

Three Daughters (excerpt)

By Kris Thompson

That night, after porkchops and scalloped potatoes, Mother took Bobby to give him a bath and put him to bed. I sat on the rug directly in front of the dark television set Mother had prohibited me from operating, studying the Sears catalogue and circling potential Christmas presents.

Joe came in from working in his study which he often did after dinner. He sometimes spent hours in there, even on Sundays, despite Mother reminding him that Sunday was supposed to be a day of rest. He patted my head, turned on the television, and sat on the davenport. I changed my position, laying prone, elbows propped, so as not to block Joe's view. I continued my catalogue work, only half-watching The Colgate Comedy Hour. Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis creating their unparalleled brand of humor. At nine, I didn't get most of the jokes, even when they had my full attention. But that Jerry Lewis made some pretty goofy faces. One time, when we were all watching, he portrayed a cranky baby which we all thought was hilarious. Even Mother laughed out loud for that one!

“Finished yet, Sweet Pea?”

“Almost,” I said, flipping through the catalogue faster now, trying to make sure everything I liked had been circled at least once.

I turned the page and recircled this amazing two-piece Dale Evans red and black western outfit, trimmed up with *Genuine Leather!* It was the most beautiful outfit I had ever seen. So

beautiful, in fact, that I went ahead and circled it a third time. A triple-circled item indicated it was a present of top priority!

Joe lay down beside me on the rug and asked to see what I had picked out so far. I proudly showed him my top pick...the Dale Evans outfit.

“That’s mighty pretty, Ellie,” he said. “But it looks like it’s only available for little girls. See here. Sizes three to six.”

I was embarrassed that I had chosen such a baby thing, considering I was nearly ten, and started to tear up, but Joe rubbed my back.

“Don’t you worry a bit. We’ll find you the perfect dress.”

He was always so comforting, and I felt my embarrassment quickly melt away. Together, we flipped through the catalogue.

“Look here,” he said pointing to pretty dresses with ruffles, velvet, and embroidery. “You’d be mighty grownup in one of these. Which one do you like best?”

“Maybe the yellow...or the blue?” I was dazzled by this two-page spread of beautiful dresses.

We settled on the blue which Joe said would go beautifully with my eyes. He confirmed it was available in my size, showing me where to look for that information, and I circled that beautiful blue dress. A few pages later he pointed out a small orange floral print cloth covered suitcase which he said was the perfect size for overnight stays.

“Where would I stay overnight?”

“I don’t know. Maybe at a friend’s house.”

“But I don’t have friends like that.”

“You will.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Well, maybe then I’ll take you myself. To the seashore. Just you and me. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes. I’ve never been to the seashore.”

“It’s settled then,” he said as he gently rubbed my back again. “We’ll walk on the beach during the day, our toes in the wet sand, the sun on our shoulders. We’ll watch sand crabs skitter at dusk, and we’ll gather seashells and string a beautiful necklace for you. And at night we’ll lie and listen to the waves and dream our dreams.”

I had never felt more special. I circled the orange suitcase. Then I circled it two more times.

It was my first Christmas with loads of presents. Gone were the days of two need-based presents like underwear or socks. This year, I received a dozen or so books including a few Nancy Drews, which I absolutely loved, a music box monkey, a nine-room doll house with tiny dolls and furniture, and others I can no longer recall. And we didn’t have to flatten and save the wrapping paper and ribbon. Mother still did this, but it was habit. We didn’t need to save it for next year. There would always be money for wrapping paper.

And, most special of all, the orange suitcase. Later that week I found a perfect delicate pink seashell tucked into an inside pocket of the suitcase. I knew Joe had put it there and guessed that because he never said anything about it, it was to be our little secret. Joe and I never took that seaside trip. But I guess we didn’t need to. Our trips to his study with the closed door did the trick.

Entering my dorm room that first day on the Kensington campus, Joe put my old orange suitcase and bag of books on one of the beds. Mother carried her new red handbag in one hand. It

matched her shoes. She'd been getting lots of new things lately. Shoes and purses and dresses and jewelry. Bobby held her other hand. He was carrying his favorite, and very tattered, stuffed animal Blinky.

Although it was hard to make it out after years of being well loved, Blinky was supposed to be a dog. He was large and blue with a red collar and had served as Bobby's security blanket since the moment Joe won it for him at the State Fair the year Bobby turned three. I was home sick with the chickenpox, so Mother and I missed going that year. Bobby had Joe all to himself and he just could not shut up about what a great time they had.

"Daddy bought me a pretzel."

"Daddy took me to see cows and horses."

"Daddy won me a blue dog."

"Daddy and I rode the carousel twice," and on and on.

He was pretty much insufferable that evening and the following week and, after that, Bobby was never without Blinky. He dragged Blinky around the house constantly, took it with him to the playground, and he never, ever, went to bed without it. Looking back, it's obvious that Blinky was his substitution for Joe who almost never had time for Bobby.

As I stood in my dorm room, looking at my baby brother fiercely clutching his Blinky, tears in his eyes, I remembered the year Bobby turned four.

We had thrown a wonderful birthday party for Bobby in the back yard and all the neighbors were there. Joe was grilling hamburgers and hot dogs and Mother made a big birthday cake and frosted it blue, Bobby's favorite color. We sang, Bobby made his wish and blew the candles out, and when he was done eating, he had frosting all over his face, in his hair, and all over Blinky. Mother whisked Blinky away, insisting she would wash it before bedtime. Bobby

did surprisingly well without Blinky during the rest of the party, but when bedtime came, he demanded Blinky's return.

