

Deanna Levis / A MATTER OF CHOICE

PROLOGUE

I drive slowly down 18th avenue, past the house where the Hurlstons lived and next door, the Jang family. I see myself at 7 in the Jangs' yard, telling Bonnie to say her name because she couldn't pronounce it properly. Boni Ta Julie Jang she'd say, with the accent on the Ta. She'd look puzzled when I laughed.

Across the street, the Sankeys. They were the last to leave, after Derek got married 5 years ago. I'd always thought they would never move away.

And two doors down, our house, grey and aged, the stucco falling away in places, the stairs uneven. Dad had always kept the trim and the stairs painted, the garden tidy with flowers along the walk. Now except for the curtains on the windows, it looks abandoned. For a second I want to ring the bell and announce that I used to live here, why aren't you keeping the place up, then realize I can't, I have no rights here anymore.

I drive to the end of the block and turn up the lane, past the big house on the corner with the garden that was so enormous when I sneaked into it 25 years ago. From the car I can see the little bridge over the lily pond, but the gnomes and elves are gone. I was a princess there and the gnomes watched over me from their rocky perches. I remembered the last time I was in that garden. I was standing on the bridge and a low voice yelled out, "Hey you, little girl! What are you doing in my garden?" I bolted through the hole in the hedge, terrified, and ran all the way up the lane to our house. Grownups didn't understand princesses, they'd just think I was crazy. I decided that when I grew up I'd understand princesses and gnomes and little girls in beautiful gardens.

I stop the car at our backyard. There's the cherry tree, the smooth branch where I used to hang by my knees, the small lawn where I practised the high jump and did hand stands and head stands over and over again. The old garage is gone, there's a carport there now, in the place where Pete asked me to go steady one Sunday after church. I thought of the manly smell of him close to me that day, how small I felt in his arms. When we kissed, our tongues touched and I suddenly got weak in the knees. It was the 5th time he'd asked me to go steady and the 1st time I didn't say no.


I looked up at the house. The basement door is the same and the stairs up to the kitchen, the nook windows. There's a face in the nook window. It's a man and he's staring at my car. I flip the gear into drive.

At the end of the lane I look back and it's the day I walked home from school unexpectedly for lunch. There was an S.P.C.A. truck pulling away from our house with my dog inside. Tumbles saw me and cried and scratched at the wire mesh door trying to get out and I ran as fast as I could after the truck but couldn't catch it. I raced back to the house and screamed, "Mother, they took Tumbles away! Where is he going?" And sadly she told me he was very sick, he had cancer and was going to have to be put to sleep. She'd hoped I wouldn't have to see him go. Then we were both crying and I couldn't go back to school. Nothing mattered anymore without Tumbles, nothing.

I sit in the waiting room of the head and neck clinic — the only person under 50. A white-haired woman meticulously washes her hands at the sink. Five minutes later, she does it again. Across from me, a man with no nose studies his fingernails. One by one, the patients are ushered into the examining room. I catch glimpses of several doctors and a bright light in the middle of the room. When I walk in, 7 faces raise their eyebrows — I'm an oddity. They seat me on a white stool under the bright light. "Good morning." "How old are you?" "May I look in your throat please?" 3 surgeons, 2 internists, a radiologist and a pathologist take turns examining my neck. Out of courtesy, they introduce themselves before touching me.

She was always there, reminding, harping, ironing the lovely clothes she dressed me in. The coats were english wool with velvet collars and hats to match. She passed them on to my cousins because they wouldn't wear out. When I got older it was navy burberrys like the kids in private school had to wear. I was 12 when she bought the last one. We had this awful fight in the store and she swore she'd never go shopping with me again. I hoped she meant it, but of course she didn't.

When I was really small, the dresses were viyella with smocking on the chests. The Bay took a picture when I was 2, in a yellow one. Mother says they blew the print up to 6 feet and displayed it in one of their windows.

For Christmas that year, Dad built me a car. It was black and white with pedals, and it had headlights that worked. It even had whitewalls and my initials painted on the door like this . I have the picture still, but nobody knows what happened to the car. Mother wasn't a keeper. The only things she still has are the pictures, and my first shoes which she had bronzed.

