Marylee Stephenson's story of

Carey

My Mother's Story

Momma, Carey Margaret, was born in 1914 in Memphis, Tennessee. Her mother was married to a man who, at 65, was 30 years older than she. There was already a sister, five, and a brother, nine. When she was two, her mother died of tuberculosis. Her father, feeling he could not care properly for the children, put them into an orphanage and visited them regularly. The institution served both as a foster home and an orphanage. Momma thinks she may have one memory of her mother – of someone with red hair (like her own) leaning over into her crib.

After three years her father moved the children to a different orphanage. He told them he did so because he realized, when he visited the original one, that he had not heard children laughing. In fact, one of the ways children who wet the bed were punished there was to be plunged in a large tub of freezing water the next morning.

My mother was always hungry, in both orphanages. She told us how one day she realized, if she took the thinner bowl from the rows set out on a table, she would get more food than if she took the thicker-rimmed one.

The next orphanage was ahead of its time. The board of directors hired a new director from New York City – probably an early social work professional. There were no more punishments, but there was still bullying and sexual abuse from other kids. I asked Momma how she avoided it, and she said, "You just know who they are and stay away from them." She also said, of all people, young or old, "You just watched their faces all the time."

But the orphanage children went to public school, and she would tell stories of her fourth grade teacher – one of those teachers that changes a life – making learning fun, being a kind of friend, someone of real warmth.

The man who became my grandfather was on the board of the orphanage. He was a very wealthy doctor, who had emigrated from Scotland at thirteen and had somehow worked his way to being a doctor with his own hospital. He was married to Grandmother, a nurse, who came from South Dakota.

The director of the orphanage realized that the girls who left at eighteen would have few social skills to get them through adult life. So the older girls were placed with the "better families" for a period of time to learn about living in a house, caring for it, maybe some cooking and some "manners." Grandmother and Granddaddy never had children and so had helped several young people go to college. They decided to adopt my mother's older sister, Mary, but Granddaddy did not want to separate the sisters (their brother had run away from the first orphanage at thirteen and became a "railroad man."), and so Momma was adopted, too. Their father, though still alive and even visiting now and then, approved.

So at twelve years old, my mother found herself in this huge house on ten acres in the middle of Memphis, with a cook, chauffeur/gardener, a pony and Airedales. I asked her how it felt, the contrast. She said the first two years she just went around in a daze. But they all got along well. Momma had clarinet lessons, since she showed traces of TB and it was thought this would be a preventative. She always would pick out the clarinet part of any classical music we heard and say, "Oh, isn't that tone just perfect?" She would feel it so deeply.

Her new parents were Seventh-day Adventists and so kept Saturday as Sabbath, did not eat pork, didn't dance, etc. Yet they were not strict about it, nor puritanical. But they did send Momma to an Adventist college. When Momma was unpacking, with the girls in the dorm around her, talking and seeing each other's clothes, the other girls saw the labels on her clothes, and Momma realized for the first time that

her adoptive family was rich. (Her parents had a mink coat made for her graduation – 600 tiny fur pieces put together to fit her diminutive self.)

Along the way my mother also got an MA in French from the University of Michigan and spent a summer in an intensive French course at Middlebury College. Because of her adoptive life, she was an educated woman from a very culturally enriched background.

Momma dated nice fellows; some pictures of them were in the cardboard box of mementos Momma had. But she fell in love with Daddy, George, son of a preacher. His dad had himself once been a railroad man, but had been converted at a church "camp meeting." Daddy was one of nine, growing up on a hard-scrabble farm in northern Florida. We asked Momma what being in love meant. She said, "You just need to be with that person so much, more than anything in the world."

In 1940, against her parents' wishes, she married Daddy. Daddy worked as a cost accountant in construction for an international company, which meant we moved every few months, and Momma's life became one of uncertainty, always packing and unpacking our home. We moved 20 times before I finished high school.

And Daddy turned out to be a compulsive gambler. Not that anyone knew this as an addiction in those days. Momma used to wonder why Daddy would sit with an upturned barrel in front of him and deal hands to himself, over and over and over. There was never a lack of places to play poker, no matter wherever they lived – at the Elks Club, the Moose, the Shriners.

