

THE GIRL IN THE  
ORANGE DRESS

*Searching for a father who does not fail*



MARGOT STARBUCK

  
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# CONTENTS

- 1 My Perfect Childhood / 11
  - 2 Dumpster Diving and Other Social Disasters / 31
    - 3 Love Child / 50
    - 4 Sleuthing Around / 68
    - 5 Welcome to Oz / 89
  - 6 One Wily Emotion Chip / 109
  - 7 Looking for Love in Too Many Faces / 129
  - 8 Stranded in a Scorpion Desert / 148
  - 9 Claimed by the Good Tribe / 167
  - 10 God's Cool Tattoo / 185
- Acknowledgments / 197

- one -

## MY PERFECT CHILDHOOD



*“I just loved you immediately.* You were adorable, just adorable. I looked at you, and you were my daughter.” My adoptive mother’s eyes still sparkle and tear up as she describes her first glimpse of me at a Boston adoption agency. In my mind I see her taking me in her arms, looking into my eyes, and thinking that I am the most beautiful little baby girl she has ever seen.

“I had gotten you a little white dress with blue satin ribbon on it,” she continues. “The first thing I did was to change you out of that orange outfit.”

### *Numb*

We moved to a suburb of Chicago when I was two. The rounded yellow door of our Tudor-style brick house at 733 Pine Avenue was framed by rugged stones and climbing ivy. For some mysterious reason, we never owned a key to that stately door. We just always went in and out the plain back door.

Someone from the local chamber of commerce with an eye for charm

had actually snapped a photo of the house from the street when we weren't looking. It was featured on the cover of a countywide real estate magazine. The fact that our home had been selected to represent the area pleased me. The view from the curb confirmed it: we were the perfect family in the perfect home in the perfect town.

When I was five, however, my father accepted a job on the East Coast, in Connecticut. He began working there while my mother, my brother and I remained behind. Though the extended absence was ostensibly for business, on one of his visits home, he and my mother gathered my eleven-year-old brother, Scott, and me together to tell us they were divorcing. I was six years old.

Our parents said all the right words. They didn't trouble us with adult matters, like my father's alcoholism. They assured us that we were loved. The news of their divorce, though, was simply not emotional information I could process. I didn't cry. I didn't feel it. I was numb when they first told me, and I stayed numb for sixteen more years. During that time, when I would tell people that I didn't have feelings about my parents' divorce, they would invariably assure me that I *did*, in fact, have feelings and that I just didn't feel them.

That was the dumbest thing I ever heard.

## *Home*

When I penciled my first memoir at age seven, my mom had recently married my stepfather, Mel.

### *My Home*

My name is Margot Starbuck.

I am seven years old.

I play the piano.

I was born in Boston.

I live in Glen Ellyn Ill.

I go to school at Main Street School.

My Mother's name is Diane.

My Father's name is Mel.

My Brother's name is Scott.

My fishes name is Benji.

I like my school.

I like my relatives and all the people around me.

I love my home.

In fact, my father's name was *not* Mel. My daddy, my adoptive father Rick, had moved permanently to Connecticut the previous year when my parents had separated. Mel was my stepfather. Scott reports that I wanted to call him "Daddy Mel" immediately. Why not? The only father I'd known had just moved across the country. Nothing in my experience taught me that a parent who left wasn't lost to me forever.

Eventually I learned that my daddy would still call. He'd visit me when he was in town for business. Scott and I would get to fly on big airplanes at Christmas to visit him. All of that came as a pretty big surprise. Discovering that we were still in relationship, one not dependent on daily physical presence, might have caused another child to wonder whether her first parents might not also be lurking somewhere out there on the East Coast, too. Never once did it cross my mind.

Even if I wasn't thinking about my birth parents, someone else was. One afternoon I had been playing at Kelly Corder's house, and we were ambling back toward mine. As our yellow door came into view she asked, "What does it feel like to be adopted?" Seven-year-olds cut straight to the chase.

Without missing a beat, I assured her, "I feel special because I was *chosen*." Even as I said it I felt a little sorry for her. When she'd been

squeezed out, her parents didn't have a choice. They *had* to take her.

