

Godforsaken

The day after Christmas, in 1962, if Saint Rita hadn't died, Dad hadn't gotten angry, and John Kennedy had not been our president, I would have existed without having lived. My insecurities would have taken over and rather than enjoying a full and blessed life, I'd have wasted it staring at a pathetic little box watching others live theirs.

An aerial shot of that day would not render it transformative. I was still Ann, Dad was Dad, and there was our mother, and I still had the idiot for a brother. Yet, when I think about it, the moment the word, "Crap," emerged from beneath the car, our world flipped on its side.

Try tossing one of your memories in a creek and watch what happens as it slides into a stream, folds into a river, eventually finding its way to a grand ocean where it blends with thousands of other memories. Along its journey this memory shifts in view and clarity bending around obstacles, raging over others, carving deep canyons in your mind, sinking, surging, or evaporating as dictated by natural law. As we make our way to adulthood, these particles of memory mutate into lessons or slip away completely. Some etch a place in our DNA becoming the essence of our souls.

This morning, my brother, Danny, called to wish me a happy birthday. I tried to explain this concept of memory to him, half expecting him to agree that in 1962 day was the beginning of our most profound lessons. His predictable response, "Ann, you're so weird. You've spent too many years living in Ocean Beach with the hippies, have you been meditating again? Ommm."

'I give up, Sixty-six years, and he remains as annoying as when he was six.'

In two hours, I'll blow out seventy candles. My wish will be for a complete recall of my ninth and tenth years, not your standard memory, remembering only a person's voice or smell. I'm wishing

Godforsaken

for a total recall, playing out as a movie in my mind. I'm asking for the two and one half years in full Technicolor, please.

I hope to again taste a cold RC Cola on a hot summer day, and smell sweet peas as the prairie winds pass through their delicate leaves, and once again share prayers and laughter with those strange hardworking people. I want to see half grown corn shift to the east as the evening breeze pushes through and I once again smell the loamy soil dampened by the Ogallala Aquifer. I knowingly accept that the dreadful memoires will tag along with the good. The good memoires will conquer the bad, and wrap their arms around me. I'll be ready to leave this earth, dirt to dirt.

I do recall that first day in detail. I am able to visualize the porch, the patio door, garage, and the dry Christmas tree wilting in the window. I recall carrying my new skates on my hip, still in the box, heading towards the front door on Shirlene Place. I remember it being warm, not at all Christmassy, despite our neighbor's attempts with canned snow decorating their windows, our little Christmas tree—so dry and Mom pulling off decorations, talking to herself, "Before we burn the house down. Everyone sure can help put it up, but no one is ever here for the taking down."

I remember, earlier that morning, picking up Great Aunt Anna, dropping her and the idiot off at the *Grove Shopping Mall*. Aunt Anna took Danny to the Kinney's shoe store to select cowboy boots for his Christmas gift. She wore her standard shopping dress—green and brown flowers cinched around her middle, where a waist should have been, with a tiny belt along with a brown cardigan. She would switch to a white sweater come March and sensible shoes, always sensible shoes, purchased by Uncle Buck at the swap meet and polished to nearly new.

After we dropped them at the mall, Mom and I prayed our way home. Saint Rita, as Mom called our old Rambler, the patron saint of lost causes, coughed, sputtered and hick-upped towards home. We

Godforsaken

lovingly rubbed her dash pleading, “Come on Rita, you can do it, six more blocks, that a girl, get us home.”

Great Aunt Anna had given me the skates for Christmas. Shiny silver with red straps and wheels. They were the best, despite Uncle Buck’s thrifty ways, Great Aunt Anna splurged on my brother and me. I planned for those skates to carry me off or at least up and down our sidewalk. “Mom do you have an old shoestring?” I asked, ignoring her complaints about our Christmas tree.

“Look in the junk drawer.”

