

Train of Thought

“See mom? I told you it was nice,” Mindy said.

Marge stood in the entryway of the mobile home her daughter had purchased and tried not to seem judgmental. All right, so it was tidy and organized and everything looked new, but it was still a trailer. Trailers were OK in some parts of the country, but around here only the elderly and the hopelessly poor were supposed to live in trailers. *Trailer trash*, she thought. She said nothing.

“The people who sold it put in lots of improvements,” Mindy said. “Wait ‘til you see the bathroom. It’s like a spa.”

“Is Jenny asleep?” Marge asked.

Mindy nodded. “So I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your voice down while you tell me what a huge mistake I’ve made about this place and that I should have come home to live with you because I’ve made a mess of my life.”

Marge looked wounded.

“I’m sorry,” Mindy said softly. “But I know you’re going to start in sooner or later and I’d rather we just get it out of the way.”

“I’m not going to criticize,” Marge said. “Now that you’ve made your decision and it’s a done deal I’m not going to try to tell you anything. We’ll all just make the best of it.”

Mindy nodded.

“So why don’t you give me the nickel tour?”

There was nothing to criticize, Marge admitted to herself when she had seen everything and was sitting at the table in the dining area watching Mindy make coffee for the two of them. Nothing to question at all except her daughter’s hasty decision. But then, Mindy had always made hasty decisions: to settle for attending a community college instead of trying to get into the state university, to quit after just a year and get a job, to quit that perfectly good job and go back to school full time, to marry Brian — then to ask him to leave so soon after they had Jenny and to divorce him before they really had a chance to work things out. And now to buy this mobile home.

“But it’s a real bargain, Mom,” Mindy had told her on the phone just a week ago. “My friend Lucy told me about it. Her aunt’s place is on the next lot. The payments are less than the rent on the apartment was and when I finish school I’ll be able to sell the unit and it will be almost like I’ve lived for free for two years. Then I can get a real job and a real house.”

“Did you say school?” Marge had asked. It was the first she’d heard of her daughter’s plan to go back to school.

“Yes, school,” Mindy had said. “I re-enrolled again. And this time I’ll be able to finish. With Brian’s child support and what Daddy gave me I’ll have enough to live on and my scholarship will pay for the classes and I won’t have to worry about work or money or anything so I’ll be able to finish and get a real career. Won’t that make us all happy?”

“Did you say scholarship?”

“Yes, scholarship.” There was a long pause while Mindy waited for her mother to inquire how she’d qualified for a scholarship with her spotty academic record. “I qualified for assistance because I’m a displaced homemaker,” she offered at last.

“Displaced homemaker,” Marge repeated.

The mug that Mindy handed Marge was familiar. It was part of the set she and George had given Mindy and Brian when they moved into their apartment. “If you’d had a wedding you could have registered,” Marge had often observed when Mindy remarked on not having this or that household item.

“You know we didn’t want to wait,” Mindy always said. Marge and everyone else thought they knew why the couple had married at the local courthouse with only the requisite three-days notice. But after the first few months with no announcement of a pregnancy Marge had relaxed a little. It was, after all, just another of her daughter’s hasty decisions.

“So you’re all right for money?” Marge asked.

“I’m OK,” Mindy said as she settled in at the table to drink her coffee. “Not rich, but OK. There’s a daycare center on campus. It’s not free but it’s cheap and they offer really good care and I’ll be able to see her between classes. And Brian will be just fine about the child support, I’m sure. And Daddy gave me a little to get us started here so we won’t starve or anything. And if anything goes wrong I can always apply for aid.”

Marge tried not to wince at the thought of her daughter living on welfare. And in a trailer no less. If that was all she’d wanted for Mindy and the boys she could have had that easily. But no, Marge shook the thought aside. There was no point in rehashing all that.

“So your father gave you some money?”

“Some. A good bit, actually. To make up for all my birthdays, he said. He says I can have more if I need it.”

Marge thought it best not to comment. She had promised herself that she would never remark against her former husband to their children, but she could never help being annoyed that he had waited until the kids were grown and their divorce was final before he straightened himself up. Max had made a big deal of giving Marge their house and more than half of their savings, which was close to zip, then gone off and moved to Chicago where he got the first really good job he'd ever had and somehow learned to control his temper enough to keep it. Then he'd met Sheila, who had a bundle of her own money from her divorce settlement and was tough enough to help him limit his drinking to a couple of beers after work. But thankfully Marge wasn't suffering and she wasn't alone. Just after Max had filed for divorce she had met George, who wasn't rich or exciting but he was mild-mannered, hard-working and steady. And when they decided to get married he'd had no qualms about moving into the house Marge had shared with her first husband so that they could save up for a nice retirement home, in Florida maybe.

