

Reversible Skirt

Excerpt

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A Memoir

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Note: To respect privacy, the names and, in some cases, identifying characteristics of many people mentioned in this book have been changed, author's family excepted.

It was an accident. Not the suicide. I planned that, although there are some things I would change if I were to do it over now. But the mess after the suicide, that was the accident. Amoebic anxiety dividing and rising like yeast in my husband's lower intestine, grief unattended pouring wet cement into the pauses of my children's games, the replacement wife/mother hiding every picture of me in paper bags taped shut and marked, "Do not touch. Alligators inside." I never intended all of that. I thought things would be more bearable if my family were spared my madness. And I thought I would return in penance to our Holy Father.

I was wrong.

Mary Agnes



Gramma

Gramma loves me. I know this by the way she says my name, Laura. She lilts it, tickles the air with it, like I'm a ruby she's just spied glittering in one of the sidewalk cracks in front of her great big red brick apartment building. It's on Birchwood Avenue. And that's where I am right now. Looking out the parlor window. Waiting. It's like I'm standing on a mountain of cream puffs all mine alone because any minute Gramma will call my name and tell me it's time for our special ride. Nobody else says my name the way Gramma does. Not Daddy, not Kathy and Mary Ruth, not Uncle John, and not Mommy, who loves church so much I think maybe she up and moved into one a while back.

Daddy has two ways of saying my name. The first is like it's the punch line to a joke that only he understands, a joke that jiggles him up tall almost all the way out of his shiny black shoes. He looks at me with his gray eyes sparkling like a silver spoon with all the tarnish wiped off. When he's happy like that, he calls me "Shimp," which he says is shrimp and imp put together, or he says "Laura Fadora Fadoo." He stretches that doo out real long like the last note of a song,

and then Kathy and Mary Ruth turn it into “Laura Kapora Kapoo.” They stretch the poo out just as long, and just like that, all the fun of having him say my name is gone.

The second way Daddy says my name is like a ball he’s thrown really hard to get my attention because he wants me to stop doing whatever it is I’m doing. When he says my name this way his face looks harder than the sides of Gramma’s building, and the last thing I want is to scrape up against him. The second is the way he says my name most often. And that makes me mad, but I’m not supposed to ever get mad at Daddy.

Now when Daddy’s around, which isn’t all that often, and when he’s not stretched out asleep with his dark hair mixing in with the tatters of Gramma’s soft green couch, he’s making a commotion. He’s like pots and pans falling from Gramma’s kitchen cupboards, knocking against the stove and table and chairs and banging hard on the wooden patches in the floor where the old linoleum is worn clear off. He echoes all through the building like thunder. But Daddy all the time tells me, “Laura, be quiet! Laura, settle down! Be a good girl now, Laura!” He has to throw my name around a lot to hammer this idea home; it’s about as hard to be quiet as it is to keep my Cracker Jacks from falling out of the box when I open it and turn it upside down looking for the charm hidden inside.

My sisters, Kathy and Mary Ruth, have their blond heads glued together most of the time whispering. And sometimes they set their deep blue eyes on me and say my name either right at the same time or one after the other like echoes in a tunnel. Their lips are moving, but my name seems to come out of their noses like when you snort your milk instead

of swallowing it, and it burns going through your nostrils until you spurt it out, finally, and you're not at all pleased. That's Kathy and Mary Ruth, not at all pleased when they say, "Laura peed in her pants, Gramma," or "Laura's eating bouillon cubes again, Gramma," or "Laura can't sing the ABC song yet, Gramma."

But they always include me in games, morning to night, like me or not. They never tell me I can't play. The first thing we usually do is ride trikes. We have two red ones, all dented and scratched up, and one green one a little bigger and newer, but still pretty banged up too. The green one is mine. I got it for my second birthday, which was way long ago because Gramma says now I'm going on three years old. It was a thrill when Daddy set it down on the sidewalk for the first time and lifted me onto the marshmallow white seat. Oh, what a beauty! The handlebars and body of the trike were deep green; the grips were green and white striped and there were green and white streamers coming out of a little hole in the end of each grip. The tires were all firm and darkest black, and the spokes of the wheels were gleaming in the sunshine. My trike, my very own trike. I couldn't wait to ride it. Until this moment I could only ride one of the red trikes if Kathy and Mary Ruth didn't want it first because they were their trikes, not mine. They had first dibs.

So there I was on my ride. My pride fanned out around me like a great big peacock tail. I gripped the handlebars and stretched my legs. I could reach the top pedal, but the lower one was way beyond reach.

"Look, Daddy, she can't ride it," said Kathy.

"Yeah, it's too big for her," Mary Ruth added.

“Looks like you’re right, girls. Maybe one of you should give it a try,” Daddy said, lifting me off the trike.

“No! No! No!” I shrieked. “My trike. My trike.”

“Oh, settle down, Laura” Daddy said, “What good will it do just sitting on the sidewalk?”

Daddy put me down and turned around, taking a few steps toward Gramma’s front door. Kathy and Mary Ruth raced to the new trike, shoving each other and screaming.

“Lemme,” cried Mary Ruth.

“No. Lemme,” cried Kathy.

I ran to the trike and held on hard to one of the handlebars.

“Mine, mine!” I yelled.

Kathy was holding the other handlebar, and Mary Ruth had hold of the seat. We were kicking and spitting up a storm. Each of us had one hand on the trike and with the free hand was trying to pry the other two off. But each of us was holding her ground.

Daddy spun around, “Stop it, you three. Stop fighting right now,” he commanded.

We were so worked up. We heard him, but kept right on batting and clawing. I had just gotten my teeth on Mary Ruth’s wrist. She’d got hold of one of my pigtails that Gramma had fixed for me, with dark green ribbons to match my trike. And then Daddy’s hands were on us, lifting all three of us at once in one motion.

