

Others will tell you, “Time Heals.” It’s a lie. This useless term serves only as an ineffective attempt to sooth another when you know in your heart that nothing you say or do will ease their pain. I absorbed this truism gradually beginning at the age of nine, and today is my sixty-fifth birthday. I maintain that time doesn’t heal a darn thing. Little pieces of my heart were rubbed raw years ago, and those pieces never healed, not one bit.

You know how it feels when you have an old injury, you move a certain way and oh lord it hurts. You endure the pain, but you keep on going. The human heart is exactly the same. We waste emotional anguish struggling to push away the sadness, hold back the grief, or steer our minds towards anything other than the pain. But it’s always there, just under the surface. Every once in a while that pain grabs hold twisting you into some contorted version of yourself while bringing you to your knees.

During my ninth and tenth years I learned this truth among others along with nearly everything necessary to be me. I learned enough that I could have written a book. But I didn’t, so for my birthday I’m making a wish. I’ve been practicing deep breathing exercises to ensure success at blowing out sixty-five candles with the strength of an Olympic swimmer. I’m wishing for a complete recall of my ninth and tenth years playing out like a movie in my mind’s eye. Anticipating an uninterrupted view with each memory appearing as vivid as the day it was created. I make this wish with the understanding that when the good memories return, the ugly ones will most certainly tag along.

When Americans are asked to reflect on the early 60’s, two very different interpretations emerge. While we agree that it was an unusual time, the optimist, recalls a nation under the

guidance of a vigorous president who inspired us with great hope. Hope in this country's ability to send a man to the moon, end the world's poverty and oppression, while halting the spread of communism. The pessimist remembers the very real threat of mass destruction, a deeply imbedded national fear, and limited hope for a long term future.

President Kennedy had our country, and especially my father, believing that we could do anything including constructing twelve Atlas F Missiles in Nebraska in the time it takes to raise asparagus. I overheard Mom telling Dad this while trying to discourage him from relocating us to what she referred to as, "That godforsaken place." Mother had been raised in Fallbrook, California among groves of avocados and oranges. She was convinced that when President Kennedy spoke of all Americans being pioneers in this "New Frontier," he had not meant that our family was to be part of his, "pioneers."

Perhaps it was genetic or my parents had failed to inoculate me with the required prejudices of 1962, although Mom tried her best, often commenting on my caring too much. Most likely it was my own doing as I failed to understand seemingly basic prejudices along with misunderstanding just about everything else. Regardless of how it came to be when others suffered, I suffered.

You're probably thinking, "How nice, a caring child." Well, it wasn't nice at all. The burden was arduous. I overheard a neighbor telling Dad how he had taken a box of kittens out to the back country and dumped them off. I never did get over that one and to this day I worry about those kittens. Another time, I heard Walter Cronkite report that we were sending troops to Vietnam. I looked to the boy who lived on our street, worked at Kinney's shoe store, and

attended College. It was impossible for me to imagine him killing anyone. One evening Mr. Cronkite spoke about whites killing people because they had the wrong skin color. He never explained why, only that it had happened. Most of this ugliness I failed to fully understand, but I understood enough not to like it. I was also aware that there was nothing I could do about any of it. I was too timid, and I was only nine so the worry just stayed in my mind tumbling around over and over keeping me awake at night.

Before leaving San Diego, we made the rounds visiting family where we were told to hug everyone goodbye. Being a non-confrontational child, I did as told. I reluctantly hugged everyone goodbye, including the cousin who was terrified of dolls, smelled of grease, and hated girls. Within hours of our visit he came down with the mumps. Shortly thereafter my neck appeared better suited to an English bulldog. Mom called the doctor for instructions on my required care, while Dad paced nervously in fear of missing his fast approaching check-in time.

After being cleared for launch, we headed east. Confined to the back of our 1961 Mercury wagon, wandering in and out of a mumps induced sleep; I prepared myself for a future resumé which would be lacking. I was a peculiar child, chronically observant, yet rarely consuming life's offerings, desperately seeking to fit in yet quarantined by my own perceived deficits. It was an odd mixture of wanting to do everything while being afraid of doing anything. Being me at the age of nine was pure torture.

I occasionally peeked up from the warmth of my makeshift bed to watch the palms and power lines of San Diego pass, the cacti and the towering mountains of the desert, then the cold nothingness of the plains. When we were told we would be relocating to London, Nebraska, my

nine year old brain visualized Big Ben, the Queen, and guards with funny looking hats. About three days in, I finally got it— London, Nebraska, not London, England.

With the chance of meeting the Queen nonexistent, I remained hopeful for a teacher in London who would speak to her students nicely. Visualizing a delicate lady with an English accent, wearing a sweater across her shoulders joined by a pearl studded clip, a crisply starched floral skirt with a gentle voice guiding us, “Now class, please line up with the ladies on the right and the gentlemen on the left.”