My memory of this one day—so precise, I can visualize the contents of the kitchen junk drawer. A small hammer, a baby food jar filled with screws, bolts and nails, a brown bottle of glue, one of the black handles from our kitchen cupboards, a square battery, a roll of caps for Danny’s cap-gun, assorted pens and pencils, an old handkerchief tied shut holding a mismatched clutter of shoestrings, keys to who knew what, matches, and for some odd reason, a baby rattle. I found what I needed, slipped the key onto the string, tied it together, pulled it over my head, and headed out the door.

The skates were exactly like Kathy’s. She lived across the street, and I planned to skate past her house, do a twirl in her driveway hoping she’d notice the skates and my abilities. I sat on our porch, lifted the skates out of their box, and slipped them on. Using the assigned key, I secured them to my saddle shoes, the standard issue sturdy shoes required in our family. I returned the key necklace to its proper place, grabbed the porch pole for stability and managed a wobbly upright position.

My first attempts, near the grass, had me falling more than a few times before realizing speed made remaining upright easier. Before lunch I’d mastered skating in a straight line and hoped to be twirling past Kathy’s before dinner.

Godforsaken

I practiced skating through the garage, down the drive way, and back again, around Dad's feet protruding from under Saint Rita as he banged away on her underside. I came to an unplanned stop as a wrench flew past, slid off the curb landing with a clink in the gutter of suburban gunk along with an angry, "Crap!" echoing from under the car.

I skated to the curb placing my nine year old ears on full alert, shocked at our father saying such a word. I picked up the wrench, expecting to hand it to him. He pulled himself out from under the car, put his dirty hands on the tire, pulled himself up, snatched the rag off the fender, headed through the garage, and in the back door of the house without a word.

Tuning my ears, I began practicing my twirling on the back patio, listening through the sliding door. Dad explained in a quiet voice, gritting his teeth as he spat out words, "It's the transmission. We can't afford a new car or a transmission. Pat, they're paying double wages and working seven days a week. We could get a new car and return with enough to buy a house."

Dad, along with our new President, shared responsibility for this pending chaos. He had this country, and especially our father, believing we could do anything including constructing twelve Atlas F Missiles, in Nebraska, in the time it takes to raise asparagus. I overheard Mom saying the part about the asparagus.

With her quiet, yelling voice she responded, "When President Kennedy spoke of citizens being pioneers in his new frontier, he didn't mean we'd be his pioneers. I will not live in that godforsaken place."

"Well, what d' you want me to do, walk to work? It's only two years. We either all go, or I'm not going, and then what'll we do? Move in with Aunt Anna and Uncle Buck? I can't go alone and be away from you and the kids that long, but think about it Pat. Two years isn't a long time when you

Godforsaken

consider how we'll get ahead. This is what the President is talking about, living the dream, being American, it's all there, we just need to grab it while this young man is in office."

After one day's practice, those skates were packed away and forgotten. Before the neighbors had their decorations down, we were making the rounds, visiting Mom's small family, hugging everyone goodbye. Within hours of our visit to Great Aunt Lillian's, the cousin who hated girls came down with the mumps. *He deserved it for saying girls were stupid*, or so I thought, until a few days later when my neck appeared better suited to an English bulldog.

Mom called the doctor for instructions, while Dad paced in fear of missing his fast approaching check-in date. Once cleared for launch, we headed east. Confined to the back of our new, but used, 1961 Mercury wagon, which Mom named Glenda, I wandered in and out of a mumps induced sleep. Sleeping was easy in the back of Glenda. Her constant hum of wheels on black-top made me drowsy like the sound of a gentle rain on the roof. I wasted hours thinking about life, the world, and my place in it.

Some of my brain cells were missing. I failed to understand seemingly basic prejudices, along with misunderstanding just about everything else. I was walking and talking as a nine year old girl, but felt as though I was observing my life from the outside. Mom said I worried too much. How does one stop worrying? When others suffered, I suffered, absorbing the pain of all that I heard or witnessed. The suffering of others sat just under my skin and felt like an ache, which explains why I am not a fan of the idiot. Danny's sole purpose is to inflict pain upon others.

