Aunt Margaret was rich. I was only twelve, but it didn't take much in years to know that she was different than we were. She had long, black hair, that she wore with combs, usually red ones. And she drove a red Buick. I wished that my mother could drive, or that her hair was black instead of plain brown. And she never wore combs.

Early most Saturday mornings I'd run for my bike and ride toward Aunt Margaret's house. I'd plan my arrival so that I would be just in time for pancakes and bacon. Her kitchen was always warm, with good smells, and real orange juice.

We had fun, sitting at the table with my cousins, talking over school events with each other.

Aunt Margaret wasn't married, or at least I didn't think so. She lived alone with her boys in a brick house with plenty of room. It was a beautiful house, not at all like ours. Ours always needed painting, but never was. It just stood in the weather, gray paint peeling everywhere.

On this particular Saturday, she looked like an angel smiling at the front door. She managed a quick hug as I darted in.

I took my place at the far end of the kitchen table, where I could see her getting breakfast ready. I loved to watch as she moved from the table to the stove in her slippers and quilted bathrobe, looking like a satin doll from head to foot.

"So what are you planning for today, Robin?" she asked. That's what I liked about her, she talked to me like I was a lady, not a girl.

"I was wondering if maybe you were planning to go downtown shopping? I have some errands I need to do."

Actually I was hoping she would need something at Ben Franklin and we could shop together. I had my yard money in my pocket, and Ben Franklin had my favorite candy.

"Perfect! Let me tidy up around here a bit and we'll be off. The boys won't want to ride along, so we'll just leave them with Grandma."

I was thrilled. I didn't want the boys along anyway. I wanted Aunt Margaret all to myself.

An hour later we were together downtown. It still smelled like lemon, chrome, and I felt like everyone we drove. Aunt Margaret had a black flower on one shoulder. She always did.

As we pulled into the parking lot to open the driver's door.

"We won't be too long today, Robin. She knew him by name. And everyone. How could you forget her?"

As we walked together to the store, I felt like she did, stopping every few windows, viewing all the new styles she was checking her hair, her clothes just so... and confirm that all was looking really, very nice. It was wonderful.

As usual, once in the store, we ran for our own favorite areas to before I worried that I might be lost. So I was going, ten or fifteen minutes I'd glance for me in the usual places, we found our own or fifteen minutes I'd glance without much trouble. After all, I loved Aunt Margaret.

Sometimes she would be in the store, checking out the newest styles and colors, before she would check cosmetics, before she would check for me in the usual places, we would check her latest selections from palettes of and stand and put some on at the counter audience. some clerk or assistant.

As I walked up to her, I saw the crowd. After all, what if she wasn't to rush her. So I browsed, watching a buyer in whatever department pocket was the fifteen cent...
wanted Aunt Margaret all to myself. And Grandma was always home, so I knew the day would belong to just the two of us.

An hour later we were together in the big Buick, headed downtown. It still smelled like leather inside, all black and chrome, and I felt like everyone was looking at us as we drove. Aunt Margaret had a black dress on, with a big blue flower on one shoulder. She always dressed up.

As we pulled into the parking lot, the attendant quickly ran to open the driver’s door.

“We won’t be too long today, Nate. Just an hour or so.” She knew him by name. And everyone knew Aunt Margaret. How could you forget her?

As we walked together to the five and dime, I tried to float like she did, stopping every few steps, as if to look in the windows, viewing all the new styles. But really I could see she was checking her hair, her dress, as she would turn... just so... and confirm that all was in place, and that she looked really, very nice. It was hard to walk like she did in her heels, me in my Mary Janes, but I kept up, and didn’t hurry her.

As usual, once in the store, we parted, each of us headed for our own favorite areas to browse. Aunt Margaret never worried that I might be lost. She just turned and said, “Look for me in the usual places, would you?” She knew that after ten or fifteen minutes I’d glance down the aisles and find her without much trouble. After all, not many people looked like Aunt Margaret.

Sometimes she would be in the hosiery department, picking out the newest styles and colors. And if she wasn’t there, I would check cosmetics, where she would be making selections from palettes of a hundred different shades and tints. She wore eye make-up, and sometimes she would stand and put some on at their mirror. Always she had an audience, some clerk or admirer, watching an artist at work.

As I walked up to her, I quietly let my presence be known. After all, what if she wasn’t quite ready to leave? I didn’t want to rush her. So I browsed, pretending I was an interested buyer in whatever department I found her. Secure in my pocket was the fifteen cents worth of candy I had just pur-
chased, usually candy corn, because the bag was lots bigger than fifteen cents worth of chocolate.

Standing there, waiting, was always the hardest part, because my lips and mind were framing the question I was hoping she would ask. Sometimes if she was in a hurry, she wouldn't. But after all, this was the part of Saturday I looked forward to the most.

