

MURIEL - FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

Lottie, I'm thinking about us and why we didn't talk for 10 years, in our 40s, why we were such good friends most of the rest of our lives. Even now, when we're old, 90-somethings. Jesus, who woulda thought? We got along so well as kids when I was the follower and you the leader. I didn't know much better or care, but that changed. I wanted to be my own person, and it wasn't only with you that I had that trouble. I had to fight for myself when I got married, had a kid.

In first grade, you were always there for me when I cried at recess. The teacher was mean, a large blond woman with small tight lips. Her legs against her nylons made a rasping grasshopper noise when she walked past the desks. Later, when we were in high school and I remembered that teacher, you called her the "Blond Bitch".

One day in first grade, I sat in my seat and had to pee. I raised my hand. Blond Bitch ignored me. So, I waited, waited until I was desperate. I crossed my knees. I squirmed. I balled my hand between my legs, and she yelled at me, "Be still!" Finally, I just peed in my chair, and it flowed down onto the floor. The kids laughed, and Blond Bitch's face turned red, her lips pursed.

"Quiet!" she yelled.

I sat there and tried to be invisible. The recess bell clanged, and everyone ran out. I didn't move.

"Get paper towels from the bathroom and clean that up," Blond Bitch levelled. I felt slices on me slide off.

My legs got me into the bathroom, though I was numb all over. I left the door wide open, stepped on the black and white diamond tiles and looked at the towel canister, which looked to be a mile away. I did get the towels, wiped up the puddle.

“Take that to the trash outside,” Blond Bitch spat the words at me.

You met me outside. I was crying, holding the wet towels over a big wet spot on my skirt.

“I peed myself,” my voice came out funny.

“Never mind,” you said. I saw the pain on your face. You couldn’t help me, but you wanted to. We took the towels to the bins.

You took my hand, and we splashed through puddles from last night’s rain in the grass along the school driveway. We stooped to pick up an orange salamander crossing the pavement, headed for the wet green grass. You had a milk carton and ripped off the top. We put a handful of grass in there and scooped in a bit of water. Just after we picked him up, a car passed right over his tracks. With your fingers to your lips, you hid him under your dress and slipped him in my desk. Blond Bitch never saw. I was so happy to have a salamander friend so close for the rest of the afternoon, so happy to have done a good deed in saving a little life. Before we got on the bus, we let him off in the wet grass, away from the school parking lot and the road.

Your school grades were always As. In sixth grade, I wrote a poem and got my first A and a “very good” across the top. I knew you were jealous. You always got As, so it wasn’t the grade that got to you. The teacher said the writing showed promise. You wanted to hold all the promise, assurance of success. I pitched along, and sometimes things fell my way.

In eighth grade Home EC, I was a better cook than you. I took my time and followed the recipe. Pie crust came out flaky, gravy stayed together, quiches looked pretty with paprika sprinkled evenly on top. You hurried your way through a dough and over-kneaded it so it got tough, ,or you tossed together a soup, just dumped in the broth, salt, pepper, handfuls of vegetables. Yours came out okay, but I measured carefully and used a bit of dill here, so me sour cream there.

You had to wear a full apron to protect your neat and fancy houndstooth wool pants and a yellow cotton button down shirt. No oil spatters on you! I wore purple pants and a bright yellow sweater, all decorated with sauces that I made. There wouldn't be a spot or wrinkle on you at the end of the day. I was constantly reprimanded for destroying or losing my purple sweater or scuffed shoes. I had to wear my gym flip-flops home one day. "How does that happen?" my mother asked. I didn't know; it just did. My mother said I was chaos personified.

You took care of everybody, starting with making meals for your family when you were five and helping me in school. To you, the rest of us must have seemed like oversized toddlers. The stakes got higher as you got older. People all around you were screwing up. You had to pull me upstairs when I was sloppy drunk one night, to prevent the crash that would wake my parents.

One night in college, we had to drive home from a concert and chose Dave, who seemed to be the least messed up person, to take the wheel. In the middle of the interstate, he slowed and stopped, just sat there. It was late, not many cars, but a few passed around us.