Our wagon continued trekking along the road atlas stretched open on Mom's lap. I occasionally peeked up from the warmth of my makeshift bed to watch the eucalyptus trees and power lines of San Diego pass giving way to the cacti and towering mountains of the desert. I slept through most of Texas. *I have since learned this is the best way to cross Texas.*

Godforsaken

When we learned we'd be relocating to London, Nebraska, my nine year old brain visualized Big Ben, the Queen, and guards with funny looking hats. About midway, I finally got it. As we entered the plains, the accent changed, but it was not the Queen's English. Lunch in Oklahoma brought a waitress who asked Danny, "Hey sugar, you want a sodie with that?"

I am proud to say there is one receptor in my brain that works quite well. I have a keen awareness of things unsaid. One of the blessings allotted an introvert—we listen, to the words and the air between the words.

As we rolled in and out of a multitude of radio stations the song, *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*, by the Tokens played about a dozen times too many. Dad whistled the high notes and when the deeper chorus came through, "*wimoweh, a wimoweh, a wimoweh*," he sang along—a clear indication of excitement. He never sang, not even in church.

We traveled along Route 66, and I let my mind wander to the first half of my ninth year. It played out fairly dull, complete with musical soundtrack. Classical music stuck in my head from Mrs. Reinhardt's fourth grade class. I saw myself as fairly ordinary. Even my name's ordinary. Not my full name, my full name's Anna Brigid Kelly, which is not dull or ordinary. My first was a tribute to my Great Aunt Anna, our sort of grandma by default. My baptismal name's after Saint Brigid of Ireland. Dad described her as a lovely lady who helped bring Jesus' teaching to his land. My last name, Kelly, the same last name of my father and his father and his father—well you get it. As an infant, they called me Anna. Before my first birthday, Anna had been reduced by one beautiful *a*, and I became Ann—listen to it—Ann. Dull as dirt.

Trying to envision our new home, I pestered Mom and Dad with questions. Most of which remained unanswered by an impatient mother. The few questions worthy of answering were replied to in

Godforsaken

curt terms such as cold, hot, ugly, backwards, corn, and it snows sideways. *Snow?* My head popped up, *I had never seen snow.*

I concluded the mumps had to be making me delirious. *Can a person catch crazy like I caught the mumps? Or worse, could I potentially end up in an asylum talking to the furniture?*

I decided if I were crazy, I couldn't possibly be dull, crazy people aren't dull, just crazy. I am merely Ann, nine years old, dull, dumb, and frightened. My only wish being that my parents understood how terrified I was.

Mom's constant chatter about relatives and recipes stopped and, I heard, "Kids, we just crossed the Nebraska state line, population 1.4 million. How on earth did they find so many people willing to live in such an awful place?"

Raised in Fallbrook, California, until her mother died, she felt anywhere right or left of Southern California wasn't worth the land it was sitting on. Fallbrook: land of oranges, avocado trees, fresh air off the pacific and nearly perfect seventy degree days all year. Her daddy was a Navy man. He often took off for two years on a ship, and she would live with her mother's sister, my Great Aunt Anna. She didn't return to her daddy much. He wasn't much of a daddy—more of a sugar daddy, than a daddy. Aunt Anna explained with a wry smile indicating I was not to ask.

When she was a teen, her daddy took her back to the classic wicked stepmother who beat her nearly to death. Mom stayed long enough to work and save for a bus ticket. She got on a bus and took it as far as she could afford, ending up in Illinois. She stepped off the bus, lied about her age and got a job at the telephone company. One evening she joined her girlfriends at the roller rink, and there stood my dad looking sharp in his air force uniform.

Godforsaken

I lifted my head long enough to be disappointed by our new home watching land as raw as a skinned potato wiz by, similar to the places in Danny's cowboy movies. Tractors long ago replaced the cowboys, horses, and buffalo. Dad explained, "Nearly every square inch of this state has been plowed or the cattle have grazed it to a nib."

Danny believes he'll see gun slinging cowboys in Nebraska along with Indians on horses in full headdress. He has an excuse for believing these ideas; he's only six and spends too much time watching *Gunsmoke*. He views this move as one great adventure, with the added bonus of time away from school.

