



I'M WALKING AS
STRAIGHT AS I CAN

Transcending Disability in Hollywood and Beyond

GERI JEWELL with TED NICHELSON
Foreword by Patty Duke

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GERI JEWELL

with TED NICHELSON

ECW Press

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To the best of her ability, the author has recreated experiences, places, people, and organizations from her memories of them. In order to protect the privacy of others she has, in some instances, changed the names of certain people and details of events and places.



I dedicate this book to my sister Gloria, who has been there for me time and again. She is not only my sister, but an angel in my path and the wind beneath my wings.

I also dedicate this book to my parents. Without them, I would not have been given the gift of life. Through the lessons and love that they gave me, they will always be in my heart.

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Preface

I have wanted to write my autobiography for many years, but it was difficult getting started. For a while, I thought it might be easier to write it as fiction, and so I wrote it as a novel called *The Remarkable Journey of Jenny Gem*. It was going to be a story based on my life. I was about a third of the way along with *Jenny Gem* when I met Ted Nichelson.

Ted and I became acquainted through my friend, Susan Olsen. After discovering that Ted had collaborated on Susan's book, *Love to Love You Bradys*, I asked Ted if he would be interested in helping me with my book. Ted and I had wonderful chemistry, and he had the ability to guide and direct me in a way that brought my real-life story onto the page. I came to trust him completely, telling him what *really happened* in the life of Jenny Gem. I explained to Ted how painful certain things were, and that it was easier to write my story in the third person.

Ted contacted his publisher, ECW Press, and everyone agreed that my book would have a great impact if it was a first-person memoir. So, the first thing we had to do was dissect my novel, removing everything that was fictional and writing the truth about Geri Jewell.

Ted was a godsend as my writing partner. Although I was confident in my writing skills, I knew nothing about putting together a book proposal. I learned that even the best book in the world is not going to get through the door of a publisher without a good proposal first. Together, Ted and I wrote the proposal for this book. As exciting as it was when Ted's publisher accepted the proposal, it was only the beginning. In the next year, I wrote almost daily, often for six to ten hours at a time.

Working with Ted couldn't have been more perfect. He never once, in all the months that I wrote with him, took my words and made them his. He allowed me to tell my story in my own words, only pointing out the times when he felt I was not clear, or too wordy, or when I needed to write more. The period of false starts was over, and Ted helped me to keep moving forward even when I felt there were some things that were just too painful to write about. Ted believed in me, and reminded me that the most important thing was that I believed in myself and was not afraid to tell the truth.

Because of my spirituality, it was very important that I was always aware of my intent. I did not want my book to be a trashy tell-all that could potentially hurt other people, but I had to find a way to write about what some people did that ended up shaping my life. I chose not to use everyone's real names because I did not want to hurt family members and friends who are in their lives today.

I believe forgiveness is so important, and what was done to hurt me, whether intentional or not, does not matter. What matters is that all of us learn from our experiences so we can forgive ourselves and move forward. Writing this book healed me in many ways. I have no anger or regrets about the choices I made or anyone else made. If we grow and evolve through our many missteps in life, I believe the pain and suffering are worth it.

I also believe that in order to survive hardship and adversity, we must have a healthy sense of humor about oneself and the world around us. I have incorporated my sense of humor throughout my book, and I hope that the readers enjoy the lightheartedness I use to tell some stories that were quite painful at the time. I could not have written this book without my sense of humor — I would have given up years ago, and the stories that I held in my heart and mind would have never made it to print. I truly hope you enjoy reading about the journey that I have taken in life. I was born with cerebral palsy, but

can only be a victim of it if I choose to be. I have been very blessed in life, and I don't take anything for granted, including having this opportunity to tell my own story through my own words.

— Geri Jewell, January 2011

Foreword

Dear Reader,

I beg your indulgence as I send a long overdue valentine to Geri Jewell:

Geri, who'd have thought our connection would be so profound? When we met more than 30 years ago, all we had in common was our fear of performing live on Norman Lear's television special *Love Liberty*. We were good celebrities inviting our fellow citizens to fully participate in our beloved democracy. As is our way, we cheered each other on.

How could we ever have guessed that in the ensuing years, we'd be living damn near parallel lives? Besides striving to keep our careers afloat, we've shadow boxed with our respective disabilities, yours cerebral palsy and my bi-polar disorder. We're a pair, all right. In reading *I'm Walking as Straight as Can*, I couldn't help but shake my head again and again as I came to know how many demons we had in common and above all, that any other human being could rival me in the insecurity department. Congratulations, my dear!

But let me not dwell on painful histories, for we don't live there anymore. Let us, together, invite your readers to share in the bounty borne of endurance and cock-eyed optimism. Your willingness — indeed, your eagerness — to share your road “less traveled,” demonstrates the generosity of your spirit, your sense of humor, that is just irreverent and divine. The following pages of this book are less about disability and more about learning to identify and accept the good fortune that is yours.

Congratulations, dear friend. Thank you for the insights and, of course, for the healing laughter you bring to your fellow travelers.

Thank you, too, dear Reader. Enjoy!

— Anna Patty Duke

Chapter One

Buffalo, Wings, and a Prayer

It was a warm day on September 12, 1956. My mom was relaxing on the front porch, reading, when her car lost control, going too fast around the corner. The car hit the maple tree on our lawn, smashed into the front porch, and threw Mom into the air. She landed on the front lawn, bleeding and in pain. Our neighbor had seen the whole thing from her bay window. She was horrified, knowing that Mom was six months pregnant with me.

In 1956, my parents, Jack and Olga Jewell, had been married for 12 years and had two sons, David and Fred. Mom and Dad came from large families, and when they found out my mother was expecting another child, the whole family was excited. My brothers were hoping for another brother, but Mom knew instinctively that the next child would be a girl. Dad was employed by DuPont in Cheektowag, New York, where they lived, and worked hard to put food on the table. He was a little worried about finances, but Mom had tremendous faith in God and believed that where there's a will, there's a way. She had no idea that this would be no ordinary pregnancy.

The story of my birth has been told by family members over and over again, and, to be honest, I have become bored with the retelling of it. Not that it was a boring event in itself, only that I have told it so many times that I sound like a broken record. (For those of you who are too young to know what a broken record sounds like, consider that a small blessing.)

My mother was rushed to the Sisters Hospital in Buffalo, where doctors frantically tried to save her life. She was hemorrhaging, and my parents were sadly informed that Mom had lost her baby. Mom was screaming that they were wrong — she knew that I was alive even though the doctors didn't. They explained to her that there was no indication of a heartbeat, and that they would have to do a Caesarean section. "We must remove the baby in order to save your own life at this point."

