

IN THE BEGINNING



*I*t's November 10, 1964, and I have a fever. My body feels achy and miserable. We're at Grandma's house, set in the middle of an Indiana cornfield. My twin brothers, Tyler and Trevor, are celebrating their seventh birthdays. I manage to enjoy the party, but after it's over all I want to do is lie down in my mother's lap and rest. But Mother is leaving. She has to go clean our trailer to prepare it for the new people who will move in tomorrow. She will spend the night there and come back in the morning. I ask if I can't go with her. She hugs me and kisses the top of my head. "You sleep at Grandma's and get better, sweetie," she says. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I fall asleep early, but my rest is disturbed with feverish dreams. When I am wakened by muffled voices in the hall, I'm not sure if they are real. I leave my bed and walk in my bare feet

to look out the window. It is still dark, but I can see a police car parked in the driveway. I peek out my door to see a huge man dressed in blue talking softly with Grandma. Her face is wet with tears.

I begin to go to her, but she tells me it is too early to get up, that I should go back to bed. I obey her, grateful to turn away from a scene I do not understand. I pull the covers over my head and go back to sleep.

I am eight years old. I do not know it yet, but my childhood has just ended.

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I don't remember much about my biological father, except that he was scary to be around. Near the end of his marriage to my mother, he beat Tyler, who was just a toddler, so badly he broke his arms and legs. People told me later that he wanted my mother all to himself. I guess we four kids (along with the twins, I had an older brother, Billy) got in his way. I can't explain why he decided to become a father. What is even stranger is that when they split up, he fought our mother for custody of us. I guess he thought if she were going to leave him, he would hurt her the worst way he knew how. While the custody fight was going on, I had to stay with these people called foster parents for

three months. This was a scary time, because my brother and I kept being moved around. Finally we were returned to my mother. I was happy to be back with her, but I was also constantly afraid that she would disappear. Even though she kept telling me that the custody battle was over, I was afraid to let her out of my sight.

But life got back to normal, and then something wonderful happened. My mother got married again. Her new husband, like my biological father, is in the Air Force. I love my new daddy! He is tall, handsome, and nice. He seems to love us kids as well. He went to court and adopted us, making us a real family. And now we have a beautiful baby sister, named Alice. She has blonde hair and blue eyes and is such a happy baby, always trying to follow us big kids around.

I think we have the best Daddy in the world. I had a lot of operations when I was little, because I had been born with a condition called a cleft palate. This means I had a hole in the roof of my mouth where the two sides hadn't grown together properly. Like many people with cleft palates, I had a split in my upper lip. My cleft palate makes me look different than other children. My lip is scarred where it was repaired. My nose is wide and flat, and my speech is affected, too. When I am in the hospital, Daddy sits by my bed at lunchtime and reads

me stories. I feel so loved and safe in these moments.

Life isn't perfect, of course. Like most Air Force families, we have to move a lot. With each new move, I am sent to a new school. That isn't so bad. I like school, and I am a good student. The other students are the problem. They laugh at me because I can't speak clearly. With every move, I have to deal with a new group of teasing kids.

The last time we all move together is when we go to Seymour, Indiana, where my mother's family lives. This time my brothers go to one school, but I am assigned to a different one. I don't understand this new school. The other kids can't read. They stare at the wall a lot, and they can't play games. Nobody gives me homework. I realize that these children are severely handicapped.

I remember sitting outside the office, listening to the principal and my mother argue over where I belonged.

"She'll be made fun of in a regular school!" said the principal. "The other children will laugh at her!"

"Well, that's her problem, isn't it?" my mother shot back. "She'll have to learn to deal with it. I can't always be here to protect her. She wants to learn, and you can't help her here."

With that we marched out, hand-in-hand.

Next thing I knew, I was enrolled in a school that gave me homework.

Just as I am getting settled into my comfortable little-girl routine, my mother begins talking about a place called Vietnam. There is a war going on there, and my daddy has to go help fight. First, though, he needs to spend a couple of weeks in Montana. As we snuggle together in the rocking chair, Mother explains that she is going to Montana, too, to see Daddy before he leaves. Billy, Trevor, Tyler, Alice, and I will stay in Seymour with Grandma.

I ask if she will be back soon. She runs her hands through my thick, curly hair and says, "Of course. I could never, ever forget to come back to you." Looking into her warm brown eyes, I know she will keep her promise. "You'll be a good girl for Grandma, won't you?" she asks. I say that I will. She holds me close as we rock, humming a soft tune. She knows that in my third-grade class, I am learning to write letters. "Why don't you write me a letter every day while I'm gone?" she asks. "That way, I'll know everything that is happening while I'm in Montana." I tell her that is a great idea. She kisses me on the forehead and says, "That's my girl."

My brothers and I know that as a soldier's children, we have to help our country by letting Daddy go to Vietnam. But we aren't sure we

like the idea of Mother going to Montana. Billy and I talk about it a lot. Billy is ten years old and the smartest person I've ever met. He knows everything about the salamanders and frogs that we catch and keep as pets. He has dark hair like mine, and he is very strong. He always beats me at arm wrestling.

I can still beat Trevor and Tyler when we wrestle. They have blonde hair and are noisy as can be. They're looking forward to their seventh birthday party, but we are all a little sad that Mother will leave for Montana the day after that. But I tell them what she has told me. She could never, ever forget to come back to us.

