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## Life Before Beth

Beth came into our lives on the day Judy Garland died. My mother cried when she heard the news. In March of that same year both Paul McCartney and John Lennon got married. I cried when I heard the news. I was too young to really care about Judy’s death, but both Beatles marriages disappointed me. I thought they could

do better. I thought they should have waited for someone else, someone more like me. In May, St. Christopher, along with thirtyone other saints got the boot from the Vatican and were forever banished from the Roman Catholic calendar. My father, a long time renegade from the Catholic Church was outraged that the only saint worth a prayer could be treated so unjustly. Who was going to save his soul? Who was going to protect him from himself ? What would he do with the fourteen karat gold St.

Christopher's medallion he wore around his neck, the one his beloved mother gave him the day he left to go overseas to fight in the "War to End all Wars?" She gave it to him to protect him from the "bullets and bombs," he always said. Too bad she wasn't wearing one herself the Saturday evening she stepped off the curb, her body, mind and soul freshly cleansed after five minutes in the confessional, when a drunk driver in a beat-up pick-up truck, with its right headlight burned out, ran a red light and struck her dead instantly. She was three days shy of her sixtieth birthday. My father didn't even know she was dead until he returned from the war but by then everyone in his family had moved on with their lives and were unwilling to grieve or shed another tear for her. I never knew my grandfather because my father never forgave him for the way he mistreated his mother all their married life and for not being the one hit by that truck. My father was convinced that had the drunk not killed her, his old man surely would have. They hadn't spoken since my grandfather, with his new and very pregnant wife hanging on his arm, told him the news about his mother's death like he was talking about one of the checkout girls at Kresges.

It was a year full of rock star weddings and suicides, movie star deaths, trips to the moon, starvation in Biafra, a war in Vietnam, civil unrest in Ireland, protests everywhere, Woodstock, Charles Manson, Ted Kennedy and Chappaquiddick. With all that going on in the world, my meeting Beth was hardly significant let alone newsworthy, but it was the single most important moment in my life, an event that changed me forever.

"Do you believe in euthanasia?" That was the first thing she asked me. The truth is, I didn't know what she was talking about. Until I met her I couldn't even spell words like that much less have an opinion. Not that I wasn't intelligent; I was young with limited experience. It wasn't that I didn't care about important issues, it's just that my world was small and the things that concerned me didn't extend much further than the street I lived on. That bland, anywhere street, with its plain ordinary people casually two-stepping from one pointless day to the next was the subject

matter of my life. For it to have been otherwise never crossed my mind. Then Fate—that ingenious painter of destiny—stepped forward and threw open the door to a whole new world, a world that terrified me one day and excited me the next.

I thought she was crazy of course, but beautiful, not in a Cosmo cover girl way, more like some mysterious alien from an episode of Twilight Zone where this exotic creature disguised in human form invaded the neighborhood and took over everyone's minds so that everything they did was orchestrated and controlled by her.

She was a funny person too. No one, I mean no one could make me laugh like she could. But at the same time there was always something beneath the surface of her laughter that haunted me. Like God didn't give her everything—beauty, brains, wit and talent weren't enough—like something more important was missing.

All the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were there except for one right in the middle, the most critical one connecting all the other pieces. It was like she had this hole in her heart and everything she did was about filling it. She was the loneliest person I had ever met.

She pursued one interest after another with such voracity and intensity it was exhausting at times—like she had this list of things she was going through, checking them off day-by-day with only a sliver of time to do them in. But at the same time it was all a big game to her too—a game that didn't come without its rules.

Rule number one: don't talk about it—especially if it's bad.

I was already good at that because it was also rule number one in our family. Rule number two: pretend it isn't happening and maybe it'll go away. I had that one mastered too. In our family whenever anything bad was happening we denied it, to each other, but more importantly, to ourselves and I wore the crown. I was the “Queen of Denial” as my father always said. Rule number three: above all else have fun. I knew very little about this rule, at least not the way she defined it—let loose, throw caution to the wind, worry about it tomorrow if you have to and maybe tomorrow will never come and above all else don't think about the consequences because chances are there won't be any—but I was about to get a crash course in the art of fun and little did I know that I was being tutored by a master.

