

ALMOST LOST, NEARLY FOUND

A Novel of Sisters and Secrets

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For John

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Abe Lincoln got it wrong when he said you can't fool all the people all the time. I did it for years, probably most of my life. Well, maybe not all the people. Maybe not my sister Peggy and Annie May—at least not all the time. And in the end, not even my mother, I guess. But a lot has happened to us.

PEGGY

July 7, 1944

Oh boy, things are awful!!

This is why.

Today when Frances and I rode our bikes past Mr. Ferguson's Victory Garden, we saw the vegetables were all standing up in straight rows, with tomatoes on bushes held up in little cages made out of sticks tied together at the top like a teepee. Frances stopped, wiped the sweat off her face with her sleeve, looked back, and said, "Let's do it." I shook my head, my hair sticking to the back of my neck the way it always does when it's hot.

She said, "Oh, come on. Don't be such a scaredy cat."

I said, "It's for the War Effort. We might get caught."

"Yeah," Frances said, "but just think about chomping into a juicy tomato." I should tell you she's my best friend, so I pretty much go along with her most of the time.

The tomato plants smelled warm and spicy, and the three tomatoes I picked were ripe and delicious. Then we went on to another row. I didn't know what they were, but Frances pulled one up, and the root was a round green thing, like a big green radish. "This is a rutabaga," Frances said. "You should try it."

She brushed off the dirt with her shirttail and bit it. "This is great!"

Frances said to pull off the green tops of all the plants and put them back in the dirt so Mr. Ferguson wouldn't know. But all of them were now wilted and droopy. We'd also accidentally pulled some of the tomato vines out of their cages and were trying to poke them back when we heard Mr. Ferguson yell, "What do you kids think you're doing?" We were too scared to say anything, and when Frances slowly stood up, she had some dirt around her mouth and a couple of tomato seeds and some juice down the front of her blouse. She was so scared her freckles stood out on her face even through her tan.

Mr. Ferguson said to me, "You're the Rubinson girl, aren't you? And you're Judge Cassidy's girl?" he asked Frances. "Wait'll I tell your dads I caught the two of you stealing. They'll whale the daylights out of you. I've got a mind to call the police. Now get out of here!"

We raced out of the garden (Frances can run a lot faster than me because she's skinny), got on our bikes and pedaled fast toward home. But the closer we got, the slower we rode. I dropped Frances off at her house and headed home. Through our back screen door I saw Annie May, trying to make herself little or even invisible even though she's quite big. Dad hung up the phone with a bang. He looked like a thundercloud, and Mother was looking nervous.

He shouted at me, "What the hell do you mean, stealing Ferguson's vegetables? He just called me to complain about you and Frances. He asked if I wasn't feeding you at home. You're lucky he didn't call the police."

He looked at me. "You sure look like you get enough food at home. You're fat enough! Look at your blouse! Get up to your room. I don't want to see you down here tonight."

I scooted upstairs to my room and flopped on my bed. I could hear Dad yelling at my mother after I heard her say, "For heaven's sake, Sam, she's just a child." When I pulled my pillow

around my ears, I got the pillowcase dirty with Mr. Ferguson's damned Victory Garden dirt. My stomach started hurting, and it got worse and worse. All those tomatoes, and maybe that rutabaga, too.

My sister Janice came in after dinner and sat down on my bed next to me. "Poor Boo. Dad really was mean to you. You're not fat...you're plump. You look very pretty when your face is clean." I laughed weepily.

"I'm sure glad Mr. Ferguson didn't call the police," I said. "Dad would have killed me."

"Of course he wouldn't. Don't worry about it," she said. "He'll forget all about it tomorrow."

By now it must be about eleven. Everyone's gone to bed, and my stomach feels better. Janice calls me Boo because she used to play peek-a-boo with me when I was a baby. I think the first word I ever said was boo. Even back then our parents got things sort of wrong because they told Janice she was going to have a new baby instead of saying Mother was going to have a baby, like any reasonable parents would. I guess Janice was disappointed when she found out I wasn't her baby after all—I was our mother's.

Most of the time I wish I was grown up—maybe twenty or so. I probably wouldn't even think of doing things like stealing vegetables from anybody's stupid Victory Garden.

My name would be Maggie or Margaret, not a dumb name like Peggy, and I'd be tall and thin and look like a movie star or maybe even be one and live in a beautiful apartment in a skyscraper in Hollywood or New York. But then I'd remember about Mr. Ferguson's Victory Garden and Dad yelling at me as if I'd broken some damned Commandment or something.

I'm glad I make her feel better. But why does Peggy always get caught? By the way, that's the first lie Mother told me that I

remember—about the baby, I mean. The second was when I asked her if I was two girls—a good one and a bad one. She said, “Of course not. You’re always a good girl, dear. We’d just send the bad girl away.”



July 8, 1944

I got this notebook last fall for school, but I didn’t need it so I’ve been saving it till now to write in it, sort of like a diary. I have to stay in my room all day and I can’t even listen to the radio, so I might as well write all this down.

Mother said I’ll remember this time as the best years of my life (hah!) and that I should keep a journal (that’s a diary) so I’ll remember the details when I’m grown up, which unfortunately is going to be quite a long time from now.

I guess I’ll talk about my town, Waynesville, Indiana. Nothing much happens here, but we have four movie theatres. Three of them have double features, but I can only go to two of them (the one that doesn’t have double features and another one that does) because the other ones are in a bad part of town.

I’ll be in the 7th grade at James Madison School this fall. My sister Janice goes to Central High, which has the best football team. The University is here, too. It has a gold dome covered with tons of genuine gold leaf that you can see from miles and miles away.

We swim at the Indiana Club in the summer. We also sometimes go to the Lake, which isn’t far from Waynesville. My sister Janice plays tennis at the Club, and she’s good. I take tennis lessons and try hard, but I’m not good at it at all. Just before we start the lesson, Dave, the tennis pro, says, “Okay, Peggy, today we’re going to keep our eye on the ball. And get our racquet back.” I don’t know why he says “we.” He always

keeps his eye on the ball and gets his racquet back. When the lesson is over, Dave says, "Keep trying, Peggy. You've almost got it." Janice plays in Club matches and wins a lot of tennis trophies.

My mother has lunch and plays bridge at the Indiana Club on Wednesday afternoons, and we eat dinner there most Thursdays when Annie May has the day off. Except for Janice, Annie May is the nicest person in our house. As I said, she's quite large and has a beautiful round brown face and sparkling brown eyes. She wears uniforms my mother buys for her downtown, but they're always a little too small for her. When she goes out on her day off, she looks beautiful, and her clothes fit her just fine.

August 19, 1944

Dad's taking a vacation from the plant and has gone to Michigan for the fishing trip he goes on every year. Annie May has the week off to visit her sister in Alabama.

This is a great week. Of course, getting Dad off was as awful as it usually is. First, all of us had to look for his fishing hat. Janice found it in her beach bag. She borrowed it when she went to Dunes Beach, and it was smeared with the baby oil and iodine that Janice covers herself with when she goes to the beach. Since it was Janice, he just passed it off. He said, "You teenagers." Believe me, if it had been me, it would have been a different story.

After the hat went into his fishing box and while Mother was packing his fishing clothes in his bag, he wrote lists of jobs for all of us to do while he was away. I'm supposed to cut the grass, and Janice is watering the garden. Mother is supposed to find someone to point the bricks on our house, whatever that is. We're all supposed to behave ourselves.