At least Max wasn't being stingy about his comparative wealth, Marge thought, if he was giving Mindy enough cash to make up for the years when they'd had so little to spare. That was something. "How nice of your father," Marge said. "He always did wish we could have done more for you kids."

"Now there you go again," Mindy said.

"Where do I go again?"

"Defending Daddy. You were always defending Daddy as if he were the greatest husband and provider on earth. Do you think I don't know how it was? With his temper? How many jobs did he walk out on because he thought the boss was stupid? Or get fired from because he yelled or talked back? And the beer? There was never enough money for us kids to do the things we wanted to do, but there was always enough for his beer. Honestly, I don't know why you didn't leave him when you had the chance."

A look passed between them and each knew that there were still some things they might never talk about.

"I was just saying it's nice that your father gave you some cash," Marge said.

"OK," Mindy said, then drained her coffee mug in a series of silent gulps. "I'm going to check on Jenny."

"Can I come?"

"Of course," Mindy said. "But please try not to wake her. I'd just got her down when you drove up and I don't get many breaks."

"Don't I know it," Marge said.

They moved silently down the hallway to the small bedroom where one-year-old Jenny slept.

Marge remained in the hall as Mindy stepped into the room and made sure that everything was OK. There would barely be space inside the room for two adults to stand, Marge thought. And yet the place didn't feel so much claustrophobic as it did cozy. When Mindy had given her the tour Marge had noticed that what space there was was well used. The hallway was narrow and Jenny's room was tiny, but living and dining areas were about the size of Marge's own. Mindy's bedroom seemed large because she had opted to use a single, twin-sized bed instead of a double, and the bathroom did have that tub with the whirlpool jets. There was even a room about the size of a walk in-closet that contained a compact washer and dryer. And it really was all nice and clean and, well, cozy.

Marge was smiling and looking around as she and Mindy settled in the living area for a second cup of coffee. "This really is nice," she said. "Do you know what it reminds me of? That hallway anyway? The train. Do you remember the train?"

"Of course I do," Mindy said, her voice warm with sudden remembrance. "It was the highlight of my childhood. Just us two on our great adventure, crossing the country on the train."

"It really was an adventure, wasn't it?"

Marge had never forgotten that summer, the year she had almost left Max. Mindy had been nine going on ten and the boys were in their early teens. It had been a worse year than usual, not just money-wise, but temper-wise. Money-wise it might have been better if she had been able to go back to her job after her emergency hysterectomy, but when she had tried she couldn't do it. She had called in sick so often that she wound up getting fired. That didn't help her mood any.

All that spring she and Max had argued about everything from hospital bills to how badly the house needed repairs to Mindy's needing dental work to their sons' academic problems. Both the boys were having trouble in school and their grades had plummeted. Ben, who was thirteen, had a very bad year at school and had even failed a required class. He would need to make it up in summer school in order to advance to high school with the rest of his friends. Michael, who was fifteen, was just being fifteen. He had copped an attitude and spent most of his days in the attic where he had moved his things after refusing to share his room with "the brat," as he called Ben. Above it all there had been the long distance phone calls to and from Oregon, where Marge and Max had grown up and where Marge's older sister Helen and her family still lived. Marge's mother was living with them on a little farm outside Portland and was, according to Helen, going downhill rapidly. There was no question of Mom traveling and if Marge ever wanted to see her again she would have to make the trip soon. Max hadn't reacted well to what he viewed as pressure from Marge's relatives to spend money they didn't have on a cross-country trip.

In the end it was Helen's husband Frank who came through for them. Although his family was also strapped for cash, he said he could afford to buy a train ticket for Marge and said she was

welcome to stay as long as she liked. Then it turned out that the railroad had a promotion going and one of the children could come along for free. And so a plan was made. The boys would stay home with their father and Marge and Mindy would make the trip. Three weeks would probably have been enough for a visit, but since she had no job to hurry home to she decided to spend most of the summer at Helen and Frank's.

"You know what I remember best?" Mindy said.

"Sleeping in that little bunk?" Marge replied.

"No," Mindy said with a laugh. "That was fun but what I really remember was getting up early and watching the sun rise across the plains. I never knew that land could be so flat that you could actually see the sun come up over the horizon. In the city it's always behind a house or a tree or something. And I remember how cool it was once I got used to walking when the train was moving. I loved going up and down those passageways to the bathroom and the dining car."

"And I always worried about you falling off when we went between cars," Marge said with a laugh.