"What are you doing?" you said to Dave.

"I'm waiting for the chariots to pass by," he said.

"I think they have more horsepower than we do, chump," you said, and you got out of the back seat, opened the driver's door, and shoved Dave to the middle of the front seat to take over the wheel. Everyone laughed, even you.

Dave did acid the first time that night. Later, he did a lot of acid. A lot. His flashbacks became like parental figures; he used to talk to you about what they told him to do. He trusted you. One summer vacation, late at night, all alone, he left his wallet and glasses on the town lake shore. He took out a rowboat and never came back. They never found his body. His sorrow

stayed in that lake, and you never swam there again. In fact, you never came back after college. You never wanted to approach that sorrow, and you couldn't see the hope that some of us still had in our hometown.

I think about the time you gave me courage lessons in your backyard. I hated that. I know you were just trying to help me learn to make my way in a tough world where I'd meet mean bitch teachers and lots of other problems. I did what you told me to do though because I believed you knew what you were doing. You found us each a stick as big as a sword and pulled the bark off them.

"Hold your stick like this." You took the on-guard position we'd seen in movies. Then you held yours in front of your chest.

"Hit me first."

I took a little tap at your stick.

"Hit harder!"

I smacked your stick with all my might with my eyes closed. Before I could open them, you smacked me back. My hand hurt from the impact. My eyes flew open.

"Hit me again!" you yelled.

I did. You taught me to cross from one side to the other and move my feet to stay in balance. You waited for me to get in position and take my stabs.

"Now we climb the tree with the big boughs," you said.

I hated heights. I was shaking. You said I had to do it.

I'm not sure I learned courage, but I learned you were stronger than me. And that I didn't like your way of doing things; and that someday I'd figure out my own way.

On that trip in Germany, we stopped at a tiny market on the way to the campsite. I wanted bread and a banana. You wanted to keep going because it was going to rain and pushed me along through the store's dark narrow aisles, a smiling Turkish man at the register. I grabbed soft white rolls wrapped in plastic – I was sick of wholesome German bread – and two bananas, one for you. At the register you looked at the bread package with disgust as you read the ingredients.

“These have polyglycol eaters in them!” you were outraged.

“I like polyglycol eaters,” I grabbed the rolls and put them in my pack. I ate my banana and rolls and kept us dry in the building when you would have pitched the tent in the rain.

Insane.

When we got back to the states, I made headway; you drifted. I applied for graduate school in psychology. You went guy crazy, then freedom crazy. Then Max. You eventually went to college but never wanted to settle down and marry like everybody else. You had to be better than us townies. You were running from yourself, running after dreams that were meant for people in movies. You'd go with Max to Paris or Athens, buy expensive clothes that made you look like a dress-up doll. You pretended to be elegant. I couldn't take it anymore when I was dealing with Dex.

You and Max got rich. Your exploits made me feel small. Compared to your fast driving energy, I was molasses dripping out of a cold bottle. Dealing with Dex tore out part of my heart. Dex was stealing by the time he was in grade school. A burglar! He wouldn't do a thing anyone told him to do – me, his teachers; his father didn't even try. One day, I hollered a blue streak at him, dropped him off with the foster agency that weekend. Drove away without a word. Of course, I picked him up on Monday. He told you about that.

“You can't do that to a kid,” you said on the phone.

“You have no fucking idea what you are talking about,” I said. That was it; we didn’t speak for 10 years.

It was at Lottie's house the day I met Dex. I rang the door to her Rumson, New Jersey colonial on Thanksgiving as we had flown in from Colorado the night before. Lottie appeared, dressed in a red chiffon poncho blouse that flowed into a tight grey wool miniskirt, that continued down to red stockings and matching MaryJane ballet shoes.

"Terrific. You two are here. Come in. Not the first but not the last."

She pulled me by the hand into the room of choreographed guests for the perfect holiday appetizer scene. Max came over, kissed my cheek and offered two glasses of champagne while he did the pinky-shake with my husband.

