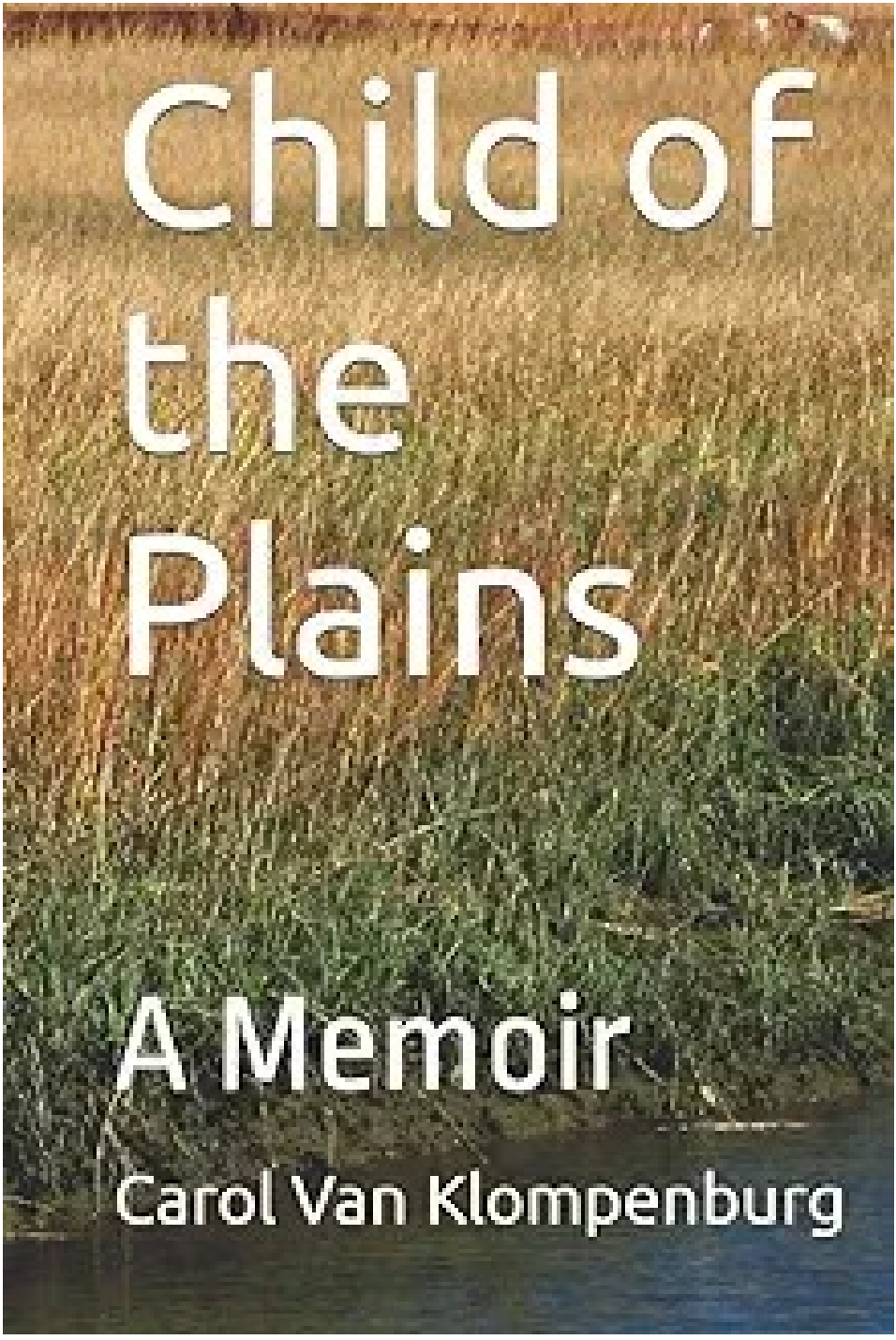
Child of the Plains
A Memoir
Carol Van Klompenburg

Child of the Plains
A Memoir

Carol Van Klompenburg

ISBN: 9798767877874

Contents

Acknowledgments

Thank you to:

- Pella Writing Group for feedback and suggestions for every page: Lee Collins, Bob Hutzell, Deb Jansen, Helen Luhrs, and Anne Petrie.
- Siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles who dug into their memories to provide stories and information. The history is richer because of their contributions.
- Kathleen Addink Woudstra for the genealogies.

1 From Farmhand to Torpedo Man

The seven-decade bond between my parents, Henry Addink and Mary Kiel, began as a World War II correspondence between a sailor and a country school teacher.

At nineteen, knowing he was going to be inducted into the Army, Dad chose to enlist in the Navy, telling friends he would rather sleep in a bed than a foxhole.

At that time, marriage was not on his radar. A yellowed paper from his Navy days records his bachelor intentions, and those of his friend Al De Haan. His handwritten note reads:

We, the undersigned,
Albert Milus De Haan
Henry William Addink
Do swear to pay the man who stays unmarried the longest
the sum of $25.00 on the day of the first man's wedding.
Signed
Albert Milus De Haan
Henry William Addink

Witness
Joseph Nicholas Diederich
Notary Public
Willis Claude Collins

Seventy years later, as I stared at the ancient paper, I imagined the scene:

One of two Northwest Iowa farm boys in basic training, Dad receives a letter. Al ribs him about a budding romance.

"What romance?" Dad asks. "Ain't so. I hardly know her. Fills the time; that's all."

Al says Dad is bluffing. The ribbing escalates, with Joe and Willis joining in.

Dad says, "Al, you'll be married long before I will. I know that for a fact."

"Not so," says Al.

"Put your money where your mouth is," says Dad. "I'll bet you $25 that you and Jackie marry first."

Al denies it again.

"I'll put in writing," says Dad. "And you're gonna pay for sure."

Joe grabs a nearby piece of paper and hands it to Dad, who records the bet.

Dad says, "I want this witnessed and notarized—because I want it official."

And so Joseph's and Willis's signatures are added.

Like many Navy enlistees of 1943, Dad took a train to Camp Farragut, in the mountains of Idaho, for boot camp. The second largest US Naval training station of the war, it was established in 1942. Photos in a camp booklet in Dad's memorabilia show young men arriving in civvies and departing in uniform. The booklet says activities included a medical exam, haircuts,

vaccinations, a commando course, marching, boot inspections, and some recreational activities: singing, fishing, baseball, snowball fights, and sledding.

In the 1990s, clacking along on the Boone Scenic Railroad's antique tourist train with Mother, my husband Marlo, and me, Dad reminisced about that trip to Idaho. "It was my first time on a train, and my first time out of Iowa," he said as we crossed a wooden trestle in an open car. "Man, that was something for a kid straight off the farm!" Until that trip to Idaho, he had never left Northwest Iowa.

Neither he nor any of his siblings attended high school. After getting his eighth-grade diploma from a country school in which he had the same teacher for all eight grades, he had begun helping his Dad on the Addink family farm. Despite his lack of a high school diploma, Dad qualified for further military training for submarine torpedo work, based on his mathematics test scores. He also passed a battery of psychological tests necessary because submariners had to spend long weeks in cramped quarters jammed into a submarine with other sailors.

Dad took sixteen weeks of classes, learning the mechanics of the submarine torpedo. First, he had to learn algebra, then master torpedo mechanics. His cloth-covered notebook of torpedo training had meticulous records for each week, including his test scores—always 90 percent or higher. The training complete, on the last page of his notes he copied a rhyme titled *Torpedoes*, replacing the word "hell" with an h, followed by a series of dots.

