

Faith

by Kenny Shepard

I heard the egg crack as Mom split it against the side of the silver skillet. The noise was barely audible over Dad's growlish yawn, but we both heard it. Had Dad and I not been so sleepy, we might've been more surprised by this unusual addition to our breakfast menu; we could count on a hand and a half the mornings we tasted eggs. Mom made a career out of quick and easy breakfasts, and eggs fell into neither category. Double Stuff Oreos, chocolate fudge Pop Tarts, tomatoes with mayonnaise, raisin bars, and orange sherbet had touched our breakfast palate, but eggs? This was truly unusual.

Instantly, Dad and I almost telepathically ran through the calendar in our minds; it was neither of our birthdays or Faith's. The egg mystery was too perplexing to ponder at 7:30 in the morning. Then, as I opened the fridge door to fetch an RC Cola, the light, like a theater spotlight focused on the answer: bare shelves; Mom was blatantly out of everything else but French onion dip, left-over pizza, cola, Kool-Aid- and eggs.

The fridge light, like a neon sign in our dark kitchen, pulled Dad's eyes toward the desolate shelves. "We are out of grapefruit juice?" he asked, the pitch in his voice now much higher than his morning yawns. As the timid words came out, I knew he wished he was eating them for breakfast instead of scrambled eggs — with or without his usual juice.

Quickly, Mom's long pony tail bobbed as her head flipped to face Dad. Like a volcano, a long list of accomplishments erupted as Mom explained all she had done for the week. Grocery shopping and cooking weren't mentioned, but somewhere between the "beauty-shop" and "playing chauffeur," she had proven her worth to us and to herself. At the completion of the monologue she paused, realized her height advantage, drew in a big breath and added: "Not that it's a chore, and not that I don't enjoy helping her, but to add to the list, I've got five days left before Faith-Ann's pageant."

I looked at Dad out of the corner of my eye and awaited his heavy sighs, the usual reaction to Mom's pageant reminders; this time, none came. I guess he had become immune to the idea now. With eleven straight titles in two years of competition, what was one more?

Dad settled for cherry Kool-Aid with his eggs that morning. Unfortunately — the Kool-Aid pitcher was sporting the only grin at the table.

With Dad at the office and me in my room getting ready for school, Mom was in her element. Now it was the time to wake the queen, the little beauty queen, that is. Crossing the threshold of Faith's room was like Dorothy's first step into Oz: from drab to technicolor. Even the beige carpeting in the hallway magically

converted to mauve as Faith's door was opened. A glimpse of mauve, rose, and periwinkle blue was rarely seen as I passed by Faith's next-door room on my way to the bathroom; since her vocal coach had suggested a vaporizer in her room closed. Faith's coach couldn't stress enough the importance of early placement skills; of course, Mom agreed.

A bookcase from the living room now sat in Faith's room overflowing with awards; sparkling inside was a shrine of trophies, crowns, sceptors, and glossy photos. When she won her first pageant at four, the trophy was taller than her, but now that she was a big girl of six, she was learning to hold flowers and a trophy simultaneously with ease. Across from the trophy case, a long ballet barre stretched across the right side of the room. Here, an adjacent mirror covered the entire wall. Although it made the room look bigger, its intended purpose was to help Faith study her line during *plies* and *tendus*. Her ballet instructor said she was too young to go *en pointe* but assured Mom she was a great talent. Her teacher even made her a cassette tape of exercises to do on Tuesdays and Thursdays when the class was off. Mom's cliché philosophy was "twice the practice meant twice the talent."

Faith's canopy bed occupied the far wall between the bookcase and the barre. Here, sheer pink layers of material surrounded her from all possible angles as she slept. Dad wondered if the double bed wasn't too big for such a tiny girl, but Mom convinced him she'd grow into it soon enough. Through the pink netting strewn from the top of the canopy, Faith looked like a china doll carefully placed among the rose and blue pillows for decoration; Mom said she looked like a miniature Sleeping Beauty.

