

Still Water

Prologue

There are things my mom carries that she never named until I asked. I drove down to Wamego for a funeral — my dad’s oldest brother Bob — and afterward the three of us settled on the back porch the way we always do, my mom and my dad and me, with the yard going quiet around us and the evening coming on. My dad was there in his usual chair. My mom is eighty-one. She speaks carefully, the way people do who have spent a lifetime measuring the weight of words, and she told me this story that evening with the voice recorder running on the arm of the chair. She told it twice, because I asked her to — I wanted to be sure I had it right.

What follows is not her voice. I have set the story down in my own way, in my own rhythms, after listening to the recording many times over and sitting long with what she said. The events are hers; the truth in it I have tried to keep faithful; the shape, for better or worse, is mine.

She grew up fifteen miles from where she sits now, and she has driven the road between Wamego and St Marys so many times it no longer has a length. Highway 24 travels east-west through the Kaw River Valley along the Kansas River, where the land flattens and the sky opens up and the cottonwoods line the creek bottoms like sentinels. It is the same road on which her sister died, on a Tuesday, the fifth of May, 1959. This is the kind of thing that becomes ordinary in a life rooted in one place, the way a scar becomes ordinary, something you stop noticing on yourself even as strangers see it the moment they look at you. You carry your grief on the same roads you have always driven. You learn to pass the spot without flinching, or maybe you never learn and you simply get good at not showing it.

The following is what she gave me, and what I have made of it.

One

They slept in the same bed from the time they were old enough to remember sleeping.

This is where it begins, not with the accident and not with the skirt but with the two of them in the dark, Shirley’s breathing on one side of the mattress and Mary Jean’s on the other, the warmth of sisters who have shared sleep so long it no longer feels like sharing but just like the way night is. There is a world you know only through that kind of closeness, the sound of someone else’s dreaming, the weight of another body shifting and settling in the small hours, the smell of a sister’s hair against the pillow. Shirley’s hair was dark and loose at night, and the bed they shared at Mission and Third in St Marys had a geography Mary Jean knew the way she knew her own hands, every spring, every slight depression in the mattress, every weight and warmth of the person beside her.

Mary Jean was fifteen in the spring of 1959. Shirley was seventeen. They had shared that bed so long it was simply the only way they knew to end a day.

St. Marys was a Catholic town and a small town, the kind of place where the priest and the postman and the farmer all knew your name and your dad’s name and which pew your family

used on Sundays. It sat in the Kaw River Valley in the Flint Hills tallgrass country of northeast Kansas, and in May the fields and pastures came green and the trees along the creeks filled with sound and the whole valley smelled of something growing. The town had a Main Street and the old Jesuit college and the Immaculate Conception Church, the big stone shrine that stood at the center of things the way churches do in places where God is taken seriously, which in St. Marys was everywhere and always.

The Pope family lived on the corner of Mission and Third, 302 West Mission to be precise, in a small white house with a wide front porch and plaster walls inside and out, turn of the century, the kind of house where things were tight in the way of small houses and careful budgets and people who kept their feelings close. There was Mary Jean's dad, William — Bill to most of St. Marys — the assistant postmaster, which in a town that small probably made him the janitor and the one who started the coffee too. He went golfing in the evenings when the light lasted. There was his wife Jean, who kept the house with the efficiency of a woman who had organized her life around duty because duty was the thing she could keep in order. There were the older boys, Bill gone to the Marines, Gary still around, Jim in the Navy and home sometimes on leave. And there was Shirley. And Mary Jean. And then much later, Mike, the surprise, the baby, just a newborn in the spring of 1959, too young to understand anything at all.

Jean Pope was not a cruel woman. This needs saying, because what follows might make her seem like one, and that wouldn't be fair or true. She was a woman who had not received what she needed, not from her husband who kept the money tight and his feelings tighter, not from the life she had found herself living, and so she turned, the way people do, toward the thing that gave her what she was missing. That thing was Shirley.

Shirley, who could energize a room simply by entering it. Shirley, who baked and chattered and made life feel lighter, who had a glow about her that made people stop and look without quite knowing why they had stopped. She was in the school chorus, the one that competed at the district level, that traveled to other towns on buses and came back with ribbons. She knew how to move through a crowd, how to make Jean laugh, which was not something most people knew how to do.

Shirley had her mom's dark hair and her mom's green eyes. The other children had their dad's blue eyes. It is the simplest thing in the world to love the child who looks like you, and Jean did.

