each wanted to kiss him. Each time an angel kissed him, it would want a strand of hair to remember him by, rewarding this sacrifice with a freckle - another tall but touching tale from his stock of stories.

In the years before I knew him, Dad held a variety of positions in addition to working for Uncle Charlie; he operated a dry-cleaning business in Portland; he managed a fur store near the corner of Van Ness and Market in San Francisco; and he sold Playtex baby diapers on a traveling route throughout Northern California. He held but one job throughout most of my childhood, that of life-insurance salesman for The Independent Order of Foresters, a Canadian fraternal organization for which he also functioned as social organizer. His job allowed him to sleep late and to go to work around noon, returning home about 10 PM from San Francisco. He prided himself on a detailed knowledge of the city's byways; he loved to watch TV series' set in San Francisco and to name the street locations as they appeared on the screen. Family story has it that he was sales manager for this same firm, until one night while getting dressed for yet another formal event - he, struggling with the hated tuxedo and she, with evening wear - he is supposed to have remarked that "for two cents I'd quit this job and go back to selling." Mother thereupon tossed two pennies onto the bed.⁸

Dad also planned trips for the Foresters for several years, in which capacity he provided memorable excursions for the membership. He and his partner-in-crime, Johnny Fernandez, would start planning complex undertakings up to a year in advance, making meticulous arrangements regarding every aspect of the trip. Participants arriving at the appointed hour simply set down their luggage; after that, everything simply happened - meals, transfers, tips, lodging, transportation, activities - all

⁸ **Frances:** *The leaving sales mgr. job is TRUE.*

for one low fee! He shepherded popular tours to Hawaii and to San Simeon in this manner. He arranged a species of trip called a "Mystery Trip", though it in no way resembled the genus of today's murder mystery parties; participants were told what to wear, but not what to expect. A typical Mystery Trip might include breakfast with the prisoners at San Quentin, the stomping of wine grapes by the women, a luncheon al fresco with a surprise visit from a dance troupe from out of the woods, etc. One prank involved a lovely woman in a full-length mink, who met and boarded the bus at a stop sign, saluted my father with two glasses of champagne, let the coat fall open to reveal her birthday suit, and got off at the next stop, all with no explanation.

Shortly after I was born, my mother celebrated a birthday. Dad wanted her to have a weekend off from child-rearing, so he reserved for her a hotel room at the very exclusive Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco.⁹ As she arrived, she received an envelope containing instructions and money for the next phase of her birthday celebration - a shopping trip at an exclusive store. She bought finery, received her next instructions, and thus proceeded to a pre-appointed lunch. By this time, she felt lonely and wanted to visit with her best friend. When she rang up her friend, she got brushed off with some flimsy excuse and refused a rendezvous. After a beauty treatment and dinner, she arrived at pre-arranged theatre seats in her new birthday suit only to find this same friend already sitting next to her; she hadn't wanted to spoil the surprise. Dad demonstrated winning ways when he wanted.

Dad's schedule meant that he missed dinner on most occasions; breakfast, therefore, became the major family meal. Dad would emerge daily from his bedroom in a tattered, blue terry-cloth bathrobe, elaborately yawning and scratching, while intoning "No Rest For The Virtuous."¹⁰ I later realized that the restless virtue therein referenced was but his own. He oft repeated, "Well, bust my britches!," to which we'd gaily rejoin, "Mom get a needle and thread. Daddy's busted his britches!" Dad retailed glib stories and practiced lines as part of his public schtick; he encouraged a reputation for humorous repartee, and he liked a joke. When Dad managed the fur store, its owner planted a spy

⁹ **Frances:** *Sir Frances Drake Hotel, not Fairmont.*

¹⁰ **Charlie:** *"I haven't eaten since yesterday. Tomorrow will make three days."*

whose identity he soon discovered. In order to bewilder and bedevil the poor woman, he would blow cigarette smoke into the container with which he watered the indoor plants, and he would also pretend that the contents were hot. She'd be certain to report that he was killing the plants, though mysteriously they didn't die under this boiling regimen. He also convinced her to change the air in her tires before a trip. In 1939, when the Golden Gate Bridge opened for the first time, a friend asked how she could be certain to have her photo taken; he told her to wear shorts and to push a baby carriage as she joined the throngs of pedestrians on opening day; the combination of these unusual accessories garnered her a picture in the paper.

Though circumstances had not permitted him to finish school, Dad later grew voracious in his pursuit of betterment. He attributed early bookishness to his soft physique, which forced him to seek refuge from persecution in a library.¹¹ For the same reason, he also accompanied Jewish friends to their Schul where he picked up rudimentary Hebrew by osmosis. Years later, he astonished a hostess when he overheard, and rejoined, a crude remark of hers, in Hebrew. While we were in high school, he returned to high school in order to graduate, which he finally did in the class of '63, the same as my brother Charlie. Dad read copiously, if not with discrimination. We enjoyed weekly family outings to the Mill Valley Public Library for most of our youth, but since Dad was not home on weeknights, he usually didn't go with us. After he had retired from the Foresters, he would pick a library shelf at random and read anything on it, just to broaden his perspective and to open himself to new possibilities. He was not broad-minded on social or personal issues, but curious and acquisitive.

The high humor displayed for guests and clients might not extend to family; we feared the unpredictable and explosive nature of his black Irish temper. His volatile mood kept us on edge when he was present, intolerant of youthful excesses as he might be. Edith remembers living in constant fear of his rages, but I harbored this anxiety to a lesser degree, probably because I had a confidante in Charlie.

¹¹ **Frances:** *Dad was also under-sized for his age and grade, like you and Charlie, especially Charlie.*

Dad exhibited a highly visible misogynist streak, affecting Edith more directly than Charlie or me. For her, it manifested daily in cute stories about ditzzy women and not so subtle put downs of her gender. For example, he continually asserted the comparative superiority of men by saying "women can cook but cannot be great chefs, they may play instruments but they cannot compose, they can copy but they cannot create great art, and they can't possibly drive well 'cause their girdle's on too tight, yatta, yatta." He ignored all other factors and interpreted the disparity of accomplishment as inherent inferiority; Edith received the brunt of his odium and continues to live with its sting.¹²

Dad handled severe family discipline, which thanks to our cooperative natures, he rarely unleashed. Several things would drive him into a rage or "up a wall" as he called it. He hated to find shoes left in the living room, and would hurl them at us in our rooms with alarming aggression, and once in a while he would swat us for not cleaning our rooms; both these attitudes puzzled me as his own shoes often remained in the living room overnight, and he made no contribution to household order.¹³ His bark may have been worse than his bite, but his dreaded bark intimidated us plenty. When angered, he would mutter dark imprecations under his breath, always careful lest we hear them clearly; we lived in trepidation of his unpredictable moods.

