

# STEP-FATHER

## A Memoir

Laura Jane Stillman Keister

With footnotes and edits by her daughter, Linda Keister Howe Steiger

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*I was born on Thanksgiving Day 1910 in Deerfield, Ohio, but grew up and spent most of my life in west Akron, Ohio, "The Rubber Capital of the World." During the hottest part of the summer, the choking odor of rubber sometimes woke me in the night. After a while I got used to it, even almost liked it, and now that I am old, I am sometimes seized by a desire to sniff that pungent smell once more before I die. These stories are fictionalized only in that the dialogue is almost all made up, although many of the quotes from my father are verbatim: "If it's not alright now, it will be alright next week" and "Never mind it'll all come out in the wash" are, for example, remarks Papa often made to encourage us. The spirit, tone, and sense of these stories is also accurate, as are the situations and the events portrayed. My own feeling of emotional bereavement and the situation at the lake are both described very much as they seemed to me then. (LJSK)*

## 1

It was late spring 1926 and we were living rent-free in a six-room house at 623 Minerva Place on the southwest side of Akron. By "we" I mean my mother, my older sister Georgia, then a freshman at the University Akron downtown, and myself Laura Jane (Lala or LJ), aged fifteen and a half. "Rent-free" because Uncle Charlie,<sup>1</sup> whose company had built and still owned that house, had not yet mentioned anything about Mama's having to pay rent. He'd installed us there two years earlier (in 1924) to take care of Grandma and Grandpa Taylor in their dotage.<sup>2</sup> But Mama was worried.

Grandma died shortly after we moved in, and recently Grandpa had followed her into the grave. So we three were living there by ourselves, each with a bedroom to herself, a luxury to which we were quite unaccustomed. Heavenly, I thought, but Mama was sure it wouldn't last. She didn't trust her somewhat eccentric brother-in-law, and she was an independent sort of woman. She disliked living off the charity of others. On the other hand, she didn't have much choice: she worked full time, but didn't earn enough money for both house rent and the "extras" she believed necessary for our proper up-bringing.

Uncle Charlie was Aunt Jennie's husband. Aunt Jennie was my mother's oldest sister. Though a strange man, Uncle Charlie seemed to have plenty of money as well as houses to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Esselburn with his friend George Ellis founded the Akron real estate and insurance firm of Esselburn & Ellis in 1887. Uncle Charlie married Aunt Jennie in 1895.

<sup>2</sup> Grandpa: William Watson Taylor, b. 29 August 1845, d. 23 May 1926. Grandma: Mary Ann Sanford, b. 13 Mar 1849, d. 25 Nov. 1924. They married 5 June 1870, and produced five daughters, our aunts: "Jennie" (b. 1871, christened Maria Jane), Mary Ann (b. 1873, m. Hiram Stroh), Laura (my mother, b. 1874, m. 1903 George Baylis Stillman, b. 1852), Melinda or "Minnie" (b. 1876, see note 5), and Gertrude or "Gertie" (b. 1879, m. Billy Wilson, no children, d. 1931 after being an invalid for 20 yrs according to her obit in the *Akron Beacon Journal*, see note 7).

spare.<sup>3</sup> So when Grandma and Grandpa got too old to take care of themselves, he and Aunt Jennie developed a plan that solved two family problems at once: what to do about Charlie's elderly in-laws and what to do about his potentially homeless, widowed sister-in-law – Mama – and her two children – us. Up until we moved into the house on Minerva Place, we'd been living with Aunt Minnie, but then she decided to sell her house, which is another story, and we had no place to go, again.

I should explain. When Papa died in November 1916, he left Mama destitute.<sup>4</sup> I was six; my sister Georgia was nine. It seemed reasonable that the three of us should go live with Mama's younger sister, Aunt Minnie. Aunt Minnie was also a widow,<sup>5</sup> and she was not destitute. Her husband left her with a house and investments. She also had a son (by a previous marriage), my cousin Robert, or Bob. Robert was about fourteen when we moved into Minnie's house. We lived there for eight years.



*This is us, Georgia and Laura Jane, in the yard of Aunt Minnie's house at 148 Hollinger in 1922.*

Dear Aunt Minnie! A jolly, frivolous, light-hearted soul, doomed to end up poor herself and dependent on sisters who considered her silly and improvident. Aunt Minnie, you see, doted on her son Robert and indulged his every whim. Gradually, she cashed in her husband's bonds and mortgages to buy him whatever his heart desired. Uncle Charlie tried to stop her, but Minnie did as she pleased. And, in the end, she even sold her house – the one we were living in with her – to get the money she needed to build Bob a new house of his own.

*That was the situation that brought us to the house on Minerva Place where we*

took care of Grandma and Grandpa instead of paying rent. Clearly, Aunt Jennie and Uncle Charlie didn't want Grandma and Grandpa – or us – living with *them*.

It seems incredible to me now that Papa, a physician, should have left behind neither life insurance nor savings. Papa was a charming man, but a notoriously bad businessman. Money simply drifted through his fingers. But no life insurance?! Mama could hardly believe it, and at intervals throughout her life would exclaim about its absence with much resentment. She was sure that if Papa had had life insurance, our lives would have been quite different<sup>6</sup>. I believe it was the only thing she held against Papa. In all other ways she represented him to us as a

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<sup>3</sup> According to family lore, Charles Esselburn died rich, only no one ever found his money, because it was said he had deposited it into savings accounts all over the country under false names. Lawyers consumed what money the family knew about looking for more. My cousin Paul Esselburn told me all he ever received from his father's estate was a grandfather's clock that, when opened, was filled with old shoes!

<sup>4</sup> Mother (b. 1874) was in fact the second wife of George Baylis Stillman (b. 1852, d. 1916).

<sup>5</sup> Minnie married Charles Weiss (or Wise) sometime before 1900; her only son Robert was born in 1902. Charles left her after a while and went off to California. After their divorce, Minnie married a second time. John Moore was a downtown Akron merchant, but Moore didn't live long. They had no children together. He died in 1915.

<sup>6</sup> Actually, many years later, after Mama herself died, we did find a fully paid up life insurance policy, but it had been cashed in before Papa's death, perhaps secretly, to pay for one of his schemes.

paragon.

Papa was twenty-two years older than Mama, so he wasn't seeking treatment t exactly young when he died. He was sixty-four. He died in Buffalo where he'd gone from his first cousin, a physician, for his bleeding ulcer. After Papa died, Mama went to work for one of Akron's rubber companies and, as I have said, we moved in with Aunt Minnie. Mama may have contributed something into the household kitty, but she did not pay regular rent. Instead, she kept house for Minnie. I don't recall Mama ever suggesting that she felt as though she were taking charity from her sister, and Aunt Minnie always seemed genuinely glad to have us around.

Mama must have had some hints before Minnie sold her house out from under us. She must have suspected our living with Aunt Minnie was not going to last forever. In 1921, when cousin Bob was almost twenty, Aunt Minnie bought him a Mitchell, a splendid seven-passenger touring car with a collapsible top that pinched one's fingers. When it rained, you hurried to put up the side-curtains, making a delightful, almost cozy tent, which leaked. Bob drove his mother out to California and back in that Mitchell. They went to California to find Bob's father, Aunt Minnie's first husband, Charles Wise, the one who left her before she married Mr. Moore, who had died on her. They did find Bob's father, but that trip, including all the side-trips they made, took well over a year and seriously depleted Minnie's capital.

Then when they got back to Akron, Aunt Minnie sent Bob off to some pricey private school he fancied. When he tired of that, she bought him an expensive correspondence course--and another car. Pretty soon she began talking about Bob's getting married. She said she had to sell her house to get the money to build another house for Bob, since she couldn't touch what she'd settled for him in her will.<sup>7</sup> This was her reasoning at any rate for her decision to leave us without a place to live. It also made Aunt Minnie herself homeless. I'm not sure why she didn't go to live with her son at this point; but perhaps she didn't want to lose her independence, or perhaps Bob was opposed to the idea. I do remember the issue was still around, six years later when Bob finally did marry Connie. By this time Aunt Minnie was seeing Mr. Tenney, and Mr. Tenney was a married man. Connie refused to allow Aunt Minnie -- or Mr. Tenney for that matter--into her house after that. Their relationship was immoral she said. But that is yet another story.

At any rate, for the rest of her life Aunt Minnie existed as a live-in dressmaker, imposing on one of her four sisters when she had between "situations." I can remember Mama, years later, having worked out how to have a home of her own, hanging up the phone with a sigh, "Well, Min's coming again." She'd shrug, and say to no one in particular, "What can I do? She has nowhere to go." She never turned Aunt Minnie away. As I look back, it strikes me that my aunt was a bit like Balzac's old Father Goriot, certainly she came to no better end.

Dear Aunt Minnie was not a difficult person to have around; she would sleep anywhere. When her stay was short -- she bedded down in the attic or on a couch. But sometimes she stayed for months. Then Mother would make me move in with Georgia so Minnie could have my room. In return for her board, however, Minnie made us clothes, or she made-over hand-me-downs from Aunt Jennie. And she taught Georgia and me how to sew.

Which all explains why in 1924, when the offer came from Uncle Charlie and Aunt Jennie, Mama conquered her pride and accepted the house on Minerva Place rent-free for taking care of the old people. Secretly I think Mama always thought of this arrangement as pure charity, even though, as she confided to us several times that Uncle Charlie would never allow Grandma or Grandpa to live with *him*, because, you see, Grandpa drank.

It was true.

And after Grandma died Grandpa's drinking got worse. Not that I minded very much really, except for the time Grandpa came home fifteen minutes before the start of our Halloween party, plopped himself down in a chair beside the front door, and falling asleep there for all to see with his fly unbuttoned. My sister Georgia, however, was thoroughly embarrassed by his regular drunkenness, pretending she didn't know who he was when she passed him staggering down the street. Poor Grandpa, Mama explained, was only mourning my grandmother. He died two

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, Bob didn't marry Connie, his first wife, until 1927, so this "excuse" doesn't really explain it.

years after Grandma. Mama always said it was of a broken heart.

Anyhow, that's how we came to be there, the three of us, alone in that six-room house on Minerva Place. It was a short, dead-end street in west Akron, a street lined with young maple trees. Uncle Charlie had built a number of houses on Minerva Place, all more or less identical inside and outside, except that some had porches on the front and some had porches on the side. As far as I know, Uncle Charlie never proposed we pay rent, but Mama did brood. She knew she could never afford that nice house on her secretary's salary. That was barely enough to pay for groceries, carfare, and the other "necessaries" of our life, much less rent. Not that Mama was extravagant, or at least *I* never thought so, with our hand-me-downs and home-made clothes. Every fall Aunt Jennie would buy us each a pair of shoes for school, and at Christmas she would present us each with a beautiful new, wool dress. I was happy, quite oblivious to the worries that ground on Mama, oblivious that is until Mama at last "took action."

At the time, I was oblivious too to most of what I've just written about, oblivious that is until that late spring evening when Mama summoned Georgia and me into the living room for a conference. She had something she wanted to discuss with us--something to consult us about. Mama looked solemn, very serious. Georgia and I sat up straight, expecting something momentous. The blue flames leapt from the fake logs in the gas fireplace. The matter concerned *us* almost as much as herself, Mama said, stumbling around for words as though she didn't want to come right out with whatever it was.

Mama was forty-nine years old in 1926, but still looked young and attractive. Short of stature, inclined to plumpness, she had always been pretty, certainly she was the prettiest of the five girls in her family. She had straight, even features and snappy black eyes, although perhaps a bit too much chin and rather thin lips. Thick, dark, wavy hair, which I envied. She held herself well and looked very smart when dressed up. She must have been blessed too with a good measure of energy, for she lived a life the very thought of which fatigues me now. No husband. Two young daughters. No financial resources with which to hire help. And she worked full-time as a secretary in the chemical lab at B.F. Goodrich Co.



Laura Taylor Stillman  
date unknown

In fact, Mama was the only one of her sisters who not only finished high school, but who finished by taking the commercial course— as if she foresaw some future need. And she went right to work after graduating, acquiring some shop experience in a pharmacy before meeting and marrying Papa. So when Papa died in 1916, she was *ready*.