Mary Jean was a different kind of girl.

She understood this about herself the way you understand the color of your own eyes, as a simple fact of nature. She was quiet — still, the way deep water is still — and she moved through the house without disturbing things, did her work without being asked, and kept her inner life somewhere Jean could not quite reach. This was not calculated. It was simply who she was.

One afternoon when Mary Jean was perhaps ten or eleven, she was passing through the hallway toward the kitchen and she stopped just outside the doorway, the way you stop sometimes when you sense something in the air, when children sense that adults are talking about them. Her grandmother Blanche Melenson, Jean's mother, was visiting, sitting with Jean over coffee, doing what grandmothers do, which is take in a household and render quiet verdicts on what they see. Mary Jean stood in the hallway and listened without making herself known.

She heard her grandmother say: *that one's still water* — referring to Mary Jean. A pause, the soft clink of a coffee cup set back in its saucer. *Still water runs deep.*

And then she heard Jean say, not warmly and not with pride: *I know.*

A brief silence.

That's what scares me.

Mary Jean stood in the hallway for a moment and then moved on quietly toward the kitchen and said nothing and let nothing show. She folded the words away the way she folded most things, and she carried them, and she never once threw them back at her mom.

Blanche had a softness Jean did not. She sewed the girls their clothes, she lit up when they came into the room, and she loved both granddaughters — the outgoing one and the still one — without measure and without preference. She had been a quiet anchor in Mary Jean's life from the beginning.

But here is what nobody talked about, what got lost entirely in the noise of her mom's preference: Mary Jean loved Shirley without any complication at all. She was not jealous of her sister's light but warmed by it, glad to be near it, glad to be the quieter one in the orbit of the brighter one. She liked hearing the telephone ring and knowing it was one of the boys who called for Shirley, liked hearing her sister's voice drop to something private and laughing in the hallway. She liked going places with Shirley because the room always tilted slightly in Shirley's direction and some of that warmth reached her too. She was proud to be Shirley's sister in the way you are proud of something that costs you nothing and gives you everything.

At night, in the bed they shared, Shirley talked. This was the gift, the nighttime conversations that went nowhere and everywhere, the way older sisters talk to younger sisters in the dark when the day's performance is finally over. Shirley would wonder aloud about boys and music and what she was going to do after graduation, and Mary Jean would listen and sometimes answer and mostly just be present and still, and Shirley seemed to need that, the stillness, someone who didn't require anything from her in return.

They fit together in the way of people who have slept side by side their whole lives, who know without asking when the other is nearly asleep, who read each other not from faces or words but from something more subtle and older, the quality of the quiet between them.

A couple of weeks before the fifth of May, Mary Jean had a dream, and the next morning she told it to Shirley in the kitchen while they were making breakfast. The kitchen was a cramped little room and it smelled of gas and butter and the heat off the burner. Shirley stood at the stove turning an egg in the pan. In the dream Shirley had been in a car accident. There were kids from school with her, but their faces were dark, and Mary Jean could not make out who they were. She told it the way you tell a dream you can't quite shake, plainly, while the egg sputtered.

Jean overheard from the next room.

She came through the doorway and looked at Mary Jean and said it was a terrible thing to say out loud, that she ought to keep that sort of thing to herself.

Mary Jean kept her face still and went back to what she was doing. She folded that one away too.

Two days before the fifth, on a warm afternoon near the end of the school year, Jean sent them to the store for groceries. Shirley at the wheel, Mary Jean beside her, the list in her lap, the windows down. They got what they needed and then, because they were young and the day was bright and the car was theirs for another little while, they took the long way home, an extra lap or two around town, the way kids do when no one is checking the clock. A song came on the radio — Lloyd Price's *Personality*, new that spring of 1959, the kind of song that catches you up the moment it comes on — and Shirley reached over and turned the volume up.

*'Cause you got personality,
Walk, with personality,
Talk, with personality...
And of course you've got
A great big heart.*

You could listen to those lines and think the song had been written about Shirley. It was what people had been saying about her since she was young. The two of them sang it out loud through the open windows, laughing between the lines, not a care in the world. Mary Jean would remember it that way exactly. The volume going up. Her sister's voice beside her. The way Shirley could make an ordinary afternoon feel like something you would want to keep.

This is the world that existed before May 5th, 1959.

Two

The evening began with dishes.

