

Summary: A sensitive, observant, feisty little girl growing up in a kooky Canadian boarding house in the 1960s is told she has everything a child should ever want, but feels something is missing. She must sort through her family's strangeness to find happiness and figure out if the thoughts inside her head are trustworthy.

PART ONE: 1963-1966, Ages 5 to 8

OUR HOUSE

Mother liked us to take our shoes and boots off in the small room by the backdoor we called the porch. She liked her floors kept clean.

In the wintertime our German shepherd, Lassie, slept in the porch. The rest of the year the dog stayed chained outside, sleeping in the doghouse Father had built. He'd painted it white with yellow trim to match our house. Yellow being my mother's favourite colour, the colour in our kitchen.

Mother put one of her worn, tattered hooked mats inside for the dog to sleep on. She liked to hook mats. They were in every room.

We didn't have running water. Marjorie and Mother carried buckets of water from the well. They washed the dishes in the pantry.

In our dining room sat a large oval wooden table with a sturdy centre post and a dozen mismatched chairs which Father called antiques, which meant they were really old, older than my parents. Mother kept the table covered with a colourful flowered vinyl cloth hanging almost to the floor, making a special place underneath, like a cave or a tent, where I liked to hide and listen to the adults when they didn't know I was there.

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In the corner of our dining room, by the door to our cellar, sat a large piece of dark furniture Mother called a buffet. Mother didn't allow us to touch the good silver or the lace tablecloths, or the bills and other important papers she kept in the drawers.

A metal cot along the opposite wall was where we sat to watch television. We were lucky; Mother said not everyone in our neighbourhood owned a TV, and that when I was a baby, Father was the first one on our road to buy one. She spoke of how the neighbours gathered at our house on weekends.

Mother kept the good room—where we were to do nothing but sit—neat and tidy, for when company came, but visitors seldom dropped by.

The front entrance was a strange shape. One of the boarders said it was like a half of a hexagon. I didn't know what that meant. Mother called the room a dingle-hole.

I asked why it had such a funny name.

"I don't know. That's what the man who owned the house before us called it."

She continued to call it by the same name, even though she was unable to tell me what the word meant. Mother didn't care about those kind of things, but I did.

I liked the room. I played there in spring and summer, when the afternoon sun came through the windows, filling the room with warmth and light. Mother kept geraniums on end tables by the windows. I didn't like their smell. In the winter, she kept the door closed because she said it was too drafty and wasted heat. Mother moved all her plants to the good room and used the dingle-hole like a refrigerator for our leftovers. Mother liked the room best in wintertime. I didn't. Mother and I disagreed on a lot of things.

We never used the front door. Mother said, "No person in their right mind comes to the front of a house." If anyone did, she rushed to the window in the dining room overlooking the

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front door, pulled back the curtain and knocked rapidly on the windowpane. Mother banged loud enough, I feared the glass might break. Then she waved her hand, motioning them to the back of the house. Once she saw they understood, she let the curtain fall and went to the back door to greet whoever it was with a smile, not letting on how upset she'd been with them for coming to the wrong door in the first place.

Usually the only people who showed up unannounced were salesmen, carrying suitcases filled with clothing or other items. Mother didn't go out to shop often, other than buying groceries. Mother and Marjorie would stop what they were doing, sit and sort through the clothing looking for a good deal. Mother sometimes bought a new dress for herself, once in a while, one for Marjorie, too.

The only time Marjorie got dressed up was on Sundays when we went to church and Grandmother's house.

Marjorie would sit in front of her dresser staring into the mirror, brushing her long dark brown hair at least a hundred times. Mother complained Marjorie spent too much time getting ready. Mother stood at the bottom of the stairs, yelled, "Get down here. Now! Or we'll leave without you."

Mother dressed quickly, tugging and wiggling into her girdle. It didn't take her long to choose which dress to wear, or to brush her dark curly hair, which she kept permed because she said it was easier to care for. She pinned her hat on her head and puckered her lips as she applied red lipstick.

Father dressed in a baggy brown suit and waited in the car. He was so thin, Mother complained his clothes never fit him right. He smoked cigarettes until he became impatient and

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honked the horn. Mother would then run once more to the bottom of the stairs and yell, "Hurry up!"

Marjorie raced down the stairs and out to the car, her Sunday hat in hand. She jumped in the backseat, behind Father, pulled a compact from her purse and dabbed her face with powder, applied lipstick, and pinned her hat on her head while Father drove.

Sundays were the only day of the week Mother and Marjorie wore lipstick and high heels. Every Sunday morning, they practiced walking in their shoes, so they didn't trip in public. Father said, "Those goddamn shoes do nothing but ruin the floors."