We were still kicking and screaming as he lined us up against the side of Gramma’s building and said, “Stay there and keep quiet.”

Except for our heavy breathing, we stood still as the row of cars parked along the curb a few feet away.

“You girls can’t act like this, like a pack of wild hyenas, screaming over a little trike,” he continued, standing really tall, both hands on his hips. “Now listen and listen well. I’m going upstairs. And if I hear you fighting again once I get up there, I’m going to come back down and take all three of these trikes away. Do you understand?”

We all looked down at the sidewalk and nodded.

“And you two, keep your hands off Laura’s trike for now,” he said to Kathy and Mary Ruth. “She’ll find out soon enough she’s too small to ride it. Do you understand?”

They nodded their heads.

“Don’t just nod like deaf mutes. Say it out loud.”

“Yes, Daddy, we understand,” they both said.

He turned and walked toward the door, opened it and headed up the stairs.

I wanted to prove everybody wrong. I wanted to prove that I could ride my trike as good as anybody. I marched up to the trike, put my left foot on a pedal and tried to lift my right leg up over the seat so I could get on, but instead, I fell on the sidewalk, scraping my elbow.

“See, she can’t even get on. How’s she gonna ride?” Mary Ruth whispered to Kathy.

“Yeah, she’ll never do it,” Kathy hissed back. They slid down the edge of the building and squatted on the sidewalk, arms folded over their chests, smiling as I fell again and again trying to get on.

Each fall made me more determined to find a way to ride my trike. I took a running jump and landed briefly on the seat and then fell off the other side, scraping myself up some more.

Kathy giggled softly at this and said, "See, she really is too puny for that trike."

"Yeah, when's she gonna give up?" Mary Ruth said.

I tried and fell again, and the trike plopped on top of me. I wiggled out from under. Then I yanked and tugged on different parts of the trike until, finally, it was right side up again. It was a little scratched on the side of the front fender, and the white seat had a big scrape on it too. I dragged it over to the tree growing in the patch of green grass between the sidewalk and the curb, leaned its rear against the trunk and climbed on from the back. And then I cracked a proud smile right there on the big white seat.

"What are you smiling at? You're not going anywhere, Laura Kapora," said Kathy.

"Yeah, you still can't pedal it, Kapoo," Mary Ruth taunted.

So I stretched and stretched until, at last, I got the trike moving by a combination of leaning forward onto the handlebars, batting my feet at the pedals and sliding back onto the seat. After I inched forward two whole sidewalk squares without falling off, I was exhausted, bleeding and bruised and ready to just ride one of the smaller trikes.

"Done now," I announced, sitting tall on the seat. Kathy and Mary Ruth rushed to the trike. Each of them grabbed a handlebar, and I slid off. They started pulling.

"You hafta ask," I said.

"What?" Kathy sneered.

"You hafta ask me. It's my trike," I insisted.

"Okay, Laura," Kathy said, with an ugly thump on the Laura like I'm a big lump in a bedspread she's trying to squish down. "Can we ride it now?"

“Yes,” I said as I leaped onto one of the beat up red trikes. I watched the two of them wrestle until Kathy was on my trike and pedaling fast down the sidewalk. As I watched the green and white streamers flowing in the wind, I was mad that Kathy, Mary Ruth and Daddy were right about the trike being too big for me because I wanted to be right for once. But at least I rode my birthday trike a little bit that day, and I was the one who gave it its first scratch. I pedaled hard, chasing Kathy. Mary Ruth jumped on the other red trike and followed too. Instantly she and I became cops chasing Kathy, the robber, until Gramma called us in for lunch. Daddy and Uncle John, “Unc,” were already at the table. They’re always talking about one sort of project or another. Well, it’s usually Daddy talking and Unc laughing along at his jokes. Unc’s so quiet, you hardly notice him coming and going—the complete opposite of Daddy, and he’s as plump as Daddy is tall and thin. Plus he’s younger than Daddy, but some of his hair is already white, like Gramma’s. Daddy’s hair is all fine, shiny, and dark as night. My hair’s like that too.

Unc lives here with Gramma, Daddy, Kathy, Mary Ruth and me. But I don’t get to see him all that much, because when he’s not at work teaching arithmetic to big kids, he’s in Gramma’s basement making jewelry and pottery and radios. And I don’t go in the basement much. First because basements are dark and creepy and make great homes for spiders and ghosts and other scary things, and second because in Gramma’s basement there’s a big pile of black coal that Daddy and Unc take turns shoveling into this stove with fire inside. I’m afraid it’ll just suck me up if I go near, even if the door’s closed.

Daddy and Unc, they love me. But Gramma loves me more. I know this by the way we melt into each other when I climb into her lap. I lose track of where I end and she begins. Daddy and Unc lift me up high into the air sometimes. They each do it for all three of us in turn when they come in the front door. First Kathy, then Mary Ruth, and then me. I love it when it's my turn, and they spin me around. I laugh and giggle and snort. It's like I'm one of the sparrows outside soaring up, up beyond the trees. Then it's over, fast as a slap, and they're off to work, or to answer a phone call, or to fix a broken window. But Gramma with her voice so kind and hair white and fluffy is always here. It doesn't matter if I make a lot of noise, or if my sticky fingers leave dark spots on the swirling patterns of her silky smooth house dresses. My fingers, my shoes, my spit, my tears are welcome in her lap anytime.

