



As I Remember It

The life of Carol Kessler Hartman

A SAMPLE CHAPTER · CHAPTER ONE

About this sample

This chapter is a demonstration, written by ChapterOne to show what your parent's book feels like in the hand and on the page.

Carol is a composite, drawn from the childhoods of a generation, and clearly not a real client. Client books are private.

A real ChapterOne book is made the same way this reads. Your parent talks with us across three or four recorded calls. We ask the questions, they tell the stories, and we write it into a book in their own voice. You approve every page before the balance is due.

A finished book runs somewhere between 15,000 and 30,000 words, printed and bound in hardback, with the photographs your family chooses.

Myles Howorth, ChapterOne

CHAPTER ONE

Grant Street

I was born in March of 1941, in the front bedroom of a house on Grant Street in Dennison, Ohio. My dad liked to say the war and I showed up the same year and only one of us was invited. That was his kind of joke. You had to wait a minute for it.

Dennison was a Pennsylvania Railroad town. The railroad built it and the railroad ran it. The shop whistle blew at seven, at noon, at four, and again at eleven for the night shift, and my mother cooked by that whistle her whole life. When a train went through, and one was always going through, the glasses hummed in the cupboard, and we heard it about as much as you hear your own breathing.

The first thing I can remember, the very first, is a night in the summer when I was four. Noise woke me. My mother carried me out to the porch in my nightgown, and the whole of Grant Street was standing in the dark, and Mrs. Doyle from next door was banging a dishpan with a wooden spoon like she meant to kill it. Every whistle in the yards was tied down and blowing at once. Car horns. Somebody had a cowbell. The Baptist church was ringing its bell too, or I've added that in since. My mother was laughing and crying into my hair at the same time, and

I decided, being four, that this was a thing that happened on summer nights and nobody had told me. That was August the 14th, 1945. The war was over. I remember the dishpan and I remember being carried. That's the whole memory. Two things.

All through school afterward, people talked about the canteen down at the depot, how the ladies of Dennison fed over a million servicemen through the train windows during the war, coffee and sandwiches handed up day and night. The soldiers called the town Dreamsville. My mother did her shift on Thursdays. I was too little to keep any of it, though I want to say I remember the smell of the coffee down there. I may have built that out of her telling it. Her canteen apron stayed folded in the cedar chest for as long as she kept house.



Our kitchen was the whole house, really. The front room was kept nice for company that mostly never came. The kitchen had a red and white checked oilcloth on the table, wiped down so many times the checks wore away in front of my dad's chair, and a Philco radio up on the shelf by the flour bin. My mother took in ironing, so half the week the kitchen smelled of hot cotton and starch. She did shirts for Dr. Metzger's family over in New Philadelphia at ten cents a shirt. She'd sprinkle them with water flicked off her fingertips and roll them up damp in a towel, and the rolls went in the icebox overnight, which sounds strange now and was just Tuesday then. Ma Perkins on the radio, and the iron going, thump and slide, thump and slide. I did twelve years of homework to that sound.

People forget that the rationing didn't quit when the war quit. Sugar was rationed clear into 1947, so I was old enough to be sent down to Kail's market with the book and told exactly which stamps

Mr. Kail was allowed to tear out. Red stamps for meat, blue ones for the canned things. My mother kept the books in a Maxwell House tin above the stove, next to the grease can. Every drop of bacon grease went into that can. During the war the butcher paid money for your grease, it went to the fighting somehow, and after the war she saved it anyway. Fried everything in it. That can was still on the stove when Eisenhower left office.

The oleo was my job. It came white as lard in a plastic bag with a little orange button of dye inside, and you popped the button and kneaded the bag on the table until the whole works turned the color butter was supposed to be. It took forever. My hands ached. My mother said the dairy men in Columbus made them sell it white so nobody could pass it off as butter, and she said it the same way every time, like she was reading it off a card.

MY FATHER'S HANDS

My dad was Walt Kessler, a machinist in the Dennison shops, and that is why the draft never took him. The railroads were essential work and the railroad had a say in who went. He stayed home through the war while other men on Grant Street went. I believe that ate at him. He never said so.

His hands were the biggest I have ever seen on a person. The coal dust and the machine grease got down into the creases of them, and no amount of Lava soap ever brought it all the way out, so his knuckles had fine black lines in them like pencil, even on Sunday, even in church. His left thumbnail had been split in the shops before I was born, and it grew back in two pieces for the rest of his life. He could take a splinter out of my palm with a sewing needle and I would never feel it. When I

had a fever he would hold my whole face in one hand, and the palm of it was worn so hard it was smooth, like the banister at school.

He spent money on nothing. He resoled his own shoes on an iron last in the cellar, and my mother cut his hair on the back porch with a sheet pinned around his neck. But once every summer he took me up to Cleveland on his railroad pass to see the Indians play, and for that one day the wallet came open. A scorecard and a bag of peanuts. A hot dog when I wanted one, and a second one when I didn't finish the first. In 1948, the year they won it all, we saw Bob Feller pitch, and at some point eighty thousand people stood up around me all at once, and I grabbed my dad's sleeve because I thought the stands were coming down. He kept score in pencil the whole game, every summer, the pencil like a matchstick in that hand. The scorecards went into the sideboard drawer when we got home. All of them. They're in this house somewhere now.



The thing I cannot get across to my grandchildren is the polio. Every summer you waited on it. The paper printed the case numbers by county the way they print ball scores now. In August of 1952 they closed the pool over in Uhrichsville, and my mother kept me home from the pictures and the church picnic both. August is a long month when you are eleven. The pool opened the next June like nothing had happened.

