

THREE

Melanie smiled at Rick, as if to say, “See what an endearing family I have?” Rick remained mute, swirling the melted ice cubes around the bottom of his glass. I told Melanie to make him another drink.

For one thing, Rick was a little too tight-assed. I wanted to know what he was like with all the burnished veneer peeled back. Getting him drunk might be a start in the process. I was sure he’d make a fool of himself in front of Melanie, possibly revealing a defect she wouldn’t be able to live with. On the other hand, if loosening up allowed his better side to sally forth, my scheme would have an effect opposite to my intentions.

I set the oven lower, so the booze’d have time to work before dinner. Taking out the largest knife in the rack, I began cutting tomatoes and celery for the salad.

“There’s an hors d’oeuvre tray in the fridge, Melanie. Why don’t you take it out to the living room? This won’t take me long.”

Rick followed her out of the kitchen, stepping on the heels of her shadow. He wasn’t going to spend a second alone with Melanie’s weird, knife-wielding uncle. His timidity disappointed me.

After I draped a wet towel over the salad and crammed the bowl into the fridge, I joined Melanie and Rick in the living room.

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Melanie was on a nostalgia trip, pointing out to Rick some of the artworks and arty mementos scattered about the room, things she herself probably hadn't looked at in a while because she'd lived with them. My reappearance startled Rick; he nearly dropped a fossil from my rock collection on the glass coffee table. I invited them to sit down.

Melanie plunged into the upholstered love-seat; Rick sat at the edge, hunching over the cheese-and-cracker tidbit on his paper napkin.

"Um, it's nice that you kept so many of Melanie's drawings up," Rick said.

"What was I going to do," I replied, "throw them down the stairs after her when she moved out? Besides, I never throw anything away. Ask Melanie."

Caught in the middle of a sip, Melanie gurgled. "It's true," she said. "This place would be crammed to the rafters with boxes and boxes of stuff. I guess I'm a tosser, of junk, anyway."

"I was happy she could tell the difference," I said. "It all looks the same to me. Where would the world be without tossers?"

"Up to our ears," Melanie said, laughing.

Rick asked, "Didn't you get into arguments over what was junk and what was a keepsake?"

"Only once," Melanie admitted. "Unc wanted to keep his old lesson books—from grade school. You still have them, don't you?"

I nodded, getting up to retrieve one of the notebooks from the shelf. "I used to write things in invisible ink, so the nuns wouldn't find out. It's the only record I have of what it was like..."

...Getting Educated

My sister and I started first grade on the same day, even though Connie was a year older. She had spent three months in bed the winter before, from a rather shapeless ailment I never understood except that Uncle Ernie had somehow brought it on. With so much time lost, Mother Superior thought it best to let my sister recover fully and begin school the following September.

Connie and I entered upon the road to erudition at a distinct disadvantage. We'd been outfitted with brand new clothes and shoes and pint-sized leather briefcases our Grandma insisted on calling "satchels." We looked like a pair of very junior executives headed for the financial district of Munchkinland.

I was required to wear a white shirt, dark corduroy trousers, and a deep green necktie: the color assigned to first-graders. Connie wore a high-collared white blouse and a pleated skirt of Tartan plaid in which the dominant stripes were also a deep forest green, as though our status as saplings required pointing out.

We hated our new clothes. We went from wearing kneeless blue jeans and tee shirts and sneakers, that our little toes stuck out of, to putting on the starched, unforgiving uniforms of budding scholars. The transition occurred in the space of a single day, the last day of summer, with nothing intermediate to ease our transformation from children into pupils.

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Connie's long skirt had more pleats than Uncle Ernie's accordion. The coarse fabric was so heavily starched and pressed the skirt stood out as rigidly as a lampshade. Connie ran her finger across the fabric, up and down the sharp peaks and valleys of the skirt, creating a noise that sounded like a stick skipping along a picket fence.