By putting his two little fingers into his mouth, Dad commanded an earsplitting shriek of a whistle. He employed this signal to bring us in for meals, or to gather us for any reason. We could hear it for a block or two, and knew that it meant, "come running, NOW." Our parakeet learned to imitate this piercing sound and sometimes added a spurious summons of his own. Dad could also roll his stomach muscles in a curious fashion and we might be vouchsafed this spectacle while watching him

¹² **JPK:** *Dad's disparagement of Edith was constant, often subtle, and just as often blatant and cruel. For instance, for Christmas when she was about sixteen, the first "gift" she opened was a pair of rubber work gloves. Her dismay and horror were greeted with strict admonitions to be a "good sport" and "take a joke." Edith does not recall anything else about that day, nor do I.*

¹³ **Edith:** *Were you going to mention that Dad did not do any sort of household chores? That was "woman's work" and below him. He also did not do any maintenance chores or yard work. After he was retired he would occasionally make the bed in the morning when he got up, significantly later than mother did, and then announce loudly to her that "your nigger servant was here again."*

shave; he sharpened razor blades in a little device that flopped back and forth on a strap and made the 'thwop thwop thwop' that accompanied his morning undulation and ablution.

Dad, undeniably a breast man, would get a glazed look in his eye like a turtle gazing at a wounded fly when a well-endowed woman passed by his sight, a look retailed for comic effect, but which had its origin in genuine urges. This open lechery bothered Mom, and she would attempt to quell him with remonstrations of, "Oh, stop that!" So far as I know, we never openly discussed sexuality within our family circle, except between Charlie and me, and he and I came to different conclusions.

After Dad's retirement from the Foresters, he worked at the State of California Department of Human Resources, in which capacity, he interviewed unemployment applicants thereby enabling him to keep tabs on our friends. His character underwent a subtle change when he no longer spent his evenings in San Francisco; he mellowed slightly, though relations with Edith remained rocky to the end of his days and beyond.

Whereas Dad had sprung from city dwellers, Mom's numerous relations dwelt in rural settings. My own nuclear family represented a rare branch to live near a large city; the rest lived either in southeastern Arizona, in the town of Wilcox, or in northern California, in the vicinity of a small farming community on the Sacramento River called Los Molinos.

Mother's mom, Grandma Monmonier, possessed deeply lined features browned by exposure, and gnarled hands that had seen labor. She resided in Arizona, in an ancient and crumbling farmhouse, but we did not mind her home's poor state of repair, for the place abounded with fascinating play.¹⁴ As a general rule, all farms accumulate decaying equipment, and hers was no exception; a collection of rusty farm implements and machines lay strewn between house and barn, inviting imaginative recreation; since we had no idea what each was built to accomplish, we were free to interpret. Later, Grandma moved into a new house built for her by two of her children, Jack and Frances, but even this

¹⁴ **Frances:** *The old "crumbling" house at Wilcox was rented.*

new dwelling somehow came with a full complement of disintegrating junk.¹⁵

Grandma Monmonier, Lucy, kept in touch with the natural world about her; she understood and respected the local flora and fauna. We would capture herds of amphibians and corral them in a play area we called "Toadytown". There, in the soft, fine, damp, sweet-smelling dirt we built edifices and dug burrows which we hoped would delight our captives. I'm certain our guests did not enjoy their quarters, for they regularly mounted escapes; tiny toads the size of a thumbnail as well as big fat ones could squeeze through a remarkably small crevice to gain freedom. A well-known law of childhood states that creatures escape, even if you try not to let them - a triumph of patience over force, survival over amusement.

Behind the house, beyond the chicken yard, lay a small dirt-banked storage pond. People fished here but I remember no fish. Parents forbade us to play close to it for standard reasons.

Praying mantises lived in the flowers and shrubs, especially zinnias where they'd prey on butterflies. We'd capture the elegant insects and bring them into the house to hunt flies and mosquitoes. In the late fall, Grandma would gather up hard mantis egg cases and send them to me in California for spring hatching. One year, I left them in their cigar box too long, for when I later opened the wooden nursery, I found a drift of tiny, perfect, dried mantises. Given their penchant for cannibalism, it is surprising that there were so many of them. Usually, however, I set the cases about the garden and inspected them daily, anxious for an emergence. I found empty cases, and once in a while a large territorial mantis; one staked out the camellia by our front door for a hunting reserve so we could find her easily to watch her in action. We did not successfully introduce the species into Marin County.

Grandma interacted with livestock every day. Twice daily she fondly milked two cows and tended chickens about which she was completely unsentimental. Grandma enjoyed milking her cows, and attributed her arthritis-free hands to this daily routine. After Ray ill-advisedly sold them, her health declined rapidly.

¹⁵ **Frances:** *In the new house, the junk was Ray's.*

She maintained a system for keeping track of her hens' laying pattern, and each time they committed a poultry transgression - like setting on eggs instead of laying new ones - a small plastic ring would be added to one leg. When they had accumulated enough rings, they became dinner. She slaughtered chickens with a small hatchet; she'd fashioned a wire contraption designed to keep them from escaping, but once in a while a frantic, decapitated hen would break free to flee aimlessly, spurting blood. We children found ourselves both repelled and fascinated by the agitation emanating from a gory, yet ambulatory corpse. Grandma also allowed her chickens supervised visits to her garden, where they would eat pests; any fat bug discovered by us in the course of a day would be routinely recycled through the chickens. I retain an image in my mind of a hen with her head completely wrapped in a large, angry centipede, simultaneously eating the stinging creature and eluding her sisters' attempts to do likewise. Very exciting!

Grandma fed a flock of feral felines which served to keep the outbuildings free of vermin. They were so wild that none but she could touch most of them; she'd feed them, and they'd rub up against her solid leather leg, purring with delight. Only one allowed petting, an old, long-haired tabby with a bobbed tail, quaintly called Bozo. We'd catch Bozo and haul him around with us, while he patiently bided his time to make a break. Grandma told us that when a cat starts eating lizards, its hair begins to fall out; I could never verify, though I longed to experiment.

Each year, at least one rattlesnake would attempt to gain entry to the yard during our stay, and Mom would dispatch it with a hoe or shovel. These acts of heroism resounded throughout our childhood and grew with each retelling.

Grandma regularly performed her washing out-of-doors. She'd put clothes through the washer and then feed them through a mangle to squeeze moisture out. The mangle, a pair of hard cylinders turning inward towards each other with considerable force, was a well-known childhood danger and we were forbidden within arms' length of its frightful revolving jaws.

Transitory thunderclouds, a recurrent summer weather pattern brought storms of terrible ferocity. Grandma cautioned us to stay away from the screen door (to which we felt inexorably drawn) for fear of attracting lightning strikes. Several strikes occurred quite close at hand,

accompanied by a deafening roar and the strong smell of ozone and burnt wood as the cottonwood tree outside the window blasted to a smoldering stump; the ozone tang smelled so sharp that it immediately cut through the fertile, moisture-laden redolence of the falling rain to find our palates.

