

I'd forgotten how long it had been since the last time she'd spoken to me like that.

I wrapped my slender arms around her neck, shut my eyes and hugged her as tightly as I could. "Please don't ever leave again," I silently pleaded, wishing to cast a spell upon her.

But, time would come to prove that whatever mortal powers I held would soon be doomed against those of The Invisibles.



After she'd been home for a couple of months, Mom was transforming into the mother we so desperately needed. She was laughing that wonderful Irish laugh of hers, and appeared connected to her outside world again . . . connected to us again. She took great pains to ensure we were always freshly dressed in clean clothes and packed our lunches each morning in crisp, brown paper bags that had our names penned across the top. When my brother and I arrived home from school in the afternoons, she was eager to greet us with a big hug and kiss.

One Saturday morning while Daddy was away, Mom decided she was long overdue for a visit with the man of cloth.

"Kids," she declared, "we'll be going downtown to St. Olaf's after breakfast."

"But Mom, it's only Saturday," Mikie replied.

"Yeah," I whined, "can't we go to the candy store instead?"

Mom looked at me disapprovingly.

I knew her answer was a resounding, "No! No candy today." She didn't even have to use her vocal cords.

"Okay, fine. Can I just wear my jeans then? I don't feel like getting all dressed up like we usually have to for church." I was pushing her buttons now, and I knew it.

Another disapproving glance . . . this time the eyebrows went up.

Mom always made us dress up for church whether it was for Sunday sermon, Sunday school, Christmas Mass, Ash Wednesday or some screaming baby's baptism. You name the saintly occasion, and it was one that called for uncomfortable hairstyles and tights that were far too tight.

After Mikie and I had finished our breakfast, we excused ourselves and headed up to our rooms to change clothes. On our way out of the kitchen, Mikie complained under his breath, "But there's not even going to be anyone else there."

"What was that? What did you say, young man?" Mom asked authoritatively.

"Uhhh . . . nothing Mom," my brother cautiously replied.

Once properly attired we went back downstairs and plopped onto the living room couch, then waited for Mom to finish the last of her primping in the bathroom.

When she finally came to retrieve us, we thought we were ready to get our coats on. No such luck. She had the dreaded bottle of Johnson's No Tangles in her hand. I sighed, knowing exactly what was in store for me.

"C'mon, Baby, I need to do your hair," she encouraged. I sighed again, this time louder.

I was unlucky enough to have been born with curly hair. Not just wavy, pretty hair, not even pretty wavy hair. I got socked with crazily curly hair, Buckwheat-style. Sure, all the grannies loved it and would coo at me in restaurants or at church exclaiming, "What a little Dollie!" I think they mistook me for a pet toy poodle. I hated my hair. It was so much work to take care of that I rarely ever did, and unless Mom or Daddy or Grandma came to my rescue, I preferred to walk about with wild, toe-headed locks, looking tribal.

Mom sat down on the couch. An "Ah, man!" escaped my lips as I took my appointed position on the floor directly underneath her, my head in between her nyloned knees. She doused my hair with the no-tangle potion until I coughed, and

then began to pull through it with a black, plastic comb. She yanked and yanked at it until she got all the snarls out. It hurt so much that I wanted to blast out a few swear words but thought better of it, knowing full well that I would have gotten grounded had I let them fly.

After the hard part was done, she fashioned my hair into two pigtails, tying a short, pink bow made of yarn around each one.

“Don’t you just look so cute!” she exclaimed. “Doesn’t she look cute, Mikie?”

My brother didn’t even bother to look at me. He merely shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “Doesn’t make any difference to me.”

“How do you like your hair, Baby?” Mom asked as she handed me a mirror.

I cringed as I peered into it and tried to sound appreciative of her stylistic efforts.

“Oh, you look just like Buffy!” Mom exclaimed. “Don’t you think she looks just like Buffy, Mikie?”

“Who the heck is Buffy?” he asked, clearly annoyed.

“You know, that sweet little girl on TV. What’s the name of the show she’s on? Is it *Family Affair*?” Mom didn’t wait for an answer. “Yes, that’s right. I think it’s *Family Affair*.”

My brother shrugged again.

Personally, I preferred to look tribal. It was a lot less work.

We were finally ready to be on our way. Mom opened her purse and took out two dimes, one for me, one for my brother. She placed a single, silver coin into each of our palms.

“Money for the bus, Kids,” she explained.

We donned our winter garb and headed out the door.