Bundled in my Great Aunt Anna's lavender handmade quilt, shivering one minute, sweating the next, staring at the rear latch on the Mercury wagon, crazy thoughts returned. *If I fell out the back door, would anyone notice?* To be perfectly honest, dying never scared me much. The way I saw it, we all were heading that direction eventually and heaven sounded pretty.

Dad would notice. He'd be sad and talk less than he does, and probably immerse himself in a new electronics project. Mom would pause long enough to speculate, "Hmm, what happened to Ann, she must have fallen out along the way. She's nearly ten, she'll be fine."

And Danny, he'd laugh that belly laugh of his, put his grimy hands on the back of the front seat and yell, "Hey Mom, Dad, guess what? Ann just rolled out the back. Look at her bouncing down the highway in her quilt; she looks like a giant purple ball."

I listened as Danny destroyed my new Etch-A-Sketch, pausing only to make me angry, calling me chipmunk head, puffing out his cheeks, ducking behind the seat, bobbing up and down like one of those clowns you smack at the county fair. I couldn't wait until he caught the mumps. I tried licking him, but he grabbed my arm and kicked me in the shin with his cowboy boot.

Godforsaken

I love my brother, although I'm not sure why. He's an angry, hateful boy with not a speck of promise who spends most of his time trying to ruin my life. He hates school, reading, rules, and for some reason, old ladies, except our Great Aunt Anna. He loves her like a boy does a dog. He's better looking than I, wears only cowboy boots, even with shorts, and is passionate about cowboys, cartoons, tractors, boats, and Mom's mashed potatoes.

Glenda landed quietly at the gated entrance to Lincoln Air Force base, as our father proudly informed us, "Home of the 551st Strategic Air Command. I'm here to help the 818th Air Division install 650 miles of wiring." I sat up in the rear of the wagon while Danny hid on the floor of the car shuddering at the sight of men with guns. We followed the guards' directions to building 952.

"Danny sit up, or they'll think we're hiding contraband," Mom said.

While on the floor with his head between his knees, speaking as in a tunnel, he asked, "What's contraband?"

"Never mind, just get up."

To the West, the evening sun leaned towards California illuminating row-upon-row of planes perfectly lined, awaiting their call. Every one of us, including the idiot, understood the threat of Cold War. Our classrooms practiced duck and cover. Mutually Assured Destruction became the daily discussion, and many of our friends wore radiation detecting dosimeters around their necks while their fathers built bomb shelters in the back yard, and took civil defense classes offered at the local high schools and libraries.

Danny stood moused in a corner staring at the uniformed men while he picked his nose. He always picked his nose when he was nervous. Wrapped in my quilt, I stood off to the side and motioned

Godforsaken

for him to stop picking his nose. I mouthed, “Stop it.” Typical Danny—glared at me and stuck his tongue out.

Dad and Mom moved from one table to another where uniformed men offered, *Welcome to Nebraska* brochures, and Dad moved on to acquire an employee number, badge, and hardhat. The men watched as Mom, with windblown hair, traveling clothes, and not a touch of makeup propelled her lyre shaped hips around the room. She wasn't a glamorous mother and spent little time or money on her appearance. She was unknowingly blessed with a natural healthy California glow along with a feminine shape. A blessing, I clearly had not received.

Listening to the conversation, I learned a housing shortage would put us in a motel until permanent housing could be located.

Returning to the car, Danny asked, “Why didn't you salute those men?”

“I'm not in the Air Force,” said Dad.

“Are we in now, did you sign up?” he said, skipping along next to Dad who walked as if there was an urgent need to be somewhere.

“Nope, already been in; my time's done, but I'll be working on one of the missile sites. We needed to get my assignment and directions.”

“Will you be the one firing the missiles at the Communist?” Danny asked.

“No, and I sure wouldn't want to be the one have that job.”

“I would.” Danny said, throwing his hands in the air with a, “Swoosh, kaboom and that old Mr. 'Koosheev' would be blown to smithereens.”

