

Stoddabubba

by

Carol E. Stowe

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the

NEOMFA

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2015

Stoddabubba

Carol E. Stowe

I hereby release this thesis to the public. I understand that this thesis will be made available from the OhioLINK ETD Center and the Maag Library Circulation Desk for public access. I also authorize the University or other individuals to make copies of this thesis as needed for scholarly research.

Signature:

Carol E. Stowe, Student Date

Approvals:

Christopher Barzak, Thesis Advisor Date

Dr. Phillip Brady, Committee Member Date

Robert Pope, Committee Member Date

Dr. Salvatore A. Sanders, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies Date

ABSTRACT

This novel excerpt is about an older woman who loses a long-time friend and spends some time remembering her youth, their friendship, and the other people and events that helped shape her life.

She remembers especially her mother and grandmother, her younger sister, her best friend Marian, and the other women friends who guided her through some of her best and worst experiences.

Aided by her faith she is able to forgive her brother and husband for the choices they made which made her life more difficult and gain the emotional strength to embrace new thoughts and ideas.

Table of Contents

Preface	1.
Chapter 1—Girlhood	8.
Chapter 2—Innocence	22.
Chapter 3—Innocence vs. Adulthood	27.
Chapter 4—Papa	39.
Chapter 5—Changes	51.
Chapter 6—Sweet Sixteen	81.
Chapter 7—Betrayal	105.
Chapter 8—Wedding	123.
Chapter 9—Newlywed	141.
Chapter 10—Celebrations	161.

Prologue

Catherine touched Marian's hand. It was cold. Of course it was. Marian was dead.

Marian looked like she was sleeping, only she had her glasses on. The pain lines in her face had diminished and she finally looked peaceful. Catherine bumped her knee on the kneeler as she walked around it to the head of the polished honey oak coffin. Suddenly dizzy, she gripped the brass hand rail and said a short prayer, standing in deference to the pain in her knees.

Anne and her three brothers were standing nearby talking with a tall, white-haired gentleman. When Catherine's turn came she hugged Anne but didn't have to say a word.

"Thank you for coming, and for being Mom's best friend. These last two weeks between pain pills Mom told me stories of the things that you and she did growing up together. I know all about what you did in the Protestant church and how my parents came to be married. Those stories will live with me forever."

"She was a feisty one when we were younger. She wanted a daughter and had three sons while she waited for you. You've been a blessing to her these last years. And she's at peace now."

Anne's tears fell on Catherine's wrinkled hand as Tom, the oldest brother, leaned down and hugged her. Sam and Ernie got their hugs as well and by the time Catherine moved from the narthex into the church for the funeral her own eyes were moist. Again.

She sat heavily on the hard oak pew about halfway down the center aisle. She was only four feet, nine inches tall in her black tie shoes with the chunky one-and-a-half inch heels, and had to sit forward on the pew so her feet would touch the floor.

Her grandson Harold had driven her for the calling hours and had even opened the car door for her. "I'll be back with Mom before the funeral starts," he had said, pulling his cell phone from his pocket as the doors closed behind him.

A smile crossed her lips as she thought about him. Even after almost sixty years, she remembered him by his toddler nickname of "Woogie" rather than his given name. Funny how the first thing you learn, she thought, is the thing that sticks with you.

She sighed. The funeral would start in an hour. She had wanted to come here to St. Michael's an hour early to pay her last respects and say the rosary for her friend. They had been raised together in Pennsylvania, neighbors on Peerless St. for nearly fifty years, and at the senior high rise for eight years. Catherine was already missing her. With Marian gone, there was no one on this earth who would call her "Cat" ever again.

The interior of St. Michael the Archangel church always awed her. The only light, aside from that produced by the flickering prayer candles at each side altar and the one large candle that hung suspended over the center altar, was from the gray March day, filtered by heavy clouds, that entered through the skylight over the altar and through the heavy, lead-outlined stained glass side windows depicting scenes from the lives of twelve saints.

She had lit a prayer candle for Marian each week for the last month when she came here for Mass, always going back to her pew to say her prayer because kneeling on the marble in front of the prayer candles was too difficult for her now. Her prayer each

week was that her friend would get better, followed by the wish that Marian would pass quickly if she could not get better. Those prayers had been answered four nights ago when Anne called to say that Marian had died in her sleep.

Catherine felt that part of herself had died along with her friend but was relieved that Marian was no longer in pain. Her cancer would have been treatable but because of her age the doctor thought that Marian would not survive a difficult surgery and had suggested that she just be kept comfortable until the end. He didn't want to give Marian much pain medication for fear that she would become addicted to it and Marian cried for the medication hours ahead of the time it should have been given. Anne threw a fit and threatened to call in her own doctor to handle her mother's case if something wasn't done immediately to make Marian comfortable. It wouldn't matter if Marian became addicted to the pain medication because she wouldn't live very long anyway. The doctor finally decided to increase the dosage until Marian was comfortable.

Thank goodness Anne watched out for her mother, Catherine thought. I wonder if Mary will be as caring when it is my turn.

In shadows the white vaulted ceiling outlined with oaken beams rose three stories from the terrazzo floor. Over the altar the ceiling was a blue painted dome, from which hung a magnificently carved oak box that acted as a second roof over the huge crucifix depicting Christ in agony on the cross. Intricate carving also decorated the oak doors of the confessional in the back of the church, and at the rear, a wide oak beam outlined the choir loft.

Against the wall under the crucifix was a great altar done in white and pink marble, with side shelves on which stood great seven-candle candelabra. That altar was built when the Mass was celebrated in Latin and the priest always had his back to the congregation. In front of the great altar separated by an Oriental rug was a second, smaller altar of white marble, installed when Vatican II had mandated changes in the Church that included saying Mass in the language of the people and allowing the priest to face the faithful and welcome them to the supper of the Lord.

Catherine remembered Vatican II, remembered the hushed awe with which people spoke of it. Priests and cardinals from all over the world were ordered by Pope John XXIII to convene at the Vatican in Rome to consider sweeping changes for the Roman Catholic Church, changes that would affect peoples of all nations for generations to come. There was much anticipation and many rumors about the subjects that the cardinals would be discussing and how the ordinary people would be affected. Rumors flew for months, but nothing came out of the meeting until the end, when a proclamation was issued containing the changes that would be required of all Catholics and the reasons for them.

Catherine smiled, remembering all the hullabaloo regarding the mandates. She herself was scandalized that the priest would be speaking English instead of Latin. How would she understand the Mass if she went elsewhere? It wasn't until years later that she realized she didn't understand it in Latin anyway.

Perhaps change wasn't so bad after all. Like Woogie's cell phone. He and some of his cousins had been after her to get a cell phone for her safety but she had ignored them. For Christmas her daughter Mary had actually bought her a phone made for seniors with big easy-to-see numbers. After Mary left Catherine had carefully placed the phone back into the box and put it into the hall closet where it remained untouched.

Feeling rested, Catherine unbuttoned her black cloth coat, pulled the tails of her black *babushka* a little tighter under her chin, and began to rummage in her purse. Her yellow-gray hair was pulled back into a meager braid, which she had coiled into a small bun at the nape of her neck. Her bushy gray eyebrows almost met over her strong nose, and she had a dark brown age spot on her left cheekbone. Well-deserved wrinkles framed her eyes and mouth, and a few long grey hairs she could not see sprouted under the right side of her chin, but her brown eyes were still dark and lively.

Catherine and her husband Andy had pledged along with the other church members to help build St. Michael's. The priest at that time, Father Kowalski, had spoken many sermons from the improvised pulpit at their temporary home in the gymnasium of the local high school, asking for donations of money, time and talent to construct the building that would house their faith center. She and Andy weren't well off--he was a laborer at the local steel mill and they had four young children—but they talked over Father's request and pledged their time and talents to help raise money to construct the building. Andy offered to provide labor for the project and Catherine promised to bake her specialty pastries--nut horns and *kolachi*--for bake sales and to prepare food to feed the workers once the work began.

Several years of fund raising passed before ground was broken on land donated by one of the wealthier parishioners. One warm Sunday afternoon in late October, the bishop came to bless the two-acre plot of land. With his secretary and aide hovering in the background, he donned his red vestments and mitre and dug the first shovelful of dirt, surrounded by the priests of all the local parishes. Altar boys from the new church of St. Michael's had been practicing for weeks for this joyous event and now, attired in red smocks and white lace overlays borrowed from the cathedral, attended the collection of priests to hold candles, the incense boat and censer, holy water pail, a crucifix on a pole, and the bishop's staff. The local newspaper sent a photographer and feature writer to record the event for the next edition, and the bishop's smiling face showed up on the front page next to Father Kowalski on the Tuesday after the ceremony.

The rosary was in the bottom of her purse, of course, and it tangled around mints, cough drops, and a few tissues as she tried to retrieve it. At last her large hands held it, one of the few personal possessions that remained from her late husband Andy. He had received it on the day of his confirmation, and it had only been out of the wooden cigar box where he kept his valuables for funerals or wakes. The black beads were shiny, as if seldom used, and the medal and cross were not worn.

Easing forward on the pew, she perched on the edge and, ignoring the kneeler, rested her forearms on the back of the pew in front of her, the rosary dangling as she shifted her weight to smooth her coat and flexed the fingers of her right hand. The damp

March air made all her joints ache, but her knees and hands hurt the worst. In deference to the arthritis, she would sit and pray.

She kissed the crucifix, made the sign of the cross with it, and began the Lord's Prayer. Halfway through the prayer the sun came out and burnished the stained glass windows on the east side of the church. A stray sunbeam bounced off the back side of the crucifix on the rosary and danced on the nearby pews like the lightening bugs she had chased in her girlhood so many years ago.

Decades ago it was, and yet it seemed like only yesterday that she was fifteen, living in Pennsylvania with her brothers, sisters, parents, and her best friend Marian. Details that she had long forgotten began to surface.

One – Girlhood

She was born Catherine Sheroski in Boardman, Pennsylvania, a small mining town. Her father had immigrated to the United States as a child, and his family had settled there along with other Slovak families. Her mother's parents had emigrated from Italy and settled there because it was a Catholic area. Her mother had been born the year after they arrived.

Her older brother was named John, and her younger siblings were, in order, Bob, Theresa, Bill, George, Tony, and Emma.

At fifteen she was a slight girl with a mop of long dark wavy brown hair, brown eyes too big for her face, and no visible womanly curves. Her skin was tanned from hanging clothes outside and weeding the garden. At four feet ten inches in her bare feet she was the same height as her mother but her younger sister was already almost as tall as she was.

Most of the miner's houses were built just the same: a large downstairs room that functioned as kitchen, dining room, and parlor, and a steep flight of stairs leading to the attic room where the children slept. They called it the loft. Some of the larger houses had a bedroom off the main room for the parents, but Catherine's house had a bed built into one corner and curtained off with blankets for her parents. A sick child would get to snuggle into the quilts to be pampered and fussed over for the day. Over the bed hung an oak cross, handmade by her father as a wedding gift to his bride.

There was a small window in each end of the loft. Thin blankets pinned to a wire running down the center of the large room separated the girls' area from the boys' area.

In the far corner, curtained off, was the lidded slop jar under a hole in a crude bench. The younger children slept closer to the stairs so Catherine's bed was closest to it. It was her job to help the younger ones in the middle of the night and empty the jar in the morning. In the heat of summer or the dead of winter after the younger children were in bed either John or Catherine would bunch the thin blankets together—in the center of the room in summer to allow the cool air from the windows to circulate and at either end in the winter to keep the cold air from blowing in.

The front door faced the dirt road from under a small porch roof. Catherine's mother loved flowers and had a small flower bed near the house to grow her favorite pink climbing roses. She had taken a cutting from her mother's bush when she married and trained the vines up the crude trellis that her new husband had lovingly made her. The tiny pink flower clusters filled the house with fragrance when they were in bloom. She freely gave cuttings to her neighbors in the spring but no one could grow them like she did.

The back door huddled under a small overhang. Two steps made of cast-off bricks went down to the yard.. Each door had a wooden screen door to keep the house cooler in the summer. Catherine's father had scrounged two long pieces of spring and attached one end to the door frame and the other to the door so that it closed with a bang each time someone went in or out.

In the back yard were clotheslines, the chicken coop and vegetable garden and farther back the new privy. When the hole was half full they would usually dig a new hole and move the building, then fill in the old hole. Nothing would grow on the site of the old privy. Because of the large family Catherine's father and older brother had

recently constructed a larger building with two seats and a latch for the inside of the door. The building was tilted back slightly so the door would swing shut on its own and, as a prank John had carved a half-moon into the privy door.

Another door at the far end of the main room opened to steps which led to the dirt-floored root cellar. The ice box sat at the very bottom of the steps, each leg balanced on two old bricks. To the far left of the steps a series of wooden shelves held pint and quart canning jars full of food that the women spent so much time storing. In the middle of the cellar clotheslines were strung back and forth to use when the weather was bad. Behind the stairs sat the wash tubs and washboard, next to another set of stairs which led through the double cellar doors to the back yard. In the far corner close to the steps outside were two wooden corrals. One held small lumps of coal for the stove and the other was full of kindling wood. The walls of the cellar were made of brown glazed building tiles. The glaze kept water from coming through the walls during heavy rains, but rain would come in through the double cellar doors.

Marian Jacobiasen, her best friend, lived in the same kind of house just across the dirt road. Marian was a little taller, about five-one, and made sure she reminded Catherine of that fact at least once a day to get her goat. After a few weeks when Catherine didn't get upset Marian stopped talking about it. She had straight brown hair and softly rounded curves where Catherine was built straight up and down.

They had spent time together from childhood, for their mothers were friends and neighbored back and forth. Together they had learned to pick wild strawberries and blackberries under the watchful eyes of their mothers, and together had wandered into a patch of poison ivy. When one had the measles the other one was sent to visit to pick up

the disease and get it out of the way. They made their first Communion together at church and were looking forward to their Confirmations.

Most of the miners were Catholic but the town was so small that they didn't have a church. The priest stayed in a larger neighboring town and came in every Sunday to say Mass in the company store, the only large building in town. The miners contributed what they could to the offering each Sunday but they didn't make enough money to build a church of their own in town.

The protestant church, a small white building with a cross over the double front doors, stood a ways down from the store. Most of the members were supervisors at the mine and Mr. Paulnesky, who ran the mine for the owners, also went there. Rumor had it that he had put up the money to build the church.

Catholics weren't allowed in protestant churches except for weddings and funerals, but Catherine had been in that white building. One sultry summer evening when she and Marian went for a walk they sat on the ground under a tree behind the church. The back door was open. Curious, they poked their heads into the building, calling hello, but no one answered.

"Let's look inside," said Catherine.

"No, we can't. Remember what Father Wilson said. We'll go to Hell for sure."

"I've always wanted to look at this place. Father Wilson won't know we were here. No one will, unless you tell them. Come on, let's go in." Catherine darted into the building.

“Come out,” Marian called several times. Reluctantly she entered the church and crept down the short hall, looking nervously from right to left for anything evil.

“Boo!”

Marian jumped. “Catherine, stop that. Come out now.”

Catherine took Marian’s hand and pulled her past the coat racks toward the main room. “Come in and have a look. It’s so different from the pictures.”

Instead of chairs the large room had five pews on each side of a center aisle. The altar was plain wood and a cross, not a crucifix, was mounted on the wall behind the altar. Open windows let in the summer breeze and the sound of rustling leaves.

“It’s so plain.” Marian was disappointed. “For a place that’s supposedly sinful, it isn’t impressive at all.”

“What did you expect to see in here, the devil himself?” Catherine laughed.

“I don’t know what I expected, but this isn’t it.”

“See, it’s just a building. We can’t get in trouble for being in a building.” They jumped when the back door slammed shut.

“What was that?”

“Someone’s come in. We gotta go.” Catherine grabbed Marian’s hand and pulled her toward the front door. She opened the door slightly and looked to see if anyone was in sight. “All clear. Run.”

Catherine shoved Marian out the door and closed it. The girls ran and didn’t stop until they were in front of the store where they stopped, panting.

“Look,” said Marian, pointing toward the church. A man came out the door of the church, looked around, and went back inside. The girls burst out giggling.

“Don’t tell anyone what we did.”

“Don’t you tell either.”

The store and the church formed the center of the town. The miners all lived on a dirt road that ran north and south of the center of town or on one of the smaller cross roads. To the west was the mine entrance surrounded by a metal fence. But to the east the road became gravel for the larger, more luxurious houses of Mr. Paulnesky and the mine supervisors.

Catherine had stayed in school just long enough to learn to read the Bible and do some elementary arithmetic, for she was needed at home. She learned housekeeping skills from her mother and nona. Her mother taught her sewing, for everyday dresses and shirts were far cheaper to make than to buy from the Sears Catalog, and mending, because clothing was handed down as her siblings grew and had to last. She had been cleaning since she was seven and a few years later learned to cook whatever her brothers could kill in the woods and fields around the houses. Her older brother had brought down a deer last year and the meat lasted the family several months.

She spoke Slovak at school and at home, as did the rest of the family, with a few words of Italian thrown in here and there from her mother’s native language.

Her mother refused to give up all her ethnic foods so she made spaghetti and meatballs every other week. Papa always said he loved his wife’s cooking.

She minded her younger siblings, learning child care from her Nona Moretti. The women grew vegetables in the small backyard garden, canned any wild fruits she could

pick from the surrounding hillsides, brought water from the joint well they shared with the house across the street, and gathered sticks and other dead wood for the fire.

Her mother's mother, Nona Moretti, had come to live with them for a few years when Catherine was seven. By then she was a frail, white-haired widow who walked with the aid of a cane. Catherine's father had built a free-standing bed in the other corner of the main room and her mother had added blankets on a wire as curtains for her mother's privacy and warmth.

Her Nona taught her how to make her stitches very small so they would hold up, whether she was making a dress or patching one of her brother's shirts. Take your time, Nona would say, because it's better to do it right the first time. A thrifty wife is a good wife.

Nona Moretti in her earlier years took young Catherine out to the woods and showed her which plants could be used for medicines. Catherine learned how to find wild horseradish and grind the roots to make a salve for a bad chest cold, and which leaves would make a poultice to draw the burn from sunburn or the poison from an infected wound.

Catherine had loved to sit by the older woman and watch her fix her hair. The thin white braid was so long that it would hit the floor and roll a few feet before the end was visible. Catherine would help her unbraid the hair and wash it. Nona would sit in the rocking chair and put the wet hair over the high back so it would wave back and forth when she rocked and dry. While the hair dried Nona told her stories of her youth in Italy.

She focused on tales of the colorful houses and beautiful countryside of her mother's native land. In the old country, as Nona Moretti called Italy, family had been

everything. Children were taught early in life that the family's name was their biggest asset and they must do nothing to tarnish that name. It was all about honor.

Girls were held to a higher standard. It was the custom for a young man to ask permission of the head of household to court the girl of his choice. If the young man was considered well-mannered and of good family, permission would be given. But if the young man's family had an undesirable name permission would be denied.

Catherine's favorite story was about how her mother and father came to be married. Catherine's mother was born in Pennsylvania after her parents moved from Italy. They settled here because there was a large Catholic community and plenty of work in the mine, but they were minorities in the mostly-Slovak town. Her mother, Mary Ann, had grown up with the knowledge that her father would choose a husband for her but she fell in love with Joseph Sheroski, a Slovak man, son of a mine worker, who lived two houses down the road. He sometimes helped her father around the house and every now and then Mary Ann convinced her mother to let him stay for dinner.

When he asked Mary Ann's father for permission to court her, her father said no—not because Joseph was undesirable but because he was Slovak. Her father wanted her to marry Italian and continue the family traditions. But Joseph didn't give up. Every Sunday night he showed up and asked for permission to woo Mary Ann, and every Sunday he was turned down. Every Sunday night Mary Ann went to bed in tears.

Finally, after about six months, Mary Ann's mother informed her husband that there would be no peace in the house unless he said yes. Their discussion in Italian had raised the roof, Nona said. She used her most persuasive arguments at first and finally

settled for Italian cuss words. Nono Moretti grudgingly gave his permission, but told his wife to go to confession regarding her language.

“He didn’t think I knew those words,” she told Catherine with a wink, “but I had brothers.”

Nona had even taught Catherine how to swear in Italian because she thought a woman sometimes needed to express herself to her husband in a way he would understand, but cautioned her to use it only when she had a strong opinion that differed from her husband’s. She also made Catherine promise not to tell her mother.

In her two years living with Catherine’s family Nona Moretti taught her how to be considered well-mannered in the community. She should not mope around or cry in public, as that would give the false impression of an unhappy family. She should dress modestly so as not to appear wanton. Her dresses should be hemmed to mid-calf length and her neckline should be high enough that her collarbone would not show. She must learn to cook and sew to the best of her ability to prepare for her adult role as a wife and mother.

The funniest thing Catherine learned from her nona was that if a man treated his mother well he would also treat his wife well. As a young girl she nodded respectfully to her nona but privately thought that was an old wives’ tale. Of course, she didn’t dare express that thought to anyone but Marian.

Finally, Nona cautioned Catherine never to take the last piece of food from a plate at a party or she would never be married. A man, Nona explained, didn’t want a girl who would eat him out of house and home. If she took that last piece of food a prospective suitor might see her as selfish and not wish to consider her as a possible wife. Catherine

took all these stories in, although she really didn't understand the one about not taking the last piece of food from a platter.

When the hair was dry Catherine would brush it and watch, fascinated, as Nona's bony fingers braided the hair and wound it into a small ball at the nape of her neck. Hairpins held the masterpiece in place.

As Nona grew more feeble and unable to leave her bed Catherine's mother asked the priest to come to the house after Mass and give her Extreme Unction, the final anointing, to prepare her for the end. The priest anointed the old woman's eyes, ears, nostrils, lips, hands and feet with oil specially blessed by the bishop. Thus anointed, Nona would be ready to enter the next life.

Two nights later her nona passed away. The priest was called back for the funeral. Catherine helped serve the funeral dinner but thought it was cruel to her mother for people to come and eat, talk and laugh, when her last parent had just been buried.

A few days later when she asked about it, her mother explained that some people had traveled several hours for the funeral and it was not hospitable to send them home without a meal. Not only that, she added, it gave everyone the chance to remember her mother and tell stories of her life. The laughter was really a tribute. Catherine still didn't understand, but she didn't ask again. She only knew that she would miss her nona very much.

While she was competent at sewing and mending, she really liked to cook. The garden soil grew beautiful cabbage, small carrots, and potatoes big as her fist. When there was no meat for the pot she made cabbage and noodles (*halushki*) or stuffed cabbage leaves (*halupki*). The family also liked her stuffed peppers and her fried

potatoes, which she flavored with onions and a bit of garlic. She cooked so well that her mom gave her the job of cooking the evening meal. She even learned to transplant wild dill to the family garden to use as a seasoning.

Every March she and her friend Marian took her younger sisters out with a gunny sack to search for dandelion greens. By then the family had been without fresh greens for the winter months and her mother was eager to taste some. They took a knife from the kitchen and searched the ground for the first tender green leaves without flowers. They cut the greens at the root and filled the sack as much as they could. Once home they washed the greens, cut off any pieces of stem, put them into a large pot with a bit of bacon grease and cooked them down. The young greens were tender and not bitter and they made a nice change from the bean soup and bread that they ate all winter.

Baking was her favorite thing to do, but sugar was so expensive that she was only able to bake sweets for holidays like Christmas and Easter. She spent most of her time making bread. She learned to make *kolachi* and nut horns, her dad's favorite Slovak pastries, and biscotti, her mother's favorite Italian cookie. She longed to be rich so she could make these things every month.

If baking was Catherine's favorite chore, washing clothes was her least favorite. She first filled one side of the washtubs with cold rinse water, then heated water and took it downstairs to put in the other side of the tubs, adding dirty clothes to soak. She rubbed the large bar of yellow washing soap on the washboard a few times then scrubbed a garment on the board, paying careful attention to the front and underarms of the garment and tossed the clean garment into the rinse side. After all the clothes had been washed, she agitated the clothes in the rinse water with her hands and wrung them out one by one,

placing them in a basket. If it was raining she would hang the clothes in the cellar to dry. In any other weather she would take the basket and a bag of wooden clothespins up the steps and out the double doors and hang them on the outside clotheslines.

Clothes had to be hung in a certain way: that is, all the dresses together and all the men's shirts together. Sheets were hung with one long edge on the outside clothesline and the other edge on the third line. Underclothes were hung on the line between the sheets so they were out of sight of the neighbors. It would be shameful for a man walking down the road to lay eyes upon female undergarments.

In her spare time she and Marian chased butterflies, caught lightning bugs at dusk and put them into damaged canning jars, and jumped ropes that the girls tied together from smaller pieces.

Her brothers stayed in school a little longer than she did because they had to be able to get jobs and help the family before they married and had to support a wife and children of their own. Her father and brothers learned a little English because they had to understand the instructions of the mine boss. They understood more English than they could speak. Until they were old enough to start working the mines the boys played with hoops from disintegrated wooden barrels and hunted for rabbits and squirrels to supplement the menu, often arguing over who would take the twenty-two caliber gun out to the woods. In the end their mother, tired of hearing them argue, assigned each of them a day to hunt.

Her brothers began working the mines as young teenagers, hauling wheelbarrow loads of rock away from the mouth of the mines. The work was physically hard, but they were too proud to say it was too hard for them. As they grew older and stronger they

progressed into the mines, carrying small cages of birds with them. If the birds fell over, the miners knew that the level of gas in the mines was too high and fled. Often, though, they were busy working and didn't notice the small birds until it was too late to get out.

Catherine's father was a straw boss, a first-line supervisor with a team of six men under him. He made sure they were ready for their shift on time, made excuses for anyone who missed work due to sickness or the occasional hangover, and did what his boss asked him to do. The little extra money he made by being a straw boss helped, because he had eight children at home. It seemed that his wife was always expecting another child, but she carried them easily and birthed them quickly. While eight had survived, three babies had died of pneumonia, measles, and whooping cough before reaching their first birthday.

The men of the town had cleared a piece of land to bury their children and the family members who didn't survive the epidemics of flu and the infirmities of old age. A wooden cross carved with the name, birth date (if known) and date of death marked each grave, and were remembered on All Souls Day.

Stoddabubbas, old widow women like Catherine's nona, served as midwives and watched the grandbabies while their parents toiled to put food on the table. Their twisted, arthritic fingers soothed many a colicky baby and their chapped lips kissed away the pain from a burn or scraped knee. Stocky and dressed in black, they showed up for Mass every Sunday with their *babushkas* tied tightly under their chins. Some used canes to support bad knees or hips. Some didn't hear well and a few couldn't read their own hymnbooks but could read over the shoulder of the person in front of them.

Out of respect for the aged the *bubbas* were always invited to confirmation parties, weddings, and bridal and baby showers. They learned what was going on with the people and repeated those stories to everyone. Their unsolicited advice was duly listened to and then not taken.

Those *bubbas* who served a useful purpose in every household were often the butt of teenage girls' jokes, but only when their parents weren't around.

Two – Innocence

Catherine couldn't remember a time when she and Marian Jacobiasen had not been best friends. They lived across the narrow dirt road from each other and, no matter what their daily chores, managed to spend some time together each day. Marian had three brothers, two older and one younger, and her mother took in washing from the wealthier families to supplement their income.

She and Marian picked sweet wild strawberries together, walked to and from school together, and stayed over at each other's homes. At first the girls just whispered to each other secrets about their families, but as they grew older and began to notice the young men they also shared their crushes with each other.

By the time Catherine was fourteen she had her eye on Matthew Paulnesky, a mature man of nineteen with a shock of shiny brown hair and laughing eyes as blue as a September sky. Quite the flirt, he teased all the girls and always walked one or two of them home from school during the dark days of winter. His clothes had no patches on them and the soles of his shoes didn't flap, making noise in the dirt road.

She dreamed of him at night, dreamed that he came to the house to see her, saying that he smelled the *halushki* and wanted to try it. Sometimes in her dreams he would take her walking in the fields with her father's approval. They would hold hands and watch the sun set over the river. When she awoke from one of these dreams she always had a strange feeling in her stomach. It wasn't hunger, it was something new. Marian wasn't familiar with that feeling and suggested she ask her mother. But she didn't.

Marian was sweet on a boy a few years older, Tom Agnostini, son of Italian immigrants, but her parents told her to calm herself, they would choose a Slovak husband for her when she was of age. Always eager to please her parents, Marian hid her sadness and continued to follow Tom with her eyes whenever her parents were not looking.