Torpedoes are to me a mess.
To make them go our teachers stress

On valves and gyros, wheels and dots,
On lines and pistons, shafts and pots.
The air goes in, the valves they raise,
The pistons work, the water sprays,
The fuel ignites, and steam will flow
Through nozzles, gear, and then they blow.
The two turbines, they go like h***
And turn the shafts within the shell.
Props go round and water churns.
Gas arises, alloy turns,
Gyros spin, belt cranks shift,
Levers trip, and pistons lift.
When it's shot and on its way,
It will go true we hope and pray.
If all's OK, it now should perk—
But I still don't know what makes it work!

In 1944 Dad was assigned to the USS *Carbonero 337*, just built in New London, Connecticut. (All submarines built at the time were named after fish.) Following commissioning on February 7, 1944, the seventy enlisted men and ten officers spent long cold, winter hours training in the shallow waters of the Block Island Sound, Connecticut.

On August 4, 1944, using a three-cent stamp, Dad sent a folded collection of New London postcards home to his parents. In tourist hyperbole, it describes New London as "one of the most interesting cities on the northeastern coast and typifying the Old New England seafaring life." Unfolded, the set contains eighteen paintings of New London sites, sites that must have seemed exotic to his parents, John and Jane Addink, who had never left the Midwest. Dad was the youngest of their seven children, and after Dad volunteered,

family lore says his mother cried hard and often, a shock to her children who had always considered her a strong woman. One family legend says her hair turned white during the years he was in the Navy.

The routine of winter training was interrupted by two high points. One wintry Connecticut day, the chief brought aboard a curly-haired puppy, which the crew named Jesse Jackson Carbonero. They provided her a personal ID card and put her name on the sailing list—surprising honors in view of Jesse's selecting the captain's quarters as a favorite place to pee, according to one sailor. She provided a touch of home for Dad, although a bit smaller than the large hound who had been his canine companion on the farm.

The other highlight for the sailors was a visit from a famous, heavy-set singer, Kate Smith. A writer in a *Carbonero* newsletter in Dad's war memorabilia said that Kate came aboard, autographed a torpedo, wished them good hunting, and presented them with her latest recordings. She also posed for a photo with the submarine's puppy. Then the article said, delicately, "Unfortunately, she was unable to inspect the boat."

Dad had been far less circumspect in the story he told his kids. He had grinned as he said, "She tried, but there was no way she was going to fit through the hatch!"

As a child, I had heard Dad describe that hatch. If sailors were on deck when the horn blared its "OOGAH OOGAH OOGAH" and the loudspeaker announced "DIVE! DIVE!" sailors had only thirty-six seconds to get down the hatch. They needed to be quick. "You didn't slow down even if the captain was ahead of you," Dad said. "Sometimes when the last guy went through the

hatch, water was already pouring in!"

Three days after Kate Smith's visit, the *Carbonero* sailed south on rough seas for further training in Florida—producing seasickness among the new sailors. I remember Dad's description: "The hammocks were stacked three high along the walls of the sleeping berth, and believe me, if the guy in the top bunk was seasick, you needed to stay awake and be prepared to duck."

Apparently, Dad didn't always get the coveted top hammock. So sometimes he chose to sleep inside the torpedo tube instead. The ability to sleep in a skinny torpedo tube amazed me. "That was nothing," Dad maintained. "One sailor, when it was his turn to oil the inside of the tube, entered head first and then came out head first. We could hardly believe our eyes!"

I couldn't imagine anyone that flexible or fearless of small spaces. When I crawled through the tunnels we made in the bales in the hay mow, I sometimes had to fight panic—and those tunnels were bigger than a torpedo tube.

After the war, Dad's bed came home with him—a three-foot by seven-foot canvas hammock and a three-inch thick mattress of matching size. Until the hammock's ropes rotted away, it was an icon in my childhood, hung between two trees just south of our home on an acreage, close to the straw-filled sack swing. My younger brothers jumped from a step ladder onto the sack swing, swinging and twirling with amazing daring. I preferred the quiet of the hammock where I could sway and read.

The mattress outlasted the hammock. It served over the years as a playhouse bed, a place for naps, and a

guest bed. In Dad's last months, when he needed a higher seat to transfer from the couch to the wheelchair, we inserted it under the couch pillows. During the Hospice social worker's weekly visits, he and Mother told her the mattress's history along with theirs.

After Florida, the *Carbonero* reported to the Pacific seas for war patrol, making two three-month patrols in 1945. On the first patrol, they rescued pilots unable to make it to land after their planes were damaged. Other than those rescues, the first patrol was uneventful. In the declassified on-line war report the captain sounds mildly disappointed.

On its second patrol the *Carbonero* sank eight small Japanese merchant craft. Again, the captain sounds disappointed in the number and size of these sinkings. All eight were merchant vessels, transporting food and supplies to Japan. Because these were not war boats, their crew members were transported safely to shore before the *Carbonero* sank their ships.

Dad loved a yarn about the boat they didn't sink. Once they surfaced near a tiny Japanese fishing vessel, hoping to get some information about the location of the Japanese. "Imagine a 300-foot submarine coming up out of the water right beside you. It would scare the tar out of you," Dad told a Northwest Iowa reporter who interviewed him in his retirement years.

When I read the article, I chuckled. Dad had censored himself when talking with the reporter. I remembered a version of the story in which he said, "They were scared shitless."

When he said the forbidden "s" word, Mother

scolded with a reproving, "Hank!" But, if he was carried away sufficiently by his tale, he continued without pause. The Japanese fishermen were so frightened, communication was impossible. The Americans let them go and dove back under the water, leaving the fishermen again alone with their adrenaline rush and a silent sea.

He also told that reporter about his sense of obligation to the military. "I felt like I wanted to go," Dad said. "Practically everyone was going, either enlisted or drafted."

Reading the captain's war report about the *Carbonero's* patrols, I understood what I had often wondered about—why Dad had no apparent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Perhaps for him the war had been more drama than trauma.

American submarines contributed greatly to the Allies' victory. In Dad's submarine files was an article written decades after the war by David Clenow, a retired New Zealand pilot. "When one analyzes what they achieved, there is no doubt they did more than any other group to defeat the Japanese and save Australia and New Zealand from being invaded. The reason is simple – they sank more than 60 percent of the Japanese merchant fleet. Without these ships, not only was the Japanese advance stifled, their occupying troops lost their supply lines, and they virtually could not be evacuated. . . . Additionally, with the loss of shipping, Japan found it very difficult to supply the homeland with raw materials from the conquered territories." He also noted that American submariners made up only 1.6 per cent of the US naval manpower, but they had the highest death rate of the US Armed

forces—22 percent.

The one moment of fear I sensed in Dad's stories was his description of the last day of the war on August 14, 1945. The *Carbonero* was on patrol, sank a ship the second-to-last day, and was bombed by a plane as it was diving. "If they had dropped a second bomb, we wouldn't have made it," said Dad. It took fourteen minutes to dive to a safe depth of 400 feet. But in those fourteen minutes the plane dropped no second bomb.

That same day, the crew was in communication with the *Bullhead*, a companion submarine identical to theirs. Then, on August 15, the *Carbonero* received the ceasefire order and headed for port.

But the *Bullhead* did not return. Dad talked about it with a sense of loss that was rare for him, "It was the last day of the war. We had heard from them the day before. But we never heard from them again. We don't know what happened. . . ." His voice trailed off. I think he was living the sinking with them, thinking of his own narrow escape, and remembering his fallen comrades.

The submarine camaraderie is obvious in Dad's photo collection showing sailors' arms around each other and their easy grins. It was the bond of men who knew they would all survive together or die together.

In Dad's submarine file, he preserved an email with this description of submariners bonding: "We are unique amongst seafarers for we sail down deep into dark and always dangerous waters. We do this not with foolhardy go-to-hell bravery, but with cool calculation and care. We challenge the dangers with training and practice. . . . We believe in each other

because we must. Alone at sea, the crew and a pressure hull are all we have to reach the surface again. Men with confidence in each other dive and surface submarines countless times. Each man trained by the others holds the lives of those shipmates in his hands."

