

## CHAPTER 28

### *Cold Heart*

*Fall 1967*

*Going on Fifteen*

It's hard to imagine Dad was once a skipper on an LST boat in the Navy, back during World War II. We have photos of him in uniform, resembling one of those dashing guys in the old war movies. I try to imagine him running a shipload of sailors, though, bossing them around like the captain in *The Caine Mutiny*, his favorite book, having the time of his life as Mom says he did, but he just doesn't seem the type. I'm jealous of those sailors who got to see him at the helm of that LST, gazing out over the Mediterranean, and then every night writing gooshey love letters to Mom which we discovered one day when we lived on Jefferson: "My Dearest Darling Mollie ..." I took the stamps off the envelopes to place them in my stamp album. One says, WIN THE WAR, and it's only two cents! I don't know if it bothers Mom looking at the letters and pictures, but it bothers me. I keep wanting that Navy skipper to come back.

There's one situation where he does return, large as life, and it is so weird and amusing and disconcerting you don't know whether you want him to go away again and just leave

the regular quiet Daddy in his place. It's when he puts himself in charge of a job. Most of the work around our house is just for Mom and for us girls to wrangle about. But sometimes you can feel Mom begging Daddy to get back to being captain of the ship, and when he does, suddenly the air is charged with electricity that wasn't there before.

One of these Navy skipper occasions is the white-glove inspections he does of our bedrooms. These are done in spurts, a few Saturdays in a row, and then he peters out for a while. He takes a white handkerchief, rubs it across the top of our door, and bellows out, "Do this or you'll have no lunch." It's clear he's having great fun being back in the Navy, and we love his soundless laughter. Our best jokes have always been about work, how we don't want to do it, Betsy and I, and how he turns into a dictator to make us do it, but something about him being so bossy and powerful makes us laugh with pleasure, and with some kind of nameless relief.

Occasionally, though, when this Navy skipper who says he's Daddy clamps down too hard on us, it feels dangerous. Last Saturday, for instance, we had to clean the basement. Dad sat at the top of the stairs, in the dinette, and gave instructions and took complaints. Every few minutes one of my sisters would go upstairs and whine to him about another one of us shirking our work: "Daddy, Kate's been pushing the broom back and forth in the same spot for the last ten minutes."

"So Dad shouts down: "Kate, you'd better get a move on with the broom right now! Otherwise you're going to have to give the broom to Betsy and I'll put you on cobweb duty!"

Five minutes later: "Daddy, Peggy's bossing everyone around, and she's just sorting laundry on top of the dryer."

So Dad booms out again, “Peggy, get a bucket and wet-mop ready right now and start the scrub-down process!”

“Daddy, Anne refuses to use the dustpan just because she doesn’t want to look at dead roaches. She’s just standing here making me do all the work!”

“Anne, you get down on the floor right now with that dustpan. Don’t be so lily livered!”

Dad couldn’t even verify that the accusations were true. It was as if it didn’t even matter. I despise cleaning the basement for a number of reasons, and that day I felt utterly like a slave. In our family, everyone’s so mean when we’re doing jobs, no one cares about helping anyone else, everyone just worries about someone working for one-tenth of a second less than them, and everyone accuses everyone else of being lazy, so when Dad started yelling down the stairwell with that Navy captain voice, I just wanted to run a million miles away.

I hate cleaning the basement because I suddenly notice how filthy and dark and hopeless it is. I get a sudden aversion to the cold cement floor and the ugly pipes and the pole holding up the whole house and the spider webs and the smell of kitty litter. Mom says it’s a wonderful basement: she designed the house so it’s built on a hill, with two cute windows looking right out on the driveway and the rose garden. That doesn’t sound bad, but right inside those windows sits the Little Girls’ playhouse, or club, and it is so full of junk, who can see out the windows? In fact there’s even a door, but it’s kind of blocked by all the cardboard boxes and old carpet squares and pink plastic kids’ chairs that divide the playhouse into rooms.

