

# RADIO SCRIPTS

By Margaret Menamin



*Clown* by Pierre Renoir

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From the early 1980s into the late 1990s, nearly 20 years, I wrote and produced a weekly radio feature called *The Baffled Generation*. It had begun as a weekly newspaper feature in the late 1970s. Here are a few of my favorites from the series.

Some of the scripts have been altered/updated slightly since they were aired. These scripts were originally produced at Public Radio Station KUMR in Rolla, MO and Public Radio Station WDUQ in Pittsburgh, PA, and are used by kind permission of those stations.

## ADRIFT ON A FLOATING PANEL

I don't suppose there has ever been a decade in history when fashions were so undeniably silly as during the 1950s. That was the era of women who looked like pumpkins, balloons, parachutes, umbrellas and flagpoles topped by flying saucers. Their hair turned into skullcaps and, a little later, beehives. They took to wearing cufflinks and bow ties, and men, in retaliation, started wearing a lot of pink.

*Le chic* in the 1950s was *le extrême*: the chemise, the sack and the bubble. If you were a young woman of fashion, you had a shape either like a pregnant matron or a 13-year-old boy.

Unfortunately, it was during this decade, more than at any time before or since, that I cared enough about fashion to follow it. I tried them all: the skin-tight sheath dresses, the top-heavy sacks, the layers of crinoline petticoats and, yes, even the hoop skirts which were back with their same old problems of creating a Gateway Arch when you sat down.

Somewhere in the midst of all this madness came an additional fillip: the floating panel, so named because it was attached only by a monstrous, carefully tailored bow between the shoulder blades and swung in space from that point to the hemline which, of course, during the 1950s, was finding its slow, painful way upwards from the ankles.

My usual reaction to a new fashion, then as now, was "How repulsive!" But then, after seeing something foisted on the female form a couple of times, I followed the herd right into it. It took me no time at all after seeing a couple of the floating panel sensations to realize I had to have one of my own. I had never seen anything so gorgeously smart and so gorgeously unnecessary.

I bought one of black crepe, with an inset front panel of green and black printed rayon taffeta, which made me look something like a brilliant caterpillar turning into a drab and undernourished moth. My less fashionable peers and my family offered their opinions, even though I didn't particularly want them. My mother said if I'd sit down in different chairs often enough, maybe she could finally get me to sweep the floors for her.

My sister said she had always suspected I was a cow, and now that I had a long tail for switching flies, her suspicions were confirmed. My brother wanted to know if he could tie a strong rope to me the next windy day and use me for a tail to his kite.

I bore it all stoically. I knew I was going to wow my more sophisticated friends at the coming New Year's Eve party.

And I did. I swept into the midst of the festivities, knocking hors d'oeuvres off coffee tables and drinks from unsteady hands. I wrapped myself around lamps and table legs, and tangled myself in shoelaces that happened to be behind me when I was sitting down. But when I did my neatest trick of the evening, there was no one there to see.

Sometime during the evening I sought the privacy of the bathroom and, in concentrating on the task at hand, forgot about the panel. As I rearranged my clothes, I realized I had dipped it into the stool and it was dripping wet from the waist down. Now I knew why the thing was called a floating panel.

Fortunately, wet black crepe looks exactly like dry black crepe. Nobody would know if I could just keep from dripping all over the carpet when I left the bathroom. I couldn't wring out the panel; that would have resulted in an instant mass of wrinkles. I found a bath towel, folded it around the panel and blotted out as much moisture as I could, crossed my fingers and returned to the party.

The rest of the evening was agony. I dared not sit down again for fear of leaving a wet spot, so I became a classic cocktail party conversation-hopper, moving from one little group of people to another. I dared not brush against anyone as I walked, and if someone started to move in behind me I fled without explanation. As the clock showed the new year in, I located my escort and prevailed on him to take me home as soon as possible.

My heavy coat kept the moisture from soaking through to the car seat, and I arrived at home damp and cold but unembarrassed. I had made it through the evening without anyone realizing my predicament.

Or so I thought. I had forgotten that crepe shrinks—rapidly—when it's wet. As I turned my back to my full-length mirror a few minutes later

and groped for the zipper on the back of the dress, I looked over my shoulder and saw all too clearly the little drama that had gradually unfolded that evening before the eyes of the party guests, not unlike a stage curtain being slowly raised after an overture.

My hem-length panel now hung only a little below my waist.

## **HONEST, OFFICER, I WAS JUST SITTING HERE**

When President Jimmy Carter was in office, I was in a newsroom. During that time I was also burning midnight oil, writing a play about a frustrated female society reporter who is fighting for a chance to cover a story more interesting than tea parties and beauty contests. To that extent, my play was based on my own experiences, but from that point on it was pure fantasy. My heroine found herself accidentally caught up in a plot to assassinate the President, and became romantically involved with a stranger who turned out to be a Secret Service man.

As I developed my plot, I spent many evenings with pen and notepad at my favorite table in a local restaurant which kept late night hours and was a favorite hangout for college students. Many of these students were interested friends who would stop by my table when they saw me there and ask about the latest developments in my play.

One evening as I sat there, a strange young man in a booth at the rear of the room waited until my friends had left, then came to my table and helped himself to the empty seat.

“Did I hear you say you’re a newspaper writer?” he asked me, and I told him I was.

“Well, I’d like some publicity,” he said.

One of those, I thought. Well, at least he was straightforward about it. I let him talk, and he told me he was a professional boxer whose father, a boxing promoter, was giving him a raw deal. “There might be a story here, after all,” I thought, getting out my notebook. I started taking down his words in shorthand (does anybody do that anymore?), but within a few minutes he began to ramble. In one sentence he would come on like a religious fanatic, and in the next, like a devil worshipper. His eyes weren’t focusing properly. He had been drinking beer, but this wasn’t all because of beer.

I began trying to ease out of the situation. “I really won’t have time to do an interview today,” I told him. “Maybe next week.”

“I’ll be gone next week,” he said. “I’m going to Washington, D.C.”

“Really?” I inquired politely. “What are you planning to do there?”

In a harsh voice, he spat out, “Confront Mr. Mondale.”

I asked him what he planned to discuss with then Vice President Walter Mondale, and he answered vehemently, “All those nice little lies and jokes he tells the public.”

“You don’t like Mr. Mondale?” I asked.

Suddenly changing mood again, he became cautious. “Mr. Mondale’s a wonderful man,” he said. “If you’re writing this down, say that I said he’s a wonderful man.”

He rambled some more, and finally left. The next morning I dumped the notes into a newsroom wastebasket and forgot about him.

That evening, at the same table in the same restaurant, I saw a policeman and two other official-looking men in suits enter and summon the manager to a back room. Not long after that, the manager came back and beckoned me to join them.

I didn’t know what was going on, but I went back, and one of the men introduced himself as a Secret Service agent. “So that’s it,” I thought, knowing what practical jokers my friends were. I decided to play along, gave him my best society reporter smile, and told him I’d always wanted to meet a real Secret Service man. I assured him that I was Sophia Loren. Then the other one introduced himself as a Secret Service agent too, and produced identification to prove it.

My knees started shaking. If these were real federal men, my little friends were going too far with their jokes. Our posteriors were in peril. I must have looked guilty of everything in the world.

One of the men showed me a snapshot and asked me if I had ever seen that man before. Then I remembered the strange young man I had talked with the previous evening and, as the two men questioned me, scraps of the

disjointed conversation I hadn't taken seriously. I came back to the newsroom, dug my notes out of the wastebasket and transcribed them for the police.

I saw the strange young man only once after that, on the street, and he didn't remember me at all. I think he left town soon afterward, probably by official request. But I'll never forget his name or his face, and I'll never forget what the Secret Service men said to me as they left the restaurant that night. They asked me not to discuss the incident and warned me to be careful if I ran into him again, because he had told them he had a girlfriend who was a writer at the newspaper.

"You don't really think the guy is dangerous, do you?" I asked.

"Probably not," they told me, "but you never know."

I didn't tell anyone about it until there was a new President in office. Somehow I felt that if there was any danger to Mr. Mondale, it ended when he left office.

But you never do know, do you? About a year later, President Ronald Reagan narrowly escaped death when he was shot by a confused young man named John Hinckley. Nobody had taken him seriously, either.