At 5:30 in the morning, a nurse comes in to put the tube down my nose, and I remember when they tried it with the woman in the next bed. She gagged, cried and then screamed, and it took 2 nurses and an intern twenty minutes to force it down to her stomach. I talk to myself. It can't be that bad, don't be silly, there's nothing to be afraid of. "This will be easy if you just relax and swallow when I tell you to," she says. Every muscle is tensed. I take a deep breath, try to relax. "Okay," I say. She sits on the bed and puts the tube into my left nostril. "The only hard part is getting over the cartilage; it may hurt a bit." She pushes up and I wince when the pain starts. She waits, then forces it over. "Now swallow," she says, and I feel the tube going into my throat. She pauses. "Swallow." Down into my chest. "Good, once more." The urge to gag is overwhelming. I swallow hard and feel the tube sliding into my stomach. "That's all, you were very cooperative. Sometimes it takes a long time to get these down," she says, and leaves quickly enough to miss the sheets trembling and the tears which never fall in company because I'm more afraid of her seeing my fear than the fear itself.

Taken almost everywhere with my parents, I learned to adapt to new situations. Mother believed that no-one should be "backward about coming forward," and I wasn't.

They took me along to a big party one night, when I was 3. I walked boldly into the roomful of strange adults and introduced myself. I was greeted with smiles and questions. After a while, my parents led me off to bed. It was too soon for me, but making a fuss was foolish. At first I was frightened in the strange bed, but I could hear the people laughing downstairs and soon fell asleep listening to the sounds. I remember Dad picking me up to carry me out to the car and Mother's arms around me on the way home.

Voices, very far away, calling a name — my name. “Deanna wake up, wake up, it’s all over. Can you take a deep breath?” Sleepy, too sleepy — breath, take a breath? In, out. “Good girl!” The voice is louder. “Open your eyes, Deanna.” So tired, only want to sleep, the voice won’t let me. Cold. Where am I? Must think, think. A shiver jolts me. Hospital, operation — oh I’m alive. I open my eyes and the face above me blurs.

They lift me and a maze of tubes into a bed. Crying children, agonizing sound. So thirsty. I open my mouth to speak but no words come out. I motion with my hands and a nurse puts something lemony to my mouth.

I wake again to someone pressing on my neck. “Oozing Doctor.” My throat hurts. I look up and Dr. McDougall is there. “You’re all right, dear,” he says. “We’re just going to take you back to surgery for a few minutes.” The nurse lifts a bandage dripping with blood from my neck. I stare at the doctor. “It’s okay, you’re just oozing a little bit. We’re going to fix that now. Go back to sleep dear.” He lifts the sheet and puts a needle in my hip.

All night I hear the children crying, try to make the nurse help them. Can’t stand the crying.

At 4, I made my debut on the stage at the Georgia Auditorium. It was Vi Cameron's Revue and the number was "Little Old Lady," a song and dance routine. The dresses were long frilly things with matching hats and parasols; all yellow except mine, which was green. I was the star. We took 2 curtain calls, but nobody realized the extent of the hit we'd made until after the show. A Hollywood talent scout had been there, and he phoned my mother to ask if she would take me to California for a screen test. In later years I often wondered what would have happened if she and dad had agreed. "Successor To Shirley Temple Found At Last!" or "Child Star Wins Rave Reviews!" In any case, I got the measles. When I recovered, I returned happily to the barre.

My father is waiting at the doors of the elevator. Through a haze of demerol, I see the shock register in his eyes. The nurse and orderly wheel my bed down the hall to my room. All the way down the hall, Dad holds my hand. "Are you in pain, how do you feel, do you want anything?" I smile and shake my head. In the room he turns away to blow his nose. He's crying. I must look terrible. I can't speak; there's a tracheotomy tube in my throat. I try to reassure him with my eyes.

When I was 5, they sent me to a private kindergarten. I remember being picked up by a chauffeur. On the first day, I cried and refused to go because his dark uniform frightened me. Mother thought I was just being 'difficult' and pushed me into the car. When I arrived at the school, the teacher called to ask if she would please pick me up. I was hysterical, and had been sick in the car. She rushed right over to get me.

