NORTHWESTERN

SUCCOTHS
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SPECTRUM
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"Bonnie, I think you'll want to come home. Your grandmother died two hours ago."

As I backed out of the driveway on the way to my parents' house those words echoed in my mind. Grandma dead? As she lived next door to us from the day my parents married, it was hard to imagine going home and not finding her there. Intricately woven into my life, memories of her abound.

When I was about five years old, I decided to leave home. According to my recollection, I arrived at Grandma's with my suitcase, my doll and my doll's suitcase. Grandma gave me a hearty welcome and escorted me to my uncle's old room. There, we cleared drawer space, made the bed, and then began the household chores. While we worked, Grandma told me about her childhood and all the good times she had with her mom and dad. As the day progressed I became less and less enthusiastic about my decision to leave my parents. About supper time, as was his habit, my father stopped in for a cup of coffee. After coffee and conversation, he rose to leave. With a tremble in my voice I asked, "Can I go, too?" Moments later, Dad's hand in mind and Grandma's kiss fresh on my forehead all seemed well. But things didn't seem so well now. Not only did I have the days ahead with the funeral, but I also needed gas and was hungry.

Pulling into Super America in Sheldon, I filled my car, grabbed a cherry pie and a can of pop, paid the clerk and headed down Highway 18. Opening the pie I took one bit and laid it down on the seat. Cherry pie is my favorite, but "Hostess" could not compete with my Grandma's cherry pie. Often when I'd eat supper with her she'd serve one for dessert. Other times, when our whole family would eat there, we'd have a feast—salads, meats, breads, vegetables, cakes, pies. And, on special days, potato dumplings, the one ethnic food our family indulged in as Norwegians. And nobody made them like Grandma. My dad, my sisters and I would have contests to see who could eat the most. "You are all going to get diarrhea," Grandma always claimed, but we knew she enjoyed our competition as much as we did.

"20 miles to Spencer" read the sign ahead. Spencer—Grandma and I attended their county fair many times. As a matter of fact, I traveled with her a good many places. She loved to visit relatives, but Grandpa didn't. Since she dreaded driving alone, I often accompanied her. Sometimes our trips took fifteen minutes, other times an hour or two. As we drove, we'd talk about school, basketball games, relatives, home
life...what we discussed wasn't so important; that I had moments when I received her complete attention was. The oldest of six girls, it was terrific riding alone with Grandma and having her listen only to me; for at home, interruptions were frequent. As my other sisters grew older, they'd join us on our trips. But at least once or twice a month, it was just me and Grandma.

Visiting was fun, too. Since everyone knew my mom and dad, I enjoyed being introduced as "Bob and Delores' oldest girl." Stories about my father as a boy weaved their way into our conversations. And Grandma enjoyed boasting about me. Overhearing her mention my good grades or my solo at church or my I rating at state speech contest, filled me with pride. I wanted to please her, so I tried even harder in activities if I knew my success would make her proud.

Noticing the stoplights on the corner before Spencer, I made a right turn. Looking down the road a sign advertising "Bingo—every Tuesday night, 8:00 p.m." flashed into sight. Bingo—what pleasant moments that suggested. Week after week, for at least ten years, my grandma would travel to Blue Earth on Thursday nights to play Bingo. "I haven't won," she'd say periodically, "perhaps I should quit." But we knew she wouldn't, and we were glad. Bingo meant a trip to a shopping town. Arriving one or two hours before the games started, Grandma usually met someone she knew and allowed my sisters and me to galavant on our own. Adventure was everywhere. In our younger years, we looked at dolls or bikes or stuffed ourselves at the bakery; as we grew older, Blue Earth meant boy watching. Some of the most enjoyable and crazy moments of our lives were spent walking down the main drag trying to get certain guys to notice us. And, when they did, it meant a walking partner, maybe a coke, and even possibly a date. Grandma didn't mind the flirting, but she'd allow no riding around. "If he wants to date you, he can pick you up at your house," she decreed. And that was that.

Following our merry adventures, we'd meet Grandma at Veterans's Hall, the location for Bingo. There, the selection of playing cards began. It was a long deliberate process for Grandma as she tried to pick out cards with commonly called numbers on them. She took playing seriously, too, delivering a critical look if we weren't watching our cards. When someone in our group won, it was especially delightful as it meant stopping for cokes and french fries, and getting home after midnight.

