

Grandmother Cynthia

Hello to my future generations. I knew very little about my own grandmother, so I'm writing this letter for my grandchildren and beyond, that they might know two things: 1) what their grandmother was like and 2) what growing up in the 1950's and 1960's was like.

My growing up was different from that of most children my age. I was the baby of a single mother who was not married. Back in the 1940's, unwed mothers were objects of disdain. I felt so sorry for my mother when I grew up and finally found out that she was not married at the time that I was born. She must have incurred so much disrespect, and experienced so much shame.

Happily for me, I was unaware that my illegitimacy made me any different from other children. I may have been the source of whispers, but I never heard them.

There were, however, big ways in which my illegitimacy did affect me. I didn't get to live with my mother until I was about two years old. She wanted to keep my existence a secret. So she went back to work at Tacoma General Hospital as a laboratory technologist. She found some people out in the country to look after me. They were not the first people that she found. But the first three couples who came to look after me wanted to do something that was very scary to my mother. They wanted to adopt me.

As much as I respect, in some cases revere, the things that I learned from my mother, I have to say that she made a huge mistake in trying to keep me, and that meant keeping me a secret, taken care of by people who didn't feel much for me one way or another. She should have let one of the couples adopt me. These couples wanted a baby so bad, and my first two years would have been filled with love and exploration, rather than exploration of a world where I was scared all the time that my mother might never come back.

Time and love. Or time that implies love. I almost never saw my mother. She would come to visit me for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon every couple of weekends. I remember crying when she left, holding my arms out to her, and I remember the distress on her face.

My mother did love me, and it was very difficult for her to leave me when she came to visit me. But if her love had been even greater, she would have ensured that I didn't have to say good-bye to her every three weeks. She should have given me up for adoption to some of the people who wanted me. As it was, I lived in a state of terror, never knowing for sure whether she was coming back, or when. I experienced a constant fear of abandonment.

When I was a little more than two, my mom and stepfather got married. Her marriage had two important consequences for me. First, I got to live with my

mother! Second, I developed the erroneous notion that my stepfather was my natural father. I didn't learn the truth about this until I was eighteen years old.

My little sister was born about this time. I remember everyone marveling about what a beautiful baby she was. I was jealous. Why couldn't I be a born-beautiful baby? That was the biggest disappointment that I suffered at the age of two.

When I was four years old and my sister was two we faced a really big event. My mother was pregnant and was soon going to deliver what both my parents hoped would be that pinnacle of creation—a boy! The baby bed (a really big laundry basket) was painted pale blue. Everything that could be painted became pale blue. In those days, people were not able to find out what the gender of their unborn baby was. So, my parents were pushing the limits of hope where the new baby was concerned.

He was a boy! I remember the first time I ever saw him. I looked at his arms and legs, his teeny fingers and toes, his blue, blue eyes. Now that I am 64 I still have tears when I write about the first time that I ever saw him. That is because he died when he was only seventeen.

At the time that he was first brought home, he was a wonder. A new person. I had not been old enough to formulate these kinds of ideas when I was two and my sister was born. But when I was four, this was the biggest event of the year. And then! More surprises! He had a penis. Again I felt a little bit of what I had felt when my beautiful little sister was born. Not only was I not an unusually beautiful baby, I didn't have a penis. I was a little bit disconsolate.

What I wanted for Christmas that year were: an electric train and a penis. My parents, who were just getting by, money-wise, managed to buy me the electric train. It was wonderful! My father set it up for me and "helped" me play with it. The tracks were in pieces that fit into one another, until a whole big circular track could be assembled. The train had a miniature engine and railroad cars and a caboose. And the most important part, a transformer. The transformer funneled the electricity from a wall plug into the tracks, and away the train would go. To this day I wonder how my mom and dad managed to get enough money together to buy me that electric train.

Another thing, a very lucky thing, happened to me when I was four. I made one of the most important friends in my life. Her name was Gale, short for "Nightengale". She was my next door neighbor, a lady in her fifties. She had always wanted children but had never been able to have any. I was a four-year-old who loved the idea of having a grown-up's unmitigated attention.

The ultimate cause of my meeting Gale was my parents' inability to make friends easily. Or, more truthfully, my mother's inability. My dad was an easy-going man who readily got along with others, but he was nowhere near as strong-willed as

my mother. And she did not get along with other people easily. So she was very suspicious and antagonistic toward the neighbors on either side of us. That meant that she was ill-disposed toward Gale, before she knew Gale and before I ever knew Gale.