As we crossed into the plains, the language was changing. It most certainly was not the Queen’s English. Lunch in Oklahoma brought a waitress who asked, “Hey sugar, you want a sodie with that?” Yep, I thought, dumb as dirt, I’ll fit right in with these folks. Long aware that I was lacking a complete set of brain cells, at least I knew better than to talk stupid.

Dad had been transferred to Nebraska to complete work on an Atlas F Missile being installed near the small town of London. With a child’s keen awareness of things unsaid, I could sense Dad’s excitement over his new assignment. As we rolled in and out of a multitude of radio stations, the song heard about a dozen times too many was *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* by the Tokens. Our father happily whistled the high notes and when the deeper chorus came through with its “*wimoweh, a wimoweh, a wimoweh,*” he sang along. His singing was a clear indication of excitement as he was not one for singing, not even in church.

The last couple of years of my life on this planet had played out in my head as a dull movie complete with musical soundtrack. Always bits of classical recovered from Mrs. Reinhardt’s third grade class. Even my name is dull. Not my full name, my full name is Anna

Brigid Kelly, which is not so dull if you know the background. My first name was a tribute to my Great Aunt Anna who practically raised my mother. My baptismal name is after Saint Brigid of Ireland. Dad describes her as a lovely lady who helped bring Jesus' teaching to his land of Ireland. My last name, Kelly, the same last name of my father and his father and his father, well you get it. As an infant I was called Anna. Before my first birthday Anna had been reduced by one beautiful syllable, and I became just Ann— listen to it—Ann. That is one dull name and suits my expected place in this world.

While desperately trying to envision our new home, I pestered my parents with too many questions. Most of which remained unanswered by an ever impatient mother. The few questions she felt worthy of answering were replied to in curt terms such as cold, hot, ugly, backwards, corn, and it snows sideways. Snow? I had never seen snow. That sounded like fun.

The only pleasant thing she did say was that our father would be making a nice bit of money, and she was going to get a new washer offering little hope to her daughter who was scared to death of the unknown. Dad— he just smiled and said, “Ann stop worrying, we’ll all be just fine. You might even like Nebraska.”

. Listening to the *thump, thump* of highway 81 under the Mercury, I concluded that the mumps were making me delirious. Maybe, I was destined to be crazy like Robert, the man our neighbors called “Repeater Robert.” He walked up and down our street with a nonworking radio held to his ear while he repeated, “Don’t go past the corner Robert; don’t go past the corner Robert.”

Do you think I'm destined to be crazy like Repeater Robert? Or worse, I could potentially end up in an asylum talking to myself or the furniture? I decided if I were crazy, I couldn't possibly be dull. Crazy people aren't dull, just crazy. We'll leave it as dull, dumb, non-confrontational Ann, nine years old, traveling to the unknown while wishing with each passing mile that her parents understood how terrified she was.

Looking back, I can see that it was about this time when a shift took place. Have you noticed how life throws each of us the occasional curve ball? Sometimes you see it coming and are able to ascertain what's heading your way and brace yourself. Is this going to be a frightening, exhilarating, heartbreaking or a heartwarming curve? Some of these curve balls allow you time to duck while others must be taken head on. I didn't see this one coming. One day, somewhere between California and Nebraska the ball dropped. Life became unpredictable, and if I didn't change, I was not going to survive.

After days of Mom's constant chatter about nothing, she spoke up, "Kids we just crossed the Nebraska state line, population 1.4 million. How on earth did they find that many people willing to live in such an awful place?" she asked.

Lifting my feverish head just enough to peek out the back window, I realized my namesake, Great Aunt Anna, had been right in her reaction to where we were moving. She said, "God help you." As the cold emptiness closed in on me, my heart ached— for what, I wasn't sure. Nebraska appeared raw, like a skinned potato. There was a nothingness to it, much like the desert we had passed through a few days prior. At least the desert had been warm with odd looking cacti and sharp angular mountains. I enjoyed looking at the beautiful changing colors

along the mountains as the sun crossed a cloudless blue sky. This nothingness was tired, sad, and depressing.

It looked similar to the land portrayed in the cowboy movies my brother Danny watches. Only there were no cowboys or horses along the way. Those had long ago been replaced by tractors. Noisy machines which had plowed nearly every square inch of this state. Danny believes he will 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 *Sheriff John* on the TV. He views this move as one big adventure with the added bonus of time away from school.

Lying there bundled up in my Great Aunt Anna's lavender handmade quilt, staring at the rear latch on the Mercury wagon, I began to wonder. If I fell out the back door, would they notice? To be perfectly honest, dying never scared me much. The way I saw it life wasn't all that great, and sooner or later I'd find my way to dying anyway.

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

And Danny, he would laugh that belly laugh of his and say, "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 bouncing ball."