Mother, busy with the party and clean up, had forgotten to wash Blinky. She refused to let Bobby have the unwashed, blue frosted Blinky in bed with him and Bobby had a complete meltdown. A yelling match ensued, ending with Bobby crying hysterically, tears and snot running down his chubby little cheeks, and Mother throwing his stuffies and toys at him, screaming that he should grow up and stop being such a baby.

When she threw his Mr. Potato Head, it hit Bobby in the face and that was it for me. I'd never felt such fierce hatred. He was only four and I thought he should be able to be a baby for a bit longer before he had to grow up and realize what a horrible mother to whom he had been unlucky enough to be born.

I was 15 and not a scrawny little girl anymore, already an inch taller than Mother. I lunged at her. I should have been able to restrain her, but she easily shoved me to the floor, sat on top of me and started slapping my face, screaming indiscriminately. I could no longer tell what she was saying. She was like a wild animal, white spittle forming at the sides of her mouth, eyes wide and crazy, hair flying. Joe pulled her off and held her tight, arms at her sides. She kept thrashing, and kicking, and screaming. Finally, Joe yelled at her to stop, or he was going to have her committed. Suddenly, everything stopped.

Bobby sat wide eyed and still on the floor amid a sea of toys, his face red and sweaty, and snotty, sucking his thumb, something he had given up a year before. I sat on the floor, my head on my knees. I looked up at Mother. She stood in the middle of the room, restrained by Joe but no longer fighting.

"Get off me," she said with calm restraint.

Joe let her go and backed up. Without another word she stormed out of the room. I knew later, from reading her journal, that she had reached her breaking point. She had had enough. Enough of pretending to be the happy wife to a man who would no longer touch her, enough pretending that she loved motherhood when she saw it only as a means to an end, enough of me and Joe and what we were doing. Definitely enough of that. Looking back, I can't blame her for that.

Moments later Mother returned with her coat and Joe's car keys and headed for the front door where she stopped, her hand on the nob. For a few moments, I felt us all hold our breath. She was frozen at the door, and I stupidly wondered how we would get out the front door if she got stuck like that. I'd give anything to know what was racing through her mind at that exact moment, but she never wrote about in her journal, so I'll never know for sure. I suspect that was when she finally decided to get rid of me.

Without turning, she said, "Have at her, bastard," and stormed out of the house. At the time I wasn't sure exactly what she meant by that. Of course, now it's clear.

Joe finally got Bobby settled down by promising that he and I would read part of Charlotte's Web for his bedtime story. And we did, making quick work of trying to erase the earlier events of the evening. Joe made hilarious voices for Wilbur and for the rat...I can't remember his name. I did my best at voicing the little girl and Charlotte. We took turns for the rest which had all three of us laughing our way through over an hour of make-believe.

To me, it felt like Joe and I were Bobby's Dad and Mom...That *we* were the family. Dare I say that my 15-year-old-self daydreamed about this possibility, hoping that Mother would magically never return. Perhaps a tragic car accident. Perhaps an unsatisfactory but fortuitous (for me) ending with a hitchhiker. Perhaps Martians. Perhaps a mystery, never to be solved.

There were so many possibilities. I didn't care which it was, I just prayed to God she would not return. But I was a child. Now I know all too well that God would never have listened to someone like me.

That night, after we tucked Bobby in bed with promises of Blinky's return in the morning, we took turns kissing his sweaty little forehead, turned off his light, and shut the door. I grabbed Joe's hand, sure we were to have some special time in his study, especially with Mother out the door, possibly to never return. But Joe pulled away, saying he had some work to do. His voice sounded funny, and not the good kind of funny like when we were reading the book. He wouldn't look me in the eye. He went into his study and shut the door behind him. Joe had literally never NOT wanted me. Had never shut me out of the room where we had our special time. Never. Not once. Feeling rejected and confused, I slowly walked to my room, quietly closed the door, curled up in a ball on the bed, and eventually rocked myself to sleep, wondering what I'd done wrong. I woke in the middle of the night to a repeating thump-thump coming from the back of the house.

I looked out my window to see if Mother had returned but the car was not in the driveway. Thump-thump. I briefly wondered where she was and if she was gone for good. Thump-thump. I got up and followed the sound to the laundry room where, in the spinning dryer, I found Blinky.

Saying goodbye to Bobby that first day in my doom room at Kensington was much harder than I imagined it would be. Somehow, despite my twisted, unsavory childhood, my heart actually had made room for Bobby. I realized in that moment, that I truly loved my little brother. He begged Mother to let me come back home with them, smart little thing. He fiercely hugged me goodbye and then, tears welling in his beautiful blue eyes, Bobby gave me Blinky. Then he

started crying loudly. People passing my room were stopping and looking in to see what the commotion was all about. Mother sent Joe to take my sweet, inconsolable baby brother to the waiting car as he was making a scene and God forbid our family make a scene. Mother would not have it and shut the door behind Joe and Bobby. I could hear him crying all the way down the hall. Mother turned and just stood there looking at me with disgust written all over her face. Uncomfortable moments passed.

“Goodbye Eliot,” she said, turning to leave, grasping the door handle. I couldn’t remember a time when she had not referred to me as Ellie.

“Mother,” I began but did not know what to say.

Without turning back, she replied, “Don’t call me that.” She paused a moment, and then said, “I could never be a mother to a girl like you.” With that, Mother opened the door and walked right out of my life.

They were all gone. I had lost a mother, a brother, a father, and a home all in one fail swoop and really, who did I have to blame besides myself? Did I think that my relationship with Joe would not come at a price? I didn’t even get to say goodbye to Joe, the one I thought would somehow save me. The one I had counted on to be my knight in shining armor. The one I had traded my body and soul to in exchange for a promise of forever love.

I stood in my dormitory room, holding Blinky. I had never felt so alone. I had never felt so ashamed. And, unlike my three-year-old-self, I could not cry.