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Shifting Gears

Remember that blatant foreshadowing back in Chapter 13 when I mentioned that we'd rue the day when all that 1950s conformity and complacency would come back to bite us? Well, welcome to the '60s.

There have been volumes written about the causes of the societal transformation that happened in that decade. I can't pretend to add anything to the weighty scholarship of that enormous library of recorded history. All I can do is tell you how those times played out in our particular family, in our particular time and place, from my particular perspective. I wish I could say this will be a story you can learn from, but probably the most important thing history teaches is that every generation is faced with its own distinct challenges. How we meet them will determine what we leave to our children to fix.

These things always sneak up on you. No one ever announces that you should prepare yourself for an assault on everything you've always taken for granted, so you trundle along day by day not really noticing the vague ripples in the air way out on the horizon. We felt pretty secure in our snug little house in Calgary.

In our case, the decade had already opened with enough turbulence to keep us fully engaged in getting our feet back under us. We came back to Calgary from Houston in January of 1962 minus our two oldest children, Ted was completely absorbed in creating a new exploration/production company he called Rozsa Oils, and I

was busy returning all our farewell gifts. I went back to church and the choir and the women's organizations desperately hoping they'd never noticed I'd been away.

The best part of those first few months back was that, with Ruth Ann and Sidney away, it was a chance for Mary Lil to be an only child. She and I both looked forward to the afternoons she'd run home from school and we'd curl up on the couch together to read endless storybooks through the long winter evenings.

We'd left Sidney in Conroe with my sister and brother-in-law to finish the ninth grade and, when he came back to Calgary in the spring, ironically he was the one who brought the news up close and personal to the Rozsa family.

We were living in Jackson, Mississippi in 1947 when Sidney was born and as much as we loved the languid, old-fashioned pace of life in the Deep South, we were both taken aback by the rigid antebellum social restrictions that still existed there. Despite the war years of the early '40s that brought soaring cotton prices and manufacturing to Mississippi, Jim Crow laws still supported staunchly segregated public education, public transportation, restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains. Poll taxes and literacy requirements meant that most African-Americans were *de facto* non-citizens. And, even worse, the Mississippi Klan was still alive and well in those days.

We weren't in Mississippi very long, however. Sidney was still a baby when we left, and really just a toddler when we moved to Calgary. I hasten to concede that most of us in that first wave of oil industry immigration were from the American South, so none of us were so naïve as to protest we were unaware of the realities of racism. Of course we knew. But now that we were all comfortably ensconced in western Canada, we never imagined that any of our children would ever have to confront that reality.

And yes, I *do* see the irony in a statement like that. That's what I meant when I said our children ultimately have to fix the issues their parents fail to deal with. Sidney came home from Conroe in the spring of 1962. We had left him there as a Canadian-raised

fourteen-year-old, blissfully unaware of Southern racism, totally unequipped with any prior experience in dealing with those ancient prejudices.

It's now a suburb of the huge Houston metroplex, but in 1961 Conroe was still just a quiet little Texas town that had seen its own boom and bust economy level out to a nice even pace. Its population was middling prosperous and overwhelmingly white, but about 30 per cent of the people were still marginalized by the separate-but-equal legislation that supported segregation. And despite the Brown v. the Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1954 that said separate education for black and white children is inherently unequal, Conroe public schools remained segregated by Texas law.

Sidney arrived into that culture in 1961 and, as a big strong kid, was approached by the football coach who invited him to try out for the team. He was a freshman; it was a great way to meet the other kids in the high school, and Sidney loved football, so the invitation was very much welcomed. However, it didn't take long before he saw what was happening to the black kids in that community and heard the other kids' racist slurs.

He discovered that the black population literally lived on the other side of the railroad tracks and that there was a side door off the alley at the only movie theatre in town. Inside that door were stairs that led directly up to the 'reserved' balcony. When he went to the Dairy Queen he saw two water fountains, one labelled 'Colored,' the other 'Whites Only.' So, in class one day, unable to choke it down any longer, he took emphatic exception to a blatantly racist discussion. When the class ended, selected members of the football team grabbed him and ushered him out behind the gym where they gave him an education.

I doubt any of us ever prepared for that moment. Most of us – at least those of us who were born and raised in the South – had lived these facts since childhood. My parents had simply included everyone in their ministry, black, white, or brown. They modelled the

best in human decency, and each of us learned to do the same. But of course too many Southerners didn't. No one had ever asked us to defend the system. But very few had really thought to challenge it either. However, I think I speak for all of us when I say we most sincerely hoped that loving hearts and wiser heads would override racial discrimination in the South before any of our children would have to deal with it. I suspect that most of us decided the less we said to them about the situation, the better. But in 1962, our fifteen-year-old son was asking, "Why?"