"And you worried about us getting left behind in the middle of nowhere! I remember you wouldn't let us get off the train unless it was going to be in a station for at least an hour and even then you wouldn't move more than ten feet from the track. And you held my hand all the time like I was going to run away or something."

"Well, I'd never done any traveling myself except when your father and I came east and that was by car. And we were practically honeymooners so it was all very exciting, just the two of us on the road."

"You know, that summer has always been my favorite," Mindy said. "I loved the train ride and then spending a whole summer with Aunt Helen and Uncle Frank and Frankie and Paul in that big house on their little bitty farm. I remember the rows of vegetables behind the house and that grove of hazelnut trees at the back. Or filberts, as they called them. It was years before I found out that a filbert was a hazelnut. Did you notice this is hazelnut coffee, by the way? And I always wondered why they called it a farm if they didn't have a barn and cows and a tractor and stuff."

"Well, it had been a really big farm when your Uncle Frank was young. It was his family's place, you know. But they sold off a lot of the land during the Depression and then after the war there was a housing shortage so even if he did have the money to buy the land back people had starting to build houses there. Besides, after the war he wasn't really well enough to really manage an entire farm."

"That's right, he'd had shell-shock hadn't he? Or PTSD we call it in my psych class. I've always wondered about Uncle Frank. He was so much older than Aunt Helen he almost seemed like he should be my grandfather instead of my uncle."

“Yes, he was over 40 when they got married.”

“He never seemed to be around much and when he was he never said much,” Mindy said.

“That’s true.”

“But I remember Grandma kept saying that if it weren’t for him you and I couldn’t have made the trip.”

“Well, he did pay for it,” Marge said. “And they put us up for the whole summer. And as it turned out that was a good thing.”

Mindy nodded, silently acknowledging the fact that her grandmother had passed away that September and how her mother’s mourning had been eased a little because they had been able to spend those months together toward the end.

“Your Uncle Frank was a good, generous man,” Marge said. “He always did the right thing, always put his family first.”

Mindy got up to get more coffee while Marge sat silently looking at the bottom of her empty mug. Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought that the room smelled of hazelnuts. Then the walls seemed to melt away and she was back in Oregon walking in the grove of trees with Frank on a cool summer evening. It was five days before the return date on her railway ticket and she had actually been thinking of cashing in the ticket and staying on. Helen had even said that she thought it was a good idea. Mindy loved the farm and there was plenty of room in the house if the boys wanted to come out to stay as well. And really, what was there for Marge back at home but more arguing? She was painfully tempted. It had been such a pleasant summer. It was great to be with her mother and her older sister. And Frank was so much older that it was almost like he was her father. It was like being a child again with all her needs being cared for. It wasn’t a lavish lifestyle by any means, and surely Helen and Frank had as much trouble at times with their boys as Marge and Max had with theirs, but it was a much more peaceful household.

Frank was checking on his filbert crop and Marge had just happened to wander along behind him. “We haven’t really had a chance to talk by ourselves,” Frank said, after almost half an hour of silently inspecting his trees for blight.

“You’re right,” Marge said. “And I haven’t really had a chance to thank you for your generosity. I know it wasn’t easy for you to come up with the money, not to mention letting us stay all this time.”

“No,” Frank said. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to you. To say thank you. I wouldn’t have had any of this if weren’t for you. You and Max. All these years I wouldn’t have had.” And with that he had turned and headed back through the rows of vegetables to the house leaving Marge to stand amid the trees and vividly recall an incident that nearly twenty years of life had all but erased.

It had happened about a month after she and Max had begun dating. Helen and Frank were already married and their first child was on the way. Marge was still living at home with her parents then. They hadn't seen Helen since two weeks ago when she'd said Frank was down with a bad cold and hadn't heard from her either because she didn't have a phone. On that particular morning, Helen had burst through the door crying hysterically.

"Frank's just going to let himself die," Helen screamed, then poured out her story of how Frank's cold had gotten worse and she'd had the doctor in and he'd said Frank had to go to the hospital. "But we can't afford it and Frank doesn't want to use his veteran's benefits now because there won't be anything left for us," she looked down at her slightly extended abdomen.

Max, who had dropped by for a beer after his midnight shift at the cannery, emerged from the kitchen. "That's crap," he said.

"No it's not," Marge's father said. "If you go into the VA hospital you forfeit your death benefits. That's the way it is."

"Oh no it's not!" Max answered. "You don't leave men behind. *That's* the way it is."

Max had been home from his stint in the Army for two years at that time. He had been lucky not to be sent to Viet Nam but he had friends who'd seen combat there and his own father, like Marge's dad and like Frank, was a World War II veteran. He knew the drill and he knew that Marge's father was wrong. "Give me your phone book," he said.