Passing in and out of sleep, the idiot brother remained in the back seat destroying my new Etch A Sketch, pausing occasionally to make fun of me, calling me chipmunk head. He'd puff out his cheeks then duck 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.

This may seem hypocritical coming from a child who claims to tote around a ton of empathy for the entire planet. It's true, I cared too much. But it was also true that he was an angry, hateful little boy with not a speck of promise and spent most of his time trying to ruin my life. He hated school, reading, rules and for some reason I had yet to fathom, old ladies. He loved his cowboy boots, cowboys in general, cartoons, tractors, boats, and Mom's mashed potatoes.

Our Mercury eventually landed at the Lincoln Air Force base. It was, as our father proudly informed us, home of the 551st Strategic Air Command. He was going to help the 818th Air Division install over 650 miles of wiring. As we entered the base, I sat up in the rear of the wagon while Danny hid on the floor of the car shuddering at the sight of the men holding guns. We followed the guards' directions to building 952.

In the distance were row upon row of planes, all perfectly lined up awaiting the impending war with hundreds of aircraft and acres of concrete—a city within a city, enough to frighten anyone. Every child including the idiot understood the threat of the Cold War as we practiced duck and cover in every classroom. Mutual Assured Destruction was a reality and had children wearing radiation detecting dosimeters around their necks, fathers building bomb

shelters in their back yards, and families taking civil defense classes offered at local high schools and libraries.

As we stepped into the stuffy office, Mom told me to stay covered up, and away from people. “We certainly don’t want to be responsible for bringing mumps to the entire air base.”

Danny stood moused in a corner staring at the uniformed men like a moron 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 made a motion for him to stop picking his nose while I mouthed, “Stop it.” In response, typical Danny glared at me while sticking his tongue out.

The check in process appeared well organized as Dad and Mom went from one table to another where uniformed men offered up, “Welcome to Nebraska” information along with buckets of maps and brochures for Mom. Dad moved on to acquire his employee number, badge, and hardhat.

The air force men watched as Mom, with windblown hair, traveling clothes, and not a touch of makeup propelled her lyre shaped hips from one table to the next. She was not a glamorous mother and spent little time or money on her appearance. She had a natural feminine California look and had been blessed with a tiny waste and curved hips. 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. Our parents finished checking in and Danny eagerly asked on our way to the car, “Why didn’t you salute the uniformed men?”

“I’m not in the Air Force,” said Dad.

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

“Nope, already been in; my time is done, but I will be working on one of the missile sites. The Air Force took over the site a couple of months ago after the US Army Corps of Engineers dug a giant hole in preparation for the missile. Now that the site is prepared, the Air Force hired my company to do the installation of the actual missile. 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 as heck wouldn’t want to be the one to do that.”

“I would.” Danny said and he threw his hands up into the air with a, “Swoosh, kaboom and just like that old Mr. Koosheve would be blown to smithereens.”

“Okay Dan, let’s get your sister in the car, it’s getting cold.”

All the way to our motel I heard, “Swoosh kaboom, swoosh kaboom, swoosh kaboom.”

As we rolled into the Apache Motor Motel the weather had turned storm brewing cold—too cold to stay in the car. Someone inside switched on the flashing red, orange, and yellow neon sign displaying an Indian in full regalia, his hand held up to signify, “How, come on in.”

Once inside the snug office, I noticed a young girl sitting at the counter. Her parents owned the motel. She introduced herself to us as Maryann. She looked at us as if we were from

Mars and went back to her drawing. Mom explained our situation to the unconcerned owners who acted as though being long term guest was normal procedure. Danny asked, “Can we go in the pool?”

Rolling my eyes in exasperation towards Maryann as if to say, “Don’t you feel sorry for me having such a stupid brother?”

Mom asked, “Kids, you hungry?”

A unanimous, “Yes.” My fever and swollen neck were slipping away and my appetite was rebounding enough to at least slug down a chocolate shake.

We headed to the Long Shot Diner attached to the motel. Stumbling along with my family, I felt confused and dumbfounded by everything. It was all so strange— eating in restaurants, living in a motel, men wearing overalls, brick buildings and streets, women in wool hats, bundling up like Eskimos just to go outside, and the wind—the never ending wind.

Our waitress was energetic and fiery taking full command of the idiot right away. He folded his arms across his chest, morphed his face to one of unstoppable anger, and began screaming, “I want Sugar Pops Pete for dinner.”

Dad looked to Mom expecting her to do something. She said, “He’s your son too Ben.”

Our waitress approached with a smile while introducing herself as Donna. She took our orders, looked up from her note pad straight at Danny with piercing green eyes and asked if perhaps he would like to eat some snow later. “Storm blowin’ in,” she said. “There will be plenty of snow for ya. Sugar Pops is for breakfast honey, and we aren’t servin’ breakfast right now.”

