

## CHAPTER 6

### PLACE OF WEIRD TREES

It Just So Happened that my father started making it in the world. No more delivery wagons. He started working for Ma Bell<sup>1</sup> and was on his way up. In 1927, he was promoted to State Cashier for the State of Arizona, and we were on our way to Phoenix.

My first impression of Phoenix was of weird trees standing out in front of the railway station: trees with branches like the branches we carried to church on Palm Sunday. And not only was it a place of weird trees, it was a place flat, flat, flat. Where were the mountains? The whole place was a bit startling at first, but before long I got used to weird trees and some of that flat, flat, flat turned out to be fascinating desert. In fact, Phoenix proved itself not a bad place to be.

SENSUALITY. We moved into a big house on a big lot--which, when I returned for a visit thirty years later, turned out to be a rather small house on a rather small lot. But what has not changed are my memories of the happiness of the place. A place where my father and mother were really in love. I did not peg this at the time, but I did peg it later. They made some friends, and started partying. Something they had never done before. They went to dances, and not just formal, party dances, but out along the roadside dances. A few miles down the road between our house and Scottsdale, Arizona, there was an open air dance pavilion. Many times we would drive out there at night and while I played around in the parking lot and along the bank of the canal out back, my father and mother danced. And they were good at it. I watched them dance and I sensed that something special was happening. I didn't know what it was. I didn't try to understand it then. But now I know. They were really on their own for the first time. They had slipped the bonds of the Calloley Clan and were Tremmels. I liked to watch them dance. And although the dancing never took with me, then or later, the sensuality did take, both then and later: the music, the subtle excitement, the lovely sexuality. It all rubbed off, even though I did not know it at the time.

DON'T JUST STAND THERE--FIGHT! Something else rubbed off, too. Not at one of the dances, but in a vacant lot just down the alley from our house. Not long after we arrived and got settled in I met a friend. His name was Blane Learn and he lived down the alley from us. Blane was my friend, but there were other kids in the neighborhood, and I was the new kid on the block. One day I was down the alley at Blane's house. I heard my father calling me, so I turned to start home. Between Blane's house and my house there were a half dozen kids standing around, and I knew what they were waiting for. I preferred not to go home, but Father had called and his call had sounded rather commanding. I started home, not looking at anyone standing

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<sup>1</sup>The Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone Company.

between me and there. It didn't work. One of those standing between me and there assumed the task of initiating the new kid. He stepped out in front of me. I glanced toward my house hoping to see my father still out in the yard. I couldn't see him. The kid pushed at me, and pushed at me, and made remarks. And I backed up, and backed up, and said nothing. It seemed to go on forever. And then I heard my father's voice. But he wasn't threatening my assailant. He was threatening me: "Junior, if you don't hit him, when you get home, I'm going to hit you." To the surprise of my assailant, and myself, I exploded in tears and fists--pounding and crying at the same time. My antagonist was taken by surprise and backed off. But I kept coming. I was a small bundle of fury. And I had one other thing on my side. My assailant had retreated backward out of the ruts of the ally into the vacant lot. There were stickers on the ground in that vacant lot, and he was barefoot.

When I got home my father said, "You don't start fights, but if someone else starts one, you fight back."

**BROTHERNESS.** So much for sensuality and pugnacity. Now for brotherness--in two parts. Part one had me back at church again. Dutifully my parents had enrolled me in the parochial school in Phoenix. That school was sponsored by the Benedictine Order, and it was a good school. It was in downtown Phoenix. On one side of the cathedral was the Benedictine monastery; on the other side was the school. The Benedictine monks were secluded behind a high wall for privacy, but some of us sometimes sneaked up on top of that wall to see what was going on inside. Nothing much. Just a lovely garden where occasionally a monk walked by reading his prayer book.

Time passed and then It Just So Happened that I learned that one of the "fathers" was coming to our house to visit. I don't remember how I felt about that prospect, but I am sure that I was curious. I got even curiouser when the good father arrived and I was shunted outside while he talked with my parents. After he left, no one would inform me about the conversation. They just would not talk. But a few days later, probably because she could not resist her pride, Mother told me that the monk reported that the Benedictines (both monks and sisters) had been watching me in school and at daily worship services and had concluded that "Junior," sometime years ahead, might make into a good priest. I was flabbergasted by the suggestion, but also somewhat pleased. I could tell that my mother and father were pleased. It did not distress them at all that I might become one of "Jesus's sunbeams" as long as it was in the right church.

There was, however, one thing wrong with all of this speculating and imagining. Junior was already learning about that sensuality stuff and he was on his way to girls, not monasteries.

**PART TWO ON BROTHERNESS.** There was more to brotherness than monks and monasteries. There was also "brother" brotherness. That occurred in Phoenix, also. My parents decided that Junior was not enough, so they adopted a little girl. That was very exciting, after I got used to it. But during her first night with us, I wasn't so sure. She cried all night. I remember thinking (although I do not remember voicing this thinking at the

time)...thinking that since we had just got her and she wasn't really ours yet, maybe we could take her back. We didn't.<sup>2</sup>

THAT'S NOT THE WAY TO DO IT! As you can see, my father early on was an active and adventuresome fellow. He always had an idea of how to do it. But in Phoenix he ran into a problem he never solved: big red ants out in the back yard. He tried building a bonfire over them. Of course, to no avail. He got more aggressive. He poured kerosene on the ground and set it on fire. No success. He poured gasoline on the ground. Bigger fire. Whoom! No success. He gave up, until one day we were out in the desert and he spotted a big old tortoise. Somewhere Father had gotten the idea that tortoises ate ants. Inspiration! We took tortoise home. Father knocked the bottom out of a big wooden box (there were such things in those days) and used it as a frame around the ant hill. He placed tortoise inside the ant hill fence and waited. It was I who discovered, hours later, that things were not going well. Tortoise was not winning the war. The ants were. Everything on that tortoise that could be bitten had an ant on it biting. He was a mess. Father grabbed his tortoise out of the enclosure. Turned the hose on it to wash off as many ants as possible. He and I went to work picking ants, endless ants, off of a tortoise who knew right from the beginning that only an idiot human would dream up such a thing. Tortoise survived and we took him back to his desert where he could eat anything tortoises eat. The ants survived, too, both in our back yard and in my remembering.

STARS IN YOUR EYES. Also, in Phoenix I discovered not only what sisters are, but what stars are. Phoenix in summer was/is a hot place. Today that hot place is undoubtedly air conditioned, but no such thing in the Tremmel days. In those "good old days" in Phoenix you built your houses with thick walls, and had plenty of fans available. But more can be done. My father invented the "under-the-stars" solution. He purchased sleeping cots. He then built frame enclosures covered with screen wire or cheese cloth. The frames were long enough to go over the ends of the cots. A couple of feet wider than the cots. And about six feet high.

Comes bed time and you take your pillow out in the back yard. Stretch out on your cot. Father fits the frame over your cot, does the same for Mother, does the same for himself. (Kathleen's baby crib was also covered.) And there you all lie looking up at the stars, which are in that desert country of Arizona just a little higher than the trees. It may not be the most efficient way of air conditioning, but it proved a mighty effective way of discovering stars--and God.

Ah, the weird, wonderful things that make a difference in our rememberings!

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<sup>2</sup>Ruth Kathleen Hendrickson lives in Hollywood, Florida.