



Chapter Four

Mission Impossible

*"Genius may have its limitations,
but stupidity is not thus
handicapped."* — Elbert Hubbard

My earliest memories are largely moods and offer no time frame. They key around my mother's activities. The smell of the vacuum cleaner meant she was up and about; it would be a good day. The acrid smell of vomit meant she had a migraine; the day would be long. At three or four I was probably not outside much by myself, so there was little way to escape a day when she was inert. I recall no activities in the house in Racine. I must have read comic books because that is how I learned to read. But I do not recall mother teaching me.

Ann Andersen was not a happy person. I do not know if she was always that way, but her cancer is a way to understand her depression. She had uterine cancer and a complete hysterectomy at age nineteen. Few areas of her life remained untouched by that experience. No area appeared to provide refuge, except perhaps our relationship, which was not designed for refuge but offered as such. Perhaps that is why I went into psychiatry. The major accomplishment of my life then would not be completing the task for which I was purchased but recognizing the impossibility (and injustice) of it. No doubt that is why I run post-traumatic stress disorder groups.

After the hysterectomy the Andersens took in a foster child for two years. But when they tried to adopt her, the girl's mother moved her to a different home. Stan and Ann wanted to adopt, but the state objected, probably due to her recent cancer. That time might have been the low point in Ann Andersen's life. She was thinking of suicide, and when they learned of the black-market option they took it. I cost \$250. A new Chevrolet cost \$690.

I was a compensation for her cancer. Perhaps a new car would have worked better—the car at least would not have wanted to take its' own trips. Stanley stated he did more for me than was required. He probably felt the same about Ann. He bought her a child; what more need he do? Stanley was not mean—nor was he spontaneous, happy, or empathic. I think he felt trapped by fate, and divorce was not an option in those days. Duty was.

I feel unchanged as a person from then until now. Physically there are changes but conceptually I appear the same. I still love animals, avoid confrontation, and stay out of trouble. Much of what I am is likely genetic, but that which is environmental was formed with Ann. An external other is required to construct a social identity. To walk a dog you must have a dog. To be a son you need a parent. She was my parent. Stanley was not. The problem was her depression and the heavy tone hanging over the house. But we were a team going downtown. On those occasions mother was alive. We had fun. These trips might have been the best of times for her back then also. They were built in part on artificial, but they took away her problems for a while. She could pretend and forget—in anonymity. It worked, for both of us, but it could not last.

So my early memories depend on whether mother was active or not. This changed as I was able to go outside alone, and especially with kindergarten. From then on the halcyon days of Mother and I were numbered. I was programmed to become autonomous; she needed me for defense. The world outside our house was exciting; inside was tedious. Acting authentically from then on was done with a sense of abandoning my mother. She did not interfere with me leaving, but life itself took on a certain amount of guilt.

We rarely returned to the connection shared on the trips downtown. At age nine or ten on return from trips to visit Stanley's cousin in Alameda, I would fall asleep on her shoulder listening to the Lone Ranger or Inner Sanctum. And in high school after football or wrestling practice and a late dinner she had set aside, I would fall asleep on the couch watching television for a brief while. Stanley was not there. I was exhausted and not going anywhere. Mother and I felt connected, although we did not say anything.

She worked on an assembly line and kept house, including my room which would probably have been a mess without her. When not working, she did crossword puzzles and stared for long periods out the window. The house was dark, the blinds pulled. She had no close friends, no confidants. I felt sorry for her but hated her inability to respond. She could not get past her losses, and the implication always was that I could or should do something about it.

So we did little together, factually or emotionally. Downtown, Alameda, and Thursday night television were the times I felt connected. There was one more. When she was sick and both of us knew time was short, we had a conversation on the couch she sat on so much. It was honest. We reminisced for several hours. It did not occur to me to ask about the adoption, although I had developed an interest in it by then. I could have asked about my biological parents. She might have answered. No one else was ever going to give me that information.

But I was programmed not to upset her. And looking at it now, I don't think it was that important anyway. I had a conversation with my aunt during that time who told me I should be glad I was not a part of the family. I responded that maybe so, but I did not feel like part of the family. She had been recounting the medical and emotional issues of the Andersens. She was not being unkind. But I remember being horrified that my mother, on her death bed, might hear that I did not feel like part of the family. For sure I had learned my role in that family. I was to fill a void, even at the expense of my identity.

Mother and I met one more time before she died. It was a month later. She was in a hospice. We went through the motions. I got the read that she had emotionally moved to a different world. She had withdrawn from this one and appeared ready for me to leave. I did not want to go. Finally, I had to make myself leave, putting one foot in front of the other by sheer effort. My last contact with her was in the airplane leaving San Jose. I stared at her hospital, then at the community, then at the clouds. It was over.

Ann and I had been a tight little unit for several years. It could not last, and it was unfair of her to expect that it could. I used to think my personality was largely a product of genetics. That probably is not true. Some of what I am was likely forged in our unit. But we could not adapt or address the issues and paid the price for that. She was a decent person. In some ways I was lucky to have her. But one cannot avoid the ugly that happens when failure to solve one's own problems leads to unreasonable demands on others. Eric Fromm believes that if people are not creative they will turn destructive. I agree. Ann could not resolve her losses and expected me to honor the debt. This is not evil. But it is not satisfactory.