

No More Excuses

By

Loren Stephens

“Pandemic Effect: Absence from School Is Soaring,” claims a *New York Times* reporter. The front page article quotes a Texas mother describing her daughter breaking down in tears: “Can’t do it, Mom. I don’t want to go [to school].” She went on to say, “As a mom I feel like it’s OK to have a mental health day.” Is this over-indulgence or empathy for a child’s emotional anxiety. The Times reported that among the students in kindergarten through fifth grade, there has been a 30 percent increase in absenteeism since Covid.

When is a parent giving up their agency and letting a child drive the bus? Or when is a parent displaying neglect when a child suffers from bona fide distress caused by some form of abuse from peers or school personnel. Some parents have gone so far as to hire coaches at \$600 an hour, according to *Town and Country* magazine, to help parents make the “right choice,” when it comes to supervising their children’s lives. The writer concludes that children are often better off handling things on their own, learning how to navigate the world without the intervention of their anxious parents. You have to wonder who is more anxious – the parent or the child.

I am reminded of my own panic attacks in first grade. It was the early 1950s when parents had no patience for their children’s breakdowns. There was no such thing as indulgence. School attendance was mandatory.

Life was chaotic in my home and whatever I might have wanted or needed took a backseat to my parents’ needs and desires. My mother was sick, hooked up to an oxygen tank that I heard hissing every time I passed her bedroom. It was up to my father to walk me to P.S. 6, about five blocks from our apartment on 77th Street at the corner of Third Avenue on the upper east side of Manhattan. It was the best public school in the city and parents did whatever necessary to enroll their children. In

my case, my parents made me lie saying I lived with my grandparents at 911 Park Avenue, which made me eligible for PS 6. On some mornings my grandfather's chauffeur, Henry, wearing a cap and black uniform, drove me to the red brick building on east 85th Street. I'd beg him to drop me off a block away so the children wouldn't see me getting out of the big, black, limousine.

Wasn't lying one of the worst sins a child could commit? My father read me *Pinocchio*. I was afraid that I'd grow a long nose every time I repeated the big lie. And I hated the thought of actually living with my grandparents – my grandfather, a doctor preoccupied with his patients; and my grandmother, with her temper, who changed all the lightbulbs in her big apartment to thirty watts to save electricity, even when they had plenty of money. We were forced to have Shabbat dinner with my grandparents every week. All the doors off the apartment hallway were closed, but I'd sneak into the living room after dinner. The shades were pulled down over the windows and the heavy damask curtains hid the streetlights on Park Avenue. I could hear the taxicabs honking. Pressing the light switch, I'd stand in front of the big mahogany lyre-legged table where all the bridal photos of Great Aunts Doris, Majorie, Lillian, Mabel, Adele, and my dour-faced grandmother holding a bouquet the size of a toilet were displayed. My mother was the most beautiful of all the brides. Wearing a white ivory satin gown, holding a fan decorated with orchids, I wondered if someday I might turn into a movie star like her. I only stayed a few minutes in the living room in case my grandmother caught me off limits.

Every morning, I ate breakfast in our tiny kitchen with my sister before going to PS 6. She was exactly a year and three months younger than me. Our nanny, Anna, who was from Czechoslovakia coaxed her, "I want you to grow big and strong like your sister, sweetheart." I knew that after I went off to school, she'd bundle my sister up in her snowsuit and they'd go to the courtyard where the other young children were building snowmen while I was at school. I was sure that my sister was

having a wonderful time, while I was miserable. On some days, John Steinbeck would come out of his brownstone and play with my sister and talk to Nanny – *Grapes of Wrath* was her favorite American novel. I didn't know what the book said, but I knew that he was famous, and I wanted to meet him.

My father – all six foot three of him -- squeezed into the kitchen as I sipped the last drop of my chocolate milk. He clapped his hands. "Time to go, Loren." He was smoking a cigarette, and had on his heavy overcoat, his galoshes, and a Mallory welt-edged hat. To me he was the most handsome man in the world.

Reluctantly I put on my dark green wool coat, struggled into my galoshes, and wrapped my tartan scarf around my neck. It had snowed the night before and the streets were wet and sloshy as the sun began to melt the fresh snowfall. People headed for work, or like me and my father trying to make the school bell. I dug my boots into the snow. My father dragged me down the street as I wailed, "I don't want to go to school, Daddy." He would have none of it. I felt a tear trickle down my cold cheek.

He barked, "Stop whining. I don't have time for your nonsense. I need to get to work."

The school elevator door slid open and Daddy and I stepped in. I suddenly felt my breakfast rising up into my throat, and then I vomited all over my father's galoshes. I was horrified, but I hoped that Daddy would take me home. "I don't feel well."

"If that's your way of getting out of school you're mistaken, little lady."

He pulled out a freshly laundered handkerchief and wiped off his galoshes; the smell filled my nostrils. Throwing his handkerchief into a trashcan, he handed me a roll of peppermint lifesavers. "Eat one of these, and then get moving. I don't want you to be late." He stood in the hallway as I

ran to my first grade class. I hung my coat on a hook at the back of the classroom, took off my galoshes and stood next to my assigned seat and recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

The radiator gave hot air; and the windows were shut tight. I started to feel sleepy. Mrs. Bruskin stepped up to the blackboard and wrote in big block letters W-I-N-D-O-W. I didn't hear what she said as I stretched my arms in the air yawning loudly. Mrs. Bruskin thought I was volunteering to answer the question she asked. "Ah, Loren, so what does this word mean?" pointing to the blackboard. I had no idea. I sat there in silence as the other children turned around and my face turned beet red, I am sure. It was another miserable day at PS 6.