My mom and dad had always told me that because I was adopted I was “special.” I had, after all, been chosen. Never once did I connect the dots to realize that my first mother and father had not chosen to raise me. The family story about me being chosen was a good one. It worked for me.

Though we didn't dwell on the losses involved with adoption, another girl who was close to my age, also adopted, opened a door for me to play with possibility. Her name was Annie.

I was eight when my mom first took me to see the live musical *Little Orphan Annie* at the Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois. The Broadway hit is, ironically, a feel-good story about a Depression-era orphan who waits for the return of the impoverished parents who had relinquished her to the care of an orphanage. Like every other little hair-bowed, patent-leather-shoed girl wiggling in Drury Lane's plush seats, I was mesmerized by my peers on stage who looked like they were having the time of their lives. I was not, though, like every other girl in the theater.

For months after the show, at home in my pink-flowered bedroom, I played my *Annie* soundtrack cassette endlessly, belting out each word to an imaginary audience. I actually wore it out and had to beg my mom for a second copy. Although I was certainly not the first tone-deaf girl to return home from the theater bellowing show tunes, that soundtrack allowed me to voice, in a very particular way, a story I did not yet recognize as my own.

In one number, all the girls in Ms. Hannigan's orphanage pause from their grueling duties to sing “It's the Hard-Knock Life.” The lively chorus that proclaims “No one cares for you a smidge” certainly bore no resemblance to my own abundance of parents. By this time I had added a stepmother to the ever-growing entourage of parental units. All of them cared for me way more than a smidge. I did not yet know that even

the love of six or seven parents does not necessarily trump that of two.

In another number, the Boylan sisters' live radio commercial "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile" is parroted by the girls in the orphanage. No matter what happens, the story goes, just grin and bear it. A dutiful girl, I was seldom caught without a broad, sparkly smile. If the glare did not blind others from my pain, it certainly blinded me.

### *Letterhead Thumbnails*

It's not as if I needed more family members. My hands were pretty much full with the ones I had. With the exception of the occasional Annie-induced fantasy, I gave little thought to the ghost parents who were mine. Those nameless, faceless spirits could be known only through the three slim paragraphs provided to my adoptive parents under the Boston Children's Service Association letterhead. My mother kept the precious pages tucked safely in her antique mahogany desk, along with passports, birth certificates, and the leftover stash of photos from school picture day.

Although I knew nothing about the invisible grandparents upon whom I might have unloaded a few more wallet-size photos, I always had access to the few sparse bites about my birth parents that had been provided by our Boston adoption agency. The brief report included my birth parents' nonidentifying information, which was neatly packaged as *hers*, *his* and *theirs*.

*Her mother is in her early twenties, and of English and German nationality descent. She is 5'11" with a large build, brown hair and eyes, and a fair complexion. She has a few semesters of college and appears to be an intelligent young woman. She has recently been employed in the clerical field. Her interests are in playing the guitar, writing, and participating in sports.*

My birth mother's participation in sports only fueled my growing speculation that I could be the first woman to play for the Harlem Globetrotters. Off the court, I imagined her flowing brown hair cascading over her guitar as she picked out new melodies—when she wasn't busy with her clerical duties. For a few years I thought that being employed in the clerical field meant that she was a cleric—a clergy person. So depending on the day, the rough caricature I imagined wore an athletic jersey, a Woodstock tie-dyed T-shirt or a priest's collar.

His paragraph read,

*Her father is in his twenties, and of Dutch and Irish nationality background. He is 6'5" with a medium build, with brown hair and blue eyes, and a fair complexion. He graduated from college and is presently employed in the artistic field.*

Unfortunately, the paragraphs gave no indication of his relationship to my birth mother. I understood his biological role in procreation, but did they date? Were they engaged? Though I could visualize the shadowy silhouette of a hippy-haired mother, face tilted down toward her guitar, I could render no image of my biological father.

