

## **SOUPY, 1490 words**

When her young husband died unexpectedly of blood poisoning in 1929, my mother was left with a shack, dwarfed by cornfields in every direction, an eighth grade education, and a three-year-old child.

Mom lived a lonely life for ten years until she met the only lover she would ever have, my father. He was, as they say, an old-fashioned rolling stone, married with kids when he courted my lovely mother. He never mentioned to her his marriage, but some months into their courtship, Daddy divorced his current wife and prepared to leave for California with yet another woman.

Mom was six months along when Daddy stopped by on his way out West. Something broke deep inside her when he said, "Damn it, woman. I didn't promise you nothing. I'm offering you some money, here. Take it." Mother could see his about-to-be-new-wife waiting in the car.

Her throat tight, tears nearly choking her, she slapped the money out of his hand, letting pride get in the way of good sense. If Mother had known she'd soon need the money regularly for bail for my brother, who was now 13 and about to turn bad, she might have taken it. My father, figuring, I guess, that he did his duty when he tried to help his unborn child, disappeared, driving west never to be seen again by mother, never to be seen ever by me.

This was the 40s, not a time when bastard children were held up in front of the congregation, blessed and brought gifts. This was a time when, if you were unmarried, it was shameful to get pregnant. People acted like you were contagious, saw you coming down the sidewalk and they'd cross the street to avoid having to say something to you.

Thus my mother never left her tiny house once she started to show, but everybody knew anyway. Podunk, being the town it was, telephone party lines were always buzzing. People hung out on their front porches in their rockers pretending to listen to the radio, watching what everybody else was doing.

On the evening of my birth, mother had waited, knowing, by the front window for several hours, one hand holding her belly, the other making a little hole in the lace curtain to see out, watching the flaming oranges, reds and yellows float to the ground, pile up. When I started my exit to the outside world, she let the contractions come as she stood there, bending slightly, never crying out. As soon as my brother left his 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and walked through the front door, her water broke. She was embarrassed, having that happen in front of Donny, and he was mortified, having to witness it. She motioned for him to help her to bed. She asked him to bring some towels, a chamber pot and her nightgown. Then, "Please," she said, "just leave me alone now. "

For the next few hours, she suffered the pains of childbirth alone. At some point between contractions, she called for Donny, told him to go next door and ask to borrow their phone so he could call the doctor. Donny hesitated, as he always disliked advertising their poverty in this way. Dejected, he left her bedside, went outside, sloshed his feet through the leaves, rapped on the neighbor's door, said he was sorry it was so late, but his mother was sick and could he please use their phone?

The neighbors stood nearby as Donny was talking to the doctor who'd had a long day and was grumpy, yet knew well his mother's situation. "Can't it wait 'til morning, Son?"

Donny wanted to scream and run out of that house, but he held tightly to his composure as he told the doctor his mother needed him bad so please please please come right away. He hung up the phone before the doctor could ask anything else and ignored the neighbors' offers to help in any way they could as he ran for the front door.

Donny let the doctor in, pointed to the open bedroom door, waited in the next room until the doctor called his name. "I need some help here, Son." The doctor was fussing with the sheets, wet and bloody. When they rolled his mother over, she cried out. Donny's gut seized, his heart pounded, tears rolled from his eyes. "Get some clean sheets, now. Hurry on," he was told.

Donny couldn't find clean sheets because Mom had only the set on her bed. He didn't know what to do. He picked up a clean towel and brought it to the doctor who was, just as Donny entered the room, pulling on my head until, finally, there I was, oxygen deprived and blue as the early morning sky. The doctor wrapped me in the towel and laid me in my mother's arms.

"Well, now. We've got us a girl. Do we have a name for her?"

My mother, exhausted, shook her head "no".

"I know you've thought about this. There's forms here to fill out. Would it be too much trouble if you told me now?"

###

Mother, poor as a church mouse, she liked to say, had even less money after I was born. She sent Donny to the food lines to get whatever he could and bring it home. He earned the nickname, "Soupy," which he hated and of course it stuck all through high school until he lied about his age, joined the Navy when I was four years old and left

Podunk.

When he came home on leave, he played his guitar and said, “This one’s for you, little sister,” and sang “Danny Boy”. *But if ye come and all the flowers are dying. If I am dead, as dead I well may be . . .*

Then the boozing started, the demons took hold. His newly acquired knowledge of electronics guided him as he attached the radio to the iron to amplify the sound. At full volume, he listened to the Holy-roller preachers from Nashville shout, “Hallelujah, Brother!” Donny let loose with a chilling, demonic laugh and spit curses at Jesus Christ all throughout the miserable night, torturing Mother and me.

Donny re-enlisted as long as they’d have him, but when I was in high school, he received a medical discharge. Paranoid schizophrenic, the papers said, and he voluntarily checked himself into a mental hospital. Every month. The routine was, on the day his disability check appeared in the mail, he’d leave the psychiatrists, the hospital and the AA meetings, stock up on booze, stay at Mother’s house until the money ran out, then return to the hospital for a free ride until the next check arrived.

Some nights, with drawn fist he’d threaten Mother, or he’d smash what little furniture she had and, laughing wildly, toss it into the coal-burning stove until he’d finally succumb to a booze-induced stupor on the rat-eaten sofa, puke and piss his pants and soil the couch, and wake up mean.

I decided to quit high school, get as far away from Podunk and Donny as I could. Mother was conflicted about what to advise me, but Donny strong-armed his way into our conversation, told me I’d better not even think about not graduating from high school. He wouldn’t allow it! He raved on, the broken vessels in his nose getting redder, saying I

had only one year of high school left and didn't I have good grades? Didn't I want to make something of myself, for God's sake? Or did I want to wind up a crazy drunk like him? Then the laugh, the demon pouring out of him. He finished his tirade threatening to make me miserable if I brought up quitting high school again.

Though I never got a decent night's sleep and slunk to school when Donny's name was on the front page of the paper for drunk and disorderly conduct, I graduated. The *Podunk Daily News* (which Donny called *The Daily Asswipe*) published my picture and an article about me, first kid in the family to go to college, get a scholarship, blah blah blah.

When I finished college, I, like my daddy some 20 years earlier, headed for California. I didn't think about Donny except to hold on to a fierce hatred of him. I had been teaching two years when Mother called, sobbing, said that Donny's body was found in Lake Michigan, unidentifiable except for his dental work. Most likely he was murdered.

In his abandoned Studebaker were found just a few things: a six-pack with four missing Pabst Blue Ribbon beers, a wallet with ID but no money, a letter from the VA hospital inquiring as to his whereabouts, and the folded, worn newspaper article from the *Podunk Daily News* with my picture and high school graduation announcement in it. In the margin, in his handwriting, were the words, "my little sister".