"Do you feel like you have time to stop for a soda?"

That wonderful question. As if I had some place to go. I shrugged and smiled as I looked up to her.

"If you do..." I tried to sound casual, as if the thought of a soda had never crossed my mind.

We walked to the fountain and took a booth near the wall. For privacy, of course. I always wondered how many shoppers were sad that Aunt Margaret had hidden herself in a booth rather sit at the stool for everyone to see. We did sit at a stool once, but it was "terribly public, if you know what I mean." I nodded, in complete agreement.

We each ordered the usual: her a lemon phosphate and me my chocolate malt. At last, we were finally alone.

She pulled out her gold compact from her purse to check her lipstick and hair. Then, putting it away, she readjusted herself in the booth and smiled.

"So, how is my favorite niece?" I was her favorite, I knew it. And because she didn't have any girls, I had no competition from her family. I wished I could be like her, and sometimes I wished more than that.

"Fine. Everything at school is just fine. I got my best grade in Arithmetic yet!" (I always had a good report, because I liked school.) And I wanted to see her smile and nod that I was doing just fine. But this time I did not add the other customary line, that everything was fine at home, too. She noticed.

"And how are things at home?"

I wanted to approach it carefully. I had thought about what I wanted to say, and needed the words to come out just right.

"Okay. Well, as good as things ever are. No one is sick or anything. There are just... so many of us."

I was hardly breathing at this point, waiting for her to answer. Secretly I was praying, just bursting over with the words. Please... please...

"Just... so many of you. You, me, I love you, of you, is that it?" Her eyebrows went up. "It's just not like your house. people. We can't have our own closet. Cheri's things are everywhere. She the truth. "There is no place to call my own."

"Mom and Dad, I think they're all crowded up. They never talk to us. All day long, we're in each other's faces. I mean, it's not like we like it. They're just brothers. All their friends talk to a friend without the limitations from them. They always have more room for stuff through puberty."

I wasn't sure what that was going through it, and that it was coming from the perspective of a male, and that it was thinking, and the puberty thing.

"Puberty," she said, nodding. "I hoped I had said it like that makes you feel sorry for me."

"Does this mean you are thinking it might be else wanted me. It would be like you might even thank me for thinking it would make things easier."

"That's true. And I would want you. After all, you're a comrade."

"Were you thinking..." I hesitated. "I took a deep breath. It I planned it.

"I guess that could work. Carving each out of an original..."

"This is almost too good for words. Please... please..."

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 JUST...so many of you. You think there are...too many
of you, is that it?" Her eyebrows had gone up as she said "too
many."

It's just not like your house. Everywhere I go, there are
people. We can't have our own room, not even our own
closet. Cheri's things are everywhere!" I was prepared to tell
her the truth. "There is no place in this whole world that I can
call my own.

Mom and Dad, I think they're too busy to notice that we're
all crowded up. They never talk to us, they just work around
us. All day long, we're in each other's way. And Dan and
Jeff, I mean, it's not like we like each other or anything.
They're just brothers. All their stuff just messes up my life. I
can't talk to a friend without them butting in, I can't even hide
anything from them. They always find it, and then it's worse.
It's just too hard being the only one in the house who is going
through puberty.

I wasn't sure what that was, but Mom once said I was
going through it, and that it was a tough time in my life. So I
figured I needed all the help I could find to get Aunt Margaret
thinking, and the puberty thing might just make the difference.

"Puberty," she said, nodding. "That can be difficult."

I hoped I had said it like she did, almost like a disease, one
that makes you feel sorry for the person who has it.

"Does this mean you are thinking of living...elsewhere?"

"I was thinking it might be possible. I mean, if someone
else wanted me. It would be easier for Mom and Dad, they
might even thank me for thinking of it. once I moved out.
There would be more room for everyone."

"That's true. And I would think almost anyone would want
you. After all, you're a companion, practically an adult." She
hesitated. "Were you thinking, possibly, of living with me?"

I took a deep breath. It had happened. Just as I had
planned it.

"I guess that could work." I said the words carefully, as if
carving each out of an original thought.

"This is almost too good to be true," she said. "I've always
wanted a daughter, and since my divorce, I just figured the
boys were my whole family. Oh. But won't you mind the
boys? I mean, your brothers...."

"My brothers are impossible."

"Of course. Your cousins, you see them differently."

She smiled. "You're right, of course. They're younger and less likely to be a bother." She was still smiling as she grabbed my hands in hers.

"That settles it! You'll move to my house."

She gave me a quick hug, and I knew that was it! Decided!

"So how do you think we should go about telling your parents? They must know as soon as possible."

I wasn't prepared for that. I hadn't thought of it. I just figured we would go together and tell them together.

"Maybe we could both go."