Sometimes she feeds me right in her lap, fruit cocktail in heavy syrup, but not from the can. No, the can she opens in the kitchen with her slow moving, gnarly fingers. They're so different than mine, so lovely to touch. They have wrinkles and veins sticking up and looking like they're trying to tell me a story I can't quite understand, and long hard nails to press with my fingertips. These hands pour all the yummy chunks of pear, peach, apple and just a few cherries into a glass bowl of crystal that fits right into Gramma's palm. Then she sticks in a spoon, a "Laura-sized spoon" she says, because it's small enough for my mouth to get around without scraping my teeth. Then, ever so slowly, she walks into the living room. It's always in the living room on one of her straight-backed upholstered chairs that I climb into her lap

for fruit cocktail, even though in the kitchen there's a table with a white-flecked top and shiny silver trim, legs that are cool against my fingertips, and matching chairs that I like to bounce on. We could feed me fruit cocktail there, but we don't. There's the dining room too, between the kitchen and the living room, with a lace-covered table and chairs with soft dark brown seats with faint golden stripes, and cabinets full of dishes and old stuff—antiques, Gramma calls them—like a box lined with royal blue velvet with Gramma's silver inside. That was a wedding present from long ago when she married my grampa. He went to Heaven when Daddy and Unc were boys, and he never came back. Gramma has a picture of him. He's got brown hair slicked down and a stern look in his eye. He's wearing a green suit that looks a little too tight. We could feed me fruit cocktail there too, with Grampa in his frame, keeping an eye on us, but we don't.

I have another grampa. Grampa O'Neill. He's slow moving like Gramma with a fringe of white hair around a sad, plump face. He used to hold my hand and lead me down the stairs in front of his great big house on Garfield Boulevard. It has giant round columns that hold up the roof above his front porch. There aren't any columns here on Birchwood Avenue. Grampa O'Neill never comes here. He's never sat in Gramma's living room with us where sunlight from Birchwood Avenue flows in, muted by the light layer of soot on the windows and curtains that gives everything inside a snuggly, smoky warm feel. I get plenty of sunshine outside in front, on the sidewalk. Inside I get this lap, this way of being with Gramma, where all the wonderful sounds and smells and rushing of the world stop for a while, until I'm ready to go into the bright again,

which I do several times each day, happily, except for when Gramma says it's time for a nap.

I hate naps. Whenever Gramma says it's nap time I scream and cry and bounce up and down. I don't do it on purpose; it just happens like when Daddy lights a match to a cigarette, it lights up. I light up like that when anybody says it's nap time. But Gramma takes my hand and just walks me to Unc's room, me bouncing up and down all the way. She lifts me into Unc's bed saying, "There we go now." And the funny thing is before she's out of the room I'm asleep.

We don't nap under Unc's covers; we stay on top. And that's not where we sleep at night because, well, at night that's Unc's place. He gets the room all to himself. When Daddy's home he has the living room couch, and Kathy and Mary Ruth have the dining room. Gramma makes neat beds for them by putting dining room chairs together. She covers the seats with pillows to make them nice and soft, and then a sheet folded just so, so each group of chairs is like a miniature bed. Kathy and Mary Ruth climb in, and Gramma covers each of them with another folded sheet and a blanket and gives each of them a pillow for her head too. I don't know why they don't fall out, but they never do. Gramma says it's because they don't roll around as much as I do.

Each night I fall asleep in Gramma's bed. Tucked under the covers, I clutch Binkie, my pink blanket, with both hands, and lean against Gramma's soft breast. But once I'm asleep, Gramma says there's no holding me still. I tumble and roll all over the place. She says it's because I never stop being a scamp, even in my sleep. Every morning I wake up in a little cardboard box at the end of her bed that she's lined with a

soft yellow blanket to cushion my fall. I always fall off the foot of the bed. It's just one of those things that happens sure as the sun rides through the sky. And Gramma leans down and says, "Good morning, Laura, you little rascal, you. In the box again, are you?" Laughing, she reaches her hands down, and I grab hold of her wrists. She lifts me up, puts me onto the floor, and I slide into my day, happy to leave my dreams behind because each night when I'm tossing around in Gramma's bed, I'm having the same dream again and again, and I'm glad it skitters off to wherever dreams go once I'm on the floor in the morning light, ready to play.

It seems like my dream takes place inside of a gigantic bubble that's floating through a midnight blue-black sky and totally disconnected from everything. There are no stars, and it's so cold it makes me shiver to think about it. And the bubble, well, it's like it's been painted, maybe with a grayish sort of paint so it's not shiny, but you can still see through it to the vast outside nothingness. Inside the bubble are Kathy and Mary Ruth and me. Just us. We're all dressed up in bright peacock and fire-colored party dresses and petticoats and pink wool coats that aren't as long as the dresses. We have bright red circles on our cheeks sort of like Raggedy Ann dolls. Yummy cookie crumbs cling to our fingers. There's a sidewalk. It's a little bit cracked but not as much as the one outside Gramma's. And there's a walk up to the front door of a house that I know in the dream is home. Kathy and Mary Ruth have on shiny black party shoes, but mine are sturdier, and white. Baby shoes.

The dream always starts with me trying to catch up with Kathy and Mary Ruth, but they're way ahead. I've just turned

off the sidewalk onto the front walk. Kathy is already at the front door to the house at the end of the walk, her hand on the knob. And Mary Ruth is behind her about to step on the bottom stair. The stairs are concrete, and there aren't many of them, not a whole flight like at Gramma's. Then Kathy turns, runs down the stairs, and says to Mary Ruth, "There's nobody home." Those words. "There's nobody home." When I hear them, it's like someone breathes all the cold air in the entire world into my body so I'm Popsicle cold inside out, and that pushes my heart up through my throat and out my mouth, and it floats off into the sky like a big red star. And while I'm feeling this, Kathy runs off calling, "I'm going 'round back to look." Then Mary Ruth turns to me and says, "There's nobody home."