Mom had lost a lot of blood and suffered great trauma. They explained to my dad that it could be a very long night, as they had to stabilize my mom before they could perform surgery to remove me. My dad's sister, my Aunt Gerry, was in the waiting room with him, and she reassured him that it wasn't over yet — she told him not to give up. The following morning, after a tremendous effort in stabilizing Mom, the doctors were finally ready to perform surgery. However, the only thing that ended up being aborted was the surgery itself. In the process of prepping for surgery, a tiny miracle was born! On the morning of September 13 at 8:34 a.m., I came into the world with a faint heartbeat, weighing just less than three pounds.

Mom was crying, saying through her tears, "I told you she was alive!" Doctors immediately informed Dad that his wife was going to make it, and that he was the father of a baby girl. He hugged Aunt Gerry, realizing that she had been right. I was placed in an incubator, going from a room without a view to a room with nothing but windows! My parents couldn't think of a name for me, so for the time being, I was only known as "Precious Jewell." In 1956 babies that tiny rarely lived, so the moniker was fitting and soon caught on with everyone. "Precious Jewell in the Glass Case" made the morning paper, announcing that at that time, I was the tiniest baby who survived at that hospital. That was my very first press release.

When most babies come into the world, they find the reassuring comfort of being held in the

mother's arms, being fed and cared for. I always wondered what it must have felt like for me living within a heated glass enclosure for the first three months of my life. I have seen pictures of me inside the incubator with one leg propped up on the thermometer. Perhaps I was content; after all, what did I have to compare it to? It was all I knew.

One morning at 4 a.m. my parents were awakened by the shrill ring of the phone. They immediately went into a panic, knowing intuitively that something was wrong, and expected the worst. Somehow I had managed to get pneumonia, and I was not expected to survive the night. A nurse told my parents that it was imperative that I be baptized immediately. "We have contacted the parish priest," she said, "and he will be waiting for your arrival." Mom notified my godparents, Aunt Gerry and Uncle Russell, so they could be present for my baptism. Soon everyone was gathered around me, praying for my life but knowing that I might not live to see daybreak.

I obviously lived but was unable to keep any formula down until a doctor decided to give me some mashed banana, mainly for the potassium and weight gain. It could have been a combination of everything that gave me the strength needed to survive: between the Jewish doctor who had donated his blood for my transfusion, the Hindu nurse who watched over me, and the Catholic priest who performed my baptism, it seemed I had many faiths rooting for me! I was finally named Geraldine Ann Jewell, but "Precious Jewell" remained on my incubator. Aunt Gerry always thought I was named after her, but Mom had named me after Saint Gerard, the sacred saint of life, because I fought for my life coming into the world. "Geraldine" was as close to "Gerard" as Mom could get without sounding butch. Aunt Gerry couldn't have been more pleased that I was named after her, and my parents were not about to spoil that pleasure for her. My name was always spelled Gerry until I personally changed the spelling in the ninth grade to Geri.

At three months, I finally weighed in at seven pounds, and my parents were notified. "Come get her quickly, before she loses any weight!" When my parents brought me home, it was a huge celebration. I was the size of a doll, and my brothers were amazed that they could hold me with one hand! Our German shepherd, Kim, intuitively took her post as my protector, standing guard over the bassinet and watching me intently. This made Dad nervous.

"Get Kim away from the baby!" he said.

"Dad, Kim's not going to hurt her!" David protested. Nevertheless, Dad ordered Kim to come over and sniff him, but she refused. She just gave Dad a doggy dirty look and lay down under my bassinet. Everyone agreed, Kim was *very* protective of this precious jewel.

Once, when Aunt Gerry babysat me, Kim wouldn't let her near me. My family backed down the driveway in their dark green 1955 Chevrolet station wagon, leaving the three of us alone. When Aunt Gerry went to pick me up, to her surprise and frustration, Kim wouldn't budge and actually growled at her! There was no way Kim was going to leave her post. My aunt was wily, though: she threw a bone down the basement stairs and locked Kim down there. As much as Kim loved me, dogs will be dogs. She ran after it and felt duped. When she was finally let back in, she ran faster than Rin Tin Tin, right back to my side. Kim adored me, and at night she was always curled up on the floor, watching over me like a guardian angel.

The entire first year of my life was jotted down in a steno pad. Every movement, mood, and *bow movement* was painstakingly kept in a journal by Mom. I was being monitored closely, just in case my health took a turn for the worse. Mom didn't mind doing this at all. In fact, by observing me so closely, she became aware that something wasn't right with me. Dad sometimes became impatient with her very detailed account of everything and felt at times that she was *looking* for problems that

didn't exist. "My God, Olga, you're so bent on every single detail, you'd think this steno pad belonged to a detective working on an unsolved murder!" Mom just ignored him most of the time, but it did create some tension between the two of them.

As much as Mom wanted to believe that everything was all right, she couldn't shake the feeling that was different. As the months went by, Mom became more and more convinced that something wasn't right. She kept comparing me to what my brothers had done at the same age, and even though her pediatrician kept assuring her that I was normal, that not every baby does everything at the same time, Mom was not convinced. She took me to two other doctors, seeking second and third opinions. On a sleepless night, she woke up my dad, telling him that she believed that I had cerebral palsy. Dad didn't think he had heard her correctly, but she repeated the same words with equal conviction in her voice. The following morning, Mom brought up the subject again. "Jack, we need to talk about Geri. She is not progressing normally."

"Olga . . . the doctors say she is fine, just a little slower."

"Jack, I don't care what the doctors say. They don't see her day in and day out. They see her once a month for about thirty minutes!"

He cut her off, waving his arms. "And they are the *doctors!* Did you go to Harvard?"

"Jack, I know Geri has cerebral palsy. David started crawling at six and a half months, and Fred was crawling by eight months. Geri hasn't even tried to crawl yet, and she's almost a year old!"

"What makes you believe that she has cerebral palsy? I mean, there are other conditions that it could be as well."

"Do you remember when I took that job in Maine for the summer, as a nanny?"

"Well, yes, but what does that . . . ?"

"Jack, they had a twelve-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy. Her mother, Anna, gave me a crash course on cerebral palsy. She wanted me to fully understand Ann's condition, so that I could be more able to care for her properly."

Dad was stunned, not least because the girl's name was Ann and that is my middle name. "Did you name Geri after this other child?" Mom admitted that, in fact, she had. She loved the Turner family and wanted to pay tribute to Ann. Dad had always assumed I was named after his mother, Anna Jewel.