The few lines were all I had from which to glean a primal narrative. The final paragraph they shared was the hinge that held my disparate world together:

*Both of her parents felt that adoption would offer the love and security they wished for her.*

### *She's Down!*

Since I had been born on the thirteenth day of the month that also happened to be a Friday, when I was ten I began to wonder if my birth parents had been superstitious. Maybe they would have kept me if I had

been born on Thursday. Who knows with these things?

In June, the week I turned eleven, we drove to Shelby, Michigan, for my first summer at Camp Miniwanca, where my adoptive parents had met. I would be away from home for five weeks. On those first few nervous nights, as we lay awake in our bunks, campers took turns telling about our families. We were all anxious to find out who had sisters and brothers and goldfish and hamsters.

My fellow campers were predictably awed by my elaborate family tree and, understandably, required occasional refreshers throughout the summer: “Now, is this your *real* mom who’s coming to pick you up?” “Where does your *real* dad live?” It usually took a little conversation to figure out what each one meant by “real.” The story about my many parents and grandparents rolled off my tongue like it was the greatest saga ever told. I also made sure to fill my new friends’ dumb silence following the story with the quick reassurance, “There are just a lot of people who love me.” If I was in a real spiritual mood, which summer camps are always good for, I sometimes even told them, “I think that God loves me *so* much that he gave me all these people who love me.” Though I had no idea where my “alleged” feelings could have been hiding, my body might have offered clues.

Before breakfast each morning, all the campers gathered in front of the dining hall for some light calisthenics before reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. During that first week I was a few lines into the pledge when I fainted. Yes, I was a fainter. In kindergarten I’d gone down on the first day of my mom’s new job in Chicago. That was also during the Pledge of Allegiance. Lest you question my patriotism, I can report that I also fainted the weekend I went away to Wisconsin with my friend Lori’s family in fifth grade. There was neither star nor stripe in sight. No doctor ever figured out what my problem was. None ever connected the dots to reveal the outline of a brave little girl who couldn’t bear being sepa-

rated from her mommy. She was my anchor, the only adult caregiver who had never left me.

### *What's on the Outside . . .*

Judging from my camp pictures, it appears as though I rarely looked in a mirror. The girls in Annie's orphanage looked like prom queens compared to what I would have seen if I'd taken the time to check. Though many of my prepubescent photos were marked with cowlicks and rats' nests, the days I *did* brush my hair resulted in six or seven braids. With a rainbow of hair bows. And the occasional jingle bell. Even the preppy garments in which my mom clothed me—monogrammed sweaters with matching corduroy pants—showed rips and stains. In fact, my parents and stepparents actually became quite concerned about my personal hygiene situation. Eventually, they worked together to develop a “Margot Improvement Program,” which included an elaborate chart with stickers and rewards.

It didn't work.

My maternal grandmother, who lived in Indiana, was a card-carrying member of the Margot Improvement Program. Despite her dubious affiliation, we were very close. We could get to giggling about anything from family stories to surprisingly supportive old-lady undergarments. My grandmother taught me to paint and sew, how to roller skate and cook. When I visited her, we often said to one another that she was like my second mother.

By age twelve I had memorized her phone number. Whenever I dialed her number, my heart held the picture of her blue eyes that always shone when they saw me. She would pick up and, upon recognizing my voice, always gasp something like, “Well, hello, honey! We were *just* talking about you!” Or, “We've been thinking about you so much, sweetie. How are you doing?” She and my grandfather would then glean, with interest

no less, every boring detail from my little life. I marvel now that they could sound genuinely interested in what I'd learned in babysitting class. Before we hung up, my grandmother would always assure me, "Know that we think about you *every single day*."

No conversation concluded without some variation on the "we think about you every minute" theme. Never once did either one give me a reason to doubt it was true. It would be years before I figured out that she and my grandfather had made every one of their four grandchildren feel like the favorite I was convinced I was.

