



Out of the Darkness

Helen M. Stummer

Out of Darkness:

**How a Birth Mother
Found Herself While Searching for Her Daughter.**

By Helen M. Stummer

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Cover photograph: Ledge on Eggemoggin Reach, Brooklin, Maine, 1998. by H.M. Stummer

This story is dedicated to my three children:
Pat, Nicholas and Jeanine.

My deep appreciation to Beverly Lowy who insisted over a decade ago, I write. Her persistence enriched my life.

Helen Stummer's insightful little book *OUT OF DARKNESS* demonstrates how we can reach the core of our experience as birth mothers by observing the world reflected around us, and how the seemingly perilous journey into our broken hearts can create a heart broken open to truth and love again.

Carol Schaefer
Author, *The Other Mother*

Introduction

My purpose as a photo-journalist, educator and human being has always been to search for the truth. I have a passion to show clearly what I have seen and, through the despair and hope of my own life, to work toward that goal. This story is part of a larger writing in collaboration with my therapist, Dr. Anne Brodzinsky, my guide through the confusion and darkness in my search for insight and understanding of what was. By learning about what was, I have come to know more about who I am.

I believe we all have a core: some call it our soul, or our inner world. I call it our unique self a special place within us where our true voice lives, a place where our passion and energy come alive. A place so incredibly sensitive to the outside world that it will not allow its inner voice to speak unless it feels certain it will not be laughed at, walked away from, dismissed or ignored.

Since the mid-1970s I have been photographing, and learning about how low-income people live and survive in devastated areas. This began when I signed up for a photography class at the International Center for Photography in Manhattan. My instructor suggested I go to the Children's Aid Society, then located on East Sixth Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, to practice photographing children. At that time, I was a painter and had taken the class only to learn how to take better pictures of things I wanted to paint but after seeing the bombed-out looking area of East Sixth Street, my perception changed and my life shifted onto a different track.

That first day, as I stood in the doorway after photographing the children, I saw rows of tenements and burned-out buildings. To my left there was a huge beaten down dirt lot filled with rubble, debris and children playing. To my right, barbed wire was strung on top of walls, blocking out another vacant lot. I heard the constant blasting of car horns, mixed with sirens and music blaring from huge "boom boxes" that some teenagers were carrying. Grim looking men stood silently in narrow doorways as crowds of people filled the sidewalks. English and Spanish intermingled with shouting, laughing and arguing as children milled around with their parents. Some people were dressed drably, but most wore brightly colored garments that seemed to swirl before my eyes. Lining the curb on both sides of the street, huge piles of garbage stood waiting for the disposal trucks. I was overcome with fear and excitement. It seemed to be very important that I photograph that environment, an environment that once the New York Times called the "meanest street in America." I wanted to try to understand the dynamics, the mystery of this place of struggle and survival.

Many years later, I came to realize that when my core saw that bleak area, it was able to remember my pain of growing up feeling invisible and ignored. I believe that only when we express ourselves from our core can our lives be enriched and the process of healing begin.

Eight days after my sixteenth birthday and unmarried, my emotionally-impooverished life was solidified when I gave birth to a beautiful seven pound baby girl. I named her Linda Susan. Six weeks later, on February 28, 1952, I gave up my baby for adoption. A few days later I called the agency saying that I had changed my mind. I was told Linda Susan already had been placed with a family. The following eighteen years were spent waiting for Linda to contact me. I had answered "yes" to the question on the agency's form which asked whether I wanted Linda to find me when she reached eighteen. During that eighteenth year, each time the phone or doorbell rang, my heart leaped with anticipation.

When I was growing up, the turmoil in my emotional life stood in sharp contrast to my apparently normal external life in a suburban, middle-class, materially privileged household. Nice house. Nice furniture. Nice neighborhood. In spite of its advantages, in my household there was a poverty of spirit: Everyone was preoccupied with her or his own struggles. Throughout my childhood I felt unloved and overlooked. A few years ago my mother finally confirmed that no one had cared for me in that house, and that I was always alone and at the mercy of my grandmother, who was also my caretaker.

"Your grandmother, was a falling-down drunk," my mother, said, "and was especially mean to you because you reminded her of her dead daughter." As the story goes, Grandma was thrifty and didn't want to spend money on a crib for her first baby, Helen. She had the child sleep in the bed she shared with her husband. When she was three years old, the child fell out of the bed and hit her head on the floor. "Immediately, the child's head swelled up," my mother continued. "Grandma put cabbage leaves on her head to bring down the swelling." Ultimately Helen's arm became paralyzed and she was blind. My mother told me that in keeping with the family's code of silence, no one spoke about the tragedy. As I was growing up, I realized that the pattern of not talking about distress would follow me as well.

After Helen's fall, Grandma bought her a crib. Two years later, on Easter Sunday, the child fell down the carpeted stairs while wearing her slippery new patent leather shoes. The doctor was called when she kept throwing up.

"She is blind and her right arm is paralyzed." said the doctor. "That was the first time anyone had said anything openly about the child's condition from her previous fall," said my mother. Shortly thereafter, Helen died at the age of five.

Twenty-three years later, I was born to Grandma's only other daughter. In memory of her dead sister, and thinking it would make Grandma happy, my mother named me Helen. Grandma was aghast. Her guilt and suffering over her daughter's death translated into a rage against me, who carried her lost baby's name and was said to look just like her.