Last Saturday’s basement cleaning was the worst one I can remember. My sisters were persecuting me: “Anne, you don’t even use a dustpan right!” “Anne, you’ve dusted

the laundry table three times—I watched you!” And Dad didn’t even care, but laughed at me with an evil laugh each time I protested to him, “This job is dragging on and on, Daddy. We’re using up our whole Saturday, and no one’s really working because we don’t know what to do it’s all so overwhelming ...” and ordered me to go back down into hell and stay there. My resentment seethed worse than the *Caine Mutiny* with Captain Queeg. Dad might as well have been a sadistic plantation overseer wielding a knife over my head. My rage was as bewildering as when Paul teased me about my dolls or Peggy burned my scapular.

Of course I know Dad would have come down and cleaned it all up if he could have, sweeping that big broom across the cement singlehandedly. It’s wasn’t his fault he had to sit at the top of the stairs and order everyone around. You would think I was mature enough to realize this by now, to have compassion for my father because of his MS. I think most of the time he’s tired and maybe sometimes in pain, and his legs are spasming more and more, refusing to move when they should. I know every time we go on vacation, it’s a sacrifice he makes for the family, because trips wear him out, especially in hot weather.

There’s stuff Mom tells us and symptoms we notice, but you would never once hear Dad saying anything about his MS. In fact he seems embarrassed whenever it comes up. I know I’d feel the same way, humiliated by everyone fussing over me, talking about me in the third person, feeling sorry for me because I suddenly get immobilized, so that people then have to lift my feet off the floor one at a time.

Actually it’s not that big of a deal, compared to Mrs. Ferry, our old Wakewa neighbor who’s moving into Meadowview. Mrs. Marquis says she can barely cook for her family now or

take care of her youngest kid. She says she's going downhill real fast. It would be much worse to have a mother with MS than a dad, since dads don't have to take care of kids and do laundry and housework. It makes me feel so sorry for Danny and Joan and their dad, thinking of how Mrs. Ferry is soon going to end up completely bedridden.

How self-centered I am as daughters go! No wonder Daddy never seems very pleased with me. I keep vowing to be more attentive to his needs, so that before he has to remind me his toast has popped up, I'll notice. But is it really because I want to make him happy, or so I won't feel so lousy about myself? I always seem to forget something anyway and feel like an idiot. I'm wondering if the truth is I don't want to help because it means thinking about him having MS. I kind of just wish it would go away and we could start all over with what we've missed. I also sometimes wish Dad would fight more against his MS. If he'd gone to Lourdes like the man with the iron lung at church and had faith for a change ... but he's just a typical New Orleans Catholic like Mom says: they're all heathens who don't care about God, just their Sunday obligation.

When I read *Anne Frank* a couple of years ago, it made me so jealous and sad that she was close to her dad. I know I love my mom because I always want to confide in her, and I sink into loneliness when she's gone, which I'd never admit to anyone. But how do I know I love my dad? How do people know they love a parent they don't feel close to? It scares me a lot, because everyone presumes it, but what if it's a huge lie? My dad just seems to be always on the edge of our family's life, not knowing what's going on, kind of irrelevant. I can't imagine going to him when I'm upset about something or being on his team the way Anne Frank

felt, with her sister on her mom's team. In our family, Daddy wouldn't be teamed up with anyone, because he's not the kind of dad who sits around yacking with his kids or hears all their secrets or hugs them or takes them shopping. I'm not saying he doesn't love us. I know he loves us so much he tosses and turns all night worrying about us. But I only know that because Mom tells us.

He seems far away to me even when he's home, and on edge too, so I don't particularly wait for him to come home. After Mom picks him up from Notre Dame, I hear him shuffling and groaning slowly up the basement stairs from the garage, slow because his legs are hating stairs more and more nowadays. Then when he comes into the family room to sit down, there's always this feeling of "Make way for Daddy. He's tired. Let him have the leather chair. Turn on the news for him. Make sure your head's not in the way because he's going to be too nice to tell you to move."

I don't have father-daughter talks with him because there's nothing to say. We both just get silent when we're in a room together. I mean, my dad is a wonderful person everyone loves, and I wish I could have talks with him, but there's just this awkward quiet all the time. We're not mad at each other or anything. It's just that there's nothing there. That's why I worry. I think if I loved him I wouldn't always be looking for excuses to go talk with someone else.

Aren't you supposed to feel something when you love someone? Like a longing to see them, as if there's a hole in the room when they're not there? I know this is a shocking question I would never ask out loud, but it really haunts me: if my dad died, would I miss him?