My grandparents came to visit us that fall. Every so often during this visit—and others—my grandmother would pause from sweeping out the garage or reorganizing the pantry to deliver the bits of inspirational fare she had been gathering since the last time she'd seen me. These included, but were not limited to:

- "You must brush your hair one hundred times at night, until it shines." (Like *that* was going to happen.)
- "When things don't go your way just smile and act pleasant." (That one I did take to heart.)
- "The sun is our enemy." (This was either about skin cancer, unsightly wrinkles, or some top-secret family vampire situation.)
- "If there's a feature you don't like about yourself, you must never mention it." (This one also stuck.)
- "Never slouch. Shoulders back and chest out. For good posture pretend like there's a string coming out of the top of your head that's holding you straight and tall." (The admonition was always followed by a demonstration of a brisk walk with a jaunty gait, head held high. I could almost see the marionette strings coming out of her silver helmet of hair. My cousin Joanna and I would practice it with our grandmother every summer, all three of us giggling.)
- "All the girls want to be tall like you. You're statuesque." (Not bad.)

- “If you had small feet you’d just fall over.” (One of my favorites.)

During this particular visit, while nursing visions of a glorious victory at the junior high talent show, I was in the backyard working up a fabulous dance routine to Stevie Wonder’s “Sir Duke.” Over my black tights I wore a red and white leotard that made me feel like a mime. The subject of conversation with my grandmother had turned to my unbrushed dancer-hair. Smiling, she assured me, “God wants you to look your very best.”

*Very nice touch*, I thought. None of my other caregivers, equally troubled by my poor grooming habits, had ever thought to invoke the divine name. It was really quite innovative.

The brazen claim, though, did not sit well with me at all. “Grandmother, how can you *say* that?” I asked, exasperated. I had always been given the impression in Sunday school that God loved me just the way I was. And this did not sound like that one bit.

“It’s in the Bible,” she announced, certain.

I had not read the whole Bible, but I felt fairly sure that part was not in there. I didn’t know if my grandmother had read the whole thing or not. This little exchange caused me to suspect she had not. I called her bluff.

“That doesn’t seem right. Where does it say that?” I demanded.

“I don’t know exactly where it is, but I know it’s in there,” she insisted.

If it was—which I seriously doubted—I figured it must have been in the Old Testament. It did not sound one bit Jesus-y to me. Scott, a senior in high school by this time, was going to college to become a pastor. Kicking at a few fuzzy dandelions, I made a mental note to run it past him.

“Something about that just does *not* sound right. I think that God loves me just the way I am.” It felt good, and sane, to say it out loud.

“Well, he *does* love you,” she yielded grudgingly, “but he wants you to look the very best you can.”

It was my grandparents who were responsible for my exposure to church. When I was five or six they offered Scott a quarter a week to walk me the six blocks down Pine Avenue to a local Methodist congregation. At his dollar-eyed insistence, he and I became regular churchgoers.

The mainline suburban church had a majestic, high-ceilinged sanctuary. From my vantage point, I might as well have been visiting a European cathedral. Most Sundays Scott and I would edge discreetly into one of the front pews. During the liturgical blur that preceded the children’s sermon, I would crane my head to watch other children cuddled up against their parents’ safe bodies.

I felt like an interloper.

I still have the Bible I received at that church as I stood beside the legitimate Sunday school kids in third grade. On that ceremonious day I listened, patiently, as a long list of students’ names was read. With a last name that began with “S,” I was used to waiting to hear it called. At last it was my turn: “Margot Lamar Starbuck,” the teacher read. I marched dutifully across the chancel. Black leather-bound Bible in hand at last, I peeked under the cover. I must have stopped listening at the sound of “Margot,” because the ornate calligraphy of my first, middle and last name took me by surprise. I couldn’t figure out how anyone at the cathedral had even *known* all those names. The beautiful inscription, along with the church’s name, the date and the pastor’s signature had validated our covenant relationship.

I was family.

Several years later, when I was in fifth grade, a dynamic preacher was pastoring the Presbyterian church in town. When my mom and Scott began attending, I naturally fell in step. The girls in my grade at this

church were called the Fizzywigs, the derivation of which can be traced back to one girl with wild red hair. Though the Fizzies welcomed me with open arms, part of me still feared rejection. This was why, despite the warm welcome, I made a special point to refer to myself publicly as an “apprentice Fizz.”

