

Poppa Was a Rolling Stone

“DETROIT,” DAD SAID, shaking his Manhattan pitcher. “I’m being transferred to Detroit, kids.” He looked at Mom. “How do you like that, Vera? District manager in just a year and a half. Going to the head office. Not bad for a fellow from . . .” He poured his Manhattan and took a sip.

My little brother, Ben, got that vacant look and sat down on the sofa next to Mom. Mom was staring at the wallpaper she’d just hung. She lit a cigarette, blew out a curvy trail of smoke, and said, “Tell them to shove Detroit up their ass.”

I was a little disappointed, because I’d been taking cheerleader classes and just learned the cheers and fight song for this school. But I was excited, too, because, for the most part, I liked moving. I went to my room and lay on the bed. Mom and Dad were still arguing, but all I could hear were the names of cities we’d lived in like Cleveland and Kansas City.

Actually, we hadn’t lived in Cleveland or Kansas City or any big cities, but in suburbs with names like Bolingbrook Heights and Heather Hills Township. Just like we wouldn’t live in Detroit, if we ended up moving again, so if there was anything unusual or unexpected about any of those cities, it didn’t matter, because the suburbs were pretty much the same.

Ben came in sucking his thumb. “If we move, we’ll probably get lost again, huh Mary Jane?” he said.

Getting lost was exciting sometimes. Dad always said you have to move on to move up, and I said you have to get lost to feel like home is home. Like that time in Cleveland.

* * * * *

It was right after we moved in, the night before we were to start at our new school. I was eager and restless. Some candy would take the edge off. I had to find a shopping center to get an Almond Joy and a package of Good 'N Plenty's.

I found my bike in the garage behind a bunch of boxes that hadn't been unpacked yet. It didn't seem to have suffered any punctured tires or anything. As I was heading out, I heard Ben rustling around behind some boxes. "Wait, I'm going too."

It was dusk, and the front light on Ben's bike was smashed. But mine worked, and we both had reflectors on our fenders, so I said okay. We glided down the driveway, a silent pair, and as we passed the front window I saw them, Dad drinking his Manhattan and Mom smoking her cigarette.

From the street you couldn't see Mom and Dad, just the jumping light from the TV. We rolled down the winding roads, past split-level houses that were practically the same as ours, some different only in that they were mirror images. On and on we rode, until we came to a slightly more expensive neighborhood. There were rows and rows of ranches, tri-levels and colonials, big ones with soft yellowish lights, homes where people would talk in low voices and be polite, even when they didn't have company. For a moment I felt a twinge of envy, but then who could relax around people like that?

Then there were smaller, older houses with aluminum siding. Instead of paved driveways with slick new cars, they had gravel ones with motorcycles and broken down clunkers in them. People in there would slap their kids in the grocery store. I was glad I didn't live in the other houses with other parents.

Pretty soon we were near where they were digging out land for a new subdivision. It was creepy, those big areas that looked like graves, the dead trees turned on their sides, the bulldozers with their ferocious jaws clamped shut for the night.

"We'd better try another direction," I called out.

"I'm getting cold," Ben said. "Let's go home and get a jacket."

"Not me." I slowed down, took off my sweater, and tossed it to him. "Go if you want, big scaredy baby." I whipped around a corner and then turned to look for him. All I could see was his smooth blond hair. I waited.

He stopped behind me, looked around, and said, "I'll go on."

Poor Ben, he was always afraid to be alone. More than normal. He went berserk one time when we were moving. The men had taken all the furniture out, and Mom and Dad told me to stay with him while they went

for coffee. As a joke, I hid in the basement for a while. He smashed every window in two bedrooms and was working on the living room by the time I came upstairs. You should have seen the blood—he hadn't used a rock or anything, just his hands.

I wasn't the only one who worried about Ben. His teacher in Kansas City called once and I heard Mom snap that he didn't need any damned psychiatrist. Still, she went off and sat with a worried look all afternoon.

It was uphill back to where the nice houses were, and it took a long time, but we got there. There weren't any street lights, but there was a big moon so close you could wrap your arms around it. I turned, and there was Ben, following me like a little duckling. I loved him more in that instant than I ever knew I could love anyone.

But now I was beginning to think we were lost. We were at the edge of a woods. We turned in another direction and passed railroad tracks, and then got into an area of average houses so I thought we must be near home. But for the life of me, I couldn't find our street, Jasmine Lane.