Mikie walked on one side of Mom while I walked on the other as the three of us marched toward the metro bus stop located only a few blocks from our house. It had been a cold, snowy season and mounds of winter wonderland flanked the sidewalks. Several long, smooth patches of ice occupied the pavement along our route, and whenever one came into range, Mikie and I took turns sprinting full speed ahead and sliding its length.

We didn't have to wait long before the bus rolled up. Mom gathered the two of us in front of her and checked our palms to make sure we hadn't lost our fare.

"C'mon, Kids, let's get on now," she directed.

The warmth of the bus welcomed us inside. Mom chose the side seats at the front so the three of us could sit next to each other. Mikie sat beside Mom, and I sat beside Mikie. He asked me if I wanted to play Bloody Knuckles, that game where you hold both of your clenched fists directly up to your opponent's and each combatant attempts to whack the other's knuckles first.

"Naw," I responded irritably, flicking my hand at him as if shooing away a fly. "Maybe later." Mikie always won that stupid game anyway.

As the bus was winding its way downtown, an elderly man boarded and sat directly opposite from us. His hair was sparse and white, sharply contrasting the brown age spots that lightly speckled his face. His worn jacket was torn in a few places, and some of the fiber filling was trying to escape its polyester prison. He woefully gazed down at the rubber-matted floor. I kept looking at him, wondering what made him so sad. Finally, I leaned over toward my brother, cupped the side of my mouth with one hand and whispered, "Ask Momma if that man over there can come with us to see the priest."

Mikie bent toward Mom and relayed my message. She leaned forward to get a better look at me, then reached over and patted my knee while shaking her head, "No."

“But Momma,” I loudly whispered back, brows furrowed.

She patted my knee more urgently so that I would stop talking and again shook her head, “No.”

As we were approaching our destination, Mom pulled the stop cord. After the bus had come to a halt, she stood up and grabbed each of our hands to steady us while we exited. As I passed the sad man, I purposefully caught his eye and smiled. He didn’t smile back. I don’t think he had any more smiles left to give.

St. Olaf’s church was only a short distance from our bus stop. We walked the first block in silence as Mom seemed to be thinking of other things. After crossing a busy intersection, with only one more block to go, she started softly singing under her breath. I couldn’t hear her very well at first because of all the background traffic noise, but as she got further into the melody, I realized it was one I’d heard her play on the piano hundreds of times. She was never able to finish a performance without crying.

♪♪♪ “Like a Bridge Over Troubled Water”

A single tear slid down Mom’s face as we entered the church. Once inside, she turned to the two of us and whispered the rules. “You’ll be good for me, right Kids?” she asked while earnestly searching our eyes.

We eagerly shook our heads, “Yes.”

Mom smiled approvingly and extracted a few more objects from her purse, then held them out for each of us.

“I’d like you to say the rosary while you’re waiting for me. Do you both remember what I taught you?”

“I do,” Mikie proudly whispered.

“Yeah, me too!” I said.

“Okay, good. Now when we go inside the chapel you’ll be very, very quiet, won’t you?”

“Yes, Momma,” replied Mikie.

“Yeah, we’ll be really, really, really, really, quiet for you, Momma,” I playfully assured her as I gave her a toothy grin.

Mom ushered us into the chapel where there were but a few other souls seated throughout the pews. The room was so dimly lit that I had to wait several seconds for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Mom led us over to the row of pews that was closest to the confessional booth. We tried to extract ourselves from our winter wear as quietly as we could, but the echoes scattered. An old lady in the front pew turned around and looked at us with annoyed curiosity. Mom knelt down, rosary in hand, and then glanced at my brother and me. This was our cue. Mikie held his dark brown rosary in his right hand and cradled the first bead with his free forefinger and thumb. He began to whisper his first prayer.

I never understood the rosary thing. To me, it was just a bunch of memorized words strung together to form a bunch of religious chants about hailing Mary, praising the Lord, and something about Art. I didn’t know what they were talking about when they said Thou Art this and Thou Art that. Hell, I didn’t really know what they were talking about . . . ever. But, since my big brother was making me look bad I, too, cradled the first bead of my rosary and began to pray:

Hail Mary . . .
The Lord . . .
Thou Art . . .
Amen.

Next bead.

The lady who’d been in the confessional when we first arrived had finished, so Mom stood up and took her turn with the awaiting clergyman. While Mom was away, I tried as hard

as I could to concentrate on saying my prayers but started getting bored and looked over at my brother. His fingers were on the seventh bead, and he was struggling to stay awake. His lips moved a few times, then his eyes fluttered and his head began to bob. As soon as his chin hit his chest, his eyes flew open and he gently shook his head from side to side, trying to become more alert. Within seconds, he was once again lulled by the comforting darkness and heady smell of incense and burning candles. His eyes started fluttering a second time.

