

The Shadow of a Decision

by Susan K. Field

(This excerpt echoes Chapter Two of *Eleanor's Song* and won the Kay Snow Writing Award for Short Fiction, 2021)

I opened the back door of my grandmother's house and entered the kitchen. The smell of bread dough rising set my stomach to grumble. I lingered and imagined eating the whole loaf with thick slabs of butter. That wouldn't happen because there was little to spare. Bread, milk from our cow Babe, last summer's canned spinach, and a few eggs were all Grandmother, two uncles, two aunts, and I had for our suppers. It seemed even the chickens were hungry and less productive that winter of 1933 during the hard times.

My uncle Ernst, who called me by my nickname, asked, "How's our little robin?"

I hesitated before answering. Usually when I came home from school, Grandmother was busy washing in the stand-alone zinc sink, cooking, or mending clothes. Ernst spent his days looking for work, any job that would help us afford to stay in our house. That day Grandmother and Ernst sat at the table, which was uncommon and troublesome. Grandmother, who wore a yellow apron over her housedress, clutched a letter in her coarse hands. Ernst, in blue coveralls, held an opened white envelope. The tea kettle, one of Grandmother's few luxuries, clattered an aggravating hiss on the wood stove as it heated water.

Her constant reprimand, "Idle hands are sinful hands," came to mind. The two of them sitting in the middle of the afternoon looked like idle hands, like sinning. Or trouble. I worried if we had to move again, or maybe someone was hurt. Or worse yet, dead.

My footsteps into the room were slow and slight. I answered Ernst's question. "Good. Today I learned how to divide numbers."

Grandmother, whose face held wrinkles like a newly plowed wheat field, waved her arm and barked an order to me. "Eleanor, get along. Do your chores."

I tiptoed toward the bedroom but dawdled and listened by the doorsill.

"One thing's for sure," Ernst said, his voice wavering. "If he's coming in two weeks to get her, we need to protect her." Uncle Ernst was like that, often looking out for me.

"What you getting at?" asked Grandmother. Feeding all of us, taking care of the farm animals, clothing us, and getting us to church left little for her to give affection. And I sensed weariness in her voice.

I pressed one ear hard to the wall to hear better. Ernst spoke with tight, staccato words. "Look. It's not good. I don't want her hurt. We got to warn her. If he wants her and you write back and say no, we'll have to watch out for him." The chair creaked as if he shifted his weight. "What I'm talking about is Haydon's a scoundrel. He might try to steal her away." He started whispering, and I had to strain to hear. "And you remember what he did to our dear Margarete."

"Quiet." Grandmother's remark had a decided snap to it.

Haydon? Margarete? They were talking about my father and mother. I pulled my coat tighter around me, every part of my body stiffened, except my right foot started thumping nervously as I peeked around the corner.

"Haydon's not fit to take care of her." Grandmother said, hissing like her tea kettle and shaking the letter until it rustled.

"Well, he's got the law on his side."

They sat unmoving. In the hallway with shadows of heavy greens and grays, sour heat flipped in my stomach as I ducked out of sight.

When I was younger, Grandmother told me Father couldn't take care of me after my mother died in a car accident. That was why I lived with her and her children. But one day when she didn't think I could hear, she told Ernst, "Haydon's a drunken bootlegger. He was a no-good to Margarete and hit her."

Grandmother's shoes scraped the kitchen floor. She sighed, got up, and plodded toward the cookstove. "My dear Margarete..." Her sad voice trailed off.

Six weeks after my father's letter and Grandmother's refusal to send me back to him, she received a court order. She told me to sit down and listen. "We have to travel to Washington and see a judge in the Snohomish County Court."

I didn't know what a court was. And the way she said it, with worry in her voice, sounded bad.

Grandmother and I arrived at the depot in Pendleton the next Sunday. The train engine with its tall stack belched thick smoke, clouding the air with a hot, sooty smell. Amid the banging of passengers dragging trunks on the platform and the conductor calling out, Grandmother's orders bellowed. "Eleanor. Follow me inside. We have to buy our tickets." Minutes later, we boarded the Pacific Mountain Railroad train.

She squeezed my hand and pulled me down the aisle to a wooden seat. "Get settled. It's a long ride that'll take all day." The train lurched forward with metal-on-metal screeching. I pressed my hands to my ears as the great whistle pierced the morning air.

