



“Life is cold without Jesus,” Mama would often say, even on a hot summer day. “Remember that Zenobia.” Mama’s muffler was well meant to keep Zinnie from the chill. In the fall she would say, “Come right on home now after school Zinnie. Don’t be dallyin’ around.”

Dallying around meant many things to Mama but by all definitions it was negative. Directed at Zinnie it meant stopping to chat with friends like Sally and Nancy who had secrets and boyfriends who might have other friends. Other secrets.

Sally had a secret to tell one day as they dallied after class. She had been saving it all weekend and was about to burst. “Dougie wants to go steady,” she said.

“Go steady?” Zinnie said. She and Nancy were both surprised. Sally had never even said she liked Dougie.

“Yeah – he gam’me this ID bracelet that opens up but there’s nuthin’ in it.”

“So whut’cha gonna do?” Nancy wanted to know. So did Zinnie.

“Oh – I took his bracelet all right but I ain’t gonna let him do – you know what – like he thinks I am.”

“What?” Zinnie asked.

“Touch me places – nuh uh.”

Zinnie knew what Sally was saying but pretended ignorance for the sake of information. “What’s he wanna touch?”

“You know – jeez,” Sally said. “Don’t be a milkmaid all yer life Zinnie.” Zinnie blushed.

But Dougie finally did and Sally pretended he didn’t until one day Nancy told about Ray touching her and making her do everything he wanted. She couldn’t help it, she said. “It was like someone else was inside me. It was fun. We got bare naked in his father’s funeral parlor. That was kinda creepy but exciting too – y’know?” Nancy threw her hip to one side and waited for the reaction.

“Nancy!” Zinnie said shame on you by rubbing one fore finger across the other.

“Well we did,” Nancy said, proudly, “an’ there’s nuthin’ more to say. I’m gonna do it agin’ too.”

“I let Dougie touch me too,” Sally confessed, not to be outdone. “But it wasn’t much fun. I wuz scared outta my pants.”

“Sure you wuz scared,” Nancy said. “Scared yer Mama would find out. They all wanna keep it to themselves. She let’s yer Daddy do it to her – you bet.”

“Does not!” Sally said skeptically but willing to be convinced.

“Does too!” Nancy said, smugly.

Zinnie was silent, not sure who to believe. She knew better than to ask Mama.

The three girls had tried out for cheerleader. Sally and Nancy made first row and Zinnie made back-up left end. Mama took one look at the

short skirt and said, “No!” Zinnie was furious, confessed her anger to Father Corcoran who sided with her Mama. Furthermore, Father Corcoran – Zinnie felt – broke her confidence by suggesting to Mama that perhaps Zinnie should go to the convent rather than stay in Public School. In the end, Zinnie succumbed to the conspiracy she saw swarming around her.

Zinnie began to read books while Sally and Nancy shook their pom-poms. That diversion probably got her through High School untouched. She did have cute little buns and a cheerful demeanor. But the boys noticed her reading books that were not even on the required list and wrote her off as a dreamer.

Zinnie thought she had two choices the summer after High School. As Valedictorian, she could pick any college in Iowa, and Father Corcoran had arranged a scholarship to St. Mary’s. She could go away to college or keep her job as second assistant Librarian. Mama favored the latter choice first and St. Mary’s second. The habit of following Mama’s wishes had become so ingrained, Zinnie hardly noticed she had no choice at all.

Sally and Nancy both went to the University in Iowa City and seldom came home on weekends. When they returned for the holidays they were, Mama thought, citified and wore too much makeup. Zinnie still wore only a light rouge on her lips but had recently begun to curl her eyelashes.

Now that she was working full-time, Zinnie had money in the bank – twenty-five dollars a week – and little to spend it on, especially since makeup too was now proscribed. Her salary would double, if and when she became assistant Librarian; an easy step if she stayed put. Miss

Starkey was past seventy-five and had been assistant under three different Head Librarians. The Librarian's job was also within reach. Polly Pandross (Miss Polly) was failing at fifty-nine and assigned Zinnie to read to the children on Saturdays. Zinnie welcomed the assignment; she remembered many a drowsy Saturday morning listening to Miss Polly read chapters from Dickens.

