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My Indian Childhood in Oklahoma

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I STILL HAVE VIVID MEMORIES OF GROWING UP AMONG MY INDIAN RELATIVES IN OKLAHOMA. In the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, before I was born, the state of Oklahoma had started removing the Native Americans from the reservations. The Government had built several blocks of homes for them, all one-bedroom, and my father, who was part Comanche and part Creek, qualified for one of them. We lived there in a community of Comanche, Apache and Kiowa in Oklahoma City.

However, I spent much of my childhood visiting my grandparents, who lived out in the country on a farm.

I can still remember my Great Grandmother Minnie, even though she died when I was a child. I can remember her long braided hair and how much she looked like the other Indian women in my neighborhood.

My grandparents had much to do with the training and character building of their grandchildren. My oldest brother Roy and I, often with our cousins Susan and Janine, visited them on weekends to help with the farm work. Grandma Ruby Nell used to give each of us a bucket and sent us into the orchard to pick apples, peaches, pears and cherries, always with strict instructions not eat any of the cherries. After filling our buckets, we took them to her to wash and remove the stems.

Of course, we usually ate some cherries. When Grandma Ruby Nell asked us if we had, Roy always said “no,” but she knew he was lying. She would then lead us out into the front yard and tell us to break a switch off the bush. If we selected a short, thin switch, she would walk out herself, choose a longer, thicker one, and switch us with it. It took us a year or two to figure out how she always knew we were lying. You see, the house had no indoor plumbing, no bathroom with mirrors, just an outhouse.

After the new, modern bathroom was put in later, we could go inside, look in the mirror, and see the cherry stains all around our mouths!

Grandmother Ruby Nell taught me many practical lessons: cooking, canning and sewing. Since she happened to be my Sunday School teacher, she also made sure I learned my Bible verses. Because I had trouble learning to read—I would see the words all run together on the page—she developed a practical way of teaching me. She always had green beans from the garden for me to snap with her in the evening. We would sit on the front porch swing, and she would say, “Repeat after me: ‘The Lord is my Shepherd.’” Then she would have me snap each end of the green bean. Then the next line: “I shall not want,” and I would snap each end of another green bean. We would continue until I knew all the lines, and got the green beans snapped at the same time.

My grandpas were also important in my life. After my parents divorced, when I was eight, Grandpa Wall came to live with us. He worked with my father’s dad, who had his own carpentry business. It was what every hyperactive girl needed, two grandfathers paying attention to her. They would often take Roy and me to work on Saturdays. I learned to sand baseboards and to use a hammer.

Grandpa Wall used to tell me, “If someone is willing to teach you something, you should learn it. You never know down the road of life when you might be able to use it.” Both grandfathers told me that they didn’t care what I did for a living when I grew up. I could be a dishwasher in a restaurant if I wanted to, but I must make sure to be the best dishwasher they had. “If not,” they said, “the pay check doesn’t belong to you.”
The Hem
Susan Blick

The fabric of a life laid flat
Pattern pinned then trimmed by cookie cutter
Edges raw and unrefined, folded in
Crisply pressed with a hot iron
And stitched together in latest fashion.
I have been sewn nice and neat
And stitched together in latest fashion.
The fabric of a life laid flat
Susan Blick

(From page 19)

I said to myself, “Now I will be kicked out of beauty college and will have to pay for
here for two years and can’t cut hair this good. From now on you will be doing hair cuts
me eighteen dollars! These are new and were supposed to last for two whole years!”
walked by, stopped, grabbed my scissors and comb, and screamed, “Your Mother owes
a short page boy haircut, not at all what Mrs. Haul expected. As I finished it, Mrs. Haul
inch all over the head. She planned for us to trim just a small bit of the long hair.
explained how to comb and section off the hair with hair clips and trim each section a half
each one of us in front of a station with a new mannequin head bolted on it. She then
long, black hair. The mannequin heads were new that year. Our teacher, Mrs. Haul, placed
had helped my brother Roy work on his car. However, Southeast High had a policy
college classes. My mother enrolled me. I really wanted to take auto shop because I
sack of sugar a large block of chocolate, powdered eggs, one pound of butter and a jar
of honey. Well, it comes to seven dollars, “ she said. “Which is better, one dollar and fifty
cents an hour or seven dollar’s worth of groceries?” I never complained again!

