

Little Nancy:
The Journey Home

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**Little Nancy:
The Journey Home**

By Nancy Alvarez

For my women friends
Barb, Doris, Ruth, Sue, Karen, Margaret, Elaine, and Beth
‡
my daughters Rachel and Leah

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Forward

Dear Bright-eyed Little Nancy,

I seem to have lost you, and I don't know where you've gone. I stare at your expectant little face, filled with delight as you smile into the camera with assurance that something good is on the way, and long to step into the frame with you in order to recapture that feeling. Years ago, so many I don't remember exactly when, you used to wake up in the morning with a thrill that a new day was about to begin, sliding your feet all over the smooth, percale sheet beneath you and glorying in the feel of the fabric. Even on a rainy day, you loved to watch the light as it filtered through the window shades, and breathe in the smell of coffee coming from our mother's kitchen, although you didn't really know then what it was. I know you smiled with contentment and well-being back then because you trusted what the day would bring. You trusted it would be full of wonder. You trusted that your body could easily run, jump, twirl and dance. You trusted that your mother would put something delicious in front of you at the kitchen table for breakfast. You trusted that you would be cared for and loved.

It is obvious from the look on your face in the photo hanging in my hallway that these distant memories are true, but I want to know for sure.

I need to find you.

At 60 my world is not right; my life is filled with peril. Whatever the day has to offer may not be good. I wake up afraid, but I don't know of what. These fears, and the familiar difficulty I have breathing each and every morning, are becoming very distressing to me. Most of my friends would not believe this frightened person is me. I am competent, mouthy, spirited, and still full of curiosity, or that is how most people in the world experience me. Even my closest friends do not know the depth of my unease. What bothers me more is that I rarely experience true joy anymore. There doesn't seem to be room for it beneath the sadness I feel about all my perceived failures: at making marriage work; at writing fiction that agents want to represent and readers wait for with eager anticipation; at

living so far from what has long been familiar to me; at believing I have to move to ensure my financial security—the list goes on. Every day I wonder what has happened to me. Every night as I fall asleep, I wonder where I am headed and why my journey has become so unsafe.

It is obvious to me why I long to recapture the spirit in those exuberant blue eyes, but I have no idea how to go about it.

That is why I am writing to you, and writing this book. As I explore the phases of your life and mine, perhaps this journey will help me recapture your easy expectation. There is so much I don't remember, especially in the early years. As I share these pages with my close friends I know we will all learn more about ourselves. My friends and I have already helped each other through so many dark times. That is the other reason I have decided to turn the exploration into a book: my hope that it will resonate with other women, sparking them to begin a journey of their own. Books have always sustained me, and you. It would be very fulfilling to know that sharing my struggle to find you through writing might inspire women I don't even know.

Please come back and help me. I will not shy away from what you have to teach me. I want to know everything, so that I can again embrace what lies ahead as you so clearly did. It is certainly possible that what I have taken as truth, or clear memory, will actually turn out to be quite different from what I have assumed all these years. What I learn may free me from some of my assumptions about life, what it is supposed to be and look like, so that I can move forward on a path we have chosen for me together. I may find that life has possibilities I can no longer see because I long ago discounted their potential for me. There may be new adventures awaiting me somewhere down the road.

It is with this spirit of hope that I begin these chapters, and my brief notes to you.

Love,

Nancy

August 2nd, 2005

Dress-up

Dear Little Nancy,

Your favorite dress was the little blue cotton one with the puffed sleeves and round white collar bordered with a darker blue stripe. That's why you chose to wear it for your picture. You didn't really understand what the man was doing behind the stand where the camera was mounted, but you loved the way you looked, and kept reaching down with your hands to stroke the skirt because the cotton was so crisp. Your mother had ironed the dress that very morning so it was warm when she dropped it over your head. The collar kept sticking up but you didn't want to take the dress off. The collar was supposed to be that way, you told your mother. The only thing you were sorry about when you saw the finished picture was that your hair stood up as well, in a cowlick above your forehead. Your mother told you your hair was supposed to be that way, and you skipped off to play with the girl up the block. Of course you believed her.

I remember when you raced outside on a sunny afternoon waving a big spoon you had taken from the kitchen drawer, and clutching watermelon seeds you had saved from the night before in your other little fist. You chose to plant your seeds immediately below the living room window next to the front stoop, and set to work. I think you hummed as you worked, something I still do when I feel happy. When you came in to tell your mother what you had done, she was dismissive: watermelons couldn't grow there; not enough light. As it turned out she was right, but by the time you realized this was so, you were on to some other grand scheme. Painting by numbers, I think, which had become 'big,' and which your mother also didn't like because it wasn't 'creative.'

What she didn't understand was that it got you started.

You loved make-believe. A friend around the corner had lots of

grown-up clothes that almost fit you because her mother was tiny. She had discarded a pair of brown and white pumps the two of you found in a bag by the back door and repossessed, running upstairs to your friend's room before anyone could object. Where was her mother? Later she must have seen you wearing her old shoes, but she never stopped you or took them away. The friend had blond hair that she usually wore in a ponytail. Yours was brown, and you wore two ponytails with a neat part in-between. You found some long muslin scarves somewhere, and wrapped them around each other in what you believed was an imitation of elegant adult gowns. She wore her own Mary Jane's, because she couldn't walk at all in her mother's shoes. You struggled but persevered in the pumps. You loved those shoes. I still like two-toned spring heels, though I no longer own any. They would look fairly ridiculous in my tiny country town. Women here wear Birkenstocks in the summer, hiking boots in fall and winter.

