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Pike Place



A Novel

Marilyn Howard Tschudi

Award-Winning Finalist – National Best Books 2007 Awards
Chick Lit & Women's Lit Category

Pike Place



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Pike Place



Dedicated to
Andrew Boyd Howard



It had been a while since I rambled across the cobblestone streets of downtown Seattle. I was early, so I took my time and allowed myself to be drawn with the crowd into Pike Place Market. Stall after stall was laden with a Thanksgiving harvest: apples and peaches, asparagus, potatoes, pumpkins, early-winter squash, and – of course – the day’s catch. Besides halibut, prawns, and Dungeness crab, I saw at least five types of salmon: Chinook, Sockeye, Coho, Pink, and Chum. That’s what I wanted for lunch, the Chum. In just a few minutes, I would be meeting my family at Café Sport, a restaurant that everyone was talking about. It was good to be home.

I was back from New Orleans for the holiday weekend. It was strange to think that people in the south barely knew that this part of the world existed. They had a different perspective of the country down there. Many were still conflicted by the War of Northern Aggression – anyone from the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line was still considered to be a Yankee. Folks in the south didn’t know how to label me. I was from the west, but I wasn’t from California. I was from the north, but I wasn’t a Yankee. To them, Washington was the nation’s capital. But to me, Washington could only mean the Pacific Northwest.

I was born in a small town in the southeast corner of Washington. It was a city that was developed by the government during the Second World War. The purpose of moving individuals, mostly engineers, to this arid, obscure place was to develop the nuclear bomb. First there was dirt, and then there was a city, Richland. Neat little houses were built in neat rectangular blocks. Trees were planted and irrigated with great diligence. Churches were built, even a synagogue, and municipal buildings, schools, libraries, and parks soon followed. The plant, out in Hanford, was out of sight of this residential haven, and men would take the bus every morning to get there, and every evening to get back home. It was, in a way, an idyllic childhood. We were white and black and Asian and Hispanic and we were all engineers, or families who belonged to engineers. If there was ever a place to grow up completely color-blind, it was Richland, Washington. Maybe this is just my own recollection of this little town, or maybe it really was as devoid of prejudice as I remember it to be. In any case, I grew up blissfully, without any real sense of need.

I had a friend, a true-blue friend, who I met when I was four and she was two. Her name was Elizabeth Ann Gardiner, and she was the easiest-going child ever born on this earth. I was always full of great ideas as to how we could spend our day, and Lizzie always agreed that my ideas were great. Whether it was making mud pies and selling them to our neighbors, or jumping off of the highest tree limb in my back yard, Lizzie was game. I will never forget the time that I convinced her that it would be fun to climb up on the roof of the junior high school to find Frisbees and tennis balls. Lizzie was a petite little thing and I was always tall for my age. I got up first by way of the big air-conditioning unit in the back of the school. Lizzie had a little difficulty, but I lay on my tummy and reached down for her, grabbing her wrist and heave-ho-ing with all of my might. I got her up there, but not without gouging a little flesh out of her arm. I felt terrible. But I was also scared.

“Please, Lizzie, don’t tell your mom how this happened!” She promised that she would never tell, and that it didn’t really hurt that much anyway, so we happily danced around on the roof, picking up as many tennis balls as we could stuff into our shirts. We had been sure that we would find untold treasures up on the roof, and we were not disappointed. What an incredible hour – and then we heard the siren. Was it possible that it was illegal to be on the roof of the junior high school? Surely not, but we dropped to our knees and huddled together closely, holding hands with all our might. I noticed at that time that Lizzie’s arm was still bleeding.

“Oh, Lizzie,” I said, “I am so sorry you got hurt.”

“Never mind,” she replied, “but I’m scared. I hope that we aren’t arrested.” We heard a squawk, and then a voice from a megaphone called out loudly.

“We know you are on the roof. Come down now!” Our life was over. We just knew it. But, being the good little Christian girls that we were, we held our hands in the air and gave ourselves up. The policemen actually helped us climb down from the roof, but then they gave us a severe lecture that went on forever. I wasn’t sure about Lizzie but, by the end, I was very close to throwing up. When they finally let us go, they warned us that if we were ever caught breaking the law again, we would be in big trouble.

Lizzie and I ran as fast as we could to our homes. I extracted one more promise from Lizzie that she wouldn’t tell her mother

how she'd gotten cut, and then we separated – each of us desperately hoping that the police hadn't ratted us out to our parents. Luck was with us. No one at home seemed to be aware of any wrongdoings committed by the girls who had guiltily slipped back into their houses. It seemed that we were going to be okay. The consequences of our sins did not appear until a day later...

It was Monday, a school day, and Lizzie was getting special help from her second grade teacher in spelling. Lizzie was favoring her right arm a bit and it hurt to hold her pencil. Her teacher told her to stretch out her arm. When she did, the teacher noticed more than a bandaged cut – she saw a dark line creeping up the vein in Lizzie's wrist.

"Lizzie," she said, "how did you get this cut?" My Lizzie, of course, would only admit to hurting herself on some metal. She never mentioned that she had an older friend who had coerced her into climbing up a rusty air conditioning unit in order to conquer the unknown wonders of the world on top of the junior high school. Lizzie's teacher quickly called the school nurse and her mom. I only learned about this much later, although I knew that something was amiss when Lizzie did not show up at the corner to wait for me after school.

Blood poisoning. I will never forget the way I felt when I was told the news by my mother.

"Lizzie was rushed to the doctor today, Bobbi," she said. "She had blood poisoning!" I immediately knew that it must have been the horrible cut on her arm that had poisoned her. Was she dying? Would I be able to tell her how sorry I was, that I loved her, and good-bye until we met again in Heaven? Finally, I understood the mumble of words that were coming out of my mother's mouth. Lizzie was okay. She was on medication, but she was home. I started to run toward the door with the question, 'Can I go and see her?' on my lips.

"Oh no you don't," my mother said. "Lizzie cannot play today. She must rest."

I was crestfallen. I was afraid to call her, knowing that her mother would answer the phone and that I, in my agony, would probably blurt out my confession in a rush of words and tears. I was certain that if I ever let anyone know I had given Lizzie blood poisoning, I would be banned from playing with her forever. And so, I suffered in silence.

It was 1971 and there were few distractions for kids at that time. We had a tiny little black and white TV with three fuzzy channels, two if it was windy. But most of the time, the television was off. We children were not allowed to turn it on when it was light outside.

“Go downstairs or go outside.” Those were our options.

I had siblings – four of them, actually – and we knew every square foot of Richland, Washington. My sister, Angela, was a beautiful, popular fifteen-year-old. She was the only one of us kids who had brunette hair like my parents. And her eyes matched her hair. Everyone always made a fuss over how pretty Angela was, which might have made the rest of us feel jealous, but Angela was so nice, she was such a good big sister, that it was pretty much impossible not to adore her. Sometimes, when we were all stuck in the basement because it was too cold to go outside, I could convince her to play the card game, Spit, with me. She was a very good Spit player and she beat me every time, which ultimately caused me to start crying.