I just freeze there feeling the cold breathing into me again and my heart getting pushed out again and again. It's so dark, and it feels like the sidewalk and house are spinning, and just off the walk is not solid ground with grass, but something shiny and blue that I know will swallow me up if I fall off the path. I'm stuck. I'm afraid to move, and then Mary Ruth runs up to the door and tries it herself. It doesn't open. She rushes off too, calling to me, "Going back to look," and she disappears.

I'm left there on the path feeling so alone, thinking I probably don't need to check the door since it didn't work for either of my sisters. Then I think I'll go 'round back too, but I'm scared. I can't see the backyard so I'm not sure if it's really there. My mind floods with questions. No answers. I grow more afraid and the bubble spins faster and faster. I feel numb. Then the bubble bursts. After that, I often go

right back to the beginning of the dream. Sometimes I drift into a new dream. Sometimes I wake up, and it's morning. Then I'm relieved that I'm in the cozy box and Gramma is leaning over me.

Gramma makes everything bad disappear. Nothing is scary here on Birchwood Avenue.

We live on the first floor, just one set of stairs up from the sidewalk. The Flanagans are in a building just like Gramma's on one side, and Mrs. Greenman is in the same kind of building on the other side. They live on the first floor of their buildings too. So my world doesn't go up farther than that. I know people live on the upper floors, but I've never met them, and I'm not allowed to crawl up and knock on their doors. But I don't even have to knock at Mrs. Greenman's and the Flanagans'. I just climb up the stairs, put my hand on the doorknob, twist a little, push, and I'm in.

Mrs. Greenman lives alone, except for her two little dogs. They have long bodies and really short legs, and I love to stand over them because it makes me feel big for a change. One of them is solid brown, the same color as Mrs. Greenman's hair. The other is black and brown. He has brown rings around his eyes, so he looks like he's wearing a mask. The dogs have high, tinny barks. Mrs. Greenman's voice is high and tinny too, for a grown-up. But her words are splashed with lonesome, especially when she talks about her children. She shows me these papers, real thin and pretty so you can see the light from the window coming through them. They're full of lovely blue swirls that fly across the pages, like angels. She says they're letters from her daughter who lives far away. She misses her daughter. Sometimes she folds a letter very

slowly making sure it's creased nice and even, and then she sticks it inside her dress at the neckline and slides it down between her sagging skin and her underwear. Then she looks out the window and pats her chest. It makes me so sad I can hardly breathe.

Mrs. Greenman always gives me a piece of chocolate just before I go. She lets me choose from what she calls an assortment—all these candies in a box each surrounded by its own pleated dark brown paper. I know there must be some good ones in her assortments, like chocolate-covered cherries or milk chocolate with caramel inside, but I always get one with this bitter kind of fruit in the middle. After one bite, I have to get outside quick so I can spit it out into the dirt.

The Flanagans' house is completely different than Mrs. Greenman's because it's full of kids like me. I go inside, and one of them will just call to their mom, "Laura's here," and she calls back, "Okay then," and I just fall in with the crowd. My favorite is jumping on their beds. I like to scribble in their coloring books too, and try to dress up dolls, which I'm not all that good at yet. If it's an especially hot day, sometimes they pack everybody up, including me, and we go visit the Lake Michigan waves. One of the biggest kids will always run to let Gramma know they've got me, and we're all heading to the beach.

I love squeezing into their sedan. There are so many of us, sometimes the bigger kids have not one, but two of us smaller kids on their laps, just stacked one on top of each other. Then there are always a couple on the floor in the front and the back squished in. When we reach the beach, we all fold out, and we run through the sand, so soft and warm, and a beautiful

color. It looks like our drinks when Unc every so often, with a wink of one of his bright blue eyes, lets us have just a little bit of his coffee poured into our milk.

I like to race along the shore, hot dog in my hand, because it takes me so long to eat I can't sit still on the blanket the amount of time it would actually take to finish it. I race in and out of the waves as they lap onto the wet sand and pretend my footprints are made by an invisible child, someone who lives in the lake. I think she eats the silvery dead fish that wash up in long, narrow piles on the shore.

I don't know how to swim like some of the big Flanagan kids do, but sometimes one of the big boys will take me on his shoulders and walk out to where the water's over my head. But I'm never worried. They never even pretend to drop me. Gramma doesn't worry either. She says if I don't come around to the kitchen for a while, she knows I'm at the Flanagans'. If it gets to be time for my nap, she sends Kathy or Mary Ruth to fetch me, and I come right back.

All in all, life is really grand here on Birchwood Avenue. Grand is one of Gramma's favorite words. When she's really pleased with something, she says, "Oh, my, my, isn't that grand!" And that's how I feel just about every day. There are so many new things happening, and not too many fights with Kathy or Mary Ruth, and not too many spankings from Daddy or Unc for doing things I don't know are wrong until I do them. I wouldn't want to trade places with anyone, ever.

But yesterday Daddy scooped up Kathy and Mary Ruth and took them and their red suitcases away. I thought he might be taking them back to Mantino, and I'm glad I was wrong.

Kathy and Mary Ruth got stuck there for a while, and I

visited them there with Uncle Dean. He's one of the O'Neills. I think I was living with the O'Neills then, but my memories are like little scraps of paper I find on the floor sometimes. Whatever bigger pieces they came from are long gone. I do remember Aunt Ruth taking Kathy and Mary Ruth for a ride one day. She's an O'Neill too. She came back, but they didn't.