## WHY AREN'T YOU WHO I THOUGHT YOU WERE?

I don't have any trouble remembering who I am, at least most of the time. But I've had my share of problems being able to tell who other people are.

Everybody has this problem now and then. I used to work with two men who had red beards and, although I didn't see any other similarity between them, people were always mistaking them for each other. It got so bad that finally one of them bought a tee shirt and had it custom-lettered to read I AM NOT BILL BLANK. The other one promptly went out and bought a tee shirt labeled I AM NOT BILL BLANK EITHER.

People used to confuse me with my sisters. I can understand this, although I didn't think we looked that much alike. The point is that other people did, and sometimes it took some straightening out. I remember the time I was standing in a supermarket checkout line, picking up a few last-minute purchases for my first baby who was due any day. A friendly little old lady behind me said, "Oh, hello, Margaret. I heard you got married last week."

"No," I explained carefully. "That was my sister. "I've been married awhile."

But I have this problem with identities all the time. Not only can I not tell people apart, I can't tell cars apart. When I was a kid I once ran out of the school building in a pouring rain, vaulted into what I thought was my father's car, and sat down beside a woman I had never seen before. My father knew lots of people I didn't know, so I supposed he was giving her a ride home, though I didn't understand why she was sitting in the driver's seat. I guess she'd slipped over on that side when he went inside to look for my little brother.

"My daddy will be out in just a minute," I volunteered.

"Oh, really?" she said.

We sat in stony silence, neither of us introducing herself to the other. Finally, I said, "I don't know why my daddy is so late. Maybe my little brother got lost."

"Your little brother, too?" she asked icily. Then I could see the light dawning in her face. "Honey, are you sure you're in the right car?"

"Well, this is my daddy's car, isn't it?" I said.

"No," she answered. "This is my car." She was right. My father was parked three cars down, wondering what in thunder had happened to me.

Only a few years ago, outside a motel, I set off an alarm when I started to get into a van I thought was my husband's.

Then there was the time, some years ago, when I saw a friend's pickup approaching me as I walked up the main street of town. Being in a lighthearted mood, I began waving and blowing kisses to him as he drove toward me. He didn't return my greeting, but that was part of the fun. He was the sort of person who wouldn't have, and I was enjoying making something of a spectacle of myself in his behalf.

Only when the pickup drew even with me did I realize it was driven by a man I'd never seen in my life before, and hope I never see again. He must have wondered what I was selling.

Another time I dashed into a Halloween party, dressed as a lady of the evening and ran into a friend I hadn't seen for some months. He was dressed in monk's robes, and had his face half hidden under the loose hood, but it was exactly the kind of costume he'd have chosen, and I recognized him at once. I threw my arms around him, gave him an enthusiastic kiss, and went on into the next room.

There sat the friend I thought I'd just kissed, dressed as Jack the Ripper.

Hoping I'd never be recognized out of costume, I returned to the hallway to apologize to the person who'd received my effusive greetings. I explained my mistake with much embarrassment.

“That’s all right,” grinned the stranger. “We don’t get much of that at the monastery.”

I’ve learned to look before I kiss, but I have a friend who once nearly got himself jailed through a case of mistaken identify. It happens that he is a minister who has a houseful of daughters, all generously built. Most of the people in his town can recognize the family structure, so to speak, from a few feet away.

On the day he learned not to take identities for granted, he walked into a grocery store only to see one of his daughters already there. She was bending temptingly over a low grocery shelf, with her ample backside taking up a fair amount of aisle space. My friend, although a man of the cloth, is not without temptations, and after all, it was his own daughter. He decided to announce his presence with hearty fatherly gusto and drew back his hand to get squared away for a resounding whack.

Fortunately, she straightened up just before the salute reached its target. She too was someone he had never seen before. He drew back his hand as if he’d touched a hot stove and hurried out of the store, envisioning headlines about ministers being jailed on morals charges.

Things ain’t always what they seem.

## **MY FATHER'S PROTEST MOVEMENT**

My father never wanted to be in the Army. He was too much of a pacifist and too much of a maverick. But he went up for his enlistment physical, prepared to do his duty, and it wasn't his fault they insisted his hives were measles, sent him home and told him not to call them, they'd call him.

He thought he should be doing something to help out his country and family instead of being a burden to them in the poverty-ridden days of the Depression, so he enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps, one of the more palatable of the government programs designed to put jobless young men to work at something useful, and was sent to Minnesota to help build roads through the wilderness.

The CCC was run like a military agency, and had the same rank system. You took orders from your superior offices and you asked no questions. Unfortunately, my father's outfit, which was already suffering the inconveniences of being stuck in a village of about 400 people, most of whom were male Indians, had another cross to bear. The sergeant sent to shape up the green youngsters from out in the sticks arrived there long after his reputation, which traveled from camp to camp before him as complaints from one location mounted up enough to get him transferred to another one. The boys were already prepared for an argumentative, egotistical, pugilistic bully who compounded his other unpleasantnesses by drinking heavily when he was off duty.

Civilians, of course, weren't answerable to this overbearing character, and the first Saturday night he "went to town" he got thrown out of its one night spot.

My father, who had always been a teetotaler, had gone to town with the rest of the boys, but he hadn't gone inside because he didn't drink or dance, and even if he had, there were only three women in the place. He stood around outside and talked with a buddy while the boys inside downed their beer and tried their luck with the women. The sergeant, already too full of alcohol, apparently had tried to pull rank with the women and when it didn't work, had become belligerent. The proprietor had put him outside, and he hit the fresh air swearing and brandishing a gun.

My father was the first person he saw, so he lurched toward him, trying to steady and aim his gun.

“I guess you’d like some too,” he said threateningly.

My father always had a strong aversion to drunks, not to mention considering it rude to point a loaded gun at someone. He was probably scared out of his socks, although it would be hard to make me believe that, but he didn’t say anything; he simply walked over to the sergeant, took the gun out of his hand and threw it as far into the woods as he could send it.

The sergeant walked away, muttering and swearing, and my father forgot about it until the next day, when two MPs walked up and said they wanted to talk to him.

They questioned him about the incident of the previous night and he told them the story. They were pleasant enough and wanted to know if he remembered where he threw the gun. He said he thought he could find it, so they followed him to the woods where they located the gun and promptly placed him under arrest for disarming an officer.

“Wait a minute,” my father said. “The man was drunk. He was waving a gun. I was just protecting myself. He could have killed me. Besides, he was out of uniform, and he’s not supposed to be carrying a gun when he’s out of uniform. It’s against regulations.”

They didn’t quarrel with his logic, but they had their orders, and he was placed under arrest and scheduled for a court-martial.

The day the hearing began, in a little frame shack buried deep in Minnesota’s northwoods, my father had given up to a case of the man blues. He was a big, tall, innocent country boy; he had enough faith in military justice to assume he wouldn’t get the firing squad, but he figured he’d go into the stockade for six months or so and his family, not being able to hear from him, would be worried sick.

The trial hadn’t gone far when he began to hear loud, tearing sounds at the front of the building. The officers of the court shifted in their chairs and tried to talk over the noise but it continued, accompanied by creaks and

pounding and more ripping. Finally one of the officers went to the front door to investigate the commotion. There on the ground before him, in a none-too-neat pile, lay the dismantled front steps and side rails of the building. On top of that lay the first of the building's clapboards, and the boys in my father's platoon were systematically removing the others, one by one, and adding them to the stack.

Nobody said anything. They just continued to tear the building down, piece by piece, as quickly and efficiently as possible, until the officer in charge stepped to the front door and said, "O.K., boys, that's enough. The case is dismissed."

The sergeant was transferred to another camp. So far as my father knew, he was never court-martialed for the gun incident. After all, he was an officer and a gentleman.

## VAN CLIBURN I'M NOT

Are you ready for this, world? I'm taking piano lessons.

I mean, from scratch. From the point where the teacher says, "These eight white keys and these five black keys make one octave. When you see this funny little thing here on the line that looks like a golf club, you're supposed to put this finger on this key."

Unfortunately—and please don't quarrel with my choice of words here—I can't give you a sample of my progress at this time, because my typewriter doesn't produce musical notes. Come to think of it, my piano doesn't seem to, either.

