

# CHAPTER 1

## *A Nomad from the Start*

“Your request for a visa to the USSR has been denied.” When I read these words on an official document in the spring of 1985, I felt stomach-punched. My career as a Russian specialist was just beginning to take off, and now what was I going to do and where was I going to do it? I knew what had caused this rejection, and the unfairness of it made me feel even worse.

The previous fall I had returned, feeling both proud and slightly edgy, from an exciting trip to Russia as the associate producer of a Metromedia series called *Inside Russia*. The all-male crew considered this assignment a great adventure, and their escapades, many involving young women, caused us to be constantly followed and observed, always on the brink of some crisis. As the only Russian speaker, I had unusual responsibility in this television medium—relatively new to me. After our return to New York, I sat hour after hour with a Russian-speaking film editor, identifying the reels and reels of footage our crew had brought back. Though it would come to harm me later, I was happy to appear in a brief interview with the film’s narrator.

Despite my hours in the editing room, I was not included in the key meeting where decisions were made as to which clips would appear in the final version. I knew that Metromedia would not be content with a lovely travelogue of the Soviet Union, but I was still shocked when our highly critical series appeared on the screen—identifying our Russian colleague as an agent of the KGB, showing an interview with a dissident that we had promised not to air, and in general shaping what we had seen to fit a foreordained concept of Metromedia and our producer.

Some months after the film aired, I applied for a Soviet visa to go to Moscow as a photographer for the San Francisco Boys Chorus. A fun assignment, I thought, photographing young singers. That's when my visa application was rejected. Because of my associate-producer credit and my cameo appearance on-screen, the Russians had judged my role on the Metromedia film to be more important than it actually was. Devastated, I sat glumly in my office, realizing that my future in the Soviet Union might be over.

The director of the Boys Chorus proposed that I accompany the chorus to Hungary and apply for my visa there—the news of my rejection in New York probably hadn't reached Budapest, he reasoned, and as a photographer I could take nice shots of the winsome young musicians by the Danube for the upcoming record album cover. But the Soviet government was more efficient than we anticipated, and my application was rejected again. I had the added humiliation of being asked to brief the choirboys about their upcoming trip to Russia, then waving them good-bye at the Budapest airport.

All this reminded me of my father and his expulsion as ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1952. But my father wasn't the first Kennan to have gone to Russia or to be expelled. My father had been named George in honor of his grandfather's

cousin, a famous American explorer of Russia and Siberia at the time of my father's birth in 1904.

Born in 1845 into a family of modest means in Norwalk, Ohio, the original George Kennan had to quit school and go to work for the telegraph company at the age of twelve. Tapping out messages to all parts of the world must have honed his curiosity about foreign travel, so when a job was advertised in 1865—surveying Siberia for a possible trans-Siberian cable for the Russian-American Telegraph Company—this nineteen-year-old telegraph clerk submitted his application and was accepted. He had never been out of Norwalk. My father used to tell me this story, impressed by the adventurous spirit that propelled this relative forward against heavy odds.

The elder George Kennan made his way to Alaska, and in August 1865 he boarded a steamer to Kamchatka. He spent two years traveling through Siberia by sleigh, by reindeer, and by skin canoe (this was before the building of the Trans-Siberian Railway) in temperatures that went down to sixty degrees below zero, and conditions very primitive. He learned to speak Russian on the way. The western part of Siberia was at that point only sparsely settled, inhabited largely by various Asiatic tribes. As a result of this trip, George Kennan wrote a two-volume book, *Tent Life in Siberia: Adventures among the Koraks and Other Tribes in Kamchatka and Northern Asia*. He returned to the United States and gave lectures about this trip in order to supplement his clerical income. He, like my father, had an intense curiosity about the world he was discovering and an ability to keep meticulous notes and card files. However, his Siberian exploration came to naught, as the transatlantic cable was announced at about that time, killing any prospect of a trans-Siberian cable.

George Kennan next returned to Russia in 1870 to do a pioneering trek through Dagestan and the North Caucasus, a wild, mountainous region virtually never traveled by Westerners. This trip led to more lectures and publications. He must

have been a charismatic speaker, because eventually he earned some sort of world record, giving a speech every night for two hundred consecutive evenings (except Sundays) from 1890 to 1891.

In his articles, the elder Kennan was rather pro Tsar Alexander II's policies, which led the tsar and his courtiers to assume that Kennan would be a good representative for them in the West. The tsarist government even assisted him in arrangements for a trip to survey penal colonies in Siberia and the exile system. This journey, taken from 1885 to 1887, totally changed George Kennan's mind-set. As he visited Siberian prison settlements, he was horrified and became a strong opponent of the tsarist system of exile. He built a false bottom into his suitcase and risked his life carrying out last letters to their families from prisoners who either knew they were sentenced to death or suspected they would not survive imprisonment. He became close friends with some early Russian revolutionaries and a founding member of the American Friends of Russian Freedom. He wrote a series of articles in *The Century Magazine* that grew into a two-volume book, *Siberia and the Exile System*. When I finally read this book, I understood how grueling those trips were and what unusual physical stamina he must have had.

When the book on the exile system was published, the tsarist government, at the personal direction of the tsar, refused to permit George Kennan back in to Russia. In defiance, my ancestor made one more trip to St. Petersburg, but he was immediately picked up by the police and unceremoniously expelled.

When my father talked about the original George Kennan, it was clear that he felt an almost mystical connection with his great-great-uncle. I have rarely seen my father so pleased as when he, my mother, and I visited Tolstoy's home, Yasnaya Polyana. He was ambassador to the Soviet Union at the time, so we were accompanied by two black cars carrying KGB agents, whom my father jokingly called his "guardian angels." Yasnaya

Polyana, a small country estate, had been left almost untouched since Tolstoy walked out in November 1910 and ended up dying at the nearby Astapova railroad station. Fitting in with the musty museum feeling of the house was the wizened old bespectacled man who greeted us; appropriately, he turned out to have been one of Tolstoy's secretaries, Valentin Bulgakov. When my father introduced himself, Bulgakov volunteered, "Oh, yes, I remember your uncle." He rummaged in the shelves and pulled out an old guest book with crisp, slightly tan paper, and we all looked in awe at the original George Kennan's signature. Even the guardian angels stood respectfully silent, in their black suits, a few steps behind.

The George Kennans shared a birthday, February 16; both played the guitar and loved to sail. The original George Kennan eventually married but never had any children, and I know my father felt he was his spiritual heir. My father told me that the one time he had gone to visit the older Kennans, the wife wasn't very nice to the young relative, but her cold reception never dampened his affection for his great-great-uncle. "I feel that I was in some strange way destined to carry forward as best I could the work of my distinguished and respected namesake," he wrote in *Memoirs*. Years later, when I told my father about my visa denial, he nodded his head. "Ah, you see, it's the Kennan curse." All my life, as my work took me back to Russia again and again, I felt this strange magnetic pull. Russia had always been and would always be intertwined with my life.