My cousin Brian lived with us then. He was like a brother, for a year or so anyway. I wanted a brother or sister more than anything else in the world. I used to ask mom and dad all the time when they were going to get one. Get one.

Dark — must be night. I guess I should be sleeping but I'm not tired any more. There's a light on in my room. It's larger than the rooms I've been in before. There's another bed but no-one is in it. One corner window, faded drapes, a sink, a few hard-backed chairs and oh — flowers. Pink carnations. They must be from Jim.

Suddenly I'm hungry and push the bell for a nurse. There's an I.V. in my arm. This must be what it's like to be embalmed — I can feel the glucose flowing through my veins. Footsteps in the hall. Maybe the nurse will get me some paper and a pencil. I wish I could talk; I have so many questions.

A lot of people said I was spoiled. I thought anyone who had brothers and sisters was more spoiled than me. I had nobody to side with me when my parents were mad, or even to share the happy times.

When we had guests in the house, I was asked to perform for them. "Deanna, sing for us dear, dance for us. Play the piano for your aunt; she loves to hear you play." Even then, I knew that was bullshit. They wanted to hear what great parents they were. Such a wonderful daughter. So much talent. Pretty too. All those years performing, learning to charm adults.

All day the ward is a maze of sounds. Nurses, doctors, visitors, auxiliary carts, food trays, tubes of blood clicking in their wire baskets. At night it's quiet enough to think. I can talk now, by putting my fingers over the tracheotomy tube. The voice is tinny and strange, but I don't care; at least I can speak. It was awful having to write everything on a slateboard. It must be horrible to be permanently dumb.

Dad is a superb, almost completely self-taught pianist. He had one year of lessons as a child, just enough to read the top line of a sheet of music. The beautiful chords and phrasing which were filled in later, he couldn't explain; he just played them. He did buy some music, but a lot of pieces he learned from me. I would sing the melody until he picked it up. It only took a few minutes. Sometimes we played duets. He'd teach me the bass, then add the melody. We did "Tea for Two" in 3 different beats with 2 key changes. Hours could go by when we were working on a piece, hours of closeness which Mother couldn't share.

It's been 4 days now since the start of this test. One more day before they give back the thyroxin pills that will sustain me for the rest of my life. I'm so tired. Each day I feel more drained. Today I keep lapsing into tears, and I know I can't control it which is worse.

Before lunch I feel nauseous. A nurse gives me a shot of graval but the tray arrives too soon for the drug to work and the smell of the food is unbearable. When they take the tray away, I cry myself to sleep.

I wake to voices near the bed. My parents are here to say goodbye on their way to the Okanagan. We'd discussed it a week ago, before the operation. They wanted to be sure I'd be okay and not mind their leaving. Now Dad looks uncertain. "Are you sure you don't want us to stay?" he asks. No I'm not sure at all. "Yes, yes, it's just that I don't feel very well today." He looks at Mother. "I don't think I should go, but you go. You need the rest." She sighs. "But the doctor said she'd be all right." "I know, I know," he says, frowning and holding my hand. "You look as if you don't want us to go." He turns to me and then Mother, torn. Jim arrives and they look at him with raised eyebrows. Tell us what to do Jim, we want to do the right thing. Dad sits on the edge of the bed. "I'm not going. She needs one of us and I couldn't enjoy the trip." There's a familiar defiance in Mother's eyes. As usual, she's fighting both of us and not understanding why. Odd man out. I can't stand it anymore. "I don't care what you do. Go, stay. For God's sake, I'm sick, I feel awful. I can't make your decisions for you!" Now she's hurt. "Don't you think you're being a little selfish dear? After all, I'm tired too, what with looking after the boys all day

and coming to see you here. My blood pressure's way up with worry." "I know that Mother, but I just can't cope with this discussion right now." Tears. Bigger them. Let them fall. "You're feeling depressed," she says. No, no I'm not depressed. I'm lying here with half a neck zippered in black silk, the prospect of more of the same on the other side and an energy level of zero. What am I supposed to be? They go out into the hall to discuss it by themselves. When they come back, Dad says they're going to go. "For your mother's sake." I sink into the pillows.