I hated my navy blue corduroy pants, especially the washboard *vwhup, vwhup, vwhup* they made as my inner thighs and the thick cuffs rubbed together. Our cheap shoes were worse. They had no suppleness; the soles were inflexible and gave every indication they'd remain so for as long as our feet could still be shoved into them. Our shoes slapped the sidewalk, *clap, clap, clap*, as though we wore Dutch swim fins carved from single blocks of wood. We made quite a sight and quite a racket, the rhythm of pleats and corduroy and wooden shoes measuring the beat of our steps: *brrrick, vwhup, clap, vwhup, clap, brrrick*.

A block from home, out of the line of sight of the upper windows where our mother and Grandma and Uncle Ernie watched us, Connie and I considered whether we might kick off our shoes and strip to our underwear and claim we were robbed on the way to school. We'd dance in the cool, dew-sprinkled grass along the parkway. The sight of a different sort of doo, however, made us abandon the idea. The thought of doggie doo squishing up between our toes was almost as distasteful to us as wearing the new shoes. We also knew that being robbed was hardly credible. Who'd want to steal *new* clothes?

Connie and I felt like showroom dummies: statues of school children immobile not because they'd been cast in plaster of Paris, but because of the starched, stiff, inflexible clothes that had been

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forced over their petrified limbs. We even walked like a couple of dummies, right out of Sears Roebuck's back-to-school flyer and down the long, straight, endless road to higher learning.

My sister and I wondered whether anyone would miss us at school if we didn't show up. Had Mom and Dad phoned ahead to say we were on our way and to watch out for us? Probably, we decided. Our parents were uncannily exhaustive when it came to managing the details of somebody else's life. They were as thorough as accountants with decimal points to four places.

As the gray limestone turrets of the grade school loomed up after we turned the next corner, Connie and I reached for one another's hand at the same instant. The only consolation we could imagine among the depressing thoughts of school was that whatever we'd have to endure we wouldn't have to bear alone. We would have each other.

Hand in hand, our gleaming leather bookbags held up at our sides like shields, we stepped into the freshly-waxed hallway of St. Mathilda's Elementary School. My sister and I were promptly parted at the front door and led by two Sisters of Mercy into separate classrooms across the wide corridor from each other.

We learned there were two first grade classes at St. Mathilda's. Mother Superior proclaimed that siblings were less likely to contrive mischief with walls of gray cinderblock and blackboard shielding between them.

I sat petrified, knees stiff, like a plaster dummy bent to conform to a school desk. I heard only the wordless buzz and senseless whirl of voices around me. Fear clotted my arteries and pounded in my ears. I would never get through school alive.

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At recess, however, the fresh air revived me. I immediately sought out Connie among the other girls in identical uniforms. We homed in on one another from across the asphalt playground.

We hugged, and I felt great relief. After being hunched over the wooden desk learning to scrawl the ideographs of the Roman alphabet with a fat crayon, standing erect lifted a burden from my shoulders. I was happy to realize I'd be able to get through the morning by looking forward to recess, through the late morning by looking eagerly to lunch. Ninety minutes after lunch there was another recess and, after that, the promised land of dismissal. We'd make it. I was sure. I knew I'd be able to survive an hour at a time.

I hugged Connie again. I felt light enough to float.

Looking around me, I saw I had upset the balance of the playground. All the boys were on the far side near the fence, playing catch, playing marbles, wrestling on the hard asphalt or just milling around in a sort of daze. The girls stood near the entrances, jumping rope, playing hopscotch, or gathering in small clusters to chat or go over their lessons. By staying with my sister, I had tipped the scales.

One of the boys swaggered over. He was a full head taller than me and my sister. I watched his approach with open-mouthed awe. By his dark blue tie, I knew he was a third-grader.

“Whatsa matter with you, playing with girls?” he asked me. “You a pansy or something?”

I cowered nearer my sister. The boy stepped forward, holding his arms out to push me down. Connie took my hand and we skittered sideways, like stones skipping across a pond. The boy fell to his hands and knees. His palms were bloody; specks of cinder and gravel had imbedded in the pillows of tender flesh. A bloody scrape showed through the torn knee of his dark blue trousers.