### **Birth in Riga**

I always loved the story of how my parents found each other. My father, a young American Foreign Service officer studying Russian in Berlin, met my twenty-year-old Norwegian mother, Annelise Sorensen, at a dinner party, and love followed almost instantly. Within six weeks they were engaged, and the marriage took place in the Lutheran cathedral of her hometown,

Kristiansand, on September 11, 1931. I never questioned why my father didn't take my mother back to meet his family before they married—it was much more romantic to believe that passion propelled these two young people from different sides of the ocean to marry so quickly.

Photographs showed a young, dashing couple, often wind-swept, who seemed to spend much time climbing in and out of my father's convertible.

A brittle piece of paper with deeply etched creases, written in an incomprehensible language and festooned with stamps, proves that I was christened in St. Peter's Lutheran Cathedral in Riga, Latvia, the city of my birth, in 1932. My father was stationed in the Baltic capital at the American legation immediately after their marriage, and I appeared nine months later. While I have no memories of Riga, I learned about my first two years, in startling detail, because of my father's propensity to record his life. In a long letter composed for me before the war but delivered only when I was twenty-one, he described Riga: "It was a rather sad place. It had never regained all the trade and activity which it had enjoyed in the good old days before the First World War, when it was one of the greatest ports of the Russian Empire. Many factory chimneys, scattered around the far horizon of the flat country, were mute; and downriver, the great timber port lay—for the most part empty and deserted."

We lived on the top two floors of a big old wooden house on Altonavas Isle, in a factory district, across the Daugava River from the main part of town. My father, who had lost all his money in the Depression of 1929, wrote: "We were in desperation about that house. We had lost all our money in the collapse of Kruger and Toll (if you don't know what that was, consider yourselves a blessed generation, and never ask), so we couldn't really afford the house anymore. But we had a year's lease on it and couldn't give it up."

Across the street from their house, a brass band performed each weekend, playing the same five tunes at full volume from

three in the afternoon until three in the morning. The music did not entertain but served only to compound my parents' misery. "You couldn't even hear yourself think. We tried to wangle out of our lease. We even enlisted the help of the Foreign Office. All in vain. The landlady stuck to her guns, and we remained for the summer, getting rapidly poorer, and slightly deaf. The last month or two we couldn't even pay the rent anymore; but I made it up to her later, in installments."

Finally, in despair, my parents gave up the apartment. My father moved in with friends, and my mother went back to Norway.

Despite their lack of funds, my parents always had help. Great-Auntie Petra came from Norway to take care of things when I was born, and she stayed a month and a half; then a friend of my mother's, Else Rinnan from the north of Norway, "came to visit us," writes my father, but she clearly came as an unpaid babysitter, and we shared a room. Over time, Else was followed by Sigrid, then Rags, and then, for years after the period of my father's letter, by a parade of nameless nannies.

My mother, nurse Else, and I left my father in Riga and traveled together on a steamship via Tallinn and Helsinki, a trip that took a week. This was before all the child equipment of today, and I simply rode and slept on the lid of the basket that held my diapers and clothes. From then on there was a constant back and forth to Norway. I was six months old the first time my parents left me alone with my grandparents. Three months later my parents reappeared from Riga to join us, as the U.S. government had ordered all Foreign Service officers to take a month's leave without pay owing to the Depression. My father reported of this visit: "You were a friendly, happy baby. . . . We were very thrilled and pleased to see you and to think you were our child."

But thrilled as they may have been, they nevertheless left me with the grandparents while they spent most of the month skiing at my grandfather's hunting cabin, Jorunlid, in the

mountains, accessible only by a long car ride and then a two-hour climb on skis.

After this visit, my parents took me with them back to Riga. Despite the family's financial straits, a new nursemaid accompanied us. But, according to my father, I stayed only the summer, and "in the fall you were taken back to Kristiansand again. . . . I did not see you for nearly a year thereafter."

I stayed in Kristiansand with my grandparents while my mother accompanied my father on her first trip to the United States, to meet his family. Shortly thereafter she joined him in Moscow, where as third secretary he was setting up the new American embassy, the United States not having had representation in the Soviet Union since the Russian Revolution of 1917. When my father finally returned to Norway, alone, a year later, he found me: "a grown-up young thing of over two years, speaking exclusively Norwegian. At our first encounter, the family urged you—with much cooing and baby talk—to show some signs of recognition or affection for me, but you didn't remember me, and your only reaction was the fierce declaration: *Jeg vil ikke gaa til mannen* (I don't want to go to the man)."

My mother reappeared a few days later, and my father wrote: "You were about as offish with her. One morning I met you early in the morning and invited you to come up and say good morning to your mother. You replied only with signs of disgust and truculence. I picked you up, carried you to our room, and gave you a sound licking. From that time on, you were again our daughter, and a very affectionate one."

I have always hated that story. I don't know which part bothered me more—my father spanking a two-year-old who barely knew him or my turning into a sweet, obedient child after being punished.

When I was three, my parents took me with them on my first trip to Moscow. An early insomniac, I used to get up at night and stand by the cold window overlooking the Kremlin, de-

veloping, as a result, a severe case of pneumonia. At the local Soviet hospital, administrators were afraid to assign a nurse to a foreigner, so American embassy wives stayed up all night pumping air into my lungs with a primitive oxygen pillow, which saved my life.

Soon after that, my father developed bleeding ulcers. He was sent to a sanatorium in Vienna for treatment, and we accompanied him. In time his ulcers were cured, and I picked up Viennese German. We have photographs of my parents and me, all dressed up in Sunday clothes, walking in the sanatorium's manicured gardens and looking like a fashion advertisement rather than a patient and his family.

In late fall 1935, Mother became pregnant again, and the two of us traveled to the United States to await this new child, while my father remained in Moscow. We ended up moving in with Father's sister, Jeanette, her husband, Gene, and their three sons, in Ravinia, Illinois.

Interestingly enough, in my parents' correspondence of the time, the unborn child is always referred to as "he." It must have been a shock when, on April 24, 1936, a beautiful blond baby girl, Joan, was born.

After Joanie's birth, our father came to the States on leave. Our new family of four sailed from the United States on a transatlantic steamer to Hamburg, along with the U.S. Olympic Team going to participate in the shameful 1936 Berlin Olympics. At age four, I had no impression of our famous travel mates on this trip, but I loved these journeys—the smell of the ocean, the slow rocking of the ship, and the screeching of the seagulls. I also loved the undivided attention I received from my parents. There was always a well-equipped playroom for the youngsters, and I was happy amusing myself with other children. After a year in Moscow we were sent back to America, where we moved into a rented house in Alexandria, Virginia, and I went to kindergarten. There are many black-and-white snapshots of me in the garden, decked out in embroidered

dresses and Norwegian folk costumes—photos presumably staged to send to my grandmother.

At the end of 1938, we boarded another steamer and sailed back to Europe. My parents were returning to Moscow, and Joanie and I were taken to Norway to spend the winter at my grandparents' apartment. There was heavy snow that year, and Joanie and I played outside on snow banks taller than we were. I had won the heart of my grandfather, known to us as Bessa, and would sit on his lap for hours while he patiently helped me learn my multiplication tables.