We went up to a house, and there was a nice old lady and man, and I asked where Jasmine Lane was.

"Never heard of it," the old man said. "We'd better call your parents."

"We don't have a phone," I said, thinking how we'd get in trouble.

Ben looked at me, confused. "They put it in yesterday."

God he was dumb. "No, you're imagining things."

Ben's blue eyes lit up and he said, "She's lying."

The man looked at his wife. She said, "Better call the police, maybe."

I glared into Ben's eyes and I felt like knocking them out, but I said, "I just remembered where our street is." I bullshitted out way out of there fast. That was the last thing we needed, the police bringing us home.

I got on my bike and zoomed away. I didn't care if Ben got lost and rode around forever. But when I heard him calling me, I stopped. I went over and shook him and said, "You're always trying to cause trouble. Can't you be normal?" And I jerked him some more until he yelled. I fished around in my pocket and found a piece of bubble gum. I tore it in half and gave him one piece. But I kept the comic for myself and refused to let him read it.

We rode some more and suddenly I remembered that I didn't know our street number, so even if I found Jasmine Lane it wouldn't do much good. Our house looked an awful lot like the others. I hit the brakes. "What kind of car do we have?" I asked. "It's a red DeSoto, isn't it?"

Ben said, "No that was in Cincinnati, when Dad worked for Rivington Tires. Don't you remember? He has a free company car again. It's a Chrys-

ler. In front it's saying 'Hi,' and in back it looks like sea gulls taking off."

"That's what you said about the DeSoto."

"No, it looked like it was saying 'cheese.'"

"Well what color is it?"

"Green. And there's a dent on the left door where Dad kicked it the time he locked the keys inside."

"Let's go," I said. This street had new black top and smooth, fresh curbs and it seemed like some fiend was putting in new developments just to keep us getting lost. But then I saw a hill that looked familiar. It was steep and we had to get off and walk our bikes. A truck went by, and the driver whistled. My handlebars were cold, and the air was damp-er. What if I got a flat tire or some guys tried to kill us?

Ben complained that he was tired. At the top of the hill, I turned and looked—there he was, his blond head glowing in the moonlight, his arms all business pushing that little bike of his, that bike with all its dents from going in and out of moving vans, the chipped red reflector winking and doing its humble best to keep Ben safe. I felt a stronger than ever protective instinct stirring in me. I thought of the nutty things he did all the time, like getting in the car trunk and closing it to see if his transistor radio would work inside it; the teacher calling to tell Mom that Ben was writing on the blackboard all the swear words Dad said when he got fired from Tyroler Tires, then calling a few days later to say he wrote the happy swear words from the day Dad got a promotion at Echenrode Rubber.

But it seemed familiar here, and I said we'd try once more. Sure enough, the houses started looking like ours, and it felt like we'd been here before, like we'd sweated here and breathed here, left our scent, the way they say wild animals find their way around the woods.

I realized later that we'd passed the house about four times without knowing it. And it was Ben who spotted it. "Hey, Mary Jane," he shouted. "That's it! I know that's it because it looks like the upstairs windows have bags under their eyes with those flower boxes. Everything's okay now."

Ben's eye for detail sure was good—maybe too good for his own good. But then again maybe that's how he had to operate because the world seemed so confused to him—like when you're on a ride at the carnival and you start to get sick, so you stare at some little thing, like a bolt on the gate holding you in or a dirt spot on your shoe, and you keep staring to shut out the swirling dizziness so you won't puke.

I'll tell you, coming up the driveway, looking in that window at Mom and Dad, who hadn't budged since we left, I was so happy to be home that I didn't care about not getting the Almond Joy and Good 'N Plenty's.

"Don't tell Dad we went out or we'll get in trouble. If he does catch us, say we took a walk around the block," I said. Quietly, we made our way to the garage. Ben was right—the car looked like a seagull saying hi. We tiptoed in through the back door and listened from the hallway. All we heard was the TV.

"Let's get a drink of water," I whispered. "Then we'll walk through the living room to our rooms. Act like we never left and were just fooling around in the kitchen the whole time."

As we passed by, Dad turned and said, "You kids got any homework?" Mom and I laughed. I said, "We haven't started school yet."

Dad looked like he really had forgotten that school hadn't started yet. Then he grinned. "When I was a kid, we got it all summer long, by God."

"And you had to walk ten miles to turn it in, through snow storms," I said.