Naming me was one thing, but Dad was beginning to understand that Mom's intuition wasn't something to be ignored, so they promptly made an appointment with a specialist in downtown Buffalo. The doctor there was the first to agree with Mom. After examining me, he believed that there was definitely something not right developmentally. In fact, he even suggested that they give me up before they become too attached. "What?!" Mom was stunned, to say the least. "She will be a year old next month! It's a little late to not get attached, don't you think?"

"Listen, I know you think I am being cruel to suggest giving her up, but believe me, it is the best thing for you and the child." The doctor had been through this routine time and again and was used to this reaction; he felt with absolute conviction that it was the right thing to do, to spare families of any further grief down the road.

Mom was furious. "Well, does she or does she not have cerebral palsy?"

"We will have to run some tests to find out conclusively. However, I have seen babies like this before, and I can tell you that most likely she will never be able to walk, and she probably has mental retardation. It is my professional opinion that these babies are much better cared for in state institutions. They have qualified staff who give the absolute best care possible to these unfortunate

children. I assure you that the pain of giving up your daughter at this point is nothing compared to the future heartache and financial burdens these babies ultimately come into the world with.”

Dad was beside himself. “The only financial burden we have right now is paying your astronomical high specialist fee! What is your specialty, doctor? Is your degree in Insensitive, Stupid, and Assholiness training?”

“I understand your anger, Mr. Jewell, but I know what I’m talking about.”

As far as my parents were concerned, regardless of what diagnosis I was given, they would absolutely never hand me over to the state. Mom believed that I was put into their lives for a reason and it was their responsibility to care for me. She understood that it might not be the option for everyone, but in her heart of hearts she knew she couldn’t live with herself if she did anything other than provide a loving home for me. “No one’s going to rip this family apart. If anyone should touch them they’re going to have to get past Kim first!” Not another word was ever said about giving me away. End of story.

My parents were so frustrated and overwhelmed. They went to at least six doctors over the following year, seeking second, third, and fourth opinions and getting nowhere, or so it seemed. She decided to call Anna Turner. The Turners knew Mom now had a daughter, but Mom didn’t want to worry them with her own concerns. Now it finally occurred to her what a valuable resource they might be. After all, they had been through this whole ordeal with their daughter. Mom had a lot of anxiety about calling them but didn’t know where else to turn. She felt better simply by hearing the lovely calm voice of Anna Turner on the other end of the line. “Hello?”

“Anna, it’s Olga.”

“Oh, how wonderful to hear from you! I haven’t gotten a letter from you in quite some time. Everything all right, dear?”

“Well, truthfully, I’m calling because I need some advice.”

“Oh? About what?”

“It’s about Geri. Anna, I don’t mean to upset you, but I think Geri has cerebral palsy just like Anna. There was a deep silence. “Anna, did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes, of course I did, child. I have been waiting for this call.”

Mom’s eyes welled up with tears. “What do you mean?”

“Ever since we heard about Geri’s traumatic birth, her lack of oxygen, we believed that there might be further consequences down the road, but it wasn’t our place to raise these concerns. If everything had turned out okay, then we would have worried you needlessly. You had to be the one to mention it first.”

“Oh, Anna, it has been a nightmare. She is almost a year old, and she can’t even sit up on her own yet! And the doctors! Last week we were told it was best to give Geri to the state, to have her institutionalized!” Anna wasn’t the least bit surprised, as she was told the same thing 22 years earlier. She asked Mom how my dad felt about the situation. Mom explained that, although he became short-tempered at times, he was not about to give me up. However, they didn’t know where to turn or where the best-qualified help was. “She hasn’t even been officially diagnosed yet,” Mom explained. Anna was a no-nonsense type of person and didn’t waste any time pointing Mom in the right direction.

She suggested that she call the March of Dimes Foundation. Mom was surprised, as she had always thought that their cause was the fight against polio. At one time, that is what the March of Dimes represented. In fact, it was Eddie Cantor who coined the phrase “March of Dimes” as a campaign

theaters to raise money to help the fight against polio. But by 1956, the March of Dimes had expanded its scope to the prevention and treatment of all birth defects. Mom couldn't thank her friend enough and Anna told her that she could call her anytime.

Mom called the March of Dimes Foundation in New York City. The woman she spoke with was supportive and didn't once suggest giving me to the state. She explained how crucial it was for me to be diagnosed as quickly as possible so early intervention and therapy could begin immediately. She gave Mom the names of two very good doctors in New York City and said an appointment was well worth the train or plane ride. When Mom hung up, she realized there was some truth in what the first specialist had said: a trip to NYC wasn't in their budget.

When Mom told Dad about her call to the March of Dimes Foundation and how she was directed to these two wonderful doctors in the city, he seemed a bit overwhelmed. His concern was the same as hers. How were they ever going to afford such a trip? The next day, before Mom could even dial one of the New York numbers, the phone rang. It was Anna, who told Mom that she'd just become aware of a fabulous organization called the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation, UCP for short. Some of the best doctors on the forefront of cerebral palsy research were in southern California, making groundbreaking progress with children. Dr. Margaret Jones and Dr. Kenneth Jacques were the forerunners in the field at UCLA. "You must take Geri to California!" exclaimed Anna. Mom could only laugh. "What is so funny, Olga?"

"Oh Anna, Jack is going to lose his mind!"

"Well, let him lose his mind, dear. You take that baby to California, I tell you!"

"But . . ."

"No buts about it!" Mom knew Anna was right, and whatever the cost, they would find the money somehow.

The time came to tell the boys about the trip to California and that their baby sister might have cerebral palsy. The whole family sat down for dinner, which always began with a prayer, and thanked the Lord for their meals, which tonight was Hungarian goulash and Buffalo wings. Dad told the boys that their mother and sister were going to take a trip to California to see some doctors there who would help their little sister. Fred didn't quite understand. "Is she sick, Daddy?" David punched his younger brother in the arm.

"No, she is not sick," my dad calmly explained, "but she has some kind of a disability." Although David and Fred had already heard the term cerebral palsy one night when they were lying awake, this was one meal of Hungarian goulash and Buffalo wings the boys would remember for a long time to come.

As much as Mom wanted to get on a plane the next morning, she knew it was next to impossible. There was so much to do to prepare for such a huge trip. The first thing she had to do was call Dr. Jacques to schedule an appointment for me. To her surprise, Dr. Jacques did not have an opening until February 14th, several months away! "You must be joking. My daughter may have cerebral palsy," Dr. Jacques' assistant understood Mom's frustration, but unless there was a cancellation, there was really nothing she could do. Mom tried to explain that they were coming all the way from Buffalo, New York.

"Mrs. Jewell, the doctor is seeing children from as far away as Peru. Try not to view this as a delay but rather as a needed time for preparation." How could this woman possibly know what it felt like for the parent of a baby with a disability? To be told that the doctor couldn't see them for at least six months felt like an eternity.