One night Catherine's mother heard her whisper her dreams to Marian out on the back steps. She sighed as she listened to her eldest daughter profess undying love, however childish, for Matthew. That night in bed she whispered what she had overheard to her husband.

The next morning as Catherine was clearing the table her father called to her.

"Catherine, I want to talk to you. Come and walk part of the way to work with me. Hurry, now."

She looked at her mother, who nodded, left the table and went to get her shawl and *babushka*. They walked down the road in silence, their shoes making plopping noises in the dry dirt. Finally her father spoke.

"Catherine, Mr. Paulnesky is my boss. It's not right for you to make eyes at his son. I'm a miner and they run the mine. I work for them. They would never accept you for that reason alone. And they're Protestants—no daughter of mine will marry outside the faith. When you are of age Mama and I will choose a husband for you, a man who will work hard and take care of you, a good Slovak Catholic man who works the mine, not a Protestant who runs it."

"But Papa," she began.

He stopped walking and turned to face her. "You're too young to know what love is, Catherine. Getting involved with that family would only bring us trouble. I never

want to hear you speak his name again. Here's the crossroads. Go on back home and help Mama. And remember what I said."

He turned on his heel and strode off toward the mine, leaving Catherine alone with her tears in the pre-dawn darkness. She looked after him for a few seconds, then turned and ran all the way home.

Her mother had cleared the table and was waiting for her.

"Papa said to forget Matthew because his father runs the mine. But I can't." She burst into tears and wrapped her arms around her mother.

"There are things about Matthew you don't know. Ugly rumors that the *bubbas* pass on. But I've heard them from other people as well. Matthew may not be the catch you think he is. Papa is right to discourage you. And you need to trust him."

"Papa said we are poor. Are we?"

"No more than anyone else around here, I guess."

"But you and Papa married for love. Why must I have an arranged marriage? Is it so different for me?"

"It's true. Papa and I married for love. But your Papa already had a house and was settled. And he was Catholic. You can't say the same about Matthew. Don't worry. A good man will come along for you when it's time. You haven't even made your Confirmation yet."

She held Catherine until the tears stopped and dawn was breaking.

"We have work to do. Let's get started."

But Catherine was not as docile as her friend and, in spite of her father's admonition to forget about Matthew, she continued to eye him going in and out of the Protestant church when she was going into the store for Sunday Mass.

Each month, it seemed, someone was getting married or having a baby and a party was always in the works. As she watched Matthew, she noticed that more and more of his attention went to Maria Andorino, an older girl with straight blonde hair and brown eyes. At a first communion party when Matthew brought Maria a glass of ice water and Maria accepted it, her hands briefly closing around his, Catherine had to run outside to hide her tears.

I hate them, I hate them both, she thought as the tears flowed. Not one to cry prettily like Maria, she finally blew her nose, took a deep breath, and went back into the house knowing that her eyes were red.

Two months later she and Marian were in the field, making daisy chain crowns for themselves.

"Marian, have you seen Tom lately?"

Marian held her head down and didn't reply.

"Marian, did you hear me?"

"I don't want to talk about him, Catherine. But did you know that Maria Andorino went away to visit her aunt in Pittsburgh? I overheard Mama talking to Aunt Anna last night when they thought I was asleep. They were talking like it was some kind of secret."

"Maria is gone? Mama didn't say anything about it."

“Ask her and see what she says. But don’t say it was me who told you. I don’t want to get beat for listening in.”

“I will. Tomorrow I’ll tell you what she said.”

Catherine went home with her daisy chain crowns and offered one to her mother, who put it on with a smile and looked into the window at her reflection. “I haven’t worn a daisy chain crown in years. Thank you, Cat.”

“Mama, I heard that Maria Andorino is going away to visit family. Do we have any family in some place called Pittsburgh?”

Mama’s face froze for a few seconds. “Where did you hear that?”

“I overheard it somewhere. Is she going? And can I go, too?”

Her mama turned to Catherine and hugged her hard, hugged her like she would never stop. “Pittsburgh is not a good place to visit. Yes, Maria went but you can’t go there. We have no family there. And I’m so glad you can’t.”

“Do you think that Matthew will look at me now that Maria is gone?”

Mama pushed Catherine to arm’s length and shook her.

“Didn’t we talk about that? Never let Papa hear you speak that name in this house again, if you know what’s good for you. He told you and now I’m telling you.”

She pulled Catherine to her and hugged her even tighter than before.

Catherine, being squeezed so hard she had trouble breathing, wondered why Maria would want to go to a place that wasn’t nice, but didn’t ask again. And the next day when she told Marian about their conversation, Marian didn’t understand either.

Three – Innocence vs. Adulthood

When Richard came into her life Catherine thought she could give up on Matthew. Richard Csokmay had a thick mop of dark curly hair and dark brown eyes, eyes that she almost fell into the first time she saw him. He and his family had moved from New York City, where they had been staying with relatives, to start their new life in the United States. Richard's dad was a laborer and quickly found work in the mines hauling coal, and Richard found work there as well. He spoke pigeon English to get by at work, but his Slovak was perfect. At seventeen, he had a good sense of humor and loved to dance. Like most of the adult males he didn't attend Mass on a weekly basis, leaving that to his mother and four sisters, but was content to go for holy days, holidays like Christmas, and his saint's feast day. He was tall for his age and considered an eligible bachelor. All the girls were interested in him.

Catherine was so taken with him when they met that she couldn't speak more than a few words, even though she was normally quite a talker, and Richard was soon drawn to Helena, who was fifteen and didn't get so tongue-tied when he was around. Beautiful Helena had light brown hair with a wave in the middle of her head and green eyes. Catherine knew that she didn't have a chance with Richard as long as Helena liked him, but found a friend in Richard's sister Irina, who was as outgoing and friendly as her brother was.

Irina, Marian and Catherine became a trio, always together. They often stole away to the forest on the pretext of gathering wood, but never seemed to gather much.

They spent time picking flowers, exploring the fields, and talking about the men they would marry.

Girls in that area were expected to marry and make a home for their husbands and children, and most of them married between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. It was not uncommon for a girl of Catherine's age to be already betrothed and practicing her cooking and sewing skills to prepare for marriage.

"I want to marry a big man, a tall man, someone who can build shelves for me and fix the screen door," Catherine said. "He will have a good job, not in the mines because all the men who work the mines die. He will be able to buy a house somewhere else, away from the black coal dust, and we will have a dozen children." They giggled at the thought of Catherine and her twelve children.

Marian looked up. "I only see myself with Tom. He's quiet and calm, and our children would be calm with a father like that. My Papa is a miner and I will marry a miner, too."

Irina said, "I hate the hills of Pennsylvania and I want to go back to New York City. I love the bustle of the city; love the little shops where people speak different languages, the smells of bread baking, the food vendors' wares, and the flood of people that fills the dirty streets every day.

"Dirty streets? Like our dirt street?"

"No, no, Catherine, the streets are brick but have a lot of dirt on them. You should come with me," Irina insisted. "Girls in the city have more freedom than we have in this little town. In New York I made a lot of friends from all over. There are Slavs, Pollocks, Italians, and Germans, and they all live together in the same neighborhood.

There are Russians on one street and Chinese on the next. They all attend church together and church school, too.” she winked. “In spite of what Papa says, I could be happy married to an Italian.”

“In New York I could get a job cleaning for some rich lady and I might become a live-in maid,” she continued. “I wouldn’t have to marry someone my father picks out for me. I could meet a rich young man and he might ask my father for my hand. Then I would be a rich lady, too.” They laughed at this idea, but Catherine began to believe that Irina could win the heart of a rich young man if she had half a chance.

Marian paled when Irina talked of a girl leaving her family and striking out on her own.

“Don’t talk that way. A decent girl would never dare to work in a city like that.”

The thought of seeing New York City was enticing, but Catherine knew her father would forbid it. ‘A single girl, alone in a big city without her family,’ he would say. ‘What would people think of her? What kind of father would allow his daughter to be the target of gossip?’ In her heart she wanted to make her parents proud of her but it would be a great adventure to go to the city and see how other people lived, how they dressed and what they ate.

When fall came the gardens gave up their harvest and the women and girls began to can and dry the food for winter. It was a lot of work and by the end of a long day, Catherine was more than ready to fall into bed. She, Marian and Irina saw each other when they were picking vegetables early in the morning, but didn’t have time to spend chatting.

Irina brought up New York whenever she could and talked about the people she had seen and the strange foods she had tried. Marian was timid and Irina's talk of New York made her nervous. She began to leave the girls when Irina talked about the city. Catherine sometimes thought that Irina brought it up on purpose just to get Marian to go home so she could and Catherine could have fun together.

As soon as the gardens were empty the wild grapes ripened and the girls finally took to the woods and fields again, looking for the grape vines and their precious fruit. They would pick grapes one day and make jelly the next day. After a week their fingers and tongues were stained purple from the fruit and the vines were almost empty, so they began to talk once more about their futures.

Marian, with a full basket, went on home, saying that her mama wanted her back soon.

"Would you miss me if I left?" asked Irina when Marian was out of sight.

"What do you mean, left? Where would you go, back to New York?" teased Catherine.

"Well, yes," admitted Irina, looking serious. "I know someone who is going back there and I want to go with him. Do you think that's wrong?"

Catherine was alarmed when she saw the look on her friend's face. "I know how much you want to go," she hedged, "but what would your papa say? I know that mine would disown me as a loose woman if I went off with someone and we weren't married. Much as I would like to see the big city I couldn't stand the thought of never seeing Mama again."

“I want to go back to New York so bad. I don’t know how Papa would feel about me going alone. I hate it here, it’s so boring. You have to work all the time and you don’t even have a decent store. Without you here I don’t know if I could have stood it at all. That’s why I want you to come with me. We will be leaving Saturday night because no one gets up too early on Sunday.”

“Who are you going with?” asked Catherine, with a sinking feeling in her stomach. “And why do you have to go now? Can’t you wait until spring?”

Tears welled up in Irina’s eyes and she looked away.

“I can’t wait because I’m in a family way,” Irina put her hands over her eyes and began to sob. “I’ve been sneaking out and meeting John after everyone is asleep. We were taking long walks and doing a lot of talking, then the talking turned to kissing. I haven’t needed my woman rags in three months. He loves me and wants to marry me, and he knows about the baby. If I don’t go now, Papa will disown me for sure for shaming the family. I love him but I’m getting scared to leave. I need someone with me that I know. Please come with us.”

“You’re in love with John Zurico? But he lives here in town. Won’t your papa allow you two to marry?”

“John asked Papa for my hand and Papa said no. Then Papa called me into the room and told me he has someone in mind for me. He forbade me to see John again, and sent him away. He was so angry that his face was red. He told me that no daughter of his will marry a God damned lazy Italian as long as he is alive. I was afraid to tell him about the baby. I didn’t even tell Mama, but soon I will be showing and the man that Papa has in mind won’t want me. This is why I have to leave, and soon.”

Irina put her purple fingers back to her face. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs. Catherine didn't know what to say but put her arm around Irina and cried with her.

"I can't come with you but if you love him I think you should follow your heart. My Mama and Papa were in love and they got around their families. You can send me letters from New York and I can write to you. You'd be Mrs. John Zurico. It has a nice sound."

"I can't bear the thought of leaving Mama now," Irina said, one hand protectively on her abdomen, "but I have to go. Please don't tell anyone what I told you. I don't want them to whisper about me like they did about Maria when she left to visit her aunt in Pittsburgh. I don't want Mama to have to hear that."

So that's why Maria left, Catherine thought. And that's why Mama told me she was glad I couldn't go to Pittsburgh. "You can trust me," Catherine said through her own tears. "I'll miss you so much, and your stories about the city."

"You might miss me, but I think that Marian will be glad when I'm gone. She's such a goody-goody. I don't know why you two are friends."

"I have lots of friends, but you and Marian are the best. And now I'll be losing you."

"We'll be friends no matter how far apart we live. You'll see."

They dried their eyes on their aprons and headed back home with the grapes. Catherine tried to listen to Irina's plans with interest, but foremost in her thoughts was the fact that she would be losing one of her best friends. Maybe Irina was right—maybe Marian was a goody-goody, always trying to do the right thing. Her heart was heavy as she made her way home.

“What’s the matter, Catherine?” her mother asked, seeing her red eyes.

“I fell on a rock and skinned my knee,” Catherine lied. “It will be fine in a little while.” She felt guilty about the lie and promised herself to go to confession the next available time.

“Mama,” Catherine started as they were squeezing the grapes to make jelly, “did Maria go to Pittsburgh because she was in a family way?”

Her mother looked up at Catherine, then quickly looked down at the juicer, but didn’t speak. Catherine grew impatient as she waited for an answer.

“Mama?”

Her mother met Catherine’s eyes and held her gaze for a long time before she answered.

“Yes, that’s why she left.” Dropping her eyes to the juicer she went on. “Her papa’s sister will tell the neighbors that Maria’s husband died in a mine accident and she couldn’t bear to look at the mine every day. She will have her child and someday she will marry and raise more children. The family name will not be shamed because no one will know that she had a bastard. But her papa doesn’t want to see her face again.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Her mother put an arm around Catherine’s shoulders and sighed. “I know you aren’t a child, but you aren’t a mature married woman either. I was trying to protect you from the ugliness of life for a little while longer. I hope you can forgive me for that.”

Catherine nodded and worked silently beside her mother thinking of Irina.

For two days Catherine thought about her friendship with Irina and wondered what she could give her friend as a memento. She didn’t have much and most of her

possessions were items of clothing, for miners' families were usually poor. Finally she decided what she could do—she could embroider their names on a piece of cloth and give it to Irina. As long as Irina had that cloth they would remain friends, no matter how far apart they lived.

That evening she asked her mother for a scrap of fabric, explaining that she wanted to practice her stitches. Her mother beamed, fetched the scrap box from under the bed, and opened it. Sorting through the pieces of colored cloth Catherine chose a piece of light pink about six inches square. “That piece is left over from one of the tops I wore when I was expecting you,” her mother said.

Catherine hemmed the edges of the cloth with white thread and put it into a small hoop. She marked her name and Irina's on it with a pencil and began to make a satin stitch with dark blue thread. The work was fine and Catherine had to pull out some stitches and re-do them but she finished it on Saturday morning. Her mother commented on her fine work.

On Saturday night after her chores were finished she went to visit Irina. The girls sat outside on the stoop and talked in low tones so the adults inside wouldn't hear.

“Are you still leaving tonight?”

“Yes,” Irina said, looking around furtively. “We'll meet at our usual place. Have you changed your mind about coming with us?”

“I can't go with you, but I want you to have this to remember me by.” Catherine handed Irina the small piece of cloth. “Please take it. It's the only thing I have to give you. When you look at it, remember me. As long as you have it we'll be friends.”

“Thank you,” said Irina, giving her friend a hug. “I’ll keep it with me and remember you always. Do something else for me, please. Don’t tell Marian. With her holier-than-thou attitude she’d look down on me if she knew. Promise me.”

“I promise. Mama is calling me. I have to go. Be happy, Irina.” Catherine embraced her friend and ran home with tears in her eyes.

Before the family left for church the next morning there was a knock on the door. Irina’s mother stood on the stoop, her eyes red. “Is Irina here?” she asked Catherine’s mother. “She’s gone and so are her clothes.”

“Come in, Elizabeth. Catherine, do you know anything about this?” asked her mother. “You were just over there last night.”

“I, uh,” stammered Catherine, torn between the promise she made her friend and the honesty she had always given her mother. She looked so guilty that her mother told her to sit at the table.

“Now Catherine, this is important. If you know anything about Irina, please tell Mrs. Csokmay.”

Catherine started to cry. “Irina said she was going back to New York.”

“How could she go that far, a girl alone?” cried her mother.

“She isn’t alone--she’s with John Zurico. They’re going to get married.”

“Married? Irina? Holy mother of God, she’s not ready for marriage!” wailed her mother. “Why couldn’t she stay here and get married?”

Catherine looked away. “Her papa said no when John asked him and she is . . . is. . .”

“She’s not in a family way, is she? Look at me, girl. Well, is she?”

“She said she was and she made me promise not to tell,” Catherine admitted, hanging her head, miserable at having betrayed her friend.

“It’s all right, Catherine,” her mother said, putting an arm around her. “You couldn’t have stopped her. Elizabeth, I am so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” sobbed Elizabeth. “I best be going. I have to tell her papa how he drove off our only daughter. Thank you for telling me the truth.”

When Mrs. Csokmay had closed the door behind her, Catherine looked up to see her mama watching her. “That’s why you embroidered your names on that cloth, isn’t it? You should have told me about this, Cat. There are dangers out there for a young unmarried girl that you can’t imagine.”

“She only told me on Thursday, and I promised not to tell. I wasn’t sure she would really go. I’m sorry. Are you angry with me, Mama?”

“No, just disappointed is all. Get Emma ready for church, please.”

Marian never asked about Irina.

A few weeks after Irina left town Richard came over to the house. Catherine saw him coming and ran upstairs to smooth her hair. “Mrs. Sheroski, I’d like to talk to Catherine. May we sit at the table with you?”

“Of course, Richard. Would you like some tea? Theresa, get your sister.”

“Don’t go to any trouble for me.”

“It’s no trouble. I feel so bad about your sister.”

“She’s always been headstrong. Once she had her mind set on something no one could change it.”

“Catherine, at last. See who’s here.”

“Hello, Richard.”

“Hello, Catherine.” Richard took a sip of his tea.

Catherine’s mother beamed, no doubt thinking that Richard was interested in courting her. “Theresa, go outside and take Emma with you.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow morning to find Irina and send back word of her. Mama hasn’t stopped crying since she left and I can’t take her tears any longer. Irina always said that you were her best friend. I wondered if you had any idea of where they were going.” Catherine’s mother looked disappointed.

“She never really said where they were going, but she talked about New York so much I assumed they were going there. She often talked about getting a job as a maid in some rich person’s house, and about walking down the street smelling all the different things people were cooking.”

“Maybe they are going to our old neighborhood then. At least that gives me a place to start.” Finishing his tea, Richard stood. “Thank you, Mrs. Sheroski.”

“Do you know how long you’ll be gone?” Catherine stood also.

“I won’t come home until I find out about my sister. I hope that Irina and John got married so Mama will stop crying. I’m sure she’ll tell you when she gets my letters.”

Catherine walked Richard to the road. “I hope you find her. She has my address but hasn’t written and I hope she’s all right.”

He looked at her with those eyes. “I hope so, too, so I can come back home. Catherine, you’re growing up. Perhaps your papa will let me come courting after you turn sixteen.”

“I’d like that, Richard.” Catherine blushed.

Richard held her hand. “I hope I won’t be gone too long. Take care until I see you again.” He looked around and dropped her hand. “Your sisters are watching us from behind that big bush. ‘Bye.’”

She watched him walk down the road until he disappeared around the bend, trying to keep his face in her mind. Richard was leaving to find his sister. And he wanted to come courting. She couldn’t wait to tell Marian. But first, to tell on Theresa.

Four – Papa

Catherine's father worked hard at the mine and was not around during the day when Catherine and her mother did most of their cooking and canning. He left for work in the predawn darkness and it was often after dark when he walked home from the mine, empty dinner bucket in hand. Little Emma was stationed at the door to watch for him. When she announced that she saw him, either her mother or Catherine would dish his supper onto his plate so it would be ready for him when he came through the door. Their mother would eat with him, rather than with the children who had eaten earlier. They would talk and occasionally Catherine would hear her mother's silver-bell laugh, a sound that Catherine loved.

The children would busy themselves until their father got up from the table and sat in the rocking chair near the small stove. Then they would gather around him and he would talk until he grew tired and fell asleep in the chair. He asked the younger children what they did in school, the older boys if they shot anything in the woods today, and ask Catherine what she and Mama did.

When the dishes were done their mother would send the children off to bed in the attic, either cold or hot depending on the season, and wake her husband. Their bed was in a corner of the big downstairs room, curtained off from the rest of the room.

Papa usually had a bottle of beer at Christmas and Easter but rarely drank otherwise. The money that other miners spent on booze he spent on his family. And he thought that a lady should never let alcohol pass her lips.

On Sundays when the rest of the family went to Mass, Papa stayed at home. Sometimes he went out hunting, and by the time the family returned had a couple of squirrels or a rabbit sitting on the counter, cleaned and ready to cook. In good weather he went fishing in the slow-moving river near their house for catfish, perch, or carp, whichever was running. It took four or five medium-sized fish to feed his family, but he always managed to catch enough.

While he made enough money in the mine to feed his family, there was no money for extras. To buy Christmas presents he trapped muskrats in the river, skinned them, and sold the pelts. In a good year he made enough for Christmas and a little extra, which went into a metal can in the cellar behind the canned vegetables.

Muskrats looked like large dark brown rodents with flat hairless tails. They lived in burrows they dug in the riverbank above the water line. Their soft fur when dry was in much demand for the muskrat coats so popular with wealthier people in the cities.

In late October he would gather a bucket of walnuts from the woods. Sometimes Catherine or some of the other children would accompany him. Wearing his oldest gloves he removed the green skins and stored the nuts in the cellar to be eaten in winter. He'd throw the skins into a heavy bucket over a small wood fire and add water, boiling the skins until the water was black with the juice. He would borrow some of Mama's paraffin and throw a slab into the bucket, stirring until the wax had melted and formed a skin on the surface of the pot. He would retrieve his burlap bag of rusty traps from the cellar. Each trap looked like a beaver trap, only smaller. A two-foot chain with a ring at the end was attached to the trap.

Dropping the traps into the pot, he would boil them for about an hour. Then he removed them, one at a time, with his stick, a three-foot piece of broken shovel handle with a hook embedded in the end, and hang them on a nail in one of the trees to dry overnight. The next day the traps were stained dark by the walnut juice and covered with a thin coat of wax. He would attach a metal tag with the number 25 on it to the ring to mark it as his and store the traps in the burlap sack.

Next he'd go into the woods and cut pieces of tree branches, ones that had a fork like a wishbone. He'd cut one side so it was about three inches long and the other about ten inches long so the fork formed a crude hook, and make enough for every trap he owned plus a few extras. Those trap stakes went into the sack, too.

The evening of November fourth he'd take his sack and his stick and go to the river to set the traps. John always got to go with him. When Catherine asked to go, her mother told her that it was a man's job. She pouted for a week afterward but John told her the whole story. Papa would set a trap near the burrow he had spent the last few weeks scouting out, stake the chain ring to the bank, and move on. John's job would be to remove a stake and a trap from the bag every time Papa found a burrow. Each man who trapped had a section of the riverbank where he set his traps. If a trapper found a trap in his territory that wasn't his it was easy to see who was poaching on his claim by checking the trap number.

Early the next morning before work Papa would go out and check his traps, bringing the dead muskrats home in his sack. He'd hang the rats in the cellar to dry and go to work. When he got home he'd eat a quick supper and go to the cellar to skin the dry rats. He'd hang one rat by its back legs over some old rags. The children loved to

watch him work so before he began he would tell them to back up and give him some room.

Using his pocket knife he'd cut around the rat's paws and tail, then cut between the tail and each back leg. Beginning at the tail he'd gently separate the pelt from the body of the rat, pulling the pelt down over the rat's head so it was inside out. He'd put the pelt on a stretcher he had made of two curved pieces of metal attached to a wooden base. He would make a tiny hole in the pelt near where the tail had been, slide a piece of string through the holes, tie it under the wooden base and leave the pelt to dry for at least a week. The body of the muskrat he would throw out in the woods for the scavengers to feast upon.

He would remove the dry pelt and hang it by the string from the rafters so he could reuse the stretcher. Each day for the first two weeks of the season he would walk the trap line twice a day. After that he would go out only once a day, in the evening. He didn't get much sleep for those six weeks but Mama said the money he made was well worth the lost sleep.

Since Catherine wasn't allowed to walk the trap line she asked if she could help skin the muskrats. Mama said no but Papa said yes, and showed her how. After she did her first one he told her she must be a natural and let her do them after her housework was finished.

The season for muskrat trapping was November fifth through December fifteenth. The fur buyers would come to the general store on December twentieth, offering top dollar for the best pelts.

The summer after Catherine turned fifteen was unusually warm and she spent a lot of time watering the garden, the flowers, and the chickens. One July day just before dinner while she was watering the flowers she heard the mine whistle go off. Instead of the normal single blast, the dinner break signal, it gave three short blasts—the accident signal. Mine accidents usually meant that someone would be injured or die, maybe several people. She said a brief prayer for the miners who were involved but went right back to her chore and didn't think any more of it until John came running down the dusty road yelling for Mama. Bursting into the house, he dropped into a chair to catch his breath while Catherine got her mother from the kitchen garden.

“There's . . . been an . . . accident. Papa is in . . . the mine . . . with four others. Come quick.” he gasped and his mother turned pale and froze in her tracks for just a moment.

“Catherine, collect the children and bring them to the mine. Lead the way, John.” She didn't even stop to take off her apron.

Catherine watched them run back down the dirt road, her mama holding her skirt up with one hand to keep pace with John. Mama could still run pretty fast. A heavy weight gathered in Catherine's chest. When miners died women became widows and children were sent to live with relatives they didn't know because it cost too much to feed them. With all her might she prayed to God, please let Papa be alive.

She collected Theresa and Emma from the garden and her brothers from the woods and herded them down the road toward the mine. Most of the townspeople were gathered there. It took her a while to find her mother at the front of the crowd, as close to

the entrance as she could get. Catherine put an arm around her mother and saw a tear run down her cheek.

“Any news of Papa?”

“Nothing yet. There was a cave-in down on level three where he was working and five men are trapped. They’re trying to clear a path through to them now. No one has come out yet to give us any news. John went back in to help.”

“He’ll live, Mama. I prayed for him.”

“Keep on praying for him and all the men. They need all the help they can get down there.”

The wait seemed endless. By evening the older daughters were sent home to feed the younger children and send back food, but the waiting women couldn’t eat. The general store owner sent over folding chairs so the women wouldn’t have to sit in the dust. When the older children returned one of the *bubbas* knelt in the dust and led the families in the rosary.

The second day dawned on five weary women waiting at the entrance. Again daughters send or brought food but the women ate very little.

Catherine was now worried about both parents. “Mama, you have to at least drink some tea.” Her mother looked up finally, took the cup and drained it. Catherine refilled it. “Mama, we need you. Please.”

“I’m better now. You’re a help to me, Catherine.” They kept their vigil in silence. Men went in and out of the mine but no one gave them information. At mid-afternoon John and Mr. Paulnesky slowly emerged from the mine carrying a stretcher between them and took it to the mine office. The women began to murmur but the

chatter stopped when two more men came from the mine, a stretcher between them. Without a word they took their burden into the mine office. People came out to join those waiting at the gate.

John walked out of the office, head down. He walked directly to Mama, put his arms around her and buried his face in her shoulder. When the sobs began she put her arms around him. They stood for a long time. Catherine cried, too, and one of the *bubbas* comforted her. Except for Emma, who buried her face in Catherine's skirt, her younger siblings understood what was happening, but their tears came quietly as they watched their mother sob.

One by one a pair of men brought a miner out on a stretcher until all five had been put into the office. Five widows and their families were grieving when Mr. Paulnesky approached them from the office, dirty and disheveled.

"Ladies, I'm sorry for your loss. They were good men, good workers, all of them. We tried to save them, dug around the clock, but when we broke through there was nothing we could do. I don't think that they felt any pain. I've sent for the priest. After you see them, we will move them to the store to prepare for the services. You have my deepest sympathy, all of you."

The sound began as he turned away and grew louder with his every step. Each woman was keening for her man. It was like a combination of the ghost noises children made to scare each other near the graveyard mixed with a heart-rending wail. Onlookers, women whose men folk were safe or who had been in the rescue party, joined in. The sound followed the new widows as, one by one, they went into the office to identify the bodies of their husbands.

John accompanied his mother to the office while Catherine could only watch from the gate with the other children. They were in the office for a long time. When they came out Catherine noticed a change in her mother. The woman who emerged from the office was broken, weeping, leaning on John for support. The energy she once had was gone and her face had aged. The next widow in line hugged her before she made the long walk to the mine office.

Five covered bodies were moved to the store two at a time on mine carts. Two families walked behind each cart. In the store five benches had been set up in two rows to give the families a bit of privacy. Catherine took the younger children outside and sat with them in the shade. She knew that inside her mother and Marian's mother were washing her father's body and dressing him in his Sunday clothes that Tony had brought from home.