After that it felt like my soul just leaked out through my shoes. I was floating along with no particular thoughts, no wants, no ideas. Just empty. And I stopped talking. Not on purpose. I still made noise, but without Kathy and Mary Ruth listening to me, I just couldn't make word sounds anymore. Funny thing is that nobody seemed to notice. Different people took turns lifting me from one place to another like a figurine that needs to be moved so you can dust a shelf. I didn't care where they put me. One spot was the same as another. Grampa O'Neill came and went from his office downstairs where he helps sick people get better. Way up in one of the bedrooms where I never went was Gramma O'Neill. She's always in bed because her heart is bad. I had to be really quiet around her bad heart. She scares me so much that I forget she's my grandma too.

Then one day Uncle Dean and I were riding in his car. Snow fell outside on the windshield and the wipers went back and forth, back and forth, making a strange wheezing, scraping sound over and over. We traveled for a long time, neither one of us making a sound. Then we stopped in front of the biggest, darkest building I'd ever seen. Just seeing it there like a dungeon above ground behind the snow flurries made me sad. I don't know why. Uncle Dean's shoes left footprints in the light layer of snow behind us as he carried me to the

porch. "This is Mantino, and we're here to visit your sisters," he said as he rang the bell. A nun opened the door and led us into a little room just off the entryway.

Uncle Dean got all stiff and quiet as he put me down on the floor. It seems all the grown-ups in my family get that way whenever a priest or nun is around, which is pretty often because we've got a bunch of them in our family. You never know when one of them is going to pop in and land on the sofa and change everything for a while. I'm not sure that they're real people though, covered in all that black. I don't think they have bodies like everybody else. Another nun walked up to us. Uncle Dean called her Mother Superior. He acted like maybe Mother Superior had Daddy's belt behind her back and any minute might take a whack at him.

Then through the doorway, heading into the room came another nun, with Kathy and Mary Ruth in tow. I ran up to them. I expected them to run up to me, but the nun kept hold of them really tight. I had part of a dog biscuit in the pocket of my coat, and I held it out to them. I had until that moment forgotten how much I like to nibble on dog biscuits. They peered at it really close and smiled. I wondered if they liked dog biscuits too and if they knew where the ones in my pocket came from.

"Say hello to your sisters, Laura," Uncle Dean said.

I nodded to them, since my voice wasn't working. The nun holding on to them let go, and we crowded together there on the floor to examine my stash of biscuit chunks. But then Mother Superior took a glass bell with tiny flowers painted on it from deep within her black robes and shook it to make it jingle. Then she said, "Come on, girls, it's time for lunch."

I couldn't believe it. We hadn't even decided what game to play, let alone play one. We went down the hall to another room. It had two long tables, and there were kids already sitting at them. None of them was smiling. They weren't even moving. And they were all pale, like the faded curtains in Gramma's kitchen. That's how these kids were, except for their eyes. They flashed hard and mean right at me. I'd never seen kids like them before, and I wondered if maybe, like the nuns, they might not be real.

Uncle Dean sat me on top of three phone books piled on a chair so I could reach the table. A chubby nun with a rosy face came through a swinging door. She pushed soup bowls on a wobbly cart, and she put them down, one at each place. Kathy and Mary Ruth were across the table from me, and they weren't sitting together. I wondered why we were sitting all split up. Then Mother Superior led us in saying grace. I bowed my head and listened.

After the "Amen" Mary Ruth said, "I want Laura by me."

Mother Superior tapped her napkin to her lips and frowned. "Now, Mary Ruth, remember your manners. Sit down and eat quietly," she said.

But Mary Ruth said, "I want Laura. I haven't seen her in so long. Why can't we play?"

Mother Superior raised her voice, "Mary Ruth, we've talked about how important it is to behave appropriately. You have to learn to get along like everyone else."

Mary Ruth didn't give up. "She's my sister. Mine!"

"Stop fussing, Mary Ruth! What makes you think you deserve special treatment?" Mother Superior hissed.

I'd never heard anyone talk to Mary Ruth like that. She wasn't just mad like Daddy gets sometimes. Something in her voice and the look in her eyes was saying she didn't like Mary Ruth at all. I wanted Uncle Dean to stand up and do something, but he just sat there next to me and said, "There now, Mary Ruth, do what Mother Superior says."

Mary Ruth started to cry, and Mother Superior said, "Stop crying, Mary Ruth. Only babies cry. You must behave like a young lady."

But Mary Ruth started wailing and screaming. So Mother Superior motioned to the soup nun, and the soup nun grabbed Mary Ruth by the arm, pulled her from her chair, and yanked her to a door that led to a dark hallway.

Mary Ruth screamed, "Lemme go, lemme go!"

The kitchen nun slapped her with a big loud WHAP across the face and dragged her out of the room. Mary Ruth was still screaming, "Lemme go, lemme go! I wanna see my sister. I wanna see my sister."

Slurps, conversations, coughs, sniggers, the weight of bodies shifting in chairs. Everything stopped. All was quiet. We all listened as Mary Ruth's screams got softer and softer until they faded out entirely. I looked up at Uncle Dean and he said, "Don't you start crying too, Laura. Just be good and eat your soup."

I didn't want to eat my soup. I wasn't even hungry when Uncle Dean plunked me down at the table. And the soup looked like dishwater with a few slices of celery floating on top.

Mother Superior fixed her gaze on me. Then she turned to Uncle Dean and said, "Finicky, isn't she?"

He fiddled a little bit with his necktie and said, “Oh, now, I don’t think—”

Mother Superior interrupted, “Well, don’t worry. She’ll get over that in short order once she joins her sisters here.”

I sat there staring at the soup forever, glancing over at Kathy every so often. She was glancing at me too, but it seemed each time I looked she was paler, blending in more and more with the other kids. And then Mother Superior rang her bell and said, “Okay children. Line up.” Without a peep, they formed two perfect rows. Kathy gave me one last look as she took her place in line. And they filed out the door. Uncle Dean picked me up, said his good-byes to Mother Superior, and carried me outside.