"Twenty," Dad said. "Through blizzards."

Dad had to start all the jokes about his terrible childhood. If someone else did, it was their funeral.

"In summer?" Mom said.

"Sure. It got colder back in those days."

"Maybe it was the ice age," Ben said.

Mom and Dad about fell out of their chairs laughing. I was so relieved they hadn't noticed we were gone that I felt like doing a big cheerleader cheer.

But then that other side of Ben emerged, the Ben who never could leave a moment alone, let it unfurl itself and lie there and have everyone enjoy it. He got that look on his face, his blue eyes glowing, like they always did when he was trying to get attention, good or bad. "We got lost and people were going to call the police."

"What?" Dad said, turning quickly. He was furious. Maybe a little scared, too, if I wasn't mistaken. "The police?"

Dad had been nervous about the police ever since they brought Ben home for climbing the fire escape to the top of Oren's Department Store to see how big the letters on its sign were. That was back in Pittsburgh.

"It was Mary Jane's idea," Ben said, looking scared now, too. I could never figure that kid out.

Dad jumped up. He seemed about ten feet tall and his hair stuck up on both sides like horns. His face was red and saggy. "Don't go out at night in a strange neighborhood."

"We never didn't have a strange neighborhood," Ben said quietly, like he wasn't sure whether he wanted Dad to hear it or not.

Quarto

Dad did hear and now I really could kill Ben. "Don't smart off to me, and don't go out without telling us."

I felt like a prisoner, standing there in the doorway, and I turned and ran to my room. Sometimes I felt sorry for Dad, but right now I hated him. And I hated Mom for sitting there and blowing smoke rings. I hated Ben for being weird and screwing things up all the time, and most of all I hated myself for not being able to figure out a way for all of us to be happy.

I cried for a while and then got out my map of the United States. I picked out Los Angeles and New York City. After a while, I had myself convinced that I'd live in Hollywood and get discovered by an agent. Then I wouldn't have to work in an office like Dad and move from one look-alike house to another all my life. I'd have a penthouse higher than Oren's Department Store and the only letters Ben would have to find out the size of would be the gigantic ones on the HOLLYWOOD sign right outside my window.

* * * * *

Ben came in and sat on my bed. "What are we going to do, Mary Jane?"

"We're going to move, probably, and there's not much you or I can do about it."

He stuck his thumb in his mouth. Eight years old and he still sucked his thumb. Finally, he took it out and said, "They have the Detroit Tigers there."

We heard Dad's voice in the living room, wheedling now. "What's wrong with one more move? I can't turn down this promotion."

"I swore when we moved to Indianapolis that it was the last time. That was three cities ago."

* * * * *

Indianapolis—our stay there was so short we must have broken a record. We hadn't lived there more than a month when they came home from a party and Dad yelled that he wanted to quit that job.

"They promote a hotshot who invites the boss over to swim in his back yard pool."

"Oh, who cares?" Mom sounded tired.

"You can knock yourself out with hard work, but they like phonies with back yard pools. I'm going to call Chuck Wylie at Acc Tires to see if his offer is still good."

"I'm not moving again."

I heard the keys jingle, the hangers in the closet dance frantically,

the door slam, and the car back down the driveway. During these fights, I never quite relaxed until the car shifted into forward gear and disappeared down the street.

After the coast was clear, I heard Ben in the next room. He was pretending he was a baseball announcer. It sounded like he was doing the St. Louis Cardinals. Ben knew every player on every team of every city we'd lived near, and he did perfect imitations of the broadcasters' voices, complete with the banter. He did an inning, then a beer commercial from Milwaukee. As I shut my door, he was singing, "From the land of sky blue waters. . . Hamms the beer refreshing, Hamms the beer refreshing."

Mom came into my room. She had put on a nightgown, the one with a safety pin holding a strap.

"Couldn't sleep," she said, sitting down at the end of my bed and leaning against the wall. Pretty soon Ben was there, too. He climbed into her lap.

"Did I ever tell you about my junior prom?" she said. "I went with Norman Gipson. He lived on a duck farm."

Benny and I loved Mom's stories. They were always so unusual and the people weren't anything like the ones we knew in real life. I tucked my pillow just right and enjoyed the warmth of Mom as she talked.