Shirley was supposed to do the supper dishes and she hadn't done them because she was in a hurry, because the girls were waiting somewhere across town, because there was music to practice with her classmates and a warm May evening opening up before her and something else too, something in the fabric of her hurry that had a boy's shape without her saying so directly.

Jean sat at the dining room table in the middle of the house and looked through the doorway at the unwashed dishes in the kitchen and felt the quiet frustration of a woman whose children were always almost what they were supposed to be.

Mary Jean was in the living room at the front of the house, the ironing board set up near the windows that faced the corner of Mission and Third, working through the pile of things that needed pressing. The three rooms ran one behind the other, kitchen to dining room to living room, and from where she stood she could hear her mom's silence — the kind that was louder than most people's noise.

Shirley came through like she was going somewhere good, quick and light, trailing something pleasant in the air. She had on the pale blue cotton skirt, the one she liked because it moved when she walked — and Mary Jean understood, in the way younger sisters understand these things, that the skirt had not been chosen without thought. There was a boy somewhere in the evening ahead, unnamed, unannounced, but present in the care Shirley had taken getting ready. Through the bedroom doorway Mary Jean saw her at the mirror a moment before she came out, smoothing the skirt, satisfied. Then Shirley passed through the living room where Mary Jean was

ironing and moved on toward the dining room with the easy momentum of someone who knows where she is going.

She paused in the dining room with her mom.

Mary Jean could see her from where she stood at the ironing board.

“I’ll do the dishes when I get home,” Shirley said.

Jean looked at her from the table. The charge between the two of them was something Mary Jean knew well, and she took it in from the living room, quietly, precisely, without being part of it.

Shirley crossed to her mom and leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, and Jean sat at the table and didn’t quite lean into it, her hands still on the surface in front of her.

“I love you, Mom.”

She looked at the table and said nothing. Shirley stood in that silence for just a moment, then turned to the back door at the side of the dining room — just a few steps from where her mom sat — and as she went she began to hum and then to sing, a few notes from one of the chorus pieces, as if song were a door she knew how to open.

The back door opened and closed.

Mary Jean stood at the ironing board and listened to her sister’s footsteps go down the wooden deck steps and fade into the warm May evening, those quick steps moving down toward Third, toward the tracks and the corner where the girls were waiting, toward the music and whatever was opening up ahead of her. She stood there for a moment after the sound was gone and then she pressed the iron down and ran it slowly along the cotton and said nothing.

Outside the windows the evening was soft and the trees were full and the lilacs along Third Street were in bloom, their smell coming in through the open windows on the warm May air. Somewhere close by, just on the other side of the house, a freight train moved through town, its whistle low and fading. The school year was nearly over and summer was right there, close enough to feel.

She worked through the pile slowly — pressing, folding, carrying stacks into the back to put away, coming back for the next thing. The house settled around her: her dad somewhere in the back with the paper, the baby asleep, the room quiet. Mary Jean dutifully continued with her chores of ironing.

The rain started around nine. Not a storm at first, just a settling, a quiet decision the sky made, the kind of soft May rain that comes on gently in the Kaw Valley and then doesn’t stop.

Three

Two high school boys knocked on the front door, soaking wet, their hair plastered to their foreheads, their shoes dark with mud, water dripping from their clothes onto the cement, their faces arranged into expressions they hoped looked calm. Mary Jean looked up from the ironing board and saw them through the window before her dad got to the door.

They asked for her brother Jim. Jim was home on Navy leave at the time and had gone out for the evening. The boys looked at each other with the look of people who are deciding how to say something they cannot say.

Shirley's been in a wreck. Out on 24. We can't find her.

Her dad was a deliberate man, a post office man, a man who sorted things into their right places. She could not see his face from across the room, but she heard it in his voice when he turned and called back toward the dining room and told Jean to call June and Johnny to come over. The flatness of it, the careful holding-back, told her everything before anything else was said.

He got his hat and he went out with the boys into the rain, and then there was just the sound of a car door and the engine fading down Mission Street and the May rain tapping the roof of the house.

June and Johnny arrived in less than ten minutes. June was Jean's sister, and she seemed to know what was required of her, which was to go to the kitchen and put on coffee and sit with Jean and hold the air steady by the simple fact of being another woman in the room. Johnny settled into the living room near Mary Jean with the quietness of a man who understood that his job was to be present and say nothing unless asked.