Two years prior, black college students in North Carolina sat down at a lunch counter in a Woolworth's store, asked to be served, and were denied. In response, 70,000 students waged their own sit-ins across the nation. In Arkansas, the Governor called out the National Guard to prevent nine black students from entering Little Rock High School. In October of '62, James Meredith, a black student, tried to enter the University of Mississippi and needed three thousand federal marshals to get him through the door. In August of '63, 200,000 people marched into Washington, D.C., demanding jobs and freedom and, at the culmination of the march, we heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his *I Have a Dream* speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. And in the same year, we listened to Alabama Governor George Wallace's inaugural address in which he infamously ranted, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" We watched the police turn the fire hoses and dogs onto women and children, and listened in shock as the news came in about the bombing of the 16th Street Church in Birmingham. Four little girls were killed in that bombing.

Why?

How could I possibly explain to a fifteen-year-old raised in Canada what slavery had meant to 350 years of American history? Slavery was a cancer that had consumed the humanity of ten generations of white Americans, and its resulting social chaos continued through four generations of Southerners after post-war Reconstruction. We could only hope that Martin Luther King's

voice for non-violence could bring some degree of sanity to this agonizing march toward justice.

Ironically though, after Sidney came home it wasn't long before we got a call from his Calgary high school principal reporting that he had objected to certain remarks by his English teacher concerning racial discrimination in the American South. Evidently he stood up in class and accused the teacher of simplifying an issue that was obviously beyond her limited knowledge and walked out declaring he wouldn't return to her class. In the end, I suppose what he really learned was that nothing that really matters is ever easy to change, particularly when it involves who we believe ourselves to be. As long as any of us imagines himself to be innately superior to any 'other,' there will be discrimination – whether it's racial, religious, cultural, or national.

Dinner table conversations got louder and more contentious as the decade advanced. In November, President Ngo Dinh Diem was executed during a coup in South Vietnam. A few weeks later, we watched in horror as President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Mary Lil arrived home for lunch just as Walter Cronkite made that awful announcement on TV, and all I could think to do was to draw the drapes and gather my family to mourn our loss through the long, sad days that followed – just as we had mourned the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945. In many ways, I think we all understood that this time we were grieving our loss of innocence. The American community in Calgary felt very far from home, and we withdrew into isolation and pain, our church once again a refuge.

After she graduated from Michigan State in 1963, Ruth Ann decided to apply for a job in communications with Pan American Airlines. It was a glamorous opportunity, but during her interview they explained they were desperate for stewardesses. If she would agree to work as a stewardess for a year, they'd guarantee her a communications job.

We weren't thrilled about it, but Ruth Ann saw it as a first step toward the job she really wanted. She donned her blue uniform and

perky little hat, passed inspection by the rather stern head stewardess who checked to make sure the girls were all tightly cinched in girdles. And then she marched them off for their month-long training course.

In those days, because Pan Am flew only international flights, all the girls had to learn another language. Ruth Ann had taken high school French, of course, but could hardly be described as bilingual, so the language instructor decided she would use her native tongue which, from looking at her name, he declared was Hungarian.

Not only had she never heard the language spoken, Ruth Ann couldn't even say her name with the rolling *R* it required in Hungarian. (She, and the rest of us for that matter, *always* have to explain that 'Rozsa' is pronounced 'Rose-ay' with the accent on the last syllable.) She promised the language instructor that she'd *definitely* study up on her French.

Then, much to her surprise, she found she really enjoyed the work. She was able to visit the fabulous cities of Europe and Africa and, because she had frequent layovers at many of them, she had the good fortune to visit beyond their city limits as well. And since she was assigned to the first-class cabin, she had some great opportunities to meet people she never would have otherwise, so it was a very good experience for her during her early twenties.

Ruth Ann was headquartered in New York and shared an apartment at the south end of Manhattan, thoroughly enjoying a very glamorous life. One morning in Chicago as she was eating breakfast in the hotel dining room before leaving for the airport, she noticed a couple of businessmen eyeing her from across the room. She looked away to discourage them, but moments later they were at her table introducing themselves. They were account representatives from the Thompson Advertising Agency who were creating a campaign for Dentyne. They were looking for a model with a terrific smile. Would she be interested in having her picture taken posing in the engine well of a new Pan Am jet? It was too bad she didn't ask for

residuals because that ad got a lot of play through the years. Ruth Ann still describes it as her fifteen minutes of fame.