That evening, Nanny, my sister, and I ate dinner at our little hand painted table in the bedroom we all shared while my mother and father had dinner in the dining room when he came home. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I knew that my father reported what had happened in the elevator at PS 6.

A few days later, I found myself in a psychiatrist's office. "So why do you think you don't like to go to school? Don't you want to learn, be smart and go to college one day like your mother and father?"

I didn't trust him. I picked up a piece of lint on my plaid skirt and rolled it into a little ball, putting all my attention on it. I didn't want to answer him. He wrote something down on a pad of paper, the pen scritch-scratching like a mouse scurrying into its hole. "Why don't you like school?"

Choking back a sob, I confessed that I was forced to lie; that I was embarrassed to be taken to school by the chauffeur, Henry; that I worried that when I came home my mother would have died, and that I didn't like being separated from my sister and Nanny. "Have you told your parents any of this?"

"No, they will only get mad at me."

“I’ll have a chat with your mother once she is feeling better.”

I couldn’t imagine that anything would change. I stood up and headed for the door. “Don’t forget this.” He handed me my tartan scarf, and as I turned the doorknob he said, “When a patient leaves something behind it usually means they want to come back. Do you?”

“No thank you.”

Yellow and purple crocuses were beginning to poke their heads through the dirt although spring had not arrived. They must have been anxious to show themselves off. Henry stood in front of the limousine waiting for me. “Where to now, Missy?”

“Home. Today is Valentine’s Day. I made one for Mommy, Daddy, my sister and Nanny.”

I settled myself in the back seat. Henry wrapped a fur blanket around me. “Do you want to see one?”

“Of course.”

They were all the same – the cover was a drawing of our apartment building with the address on the canopy – 177 East 77th Street – and inside was lined paper with Daddy in his hat, Nanny wearing an apron, my sister holding her Madame Alexander doll, and my mother putting on bright red lipstick. In big block letters was the message GUESS WHO. . . Henry congratulated me on my artwork.

My parents bought an acre of land in suburbia and built a custom Georgian colonial house once my mother had recovered from her mysterious illness, she devoted all her time to overseeing the house’s construction: four bedrooms, a large living room, a dining room, a den, and a screened porch. It was my father’s dream to live in suburbia; my mother, not so much, but she went along

with my father's wishes. My sister and I were to share a bedroom, and the adjoining playroom would eventually be converted into another bedroom for one of us. Nanny came with us. My father drove to work across the George Washington Bridge at seven in the morning, returning at seven in the evening. We now had dinner in the kitchen, and my parents ate an hour later in the fancy dining room with the crystal chandelier and aubergine wallpaper.

The house was finished in March 1951. I had four months remaining in first grade. My mother yanked me out of PS 6 and enrolled me in the Pleasant Ridge School, a ten-minute walk from our house. Every day I joined a procession of neighborhood children, crossing North Street when the light turned green. The school was one story, with a large playground. I was hopeful that things would be better at my new school. The children treated me like a stranger, but I was able to keep up with the schoolwork and got all "Ss" on my report card, which stood for satisfactory. I also got 100 percent attendance.

Toward the end of the school year, the first grade class gave a short musical. Each child was to wear something white to represent snow. We were to sing:

*Snow is falling on my garden, whirling twirling gently down
Snow is falling on the branches, of the trees tall and brown.*

*But the flowers are not forgotten, Spring will bring them back to life
For Jack Frost in dreams has traced them, on my window last night.*

My mother went to Alexander's Department Store and bought me a terry cloth bathrobe. Under the fluorescent lights, it must have looked white to her, but when I tried it on, it had a yellow tint to it, as if a dog had taken a pee in the snow. I begged my mother to exchange it, but she said, "I

schlepped all the way to Alexander's and I'm not going back. You'll just have to wear it." Whatever happiness I felt about being in my first musical was crushed.

Nanny, my mother, and my sister attended the performance. I stood in the first row as one of the shortest children. I sang my heart out and prayed that my robe would not stand out among the crisp white costumes of my classmates. I was so embarrassed.

My childhood was like *The Winter of Our Discontent*. I felt neglected and unheard. But Spring was around the corner. Like the lullaby promised "flowers are not forgotten." I developed resilience and independence. I think my parents did me a favor in the long run.

Summer 1954. I was ten years old. My parents took me to Grand Central Station to board the train to the Adirondack Mountains for my first year at Camp Severance, an all-girls, sleep-away camp. I had studied the pamphlet which promised canoeing, swimming, arts and crafts, cookouts, acting lessons volleyball, archery and tennis. I was told that I'd be assigned to Seahorse, a tent with seven other girls. Most of the prospective campers were crying at the platform, whining "I don't want to leave you, Mommy and Daddy." I was overjoyed. I sat down next to the window, holding my brown paper bag with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a Hershey's bar, and waved goodbye to my parents, my sister and Nanny, a huge smile on my face.

The End