Loud pounding echoed from the carpenter shop just down the street from the protestant church as pine boxes were hastily nailed together. John and some other men had gone to the cemetery with shovels to prepare proper graves.

Catherine held her mother's arm as they slowly walked with the children toward home, their feet raising a cloud of dust on the road. Once inside the children sat quietly. "Catherine, please make a meal for the children. They need to eat before we go back."

As she put together a simple meal she watched her mother remove a box from under her bed. From the box she took a piece of black cloth and shook it open. "What's that, Mama?"

“It’s the apron your nona wore when my father died. I never thought I’d wear it so soon.” She retrieved another black apron and hand washed them in the kitchen sink, then hung them on the clothesline to dry.

When the food was ready they sat together at the table. “Eat, children. It will be a long evening.” The youngsters tried to eat and managed a few bites each. Catherine’s mother only drank her tea. While Theresa did dishes Catherine got her siblings dressed in their church clothes. Her mother pressed one of the aprons dry. Holding it up in front of her for a long while, she finally put it on with a small sigh.

They went back to the store that evening. Townspeople passed down the rows of coffins, most of them open, and offered condolences to the widows and their families. Relief was etched on the faces of the women whose husbands had come safe from the mine, while less recent widows whispered words of encouragement and hope to the women wearing black aprons.

When most of the townspeople had gone home the wake began. As the widows and children left for home and a mostly sleepless night, men pulled jugs of hard cider and home brewed beer from behind the counter and sat in a circle by the door to protect the bodies of their friends and tell their stories.

“Mama, John didn’t eat anything. Won’t he be coming home with us?”

“Your brother chose to stay at the wake to tell tales of Papa’s hunting and trapping. He’ll be home in the morning.” At sunrise the group was relieved by a few old men and went home to clean up for the funeral.

Coffins were closed and arranged side by side up front near the table used for the altar. The widows and their children occupied the first five rows of seats. Family

members, friends and neighbors filled the store; chairs had been borrowed from the protestant church and benches from nearby homes. The *bubbas* sat together in the back. The priest wore black trimmed with gold and the altar boys wore black cassocks. By the time the priest had talked about each of the men individually, praising his good qualities and downplaying his bad ones, every eye in the place was leaking.

The same carts that brought the miners to the store took them to their final home. Walking behind came the widows and children, then the townspeople. Men with shovels came last. One last prayer was said over the coffins before they were lowered into the ground. The widows brought their children back to the store for a meal. The *bubbas*, while not able to cook and serve, sat with the new widows, urging them to eat and gain strength for the sake of their children.

The wake and funeral were a blur to Catherine, who couldn't believe that Papa was gone. Although she should have sat with her mother, she was unable to be still and helped serve food to the mourners and later to the men who had stayed to bury the coffins. Her brother had dark circles under his eyes as he took a plate of food and sat by his mother. Catherine felt like she was in a bad dream, one that had lasted too long. Any time now her papa would come through the door looking for a plate of food. She glanced at the door from time to time, but no one came in. Marian worked beside her in silence.

Catherine saw Matthew Paulnesky talking to John and her mother. He took her mother's hand and they spoke for a long time. When he had finished speaking to Mrs. Sheroski he came over to where Catherine was serving. "I'm sorry, Catherine. Your father was a good man. I never heard a bad word about him. I wish I could do something for your family."

Catherine had all she could do to look into his eyes and stammer out a few words. “Thank you for coming. Everything is so overwhelming right now. I saw you speaking to Mama and John. I’m sure they appreciate your kindness.”

His smile and Marian’s presence were beacons in the middle of her grief, something she could hold on to in the coming days.

That night she lay awake for hours wondering how life might change without Papa. Tears came, not only for her father, but for herself and her mother as well. Her father would never walk her down the aisle, never see any of his grandchildren. Her mother would become one of the *bubbas* in her black clothing. She heard John tossing on his cot on the other side of the curtain and thought that he probably couldn’t sleep either. The realization hit her that her older brother was now the head of the house. At eighteen he now had the responsibility for his mother and seven younger siblings. Her next tears were for him.

Things changed after the funeral. Emma now watched for John to come home from work. Mama sat with John and waited on him while he ate, but the silver-bell laughter that Catherine had loved was silent. And at odd times of the day Catherine would see tears on her mother’s cheeks. John allowed his siblings to crowd around him and ask questions as he ate his supper. Each night after supper, for the first few days, he went out. He told his brothers, accustomed to going with him, that he had business to handle and they couldn’t come. They pouted their displeasure but stayed home.

On Saturday night the boys gave their pay envelopes to John.

Papa's chair was empty for a month. The first time John sat in Papa's chair was for Sunday dinner in August. His siblings went wild. "Mama," they all yelled, "John's in Papa's chair. Make him move, it's not his place." John quickly stood up.

Mama turned from the stove. "Quiet! Now listen. That chair has always been Papa's because he was the head of the house. But Papa . . . isn't here anymore. John as the oldest son is now head of the house and has the right to sit in that chair. And you must mind him as you would have minded Papa."

The children's complaints were loud and shrill. Her tone softened. "I know. I miss him, too. But he would want us to move on with our lives and that is what we must do. He always said that life is for the living. Each of you will grow up, get married, have children, and grow old. Papa will be with each of us because he's watching us from Heaven now. And whether you like it or not, John is now the man of the house."

The other children grew quiet, looking at John. Catherine watched as one by one they went back to what they had been doing. That sick feeling in her stomach returned. John looked at his mother and slowly sat back down. A tear rolled down her mother's cheek as she turned back to the stove.

Although no one spoke it, they were all missing Papa. For weeks whenever John sat in Papa's chair everyone stopped talking and just watched John. Mama usually broke the silence by asking one of her children a question that required more than a one word answer.

Five – Changes

A week after the funeral John called a family meeting. He sat at the table looking solemn. Mama wasn't smiling either.

“I have some bad news. Yesterday I went to the supervisor and asked to take over Papa's job of straw boss in the mine. He said I'm too young and the men won't take orders from me so he gave the job to Andrew Bielecki.”

“Andrew? Andrew got that job?” Catherine was surprised.

Her mother explained. “He's the quiet man who lives at the other end of town with his mother. You remember him, don't you, Catherine? Curly black hair, blue eyes. He brings his mother to church every Sunday.”

Catherine remembered him, although there was nothing impressive about him except that he attended church every Sunday, unlike most of the men. His white-haired mother was old and bent over. She walked with a cane and he helped her into church every week. The girls gossiped among themselves that he was a Mama's boy, almost twenty-five and unmarried. He didn't even flirt with the eligible girls at parties.

“So, that means we have less money coming in. But I have good news for Catherine. Mr. Paulnesky's wife is ill and he needs someone to come in and take care of the house for her. I told him that you are a good cook and can keep house and he agreed to hire you. You will start tomorrow at first shift and work as long as they need you. You can walk to work with me as far as the crossroads near the mine.”

Catherine was speechless. I'll be working in the house where Matthew lives, she thought. I'll see him every day. He'll notice that I'm a good cook and can keep house, all the skills a good wife needs. He'll come to love me as much as I love him.

Her mother's voice brought her back to reality. "Are you listening?"

"Yes, Mama."

"You will eat breakfast and dinner with the family. If Mrs. Paulnesky needs you to make supper stay until the dishes are done. Sundays you will be off for church. This is a good opportunity for you. You can help them out and prove yourself as a hard worker, something every man looks for in a wife."

Something every man looks for in a wife, Catherine repeated to herself. Matthew should be looking for a wife soon and she would be there as a good example.

"I'll work hard. You'll be proud of me."

Catherine thought, John must know I have eyes for Matthew and got me this job to prove myself. If Matthew asks for my hand John won't turn him down like Papa probably would have. Catherine smiled, her eyes shining, and never noticed how closely her mother was watching her.

"May I go tell Marian the news?"

"Yes, but don't stay too long. We have a lot to finish up."

Marian was doing dishes. Catherine helped so they could go out on the back steps and talk in private.

"I can't stay long but I had to tell you the news. John got me a job. I'll be working for Mrs. Paulnesky, Matthew's mother. She's been sick and needs some help. Do you know what that means? I'll be in the same house as Matthew. I'll cook for him.

I'll probably have to wash and iron, but some of the clothes will be his. He'll get to know me better and see what a good wife I would make. Isn't that wonderful?"

Marian looked down at the step, then back at Catherine before she spoke.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? Matthew's father runs the mine, while we are just miner's daughters. And you know about the rumors. What would his parents say if he wanted to court you? And what about Richard? Didn't he say he wanted to court you when he comes back? Please give up this crush on Matthew before it breaks your heart."

Catherine was shocked. Her best friend was telling her to give up on the man she loved. "I just can't believe you said that. After all, Matthew is here and Richard is God-knows-where chasing his sister. Those rumors are just the old *bubbas* telling stories. Aren't you even a little bit happy for me?"

Marian grabbed Catherine's shoulders and shook her slightly. "Can't you see, only poor girls have to work. You'll be a servant in Matthew's home. How do you think that Mrs. Paulnesky would feel about her son marrying a servant? I just think it's a bad idea. But if you need me to say I'm happy for you, then I am. At least you'll have some money coming in." Marian hugged her. "It's late and I have to go in. Have a good day tomorrow, Cat, and be sure to tell me all about it." The back door slammed shut by its spring.

Alone on the back steps Catherine felt numb inside. She had never thought of herself as poor, since she lived like the rest of her friends. But if she was poor, was it so wrong to think that a poor girl could win the heart of a rich man's son? Irina thought so. Marian never acted like this before. Maybe she's jealous. Maybe she is a goody-goody like Irina said. Slowly Catherine walked back across the road.

She was in a quiet mood all evening, thoughts of Marian's comments in her head one minute, and of Matthew the next. She began to daydream how he would compliment her cooking, how his mother would say she couldn't get along without her, how he would finally take her hand and ask her to be his wife, then kiss her tenderly when she said yes.

Catherine's mother watched her expression as she patched John's work shirt. After the younger children went to bed she spoke up. "You will be working in a non-Catholic home tomorrow. They probably do things much different from the way we do. Remember that you represent the family as much as your brothers do when they work. Be honest, do what Mrs. Paulnesky asks you to do, and remember your place. You are there to work, not to flirt with Matthew."

"But, Mama ."

"No buts. I know you have eyes for him, don't deny it. But remember what Papa said. Now off to bed. Morning comes early."

"Yes, Mama. Good night."

Catherine kissed her mother on the cheek and went up the stairs. The younger children were already asleep, but sleep didn't come to her. She hadn't told her mother how she felt about Matthew, so how could she have known? Would Matthew see her as a servant? No, he couldn't. Mrs. Matthew Paulnesky. The name had a nice ring to it. She closed her eyes, saying the name over and over to herself.

"Catherine, time to get up."

Her eyes felt dry and sore, like she had cried herself to sleep. Then she remembered she was working at Matthew's house today and sprang out of bed, sore eyes

forgotten. Quickly dressing, she almost flew down the stairs to help Mama make breakfast.

When John was ready for work she walked outside with him and down the dirt road. The air was already humid. The smell of a skunk drifted on the wind. Finally she asked the question that had been on her mind. “John, do you know what’s wrong with Mrs. Paulnesky? It isn’t anything catchy, is it?”

“The boss just said that his wife was tired all the time and couldn’t run the house. Don’t worry, you won’t get sick.” He nudged her upper arm playfully. At the cross road he put his hand on her shoulder. “Make us proud, little sis.”

She smiled at John and turned right toward the Paulnesky house while he turned left toward the mine. John hadn’t called her by that nickname for years, not since he went to work. The sky was turning pink and orange as she stepped off the dirt road onto gravel.

She didn’t come to this part of town often and her feet made crunching noises on the gravel road. The homes here were much bigger than those in her part of town, and most of them were a full two stories. She guessed that there was a bedroom for the girls and a separate one for the boys, as well as one for the parents. How nice it would be to have separate bedrooms. None of her friends had that luxury. But all of her friends were miner’s daughters.

Even in the predawn she could see that each house had a big front yard with flowers. One house had a round bed filled with geraniums and marigolds. A yellow house with blue shutters had a long garden filled with bright flowers Catherine had never seen before. The leaves of lily of the valley clustered around the large tree in the front

yard. The white house had red window boxes under each window filled with trailing ivy and geraniums. But none of them had the wonderful fragrant roses that her house had.

At last she stopped in front of a two-story house with a gigantic front porch. The house was painted in three colors: white was the first floor color and the second floor was yellow, while the gingerbread trim around the eaves and porch supports was painted either orange or red. It was too dark to tell for sure. Two large trees shaded the front yard and a sidewalk of irregularly-shaped stones led from the road to the porch steps.

Catherine had butterflies in her stomach at the thought of working in such a fancy house. There was a light showing in the front room of the house, so she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, crossed herself, and walked up the steps. To her left was a porch swing and to her right was a pot of ivy and white petunias next to a heavy oak rocking chair. For all her show of bravery she knocked timidly. The door edged open. Catherine's gaze traveled downward until she saw a pair of blue eyes.

"Hello. I'm Catherine. I'm supposed to help out today."

"Hello. Papa said for you to come in and wait in the kitchen."

The little girl was about the same age as Emma. Her pale skin contrasted with the red-brown of her hair, which hung in a tangled mess past her waist. A long blue nightgown enhanced the blue of her eyes.

"Where's the kitchen?"

"I'll show you."

Catherine followed the barefoot girl down the hall to the back of the house.

"Here's the kitchen. My name is Rose. Are you going to make breakfast?"

"If that's what your papa wants me to do, Rose."

Rose looked past Catherine to the door. Catherine turned to look.

“Papa, this is Catherine.”

Mr. Paulnesky smiled. He was tall, about five-seven, with dark brown hair and eyes. His neat moustache fascinated Catherine, for it wiggled when he talked. He took a watch from the pocket of his brown vest, looked at it, and snapped the case shut.

“Catherine, I’m happy to have you work for us. Your father was a good worker and your brother is just as good, so I was pleased when John said you were available. My wife is still sleeping. She has a tiny appetite lately but she’ll let you know what she wants when she wakes up. You may make breakfast for me, Rose, Matthew, and yourself. I need to wake Matthew.”

He abruptly turned and left the room. Catherine looked around the kitchen, lit only by a lantern on the heavy oak table. There was a sink with a pump under the window that looked toward the back yard where the sky was brightening, some counter space, and a small stove. The ice box was in the kitchen instead of in the cellar like at Catherine’s house. The cupboards under the counters actually had doors, not curtains, and a couple of drawers for silverware and cooking utensils. She turned up the flame on the lamp.

“Well, Rose, what do you usually have for breakfast?”

“Oatmeal and toast. But first you have to put a fire in the stove. Here’s the kindling box.”

Great, thought Catherine. I have never used this kind of fancy stove before. I’m going to look like a fool if I can’t put some food on the table.

“Where do you keep the oatmeal?”

“It’s in this door.”

Catherine set a small fire in the stove, filled a pan with water from the pump, and set it on the stove.

“I don’t see the bread.”

“We don’t have any. Mama’s been sick and hasn’t made any. But we have flour.”

Catherine found the flour and yeast, added salt and butter and made some biscuits, which she put into the smaller door of the stove before starting some coffee. Rose stood next to her the whole time, watching Catherine’s every move. Every time Catherine took a step she either bumped into Rose or stepped on her foot. Finally Catherine suggested that Rose set the table. Rose quickly set four places while Catherine found some meat in the ice box and made up four sandwiches for the dinner pails.

Just as the oatmeal was done she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and by the time the men entered the kitchen she had everything on the table.

“I thought I smelled coffee.” Mr. Paulnesky draped his coat over the back of his chair before he sat.

In contrast to his father Matthew was wearing a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up, Levi’s, and work boots, the same work clothes that her brothers wore. He and little Rose joined their father at the table. When Matthew scratched his head his father frowned at him. Matthew sullenly returned the look and grabbed a biscuit from the plate. Catherine poured coffee for the men, trying not to stare at Matthew, who was unshaven in stark contrast to his father.

“Do you need milk for the coffee?” Catherine asked her employer.

“Yes. Then you sit and eat, too”

The men fell to eating without saying grace, something that would never happen in Catherine’s house. Mama would make sure of that. Even little Rose grabbed her spoon and dug right in. Catherine thought it was because his wife was upstairs sick instead of in the kitchen, but she silently said her own prayer before taking a bite. She was only half finished when Mr. Paulnesky stood to put on his suit coat.

“What do you want me to do today, Mr. Paulnesky?”

“Make some bread, for one thing. And get Rose dressed. Mrs. Paulnesky will be awake later on and she can direct you further. Matthew, let’s go.”

He strode into the hall and Matthew rose, gulped the rest of his coffee, grabbed another biscuit and their dinner pails, and followed without a word. He didn’t even acknowledge her. Catherine’s spirits sagged.

Rose was looking at her expectantly, and Catherine was at a loss. Finally she heated some water and washed the dishes, telling Rose to dry them and put them away. Obediently the girl grabbed a dish towel. When the dishes were done Catherine began to make bread, sifting flour, adding the cake yeast to warm water. She set it on the shelf over the stove and turned to Rose.

“Your papa wants you to get dressed. Why don’t you show me your room and we’ll pick out a dress for you to wear.”

“Will you braid my hair? Mama used to braid it all the time. Before she got sick, I mean.”

“Yes, I’ll braid your hair. Let’s go upstairs.”

Rose scampered up the stairs with Catherine behind her trying to walk quietly. She skipped past the first door and opened the middle one. "This is my room." Rose had her own room with a single bed, a nightstand with a lamp, and a wardrobe. She opened the wardrobe door and chose a dress. "This one."

A whole room, Catherine thought. Rose has a whole room to herself while I have to share the attic with all my brothers and sisters. All the dresses in the wardrobe are hers, too. How wonderful it must be to live this way and not have to share clothes. Rose will never have to wear hand-me-downs from her cousins. She probably doesn't know how lucky she is to grow up in such a house.

Her thoughts rambled. One of the other rooms must be Matthew's. Which one, the one at the front of the house or at the back of the house. What did his room look like? Finally she realized that Rose was watching her.

"Let's go downstairs. You can wash up in the kitchen and I'll do your hair down there where there is more light. Bring your brush and comb."

Rose's hair was so tangled that it took Catherine a long time to brush and braid it into two long pigtailed. By the time Rose was washed and dressed the bread dough was ready to punch down.

Rose came back downstairs. "Mama's calling. Come with me."

Up the stairs they went for a second time, this time to the corner room at the end of the hallway. Three tall narrow windows were covered by drapes so thick that very little light came through even though it was mid-morning. A brass double bed sat against the far wall. On one side of the bed was a small table and a large arm chair stood on the other side. Between the far windows next to a dry sink was a slipper chair. There was a

huge wardrobe, a bureau and a dressing table with a small mirror and a stool. This bedroom facing the street was almost as big as the whole downstairs of Catherine's house.

Rose ran to the tiny figure in the bed.

"Mama! Good morning, Mama. This is Catherine. She did my hair."

"My husband said you were coming. Open the drapes so I can get a good look at you, girl."

Catherine did as she was told, and turned around. Mrs. Paulnesky had pale skin and disheveled black hair that hung in her eyes. She looked much younger than Catherine's mother, but there were dark circles under her eyes. Catherine couldn't imagine that she had a son as old as Matthew.

She returned Catherine's look for a long moment. Pushing the hair away from her eyes she held out her hand.

"Help me up."

Catherine threw back the quilt and took both small pale hands in her own suntanned ones. When Mrs. Paulnesky was standing beside the bed she was so unsteady that Catherine slipped her arm around her, afraid she would fall.

"Now help me to that chair."

Catherine helped her move the few steps to the chair before she realized what it was. Lifting the cover on the seat she tried not to flinch as the stench offended her nose. She eased her employer down and waited until she had finished, then covered the seat and helped her back to bed. The other woman moved slowly, like her Nona Moretti had before she died.

“Would you like some breakfast, Mrs. Paulnesky? There is a biscuit left and I can make you oatmeal or an egg.”

“Where did the biscuits come from?”

“I made them this morning. I have bread rising over the stove, too.”

Mrs. Paulnesky smiled.

“A biscuit and some oatmeal will do.”

“I’ll bring it up soon.”

Catherine felt relieved as she made her way downstairs to make another breakfast, leaving Rose chattering away to her mother. Mrs. Paulnesky seemed happy that she was making bread. When the food was ready she set it on a platter, added the last cup of coffee, and brought it upstairs. After she helped Mrs. Paulnesky sit up in bed, propping her with both pillows, she set the platter on her lap.

“Thank you. I haven’t had coffee in a long time.”

“I didn’t bring sugar or milk. Do you want any?”

“No, I like it black. It tastes better.”

Mrs. Paulnesky ate a little of everything, then lay back.

“There’s a tray on top of the ice box if that will be easier for you.”

“Thank you. What else would you like me to do today?”

“Feed the chickens and gather eggs, check the garden and make supper for Mr. Paulnesky and Matthew. And empty the chamber pot.”

Catherine had been dreading that last order. The pot was full and she had to take it down the stairs and out the back door to the privy.

“Are you in any pain? Can I get you something else?”

“No, I’m just so very tired.” Her eyes closed as she was speaking.

Catherine stepped carefully down the stairs, heavy lidded crock in her hands.

Rose followed with the platter.

“Open the back door for me, please.”

Down the stone steps and down the path she went to the door of the outbuilding.

Rose opened the door for her and another stench hit her nostrils. Cobwebs lined the walls and a large spider glared at her from a corner. She must have been sick for a long time, thought Catherine. Everything is dirty. At least it’s only a one-holer, not a two-holer like ours. She emptied the pot, rinsed it with a little water from the full rain barrel and set it on the back steps.

“Where does your mama keep the old broom?”

While Rose got the old broom Catherine poured hot water from the stove into a bucket with some soap and took it back to the outhouse. She scrubbed the seats, floor and walls with the hot, soapy water and threw the rest of the water on the little step leading to the building. As a parting shot she threw some lime into the hole.

As she entered Mrs. Paulnesky’s room she saw that the woman was sleeping. She looks so young, thought Catherine, and began to feel sorry for the pale, weak woman. She lives in a house with a wonderful front porch and can’t even get down the steps to enjoy it.

Back downstairs Catherine scrubbed her hands at the sink, punched down the bread and set in into pans for the final rise. She swept the floors with the new broom, and finally put the bread into the oven.

The smell of baking bread filled the house. Catherine had time to feed the chickens and gather eggs, Rose at her heels like a puppy chattering away.

When the bread was done she turned it out of the pans to cool on the counter and went upstairs to see if Mrs. Paulnesky needed anything. She was awake.

“Is that bread I smell?”

“Yes. I just took it from the oven. Would you like some when it cools?”

“Bread and jam would be a fine dinner for all of us. Would you help me up for a moment?”

Catherine hadn't counted on nursing as part of her job, but she remembered when her Nona Moretti had lived with them for a few years before she died. Toward the end Mama spent most of her time taking care of her own mother, often giving directions to Catherine and her sister about household chores. Your nona won't be with us for that much longer, her mama had said, and I want to spend as much time with her as I can. Catherine hadn't completely understood what her mama meant at the time, but seeing Mrs. Paulnesky bedridden made her realize what her mama had gone through.

“Would you like to sit up for a little bit while I bring some bread and jam?”

“Just for a little. Eating is easier sitting up than it is lying down. By the way, the jam is in the cupboard in the fruit cellar.”

“I'll get a jar. Rose, do you want to stay with your mama while I bring bread and jam?”

“I want to brush Mama's hair like you did mine.”

When Catherine left the room Rose was taking the pins out of her mother's hair and laughing because she dropped one on the floor.

Catherine braved the dark steps from the kitchen to the cellar. A small window let in enough light for her to see the massive furnace with huge pipes running to the low ceiling in all directions. Bricks had been laid down to form a base on which the furnace sat.

A doorway led to the fruit cellar. The crude door was propped open. Wooden shelves lined three walls of the fruit cellar, most of them full of glass canning jars of food. Quarts and pints of green beans, peas, corn, and beets were lined up in order on one set of shelves, while pints of pears, berries, and jams and jellies were on another set. Clean empty jars were on the last rack.

A set of wide steps led up to a pair of cellar doors straight ahead, one of which was propped open, so there was plenty of light. One tiny window allowed a ray of sunshine to enter, lighting up the barrels containing apples and potatoes that huddled together on the dirt floor in the center of the room. The potato barrel was only about a third full—when it was nearly empty Catherine would not be able to reach the contents without tipping the barrel over. Two smaller lidded barrels, one for sauerkraut and one for pickles, stood against the wall under the window.

She selected a jar of strawberry jam and hurried back to the kitchen. She cleaned the dusty layer of wax on the top of the jar before removing it. The jam smelled wonderful and made her mouth water.

Rose was still brushing her mother's hair when Catherine came back upstairs with the tray. She cut thick slices from the loaf of bread and spread them with butter and jam. Glasses of water and a cup of tea for Mrs. Paulnesky completed their meal. Catherine

was happy to get the heel of the bread, her favorite slice, for her own dinner. As they ate they talked. “How long have you been ill?” Catherine asked between bites.

“I’ve been so tired I lost track of time, but I think it’s about a month. I’m not really sick, just tired and too weak to do much of anything. My husband has been trying to run the household but just gave up and said he would look for some help. He’s even had Matthew feeding the chickens.”

Catherine laughed at the thought of Matthew feeding chickens and Rose joined her. Mrs. Paulnesky smiled at them.

“I’m glad that he hired you, Catherine. You’ve done so much already. Look, you even braided Rose’s hair. I haven’t been able to do that in so long.”

“If you want I can braid your hair, too. You might be more comfortable without all those pins poking your head.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I’m tired now.”

Helping her back to the bed took only a moment, now that Catherine had done it once before.

“Oh, before you sleep, what would you like me to cook for supper? And when does Mr. Paulnesky want his supper?”

“Make something easy. Sausage with *polenta* would taste good. He and Matthew get home about the time first shift is over, but Rose and I can eat before that.” She was nearly asleep.

Checking the cupboards Catherine found yellow corn meal for the *polenta*. She had some free time so she and Rose went out to the back yard and jumped rope in the shade of the nearest apple tree. When they tired of that they sat on the back steps.

Rose was full of words, which tumbled out of her mouth, falling all over each other in an attempt to be heard. She rattled on, telling Catherine more about the family than she wanted to hear. “Papa uses his belt on Matthew when he’s bad. He grabs him and takes him to the cellar and calls him bad words. Matthew only yells back for a little while. Before Mama got sick I saw Papa shove her down on the bed and hit her with his belt buckle. When he saw me in the hall he told me to go downstairs and slammed the bedroom door. Mama was crying and I could hear her all the way down the steps. I was so afraid that I started crying, too. Matthew found me and took me for a walk outside and made me feel better. After that Mama got sick. I think that Papa made her sick.”

A shiver went down Catherine’s spine at those words. Her father had never raised his hand to her mother. He had beat John with his belt once when he found him with beer, but had never touched the girls. Mama disciplined the girls—the sting of a wire mesh flyswatter on bare legs was more than enough, she thought, but Mama’s frown of disapproval was the worst punishment of all.

No wonder Rose’s mother was sick if her husband was beating her. A new thought struck her: would Matthew beat his wife if he had seen his father beat his mother? How would it feel to be married to a man who beat her? Had her papa known something about this family that he didn’t want to tell her? She missed Papa deeply—missed his comforting presence and his knowledge.

Soon it was time to start supper. Catherine served Mrs. Paulnesky and Rose and came downstairs to set the table for the men. Soon she would see Matthew. Would he talk to her now that his work day was over? Rose went out to the front porch to look for

them. When Mr. Paulnesky came through the front door followed by his son, he sniffed the air. By the time he got to the kitchen sink to wash up he was smiling.

“The bread smells good.”

“Thank you.” She handed him a towel and began to set the food on the table. Once again Mr. Paulnesky and Matthew ate without blessing the food. Perhaps that’s the way Protestants are, Catherine thought, as she waited on them, cutting more bread and sausage. After what Rose had told her today she was a little afraid of her mustached employer.

“Sit down and eat. It looks like you had a busy day. Tell me what you did.”

Between bites Catherine outlined her day. When she was finished, he nodded.

“You got a lot done today. After you redd up the kitchen you can go. I’ll put Rose to bed.”

Matthew left the room without speaking to her again. Halfway out the door, his father turned.

“When you come in tomorrow you can use the back door. Don’t bother to knock, just come in. Good night, Catherine.”

“Good night, Sir.”