As I started into the eleventh grade in 1970, our school offered beauty college classes. My mother enrolled me. I really wanted to take auto shop because I had helped my brother Roy work on his car. However, Southeast High had a policy that, although both girls and boys could take beauty college classes, auto shop was only for boys.
The first haircut I did in beauty college was on a mannequin head with very
long, black hair. The mannequin heads were new that year. Our teacher, Mrs. Haul, placed each one of us in front of a station with a new mannequin head bolted on it. She then explained how to comb and section off the hair with hair clips and trim each section a half inch all over the head. She planned for us to trim just a small bit of the long hair.
I began sectioning and cutting, sectioning and cutting. I ended up giving a
short page boy haircut, not at all what Mrs. Haul expected. As I finished it, Mrs. Haul
walked by, stopped, grabbed my scissors and comb, and screamed, “Your Mother owes me eighteen dollars! These are new and were supposed to last for two whole years!”

That year marked a major turning point in my life. My husband and I soon
left Oklahoma. My old days with my Indian relatives were behind me, but I missed them.
In the fall of 1970, Mr. Barnes got me my first job, at The Country Club Barber Shop, owned by a country western singer named Conway Twitty. I have to say I didn’t like working in a barber shop at all. I did, however, meet an interesting man whom I introduced to my single mom. They have been married now for thirty-some years.

The Handwriting
Molly Boyce

Handwriting
Molly Boyce

Risky business, this putting words to paper. Red blobs of throbbing ink, a stain against
Your soul, proof indelible of conscious intellect
And emotional barometer for all to gauge.
Yet, I cannot keep this pen contained.

and helping me teach the second-year girl.” And that’s exactly what I did. Every once
in a while a neighborhood woman would bring me a picture of a hairstyle, and I had to
teach the whole class how to cut hair by looking at a picture.

Mrs. Haul said I was a natural born hairstylist, just like her. She told me
I would make a good instructor for a beauty college, and she wrote a letter to the well-known Paul Barnes, who had written the book Cosmetology, used by the beauty college. Mrs. Haul asked him to let me into his college in Oklahoma City, and soon I was enrolled. I was successful in my studies and graduated with a diploma, largely
through the help of Paul Barnes, who received permission from the State of Oklahoma
to administer the manicuring test to me orally because of my vision impairment. I missed
only one question out of one hundred and twenty five.

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Soon my life took a new turn. Conway Twitty owned a number of
businesses in Oklahoma City, including a boat business named Twitty Boats, a restaurant
named Twitty Burgers, and a night club called the George Girl’s Lounge. His parents
leased the lounge. When I quit my job at the barber shop, my mother thought I could
work at the George Girl’s Lounge. She wanted me to tend bar and go-go dance. The
lounge had a stage, and disco was really in at that time.

You might wonder if encouraging me to work at the lounge was a good idea, but my mother knew what she was doing. You see, I was very shy and very small. I weighed about ninety pounds. I wondered who would want to watch me dance.
Furthermore, I was not a good dancer and did not want to be. My mother would say
I had a lot of rhythm, but did not know what to do with it. My parents then hired a professional go-go dancer to teach me. It worked. I became an excellent dancer, gained
confidence and danced at the lounge for six months. My mother was there to watch me.

I worked one night with a new bartender they had hired, a pre-med student
at OU, in Norman. He wanted to work weekends only. We worked together for only
three months on weekends and were married in 1971.

That year marked a major turning point in my life. My husband and I soon
left Oklahoma. My old days with my Indian relatives were behind me, but I missed them.
Everything seemed to remind me of home in Oklahoma. Trying to cheer me up, my
husband once suggested, “Let’s go to see the movie Terms of Endearment. “ We did. It
was about a young woman who had been close to her mother, grew up, married, and
her husband once suggested, “Let’s go to see the movie Terms of Endearment. “ We did. It
was about a young woman who had been close to her mother, grew up, married, and
came down with cancer. I cried.

Whenever I saw pictures of hills and mountains like those in Oklahoma, I
cried. When we visited my family in Oklahoma for the holidays and had to leave, I cried.
However, with the passing of months and years and with the birth of my own children,
the sadness and longing faded away.

Eventually I learned to find happiness no matter where I was, but even today
those memories of growing up in Oklahoma are still vivid and dear to me.