Through the wall that separated our rooms, I heard the usual morning greeting: "Rise and shine, Faith-Ann. Time to face the day." Mom added "Ann" to Faith's name two years ago after she won her first pageant title, "Little Miss America." Mom noticed all the other girls in the finals had two first names: Susan-Beverly Anderson, Laura-Lee Haynes, Katy-Marie Collins. These girls were all top contenders, but even with only one first name Faith had beaten them all on her first try. Two months later, Faith Spencer, "Little Miss America" was Faith-Ann Spencer, "Mid-West Miss."

Mom assured Dad and me no one would check her birth certificate. "Besides," she told us, "I don't think Faith Inez will win many pageants for us." Naming Faith after rich, old Aunt Inez MacAllister before she died was a touching gesture on Mom's part; we realized just how touched Aunt Inez was at the reading of the will. When Faith was born, how was Mom to know she'd be a three-named beauty queen?

Just as Faith's name had been altered for commercial reasons, so was her appearance. Mom highlighted her strawberry hair every couple of months or so, especially before a competition. When Mom applied the bleach for the first time, she accidentally globbed on a huge chunk at the crown of Faith's head; for two months, she had to disguise her obvious faux pas with a braided pony tail or bun whenever Faith went to nursery school or to a lesson. Eventually, though, she learned to paint Faith's hair with the skill of an artist creating a living masterpiece.

At ribbon cuttings, mall exhibitions, or pageants, Mom would apply green to Faith's eyelids and rose to her cheeks. Then, she'd go to work on Faith's freckles, covering the ones around her eyes, accenting the ones on her nose with an eyebrow pencil. At every public appearance and especially for contests, Mom would meticulously go through the ritual of bathing her, painting her, hot rolling her hair, and attaching huge hair bows and a sash from her latest competition. Finally, Faith's most recent crown would be carefully fixed in her hair with combs instantly transforming Faith to Faith-Ann — child royalty.

As I approached the doorway to Oz, I noticed that in her untarnished morning state, my sister really was a pretty little girl. I just wished she would have worn the Mickey Mouse nightshirt I bought her for Christmas instead of those silky pastel nightgowns Mom set out for her. I stood silently in the doorway as Faith mumbled something about school in a cranky voice; then, without missing her cue, Mom chimed in with the desired response. She explained to Faith that she wouldn't be going to school today and how the pageant Saturday meant a special week ahead. "Today," Mom explained, "we've got a fitting at eleven, a permanent at two, and a voice lesson at 4:30. Besides," she reminded, "which would you rather be — a scientist or a star?"

"A star, a star, a star!" Faith screamed, her sophisticated, shiny-pink gown moving as she jumped on her bed. Then, her infectious giggle gave her age away, her rapid-fire vibrato echoing against the makeshift trophy-case.

"I gotta catch my bus," I said, my neck straining to kiss Mom's cheek; she returned my peck with three quick pats on the head.

"Study hard, Theo."

Leaving Oz for academia, I approached the landing and heard Mom add, "There goes the scientist of the family." This time Mom joined Faith as they giggled together.

Scientist, maybe, but Mom knew I had set other career goals for my future. Dad and I talked at length and my junior high and high school curriculum was tentatively mapped out. I loved English and reading. Although I hadn't been to high school yet, I wanted to be a high school English teacher — the higher level the better. Give me a sentence, I'd diagram it; give me a play, I'd analyze it. When I told Mom I wanted to teach when I grew up, she said that was a fine idea and asked me to take out the trash. She tried to be interested, but Poe and past participles weren't up Mom's alley. She knew pageants and powder-puffs much more intimately.

Naturally, most of the time Dad and I were a team — taking turns making up stories before bedtime, seeing the summer drama series every year at Clyde Park, reading the newspaper together on Sunday mornings. Occasionally, though, Mom and I had our moments. She loved to take me shopping every August for new school clothes. She always knew what was best: "Greens and blues," she'd say. "Redheads should always stick to greens and blues. Someday, you'll have to pick out clothes by yourself and if you remember nothing else from me,

remember that."