Angela got to the point where she would say, “I don’t want to play with you because you always get mad at me and cry.” I would cross my heart and hope to die.

“I won’t cry this time. I promise!” And she, because she was such a love, would agree to play with me one more time. And I, because I was so competitive, would always end up crying.

Next was my brother, Graham, who was fourteen at the time. He was my idol. Graham was musical; he played the piano with such a passion that my mother knew that he was going to be the next Van Cliburn. And he could have been; only he was also a singer, and an actor, and an athlete, and the president of his class. I remember, as we got older, girls would come up and surround my mother after one or another of Graham’s performances.

“Please, make Graham marry me, Mrs. Johnson,” one girl would beg, while the others giggled. “We love him!” My mother would smile and bask in the reflection of her son’s glory. I would usually be standing near my mother, with a proud smile on my face. For as long as I could remember, I had been known as Graham’s little sister. But that never bothered me one bit.

It was common back then for all the neighborhood kids to get together in the evening to play baseball in our back yard. Graham was older than most of us, so he usually wouldn't join us, but when he did, it made the game so much more fun. I always wanted to impress him, to hit a home run so that he would notice me and maybe tell me that I was good. One time, I got up to bat, my dad was pitching, Graham was catching, and I hit the ball so hard that it went over our chain link fence. I was elated and my feet barely touched the ground as I rounded the bases. As I was heading for home, I turned to see where the ball was and somehow got off course. The next thing I remember was hitting the steel pole of the carport with my head. I fell down as if dead, so quickly had I been running. Even through my pain, I looked around for my big brother.

“Was I safe? Did I touch home plate?” That was really all that mattered to me.

“Yes, Bobbi,” Graham assured me quickly. “You touched home before I caught the ball. Way to go!” I just closed my eyes and smiled. All was well. Graham had witnessed my home run.

My sister, Adele, was next in line. She was twelve. Adele had flaming red hair, or at least that's how I heard most adults describe it. Her hair was stick straight and it was so long that she could sit on it, which I thought was the coolest thing ever. As far as I was concerned, she and I were the same person. I mean, we didn't look alike; I had ash brown curly hair that seemed to stop growing once it reached my shoulders, but we felt the same way about everything, pretty much. We loved to play dolls together, and always had. No one played dolls as well as we did. Sometimes, we would let our friends bring their Barbies over and join us in our basement. But, in spite of the fact that our friends had way better Barbie stuff (Adele and I had always dreamed about getting a Barbie fold-out house for Christmas – the one with the built in closets, where you could hang up little Barbie dresses on little Barbie hangers), we always agreed, once our friends left, that they just didn't know how to play dolls as well as we did.

Adele and I were outside girls as well. Whether it was baseball in our back yard, or any organized game on the playing field during recess, we were both good athletes and we played to win. At school, boys always picked us first to be on their teams, and we rarely let them down. The thing that I loved most about Adele was that, even though she had her own friends, she was

always happy to let Lizzie and me join her. She never seemed to get annoyed with us, that is, until the day that she got her period. After she crossed that milestone, Adele suddenly began to realize how interesting Angela was. I fell off her radar screen and there was no amount of ‘Let’s play Barbies’ that could draw her back. She wanted to learn the art of being feminine from our older sister, and I lost my Adele.

I could not have been less interested in being feminine. As a matter of fact, even the word feminine made me blush. A few years earlier, I had been in the ladies’ room with my sisters and my mother. I was standing in the midst of a number of women who were waiting to use the facilities. I walked around the room and stopped in front of a rectangular box hanging on the wall. It had a pretty flower painted on it. I looked up and read the elegant cursive writing.

“Oh,” I said out loud, “they are selling feminine napkins in this bathroom.” To my surprise, every last lady in the room burst out laughing. I didn’t know why the fact that lacy handkerchiefs being available for purchase in a bathroom was so funny, but I knew well enough that I had made a complete fool of myself. I was too embarrassed even to have my mother explain it to me in the quiet of our own car.

“Never mind,” I said, shaking my head vigorously. “I don’t want to know.” And so, when Adele joined the ranks of the feminine, I let her go. I loved to play. I was all about playing, and so I gave her up without much of a fight. No hard feelings.

I was the fourth child. Although I was two years younger than Adele, I was almost as tall as she was, something that I hated about myself. I always looked around at the short girls in my classroom and thought that they were so much cuter. And even though I was the same age as the other girls in my class, I felt like I was much older. The things that my classmates talked about seemed to be, I don’t know, silly to me. I would never have let these girls know what I was secretly thinking, but I was just not like them. The only positive thing about being different, about being so tall, was that I was also athletic, which made me popular with the boys.

After me came Scottie, my baby brother. Scottie loved Lizzie almost as much as I did because he knew that – when Lizzie wasn’t around – I would be looking to play with him every waking moment. Scottie and Lizzie were the same age, and I always felt

that they were destined to get married, and then Lizzie and I would be sisters. When Scottie was little, he was docile, and I loved that. He would let me play make believe with him; he was Ken to my Barbie, so long as I didn't tell anyone (and why would I – and risk losing Ken?). He climbed trees with me and we played with his STP racers, and we rode all over the countryside on our Honda 50's. He was a perfect playmate until about the age of seven – and then it dawned on him just how much power he had over me.

Lizzie was known to go on long vacations over the summer, and that left me with Scottie. It became a game for him to act uninterested in the plans that I made for us on those glorious summer days. Lizzie and I had discovered that if you dug by the banks of the Columbia River, which was just a short bicycle ride away from our homes, you found oozy, wonderful clay. Before Lizzie's parents took her off to the coast, she and I had dug up pounds of clay and dragged it back home in buckets. We made clay pots, and clay kitties, and clay fruit. It was so exciting. We felt like we were real artists. We lined our creations up on a board in the back yard to let the sun bake them. Once they were ready, we planned to paint them, and then they would be perfect. We were going to sell them, of course. We just knew that our neighbors would love to own one of our beautiful clay objects. So, even though Lizzie had to leave, I wanted to keep making more and more art. But it was no fun digging by myself – I really wanted Scottie to take Lizzie's place. I asked him to ride with me to the river and help me dig up more clay and then help me lug it back home.

“Scottie,” I explained, “not only will it be fun, but we'll make lots of money.” I knew that if there was something in it for him, he would be more likely to say yes. But Scottie said no. He said that he thought our clay figures were stupid and that no one would ever in a million years buy them. Well, that was Scottie. I always had to make allowances for him. He wasn't the creative genius that both Lizzie and I were, so I decided to change my approach. Instead of emphasizing the money that we could make, I told him all about how much fun it was going to be at the river. I told him that everybody was hanging out at the river that summer. I told him that we could wear our swimming suits so it wouldn't be like we were there just to work. We would dig a little, and gather our buckets of clay, and then we would swim a little with our friends.