I grew tired of traveling after a while and asked her, “Will my father be there? What’s going to happen? What’s a judge?”

Grandmother blew out a sigh, pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and first finger like she did when she was worried. “I’ll be there.”

It occurred to me that maybe Grandmother didn’t know what would happen either. What had she told me several times? “Just remember. When the judge asks who you want to live with, don’t say your father. You’d be making a big mistake.”

I then settled and played with my rag doll, Little Mary. Over time, I had loved her up so much her cloth arms dangled from single threads and her sewn-in blue eyes frayed.

In that quiet moment, a baby across the aisle suckled under a blanket. The mother hummed a sweet tune to the baby while its smacking lips gulped her milk. When the baby cooed, she shared the tender moment with her husband.

“Look John, he’s smiling at you.” The man turned and gazed at the young’un. A girl, about the same age as I was, slept with her head on the man’s lap. Once when I peeked over, the father stroked the girl’s curly hair. His hands were clean, unlike my uncles’ whose fingernails were filled with grime from the chicken coop, Babe, or grease from their tinkering.

I stared out the window and was startled when Grandmother jerked and snorted in her sleep. In her lap lay the Holy Bible, open to a passage. Instead of a strict grandmother, I longed for a mother’s pleasing voice to sing to me and a loving father to pat my hair. I touched my head and fantasized about Mother caressing away my worries. But all I felt was my straight, brown, braided hair.

Soon, the rhythmic clack, clack of the train calmed me and I dozed. When I woke, the peter-pan collar of my moss green dress was soaked because I had a fearsome nightmare that

Grandmother left me alone by a road. From that point forward, I sat still. I didn't want to upset her on whose good graces I relied, and who took that long trip because of me, even though she couldn't afford it.

We rolled into Seattle, and soon I stepped off the train with my insides somersaulting. This would be the first time since I was a baby to see my father. I didn't remember how he talked, how he moved, or smelled. Grandmother and I walked into the station lobby where whiffs of sweat, scuffed leather, and dust drifted among the travelers who crisscrossed the sizeable room. Announcements over a loudspeaker pierced in a jumble of noises so loud it hurt my ears.

"Haydon's going to meet us. I don't like it, but he's got a car. He's taking us to a boarding house." Grandmother scanned the area. "There he is." She pointed to a man with a pudgy face whose gut hung over his belt. He stood at the refreshment counter, leaning toward a young lady. He tilted his head back, opened his mouth, and laughed above the noisy racket.

I heard what he sounded like, and he was loud. We headed toward him; Grandmother's sturdy shoes clomped on the stone floor.

"Haydon." Her sharp tone warned me she was tired from the long trip.

He turned toward us. I stood stiffly as I watched the barrel-shaped man in a striped suit with broad shoulders approach. On his head was a gray Fedora hat. When he bent down to greet me, I jerked away because his head loomed large—bigger than Grandmother's enamel dishpan—and his breath stunk.

"Well, well. Aren't you a scrawny thing?" He chuckled and tousled my hair with his thick hand. I didn't like strangers touching me. I thought of the father who affectionately patted the girl's curls on the train; my father was nothing like him. I shrank away from him, and my knees wobbled.

From the station lobby, we walked outside to Father's big black sedan. Lights on the outsides of the building shone enough I could see my reflection in the car's polished fender. He opened the door, and I climbed onto the back seat while Grandmother sat in the front. The cool, soft leather felt like butter tasted—smooth and creamy; and plush fabric lined the inside roof. I fingered the slick metal around the window and tried to avoid smearing it with my grimy hands.

When we reached the boardinghouse, Father lifted me out of the car. I squirmed and tried to wiggle out of his clutch. At the door, he told me, "I'll see ya at ten so I can show you the town."

Grandmother's head whipped around, and her angry eyes glared straight at him. "She's staying here with me!"

Haydon spread his shoulders and met her refusal with a rough laugh. I glanced from Grandmother's stern face and folded arms to Father's smirk.

"Uh hum." He cleared his throat. "I *am* her father."

Grandmother's lips squeezed into a scowl, and she shut the door as Father stomped his foot down on the threshold. "She'll stay with me until the court date."

"You forget. She's my daughter. I'm picking her up tomorrow."