Mary Jean went back to her work because her hands needed something to do. She kept herself useful and quiet, drifting between the front room and the hallway, close enough to the kitchen to hear without being part of it.

The house had the stillness of people in waiting, of breath held, of a world pausing to see what it would do next. The rain was steady on the windows, water running softly down the glass. Little Mike was asleep in his crib, too young to know that anything was wrong, too young to understand anything at all. From the kitchen came the low sound of Jean and June managing it together, the clink of cups, the murmur of women moving carefully around the edges of something unbearable.

At some point Mary Jean reached toward the television, thinking there might be news. Johnny said gently that she probably didn't want to find out that way. She left it off.

She set the iron on its heel and looked at the window, at the rain on the glass, at the dark street outside.

Time moved in a strange way. She did not know how long her dad had been gone. She had ironed everything there was to iron and folded everything there was to fold, and she stood at the board anyway, her hands resting on its edge, because it seemed important not to sit down, as if staying on her feet was its own kind of keeping vigil, as if the night couldn't fully arrive while she was still standing.

At some point another freight train came through on the tracks behind the house, the way trains always came through, without asking, without knowing what house they were passing or what the people inside it were waiting to find out. The whole room trembled slightly and the windows shivered in their frames and the low rumble moved through the floor and up through her legs and then faded away down the valley, leaving the rain and the silence even more complete behind it. She stood at the ironing board and let it pass.

She heard the car out front.

The front door was open to the screen as the evening had been warm when it started and nobody had thought to close it. She heard a car door and then her dad's footsteps coming up the front walk, and Father Edward Thro's behind him — the pastor at Immaculate Conception, a kind man who had come from the rectory because someone had thought to call ahead. Her dad paused on the steps. She heard him say something low to Father Thro:

How am I ever going to tell her this?

The words came in through the screen and Mary Jean stood at the ironing board, frozen, unable to move.

Her dad and Father Thro came inside and walked past her through the living room and into the kitchen. They did not stop. They did not look at her. Then she heard her mom's voice — not a scream, something that came from deeper than screaming can reach. The sound of a woman anguishing that the last thing she said to her daughter was silence.

Mary Jean stood in the yellow light of the living room and did not go in where the adults were gathered.

Someone always had to be still. She was still.

Four

The days that followed had a dimension that she moved through without entirely inhabiting.

Bill came home in his Marine uniform and she would always remember the sight of him in the back pew at Immaculate Conception Church, his grief held the way the Marines had trained him. Jim came back from wherever the evening had taken him. The house filled with neighbors and relatives and casseroles left on the porch and the quiet, practiced protocol of Catholic women managing a death, which they did with the grace of long experience. Her dad had to borrow the money to pay for the funeral, which embarrassed him greatly.

Verschelden's Funeral Home was too small for what Shirley's death required and people stood out on the sidewalk for the rosary.

Jean stopped on the way to the visitation to buy a pair of socks. They didn't put shoes on the dead back then, and she could not have her daughter buried with bare feet. She had the undertaker put the socks on Shirley.

Mary Jean stood in the receiving line for what felt like hours, accepting pressed hands and earnest faces and the well-meant words of adults who didn't know what to say to a fifteen-year-old girl whose sister had just died. She kept herself composed, or composed enough, and she did not cry where anyone could see her, not because she wasn't grieving but because some grief needs privacy.

They buried Shirley at Mount Calvary Cemetery, on the hill above town.

What she understood in those first days, without quite having words for it yet, was that she had become invisible.

Her mom's grief was total. It filled every room she entered and took up all the air — not by any choice of hers, because you cannot choose how grief moves through you. But the consequence was that Mary Jean, who had never been the one Jean reached toward, now became the one Jean looked past entirely. Her eyes were focused on something that wasn't there, something that had been there and was gone, and Mary Jean moved through her mom's line of sight the way a shadow moves, present and unregistered.

Mary Jean did not resent this, or she tried not to. Her mom had lost the thing she loved most. What Mary Jean had lost was different, smaller in her mom's accounting. Jean had never known what her younger daughter was carrying, and she did not see her carrying it now.

Mary Jean did what needed doing. She cooked and cleaned and looked after Mike, making herself useful in ways nobody noticed because nobody was supposed to notice. The same stillness that had frightened Jean turned now to something steadier and more necessary, the thing that kept the house from going entirely sideways in those first impossible days.

But at night she had to go to bed.

