

Memories of Mom

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(Some of the typographical errors on this page are not mine; they resulted from the imperfect transformation of the Word file into the popular PDF format. These errors result in some words being joined together, likethis.)

I'm going to share some of the good memories I have about Mom. They are not in chronological order. More might be added later, so check back periodically. If you have memories you wish to record in written form and placed on this page, please send a Word file (.doc) to me, using my email address above.

The first story is called,

Church Mice

Mom grew up with aunts and uncles and nieces and about ten brothers and sisters, and her Mom and Dad, in Red Bluff, California, during the Depression Years. There was never enough money to go around. They were basically poor, like almost everyone else in those days.

Mom and Dad were married in 1942, and I was their first-born, in 1944. The three of us lived in a one-room apartment in North Sacramento, about five miles from here, behind a drive-up restaurant where the waitress would walk out to your car and take your orders, then deliver your order to you on trays hung on the windows. Dad worked as an electronics technician at McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento, fixing electronic equipment on airplanes during and after World War II. Mom, like most wives and mothers at that time, stayed at home. There were lots of poor people in those days, it seemed to me.

There was an expression Mom liked to use. In poor parts of town—any town, the

church pastor's congregation was poor, and so was the pastor and his wife, who often lived at the back of the church. They would let not a crumb of food go to waste, so there wasn't enough left even to feed a mouse. Mom liked to say, so-and-so 's family are poor as church mice. To me, that meant that we should take pity on them, and be glad for what little we had. When she saw poor people on the street, she would always make some comment, like, Oh, look at that man. How terrible.

The Soup Delivery

After the apartment, we moved into a house on Norwood Avenue—it's about five miles from here, in North Sacramento. Dad, with his father's help, build that house, and Susie and I, Mom and Dad, moved into it when I was about two or three years old. The house is still there.

One December in 1949, close to Christmas, Mom learned that the renters in the house near our Norwood Avenue house were behind on their rent, and she figured they might not have enough food to eat, so she made a huge pot of soup for them and had Dad and me put it in the car and drive it to their house. That kind of consideration that Mom showed for others is not very common these days. Most people now just wait for the government to feed their starving neighbors.

The Saw Blade

The reason Mom knew the renters were behind on their rent is that the house on Norwood Avenue where we took the pot of soup was built by my grandfather, with Dad's help, and Dad collected the rent. One day during the period when Dad and my grandfather were building the house, when I was about four years old, Dad took me with him to the house to watch them work, and maybe help. They

were inside the house using a buzz saw—one of those circular rotating blades sticking out from the top of a table.

It was my job to pick up the small waste blocks of wood that fell to the floor, and put them in pile somewhere, anywhere, to keep me busy. When the blocks of wood stopped falling off the table fast enough for me, I reached up onto the table to grab some blocks, and my fingers were caught by the spinning blade.



The next thing I remember is speeding down the street in Dad's car, past our house, on the way to the doctor's office. Mom heard the car coming, and looked out the window just in time to see us zoom by. When Dad brought me home from the doctor, Mom scolded him for putting me in danger, and I never returned to that house again, except for the time Mom made us take the soup there.

The Poor People

One of my oldest memories of those days in the Norwood Avenue house is "going for a ride."

In those days, it was considered great entertainment on a Sunday afternoon to "go for a ride," at least for people who didn't have much money. We would just get in the car and drive around town; gas was practically free in those days, so that was not an issue, and not everybody had a car then, the way they do now, so the roads weren't crowded, and just driving around with no particular place in mind was what many people did back then. At the end of some Sunday afternoon drives, we would stop to eat at that drive-up restaurant behind the apartment where we used to live, Mom and Dad in the front seat, and Susie and I in the back seat, having our trays of hamburgers and shakes brought to us and hung on the windows. This was a very special event for all of us, because we didn't do this very often. Drive-up restaurants at that time were quite a luxury for a lot of people. It was something you talked about at work on Monday mornings. Spending twenty cents on a hamburger, and fifteen cents for milkshake was not

something Mom and Dad could afford to do very often, and when we did do it, it made her feel special, like she actually was rich, knowing she wasn't, of course. In fact, we didn't have much more money than those people who were poor as church mice, but Mom loved to pretend. I remember what she said to no one in particular one of those times at the drive-up restaurant. She held her hamburger up as daintily and as elegantly as she could, pinky finger outstretched, cast her gaze upwards thoughtfully, and said: "I wonder what the poor people are doing?"

Paper Forts

I was about five, and still living in the Norwood Avenue house. Mom was sewing in the living room, and I was building a small, pretend fort made of newspapers next to the garage in the back yard, using one side of the garage as one of the walls of the fort. Wouldn't it be great if the fort was set on fire? I thought. Mom wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, so I was able to sneak into the kitchen to grab a book of matches from the drawer. The fort's paper walls went up in smoke in seconds, without anyone noticing, and the since the black scorch mark on the garage wall wasn't that large, and the fort-burning was so much fun, why not build a much bigger paper fort?

At the exact moment the second fort caught fire, smoke from the first fort-burning reached Mom's nose in the living room, and Mom double-timed it out the back door. She commanded me to "Put out that fire, and just look at what you did to the wall!" The point of this story is that Mom never punished me for that crime, or for any of the many other ones I'd committed over the years. The most she ever did was to say that she was going to tell Dad what I'd done, when he got home. We had a calendar on the desk in the living room, a page for each day, and before Dad would come home, she would grade the behavior that day of Susie and me, and as soon as Dad got home, he would make a point looking at the calendar page for that day. It would have

Susie: Good

Joey: Bad

written on it, and Dad would deliver the rewards or punishments, but never Mom.