Then she was hit with another thought. “Are there that many babies with cerebral palsy?”

“I’m afraid there are, Mrs. Jewell, as well as a host of many other disabling conditions.”

“What about Dr. Margaret Jones? I was given her name as well.”

“Dr. Jones and Dr. Jacques both have about the same length waiting list. Trust me when I say that there is so much you must accomplish to make this trip as comfortable as you possibly can, for yourself and your child. You must consider where you’ll stay, how much to budget for meals, and after your baby is diagnosed, what therapy programs to begin. Please take this time as a blessing, so that you can plan this trip very carefully, minimizing any surprises.” As much as Mom wanted to scream, this woman’s logic actually did make sense. She thanked my mom for her patience and scheduled my appointment for Valentine’s Day.

The assistant in Los Angeles couldn’t have been more correct; there was so much to do. In fact, in the process, Mom convinced Dad that they should actually *move* the *entire* family to California! So now they were preparing for not one trip, but two. Dad and the boys were going to drive out to California at the end of June, so David and Fred could finish the school year. Fred couldn’t have been happier; he was still young enough to welcome the excitement of change. David, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as thrilled with the idea. He had been looking forward to starting school in the fall with all his friends. He didn’t want to leave his relatives either. Fred tried to convince him how much fun California would be, but there was little that would change this boy’s mind. In a way, David left a part of his heart in Buffalo (buried under six feet of snow). This move to California was definitely a sacrifice for his baby sister, but he loved me with all of his heart.

In any case, everyone was going to California, just like Lucy and Ricky. Everything was falling into place, and, as fate would have it, Mom’s niece, Diana, had just moved out to California with her newlywed husband, Charlie. Mom asked Diana if she could stay with her for about three months. Diana was thrilled! She missed her relatives after leaving Buffalo. Charlie was in the air force, stationed at Edwards Air Force Base in Lancaster, California. “Aunt Olga, we live in the desert! It’s the complete opposite of Buffalo. I’m talking tumbleweeds, cacti, and sand!” Even though Lancaster seemed like another world altogether, it is actually only about 40 miles north of Los Angeles.

It worked out perfectly for everyone, and my parents couldn’t express their gratitude enough for Charlie and Diana’s willingness to open their home to them. It relieved a lot of stress, knowing that we had a place to stay temporarily. Mom still kept up her steno pad entries that she’d been recording since I came home from the hospital, although now she also kept adding to a checklist of things that needed to be done for the *big* trip to California.

Dad realized that he was probably going to have to walk away from his job security at DuPont. He had been steadily moving up the ladder of job positions; some coworkers even believed that had my father stayed with DuPont, he would have become the CEO. So, in essence, everyone in my family made sacrifices for me. My dad not only was forced to start over for himself, but for his entire family of five. The process of finding employment in California, giving up a home that he had purchased through his G.I. Bill loan, and uprooting every conceivable seed that had been planted was quite an undertaking!

They decided to put their home on the market, even though they would probably take a loss on the sale. They didn’t have a lot of equity in it, and there was no longer the beautiful maple tree in the center of the lawn. In fact, they found out very quickly that it was too costly to remove the tree altogether, as its roots snarled all over the entire property. The FOR SALE sign was posted next to the huge tree stump, so my mom stuck a potted plant on the stump. (I’m sure *no one* noticed the tree after

that, Mom.) There was tremendous stress in the Jewell household, but there was also much hope and anticipation.

We were booked on Pan Am Airlines and arrived in California a couple of days before our appointment with Dr. Jacques. It was a long trip that included a layover in Chicago, with us finally landing in Los Angeles around midnight. Diana and Charlie were at the airport to greet us. I actually slept for the entire car ride from the airport to Lancaster. Diana mentioned what a wonderful, good baby I was. Mom laughed, saying, "Most of the time." She explained that I was probably just coming down from a sugar rush, that all I had to eat on the plane were cherry Life Savers. How symbolic that the cherry Life Savers kept my little tummy filled on this lifesaving trip across the country . . . especially considering that what would follow wasn't always going to be a bowl full of cherries.

Mom and Diana stayed up for a while visiting. Diana was thrilled to have her Aunt Olga staying with her. There were not that many neighbors, unless you counted all the jackrabbits that roamed freely. The desert was beautiful though, and as Mom passed the large bay window, she couldn't help but notice the dark sky filled with what looked like a hundred stars. "Wow! Are there always this many stars in the sky?"

Diana explained that it was one of the most mesmerizing and calming aspects of the desert, seeing all the cosmic stars twinkling on a clear night. "You might want to focus on one and make a wish," she said. Mom searched for the brightest star she could see that night and wished for her daughter to get the best possible care she could have. In a way, I already had.

The next morning, Mom carried me into the kitchen where Diana had prepared breakfast for us. Diana couldn't help but notice that I couldn't hold my head up very well. It was obvious to her that even though I was a little past 18 months old, in some ways I was developmentally at the age of six months. Mom explained that yes, I was delayed, but that with the right doctors and therapies, I would catch up. Like most people, Diana had never heard of cerebral palsy before and hadn't quite known what to expect. Frankly, there is no way to totally prepare for seeing an 18-month-old baby developmentally equivalent to a six-month-old. Diana couldn't hide her pain at seeing my head still bobbing like an infant's.

Mom had grown accustomed to receiving shocked responses from family members, friends, and even total strangers. But sometimes, my sunny smile actually put others at ease instantly. In the face of everything, I was a happy baby. This was something that inspired Mom daily. The strong front that Mom showed the world was genuine, but she was only human, and sometimes she did cry herself to sleep, praying that God would keep showing her the way. It was now February 12, with my long-anticipated doctor appointment two days away. Charlie had arranged to take the day off so he could drive us there himself.

It was a clear windy morning in the desert that day. The sand swirled, and tumbleweed sometimes crossed our path, but there were no major delays. The beautiful scenic drive against the backdrop of the purple sky took a little more than an hour. Finding a parking space proved somewhat challenging, although it was free — unlike in medical parking structures today, which demand a week's salary for an hour's stay.

When we entered Dr. Jacques' waiting room, there were at least three other children who hadn't been seen yet. We signed in and waited. Finally, just before noon, my name was called. Dr. Kenneth Jacques was a soft-spoken man in his mid-forties. He took his time to ask a lot of questions. He finally said the words that Mom had been waiting to hear, "Geraldine definitely has cerebral palsy. In fact, if you don't mind, I would like to officially diagnose her at a symposium later on this afternoon."

UCLA.”