Why do I pay attention to those prohibitions? You didn't.

*Love,
Nancy*



My mother

I WAS BORN IN 1944, AT THE END OF WORLD WAR TWO. My parents had lost relatives in Europe, although they and the rest of the family had tried to help them emigrate to the United States during the early years of the war. Several cousins in the Polish Ukraine had applied for the proper papers through the necessary officials. My father's brother, Nathan, who was a well-respected attorney in Elizabeth, New Jersey where we all lived, took care of the arrangements on this end. The relatives disappeared before the paperwork was ever completed. Although I have no memory of being told about this, I know that loss permeated both households. It is no surprise that the first book to have an impact on me was *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

We lived in a brick duplex near PS 14, the elementary school I would later attend for two years before we moved to a 'real house' in Roselle Park, the town across the border from Elizabeth. The duplex had a small covered porch that wasn't big enough for outdoor furniture. This annoyed my mom, but otherwise it was a decent place. I know I never felt cramped living there. Susan and I shared a bedroom, but we shared one when we moved to Roselle Park, too, until she went away to college years later. I didn't mind: that was just the way it was. I liked sleeping in the twin bed next to hers, especially when we whispered together after she came to bed on the nights I managed to stay awake. We each had white chenille bedspreads I loved, and soft down pillows. Even though my parents were genuinely concerned about money during those early years, my mother said those were the only pillows worth having. My parents bought each of us our own dresser and a big bookcase, or one that seemed big to me at the time. Books were part of my life for as long as I can remember. At first, only my sister had books in the bookcase, but I actually started reading simple words in picture books when I was two, or so I was later told, and some of those books found their way to the lower shelves where I could easily reach them. Despite their money worries, both of my parents thought books were essential, even if buying them for us meant they would sacrifice something personal for themselves.

My parents adored me, each in their own way. As soon as I climbed down the stairs to the kitchen in the morning, my mother would turn to look at me with a big smile on her face, scoop me up in her arms and

hold me close, often covering my face and arms in kisses and making me laugh. I loved what she smelled like, Colgate toothpaste with a little bit of Ivory Snow mixed in, coffee, and sometimes, rye bread toast. She was my Mommy and the way she smelled was totally reassuring. Often when she took me to the park, she would play on the teeter-totter with me, push me on the swing, and when there weren't other mothers around, even coast down the slide with me, pushing so we would go faster and screaming with me. It was so much fun. At night she read to me, letting me follow along and point to each picture as she identified and read the words beneath it. When I began to say the words too, she let me continue by myself. I felt so proud. I knew very early on she believed in me. The night I first read the words by myself I made myself stay awake until my father came home. I heard her tell him, "Nancy is reading, honey. Isn't that marvelous?" Her voice rose with excitement even before the door closed and he was fully inside the house.

The last thing that happened each and every night, except when my parents went out with their friends and we had a babysitter, was my mommy kissing me gently on the forehead as she tucked me in and closed the storybook. She didn't kiss me all over like she did in the morning because I suppose she wanted to calm me so I could sleep. Because of my mother, I loved both waking up and going to sleep. I knew I was safe and that she would always be there.

My dad was a distant figure. He worked long hours at his drug store and was rarely home. When he ate dinner with us, it was a quick affair and didn't seem to have much to do with the food. Suppertime revolved around getting him fed so that he could go back to the store. He must have often worked on weekends, because I don't remember doing much with him then either. I knew how he felt about me because of the way he looked at me rather than what we did together. His eyes would soften when he looked my way, and he would often ruffle my hair. I didn't mind that he made my hair stand up more in front. Getting the attention was well worth the bother.

On holidays like Christmas he often slept late. He must have been exhausted from working even longer hours over the holidays, staying open for people who wanted to buy last minute candy or perfume as gifts. I hated it because I always woke up very early so that I could

see what Santa Claus had brought me and placed beneath the tree. Although we were Jewish, my parents belonged to The Society for Ethical Culture so a Christmas tree was allowed. We also had a menorah, but we rarely lit the candles on it during Chanukah. My mother preferred Christmas.

Of course I always tried to stay awake to hear Santa arrive, but didn't manage it until I was almost four. That Christmas I heard noise in the living room and crept down the stairs to meet him, not wanting to spook Santa so he would go back up the chimney before I could get a word out. Much to my dismay I saw my mother and my father laying out the wrapped gifts beneath the tree, whispering to each other. My father laughed before either of them realized I was standing there. I was disconsolate, and nothing either of my parents did could make me stop crying for the longest time. Even unwrapping Marushka, the huge rag doll I had seen in the toy store in early December, didn't console me. I loved believing in Santa Claus.