Leaving Spencer and heading towards Emmetsburg, I drove by several new businesses—a printing shop, McDonald's, a steak house, a farm implement dealer, a bicycle shop....I was one of those people who took forever to learn to ride a two wheeler. When I was finally able to go without
training wheels, my father's orders were to ride only from our lane to Grandma's and back again. But the ride soon lost its challenge, so I'd stop and visit her. Eventually, the realization that I had paused and visited Grandma five times in one hour dawned on me. Feeling like a nuisance, I apologized to her. "Don't be silly," she laughed. "You can stop here as often as you like." I never stopped believing that. Certainly her house was as much home as was my parents.

My relationship with Grandma was closer than those of her other grandchildren. The night my grandfather died she asked me to come and stay with her. How awkward I felt. Indeed, I wanted to be with her, but I sure didn't know what to say. We talked some about what she could wear to the funeral, who she wanted to phone the next day, and if she had enough coffee in the house for guests. Then we watched television. About 11:00 p.m. we went to bed. Since neither of us could sleep, we talked some more about Grandpa. About an hour later, we decided to try to sleep again. Because I felt I should be able to offer her some comfort and hadn't, my body was tense and sleeping was impossible. Seeming to sense this, Grandma touched me and said, "I'm all right. Thanks for coming tonight. Having you here helps. I'm glad you're my granddaughter." When I pause and listen, I still hear that voice.

"Algona--20 miles." And then, 25 more until home. Would I ever get there? My other trips during college hadn't seemed to take this much time. As I reflected, I realized how going to school had brought changes into my life. Learning to stay in touch with Grandma was one of them. She'd write often, always including a dollar or two for a treat. I'd write her, too. And, whenever I went home, visiting her was at the top of my agenda. She'd always have something fresh baked in the house, usually cherry pie; and I could never leave without a cup of coffee. This cup often turned into a pot as we shared what was happening in our lives. We talked about my sisters, my parents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives. Grandma had real concern for their happiness. And we talked a lot about me, what I was doing and why. We discussed Christianity, the way faith could help one accept all things. We debated possibilities for my future, fulltime work in a church or a career outside of the church or being "just" Mom and wife. We laughed a lot, and once-in-a-while, like when we tried to understand why so many of Grandma's brothers and sisters had died so young of cancer, we cried. My parents joined us from time to time, but never intruded, and never seemed envious of our closeness.
My parents. They hurt too while Grandma suffered. When she began the operations they tried to tell me it wasn't cancer. But, from the first, I had no doubts. Cancer had killed several of Grandma's brothers and sisters and she had a cancerous breast removed when I was small. What else could it be? I wanted to ignore the whole situation, but this time I couldn't: Grandma was dying, and she was part of me. The hardest thing was accepting her pain and suffering. I didn't want her to go through that. Why? Why? So often I struggled and wept as I considered that question. And I didn't have any answers. At times, I clung to the memories of her and our conversations, praying to accept as she did.

Visiting her in the hospital was trying. Her last days brought anguishing pain. Once, as my sisters and I walked into her room, she began to cry. Thinking we should leave, I signaled toward the door. Recovering from the tears, Grandma insisted we stay and talk. After a twenty minute conversation about my parents, school and television, we each gave her a hug and kiss. Walking out the door, I turned to look at her. She attempted a wink. That was the last time I saw her alive.

"Ledyard--4 miles." That sign once meant a few more minutes until Mom and I would have coffee with Grandma. This time it meant only a few more minutes until I'd join my parents and sisters and share the sorrow. Getting used to Grandma being gone would not be easy for anyone. During the last years of her life my sisters spent as much time with her as I had before college.

Beginning to cry, I turned into our driveway. My dad came out and hugged me. "Remember," he whispered, "your grandma loved you."

"And I loved her," I reflected. Through my tears I smiled. Fruitful memories nourish. And Grandma gave me baskets full.

Bonnie Jorgenson
Being home during spring break reminded me once again how much fun mealtimes are at our house. Playing "see food", telling dumb jokes, having burping contests, etc., all make meals so enjoyable and pleasant. I must admit that my brother Dave contributes considerably to the humor but I refuse to give all of the credit to him. I can think of one incident in particular when my wit was just a little sharper than Dave's. I'm sure he'd have his own version of this episode but you'll have to decide for yourself whose account is authentic.

