Chapter 3: Memories of Wheeling, West Virginia, 1944-1948

The 1940s were a time of simple pleasures and big imaginations. Our family lived in Wheeling, West Virginia, where my earliest memories were formed — moments stitched together like a patchwork quilt of laughter, lessons, and a many small adventures.

My Third Birthday

As the youngest of four, I was determined to make my own decisions — even at three years of age. My brother Tom was six years older than I was, Mary four years older, and Ted two years older. Even though we were loving and close siblings, I didn't like being bossed around.

On my third birthday in 1947, Mom presented me with a beautiful cake decorated with a teddy bear. She wanted to take my picture holding it, and soon my siblings surrounded me, each offering advice on how to hold the cake. I wanted none of it. The photo that day may have captured a sweet little girl, but behind that smile was a rather independent spirit in the making.

The G.I. Joe Beer Garden

Our parents owned a neighborhood bar called the G.I. Joe. Behind it stood our two-story home — a lively place filled with stories. I remember Dad's pride as he asked me to dance on a table in the bar or spell words we'd practiced. I fancied myself the next Shirley Temple, eager to perform for anyone willing to watch.

One morning, I snuck downstairs before anyone was awake and climbed onto a chair to fetch a Coke from the cooler in the back of the bar. As I turned, drink in hand, I saw Dad

standing silently in the doorway, watching. Without a word, I climbed back up, replaced the Coke in the cooler, and walked to him. “Daddy,” I said sweetly, “could I have a glass of milk?” He loved retelling that story — maybe a little too often for my liking.

Susie the Cat

Our first pet, a black-and-white cat named Susie, was endlessly affectionate and endlessly pregnant. One day, Mom was doing laundry and didn’t realize a few kittens had crawled into the linens she had put in the washing machine. It was a heartbreaking accident. A kind family friend helped Mom afterward, but the memory lingered as one of childhood’s earliest lessons in fragility.

Norma Jean and the Backyard Gang

Behind our house was a shared yard where neighborhood children gathered and played. One of our friends was Norma Jean, and we loved teasing Ted about “making out” with her. None of us knew what that meant — but it sure made us laugh.

The Floods

Our home sat only a few blocks from the Ohio River, which occasionally swelled beyond its banks. I can still picture rowboats passing our house during floods, people paddling down what had once been our street. We carried what we could upstairs and helped mop up the mess afterward — an early reminder that nature had a will of its own.

Norman's Ice Cream and Pickles

Before television came along, evenings were filled with conversation and small treats. I remember Mom sitting with us kids in our parents' bedroom, sharing ice cream or the biggest , juiciest dill pickles from Norman's store. Sometimes we'd eat both together, an odd but delicious combination. I never saw Dad during those moments. Mom always said he was "at the beer garden," and in my young mind, that phrase painted a tropical picture — a place filled with plants, trees, flowers, and happy people walking around.

Walks and Lightning Bugs

Summer evenings sometimes brought slow-paced walks with Mom and my siblings. The air was thick with warmth and the sparkle of lightning bugs. We caught them in jars and watched them glow, our own little nightlights. I may have imagined this, but I can still see Mom twisting the glowing bugs into makeshift rings that shimmered on our fingers.

Buried Treasure at the Tolpas'

The Tolpa family lived nearby and were dear friends of Polish ancestry. One afternoon, I buried pennies in their yard, determined to grow a money tree after overhearing someone say, "Money doesn't grow on trees." I planned to prove them wrong. Years later, after we moved to Detroit, Mom would send the Tolpas packages of kluski noodles — a taste of home they couldn't find in Wheeling, showing how our connections from Wheeling carried into our new life.

The Gerstings and the Gold Tooth

The Gersting family were generous friends who welcomed Mom and her four lively children into their home. Mr. Gersting often gave us tickets to events, though I can't recall what they were for — just that we were happy to receive them. I was fascinated by his gold tooth, which gleamed every time he smiled. It was both strange and beautiful to me.

The Wings and the Grape Arbor

The Wing family's front yard was covered by a thick arbor of Concord grapes — deep purple, tart, and full of seeds. Despite the spiders that lurked among the vines, I loved picking and eating the grapes. I remember when they added a second story to their house, and how much I enjoyed playing with their little Pekinese dogs.

The Mateja Family

Another family, the Matejas, had a bustling household like ours. When Mom visited, she and Mrs. Mateja would sit around the kitchen table sharing stories and frustrations about raising children. I remember Mrs. Mateja's comforting words: "One day, these kids will be grown up and be something special." That simple belief seemed to bring them relief and a sense of pride.

Great Grandpa Hawkins and Aunt Cass

Great Grandpa Hawkins was my Grandma Lavy's father. His deafness required my Aunt Cass — Mom's older sister — to shout directly into his ear, which always made us kids giggle.

No one ever explained what caused his hearing loss, but his eventual understanding of loud conversation was apparent with his smiles.

Aunt Holdie and the Telephone

Grandma Lavy's twin sister, Aunt Holdie, lived behind St. Mary's Church. In those days, few people had telephones, so we went to her house to make essential calls. I remember her two sons, who were physically handicapped, likely from some kind of arthritis. They walked by our grandparents' home bent over like a very elderly person though they were quite young.