Suffice it to say that after only a few lessons I'm already composing at the keyboard. Not that I'm supposed to, but you can't stifle genius. (Think Mozart.) I doubt if any composer in history has come up with so many different variations on "Skip Along" and "Little Sleepy Tune." And you ought to hear my Rhapsody on a Theme from Wrist Exercises for the Lower Grade Student. My teacher simply couldn't believe it when she heard it.

Of course, my teacher really doesn't appreciate my digressions from the traditional melodies, but the, who appreciated Debussy's early compositions?

I must say I do find it difficult to relate to pieces with names like "Sad Dwarf Walking," although my teacher tells me everything I play sounds like something sad walking. They're charming little exercises, and rather intricate, too: most of them have five different notes for each hand, and that takes all ten fingers. I haven't yet learned what I'm supposed to do when I come to a piece that takes more than ten fingers. I'm making a list of friends I might invite to go along to practice with me.

At any rate, I composed my own work, which is a lot easier to play. It's called "Tired Housewife Drooping" and it takes only two fingers. It goes something like this: "Thump...thump. Thump...thump." It's written in the key of Up, and it gets slow and slower as you get tireder and tireder.

Then there are two other little exercises called “Ride Up Hill” and “Ride Down Hill.” They’re supposed to teach me to play steps. Steps on a piano keyboard are like jumps on a checkerboard. And I play them the same way I play checkers. That is to say, I forget which direction I’m supposed to be moving, and whether I’m supposed to be on the black spaces or the white ones. Then my teacher crowns me.

She also makes a lot of personal comments. Like telling me I need to limber up my wrists. Now, that bothers me. I never mentioned her broken fingernail. But she said it, and she gave me another exercise which she calls Caterpillar Walk. I surprised her with another of my original pieces, which I call Centipede Stumble. The average pianist couldn’t handle this one at all. You have to have several thumbs on each hand to make it work.

It isn’t helping me a great deal that I’ve been fooling around with a typewriter for so many years. It’s getting me all confused. Every time I hit a wrong note on the piano I start looking for the backspace. Then I go to the typewriter and hit C and expect E to be two keys away. The last letter I wrote to my Aunt Mavis looked as if I was studying a foreign language.

And I almost feel I am. But don’t despair, music lovers everywhere. My day will come. I’m going to play Carnegie Hall, and when I do, you’re all invited. The doors will be open wide. I think that’s what they call an escape clause. At any rate, when I walk onstage, it isn’t going to be one of those cases of they all laughed when I sat down to play. I promise you, a hush will fall on the house and there won’t be a dry eye in the place.

Right now my piano teacher cries every time I walk in.

## BIRDS OF A FEATHER

I once got one of those funny little cards from my sister that read “May the Bluebird of Happiness Richly Decorate Your Easter Bonnet.” I didn’t think it was funny at all. The only thing that could make a cat lover of me would be birds.

Years ago, Alfred Hitchcock produced a movie called “The Birds.” It wasn’t a great movie, but it was a scary one. Based on a short story by Daphne du Maurier, its premise was that the birds—all kinds of birds, all of them, everywhere—decided to fight back. They were attacking people. Hitchcock ended the movie on a hopeful note, but in the original story, the last living family was barricaded in a little house on a remote island, waiting out their last hours as the hard little beaks were splintering through the heavy wooden door.

I don’t recommend the story for imaginative children. It’s enough to give you recurring nightmares and keep you out of the library, on whose ledges pigeons love to roost. Did you ever look a bird in the eye? I mean, up close, from the side, which is the way they look at you? They’ve got a mean look, downright malevolent. They’re malicious. I’ve never walked right up on a big, fat robin, but I’ve seen a few of them, and cardinals, too, at close range through my windows back in the days when I aided and abetted the enemy by putting food on the window ledges for them. They looked right at me, as bold as you please, and not at all afraid of me. I’ve known for a long time the little devils are watching mankind—especially the buzzards.

People rhapsodize about birds. Take Papageno in “The Magic Flute.” Take Siegfried, who is led through the forest by a magic bird to the rock where Brünnhilde lies asleep. The Germans set store by this kind of stuff but, frankly, I think the birdman is squirrely, and as for Siegfried, he’s an ungrateful brat who’s no better than the dragons and giants he mows down.

Folklore is full of stories and songs about birds, birds who carry tender love letters or fly little air mail messages from behind prison bars. So what? Birds hate cages, and they identify with jailbirds. It took only one little incident in my life to convince me that I don’t want anything to do with jailbirds or any other kinds of birds.

For several years I was clerk of the magistrate court in a small rural county in Missouri where my duties included such unpopular tasks as writing out warrants for arrest and writing orders committing convicted criminals to jail.

I came to know some of these lawbreakers quite well, because they kept coming back. Their crimes were often those of weakness or indiscretion rather than intent, and often as not committed under the influence of alcohol. One such criminal was Red. He was a good-natured rascal whose only real transgression was a love of whiskey. When he loved it too much he did stupid things, such as getting behind the wheel of his pickup and driving across the cemetery, or falling asleep in the middle of a city street or, once, setting a state forest on fire.

By the time he appeared in court to answer charges each time he was sober and sorry, but the damage was done. He spent quite a bit of time with us, and he was a trusty. He washed windows, cut the grass around the courthouse and, when he had it with him at the time of arrest, would bring his guitar to jail and entertain the other prisoners or even the judge with his shaky renditions of the latest country and western tunes.

Although he was pleasant about it, Red didn't like being in jail. It gave him a few meals and got him off the sauce for a few weeks, but he missed his freedom. After so many days in the cage, the bird would stop singing.

One day as I crossed the lawn between my office and the main part of the courthouse, I waved to Red and started up the courthouse steps when I felt something moist and cool hit the top of my head.

I looked up and realized I had just been anointed by a pigeon.

Red looked up at the same time and, as I put my hand to my hair and further spread the good deed, he began to cackle like a malignant old hen.

There was no keeping the humiliating incident quiet. Red's cackle changed to a roar, then to loud, knee-slapping whoops. The courthouse officials came outside to see what was going on, and Red howled and pointed to me as I slunk to the bathroom.

I washed my hair vigorously and came out dripping and miserable. I was so busy that day I knew better than to ask for the afternoon off to go home and get dried out, so I sat at my desk looking like a drowned sparrow.

Red told the story to every incoming prisoner after that. Those who were allowed outside the jail made a point of greeting me each time I passed with a loud, "Hi, Birdie!"

Don't tell me that bird didn't choose its target. And don't tell me Red didn't put him up to it. Birds of a feather flock together.

## **GRANDMA AND GRANDPA SPLIT THE BLANKET**

One out of every two marriages in the United States today ends in divorce. The next sentence is: It makes you wonder, doesn't it?

Well, yes. Since divorce was relatively rare in Grandma's day, it makes you wonder whether marriages were happier then than they are now.

I say they probably were not. My grandparents saw two of their children die before they reached adulthood, one from pneumonia and the other of tuberculosis; saw two more die before their own lives ended, one from complications of alcoholism and the other one victim of a murderer. They eked out a living on a rocky farm during the years of the Great Depression, and pulled themselves and their children through diseases that are relatively unheard of now but were often fatal then.

My grandparents were more typical than unusual, I would imagine. Their marriage survived problems few marriages could survive today, and the reason was probably simply that divorce in those days was scandalous, unthinkable, and a last resort. Today, too often, it is a first resort when a couple can't agree.

Today people not only have more freedom to dissolve a marriage, they have more freedom to choose their marital partners. My grandparents weren't forced to marry each other, but I think there was a kind of social pressure in those days that was more subtle and psychological than anything else. You grew up in a certain neighborhood, associated with certain people, and you chose your mate from among them. Often you knew, from the time you were in your early teens, who your life's companion would be.

My grandparents were like that. Grandpa, whose father had died and whose mother had abandoned him at an early age, and Grandma, whose father was a brutal alcoholic, lived in the same small rural area and found each other while they were still children, probably bolstering each other's courage as needed. "Will chased me under the bed and kissed me when we were about 12," my Grandma told me. "I guess that was my engagement. I always knew we'd get married when we grew up."

By the time they were married, my grandfather was a handsome young circuit-riding Methodist minister, with a single-minded devotion to spreading his faith wherever a small congregation would spring up in the area and ask for a leader.