This specific incident occurred at suppertime--an often rushed meal at our house. We usually sit down, pray, pass the food around, chomp it down, pray, and leave the table to go our separate ways. There is usually very little conversation during a rushed meal and it is unheard of to bring up a matter of importance because there will be no time to discuss it. One night, however, an exception was made to this unwritten rule. Everything started out quite normally. It happened somewhere between passing the food and chomping it down.

Right out of the blue, Dave announced, "I'm going to get a haircut."

Upon hearing this, my dad spilled his milk, my mom almost went into shock, and I chomped on my cheek instead of my piece of chicken. Trying to hide my pain and my amazement, I asked, "Are you really? Which hair are you going to cut?"

"Very funny," Dave replied.

"Personally, Dave," I continued, "I think that strand right behind your left ear is a bit long. But, then again, maybe you should cut one of those curls in the back of your neck. What do you think Mom?"

"Don't be silly," she said as she helped my dad wipe up his spilled milk. Dave is going to go to the barber shop and get a nice, short haircut."

"You'd better not get it cut too short, Dave," I snickered. "People might mistake you for a girl. Or, even worse, they might mistake you for ME!"

"I don't think you have to worry about that, Becky. Your moustache is darker than mine."

"You're just jealous," I answered dryly while making a mental note to buy some hair lightener. "I was looking in a magazine yesterday and I saw a terrific summer haircut for guys."

"And I suppose you have to have a style dryer to keep it styled and a bunch of junk to condition your hair everytime you wash it."

"Oh no, Dave, it's nothing like that," I assured him. "It was copied from a famous actor."

"Really? Who?" he asked eagerly.

"Kojak!"
I hate winter evenings like this--
the earth, all muted browns and grays,
is drenched with a melancholy blue light;
the sky hangs heavy, too tired to snow.
The world is utterly still,
like the heart beat after a dream shatters
the hush before a child takes its first breath
the hollow expectancy of an empty house.
People in Haneberg don't suppose I know anything
about newborn babies or broken dreams.
I'm what they'd call a career woman:
I forced my dreams to come true.
I've returned triumphantly
to gather more teaching laurels
after collecting a handful in the big city.
I don't even have empty rooms staring at me anymore--
just Dad,
    too old to work the farm
    too newly grieved to care for anything else,
and old memories
silent and pervasive as this twilight stillness.

You see, none of the people realize
I used to have two dreams.
One, of course, was education.
    I always did well in school
    I enjoyed my books
Education became a passion.
I distinctly remember an incident from third grade:
I had brought home a perfect paper
while Aunt Josie and Uncle Wim were visiting.
After it had been properly admired
I started up the stairs just beyond the sitting room door.
"Leah sure does well for herself."
I stopped on the steps as Uncle Wim spoke.
"Yep, she usually does perfect or pretty near."
I puffed up a little with pride when Dad said that.
"Our boys could stand to take lessons from her,"
    Uncle Wim said ruefully.
"Pity she isn't a boy," Aunt Josie remarked, 
She was a pudgy woman with small eyes. 
"How's that?" my father said almost sharply. 
"Why then you could send her to an academy—
do something with those brains."
"It is a shame to waste them," Ma agreed, 
"on diapering babies and cleaning up after some farmer." 
I don't know what else they said. 
I tore out of the house as fast as I could. 
When I was far enough away, I kicked trees. 
Finally, I wiped my cheeks with the hem of my pinafore, 
laid one hand on a tree, the other over my heart, 
and vowed a solemn vow: 
"I will never waste my brains on diapers, 
I will go to an academy, 
I will use my mind, 
I will show them all."
Then I stuck my tongue out for Aunt Josie's sake 
and skipped home. 
I'd already been trying to show my dad 
that I was as good as the son he never had. 
I loved to help him in the barn; 
worked doubly hard in school 
to earn his approval. 
Jealous of the attentions of her only child, 
Mom resented my indifference to the very things 
she deemed most important. 
It really isn't odd 
although I suppose many would find it so 
that the other dream dangling above my head 
was to be loved, as I was, 
unconditionally. 
Several years after my vow 
a preacher put the fear of hell in me. 
I turned to God. He might have loved me 
if I'd have let Him. 
But He wanted me to give Him everything— 
even my plans for college. 
What would I have left? 
I could not surrender the one thing that held my life together. 
I resolutely proceeded to high school
despite my mother's protests
and graduated second in my class.
Somewhere in high school a neighbor boy
reintroduced himself to me as a young man.
Jim naturally emanated what I desperately needed;
with him I could believe
there was something soft inside me,
something beyond my steel-trap mind.
I did give all of me to Jim,
but then he wanted me to surrender college, too.
He wanted it so badly he turned traitor
to his God, his own nature,
and, lastly, me.
When I understood the snare he'd laid
I dropped him like an unexpectedly hot bowl
and watched dreams crash
into a thousand splinters at my feet.
Then I turned and determinedly walked away.
I did graduate from college
magna cum laude
about five years later.
I didn't start school immediately
because the child was born at dusk
on a January day very much like this one.
In the split second before he gave his first sharp cry
I saw Jim's red hair reproduced on his tiny head
and the incarnation of my twisted soul in his hand.
I knew only too well how he would have to prove himself,
how he would have to work for love.
A mother would love him naturally but
it was too late for his mother to learn how.
Before I had even graduated I'd been offered a job
at a large city high school.
When I returned to Haneberg last July for Ma's funeral,
I was as readily given a position here.
Only Jim and my folks knew the true cause
of my delayed degree.
Women like Aunt Josie narrow their eyes at me and whisper
that success has made me cold-hearted;
Men with long memories wink at Jim Tainer.
I don't even blink.
I suppose my father would gain some satisfaction
if he knew he had a son of sorts.
We've never mentioned it.
Perhaps Mother would claim me as kin again
if she could witness how well I keep her house.
I doubt it.
She never could understand—
not even basic things like my drive for education.
The child wouldn't, either.
Jim seems singularly silent
when I see him on the street.
That's what happens when dreams die
or prove worthless
and the empty winter nights close in.