Besides the farmhouse and the nearby home Grandma later lived in, one other spot signified our visits to Sulphur Springs Valley, the Blanke family homestead huddled at the foot of a group of hills known as The Three Sisters, a landmark for miles around. The eponymous springs nearby had provided a stop on the route of the Butterfield Stage, whose wheel furrow could still be seen traveling in a straight line across the valley. This hillock had also been a favorite spot for the indigenous populace to make camp and to make war. Metates scraped deep into the living rock bore mute witness to domestic chores for centuries past. A shallow cave on the upper slope was reputed to have been the site of an Indian and cavalry battle; the indigenes had fought from the heights, and arrowheads might still be found on the lower slopes. We also found pottery shards, and one almost complete pot that had been stepped in and shattered by a cow; we carefully lifted its remains and brought them home, but we were never able to reassemble it. On another slope of these same hills occurred a deposit of garnets, a natural crystalline structure, elsewhere valued as gemstones and abrasives. Though far from gem quality, I nonetheless collected them passionately. Grandma and Uncle Ray were particularly discerning and adept at uncovering half-buried treasures.

Young Lucy had participated in her family's westward trek from Oklahoma to Oregon to California, and finally to Arizona. Although when the trip started, they already had a family, more children continued to be born along the way. According to Grandma, they bore a child in each state they traversed, for a total of thirteen - six boys and seven girls. (No, they were not Catholic, just prolific.) Contrary to popular notion, the trip west was not made in one heroic effort, as movies and TV suggest, but rather the travelers would stop to farm along the way, setting up housekeeping long enough to raise a crop before moving on; plenty of time to bear a child between chores. Grandma spoke of having gone through San Francisco before the 1906 earthquake, much to the delight of local children who jeered their wagon and livestock as if it had been a traveling circus.

Lucy suffered injury from a fall in the middle of her childhood, and the ensuing infection almost took her life (twice later she was given up for dead - once from childbirth in her late forties and again from polio in the 1950's). She recovered from her injuries, but one leg had ceased growing.¹⁶ This handicap rendered her less useful for making evening camp, so nightly she received a rifle and two shells and went to shop for dinner; she became a crack shot. While raising her family, Grandma employed a crutch, and putatively could hurl it to devastating effect. By the time I knew her, however, she had given up the crutch for a contraption built to encase her short leg, and build up the sole of the right shoe to a height of about six inches. This encumbrance gave her a clumping, rhythmic gait with which she could cover considerable ground. Due to the force of momentum, she was unable to halt a step once begun, so we were forewarned to avoid getting stepped on. Her leather prosthetic devices had been fashioned by a saddle-maker upon a supplied shoe, of which she always bought several pair for the other foot.¹⁷

Lucy's eldest sibling was Suzy, a tough old bird who had grown up in a sod house in Missouri.¹⁸ Aunt Suzy was a nonagenarian when she died, and for many years before, she had sworn to "reach 100 and go fishin'". She had adopted masculine apparel in her early life, and wore coveralls until she died; I'm not certain if I ever saw her in a dress, but that's certainly not the picture I retain of her.¹⁹ Suzy remained spry until the

¹⁶ **Edith:** *The infection that crippled Grandma was in her knee, but I don't remember which leg.*

¹⁷ **Frances:** *The first two leather braces and shoes were built by Hittenberger in SF for a horrendous price. Using the "cast" of the old brace, the saddlemaker could make or repair. Charlie Monmonier used balsa wood to gradually build up the shoe - it took several weeks, as each layer must dry and then have holes bored to remove weight.*

¹⁸ **Frances:** *Aunt Susie's sod house was in Oklahoma near Texhoma. Uncle Pat's homestead. (Frank E. Patrick).*

¹⁹ **Edith:** *I seem to recall seeing Aunt Susie in dresses, probably at the picnics.*

Jim: *You're right. She sometimes wore the same shapeless dresses of tiny-patterned cotton that Grandma wore. Pioneer lady dresses. Frances: She always wore a dress to our "family" gatherings. Aunt Susie ws about 19 when the "flood" at Arroyo Grande, CA ripped out a bridge on which Grandma Cundiff and she were driving a wagon of furniture and two borrowed horses. Horses and*

end of her life; she habitually bent at the waist in order to pull weeds at ground level. In later years, she fashioned numerous quilts, one of which I now employ and enjoy. She had children by a husband I never knew.

My mother's favorite aunt, Patty, is the youngest of the seven sisters and but a few years Mom's senior. They had been confidantes as children, and have remained close, though Patty and her husband, Curtis Cole, now live at some remove. Their son, George, possessed a huge trove of comic books, which we pored over greedily during childhood visits; he still owned them when he died. For much of my life, the Coles lived on a farm not far from Los Molinos and a scene of one childhood trauma. The three of us were playing with the detritus of farm implements surrounding Patty's dwelling; I had my hand resting on a cement mixer, when Charlie spoke to me, and Edith, on the other side, began to turn the crank. As the barrel turned, it bore my hand into the mixer's gears unnoticed, and severely gashed my finger; I kicked the physician in the head when he tried to stitch the wound. My anus still clenches with remembered pain when I think about it.

My favorite great aunt, Mary, exhibited many of the same attributes as Suzy, including her taste in wardrobe; these practical women had grown up with neither time nor patience for feminine finery. One summer while we boarded with our Aunt Helen in Los Molinos, Mary took the three of us under her wing and chaperoned long walks along Mill Creek (pronounced "crick"), where she knew all the plants and spied all the creatures; members of my mother's family share the characteristic of keen natural observation. Her farm is adjacent to the creek, and encompassed a classic swimming hole complete with rope swing. Mill Creek, a tributary of the Sacramento River, is where Ishi had been found, though far upstream from my relations.

That same summer, we worshipped her son, Earnest. Earnest studied electronics and had his parents front door wired for surveillance - more unusual in the mid-50's than now; he also introduced us to "Mad

wagon were lost. Grandma and Susie managed to wade out. She said their several petticoats and long skirts nearly drowned them both. She never wore more than one petticoat after that, and wore bib overalls to plow, plant, reap, etc. ride her motorcycle. Jim: Wow! Aunt Susie rode a motorcycle!!!

Magazine".²⁰ Earnest was in his late teens when we met him, the right age for hero worship by younger cousins. He went on to become a top secret something-or-other with our nuclear submarine fleet, though I never knew exactly what. He had become reclusive by the time of his death, which was not discovered for several days.

In his childhood, Earnest shared with me a love of creatures. He grew up in Arizona and frequently carried a prairie dog in attendance in his pocket. One particular pet stayed quite tame for an entire summer, but when this pet disappeared in the fall, all assumed he had fallen prey to wanderlust or to a local predator. Later that year, when it was time to bring heavy blankets down from the attic for the winter, the sleepy little fellow lay revealed. He had started at the top of a stack of wool blankets and gnawed a burrow through all the folds, hibernating in a snug winter's nest.