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He picked himself up, rubbing his palms on his thighs, but he didn't cry. He blubbered for a moment and then shouted, "No fair!" Every head turned in our direction. Marbles and jump ropes became as still as photographs. I couldn't quite figure out how Connie and I had escaped.

The boy's friends taunted him. "Whatsa matter, Chuckie? You let a stupid first-grader show you up?" they said, bursting into braying laughter. Enraged by their taunts, Chuckie lunged at me a second time. Again I skittered out of the way. I felt the soles of my hard shoes settle back to the ground with a mild jolt that made my head bob. The new leather slapped the pavement.

Chuckie teetered on the tips of his toes, flapping his arms to regain his balance.

The bell rang for the end of recess and the students lined up in single file at the entrances. Chuckie glowered at me, a glint of refined hatred darting from his squinty eyes. "I'll get you," he promised. "I'll fix you real good." I took his threat seriously. My stomach fluttered and my heart pounded even after he had disappeared among the line of third-graders filing into the building.

Back in class, we picked up our lessons with the letter D. *D for dead*, I thought. Since I could already draw all the letters of the alphabet—Connie had taught me—and could even read a little bit, I grew quite bored before very long. My mind wandered out the window. My stomach knotted up with fear every time I returned to the classroom. My hands were sweating so much the thick black crayon kept slipping out of my fingers. It rolled down the slanted desktop and fell to the floor, cracking in half. The whole room heard the noise.

Sister Mary Apollonia stood beside me and stared down her long, slender nose at me. "What seems to be the problem, young man?" she asked.

"It's slippery," I said, holding up the stub of crayon.

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Sister Mary Apollonia ignored the broken crayon and jabbed the end of her long, bony finger at my paper. “What’s the meaning of this? We’re on the letter D. I haven’t shown you how to do E and F yet. No one likes a show off, young man. You can just rip that sheet up and start over again.”

“Yes, Sister.” I crumpled up the sheet of lined newsprint and tore a fresh one from the pad in my bookbag.

“Over there,” the nun said, motioning to the wastebasket with her pointy finger and the full length of her arm.

I could barely stand. Every eye in the class was upon me, searing holes in my new clothes. A wave of muffled tittering splashed around the room.

“Mind your own work,” Sister Mary Apollonia admonished.

My knees turned to rubber. The wastebasket in the corner seemed a half-mile away. I pictured my legs buckling under me and landing me flat on my face with a dull splat, a roar of laughter crashing over my head and drowning me in shame.

Sister Mary Apollonia turned her back and went slowly up the narrow aisle between desks towards the front of the classroom, glancing left and right over the shoulder of each pupil along the way.

I saw that as my chance. I’d never be able to walk over to the wastebasket. I swallowed a gulp of stale air and held my breath.

Slowly, I floated up from the floor. I stretched my arms out before me and my legs behind and pushed off from the edge of my desk. Flying over the heads of the next two rows of students, I dropped the wad of paper into the empty metal basket and drifted back the way I had come. I

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nearly scraped the blackboard with my shoe. My new clothes hindered my efforts to fly almost as much as they restricted my walking and sitting.

Hearing the thunk of the wadded paper in the wastebasket, Sister Mary Apollonia turned around abruptly, her habit swirling around her, sweeping papers off the nearest desks. My classmates stifled their laughter with their hands over their mouths. A gasp of fright at being caught escaped my lips and with it hissed the lungs full of air that had held me aloft. I fell to the floor beside my desk, stinging my palms and knocking my chin on the hard tile.

Sister Mary Apollonia slapped her hand down on the desk of the nearest student and sucked in all the air in the room with a windy whoosh. The boy whose desk she whacked wet his pants. The pee trickled down the heavy wrought iron sides of the desk from loop to swirl, like melted snow dripping lazily down an ornamental handrail, and pooled under his desk.

I picked myself up from the floor. The black cloud of Sister Mary Apollonia's habit towered over me. Her face, rimmed in white, reflected the glare of the bare fluorescent bulbs. I could not look at her; it was like trying to stare into the sun.