Mary Van Rheenen
READY TO LAUNCH

Whenever the giant B-52's took off from bases in southern Thailand, they were escorted by F4's and 105's from Korat. During U.S. involvement in Vietnam, every minute of every day the flightline at Korat bustled with activity keeping those fighters combat-ready. Even after ten years, I can still picture the operation on the line as if I were still there.

Perched like falcons anticipating their prey, the fighters point toward the runway. On their leading wing edges the camouflage paint wears thin, so patches of silver skin cast back the bright sunlight. Men and equipment hover around the "birds" like worker bees around their queen; yellow bomb lifts hold 500 pound bombs, rockets, and external fuel pods (tanks) under the planes' wings so they may be attached; navy blue metro vans scurry men and equipment where they are needed; fuel trucks top off (refill) hungry wing and belly tanks; liquid oxygen carts belch cold white clouds of vapor when their contents overflow into the thirsty air; bronzed men open panels to inspect the planes' hidden parts as meticulously as surgeons anxious to get at their patients' guts; thick electric cables snake across the concrete between planes and power units providing "juice" for avionics technicians. The tropical air, reeking with sweat and jet fuel, scorches the nostrils. Noise is inescapable as power unit turbines roar; jet engines scream at decibels which rupture unprotected ears; and line-truck radios cackle an endless flow of information to and from job control.

"Control, orange five."
"Go ahead, five."
"Show ECM complete on job 3-4-1, aircraft 4-4-2-4. That makes her code two."
"Roger, five."
"Orange six, control."
"This is six, go ahead."
"You got a man on location B-12, aircraft 63-88, says he needs an altimeter from supply."
"10-4."

And over it all, crew chiefs, concerned about the welfare of their planes, shout questions at specialists—who shout their replies.
"You going to have this bird ready for launch, Sarge?"
"Should have. I gotta pick up a new box for it."
"O.K. Let me know as soon as she's ready."
"Sure thing."
At launch time planes with names like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, Ruby, or Honeybun, with red stars beneath canopies displaying the number of enemy shot down, and with menacing shark teeth painted on their snouts, begin to taxi. Turning at the end of the flightline, they spew everything on the line with heat and fumes of jet exhaust erupting from their tails. Representatives from all specialties stand by to right any malfunction which at the last minute could deter a craft from its rendezvous. The birds diminish in size as they taxi a half mile to the launch pad where launch personnel remove remaining safety pins from landing gears, bomb racks, fuel pylons, and rocket pylons. Then side by side, the first two birds move onto the runway; their engines begin to rev increasing in volume, becoming disquieting—thunderous—frantic; when about to be disintegrated by their own force, their afterburners kick in, and what had been deafening becomes inaudible—lost in a tremendous crash of power. Underfoot, the earth and concrete tremble as the planes now begin to roll down the runway. Heat waves bounce off the concrete aft of them, until together, they lift. Three more times the roar, the blast, and the take off is completed until eight craft are airborne.