Dad loved a story about submariners telling jokes: "After a while on submarine, you knew each other's jokes so well that all you had to do was call out the number for a joke. Number Seventy, Number Three, etc. And the crew would laugh in response. There was no need to tell the whole story.

"A new shipmate who didn't know the jokes sat quietly as sailors called out joke numbers and laughed uproariously. Then one sailor called out, 'Number Twelve!' and was greeted by dead silence.

"The newcomer leaned over and whispered to the sailor next to him, 'Why didn't anyone laugh?'

"'Oh,' his neighbor retorted, 'That sailor just doesn't know how to tell a joke.'"

In a submarine veteran's newsletter, one seaman wrote he never heard the words "thank you" aboard ship. The sailors were all so close, their gratitude was understood and didn't need to be formalized with words. This habit stuck. Dad rarely said, "Thank you." Mother, however, blamed Grandpa Addink for this trait, not the submarine experience.

Another submarine veteran remembered that there were cheers when they downed a Japanese freighter, but not a submarine. When they downed a submarine, there was silence, as each sailor imagined what those fellow submariners were experiencing, the silence, the eventual crushing of the submarine walls, the flooding

water, the gasping for breath, and then oblivion.

On the pages of Dad's World War II photo album are notes in Mother's careful printing about the nicknames of each sailor; Dad's was the "Dink"—the last syllable of his Addink surname. And it was a nickname he later used for computer and internet passwords, though never in civilian life where he was always simply "Hank."

In the album are solo photos of each of the "lucky ones" as they are ready for discharge, and photos of others with a note that when a sailor got promoted, he was tossed overboard. Almost all of the photos are topside. Only one photo pictures Dad below deck, in the torpedo room surrounded by gages and controls. Two lines below, again in Mother's careful printing, is the note: "This picture illegal. Punishment could be court-martial."

Marriage records show that both Dad and Al De Haan married in 1947, Dad in February and Al in June. Although there is no record of payment, I suspect Dad ponied up—all the while insisting that Mother was the one who set the date and therefore payment was totally unfair. He probably complained loudly and enjoyed every moment of the drama.

2 A Teacher Writes a Sailor

The sixth of eleven children, Mother walked with her siblings to the one-room country school one and three-quarter miles from their home.

That distance was a precise memory for each Kiel sibling I interviewed, even those whose memory was failing. All described it with the identical words, "We walked one and three-quarter miles to school." Reading Iowa history, I understood their precision. Rural Iowa created one country school for every four square miles of land. The result: no child had to walk further than two miles to school. The Kiel children had the dubious distinction of being those who walked farthest. In typical Kiel understatement, they could not boast about this; they could only repeat it precisely and trust its meaning would be understood.

On bad weather days, though, their father John Kiel or one of the older siblings drove them to school by horse and buggy or by car. The horse and buggy could pass through muddier roads than the car, and were

used on rainy days.

Mother had four different teachers in grade school. One of them was her unmarried aunt, Nell Huisman, who was, like Mother, the middle child in a family of eleven children. “I was afraid I’d end up like she did—an old maid,” Mother sometimes told me.

When the Kiel siblings graduated from eighth grade, their formal education stopped. Some began to work on the farm with their parents—boys outdoors, girls inside—although during peak times such as milking and harvest, the girls also worked outdoors.

After eighth-grade graduation, Mother’s older siblings lived at home, and some worked on the Kiel family farm. Others “worked out.” Hilda helped mothers who had newborns, who were sick, or who didn’t have enough daughters to cook, can, and clean. Hermina, who was known for her “business head,” became a clerk at an Orange City grocery store.

Mother broke the family pattern: she was the first in her family to attend high school. “There were enough older kids to work on the farm and in the house,” she explained. “They could get the work done without me.”

She paused, and added, “My eighth-grade teacher told Ma and Pa that I should go to high school, and they agreed to it.” She teetered between embarrassment and pride. “I was a good student, believe it or not. Students used to come to me for help with homework.”

Her scrapbooks verify her story. Her grades for all eight years were always higher than 85 percent, usually in the 90 percent range. She received multiple certificates for perfect attendance and perfect spelling-test scores.

One of her scrapbooks has a letter from her eighth-grade teacher congratulating her on her high scores on the test administered to all the eighth graders in Sioux County. It was a required test that Mother told me many eighth graders faced with fear and trembling. Her scores were fourth highest in Sioux County, with an average of 92.6 percent, according to the letter from her teacher Delia Wierda.

At thirteen, Mother left the Kiel farm on Highway 10 between Orange City and Sioux Center, for the great unknown: Sioux Center Community High School. Sometimes she traveled to school with a cousin in a car, sometimes she rode a bicycle, and in the winter she boarded with a succession of relatives and acquaintances.

She had mixed feelings about the first years. “I really wanted to go to high school, but I was scared stiff—a country kid with all those townies!”

She made the high school honor roll and got the highest possible behavior marks in all categories except for leadership, where she received a “satisfactory.” Her report cards indicate that she was popular in her own group, cooperated, was mature and industrious, had a good attitude toward criticism, and displayed good sportsmanship.

Her older brother Bill didn’t mind that she got to go to high school and he didn’t. He wasn’t interested in further education. “I didn’t like it, though, that she got out of work on the farm,” he said.

The next three siblings in line—Howard, Clarence, and Evelyn—did not follow Mother to high school either. Clarence begged his parents to be allowed to go to high school, but they were adamant. He could not

go.

Evelyn, the third child after Mother, asked to go to Northwestern Academy in Orange City. Grandpa Kiel said, "No. That costs money."

She asked to go to Sioux Center High School instead. But Grandma said no.

"Why?" I asked Aunt Evelyn, but then in her 80s she still didn't know. Maybe they needed her at home. She was the only girl left—surrounded by two older and two younger brothers. "When I married Orville," she remembered, "I was sure Mom wouldn't be able to get everything done in the house without me. That first year I often went back to help her in the house."

Needing help at home could not have been my grandparents' reason for saying no to Clarence, though. After graduating from grade school at thirteen, he started working out for neighboring farmers.

"I always thought Mary was different because she went to high school," Aunt Evelyn recalled. "I felt I couldn't do much when I compared myself to her.

"But Orville [her husband] often told me if I had gone to high school, he might never have married me." So, over the years Aunt Evelyn had made peace with her life.

Why did my grandparents forbid more schooling for their next children? Did something happen to Mother in high school? Did she change in some way they didn't approve of? I probed as far as I could, but the answer remained concealed by the passage of time. Grandpa and Grandma did relent for their youngest two children. Both Raymond and Vernon attended high school.

Among the eleven Kiel siblings, in addition to being

the first to attend high school, Mother was considered the "musical one." She played piano, mouth harp, accordion, and guitar.

Mother graduated from high school in 1942 with the third-highest grades in her class of forty students. Just seventeen, she was still too young for "normal school," the summer of teacher training required by Iowa law for aspiring teachers. So, she went back home for a year, then went to normal school in the summer of 1943.

She also started attending Young Peoples' Society at Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, which Dad also attended.

Mother knew of Henry Addink long before that youth group. She had met him in 1940 when her older sister Hilda had married Dick Addink, and her siblings called his handsome younger brother to her attention. "I was teased about him lots," she said.

And, as she would later recall, she had her eye on him long before he was interested in her. Eventually she caught his eye, and they had a few dates. When he canceled a Sunday evening date at 6:30 p.m. just half an hour before its scheduled start, she was furious. She wrote him a scathing letter, converting the word "Darling" into "Darn-ling Hank," the closest she ever came to using an epithet. She wrote:

> Darling???? (Darn-ling) Hank,
>
> I guess you can guess who this is from. At least if you can't you're dumber than the dumbest. It's just a little note to tell you just exactly what I think of you. You could at least have broken your date earlier.
>
> I'm just wondering what kind of flimsy excuse

you'll probably attempt to give if you have the courtesy to call??? Again??? Did you get diphtheria or the like? If so it certainly came up suddenly. There isn't a word enough in the dictionary to express just what I think of you.