One rainy morning when Mom's car was flooded, she kept Faith and me home from school. She said she'd educate us herself without books or chalkboards. First Faith and I received media education; Mom and the two of us laid on the couch together like pieces of a puzzle: Faith curled against Mom's belly in a fetal position while I rested my head on Mom's bony hip pillow. Together, we watched the soaps, the game shows, the talk shows, and we napped. When Faith got fidgety, Mom taught us tap on our hardwood living room floor. Mom used to dance in touring shows after high school and gave Faith lessons whenever she was feeling nostalgic. She put on Broadway albums from shows she toured in like 42nd Street and Damn Yankees; she'd always start with the basics, but by the end of the sessions she'd end up doing mad time-steps and trenches in front of the sofa. Faith would join in with the hoopla; her shuffle-ball-changes now flailing as she mimicked her mentor. Mom told Faith she had a big head start with her own resident tap instructor, and she was right. Mom was patient with Faith and had some real talent of her own. Before she married Dad she even made it to the final cut at Radio City Music Hall. As the rain pellets tapped against the living room window to fill in the gaps between Mom's final flaps and brushes, the record and the tap lesson ended.

Mom held each of us tightly as we climbed to the attic to continue our tutoring. Like rookie pirates reaching their fortune, Faith and I followed Mom's tug to the treasure chest. "In here are pictures of me when I was a tapper, Faith. Theo, help me with the lock, honey." Together our knuckles whitened as we pried open the rusty lock. With a final yank the top flew open and out popped a couple of yellowed envelopes with photos, and some dried up flowers, now crusty and brittle. Inside, the chest was overstuffed with photo albums, scrapbooks, some starched dresses, sequined costumes and yearbooks. Like an archaeologist's dig, at each level we found more fascination. Quickly, Mom plunged her hands down to the bottom skipping the top layers of trivia. "Here," she said. "Here's a hat they let me keep from *Anything Goes*." As she placed the silver-chipped chapeau on her head I noted a similar silverish gleam from her green eyes. "One forty-two," she recalled digging farther. "This was my audition number for the Rockettes. We had to fasten these on our leotards so they could tell us apart, Faith. Can you imagine — over a hundred and forty-two of us?!"

Mom continued to the bottom and surfaced for air with the prize in her hand: a cast shot of the summer-stock touring company of Kiss Me Kate. Mom was front and center of the black and white photo with knee popped and wide smile beaming at the camera. Mom's legs were bony and exposed underneath her short, shiny tap skirt; her tight-fitting bodice revealed her curves and cleavage. A high bun was neatly piled on top of Mom's head making her line longer; from the top of her hair to the arch of her character shoe she was every bit a glamour-girl. I continued to dig through the memorabilia as Mom brushed off the dust revealing the rest of the dance corps to Faith.

Underneath a pair of long white gloves I found another photo of Mom in a silver 8x10 frame. I never knew Mom had entered a pageant until that moment.

Mom was standing to the right of a crowned, glowing winner. This black and white photo had been retouched with color and Mom's cheeks and lips matched the red colored roses in her hands. She wore a light blue bathing suit with big straps, matching shoes and a hair bow on the side of her head. She was smiling, but not the same smile as in the other photo. This time her eyes looked distant, dull.

Behind me, Mom continued to relive the touring years with Faith. Quickly, I placed the photo in the trunk, closed the lid, and straddled the top rounded part of the chest, secure that I was literally sitting on Mom's secrets.

Our rainy day off from school was an educational one; Faith learned the shuffle-off-to-Buffalo, and I learned a great deal more.

Saturday, I awoke to find my navy suit staring at me as it hung on the outside knob of my closet door. Obviously, this was what I was wearing to Faith's pageant at Royer Hall — this, and a blue and green checkered tie taking up the excess between my feet and bedposts. Mom had been up since the crack of dawn to ensure everything went as planned.

Downstairs at the kitchen table, a note was placed on top of an old pizza box:

Boys — Reheat this pizza for your brunch.

Wear what I ironed for you. The pageant starts at 2:00. I'll save us seats in front.

Wish us luck! Mom and FA.