In night's darkness the environment changes, though the activity continues: heavy dew freshens dry air, releasing the fragrance of thick vegetation to overpower the stench of man and machine; men hunt for their earlier discarded shirts and stand near the glow of power turbines; portable light units add the smooth muffled beat of their gas engines as they attempt to lengthen the day, and the hordes of millers they draw cast eerie shadows into the distance; frogs and lizards chant, despite the invasion of their privacy; mosquitoes dine uninvited; and with mechanical—like locomotion, huge, black rice bugs crawl across the concrete, turning it to slime as their bodies crackle beneath feet and tires. Again planes must be launched. Now landing lights, slicing through occasional patches of mist, illuminate their trek to the pad. Out in the black once again the engine roar is dwarfed by the crash of the afterburners, and instantly, cones of flame boil onto the runway, trailing the planes as they begin to roll. Near the end of their run as the planes' noses lift, the flames flatten against the runway until rising in the distance, they merge with the stars. At last, when the boost power of the afterburners is no longer required, the twinkling specks are extinguished.

Larry Van Donslear
Some people connect visions of fresh air, red barns, homemade bread, and clean eggs in quaint iron baskets with the word chickens. Others associate chickens with summer picnics or sumptuous Sunday dinners. I myself conjure up no such pleasing pictures at the mention of the beast. Instead, I see a creature bobbing its head back and forth in a feeble-minded manner, making an incessant noise even more annoying than a small child’s mocking nyah-nyah, scratching in the dirt after something I would just as soon not identify. Chickens, in my opinion, are cruel, brainless creatures whose only good qualities are the ones exhibited when deceased.

Granted, no animal particularly intelligent compared to man (well, most men), but some chickens are so stupid they can’t even figure out how to feed themselves. My neighbor used to feed his chickens out of a long narrow trough with wires looped over it at intervals. Apparently this simple design was too complex for them to handle. They were forever getting caught in it and strangling themselves to death. This man (though mentally stable in every other way) now mass produced chickens from egg to pullet in an enormous building two football fields long. The little birds get water by pecking at round devices on the automatic watering system. Some of them never grasp this elementary concept and die of thirst.

One of the first things my neighbor has to do to each new batch of chickens is debeak them because the darling little balls of fluff have the peculiar custom of pecking each other to death. My aunt Genella (who, under strong protest, raised chickens for a quarter of a century) also noted their homicidal tendencies which were frequently linked with racism. She always butchered the odd-colored chickens first to save them from a slow and painful death at the beaks of their fellows.

Chickens also kill each other on a massive scale—some might call it mass suicide. In monstrous chicken houses like my neighbor’s, everyone must walk softly, speak softly, and turn on the lights very gradually. If someone were to yell or turn on all the lights at once, all thirty thousand chickens would panic, dash madly into the nearest corner, and consequently suffocate each other.

Even their own cackling can set off this idiotic reaction. One farmer was unfortunate enough to have a chicken get caught in the ventilation fan. (Don’t ask me how it managed to do that.) The bird naturally started squawking, and suddenly the poor man had a couple thousand dead chickens on his hands.
I can dimly perceive why others might find chickens appealing: I, too, appreciate Sunday dinners, red barns, and fresh air. But unfortunately when I see or hear of the creatures, that's not what I'm reminded of. I see imbecilic birds that strangle themselves on simple feeders, ruthless beasts who peck each other to death, and animals so scatterbrained that any sudden occurrence, no matter how harmless, can provoke mass suicide. As far as I'm concerned the only good chicken is a dead chicken, preferably fried.

Mary Van Rheenen
"Ahmad?" The gold bell jingled loudly in my mother's fingers. "Ahmad! Please bring us some more french fries." The white wooden door swung open towards us, as Ahmad's face appeared in view.