One week she was an actress, New York bound, then she was the next Alfred Hitchcock directing her horrifying version of Romeo and Juliet with me and Harold as the star-crossed lovers, then, thank God, she abandoned that flea-brained idea for photography, recording our every move with her Nikon, our entire lives frozen in black-and-white rectangles. Then there was her stint as the Joni

Mitchell clone, her guitar slung over her slender shoulders like an over-sized purse, always looking for an opportunity to play the four chords she had mastered: A - C - D and G. It was astounding the number of songs she could play with just those four chords. The only thing I do know for sure, that had I not met Beth I would not be who I am today. In a lot of ways, you probably would have thought otherwise because to an outsider I have a pretty ordinary life, exactly how most people would have thought it would turn out. But the things I'm talking about you can't see. My interior life, the way I think and feel and see the world around me—all my thoughts and emotions were re-constructed that summer so that a completely different person emerged.

On the day she moved in across the street it was a large-sky, sunshine-dripping Saturday morning; a typical Northwestern Ontario summer was unfolding with its relentless heat, humidity and the smell of freshly laid asphalt. Paving companies had three or four good months to cover the roads and driveways of our town with the steaming black ooze before the entire place froze over—the first thing you'd smell in the morning, the last thing at night, every dream laced with the odor, the color of your worst nightmare, the last drawn breath of the summer dying.

It's uncanny that years and the passage of time haven't dulled the memory of our first meeting. How could so much living pile up on top of one summer and still have the events be so crystallized, so vividly laid out before me like I was watching a movie? Perhaps because I have relived it a million times since, replaying over and over every detail in my mind, every word spoken and every breath in-between, every pause, every single gesture. I've been helpless, unable to let go. It is my hope that through the telling of the story of Beth, and what she did to our lives that summer, that I will be set free, not from the memory of her because that I cherish, but from the burden that I have carried in my heart and soul for the last twenty-five years.

## Chapter

I was up early mowing everything that grew as part of our lawn—choke weed, dandelions, stink bombs, and seedlings from the Manitoba maples that lined our street—when the moving van pulled up in front of the house across from ours. The place had been vacant since the winter. Mr. Luoto had died there the day after Christmas leaving it not only vacant but the topic of every conversation amongst the neighbors. Everybody was so concerned about poor old man Luoto and his house.

“Dead ten days already before anybody even noticed. Poor Mr.

Luoto had nobody. Poor Mr. Luoto, not a soul on this earth who cared about him. Can you imagine? How awful.”

I didn't have much sympathy for Mr. Luoto. I thought he stank. He was a mean, old coot who hated kids, dogs, cats, birds, squirrels and anything that breathed. He walked around the neighborhood snarling at the world and everything in it. I heard he had a wife and a kid once but they fled one afternoon while he was at work, taking all the furniture and the family dog. As far as I was concerned Mr. Luoto's death improved the neighborhood.

Mr. Luoto's house was just like everyone else's on the street. Built around the Second World War for vets as incentive to breed large, happy families who slurped Campbell's soup from Melmac bowls and watched Bonanza on Sunday nights. Or perhaps they were some misguided token of appreciation for having endured the horrors of war. I don't know for sure. Anyway, the 'wartime houses' weren't much of a prize but they were affordable and allowed my father to become a homeowner on an income that was modest and made even more so by his weakness for red wine and vodka with a whisper of orange juice and other demons.

I was always a little embarrassed by the look of the neighborhood. It wasn't exactly the wrong side of the tracks, but it wasn't the right side either. I envied my school friends, who lived in the new subdivision two streets behind ours with fathers who wore ties to work and mothers who golfed with their friends on Wednesday afternoons. Some of their mother's even worked as nurses and teachers or at Eaton's selling lingerie and perfume. Those were the ones I was most in awe of because they dressed so nice and always smelled like Chanel No.

, no matter how hard they had worked that day or how hot it was outside. Mind you, how much of a sweat could you work up folding and refolding underwear in an air-conditioned store all day? The truth is, it wasn't that the families from Glenn Park were a whole lot richer than we were; they just looked it. Not all of the fathers wore ties to work either—a lot of them worked in the elevators shoveling grain or at the Abitibi Mill slopping pulp but somehow between selling perfume and slopping pulp they were able to live in a neighborhood that put them at least one notch above ours. And that was just enough for me to be self-conscious when any of them came over to our house and saw that we didn't have wall-to-wall burnt orange or avocado shag carpets or a picture window in the living room. Ours wasn't a tidy three-bedroom rancher with attached garage, basketball hoop and paved driveway. Ours was one of those blue-collar houses from “that

wartime neighborhood.”There’s nothing like the snobbery of the middle class.