Oh, God, don't let anyone see how hard and cold my heart really is, how I don't even care if Dad worries about me all

night. What I really long for is for him to look at me and say, “How beautiful and sweet and fun and delightful Anne is! Of all my daughters, she’s the one who shines in my eyes every morning when I wake up.”

Oh, talk, my dad! Stand up from that captain’s chair where you’re slumped and silent, and tell me, you who paced with me for hours on end, tummy-down in your arms, every night when I was a colicky baby screaming, screaming, destroying the sweet peace of Mommy’s first family so precious and good, you who never gave up on me, you who rubbed me brusquely with the towel as a little girl while I squealed with delight: do you miss me? Do you remember me?

## CHAPTER 29

### *Sentimentality*

*Fall 1967*

*Going on Fifteen*

Mrs. Syburg, six feet tall, large-boned, straight bobbed hair, always delivers memorable little sayings to our English class while perched on the edge of her desk. She speaks with conviction, with personal authority, like Jesus. Any student at Saint Mary's could tell you her most important sayings, the kind that appear on tests as definitions. But even the off the cuff remarks usually stick, they're so thoughtful. And her red-ink comments on our compositions feel personal, as if she's been thinking about you all day.

I've sometimes thought I'd like to be an English teacher too, because I could really influence kids' lives. But now I'm noticing how scary it would be to have such power. No matter how much you try to help students, you can't protect them from the stories that you read together or any little comment you make in front of the class. Mrs. Syburg is the most enthralling teacher in the world, so everything she says penetrates deeply. But isn't that the problem?

At the end of last year she created a special grade on my report card, so she could give me a C for what deserved



a C, declining participation levels. We never even had participation grades before that! My shyness had been getting me in trouble for some time already, as if something started dragging away at my voice. As a new freshman I liked to get in discussions; I knew that Mrs. Syburg considered my remarks insightful, and I felt satisfied they weren't said in a braggy way. But more and more, I just couldn't get my mouth to open in time.

It's very odd, but at some point I assigned myself the identity of "shy girl" once again, even though I didn't mean to—maybe being anything else just felt too difficult, too foreign—so now I'm forced to just sit quietly at my desk most of the time and churn with a lot more thoughts than I ever say out loud. I practice clever comments in my head, but inevitably I lose the right moment—someone else says them, or Mrs. Syburg moves on. Occasionally when I'm about to fall out of my seat with needing to talk, yet never letting on, except with excitement in my eyes, Mrs. Syburg will call on me. It's a relief.

Anyway, during class last week, I knew she had to be looking at me when she declared: "Shyness is simply a form of pride. Think about it. I tell my husband this. He's a shy man."

Well, how was she to know how seriously I would "think about it"? I let her words seer right into my soul. And I suddenly realized why I don't speak in class: it's because I want everything I say to be perfectly stated and utterly original. So then instead of feeling sorry for myself for being shy, I saw that I had yielded over and over again, for my whole life, and most especially lately, to the sin of pride. Suddenly my shyness wasn't just a matter of being a tender flower, a "lonely little petunia in the onion patch," like the song on *Captain Kangaroo*.

And what Mrs. Syburg couldn't imagine was how the terror of this moment was compounded by the short story we had read the previous week, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." How is she to read inside kids' minds to know which student is disturbed by which story? And what would I want her to do if she *did* know? This whole short story takes place inside the mind of an old lady as she's reviewing her life, so bitter after all these years because her fiancé jilted her. Mrs. Syburg told us that the secret point of the story is that God is going to jilt Granny, who is so sure even as she's dying that she's good, and everything is everyone else's fault. She thinks she's going to heaven, but she's really going to hell for her sin of pride she doesn't even know she has.

When I heard this horrifying interpretation and noticed I had missed the point of the story completely, this question came upon me: "Why should God put people in hell when he hasn't even told them what they need to do differently?" As far as Granny knows, she's led a good life—just secretly resentful and superior—and done everything right. I don't think secret sins that you don't even know about should destroy you for all eternity. If Granny knew she was suffering from the sin of pride, which is the worst sin there is according to Mrs. Syburg, and she knew she'd go to hell for it, don't you think she would have gone to Confession? This idea of the worst sin in the world being the most secret one really bugged me that day, but of course I could not discuss it with a bunch of kids who probably never even think about this stuff.