“Come on, you know that sounds like fun,” I said, trying not to sound desperate. “How about it?”

“No,” Scottie said. “I’m not interested in playing in the mud with you.” Oh, he made me so mad! To make matters worse, in that very same mud where we would have been digging, they later discovered the ancient remains of what they called Richland Man. If only Scottie had helped me that summer, maybe we would have found those bones. We would have been famous. But it was ‘no’ and ‘nope’ and ‘don’t wanna’. I was so furious – I could feel the blood rush to my cheeks.

“What else do you have to do?” I asked him sternly. But he just ignored me. What I didn’t realize was that the more upset I got, the more entertaining I was to my brother. This went on for years, simply years. It was so irritating.

All of us kids knew that we were not allowed to hate; we were certainly not allowed to say the words ‘I hate you’. In fact, there was a verse that my mother quoted to us all the time that said if you don’t love your brother, how can you say you love God? It was clear to me that if I allowed myself to feel hatred toward my brother, then I *would* go to Hell. And so, when Scottie refused to play with me, I got as close to him as I could and I said in my harshest whisper, “I love you in Jesus, Scottie, but I hate your guts!” I was pretty sure that God would give me that one. But Scottie just laughed, which drove me to the brink of insanity.

Year later, when Scottie and I were in college, he finally admitted to me that it had been his favorite thing as a kid to yank my chain. I can remember very clearly looking at my eighteen-year-old brother.

“For real?” I said incredulously, “You knew what you were doing to me? You knew how mad you were making me?” He just laughed, but this time it didn’t anger me.

“Yeah, it was so funny. Your face would get beet red.” Thankfully, by that time in my life I had adopted a more Lizzie-like approach to dealing with my frustrations, so, where I would have wanted to kill him just a few years earlier, on that day I just laughed.

“I knew it,” I said to him. “I knew you were doing it on purpose!” And then, just because I could (after all, Mom wasn’t anywhere near us) I punched his arm as hard as I could, but he just laughed.

When I was ten, my father received a scholarship to attend the University of Washington in Seattle. He and my mother had married five days after they graduated from high school and, consequently, my father had just started his second year of college before the babies started coming. The two years of school were enough to get him an associate's degree, which made him eligible for work out at the plant. Now, all these years later, he was given the opportunity to earn his engineering degree. And so, the seven of us packed our bags and moved to Seattle.

This was a very traumatic move for me, because it meant I had to leave my very best friend in the whole wide world. How could I live without my Lizzie? It also happened that at the same time I reached another milestone. I 'blossomed into a young woman', as the fourth grade pamphlet read – I had begun to menstruate. Okay, I couldn't even say the word because it creped me out so much. The day it started, I was so mortified that I told no one. I was so afraid that my mom would be mad that I'd ruined my underwear. I was so shocked and angry that my body had betrayed me and turned me into a woman without my permission. And I was so completely embarrassed at the prospect of anyone else finding out, especially Lizzie (who was so young and so innocent), that I went into the bathroom by myself, found a sponge under the sink, and wrapped toilet paper around and around and around it. After few hours, however, I realized that my solution wasn't going to work. I ran into the bathroom, burst into tears, and called out to my mom for help. She thought that I had thrown up. I wished it was just that; how I longed for the simplicity of a childhood illness! She wanted me to let her into the bathroom, but I couldn't, I simply couldn't. It became obvious that I was beginning to annoy my mother, so I very quickly confessed that I had become a woman, and that I didn't know what to do about it. To my astonishment, and to my extreme embarrassment, she let out a sigh and started to laugh. She left me for a few moments, and then she came back and insisted that I let her in the bathroom. What could I do? I knew better than to say no to my mother at that point. She came in with a box of feminine napkins – the dreaded feminine napkins – and so began my life as a woman.

There I was in a new town with an entirely new body. I had always been tall for my age, but now I was developing so quickly,

I barely recognized myself. I refused to discuss these changes with the female members of my family. I felt sure that they found my physical changes amusing; that they were talking about me behind my back. It wasn't that the girls in my family were mean-spirited, they were just so very blasé and open about topics that I found to be so deeply personal. I tried very hard not to make eye contact with them. My mom would not allow me to wear a bra yet – I was too young. So I took to wearing loose shirts and slouching a little bit; hoping to disguise my 'mountains', as my little brother called them.

Scottie had become a very important part of my life once we moved to Seattle. For one thing, he and I shared a bedroom. We slept on bunk beds; I got the top bunk, of course, and he was below me. Our bedroom was also my father's office. It was a long and narrow room in which our bed was pushed up against one wall and our dad's desk was pushed up against the other wall. He had to shuffle and squeeze in order to get into his chair. Every night, he would study into the wee hours of the morning while Scottie and I snuggled into our many blankets, trying to keep warm. We always felt safe and secure in our beds, with the green glow of Daddy's desk lamp acting as a night light.

We lived in a rented house within the Seattle city limits. There was actually a sign that said 'Seattle City Limits' on our very own street. Somehow that made me feel very, I don't know, sophisticated or something. Considering Richland had a population of about twenty-five thousand people at the time, Seattle, with over half a million people, was a very big city indeed.

Our house was old, but it was big and sprawling and architecturally very interesting. It had a large stone fireplace that seemed to grow out of the floor. The room that Scottie and I shared was on the other side of the fireplace. It was quite obviously an add-on, because the back of the fireplace protruded into it. I loved having those large stones as a wall in our room. As Scottie and I fell asleep each night, I would talk about how cool it would be if we could burrow through those large boulders and get into the big part of the house. There would be a secret passageway that no one but he and I would know about. We would press a button and the back of the fireplace would open up, and there it would be, our very own private entrance into the house. There was always a tunnel and it was always exciting – like something out of a *Hardy Boys* book – filled with mystery and intrigue.

By the age of nine, I had already decided that I was going to be a sleuth when I grew up. I would be like Joe Hardy, not Nancy Drew. Nancy Drew was such a girl. No, I was going to be Joe Hardy, fearless, brave, and most of all, impetuous. I had read every *Hardy Boys* book that had ever been written, some of them more than once. The *Hardy Boys* were terribly exciting. They allowed me to travel to New York, to Brazil, and to Peru. Every book started by describing the principal characters. Frank, the oldest, dark-haired brother, was practical, reliable, someone to depend upon. Joe, on the other hand, was full of life. He loved adventure. He was impetuous. Every *Hardy Boys* book described Joe as being impetuous. I loved that word. I wanted to be that word – impetuous.