Early that spring (around the time both John and Paul got married and Jim Morrison was charged with a total of six counts of “lewd behavior” at a Doors concert in Miami) there was a flurry of activity as the builders, painters, plumbers and electricians took over old man Luoto’s house. Day after day they came, putting up new walls, replacing the roof and all the windows, adding on here, tearing down there. And then one day, as if by magic, Mr. Luoto’s house was transformed into a quaint, New England Cape Cod—a page right out of *Better Homes and Gardens*—completely ruining the monotone uniformity of the street. And then suddenly poor old Mr. Luoto wasn’t so poor anymore with his “hoity toity, who does he think he is?” new house.

About an hour after the movers left, a black Cadillac pulled up in front of Mr. Luoto’s house. I had never seen a car like that in our neighborhood before, at least not parked and looking like it might stay. She sized me up from the back seat of the car like some teenage movie star, kind of like Hayley Mills or Marsha from the *Brady Bunch*. And I looked at her with the ignorant curiosity of a small town girl who had never been further than Duluth in the back seat of her father’s fifty-nine Ford with the rust on the fenders and cigarette burns on the driver’s seat.

She smiled at me first and I was obliged to smile back. And that was it.

She was pale and interesting looking, the complete opposite of me. Despite minor skin eruptions, I was actually feeling pretty good about the way I looked until she showed up. Next to her I looked over-cooked like Mrs. Korkala’s Finnish rye bread. Anyway, I was all excited inside about her sudden appearance because I had been anticipating something incredible happening that summer and as soon as I saw her I knew it had something to do with her. I don’t know, maybe it was watching all the reconstruction going on across the street; or my sixth sense was at work, but I just had this feeling in my gut that this summer it would be different. There would be something besides cutting grass, fighting with Harold and looking after my kid sister, Danny.

She got out of the car first and approached me as though we were old friends. There was nothing of the teenage awkwardness in her walk, not a bit of hesitation or shyness. Her fine blonde hair was cut in one of those fashionable pageboy styles I saw in the March issue of *Seventeen* magazine. She had sea green eyes with flecks of gold that reminded me of cat’s eye crockers, the oversized

marbles, that we played with in the spring when the snow was just starting to melt and we could shoot without our gloves on. They stood out because her skin was so shockingly pale, almost as if it wasn't there at all, like she had no face, just these big eyes. She was tall and thin and elegant like Twiggy. Next to her I felt very short, over-weight and too dark in my cut-off shorts and ripped tee shirt. She stared at me for what seemed like eternity while I, paralyzed by inadequacy, inferiority and my obvious lack of fashion sense no matter how many issues of Seventeen I had read, was unable to do anything but gawk back. And that's when she started talking to me about the youths in Asia. As if I cared.

"What?" I asked, rolling my eyes in opposite directions and crossing them at my nose. This was a bad habit (or talent, depending on your perspective)—an automatic reaction to totally insane things like that.

She started to howl like I was the crazy one. As if things weren't awkward enough, then she goes and makes it even more uncomfortable by laughing at nothing. I wanted to pull up the grass and crawl under but instead I started to yuk it up too. At what, I hadn't a clue.

"That's pretty far-out," she said catching her breath.

"Far-out?"

"That bizarre thing you do with your eyes."

"Yeah, well. It's a gift," I said, lowering my eyes just in case I started to roll them again. Sometimes I couldn't control it and looking into those alley-eyes of hers was too intense especially when she was making such a big deal about mine.

"Quite the talent. I'm Beth Luoto, by the way," she said, taking my hand and shaking it. I didn't know which was weirder, her having the same name as old man Luoto or her shaking my hand. The only people I knew who shook hands were old like my parents.

"I'm Jo. Jo Fasano," I stammered. She was still pumping away at my hand, which was starting to make me nervous. What did she think I was—a well?

"Interesting name," she said, releasing my hand finally and crossing her arms over her flat chest. "Is that Italian?"

"Sorta."

"Sorta," she mimicked. "Is that like sorta pregnant?"

