

CHAPTER ONE MY FORGOTTEN SEVENTH BIRTHDAY

My favorite verse: Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need *Hebrews 4:16*

Facing the clean blackboard, sweet Mrs. Weinhold, with white chalk in hand, was poised ready to write the day's date and short weather report. Her brown, small-rose print, cotton dress hung slightly higher in the front exposing half of her knees as a thin, dark brown belt rested slightly above her rotund waist.

Monday, November 8, 1959 Partly cloudy

Wait! November 8th? My seventh birthday was yesterday and nobody in my family, including me, remembered it?

After glancing at the blackboard and mumbling "Good Morning, Mrs. Weinhold," I slowly strolled back to my desk and sat down, slumping in a reflection of my disappointment. My mind was still numb as I opened up my wooden desk lid and pulled out my second-grade book *Sally Finds Friends...Fun with Dick and Jane* to prepare for my Reading class.

The school bell rang, as it always did, loud and expected, signaling students to be seated and ready for Bible reading, a short prayer and a pledge allegiance to the flag. Glancing over at my friend, Martha, with tears welling up inside me I managed to blurt out, "My birthday was yesterday. I turned seven but nobody said 'Happy Birthday' to me. I didn't know it was the seventh."

"Well, I am saying 'Happy Birthday' to you now, Leanne," Martha said, big blue eyes the same hue as her buttoned-down sweater. "Then, at recess I'll even sing 'Happy Birthday' to you." Confident she cured my sadness, Martha also got her reading book from her desk.

With a broken heart that made for heaviness in my chest, I gave a weak smile and my attention to Mrs. Weinhold, who was pulling out the small devotional and roll call log out of her top desk drawer, preparing to start the day. "Good Morning, class," she smiled, as she put on up her black reading glasses and glanced around the room. "Let's take roll call."

Mrs. Weinhold's familiar voice echoed in the back of my brain as she called out each of my classmates' names, while my mind wandered back to yesterday's events in my Mennonite, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, home. *Mom is always so busy cooking and taking care of us kids. She didn't realize the date, while bustling to get us all out the door to go to church and all. Surely, she would have said "Happy Birthday" to me? But, Daddy or none of my seven brothers and sisters remembered either?*

But, I'll start from the beginning to give some background.

My birth was needed to secure a fourth player for my frequent card-playing family. At any given point, including Daddy as one of the four players, either one or two card tables of four were now filled. With no television, playing cards was our entertainment and we loved a good competition. Following behind five brothers and one sister, I was child number seven born into a Mennonite family of Anabaptist roots to Aaron

and Elizabeth (Fisher) Martin. Anabaptist is a Protestant sect that arose in the 16th century advocating for the baptism and church membership of adult believers only, non-resistance, and the separation of church and state.

On the outskirts of New Holland, Pennsylvania, GreenBank is a small rural area in the Garden Spot school district in northern Lancaster County, where I was born. In 1727, my ancestors stepped on Philadelphia soil after disembarking off the ship *Molly*. The Queen had given her blessing for my relatives to leave Europe. The village founders, a mixture of German, English and Welsh Quakers, Episcopalians, a few Swiss-German Mennonites and some Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, were fleeing religious persecution.

A German, John Diffenderfer of Heidelberg, settled New Holland. A distant grandfather, David Martin, purchased 89 acres of farming land in the area. Grasping the same life-and-death urgency, he toiled the land with the intention to savor his farming livelihood from the Old World. Two sons each inherited a farm and raised wheat, barley, oats, and rye. In the 1880's, one barn tragically burned down. Great-Grandpa Joseph Martin rebuilt it and later sold his farm, when he retired. My ancestors' hard work paid off. Today, the area is appropriately named "Garden Spot" defined as "a well-cultivated or an especially fertile region." Philadelphia is 60 miles to the east, while Baltimore is 90 miles to the south, and Harrisburg is 40 miles to the northwest. According to the *Lancaster County's Visitor Bureau* in 2014 more than eight million tourists visited beautiful Lancaster County!

One of several rural locations, GreenBank, true to its name, consists of many picturesque, neighboring patchwork Amish farms dotting the landscape for miles. Today, radio and TV stations, the tourist industry and realtors promote and advertise for one and all to visit or relocate to this beautiful, productive, agricultural Garden Spot area. There is still an elementary school named GreenBank.

Typical of Mom, she gave birth to me at home with the assistance of Dr. Martin, a physician who continued to make house calls. I was born on November 7, 1952, sharing the same birthday with Billy Graham, in the late fall when local farm fields were plentiful with baled, square-shaped corn fodder (silage-type feed for livestock). I had dark hair and eventually, as I grew up, became dark complexioned, resembling relatives on both Daddy's and Mom's sides of the family. I remember asking my mother the typical questions—what time of day I was born, my weight and length, but Mom didn't remember.

All total, my parents, Aaron and Elizabeth, had nine kids; my baby brother, Douglas (Doug), was born as an early menopausal baby when Mom was 42, ten years behind my youngest sister, Lorna. By age 32, my mom had given birth to eight children and had two miscarriages.