Joe was a Hardy, so he was reputable. He was a good boy, a boy of great character, but he had urges that drove him to do things that maybe Frank just wouldn't have done; but, in the end, the mysteries wouldn't have been solved without Joe's passion. Frank always acknowledged that it was Joe's instincts that inevitably led them to find the culprit. I'm not sure that Scottie ever actually felt the great, stirring passion in his heart that I was left feeling in mine after finishing each and every one of those exhilarating books, but he read them anyway, and we had that in common.

Poor Scottie, he was sweet enough to listen to me while I talked on and on about how amazing it would be if we had a secret tunnel, or maybe even a spiral staircase that led to – who knows what – maybe an attic full of old treasures?

I guess that I was a bit of a dreamer. There is no doubt that I was an optimist. I believed that if a person was selfless; if she was full of dreams that only God could place in her heart and soul – she would be able to accomplish great things – things that would prevail beyond her own lifetime. As it turns out, during the years that I spent in Seattle, my faith would be shaken to the core. I had grown up believing that right would always win out; that purity, wholesomeness, and unconditional love would always bring safety and happiness to one's life. Circumstances would soon force me to face the fact that evil existed, even in my perfect world.

It went against every nice, happily-ever-after story that I had ever read. It went against every wonderful show that ended with a kiss that I had ever seen. I had been taught that if I didn't look for trouble, then I would be able to avoid it. I discovered that no one was exempt from the darkness that existed on this earth. It crept

into even the lightest, most unlikely places in the world. I found that out one day when I wasn't looking.

My first encounter with the ugly side of life came when I was asked to babysit the little boy across the street. His name was Nicky, and he was a cute little kid. So what if I was only ten; I was very mature for my age. Plus, I could easily see my mom from Nicky's back yard. Usually, she was standing at our kitchen counter, baking cookies. If anything went wrong, all I had to do was cry out for help; she would be able to hear me through our kitchen window.

The first time that I babysat, Nicky and I played in his yard for a little while, and then he wanted a snack. I took him inside to make him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, only to discover that there was no peanut butter.

“My mom keeps the peanut butter downstairs,” Nicky told me. So I went down into the basement in search of the pantry. It was a dark, dank basement, as basements in Seattle tended to be, and the only light that I could see was a bulb hanging from the center of the room with a string on it. I quickly pulled the string and then was able to see a row of shelves that had cans and jars of food lined up on them. I ran my eyes over every shelf, but I did not see any peanut butter, so I carefully felt my way down a dark hallway to see if there were more shelves somewhere else. I felt something rub across my face which made me scream, and then I realized that it was just another string to a light. I pulled it, and when the light was on, I saw that I was at the other end of the basement in a little hall. There were more shelves on the back wall; most were filled with jars of canned fruit, but there was a big can on the top shelf that looked like it could have been peanut butter. I had to step on a lower shelf in order to reach the can, and when I did the entire wall moved in like it was a door.

That was cool. I couldn't help but wonder what was behind the moving shelves; it looked like it might lead into a closet, but maybe it was a secret passageway. Maybe the passageway went under the street and connected to my house! I was excited as I pushed the heavy door in – there was a glow coming from behind it. I stopped pushing and made my way around the shelves. When I peeked in I saw that it was a room, not a passageway, and I was kind of disappointed. But still, it was a *secret* room, something I had only read about in books. I simply had to explore it. I glanced over my shoulder to see if Nicky had followed me. I didn't want

him to tell his parents that I was snooping around their house. He wasn't there, so I pushed my way farther into the room. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I looked around. What I saw made me gasp and I quickly slammed my eyes shut. I backed my way out of the room and once I was on the other side, I pulled on the shelf-door with all my might. It clicked shut. I tried to push it open again, but it wouldn't budge. Apparently, it had locked when I pulled it shut. I quickly reached and pulled the light off and ran back into the main room. What I had seen hanging on every wall in that dark little room were dozens of pictures of naked ladies. I was so shaken up that I couldn't remember why I had gone downstairs in the first place. When I emerged at the top of the stairs, Nicky asked me where the peanut butter was.

"We're going to have crackers and cheese instead," I said. I wondered if Nicky even knew about his father's disgusting secret. I never mentioned it to him. In fact, there were very few people who I talked to about that room, until... but I will get to that later.

I didn't like to think about nasty stuff and I was good at tuning it out and closing my eyes to it. So that's what I did – if I didn't think about it, it wasn't there. What was difficult for me was that Nicky and his parents thought that I was the best babysitter ever, so I had to go over to the Anderson's house all the time, but I never looked directly at Mr. Anderson again. In spite of how hard I tried not to think about it, his secret had opened up some scary place in my soul. It frightened me, especially because I couldn't talk about it with anyone. I began to develop other fears too. I hated to be outside at night. If I was coming home from a friend's by myself after dark, I would jump behind a tree when a car came, and wait until the headlights faded away. Then, I'd make a dash for home, fleeing – I don't know what exactly.

Of course, this was the height of the hippy era, and there were some pretty odd-looking people roaming around Seattle – people we would never have seen in Richland at that time. I would overhear my dad telling my mom about some of his classmates and how they were always talking about marijuana, LSD, and rock-and-roll music. Before we moved to Seattle, a really good local electric guitarist had just died a young death. He was drunk or high one night and they said he drowned in his own vomit. Sad and gross, I thought. It seemed strange to me, because I had never even heard of Jimi Hendrix until after his death, then everybody was talking about him. People said it was tragic because he could

have been really great, but in a few years he would probably be forgotten.

My father was a full-time student at the University of Washington. That was his job during those years that we lived in Seattle. I thought that it was pretty cool that he was getting paid to go to school, and I wished that somebody would pay me to go to school. One day he took all of us to an open house of sorts on the campus at the university. There we all were, ranging in age from eight to sixteen. We went to my father's English class and the professor turned off all the lights to show us a short, creative film that he had produced. The music came on; I will never forget it:

*Here comes the sun... Here comes the sun and I say,
It's all right, to do oo oo, do oo oo, do oo oo, do do do do*

On the screen was a beautiful sunrise, reflecting off of the ocean. We all settled in to enjoy the short film, and then, right in the middle of the glorious sunrise appeared a wet, curvaceous blonde who was totally naked. She was spread out on a blanket on the beach, apparently enjoying the sun on her body. I didn't see anything else because I, of course, instantly shut my eyes – icky feelings spreading all over my body. My dad immediately jumped out of his seat.

“Children, let's go!” he ordered, and all five Johnson children scrambled to follow him out of the room. A long-haired student wearing a leather headband looked at my dad and shook his head.

“What's the matter, Man?” he said. “It's a beautiful thing.” But Dad ignored him and focused on getting us out. We never talked about it. My poor father, I'm sure that he felt like he had defiled his precious children. I'm not sure what effect that experience had on my siblings, but I did, in fact, feel dirty or guilty or some other bad feeling that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

There were other reasons to be afraid as well. I always took a shortcut home from my elementary school through the woods. Sometimes Scottie walked with me, but sometimes he ran away from me, just to make me mad. It was one of those days, when Scottie was far ahead of me, that I heard him yell.