The symposium was attended by 300 medical students. At 2:30 p.m. I sat on top of a table, strapped in a little chair, and showed all the classic symptoms of cerebral palsy. I was diagnosed before an attentive audience — that was my first stage appearance. I was unaware of the seriousness of my first performance and pretty much laughed and giggled the entire time, to the delight of my audience. I didn't get a standing ovation, but there was applause as Dr. Jacques acknowledged Mom's willingness to have me diagnosed for them that afternoon. I'm sure I mistook the applause for my own performance, and if I could have taken a bow, I'm sure I would have.

I was diagnosed with having a combination of athetoid, ataxia, and spastic cerebral palsy. Even though Mom had suspected this was the case all along, it was nevertheless painful to hear it so clearly. These words carried a lot of weight; I now had a label. There was a sense of relief that I was finally diagnosed, but there was also a sharp pang. There were so many questions with no immediate answers. Would I develop speech soon? Would I be able to sit up on my own? Would I learn how to walk? All these questions and many others raced through Mom's mind. Dr. Jacques had the same answer for all of them: “We will have to wait and see.”

The fact that I was diagnosed so young was a blessing. It gave me a gigantic head start in getting the intervention and therapies that I would inevitably need throughout my lifetime. The earlier the issues are addressed, the more likely they can be worked with. Some of us will never have speech or be able to walk because of the extent of the injury to the brain. But even in these cases, early intervention will still make a difference. My parents always said that if they had to do it again, they would. Diagnosis was just the beginning of a long process that was challenging every step of the way. No family can ever remain the same after having a “special needs” child. The entire family dynamic changes forever.

Diagnosis is just the beginning. Once the reality sets in, there is the heartbreak that every parent must feel after discovering that their baby will never be normal. There is the unspoken guilt that transpires where the parents believe it is somehow their fault the child has a disability. If there are siblings involved, there is even more guilt to contend with. Does the child with the disability pick up on the guilt as well? I think so, but I also believe that with so much focus revolving around the physical achievement, however big or small, becomes a priority over emotional developments that inadvertently are put on the back burner.

After my stage debut at UCLA, Mom took me to Los Angeles twice a week to have physical and occupational therapy. We would board the train to L.A. in Lancaster at 6 a.m. every Tuesday and Thursday. Then we'd catch a cab to UCLA. Mom always stayed with the therapists, observing and learning how she could assist me. Each day I made a little more progress in developing my motor skills. I worked hard, fighting against the spastic and involuntary movements that oftentimes kept me awake at night. Falling asleep was never something that came easily to me. My right arm would always be flinging from one position to another, as if it had a mind of its own. No matter how tired I was, my arm was “awake.” This was challenging because I worked so hard and tired quickly.

The therapy kept both Mom and me busy, and the excitement that our family would be back together again very soon kept us going.

Chapter Two

A New Life Out West

The boys were out of school, and the day had finally arrived for them to leave on their *big* trip across the country. Dad, my Uncle Ed, the boys, and Kim all piled into Dad's 1955 black two-door Chevrolet Handyman station wagon. Luggage was piled sky-high on top, with the rest of their belongings being transported by a moving truck. Our home with the maple tree stump finally sold; everyone was ready to join Mom and me in California. Dad and Ed took turns driving, enjoying the scenic trek across the country. Most nights they slept in the car or camped out, although a couple of nights they stayed at a YMCA. My brothers collected various two-cent postcards, capturing all the landmarks they traveled through in the past.

They saw the Great Lakes, the Ozarks, and pretty much all of the old famous Route 60. My brothers got a kick out of seeing real Native American reservations and tepees. The average price of gasoline in 1958 was 14 to 19 cents per gallon. The trip captured a slice of Americana when life was still considered as simple and wholesome as apple pie. David insists that they even traveled through a small town that looked exactly like Mayberry! He remembers the pop machines, being able to get a cold cream soda for a nickel, and Black Jack gum for four cents. My brothers missed Mom and me, but this cross-country trek was so much fun, they weren't in the greatest hurry to get to Lancaster.

After eight days of zigzagging across the country, the guys finally reached the California border. In about five hours, they would be arriving in Lancaster. It was a beautiful day but very windy. When the Santa Ana winds are not whipping up some firestorm disaster, there is a rare beauty to the smell and feel of these winds. I always loved them as a kid. Even when their strength would knock me off balance, I laughed and tried to get back up again. Kim didn't quite know what to make of them. She stuck her head out the car's back window and barked at the invisible force. When they pulled into a service station about 20 miles south of Lancaster, my brothers walked Kim so she could pee, but she barked at the wind the entire time. Dad was hoping Kim would eventually calm down, but he also knew that this was a whole new experience for her, and that it may take her a while to get used to the climate. He had to get used to it as well; I'm sure that deep in his psyche, he felt like barking once in a while too!

The last 20 miles into Lancaster reminded Fred of the Old West, and he kept expecting to see some cowboys and Indians. David kind of scoffed at his little brother's excitement. "There were probably real cowboys and Indians over a hundred years ago! But the only cowboys and Indians we're going to see out here are actors!" At the time, Fess Parker's *Davy Crockett* was the craze for millions of kids across America, and Fred had a raccoon tail hat. As they drove into Palmdale-Lancaster, the 103-degree heat was scorching. They pulled into Charlie and Diana's small driveway, lined with boulders and cactus plants, and the front door flung open. They were greeted by everyone. There were a lot of hugs, kisses, and tears. My mom held me high in her arms so I wouldn't get trampled. Diana grabbed me so Mom could hug my brothers.

The next morning, Diana and Mom were up early. Dad knew that he needed to be educated more about my therapy, so he drove Mom and me to UCLA to see for himself what I was doing. Dad was truly amazed at how hard I worked. He also noticed the other children with cerebral palsy who were

receiving therapy as well. It actually brought tears to his eyes, seeing these beautiful, innocent babies struggling so hard, while their bodies seemed to have no navigation. How could God allow such pain?

Even my father's strong John Wayne persona couldn't belie his sadness. As he looked closer, though, he became aware of something that his own pain hadn't previously allowed him to see. Through the entire struggle, these children were not unhappy, especially me. I was cheerful, cooing and giggling with joy that my daddy was there watching me. From a very early age, I was a people pleaser, wanting to perform my best and make others proud of my accomplishments. Like most children, my daddy's approval meant the world to me, and it was always something I strived for.

For the next month, Dad diligently sought work, filling out one application after another. The boys and Kim enjoyed playing in the desert, building forts out of small boulders, scraps of wood, and tumbleweed. The tiny house in Lancaster was a bit cramped, and we soon moved to Long Beach. Dad managed to secure a temporary job as a cook at one of the hotels in downtown L.A. He was a good cook, and even though it was hardly what he envisioned himself doing, he knew he had a responsibility to provide for his family. He was hired because he had been a cook during his tour of duty in the navy. However, he was not a short-order cook for long; he knew this job wasn't his true calling.