My mother also told me that when I was very small Grandma would pound on my head with her fists. "I told her to stop," said my mother, "but she never listened."

On my birthday and at holidays, like most little girls, I was given a doll, but somehow each mysteriously disappeared and could not be found again. When I was twenty-one, we were moving and I was cleaning out the attic eaves. In the deepest, darkest corner I discovered a pile of my long lost dolls, now old, with cracked faces and dusty faded dresses, like a graveyard of discarded beings. Stunned, I held up a doll with a frilly yellow dress. She had been my favorite and many times I had yearned for her.

There was a kind of a terrible irony in always being told by my grandmother and mother that I didn't like dolls. It was bewildering because whenever I heard that, I had a mixed response. I felt deep inside that I really did like dolls and often would think about my doll with the yellow frilly dress and wonder where she'd gone. There was also a part of me that enjoyed the attention I got for being a "tomboy," and thought liking dolls would interfere with that image. Many years later I would find out that it was Grandma who had taken away my dolls before I ever had a chance to play with them. In fact, she had done the same thing to my mother.

Even now I can hear Grandma whispering in my ear as I tried to do my homework. "You are stupid. You will never amount to anything." Sometimes she would whisper through my bedroom keyhole, as I was trying to sleep. "You are a good-for-nothing-bitch-bastard."

Grandma was very powerful in my household since she held the purse strings. My parents continually borrowed large amounts of money from her and if they objected to something she had done, she said she would leave as soon as they returned the money they owed her. This scenario paralyzed my mother. She loved things and was also afraid. She feared her mother and needed to protect herself. She usually sat and watched TV and ate everything that Grandma put in front of her. My mother met my anguish with denials; she was completely inaccessible to me. "Mommy, Grandma's always hurting me," I'd plead.

"Grandma would never do that," my mother reassured me, as Grandma stood behind her, sticking out her tongue, thumbs stuck in her ears with fingers flapping at me.

My father stayed away as much as possible and did not become involved. I loved being with him. Even if he wasn't there, I would spend hours in his basement workshop putting together puzzles and listening to the radio. Later I would glue the puzzle pieces to a cardboard and my father would put the pictures in large ornate gold frames that he found in the dump. Then he would hang the framed puzzles along the inside wall of the carport. I felt special looking at those pictures of ocean and landscape scenes and "George Washington Crossing the Delaware."

At seven, I was familiar and intrigued with the letters of my name: How they looked, their shape and spelling. In 1943, it was highly fashionable to have the family names printed on Christmas cards. It was as exciting to us children as TV. Crowding around the dining room table, we waited in anticipation as my mother unwrapped and opened the first box of printed cards that had just arrived in the mail. Everyone loved the winter scene of people happily ice skating together on the pond while the snow was lightly falling. Then the big moment came as the first card was opened and everyone looked for their name. Shouts of happiness from my brother and sister filled the room as despair flooded my heart. There was no Helen on the list. No one said a word. Maybe they didn't notice. I can't remember what happened after that but my next recollection was looking over my mother's shoulder while she sat at the desk sending out the cards. I watched as she signed, in her large handwriting, at the bottom of each card, "Also Helen." I had a sudden rush of feeling special seeing my name bigger than the rest and watching her write my name over and over again. During my childhood I was thrilled by the slightest amount of recognition or notice. I never complained because I believed that everyone knew better than I did, and if I disagreed with them, then I must be wrong.

In 1971, Linda Susan turned eighteen and I didn't hear from her. The following year I decided to do something with my life so that when we did meet, she would be proud of me (The records were closed more than they are now and I would not have been able to gain information about her if I had tried). I studied for, and took, the General Equivalency exam required for my G.E.D. Before the grades arrived, I thought I had failed and went into a severe depression. I still heard the voices from my childhood "You are stupid. You are a good-for-nothing." When the letter with the results arrived, I slowly peeled back the envelope and the numbers swam in front of me. I had no idea of what they meant. For an hour or two, in despair, I paced the floor, certain I had failed the exam. Finally, I called the testing office. I was told

that I had received the second highest mark in the class. Shot out of my depression by the news, I was ecstatic. I was flying. I was beyond happiness. Those grades were the first challenge to the crippling words of my childhood.

There was no stopping me now. I registered at Union Community College, swearing to take only one course. Seven years later, I graduated cum laude from Kean University. The following year, I received my certification to teach art. I began teaching photography at a High School in Jersey City, and finally, in Scotch Plains/Fanwood High School. In 1987, I earned a Masters in Visual Sociology from Vermont College which allowed me to teach photography on a college level. During those years, I exhibited my photographs in many galleries, and wrote articles which were published along with my photographs in many periodicals.

In 1991, I began the process of writing a book about Newark, New Jersey. For fourteen years, I had photographed the devastated Central Ward. I became inspired to write about the twenty years I had been trying to give poor people a voice by making them visible as individuals to mainstream society. By learning about the struggles and spirit of others, I began to understand my own.

My concern as an artist was to illuminate the darkness, show beauty immersed in ugliness, and find clarity in chaos. I became involved in the inner-city community. I took clothes, food, household items and even two old cars to desperately needy families, in my hope to bring some comfort into their despair. In turn, the residents guided me safely through the ghetto. Respect, I learned, was one of the most important ingredient. Respect made all the difference in surviving in a hostile environment. Respect was the bottom line. "I don't have to like you," was the general tone, "but I respect you and expect the same treatment in return." I was privileged being allowed to photograph freely and to document the conditions under which poor people live. I felt humble being invited to enter and become part of this invisible world, to bear witness, to tell the story. This reciprocation brought light into my own life. The pleasure of giving photographs to many who never had any and receiving joy and appreciation from this exchange gave me a deeper understanding of our human connectedness. When the book, *No Easy Walk, Newark, 1980-1993* was finally sent to Temple University Press in November of 1993, I was ready to begin my search for Linda.