Often he would hold my hand and lead me down the stairs into his hardware store, where I relished the smell of sawdust and the hanging pots, knives, and cooking utensils, all arranged by size. I especially loved looking at the smaller pots and implements and wishing that I could play with them.

My grandmother supervised Christmas preparations that went on for days; I remember the baking, the cookie smells, the candlelit tree around which we danced, holding hands, and singing carols on Christmas Eve. My dolls would mysteriously disappear at the beginning of that holiday season and emerge under the tree with newly painted china faces, new clothes, and fresh wigs.

In the spring my parents reappeared to take us to Prague, where my father was stationed at the American embassy as a second secretary. My main memory is being held up to see Hitler from the window of our apartment. He was riding in an open convertible, on his triumphal entry into Prague in March of 1939. I still have my letter to my grandparents, written in Norwegian, about this important event. My father was soon transferred to Berlin, where, although I didn't go to school, I did perfect my German. My parents told me that I would answer the door when they had guests and greet each guest in his or her language—Russian, German, Norwegian, or English.

But despite my linguistic prowess, this was a confusing time for me. There was a parade of constantly changing nurs-

es—some nice and some awful. All of them drilled into me that I had to behave well or my parents wouldn't love me. I started having a recurrent nightmare: I was to be buried alive, and my nurse's job was to dress me up to say good-bye to my parents before I left to be entombed. The nurse said I had to wear a hat, but since I hated hats this was almost as upsetting as the prospect of interment. She then ordered, very strictly, "Whatever you do, you mustn't cry. Crying would upset your parents, and you can't do that." Somewhere after bidding farewell to my parents, I would awake, trembling, relieved at my narrow escape.

In the spring of 1940, Mother, Joanie, and I traveled back to Norway for a spring skiing vacation at Jorunlid. While Joanie was left behind with a nurse at my grandparents' home in Kristiansand, I happily went skiing with Mother and the Norwegian family. There was no telephone in the mountains, but as soon as Mother and I returned to Kristiansand, my father, having heard rumors of an impending German invasion of Norway, was on the phone, telling my mother to bring us back to Berlin on the next train. Mother, who did not like changing her plans, refused, saying, "Oh, George, we are having a lovely time, and the girls are so happy." My father then sent a telegram: I ORDER YOU TO TAKE THE CHILDREN AND LEAVE ON THE NEXT TRAIN TO GERMANY. This time she did not argue, and we left on April 7, 1940. Two days later, the German troops landed and marched into Kristiansand. I was seven years old.

My prescient father was convinced that the war was going to spread. After a few more months in Berlin, he insisted that Mother take Joanie and me back to the United States. Off we went, back to the New World.

### **Warm Hearth in a Cold Place**

During the peripatetic years of my early childhood, my grandparents' home in Norway emerged for me as the one stable base. For my father, as well, my mother's family must have substituted

for a kindred life that he had never known. In another letter, he wrote emotionally about the Sorensen home. At the time, he was in Moscow, worrying about the war clouds hovering over Europe.

I cannot tell at the time of writing whether you will ever see that house again, so I must describe it for you. The family lived on the second floor, above the store and the warehouses. You slept in the little front room, one of the two rooms on a different level, over the entrance driveway. There was an iron stove in the one you slept in. Every morning, early, in the darkness, the maid would come in and build a fire in the stove, and the light would flicker in the dark. The warmth would spread throughout the little room, and gradually it would get light outside and there would be the sounds of early morning in the street.

I wonder whether you sensed, in the world of infancy, something of the note of security and wholesomeness and human warmth in the crackling of the stove in that room, where other children had lived and grown up before you. That, my child, was part of a home, a real home, as people knew them when your mother and I were young—a home in the deepest, most indescribable meaning of the word. It was so much a home that I, who am not a hysterical person, cannot think of it now—and all that has happened to it in the meantime—without weeping.

Unlike the Kennan family, which migrated westward, farm to farm, from Massachusetts to Milwaukee, the Sorensens had been rooted for generations in Kristiansand, an old port city located at the southern tip of Norway. The Sorensen men were house painters, a skill for which nineteenth-century Norwegians had to study and pass numerous tests. Part of the exam was to copy a painting from the art museum to demonstrate how skillfully the applicant could mix colors. Grandfather's painting still hangs in the Norway summerhouse. Painters

had special artisan stature in this rather rigid class society. My great-grandfather, Severin, opened a small paint shop that ultimately grew into the hardware store. He must have had other gifts in addition to painting, as he became the vice-mayor of Kristiansand. He died young, of a heart attack while giving a public speech, and according to photographs, half the city showed up for his funeral.

His son, my grandfather, Einar Haakon Sorensen, stopped house painting and raised the family status by becoming a prominent local businessman, owning a lumberyard as well as the hardware store. He joined the Klubbsekskapet Foreningen, known as “Klubben,” a club for male civil servants and businessmen, which became the focus of my grandparents’ social life. It still functions today as a private men’s club. Tellingly, my mother never mentioned our house-painting forebears. I only learned about them from my Norwegian cousin many years later, after my mother had sunk into dementia.

The roomy two-story apartment, described by my father in his letter, was above the hardware store on a street called Skippergata. My grandfather was born there in 1875 and lived there with his mother until he was thirty. Only after her death did he start looking for a wife and find my grandmother, Elisabeth. She was from Oslo, and they met at a wedding in the coastal town of Grimstad. They had something in common, as her father was also a master artisan, supervisor of the handcraft workshop in the prison located in the Akershus Fortress. She grew up in a house on the prison grounds, which I thought was strangely romantic. When Grandfather Einar proposed to my grandmother, his older sister, Anna, nicknamed Tatti, cautioned Elisabeth, by now her good friend, against marrying him. She described her brother as “spoiled, demanding, and solitary in his habits.” But my gregarious, fun-loving grandmother married him anyway and moved into the apartment above the store, where she bore four children, the oldest being my mother, Annelise.

Always social, my mother appropriately made her first appearance in the summer of 1910 in that Kristiansand apartment the day after a family gathering full of joyous talk, drink, and food. Family lore has it that my grandmother sang a popular opera aria, “Mona, My Handmaiden,” so loudly at the dinner that it could be heard out on the street. The next morning she gave birth to my mother. In a letter to my mother celebrating her confirmation day in the Lutheran church, her aunt Petra described the event: “You made your entrance into the world in a house filled with people, and everybody was happy. Your mother called you the ‘Sunray’ of Sorenhus.”

My warm and loving grandmother, whom I called Mormor, was very different from her quiet, reserved husband. Everything about her was ample, including her body. All summer long it was encased in Norwegian folk costumes that she filled to overflowing. She had a loud, infectious laugh, long brown hair that she washed and brushed to dry outside in the sun, and a melodious voice. She loved to sing and to participate in amateur theatricals, but my grandfather vocally disapproved. He did not like her performing in front of other men, and she reluctantly gave up the stage. Her talents were then confined to the kitchen, where she produced, with the help of a young maid, delicious meals. Streams of great-aunts, aunts, uncles, and cousins drifted in and out of both the apartment in the winter and their house on the fjord in summer—mostly, I suspect, to partake of my grandmother’s cooking. Both homes were suffused with the smells from the kitchen. I was fascinated by the elaborate ceramic spice rack that hung on the wall in the apartment, each miniature drawer labeled with the name of a different fragrant spice. My grandmother’s succulent meals inexorably expanded her already wide waistline. To me she was pillowy, warm, and nurturing—everything my slim, reserved mother was not. Mother, however, described her simply as “fat.”