“Bobbi,” he cried, “over here.” I ran up to where he was standing and looked to see what he’d found. There, next to what looked like a campfire site, were a pair of panties and a bra.

“Scottie!” I said, and I grabbed him and tried to clamp my hand over his eyes. “Don’t look at that.” He tried to pull away from me, but I was bigger than he was, and I forced him to run all the way home with me. Later that night, Scottie, from his bottom bunk, wasn’t his usual silent self.

“Do you think they burned her body at the campsite?” he whispered. “I wonder why we didn’t hear about this on the news?” I had been thinking the same thing: her bra and panties were there; what had happened to the girl? Something awful – I was sure. After that experience, Scottie and I discovered other articles of clothing left in random places all over the same area. We came to those woods almost every day after school because that’s where the best trails for riding mini bikes were.

We never told our parents about the underwear and other clothes that we found there, but one day – and I wasn’t sure what caused them to do this – they told us that we were not allowed to take the shortcut through the woods anymore. Neither Scottie nor I put up much of a protest, even though it meant that it would take us ten minutes longer to get home every day, and we would also be losing our favorite mini bike trails. These things didn’t matter because the truth was, we were getting scared of those woods.

Thankfully, not everything in Seattle was scary and bad. We had been living there for over a year, and during that year, I had finally met a boy who was taller than I was, Jimmy Gilbert. We were in the fourth grade so we still had recess at school. Jimmy was a real jock and he was always chosen to be one of the captains of whatever sport we were playing during our time outside: kickball, baseball, or dodge ball. The captains would, of course, pick the athletic guys first, but once the wimpy boys and the girls were all that were left, Jimmy would always pick me. That made me feel so special. Jimmy was taller than I was and he was cute and, at that time in my life, that’s all it took. I was in love. He had blonde, curly hair and green eyes. Every time I saw him, I wanted to sigh. But I didn’t, of course. For Christmas that year, Miss Nelson had us put our names in a hat to pick out our Secret Santas. I have no recollection of who I picked, but as it turned out, Jimmy got my name. It couldn’t have been an accident because I had been secretly praying that God would make Jimmy notice me, you

know, as a girl – not just a teammate. I will never forget what he gave me; it was a gigantic, three-inch thick candy cane.

I loved that candy cane. I wouldn't open it – I never did – even after the plastic wrapping yellowed and cracked apart. His sweet offering secured my heart. I planned to save it forever. After receiving his gift, I wanted to show Jimmy how I felt about him, but I didn't have an inkling as to how to do it. It wasn't until spring that I came up with an idea that, to me, seemed very romantic. I decided that I would gather wild daisies and tie them together with a string and leave them on his front porch.

And so I did. I picked the biggest bunch of daisies that I could hold, and took them home to find a string. The problem was that daisies really didn't smell very good. I couldn't give Jimmy a bouquet of flowers that stunk! Fortunately, everyone was occupied, so I was able to sneak into Angela's room. She had a bottle of perfume with a soft, fuzzy, leopard skin top. I loved that bottle of perfume. I would always pet the fuzzy cap whenever I went in to her room. Angela and Adele were in the living room, singing *Daydream Believer* at the top of their lungs, so I knew that I was safe. I quickly grabbed the perfume and ran out of the house with it. I unscrewed the top of the bottle and liberally sprinkled Oil of Musk all over my daisies. I then tied the daises together in a bundle, and headed over to Jimmy's house.

I had to ride my bike because it would have taken me too long to walk, but, luckily, I had a basket on my bike, so I put my bouquet of daisies into the basket, and sailed off. I was so happy. It was a beautiful spring day and I was in love. I rode with no hands, and even closed my eyes. Life could not have been better. Once I got close to Jimmy's house, I hid my bike down the road, grabbed my daisies, and ran from tree to tree until I was in his front yard. I slipped up onto his porch, placed the daisies on his front mat, and rang the doorbell. Then I ran like the wind.

I got to my bicycle without looking back and rode with all of my might back to my home. Once home, I climbed my favorite tree. The tree was actually a landmark in our area. It was enormous – the perfect climbing tree with low, fat limbs and a smooth bark that felt good to lay your face against. The five of us thought it was a perfect place to build a tree house in, and so we did, nailing scrap pieces of wood into the smooth bark with complete abandon. Our landlords saw what we had done to their tree one day, and I remember them yelling at my parents! Oops –

we didn't know how valuable the tree was. But the damage was already done, so they didn't make us take our fort down. The other kids eventually grew tired of the tree house, but not me. I would have slept in it if my parents had let me. So, that's where I was when I heard my sister Angela call my name.

"Bobbi," she said, "were you playing with my perfume?" Yikes. I had forgotten to put the leopard bottle back on my sister's dresser. How could I have been so stupid?

"What?" I said, desperately trying to think of a reason that I would have brought her bottle of perfume outside.

"Bobbi, I know what you did," she said. What did she mean, she knew what I did? I lay in my tree house hoping against hope that Angela would just go away. "Jimmy's mother just called." Noooooo, this could not be happening. How could Jimmy's mother have known that it was me who left the daisies on the front mat?

"I don't know what you are talking about, Angela," I said breathlessly.

"It's okay, Bobbi. She's not mad, and I'm not mad that you used my perfume." Oh, how I wanted to die. Nice as it was that Angela was being so sweet to me, I would have rather walked through flames than to have to go through the humiliation of being caught in the act of playing out one of my romantic dreams. "She thinks it was kind of cute," Angela continued. "I do too, Bobbi – I didn't even think you knew that boys existed."

By that time I was crying. I pulled my shirt up to my face to muffle my tears, but I was simply beside myself with embarrassment. Angela must have heard my sobs because she climbed up into the tree house to be with me. To this day, I feel badly about the way I treated Angela that afternoon. She was being so kind, when she could have been terribly, terribly angry at me for taking her personal belongings. But she crawled up next to me and said, "Don't be embarrassed, Bobbi. I think it's adorable that you have a crush on a boy."

"I do not have a crush on a boy!" I said in my meanest voice. "I don't know what you are talking about. Just leave me alone!" And after a minute, she did. She climbed back down out of the tree, and we never talked about that incident again. Stupid, stupid little girl I was...

Between Jimmy’s home and mine was an old abandoned house that was a favorite place for Scottie and me to explore. It was kind of scary, which was part of the fun. There were broken steps out front, and actual holes in the wooden floors inside. We would pretend that we were on a case, looking for the stolen gold that the bad guys had stashed in the house until it was safe for them to come back for it. They had been caught and put in prison, but one of them left a note pointing to that very house as the place of concealment. We found the note and were moments away from discovering the gold. We tippy-toed like Indians as we went from one room to the next, just in case one of the thugs had escaped and returned for his loot. We loved this game and looked forward to it every Saturday.