I made an appointment with a social worker in an adoption agency affiliated with the one where I had surrendered Linda. Sitting in the office, I was calm and collected as the case worker read the information the social worker had written about me when I was in the home for unwed mothers. I listened carefully to the facts surrounding Linda's adoption, and the life she had had growing up in her adoptive home. Linda's adoptive parents and the social worker agreed that as a baby "Linda's development was very satisfactory...She was a healthy, active, responsive child who appeared to be advanced mentally and physically." When Linda was four years old, her parents adopted another baby from the same agency allowing the social worker another opportunity to see Linda on several occasions. She noted she was positively impressed with her excellent development and independent spirit. I also heard a little history that had been written about my own life prior to giving up Linda.

Two hours later, I felt fragmented. Listening to all that information, I was immersed in being sixteen again. Living in the unwed mothers' home and taking care of Linda for her first six weeks was a fast-ticket back to that entire stage of my life experience. The caseworker suggested that I join a support group for birth mothers and adoptees. I resisted, but driving home from the agency was a blur, and before long, I knew that I needed help.

Despite my reservations I joined the support group, bought books on the subject, joined the local Y. Going to the Y helped me to release some anxiety. I swam, worked the Nautilus program, and ran on the treadmill. At the same time, from a list of three therapists, all experienced with birth mothers and adopted children, I chose Dr. Anne Brodzinsky. With nothing to go on except that I liked the letter A, and her office location was different from those of my usual appointments. I thought it would be interesting to travel to a fresh area.

When I walked into Anne's office, an instant connection was made: On the wall of her waiting room was one of my photographs, a child sitting by a window, writing his homework on a paper bag. After each visit with Anne, my foundation shifted. A word or statement transformed me, and immediately upon arriving home I was consumed by the need to write down my thoughts as a record, a reminder of what had been shared. I had never written poetry; in fact, I hardly ever read it. But each week the ideas and feelings that were explored in Anne's office were expressed in poetic form.

During one of our sessions Anne said, "Writing your experiences of being a birth mother would be an important contribution to other birth mothers and to adoptees, and by the notes you're taking you have already begun the work." I had been noting things that Anne or I said during our visits, connections that warranted contemplation, ideas that I didn't want to lose. Rolling my eyes as I sat back, I knew my next project had begun.

From time to time I showed my photographs to Anne and came to realize that they were also self-portraits. We would discuss what part of me I was expressing: loneliness, kindness, sadness, dignity, caring, fear, anger, joy, skepticism. By exploring my photograph's depiction of evil and cruel environments I was able to understand more about

my own emotional landscape.

Out of Darkness, How a Birth Mother Found Herself While Searching for Her Daughter is a metaphor for birth. "We come out of darkness into the light," said Anne. "The journey of going into a broken heart and emerging is a profound experience." Finally, I came to realize, in therapy, how deeply my experience as a birth mother has affected my entire life. Always the gloom surrounding me during holidays had offset the gaiety and celebration. As my face projected happiness, I was filled with sadness and loss. On Linda's birthday I was devastated. Each year I relived the entire experience of being pregnant, taking care of Linda for six weeks and then surrendering my child. Always I have paid an extraordinary emotional toll by hiding what I have considered a stigma. Birthing a child out of wedlock and its surrender was not talked about openly in the 1950s. Keeping my secret in the closet, feeling an outcast wherever I went, has had an overwhelming impact on my life. It was only after facing the demons, bringing light into the closet and into my experience as a birth mother, that my major healing began.

In the adoption papers it was written that Linda Susan's parents had told her she was adopted, but it turned out that she was never told. It also turned out that at the time of the adoption they changed her name to Patricia. By the time I found her, both parents had died: Her mother, when Pat was a teenager, and her father while I was searching for her.

After I was told that Patricia did not know she was adopted, I had to struggle with the dilemma of what to do. I knew that if I continued forward I would be turning her life upside down. But I couldn't imagine never seeing her face again, never hearing her voice, never just being in her air. After the painful wrestling with the pros and cons, I realized this search had taken on a life of its own and I couldn't stop. For Pat, learning that she had been adopted was a nightmare. A torment. But gradually after fourteen months, her curiosity to know me and to learn about her biological history caused her to call me. Her first words as I picked up the telephone were "Hi Helen, this is your daughter Pat."

Pat and I had our reunion on her forty-fourth birthday, January 16, 1996, three years from the time I began my search. Seeing Pat's smile as she came through the airport gate from Kansas City was a pivotal experience. After hugging and exchanging how good we looked, we stopped at the first coffee place. I had to sit down and look at her. My legs were shaking. Joyous in our steady stream of chatter, I was in paradise. Later, as we sat opposite each other in a quaint restaurant, I looked at my watch. It was three o'clock. I told her this was the time when I had gone into labor.

With tear-filled eyes, we nodded, touched hands and toasted to our new life together. In the car I had given her a book about birth mothers and her birthstone set in a silver pendant. We kept repeating our amazement, a miracle, that today was actually her birthday.