Before, during and after our weekly Bible studies, we Fizzywigs would practice our dynamite dance moves. These included gyratory tracings of the letters of the alphabet. On an imaginary horizontal plane. With our hips. Along with some of the other Fizzywigs I sang in the choir, served as a youth deacon and tutored children in Lawndale, the Chicago neighborhood that was the birthplace of the Christian Community Development Association.

However, the earliest record of my spiritual journey is marked by a photo of Scott and me leaving for church when I was six or seven. Wearing a frilly smocked church dress, I’m grinning broadly and standing in front of our yellow door. Scott, behind me, wears a buttoned shirt with groovy, thick vertical stripes.

My grandmother would have been pleased. By her reckoning, *God* would have been pleased. It wasn’t until years later, seeing a movie set in the Depression-torn Midwest, that I would come to understand why it had meant so much to someone from her generation to look one’s very best. All I knew as a child was that my grandmother loved me. Because that counts for a lot in my book, I was more than willing to overlook a heresy so blatant it could be sniffed out by someone barely into double digits.

### *OK as Is*

When I was fifteen years old, I flew to Connecticut to spend the summer with my dad. In the decade since we’d shared a roof, my dad had gotten remarried, had a daughter and divorced. That summer I was able to en-

joy some sweet days with my five-year-old sister, Kristen. When my dad and I would pick her up at day camp or drop her off at dance class, though, I wished that the father we shared was in the state where *I* lived. I envied her that.

Although I had arrived in white pleated shorts and a red Izod shirt and carried a matching Bermuda bag, I quickly figured out that policing my wardrobe was not at the top of my dad's priority list. The sudden freedom to dress however I pleased was intoxicating. Unfortunately, with a suitcase full of clothes I'd packed from home, the only things I had to work with were the low-budget accessories I could purchase at the mall or win at the fair.

My feeble attempts to look like Madonna (and I don't mean the Virgin Mother) involved pulling my kinky-when-braided-wet-hair back with a black mesh scarf and wearing a chunky, buckled belt around my white shorts. My fingernails and toenails were usually painted in ten rainbow colors and covered in a sparkly silver glaze. The dutiful big sister, I kept Kristen's toenails looking pretty fantastic too. Although I'd been unable to wrangle one out of my mom at home, my dad provided the requisite parental signature for me to get my ear double-pierced. When I noticed that the woman piercing my ear had six or seven studs climbing her own right ear, I dared to dream of more. But first I'd let my mom get used to the second one.

One weekend my dad and I drove down to Virginia to visit his brother George's family. On our trip back north we made a point of stopping in Princeton, New Jersey, to sneak a peek at the seminary campus there. Scott, having just graduated from college, would be enrolled at Princeton Seminary in the fall.

Seminary: it sounded to me like a place where brown-cloaked monks walked around barefoot, thinking reverent thoughts. The fact that the out-of-session campus was desolate did nothing to persuade me other-

wise. Although Scott didn't strike me as the monkish type, he had developed a love for scholarship in college. The quiet, I reasoned, would at least be good for that. Never once during our visit did I entertain the absurd possibility that my own glittery toes might one day call those very sidewalks home.

I had a great summer with my dad. He wasn't the man with whom I'd lived when I was young. I suppose that's always true of someone over time, but it was particularly evident in his case. During my teen years, my father had entered recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous. He had also returned to school in order to become a marriage and family counselor, and part of that training would spill over into his relationship with me. Even when we were separated by half a country, he would tell me over the phone that it just didn't matter what other people thought of me. The only opinion that mattered, he assured me, was mine. That summer he walked the talk. I could see in his eyes that I was acceptable just as I was.

### *Children Learn What They Live*

Back at home later that summer, I recognized that things were becoming increasingly difficult between my mom and my stepfather, who also drank too much. I had lived alone with them since Scott had left for college four years earlier. Wary of sparking the next explosive argument, I managed by smiling and pleasing. For years, my mom had tried to make the best of hard situations, holding it all together for the sake of Scott and me. I confided in her that I thought she should file for divorce. Unlike my dad and Scott, there was now actually a man I *wanted* to leave my house.