The first night she lay on her side of the mattress and looked at the wall, in the dark of the room, at nothing. The bed had a geography she knew completely, every spring, every slight give of the mattress, the height of the pillows and weight of the quilt. She had never paid attention to any of this because it had never required attention. Shirley had simply always been there and the bed had been the bed and the night had been the night.

Now the other half of the mattress held nothing at all. Just cotton and springs and the absence of warmth, just the place where someone had been.

She could still smell her sister, or she thought she could, and she lay in the dark and didn't know whether to believe it.

She lay there and thought about Shirley coming through the living room that last evening, the pale blue skirt moving when she walked, those few bright notes of a song trailing behind her through the room as the door opened and closed. And Jean at the dining room table saying nothing. Nothing at all.

She did not sleep for a long time, and when she finally did she woke early, and the first thing she did before she was fully conscious was reach across the mattress for the warmth that wasn't there.

Five

The clothes came back from the funeral home in a plain bag.

The undertaker had dressed Shirley in something Jean had chosen, something appropriate for being seen for the last time. What Shirley had been wearing that evening, the pale blue cotton skirt she had chosen so carefully before going out, came back to the family folded inside the bag.

Jean took the bag to the back room and Mary Jean heard water running for a while, the sound of something being washed carefully by hand. She didn't go to see.

Later she noticed the skirt hanging in the hallway. Just hanging there, clean, nothing remarkable about it. The pale blue cotton had dried with the soft, slight wrinkles that come from being washed gently and hung to air. It looked like a skirt. Nothing you could point to and say this is what loss looks like. That was perhaps the strangest thing about it, that it just looked like a skirt.

About a week after the funeral, Mary Jean was in their room getting ready for school. The days had started up again, you had to let them, and she was moving through the motions of making herself presentable for a world that was going to expect that of her regardless of what she was carrying.

Jean appeared in the doorway with her hair not yet done, in her house dress, looking at a point somewhere near Mary Jean rather than quite at her.

“Why don’t you go ahead and wear Shirley’s skirt today,” she said quietly, not exactly asking. “There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just sitting there.”

She turned and went back down the hallway.

Mary Jean stood in the room and looked at the skirt where it hung on the chair. She looked at it for a long moment.

She knew it was a strange thing her mom had asked. A small trespass. She felt it without naming it.

She understood what her mom was doing, or enough of it. The skirt was a way to keep Shirley moving through the world a little longer, to see something of Shirley in the hallways, in the morning light, in the ordinary Tuesday of an ordinary week. Jean needed this. It didn’t much matter whose body was inside the skirt.

Mary Jean understood this without bitterness, or she tried to. And then she understood something else, something quieter and entirely her own, that she wanted to wear it too, not only for Jean but for herself, because she had reached across that cold mattress every morning for a week and found nothing, and the skirt was the nearest available thing. Just the pale blue cotton her sister had been wearing on an ordinary Tuesday evening. Nothing sacred about it, and yet the most sacred thing in the world.

She picked it up.

The cotton was soft in her hands, worn in from washing, the kind of softness that comes from use rather than expense. She held it for a moment and felt where Shirley’s body had shaped it slightly over time, the small intimacies of fabric that accommodate you gradually without your noticing. And then she put it on, smoothed it with her hands, and stood before the small mirror in their room — the same mirror where she had watched Shirley stand a week ago, tilting her head, smoothing the skirt, satisfied. She stood there the same way now. The same glass. The same skirt. A different girl looking back.

She picked up her schoolbooks.

To reach the back door she had to pass through the kitchen and the dining room. Her mom was at the dining room table in her house dress, coffee in front of her. Mary Jean stopped in the kitchen doorway with her schoolbooks pressed against her chest and waited.

Jean looked up.

Her eyes went first to the skirt — a flicker of something across her face, recognition or wanting-to-recognize. Then she remembered Shirley was gone, and the flicker went out.

She looked at the table and said nothing.

Mary Jean stood in that silence for just a moment.

She understood, right then, what the singing had been for.

Then she went out the back door.

Six

The morning was warm and the air carried the smell of rain coming.

She came down the back steps and turned out onto the sidewalk, and the town arranged itself around her the way it always had, the familiar streets and houses whose families she could name, the elm trees arching over the sidewalks with their new green, birds moving through the branches in the easy way of creatures who know nothing has changed. The world was unchanged. She was not the same. Walking between those two truths made the sidewalk feel tilted under her feet.