Any time left over from his church went into his little farm. There wasn't much time for fun. My grandmother, who had come from nomadic, almost gypsy people, had run barefoot over Missouri hills and woods until she reached an age at which it was unseemly for a young lady to do so. A clear-eyed, high-spirited beauty, she loved the outdoors, and was as strong-willed and independent as Grandpa was gentle. Nevertheless, she settled down to a life of hard work, childbearing, and pride in her husband and his profession.

Several years before World War I broke out, my grandfather felt the call of God to spread Christianity to the Indians in the Oklahoma Territory. Unquestioning, my grandmother packed up her household goods and the children, and went with him.

Oklahoma was a nightmare to her, full of drought, disease and deprivation. She reached rock bottom when she and the children were all desperately ill with diphtheria and Grandpa was away preaching on some Indian reservation. Gold may have been with Grandpa, but she felt they had both forsaken her.

"Nobody would come near us or help us," she told me, years later, well after their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. "They were afraid of getting sick too. I knew we were all going to die if we stayed there."

She finally found a farmer who pitied them enough to pack the family into quilts and blankets in his wagon and take them to the train station where she used her carefully hoarded household money to buy tickets to Kansas City.

By the time they had reached Kansas City, the children were, by some miracle, beginning to feel better, and she was beginning to think it over. "I decided I was putting myself and my children before God," she said. "I didn't like it much, but I figured Will was right, and I didn't have any right to leave him." She counted her money; if they could make the trip back

without eating, she had just enough money to get back to Oklahoma. Maybe somebody would be kind enough to give the children some food on the way.

As she made her way determinedly toward the ticket window, another eastbound train rolled into the station, and she turned around to see a tall, familiar figure striding toward her.

“Will!”

“Ora!”

“I was wrong—”

“I was selfish—”

Grandpa gave her one of those smiles that had won her heart in the first place. “I have a whole houseful of little heathens right here who need to be saved,” he said. “Come on, Ora. We’re going home.”

## GAMES PEOPLE PLAYED—BACK WHEN

Nearly 70 years ago I came into a world without video games.

I suppose it was fortunate, because it was also a world without money, at least the kind of money it would take to install fancy entertainment for the kids in the family room.

We scraped up a dime now and then for the Saturday afternoon matinee, and if our parents didn't consider it gambling, we might buy a chance on a punchboard. (Does anybody today know what a punchboard was? It was like a baseball pool. The person selling the chances had a little double-thickness cardboard with perforated circles all over it. You paid a dime or a quarter to punch out one of the circles, and under the first layer you found a second circle with a number. When all the punches had been sold, the cardholder punched out the big circle in the middle, revealing the winning number. The person holding that number got a price or a percentage of the money, and the rest went to the person who had sold the punches.)

Mostly we made our own entertainment when I was a kid. There wasn't any money to do otherwise. Looking back at the things I found to enjoy when I was a child, I can just hear today's youngsters, oriented to cell phones, pocket calculators, home computers and highly sophisticated digital toys, say, "You gotta be kiddin'."

But it was such a simple world then. And my parents and grandparents knew how to make the most of it on the least possible money.

One of my earliest memories is of my grandmother showing me how to pull apart a horsemint blossom, petal by pink petal, and insert the long, spiky end of each petal into the open front of the last one so that eventually, if you were very careful and very patient, you had a full circle, a delicate little wreath. I don't think I ever managed to finish very many; if I did, they couldn't have lasted very long before they wilted. But I'm sure my efforts kept me out of my grandmother's hair many early June afternoons when she was busy in the garden.

My other grandmother showed me how to braid long chains from white clover blossoms. On lazy days I made them just long enough for

crowns and appointed myself princess of some fantasy realm, but when I was more ambitious I made them longer and jumped rope with them.

My grandfather showed me how to make baskets from apple halves. Now I realize that Grandpa hadn't had the opportunity for good dental care and simply couldn't bite into an apple and chew it as other people could. But then I thought he went to all that trouble just for my amusement. He would cut an apple in half with his pocket knife and carefully scrape the apple from inside the skin, a bit at a time, eating the apple as he worked. When he was finished, the skin and a little strip at the center would remain, and this would be my plaything, into which I would put buttons or kernels of corn.

My parents, too, knew how to make occasions out of events that would probably bore kids today. I remember going out to someone's cornfield with my father when I was about four, where he lifted me into the cockpit of a small plane that belonged to one of his friends. We didn't go up in the plane, just sat there in the cockpit of a real, honest-to-goodness airplane, and I was so impressed I never forgot it. I love flying now, but I think my first real taste of the thrill of it came to me in that primitive little contraption in that old cornfield.

Dad used to play a game with us when we drove to a neighboring town to visit my grandparents. In those days the railroads were used much more than now, and we often drove through the underpass just as a train passed overhead. Dad would speed up or slow down a little bit sometimes to make it happen, and his comment was always the same: "Look out! We're going to be run over by a train!" We loved getting "run over the train" and it was always a disappointment when there was no train in sight as we approached the underpass.

We loved riding in the bed of Dad's truck and, if another car was following closely behind us, we'd wave or make faces at the driver. One time we had been waving at a family in a car behind us for quite some time when the driver had an opportunity to pass us. When he did, his wife threw packages of chewing gum into the truck bed. After that, we waved vigorously and hopefully at anyone who came in sight.

When I was a little older we went on a month-long trip to Colorado and Wyoming, staying with relatives, mostly, and spending very little money. But we did things that didn't cost any money: slept out, serenaded

by coyotes; explored old, abandoned miners' cabins; picked sagebrush and scented our palms and skin with it. At one point my father lined us up against a nondescript sign and took our picture. "Children," he announced impressively, "you are standing on the Continental Divide." I didn't know what that meant until he explained that that was there the two halves of the world came together. I was properly awed, but I was glad to get out of there. I didn't want to stick around too long in case something came unglued.

## THE BEST SHOWS ARE LIVE ONES

I've had so many embarrassing moments in my life that they're a way of life to me. I no longer rate anything that happens to me as to whether it's embarrassing; just whether it embarrasses me in front of one or two selected onlookers or provides entertainment for a large segment of the population.

When something supremely embarrassing happens in front of only a few people, you have some chance of suppressing it. If they're friends, they might possibly refrain from mentioning it, but there aren't very many friends with that kind of loyalty. Your best bet is to know something on them, and quietly bring it up in a private conversation as soon as possible afterward. You know, something like, "Say, George, I bet that time you stood up at the city council meeting and realized your fly was unzipped, you must have felt just about the same way I felt just now." Something casual and meaningful like that. George will get the idea, and he won't say anything to anybody about what happened to you—at least until you're out of earshot.

But when it happens in front of, say, anywhere upwards of a dozen people, you don't have a chance. You can't know something on everybody, and even if you did, the story would be out before you could remind all of them.

I don't know how many employees there were at the Missouri Department of Conservation office that awful day, years ago, or how many of them were at work the day I entertained them with my sweat and agony, but there were three floors of them, in the old Farm Bureau Building, and the entire front of the building was windows. They all had a front-row seat for the show.

I was doing some contract typing for the department, and I delivered various parts of the job to the office at two- to four-week intervals, usually catching a ride with a state official from another agency who drove from my town to the state capitol at the end of each week.

It happened that the man with whom I most often rode always made a pass at me in the car somewhere along the way. Just one, each trip, and I always fended it off, and then he'd forget about it for the rest of the trip. I always knew he'd do it, and he always did, but I always knew I'd have to

resist only the first one and there'd be no further attempt until the next trip. I was glad to get a free ride, so I always shrugged off the arm that landed casually around my shoulder, or gently pushed aside the hand that wandered toward my knee.

I don't know why he did it; maybe he had some kind of notebook in which he recorded these things, and felt he had failed to live up to his quota if he didn't at least try. Having once tried, he'd fulfilled his commitment, and could go ahead and turn his attention to the steering wheel. Whatever the reason, I suspected I wasn't the only woman who had to discourage his attentions. Such men usually have a reputation, and women keep each other informed of it.

On one such trip he had just bought a new car, outfitted with all kinds of extras including seat belts, which he insisted I use. I wasn't accustomed to them, but I followed his advice and buckled myself tightly into the contraption as he did the same, and thought that this might at least serve to keep him well on his side of the car.

He was more businesslike on that trip, and I thought he was either growing up or the seat belts had indeed inhibited him.

As we pulled up in front of the big building with its long, three-story high expanse of windows, I thanked him and tried to unfasten my seat belt. I couldn't get the buckle open.

