

PART ONE  
1963-1966  
AGE 5 TO 8

EARLY CONFUSION

The Avon Lady's hair was brown when she first came to our house, weeks later, black, then red, and in the end, blonde. I asked my mother how this could be and she told me about dye. Immediately, I wanted this magic solution to change my plain brown hair into something more exciting. I asked my mother to buy me some. She stared back at me, said, "Barbara Ann, only bad women dye their hair."

What I couldn't understand was why my mother allowed a *bad* woman into our house to sit and chat with her and make it seem okay. Even more confusing was how my mother's smile disappeared after the Avon Lady left, how her voice turned loud and mean, how she stomped through the kitchen saying, "A woman's place is in her home. With her family. Taking care of her children. Not traipsing all over the neighbourhood."

Still more confusing was when the Avon Lady asked my mother to care for her child while she worked. My mother smiled and welcomed the little girl into our home.

The three-year-old was tiny, with the lightest blonde hair I'd ever seen; hair I wanted. She napped on the cot in our kitchen, sucking her thumb, while her other hand slipped inside her panties, touching herself like we were never supposed to.

When my mother spotted what the little girl was doing she stormed across the room spitting, "Dirty girl! Dirty! Dirty! Dirty girl!"

My mother slapped the child, said, "You're going to grow up to be dirty just like your mother!" I wondered if I, too, would someday grow up to be like my mother.

At that time, I had no idea that this would be only one of many confusing mixed messages from my mother. Throughout my childhood I'd learn that when what you say and what you do are not necessarily the same; only confusion remains. It became up to me to sort out the answers for myself, to decide right from wrong, and what to believe in.

We lived by the sea, on the South Shore of Nova Scotia, in Canada, across the water from Mahone Bay. The road twists and follows along the shoreline. I liked staring at the waves. Mother didn't like the ocean. She said the waves might wash over the road and leave us stranded or drowned.

Our house was the first on the left on a dead-end, dirt road. If you turned right, you'd end up in the harbour. When my father drove down our driveway, Mother braced her hands against the dash of the car and asked, "Are the brakes okay?"

In a huff my father answered, "Yes, the brakes are fine."

Our driveway wasn't that steep, but Mother still tensed and held her breath.

My mother also didn't like being alone after the sun went down, or our father working late at night. That's one of the reasons Dorothy moved in with us.

Dorothy wasn't like the other boarders in our house—she didn't pay money. She'd arrived in her early teens when I was too young to remember. Dorothy was always there, like part of our family, but Mother said she didn't have the same blood as us, and blood is what makes a family.

"Lucky," is what my mother often told her. "Lucky we took you in. Put a roof over your head and saved you from a life of misery." I didn't know what a life of misery was, but it sounded like my parents had done something good. Dorothy scrubbed floors, washed dishes, made beds, and did whatever else Mother wanted done.

Whenever Dorothy mentioned wanting to go out, Mother would tell her, "There's no need of you going anywhere. You have everything you need here!"

"I'd like a boyfriend," Dorothy would say in a quiet voice. "I'll soon be twenty."

"Huh," Mother shot back, "you think long and hard. Men are only after one thing. If you don't like it here, you can leave."

Dorothy stared at my mother, wringing her hands on her apron. "What if I never marry?"

Mother said, "Believe you me, marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be. I wish I was in your shoes. You've no responsibilities, and no man pawing over you at night."

Dorothy said no more. She just turned and walked away, looking sad.

Harold was a fat man in his sixties who paid money to live with us. He spent his days sitting in our kitchen, watching my mother bake and prepare our meals. Often she grumbled under her breath, "Too much time on his hands. Must be nice to sit around all day. Must be nice having nothing to do."

Harold wanted my sister, Kathleen and me to sit on his lap. We didn't want to, but our mother said, "Go on. Go. Sit on his lap. He'll buy you something when the Avon Lady comes."

She kept at us until we did as she wanted.

I didn't think it fair that Dorothy got to pick items from the Avon Lady's colourful book of pictures, even though she never had to sit on Harold's lap.

She also didn't have to put up with his stubbly face, or the way his hand rested on my bare leg, or his hot breath on my cheek. I especially didn't like his belly jiggling against me when he laughed.

But my mother didn't want to hear. She simply told my sister and me, "You're foolish, complaining about someone who's being so nice."

So, I tried to convince myself that sitting on his lap was worth all the trinkets he'd buy me.

Harold sat beside the doorway and dropped bits of tissue on the floor when he saw Dorothy approaching.

"Look at this mess," she said, stooping over to pick it up. Harold reached forward, rubbed the back of her leg. She straightened and spun to face him. "Not here," she hissed, then loudly said, "Stop touching me!"

"What are you talking about?" He chuckled. "I didn't do anything."

"I'm sick of your shit," she said and marched into the pantry. She dipped a pan of water from the bucket we kept on the counter—water Mother and Dorothy carried from our well, for we had no running water in our house. She stomped back to the kitchen and threw the water over Harold.

“Frig!” He jerked back in his chair, “Dorothy! What the hell?” Water ran down his body, onto the floor.

“Hope that cools you off, you fat old bastard!”

Kathleen and I laughed; we skipped back and forth in front of him. Mother stood at the other end of the kitchen pointing at Dorothy. “Clean that mess! Right NOW!”

Before Dorothy could get a rag, I slipped on the wet linoleum and slid across the floor, hitting the back of my head on the edge of the solid oak door.

I stayed on the floor, hands on my head, screaming in pain.

“Barbara Ann!” Mother rushed to me. “Barbara Ann! Are you all right?”

I didn’t know the answer. All I could do was keep crying loudly.

My mother turned toward Dorothy and screeched, “This is all because of your damn foolishness!”

Dorothy remained on the other side of the room, saying nothing.

My mother paced across the dining room with me in her arms, rubbing the back of my head. She didn’t stop talking, all the while she walked. In one sentence she said, “Everything’s going to be all right stop crying stop bawling.” In the next breath, she moaned, “My God, my God, what’s happening? Oh God! Oh God! What’s wrong with her?”

All the while she held me I cried and screamed.

She went to the phone on the wall and called the doctor, screeching into the receiver, “Something’s wrong with Barbara Ann!”

I thought I heard the doctor say...

*“No more monkeys jumping ...*

Then she called my Father and screeched that she thought I was going to die.

*...One fell off and bit his head.*

In a matter of minutes my father rushed home, though it seemed like it took forever. Off to the hospital we drove, my mother in the front seat with me on her lap, cursing Dorothy, while my father drove as fast as he could, cursing his lost time from work.

The rest became a blur of white sheets, strange smells, cold machines, nurses’ and doctors’ hands and the word “concussion”. I had no idea what it meant, but it seemed serious.

It was serious enough that when we got home Mother sent Harold packing, and Dorothy had to tiptoe around the house for weeks to make up for the terrible deed of causing me harm.

The Avon Lady soon stopped coming and from then on, whenever I didn’t do as my mother wanted me to, she blamed it on that bump to my head.

