

Mothers, Daughters, and Dolls

Valerie Holladay

Came home from school Thursday about 7:30 absolutely exhausted but committed to writing a paper. Although I had planned to go to Mozart's Marriage of Figaro that night, I forgot to get tickets before it sold out. To my surprise, Mom left a message on my answering machine saying that she had managed to get tickets, since she knew I wanted to go. Immediately energized, I quickly called to say I was on my way (the paper could wait!).

I raced downtown (missing the freeway exit and ending up in totally new, strange, and dark territory), found parking in a town overrun with Jazz fans and opera buffs (realizing too late that I had no change to pay for it—but the very kind attendant let me park for free), and ran the three blocks to the Capitol Theatre (over patches of black ice and in sub-zero weather) with heart pounding, eyes watering, and throat burning. I made it at exactly 8 o'clock!

Despite my misadventures, the opera was marvelous (once I caught my breath). Mom is such a doll. She doesn't even like the opera—she slept through the second half! To thank her I told her I'd treat her to the symphony next weekend, since she's really a symphony fan.

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I knew my mother was eccentric, but her adventures seemed exciting to a nine-year-old child. We were always going somewhere, rattling around in her old car. She earned money cleaning and ironing for other people and usually took us children with her to help scrub and wax tired linoleum floors or to deliver crisply pressed shirts. Sometimes we parked the car beside the gleaming white Singer building that was for lease on Foothill Boulevard; there I listened to her dream aloud about the beauty spa she would start there. Many nights we didn't get home until after midnight—after a quick stop at 7-Eleven for Dr. Pepper and anything with the Hostess label. Mom's gallivanting frustrated my dad; he never knew where his wife and children were. Even worse, sometimes he came home late at night to a

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house full of young children who had no idea where their mother was. He didn't come home until nearly ten o'clock himself most nights; he supplemented his teacher's salary by working evenings for the county library system. Seldom home, he was a stranger to his family. We spent more time with Mom.

I especially remember going shopping for dolls with Mom. The dolls weren't for my sister or me, but for herself. My mother collected dolls, which is not an unusual hobby for most people, but she went about it in an unusual way. Her dolls were not like the carefully guarded beauties of other collections, many of whom proudly displayed eye-lashes and real human hair. Hers lacked their pink porcelain cheeks and fine hand-crafted gowns of silk and lace. Nor were they artfully arranged on shelves or in glass china cabinets. But even so, the cashiers where we shopped used to call her "the doll lady" when they saw her coming through the doors.

Although there are now half a dozen in the valley, there were only three Deseret Industries in Salt Lake when I was a child. My mother shopped them all. Owned and run by the LDS Church Welfare Services, Deseret Industries is both affectionately and disdainfully referred to as "the D.I." In this secondhand store, a careful shopper might find a rare book, a still reliable food processor, an impeccable tuxedo for \$10, or an oak desk for \$30. Once I saw a 1959 Harley Davidson motorcycle on display at the D.I. on 45th South. Rather than being assigned a set price, it was open for bids starting at \$1500. The only bid received at that point was for \$50.

Mom runs through her monthly welfare check in about three days. Last time she was clearly on a roll, so I did the only thing I could do—I went along. We spent an hour or two in the D.I. (still her favorite place to shop) and found about ten books we wanted. She also bought two beat-up tennis rackets, a bunch of yarn, a large carry-all shoulder bag, and some other odds and ends.

Teresa's apartment is too small to hold all Mom's stuff, so Mom rents a small storage shed. In the last several years I can't count how many times she's gotten behind in her payments for the storage space and lost it. The managers just haul all of Mom's stuff to the junkyard. And Mom just goes out and buys more.