Catherine had a lot to think about as she cleared the table and washed dishes. Matthew didn’t even notice her and now she was expected to use the back door. She wondered if Marian was right. She was just a servant in this house, but it was only the first day. As Matthew became used to seeing her here, things would change. She was sure of it.

Afterglow was fading as Catherine left by the back door and walked down the gravel road toward the crossroads. The grand houses, so quiet this morning, were full of the sounds of children and the smells of supper drifting on the breeze. Even though she hurried, pulling her shawl closer against the chill, it was fully dark by the time her feet felt only dirt under them. Up ahead she saw a small light, a candle. Had John come to meet her on her first day? She hurried toward the welcoming light but her smile vanished when she recognized who held it. It was Andrew Bielecki.

“Good evening.”

He was not menacing her and her racing heartbeat slowed. Maybe he was going to call on someone. It would be rude of her not to speak, though, and Mama had cautioned her to be on her best behavior. But it had been a long day and she wanted to turn and run down the dirt road toward home to tell Mama everything. Besides, how would it look for her to be alone in the dark with a man to whom she was not related? The *bubbas* would gossip for a week over this.

“Good evening, Mr. Bielecki.”

Andrew was silent, standing in the darkened street looking uncomfortable in the candle light, and she knew she would have to start a brief conversation if she was ever to get home.

“What brings you out after a long day?”

“I, uh, John told me that you, uh, were helping out Mrs. Paulnesky and I, well, I wanted to be sure you made it home. Without any problems, I mean.”

He had come out to light her way home when her own family had not. How nice of him. She gave him a grateful smile.

“That is so kind of you. I’ll have to remember to bring a candle tomorrow.”

“Please call me Andy. Do you want me to walk home with you? I mean, so you can see the road.”

“It’s still light enough, and I will probably run most of the way. Thank you again, Mr., I mean Andy.”

She turned toward home but he wasn’t finished speaking.

“At least take the lantern with you. I would feel so much better knowing you have a light.”

She turned toward him and accepted the lamp from his outstretched hand.

“I’ll return it to you tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be waiting right here. Good night.”

“Good night and thank you again for your kindness.”

Catherine turned and hurried down the road, breaking into a run, holding the candle lantern ahead of her. She did not see the tiny smile on Andrew’s face or the way he watched the light until she was out of sight before he turned to head home.

The lights of her house came into view. She blew out the candle before entering and set the lantern on the floor near the door so she wouldn’t forget it in the morning.

John was at the table just finishing his supper.

“Where did you get the lantern?”

“Andrew Bielecki met me at the crossroad and insisted that I take it to light the way home. I told him I would return it tomorrow morning. Was that all right? I didn’t want to be rude.”

They both looked at their mother. After a moment she smiled.

“Yes, that was all right, as long as you return it tomorrow. We don’t want to be beholden to him. Now come and tell me about your day. Did you have something to eat?”

Catherine moved to the table and told her mother everything as she helped with the dishes. She was still talking when her mother sat down in her chair and began to darn a sock. John had pulled his chair to the stove and Catherine was unaware that he was listening to her.

When she had wound down, no more words able to come from her lips, she realized how tired she was.

“Do you need me for anything else? I am so tired.”

“The first day is always the hardest. Go on to bed.”

She kissed her mother good night and climbed the stairs to the loft. Once upstairs she remembered one more thing she wanted to tell her mother and leaned down to talk through the stair hole, but stopped when she heard her mother speaking to John.

“We must get her a candle lamp or have one of the boys walk her to and from work. It’s not right for her to meet a man alone on the road after dark. Her reputation will be worthless after the old *bubbas* are finished discussing her all over town.”

“I was thinking that same thing. Tony is too young to work the mine right now so he can walk her to and from her job. And I’ll talk to Andrew about it, too.”

Catherine felt grateful that her family was taking care of her and fell into a deep sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, too tired to even think about Matthew.

The next morning Tony left the house with her and John. Tony carried a lit lantern and Catherine carried Andrew's. Andrew was waiting for them at the cross road. She handed him the lantern and thanked him again.

"I can walk out to meet you tonight, Catherine, and see you safely home."

"Thanks for the offer," John said, "but Tony is going to walk her to and from work for company. You don't need to bother going out. I'm sure you have your hands full with your mother."

Andrew looked from Catherine to John, then back to Catherine. He was looking at her the same way Mr. Paulnesky had looked at her yesterday and it suddenly made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

"As long as she is safe." Andrew turned and walked back toward his own house. Catherine was relieved.

"Hurry up, you two. Don't want Catherine to be late, do we?"

Tony walked Catherine to the back door and waited until she lit the lantern in the kitchen before leaving.

The second day of work was much like the first for Catherine. She made eggs and sausage for breakfast and noticed that Matthew didn't shave before going to work. He must shave before bed, she thought. Papa always did that, too. She helped Rose wash and dress, fed the chickens, and cleaned the privy before Mrs. Paulnesky was awake.

"Good morning. Ma'am. Are you ready for some breakfast?"

Catherine threw back the heavy drapes and turned to smile at her employer.

Rubbing her eyes, Mrs. Paulnesky put both arms around Rose and hugged her. She looked more awake this morning and smiled back at Catherine. "Call me Rebecca, please." Throwing back the quilt she swung one foot over the edge of the bed before Catherine got there to help her stand up. "What do you have this morning for breakfast?"

"Eggs and sausage, bread if you want it, and coffee. Does that sound good?"

"Yes, it does. And I would like to sit up for a bit. Rose will stay with me, won't you?"

Rose nodded and took her mother's other hand to help her to the slipper chair, and Catherine left them as Rose chattered away.

On her way to the stairs she hesitated, then looked back down the hall. Rose was with her mother out of sight. Could she sneak a look at Matthew's room without being seen? She went to the door. Hand on the knob she glanced back down the hall before opening it a crack to peer in.

She saw nothing unusual in the light of the single window: a badly rumped unmade single bed, a night stand, chair, wardrobe and washstand with mirror. Unused shaving gear lay on a towel next to a pitcher and basin. The doors of the wardrobe were wide open and clothes were draped on them as well as thrown on the chair and the floor. When she noticed the underwear on the chair she immediately closed the door and went downstairs.

Catherine, you're as nosy as those old *bubbas*, she mentally scolded herself as she prepared the tray. You should be ashamed of yourself, snooping in someone else's house. Mama told you that you represent the family and you're doing a fine job of shaming everyone.

Mrs. Paulnesky ate a little more than she did yesterday. As she finished, she asked Catherine to help her wash up, so Catherine made another trip up the steep stairs carrying a basin of hot water. Catherine retrieved a bar of soap from the bedside table and a clean nightgown from the top drawer of the chest.

As the lady removed her nightgown Catherine tried to hide her embarrassment. She had never seen an adult woman without underclothes and didn't know where to look. Her cheeks burned. She didn't want to touch the older woman's skin and wondered how her mother had cared for Nona for all those years.

When Mrs. Paulnesky turned around Catherine noticed a big dark bruise on her right side and several others that were already turning a greenish color. There were three dark spots on her upper arm that looked like fingerprints. Rose must have been telling the truth, Catherine thought. What kind of man would hurt his sick wife? What did John get me into? She crossed herself and, lacking her rosary, kissed her right thumb instead.

“You'll have to help me, Catherine. I 'm weaker than I thought.”

She tried to wash the bruises gently. The other woman flinched but didn't cry out as she worked.

It's not so bad taking care of a baby, Catherine thought, because a baby can't do for himself. But having to look at another woman's private areas and her bruises makes me feel uncomfortable. She tried to look everywhere except where she was washing.

In the end it was Rose who saved the situation. Chattering away, Rose kept asking questions and Catherine found that by concentrating on those questions she didn't think so much about what she was actually doing. When her employer was once again clothed Catherine gave a small sigh of relief.

Catherine brushed Mrs. Paulnesky's hair and put it into a loose braid. Washing up took more energy than the lady expected, and she requested that Catherine help her back to bed for a nap.

"Can I get you anything else? What do you want me to do today?"

"If you would, dust the parlor and beat all the rugs. I haven't had the energy to do that in a long time. And please call me Rebecca."

"All right then, Rebecca."

"Rose, go downstairs. I need to talk to Catherine."

"All right, Mama." Rose happily skipped down the hall.

"I want you to do something for me. Don't tell anyone that you have to help me bathe. Or that I have bruises from falling out of bed. Promise me this."

Catherine knew that Rebecca's bruises weren't from falling out of bed, but remembering her mother's words to do what Mrs. Paulnesky asked of her, she said, "I won't tell anyone."

"Thank you. You are a good girl." Rebecca's eyes began to close.

Downstairs Catherine and Rose began to collect the rugs. The one in the parlor was large and heavy and it took all her strength to put it on the clothes line. She and Rose had to hunt for the beater and found it hanging on a nail in the cellar. Dust flew off the rugs as Catherine hit them again and again. When she was out of breath she sat on the back steps for a bit, leaving the rugs to swing gently in the breeze to air out.

Back in the parlor she opened the heavy drapes to see the room better and spotted a treasure, a whole shelf of books. Besides the Bible there was *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Little Women*, *Peter Pan*, and a number of other cloth-bound volumes. Rose was

so lucky to live in a house with so many books. Someday, she thought, I want to read every book on these shelves and more. A thought came to her. Someday she and Matthew might sit in this room with their children. She would read to the little ones while Matthew sat nodding off after a day at work. You're a silly goose, she thought. Now get to work.

The rest of the day flew by until it was time to start supper. Catherine picked green tomatoes from the back garden and cut thick slices of them to go with the left-over sausage and polenta. She breaded them with cornmeal and began to fry them when Rose told her that her papa was coming down the road.

"Fried green tomatoes! My favorite!" Matthew's first words to Catherine rang like music in her ears. He washed his hands as his father went out the back door toward the privy.

"Your mama liked them, too."

Matthew's face darkened. "She's not my mama." He looked around and not seeing Rose continued. "She's my father's wife. She's not even Rose's mama, but Rose doesn't know." He sat at the table, a sad look on his face.

Rebecca is not his mama? Catherine thought. His mama must have died when Rose was born. He probably misses her very much. Was there anything she could say to make him feel better?

"Matthew, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's alright. I don't think anyone else knows, either. My father doesn't want her to neighbor and Rebecca just does what he tells her."

Mr. Paulnesky opened the back door and a sullen look spread over Matthew's face. Catherine had a lot to think about as she cut, breaded and fried green tomatoes. Rebecca was Mr. Paulnesky's second wife and he beat her. No wonder she had taken to her bed. Catherine wondered if they shared the same bed, then blushed at her own thoughts. Rebecca looks young because she probably is young. That must be why she wants me to call her by her first name. If she's not allowed to neighbor she must be very lonely.

She cooked until the men had their fill, then did a few more slices for herself.

As Mr. Paulnesky was leaving the kitchen he said, "Good supper, Catherine." And smiled. His mustache moved. The hair on Catherine's neck stood up.

She saw the light outside as she was doing the dishes and invited Tony into the kitchen. He looked around in wonder, afraid to sit down.

"Their ice box is in the kitchen," he said, rather too loudly.

"Hush, they'll hear you. I'm ready, let's go."

As they approached the crossroad Catherine looked around apprehensively, but Andrew Bielecki was not there. Relieved, she elbowed Tony.

"Race you home!"

They arrived home breathless as Mama was finishing the dishes. Catherine told her that Rebecca was not Matthew and Rose's mother, and that she wanted Catherine to call her by her first name.

"You may do that while you are working, but everywhere else, including church, when you talk about her you must be respectful and call her Mrs. Paulnesky. And remember, a good woman doesn't gossip about her neighbors."

Catherine smiled and agreed, then kissed her mother and went to bed.

The next day was Saturday—she would be off on Sunday so she cooked some extra food and put it in the ice box. After supper Mr. Paulnesky took a small brown envelope from his pocket, just like the pay envelopes that her brothers had given her papa and now gave to John, and offered it to her.

“Here’s your first week’s pay. You’re doing a good job. Your brother was right.”

“Thank you, Sir,” was all she could stammer as she took it. Of course it was just like her brothers’ pay envelopes. He ran the mine, after all. She put the envelope into her apron pocket without looking in it.

When she got home she took the envelope from her pocket and gave it to John, who was still at the table. He opened it and looked up in surprise.

“You must be doing a good job. You only worked three days but he gave you a whole week’s pay.”

“He told me I was doing a good job, and that you were right.”

He counted out the four dollars and fifty cents, then put it back into the envelope and handed it back to her with a smile.

“Give this to Mama. You will be giving her your pay envelopes from now on.”

Mama put the envelope into her pocket and smiled at Catherine. “I have some news for you. Mrs. Csokmay had a letter from Richard today. He’s in the city but hasn’t found Irina yet. He got a job in one of the produce markets and will look for her in his spare time.”

“I hope he finds her soon.”

“I hope so, too. His mother was in great spirits when she ran over today with his letter. You’ve been working hard and haven’t seen Marian in a few days. Do you want to run across the road for a few minutes before bed?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Marian welcomed Catherine in and they sat near the fire. Catherine told her friend all that had happened in the last three days and mentioned all the nice things that Mrs. Paulnesky had in her house. She even told Marian about Richard’s letter to his mother. Marian’s mother listened in as she mended a pair of pants. Finally Catherine whispered that Mrs. Paulnesky was not Matthew and Emma’s mother. Marian’s mother quit sewing but said nothing.

“Did Matthew talk to you?”

“Not until today when his father was out of the room. Marian, he calls him his father, not his papa. Isn’t that strange? He only said she wasn’t his mama and that Rose didn’t know.”

“He must not get along well with his family, then.”

“Well, he didn’t seem to dislike Rebecca, uh, Mrs. Paulnesky, but he made it clear that she wasn’t his mama.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it? They have such a wonderful large house but they don’t seem to be a real family. Not like yours or mine. I wouldn’t trade my family for anything.”

“I wouldn’t either. Maybe you were right. Maybe he won’t look at me as anything but a maid, someone who cooks and feeds the chickens. But I still hope I can make him love me. Oh, that’s Mama calling me. Bye, Marian. Bye, Mrs. Jacobiasen. I’ll see you tomorrow in church.”

Tucked into her bed, Catherine thought about the last few days and how good they had been. So many changes in such a short time, she thought as her eyes began to close. I hope there are no more changes for a long time.

She thought of her father. He would never change, never become old in her thoughts because he had been so strong when he died. He had taken care of them all, but John wasn't strong like Papa. He's still a boy. John cares a lot about what others think of him and our family. Maybe he thinks too much about it.

Six – Sweet Sixteen

On the first Sunday of September the family rose early to do chores before getting ready for Mass. John no longer attended on a regular basis, but the rest of Catherine's siblings walked with their mother down the dusty lane to the center of town. Weekly services were held in the general store, the largest building in town. George and Tony immediately helped drag benches and set up chairs, while Bob and Bill, altar boys for the day, went to don their cassocks. The women watched and chatted among themselves.

Andrew Bielecki nodded to Mrs. Sheroski as he helped his mother toward a seat in the front. Catherine noticed a small smile on her mother's lips and thought that very strange. Andrew had never acknowledged their family in church before. And her mother had smiled at him. Andrew was old, perhaps twenty-five. He had been working at the mine for quite a while and had taken over her papa's job as straw boss. Since he was unmarried with no siblings he must have spent all his time out of work taking care of his widowed mother, who looked very ill. The girls in town whispered to each other that he cooked for his mother and even did dishes. That was very unmanly. Irina had called him a confirmed bachelor, and winked when she said it. Marian thought he just hadn't found the right girl yet.

At the end of Mass, Father Wilson announced that the bishop would be coming to their church next April to administer the sacrament of Confirmation. Candidates age twelve and up would begin their classes after Mass next week. Bob and Bill smiled, for they knew that after they were confirmed they would not have to come to church every Sunday, but only on holy days. They could stay home with John.

Catherine realized she would have to stay with her sister and two younger brothers for an extra two hours each Sunday and walk home with them. She would miss the time she usually spent idling in the meadow or reading. But Marian was her age and would probably be in class with her so they could walk home together.

On the way home from church with her mother, Theresa and Emma, Catherine asked, “Mama, do I have to be confirmed next year? Can’t I wait until the next time?”

“The bishop only comes here every four years, so you would have a long wait. Besides, confirmation is the last step to being an adult. Once confirmed you can begin to keep company with a man who is looking for a wife. You don’t want to wait until you are an old maid of nineteen, do you?”

Catherine looked toward the goldenrod blooming on the side of the road. “No, but, no one is interested in me.”

“Perhaps someone is interested but hasn’t spoken yet because of your age. You just have to trust that God will send a proper husband for you. So yes, you have to be confirmed next year.”

After dinner Catherine had a chance to walk in the woods and talk to Marian in private. Though the ground was full of green plants there was a hint of fall in the air. Goldenrod bloomed in small sunny spaces along with clusters of little purple flowers with yellow centers. Catherine kicked at a pile of branches. “We are going to have homework, I just know it. As if I didn’t have enough to do at the Paulnesky’s house.”

“I know what you mean. Mama says that I have to be confirmed, too, and she’s trying to teach me all her recipes so I know them by heart. But at least after that we will be adults.”

“Are you ready to be an adult? I’m not sure that I am. It’s a scary thought, running a house, having a husband and children.”

“You’re already doing most of that now at the Paulnesky’s house, aren’t you? I mean, you run the house and take care of a little one.” Marian picked up a stick and broke it in half. The crisp sound made a chipmunk scamper for his hole.

“Yes, but it’s only temporary until the lady is back on her feet. And I’m not really responsible—I just do what she tells me. That’s different.”

“Still, it’s good practice for you. And you get to make some money, too. What will you do with it?”

“I’m giving it to Mama. John said it will help with the household expenses.” Catherine picked up a piece of firewood and carried it with her.

“Do you get any of it to spend?”

“Do you think I should?”

“I don’t know. Mama says that times are hard and we need every penny, so I guess your family does, too, especially with your papa gone. Don’t mind me—for a while I was a little jealous of your job.”

After supper that night Theresa and Emma were assigned the cleanup chores.

“Shouldn’t I help them?” asked Catherine.

“I have something else for you to do. On Sunday evenings from now on I want you to help me with the mending. My eyes get tired working by lamplight. Besides, you need some practice in case you have to mend clothing for Mrs. Paulnesky.”

“She has a sewing machine, one with a treadle. And books, lots of books, more than just a Bible. Do you think I might ask her if I could borrow one of her books to read on Sundays after Mass?”

Catherine’s mother looked up from her darning and gave her daughter a long thoughtful look before answering.

“It wouldn’t be right for you to borrow from your employer. What if a book got damaged? We would have to pay to replace it and we can’t afford that.”

“I didn’t think about that. But there is so much to learn about other people and the way they live.” Catherine concentrated on patching a pair of Bob’s work pants but her thoughts were with the books. Finally she looked up. “Are people the same everywhere? Not everyone lives the same way we do, right? Irina once told me that in New York all kinds of people live together on the same street. Men have adventures, like Richard looking for his sister. I wonder what it would be like to have an adventure. Can women have adventures, too?”

“Why are you asking?”

“Irina came from a city. She told Marian and me that in the city some single girls were maids or cooks for rich families and earned their own money. She talked about hearing people speak different languages on the same street, smelling food from other countries cooking, enjoying the different ways people dress. I just wonder if marriage is all there is for a woman or if she could travel to the city and work.”

“Adventures are not for decent women. A decent woman leaves her parents’ house only when she gets married and spends her life making a home for her husband and children. It’s a shame if a married woman has to take in washing or sewing and work to

support her children when her husband is supposed to do that. Just living is enough of an adventure for a woman most of the time. When you are married you'll understand."

"But..."

"That's enough about adventures, now. Make sure your stitches are fine and evenly spaced. Your patch will hold better if you treat it like you are patching church clothes."

"That's funny. Church clothes with patches."

"When I was a young girl my church clothes were the ones with the fewest patches. You never know what the future holds for you so it's best to be ready."

Catherine kept sewing but her thoughts were all mixed up. Irina spoke of a very different life than the one her mother talked about. Irina had left town with child, but with a man she loved. How much of an embarrassment would it be for her to work once her child was born? For the first time in her life Catherine was envious of Irina's adventures.

Catherine felt caged sometimes with so many rules. Don't take the last piece of food on a platter. Sit up straight. Speak politely. Her brothers didn't have nearly as many rules to follow as she and Theresa did and they got to do things like trapping and hunting. Papa never even taught her to shoot the gun. What if she had to hunt for food for her family some day?

The next day Catherine was embarrassed when she had to bathe her employer again but she tried to make the best of the situation by telling a story about her brother Bob's first hunting trip. Rebecca Paulnesky laughed at the thought of a missed squirrel

coming back to sit on a low branch and chatter at the hunter. Rose, playing with her doll in the corner to keep out of the way, laughed too.

“Do you like stories?” asked Rebecca as Catherine washed her back. “I used to read a lot before I was married, when I had more time. I always meant to read to Rose like my mother read to me, but I never did.”

“I like to read but the only book we have is the Bible. Now hold still so I can dry your back.”

“Would you like to read to Rose for me?”

“Oh, yes.” Rose jumped up and down, clapping her hands. “I love stories.”

Catherine dropped the bar of soap and ducked to retrieve it, hiding her wide grin until she could get it down to a proper smile.

“I’d like that, Mrs., er, Rebecca. My younger sisters learned to read because Mama read to them every evening. Maybe Rose could learn to read the same way.”

“Good. Every day after lunch take about a half hour and read to Rose in the parlor. And, Rose, you sit still and listen to Catherine as she reads.”

“I will. Can I pick the book?”

“Let Catherine choose.”

After lunch Catherine opened the heavy drapes in the parlor, walked to the book shelves, and took down *Little Women*. She sat on the love seat and motioned for Rose to sit next to her. Looking at the mantle clock, she carefully opened the book, turning pages one by one until she got to the beginning.

“The author is Louisa May Alcott. Let’s look at the first page.” A woman wrote this book, Catherine thought. I wonder if she lived in New York. If she could write a

book, maybe I could have an adventure if I lived in a city. Irina might be right. Maybe there's more to life than getting married and having children like Mama says.

As Catherine began to read out loud, she became absorbed in the story. An hour passed like the wink of an eye. Carefully she placed a scrap of paper into the book to mark her place before going to the kitchen to start supper.

On Saturday night she received her pay envelope and fingered it as she and her brother walked home. The rising moon made the night sky look like it was smiling at her. I wonder, she thought, if Irina is looking at the moon right now. From New York.

After church on Sunday the confirmation candidates gathered on benches at the side of the church/store to eat their dinners before beginning the first class. Class lasted until mid-afternoon and they did get homework to do for the next week. Bob and Bill ran most of the way with tomboy Theresa following, but Catherine and Marian walked together, trying to behave like the young women they thought they were.

“By the time we are confirmed I will be nearly sixteen,” Catherine remarked.
“Do you think that Matthew will want to keep company, as Mama says, after that?”

“Does he act interested now?”

“Well, no, but it's awkward with his father there all the time.”

Marian sighed and remained silent for a long minute. “Don't get your hopes up for him. But someone else might be looking at you in that way.”

“Richard is gone. Who would be looking at me?”

“Why, Andrew Bielecki, of course.”

She elbowed Catherine and they had a great laugh over the idea that old Andrew who lived with his mother would be interested in Catherine.

“Have you seen Tom recently?”

“You know Papa told me he wasn’t my type. I’m trying to be a good girl and mind my parents. After all, Confirmation is coming up. But sometimes I watch him in church. He winked at me last Sunday and I smiled back, then looked to see if Mama was watching. She wasn’t, thank goodness. I still felt guilty for disobeying in my heart. But we need to talk about something else.”

Days turned into weeks. The half hour Catherine spent reading to Ruth after lunch often extended to an hour and was the high point of her day. Every morning she spoke to Matthew, but he answered in short sentences and never tried to keep a conversation going. Still she was hopeful that one day he would notice her.

One day in November Rebecca asked her to do some mending on her husband’s work clothes. Catherine took the sewing basket downstairs and sat at the kitchen table where the light was better. Remembering her mother’s words she made her stitches fine and close together so the patch would stay. Rose watched her closely.

“I didn’t know you could sew. Maybe you could fix the tear in my doll’s dress, too.”

“Let me see it.” Rose showed her the doll. The skirt of the dress had been ripped away from the bodice. “I have enough time before supper to fix it for you. Go ahead and

take it off the doll while I finish this patch.” The dress was easy enough for Catherine to fix and was back on the doll in no time.

“Oh, it’s getting late. Take the sewing basket back upstairs for me while I start supper, would you?”

Rose took the basket in one hand and her doll in the other and left the room. She came back into the room empty handed.

“Mama wants to see you. She wants me to stay down here and wait for you.”

That was odd, thought Catherine as she took the stairs. Rose usually followed her from room to room. She wondered if she was in trouble. Rebecca was smiling when Catherine stopped in the doorway and motioned her closer. She was holding Rose’s doll.

“You did such a nice job on the doll dress that it gave me an idea. Would you make a new dress for this doll for Rose for Christmas? I have some fabric tucked away in the drawer and there is some ribbon in the sewing basket. Rose would be so happy with a new doll dress. Will you do it?”

“She follows me around all the time,” stammered Catherine. “I don’t know when I could do it.”

Rebecca grabbed her hand. “You would have to take the fabric home and do it there so she wouldn’t see you. I’d pay you extra for it. Please say yes.”

The pleading look on Rebecca’s face moved Catherine, but she thought about the homework she had for the confirmation class and hesitated.

“It’s not for me, it’s for Rose. Henry always makes sure that Matthew gets something for Christmas but I usually take care of Rose’s gift and I can’t this year. Please say yes.” Rebecca held onto Catherine’s hand with both of her small cold ones.

Catherine was torn. “Well, if it is only one dress, I think I can do it in between the mending at home.”

“Thank you so much. The fabric is in the bottom drawer of the bureau, left side, under the aprons. Go ahead, take it out and look at it.”

Catherine retrieved the cotton from the drawer and unfolded it on the bed next to the sewing basket. There was about a quarter yard of fine lawn in a soft pink color. How appropriate, she thought. A rose-colored dress for Rose’s doll.

“Make it soft and feminine. There’s enough fabric for a long full skirt. Put some tucks on the bodice if you want. I have ribbon and a few small buttons in the sewing basket. Can you have it done before Christmas?”

“Yes, I think so. Do you have thread? We don’t have any this color at home.”

“There should be a spool in the drawer. I’m so happy that Rose will have something very special for Christmas. You have been a Godsend to me.” Rebecca lay back on the pillows.

Catherine arranged the fabric, spool of matching thread, ribbon and tiny white buttons in her pocket. On the paper bag she sketched the pattern pieces of a doll dress. She measured the doll’s bodice and skirt, writing the measurements on the bag near the pieces as Rebecca watched approvingly. Finally she put the sewing basket back near the slipper chair and tucked the folded bag into her pocket.

“You look tired. Why don’t you take a nap? I’ll bring supper up in a while.”

She hurried down the stairs with the doll in hand, anxious about supper. Rose was sitting in her chair looking dejected but her face brightened at the sight of the doll and she reached for it with both arms.

“My dolly.” Rose put her cheek next to the doll’s face and rocked it gently. Catherine realized how much Rose loved her doll and was glad that she had said yes when Rebecca asked her.

That evening she pulled the fabric from her pocket to show her mother. “Mrs. Paulnesky asked me to make a dress for Rose’s doll for Christmas, but I have to do it when she can’t see it.”

“You really like little Rose, don’t you?”

“Yes, she’s such a dear thing and doesn’t have anyone to play with. Do you think I was right to say I’d make the dress?”

Her mother smiled, not the smile that she gave Andrew Bielecki every Sunday at church but a real, honest smile. “Yes, I think so. Do your best job on it.”

Catherine settled down to draw the pattern pieces onto the fabric with a pencil. Her mind was as busy as her hands. She was happy that her mother approved her decision. Perhaps Marian was right and becoming a woman wouldn’t be as hard as she thought. Maybe tomorrow night she could stop over for a few minutes to see Marian. But a part of her missed Irina and wondered how she was doing.

“That’s enough for one evening. Off to bed with you. Tomorrow’s another day.”

“Can I put the fabric and pattern by your bed so the children won’t get into it?”

“Yes, just put it in the bottom drawer. Sweet dreams.”

Catherine worked on the dress a little almost every evening, except for wash days and baking days. One night, not paying attention, she stabbed her finger so hard that it bled and she stopped sewing for the night. It took her a whole evening to figure out how

to make a ribbon rose that looked like a flower, but she was happy with the end result. She finished the dress in two weeks.