Since our reunion, my life is better. Now, if something isn't fine, I seem to have a new attitude. I can turn an emotional experience into an incident rather than a war. My pace is right. I'm on cue, on track. I'm not overwhelmed as often as I used to be. I stop when I'm tired. I let projects go for another time. I can say "what about this" to people, or "let's discuss that" without feeling apprehension. Basically, I'm no longer afraid. Something in me has thawed. Seeing and being with Patricia has freed my voice and opened my heart; I have a sense of balance.

Anne told me that "Being without Patricia created a sense of disequilibrium throughout your whole life." After the reunion, when I hadn't heard from Pat in a while, I mentioned to Anne that "Whatever happens from now on is gravy. I know where she is. I know how she is and that has stabilized my life."

On the other hand, my decision has caused a great deal of havoc in Pat's life. I believe she's caught between being happy to know me and at the same time angry that I came into her world. But I do know that being told that she was adopted verified her life-long feeling that she had been abandoned. "Now I know I'm not crazy having those feelings," she told me.

"I would tell my friends about this sensation and they always replied that you have a wonderful family. Why would you feel abandoned?"

Just as Pat's feeling of abandonment followed her throughout her life, I also had a similar experience. A short time after giving up my baby for adoption, I began having pain in my arms. I don't remember when I stopped asking the people I was involved with to please hold me--hold my arms tight. Their hugs temporarily relieved the ache. What I did notice was that about a year after my reunion with Pat, the pain disappeared. I had never connected the sensation with the weight, the imprint of Linda Susan's body pressing against my arms as I held and rocked her during those weeks in the Home.

While writing this book, I asked Pat how she felt about knowing me and she wrote that "the news of being adopted came as a total surprise. There I was, forty-three years old, and I had no idea until then that my parents had adopted me. The rough part was that I received this information from a very cold and insensitive social worker two months after my father had died a slow and painful death.

"The ironic part of this whole situation is that I had always wished my husband could have met my mother, who

died when I was fifteen. I was sure he would have loved her thoughtful and caring ways. Then much to my surprise, my wish did come true, he got to meet my birth mother whom I feel is a lot like the mother I grew up with. For this I am very grateful."

Pat and I are now friends. We have long relaxed telephone conversations. She is open, honest, insightful and generous. We visit each other with ease. Perhaps I will always be somewhat apprehensive, but I see that as a positive. It has been a hard, emotional journey, but if that was the price I had to pay to know her I wouldn't change any of it. My willingness to wade through the murky waters of investigation, of facing the demons, held no guarantees. It was a risk. I have been given a second chance and I am deeply grateful. I can never be a part of Pat's growing up--that time is lost forever--but I can be part of her future and for that I am profoundly thankful.

At one point I was certain that I would use a pseudonym for writing about my life. In fact, I even had the most wonderful name picked out, Helen Tassom Dory. Instead, the insights, realizations and understandings learned with Anne became a catharsis and I refuse to go back into the darkness. I am taking responsibility for the contents of this work. I am not hiding or running away or feeding into the code of silence. This is my story. These are my experiences. My life.

According to the late poet May Sarton in *Writings On Writing*, "To escape from our individual past is to murder a part of ourselves."

I wish you courage.

Linda Susan

On a cool gray day early in October of 1951, I walked slowly up to the entrance of the Florence Crittendon Home for unwed mothers. Huge trees lined my path. There was a smell of dusty dried weeds in the air. My tight yellow gabardine suit was uncomfortable. I felt leaves crackle under my feet and from habit kicked a few aside. I was scared about the unknown--of being in a strange place--living among strange people. I was scared of what was coming--of what had been--of what I didn't know. But at the same time I was also excited. I was alone and going on an adventure. Something new was about to happen. I felt grown-up and a child at the same time. Cold and rigid, I silently walked behind my parents. In a short distance from the street to the front door, I was immersed in the fear of being away from home for the first time. I was fifteen years old.

Until recently, I had never connected that experience with my aversion to yellow clothing or the immediate state of melancholy, of impending doom, that would overcome me in stormy autumn weather whenever leaves were falling.

The four-story red brick building with rows of white trimmed rectangular windows solidified my feeling of confusion and strangeness, as though this was another person, not me. "Me" was hidden deep inside somewhere, shivering in a dark corner.

My father rang the doorbell. A matronly, kind-looking older woman in a white uniform smiled as she opened the door and guided us in. What was going on? What was going to happen? I didn't understand. I didn't even know how the arrangements were made. From the hysterical time in the doctor's office to this moment, my parents never said a word about my condition except my father who suggested an abortion. I guess my horrified face caused him to forget about that idea or perhaps he checked out the illegal process and found I was too far along for that procedure.

My parents exchanged words with the nurse. Vaguely I recall a tall woman joining us and there were papers to be signed. I didn't know how long we were there or what was said until I heard

"Be good."

"Yes mamma. Yes daddy."

My attention was swimming in an emotional fog and I don't remember my parents leaving. They just sort of disappeared. Looking back, I have the sense that they were relieved to turn me over to the nurse and get on with their lives, lives that I had violently interrupted a few weeks earlier. I had gone to the doctor because of severe constipation and he told me to return with my parents. Actually, I felt a sense of importance about the attention I was getting as I sat between my parents in the waiting room the next day.

"She's five months pregnant."

