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# 1

## *Mother, Please Come Home*

I walked quietly to the window and stared into the darkness. My eyes followed the headlights of each passing car. I sat on my brown wooden stool, my hands tucked under my legs, trying desperately to keep warm.

Hours passed. Finally I saw the shadowy form of my mother turn the corner and come up the walk. By the time she reached our second-floor apartment, I had groped through the dark room to meet her.

*I hope she'll be glad to see me.* But as usual she brushed past me and gathered my sister Marie\* into a hug. "Honey, how are you?" she cooed. I stood, my hands stuffed in the pockets of my faded coveralls, waiting for her to love me. But she pushed me away. "What do you want?" she barked. "Would you hug me?" I asked timidly.

"You get out of here!" she barked back.

I was only six. But scenes from that apartment are etched indelibly on my mind. I remember nothing bright. Dark woodwork trimmed the drab walls. A brown overstuffed chair, a bench, and a small rug furnished the front room. The next room was bare except for a bed, shared by Marie and me, that pulled down from the closet.

Each morning my mother left early and was gone until late at night. I can still see her—jet black hair framing her perfectly oval face. Her brown eyes turned stony as she

\*This name has been changed.

shouted, “Doris, take good care of your sister. And remember, don’t turn on the lights!”

Marie was a year younger than I, and my mother was anxious for me to understand one thing clearly: if anything happened to Marie, I would be blamed. The responsibility rested with me.

Marie and I spent our days in the apartment alone. We looked forward to the weekends when Mother would fix us something to eat. On those mornings she slept late, and then the three of us ate together in silence. But most of the time our menu consisted of the only food a six-year-old can fix: peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. I could reach the jar in the pantry. Holding the jar between my knees, I twisted and scraped with a knife to mix the oil and peanut butter. “Don’t spill the oil,” Mother had warned. If I did, I quickly mopped it up with toilet paper. I spread the peanut butter, gouging holes in the bread. If we had no jelly, we gulped it down as best we could.

Occasionally we had milk, but usually we drank water. We had no tin tumblers, only jelly-jar glasses. Having been whipped for breaking one of them, I learned caution. I pulled a chair up to the porcelain sink set the glass under the spout, then turned on the water. With both hands, I passed the glass to Marie, then climbed down.

Our stomachs often growled with hunger. Once I bravely walked to the store, hoping the grocer would give me some food. When he said no, I promised that my mother would pay the next day. I learned that only people with money could have food. Reluctantly, I walked home to the apartment empty-handed—and hungry.

Each evening waiting for my mother, I felt alone, responsible. I was terrified that something awful would happen to me or my sister. The darkness of our dingy apartment fed my childish imagination. *What if Mother doesn’t come home?*

One evening we heard the door open on the first floor of the apartment building. I grabbed a butcher knife from the kitchen, opened the door of our apartment, and saw two drunks standing at the bottom of the stairway. Clutching the knife till my knuckles turned white, I yelled, "Get out! I've got a knife!" with all the fierceness I could muster. Marie hid behind me. They laughed, then left a few moments later.

When I reported the terror to Mother, she shrugged. "So? They didn't come in, did they?" Then she asked the only question that mattered. "Did you have the lights on?"

That's why I put my chair next to the window. The car lights moving along 34th Street in Oakland, California, were more friendly than the haunting darkness of the cold apartment. I was afraid to fall asleep without Mother there. Sometimes Marie would cry out, terrified by strange noises. I would calmly put my arm around her shoulders, telling her not to worry. Inside I was terrified. Night after night I sat in the dark and worried about what Mother would do to me if Marie became sick or was hurt.

When Mother did arrive late in the evening she didn't speak to me but always quickly went to find Marie, who usually had fallen asleep on the couch. "Marie is a pretty girl—she's not like you," my mother would often say. She tucked Marie into bed and kissed her good night. I was on my own.

Without changing my clothes—I had no pajamas—I crawled under the covers next to my sister. Not once did my mother hug me or let me sit on her lap.

Occasionally, my mother would bring a gift for Marie, but never for me. Our clothes were given to us by our friends next door. Our dresses always seemed to be either too small or too big; our trousers were worn bare at the knee, and our shoes pinched our toes. Anything new was given to Marie.

When Mother was home I hid my fears. I would crawl behind a couch where I could sob undetected. Sometimes when my stomach ached, I sat doubled over on the floor. If Mother found me crying, she would spank me.

Late one evening I awoke and Marie was not in bed beside me. I called for Mother, who had come home earlier, but I received no answer. Frantically, I searched the four rooms of our dark apartment. Thinking I had been abandoned, I began to scream. I crouched in a corner crying hysterically. Perhaps an hour passed. Suddenly I heard someone on the stairs. Then I saw Mother at the door with Marie in her arms. She had left me without telling me, and she never explained her disappearance.

One afternoon my mother took Marie and me to visit a friend. Marie sat on my mother's lap while the woman admired my sister's beautiful features. Then, in a not too subtle reference to me, the woman added, "But it's too bad about the other one."

*What is so different about me? Why am I so ugly? Can't anyone love me?* Dejected, I slid off my chair and squatted in a corner. My emotions imprisoned me; no one spoke to me, and I did not care to speak. Even this woman regretted that I had been born.

*Perhaps I can make Mother love me,* I thought. But whenever I put my arm around her, she would push me away. If I tried to climb onto her lap, she would brush me aside like one might do to a friendly but unwanted dog. "Don't do that," she would snap. Then she would add, "And don't call me Mother. Call me Laura."

At the age of six I knew I was unwanted. A disgrace, a burden, a nuisance—I didn't know the meaning of those words, but I felt every ounce of their weight. *I'm ugly, and it's my fault. If only I could do something about it!*

The days dragged on hopelessly in dreary succession.

Marie and I seldom laughed. Mostly we just sat and wondered what was wrong in our world.

A few hundred feet from our apartment was an empty lot where my sister and I played. We had no toys, but used odd objects such as sticks or stones to represent anything our imaginations desired. There we would forget our fears, but not for long.

We sensed that other children had fun. They were happy and carefree, but we found it difficult to enjoy ourselves. Our fleeting fun times could not erase the hurt we knew so well. Something was wrong in our home. We found it hard to be friendly or smile.

My father came to the apartment perhaps three or four times. Although I recall little about him from those visits, I remember his saying how cute Marie was. She was his favorite, too.

One small shaft of light penetrates the dark memories of those days—the corner drugstore. I went as often as I dared. “Hi there, Clara Bow,” the druggist would greet me, gracing me with a nickname. “Want a soda?”

I would say no, for I had no money. But his eyes twinkled with kindness as he lifted me onto a revolving stool and gave me a strawberry soda. *Please see beneath my shabby clothes and see how afraid I am. I hurt!* Although he couldn’t see that deeply, he gave me my first experience of human love.

Those trips to the drugstore soon ended. My mother made a decision that radically affected our future.

Our days in the apartment were over.