She was aware of the skirt the way you are aware of something new you are wearing, a slight consciousness of the fabric around her legs as she walked. The skirt was Shirley's, and people might recognize it. What she now knew about Shirley was hers. She kept her eyes forward and her pace steady.

What had passed in the kitchen walked with her. She thought of Shirley singing her way out the back door a week ago and understood now what she had not understood then: the singing had been for something. Her sister had stood in that same silence and found her way out of it. The brightness had been her strength.

She did not have her sister's singing. But she had walked out of the doorway, and she was walking still, and she was strong too.

She passed the corner of Third and Bertrand, across the tracks, where the girls had waited for Shirley on the evening of the fifth, and she passed it the way you learn to pass the scenes of things, without looking directly, letting it move through her peripheral vision and recede behind her.

The school building came into view and she went up the steps and through the door and into the ordinary Tuesday hum of a building full of young people, and she found her seat in study hall and set her books down and folded her hands on the desk and looked toward the front of the room.

Seven

The study hall held nearly thirty students at that hour, juniors and seniors mostly, the hush of a room full of upperclassmen with their books open and the proctor at the front. Mary Jean was a

freshman. She was fifteen, and she had spent her first year of high school in that building doing what she did at home, which was to take up no more space than necessary.

Shirley's friends were only a few desks away. Her classmates, the girls she had sung with in the chorus, the same ones who had been waiting on the corner with her on the evening of May fifth, who had known before most people knew and had carried that knowledge through the night and then gotten up the next morning and kept going because there is nothing else to do. They had grieved and were still grieving, openly and without much armor, in the way of girls who lose a best friend at seventeen.

Mary Jean wasn't looking at them. She was looking at the front of the room, present and still the way she always was, the way still water registers everything that moves across its surface.

She heard the first words before they landed.

She wore that.

Low, meant to be private, not quite private enough. She kept her eyes forward and told herself she hadn't heard correctly.

That's horrible.

And then from another voice, in the same low register of shared outrage: *It's obscene.*

She sat with it. The word settled over her with a weight she hadn't expected. Obscene. These were Shirley's best friends, the ones she had laughed with and practiced music with and talked with on the telephone at night, the ones she had called her best friends and truly meant it. They were not entirely wrong, she could feel the nature of their hurt, could understand how the sight of the wrong girl in the right skirt must have struck them, a reminder of what they had lost when Shirley was no longer there.

But they didn't know. They didn't know what it had taken to put it on that morning. They didn't know about the cold empty mattress, about reaching across it every morning into nothing. They didn't know that she had wanted this for herself, not only for her mom, that she had chosen it because it was the closest she could get. They didn't know about the small hope she had let herself feel that morning — that her mom, seeing her come down the hall in Shirley's skirt, might finally let her in. They didn't know the hope had died in the kitchen doorway, before she ever picked up her schoolbooks.

Today, however, she was not going to disappear. Not today.

She stood up.

A chair pushing back in study hall is a sound the room registers. Books closed. Heads came up. The proctor looked up from his desk at the front. Nearly thirty faces turned and found her, the freshman, standing alone at her desk with her hands at her sides. She looked at Shirley's friends, really looked at them, one face and then the next.

Her voice came out low and steady. She wasn't performing. She was just saying the thing that needed saying.

“I can hear you.”

Their faces still.

“You don’t have a clue what this is like.” She held their eyes and did not look away. “I feel closer to her wearing this.” A pause, just long enough. “She considered you her best friends. And if she could hear what you’re saying right now, you wouldn’t be her friends.”

She picked up her books and walked out of study hall.

The hallway was wide and empty and her footsteps rang down it and the school went on around her behind other closed doors, the ordinary Tuesday of it, the whole busy machinery of young people learning to become something. She walked through all of it and did not shake and did not cry and did not look back.

She wore the pale blue skirt all day.

She never wore it to school again.

But she wore it other times, at home, in the private hours when there was no one to react and no explanation required. And in those moments it still did what it had done on that first morning, it closed a distance that nothing else could close, the pale blue cotton of an ordinary skirt on an ordinary Tuesday evening, the most everyday thing in the world and the nearest she could come to Shirley.

She doesn’t remember whether she told her mom what happened in the study hall. She thinks probably not. Some things you carry quietly because that is the only way they can be carried.

Epilogue

The rest is not this story.