Those words threw me sobbing into a place that had no sides or bottom: a black, empty pit. Those words caused my mother to start screaming "I never knew you were that kind of a girl," and my father quietly to say "We can't cry over spilt milk."

"We don't use our real names here," the head nurse announced as we walked up to the second floor dormitory. "What would you like to be called?"

I thought for a moment. "My middle name is Marguerite."

"That is what we'll call you."

There were many neatly-made narrow beds lined up against the light-green walls of the room, each with its own small gray metal dresser. I was assigned to one by a window that overlooked the front entrance, then left alone to unpack my belongings. Longingly, I touched my high school text books as I lined them on the dresser. I felt a sense of connection to a part of the world that I had left behind. School. School was a place where I could get some recognition. During sixth, seventh and eighth grade I was deeply involved in sports. It was at the end of my freshman year that, somehow, I seemed to clearly understand what the teachers were saying. My hand was up all the time and my correct answers even surprised me, I had made the honor roll. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to achieve a doctorate degree like my uncle who was highly respected when he came to visit. Being on the honor roll held promise for the person I wanted to be.

As I looked around at the sterile feeling dorm, caught between this strange new world and the one I had just left, Grandma's words came back to me. I wanted to be more than a crazy, good-for-nothing, stupid, trouble-making bitch-bastard that she constantly called me. What would she have called me if she knew I was pregnant? My parents

didn't tell her because they knew she would tell the neighbors.

Putting on an oversized gray and white print house dress that my mother must have packed in my suitcase, I felt a sense of relief and release. For the past five months my stomach was being held in by willpower and girdles. Looking in the dresser mirror now, I saw a very pregnant person. Who was this girl I was looking at? Could this really be me?

That day, I could only absorb my environment in small pieces, responding to my new name and the smell of the institutional PineSol. Although I was shy and feeling out of place, I also felt strangely safe and kind of comfortable as the other pregnant girls began coming into the dorm from their various jobs to rest before dinner. There wasn't any fuss made over my being there. People came and went about their business, talking and laughing. We were all in the same predicament which in a sense added to the relief, but the house regulations made it very clear we were living in shame. Firmly, we were told not to become attached to anyone--not become involved or tell anyone our real name or where we lived. If by chance we did bump into someone after we left, we were to instantly avoid them. We were to forever stay anonymous--secret from the outside world, from each other and ourselves.

Molly had the bed across from mine and responded immediately to my Latin books that she saw spread out on my bed before me to study. "Never stop studying," were her first words. She had dark shiny brown hair and eyes and was certainly a lot taller than my five feet. She was probably about twenty years old. Molly became my only friend in the five months I was there. Many times while I was studying, she would tell me how smart I was and make me promise that I would return to school and never give up learning. She seemed detached, not caught up with the emotions of being in an unwed mothers' home as I was, or the worry about whether to keep or give up her baby. Once, as we were alone on our beds, she looked at me very carefully and slowly and clearly said she was giving up her baby and would never think about it again, and that's what I should do. Her detached coldness fascinated me because I was so different. During those months when we were alone in our dorm, she continued to break the rules. She told me that she was an artist and living in a Greenwich Village loft. She seemed so worldly to me. I never knew why she singled me out, looking at me with kindness and warmth. Perhaps she saw something of herself in me, something that had died or changed. But I do know that even the smallest amount of praise fed my heart that was shrunken from the lack of being touched or caressed or acknowledged, until boys came along with their shining eyes and arms that held. I'm not sure if I told her about Grandma and my home life but I clearly recall her inviting me to live with her after I got out of the home. I was deeply flattered, but too frightened of going all the way to New York City by myself and living in Greenwich Village with artists. The idea was too extreme for my fifteen-year-old imagination, too rebellious. I wasn't even suppose to talk to her if I saw her in the outside world--forget about living with her. I declined her invitation. But she believed in me, gave me her attention, and I loved her.

After a few weeks, my mother and father came to take me out for the day. As I sat in the back seat of my father's car, they discussed where we could go where no one knew us. They decided on a Chinese restaurant in Union City. Sitting across the Formica table from them in the green and white tile restaurant, I noticed how they kept looking around, worried that we might be recognized. I shared their concern and felt their shame, as well as my own. All I wanted to do was to get back to the safety and comfort of the Home. Nothing was ever said between my parents and me, but we never went on another outing. My father came to visit me once a week. Until the day I left the Home, my mother never came back again nor said anything about it later. We acted as though it had never happened.

The nurses and social workers repeatedly told us PGs (pregnant girls) that we would forget all about this experience as soon as we got home. I never came close to forgetting what I had experienced and wonder where they had come up with such a standard lie.

Everyone in the Home was given a task. I was assigned to the laundry room. That meant being in the basement each day at 5 A.M. In my oversized house dress, with my flapping slippers and swollen ankles, while carefully holding onto the banisters for balance, I slowly waddled down the three-story, cold, dark staircase.

Entering the dark laundry room, I turned on lights, sorted the clothes and started up the machines. I sat awkwardly on the narrow bench with my back against the wall and watched the clothes spinning around, listening to the building wake and the pipes knocked with signs of heat as the morning light turned the bars on the basement windows from solid black to a silhouette. The dryers also heated the room and gave off a laundry smell and a thickness to the air that still lives in my memory whenever I enter a laundromat. I liked the quiet and the solitude of the laundry room. I liked being in charge. I liked feeling responsible. I liked being told by the head matron that I was the best worker they ever had in the laundry, and that nothing had gone wrong in all the months I was in charge.