Dad and I obeyed and left home at ten after one. We didn't go to all of Faith's pageants, but Mom explained the importance of this particular competition the night before at dinner. If Faith won this one, her twelfth straight title, she'd be a contestant in a cable-televised pageant taped in California. The regional competition would be stiff, Mom told us, but she assured us Faith would win again. For weeks Faith had been rehearsing a new talent number and Mom had taken great efforts in finding a local seamstress who could construct the gown she designed.

At Royer Hall Dad and I spotted Mom instantly. She was standing in the third row and looked great. A new royal blue dress, bold scarf, and dramatic make-up accented her figure and face. Her hair was twisted in a tight knot behind her head; gold dripped from her pink flesh. She waved to Dad and me from across the hall as if we couldn't find her in the crowd. Then, seated in the center of us, she pointed out the television station reporter, cameras, and newspaper feature writer in the front row. Seated five rows back, the judges were in place with clipboards and pens in hand; I recognized nearly all of their stern faces from previous pageants.

Mom became fussy and sweaty as the hall filled with proud parents. "She's got it wrapped up," she told us and herself; then, as the lights dimmed, she turned to me, winked, and hummed a barely audible chorus of "California, Here I Come."

After a dozen or so tap dancers, some baton twirlers, and a clogger, it was Faith's turn for the talent portion. She walked with back straightened, hair stiffened, face painted, and freckles darkened, to her X on the stage. This time, Mom had truly outdone herself. Faith wore a navy rain slicker with white piping around the edges and carried a matching navy and white umbrella; a huge hair bow with white polka dots in a navy sea decorated her hair. When the pianist thumped out the opening chords of "Singin' in the Rain," the audience burst into applause, and as predicted, she was a hit. Naturally, a gracious, rehearsed nod followed her last bellowed note, and the applause crescendoed over the echo of her final E flat.

At intermission the blackness was gone and so was Mom, helping Faith change for the poise portion of the pageant. The next half of the competition was a parade of three and a half foot statues. Some wore cutesy crinolines. Others wore more sophisticated dresses; all were well-rehearsed and professional.

As the name "Faith-Ann Spencer" was called, Mom's fists tightened. Again, her creative flair impressed me as Faith took the stage. Slowly, like a resistant magnet, Faith glided to her x, her head cocked toward the row of judges. Center stage, she stood in fifth position and pivoted to face upstage, her head straining to look over her shoulder. The back of her pink gown had a small slit in back, so Faith remained facing backwards seconds longer than her competitors. As Dad and I exchanged glances across Mom's line of vision, her eyes remained transfixed, wide, teary.

A sigh of relief escaped from Mom as Faith successfully exited stage left. Then, she leaned back and remained silent until all the contestants regrouped for the announcement of the winners. Faith reappeared like a pink daisy springing up among a floral, pastel bouquet. The thirty-six contestants quickly assembled on risers, their hair-sprayed mini-bouffants sticking together. Faith strategically placed herself in the middle of the organized madness exactly where Mom had told her to stand; this way she could gracefully descend from her peers but not have such a trek that the audience would lose interest. Mom smiled seeing Faith's position, but her body stiffened; her teeth clenched in a forced smile.

Red lights from the cameras illuminated the first row as the tuxedoed emcee approached the podium. When he cleared his throat, Mom's hand squeezed mine. The second runner-up was announced, and it wasn't Faith; it was Laura-Lee Haynes, a girl Faith had beaten six times earlier this year in competition.

"The first runner-up, winner of a five hundred dollar scholarship fund, and a six month modeling contract — is Ellen-Kaye Thomas!" the man said smiling, not caring that his pace was setting the rate of Mom's heartbeat.

"And now," he continued, "winner of a one thousand dollar scholarship fund, one year, renewable modeling contract, and chance to compete in California's national pageant next month — the new 'Miss Junior Mid-West' is Susan Beverly Anderson!"

As the words blared through the sound system, Mom's long painted nails dug deeply into my flesh. The crowd around us cheered as the black-haired baton twirler moved toward her talent trophy and crown. Dad and I stared at Faith to

try to read a reaction as Mom made a quick exit in the blackness. Faith, still in fifth position was applauding, trying not to be distracted by the girl behind her yanking at the pink bow in her hair.

