

My Early Life of Crime and Other Stories

By: Linda Stapleton

I always went to bed earlier than my sisters. In summer, I was usually asleep before it got dark. As a result, I often would awake after a few hours and enjoyed the peace and quiet of the family sleeping.

On this particular night, Dad was still up watching TV. It had to be before midnight, because the National Anthem played at midnight and the TV stations signed off.

I still am not sure what triggered the following behavior in my 12 year old mind. I crawled out of my bedroom window, went out to the car, which was parked in front of the house. In those days and in the area where we lived, very seldom was our house or car locked and the keys were left in the car ignition. The car was parked on a slight rise, so it was easy to push in on the clutch and the car rolled forward. I had to make an immediate right turn to get down the alley to the street. Very few cars traveled that street at night which was good, because I dared not hit the brakes or Dad might see the brake lights. I had to switch the gear shift to 2nd and let out on the clutch, the motor started. I turned right on the main street and turned on the head lights. I drove the half block to the church, turned right then when I reached the alley that would go in front of our house, I negotiated the right turn and quickly turned off the head lights. I gave the gas a little boost and turned off the motor. As I glided past our house I could see Dad sitting in his chair still watching TV. I repeated this block circling 8 or 10 times and was feeling very relaxed and pleased with myself. As I glided in front of the house, Dad was not in his chair. To my horror the front porch light was on and Dad was standing at the end of the walk. In a quiet voice he said "Turn off the switch, put it in reverse and bring me the keys."

Dad had never smacked me, but I knew I had it coming. I reached out as far as I could to hand him the keys. He took them, didn't smack, me and said, "That's enough driving for one night...get your ass to bed!" I ran.

I was quickly under the covers thinking he was just taking his time deciding how to kill me when I heard Mom say, "Who were you talking to?"

"Linda" he said.

Mom asked, "Did she have to go to the toilet?"

Dad said, "No, she was driving the car around the block."

Dad continued, "While watching TV, I kept seeing flashes of light. I listened for thunder and when I didn't hear any, I went out to see if it was heat lightning and discovered there were no clouds and there was no car. About this time the car came coasting in with Linda driving.

Mom said "You spanked her didn't you?"

Dad replied, "No she didn't hurt the car!" Thus started my life of crime.

Sister Dorthy wanted a bicycle. She asked Dad to float her a loan and she would pay him back from her various summer jobs. You may say, why couldn't she just *have* the bike? There were 6 girls in the family at that time. Everybody would love to have had a bike. Besides, Dorthy eventually went into banking when she graduated, this loan may have started her career.

The bike was kept inside on the screened in front porch. It was dusted and waxed. I thought to borrow it would not be bad, as long as I made sure it was dusted and parked in the same place afterward.

I was a skinny 11 year old, just getting it out and down the front steps was a challenge. Once I got it started, I was sure I'd have to have a big area to turn around. So, I headed for the filling station at the other end of town. All was going well except when I glided into the drive of the station. Their little boy was playing in the gravel. He moved the same way I moved and I ran right up and across him. If he wouldn't have moved his head, I would have run across his face. He was laying out screaming and the bike and I were laying the other way with me crying. I wasn't hurt, but I thought the bike may be. The little boy's mother and grandmother came out and helped him up and he quit crying. They had just had a baby girl the week before, so to try to calm me down, the mother said "Would you like to see our new baby?"

"No, I don't want to see your darn baby!"

I gathered up the bike and walked it home. I cleaned it up and it didn't have a scratch.

We had a great hill for sledding near our house. With only one sled and three sisters to share, we 'stacked' our sledding runs. Nancy, the oldest, 10, on the bottom guiding the sled, Sally, 5, next, then me, 8, whose job was to give 5 or 6 running pushes then land on the top holding the sides of the sled to anchor Sally and me reasonably secure.

We had witnessed a neighbor boy on another hill, get off course, went off a bump and crashed hitting his head either on a rock or the sled runners and caused a lot of blood on the snow. Nancy and I decided since sleds don't have brakes, we had to plan an emergency stop. Nancy would yell, "stop," Sally would let go of the sled, I would hang on to Sally and roll to the right, Nancy would hang on to the sled and roll to the left. Thus stopping the sled.

On this run, Sally had gone inside to warm up and dry out. It was an exceptional slick pack of snow so when we got to the bottom of the hill, we could continue across the street. There was very little traffic, but we posted a look-out for safety sake.

We were about 10 or 12 feet from the street when Nancy and I both saw the dump truck. I rolled off and when Nancy rolled, she let go of the sled. It continued out across the street between the front and back tires of the truck. The driver never knew. I yelled at our cousin, "Why didn't you warn us?"

Her reply was, "I said, truck."

Although ours was a family of seven girls, there was never a 'Birds and Bees talk.' As a result of no info, when I was 12 "The Curse" hit me totally unprepared. I could not sleep, so I went to the living room and sat in Mom's rocking chair. The movement helped ease my pain but the chair squeaked. Dad came out of his bedroom and turned on a light. "What's wrong?"

Due to an epidemic raging, I had diagnosed my problem.

"Now, Dad, don't get excited, I have polio!"

"What?" He asked, "does your throat hurt?"

"No"

"Do you have a fever?"

"I don't think so." I replied.

"Then what?" He asked.

"My stomach and back hurt, and my legs hurt and I feel terrible."

"Anything else?" He questioned.

"Yes, but I'd rather not talk about it."

"Oh...OH! Take 2 aspirin and talk to your mom in the morning."

As it turned out, my sister Dorthy (7 years older) explained things *very* well. I will always appreciate her delicate introduction for me into womanhood.

Linda Stapleton. Prose, non-fiction. Green Hills. "My Early Life of Crime and Other Stories"