On the sidewalk the snow that had held Uncle Dean’s footsteps was gone. He carried me to a playground area under the dark shadow of Mantino and put me in a swing, locking me in with the little wooden bar that slides down. He pushed me. Back and forth I went. I felt like I was disappearing, that I was getting buried in the freezing air, and I didn’t care. I went limp in the swing, with the world spinning around me. I wished I could just spin off to a place where everything was warm, a place where Mantino could not trap little kids and turn them pale, unhappy and mean. I wanted a place where I could play with my sisters all afternoon.

The next time I was in the car with Uncle Dean I thought we were going back to Mantino. My suitcase was packed. I thought he’d be leaving me there, and I’d have to start living on dishwasher soup. Then we pulled up in front of Gramma’s building. And that was it. The day my real life began. Uncle Dean stayed in the hall and put my suitcase just inside the

door. I walked into the living room. Then he turned and left. No good-bye.

And then Gramma said my name that wonderful way only she does. I ran to her and she lifted me up. She looked to the parlor and cried out, "Look, Kathy, Mary Ruth, Laura's here. Isn't that grand?" Kathy and Mary Ruth looked up from a puzzle they had spread out on the floor. They didn't smile. They were different, like they had a halo around them, but it wasn't a bright angel's halo. It was dark. It was a Mantino halo, beaming mean all over them. "Oh," Kathy said, and looked back down at the puzzle. Mary Ruth did the same.

I followed Gramma to the kitchen where she opened the first can of fruit cocktail I'd ever seen.

"You're going to love this, Laura, especially the cherries, don't you think so?" she asked. I didn't answer. She went on as though I had.

"Although, the pears are awfully nice. You like pears, don't you?" I still didn't answer. I would have if I could have.

She talked to me the whole way to the kitchen and back, asking questions as though she expected any second I was going to answer. In the living room she sat me on her lap and urged me to savor each little piece of fruit, paying no mind that I was silent. This went on day after day. She sat me on her lap and talked to me while she fed me soft-boiled egg in the morning, bits of bologna sandwich at lunch, orange peanut-shaped candy in the afternoons, until one morning she asked me, "How many eggs do you want for breakfast, Laura, one or two?"

I said, "Two."

"Two eggs it is then," she replied.

That was it. I've been talking ever since.

Now my sparkly red suitcase is packed again and sitting by the door. Gramma and I are going on our ride. We're having an adventure. The sun's warming me top to bottom. We're all dressed up—white gloves, white hat for her, white ribbons for me. She took extra care with my hair this morning, brushing it soft and slow. She says pretty soon my hair will be long enough for a ponytail. I can't wait for that. I've got white patent leather shoes, too, with straps I can buckle myself, and anklets with scalloped lace folded over looking oh so pretty. Gramma's shoes are black boots that lace up way past her ankles. It takes her a long time to get the laces just so around each little hook. They're the only shoes she ever wears out of the house. Inside she's in floppy slippers that scrape lightly on the floor when she walks. I'm wearing a white dress with little bows of all different colors on it. Kathy and Mary Ruth each have one of these dresses too. Gramma says that Mommy got them for us and that Mommy used to dress us real nice. Gramma's dress has a white lace collar, like my socks, and lace at the end of her sleeves. It's full of lots of different colored flowers, like my different-colored bows. We're as matching as we can possibly be. I'm ready for an adventure. Gramma says today we're going to meet my mother and that Kathy and Mary Ruth are already there.

The doorbell rings. "Time to go, honey," Gramma says. She grabs her purse and my suitcase. And we're off. The cab is like a car. But there's so much room inside it makes me giddy. There are even two little seats you can pull up from the floor to make room for more people. I think I've ridden in something like this before. It was big and shiny and black

with seats just like these that pull up, but I can't remember when it was. Now I wish Kathy and Mary Ruth were here too in this grand cab with Gramma. We could have a tea party and look out the windows as Chicago's sidewalks and buildings fly by.

Even though we have lots of room to spread out in, Gramma and I are snuggled together. She is holding my hands in her hands, like hers are the bread and mine are the peanut butter in a sandwich. Every so often she lifts the one on top and just pats my hands a couple times, ever so gently. Holding hands with Gramma is one of my absolute favorite things, and holding hands with Gramma, in a cab, on a sunny day, on the way to see my mother has to be what Heaven is like.

I have a little smile growing from deep inside me. It's been so long since I've seen Mommy that as far as I'm concerned everything that isn't right between us doesn't matter. Seeing her, being in the same room with her, even if she doesn't want to talk to me, or hold me, or even look at me, that'll be okay now. I'll stay near her on the floor, playing with my toy that makes sparks with a little circle that goes around and around. I'll be quiet and wait for her to come to me. When she does, I'll be sure to smile. I will be happy with anything she does; she doesn't have to be my pal like Gramma.

It didn't used to be okay with me, the way Mommy ignores me, and especially the way she just goes away sometimes with no explanation. People think because I'm so small and don't talk that well, or all the much, that I don't understand what they're saying. But I do understand a lot, and if I don't understand something the grown-ups say, I keep all their words inside. It's like I'm a storage box that's also a puzzle,

and each day I pick up new words and put them in and shake things up, and I remember things, and I think things over and figure a lot of stuff out. It's one of my favorite things to do, figure things out on my own while I'm playing with crayons, or petting Mrs. Greenman's dogs, or chewing one of Gramma's fresh-baked biscuits. I'm always thinking and figuring things out. That's my secret, and I've been trying to figure out what's happened to Mommy. There haven't been many clues.

One time I was alone out front at Gramma's. I was licking a Popsicle and playing with a doll buggy. Kathy and Mary Ruth came down and told me that Mommy was upstairs visiting and they'd gotten to say hi to her.