If I only had the courage to tell Mrs. Syburg about all this, I wonder if she would help me to feel better. I might write it on a test, or in a composition if one comes up. But I don't know if I'll ever have the heart, after what happened today. I just don't know.

What Mrs. Syburg hates worse than anything else in the world is sentimentality. She says there's honest human emotion and dishonest human emotion and warns us about being sentimental in our papers, as if it's one of the Ten Commandments. I guess she thinks girls our age have a problem with this, like when we write gooshey little notes in each other's yearbooks. The way she shudders at sentimentality reminds me of the look my dad gets on his face when we talk about menstruation or having babies. But when Mrs. Syburg played the two songs, the unsentimental one sung by Simon and Garfunkel, "For Emily, Whenever I Will Find Her," and the sentimental one Bobby Goldsboro sings about "Honey," someone's wife who died, and asked us to discuss the differences, I couldn't come up with many. I actually cried more over "Honey" because it was clearer what was going on. In the other one you had to guess. I don't care as much about sentimentality as Mrs. Syburg. I just think stuff is sad or isn't. Why does it matter how you say it?

I keep telling myself Mrs. Syburg wasn't even talking to me personally today when she crushed my idea. She doesn't know I have a problem with separating out dishonest human emotion. She was just talking to the whole class, probably recalling students who drove her crazy through the years with sentimental compositions. There are some kids who do act kind of sappy, come to think of it, gushing over puppies or babies, but I wouldn't be caught dead acting that way. Probably Mrs. Syburg had forgotten what happened in our family, it was so many years ago. Maybe her husband hadn't started teaching at Notre Dame till the year afterward, when she first brought her children to register at Cleland, and no one had told her.

You see, what threw me off was the first thing she told us this morning: “I want you to write a true story from your lives, a long, detailed story, about an episode that really matters to you.” Inside me a smile was spreading. I had always known those deaths *had* to have mattered in my life, even though I was so little I could hardly remember them. But all these years I had never written about them, never even told about them as a real story, one with details and feelings. You couldn’t just talk about people dying like you would about what you did over summer vacation. They just formed a big field inside me, wide as the eye can see, lying fallow, untouched, since the days I could no longer remember.

Now my teacher would know. Now she’d know not just like she must have known before—but now she’d know from *me*, from the dark, secret sorrow inside me that no one knew. Something new and full and warm flooded my whole being. I would tell the complete story tenderly, in all its utter, unique sadness, starting with Mary-Louise, then Paul. I thought Mrs. Syburg would read my composition on a quiet night on her little back porch where I had visited, and she would cry for me. She’d write me a gentle note, as if I were the fragile little boy in the story she tells us is her favorite, “The Scarlet Ibis,” or the going-crazy boy who haunted me all the time in “The Rocking Horse Winner.” I wanted this. I wanted this more than I had ever known!

But while I was dreaming about my composition, I was also listening to her instructions closely. And then I heard her say, as if I was lying in the grass somewhere with the sun on my face, and suddenly a ball smacked my eyes, “Now I don’t want anything really obvious, like sad stories about brothers or sisters dying. I want an event with several angles

to it, one that you can develop in a manner that's complex and original, with conversation and perhaps some humor."

I sat there at my desk taking notes, good and quiet as a church mouse, and no one noticed how I was getting suffocated by chaos rising up out of my gut. I was lost. How had I forgotten Mrs. Syburg's lessons, the lessons of good literature, and good art, and tasteful conversation, for just a moment, a long, lovely moment? Now I had come back to my senses. I must not be sentimental. Never sentimental. It is the capital sin, one I had never indulged in before, not once in my whole life, not once in any school paper or poem or letter or any conversation anywhere, because in our family it would make everyone go "yuck!". And I would never dream of being that way again. Why would anyone have ever wanted to hear my gooshey sad story? I would just be fishing for pity, the way kids in grade school used to fish for compliments, despicably. The only way you could talk about sad stuff without being sentimental was to not really tell how it felt. Not really describe the heartbreak. People had to guess. But I had never noticed anyone wanting to guess about stuff like that. What had made me think I could just tell a story that's so sad no one wanted to hear it?! I was shivering with embarrassment at my puky sentimentality. I was going to kick my crazy idea back into its hiding place where it belonged.