"How does this thing work?" I asked him. He told me which gadget to push before pulling the belt loose, but I couldn't locate it.

"Here, let me try," he offered.

"No," I said, panic-stricken. "I'll get it in a minute." But I didn't. I had somehow twisted the belt, and had the buckle turned inward on a belt that was pulled very tightly around my middle.

My erstwhile chauffeur leaned over me, almost lying in my lap, and both of us struggled energetically with the buckle. Neither of us could get our hands inside the belt well enough to turn the buckle over, and finally he said, "You're going to have to hold your breath in real hard while I see if I can get the buckle released."

To his credit, he was all business. Every move he made was directed toward getting me out of that miserable belt. But for all I knew, he had a front-page reputation as the capital city's number one wolf, and I could imagine how it looked to all those faces in all those windows as we puffed, strained, sweated, groaned and jiggled around on the seat of that car.

The buckle finally gave and the seat belt loosened, and I fled the car with an embarrassed "Thank you." He gave me an amused look as if to say, "See, I really am perfectly safe, after all."

When I walked into the building, nobody said a word about it. At least, not until I was out of earshot.

## **YOUR KIDS OR YOUR IMAGE – TAKE YOUR CHOICE**

There are two kinds of adults: First, there are those well-groomed, carefully dressed, socially correct people whose seams are always straight, whose ties are always knotted perfectly, who always say and do the right thing at the right time, and never find themselves in circumstances where an explanation or apology is necessary.

And then there are parents.

Kids can get you into a heap of trouble, you know?

One reason, of course, is that we teach them to be honest and then it backfires.

For example, when Aunt Sophronia comes calling unexpectedly and remarks that she doesn't see the vase she gave you for a wedding present, and you say, "Oh, Auntie, my best friend Julie—you remember Julie?—was having her husband's boss over for dinner tonight and she wanted to borrow it for a centerpiece for her table. She wanted something really impressive, and she admired it so, I just didn't have the heart to refuse her. She promised to be very careful with it."

And then little Jimmy opens up and says, "But, Mommy, I saw it just a few minutes ago, right there in the pantry under the stairs, where you always keep it."

You don't have to give a kid something to work on; he'll find it for himself. A young couple who lived in my home town and operated the movie theater there had a talkative, precocious toddler who liked to play "Mommy." One evening her father overheard her playing "Mommy talking to the movie salesman."

"Come in, Mr. Salesman," she trilled. "Take off your coat and take off your hat and take off your pants and make yourself at home."

Fortunately, her father had a sense of humor. But when a stranger is confronted with something like that, he doesn't know what to think of your home life.

Another acquaintance of mine, whose husband ran the local motel, used to amuse her little girl by joining her for a morning gallop around the house on their broomstick horses. If Daddy was delayed at the motel office next door and couldn't get home for lunch on time, it kept the little girl's mind off her tummy until he could get away.

They were the Lone Ranger and Tonto, stalking bandits, varmints and stagecoach robbers until Daddy's steps sounded on the porch, at which time her mother would say, "Me hear-un paleface. Me go get-um." One day, when Tonto went galloping to the front office astride the broomstick steed, paleface became even paler and Tonto became genuine redskin. It wasn't her husband who stood looking through the screen door, but a customer who had mistaken her home for the motel office.

"I still can't think of it without cringing," she told me later.

I had my day too, all for the sake of my son, who has long since forgotten the incident, but I never have, and I never will. His favorite game, when he was about three, was "Mama-play-the-harmonica." I played with swirls, trills, flourishes, swoops and sweeps that would have put Borah Minnevitich in the shade. I rolled my eyes and arched my brows and puffed out my cheeks; I closed my eyes in ecstasy and widened them with excitement as the concertos and fiery rhapsodies poured forth.

It was always a magnificent performance, despite the fact that there was no sound. Indeed, there wasn't even a harmonica. For some reason I never understood, it delighted my son no end to see me pretend to play a harmonica that wasn't there and made no music. He would lie on his little back on the living room floor, rolling with laughter, applauding and shrieking with delight. Like most good hams, the more my audience urged me on, the more I showed off.

Unfortunately, my living room had tall windows that began just about a foot above floor level and reached within six inches of the ceiling, and it was in front of these that I was giving my solo performance the day the mayor walked up the street in front of my house.

I'll never know why the mayor was walking instead of driving his late-model Ford. I'll never know why he chose to walk on my street instead of one of the more scenic streets in town, but I found myself looking directly

into his eyes and playing a harmonica that wasn't there. It was too late to stop, so I went on playing, remembering that the mayor had kids of his own and must realize I was just amusing my son.

It was only after he had given me a couple of strange, startled looks and hurried on past my house that I realized he couldn't see my son at all: Bobby was lying on the floor, completely hidden from the street while I, for all the mayor knew, was serenading the angels or little creatures who were singing along with me from behind the wallpaper.

I think that's why I have never run for a city office. The opposition can use things like that against you.

## **“GO TO YOUR ROOM!”**

Show me a convict who's afraid of solitary confinement and I'll show you a kid whose mother's favorite phrase was “Go to your room!”

It's a peculiar thing that expectant parents will go out and buy yards and yards of pink and blue gingham, and spent hours painting miniature furniture and plastering nursery rhymes all over the walls of a room, only to start teaching the baby before the pabulum is dry on his chin that his room is the household equivalent of a leper colony.

I think parents make a big mistake by sending their kids to their rooms as a punishment. The average kid grows up in a whole houseful of unfriendly rooms: There's the kitchen, where Mom warns him to stay out from underfoot while she's working. There's the living room, where he knows he'd darn well better not get any chocolate or jelly or peanut butter on anything. There's the family room, where Dad or big brother monopolizes the TV or big sister chases him out because she wants to be alone with her boyfriend. There's the bathroom, where he's not allowed to dawdle or splash water, and there are other people's bedrooms, which are guarded like the vaults at Fort Knox. Then there's his own room. That's where he's sent when he's bad.

This is really sad, when you think about it. I wonder if this is why so many people are afraid to be alone with themselves, why they get fidgety if they are confronted with solitude? Maybe it has never occurred to them that it might be nice to just go into their own rooms and sit and read a book or stare at the wallpaper. Maybe the only times they ever spent in their rooms, except for sleeping, were times when an accusing adult voice was ringing in their ears.

How many people do you know who get into their cars, turn the key in the ignition, and the radio automatically comes on? They probably don't even really hear it, but they always have it on if they're in the car. I think they're people who are afraid of being alone, or feel guilty in the presence of silence. The sound means company, and they've been conditioned to feel uneasy if they are completely alone with themselves.

What about those people who would rather skip lunch than eat alone? Maybe that table for one is a symbol of the room with the door closed, and the closed door represents a barrier between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

A child's room should not be a sad room; it should be where his toys and books and ideas and dreams are kept. It should be a refuge when he doesn't want to be around anyone except himself, when he wants to sort out his thoughts. But he grows up thinking it's wrong to feel that way, because staying in your room means you are being punished.

When I was growing up, there was nothing I wanted more than a room of my own. I daydreamed about furnishing it and decorating it with brightly painted furniture and my favorite pictures and treasures. I envisioned my few books standing on its shelves like a motley chorus line and pictured myself sprawled across a spacious bed, absorbed in my latest haul from the town library. The room would be all in yellow, and full of sunny things like Van Gogh prints and braided straw rugs, and flooded with the music of Grofé.

But I shared a room with my three younger sisters, all of us as different from each other as random pebbles on a gravel bar. There was no privacy, no individuality, no quiet, no solitude in that small room, and there were a lot of arguments. We were a big family, and there simply weren't enough rooms for each of us to have our own. But I felt as if I lived in a bus station, and I could hardly wait for the day when I would be old enough to live home and live in a place of my own.

Shortly before my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday I found a small crackerbox of a house for rent in my town and moved into it. I had a job and could afford the rent, but my mother was scandalized. Nice girls didn't leave home to live by themselves when they had a perfectly good roof over their heads elsewhere in the same town. It had nothing to do with my mother, however, or with being nice. I just wanted a place of my own, a place where I could get to know myself. If I'd had my own room at home, who knows? I might still be living with my parents, a complacent spinster with a growing collection of books and records.