Plenty of information has been written about birth order of a "middle" child in the pecking order of a family. Prior to my youngest brother's birth (child number nine), I always thought of our family as two units of four kids: the first set consisting of my four older brothers and the second set of four kids consisting of the three girls with my brother sandwiched in between my sister and me.

Years later, Psychologist Dr. Kevin Leman was a guest speaker at my former church. I learned through his lecture that a middle child may receive less attention, feels left out, is less of a perfectionist, but more of a people pleaser, somewhat rebellious, thrives on friendships, has a large social circle, is a peacemaker, and a "fixer" (which was confirmed many times later during my annual job reviews). One expert has gone to the extent to say: "When you (middle child) actually accomplish something, nobody cares."

My personality was pretty much scripted as experts predicted. Out of the brood of nine, no one had any exceptional gifts, a reason to stand out, or deep individuality. If asked, except perhaps for the youngest, Doug, I am sure any of the other eight would answer: "We were just another cookie in the cookie jar." As non-descript as a plain Amish doll, which is faceless and without curves, we were simply the sum of the whole of "us kids."

You can imagine how spoiled my older sister, Lenora, was after being born behind four brothers. Mom was so happy when my older sister was born that she kept her beside her in bed all night long the night of her birth. She wouldn't let anyone to take the baby from her. By the time I came along, another baby sister wasn't so novel.

Daddy suggested they name me after a friend and Mom agreed. Thus, my official name became Leanne Rose Martin. As it played out, the three girls' names all start with the letter "L:" Lenora Arlene, Leanne Rose, and Lorna Sue.

When Mom called me by my full name, she was agitated and usually at her wits end. Realizing a calm request or simply yelling at me to do something was ineffective, Mom resorted to her use-of-full-name yell. To get my attention as a last ditch effort and to give me the third chance to obey, she yelled louder, "LEANNE ROSE, get in here NOW and do the dishes!" That got my attention, as I knew the "use of the belt" to my backside followed her using my full name, if I didn't obey and comply with her command.

My brother, Matthew (Matt), one and a half years older than me and my sister, Lenora, who was about three years older, engaged in some pretty harrowing childhood fights. I can only imagine the ugly early childhood fights that ensued amongst my four older brothers. Perhaps due to my younger sister being the baby of the family for 10 years and realizing punishments could be more severe, I don't recall having as many squabbles with her as I did with Lenora and Matt.

Typical childhood noise and fights were expected; but, there was one house rule-- we were not allowed to hit each other. We over-compensated by using our weapon of choice: a mouth. Our parents tried to make it clear that they were the parents and they doled out punishments, including hitting and spanking. Besides using the belt, a snap from a dishcloth, a twig or switch from a tree in the yard was as a good belt substitute (especially if the disobedience occurred outside), or simply a hand slap was used with purpose and expected behavior improvement. That didn't stop us from punching and slapping each other when our parents weren't around. The frequent flying of rude, hurtful words was our most-used assault. Teasing of some kind was a nearly daily occurrence as we each wanted to be heard and gave our "two cents" in this noisy family of eleven. Hurts came and went as they were passed around; sometimes I was the giver, other times the recipient. Come to think of it, I don't remember ever my parents teaching me to say "I'm sorry" to my siblings.

Teasing topics included references to a sibling being adopted "because you are just too weird to be a part of the Martin clan" or a facial feature, ears or nose would do. Somehow, it proved in our feeble minds he or she could not possibly be an actual blood relative. When feeling like queen over the siblings for the day, or at least for that hour, I sometimes questioned Mom. "Since he (or she) is 'adopted', you love me the most, right?" Or I'd question her about the local bum's involvement, "Maynard is their dad, right?" On the days I was not winning too many fights I recall asking Mom, "Why did you have to have so many kids? Couldn't you have done without some of us?" Mom always appropriately answered, "No. God gave us all of you and we love you all the same. Besides, who would you want to do without?" My response depended on which sibling I needed to get one up on at the time!

From my birth to one or two years old, we lived on a small rental "farmette" in GreenBank, where Daddy raised crops in the fertile farmland and tended a herd of steer. My older siblings simply walked across the street to GreenBank Elementary School. Mom recalled the time I toddled over to the door of the landlady, who lived on the other side of our two-family farmhouse, and knocked on her door saying, "Nedna (Edna), let me in." She was a kind woman who provoked feelings of friendship and security. Besides Mom, this was the first relationship of an influential woman in my life.

During the Korean War, Anabaptist Mennonite young boys were exempted from armed services as conscientious objectors, believing in nonresistance to the enemy. Youth who were farmers received deferments because they were needed to sustain food and grain production stateside. The landlady's son qualified for such a deferment and we had to move to allow him to do the farming on the homestead. To accommodate our growing family, we moved to Churchtown into a larger house on another farmette rental property about 10 miles away, but still in the middle of Amish country.