It was one of those Saturdays, and Scottie and I had just finished our chores – or, I should say, I had finished my chores. Scottie, after all, was the baby in the family, and he was a boy. What could he be expected to do around the house for my mom? But I had folded the clothes and put them away, and dusted and vacuumed the living room, so I was free, completely free, and it was only eleven o’clock in the morning. We were excited to head over to the Haunted Mansion, as we liked to call it, for another afternoon of adventure. As we got close to it, we heard noises coming from inside.

“Shhh – Scottie, come over here,” I said, and I quickly pulled him behind an overgrown shrub. We were very still as we listened for what seemed like hours, trying to figure out who was in our house. From the sound of it, there was a group of people inside. And, after a while, we detected a funny smell wafting out of the front door; kind of a sweet, smoky smell, but it wasn’t cigarettes. The longer we stayed, the louder they got. Apparently, something was very funny, because they were all laughing hysterically. And then we heard a shriek, and a girl came bounding out of the house.

Scottie and I bunched ourselves into little balls so as not to be detected, and soon four more people came tumbling out of the house.

“Ewwww!” one of the girls screamed, “was that a rat or a mouse?”

“I think it was a rat, Man. Did you see that thing? Can you say huge?” It was a group of teenage hippies; they were laughing and falling all over themselves.

“Come on,” one of them said, “let’s go to the cave.”

Scottie and I looked at each other excitedly. A cave? Right in the middle of the city? Without saying a word to each other, we began to follow the hippies from a distance as they laughed and staggered and zigzagged through the woods. Right before they got to our back yard, they turned into the overgrown brush to the right of our property. Scottie and I had never gone in there because it was just a bunch of weeds and pine trees, but the teenagers seemed to be very familiar with those woods. We stayed way back so that they wouldn’t discover us, and after a while we couldn’t hear them anymore.

“Where do you think they went?” I asked Scottie. He just shrugged and started to make his way into the woods. “Be careful, Scottie,” I said. But I was right behind him. We had only gone about twenty feet when we came upon a hole in the earth. We looked at each other in amazement. Talk about an adventure. We knew better than to go into the hole while the teenagers were in there, so we sneaked back out of the woods and stealthily made our way back home and climbed into our tree house.

“It really is a cave!” I said. “Can you believe it? We have to go back there and explore!” Our lives had never seemed more exciting than on that Saturday afternoon. We waited and waited until we were sure that the hippies had left, and then we headed back. I’m not sure about Scottie, but I was so scared, I was afraid I was going to wet my pants.

We made our way to the hole in the ground and listened long and hard. When we were absolutely sure that there was nobody inside, we dropped to our knees and crawled into the cave. It turned out to be a long tunnel, and there were candles that were still lit as we got deeper and deeper into the earth. We finally got to the end, where it opened up; it was probably ten feet by ten feet. It had a bunch of candles that were burning, and there were pillows and blankets and burned-out sticks of incense scattered all around. In the middle of the cave we saw a Zippo lighter and a couple of funny looking pipes lying in a pile of ashes.

Scottie and I looked at each other, and we both saw fear upon the other’s face – drugs! I think it occurred to both of us at the

same time that the hippies would probably be coming back soon, so we started to scramble out of there like our lives depended on it. Thankfully, we ran into no one, and once we got to the end of the tunnel, we made a beeline for home. We never returned to that site of adventure again because we knew that if we had been caught by the teenagers, we probably wouldn't have ever seen the light of day again.

Later that year, someone bought that plot of land and began to clear the trees. Once they had cut them all down, they brought a big earthmover to dig out the roots, and as the machine moved over where the cave was, the earth gave way under the weight of it. The driver was fine, but the earthmover was stuck in a cock-eyed position for an entire day while construction men tried to figure a way to pull it out.

Scottie and I finally felt like it was safe to tell about our discovery earlier in the year. Our big brother and sisters thought that we were very cool to have discovered an actual cave near our own back yard.

“And it was a cave that was used for nefarious reasons, even,” Graham remarked.

Scottie and I looked at each other. He shrugged and I shrugged back. We had no idea what *nefarious* meant, but we both looked at Graham with big smiles on our faces and nodded our heads in agreement.

I spoke of my fears before, because fear, for me, was a new thing. I had always prided myself on not being afraid or, at least, on being very good at disguising my fear. But something about the big city of Seattle, the sudden changes that I was forced to go through physically, and the creepy discoveries that I was making about people who lived very, very near what I considered to be ‘safe’ – like in the game *tag*: ‘This is safe! You can’t get me here, I’m on safe!’ – combined to make me aware of a very unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Lucky for me, I received the news that Lizzie was going to be allowed to spend the entire month of June and some of July with me in Seattle! In exactly twenty-six days, Lizzie would be arriving on my doorstep – I could hardly contain myself. I noticed that my mother was requiring that I spend a lot of time out-of-doors. Possibly it was because I had gotten into the habit of asking the same question eight and nine times a day.

“Lizzie’s mom said she could come, right? She’s really going to spend most of the summer with us, right?”

I had developed insomnia that spring. I simply could not fall asleep. The harder I tried, the wider-eyed I’d become. At first, my mother let me sleep with her and Daddy. I loved that. They had a great big bed, and it was so warm – much warmer than my top bunk. But, as much as I loved being in between my mom and dad, I still could not fall asleep, and I tossed and turned, pulling the covers here and there. Finally, my parents decided that the arrangement was not working. My mother moved me to the couch. She told me it was in my best interest. In order to help me fall asleep, she tied a string to the chain on the light. The string reached all the way to the couch, so I didn’t even have to get out of bed to turn it off. When I felt like my eyes were just about to close, I would pull the string. My insomnia was so bad that my mother did not even tell me that I had to shut off the light at a certain time.

“Read,” she instructed, “for as long as you want...” She really must have been desperate, because my mother was a get-with-the-program kind of woman. She did not readily make allowances for our petty needs. But my sleeping problem was an issue that was taking a toll on the entire family, and she wanted to

fix me as quickly as possible. The couch was my bed for three months, and when my mom asked me how it was going, I told her 'fine' because I didn't want her to get mad at me. But one night, she came out of her room and caught me reading at two o'clock in the morning. The next thing I knew, she had put me in Adele's room.

Adele wanted to be a doctor from the time that she could walk, and she was very good at healing people. I don't know what my mother said to Adele about me, but Adele took it upon herself to make the boogeyman in my life go away. She rubbed my back and told me stories and chanted little hypnotic songs until I eventually gave up the ghost, but the minute she stopped her incantations, my eyes snapped back open. I was miserable, and I knew that I was making everyone else in the family miserable too. The thing that made my problem almost unbearable was the fact that everyone in the family knew that I had a problem. I was such a deeply private person, but my inability to fall asleep was making me so anxious that I simply could not hide my fears. We never spoke about my problem out loud, but I was aware that everybody knew.