"I'll have some ice, please," I said.

"You don't drink Cliquot with ice," Max said lightly. "Just try it like this. Tsar Alexander I was a fan." He turned to attend other guests. "The boat came out yesterday," he said over his shoulder to us " A new record."

Oh Jesus. New records and fancy outings. I looked up the spiral staircase and wished I could duck into the bathroom I knew was on the left at the top. Had I zipped my pants? Lottie didn't let go of my hand but pulled me to the left into the dining room which looked out over the heated infinity pool. Everyone else was in the 5,000 square foot main room to the right with the view of the dock. Max's boat lift was still in place to mar the view. How tacky. And it was raining. Too bad.

"I've been waiting for you," said Lottie. "I saw a notice in the VNA Board bulletin for volunteers to take foster kids for the holiday and a little boy is showing up anytime."

"Lottie, are you nuts? Those kids can have serious issues, especially on holidays. You can't just sweep on a holiday like a miracle worker. Do you know how many pies show up at the Food Shelf on Thanksgiving? And how much meat and potatoes and vegetables they need every other day of the year?"

"I wanted to do something good. And have... a family here. They needed volunteers." She looked like she was knocking on a door that had never opened to her. A place she wanted to go but had never dared. Something she maybe wanted but wouldn't let herself think about. Not so much having kids, I was analyzing as usual, but connection to roots or ancestors or an anchor amidst a luxury ocean of plenty.

"Did they say anything about experience?" I asked

"Well yes, but how hard can it be?"

Ten minutes later, the crisis intervention worker, holding a plastic bag, arrived with Dex.

"He's eight. Thanks so much. The Reform School closed for Thanksgiving and we...."

Another guest arrived; the door opened. Dex made a run for it, out into the street. The crisis intervention guy chased him down, slipped in his brown loafers on the wet lawn, fell and got mud on his dark pants and sports jacket. I thought, his wife will give him hell for working on a holiday, just like last year and the year before, and wasting the dry cleaner bill. He caught up to Dex, pulled a kid harness and leash from the plastic bag, hauled Dex back to the house, closed the door and handed the leash to Lottie. She immediately dropped it.

"I'd use that, if I were you. Have a great day," the guy turned toward his car, wiping mud from his elbows.

Dex was no bigger than a five-year-old and skinny. Lottie tried to take his hand. He wrenched free, climbed over the dinner table, dashed away the table drape. The gourd

presentation scattered. That was the beginning. He barely spoke, handled a fork and spoon like an ape, got sucked into a TV show like it was his mother, but wouldn't interact with people. He had been at the Social Services reform school for a few months because no one knew what to do with him; he had failed five foster homes. I had access to VNA records as an employee and checked that night.

The harness had a little backpack on it with a plush monkey peeking over his shoulder, which was supposed to be cute. But Dex went nuts, tried to buck it off or rub it away against the wall. He couldn't tell us how bad it was for him, a monkey thing trying to get him from behind. I took it off. He glared at me.

Anyone could see he was terrified. Of people, or anything behind him that he couldn't see. He tried to get away from what he didn't understand which was everything in that mansion.

He knew about food. We gave him a big plate of turkey, potatoes, and gravy which he grabbed, ran into another room, and wolfed down as fast as he could. No one was going to take it away from him, but he wouldn't let Lottie near him unless she was bringing more food.

A television set was on. He sat in front of the moving color and pictures. There was a dumb sitcom running, an episode about 45 live turkeys dropped from a helicopter onto a shopping mall parking lot. The turkeys smashed through windshields. They hit people. We all thought this was terrible. The reporter was horrified. He was yelling, "I thought turkeys could fly, and it would all be so funny. What a f--king mess." He sure lost his stage self. Dex wouldn't let us turn off the TV.

He stayed away from everyone that day, especially if they tried to talk to him or touch him. I was in the kitchen, doing dishes. He came in, slowly, waiting for something bad to happen. I ignored him. For a long time, he watched me. When I turned to put the last dish away,

he ran up to me, wrapped his arms around my knees and wouldn't let go. I couldn't pry him loose.