My life revolved around my mother. Often we did the grocery shopping together. I either walked next to her and helped her push my stroller, a cumbersome thing with a big basket in the back we used for our purchases, or sat in it while she pushed. Of course I preferred walking like a big person to being pushed, but it must have made the venture unbearably slow for my mother, though she never made me feel like I was holding her back. On the contrary, she seemed proud that I could keep up with her, which must have been an illusion created by her taking teeny tiny steps. I have always been short for my age, and even today don't have a long stride.

I liked the vegetable man the best. His name was Andy and he had curly black hair with a five o'clock shadow on his cheeks even in the morning. He clearly liked my mother a lot and enjoyed giving her special deals. He usually went into the back as soon as we entered his shop to get the vegetables he had saved for her, especially red tomatoes in the summer, plump green beans, zucchini and the like. She used frozen vegetables as seldom as possible, which was quite a feat in the winter in New Jersey in the 1940s. By the time we finished shopping I was tired, so I would sit in the stroller without prompting, and hold the grocery packages that didn't fit in the basket on my lap. My parents didn't buy a

second car until we moved to Roselle Park, which was too far away from Elmora Avenue for my mother to walk to her favorite shops. We would also get fresh bagels and a quarter of a large rye from The Superior, a delicatessen across from Andy's grocery store. I loved pulling pickles out of the wooden barrel and was allowed to lick my fingers until they were clean. On the way home we often stopped at a little corner candy store and got marshmallow twists. I liked the chocolate covered white ones; my mother preferred strawberry marshmallow. We both loved them. They were only a penny a piece, so I never worried about this extravagance.

My friend Elaine told me that her mother was the center of her world too, after she read this chapter. The memory it engendered had always been embarrassing for her. The first day she went to kindergarten she had been inconsolable; she wouldn't let go of her mother's hand and wouldn't stop crying. Thinking about that day helped her remember the part she had pushed away in her humiliation. A little kid who lived in a cabin near hers in the sugar fields where her family lived on Maui had told her she would be subjected to a doctor's exam and an injection that first day. Although neither had occurred, she had been terrified nonetheless. She smiled with relief as she told me this over a cup of tea: she hadn't been a baby, or different from the other kids. She had adored her mother, but that wasn't why she had been crying.

Sometimes Susan and I would be allowed to play outside the house before it got dark. She liked throwing a ball around even when she was little. Since I was too small to catch it, I didn't enjoy the game. When I got bigger and older, I didn't fare much better with a ball. In those early years I always wanted to color with chalk on the sidewalk, which she enjoyed as well. At least she didn't object, especially if I would let her throw the ball to me for awhile afterwards. We stopped when I refused to chase the ball down the block, or it kept rolling into the street and we had to get our mother to go after it. We finally discovered that if I stood at an angle with my back to the tiny front yard, the missed ball would go there and chasing it wasn't as big a problem. When Susan was six or seven, our mother let us go to the playground at PS 14 by ourselves. There Susan could run around the bases with bigger kids, mainly boys, and I would climb up the ladder and go down the slide over and over.

We both liked this, because we each got to do what we wanted, and felt grown up because we were there by ourselves.

Perhaps in the 1940s there was less abduction of children or rape, but our mother, who was very careful, let us go by ourselves several times so it must not have been considered dangerous. I don't remember if other kids were there without their parents. I know I never felt scared, but I also enjoyed going home, because our mother would have a treat waiting for us: in summer, juice and cookies for me, Coke and cookies for Susan; hot chocolate in winter for us both with marshmallows melting on the top. I always asked for a second cup, and usually got it. I loved the melted gooey marshmallow. We would sit at the kitchen table slurping away. I imagine both of us savored the smells wafting from the oven, because by the time we came home our dinner was already baking there. Since we ate at five, we must not have stayed at the park very long because no one ever worried about our dinner appetites, and we both ate daily snacks.

I hated being a round little butterball, but it didn't keep me from eating, either. Maybe I wasn't old enough to connect the two events, and neither of my parents ever said anything to me about it. I loved sweets, but so did they. All the candy and soda my father brought home from the store was quickly consumed along with my mother's baked goods. My mother thought I was beautiful, and laughed at me when I wheedled things out of my father. She said that I had already learned to 'bat my big blue eyes at him' to get what I wanted, and this would 'hold me in good stead' when I got older. It certainly worked wonders with my father, although it didn't seem to do much for me later in life.

When Nanny, my mother's mother, was scheduled to come to visit us from Washington, D.C. where she lived, my mother became anxious and worried for weeks before her arrival. She would scour the house from top to bottom, doing only one or two rooms a day, but cleaning absolutely everything in them. Not a speck of dust could be found anywhere; we were told about a week before Nanny came to stop sitting on the couch, which had down cushions, because they wouldn't look right when she arrived. This admonition did not please me, since I loved curling up on the couch with my bed pillow behind my head to read or just stare into space dreaming. This is something I still do with great plea-

sure, sometimes for hours. The most difficult part of a visit from my grandmother was how crabby our mother became. She snapped at both of us, which she rarely did otherwise, and didn't let me come into the kitchen to watch her bake. I made more of a mess for her to clean up, she said. Thinking back on it, I know she was worried that her baked goods wouldn't pass muster with her mother who was a very good cook and very particular. I liked my mother's pies better than my grandmother's, which I readily told my mother. She just stroked my head absentmindedly and shooed me out of the kitchen.