Jean Pope died in November of 1963, just weeks before a president was shot in Dallas. Breast cancer, the certificate said, but the small-town doctor said it had really been a broken heart. Bill, who had watched Jean grieve for four and a half years while carrying his own grief quietly, did not argue. While they watched the Kennedy funeral, the tragedies folded into each other and Mary Jean saw her father finally break. Not for a man he had never met, but for the weight of it all.

My mom had come home from college earlier that fall. She left her freedom without complaint to cook, clean and look after little Mike, while her mother lay in a bed looking at the ceiling and worried aloud about him. Jean still did not quite see the daughter at her bedside, quietly holding her hand, still water, as she had always been. And who would help to hold the family together long after she was gone.

She married David Peterson, the farm kid from up the valley, second of ten in a Catholic farming family, the boy she had loved since junior high, the one who looked at her and saw all the way down to where the still water ran deep. He was not frightened by what he found. He chose her completely and without conditions, which was what she had needed without quite knowing she was waiting for it. They built their life in Wamego, fifteen miles west of St. Marys on Highway 24. St. Marys sits between Wamego and the curve at Bourbonnais Creek where the car went off

the edge on a rainy May night, into the creek below. To go anywhere east, Mary Jean had to pass the spot. She has passed it more times than she has counted. She doesn't count.

When she and Dad married, Father Edward Thro stood at the altar at Immaculate Conception — the same kind man who had come up the front walk in the rain that night years before. The town that had held her family through the worst of it held her wedding too. Small towns hold you that way, across decades, the same hands and the same prayers and the same stone walls.

She still prays the rosary in the early mornings, the same worn beads her mom used, the same words said in the same dark, something passing down through the hands whether we intend it to or not.

She told me this story on a spring evening in Wamego while my dad listened and the voice recorder ran. The next day, I drove home down Highway 24, through the Kaw Valley, the recording on the seat beside me and my mother's voice running underneath everything else.

What I see now, that I did not quite see before, that maybe nobody outside the house would see at all:

She was not the favored one. That is a cruel thing for a parent to do to a child, even when they do not mean to be cruel, and the shape of it stays. My mother grew up shaped by it. What is remarkable — what I keep coming back to — is that she never resented Shirley for it. She loved her sister cleanly, without complication, without the small daily envy that grief alone would have given her cover to feel.

When Grandma Jean put the skirt in my Mom's hands and asked her to wear it out into the world, the cruelty in that request was real too. Her mother was using her younger daughter as a vessel to keep the older one moving a little longer — and could not see, or could not let herself see, what she was asking. My mother saw it, even if she did not have the words for it then, and she did it anyway, because she loved her mother despite everything.

What I think she did not expect — what nobody expected — was what she would find inside the skirt her mom handed her. Not Shirley. Not her mother's approval. Something else. *Strength* is too small a word and the wrong shape for it. *Resolve*. A spine she did not know she had until she stood up in that study hall and used it.

She would need it. She would need it the next year and the years after — for her mother's dying, for raising Mike, for setting her own college aside; for brothers who left her in different ways, some by ambition, some by illness and some by their own slow undoing; for losses she does not talk about and griefs that are not mine to set down here. She would need it for all of that. She had it. She had had it since the morning she walked down the back steps in Shirley's pale blue skirt.

She built her life on the same stretch of Highway 24 that took her sister. She raised her children in a house in Wamego. She became the warmest, most patient, most quietly thoughtful mother any of us has ever known. None of that was an accident. It was made, all of it, out of what she had been given and what she had refused to let be the end of her.

She is a humble woman. She would not put it this way. But I will.

I thought about a fifteen-year-old girl standing up in a study hall in 1959, the quietest one in the room becoming for a moment the clearest, saying *I feel closer to her* to a circle of faces who didn't understand.

And she did feel closer. In the pale blue cotton of her sister's ordinary Tuesday skirt, in the body of the girl nobody was watching, she did.

She still does, all these years later.

And I am closer to my mom for knowing this.

* * *

A note on the text

This story was built from a recorded conversation with my mom on the back porch in Wamego, Kansas on April 10, 2026 – the evening described in the prologue. I worked through that recording over many weeks with the help of an AI writing assistant — Anthropic's Claude — for drafting and line-level revision. Every choice in the prose is mine, made deliberately, often after many passes. My dad read the final drafts, and his careful marks shaped this one. Any errors of fact, judgment, or feeling are my own.

Brian C. Peterson
Omaha, Nebraska
May 2026