I leaned in closer to him and mischievously whispered his name, "Mikie."

The sound of my voice nudged him back to reality and he sleepily replied, "Yeah?"

Instead of saying something, I giggled mischievously, then lifted my buttock and let a fart fly out.

Mikie tried not to laugh and elbowed my shoulder. "Stop that, Dufas, you're going to get us in trouble."

I couldn't stop giggling and let another one rip.

Mikie lost his composure this time and started to snicker right along with me.

The old lady in the front pew turned around and eyeballed us again. Now she was really annoyed and let us know it. "Shhhhhh," she hissed at the two of us as she menacingly drew an arthritically crooked finger to her lips.

Mom came out of the confessional booth just then. I thought my brother and I were doomed for sure. Either Mom would be giving us a tongue lashing on the bus or, worse yet, she'd tell Daddy when we got home, and he'd give us the belt. The two of us froze immediately and scoured Mom's face for any signs of anger. Much to our surprise, her expression held no hint of disapproval whatsoever. In fact, she didn't even seem to notice we'd been horsing around. She had this wonderfully serene look about her; a look of absolute peace.

Usually I didn't stare at Mom, but I was staring at her now. She looked angelic, almost as though she were akin to the

majestic statues we'd passed earlier when we entered the church. Her eyes met mine as she smiled sweetly down upon me. Mikie elbowed me and said, "C'mon, Dufas, get your coat on."

I punched him in the arm and annoyingly replied, "Stop calling me Dufas, would you, Dufas."

"You are a Dufas," Mikie responded.

"You're the one who's the Dufas, Mikie!" I argued.

"I know you are, but what am I?" my brother quickly snapped back.

Mom put on her black wool coat and glanced down at the pew to make sure we hadn't forgotten any of our hats or mittens.

As we were about to exit through the chapel's giant, wooden doors, I gently dipped my fingers into the bowl of holy water and lightly dabbed it onto my forehead. I wondered if this clear liquid really was divine. I re-immersed my hand into the copper bowl and let a few of my fingers skim the water's surface a second time, then firmly grasped Mom's hand. I prayed that it was.

On the bus ride back home, my brother asked me if I wanted to play Bloody Knuckles. I rolled my eyes and replied, "Geezzz. All right already!" Mikie always won that stupid game.



Winter crawled on. By mid-February we'd had a warm spell, if that's what you can call it. The thermometer crept up to a whopping 38 degrees for four straight days; warm enough to reduce any remaining snow piles into crusty sheets of ice. With my outdoor options dwindling as fast as the melting snow, I turned my attention to that favorite all-American pastime . . . watching the tube. My daily social life began to revolve around episodes of *Bewitched*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Mission*

Impossible, and, whenever I could get away with it, *Love American Style*.

One day Daddy asked, "Why've you been watching so much boob tube lately, Twink?" Daddy always referred to the television set as the "boob tube."

"Nothing else to do, Daddy," I replied matter-of-factly.

He didn't seem to like that response, and I could hear a loud "HMMMM . . ." escape as he walked away. Faster than I could spit out the words "Black Gold, Texas Tea," Daddy had enrolled me in Camp Fire Girls, a youth group whose mission was to build confident, future leaders. Boob tube problem solved.

At first, I didn't want to go, assuming most of the other girls would know each other and I wouldn't fit in.

"You'll make some new friends," Daddy encouraged.

I wasn't buying it.

He forged ahead, "The troop leader told me you'll make lots of neat crafts. You know, like pinecone feeders for the birds. You want to help the birds, don't you, Twink?" Daddy ignored my shoulder shrug. "And you'll go on fun field trips. Hey Kiddo, maybe they'll even take you skiing."

"I only want to go skiing with you!" I replied in the poutiest voice I could muster.

"Oh, c'mon now, Twink. You don't really mean that," Daddy gently insisted.

My lips pursed even tighter.

I eventually succumbed to Daddy's persuasive rhetoric and agreed to let him take me to the first Camp Fire Girls meeting, trying not to whine too much on the drive over.

Meetings were held every Thursday evening at 7 p.m. sharp in Longfellow Elementary. At 6:45, Daddy maneuvered the Buick up to the school's main entrance, then stopped to let me hop out.