Behind them, they'd leave a trail of small rounded dents in the linoleum, like bird tracks in snow. "No need of you two wearing such trash," Father said. "You look like a pair of fools."

I studied how they walked, wishing I could wear high heels, too. All the women in the Simpson Sears and Eaton's catalogues wore heels. I wondered if anyone yelled at them for ruining floors.

EARLY CONFUSION

When the Avon Lady first came to our house her hair was brown, then black, later red, and finally, blonde. I couldn't understand how this happened and asked my mother to explain.

That's when she told me about dye. I immediately wanted this magic solution and asked my mother to buy me some. She turned and gave me a hard stare, her lips pressed tight. I tensed. "Only bad women," she spat, "dye their hair."

I was confused as to why my mother sat chatting with a bad woman. Why she smiled and laughed, like everything was okay. I was even more confused after the Avon Lady left, and

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Mother's smile disappeared, her voice loud and mean, "A woman's place is in her home, with her family, taking care of her children, not traipsing all over the neighbourhood."

But when the Avon Lady needed someone to care for her little girl while she worked, Mother smiled and seemed excited to welcome the child into our home.

The three year old was tiny, with the lightest blonde hair I'd ever seen. She napped on the cot in our kitchen, sucking her thumb, while her other hand slipped inside her panties. When Mother saw this she rushed across the room screeching, "Dirty girl. Dirty. Dirty, dirty girl."

Mother grabbed her hand, yanked it out, and slapped it hard. "You're going to grow up to be just like your mother."

And I wondered if I'd someday be like my mother, too.

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Wellington Demone was a fat man in his sixties that paid money to live with us. He sat on a chair in our kitchen, watching my mother bake and prepare meals. Often Mother grumbled under her breath, "Too much time on his hands. Must be nice to sit around all day with nothing to do."

"Go on. Go. Sit on his lap." Mother would motion to my younger sister and me. "He'll buy you something when the Avon Lady comes."

Charlene and I did as we were told, but I didn't think it fair that Marjorie got to pick something out of the Avon Lady's wonderful book of pictures, even though she hadn't sat on his lap.

I didn't like his stubbly face, or the way his hand touched my bare legs, or his hot breath. I especially didn't like his belly jiggling against me when he laughed.

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But my mother didn't want to know why I didn't like him. She turned her back and said, "You're foolish to complain about someone who's being so nice."

So, I sat on his lap to get the trinkets I wanted.

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Demone dropped bits of balled-up paper on the floor when he saw Marjorie approach.

"Look at this mess." She bent over to pick it up. Demone reached forward and rubbed the back of her leg. She straightened, spun, and faced him. "Not in front of everyone." Then in a loud voice said, "Stop. Touching. Me."

"What are you talking about?" He chuckled, "I didn't do anything."

"I'm sick of your shit." Marjorie marched into the pantry, dipped a pot of water from the bucket we kept on the counter, and stomped back to the kitchen where Demone sat. She threw the water over him.

"Frig!" He jerked back in the chair. "Marjorie, what the hell?" Water ran down his face and shirt and onto the floor.

"Hope that cools you off, you fat old bastard."

Charlene and I ran back and forth in front of him, laughing as he wiped water from his face. Mother stood at the other end of the kitchen with her arms folded. She ordered Marjorie to clean up the mess.

My feet slipped on the wet linoleum; the back of my head slammed against the solid oak door.

I cowered on the floor, screaming.

Mother rushed to scoop me up. "Barbara Ann. Barbara Ann, stop screaming."

But I didn't stop.

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Mother turned and yelled at Marjorie. “This is because of your foolishness.”

She paced the floor with me in her arms, rubbing the back of my head. “It’s all right. It’s all right. Stop crying.”

Marjorie stayed off to the side, silent.

Mother picked up the phone and dialed the doctor. A song went through my head...

And the Doctor said,

“No more monkeys jumping...

—

Then she called my Father.

...One fell off and hit his head.

My father rushed home and off to the hospital we went. My mother sat in the front seat, holding me on her lap, cursing Marjorie, while my father cursed his lost time from work.

The rest became a blur of white sheets, strange smells, cold machines, nurses’ and doctors’ hands and the word concussion. I had no idea what it all meant, but it seemed important.

At home, Mother sent Demone packing.

Marjorie tiptoed around Mother for weeks to make up for her terrible deed. The Avon Lady stopped coming, and from then on, whenever I didn’t do as my mother wanted me to do, she blamed it on that bump to my head.