Rebecca fingered the dress when Catherine gave it to her and marveled at the workmanship. “How tiny your stitches in the tucks of the bodice are. I never would have thought of putting satin ribbon around the waist, but it looks just like a sash. And is that a ribbon flower at the waist? Rose will love it. You did such a nice job that you should be a dressmaker and not a housekeeper.” She handed Catherine a silver dollar. “Thank you so much for everything.” By the time Catherine put the dress away they both had moist eyes.

That evening as Catherine walked home she fingered the dollar in her pocket and wondered if she should keep it for herself. She gave Mama all her work money. It would be nice to have a little money to spend at the store. She could buy some sweets for the children for Christmas. But Mama would ask where she got the money to buy the sweets.

When she got home she put the dollar into the cardboard box under her bed where she kept her treasures: a smooth white lucky stone from the river, the pressed violet that Matthew had given her when her father died, a handkerchief made of plain white fabric with a small blue flower hand-embroidered in one corner by her nona, and a lock of hair, folded into a paper, from the baby sister who had died shortly after birth.

The next Saturday she handed her pay envelope to her mother, who looked inside it as she usually did to be sure that her daughter hadn’t been cheated.

“Is that all?”

Standing before her mother Catherine looked at the floor. “Yes,” she replied.

“All right, then.”

Catherine looked up to see a disappointed look flash across her mother’s face.

“Come, let’s work on the gifts.”

They were knitting Christmas presents for the children: Catherine was making the scarves and her mother was making mittens for the cold months ahead. They worked in silence for a while until her mother said, “My eyes are tired. Let’s go to bed.”

Catherine was much better with a needle and thread than she was with knitting needles. She willingly put her work away and crawled up the stairs. Once in bed, however, she thought about the dollar. She took it out, feeling the cold, hard coin. Guilt welled up inside her, threatening to spill out into tears. She put the coin away, but didn’t sleep for a long time.

The next morning while getting ready for church, she felt the coin calling to her from the box. I haven’t been as honest with Mama as I should have been, she thought. I have to be honest if I’m to be confirmed. Taking the coin downstairs, she stood next to her mother at the stove.

“Here, Mama. Mrs. Paulnesky gave me a dollar for making the dress for Rose. Maybe we can buy some sweets for the children for Christmas.” She put the coin into her mother’s hand and looked at the floor.

Her mother dropped the spoon into the pot and put both arms around her. “I wondered if she had rewarded you as she said she would.”

“I just wanted to see what it was like to make money and keep it. You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“I’m disappointed that you didn’t tell me last night but not mad. Would you like to use it to buy a Christmas treat for everyone?”

“I’d love to do that.” Catherine’s face lit up and she hugged her mother back, hard. How, she wondered, did Mama get to be so wise? Is that what it takes to be a mother? She certainly didn’t feel ready for that.

Christmas fell on a Saturday that year. The Confirmation class got a two-week break for the holidays so the children could help at home. After Mass Catherine went to the candy counter while her siblings were outside with Mama. She bought a big, beautiful orange for each of them and a bagful of penny candies for them to share. When she walked out of the store the children wanted to know what she had in her bag, but her mother shushed them and hurried them home to do to chores.

John took Bob and Bill out hunting while George split wood in the back yard and Tony stacked it against the wall of the house. They split and stacked extra wood because John smelled snow on the wind and wanted a good supply.

Catherine hid the bag of oranges and sweets under her mother’s bed so the younger children wouldn’t find them before Christmas.

After changing clothes Catherine and her mother began to bake. The fruit cake had been made in early November and was tucked into a tin, steeping in a brandy-covered cloth on a shelf in the cellar. Theresa ground the nuts and little Emma learned to sift and measure flour. By evening twelve large nut rolls were cooling on the table. Catherine’s feet were tired.

“Mama, why so many nut rolls?” asked Emma, drying her hands for the last time.

“Some we’ll eat and some we’ll give as gifts to friends and neighbors.”

“Can we give one to the Paulneskys?” asked Catherine, thinking of Rose.

“That would be a kind thing to do,” her mother said. “Yes, we can. I’m glad you thought of it.”

The boys came in with a couple of rabbits but the turkey they wanted had eluded them. “We’ll try tomorrow after work.” John said, “George, you can take the gun out tomorrow morning if you want. Take Tony with you so he can start learning but don’t let him carry the loaded gun just yet.” George and Tony smiled through their yawns. After a quick supper the younger children went to bed while Catherine and her mother wrapped the nut rolls to store in the cool cellar.

Baking and hunting went on every day. The women made sugar cookies, nut horns, butter cookies, and a honey coffee cake for Christmas breakfast. Every day the boys came back with squirrels or rabbits.

Christmas Eve Catherine took the nut roll to work. “Merry Christmas from all of us, Rebecca. I hope you and your family enjoy this.”

“Thank you, and thank your mother for me as well. You’ve been such a help in the last few months.”

When supper was on the table Catherine nervously reminded Mr. Paulnesky that she wouldn’t be coming tomorrow because it was Christmas Day.

“I’m glad you reminded me. Here’s your pay envelope. Matthew and I can handle dinner tomorrow. Rebecca told me about the nut roll. Thank your mother for me. We’ll see you on Monday as usual.”

Later as Catherine was putting on her coat Matthew came into the deserted kitchen.

“You have been so nice to my sister. She talks about you constantly. I wanted to give you something.” Matthew smiled shyly and offered her a small box.

Catherine hesitated. She knew that if it were expensive or too personal a gift she would not be allowed to accept it. Only if they were engaged would it be acceptable. She took the box and carefully opened it. Inside was a thimble and a packet of needles. The thimble fit her tiny middle finger perfectly.

“Thank you. I never had my own thimble. I’ve been using Nona’s. And it fits. How did you know?”

“Rebecca told me about the dress you made for Rose. I wanted to get you something pretty, a scarf maybe, but she said this would be better.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you again.” Catherine’s eyes finally met Matthew’s. Matthew took her tiny hand in his. For a long moment they gazed into each other’s faces until the door handle rattled.

They jumped apart as Tony opened the door and charged into the kitchen. “Cat, are you ready to go? It’s snowing a blizzard out there.”

“I’m ready, Tony. Goodbye, Matthew.” Matthew winked at Catherine as she and Tony stepped out into the night. Matthew closed the door behind them, and watched from the front window until the snowflakes claimed their shapes.

“Catherine’s got a boyfriend, Catherine’s got a boyfriend,” sang Tony several times. “What did your boyfriend get you?”

“You were watching us. How could you?” Catherine was outraged.

“I couldn’t help it. You were right there in front of the window. I’m going to tell Mama that you have a boyfriend.”

“Don’t you dare. Besides, I’m going to tell her about the present myself. Just hold the lantern and stay on the road. The wind is strong and I’m getting cold.” She tied her *babushka* tighter and bent her head against the wind. She was glad she’d worn her overshoes, for the snow on the road was already past her ankles but thoughts of Matthew kept her warm inside.

Tony continued to tease for a bit but grew tired of it and walked silently through the gathering storm. By the time they got home snow covered their clothes and they brushed each other off before going in. Their mother pulled Catherine to the stove to get warm while Tony blew out the lantern and hung his coat on a peg by the door.

“Mama, look what Matthew gave me for Christmas,” said Catherine, pulling the box out of her pocket and opening it. “It’s not too personal, is it? I can keep it, can’t I?”

Her mother smiled at the thimble and needles. “Yes, you may keep it. It’s a very thoughtful gift. Is it from the family?”

“He didn’t say but it must be.” Catherine thought she must have imagined Matthew’s interest in her. Of course it must be from the family. What a silly thing I am, thinking that suddenly Matthew would be interested in me. But he didn’t really say it was from the family-- he just said he wanted to get me something. Maybe he really is interested in me.

Catherine’s heart slowly slid from her throat back to its rightful place. Her internal music was so loud that she hardly heard her mother say George had bagged his first turkey that morning.

Christmas morning a sifting of snow covered the attic windowsills and weak sunlight revealed only white. The snow was so deep that the family decided not to walk to church. Catherine gave everyone the oranges she had bought and put the hard candies into a bowl for everyone to share. John had sold his muskrat furs at a good price and was able to buy leather gloves for each of the boys and a length of dress fabric for his mother and each of his sisters. The scarves and mittens were a big hit.

The family had a special breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, honey coffee cake, and a pot of real coffee. Coffee was so dear that they only had it on holidays. The rest of the time they drank tea made from rose hips and other herbs that Catherine and her mother picked and dried.

Breakfast wasn't so bad but that first Christmas dinner without their father was hard to handle. John carved the turkey from their father's place, but no one could watch as they had always watched Papa. To go with the turkey they had *kielbasa*, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes sweetened with molasses, carrots, dilled green beans, and canned tomatoes. Everyone told George how good the turkey was and he beamed with pride. When Bob said that Papa would have been proud of him, the room became quiet for the first time in months. Their mother spent a lot of time at the sink and Catherine knew that she was crying.

When the table had been cleared Catherine sliced the fruitcake and a nut roll and placed the slices on a platter. Theresa piled cookies on a large plate. Their mother

poured cups of coffee, adding in a lot of sugar and milk for Emma, and they enjoyed dessert together.

The hardest part of the day was after the dishes were done when they tried to sing Christmas carols. Their father had been a bass and, even if he didn't remember the words, he hummed along giving a low note for everyone to sing around. It just wasn't the same without him, and after a while they quietly gave up.

In the quiet of the evening Catherine's thoughts were of Matthew: his gift, the way their eyes met. She was daydreaming about walking with him through a daisy meadow when Theresa interrupted her.

"Catherine, did you hear me?" Theresa said. "I asked you twice what you were thinking about so quietly. Is it Papa that's on your mind? Or are you thinking of Matthew?"

"Tony told you, didn't he, the little brat. Well, I was thinking of Papa and how Christmas isn't the same without him," Catherine lied.

"No, it isn't. And Mama misses him more than any of us. Did you know that she still sleeps only on her side of the bed?"

"I didn't know that. I guess I missed him so much myself that I never thought about how hard this must be for Mama."

When Theresa went back to play checkers with Tony Catherine thought about her mother. Her parents had been married for twenty years and this was the first Christmas without him. No wonder her mama had cried during dinner, missing her husband.

On Monday Catherine shivered with excitement on her way to the Paulnesky's house. Did that exchange of looks in the kitchen mean that Matthew saw at her in a different light, as a woman? Or was it just his way of being nice to her for making the dress for Rose?

Rose came bursting into the kitchen. "Look at the beautiful dress Santa brought me for my doll. It's the most wonderful dress I ever had. Do you think the Little Women ever had such nice doll dresses?"

Catherine admired the dress with Rose, happy to have given so much joy to the little girl.

She was making pancakes when Matthew came into the kitchen ahead of his father. Her heart stuck in her throat so she had to swallow twice to speak.

"Pancakes will be ready shortly."

"Take your time. I'm early."

When Catherine looked up he was sitting at the table watching her. He winked at her as she set a plate before him.

That set the tone for the next several weeks. Matthew made an effort to see her alone for a few minutes every day before breakfast and after supper while she was doing dishes. Because Rose was always there they talked about the weather, but each evening Catherine walked home with a happy heart.

Easter was early that year: March 28, 1937, just before her sixteenth birthday. According to her mother she had been born sometime in mid-February but always celebrated on the day she had been baptized, March 31st. Catherine was happy to see it come because confirmation was scheduled for April 11th, two weeks later. She and

Theresa had made white dresses and veils for the ceremony. Catherine had embroidered some flowers on the sleeves of her dress. The work kept her busy during the long cold winter evenings and gave her a chance to use Matthew's gift and dream of what life with him would be like. After her birthday and Confirmation she would be free to keep company with an eye toward future marriage. She felt a little more confident about her future.

On Good Friday she was scheduled to leave work a little early and meet her family at the store for church services. Trying to hurry, she was down in the root cellar selecting a canning jar of vegetables when she saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye. Panicked, she whirled around to see Matthew in the doorway.

"Oh, you scared me," she said, taking a deep breath.

He walked toward her wearing a boyish smile. "I wanted to talk to you and I knew that Rose wouldn't follow you down here because she is afraid of the cellar. There's a May dance at the store next month and I, well, was hoping that I, I mean you, would go with me. To the dance."

"I would love to go with you." Catherine's heart was so full it felt about to burst as he took a step closer. Instinctively she stepped back until her shoulder touched the wooden shelving. He took another step. He was so close she could feel the warmth of his body. She had never been this close to a man.

He lifted her chin with his hand and leaned down. "You are quite the woman, Catherine," he whispered, and gently kissed her full on the lips. When the kiss ended, she opened her eyes. She forgot about the dampness earthy smell of the gloomy cellar. She forgot about everything except him. He kissed her again and she kissed back. His

kisses gave her a tingly feeling that ran from her lips to her belly. He put his arms around her and pulled her toward him. An exciting new feeling erupted within her. She put her arms around him.

“Catherine.” The voice seemed to come from a long distance.

“Catherine. I set the table. Are you ever coming back upstairs?” It was Rose.

“I have to go. Rose is calling,” whispered Catherine as she pulled away from Matthew. “If I don’t go she’ll come down here.”

“Yes, Rose, I’ll be up in just a minute,” she called, trying to slow her breathing. Matthew released her hand.

“I never knew how much I liked vegetables,” he said, and snickered. Catherine grabbed a pint of peas and headed through the furnace room to the stairs, her cheeks pink. Matthew stayed downstairs for a few minutes listening to Catherine and Rose talking, before going out the double cellar doors. He walked around to the privy, waited a moment, and went into the kitchen.

Catherine’s face was glowing when he looked at her. She smiled shyly at him and turned back to the stove. It wasn’t until supper was over and she was walking with Tony to the church services that she noticed that her top button was undone. It might not have been a good Friday for Jesus, she thought irreverently, but it has been a very good Friday for me. Matthew loves me. I’m going to a dance with him. And I’ll be of age.

In church she had to try and keep her thoughts on the pain of Christ’s crucifixion to keep that happy smile off her face. She didn’t want any questions from Tony, that nose-y brat.

On Easter Sunday John gave them each a small chocolate cross. After breakfast they put on their overshoes and slogged through the mud to church. Catherine sighed inwardly when she saw extra candles on the altar table. That meant a high Mass. Father Wilson would sing most of it and he was frequently a little off-key. Because of the singing everything took longer. Father Wilson gave such a long sermon about what resurrection means today that even the girls were fidgety. They came home to a dinner of sandwiches and canned fruit. The boys argued and roughhoused until their mother gave them the look. They decided to get out the checker board. The girls had to pluck, clean, stuff and cook the chicken that John killed. Their evening feast included kielbasa, *polenta*, canned carrots and corn, and hot cross buns. And the chocolate crosses.

Catherine was up early on March 31st. Her mother was already dressed.

“Happy Birthday, Catherine.”

“Thanks, Mama.”

Catherine’s gift from her mother was a ring with a tiny ruby in the center. The ring had belonged to her Nona Moretti. Catherine slipped the ring on her right hand and admired it.

“It’s beautiful, more beautiful than I remember.”

“Wear it well,” her mother said with a tiny smile.

“Are you thinking of Nona? Don’t be sad—she lives on in Theresa and me. And Emma, too.”

“I was thinking of Papa. He would have been so proud of you today, a woman on her way to a good life.”

Catherine put the ring into her treasure box for safekeeping before she went to work. The sun was stronger now and the snow was almost gone, raising spirits in the Paulnesky household. Rebecca felt especially well that day and sat in her chair for nearly an hour looking out the window.

Just before Catherine was to leave for the day, Rose came into the kitchen.

“Papa said he wants you to check the fire before you go.”

Catherine went down the narrow stairs to the cellar and pulled open the heavy furnace door. The fire was burning merrily, so she closed and latched the door and started toward the stairs.

“Catherine, come here a moment. I have something to show you.”

She turned toward the fruit cellar. Mr. Paulnesky stood in the doorway, motioning to her. Obediently she went toward him. When she got through the door he grabbed her and shoved her against the cold tile wall. He put one hand over her mouth and ripped the top button off her dress.

Seven – Betrayal

Frightened, Catherine with her back against the cold wall of glazed tiles began to panic. Mr. Paulnesky had become a monster and she didn't know what to do. Blessed Mother, she thought, help me in my time of need. Another button gave way.

She pushed against the side of his face with her right hand, trying to stop him from slobbering on her collar bone, bracing herself against the wall with her left. Her hand touched wood. The shelves of canned food. If she could just move a little more to her left.

Her attacker brought his face up to hers and she tried to shift to her left. His breath smelled of whiskey. "My back," she mumbled through his fingers, squirming. He let her move slightly before turning his attention to her neck once more. As he pressed against her she felt something hard in his pants. I have to do something now, she thought, and bit down on one of his fingers. He let out a groan and flung her toward the shelving. Her fingers touched glass as he came at her again. He yanked the front of her blue printed dress and the fabric ripped. A flash of anger blazed up in Catherine replacing her fear. That was her favorite dress.

"*Sei un bastardo.*" she hissed. You bastard. As John had taught her, she caught Mr. Paulnesky between the legs with her right knee. He bent over with an oath and she shoved him away.

Fingers closed around glass. Praying for strength, she brought the canning jar down on his head. Shards of glass and kernels of yellow corn flew everywhere as her

employer silently crumpled to the dirt floor. A bloom of bright blood showed up in his dark hair. A musty odor from the disturbed dirt floor filled her nostrils.

She ran for the stairs, panting, trying to hold her bodice together, and burst through the kitchen door with such force that she knocked Rose down. Ignoring the crying girl she pulled on her overshoes and grabbed her coat. Taking the back steps two at a time she escaped the house and didn't slow down until she was in the street. She buttoned her coat on the run, tied on her *babushka* and was feeling in her pocket for mittens when she ran right into Tony, almost knocking him down.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hurry,” she said, looking back toward the house. “We have to get home. I ... think ... I killed Mr. Paulnesky.” She grabbed his arm and propelled her younger brother down the dark road.

“What? How ...“ was all Tony could get out before Catherine spun him around and slapped him.

“Not now, Tony. Just do what I say.” She turned and ran down the road.

After a few seconds, hand to his stinging cheek, Tony ran after her. “Cat, wait up.”

He caught her at the crossroad, a dark figure bent over vomiting. “What did you do?”

She wiped her mouth with the back of her mitten. “I can’t talk about it now. I’ll tell Mama when we get home but we have to hurry. Hurry, before someone finds him.” She took off again, slightly slower and Tony followed.

Everyone was home when they charged through the door. Catherine ran to her mother, tears welling up in her eyes. Her brothers and sisters grew quiet and stared at her. Tony closed the door and stood behind her.

“Cat, Baby. What happened? Talk to me.”

Wordlessly Catherine opened her coat. Her mother took one look at the ruined dress and gathered her daughter into her arms.

“Who was it?” she whispered into Cat’s ear. “Who did this to you?”

John left his seat near the stove and stood behind his mother. The rest of the family moved closer to comfort Catherine, who was now sobbing so hard she couldn’t speak.

“Was it Matthew?” John’s voice was emotionless.

Catherine shook her head. “No. It was ... his ... father.”

“*Madre di Dio*” whispered her mother, making the sign of the cross over them both.

John gripped his mother’s shoulders and leaned his cheek against her temple. They stood silently until Catherine was able to speak.

“I think I killed him, Mama. I’m going to hell.”

John snapped to attention.

“You are not going to hell.” Her mother’s voice was firm. “Tell me what happened.”

She told them everything as a fresh wave of tears began to fall.

John gave her a stern look. “Did he ever do this before? What did you do to bring this on yourself? Did you encourage him?”

“John, don’t talk to her like that. What’s the matter with you?” Their mother sounded angry, protective of her oldest daughter.

“He runs the mine, Mama. I can’t believe he’d do this knowing she’s my sister. She must have done something to make him think she was interested.”

Catherine looked up to face her brother. “I didn’t do anything to lead him on. It happened just like I said. Don’t you believe me?”

John looked at Tony. “Did you see any of this?”

“No. She ran into me in the road and I almost dropped the lantern. She slapped me, too, and told me to hurry. We ran most of the way home.”

John walked to the front door and leaned his forehead on it. For a few minutes the only sound in the small house was Catherine’s sobs. Finally he turned and came back to the women, his face an unreadable mask. He put his arms around his mother and sister and hugged them. “It’s going to be all right, Catherine. Take care of her, Mama. Bob, Bill, George, get your coats and come with me. Tony, I want you to stay here with the women. Lock the door after me and use the twenty-two if you have to.”

“John, remember you are head of the house now. Be careful what you do.”

John turned and spoke firmly from the open door. “Don’t worry, Mama. Papa told me how to handle things like this. We’ll be back.” When the door slammed Tony locked it. He put a kitchen chair near the door, took the gun from its place over the coat pegs, and sat with the loaded gun across his knees and a determined look on his face.

Emma and Theresa started asking questions. “Did he stop breathing?” “Was he cold like a dead rabbit?” “Cat, did ...”

“Enough,” declared their mother. “Leave her alone, now, she’s had a bad time.”

Emma began to whine, “Aww, Mama.”

“I said that’s enough. Up to bed with you. Now.” Tony opened his mouth. “Not you, Tony, you have a job to do. Give me a kiss, girls, and go on up.”

When the last little foot had cleared the stairs Catherine put on a sweater, both to hide her ruined dress and because she was suddenly shaking with cold. Her mother made tea and the two of them sipped in silence while Tony guarded the door. The room glowed with lantern light and smelled like spaghetti sauce, tonight’s supper. In between sips Catherine’s mother quietly asked questions and got the rest of the story. The warm liquid stopped Catherine’s shivering and the relief of being safe at home made her sleepy. “Lay down on my bed and rest, just until your brothers come home.” Her mother covered her with a quilt and pulled the curtain. In her mother’s bed with the smells of home in the room, she closed her eyes and relaxed.

Sometime later she woke to the low buzz of voices. Her head ached and her eyes felt like they were glued shut, but she tried to focus on what her mother was saying. “She’s intact, John. He touched her and scared her half to death, but that’s all. What happened out there? Is he really dead?”

Catherine sat up and peeked through a hole in the curtain.

“First we went to Andrew Bielecki’s house. Andrew’s face was grim when I told him what Paulnesky did to Catherine and he said he’d go with us. I banged on Paulnesky’s front door. He answered it holding a chunk of ice to his head. I cursed him for taking advantage of my sister and he denied it all but invited us into the kitchen to talk it over. An open bottle was already on the table. He got more glasses and we discussed

it. He gave me a month's wages for her. She won't be going back to that house to work." John dropped some money on the table.

"You talked to him? After what he did to my Catherine? Your papa would have gathered the men together and gone to his house. They would have thrown a potato sack over his head and beat him with hoe handles until he was bloody on the ground to teach him a lesson. Everyone would have known what he did after the gossip got around. And you just talked to him?"

John stood and slammed his fist on the table. Catherine jumped just as her mother did. "I handled it. For months you have been telling me that I am head of the house, so I did what I thought was best. For all of us. I handled it, Mama. That's all you need to know." Her mother put her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook. John walked to the door and back several times, then sat down and took his mother's hands in his. In a softer tone he said, "By the way, as we were walking home Andrew said he was ready to make good on his promise as soon as possible to avoid any gossip that the old *bubbas* might start."

Promise? Catherine thought. What promise could Andrew have made to Mama? She stood up and walked unsteadily around the curtain. "What promise are you talking about, John?"

John and her mother exchanged a look that Catherine didn't understand.

"Well," her mother began, glancing at John again, "we had planned to tell you on your birthday tonight so we could celebrate but because of what happened we, uh."

"What she means," John said, "is that, well..." In the long pause that followed he looked at their mother.

“Tell me what?” Catherine suddenly felt uneasy. People in her family always said what was on their minds. They never beat around the bush like this, never had trouble expressing themselves, and she didn’t like the way John and her mother kept looking at each other, as if they were hiding something from her. She began to feel a little dizzy and sat at the table. “Just tell me, then.”

John took a deep breath. “Andrew Bielecki has asked for your hand in marriage and I promised you to him. He took a shine to you last fall and asked me then, but I told him you had to make your confirmation before we could consider marriage. Now he wants to announce your engagement right away to counter the gossip that’s sure to go around about this incident and I agree with him.” Catherine stared at him openmouthed.

John continued, counting on his fingers as he talked. “I know, I know. He’s older than you, but not too old. He got Papa’s job in the mine, has a decent house and could support you and a family. He’s Slovak and a good Catholic. Since he has no brothers or sisters to help him care for his sick mother you would be a big help to him. You and Andrew will be a good match.”

Catherine continued to stare at John as his words sunk in but finally found her voice. “What? Me marry Andrew Bielecki? But he’s old and strange. He doesn’t even look at girls and he doesn’t dance.” Catherine looked from John to her mother. “Mama, you know I don’t love him. I don’t even like him. I can’t marry him. He makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Tell John to take it back.”

Her mother lowered her eyes. “Andrew will be a good provider and in time you will learn to love him. He must care for you or he wouldn’t have gone to Paulnesky’s house tonight, risking his job. And he still wants to marry you after all that has

happened. John gave his word as head of household. The family honor is at stake--we must keep that promise.”

“If family honor is so important someone should have asked me about this first since I’m to be the sacrifice.” Catherine stared at John, who looked away. “But I can’t marry Andrew. I’m going to the May Day dance with Matthew. He asked me just before Easter and I said yes. I can’t be engaged now.”

John’s head snapped around. “You aren’t to talk to Matthew ever again, or go near that house, Catherine. You are done with that household and every member of that family. Do you understand me?”

“No!” yelled Catherine, jumping to her feet. “I’ve never been to a dance, never even had a date. I’ve never had the chance to be an adult. You want to get rid of me because you think I’ll shame the family. This is all your fault, John, for getting me that job. You put me in that house.” She kicked the chair leg and turned her attention to her mother. “You didn’t have an arranged marriage. You and Papa chose each other and Nona told me that you threw a fit until you had permission to marry him. Why can’t I have a chance to be courted and then make my own choice, too?” She ran to the stairs and turned for one parting shot. “I don’t care one bit about family honor. No matter what you say I will never marry Andrew Bielecki. Ever.” As she began to climb John rose and started toward her but his mother put her hand on his arm.

“Let her go, John. She’s had too much excitement for one day. In the morning she’ll be calmer and I’ll speak to her.”

Catherine threw herself on the bed while her swollen eyes squeezed out hot tears. How could John do this to me, she wondered. It’s not fair. And Mama wouldn’t even

stand up to him. Nona said she stood up to Nono for Mama, but Mama won't stand up to John for me. Mama got to go to dances. She got to choose her husband—I should be able to choose mine, too. This isn't the old country, it's America. John shouldn't have made a promise like that without talking to me first.

And what about Matthew? He doesn't know what his father did. He will wonder what happened to me when I don't show up for work. And I won't be able to tell him what happened, what John said, if I can't see him again.

If I have to kill myself, I will never marry Andrew Bielecki.

Like a baby she cried herself to sleep, still fully dressed. Her last thought before sleep overcame her was, happy sixteenth birthday, Catherine.

The next day Catherine told her younger siblings that she had quit her job and would be at home from now on. They were happy to hear the news. At least someone is happy, Catherine pouted, noticing that her mother hadn't said much to her. Mama's disappointed in my behavior, she thought. I've yelled at Mama and John. I never did that before. Maybe I should apologize to them before I go to confession. But I'm not sorry for what I said because it's the truth. John has no right to marry me off to that old man, especially without talking to me first.

She thought of Irina, who had risked everything to be with the man she loved. Irina had the right idea, Catherine thought. She stayed true to herself, trusted her feelings and was probably happy right now with a man she loved and a baby.

Catherine remained stubbornly silent all morning while attending to her chores. From time to time she noticed her mother watching her face, but said nothing.

As the afternoon warmed Catherine grabbed a sweater and went outside to sit in the sun. Birds were chirping and crocus were beginning to bloom. The whole world is waking up and I am in a living nightmare. Perhaps I should talk to Marian, she thought, walking across the road. Marian is always on my side. She'll understand. She has a good head on her shoulders.

“Happy birthday, Cat. Did you have a wonderful day?”

“I had a horrible day. Come walk with me and I'll tell you all about it.”