Here's a tip if you want me to help you find a girlfriend when you decide you are capable of treating one decently: there are a few in the county home who might consider your affections. Sure, go ahead and show the whole world this, and then they'll all know what a certain person thinks of you. But it would only be doing you harm so I almost hope you show it to everyone in the U.S.

No, this isn't a letter asking you to come back. Far be it from that. Only a dizzy dope would be crazy enough to think of it.

The next time you break a date (with girls in the county home), be a little more lenient on the time.

I hope you aren't too dumb to catch the drift of this letter, but some people are naturally that way. I surely hope you get a bang out of this. An idiot never takes anything seriously. Or puts the shoe on when it fits.

Apparently the two eventually made peace.

Mother received her normal school certificate in 1943. She subsequently taught at three northwest Iowa country schools over the next four years for a payment of $110-$125 per school month. Besides teaching all eight grades, she was also the school janitor and nurse. At the end of the day, after she had swept the floor, set the mousetraps, and brought in

firewood for the next day, she went home to grade papers and prepare for the next day.

Despite the workload, she told me it was one of the two most satisfying periods of her life. She kept her students' pictures and papers until retirement age, and then returned the artifacts to those who still lived nearby. On a wicker shelf in the bathroom of the condominium to which she and Dad moved in retirement, she displayed a half dozen of the perfume bottles students had given her as Christmas gifts. All were unopened, because never in her life did I know her to use perfume.

When, at eighty-nine, she moved to two small rooms at Orange City's Pioneer Memorial Home, those ancient bottles—still unopened—went with her.

Each day, her teaching and paper grading done, she wrote a letter to Dad in the Navy. The month before his departure, he had been dating a woman named Lil. Perhaps she was hedging her bets when she wrote a nonsense letter to different soldier:

> Dear Bernie,
>
> I felt like writing a letter and decided you'd be the unlucky guy. I'm not signing my name to it cause then you'd start figuring me as one of those mail chasers. . . .
>
> I'm picking corn lately and have a habit of talking to myself. Now isn't that a predicament when there's so many ears around who spill the beans to whoever comes along.
>
> My pencil ran dry so I thought I would use my pen. . . .
>
> The folks went to Grandpa and Grandma tonight to celebrate Grandma's sixteenth

birthday. Dad's gray hair is turning black of worrying so much and Mom's getting bald.

It's raining snowflakes right now. . . .

The letter continues for four pages in that style and concludes with "I got a new baby tooth tomorrow so that means I've got one more tooth in my plate." It is unclear whether this letter is a draft of one she sent or whether she had second thoughts and decided not to mail it.

Then a lucky break came in her correspondence with Dad: she saw Lil out with another guy. She immediately wrote Dad that Lil was stepping out on him. And then she kept up a flood of daily letters.

He began answering more often, at least once a week. "It wasn't as easy for him," she said. "Especially when his ship wasn't always in port for him to mail them." Each Sunday evening, she went to the local post office and waited with lots of other sweethearts and wives for letters from servicemen to be put in the appropriate boxes.

When stationed at New London, Connecticut, Dad loyally attended his denomination's Christian Reformed Church there. He met an attractive young woman or two, and asked them out. He wrote this news to his best buddy John Broek, who told his sister Marge, who shared the tale with her good friend Mary Kiel.

Mother took action: She bought a beautiful big box of cherry-filled chocolates—her favorites—and put it in the mail. In New London, Dad received the box and opened it—to find in each elegant ribbed wrapper, not a chocolate, but a stone.

Despite that rocky interlude, this breach was apparently bridged, because their correspondence continued through his military travels to Florida, San Francisco, and the South Pacific. Her letters were amicable, sometimes in rhymed verse:

Sweetheart, though you are far away
And I right now cannot hear you say
Those words that I so love to hear
And will always cherish and hold so dear. . . .
It felt like I was living a dream
And picking out of life's flowing stream
Things never before sought or seen
Or ever given the noblest queen. . . .
Be that as it may, I still do mean
That sure as the grass is always green
You're an OK guy and always will be
At least to a girl as dumb as me.

In one of his letters to her, Dad marveled at her ability to rhyme and asked if she had copied parts of it from a book.

In December 1945, Mother bought an autograph book and convinced all of her siblings and his, along with nephews and nieces old enough to do so, to write him a note on one of its pages.

Grandma Kiel wished him well and wrote, "I'm writing you for both of us since my husband won't." Grandma Addink's note is straightforward, hoping he'll be home soon. Grandpa Addink sent a word of rhyming advice:

Here's a motto:
Take it for your own.
Love your neighbor as yourself,
And leave his wife alone.

Dad arrived home May 8, 1946. He decided this first night back he was going to ask Mother to marry him, and he did. She said "yes." He joked that when he had to pay for the diamond, he wished she had said "no." The following February 13, they married at the Kiel farm a few miles west of Orange City on Highway 10. Grandpa Kiel had vetoed their first choice for a wedding date—Valentine's Day—because he wanted to attend a farm sale on February 14. It turned out to be a serendipitous choice: February 13 was one of the few days that month without a snowstorm.

The next day Dad and Mother went to Bodnar Studio to have their wedding picture taken. Mother disliked that photo. She said whenever she looked at it, all she saw was the wrinkle on the dress.

For two weeks, until their rental farm was available, Mom and Dad lived with Dad's parents, skipping a honeymoon. In a humorous reading Mother created for their fiftieth anniversary, she said, "What honeymoon? Going to live with your parents for two weeks? Every morning and night milking the heifers you bought to start farming with? I still think your sisters could have milked them a day or two. It felt like going from the altar to the gutter."

On March 1 they moved to a one-room schoolhouse that had been converted to a house on a rental farm just a few miles from the Addink family farm. In the anniversary skit, Mother wrote this line for Dad describing it: "No electricity, and a windmill as the only source of power for our water supply. It was a case of 'no wind, no water.'"

Her line in response was: "I remember getting water from the neighbors with a five-gallon cream can for

household uses when the wind wasn't blowing. . . . And all the water had to come from a single hydrant in the middle of the yard for the cattle, hogs, chickens, and house. Guess who was usually last in line. And to think all the water for dishes, baths, and wash had to be heated on a stove. I remember being glad there was water in the house for a Saturday night bath."

Their other memories of that farm included an outdoor toilet, where they read—and used as toilet paper—the Sears and Roebuck catalog, glad for the softer peach wrappers during August canning season.

Mother taught through May to finish out the 1947 school year, and then—as was typical of the era — resigned. The following March she gave birth to me. Eight years after that, their children totaled six: Donald, Marvin, Roger, Janice, and Kathleen had joined the family. Somewhere in childhood, each of them eventually switched to a shorter name—Don, Marv, Rog, Jan, and Kathy. My given name endured.

Then, when I was twelve, after a four-year hiatus from newborns, my parents added a seventh child, Dale. A few years later, Mother told me, "I had to beg and beg Dad before he would finally agree to another baby."

3 Out Under the Sky

Born an Iowan, I am a child of the plains. Others are awed by mountain majesty, I by a vast circle of sky. For seven decades now, the Iowa sky has healed and humbled me.

Under a cosmic bowl of blue, I fall silent. I know both my limits and a vast infinity. Sometimes jets crisscross the blue with streamers of white. In my childhood years jets also produced sonic booms that rattled my ribs. On the south border of Orange City, the town where I grew up, the flat circle of horizon was broken only by the silos of the grain elevators. They were huge exclamation points that preserved harvests from surrounding farms.

I began life on two of those surrounding farms. The first we called the Wabeke[1] farm—rented from Gerrit

[1] I am unable to confirm the spelling of Mr. Wabeke's last name. Online options include both Wabike and Wabeke. My parents pronounced it Wah-bi-key.