"Do you know why you tripped, young man?" she asked. Not waiting for me to reply, she explained, "Because your guardian angel would not stand by you in mischief, that's why. He abandoned you and you fell. I asked you to *walk* over to the wastebasket and *place* the paper into it. I did not say to *run* and *drop* it in there like a load of bricks. You will do it over again, *quietly* this time, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sister."

"See that you do."

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Again she turned her back and bent over the work of the nearby students, tracing the proper shape of the letters with her bony finger. I dared not fly again. I swallowed a mouthful of air and stumbled down the aisle toward the wastebasket.

Sister Mary Apollonia stood still, swivelling her veiled head like an enormous owl listening for a mouse. I retrieved the wad of paper and gently replaced it at the bottom of the basket. Sister nodded her hood and moved on up the aisle, swooping down onto the next student who had got his small Bs and Ds mixed up. I sat as quietly as I could for the next hour, not letting out so much as a peep to give myself away. I shrank lower and lower into my desk, becoming nearly invisible.

The Great Owl circled the room two more times and returned to her big four-legged nest in front of the blackboard. She lifted her head from time to time. Her wide, dark eyes gazed out over the class for any sign of a disturbance.

At noon, the first-grade classes were led to separate sections of the lunchroom, each with their own row of long tables and backless benches. I couldn't find Connie right away and my heart raced faster and faster until I caught sight of her, moving down the line to get her carton of milk. I had lost my own nickel and had to eat my cheese sandwich without anything to wash it down. The bread stuck to the roof of my mouth like a lump of library paste.

The students talked and laughed all around me, but whenever one of the Sisters passed near, they fell to whispering. A bubble of silence followed the nuns around the room.

I caught Connie's eye again as she sat down at her table on the other side of the lunchroom. I asked her how she was doing. We talked with our eyes so no one would hear us.

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“It’s horrible,” she said, blinking. “One of the boys had to stand up in front of the class because he was playing with a booger instead of practicing his alphabet. Sister made him put it on the end of his nose. Everybody laughed at him, after they quick put their boogers under their seats. How’s your class?”

“About the same,” I said. “A kid in my class peed in his pants. I got in a little bit of trouble, too.”

“What for?” Connie asked.

“I did Es and Fs when we were only on D.”

“You should never do that,” Connie warned. “You know my friend Eileen, from the end of the block?”

I winked.

“Well, Eileen’s in the second grade and she says you should never ever know anything you haven’t been taught. The teachers get really mad. Why aren’t you drinking any milk?”

“Lost my nickel.”

“Want some of mine?”

“No, we’d just get in trouble. I got scolded for something else, too.”

“What?”

“Sister Mary Apollonia wanted me to throw my paper away and start over again, so I flew to the wastebasket and...”

“You flew?” my sister asked, blinking like mad. “In front of her?”

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“No, not in front of her,” I said. “But she almost caught me. I got in trouble for making noise when I dropped the paper into the basket.”

“Still,” Connie said, “you shouldn’t take the chance. It’s not a good idea to fly in front of the other kids, either, unless you know them.”

“Why not?”

“Because some of them can’t fly any more.”

“They can’t?”

“No, and it makes them feel bad. Some of the older kids might tattle, too. My friend Eileen can’t fly any more and she stutters when we talk with our eyes. I don’t do it when she’s around. There’s one boy in my class who can still fly, though. He’s from Puerto Rico. He has big brown eyes, too. That’s him at the end of the table.”

“Should I say something to him?”

“You can try it,” Connie said.

“What if he can’t hear me?”

“Then he won’t hear you. He’ll just think you’re looking at him. Go on, try it. His name’s Carlos.”

“Okay,” I said. “See you at recess.”

I folded up the rest of my sandwich in the waxpaper and put it into the front pocket of my bookbag. I sat still and folded my hands in my lap, staring at the boy with the brown eyes, hoping he would look up. He did.

“Hey, Carlos, can you hear me?”

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“How’d you know my name?” he asked, his thick eyebrows rising up like question marks.