After 8 years of dancing lessons, I “retired.” I was 12, tall, slim and agile. On sports day I battled with Patsy Tiefenbaker for the most blue ribbons. *She* was 12, tall, slim and agile, and also the winner. In the spirit of good sportsmanship, I congratulated her through gritted teeth and hated her guts.

At school I got straight A’s in music, one of my few scholastic triumphs. In grade 7 I sang “I Could Have Danced All Night” at the noon-hour talent show. My english teacher, Mr. Brockington, accompanied me brilliantly on the piano. In Mother’s pink satin wedding gown (pinned down the back) and brown velvet shoes, I sang with everything I had and received a wild ovation.

We had english right after lunch that day. I floated in late (the performer’s privilege) and to my delight, the class applauded. Mr. Brockington beamed, sat down at his desk, and gave an inspired reading of “Old Yeller.” Before he had finished most of the class was in tears, and when the bell rang, nobody moved.

The next morning an orderly takes me down to radiology in a wheelchair and leaves me in a hallway. I wait and wait and after a while the nausea comes back and I want to lie down. People in green uniforms rush by, ignoring me. I think I'm going to faint, I can feel the blood draining from my face. I bend over in the chair. "Are you Mrs. Levis?" somebody says. I look up. "Yes." "Good, we're ready for you now." She wheels me into a room with a machine that will pick up any trace of thyroid tissue. The radiologist warns me to lie perfectly still and not to swallow. For fifteen minutes. "If you have to swallow, do it when the machine is over the side of your head — not in the middle, okay?" I shiver on the cold table. "I'll try." Back and forth it clicks interminably 8 inches over my head. My arms and legs are strapped to the table. After 10 minutes I want to scream. Suddenly I've got to swallow. The machine is right over my nose and he said I mustn't. Click, click, I'm going to choke, must wait — now.

As a young boy, Dad would sit for hours at the edge of a swamp to watch the birds and insects. If you sat very still he said, you could see an infinite variety of aquatic life — water skaters and little black beetles which rely on the surface tension of water for their mobility. Or spiders which live under water and bring air between their legs to their habitat below. He talked about the steel-like sound of rain on the surface of a pond when no other sound invades to lessen it. He tried to teach me to be observant, but I was always in too much of a hurry.

It seemed that there was never a moment when somebody wasn't telling me what to do. If it wasn't one of my parents, it was a school teacher, piano teacher or dancing teacher. I became resentful and more than a little rebellious with authority figures. Nobody ever wanted to learn anything from *me*. My friends who had brothers and sisters didn't seem nearly so pressured to be perfect. I envied them constantly and longed for a sibling so that Mom and Dad would ease up on me.

Once Dad sat me down and dictated a letter to me, while I wrote. "To whom it may concern:" (My future husband, perhaps?) "If when I grow up, I am not all that I should be, I promise I won't say it was my parents' fault, because when they tried to teach me what was right, I wouldn't listen. . . ." There was more, but I've forgotten the rest. I was to keep the letter for future reference he said, and decide whether at 13 I could make all my own decisions from then on. After a week or so, I apologised and burned the letter in the fireplace.

In my battles with Mother though, Dad was usually on my side. "Why don't you leave her alone?" he'd say. "You're always at her for something." She would get furious because she often had legitimate

complaints, and then they'd start fighting and there I was in the middle. I became quite adept at patching up their arguments and getting off scot-free myself. Her pet peeve was my room. She'd say, "Your room looks like a cyclonestruckit!" For years I had no idea what the word cyclonestruckit meant. I only knew it had something to do with my room being dirty. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," she quoted, but I couldn't understand that either. I figured that God would like me just as much dirty as clean. After all, it wasn't really sinful like stealing or lying or telling when you swore you wouldn't tell. And anyway, even a girl couldn't play kick the can without getting a little bit dirty.