Six days a week for ten years, Mama traveled back and forth to "The Goodrich" (as it was called in Akron), rising at five in the morning to iron our school middies, trudging through rain or snow to catch the street car or bus, for we had no car, and often standing up all the way to work. On the way home (more standing) there was the shopping to do, then a walk home of several blocks from the store

lugging purchases, climaxed by the daily attack from her children as she entered the house. I remember how we screamed when she arrived, running to throw arms around her as she came through the door, and her mild protests. "Now girls. Let me get my coat off, will you? Wait till I put the groceries down." Kisses. Hugs. Everybody talking at once. She must have been ready to drop, but instead she cooked.

After dinner Mama often did another full day's work: at first it was keeping house for Aunt Minnie; then it was taking care of Grandma and Grandpa. Then there was the year Minnie and Bob went off to California, that year we rented most of the house to a Canadian chemist and his family, for I suppose Mama needed the extra income. That year we had to live in the attic, which could not have been easy for Mama. The attic was one vast room, big enough for the double bed

that Georgia and I shared, a table, and all the equipment needed for cooking and eating. Mama kept one room for herself on the second floor, her sitting room and bedroom.

She did not keep house for the Canadians, but those living arrangements must have been draining. Every day after work, she carried the groceries up two flights of stairs into the attic where she cooked dinner, then after dinner she carried all the dirty dishes downstairs to her bathroom where she washed them and then them all back upstairs to put them away. In winter our ice box was a wooden crate nailed outside the window. What we did for refrigeration in the summer I cannot remember. After dinner Mama washed and mended our clothes, fixed our food for the next morning, all the while listening to our chatter, responding, attending, advising, and mothering us. These were all things our friends and cousins mothers did during the daytime. Mama rarely got to bed before eleven or twelve, and next morning it started all over again.

On Saturdays Mama worked until noon, sometimes taking one or the other of us to work with her. I found it exciting to be led through those stinking caves full of buzzing, clanking machinery and into the sanctuary of that great, light-filled laboratory. She would sit me on a high stool at one of the long lab tables, sometimes with a coloring book and some crayons. But I didn't need these things: it was amusement enough for me to watch the men and women dressed in long rubber aprons, puttering about with their glassware and the Bunsen burners, making pungent, bitter smells. The lab workers treated me like a visiting princess, bringing me gifts and tributes: bits of lumpy yellow rubber, balls of rubber bands, snippets of tubing, tiny squares of sheeting covered with powder. As I played, Mother sat typing in her glass enclosed office.

When she got off, we'd go downtown, sometimes it was for swimming lessons at the YWCA on High Street. That wasn't an opportunity for her to relax, however, for Mama took the lessons too! Then on Sundays, we all went to Sunday school and then church, while our dinner cooked in a device called a fireless cooker, a long wooden box whose lid covered two deep wells into which you dropped hot stones before inserting the kettles full of food.

Sometimes after school during the week, Georgia and I would meet Mama downtown, eat dinner in the Y's cafeteria, then go to a movie. Friday nights after dinner we often walked the three blocks to the Five Points Theater, where the serials were shown. These were mostly about spies and soldiers and Red Cross nurses in the war. The heroine of one serial was, I recall, much given to lying. Her lies, however, were always foiled as whenever she lied a red circle appeared on the back of her wrist; thus she was known as "The Red Circle Girl." Movies were moral in those days.

In other words, when I look back, it seems we were always busy, and, despite Mama's constant worrying about money, also rather privileged. Aunt Jennie paid for our piano lessons, but Mother supported our dancing lessons, our summer camp sessions, some ecstatic birthday parties, and even live theater performances, presented by a local stock company called The Pauline MacLean Players. The Players performed all summer long at the Colonial Theater on Main Street downtown, and we went every Saturday afternoon. Once, during her *two* week vacation (generous for the time, and the period that we usually spent turning the house upside down for its annual cleaning) Mama rented a cottage at the nearby Portage Lakes. There we learned how to row a boat and catch bluegills.

How Mama found the strength to do everything that she did, much less pay for it all, I don't know, although it's obvious to me now why she worried what would happen to our lives if she were forced to pay rent. In her old age she hinted at her secret – her source of strength. It was a delight in her own independence, an independence remarkable for women of those times. "That was the happiest time of my life," she would say dreamily. "We had such a good time, didn't we? We used to do as we pleased."

"Your father would never have allowed those dancing lessons," she told me once. "Nor the overalls you wore when you were little. Remember those?"

"Why not?" I asked once.

"Oh, he had his ideas. You girls wouldn't have been so free if he had lived. I can tell you that.

"So, it was the freedom that energized her I believe, the intoxicating sense of being one's own boss, of earning one's own living, of spending one's own money the way one wanted to. It was

exhilarating, sustaining; but she must have been aware, it would not last forever. There was the question of money, and she must have felt herself getting old. And tired.

I remember vague ailments beginning to attack around that time. "Sick headaches" confined her to bed for a day at a time. Migraines? She grew increasingly anxious. What would happen to us, to her, if (and when) she could no longer go to work? There was no Social Security then, no Medicare; she had no pension, and she didn't make enough money to put by any savings. Nor did she have a son to support her (not that that had helped Minnie much); there were just we two girls. Being dependent on her daughters or, worse, on their husbands, was a prospect both unpalatable and unreliable for Mama. I am certain such thoughts haunted her, and that these were the ghosts that led us to that evening consultation in front of the flickering light of the gas log.

"You know," she said, finding her words at last. "You girls are growing up. You'll be leaving home before long."

I was only fifteen and a half. I was shocked by that idea, and worried. No wish to leave home had ever occurred to me. Was she going to throw us out?

"I mean," Mother explained, "You'll get married and go off with your husbands pretty soon and then where will I be?"

"Not me," I said indignantly. "I'm *never* going to get married."

In fact, I was madly in love at the time, but only in an abstract way—I had never spoken to the object of my adoration nor did I ever expect to. Anyhow, I liked my life the way it was; I doubt I had ever thought in any practical way about my own future. I believe I had always just assumed I would live with my mother whom I loved uncritically. I was a child, emotionally immature. No idea of rebelling against my parent ever crossed my mind.

Mama laughed. "Oh, yes, you will. Just wait. Some boy will come along. You'll fall in love and you'll be gone."

I shook my head. "Not me. I'm going to get a job and work. Like you, Mama."

"Stop arguing," said Georgia. "Let Mama say what she wants to say."

I glared at her. Georgia was always trying to boss me. "Well, are *you* going to get married?" I asked my sister.

"How do I know?" Georgia responded. "That depends on who asks me. Maybe nobody will."

My sister was convinced that she was ugly and hence unmarriageable. True, she wasn't conventionally pretty, but she was neither deformed nor ugly. Not at all. My sister had a mobile, changeable, interesting face; large brown eyes; dark curly hair; and gestures full of intensity and vivacity. Gripped by one of her many enthusiasms, she *glowed*. She *was* beautiful, I thought. Georgia dressed well too. Better than I. She had unerring taste in clothes, although her looks never seemed to satisfy her, viewing the mirror as an instrument of torture.

I did not consider myself pretty either, of course, but I don't recall worrying about my looks as much as Georgia did. My hair was straight, fine, unmanageable. My shoulders were round. I had a tendency towards sloppiness. All circumstances that spoiled the look of my clothes. My face was as plain as my sister's I thought, although Georgia said because my nose I had the advantage in the looks department.

I guess neither of us really believed anyone would want to marry either of us.

"Oh, somebody will ask you all right," said Mama from the heights of her experience. "You may not think so now, but you'll both get married. You'll both go off and leave me."

Why was Mama doing this? Tearing our family apart for no reason at all? Georgia appeared calm in the face of this disaster. I felt like crying.

"Then I'll be alone, and you know I have no savings. I can't go on working forever," said Mama. "I'm getting too old."

"No you're not," I shouted out.

What a shocking idea—Mama, old?

"Be quiet and let her finish," said Georgia.

Mama gave me her nicest smile, and then plunged to the heart of the matter. "What would you girls think if I got married?"

I was struck dumb!

I stared at her, horrified.

Georgia, however, smiled. Her large expressive eyes lit with excitement. "To Mr. Butcher?" she asked – obviously she was not only in on the business, but also she *liked* it.

I felt sick.

Mother nodded shyly. "To Mr. Butcher," she said. "He wants me to marry him. But I won't do it unless you girls approve. I told him I'd think about it, but what I meant was, I didn't know how you'd feel about it. What do you think?"

Georgia clapped her hands. "Oh Mother! I think it would be wonderful."

I was stunned. How could Georgia be so unperceptive? Or was my sister lying? Putting on one of her maturity acts? After all she was a college girl. I wondered, was she already thinking of leaving home? Certainly it was not possible she actually *liked* Mr. Butcher. I stared into the gas fire, unable to speak.

"Do you?" Mama said to Georgia. "Do you really think it would work? And you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not," said Georgia. "He's a terribly nice man."

Now, I thought Mr. Butcher actually *was* ugly, so perhaps, the thought crossed my mind, Georgia liked him because he was ugly too. Well, I certainly didn't *like* him. I didn't exactly hate him – I didn't know him well enough for that – but I did not trust him. I had no specific reasons for this, just feelings I couldn't explain, vague, slippery intuitions that Mr. Butcher was not "our kind" of person. Of this I was very sure.

Charles Butcher was our neighbor; he lived, with his very ancient mother, two houses down the street from us, at number 641 Minerva Place. Mr. Butcher taught business classes at West High where I was currently a sophomore, although I had had no contact with him there as I was taking classical rather than commercial courses. Mr. Butcher headed the Commercial Department and, in fact, was an important and respected figure at school, treated with much deference. He often spoke in school assembly, so I was acquainted with his speaking manner, a manner I considered slow, stodgy, authoritarian, and totally lacking in humor. His topics were boring too: the savings program, the importance of taking typing, or what would happen to people caught talking in the hall during class time. Ugh.

His appearance frightened me too. Mr. Butcher had a long upper lip that resembled, I told myself, an ape's. He wore a pair of prim, gold-rimmed spectacles, spectacles that mirrored what I later found to be a profound primness of mind. Thinning gray hair, gray suit, gray behavior. He could appear genial on occasion, bowing and smiling at those he wanted to impress or in response to some flattery. To be fair, Mr. Butcher did have his fans--but *I* always thought of him as the emblematic nineteenth-century schoolmaster, birch rod behind back. Once I'd seen him literally drag a boy through the halls. To my mother, Mr. Butcher must have seemed a very good catch--a nice, safe, hard-working, by the ear. This is who my mother now proposed to marry?!

Among the fourteen households on Minerva Place, his was also respected, for Mr. Butcher was the Old Settler, the Dean of the Street. His house had the largest back yard – one with a vegetable garden; the only double garage – which housed a Buick; and the only front yard tree. In every way, his property seemed better than anyone else's, perhaps because he took better care of it than most, replacing things when they broke, regularly making small carpentry or electrical improvements, painting things up.

His neighbors, working class people of marginal means, including several rubber workers, a shipping clerk, a milkman--people who slipped about from one job to another. They all looked up to him, a teacher, a scholar, a man with brains. He possessed what they did not – an education. It is hard now to explain just how respected, if not revered, teachers were back then. Certainly, the way his neighbors greeted him on the street was enough to keep the ego of this man I did not like at all in a well-battered condition good provider, a man with an education, a house, and a car, a man whose importance in the community would reflect well on his wife.

Of course, I had been aware for some time that Mr. Butcher took Mama out riding in his Buick. They went to movies and restaurants together, and Mama twice invited him home for

Sunday dinner. But I thought little about any of this, for Mama had always had a beaux or two, like Aunt Minnie. Never before had she proposed to marry one of them. And Mr. Butcher was the first one I had actively disliked. Not that I ever mentioned this to Mama.

"Well, Lala," said Mama, using her pet name for me. "And what do you think?"

I squirmed. I stared into the fire. I cleared my throat.

"I, well, uh -- I don't know."

Could I be wrong about Mr.. Butcher?

"What do you mean, you don't know?" said Georgia severely. "Don't you want Mama to be happy?"

"Now, Georgia. That's not the question. What's the matter, Laura Jane? Don't you like Mr. Butcher?"

I shook my head, kept my eyes down.

"Why not?" said Georgia. "He's a *terribly* nice man."

"What don't you like about him, honey?" asked Mama. She seemed puzzled.

"I don't know. I just don't like him." I floundered. "I... he... he's too... well, you said it .... I don't *like* him."

Mama looked grave. "I wonder why..." she said. "Did he do something you didn't like? There must be something."