Elsie lived upstream from Mary in a dilapidated corrugated-tin farmhouse, but she built a new one in her later years with her own hands - these women were tough!²¹ Annual family picnics took place at Elsie's for several years, and her farm held the promise of great adventure for the suburban Kelly children. Mill Creek ran through it also - we would float cantaloupe in the stream, accompanying them in inner tubes, from Elsie's to Mary's. Her son, Johnny, capitalized on his rakish charm and his motorcycle to also win our hearts.²² I never knew Elsie's first husband.

Helen, one of the younger sisters - always referred to as Helen Hayduke to distinguish her from Helen (Hamer), mom's sister - lived in Coolidge, Arizona, a tiny hamlet famed as the site of "Casa Grande", an ancient, native-American adobe abode. Her family owned the local drugstore, and

²⁰ **Charlie:** *Actually, I believe it was Johnny Junge who introduced us to Mad Magazine. The first copy I remember seeing, with A.E. Neumann on the cover was at Elsie's. Jim: Earnest and Johnny were cousins and neighbors, so it is likely that they shared, for I remember Earnest lending us some precious magazines.*

²¹ **Edith:** *Aunt Susie helped Aunt Elsie build the house. Aunt Elsie married Roy Moore later in life and was still married to him when she died. He still comes to family functions, including to Uncle Vernon & Aunt Midge's 50th anniversary party.*

²² **Charlie:** *It was quite a motorcycle for its day, a Triumph Bonneville. Jim: I remember him taking me for a 100mph ride on the back of it over rural roads and scaring the bejesus out of me.*

as a great treat we might be vouchsafed limeade and burgers without having to pay for them. We enjoyed a lively correspondence her daughter, Mikey, though we rarely saw her in person.

Hazel, the seventh and final Cundiff sister I don't know very well, because she and my mother had some difficulty.²³ Only one son had survived to my time, Louis, whom I knew but little. Other brothers had died when the family lived in Arroyo Grande, in central California; as a child, one had suddenly keeled over from an unsuspected brain aneurysm; two or three drowned (along with others) in a flood that swept away the family farm; and one died in his sleep on the eve of their departure from the site of this tragedy.²⁴ Since all this mortality occurred long before my birth, I am hazy about the details. One thing I do know, the scarcity of water in Arizona prompted their relocation thither.

My heritage features strong, resilient and determined women; men figure less prominently in the story. Most of my great aunts achieved advanced years, and none willingly submits to time.

Our mother, Frances, is the second of the six surviving Blanke children; Bert died as an infant and Ray is her elder brother. Ray, a towhead with watery blue eyes, stayed in Wilcox near his mother, and never set his sights too high. Mother claimed that she'd carried him academically throughout school; they are now reconciled after enmity following Grandma's death. His wife, Deedee insisted on selling Grandma's cows. Their three children are Paul, Becky and Melanie.

The next brother, Vernon, a tall, handsome, open-faced, upright individual lived close to us and thus we often saw our cousins Lynn, Kit and Beth. His marriage to Midge owned its share of challenges, but he has stuck by her despite chronic difficulties. I've always resented Lynn for being born a few weeks before me, thereby depriving the three Kellys of being consecutive eldest cousins. He contracted Legg Perthe's when young,

²³ **Frances:** *Aunt Hazel is OK - it's her eldest daughter Evelyn, who can't get along with anyone including her sister Alma and brother Paul!*

²⁴ **Frances:** *"A" for Aaron; died from carbon monoxide in a 'cheap' hotel room near Santa Maria where he had ridden his motorcycle to say "goodbye" to friends, as he was to leave with the family to go to Arizona in a few days.*

which affected his hip, necessitating crutches, and occasioned much parental anxiety. Vernon now owns a homestead deep in the rural countryside, which he continually improves with ingenuity and patient diligence; it gets him out of the house.

At this point, Grandma took a several-year hiatus from childbearing, which was later resumed with three more offspring - Jack, Helen and Jeanette; Jack is the only unmarried sibling of Mom's generation. When a young and vigorous outdoorsman he included us in his less strenuous outings, to our delight. Tall and trim, wise and trusted, we all adored him, but he was closest to Edith. After he'd served in the Air Force, while in school at nearby Berkeley, we saw quite a bit of him; back then, he drove a black and white '57 Thunderbird convertible with portholes, which he kept in perfect shape. He spent much of his career as a geologist for Bechtel Corp. and has led an active and adventurous life preparing wild places for roads, dams and domestication, including sojourns in Malaysia, Alaska, Japan, Tennessee and Greece. He now resides on a homestead adjacent to Vernon. He recently broke his back but due in part to the top physical shape in which he maintains himself and the ministrations of his many devoted friends, he achieved a complete recovery. He presents a model of filial devotion for he supported his mother to the end of her days; Jack and my mother were responsible for the building of Grandma's new house.

At one point in my adolescence, Jack came under the thrall of our neighbors, the Lucases, who had moved into the Pipals' odiferous house. This friendship ended with a rift never breached between our families, and never fully explained to me. It may have concerned voluptuous Carol Lucas' attempts to trap Jack into matrimony (coupled with Mrs. Lucas' meddling ways), or it may have concerned his close relationship with Jack Lucas, a charming and attractive youth a few years his junior (coupled again with Mrs. Lucas' meddling ways). Our two families rarely spoke to each other thereafter, but Mom missed no opportunity to speak ill of them.

Helen and Frances remain close, and speak often on the phone. Helen lives in Los Molinos, near four of her six children. Two of these cousins - Laura and Diane - married badly and linked themselves with men who kept them pregnant while abusing wives, children and drugs. In spite of concerted efforts by several family members, but especially Edith, we

have never been able to break this chain of abuse.²⁵ Their sister, Karen, made the leap: first she was engaged to marry a man killed in a freakish farming accident on his way to their wedding; but since then she married wisely and now raises a brood of children; she lives out-of-state and I rarely see her or her family. Dan, Todd and Bradley, a few years younger than I, and were banes of my existence, simply by being younger. Dan settled close to home, where he works a variety of low-skill jobs. Bradley escaped to Phoenix, where he has been born-again and now works on computers. Todd, the athletic and brilliant shining hope of his family, broke his neck in a diving accident in the Sacramento River, and has become a blighted and hopelessly embittered paraplegic.²⁶ Norman, the father of all these children, dumped Helen for a younger women after she finished bearing his children, and he has since been dumped in turn. As a youth, I admired Norman's olive complexion and dazzling white teeth, as well as his raffish ways. Helen remarried a husband who appears to value her simple virtues.