At 6:30 am a nurse comes in to give me a shot of demerol and in a few minutes I fall back to sleep. I wake to the sound of a stretcher being positioned by my bed. For a second I visualize myself leaping out, running to the elevator, and escaping from the Outpatient's exit in my backless O.R. gown. Too late. A nurse and an orderly help me onto the stretcher and strap me down. We wheel down the hall.

I keep thinking about last night when that resident said I'd have to have another tracheotomy along with the neck dissection. He acted patronizing when I demanded to see Dr. MacDougall about it. "But Dr. MacDougall didn't say anything to me about another tracheotomy," I said. For some reason I noticed that my arms were crossed. "It's on your chart though," he said. "I don't care — I want to see him!" "He isn't here now, but you can see him tomorrow." "Tomorrow will be too late. The operation is scheduled for 8:00 in the morning." "Well you'll see him then. Don't worry about it." He left me there crying, and a few minutes later, a nurse comes in with a pill. "What's that?" I wailed. "Oh, just a mild sedative." "I don't want it!" "Why don't you take it dear. You'll feel better." She handed me the tiny paper cup and a glass of water and I knew she was just going to stand there until I took the goddamned thing anyway, so what was the use?

More than any friend, the piano fulfilled my needs for emotional release. When I was angry, it tolerated my attacks of dissonance, and in happy moments we melded together in harmony and well-being. Time became irrelevant. Mother could never understand it. "Deanna, your dinner is on the table!" To me, dinner was so trivial. I couldn't get it through to her that inspiration doesn't adhere to a clock.

I spent a lot of time at the piano, but Mrs. Wallace was often angry because I wouldn't do enough practising. It was more fun to compose my own music. I never wrote my compositions on manuscripts; it was easier to just remember them. One piece was pretty good. I played it at a recital and they fussed over me as if I were another Chopin. Mother clucked away. "She wrote it all herself. Oh yes, she *is* talented." She was so proud, I should have been happy, but somehow it just made me sick. When we got home, I put on my jeans and escaped to the garden.

They wheel me off the elevator and into a hallway. After a while someone pushes me through swinging doors to the anesthetist's room. Green uniforms, masked faces. "Could we have your left arm please?" Straps off, needles. I scream, "Please don't put me out until Dr. MacDougall gets here!" Eyebrows raise, questioning. "All right," a face answers.

He arrives; I know his eyes. At least they won't cut off my leg by mistake. I tell him what the resident said about the tracheotomy. "Oh, I'm almost certain it won't be necessary unless you have trouble breathing. I don't think you will." Mild relief. They push me into the O.R.

I began to realize that my parents had been right about the important things. I'd always felt loved. And they'd instilled in me the power of a "yes I can" philosophy. There was nothing I couldn't do. It was simply a matter of choice.

Dad would put his arms around me and say, "You're the best thing that ever happened to me." We used to laugh about it, because he hadn't wanted any children. Mother said that when she became pregnant, he told her she'd better not expect *him* to look after the baby; he didn't want any part of it. She said that lasted until I was born. He looked at me and fell in love for good. I was in no danger of growing up without a strong self-image. No doubt about it.

The flowers are everywhere. One of the interns counted 21 bouquets. "What have you got that I haven't?" he asked, grinning. "Fantastic legs," I said.

Yesterday a card arrived from Toronto. It was from Pete. I couldn't believe it. I haven't seen him for 10 years. He was in Vancouver on holiday and somebody told him I was in the hospital. "I heard you weren't well Deanna," it said, "and I wanted to say hello and send you my best wishes for a speedy recovery. Sincerely, Pete."

Dad said, "If you want lots of friends, be one." It was a simple credo and I saw no reason to disagree with it. The neighbourhood kids and school friends were welcomed into the house. There were always enough cookies and Mother was generous with them. On sunny days we played outside, and if it rained there were lots of toys in my bedroom.

Sometimes we built forts in the sawdust bin in the basement. We'd shovel out pathways and hold secret meetings, hidden behind the fragrant chips of wood.

Years later, when the old furnace was replaced with an oil burning model, I stood in the empty sawdust bin and relived those childish moments, the smell of the wood still strong in my nostrils.