Wabeke and nestled among a cluster of Sioux Center area farms belonging to my father's relatives: the Addinks and Lammerses. My parents rented their second farm, located a few miles southwest of Orange City, from John Jasper. When we moved there, we cleaned up the mess of a previous renter to make it more presentable. Dad pulled a flatbed wagon around the yard with a tractor. The rest of the family rode the wagon, hopping from it to pick up crushed tin cans, pieces of cardboard, broken strands of barbed wire, and other junk. Dad took the load of junk to the Orange City dump.

In the grove behind a chicken coop stood an abandoned car in which my brothers and I made imaginary trips, taking turns at the wheel. One spring morning, we drove a very bumpy imaginary route, bouncing as high as we could on the cracked seats. Our bouncing angered a nest of bees that had made a home in the back seat. They buzzed out, and we ran, followed by a swarm of them, crying and screaming at each new sting. Mother dipped our welted arms and legs into baking soda water to ease the pain, and we soon recovered. I don't remember ever playing in that car again.

The farmyard made a good playground. I walked the tops of the wooden fences, arms extended on both sides for balance, grateful each time I reached the flat top of a round wooden post and could pause there for stability and safety. On one side of me lay the hog yard, with pigs' squeals and grunts and muck and pungent smells. On the other side was the farmyard with weeds and dirt. I knew that if I lost my balance I would jump into the weedy yard, not the smelly one.

Both my parents sometimes worked outdoors doing chores, leaving me and my three younger brothers alone in the house. One morning, while our parents were choring, Marv, the middle brother of three, came running into the bedroom where I was reading. "Carol," he said, "there's a fire in the cob box! Don started it." I ran to the kitchen, and a fire was indeed roaring in the cob box next to the stove Mother used for cooking.

As eldest child, I did the only thing I knew to do. I ran to the front door and screamed at the top of my voice, "FIRE! FIRE!" Both parents appeared immediately—Mother from the chicken coop and Dad from the barn. The chicken coop was closest, so Mother arrived in the house first. She grabbed the rectangular, enamel pan she normally used for peeling potatoes and turned on both faucets wide open. When it was full, she tossed the water onto the flames. After sizzling under several pans full, the fire was reduced to a sodden, smoking mass.

An inquiry began. My parents found Don, the oldest of my three brothers, cowering quietly in a far bedroom. "Why did you do that?" they asked in disbelief. He said he planned to start a fire in the stove, as he had seen Mother do, but had accidentally dropped the match onto a few oil rags in the corner of the cob box, which instantly flared up.

"Why didn't you call us?" Dad asked.

"I was trying to think of what to do," he said.

No, he wasn't, I thought to myself. I knew with an older sister's certainty his real motive. *He was scared of being found out, so he ran and hid.*

In the tradition of my father's family, my mother

worked in the coop with the chickens and my father in the barn with the cows. Both buildings smelled rank to me, but the chicken coop smelled worse. And the coop had more dust and floating feathers. I preferred the barn.

The cows came back to the barn at milking time when Dad called, "cuh-boss, cuh-boss" in the direction of the pasture. They followed a dirt trail along the fence line, took their assigned spots in the stanchions, munched hay, and waited for relief for their distended udders. Holsteins all, they were covered with dramatic black-and-white sprawling patterns, each different.

Sometimes Dad let me join him in the barn when he milked. The cows fascinated and horrified me when they lifted their tails and peed or pooped into the concrete gutter behind them, filling the barn with putrid smells. In the early years, Dad milked by hand, hobbling the cows' bony knees and leaning his head against their soft flanks. He sat on a three-legged stool and worked each of the four tough teats with skilled hands, squeezing sprays of milk toward metal pails in strong, rhythmic streams. The cats sat nearby, ready to leap up and swallow the occasional spray he sent in their direction.

Sometimes, Dad let me try to milk, showing me how to pinch and pull, pinch and pull, stripping the milk down the teat, but my hands were not strong enough. I could only extract a few drops.

When we got milking machines, the sounds in the barn changed. The machines sucked and hissed rhythmically as they extracted the milk with vacuum power. Dad didn't have to be at the side of the cows, working every moment, so sometimes he sat on the

worn wooden *drempel* (threshold) of the barn door, one leg sprawling on each side of it, while I in sat in front of him, facing the cow yard with its green pasture and sky beyond. We sat in silence, looking out. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a roll of candy, gave me one, and then took one himself. Together we looked out the doorway at the clouds, with the clanking and hissing inside the barn and the cool breeze outside. As the sun set on the horizon, I sucked my candy, and he crunched his. It was green, Lifesaver-size without a center hole, and oh-so-sweet. I have never been able to find that candy again, and no candy has ever tasted as fine.

One Sunday morning, I was too sick for church, but well enough to stay home by myself. I lay on the living room couch while the rest of the family worshiped in church. All around me I placed my toy animals—a pig, a teddy bear or two, a woolly lamb, and my favorite—a stuffed, plastic horse whose strips of mane were tattered. In the drama I enacted with the animals, the horse was the underdog. The others refused to play with him. They mocked his tattered mane and called him names. I took him in my arms and comforted him. I told him he was my favorite. I would play with him and always be his friend.

My parents came home from morning worship to find me on the couch surrounded by the stuffed animals, the tattered horse in my arms. They chuckled. I couldn't understand why they laughed. When they stopped chuckling, Mother looked up at Dad and said, "I think it's time to get her a doll."

They did. My new doll had a light blue floral dress, deep blue eyes that opened and closed, and a mane of

red hair that could be combed—in theory. It was, however, so stiff that I could never pull a comb through it.

I took her out to the farmyard, sat on the round, cement, well cover, held her in my arms, and read the tag attached to her dress, "Eegee." I pronounced the mysterious sounds several times. I held her on my lap, watching her eyes open and close, but I never created stories for her and she never needed me in the same way as the horse with the tattered mane.

When, a few years later, I read *The Velveteen Rabbit* over and over, I felt the same bond with that rabbit that I had felt with my horse with the tattered mane. I loved them both with the same fierce passion. In my inner world, when my horse's mane became tattered, like the velveteen rabbit, he became real.

Down the hill from the Jasper farm, a creek wound through the pasture and under the road. Once, arriving home with Dad, I told Mother that we had crossed the creek.

My younger brother Don disagreed. "Not one creek—two," he said.

"Two creeks?" Dad asked him, puzzled. "Where did you see two?"

His answer: "There was one creek on each side of the road." We could not convince him differently.

I knew it was one creek, because sometimes I walked down the hill to the bridge, then through the weeds in the ditch. I sat in its sand and shade and watched the creek trickle into the unknown. That moment came to mind later when I was in college and read a line from Faust in Goethe's poem:

"When, to the moment then, I say:

'Ah, stay a while! You are so lovely!'"

I knew that moment Goethe described in the shade of the bridge beside the trickling creek. Later I would come to identify this as my first experience of holy longing that C.S. Lewis calls *sehnsucht.* I sat in peace there until the sun called me into the pasture, where the creek also ran. I perched on a giant rock, watching the brighter ripples in the sun—and saw the shimmer of flitting minnows. They were soooooo beautiful. I walked home, selected an empty Karo Syrup pail and a coffee strainer, and went to catch minnows. I succeeded, capturing dozens of the beauties. I carefully carried them home, switching the pail from one hand to another when the wire handle dug painful grooves into my palms.

I set the bucket in the cool shade of the house next to the cement front step. In an hour the minnows were bottom-side up on the surface of the water, their silver bellies an ugly white, already beginning to smell rancid. I had tried to capture the beauty of the minnows, and I had destroyed them. I was horrified.