"It is," I stammered, suddenly feeling defensive about my heritage and wondering why it even mattered. Why give someone the third degree over a name? Further proof that she was a certifiable loon and I should run for my life. "Italian I mean. Not pregnant. My grandparents were from Italy. But we're all Canadian now eh."

“I’m American huh. I was born in New York. There were lots of Italians there. Not a lot of Finns so my parents left. Actually that’s not true but it sounds good. That’s just where they were when they had me. They were visiting, you know like tourists—right at the top of the Empire State Building my mother goes into labor, seven weeks early. So I ended up being born there but we’re actually from Minneapolis. Talk about your colossal bore.”

“I’d give anything to be in New York right now. Broadway. Off-Broadway. Off-Off-Broadway. Who cares? Just so long as it’s the theater and I’m not stuck in this God-forsaken place.”

“I guess you’re a little ways from New York up here eh,” I said like a total moron.

“Oh please I’m a million miles away from everything up here. I might as well be on the moon. This is worse than Minneapolis and things can’t get much worse than that. Trust me.”

“I almost went to Minneapolis once. When I was eight. Our car broke down just outside of Duluth. By the time we got it fixed my father was so cheesed off he turned the car around and that was the end of our trip to Minneapolis. I was real disappointed too because I was really looking forward to seeing a big city eh?”

“You should see New York. I’m going to be a super famous actress some day. I’ve already got my stage name picked out and everything. Elizabeth Evans. Whadoya think?”

“It’s okay I guess. What’s wrong with your real name?”

“Everything. Tell me who sounds more like a movie star? Bernard Schwartz or Tony Curtis?”

“Is this some kind of test?” I asked.

“No test,” she laughed, “just answer the question. I want to know what you think.”

“Okay then, Tony Curtis sounds better,” I answered, confident that I had gotten the right answer just like a contestant on Jeopardy.

“And who sounds sexier Roy Scherer Junior or Rock Hudson?”

“Rock Hudson,” I answered, “but Rock is kinda stupid.”

“And do you think John Wayne could have pulled off all those Westerns if he’d stayed a Marion Morrison?”

“I never thought about it before. I guess you’re right. But those were all wimpy names and yours is kinda nice.”

“Nice? I’m not going for nice. I mean you have to have the right name to be a star. It’s all part of your image. Tell me who would pay to see Elsbeth Luoto?”

“I don’t know. No one I guess,” I said, but inside I was thinking—me. I would go see a movie with her in it, no matter what her name was. In a New York minute I would have even traveled to



Off-Off-Broadway to see her perform.

“Precisely. But Elizabeth Evans, now that’s a groovy movie star name.”

“I get it,” I said. The truth is I didn’t get it but then I was never all that big on movie stars anyway. It was obviously very important to her though. And already, just minutes after meeting her I knew somewhere deep inside of me that whatever was important to Beth was going to be important to me.

“Remember it Jo-Jo Fasano. ’Cause one day you’re going to see me in all the movie magazines, right next to Robert Redford and Paul Newman. I’m going to be famous, more famous than Elizabeth Taylor even,” she laughed as she rolled back onto the sweet smelling grass. She crossed her legs at the ankles, cradled her arms behind her head and gazed upwards as if this dream of hers was painted across the endless blue sky. That’s how large it was. Not sure what to do, I dropped the rake I had been clutching and flopped down beside her. An outsider would have thought that we were two old friends who knew each other forever. Just think, me lying on the grass next to someone more famous than Elizabeth Taylor. I couldn’t believe my good luck.

“So you’re related to old man, I mean Mr. Luoto?” I asked after we had been lying there for awhile staring up at the sky.

“Old man Luoto was my grandfather,” she answered.

“Sorry eh. I mean for calling him old man Luoto like that and that he’s dead.” I could hear the idiotic words pouring out of my mouth; tripping over themselves with the grace of an elephant, yet for some reason I was powerless to stop them. It was like my mouth took on a life of its own, completely disconnected from the rest of me.

“Don’t be. On both counts. I never knew the man, didn’t even know I had a grandfather until he died. The only thing my father ever said about his childhood was that he was born in Canada. He’s not the kind of guy you ask questions of, and the truth is, I’ve never been all that interested in anything he had to say anyway, so even if he did talk about it I probably wasn’t listening. Six months ago if you had said I would be living up in the middle of Nowhereville I’d have laughed right in your face. And look at me now.”