Soon they were walking slowly down the muddy road in silence. Having left their galoshes at home they picked their way, trying to keep to the driest places. Marian waited for Catherine to say what was on her mind. Last night's tears resurfaced as Catherine told her friend about the torn dress, the shattered jar, and the marriage promise. Marian's face registered shock, disbelief, surprise and finally happiness.

“I'm so glad that you have been promised, Cat. You're a woman now and will soon have a husband and family while I will still be a spinster living at home.”

“Didn't you hear what I just said? It's not my fault. John promised me to old Andrew Bielecki. All the girls make fun of him and they'll make fun of me for marrying him. He just wants a wife to take care of his sick mother but I want a young man. I want to choose my own husband like my mama did. I never even had a chance to date. John can't just sell me to keep the *bubbas'* gossip away, but that's what he's doing.” More tears came.

Marian looked serious. “Cat, when we make eyes at the boys we dream of the cute ones, the ones who laugh and dance and are full of fun. The boys we look at are just that, boys, and not yet ready to support a wife and family. A man who has a house and a good job is husband material. In that way I think your brother chose wisely for you. Don’t be angry with me for saying this—you’re my friend and I want the best for you. You know that the *bubbas*’ gossip could ruin your reputation and any chance you have of ever getting married. If you don’t take Andrew you might be an old maid yourself, a burden on your family.”

Catherine stopped walking and stared at Marian. “I can’t believe you just said that. How would you like to marry Andrew instead of Tom? Would you be thrilled at the idea?”

Marian looked down at her muddy shoes. “No, I guess not. But at least you won’t be an old maid like I probably will be.”

“I’d rather be an old maid than marry Andrew. Why am I the only one who has to protect the family honor?”

Catherine began walking, kicking the clumps of dirt at the edge of the road. “It’s not fair. My birthday was horrible, my brother practically sold me, and I haven’t even been confirmed yet. Now the whole town will laugh at me.” Tears overflowed onto her cheeks. “Matthew asked me to go to the May Day dance with him the day before my birthday. I was so happy. How can I go to the dance with Matthew when they are going to announce my engagement to Andrew?” They came to the end of the road and started back. “Irina had the right idea. She ran away with John because her papa wouldn’t allow them to marry. Maybe I should just run away, too.” Too late she saw Marian’s eyes

open wide. “I shouldn’t have said that about Irina. Don’t let on that I told you, I promised to keep it a secret.”

“Think about this for a while, Cat. Marriage to Andrew might not be as bad as you think.”

“Why not?”

“He could be a nice person who has so much responsibility that he grew up too soon.”

“Marian, you always look on the bright side of everything, but life is not always that way. I wish I could go back a few years to when Papa was still alive. I really don’t want to be a woman now that I see how choices are made for me.” They walked on in silence. “If they force me to marry him, will you stand up with me?”

“You know I will.”

“Keep this a secret until my mama announces it. Maybe before then I can talk her and John out of it.”

“Do you think you can?”

Catherine sighed. “No, not really.”

Marian hugged her. “Think about what I said. If you need to talk, I’m here. I have to get back now.” Catherine watched as Marian’s back disappeared into her house.

Catherine returned to her house in a better mood and helped her mother prepare supper. When John came home from work he had an announcement. “Listen, everyone. I finally got promoted to straw boss.” Catherine was as happy for him as the rest of her siblings were, but while they were eating she began to wonder if that promotion had anything to do with John’s visit to Mr. Paulnesky’s house. She tried to remember the

exact words John said to their mother as she was waking up behind the curtain in her mother's bed, replaying them over and over again in her mind. John never said that he got revenge for her. He just said that he handled it. Did he make some kind of deal with Mr. Paulnesky? That question remained on her mind the rest of the evening.

Before she fell asleep that scene in the fruit cellar replayed in her mind and she realized what she had called Mr. Paulnesky. Some girls turn into their mothers, but I'm turning into Nona, she thought. Maybe that's not a bad thing. At least Nona stood up for herself and her children.

Sunday was Confirmation day. The bishop was coming for the occasion so the women and girls had spent Saturday cleaning the general store in preparation. They even washed the benches. Catherine had not joined her mother and Theresa but stayed at home with Emma to avoid the *bubbas*.

The sun was out and birds sang their territorial songs as she and her family walked to the store with Marian's family and others from their street. In spite of herself Catherine was in good spirits.

She had made her white calf-length A-line dress of cotton lawn, adding lace around the neck and hem. The fabric was so fine and soft that she made a special slip to wear under it. It seemed a waste of good fabric to use it for a dress that she would only wear once, but her mother just smiled when Catherine mentioned it. She wore her mother's wedding veil and white gloves, and overshoes to protect the white high button shoes that her mother had been married in. It seemed a shame to put the heavy winter

coat and *babushka* over her dress. Theresa's veil was short, just reaching her shoulders. Marian, too, wore her mother's veil and a white dress under her coat.

The girls walked ahead of their parents, talking and giggling all the way to town. Catherine's mother watched her daughter smile for the first time in days.

When they reached the store the men and boys arranged the benches and the table they used for an altar while the women removed their overshoes and placed them outside the door, where they stood together basking in the sunshine and catching up on each other's lives.

Catherine turned at the sound of her name. Andrew Bielecki was approaching the group of women. All the women stopped talking and watched as he neared the group. A sick feeling started in her stomach and she folded her arms across her chest to protect herself.

"You look very nice today," he began. Embarrassed, she stammered a polite thank you and lowered her eyes.

"How is your mother today?"

"She isn't feeling well and stayed home to rest. Thank you for asking." They stood in silence for a few moments. While the other women moved a little apart to provide some privacy, Catherine knew that the *bubbas* would be listening to every word they spoke.

Finally Andrew asked if John had spoken to her and she could only nod because the lump that had risen in her throat made speaking impossible. He wasn't really going to discuss this here and now in front of everyone, was he?

“Catherine, please look at me.” Slowly she raised her eyes to his. “I have loved you from afar since you were young. Each year you became prettier and each year I was afraid to speak to your father. After he died I thought I had lost my chance, especially when you went to work but that changed the other night. I spoke to your brother first as a man should do, but now I am asking you. Will you honor me by becoming my wife? I have a house and a job that can support you and a family. I promise to love you and try to make you happy.”

Catherine’s face turned white and her mind raced. She looked back at the group of silent women. Everyone must have heard him propose. If she went against her brother’s promise she would dishonor the whole family. Her best friend Marian thought he was husband material, but Marian didn’t want him, either. There was no way out for her now, nothing else she could do. Her stomach began to hurt but she thought, Andrew took good care of his sick mother. Perhaps as Nona had said he would take good care of her as well. Nona had never been wrong. She looked back at Andrew. He was watching her, waiting for an answer, hope in his eyes. She swallowed twice to get rid of the lump in her throat and spoke one word: “Yes.”

His face lit up like the sun from out a cloud. “Thank you, Catherine.” He kissed her hand and escorted her back to her mother’s side before entering the building. Her mother looked at her approvingly. The *bubbas* nodded. A tear ran down Catherine’s cheek.

An altar boy came outside ringing a hand bell to announce the start of Mass. Those to be confirmed were seated up front, the boys on the right in white shirts and dark pants and the girls on the left in their white dresses and veils. Marian guided Catherine to

their seats as they had practiced last week. Catherine was distracted and didn't pay attention to the first part of the Mass, the liturgy of the word. Her mind kept going back to Andrew's face when he asked her to marry him. During the sermon while Bishop Minotti in his scarlet robes, mitre, and staff spoke to the young people about withstanding the devil's temptations Catherine thought about Matthew. She wanted to talk to him, tell him why she couldn't go to the dance with him now even though she very much wanted to.

Lost in thought she didn't notice the boys stand and approach the Bishop to be confirmed. Marian elbowed her when it was time for the girls to stand and move up the center aisle to the Bishop. He marked Marian's forehead with holy chrism in the sign of the cross and tapped her lightly on the cheek to remind her she might one day have to die for her faith. Marian moved away and it was Catherine's turn. The oil was warm on her forehead. As Catherine walked back to her seat she wondered how the sacrament could possess her soul when her mind was on sinful things. Before she knew it, the two-hour service was over. It was one of the most important events in her life and she was so upset that she didn't even enjoy it. As she and Marian walked out in procession behind the boys, she felt many pairs of eyes on her. Shame rose in her, shame for allowing herself to be cornered by Mr. Paulnesky and for allowing herself to be, well, sold by her brother. The color in her cheeks enhanced her looks and several young men followed her with their eyes but she didn't notice.

She joined her mother, John and Andrew outside, an adult in the eyes of the church. That sick feeling stayed in her stomach. John smiled at her--he must have talked

to Andrew. She frowned at him and turned her face away. Her mother's smile reappeared as they walked to the house next to the store for a little reception.

That evening John called Catherine to join him and their mother at the table after supper. John came right to the point. "Andrew wants to marry in June and asked you to choose the day so the banns can be published."

"June? That's only three months away. Won't there be gossip if we have such a short engagement? The *bubbas* will think I'm in a family way and their sharp tongues will wag. They will ruin my reputation and the family honor. If we wait the normal year everyone will know the gossip is false and I'd have more time to make my trousseau. I can't even help pay for the wedding now." Catherine looked hopefully to her mother for support but found none when her mother looked down.

John set a calendar on the table. "Mama saved all your pay. Added to the amount that Papa put back for you, we have enough for a June wedding. And since you aren't working now, you can sew up your clothing in no time. You can be married in your Confirmation dress. Which day will you choose to become a bride, little sis?"

Little sis. He must be feeling guilty to dredge up the old nickname that used to make her smile, she thought. He should feel guilty. He had betrayed her and sold her off to Andrew. What kind of dowry had Andrew promised John? What was she worth? As much as a cow or only as much as a pig? And the Confirmation dress. Mama must have chosen the fine soft material, so much nicer than Theresa's, knowing that it would also become her wedding dress. Was her own mother against her, too?

In just a week her whole outlook on life had changed. Her employer had done a horrible thing. Her family, the people she trusted and loved, had turned against her. John had even acted like it was her fault. That feeling in the pit of her stomach was back, like hunger but different, that made her wrap one arm around her middle.

Marian was not allowed to see her Tom. Irina had been right to escape before she, too, was sold off to an old man. At least one of the three of them would be happy. For a moment Catherine wished she had gone with Irina.

Wordlessly she pulled the calendar to her and stabbed the last Saturday of the month with her index finger. She would put it off as long as possible. John nodded and circled the date. The feeling in the pit of her stomach grew into an ache. On June 27, 1937, with her best friend by her side, she would say I do to a man she didn't love and become Mrs. Andrew Bielecki.

For better or worse.

.

Eight – Wedding

Catherine's days became busier than ever. She had three months to prepare for her future, but secretly hoped that Andrew would change his mind. She and her mother planted seeds in the hot bed, a large wooden box filled with dirt and compost and covered with old glass windows. The glass let in the sun to warm the soil and keep the seedlings warm enough to thrive during the cool days of spring. In a month they would transplant the young seedlings into the garden, but for now the watered seeds rested under cast-off windowpanes.

“This year since you don't have a garden at Andrew's place come down and we will can food together. Next spring you can plant seeds here in the hot bed and put them into your own garden.”

“It will be fun to work here with you and the girls, Mama. Maybe Andrew will turn up a small plot so I can plant onions, radishes, and a few tomato plants. I'll bet his mother would like some fresh strawberry jam, as well.”

Each afternoon she worked on her honeymoon clothing. Her grandmother had told her that in Italy each new bride was expected to have a dozen housedresses, slips, and undergarments, all ready for her new life as a bride. Catherine would have eight of each, one for each day of the week with a spare, and one good dress for weddings and funerals. That would have to do.

When she had cut out the dresses there was fabric left over. Knowing her mother was tight with a penny, Catherine asked about the excess.

“That's for you for later, Catherine,” her mother said.

“What do you mean, for later?”

“At some time you and Andy will be starting a family, and after a few months your clothes won’t fit. You can use the left over fabric to make larger tops.”

Catherine had tried to forget about that aspect of marriage. When Andrew came to see her he sometimes held her hand in front of the family or planted a chaste kiss on her cheek before walking home, but he behaved like one of her brothers. There was no love between them, no excitement, nothing like what she had felt with Matthew or Richard. How could she live like that? She didn’t even know exactly what was expected of her on their wedding night but every time she thought of it she got that sick feeling in her stomach. She thought about it so much that she wasn’t eating and started to lose weight.

One day she was alone in the house with her mother. “Mama, did you buy that beautiful white fabric for me so I could be married in my confirmation dress?”

“Yes.”

“Then you knew about Andy’s request a long time ago, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Especially since it concerns me.”

“John told me that Andrew had asked to court you but he didn’t promise you to him until later, and I didn’t know about the promise until well afterward. I didn’t want to jump the gun and tell you before things were final.”

“Why didn’t he tell you about it? He usually talks things over with you. I heard him do that many times.”

“Ever since your birthday he has been doing things on his own without asking my opinion. I guess he finally feels comfortable being the head of the house now.”

“John shouldn’t have promised me without asking me how I felt about it.”

“We both know that women don’t get to choose what their lives will be like.”

“You got to choose.”

“Only because I was special to Papa. I knew he couldn’t bear to see my tears.”

“You worked him, didn’t you?”

A smile flickered on her mother’s lips. “Yes, I did. In this world a woman has to be content with small victories here and there. Just choose your battles wisely, because you won’t win them all.”

The first banns were announced in church on the first Sunday of June. After church Catherine was surrounded by the women, offering congratulations and good wishes. Marian stood by, beaming with happiness for her friend.

Banns would be announced on three consecutive Sundays before their wedding, so that if anyone knew a reason why the young couple shouldn’t be married they could give their information to the priest, who would check into the accusations.

On the Sunday before her wedding, the day the third banns would be read, Catherine’s mother didn’t go to church, pleading a headache. Marian was ill, too, so Catherine walked to church with her siblings. When they returned her mother asked her to run across the road and ask Marian’s mother for half a cup of sugar before she changed out of her Sunday clothes.

“Come in, dear, while I get the sugar,” Marian’s mother said, pulling her into the house. “Surprise,” people shouted. Twelve of her closest female family members and friends were sitting in the house along with some of the *bubbas*. Marian jumped up just as Catherine’s mother and sisters walked into the room. “Did we surprise you?” asked her mother.

“Yes, you did,” Catherine responded, glowing. The mothers served a lunch with cookies for dessert and the guests chatted until time to open her gifts. Since Catherine was moving into Andrew’s house she would have kitchen utensils and some linens available. Her gifts included hand-crocheted pot holders, a new birch rolling pin, pints and quarts of canned food, and kitchen towels, but her favorite gift was a baby-blue nightgown hand made by Marian.

“It’s for your wedding night,” Marian told her.

“Thank you, Marian.” Catherine held the gown up to her tiny frame. “It’s beautiful, but it’s a little big.”

“You’ll need it big so you can wear it, when, you know,” Marian said, blushing a bit. That remark brought a chorus of laughter from the older women which made Catherine blush.

Her mother offered Catherine a final present. “Andrew’s mother is very sick and couldn’t come, even though she wanted to. She sent this over for you.”

Catherine opened the little box, tied with a bit of blue ribbon, and peeked inside. She closed it again and smiled. “I’ll walk up and thank her this evening, Mama.”

All the women wanted to know what her soon-to-be mother-in-law had given her, but she only smiled and said it was personal. They were disappointed but didn’t press the

issue in the flurry of heading home. The wedding was a week away. Before the women left, they told Catherine's mother what they would make for the wedding dinner. While Catherine was standing at the door waving to her cousin, one of the *bubbas* peeked into the box. As she joined the others to leave she nodded slightly to them. And smiled.

Marian helped carry Catherine's gifts across the road. "Marian, thank you so much for everything. You're a good friend. How you kept it a surprise I'll never know."

"So what did Andrew's mother give you?"

"Blue baby booties, Marian. I guess she's trying to tell me something."

They shared a laugh before Marian went home.

Catherine's mother was looking at her. "Did you like your gifts?"

"Yes, everything is so beautiful. I have my own rolling pin and canned goods. I just wish...."

"Wish what?"

"I was hoping for a wedding quilt like yours but my engagement was so short that no one had time to make me one. I understand, but I'm disappointed because I'll never have one now."

Catherine's mother looked away. "Perhaps someone is still working on one for you."

"I doubt it. There wasn't enough time. But everyone was so kind I'll never forget this shower."

Catherine and her mother walked down the road to Andy's house after supper. Even though Andrew lived with his mother Catherine couldn't visit alone without causing gossip. He answered the door looking worried and invited them in. The house was bigger than hers and had a real downstairs bedroom in the back where his mother was lying. She opened her eyes and smiled weakly when Andrew told her that Catherine and her mother had come to visit. Catherine took her thin hand and thanked her for the gift.

"Those were Andy's when he was a baby. I wanted you to have them, dear, for your first son." Her eyes closed, alarming Catherine.

"I'll try to fill them for you," Catherine murmured, patting her hand. How transparent the skin on the back of her hand was. She must be every bit as old as Nona had been when she died. Andrew's parents had been old when he was born, probably almost thirty. In spite of herself Catherine liked the older woman, but she didn't know what to call her. She couldn't call another woman Mama and it would be awkward to call her Mrs. Bielecki. Well, she would cross that bridge when she came to it. After all, the wedding was a week away.

"She should probably sleep now," said Andy. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Don't be silly," whispered Catherine's mother. "I'll get it. You sit and visit with your bride-to-be."

They walked out of the bedroom. “Andy, she doesn’t look good,” said Catherine, admiring the solid oak kitchen table. It had a split in the center where a leaf or two would go to enlarge it for company dinners.

“She’s had a few bad days in a row, but she’ll come around. She wants to see us get married more than anything,” Andy said. “She told me that I’m lucky you said yes.”

“Let’s not disappoint her then,” said Catherine’s mother, with a meaningful look at her daughter. She began filling three glasses with lemonade.

Catherine was silent on the walk home. She was thinking about moving into Andrew’s house and taking care of his mother. It would be just like taking care of Rebecca Paulnesky, except that she wouldn’t get to go home and her mother-in-law was in far worse shape than her former employer had been. She hadn’t seen either Rebecca or Rose since she had run from the house and she missed little Rose. Catherine had heard through the gossip mill that another girl from the town was working at the Paulnesky’s. Catherine had wanted to warn the girl but in her shame said nothing. Would the new girl be molested, too? Would she be betrayed by her family as John had betrayed her?

She remembered the look on Matthew’s face when she told him about her upcoming marriage. On the Wednesday night following her confirmation she was sitting on the bench outside at dusk when someone called her name. Matthew had materialized from the trees. “I need to talk to you. Can you take a walk with me?”

“Let me tell Mama something first.” She went back into the house. “Mama, I’m going over to Marian’s for a while.”

“It’s dark, stay close to the house.”

“Yes, Mama.” Catherine went over to where Matthew was standing in the shadow of the trees. “Come across the road with me while I speak to Marian a minute, then we can walk.” At Marian’s house she knocked until her friend came to the door, grabbed a coat, and stepped outside. “There’s something I need to do,” whispered Catherine. “Can you tell your mama I’m here and stay out here for a while so I can do it?”

“Well, I don’t know. What is it?”

“Please, Marian, Matthew wants to talk to me and John has forbidden me to see him. I feel that I owe him an explanation at least. Please help me.”

“Well, all right, but don’t be long. I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“Thanks so much.” Catherine turned and ran down the road. Marian watched as a figure joined her before the darkness swallowed them. Sighing she sat on the tree swing to wait.

Catherine walked with her head down. “I’m glad you came, but I could get in a lot of trouble walking alone with you.”

“When you didn’t come back to the house I thought you were sick, but today I asked my father and he said that you had quit. When I questioned him he just walked away. I had to know if you were all right.”

Catherine stopped walking. There were no houses at the end of the street. She looked away. “Did he tell you that my brother visited him?”

“I saw your brother at the door but Father sent me to my room. By the time I crept downstairs to listen he was gone.”

“Your father tried to....”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. But he tried to.” Catherine looked back at Matthew. He looked almost guilty. “Why, has he done this before?”

Now it was Matthew’s turn to look away. “We left Philadelphia because he hurt the constable’s daughter. My father took this job because we had to leave town so fast. He hates it here and he’s taking it out on Rebecca and everyone else. Except Rose. He attacked a girl I was seeing here and she had to leave town. Everyone thinks it was me.”

Catherine put her hand on Matthew’s arm and cleared her throat. “I...I have something else to tell you. I can’t go to the May Day dance with you.”

His head snapped around to face her. “Why not?”

“My brother John has arranged a marriage for me. The engagement will be announced on Sunday.”

Matthew grabbed her shoulders. “Who? Who are you marrying?”

“It’s ... Andrew Bielecki.”

“Not him.” Matthew let her go and kicked a clod of dirt so hard that it broke into small pieces. “Anyone but him.”

Catherine had that feeling in her stomach again. “Why are you saying that? Tell me.”

“It’s just that he’s so much older than you. I didn’t want to see you with an old man.”

“I don’t have a choice. John arranged it and Mama went along with it.”

Matthew took her hands. "I'm so sorry. I thought my father had learned a lesson when the constable ran us out of town. I never thought to warn you." He kissed her fingers, then her wrist, then her lips. She kissed him back, but when he slipped an arm around her she broke free, the replay of his father's attack playing in her mind.

"I better go. I can't meet you again, Matthew. If I'm caught, well . . . goodbye." She turned and ran back to Marian's yard. Matthew, his face unreadable, watched her disappear into the darkness before he took the short cut through the woods back to his own street.

Five days left. Catherine and her mother walked home from Andrew's house. Life had changed so fast in the last year. She still missed Papa, especially in the evening. She missed Mama's silver-bell laugh as they sat at the table. Stealing a sideways glance at her mother Catherine wondered how she managed without him.

It occurred to her that John would walk her down the aisle. All her life she had imagined Papa beside her on her special day, not leading her but accompanying her toward the man she loved. Now after forcing her into this marriage John would take Papa's place next to her, as he had on every other occasion this past year. It wasn't fair. But there was nothing she could do. Or was there?

They reached their house as the sun began to set behind the hills. Golden light caressed the tree branches and rooftops, making her think of the thin gold wedding ring that her mama still wore. Mama said I'd grow to love Andy, she thought. I hope she's right.

Banging woke her. Was it the mill alarm? No, someone was knocking on the door downstairs. It was still dark. Who would be here so late at night? A large shadow rose from the bed across the room from hers and headed down the stairs. John. A faint light flickered from the room below. The door latch clicked and she heard voices: John's, Mama's, and another voice. It was familiar but she couldn't quite place it. The light downstairs grew brighter. Someone had lit the lantern. Footsteps creaked up the stairs and John's voice softly called her name from the opening.

"Come downstairs," he said. "Andrew's here."

"Andrew, here? In the middle of the night?" Something must be wrong, she thought, throwing her dress on. She slipped bare feet into her shoes and smoothed her long dark braid with her hands before descending the stairs.

Andrew was sitting at the table between John and her mother. He was quiet—too quiet.

"Andy?"

His eyes were red. "Mama died a little bit ago."

"Oh, Andy. I'm so sorry. Is there anything we can do?"

He silently shook his head as her mother rose to take hot water off the stove. Catherine slipped into the vacated seat and put her hand on Andrew's shoulder as he dropped his head into his hands.

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know the older woman who would have been her mother-in-law well enough to cry for her so she remained silent. No one spoke until a hot cup of tea was in front of each of them.

Finally Mama broke silence. "Andrew, is there anything we can do? Have you called off work?"

Andy looked at her. "No, I didn't. All I thought was that she wouldn't get to welcome Catherine into the house as my bride. She was so looking forward to that. I guess I should call the priest and arrange a funeral. I didn't know where to go, so I came here."

He's lost, thought Catherine. An only child with no one to turn to but my mama. And look at her, she's taking charge. I hope one day I can be as calm and confident as she is.

"John will tell the boss when he goes to work. Later Tony can walk down to the mill office with you to call Father and make the arrangements. Catherine and I will set up the wake and funeral dinner. Now drink your tea while I make you some breakfast. You need to keep your strength up."

Andrew obediently sipped his tea. He must be grateful not to have to think, to do what he's told, thought Catherine. Mama must be right—men are just large children who need us to take care of them.

By the time the rest of the family got up Andy had eaten something and was sitting with Catherine, holding her hand as if he would never let it go. When Tony and Andy left for the office Catherine went across the road to speak to Marian and her

mother. They promised to spread the word and line up food for the meal and women to serve.

“Mama,” said Catherine when she returned, “we can’t get married on Saturday now. It would be disrespectful to the memory of Andy’s mother.” A reprieve, she thought, turning around to hide the beginning of a smile.

“Perhaps you should talk to him about it.”

“Will you be with me when I bring it up? You always know just what to do or say, and I feel so useless.”

“We’ll sit at the table when he comes back, Catherine.”

Tony and Andy came in the door a few minutes later.

“The priest can come tomorrow for the funeral. I spoke to the shopkeeper about it, too.” Andy turned to Catherine. “I asked Father if it would be disrespectful to my mother’s memory if we still got married on Saturday. He said that when he gave her Extreme Unction she told him she wanted us to get married on time even if she wasn’t around to see it. Under those conditions he thought it would be all right.”

Catherine’s spirits fell. Just as fast as it had come, her reprieve had gone. He took her hand. “Last night after you left Mama told me that she wants you to have her wedding ring. It looks a lot like your mother’s ring. If you don’t mind, I’ll put it on your finger next Saturday.”

Catherine tried to keep her feelings from showing on her face. Wear his dead mother’s wedding ring? She had wanted to wear her grandmother’s ring but didn’t have the heart to hurt Andrew when he had just lost his mother. He looked so earnestly at her that she told him she’d be honored to wear his mother’s ring as long as it fit her finger.

The next few hours went quickly. She and her mother went to Andy's house and washed his mother's body, putting her in the parlor for the wake. The following day Marian and her mother and a few other women served the funeral dinner at Andy's after the burial. The smell of incense was in Catherine's nostrils for several hours after the funeral, making the food smell and taste unpalatable. Father Wilson took her hand and told her to be strong for Andy and he'd see them both on Saturday. The only good thing about this, she thought, was that she wouldn't have to take care of Andrew's mother after she was married. But then she'd have no buffer between her and Andrew, either. Only two days to go.

Friday night Catherine had a case of the nerves and stayed up until all her siblings had gone to bed.

"Catherine," her mother said, "aren't you going to bed? You have a big day tomorrow."

"Mama, I'm afraid. Of tomorrow night. I don't know quite what to do. I keep thinking of Mr. Paulnesky. Will Andrew tear my dress? I don't feel about him the way you did about Papa and I'm afraid."

"I don't think he'll tear your dress off," her mother began. "He will probably kiss your lips. He will touch you in places no one has touched you before. Try to do what he wants you to do and make him feel important. That's all any of us want, to feel important and loved."

"Will he hurt me?"

“It might hurt a little but he won’t do it on purpose, I’m sure. Just try to relax. You’ll get used to it in time.”

That doesn’t sound good, thought Catherine. Aloud she said, “I guess I’ll go to bed now.”

She was awake most of the night. For the first time in her life her mother’s words hadn’t reassured her. Thoughts of that evening in Mr. Paulnesky’s fruit cellar came flooding back

Her stomach began to tighten with fear. Once she was married she would have to do what Andrew wanted her to do. He would be in charge the way John was now. She would have no way out.

Saturday Catherine was up early. Her mother curled her long dark hair with the curling iron, setting it on the stove after each curl was set. She was so good with it that she only singed one section of Catherine’s hair.

Marian was up early, as well. Her straight hair was tied with blue ribbon and she wore her Sunday best. She brought over a bouquet of pink roses that she had picked from the front yard at dawn. She tied them together with a bit of thin white lace and buried her face in the fragrant flowers before handing them to Catherine.

“Smell these, Catherine. Aren’t they wonderful? People always smell roses when the Blessed Virgin appears. You will be wed with the scent of roses.”

Catherine accepted the flowers and took in their scent. Not even the Blessed Mother can help me now, she thought, putting the fragile blooms in water until the ceremony.

Catherine's brothers dressed and left to meet Andrew and her sister Theresa took Emma over to Marian's house. When everyone was gone Marian helped Catherine dress behind the curtain of her mother's sleeping area. Her mother kissed her on the forehead before they began the walk to town.

Her brothers were waiting for her at the store. After everyone was seated and Andrew waited at the altar with the priest, Marian and Catherine joined John at the front door. Marian began walking down the aisle toward the altar. John, taller and thinner than Papa, took Catherine's arm. "Are you ready, little sis?" he asked.