A Jedi master in conflict avoidance, I laid low in the mornings by staying buried in the pages of the *Chicago Tribune*. Having no more interest in conflicts that were transpiring in the larger world than I did in

the ones happening upstairs, I spent most of my mornings reading the comics and “Dear Abby” over my breakfast cereal. *Peanuts* and *For Better or for Worse* were must-reads. Once a year Abigail Van Buren would publish a column about long-lost kin, like birth parents and adopted children, reuniting. At the end of the piece she’d include the address of an international registry that matched up those searching for lost loved ones. Each time I came across it, I thought to myself, *I should probably cut that out*. Both my mom and dad had assured me that they’d support me if I ever wanted to look for my birth parents. Things like that, though, happened to other people—inky, typeset, Dear Abby people with clever pen names—not me. I never clipped it out.

Hanging over the breakfast table in our kitchen was the framed calligraphy poem “A Child Learns What He Lives.” Frolicking children had been carefully painted by hand in its margins. Many mornings, I’d glance up from the *Tribune* and read, “If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn. If children live with hostility, they learn to fight. If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive . . .” You get the idea.

Gradually, I became more and more disenchanted with the trite ditty that seemed to mock me over my Cheerios. I longed for somebody in my home to heed the poem’s warnings. I longed to scream out, with a *Peanuts* wide-mouthed bellow, “Am I the only one in this family who can read?”

Those desperate words that banged around inside my head never did escape. Instead, I just smiled. Like Annie and the girls.

### *Love Child*

Although her voice lived on in my head, I no longer listened to my Annie cassette tapes. Consequently, in my teens, I really didn’t spend much time thinking about being adopted. Annie was quickly replaced by R&B, funk and disco.

At age sixteen, I was listening to some of those oldies with my boy-

friend Seth when we first heard Diana Ross and the Supremes' hit "Love Child." Released the month I had been conceived and quickly climbing the pop charts, it reached number one about the time my own birth mother would have discovered she was pregnant. In the song a young woman describes the pain and shame of being born out of wedlock and raised in poverty. Seth and I immediately decided that I, too, was somebody's love child. We thought it had a nice ring. Because the narrator's experience seemed worlds away from my own, however, Seth and I fancied ourselves quite funny by calling it "*my song*." After all, I'd been raised with plenty: plenty of parents, plenty of money, plenty of clothes, plenty of opportunities. I was nothing like the unwanted child in Ross's ballad.

I was *chosen*.

Not only was I different from the struggling young woman Ross describes, I was also different from so many others who are emotionally crippled by life's losses. Being relinquished by the parents who had borne me had left me completely unscathed because I had two—and then three, and four, then three again, and eventually the original two—parents who loved me. I had not been affected by living in a home with domestic violence because I had never *personally* been physically hurt. I hadn't *really* experienced my adoptive father's alcoholism because I'd been so young when we shared a home and because my mom had sheltered me from it. I certainly wasn't like those kids who are scarred by their parents' divorce, either, because my own parents had behaved so civilly. I was not affected by my mother's divorce from my stepfather that year because, after all, it wasn't like he was my *real* dad.

That I decided I was nothing like one cultural icon from the 1960s, however, in no way stopped me from fantasizing about emulating another. During my junior year of high school I joined the school's forensics team, and being seen and heard and known proved deeply satisfying. At sixteen, I began imagining that I might very well become the next Rev. Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr., and saw myself standing on a soapbox spouting fervent rhetoric about justice, freedom and inalienable human rights. I suspect that the holy convergence of the public speaking and the tutoring in that Chicago neighborhood, which was my first personal exposure to poverty, must surely have contributed to my delusion. (If I had my druthers, of course, I would have preferred to skip the “Dr.” part. This sixteen-year-old was not up for a dozen more years of school.)