We did most of our shopping for dolls at the D.I. on 2nd West. The most run-down of all the Salt Lake stores, it took all donations and refurbished nothing. Dolls and toys were tossed in heaps or in bins in the back of the store. Clothes hung on circular racks to the right, appliances and furniture crowded our left. The wall space above the shelves and clothes racks showed lusterless painted brick. The air itself always felt musty and chill inside, like the walk-in freezer in a convenience store, almost as if the cool air could preserve what little life remained in each rejected, cast-off item. As I browsed, I might

rummage through a bin that contained several broken records, an \$80 lady's silk blouse with a scorched and tattered sleeve now going for fifty cents, a broken electric can opener, a child's scratched and dented Snoopy lunchbox, a grimy pillow, and a stack of old *Good Housekeeping* magazines. A bundle of crooked hangers and a ragged Raggedy Ann might be thrown in for a good measure.

The other two stores were more organized. Different clothing racks held slightly to moderately worn women's blouses, children's pants, men's jackets, and boys' shirts. Here donations that were unsalvageable never made it to the racks and shelves, unlike those at the 2nd West store. Instead of being tossed indiscriminately together in a bin, toys were separated into stuffed animals, dolls, games, and books; a few bikes with flat tires or missing spokes were propped against the wall. Furniture was also grouped together: scuffed desks, lopsided bookshelves, scratched tables and chairs, and faded, sagging couches. Often new furniture still in plastic was available that the D.I. had somehow bought in quantity; their prices, however, were no cheaper than those in the regular retail furniture stores.

My second-most favorite part of the store was the book section. Books were divided into paperbacks and hardbacks, fiction and old textbooks, with stacks of old, tattered magazines off to one side. Sometimes pages had been colored on or torn out. Often the cover looked as if it had been chewed apart by a family pet; sometimes it was missing altogether. I didn't mind. I loved to read and always found room to tuck a few books in with the dolls.

Just inside the door of the Deseret Industries store, Mom and I might have passed a large rectangular table, the kind used for ward banquets and Daddy-Daughter Dinners (minus the crepe paper and ribbon flower centerpieces). Instead, the tables held heaps of scattered, naked junk, with no attempt to claim refurbishment. Broken toasters and tangled jewelry, incomplete puzzle sets, out-of-date eight-track cassettes—all lay humbly open for inspection. These received only a cursory glance from my mother, who stopped only for a battered but irresistible book on hypnotism or never-fail dieting tips. Then she beelined for the dim back corner of the store where the dolls awaited her.

She did not shop like most experienced "thrift-seekers," who, like surgeons, probe the tables and bins for the elusive article of concern. Neither did she peck at the clothes rack like a sparrow searching for a breakfast beetle. She pillaged. Like a human bulldozer, she rumbled gustily into the canvas bins of rejected playmates, who had been replaced by that year's model, a slicker, cleaner, and more sophisti-

cated Baby-Wet or Cutie Pie Cuddles. When she and I left with our purchases, the tables that had been cluttered with plastic humanity lay as barren and empty as a school hallway on a Saturday.

Mom found some Mon Cheri chocolates on sale at Smith's—they were a dollar a box, and each box contained a coupon for the next box free. She bought about fifty boxes (with her food stamps, of course) in order to get another fifty free boxes. She gave everyone—including me—a few boxes, which I was glad to have, but I couldn't help thinking that's not what food stamps are for.

Driving home from Grandma's last week we stopped at a store for a gallon of milk. Mom gave me some food stamps and asked me to get it for her since she was tired from cleaning Grandma's apartment. At the check-out stand my fingers and face felt stiff as I tore two one-dollar coupons from the booklet and gave them to the cashier. Mom says that all the street people she knows call them "tramp stamps." She laughs about it, but I wonder if she's embarrassed.

Like a Schweitzer, Mom dedicated herself to rescuing the dolls from the jungle darkness of the D.I. The castoffs, the rejected, the unloved—these were the ones upon whom she showered her abundant love. Buying them by the bin full, we transferred the naked dolls from their mass grave into cardboard boxes which we then piled, stacked, and crunched into her small Volkswagen bug. My mother knew that each doll needed only to be bathed and dressed; each shorn and ratty mass of hair—usually the training ground for youthful, would-be beauticians—could be made to curl once again around the smudged and sometimes dented cheeks. She could easily sew a simple full-skirted dress with a gathered waist and sleeves and lacy pantelettes, or even a daintily dotted flannel nightgown to cover their nakedness. Thus resurrected, her dolls could find new homes.