Food played a major role in my life during those Norwegian summers. A favorite activity was picking wild blueberries

and strawberries in the woods or gathering cherries from the big cherry tree in the garden. Every day we washed and peeled freshly dug, dirt-coated potatoes, until our fingers wrinkled in the cold water. No *middag*, or main meal, was ever complete without potatoes. Normally we ate fish, but on Sundays, Mormor cooked *ryper*, or ptarmigan, which Grandfather Bessa had shot, and served it with a sour-cream gravy that years later we still try to duplicate. At each *middag*, we children were measured out a small glass of “Solo,” a Norwegian sparkling orange drink, and the meager ration made it especially desirable. In the afternoons at coffee time, Mormor made delicate waffles topped with fresh strawberries and whipped cream, another favorite.

Unlike my tender grandmother, Bessa terrified most children, but never me. When I was three, he built “Sorenhus,” a house on a promontory jutting out into the wide Kristiansand fjord. An artificially created flat lawn in front led to rocks that tumbled down to the sea. While all the other houses snuggled into the rocky coast were similar—two-story white wooden buildings—Sorenhus was dark brown, flat-roofed, and low-lying. Our house looked like no other house on the coast and was probably considered an eyesore. I wonder what inspired my grandfather to be so modern and so original, defying local tradition.

Bessa stood out in other ways, as well. Most of our neighbors commuted to town on open, round-bottomed wooden boats with noisy, smelly motors. He, by contrast, had bought a sleek American Chris-Craft with a flat bottom and canvas roof, which made little sense in the rough northern waters of the Skagerrak, the strait separating Norway and Denmark. But the boat was distinctive and elegant, and when the German army occupied Norway in April 1940, the commandant immediately came to my grandfather to commandeer the Chris-Craft.

Clever Bessa had foreseen this and transferred ownership to my father, his American son-in-law. As America was not yet

in the war, the Germans could not take possession. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, the Germans returned for the boat.

“You can have it,” my grandfather said. “But, unfortunately, the motor has been stolen.”

The Germans searched his hardware store, the Kristiansand apartment, and Sorenhus, but they never found the motor. Grandfather, again with astute foresight, had arranged for a carpenter in his lumberyard to build a dining room table with a thick hollow base to house the motor, and all during the war the family ate on top of the Chris-Craft engine.

Both before and after the war, my grandfather loved to commute across the sea in his beloved Chris-Craft. Whenever we arrived by steamer from America, we would hang over the railing to see the first glimpse of Bessa, bobbing around the big ship in the Chris-Craft, the Norwegian flag flying, waiting to escort the liner to port. We would descend the gangplank, our belongings would be piled up on the dock and transferred to his boat, alongside baskets of food and provisions already purchased by him, and off we would go to Sorenhus. Because the house was so low and brown, it was hard to see from the water. Always visible, however, was the flagpole on the front lawn. Every day that he was there, Bessa flew the Norwegian flag. The only time he made an exception was on the day of our arrival. Then, in our honor, he raised the American flag.

The boat would dock at our boathouse, located on a little bay a fair distance from Sorenhus.

Bessa then piled all the suitcases and packages into a wheelbarrow, which he pushed down a long path through the woods toward our home. The house itself was simple but light and airy. We had no running water, so we used a two-seater outhouse, which no one ever seemed to share. Water for the kitchen was hand-pumped from a well. When it was warm we bathed in the sea, but on cold days we used a metal tub that Mormor filled with water heated on the stove. Joanie and I loved our

Sorenhus arrivals. We knew that Mormor, smiling and full of hugs, would be waiting, always with a lunch, coffee, or dinner prepared, depending on the time of day. We scanned the horizon as we approached on the Chris-Craft, and as soon as we sighted the American flag fluttering above the rocky shore, we knew we were home.

Family members wandered through our visits to Norway and were an important part of my childhood. These included my mother's siblings, the most dashing of whom was my uncle Einar, the closest to my mother in age and spirit. His exploits during the Second World War became legendary in the family. Heading toward England from Norway in a small boat, he was captured by the Germans and taken to Germany. He made several spectacular escape attempts, helped by the fact that he spoke excellent German, which he'd learned when he attended business school there. But he was always caught. Finally, while being moved to a maximum-security prison camp by railroad, Einar climbed out through an air vent at the top of the boxcar and jumped off the train. He found his way to Hamburg and ultimately to neutral Sweden, after sneaking onto a coal freighter and burying himself under the coal. He almost starved before the freighter sailed days later. From Sweden he set off, again in a small boat, to England. This time he arrived successfully and spent the rest of the war as an officer of the Norwegian army in exile. I loved the stories of my uncle's wartime adventures. Back at the National Cathedral School for Girls, I was awarded the Laura Tuckerman Prize for English for an essay about him.

My mother's two other siblings were still at home in the Skippergata apartment when I first lived in Kristiansand. In keeping with the Norwegian penchant for nicknames, my mother's sister Rigmor, six years younger, was called Mossik. Unlike Mother, who had brown hair and a dark, mysterious beauty, Mossik was blond and outdoorsy, radiating good health. Much more outgoing than my mother, she showed an interest

in me. There were many times I would have been more than happy to have her take my mother's place.

When she was eighteen, Mossik came to Vienna, while my father was being treated for bleeding ulcers. There she met a young American, Bob Burlingham, who was living with his mother, Dorothy, daughter of the artist Louis Comfort Tiffany. Mossik ultimately married Bob, and they had five children.

The other sibling to share that apartment was my mother's youngest brother, Per Svein. He became an English teacher in the local gymnasium, or high school. While never close to my mother, he was curious and eager to share knowledge and tell stories that were a treat for his American nieces and nephews. Per Svein took us on hikes, boat trips, expeditions, and, when we returned to Norway after the war, he was the one who reintroduced me to the country.

In common with the Kennan family, the Sorensens displayed a Northern stoicism and a disapproval of showing undue emotion. I always felt that this self-restraint was a definite drawback and wished that we had been spiced up with a little Spanish or Italian blood. But it is to the Sorensens that I attribute my love of the sea and the visual arts, as well as my lifelong appreciation of cooking and good food. More than anything, I received a strong sense of family and of place, without which I might have been forever searching for roots. In a life of many shifting scenes, Norway remained a constant. My father promised my grandmother before my parents married that they would return to Norway every year. He kept that promise. I still do.

### **The Kennans**

I never had the same sense of place about Milwaukee, my father's birthplace and childhood home, as I had about Norway. What I have learned about my Kennan grandparents has been culled

from letters collected by my father's closest sister, Jeanette, who shared his passion for historical research. She ferreted out and saved much correspondence from this family of constant letter writers. Very little went undocumented.

