

“To See Ourselves As Others See Us”

By Sandy McCune Westin

I figure I was made from leftover parts at the end of World War II. My mother had given birth to my five older sisters, plus one stillborn brother before me. Raising kids was old hat for her. I grew up as happy as a weed. One of my older sisters doted on me as a favorite plaything, while the others either ignored me as a pest or made me the “goat” of their games and jokes. It came as a bit of a shock when I turned 13 and my last sister to leave the nest took off for college. For the first time in my life, I was an only child – a position I found to have both its advantages and burdens.

When my parents had homesteaded a sixty acre farm in southwest Washington State back in 1952, it was with the idea of “having enough chores to keep the girls out of trouble.” But when Jean left, all those chores were left to just my parents and myself. Working beside Daddy, I grew through my teen years plowing fields with our Ferguson 35 tractor, taking down fifty foot tall Douglas Firs to bring in firewood for the winter, and tending fifteen acres of blueberries. When Daddy needed surgery one of those summers, the berries continued to need irrigation every four hours around the clock. In daylight I could manage pretty well, but getting out there at 2am to tote thirty foot irrigation pipes and stands into a new configuration was a challenge for me at 15.

In June and July when the berries were at their peak, the three of us would start picking as soon as there was enough daylight to tell ripe berries from green, and would quit for the day when both looked black. When I grumbled that I didn’t get to enjoy much of a summer, Mother would set me right with, “It’s these berries that are going to pay for your and your sister’s college education, dear.” Those berries taught me how to work tenaciously, even when I didn’t feel like it – a learned skill that stays with me even today.

As an added benefit of all the farm work, I grew up fairly slender and quite strong. At eighteen, I weighed a mere 112 pound, however in that Twiggy era of the early ‘60’s, I was

convinced I was fat, and ugly to boot. Like everyone in my family, I wore bottle-bottom-thick glasses and grew up with buck teeth. However, I discovered one benefit of being the youngest was that my parents had more money to spend than they had in earlier years. With classic Scottish thrift, they put their extra funds into things that mattered more than a big allowance or new clothes for me.

When I was fourteen, Mother had taken me to see Dr. Schultz, an orthodontist in Vancouver. Seeing my crowded mouth as a professional challenge, he pronounced his verdict. "Four of her permanent teeth will have to be pulled. I can fit her for braces, but it will take four years to get the job done."

Wearing a mouth full of braces AND thick glasses to school every day didn't do much for my tender sense of self-worth in those highly competitive teen years. I concluded that, if I was going to be attractive to boys at all, I'd better cultivate my personality. It was obvious to me that my looks were certainly not going to be my strong suit!

That conclusion had been painfully brought home to me back when I attended that torturous, long-established rite, the Ninth Grade Dance. A giggling, self-conscious nest of us gangly girls had lined up along one wall of the school's gym, hoping against hope that That Boy, heck, ANY boy, would ask us to dance. When Daddy picked me up at the end of that agonizing evening, he sensed something was bothering me.

"How'd it go? Did you have a good time?", he asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," I muttered in response.

"Did you get to dance a lot?", he continued, probing gently. This was met with a tense silence for a few moments, then it came spilling out of me like a ruptured water balloon.

"Oh Daddy, the only time I got to dance was when it was GIRL'S CHOICE!"

In response to my quiet sobbing, he offered the wisdom of an experienced father of girls, "There, there. You might think you're just an ugly duckling right now, but before long you'll be a beautiful swan."

At the time, that was somewhat encouraging, but “before long” seemed like a life sentence away to my dubious young mind.

My parents had envisioned a better future for me than I was aware of, however. In the spring of my senior year, three events changed my world in a matter of months: The braces came off, the dark brown hair I’d worn long and stringy for years was cut into a short, fashionable bob, and I was fitted for contact lenses. I could hardly believe the change in my own appearance. One day as I walked by in the school hallway, I overheard a neighbor boy remark to his buddy, “I grew up next door to THAT?”

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