"Just a minute. I'm coming." He scowled briefly, picked up the empty Pyrex pie plate, and shuffled back to the kitchen, muttering under his breath.

"I don't think he's very happy," I said to my mother with a grin. "But I DO want some french fries."

"He'll get you some more. You know how Ahmad is. He's always grumbling. I don't think he really minds getting them for you."

I concentrated on my fish, relishing every crisp, tasty bite. I avoided tartar sauce with diligence; I preferred pure unadulterated hamour, a fish that swam in the warm salty waters just off the island.

"Mmm...this is good fish, Mom. Even I like it." The kitchen door swung open again as Ahmad trudged in, bearing a plate heaped high with fragrant french fries. He set it down noisily, walked briskly out to the kitchen, and returned with an unopened bottle of ketchup.

"Thanks Ahmad! These are good!" I said, licking the salt from my lips, and helping myself to more fries.

"Hey, don't take them all!" yelled my sister. "There's supposed to be enough for everyone, remember?"

"You like them?" Ahmad asked.

"Ummmhum!" I nodded my head vigorously. A quick boyish smile flashed over Ahmad's face, showing his white teeth. His dark brown eyes sparkled, the contrasting whites almost dazzling us. He tugged at his right ear lobe with pleasure.

"Thank you, Ahmad," said my mother. "What's for dessert?"

"Ice-cream," he replied. "I'll get it for you in a minute."

"Wow!" exclaimed my sister and I together. Ice-cream was a rare treat around our house; the only place it was available was at the Danish Dairy, for five dollars a gallon. We gulped down our fish and fries, grabbing at the pie plate until the fries were all gone.

"Oink oink oink oink girls!" said my father, giving each word a different pitch. It was a familiar reproof during mealtimes.

"But Dad, they're so GOOD!" I protested.

"I know. But you don't need to stuff yourself."

My mother rang the bell. We waited. Nothing happened. She rang again. Nobody answered.

"Maybe he's mad. Sometimes he sits in the kitchen and doesn't
"Really?"

"Yeah, didn't you know that? He's just like me sometimes. He likes to pout." I smiled, with the delighted air of a child who knows something that her parents don't.

"Boy that makes me mad!" said my mom. "Ahmad! Where are you?" She picked up the bell and rang it continuously for a couple of minutes. Nobody answered.

"Where is he? I have lots of work to do tonight," said my mother, glancing at her watch. "Barby, will you go find him?" I slid from my chair and ran into the kitchen, pushing the door in front of me. I liked to hear the "swooshing" noise it made when it swung back on its hinges.

"Ahmad!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "Oh." I stopped as I saw his dark slim figure kneeling outside on a ragged prayer mat. "Oh, sorry!" He opened one eye, grinned at me, and shut it again. I turned around and ran into the dining room. "Mom, he's praying."

"Now?"

"Yeah. Didn't you hear the call to prayer?"

"Well, let's have devotions then," suggested my father. "Cathy, it's your turn." We each chose a song, and ended with prayer. I was anxious to go outside and play. As soon as the "Amen" was pronounced, I jumped out of my chair and dashed into the kitchen. "Ahmad? Oh." He was finished with his prayers, and was now dozing in a rickety wooden chair in the center of the kitchen. It always amazed me how fast he could fall asleep.

I decided not to wake him up; he looked too peaceful for that. Instead, I jumped up onto the countertop, swung my legs back and forth cautiously, so that I wouldn't mark up the cupboards, and scrutinized him carefully. He was an Arab, with possibly a touch of Negroid blood in his veins. His thick, seamed skin was about the color of coffee, and resembled polished leather. His hair was short, coal-black and slightly curly. He had a wide forehead, thin black eyebrows, a long Roman nose, and a rather small thick-lipped mouth, topped by a scraggly thin moustache. His arms and hands were especially skinny, with fingers displaying huge knotty knuckles. He was dressed modestly, in American-style clothing. Usually he wore a white short sleeve shirt, white or tan pants that always looked a little too big for him, cinched by a thin black belt with a rusty silver buckle. Occasionally, if the mornings were cold, which they very seldom were, he would drape a worn gray diamond-patterned sweater over his bony shoulders. His shoes always re-
minded me of the typical businessman—dull black flats, with a diamond pattern traced on the toes.