I shook my head again. "No" I said weakly. "It's just a feeling. I just don't *like* him. Oh, I wish you wouldn't marry him, Mama."

"Do you realize what you're saying?" cried Georgia. "How can you be so selfish, Laura Jane? Here Mama has a chance to marry somebody really nice and reliable, somebody who'll take care of her so maybe she can stop going to work. He's a terribly nice man, really. You don't even know him." (Yes. That *was* the trouble, I remember thinking to myself.) "I don't think you have any *right* to raise objections."

Mama looked worried. "Well," she said. "I did ask what she thought, Georgia. You wouldn't want her to tell a story." Mother never said "lie", a word in her opinion almost as bad as "damn."

I said nothing. How *could* I stand in the way, maybe ruin Mama's future, and on such flimsy grounds as feelings?

"I just wish you wouldn't," I repeated. "I have this feeling . . . He' s not. . . He' s not. . . ." Not our sort of people was what I wanted to say, but all I said was something stupid, albeit true. "I'm afraid of him."

Oh, how they laughed at me. Afraid of Mr. Butcher? They howled. Afraid of that nice man who is so polite to everyone?

I should have said, Beware of over-polite people. But of course I didn't.

"You just don't know him yet," said Mama. "Wait till you get acquainted. You'll learn to love him. And he'll be a good father to you."

I didn't want a father, or need one.

"If I didn't think so," Mama continued. "I won't consider marrying him."

And so they talked and talked at me all evening, about how nice it would be to have somebody around who could fix things – the furnace, for example, in the morning, so Mama wouldn't have to do it – how nice to have a car to bring home the groceries – the store was so far to walk, carrying heavy bags in winter.

What they said was true, and I had no response for any of it. But I remained sullen, repeating stupidly only that I didn't like him. I hadn't the sophistication to explain how I thought him an unctuous, vain, egotistical, authoritarian hypocrite. In fact, I didn't really know this then; I just felt it. I trusted my feelings, but I could not defend them.

So, in the end, despite what Mama said, I was overruled, forced to withdraw my "no" vote. Mama assured me over and over that everything would be all right, that once I got to know him, I would feel differently.

Mama and Mr. Butcher were married that June, Mama looking divine in a rose-colored dress and hat, Mr. Butcher all smiles in a brand new gray suit, with flower in lapel. We saw them off on their honeymoon from the old Union Depot downtown. They took the train for Atlantic City.

They were gone for a week and a half.

Their marriage ceremony had been held, not in our own familiar, relaxed and cheerful West Congregational Church, but in the small, cramped, dark Westlawn Methodist Church frequented by Mr. Butcher and his mother. It was a portent.

## 2

When Mama and Mr. Butcher returned from their wedding trip to Atlantic City, our little family officially moved down the block into number 641. We went to stay there with Mr. Butcher's mother right after the wedding.

Mr. Butcher had personally polished the place up for us before they left. The hard wood floors glittered with shellac; the windows gleamed. But for me, the shiny surfaces did not make up for the psychic emanation of dust and mold given off by the old lady, Mr. Butcher's ancient mother, who we had been instructed to call "Grandma Butcher."

During that first week we quickly discovered the lay of the land. The kitchen was Grandma Butcher's kingdom, and her private property. She made this clear to Georgia and me immediately. Alas, Mr. Butcher's polishing had not intruded to the kitchen at all. It was full of filthy corners, the dishes in the cupboards only half clean. Georgia, more sensitive than I to such matters, tactfully tried to wash the dishes that first evening, but her efforts were rudely repulsed. Grandma Butcher wanted no one but herself to do a thing in *her* kitchen.

We tried the ruse of getting up early, so we could prepare our own breakfasts and eat in peace. But that wasn't possible. Grandma Butcher was *always* ahead of us, puttering about. If we made any moves to take care of our own needs, she snatched things out of our hands.

On our first morning, Georgia and I were sharply instructed. It was a Sunday, a day when we usually ate something special, like pancakes or French toast, which Mother would make for us while we comfortably read the funnies. Coming downstairs late that morning, I followed Georgia to the kitchen door. Grandma Butcher was already peeling potatoes at the sink.

"Good Morning," said Georgia brightly. "I guess we over slept a little."

The old lady muttered something. She neither smiled nor looked up. Her mottled, yellow-gray hair, parted in the middle and pinned up in a thin little bun, was drawn back so tightly that it pulled at the transparent skin of her temples. The blue veins were visible. Did it hurt? I wondered to myself. I remember being aware of the contour of her skull, of her fingers, thin as sticks. The rest of her tiny body was covered with a long sleeved, floor length, cotton dress straight out of Dickens. Over this dress hung a full length, bibbed apron, topped by a lavender, hand-knit hug-me-tight. She wore little gold-rimmed glasses, but she remained bent over the sink as though severely near-sighted.

Georgia crossed the room and looked out the window. "It's going to be a lovely day, isn't it?" she remarked.

Grandma Butcher gave her a contemptuous look. "It already *is* a lovely day." She sniffed.

"Well, yes. That's what I meant," said Georgia, laughing nervously. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

Grandma Butcher harrumphed without looking up. Behind her back, Georgia raised her eyebrows at me. Clearly there would be no pancakes or French toast today—unless we made them ourselves.

"Well," said Georgia. "Is it okay if we make a piece of toast or something before we go to church?"

"Oh. Are we going to church?" I asked stupidly. It was weeks since either of us had been to church. Georgia signaled me to silence.

"Of course we are. And we haven't much time. *We* don't want to be late, do we, Laura Jane?"

Grandma Butcher dried her hands on her apron. "It's too late to be eating," she said bitterly. "Everything's washed up." She opened the oven, struck a match, and lit the broiler.

"I know," said Georgia in her best ingratiating manner. "And you mustn't bother." She looked around the kitchen. "We can get our own breakfast. Do you happen to know where Mother's toaster is? I know she brought it along."

Grandma Butcher mumbled something unintelligible, took the bread out of the bread box, cut off two slices, and laid them in the oven as we watched. Her gray eye-brows beetled over the cavities of her sunken eyes. She sniffed a beak-like nose and seemed to smirk in contempt. I stared at the two long gray hairs protruding from that sharp chin and thought of witches. The milky film over her diluted blue eyes looked positively evil.

To be fair, she probably had cataracts, and arthritis, and God knows what other aches and pains of old age, but I was young and quite unsympathetic with such explanations. I was too afraid to open my mouth.

"Is that for us?" asked Georgia boldly indicating the slices of bread.

"Um", said the old lady.

"Well, is it all right if we have a glass of milk too?"

Georgia started to move towards the icebox, but Grandma Butcher pushed her aside. "I'll get it," She said, opening the icebox lid and thrusting a bony hand down inside where the milk bottle stood beside the block of ice. When she turned back toward us with the bottle in her hand, she saw Georgia reaching into the cupboard for some glasses.

"Not *those!*" she croaked, pushing Georgia roughly out of the way and pulling down two old jelly glasses. She filled them – skimpily – with milk. "Here."

We didn't know whether to drink our milk in the kitchen or carry our glasses into the dining room and wait there for her to bring us the toast. The kitchen table was about the size of a bed pillow, and completely occupied by two pans and a bowl. We decided to remove ourselves, turning in unison towards the dining room and its inviting expanse of polished table.

"Not in there!" said Grandma Butcher angrily. We halted, standing on the Wilton rug, holding our glasses of milk, like statues waiting for some magic word to bring us back to life. No word came.

Slowly my sister turned to the old lady, "Where *can* we eat?"

"Here," she said, moving the pans over to the stove. She beckoned me. "Here, you. Sit here." I sat.

"There's only one chair," I protested.

"Never mind," said Georgia. "I'll stand up."

My sister set her glass of milk on the table and reached towards the oven door to retrieve our toasts only to have Grandma Butcher slap at her hand and screeching, "I'll do that." She opened the oven. We all peered inside. The toast was barely colored in one corner. "Done," pronounced the old lady. She turned off the oven and handed us our slices. No mention of plates or butter or jelly or any such domestic amenity. Silently, and as fast as possible, we consumed our toast and drank our milk. Grandma Butcher went back to her peeling.

"We'd better hurry if we want to get to church," said Georgia. "Come on, Sis."

As we left the kitchen, there came a croak from behind us. "Dinner at noon."

Georgia, spunky as usual, said snippily, "Well, then it will have to wait. It takes half an hour to walk home from church and we don't get out until twelve."

There was a sniff and a grunt from the old lady. We went upstairs, dressed, and went off to church. When we got home at 12:30, Grandma Butcher was putting dinner on the table.

I really don't know how we got through that week. Perhaps we were sustained by the belief that as soon as Mama and our new step-father returned home things would change, that the old lady would move out and her terrible presence would disappear forever from our lives. And of course things did change when Mama got home, but not as we expected.

### 3

As soon as she returned from Atlantic City, Mama instructed us to call our new step-father "Dad," a name that I found quite impossible to utter at first and one that never became truly easy. For a long time, Georgia and I both addressed him quite awkwardly only as "you," taking care always to make sure he was there to be spoken to and aware he was being addressing.

And if that wasn't enough, we quickly learned that we had not only a new "dad" but also a King to deal with. For that is how our new step-father thought of himself--albeit a benevolent king to be sure, a king who made embarrassingly forced efforts to be jovial, but also a king whose word was Law. When he was in the house, Grandma Butcher retired to silence, almost to invisibility. When he left as he did every morning, she appeared in the kitchen and took up her daily occupation of obstructing whatever Mama tried to do.

Now that she was married again, Mama gave up her secretarial position -- she had changed jobs by this time from "The Goodrich" to "The India Tire and Rubber Company" out in Mogadore, a small suburb south and east of where we lived in Akron. It was with a sigh of relief that she abandoned those long daily bus rides, an hour or more each way. She stayed home and kept house, while "Dad" brought in the paycheck. It must have felt to Mama, for a while at least, like purest luxury. But soon reality burst on her, and I believe she missed the activity, the companionship, and even the intensity of all those people at work, people, even the most boring of whom, interested her. She became a virtual prisoner in a six-room house, her only companion an old mother-in-law with few interests outside *her* home, and who simply radiated resentment at Mama's intrusion into what had been her sole domain.

I believe there had been an understanding between Mama and my step-father that after their marriage (his third), Grandma would go to live with her daughter in Salem, Ohio. But she never did. Perhaps she simply refused. "Next week," Mama would tell us when we complained. "He says she'll go next week."

Mama, whose temperament was naturally mild and sympathetic, tried to make friends with Grandma. But it was useless. Mama's cheerful overtures were greeted always with a grunt, followed by silence, and everything seemed to go on as before.

We tried for a while to help Grandma by washing dishes -- we'd decided she couldn't see well enough to get them clean, and Mama to avoid trouble would wait until the old lady had gone to bed before washing them all over again. But when Mama told our step-father what she was doing, and why, he simply burst into that high cackling laugh of his: such matters were not *his* problem, they were just an amusing altercation between women.

Poor Mama. Try as she would, she no control in the household, she who since our father's death had run things. It must have been difficult for her; it certainly was for us, for what we wanted no longer mattered, and we were not used to that, spoiled as we were by our indulgent, independent minded mother. Bills and money were all now under her new husband's iron superintendence. And he was not open handed with the money. As for the housework, the shopping, the washing--everything was transformed. It seemed as though she required permission for everything. If she used her own initiative, she ran high risk of running into opposition. Even simple things, like the placement of the furniture, or knick-knacks, or rugs or lamps--even so much as touching them was dangerous territory where one could fall quickly into pockets of inexplicable disapproval.

Like the matter of the fern. In its oversize brass pot, the fern occupied a small table beside a pair of windows in the dining room. Its fronds drooped in all directions, commanding more than their fair share of space. The first night the five of us sat down together at the table, the fern was obviously in the way. With just two at table -- Mr. Butcher and his mother -- avoiding the fern had been simple. But no more. Perhaps because I was the smallest -- and the youngest -- I was given the tight spot between the fern and the table. Day after day, I bumped into the damned plant whenever I got up from the table. It seemed impossible not to. "Watch the fern," Dad would

yell at me. Grandma glared as though I were bumping the fern on purpose. I was "advised" that touching the fronds of a fern in any way was poisonous to the plant. It would die! This went on and on, every day. Nobody did anything about it except yell out a warning, "advise," and glare. In retrospect it now seems quite unreasonable. No ever made a suggestion – within my hearing anyway – that the fern could be moved. In that household, people adjusted to things, not vice versa.

