

finding this place

one woman's journey beyond restriction

Flour lingered on Grandma's hands and forearms, but I looked as if I'd gone for a swim in the flour sack. "Look at you!" She didn't really mind. "While our dough gets bigger, let's dust you off outside." The weathered, green screen door clapped behind us.

I giggled as she dusted the flour from my eyelashes with the corner of her apron and the breeze brushed a white cloud from my hair. Back inside, she let me wipe the floor around my wooden stool with soapy rags. I probably made a bigger mess that she cleaned up later, but her patience felt like love.

I filled the sink with bubbly warm water and washed my four toy bread pans, then shaped tiny loaves with the dough Grandma had set aside for me. I waited on the floor by the oven.

"Are they done yet?"

"Now are they done?"

At last, Grandma removed one pan at a time, holding the precious golden bread high at arm's length and placed each loaf on the windowsill. "Look what a wonderful cook you are," she said. "Your little loaves are prettier than the big ones." Once they cooled, we wrapped all of the loaves in aluminum foil and found a basket to hold my little ones.

My mother arrived with three-year-old Rob and our baby sister, Lili. They were still too young for the farm. I told my mother my plans, "I'm going to make little peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my dolls' tea party." I don't remember my mother being part of those days on the farm, but I remember the two-hour drive home in the back seat of her green 1952 Pontiac. It had big whitewall tires and a white roof. I sat between my brothers on a beige leather seat watching telephone poles pass by. Lili's baby chair hooked over the front seat, and Mom's arm flew sideways to hold her steady whenever we stopped or turned. On my lap, the former Easter basket lined with a yellow cloth napkin held four foil-wrapped loaves of my special bread.

After my bath, I readied the dolls' table with my china tea set, placing its pink cups and black saucers just so. Each doll waited on a little wooden chair. When my mother tucked me in, I reminded her, "Tomorrow I'm going to make sandwiches for my dolls."

Finally, at noon the next day, my mother placed the four tiny loaves on the cutting board. Barely able to see over the counter, I stood ready, sure I'd be invited to spread each tiny slice.

As though the big serrated bread knife cut my skin, I watched as she sliced a lengthwise gash in each loaf, reducing my culinary creations to hot dog buns.

"Why the tears?" she asked.

She knew my plans. I said nothing.

"Now stop crying and eat your hot dog. Do you want mustard?"

Wrongly forced into service, those perfect little loaves of golden crusty bread became a metaphor for my life, their destiny no longer my decision.

The horizontal gash signified the difference between fantasy and life. My mother could have said, "What a chef you are" or "How pretty they look" or "You must have worked very hard. Let's make hot dogs buns so we can all enjoy your bread." She could have recognized the importance of my spirit, my creativity, my talent perhaps. I could have learned a lesson of intent versus effect. Instead, she ignored me, assigning me to the periphery, as real as my dolls' repast. Any remaining spirit was set aside, like a condiment, waiting.