“So are you movin’ in there?”

“Uh-huh. I still can’t believe it. My father accepted a position at the university after the old coot left him the house and a ton of money he had stashed away that no one knew about. For some inexplicable reason, that only my father and his shrink understand for sure, we had to move into this house. He’s absolutely obsessed

with this place. He didn't even want to fix it up but my mother drew the line on that point. The place was unlivable, not to mention that he died in there for God's sake. It's just too weird."

"Wow! That is weird eh. Do you think you'll stay?"

"Not on your life. The first chance I get I'm off to New York to study acting. My parents can stay here and figure this psychodrama out on their own. One way or the other I'm out of here."

"What about the youths in Asia?" I asked.

"Huh?" she gave me this look—akin to my eye-rolling thing, only more like she thought I was nuts.

"You asked me what I thought of the youths in Asia,"

I explained. "I thought maybe you were thinking of going there."

I struggled to make sense of our conversation and desperately tried to impress her with my worldly knowledge, which was obviously non-existent. The second I opened my dumb, hick mouth though I knew I had said something so idiotic even a monkey would have been more eloquent.

"Huh? Who said anything about Asia? I deplore the place.

I said euthanasia. Look that up in your Funk & Wagnall's Jo-Jo Fasano."

## Chapter

After she left I went inside to look up the word in the Webster's (we didn't have a Funk & Wagnall's) my old man bought when I was in first grade. He thought it would make me smarter. Until Beth came to town it was rarely opened. I figured I was smart enough without it. Stick to words you know and leave the big ones for geniuses and English professors; that was my philosophy. Danny used it once and awhile to stand on when she needed a little extra height getting stuff out of the top cupboard in the kitchen.

The house was empty, quiet and peaceful, a welcome reprieve from the blistering heat. My mother took Danny down to the bakery where Joe Senior worked. It was their Saturday morning ritual.

They'd pick up bread for the week along with some sweet pastries as a treat for dessert that night. Then they sat next to the door on dilapidated paint-chipped-wobbly-legged chairs and watched Joe Senior as he waited on customers in the oppressive little storefront with its sweaty windows from non-stop bread baking. It was enough to make you crazy. The truth is I don't think it was the heat that made my father behave the way he did but whenever I stood in that sopping yeast hive I could see how it could turn a normal person into a raving lunatic.

At noon the three of them would go for lunch at the Hoito, a Finnish restaurant in the basement of the Finlandia Club just

around the corner from the bakery. They'd have Finnish pancakes smothered in pure Canadian maple syrup with crispy bacon on the side or greasy pork sausages dipped in mounds of Heinz ketchup, bottles of which were kept in endless supply on every table.

Everyone had the same thing. It was part of the ritual. At one o'clock Danny and Ma would give him goodbye kisses on the cheek and walk back home. I knew all this because up until two years ago, that was my Saturday morning ritual too. I stopped because I found it embarrassing to be seen in public with my parents, even if it was just the Hoito; and besides it was the only time I could get away from Danny, my eleven year old shadow.

Danny wasn't a bad kid. She just drove me crazy some times. Everywhere I went Danny had to go too—kinda like Mary's little lamb. She idolized me and that only made things worse. She had two imaginary pets, Boo Boo Kitty and Zee Bee the dog. My mother was allergic to all animals, at least that's what she told us. No pets were allowed in or near our house. I was okay with this but poor Danny loved anything that walked on four legs and preferably had a tail. Before she made up Boo Boo Kitty and Zee Bee she was forever trying to sneak some stray into her bedroom. Danny was pretty slow about this whole pet thing though because Ma would always catch her but instead of yelling at Dan she'd take it out on me. Like I was supposed to know better. So I threatened to strangle the next animal she brought into the house. That's when she invented her imaginary pets. Everybody was pretty happy after that. I poured myself a glass of cherry flavored Kool-Aid and brought it into the living room along with the Webster's. I sank into the secure comfort of our couch that was as reassuring as it was shabby with its well-worn burgundy cushions that were faded by the sun and years of holding the weight of our family. I turned the pages slowly and methodically, letter by letter until I came to the U's, where I stopped and picked up my Kool-Aid, emptying the glass all at once. I couldn't find anything even remotely close to what I was looking for.