The Phone Call

Norwood Avenue had mostly vacant lots in back of several of the houses on the block, a few old wooden goat shacks here and there. One day—it was probably around 1949, when I was about five years old, and about six months after the fort burnings episode—I was crouched up into a ball on the kitchen floor one morning, trying to make myself as small as possible. I really don't recall any of the events that led up to this. Anyway, I was on the floor, pressed up against the side of the refrigerator, between the refrigerator and the kitchen counter, when the telephone in the kitchen rang. Mom came into the kitchen and picked it up. It was the lady down the street--Beulah, who called to tell Mom about a wooden shack in the lot behind her house. It was burning down as she spoke, and she had seen some kids playing out there just before it caught fire. Was Joey one of them? Mom put her hand over the phone, and looked down at me on the floor, "Were you playing behind Beulah's house." No.

"Joey says he wasn't there." Mom took my word for it, without further interrogation. I wish now that I had asked her what she remembered about that incident, but during all of these years, I never once mentioned it, nor did she. I remember, though, feeling grateful then that Mom would defend her five-year-old against accusations of arson, even though she herself had caught me burning down those paper forts.

She hung up the phone, and as far as I know, never mentioned the phone call to Dad. If I had played a role in that fire, I've blocked out any memory of it. And if I had been guilty and have since forgotten about it, I think I must have felt then the way the kid in the movie, "A Christmas Story," felt when his mother didn't let on to the father that her son beat up Farkus that morning.

Dad Plays a Trick on Mom

Mom liked tricks being played her. When I was about five, Dad came home from work one day to our Norwood Avenue house and Mom and I were waiting for him as he came in the door. He was holding a small, wooden box in his right hand, palm up, with a serious look on his face. The box was about six inches long, with a lid that would slide off. Look at what's in there, he said to Mom, and as I watched, Dad continued to hold onto the box as Mom slid the cover off. Whatever was inside was covered with a layer of straw, so she lifted it up. There was a thumb in the box--a real thumb, not a fake, covered in what looked like blood. Mom jumped back, shouted Dad's name. Hidden from view at one end of the box was the opening through which Dad earlier had inserted his thumb and spread ketchup over it, before he got out of the car and came in the house. Mom was disgusted at first, but I could tell she secretly liked having people play tricks on her, most of the time, because it made her laugh.

Hiding from Mom and Dad

There was the time I played a trick on Mom that she didn't like at all. I was about four when Mom and Dad let me go hide before I was to be taken to bed, and they would try to find me. I hid so well that even after five minutes they hadn't found

me, and I could hear how worried they were becoming. I heard Mom say maybe I hid somewhere outside the house. It was dark. What if Joey wandered off, got lost? I could hear the fear in her voice. They went outside and looked around, called my name, then came back in and Mom started begging me to say where I was hiding, hoping I was still inside. I thought the game required that I never reveal my location, so I let another minute go by, then shouted out where I was. Mom explained to me that it was not nice to scare her like that. We never played that game again.

Box of Crackers

Mom learned to play tricks well, too, and loved getting the best of me. This story is about something that happened when we lived on Pluto Way, the house we moved to just after Rod was born, the house after the Merrywood Avenue house. My room was on the second floor. Mom didn't allow me to have food in my room, but I would always find ways to sneak things by her when she wasn't looking. My favorite snack in the early years there was Cheese-It crackers. I would ride my bike to the store, and pedal back with a box under my shirt or jacket, and if Mom was in the family room or her bedroom, I would hurry through the kitchen, through the living room, and up the stairs. One day when I was 13 years old, I just got home on my bike from the store with a box under my jacket. I stashed it in the garage, then went into the house to check to see where Mom was. She was sitting in the living room, in her chair near the bottom of the stairs that led up to my bedroom. I couldn't get the box of crackers up there with her sitting there, standing guard. So I walked past her and up the stairs to my room. I opened the window overlooking the backyard, and unfastened the screen, then went back downstairs, got the crackers, and went around to the back yard. This was going to work brilliantly. After four tries, I was able to throw the box through the window. I had just committed the perfect crime, or so I thought.

I walked back in the house. Mom was still in her chair. I walked past her as nonchalantly as I could, on my way up the stairs. She gave me a funny look, one

of those, "So you think you're smarter than your Mom" looks. This was not a good sign.

The crackers were not where they should have been. Mom evidently had run upstairs after hearing the box hit the window on the first three tries, and then heard the sound when the box landed on the bedroom floor on the fourth throw, and then snatched the box off the floor, then hurried back downstairs and hid it. The worst thing was that I eventually had to come back down those stairs. I couldn't stay up there forever. She was going to sit there until doomsday, if she had to. I had to admit what I had done, and admit that Mom had out-smarted me. It was Mom's finest hour. She told that story for the next fifty years.

BB Gun Story

We were living in the Pluto Way house and I was nine years old. Just like Ralphie in "A Christmas Story," I really wanted "an official Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot, range-model air rifle." A BB gun. Every mother in those days really did tell their kids, "You'll shoot your eye out!" and Mom was no exception. She insisted that I would not get a BB gun for Christmas, or any other time, but I was sure that she was just telling me that so that when I found the gun under the Christmas tree on Christmas day, I would be all the more excited and grateful. Christmas came.....and there was no gun. I was devastated. But, about a month later, late one afternoon, out of the clear blue with no warning whatsoever, she came home from the store and presented me with my official Red Ryder BB gun. It really was my best Christmas present ever. Evidently, Mom came to understand how much getting that rifle would mean to me, so she got it for me even though she was sure I would hurt myself or someone else with it. Every time I see "A Christmas Story," I think of Mom.