

# Trees and Strangers

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

The summer I was eleven years old my parents and I moved to another new town, to half of a single-story duplex, one of four built on the corners of a big sandy square of land between a four lane highway and a residential street. From my bedroom window I could see the other apartments and the tall pines that grew here and there in the sand. The trees swayed in the slightest breeze, bending toward each other like they wanted to touch.

Our apartment was on the highway side. My mother and father worked at a department store a mile or so down the road. I spent my days alone with nothing much to do. We were poor. No tv, no radio. No phone. Not even a car. My parents walked to work along the median of the highway, on the shoulder in the scattered gravel, my mother in her black high heels.

We were "hard up," as my mother said. A bad car wreck a few years before, bill collectors, money worries. I was three when the head-on collision happened, standing between my parents on the front seat. Somehow I wasn't hurt, but my mother's head hit the windshield and my father's broke it.

My father always said God meant for him to die in the wreck, but I thought God meant for all three of us to die that night and then he changed his mind. I always wondered if he'd change it back.

The town was close to an Army base famous for paratroopers. Except for us, the tenants in the duplexes were soldiers' wives with husbands on duty far away. Some of the women had babies, some were pregnant. Most were from other countries, I think, and kept to themselves. If they ever visited each other, I never saw them and I spent hour everyday staring out that window.

Of all the apartments I made friends with the tenants in one, a mother and her baby. They lived on the quiet street on the other side of the trees. I must have met them one day when I was outside messing around. Maybe the mother hung her laundry on the clothesline stretched between two pines. That seems likely but I don't remember. I do remember for the rest of the summer I went to their apartment for an hour or so almost every day.

The mother was a sincere young German woman. She had a daughter named Gaby about a year and a half old with pale blue eyes and fine yellow hair that glistened rainbows in sunlight. She smelled like the soap her mother washed her diapers in and her dresses were ironed.

The first time I went to see them, the mother spoke to Gaby in German and didn't know enough English to translate what she was saying to me. She cooed words to her baby, pointed to me, and Gaby stared with wonder. Whatever the words meant, I was definitely the first example of it Gaby had seen.

We played on a blanket on the living room floor. Over and over Gaby dropped her toys and to her single-toothed delight I picked them up and gave them back. Her mother watched and laughed from a chair close by.

Gaby always had her rubber doll in her lap and she'd kiss it carefully whenever her mother said, "Bussi, bussi." Before long Gaby would kiss me too, stamp her mouth on my cheek and squeal.

If I missed a day, when I came again, at the end of our visit the mother would tap her watch, point to a number, and look at me with a question in her eyes. It was her way of asking me to come the next day at a certain time, although there was never anything special going on I had to be there for. I think she did it just to be sure I was

coming back. And sometimes I missed a day on purpose just to make sure she would.

