

The Fortunate Child

Chapter 1

After I read “The milestones in the life of a person are birth, school, graduation, work, marriage, divorce, death, or retirement,” in the epilogue of Joseph Campbell’s book, “The Hero With A Thousand Faces,” I was very surprised. Until that moment, I’d thought that the milestones of my life were incidents that caused the most dramatic changes.

The earliest memory I recall began on a June morning in 1936 when I was awakened by Mama’s voice, screaming up the staircase to the second floor bedroom, “Wake up, Max! My brother is here waiting to take you along with him.”

I really liked being with my nine-year old Uncle Larry. It meant having fun. I quickly jumped out of bed, washed and pulled on my oversized sun suit. Then, holding onto the wooden banister, I hurried downstairs and ran through the living room to the kitchen.

Mama handed me a slice of bread and butter, and Uncle Larry hoisted me, his three-year old niece onto his shoulders. Mama opened the door for us. I waved to my “sissy cousin” Melvin who was eating breakfast at the kitchen table with his mother.

Larry always took me and not him. *Larry loves me* I thought as we hurried to the street corner where the neighborhood boys were waiting for us. I clung to his neck.

“Here comes Larry,” one of them, the tall brown-shirted Otto said, and passed the brown bag of candy that he always brought with him to Larry.

“What are we doing for fun today?” Larry asked.

Otto was wearing his usual brown shirt and stroked his yellow hair. He rubbed his chin and said, “We’re going to throw snowballs.”

I was very surprised to hear him say that. It was a sunny day in June and there was no snow on the ground.

“Dum ta dum” the boys chanted as they galloped after him on their imaginary horses. Then, Otto stopped in front of a big wooden house. Hydrangea bushes were growing on the lawn next to the house. They covered the bushes with their large white flowers. I was amazed. They really did look like snowballs.

Larry put me down on the lawn. Otto tore off one of the blossoms and said, “Add pebbles to these 'snowballs,' and we’ll throw them at the people who pass by.”

I pulled off a flower too, but I didn’t add the pebbles to it. We hurled them at two teenage girls who were walking by.

“Ouch!” They cried and ran away. Then the boys all laughed at the girls.

I saw a lady holding her child by the hand coming toward us. I didn’t think that the boys would throw anything at her, but I was wrong. They pelted her with “snowballs.”

The brave woman raised her arm and pointed to Otto who was the oldest in the group and shouted, “You Nazis are a bad influence on these children!”

Otto pulled off another snowball and was lacing it with pebbles to throw at her. Suddenly, the front door opened and a burly man dressed in an undershirt and pants came outside. Otto screamed, “Yipes!” He dropped his snowball and ran. All the boys and I ran after him.

The owner of the house bounded down his front steps and chased after us. The man caught me by my sun suit's straps and spun me around. I saw him raise his hairy arm to hit me and scrunched my eyes shut in anticipation of what was to come.

When no blow landed on me, I peeked and saw he had lowered his arm. He shook his head and said, “I no hit babies,” and walked back into his house.

Feeling insulted at being called a baby, I stamped my foot on the sidewalk and shouted, “I'm no baby! I know where I live,” and then walked home.

I waited in the house for a long time for Larry to return. I wanted him to read to me in the front room. I was passing the time looking at the pictures in the Grimm's “Fairy Tales” book. Larry had read these stories to me many times. I knew them by heart, but I enjoyed sitting close beside him.

Larry arrived and asked, “Are you okay, Max?”

Seated on the couch, I nodded my head.

He said, “We were worried about leaving you. Come outside and show the boys that you’re alright.”

As we walked from the living room through the kitchen to the back porch, I realized no one had stayed to see what happened to me. When Larry pushed open the door screen, we stood in the doorway and I looked down at the upturned faces.

“Max, what happened?” they asked.

Well, I wasn’t going to tell them the man said I’m a baby and then let go of me. They might call me baby, too, so I quickly made up a story: “The man caught me. I raised my fists and shouted, ‘You let me go, or I’ll hit you!’ And the man let me go.”

On hearing my heroic tale, the boys murmured in wonder. However, Otto shouted, “Nah! He let her go ‘cause she’s a girl.”

I thought being called a girl was worse than being called a baby. “I’m no girl!”

Some of the boys snickered. Otto jeered. “Go ask your Mama if you don’t believe me,” he said, and then they all laughed.

Upset, I opened the screen door and ran inside to search for my mother. I found her on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor tiles with some nasty smelling stuff.

“Am I a girl?”

Surprised by my question, she stopped what she was doing and sat looking up at me. “Of course you’re a girl, Maxine.”

I stamped my foot, “No! I’m not a girl.” Uncle Larry takes me to be with the boys.

“Larry takes care of you while I do the housework, Maxine. Tonight, when I bathe you and Melvin, I’ll show you why you’re not a boy.”

That evening, Mama placed me in the tub first and then dangled Melvin’s body in front of my face. I saw he had something between his legs that I didn’t have. *Hmm. I don’t have that thing between my legs. Is that what makes him a boy? If it comes off, can I put it on me?*

When Mama left us to get a bath towel, I grabbed his boy thing and tried to yank it loose.

“Ow-w!” he wailed.

It didn’t come off. So, I had to agree that I must be a girl. *Hmm. Tomorrow I’ll stay in the house and see what girls do for fun.*

Chapter 2

In the morning, I washed and dressed. From downstairs, I overheard Mama, Aunt Jean, and grandma talking in the kitchen. When I entered the room, Mama giggled and pointed at me. “Max thought she was a boy!” Then the women all laughed.

Mama had squealed on me! Furious, I saw red and charged at her. I hit and kicked her with all my might. Everyone stopped laughing. Mama grabbed my arm and held it behind my back and forced me to walk back upstairs.

After that, she unlocked the dreaded hall closet. Grandma had told me a monster lived inside of it. She pushed me into it and locked the door. “You’ll stay in there until your father comes home.”

I was scared the monster was going to hurt me. It was very dark in there. Terrified, I banged on the door, “Let me out!” In the blackness, I felt something touch my head. *The closet monster wants to eat me!* I fought it back until it no longer dared to touch me. Exhausted, hungry, and thirsty I pounded on the door, “Let me out!”

No one came to open the door. I had to pee and wailed, “It’s no fun to be a girl.” Then, I fell asleep.

Daddy came home and the closet was unlocked. Their angry voices awakened me. I rubbed my eyes and saw there was no monster lying on the floor beside me. Strewn about me were shredded shirts and dresses. *Grandma hadn't told me the truth.*

Mama was shouting, “See what a monster your daughter is. You must punish her!”

My six-foot, two-inch Daddy plucked me from the closet. I was frightened as he carried me into the bedroom and closed the door. Then he put me down and unfastened his leather belt. *He’s going to whip me with it*, I thought.

I whimpered, “Daddy, I want to be just like you.”

He folded his belt in half, and knelt beside me and whispered, “When I snap my belt, you cry out like I’m hurting you.”

I didn’t understand what he’d told me to do. Daddy made a snapping noise with the belt. “Cry out,” he encouraged me, and he snapped his belt again.

“Ouch! Wha-a!” I screamed, making believe Daddy was hurting me.

On the other side of the door, I heard Mama laughing. She said, “That’s it! Hit her some more.”

I was very sad because she was happy to think Daddy was hurting me. He snapped the belt several times. I shed real tears on hearing Mama’s laughter. *Mama is not my friend*. I was glad we were fooling her. I decided Daddy was my friend and hugged his legs. I didn’t speak to Mama for a long time.