I didn't have a stick of furniture when I moved in, except a phonograph, some straw mats and some cardboard boxes. I tacked up some

Van Gogh prints, slept on the floor and sat on the mats, Japanese style, eating my meals off the boxes until I could afford some furniture. In the meantime, I drenched myself in music, wrote poetry, tried my hand (unsuccessfully) at painting, and listened to the silence.

Now I have a whole house of my own—well, mine and the husband's. But there is still one favorite room where I write, read, listen to music and think. People wander in and out of the rest of the house as if it were a country club, but I don't mind. When I've had enough of company, I hang a little sign over the doorknob that says, "Do Not Disturb," pull the door to and go to my room.

## **DON'T LOOK A GIFT HORSE IN THE MOUTH**

When it comes to gifts, I don't like surprises, at least from people who don't know me really well. It's a strain to hold a smile on our face as you unwrap a basket made from an armadillo hide with oversized rhinestones set into the eye sockets.

Playing it safe by sending flowers doesn't get it, either. Those people invariably choose something that has me chain-sneezing before I'm halfway through the message card.

I try to warn off my well-meaning friends and relatives with refreshing honesty. I tell them, "I've always been one of those nasty, impossible-to-please people, you know." At Christmas time I go around muttering "Bah, Humbug!" and wear tee shirts that say, "No gifts, please—just send money."

None of which does any good. People love to give other people things. That is, unless they think they ought to. Then they hate it.

You can learn a lot about people and what they think about you by taking a good look at the gifts they give you. For example, one of my sisters, after she was old enough to earn her own money, began to give me the strangest gifts at birthdays and Christmas time. I don't remember all of them, but there was a book called "Poems to Read in the John" and, one Christmas, a large black plastic replica of a chamber pot, lined with fur.

I could rationalize the book: I do write an occasional poem, and I read a lot more of them than I write. My sister has seen my bookshelves and probably figured I had to start a new collection somewhere else in the house. But I've never been able to figure out that fur-lined pot. Maybe it was retaliation for giving her and both of my other sisters dolls every Christmas until they were old enough to leave home. I even gave my brother boy dolls. Oddly enough, he liked them; I think he was lonely for some kind of company of his own sex.

My grandmother always gave me books. It didn't matter what kind of book; it might be an old history or geography she picked up at a rummage sale, an old novel, a songbook, or a long, tedious volume of some obscure

Victorian poet's works. Books were magic to my grandmother; to her they represented education, power and understanding. She had gone only far enough in school to read the things necessary for a farm wife's existence in those days, and it was her lifelong sorrow that she hadn't had "an education." It was her constant pride that her children and grandchildren could read. To me, books meant finding out things, and my grandmother's gifts pleased me more than anyone else's.

Except when she bought me clothes. Grandma loved bright colors but she didn't think it was proper for a woman her age to wear them, so she wore them vicariously through me, buying me bright, gaudy dresses, usually red. It didn't matter that the styles were sometimes too old for me, or the cut intended for a young lady's figure instead of my stringbean frame. Grandma didn't notice things like that. She saw me as a bright flower. I saw myself as a wallflower but, unless my mother tactfully intervened, I wore her gifts.

One of my friends used to bring me roses from his garden, first carefully cutting off all the thorns. This tells you all you need to know about him. He also wanted to fight all of my battles for me. Maybe roses aren't really worth it, though, unless they come equipped with a few thorns.

The first year I gave my children money to buy Christmas gifts for their family was a real eye-opener. I started them with five dollars apiece, which I thought was plenty for them at that age.

My son couldn't wait to get to town. On his next shopping trip he quickly picked up a five-cent comb for his father, some small nickel or dime gift for his sister, a pocket pack of tissues for me, and pocketed the rest.

My daughter pored over her gift list for days, revising it, adding names, comparing prices, figuring totals, and finally went shopping. When she came home with her packages, she was in tears. "Mama, I tried to get everything for five dollars, but it just wasn't enough," she said. I was surprised to hear that until I examined her purchases and her shopping list. A home economics expert couldn't have stretched out that five dollars as carefully and thoughtfully to so many grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, friends and teachers. And there were still two names not checked off. Of course I gave her more money!

To this day she puts a lot of thought into any gift she buys, and is one of the very few people whose choices for me are invariably things I would have chosen for myself.

When my son was a little older, he figured out what kind of gift pleases me best. I'm a pushover for anything handmade, however clumsy. One Christmas he worked secretly on some project during the holidays, and on Christmas morning presented me with a little handcarved candle complete with nail-punched eyes and a lopsided grinning mouth. I was delighted. "What a marvelous jack-o'-lantern!" I said, giving him a hug.

He burst into frustrated tears. "It's an apple," he said, and whirled angrily on his sister. "See, I told you it was no good, and you said to go ahead and give it to her anyway. It's no good," he wailed again, as I tried to rectify my mistake.

He was wrong. It sits in a place of honor in my study right now, on a shelf directly above my computer. The color has long since faded from it, but it is one of the first things I'd carry out in case of fire.

## A SHERIFF AND A SHIRT

When they told me Johnny Giles wasn't going to run for Sheriff of Crawford County, Missouri again, I couldn't believe it. I thought that after he had been sheriff for more than 20 years, they automatically printed his name on the ballot.

When I started working at the courthouse, Johnny's dad was sheriff and had been for years. Every now and then somebody would get the itch and file against him, but about all any other candidate could accomplish was running up some printing costs for candidate cards. Johnny's father was the kind of sheriff everybody wanted. He wasn't afraid of anything or anybody, but he didn't make a big thing of it. He never carried a gun; he'd just walk up to the craziest kind of fugitive or suspect and say quietly and firmly, "You'd better come along with me, son," and the guy would do it. Whether they were law-abiding or not, people trusted and respected him, and they knew he'd be fair with them.

When he died, the county appointed Johnny's mother sheriff until after the next election, because the deputy wanted to run for the office, and it was generally agreed that appointing him temporary sheriff might give him an unfair edge over the other candidates. A few people even tried to get Mrs. Giles to run for the office, but she didn't want it, and the deputy won it and held it for a few years. Nevertheless, I think it was kind of generally understood that everybody was just waiting for Johnny to get old enough to run.

When he finally did, he was elected the first time. He had the same qualities his father had, and got the same kind of loyalty from the voters. Of course, times had changed since his father's day and the county frowned on a law enforcement officer going out after an armed criminal without equal ammunition. More deputies were added, along with a radio dispatch system and other improvement, but Johnny's office still had a great deal of the flavor his father brought to it 30 or 40 years previously.

Another thing Johnny did that reminded old-timers of his father was playing practical jokes with such a straight face that you never suspected a thing until the pie hit your face.

I used to kid him about a plaid shirt he wore—in those days, nobody in the sheriff’s office wore a uniform—that was exactly like one my husband had. “I can’t believe there are two men in the same town with such bad taste,” I’d tell him, and he’d answer, “There’s only one man in town with taste that bad. I wouldn’t have a shirt like your husband’s.”

One morning after my husband left the house wearing his gray plaid shirt, I arrived at work to find Johnny wearing his identical one. I said nothing that morning, but I was determined to get those two plaid shirts together, perhaps for a snapshot. After lunch I asked my husband to come back to the courthouse with me, and I took him over to the sheriff’s office. There stood Johnny, in an entirely different shirt.

“Where’s the shirt you were wearing this morning?” I asked him.

“This is the shirt I was wearing this morning,” he said.

“No,” I said, “you were wearing a gray plaid shirt this morning. Remember?”

“Margaret,” he assured me, with heart-touching solemnity, “I don’t even own a gray shirt.”

I turned and tried to enlist the help of his deputy. “He was wearing a different shirt this morning, wasn’t he?” I persisted.

“Right there’s the same one he’s had on all day,” the deputy replied, without batting an eye. I argued and spluttered, and my husband left, mystified. I finally returned to my office, half convinced that I might be losing my mind.

Later that afternoon I went back to the sheriff’s office and confronted the deputy privately, almost in tears. “Tell me the truth,” I said. “Johnny was wearing a gray plaid shirt this morning, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah,” he grinned, “but the thing was so slippery it wouldn’t stay tucked in his pants, and he got mad and went to town and bought another one.”

I saw red. “Where’s the gray one?” I asked.

“Over there in the corner in that paper sack.”

“Would he miss it if I borrowed it overnight?” I asked.

