

## *The Strap*

RUTH LATTA

“Carmen? Carmen Lawrence? Where are you, girl?”

*I peeked through the planks of the porch stairs at Aunt Helen’s uneven stockings. Her worn shoes disappeared. I heard the porch door squeak, then slam. She’d threaten me with the strap later, if she didn’t fall asleep in her rocking chair.”*

When I looked up from my page, all the faces around the table wore shocked expressions. The writing instructor thanked me for sharing my story, then asked for comments. There was no shortage of feedback.

“You poor thing, living with an abusive aunt!” exclaimed a large, white-haired woman.

Another woman wiped a tear from her eye.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I’m a retired social worker and I can’t help but get upset when I hear about cruelty to children.”

“This was in the 1950s,” I reminded her. “Back then, older people still believed in ‘*Spare the rod and spoil the child.*’”

“Ignorant people believed that,” said the retired nurse.

“I’m so thankful I never had an Aunt Helen in my childhood.”

The woman with the fur coat draped over her shoulders sounded smug.

No one seemed to have listened to the earlier part of the story, in which I had stolen cookies from the pantry and taken off for the day with another nine year old, the neighbour boy. After devouring half the cookies, we went to the river to fish, and when we caught some

trout we took them to the shack where he lived with his family. His mother welcomed us with open arms because we'd brought dinner. She fried the fish in dripping and it was delicious with salt and vinegar. After the meal we played cards, then we went swimming, then we had the rest of the fish for supper, and following that, we all played cards on the worn oilcloth on their kitchen table.

It was after 8 p.m. by the time I got back to Aunt Helen's. She heard me come in, and shouted to me, but before she could waddle out to the kitchen I'd darted outside again and crawled through the broken lattice work under the porch, a place where she could never follow me. Actually, she never seemed to figure out that this grubby cave was my hiding place.

Aunt Helen was angry because Kenny Johnson, the neighbour boy, and I were supposed to have spent the day at Vacation Bible School at the village church. We would have gotten away with playing hookey except that Aunt Helen had trudged down to the church with my lunch and found me absent. She must have suspected that I was with Kenny Johnson, but she wouldn't lower herself to call in at their place to check.

Essentially, my story was about me outwitting my aunt, but the thing the other memoir-writers had seized upon was the strap.

"Aunt Helen never actually strapped me," I informed them. "The old strap hanging by the back door dated to my grandfather's era, and never came off the wall. She threatened, but she was all bluster, no action."

"Still, Carmen," said the former social worker, "the threat must have upset you. People like that shouldn't be caring for children. What were your parents thinking?"

“They were thinking about my little sister, who was in Sick Children’s Hospital in Toronto that summer,” I told them. “My mother was with her and my father was working full time. They couldn’t afford to hire someone to look after me, and none of the neighbours offered, so they sent me to Dad’s Great Aunt Helen. Her bark was worse than her bite. When I really displeased her she’d burst into tears and bury her head in her apron, and I had to pat her shoulder and promise to do better, or she’d cry for hours.”

“Sounds like bipolar disorder,” declared the retired nurse.

“Another reason why she shouldn’t have been entrusted with a child.”

“Do you want to know what was far harder on me than Aunt Helen?” I said. “It was that my parents were too distracted by my sister’s illness to make time for me. I felt abandoned but didn’t know how to say so, and nobody would have paid attention anyway. Being at Aunt Helen’s brought me the one silver lining of that bad period—Kenny Johnson. I loved my adventures with him and enjoyed his company.”

The instructor spoke up, saying it sounded like a pivotal summer in my life and that she looked forward to hearing more about it in future classes. Then she gave the floor to the fur-coated woman who wrote about seeing *Swan Lake* when she was ten. The next reader told us about the year she spent in Paris. Her father had been posted there by External Affairs when she was thirteen and living there had shaped her future. For instance, she said, she’d learned pure Parisian French, not the patois that is spoken locally. Not a tactful remark.

My mind wandered back to the summer at Aunt Helen’s, and the days when Kenny and I *did* go to Vacation Bible School. I remember questioning the miracle stories, much to the irritation of the well-

meaning teachers, who were Bible literalists unversed in an historical approach to the scriptures. They must have been glad when I didn't show up. Kenny was more enthusiastic than I. His fishing helped feed his family, and he was fascinated that some of Jesus's disciples had been fishermen. He drew a remarkably detailed picture of a storm-beleaguered boat on the Sea of Galilee.

Aunt Helen said Kenny's family was "low class". I'd noticed that their four room house was covered with black tar paper on the outside and newspapers on the inside walls. Kenny's dad, who had a back injury and received a meagre disability pension, kept sipping from a dark bottle of what he called "painkiller." I knew, too, that Aunt Helen had quietly paid Kenny's fee for Vacation Bible School in the hope that he'd benefit from it.