The Kennans were Scots who migrated to Ireland and then to the States. For generations, the Kennan men worked as farmers and ministers, moving slowly westward from Massachusetts, but my great-grandfather changed the pattern and became a lawyer. His son, my grandfather Kossuth Kent Kennan—named after a well-known Hungarian freedom fighter of the time, Lajos Kossuth—was the first Kennan to go to college. The name Kossuth may have seemed a little exotic for midwestern tastes, so he was always called Kent. As the family had little money, Kent struggled to earn his college tuition at Ripon College in Wisconsin. He frequently quit school and worked at odd jobs until he earned enough to continue his studies.

By the time he met my grandmother, Florence James, Kent was already in his forties and had been married to a wife who died during childbirth. He lived a simple life, with no social pretensions. Florence, in contrast, came from a socially prominent family. Her father, Charles James, was president of the Northwestern National Insurance Company. When Kent came courting, Florence's parents deemed him too impecunious and without prospects to be an acceptable suitor. So they dispatched Florence off with her sister, Venice, on a six-month tour of Europe, hoping that the trip and the separation would cause Florence to forget Kent.

In fact, the banishment had the opposite effect. The young couple, with Venice's help, engaged in a courtship by mail, with letters that started out "My Dear Miss James" and "Dear Mr. Kennan" and ended up "My Dear Florence" and "Dear Kent." Secretly engaged by the time Florence returned to Milwaukee, they married in January of 1895 at the home of Florence's

brother. Her parents did not attend. Despite the wedding boycott, the James parents did stay in touch with their daughter and periodically helped the financially hobbled couple.

When my father, George Kennan, was born in 1904, Florence had already given birth to three girls, Frances, Constance, and Jeanette. Two months after my father's birth, Florence developed peritonitis and died. I was told that in those days a married woman needed her husband's consent before an operation, and they could not reach my grandfather, off on a fishing trip. The story still gives me the chills. But the truth was worse. While appendectomies were controversial and considered dangerous, a husband's permission was not legally required. In Florence's case, the doctors disagreed on what should be done for the young mother, so they ended up doing nothing. Aunt Jeanette told me about being brought in with her sisters to say a final farewell to their mother. In his book *Sketches from a Life*, my father wrote of his mother: "We all held you, in retrospect, in a sort of awed adoration—our ever-young, dead mother, beautiful, unworldly, full only of love and grace for us, like a saint."

The family lived in a tall, narrow dark house on Cambridge Avenue, given to them by the James grandparents after the birth of Jeanette and described by her as noted for "its gaunt exterior and lack of sunshine." It didn't even have a yard. She speculated that the gloomy house was Florence's punishment for marrying Kent Kennan. Aunt Jeanette added, "They surely could have afforded to be more generous."

Florence's death left my widowed grandfather saddled with responsibility for four young children, so a distant relation of the James family from Massachusetts, a young woman named Grace Wells—doomed to spinsterhood because of a slight hunchback—came to live with the family and took care of the Kennan children for four years. She was much loved by all, so much so that I am named for her. I knew that I should be proud

of being named for this good, self-sacrificing woman, but as a child I secretly wished for a more dashing namesake.

In the summers the Kennan family packed up and traveled by train to a cottage on Nagawicka Lake in Waukesha County, on land left to Florence by her family. After dark, cold winters in the narrow town house, those summers with swimming, boating, and berry picking were memorable for the four Kennan children. My father, who became a passionate sailor, named one of his first sailboats *Nagawicka*.

Family life was again disrupted when his father married a Ripon College classics teacher, Sarah Louise Wheeler, from Kalamazoo, Michigan. My father was four. Her arrival meant that the beloved Cousin Grace had to leave. The new stepmother was not warmly welcomed by the four Kennan children. Frances and Connie nicknamed Sarah “the kangaroo from Kalamazoo,” and all accounts depict her as unaffectionate and lacking in charm. My grandfather was fifty-seven and his bride thirty-five.

Four years after their marriage, Kent and his new wife took his children to spend a year in Kassel, Germany, so that he could study the German tax code and the children could learn German. The family sailed from New York on the Hamburg America liner the *President Grant*, in August of 1912. This trip had an enormous influence on my father, aged eight at the time, who later talked about the time abroad and the voyage as sparking his interest in foreign languages, foreign cultures, and leading to a lifelong passion for boats and the sea. The trip was cut short, however, when Sarah became pregnant, and the family had to return to Milwaukee. A little boy, Kent Wheeler Kennan, was born in April of 1913.

Back on Cambridge Avenue, the family had little social or community life. In *Memoirs*, my father describes the Kennans as having “an obdurate tight-lipped independence, a reluctance to become involved with other people unless in a church com-

munity.” The stepmother’s personality may have added to their isolation.

The presence of a new baby and the influence of three older sisters contributed to my stern grandfather’s desire “to toughen George up,” so in 1918 he sent his shy, sensitive son of fourteen to a military school, St. John’s Northwestern Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin, twenty-five miles from Milwaukee. St. John’s was derisively known as “the rich man’s reform school.” My father hated it so much that he ran away from the school and back to his family, but his father returned him with a stern note saying that he deserved any punishment that the school would mete out. When my father told me this story, I was shocked that my grandfather was so cruel, although my father was rather proud of it. After graduating from St. John’s, my father never lived at home again and returned to Milwaukee only for brief family visits. I found a startling description of his hometown in his diary: “A raw, dirty wind sneaked out of the railway yards and the dim alleys, bringing clouds of stinging dirt; and over it all lay the familiar flavor of cheap, sinister sin—of back rooms in saloons, of sailors in bus stations, of the stage doors of burlesque theaters, and of dirty picture cards—the same flavor that hung over it, so repulsively and yet so unsettlingly, when I was a youth arriving and departing from this square on my trips to and from the military academy.”

My father’s one distinction at St. John’s was as the class poet. In his junior year, he read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* and decided that if Princeton University could produce such a talented writer, that was where he wanted to study. No graduate of St. John’s had ever gone east to college, so my father was excused from drill for his whole senior year in order to study for the Princeton entrance exams, which he nonetheless failed. Undeterred, he moved to Princeton and spent the summer studying, paying his way by trimming trees. He passed the exams in the fall and enrolled in Princeton. An introverted

and vulnerable boy from the Midwest, he was totally unprepared for Princeton. He had a lonely time there but graduated in 1925. In his *Memoirs*, my father described himself in college: "I was hopelessly and crudely Midwestern. I had no idea how to approach boys from the East. I could never find the casual tone. My behavior knew only two moods: awkward aloofness and bubbling enthusiasm."

While his description of his Princeton years is bleak, my father often exaggerated his bad times. Since he spent the last fifty years of his life living in Princeton and became a dedicated alumnus, wearing the Princeton jacket and hat and marching in Princeton P-rades, it's clear that his years in college acquired a rosier hue in retrospect.