Jeanette, the youngest, arrived while our mother attended college. Nobody bothered to mention this new arrival to Frances, soon surprised to find a baby sister upon returning home. Jeanette lives in the Midwest, so I rarely see her. Her husband, Dick Gee, a sanctimonious hypocrite, is unwelcome him in the bosom of our family and I have not seen him for many years. They have children whom I don't really know. Jeanette passed a high school semester living with my parents, and when her detested father gained admission to school to see her, she became so hysterical that she had to be sedated. Mother told their father then and there to get out and stay out.²⁷

²⁵ **Edith:** *I didn't do anything to try to help Laura or Diane escape their marriages. I talked to Diane once and that's about it.*

²⁶ **Edith:** *Todd is quadriplegic, not paraplegic. I don't think he's "hopelessly embittered;" he seems to try to ignore his limitations, with the sad consequence that he has been even more limited by avoidable complications. After graduating from Colorado School of Mines, despite all odds, and trying hard for nine months to find an engineering job, he went back to Los Molinos and sort of let it swallow him up. His sights seem to have shrunk down to the size of the little dirt town he lives in.*

²⁷ **Edith:** *It was Helen, not Jeanette, who went to Tam. It was when Charlie was a baby and mother has repeatedly told me how Charlie was Aunt Helen's favorite. And Dad confronted Arthur Blanke, not mother. I'm not sure when mother saw her father last, however, once when we went to Pearce just to look*

Grandma told the story of Jeanette's first complete sentence (sort of) as a toddler. A cruel neighbor child was catching baby chicks and squeezing the life out of them one by one, prompting Jeanette to run into the house crying, "Momma, Bobby, Chicken!," whereupon Grandma let fly her crutch to stop the mischief.²⁸ Jeanette, an excellent student became a nurse like Frances, nursing being one profession women might aspire to.

Mom's people settled in southeastern Arizona at the turn of the century and begat Frances Laura Blanke in 1920 at Pearce, a town that has since dried up with the copper vein and blown away. My step-grandfather's family homesteaded even earlier; his father, Judge Monmonier, had been the Territorial Judge of Tombstone Territory at about the time of Wyatt Earp, for whom we held scant regard. Legend has it that as a child, young Charlie Monmonier played upon the infamous courthouse noose. He bore a childhood scar upon his cheek, which he attributed to coming around a corner into the path of an erupting gunfight. Among his possessions I saw an original photo of the surrender of Geronimo, which he may have attended. He also owned memorabilia belonging to Judge Roy Bean, a notorious hanging judge. He kept his treasures in a barn out back; when Grandpa died, we donated these effects to a historical society.

Grandpa Charlie wore kakhi pants and kakhi shirt every time I saw him, along with his characteristic kindly expression; a gentle soul who still remembered his own youth fondly, he interested himself in our well-being, though we were not, strictly-speaking, kin. One Christmas, he sent me the magical gift of a collection of particularly fine and colorful copper specimens, gleaned from his tenure at Bisbee Mine, each one carefully labeled in a spidery hand on a flat patch of plaster of Paris. I gloated over

around he was spied walking down the road toward town. We were rushed into the cars and sped out of town. Frances: It was Helen NOT Jeanette who lived with us. She came a few days before you were born, she just naturally cared for Charlie and Edith - walked them, helped them dress, etc. Jim: I sure got that one wrong!

²⁸ **Frances:** *It was Helen who talked - "chicken..."* **Jim:** *I'm wrong again about the same two aunts. Hmmm.*

these minerals with the fervor of a prospector and guarded them jealously.

By all reports, Mom's blood father must have been repressive and abusive in ways both cruel and criminal, for she escaped to college as soon as humanly possible, and rarely mentioned him in later years, and then never kindly. She once saw him walking in the street of Pearce and rushed us to the car and out of town; as he lay dying, he asked to see his children again and she replied over the phone that for her he'd died years ago - click.

Frances aggressively pursued education all her life: she graduated from Pearce High School, as valedictorian, at 16 yrs. 16 days; from Pasadena Jr. College (later PCC), as valedictorian, at 18 yrs. 18 days; and from Bethany nursing school, again as valedictorian, at 21 yrs. 21 days.²⁹ Granted that the graduating classes were not large, nonetheless she rose to the top. In the 1970's, she returned to Dominican College where she earned a BA. Her beloved grammar school teacher remained a friend well into Mrs. Gibbens' nineties. The celebrated Johnny Ringo had been found shot dead on the Gibbens ranch. The son of Texas John Slaughter the first Texas Ranger, taught at the same school.

When Frances was in third grade, in a one-room adobe schoolhouse, the teacher asked her to define a fraction, and when she replied "any portion of the whole," the teacher told her to go and sit with the fourth grade. It took some time for it to sink that she was not being punished, but rather that this elegant answer had enabled her to skip the third grade in one stride.³⁰ Although her wicked father may have done his best to extinguish any shred of culture, beauty or learning from the family home, by forbidding music and books, she secretly consumed printed matter

²⁹ **Edith:** *I don't think mother graduated from PCC. I believe she went there for one year, then returned to Arizona and was a "mother's helper" for a family in Douglas or Tucson or someplace, until she turned 18 and could be admitted to Bethany Hospital School of Nursing in Kansas City, Kansas. Once she left for Kansas she didn't return until she had graduated three years later. Frances:* *I didn't graduate Pasadena Jr. College - too poor. I worked as a babysitter housemaid in Tucson to earn the \$ plus my scholarship to go to KC, to nursing school when I was 18. I got the highest grade in Kansas (by.2!!) when I took the State Boards.*

³⁰ **Frances:** *I went from first year in school to 3rd grade.*

omnivorously, indiscriminately. As a child, she soon read every book she could lay her hands upon in this sparsely populated region. In grammar school, each child contributed a favorite passage to read to the class; Frances brought in what she'd been reading, Lord Byron's lengthy poem, "Prisoner of Chalon" - Mrs. Gibbens allowed her to read it over the course of several sessions. Frances left home immediately after high school graduation, supported herself completely while she pursued education, and did not return to Arizona for years.

When Frances left home, she'd decided to become a different person, a better person. Mom tells she didn't appreciate her high and thin voice, and by dint of steadfast practice she deliberately lowered it to achieve a more dulcet speaking voice. She also asserts that by exerting constant pressure on her front teeth as a study habit, she corrected the alignment of her otherwise excellent teeth. (She hadn't a cavity until nearly thirty; she grew up drinking naturally fluoridated water.)

Though Mom didn't work throughout my early youth, in seventh or eighth grade she rejoined the work force, first as a relief nurse, and later as head nurse of a convalescent hospital. She forever wrangled with hospital management to remedy what she considered shoddy patient care. She eventually decided she'd had enough of poor nursing and joined with a friend to create a home nursing service,³¹ the first of its kind in the area. They'd hoped to be assisting with newborns, but served geriatric clientele from the start; Mom assisted with a total of but one baby. She entertained mixed feelings about this job, because of the imminent mortality all her patients; she felt her own empathy needed to be held tightly in check to effectively succor them. She nonetheless formed bonds with her patients and performed humane services - filling bird-feeders, bringing in mail, caring for pets, etc. - duties not on her job description, but necessary to maintain quality of life; I am proud to say that she may have been the last earthly friend of many. Mom particularly enjoyed Louise Fegan, the colorful widow of a turn-of-the-century sea captain; when Mrs. Fegan died, Mom placed a plaque in our garden commemorating her.