I didn't want kids, told my husband that from the beginning. I had never played with dolls and didn't like babies. A switch flipped when he grabbed me. Dex was 8, so how much worse could it get? I can't believe I was sounding like Lottie.

I told my husband on the way to the hotel I wanted to adopt him. Three weeks later, I'd done a bunch of paperwork and interviews. The same crisis intervention guy flew out with Dex and dropped him at our house, a foster kid in line for adoption. I was in a strange never never land of certainty. I knew I had to do this. Even though my husband always joked that I was a social worker who needed a social worker, my clients responded to my unorthodox methods.

My husband is a caring man, unflappable really, so he said it was okay. He always said things were OK. For 40 years, things were OK, even when they weren't. In his last day, he said to me, "If only I could live a hundred years like my turtles, and stay with you...." I'd never heard him say anything so romantic in 40 years.

I miss him I never thought I would. His gentle voice barely made a dent in my life. His unwavering routines. But on my birthday every year, he'd touch his hand to my hair. "You're unexpected," he'd say. I think I made his life a little exciting. He was a biologist who gathered data on endangered turtles. I was the spice of life. Dex was the jalapeño.

The first morning with Dex at our home, I opened the door to let the cat out. Black Cat was her name. Dex pushed past me and ran, flying down the sidewalk. I couldn't figure out what to do, so I left the door open and ran after him. I figured hollering at him wouldn't do any good. He didn't even see me. Pumping his stick legs fast, he went around the corner, onto a road, and up a rise, over a bridge that crossed the river. He paused, looked back at me, and ran faster. We

kept going. Luckily, in the last 3 months, I had walked up to 30 miles a week to lose some weight. We were out of town with scrub brush all around and no houses. He stopped, panting and sweating, about 25 feet ahead of me. I didn't try to get near him.

“Are you done?” I asked.

He didn't answer.

“Do you want to run some more?”

He shook his head no.

“Let's go home,” I said, “and get some food.”

He followed me from a safe distance behind so I couldn't grab him. It took an hour to walk back. I joked that we'd have to eat a lot of food to make up for all the running and walking. I chatted about what was around, short trees and scrub brush and to the northeast, a bridge over the Arkansas River, wide shallow water in lazy curves and spotted with steppingstone boulders. He pointed to a path along the river. The flat land to the east was the Plains, I told him. I was cheerful and calm.

“The Front Range of the Rockies is west. Maybe someday, you'd like to run trails on those mountains – Greenhorn, Hogback, North Peak, Bears Head,” I said.

As we got closer to home, I pointed out St. Therese Catholic School, where he'd go. I wasn't religious, but I had done volunteer work with the Sisters of Providence in that Diocese. The sisters were cool. I figured he'd need the extra discipline and structure. It would take compassion and patience to deal with him, and the sisters had that. I had already talked to Sister Pat, who would be Dex's teacher, about it. I knew her from social work circles as she worked with immigrants and refugees. She was kind and wise. Dex had no idea about school or nuns, so

this didn't affect him much. We ended up in front of a football stadium, and I said he could run the track the next day if he wanted.

“Could we do that path along the river?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

We passed the steel plant, an old orphanage turned into apartments, and a mental hospital, but I didn't tell him about any of those. At home, I made Dex a turkey sandwich with potato chips and three glasses of milk and dumped six Oreos near his glass. Black Cat sat on his lap while he chewed. My husband grabbed an Oreo on his way out the door and ruffled Dex's hair. Dex didn't object.

Next morning, Dex dashed out the door ahead of Black Cat, not trusting what I said about running again. I booked out behind him, staying a distance back. When he stopped, we walked back home. This time I told him about the streets: Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Grant, named for presidents who he would learn about in school. And other streets: Spruce, Pine, Cedar, Cypress, and I pointed out those kinds of trees when we passed them. He liked the trees. When we got home, he ate two bowls of Cheerios, two bananas, and drank two glasses of milk. I gave him a multivitamin. My husband ate one bowl of cheerios with him and got a vitamin. Dex tried to get Black Cat to eat the vitamin, which she just sniffed. She did lick the cereal bowl.