Meanwhile, the family scattered. Constance and Jeanette married and left Milwaukee. My father's oldest sister, Frances, ran away to be an actress in New York and advanced to playing second leads. She never made it to the top. Instead, she fell in love with an Alaskan and moved to Juneau. I met Aunt Frances only once, in 1982, when the four Kennan siblings had a reunion at our family farm in East Berlin, Pennsylvania, and she was already in her eighties. She had been a heroine to me when I was a young girl. I admired her independence, her unconventional life, and her love of the theater. When I was finally able to tell her this, she looked surprised and stunned me by responding: "My dear, my life was not at all like that. We had no money, and your uncle Harry was the town drunk. I worked as a librarian to make ends meet, but Uncle Harry imbibed much of what I earned. You can't imagine how we lived."

I was chagrined by how little I had understood and how I had romanticized her unhappy life.

After my grandfather's death in 1933, the Cambridge Street house was sold and Sarah Wheeler Kennan moved back to Michigan, disappearing from our lives. The Kennan siblings, however, kept up with Uncle Kent, who became a well-known composer, musical scholar, and professor at the

University of Texas in Austin. Kent and my father corresponded regularly, but we saw Uncle Kent only episodically, as he lived so far away.

The Kennans often found themselves in financial straits. My father even worked as a mail carrier in Trenton during college to earn money to go home for Christmas. But when the James grandparents died, each Kennan grandchild was left a nice inheritance, so, for the first time, the four Kennan children had money.

When my father met my Norwegian mother in Berlin, he was the dashing bachelor and she referred to him as the “super American” who appeared and courted her in a convertible car.

Years later, my cousin Lillebeth gave me my mother’s letters to her parents in Norway, written in Berlin at the time she met my father. Mother was looking after a cousin’s child, as well as taking a secretarial course, learning how to write business letters in English, German, and French. Each letter home contained a plea to her father asking for more money. Maybe he kept her on a tight leash as a means of control. When she married my father, she was happy to escape that constraint. I don’t think that she married him for money, but there is no question that his comfortable financial situation added a little luster.

Their newfound affluence, however, was short-lived. All the Kennan children, except Aunt Connie, put their money in the care of Aunt Jeanette’s husband, Uncle Gene Hotchkiss, a Chicago broker, and it was all lost in the Depression. From then on, my parents lived on a small Foreign Service salary, cut by 50 percent in the Depression years. The loss of income was especially hard on my mother, the household accountant, and I have uncovered long lists of even the minutest expenses, such as “one pair of socks—89 cents,” and “one pencil—10 cents.” To the end of her days, Mother never bought in bulk and was always concerned about money and financial security.

As a young girl I devoured my father’s and Aunt Jeanette’s stories of growing up in the narrow dark house, dominated by

the grim grandfather and haunted by the ghost of the beautiful young mother—it was almost as good as reading *Jane Eyre*. I also inherited some of the moral strictures passed down by the Kennan family, which often tormented me when I strayed too far from the prescribed path. But, on the positive side, my love of books and of writing certainly came from this family of bookworms.

### **On the Move Again**

The constant dislocations of my early years make that period a blur, with only disconnected memories standing out. In 1940, when our father decided it was too dangerous for us to remain in Berlin, mother took Joanie and me back to Ravinia, Illinois, where she left us in the care of my father's sister Jeanette and her husband, Gene Hotchkiss. Mother then disappeared to rejoin our father in Berlin. My cousin Gene later told me that he and his twin brother, Jim, then twelve-year-olds, resented having two little cousins dumped on their family and having to give up their room in the small house. My aunt Jeanette, however, was the warmest and sunniest of human beings, and if there was a resistance to our presence, we were never aware of it. Quite the contrary. When I was with my parents, a succession of nannies and nurses tended to us, but in Ravinia I felt part of a family. I loved Aunt Jeanette's sparkling eyes and engaging smile and boisterous, jolly Uncle Gene, who came home from his work in Chicago and put on a big show of shaking the ice in a silver martini pitcher. An older son, Frank, lived at home, too, but it was the twins that I worshipped and followed around, much to their annoyance.

Sometimes I wonder about my aunt's having taken us in so uncomplainingly. Maybe Uncle Gene's role in the loss of my father's inheritance explained why my parents felt comfortable dumping two little girls, aged four and eight, on a family living in a crowded house with three adolescent boys. Aunt Jeanette

even ran a home nursery school to make ends meet. Joanie became one of her pupils. Aunt Jeanette enrolled me in third grade at Ravinia Elementary School.

Scholastically, I seemed to hold my own, despite the fact that I'd never gone to second grade. When I asked my mother about this strange omission, she answered simply, "It wasn't convenient."

A great plus about living with Aunt Jeanette was reading. I had always loved books, but my mother disapproved of her daughter's preference for reading over helpful chores. She rationed how many books I could take from the library. In Ravinia, however, reading was considered a good thing, and I spent happy hours on the screened porch overlooking the ravine, lost in a book.

During the winter, Mother returned and announced that we were moving to Milwaukee. We went to live with Tekki Brumder—a friend of Mother's from Pine Lake, where the Hotchkisses had their summer cabin—in her large Milwaukee house. I never understood this unexplained move. With no apparent trouble I was enrolled in the prestigious, private Milwaukee Downer Seminary. I suspect that the Brumders, heirs to a beer fortune, had something to do with the ease of my admission, and considering my family's lack of finances, they may also have paid the bill. All the other girls had known one another since first grade, so I was especially scared going into this new class, but I was skipped to fourth grade and felt inordinately proud of this advancement. My letters prove that I loved the school, but today I can't conjure up one teacher or student. About three months later, we were just as abruptly moved back to Aunt Jeanette's. I was put back into third grade, and Mother left again, this time for parts unknown. My feelings of upset and humiliation about this demotion are still clear, as I wrote my parents: "How are you? I am not fine. I'm not happy. I cried all afternoon and part of the night. I want to go back to Milwaukee Downer Seminary. Will you please let me?"

Needless to say, nothing happened.

My father remained in Berlin, and we did not see him for two years. In June of 1941 Mother reappeared, and we spent another memorable summer at Aunt Jeanette and Uncle Gene's rustic cottage in Pine Lake, swimming and sailing. At the end of this idyll, Mother announced we were moving to Bronxville, New York. We took the long train trip from Chicago and settled in a yellow hilltop house on Lookout Avenue. I attended fourth grade in Bronxville Elementary School, again the new girl in my class. Why did my mother choose Bronxville? It was close to Riverdale, New York, where mother's sister, Mossik, lived. Mother claimed that she chose Bronxville because it had a good school system, but how did she, who had never lived in the United States except for visits to Wisconsin and Illinois, hear about the Bronxville school system?

In December came Pearl Harbor. Mother sat us down in the living room and told us that America was at war. As a result, she said our father would probably be imprisoned in Germany. She didn't know when we would see him again. To make things worse, she added that communications had been cut off from our Norwegian relatives, because Norway was occupied by the Germans, now our enemy. There would be no more letters to and from my grandmother. That was the only time I saw my mother cry. She must have felt very alone, separated from both her husband and her parents, and only her sister Mossik nearby. We were too young to be much comfort. I understood, however, that war was serious, and I gave our father, serving his country, some kind of hero status.