The deputy, seeing a chance to conspire in further mischief, shook his head. “Nah, I doubt it. If it’s like anything else it’ll lay ’round here for a month before he takes it home.”

That was all I needed. I tucked the bag under my arm, took it home that night, and handstitched delicate white lace around the bottom of the shirt and along the edges of both sleeves.

The next day I slipped the bag with the shirt in it back into the corner of the sheriff’s office and left it there.

The deputy was right. It lay there for weeks before Johnny finally took it home.

I don’t know what his wife said when she dumped it out in the laundry. But it didn’t ruin his marriage. They continued to live happily together after his retirement.

## **MORE EMBARRASSING MOMENTS**

You name it, and somebody collects it. There are stamp collectors, coin collectors, doll collectors, autograph collectors, and book collectors. I even heard once about a person who collected knotholes from trees.

Looking back over my life, it occurs to me that I collect embarrassing moments. I suppose it's a natural hobby for someone who was born with a silver foot in her mouth. But, although it helps a great deal, I don't even have to have my mouth open to be embarrassed. Embarrassment stalks me the way fever stalks the tropics. It hunts me down, draws a bead on me, and then invites the world to step up and inspect me through the crosshairs on the sight.

It goes 'way back. I can't remember my first embarrassing moment. When you're born with a talent for being embarrassed, your first embarrassment probably predates your first long-term memory. I remember that winter day when I rushed in late to my second-grade schoolroom and furiously unbuttoned my suspenders and tore off the heavy wool leggings my mother had insisted I wear, only to realize I had forgotten to put my skirt on under them. I remember the following year when I started to pull a handkerchief out of my jumper pocket and couldn't find my pocket. I finally discovered it behind me and realized I'd had my clothes on backward all morning.

I'll have to admit to having a hand in embarrassing myself on those occasions, but there were so many other times when I didn't do anything but stand there and wait for the pie to hit my face and the snickers to start.

Like the time I brought my first real boyfriend home. Being a proper, civilized, well-brought up boy, Ed had come to meet my parents and be sized up by them before he and I went on our first movie date together. My baby sister, about five years old, was an incurable and charming flirt, and Ed had scarcely walked in before she set about to conquer him.

I could scarcely blame her. In my eyes he was a darling, and her only other preferred company was toy rabbits. Where most little girls had dolls, Carol always had a battered toy rabbit of stuffed cloth, plastic, rubber or something, always named Bunny, and always her inseparable companion.

The current Bunny was a little soft, hollow rubber toy, one of the kind that is poured over a mold or form, cooled and then removed, leaving an opening where it fitted over the mold. Carol knew how to get attention: Rabbit and all, she scrambled onto Ed's lap the minute he sat down. "This is Bunny," she said, thrusting her friend at his head. "And this," she proclaimed, drawing on words she had heard from my automobile mechanic father and pulling out the little cylindrical bit of leftover rubber that had been tucked up into Bunny's insides, "this is Bunny's exhaust pipe."

For real embarrassment, you can't beat the kind dished out by your siblings. I've often been asked what was my most embarrassing moment, and that's a little like asking a glutton to name his favorite food. Nevertheless, I believe it was the time I double-dated with my next younger sister. The fact that she didn't intend to embarrass me and didn't realize the effect her action would have didn't make it any less diabolical in the long run.

I had been dating the same young man for a couple of years and everyone in town knew we were an "item." He and I arranged to take my sister over to a neighboring town where his cousin lives, so the four of us could go to a movie together.

It was an uneventful evening and my sister may have been bored. At any rate, as we drove back home after dropping her date off at his house, Pat decided to stretch out in the back seat, prop her feet up in the window and take a nap. When we got home, I woke her and the two of us said good night to my boyfriend, who then drove home to his little apartment above the lumber store which was directly across the alley from the office where I worked 5½ days a week.

By this time I was already past the point of no return, but I didn't realize it as I walked to work the next morning. I turned the key in my office door, a bit resentful that my boyfriend didn't have to work on Saturday morning and could sleep late. I glanced across the street to where his car was parked and saw something which at first struck me as very funny.

As I looked again, I realized that the rest of the world didn't know what I knew, and I was suddenly stricken with horror. I rushed to the car and tried to open the doors but they were tightly locked and my boyfriend was

sound asleep somewhere on the second floor behind a door that was also tightly locked. He had no telephone in his apartment.

I thought briefly of suicide and then squared my shoulders and prepared to assume my cross. I knew there was no point in trying to explain to the office gang, all of whom worked along that street beside the courthouse square.

Somehow, overnight, the windows of the car had steamed over inside. And in the rear side window facing the street were the perfect prints of two bare feet, toes pointed toward heaven, flaunted like a scarlet letter to every passerby.

## LAUREL-AND-HARDY MOM

Some of my listeners with delicate sensibilities—a steadily dwindling group—have expressed refined horror at the lengths to which I will go to perpetrate a practical joke.

All I can say in my own defense is that I had good training.

It wasn't easy growing up in a home where M was for the million tricks she played me, O meant once a fortnight, at the least; T was for the times that she betrayed me, H was for the horselaugh she released. E is for embarrassment eternal, R means red, and red my face will stay. Put them all together, they spell M-O-T-H-E-R, who made me what I am today.

Imagine being called out of a reasonably warm bed on a November morning, where you were curled up back to back with your kid sister, by a cheery summons of "Hurry up, kids, get in here and find a warm spot and dress." We'd grab our clothes and run to the living room, our teeth chattering, and huddle around a stove that hadn't been lighted long enough to see what it was supposed to do, our breath freezing on our faces. As we used part of the icicles to pick the rest of them out of our teeth, one or two of us would manage a shivering, "Warm? Where?" and my mother, jauntily setting the oatmeal on the table, would say innocently, "Well, I hear it's warm in Florida..." It was guaranteed to keep us from dawdling over getting dressed in the morning, and now that I've had kids of my own, I realize that. But I grew up resentfully convinced it was a means of saving my father a little extra woodchopping.

I think the worst thing about my mother's practical jokes, though, was the fact that she didn't confine them to the family. Any of our friends or acquaintances might be subject to one without warning.

I had my first real love when I was a senior in high school. He was a quite, intelligent, charming boy whose company I liked so much and who apparently liked me enough that neither of us was self-conscious about my less-than-first-class clothes and the conspicuous absence of modern appliances and urban conveniences in my home. Moreover, he loved my mother's homemade gooseberry pies, and when he came to our house for dinner, I always begged her to make one for him. He'd polish off a couple of

servings of dessert, sit back contentedly and talk with the family, always chewing up a pile of toothpicks as he talked.

My mother teased him about his toothpick-chewing habit, and he took it good-naturedly. But Mom couldn't stop with teasing. One evening, as Ed happily awaited his serving of gooseberry pie, she handed him a small, separate pie and told him, "I made this one just especially for you." He picked up his fork and prepared to dig in, but he couldn't get the fork past the crust. He looked around to see if he was being watched, then gave it a little more elbow grease. No results. Finally he plunged the fork into the pie as if he were putting a pitchfork into a haystack. There was a crackling sound and he burst into laughter as he realized he'd been served a toothpick pie.

As time went on, Mom refined her art to include collaborators. When I left my job at the small weekly newspaper in my home town to go to work at the courthouse, my mother stepped into my job and stayed there until she retired. Like me, she began as a printer's devil, but her work expanded to include managing the circulation, handling classified ads and doing most of the bookkeeping for the business. She did a little of everything, including assembling the town's telephone directories which were printed there each year.

Once they were assembled, before they were mailed out, somebody had to punch holes in the corners so they could be hung on nails or wall hooks. My mother loved this job, and she'd fight for it. The reason was that she was carefully saving all those little round punched-out bits of paper in an envelope. When the envelope would hold no more, she'd seal it, address it to the town's best-known practical jokes (I always did think Mom was jealous of him) and mail it.

The first year he received it, it was an accident. But it worked so well that it became a tradition after that, a tradition which, I suppose, died with my mother's retirement.

I don't know what they do for entertainment at the post office now. But that first year, and one day a year for many years afterward, Andy walked in, picked up his mail, pulled out a fat envelope and said, with his usual look of innocent concentration, "Hmmm...I wonder what this is?" He

then tore open the envelope with a great display of interest and excitement, scattering a great cloud of confetti all over the post office lobby.