Gale had some raspberry bushes in her back yard. My folks encouraged me to surreptitiously pick her raspberries and eat them. When I did this, they thought it was so funny. That was getting even with the neighbor lady!

But wait. When you take things that belong to other people you sometimes get caught. I got caught. I got caught by kindness. The neighbor lady leaned out of her upstairs window and said, "Do you like the raspberries? You can have more!" I stopped in mid-chew, my lips stained with raspberry juice and felt as if I could not move. "Go on", she said, "you can have more."

I can't remember whether my parents suddenly stopped laughing about her, when they found out that she was actually nice, or what exactly transpired after I got discovered among the raspberries. But in the following days I ended up over at her house, doing things far more fascinating than eating raspberries.

Gale had cats, who avoided me but whom I was crazy about. Sometimes, if I was quiet and careful, I could pet the shiny long-haired black one named "Dinah". This was heavenly.

And there were other things at Gale's house that were heavenly. For instance, we would clean out her spice cabinet. This task consisted of taking all of her spices out of the cabinets and going through the bottles one by one and throwing away those that had gotten old or been used up. This necessitated both of us opening every bottle and inhaling the scent of the contents. Those spices smelled wonderful! And some of them were strange-smelling, like eucalyptus and clove oil. The bottles themselves were a wonder. Many of them were of dark blue clear glass, a kind of container that I think used to be common in pharmacies in the first half of the 1900's. Everything about cleaning out the spice cabinet was an exploration, for both of us.

She had an old pump organ in her living room, with stoppers, and I loved to try to play it. I couldn't, of course, I was just four, but I could make sounds come out of it, which was wonderful as far as I was concerned.

She had hats, maybe fifteen or twenty, and I got to pretend to be a grown woman, trying on all of Gale's hats. She had a wringer washing machine, which meant that the top of the washer was an open tub, and you could look right down on the agitator as it was turning back and forth, making the clothes swish through the water. Looking at that machinery was like looking at the innards of some living thing, as far as I was concerned. The washing machine used to mesmerize me, until I went off in search of even more wonders.

Gale taught me to read, or did her best to teach me to read. I can't remember if I actually read words or just memorized what they looked like. At her house I "read" bible stories (Cain and Abel being my favorite) and I read the best story of all, "Little Black Sambo".

This story is considered to be racist now, and very much out of favor. What nonsense! Every little kid knows that it's a story about little kids versus the ferocious monsters that await us whenever we don't feel safe. It's about how you feel when you see two glowing eyes in the dark. It's about how a kid can turn the tables on whatever it is that would eat him up. If you're a kid, you just have to think. If you think hard enough, you can figure a way to conquer the monsters that pursue you. In little black Sambo's case, he had to wait until the tigers' own vanity did them in. Then he could happily have pancakes flavored with the butter that the tigers turned into. All it takes is the courage to wait, and believe in your wits, when you're a little child who is scared to death.

Gale was in a wheelchair much of the time. She had been born in 1907 (and lived into her nineties). She had a mishap when she was a baby, and it broke and twisted her leg. Medical science was so primitive back then. They kept her in the hospital for a year (from the age of one until she was two), but with everything they tried, they could not make her leg work right. So she was crippled for life. This did not appear to affect her quality of life, in that she enjoyed being alive very much. She was also a devout Christian, and believed that angels were always watching over her. Though she lived alone in her house and was mostly wheel-chair bound, she was never afraid of being broken into or having her home invaded. She believed that her angels would protect her.

Gale introduced me to something else that was completely new to me. She introduced me to social activities outside of the home. She belonged to a ladies' club that would get together every couple of weeks for a big luncheon and socializing event. There were not only lots of ladies there, there were other kids! I got exposed to the idea that people did not just get up every morning to spend the day playing with a brother and sister and then go to bed when nighttime came. There were other worlds out there. People would get together just to talk with each other and laugh and have fun. What an idea! And playing with other kids outside my family. Another great idea! And all thanks to my old-lady friend, who ended up having a wonderful influence on my young life.

I can never repay Gale or thank her enough, or be grateful enough, or love her enough, to make up for what she did for me. She gave me an early childhood where I was the apple of somebody's eye, the focus of love from a grown-up. She changed my whole life. I cry when I think that she is dead and so can never know how much she meant to me, more to me now as a grown-up than when I was a little 4-year-old girl skipping around her house.