Accepting defeat and the fact that I was a lousy speller, I called Harold, the drip nerd that I was practically raised with. Harold and I were born on the same day of the same year, six hours apart. Our mothers shared a room together in the hospital and became instant and lifelong friends. This circumstance of bad timing on our mothers' part accidentally forced Harold and I into each other's lives permanently. If I had been born a week earlier instead of six hours I would never have known him. My mother loved Mrs. Korkala though so for that I am grateful; since my mother didn't

really have any other friends or close family members to speak of. Everyone who met my mother loved her immediately but she kept to herself and this always made me a little sad. It was one of the mysteries of my mother I never fully understood until I was much older and could see the truth about our family secrets and how closely we all guarded them, in particular Ma. Harold's father Vilho died when he was two, and shortly after that he and his mother, Mrs. K. as we all came to call her, moved a mere two doors away so it was like we practically lived together. You couldn't belch without Harold knowing about it. But like I said I was happy for Ma having a friend like Mrs. K. so near by especially with the way Joe could be sometimes.

Harold had quite a few physical problems that made him stand out. First there was his poor vision and consequently his need for glasses as thick as the bottom of Coke bottles. Then there were his slightly oversized ears and rather problematic skin, which made him the butt of many jokes and name calling at school. Crater Face and Dumbo were just two of the kinder monikers that were said to his face, those said behind his back I can't bring myself to repeat even after all these years. I tried to disassociate myself from him but he was just like Danny that way, everywhere I went Harold was sure to follow. The more I tried to brush him off, the more he pursued until one day in about the sixth grade I gave up and accepted my situation. The thing was, I basically liked Harold. He was truly a nice guy, kind and generous to a fault, perhaps a little too sensitive at times, but he would do anything, I mean anything for me.

And most importantly, he could be trusted.

I picked up the phone and called him. Considering his looks, Harold had the deepest, sexiest telephone voice. It defied reason.

"It's spelled E-U-T-H-A-N-A-S-I-A beginning with an E not a U," he said, spelling out each letter for me as I wrote it down on the pad of paper Ma kept by the phone. "That's why you couldn't find it. What do you wanna know for eh?"

"No reason," I said, "just something I heard on TV." I hung up quickly before he could ask any more questions. Harold had one of those naturally scientific, enquiring minds. Something like this would make him suspicious to the point where he'd pester me until I snapped and we got into a fight, which was what usually happened. No one—absolutely, positively no one—could irritate me like Harold.

I whipped open the Webster's and found it spelled just like he said but it made no sense at all. It only left me with two questions: why was she talking to me, a complete stranger, about something

awful like that and what made Beth Luoto tick?

## Chapter

I stood on our front steps and stared at the house across the street, willing her to appear. The Cadillac was gone and everything was still. I was trying to decide whether to go back in the house and watch American Bandstand or go across the street and knock on her door.

I chose the latter and sauntered across the street, pausing for a moment to pick up a good luck penny I spotted on the side of the road, stuffed it into the pocket of my shorts along with the four leaf clover I found earlier while cutting the grass and headed up her driveway to the back door. It was creepy since I hadn't stepped foot in that yard all the years Mr. Luoto lived there. I felt like a criminal, like I was up to no good instead of just paying someone a nice neighborly visit. I had visions of myself making license plates in some horrible jail for female trespassers in Manitoba. I rang the doorbell two or three times but there was no answer so I took the liberty of peeking in the window. There were a few unopened cardboard cartons in the middle of the ultra-modern kitchen with its white appliances and shiny chrome fixtures. Everything looked cold and uninviting and other than the cartons it was immaculate—too tidy for a house that had just been moved into that morning. Poor old man Luoto, if he could only see his house now, he'd roll over in his grave and have another heart attack. When I turned to leave, Harold was standing at the foot of the steps watching me. I was so frightened I almost jumped right out of my skin.

“Jesus H. Korkala!” I screeched. “What are you doing ... spying on me? Look at me! I'm shaking like a leaf!”

“Sorry Jo. I didn't mean to scare you,” he apologized. “What are you sneaking around here for anyway?”

“I'm not sneaking around. I came to visit the new girl.”

“What new girl?”

“Beth Luoto. Old man Luoto's granddaughter. I met her this morning when I was cutting the grass. She told me I could visit her anytime. She's going to be a movie star. In New York. Like Elizabeth Taylor only bigger cuz she's Elizabeth Evans.”