Miss Polly had suffered a minor stroke, which she preferred to call a cerebral interlude. The interlude was not at all debilitating except that portions of the Dewey Decimal System were no longer available to her. Even that was no problem. Miss Polly now had serious doubts about the advisability of storing information in bound paper volumes. Objects that for the most part merely rot and/or make homes and dinner for the centipedes. At the very best they collected dust and Polly began to take the dust personally since she became allergic.

It was depressing to Miss Polly that less than one hundred books in the entire collection were checked out more than once a year. She found it even more depressing when she read that the average book of poetry sold only four copies. And that figure included Shakespeare, Milton and her beloved Whitman.

Folks around town found Polly progressively curious. But instead of making her suspect, her eccentricity made her seem wise. Some few – less charitable folks – thought senile was a more accurate word.

Zinnie stayed one year, then it was three, then in a wink it was six years past the date when she could have graduated from college. Miss Polly and Miss Starkey were both still hanging in there and every year Zinnie told herself she should have left; as if it were no longer an option. If

she had left, she wouldn't have had to eat Mama's tuna fish sandwich one day and her mozzarella and tomato the next. And she probably wouldn't have become addicted to the Caffè doppio she sipped all day long, every day for ten years.

She didn't tell anyone, least of all Mama, but the coffee gave her a buzz. A buzz that was sometimes enough to make her want to get up in the morning. Later in the day she would often slip a spoonful of sugar into her cup. And when she got home, she would feign drowsiness and say, "Boy – I sure could use a nice cup of coffee. Haven't had a cup since breakfast."

"And you should, Honey Dear Sugar Plum," Mama would say as she packed the drip pot and poured herself a cup of Camomille. "But I can't understand why you don't have a nice cup of tea – like me."

"Tea leaves a funny taste in my mouth, Mama." And no buzz in the brain, she might have added.

Sometime after Zenobia turned thirty she bought a pack of Lucky Strikes."There's a bookseller over to the library, she explained to Mandy, the checker at the Red Owl. "He wants a cigarette." Mandy's shrug said, so what?

Zinnie looked around furtively before darting into the bushes behind the library. She found the little red strip on the green package but couldn't find the tail. Finally, in frustration, she bit open the pack. She ripped the top and got excited when she saw the evil little cylinders lined up neatly. She counted 3,2,3,2,3,2,3,2. Twenty. How cute. She ripped the first one pulling it out. The second one came easier and she placed it between her puckered lips. She wished for a mirror, imagining herself to be Veronica Lake or Mary Astor, who she sometimes caught in a matinee after reading

to the kids. She lit the first match and blew through the cigarette. The match went out, so she practiced sucking before lighting another. The match flamed then glowed red at the tip, then blue, then yellow. Those are the three primary colors, she said to herself.

The cigarette caught fire, spewing hot smoke into her lungs. She coughed and coughed, then spit up onto the brick wall. The tiny white bubbles dripped down the mortar, hit the horizontal line and blossomed out before slowly being absorbed by the sun-warmed brick.

Zinnie looked at the glowing tip and spit again; this time, into the dust. The glob of spit sucked the dry earth into a little ball and Zinnie leaned over to watch it more closely. She felt dizzy with awareness and shook her head to clear it, which only made her dizzier. She puffed again and watched the ember turn to white ash. The next puff she held in her mouth until it turned bitter like her coffee. Wish I had a cup, right now, she said to herself. She opened her mouth and let the acrid smoke roll out slowly. That's better, she thought, I'm getting it now. She smoked that one, then another, before going back inside to sort books for the reserve shelf.