We soon had our food while Danny began to cry. “I’m hungry,” along with long drawn out annoying sobs of impending starvation.

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

Dad stood, looking amused, while Danny climbed out of the booth, approached Donna with his head hung low but with an apology just the same. Soon he was smiling, eating an open faced roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes covered in gravy. An understanding had developed. Donna noticed right away that this angry boy needed a bit of tough Nebraska style attention. She quickly assumed the role of temporary teacher while at each meal she patiently waited while he read the words off of the menu along with the prices.

The mumps long gone, we settled into the day-to-day life of living in a motel. The diner became my haven offering a much needed break from the monotony. Mom had her soaps on most of the day, and they definitely were not 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 which left 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 truly was a blessing.

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

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

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

“Yes Miss Donna, I hear you,” spoken clearly yet with an embarrassed glance at his plate of corned beef hash.

“Good, glad to hear it because I don’t like using this thing, it’s dirty,” walking off with her ponytail swinging and the plunger twirling in her hand. Dad grinned from ear to ear and nearly laughed out loud.

Donna became my friend. She allowed me to sit at the counter with my 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, move it this gentleman would like his eggs before dinner!” She never missed a beat and was a lively bundle of positive energy slowing down only while calculating tips at the end of her shift.

Shyly watching while pretending to color, I observed the handsome Air Force men who frequented the diner with their hats in their hands and perfect manners. “Yes ma’am, no thank you ma’am.” Their speech was like fancy Shakespearian literature. Those from the south with their long drawn out, “Yes maa’am, I’ll take more plea-ea-se,” were especially pleasant sounding to my ears. They told animated stories often jumping out of their seats to further enhance their tales while transmitting boisterous laughter which danced through the diner like music. I loved

everything about them and decided one day I would marry one of those beautiful men. Who needs a prince from England when one can have an American Air Force man?

Farmers with hard work written on their faces and clothes stopped in for breakfast. Coming together in the Long Shot Diner to fret over and discuss what they could not possibly change. As January turned colder, the weather appeared to be the one and only discussion they had. Each farmer who spoke produced a lower number on his thermometer than the previous farmer. With enough of them gathered in the diner, the temperature would have plunged to 45 below.

Donna had a way of making even the most worrisome farmer feel regenerated. I watched as she placed her hand tenderly on a farmers arm as he exited, reminding him, “Frank, now last year at this very same 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 gave her the answer she expected.

“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....”

“Okay, no buts just stop your frettin’. You’ll have another great crop with record prices; you just wait and see hun. Now get going so you can order steak and eggs again.”

A group of women came in to drink coffee and gossip nonstop, joking with Donna asking, “Is this your daughter?”

In her loving way, she responded with, “You bet,” along with a wink my way. Donna was a gifted woman— gifted with people, all people. Oh how I wanted her gift.

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

I, on the other hand, was too darned skinny with reedy legs like my father which should never be seen by anyone. My dirty dishwater colored hair had been cut short, like a boy, and as an extra touch— crooked bangs compliments of my mother. Just below the bangs sat a pair of colorless grey eyes. Have you noticed those black and white photos showing a puny woeful girl facing the Dust Bowl, the Orphan Train, or Depression times? I could have been that girl. I appeared dusty, as if someone had set me down somewhere and forgotten all 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 us secrets about the guests. Those secrets pushed back the redundancy of each day. We quickly became the very best of friends spending hours giggling and running between the diner and motel office. Danny desperately tried to interfere. We had no interest in his guns, trucks or cowboy play, so he settled into pestering us whenever he could.

In February, after four long weeks in the motel, we were selected for a house and would be moving within the week. We were eager to get out of that motel. We craved the simplicity of

home, a kitchen, Mom's cooking, and most of all, space. I realized that 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 55 degree day. Maryann and I made promises that would never be kept as we begged 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 lobster's head he had brought from San Diego. It remained mostly in tact with its claws, dark buggers where its eyes had been, and two antennae coming out of its nose.

As Danny continued his menacing chase, we ran to the second level taking the stairs as fast as possible, running down the second story hall past each of the rooms screaming and aggravating the guests. We turned the corner towards the back side of the motel. Leading the way down the hall with Maryann just behind, I heard a chilling scream. I turned to see that Maryann had missed the turn and was tumbling down the stairs, sliding on air to the cement below. I screamed, Danny ran off, Mom flew out of our room shouting, "Where are the kids? Oh my God, don't touch her."

I leaned against the cold brick building, my hands covering my ears, paralyzed— feeling as though I was going to vomit. A pile of precious child lay on the ground at the bottom of the stairs in a puddle of blood. I watched from above as Mom held onto Maryann's screaming mother while the ambulance men took her away. Maryann died the next day. In an instant a piece of my heart had been rubbed raw while my own self-perceived dullness just slipped away.