Soon we got some very exciting news. On August 1, there was an opening in a very progressive school for children with cerebral palsy. I was immediately accepted into the program, which was taught by Ms. Hazel Olds and was in Long Beach. I was finally going to get aggressive therapy five days a week, along with intensive academic schooling provided by Ms. Olds. Dad managed to find a small two-bedroom apartment on Ohio Street. Everyone was getting ready to make the next big move except Kim. One night, as Diana came into the house, Kim ran out without her leash. Diana called her name but Kim was in sheer delight in what I'm sure she perceived as blissful freedom.

Unfortunately, Kim went from a state of sheer delight into a state of absolute blindness from the fast approaching headlights of a small truck. Diana was horrified when the vehicle, unable to stop, struck Kim, and hoped against all hope that Kim would survive her severe injuries. My dad carried Kim home, and she died in his arms as tears streamed down my father's cheeks. He knew how devastated everyone was going to be and felt powerless in not being able to save her. Everyone was heartbroken at losing our beloved Kim. Even I was aware of the loss. I had learned to steady my right arm by grasping onto Kim's ear. Kim just moved with me, never pulling away. Even though I was still pretty much nonverbal, David swears that he heard me say, "Where's Kim?"

The move to Long Beach went very smoothly. Everyone welcomed the much needed space and privacy. Besides, Diana had found out that she was pregnant with their first child, my sweet cousin Juliana. Long Beach came just in the nick of time. The little apartment with a round, royal blue stained-glass window in the hallway was a new beginning.

I started attending school with Ms. Olds. The school didn't have any bus transportation, and Mom hadn't applied for a driver's license in California yet. She usually wasn't one to be afraid of anything, but driving in California terrified Mom. So, as it was, I took a cab to and from school. It wasn't exactly a limo, but it might as well have been. I wouldn't have known the difference. Ms. Olds proved to be the greatest influence in my life. She did not believe in babying toddlers just because we had cerebral palsy; she firmly believed that we had to be pushed and had to work hard. If we were spoiled, we would only become lazy and wouldn't have the tools to overcome as much as we could otherwise. She was a drill sergeant, and her school was boot camp.

Hazel Olds was way ahead of her time. She made up her mind to build the strongest possible

foundation she could for the first four or five years of our schooling, because after that it was out of her hands. Some parents pulled their children out of her program because they felt Ms. Olds was too hard on her pupils. Mom held the same standard as Ms. Olds, so I was never pulled out, even when I threw an occasional temper tantrum. Five days a week, from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon, I received physical, occupational, and speech therapy and was provided a huge head start academically as well. I loved learning new things and looked forward to going to school each morning. Hazel commented that because I accomplished everything so quickly, she actually had a hard time keeping up with *me*. For the most part, I had a pretty good attitude, except I hated having to use the standing table. It was a wooden work table that I was locked into, forcing me into the standing position. My legs wanted to fly out in every direction, which made standing up difficult. Even when I was harnessed into the sitting chair, my feet were buckled down for the same reason.

Dr. Jacques wanted me to wear braces all the way up my legs, but Mom wouldn't allow that. She wouldn't even compromise with the shorter braces that only went as high as below the knees. Mom was right on the mark with most things regarding my development, but I have always felt she made a mistake here. Had I been allowed to wear the lower leg braces, I would have walked straight overall. I think my mom's reasoning was twofold. She did not want me to become "brace dependent" and subconsciously she didn't want me to look even more disabled than I was.

Shortly after my second birthday, I was chosen as a poster child for AID, which was an umbrella organization that raised funds for such charities as the Crippled Children's Society, United Cerebral Palsy, and the March of Dimes Foundation (to name a few). From September through December, my picture was in every post office across the nation. In 1958, I was the Shirley Temple of handicapped children. There were several local newspaper articles that featured me and all the wonderful things that were being done for children like me, who went to Ms. Hazel Olds's preschool. Of course, these spots had no monetary value but were another early sign of my future in the public eye. I seemed destined from the very start to become an entertainer.

I hardly led the life of a child star, but there were some psychological similarities between child stars and children with special needs. Child stars tend to view themselves as special, set apart from other children. Special needs children deal with very much the same thing, only they don't get paid for being different. Instead of going to the studio every day and having Louis B. Mayer as a boss, I went to my special school every day and had Ms. Hazel B. Olds as my boss. While child stars were learning their lines, I was learning to walk.

In 1960 I could finally walk by myself. I had spent the last two years getting extensive therapy and schooling from Ms. Olds. By mastering the parallel bars and orthopedic walker, I graduated from the crummy standing table. I only had to wear a protective brown leather and foam helmet, similar to a boxing helmet, for protection.

Home life at this time was good, except that Mom knew intuitively that Dad had to find a job that was more secure, higher paying, and more suitable for his ability and talent. When Dad was a teenager in Buffalo, he used to hang out at the police station and made friends with many of the local officers. At that time, they allowed teenagers to ride along in their patrol cars, giving them a window into and experience the life of a police officer. Dad had dreamed about having such a career, but when he returned from serving in the Second World War, he was married, in love with my mom, and had two small boys to think about. For Dad, being a police officer was always a pipe dream.

One morning, Mom showed him an ad in the paper for a job at West-minster Memorial Park and Cemetery.

“What do I know about the cemetery business?”

“Jack, with that Jewell charm and your dashing good looks, you are a born salesman!” Going door to door selling plots and caskets? My dad was aghast at such a profession! That is . . . until he saw how much the starting pay was: \$2.25 per hour! Besides, their fourth child was due in four months. My dad knew nothing about the cemetery business, but his charm always got him a long way. After his interview at the cemetery, he was hired.

By this time, the tiny two-bedroom apartment was getting too small. We had acquired two cats, Gunsmoke and Maverick; my brothers were getting bigger; and then my little sister, Gloria Elaine Jewell, was born. We moved to Garden Grove, which was closer to where my dad worked in Westminster. It was a brand new housing development, and we got to see our new two-story, five-bedroom home being built from the ground up. From my perspective, it was like moving into a mansion. The move was a milestone for my parents, who were full of pride and excitement at showing off their new home. Every curtain and bedspread was made by my mom. In fact, until I was in the third grade, Mom made most of the dresses I wore to school.