In December of 1965, Ruth Ann married a young American Air Force officer. They were stationed first in Del Rio, Texas, and because Reed was on the career fast track, he was away frequently on training exercises. They moved from Del Rio to Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane to Merced, California, so Reed could train on the new KC 135 tanker jets. And when he was scheduled for the three-month courses, Ruth Ann would come back to Calgary to visit and the conversation would inevitably go to the escalating war in Vietnam.

The American military advisors in Vietnam had been given permission to return fire on the enemy if fired upon. After the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin destruction of two American destroyers, Congress authorized President Johnson to take action against the North Vietnamese, and less than six months later the president ordered the continuous bombing of North Vietnam below the twentieth parallel. Eight months after that, the first draft cards were burned.

Sidney turned eighteen in 1965. He was an American citizen living in Canada. He would have to register for the draft. Reed was on active duty with the U.S. Air Force. Can you imagine the tension around our dining room table?

Remember too, the war in Vietnam wasn't happening on a clean slate. The Cold War was in full deep freeze. An American U-2 reconnaissance plane had been shot down over Soviet territory. Children in American elementary schools were having regular Soviet attack drills as though hiding under their desks was going to save them from nuclear annihilation. Mary Lil was just old enough to hear about the Cold War on the news but not quite old enough to understand the context, so she was frightened to death and secretly packed a suitcase full of canned goods and emergency supplies in case she couldn't locate us and had to find a nuclear fall-out shelter on her own. The Berlin Wall was raised in 1961. The Bay of Pigs disaster in Cuba continued to be an embarrassment for Americans.

Ted and I were on a three-week Chamber of Commerce trip to the Orient with a number of Calgary business people in October of 1962. Sam and Olga Nickel, Webster and Sheila MacDonald, Wilbur Griffith, Gordon Love and his wife; we were a mixed bag of Calgarians on a mission to learn more about Hong Kong and Japan, and we were most warmly welcomed and feted throughout the trip. However, we were cautioned to stay close to our guides as we approached a fence separating us from Communist China. We could see that people were living in squalor just steps away from that fence. One of our group moved toward them with his camera poised, but, within seconds, armed soldiers confronted him, and it was obvious they felt no hesitation about firing should he fail to respond to their orders. We were scurried away and strongly reprimanded by our guide.

Later that evening, we were having a lovely dinner with members of the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce when we heard the news about the Kennedy-Khrushchev stand-off in Cuba. Wilbur Griffith was so alarmed by what had happened to us earlier in the day that he decided those of us in the group who carried American passports had better be ready to board the American battleship anchored in Hong Kong Harbour. From that time on, I don't think any of us had any illusions about the Communist threat. After those thirteen days of terror, we figured we had been within a blink of World War III.

In defence of my own generation, I tried to remind my kids that during the so-called complacent '50s we were recovering from a Depression and a World War and working hard to manage our own social upheaval as the face of North America rapidly changed from rural to urban and from agriculture to manufacturing. We were proud of the future we were building for the next generation, but it's true – there *were* serious crises looming that they had now been swept up in. Communism would have to be stopped in its tracks in Southeast Asia. Ted and I believed it was the right thing to do.

Sidney graduated from Western Canada High School in 1965 and registered for his first year at Michigan State just shortly after the first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam. Now that he was grown up and about to venture out on his own, he decided to use his first name, reserving his middle initial. Young Ted, as a student, was safe at least for the time being. By the end of June, American warplanes were bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, and by December more than 385,000 troops were stationed in South Vietnam.

With each trip home, Ted grimly reported that students he knew in Michigan were talking about how they could take action to stop the war. One, the son of a Dow Chemical executive, was radicalized to the point he was seriously plotting to blow up Dow's headquarters where the napalm was manufactured and stored. Ted said he and another friend spent several late nights casing the office of the local draft board to find out whether it was feasible to prop the basement window open, slip through it, and set fire to the files. They didn't, but obviously student protest against the war wasn't restricted to colleges on the east and west coasts. We constantly worried. Did young Ted have the wisdom to know when legitimate dissent turns to reckless disregard for life and property? Dinner table conversations continued to escalate.

When he went back to school after the holidays, it was almost too quiet. Ted felt so sorry for Mary Lil that one day he brought her a little Basset Hound puppy. He was all long floppy ears and sad eyes, and we instantly bonded. We were his to do with as he liked. Not that he ever indicated that he *shared* our affection, mind you, but little Tex was the new baby of our family and we all loved him to death.

Mary Lil and I read all the books about Basset Hounds and decided we should take him to obedience school. To this day, I can't swear that Tex was actually the one being trained. All I know for sure is, by the end of that experience he had *us* whipped into shape.

In fact, we were *so* compliant that, when someone suggested we enter him in a dog show, we jumped at the chance.