Sometimes we PGs would be called to the meeting room by the head matron who, it was rumored, had also given birth to a child out of wedlock. She asked us to express how we felt about ourselves and the boys we had been involved with. As we sat in a circle, it was always a mixture of feelings. Some girls missed their boyfriends. Some didn't. Some enjoyed sex. Some didn't. Some were going to keep their babies. Some were not. I didn't talk very much because I was still concerned about others finding out that I was crazy like Grandma said. Besides, talking about my experiences and hearing about sex confused and embarrassed me. I didn't know how to make up stories, and how was I supposed to

tell a room full of relative strangers how I had fallen in love with an older boy, of nineteen, who was interested in someone else? How one day he asked if he could "pet" me because he needed to practice on someone so he'd know what to do with my girlfriend? How was I supposed to tell someone how good I felt helping him learn and how naive and gullible I was--how he lost interest in my girlfriend and after a while we became sexually involved. At that time I was thinking about becoming a nun.

Before my fall from grace, I used to write long letters to Jesus. He was my friend, and since He knew everything, I could just jump in anywhere and start writing about my problems especially with Grandma. But now I couldn't write to Him anymore. I wasn't worthy. I was sinning big time. Sex. The ultimate mortal sin in the 1950s. So how could I tell Him I was crying during the act, guilt-ridden, and asking Jesus and my father to forgive me. How bored I soon became with sex. But each time I tried to break up the boy would start crying and plead for us to stay together or he would die. How could I reject him when that was what I felt from my own family? It was all too complex and I drifted into a haze of detachment and continued my shameful double life feeling dirty and guilty and praying that I wouldn't become pregnant--having no idea about birth control and not knowing how to firmly say no. All I told the group was that he didn't know I was here or that I was pregnant, because I knew he'd want to marry me and I couldn't imagine being married to him. In fact, my parents must have felt the same way because there was never any discussion about marriage. My story caused some of the pregnant girls to look at me in awe and others in disgust as most of them only wanted their boyfriends to marry them.

Every month a doctor came to the Home to give us PGs an internal examination. I sat in the hallway with the others, waiting my turn to go into the small medical room for my first internal. I was terrified. No one spoke. Everyone just stared straight ahead. Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead, my hands were cold and clammy. Finally the nurse called my name, I felt dizzy as I got up, and, as if I were walking through a swamp, I slowly entered the room.

I lay on the examining table with my eyes and legs tightly closed--locked. Waiting, the doctor impatiently told me to open my legs. The kind nurse in the room was mute. "You obviously opened your legs for your boyfriend," he sneered as he grabbed my knees and pulled them apart. My flaming face snapped silently toward the wall as my outraged heart screamed with humiliation and hate. I don't remember anything else after that. The following month, I let out a deep sigh of relief when I saw it was a woman doctor's turn. She was soothing and gentle and I prayed that she would be the one on call when I went into labor.

Sitting next to Molly on the side of the long table, surrounded by all the other residents at the Thanksgiving Day dinner, I felt wrapped in warmth, but strangely out of place. I told Molly how I felt distant from my family--an outcast--but I still missed them. I had never been away on Thanksgiving before. She responded with her usual caring but emotional detachment. "Just think of it as another day and go to sleep early. Tomorrow it will be all over and you will have saved yourself a lot of grief." I wanted to be grown-up like she was, so I put on a good stiff upper lip, but the night was long. I didn't know how to shut off my emotions. How to stop missing my family. How to stop hating them. How to stop brooding about the child that I knew I would have to give up for adoption. How could I give a child anything except misery living with Grandma?

After I knew that everyone else in the dorm was asleep, I quietly got up and sat on the edge of the bed and watched the snow falling outside my window. Circled by the glow of the single street lamp, I could see the intermittent car tracks slowly disappear.

I was an outcast. A sinner. A person to be shut away in shame. The room began to close in around me. I didn't want to stay in this place and I couldn't leave. Gently, I opened the window slightly and deeply inhaled the cold winter air. My panic subsided. I wanted to be the way I was before. I wanted to be back in school with my friends, raising my hand to questions that were just becoming easy to me. I wanted to see the flicker of pride in my father's eyes when I showed him my report card. I wanted to go back. My tears fell.

I wanted this swollen stomach to go away--to hear it was a nightmare that I could stop pretending was happening. Many times, to block out the painful reality I would pretend that I was recuperating from a bad heart in a convalescent home as my relatives and friends were told. Then I would feel sorry for myself rather than a person to hate.

During that long night, I recalled how once in awhile my sister would come to visit. I was glad to see her but at the same time she plunged me into a state of swirling confusion, bouncing back and forth between the two worlds. I sat next to her, with my bloated body awkwardly perched on the sofa, with puffed ankles and heavy heart, wearing my gray-print old lady house dress. My sister was the way I used to be--thin--concerned about clothes. She was meticulous with her black purse, matching high heel shoes with narrow ankles and perfectly straight stocking seams, tan coat with gold pin and matching earrings and the straight expert outline from her lipstick brush. Each part registered her clean and neat world. The good world that wasn't mine anymore, and I was screaming inside, "I can't stand this anymore," while being polite and smiling to her and really glad she came, but impatiently waiting for her to leave so I could be alone or with the other shameful ones.

She told me that mother wanted me to keep the child and that daddy would go along with whatever was decided. But the two of us knew I could never bring a child into that house.

