

KEEP THE CHILD IN BED UNTIL I GET THERE

Decatur Island, 1939

Surprisingly, my parents announced they were taking us to see Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, playing at the only movie theatre in Anacortes. Living on a remote island, we never had chances like this. I was willing to put up with any discomfort, cold, engine fumes, seasickness, or temporary hunger to participate. My brother, Bob, wouldn't admit it, but he was excited too.

Our thirty-two-foot, wooden boat, the MaryBob, was not comfortable to travel in. Besides two bunks in a cabin below, there was one tiny lavatory that I avoided because of the cramped, airless space. Netting suspended above the bunks contained emergency supplies like a blue and white box of Pilot Bread, a cracker that never deteriorated. Heavy canvas life preservers were stacked in the bow, over extra ropes and an anchor and chain, also for emergencies. A narrow entrance to the cabin forced a person to walk around the engine, with its exposed flywheel indifferent to one's feet. Closing the door into the cabin shut out some of the noise, and when we opened an overhead hatch clean air rushed in, helping obliterate any lingering gasoline fumes.

Mother packed a picnic lunch because going to a restaurant was too extravagant. She made up the bunks with blankets and pillows from the house. The bedding barely staunched the ever present petroleum odor coming from the heavy mattresses. When we were underway, she sat down on one of the bunks and opened her purse, taking out a small compact. At home she never put on face powder or lipstick and rarely opened her purse.

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I watched, fascinated when she began applying face powder while holding the tiny mirror in one hand. Her compact smelled of perfume and was a pleasant contrast to odors generated by the engine.

Once we reached Anacortes, there wasn't a float where we could tie up the MaryBob, only pilings supporting a pier. Anemones clung to them, but not as many as we had at home. Dark, oily water swirled underneath us as we climbed up a ladder to reach the top.

We walked uptown to the theatre, mother and dad ahead, then Bob, then me. He couldn't resist taunting me, saying I was an eight year old sissy for wanting to see a movie about Snow White. I hurried to get ahead, ignoring him.

I had never been in a movie theatre. Lights sparkled and danced outside as well as inside. Gold threads in the stage curtains reflected more light. Sitting in the soft dark I never knew a place like this existed. When the movie began it was a vivid world of animated fanciful characters, exotic colors and magical landscapes.

I forgot about my brother (who I learned later had wiggled around in his seat and made too much noise) I forgot to look around me at the other children in the packed theatre, and I forgot to look at my parent's faces to see if they were enjoying this. I had found something too beautiful to even imagine.

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When the movie ended and we left the theatre, I felt as if I was floating on air. Once again inside the MaryBob, mother tucked us under blankets and gave us cups of hot cocoa from a silver thermos. It was dark and I soon fell asleep, lulled by the sound of the engine and the motion of the boat, heading home to Decatur Island.

Two weeks later the thrill of watching Snow White and her entourage had diminished. I broke out in a rash and I was feeling headachy. I couldn't swallow food, even my favorite, a poached egg on toast.

Mother took my temperature. I could tell it was high by the look on her face, and the way she vigorously shook the thermometer to send the mercury back down. Then she made me put on pajamas and go back to bed.

She immediately wrote to the County Health nurse in Friday Harbor, informing her she thought I had caught the measles in Anacortes, and asked for advice. We didn't have a doctor in San Juan County and Elsie Scott was the Florence Nightingale for the islands. She was a flamboyant woman with short blonde hair, who had visited the Decatur school once. She wore her red and blue nurse's cape and white cap with flair, promising to return to the island anytime we requested her to. It took two days for the mail boat to go back and forth and receive her reply. In a letter to mother she advised, "Keep the child in bed until I get there."

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Anticipating her arrival, Mother moved me to a downstairs bedroom. I could smell the freshly baked cookies she made to serve Elsie, but the aroma was an affront as I lay there unable to eat.

It was never easy to keep our farmhouse clean, but I could hear mother, in the kitchen, declaring new rules. Our dog, Patches, was banished to the outdoors. Coats, shoes, and boots all disappeared into a closet. I overheard her scolding dad about “tracking mud into the house” as she swept and mopped the floor.

Confined to my room, one day slid into the next and I became bored and restless. I felt as if mother’s resolve was dissipating. My brother came into my room with a handful of cookies, and Patches sneaked in to lie down beside my bed.

It’s not that mother didn’t know how to care for a child that had contracted the measles. She had generations of medical advice passed down by my grandma. But Elsie had promised during her one visit, to help island families. At the least, mother expected the county to establish quarantine on the island to keep anyone else from being exposed.

After assuring us she was coming and advising mother to keep me in bed, Elsie never arrived. Mother could hardly contain her disappointment, and repeated the story to everyone who would listen. Perhaps the county commissioners refused to send her to a remote island just for a case of the measles, or maybe Elsie was afraid of coming down with the disease herself, and didn’t wish to be exposed.

We never heard from Elsie again, and two weeks later my brother developed a rash and a fever.