The fact that my amateur forensics performance of a scene from *Arsenic and Old Lace* never once took first place in a local high school forensics competition did nothing to dissuade me from the grandiose dream. Nor, apparently, did the fact that I was an over-advantaged white girl from the suburbs. That I could not reconcile my painfully unqualified demographic profile with the type of eloquent activist who might truly follow in the footsteps of the late Dr. King did not dissuade me in the least.

I just thought I'd surprise everyone.

### *Decisions, Decisions*

As a junior in high school I began to consider attending a Christian college. I'd been impressed by Scott's experience at the one he had attended, but I did not—I repeat, did *not*—want to look like I was following in his footsteps. This ruled out his alma mater, Whitworth College, in Spokane, Washington. Thankfully, there were other interesting Christian schools.

The winter of my sixteenth year had been icy cold in Chicago, as so many of them are. That winter I received a brochure from a school called Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. Clever recruiting strategy, I mused, with the subzero Midwest temperatures and all. It was enough to make Christians out of chilly pagans. One evening, a family in nearby Wheaton, whose sons attended Westmont, hosted an informa-

tional meeting in their home. The admissions director would be there to field questions after showing the promotional video. As we drove to the event, skidding along icy streets, my mother wanted to make sure I didn't get my hopes up too high.

"Now honey, this may be a nice video," she cautioned, "but that doesn't mean you're going to this school."

"Sure, I know," I agreed. Sort of.

I truly had the best intentions about being level-headed when it came to choosing a college. When I saw the beach in that video, though, it was all over. I thought to myself, "Oh yeah, as a matter of fact, I *am* going to this school."

California seemed like the perfect place for me since, at seventeen, I looked like the strange offspring of Pippi Longstocking and G.I. Joe. Blonde spiky hair, candy-cane striped tights, mismatched socks, rhinestone jewelry and daisy-painted combat boots did not a mother's dream (nor a grandmother's) make. When I look at the short stack of pictures I have from the period, I am forced to admit that I cannot distinguish from my clothing a typical school day from our high school's annual Wacky Tacky Day. Could we really have celebrated it five days a week?

For my school's annual Senior Ditch Day, some of the Fizzies and I made plans to go into Chicago. They no doubt were interested in hitting department stores like Marshall Fields and Carson Pirie Scott. Though I'd rather have flossed with barbed wire than shop for tasteful clothes, I was happy enough to go along for the ride. And eat lunch at Burger King.

"Mom, when we go to Chicago tomorrow can I get a third hole pierced in my ear?" I asked very sweetly.

"No."

"Please? Please-please-please-please-please-please-please?"

"No."

“Work with me. What if I get a nice outfit?” I bargained. That’s when I knew I had her attention. Clothing me was her love language. Although I was not fluent, I spoke just enough to get by. Taken off guard, she paused for just a moment to strategize.

“Okay, listen,” my mother reasoned like a trained hostage negotiator. “I’ll give you my credit card. If you get *three* nice outfits at Marshall Fields, you can get your ear pierced.”

As you might expect, most of my friends wanted my mom to be their mom.

## *California Girl*

Before my mother and I flew out to California to visit Westmont College, my grandmother cautioned me not to talk to any flower children in California. She had no idea that I had plans to revive the movement and *be* a flower child. Right after I learned how to surf.

The school was all I’d hoped it would be. The lush campus, blooming with exotic flowers, was a short bike ride from the beach. All the students we met were friendly. I suppose there might have been classes happening, too, but I can’t say for sure.

Most of the girls my mother and I passed on campus wore trendy hairstyles, fashionable outfits and cute sandals. I knew this would work in my favor with my mom; for some reason the manageable beach commute wasn’t quite enough to convince her that this was the place for me. I suppose she wanted me to get a good education, but I was certain that all the tastefully dressed girls weren’t hurting any.

Turning toward her beloved daughter with half-shaved head, cut-off overalls and high-top tennis shoes, my mom asked hopefully, “So honey, do you think we should go shopping for some new clothes for you?”

“No. But thanks for checking.”

Mine had to have been the only family in the Midwest to hope that

the child they were sending off to college in southern California might actually be *domesticated* by the experience. My family would, of course, be sorely disappointed.

I *would* be changed there, but not in a way I ever would have expected.