

Escape from Shoshoni

by Paula D. Rugen

A satisfied grin spread across her face as she fingered the matches in her pocket. “I’ll get even with him now. He won’t ignore me anymore,” she hissed as she pulled the matches from her pocket to light a fire in the baby’s room. Pushing her drab, unkempt hair away from her lifeless blue eyes, she strained to listen for any sounds from outside as she noticed the clock read 9:47PM. The old house groaned as she stared at the sleeping child, golden locks falling over her round face and little fists clutching her favorite shriveled and torn teddy bear. Emma Sue stirred in her bed and, stretching her thin legs, let out a mournful cry.

With match in hand, Ellen paused, seeing another baby in a different crib, remembering ...

“I was five when you came to our house as a new baby.”

Ellen’s grin left her face, as she gritted her teeth.

“Ellen, come meet Louise, your new sister,” Daddy said as he carried you in from the car.

I remember hearing Daddy tell Grandma how they’d used his name, Louis, to name you. It bugged me. I didn’t need a new sister, especially one who had Daddy’s name.

“You’re to love her forever,” Daddy instructed.

I wasn’t so sure. I frowned while Daddy settled you in for your nap.

He turned to me. “What would you like to play, Ellen?”

A little relieved, I tugged him by the hand. "Can we play with my Lincoln Logs?" Everything seemed like it would be okay, and I tried to forget about you.

Ellen's mind traveled back to those happy days more than 15 years ago.

Finishing WINNIE THE POOH, Daddy handed me the book to put away. His tobacco-scent and warmth made me feel safe. My daddy loved me.

"Daddy, everyday for always can we play and read like this? No one else is as much fun." I thought about you sleeping in your crib.

"Of course, Peanut." I always laughed when he called me 'Peanut' and he laughed with me. "As long as you want me to play, I will play, but someday you'll find other things more interesting than playing with Daddy. Soon you'll have so many friends at school, you won't have as much time for your old dad."

As these thoughts passed through Ellen's mind, a gentle smile returned to her face, and she sat down on the floor next to the crib. The smile transformed her appearance from distraught to serene, like the unfolding of a spring flower.

Ellen continued her thoughts of the past, remembering that this new baby changed her life completely.

You were fine until you were a few months old. Then you got sick and cried all the time.

Daddy said, "Louise has 'po-le-o' and might not live," but I didn't care. You were useless anyway.

You took everyone's time ... all day and all night ... Mama, Grandma, Aunt Betty ... even Daddy. When he came home from work, he'd give me a quick hug and then help with you all evening. I was sent to my room to keep out of the way. Sitting with my books, I would try to think of a way to make you go back to where you came from.

It's not fair that you made everyone forget about me! You could've let me have my daddy!

As Ellen recalled the past, she stood, body rigid, glaring at the crib and breaking the match.

Even when the crying stopped and you were better, I didn't get my daddy back. Once in a while he would read me a story before bed, but we never played or colored on the floor anymore. He didn't tell me he loved me either; he just said I was too big to be his 'peanut'.

Again Emma Sue made a sound, bringing Ellen back to the present. She pushed rags under the crib. "I should have done this when Louise was a baby," she whispered while glancing over her shoulder.

A door slammed; heavy footsteps made Ellen cringe. She hastily reached to retrieve the rags and can of kerosene, a little of which spilled. Hiding them in the closet, she rushed back to the crib. The odor of kerosene lingered, and she could hear her heart thumping as Zach walked into the room. She gagged as she inhaled the stale beer and smoke stench he brought with him. Relieved he would not detect the kerosene, Ellen covered Emma Sue with a blanket.

"How is my Baby-boo?" he asked as he approached the baby. "Emma Sue wanna play wif Daddy?"

His three-year old adored him; Ellen believed that Emma Sue was the first person Zach ever really loved. He reached out his calloused hand to touch Emma Sue on the forehead, gently brushing aside her blond curls.

"Why did you put her to bed?" Zach grumbled.

Matching his glare and tone, she backed away. "You're late. She fell asleep."

Zach leaned his trim, six-four frame over the crib and gently kissed Emma Sue as she began to waken. Then he turned on Ellen again. "I warned you," he hissed, with a hand raised high to hit her.

Ellen's five-four, 165-pound body could not move quickly enough, and the blow caught her on the shoulder. Silently, she dashed out.

She expected him to follow, but to her surprise, he began singing Emma Sue a soft lullaby. Ellen grabbed a can of beer ... her third for the evening. With hands shaking and eyes blazing, she stumbled outside to escape more blows from Zach.

Ellen tread carefully down the broken steps. She shivered in the breeze. The full moon caused shadows around the trees where Zach had placed the tree swing he had made for Emma Sue. As she tried to sit down, a grimace from the shoulder pain made her face like that of a wounded prey desperate for escape.

“I hate you!” she whispered through clenched teeth. “You’re big; you’re mean, but I’ll get even with you!”