I wasn't sure if it was the accidental "thud" of my bare heel against the cupboard, or some scare in his dream, but something made Ahmad jump. He looked at me with vacant eyes for a minute, then slowly smiled. I grinned back.

"What are you doing here?" he said in a tone of mock anger. "I have to do the dishes." He got up and folded the chair, setting it behind the back door.

"I know." I said. "That's why I came in here. But we didn't get any ice-cream."

"Ice-cream?" His face looked blank.

"Remember?" I tugged at his arm. "For dessert."

"You Americans don't need ice-cream anyway," he answered with a gleam in his eye. He suddenly appeared very busy, rummaging around in the cupboard. I wondered if he thought my mother was coming.

"Don't you have to clear the table?" I asked impishly.

"Go away. Get out of my kitchen, so I can get some work done," Ahmad said, taking me by the shoulders and steering me towards the back door.

"Okay, okay. But tell me--" I turned and faced him, "...have you seen Maro? Do you want some loas?"

He hesitated a moment, then shook his finger at me. "You are just trying to make me poor. I don't have money for loas." He dug his hands into his pocket and jingled the coins.

"Aw, come on Ahmad! Please...please?" I tugged at his arm again.

"You like loas, don't you? I'll go see if there are any." I ran out the back door and over to the apartment house next door, the home of the single nurses and missionaries. They had a tall tree in their back yard that bore fruit Arabs call "loas", a green pear-shaped fruit with red pulpy skin. Loas had a tangy tart taste, and were messy to eat, but Ahmad loved them.

As I gazed up at the tree, I felt slightly guilty. Ahmad was right—he didn't have very much money, not with nine children and a wife to support. But there they hung, about ten bulbous thick-skinned beauties. Besides, what other way did we have of making money?

"Maaaaaaro! Maaaaaaro!" I tilted my head back and let out a yell. She should be able to hear me, I thought, if she was anywhere in the mission compound.

"Whaaaaaat?" The answer came back, the ascending and descending tones in imitation of my own.
"Taa--aa--li." I used the Arabic words, just for the fun of it. "I'm coming," she called back. "Where are you?"
"By the tree--the loas tree."
"Okaaaaay." I could hear light running footsteps gradually becoming louder. Then I saw her face peeking out from behind the umbar, the poured concrete storage buildings that stood behind our house, and the single women's residence.

"What do you want?" She tucked her long, glossy, black hair behind her ears.

"Ahmad wants some loas. Do you want to help me get them?"

"Okay. But will your mother and father be angry?"

"No. We can do it quickly. Besides, we're too light to fall through that roof, even if it is cracked." With lightning speed we raced around to the back of the umbar, and climbed up the chain link fence which surrounded the tennis court. When I had climbed high enough I slid first one foot over to the flat roof of the umbar, and then the other, until I was standing straight on its crumbling plastered surface.

"Need help Maro?" I asked as she gingerly slid her first foot to the roof.

"No," she replied obstinately. "If you're not afraid, I'm not either." She scrambled the rest of the way up, stood up straight, and brushed the white plaster dust off her hands and knees.

"Let's go," I urged. We tiptoed carefully to the other end of the umbar, avoiding the huge cracks that marred its surface.

"Now what?" asked Maro. "Are you going across first?"

"I don't know." I looked down at the narrow splintering wooden doorframe that formed a "bridge" from one umbar to the other. It was the only way across.

"You're scared," she accused. "You're a chicken."

"No I'm not!" I retorted hotly. I closed my eyes and eased my body down until I felt a solid base beneath my feet. Then, walking tight-ropes style, arms out at both sides, head up, I crossed the bridge safely. "See?" I said proudly. "Now you have to do it." I was trembling from head to foot.

"Is it scary?" she asked. I suddenly realized that Maro had never gone beyond the first umbar either. She had always stayed behind and watched her older sister pick the fruit.

"If I can do it, you can do it, remember?" I said, mimicking her earlier statement. The kitchen door slammed loudly. We jumped. It was Ahmad. He stood below the bridge, hands on hips, watching our progress.
"Yella, Maro," he urged with a sarcastic laugh. "Are you afraid?"
"No! I'll show you!" she replied and began to ease her body down to the doorframe. I scrambled onto the next umbar.

"Barby."

"What?" I said impatiently, looking down at her. Her eyes were wide with fright.

"Barby, I can't do it."