Catherine gave him a hard look and yanked her arm away from him. "Ready? How can I be ready, John? You sold me," she whispered, "sold me like a chicken or cow. What am I worth in the marketplace? How much did he promise you? Did he pay you as much as Mr. Paulnesky did to forget that he hurt me?"

John took a step back, looking as if he'd been slapped.

"Don't 'little sis' me ever again, you bastard. You ruined my life twice and I hope you pay dearly for it. Papa would never have done what you did. *Ti odio*. I will hate you forever. And you are not going to walk down the aisle with me."

Marian was at the end of the aisle waiting to stand up for her and Bob stood with Andrew. Catherine started down the aisle alone. I might as well get it over with, she thought, and strode toward Marian. After a moment John followed her in embarrassed silence so he could respond to the question of who was giving the bride away. Andrew was grinning from ear to ear. Catherine tried to smile at him but couldn't.

At sixteen, in the sight of God and her family, she vowed to love, honor and obey a man she did not love. Blessed mother, you yourself were betrothed to a near stranger.

Protect me now, Catherine prayed silently. Andrew produced the tiny gold ring from his pocket and slipped it onto the third finger of her left hand. It fit. While the bell from the Protestant church rang noon they walked back down the aisle as man and wife.

Afterward they posed for a formal sepia photograph in Andy's house, two young people uncomfortable in dress-up clothes. Catherine's whole family looked on as Andrew sat in a chair and Catherine stood next to him to show off her dress. In the style of the day they didn't smile. She had nothing to smile about.

They hadn't eaten to observe the fasting period for communion, so Marian's mother prepared breakfast for the wedding party. She was a good cook but Catherine took only a few bites before her stomach began to hurt. She drank two glasses of iced tea.

The evening wedding reception at the store was a success. Benches and chairs had been set on the grass under the trees. The women of the town had baked and cooked for several days and the result of their labors was on the borrowed tables. Beer and whisky flowed freely. After supper three men took out their instruments—a squeeze box, an accordion, and a harmonica--and the dancing began.

Andrew offered Catherine a sip of his beer. She made a face—her papa had frowned upon women drinking—but she took another sip at Andrew's urging. Do what he wants you to do, her mama had advised her. She looked at the ring on her hand. She was a married woman now and would try to be a good wife. To do otherwise would bring shame to her family and to her.

Dancing the polka was harder after a few sips of beer but it was also more fun. Her new husband was a good dancer after all. They only bumped into a few other couples.

The *bubbas* noticed that she was drinking beer and discussed it with each other. They also noticed that she wasn't radiant as a bride should be.

The party lasted late into the night. At eleven Andrew asked her if she was ready to leave. She said no. He asked again a few minutes later and again she said no, but she knew she was just postponing the dreaded event. The fifth time he asked she said, "We might as well get it over with." And stood up. They walked down the lane together toward his house. When he took her hand she didn't pull it away. But in her heart she wondered why God didn't help her.

Chapter 9 – Newlywed

Catherine hurried to clean up the kitchen from breakfast. Before she left with her basket for her mother's house she fussed with the gaping buttons on the top of her dress. It was a little tight—she must have shrunk it in the wash. The late September air was cool but it would soon warm up. The thought of making grape jelly together and visiting with her mother and sisters filled her with pleasure. As she passed the turnoff to the mine she looked right, thinking of her new husband at work, then looked left down the gravel road toward the Paulnesky's house.

She had been so worried about her wedding night. Andy must have known how nervous she was because he had given her some beer at their wedding reception. It had had quite an effect on her. By the time he whispered to her that he was ready to leave, she was feeling tired and ready to go. Sip after sip of beer threw her off balance and made walking difficult so she was glad when he took her hand on the way home.

When they arrived at his house she felt a momentary stab of fear. He threw open the door and in one motion scooped her up into his strong arms. Stepping over the threshold he announced, "Welcome home, Mrs. Bielecki," and set her lightly on her feet. She was so overcome that she had thrown her arms around him and kissed him on the lips for the very first time.

As her mother had said, he was nothing like Mr. Paulnesky. His touch was gentle, his kisses tender. He didn't hurt her but she didn't have any strong feelings about him either. It wasn't a wonderful experience for her but it wasn't horrible either. Luckily he didn't have to go to work the next day, for they slept in. The memory of that first

morning as his wife brought a smile to her face every time she remembered trying to find utensils in a strange kitchen to make breakfast while he tried to wrap his arms around her.

In the breakfast confusion she had overlooked a flat brown bag. When she asked what it was Andrew had simply said to open it and look. Inside was a roughly carved wooden cross with pointed ends. "I don't understand," she admitted.

"John told me about the cross your papa made for your mama as a wedding gift and I thought you might like one as well. It's not quite finished but I can work on it evenings. Do you like it?"

"I do like it. That was so sweet of you, Andy."

She had been a married woman for nearly three months now. Marriage wasn't as bad as she had thought it would be. Andy had finished the cross and put up shelves in the bedroom so she could keep her things off the floor. He went to work every day and went hunting with her brother John at least once a week. He wasn't messy and didn't create extra work for her. He did like his beer but he wasn't after her every minute as some of her friends had said about their husbands. Even after all this time she didn't feel the butterflies in her stomach when Andy reached for her the way she had when Matthew kissed her that day in the cellar. It wasn't a match made in heaven but it could have been much worse.

Emma saw her coming and ran out to meet her. "Cat's here, Mama. Cat's come home."

"No, silly, I'm not home, just here to visit." Catherine picked up her baby sister and hugged her. "Now let's see who gets to the door first."

Emma took off with Catherine following her and touched the screen door. “I won,” she yelled, opening the door. Catherine caught it before it banged shut and eased herself into the house.

“Mama, the house smells good. Are you cooking already?”

“Just making a little sauce. We can have some for dinner.”

Catherine’s stomach growled. How could she be hungry when she had eaten a good breakfast, she wondered. Come to think of it, she was hungry almost all the time now, probably because she spent a lot of time thinking about what to cook for her husband. When she lived at home her mother had planned the meals and told her what to cook.

But any thoughts of food were soon forgotten as the women got down to work. Theresa washed the rich purple wild grapes they had picked yesterday and Emma helped Catherine pull the grapes off the stems. Their mother poured the grapes into a large pot and smashed them with a potato masher to break the skins and release some juice. She added some water and placed the full pot on the stove to boil the grapes and juice for a few minutes to soften the skins while Theresa measured out the sugar and Catherine measured the pectin. When the grapes were done she ladled them into a cone-shaped colander and smashed them with a round wooden pestle. The juice flowed into the pan below the colander while the seeds and skins remained in the colander.

The women talked and laughed as they worked. By the time they had sieved all the grapes it was time for dinner. Emma set the table and Catherine cooked some pasta. Tony came in with the twenty-two and a rabbit just as they were sitting down to eat. Hurriedly he washed up and joined them.

For the first time in her life Catherine ate all the pasta on her plate, sopping up the last of the sauce with a slice of her mother's bread. This is heaven, she thought. Perhaps she would make sauce for Andy someday. She hoped he would like it because it would make a fine meatless dinner for Fridays. When Tony was finished he went outside to clean his bunny. There was no way he was staying in the house while his mother and sisters were canning.

They put the juice back onto the stove to heat. Catherine added pectin and some of the sugar to the pot and stirred to mix it well while Theresa washed the jelly jars and lids and Emma rinsed them and turned the jars upside down on a clean cloth.

Catherine stirred in the rest of the sugar and let the mixture boil hard for a few minutes while Emma turned the jelly jars right side up and Theresa boiled the two-piece lids in a pan of water. Their mother was melting wax in a coffee can set into a pan of boiling water, since she didn't own a double boiler. After the juice mixture had boiled for a few minutes Catherine's mother took out a bit on a clean spoon and cooled it. "Not quite ready," she announced, and Catherine went back to stirring the pot. "I'll give it another five minutes and check it again." The next test spoonful gelled perfectly.

Catherine carried the pot to the table and began to fill the clean jars with liquid jelly to within an inch of the top. As soon as a jar was full Theresa moved the hot filled jar to the other end of the table with a pot holder while Emma set an empty jar on the saucer. The assembly line moved on until all the jars were full. Catherine spooned the tiny bit of jelly left in the pot into a dish to eat later. She and Theresa washed the utensils while their mother poured a layer of wax onto the top of each filled jar. With tongs she took the flat metal lids from the hot water and put one on each of the jars. "Done," she

said, “and just in time, too.” Twenty-six pint jars of hot grape jelly sat in rows on towels at one end of the kitchen table.

“Theresa, take Emma outside for a while and blow the stink off.”

“Can’t Cat come with us?”

“She’s not a child any more. Go on with you now.”

Catherine and her mother sat at the other end of the table with a pot of tea between them enjoying the silence. After a few minutes Catherine asked a question she had wondered about for years. “Mama, how did you know that you loved Papa?”

Her mother smiled and waited a bit before she answered. “He always sat with his family on the other side of the aisle in church. He had curly hair back then, black as tar, and one large curl in the middle of his forehead. His brothers all had straight hair. The coal dust took the curl out of his hair so you probably don’t remember. I used to sneak a glance at him from time to time, until I had the shape of that curl memorized.

When we started keeping company I asked him if he curled it around his finger so it would sit like that, and he laughed at me. He had such a wonderful laugh, a laugh that burst out of him as if his body couldn’t contain it. The first time he made me laugh like that I knew I’d never marry anyone else.” She looked down at her cup with a sigh. “It’s been over a year now and I still touch his side of the bed before I get up every morning, expecting him to be there.”

Catherine had never heard this story before. “So you fell in love with him because he made you laugh?”

“That, and other things. The way he got along with everyone he met, even my own Papa. The way the muscles in his broad shoulders rippled when he had his shirt off

working. The twinkle in his eye when he teased me. I knew that life with him wouldn't be easy but it would be fun." They sat in silence for a while as Catherine remembered her mother's silver bell laughter as she ate supper with him. Remembered the laughter she hadn't heard in the last year.

"Why did you ask me that, Catherine?"

"Well, I just wondered what it was like to be in love. Not that Andy has been a bad husband or anything. I told you that he built shelves for me. He fixed the screen door. He's funny and he doesn't mind when my food doesn't turn out quite right. He even ate a burnt piece of chicken because I cried over burning it." Catherine blushed.

"That's good. Your children will have loving parents."

"Children?" Suddenly it all fell into place. "Mama, I might be in a family way. Aunt Flo only visited once since I got married and I've been hungry all the time. I thought it was just because of the excitement of the wedding and getting used to being married and living in a different house, but now I realize what's been going on."

"You had the look when you came in the door this morning and the top of your dress is tight, but I didn't want to ask you about it." She rose and hugged her daughter. "Oh, Catherine, you will be a wonderful mother. And I'll be a nona. When do you think you are due?"

Catherine thought a minute and counted on her fingers. "Probably April. But don't tell anyone until I tell Andy. He should be the first to know. Outside of you, I mean." They hugged and laughed again as the girls came back into the house.

The women were talking all at once when they heard the first 'pop.' "Which one is it, Mama?" asked Theresa.

All four of them looked at the jars until Catherine said, "Here it is," and pointed to a jar lid that was flatter than the others. The cooling jelly had created a vacuum that sucked the thin metal lid down. Over the next hour they heard most of the lids announce their vacuums. Their mother checked the jars carefully and found that all but one had popped. She tapped that lid with her middle finger a couple of times until it emitted the pop.

"They're all sealed," she said wearily. "We did it. When they cool some more we'll screw on the lids. Good job, girls."

The sun was near the horizon when Catherine started her walk home. In her basket were four jars of jelly, a jar of sauce, and a bunch of thin homemade noodles. Although tired, she was eager to get home and make a special supper for Andy. They had a lot to talk about.

She cooked the noodles and warmed the sauce, set the table and sliced some of her bread. When Andy came through the door she smiled at him. He washed up and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Supper's nearly ready. I made something different tonight, spaghetti."

"Umm," he replied, nuzzling her neck. "Smells good."

Suddenly nervous, she told him about making the jelly, going on and on while he ate.

"How do you like the spaghetti, Andy?"

Andrew twirled a couple of strands onto his fork. "Not bad, once I got the hang of it." He used a piece of bread to hold the pasta on the fork until he could get it into his

mouth. “Yeah, you can make this again. It would be good with some kielbasa cut up in it.” He looked up with a grin to find Catherine staring at him. “I smell a thought.”

“Andy, do you think our son would like the spaghetti?”

Andrew tilted his head. “Cat, we don’t have a ... wait, are you? Are we having ..?”

She nodded. “I don’t know what we’re having, but I guess we’ll find out.”

Andrew jumped up and pulled Catherine out of her chair. Grabbing her around the waist he swung her in a circle and kissed her. “Whoo, hoo. I’m going to be a papa.”

“Easy, Andy. Go easy on me.”

“Oh, I will, but only for the next nine months or so!” After he let her sit back down he put his arm around her shoulders, kissed her hair and asked, “Do you want to walk down and tell your mama that she’s going to be a *bubba*? I’ll go with you.”

“She knew the minute I walked in the door this morning. She said I had ‘the look.’”

“You know that’s just an old wives’ tale.”

“Andy, there must be something to it. She knew before I did. Anyway, I’d love you to walk down with me. I made her promise not to tell anyone until I told you and it’s probably killing her to hold it in. And she’s going to be a nona. Your mother would have been the *bubba* if she had lived.”

Andrew looked sad. “I wish she had lived to hear the good news.”

“Too bad she won’t get to see those blue booties on our boy.”

They walked down the dusty road hand in hand. It was starting to get cool and Catherine took a sweater. Her mother and siblings welcomed them into the house, still smelling of sauce and grape jelly.

“Sit down, everyone, we have an announcement,” Andrew said. When everyone else was seated on chairs and the younger children on the floor, he smiled at Catherine. “Go ahead, tell them.”

“I’m, uh, we....” She glanced at her husband, who nodded. “Well, Andy and I are starting a family, probably around Easter.” The noise was deafening--shouting, clapping and cheering. Her siblings were so excited that they would be aunts or uncles. Goodness, thought Catherine, the whole neighborhood must hear us. Everyone came up and took turns hugging her and Andrew, starting with her mother and ending with John.

“Congratulations, little sis. I hope you have a boy so you can name him after Papa.”

“I don’t care what we have as long as it’s healthy. But the name will be up to Andy. He might want to name the first one after his father.”

“Oh, I forgot it’s not just our family. Family names should be passed on. But there’s lots of time to think about that. Andrew, take care of her so she has a big, healthy one.”

“I’ll take care of her. I promise.” Andy hugged Catherine and watched her with happy eyes.

“Who wants root beer?” Bob asked, coming upstairs with a large stoneware bottle. Andrew went to help Bob unlock the wire keeper.

Catherine grabbed John’s upper arm. “I told you not to call me little sis again.”

“You’re still angry?”

“I’m still married, aren’t I?” Catherine turned around and headed for the table.

Bob removed the white ceramic top with a pop. Catherine went to help her mother pour the cool homemade liquid into glasses. When everyone was served John held his glass high. Everyone else did the same and the house became quiet.

“To the first niece or nephew, may he or she be healthy.” Everyone drank. Emma got bubbles up her nose and coughed, then giggled. Theresa patted her back.

“Mama, we have to go. I want to stop and tell Marian before we go home.”

Andrew and Catherine walked across the road and knocked on Marian’s door. Marian wanted them to sit but Catherine explained that they could only stay a few minutes. “We just wanted to tell you that we have started our family, Marian. We were just over at Mama’s and I wanted you to be the next one to know.”

Marian squealed and hugged Catherine so hard she had trouble breathing. When Marian was finished with Catherine she hugged Andrew, who rolled his eyes at his wife but tolerated it.

“Oh, Cat, that’s so wonderful. I don’t know what to say. Married and expecting in the same year. How wonderful!” Marian’s mother chimed in with her congratulations.

“Marian, we have to scoot so Andy can get up for work. I’ll see you next week when I visit the midwife. Bye.”

On the way home, still hand in hand, Catherine was glad she had brought her sweater. The moon was half full and shed some light on the road.

“I thought she was going to take my head off,” Andrew said, laughing. “She really gets excited about things, doesn’t she?”

“She’s happy for me, that’s all. She’s sweet on someone but her papa doesn’t agree with her choice so she thinks she’ll be an old maid. But a better friend I couldn’t have.”

“You deserve good friends. You deserve everything good, you and our baby, and I’m the luckiest man in the world.” Catherine imagined that the moon was smiling down at them.

Word got around fast, for on Sunday before church all the women were congratulating her. A few of the *bubbas* stared at her trim waistline and gave predictions as to whether they thought she was carrying a boy or a girl. When she said that she didn’t have morning sickness, the oldest *bubba* waved her cane and emphatically stated that she must be carrying a girl. One said she was having a boy because her skin was dry. Another said her hair was thick and glossy so she would have a son. They also gave advice on how to behave during her pregnancy to insure a healthy baby, but each one had a different suggestion. Drink a little beer each night, urged one. The sugar is good for you and the alcohol will help you sleep. The questions continued: are your feet colder than before or the same? Do you have more pimples than before? Are you left- or right-handed? When you sleep is your pillow north or south? Is the hair on your legs growing faster than it used to? The only thing they all agreed upon was that if she had a hankering for a certain food she should eat it. Cravings meant that her body was lacking an important nutrient and if she didn’t eat that food the baby wouldn’t come out healthy.

Catherine didn't believe all the traditional folklore but tried to be gracious to the old ladies because they were the ones who had time to knit the beautiful sweaters and booties and crochet the baby blankets she hoped to receive as gifts at her shower. After all, her first-born would be due in the early months of spring and she would need warm clothing for him. She didn't want her child to get sick, being born around mid-April. Still she was glad when Mass started and she was able to sit in silence next to her mother and pray.

"Dominus vobiscum," said the priest. The Lord be with you.

"Et cum spiritu tuo," replied the congregation in unison. And with your spirit.

Clothing. She would have to get busy and make some of the larger tops and dresses she would need. Her mother had bought extra fabrics for her. She would have to make some in the next month to be ready. She hated the way the skirts looked, with the hole cut out so the expanding belly showed through. Maybe she would just make big shapeless dresses. She could bring the waist in with a fabric belt until she got big. Good thing her friend Marian had made that nightgown large. If her child was a boy she'd have one pair of booties for him; the ones that Andy's mother had given her. She would put them on his feet for his baptism and whenever they had visitors. Her mind raced and she barely heard the sermon. In what seemed like a few minutes it was communion time. The wafer stuck to the roof of her dry mouth. Finally she moved it down with her tongue and swallowed it.

"Ite, missa est," intoned the priest. Go, you are sent.

"Deo gratias," replied the assembly with one voice. Thanks be to God.

Outside again the *bubbas* resumed their advising until Marian rescued her and pulled her down the street toward her house. “We never get to see each other the way we used to when we lived across the road. I miss that.”

“I miss it, too. Maybe I can convince Andy to move into Mama’s house.” That made Marian laugh but her laughter died down a bit as Tom Agnostini walked by. His eyes met Marian’s and he raised one eyebrow. Catherine looked at her friend just in time to see her wink at Tom before he turned and walked away.

He came to church just to see Marian, thought Catherine. He must be just as sweet on her as she is on him. Too bad her Papa won’t let them keep company. I wish there was something I could do. When she and Marian parted Catherine resumed her musing as she walked home. Andrew was cleaning a squirrel at the bench in the back yard and greeted her with a peck on the cheek but no hug. Catherine sat on the other end of the bench and watched his callused hands work. Maybe, she thought, Andy could talk to Marian’s papa about Tom.

She explained the situation and asked Andy if he would help out but Andy said he’d better not. “I can’t tell a man who his daughter should keep company with,” he explained. “I’d rather not get involved in it, much as I like Marian. You should stay out of it, too, and let her fight her own battles. Better yet, you can fry up this tree rat for supper.” He tossed her a leg which she deftly caught.

Catherine took the cleaned squirrel pieces into the house to soak in salt water while she made sandwiches for dinner. Why wouldn’t Andy put in a good word for Tom? Andy was a supervisor and people listened to him with respect. Was it so hard for him to meddle in other people’s lives when he had meddled in hers? The more she

thought, the angrier she became. By the time Andrew had washed up and come in for dinner she could barely stand to look at him.

She was quiet as they ate, afraid to speak her thoughts. Even though he had never hit her, she was not sure how he would react if she questioned his judgment. Finally Andrew said, "I know how much you want Marian to be happy. Tom is in my crew. I'll tell Mr. Jacobiasen what a good worker Tom is and how much I depend on him, but that's all I can do."

Catherine let out the breath she didn't know she was holding. "Thank you, Andy. I feel so bad that I have you and the baby and she doesn't have anything. How can I thank you?"

Andrew winked. "You can thank me after I finish this sandwich."

A couple of days later Catherine went to visit the midwife, Marian, and her mother. She arrived just in time for dinner.

"You look good," said her mother giving her a big hug. "The cool air brings out the color in your cheeks, Catherine. Sit down and eat. Did I tell you that Mrs. Csokmay had a letter from Richard? He finally found Irina, safe and well."

"No, you didn't. Where is she? Did she get married?"

"She married John Zurico. They have a little girl and are living just a few blocks from where she used to live with her family."

“I’m so happy for her. Did Richard say he was coming home?”

“He said in his letter that he’s going to stay in New York. He likes his job and has found someone.”

So, thought Catherine, I’ll never see Richard again. I guess it doesn’t matter since I’m married now. And he has someone there. She had a thought. “Mama, can I get Irina’s address so I can write to her?”

“We’ll walk over to see Mrs. Csokmay before you leave.”

“I saw the midwife today. She asked me a lot of questions and said to come back if I have any problems.” Catherine took a big bite of macaroni and cheese. “She thinks I’m due around the first week of April but said it could come two weeks early or two weeks late.” Her mother nodded. “Babies come when they are ready.”

“Was I early or late?”

“You were three weeks late. And I was so tired, what with John running around all over and wearing me out.” She sat at the table opposite Catherine with her plate.

“Marian seemed so excited on Sunday. What did she say when you told her?”

“She hugged me hard, then got a death grip on Andy’s neck. He laughed about it later.” Catherine set her fork down. “Mama, Marian is sweet on Tom Agnostini and he feels the same way about her, but her papa is against the match because Tom is Italian. She says that if she can’t have him she’ll end up an old maid, and she would do it, too. It makes me feel bad to have everything and see her so unhappy. You and Papa were in the same boat. Is there something you can do to help Marian? Would you talk to her papa?”

“I can’t tell Mr. Jacobiasen how to raise his daughter.”

“No, but you can tell him about you and Papa and what you went through.”

“Catherine, why don’t you just suggest to Marian to have Tom do what your papa did and come calling every Sunday night to ask for her hand. Perhaps Mr. Jacobiasen will get tired of seeing the boy and say yes. Like my Papa did.”

“Maybe I will. Anything to get Marian to smile again.” Catherine picked up her fork, relieved to be able to do something to help her friend. “Oh, Mama, remember that extra fabric you bought for me? Can I take it with me today? I should probably get started on making some dresses for later on only I don’t have a pattern to use.”

“Remind me when we finish eating and I’ll get it. I think I have a pattern in that box, too, for you to use. If not I can show you how to add to the pattern you used for your wedding dress.”

Catherine walked home with Irina’s address, a bag of fabric, and a pattern. The early October sun was warm on her face and made her a little sleepy. Here and there a green maple tree had a crown of red leaves and the willow trees were half bare already. Enjoy the sun, Catherine, she thought, because soon the leaves will fall and the snow will come. When the snow is deep you won’t be walking down here very often. At least snow only lasts a few months.

Once home she put the fabrics and pattern away and went to the back yard to choose a place for next year’s garden. The sunniest place was occupied by the clotheslines but on the west side of the house was a patch of ground that seemed to get a lot of afternoon sun. Maybe Andrew would turn over a patch of ground for her before the

snow fell. If he did it now it would be easier to turn it again in the spring. She would have to ask him where his mother had her garden when she was able to get around.

She felt a cramp in her abdomen and she placed her right hand over it. The heat from her hand eased the cramp but she went into the house and made a cup of tea. Sitting at the table she decided to make Andy *kielbasa* and kraut for supper but when she stood to start the meal she got a stronger cramp. That one felt just like it was time for the curse, but of course that couldn't be possible. If the cramps continued, she thought, she would visit the midwife tomorrow. As she went about getting supper she moved carefully but nothing else happened.

Andy came home. They ate, talked about the garden, and laughed. His mother's garden had been in the same place that Catherine had picked out. He had only been waiting for her to choose a spot for him to turn over. He wanted her to plant onions, beets, cucumbers, and potatoes. She wanted peas, green beans, garlic, and corn. When she said the word corn she remembered how the yellow kernels had exploded in slow motion out of the broken jar in the Paulnesky's fruit cellar. With an effort she put that thought out of her mind and concentrated on planning her garden with Andy.

She cuddled up to him in bed that night and he wrapped his arms around her. He promised to have the plot turned over before the snow came if she would mark out the size she wanted.

Catherine woke in the middle of the night to another, stronger cramp. It only lasted a few minutes, but that was long enough to scare her. She lay awake a long time waiting for another one and was just falling asleep when it came. It was so strong that

she cried out and curled into a ball. Her cry woke Andrew, a light sleeper. “Cat, honey, what’s wrong?”

Catherine could only moan until the pain began to ease. “Andy, I’m having cramps, bad ones. They started this afternoon after I got home from seeing the midwife and each one is worse. Can you send for her? I’m afraid for the baby.”

“I’ll go get her. You, you just stay here. I won’t be long.” Andrew grabbed his jacket on the way out the door. Catherine tried to doze off but another cramp hit her. It seemed to last longer than the others and she longed for her mother. Her mother could fix anything. If only she were here. Catherine dozed off again and dreamed that her mother was coming through the door, dreamed of pain after pain. “Mama,” she said in her dream. “Mama, I’m afraid.”

Her mother replied, “I’m here now, Catherine. Everything will be all right.”

Catherine opened her eyes as another pain hit. Her mother was leaning over her. “I’m here now, Catherine. It’s going to be all right.”

“Mama. How did you get here?”

“I came as soon as Andrew told me. He left our house and went on down to get the midwife and I dressed and came up to you. Let me see your belly.” She threw back the covers and raised the hem of Catherine’s nightgown. “Oh, dear, you’re bleeding. Let me put this blanket under you until the midwife comes. Can you move?”

Catherine remembered hearing Andy’s voice and hoping that the midwife was with him, but the rest of the night was a blur of pain. She opened her eyes sometime in mid-morning, by the position of the sunshine, and saw her mother and the midwife sitting in her room. “Mama.”

“Cat.” Her mother hurried over. Catherine noticed that she had dark circles under her red puffy eyes.

“Mama. What happened? Where’s Andy?”

“We sent him to work, Cat. There wasn’t anything he could do. We couldn’t do anything either. Honey, you lost the baby. I’m so sorry.” Tears ran down her cheeks.

Catherine touched her abdomen with her right hand. She didn’t understand. How could this happen? Just yesterday she was a mother-to-be, and now there was – nothing. What had she done? Was it her fault? Was she such a bad person for not wanting to marry Andy that a child couldn’t grow inside her?

She and her mother cried together.

The midwife was gone and Catherine’s mother had supper on the stove by the time Andrew came home. He burst through the door, dropped his dinner bucket on the floor and ran to Catherine in the bed. “Cat, honey. You’re all right. I was so worried about you I don’t know how I made it through the day. How do you feel?”

Catherine started to cry again. “I lost the baby. I lost our baby.”

“Hush, now,” he whispered, putting his arms around her. “It’s all right as long as you are here. All that matters is you.”

“But the baby . . .”

“Look at me, Cat,” he said, putting his hand under her chin. “You are all that matters to me. I don’t know what I would have done if I had lost you.” He kissed her forehead. “As long as we have each other, that’s what matters. We can have other babies.”

Catherine's life began to unravel. He didn't want to talk about the baby, mourn the life lost before it was here. He was already talking about having other babies. This life that she had carried inside her for a few months was gone and she and her mother were the only ones who could mourn for it. She remembered that her mother had miscarried several babies in her younger years and had gone on to bear strong healthy children. How do you go on after your child dies? She would ask her mother's advice when Andy wasn't around. She put her head on Andrew's shoulder and cried.

The midwife had told her to stay in bed for a few days. Her mother came every day to see her and cook for Andrew. Finally Catherine was able to ask. "Mama, how do I go on with life after losing my son? Andy doesn't want to talk about him but I carried him next to my heart for a few months and I have to mourn. How did you do it?"

