

Growing Up
By: Lisa Utkin

It all started in a southern town full of tradition and hope. He was a strong man with a giant heart full of love and devotion to the three ladies in his life. He spent his days working to provide for them and spending all of his free time just loving them. And then one day out of clear blue sky, the love of his life his beloved wife decides she can't stay another minute and leaves him with two little girls to raise on his own. She shattered his heart into a million tiny little pieces, but he still had room to cherish his little girls. They worshipped him in return. He would move on and fall in love with another woman who turns out to be an angel in disguise. She rescues him and gives him her whole heart and takes in his precious little girls and gives them a new mommy to love and soon they forget all about the woman who left and begin to call this new woman "mama."

The man marries this new woman and begins a new life. His little girls thrive, growing into healthy happy little girls. Their new mama takes care of them as if they were her own. He is thrilled to have this second chance and they all become a happy family until one day the woman left him shows up on his door step. His oldest daughter was seven and his youngest was six. They found out that the woman they called "mama" wasn't their mama after all.

He had to explain to his daughters who this woman was. They couldn't believe it. How had they not known until then? Needless to say, this created quite a blow for the family. His little girls were heartbroken and confused. They felt as if they weren't really loved. They had been lied to and now this strange woman wanted to spend time with them. They were also angry at her for leaving them, but it would be years later before they truly understood what she had done. The little girls would be forever changed by

this turn of events and their father would never truly recover from this unexpected visit by the woman he still secretly loved. Things changed for the happy family and could never be put back the way they were.

That was years ago and I still remember the day like it was yesterday. I wrote this poem for that occasion.

Memories

It was a beautiful spring day
The wind was up and blowing the clouds away
They were just playing as was their norm,
When suddenly in comes the storm.
It wasn't the weather that blew onto the scene,
But an estranged mother keen
On seeing the girls she had left long ago.
It came as a shock to the girls with cheeks all aglow
as if their little world had toppled over
And the stranger was soon taking cover
in their rooms for a little talk about
the day she left and they wanted to shout
Why, of Why did you come this day?
We were content to just play.
Now, we have to come inside
and be these new girls with thicker hide.
They would become very tough

and would never get over the rough
way she turned up on that spring day.

I cannot say that it hasn't affected me in some way over the course of my childhood and now my adult life. Now that I am a mother, I understand why she gave us up. She wanted what was best for us and she didn't believe that she could provide that for us. She had to make the painful choice of having a life without her children. *I* compare the pain she must have felt to having my children ripped from my arms never to be heard from again. It is utterly devastating to lose a child and she lost two children all those years ago and, we had to live a life without her in it. I have only seen her three times since I was seven years old. I rarely hear from her at all. I think it is too painful for her to be around my sister and me because of the guilt she feels at giving us up. I don't blame her anymore, but still feel some of the old anger from time to time because of some events that took place in my father's home. I always wonder if things would have been different for my sister and I had she raised us instead of him.

You see, I was the oldest of six kids and had all the responsibility that came with it. I remember being just five years old and changing my little brother's diapers. I also started doing the dishes and helping with the laundry around this same time. I had so much responsibility that I never felt like a child. I used to come home after school and help my mom with the younger children. By the time I was ten years old, I was babysitting on my own my five younger siblings. A typical afternoon when we came home from school would be for me to turn on "Tom and Jerry" on the TV to get the boys to sit still for a few minutes. Actually, we would all sit in front of the TV watching this crazy cat chase the oh so smart little mouse. Then, I would hurry and get them started on

their homework and make sure everything was clean before my mama would come home from work. I would then help with getting supper on the table and cleaning up afterwards. I didn't get to my homework until later in the evening. This really became an issue for me as I got older. My mama had to work six to seven days a week usually in the evening and my dad wouldn't get home until around six o'clock. This meant that we were at home alone for about three hours a day on schooldays.

My family was poor most of the time. I remember standing in line at school for free lunch tickets. It was so embarrassing because the school actually made the lunch tickets different colors so everyone knew if you had free lunch. The free lunch tickets were a light blue color and the regular lunch tickets were pink. Everyone knew the difference between the two. The line was even different than the rest. We had to stand in the line away from everyone else as they walked by staring and whispering behind cupped hands about how poor we were and how funny that was. It was utterly humiliating every week; I mean every single week for my entire school years was spent with this kind of humiliation.

