

# There's No Place Like Home

*Nellie Brown*

IT HAD BEEN THE PERFECT DAY. We had learned how to write cursive L's and mine were the best, so Miss Handy hung my paper on the board for the rest of the class to see. The last hour of school Miss Handy read us *James and the Giant Peach*, and I could just imagine this huge peach, rolling over his two nasty aunts. I could hardly sit still. I didn't know which was better, my cursive L's, the story, or the fact that Mom was taking me to Grandma's after school. There was no place like Grandma's. She always had treats—Pecan Sandies or Deluxe Grahams, ice cream sandwiches, or candy bars. Her cupboards and closets overflowed with treasures: ceramic figurines and glass bowls; earrings and necklaces; chiffon formals and velvet dresses with long zippers down the side; high-heeled shoes of brown, black velvet, and ivory; hats of velvet, felt, crepe, and fur, adorned with veils, bows, flowers, and beads; and black leather bags and purses, with gold and silver clasps. Grandma loved fashion shows. She reminisced as we clomped in front of her in the too-large shoes, her velvet and chiffon skirts dragging along the floor behind us. She called us her little princesses.

The bell finally rang, and I hurried outside. The car wasn't there. I watched impatiently, craning my neck to see down the road. Finally the station wagon rounded the corner, coming so fast that Mom went right past me. When she finally stopped, I ran to open the door. There was something scary about her face. I got in, noticing that Kristi and Julie, my younger sisters, were cowering, strangely quiet in the back of our old brown station wagon. The air was thick. We drove the block to the post office in silence.

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"Nellie, go in and get the mail," Mom snapped.

"I don't know how to open the box," I said.

"How many times have I told you the combination? Get in there and get the mail. Now!"

"What's the combination?" I asked timidly. I knew better than to refuse again.

"Clear it. F. Back past F to between E and F, then again to F. Hurry up."

"What if I can't do it? What if it won't open?"

"Nellie, don't push me. Now get the mail!"

I scurried out of the car and into the post office. Sweat made my fingers slippery as I fumbled to turn the knob. My stomach hurt, my pulse raced. I turned the knob, but it didn't open. Again I turned the knob whispering, "Please, God, let it open. Please, please help me get it open."

It didn't open. I fumbled with it again, clearing it. Please, please, please open. The left side of my index finger ached from twisting the knob. My eyes blurred with tears. My hands shook. Please, Heavenly Father, help me. Please let it open this time or Mom will be mad. Please hurry. Please let it open.

I turned the knob again, F, EF, F. It didn't open.

The post office door flew open. A figure stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the bright light outside. Mom.

"I told you to hurry!"

"Mom, I am. It won't open. I can't do it," I wailed desperately.

She moved in front of me; I backed up and felt the wall of little knobbed doors poking me in the back. She grabbed my hair on either side of my head and banged my head back against the knobs. Bright flashes shot across my eyes, then pain in my head, then a warm, stinging feeling where the knobs had hit the back of my head. A small, warm trickle ran down my skull.

"Now watch me do this," she shouted, her voice wavering, "because you're going to open this before we leave."

Blinking back tears, I watched. She opened it, then closed it again and stood back to watch.

Trembling, my fingers slipped on the knob. I grabbed it tighter and started to turn it. My hand shook. I whispered the directions as I turned the knob. My knees almost gave way when I turned the other knob and the door opened.

"Now get to the car and don't go telling the girls or Grandma about this."

As I stumbled to the car, hands shaking and knees trembling, I put my hand to my aching head and felt warm, wet stickiness on my

fingers. I looked at my fingers—blood. It might get on my new green dress, I thought. I looked at Mom who had seen my fingers and was glaring at me. I hid my fingers in my lap.

Riding to Grandma's I thought about how I had wanted the afternoon to happen—I rehearsed the scenario over and over.

