

The Stepsister

Maggie Jansen

When I was twelve, while I was out at a drive-in movie with my father and my little sister and brother, Mum left us. As soon as we got home, I knew. One look was all it took. Choked with terror, I ran through the house looking for my mother. In a nanosecond I knew she was gone. She wasn't gone for a bit, a while, down the street, out to a friend's, but gone, gone, gone. Not a single physical sign of her was left. Not a tube of lipstick, hairbrush, bottle of scent, nothing. I should have known the drive-in and candy were a trick.

I cultivated my brave-face smile and reassured adults and curious kids, "We're fine, just fine. It's best for us kids if Mum and Dad are apart. Nothing has changed except Mum has moved." This false testimony beat a steady rhythm in my heart. "Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed. It's for the best. It's for the best."

"Margaret," my Twiggy look-a-like, thirty-two year old mother said to me months later, as we roared away in her divorce-settlement red convertible MGB. "This way you have the same school, the same friends and house. I don't want to be a single mother raising three kids on welfare."

Mum left Dad to "find herself," find something else, leaving us to fend for ourselves. Summer turned to fall, fall to winter; each season dragged me along behind in my new mother-free life. I was the only kid I knew in grade eight who woke up Saturday mornings wondering what lady-friend her father had brought home the night before, who would be fixing coffee or pouring juice in a kitchen I had taken over, as mini-mum, cooking and cleaning. It was my kitchen now.

In the blue cold of February 1972, Dad began to date Violette del Valle. Violette was exotic, from Québec, an ocean of prairie away where a famous leader wore roses in his lapel. I lived in the oil patch of Calgary, a town of cowboy boots, Levis jeans, saddles,

Cadillac cars, and country clubs, surrounded by oil derricks. Violette did not speak French like my parents' French-from-France friends, or les Soeurs at l'Academie de l'Assomption, where I'd learned to read and write in spite of being neither French nor Roman Catholic. She was not one bit like the nuns who glided like soft black and white tents.

Dad liked Violette. I fell in love with her youngest daughter, Linda, ten days older than me. Linda was tall and curvy, with luxuriant hair. I was short, chubby and flat. Linda was my idol.

"My Dad is a Spanish count," said Linda. "My real name is Maria Linda Mercedes Tejada del Valle de Garcia." We just called her Linda. Her mother was an ex-wife and an ex-countess, everything my outdoor-loving geologist father was not. Violette and Dad got engaged that spring and started to plan their wedding. If she loved Dad enough, maybe she could save us, I thought. Maybe Violette could stop the howls of his sobs at night, the nights he was alone and thought I was asleep.

Linda had huge boobs. My guy friends loved her on sight. I didn't stand a chance around her in the love-life department, but wallowed in the splendor of her buxom shadow. "You gonna bring Linda to the party?" they'd say.

"We're going to be step-sisters," I'd brag. Linda was my ticket to party-time, the cool kids, and a new life. Linda smoked Players plain and weed; she was rude to her mother, skipped classes, and never read a book.

"Girrrrrllss," said Violette, her head tilted back, smoke squeezing out of her pinched nose as she looked down at us through a blue cloud of Benson and Hedges Slim. "La Société Franco-Canadienne de Calgary needs Québécois high school kids to cook crêpes at their booth at the Stampede. You need jobs."

“You’re supposed to be sixteen,” she said to us both, just fourteen. “We can lie about your age. Linda looks sixteen.” My heart sank. Working at the Calgary Stampede was a rite of initiation for teenagers growing up in Calgary. Linda didn’t look sixteen, she looked twenty-one. But how was I going to pull it off? I looked thirteen turning ten.

“Margaret,” Violette said to me, “let Linda do the talking. Your French is strange old-fashioned church-French.”

Was she crazy? I hadn’t spoken French since I was sent to the principal’s office in Grade 4 for mocking the *M. et Mme. Thibaud* film strips in French class.

But if we were to cook crêpes, at least I could cook. My Kenner Easy Bake Oven had inspired my love of cooking in Grade 3. After Mum left, I graduated myself from the blue Easy Bake to the real white ceramic stove on which I cooked suppers for my family, including the pheasants, partridge and grouse which my father hunted, stuffed with onions and wrapped in bacon, just like Mum had done.

The lies worked, and in the middle of July, in the middle of the Midway, in the middle of the Calgary Stampede, I poured jugs of sticky white crêpe batter over hot, round griddles. This was no Easy Bake; my hands got burned, my hair crunched with dried batter, and sweat ran down my greasy dust-covered cheeks. I said little to hide my French-from-nuns accent and wore an apron to hide my lack of figure.

Music blared and carneys shouted. “Louie Louie Louie; Louie Louie Lou-ah” boomed from speakers the size of small cars. Summer hits reverberated through the thirsty, hungry, cowboy crowds. I hummed along: “Summer Breeze – makes me feel fine,” as I inhaled the smell of burned sugar and lemon, scorched crêpes, horse pee, cow manure, sweaty saddles, popcorn, cotton candy, and hot dogs. “Nights in White Satin” promised the respite of cool evenings as the day’s heat built, the crêpes got hotter, and the line-ups of hungry, rude cow-people got longer.

I had always loved the Stampede. The summer before Mum left, she had made matching pink-and-white pinstriped cowgirl dresses for her and me, with silver rickrack rippled down the front. My skirt twirled in pink clouds as I learned to square dance. Mother and daughter, we devoured treats, screamed on the Ferris wheel, and breathed in the sweet horsey smell of Stampede perfection. That was before she decided she couldn't live with Dad anymore.

Our boss didn't seem to mind that Linda stopped making crêpes after the first day, when she came back from a cigarette break with another new boyfriend. Kent was older, sixteen, maybe even seventeen, and he wore plaid cowboy shirts with shiny snaps. Sometimes he even said 'hi' to me. Every time I splattered a crêpe on the grill, or spread honey for the honey and walnut special, I would turn and there they would be, kissing like no one had ever kissed before. I made hundreds of crêpes, and Linda necked the whole ten days long of our job at the "stupide," as I soon thought of it.

Not even the Stampede was fun with Mum gone. Violette hadn't cured Dad of his sadness, and Linda lost her luster. The del Valles started to grate on me.

Couldn't anybody see how sad I was? I thought. "Just what I'm going through, they can't understand," said the Moody Blues ten times a day over the radio loudspeakers.

I worked hard and nobody cared. I prayed that Dad and Violette would break up; I didn't want a stepsister. I slopped batter and sang "Bang a Gong", "Layla", and "American Pie" at the top of my lungs, in broad English.

After the summer was over, the del Valles vanished from our lives, and I was done growing up.