My grandmother would always arrive with lots of baggage. Out of it would come not only her clothes, but gifts for Susan and me. I hated them. She always brought handmade sweaters for us. I remember the red ones particularly. Although she earned money by knitting, she never learned to make shoulders, at least in the sweaters she made for us. Her sleeves had little, rounded Mickey Mouse ears protruding from each shoulder and they looked ridiculous. No one else wore sweaters like those, but if we refused to wear them outside, her lips would compress with disapproval, and she would become silent. At least the sweaters felt good which was a plus. I liked stroking them because they were soft—made of very good quality wool—but I didn't want to put them on. When she started to bring afghans instead, I was thrilled. I still use one in my living room to wrap myself in when it's chilly. It is a beautiful thing, with a tight weave and flowing chain pattern in multiple shades of blue. Now it has sentimental value. Then it was merely a relief: no more sweaters.

Nanny always made apple cake when she visited. It looked like a pie, but she kneaded the dough a long time and it tasted sweet. She made cookies from the leftover pieces. Susan and I would both sit at the kitchen table and eat them as soon as they came out of the oven and had cooled down a bit so they wouldn't burn our tongues. I liked watching her bake too, although she was much too stern for me to dare ask her if I could help. I'm sure it never dawned on her that I might want to. Amazingly my mother loved the apple cake, and would make it herself when Nanny wasn't there. Hers came out just as well, but I instinctively knew not to say so to my grandmother.

It was Nanny who introduced me to *Heidi*. She would read the book

aloud to me at night before I went to bed, taking my mother's place beside my bed for the few weeks she was in New Jersey. I loved Heidi, and thought of her as my friend. Together she and I would run up and down the mountain pathways and chase the goats. I wanted Peter, the boy in the novel, to stay with her forever, but I don't remember what happened to him or how old Heidi was at the end of the book. I hated it when there weren't many pages left for Nanny to read and wanted to slow down the process, which of course I couldn't do. I still feel like that when I'm reading a novel I love, like *Pillars of the Earth* or *Kite Runner*. I don't want to finish and lose contact with my new friends. It is my grandmother who introduced me to the first book that inspired such a feeling, and for this I am grateful. I just wish my mother could have had an easier time with her.

I was called a creative child from a very early age. I asked lots of questions of everyone on a wide range of subjects—parents, teachers, aunts and uncles. Curious about everything that went on around me, I wanted to 'understand' it all. I still feel better when I understand the dynamics of a situation; as a child, it felt exciting to soak up the information I garnered from the adults around me. Some of them thought I was a pain in the ass; others were amused by my curiosity. When no one would answer my question, I made up my own answers, the first stories I ever invented.

My family often had dinner with my Aunt Helen and Uncle Nate, my favorite relatives. I loved going to their house. They lived across from an elementary school, not the one my sister attended with the playground, but the one in the 'better' section of Elizabeth for the wealthier kids. Their house was much nicer than ours. The living room had been decorated in pastel blues, my favorite color. I loved walking into it, down the three steps from the entryway onto the plush blue carpet. Aunt Helen's couch wasn't as soft as ours, but I still liked her living room better. It was so pretty. She usually made brisket of beef, her favorite dish to cook. Because she and my mother were so close, my mother never complained that we were served the same meal over and over when we went there for dinner. If it had been anyone but Helen who committed this heinous sin, we would have heard about it at every meal for weeks after the event. The adults had a very good time in

that pastel house, laughing at jokes and talking constantly. They never lacked for things to say. Susan would go upstairs to play with my older cousin, Steve. Steve was a fairly serious boy, or seemed that way to me. He was unreachable. Perhaps I was just too young to attract his interest. At any rate, I was left below with the adults, which I preferred anyway. I loved sitting at the dining room table and listening to their varied conversations. I must have sat on pillows so that I could reach the table because the chairs were very big, with satin cream cushions built into the wooden seat beds. I remember swinging my legs back and forth as I watched and listened in rapt attention. The adults made me feel included, though I don't know how since I usually couldn't understand what they were talking about.

Sometimes in the spring or the fall, all of us would go up to a place called Smith's Farm in the Catskill Mountains, where my mother had vacationed as a child. She was always welcomed back with open arms, as were we. The meals there were sumptuous, and the children all ate with the adults, which made it especially pleasing to me. I see a rather dark room with wood wainscoting, round wooden tables with high-backed chairs, and a long, large hutch where the owner's wife left the food in large chafing dishes after serving us, for seconds. There was always plenty, so I was able to eat at my own pace when we went there. Several families ate together at the big round tables. In the spring the kids would race around outside playing tag or take-a-giant-step, swing on the tire swing, which I could do endlessly, and play croquet and badminton when the adults weren't using the equipment. I wasn't good at any of the games, but I was too little to care. I loved being included in them by the older kids and remember running around with wild abandon. There was a brook that I'm sure we were told not to cross, but I remember pitching stones into it, and trying to bend down to touch the water, which was freezing. I think Susan, who couldn't have been more than 6 or 7, pulled me back. No one told our parents. In the fall it was already cold in the Catskills, but it was great fun to walk through the woods, crunching leaves under our feet, playing tag and other running games. We were given hot chocolate sitting around a roaring fire in the afternoon and often at breakfast as well. It was made, I'm sure, from Hershey's Cocoa in the brown metal box, no instant at the farm,

if there even was such a thing in those days. It was thick and creamy and scrumptious. I must have walked around with my mouth rimmed by chocolate more afternoons than not, since our parents were off doing whatever it was the adults did to amuse themselves in the country. I don't know which season I preferred there: spring or fall.