After she left, I waddled painfully up the double flight of stairs to my dorm desperately trying to ease the emotional pain of reality that she had brought with her.

I watched as the dawn outlined the dorm beds and still I couldn't comprehend where I really was--who I was and what was happening to me. Where was the cheerleader? The athlete? The scholar? I picked up one of my text books from the dresser and slowly put it to my nose, deeply inhaling the smell of days of being good. The smell of respect.

Putting a blanket around my cold shoulders, and noticing how the snow was piling up on the window sill, I felt the baby moving around and shifting position in my stomach. I gently touched and massaged my stomach--my baby. It seemed so unreal, that it wasn't going to happen. In fact, I didn't even know how a baby was born. No one talked about it. Did it come out of my rectum? I was too shy to ask and kept that anxiety in the same pile as so many other unknowns.

Again, as in many other long nights looking out of the window, I would go over all the names that I could think of. Somehow giving her the most beautiful name was very important to me. I spent all my time thinking about names for a girl. I never considered that it could be a boy. Finally, after months of decision making, I decided on Linda Susan. It was the prettiest name of all.

Christmas was another especially hard time to get through. But after our Christmas Dinner each PG was given a huge box. I never even came close to receiving such a large gift in my life. Delighted, I tore open the box and there was an entire layette of baby clothes. I cried. It was the most wonderful gift I had ever received. As I gently touched the little clothes I asked, "Who gave this to us?"

"Volunteers." said a staff member. "These clothes came from women who gave their money and time to make Christmas better for you and your baby."

I was deeply impressed. It was the only present I received that Christmas and it meant a great deal to me. I often think about those women. I hope somehow they knew the importance of their kindness. I had been concerned about clothes for my baby. The Home would probably supply what was needed. But here were my baby's very own clothes and I carefully kept the layette under my bed. From time to time, I lovingly took out the box and touched and folded and refolded the blankets, the bonnet, sweater and other items.

There was something emotionally surreal about the clothes: One part caused me to look at them with love and another part to run away from the reality that in a few weeks, I was going to be a mother. Some afternoons after our assigned jobs, four or five of us PGs would sit around in the dorm, keeping to the house rules about non-identifiable information, dabbling in superficial conversation about food or TV or boys, I would pretend we were in a college dorm, just friends passing time. Pretending and making believe came easy to me. In fact, the social worker had mentioned during one of our meetings that she thought I might not realize what going through labor and giving birth was all about. I shrugged off her insights and lightly laughed as I left the room shaking--trying to push away the cold fear that her statement created in me. I kept quiet about my anxieties. I had never been taught to express how I felt: No one ever spoke about feelings in my house.

Pretending was reinforced by the social worker, the Matron and the nurses who repeatedly told me that I would forget about the baby and being pregnant, as soon as I had given the child up for adoption. I guess they thought some magic veil would cover my mind, my heart, my soul and myself.

I prayed as my due date and sixteenth birthday approached. Please don't be born on my birthday. How could I forget if the child was born on my birthday? I don't recall how the situation came about, but I do remember wanting my braces removed before my baby's birth. Somehow a dentist appointment was made, and on my sixteenth birthday, I was in a dentist's chair. What a relief the braces were off. My mouth felt free and I felt grown up.

Eight days later, at 3 p.m. on Thursday, January 16, 1952, while visiting other PGs, in another dorm, I got up from sitting on the bed to leave when a gush of water spilled down my legs into my shoes.

"Marguerite's going into labor," I heard, as others went hollering through the halls.

"Get the nurse! Her water broke!"

The Florence Crittendon Home comes to life when a PG goes into labor. Everyone identifies. There is an electrifying hush. The air changes. On some level everyone knows a lifetime of suffering has begun. Everyone knows that this is the beginning of going home--of forgetting--of getting back to one's regular clothes, name and life. Everyone knows that everything will always be different. Nothing will be the same again.

Walk! Walk! Was repeated hour after hour, over and over again, as I walked back and forth up and down the hall with the nurse and someone else on the other side of me. As the pain increased, my mind was replaced with fog. I drifted into a zone where I was not really aware of my surroundings. Sounds were muted and seemed far away, as echoes through a tunnel. I saw everything as shades and outlines, as though looking through a thick piece of glass. I was terrified.

There was no way out. There was no way I could say I had changed my mind. I had to go through this. I had to shut everything else out except the job I had to do. Even though I was not given even an aspirin until the actual birth in the Home's delivery room, my body was numb with the pain. With the anxiety. With the fear. With the unknown of what was going to happen. Somewhere deep inside I longed to see Molly. She had promised to be there when I went into labor.

In the labor room bed, I wouldn't scream. I would take the pain. I wanted to be good. I whispered for Molly. She had already had her child and didn't want anyone to be with her. But I needed her, and she knew it. "She's not here," I vaguely heard the nurse say. "But she'll be back soon. We know she wants to be with you," broke through the excruciating pain. I wanted Molly. Molly would make the pain better. Hold on tight to my hand said the nurse. Press! Press!

Thoughts of from where the baby would come out crossed my mind as I was wheeled into the delivery room. I was joyous that the female doctor I had hoped for was there. An anesthesia mask was put over my face and I deeply inhaled. The medication released me from the piercing, wracking, throbbing agony of the past hours.