We also had food stamps from time to time and had to eat government cheese and bologna. I don't know if you've seen these Government Issue foods, but they are a site. We would get these huge blocks of cheese and a tube of bologna. We would have to slice them ourselves. I guess a good comparison would be to buying bulk items at Sam's Club except we had to stand in line at the government office to get it. The cheese was this weird yellow color and smelled really funny like when someone lets one loose in the elevator. You know what I mean? The bologna was like a giant sausage in this plastic like red covering, I think it was wax, but I couldn't say for sure. All I know is that this

stuff was horrendous and needed lots of mayo to disguise the taste. I apologize to all of you mayo haters out there, but a girl had to do what a girl had to do. When we weren't eating these lovely items we were eating peanut butter and most of the time without jelly, so the sandwiches would be really dry. I didn't eat either of these things for years after I left home. Now, I can eat peanut butter, but rarely eat bologna or cheese.

We could barely buy any other groceries, so we also ate a lot of pinto beans and plain rice. Sometimes, my mom would be able to buy some chicken or pork chops on sale at the local butcher shop and we would eat them everyday until they ran out. I mean she would come home with this huge box of meat. It was as if she went out and killed the chickens and the pigs herself so she could feed her family. My mom is an awesome lady. She really knew how to cook up these luxury items too. We thought we had died and gone to heaven. Anything beat eating those beans even one more night. We were not allowed to be picky and we had to literally eat every morsel on our plates. We would always hear, "There are starving kids in the world. You have no right to complain because at least you have food to eat." We also never ate out. McDonalds was a rare treat. My mom would sometimes bring home the kid-sized regular hamburgers with a couple of fries we would all share. We thought we were in heaven those nights because we didn't have to eat beans and cornbread again. Like I said, my mom was awesome and always found a way to make our tough times a little more bearable. Thanks Mom.

This experience taught me early on the value of money and that my parents didn't have any. I would never ask for anything unless it was absolutely necessary. I didn't want to be the cause of stress or unhappiness for my parents. I tried to be the "good" child so they would be proud of me. I always wanted their approval no matter what I had to give

up to get it. I always felt like I was a burden, therefore never asked for what I wanted. I never argued or “talked-back.” I was quiet unless spoken to and never created any reason for my parents to be angry with me; at least not on purpose. I did get into my share of trouble, but it was usually because I misinterpreted what they expected of me.

This one time, I decided to go for a walk after school with my best friend and her show calf, yea I said calf. She had it for 4H and had to take care of it by herself, so I would often go with her on their walks. Well, this particular day my mom had had a bad day at work apparently because when she came home and found out I wasn't there. Boy was she hot. She literally got in her car and came after me. Keep in mind I was only about a mile down the road. She stops the car behind us and honks her horn to get our attention. She starts yelling at me in front of my friend. She yells, “Get your ass in the car right now.” I was shocked, then embarrassed and slightly confused. I thought to myself, “Why is she so pissed?” I would never actually say that out loud. You don't even want to know the consequences for such a screw up as that. Anyway, I shrug my shoulders ever so slightly, so my mom wouldn't see, to my friend as if to say “I'm sorry.” I get in the car and we proceed to go home. I found out soon enough that I wasn't supposed to leave the house until she got home. I get grounded indefinitely and threatened to not be able to see my best friend anymore. My mom thought she was a bad influence. She did let me off my punishment two weeks later because it was my 16th birthday and I did remain friends with my best friend. This is just one example of many that make up my teenage years. I felt so alone and oppressed most of my childhood. I developed a need to please that would get me into bigger trouble than you can imagine.

I will leave that story for another time. While my childhood may seem really rough and a bit tragic at times, I did have some good times and developed a really close relationship with my younger sister. She was the one who kept me sane through all of the chaos that was our childhood. My dad would never really recover from my biological mom leaving us and my mama would never really feel secure in his love for her. I think she knew that he still loved my mother. I admire her for sticking by us and being the mama we needed when our mother left us. I am the woman I am today because of all of my experiences as a child.