"Yes you can. Come on. My dad is going to catch us if you don't hurry up. Just don't look down, and crawl across." She took a deep breath, closed her eyes tightly, and painfully inched her way along the frame until she reached the other side. I leaned down and held out my hand to her. "Here," I said. She grabbed it tightly and scrambled up beside me.

"Hurry up. I'm getting hungry," complained Ahmad.

"Oh Ahmad!" we groaned. "We're hurrying. Just let us catch our breath. C'mon Maro," I added, "just ignore him." In a few minutes we had reached the tree. While Maro clutched my sweaty palm, I leaned over and tugged at the loas.

"Are you getting them?"

"Not yet. Hang on tighter; your hand is slipping."

"Pull!"

"I'm trying to. What do you think? How many does he want?"

"I don't know. Just pick them. Hurry up Barby, I'm scared. Will your dad beat you if he finds out?"

"...no, I don't think so." I winced, remembering the huge swollen welts I had seen one day on the back of Maro's legs. "My dad doesn't beat me like yours does. There. Hold that." She grabbed the precious loas.

"Are there any more?"

"Only two or three ripe ones."

"I think Ahmad is mad. You'd better hurry up."

"Will you please shut up?"

She gasped. "Barby, I'm going to tell your father on you. You called me a bad word."

"Don't you dare! Can't you see you're making me scared?" I plucked three more loas and handed them to her.

"That's enough now. Let's go."

"Barby, I think I hear your father." I stiffened, then fell to the roof and lay quietly, listening. I could hear my father's angry voice. He was questioning Ahmad.

"Why did you let them go up there? They could get killed! Barby?"
"Yeah, Dad?"

"Get down from there!"

"Okay." Trembling, I stood up, and took the loas from Maro. "Here Ahmad, catch!" I threw them down to him, one by one. The last loas slipped out of his hands, and split open on the ground. "Oh nooooo!" Maro and I groaned together. After all our hard work the financial loss seemed unbearable.

My father walked over to the doorframe. "Girls, come over here. I'll help you down," he said sternly. His face was grim. As I jumped into his arms I could feel my body suddenly grow weak.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. We just wanted to help Ahmad. I promise we won't do it again...ever." Visions of Maro's beating danced in my head.

"Do you know that you could have been killed? Do you know how scared I was?"

"Yes. I'm sorry." I hung my head.

"I'll talk to you later tonight. Right now I have a man in my office." He strode away. I glanced furtively at Maro and let out a deep sigh. Ahmad glanced at us, then at my father, then at the loas in his hands. His face wore a bemused expression.

"Okay. How much will you pay us?" I was playing the businesswoman now. He dug into his pockets, jingled the coins just for show, and pulled out a twenty-five fils piece, (about the equivalent of five cents).

"Is that all?" Maro groaned. I echoed her complaint. Ahmad cursed rapidly in some strange language.

"Hey what's he saying? Do you know, Maro?"

"No, I don't understand Farsee, or any of that other 'khurbish-murbish' he knows." she replied. We giggled at the "khurbish-murbish". C'mon Ahmad, we want our money. We want twenty-five fils for each of them," Maro declared. I stretched out my hand.

He growled for a little while longer, turned away from us, and meticulously selected a few choice coins from his hand. Then, glaring at me, he deposited two twenty-five fils pieces in my palm.

"Wow! Thanks!" I exclaimed. "That almost makes a rupee. We can go get some bubble gum now. I hope your loas are good!" Ahmad muttered a few more oaths, opened the whining screen door, and shuffled inside.

"You want bubble gum? I wanted bread," said Maro.

"Okay, that sounds good too." I handed her the greasy coins. "Put these in your pocket, okay? Mine has a hole in it. Hey, I'll beat you to the store!"

"Okay, but Barby wait a minute. I want to ask you something. Is
Ahmad mad?"

"No, I don't think so." I shrugged my shoulders. "He just acts that way to get attention. Just like me sometimes, I guess. I like him. I think he lives us too, but he tries not to show it." I glanced behind me at the kitchen window. "He's happy again. See? Shh! Listen a minute."

She followed my gaze. As we peered at the dusty panes we could see his slight figure shuffling back and forth, munching on a loas. He was singing a strange melody, and smiling to himself. "Good old Ahmad," I said, and we began to run.

Barb Weiss
WHO'S WHO

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