My mother soon made friends and went out a lot. She had an admirer, a bachelor named Carl, who came to call and of whom I was very jealous. I think I blamed him for the move to Bronxville. Spending a lot of time in the kitchen with our cook/housekeeper, Betty, I began to resent Mother and at the age of nine decided to run away from home. Several nights were spent amassing the appropriate clothes for this trip—how

many pairs of underpants did I need, and how many T-shirts? My heart thumping with fear, I stole \$25 from mother's dark-green leather purse. I was going to New York City, but where in the city I was headed and what I planned to do when I got there remains unclear. I walked as far as the railroad station with my small suitcase, but then the realization that I had nowhere to go must have sunk in, and I lost my nerve. Slinking back to Lookout Avenue, an unsuccessful escapee, I managed to replace the money and unpack my suitcase, and my venture into the real world remained undiscovered.

Recently, I found in Mother's papers a year-end report card from Bronxville. I read it avidly, looking for clues about this strange year. Much to my surprise, the report card gave a picture of a poised and capable little girl: "agreeable, friendly, and cooperative . . . a conscientious worker, she gives excellent attention and participates freely in situations such as topical discussions, planning class activities, and contributing ideas to help solve group problems." The funniest part is that my teacher, Mrs. Castor, continues, "She has a good memory and uses it to advantage." Yet I remember so little. Why did my mother keep this report card and no others?

The school year's end brought a note of hope. Daddy was coming home! The American diplomats, who had been interned in an abandoned spa in Bad Nauheim, Germany, were sent home on a Swedish liner, the *Drottningholm*. The same ship had brought the German diplomats, confined at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, back to Germany. Mother met the ship, but Joanie and I were not included. When our extremely thin father appeared in Bronxville, we looked with awe at this gaunt man we hadn't see for two years. He brought with him a wave of excitement and joy that had been missing from our lives. Unlike my mother, my father had a way of dramatizing life, which was immensely appealing. We soon acquired a Ford convertible and a cocker spaniel. Suddenly we were a family again. We said good-bye to the yellow house on Lookout

Avenue and moved to Washington, DC. My father, who told us how much he had suffered because he didn't know where we were living during his internment, made exciting plans—we were going to buy a farm and finally have a home that belonged to us.

### **The Cherry Orchard**

Because my father had been absent so much, when he returned from internment in June 1942 it was as if a light had suddenly turned on, and family life was transformed from black-and-white to color. My father became my idol. Handsome and energetic, with an infectious smile, he injected music, art, and literature into my life.

With his sense of drama and attention to detail, my newly recovered parent gathered us together one day and showed us a map of the East Coast, on which, with the help of a compass, he had drawn a hundred-mile circle around Washington, DC. We were going to look for a farm, and it had to be within driving distance of our nation's capital and the State Department. He crossed out Virginia because he didn't like the South, but that left quite a bit of Maryland and a slice of southern Pennsylvania open to us. Taking advantage of a month's postinternment leave of absence, Mother, Daddy, Joanie, and I set forth in our Ford convertible to find a permanent home in the States.

We made short shrift of Maryland because, as soon as we drove over the wide Susquehanna River, heading toward Lancaster, and entered the rolling rich Pennsylvania farm country, my parents decided they had found the right region. During our search, we stayed at a bed-and-breakfast, where the owner taught me how to weave simple Pennsylvania Dutch patterns on her loom. Samples of my handiwork still pop up in various houses in the area. We ate corn on the cob, hamburgers, apple pies à la mode—all perfect for my ten-year-old taste buds. This was the first time we had banded together on a family project.

I loved doing reconnaissance, a passion that has stayed with me to this day.

There were challenges, however. Since my father was going back to work in the State Department and we planned to be only weekend farmers, we needed a property with two houses, one for the farmer and one for us. This was not easy to come by. After three weeks, our parents hadn't seen anything that suited our needs. My weaving was improving, but my father's leave was ending and his enthusiasm considerably dampened, as nothing we looked at seemed to work for us. We were about to give up when Mrs. Bechtel, the realtor, said, "Well, there is the old Miller place. Of course, it's been for sale for three years, and the house is much too big, and he died before it was completed." I could see the interest in my father's eyes. "He has six kids, but none of them want a place like that," she continued. "In fact, none of them have been out there since the old man died. But it is different and it has two houses. And he came from Russia. You might want to look at it."

To call the place "different" was an understatement. Jacob Miller, a Jewish immigrant from Odessa, had come to this country at the age of twelve and worked his way up in classic Horatio Alger style, making a substantial amount of money in the cement business in York, Pennsylvania. But in all those years he never forgot the sight of stately country houses around Odessa. He was determined to reproduce one for himself, however incongruous it would seem in the modest Pennsylvania landscape. So he bought an existing farm and went to work transforming an old farmhouse into the manor house of his dreams.

By the time we saw the farm, the house had grown into a twenty-two-room edifice. The roof had been raised and a third floor added, which included a large room we always called "the ballroom," although we never had a ball. Former verandas were glassed in by Mr. Miller and became sleeping porches. Several of the rooms in the house could be accessed only by traversing

someone else's room. My aerie was a glassed-in porch, off a guest room. The only way to get there when guests were in residence was to climb through a window from another small bedroom, which I thought great fun. Fitting with Odessa memories, Mr. Miller installed parquet floors in the first floor, unheard of in rural Pennsylvania. He embellished the front of the house with two Southern plantation-type columns, a wide porch, a concrete rococo facade, and a mezuzah. From the front porch, a curving staircase led down to a circular driveway, where I always imagined horses and carriages pulling up to deposit their charges. A grand allée of Lombardy poplars led up to Mr. Miller's folly. As time went on, the poplars had died, the facade was finally taken down, and the circular driveway had become lawn.

In addition to the main house, there was a farmer's house, a huge cow barn, as well as a tobacco barn and a little stone caretaker's house, which my father surmised had probably been a summer kitchen for the original farm. Mr. Miller had added a six-car garage, the home of several horse-drawn carriages.

On our initial visit I gasped as the real estate agent opened the torn screen door to the main house. The inside looked like a rural antiques shop, uninhabited for years. An auction buff, Mr. Miller indiscriminately bought old furniture, glass, china, paintings, and artistic objects. We could barely walk through the house, as the rooms were so filled with junk that we were sneezing from the dust. I loved it. Much to my surprise, my parents did, too. Soon after my parents' first startled look at the farm, the deed was done. For \$14,000, the farm was ours. A nervous, proud owner, my father, who was planning to write a biography of Chekhov at the time, decided to call the farm "the Cherry Orchard," but the name never really stuck, and it became simply "the farm." The nearest small town and our postal address was East Berlin, Pennsylvania, which seemed fitting, as my parents had met in Berlin.

After wagonloads of Mr. Miller's treasures were hauled away, we surveyed our new possession. There was a lot to be done. In the beginning (and I realize now that my parents were only in their thirties), the projects were big remodeling efforts, which were gratifying because they showed results. Walls were knocked down, tiny rooms combined to create bigger spaces; a false fireplace was replaced by an attractive, functioning brick one. The Miller clutter that remained was gradually moved up to the third floor and relegated to two unfinished porches, which were now crammed with old paintings, cribs, sleds, discarded dolls, old suitcases with exotic labels, and ornate lamps. The porches were great troves for rainy-day treasure hunts. I delighted in the endless discoveries in our new home.