The creek was not always a gentle beauty. In 1953, the year Roger was born, we had seven inches of rain in twenty-four hours. The stream became a torrent. As night neared, the cows were not yet home. Dad wasn't either. He had gone to get them and hadn't returned. Although Mother said little, I knew she was terrified—and she was torn. She was afraid both to go out in the storm and to leave us alone. But she was equally afraid of what might be happening to Dad. Eventually she made a decision. She seated me, Don, and Marv on the worn wooden steps to the basement, away from any exterior walls. We couldn't go all the way down the

steps, because the water in the basement was already a foot deep. She put baby Roger, bundled and blanketed, into my arms and told us to stay there until she returned.

Then she headed out into the storm. Obedient, quiet, and scared, we huddled on the steps until we heard the slam of the front screen door—and two sets of footfalls. Mother and Dad both appeared at the top of the stairs. Mother took Roger from my arms, and we clambered up behind her.

The cows, terrified of the torrent, had refused to cross the raging stream. But together Mother and Dad had coerced them into braving the water, climbing the pasture hill, and coming home.

Sometimes in that pasture, I perched in the seat of our tractor, driving it—in the lowest possible gear—along the barbed-wire fence. Dad walked alongside, checking for breaks in the fence. If he found one, he climbed aboard and stopped the tractor. He repaired the fence, restarted the tractor, and we continued on. In that same pasture we flew the kite Dad made us from laths from old roll-down shades—the same kind of laths we used as Carom sticks.[2] He covered the sticks with brown paper from saved grocery bags and a tail of rags from Mother's rag box. We helped rip the rags into strips and knot them together. In a gentle breeze, we needed just a few rags. In a strong wind, we tied on more rags for stability. At first, Dad went out with us, teaching us to fly the kite. He seemed to enjoy

[2] Carom is a game in which four players shoot wooden rings into pockets at the corners of a three-foot-by-three-foot wooden board.

it as much as we did. Eventually, Don and I could manage the kite on our own.

One spring day, we flew the kite and then explored along the thawing creek. Its mud sucked in one of my boots and refused to release it. Eventually I tugged my foot from the boot, and we traipsed home, with me limping and crying as my sock grew wet and my foot numb. Dad made the trip down the hill to retrieve the boot, while I shivered and recovered, my foot in hot water in the same enamel pan that had been used to put out the fire.

Sometimes my brothers and I lay on the pasture grass, or in the ditch near the house, and watched the clouds move from west to east, changing shapes as they went. In school, I learned that clouds have names such as cirrus and stratus. I liked the name "cumulus" best, savoring its sounds and searching the sky for samples. Cumulus clouds were a playground for pretend. Lying in the ditch that bordered our farm, I watched them morph from two-headed elephants to lambs to mountain ranges. Usually, though, I preferred to simply watch them change shapes and imagine drifting along with them through the heavens. I watched them while I lay on a spinning merry-go-round at school, I not only drifted with them, I whirled and spun into them—leaving earth for the vast unknown, dizzy and weightless.

When I was six or seven, we had a farm sale. What seemed to be hundreds of cars and pickups arrived, parking first on the yard, and then along the road. From atop a flatbed trailer, the auctioneer rapidly babbled the current bid in what sounded like a foreign language. Poised to record the momentous event, I

stood with my clipboard, pencil, and paper at the back of the crowd of men in bibbed overalls and blue jeans. After four items, I found I could not keep up and couldn't understand the final price amid the auctioneer's jibber-jabber. I brought my clipboard to the house and took the coins I'd been given for the day to the sale-day canteen set up in the garage, where candy bars and sandwiches were available for sale-goers. For five cents, I bought my favorite—a salted nut roll.

Shortly after the sale, we moved to a house in town—a former parsonage of the Protestant Reformed Church which had dwindled and closed, leaving its parsonage for rent.

It was not until later that I would learn the reason for leaving the farm: finances. I would hear Mother cry as she talked with Grandpa and Grandma Kiel. She would say, "When we had corn or steers to sell, the price was always low. When we needed to buy, the price was high. The timing just never worked out right."

4 In the Beginning Were the Words

Long before we moved from the farm to town, I had begun a love affair with words. My earliest word memory begins with Mother pulling into a strange driveway. My brother Don was next to her in a baby buggy where the passenger-side seat had been removed. I was in the back seat.

"Why are we here?" I asked

"For strawberries," Mother answered.

Straw. . .berries. Straw. . .berries. "Straw" I know. And "berries" I know. But what are strawberries?

When Mother set a box of strawberries in the car, I sampled one. Yum! They didn't taste like straw. *Maybe the "straw" is because of the gold color of the little seeds,* I thought. The next year my mother had her own strawberry bed—three tiered squares with ascending levels, each tier held in place with old barnboards. When she covered the young seedlings with straw, I thought, *Maybe that's the straw in strawberries.*

In adulthood I learned straw mulch is indeed

considered one option for strawberries' name origin. Another possibility is that the runners the plants send out resemble straw. A third option is that the old English word "streawberige" (strewn berry) was assigned because the runners strew the plants throughout the patch. Then, in the process of word evolution, "strewn berry" morphed into strawberry.

As a child, I wondered, too, about the name "milkweeds." I loved the airy fluff that floated out when I cracked open dry milkweed pods. One day, however, I cracked off a green pod, and it dripped sticky milk. I smiled. Now I knew the reason for the name.

Potatoes provided word pleasure as well. Grandpa Kiel grew potatoes in his garden. Once, my cousin Harriet and I helped him. He dug, and we put the potatoes in the bucket for him. Harriet and I laughed about a three-lobed potato. It looked like a head with a giant earlobe on each side. Then Grandpa told us the little black circles on that head were called eyes. He wasn't joking; they really were called eyes. *That name is exactly right*, I thought. Those black dents with an arc above them looked just like eyes.

One summer day, my older cousin Hank created a new word mystery for me. He and his two brothers lived with their widowed mother, my Aunt Minnie, on a farm just a mile from ours. One afternoon while Mother shopped, I stayed with them. Cobs crackled in the black kitchen stove where Aunt Minnie was cooking, and the wind howled above the mutter of thunder. We watched the afternoon sky grow dark with ominous, yellow-green clouds. Rain fell in waves. The sky turned green-black, and the rain fell even faster. Then Hank called from the back door, "Look! Hell

stones are falling."

Hell stones? What are hell stones? How can stones be falling from the sky? I ran to see, and marbles of ice, like stones, were falling from the sky.

Hank said the word again, and this time I heard it right. Hailstones. I tasted the word with my tongue. "Hailstones. Hail. Not Hell." I smiled, then startled as the sky blazed white, thunder crashed, and my ears hurt.

My cousin Arie called from the front door, "The barn's on fire! Ma, the barn's on fire!" A flurry of action followed. My next memory is of gazing through the window of our car with Mother, watching from the road as someone in a blue denim jacket and jeans threw stuff down from the haymow. People were soon forced to leave the barn, and flames eventually burst through the roof. We felt the heat even through the window of the car, parked at a safe distance from the flames. My clearest memory of the day, however, is hearing that new word "hailstones" and the pleasure of learning what it meant. That pleasure is layered above feelings of family security and mixed with fear.

That same word-pleasure had occurred when I was three or four and Mother read two Little Golden Books to me over and over. The first—a tiny book which soon developed a tattered spine—was a rhymed verse about a train that went "clickety-clack, clickety-clack, around the bend to town and back." I loved its rhythms and rhymes, and soon recited it along with Mother as she turned the pages.

The second book was *Mister Dog*. Crispian was a dog who belonged to himself and had his own fairy-tale house with a winding staircase. He was, the book said,

"a conservative." (I think "conservative" may have been my first four-syllable word.) Crispian liked his meals at the right times, and at bedtime he liked everything in the right place. Chasing some cats and rabbits, he stumbled upon a boy who also belonged to himself. The boy moved in with Crispian. They went on long walks and fishing trips, and at bedtime each went to bed and dreamed his own dreams. I wanted to live with Mister Dog and the little boy. I longed to fish with them outdoors and climb the winding stairs to the bedrooms with a place for everything and everything in its place. It sounded very daring and dangerous to belong just to myself.