I thought that if they got to say hi, I ought to be able to say hi too, so I put the Popsicle in the buggy, and began the long climb up the stairs. It seemed long anyway. I was so much smaller then. I crawled up; I couldn't walk up them back then. When I reached the top the door was already open. I stood up and charged into the living room. And there they were, my wonderful Mommy and Daddy at the edge of the living room by the parlor up near a lace-covered window. They faced each other, holding hands. Mommy was dressed all in pink. Pink hat, pink suit, pink purse, even pink shoes. I saw her there looking like Gramma's cameo, only in full color. She was absolutely beautiful, like a princess. I was about to run across into the room when Daddy turned his head to glare at me and said sternly, "Go away, Laura. Your mother can't see you now."

I did manage to stop myself after a step or two, but then I stood there gaping at them. His words just didn't fit my idea of what was supposed to happen. I couldn't believe Mommy

didn't want to see me. I was hoping she'd look over at me, smile, and say something, at least hi. But she kept looking straight ahead at Daddy as though I wasn't there at all. Then Daddy said, raising his voice some, "You heard me, Laura. Your mother can't see you now. She's on her way to church. Now scam."

I still couldn't move. I was taking that in, the fact that Mommy was on her way to church. I was wondering why she wouldn't even turn her head to say hi before she left.

Then Daddy said, "I'm warning you."

He took a step in my direction. I knew I'd better go before he took another step if I didn't want to get whacked all the way to Mrs. Greenman's. So I turned, went out the door, and started to crawl down. I felt so jumbled up. I didn't know what to think. I hoped Mommy would come after me. I moved extra slow to give her a chance to catch up. But with each step down, feeling the rubbed, worn hall carpet on my hands I felt worse and worse. By the time I got back outside with Kathy and Mary Ruth, my Popsicle was just a puddle with a stick on top. I flopped down on the sidewalk.

Kathy and Mary Ruth both asked, "Did you see Mommy? And I replied, "Yup."

I got up, took the handle of my buggy and started pushing it back and forth on the sidewalk.

"Daddy told Gramma that Mommy's back at home. But we can't go. Mommy needs to be by herself for a while before we go back," said Kathy.

"Wouldn't wanna be by myself," Mary Ruth said.

I decided then and there that I wasn't going to like Mommy if she didn't like me back. Not too long after that, Mommy

came with Aunt Ruth to pick Kathy and Mary Ruth and me up and take us home. Mommy didn't even get out of the car. It was Aunt Ruth who rang Gramma's bell to fetch us. She looked especially beautiful with her long red hair tickling her shoulders and not one wrinkle in her robin's-egg blue dress and not one scuff on her matching shoes. She stood so much taller than my Gramma and so much straighter. I clung to Gramma's hand harder than I ever had the whole way down the stairs. When I saw Mommy just staring straight ahead, looking a lot like she did when she was facing Daddy the other day, only this time dressed in a gray dress with white trim, something snapped. I started jumping up and down and screaming, having a real conniption fit. They had to struggle to stuff me into the back seat with Kathy and Mary Ruth.

I watched Aunt Ruth walk around the car and get into the driver's seat. I was sniffing, but not screaming anymore. Before she started the engine she turned her lovely head around, leaned as far as possible into the back seat and said, "You're a very, very bad girl for treating your mother this way, Laura. You should be ashamed of yourself." Mommy just kept staring straight ahead out the front window.

Well, that shut me up. I didn't know I'd been treating my mother any way at all, but at that moment I felt badness just creeping through me. Kathy and Mary Ruth shrank away from me as if this badness was something they could catch. I can't remember a thing about the rest of the ride or if we ever made it home.

But what do I care about that now? Birds are chirping happily, and I see all kinds of flowers blooming in the yards we're passing. It's a grand day! Gramma and I are quiet, still

holding hands as the cab turns down this beautiful street with big trees on each side, leaning toward each other like they're trying to kiss over the cars below. It's so much quieter than the bigger street we turned off.

"Pretty," I say to Gramma.

"Yes, it is, Laura. It's Richmond Street," Gramma replies.

The cab stops in front of a little gray house. "This is it," Gramma says.

The driver opens the door for us, and then helps Gramma up the front stairs, holding her by the elbow. Then he pats me on the head saying, "Good luck, little one."

I'm certain I've never been to this house before, but then Daddy opens the door and says, "Welcome home, Laura."

Gramma and I step inside to a space too small to be a room, but not long enough to be a hall. There's a table about as tall as I am with a vase full of pink carnations in front of me. To the right is a doorway to the living room. Daddy steps through and walks across the room, and stands by a smiling woman leaning against the door to another room. By the window on a couch are Kathy, Mary Ruth and a hunched up man with thin, dark hair and yellowy gray skin. To his right is a big curvy piece of furniture with a bench in front of it. And under that is the most beautiful dog, with long white, black and brown hair. Daddy calls me over. I slip away from Gramma and walk across the room. Daddy is holding the woman's arm, and he says, "Laura, this is your mother. Say hello."

She smiles looking me right in the face and leans down a little toward me and says, "Hello, Laura." I'm feeling really strange because there is my own mother standing in front of me and I don't recognize her.

Lots of things flood into my mind all at once. One thing I know for sure is that Daddy is always right, and if he says this is my mother, she must be. And I think about things changing, like if I put biscuit dough into my mouth and chew, it disappears. It doesn't exist anymore. If Gramma takes some dough and puts it into the oven, when she takes it out, it's fluffy and crusty and golden brown. If I put some dough in a bowl of water, it gets bigger and starts to sort of melt, and the water starts to look like milk. Other things change too, like my trike was shiny, and now it's dull and full of rust. And Kathy, Mary Ruth and I are always changing. Mary Ruth's hair is darker now than Kathy's, and just a bit ago their hair was the same color. We're always growing too. I think Mommy must have changed somehow like this.