"Grandma made me a beautiful dress, blue satin. It was the Depression, you know, no one had any money, but Norman managed to rent a tux. But do you know what? He still smelled like those ducks. He couldn't get rid of that smell." She lit a cigarette and held the match for Benny to blow out. Then she tossed the match. It landed in Ben's Fort Apache set. Mom had told us she didn't care about housework any more. She took a long puff and flicked an ash off into nowhere.

"What do ducks smell like?" I asked.

"A whole farm of them smells worse than anything you can imagine. Worse than a house full of dogs, or even cats. My mother took a whiff and led me into her bedroom. She whispered, 'It's his boots. Look.'

"So I looked through a crack in the door, and sure enough, he was wearing big, clodhopper work boots."

"Why didn't he wear shoes?" Ben asked. He put his thumb in his mouth and his throat wobbled like a little bird's.

"I guess he couldn't afford any, honey. So Grandma got out her eau de who-knows-what and started spraying me and said, 'Now you'll smell so good you won't notice him.' And the next thing we knew, the atomizer got stuck. We giggled so hard, she forgot to point it away from me. I was

drenched.”

Mom hugged me and I felt good. I'd had a lot of best friends, but they never became old friends because we never lived anywhere long enough. My family had to be my old and best friends, and since Ben was unpredictable, that made it tough. Sometimes it seemed like Mom was my traveling, portable best friend.

“So we walked out the door, one of us smelling like duck turds and the other smelling like a French cat house.”

Ben said, “What’s a French cat house?”

Mom winked at me like I would know and hugged Ben. “Never mind.” “Well it sure doesn’t smell as bad as a duck farm,” I said.

Mom laughed to herself. All her mascara had been wiped, or cried off, and now from the side she looked old. “But do you know what I did?” Mom got up from the bed and twirled around in that old nylon nightgown with the safety pin on the strap. Under the faded and snagged material you could see her still-youthful body. “I danced with everyone else, and I was elected prom queen, and I wore a beautiful tiara and cape.”

I could see it. I really could, Mom looking like Miss America.

Then, like a girl at a slumber party who doesn’t want to go to bed she led Benny back to his room. A minute later she was lingering at my door, dragging from her cigarette, staring at me like she was thinking

“You’ll do all right, Mary Jane,” she said finally. As she turned and walked out, her nightgown strap fell down. She didn’t bother to pull it back up.

I lay in bed seeing Mom waltzing around in a blue dress and smiling with her red lipstick smile all over the room. It came to me then, the truth about Mom—she was always in a better mood when Dad left after a fight. She wasn’t totally crazy about being married to him.

On the other hand, she was glad she got away from small towns and the Depression. Dad wore a suit and the right kind of shoes to work and had probably been exotic to her. So if her life was all confusion now, at least she didn’t have to be the prettiest and smartest girl in town with no one to dance with except guys that smelled like ducks.

* * * * *

“Detroit’s too cold.”

“Okay, we’ll get a house that’s heated, then.”

“You’re funny. You’re so damn funny you should be on the Ed Sullivan Show.”

Dad left in an avalanche of gravel down the driveway. I always worried that he’d get hurt during one of these angry fits. Once, he broke his

foot. It was when we lived in Denver.

* * * * *

That night in Denver Dad had come home tense but all smiles. He threw his briefcase down. "We're going to Chicago, kids." He put on his Frank Sinatra album and sang along. "My kind of town, Chi-cah-go is, my kind of town," as he mixed his Manhattans.

Mom just turned the TV up louder.

I was awakened at three in the morning by a crash and some thuds. Then I heard Dad hopping around the living room and shouting, "I think I broke something. Son of a bitch."

I heard Mom come out of the bedroom. Her voice was frantic. "Shall I call a doctor?"

"I'll have to go to the hospital. Find out where it is."

Dad kept hopping and swearing as Mom rustled through drawers. The floor shook and the knick knacks on shelves rattled. Finally she said, "There's no hospital here. What town is nearby?"

"How would I know?"

Mom called some hospitals. "John, two say they're not nearby, another doesn't even know where Harvard Valley Manor is, it's so new."

"Harvard goddamn *Hills* Manor. Call the police then."

There was a lot of commotion with keys and doors, then the car tried to start. "Chr-r-ysler, Chr-r-ysler," that particular car went, as Ben put it. Finally, it took a firebreathing deep breath as it backed down the driveway, preparing to charge off in search of a hospital.

I felt like I'd just swallowed a sink full of dish water. Ben appeared in my doorway. I felt the silence, the healing silence, like someone had just washed and put salve and a band-aid on all the swearing and yelling.