"You don't remember. After Margarete died, you said you didn't want your own child. So, I've had her. You'll see her in two days."

His snort mocked, boomed as he turned, and walked away. "Tomorrow!"

The boarding house walls shook when Grandmother slammed the front door.

The next morning, Father announced to Grandmother, "I'm here."

Her face flattened. A rush of red marbled up her neck, and she didn't speak.

Father broke the silence. “I’ll be takin’ good care of her.”

Grandmother’s jaw tightened as she leaned her body forward and squinted straight into his face. She and Father looked like two dogs ready to fight. “Be back by noon.” Her words sizzled. “Eleanor, get your coat on.” She bent down and whispered in my ear. “Mind yourself and be careful around him.”

Father and I left. My arm, shaking from fear, waved a weak goodbye. Once I settled on the front seat, I slid my body as far from him as I could. The engine revved.

“Did ya’ know I’m a salesman? But I make most o’ my money playing poker... er, I mean playing games and selling spirits.”

Spirits. Finally, something I recognized. I knew about the Holy Spirit from church members who received the divine touch. I was surprised Father had The Spirit in him. He must be a God-fearing man. Holy and church-going. Although, I couldn’t figure out how a man could play games and earn money because Grandmother never allowed playing games in the house. To her, they were sinful. I thought he must have special games.

Soon, Father said, “I know you don’t know me real good, but I’m your daddy. Your old granny, she don’t love you. Why, look at what you’re wearing.”

I looked down at myself, embarrassed at my dingy dress, floppy hand-me-down shoes that were too big for my short feet, and socks with holes in the heels.

“I can buy you lots o’ new clothes. You’re my daughter, and I want you livin’ with me. I’d treat you real special. See, I’m gonna run for Sheriff and one o’ my buddies said if I wanna get elected, I need to show I’m a family man.”

We soon parked in front of a tall building. Father said, “This is the fanciest shop in town. Just like I promised.”

We climbed a wide staircase until we reached the second floor. Father found three dresses and a gray coat with a black velvet collar. In the shoe section, I hid my feet as I pulled off my scruffy shoes and exposed my holey socks. I slipped on a pair of Mary Janes, and they fit. Best of all, they were brand new. With my toes to the floor, I pivoted my foot from right to left, admiring the patent leather shoes and thick soles.

“Those look good. I’ll take ‘em,” he said to the clerk. His money clip bulged with bills, and he pointed. “The toys is over there. Go have a look around.”

Toys! My head nearly spun while I scanned the area. So many I had never seen. I skipped a few steps with delight, then slowed and began to search. Here were dolls, brown teddy bears, boxes of trains, puzzles, wooden doll houses with delicate furniture, balls, tops, and play cars. The packed shelves thrilled me. In the excitement, one item caught my attention. I stopped in the middle of the aisle and stared up at a pink box high on a ledge with a pretty doll inside. I looked to Father, ready to ask him for help to get the doll down, but he was talking and laughing with a saleslady at the counter.

A passing clerk found me admiring the doll. “Her name is Madeline. She’s a real cutie, isn’t she? Would you like me to show you?”

I nodded, wide-eyed. The salesgirl reached to the top shelf and lifted the box down into my open arms. I fell in love instantly.

Madeline. Her face with delicate features matched the musical sound of her name. She was the most beautiful dolly I’d ever seen. I stared at Madeline through the cellophane window on the box. I twirled while my braids flew as if they sang a duet in tandem. My heart thumped as I looked at the doll’s bright blue eyes. They blinked! Really blinked. Madeline’s light brown hair curled around her soft, painted pink cheeks. I hugged the box and wanted to tear off the

cardboard, pull Madeline out of the package, and cuddle her. I imagined playing house with the sweet doll, taking her to my favorite tree in the afternoons, and singing to her at night.

Father paid for her as I squeezed the box with Madeline and my dreams inside.

On the ride back, Father asked, “That was fun, wasn’t it? You can have all them things. They’re what you always wanted, ain’t they?”

I thought about them. A wool coat with a soft collar. A pair of shoes—the first that didn’t have holes in the soles stuffed with cardboard to protect my feet from the snow and rain. Three dresses, one frilly with lace, and a new doll.