I reveled in the fact that for the first time we had our father to ourselves. Always a storyteller, he invented tales in which the farm animals were characters with voices and personalities. He dramatized their interactions. Maybe in keeping with the animal theme, he also read us *Winnie-the-Pooh*. He acted out plots from literature, particularly from his favorite author, Chekhov. My favorite story was of the man whose job was to trail the horses in the circus, picking up their dung, and who therefore thought he was important.

My father loved organizing projects, and I loved participating. First he made a plan, then we gathered the materials, and finally we embarked on whatever the undertaking was. At the farm we planted five hundred trees. My father also built a toolshed, with all his work tools carefully arranged and displayed. Just sitting around was impossible for our father. He had to be constantly busy. If he wasn't preoccupied with intellectual activity—where his output was prodigious—he was equally productive building, chopping wood, laying paths, or cleaning out his workroom. Since he didn't play tennis or golf, these physical projects substituted and kept him healthy.

He was very musical and played Russian folk songs on the guitar at night, serenading us with favorites such as "Dark

Eyes,” “Kalinka,” and gypsy melodies. I was disappointed later when he gave up such songs, which he played by ear, and decided to learn to read music. He then spent hours practicing exercises and elementary pieces on the classical guitar and later the piano. But that was typical of him, never satisfied to rest on his achievements.

Joanie and I mostly lived outside. We invented trips in the carriages left by Mr. Miller; helped Merle, the tenant farmer, milk the cows; rode the farm pony; played hide-and-go-seek in the pungent dusty hay barn; explored the tobacco barn, also full of Miller finds; and climbed up to the top of the silo, with its intoxicating smell of fermented hay. We loved naming the stray cats that were always having kittens. But our early farm period did not last long, as in September 1942 my father received a new assignment, to the American legation in Portugal. My parents and Joanie flew off to Lisbon on a clipper-ship airplane, while I was dispatched to boarding school in Washington, DC.

### **Walking the Parapets**

My parents told me that they were permitted to take only one child on the Lisbon assignment, and because Joan was six and considered “frail,” she was the logical choice. They arranged for me, age ten, to live at the National Cathedral School for Girls, in Washington, DC, adjacent to the National Cathedral, which had a small boarding department. I arrived with two distinctions: I was the youngest boarder, and I was the only student with married parents. The other eleven middle school boarders were all children of divorce, and many were clearly suffering the effects.

The daily schedule for this small group of misfits was designed by someone who clearly had forgotten childhood. We started the day with breakfast and chapel, then went to school from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. After forty-five minutes of “free

time,” we had to be back in our rooms by 3:45, getting ready for our first study hall, followed by baths, piano practice, dinner, chapel, and more study hall until bedtime. Needless to say, given so much studying, we all received splendid grades.

Except for an escorted trip to the local drugstore each weekend, we were not allowed off the cathedral grounds. Our main contact with the “outside” was the view from our third-floor windows onto the cars and passersby moving along Wisconsin Avenue. We amused ourselves by playing hide-and-go-seek among the crypts in the cathedral basement on nasty days or in the cathedral herb garden in good weather. For real excitement we would scare ourselves by climbing into the cathedral dome. Fortunately, no one paid any attention to this unsupervised play, and we were allowed to cavort as we wished.

My start at school did not bode well. In the various countries where I had lived, someone always took care of my laundry. I never really considered how my clothes remained clean and pressed. At National Cathedral, there must have been a system for our laundry, but no one thought to advise me of it and, shy and somewhat confused in my new setting, I never thought to ask.

When clothes got visibly soiled, I simply stuffed them under the bed. Finally, the day came when I had no more clean clothes. Incapable of discussing the problem, I stood, embarrassed and silent, when a teacher came up to inspect my room. I prayed that she wouldn’t look under the bed, but of course she did, and the dirty clothes were pulled out, one by one. Other teachers were even called in to witness this unusual sight, but beyond the humiliation there was no punishment. Somehow, it probably didn’t fit anywhere into the school’s lengthy list of rule violations. If it had, I would have suffered the primary penalty—banishment from the next weekend trip to the drugstore.

For the Christmas holidays that year I was sent off to Cousin Grace, the distant James relation for whom I was named. By 1942, Cousin Grace was working as a paid companion to

a woman whom I was told to call Cousin Bess, although she was no relation. Cousin Bess was a rich lady who lived in a big old-fashioned house in South Orange, New Jersey. She was chauffeured around the countryside in a long black car. During my visit, I accompanied Cousin Grace and Cousin Bess on those rides, stuck between the two old ladies, a blanket tucked solicitously around us by Arthur, the driver. I felt claustrophobic in that backseat and prayed that no one my age would ever see me.

It was a horrible Christmas. The holiday had always been a high point for my family, but the “cousins” seemed very old to me, and there were no children around with whom to play.

Instead of the big tree that I was used to, there was a very small token spruce. The old ladies towered over it. On Christmas morning I gave my present, an herb sachet, to Cousin Bess, who responded by slapping me in the face. What had I done? I will never know. Later I was told she was crazy, but nobody volunteered such information at the time. I went up to the attic and made myself a calendar, on which I crossed off the days until I could return to boarding school.

Skulking in that attic, I discovered a library of children’s books, and I spent much of my time up there reading. I read my way through *Anne of Green Gables*, all the *Katy Did* books, and other Victorian classics. Truth is, I was scared to be downstairs with Cousin Bess. She marched around the house in square patterns and ate that way, as well. Up would come the spoon from the table until it was parallel with her lips, then it would make a ninety-degree turn and follow an imaginary horizontal track into her mouth. She complained loudly about any food she didn’t like, and the offending dish was immediately removed. A maid named Bertha scuttled back and forth between the kitchen and dining room in a black dress and white apron, carrying the rejected meal.

Back at National Cathedral, the combination of so little play and almost no exercise made the boarders very restless. I

was never ready to go to sleep at night. Normally a goody-goody who was acutely uncomfortable when breaking rules, I would climb up onto a small space on top of the closet after lights out and read by the trickle of light that came through the transom. When particularly restless, I would go out my window and fearlessly edge along on the wide rain gutter thirty feet above the ground, peering into other girls' windows. One night when the vice-principal came to say good night to me—a dubious treat awarded me for being the youngest girl in the school—she almost fainted with shock at seeing my face pressed against the outside of the third-floor windowpane, looking in. After that my windows were nailed shut, and I was hermetically sealed inside for the rest of the year.

In June of 1943, my father arrived back in the United States on consultation and came to retrieve me. I hadn't seen or had contact with my parents all year. His first words were, "My God, she's yellow." Tests revealed that I was anemic, so I left the school, flushed with pride at this tangible proof of the school's mismanagement and also with secret pleasure that I, too, was finally frail. I was also thrilled that I was going to join the rest of the family in Portugal.