“Oh yeah! You don't look like you're supposed to be here. Snooping in people's windows and stuff. And what's a movie star doing living across the street from us eh?”

“I wasn't snooping. I was just looking to see if she was home. I thought maybe the door bell wasn't working!” I brushed past him

and stomped down the driveway. He stood there for a moment, then ran to catch up with me. By this time I was furious. “She isn’t one yet Korkala,” I hissed, “I said she’s going to be ... when she gets out of this dump of a town.”

“Sorry Jo,” he apologized again, even though I knew he didn’t know what he had said or done that made me so angry. He only knew it had something to do with him. That’s just the way it was with Harold and me. I got angry and he apologized. Half the time neither of us knew why.

The significance of someone who was practically a movie star living in our town much less right across the street, flew right over his head and landed in Timbuktu. Poor Harold, he just didn’t have a clue.

“Hey Jo, don’t you wanna know why I tracked you down?” he asked, all keen and excited like he was about to tell me he had just won a million dollars.

“No Korkala. I don’t. Unless it’s news of your departure permanently from my life I’m not interested,” I snapped, kicking a rock as we crossed the street. He kept walking beside me like one of those neurotic little Chihuahua dogs that bark and nip at your feet whenever they get excited.

Ignoring (or worse yet, not noticing) that I was about to explode with anger, he starts babbling on about his mother and long deceased father.

“Mama wants to know if your family can come for supper tomorrow night. It’s Papa’s birthday. She made a cake.”

“Korkala, you don’t have a father. He died when you were two remember,” I said impatiently.

“So! We can still celebrate his birthday. It’s a Finnish thing.”

“Oh please. It is not. What crap!”

“Okay so it isn’t a Finnish thing. It’s just something we want to do. Come on this is his sixtieth and it would mean a lot to her.”

“If it’s such a big deal why hasn’t she said anything to Ma?

They tell each other everything.”

“Because it was my idea, kinda last minute and all I know.

I told Mama I’d do the inviting ... you know get everything set up with you first.”

“Why?”

“Because I just thought it would be nice,” he said. Harold had this way of saying the word nice that was so NICE it was sickening.

“No, I mean why me? Why do you have to set things up with me first?”

“I don’t know. Why not?” He gave me this puzzled look like I had just asked him to walk in front of a moving bus but good old Harold had turned into a pit bull by this time and there was just no tearing him away from this notion he had about dinner.

“It’s been such a long time since we’ve had your family over,” he continued like he was delivering earth-shattering news.

“Korkala our families just had dinner together,” I said.

“Not since Easter and that was at your place,” he said.

“Easter,” I repeated. Could it have been that long? Why did it seem like last week? Was I losing my mind?

“Mama gets so sad at this time of year,” he continued. “You know he died on his birthday. We were just about to have the cake, just the three of us having this nice family celebration. I was too young to remember of course but Mama told me all about it when I was old enough to understand...”

“When was that? Yesterday!”

Ignoring my sarcasm, he carried right on with his story about his dead father without even skipping a beat, “anyway right in the middle of him blowing out the candles—bam! Drops dead from a heart attack—right there in front of Mama and me. He does this face plant directly into the whipping cream and double fudge icing. So I just thought if we did something really nice this year with your family eh she wouldn’t be so sad. Come on Jo? Whadoya say?” Harold got this pathetic sad-dog look on his face, the kind that you’d have to be totally stone hearted to walk away from. I’m not sure if he had ever told me that story about his father’s death before but it really got to me.

“Ah jeez Korkala,” I sighed as I watched him walk happily home to his Mrs. K. and their fake birthday party plans.

I spent the rest of the afternoon planting pansies, impatiens and marigolds in the garden beds that surrounded our house. From time-to-time I glanced over at the Luoto mansion, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. When I was finished, I pulled out a fluorescent green webbed lawn chair from the basement and planted it in the middle of the front yard where I pretended to be reading my mother’s latest copy of Family Circle magazine. Danny and Ma came home around five. They had decided to go shopping after lunch. I was so busy thinking about Beth I hadn’t even noticed that they were three hours late. Danny brought up another chair from the basement and placed it next to mine.

“What’s up squirt?” I asked, as Danny pulled out a bag of licorice Jujubes and started stuffing her face. “How about one?” She handed me the bag and said, “Ma took me to the plaza eh.

