

In The Beginning.

I was born at a time when the Great Depression had not yet receded into memory. My parents had closed the door of their general store in the small central Alberta farming community of Beiseker and simply walked away, leaving behind all the unpaid accounts owing to them, leaving behind their hopes of earning a living on this flat plain that was no longer golden with wheat or dreams.

I was born into a family of adults, the late unexpected child, born when my mother was forty and my two sisters were in high school and beginning to contemplate lives outside the family.

Adjusting to their relocation from country town to city, from Beiseker to Calgary, and worrying about earning a living, my parents now had to accustom themselves to the idea and responsibilities of raising another child. I imagine they might secretly have hoped for a boy, but I never doubted that they were thrilled to have a third daughter. To my sisters I was a surprising thing that had happened in their family, a new person who had entered their lives, a novelty.

For me, once I was big enough to have a sense of myself, I became aware that all my family were big people, not just my mother and father, but my sisters too. As I grew older, past being a toddler, I began to feel, not neglected or ignored, but left out of family activities.

I hated being the youngest, the baby in the family. It wasn't that I didn't get any attention, but it just seemed to me that everybody was very busy with big- people things. I was always waiting. Waiting to be big enough or old enough to join in all the fun, in the exciting things my family did. My perennial questions were "Can I come, too?" or "Can I do that too?" To these questions my parents or sisters answered "No dear, it's only for grownups" or "Sylvia, you're not big enough to do that yet". Sometimes I would get angry and stamp my feet. I didn't yell. In our house no one yelled. Other times I just sulked or was sad. I wanted to be included, to feel a part of this family of mine.

I needed to be as old as my two big sisters, Lillian and Beatrice. Just like them I wanted to stay up late at night and join in the talk that went on after my

mother lowered the blind, kissed me good night and closed my bedroom door till only a sliver of light from the hall ran across the floor.

My sisters went off to high school and learned new things. They had friends over, went to parties and sometimes out on dates, particularly my sister Lillian. My mom was always saying “Can’t you think of anything but boys, Lillian?”

All the grownups got to eat whatever they liked. My sister Beatrice ate a Sweet Marie chocolate bar nearly every night. Mom said it was just for Beatrice because she needed building up. I didn’t understand exactly what that was all about. I didn’t want to share the Jersey milk my mother got for her from the milkman, only the evening chocolate bar. But inside I didn’t really care so much about the candy bar. I didn’t want to be the baby outside the circle.

My Mom was a good cook and had a well organized household. It was a point of pride with her to always have something home baked to serve when company came. Whether it was fluden, a layered confection with red, green and pink pieces of Turkish delight, komish broit that are much like biscotti, chocolate macaroons or strudel filled with dried fruit and nuts, she baked regularly and filled cookie tins that were stored in the cool basement. She was often in the kitchen. I liked to watch what went on, so I was there too. I wanted to share in the pastries but the pastries were definitely for company and not for me. Occasionally she gave me a piece of dough to roll out and cut into cookies, sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar and bake. That was fun. My cookies even tasted pretty good.

It soon became clear to me that company was special and I wasn’t company. At some point I began to feel that being served food my mother made was a sign of importance, perhaps even love. I knew my mother cared about me and looked after me, but I longed to be as special as company.

When family came to visit some of our best time together was spent around the dining room table. My mom’s sisters and brothers had favorite dishes that my mom would make for them. Of course, at the dinner table I got to eat the same thing as everyone else, but it was not made especially for me.

Thus began my complex relationship with food, a relationship that started by having less to do with food itself and more to do with my wanting to be important to my mother and included in the family circle.

At six I too went off to school to learn new things. By this time my sisters were in Edmonton. Lillian was married and Beatrice was at university. My mother, wanting the best for me, convinced my father that I should go to private school, St. Hilda's School for Girls, and not to Connaught, the nearby public school that the neighbourhood kids attended. So I found myself separated from my playmates.

I still played with the kids on my block, but when they talked about school, their teachers, and what happened in class, I couldn't join in. They didn't care about what went on at St. Hilda's and they teased me about the navy tunic and itchy, long black stockings I had to wear. Thus began the first years of my schooling.



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