“My sister told me. She’s in your class.”

“You have a very nice sister. I have a sister, too, but mostly just a lot of brothers.”

“I wish I had a brother,” I said.

The bell rang and we got up. It was hard to see what Carlos was saying sometimes as we got jostled in line.

“I could be your brother,” Carlos repeated.

“Would you? But how do we do that?”

“We just say we are, that’s all. You’re my brother. See?”

“You’re my brother,” I said. “But don’t we have to shake on it or something?” I asked.

“Later,” Carlos replied. “At recess.”

“Okay, at recess,” I said, but Carlos had already turned to file into his classroom. I caught my sister’s eye for a second and told her Carlos could still talk with his eyes. Then I turned to go into my own classroom. The butterflies churned in my stomach again as soon as I saw Sister Mary Apollonia, perched behind her big oak desk, licking green, red, blue or gold stars with the tip of her tongue and pasting them on the papers we had turned in at lunch. It was going to be as much fun as getting the mumps on your birthday.

The afternoon dragged on like one of Uncle Ernie’s accordion concerts in the living room. You had to listen, even if you’d heard it all before.

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Sister Mary Apollonia never got to E and F. She kept going over the first four letters until all of us got them all right. I almost fell asleep. I could feel myself drifting up out of my desk, but caught myself just in time.

By recess, my legs ached from trying to hold myself down. I met Connie and Carlos in the playground. Connie seemed to be limping, too. “How’s it going?” I asked.

“A little better,” Connie said. Carlos said something in Spanish. He’d only been in America for a couple of months and his English wasn’t very good. We went back to talking with our eyes. I reminded him about the handshake.

“Okay,” he said taking my hand. “We’re brothers.”

“What about me?” Connie asked.

“You’ve got a brother already,” Carlos told her. “He doesn’t.”

“Okay,” Connie said, but I could tell she felt left out. I’d make her my honorary brother after we got home.

“Shit,” Carlos said. “Here comes trouble: Chuck Swan and his pals.”

Connie and I watched where Carlos was looking and saw Chuck and three of his friends, each goonier than the others, coming toward us.

“Ah way rake tomb,” Chuck said, holding his palm up in salute.

“It’s Latin,” Carlos told me. “They learn some Latin in the third grade. It means ‘Hey, asshole.’”

“Same to you,” I told Chuck.

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“You getting smart with me, boy?” Chuck asked, grabbing hold of my dark green necktie. All by themselves, my feet lifted up off the ground until it must have looked like Chuck Swan was holding me level to the ground with a single hand. My head was bent back so I could look Chuck in the face. He didn’t seem to hear anything I said, though I was yelling at him. Except for the tie hitched around my neck, I would have flown away as fast as any bird. I was that scared.

Connie pushed on the back of my legs and tried to get me back onto my feet. Carlos looked at me. “Don’t fly away, man,” he said. “Whatever you do, don’t fly. They can’t do it any more. It makes them really mad. It’s okay if you try to *run* away, but don’t *fly*.”

I didn’t care what Carlos said, I wasn’t going to hang around waiting to get turned into a hamburger patty. I tried to fly backwards with all my might, flapping my arms wildly, grabbing handfuls of air, and taking in great gulps and blowing them out again. Slowly, I slid away from Chuck. He held only the tip of my necktie. All at once, he let go of it.

I crashed backwards into the brick wall of the school building, my feet striking the bricks first. My feet and knees took the jolt easily, as though I had merely jumped down off our front porch. I wasn’t expecting to hit the wall, however, and lost my balance. I fell to the ground on my hands and knees. The small stones and little pieces of broken Coke bottle dug into my hands like hornets’ stingers. My scraped knees hurt so much they felt like they were burning.

Connie and Carlos picked me up by my armpits. I was too shaky to stand, so they held me up. Chuck and his friends laughed like a pack of hyenas. “Let that be a lesson to you,” Chuck bragged. “Don’t you ever get smart with me again. Same goes for you two,” he told Connie and Carlos. “I’d just love to find an excuse to let you have it, too.”