Godforsaken

“Okay Dan, I’m sure Mr. Khrushchev can wait while we get your sister in the car, it’s getting colder.”

We heard, “Swoosh kaboom, swoosh kaboom, swoosh kaboom,” all the way to the motel.

Rolling into the *Apache Motor Motel*, the weather turned storm-brewing cold. Someone inside switched on a flashing red, orange, and yellow neon sign displaying an Indian in full regalia, his hand held up signaling, “How. We’re open. Come on in.”

Inside the snug office, a young girl sat at the counter. The owners of the motel introduced her as their daughter, Maryann. She looked at us with barely a sideways glance, as if we had flown in from the land of *None of Her Concern*, and she went back to drawing. Danny asked, “Can we go in the pool?”

Looking towards Maryann, I rolled my eyes in exasperation at such a stupid question.

Mom asked, “Kids, you hungry?”

A unanimous, “Yes.” My fever and swollen neck gradually slipped away, and my appetite rebounded enough to slug down a chocolate shake. We headed to the *Long Shot Diner* attached to the motel. I stumbled along, dumbfounded by it all—eating in restaurants, living in a motel, men wearing overalls, brick buildings and streets, bundling up like Eskimos, and the wind—the never ending wind.

Our waitress approached with a smile, Danny folded his arms across his chest, morphed his face into anger and announced, “I want *Sugar Pops Pete*.”

Dad looked to Mom, expecting her to do something. She responded to his questioning look, “He’s your son too.”

Godforsaken

The waitress introduced herself as Donna. After taking our orders, she peered over her note pad, straight at Danny with piercing green eyes and asked if perhaps he would like to have some snow for dinner. “Storm blowin’ in,” she said. “There will be plenty of snow. *Sugar Pops* are for breakfast honey, and we aren’t servin’ breakfast right now.”

We soon had our food while Danny wailed, “I’m hungry,” along with drawn out sobs of impending starvation.

Mom spoke, “Danny, straighten up, apologize to the waitress, and maybe she’ll take your order. For goodness sake, stop it. You’re embarrassing us with your shenanigans.”

Dad stood, hiding a mischievous grin, while Danny climbed out of the booth, approached Donna with his head hung low but an apology just the same. His face brightened as she delivered an open faced roast beef sandwich covered in gravy. An understanding developed. Donna realized this angry boy needed a bit of tough, loving attention and she took on this and the role of temporary teacher patiently waiting as he read the words on the menu along with the prices.

We settled into the day-to-day life of living in a motel. The diner became my haven offering a needed break from the monotony. Mom’s soaps were on most of the day, and they definitely weren’t worth watching. We weren’t in school because we didn’t know where we’d be living and the town Dad worked in was London, not Lincoln leaving us without a car. We didn’t go to Mass, which Danny and I remained mum about, as a Sunday without seeing the inside of a church was a blessing.

Donna astonished me again when she successfully motivated Danny to stop picking his nose, at least while eating. She showed up at our table with a plunger, a three foot stick attached to an ugly brown rubber dome large enough to cover Danny’s face. She asked, “You got something stuck up there needs pullin’ out, cause this works great. You wanna try it, or better yet, let me do it?”

Godforsaken

Danny shook his head firmly, giving her a wide eyed look.

“Well Master Danny, I’m a woman of my word, and if I catch you picking your nose in my diner, I’ll attach this thing to your face and suck that stuff outta there. You hear me?”

“Yes Miss Donna, I hear you,” spoken with an embarrassed glance at his plate. Around us customers were smiling with whispered laughter.

“Good, glad to hear it, because I don’t like using this dirty thing,” she said, as she walked away, ponytail swinging, and the plunger twirling in her hand. Dad grinned from ear to ear and nearly laughed aloud, while Mom looked shocked.

Donna became my friend, allowing me to sit at the counter with crayons and coloring books, while I watched in awe as she rushed around pouring coffee, flirting with the military men, and hollering at the cook, “Get the lead out! Rick, this gentleman would like his eggs before dinner!” She never missed a beat, taking each day with a lively bundle of positive energy, slowing down only to calculate tips at the end of her shift.