One year when I was just toddling around, my father took Susan and me to a playground in town. One piece of equipment had monkey bars that ran across the top of the structure, with a ladder at each end. I would watch Susan climb up one side and then swing across to the opposite side with bated breath. Even at five or six she was able to go all the way across, which when I think about it now, seems pretty amazing. She must have had very strong arm muscles for a kid her age. That day my older sister managed to talk me into climbing up the ladder and grabbing the first rung, where I hung, too terrified to even yell out to my father. He was standing by the swings, lost in thought. For seconds, Susan and I were frozen there, me hanging, her standing below, until she started to laugh. This turned my father around, and then he was below me, telling me to let go; he would catch me. He held me in his arms for a long time, kissing the top of my head and my forehead, which he rarely did. It was marvelous to be rescued by my usually absent father. Even better, when he put me back down on the ground, he turned to Susan and scolded her, clearly furious at her for what had just happened. By the time my mild-mannered father was through, she was crying. I was ecstatic.

In the summer we went to the Chatham Pool in Chatham, New Jersey. It was a huge swimming hole, more like a pond than a pool, surrounded on all sides by grassy areas and tall trees. There was a small sandy beach at the shallow end. Families came with chairs, blankets, and picnic lunches. There was also a stand where you could buy ice cream pops and soda. My mother always made spaghetti, cutting Velveeta cheese into the tomato sauce, pre-cooking the casserole and bringing it cold to the picnic. I thought the cold spaghetti one of the most delicious things I had ever tasted, and still recall it with nostalgia, despite the ingredients. It was considered a treat for us to be able to go to the stand and get Eskimo Pies, my favorites, or ice cream sandwiches, which I also loved. My mother would check her watch when we fin-

ished eating, and forbid us to walk into the shallow end of the pond-like pool for twenty minutes. I was supposed to nap, but even when I lay down I couldn't close my eyes. I would stare up into the trees, and make patterns from the leaves and the sky and the light. It was too exciting being at the pool to allow myself to drift off to sleep: after all, I might miss time in the water.

When my mother gave him the nod, my father would take us into the water, holding my hand, and then float on his back beside me. I was a little fish from the start. I would doggie paddle next to my dad, or duck under to pinch my sister, or try to swim away from her so she couldn't pinch me. She was older and faster and probably got me more than I got her. But I loved swimming with them both, and was on pins and needles Saturday mornings waiting for the picnic basket to be packed into the car, along with blankets and towels and all the necessary paraphernalia for a day at the pool. We usually stayed the whole day. My parents sometimes fell asleep, but there were always friends of theirs at the pool, so someone was awake to watch us. I stayed in the water for hours and hours, sometimes just floating on my back like my father, wondering what he was looking at. He certainly seemed relaxed on those pool days, and not worried, which he often was at home. That was another reason to love those weekend trips.

Driving there my sister and I sat in the back, with my parents in the front, the towels piled in the trunk and the picnic basket between us on the back seat. My father always listened to the baseball game, which Susan loved even as a little girl. They both rooted for the New York Yankees. I got car sick and always associated baseball with feeling nauseous because I had to suffer through endless innings as the nausea built. To make matters worse my sister and my mother loved playing a ridiculous game that still irritates me when I think about it. My mother would call out, "We're coming to a hill!" and she and my sister would start to intone "Uuuuuup theeee hiiiiiiillllllll, doooowwwwwn theeeeeee hiiiiiiillllll" which would immediately bring on my nausea to the fore. They thought it was funny, even my mother. Her laughter felt like a betrayal to me, but I hated being called a baby, so after the first time, I didn't complain about it. It took awhile for me not to feel nauseous at the pool even with the incentive of the water beckoning.

The Chatham Pool was the place I learned to jump off a diving board into the deep end of a pool. At three or four, this was a big deal, and terribly exciting. First of all it meant that my parents trusted that I could swim well enough to make it back to the ladder. Second, it meant I could now swim not only in the shallow end where I could walk in, but in the deep end with the older kids. It looked awfully far down the first time I stood on that board, but Susan was already in the water calling up to me offering encouragement, so I just held my nose clips on my nose, squeezed my eyes shut and jumped. At first I thought I wouldn't come back up, but then I just popped out of the water with this amazed expression on my face that made Susan start laughing and my parents cheer from the shoreline next to the diving board. I must have jumped over thirty times that first day; each time the water closer and the plunge less intimidating. From then on, Saturdays we couldn't go to the pool because my father had to work were an even bigger torture. Susan loved the Chatham Pool too; it was one of the places where we actually enjoyed playing together. She loved the diving board even more than I did, because she was learning how to go off of it face first, actually diving, something I didn't think I'd ever be able to do. She would dive and I would jump, and we would swim back to the ladder side by side. Summer for me was swimming all day every weekend with my sister, baking pies with my mother, and staying up later during the week because my sister got to and my mother clearly believed in parity. Even though I still went to bed earlier than Susan, it wasn't hours earlier. Whether I was sleepy or not, I always stayed awake until the very last minute. It made me feel older.