"Can you believe being sweet sixteen and going through this?" I heard the doctor say to the nurse as I drifted away. "I was so far away from being pregnant," said the doctor. "Dances and parties and school filled my days, with wonderful parents encouraging me all along the way." Tears sprang to my eyes as I vaguely heard the conversation. I wanted to have her life and hated where I was.

"You were so good," I heard the doctor gently say as I came slowly back to life. Lying on the table, I strained through the wall of medication and said, "Thank you." I felt like a good girl and loved being praised for doing a good job.

"You have a perfect little girl." A girl. I smiled. I knew it. How wonderful. I recalled the common knowledge in the Home, that a girl adapted easier to being adopted than a boy. I felt warm and cared for on the delivery room table and fell in love with the doctor as she handed Linda Susan to me. My heart opened and burst with the joy of holding my baby.

While I was pregnant with Linda, I had worried about being able to hold her, because, as I was growing up, I was always nervous about holding a baby. I thought I might drop the child. When I had baby-sitting jobs, I always brought along a friend in case I had to hold the baby. Many times my friends would tease me by holding out the baby and say, "Come on, here, hold the baby." They would laugh as I became rigid and backed away from the child in fright. But when the doctor put Linda in my arms, I held her without any problem. I held her and I loved her.

Molly was all apologies for not being with me while I was in labor. She heard how I had gone through it without making a sound and she was proud of me. I swallowed my deep disappointment and acted like her absence was no big deal. Our relationship had changed. I was absorbed with my baby and Molly didn't have patience with me anymore. She had had her baby two weeks earlier and didn't want any attention. In fact, to avoid taking the chance that she would get the male doctor, she didn't tell anyone she was in labor until her baby was ready to be born and by that time it was too late to call the doctor, so the nurse delivered her child. Instead of staying the usual six weeks after delivery, Molly insisted on going home early. Therefore, by the time I got down to the Mothers' Dorm, Molly was ready to leave.

I felt different. I felt old. I now knew something that women knew. I felt equal with Molly as I moved into the first floor Mother's Dorm. It was like graduation. Suddenly the PGs seemed like children. The mothers had respect. We had gone through the rite of passage. We were on our way home. Mothers were given more freedom. We could eat at different times if we wanted to. We were allowed more outside time if we wanted. But we were not allowed to give our babies their night feeding. I never really knew why. But I knew that I had to feed Linda as many times as possible. I had to squeeze a lifetime into those six weeks that were allotted to me. When the matron refused to allow me to do the night feeding, I asked the night caretaker (who stayed on in the Home since she had had her baby a year earlier) if I could feed Linda. "Just as long as I don't see you," she winked. Ecstatic, each night I sneaked into the dark nursery, warmed Linda's bottle in the kitchen and together we sat, deep in the shadows, in the black rocking chair by a window that only showed snow and bleakness. Except for slight sounds from the caretaker going about her duties, all was quiet.

On our last night together, as usual, I hummed and rocked my child in the dark corner. As she drank from her bottle, I could still smell the baby oil and powder that I had earlier rubbed into her skin. I talked to her softly and at length about why I had to give her up. I needed her to understand that I had to harden my heart. I had to protect her from Grandma. I had to. I had to. As my empty heart filled with love, my tears spilled onto her little face. I repeatedly whispered throughout the night that we will always be connected. Always.

I have to give this gift away, I thought. Tormented by the whole idea of never seeing her again, I had no idea what I was going to do. I kept fluctuating between keeping her and surrendering her to someone else. Someone who will give her everything she needs. Someone who will make her life better. Someone who will protect her from meanness. I knew what I wanted to save her from but how does one do that? How do I do that? Then Grandma's face loomed up

and I knew.

I signed papers that gave Linda Susan permission to contact me when she became eighteen. I also requested that the adoptive parents keep her first name. I needed a thread. A hope. That somewhere, sometime, the possibility would be there for us to see each other again.

The day of parting came the next morning. A social worker I had felt close to had promised she would be there to help me through the ordeal, but was delayed somewhere. Molly had already left the Home. Daddy was waiting outside the glass nursery door, my mother sat outside in the car. No one else was in the nursery except the nurse as I slowly dressed Linda Susan. Lying on the table in front of me she smiled as I slowly wrapped each garment around her. The closer I got to buttoning her sweater the closer I got to feeling as though I was free falling into a pit of darkness. Putting on her bonnet, tying the ribbons around her neck, my head dropped gently down onto her chest as I let out a wail of torment that wracked my body. It came from the same depth, the same wretchedness, the same agony as when the doctor told me I was pregnant.

Everything went black. I faintly heard my wailing sobs as though they were coming from far away. I vaguely became aware that the nurse had put her arm around me and was trying to comfort me, as death came cutting deeply through my heart, twisting and burning, solidifying forever that horrendous moment.

Wrapping the soft cotton and wool blankets around Linda Susan's body seemed to signal the need to harden my heart. The signal to be courageous. The signal to go against nature. The signal to face the world. Dressed in the same yellow suit that I had arrived in five months earlier, with Linda Susan in my arms, I opened the nursery door. Daddy said he wished my sister were here to witness what he saw me going through. Maybe that would keep her from also getting pregnant.

My mother sat in the middle next to Daddy. I sat with my baby next to her as we rode in silence to the adoption agency where I was to sign the final papers and surrender my precious one to a strange social worker.

"You can't do this," said my mother. "Let's take the baby home."

"What about Grandma?" I replied.

"We'll get rid of Grandma."

I didn't believe her.

I was right.