Max closeted himself in Marge's bedroom to use her phone and when he emerged thirty minutes later he grabbed his car keys and put his arm around Helen. "It's all fixed. I'll take him to the VA hospital myself."

Helen just nodded her head and allowed Max and Marge to lead her to the car.

Back at the farm house Frank lay in bed looking like a skeleton. Marge would have thought he was dead already if she hadn't heard him coughing. He looked up at the three of them and the fear was heartbreakingly apparent in his eyes. Frank had never met Max, who was barely six feet tall, but must have looked enormous to the weakened older man.

"It's all fixed," Max said, looking down at the bed. Marge had never heard him speak so gently. "I'm taking you to the VA hospital and everything will be all right."

Frank gaped up at him, then turned to Helen and seemed to try to speak.

"Please..." Helen said.

Frank seemed too weak to move but when Max tried to pull back the bed sheet Frank's fingers locked onto it. Max put his much larger hands on Frank's and bent down to look him closely in the eye. From over Max's shoulder, Marge heard him whisper "It's OK buddy."

Frank seemed to let everything go with an exhausted sigh and Max scooped him up in his arms, then wordlessly carried him out of the room.

After making sure Frank was properly checked in at the hospital, Max had left Marge and Helen in the waiting room to go home and to bed. That night, when he came by her house on his way to work, Marge had tried to praise him for his heroic action of that morning, but he had brushed her words aside. "These old guys and their crazy ideas drive me nuts," he said. "If he recovers somebody needs to cram some sense into his skull and your dad's too. Thinking that if you use your benefits while you're alive there won't be any for your family when you're dead. That's just ignorant. And stupid."

But nothing could dim Marge's pride in her boyfriend at that moment. He was a hero. Frank, when he recovered from what they later discovered was not a bad cold but tuberculosis, would have Max to thank.

As it turned out, Frank never got that chance because by the time he finally came home, Max and Marge had gotten married and were headed to Ohio where Max's brother lived and where he had better job prospects. And that was where they had stayed to raise their family in the best way they knew how.

It had all come back to her that day amid the filbert trees. That day she knew she had to go back to Max and give it another try.

"I said *do you want a refill?*" Mindy said.

"Oh coffee," Marge said, "Yes, please. I lost my train of thought. What were we talking about? Oh, that's right. Trains. So you remember the train."

"Trains, farms, whatever," Mindy said. She refilled their coffee mugs and resumed her seat. "Listen, Mom. I know you think I've jumped into this but it really is OK. You know that you and George wouldn't really be happy having me and a baby around all the time. This is a nice place and it's close to the college and in two years I'll have my degree and I can get a good job and then I can think about selling this unit and moving on. And by that time, maybe you and George will be moving on too. I mean, you're not going to stay in our old house forever, right?"

"No, of course not," Marge said. "George really has his heart set on retiring to Florida if we can afford it. But maybe..." she looked around again at the pleasant room and toward the narrow corridor that led to the bedrooms, "maybe we can get a place like this down there. Or maybe when you're ready to move, we'll buy this place from you and have it moved to a lot in Florida.

They can do that, can't they?"

Mindy shrugged. "I guess. They do call them mobile homes. Then we can be two generations of trailer trash."

"I never said that," Marge said guardedly. She and Mindy had had too many arguments in recent weeks and she didn't want to start another one. "You know that I just want the best for you. And," there was a careful pause, "so does your father. And so do George and Sheila for that matter. We all just want the best for you."

"I know, mom. But you...and Dad...and George and Sheila...you all have to let me have my own life and make my own decisions and live with them. You stayed with Dad through thick and thin and put up with his problems and tried to pretend everything was just fine and dandy. I just couldn't do that with Brian. We all have to make our own choices and we all have our own reasons for making them."

It seemed that Mindy was going to say more but instead stood up in reaction to a tiny squeak from the baby monitor. "Oops. Coffee break's over. Jenny's up." She moved quickly, leaving Marge to contemplate the room around her.

How's my baby girl? Marge heard the voice coming both from the baby's room and from the monitor. She looked at the monitor as fondly as if it were the baby herself and smiled.

"We all have our own reasons," she repeated her daughter's words. Then she picked up the photo of Jenny that sat on the table next to the monitor. Jenny had been just six months old when the picture was taken and was dressed all in pink. She was sitting up and although she wasn't smiling her wonderful smile, she seemed placidly happy. Her blue eyes were wide open and not looking directly into the camera's lens. Her gaze seemed to be fixed on some wondrous thing that lay in the distance.

"We all have our reasons."