Before Susan and I went to camp at the Burchardt's who were friends of my parents, we would go to their house on summer weekends, swim in the pool, and have mouth-watering barbecues. There I was relegated to the shallow end where Bob, the Burchardt's older child, acted as the lifeguard. He was only a year older than Susan, but he was a terrific swimmer and could have yelled for help. Bob obviously spent lots of time outdoors. He was very brown, with a lean body, dark hair and dark eyes. I thought he was adorable. He never noticed me, not even when we were older. His sister was close to my age, but she seemed snooty to me because she didn't enjoy playing with either Susan or me. She was

athletic, so this must have been a surprise to Susan, but she was often in the house when we came over. There were two grandmothers living there, one skinny and one fat. Both made very good fruit pastries. The outstanding thing about those outings by far were the charbroiled hamburgers. They had a hickory, smoky taste that was new to me and I liked it immediately. The buns tasted good too, because they were made from white bread, which we weren't normally allowed to eat due to its lack of nutritional value. Walter, the dad, would slather my bun with ketchup, also a taste treat, and pile my plate with potato salad and coleslaw. He must have thought I had a healthy appetite, although I never finished what he gave me. On the way home I would often fall asleep, water logged and exhausted from both the swimming and all the food.

The other culinary treat of summer during those early years was making tomato sandwiches with my father on the weekends when we got back from the Chatham pool, with Jersey tomatoes my mother would buy from Jerry on Elmora Avenue, or from a fruit stand she would drive to when she had the use of the car. She would also buy juicy plums and peaches that would drip down my chin, and melons. I loved all of it. I don't remember ever getting a tummy ache from all the fruit, which is quite amazing. My dad would stand at the kitchen counter, slather the machine-sliced seeded rye bread with butter, thin slice the fresh-picked tomatoes, salt them, and hand my sandwich down to me. He seemed very, very tall to me. My mother didn't like that they dripped, and Susan must not have liked them at all, because I only remember my father and me, side by side, gorging ourselves on the juicy treats. He also liked dipping slices of the rye bread into sour cream. When I was little this didn't go over nearly as well as the tomato combo, but when I got a bit older, I loved those carb delights too.

It's amusing to me now how many of my early childhood memories are wrapped up in making or eating sumptuous treats, but they are. As I sit here typing in front of my computer screen, I find myself salivating in remembrance of all that delicious food. It is not so surprising that one of the ways I nurture myself as an adult, and nurtured my own children, was by searching for and cooking special recipes. My friend Elaine and I would spend hours planning what food we would bring on our camping trips when our kids were young as well; her delight in taste treats mir-

rored my own. Even when I'm totally alone now the very idea of what I am going to make for dinner can give me pleasure all day long until the moment comes for me to begin the meal's preparation.

Another favorite summer pastime for both Susan and me was listening to radio programs in the evening after we had been called inside. My favorite was *The Lone Ranger*. Of course I imagined riding the range with him and Tonto, whom I liked better than the Lone Ranger. His voice was more pleasing to me. I pictured a man with a long black ponytail, which was also very appealing since I, myself, usually wore my hair that way. The idea of a man with a bare chest wearing such a thing made me smile. My father only bared his chest when he went into the water and he had a little pot belly. When I was sick, I got to listen to *Stella Dallas* in the afternoon as well as some other soap operas. Somehow not much would change in the story lines of any of the shows between illnesses, which was a relief to me. I would get caught up in the lives of the characters, just like I did with Heidi and Peter when Nanny read to me. The radio made getting sick less awful.

My sister would tell me what she was learning in school, a place she was thrilled to be attending on a daily basis by the time I was 3. Because we both loved to read, she said she would ask her teacher what books someone my age might enjoy, and then she would bring them home for me from the school library. Since she was reading ahead of her age group too, we weren't reading the same things. Some of the books she brought me were books her classmates were taking home. If I didn't understand a word, she would tell me what it meant, or help me sound it out. We would often sit side by side on the living room couch reading, which I'm sure tickled my mother when she passed through the room on her way to make dinner. I know it felt to me as if I were in school too, because Susan enjoyed sharing what she did there with me.

Another thing we both loved was taking baths. My mother would fill the tub with very warm water and sit on the toilet seat while we took our baths. Sometimes we bathed together, but usually not, because at least in the summer, Susan was still out playing when it was time for me to come in and get ready for bed. I tried to make my baths last as long as possible, so that I'd have our mother to myself. But sleep always defeated me. Often I later would be awakened by Susan laughing in the

tub and I would picture my mother teasing her about something. I was so jealous that she got to stay up later than me, and had my mother all to herself in there.