³¹ **Edith:** *Mother was June Clarke's first employee. June Clarke was the sole owner and did all the administration, going to Sacramento to get special legislation to allow such a business, etc.*

Mother's professional medical expertise elected her as the first neighbor contacted in many a minor medical emergency. In this capacity she came to the Comstock home when Betsey became ill. Only later did I learn that my mother had participated in heroic measures when my friend was choking to death, measures that included an emergency tracheotomy performed with the family doctor on the Comstock's kitchen table. No mention of this came forth at the time of the snow.³²

In southeastern Arizona, Jews had been scarce, and generally despised by Frances' acquaintance; they were said to be responsible for the majority of the world's ills, and consequently considered close kindred to the devil - complete with horns. Frances had never met anyone she knew to be Jewish.³³ After all, how could she miss the horns? While attending nursing school, a valued and generous roommate revealed herself as Jewish. When the implications of this revelation hit home, the scales fell from Frances' eyes and she could no longer permit herself the iniquity of anti-Semitism; other racial and religious prejudices also fell by the wayside. Nonetheless, Mom bore her own grudges long and gladly, for she affected to despise Germans - all of them - for their bellicose impact on this century, as well as for the putative repressive turn of their national character (her father, perhaps?). She often announced her

³² **Edith:** *I think the emergency tracheotomy was on Betsy's younger sister who also died. I can't remember her name. Mother and Dad donated an emergency tracheostomy kit to someplace in memory of the girls.*

Jim: *Then how did Betsy die? Mother clarified recently: there had been a croup epidemic in Marin and several children died earlier in the year, including Judy Comstock. On December 14th, the eve of the Comstocks moving to San Diego (Frank was in the Navy), Mom got a frantic call from Nadine Skinner who was babysitting - something's wrong with Betsey. Mom rushed over to find her choking and summoned the doctor; he arrived quickly and immediately agreed that the child needed a tracheotomy. Dad was dispatched to Ross Hospital to pick up a tracheotomy unit which the doctor had ordered by phone. The hospital gave Dad a hard time but eventually he was given the kit. In the meantime, Mom had broken the spout off a coffee pot and she and the doctor attempted to open an air passage in order to insert it. The tracheotomy was unsuccessful, though the efforts were heroic. One aspect of all this that astonishes me, is that Mom didn't give any hint the next day of the drama that had just taken place.*

³³ **Edith:** *The Jew mother encountered was an acquaintance at PCC. I think it was a girl who used to ride the bus with her or something.*

particular prejudice in stentorian tones whenever she caught a whiff of anti-Semitism. She felt that anti-German prejudice, defensible and passionate enough to quell any incipient anti-Semites, cut the widest possible swath through her probable auditors.

Woe betide any child with the temerity to injure or to best us, for he also received the brunt of Mom's rancor which marked his family for lifelong hostility. Frances cherishes a stubborn streak, a quality she habitually attributes to pig-headed Germans; she's contentious and tenacious, and enjoys politics for the invective and opprobrium it enables her to visit upon the opposing party, generally Republican. She reserves a circle in her personal Hades for political figures, among them Richard Nixon. While he ran in the California gubernatorial race, she threatened to make us get up an hour earlier each day just so we could intone "I hate Nixon," one hundred times before breakfast. The woman can hold a grudge! Thank goodness Nixon didn't win that election; she found bliss during Watergate and fury at his pardon.

She has always insisted that political discussions in our household be guided by the correctness of her judgment. I don't know if Dad held any strong political views, but publicly he yielded the domain to her.³⁴ I don't know how much political clout she possessed, but she wielded it carefully. When a visiting nurse, she would assist a portion of her patients to vote, but mostly those whose vote she trusted to be the same as her own. She'd help them fill out absentee ballots also, but altogether more eagerly if Democrats.

Now in her 80's, she is still physically strong and active, and out to clean up the world, though minor ills now beset her. She takes long walks along Richardson Bay in her rapid stride, while she picks up debris from the bike path - a pet project; she recently took a walking tour of the Scottish West Highlands. She is herself stoic and disbelieves the illness of others, including her own children; Edith suffered from an untreated abscess for years because Mother did not take her alarming symptoms seriously. She

³⁴ **Edith:** *I think Dad had strong Republican tendencies. He would spout Republican party-line to which mother would not reply in his presence. I think it was their way of discussing issues, he would pontificate to us and when he was gone she would give us the "correct" view.*

rarely becomes ill herself, and like Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell, expects the same of others; she comes from strong stock.

In spite of our being raised side by side in the same household, each sibling experienced childhood in radically different ways. Edith always despised our father for reasons explored below, but has only recently discovered the source of this long-standing antipathy.³⁵ With the birth of Charlie, she felt the attention that had first greeted her entry into the family turned away from her permanently and towards its newest member, the first-born son and namesake. My own childhood felt peaceful up until puberty, hers never.

Edith does not enjoy the mixed blessing of an open nature. A naturally reserved being, her already quiet disposition and feelings of unimportance in the family became dampened further by the shameful, silent secrecy of sexual abuse. Not long ago, she began exploring, understanding, and finally coming to terms with her life-long pain and grief. She remembers that Dad touched her frequently during 'play' in ways that made her squirm, and that he violated her personal privacy in other insidious ways. The effects of this behavior, coupled with his steady stream of invective against women in general and disparagement of her in particular, have been lasting and profound.³⁶ As one of her coping strategies she became as 'good' as possible in the vain hope that she might escape lascivious attention from our father and achieve approval from both parents, approval that she feels eludes her yet today. For instance, she delved

³⁵ **Edith:** *I think "despised" is too strong for how I felt about Dad. I hated him all my life, but that was confused with love and a sense of familial loyalty and the hope that someday he would approve of me (he never did).*

³⁶ **Edith:** *He sexualized me and that was improper. The extent IS known, I know it and the doubts and denials of anyone else will not wash out a word of it. When I told you about it you paused and then said, "That explains so much! There was always a subtext about Dad's relationship with you that I never understood. I never understood why they always treated you so differently, so harshly." Unfortunately, the early abuse set me up to be molested by Scotty later on, a common story.*

Author's note: Some textual changes have taken place since Edith wrote this note.

into schoolwork with a thoroughness that continually astounded her brothers; she was a good student, though by her own admission, not very assertive in class. Today she expresses the belief that her own accomplishments have never measured up to ours; she did, however, accumulate a much better scholastic record than either Charlie or me, and today holds an advanced degree, something to which neither of us has ever aspired. At the time I knew not that she suffered from anything of the kind.

Charlie lives oblivious to his surroundings; he expresses no abiding interest in attracting notice to himself. Our parents nurtured him with particular care because they perceived he needed additional attention in order to survive his own indifference; he ignored their notice and thereby attracted it. The most painful scenes of his recollection pertained to his grades, mediocre in spite of his quick mind. With the advent of each report card came a fresh onslaught of parental disappointment, manifested in "The Talk". This one-sided discussion recurred whenever his performance did not meet standards, so most of the time. I was a good student, sometimes a brilliant one, and this carried special weight when contrasted to Charlie, much to our mutual chagrin. "Why can't you be like your brother?" came the constant refrain of his sequestered lectures - a rhetorical question at best. Instead of achieving better grades, he retreated ever more deeply into his interior, and he often had to be spoken to several times in order to gain his attention. When I finally came out sexually, Charlie recognized the transitory nature of his scholastic burdens, versus the lifelong duration of my sexuality, and felt grateful for his fate.