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Chuck and his chums walked away as though nothing had happened. I don't know whether they even knew I'd been flying. Chuck probably thought he was really strong and had just pushed me really hard. I hoped he'd leave us alone.

Sister Mary Apollonia came out of the doorway. Her clothes billowing all around her, she sailed over and looked down her long nose at us. She didn't say a word, but kept staring at us, turning her head from one to the other.

"He fell, Sister," Connie offered.

"You must have given your guardian angel cause to forsake you again," she remarked to me, glancing down at the torn knees of my new trousers.

I nodded and shrugged at the same time.

"I thought so. One more such incident and you'll be sent to the Mother Superior's office, is that understood?"

I nodded again. Sister Mary Apollonia left us, her habit trailing after her like the wake of a ship in a black ocean, her rosary beads a clicking chain with a crucifix anchor.

"How come she's never around when Chuck and his pals are up to something?" I asked.

"They never are," Carlos said. "Grown-ups are like that. They only see what they want to see."

I didn't know how that was possible, but I tried to agree with Carlos. "Yeah," I said. "I know what you mean." Then I asked him, "How come you know so much about Chuck Swan and his friends?"

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“My older brothers and me came to the empty lot to play softball, but Chuck and those guys wouldn’t let us, even if they didn’t want to play there.”

“How’d they do that?” I asked. “I mean, couldn’t your brothers beat them up or something?”

“Sure. But Chuck always went and told the cops there was a Puerto Rican gang trying to take over their lot, so the cops came and chased us out. After a while, it wasn’t worth it. Who cares, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it’d be nice to see him get beat up just once.”

Connie started crying. It happened real quick, like a thunderstorm in summer.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“School,” my sister sobbed. “I hate absolutely everything about school.”

“Me, too,” I said. “But we have to go. If we don’t, Mom and Dad will kill us for sure.”

“I’d rather be dead then,” Connie said.

I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her gently closer to me. Her eyes looked dark and sad, like they were so full of tears they’d burst. I took the end of my torn necktie and dried her eyes, streaking her cheeks with dirt. Carlos seemed a little embarrassed. He went to line up at the entrance. The bell for the end of recess rang out a minute later. There was an hour-and-a-half of school to go.

For the rest of the afternoon I drew the same four letters of the alphabet, but only as many as Sister Mary Apollonia wanted. I watched the pigeons swoop down onto the window ledge and dart into the sky again. I wanted to go with them. I wanted to fly and never return.

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All I could think about was soaring into the clouds, looking down on the little black boxes of the buildings far below. I floated up in my seat and I had to hold on tight to keep from drifting off up to the ceiling. I wanted to fly so bad it hurt to sit there. Every muscle ached trying to hold myself down.

I gripped the desk as firmly as I could with sweaty hands. The wood creaked. I heard the bolts in the sides of the desk ripping up out of the floorboards. I wanted to fly out of that classroom more than I had ever wanted anything before. I wanted it so bad it hurt like a punch in the stomach, way deep inside.

I thought of Connie and Carlos in the room across the hall wanting to fly away, too, but just as afraid to do it as I was.

The bolts strained to get free of the old floorboards. The wish to fly away burned hotter and brighter inside of me until, like a Fourth of July sparkler, it burned itself out, leaving a rough little cinder that scraped at the sides of my stomach. I must have slipped out of my desk and fallen to the floor, because I next saw the dusty hem of Sister Mary Apollonia's skirt and the puddle of pee beneath my own desk.

I never flew again. I couldn't. It hurt to even try. Carlos just sort of forgot how; he had no one to fly with. Connie stopped flying, too, but for a different reason. She didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. She didn't want to fly when nobody else could. I've never seen her float again, either, not even in her sleep.

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We learned our lesson that first day. I discovered we hadn't been sent to school to learn anything at all. We'd been sent to get educated, and we had been. It happened more quickly than I ever imagined possible, though. They always told us you had to go to school for twenty years to get educated. Connie and I always were quick learners.