Dozens of locals had been converging on the library in search of a play called Mister Roberts, which had recently played the Bijou. When six people signed up for the book in one day, Miss Polly took a look at it. Miss Polly passed it on to Miss Starkey who passed it on to Zinnie.

"Miss Polly," she said, "wants you to read this – see what all the fuss is about."

Zinnie tried to read the play but found it dull. A world of men and their petty problems. The war was hardly mentioned and those few cuss

words – well – they were to be expected. She returned the book to Miss Polly. “Can’t see why this can’t be put on General. Just a few naughty words,” Zinnie said.

“Which naughty words?” Polly demanded. “Tell me girl.”

“No – I shouldn’t,” Zinnie said. It didn’t matter, just men talk.

“None-the-less – you put it on the list. No one under eighteen without they got their parents say so.”

“Yes’m,” Zinnie said and slipped it into the General stacks.

The next day, Zinnie smoked a cigarette while walking to work. She liked the secrecy, so she smoked three more at noon in the bushes. The last one she smoked all the way down without dropping the ash. That was fun.

When Zinnie kissed Mama after work, Mama recoiled. “What you smellin’ like?”

“Whatchew mean, Mama?”

“You smell like smoke. You been smokin’ Zenobia?”

“Oh – that – No Mama,” Zinnie was thinking quickly. “I stopped to talk to old Judge Carmody an’ he kept blowin’ his nickel cigar in my face – smoking those nasty old wine soaked crooked things.”

“Nasty ol’man,” Mama said and Zinnie breathed easier. “He’s always dallyin’ around the pool hall when he supposed ta be in court.”

Sometimes Zinnie wished Mama would find her dallying about something; it might break the tension between them. Not that there was much to catch her at. There were only a select few ways to dally in such a small town and hardly any for a girl like Zinnie. “Take a bath Zenobia,” Mama said. “Don’t want that smell in my house.”

Zinnie bought Good’n Plentys at the five and dime the next day. After

each cigarette she popped one of the pink or white pellets into her mouth. When she had finished all but two of the Luckies she threw the pack away along with the Good'n Plentys. The taste of licorice definitely did not go with her Caffe dopio. If I have to chew those things, just so I can smoke – the H-E double toothpicks with it, she said to herself.

Nancy had been back in town for the first year after college, Sally too for awhile. Then Sally left in '41 to join the WACs and Nancy left soon after for Sioux Falls to learn shorthand and typing. Zinnie was doing okey until Nancy left. But now there was no one to gossip with and there hadn't been that much even when she was around. There was Clifford who toured mainstreet in his father's pickup every Saturday night. Clifford Klippstein was eligible, except for the fact that he was a Baptist and had a gimpy leg and a rumor about him. Folks said old man Klippstein hid Clifford in the corn crib when the draft board came around. And when that didn't work Clifford had small accident with his foot. The name Corn Crib Klippstein didn't bother Zinnie. She thought he was handsome, at least he was until he took his shirt off for a dip in the gravel pit. Zinnie and Nancy couldn't help it, they had to giggle at the harsh red line from his collar up and from his elbows down. Clifford never stopped cruising but neither did he ever try to pick them up.

Then there was Jack, the new man on the grease rack at Joe's Skelly Service. Jack spent his off-hours up near the state line at the 9-59 Club. Zinnie wrote him off as a boozier. If she hadn't, Mama would have. When Joe retired a year later, Jack became manager of the station, then soon half-partner. Then he was elected President of Kiwanis and Treasurer of the School Board. That same year, Mandy left her cash register at the Red

Owl and moved on to mixing drinks at the 9-59.

Jack and Mandy had one girl one year then two boys the next. They built a sixteen thousands dollar house with a three thousand gallon tank pool in the back and a redwood patio. The first pool and patio in Arnold's Park. Zinnie sometimes thought it might be accurate to say she had written Jack off too easily.

Now here she was over thirty. The age when she could check herself off as too persnickety for her own good. That was the best that could be said. The worst was to become the subject of deeper and darker rumors. The kind of gossip that is exchanged in glances but seldom by word and never by Christians.