Meeting the Easter Bunny

When I was three, I imagined the Easter Bunny as a soft, gentle creature who would greet me with cuddles and candy. But when the big day arrived, I faced a towering, shaggy, wiry-haired figure instead. My siblings' chatter — telling me what to do and how to pose — didn't help. I held the hand rail as I climbed the long staircase on my own, heart full of excitement, only to burst into tears when I met the frightening version of my dream bunny. Somewhere, there's a photo of that tearful encounter — a memory of childhood expectations turned upside down.

Baked Boots

One day, a photographer came through our neighborhood with a saddled horse. Ted and I eagerly put on cowboy hats and climbed on. I adored that horse, rough hair and all, and proudly declared that I wanted to be a cowgirl when I grew up.

That Christmas, my wish came true — a brand-new pair of oxblood-colored cowgirl boots, the greatest treasure I could imagine. I wore them everywhere. Sometimes Mom polished them and set them on top of the stove to dry, filling the kitchen with the smell of warm leather and Shinola polish.

Easy-to-Open Liquid Shinola Polish

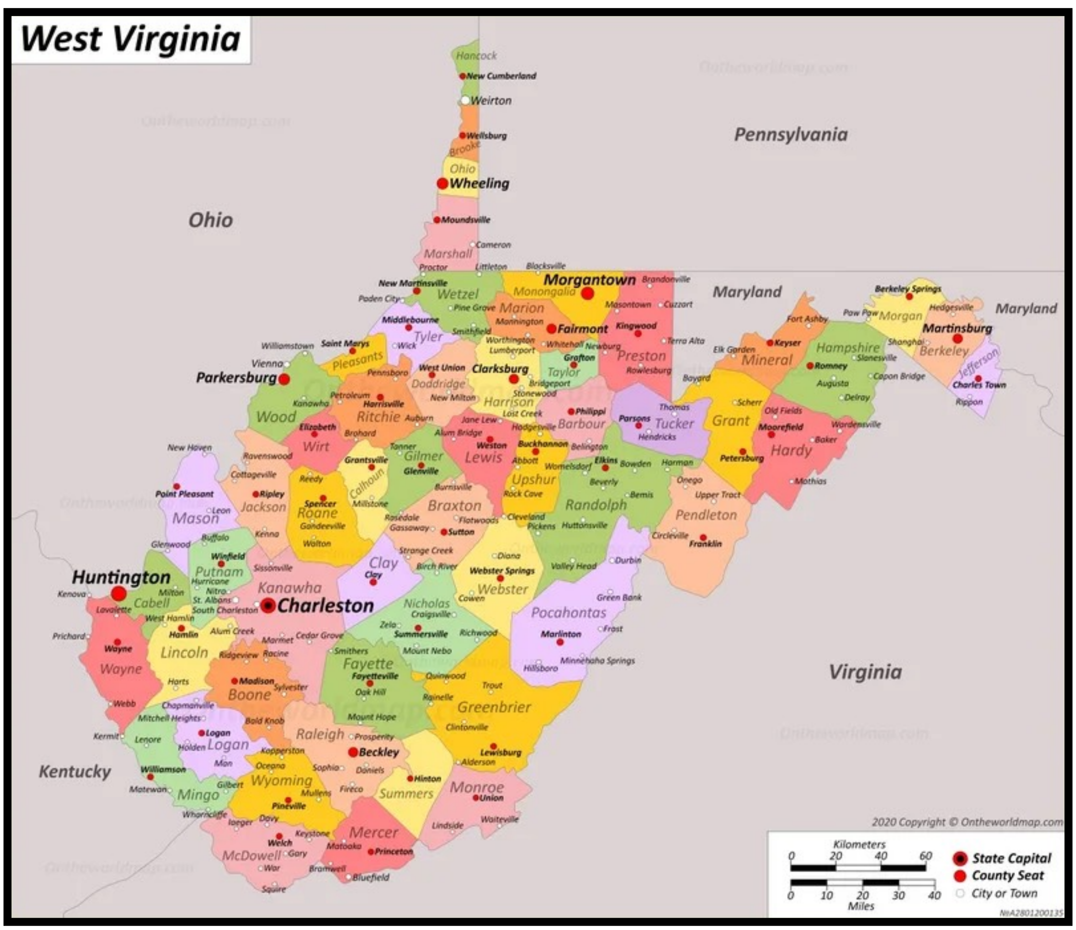
Of course, these are not my actual boots, but very similar

One afternoon, while Mom visited a neighbor, I decided to clean up my precious boots. I carefully applied polish, then turned on the oven to "dry" them. Instead of putting the boots on the stove top like Mom did, I put them in the oven. The smell hit Mom before she even opened the door — my beautiful boots were baked stiff as rocks. I cried over them, but it taught me to think through a task before performing it — a lesson I'd carry with me for life.

Looking Back

Wheeling was where I learned about family, friendship, and finding joy in the small things — the glow of lightning bugs, the taste of pickles with ice cream, and the love that surrounded even the simplest of days. Life there was sometimes laden with anxiety, sometimes messy, sometimes funny, but always filled with love.

Those early years shaped the way I saw the world — with curiosity, carefreeness, and a belief that, even after mistakes and floods and baked boots, life had a way of turning experiences into lifelong lessons.



Wheeling is Located in the Northern Pan Handle of West Virginia