One of the most exciting things we experienced in moving to Garden Grove was that there were frequent air shows nearby, put on by the Air Force Blue Angels. We used to sit out on the lawn and watch with awe as the pilots did their magic in the sky. Granted, it was loud, but it never bothered me since I was hearing impaired. However, we did have to tearfully find new homes for Gunsmoke and Maverick because every time the planes flew overhead, both cats would be cowering under someone's bed. I guess there are pros and cons to everything. We gained some fabulous air shows but lost our two kitties. It's not like we could have gone to the air force and said, “Cut that out, you're scaring our cats!”

Chapter Three

Changes, Challenges, and Choices

Nineteen sixty-one was an exciting year. John F. Kennedy was voted into office, which was every Catholic's dream, except my father's, as he was a staunch Republican. We had just moved into our brand new home in Garden Grove, and Dad was thriving in the cemetery business. (Turns out, death is a big business!) My brothers were both in high school, and after I graduated from Hazel Olds program, I was attending school in Santa Ana. At the time, Carl Harvey Elementary was the only school in Orange County that catered to children with special needs. The school was three hours away, so I was the first child to be picked up in the morning, at 6 a.m., and the last child to be dropped off. At age seven, I literally spent as much time on the bus as I did in school — six hours on the bus, six hours in class. Luckily, for two of the three years of my extensive bus travel, I had a sympathetic driver, Mrs. Kay Arden. Kay felt bad that I had to spend so many hours on the bus. After all the other children were dropped off, she always stopped and bought me a cookie and carton of milk. It was our little shared secret.

I missed Ms. Olds but was making new friends at Carl Harvey. My closest friend was Christine Kellogg. Christine had polio and was in a body brace. She wore full leg braces, a torso brace, and a neck brace. Talk about heavy metal! Many special needs children are very bright. Christine was intellectually gifted, and this is what sparked our friendship. Christine and I were at the top of our class academically, so the one thing we both hated was taking naps after lunch. We weren't tired, and we felt naps were a waste of time. Our wish was granted, and while our classmates were resting, Christine and I got to sit out in the hall doing schoolwork together.

There were many children in my school that had learning disabilities as well. So, in each classroom there were always many levels of development going on simultaneously. There were 12 or 13 children per classroom. Those who did not have learning disabilities tended to gravitate toward one another and vice versa. Of course, as in any group of children, there was a pecking order. Previously, I had only been exposed to children with cerebral palsy, and now I was going to school with children who had polio, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, and autism. I always felt that this was one of the gifts of being in special education: you developed empathy and appreciation for the diversity of all children.

At home on the weekends, I enjoyed playing with my new baby sister, Gloria. I loved her — that was a given — but I was also jealous of her. I had been the baby of the family for so long and now someone had taken my place. I knew that while I was at school, Gloria had my mom's undivided attention. My envy caused me to act out from time to time. One time in particular landed me in very hot water. While Gloria was napping, I climbed into the crib with her, with a jar of A&D ointment in tow. I covered the whole top of Gloria's head with it. She looked like one little greaseball with curls. Hiding the evidence, I got out of the crib, washed my hands, and went back into the bedroom to look at my greasy little sister. I called Mom, pretending to be *shocked* at what Gloria had done to *herself!* The only thing that shocked Mom was that I could have been so devious. I was punished by having to kneel in the corner (well, at least she didn't lock me in Ms. Olds's old standing table). Mom knew that I was jealous, but she told me that I had to learn to deal with my feelings, just like all children do.

My third and last year (1964) at Carl Harvey was very painful for many reasons. Dad couldn't afford

the mortgage on our big home in Garden Grove. David was not going to graduate from high school and he was moving out at age 17, and I was going to have to say goodbye to my best friend, Christine Kellogg. It was a lot of change in one year, and nobody likes change. We moved to Fullerton, putting me in another school district. My new special education school was Woodcrest. Initially I didn't like going to Woodcrest nearly as much as I enjoyed Carl Harvey, but I soon made new friends and settled into the new environment. However, academically Woodcrest never even came close to the program of Carl Harvey.

The first time my parents took Gloria (who was then six) and me to see our new home in Fullerton we were both disappointed. We had just come from a two-story five bedroom *mansion* and we were moving into a small three-bedroom one-story fixer-upper. We didn't understand why we had to move there; the Jewell finances were never discussed in front of us kids. The only thing that remotely put any kind of a smile on my face was the big orange tree in our new backyard. "Wow, we have our own oranges!"

Not only did we move into a smaller home, but David was moving away to Seattle, Washington. David and Dad never did see eye to eye and fought often. I think in many ways my brother was too sensitive for my dad's macho expectations. David loved to draw, act in plays, and sing. Dad wanted him to play football and box. In the end, after David left home, he simply joined the army. As horrible as this choice was during the Vietnam War era, I believe that unconsciously he was hoping this would finally make my dad proud of him. David and I were so close that it crushed me to watch my oldest brother leave.

I was also breaking David's heart, holding onto his leg, begging him not to go. "Geri, stop it . . . I have to go. I can't live under the same roof with him!" I had known this for years, but I couldn't help feeling that he was abandoning *me*. "You still have Fred and Gloria. Stop being a baby!" I tried to be strong, but David made my world special in many ways, like letting me ride on his handlebars to the fairgrounds in Long Beach, playing all kinds of games with me, and watching television together on Friday nights, eating popcorn. He took the training wheels off my bike when Dad wouldn't allow and taught me how to ride without them. He even created a magical world of imaginary people who lived under the house. There was the Great Pumpkin, Big George, Zelda the Good Witch, Ichabod, and the Blue Fairy, who lived in David's sapphire ring. I told David that if he left, all the mystical people would be gone, too. "Geri, you know that was a game," he replied. On some level I knew that, but these games filled a gnawing sense of loneliness that I felt. I didn't have any friends in our neighborhood, as I was ridiculed and mimicked by most kids. If the magical people left with David, who would be my companions when Gloria or Fred were off with their friends?

Truthfully, my best friend in the world was Gloria. Gloria loved me, and from the time she was able she looked out for me. She was three years younger, and had friends of her own, but quite often she allowed me to tag along with her friends. Gloria accepted me unconditionally, even though I did things that were kind of mean. Once, at Disneyland, Gloria was afraid of the Dumbo ride, but I was controlling the car and made it go really high while Gloria screamed for me to bring Dumbo down. Ah, what power I had! Even though I was not always sensitive to Gloria being a wimp, she was almost always sensitive to me. She knew that I experienced the world differently and always tried to be sensitive to those differences. For example, when we played school with our dolls, we always played "special ed." All our dolls had to have one disability or another. We crafted wheelchairs out of shoe boxes and leg braces out of Popsicle sticks and elastic hair bands. A couple of dolls were made blind by pushing their eyeballs deep into the sockets and coloring over them with crayons.