Maybe he wasn’t a bogeyman like Grandmother and Ernst said. My mind circled. I finally uttered, “I love my dolly.”

“Good. You can have her and all the rest of the stuff.” Father’s voice softened like a sweet song. “If you want these, you can keep ‘em. You just gotta tell the judge you’re gonna live with me. If you tell the judge you want to go back to your granny’s rat hole, I’ll take ‘em and give ‘em to some other girl.” He eyed me. “Understand?”

I didn’t understand. His words no longer like a song anymore. They sounded like a trick and resembled a mad dog’s threatening growl. I stayed quiet.

Before returning me to Grandmother, Father stopped at his house and carried the packages inside. “Bring that doll.”

I trudged up the front steps. At the top, I clung to the box with Madeline, rocked it in my arms, and kissed the clear covering. My father snatched it out of my arms, and I turned my head away.

Father’s words, “They’ll be here tomorrow when ya’ come home with me,” didn’t reassure me. My insides churned because his promise didn’t feel genuine.

Tuesday morning meant Grandmother and I had to go to court. I picked at my breakfast. The thick mush lumped in my throat.

“Finish up,” said Grandmother, “we need to leave.”

We soon walked to the courthouse. March gusts, blowing in from the Sound, slanted the winter’s rain into our faces. Amid the briny air and fish tang, white sea birds screeched as they flew one direction, stopped in mid-flight, and then darted another direction in the chaotic winds. Grandmother clutched my hand; my fingers ached, and I tried to loosen from her grip. Instead, she held my hand even closer to her body. As we entered a massive building, I couldn’t tell if she was mad or if she was scared, too.

I wiped rain away from my face with my coat sleeve as we hurried down a long hall. We took a seat on an empty wooden bench. Father stood on the other side of the room. He smiled at me, winked, and watched me sit down. I lowered my eyes and then stared straight ahead. Dark wood paneled the walls. Two flags on poles hung on each side of the judge’s bench. I waited and grew impatient until the judge strode in with his black robe. We had to rise and sit down again. That time I tucked my hands under my thighs and willed them to stop shaking.

Although the judge said words I couldn’t figure out, I understood one thing. I had to tell him who I wanted to live with. Grandmother. Or Father. I gulped hard when the judge commanded me to walk forward to his bench. My footsteps on the hard wood floor echoed, and I shivered so much my teeth chattered. When the judge, sitting high above me, asked me who I wanted to live with, my mind swirled like a summer’s dust devil. Although Father scared me, I wondered, did he love me? Did he really want me? Could I have a good life with him? And maybe a mother?

I thought more. Why did Grandmother warn me to stay away?

I knew children were supposed to obey their parents, and at church I recited the Ten Commandments, “Honor thy father and thy mother.” I no longer had my mother, and I didn’t know Father. My mind swayed back and forth between two worlds. My current life with strict grandmother, my aunts and uncles in the old, leaking shack was familiar. There were even a few good times. The summer before when we climbed the grassy slopes of the Blue Mountains to pick wild lupines and buttercups, and when we sang hymns together in the evenings.

I peered up at the judge’s face. I had to reveal my private feelings to a stranger and make a decision that I didn’t think any of my eight-year-old friends ever had to answer. The silence in the room throbbed in my knees.

Time stopped.

I looked at the judge, then glanced at Grandmother. I turned my head and found Father’s face as he perched on the edge of the seat. I then focused back on the judge, inhaled, and blurted. “I want to live with my grandmother.”

The gavel pounded. It banged so loudly I barely heard the judge say, “Mrs. Delores Bowerman will now serve as the legal guardian of Eleanor Owens.”

Grandmother blew out a sigh of relief. She came from behind and gave me a brief hug.

Father stomped out of the room. His heels struck the floor, rumbling like thunder.

Grandmother took my arm, and we left.

Father didn’t even say goodbye. Tears almost squeezed out of my eyes, but what good was crying? No Mother. No Father. My shoulders slumped under the weight of his stinging anger.

Traveling home on the train, I wanted to shove the visit, the courtroom scene into the back of my mind and never think about them again. Try as I might, I couldn't. The shadow of the decision darkened my thinking. So, I gripped my rag doll, Little Mary. She wasn't Madeline, but she was more precious to me than the frilly dresses. More loving than my own Father. I adored her and would never trick her to love me.

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