Finally, after sleeping in my parents' bed and sleeping on the couch hadn't worked, and Adele hadn't been able to cure me, my mother, in desperation, took me to a doctor. We didn't have the money to go to a doctor, but she was determined to get to the bottom of my insomnia. Mother liked everything in her family to be ship-shape, and my lack of sleep was rocking the boat. It was time to take me to a professional.

In the meantime, I was truly in a state of self-loathing. What in the world was wrong with me? I just wanted it to be all over soon. I hated being a nuisance. The doctor came in and did a thorough exam, and his prognosis would forever resonate in my memory. I was sitting on the examination table, wearing a thin paper shirt that opened in the front, listening to the doctor talk to my mother. I held my arms clutched around my chest, and I was swinging my crossed legs back and forth to the beat of a song I had just learned on the piano. The doctor looked at me, shook his head, and made a little 'tsk-tsk' noise with his tongue.

"This is a very nervous child," he said to my mother. "I really don't know what to say." And with that, he turned and left the room. My mother was so angry. She muttered to herself in the car all the way back home.

“I paid fifteen dollars to be told that my daughter is nervous? Well, thank you very much – I had already picked up on that!”

Thank goodness, a few days later, Lizzie came, and the very first night she was there, I fell asleep the minute my head hit the pillow. I was a very happy little girl again.

It was the summer of 1972, and life could not have been better. Lizzie was with me and we had a whole big world just waiting to be explored. I had determined in my heart to make the most of our seven weeks together.

My whole family had gone together to the Sea-Tac airport to pick her up. We arrived at the airport early to be sure that we were there when Lizzie got off the plane, so we had about an hour to kill, and my parents let Scottie and me go explore the airport for a while.

“Just stay together,” my mom called out as we scampered away. Scottie and I were excited. There were escalators to ride on, something that we did not have in Richland, and so we ran over to them and took them up and then took them down. We really wanted to try running up and then back down the up escalator, but there were too many people in our way. I had gotten ahead of Scottie by slipping past a mother who was trying to convince her child to step on to the moving stairs. Poor Scottie was stuck behind them. Once I got to the top, I decided to wait until he caught up with me. I was wearing a new striped tank top that my mom had just bought for me on sale at the Sears on Aurora Avenue and a pair of cute shorts that I borrowed from Adele. I turned around to look out the window at the huge planes and, as I was turning back to see where Scottie was, a man was standing in my way. He was very close to me, so close that I could see the weave in his navy blue sweater vest. I tried to get around him but he stepped to the side. At first I was embarrassed, like it was my fault that I was in his way, but as I attempted to step around him, he reached up and grabbed my breast and squeezed it. He then pushed me out of his way and hurried on. I just stood there. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t move. I put my arms across my chest and I was hugging myself when Scottie came running up to me.

“What’s the matter?” he asked me. I didn’t say anything. “Bobbi, what’s wrong with you?” Scottie tugged at my arm.

Why had I worn a tank top? What had I been thinking? I just wanted to get Lizzie and go home. I watched as Scottie started going back down the other escalator.

“Come on,” he said, shaking his head. “We don’t have all day.” Suddenly, I realized that under no circumstances was I

going to let Scottie or anyone else in the world find out about what had just happened to me. I rubbed my burning eyes and I ran after him. We only had a few minutes before we had to go back to the terminal where my family was sitting, waiting for Lizzie.

By the time we got back there, I had pulled myself together and no one, not even Scottie, could tell that anything was wrong. Then I saw Lizzie, and instantly I was a little girl again. I was so excited that I hugged her and I hugged her and I didn't want to let her go. We went to get her luggage and I never once dropped her hand.

Now that Lizzie was here, everything was going to be just the way it had always been. Everything would be perfect. I was determined to show Lizzie all of the things in Seattle that I thought that she would love to see. I wanted to make her comfortable in this new world that had become mine. But, my dad said that we should get Lizzie home and get a good meal into her. "Traveling is hard on a body," he declared.

I told Lizzie all about Highland Terrace Elementary, and how I could see the snowy peak of Mt. Rainier from my classroom window. I also told her all about our house, and the Haunted Mansion, and about the great mini bike trails throughout Seattle. I told her about everything that I found to be interesting and happy. Lizzie, ever true to her sweet, easy-going self, was totally interested and completely excited to hear all that I had to say. And she wanted to see whatever it was that I wanted to show her.

The first thing we did after we ate was to get our Honda 50's out of the garage. "Lizzie," I said, "if you thought the trails that we rode on in Richland were fun, then you will die over the trails that Scottie and I have found here." Lizzie's eyes were wide with excitement, which was all I needed.

"Let's go!" she cried. And so Lizzie and I took off on our little mini bikes. We went all over our yard, and up and down our street, and then, for some reason, I took Lizzie to the area of town where Scottie and I had been forbidden to go: the woods where we had found all the clothing. Before Lizzie had arrived, I would have been afraid to have gone back into those woods where we had seen the abandoned clothing, but now everything seemed safe again. Nothing seemed scary, so I took her to the very best trails that Scottie and I had ever discovered.

We were best friends and we were looking for an adventure. What could possibly go wrong in our lives? And so we rode on the trails in those terrifying woods. We rode until we were exhausted. The forest was truly vast. It was so much fun riding together. We pretended that we had been born a hundred years earlier and that we were riding horses over the heather-strewn landscape of England. We were the Brontë sisters, Charlotte and Emily, creating exciting and imaginary worlds. We were fearless, we were strong, we had little adult supervision, and we were having the time of our lives.

It may seem like my parents were a little reckless, giving us so much freedom, never really knowing what we were doing or where we were. But life in that day and age for us kids was pretty simple. We did our chores, practiced our instruments, and then we were told to go outside and play. We were encouraged to explore the world around us, and free to roam about all day long – so long as we weren't late for dinner.

After I showed Lizzie our trails, I showed her the Haunted Mansion, our tree fort and the other tree that was great for swinging on. I took her to Jimmy's block and pointed out his house, very carefully, lest he see us, and then I showed her my school. And at that point, I ran out of things to show her. I was a little bit worried that Lizzie might begin to feel bored and want to go home. And, there was a moment when she did, in fact, begin to show signs of being lonely for her family. But her melancholy lasted only for a few hours. Once my mother picked up on Lizzie's burgeoning homesickness, she made a phone call to her uncle who lived about a half-hour away, near the waterfront.

Uncle Roy came over that evening in his blue and white police car. Uncle Roy worked for the Seattle Police Department, the SPD. He was really nice and really handsome. I mean, he was old and everything – Lizzie said that he had just turned thirty – but he wasn't married and he loved his nieces and nephews and their friends. He took Lizzie and Scottie and me for a ride in his car, and he even played the siren and made the lights go on. Scottie and I already thought that crime-solving was the best job in the world, and now we knew firsthand that it was. It was so exciting. We were hoping that all of our friends could tell it was us in the police car. Scottie was bouncing up and down in the back seat, waving to anyone and everyone we passed. Uncle Roy finally had to tell him to settle down.