Zinnie was not really a Christian, she was a Catholic. And around those parts, Catholics thought themselves to be a breed apart. The Baptists, the Lutherans, even the 1st Reformed were Christians. It was synonymous with Protestant. Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, was the One True Church Founded By Jesus Christ Himself. And all those others? Well – they could just forget about getting into Heaven, They could scream and shout, rant and rave about being saved, all they want, abstain from dancing and drinking seven days a week, but come Sunday they had no Mass to celebrate and nothing to hope for. The fact was, all they could expect was the boredom of Purgatory.

Somehow these received distinctions had lost some of their meaning by the time Zinnie watched Mama being lowered into the frozen ground. She wished that she had been able to love like Mama. Love what wasn't there. Her Daddy. Jesus. She felt no loss of father and was surprised how little she felt the loss of Mama. Perhaps it would come later. Being alone

did not terrify her unless she thought about dying herself. Being alone was soothing in a way. No one left to proscribe her activities, no one to tell her no.

The Holy Mother Church may have had a half-dozen ‘thou shalt nots’ but Mama had dozens. All were meant, Mama insisted, to protect her from the forces of evil. “And evil doesn’t only lurk in dark doorways,” Mama said. “It’s all around. That’s why you need Jesus. He’s always around – not just dallying around – mind you.”

“Where are you Jesus?” Zinnie asked each shovel of rich black Iowa top soil that fell and mixed with the snow covering the grey casket. “If I’m struck dead now – where are you? Who will care? How will you find me Jesus?”

If thugs had lurked in dark doorways in small farm towns and if Zinnie had been struck dead by one, the coroner would have found a still beautiful woman. He would imagine her no more lonely than himself. It may have saddened him, upon examination, to discover she was still ‘intact’. The word may have sounded too clinical but no more so than the ones used to describe the opposite condition.

The closest Zinnie had ever come to a sexual experience was with the milkman. Milkman jokes, along with traveling salesman stories and farmer’s daughter fantasies, were among the first bits of sexual information to filter down to boys and girls in those days. Zinnie always nervously absented herself when a new joke was being passed around. She had her own version but it was not so very funny.

When Zinnie was twelve, Mama switched from the County Co-Op Creamery to The Okoboji Dairy. Mama said it was undemocratic for the

producers to own the dispensary. That was too deep for Zinnie at that time but Mama also said the man who delivered for the Dairy was a widower. Zinnie sort of understood about that. “Fifty-eight years young,” Mama said. Zinnie knew Mama was at least thirty or fifty. Anyone over twenty was thirty or fifty, to Zinnie.

The first morning Mama shooed Zinnie away while she composed a note.

Dear Sir...she wrote ... No. Yes. Mama took a new sheet.

Dear Sir: I would very much like 2 qTs of your delicious non-homogenized milk and 1 lb of non-skim coTTage cheese.

Sincerely, Mrs. Hjalmer Walford.

Mama was waitin to pounce when Packy came to the door. “Oh!” Mama pretended to be startled. “Why there you are. Good morning. We haven’t met. I’m Mrs Walford – Hilma to those who know I lost my Mister nigh onto ten years now. I was just gonna leave this note – well – it’s sorta formal seein’ as how here you are and all...but – since I wrote it – here. Sure hope you can read my chicken scratchin’.”

Isidore Packman, besides being taken aback by Mama’s effusion, was five feet four, bald and had a cute little paunch. Hilma noticed all these things, found none of them offensive except the paunch which she was convinced could be gotten rid of with home cooking and temperance. Packy, though Mama didn’t know it, could pack in the beer. He had been chug-a-lug champ of Arnold’s Park for as long as anyone could remember. No one had ever discovered the secret of his undefeated record.