Only one of us could actually *show* him, so while Tex pranced Mary Lil around the ring, I sat with the other competing owners nervously chewing our nails in the bleachers. I don't want to sound prideful, but Tex really was a good-looking dog, so I was sure he could hold his own against any dog in the ring. Unfortunately, though, part of the competition actually involved obedience. The dog's obedience, that is. Not Mary Lil's.

As I've said, we weren't very confident that Tex actually understood this concept. Mary Lil was extremely well-trained, as I'm sure Tex would attest, but neither of us knew whether or not he might decide to humour us with *his* cooperation.

The instructions were that Mary Lil was to walk Tex around the ring one time. Then she was to release him from his leash at the judges' end of the ring and tell him to lie down and stay put while she went to the other end. On her command, Tex was to stand up and walk to her where she would replace his leash and walk him back to the judges.

The first part was easy. Tex was born tired. The minute Mary Lil suggested a nice rest, he took advantage and lay prone – as if dead. However, when it became apparent that he was to walk all the way to the other end of the ring for no particular reason, he sort of cocked one eyebrow. We could tell he was irritated. Then, with profound distaste, very, *very* slowly – one – vertebra – at – a – time – he deigned to rise to a sitting position.

He could tell that Mary Lil was desperate; everyone in the room felt sorry for her. Tex, I think, was just embarrassed for her. But finally he decided to put her out of her misery. Inch by agonizing inch, he made his way to Mary, sat down next to her, sighed, and looked up from those reproachful brown eyes as if to say, "Really? *This* is what you're reduced to? Have you no shame at all?"

He won a ribbon. He was one of only three Basset Hounds in Canada to get an obedience certificate. We were ecstatic! We went on the dog show circuit ... and Tex came along for the ride. (Umm, in the interest of full disclosure I should probably note that we had

started introducing him to a couple of lady friends hoping we might one day have a litter of little Texes, so maybe he only came along for the ride anticipating a date with one of his girlfriends.)

Like I say, Tex was born tired and he took full advantage of Ruth Ann's visits home with baby Howard. Every afternoon at nap time, I'd spread out a baby blanket on the floor of the living room, lay Howard on one side and Tex on the other, and the two of them would instantly start snoring, each of them drooling on the other. And when Howie woke up, Tex would come find me, no doubt because the baby had so rudely awakened him. As nannies go, Tex may not have won any prizes for encouraging parallel play, but he could sure teach those babies to sleep. I often thought I might make a little pin money renting him out to all my friends with visiting grandchildren, and one time suggested as much to him. Tex gave me his most withering look ... again.

Tex and the dog shows were the comic relief during that decade. Every single day seemed to present another tragedy. Thursdays were always the worst; they announced the body counts on the Thursday evening news. The worst year was 1968. In March, President Johnson announced, "I will not seek and shall not accept the nomination for a second term as president of the United States," knowing that there was so much opposition to the war in Vietnam he could no longer provide the leadership to proceed. In April of that year, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. In June, Robert F. Kennedy was shot and killed after a campaign victory celebration in Los Angeles. In August, the Chicago police took on the protesters outside the Democratic National Convention and caused a riot between the 10,000 anti-war demonstrators and 23,000 police and National Guardsmen.

Friends Ted had known in university were delivered home from Vietnam in metal caskets. He was aggressively working the system and twice changed his place of registration for the draft from the Foreign Residents' Draft Board to the local Michigan Board and back again to reset his priority on the record. Ultimately, though,

he was issued a draft notice and ordered to report to Detroit for his pre-induction physical in the spring of 1969, and, despite the fact he had severe back problems, it was determined that he was fit, so he was classified 1-A.

On the first of December, he and a group of friends gathered to watch the first draft lottery on TV. All physically able young men, without other deferments, who were born between 1944 and 1950, were eligible. Should his birthdate be drawn, he would be called to serve. He told us that one in three ground soldiers in Vietnam weren't surviving their first ninety days. The first number drawn was September 14; Ted's birthday is September 16.

Ted was lucky. His friend Eric Farkas wasn't. He was watching the lottery that day with Ted; September 14 was Eric's birthday. Eight hundred and fifty thousand young men aged nineteen to twenty-six were included in that lottery. The 1970 draft was the highest of the Vietnam era; more than 450,000 were called. Ted missed by a headcount of less than 30,000. Thousands of potential draftees illegally fled to Canada. Ted never found out whether his friend Eric survived the war.

Reed was flying tankers between Guam and Southeast Asia. By the time Woodstock and the Summer of Love was over, Mary Lil was decked out in full hippy garb. In our family, around the dinner table at least, we finally had to agree to disagree.