Finally Mama took the matter in hand. She moved the fern herself. She said not a word about it to either Dad or Grandma. She was cagey too. In the course of cleaning the dining room, she slid the little table three feet to the right so that the fern now stood in front of the other window in the room and would be out of the way of my chair. Perhaps she intended to simply "forget" to move the fern back. Anyway, she went off to vacuum the living room leaving it the new location. But someone had been watching. By the time she done in the living room, Grandma Butcher was tugging on the fern table, trying to return it to its former position.

"Oh," said Mother, turning off the sweeper. "Mrs. Butcher, I put that there on purpose. I thought that would be a better place for it. Nobody at the table will run into it if it's there."

The old lady paid no attention. She went on trying to shove the table back to its former position. Mother came into the dining room, placed herself close enough to Grandma to make sure she could hear what she said, and repeated firmly what she had just said. "Don't move that. I want it there."

Grandma Butcher became defiant. "It *belongs* over here," she said.

"It will do just as well in front of this window as that one," said Mama reasonably. The old lady ignored her and tried to lift the pot off the table, but the pot was too heavy for her. As she abandoned the effort, her lips set into an expression of bitterness, and she muttered a warning, "He won't like it. You'll see."

And the old lady was right. *He* was teaching summer school that summer, but when he came home, the first thing he said was, "Who moved the fern?" It was the tone of an outraged monarch. Who *dared* to move the fern?

"I did," said Mother. "I thought it would be better there, safer from being knocked over by somebody getting up from the table."

Without a word more, he marched round the table and pushed the table and its fern back into position. He turned to mother, and with great gravity, made his pronouncement. "That's where it belongs. We've *always* had it there."

"But, Charles," said Mama. "What in the world is the difference? The fern will do just as well in front of the other window. You've seen for yourself how it gets in the way when Laura Jane gets up from the table. And I've seen her brush against it when she's trying to get into her chair too. Surely that's not good for the fern."

"She'll just have to learn to be careful," he said severely.

I was listening to this from the living room where I was reading in an upside down position, my legs flung over the back of a large leather rocker. Suddenly I had an idea, and without thinking I shouted out, "Why can't I change places with somebody else?"

For some reason this struck an agreeable chord with my step-father, possibly because it let him back down without losing face. "A good idea. Mother," he said, calling to the old lady in the kitchen, "You will change places with Laura Jane tonight." Then he looked Mama and said, "Don't you think she ought to put her legs down? She's getting too old for that."

It was summer; I was wearing shorts and my legs would be bare whether they were up or down. "Put your legs down, Laura Jane," said Mama. So I put my legs down, but I didn't like it. Just more unreasonableness.

That night at dinner there was an altercation between Mr. Butcher and his mother. She did not want to change places at the table. Because, as far as I could see, she didn't like to change *any* thing. Her son, however, insisted and so she squeezed into my former place. When dinner was over, she pushed back her chair as usual. The fern crashed to the floor.

And that was the end of the fern.

# 4

I don't know how long Grandma Butcher lived with us on Minerva Place. All I am certain about is that for me, it was much too long. Mr. Butcher himself was bad enough to deal with, but Grandma's dour, unfriendly spirit brooded over the household like a dark cloud. I remember a photograph of Mama, our new step-father, and the old lady from this period. It hung in the



dining room of our house for years. I don't know exactly when or where this picture was taken— or when— or even why—but in my imagination it captures rather nicely the situation we endured. At first glance, the photo seems to have been taken the summer of 1926, shortly after Mama and "Dad" were married, for Mama is wearing her stylish, rose-colored wedding dress, a string of pearls, a fashionable cloche, white stockings, and white, T-strap shoes with pointy toes. Dad stands proudly in front of his Buick. He was in the habit of buying himself a new Buick every couple of years,

but I'm pretty sure the car in this photo was the car he had when he married Mama in 1926; it was his first Buick, the coupe. In the photo, he turns a little towards the two women.

Mama stands next to him, looking self-conscious but cheerful, a little smile on her face. Who knows what she is thinking. She looks happy, and dressed up. Dad is dressed up too, tie, long-sleeved white shirt, although no jacket, so it must have been hot summer. He holds a straw hat in one hand.

A little off to the side of Mama stands Grandma. Stiff, upright as usual, glaring at the camera with that everyday expression of hers, an expression firmly stuck in my memory of her—cross, frowning, resentful, angry. She is not dressed up at all; she wears her everyday clothes, a high-necked, long, cotton dress covered by a full-length apron and hug-me-tight. Her knotted, fleshless hands are curled tightly against her skirt; they seem to me now more pathetic than fierce. Painful. What an effort it must have been for her to lace those high black shoes every day. I wonder, did she suffer from arthritis? Or from some other of the innumerable unidentifiable pains that strike the old without warning? Perhaps. But still.

Behind them stretches open country, a few pine trees, the car parked at the side of narrow dirt country lane. It looks to me like the environs of Salem, Ohio. It seems queer to me that Mama and Dad are so dressed up, almost celebratory, while Grandma Butcher looks, well, fresh from the kitchen. And there's that other queer thing—the license plate on the Buick clearly reads "1928." So I don't understand the situation at all. Did this photo mark Grandma's exodus, her trip to live with her daughter? Could Grandma really live with us for two whole years? In retrospect, that does seem like a very long time. Or was it something else? Were they going for a visit somewhere? Out for a ride in the country? But why were Mama and Mr. Butcher so dressed up and Grandma Butcher so dressed down? And who was holding the camera?

I don't know. Just as I don't know how Mama put up with Grandma in the house like she did, for I am quite certain Grandma did not move out immediately as promised. It took Mama's campaign to get her out. And while she campaigned, both Georgia and Mama seemed to come round to my position on our step-father, the not-so-benevolent dictator under whose heavy hand none of us was ever completely comfortable.

I recall, once during the summer of 1926 not long after Mama's wedding, coming upon my

mother sitting on her bed, crying. I had rarely seen Mama cry, so this was a shock for me. I asked what the trouble was.

Mama refused to look at me at first, but hung her head and said, "I've made a mistake. I've made a terrible mistake. I don't know what to do."

"What mistake?"

"I got married. It was a terrible mistake to get married. You were *right*, Lala Dane. I should have listened to you."

I didn't know what to say. It seemed such an awful, a portentous admission. I felt overwhelmed by the implications – and elated. I was well aware we could not just move back into our old house, for 623 Minerva Place had been rented and all of our furniture sold or given away. Nor could we move in with one of Mama's sisters: Aunt Minnie had gone to live with friends, Aunt Gertie at death's door<sup>8</sup>. Aunt Mary, who lived in Wadsworth and was poor herself, had no space for us. And as for Aunt Jennie, the only of Mama's sisters who might have taken us in at the time – well, Mama's pride would not have been able to face *that*, not after Uncle Charlie's charity of the house on Minerva Place we'd just left.

Still, I remember feeling a kind of secret glee at hearing Mama talk so rebelliously. I had a vision of we three, chins up, courageously walking out, through the front door, ending the whole horrid situation. I, of course, had never liked or trusted Mr. Butcher – was it possible that Mama had had enough? That she saw how all the oily good will and cheerful solicitousness that so characterized the man's behavior during their courtship, vanished when they returned from Atlantic City? That she now loathed him, as he relaxed back into his old routines facilitated by the old lady, that she saw how his authoritarian temperament had re-surfaced, how his native gruffness had re-asserted itself. Oh, how I hated hearing him boss Mama around. And how I hated watching the quiet war between Mama and Grandma. All those *inflexible* routines – the tyranny of the clock! For our step-father got up, went to bed, ate his meals, shined his shoes, brushed his teeth, *and* wound the clock, always at the same time. Regular habits are not to be completely despised, but *such* regularity was a heavy burden, and it was so very dull. Could it all be over? I was lit by the hope of it.

"He doesn't seem to have any intention of sending her back to Salem," Mother went on, as though talking to herself. "He lied to me."

Now, using the word 'lied' was, for Mama, a *bitter* condemnation. "Maybe I should leave him right now," she muttered desperately. "But where could we go? Oh, what am I going to do?"

Was Mama were appealing to *me* to help?

"I can't go on living in this house with that old mother of his. I just can't stand it! And besides," Mama said. "You *were* right about him. I don't think I can stand *him* either"

It flashed through my mind that even if we couldn't simply move in with one of the aunts, Mama was still perfectly able to earn her living. Certainly if she dared to leave Mr. Butcher, she would have nothing but admiration from me! But as Mama talked on, slowly, it dawned on me – Mama might complain, but she wasn't going to do anything about it then – or ever. Over the years I watched her return to the idea of leaving over and over again, examining, fondling the idea like some treasured toy: "A week after the honeymoon, I knew I ought to leave him," she would moan, "Oh, why didn't I do it then, when I could have?" Once, long after I myself was married and had my own family, my own house, she sounded more serious than usual, so we offered her a bedroom in our house. She changed her tune immediately. "Oh, but I can't leave him," she said contritely. "He would never survive. It would kill him."

I had no doubt Dad was a difficult man to live with, more difficult I think than Mama had ever imagined he might be. I don't know whether or not she loved him – frankly, I always doubted it. I do know however he never abused her physically, nor had he an eye for any other woman. In fact, in all conventional ways, I have to admit my step-father was an "upright" man, even a "good" one. And he was uxorious, as firmly attached to my mother as a barnacle to a ship's bottom, affectionate, holding her hand in public as well as private. I always thought,

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<sup>8</sup> Actually Aunt Gertie held on until 1931.

however, his "love" for her was more abstract than personal. She symbolized the idea of Marriage. She was Wife. To her Self, her essence, her inner life, he seemed quite oblivious, and consequently cruel. And *that* was the problem I would guess for Mama.

That afternoon as we sat on her bed, I did have high hopes, but not for long. I put my arm around her and hugged her. Mama stopped crying and brightened. Then she said, "If I could only get *her* to leave, maybe he would be better. He's a good man, really." My vision of our walking out the door evaporated. "He *is* the boss, you know," she continued. "If *he* tells her she has to go, she'll have to go. I'll have to work on *him*."

Now, if I were writing fiction, I would invent all kinds of nasty tricks we played on Grandma in order to make her want to leave. But this isn't fiction and the idea of playing tricks on the old lady never occurred to us. We three went right on being polite and considerate, as kind to her as she would allow us to be, while putting the pressure on Dad. I could hear her voice murmuring in their bedroom at night, cajoling, arguing softly, and then the gruff barking of his outbursts. This went on and on and on, for, if my memory serves me, months and months and months.

So where was Georgia in all of this? Well, she started off by putting real effort into trying to make friends with our new step-father; after all she had not opposed the marriage as I had. Georgia, now a student at the University of Akron<sup>9</sup>, was wonderful at charming men. She began by flattering his ego, expressing interest in his collection of typing and shorthand books. Nothing could have pleased him more, for he was one of the minority of people I had ever encountered who knew *two* systems of short-hand, that system of collapsing words used to transcribe words at the speed of spoken speech, a skill considered to be highly valuable for women until women stopped being secretaries. Our step-father knew both Gregg and Pitman<sup>10</sup>. As a young man he had learned Pitman, which was in vogue around the turn of the century. After World War I, Gregg came into fashion, so, to teach in the public schools, he had to learn that also. Although he taught Gregg's method at West High School, he never missed a chance to point out the superiority of Pitman. It was something he and Mother had in common, for she too was a skilled practitioner of Pitman.

That first summer, Georgia took him up on an offer to teach her the Pitman method. The lessons went on for about a year. Georgia seemed to start off with her usual enthusiasm for learning something new, but her enthusiasm waned and the frequency of their lessons petered off as Georgia grew busy again with college life. She grew bored and disillusioned by both topic and her instructor. She also developed growing suspicion regarding the long-term value of either Gregg or Pitman. Once, she bluntly revealed this opinion to our step-father, who at first took it as a personal insult. Then he shook his head wisely, remarking on the general ignorance of Youth.

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<sup>9</sup> The institution now known as The University of Akron was founded as Buchtel College in 1870 by the Ohio Universalist Convention, which was strongly influenced by the efforts, energy and financial support of Akronites, particularly industrialist John R. Buchtel. By 1907, Buchtel College's emphasis on local rather than denominational interests led it to become a private, non-denominational school. The college's strong ties to the community and its challenging financial situation prompted Buchtel College trustees to transfer the institution and its assets to the city of Akron in 1913. For the next 50 years, the municipal University of Akron, assisted by city tax funds, brought college education within the reach of many more young people. During those years, enrollment swelled from 198 to about 10,000.