After a couple swigs of beer, she began to rock. The motion of the swing soothed her; she closed her eyes thinking of the swing her daddy had made for her.

It was you who made him get sick! Daddy spent so much time with you that he caught the disease.

Mama said, “No, Ellen, Daddy has had TB for a long time, since before you were born. It’s just getting bad again. He will need to be in the hospital for a few months.”

I knew she was just protecting you; I knew it was your fault that he got sick. But he did come home again after a few months. He couldn’t work; he couldn’t play with me or he would begin to cough. Sometimes he could read to me though, and as I learned to read, I read to him. He always laughed when I read to him, but I no longer smiled.

“Peanut, why are you so sad?” he wheezed between coughs. “Where is that happy little girl I once had? I want her back.” Then a coughing spell overtook him leaving him speechless.

Clenching my fists and turning away, I left the room. Didn’t he know I wanted to go back to the way things were before you arrived?

As the years went by everyone thought you were perfect; I spent hours planning how to get you into trouble. One day I wrote with magic marker on the wall and let you color your hand with the same marker. Another time, I let Midnight, our indoor cat, outside and you were blamed. The best was taking Mama’s things and hiding them in your things. I always laughed inside when you got in trouble, but I just kept reading, pretending I didn’t even know what was going on. As you got older, you never got mad at me; you just apologized to Mama for not thinking.

By the time I was about 10, Daddy's coughing fits lasted for an hour at a time and he often spat up blood. He finally went to Denver for treatment.

I never saw him again. He was there for eight months, and no one could see him. They said he was too contagious. But while I was at Grandmas one weekend, YOU got to go see him. You told me about it when you caught me eating your Easter candy.

A tear descended down Ellen's cheek. "Why didn't he want to see me?" she cried aloud. Stopping the swing, she kicked at the dirt.

Then Daddy died. I didn't cry; I didn't even want to go to the funeral, but Mama made me. You and Mama cried all the time, but I had no tears.

These thoughts brought up bitter tastes of bile, forcing Ellen spit on the ground.

Kids from school felt sorry for me. They would call or come ask me to play. I just glared at them and responded "NO!" Soon they stopped asking. I didn't care; I didn't like anyone and no one liked me. My happiness came from books; I read all the time and lived the adventures of the characters in my books. They were real to me.

I hated the little town where we lived ... Shoshoni, Wyoming. The dirt streets and constant wind often made the air look like pea soup. Ignoring the town gossips and their stares, I just stood up straight and sneered at them when I heard them whispering behind my back. They thought I didn't hear, but I knew what they were saying.

"She is so unfriendly and mean. Did you hear her scream at her mother the other day?"

"Yes, and her mother works so hard to keep a house over their heads and food on the table."

"The argument was about that darling little sister, Louise. She is so helpful and kind to everybody; she helped me carry my groceries home yesterday and then played with Joey, while I fed the baby."

Ellen imitated the cattiness in their voices perfectly, addressing the shadows. "I hate them; I hate life in Shoshoni. I had a good plan to save money to leave here. I had it all figured out ... to quit school at 16 and get that job as a waitress at the Rigger Café. But look at me ... five years later and I'm still stuck here!"

One time I heard Elsie, owner of the Rigger, explaining to her neighbor, “She’s not overly friendly, but she works hard and will put in many hours. It seems like she doesn’t want to go home. If we aren’t busy she has her head in a book. That’s the only time I see her smile.”

Early one morning, a stranger with a lopsided grin walked into the café. “Well, aren’t you beautiful?” he declared as I took his order.

He turned to the regulars in the café announcing, “My name is Zach Moyer. Jes got here. Come to make sum cash in the oil fields. Enybody got a room to rent?”

He talked like a man who’d been around and knew what life was about. He came to the Rigger each day, and always asked me to serve him. He rented a house on the east side of town and was nice to me. When the café wasn’t busy, I talked to him.

After about three months, I moved into the little, three-room house he rented. Emma Sue slept in the tiny bedroom, while me and Zach slept in the living room. It connected to a primitive kitchen, which had crates instead of cabinets, a sink and an old, propane range. The refrigerator was on the screened-in back porch, and there was a small bath, an add-on, connected to the kitchen.

He spent his days working in the oil fields in Sand Draw and brought home more money in a week than I got in a month. I thought we were rich and we partied most of the night.

The fun lasted two weeks and then Zach demanded my money from the Rigger. I refused to hand him my check and \$15 ‘tips’; he slapped me, and grabbed the money, stuffing the cash in his pocket and tearing the check in pieces. He kicked me and left, returning at 1AM.

Then I learned I was pregnant. I wanted to get rid of the baby, but Zach had a fit and wouldn’t let me. At 30, he was excited to become a father, so I let him have his way, planning to leave Shoshoni after the baby was born. He could have the baby. I didn’t want anything as a reminder of this life. I only wanted to escape.