I observed handsome Air Force men who frequented the diner, their hats in their hands and impeccable manners. “Yes ma’am, no thank you ma’am.” Those from the south spoke with long drawn out, “Yes maa’am, I’ll take more plea-a-se,” sounding youthful and poetic. They told animated stories often jumping out of their seats with jubilation, transmitting boisterous laughter that danced through the diner like music.

Farmers with hard work emanating from every inch of their being came in for breakfast. Coming together in the Long Shot Diner to fret over what they couldn’t possibly change. As January leaned into February, the weather appeared to be the one and only discussion worth having. Each rolled in bragging

Godforsaken

about a lower number on their thermometer than the farmer before, until even I failed to believe their tales.

Donna had a way of calming even the most worrisome farmer. I watched as she placed her hand tenderly on a man's arm reminding him, "Frank, last year, at about this time, didn't you tell me a sad story about how the weather was going to turn you into a poor man without a home?" A shuffle of his feet along with a look at the floor provided the expected answer.

"And Frank, tell me weren't you in here last August, slapping your hat down on the table asking for steak and eggs, bragging about the best profit since 1953?"

Another look down, along with a, "Yes Donna but....."

"No buts stop your frettin'. You'll have another great crop with record prices; you just wait and see hun. Now, get going so you can be back in here ordering steak and eggs."

A few women came in to drink coffee and talk nonstop. They joked with Donna asking, "Is this your daughter?"

In her loving way, she responded with, "You bet," and a wink. Donna had a gift. Oh how I wanted that gift. People wanted to be around her—all people.

Maryann joined me at the diner. She was eight with long dark bouncy hair, crystal blue eyes, and a cute giggly laugh—as perky as I was dull. She had a romp in her step as if she was a filly and each day was the first day of spring.

I took life too seriously, *the expected result of caring too much*, I guess. I had reedy legs like my father that should never be seen in public, and dirty dishwater colored hair cut short like a boy, and as an

Godforsaken

extra touch—crooked bangs, compliments of Mother. I appeared dusty, as if someone set me down and forgot about me.

While waiting for permanent housing, we explored our surroundings and adjusted to the required dress of jackets, scarves, hats, and mittens. Maryann taught us how to play in the confines of the *Apache Motor Motel*. She knew the best hiding places and told secrets about the guests. Those secrets pushed back the redundancy of our days.

We became the best of friends, spending hours giggling and running between the diner and motel office. Danny desperately wanted to interfere and settled on pestering us whenever he could.

After three long weeks in the motel, a house had been located and we would be moving within the week. We craved home, Mom's cooking, and most of all, space. I would miss Maryann and Donna, but my yearning for space grew larger than those friendships.

Our last day at the motel began with an unusual 50 degree day. Maryann and I made promises that could never be kept pleading with our parents to drive us to each of our homes for play-time. As we ran between the diner, our room, and the motel office, Danny chased us with a gutted lobster shell he brought from San Diego and named Todd. He carried Todd in an old lard bucket with a lid. Mom threatened to throw Todd out due to his predictable stench. He remained mostly in tact with claws, dark buggers where his eyes had been, and two antennae coming out of his nose.

Danny continued his menacing chase to the second level. We took the stairs as fast as possible, running down the second story hall past the rooms screaming and aggravating the guests. We turned the corner to the back side of the motel. Leading the way down the hall with Maryann following closely

Godforsaken

behind, I heard a chilling scream and turned just as Maryann missed the hall and tumbled down the stairs, sliding through air to the sidewalk below. I screamed, “Maryann,”

Danny ran off, Mom flew out of our room shouting, “Where are the kids? Oh my God, don’t touch her.”

Leaning against the cold brick building, I closed my eyes and covered my ears with icy hands—feeling as though I would vomit. A pile of precious child lay at the bottom of the stairs in a puddle of blood. I watched from above as Mom held onto Maryann’s screaming mother and the ambulance took mother and daughter away. Maryann died the next day. In an instant a piece of my heart died along with my self-perceived dullness.