<sup>10</sup> Gregg shorthand, a form of stenography, was invented by John Robert Gregg in 1888. Like cursive longhand, it is based on elliptical figures with lines that bisect them. Gregg was the most popular form of pen stenography in the United States. Stenography went into decline after the invention of dictation machines, shorthand machines, and the practice of executives writing their own letters on personal computers. The last edition of a Gregg textbook appeared in 1968. Gregg is often contrasted with the Pitman system, which uses a combination of line thickness and position to discriminate between similar sounds. Gregg discriminates only by the length of the stroke.

Although I believe Georgia did learn some shorthand, the lessons eventually became yet one more irritation added to the increasing number of irritations she counted against our step-father. He was, as I well knew, very difficult to be around, and Georgia became even less forgiving of his behaviors than I, perhaps because she had been at first his advocate.

I can see my sister now, bursting into our bedroom, exclaiming about some behavior of our step-father's that deeply offended her. "Oh! If he does that ear thing one more time at the dinner table, I'll scream!" This referred to our step-father's habit of sticking his little finger into his ear and shaking it so violently and for so long that everyone would look at him with alarm. He never however stopped, looked up, or apologized, but would continue until his ear "opened up." As far as I am aware, no-one ever had the nerve to protest that this behavior was in any way inappropriate at table, and he did the "ear-thing" till the end of his life.

I recall, too, a long, stubborn argument between our step-father, who was extremely vain about his learning – such as it was – and Georgia about the difference between "a good deal" and "a great deal." Georgia contended that "a good deal" was more slangy than "a great deal." Dad disagreed stubbornly. Although Georgia pulled out Webster's International which confirmed her opinion, Dad steadfastly, and annoyingly, refused to bend.

Once in his relations with Georgia, our step-father made a serious tactical error, for which I don't think she ever forgave him. Georgia was employing in her usual delaying strategies about going to bed. Ever since I can remember, she has hated the idea of going to bed, for her there was always something better to do. Getting Georgia into bed had for years been a daily source of struggle, and often defeat, for Mama. On this particular evening there was some necessity for her needing to get up early the next morning and Mother had been pleading with Georgia for over an hour.

"I'm going just as soon as I finish this. Five minutes. Just give me five minutes more. . . . I know, Mother. I'll be up in a minute."

Mama was calling down to her from upstairs: she was ready for bed, as was Dad. I lay in my bed, listening to their voices. It was after midnight. Mama stood in the hall and lamented, "Oh, that girl! What am I going to do with her?" Suddenly, Dad headed down the stairs, declaring he would make her come to bed.

"Oh, no, Charles," cried Mother, alarmed. "Don't."

For what happened next, I have only Georgia's admittedly biased report. According to her, our step-father came down the stairs, and, in a severe tone, ordered her up to bed. Offended, she looked up and told him with a level voice that she would be up as soon as she finished the chapter she was reading. At this, he shouted, "You're going to bed *now*," and grabbed her shoulder, pulled her from the chair, and shook her.

Georgia wrenched herself loose, or at least struggled wildly until he let go of her. "Take your hands off me!" she shouted. "Don't you *ever* touch me again."

He was surprised by her response. He was used to being obeyed, and I suppose in his world he had only been following his convictions about how to handle the young, although Georgia was at least twenty when this happened, no longer a little girl. Mama appeared quickly on the scene and took Georgia's part. "You leave her alone!" Our step-father retreated muttering bitterly, "Let her stay up all night then." In fact, not bad advice, I suppose, but he never got involved like that again. The incident marked the end of any lingering fantasy my sister had about his suitability as our step-father and she became his bitter enemy, mellowing only very slightly years later, long after she had escaped, putting a thousand miles between herself and the house on Minerva Place.

I am puzzled when I try to pin-point what made us so unhappy about living in the same house with him. In fact, he never did anything that was grossly cruel or unkind to us. Why *did* we hate him so much? Perhaps it was a matter of tone, for when he was around, it was quite impossible to feel relaxed or light-hearted, at liberty or, even, thoughtless, as we had been before Mama married him. His presence, like Grandma Butcher's, loomed. Every evening, there he was in his leather rocker, under his reading lamp, painstakingly going through the evening paper, shaking his head, clicking his tongue at intervals. In the other corner of the room sat Grandma,

holding her Bible up close to her eyes. Both of them frowning hard. If I or Georgia giggled or made even a small noise, they both looked up and glared.

Perhaps Mama figured all this out early on, for she rarely came into the living room during in the evening. She found something else to do, in the kitchen, or at her sewing machine in the dining room. During the summer, Georgia and I could retreat to the front porch and sit on the steps. Alas, unlike most other porches on the street, ours had no porch swing, a small thing, but typical, I always thought, of our step-father's attitude toward modest pleasures, like dreaming at the moon, or rocking back and forth to catch a breeze on a hot night.

He had no imagination at all. He came from hard-working but un-schooled farm people, correct, plodding, respectable. He was pleased with himself, never tempted to wander off the path of serious industry. He hadn't a frivolous urge in him.

I had a hard time getting used to his being around all the time. His step was soundless so he could seem to appear out of nowhere, when we least expected him. For example, as girls, living with Aunt Minnie, my sister and I had gotten into the habit of running stark naked from the bathroom to our bedroom – no body had given it a second thought or us a second look. But once Mr. Butcher came on the scene, it was different. Once I dashed out of the bathroom quite stark, heading for the bedroom, and came face to face with him as he arrived at the top of the stairs. I shrieked and ducked into my room. He burst into raucous laughter.

He told Mama what happened as if it was just an hilarious encounter. I don't believe he was embarrassed, although I must have been sixteen when this happened, nor did he ever think to apologize to me for his unexpected appearance. I was mortified. I was very innocent, but I am sure now there was no hint of lechery. He was far too attached to Mama for that.

In fact, he often came upon us unawares. I believe he could have walked up the squeakiest stairs in the world without making a sound. It was a function of his carefulness. Anyway, if a step had squeaked when he tread upon it, he would have immediately fixed it. He himself had applied the varnish to the steps, and then tacked down the rubber treads. He treated those steps with tenderness. Perhaps it was a torment to him to hear one of his step-daughters larruping down the stairs to answer the telephone.

This quietness of his did drive Georgia and me wild; and his slowness. His pace, his thoughts both moved with the all speed of turtles. If I asked him a question, he would say, "Well, now. . . ." and then fall silent for two long minutes. . . forcing me to stand there, waiting, silently for him to go on. When he did answer, however, it would be with careful, objective accuracy. He seemed to be able to dredge up from his memory, just about everything he had ever learned. Neither Georgia nor I much appreciated this quality of his, however. We were much too excited about poetry and contemporary literature, imaginative, cultural topics that our step-father seemed hardly to know existed.

We adored jazz music too. Georgia, had a part-time job in Cook's Tea Room, and squandered any extra cash she had records, which we would play over and over. I don't remember our step-father objecting to the noise particularly. Noise didn't seem to bother him. But it bothered Grandma. She hated our music. As soon as she saw one of us winding up the Victrola, she pointedly marched upstairs to her room, not that her actions had effect on us; we went right ahead and played those records.

Our noisy habits may in the end have been one of the reasons why Grandma finally consented to go. I'm sure there were others. Perhaps Mama's campaign certainly must have had some impact. The old lady's mind remained a mystery I never plumbed, certainly not at sixteen or seventeen. Her attachment to her son must have been deep, but I never understood why she preferred him to her daughter. She may well have dreaded living with her daughter. She must have felt her old domain shrinking by degrees.

First Mama eased her out of the kitchen, by cleaning out and rearranging the cupboards so that Grandma no longer knew where anything was, and then by changing the foods we ate.

Grandma's cooking repertoire was strictly limited and she liked it that way: boiled potatoes, turnips, or cabbage, cooked with a piece of pork, were her winter fare; dessert was always baked apple, apple sauce, or cornstarch pudding. Occasionally a piece of boiled beef. Mama brought on

variety, every day challenging Grandma with some dish she had never tasted before and certainly didn't know how to make.

I remember the time Mama introduced large Elberta peaches from a can. Grandma became outraged: they cost too much; she refused to put one in her mouth. Or angel food cake, which Mama loved and made frequently, Grandma declared it took too many eggs and tasted like cotton. She found dried beef gravy was too salty, and ate her potatoes dry. She was almost totally unacquainted with the uses of fresh beef. And Mama made soup "too thick," meaning Mama put too many vegetables in. Gradually Grandma gave up cooking.

Mother also banished her from the cellar. It was easy to take over the washing, because we had brought with us our old water-powered washing machine, a contraption Grandma Butcher didn't know how to operate. Before she had done everything by hand, rubbing it on one of those rippled washing board, even the sheets and towels. I think she did admire our washing machine a little, because she let Mama wash the linen from her bed in it. But she continued to rub her own clothes out by hand, never trusting them to the dangers of being tossed into the water with everything else. She too was very quiet in her movements: I can remember charging down the cellar steps, and being startled to come upon her, silently rubbing away her stockings and apron in the laundry tub.

By the end of our first winter in that house, Grandma had almost completely retired into her room, where she would sit for hours, reading her Bible, or knitting. I was never invited into her room, but I can still see those tiny, half-blind, gold-rimmed eyes, looking up at me as I raced past her door, trying to avoid detection.

I did try a few times to make an overture of friendship, but was always rejected with hostility. It was awful. Poor old lady. She must have felt lonely and rejected in that house she used to rule, replaced by the idiotic hysteria of the young.

Grandma's departure came upon me suddenly. I don't recall exactly when this happened, except that it was during the summertime, for I was staying with a friend at her parents' cottage on the West Reservoir in the Portage Lakes, south of Akron but not too far from home. There was no telephone at the cottage, so the announcement came by mail, in a letter (no date) from Georgia. "Guess what!" she wrote. "You'll never believe the news. Grandma Butcher has gone! Dad took her to Salem yesterday. An awful blow-up the day before. She accused Mama of trying to poison her! The beans tasted funny or some-thing. Anyhow, Mama started to *cry*, and ran upstairs to the bedroom and slammed the door. Wouldn't come out all evening. Guess who had to help Grandma Butcher with the dishes. Total silence the whole time. Dad was upstairs forever. When he came down he told her she would have to go. She didn't answer and he got mad and yelled at her. She went upstairs and he wound the clock too tight and it went zing! No more bong, bong in the night. He was absolutely furious. He got livid and stamped his foot. I just sat there reading *Sons and Lovers*. You *must* read it. Next morning her suitcase was all packed and he took her off in his car. Mama wouldn't go along. She says she threatened to leave him. Ha! Too bad she didn't do it. As far as I can see, HE is not going to be any different, so stay as long as you can."

And in fact, our step-father didn't change at all after Grandma Butcher moved out. Georgia was right about that. My sister graduated from Akron University in the spring 1928, and two years later, she and her friend Helen [Crawford?] left Akron for Boston, where they had a number of friends from home, including John Lewis and Van and Naomi Quine.

At the time, I believed she went to escape our mutually hated step-father. Many, many years later, my sister revealed that her escape had been driven just as much by Mama, who, Georgia maintained, was trying to live vicariously through her oldest daughter: disappointed with her own life, Mama pushed Georgia to achieve what she herself had never managed-an independent life, well-cushioned with money. Mama nagged at Georgia to get into activities that might bring her into contact with Akron's wealthy elite, and she was insatiably curious about Georgia's friends, demanding to be informed about what happened on every date. Georgia said she felt sucked dry emotionally.

All this is Georgia's story, of course; Georgia came to believe that it all resulted from Mama's

disappointment with her marriage to Mr. Butcher. None of it, however, had been apparent to me at the time, and even now I find it a bit hard to believe. I always found Mama sympathetic, comforting, undemanding. I loved her very much, and pitied her inordinately. Truth is elusive. But I did feel abandoned when my sister moved out, even as I was beginning my own life as a student at Akron University.

## 6

It was a fact that Mama did seem much cheered by the disappearance of Grandma Butcher. I think the struggle had gone on too long, brought too many disillusionments about her husband. Although I always believed she married him primarily for reasons of economic security, it was becoming apparent that this security, that looked like such a solid structure from the outside, was quite precarious within.