About the time of my coming out in my mid-teens, he ceased to get along at all at home, because he had begun to grow his hair long, and had evidenced early symptoms of incipient hippiehood. Charlie used the self-referential term 'hippie' the first time I ever heard it and he employed it proudly to describe himself; the handle still fits, though his long hair has thinned (he inherited Dad's hair, or lack of it). Edith made no overt rebellion at this time. It seems curious that she bonded with the generation of the '50's, and we with that of the '60's; her high school class had graduated and gone off into the world before Marin turned hip. Her quiet rebellion against one authority figure in her life (her divorce from Don) resulted in ostracism from Dad's good grace; it took years before he could bring himself to speak to her civilly. Edith found herself

decidedly out of paternal favor, though mother affected not to notice any such undercurrent.³⁷

I don't remember Edith's early grammar school friends, save Paula, but Edith's circle of friends leading up to high school consisted primarily of a group of five girls self-denominated as "The Puu'a Noni's", Hawaiian for "Five Flowers"; one of their members, Yvonne, a beautiful half-Hawaiian, coined the term. Other group members included Anna Clare, a tall towheaded musician, also of a diffident nature. Julie, a triple-threat with beauty, brains and talent - now Dr. T - who excelled scholastically, culminating her education with double majors and top honors at Harvard and Radcliffe. Julie danced with the Boston Ballet while attending Harvard. Her interest in dance led to a grant to conduct an anthropological study of the impact of tango upon Argentine culture, but when she got to Argentina, her attention turned to Eva Peron and she ended up writing instead one of the first scholarly examinations of this remarkable woman's life. (Her book became the un-credited factual basis for the Lloyd Weber musical upon the same subject, the only account in print at the time.) Julie was the first woman to spend a night on Antarctica, and always a hard act to follow. Last, and sometimes least in the group was Linda A, the only Noni not to blossom academically. Linda suffered by comparison at the time, but her sweet nature was oblivious.³⁸ Later in high school, formed a close bond with fellow Methodist parishioner, Geri B. Geri lived with her moss-backed, elderly grandparents and often relished a jolt of the energetic Kellys. Although Geri remained Edith's closest confidante and a person of serious depth and worth, according to Edith, Dad could never find anything nice to say about her.³⁹

Charlie enjoyed a succession of close childhood bonds, first Tim B in grammar school, whose friendship originated in domestic propinquity.

³⁷ **Charlie:** *I'm not sure my spending ten years with a bunch of long-haired rockers was a strategy designed to get me approval. I don't believe I got that until I started to get "famous," ironically for doing something unconventional (apparently my forte) -- with bicycles. Frances:* *Dad was inordinately PROUD of Edith - he did approve. I was sad, too, when she left Don. I still like Don.*

³⁸ **Edith:** *You might mention that although she didn't sparkle academically, Linda and her husband bought a small rental business before the rest of us had graduated from college and built it to the 8th largest in the country, she and her ex-husband are probably the wealthiest of all of our high school classmates.*

³⁹ **Frances:** *Dad said a lot of nice things about Geri. He liked her.*

Tim fomented the two most serious accidents of Charlie's youth. The first occurred on the hill near Tim's house, where Charlie coasted on Tim's Flexie (a.k.a. Flexible Flier), a low-slung sidewalk device with steering and brakes, the top-rated toy among boys; Tim owned one (though he may have inherited it from his older brother, Dave), and sometimes he let us ride it. On the day in question, Charlie flew the Flexie down the curved sidewalk of Elm St., while Tim held back the heavy stones of a garden wall. A large stone eluded his grasp in time to strike Charlie in the forehead, releasing gouts of gore, bleeding so profuse that Millie B had soaked two dishtowels in the time it took for Mother to be called, and for her to get down the block. Mother took one look at the gash and said "He has to have stitches, let's get him to the doctor, can we take your car?"⁴⁰ Millie, terrified of her husband, replied with characteristic callousness, "Oh, we can't take our car. Don't kill me if we get any blood in it," and her son had done the deed. Mother promised to wrap Charlie in newspaper and to keep him in her lap for the trip, which she did.

The other incident took place at our tree house. Tim perched in the tree with his hatchet which he stuck into a branch; then he clambered about, loosening his tool which fell and struck Charlie in the forehead. The hatchet, a roofing tool with a notch for pulling nails and a blunt side for hammering, was much heavier than an ordinary hatchet. I stood on the ground next to Charlie at the time, but hadn't seen the blade fall. The hatchet struck him between the eyes, just above the eyebrows and fell to the ground. I didn't see the accident, but looked up to see Charlie staggering and clutching his forehead, from which blood began to emerge in increasing spurts. It took a few moments to assimilate both the enormity of his injury and its proximity to potential tragedy. It is telling that both times Tim struck Charlie a potentially lethal blow to the forehead. The Mark of Cain? These two scars began Charlie's lifelong collection.

Charlie is loyal and once you achieve his trust, it takes considerable effort to dislodge it. Tim remained close through high school but it became increasingly obvious that their ways diverged. Fred W succeeded Tim in Charlie's youthful regard. Fred, tall (6'4") and lanky, with a rangy powerful build, has always been capable of tremendous sprints. Charlie,

⁴⁰ **Charlie:** *Dr. Garretson sewed up my forehead twice. He was the family physician.*

also tall (6'0"), but with a long waist and a different body type altogether, excels at endurance. Born three days apart (Fred is older) and well-matched as chess opponents, these telling contrasts formed the basis for a physical rivalry that persists in their friendship to this day. Fred could obtain a car and began driving long before Charlie or me; he introduced us to several aspects of sexuality and the two are not as disparate as they might at first appear. He also taught me to hitchhike, a pastime with licentious potential of its own.

(As the eldest, Edith drove first. She took her responsibility in earnest and drove safely. For boys, driving rights in that era had costly insurance implications, which hers did not, and we needed to pay our own insurance before we could get behind the wheel. I didn't drive until well into my senior year.)⁴¹

⁴¹ **Charlie:** *Another small "advantage" Edith has forgotten. In order to pay the "extra" insurance for me to drive, about \$140, I worked with Fred one summer pushing wheelbarrows of dirt out of the Wickersham's basement for \$1.25/hr.*

Jim: *Charlie also corrects me on Fred's driving: although Charlie had his license first, Fred had more frequent and consistent access to his mother's car.*

Charlie continues: *Speaking of which, I got fired from the first two jobs I had. The first was the job sweeping the parking lot at the Top Hat market every morning (\$1/day), which Keith Krieger had donated to me when his track practice took the time from him. I did a fairly half-hearted job, and deserved to be fired. The second was the job I had mounting tires at Montgomery Ward, and I'm not sure what I did there to deserve it, but it is certainly true that I didn't enjoy the job, and did no more than was necessary.*

Because I was such an indifferent student, I wound up at COM (College of Marin, the local junior college), taking classes for the express purpose of avoiding the draft. I was told by the parents, "If you don't go to school, it's the Army for you." This was considered the ultimate threat, because it suggested that one was not smart enough to do anything else, but in spite of it, I flunked out twice, through the simple expedient of skipping classes to play bridge. The first time I was reinstated after a probationary semester (during which I worked at Ward's), but the second time brought with it the 1-A classification, and inside of a couple of months, "Greetings..."