Janet Brandt sat two rows over from me at school. She caught it the summer we were nine and came back with a brace on her left leg, and you could hear her coming up the school steps, the leather and then the metal. Nobody said one word about it, ever. You didn't, then.

Then one spring they lined us up in the gymnasium for the Salk shot. That was 1954. We stood alphabetical, so I was between Sharon Kelley and Dick Kimble, same as I stood for everything for twelve years. The gym smelled of rubbing alcohol and floor wax. A few of the boys fainted. The girls mostly did not.

I said 1954. It must have been 1955, because it was that same spring the radio announced the vaccine worked, and my mother stood at the sink with her hands still in the dishwater and cried. I had never once seen her cry. Some towns rang their church bells over it. In Dennison the yard whistle went, but the whistle went at noon anyway, so I could not tell you which it was blowing for.



We got a television in 1955, a Philco, bought on time from the furniture store in Uhrichsville at a dollar and a quarter a week. The payment book went in the Maxwell House tin, in with the old ration books my mother had never thrown out.

So when Elvis came on the Ed Sullivan show in September of 1956, I watched him in my own front room, fifteen years old, sitting too close to the screen. And here is something people get wrong. Ed Sullivan wasn't even there that night. He had been hurt in a car wreck that summer, and an English actor named Charles Laughton introduced Elvis instead. Hardly a soul remembers that. I remember it because my dad looked up from his paper, said, who's the fat fellow, and that was everything he had to say about the entire evening. My mother stood in the kitchen doorway with a dish towel over her shoulder and said the girls screaming in that audience ought to be ashamed of themselves. She watched every minute of it standing up.

Monday at school half the boys had their collars turned up and their brothers' Brylcreem in their hair, and Mr. Householder sent Gerald Stutz to the boys' room to wash his out before first bell. Saturdays were for Isaly's up on Second Street. Chipped ham sandwiches, and sky-scraper cones cut with a scoop shaped like a little rake, so the ice cream stood up taller than your hand. A Coke at the fountain was still a nickel. The whole place smelled of Brylcreem and fried onions that year, and every boy in it thought he was Elvis, and every one of them was still Petey Kavanaugh underneath.

Eddie Broadhurst had the use of his father's Studebaker, a green one, and he could fit six of us in it if two sat forward. We'd ride over to New Philadelphia and take up the whole end of the lunch counter at Woolworth's and make one grilled cheese apiece last the entire afternoon. The waitress there, I never learned her name, called every one of us hon and never hurried us once.



School itself I liked more than I let on. I was no scholar. Miss Ondrick, who taught the typing, ran her drills to a metronome on big black Royals with the letters blanked out so you couldn't peek, and by senior year I could do sixty words a minute clean. To this day I can type to a metronome nobody else can hear. That was my plan, such as it was. An office job in New Philadelphia or maybe Dover, and my own money.

There were record hops in the gym after the home football games. Mr. Hutch, the shop teacher, ran the record player, and he allowed one slow song an hour, like he was rationing those too. By my senior year you could feel the town going quiet underneath everything. The railroad was done with steam by then and half the roundhouse stood dark.

My dad didn't talk about it, so we didn't either. That belongs to a later chapter anyway. The gym was warm and the records were loud. Mr. Hutch put the slow one on at nine o'clock sharp.

THE DRESS

Graduation was the spring of 1959. My mother started the dress in March. She had taken on extra ironing that winter, the Renners' flatwork on top of Dr. Metzger's shirts, and she never said one word about why. The board was up past nine some nights. I could hear it under my homework, thump and slide.

The dress was white pique from the yard goods counter at Penney's in New Philadelphia, made from a Butterick pattern with a boat neck and a full skirt. She fitted it on me in the kitchen with pins in her mouth, turning me by the hip with two fingers, and she'd step back and squint with the pins still in her lips, so all her opinions came out as hums. Half the girls in my class wore homemade, and we could all tell whose mother could really sew. Nobody said it out loud. One of the Catholic girls had a saint's medal sewn into her hem for luck. My mother put a safety pin in mine and said it did the same job. That dress fit me the way nothing out of a store ever has since.

Two nights before the ceremony she gave me a Toni home permanent at the kitchen table, and the whole house smelled of ammonia. My eyes ran. Hers ran. We got laughing so hard at something, I couldn't tell you now what, that she had to sit down and wave at me with the comb.

Nobody ever believes this. I don't remember the graduation ceremony at all. Not one thing. I couldn't tell you who gave the speech or what we sang. I know I was there because there is a photograph of me on the front steps of the school, squinting into the sun, holding the diploma like a relay baton. The morning of it, my mother pressed the

dress with a damp cloth laid over the fabric so the iron never touched it. That part I have. The ceremony itself is just gone.

What I do have is the night. After the parties, Donna Jean Albaugh and I walked down to the depot in our dresses, way past midnight, shoes in our hands, and sat on a baggage cart on the empty platform where all those soldiers used to lean out for coffee. We put two pennies on the rail for the freight that came through around one. It shook the platform the way it always did. A long one, coal hoppers mostly. Then we hunted in the dark for the pennies and found both, still warm. Flattened out thin as foil, with Lincoln's face pulled sideways like taffy. Donna Jean kept hers in her wallet, she told me years later, right up until the wallet was stolen in Columbus. Mine is upstairs right now, in the button tin.



The rest of her book is 60 more years

Chapter One ends in 1959. A finished ChapterOne book carries on through everything that came after, the wedding, the children, the work, the houses, the people, told the same way, in her own voice.

We are taking on a small founding group of families. A book is \$1,500, reserved with a \$150 deposit. You read the finished manuscript before you pay the balance, and if it does not move you, you owe nothing more and the deposit comes back.

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