My mother was a skillful seamstress. She had made her own clothes all through high school during her summer vacations at her grandparents' home in Hiram, while the rest of her family went on weekend fishing trips. In college, my mother preferred "store-bought" clothes; homemade clothes lacked the flair needed to attract the young men she wanted to date. Later, during the years she worked as a county social worker, she bought clothes not for that extra style, but simply because she was a mother with three small children who worked full-time; where would she find time to sew?

She did, however, find time to teach me to sew. For my first project, I proudly chose a black and white zebra-striped cotton for a new pair of pants. Together we cut out the bell-bottomed pattern. As a team we pinned and basted the pieces together, and I made careful, jerky seams which I then unpicked and sewed again under her patient supervision.

But it was alone that I faced my amused and mocking classmates. I only wore my zebra-striped pants once, then hid them in my closet.

It would not have been difficult to fashion a few small dresses, with a whisper of lace at the sleeves or along the hem. For several dolls, perhaps. But for hundreds? My mother, tender heart that she was, could not say no to any doll, no matter how plain, no matter how unlovable. Each had-been doll was a vulnerable child hoping to be asked to come along, to be invited to play on the kick-ball team. She heard a myriad plaintive voices calling, "Take me home with you." She answered each cry.

She has another job for the moment. Ironically, it's in the Assistance Payments Office; she's shredding up papers by hand. The state's Work Experience and Training program—WEAT assignments, as they're called—are supposed to provide experience and also act as an "in" to other jobs. Her job only pays about fifty cents an hour, but it's necessary in order to keep her welfare money. I'm hopeful for her, but it's hard to get excited about it after all the jobs she's walked away from.

I know she's a hard worker. We used to stay up all night cleaning A & W Drive-ins and business offices. And she used to iron for hours at a time. While I was a missionary in France, she worked as a cook at the Lion House for nearly two years. Some say that people who are unemployed or on the street are just too lazy to get a job, but I know that's not the real reason.

Originally a music student at the University of Utah, Mom changed her major from music to social work after getting a D in music theory. She didn't start piano lessons until she was eighteen years old but became quite skilled through her own determination and musical ability. Before learning the piano, she played the guitar and sang Gene Autry and Roy Rogers cowboy songs (and yodeled!) at school and church talent shows, USOs, and employee socials at the electric company where her father worked.

She had also considered art as a major, since she wanted to illustrate children's books, but her advisors said she was too close to graduating in her major. So her creative instincts expressed themselves on the walls of our house. A beautiful winter scene covered the cement playroom walls of our basement. Our front room wall showed a life-sized Christ, his arms outstretched. When the curtains to our large front window were opened, it looked as if Christ was standing in our front room! Once Mom painted Venus de Milo on a large doorboard and set it outside to dry. The nude beauty created quite a stir in our conservative Mormon neighborhood.

Even before the divorce from Dad, I didn't understand why Mom did some of the things she did. But since she met Mike in the Plasma Donor Center where she sells her blood every week for a few dollars, she's changed even more.

While Mom may be unreliable and eccentric, she's never been deceitful. But Mike—he's lived on the street for years and has taught Mom how to survive his way—by sleeping in

abandoned cars and houses, and even in hospital waiting rooms, getting free meals in the soup kitchen downtown, and panhandling off the sidewalk. When he wants some easy money, he lies to pastors of different churches by telling them he and Mom are out-of-town visitors who need some money to fix their car. Now Mom's starting to lie to us and she avoids us. I think that hurts most of all.

After Mom graduated from the University of Utah, she married my dad and began working with the county social services. She worked for three years until my oldest brother was born, when she quit to stay home with him and my sister, Teresa, born eighteen months later. By the time I came along two years later, my parents needed more income than my father's teaching salary to make house payments, so she went back to her county job.