“He thinks he takes all my money, but I have some hidden,” Ellen chuckled as she slid her shoes through the dirt under the swing. “How could I have thought I loved him?”

It was just better living with him than at home. But now, I'm going to take my money and catch a bus out of town." Taking a gulp of the now warm beer, she listened to the serenade of the crickets and watched the dance of the fireflies.

Yelling from the house brought her back to the present.

"Ellen! Where are you?" He appeared at the door. "Get your butt in here. I want something to eat. NOW!"

Ellen didn't budge. She remained in the swing though her body involuntarily shook. She knew what Zach would do next.

Banging open the screen door, he stalked toward her.

Her hatred for him rose in her throat like the beer that was rising from her stomach. She stared straight ahead as he advanced across the yard, belt in one hand, and a fresh beer in the other. He stopped about ten feet from Ellen.

"Yer job is takin' care of Emma Sue," he uttered through clenched teeth. "Yer supposed to see that she's clean, fed and awake when I get home. Then ya need to satisfy me. Little tramp, ya failed; ya know what comes next. Git in the house!"

Gripping the rope on the swing, Ellen remained seated. She examined the beer can in her hand, imagining a gun instead and pretending to pull an imaginary trigger.

He lunged, bringing the belt down with a sharp crack like a whip. As the belt hit Ellen's head, she flinched. Her can plunged to the ground. A second blow knocked her over. She lay in the dirt and a pool of spilled beer. He raised the belt again, and she screamed as it assaulted her back. Without another word, he snorted, turned and strolled back into the house.

Ellen was not aware of how long she lay there, but she started to shiver as the cold began to seep into her bones. Her head ached; her mind raced; her eyes opened to shadows on the dirt. Ellen grabbed for the swing to pull herself into a sitting position, swearing as the pain in her head increased. Rubbing her cheek, she felt a sticky substance and torn flesh. Beer-tainted mud came off in her hand, and her shirt stuck to the skin on her back.

Ellen steadied herself on the swing, and her face contorted into a rigid scowl, while her hands twisted around, fingers taut and grabbing at empty air. Her heart pounded; her body oozed sweat; her mind raced to encompass her rage.

I'll get even this time. I will escape from this hell! I will not be his slave.

She took a deep breath and clinched her fists.

He cannot do this to me anymore. He won't like it, but I want to leave here and I will.

Hands shaking, Ellen picked up the beer can and heaved it toward the house. Her fury spent, she rested as she thought through the details of her plan to end her misery in the hated town of Shoshoni.

The wind blew through Ellen's hair as she crept back to the house. Bats screeched as they flew overhead. The increasing humidity made her aware that clouds had erased the moon's face from sight, suggesting a coming thunderstorm. As she entered the back porch, she could hear Zach snoring as loud as the freight train that passed through Shoshoni each afternoon.

Ellen tiptoed past Zach and into Emma Sue's room. She retrieved the rags and kerosene from the closet.

Ellen appeared as though she were in a trance. Expressionless, she showed no reaction when Emma Sue mumbled in her sleep.

Spreading the rags under the crib, Ellen smiled to herself.

This time nothing will interfere with my plan.

Gathering the newspapers from the corner, Ellen added them to the rags. As she reached into her pocket, she realized Zach's snoring had stopped. Holding her breath, she listened as she took two steps to the door. Peering around the corner, she could see Zach had merely rolled over.

Returning to her task, Ellen's pulse increased, and the cap slipped a few times in her sweaty fingers. She poured kerosene over the rags and papers, delighting in the pungent smell. Satisfied that all was ready, Ellen again reached for her matches, striking one to light the fire. She tossed it onto the rags.

A smile of satisfaction emerged on her face.

I am getting even with you now, Louise. This is your final punishment. You caused my daddy to get sick and die. You caused him to love you more than he loved me. Now with you gone, he is all mine again.

The fire flared, reaching Ellen's feet in seconds. Some of the kerosene must have spilled on her jeans because the flames rushed up her legs. She stared in disbelief. She felt no pain, but gasped as the putrid smoke reached her lungs.

She knew she must run to escape, but then she remembered her money hidden in the closet. Turning, she watched the fire zigzag like a snake across the worn carpet toward the closet.

Ellen became aware of pain in her burning legs as the first crack of thunder occurred.

The baby screamed.

"Daddy, Daddy!" Emma Sue shrieked.

From the living room, Zach shouted, "I'm coming, Baby-boo. Daddy's coming."

Mixed with the crash of lightening bolts from outside, Zach could hear *two* voices yelling, "Daddy, **Daddy!** Daddy! **Daddy! DAAADDY!**"

The guard at the First Bank of Shoshoni had gone outside to smoke his cigar. He heard a gigantic explosion, and his jaw dropped, leaving his mouth wide open as he observed a big fireball in the sky on the east end of town.