The pleasure of rhymes and rhythms and the joyful longing evoked by imaginary worlds well up in me again whenever I hold Little Golden Books with their leopard-spotted gilt spines and colorful pages.

I could recite the words of books along with Mother, but the squiggles on the pages remained a mystery. Despite her teaching experience, she didn't teach me letters and words. She told me later she didn't want me to be bored when I started school.

At five, I walked down the driveway to meet the school bus each weekday morning. I blithely mounted the steps onto the yellow bus with black letters announcing "Orange City Christian School." I sat on the driver's side with the rest of the girls behind the genial and soft-spoken driver, Mr. Hibma. The boys sat across the aisle.

In class, the genders mingled, sitting at wooden tables, surrounded by windows and shelving. At my table sat a girl named Robin. *How embarrassing*, I thought, *to have the same name as a bird! If she has to*

be named after an animal, "rabbit" would be better, because the tip of her nose wiggles when she talks.

My favorite songs at the beginning of the school day were, "The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me" and "Dropping, dropping falls the rain, from the sky." The spelling out, rhyming, and the melodies pleased me as much as the content.

Words were not the only excitement in my life, however. Riding the bus home from school, Mr. Hibma's three daughters and I were always the last four people on the bus. The bridge over the creek near the Jasper farm loomed as a huge bump in the flat road, and we often moved to the back of the bus and asked Mr. Hibma to speed up as he came to the bridge. He usually obliged. We clung to the seat in front of us, closed our eyes, and imagined a roller coaster as the bump launched us up from the brown vinyl seats.

One afternoon he pushed the gas pedal to the floor, we zoomed over the bridge, and his daughter Kathleen crashed her solar plexus into the seat ahead, knocking her out of breath. She fell to the aisle crying. He stopped the bus and ran back to her. When she was breathing normally again and calmed down, he drove on. We never dared to beg for the roller coaster ride again.

One spring morning when I attended kindergarten, my brother Don came along for a visit because he would be starting school the next year. Mother drove us to school, and we planned to ride the bus home together. During lunch, I began thinking about our return trip. *Don won't be able to sit next to me. He will be across the aisle on the boys' side of the bus. Who*

knows what might happen way over on the other side?

Scared, I lingered in the classroom as the afternoon recess began. Don waited for me near the hallway door. Voice quivering, I alerted my teacher to the impending danger.

She didn't miss a beat. Had the word "Duhhhhhhh" been in vogue, she would have said it. She shook her head, and then in a no-nonsense voice exclaimed, "Goodness sakes, Carol, you will both be on the same set of wheels!" With that, she sent me out to recess. Don and I both made it safely home—on opposite sides of the bus, but on the same set of wheels.

In first grade, I finally unlocked the mysteries and beauty of reading. In our Dick and Jane reader, the first page had a picture of Sally, her white shoes beside her, tucking her feet into a giant pair of black rubbers. Beneath Sally were some black squiggles. Our teacher told us that the word was "look." I studied those squiggles intently—a straight line on the left, two eyes in the middle, and walking stick man on the right—and I suddenly realized wherever I saw those shapes, it was the word "look." I must have known the alphabet at that point, but my clearest memory is of the shapes with those two eyes in the middle, staring at me.

I immediately flipped through the book, finding every "look" on the pages. There was one under Sally splashing in a puddle, another under Dick pulling Sally in a red wagon, and another beneath Jane zipping around on a tricycle. I turned page after page in triumph. *I can read! I can read!* My love affair with spoken words instantly included those four black squiggles. Soon I was reading "Oh, oh, oh!" and "See

Spot run!"

Dick, Jane, Sally, Spot, and Puff inhabited a world very different from mine. The children wore yellow raincoats, rain hats, and red (I think) boots. They also carried umbrellas! There were no yellow raincoats in my world. All the boots I had ever seen were black. And I didn't know anyone who carried an umbrella. When it rained, I simply ran to the house from the bus as fast as I could, and let my clothing air dry. I waited until it stopped raining, put on my black boots, and went outdoors to make mud pies or carve tiny creeks into the driveway.

I eventually began to love the magic of reading a bit too much. One morning as the bell rang to start the school day, I was reading a library book from the shelves at the back of the room about a billy goat that ate everything, even tin cans and laundry! It was a page-turner. I hid it under my desk, closed my eyes for the morning prayer, and then read some more when I was supposed to be singing hymns. Mrs. Vanden Berg noticed my bowed head and mute lips. She marched to my desk, spied the book, and wrote my name in the upper left corner of the blackboard.

I was stricken. Other children—naughty ones—had their names in that corner of the board from time to time, but I never did. Now I was on the naughty list! I would have to stay indoors for the first recess. I fought back tears.

When the recess bell rang and the other students ran chattering through the door, I slumped at my desk, eyes on the floor. Mrs. Vanden Berg summoned me to the front of the room. She asked if I knew what I had done wrong. "I read instead of singing," I

whimpered.

"Will you ever do it again?" she asked.

I shook my head fervently. Never, ever!

"Good!" she said, and she released me into the sunshine. I never again read during opening hymns or had my name on Mrs. Vanden Berg's naughty list—for anything.

That same spring, I discovered the joy of putting words together myself, and Mrs. Vanden Berg entered my poem in the Sioux County poetry contest:

The snow was falling fast,
But soon a wind went past.
The weatherman said it would freeze,
But there was just a tiny breeze.

Despite its gap in logic, it won a blue ribbon, perhaps based on its predictable rhythm and rhyme. It—along with the other winners—was honored by being displayed at the Orange City Library.

Whatever the reason for the ribbon, I was hooked, both by the writing process and by awards.

In second grade I wrote a poem of just four lines, but a word in the fourth line gave me trouble.

If the world were made of ice cream,
If the world were made of pie,
If the world were made of a moonbeam,
You'd be ___ and so would I.

I couldn't decide if I would be sad or glad. Would it be wonderful to live in a world of pie or ice cream or a moonbeam? I wasn't sure. Eventually, I decided on the more optimistic version. The imaginary world gave me pleasure, even though I wasn't sure how I would feel about it if it were real.

It was in third grade, I think, that I composed a

rhyme in my head as I formed hand prints in the frost on the car window and listened to the car radio.

As music fills the air,
We put away all care.
And our face glistens
As our heart listens.
Happier we go from there
Because music filled the air.

By high school, I hated the cold and loved a good punch line. I wrote:

The poet speaks of winter as a very awesome time
When the children build their snowmen in a
happiness sublime,
When Jack Frost has used his artistry upon the
windowpane
And the twinkling diamonds sparkle from the
trees along the lane.
Ah, yes, concerning winter's joys, the poet speaks
from old.
I have two words to answer him, "I'm cold!"

I was a woman, but I used the masculine pronoun "him" for the poet. In the primary grades, I didn't question the use of the masculine pronoun. Then, in fifth grade, I raised my hand and asked Miss Reinders, a single teacher whose carefully groomed, auburn hair was tinged with grey, "Why does that sentence say 'men'? Isn't it talking about everyone?"

She didn't miss a beat. "In this case, the word 'men' means everyone."

I believed her. As an adult and a teacher, she must be right. Whenever a doubt niggled me, I repeated Miss Reinders' statement, "In this case, men means everyone." I would be in my fifties before gender-

neutral language provided me with a better solution than the one offered to me in fifth grade.

As I moved from one grade to the next, a new motivation grew: good grades. An A became the only grade that satisfied me. And when Miss Reinders read my Iowa Basic Skills scores to the class as setting a class record, I felt like I was spinning on the merry-go-round into the clouds.