In a few weeks, school started. I took Dex down a long hallway that smelled like Mr. Clean which I didn't favor but used Mop & Glo. The commercials on *As the World Turns* said it cleaned and shined in one step. Dex liked that smell. I found out decades later the stuff contains methoxydiglycol, a chemical suspected of damaging the unborn child, but Dex was already born and damaged. He sniffed and sniffed in that school hall, wrinkled his nose.

“I want to go home,” he said.

“Let’s see what’s in this room first,” I answered. “They have a track team in junior high.”

We came to the big classroom for both first and second grade. No kindergarten because of budget cuts in those days. Dex looked for a place to run, but he must have decided it would be worse to get lost in those hallways past big doors that closed behind him. He stayed at my side. Sister Pat greeted him kindly, and we went over to a window with dinosaur figures lined up on the sill. She got him playing with those, and I snuck out. When I went to pick him up that afternoon, he ran to me and grabbed my hand. First time he’d done that. First time he had touched me since he wrapped around my knees on Thanksgiving.

“Good job on your first day. Hey, go get your coat from off the hook, and I’ll talk to Sister Pat,” I said. To my surprise, he ran across the room to the coat rack.

Sister Pat told me he had stood alone in the corner once he realized I was gone, and no one could budge him until morning prayer. All the children bowed their heads. Dex looked around. He watched Sister’s hands on the rosary beads.

Psalm 28: Sister Pat read the words, simplified.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadows, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; to comfort and hold me.

Sister Pat told me Dex came up to her and asked who was the guy in the prayer.

“I told him the Lord and Shepherd is Jesus. Jesus is just like him and me and all of us. That He came to the world to save each child and parent and friend. And he would help with everything.”

“Did Jesus help me find Black Cat? And a place to live?” Dex asked.

“Yes”, Sister Pat told him. “I started to teach him to write out some of the words of the prayer. He did well to copy my letters.”

When we got home, Dex told me about Jesus and that he needed some rosary beads. Trouble was, I didn’t really believe that stuff. I told him rosary beads were special for nuns, but I’d get him some beads. I had mala beads, 108 on a string. It’s a yoga necklace that I used with the kids in the clinic. He loved those beads. Wrapped them around his neck and slept with them.

"What do I do about this Jesus thing," I asked my husband.

"Go with it," he said.

The next week at school when I picked him up, Sister Pat told me she needed to talk with me. I sent Dex outside to run the track a few times. We’d been running every day since those first days. His endurance was building up, and it calmed him down. I could trust him to stay on the track for 15 minutes while I heard what she had to say.

Dex was stealing from other kids. Food. A math ruler. Pencils. When they played soccer outside, he took the ball and ran away with it. He wasn’t making friends.

That night, I was making chicken pot pies. Dex sat at the table and flipped through a Bible he insisted I get for him. He couldn’t read it, but he liked to finger the pages.

“Sister Pat says you’re taking things from other kids. Food and pencils and stuff.”

“Yah.”

“Why?”

“I need things.”

“If you need something, you can ask me. You can have what you need. Not everything you ask for, but the things you need. And some stuff for fun.”

“I got to have things.”

“Why?”

“I feel better if I have things,” Dex said, not lifting his head from the Bible.

“It’s not right to take things that aren’t yours.”

“You don’t understand,” he said.

Sister Pat told me he punched a kid who tried to take back his own lunchbox. I didn’t know what to do. One Saturday, a friend visited our house. Dex found her purse and stole a 5-dollar bill.

“You can’t do that,” I told him later when all was discovered. “Where is the money?”

He went under his bed, pulled out a Nilla Wafers box and drew the bill from inside. There were other bills in there.

“Jesus,” I said. “You’ve done this before.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” he said.