Curtain closed, lights up, Dad and I made a conservative dash for the car anticipating chaos and whining children about to invade the lobby. In the car I took my back seat position, and as usual stared at the pale scalp peeping through Dad's red hair. We sat and busied ourselves with listening to the radio, talking about how pretty Mom and Faith looked, and eventually, watching the families drive from the parking lot. Soon, Dad and I began staring out the back window watching the double doors for the girls' exit. I hoped Faith wasn't too embarrassed or upset and that Mom wasn't having trouble getting her to come to the car. Finally, a set of doors opened, and we caught a glimpse of Faith's pink dress, though her tiny hand was held by Mrs. Hughes, Laura-Lee's mother. When Mrs. Hughes spotted our car, she waved, and Dad hopped out to outstretch his arms to Faith. As quickly as her bony legs would carry her, Faith ran and leaped towards Dad's hands; she giggled wildly in his ear.

"I waited for Jeannie to pick up little Faith-Ann, and then I thought maybe you'd all be waiting out here," Laura-Lee's mother told Dad.

"I'm sure she'll be right along," he assured us all; then he thanked Mrs. Hughes for her trouble.

Inside the car, the three of us waited, laughing and playing peek-a-boo, twenty questions, and tournament patty-cake. When the parking lot lights finally came on I was glad I could finish my book. We all entertained ourselves realizing it might be a long wait until the passenger side was completely filled.

Finally, Dad's voice broke the silence as he summoned me to check on Mom. I knew this wouldn't be a pleasant task, but I was beginning to worry, and Faith would need to eat soon. As I shut the car door, I started my jog to the auditorium and wondered where to search first.

Inside the empty lobby, I heard my own voice echo against the walls. "Mom?" "Mo-om?" With no response, I began my search for the missing mother. First, I opened the heavy doors to the auditorium. With the crack of light I let in from the hallway I scanned the seats, again with no luck. Next, I tried the backstage area where Dad and I had seen mothers running during intermission: still, no Mom. Determined I would not leave the theater an orphan, I walked down an adjacent hallway marked "Restrooms." There, in the darkness, a rectangle of light started me as it flashed from behind the "Ladies" door; as my eyes focused, they spotted Mom's manicured hands slowly pushing from behind.

Silently, Mom approached me as I noticed her features emerging from shadows one by one. First, I saw her wrinkled dress, her scarf hanging limply from her neck. Then, as she came closer, I noticed a wadded tissue in one hand, a mangled program in the other. Finally, as she neared me, I saw her face: stale, but relaxed. Now, Mom's meticulous make-up was striped near her cheekbones, revealing white flesh between red rouge; obviously tears had rolled there during her visit to the ladies' room. Cosmetics had also been washed away from Mom's eyes at a time when she needed to disguise them most; red and swelled, they aged

her rather than pulled focus.

When Mom met me in the corridor, she tossed her soggy tissue in a nearby trash-can and simultaneously stuck her hand to me. Gripping it firmly, she took me with her, silently, slowly towards the illuminated exit sign. "How is she?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

"She's great; she's laughing; I don't think it bothered her at all," I heard myself telling her, wondering if that was the right thing to say, trying to make everything better.

"Good," she said, squeezing my hand tighter, making me glad I had told her the truth.

Just before we arrived at the exit, Mom stopped and faced me in the archway. "You know I love you, don't you, Theo?"

"I know," I answered, staring up at her puffiness. "I know you do."

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On Sunday morning I smiled when I saw Faith wearing her Mickey Mouse nightshirt to the breakfast table. Dad and Faith and I were starving since Mom's headache the night before resulted in another ordered pizza for dinner. Mom had been to the store early that morning though, and we each were anxious for our unlikely, but hopefully tasty meal. After swear words, caused by burnt fingers, and some clinking of skilletts, Mom grinned proudly as she placed some paper-thin pancakes, hard biscuits, and black toast on each of our three plates.

We each returned her hopeful smile; then we nodded in approval and swallowed hard.