As a social worker, she taught a group of expectant, first-time mothers an early form of natural childbirth. She wrote and published her teaching experiences in a slim volume called *Having a Baby*, using a loan to pay a private publisher to produce several hundred copies of her book. While she enjoyed her early assignments, though, her case-work later started to take her to broken families, to diseased and crippled people, to people who had lost hope. She dreaded her visits to nursing homes, which at that time had no state regulatory standards. Large bed sores covered the elderly, frail bodies that housed the even more fragile spirits of cast-off grandparents and used-up people. She had no answers for them, no strength to give them. She quit working for the county and taught antiquing classes at home. She also took in ironing and hired herself out cleaning other women's houses.

Mom drove all over the valley to clean or deliver ironing in a series of puffing secondhand Volkswagen bugs. She wore out several, including a black one, a blue one, and a fire-engine red one. She never remembered to have the oil and filter changed, and her cars disintegrated quickly from her abuse. Once, because we children quarrelled for the privilege of riding in the front passenger seat, she took the seat out of the car completely. No longer did we whine to sit in that once-desired spot; we avoided it if possible. How much fun was it to crouch there uncomfortably, clutching the window and bouncing around as Mom sped along the streets, occasionally plunging the car into a pothole?

Mom has filed for divorce from Mike and has been living with Teresa for the past few months. In March we convinced Mom to leave Mike; he nearly killed her in one of his violent, schizophrenic rages, so we took her to the Battered Women's Shelter at the YWCA. A few weeks later he broke into my apartment to find out where she was. I called the police, and he spent a night in jail. But only a few weeks later, Mom went back to him. After she finally divorced him, she married him again, then left him a few more times. Now it sounds like this may be the last time.

But today she disappeared again. Teresa and I drove all over town, passing her usual spot in front of Crossroads Mall. She was upset with Teresa, who tried to tell her tactfully that she can't start interviewing for a real social work position while she pulls in a few extra dollars playing the harmonica on the street.

After dragging the dolls across the parking lot, we loaded the car with our purchases from the D.I. Most of the time the car was so full that Mom's chosen accomplice—usually me—had to sit on a box of dolls, the hard plastic arms and legs poking my backside without mercy. I was my mother's companion because my older sister and brother didn't understand Mom's need to buy *all* the dolls in the Deseret Industries; once she paid one hundred dollars to clear away all the dolls—including those without arms and legs (and even an occasional severed and abandoned doll head). Together we rode home as I perched uncomfortably on the stubborn plastic flesh and scratchy, wiry hair. Despite my seeming heartlessness for suffocating our foundling children, my nine-year-old heart shared my mother's encompassing compassion for the unloved.

When I went to school, the other kids ran away from me, except when they came just close enough to pinch me or spit on me. Sometimes they stood on the benches that lined the halls, so they wouldn't have to stand on the same floor that I did and be susceptible to my "fleas," despite the talismanic "F.F.F." that most children at my school carefully wrote on the backs of their hands to be "Free From Fleas." I ran home from school at night, with my tormenters chasing after me with rocks or snowballs. My sister, two years older, was not totally immune to the teasing of other students, but she received less of it than I did. My older brother, Stuart, had also been cruelly tormented by his classmates, but he had gone on to the greater anonymity of junior high school. So I was left alone.

I wasn't sure why I stood apart from the others. No doubt my braces and my dark-rimmed cat-eye glasses with taped earpieces were a natural invitation to catcalls and shrieks of "Brace-Face" and "Four-Eyes." The worst of the names, "Stink-a-day," was perhaps not totally unearned. Our house was not cared for by my overworked father and busy, wandering mother; and to make matters worse, we had seven cats, a dog, a few ducks, and various hamsters, birds, and once a tiny alligator—all in the house or trying to get in the house most of the time. The exterior of our house was just as bad; the lawn was peppered with dandelions and weeds grew nearly waist high.

Not only was our house and yard unkempt, but we children had the same neglected appearance. My fourth-grade class photograph shows a serious-faced child dressed in one of the unstylish jumpers that my grandmother sewed for me. With it, I'm wearing an unironed blue

shirt; the jumper is an orange-flowered print. My dishwater blond hair is uneven and scraggly from my endeavors with the scissors. I was five the first time I cut my own hair. Actually I let my friend Barbara cut my hair, then I cut hers. When her mother came to pick her up, she gasped in horror and turned her over her knee and spanked her right there in front of me. My own parents reacted more mildly; they simply took me to the woman in the corner house who had a salon in her basement. There my hair was evened and trimmed until it was shorter than a boy cut, a new style called a "pixie cut." In time my hair grew to my shoulders, despite my repeated attempts at playing beautician.