I gave my little brother a stern look and said, “Scottie!” I was so afraid that Uncle Roy would never take us for a ride again. Scottie’s face kind of drooped when I yelled at him, and I felt a little bad. But Uncle Roy got all nice again, so everything was all right.

Lizzie and Scottie and I were happier than we had ever been. Uncle Roy promised to come back at least once a week to check up on us. We shouted our good-byes to him that night as he drove away, never thinking for a moment that something would happen that would require him to come back before a week’s time – something that would have nothing to do with Lizzie feeling homesick. What happened four days later, on the third of June, overshadowed anyone’s trivial feelings of melancholy; it was so awful, so unforeseen as to make anything that had ever happened in the past seem insignificant.

My sister Angela did not come home...



Angela. My oldest sibling, Angela, was the kind of child that any parents would be thrilled to have as their own. Angela was responsible. She was caring. She was helpful and giving and warm, and the perfect big sister. I had spent time with other families, and I'd met lots of big brothers and sisters who were really mean to us younger kids. Angela wasn't like that, not even to me, her baby sister. I knew that I probably bugged Angela, but she never let on. She was patient and kind to me – just thinking about how nice she always was gave me a big lump in my throat.

For some reason, I always acted younger than my age around Angela. I guess it was because she babied me, and I kind of liked that. With five kids, our mom didn't have time to baby anybody. Well, maybe Scottie a little bit. But when my mom was busy doing mom stuff, Angela seemed to have all the time in the world for me.

I already described our Spit matches, and I guess they really captured the relationship I had with Angela. If I had been her, I would have killed me. But not Angela; for some reason, she never seemed to tire of giving me one more chance. Most of the time, I wouldn't take advantage of her niceness. I would just walk away with my shoulders slumped, letting her beg me to play one more time and not to be sad. But sometimes, I would agree to play again, and once in a while – somehow – I would even manage to win. At those times, I would forget myself and would throw my arms around her.

“You didn't let me win, did you?”

“Of course not,” she would always reply. “You just needed to get warmed up.” My sister was as close to an angel as any human being has ever been. In fact, when I was little, I used to think that that was why my parents called her Angela. And so, when she did not come home that day, we were all scared out of our minds. Angela would never, ever, do something that would cause anyone to worry. She was always so aware of other people's feelings that she over-compensated when it came to letting our parents know where she was and what she was doing. So, when it got to be late on June third and Angela had not gotten home, everybody in the Johnson family took notice.

Life up until that point had felt pretty safe. My brother and Lizzie and I could freely roam all over King County without a care. But now, that same area seemed threatening and dangerous. Where was Angela? It was six-thirty and then seven and then eight and nine and ten, and still Angela had not come home. What was going on? What had gone wrong?

The first thing that happened on June third that was completely terrifying – and yet was the excitement of our community for miles around – was that the Haunted Mansion caught on fire. Lizzie and Scottie and I were over at Nicky’s playing on his tire swing when we first heard the sirens. Sirens were common in Seattle; in fact, the constant sound of them in the big city was one of the first things that I noticed as being different from life in the little town of Richland. But that afternoon, as the sirens got closer and closer, and louder and louder, we stopped what we were doing, and ran to the edge of Nicky’s yard. It was then that Scottie noticed the smoke.

“Whoa, I think the Haunted Mansion is on fire!” he yelled. I ran out of the gate, into the middle of the street, and then stopped, afraid to go any farther. All I could think was ‘Impossible. That’s our hangout – it belongs to us’. And yet, sure enough, when I finally got to the edge of our yard and looked toward the mansion, I could clearly see the smoke billowing out of the windows. By then our family had joined us outside. My father, who had just gotten home from class, began to make his way toward the burning building and we all followed him. We had not gone very far before we began to feel the heat emanating from the fire.

“That fire is not going to be stopped,” my dad said. We all just stood there, along with about twenty other people, maybe more, watching the flames lick up that old, dry house. At first, the fire was only inside the house, with the flames just peeking out of the windows, but soon we could see the fire crawl out of the windows along the clapboard siding, up to the many gables of the roofline, until finally all of the shingles on the roof were alive with flames. The noise of the fire was as scary as the sight of it. It roared. I had never before considered what a fire would sound like. But now I knew. It was loud like crashing waves of the ocean, but there were also groans and creaks as the wood buckled and finally gave way with a whoosh. I could not take my eyes off of the flaming framework. It was awesome to behold and yet it was horrible at the same time, and in spite of the heat that it was giving off, I was shaking all over. The roof finally grew weak and we all watched as one gable after the other fell into the depths of the house. I couldn’t look away. The fire department made a good effort, but it soon became their purpose to make sure that the fire did not spread to any of the other dwellings in the area. They

sprayed down the lawns and the trees, even as they kept a steady stream of water on the old Haunted Mansion.

Eventually, my mother decided that maybe it wasn't such a good idea for us kids to be watching such devastation happen right before our eyes. She told us we had to go home. Scottie and Lizzie and I walked backwards. We felt a certain allegiance to the old place and we didn't want to let her down by leaving her. I realized as I was getting farther and farther away that my eyes were filled with tears. In fact, they were spilling down my face. I mopped them away before anyone noticed.

It was later on that same day that Angela didn't come home. She just didn't come home.

The burnt skeletal structure of our old Haunted Mansion would always remind me of the horror of that day. As it turned out, the fire department had been able to douse the fire before the entire house was completely obliterated. What was left was one standing gable, blackened and charred, but still standing.

Later, after school was back in session, I would walk past the mansion on my way to and on my way home from school every day, and I could see the scorched gable on my right in the morning and on my left in the afternoon. Day after day, I walked past the mansion, and day after day my eyes locked in on that gable. I couldn't seem to help myself. I stared at the charred remains of the mansion even though looking at it made me feel desperately sad. I kept my eyes on it until it was far enough away that I could no longer see it. I hated to see that sight every morning and every afternoon, but I could not prevent my eyes from seeking it out and staring at it.

Eventually, I took to placing my hand against the side of my face, to shield my eyes from seeing what had now become to me a sign of evil. In the morning, I would hold my right hand against my face, kind of like a horse blinder; and in the afternoon, I would place my left hand against my face. I was simply not strong enough to keep my gaze from wandering over to the blackened ruins without the help of my shielding hands.

I was never so glad as the day that the men came and completely bulldozed the mansion flat. It didn't happen until the spring of the next year, and I felt like a burden had been taken off of me. The darkness of that winter – and everything bad that had happened before that winter – was behind me, and now I could try to begin to live again.

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