Momma lived with times of empty bank accounts, when a bank manager would be kind and advance her enough for food. She lived with Daddy's womanizing, because, along with the poker, the clubs and the late nights, came the women.

She had the three of us: my brother, two years younger than me, my sister, three and a half years older; there was a stillborn child between us. Momma knew before the birth that it was not alive. She remembers the nurses discussing the ball game scores as she laboured to deliver it. Once, when we were probably five, seven and ten, we asked her if it hurt to have a baby. We had been waiting in the car outside the hospital for some reason and heard these terrible moans. We were very uneasy and so we asked her. She said, "It hurts so much that the pain fills the room, and then you don't feel it anymore." She was not secretive about sexual or physical matters, but tended to be a bit euphemistic. This time her answer was totally frank, completely clear, and I remember that what I felt was a relief, a comfort, Not only from the information, but confident that she was not holding anything back from us. So we knew where pain stood.

Momma would teach school whenever we were somewhere for more than six months. She taught first grade, because after age 45 you could not teach high school. She loved teaching and every day would come home with stories of the children. She told stories very well and must have so much needed to be able to talk about her work. She was afraid she would create a non-reader, that she would somehow cause a child to reject reading, but I know that would have been impossible, for someone with her warmth and her love of reading and learning.

After seventeen years she decided to start confronting my dad about his gambling. She knew the gambling came from a weakness and for all those years had felt the best way to handle it was not to challenge him. I happened to have a bedroom across from theirs at the time, and I would hear him blustering. But above all, I remember her voice, "but George, we don't have the money," her voice filled with dread, humiliation and fear.

She tried to protect us from this and mostly succeeded with my brother, who was too young to grasp it, and my sister, who went away to an Adventist school at fifteen. But at age twelve I was there, and from then on I was acutely aware of it.

At the same time she tried to make our lives as stable and loving as possible. Every time a move would come up, she would call it another "adventure." She would look up what the state or city was known for and talk about that, like Georgia having a red clay base. And when we drove two days to get there, just us and her, as soon as we crossed the border from Florida, we saw the clay on the road cut. She pulled over so we could get out and take a few chunks as souvenirs.

She would play baseball with us, even if the bases were treasured plants. When we lived in Florida, we would fish in the local lakes, six days out of seven (not on the Sabbath), bringing home maybe fifteen pan-sized fish. She told us the rules, "You catch them, you clean them, you eat them." She knew how to do this with us and was a superb fish cleaner, because her folks had had a summer place on Sanibel Island, and they fished every day for their breakfast. We had a kind of barbeque, and with six or seven neighbour kids, we'd work together with Momma, and we'd all have a fish fry.

She taught us songs from her orphanage days – classics of the oldest true folk songs. She played with us and was playful herself, about herself. She would often say, "I learn so much from you children. You children are my chief joy." I'm glad for that, but it so much speaks of her husband not being a part of that joy.

They divorced after 24 years; Momma had tried to get him to let go before, but he would beg to come back. I think he finally let go when her parents died and it was clear there would not be any inheritance from them. He was always looking for the big chance, the shortcut, the luck.

Then Momma taught for years, until by age 55 glaucoma and cataracts prevented her from continuing. My brother-in-law bought her a home that was large, level, bright, and five blocks from him and my sister. I kept in touch all the time; my sister was there every day; my brother wrote and came when he could. I only recently realized how much I had indeed written to her, and she to me. I myself moved many times – college, grad school, jobs, etc. – and not long ago found among my lifetime of saved mementos a trunk that is entirely full of letters between us. She wrote wonderfully – beautiful word pictures of the cat laying in the sun, or the birds she had seen (having become an avid bird watcher), and eventually those she could only hear. She was not alone in her last 25 years. She did have us around her, in person, or by letter and phone.

We often talked about her life, and now and then she would say, "I encumbreth the earth." I would say, "Not my earth, Momma." She was very clear about how she wanted her life to end (no extraordinary measures, just let her go). As for the afterlife, she would say, "I think dying will be another adventure." She meant it, maybe to reduce any fear, but also because that is how she lived her life. So that is how she would live her death. She had a stroke or heart attack. My sister found her when there was no answer to the morning phone call. Momma was taken to hospital and survived two more hours, with my sister stroking her hair. I was on a plane, but Momma was off on her latest adventure.