The Johnson house was always filled with merriment and music, some from the radio, mostly from the songs we sang, like "*Ninety-six Bottles of Beer on the Wall*". It was fun to play cards with Kenny's folks. I learned a game called "Five Card Draw" which came in handy later in life. Aunt Helen said Kenny's teenaged sisters were a pair of heifers who were no better than they should be, but I loved it when they brushed and braided my hair or put lipstick on me, or taught me the words to Johnny Rae's "Cry." I was far happier there than I'd been at home, with my parents arguing over what to do for poor little Julie, and leaving me alone when they rushed her to the hospital.

In those days there was no universal health care coverage. Saskatchewan had hospital coverage, but we were in Ontario. That summer when I was nine, I did not know that the hospital and doctor bills would cost us our house, or that Julie would die at fifteen, or that

my parents would decide, after that, that they had no reason to stay together.

All I knew was what I liked doing. Spending time with Kenny came first. My next favourite thing was to lose myself in a book, an interest that pointed toward my future career as a school librarian. So our writing instructor was right; that summer was a life-defining one for me.

When the reader finished sharing her Paris years, our teacher looked at the clock and announced the customary fifteen minute break. As I followed the others down the hall to the common room of the seniors' centre, we passed a line-up of people, mostly mothers and children, waiting for the food bank room to open.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Paris lady, with a look of disdain. "I thought the food bank had been relocated in the basement."

"What a spectacle!" murmured the fur-coated one. "They have to come here because they spend their welfare cheques on beer and popcorn."

In the common room, fragrant with the aroma of freshly-brewed coffee, the white-haired woman mentioned that her son the doctor was moving to the United States to make some "real money." She was glad he was advancing his career, but would sorely miss him. The woman to whom she was talking had also endured a rough week. Her daughter-in-law had asked her son to move out of the house.

"She must be mentally ill!" she exclaimed. "I'll insist that my son fight her for custody of the children."

If the son was anything like the mother, I thought, the daughter-in-law was quite sane in wanting him out of her life. And which is more damaging, to be threatened with a strapping that never happens, or to have your parents battle for custody?

Strolling over to the book shelves, I examined the volumes.

“Ms. Lawrence, I hope you’ll write more about that unusual summer.”

Our instructor put her hand on my shoulder.

“Your story really caught my interest,” she added. “What became of Aunt Helen?”

“She died eventually,” I said, “but before that, she sold the house and acreage and moved to an apartment in the village. When I was in my final year of high school she offered me money for a year of teachers’ college. So I went, and emerged a teacher, and later took extension courses and became a teacher-librarian. I’ve always been grateful to Aunt Helen. I really wish now that I hadn’t mentioned the threat of the strap. It was an empty threat, and I’ve given a false impression of a basically decent old woman who had a hard life.”

“You can always edit the strap out, and substitute ‘a scolding,’” suggested the teacher. “Do you know what happened to Kenny Johnson?”

“I lost track of him after I went home and never saw him for years,” I told her. “Then, twenty years later I ran into him on a campus where I was taking a summer course. I was at the reserve desk of the main library waiting to borrow a book that had to be read on site. The man in front of me seemed vaguely familiar and I was wondering if I’d met him at a teachers’ convention. Then he gave the girl at the desk his name, and I exclaimed, *Kenny Johnson!* and he turned around, and said, *Carmen Lawrence!* He recognized me after all that time.”

“So Kenny got a university education?” The teacher’s voice dripped surprise.

I nodded. “He’d worked his way through. When we met, he was finishing his degree in theology. Vacation Bible School must have

started him on his path. He was soon to be ordained a minister. We went for coffee and picked up where we'd left off twenty years earlier."

"Remarkable!" she exclaimed. "You *must* write about that! I look forward to that episode."

I smiled.

"You're very encouraging, but I won't be coming back to class. Taking a course in the afternoon the same evening that I tutor ESL students is too much for an old woman like me."

"I'm so sorry!" she said. "We'll miss you."

"I'll miss *you* too," I assured her, "but not my classmates. We're not on the same wave length. Besides, I've promised Ken to help with the ESL tutoring at the church."

"Ken? Do you mean Kenny Johnson? Have you kept in touch?" She looked dazed.

"Yes, indeed. We celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary this month. I have so much going on that, regretfully, I must sacrifice writing class. No reflection on you. You're a great teacher."

Leaving, I overheard someone complaining that her granddaughter had picked up head lice from some public housing kids. I didn't look back. □