Winter was my second favorite season. The first time I saw snow I must have been two or so. I stood at the kitchen window looking out at the back yard and felt a sense of wonder I still experience when I see those big white flakes falling from the sky. My mother told me that I turned to her after she asked me what I thought of the snow, eyes huge in my tiny face and said, "It's bootiful, but I wish it was pink." This story was repeated many times and the adults always looked at me with great affection during the telling. I did want it to be pink for years, but I also enjoyed it any way it came.

The day I was first allowed to go outside in snow was miraculous. I must have been very impatient as my mother stuffed my arms into the sleeves of first a sweater and then my jacket, somehow managing to zip it up around my fidgeting body, and then making me sit down so she could pull my big red rubber boots over my shoes. I loved the boots, which seemed shiny and bright and new to me. The wool hats Susan and I wore in the winter were of course knit by my grandmother, who did better with hats than she did with sweaters. I hated that they tied under the chin, because it took too long, but they were warm and cuddly and brightly colored. When they were red, and matched my boots I liked them best of all. That first time Susan and I both had to be outfitted to go outside was no easy matter; it took time and must have been quite a struggle for my mother. When we finally were ready to go, all three of us burst out the front door screaming like banshees. My mom made a soft snowball right away, and hit first Susan's jacket and then mine with one, which made me sit down and laugh. I can picture us there, surrounded by the mounding snow, laughing and laughing. Susan probably managed to make her own snowballs, but I didn't have the dexterity at that age to manage it.

Then my mother told us we were going to make a snowman. I was able to help with the blob that made up his body because it was big and didn't require much agility. I got soaked pushing the snow into the pile already begun by my mother and then patting it down to form a kind of ball. Susan was covered in white sticky stuff from head to toe. When

my mother pulled a carrot out of her jacket pocket and a little box of raisins so that she could fashion two eyes, a nose, and a smiling mouth with them, my sister and I were both utterly delighted. I wanted to get one of our extra knit caps for the snowman's head, so he wouldn't 'get cold.' Susan and I promised to sit on the front steps while our mother went back inside to find one. Since our mother was lenient as well as playful, it was fairly easy to obey her when she set down rules. I loved that snowman, and cried when he started to melt. Even being assured by both parents that more snow would soon fall since it was only the beginning of winter didn't make me feel better. That snowman had become real to me, just as my rag dolls would several years later. Susan made fun of me because I would sit and talk to him when we went out to play. It was something I later did with my dolls too. I hated being teased about the snowman, but actually felt sorry for Susan that she didn't see that he was real. I thought it was her loss.

We both adored sledding. Our mother would drive us out to Galloping Hill Golf Course where we, along with hundreds of other kids, trekked up the gentle hills (which seemed huge to us) and then madly sledded down them. We owned the old, wooden kind of sled with the red stripe on the body, a red steering bar and red tracks called a Flexible Flyer. When I was really little I would lie down with Susan half on top of me, and she would steer with her hands over my head. Sometimes we went so fast I closed my eyes and screamed, loving every minute of it. When I got a little bigger, I would sit in front, with Susan behind me, her legs straddling my waist. She steered with her feet, which barely reached the steering bar. At some point she trusted me to steer, but that was several years later. I didn't tell her that I sometimes still closed my eyes. Often we wouldn't make it all the way to the bottom, but would careen wildly in a crazy arc and tumble off the sled as it tipped over. This was almost as much fun as flying all the way to the bottom of the hill. We would lie in the snow laughing and laughing. Thinking back on it, I'm amazed we didn't wet out pants.

I wonder what my mother did for the hours we sledded.

Susan loved to ice skate, too, but even before I injured my ankle I was not very good at it. Of course I wasn't even four, so the fact that I couldn't balance isn't a big shocker to me now. Back then it felt humili-

ating. We would usually go to an indoor rink. Susan would happily don her skates, which she actually owned, and my mother would rent a pair for herself and a pair for me. Sometimes she would entice me out on the ice—I would have followed her anywhere—but usually I just sat on the sidelines and watched them skate around the rink together. My mother taught my sister to raise her leg in a kind of arabesque, but my mother's was much more graceful than Susan's. I think if girls had been allowed to play ice hockey in those days that is the direction Susan would have gone, as would my mother. As it is, Susan raced around the rink going faster and faster, and I watched in amazement, just glad it wasn't me.

The only awful thing that happened to me before I turned four was my first bladder infection. When I became uncomfortable, never feeling completely satisfied after peeing, my mother told me I had a little cold in my bladder. It felt like I had to pee when I didn't, and finally, after a few days, it would burn when I finished. I had to be taken to a physician near Smith's Farm where we were staying at the time, but I don't remember much about that visit. I know I was frightened, but I didn't have the words to express my fear to anyone, even my mother. When we got back to the farm, I had to pee. It burned terribly, but I wasn't able to hold back the urine. I cried and cried. My sister came into the bathroom and watched me. The bathroom was very big, and had a white-tiled floor. She stood just inside the doorway looking as frightened as I felt, and then raced downstairs to get my mother. After a few minutes in her arms, I stopped crying. She told me how sorry she was, but she knew what the doctor had done would help me. I wouldn't get as many 'colds.' For awhile that was true.

It is not surprising that I have always had an enormous problem trusting doctors. I still crane my neck around when I'm lying on one of those exam tables so that I can see what they are doing.