I credit the Army experience (2/16/66-2/15/68) with much of my current satisfaction, perhaps equivalent to the college experience that I passed up but which shaped the lives of my siblings. First, since I didn't get shot, didn't go to Vietnam, and was not exposed to any horrors (other than a helicopter accident

In about fourth grade, Charlie brought home a major new buddy, Biff Y. Biff has a quick mind and an active musical talent that brightened and sometimes deafened many gatherings. He excels scholastically, though Charlie regularly bested him on aptitude tests; today Biff is a tenured professor of Archaeology. (Charlie achieved Semi-finalist for a National Merit Scholarship, an accomplishment that eluded his siblings and lightened Charlie's "talks" for a short while.) Biff introduced me to a variety of vices since he was as much my friend as Charlie's; our intimacy grew over time to include furtive sexual bouts. Biff and Fred competed with one another for Charlie's approbation and for my sexual favors.

I wanted to be a good boy. I tried to be. Charlie and I were born but 13 months apart and for many years we varied by one inch and five pounds. Some adults could not tell us apart, or rather, they could tell us apart, but could not remember which was Jimmy and which was Charlie; the Kelly boys, a team. When Charlie began first grade, he came home with his primer to read to me. "See Dick. See Jane. See Spot run. Run, Spot, run. Run Dick, run." At this point he stopped and turned to me, and Mom who had been listening almost fell down when he said, "I know it's stupid, but that is what it says!" Charlie has always possessed a gift for revealing the obvious.

that killed 16 soldiers), it was an adventure I shared with a host of friends I haven't seen since. We bonded through training, we got to shoot real rifles (and carry them everywhere and clean them a lot), we partied, I got drunk enough on two occasions that I have never had to repeat the experience, and you could hardly flunk out of that outfit.

Second, the reason I went to COM was that in light of my disinterest in formal education, I would have felt guilty making our parents pay to send me to a place I didn't care to attend and where I would have flunked out just as surely and just as swiftly. Once the Army was done, I was off the hook for living up to any parental expectations, and I went on with my life, sans "draft problem" at a time when that occupied the thinking of virtually every one of my friends who had put it off through higher education. The Army made a clean break in my life from parental control to the realization that I could do anything I wanted to do.

Chums from earliest childhood, close in age and sharing certain salient characteristics such as a love of language and a compulsion to read, we would lie in bed across the room from one another, and occasionally look up to read aloud a juicy passage. This comfortable kinship entrained our intellects and imaginations; when quite small we began to weave for one another a picaresque serial featuring ourselves as heroes. In our fictional world, we could change into any organism we wished, and utilize the abilities native to that species: become a hummingbird and dart, or an albatross and soar; become a tiny but fierce shrew, or a swift cheetah (as the fastest land animal, cheetah was very chic and popular). Mutual interest in the natural world informed our creature choices. We also had a complement of fabric animals that served as icons in the ritual of our childhood play, which often consisted of enacting our tale upon our toys. Among our collection of stuffed creatures was one stringy rag-doll with embroidered facial features, lank black yarn for hair and only one arm. Upon her we heaped rhetorical indignities; cast as perennial villain of our piece, her name was "Girl". This sounds more misogynistic than it felt at the time; we may have chosen this doll for our obloquy simply because she was flawed and represented our collection's most inelegant execution, but significantly she also represented the only human in our zoocentric fable. The psychosexual implications are also moot, for I am now gay while Charlie has always been straight - sexually at least.

This never-ending story began each night when our bedroom dome light extinguished. Our fraternal ritual included a litany: whoever was in bed first did not have to turn out the light (we employed elaborate stratagems and fantastic ruses to avoid this inexplicably onerous task); as soon as the room grew dark, we could ask the nightly question - "Where Were We?" - and he who controlled the light switch maintained the element of timing as an ally, for he, and only he, knew the exact moment at which to launch the fateful query. It was always difficult to remember exactly where we had left off the tale the night before, and implicit that we not cover the same ground twice. We strained our brains trying to remember what we'd been talking about just before falling asleep. The above catechism had a sanctioned response, an alliterative nonsense sentence, in imitation of the question, thrown out in order to stall for time while wracking. Eventually we found our clue and returned to an agreed-upon juncture to resume the tale. The story might not legally end each night until both of us had murmured "Good Night". This had the effect of prolonging the story-telling for both parties, as one daren't go

to sleep while the other chattered on, for one might be required on the following night to recount the last few paragraphs. This epic went on for a decade, simultaneously a memory game, a test of skill, a test of scholarship, and a continuing saga - the most ambitious and important intellectual activity of my childhood. I remember the night Charlie finally refused to engage in "The Story" I knew even then that he would never again do so. I felt in my heart and in my conscious thought that a piece of childhood and innocence had now ended. We both knew it.

Edith was the only family member afforded the privacy of her own room. This solitary bedroom did not lend itself to intimacy comparable to that of her brothers; Mom and Dad had each other; and I had Charlie, but Edith had no one of her age or gender, thus increasing her isolation within our family unit.⁴² When we went on outings, like to Disneyland, we paired up differently but achieved the same net result: I rambled with Charlie - we got into boy mischief and took roller-coaster rides; Dad went by himself and probably ogled breasts and smoked cigarettes, foregoing rides entirely; while Edith was stuck with Mom and tame rides and girl stuff. Not that Mom isn't good company, but she's not the companion of choice at an amusement park, though none other availed itself. Mom accompanied Edith primarily to provide for herself a sounding board for her own garrulity, an unsatisfying role in which to cast Edith's quiet nature.⁴³

Though as siblings, our experiences of childhood differed in many regards, in one another we found friends, playmates and confidantes - roles we still enjoy today. The most worldly cousins of our generation, we lived near the sophistication of San Francisco, and dwelt in the bohemian and liberal village of Mill Valley; this urbanity represented an advantage other relations didn't enjoy. Our parents, not perfect by any means, didn't treat us with absolute equanimity, but in spite of that, or perhaps

⁴² **Jim:** *Charlie recalls his envy of her possession of a radio upon which to listen to serials. We had no such luxury and had to fabricate our own serial.*

⁴³ **Edith:** *I don't think Mother ever understood that I was a different person than she was. I have struggled all my life with that, but that's my story, not yours.*

because of it, I enjoyed a happy childhood, certainly more sunny than that of Edith or Charlie.