In Championship Chug-A-Lug, Tavern style, you face an opponent across an empty table, beer is poured into clear, twelve ounce Pilsner glasses. One glass at a time from a pitcher. Each competitor must down the contents without spilling or pausing for breath. Glass after glass is drunk until one person passes out. Each idiot is allowed one pit stop in the half hour race to unconsciousness.

Packy's secret was to enter the stall, drain his mainline, then quickly – as he pulled the chain – stick his fingers down his throat and puke his guts out. With this little advantage he obliterated all challengers, comers and die hards alike. His prize for this was the beer he consumed and the pride he swallowed each time he upchucked.

Zinnie peeked from the pantry as Packy read Mama's note. He nodded at her and smiled broadly, "Mornin' to you too, young lady." Packy made note of the incipient protrusions on Zinnie's chest as he deciphered Mama's chicken scratching.

"That's my daughter. Go away Zenobia – don't be botherin' Mr Packman." Mama turned back to Packy. "She's hardly ever around when you want her."

That isn't true, Zinnie thought. She was always around. If Zinnie went outside, Mama sat on the steps. If Zinnie had to pee (make wa-wa), Mama said, "Leave the door ajar, Honey Dear Sugar Plum. You shouldn't get locked in." It was never Honey or Dear. It was always Honey Dear Sugar Plum.

In addition to the bathroom, the only room that had a lock or a door, Mama and Zinnie had a single bedroom and 'the other room'. Zinnie went into the other room, leaving Mama and Packy alone in the kitchen. They

chatted for a good ten minutes that first day and for twenty the next. It went on like that until one day Mama served Packy coffee and danish. He hung around for an hour that day. Then he wouldn't go until Mama brought Zinnie in to say hello.

"Hello," Zinnie said with a quick curtsy, like Mama had shown her. She then exited promptly, as she had also been instructed.

One morning Packy was later than usual. An hour late, then two. Mama couldn't wait any longer; the D.A.R. began Bingo promptly at ten every Saturday morning. "You be sure and give him this note. And stay outta his way. Tell him there is coffee in the thermos if he wants it."

"Yes Mama," Zinnie said, softly. As Mama pulled away, Packy pulled up. Packy was strung out that morning. He had won last night, of course, but only with a big bluff. The goddam toilet wouldn't flush at his command. Or maybe his timing was off. Maybe he was losing his desire. Anyway, it was damn shit luck and there he was up against the third best drinker in the county.

When he couldn't upchuck as usual, Packy was forced to tighten his belt two whole notches. He didn't like to do that, it cut down on his total volume. But his old stomach muscles were not as tight as when the Missuz was still around. And a tight stomach was essential to push the belches out after each glass.

Back at the table, Packy felt himself slipping once or twice. His opponent hadn't taken his pit-stop and was looking pretty cocky. Something drastic was called for. To make up for his poor showing thus far, Packy called for a full pitcher and downed it non-stop. He grinned at his adversary, burped once, profoundly, then waited smugly for his

opponent to catch him. It was a wonderful, intimidating gesture and it worked. But this morning Packy was paying the freight.

Zinnie read Mama's note quickly as Packy staggered up the walk.

*Good morning Isadore! 2 qTs plez and 1 o€ bTTmilk.
Glorious day, no? Makes a girl feel fiFTy again. Sorry I
missed you. Hope you're feeling okey. Hilma.*

Zinnie was shocked. Hilma? Mama didn't use words like glorious. And fifty? Was Mama past fifty? Daddy died when he was fifty. Zinnie tried to remember her daddy but there was nothing there to remember. Nothing except that faded newspaper clipping that hung in the other room. A group of men all wearing parkas, posing with snowshoes and a dog sled. Zinnie wasn't even sure anymore which one was her daddy. She had once asked Mama about her Daddy. "What was he?" she said, meaning what did he do? Sally and Nancy had wanted to know.

"He was a man who did his very best with what the Lord gave him," Mama said. "Not that much ever came to him 'cept me'n you child. So we got to do our best by him."