I have always thought of my childhood as a sad time because of all my later responsibilities. I didn't remember how safe I felt as a very young child, and am surprised by how many specific and warm memories I have of those early years. I had completely forgotten that our mother played with us. Now I have regained memories I can cherish, and pass on to my daughters. I've always known I loved to cook side by side with my mother in the kitchen, especially to bake and roll out

dough with her. This is a process I not only shared with her but passed on to both of my girls as well. Baking in the kitchen has always meant time filled with warmth, laughter, and marvelous smells to me. I loved both the preparation and the final result as a child and carried that into adulthood. For years I have been the dessert maker at special events for my own circle of friends as well as for my children and their friends. In writing these few pages it has become clear that my mother's early influence permeates many areas of my adult life, the preparation of food one of the more significant.

Her sense of humor has also been passed down to my children. One day a few years ago I drove down the coast to visit my younger daughter who was living in Santa Cruz. She greeted me at the door with the words, "I have a batch of your brownies frozen in my refrigerator. I made them for you!" We unpacked my car, and then like two little kids, opened the plastic container in her freezer and dove in. After just one bite I turned to her and said, "What is this? It tastes good but it certainly isn't the brownies." "Oh mom," she moaned. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice. I thought they tasted different too, but have no idea what I did!" We finally figured it out. She had made the cake portion of our buttermilk chocolate cake, cooked it in a brownie pan and had then cut and frozen it, which is the way she likes to serve brownies. We laughed our heads off. The entire experience reminded me of my mother, and cooking mistakes she made and I kept hidden from everyone else for her, and how we, too, had laughed uproariously at all of it.

My mother is with me in so many ways. One evening recently I walked around a park in Portland, Oregon with the same daughter, and when we passed the teeter-totter, there my mother and I were, bouncing up and down. Sitting on the opposite end of the teeter-totter with my own daughter in the dark that night seemed perfect, both of us laughing and bouncing the other with more and more force. Thankfully both of my daughters can also laugh at their mistakes, even long distance over the phone. This seems a gift to me, an asset for understanding the self, which doesn't always have to come with tears. It is comforting to me to think that the girls will continue these traditions, and that hopefully, their children will as well.

Writing this has already given me significant insights into the form-

ing of my character: both the environment that allowed little Nancy to flourish and some of the experiences that made her feel safe. In three days I leave for New York to visit my Aunt Helen who will turn ninety-seven this year. I last visited two years ago, when my Uncle Nate was still alive, and thought that would be my final visit with either of them. My uncle died several months after I returned home, but my aunt is still ticking. I had forgotten how influential they both were in my early years, though I certainly remember their presence throughout the rest of my life. I loved visiting my aunt and uncle even when I was little, and thoroughly enjoyed the last visit east too. Helen read *The New York Times* wearing little white gloves because the ink was hard to get off her hands, which were often covered with eczema. She and Nathan each sat in their matching chairs, feet up on their matching ottomans, exchanging sections as they read. This, they told me, was a daily ritual. I am proud to come from stock like this.

I have often read how important the first few years of life are in how we develop and behave in later life, but I hadn't thought about it in relation to myself. Because of my mother I believed, early on, that I had worth. I knew I could try anything, even if she didn't think it very worthwhile. She never stopped any of my pursuits, though she wasn't always positive about them. It was obvious she thought me capable. I felt loved and learned early on to be open with my affection. Although I inherited some of my father's fear, it hasn't incapacitated me as it did him for most of his life. I believe that is due to my mother's influence. Most of my life I have relished each day as she did, which thankfully was apparent to me as a child. I developed an abiding curiosity about almost everything (except mathematics), and that inquisitiveness has stayed with me throughout my life. I believed I was pretty as a child because of being told I was by both of my parents, and whether that was true or not, the belief gave me a confidence I carried until I became a teenager and nothing about me seemed right. I thought I was meant to speak up as a child, and knew what I said would be heard, because my ideas had counted with both of my parents from my earliest years, when my father had the time to actually listen.

These are true gifts to have received, and if my parents were still alive, I would thank them with all my heart. As it is, remembering fills

me with gratitude for all they gave me. The love and comfort of my home in those early years has been the foundation upon which I have built a life of worth despite years of adversity. What I gained in those early years helped me to believe, always, no matter what transpired that I could overcome almost anything, and do just that. More important, I am discovering that the little girl in the hallway picture never went completely underground. It is as if her spirit unconsciously transformed inside me into a belief in self which I have managed to maintain all these years, at least most of the time. It has gotten me through some very rough times, periods of great disappointment, illness, and grief.

The awareness that I can still feel parts of the child I used to be is very affirming and comes as a complete surprise. What has disappeared is the 'play' in the face in that picture, although maybe not as completely as I had feared. Perhaps she is the one who wants me to rush through the writing of the rest of this book so that I can learn even more about her and myself, convinced that I will be pleased as well as surprised by what I discover. Certainly completing the entire manuscript seems a less daunting task to me now, after writing this chapter about my early life, and recounting all that I have been able to remember about it. These days I find myself waking up most mornings with excitement rather than apprehension. It is with that spirit that I move onward.