We even went to Pet Land to see the new kittens. There was eight of 'em. All different colors. They were so cute. I liked the black one with the white paws the best. I bet his name was Boots.”

“Boots. Ma actually took you inside Pet Land?”

“Not exactly.”

“What does that mean Dan? Not exactly.”

“They were in the window ... in a big basket ... and we looked at them through the glass ... but we were practically inside.”

“That’s like being practically pregnant Dan.”

“I guess,” she shrugged, but I could tell she didn’t have a clue what I was talking about.

“So what else did you do?”

“Nothin’.”

“Nothin’. You were gone three hours Danny. Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere. Home.”

“It took you three hours to get home?”

“I can’t remember.” Danny hated being put on the spot, although in my mind I was just trying to have a little conversation, but she thought I was giving her the third degree. She was getting real tense. I could see her bottom lip starting to quiver and her black eyes filling with tears. I had to think of something fast to prevent her from losing it and letting out a big howl that would have attracted the unwanted attention of my mother. Danny was the nervous type and it took very little to set her off but for some inexplicable reason Ma thought I was deliberately trying to make Dan cry all the time, like I was some mean spirited person. I wasn’t of course; it’s just that I was getting to an age where I didn’t want my kid sister hanging around me all the time.

“Ah jeez Dan. Do you wanna play catch?”

“Sure Jo!” she gushed and smiled so wide I could see all these licorice bits stuck between her teeth from the Jujubes. Her lips were all black too which made her look like a miniature vampire but I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to set her off again.

“Go get the ball and our gloves and we’ll toss a few before supper eh?”

Danny and I weren’t like other girls. First of all, we had boy’s names, real boy’s names, not nicknames like Charlotte becoming Charlie or Samantha, or Sam. We were Jo Frances and Danny Marie Fasano, named after my father and his best buddy who wasn’t lucky enough to make it back from the war and find his “bastard father had married a whore young enough to be his daughter,” as Joe always said whenever he made any reference to my grandfather. I guess I was Jo Junior but I didn’t like to think of it



that way. When I was born, I think my father knew deep down inside that he would never have a son, not a real one anyway. Sometimes I think he wanted Danny and I to be boys so bad that he actually tricked himself into believing that we were. If it weren't happening to us, I would have thought that it was real sad for someone to go his whole life feeling like that.

At first I thought he blamed my mother for bearing only girls, as if we were somehow inferior beings, but I realized that summer that he actually hated himself all along. In his mind he had this Italian machismo notion, that he wasn't man enough to make sons. I think that's why he was always trying to prove himself, always showing off, doing things other fathers never did. I remember one time he climbed up on the roof of the house to repair the shingles. Instead of just going up there and fixing the stupid things he had to strut around on the roof like Elvis Presley, gyrating and making a fool of himself, not to mention scaring Ma half to death.

She stood below on the lawn calling to him to come down.

"You're gonna fall Joe. Be careful. Come down here before you hurt yourself." Eventually he climbed down, unhurt and unrepentant, a little too smug. Ma stomped back into the house shaking his hand off her back and pulling away as he followed her in, calling her name in this embarrassing voice that should have been left for the privacy of their bedroom. At times like those I wished he had fallen. Not necessarily died or anything, just hurt himself enough to wipe that smug look off his face.

Because my father treated us like boys we never got girl's toys when we were growing up. Not even at Christmas, no matter how good we were all year long, no matter how many cookies we left out for Santa, no matter how many letters we wrote him. Instead of Barbie dolls and Chatty Cathy's, we got hockey skates and baseball gloves, train sets and racing cars. Joe Senior encouraged us to play sports of all kinds. The thing was, Danny and I hated organized sports, except for baseball. I longed to dress up Barbie and take her out on a date with Ken. All Danny wanted was a stuffed animal to hang onto at night when things got too dark and scary.

Until that summer Danny and I both played on teams. Just like the Saturday morning ritual with my family, so went the baseball team. Joe Senior wasn't too happy about me giving it up but as long as Danny played, he still had hope. Then Dan did the unthinkable and announced one night at supper—right over a plate of rigatoni and veal Parmesan—that if I wasn't playing, she wasn't either.

In our family we didn't just break bread, we broke bad news and often at the same time. The kid had guts. Shattering our poor old

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