Chapter 7: Not the Brady Bunch

In 1952, our lives took another turn. Mom moved us into a modest two-story townhouse at 5280 Lorraine Street, not far from Olympia Stadium in Detroit. She was living with a widower, Bernie Brunson, and his four children—Marvin, Phyllis, Sharon, and Jerry. Between his family and ours, ten people squeezed into a home meant for much fewer.

It was a far cry from the tidy, cheerful domestic scenes on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* or *Father Knows Best*—TV families that would soon become ideal families for American households. And, we weren't the *Brady Bunch*, whose TV shows were a hit in the 1960s. Our version of blended family life was crowded, chaotic, and shaped more by necessity than romance. Still, despite the lack of space, there was a shared sense of responsibility. I don't remember where we all slept, but I do remember that we took care of one another.

Baby Bernie — A Surprise Arrival

Just a few months after we had settled in, Bernie and his children moved to Evansville, Indiana, leaving Mom and her five children alone and desperate, without the means to pay rent. Eviction loomed. For some reason, Mom had us move furniture from the second floor downstairs in anticipation of the eviction.

Then, on the night of October 14, 1952, something terrifying and miraculous happened. At home, with no medical help and under great stress, Mom gave birth to a baby boy—our new little brother, Bernie Lewis. I may not remember this accurately, but I seem to recall that home

births weren't uncommon for families without access to regular medical care, especially among the poor.

The police arrived in the middle of the night and transported Mom and the baby to the hospital. The next morning, our older brother Tom took charge. At only fourteen, he made sure we all got dressed and went to school, as if holding onto routine could somehow protect us from the uncertainty around us. His quiet act of leadership was a form of love.

On Our Own

For the next few days, we were left on our own. There was no coal for the furnace, and October nights in Detroit could be cold. Ted and I, still just children, went to a lumber yard and asked for wood scraps. We loaded what we could into a wagon and brought it home to heat the house.

We were a resourceful group of kids, like due to desperation. What I remember most about those chilly rooms on Lorraine isn't the chill, but kindness from others. A gentleman came one evening and took the five of us to a local restaurant for a hot meal. I don't know his name, but he knew brother Tom. That wonderful dinner was an act of pure compassion. God bless that man.

Social Services Entered the Picture

Soon after, our independence came to an end. Social services intervened. In the early 1950s, juvenile authorities didn't distinguish between juvenile delinquents, children left alone by tragedy, and those abandoned by neglect. The system was designed to "protect," but it was far from gentle.

We were taken to a juvenile detention center. The boys were separated from the girls. It was a sterile, impersonal place with strict routines and strange adults making decisions for us. We underwent physical exams—standard protocol at the time. But for us girls, it was terrifying, especially the pelvic exam. I'll never forget how Mary screamed when they examined three-year-old Eleanor.

"Don't touch her! Let me go in there with her!" she yelled, her voice rising above the sterile clinical air. Mary was only a child herself, but her instinct to protect her baby sister was fierce. It was one of many moments that revealed our deep care for one another.

Despite everything, I looked forward to school each day. The classes at the detention home were basic, but I enjoyed them. I was surprised to find many of the children couldn't read simple sentences. I didn't understand it then, but public education—especially for children in poverty—varied in quality. I silently thanked the good sisters at St. Leo's, who had drilled phonics into us. Because of them, I could read, and I could spell. That knowledge became my educational foundation and love of learning.

A Place to Rest — The Shelter

After a few days, Mom and baby Bernie were released from the hospital. A friend of Tom's, the McKeon boy, told his parents about our situation, and they welcomed us into their home for a short while. Their kindness gave us a brief reprieve from the chaos.

Soon after, we were placed in a homeless shelter on Scotten Avenue. It was a grim place —crowded, smelly, and riddled with pests. But it was better than the streets. We were given a small room with two beds for all seven of us: Mom, newborn Bernie, Tom, Mary, Ted, Eleanor, and me.

One day, a maintenance worker came in and removed the mattresses for fumigation, using high-heat machines designed to kill insects. That evening, Mr. McKeon and his wife stopped by to visit. As he stepped into the room, Mr. McKeon pointed to a mattress. "There's smoke coming from that," he said. He and my brothers quickly dragged it to the alley. By morning, it had burned to ash. Their quick thinking may have saved us all.

Light in the Darkness

Even in the darkest places, we found pleasures. We resumed school nearby. On my first day back in a third-grade classroom, we had a spelling test. I got every word right.

"How did you know how to spell those words?" the teacher asked, puzzled.

I was confused by her question. Wasn't that what we were supposed to do? It reminded me that not all children had been taught as well as we had. The good nuns at St. Leo's may have

ruled with stern looks and sharp rulers, but they had given me a gift—a love of learning, and the confidence that I could succeed.

Then came Halloween. I will never forget what the Salvation Army did for us and the other poor families in the shelter. They hosted a celebration with costumes, games like bobbing for apples, and little gifts and treats. It wasn't just fun—it was proof that someone, somewhere, cared.

That simple act of joy left a deep imprint on me. The sight of adults dressed up, laughing and playing with children who had so little, reminded us that we weren't invisible. We mattered. Even now, decades later, I still support the Salvation Army — I remember what they did for us when we had nothing.