In addition to my odd clothes and hair, perhaps, too, I was the stereotyped "brain," the smart student who was heckled by other students who struggled to finish their homework and to bring home satisfactory grades. Besides getting good grades, I kept my face sunk in a book every spare minute I had. I even read during recess, something *nobody* did. In fifth grade my favorite book was *Mara, Daughter of the Nile*. I was fascinated by Mara, a blue-eyed Egyptian slave who ran away from her cruel master, stowed away on a boat on the Nile, and became involved in royal espionage. She fell in love with Sheftu, an Egyptian lord and one of the king's spies; together they helped to dethrone the usurping queen and place the rightful pharaoh on the throne. Another favorite book of mine was a thick volume of fairy tales with heavy, crinkled pages and lustrous illustrations of fire-breathing dragons and milky-complexioned princesses. When one of my tormentors saw me hug the book to my flat chest, he pushed my shoulder roughly and snorted, "You can't read that. You don't know how."

Stung, I quickly (and truthfully) replied, "I already have. Twice."

When I was younger, I thought it was Mom who caused my unpopularity. In her impetuous and generous way, she had let the Cub Scouts in her den use her oil paints. Ignoring her cautions, one boy nastily daubed paint on the other boys' clothes. When the Scouts returned home after their activity, their irate mothers punished them for ruining their clothes. Together, the worst of the bullies took revenge on my family. They left burning sacks of manure on our front step. They toilet-papered our house. And when I left the safety of our chain-link fenced yard, they took out their anger on me. The children at school, sensing a scapegoat, quickly followed suit.

As I look back now, however, I wonder if perhaps the other children knew about the dolls. I can imagine them watching through the windows of their well-ordered homes as Mom and I hauled box after box into our house. Like a large, unblinking eyeball, their gaze pierced through the walls of our brick home and focused upon the piles of

dolls that spread across the floor in jumbled heaps. The stacks of bulging cardboard boxes sagged against the walls and against each other, seeming to spread and grow and push against the walls and the ceiling. Higher and higher, faces and legs and ears smashed against the windows and doors and walls and roof, until at last they exploded through the windows and out the chimney like a volcanic eruption of human plasticity. Naked dolls with shapeless, frizzy curls and grasping hands clutched at the air as they jettisoned upward and tumbled and bounced down the roof, their cries muffled as a shower of bodies thudded on top of them. The sound of skidding, smacking plastic on plastic and the hot, airless smell of doll flesh filled the air. Their innocent bodies lay scattered everywhere, like mangled remnants of motorcycle collisions, heads smashed, legs and arms missing.

Maybe the other children saw these dolls, covering our house like the remnants of some bizarre and violent storm. Like human drifts, dolls surrounded the house, blocked the car, and barricaded the driveway. Naked and vulnerable, but endowed with the power of deathlessness, the dolls held us in their tiny, curved fingers that reached upward from the clumps of weeds and dirt like corpses straining for life in a plowed-over cemetery. The thick stench of unwashed and compressed bodies darkly covered our house.

Did the other children see the dolls crawl after me each day as I went to school? Dragging themselves on tiny, bloated stomachs, the survivors of the holocaust hitched themselves slowly across the crystal-sharp concrete, their naked flesh scraping and bleeding, following me relentlessly as I ran to school. When I arrived at last panting at the steps of the main door, I slammed it behind me and paused, breathless, only to face my schoolmates who froze at my entrance. With a new distraction until the bell for class rang, my persecutors came toward me with smirks and giggles. Behind me tiny, inhuman fists pounded the metal doors.

In the fourth grade I refused to go to school any more. Mom told me she understood and would explain to the principal why I didn't want to go. But I didn't want to force my beloved mother to talk to the principal, who I had heard was a terrible, hateful man. So I went.