"That might work. But I would rather give them time to adjust. I mean, it's going to be pretty tough at first. Your mom was just telling me how much of a help you are around the house. Of course, Grandma does most of my cleaning when I'm at work, but your mom, she always appreciated all your help. She was saying that she could always count on you. didn't need to check up on you. She just knew you would do the job, without complaining, the way she would do it herself. It's going to be hard on her."

She went on: "And Cheri. It will be tough on her not having her big sister to look up to. I remember what that's like. I tried to pattern my life around your mom's. Unfortunately Nick was nothing like your dad. If Nick hadn't agreed to a good settlement for us, I don't know what would have become of me. I'd probably still be living at your house, thanks to your mom's goodness."

I vaguely remembered her coming. I gave up my room, and Aunt Margaret slept in beautiful gowns, all colors. But she cried a lot.

"Your dad might be disappointed at first, but he'll get over it. After all, he has the boys. He always seems to favor you, though, I can see it when you're around. You have his personality, always helpful, thoughtful. Just like now. You probably realize how much you'd miss them, but you're willing to move, to make everyone else more comfortable."

We had grown quiet and into our own thoughts when the waitress brought the drinks and spoons. I unwrapped the straw and began folding and untidion-like, as we sat. Aunt Ma...
..."you see them differently," of course. They're younger.
She was still smiling as she told me, "Of course, I knew that was it! Decided I couldn't go about telling your mother as soon as possible."
I hadn't thought of it. I just assumed she would tell them, together.
But then, Mother didn't work in an office, and didn't type. Or at least, I didn't think she could. Still, Mother was pretty, in a natural sort of way.
"I would never want you to let them know I told you these things...about you being your father's favorite, or how your mom depends on you. They told me in confidence. I would suppose they don't want you to feel you are...well, so very special. It wouldn't be fair to the others, to realize you are so unique." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she talked, and I knew this was a secret we would have to keep to ourselves.
"Of course, you'll want to prepare your mom for your leaving. Maybe you should plan on staying there a little while longer, to help her catch up on things. After all, I'm sure she'll be needing you now that canning season is here. And your dad. You do the raking, don't you?"
I nodded.
"I know he could do it himself, but he works so many hours, and after standing in the store all day, it's just so nice for him to be able to sit down and enjoy his chair when he gets home. And the boys. I would guess they aren't dependable enough to do a job as important as that yet."
She was right. They had helped me cut the grass once, and left thin patches of grass borders. Raking had been a disaster. They had thrown more at each other than they had raked into the gutter. Dad and I had decided that the yard was my allowance project, and that gave me my spending money. The boys weren't old enough for an allowance. Dad said they weren't "responsible." And I liked it when Dad would come out and burn the leaves in the street. I would help him keep the piles together and ready for the fire. And we would laugh at the wisps of smoke that would filter up like old campfires, warming our faces in the cold wind and making our clothes smell like smoke.
I guess I knew in my heart I couldn't leave just yet. Mom..."
was depending on me to keep Cheri out of her hair. There were already apples in the cellar, waiting to be made into applesauce and canned. I should have stayed home today and played with Cheri outside, so she could have tackled them.

"How do you feel about giving this idea a few days to settle in before we share it?" I sighed in agreement. Aunt Margaret must have been a mind reader.

I felt relieved, but the lump in my throat made it hard to finish the malt, and I was afraid to say much right then.

"I know this is a terrible time of decision making. It would be for any person," she ventured. "Some of the toughest decisions we make are not ones we would like to make. Like when I moved the boys next to Grandma. Nick said he would buy me a house, and when the one next to Grandma went up for sale, I knew it would be for the best. Still, it was tough coming home without a husband. Grandma has been good for us. She is good about cooking dinner during the week. Did you know I only cook on the weekends?" She was laughing.

"I love to make pancakes and bacon, but honestly, I can't do much more! It's a good thing the boys aren't picky, they'll eat pancakes every Saturday and Sunday. That is, if I'm home."

We were walking back to the car before I realized it. I was thinking about the applesauce Mom and I made last year, how good it was. I think I even brought some to Aunt Margaret once in my bicycle basket.

Aunt Margaret slid into the driver's seat and adjusted her skirt, taking time to turn the mirror and reassure herself that her hair had survived the walk from the store in the wind.

"There is one other thing," she said, taking a dime from her change purse.

"Have you ever ridden the bus?" she asked, nodding her head toward one of the ugly green and white caterpillars traveling down the street.

"No. Why?"

"Take this dime," she said.

Putting the coin in the center of my hand and closing my fingers around it, she wrapped her hands around mine, squeezing dime and hands into a tight warm ball.

"A dime is the fare from your house to mine. The Chestnut Street route—just ride it all the way. If you ever change your
Cheri out of her hair. There...