Her mother sighed and patted her shoulder. "Mourn quietly to yourself and to other women. When a woman carries a baby she has a strong connection to the little life. For her it is a baby from conception on but to a man there's no baby until it's born. That's why they don't feel so much sadness over a miscarriage. But we women know better, and we mourn together. Very few women in town have not lost a baby, either before birth or in the first years of life. That's why we need our friends, Cat, to share the good times and hold us up in the bad ones."

Catherine felt better knowing she wouldn't have to mourn alone. Her mother and Marian would understand. They would grieve with her. And the *bubbas* would pray for her child.

Chapter 10 – Celebrations

Catherine bustled around the kitchen as best she could to finish preparing the *halushki* for Marian's shower. Her rounded stomach bumped into everything and her apron bore permanent grape stains. Catherine was to be Marian's matron of honor but since Cat was so close to delivery her mother was hosting the shower later this Saturday afternoon. Finally finished, she sat on a hard wooden kitchen chair with a small pillow tucked in the small of her back.

Everything she did tired her--she was bone-weary at ten o'clock in the morning but she wouldn't miss her friend's shower for the world. She sat and watched dust motes sparkle in the late October sun coming in the window and reread Irina's last letter. She was expecting again and wanted a girl this time.

Before he left for work that morning Andy had kissed her. "Be careful, Cat. Don't overdo it and sit when you get tired."

She had smiled up at him. "Everything makes me tired lately. But I'll take it easy walking to Mama's for the shower."

The baby kicked. Why does he have to be so active when I want to rest, wondered Catherine. He kicks so hard I'm sure he's a boy. She rubbed her stomach. "Settle down in there," she told the child. "You can sleep when I walk down to your nona's house."

Catherine waddled down the road shifting the pan of *halushki* from her left side to her right. The pan was so heavy that it made her muscles ache. She hadn't gone far when she saw Bob walking to meet her. "Mama sent me to carry the food for you," he

said and she gratefully relinquished the pan. "Here, give me the basket, too." She walked so slowly that Bob had to either shorten his stride or walk a few steps and wait for her to catch up. "C'mon, Cat, get with it." She took a swing at his shoulder but he ducked out of her way.

"Just wait until I have this baby," she said. "You won't have a chance. I'm still faster than you are."

"Not now you aren't," he said with a wink. "How are you feeling, Sis? And when am I going to finally be an uncle?"

"Oh, I 'm mostly good but you have another month to wait to be called Uncle Bob. And how about you? I hear you've got your eye on a certain little girl from Maple Street."

Bob blushed. "How'd you find out?"

"I have my ways. Are you serious about each other?"

"I am but I'm not sure she is. She's going to make her Confirmation next year and if she settles down I'll talk to her father."

Emma came running up the dirt road toward them. "Catherine, hurry. Everyone's here but you, even Marian."

"I can only walk so fast." By now Catherine had her hand on the small of her back. Emma danced ahead of her and held the door open. Bob, seeing a roomful of women talking all at once, left as soon as he set the pan and basket on the table.

Catherine sat between her mother and Marian.

"How are you feeling, Cat?" Marian asked.

“I’m good, Marian. Are you excited about getting married? Mama, can I help with anything?”

“No, just sit and rest.” Her mother announced, “Ladies, let’s eat while everything is still warm. Marian, why don’t you and your mother start. Mrs. Agnostini, don’t be shy.”

The women lined up and filled plates with *halushki*, *halupki*, chicken and rice, spaghetti and meatballs made by Mrs. Agnostini, homemade bread, grape jelly, and other treats. By the time Catherine stood up the chatter had died down as everyone enjoyed the food. Theresa and Emma collected empty plates and passed out coffee. Catherine’s feet had begun to swell and felt too large for her shoes.

She remembered the night she had told Marian about how her papa had won permission to court her mama. Marian had been surprised and said she’d tell Tom the story. Having no other plan Tom had arrived at Marian’s door the next Sunday night and spoke with her papa. It only took four months until he had permission to court his sweetheart. And now they were to be married.

At last Marian began to open her gifts. She received basic items for her new home: embroidered kitchen towels, an iron skillet, bread pans, a set of sheets from her mother, and three wooden spoons from her soon-to-be mother-in-law. At last she opened Catherine’s gift: a handmade pink nightgown trimmed with lace. “It looks just like the one I made you, Catherine, except for the color. And it’s big, too.” She held it up to her thin frame and laughed. The other women joined in as they gathered their things to leave. Catherine, Marian, their mothers and Catherine’s sisters were alone. Theresa and Emma began to clean up while the others shared the last of the coffee.

“Do you have names picked out?” asked Marian’s mother.

“If it’s a boy he’ll be Daniel Joseph. If we have a girl we’ll call her Mary Ruth. Andy wanted to name the first one after either his mother or father and so did I, so we compromised.” Her mother beamed at the mention of the names.

“Those are nice names, Catherine.” Marian’s mother went on. “You look like you’ve dropped a bit. When are you due again?”

“In about a month. My back hurts and my feet are swelling. I’m ready now.”

“You might go early, Catherine. I hope so, that last month is miserable. Anyway, we’ll see you at the wedding next week and at your shower the week after. Marian, we’d better be getting along, the men will be home from work soon and they’ll be hungry. Thank you, Mary Ann, for a wonderful shower.”

The women hugged before parting. “I’d better go, too, Mama. Andy will want to eat when he gets home.”

Theresa handed her a basket of food. “We packed you some food for Andrew. You just have to heat it up when you get home.”

“Thank you, Theresa. You’ve grown up a lot in the year and a half since I married.”

“Me, too?” asked Emma.

“You, too,” confirmed Catherine, putting an arm around her youngest sister.

“Mama, can I walk Cat home? I can carry the pan and basket for her.”

“Go ahead, Theresa, but don’t stay. The shadows are getting long.” Catherine’s mother hugged her and rested her hand on Catherine’s belly. “Mrs. Jacobiasen is right;

you may go early. Be careful not to lift heavy things and get lots of rest. See you tomorrow.”

As the girls walked they chatted about their siblings. Catherine told Theresa about Bob’s girlfriend. “I didn’t know about that and I live with him. How did you find out?”

“He told someone at the mine and Andy told me. Those men gossip worse than the *bubbas*. But what about John, Theresa. Is he seeing anyone?”

“Not that I know of. He goes to the bar on Saturday night sometimes, but mostly he’s home if he’s not working or hunting.”

“I hope he finds someone soon, Theresa. He’s old enough to be married. He could build on a room and move his wife into the house. Lots of brides live with their in-laws for the first few years.”

“I teased him once about a girl, Catherine, and he gave me such a look that I never did it again. You might be able to get away with it, but I can’t. But he’s talking about adding a room on to the back of the house for Mama and moving downstairs to her area.”

“What about you? Are you sweet on anyone?”

Theresa smiled. “Not yet. Here we are already. I’ll put this heavy basket on the table for you and then I’d better scoot. See you tomorrow in church.”

Catherine kicked off her shoes and wiggled her toes. Her feet and ankles were badly swollen. By the time she heated the *halupki* and set the table Andrew was home. She stopped slicing bread to give him a kiss.

“You look tired, Cat. Sit and I’ll dish my own food.”

“But, Andy.”

“I said sit, woman.”

She sat at the table and tucked the pillow behind her back as she watched her husband heap a plate with food. “Your mama made this, didn’t she? It’s good. How was the walk, Cat?”

“The walk to Mama’s was OK, but the walk home seemed endless. I didn’t do anything this morning except make *halushki*. Mama sent Bob to help me carry the food and Theresa walked me home and carried my basket of left-overs.”

He looked down at her bare feet and grinned. “Feet hurt?”

“Yes. I couldn’t wait to get those shoes off.” Andrew couldn’t stop grinning. “And don’t give me that old line about barefoot and pregnant or I’ll get the wooden spoon after you.”

Andrew put his head down and grinned at his plate until he was able to pull his lips into a more solemn expression. “If you move to the rocking chair I’ll rub them for you.”

Catherine waddled to the rocking chair with her pillow. Andrew finished his last bite of bread and sat on a stool in front of her. Setting her right ankle on his knee he proceeded to massage the foot. Catherine watched as he rubbed her foot in small circles with his calloused thumbs. He paid careful attention to the arch and ball of her foot where it hurt the most, pressing hard enough that she felt it but not so much as to hurt her. “That feels wonderful. Where did you learn how to do that?”

“My mama had sugar the last few years of her life and her feet would swell. I learned I could make the swelling go down a bit by rubbing them. You can be sure she

told me if I hurt her.” Andrew finished with her right foot and began on the left one.

“Afterward I would have her sit here with her feet on the stool. Keeping them up seemed to help, too.”

Andrew glanced up, meeting his wife’s eyes. She smiled. “You’re a good husband, Andy. I pray this baby comes soon so I can have some energy again. I just hate feeling so awkward and useless.”

Andrew stood, placed both her feet on the stool, and patted them. “You’ll be running after our son soon enough. Sit here for a while.” With sleepy eyes Catherine watched as he cleared the table and washed the dishes, leaving them in the drainer. She had never seen a man do dishes before and wondered how he learned. Of course, she remembered sleepily, his mother had been ill for years and he had probably taken over her duties bit by bit. The baby kicked and as she rubbed her protruding belly she wondered why everyone assumed she was having a boy. A man might be the head of the house but his woman was the heart of the home. Wasn’t a girl just as valuable as a boy? Her chin dropped to her chest as sleep came.

The following Saturday Catherine took extra care with her hair, hoping that the wedding guests would notice her hair instead of her belly. She pinched her cheeks and bit her lips gently to add a bit of color. For several days she had enjoyed a burst of energy. The house was clean, the laundry caught up, and Andy’s old basinet was clean and in the bedroom. Today she had to push herself to move. Even doing her hair was a

bothersome task and she sat to do it. She put on a clean pink top over her skirt and sat at the table with some mending to wait for Andrew to come home from his half day of work. He bounded in the door full of good spirits.

“I’ll clean up and we can walk down to the general store for the wedding.”

Dressed in his Sunday clothes he hesitated when he took a good look at his wife. “Cat, you look really tired and it’s a bit of a walk to the store. Maybe you should stay home and rest. We can go to the reception tonight.”

“I’m Marian’s matron of honor. I can’t just stay home and leave her with no witness. I have to go.” She stood and gave Andrew a wan smile. “I’ll be fine.”

He opened the door and helped her out into a gloomy day. They walked arm in arm to the store, stopping twice so Catherine could get her breath. “If it weren’t for Marian, Andy, I would go back home. I wonder what happened to all the energy I had yesterday.”

“She’ll be glad to see you, Cat, but please be careful. I’ll see that there’s a chair near the altar for you.”

Andrew took a seat in the main room. In the backroom of the store Catherine helped attach Marian’s short veil to her hair with bobby pins before resting on a chair. Marian glowed with happiness.

“Cat, you have dark circles under your eyes. Are you feeling all right? Do you want me to have your mama come back?”

“No, Marian, I’m fine. Tired is all. I had lots of energy the last few days but now I can’t seem to get moving.”

An altar boy in a too-short black cassock and embroidered white surplice appeared in the doorway. "Father says he's ready for you." He disappeared as fast as he came.

Theresa bounded into the room out of breath. "Here," she said, holding out bouquets of purple asters and goldenrod to the girls, a large one for Marian and a smaller one for Catherine. "Sorry I'm late, Cat. I almost forgot to pick them for you." Looking closer she said, "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Make sure to tell Mama that, too, or she'll be worried. We have to go."

Theresa went back to the main room and plopped down on a chair near her mother and siblings. Catherine and Marian went outside and walked around the building to the main doors. A sprinkle of rain began just as they moved inside. "We made it," whispered Marian to Catherine. The chairs set up in the store were mostly full and at the other end of the aisle Tom waited with his brother, the priest, and the altar boy.

"It's been a year and a half since I was your maid of honor. So much has happened. I know you're uncomfortable but thanks for being with me today."

The priest nodded to them and Tom's eyes followed the priest's gaze. Catherine proceeded down the aisle with her bouquet of wild flowers. Every eye was on her. She felt very warm. Every woman present would judge her poorly for appearing in such a public way so close to her confinement. She would do anything for her friend Marian but right now she just hoped she could get through the ceremony.

As she reached the end of the rows of chairs she saw a stool placed right where she would stand. Dear Andy remembered, she thought. The congregation rose and

turned to the back of the building as she reached the stool. She turned to look at Marian walking down the aisle on her father's arm toward her future. Marian's face was glowing.

When Catherine saw the look of love that passed between Marian and Tom, she felt jealous and cheated. She was big as a house and married to an old man while her best friend was marrying the man she loved. You're in church, she reminded herself. Don't covet. Be happy for her and make the best of what you have. Marian's father pulled up her veil. She kissed him on the cheek and he gave her hand to Tom. The bridal couple approached the priest and the wedding began.

Catherine felt warm and a little dizzy and was happy to sit during the sermon. It was always the same sermon for a wedding: the woman was to honor and obey her husband. While the woman had a list of things she was told to do, the man did not. She wondered if marriage was invented for the sole purpose of enhancing a man's comfort and torturing a woman with childbirth. After the sermon the wedding party stood and Marian and Tom joined hands and repeated their vows. The *bubbas* wiped their eyes. Someone opened the main doors of the store and Catherine felt a refreshing breeze as Marian and Tom walked back down the aisle as man and wife. Catherine walked to the back of the store beside the best man. Through the open doors she could see rain pounding the walkway. The air felt heavy and stale. Her head began to swim. The best man caught her as her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed.

Catherine awoke in her own bed looking at the midwife. “Did Marian get married?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes, Honey. You didn’t pass out until you got to the back of the church.”

Catherine struggled to sit up. “I have to get up. I should be with Marian.”

“No, you don’t.” Her mother had appeared from nowhere. “I sent Theresa to help Marian at the reception. You need to stay in bed.”

“But I feel fine, Mama.” No sooner were the words out of her mouth than a sharp pain caused Catherine to clutch her stomach. It was the same pain she felt when she miscarried, only worse.

“Your baby is coming,” the midwife said. “Here, drink a little of this when the pain goes away. It will help you.”

Catherine took a sip of warm, foul-tasting liquid and made a face. The midwife laughed. “Make all the faces you want, Honey, but keep sipping. It will help with the pain.” Catherine sipped again.

Catherine heard voices from the main room of the house. “Mama, who’s out there?”

“John came to keep Andrew company. It’s raining too hard for them to be outside.”

John and Andy are here, thought Catherine sleepily. Another pain came, wiping all other thoughts from her mind. After each pain she took a sip of the nasty-tasting drink and tried to sleep a little. Sleep became her world, accented by pain. After a while the pains were too close together to nap between them. A constant barrage of increasing pain. She felt an incredible urge to bear down and expel the child within her. As the pain

level increased she moaned. She couldn't ignore the urge no matter how bad the pain. Every time it came she obeyed. She had only enough time between pains to fall back on the pillow and gasp for air. Would the pain never stop? Finally she pushed so hard she felt something within her tear. Someone was screaming as she gave one final push. The pain stopped and she fell back and closed her eyes. The screaming had stopped.

“You did it, Catherine. You have a son and I have a grandson.”

Catherine opened her eyes and tried to focus on her mother's face. “A boy? But I don't hear him.” She listened. A tiny mewling cry broke the silence of the bedroom, a sound like the cry of a new-born goat. Could that be him?

Her mother squeezed her hand hard. “Do you hear him, Catherine? He's pink and healthy. You did a good job. Rest now while we clean him up.”

Catherine closed her eyes. It seemed like just a minute until her mother was waking her. “Do you want to hold your new son?”

Catherine opened her eyes and held out her arms. Her mother placed a tiny bundle into her arms. She raised the flap of blanket and looked at the baby that had caused her so much pain. He held a chubby red fist near his face, also red. He looked a little sunburned, although she knew that was impossible. He had a lot of dark hair and he breathed quickly as he rested from their shared ordeal. Catherine touched his tiny nose. “Hello, Daniel Joseph Bielecki. Aren't you going to open your eyes for your mama?” The baby slept. And the pain seemed like an even trade for such a precious gift. “Mama, did you tell Andy?”

“Yes. He was so excited. He's waiting to come in and see you both. Are you ready for him?”

“Bring him in. Let him see our son.” She closed her eyes for just a second and Andy was leaning over her. He kissed her on the forehead.

“You scared me when you passed out. I’m glad you’re going to be all right. Don’t ever do that to me again, hear?”

“See our son. Daniel, meet your papa.” She lifted the flap and Andrew leaned in closer, a smile on his face. Tiny blue eyes opened and looked into his. Catherine watched as they shared a wordless communication. Daniel’s eyes closed and Andrew turned to Catherine. Catherine touched his wet cheek. Andrew took her hand and kissed it.

“All right, Andrew. She needs to rest.” Catherine’s mother was adamant. “Go on out with you and have some supper. Tell John I’ll bring his nephew out soon.”

Andrew kissed Cat’s hand once again. “Get some sleep. I’ll be right outside the door if you need me.”

Catherine’s mother took the bundle from her arms and held the baby up for Andrew’s last look. Catherine heard the door close right before her eyes closed. Her mother was saying something.

She woke several times during the night. Each time her mother was there, hovering over her and the baby. Finally Catherine opened her eyes to see sunlight filtering through the window. “What day is it?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“How long was I in labor?”

“Not too long. You had the baby last night just before midnight.”

“I had him on Marian’s wedding day. We’ll all celebrate together next year. That means we’ll be friends for life.”

After Catherine washed her face and hands she tried to nurse her son, but he wasn’t interested. “Mama, what do I do? He won’t nurse.”

“Give him an hour or two and try again. Remember, he had a hard day yesterday, too.”

With Daniel resting in the cradle next to the bed Catherine closed her eyes. Soon Andrew was in the room waking her. The sun was much higher in the sky. “Cat, wake up. Marian and Tom are here to see you and the baby. Uh, how do I pick him up?” Catherine couldn’t repress a smile, imagining Andy’s large calloused hands holding tiny Daniel.

“I’ll get him, Andrew.” Catherine’s mother bustled in the door. “Later on I’ll teach you how to pick him up and hold him. Papa.” She nudged her son-in-law and smiled. Catherine enjoyed the gentle teasing between her mother and her husband. They had always had a kind of bond, but the teasing was something new. I guess a baby brings families together like the *bubbas* said, thought Catherine, as her mother placed Daniel in her arms.

“Oh, Cat! You gave us a scare yesterday. Can we see the baby?” Marian was full of good spirits, her husband by her side. After everyone admired the baby Andrew and Tom went to the kitchen leaving the women alone.

“I made you something for the baby, but I didn’t have time to wrap it because you were so early.” Marian handed Catherine a soft yellow baby blanket. “I’ve been knitting it for a couple of months. Too bad you won’t make your own shower next week.”

Catherine opened the blanket with one hand. “Thank you, Marian, it’s beautiful. You make the most beautiful things and I only have one blanket for him. Want to hold him?”

“Of course I do.” Marian carefully took the baby bundle from her friend. “Does he ever open his eyes?”

“Not much.”

Marian handed Daniel to Catherine’s mother and leaned in close. “Did you plan that, Cat?” she whispered.

“Plan what?”

“Ruining my wedding by going into labor. I had to have your sister fill in for you at the reception. Yesterday was my day and you had to take it over just like you did my shower, talking about the names you had chosen. I know you got married first, but do you always have to steal the limelight from me?” Marian’s eyes filled up and ran over, tears spilling onto her cheeks.

Catherine was dumfounded at her best friend’s words. “Marian, I didn’t do it on purpose. The midwife said I had another three weeks to go. I didn’t mean to steal your thunder. When it comes, it comes is all. Please don’t think I meant to hurt you or ruin your wedding day.”

“You did ruin it, just like you take over everything else. Well, it’s the last thing you’re going to ruin for me.” Marian’s eyes filled with a fire that dried the tears in an instant. “I don’t want to be your friend any more, Catherine. All you think about is yourself.” To Catherine’s mother she said, “We promised Tom’s parents that we’d join

them for dinner after church and we need to hurry. ‘Bye now.’ She closed the door with a thump.

“Mama, I can’t let her go like this.”

Catherine’s mother opened the bedroom door just in time to hear Marian and Tom saying their goodbyes to Andrew. He poked his head into the bedroom. “They sure left in a hurry. What happened?”

“I was going to ask them to be his godparents but she doesn’t want anything to do with me anymore, Andy. She thinks I had the baby just to spoil her wedding day and steal her thunder. What are we going to do now? With winter coming I want to have him baptized before Christmas.” Now Catherine’s eyes filled up with tears. Andrew gave Catherine a worried look.

“Don’t worry about it. It’ll work out.” He withdrew to the kitchen.

After he left Catherine’s mother handed Daniel back to her. “Want to try nursing him again?” This time Daniel nuzzled her nipple and suckled for a few minutes before falling asleep.

Catherine sniffled as she tried to coax her son to nurse. Through her tears she managed to say, “He took some, Mama. He’s going to be strong and healthy.”

“Of course he is,” her mother responded, looking on with pride. “He’s my grandson.”

Catherine’s mother and her sister Theresa took turns staying with her during the day to clean, cook, and bathe the baby. At night Andrew handed her the baby when he

cried. By Wednesday Catherine was ready to get up, with or without her mother's approval.

"You know the midwife expects you to stay in bed for a week."

"How long did you stay in bed after Emma was born, Mama?"

"Three days, but that was different. She wasn't my first baby."

"I can't stay in this bed any longer. I'm getting up." Catherine put two feet on the floor and stood up. The room began to move around her and she sat and closed her eyes.

"When did you become so stubborn?" her mother asked, putting an arm around her. The room stopped moving. Catherine opened her eyes and carefully walked to the rocking chair in the kitchen. She eased into the chair and looked around. Her mother brought the baby. Catherine put him down on her legs and opened the blanket to look at him. He was perfect, from his tiny toenails to the hair on his head. She could see his pulse beating in the soft spot on his head. She re-wrapped him and held him up to her shoulder. While she gently rocked she rubbed his back and sang a lullaby in his ear.

*Rock-a-bye baby in the treetop
When the wind blows the cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

She had never thought about the words before, even though she had sung them to her sisters many times. It was a good thing Daniel couldn't understand what she was saying or he'd be afraid. After she nursed and burped him her mother took him. "Are you ready to go back to bed now?"

"Yes. I can't believe how tired I am after just a few minutes up." The walk back to bed seemed twice as long as usual.

When she was settled in her mother said, “Since you are doing so well, why don’t we have the shower here? That way you can see all the women and thank them in person, and they can see the baby.”

“That’s a great idea. I’m not moving too fast but at least I’ll get to see everyone.” She slept with a smile on her lips.

Saturday morning Andrew told her he was glad he had to work. All those women in the house, he said, would drive him crazy. She just laughed and kissed him goodbye. She heard the ice box open and close as he put the lunch her mother had packed last night into his dinner bucket and left the house. She was back in bed nursing Daniel when she heard the door open again.

“We’re here, Cat.” called Theresa. Catherine heard Emma’s and her mother’s voices, too, and the ice box opened and shut again.

Emma came in to see the baby. “He’s a little wrinkly, isn’t he?”

Catherine laughed. “He’ll smooth out in a few weeks, Emma.”

Theresa and her mother did their cooking in Catherine’s kitchen and told Catherine to stay in bed so she would have the energy to sit up during her shower. For once she obeyed.

When the guests began to arrive Theresa helped Catherine dress. It was the first time in a week she had worn more than a nightgown. She fit back into a regular house dress with no trouble. As she came from the bedroom holding Daniel the women

applauded and crowded around her to see him. One of her aunts took him as Catherine made her way to the rocking chair.

Theresa brought her a plate of food before the women lined up with their plates, *bubbas* first out of respect. Daniel was still being passed around like a box of chocolates, all the women fussing with him and cooing at him. After they ate Catherine opened gifts: crocheted sweater sets and booties, embroidered burp cloths, two baby quilts, a white knitted blanket, several buntings with matching hats, more cloth diapers, belly bands, undershirts, nightgowns, and everything else that a baby would need. Everything except a godmother, that is. Mrs. Jacobiasen was there but Marian hadn't come and Catherine tried not to cry over the slight.

“Thank you all so much for coming and for the beautiful things,” she said. “We hope to have him baptized after Mass the first Sunday of December and you are all invited.”

She was tired by the time the women left. Theresa had retrieved little Daniel and he was fussing, sucking on her index finger. “Your little man is hungry,” she said, and gave him to Catherine, who put a small blanket over her shoulder and opened her top so he could nurse.

Her mother woke her. “I put him in the cradle, Catherine. Why don't you take a nap while we clean up?” She gratefully moved to the bedroom and slept until Andrew came in.

“You got a lot of things for the baby today,” he said. “Will you use all of them?”

“Those and more,” she replied. “Babies go through a lot of clothes. I'll be washing every other day now.”

“I guess I have a lot to learn about babies,” he said. “But at least I know how to pick him up now, thanks to your mother.” They shared a smile.

The first Sunday of December was cold. Flakes of snow fell on the white-wrapped bundle that Catherine carried to church. In keeping with custom she hadn't taken the baby out since his birth. Today he would make his debut in the church and be baptized. He was small for his age and his papa's white baptismal gown was too big for him. He wore the white knitted hat made by her mother and the blue booties that had been his papa's.

Catherine had regained her figure and her strength. Good thing, too, because Daniel needed something all the time. She barely had time to cook, wash, and clean, much less sleep. She wondered how her mama had done it so many times. But today was a joyful day, her son's baptism.

The one thing she hadn't regained was Marian's friendship. Marian didn't come over and didn't send messages by Catherine's sisters, either. If they came face to face in church Marian averted her gaze and went the other way. After all the times they had spent together she avoided Catherine. Catherine missed her so much, especially when the baby blues hit and she wanted another woman to talk to.

She and Andrew met her family at church. They took up a whole row of folding chairs. Looking around Catherine saw Marian and Tom farther back. After Mass two altar servers brought forth a large shallow bowl and filled it with water. While the people

who had to get home filed out of the store and the *bubbas* came to the front for the ceremony Catherine ran back to find Marian, who was just leaving. “Marian, wait up. Marian.”

Marian stopped and turned around. She didn’t look angry, just sad. Tom stood next to his wife with his arm around her.

“Marian, I miss you. I’m sorry we had such a falling out. Daniel is being baptized today. We wanted you and Tom to be his godparents.”

Marian looked up at Tom. He nodded slightly. She turned around.

“I’ve missed you, too. I felt so upstaged that everyone talked about you at my shower and then again at the wedding reception that I took it out on you. I know it wasn’t your fault. If you still want us, we’d be thrilled to be Daniel’s godparents.” She and Catherine hugged around baby Daniel and they both cried. Tom watched them with a tiny grin on his face.

The priest called the baptismal party to the front and blessed the water. Tom and Andrew shook hands while Catherine took Daniel out of his heavy blanket and hat and handed him to Marian. She listened while Marian and Tom promised to step in and supervise Daniel’s religious education if his parents were unable to do so. They made the traditional promises on Daniel’s behalf to reject Satan, his empty promises, and his works. They affirmed belief in the Almighty God. Then Marian held Daniel over the bowl of holy water. The priest scooped holy water into a large shell and poured it over Daniel’s head three times, saying “Daniel Joseph Bielecki, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” as he poured. Daniel cried heartily as the cold water touched his forehead. The priest smiled at the baby while the altar server handed a

white towel to Marian to dry Daniel's head. Then the priest gave him a white bib as a baptismal garment, telling him to bring it unstained to the temple of God. He placed a lighted candle into Tom's hand, informing him that this was the light of Christ and they were to encourage that light in their godson.

The baptism was over. The *bubbas* wiped their eyes. Catherine did, too.

Catherine's family joined the baptismal party back at her house for a dinner of fried chicken, potatoes and corn. As they ate they made big plans for their joint futures. Marian and Tom would have ten children. Daniel would grow up to be a doctor or a priest. They talked of their hopes and dreams for the future as they celebrated together.

That night in bed Catherine snuggled next to Andrew against the cold and whispered, "Wasn't it great how Marian just said she was sorry, too, and they came in to be Daniel's godparents? Just like a sign from God."

"Yeah, but it probably helped that I've been talking to Tom at the mine. He said that Marian felt bad about what she said to you and missed you, too."

"You had a hand in this? Thanks, Andy." Catherine kissed him.

"I can think of a way for you to thank me," Andrew whispered.