I finally met Andrew, Mom's new boyfriend. Teresa went to talk to Mom a few days ago, and he nearly threw her down the stairs of the hotel where he and Mom are staying. Then he spitefully threw his empty glass after her. Mom had Teresa's car keys, so Teresa asked me to come with her in case he was drinking again.

The hotel was filthy; the ceiling was falling down, and some of the rooms didn't have doors. As I walked down the dark, narrow hallway, I could see the people lying on their beds in their rooms. They pay twelve dollars a night for a tiny ten-foot-square room with a scummy sink in the corner and a community bathroom down the hall. Mom sleeps on the floor while Andrew spends most of the day in a drunken stupor on the bed.

When I was little, I used to think monsters lived in my house. But as I grew older, I realized that my monsters didn't exist, and I ventured into our unfinished and drafty basement where dolls tumbled from wilted cardboard boxes and spread knee-deep across the floor. More dolls were jammed under our basement stairs, an area I cleared away when I was ten. I sheltered it with hanging blankets for privacy. Not only did the dolls cram our basement, but they filled our attic as well, a shallow affair that ran the length of the house; since we couldn't stack the boxes of dolls there, we laid them out end to end, filling every spare foot of space. But the space under the stairs became mine.

With an old chipped and shadeless lamp on the cement floor and my posters of Bobby Sherman and David Cassidy on the walls, I created my own world. With a librarian as a father, I had access to shelves of books with no danger of overdue fines. Here, away from the other world, I became Mara, Nancy Drew, Trixie Belden, Harriet Tubman, and Sarah Crewe. I was Jane Addams, Clara Barton, and Florence Nightingale. I was a beautiful and timid governess at Dragonwyck. I was Annie Oakley. I survived, forgotten and alone, on the Island of the Blue Dolphins. I was called the Witch of Blackbird Pond. I played in the Secret Garden.

When I grew older I read *Teen Beauty Secrets* and *The Fascinating Girl*. Trembling and breathless, I devoured *How to Get a Teenage Boy and What to Do with Him When You Get Him*. I read and reread my copies of *Tiger Beat* and *Teen*. I dreamed that I was kidnapped with Bobby Sherman and locked away in a damp cellar where we huddled against each other for warmth. I had no rational explanation why a kidnapper would snatch an unknown girl with a famous movie star, but that was immaterial. Sometimes I dreamed I was Mara, floating down the Nile, aware but careless of the handsome, arrogant Sheftu who watched me admiringly. And I dreamed, more awake than asleep, that my house would burn down to ashes.

The only reason Mom has come back to Teresa's apartment is that Andrew took the money for the room where they're staying. She paid in advance for the room for the rest of the week, but Andrew took the money back from the hotel attendant, saying they wouldn't need the room anymore. Then he took the money to go get something to drink. Judging by all the empty Listerine bottles in the room, I'd say he was pretty desperate.

Mom stays close by the phone and crochets or plays the piano, guarding the hope that he'll call when he needs money to rent a room or buy a drink. Sometimes we might spend a few hours browsing around the D.I. together. Some days she'll go downtown and play her harmonica to earn a few dollars. And once in a while, Mom and I go to the symphony.

While I dreamed in my tiny cubbyhole and Mom went from house to house to do cleaning, the dolls hibernated in the attic and in our basement, forgotten once again, as they awaited resurrection from

another more dependable source than my mother. It was not an innate cruelty that caused her to neglect the promises of hope she had given to her dolls. Within her waged an immense battle of talents and dreams—her music, her art, her family, her need to be loved, her need to be needed. Each desire struggled to voice itself as Mom juggled first one project, then another. And every few weeks, when her work was done or could wait a little longer, we jumped into the car and headed to the D.I. for another load of dolls.

When I was fourteen years old, my father divorced my mother and moved to a narrow ten-by-fifty-foot mobile home in a well-manicured mobile home park. After a time, my mother sold our tired house to two enterprising young men who hoped to spruce it up and sell it for a profit. Our buyers spent days hauling boxes of unfulfilled dolls to Deseret Industries.