Daddy clears his throat in irritation and says, "Say hello to your mother, Laura."

"Hello," I say staring into a face that has sharp, little brown eyes. It's not like I can say for sure how she's different. I don't exactly remember Mommy's eyes because I can't remember looking into them, but I don't think they used to be brown.

"Go sit on the couch now next to Grampa Adams," Daddy says.

I look at the man. He looks so sour, like a pickle. I think of my grampa who just looks out from his picture frame at Gramma's. And I think of Grampa O'Neill. I haven't thought of him in a while. I look over at Mommy and wonder if maybe this Grampa Adams is really a changed Grampa O'Neill, but Daddy didn't say he's Grampa O'Neill, so I think he must be someone different. I sure hope he is.

I sit down next to Grampa Adams. I'm not the least bit inclined to lean into him like I remember leaning into Grampa O'Neill. Grampa Adams is looking at me like I'm a mosquito about to land on him. Then the dog under the curvy thing growls.

"That's Rusty, Laura, Grampa Adams' dog," Daddy says.

Grampa Adams says, "You aah ehh better stay away from ehh him. He no like aah children."

The way Grampa Adams talks, he says the same words, but they're all different sounding. I have to listen hard because he stops and starts at different times than I'm used to.

I don't ask about how Mommy got to be so different, where she was when she was gone or where Grampa Adams came from. This is all just more stuff to figure out, and I'm pretty good at that. I'm thinking all of this over, thinking maybe Gramma will come in and sit next to me, and I'll be more comfortable, but then Daddy says to Gramma, "Well, it's time to get you on home now, Mom."

Gramma hasn't even stepped into the room. I didn't think that meeting Mommy would mean saying goodbye to Gramma, especially this way, without Gramma even coming into the room and having a piece of candy or something. Gramma didn't tell me she was going to leave me here. How can she have ridden so happily all that way with me and known she was just going to slip away? I slide off the couch and take a few steps toward Gramma, thinking if Gramma's going I'm going too, but Daddy says, "Get back on the couch, Laura. You're staying here with your family where you belong."

So I go back to the couch, hoping Gramma will say something to make Daddy change his mind. "Goodbye, my

sweet girls," Gramma says to Kathy, Mary Ruth and me, blowing each of us a kiss with trembling lips and wobbly hand. Then Daddy takes her by the elbow, and they go out of the door.

I almost cry right there on the couch, but I remember how Aunt Ruth said that day when she and Mommy came to pick us up that I was bad for not wanting to leave Gramma and go away with Mommy. I don't want to be bad, so I hold my breath and keep quiet. I feel tears come into my eyes. I scrunch up my face and squeeze the tears out and brush them away with my fingertips. I wipe them off on the bright bow pattern of my dress, and Mommy doesn't notice, thank goodness.

Hank didn't shed one tear when my body was lowered into the ground. He laughed. Oh how he laughed. Guffaws and chortles and gasps came bubbling up, a whirlpool on overdrive. He sucked in his breath, tried to control the force bursting from his core, but he could not. Nor could he feel my hand on his shoulder, telling him everything would work out; he doubted whether I ever really loved him, wished he had fallen for some other girl. And he laughed. Even under sedation, he laughed on and on. It wasn't until he realized our girls were slipping away from him and might be split up forever, each to a different home, that the storm finally receded. He rose from the detritus of our love, reinforced. He gathered his children, locked all memories of me and all notions of romantic love in a cold, hard part of his soul and moved on.

Mary Agnes



Richmond Street

I love Chicago. There are so many reasons why. I didn't know when we moved to Richmond Street that our house, Gramma's building and Grampa O'Neill's home are all really part of the same place. But they are. Knowing that makes them all connected, like Chicago's one giant house, and when I've gone from Garfield Boulevard to Birchwood Avenue to Richmond Street, I haven't gone away so much as moved from one room to another.

I love that Chicago goes on and on and on, block after block after block. I think about how fine our little block is. We go along, Daddy driving Kaisery, our pink Kaiser, Daddy's favorite brand of car. Most days Kaisery is busy speeding Daddy to work or off to a far-away place called Hinsdale where he and Unc are building us a new house. But on just about every Sunday, Kaisery carries us all to Gramma's. There and back again we'll go on forever down wide streets, full of traffic lights, and buses, and cars, and trucks honking their horns, and people rushing along the sidewalks. This is exciting. But then Daddy turns Kaisery onto Richmond Street. It's like a different world, so quiet and peaceful and

Want to read the rest of the book?

Thank you for reading this excerpt. You can purchase *Reversible Skirt* at <http://amzn.to/1DZLQRo> or at your favorite bookseller.

If you buy the book and write a review on Amazon.com, please send a link to the review, along with your email address, to [laura \[at\] wordforest.com](mailto:laura@wordforest.com), and Laura will send you a personal email thank-you note that includes a new, 100-word story.



Laura McHale Holland is the editor and publisher of *Sisters Born, Sisters Found: A Diversity of Voices on Sisterhood*, which won a gold medal in the 2015 Next Generation Indie Book Awards. It contains memoirs, poems, essays and stories from writers across the globe.

Her childhood memoir, *Reversible Skirt*—which illustrates the far-reaching effects a parent's suicide can have on surviving children and other family members—won a silver medal in the 2011 Readers Favorite book awards. She also published the arresting flash fiction collection, *The Ice Cream Vendor's Song*.

To keep up with Laura, subscribe to her newsletter at <http://lauramchaleholland.com> and receive the first four chapters of her sequel in progress to *Reversible Skirt*, tentatively titled *I Will Claim You*.