The first warning of this I had, was money became much harder for me to come by after Mama's marriage. We should have been better off, not worse off. *He* never offered me any money. Mama would hand me change on occasion, but I as carried my lunch to high school, I had no regular need for money. I developed an intense financial envy.

I remember one afternoon walking through the cosmetics department of Polsky's, one of three department stores in downtown Akron. I saw Jean Polsky, a local romantic heroine. She did not know me, of course, but I had followed her adventures from afar in the society column of the Akron Beacon Journal. She was the daughter of one of the three Polsky brothers who jointly owned the store, and she was rather a beauty. Envy crept up as I watched her, in that a red, *real* leather coat, buying half a dozen expensively packaged bits of paint and varnish for the face and body, things I now wouldn't think of squandering money on. Now, of course, I don't covet them, but then I certainly did.

The clerk had finally written all her purchases on her charge slip, when Jean casually added more, "Oh yes, " I overheard her say, "and give me one of those . . . no, make it two." She pointed to a display of bottles of Odorono--at that time the only brand of deodorant on the market. I stared, rudely, now burning with envy. Why was deodorant of all things so appealing to me? I don't remember ever worrying I might smell bad. But I wanted at that moment so badly to be able to buy a bottle of that stuff, and I knew I could never even the smallest one. And there was Jean, taking a large bottle without a second thought! No, she changed her mind again, she'd have *two* large bottles! That seemed the very essence of luxury. I day-dreamed after that, repeatedly, about buying a bottle of Odorono with neither thought nor consideration of cost—myself, obviously in the part of Jean. Oh, *why* hadn't I been born with a rich father? Why? No other fate seemed worthwhile.

I realize this incident marks me as being completely sunk in the materialism of the late twenties commercial culture. But what it suggests to me now is how very little spending money I had, so little I could never have saved up for a bottle of deodorant! Mama seemed to have no money either. Her new husband kept her on a very tight financial rein, after years of working and managing her own money, this must have been very difficult indeed.

I remember scenes around the dining room table at which Dad and Mama counted out bills and coins and added up columns of figures. There were worried looks on Mama's face. questions that he didn't answer. Puzzles: "But where did that other ten dollars go?" Sharp words. Deliberate economies at the grocery store. Could it be possible that the head of the Commercial Department at West High School was not paid enough to keep a small family decently without skimping? What happened to the that comfortable and secure financial nest of Mama thought she was marrying into?

It's obvious now what was happening then, but we were right in the middle of it. It was 1929, nobody knew we were soon to be crushed by the Great Depression. One day Dad came home with a new car. Just like that. No discussion. No warning. There he was in the driveway with a

shiny new maroon-colored Buick – beaming, so pleased with himself, asking for approval.

Mama, I think, had a hard time being pleased about it, although she tried. "Oh Charles," she said. "Can we afford it?"

He nodded sagely. Yes, we could afford it. Apparently, the salesman had persuaded him that he would lose money in the long run if he kept his old coupe. Repairs would start soon, expensive repairs. "He gave me a good trade-in," said Dad. "A good deal. Do you like it?" Mama made some satisfying exclamations of pleasure. A car, after all, was something she had never owned before she married him, and in 1929 a new car was the mark of affluence, especially a new Buick. Glowing with self-satisfaction, our step-father offered to take us for a ride. I remember that as pleasure, stroking the upholstery, complimenting the springs, watching people stare.

So--there was money enough for a new car, in the household I remember thinking. We could not be so poor. Although we felt immediately poorer, as now we had to meet monthly car payments.

I was a freshman at Akron University, and although Dad had not yet had his salary cut, as he would later as the Depression set in, and he seemed to have enough money to buy himself a new car if he wanted, he made no contribution to either my or Georgia's education. Of course, there was no tuition at the college for city residents, although there were fees, and books, and lunches, and car fare, and clothes, the cost for none of these was forthcoming from my step-father, who controlled the purse. Had I not received a one hundred dollar high school graduation gift from a cousin of my father's, I would not have been able to attend. That gift got me through my first year. Georgia had been more fortunate. She had had a benefactor, a friend of Mama's, although that is another story.



Laura Jane Stillman ca. 1930

My step-father did help me into a job, however. As head of the Commercial Department at West High, he often placed people in jobs, so when someone from the YWCA asked him to find them a girl for the post of checker in their cafeteria, he sent me. I have always felt this recommendation to have been slightly dishonest: surely they must have wanted someone with a little commercial training and I had none. No questions were

asked however, I got the job. Mr. Butcher's recommendation was enough. The job itself consisted entirely of doing mental arithmetic: I sat on a high stool at a register and, as the trays came by, added up costs and punched out a ticket for the total.

Doubting my math abilities, I wasn't sure I could do it, but I mastered the business in less than a week and I couldn't do it. But I learned it in a week, and punched out those totals at top speed, four hours a day--two at lunch-time, two at dinner-time, five days a week. For this I received ten dollars a week, which works out to twenty-five cents an hour, not too bad in those days.

I was carrying a full load of courses at the University, and had to walk back and forth to the Y twice a day, which took about half an hour each way. I soon found the job too time consuming. No time study. By Christmas I had found another student to work my dinner shift, and I got along well enough on five dollars a week. I sewed all of my own clothes, never having enough money to buy anything ready-made. My coats were still handed down from Aunt Jennie, fitted

over for me by Aunt Minnie.

The following fall, 1929, I did not go back to school; instead I got a full-time job, intending to save enough to return to school in the fall of 1930, and not have to split my time between working and studying.

The point I'm trying to make is that my step-father supplied me with very little besides room and board – his lack of support had nothing to do with the Crash or the Depression. During the Great Depression, of course, he had his pay cut several times, until finally his pay-check metamorphosed into “scrip”, fake money, IOUs issued by the city when it could no longer pay its bills. Despite all that, until he retired in 1940, Dad never failed, even in the worst of times, to come home with a new Buick every other year. And during this period too, he bought very expensive living room furniture, two new carpets, and an octagonal walnut living room table which turned out to be too heavy to move. Perhaps my memory is inaccurate, but I can remember receiving real cash from him only once.

I was coming down the stairs and he was coming up. We met halfway. He stopped, grinned, and gripped my arm. "Wait, Laura Jane. I have something for you. I want to give you something." He reached into his pants pocket, with a flourish, deposited his gift in my hand, folded my fingers over it tightly, and patted them on top. "There," he said in his self-satisfied way. "I wanted to give you that."

"Why, thank you," I said, struggling for the proper tone, to understand what was happening. "Thanks very much." I wandered on down the steps, stunned. It was a *whole* fifty cent piece!

Now fifty cents *was* the equivalent of two hours work at the cafeteria, so I'm sure I was glad to get it. But the price I had to pay for that fifty cents--some dramatic form of gratitude was obviously expected, gratitude to match the dramatic show of generosity that he felt himself to be displaying. I couldn't do it. I think I summoned sufficient polite effusions for the situation, but I hated him for making me feel like a hypocrite. I felt at the time like throwing that coin back in his face.

I don't know, perhaps I've forgotten something. The man is dead now and can't defend himself. And to be honest, I don't recall any particular instances during that period of Mother giving me money either, but I do have a general sense that from time to time she did. Or at least I felt I could ask her for some, though she might not have any to spare. I know I would never have dreamed of asking *him*.

## 7

Over the years, we heard a good deal about Frances, our step-father's deceased third wife. Judging from pictures, Frances was a pretty woman, lively and piquant. She suffered from tuberculosis, a disease then thought could be arrested, if not cured, by fresh air. Dad had built a sleeping porch above the sun-room in his house for Frances's use. But the fresh air cure didn't work, and the disease progressed to its fatal conclusion. He nursed her with faithful attendance and after her death revered her memory to such an extent that he was reluctant to change anything in the house that had been arranged "the way Frances wanted it." This was a phrase that never went down well with Mama.

Frances had a son, Jack, by an earlier marriage, and for several years Jack had lived in this house on Minerva Place with them. Once, he came to visit us. He was a tall, dark, handsome man in his early twenties. He treated Dad with great respect, and told us privately that he and his mother's family could never be grateful enough for the way Dad had cared for his mother during her illness.

A continuous stream of jokes, laughter and talk poured from Jack's mouth. He also played the guitar and sang. One night he kept Georgia and me up half the night, enchanting us with his performances. Finally Georgia got bored and went to bed, leaving me with a plastic grin on my face alone to appreciate him by myself. I felt like a sucker. It got later and later, and I had no idea

how to make him stop. At last Mother came downstairs in her bathrobe to put an end to it.

Jack it was said resembled his mother. But if she had his spirit and his liveliness, how I wondered was it that she had married my stodgy step-father? It made me wonder.

At any rate, Dad was very proud about having married into Frances's family, for they were wealthy Canadians. Once he even drove Mother and me to Toronto to visit them. We stayed with Frances's obviously prosperous brother, his wife, and teenage children. They were cheerful, worldly people, who served champagne at dinner to show how highly they regarded my step-father. A puritanical man, to my knowledge my step-father had never owned a bottle of alcoholic beverage, still he didn't refuse the champagne. His pleasure at the flattery of these people embarrassed me, and my first champagne made me dizzy. If Frances belonged to this family, I thought, and was anything like them, why would she ever have married *him*? I couldn't let it go.

It was during this visit that I became more than usually mortified by – pimples. How I hated them, on my forehead, ruining my looks. I tried to cover them up with bangs, but of course the pimples only got worse. A new batch had broken out, and the last thing I wanted was the curious inspection of strangers.

One afternoon, unable to think about anything besides these damned pimples, I was sitting alone on the front porch steps of that large comfortable house in Toronto, fighting back my tears as the adults rested in the wicker porch chairs filling the air with talk. Jack came over, and I suppose meaning only to be amusing, tipped up my chin in his impudent way, and cried out for all to hear, "Why, she's crying."

Mortification! Humiliation! I was ready to die on the spot.

Mama came to my rescue – or I guess she thought she was coming to my rescue but she only made me feel worse--she explained to Jack and everybody else my forehead was broken out with "adolescent pimples" – that was all that was wrong. I took it too seriously, she said. *She* had never had a pimple in her life I knew, and everyone really was kind. Jack put himself out to be humorous and entertaining, reassuring me that I was, as far as he could see, irresistibly beautiful. I laughed between my sobs, feeling even a bit of relief being able now to cry without hiding it. Sulkily, I let myself be led into the house and diverted by Jack's piano playing and his cousins songs. Oh, but it was awful.

Among the cousins was a tall, blond boy, perhaps eighteen years old, who frightened me considerably by his worldly behavior. He seemed to me so "sophisticated" and full of experience. He paid no attention to me, but I was terribly self-conscious. I listened dutifully to Jack's playing but refused all invitations to sing along, still paralyzed by my trauma on the front porch. A little later, after the singing had stopped and the family was once again milling about the living room, Jack beckoned me out into the hall, where this handsome blond boy was standing with his hand on the screen door.

"David has to run out to the store to get a few things for Aunt Julia before dinner," said Jack. "And he wants you to go along. Okay?"

David *wanted* me to go? I couldn't believe that, but *was* flattered. "Oh," I said, tentatively. If I went, I knew I would have to talk to this superior creature who was blandly smiling down on me, and I knew I could not do that.

"Come on," said David. "I'll take you for a ride. Show you the city."

I said, "Well. . . "

"What's the matter?" said Jack. "Don't you like him? He won't bite." And he pushed me out of the door. David led me to a little Chevy coupe in the driveway. One had to climb up on a running board to get into those things, and I stumbled as I did so, caught myself by grabbing the seat, and finally ended up inside, half dead with embarrassment. Awkward!! Clumsy!!

David tried patiently to get me to relax, to coax a word or two out of me. He pointed out local spots of interest, told jokes that for me fell flat, and asked questions about Akron for which I didn't know the answers.

After stopping at the grocery store, he said he wanted to show me where he lived. He drove up the driveway of a big, comfortable-looking house, and parked near the back porch.

"This is where I live," he said. "See that little window up there? That's my room. I have the smallest bedroom in the house." I looked at the window and said, "Umm." He turned off the motor. Did he mean to take me inside? No. He made no move to open the door, but calmly sat there, making conversation. "My sister has the biggest. Girls always get the best of everything."

Finally, I had *some* thing to say. "In my family it was always the oldest who got the biggest bedroom." How long were we going to sit here? What's he waiting for? It was getting dark, the trees along the driveway loomed overhead.