“It’s all well and good to believe in Jesus. And one of the commandments is, ‘Thou Shall Not Steal.’” I can’t believe I pulled that card.

“I’m not stealing. I take what I need,” he explained.

From then on, Dex was sneaky about stealing. He made sure he didn’t get caught, but I knew it hadn’t stopped. He often fought with boys at school. He avoided the girls. I started to think my goal for him was to keep him out of jail.

He asked me to take him to Catholic Mass and communion.

Oh crap. I talked to Sister Pat about that, and he enrolled in the Rite of Christian Initiation. Gives the creeps to think about it. Dex had to study with a church advisor for a year, profess his faith (God!) and prepare for the sacrament. I had nightmares about lambs, sacrificed

on altars and woke up screaming. During the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, the ceremony took place.

I stood at the front of the church with a pained look on my face. I had pulled on my tight black skirt. I'd gained a few pounds and hoped my white blouse didn't show too much bra through the cotton fabric. My husband was passive and calm, tall and skinny. He had maintained the "go with it" strategy from day one. Dex liked him; let him ruffle his hair.

The priest spoke in a sweet tone of voice, "Dex has decided to follow Jesus and dedicate his life to a relationship with God. Water baptism is the next step in his faith journey. It's an outward expression of the inward decision to let your old life die so that you can be raised to new life with Christ. Water baptism is a significant moment that will serve as a reminder that the old is gone and the new has come."

If only, I thought.

There was a steel tub of water that looked like it should be in a field for cattle. In all his clothes, Dex sat in it, held his nose, and the priest placed a hand on his chest and back.

"I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," said the priest and helped him dunk his head.

Dex dove all the way in.

The church secretary, the assistant pastor, and Sister Pat cheered and clapped. Dex came out of the water smiling, as if the priest's words were sweeter than honey and he was seeing pillars of clouds.

I wrapped a towel around him as he stood before the priest who said, "Dex, be sealed with the Gift of Holy Spirit" and anointed his forehead with consecrated oil. He then offered Dex

his first eucharist, and the other church members also partook. My husband and I were not offered the host, thank god.

The next week, Dex asked me to go to Mass and communion with him. I told him I would drop him off and pick him up. He came out of church with peace on his face like a Baby Jesus in Pat's lap. What could I do? He was calmer. But he didn't stop stealing or fighting.

I took him to a psychologist friend of mine. After the first few weeks, I asked him what happened in the sessions.

"First, I play with some puzzles and stuff. We sit in chairs. She talks to me like a regular person, not a dumb kid. She doesn't try to change my mind."

"Hmm."

"She asks me questions."

"Like what?"

"Like why do I take things."

"What do you say?"

"Same thing I always say. Because I need stuff."

"What else does she ask you?"

"Why do I think Jesus helps me?"

"And?"

"I say because he's the Son of God, and it's his job to help."

"Hmmm."

"She asks me why I won't help you with the dishes."

"Yah, what's that about?" I ask.

"Because I don't want to."

“So, then what does she say?”

“She keeps asking me questions. Why don’t I want to? Why don’t I think I have time to help? Why can’t I put off the TV and help? On and on.”

“Hmm.”

“I have figured out Psychologist lady. I tell her the truth and there’s really nothing she can say about that except ask another question and eventually she gets tired of that.”

“Does she ask you about your life before you came to live with me?”

“Yah.”

“What do you say?”

“That I don’t remember.” He was silent. I looked at him, for a full 30 seconds. He wasn’t breathing.

“Hey, take a breath, will ya?”

He gasped.

“She’s a nice lady, and I like her, not as much as you and Black Cat, but I like her.”

Dex grabbed his 108 beads and left the kitchen. He held them all night, through dinner, homework, TV, and when I kissed him goodnight for bed. I looked in later when the half moon shone through the window and those beads were twined in his fingers.

I stopped telling you about this stuff, Lottie. I got so tired, raising Dex. Too tired to explain to you what was happening in my life. Until that day in the Detox Center.