I also developed high behavioral standards. When I was in third grade, Orange City Christian School moved from a two-story clapboard building with worn wooden floors and hollowed-down steps to a pristine cement-block structure with shiny tile floors. Instead of hooks in a community closet, each of us had our own locker at the back of the room. Beside the lockers stood a sink. Next to the sink was a row of windows, clear and shining. Their perimeters were sealed with a soft, gray putty, perfect for sinking a pencil point into when we sharpened our pencils right next to the sink. Soon the smooth putty surrounding the pane was pockmarked.

One noon hour, our teacher noticed. She scolded us. “It’s a terrible thing,” she said, “not to treat our new building with respect. It is our responsibility to care for it.”

Sharpening my pencil that morning, I had finally succumbed to temptation. After sharpening the yellow hexagon to a perfect point, I had pressed it into the inviting softness. When our teacher scolded the class, I was stricken. My heart felt heavy and my skin tingled. That afternoon I wrote a note of confession: “I pushed my pencil into the putty ONE time. I am sorry. I won’t ever do it again.” And I signed my name.

The other students scrambled into the hallway at the final bell, but I stayed at my desk. I trudged to the front of the room, handed her the note, and joined them, my conscience cleared by confession. I don't remember any penalty or conversation with my teacher. But I do remember a profound relief.

Mr. Smit, our smiley-faced janitor, kept the new hall floor clean by sprinkling it with a red sawdust before sweeping with his four-foot-wide dust mop. When he sprinkled, the scent of kerosene and perfume crept under the classroom door. When, occasionally, he sprinkled it on vomit on a classroom floor, its scent overpowered the sourer odor.

One afternoon he sprinkled the hall and then ran behind schedule. The slippery compound remained on the smooth floor at the final bell. Miss Bouma warned us to be careful as we left, and forbade our sliding on it.

It was my turn to clean the blackboard that day, so the hall was empty when I left the room. The sawdust was so-o-o red and its scent so-o-o heady. I looked around. The hall was empty. I took a few running steps and slid. First came pleasure. Then immediate guilt. I stopped at the principal's office to confess. Mr. Zylstra wasn't in, so I confessed instead to the school secretary before leaving the building.

I always walked softly when I passed the office of our tall new principal. Mr. Zylstra's bass voice vibrated terror from my ears to my toes. I was sure his black eyes, made steely and small behind thick glasses, could penetrate the secrets of my soul.

His daughter Judy, who shared his eyes and hair, but not his height, was in fifth grade with me. We did

not fear her. Judy we disliked. Across the mist of decades, I remember nothing she did to deserve our disdain. Perhaps it was just our established clique closing a circle against a new girl in class.

Several months into the school year, my classmates Rachel, Mary, and I walked the short block from school to the neighborhood my family had moved to. We paused in the single-stall, dirt-floor garage at my home to chat before we parted. Our conversation turned to Judy.

Mary said she had seen Judy's arithmetic paper of the day. "She got a D! She's not as smart as she thinks she is." Rachel and I agreed.

Rachel asked what we thought of Judy's new sweater "She throws back her shoulders in that sweater, to show off. But she is as flat as this tablet!" She held up her penmanship tablet, and we nodded.

Uncomfortable, I turned to the garage window and saw the lilac hedge, its leaves beginning to be tinged with brown. Beside it, Judy was running straight from my garage toward home.

"Judy's outside!" I said. "Do you think she heard us?" We were sure she hadn't.

After noon recess the next day, as I tiptoed past the principal's office, Mr. Zylstra loomed in the doorway. He beckoned me in. "I'd like to talk with you."

Inside, he motioned me to a seat and took his seat behind his desk, like a judge in a courtroom. My knees shook and my mouth quivered as he asked, "Do you know why you are here?"

Wordless, I shook my head.

"I think you know," he persisted, then waited in the silence. A l-o-n-g silence.

"About Judy?" I said, my voice more frog's than child's.

"That's right," he said. "You have a club where all you do is talk about her." He talked at length, while tears streamed from my eyes to my chin and then down my neck. He talked about permanent scars from childhood pain and that he wasn't doing this just because she was his daughter.

At his concluding question, "Can you assure me this will stop?" I nodded, unable to swallow, much less speak.

He told me I could wash my face in his private bathroom. Tears scrubbed, I returned to class and listened to the post-noon-hour story with my head on my desk and my face to the green cement-block wall. I was ashamed, ashamed of being summoned to his office and of my tears. I do not remember regretting Judy's pain.

In his five years as my principal, that was my only conversation with Mr. Zylstra. And although my neighborhood trio did not hold another conversation about Judy in my garage or anywhere, neither did she enter our circle of friends.

Other than a few neighborhood friends, my social life was less successful than my academic life. From first grade on, Linda and Kary ruled over the rest of the girls as our class dictators, determining who was allowed to join their elite circle. I was not among them. Once, Linda asked if I wanted to join their circle and play with them. "Yes," I said.

"Well, yes means no, and no means yes, so you can't," she retorted. I felt crushed, but I didn't question her royal right to twist language as she wished.

Until grade six, other than Linda's absolute sovereignty, I knew nothing of pecking orders. I focused on books and getting good grades. By junior high, at six feet, I towered above the rest of the class, weighing just 130 pounds, with a face dominated by thick glasses and a set of oversized teeth.

In the crowded conditions of Orange City Christian Grade School, the kitchen, equipped with several Monroe tables surrounded by folding chairs, doubled as junior high study hall. At first, I didn't pay much attention to who sat at which table. Then, one day I looked around and realized we had settled into a locked pattern. Evan, the most popular boy in class, and Linda were sitting at the west table surrounded by all their friends. The rest of us—who hadn't made the grade—sat at the east tables. I was sitting farthest east, at a table of outcasts.

As I looked around the room at the twenty-five other students, I felt humiliated and then furious. The next day, as I took my seat at my bottom-of-the-class table, I remarked bitterly to my neighbor, "I'll sit here again. I don't want to sit at the snobs' table."

She looked at me in shocked surprise. I don't know if she felt embarrassed I had mentioned the unmentionable or was surprised by my assessment. Considering that my academic and social skills were inversely proportional, I suspect she was embarrassed. When I realized my social standing, I redoubled my efforts to get the best grades possible and entered more deeply into fictional worlds.

Book series—the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew—provided me with an extended fictional world. And I read the "boy books" my brothers checked out, too—

going on adventures with the Hardy Boys and the Sugar Creek Gang. The members of the gang talked to each other in a special language, inserting "op" into each syllable of each word. It was much more challenging than Pig Latin, in which you simply had to move the first consonant to the end of a word and add the "ay" sound.

I practiced this language until I could zip through sentences in Op Language. Then I tested my brothers and my mother to see if they could understand. "Copan yopu opundoperstopand whopat opI opam sopayoping? [Can you understand what I am saying?]" Usually they couldn't, even after I repeated it a second time. I never found anyone interested in learning the language and conversing with me, so I contented myself with the fun of simply mastering it.

The Wizard of Oz books guided my first trip into a fantasy world, other than fairy tales. And in high school, *Gone with the Wind* was my first tragic romance. I cried for half an hour when Rhett told Scarlett, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Each Saturday afternoon of grade school, Mother dropped off her children who could read at the Orange City Library. We carried in armloads of last week's books and began gathering a new supply. One librarian sometimes greeted us with the words, "Look! Here comes the other half of the library." We grinned, proud to be good readers.

As a family, we prized our minds. When Don challenged a math answer his teacher had marked incorrect, and he proved her wrong, we were proud of him. Several Saturday lunches were dominated by vociferous debates about whether a vacuum really

existed. Dad said it did, and his sons said it didn't. Air pressure existed, but not a vacuum. There was no such thing as suction. Round and round they went, with neither side conceding defeat.

Given our family standards, I decided already in grade school to become a teacher. After all, I loved reading and learning and school—and Mother had told me often teaching was the best of all possible occupations.