I had tremendous talent in making elaborate tents in the backyard with old blankets, clothespins, and chairs. When Gloria wasn't there to play in the tents with me, I often played by myself. One game used to play was "Vietnam." I was totally unaware of the true reality of 'Nam; I was only trying to imagine where my brother David was. I had a wild imagination and was able to shut out emotional pain by retreating into a world of make-believe friends.

Mom thoroughly enjoyed her children and was forever thinking of creative ways to make our memories special. For example, one Christmas Eve while Gloria and I were asleep — not dreaming of sugar plums but rather Hostess Cupcakes, Twinkies, and Ding Dongs — Mom and Fred were up late with a Super 8 camera "filming" Santa Claus to prove to Gloria and me that he was real. Yes, Grandma, there is a Santa Claus! In Mom's film version, Saint Nick was smoke! That was how he got down the chimney. When the film was developed, Gloria and I watched in awe as the magical smoke swirled around the Christmas tree, while gifts piled higher and higher. The film certainly didn't use high-tech special effects, just Mom off camera, smoking many cigarettes in front of a fan, blowing the smoke into whimsical circles toward the tree. Fred operated the camera, turning it on and off, as one more gift was placed under the tree. This convinced me there was a Santa Claus . . . for longer than I care to admit.

What changed for me psychologically as I got a little older was that I became more acutely aware of how different I was from other children, and I began to compare myself unrealistically to Gloria. I was always watching Gloria with scrutiny, because in my mind, Gloria was normal and I was not. Gloria did nothing herself to perpetuate my low self-esteem; she couldn't have been a more loving sister. But she wasn't teased because of a disability.

After we moved to Fullerton, one of the things that changed for the worse was that the neighborhood kids harassed me almost daily. They mimicked my movements and called me "retard" and "spaz." Their cruelty ate at me. Then, of course, there were adults who reinforced my feelings of shame. I can't believe that the ignorance and stupidity of an adult can be more harmful and influential than anything another child could do. Because I was still being bussed to another school district, there was again no social setting for building friendships in my own neighborhood. I tried becoming friends with Katherine, a girl who lived down the street from me. We played together once in a while, and I thought I had a best friend like Gloria had in her friend, Janet Tokarz. However, Katherine told me that her mom didn't approve of her playing with me, and if she were caught, she'd get in trouble. One day her mother came storming out of the house, grabbed Katherine, and told her right in front of me that she couldn't play with me. Katherine was torn and could only react with sadness.

After pushing Katherine inside, her mother came back outside and shouted at me, "I told you not to play with my children! Do not play with Katherine anymore! I don't want you touching our property. Go find kids like yourself to play with!" I was absolutely crushed and wished so badly that I could be normal like Gloria. However, I rarely vocalized my sadness because I knew deep down that nobody could do anything about it. It was my shame, and I would find ways to cope. Luckily, my family tried to make my life as normal as they could. Mom ensured that I had a happy childhood and never treated me any differently than she did Gloria. Dad could be a strict disciplinarian, but he adored his little girls, taking us to the beach or the public pool, bike riding, even kite flying. While in Fullerton, we acquired another German shepherd, Kelly, who enjoyed walking to the park with us and on hot summer nights we'd sometimes take her along to Fosters Freeze for ice cream. Both Gloria and I loved it when we got to do these things with our daddy.

Meanwhile, Dad wasn't getting the promotions that his boss had promised him, so Mom was forced

to go to work, at the post office as a letter carrier, to supplement Dad's income. Sometimes when Mom had to work on a Saturday, Fred would babysit, and it was a treat when he would take us to 3 Flavors, the ice cream parlor where he worked. Gloria would agree that we had the best brothers in the whole world. But more than anything else, we loved it when Dad took us to work — the cemetery.

I loved playing the organ in the chapel, or walking around the graveyard, reading all the names on the tombstones, wondering what kind of lives these people led and how they had died. I was especially intrigued by the children who had died so young. At school, a lot of my classmates had died, and I mistakenly believed that if you had a disability, you were going to die young. It didn't bother me too much though, because the pat answer that I always got when one of my friends had died was that they were very special to God, and He wanted to bring them back to Heaven. Secretly I was always hoping that I was special enough for God to want to take me back too, as I didn't fully grasp the concept that death was not degenerative, and that my lifespan would not be affected by it. Mom used to get so upset whenever she had to break the news to me that one of my classmates had died, but I often ended up comforting her, repeating what I had been told, that it was okay because they were with God now.

One particular Saturday, Dad had told me that I could not play the organ in the chapel, that I had to stay in his office and color. When asked why, he told me that there was an inspection going on, and he didn't want any kids wandering around. It was true, but he failed to mention that there was also a funeral service taking place in the chapel. Thinking I could dodge the inspectors, I sneaked into the chapel, assuming no one would even notice me. Instead of entering from the front, I went in through a back stairway in the back, which led directly to the pump organ in the foyer. Once inside, I could play to my heart's content, and nobody would ever know.

However, because of my hearing loss, I was oblivious to the funeral service taking place below so I turned on the organ and started playing one of my favorite songs, "Home on the Range." The mourners were shocked by the music that filled the room from above, and someone finally yelled loud enough to get me to look down. As soon as I realized what I'd done, I knew that I had to get out of there *fast*. I ran down the stairs as quickly as I could and didn't stop until I made it to Dad's office. I sat down at his desk with my coloring book and crayons and pretended I'd been there the whole time. Unfortunately, "Home on the Range" was one of five songs I knew how to play, so he knew the ghostly organist had been me. I was banned from the chapel for a month.

Gloria loved going to work with Dad, too. The day before Veterans Day and Memorial Day, she helped him put flags on the graves of persons who served in the military. One Christmas, my sister and I noticed that some graves had a lot of flowers, wreaths, even small Christmas trees, while other graves had nothing. We began moving stuff around, spreading the decorations more evenly among those graves that seemed forgotten. It was a thoughtful gesture, but Dad said we had to put them back the way they were, that it wasn't for us to be the "Robin Hoods" of the cemetery.

However I felt about Fullerton, it would be my home for the next 13 years. I was able to make some new friends at Woodcrest, but I just didn't know how to make friends in my own neighborhood with kids my own age. There was one boy down the street, Johnny de Vaux, who was my age, and was always sweet. In fact, he rescued me more than once from bullies who were harassing me. For different reasons, we shared a commonality of being misfits. His parents were divorced, and back then, divorce was frowned upon, and kids had to deal with ridicule and prejudice. Had Johnny been a girl, we probably would have played together, but, nevertheless, he always looked out for me.

In truth, I was a tomboy and felt more comfortable playing with the boys. At school, I could always be found on the playground with the boys. I never felt comfortable being a girl. From as far back as

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