Somebody ought to renew that tradition. Maybe it would be worth my time to sit down some evening with my paper punch, and ... well, you know...

## **THE DAY I STOPPED BEING A SISSY**

I'm one of those people who believes snow should happen only one day a year, long enough to get suitable photos for Christmas cards, and then be outlawed for the rest of the winter.

I do remember, with some pride, one cold winter day when I deliberately braved an hour of formidable wind chill, getting my fingers and toes half frostbitten and my legs soaked to the knees in wet snow.

I'm strictly an indoor person. There's nothing I like better on a winter day than to sit by the fire and read, occasionally looking out the window to see how much snow has piled up since the last time I looked. When I was a kid I loved snowy days, as long as they happened on weekends and I could sit inside and enjoy them. But on school days I had to trudge in and out of the building and struggle with galoshes and try to remember where I put my mittens. It took a lot of urging to get me outdoors, but when I couldn't be persuaded, I was usually tagged as a bookworm or an egghead. It took some special evidence of cowardice, such as refusing to take a dare, before you were actually branded as a sissy.

I think somebody said we were going to build a snowman, a real fancy one, higher than our heads, and make him look like Miss Key. It must have been something special that enticed me outdoors on that miserable morning during my sixth grade year. Several of the other girls in my class went out, too, much against their better judgment.

It didn't take us long to find out the snowman story was a ruse. The boys had decided to wash our faces with snow. In my rather sheltered upbringing, I'd never before encountered this rustic custom, and when the first pair of rough arms grabbed me from behind and smothered my face in cold, stinging snow, I was unprepared for it. Other girls were struggling and protesting, but I, caught off guard, burst into frightened tears. It was all the boys needed. Immediately they set up a hooting and yelling cry: "Dobkins is a sissy! Dobkins is a crybaby!"

The other girls gathered around me and escorted me back into the schoolhouse, indignant and sympathetic, but I was the one who bore the

brunt of the boys' ridicule. I was the one who returned to classes with revenge simmering in my heart.

I suppose, in a way, I wasn't the only victim. Edwin, the boy who had washed my face, came in for his share of teasing from the boys for making a girl cry. Each time I looked up during the rest of the morning I caught him staring at me uncomfortably, and both of us dropped our eyes.

At noon I stayed close to the other girls as we walked to the school cafeteria, and as soon as I had eaten lunch I joined them in a snowball fight outdoors. Within five minutes all of us were chilled to the bone, and girls began drifting back into the schoolhouse.

I was determined not to go inside until I had washed Edwin's face. Although he wasn't as big as some of the other boys, he was a lot taller than I, and I had to plan my strategy before I put it into action. It wasn't going to be easy.

The rest of the girls gave up and went indoors, accompanied by yells of "Sissy!" from the boys. When they looked around and saw that I was staying, they were obviously surprised, but they added the fact to their ammunition against the other girls. "Dobkins is no sissy! She can take it! She's a regular guy!"

I was somewhat appeased after my fiasco of the morning, but I wasn't finished yet. I had to catch Edwin with his back turned, and I had to catch him by surprise. Fortunately, everyone was absorbed in the snowball fight and I was the only one who still remembered the morning face-washing. As Edwin bent over to pick up a handful of snow, I did the same. I took a short run toward his back and, with one leap, attached myself to him like a leech and wrapped my legs around his middle, hanging on for dear life. I bent my left arm around his neck and with my right hand rubbed his face mercilessly with a generous supply of snow.

"Quit!" he spluttered. "Get off my back!" I kept on rubbing.

He shook himself hard, trying to fling me off him, and I clung tighter. The rest of the boys were having a fit. "Look at ol' Dobkins!" one of them yelled. "She's washing ol' Edwin's face! Attaboy, Dobkins!"

When I had exhausted my supply of snow and my thirst for revenge, I dropped off his back and turned to face the rest of the boys. With a bravado I didn't feel, I asked, "Who wants to be next?"

Luckily for me, the bell rang just then, and I headed back to the schoolhouse with the boys. All but one of them seemed to have developed a sudden feeling of camaraderie with me.

The teacher took one look at me as I walked in, took me by the arm and marched me to a seat by the radiator where she insisted I sit with my shoes off and my feet stretched out by the heat. She cancelled recess for the afternoon, saying it was too cold for anybody to be out, and read us a story instead.

I thought my feet and fingers would never thaw out, but my heart was warm with the pleasure of revenge carried out. Even more warming were the words that rang in my ears throughout the afternoon classes: "Dobkins is no sissy! She's a regular guy!"

## CHRISTMAS CAN BE MAGIC

I seem to be always broke at Christmas time. The year my daughter was in the first grade was no exception. Of course, if I'd known then what I know now, I'd have realized that kids at that age don't set a price tag on Christmas, anyway. What you do is buy twenty five-cent presents and wrap each one of them instead of buying a dollar present and having just one thing under the tree. This makes it look like lots of stuff, and that's what they want.

As far as possible, that's what I had done. There were a few little things tucked away in a dresser drawer hiding place that Greta and her four-year-old brother hadn't yet discovered, and probably some handkerchiefs or a shirt or something equally exciting for their father. The kids had worked themselves into the usual state of pint-sized frenzy over the approaching holiday, and it didn't much matter what kind of loot they would or wouldn't get on Christmas morning. It was the anticipation that mattered.

I guess what was really bothering me that year was that *I* wasn't looking forward to Christmas. There just wasn't anything special about it. Whatever small amount I'd spent for the kids was more than I could afford, and on top of that I had to come up with some kind of Christmas dinner that would be above and beyond the usual opening a couple of cans and throwing a hamburger apiece into the skillet. My heart wasn't in it, but I had to do it, and on top of that I had to decorate the house and the Christmas tree, as little as I felt like it, because nobody else who was old enough to do it wanted the job.

My husband was no help at all; even in better years he was one of those people who left his Christmas shopping until a half hour before the stores closed on Christmas Eve and then came home empty-handed, saying that everything was already sold, and secretly relieved that he didn't have to bother with shopping.

I did what I could that year to get into a Christmas mood, but looking at toy catalogs with the kids depressed me; I already knew they weren't getting any of the things they were excitedly pointing out to me. Playing Christmas carols on the phonograph got on my nerves, and the thought of a white Christmas brought not joy but panic as I contemplated the increasing

fuel bills. By Christmas Eve I was so down I felt I had been stoned with sugar plums and beaten with peppermint canes.

My husband did the only thing he could have done to make a bad situation utterly wretched: He brought home a buddy to have a Christmas Eve drink. When he had poured the drinks and the two of them had settled down in our living room, it was obvious that Paul intended to spend the evening, and I was scarcely able to be civil to him.

He was a tall, lanky man who looked a little like pictures of Abraham Lincoln. He worked part time as a sheriff's deputy, and he had told us that in his younger days he used to follow the carnivals, working as a roustabout, a barker or whatever odd jobs came his way.

I relaxed a little as I realized the children were enjoying his company. We didn't have visitors very often, because I worked full time and didn't have much time or energy left for entertaining. So it was something of an event to the children any time someone stopped by our place.

Apparently Paul was enjoying the kids too. He made little jokes with them and teased them, and suddenly he reached over behind Bobby's ear and said, "What on earth is this thing back here?"

Bobby looked up questioningly as Paul pulled a bright penny from behind his ear and handed it to him.

After that he pulled pennies out of the children's noses and found bright handkerchiefs in their empty pockets. He juggled apples and leaned back in his chair, balancing it on only one leg, continuing to talk all the while as if there was nothing at all unusual about that.

He found peppermints in Greta's hair and pulled sticks of gum from Bobby's pants cuffs. He tied pieces of string in knots and they untied themselves before our eyes. He whistled and made flowers grow out of his hat. Bobby wanted to learn how to do it, and Paul tried to teach him, but somehow Bobby couldn't seem to whistle right. It worked for Paul, every time.

It wasn't yet midnight when he finally said he had to go home, and I, along with my kids, begged him to say and do one more trick, just one more.

And Christmas morning arrived, with all the magic Christmas morning should hold, not because of anything that was or wasn't under the tree, but because magic had come to our house at Christmas time and we had been ready to believe in it. I think I realized then why I had misplaced my Christmas spirit. I had forgotten how to be a child. I had been worried about fuel bills, when there were pennies to be had, simply for plucking them from behind our ears.

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