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After I see the big man in blue talking with Grandma, I sleep for several more hours. Finally I wake up and get out of bed. The police car is gone from the front yard, and I wonder if I dreamed that strange episode in the dark. I wander around the house until I find my brothers and Grandma. We ask her who the man had been, and why he was wearing that funny hat with a strap that looked as if it was choking him. She explains that he was a state police officer and wore a special uniform. We ask why he had come to the house. Instead of answering, Grandma says that we should go outside to play.

I ask if I may pick some autumn flowers as a surprise for my mother. Grandma says yes.

The boys and I play hide-and-seek for a long time in the cornfield. I wonder why Mother is so late picking us up, but I'm not going to complain. She had promised that if Grandma gave her a good report, she would take us all out for ice cream. Finally Grandma calls us in for lunch. Her face is red, as though she had been crying again. I put my arm around her and ask if she is OK. She says yes, but that her heart hurts and that she needs to be quiet for a bit longer. I leave her alone for a while, but eventually wander back to ask what time Mother will be picking us up. She answers that she wants to take a walk with me.

We walk along, she holding my hand. She asks if I believe that Jesus loves everyone. I say of course; my mother always told me that. Grandma tells me that Jesus does love me and my mother too, and that he has made special plans for her. My mother has gone away forever, to live with Jesus in heaven.

I drop my flowers. I tell Grandma that she is wrong. My mother had promised she would never leave me. She was going to that place called Montana, but she would be coming back to me very soon. I explain that Jesus does not need a mother, because he already has one. Besides, Mother would not agree to live with

Jesus without me. I tell Grandma I will go sit on the front steps and wait until my mother comes to pick me up.

As I sit there, Grandma tells me again that my mother will not be coming. Something bad has happened at the trailer. She says something about a defective heater, a gas explosion, a fire. I ignore her words. I know my mother. She will not let a fire keep her from coming back for us.

It is getting dark and cold out on the steps. Grandma makes something to eat, but I am not hungry. Finally Grandma tells me that Daddy is on the phone and that he wants to talk to me. Daddy repeats what Grandma has said. He adds that Mother has gone away on a secret special mission for Jesus and will not be coming back. I tell him I don't believe him; that my mother promised me she will always come back for me.

The house becomes very busy. The phone keeps ringing and Grandma rushes to answer it, whispering so we can't hear what she is saying. People arrive at the house, including one of my mother's two sisters. I like her; she has kids I play with. Mother's other sister lives far away in Colorado, but I hear Grandma say that she is coming home as well. Everyone is either very quiet or crying. Finally I go to sleep, hoping that Mother will be there in the morning and that all the confusion will stop.

But in the morning, Mother is still not

there. Instead, my daddy's parents have arrived. This is Grandma and Grandpa Resuba, and they have brought us candy. I don't know the Resubas very well. All I remember about visiting them is sitting in their kitchen having a snack. My mother's younger sister has arrived from Colorado, too. She is my favorite aunt. She sometimes comes to help us when we move. I feel sure that she will fix everything and bring Mother back. Although she is blonde, she is a lot like my dark-haired mother.

Grandma and Grandpa Resuba leave for a hotel, taking baby Alice with them.

That night, I cry in bed because I miss my mother so much. Tomorrow, Grandma says, we will go to her funeral. My aunt crawls into my bed. She rocks and holds me, running her hands through my hair just like my mother does. "I want my mommy!" I sob. "I don't care what Jesus wants! I want her back!" She rocks and rocks me, telling me over and over that my mommy loves me.

In the morning, I put on my best dress and good shoes. We go to the funeral home, where I see a long brown box with pretty gold handles. It is closed. Everyone tells me my beautiful 31-year-old mother is in there. This is a silly thing to say, because anyone can tell my mother can't breathe inside a box. There are a lot of songs and prayers, and then we drive to a cemetery,

where the long box is lowered into the ground.

As we leave the cemetery, we are told some surprising news. We aren't returning to Grandma's house in Seymour. Instead, we are driving to the bus station. We will be traveling with Grandma and Grandpa Resuba to their home in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

This news scares me very much. How will my mother ever find me if I leave Indiana? And why do the Resubas seem so angry? They are hugging and kissing Alice, but glaring at Billy, Trevor, Tyler, and me as if we have done something terrible. They keep calling us a name I don't understand. Alice is their "granddaughter," but we are "those bastards."

Once we are on the bus, Alice sits with them, but they tell us to find seats further away. I am so small I have to kneel on the seat to see out the window. A kind old black woman sits beside me and gives me half her sandwich. She asks Grandma Resuba where we are going. Grandma Resuba answers, "My son's wife died, and we're taking our granddaughter home with us. Those others are the children from her first marriage." My mother taught us that children should be seen and not heard, so I don't ask any questions. But I wonder why the Resubas are putting us into two categories. We are all brothers and sisters, but only Alice is "our granddaughter." What are we?

Everywhere the bus stops, I look desperately around for my mother. I am terrified that with every mile we travel, we are moving further and further away from her. I remember the last conversation we had about her going to Montana. Maybe I should start writing letters so that she will know what is happening to us.