That was not exactly what Zinnie needed. She needed a word like Doctor or Grocer or Milkman. "I mean – did he have a job?"

"Oh sure – lots of jobs. He could do almost anything he set his mind to. They called him Cracker Jack. Trouble was he couldn't set his mind to any one thing for too long. He never came out ahead on any deal but he didn't dilly dally. And we don't owe a penny to no one. So don't you ever let yer snotty Doctor's daughter tell you different."

"No Mama – they was just asking."

“Well – you tell ‘em he was an angel. That was his job and they ain’t no better one than that.”

But Zinnie got confused and flustered when Sally and Nancy asked her again. “So – what’s yer Mama say – about your Daddy?”

“He was an apostle,” Zinnie said. Nancy and Sally suppressed a snicker and Zinnie flushed red.

“One of the twelve?” Nancy teased.

“Yeah – one of the twelve,” Zinnie replied, proudly. It sounded right. There were about twelve men in that old clipping.

“Morning Mister Packman,” Zinnie said, standing erect, as the nuns had directed.

“Why good morning, young lady. Zinnie – isn’t it?”

“Zenobia is my real name but ever’body calls me Zinnie. Well – actually no one ‘cept Sally and Nancy and Mama – she calls me Zinnie sometimes when she’s not mad.” Zinnie knew she was talking too much and clammed up. She passed the note to Packy.

“Zinnie it is then,” Packy said, once again focusing on the tiny buds poking through her dress. The buds were scarcely larger than the pimples she was now fussing with and, to Zinnie, not at all as important. Packy stepped into the kitchen with familiarity and put an arm around Zinnie. “And where is Mama?”

“Mama had to go play Bingo.”

“Bingo!” Packy said with a look of glee washing away part of his sallow complexion.

Zinnie thought he was asking if he heard correctly and replied, “Yes – Bingo.”

“I had me some girls once too,” Packy said, abruptly. “But they’s all growed up now, married and all. Don’t have much time for they old daddy.” Packy let his hand slip down Zinnie’s arm, then under and across her ribcage, giving her a little squeeze. Zinnie’s arm shivered with gooseflesh as Packy rubbed his hand up and down, softly tickling her nipple. Zinnie was terrified but didn’t know why. She stood mute and immobile as Packy read the note and pulled out Mama’s order. As he knelt down to remove the bottles from his wire basket, he slid his free hand up Zinnie’s leg until he reached her white cotton panties; the ones that had *Saturday* stitched on them. He squeezed her little bun then moved his hand around her leg and brushed that area that could one day, in another story, be called many things. But now, in this story, it is called nothing. Zinnie had no name for it; just a vague sense that it was to be kept clean and covered. She felt a tear welling up and did her best to stifle it, like Mama always told her. Packy noticed the look of terror, put the milk in the icebox and left quickly.

“See you agin’, Zinnie Dear,” he said and gave her a little toodle-oo wave.

From then on, Zinnie made a point of staying away from the kitchen and backyard until after Packy had come and gone. She kept quiet when Mama went on and on, to herself, about Packy. “That Mister packman,” she would say as if Zinnie was not there. “He’s the funniest man. You can hardly believe where all he’s been. Why he’s done just about ever’ thin’ a man could do and live to tell about it. He sure don’t dally around.”

Then one day a new, younger man was delivering the milk. He introduced himself by saying, “Packy packed it in last night. M’name’s

Chester – I'll be your new milkman.”

Mama got a terrible stricken look on her face and had trouble speaking. “Wha – whachoo mean – packed it in?”

“Died. Kicked the bucket. Bought the big one. Undefeated he was too, till last night.”

Mama didn't know what Chester referred to but the next day she canceled her subscription to Okoboji Dairy and began to buy her milk at the Red Owl. Zinnie didn't care about that except Mama became very quiet, for months. When she wasn't quiet she was likely to be weeping muffled tears, alone in the bedroom, while Zinnie was in the other room reading.

©Jan.83

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