One day Daddy brought Mom and the newest Martin addition home from Lancaster Osteopathic Hospital. I vaguely remember standing on the middle "hump" of the car on the backseat floor board (this was before seatbelt laws). I was puzzled and confused as I looked over my mom's shoulder. Why was she holding this small baby (my younger sister, Lorna) in her lap? I wondered why I was not the one sitting in Mom's lap which was my usual arrangement. I stood quietly and stared.

Unless you were the baby sitting on Mom's lap, your seating arrangement in the family car, when Daddy was behind the wheel, was either between Mom and Daddy in the middle of the front seat or in the backseat with other brothers and sisters. Over the years many heated discussions derived from who deserved to be in the coveted middle front seat where you were less crowded and had a better view out the front windshield. The winner was always Mom or Daddy's decision. I'm sure that when they chose not to pick the winner of the "seating battle," the kid who won out was the one who was either the strongest, most vocal, most behaved for the day, or the most convincing to Mom or Daddy at that time.

But back to the fact nobody remembered my birthday yesterday!

With my two dark brown pigtailed bouncing off my back, I ran into the kitchen, as the school bus pulled away from the front of our two-story duplex. Of course, Matt and Lenora reached the porch first. Mom faced the door and stood at the table, looking fresh, in spite of it being mid-day. She looked up from her task of folding laundry. Piles of folded clothes of each family member were neatly stacked, some higher than others. A stack of folded towels about to tumble over and washcloths were in front of her. A straw like-woven, worn oval laundry basket already emptied rested at her feet. I placed my school books on a cleared-off spot on the faded, green plastic, oilcloth-covered kitchen table. As I fought back tears, I said in a sad voice, "Mom, my birthday was yesterday. We all forgot."

Mom continued to fold clothes and chuckled slightly, "Yes, I guess it was the seventh your seventh birthday, huh?" She changed the subject. "Do you remember the big snow storm that we had on your fifth birthday when we got the new chest freezer delivered? That was some storm! After the roads were plowed, the snow piles were higher than Daddy's car. Today it is a beautiful fall day--so different from back then. Oh, well. Hopefully, we'll remember your birthday next year." She finished folding the last faded, worn towel, added it to the top of the pile, and handed me my stack of clothing. "Here, put this away."

About five foot, two inches tall, slightly overweight with nearly-black hair and brown eyes, Mom was attractive with a shapely figure. Plus, she was a smart woman. Around five o'clock (before Daddy was expected home from work), Mom would look in the wall mirror and assess her appearance. She had worked hard all day gardening, cleaning, or doing laundry. Her dress would become somewhat soiled or her hair needed a little touch-up with the comb. Sometimes Mom would simply freshen up and re-comb the front of her hair and re-apply her head covering. She would change her dress entirely if she thought it was too dirty for Daddy to see. Nicely-dressed female secretaries worked in the business office where Daddy was employed. Even though he was a truck driver, he had opportunities to go into the office. She wasn't taking any chances on what would be the first thing Daddy would see when he came home each night. Kissing him as soon as he walked in the door, she was confident she could hold a candle up against any one of them!

Mom walked over to the kitchen wall mirror and checked her appearance. She used her fingers to fix the small waves that rested on both sides of her middle part. Mom removed the two small straight pins from the front of her white head covering and put them in her mouth and used her front teeth as a pincushion. She removed the covering and placed it carefully upside down on the edge of the sink. Then, she used her hand to sweep any loose hair strands (sometimes with wet fingers) from the back of her head that might have fallen out of her bob and tucked them under it. She then carefully removed the straight pins from her mouth to pin her covering back on her head. Mom ran her hands over her dress bodice and her ample breasts, looked down at the dress's skirt, and determined if her dress was clean enough for Daddy.

Is it any wonder this cookie had her birthday forgotten by her family? I struggled to convince myself to stop any tears and forget about it. I opened up the door to the bedroom I shared with Lorna, who was sitting on the floor playing dress-up doll. Her stack of clothing, still on her side of the bed, hadn't yet found its home in her drawer. As I put away my undershirts, panties, slippers, and colored knee-high socks in their proper place, I said, sadly, "Nobody remembered my birthday yesterday."

Almost four-year old Lorna was easily recognized as my sister and Mom's daughter with the same brown hair and eyes, sucked in a quick breath. "Oh, happy birthday."

More disappointments and hurts peppered my life's journey; some felt by me... some caused by me. Life is not a trek for the faint of heart. As we fight our battles, what would it look like for us at our journeys' ends to feel completely whole, healed, and...at home? Our path may require that we make hunkered-down choices, while wearing combat boots. I've surely stepped on too many hidden land mines marked "ME." The consequences were devastating and difficult for me to realize I would need to sit in the results. Most times I fought fiercely. My journey included taking crossroads I never predicted I would select and life goals I never dreamt I would achieve. There was a time I could not trust myself. When weary, I could only walk, stop, and breathe. Eventually, I realized nothing would work until I learned to trust in God's grace. As comforting as my mother's quilts, grace will beckon me through my last and final front door of home.

But, until then....hold on...

Thought of the Day:

Grace is...bestowed by saying "I'm sorry" when I could be half-right, to keep peace, or to move beyond a stalemate.