David looked at me appraisingly. "Do you have many boyfriends?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Oh, I'll bet you do. You're too cute not to have boy friends." He put his arm around my shoulders.

Uh-oh. "What are we waiting for?" I said. "Aren't we going to go back soon?"

"Oh, pretty soon," said David blithely. "Don't you like the view? I just thought we'd sit here for a little while, and talk."

"What about?"

"I don't know. Get acquainted, sort of. If you don't want to talk, we can neck." He pulled me toward him and planted a kiss on my ear. Actually, my ear was the only thing he could hit, for I had jerked violently away from him.

"Oh no," I said, shaking my head. I was frankly terrified! Far from help, alone in a dark car with a sex maniac! He *must* be crazy, I thought: nobody I knew would try to kiss you on such short acquaintance. I had actually been kissed—once or twice—by a boy. But this was all wrong. Who, did he think I was?!

Amazingly he persisted. "Oh, come on now," he said. "You're cute." He grabbed me tightly and planted a kiss on the corner of my mouth, a lucky hit that, for I was now struggling very hard. I didn't have the spunk to slap him though, or scream. I just struggled silently, while he kept trying, also silently. It was a pretty weird and most embarrassing two or three minutes.

Finally, he gave it up and started the motor. "Oh well, all right," he said. "If you don't want to."

He too seemed to be embarrassed by events. And puzzled. He may not have been used to being rejected. We drove home in silence, and didn't speak to each other for the remainder of the visit.

That night I lay awake wondering why he had done tried to kiss me. Was there something about me, some submissive quality that made him think me easy prey? I was sure I was *not* irresistibly attractive. I slept badly and woke in the middle of the night, suddenly enlightened: Jack had put him up to it! The whole thing was Jack's idea of how to cure me of my depression over my pimples. Of course! Jack's notion of how to fix me up, of being kind. Poor David. Though I pitied him, but I was now more embarrassed than ever. But the more I thought about it, the more sure I became that I had landed on the right explanation, for it more or less fit the style of Frances's whole Canadian family.

Then my mind came back again to the question: why, if Frances had been anything like these people we visiting, would she have married Charles Butcher? I couldn't figure it out, and I knew I couldn't ask Mother, at least not point blank. Then, by a kind of fortuitous indirection I came upon a kind of answer to my puzzle.

On the way home, Dad drove us through downtown Toronto. He wanted to show us the building where he had once taught in a business college. "That's where I met Frances," he said, "She was studying book-keeping."

"Oh?" said Mother. "She didn't have TB then, when you married her?"

"Eh?" he said. "Jack was ten years old then. Quite a handful for a woman to handle." He laughed his self-adulatory little laugh and shook his head. "I used to handle him alright."

Mother said, "But I thought when you married Frances and came to Akron, you left Jack with his grandmother."

He thought for a few minutes, then said gravely, "Yes. But I had him for a while, at first, when we were living in Toronto. We lived in Toronto for six months before we came to Akron."

"Why didn't bring Jack along to Akron?"

Silence. This question seemed to puzzle him. Finally Dad said, "He came later, when he was about fourteen, when we thought Frances was getting better."

"You mean she did have TB when you married her?"

He nodded. "We didn't know it, but she did." Long pause. "She had a high color then. I decided later she must have started running a fever."

We were out in the country, driving on a dirt road, before Mama said anything else. "Charles," she said thoughtfully. "Do you think Frances knew she had TB when she married you?" He didn't answer her immediately. In the back seat I was all ears. "Because if she did," said Mama, "That wasn't right. She should have told you."

Dad was suddenly seized with a fit of coughing. My mother handed him a hand-kerchief. "It's a wonder you didn't catch it from her," said Mother, a bit wryly.

He jerked his head sharply to the left and downward, a gesture that for him always indicated contempt for what someone had said. I couldn't see his face, but I knew the expression which went with that gesture: a combination of amusement and superiority. "I wasn't afraid of that," he said. "I never thought of that for a minute."

## 8

I believe one remembers feelings far better than one remembers the situations that produced them. The emotions inspired in me by my step-father, their intensity, are still vivid decades later. Images of my mother, angry or despairing, come to mind readily. But my brain has mislaid the specifics. All I can dredge up are trivialities and generalizations--his somber tone, his stubbornness, his penchant for blaming others for whatever goes wrong ("*Somebody* left the bathroom light on"--"*Somebody* didn't wipe their feet"), his inelasticity. If a change of plan was to involve him, *he* needed several days' notice. These are hardly capital crimes, but they do drive a wife slowly bonkers. My step-father hated to agree to making any expense unless it was something he himself had thought up, and in that case, cost was never a consideration. As I've said before, *he* bought himself a new car ever other year, but Mama, who got deafer and deafer, was never able to afford a hearing aid. Things like that build up.



Laura and Charles Butcher, 1949

For me, our step-father always lacked the kind of personal charm that might make up for such habits of character. Throughout our acquaintance, I found him to be rigid, humorless, insensitive to the nuances of other people's moods. I don't think now that he meant to be unkind, but in the ordinary course of events he never seemed to me to give much thought to other people's feelings or desires, Mama's included. Far too often I found Mother crying because of some slight, some request she felt was unreasonable, some brutal words; they were small things individually, but they for her and me, they added up. It surprises me a little that I seemed to see all this coming when I was so young, so innocent of the world. But I did. It's what I was tried to tell Mama that he wasn't "our kind of people" all those many years ago when she first proposed the idea of marrying him to ensure our future security. Alas.

And yet, to be fair, he did have his moments. He once tore the kitchen apart in order to put in a whole new set of cupboards and counter tops six inches

lower than standard, because Mother, who was less than five feet tall, complained that rolling out pie crust on those high counters made her shoulders ache. He *was*, it seems, sensitive to other people's physical pain or illness (but not deafness). If anyone got sick, it brought out the best in him, witness Frances and her TB. He was a faithful nurse and somehow seemed to like people better when they were ill. I noticed this when I was young, and with my youthful unkindness, decided that caring for the sick gave him a sense of power over them, or superiority.

He owned a Victrola, so he must have been touched somehow by music. He had several dozen records, Red Seal Victor records, mostly of an operatic nature, but he rarely played one unless he felt really festive. Then he would wind up the Victrola and put on his John McCormack records, listening with a silly grin on his face. He liked the *idea* of culture, I guess, although I could witness him being moved much by anything of an aesthetic nature. I can't remember him ever reading a book for pleasure.

He did like to be busy though, he was always building something in the basement, polishing all his shoes, oiling his tools, cleaning out the garage. Single-handedly, he converted the house into a duplex, so that rent from the upstairs apartment could augment his pension. Slow he was, but never lazy.

I am talking to myself here, trying to hit on the reason why I and Mama and Georgia disliked him so much--why Mama became so desperately unhappy after she married him. Sometimes, long after my own marriage, Mama cried to me over the phone. She would come over to my house and sit there in the kitchen, weeping as she told me of some new insult. On at least one occasion, Don urged her to leave the man, come live with us. He would surely not have done *that* unless he believed there was serious cause. Yet no details of specific incidents that seem intolerable emerge. All I know for sure is that my mother was miserable in her marriage, that the last *twenty-eight* years of her life were poison for her.

She never ceased to look for remedies for her unhappiness, remedies always short of divorce or separation however. She could not bring herself to that. She got Dad to abandon the Methodist church, however, which she found terribly gloomy, and took up a new cult of affirmation called "Unity." She seemed to have no trouble getting Dad to go along, for Dad did insist on going to church every Sunday. The house became cluttered with pamphlets advocating positive thinking in all its aspects. Later, when Unity palled and she and Dad took up something called "I Am," a church whose doctrines I was never able to distinguish from Unity's, the general idea of both being that one could achieve anything by thinking about it in the correct way. That too, apparently failed her, and at the end of their lives they became loyal members of the High Street Church of Christ, a conventional and cheerful dispenser of an un-demanding version of Protestant piety.

Mama was nothing if not practical about trying to find a solution. She still had habits of working and independence. When the Depression years settled most heavily upon us, she took to selling corsets over the telephone. And she made money at, since at that time all "mature" women wore corsets, and corsets had to be carefully fitted, sometimes made to order. Mama developed customers who came back to her year after year. In 1932, at the age of 55, she had earned enough money to buy herself a Ford Coupe, which she learned to drive so she could visit her customers for fittings. Later, she (or perhaps it was the company that actually produced the corsets she sold) decided that she was doing well enough to warrant opening a shop downtown. This she actually did, although the "shop" was unfortunately located on the third floor of an old office building, so that nobody ever came unless they were invited. She still used the telephone to drum up trade, and the shop closed in less than a year.

This corset business was to be Mama's last taste of independence, last activity that really kept her mind away off the insoluble problem of her marriage. She seemed relatively happy then. When it ended, there she was, back, lashed to a man who bossed her around and bored her to a misery, a man who never drank, never smoked, never swore, a man who had few interests outside his home and no friends or cronies. He didn't seem to need them. He only needed *her*.

# 9

Mama had been married for perhaps three or four years when she began to talk about making her will. "I was talking to our minister," she began one night at dinner. "And he said everybody ought to have a will. Even if you don't have any money. Did you know that, Charles?"

Dad grunted, chewed for a while, then said solemnly, "I suppose."

"Don't you think we ought to write our wills?" said Mama.

Georgia and I waited for his answer. Eventually it came. "Huh. I suppose."

"Well, you know, something could happen to either of us, anytime," Mama went on. He nodded and continued chewing.

"It would save trouble," said Mama. "He said it would save money too."

"Yes," said Dad. "I suppose so."

"I think we ought to do that," said Mama.

A week later she raised the subject again. They were sitting in the living room after dinner.

"Charles," she said. "This house is in your name, isn't it?"

He looked up from his newspaper and said, "What?" She repeated her question.

He considered it. After a minute or so he nodded. "Ye-es," he said. "It's in my name."

"And the car's in your name, isn't it?"

"Ye-es."

"If anything happened to you"--my mother thought it unduly harsh to speak of actually dying--"would the house come to me, do you think?"

He looked at her like a teacher looking at a willfully stupid child. "Of course."

"What about your sister in Salem? What about your mother? What about Elwyn? Elwyn was his sister's son, a nephew of whom he was particularly fond. "Wouldn't the house go partly to them if you didn't have a will?"

"Hmm. . ." said Dad, staring off into space. "I don't know."

Mama kept at it until one evening she got him to sit down at the dining room table with her and actually try to draft their wills. They got nowhere except into an argument. It had occurred to him that he really should leave something to his nephew and his mother. He disliked his sister, so she was not under consideration. However, he had no idea how to devise such a bequest, as he had no assets except the house and his current car, which was itself not fully paid for. The only way to raise money after his death would be to sell the house. Mama could see herself being thrown out on the street so Grandma Butcher could have some money.

Dad muttered something about a lawyer.

"The least you could do would be to go down to the courthouse and have the house put half in my name," said Mama. Finally, he did do that, but he never his car into joint ownership, and he didn't make his will.

It was not long after this that Grandma Butcher died, leaving only Elwyn to be taken care of. Elwyn was still a young man, well able to support himself.

Once Dad made an appointment with a lawyer to talk about his will, but at the last minute canceled it. The tug of war went on—for years.

One evening, in 1931 or 1932, unusually thoughtful at dinner, suddenly burst out, "You're never going to hear from her. You might as well give up the idea. *She* doesn't have any feeling for *you*."

My mind, which had been daydreaming, leapt to attention. "Who?" I asked.

Mama ignored me. Dad, his eyes downcast, chewed vigorously and didn't reply.

Mama went on. "You're just torturing your-self by thinking about it. She washed her hands of you, and you ought to do the same with her. Of course, I know it's hard when it's your only child."

"What?" I cried, looking at Mama.

"His daughter," said Mama quickly. "Dad is worrying about why his daughter doesn't write to him."

"I didn't know he had a *daughter*." I stared at them, waiting for explanations.

Dad nodded, his rheumy little eyes fixed on his plate. "She ran off and got married. Her name was Cora."

"And you're *never* going to hear from that girl," said Mama, shaking her head. "Not even a Christmas card in twenty years." She turned to me. "You'd think she'd send a Christmas card. Her own father. He doesn't even know where she is."

"No. I did hear from her once," said Dad judiciously. "About five years after she left home. She was in California."

"But you haven't heard from her since, have you?"

"No. . . . No. I haven't."

"She could be *dead*," said Mama cruelly.