"Hey, Benny, let's go see what's in the cupboard."

As we passed through the living room, we saw that the aluminum panel on the screen door had a big hole in it—right at kicking height. The front of the hi fi was smashed in, too, and a speaker was hanging out by a cord.

We stared until the upset feeling went away, then headed for the kitchen and looked through the cupboards. There was no candy, but there was a yellow cake mix. I showed Ben how to do the three hundred strokes by hand so he could practice counting while I got the pans ready. We put the cake in the oven and went into the living room and turned on the TV.

There was an old black and white movie with people in evening clothes. I knew who the woman with the squeaky voice was. It was Jean Harlow.

Happiness came over me for how many interesting old things—like that movie—and how many new things there were in life. Living in different places gave you a lot of stuff to compare—like accents and weather and the different ways to wrap your garbage. Then I felt sad for Ben, because the older we got, the more fun I had and the more confused he seemed.

I put those worries out of my head and thought, who knows, maybe he'll survive just fine, along with the rest of us.

I told Ben the movie was made when Mom and Dad were kids. We watched a while longer, and Ben said, "I think Dad hates it when he was a kid. He wants things to be like on TV now."

I didn't feel like thinking about Dad just then, especially with his broken foot. Mom had told us his family didn't treat him right, that he didn't have enough of a home to know what one was supposed to be like. He sometimes went without a coat or boots in the winter, and one night his Mom didn't come home and he was locked out and his feet got frost-bitten. The doctors had to cut off four of his toes. Dad always went around in socks and made excuses not to go swimming.

Ben said, "Middle of the night commercials remind me of driving through a scary new town and suddenly you see a happy neon sign."

I knew the ads were clicking in that brain of his, and pretty soon I'd be hearing them.

The next ad was for a floor wax. There was a shiny house and adorable kids and a Mom who thought scrubbing the floor was the most important thing in her life. None of the doors were kicked in, and no one looked confused. Dad wanted a life like they had in the commercials. So did Ben. Even Mom probably did.

So how come I didn't dream of that? Maybe because none of this stuff—nice suburban life like they showed in the commercials—ever happened to real people, or if it did, it didn't happen to us, no matter how many times we moved. Whether people other than Jean Harlow got fancy penthouses in real life was something I'd have to wait and find out.

Ben sat in the armchair next to the window and it was his job to watch for the car so we could ditch the cake out the window and run to bed, if necessary. My job was to watch the clock for the cake and serve it.

Ben every now and then got up and went over and ran his hand around in the holes of the hi fi. Predictably, he ended up hurting himself and started yelling. His hand got stuck in the hole. I helped him pull it out. It started to ooze blood.

I thought of the time Ben jumped into the basement instead of going down the stairs. He cut his ear and Dad thought it was an internal injury

and drove him to the hospital at about ninety miles an hour. Dad had sweated and prayed out loud and even cried.

I took Ben to the bathroom and washed his hand off and held it until it stopped bleeding. Then I bandaged it and cleaned up the blood on the floor. Usually, something like this would depress me, but Ben was acting so sweet and normal that night and I was so desperate for a portable best friend, I didn't let it get me down.

Ben wanted a drink. There was no pop or milk, so I made us cocktails with Dad's soda water and Hershey's Chocolate Syrup and maraschino cherries, and we drank those and watched Jean Harlow and waited for the cake to bake.

* * * * *

We moved to Detroit, of course, just as we of course moved everywhere else.

We started listening to Motown music. A popular song then was "Poppa Was a Rolling Stone," by the Temptations. Ben, Mom and I thought it was funny the first time we heard it on the kitchen radio, while Dad listened to Frank singing "High Hopes" on the hi fi in the living room.

I decided this suburb was as good as any other. Better, in fact, for me, because I finally made cheerleaders.

The day I tried out was an important day all around, I guess you could say, because that was the day Ben got placed in special classes and transferred to a different school.

I'll never forget how I felt the morning Ben first climbed on that bus that took the retards and the behavior cases that my "cool" friends made fun of. He turned, looked at me, and smiled, and he gave a wave that tried to be nonchalant.

I just turned away from the window and quickly told myself, heck, he'll probably turn out just fine.

I turned on the Motown station and tried to get Ben out of my head and to make myself think about my own problems, cheerleader kinds of problems, like whether to wear my hair down or in a ponytail.