*When the bell finally rang and Mom came to pick me up, my excitement mounted. Kristi and Julie played in the back of the station wagon with their Barbies, and when I got in, two-year-old Julie said, "We'w goin to gwamma's."*

*"I know," I said, "Mom told me this morning."*

*Mom said, "We need to get the mail since we're in town. I don't know when anyone else will be coming up." We drove the block to the post office.*

*"Nellie, run in and get the mail, will you?" Mom asked.*

*"I don't know how to open the box," I said.*

*"Haven't I told you the combination before? You need to learn it in case you ever have to get the mail. Come on then, and I'll show you how to open it."*

*We got out of the car and walked in together. "What did you learn in school today?" she asked.*

*"I learned how to write a cursive L," I said, "and mine was the best so Miss Handy hung my paper on the board for the whole class to see."*

*"L's were my favorite letter to learn," Mom said. "I'm glad you are doing so well in school."*

*We stood in front of our box. "First you have to clear it," Mom instructed, grasping the knob and turning it several times. "Then you turn that little arrow to F. Back past F to between E and F, then to F again." She turned the other knob and the door swung open. She closed it, then turned to me. "Now you try it."*

*I grabbed the knob and turned it to F.*

*"First you have to clear it," Mom said.*

*I turned the knob a couple of turns, then went to F. I whispered the directions as I turned the knob. I tried the other knob and laughed when it turned and the door opened.*

*"Good," Mom nodded and patted my shoulder. "You can open the box by yourself now." I pulled the mail from the box, and we turned to go out the door. "I'm so proud of you."*

My head hurt, but I didn't move until we got to Grandma's house. As soon as we pulled into the driveway, I jumped out of the car and raced inside. I hugged Grandma tightly. I had really missed her.

I am ashamed of this memory. It forces me to admit that my mother was a child abuser. Mom and I often fought, and afterward I usually went to school with bruises. When I got older, girls in drill team or volleyball practice sometimes asked me about the bruises. Too ashamed to tell them my mother beat me with a stick or wooden spoon, I lied.

When I reveal details about my relationship with my mother, like this episode, I feel that I should say I love my mother, that she is a good woman just trying to do her best, that she was raised by a stern, horse-trainer father whose child-rearing theories reflected his profession: "Break their spirits; you've got to get their attention." "Spare the rod, spoil the child" seems to be the motto of that era, and my mother just carried it through. But I can't defend her. Saying those things doesn't change our relationship. It doesn't make the memories go away. It doesn't change *her*.

When I left home for college, I thought things could change. Distance will help, I thought. I invited her to Mother's Week at Ricks. But a month before she was to come, when I was visiting home, Mom got hold of my journal. She said she wanted to find out what I was doing, to get to know me better. We parted angry and didn't speak for a month. Mom came for Mother's Week but spent the time with my roommate.

I thought more distance, such as the Netherlands where I served a mission, would help. We wrote weekly, and Mom mentioned many times how I had changed. When I came home, I was patient. I worked to love her, to make things work out. For almost two months, I fought to have a relationship with her, to laugh things off, to hold my tongue. But when I lost my temper once, she said, "See, I knew you hadn't changed." No, *nothing* had really changed.

When I got engaged, she was furious that my fiance and I hadn't asked her permission. John encouraged me to talk with Mom, to try one more time to work things out. Together we approached her, and I tried gently and carefully to tell her I needed to feel love from her. I asked her about the problems in our relationship and the way she handled her anger, about the post office incident and the fights. She denied everything. "It's all in your head," she said and promised never to forgive me for embarrassing her with stories like that in front of John.

I thought marriage would help because we would finally have something in common, but she feels now that I don't need her, that I don't call enough, don't make a big enough effort. The chasm widens between us.

I have tried to talk to her, to build a relationship with her, but my attempts backfire. One of us loses control eventually. I want to give up. I've tried to learn to love her, but what I feel for her is not love.

Even understanding her doesn't help. Defending her can't make me feel loved by her or love for her. It doesn't change my fear of having children, of losing control when I discipline them. It doesn't change the panic I feel when I tend my nieces and nephews, the frightening desire I have to force them to do what I want when they want to be independent or headstrong, as children do.

One evening I tended two of my nieces, one just a year old and the other ten months. Suddenly they both began crying. I was home alone, and for the first ten minutes I laughed, able to find humor in the situation. But when they cried on and on, anger welled up in me, and I wanted to shake them both. I wanted to make them stop, to hurt them until they didn't cry any more. Then I cried, too, loving them both desperately and fighting my anger, fighting the impulse to react to them as I was often reacted to.

How I treat others, how I react to situations is up to me, but I fear that violence has been bred in me. I fear my anger. I have almost not wanted to have children because, if pushed that one last time, I might strike one of them. Not because I can't overcome my past, but because maybe, without knowing, I haven't overcome it yet.