"Dad nodded sagely. "Yes. Yes. I suppose so." He was silent for a moment. "I don't think so though. I think she'll turn up one of these days."

"Did you answer her letter," I asked.

"Yes. Yes. I wrote back three times, but never had another letter."

As we did the dishes that night, Mama confided to me that Cora was the reason why Dad was so reluctant to make his will. He was angry with her for deserting him, but he couldn't make up his mind to cut her out all together.

"I didn't know he and Frances had a child," I said. "How come Jack didn't say anything about this Cora?"

"Oh, she wasn't Frances's child," said Mother. He was married before that."

My jaw dropped.

"Twice," she added.

"You're his *fourth* wife?"

Mama nodded, looking at me sideways, rolling her eyes cynically. "He just told me all this recently. When I married him, I thought I was only his second, I just knew about Frances who died, you know."

I tried to absorb this idea of so many marriages, but it was nearly impossible for me to imagine that this stodgy, deliberate, unattractive man marrying *four* times.

Finally I said, "So what happened to the first two? Did they die too?"

Mother wiped off the zinc tabletop carefully, glanced through the door toward the living room, then said softly, almost conspiratorially, "No. They both left him."

"Both?" I was stunned. I went on drying dishes. Pretty soon Mama whispered, "Cora's mother was his first wife. She ran off with another man and left this little girl with him. He raised her himself. At least that's what he says. Then, when she was fourteen, she ran away with a man."

My brain was not taking in this information very well. It was too grotesque. Anyone more unlikely than my step-father for the role of abandoned, single parent, I could not imagine. "What happened to the next wife?" I whispered.

Mama shook her head. "I don't know much about her. They weren't married very long, he said. She just up and left him and he got a divorce."

"You mean he's been *divorced* twice?" In those days, *one* divorce was a scandal, but two? I couldn't connect this concept of double divorces with this prim, well-regulated, habit-heavy, pious man. Besides, I couldn't see why *any* woman would marry him in the first place, let alone *four*. I brooded, trying to understand. Spitefully I found some satisfaction in the intelligence that two wives had once left him. Frances, I knew now had been fatally ill when she married him. I rather hoped that Mother would take courage from such information and leave him herself. But, of course, she didn't. She went on unhappily, making a brave show of cheerfulness, getting older and more despairing.

Eventually they did write their wills, sometime around 1941 or 1942. I remember Mama coming into my house, beaming with satisfaction. "Well! We've done it at last. We've made our wills."

I expressed surprise. "And what about Cora?"

"Oh, he's finally given up on her. She'll never turn up anyway. If she hasn't written to him in

all these years--thirty years now, I think -- she's never going to write. She's probably dead. Anyhow, he did it. We went to a lawyer and did it right." And she told me where the will would be kept.

"And what about Elwyn?"

"Well," said Mama, looking like the Cheshire cat. "I talked him out of that too. After all, he doesn't owe anything to Elwyn. Elwyn lived with him for two years and went to high school from here. Dad gave him that. If anybody owes anybody anything, it's Elwyn owes *him*. But he did put in a bequest of \$100. That made him feel good. If Dad dies first, I'll have to sell something to pay Elwyn the hundred dollars. But at least I won't have to sell the house."

"And the house would be yours?"

"Absolutely. After that it goes to you and Georgia. Half and half. Both wills are alike."

"What if Cora turns up?"

What could she do about it? She hasn't paid any attention to her father for all these years. How could she expect anything? Besides she'll never turn up."

But she did. In 1950, when Dad was 79 years old, he received his second letter from Cora. She was still in California. Long since divorced, she had raised two daughters, and now lived by herself, earning a living by hanging wallpaper. She said she had been meaning to write for a long time, had been thinking about coming east to visit him. What did he think about that?

Dad was transported. Delighted. Gleeful. Victorious. See! He seemed to gloat at us, Cora was not dead. He had known it all along. So he wrote back urging her to come. She wrote back: she couldn't come right away, because she didn't have the price of the train ticket, but she would start saving up -- although, if Dad could afford to help her out. But Dad didn't bite: he quickly wrote back to say that although he would like to help, he couldn't raise the money himself.

In fact, it was all quite true: by this time Dad and Mama had little money at all. Over the years they had sold everything of value, including my father's flute and his ivory-handled cane, and Mama's cut-glass goblets and punch bowl. Alas. Money became scarcer and scarcer for them towards the end of their lives, as postwar inflation ate away at Dad's inadequate teacher's pension. I suspect if he could have found the price of that train ticket, or if one could buy a train ticket on time, he would have happily sent the money to Cora. He never denied himself anything he wanted, if he could figure out how to get it.

He continued write to Cora, urging her to come when she could.

As it turned out, Mama was the first to die, retreating from life in a torrent of tears and grieving. In August 1952, she was stricken with jaundice and kidney failure, gone after only two weeks of oxygen tents and kidney machines. Dad was desolated.

At the funeral he sat in the front row, staring at into her open coffin, while the preacher read consoling passages from Scripture. When they started to close the coffin, Dad suddenly sobbed loudly and called out, "They're taking her away. They're taking her away." Startling and embarrassing me, I might add.

Hardly a month later, Cora found the money for her trip to Akron. Dad was ecstatic. She stayed with him for two weeks, cooking, reminiscing, doing his housework, and being generally quite nice to him.

Cora was a real surprise to me. She looked a lot like her father, but she lacked his phlegmatic temperament. A thin, lively, energetic little woman with black hair and intense eyes, she laughed a lot and told stories, although not very interesting ones, about her life growing up with her father in a small, southern Ohio town. She never mentioned running away with a man, but talked about "our" children, "our" house, "our" cat. When the subject of Dad came up, she would agree with whatever Don or I said, adding, "You don't have to tell me anything about him. I lived with him. I know him." She claimed to have the same stubborn will--"When I make up my mind to do something, I do it," she told us firmly. We heard little about her life in California except that she liked it and was determined to stay there. Dad begged her to come and live with him. Couldn't do that, she said. Whether she asked him to come and live with her, I have no idea, but she did persuade him to hire a housekeeper, which he did shortly after she went back home.

The chief thing I remember about the housekeeper Dad hired was her cheerful submissiveness

to his will – that and the fact that I now had to take Dad to the grocery store every week. I rather wish it had been the housekeeper. But Dad did all his own shopping and directed the cooking, she just did the work.

Rarely did Dad do anything he didn't want to. He even managed to evade dying in the hospital. In his 84th year, only two years after Mama, he got out of bed in the middle of the night, walked around the house for a while (we think), settled into a chair in the dining room, and died.

Mrs. Smith, his housekeeper, found him next morning. She seemed genuinely grieved. She was a white-haired widow, somewhere in her sixties, competent, kindly, and quite stupid. "I never met a nicer man," she told us. "Always so polite and considerate. Never a cross word."

He had made himself a new will after Mama died. Proceeds from sale of the house were to be divided three ways: a third to Georgia, me, and Cora, after all.

"I got really fond of him," Mrs. Smith told me. "Do you know, he wanted me to marry him! He talked about it a lot. Said he would marry me in a minute if he wasn't so old with that heart condition and all. He knew he was going to die. He was just waiting."

In his desk we found a piece of lined notebook paper covered with his careful Palmer-style handwriting in pencil. In several places words had been crossed out and rewritten, the whole was rather a shocking document, written by a man who taught Business English to High School students. I quote verbatim, misspellings and all. It's all he left about his life story, perhaps he meant it as his obituary.

*Mr. Butcher was born on a farm near East Rotchester, Columbiana County, Ohio in 1871 began his education in the country schools. [Inserted in ink between lines:] later Graded schools and High schools Was a graduate of the Commerce Department of Mt. Union College, Alliance, Ohio, receiving the degree of B.C.S. in 1897 and he continued his education at night school at the Akron University when he began teaching in the Akron Schools in 1920.*

*Began his teaching in the country schools near Leetonia Ohio in 1890; after about 7 or 8 yrs of such teaching, he taught in Business Colleges. At the Detroit Business University [inserted:] Detroit Mich from 1900 to 1912. Taught at other business colleges in Buffalo, N.Y., Charlotte, N.C. and Waterloo, Ia. Taught in the Com'l Dept of West High School, Akron, from 1920-1940 Mr. Butcher also did accounting work in Detroit, Mich, Toronto, Ont. and Ottawa Can. Mr.. Butcher married three times, ~~both former~~, all three wives died. was married to ~~the present wife~~ Mrs. Laura Stillman on June 8, 1926. [inserted in ink:] She died Aug 27 1952.*

Except for the stay in Toronto, neither Georgia nor I had ever heard of these other travels. A measure of his silent, uncommunicative nature. Or had he redesigned the happenings of his life? Or was Mama just being vindictive, making things up yet another wife between Cora's mother and Frances? We had no idea. Later we found out that four wives was in fact the count.

During the year after Dad died, I had several reasons to correspond with Cora, and received half a dozen friendly letters back.

"You see," she writes in one, "I left him to go to my mother's people when I was thirteen and Dad got married so I never went back to live, though I did go to visit him. But I never asked or received anything from him or caused him one minute of worry or trouble or expense." Her style left a lot of questions in my mind.

In another letter, Cora writes Dad's family in Salem: "Since Walter did what he did to Dad and I never knew or had seen any of them--Also just saw Ollie once when I was a kid - for a minute<sup>11</sup>. But I just feel I would be better off forgetting all of them--as I couldn't cope with any of that kind of stuff. My folks didn't know any of them and I asked them why as a child. They told me then my Dad was the only one that amounted to anything. The rest were always in trouble. So I think from what I have seen -- Its best to leave them alone." Well, I never found out who Walter was, but he does come up again in yet another letter. "Just one thing I don't ever want to see hide nor

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<sup>11</sup> Ollie was Dad's sister.

hair of that Walter or I would call the police right off--There was no excuse for what he did as good as Dad was to him. He is sure no good. That is why my mother's folks would have nothing to do with any of them--No good they said - I think they knew--But they all liked Dad."

A curious thing about those letters, Cora never mentions her mother in them, except to refer to "my mother's people." Nor did Cora mention her mother when she was visiting here in Akron.

Finally, I might mention that she did write of Jack and Frances, but in a puzzling sort of way: "Would love to have Jack's address in Canada--I knew him. In fact it was me that had Dad and his mother take him out of school with us." What? How little we knew about this man, I came to realize in the end, how little of his story. And then there's that final puzzle: why in those paragraphs he wrote about his life just before he died, why did he not mention Cora? Or, perhaps, it's only that his memory was going before he himself died, and that caused him to forget that other wife.

ED NOTE on Charles Butcher's wives and children – from research by Richard Stillman Keister.

1896: Charles m. Beda Aldridge. Daughter Cora Beatrice Butcher b. 1896. Beda d. 1896 (in childbirth?).

1897: Charles m. Lizzie Aldridge (Beda's sister). Two children are born in quick succession: Dwight and Pearl. By 1900 Charles and Lizzie have separated (divorced?) and Charles is teaching in Detroit. Lizzie and their two children are living with her parents in Salem, Ohio. Pearl dies sometime before 1910; Dwight is dead by 1920 (as he does not show up as a soldier in WWI, he was probably not killed in the war). Lizzie lives on with her parents for twenty-some years.

1909: While working in Detroit, Charles meets and marries m. Frances Beatrice (last name not known), a Canadian, living in Toronto. This is Frances's second marriage. She already has a young son "Jack" from her first marriage (possibly born sometime around 1907; in Step-father he seems to be in his early twenties when Laura and her parents visit him in Toronto. Frances d. tuberculosis in Akron.

Cora lived with Charles and his mother in Detroit until her father married Frances (according to Cora's letter she was 13 years old when this occurred, so Beda may have already been pregnant when she and Charles married in 1896. Cora goes to live with "her mother's people," that is, with the Aldriges in Salem, Ohio. In 1913 Cora, now about 17, elopes with Walter Ferguson and moves to Florida; possibly this is the Walter referenced in her letter to mother; possibly there was conflict between Walter and Cora's father, Charles Butcher. At any rate, Walter is dead by the time of the 1930 census, and Cora (now calling herself "Bee") has married Mr. Armstrong and moved to Los Angeles.

1926: Charles m. Laura Taylor Stillman. Laura and her children by George B. Stillman (Laura Jane – b. 1910--and Georgia – b. 1907) move into Charles's house at 641 Minerva Place in Akron.

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